The Childhood Set, featuring Scan Boy & Printer
Adding Value Through Physical Nostalgia
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BFA DT Thesis 2
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The Childhood Set, featuring Scan Boy & Printer is a BFA Design & Technology thesis project by Theodore Richards. It explores the connection between nostalgia and value by inserting personal anecdotes and memories into an experience where people can revisit their own childhood, as well as Richards's. They can also then purchase the games if they feel compelled. The project is an experiment to see if the personal story injected into the games will convince anyone to buy at highly inflated prices. This paper will describe the thought process behind this project and will show the many different forms it took before finally reaching the thesis exhibition. It will also give information on who it was made for, as well as whether or not it was successful in increasing the value of the objects.

I. Introduction

My thesis project has been a journey through many ideas, relating to four main topics of research: nostalgia, simulation, value, and storytelling. These ideas have taken many forms, from machine learning to virtual environments to where I've landed now with a miniature retail-like experience. Throughout this process, I've really had one core question: what gives something value? Simple economics tells us it has to do with supply and demand. If people want it, and there are limited quantities, price goes up; if quantities or demand drop, price goes down. But how can we increase demand for something, especially if it is a secondhand item, which we aren't in charge of inventory, manufacturing, etc.?

To answer this question, I started looking at how antique stores, art dealers, and auction houses use provenance, which is essentially storytelling, to increase the value of their objects. For example, the chair in which J.K. Rowling wrote the first two *Harry Potter* books recently sold for $394,000 at auction, up from $29,000 when it was sold at auction in 2009[1]. And seeing that Rowling was a near-homeless single mother when she wrote the first book, the chair was actually given to her for free by a friend, never mind the six figures for which it sold. This is not an anomaly. Ordinary objects regularly sell for exorbitant prices. All they need is an extraordinary story or person affiliated with them, and consumers see added value. This is usually because the story makes an object that started out as one of a million to something that now only exists as one of one.

This led me to thinking that all I need to do to increase the price of something is to get it affiliated with an extremely well-known event or person. The problem with this is that I don't

[1] Gibbs, "JK Rowling's 'Harry Potter' chair sells for almost $400K."

know anyone with that kind of impact. I certainly don't have any sort of large outreach, myself. My total follower count across social media is less than 500. So I probably can't turn my $20 chair into half a million dollars, but how might I turn it into $50? My answer to this question was actually one of the topics that I was interested in throughout both semesters working on thesis: nostalgia. How can I tap into people's nostalgia in order to get them to see added value in something? What would those items be? How would I differentiate those items from the exact same things being sold on eBay everyday? These were the driving questions for what became the final form of my thesis project.

Before I go too far, I want to take a step back and explain why value is such an important part of this project. I didn't have much money as a child, so I always knew the value of a dollar. My parents always encouraged me to keep my Pokemon cards and other toys in the best condition possible in case they would be worth more money in the future. Over the years, however, I became impatient and started selling things of mine that I no longer saw value in. This included all of my Game Boys and games. I don't remember the exact amount, but I would say I sold everything for somewhere between $50-$100, which to me at the time was a lot of money, but now is not worth it at all. As I got older, I started to keep the boxes of everything I bought with any value: computers, phones, games, etc., knowing that in the future when I decided to sell and buy a newer version, they would be more valuable with the boxes than without. Eventually, I started selling other people's things. I would buy at auctions, garage sales, flea markets, wherever and sell online. It was only then that I realized how much more there was to these objects. They had owners, stories, and personal meanings. Most of these details died as soon as I sold the items because the buyer would see it out of context online. They didn't buy it

from the old man who bought it during the war or from the son of a man who went crazy. They bought it from a kid trying to make a quick buck. And I always thought these stories added a whole separate dimension to the objects, but I never knew how to turn that into value. I felt as though telling the stories, myself, could be manipulative and not factual because they weren't really mine to tell. However, this idea of everyday stories and background adding value to objects interested me.

How could my personal stories add to the value of objects that I had? I started to look at bootleg toys, a type of modern art form that sees ordinary, and often cheap objects, modified and branded in a way that they become culturally relevant, usually involving music, television, movies, and video games. Many of these references are nostalgic to people my age, involving PlayStation 2 games, Cartoon Network shows, and The Simpsons, and people are willing to spend hundreds if not thousands of dollars for these things. This got me thinking that personal stories dealing with something that is collectively nostalgic for many people could be used to increase the value of an object because the potential buyers could connect themselves to the stories being told. With this in mind, I decided that the Game Boys I had as a kid were the most likely items that I had close personal connections with that I could sell for above market price. And this became the jumping off point for the final form of my thesis project.

II. Contextualizing Concept

In conducting research for this project, I focused on four main topics, as mentioned before: nostalgia, storytelling, simulation, and value. I made a visual map (Figure 1) of this research, showing how these topics overlap. This map also includes exhibition layout, as that is a key part of the final form of my thesis. Nostalgia and storytelling sit at the center of the map, as

they reach into every sector. These two work closely to paint a picture for the user on how he or she should see the project. The storytelling, exhibition design, and simulation aspects work together to convince the viewer to believe the story they are being told. All of these aspects, combined, hopefully equate to an increased value of the objects for the viewer.

In researching projects similar to mine, I really focused on three main precedents to help guide my project. The three projects, while related in content, are described by their creators in much different ways, which seems to place them in very different areas of study. The first of these projects is "99¢ Futures" (Figure 2), a speculative design project by The Extrapolation Factory, a design-based research studio in Brooklyn, NY[2]. The project is described on their website as, "stories of possible future scenarios, each giving birth to a product concept that might be found in a 99¢ store of the future." Essentially, cheap, even worthless, objects were combined to create new pieces that were backed by a story of a possible future, which added value so that they could be sold later on.

While the intention of this project was not to increase the price of worthless objects, it was a byproduct, and an interesting aspect to the project as people did actually have to pay $1.08 to get their hands on one. This example is definitely the most researched and planned out of the three projects I looked at. This is similar to my project in that the value of an object, both monetary and otherwise, comes from the story that was added to it, as well as manipulation of the object itself. It differs, though, because the stories told by The Extrapolation Factory had little to nothing to do with personal connections to the objects, whereas mine deeply depends on

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[2] The Extrapolation Factory, "99¢ Futures."

the viewer having memories or nostalgia for what is being sold. Therefore, their stories must work as the sole driver toward a sale, while for my thesis, they are only complimentary.

The next project I looked to throughout the process of creating my thesis stands as almost an exact opposite to "99¢ Futures." "Aku By Euphoric Supply" by Julian Armstrong (Figure 3) is almost purely dependent on nostalgia. It is a relatively poorly manipulated toy, made from what seems to have once been a Star Wars action figure, that now resembles a character from the Cartoon Network show, *Samurai Jack,* which first aired in August, 2001. Its creator even describes it as, "a bootleg toy." However, his ability to connect with the collective nostalgia and culture of his peers has given him some notoriety, which allowed him to sell this on eBay for $102.50, plus shipping.[3] This is not the most expensive of his bootleg toys, either. He recently sold a similar quality action figure of Dennis Rodman from the 1995 MTV Awards (Figure 4) for $325.[4] However, I decided to focus on "Aku By Euphoric Supply" as my example because the age range for who he is touching in terms of nostalgia is practically identical to mine with this piece.

In addition to the figure, itself, another selling point for the toy was the packaging. The minimalistic background, showing the villain, Aku's, memorable face sparks instant memories in the viewer's brain, as well as elevating the mediocre toy to something that more closely resembles a collector's piece. It is from this that I decided to really focus on the packaging of my Game Boy games, making their physical presence larger and giving the viewer a better chance of connecting with the objects more quickly. The difference between my project and those of

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[3] Armstrong, "Aku by Euphoric Supply."

[4] Armstrong, "Dennis Rodman by Euphoric Supply."

Armstrong's is that his are purely visual and collective; he does not insert any sort of individual or written anecdotes into his pieces, and he depends solely on the uniqueness and cultural impact of what he's made in order to sell his product. I, on the other hand, depend fully on the stories of what I'm selling, as they can be bought for much cheaper elsewhere.

The third example sits somewhere between "Aku By Euphoric Supply" and "99¢ Futures" in terms of nostalgia and storytelling. *Significant Objects* is described as, "a literary and anthropological experiment devised by Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn, demonstrated that the effect of narrative on any given object's subjective value can be measured objectively."[5] Starting in 2009, objects were purchased from thrift stores for an average price of $1.25. Writers then wrote stories about the objects, depicting the incredible possible histories of the pieces. The first run of objects and their fictional counterparts were then uploaded to eBay, where the $128.74 worth of objects, sold for $3,612.51. Now, there is no way to say that the 2800% increase is solely due to the stories. Some of the items could have had inherent cultural value that also helped increase the prices. However, the consistency of the price increases imply that the stories definitely had an effect on the objects. It is this grey area that interests me so much. Why did a wooden rubber band gun (Figure 5), originally purchased for $1.50, sell for $63.50? Was it the story, describing how the rubber band gun had caused a man to lose his eye as a child, which he then kept in a jar of formaldehyde? Or was it because someone actually owned the gun as a kid and wanted to buy back a piece of their childhood for strictly nostalgic reasons? My guess is probably a combination of both. Someone probably clicked on the item for nostalgic purposes but then became infatuated with the story, which gave the gun additional value. This is the type

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[5] Glenn & Walker, "Significant Objects."

of experience that I wanted to create with my thesis: something that uses nostalgia to get someone to look, along with a story and interaction that gets them to stay interested and possibly buy.

III. Target Audience

Due to the specificity of the objects that I am using, the main target audience would be people who grew up playing Game Boys, especially the Game Boy Advance. This means that while people born between 1980 and 2002 in the USA, Europe, and Japan, will hopefully connect with it, it is really individuals born between 1990 and 1996 that will have the deepest connection with my project. This is because the Game Boy Advance was released in 2001 and the Game Boy Advance SP, in 2003. Those born between 1990 and 1996 would have been between five and thirteen when the consoles were released. I was born in 1995 and got my first Game Boy around age seven, putting me right in the core target audience. An obvious reason that I chose this target audience was because it is my own and true to my memories and what I'm nostalgic for. However, another reason is that this age group is now between twenty-two and twenty-nine years old. They are finally starting to get good paying jobs and are starting to have a little bit of disposable income. Therefore, they are more likely to buy items that make them nostalgic than they were only a few years ago.

The way twenty-somethings with disposable income will interact with my piece will be drastically different than, say, forty-something year olds, who would neither have had a Game Boy, themselves, nor had children old enough to have one. Twenty-somethings will ideally be attracted by the familiar typefaces, logos, and objects. They will experience the games both first-

hand through playing them, as well as through the notes I have written on the backs of the games and the tips and tricks they will receive by using the Scan Boy. Hopefully, they will relate their own experiences with the games to mine and be compelled to play, explore, and even buy.

Outside of the thesis show, I would like to see my project in a pop-up shop setting as one of many similar pieces. The Childhood Set, featuring Scan Boy & Printer would be the nostalgic storefront for Game Boy games, but there would also be other types of nostalgic objects for sale, as well, such as VHS tapes, CDs, Pokemon Cards, green ketchup, Lego, etc. The pop-up would serve as a time machine back to our childhoods, giving the target audience an escape from their current lives back to their previous ones. This type of all-encompassing environment would likely lead to an increase in sales and prices, as well, because there is a larger chance for the user to see something that they've forgotten and now cannot live without.

IV. Prototyping Process

Throughout the thesis process, my project took many forms. While all of the iterations revolved around the four areas of research I discussed earlier, especially nostalgia, they were all very different. The first prototype was a simulated machine learning piece that took images, mostly of nineties and early 2000s packaging design to make one image, which I then interpreted and made into a product myself (Figure 6). The problem with this was more about technological boundaries, as I didn't want to spend the time needed to source enough imagery and learn how to get the types of results I wanted from the machine learning algorithms. I wanted to focus on creating unique, yet slightly nostalgic items that people could play and interact with but found

that most of time would actually be spent doing more of the computer work, so I abandoned this idea of using machine learning and moved to Markov chains and word generation.

Instead of interpreting new product from images, I would simply have the computer write prompts for new toys, based on the toys that I played with as a child. I was actually successful in creating these types of responses, using Lego set titles (Figure 7), and even found some of them quite funny and charming. However, the idea seemed too disconnected from my own experiences, and didn't necessarily convince me to want to buy the objects. If I couldn't convince myself to buy something, then how did I plan on convincing others? For that reason alone, I decided to continue thinking about where exactly my thesis should go.

The next step in my process was a speculative project, where you could sell a memory, itself. I designed a digital store that resembled a video rental store from the early 2000s (Figure 8), which people could visit in a VR or a web environment and, hypothetically, buy other people's memories and experience them, similar to a movie or game. It was a speculative piece, so none of this would be real, but the idea was that you would purchase the memory, which would then be sent to you to be transported into your brain via some sort of wearable device. My issue with this was that the technology I was proposing was very similar to technology already used in popular science fiction, such as *Black Mirror*'s "Crocodile" and *The Twilight Zone*'s "The Mind of Simon Foster." So I decided to pivot the idea to edible memories instead.

This idea, which I called Memz, was an online marketplace, not dissimilar to eBay, where people could buy and sell their own emotional response sequences, which includes neuronal firings and chemical releases in the brain that could then be duplicated in someone else's brain by consuming something orally (Figure 9). They could sell in two tiers: the first would be the

responses, themselves, which would in turn be extracted from the owner's brain; the second tier

would be copies of the responses, which would be cheaper and allow the owner to keep the

original copy. This is similar to owning the rights to a movie, versus owning the DVD.

However, I struggled to figure out how I would actually create this marketplace in a way

that users could get a valuable, unique interaction with it. I decided that instead of making the

marketplace, I would instead create objects and stories from within the world that this type of

technology existed. This included a Portable Emotional Response Sequence Monitor, which

allowed someone to see which chemicals were releasing and which neurons were firing in real

time (Figure 10), among other ideas. Unfortunately, I found that the back story was too difficult

to tell in the amount of time that I wanted to tell it and decided to make my last big pivot.

For the last iteration before the final form, I decided I would make up a narrative that

weaved its way through a series of objects (Figure 11). The user could then uncover these

connections by interacting with the objects and put together a version of the narrative for

themselves. The story I decided on was that of a ten year-old boy, who died when he was hit by a

car near the campground where he and his dad were living. The audience would then scan his

different toys on this magical scanner that would then lead them to each page in his journal

where he mentioned that particular toy. This way the audience could see how these items affected

him in his daily life and unveil some truths about his death that weren't previously known. I

liked this idea, but I had two problems. The first was that I was struggling to figure out what the

story behind the scanner would be. It was cool, but there was really no other narrative reason for

it. The second issue I was having was that the narrative, itself, was very similar to my own life.

The toys were all toys I had as a kid, and while I didn't die, I did live on a campground around

age ten. This made me think that maybe I should just make the project autobiographical, instead of trying to fill in all the gaps between this fictional character and myself. It was from there that I finally moved into what is now the final form of my thesis project: The Childhood Set, featuring Scan Boy & Printer.

The current form is now built around the scanner, giving it a strong narrative presence. The idea is that Nintendo released a product line, called The Childhood Set, featuring Scan Boy & Printer (Figure 12), which is comprised up of both the Game Boy Advance and Game Boy Advance SP that I had as a kid, as well as all of the games. In addition, there are also the Scan Boy & Printer, which are only compatible with this new set and allow users to get tips and tricks that have been unlocked so far in the game simply by scanning the game case on the Scan Boy. Using RFID, the scanner reads which game it is and prints out a corresponding tip. These tips are only relevant for unlocked levels and serve as a form of on boarding for someone who is new to the game or hasn't played in a long time.

V. Evaluation

While I cannot be sure if I succeeded in my efforts to increase the monetary value of these objects to others until after the exhibition when people will have the chance to purchase them, I can say that I succeeded in creating a project that increased the value of these games for myself. My original plan was to just sell everything after the show was done in order in to recoup some of the money that I spent. However, after creating the cases and Scan Boy, as well as reminiscing on my experiences with the games, I don't think I could sell them for what they are worth online. They have become too valuable to me, which I hope is a similar effect the viewers

have. In addition to just adding value to the objects, I believe that I have achieved the goal of touching the four main topics that I have been looking at from the beginning. This idea to me was the perfect combination of my four main topics of research. It is nostalgic of what I had as a child, tells a story both through the tips and case designs, simulates a childhood experience, and, again, increases the value of the games themselves to me.

If I had more time, I feel as though I would've done some more research into what actually makes people buy something, especially if the price is high. The critics that I spoke with for final presentations mentioned that hiding the prices from the viewer could be a way to do it, as well as adding some sort of tiered system, similar to what I was thinking with Memz, where people could buy my custom version of the game for an inflated price or just a plain copy of the game for much less. I'm not convinced enough by these ideas to change my final form, but with more research into what makes people purchase things, I could definitely be swayed away from my current idea.

VI. Glossary

bootleg - imitation of something authentic.

Game Boy - 8-bit handheld game console manufactured by Nintendo between 1989 and 2003.

nostalgia - a sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place

       with happy personal associations.

provenance - a record of ownership of a work of art or an antique, used as a guide to authenticity

       or quality.

RFID - Radio-frequency identification (RFID) uses electromagnetic fields to automatically

       identify and track tags attached to objects.

simulation - imitation of a situation or process.

value - the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of
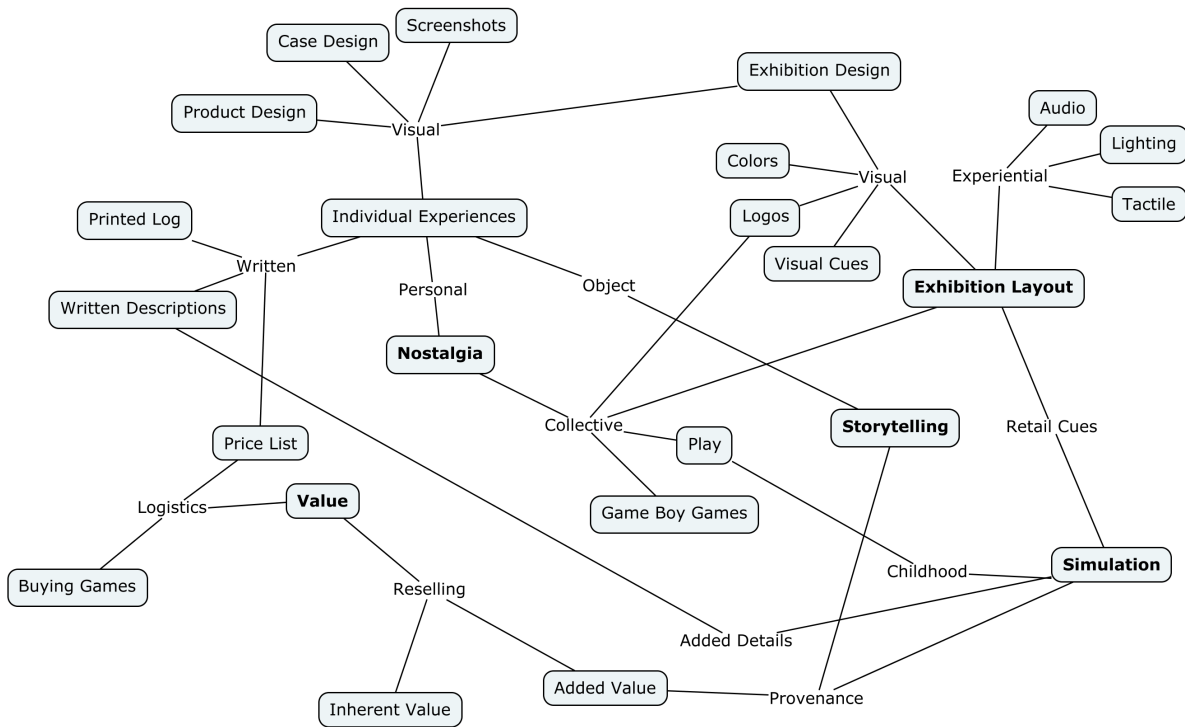
       something.

Images

Figure 1.

Figure 2.
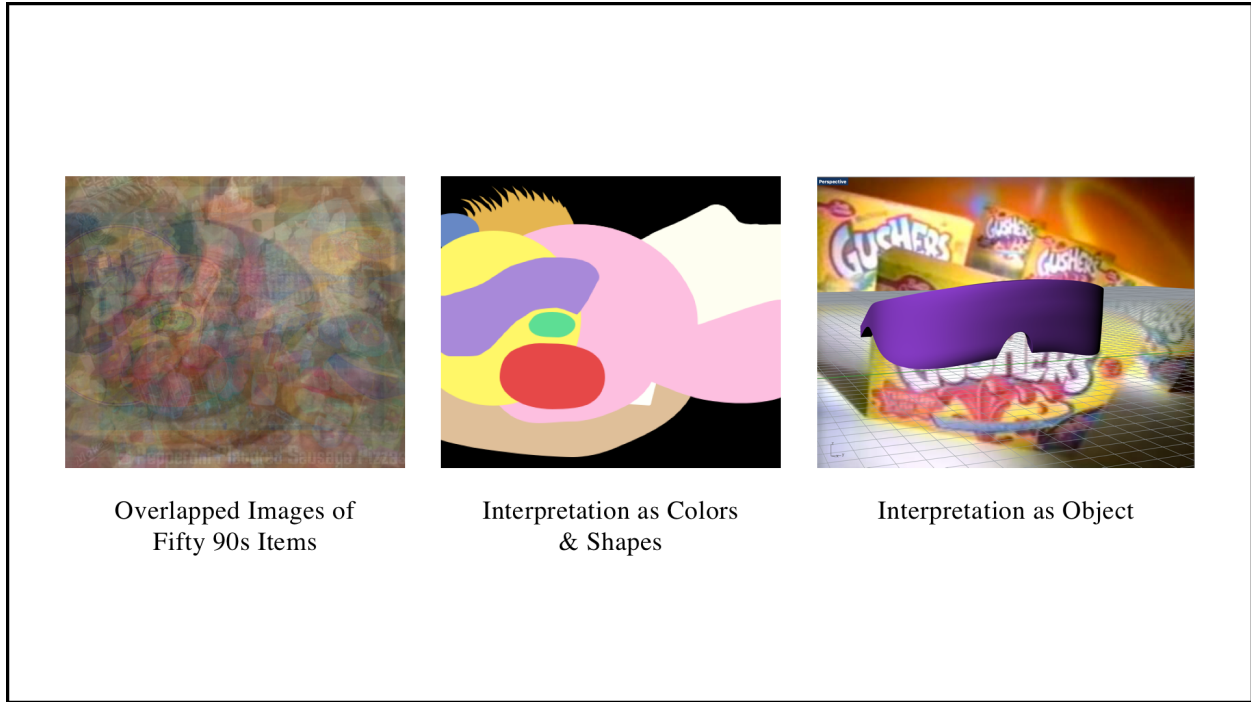
Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Overlapped Images of
Fifty 90s Items

Interpretation as Colors
& Shapes

Interpretation as Object

Figure 6.

Tugboat
Ferry
Cargo Ship
Container Ship
Fire Fighting Launch
Ambulance
Bungalow
House with Mini Wheel Car
House with Car
Fire Station
Garage with Automatic Doors
Swiss Chalet
Spanish Villa
Gravel Depot
Windmill and Lorry
Terrace House with Car and Garage
Police Heliport
Town Center Set with Roadways
Italian Villa
Fire House
Rocket Base
Gravel Works
Tea Garden Cafe
Windmill
Hospital
Harbour
Wild West
Space Module with Astronauts
Taxi Garage
Coast Guard Station
Police Headquarters
Tipper Truck
Sea Plane
Tow Truck
Offshore Rig with Fuel Tanker
Ambulance
Fire Engine
Refrigerator Truck and Trailer

Breakdown Truck and Car
Truck with Excavator
London Bus
Jeep with Steering
Air Ambulance
Excavator and Dumper
Payloader
Police Car
Fork Lift
Biplane
Tipper Truck
Police Units
Fork Lift
Learjet
Spirit of St. Louis
Rescue Units
Rescue Helicopter
Fire Truck
Mobile Crane
Formula 1 Racer
Truck with Payloader
Swiss Villa
Conveyor Station
Windmill
Hospital
Police Heliport
Moon Landing
Fire House
Brick Yard
Police Headquarters
Ambulance
Tow Truck
Fire Truck
Vintage Car
Excavator
Taxi
Tipper Lorry
Kiosk

Forklift
Cowboys
Police Helicopter
Rally Car
Fire Truck
Sell Tanker Truck
Baggage Trolley
White Car and Camper
Police Helicopter
Fire Truck
Double Excavator
Mobile Crane
Double Tanker
Milk Truck with Trailer
Mobile Site Office
Lorry with Girders
Service Station
Low Loader with Excavator
Car with Trailer and Racing Car
Tow Truck and Car
Forklift with Trailer
Ambulance and Helicopter
Crane Truck
Mobile Hydraulic Joist
Car and Caravan
Aircraft
Fire Engine
Police Patrol
Air Transporter
Spirit of St. Louis
Dump Truck
Hovercraft
TV Crew
Low-Loader with Crane
Low-Loader with 4 Wheel Excavator
Low-Loader and Tractor
Articulated Lorry
Low-Loader Truck with Forklift

Low-Loader with 4 Wheel Excavator
Low-Loader and Tractor
Articulated Lorry
Low-Loader Truck with Forklift
Truck with Trailer
Digger and Tippers
Caravelle Aeroplane
Shell Tanker
Grabber
Shell Garage
Rescue Helicopter
Road Repair Crew
Fire Engine
Transport Truck
Racing Car
Bus Station
Stage Coach
Boeing Aeroplane
Photo Safari
Wrecker with Car
Jeep CJ-5
Sea Plane
Steam Shovel with Carrier
London Bus
Rescue Set
Fire Fighter
Road Construction Set
Sterling Super Caravelle
Sterling Baggage Train
Sterling Boeing 727
Sterling Airways Aircraft
Airliner
Biplane
Factory
Airliner
Aeroplane
Maersk Line Container Ship
Front-End Loader

Hovercraft TV Crew

Shovel with Fire

Helicopter Rally Car

Girders Service Station

Heliport Moon Landing

4 Wheel Excavator

Cowboys Police Headquarters
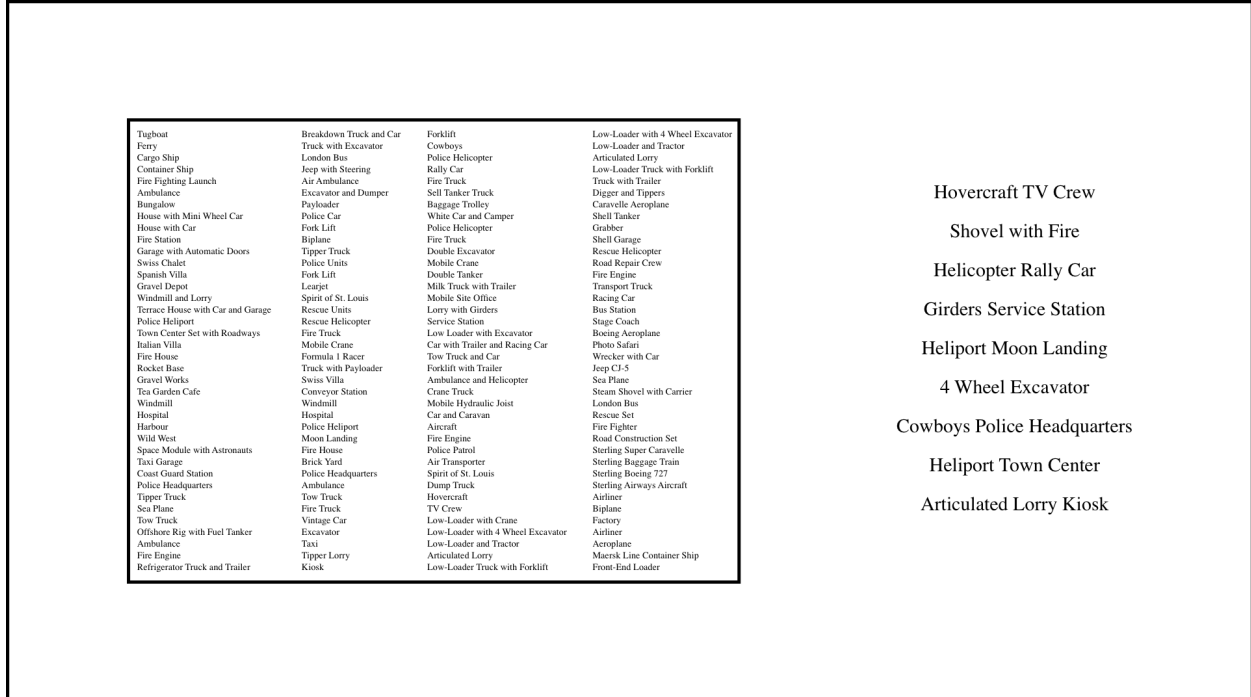
Heliport Town Center

Articulated Lorry Kiosk

Figure 7.

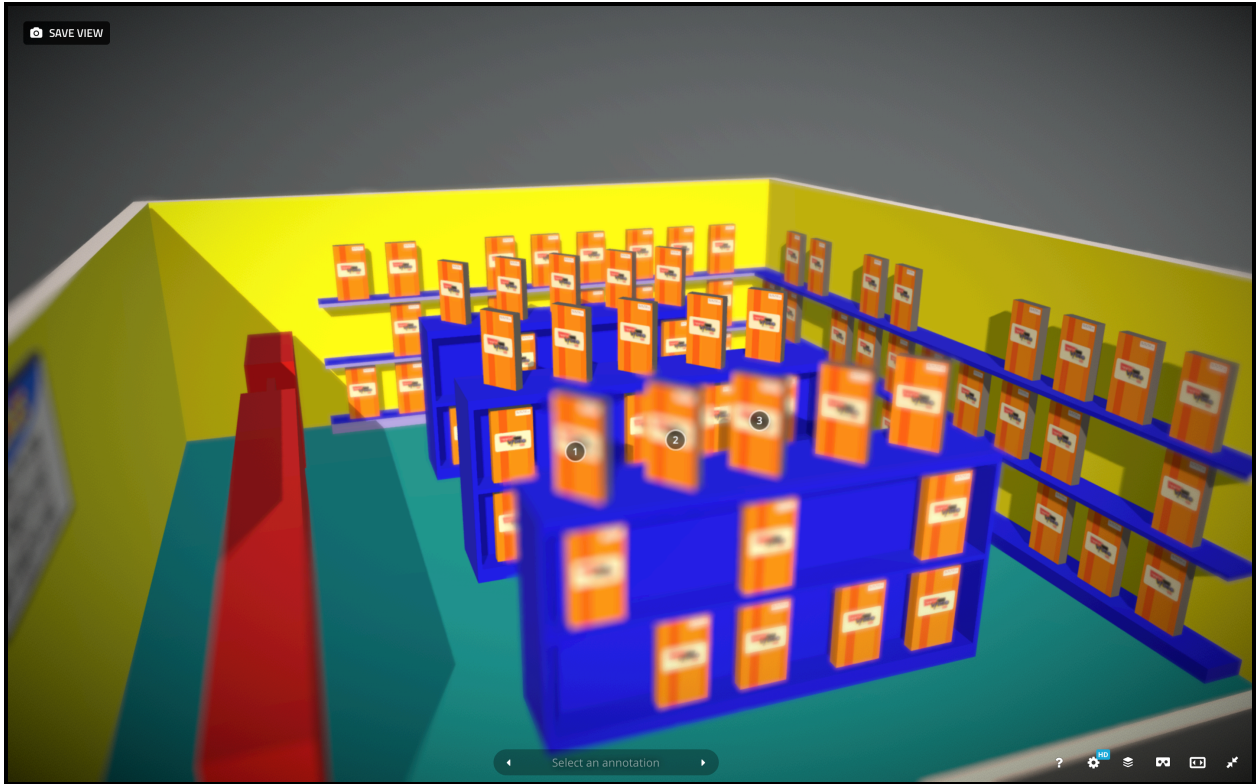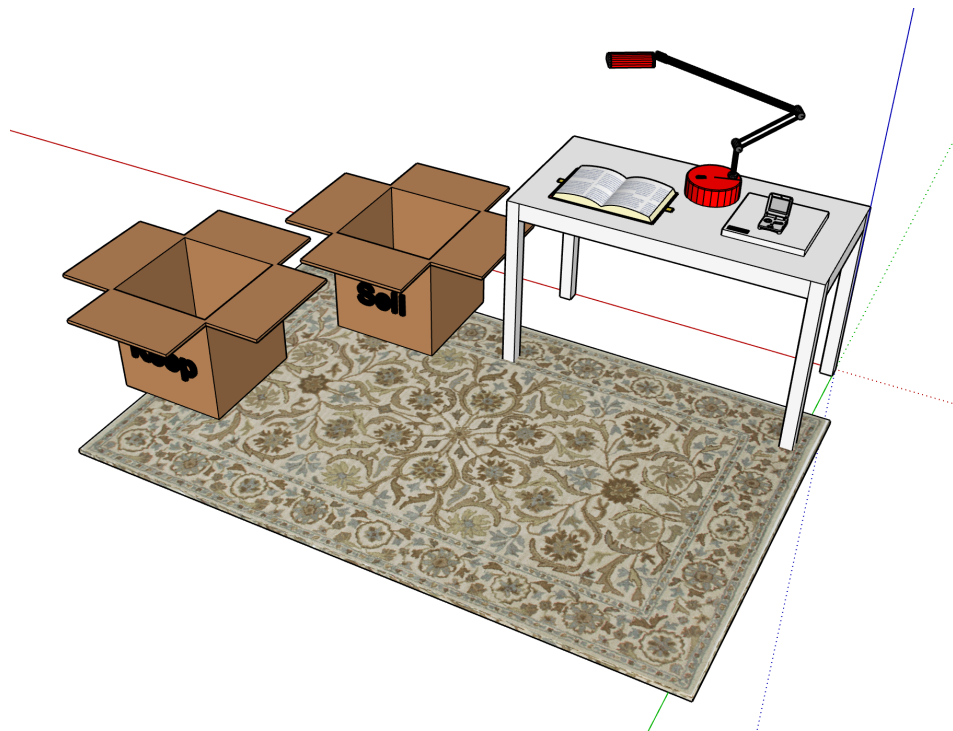Figure 8.

Figure 9.

Figure 10.

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

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