Mark Molnar

BEHIND THE PIXELS

From Sketches to Polished Concept Design

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Tutorial **Online Video** **Link**

Introduction

I have been drawing as long as I can remember. I was fortunate because my parents were also artistic and instead of pushing me towards being a doctor or engineer, they encouraged me to get into drawing at quite an early age.

I started to learn the basics of drawing from life when I was twelve and was hooked from the first moment.

I still remember my first drawing class. The teacher put a small red ball on the ground in the middle of the room and asked us to simply watch the ball for ten minutes. After the exercise he asked what happened during that ten minutes. At first nobody understood what he wanted then, slowly, the class began to mention different things: birds outside, sounds of people at the front of the room, change of light, our changing postures, etc. With that really simple exercise he showed us that nothing exists on its own and everything is connected to the world around it. I still keep this in mind for every concept design and piece of artwork I create.

The idea of this book started five or six years ago. To force myself to draw more and get better, I came up with a daily sketch challenge for myself. Besides my work, I had to do one pencil sketch every day, for a 1000 days. I never thought I could actually do this, but after a couple of months it became a habit and I finished my little challenge without missing one single day. Right from the start I wanted to create a book from those sketches, so that the challenge would have a real goal, but as I did the challenge I also experimented with digital speed-paintings as well. So I thought it would be good to include finished artwork in the book and then maybe show the rest of the process as well – and the list just got bigger and bigger.

When I began working in concept art and digital illustration: there weren't any tutorials; Gnomon and Ca.org had barely started; and I did not even have internet connection at home. I remember saving images onto a pen-drive for inspiration at my university. I teamed up with a couple of friends and we tried to learn from each other and through our own failures. I went to an art university, so was lucky to learn all the fundamentals of art and design there, but I had to learn everything about concept art and illustration on my own. That was the period when I promised myself I would try to give back my knowledge to this community as much as I can.

You can get most of the technical knowledge online now, but very few people talk about the actual thinking process behind artwork. You can find a lot of resources about HOW you can do things, but nobody tells you WHY. The problem is that as a concept artist or designer you will not just be hired to create pretty pictures, you will be hired to create the world and the reasons behind it.

Dune – Arrakeen Guard © Mark Molnar

In this book I am going to show the most common steps of a production workflow from the viewpoint of a production artist and explain the importance of each step.

What I have done is try to create the book what would have been the most useful to me when I started in the industry. I hope you find it useful too.

Mark

Rooftop View © Mark Molnar

What is concept design?

Concept art or concept design is a form of production illustration to visualize an idea for films, video games, animation and comic books. It is also getting widely used in other fields, like advertising, music videos, theatrical and concert productions and theme park development.

I would like to handle the two terms separately, because they have a different place in the industry in my experience.

Concept art is much closer to the field of illustration and is used to establish a general visual direction for a project. This includes a lot of experimental artwork about various moods, environments, characters, creatures, vehicles, and so on. It mainly focuses on creating inspiration for the production and on coming up with unique ideas.

This phase usually happens even before the production of a project starts and blends into the early stages of pre-production.

Most of the time the images published in "Making of" art books are like this, or are carefully tailored production artwork that shows the best possible side of the actual project. This can be misleading for beginner artists, as this is not what the industry is about – this is only 10-15% of the actual job.

Concept design is creating the actual production artwork and it is much closer to industrial design, set design, costume design, make-up design and VFX/ special effect design. It is called "design", because the created artwork has to serve a certain function in the production. This type of artwork is usually far less pretty than concept art because it is intended to visually communicate the ideas of the director and art director to the production team as accurately as possible.

There are a lot of different techniques for this from a simple collection of reference photos organized onto mood-boards to the detailed and polished 2D or 3D designs of various parts of the project.

This phase of production art creation starts in the pre-production period and runs until the very end of post-production ending with concept designs for VFX and visualizing final adjustments on the look of the game, film, or animation.

I should also mention marketing art, which is somewhere between concept art and illustration. Each production needs this type of artwork at various stages of the development, but it's more commonly used in game production, where the marketing materials are usually created by the production company. In the case of movies and other types of production the marketing is handled by the distributor and the art is created by global advertising agencies.

Marketing art is purely about aesthetics; showcasing the main characteristics of the product using materials created during the production phases.

What is the job of a concept artist?

The main job of a concept artist is to help visualize the project (script of a film / animation, world of a game, etc.) or to help visualize the ideas of the director and art director. The key point here is this not just coming up with nice artwork and functional designs that are visually appealing to the audience, but to save money – and that's probably the most important part from the production point of view. It is simply much more budget-effective to experiment with different designs in a 2D or rough 3D form before starting the actual production period.

The tools used in the industry change all the time, but this doesn't mean that one is better than the other. Digital painting and sculpting software are industry standard now, but you can be fine creating marker sketches, if you can communicate your ideas most clearly that way.

The daily work of a concept artist depends on the phase the production is in and varies from doing sketches and rough speed-paintings to creating detailed designs of production assets or painting marketing illustrations.

This book roughly follows the structure of this workflow starting with early pre-production techniques and finishing with post-production needs.

Afro Samurai © Mark Molnar

Rough break down of concept artwork based on production phase:

Pitch (Pre-pre-production) Phase:
Sketches and speed-paintings
Mood concepts and key frame concepts
Mood-boards and reference boards

Pre-production Phase:
Speed-paintings and color studies
Sketch, thumbnail and silhouette development
Line drawings and composition sketches
Mood and environment concepts
Character and creature concepts
Vehicle designs

Production Phase:
Environment and set design
Costume design and design of accessories
Vehicle and prop design, and blueprint creation
Make-up and practical FX design

Post-production Phase:
Matte painting and set extension design
VFX design
Digital make-up design
Design of digital color corrections
Marketing art

Concept art in today`s entertainment industry

"Concept art, the phrase conjures up everything from medieval worlds to epic space battles. It is the culmination of 100 years of illustration, architecture and production design. Concept design evolved from an illustration service to being the blueprint for most virtual characters and environment designs now. Its role has increased in visibility and prestige logarithmically. The speed and skill at which designs are derived nowadays is almost incomprehensible in the days of watercolor illustration of set and costume design. But the key component in concept design IS design."

Robh Ruppel – Art Director at Naughty Dog

"Concept Art & Visual Development is one of the most integral "Communication" building blocks in the Entertainment Industry. Without the inception of Narrative Visual Storytelling the Production wouldn't have a foundation to stand on. Whether it being for Feature Films, Animation, Theme Park Design, Stage Design, and Video Games; there wouldn't be a focal point for the viewers to engage on. Lighting Design, Location Design and Costume Design are all facets in the larger gear of Visual Development and concept art. Concept Artists create hundreds of drawings, paintings, sculptures, and models before anything is green lit and the production goes into effect. These ideas are turned into reality and are carefully executed by the exacting team that works in conjuction with the Conceptual Design Team. As the tools such a software changes, so will the adaptation of design; and the demands needed in the Production Design. It's a carefully implemented art form that should be invisible to the viewer at the end of its process. The craftsmen has done his/her best work when there is no question why a film, game or ride is the way it is. That is when the concept becomes real, it has taken on a life of its own. Concept Design is Visual Communication."

Jason Scheier – Entertainment Design Instructor at Art Center College of Design and Senior Concept Designer at EA Digital Illusions

"Concept art, especially in today's market of video games and entertainment properties, has increased in value dramatically. Its value in ideation and concept exploration is unequaled in the production pipeline for modern IP development. Other than the facts, some of my greatest heroes are all concept gods: Iain McCaig, Robh Rupple, Daniel Dociu, and so many more... They are the folks that inspire me, motivate me, and give my dreams wings."

Jon Schindehette – Creative Director at ThinkGeek Solutions, Founder of ArtOrder

"A concept artist is an explorer, using their imagination to find a world that we have never visited before. Once they have found the key to this world, a doorway is opened for the rest of the team to step through."

Tameem Antoniades – Creative Director at Ninja Theory

"The ability to deliver story in an efficient and emotional manner is the business of the concept artist. We are at the vanguard of establishing the emotional experience of any movie or game."

Carlo Arellano – Art Director at SuperEvil Megacorp and Instructor at Concept Design Academy

"Concept art is the best creative job there is. All of the fun of coming up with sexy ideas, depicting them in a cool way and leaving it to others to see it through! Concept artists are like chefs who come up with ideas for recipes, but don't have to actually cook. (Btw, thanks 3D guys for making the actual games!)"

Shaddy Safadi – Art Director at One Pixel Brush

"I think the industry is growing at a rapid pace that has never been seen before. Just 20 years ago not many actually knew the term 'concept artist'. Now, students all over the world dream to have a career in this industry. My advice to make it into this industry would be to work hard, never give up, and more importantly have fun!"

James Paick – Art Director at ScribblePad Studios and Instructor at Concept Design Academy

Chapter 01:

Sketches

Importance of life drawing

Although I started life drawing at a really early age I still feel I have a lot to learn about the fundamentals, like anatomy, perspective, composition and color theory. To understand why drawing from life is important in this industry, we have to simplify it a bit. I always say to my students, who think concept art as creating technical illustrations about an imagined world: the rules of that imagined world can be different, but we cannot change human perception. For example we are used to seeing the world in perspective; we somehow know if the anatomy of a person is not right; or what time of day a certain temperature of sunlight shows. We simply have to follow these rules (or consciously break them) to be able to communicate our ideas in the best way. And the best way to learn the fundamentals of the world around us is simply to draw it.

study © Mark Molnar

Kan Muftic:

"Drawing figure from life is an ancient old practice – possibly one of the oldest in the history of painting. And one of the most popular tools to do that is, and always was, charcoal. Made from ashes in our primal caves, this tool is as popular as ever. It is very hard to use but if used right, the results are beautiful. In fact, some say it is a drawing tool that 'paints'.

"Learning how to use charcoal means that one needs to be focused and to take time to make decisions about where to place strokes, and this is probably the best way to get better at drawing and very likely the reason why charcoal is used in art schools across the world."

You don't have to go to art school to start practicing life drawing. Just start with the objects around you. A couple of books, an old vase, or even a simple everyday object like your mobile phone or game console controller can be your subjects. Use your desk lamp to set up a constant light source and try to vary the materials and shapes of the chosen objects to keep your subject interesting.

After that you can move to drawing your furniture as a perspective exercise and your room in different times of the day or the view from your window to study various lighting conditions and more complex compositions. Remember, everything and anything can be the source of your inspiration.

studies © Mark Molnar

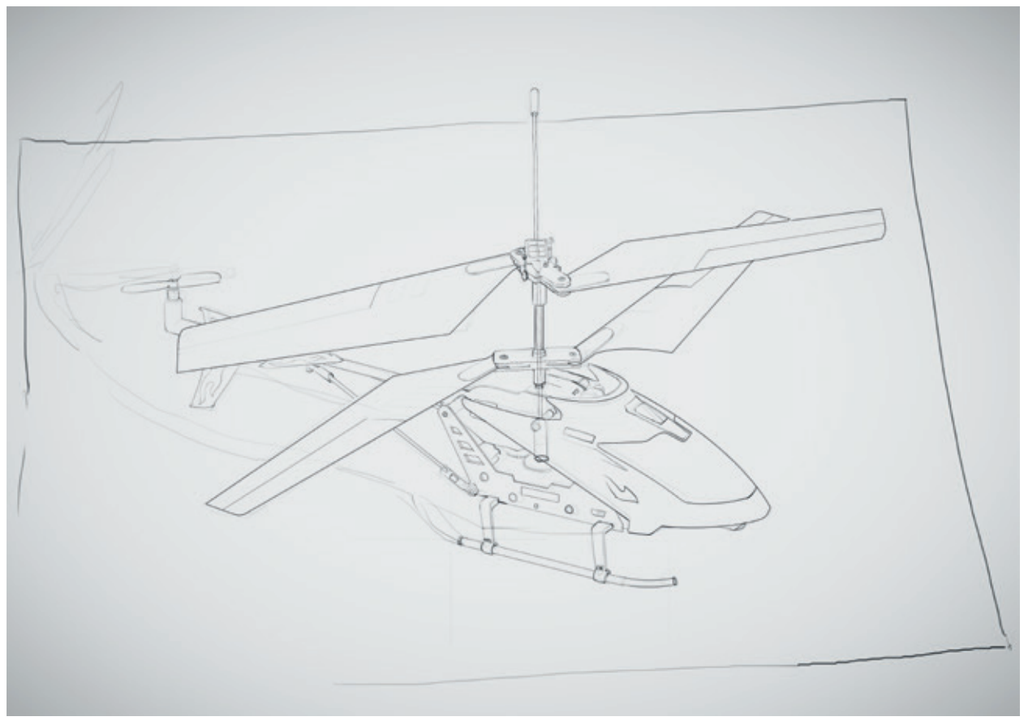
plain air sketch © Ben Leon

study © Kan Muftic

plain air sketch © Ben Leon

Tutorial by Alex Negrea | alexnegrea.daportfolio.com

Still Life Study



Heli Copy © Alex Negrea

Heli Copy © Alex Negrea

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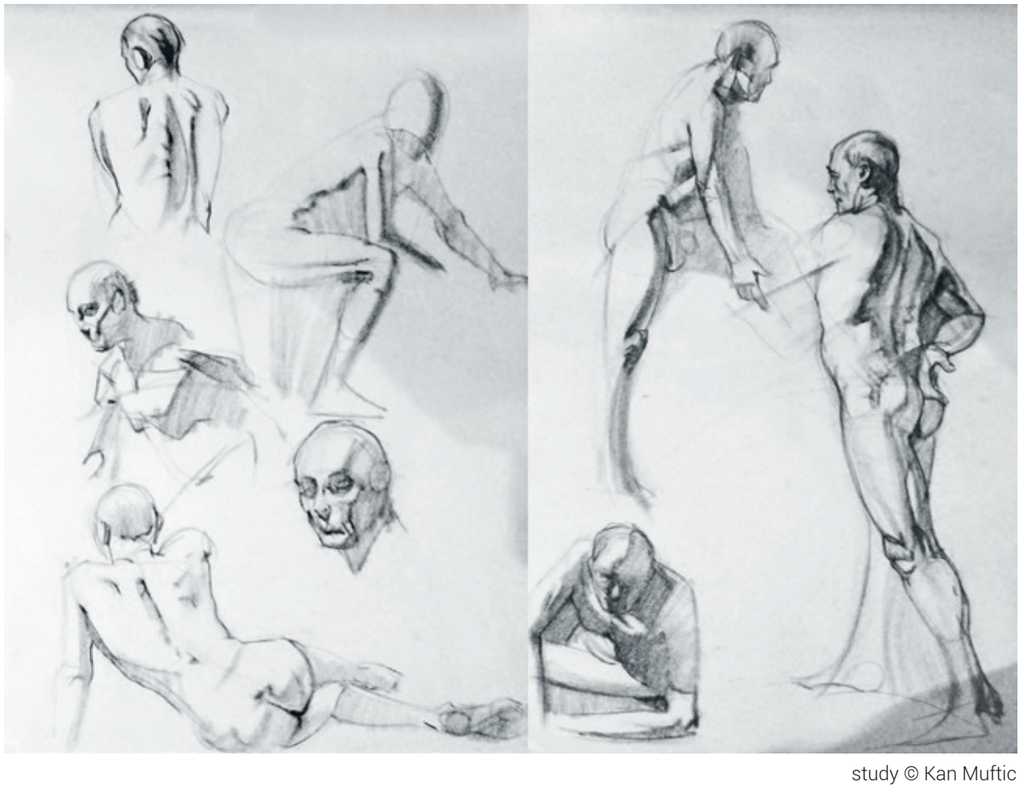


study © Kan Muftic

Applying your studies to production designs

Most life drawing and painting can be directly applied to concept designs.

The next step is taking your studies further and using the same knowledge as references to establish your designs or bring your artworks to the next level. Using a certain shape language or anatomical base could be a good cue to remind the viewer of a real world reference, which could make your design even more believable.

In Search of Sunrise © DarekZabrocki

Tutorial by Alex Negrea | alexnegrea.daportfolio.com

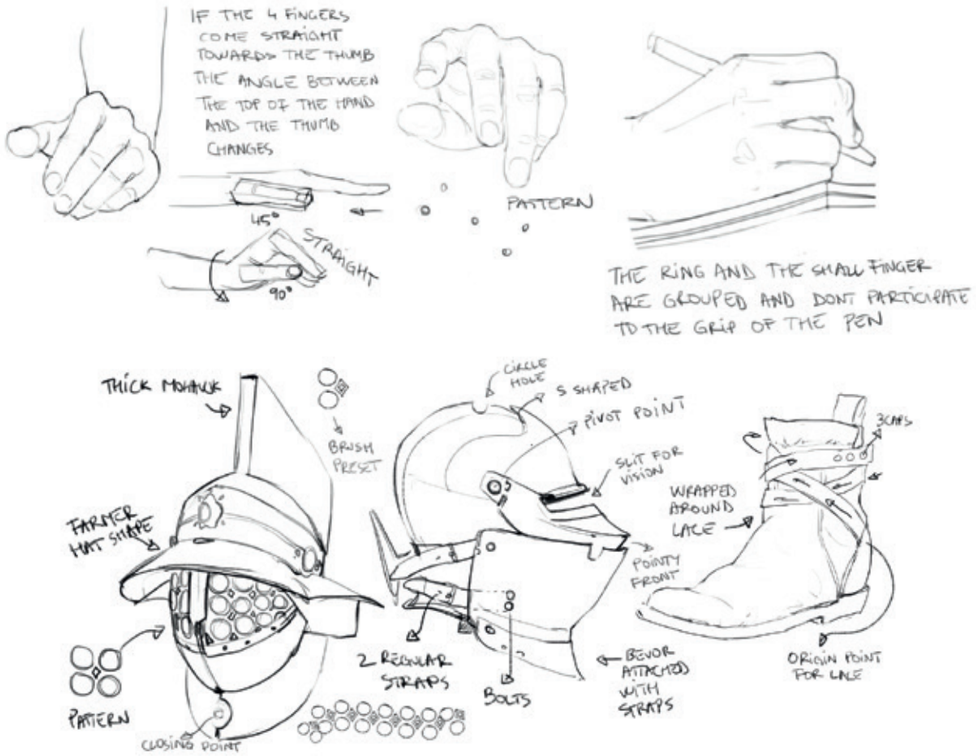
How to improve your character design skills

When I started drawing, I soon realized I had a certain go-to model I was drawing over and over again. It was really close to a standard T pose that you see in 3D model presentations. That was because I had no understanding of the movement of the human body. The key to break that habit was a really simple one. Gestures!

You can create them anywhere as long as you have something to draw with. I prefer to do them on my computer because I have built a big collection of images I constantly reference and draw from. The only rule I have for them is the time limit. I set the time to 60 seconds because I feel this is the shortest time I need to capture a body pose. I avoid thinking about details such as hands, feet or portrait. I recommend doing a page of gestures each day, no excuses! The gestures that I am doing look something like this.

I also recommend after each full page of gestures drawing a few poses completely from imagination. This will make you focus even more on the gestures you are doing. It's pretty easy to let your mind wander and not learn anything after you get used to this exercise. Knowing that you have to do some quick drawings will give you an extra awareness that will allow you to remember much better poses. Here are a few examples:

I spend longer on these drawings since it's a bit harder to come up with a pose from imagination. But still I don't go over 5 minutes. You have to realize you are faster than you believe. If you do



these exercises for a month on a daily basis you will see some great improvement in your drawings. The key is to not stop doing them.

To better capture a great character you can start breaking the big figure into smaller parts. Because of space reasons I will talk only about the hands now. The same thing goes for portraits, feet, ears, eyes etc. The same thing I do with the gestures I do for all these smaller parts. The only difference here is that I don't really have a time limit because I like to note things down as I observe them and that takes extra time. Here is an example.

Each day give yourself from 30 minutes to an hour and draw a certain part of the body that you have trouble with. The more you do these exercises the better you will get. Also a good tip would be to keep a mirror near you all the time. Sometimes when you look at a picture you can't really understand what you are seeing. Trying to imitate the action in the mirror might reveal to you some really important detail.

The next step would be to study what humans wear. For this step it's important to go online and search for specific items like: armor, weapons, hats, pants, hairstyles, etc. My weapon of choice is Tumblr. There are many pages created with these specific keywords. All you have to do is google "keyword" + Tumblr and you will find some great collections. And since these studies are meant for me to build a visual library I don't set a time limit for studying them. I really like to analyze them properly and to write my observations down.

OK, now it's time to have some fun! All these studies might get boring at some point. The way I keep myself on purpose is by doing drawings from imagination to see how much I have learned. Every time I do it I realize how important the studies are and how much they have helped me improve myself as a character artist. Here are a few examples of imagination drawings based heavily on gestures and wearable items.

Now let's talk about rendering for a bit. This is not meant to be a finished render but it should do the trick if you want to show some quick color

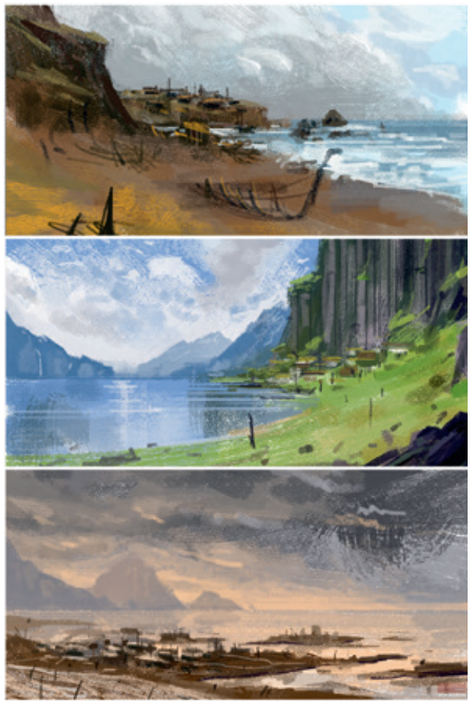
version to the client or art director. First you have to make a selection that defines the edge of the character and fill it with a color. This will be the layer that we're going to use to extract further shapes as the armor, straps, skin and so on. Make selections for these groups of elements and extract them from the base layer. To show some volume just duplicate the base layer, fill it with white and paint with black where surfaces touch or where you assume that light can't get in and once you are finished set that layer on multiply over all your other layers. If you want to add light sources, again duplicate the base layer, fill it with black and set it to linear dodge(add) mode and on it paint with a brush set on linear dodge(add) mode. This should take you a few hours max. Once you are done with everything you might want to add some textures to make it look more natural. And TADAA! You are ready to send it for approval to get permission to fully render it.

A few thoughts:
If you are a starting artist, there are no excuses to stop drawing. Everyone has to start somewhere and the drawings you do in the beginning won't be great. I created my own fair share of ugly drawings when I was starting out. The learning process is heavily based on making mistakes. Only then you will know what your problems are. Once you know the problem you can start looking for an answer.

When I started drawing I was doing studies because I saw other people doing studies. But I wasn't sure what I was studying. For example I would study environments and then I would paint robots from imagination. They don't really connect as you can imagine. I learned that it's better to start with a drawing from imagination to see what problems you really have and then go and study those problems. Start breaking big problems (for example, can't draw a full character) into small problems and tackle them one at a time (e.g. portrait, pose, weapon, clothing, etc). Make sure you set some time aside for your studies. Many of you might already have full time jobs. But if you really want to get better at your craft you have to make sacrifices.

One final thing: You really have to do these studies regularly, and make a habit of them. If you stop you will start to lose whatever it was that you were working on.

Alex



environment sketches © Mark Molnar

Soldier Portrait © Mark Molnar

Desert Road © Mark Molnar

The Last Fort © Mark Molnar

Building a visual library

The more you study from life and the more you draw certain subject matter, the bigger your imagined visual library gets and the easier it will be to draw things from memory and imagination.

NodeWorld Line Drawing © Mark Molnar

In the case of memory we are not just talking about remembering, but when you draw a thing it also becomes a muscle memory. You can train your memory with drawing pretty much anything, but this can be channeled towards a certain subject matter really easily.

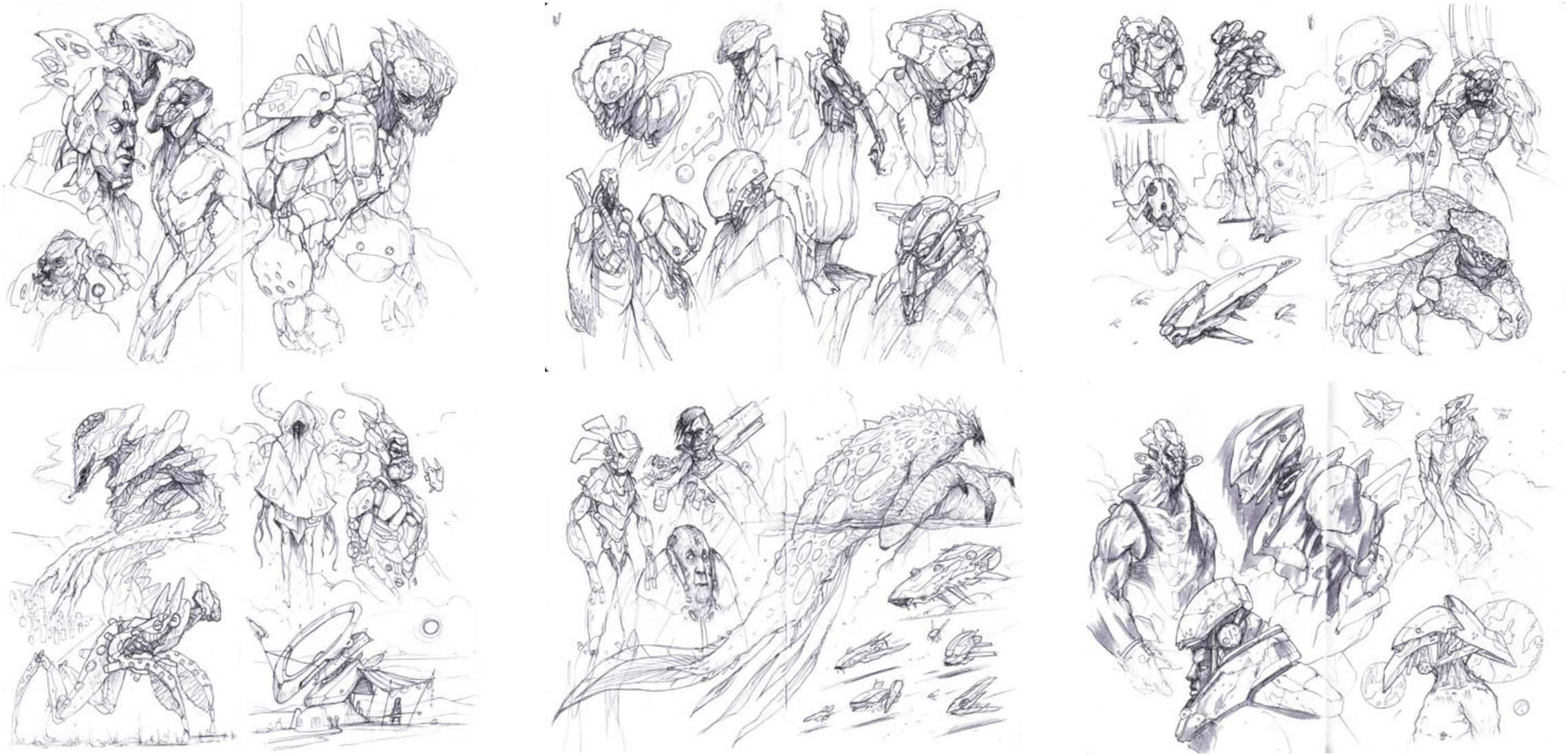
For example, before I started working on one of my previous projects based in the early medieval period, I did digital studies of Scandinavian and Icelandic landscapes which were close to the mood I had in mind. In addition I did quick and rough composition thumbnails of ruined forts and castles in my sketchbook with pencils and markers. This preparation not only helped me get into the right mood for the production paintings, but contained the hard part of the visual research – already done. Painting the concept artwork went much faster, because I already had a clear image of the subject in mind.

You don't have to handle this that seriously though, I am trying to build my visual library just sketching around and having fun. It really helps me to sketch out ideas effortlessly, it could be useful for my future projects and help in solving visual or compositional problems really easily.

These sketches can vary from simple rough thumbnails and composition exercises to more polished designs. Try to start with something in your surroundings, see what sparks an idea and let that idea evolve. Sketching without any purpose may not come naturally at first, at least it didn't for me. I had to push myself consciously into coming up with different themes and topics for myself every time I wanted to sketch. A good technique or rule is to always sketch something totally different than your previous drawing. You have drawn a skinny zombie dude before? Let's create a fat astronaut girl then! The key is to keep yourself entertained and to have fun.

NodeWorld – line drawing © Mark Molnar

© David Sequeira



NodeWorld Sketches © Mark Molnar

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

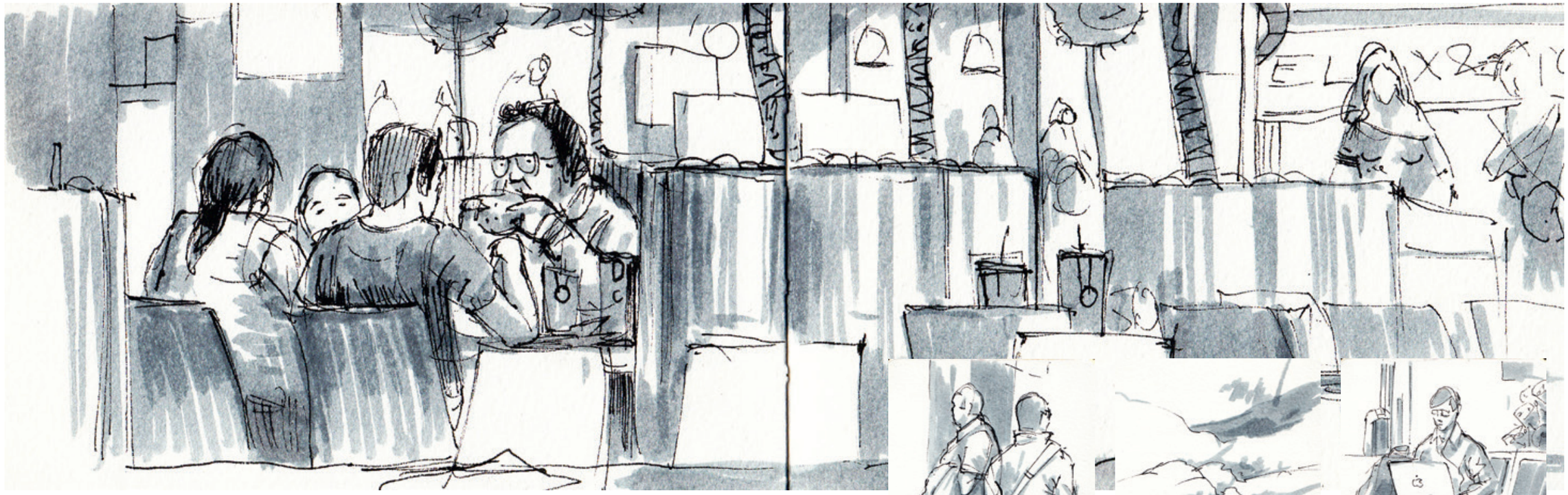
Brainstorming for NodeWorld

Nodeworld was an online fan project organized by a loose group of artists after the success of its fantasy themed predecessor, Substrata. It was a creative exercise to design a fictional game universe in a cyberpunk world. Every artist imagined this world differently and interpreted on their own way. Unfortunately the project was cancelled for various reasons, but doing the sketches and other designs and illustrations were really useful to strengthen my creative muscles.

I already started some personal experiments with an idea, what takes place in the far future in the outer regions of the colonized space. I imagined that strange hybrid creatures inhabit these planets, coming from various humanoid, alien and more animalistic ancestors. All the characters are using high end technology to support their explorations in these new worlds and most of them has cybernetic implants. As they are relatively new cultures they also have a tribal vibe representing the fresh start of the colonies.

After summarizing the general direction for myself, I took my sketchbook and simply started to draw based on my first impressions. I know it is strange that I do not gather any references, like in my professional works, but I start most of my personal projects like this. The process helps me to spark new ideas and to come up with unexpected design choices. I can create without the limitations and restrictions of other imagery and simply experiment around freely.

These are a selection of the sketchbook pages I worked on before even touching my computer.



Sketchbooks

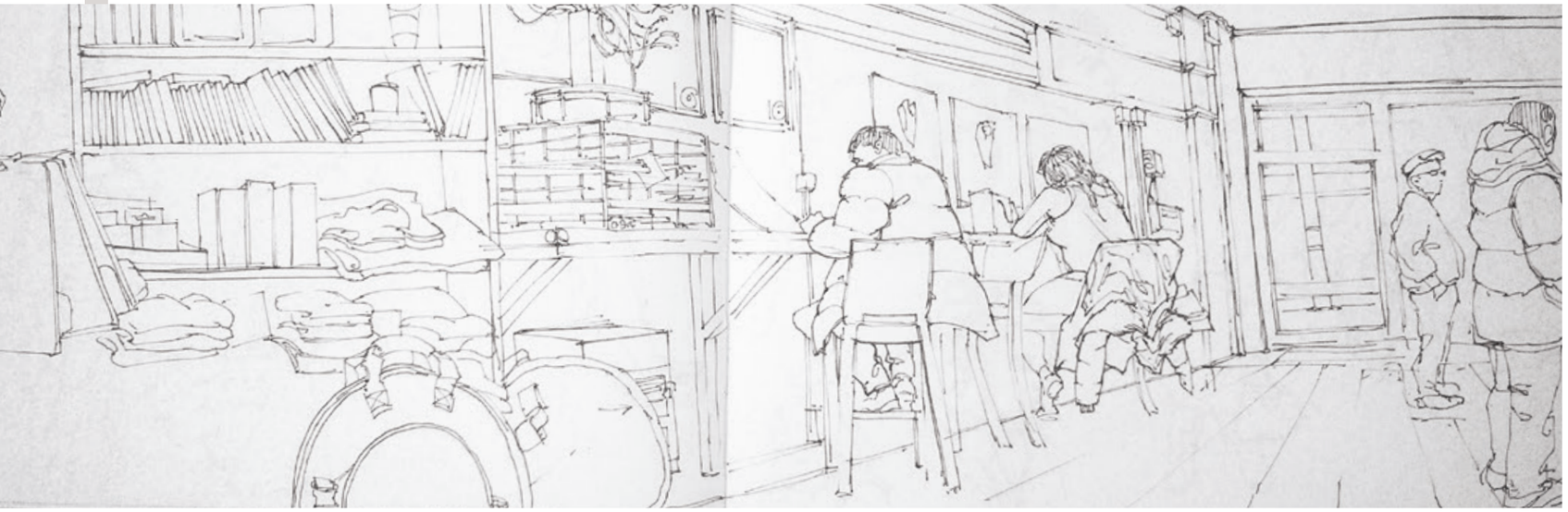
I always kept sketchbooks with me (when I remember) and although I am doing far less sketching than I used to I still think it's a great little tool to spend the "downtimes" of your day with something useful. Just think about all the time you spend on a bus or train each day or the valuable minutes you're waiting for someone at a cafe. You can also use the leftover half an hour of your lunchbreak for sketching instead of flipping through the endless stream of your preferred social media platform. Or are you bored watching a movie your girlfriend / boyfriend really wants to see?

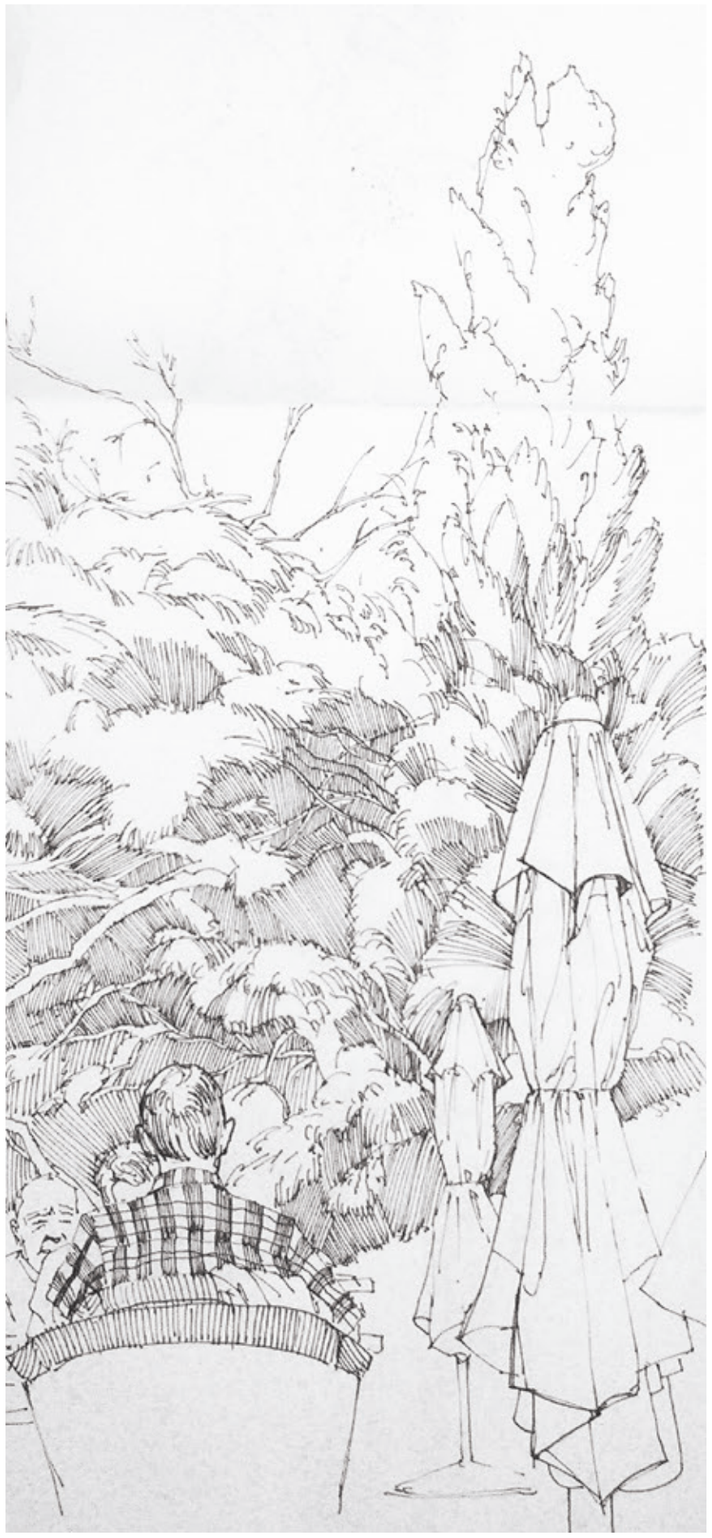
There was a time when I went a bit overboard with my sketching habit. I had a sketchbook beside my bed, one in the toilet, one in my jacket, one at work, and so on. I had a sketchbook basically everywhere I could possibly have a bit time to draw. Now I only keep two sketchbooks and they are both with me most of the time.

I use a really small one for doing life-drawing sketches on the go, I use it on the street, in cafes, buses, airports, etc. The function of this is simply practice. I don't want to create the prettiest line drawings, I just draw what I see. Streets, cars, nature, people, everything and anything can be inspiring around you.

My other sketchbook is slightly bigger, but it still fits into even my smallest bags easily. I use that to sketch out ideas for my actual projects and to just simply doodle around from imagination. This is one of the ways how I build my visual library.

Airport Sketching © Mark Molnar





Tutorial by Kan Muftic | kanmuftic.blogspot.com

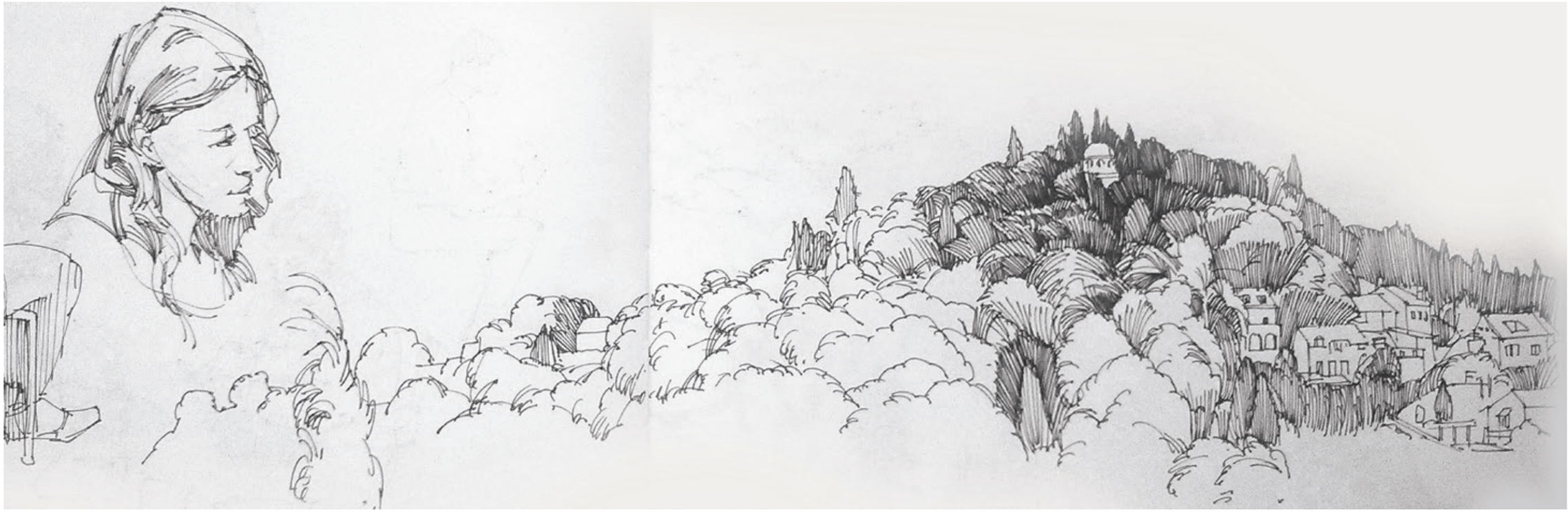
The Art of Urban Sketching

"My sketchbook is my drawing gym. I carry it everywhere and I don't miss any opportunity to pull it out and draw whatever is in front of me. In most cases, when I draw, I am uncomfortable, standing in the rocking London Underground train, or hunched on a bench in a park. Sometimes it's very cold, rainy or grim outside. I am using a 0.1 pen which doesn't allow for many mistakes and, very much like charcoal, forces me to think before I draw. Which is why I really like going to fancy coffee shops to draw the interiors and people. I find that this kind of sketching really helps get my client work sketched and laid out easily – a very important aspect of my work."

sketch © Mark Molnar

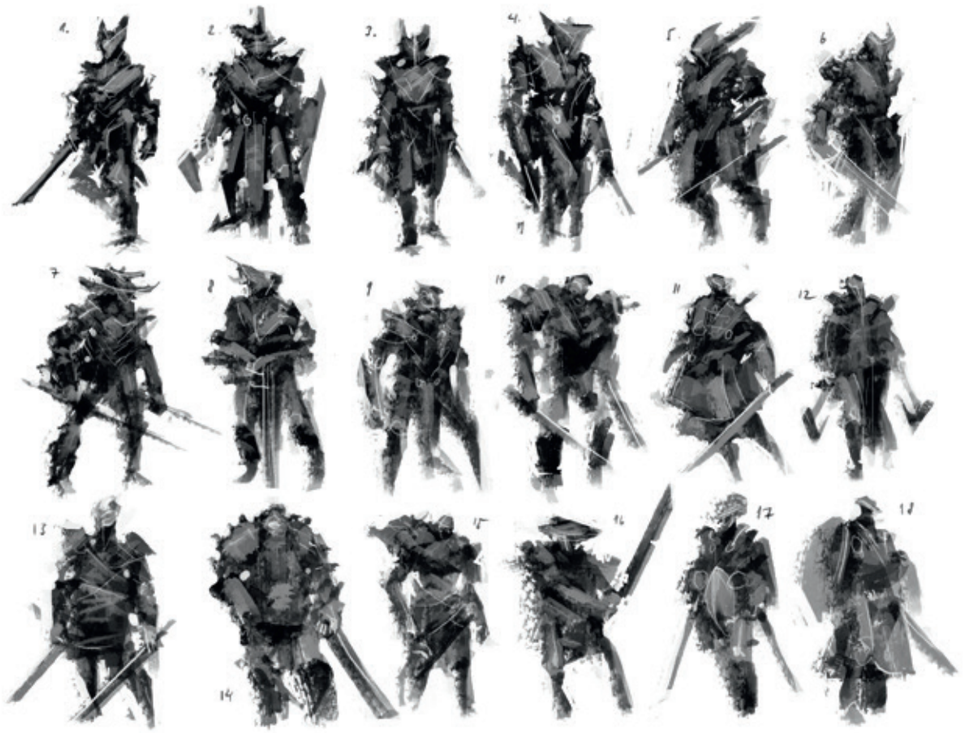
sketch © Mark Molnar

sketch © Kan Muftic

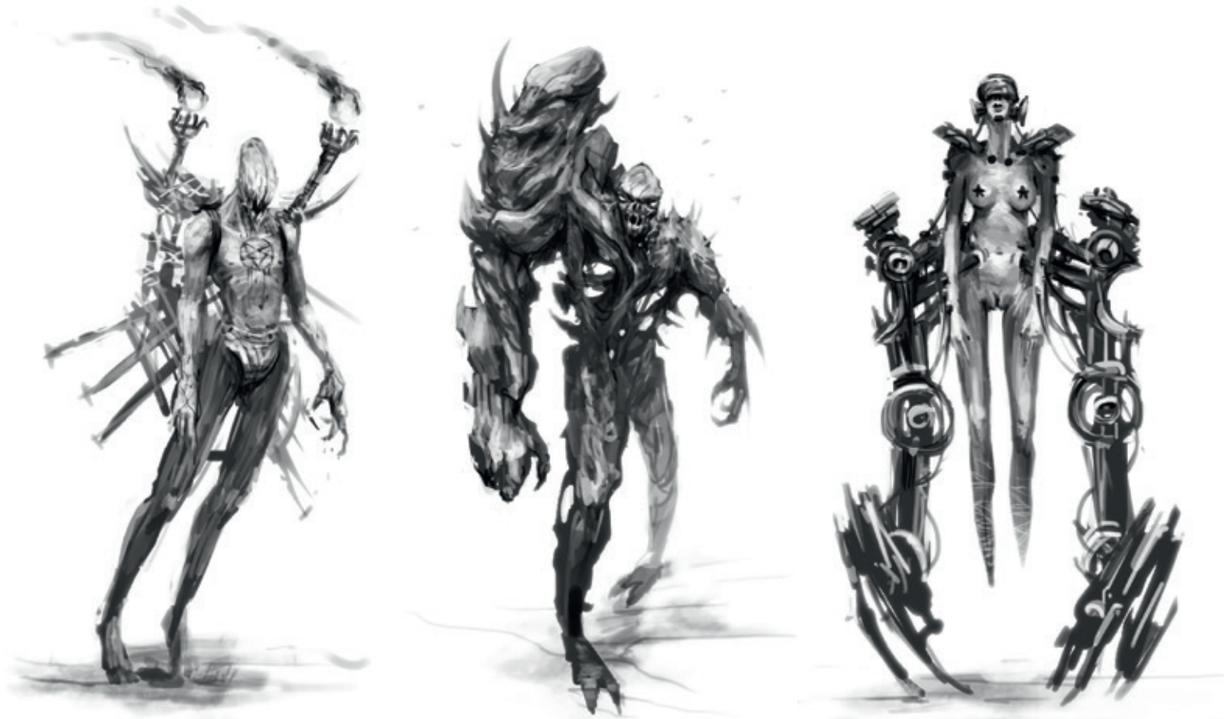


sketch © Kan Muftic

Silhouettes and Thumbnails



HellBlade – Rough boss silhouettes © Ninja Theory and Mark Molnar



character silhouettes © Mark Molnar

Silhouette development is one of the most important in character design. It simply comes from the fact that this is the first thing our mind sees and how we used to distinguish threats when our life depended on noticing an attacking animal in time.

Entertainers have used the power of silhouettes from the beginning of movie and production design. Just think about the iconic shapes of Charlie Chaplin or Mickey Mouse, but I can keep going further back in time. Theaters and their costume designers are consciously using various shapes since the first theatrical pieces shown in the Greek amphitheaters, not to mention the traditional South Asian shadow plays, that are based purely on silhouettes.

Designing silhouettes is especially important in case of video game development, because the player has to able to distinguish dozens of types of characters and creatures in moments to make decisions. Most of the time the silhouette includes the costume, custom accessories and weapons as well as the overall body shape. If the character or creature has a really unique movement or animation, it is also helpful to include that particular pose in the silhouette design as well.

Thumbnails are the equivalent of silhouettes just for designing compositions and scenes. They can be done in various ways, using simple lines, blocking in shapes or even adding some values to indicate depth.

Exactly the same way as silhouettes, they are a great way to solve your visual problems quickly and easily before going into too much detailing with an artwork. The key for both of these techniques is saving time and energy, and being more efficient during production.

Most of the time my silhouette work is only done as a personal exploration and the client never sees it. That's simply because it's a very early and abstract form of the design and usually too far away from the final. A lot of the time the clients are not necessarily good visual thinkers and it is much harder for them to judge the final outcome of a design with a lot of missing details. Usually the first thing I present is a line-up of more detailed black and white sketches based on the best silhouettes and thumbnails I have done.

Some people find it unnecessary to do silhouettes or thumbnails, but with one hour of really simple sketching I can come up with 30 completely different ideas and save 5-10 hours of work.

Handle this process as a writer handles his notes – they are visual representation of your purest ideas.

Tutorial by David Sequeira | davidsequeira.deviantart.com

Doodling

Initially I will try to explain my process when I'm doodling; the methods I feel more comfortable with and which are quite quick. I know every artist has their own way of doodling, but I hope this will help you explore the one you like. Take time to explore new methods.

When I doodle I try to imagine the shape or silhouette.

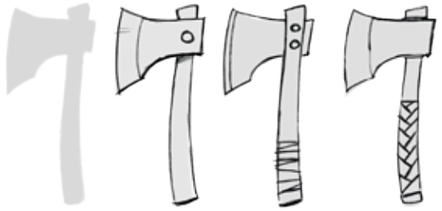
Silhouettes are very useful for exploring ideas and help a lot in games, movies, comics and illustration. It is also the easiest way to get a good lesson in form.

Imagine the following: you are in a room alone with the door open and you feel a presence of someone. You turn and you see only the silhouette of your mom standing there. You recognise her instantly because you live with her, and you are familiar with her gestures and body shape.

You can even tell her mood based on her pose.

The silhouette is the basic form of the object, the contour. Almost everything around us can be transformed into simpler shapes that you remember. And these shapes come out when you look at a cloud and see a dog, or a horse, or maybe a demonic bunny.

Here you have an axe. Yes, it's obvious but that's because even without texture, material or volume you still recognize the shape. You can play with this main idea and use common shapes to get a stronger image.



The interior of a silhouette is a virgin place where your creativity is let loose. The same silhouette doesn't necessarily need to have the same interior. Explore, sailor, explore!

The top one here is a simple example using the same shape, but with different end results without losing the main mental image of the axe!

Little exercise: creating one silhouette and try to fill it in with various random ideas.

Certain shapes or lines convey different feel or emotion:
Strong, crisp lines, give a sensation of hardness, evil, sharp, stones, ice, and so on.
Curvy, gentle lines give the opposite: soft, elastic, organic, liquid, etc.

That might also seem obvious, but having it in mind can add a lot of flavor to your drawings.

When I'm doodling I use three different approaches depending on how I feel or if I already have a concrete idea.

1. **Starting with a thumbnail, I enlarge it and work the interior;**
2. **When I have a fairly clear idea, I use a more developed thumbnail and do the same as 1;**
3. **Here is a drawing with a concrete idea – most of the time one shot and a little eraser.**

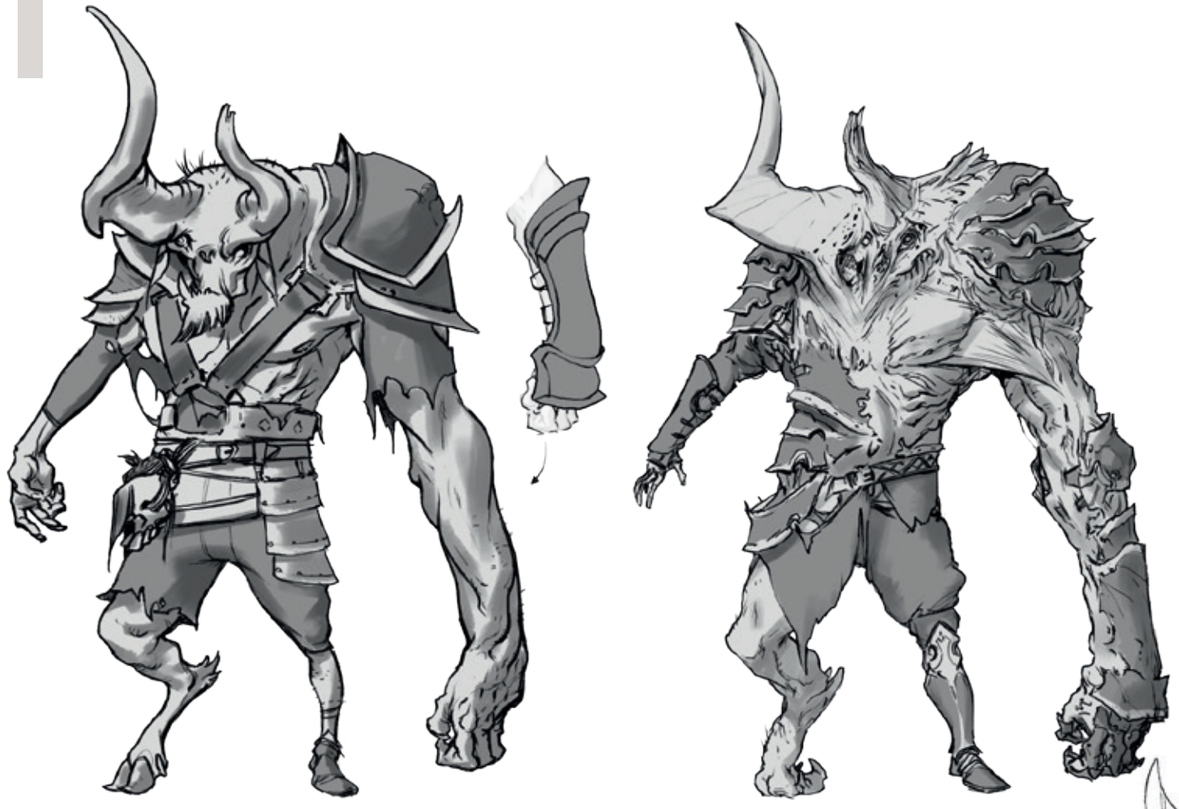
Theme: Warrior Aberration

The style depends a lot on the kind of project (realistic or super cartoony). For this one, the work was quite free-style. When you create a silhouette you need to show most of the body (don't try to hide an arm), try to make it direct and easy to read. You are totally free to create different poses to give the sensation how the character moves (crippled, sexy walk, proud, and so on) and this also works perfectly for creature design.

I use this approach to help me to get a structure to work with when I don't have a strong idea about details, like the armor design, what kind of culture or historical background he comes from, and so on.

Moving on from there: I could draw all of the options, but I choose only one. I enlarge the best silhouette in size, adjust its opacity to very low (around 20%) and start sketching.

After finishing the doodle you can create more props to the character, like upgrading or levelling up.



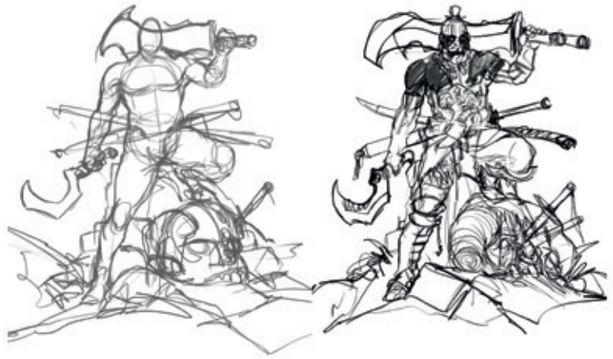
Okay, now to the fun part: let's give it life. Earlier I mentioned the graphic style, choose the one that works best for your project, cartoon and more realistic design. After finishing this step you can go to a cleaner version and add colors or textures depending on your desired result.

Some tips: Use references, if you don't feel sure about how the armor works or anatomy. With time you will become less dependent on references, because you create your own mental library. Even so, keep watching everything around you, sometimes you will find an object or see an animal that gives you new ideas for design, or spark ideas to create a new and fresh drawing. Watching bugs can give you ideas for aliens or fantasy creatures, even for props like armor or weapons.

Always keep your eyes open.

When I have a more precise idea I use the base lines technique. It is quite similar to making illustrations, but works perfectly for thumbnails.

If I am still not 100% sure about the direction, I draw a more refined idea of the armor, props and details loosely. You don't need to spend too much time at this stage, anatomy correction and clean-up are the next step.



Let the fun begin!

Grab the last version of the sketch and lower the opacity. Try to work on separate layers, if you want to change anything later. I started with the head and necklace, then added a new layer for the torso and corrected the anatomy and perspective. Next are the wrists and legs, etc. Its like assembling a lego!

After I have merged everything, I gave some extra white lines to the character. It adds more volume and weight and gives an idea where the main light comes from.

Practice and have fun! Find a technique you enjoy and practice it until you find it challenging, then jump to a new one!

Always carry a sketchbook with you, you never now when a new idea strikes you!

Artist tip:
The brush I really like to use is a triangular one, that mimics a more realistic pencil:

character silhouettes © Mark Molnar

Line Drawing for Design

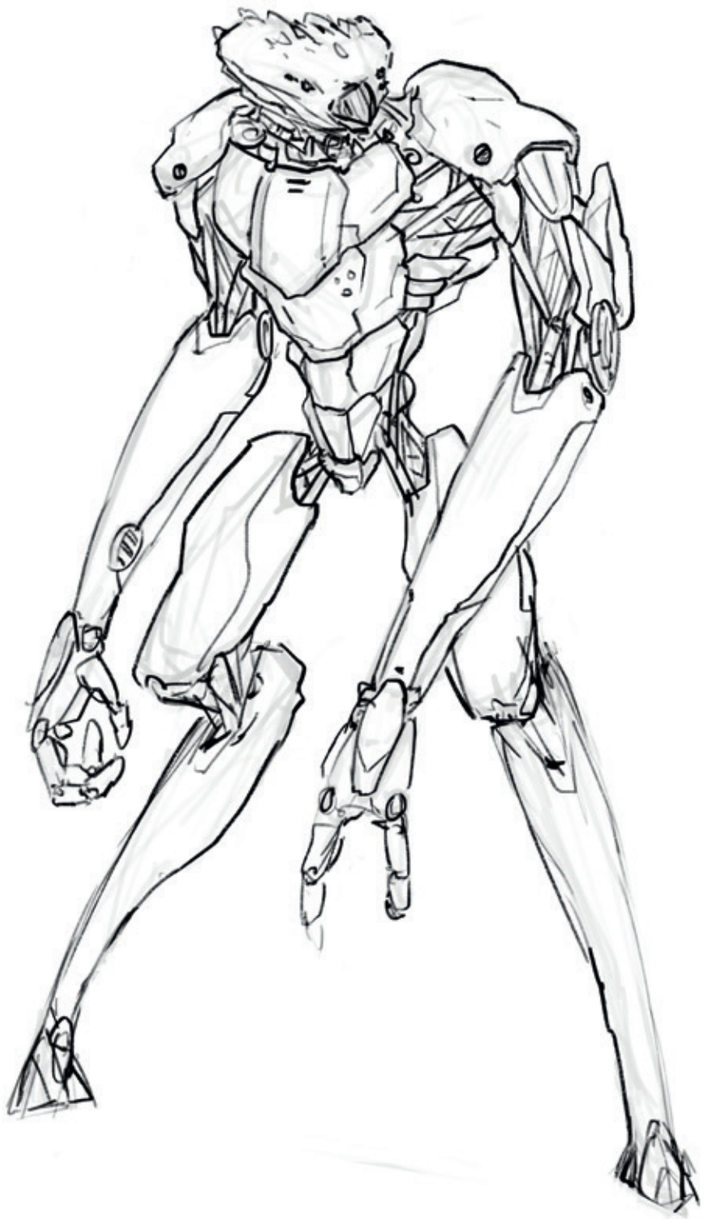
Although silhouettes and thumbnails are really useful at the first ideation stage, it's much easier to finesse out a design problem with a simple line drawing. Lines are really tricky, because in the real world they don't exist on their own. Lines are created when two colors or values meet and we translate what we see into a more easily understandable form. We like to think in simplified structures to understand the world around us and the lines are the abstraction of these structures.

In my everyday process linework is usually the second step in the design phase after the main composition sketching or the creation of thumbnails. For example, in the case of a character design, I take the most successful silhouette or black & white rough sketch and I draw on top (in a separate layer). During this phase I am just trying out different ideas about how to solve the details and most of the time I create multiple iterations from the same design.

After this I push back the opacity for both of my layers and I start the fine linework on top. It's really worth spending time with your fine linework, because that is going to be the base of your overall design. This is the point where you can lay down all the perspective lines and fix every anatomy issue.

Linework can be useful for any design task, but the most valuable is in case of hard surface or industrial design. The draw-through technique, where you are building a perspective grid and sketching up both sides of a vehicle, robot, or whatever, is still the most frequently used technique for hard surface designers working in the entertainment industry.

Nowadays 3D concepting techniques are more and more common even in the early stages of visual development, but it's always good to lay down your ideas with a much quicker linework beforehand. There are some amazing 3D concept artists around, but usually it's better to move to a 3D modelling package with a relatively solid idea, because your workflow can really slow down and the experimenting usually stays more on the level of small and medium details.



Robot Chicken – line sketch © Mark Molnar

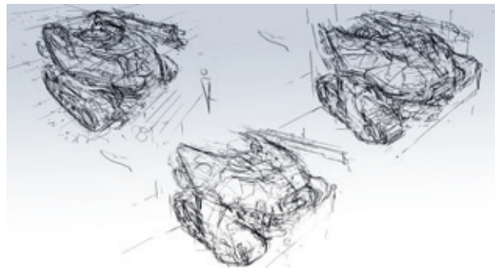
Robot Chicken – final © Mark Molnar

Tutorial by Michal Kus | www.kus-art.com

Scorpion Tank

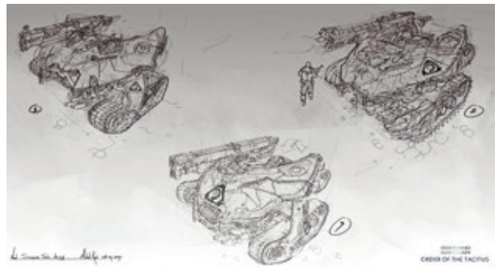
Let's take a look at how I approached a Military SF vehicle.
Specifically a redesign of Feng Zhu's Scorpion tank which he designed for "Command & Conquer 3".

Step 01.



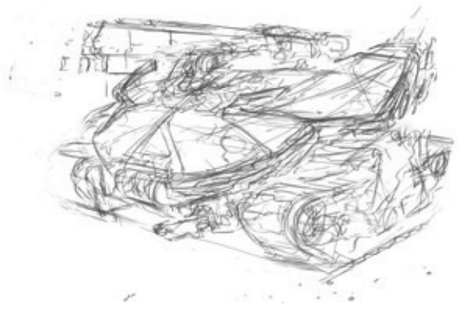
One first thing you want to do is to make sure your design looks cool before you start creating the final presentation. These are exploration sketches, be loose and don't worry about making it look pretty. Even though I know how the general shape will look I still want to sketch around doing these variations. I am getting warmed up and putting myself in the SF vehicle design mood. I advise everybody to do that because the tenth sketch will always look better than your first and here are some of the roughs I picked that fit best.

Step 02.



From the selected roughs we make tighter sketches. In this step we define some of the designs. We give the client (or ourselves) a clear choice of direction. Line drawings are pretty handy for this. You have all the freedom you want when you draw from scratch and not losing too much time to show off an idea. When drawing digitally, remember to make straight lines from your elbow in a fast swift move and use your wrist for the smaller details. In order to make a design successful creatively it's super-important to build up a visual library. For this SF vehicle I looked and researched a lot about on how modern military hardware looks like and functions. Of course you don't need to know everything about military hardware because, as a versatile concept artist, you will be doing research about a lot of topics anyway.

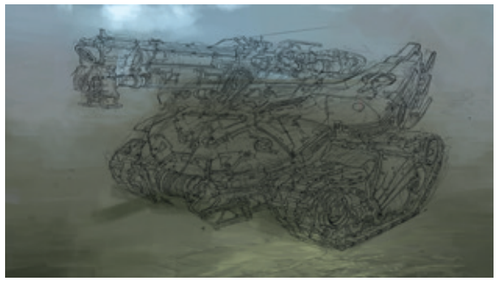
Step 03.



Since there are a lot of tutorials and breakdowns on how to approach concept design in 3D I wanted to stay all 2D with this one. Here we are drawing the final design from a different, more dramatic, low camera angle that suggests the overall mass of the tank. I will end up mixing all three drawings from the previous step into this one.

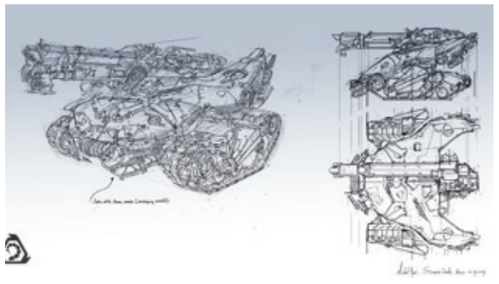
Step 04.

And here we are, we have spent some time making a final line-art drawing. Since we established the look and various features in previous steps I took time here to focus on details and how they function. The gun is being fed by a large belt of



ammunition of Sabot 120 mm anti-tank rounds and you can see the ammo belt at the rear of the main weapon. All these details and thoughts on how the vehicle functions were achieved using the proper reference. My visual library also helped but this is something that comes with experience. You perfect your craft with practice, although I know perfection is something I will never achieve. Constant improvement is something that keeps me on fire to achieve better next time.

Step 05.



Alright, although we don't have a final pretty rendered piece that would do your mother proud, it is good enough for production. A good modeller will be able to do their work and to make his job even easier we take a small break from our final presentation of the design and create some orthographic views along with some basic explanation of how this tank works. I personally find it cool to make different views of a design, it gives you a complete insight and it looks great if you put them next to one another. Although I could have done the rear and a rear three-quarter view I wanted to continue with my render since I did this view as a fast bonus.

Step 06.

In this step we give the tank its first sense of value, color and the overall mood. By giving the design a first basic render pass the silhouette appears, from here we can always adjust the design a little bit if needed. Other than that I play

around with the lighting. A good working knowledge of value structure and color theory helps you show your ideas in a believable way. The main light will come from the right. I use other light sources like ambient and bounce lighting once I am starting to go into the details.

Step 07.

To have a feeling of how the smaller parts will look like I decided to start with the finer details, and see how they look as a whole in my current lighting conditions. I often zoom out, or stand back from the screen, to see if the bigger shapes still read well. I am also now relying less on the line drawing. The render will eventually replace the line drawing and all the forms will be held by the render itself. I put in a quick "dude" for scale

and a sense of setting. The tank is somewhere in a post-apocalyptic desert with an infantry soldier next to it. He's just chilling and happy the machine is on his side.

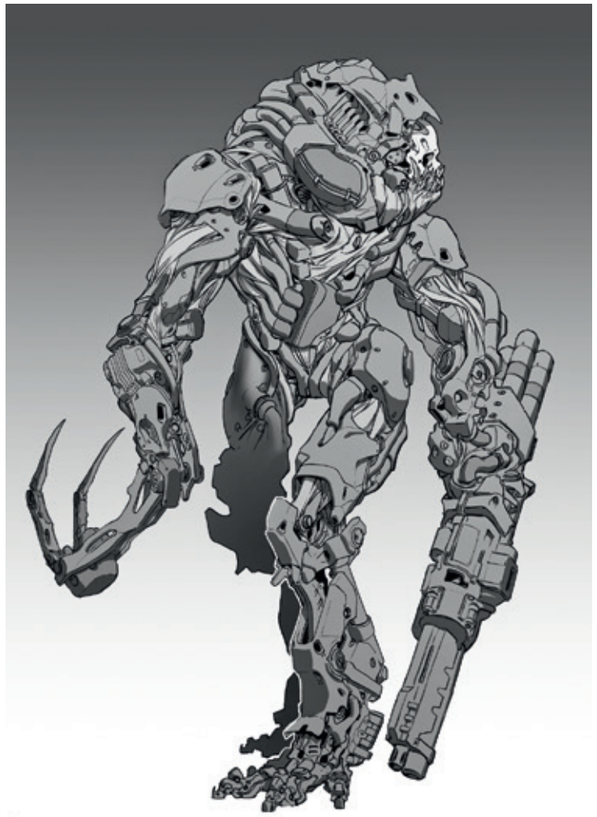
Step 08.

From step 7 we just keep the ball rolling. We flesh out all the details we designed into our final line drawing and render/paint the sh*t out of it. I use smaller chalk brushes for the little details and large custom brushes with some nice metal textures for the bigger surfaces. By this point the opacity of the line drawing is low and we see all the forms thanks to the lighting alone. While I was detailing I kept the lighting in mind: There's a slight bounce light from the ground on the tracks; some specular lighting to highlight the smaller details; some reflections with a nice blue hue on top of the tank; and the direct lighting from the right. All these light sources help the tank to pop out in a nice way while keeping all the elements visible. Additionally I gave "Scale Dude" some love.

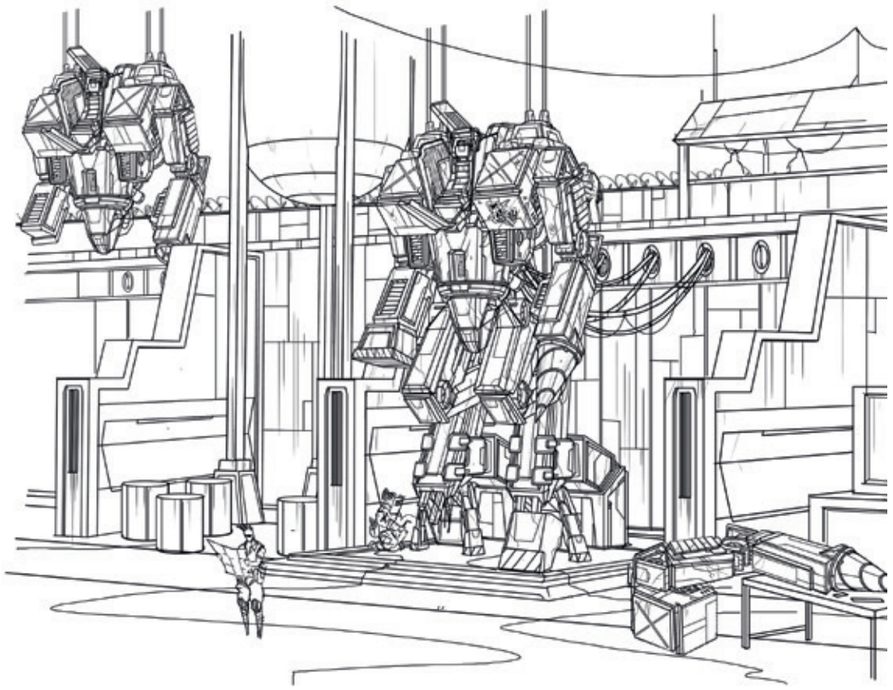
Step 09.

Knowing that the piece is nearly finished I usually take a break. I take a walk and listen to the birds sing. I swear it really balances out your state of mind after designing a machine of death like this. Then I come back and can see mistakes. I tweak the piece and add some nice extras: some volumetric fog; dust near the tracks because I'm imagining the tank has just stopped; and a nice lens flair from the red optic system to make Michael Bay happier when he sees it.

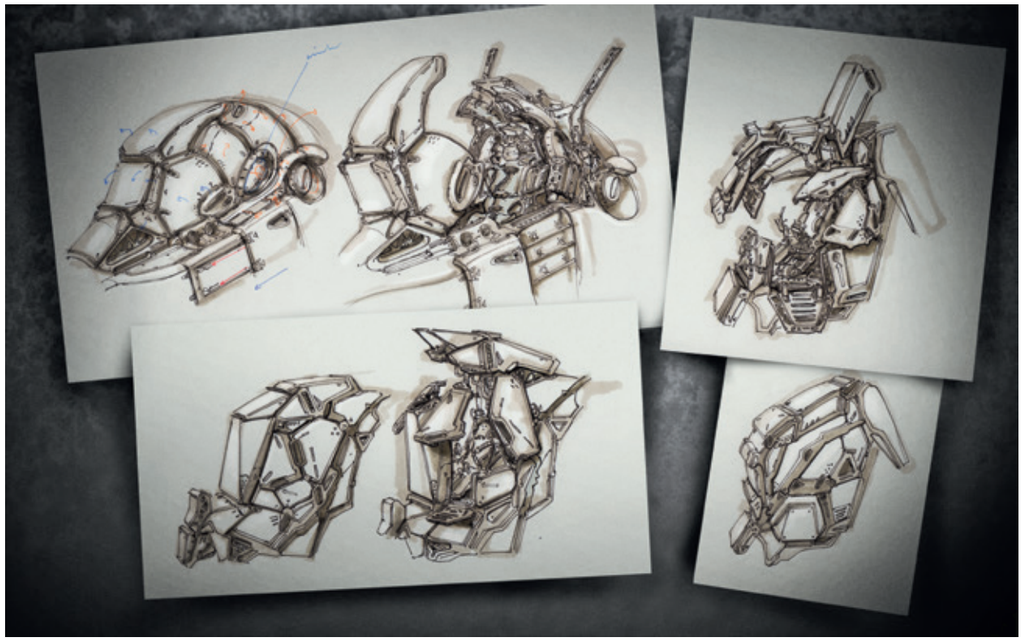
Armour © Georg Loeschner



Nodeworld Creature © David Sequeira



Steam Mecha – digital linedrawing © Mark Molnar



Cockpits © Georg Loeschner

Skirmish Boat Europa © Michal Kus

Chapter 02:

Speedpainting and Digital Sketching

Master and Photo Studies

Doing studies from real life is a great thing, but most of the time we cannot organize a real person modeling for us and it also would be hard to travel to the other side of the world to do some pre-production plein air study of an ancient ruin. We are lucky because we are living in the digital age and we can get a huge library of reference pictures online. We can study hundred year old paintings, do endless quick-pose virtual life drawing sessions with a timer, and even go virtual plein air painting, if we want.

Of all these things I think the most important is studying the work of old masters. It's not a coincidence we call them 'masters'. They mastered all the knowledge of image creation from perspective, through composition, to lighting and anatomy. I know it's really tempting to browse the trending digital artists online on the social networks, but the most successful artists today have the same roots and built their craft onto the exact same principles.

For studying the old masters you can just use a search engine, but there is Google's art project (https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/project/art-project) and many world-famous galleries have online archives where you can view the paintings in high resolution. When doing a study, don't just copy the image, but more importantly, try to understand the decisions made during the creation of that particular work.

Observe the color palette, the brushstrokes, the grouping of details, the handling of the focal points – think through how you would construct the image. You don't have to study all of this at once though, stay with one topic for each session you do. For example, for studying lighting, pick the paintings whose mood captures your imagination the most and try to study how the painter achieved that with lighting and atmosphere.

Studying photos can be really hard because it's even easier to fall into a state of mindless copying. You can apply the same principles I mentioned above, but your focus should be more appropriate to the medium itself.

No Country for Old Man – color study © Mark Molnar

The most important things to study are composition and real world lighting, or how the camera captures real world lighting to be exact. We are so used to seeing everything on screens through camera lenses that we adapted to it. In the world of entertainment design it's really important you learn how to imagine the world through a camera lens including all of its visual artefacts, perspective distortions and imperfections.

The best resource for this is movies. You can easily pause a movie on your DVD or computer, but there are also a lot of cinematography websites where you can browse through a huge archive of movie screenshots from award-winning cinematographers and photography directors.

Alphonse Marie de Neuville – color study © Mark Molnar

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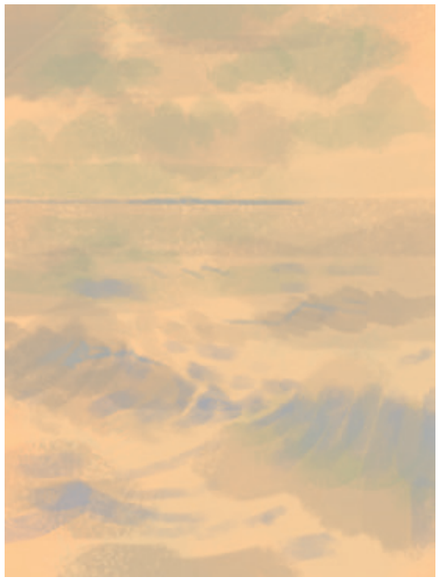


02

03

04

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

Seascape study after John Singer Sargent

I wanted to choose a relatively simple painting from an old classical master for this tutorial, because I wanted to focus on the subtle color changes. This painting from Sargent gives a great chance to practice the different hues in one single painting and it is great for focusing solely on the colors of its simple and natural subject matter.

The same process can be applied to studying more complex paintings, the only thing you have to do is to break down the image into its main compositional elements (eg. background, characters, foreground) and handle those separately at the detailing phase.

I never pick the colors when I am doing studies, I always put the original painting or image on my other screen and try to handle it as it would be a window to another reality. I use very basic brushes on only one single layer and the smudge tool with the basic charcoal brush to blend colors and to achieve a more painterly result.

00. The original painting.

01. When I am doing studies I try to use the same method, when I was painting with oils. Classic painters never really started with a bleached white canvas. Here I tried to guess the color of the base coat that Sargent may have used.

02. I am blocking in the main compositional elements of the image with using desaturated versions of almost the same color as the base coat. As I am going towards the grays and this way in the direction of the complementary color on the color wheel, our mind feels that the color is getting colder.

03. I start to add various hues to my painting. This phase is about observing the different colors on the original painting, the same way as you would observe nature, if you would do a plain air painting on the spot.

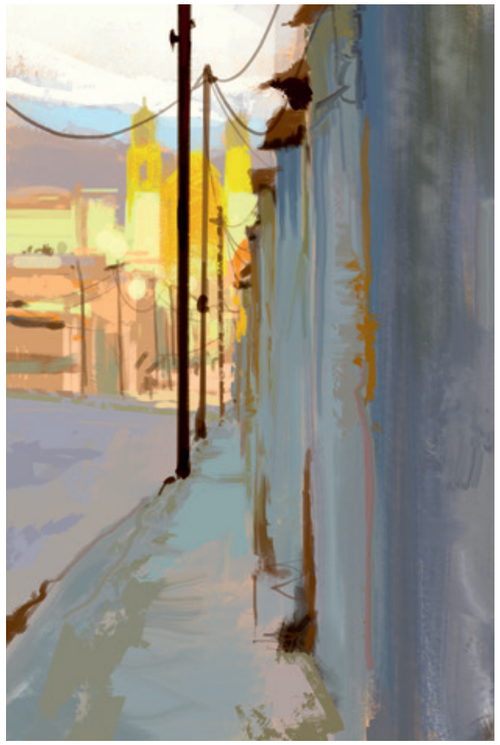
05

Always try to think through how light reacts in real life. In this case most of the colors we see on the waves are reflections of various parts of the sky behind the painter.

04. I gradually move towards more saturated colors and I also extend my value range slowly. Usually I start with very limited values and I move towards really dark and really light colors. This gives me a much greater control over my painting, but I can still keep the dynamism of the workflow.

05. The final stage is adding all the fine details, the darkest darks, the lightest and most saturated lights and the colors what are slightly out of the overall color scheme of the painting, like the bright peach colors and the desaturated blues of the foams and the orange color aberration we can only see where the saturated reflections of the light source meets the desaturated complementary blues of the ocean.

No Country for Old Man – color study © Mark Molnar



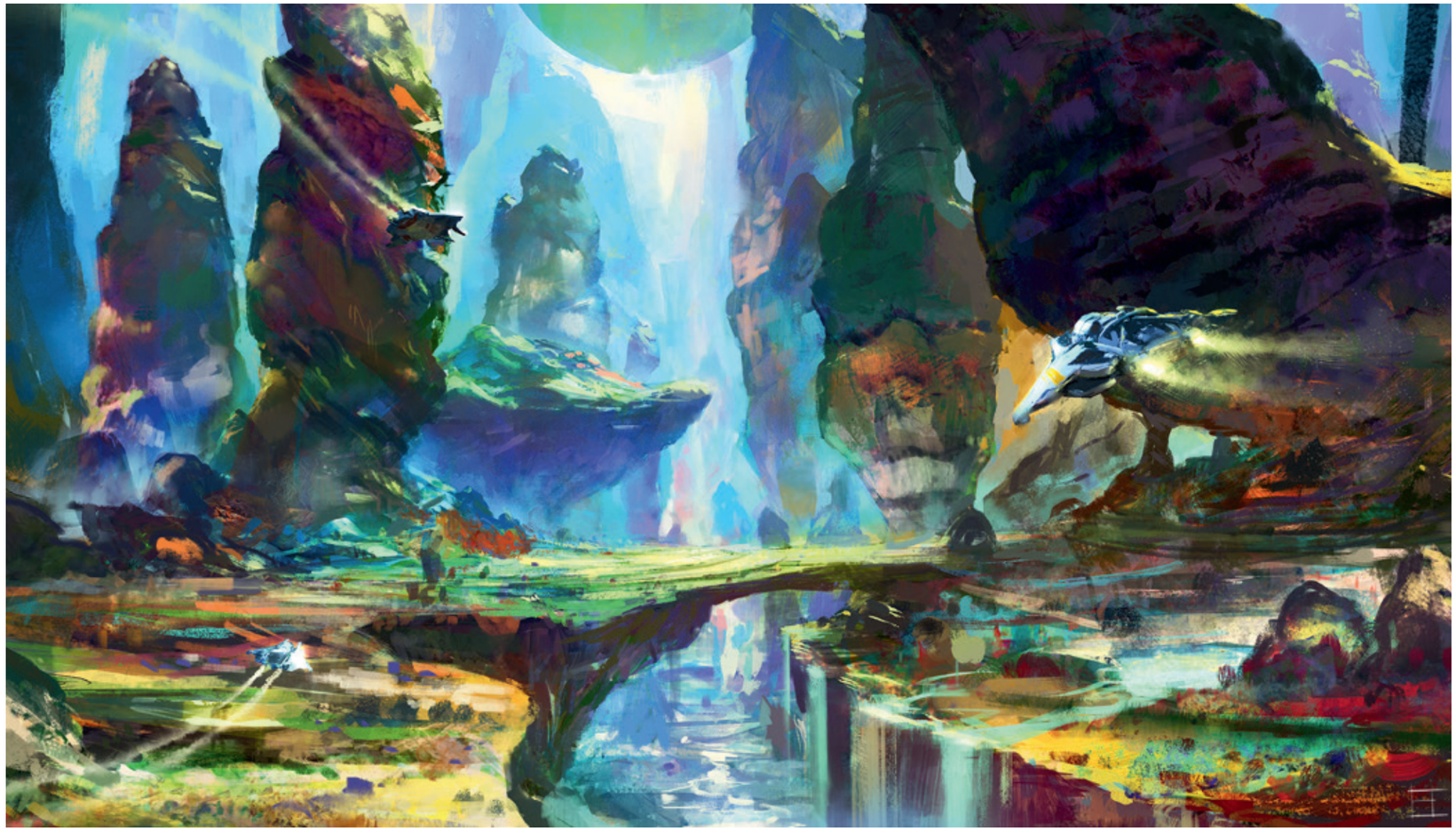
Kim English – color study © Mark Molnar

Big Ben – color study © Mark Molnar

David Lidbetter – color study © Mark Molnar

Bride © Lukas Esch

Creative Ideation Experiments



No Man's Sky © Paul Scott Canavan

Scrap River © Mark Molnar

We can all run into creative blocks, when no idea pops up when we want to draw or paint something. There are only a few worst things for an artist than staring the blank white page or starting something from scratch without any direction. And the really scary thing is that you cannot allow this to happen if you are working professionally. There are some ups and downs, of course, but you cannot say to your art director "Sorry mate, not today". To avoid this situation I began to do creative digital painting exercises, to help me to come up with random compositions without being concerned about the outcome or how the final result would look.

It's exactly the same thing we used to do as kids: watching the clouds and try to see something in them.

I start with random shapes and just going with the flow and rhythm of the creation itself. Duplicating and transforming the painted information I have put down already, trying out layer modes, effects, filters – there are no rules when you are experimenting.

The next step begins when I discover something in the shapes. After this I start to build more consciously on top of that idea to make sense of the initial composition and describe as much as I can, but also as quickly as I can. My usual time limit for a piece like this is 10 or 15 minutes, which is just enough to block in the key things. Some of you may say "wow, you are fast!" but I am not that fast actually. This whole thing is not about the speed, but learning how to make good decisions during this process; how to focus your energy on the most important things; and how to ignore everything else. Always try to think about your focal areas and how you can drive the viewer to look at those. Spend time on the story behind the image and leave the rest to the viewer's imagination.

You can apply the same exercise to any base image. Start the process with a photograph or one of your old paintings. The same thing could work in 3D as well, creating quick speedsculpts or kit bashing together random objects based on the same idea – breaking the habits of your mind.

The key for this exercise is to do it often and do at least five or six images in a row. Sometimes it works straight away, but we usually need time to rid ourselves of the shapes, forms, colors, etc. that usually come out of our hands the first time.

Tutorial by Levi Peterffy | www.artoflevi.com

Thumbnailing – How and Why it Works

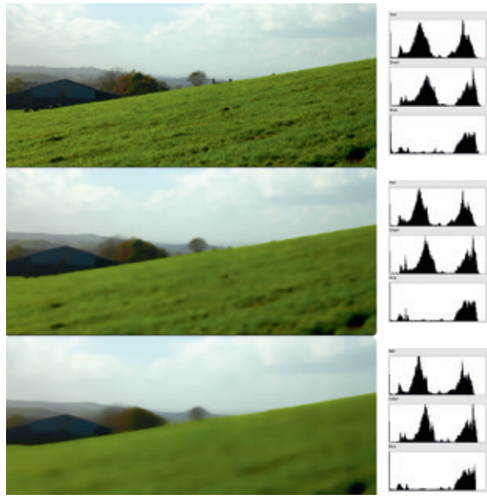
My name is Levente "Levi" Peterffy, i am a VFX professional and have been working in games, feature films and advertisement. I was given the opportunity to do a tutorial article so i decided to write one about thumbnailing. Hopefully it will be something you can apply to your workflow. All of these images from the top is created by this thumbnailing technique.

Good representative image of hue-range and brightness contrast range.

Before we dwelve into the technique we need to find a good starting position. Since this technique will be aiming at achieving a good sense of realism i felt we need to set the base there to explain it better. This is the image I picked for that purpose. Why we need it is because it has the following:

1. **Good atmospheric depth range from foreground to background.**
2. **Good saturation levels and range of hues, we can see this in the histograms.**
3. **We dont have any clipped values.**
4. **Good amount of contrast/brightness.**

Now that we have the image we need to simplify it to see what makes the realism work on its simplest level. As you see in the examples which is a simple median filter applied is that we still have an image that feels real. Loss of details does not mean loss of the sense of realism. What creates the sense of realism are hues in relationship and harmony as brightness and contrast is the frame for how dark/light relationships will be. Even with loss of detail, the main colors stay, all histograms are basically still very much the same. Even brightness shifts are very minimal.



This bottom image gives us enough to work with for the next steps.

Tip: When introducing new hues in your painting, try to smooth the transitions between them so the hues blend.

Viewing images small unifies the core elements of realism requirements.Ultimately our brain reads the same image. This also means that the strokes you do on a zoomed out image are larger then you would do on a zoomed in canvas. Changing an image becomes a very quick process.

Tip: When blocking in painting, always paint zoomed out. This makes sure you focus on the overall image and forces you to work with big brushes.

Saturation / Vibrance of Hues

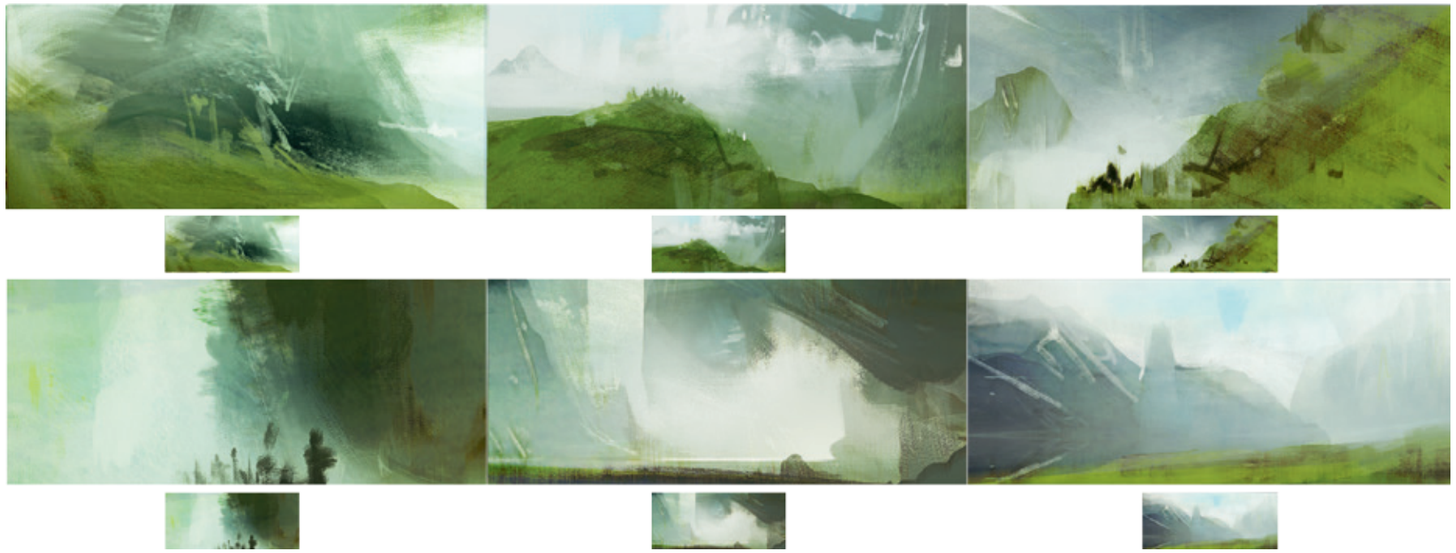
Mid to high saturated hues allow wide range of color shifts and tints. Low saturated hues give limited range of hues to shift and tint. If you desaturate your image too much it will be more difficult to alter an images palette and colors as it is close to greyscale. Overly saturated colors breaks the realism and makes an image look more like like a high dynamic range image. Somewhere in the middle is recommended as you can view in the image sheet.

Tip: start painting with saturated colors as you can define and change your palette of the final image later in the process.

Brightness / Contrast

With brightness and contrast you can control how dark your deepest shadows will be and how bright your whites will be. This is independent of what color palette and hues you have. The level of brightness/contrast has to be acceptable without ruining the readability of the image. High contrast clips values and narrows down the hue relationships, resulting in readability loss of the image.

Tip: avoid using pure black or pure white in the painting.



By simplifying and painting in thumbnail size and almost solely using big brushes we can block out our scenes. What is key is that the hue relationships are kept intact and so the realism is still maintained despite we alter the shapes and compositions. In thumbnail size our brain unifies everything into believing these scenes as having a sense of realism. The process is to constantly interpret the painting as a whole and respect the hue transitions and relationships that make the top image work. The following images are based on the understanding of those relationships which we adapt to our painting. We create new images with same realism. The grass has similar green hues, the sky is bright but not too much, with hints of cool light blues.

Alternate Palette

Original Palette

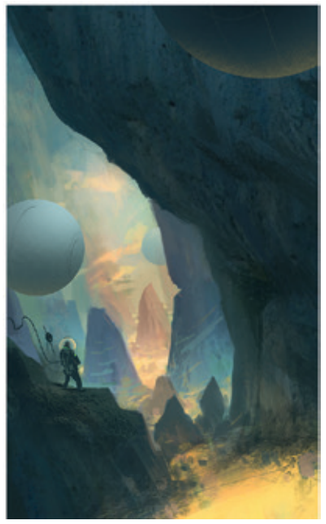
Alternate Palette

Original Palette

Keeping the hue relationships intact doesn't mean that it has to be the exact same hues as in the starting image in the end, only the relationships between them should work. This means that the final image can have a different palette and what is truly kept is the lighting, which in turn conveys realism. The following thumbnails have a different palette but they still convey realism. This give us the conclusion that hue/color is irrelevent on its own. Light is the key that holds everything together.

Exploration © Darek Zabrocki

White Death © Mark Molnar



Journey © Mark Molnar

sketch © Alex Brady

Ancient Ruins © Mark Molnar

Metropolis © Darek Zabrocki

sketch © Arnaud Pheu

sketch © Alex Brady

sketch © Alex Brady

Composition Sketches

This is Not Mars © Geoffrey Ernault

Night Watch – Bolton Better Run © Gilles Ketting

When developing environments or more complex scenes for a production, a really important part of the process is doing black and white composition sketches. This is the step where you push what you laid down at the thumbnailing or ideation stage further, and where you establish the overall value structure and lighting of your image.

Some people prefer to paint straight in color, but to work in black and white can really help you focus and reduces the number of problems you have to solve at one time. Don't forget the colors we see all have different values at the same color temperature so changing one color, if you are not careful, could seriously alter your value structure. For example, some colors feel brighter because of the wavelength of the light that bounces back from them, but in real life they are exactly the same tone.

The value range of your artwork can help direct the viewer's attention. Usually the brightest areas attract our eye first, but you can also play with contrast. Consciously apply more brightness and contrast around your focal areas and you can also place cues to direct the viewer in that direction. Try to build up your value structure to follow the story of your image, this way it is going to be much more easily readable and feel cleaner.

In a production environment you are required to develop multiple value studies / tonal sketches around the same environment or space. These are the scenes that help your art director or director to decide which direction could be the most interesting and also serve the project, and the overall visual direction, the most. The key thing again is to save valuable time and energy before going into a more time-consuming detailing phase or before creating a basic block-in about the scene in 3D.

Try to limit your general value range between 15-85% of grey and spare your darkest and lightest values for the final touches. In real life there are very few places and things that are not reflecting any light and therefore completely black, and even the brightest lights are not 100% white. You can achieve a much more balanced image with limited values and use your extra contrast and highlight to strengthen your story elements and focal points.

sketch © Arnaud Pheu

sketch © Arnaud Pheu

You can also limit your values even further to use only 30-40% of the full range. This technique is perfect for creating ultra-low key and ultra-high key images, but you have to balance the overall dark or overall light values with some opposites. This is a really effective tool to create tension and drama in your images, if you use it at appropriate places from the storytelling point of view.

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

Arctic Vista for D&D

(Art Director: Daniel Gelon, Copyright by Wizards of the Coast)

Step 01

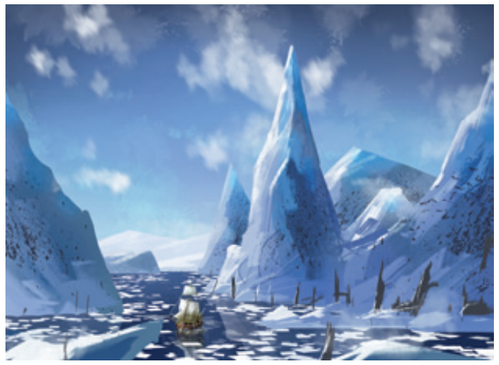
My task here was to create a location background for the latest edition of D&D. Background images are used to illustrate certain scenarios and to establish the mood of various parts of the game. As there wasn't really any specific landmark or building in the image I could focus on, I wanted to create nice composition with slightly unusual mountain shapes, like giant ice shards.

As the key to this environment was to create depth, I wanted to handle the different space segments separately. The easiest way to this is to block in each of them with pure silhouettes and then fill those out with details and texture.

After you have foreground, mid-ground and background, you can break those down into more and more layers and apply extra aerial perspective to strengthen the depth. If you handle your layer structure consciously, the detailing is going to be much faster and it will be really easy to introduce any changes that the client requests.

Step 01. Black & White Thumbnails

I have started with limited value thumbnails to experiment with the composition and various shapes. I knew I wanted the spiky shards to be the main feature of the image, so I kept the horizon line relatively low. This way the vertical shapes could dominate the compositions. I have done about 12-15 of these, but I only show the three I picked for further detailing. Usually I don't show these quick sketches to the client, because I want them to get a much accurate picture of what I am after with the final image.



Step 02a

Step 02b

Step 02. Coloring the Sketches

I moved further with the chosen black & white sketches and added more definition to all the mountains. I used color, overlay and soft light layers to color them up quickly and also added some extra texture to them with custom brushes.

Step 02c

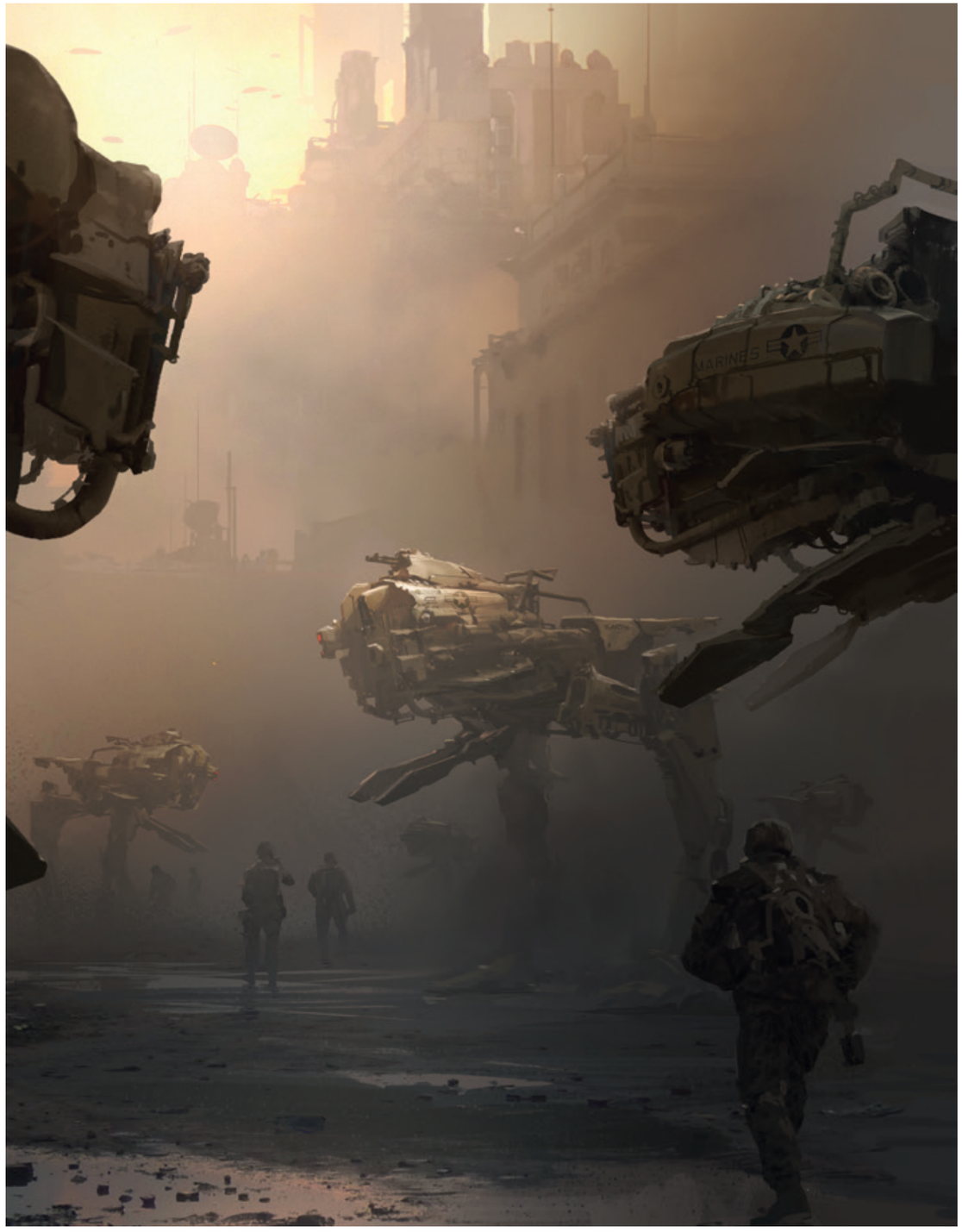
I added clouds to the sky plane and introduced moist and aerial perspective between the different space segment. I also painted in a point of focus to each image to add a little bit of a story and life.

These were the sketches I have sent to the art director for review.

Step 03. Detailing

The client choose the first sketch, depicting a boat sailing in the ice fjords. Although Dungeons & Dragons is a fantasy world, my art director felt that the ice shards are a bit too much, so we went with a slightly more realistic direction.

I changed the right side of the image to the bottom part of a glacier and also introduced more rocks between the ice and snow to bring in a variation in the color palette. From this point on it was just hours of detailing to get to the quality that I was after.



Smoke Zone © Scribble Pad Studios and James Paick

Black Skull © DarekZabrocki

Xtypes © Emrah Elmasli

Color Roughs

sketch © Efflam Mercier

Environment Demo © Scribble Pad Studios and James Paick

sketch © Ben Leon

Creating color studies in your production pipeline could be essential in establishing a certain mood for a project. With these relatively quick sketches you can easily experiment more and as a final step lay down your overall color palette before moving to more detailed illustrations.

The technique of painting rough version of color key frames comes from the development of animated movies, where it was really important to see all different mood changes through the whole storyline. This way the production designers and art directors could give a solid guideline to background painters, character painters and animators on how to handle the actual scenes. The overall sequence of the color roughs is called color script, because it follows the whole storyline and tries to translate that into simplified color sketches and palettes.

Besides associating them with moods using colors to differentiate the presence of dominant characters in the scenes is also very common. The greenish tone used for the evil character of Syndrome in the animation feature The Incredibles or the red lightsaber and other lasers used by Darth Vader and other villains in the Star Wars saga are perfect examples for that.

In case of movie productions you don't really need to include this in the pre-production, simply because you have much more freedom to apply post effects and various filters even after the shoots. But this does not mean that color is not important in feature films. There are many movies where the director of photography handled the color palette very deliberately. Think about the overall green tone of the virtual world in the Matrix movies, the sick brown-yellows of Se7en or the heavily colored fantasy movies, like the Lord of the Rings trilogy or 300.

In video game productions the same process is increasingly used to create a specific color palette for the various levels. This is usually part of the initial exploration phase, where the final look of the game is still uncertain.

The main difference is that the actual game usually goes through many more iterations than a feature film. The final look is always based on the changes in story, game design and gameplay, so it is much harder to block in the final look months or – in case of triple-A titles – years in advance.

You can easily create the base of your color roughs on top of your black & white sketches using various layer options, like Color, Soft Light and Overlay. After you have successfully created your main palette, you can simply paint on top of these layers to introduce more colors outside of your palette which can help emphasize your focal areas.

I prefer to start my color studies in color (rather than beginning with black and white) and approach them almost the same way as I do my black & white thumbnails. The difference is that I try to focus on the overall color palette and the balance and ratio of colors. I care much less about the actual composition. What I have to keep in mind is the story I am trying to tell and the mood and emotions I want to connect to scene.

Tutorial by Levi Peterffi | www.artoflevi.com

Color Rough Thumbnails

Step 01. Start Image

Our starting image, witch one that has a good amount contrast, depth and hues.

Step 02. Simplified image

With this image we can identify the following bits we need to do our own sketch.

1. **How dark the shadows go**
2. **How bright the highlights are**
3. **The palette showing hues across the whole lighting environment, how they smooth and connect together. These are the hue transitions we need to remember.**
4. **We see the kind of mood lighting we aim for.**

Step 03. Thumbnails original hues

Based on the information we found from the simplified image, we paint new thumbnails. These follow the same structure and relationship as our first simplified image. We use big brushes, zoomed out view and paint new shapes and compositions.

It goes without saying that you need a solid base understanding of painting, defining shapes, understanding form and composition.

Step 03

Step 04

Step 04. Thumbnails alternate hues

We alternate the palettes by using color balance shifts, gradient maps to affect midtones, shadows and highlights with different colors.

To demonstrate how this method works in a practical way, i have recorded the progression for the following image. In it you can view how I start with the simplified image and use that to redefine it to new shapes and composition. Notice that the painting is not rushed as I am trying to read the painting over and over again. Sometimes subtle hints. I am keeping the relationships intact for the light to stay consistent with our starting image. Meaning I use similar darks, similar midtones and highlights. So our first sketched image has naturally the same palette and hue relationships.

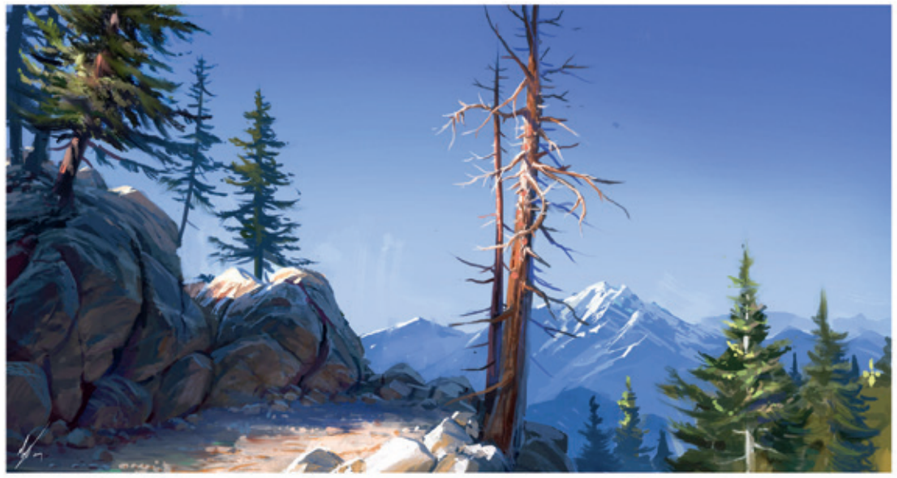
The last step once I am done with the sketch is alter the hues, with color balance and gradient-maps. These functions impact the image universally so the overall image is changed.

Now that we have gone through the process and know how and why it works, we can ask ourselves: "What is the point of thumbnailing?"

Simply put it's a very fast technique to use for blocking out ideas. We can also achieve a sense of realism with it because it respects the hue relationships within a lit environment. All this without spending any time on details. If the thumbnail works and is suggesting enough, then that serves as a solid base for rendering a highly detailed image.

Another aspect of the technique is that you become more comfortable working with hues and light for an image as whole. It also forces you to not be precious about the strokes you make in the painting. Reiterations become very quick and easy. All in all I think it's a powerful technique that unifies a lot things in a very simple matter-of-fact way.

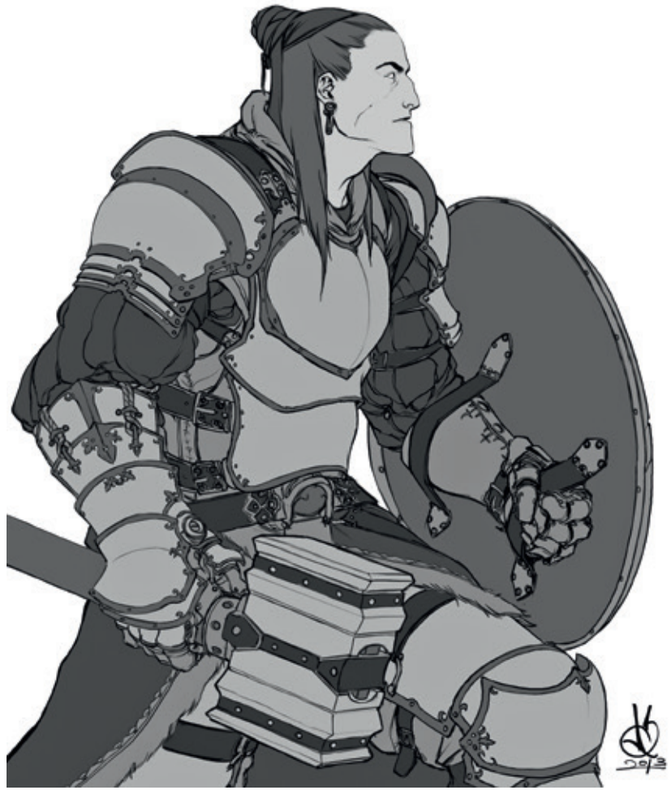
The technique beforehand does require that you do understand shapes, composition, perspectives and can define things with painting.So if you lack that knowledge it will be hard for you to define your thumbnails. With a lot of practice you wont even need a starting image to simplify. Your knowledge of hue relationships will be wide and so you know which hues work together and how to connect them. But this comes from encountering these hues and remembering why they work.



Blue Color Speedies © Michal Kus

Black Pegasus © Darek Zabrocki

Digital Painting Demo © Scribble Pad Studios and James Paick



Knight Sketch © David Sequeira

Empire The Emperors Sketches © Gilles Ketting

Character and Creature Sketches

The method of sketching out characters and creatures can vary from simple linework, through black & white digital tonal sketches to creating slightly more advanced color variations, but the goal with doing more loose drawings is always the same: exploration, but at a more advanced level than doing simple silhouettes or ideation sketches. I call this "directed exploration" because by this point in the production I usually have a more solid brief in hand accompanied by several references and extra production guidelines. The main task here is not coming up with the fundamental ideas, but to explore what would be the best visual solution within the already set rules.

Different productions need different techniques at this point. In the case of animation productions in video games you can still stay a bit loose and focus on further detailing of your silhouettes, or rough black & white block-ins with more tight line drawings. The other option is towards a more painterly approach where you can push your value sketches to a more polished look, or you can simply start adding colors.

In movie pre-production you have to push your sketches more towards a realistic style even at this early stage. In most of the productions you can simply communicate your ideas more clearly, such as supporting your sketches with photo references to clarify various materials, details, accessories, and so on. This can save you time and you are probably going to end up with a much clearer direction for the next step in the process after the approval.

It always comes down to personal preference and what your client or art director requires you to do. The key is that you have to provide clear ideas and it is also great if you can match the style of the sketches to the overall style of the project.

The main thing is to create personality for your characters and show their back story. You can suggest certain things through their anatomy and proportions and add more definition with their costumes and accessories. At this phase of character development you can also start thinking about different posing to show the most characteristic movement / stance of your characters and creatures. This could be really helpful for the actors playing the roles or the animators bringing them to life.

You still don't have to clarify everything and finesse out all the details, but you have to show enough to indicate the main direction for the character. Main characters usually need much more work and can go through a lot of changes and iterations during the production, but most of the changes are happening on the micro level. If you have an approved character sketch, that encapsulates the essence of a character's personality that is always going to stay the core of design till the end of the production.

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

The Chaser

Step 01

Step 02

Step 03

Step 04

I created this creature design as a demo creative sketching for my students when I was teaching. I wanted to show how you can easily block in an idea and keep the essence of it through detailing.

We were developing a fictional scifi-horror pitch and I wanted to create a horrifying creature that barely resembles human form. The idea was that an alien virus infected a person and altered its DNA to transform the host. I imagined a really fluid creature that can move really dynamically, but I also wanted to see some overall humanoid shape – showing the person half way through the mutation.

I did not use any references for this, because I was aiming for a really strange alien form and did not want to get influenced by any other images of animals or creatures. I started with some really rough silhouettes and moved from there to a presentation ready piece.

Step 01. Blocking in the main shapes

After creating some really quick silhouettes I picked the most dynamic one and sized it up to a more printable resolution (around 4-5000px high, what is roughly A3 in 300dpi). I quickly blocked in some lighter values as well, just to understand where the light is coming from and to add a basic internal shape of the limbs.

Step 02. Adding textures

I created a sub-layer and started to add textures of toad skin to my silhouette. Most of the time I keep the texturing phase for the end, but in this case I wanted cover the entire creature with some level of visual noise. This step gave me enough visual information to build on. The slight changes of tones and colors helped to find new shapes inside the silhouette and I could get a better idea of direction I am heading with the design.

Step 03. Cleaning-up and Lighting

I added some main lights and shadows on an overlay layer with gradients and started to clean up the silhouette to make the body shape and the tentacle-like fluid limbs more readable. At parts I also wanted to break through the body a bit more to create more visual interest. I added a casted shadow as well to feel the ground-plane, what instantly creates relation between the creature and it`s surroundings and adds weight.

Step 04. Painting and Definition

This was the main painting pass, where I started to unify all the previous elements and connected all the limbs and tentacles with each other to create a sense of function inside the creature. I added the fangs and spikes to various parts, because I wanted to make it even more aggressive and pushed back the saturation to get to a more gritty and realistic look.

Step 05. Refining the Details

I went on with the detailing, but only around the focal areas this time. I added some lights on an overlay layer to the head area and to the main limbs and joints to help the eye circle around creature. This was the first time when I zoomed in and worked on accidental details what popped up during the texturing and more loose painting phase. I consciously wanted to keep parts of the creature rough and painterly, because this method always leaves room to the viewer`s imagination.

Step 05

Step 06

Step 06. Background

After a quick internet search I composited 3 photographs into the alleyway you see here and to make them a bit more painterly I duplicated the layer, pushed back to around 50% opacity and applied a cutout filter on top. I flattened my creature as well and with free transform / warp I matched it to the perspective of the background. Unfortunately the old casted shadow did not match to the new lights, so I had to remove that. After that I re-colored the final result with soft light and overlay layers using the colors from my creature.

Step 07. Final Touches

This is the last step, where I usually flatten everything and simply paint on top add some final touches. In this case I also used a couple of overlay and color dodge layers to alter the lights in the creature and to create the bloom around the most lit areas. To create and unsettling feeling I tilted the image slightly and to achieve even more dynamism and I added various amounts of motion blurs to the parts of the creature. The absolute final touches were the color and contrast corrections and adding the extra dots of highlights to some parts of the creature and to suggest its slimey-ness.

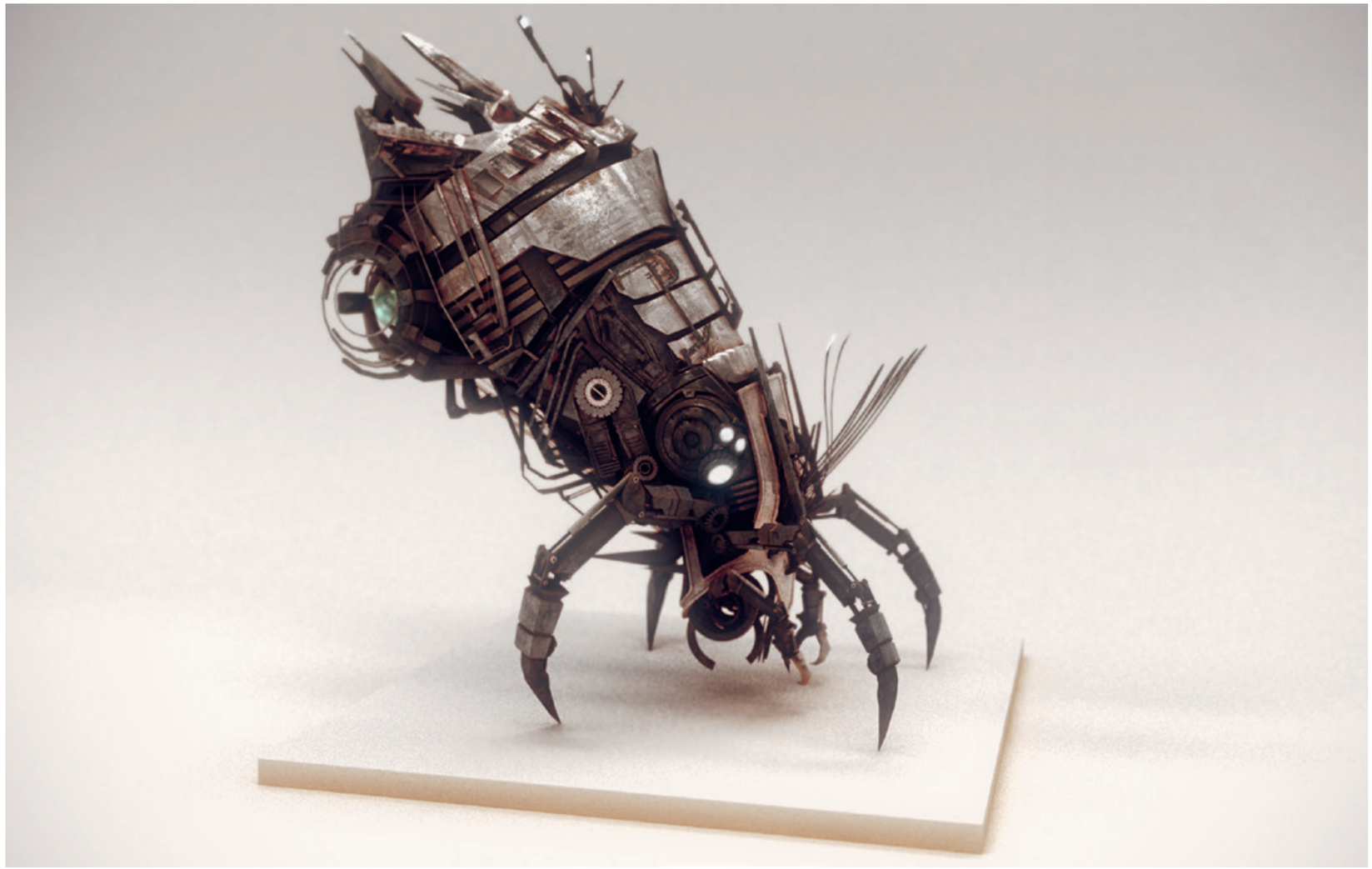
Pyramid Lord © Mark Molnar

Dwarf © David Sequeira

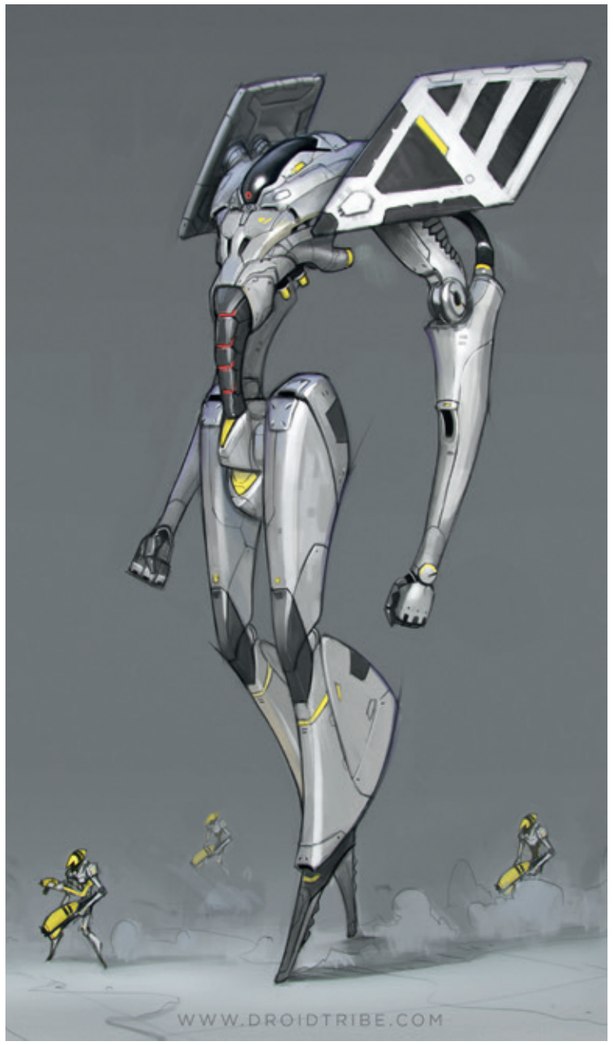
Diablo Roge © Daniel Orive

Chapter 03:

Character and Creature Design



MULBURY Ship Design © Gerard Dunleavy



Ftype © Emrah Elmasli

Shapes and Silhouettes

As we discussed earlier, silhouettes are the first thing we recognize about a character. It helps us define our subject and should include information about the pose, and possibly the mood, of our character. In designing our character's silhouette and main shape carefully, we can strengthen its main characteristics and guide the viewer more consciously through our design.

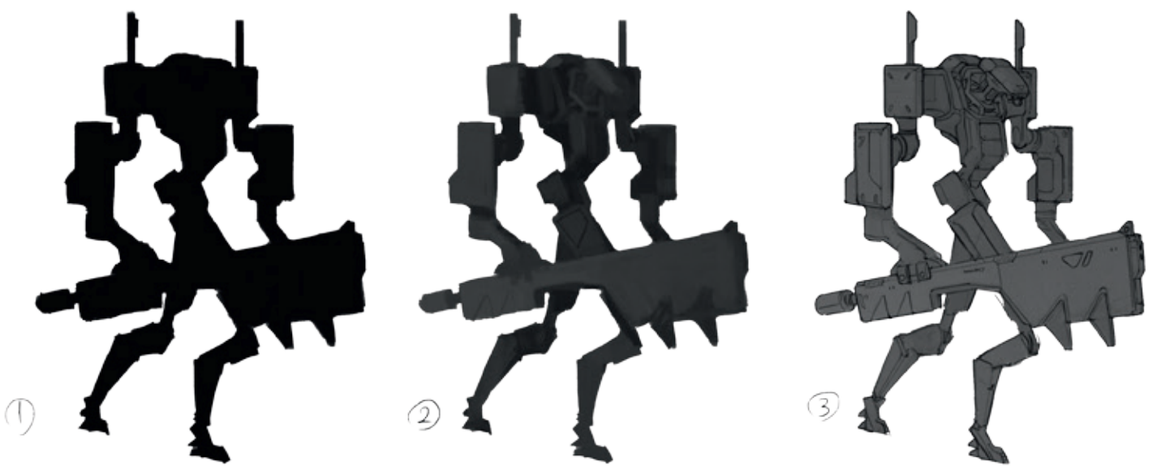
It's good if we bring the most important parts of our character into the silhouette. This could be a characteristic pose, the hands making a gesture or even the face or a unique hairstyle or helmet. This principle can also be applied to more polished illustrations, where we are not necessarily starting with silhouettes. In that case try to imagine the figures and main shapes of your composition as black & white images or create a Levels adjustment layer, where you can easily get rid of mid-tones. If the shape, creature or figure standing alone in front of a full white background still communicates the initial idea, it will most probably work as a fully finished painting as well.

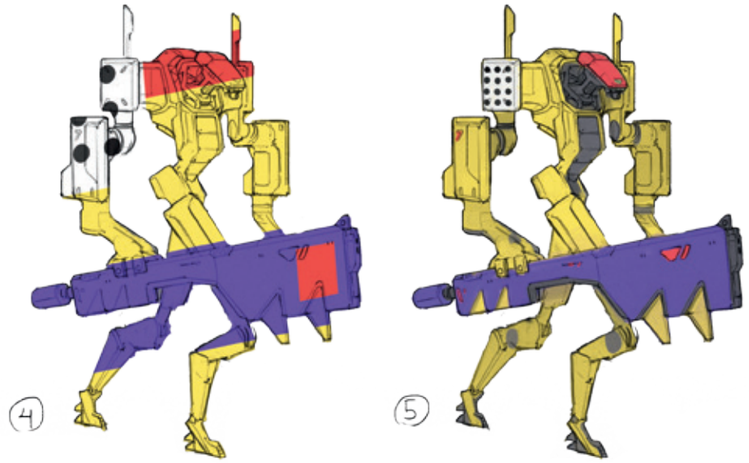
Main shapes can tell a lot about your character, you can suggest various moods, like aggression, calmness, stability, and so on.

Based on the shapes used in the silhouettes and internal parts (like costumes) of your character the viewer should be able to differentiate good from evil, friend from foe, hero from secondary character. There are universal meanings of certain shapes (like circle is wholeness or the standing triangle suggest stability), but the more complex forms have different meanings depending on the cultural background of the artist or viewer. Before building up a shape language for your project and its characters, do your research about the cultural heritage the project can be connected to and also consider the main target audience of final product.

Tutorial by Emrah Elmasli | emrahelmasli.tumblr.com

Droid 7





In this tutorial, I'll talk to you about the process I generally use while designing characters, creatures, robots and so on. It is the way I prefer and I feel that it's the most efficient method for me. I'll also try to keep it brief while explaining why I do certain things.

I'm going to design a new Droid for my personal project "Droid Tribe", which is something I'm working on in my free time. I love playing around with hard surface designs and robots are my favourites. The possibilities are endless and you can come up with all sorts of shapes in the ideation process, which brings us to the first step:

Thumbnailing

This is the most important step for me as I come up with the main shapes and design language. I generally start with a silhouette. I prefer this method because it's what you see first when you look at a dimensional thing. Especially if you squeeze your eyes, you only see the outlines and everything else gets blurred out. That's what you need to nail first to create successful designs. Every other detail comes after.

I start by sketching in Photoshop, which is my main tool. I barely use any pen and paper these days as I sketch much faster in PS. This doesn't mean you shouldn't though. It's just a different medium. So, I open up a new canvas, fill it with grey and start sketching with a chunky, square brush. I prefer chunky brushes as it's way easier to block in the shapes with them. I do lots of thumbnails and come up with different shapes. I do this until I'm happy with at least a couple of them.

After that, I block in a grey tone, which would be a very basic lighting pass. I do this to bring out some secondary shapes and forms. I repeat the

process for every thumbnail just to see if I can come up with any interesting secondary shapes within the silhouettes.

Line work

Next step is to draw on top of my chosen design. I just drop the opacity of my silhouette a bit and start drawing the details on top. This is an interesting step as I can come up with many designs from just one silhouette (and it's one of the reasons I prefer this method). The linework provides most of the information for me to go ahead with the design but it's not necessarily the final step of the design process. I still add and remove things until the end. So, it's a very good guideline for me.

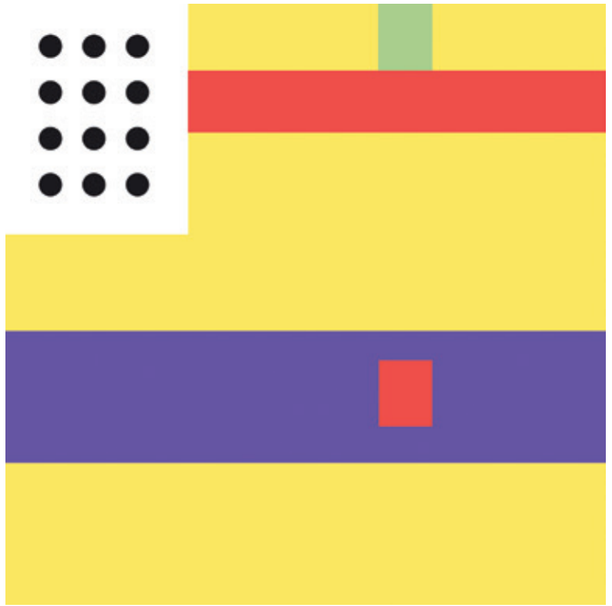
Colors and Patterns

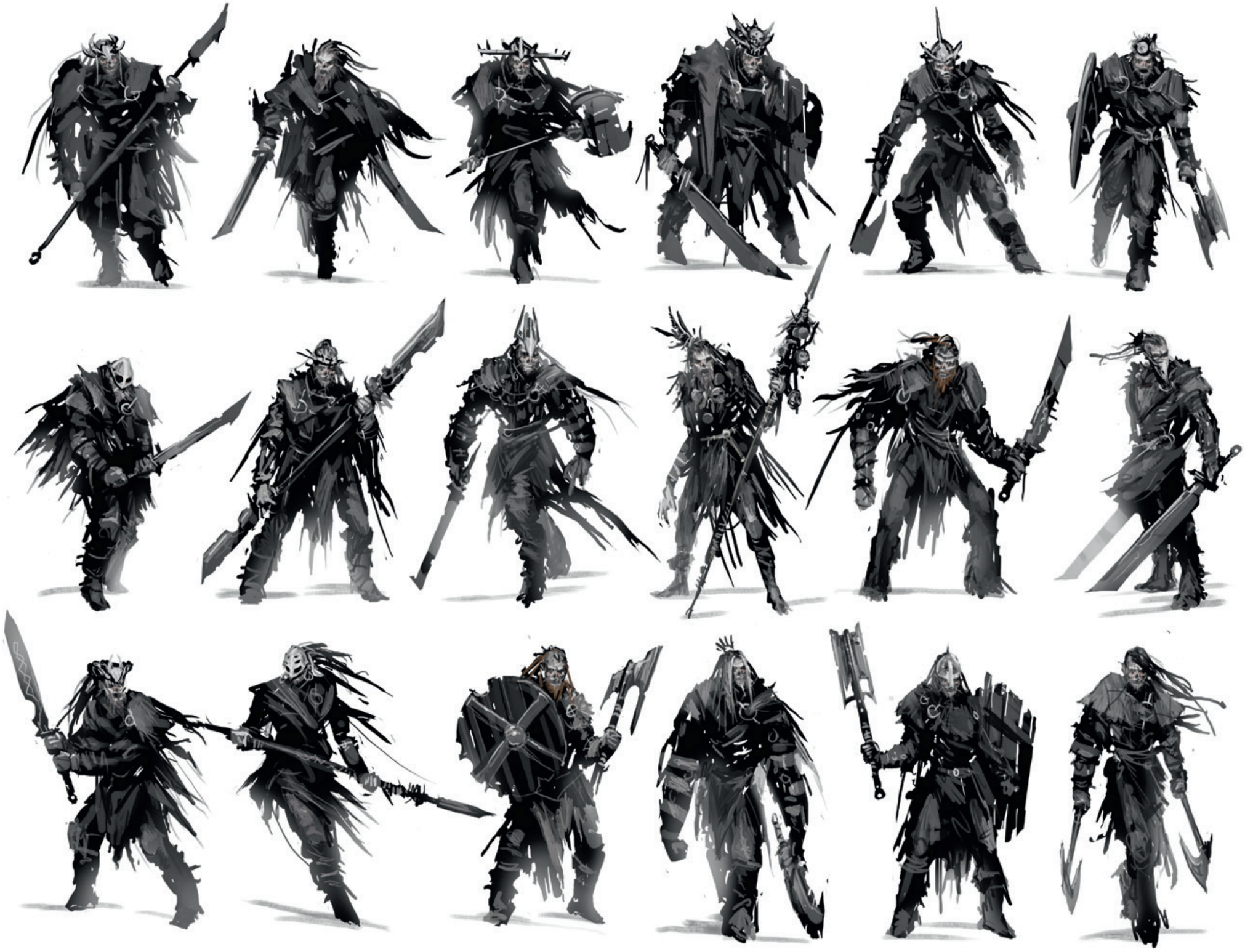
This is where I go a bit experimental. Rather than filling in my design with the first color palette that comes to mind, I prepare a color and pattern sheet. This sheet would consist of interesting color palettes I find on the Internet or I just pick colors from a poster I like, any source will do. Also, I would include some random patterns which I design in Adobe illustrator. After that, I copy and paste the whole thing on my chosen droid sketch, clip mask it on my design and start spinning it around. My aim here is to come up with an interesting color and pattern layout. It's an interesting process as happy accidents can happen which I wouldn't have thought about if I painted my design in a generic way. After finding an interesting layout, I clean it up and get the design ready for painting.

Details and Polish

This is the best bit as I take this sketch further and paint it to finish. As I said, I keep thinking about the design, add and remove things until the end. It keeps the creative juices fresh and keeps you excited about your design. As I bring my droid to final, I add graphical elements to it. Like little decals and logos I design for this purpose only. These details are important as they will make your painting look even more elaborate. For polishing, I play around with some adjustment sliders to bring up the contrast, correct color, and so on.

I finalize my design and call it "Droid 7". It wouldn't hurt to design a logo as well, right? Now, it's done.

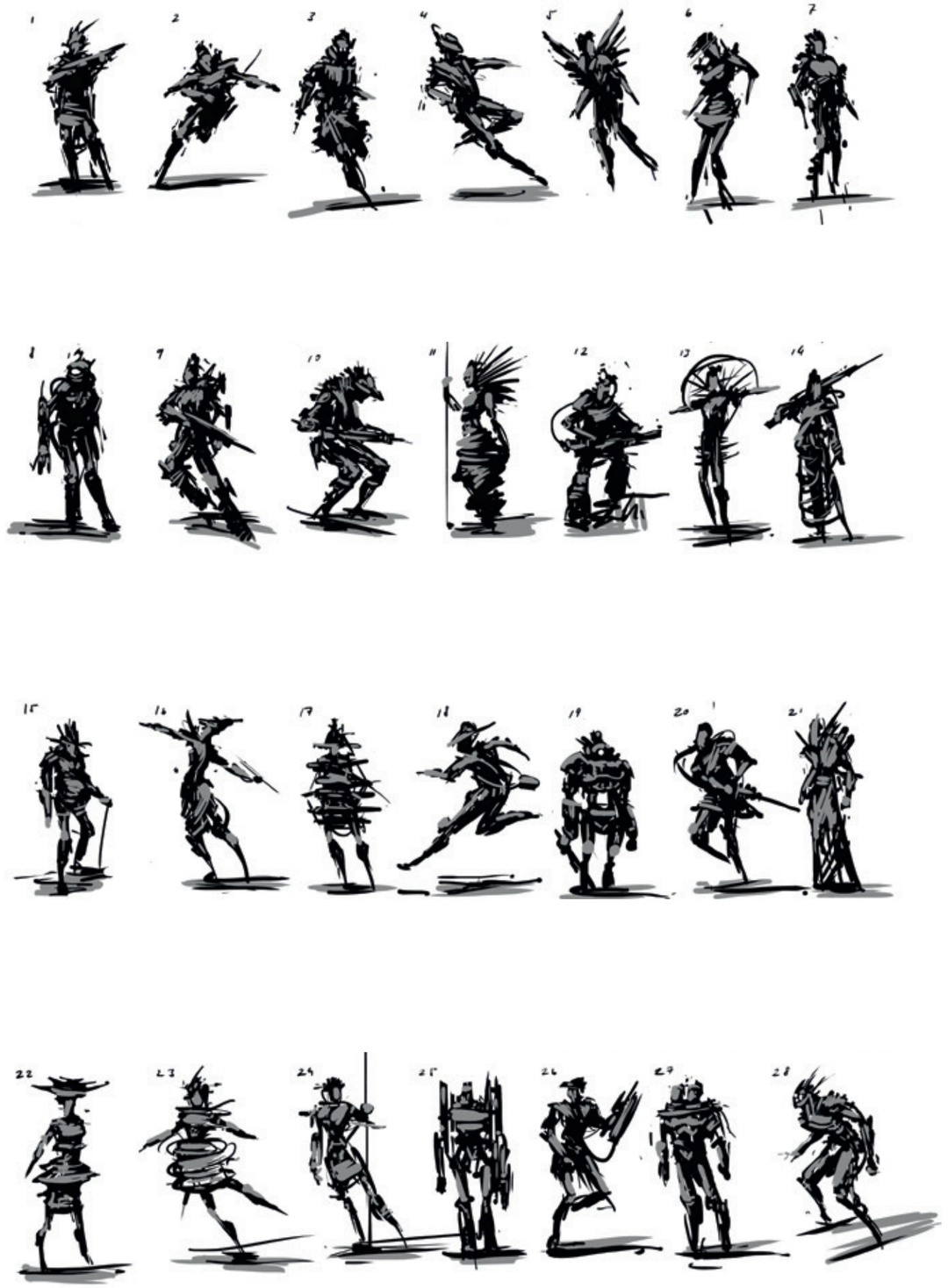




Zombie Silhouettes © Ninja Theory and Mark Molnar

India-Future-Contractors © Michal Kus

Canyon Bug – Silhouette and Final Design © Mark Molnar



Character Thumbnails © Mark Molnar

Importance of Anatomy

When designing any characters or creatures, even if they are imagined ones, anatomical accuracy is really important. During our life we get used to seeing anatomically correct animals and other humans, and we can immediately recognize any faults. If you show a drawing with incorrect anatomy to a person who is not trained in arts, they will probably say that there is something wrong with it or just find it unsettling.

Synthaur for Eclipse Phase ©
Posthuman Studios and Mark Molnar

Even when I have to design fantasy creatures, I go back and study the anatomy of real animals and apply the same principles to my designs – how the wings are connected to the body in case of a dragon, how the muscles sit on the bone structure, what the key points are of the skeletal structure of that animal, and the list is endless.

Learning the basics of drawing from life is relatively easy, but takes a lifetime to master. I started learning anatomy around the age of 14 and I am still going to life-drawing classes when my time allows, because I feel there is still so much to learn and practice. I strongly suggest that anyone who is trying pursue a career in this industry should draw from life, real people.

Many people are afraid of this because it looks really scientific, but learning the anatomy of humans and real animals is not about knowing the names of bones and various muscle groups. The key thing is to gain an overall knowledge of how the different living organisms are built up and why. Nature is logical and you can apply the same knowledge to any other species, if you learn the basics.

I remember when I started drawing life nudes in high school, our teacher set up a skeleton beside the model in the exact same pose. We had to draw the two thing together, the actual model and the skeleton inside. It was a great help, because we could instantly understand how the different bones work in the posture and what is happening why.

Unfortunately it's a rare thing to be able to do that at a life drawing course nowadays, but you can use technology to help. There are a lot of mobile anatomy apps, where you can strip down the body and study how various parts work. Use these apps as a help during life drawing. Remember life drawing is not about creating a pretty picture: it is about understanding your subject.

Botbust © Justin Goby Fields

Tutorial by Salim Ljabli | salimljabli.artstation.com

Originality in Creature Design

When I started working on creatures some years ago, I always had the idea that drawing creatures or monsters wasn't a big deal. I thought all I had to do was exaggerate some details, play with proportions and maybe switch heads between animals. But later, I realized that creating a creature that appears to be a real living thing is more than a simple mixture of species. Many concepts and executions don't really make sense when you project them into real life.

So I had to look for what makes a monster or creature look realistic and more believable, and I realized those criteria can be achieved based on study and a strong background in anatomy.

1st: "A strong background in anatomy" isn't just the visual look but includes purpose. It is not limited to humans but covers animals, insects, fish, cars, machines and more. It's everything moving with a purpose.

2nd: "Study" is about when you put what you've learned from either books or references into practice. Personally this is the most important part where you acquire the ability to express yourself and use the information you've gathered from either books, or real life and experience.

I know that studying can be boring and hard to do, and many people avoid it because they don't get a decent result at first; or what they did doesn't look good or polished. But what I've noticed from the work of students, and other artists, is that they focus on the details and care about the final result more than the process itself. What I recommend is a study which is based on analysing the subject, reading it, and asking yourself what are you reading? What make this creature different from the others? And then start breaking down the subject into small parts and extract all the information you can from that small portion of what you see.

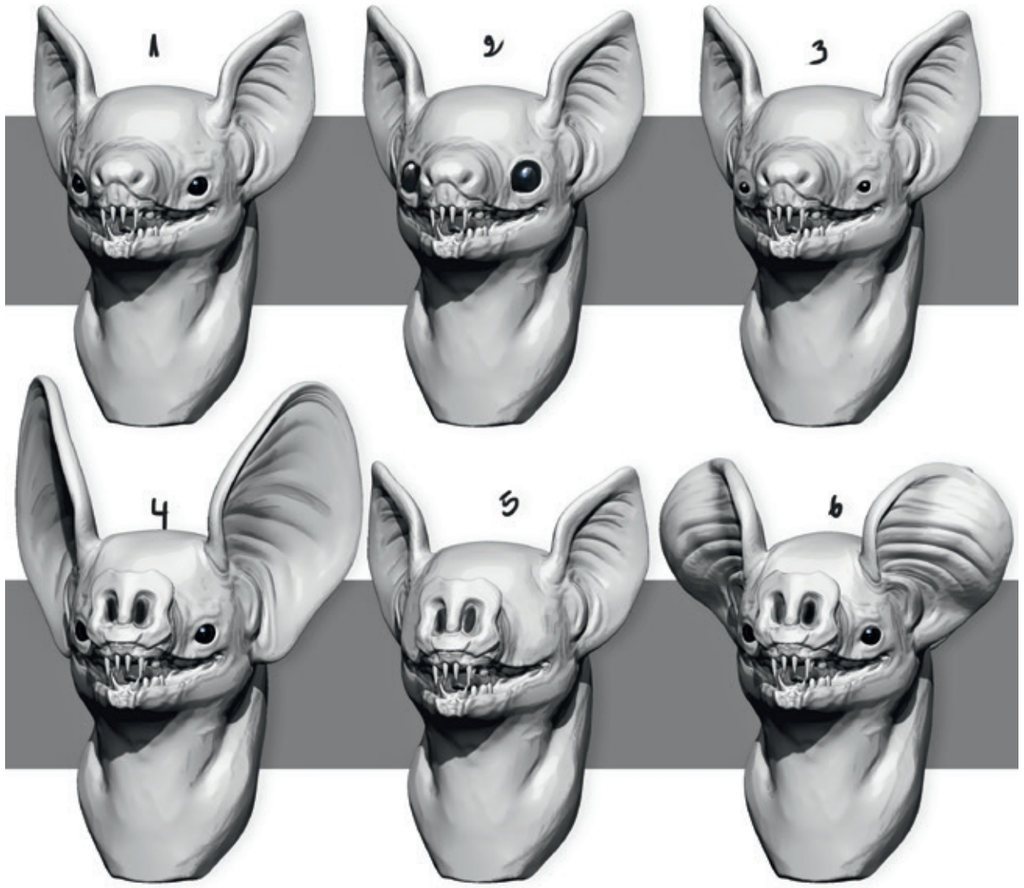
For example, a set of eyes might have something special about them and provide a reference.

This is the importance of analysis, it helps you see the differences between different creatures and, even better, see what differences there are between individuals of the same species.

Doing speed-sculpt or speed sketches will help you to see those key features because they are what really define one creature from another.

From the picture we can see a bat head design with different variations.

So playing with the feature that define our design is one of the known ways to make creatures that has a mixtures of features from different creatures to build a specific creature designed for a purpose" which is the back story of that creature: what does it eat, is it fast? What does it do? And it is mainly the story behind this creature."



1st This looks typical.

2nd This one has big eyes which makes him look friendlier or maybe young.

3rd This one has very small eyes and that gives him a creepy look.

4th, 5th, 6th These all have different ears but are still the same design.

This is a generic head using more iconic features from the bat.

So basically making a monster or a creature is nothing but a mixture between the existent creatures in nature, isn't it?

Tools you'll need to create a convincing creature:

Anatomy, a lot of people try to avoid it at the beginning but it's the core of everything you'll do if it is either organic or mechanic.

A good visual understanding of the human body. Function is the starting point for every humanoid creature, you should also build a visual library by studying the human body in different poses, including a relaxed pose and extreme poses when all the muscles, bone and skin deformations are at their extremes, which help you create the in-betweens.

Having a good understanding of anatomy of human body as well as animals will give you so much flexibility to do smooth transitions between the organs of the body and make everything have a good and natural flow which everyone is used to see in nature, which makes it easy to read and accept.

For me anatomy is mostly a technical part in doing creatures, but once you master it, it will be the key for a successful design, a design that answer the needs match the back story behind the creature as it will be the logical representation of those words into a living thing.

This is a quick sketch I did to demonstrate the importance of reference and the use of features if they are either organs or shapes or colors.

This one is the same design with different paint, and from the one in the middle you can see that I've used the eye of a lioness or a lion as reference even though the overall design is still the same but the textures give you a different result.

Paying attention to what really attract our eyes to define or distinguish one animal from another can be key for an easy and acceptable result on any creature concept you can make, and it can be achieved by a good anatomy background and good sense of analysis which can be acquired from study.

Neo Whale for Eclipse Phase © Posthuman Studios and Mark Molnar

Jim © Peter Yong

MKS V1 © Salim Ljabli

Personality through Design

Your main goal with your character designs is to create a fictional person that the viewer can relate to. When you design a king or ultimate warrior for example, it is okay to create an "unrelateable" character, because it is out of the general viewer's experience. But even in those cases it is better if you can sneak some little everyday thing into your design. This could be a simple half-sided smile from a girl you met in a cafe or the weird ear-hair of the grumpy grocery shop owner on the corner, the key is to find a personal touch that makes the character unique. By adding these small, and usually unnoted, details to our design, is how we project our emotions into them and that is going to come through the artwork and fill the design with life.

Chubby Link © Gerard Dunleavy

Beside the little personal details you can tell a lot about the character in the design of its costume and overall appearance. It is not coincidence that in real life we form our first opinion about somebody based on their outfit. Clothing says a lot about social status, likes and dislikes, sub-culture and so on. In the age of the Internet we are all affected by the media and form pre-conceptions about dress habits and cliches. As creative people we are usually trying to break these but, in the case of character design, we can consciously use these stereotypes to shape the personality of our fictional characters. Don't be afraid of overdoing things, it is okay to exaggerate the most typical things in your character, if those things can communicate its place inside the story, script or game.

The third thing you have to consider is the pose of your character. The posture of a person also says a lot about their personality. Beside the basic heroic pose you see in most concept art, there are a lot of subtle variations. Try to learn about the psychology of body language and what pose is connected with what personality. What does a shy introverted person look like? What are the signs of aggression? How does "pride" look? Fear?

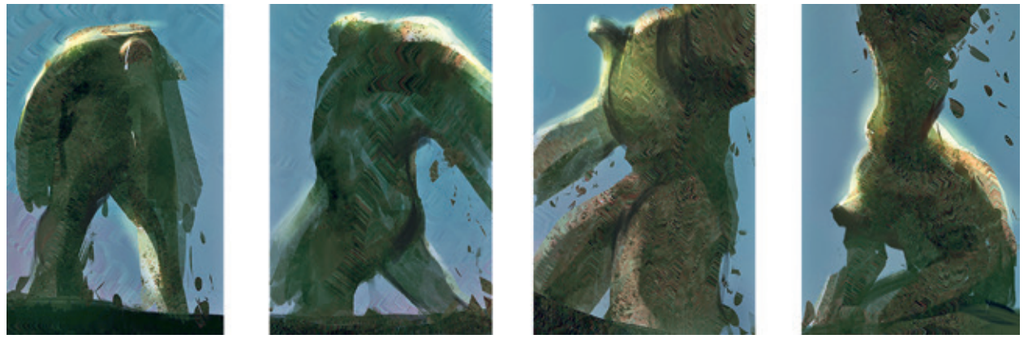
I always observe people – and sketch them, if possible – in public places and try to guess what kind of person they could be. See how people perform ordinary actions, like drinking a coffee or holding an umbrella, and spot the differences between simple movements and stances. Remember, the hardest thing is not to paint a character in a super-dynamic pose jumping out a window shooting two guns, but showing the same person in a simple standing pose and making that interesting and full of life.

Empire The Sage © Gilles Ketting

Tutorial by Abe Taraky | www.abetaraky.com

Asmodan, the Graveborn

(Terraforge, Copyright by DLK Studios)



Step 01

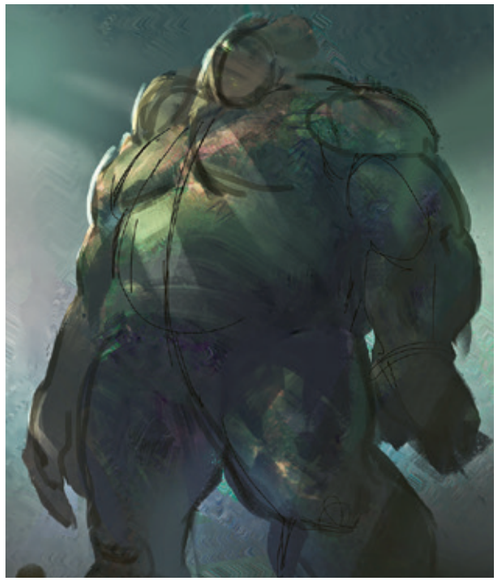
With only a brief description of the character, I cover the stages of imagining a creature in a believable environment. By taking you through the thumbnailing, primary block in, detailing and compositing stages, I hope to demonstrate how one could create a well thought out character while maintaining clarity and staying true to the original brief.

Step 01.

When starting a character piece you're essentially picking the battles you will fight through the rest of the painting process. Thumbnailing is a great way to get an idea of those battles without lengthy commitment. As I started this piece, I had to ask myself what the most important attributes of the image are and how I can communicate them in a clear, concise manner. At the thumbnailing stage, I kept the details to a minimum and focussed on broad shapes. I added tiny hits of light to give dimension and drama.

Step 02.

Knowing that the creature is a hulking dead giant walking through a landscape covered in tombstones, I decide to develop the first thumbnail. The eerie and lifelessness of the pose reads well and suits our purpose. I then described some musculature with a larger flat brush. This way there is no nitpicking, just broad strokes. For colors, I refrained from going to my color picker

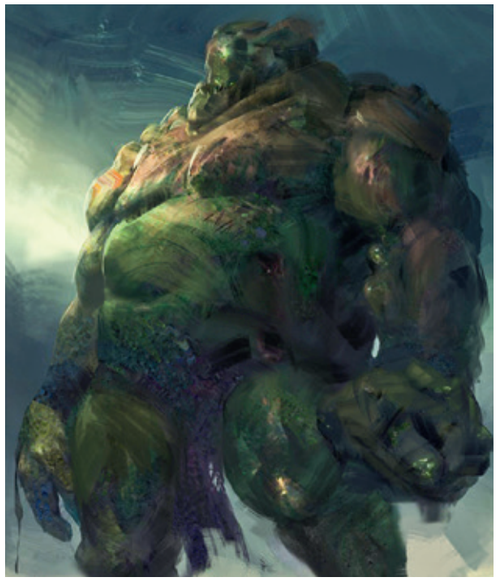


Step 02

or the swatches. Instead, I used the eye-dropper tool to take colors directly from my painting. This kept me in the local value range and helped me avoid using extreme values at such an early stage.

Step 03.

I kept layering in paint while trying to push and pull surfaces. The goal here was to create believable form and I did this by varying edges. Using



Step 03

the edge control, I suggested ideas like a loin cloth, a deformed hand and a dislocated jaw. Remember, the painting was in its early stages, so there were not too many ideas that were off-limits at this point.

The background got a similar treatment. Going back and forth between a flat brush and a rake-like one, I roughed out some mountain ranges, cloud formations and did further work on the river I added earlier. In the sky behind the character, I used the smudge tool, with the rake brush equipped, to pull the paint and create interesting forms. The goal was to keep in mind the light formations and how they helped stage the scene. I wasn't too worried about keeping things clean. As a matter of fact, I wanted the paint application to show in the final image. Therefore anything put down was applied with full opacity and flow: this way the strokes were very prominent and clear. I have found that by doing this in the earlier stages I make room for some happy accidents.

Step 04.

Next was the laborious, but most rewarding, part of the process: making sense of the madness. I decided on the direction of the light source, so had to apply light and shadow to the planes of the surfaces put down.

Materials and objects are really difficult to make up on the spot, so a little reference goes a long way. With all that in mind, I developed the arms by adding creases around the fingers and cloth around the wrists. For the creature's left hand, I wanted to give him a weapon both unique to his character but with obvious functionality. So I wrapped bandages around protruding tumors, and turned his hand into a massive fleshy mace. Remember, clarity.

Step 04

I worked my way towards the face where I added structure and played around with some design. I thought it would be interesting to have a neutral state where the mandible is broken, causing the creature to drop his jaw. Thus he is always walking with his mouth open. While painting the forms on the face, I kept in mind the structure beneath his skin couldn't hold a massive amount of fat. So there is sagging that forces the skin to stretch and layer over other skin. As a result, I decided to make his left eye sag too.

Step 05.

To take the image further I added details to both the creature and the environment: torn skin, exposed muscles, gaping stomach punctures, spears sticking from the body, torn cloth, a wagon wheel belt buckle and even gravestones. These elements are for visual interest. Similarly, I added details to the environment by organizing the mountain range and cloud formations. In the foreground, I put in sharper reflections along with waste material to create a convincingly polluted reflective river and applied a splatter brush to paint in some wild and overgrown vegetation.

Step 07

Step 06.

After finishing up the details, I do one final pass of both the environment and the character in order to ensure that the materials are convincing enough. I play around with the reflectivity of the flesh by adding highlights to both the skin and his exposed innards. A red aura is added to the eyes to further emphasize them. After all, with a small head and massive amounts of flesh around the face, it's easy to lose the eyes.

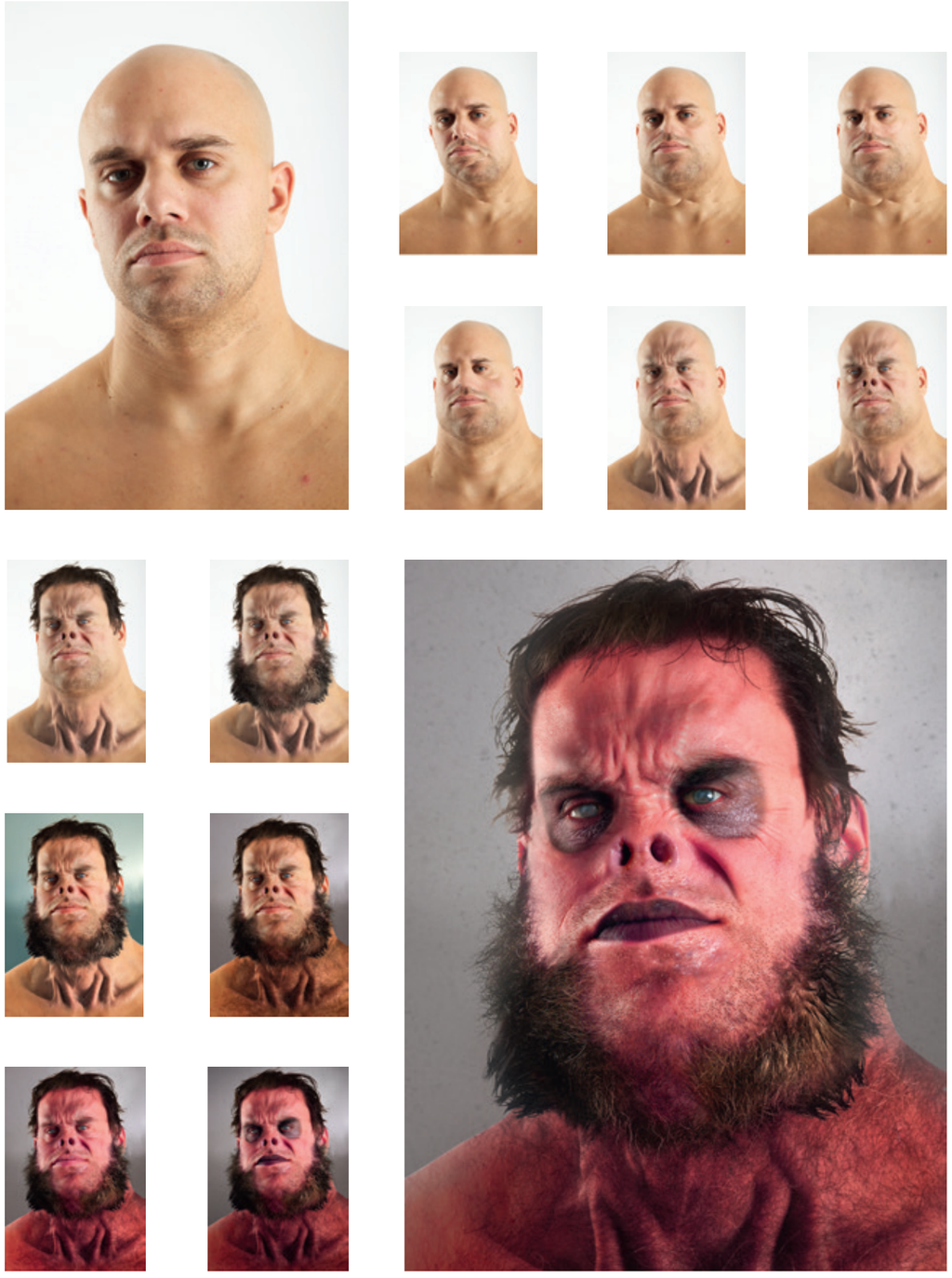
I play with the layering of certain elements and begin to separate the foreground, midground (the creature) and background. I do this by applying a number of fog and dust layers which also help in creating a believable sense of space. A few gravestones are also sprinkled in the foreground in order to push the idea of a mass graveyard . The graves tie in the creature to the environment as he is also covered in tombstones. Then, I add in a disturbed flock of crows and blur them to create some motion.

Step 07.

After all the final touches had been taken care of, I looked over the value and color relationships. A duplicate of all the layers was made and here I made adjustments to the image using some of the powerful colorization tools that Photoshop offers. This is also the stage in which I added camera effects, such as blurs and color distortion.

Tutorial by Andrei Riabovitchev | andrei.artstation.com

Red Giant



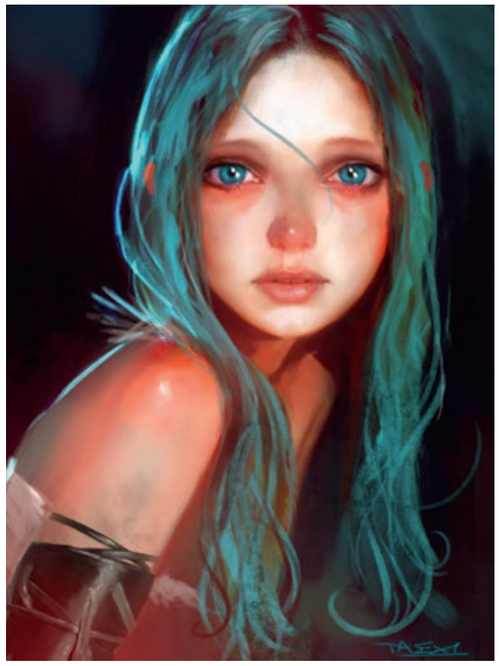
Alistair © Peter Yong

Hendo © Peter Yong

Fremen Eagle Hunter © Mark Molnar

Oravores © Daniel Orive

Aliensmile © Justin Goby Fields



Polly © Alessandro Taini

Senua © Alessandro Taini

Grom © Daniel Orive

Building a back-story

Deathray Trooper © Michal Kus

Sniper Ambush © DarekZabrocki

HellBlade Berserker © Ninja Theory and Mark Molnar

We all have our personal backgrounds: where we came from; what culture and part of society we grew up in; what we learned; who our friends were and so on. You have to think through exactly the same thing when designing a character or creature. Without a back-story your character will be soul-less, like a ghost floating in mid-air.

Usually the back-story comes from the script of the project or maybe from the director / art director who oversees the character's place in the overall production. But there are some cases where the concept artist has to create the background information to support a design.

The most important thing is to have some key elements in the design that reflect the character's past. I usually write these down on a simple post-it note when I start designing any character and try to come up with 'visual associations' during the design process. These cues can be included in the character's costume, accessories, weapons, hairstyle or even really simple things such as scars, small tattoos or jewelry. The important thing is to form a visual language that corresponds to the story / script and matches what we would like to communicate about the character.

Beside my professional work I use the very same process when I am creating characters for my personal projects and illustrations. In those cases I come up with a short back-story myself, I write it down next to the first scribbles of the characters in my sketchbook. These back-stories don't have to be long, it is enough to summarize them in a few words or a couple of sentences. A Viking fantasy character's background can be something like this: "He is a battle-worn warrior of the north with red hair and piercing blue eyes. He traveled a lot with the Vikings as far as Mediterranean region, that is why he wears mixed armor and accessories from various cultures. His main characteristic is a long battle-scar, what cuts all the way through the right side of his face making his nose and lips slightly asymmetric." Something like this gives enough base to build all the other elements on top, but try to avoid going into too much detail.

Exactly the same thing applies to creatures, but usually in a more natural way. If you are designing an imagined creature, you should ask yourself: How and where does this creature live? What does it eat, is it carnivorous or herbivorous? If the former, how does it hunt and what? And so on.

After you have answered these questions, find real world animals with the same characteristics and use them as your references for the creature's muscle structure, fur pattern, etc. but give it your personal twist. The crazier you go with your design, the more fantastical the creature is going to be. I think keeping a healthy 10-15% of real world animal in your design is the minimum, but there are no set rules for this and it is always dictated by the project itself.

Tutorial by Peter Yong | www.peteryongart.com

Pug Power Suit

character sheet

Step 01. Concept

This is the most important step and requires the most thought. In a professional environment this could be given to you by the client and could be specific or vague depending on where they are in the production. It will be in the form of a brief, so here is the one I created based on my own story.

Pug Power Suit
Dr Mechastone is an evil genius pug dog and creator of an army of killer robots. He has just created a power suit to fight his nemesis Mr Wonderful and the other superheroes. Here is a character sheet I did for him.

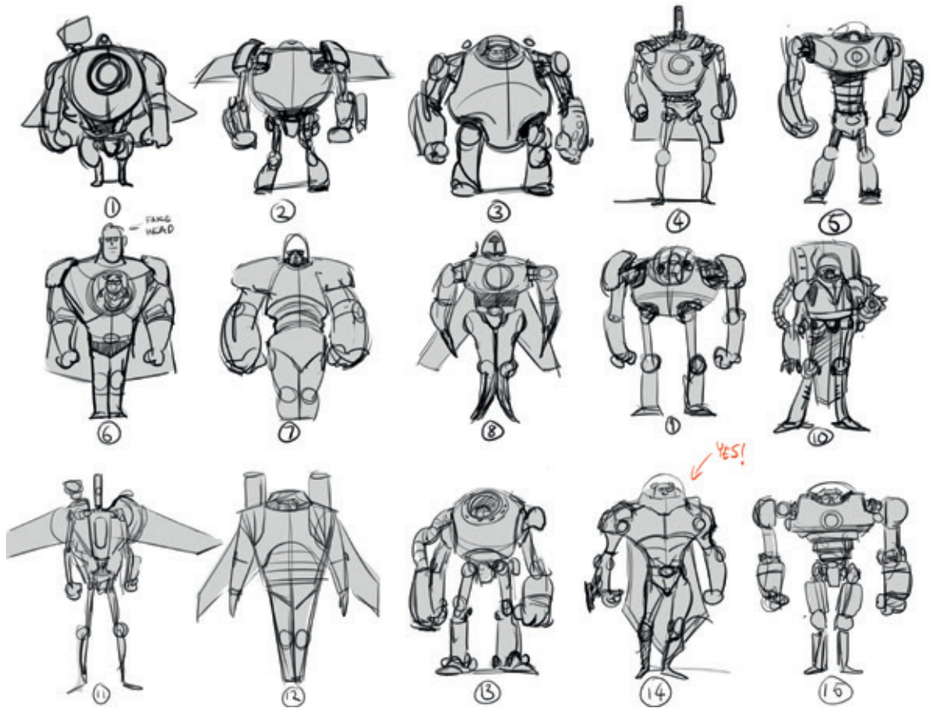
Visual Goals:
It has to look like it can fight a superhero one-on-one (obvious example is Ironman).

Little man syndrome (how can I play this up in the design?). He is a show-off, arrogant and a megalomaniac.
Sleek, intimidating design...yet kind of cute (a bit vague, I know).
Looks statuesque, proportions are even more pushed than regular superheroes.

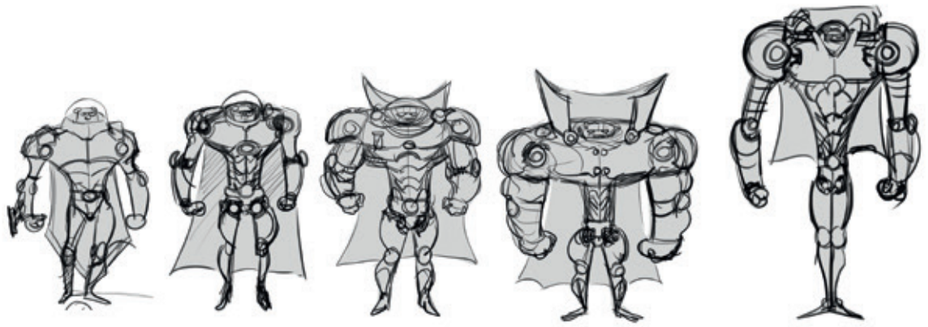
Features:
Flying – rocket boots.
Weapon – gun concealed in arm.
Must be able to be piloted by pug (in Chest? Head?)
Resembles a superhero and can fight hand-to-hand.

Step 02. Thumbnails

At this stage I work in very broad shapes. All I think about is the feel I want from the design. I recommend doing a lot of these. We all have a tendency to draw shapes and designs we are comfortable with and see every day. To make something unique and interesting I feel I have to work through all the generic designs I have in my head and eventually I will come up with something cool and interesting, and that fits the



Step 02



Step 03

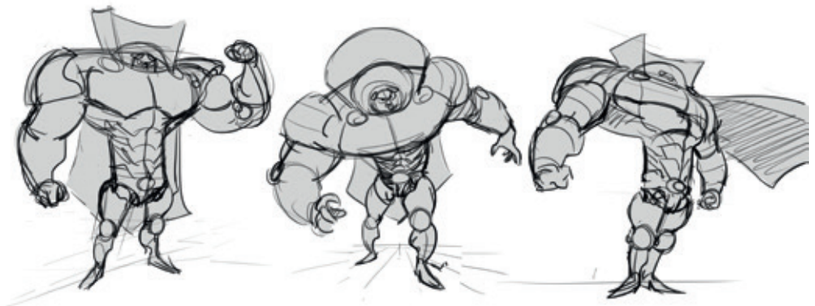
brief. As you can see I really liked number 14, he looks like a superhero and I like his little pug face poking out of this really statuesque figure, a nice bit of contrast.

Step 03. Refined thumbnails

Having chosen the shape I want it was time to explore its possibilities.
I'm still playing with shapes but now it is more focused. These are some questions I ask myself:
How far can I push the design?
Can I add anything more to it?
Am I still following the brief?

Step 04. Posing

At this point I had a good idea of where the design was going. I did a few quick drawings of how I wanted to pose him. My goal here was to express his character in the pose; and to show the design clearly. I chose the first one on the left



Step 04

because I felt his pose was simple and showed the shapes and forms. The flexing of the bicep was fun too.

Step 05. Refined line drawing

As you can see I didn't have the cleanest lines but that is not important. The next stage was to refine and push my rough pose, and design the smaller shapes such as more functional areas in the joints. I find that, when designing robots, if you make the joints functional the robot will feel much more believable. This guy has strong pivot joints with synthetic muscle for fine movement.

This is the point where I make a reference sheet. Just go to Google image search and find images for what you do not know how to draw. For example I found a bunch of mechanical joints and anatomy images. I recommend using photos of real things, not other people's artwork because it will be too tempting to use their shape language and, before you know it, you have designed something that looks just like their art.

Step 06

Step 06. Color thumbnails

In the previous step I filled in the silhouette under the line drawing. Here I just grabbed the shape, shrunk it to thumbnail size and created a bunch of color ideas. Don't be afraid of experimenting and jumping into crazy color combinations.

Step 07. Flat colors

Once you have chosen your color palette from your thumbnails you can color pick from it and apply it to your line drawing.

Step 08. Rendering black & white

By making the character white I could render the forms using a soft brush. All I am thinking about here was sculpting the volume of the forms using cast shadow and reflected light to make the forms turn in space. An important thing to think about is where the light is coming from and sticking to it.

Step 07

Step 08

Step 09

Step 10

Step 09: Overlaying your B&W render with your flat colors

Make the rendering layer a multiply layer, put it above your flat color layer, and adjust with curves if necessary. And like magic the flat color character has volume. This is a great base with which to finish the painting.

Step 10. All the bells and whistles

It's almost finished. Then I defined the materials more and added more subtle color variation. Thinking about ambient light (how the environment and sky affects the character) can really help to ground and put the character in the scene. This is a good point to take a break before coming back to the work with fresh eyes.

Step 11. Final refinements

Now it's just about the finishing touches: little specular highlights, shadow, slight color adjustments, that sort of thing. Just put a layer over the top and paint away.

Conclusion

I will be honest and say that I am not a great painter. You can see from this tutorial I have skipped a lot of the "fancy" painting stuff. In my opinion, the most important part of design happens in the first few steps and the painting is just the icing on the cake. From a design standpoint most of the problems are solved at step 6. The rest is just really selling the design so anyone can understand what you are communicating.

Rogue © Björn Hurri

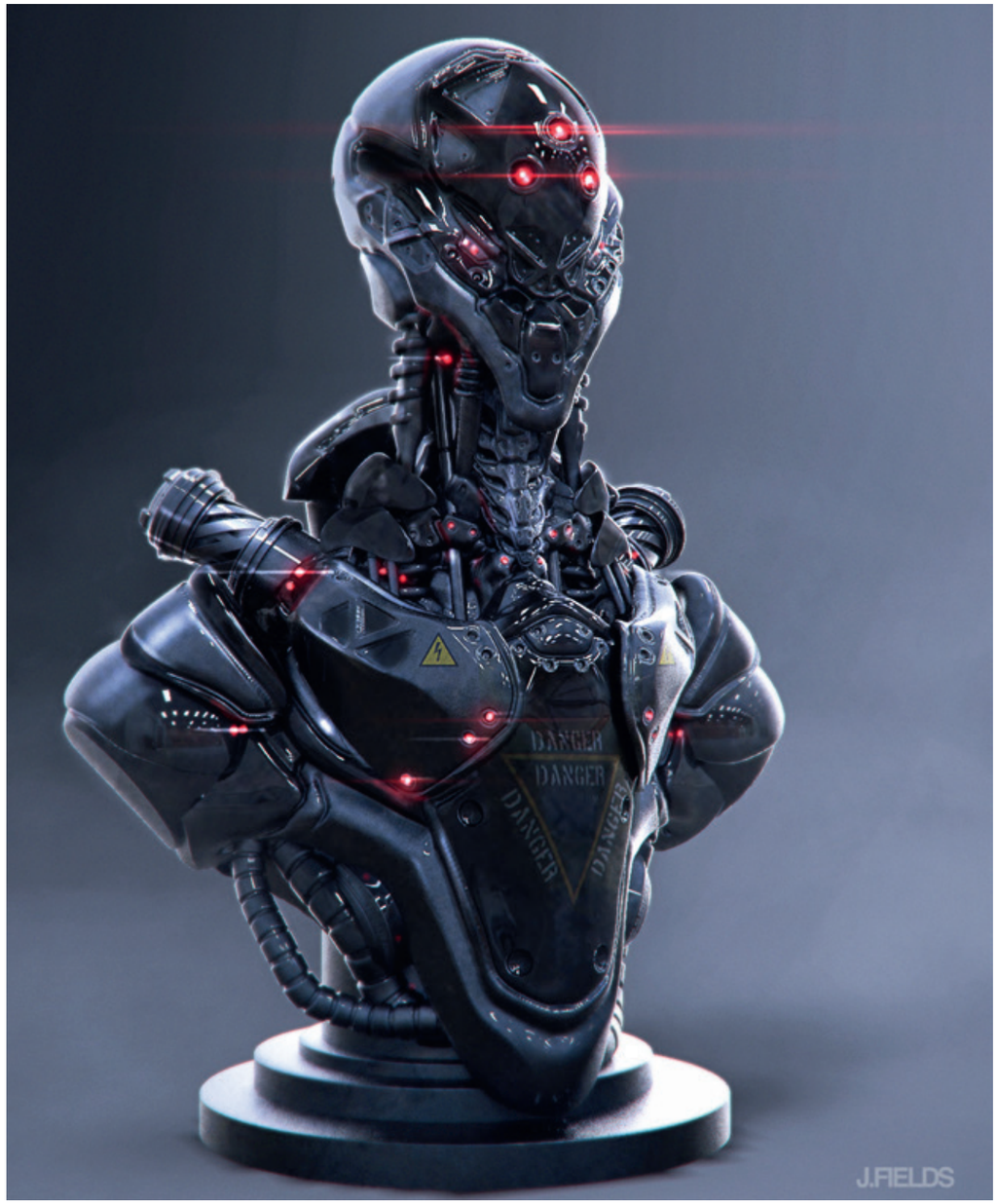
Empire – The War Chief © Gilles Ketting

HellBlade Witch © Ninja Theory and Mark Molnar

Tribal Leader © MarkMolnar

The Lost Souls © Gilles Ketting

Using Different Materials



Botbustrobot © Justin Goby Fields

You can give your character more interest and unique appearance by using various materials and clothing. It is a common mistake to use the surface qualities everywhere on a character, this makes it boring and very unlike real life. Just look at your own clothing now. You wear at least three or four different materials, jeans, cotton t-shirt, maybe a leather belt, a canvas baseball hat, and so on. You have to achieve the same level of refreshing variety in your character designs too.

If the back-story tells you the past of your character, then the costume reveals the character's present. All of their costume and accessories should reflect what the character does in the script or story, and strengthen the primary characteristics from the back-story.

You can start building these things from the very basics, like re-using the shape language from the already established silhouette. The next step is choosing the appropriate materials of clothing, weapons, armor and all the primary objects the character uses or wears, as this will be what we first see and what our opinion of the character is based on. The last step is adding the fine details and easter eggs to the costume: those things that are going to be used later in the story or simply add to the character's specific appearance. This final step is one of the most important ones because this is what fills your design with personality and gives you your own unique touch.

Try to match your design to the appropriate weather conditions and always use references as a starting point. Do your research before jumping into a project even if you have a really solid idea in mind. Real world clothing can elevate your designs to the next level and are crucial if you are working on projects with realistic content, like movies or real-life based Triple-A video game titles.

HellBlade Wicker © Mark Molnar

Tutorial by Daniel Orive | www.danielorive.com

Etsuko Project

The idea:

A few weeks ago I got to go to Japan, that country and its culture touched me. I came back inspired by how they mix together their ancient culture, temples and colors, with the new age, anime, manga and technology. And I was compelled to create a piece in which I could make use of that fusion.

Its core had to be, mainly, representative of their ancient culture. Something very oriental, I wanted it to carry their color scheme. The pinks, whites and reds brought my imagination to the geisha. Also, I knew I wanted it to be a doll, as I'm a collector and I thought I could give it a nice twist.

Gathering reference:

When it comes to reference it's easy to get caught by the obvious, that main image that always comes up on your search. This is why

I use Pinterest, I think it's a great tool. It allows me to browse among many different results and it links me to options distant from my initial search.

First Pass:

I began developing the character based on all those initial thoughts, pictures and references.

My initial process is quite simple. I draw an initial messy sketch, and once I'm happy with it I clean it up to enhance the main idea. This is my foundation. I apply the color on top of it until I cover it up. I hide the initial sketch line focusing more on light and color.

First pass recap:

At this stage I wasn't really pleased with the outcome. The character design was within the requirements I initially decided, however it seemed too much. The heroine look wasn't what I wanted, I was after something more unique so I decided to start over.

Second Pass:

I found some images which I thought were great references and they would help me reach a more unique design. I would like to mention I'm a big fan of Mark Rayden and Skydoll. Their work is always somewhere in my brain, part of my subconscious. I can see how they've influenced me in this character design.

Second Pass recap:

I was finally happy with the result. The character was showing what I had in mind since the beginning, that culture and new age fusion was there and it had a nice and unique presence.

I ended up adding a mixture of helmet and tiara with a more "sci-fi" style, even though it's a bit futuristic, the idea was to maintain the classic oriental hair look. You can see this in my references and I'm sure you remember it from characters like Chun-Li.

The colors were always part of my initial inspiration and I did go for a more red and pink palette initially, however I felt it was a bit boring. After adding the blue here and there, I saw it gaining a more of an stylized look, so I decided to stick with it.

This final design might be more of a Japanese / Chinese fusion, I didn't see this as a problem or a departure from my initial inspiration but as a way of making the character more individual and special.

3D process – part 1:

Once I've got the main concept I want to sculpt, I have a few workflows I like to use. I change from one to another, depending on the amount of time I have to finish the piece. I do want to say that I'm not married to my initial design, and if I feel like tweaking it or changing it, I do. This has sometimes enhanced the work.

So, in this case, since time was crucial, I decided to go for a pre-existing model, I had a female base mesh and I decided to use it as a starting point.

This meant it was just a matter of adjusting some proportions, remodeling the face and adding all those details and extra parts my new design had.

In this picture you can see the initial base mesh I modified.

3D process – part 2:

Once I have the foundation in 3D I tend to give a bit of detail to it in symmetry. I do that on the parts I think will benefit, but make sure I don't overcomplicate things.

The final step of adding details is done with the posed character, you can also have a look on my website where I have this step and workflow explained in plenty of tutorials.

As I've always said I'm a huge fan of 3Ds Max as a tool to create all these sort of parts. I have a tutorial on my website on a character called Oravores in which I explain my workflow in detail (www.danielorive.com).

Once I have the part, if I feel the need to, I will bring it to Zbrush to fine tune and add details. Things like screws, marks or scratches.

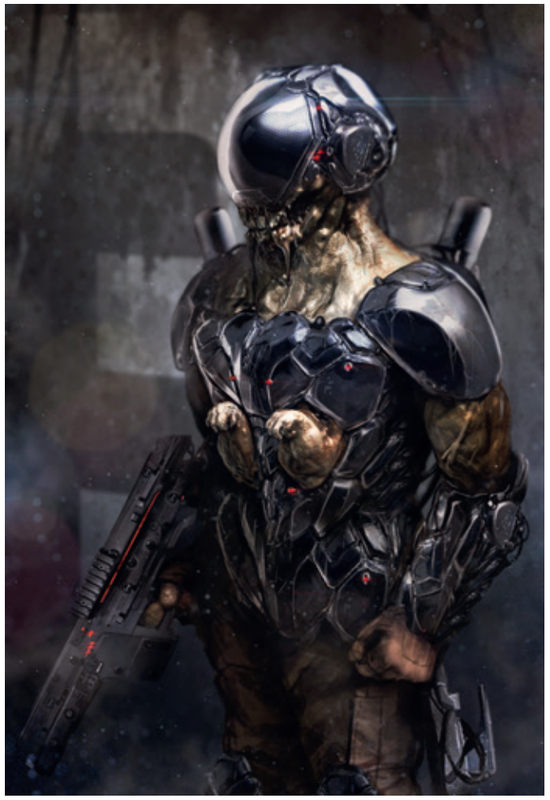
Final Result:

I'm quite happy with the end result. The piece has been entirely created for the book "Behind the pixel" and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mark Molnar for allowing me to be part of it.

In my opinion, being able to talk about where the idea comes from and how to implement the initial inspiration to further develop it into a final piece is a rare and valuable piece of information.

Thanks!

Cop © Björn Hurri



Mercenary © Mark Molnar

7Eyes warrior © Salim Ljabli

Mechs © Michal Kus

Vampire Hunter © Andrei Riabovitchev

Chapter 04:

Environment Design

Epic Landscapes

Beyond Control © Arnaud Pheu

The key for a successful landscape painting is to handle the perspective right and to have pleasing variation in terms of rhythm and scale between objects.

There is aerial perspective where the darkest areas become lighter and slightly bluer through layers of air, while the illuminated side of the objects lose their saturation as they move further away. The contrast of values reduces into the distance until it merges with the color of the sky. This effect is also enhanced by dust, moisture, fog or even smog. It is good to keep in mind the air is getting cleaner and thinner as we are getting higher, so the effect of aerial perspective is always going to be stronger closer to the ground.

A very effective technique is to focus only on silhouettes first and create lots of space segments (lots of mountains for example), that become lighter towards the horizon. After blocking in the main shapes at the thumbnail stage I only have to add more details inside them and break up the space between to achieve more depth. I can fill

Academy of Necromancy © Mark Molnar

You can separate your space segments further with the amount of detailing as well. The aerial perspective not only unifies the values, but also flattens out the shapes. Adding more textural details and contrast to your foreground will help it feel closer to the viewer.

The other part is to play with the size of the objects from very small to gigantic. By using vertical objects, taller than the canvas, we can create a natural effect, because it is relatively rare to see the top of a mountain or building in real life and by placing our horizon line closer to the bottom of the image we can create even more space for these massive objects. Also, working on the ground level, you can play with adding perspective cues to your sky and clouds by using blurrier edges closer to the camera and more compressed shapes with harder edges far away. Adding gradients to the sky towards the sun and painting your clouds with more saturated colors in the foreground will both help to give an extra level of depth to your illustration.

out my basic silhouettes with gradients quickly, which instantly gives them a feeling of realism. We are so used to seeing the natural gradients caused by aerial perspective in real life, that even a simple technique like this can alter our perception.

Finally it is important to add a point of reference to our images, because without that the viewer won't be able to determine the actual size of things. It's best to use an easily recognizable object which has a specific size: a human or something man-made, like a house or maybe an animal, like a deer in the forest or some birds in the sky. With adding living things to your environment concepts you strengthen the focal area of the image and tell a small story inside of a simpler mood piece, that can connect it with the script / project more.

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

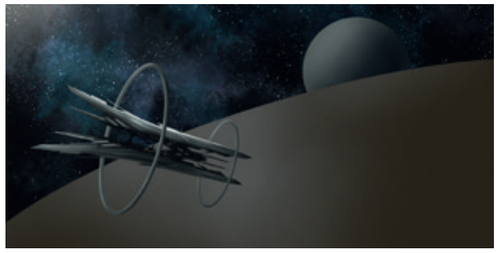
Apocalyptic Planet

For this image I wanted to show the over-civilized side of chaos, a planet covered with smoke and smog from the factories of its many cities below. The first thing that popped in my mind was an invasion against the planet, but I did not wanted to show the actual attack. I decided to depict the scene where the invaders arrive, just before they start to wipe out the planet.

Because the forms and tones in nature are always harmonious, the best way to show chaos is through colors and disorganized abstract shapes. To strengthen the feel of aggression I wanted to make the lights of the planet more red, almost looking like fire or molten lava. I wanted to add a really chaotic structure to the cities as well, so I imagined that the originally structured giant cities of the planet slowly `overgrown` the planet and merged into each other.

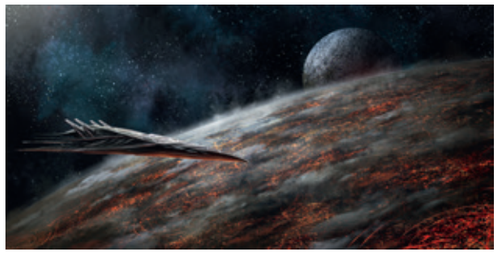
I painted a thick cloud cover to show my original idea, that also helped to add more depth. It can be really helpful if you imagine the surface and the clouds as parallel layers. First I painted the clouds with leaving out dark patches where I could see the planet and I added the lights of the cities to these dark spots on a color dodge layer. This instantly created four levels on the planet: the actual surface, the cities, the overall dark but slightly lit underside of the clouds and the very top level of the cloud cover hit by the sunlight. In the following steps I simply had to detail these main areas further and figure out their transition into each other properly.

Step 01



Step 02

Step 03



Step 04

Step 01. Painting the background

Its good to add some movement to the background of your space scenes, so I painted in some nebulas to make it more interesting and also added the stars with using custom brushes with high scattering. Try to avoid using a plain black background, because it can flatten out your artwork really easily. I also blocked in the sun into the upper left corner to establish the lighting scheme of the scene.

Step 02. Blocking in the key elements

I painted in the three key elements of the image (planet, moon and main spaceship), this is the step where I lay down the overall composition. It is important to create a rhythm with your main objects (large, medium, small – planet, moon, ships), as this can not just help to understand the size of them, but also strengthen the depth of your image. At this stage I concentrate on silhouettes and only block in the main lights and shadows to see the main shape of the objects clearly.

Step 03. Adding more depth to the objects

I tried to differentiate all my major elements with their material and way of painting and created extra levels inside them (like the surface and the cracks of the moon or cloud layer and cities / surface of the planet, etc.). It can really help you to make your pieces more interesting if you are breaking them down into smaller things and not just detailing them out.

Step 04. Fine details and texturing

I added some photo textures to the key elements to give them more visual noise and painted on top to create a more cohesive look. The key for using photos is not what you use, but how you integrate the really different source materials into your images. I also tried to push the drama and lighting a bit more to achieve a more theatrical scifi / space opera look.

Step 05

Step 05. Final adjustments

I created the other smaller ships in this last step – I like to finesse out the story elements at the very end of the process, because at this point all the artistic and technical problems are solved. The very last thing was adding some cinematic effects, like blurs and lens flares and doing the final color correction with adjustment layers (color balance, brightness and contrast, curves and selective color) to unify the image.

Tutorial by Jan Urschel | hendrix-design.com

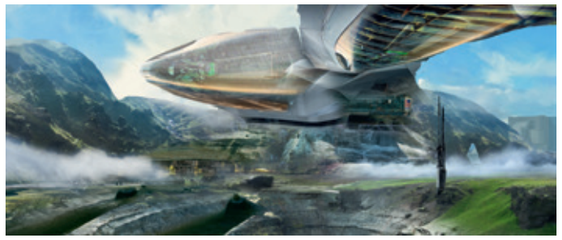
Research Base

Step 05

Step 01

Step 02

Step 03



Step 04

Quiet Night © Geoffrey Ernault

Milkshake © Alex Brady

Giant Trees © Arnaud Pheu

Vampire Hunter © Andrei Riabovitchev

Belgarath, Light My Path © Efflam Mercier

Celestia © Jonas de Ro

Fictional Architectures

Although there are a lot projects that require the concept artist to design historically accurate environments, or match the architecture and props with certain geographical characteristics, most of the time our job is to create things that have never existed.

This can include creating believable and realistic buildings visually rooted in a known culture, like designing Troy based on the ancient stories and archaeological information or Valhalla based on Viking heritage and Nordic sagas. Designing futuristic architecture for science-fiction projects is very similar, as it is usually based on today's technology or, more precisely, the way we see the future with our current technological knowledge.

The other end is to design something completely strange and alien, which is usually the most fun for any concept designer. Most clients think we can simply unleash our creativity and produce something really strange just from our imagination, but the reality is much more complicated. As humans it is really hard to understand something we have never seen before. We need to find something familiar and recognizable in what we are seeing to be able to relate to it in any way and form a feeling about it. This is exactly why we have to find some basic element in the design, that can be recognizable for the audience. The shape language of the fictional nest of the aliens that we see in the Alien movies, for example, are is roughly based on the interior of bee and wasp- hives, which gives us a point of reference, so we can connect with it and place it in our own universe.

There is no overall rule for these designs, but they all have to work and fit inside their fictional universe. Other than that it is always up to the designer and director / art director how we approach solving the problem.

It is safe to say though, that all designs need to have some sort of connection with reality. Even the heavily stylized games and animations use real world references to create clearly identifiable worlds for their characters to live in.

So it's best if you consciously establish your reference library at the start of every project. Try to come up with associations based on the script and overall subject of the project and gather images what can be connected to it visually. Sometimes the most unexpected references can give you an idea and a new direction for your designs.

Tutorial by Titus Lunter | www.tituslunter.com

The Greenhouse

Step 01

Step 02

Step 03

How to make an interior concept for game or film quickly

This process is a quick way to show an art director your intentions for the scene. It is not useful for designing props, or for people who want to paint a painting. This is a more commercial approach.

Step 01. Setting up the canvas

Once you have your brief and you know what to do, gather the reference required. I like to use a very organic approach for my high concepts, meaning loose and establishing images. I'll start by putting in the reference and moving them around to get a rough color and composition block out. Setting a base for the idea is the most important part here.

Step 04

Step 05

Step 02. The focus

Once you have a nice base to work off immediately put in your focal point. Make sure to move it around to find the right balance. Think of what the different compositions mean. What is the story of the image?

Step 03. Filling in

Once the focus is in make sure you lead the eye to the focus and start enforcing the theme. Lighting and color are still not super-important. All those changes can come later. A handy tool is to lead the eye using complementary colors as highlights.

Step 04. Depth

So far the image was pretty flat. While relying on colors and light information in the photo plate can sometimes work, it's very important to learn how to control it yourself. Try out different light settings. I use multiply layers for shadows and levels for light balancing. In the ref stage make sure to look for neutral photo plates!

Step 05. Finishing touches

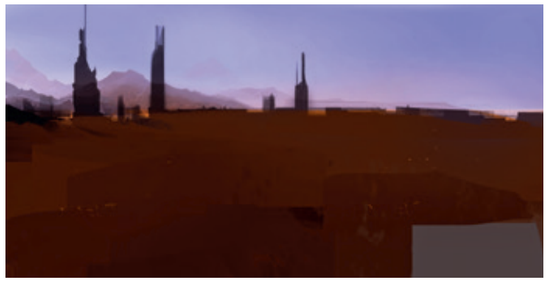
In the final step add details to make your image stand out. Use the same visual elements already in the image and reinforce the visual language you already have. Make sure the image reads well.

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

Arrakeen at Night

I am working on my Dune inspired personal project for a long time and I always keep going back to the main city of Arrakeen as one of the key places in the story. This was the first image, where I could capture the essence of its mood with mixing different style of architectures on the same image.

I wanted to show that the Arrakeen, like every city, is evolving organically and we can see all the various architectural styles and historical parts beside each other simultaneously. I used African and South-American slums for the poor areas close to the city walls, Middle Eastern and North African historical buildings for the general population of the city and I made up a more streamlined shape language for the most modern buildings and used textures of contemporary skyscrapers on them.



Step 01

Step 02

Step 03

Step 04

Step 01. Blocking in the main colors

I had a really clear image in mind about the morning lights of the city, so I quickly blocked in the colors of the sky and the tone and overall silhouette of the city.

Step 02. Adding textures

After collecting various photo references about Middle Eastern architecture, I quickly collaged the whole city using 6-7 of the best photos with constantly matching their values and hues to the established color scheme.

Step 03. Painting Pass

I painted the sky as that is what leads all the hues, roughly painted over the whole and added more details and aerial perspective.

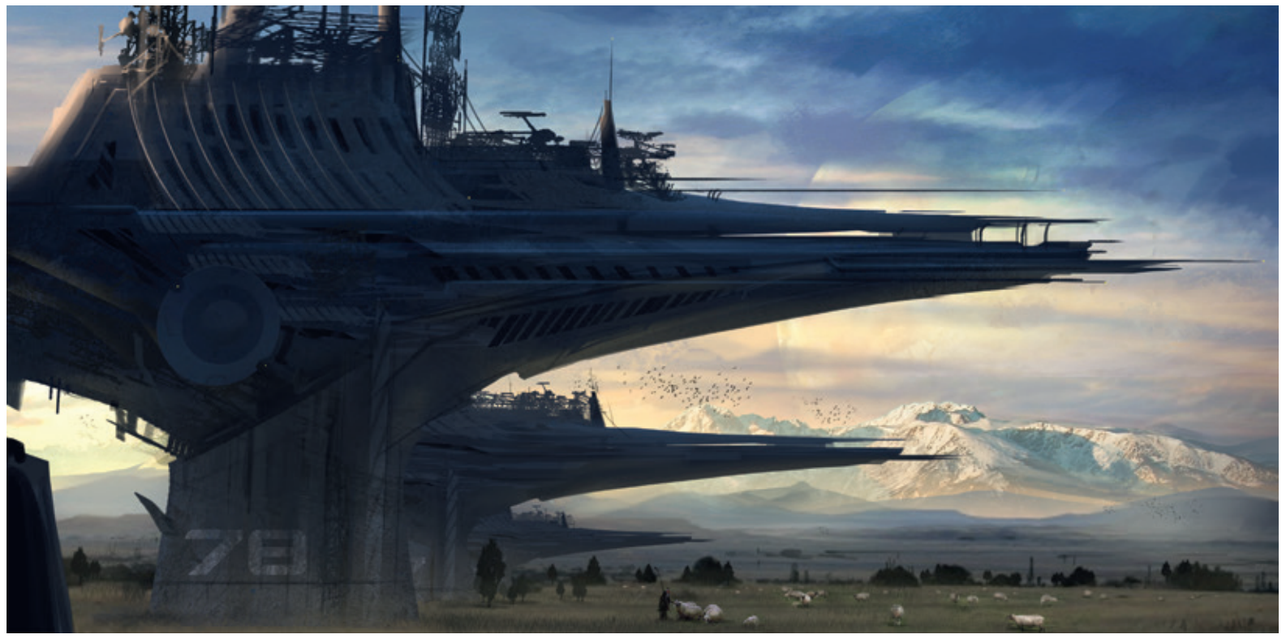
Step 04. Additional details

Added more high tech fine texture detail to the taller buildings to create variation and tightened up the light and shadows across the whole image.

Step 05. Lights and final adjustments

Final painting pass, where I added all the city lights, one of the moons to the sky and also some hovering ships above the streets to bring the city to life.

Eden © Lukas Esch



Guardian Towers © Mark Molnar

sketch © Alex Brady

Titanfall Concept © Respawn Entertainment – Scribble Pad Studios

Desert Towers © Mark Molnar

Moutain Riders © Efflam Mercier

sketch © Alex Brady

Dante Secret Area © Alessandro Taini

Designing around History

Whiterose © Jonas de Ro

HellBlade Real World © Mark Molnar

Besides science fiction and fantasy projects, where concept art is needed the most, there are projects where the designer has to adapt to a certain time period with the pre-production work. Sometimes the story is happening during an identifiable historical event, like the French Revolution, one of the world wars or other military conflicts or simply during the period of building the Great Wall, for example. In these cases you have to know how to approach the designs and what will be the key characteristics of the visuals.

I remember that during my art university years I hated learning art history, I felt it was useless to me as a designer, because I should be looking to the future instead. Plus I did not just have to learn the historical painters, but also architecture, craft history and contemporary art and design – hardest exams of my life.

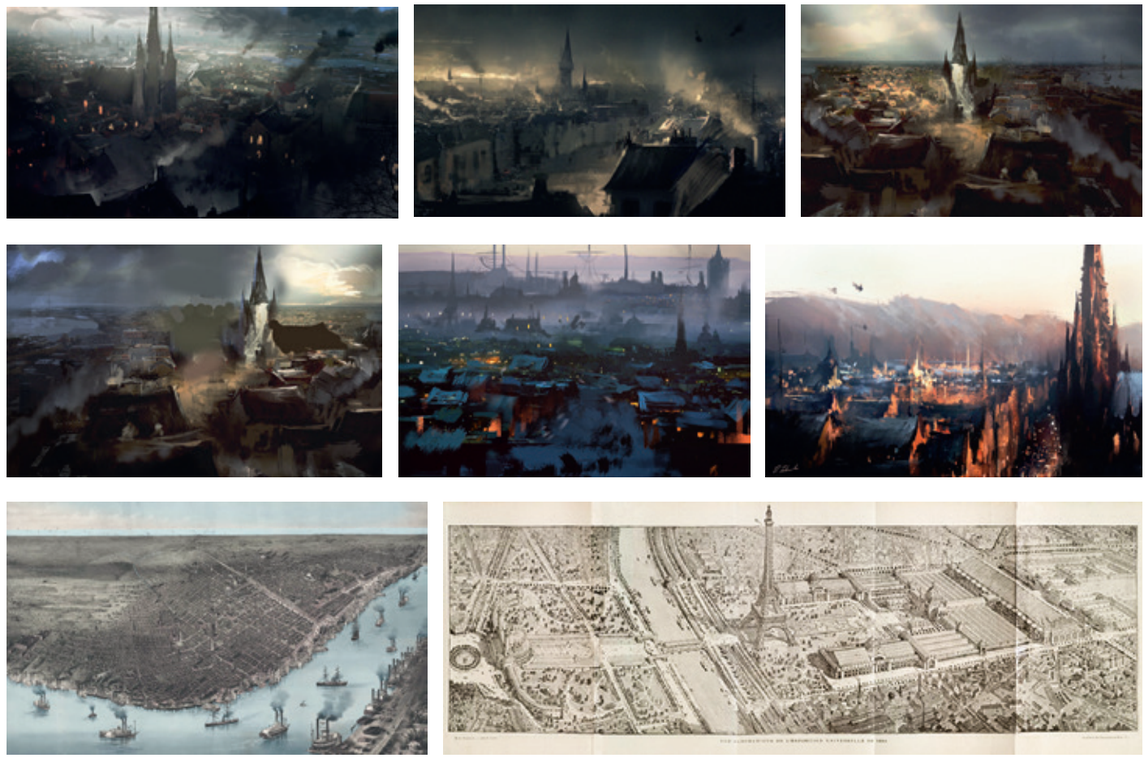
Interestingly enough this knowledge is what I find the most valuable and use almost every day in my job as a concept artist. I won't claim I know everything from the Ancient Greeks to contemporary furniture design, but I have an understanding of everything, and I know where to look if I need a more specific information or reference.

Games and movies, where the story is happening during a well-defined time period or historical event, are still usually fictional, so you have a lot freedom with your designs. What is important is to show the clearly recognizable parts with historical accuracy, because those are going to guide the viewer / audience. This can be placing famous historical buildings (like the Eiffel Tower) in the background, or matching the architecture to that particular time period. You can do research on the vegetation, clothing and fashion, accessories, habits, you name it. The more accurately you include these things in your design, the more believable they will be.

Although it is really essential to base your designs on historical facts in these cases, I think it is also necessary to exaggerate things. We all had to learn a bit of history in school, but very few of us became historians. People usually form a certain image in their mind about different time periods and this image not just includes their high school studies, but also the stories they read as teenagers, the games they played, the movies they have seen and the exhibitions they have visited. The result is an idealized image and as designers we have to find a middle ground between this and the historical facts.

Tutorial by Darek Zabrocki | www.darekzabrocki.com

Riots in Paris



Step 01

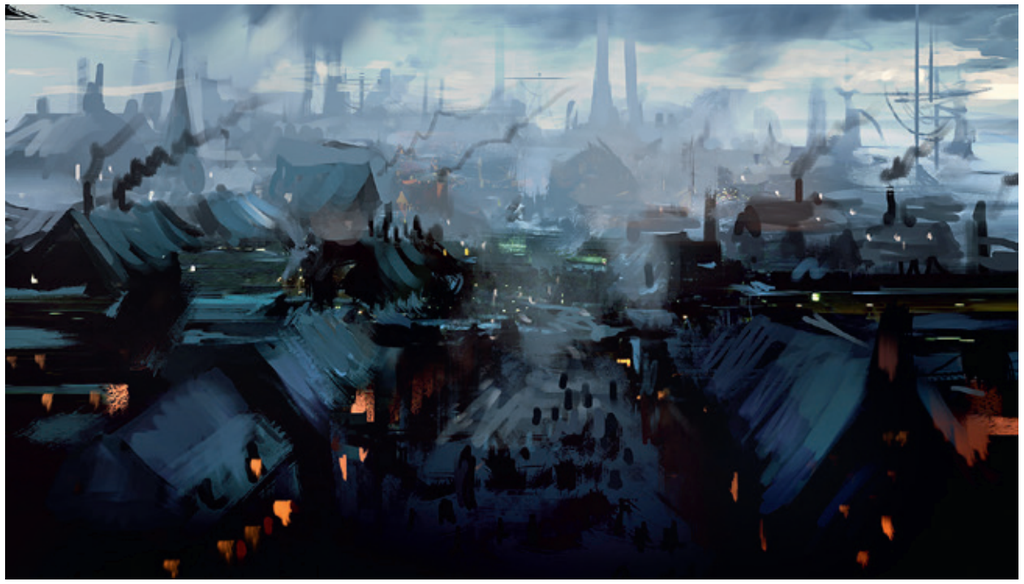
In this tutorial I would like to present the process of creating moody and realistic environment concept art set in Paris during the 19th century's riots in the city. Additionally I wanted to show the very distinct difference between rich and poor parts. The main technical focus of this picture will be the mood and climate built by game of light and shadow, atmospheric effects, color palette and a "rooftop view" composition. I will cover painting convincing and realistic scenes based on historical maps.

Step 01. In search of good composition

The first stage is essential and usually determines how good the picture will be. Basically, if your picture looks good in thumbnail you should do everything to keep it that way while progressing with details. I always start with bigger brush strokes, creating the shapes for objects I want to put on the picture and then I can cut it off or add more.

It is good to keep all the planes separated in layers from the beginning. I always make one layer for background (sky), then another one for distant building/city shapes, and others for mid-ground and foreground. Don't forget about grouping your layers, it will make your life so much easier.

For setting and concept you should look for references. For what I had in mind, Paris, New Orleans, London or any other big city would be a great source of inspiration. Additionally it's good to do research with original maps. You can learn how they were designed in terms of transport, communication, positions of the buildings, how they were formed and so on. Here are some map examples from 19th century Paris and New Orleans. It is all great because you can learn a lot about history while working on these kinds of pictures.



Step 02

Step 02

Step 02. Improving initial idea

Once I decided on which version was the best for conveying my idea I started to play around with it more, exploring the shapes of city, adding more colors, fixing values here and there. I also started to add some of the buildings, especially the ones we see very distinctly and keeping in my mind the closer part of the picture will show poverty whilst the middle and further parts will expose richness of the city.

Step 03

Step 03. Color balance/lighting conditions

While working on the picture I saw the new Assassins Creed's trailer that took up a very similar subject. I was inspired by the amazing play of light in it and I decided to try incorporating similar lighting. It was a bit tricky to incorporate the sunny setting and maintain a difference between poor and rich classes on the picture. I really liked the new colors and emphasized the poor areas by cutting the light and keeping those parts in shadow. It's an easy but effective method and I think it works.

Step 04. Further refining, detailing

I am still at a point where I can change a lot of things. The poor areas are clearly visible so I can move on to refine the rich areas. I added a cathedral on the left, some palace pinnacles and played around with shapes of churches in the background and a Royal port on the right. The composition works well so I can focus on adding shapes, it all needs to be done deliberately because with all those pinnacles and castle spikes it can be just too much. Keep it clean and simple.

Step 04

Step 05. Detailing more!

I came up with the idea of making that picture a bit warmer. Basically my goal was to create an almost cinematic feeling with warm light crossing the city, brightening the rich areas and stopping on the edges of roofs of the poor, half destroyed houses. I also played a bit more with the Royal port, ship shapes and some fog effects that the riot beneath will cause.

Step 06. Riot, lighting fix and final texturing

I am close to the final stage and focus on adding silhouettes of people rioting. The good references for that sort of image are everywhere, just Google some recent incident in world and you will find them. Of course I am adding some hints of dirtiness, old rags hung in the windows, trash on the street, people with dirty and ragged flags and so on. I also added more smoke effects, keeping on mind the wind direction so the smoke from chimneys and fumes of the riot are consistent and work realistically together. Then I added textures to the rich buildings, covered water surface with texture and built up lighting effects on the roofs and parts where the light is shining. It's time to save the picture, flatten layers and add some grain effect to make it even more cinematic and "raw" looking.

I hope you found this walkthrough helpful. The most important thing to keep in mind is thumbnailing, choosing the right composition and trying to stick with it throughout the whole process even when you change the color composition, the thumbnail can stay the same and be as good as it was initially. Good research for the design of the buildings, shape language, consistent and interesting lighting always makes your environment concept better. The more you research, sketch and "concept" the buildings in separate documents, or in your sketchbook, the better your environment art will be.

Step 06

Blacksmith Cabin © Gerard Dunleavy

Blacksmith Cabin © Gerard Dunleavy

Alley © Marc Simonetti

Blacksmith Cabin © Gerard Dunleavy

Empty Asylum © Mark Molnar

Midland Cathedral © Mark Molnar

Interior and Exterior Design

Most concept artists are in love with designing huge vistas and mood pieces, but unfortunately this is only part of the job. Creating key artwork to establish the overall mood and visuals of a project is crucial in the beginning and that is the biggest part of pre-production or visual development. After the start of the actual production the importance shifts towards the more practical concept design, where you have to create the environments in which the story is going to take place.

The industry changes all the time because of constantly evolving technology. Even 8-10 years ago the designers had to work with restrictions and limitations in mind both in movie and game projects. There are budget limitations in every project of course, but the imagination of the concept artists can now wander much more widely than ever before. The latest PCs and game consoles along with faster and better rendering workstations, tools and other software in movie post production, has made a lot of things possible that could not be done before.

This has changed how we, and directors, approach certain scenes. In the past it was better to place part of the story in an interior, simply because it limited what the viewer could see. This made game designers' and virtual or real set builders' work much easier. Now we have a tendency to not only open up the spaces more freely, but consciously play with the depth of space more and create a more varied environment around the characters.

You have to build both interior and exterior design using the same principles we have discussed in previous chapters. It's really important to collect references and ground your designs in reality. Even if we are building an imaginary world, we have to remember the laws of physics, like how gravity and light behave for example. Without these it is going to be much harder for the audience to understand what we want to show.

When designing a believable environment, one of the most important things is the layering. And by this I don't mean layering the virtual paint in Photoshop, but layering the information and various objects in the scene.

Imagine you are moving into a new flat with bare walls. First you lay down a carpet, then you put in your furniture, and then add your personal belongings. After a month new objects appear in your room, a new book you bought, a magazine, maybe an empty pizza box in the corner – the room slowly becomes alive. This is exactly what you have to do in case of interior and exterior design. Construct the space and think about what happened there, tell the story of that small corner of the environment and your concepts are instantly going to feel much more realistic and believable.

Tutorial by Lukas Esch | www.lukasesch.com

Abandoned

Step 00: Planning and Research

I had had the idea for this painting for quite a while after I found a great album of abandoned places on Flickr that gave me tons of inspiration. Nowadays everyone thinks of a few well-known video games when it comes to abandoned images, but in my opinion there's way more behind the beauty of the real locations.

As a general guideline for inspiration I recommend saving every image you find that interests you. Organize them carefully so you have easy access to them when you're looking for ideas or references.

Once I have the general idea for my painting, I search for images that have the mood I'm going for, as well as photos I can use for the photobashing/texturing part.

And I can't emphasize this enough: rushing into a new painting without careful planning often ends up with people being totally disappointed about their skills.

Step 01. Helping yourself with 3D

Everyone knows that 3D programs exist but only few artists actually take advantage of them. Living in a time where tutorials are easily accessible, 3D has become a super-helpful tool to have.

As I already had the basic idea in my head, as well as references collected, I instantly jumped into Luxology Modo (my preferred 3D software, but anything else will work) and began building the scene with super simple geometry. I think I'm a really bad modeler, but it doesn't matter, as long as you're able to achieve what you're going for (even with bad topology).

I focused on achieving a proper sense of scale, the right perspective as well as a good composition. Having the ability to quickly move and build objects opens up tons of possibilities.

Trying out different compositions is a matter of seconds. Changing the lighting or moving the bed into another spot of the room? It's just a couple of buttons away so this is the perfect step to experiment.

Of course 3D isn't necessary, but I would personally recommend it to everyone.

Step 02. Game plan? Check!

Hours and hours of painting can blind you to your own work. You're getting trapped into ideas that don't work and you're making decision you regret afterwards. So I create a very fast greyscale sketch on top of the 3D to test out ideas and play around with the overall shapes.

I don't restrict myself in this step, I'll use raw painting, photos, 3D, and so on, whatever works as long as it ends up in a "game plan" I can stick to while rendering everything out.

My initial idea starts to shape up as an overgrown room that a survivor left behind just a few days ago. I loved the idea of having parts of the tree crawl into the room, as well as having plants growing on the wet ground, soaked by the moisture of the wild.

The lighting took me a while as I wanted to have it realistic look but also stylized at the same time.

Step 02

Step 03. Texturing your 3D model

This is one of the most boring and painful stages: Texturing the 3D with photos I collected during my research phase. You could probably do this step in your 3D program as well, but I don't know how, so I quickly do it in Photoshop which also means I won't change my original composition.

A super-helpful trick is to render a "Surface ID pass" in Step 1, which basically gives you the ability to mask each object you did in 3D because drawing selections by hand would be quite painful.

Additionally:
I'm not thinking about any lighting yet as I want to paint everything in ambient light first. Breaking it down into tiny and easy steps always helps you keep track of your process and not get demotivated by the sheer amount of work you still have left to do.

Step 03

Step 04

Step 04. Finishing the ambient version

Right after the most boring part I jump into the most fun part:
I stop caring about the underlying 3D model and start adding everything that improves the painting.

Overlapping plants, leaves fighting their way into the room; all the cool stuff now comes into play to make it look real. Thinking about what kind of room this had been before, I add more "personal" things, such as posters on the wall or other related stuff like books or medical bottles.

After some feedback from my friends I realized that the initial sketch was missing narrative so I added two raccoons into the scene that have found some food that's been left behind. Not the most interesting story but gives a nice little touch to the interior design. Besides, racoons are cute.

Step 05. Boom! Directional light!

Even more fun ahead! I totally love this step as THIS is where everything starts to come to life!

Step 05

And here's the trick: having done the ambient version already helps me tons. I simply create a super merged copy of the image (all layers merged down on a new layer) and then creating a lit version of the ambient image, just by adjustment layers. First I cranked up the values, added more green and a tiny bit more saturation. As this affects the whole image I simply applied a layer mask to this "lighting" layer. Inside this layer mask I just had to paint the light into the spots where it belongs and boom! Added the light! Cool, right?

Step 06. Careful painting and final adjustments

Most people would probably stop at step 5 but I'm not done yet. In this final step I adjust the values, tweaking the lighting and adding small layers of fog and gradients to bring all elements together. The cardboard boxes on the ground were lit in the wrong direction which I had to fix for example. Some of the shadow spots were also looking way too bright which destroyed the realism to the painting.

Step 06

The advantage of working this way: no matter what your art director tells you to change you'll have a super easy time adjusting and fixing parts.

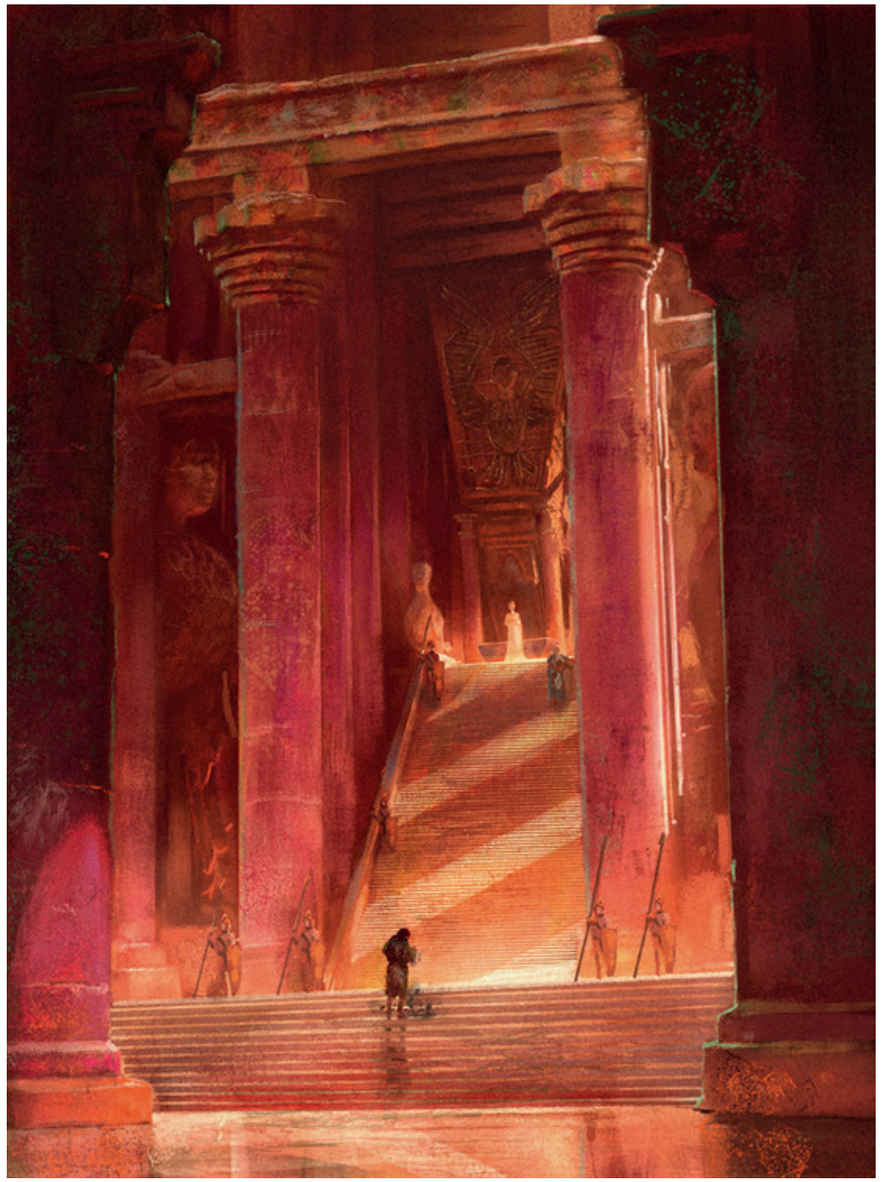
And breaking the whole painting down into those organized steps also helps you to stay focused.

In this step you have to be really carefully not to overdo stuff or even destroy parts that you built before. Painting and adjusting stuff "by hand" is totally fine but a mistake would be to paint over all textures that had been carefully placed before. The changes are meant to improve the overall painting, but not to change it in any drastic way.

And then suddenly, after hours and hours of work: done.

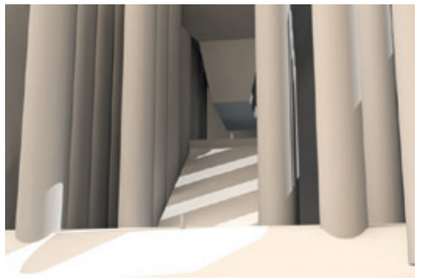
Tutorial by Marc Simonetti | art.marcsimonetti.com

Mereen Pyramid



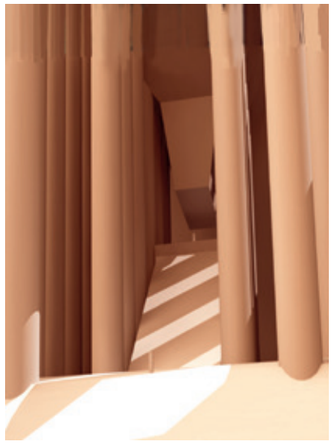
Final Image

My aim was to make the Meereen pyramid without showing too much of the main characters and focusing more on the grand scale of the environment. I was trying to be as close as possible to the text: a big stair, purple columns, many color variations in the bricks. As the deadline was very short (I had one month to do the 5 cover arts), I started with 3D block-in to settle the composition and a basic lighting of the scene and done the painting on top of that.



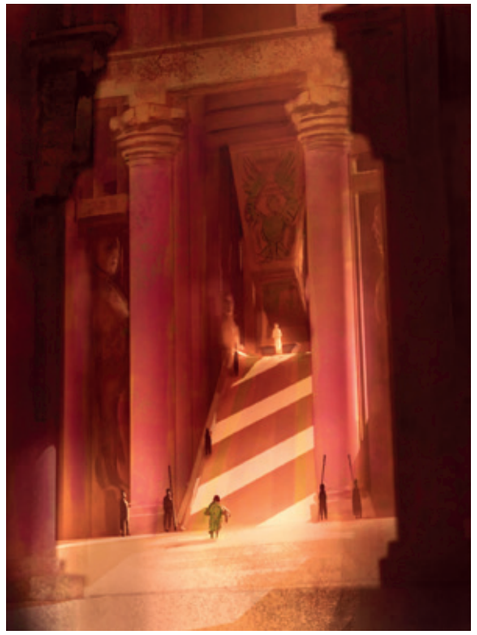
Step 01.
Rough 3D mesh made in 30 minutes in Modo to create a base for the painting.

Step 02.
The base sketch, only reframed to fit the cover.

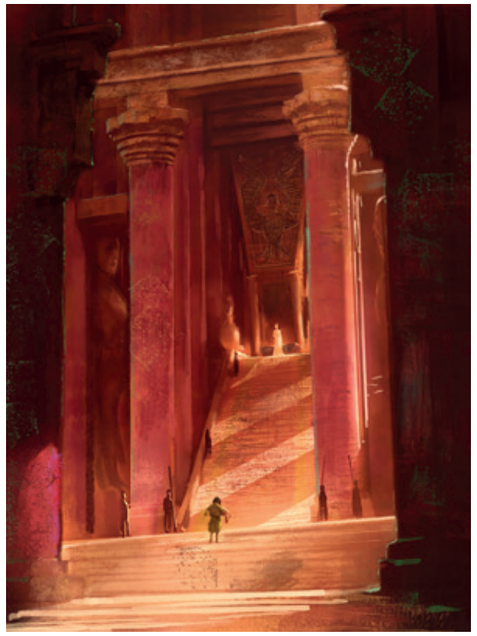


Step 03.
A fast paintover still in monochromatic tones to establish the values.

Step 04.
Only working in overlay layers, and basic normal layers to add colors.



Step 05.
The final painting: Just detailing the whole picture, trying to bring some color variations and to keep the lighting.



Abandoned Street © Lukas Esch

The Den © Jonas de Ro

Abandoned City © Mark Molnar

League of Legends Concept © Riot Games – Scribble Pad Studios

Object and Prop Design

Designing environments is not only about creating the locations where the story takes place, but also populating it with objects: props, which is movie industry jargon for properties. The actual sets are still constructed the same way today as 50 or even 100 years ago. First they build the fake sets as a base, which gets painted and aged depending on the story and then it gets decorated by the set decorators or set finishing team. In case of a movie, happening in the real world, they use mostly real objects of course, but there are productions where the concept artists have to design all the objects, that we see in an imagined world.

In case of designing for post-production or for a video game, the design process is exactly the same except the prop will only be a digital model, which gives the design process more flexibility.

Props can range from simple everyday objects, that are just lying around, to character-specific objects like weapons, shields, armor, and so on. This is the point where costume design and environment design merge and depending on the importance of the actual object can fall under one or the other.

The most complicated and absolute top category of object design in the entertainment industry is vehicles. This task is more common in the video game industry, where it is easier to realize a design virtually. In movies usually only the very high budget and highly fictional movies can afford to create custom vehicles, in all the other ones they are usually using modified or customized, but real, vehicles for shooting.

Designing objects needs the mindset of an industrial designer, no wonder that people with similar background are much more effective in this part of the industry. The design of every object or prop has to be based on its function and built around usability. You can break the overall laws of course, if you have to design fantasy weapons for a heavily stylised game for example, but always try to keep in mind that the object has to work inside the rules of the imagined world.

Chicken Jet © Alex Brady

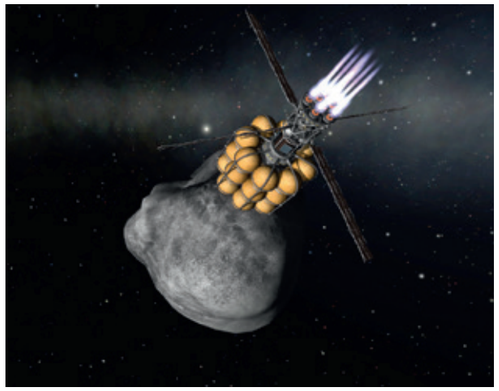
Tutorial by Geoffrey Earnault | geoffreyernault.com

The Fall

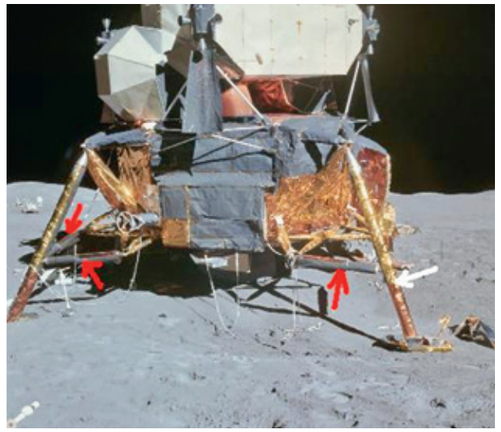
Here's the composition ref. That's the image that sparked the main idea. (Lol lvl 1 noob ship yo.)

Step 01. References and idea

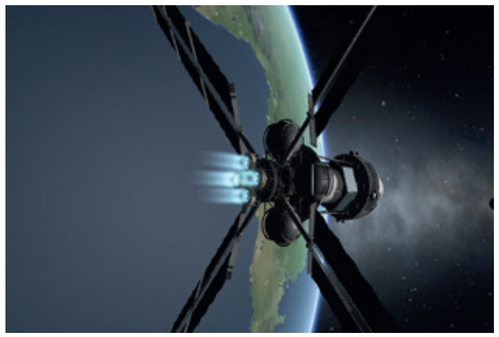
Whenever you start on something new, make sure you gather references. It probably has been said a hundred times already in this book, but it is really valuable. It's usually difficult for me to come up with ideas on the spot, so whenever I get an idea, I make sure to write it down somewhere to be sure I have something to work with whenever I get the time. For this one, the main idea came after playing Kerbal Space Program and Destiny. I wanted to get a top down view of a station crashing on a planet.



Really liked those spheres, and thought I'd try to integrate them in the design



Awesome space foil

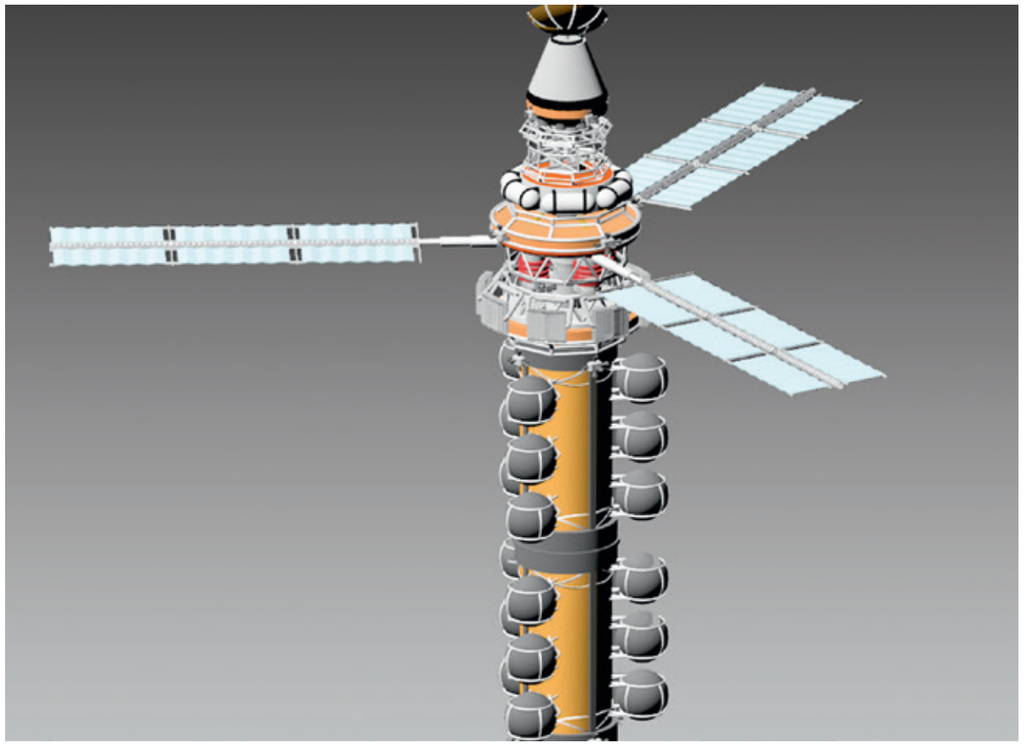


I realized I liked those more, but still liked the golden foil used on some spacecraft. Those were my two main material references

Step 02. Using a 3D base and 'smart' tools.

Here's the reference built in KSP
Look at those glowy radiators!
So sexy. Don't try to touch them though.

Whenever you're tackling a new project or image, try to find the best tools suited for the job. If I'd be to work on a loose image, I'd probably stick to Photoshop and to a rough pencil sketch for the composition if I have the time to do something refined, beforehand. On the other hand, if I know I'm going to work on something design heavy with a lot of precise parts that need to be in perspective, I like to use a 3D base to help me. In this particular case, I really liked some shapes in a mod of Kerbal Space Program. The idea was to design the ship in the game, reference the shapes, and remodel it entirely from scratch. That was also a nice practice for me to get faster at 3D. I can't stress enough how good it can be to be able to add more tools to your palette. Plus, you never know, maybe one day you'll really need it and just won't be able to make it in 2D in due time ! Or an army of deadly robots will take your family in hostage and force you do to 3D for them or something. I already had my background done at this stage, and roughly had an idea in mind of what I was going for. Don't just stop at 3D though! Photography, sculpting , traditional painting, model kitbashing... All these can really help you achieve something great and fast!



Here's the model done from scratch in 3Ds Max

Step 03. Setting up the background

The background was started from a top down desert view picture, on which I added clouds on a 'lighten' layer. I played around a bit with the perspective of both to get something a bit more dynamic and get some nice flowing lines.

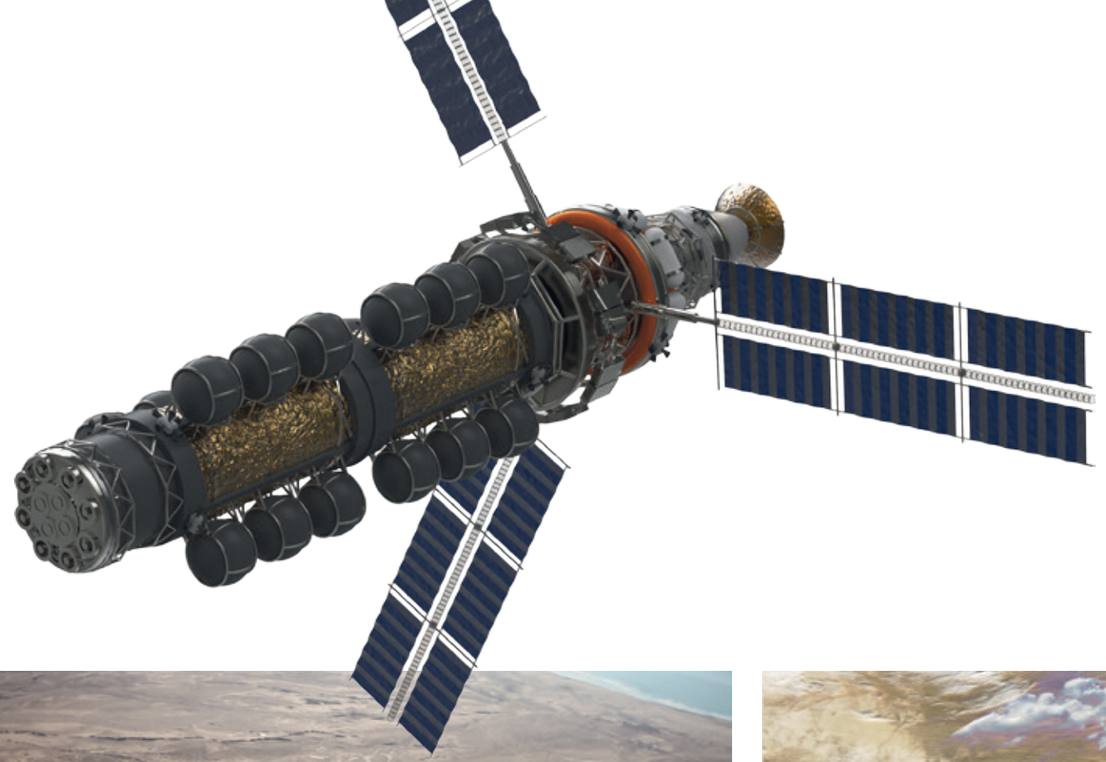
At this stage I was trying different things, but still wasn't sure of what mood I was aiming for. I tried a green looking ground, a purple one and even a blue one, but for some reason they didn't work with the mood I wanted to convey (something a bit end of the afternoon-ish, with nice warm earth tones, to tie it all together with the main yellow colour of the craft).

At this stage I started introducing a few reds, blues and yellows to the palette to add a bit of variety. I've also added more clouds to add a bit of speed. On all those stages, I keep the ship on a separate layer (Yes, I already had a .png render with an alpha), to be able to control what the ship hides or not. It's pretty important to keep that in mind. There's no point in adding for example those clouds if they're going to be hidden by the ship or other elements. I also realized that they lead your eyes around the composition nicely. Be sure to control all those elements to help your composition and how it reads!

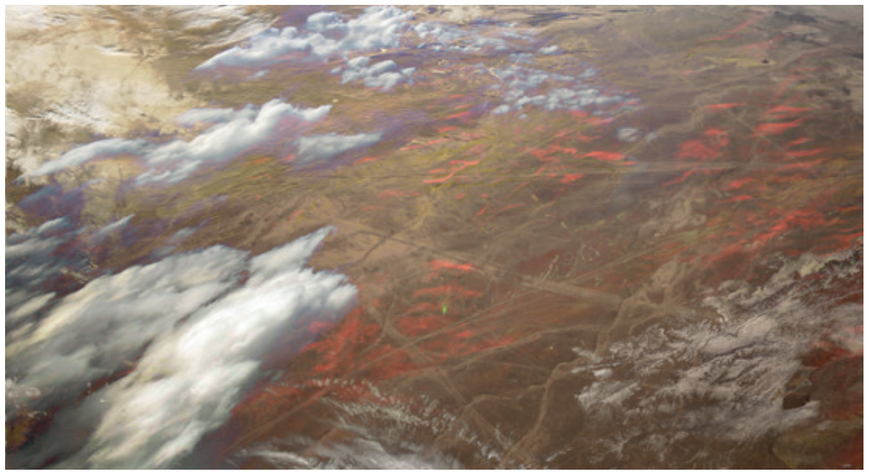
Finally, I decided to add some water at the top left corner (inspired by the top right water on the picture that I used for the base). I've used a colour dodge layer on top of it with a clipping mask to allow me to add that shiny effect, as if the sun was bouncing in it. Again, it's a small area of the image, but it really helps understanding the overall mood and lighting of the scene. The main light source being out of the image, this helps showing where the light comes from as well.

Step 04. Merging both

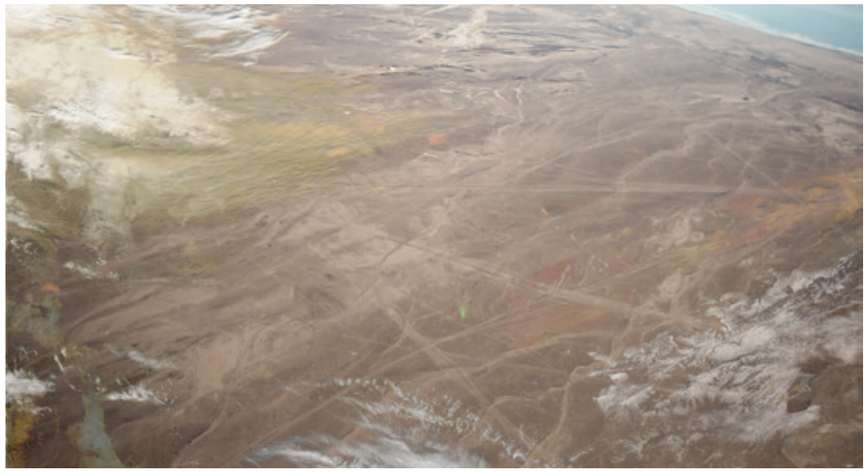
Now that I've got my model done, I can put it in Keyshot 5. I already know what the materials are supposed to look like thanks to the references, and Keyshot has a great way of mimicking the different materials that I need. You can cheat a bit to get the right looking effect, and for example use aluminium or steel etc. The image is supposed to 'look' right, so trust your eye on this. If an item is supposed to be made of steel, but the steel material makes it look wrong in Keyshot, then use something different!



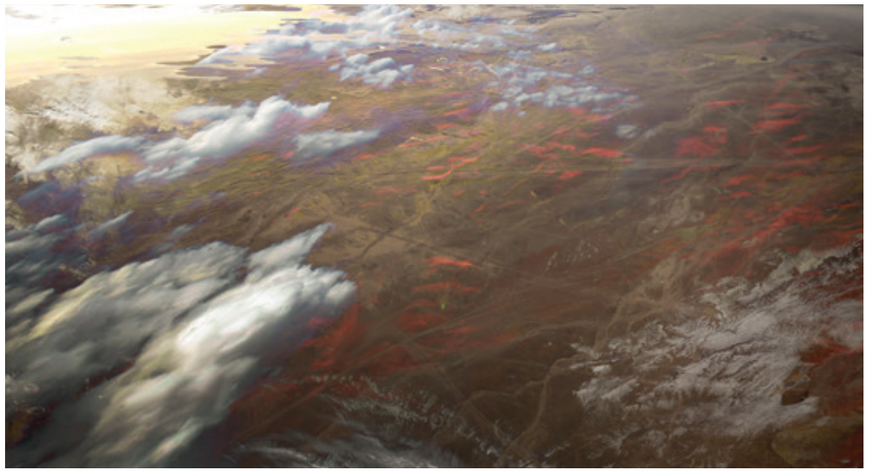
Step 03a



Step 03c



Step 03b



Step 03d

Here's the PNG, straight from the software. I had my previously done background behind my model so I could play around with light settings until both matched. Again, with this type of stuff, your eye is your best tool. So make sure everything 'feels' right.

Once I'm happy with it, I export it all in Photoshop. The great thing about having a .PNG an an alpha, is that I can use clipping masks to be sure every details or correction I add to the craft only applies to the craft. I start with destoying the parts that need to be destroyed, so that I don't need to render things that might move afterwards. Since the station was supposed to fall apart in the atmosphere, I used once again references of that. A friend suggested I'd look

at the Columbia shuttle disaster, and that really helped (Thanks Al!). Again, references are your best friends when it comes to design.

Now that this is done, I can start on doing the first tweaks. I usually like to focus on the first things that come to mind and bother me the most. In this case, I wanted the hydrogen foil to have more orange shadows to be less dull, add the glow on the radiators (see previous image), and also add a gas leak. I'm not too sure about the accuracy of this, and technically Hydrogen is not visible in reality, or might instantly explode in this case. But since this is art, you can play around a bit and (hopefully) no one will notice too much! Once again, I try to go for the big changes first, and keep the fine tuning for the end.

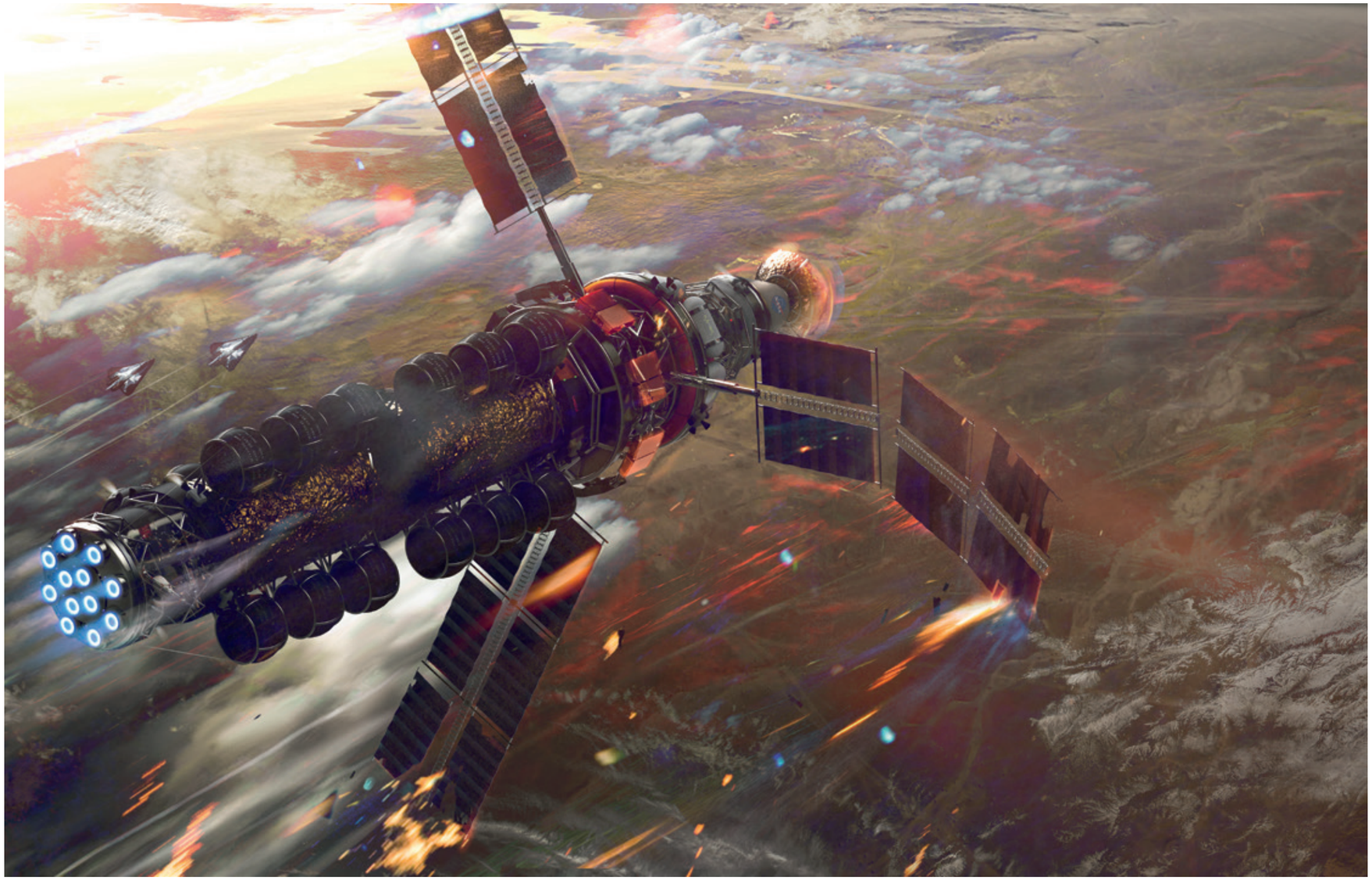
Step 05. Rendering

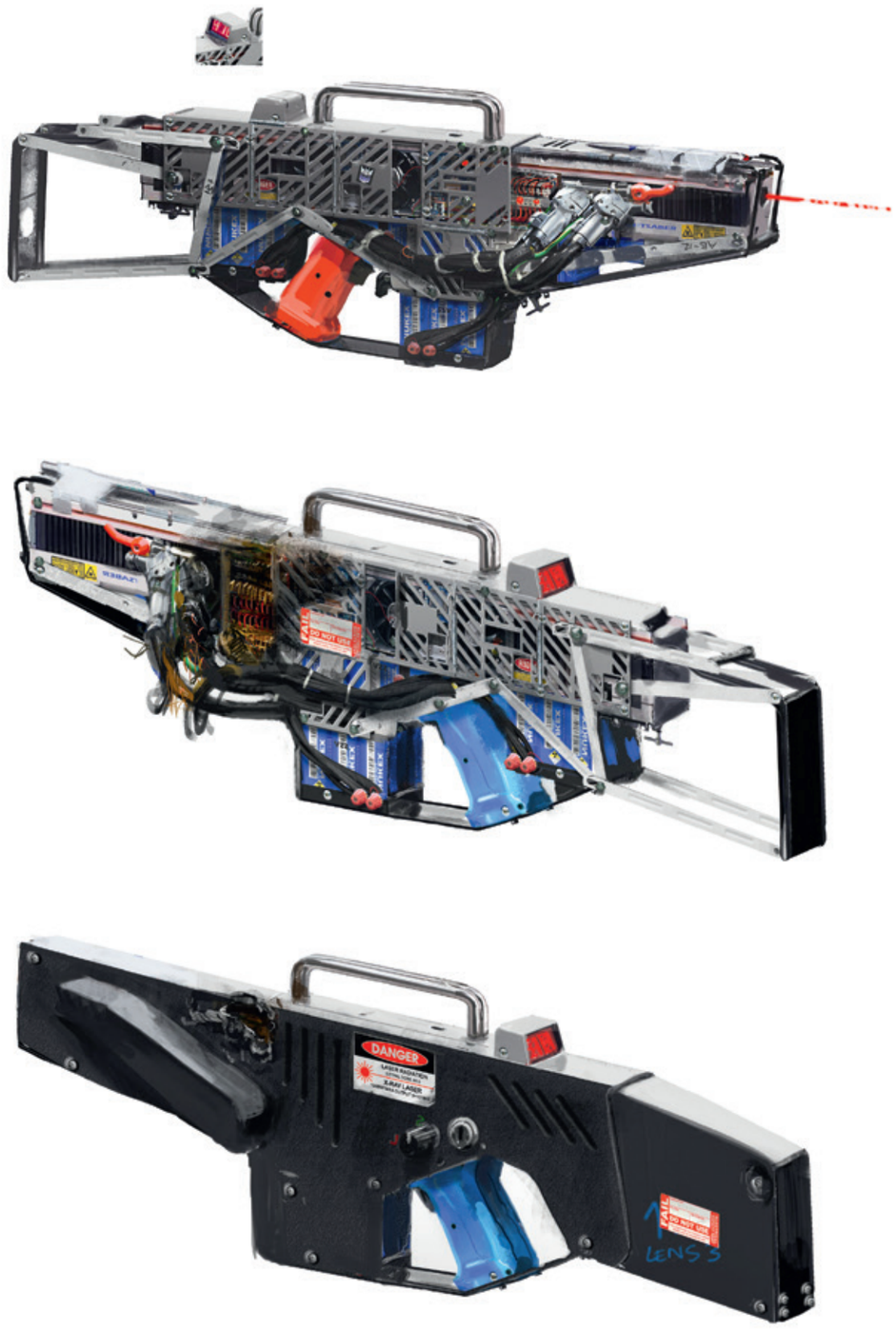
Once I'm done with this, I can start focusing on smaller details. I started adding things like the engine effects and some heat effects around the antenna. At first it was a lot more visible, but it distracted the eye. It's important to have a hierarchy of details and contrasts. If everything looks the same and is super detailed and contrasted, you'll lose interest on the important key points of the image. Make sure you focus the eyes on what's important! For this image, the important things are: the engines, the gas leak, speed, and the fact that the craft is falling apart. I could have made everything burning and made it more 'realistic', but that would have ruined the image. After the main details have been fleshed out, I can start adding overall effects to the image and work on the layers that will overlay everything. I started playing with a lens effect at the top left, and started adding a bit of heat effect to the panels as well. I've also added some burning pieces that are blurred out to add some speed to it. That lense effect overlays a lot of the solar panel in that corner, but it doesn't matter since we have them fleshed out at other parts of the image. That way, the viewer still knows what they're made of and what the pattern on it looks like. I also continued pushing the contrails coming from the panels. (They're also in the previous image.)

Finally, I can add the fine details. That includes the hottest burning parts which are blue, more burning effects, and more trails. At first, the fire trails were blue since I was referencing Columbia, and wanted to make it look realistic, but it attracted the eye too much, clashed with the thruster effects, and also changed the overall colors too much (I wanted to keep a relatively warm tone, and too much blue kind of ruined that). So instead, I decided to go for something a bit more unrealistic but visually pleasing and went for normal looking fire trails. Notice the ships in the background, they're referenced mostly from F-16s, and help adding story and scale. I had to made them look futuristic, since nowadays it's hard to get jets near orbit because of the lack of oxygen.

Step 04

Step 05

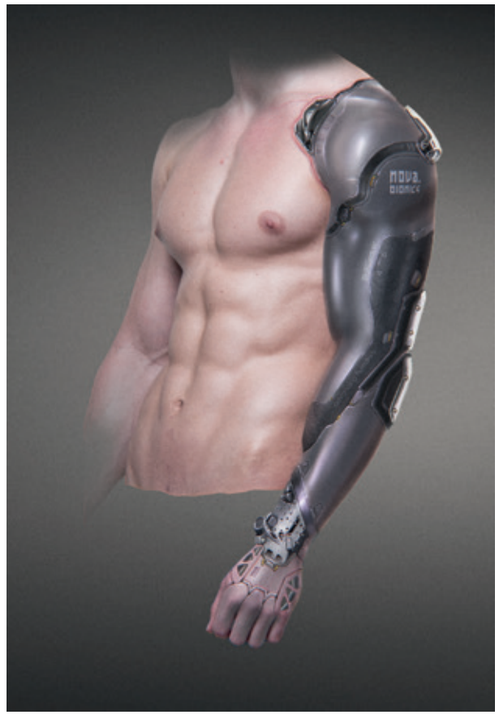




Laser Rifle Design © Alex Brady

Chicken Jet © Alex Brady

Flagship © Emrah Elmasli



NB-1 © Georg Loeschner

Needler5 © Geoffrey Ernault

NB-2 © Georg Loeschner

R1o © Georg Loeschner

R2o © Georg Loeschner

R3o © Georg Loeschner

R4o © Georg Loeschner

Chapter 05:

Mood and Key Concepts for Films and Games

Charge © Jonas de Ro

Presentation Pieces

The purpose of creating mood and key concepts for movies and games is not simply about designing a nice environment, a cool character, scary monsters or an appealing mood. Their purpose is to impress people and summarize all the design work that went, or in some cases will go, into a project. They can help sell an idea to investors when included in a pitch package, and they can also be used to motivate the team. These images have to show the vision.

This part of concept art is the closest to straight illustration. Although you have to include the characteristic designs and visual language of the project to make it easily identifiable, the focus is not on that. This is the place where you can experiment with unusual camera positions, more theatrical lighting and mad poses for the characters.

The most important part of these images is to find the key moments in the script or game, and summarize the overall arc of the story. These could be simple and personal images, but you might also show action, adventure and dynamism. Every project is different, and as a concept artist you have to aim to show all possible sides of the actual story. Usually the key points are picked by the director or art director, in that case your job is to find the best possible way to show the scene, the characters in it and what's taking place – the action.

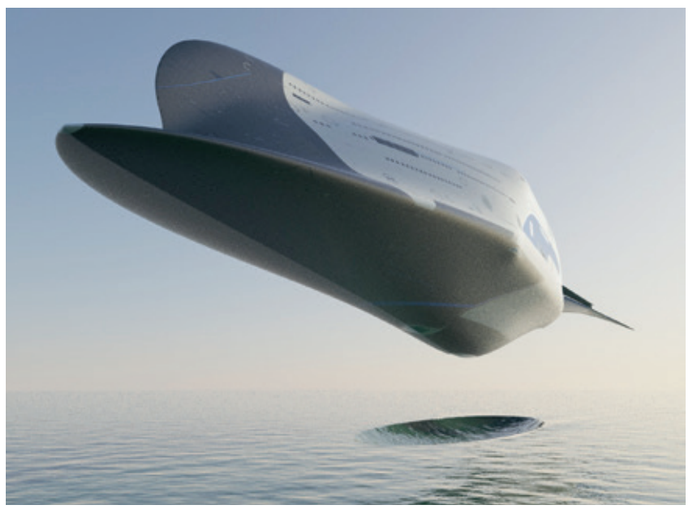
Every part of a story can be broken down into smaller pieces. If you start with a two-hundred page script, it will be really hard to summarize it in a couple of images. Break down the story into key characters and their progression through the story. Find their most memorable moments and create your pieces from a more personal point of view, even if you show a huge battle scene, we have to feel that we are seeing this through the eyes of our hero or heroine. Put your audience inside the story and form a connection with a viewer.

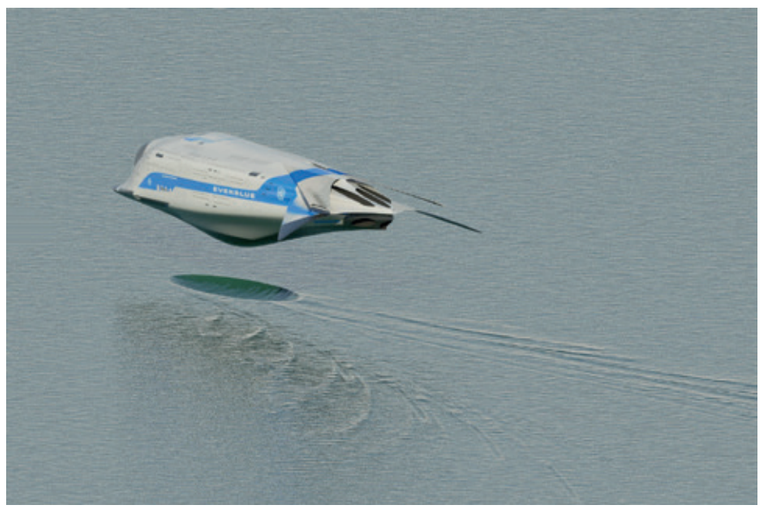
Some key points to get a better result:

1. **Try to imagine them as cuts from a trailer for the next big block-buster movie and freeze them in your mind.**
2. **Try to use dynamic compositions and strengthened perspective even for static pieces.**
3. **What would be the best angle to show the scene? Try out unusual points of view and viewing angles.**
4. **Lighting is the key. Try to use theatrical lighting that focuses on the story elements of your picture.**
5. **Use more contrast. Not just in values, but colors, lines, edges, dynamics, and so on. Try to include more oppositions in your images.**

Tutorial by Alex Brady | aj-brady.squarespace.com

Star Ferry – The Process of Finding Images





I can't draw people very well at all, but my brain can. My attempts to draw human beings are clumsy but I can pick out realistic-seeming faces in the clouds without any conscious effort. What gives?

Humans are what's called hypersocial, we love to talk and hang out in huge herds called cities. We communicate non-verbally a great deal and try to model the mental states of other people. So we have devoted large portions of our minds to observing and decoding the facial expressions of others. This system of pattern recognition tends to be overactive however, trying to spot faces (and minds) everywhere.

Facebook's algorithms occasionally pick out areas of light and dark in your photos that fool it into asking you to tag a friend in the image. Every time I look at the moon I see a big grey face grinning back at me whether I want to or not (I don't). There are whole blogs of pictures of faces that people have found in their surroundings. Ancient peoples projected thoughts and personalities onto the forces they saw in their world, the rains and the sun, and so invented gods.

I'm sure designing cool images is a difficult thing to do even for the best professional artists, yet nearly everyone notices the lovely compositions that nature assembles around us. This process is an aspect of something called Pareidolia; 'a psychological phenomenon involving a vague and random stimulus (often an image or sound) being perceived as significant.'

We can use this over-active pattern recognition system in our brains in creating dynamic designs and images at several stages in a project: here's how.

Way number one:

When you're faced with the panic-inducing white wall of the empty page, trying to think of ideas can be like trying to find faces in a flat overcast sky. There are no areas of brightness or shadow, no hard edges or sharp highlights that might suddenly reform into a cheek or a nose, the corner of a smiling mouth. There's absolutely nothing to pin your imagination on.

So you need to change that. Throw down some big cloudy shapes over a gradient background using very large texture brushes. Alter the brush frequently, paint in light and dark as the whim takes you. Turn the image upside down. Destroy large chunks of one side, and look what effect it has.

And persist: your initial efforts might feel frustratingly futile. Keep going. And going. (And have a break and a snack and come back and do it some more. Learning how to make a good mess takes practice.) Mirror one half of the page onto the other side, so it forms a Rorschach test. Suddenly, thanks to your facial recognition software, you'll see leering faces, bats, aliens, insects, nightmare hell beasts, awesome stuff like that. And now your imagination can go to work. Who is that face? What is she thinking? What's that coming over the hill?

But maybe you're not looking for a character design today, perhaps it's hunting spaceships day. Grab a chunk of image with the lassoo tool and stretch it out into a sleek spaceship hull. Add some guns and engines, portholes and dark shadows. Do that five times and see which ones are the best. Who flies that ship? Where has it

been? How might it be improved by making it longer and sleeker? There's only one way to find out.

This process can be a struggle. Everyone feels that way. But just by starting, by throwing down structures of color and tone, you begin the process that will lead you to new ideas.

Try not to be a perfectionist when you start. Early on, your ratio of design to presentation needs to be totally weighted in the favour of design. Some of the greatest ideas were scrawled on cigarette packets and napkins, or emerged from puddles of spilled ink.

As time goes by, and you nail some ideas down you can start to think about making them pretty, and at the very end when the design is done, you can present it in sexy finished images. For now, the rougher, and more impulsive, the better. Vomit those shapes onto the page. Go nuts!

Way number two:

Sometimes I have half an idea. It's something I find interesting, but got stuck on and couldn't think where to take it. So I dump it in a big folder of similar broken pieces of junk, and periodically have a look through and see if there are any two that might feasibly connect. Quite often, just by hooking together a pair of ideas that would normally never touch; a fun new one appears.

Also, ideas tend to breed. Keep connecting, adding and subtracting, looking for interesting combinations.

It's also worth keeping a massive folder of things you've found interesting on the internet. So if you're designing a spaceship, you don't just want a lot of good images of ships to learn from (although you'll need them too), or your work will just look like other peoples. I think you also need as many other influences as you can find. Stuff from the news, nature, science, movies, history, faraway cultures, things you loved as a kid, things you love now, things you hate because they're a powerful source of ideas, jokes, nonsense, things relevant and irrelevant, good and bad, just a big old mess of beautiful junk and strange treasure.

Wandering through your private museum of odd and interesting things, picking up a piece of ancient cave art or a roman spear here, a dazzling coral or a Martian laser rifle or a great work of Renaissance art or a very rude picture from Ancient Japan and turning it over in your mind, you can't fail to both find your interest in art and the world reinvigorated, and your idea brain buzzing with plans.

Way number three:

One of my favourite periods during the construction of some work is doing the mood images. The design is more or less wrapped up and presented in nice clear descriptive views. With that in the bag, I'm free to have fun making more artsy fartsy abstract compositions. The hope is that a viewer will enjoy and engage with the image more if they have to do a little bit of work to understand what's going on. Plus, it's exactly like playing with Lego, what's not to like?

The trick here is to put loads of views of your design in front of your eyes; I might render 40 quick 'photos' of my design from different angles scales and relative positions. Zoom right in and get some detail shots too. If you lay them all out, some will jump off that page and those you can hang on to. I like picking five or six from my 20-40, and polish them up a bit in parallel, working on one for 15 seconds till I'm bored then moving to the next one.

Another aspect of working on several is you spread your eggs into more than one basket; if you're working on a single image and it's not going well, it can be demoralising. In this method, if one isn't happening, move to another. There's always something you can be working on and, in the meantime, sometimes your subconscious is working on the problem in the first image, so when you return to it, the way ahead is clear.

I use 3D software to do this, designing and building the basic components of my scene first, arranging them, and then using Photoshop to color, paint and finesse them.

I believe this way of 'finding' can be very powerful and you can use it a lot to get nice results with minimal stress. Think of yourself not as a designer building a picture, but as a photographer, looking for cool chance compositions in the world around you to frame. You have a camera with infinite film, so shoot loads of images.

There's no need to stick slavishly to the compositions you find, they can always benefit from a few tweaks to make this 'gesture' or that coincidence more (or less) balanced. Sometimes details are fighting the larger flow of the image and need correcting.

I've noticed though that if I tweak a scene too much, it can become dead looking; the dynamic almost-balancing elements I liked in the early, more chaotic, composition sketches start to lock together; unfortunate tangents connecting unrelated elements in static ways like concrete. I have to deliberately step back from that kind of 'correcting' for fear of killing the scene, and always keep an older version saved so I can compare the two. I've found a fun, challenging part of the game in learning how much chaos, and how much order, to impose on the scene.

Looking at the work of a really good painter, often the highly finished scene feels both naturalistic and yet cleverly guides your eye. Maybe a dark object will occlude a light area, or an object will have a very detailed surface to attract your curious visual cortex's attention. Strategies like these are deployed by the artist to instruct your eye where to go in the image. The work of great painters, even when they paint their subjects to a very high degree of finish, remains loose and dynamic.

This is very hard and can take decades of work to learn, so don't worry if it takes a bit of practice to get into it. But it is possible with trial and error to find compositions where the elements of the scene are arranged pleasingly, or strikingly, that might not have occurred to you otherwise.

The reason why certain images work depends on the project and the person; but are there any rules to stick to?

There has been a lot of formal study in the area of what makes an effective composition; superimposing grids and swoops of linework across great masterpieces to show how the artist has deployed his technique to guide the viewer around the image, or investigating the performance and evolution of the bits of the brain which analyse its visual environment and presents images to our awareness.

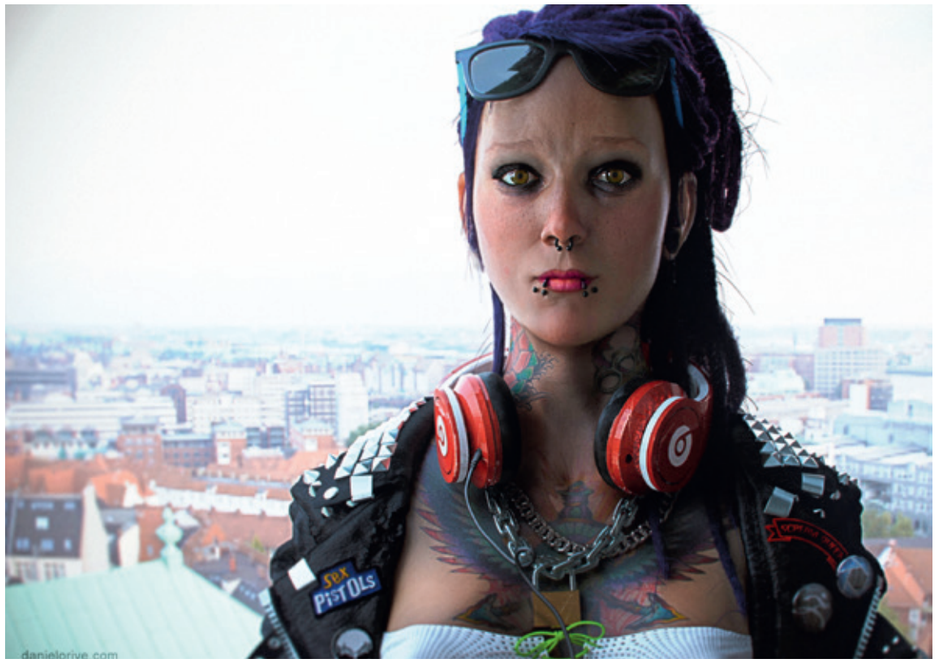
I've starting reading about the principles of compositional storytelling largely thanks to the encouragement of other artists (shout out to Jon McCoy and Robin Doody) and the first thing I've learned is that I really have a lot to learn, but even by watching well-directed movies I think it's possible to pick up some understanding of the principles.

I highly recommend you buy 'Framed Ink' by Marcos Mateu-Mestre. He is a Jedi in the art of telling a sophisticated story with composition. To give you an idea of a panel selected at random from this amazing book: "If the male character in the scene is wondering about what is in the mind of his partner, we might as well put ourselves in his shows by obscuring her expression, so that the question is equally valid for both the first character and ourselves." Clever.

It's a complicated and powerful language, and thrilling to learn about. Even a little knowledge of these principles, and how to deploy and subvert, use and abuse them will really help you pick images that pop. Remember you don't need some deep reason to draw spaceships though, just enjoy yourself.

The next time you're trying to find ideas and are making slow progress, have a go at scattering some shapes on your page and literally looking for ideas in the emerging clouds of color. Let your mind wander and quite quickly your imagination will start to notice what look like faces, places, scenes. There's a weird face. There's a cloud that looks like a giant starship. Those ones look like the bubbles streaming up and away from a whale's blowhole. Once you have spotted something, your job is simply to embellish those areas and cut away everything else. Relax, sit back and watch the clouds. Your brain will take care of the rest.

Dr Who Jelly Fish © Michal Kus



Leona © Daniel Orive

Tank © Alex Brady

Skyriders © Peter Yong

sketch © Alex Brady

Swat © Björn Hurri

Arrival © Lukas Esch

Sacrifice © Paul Scott Canavan

Dodge This © Jonas de Ro

Characters in your Scenes

Naturally we try to relate to every image and the easiest way for this to happen is to find a human figure in it. We unconsciously look at the characters first in every painting, photograph and illustration, because that is how we try to understand the image and the story behind it. We don't just look at the figures, but their relation to one another and their surrounding space / environment. You can reveal a lot by placing characters in your scenes: you can define scale instantly, suggest what happened, or what is going to happen next. By placing your characters carefully in your composition, you can consciously guide the viewer's eye through your image. This not only helps you create a cleaner image, but can be a great addition to your storytelling.

Usually it's best if we place characters at key compositional points, like intersections of the rule of thirds, or the golden ratio. You can move away from this if the key focal points are not the characters, but more the interaction or relation between them. If you are trying to show a gunfight for example, but want to make it look more balanced, place the actual gunfire and the space between the figures into your focal area. It might look a bit unnatural first, but your composition is going to become more dynamic as well.

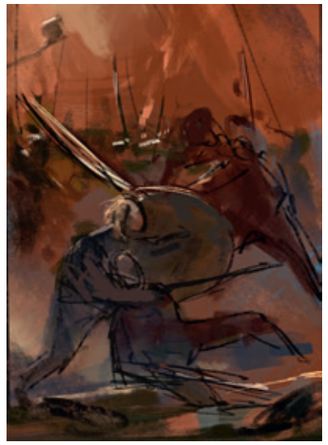
You can also use your characters as bigger elements when creating dynamic compositions and establish your whole composition around them focussing on the relation between them. The easiest way to do this is to handle your figures as simplified shapes, almost the same way as you would treat a more complex environment piece. Try to break it down into different space segments and create overlaps between your figures. This way your piece will be more easily understandable, the viewer will see the differences between your characters, and read them separately.

When you focus on the storytelling, it is really important to leave as much to the viewer's imagination as possible. We want to direct the audience thoughts to a point but it isn't great to tell everything. We would like to define the surroundings, the costumes, the characters, the creatures, and so on, and we set up a situation. But we have to leave the most exciting part to the viewer so they can imagine what will happen next.

Tutorial by Paul Scott Canavan | paulscottcanavan.blogspot.co.uk

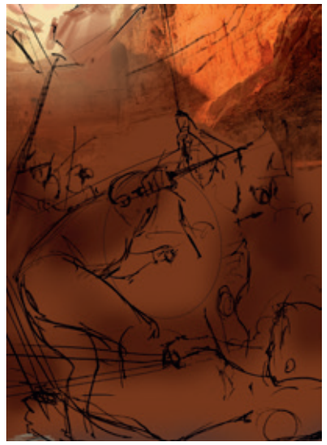
War Chief

(Copyright by Fifth Exile)



Step 01

Step 02



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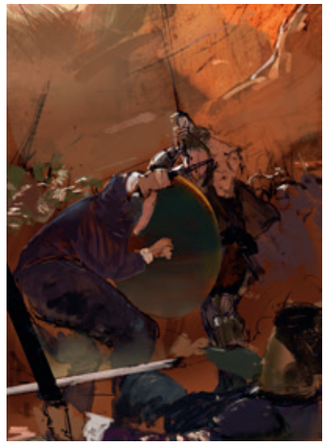

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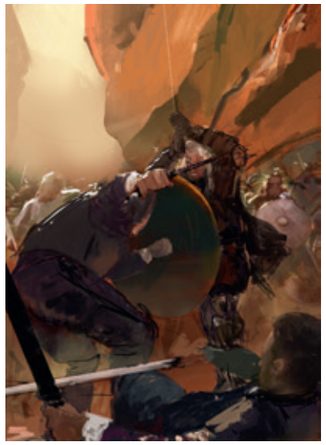

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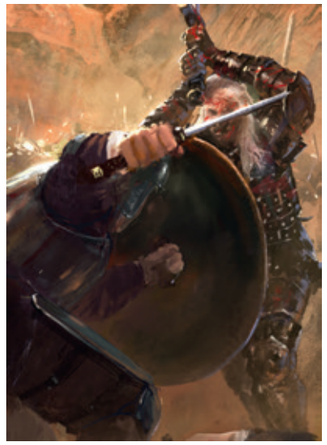


Step 06

Step 01.

I was working for a client on this painting so nailing the overall feel and composition early on is vital; getting that right now saves lots of time later. This mood sketch sold the tone of the painting as well as the rough poses of the characters.

Step 02.

Multiple character illustrations always require a bit of planning. I find shooting reference photos hugely helpful, both for working out the anatomy and getting the lighting to look realistic. All you really need is a half-decent camera, some lamps and a couple of cheap costume props. Of course I have none of these things, so instead awkwardly posed around the flat in front of my iPhone.

Step 03.

I was working to a tight deadline on this painting so pulled out every trick in the book to get it done in time to a high standard. I photobashed in some canyons to help figure out the environment, and started sketching using my reference photos. Remember you are working in a digital environment so don't be afraid to use the tools at your disposal. Photographs, 3D, mixed media, it's all good.

Step 04.

Now that all the main elements are in place it's just a case of rendering the individual areas and bringing out the forms. I'm not worrying about details yet, instead focusing on achieving a nice balance to the overall painting.

Step 05.

Time to start thinking about the background: I introduced a canyon wall to drive the viewer's eye towards the two main characters. One of your goals as an artist is to lead the viewer through your painting; note the use of straight lines to direct your attention and curves to pull you around the edges back into the image.

Step 06.

The rest of the painting is simply a case of rendering until I'm happy with the overall piece. I don't want to take this to a photoreal finish; instead I want to retain a painterly feel. You can see in this close-up that my brushes are still large and chunky, smaller brushes are reserved for occasional details like the hair. A few hours of noodling away and we're done.

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

The Last Ship

Step 01

Step 02

I created this image for a movie pitch originally and it was really important to direct the viewer's eye because of the relatively complicated story. I had to show a scene where the main hero drives a spaceship into the enemy alien mothership, just before the collision and explosion of the two ships.

I imagined an almost back-lit scene, where the light of the sun bounces back from the planet below. The space, the planet with the moon and the two ships gave a great opportunity to create an epic scene with a lot of space segments.

Step 01. First Pass

After some sketches I went straight to detailed concept, where I used various digital painting and matte painting techniques. As I was working from an early version of the script and we were way before production, there wasn't any preliminary designs for the spaceships. I was lucky, because the director really did like the design of the big mothership, but we decided to change the smaller human ship.

Step 02. Adjusting the Composition

I zoomed out slightly to get a better view of the big ship and changed the design of the human ship. I also scaled up the main hero to see him more clearly as he catapults out in the last minute.

Step 03. Back to Basics

After having a chat with the director I realized that we miss the connection with the action, so I should bring our character closer to camera and show the scene as we would see it through his eyes. Did some quick black & white compositions and sent those to the director.

Step 03

Step 04

Step 04. Final Composition

This was the point, when we realized I misinterpreted one small part from the script and what actually happens is that the hero docks onto a bigger 'dead' ship and drives that giant hull with his small jet into the ship of the aliens. After clearing out all the confusions we worked together on skype to block in the final composition with mixing two thumbnails and adding the big human ship in the foreground.

Step 05. Finished Concept

After having a final composition I was able to go back to the detailed concept. After adding the new elements I finished the detailing. The final composition tells the story perfectly and beside having more depth, the viewer can really feel that he is part of the action.

Fog Demon © Efflam Mercier

The Piano Lesson © Geoffrey Ernault

Helios – The Gates of Hathor © Gilles Ketting

The Search © Mark Molnar

Rebel Scout © Mark Molnar

Mystic Dragon © Darek Zabrocki

Popped © Dan Luvisi

Cinematic and Theatrical Lighting

In recent years, movies and games have become closer to each other in terms of visuals and approaching storytelling. With this movement the concept art required for these productions are also getting more and more 'cinematic'. I think this is a really overused term, but what it really means is that concept artists often have to show exactly how the final product is going to look, even at a very early stage of the production. This is mainly because most of the decision makers are not necessarily visual people and it is much harder for them to imagine the final result based on a – although very artistic and cool, but less detailed – rough sketch.

There are many tools that can help achieve a more finished and accurate look in your images. You can use various 3D software packages to nail down your perspective or create a basic digital sculpt for your characters and creatures, to understand their weight more, but the most important is to master lighting. Light is what shapes everything around us and we have to remember that without it we won't be able to see anything: everything we see is the interaction of light with our surroundings.

When we talk about cinematic lighting, it does not really mean realistic lighting. It is more about what is perceived as realistic, about what kind of image we have in our mind about a certain situation, mood or environment. Cinematographers have worked on this for over a hundred years and as concept artists we have to apply the same principles. Being able to use the same lighting techniques is not merely useful, it's vital in creating a connection with the director because we are communicating in the same language.

I really like to use the term 'theatrical lighting', because these lighting techniques come from traditional theaters. If you observe stage lighting, you will see that everything is a bit over-dramatized to support the actors in achieving the exact mood the director was after. And this is exactly what we have to do in our 'postcard' or 'establishing' concept illustrations.

Like Tears In The Wind © Efflam Mercier

It is alright to use an over-dramatic sky or oversaturated lighting, if it supports the storytelling. Explore and use various lighting scenarios for various pieces and settings. Use low-key lighting and complementary colors to build tension, background lighting to show mystery and soften your lights and tones to suggest romance.

It is also absolutely fine to use effects, lens flares, glows and rim lights to create artificial focal areas or add more dynamism to your work. Just be careful to not overuse these techniques and not make them a key feature of your illustration.

Study your favorite movies, look for their cinematographers and directors of photography. Understand the visual language of certain scenes and figure out how they direct your attention inside the frame with lighting and colors. Also watch these movies without sound – it makes a huge difference, because you focus only on the images and the movie's visual structure.

Tutorial by Efflam Mercier | www.efflam-mercier.blogspot.com

Lighting the Cinematic Way

Light and color interactions have a great impact on the way the audience reacts to a picture. It influences the storytelling so much that you can take an environment designed to look calm and cozy, then change the lighting to make it the most unsettling and dangerous place.

Once we know where our lights are coming from in the scene, we can think about the characteristics of each light source in terms of:

Intensity

How bright the light is, (I also tend to think about the value range we will get out of it);

Relative size

The bigger and closer a light source is to the object, the softer the shadow is going to be, specular highlights become broader and less intense too;

Temperature

Cool vs warm color on the spectrum, I tend to talk about it in K degrees because otherwise what is cool or warm is very subjective. I definitely recommend looking around online for more technical info about that, (the Wikipedia page about color temperature is pretty good).

To get my paintings or 3D scenes to look cinematic, I first try to get a good read, secondly to have nice gradients to create the illusion of depth and surfaces, but like always, unity with variety. You can have four differently colored light sources in your scene, but then definitely give the lead to one color and tone down the others, this is "unity with variety".

This principle works in everything you design, but for lighting I think it makes a good guideline. So, for example, you would avoid having the same intensity in multiple lights, unless it's intended, variety in the light softness can also help you avoid ugly overlapping shadows. Most of the time I go for crisp shadows for the main (key) light so they give a second "view" of the form, and then soft shadows for the rest of the lights.

A very important thing to think about when trying to get something to look photographic, is to think about exposure and value range. There is no phenomenon in physics that makes a very bright red light become white, it's just over-exposure, so if you struggle figuring out the diffuse vs specular highlights, paint them separately.

Once you are more familiar with lighting principles, you can start getting creative. Lighting is supposed to emphasize what we need to see and the mood surrounding it, a principle I use to focus the viewer's attention is the Gestalt principle. Basically, if something is different in the picture that's what you're going to look at first, that's why we tend to look at the highest point of contrast first, but with this principle you can create secondary reads and interest points that will reinforce the image rather than fighting for attention. For example, have a character in a crowd highlighted by a spotlight: you can see only him because of the light. The problem comes if you want the audience to look at a secondary character in the crowd, if you have another spotlight it will fight for attention, rather make this secondary character taller, wear color, or be running when everybody else is walking.

In the fire dragon image, I've created a gradient of values from left to right by playing with the light and atmosphere, I wanted the fire to emit soft shadows and create an overall warm image. I filled the room with moisture and fog to help reduce the contrast a bit, one interesting thing with this image is that there aren't any cool colors, yet the relationship from desaturated grays to oranges makes the gray look a lot cooler than it is.

I created this piece mostly in 3D because it's a more fun, and iterative, process for lighting, What I often do is create 80% of the work in 3D then do 20% of the rest in paint-over. You can see I tweaked the dragon's head design by painting over it, and replaced CGI lights by hand painted fire.

Using 3D

3D comes with disadvantages: it can be very slow to model, texture, and shade your assets. The way you can take advantage of 3D is to be lazy (or smart): take the easiest and fastest route. Re-using and combining assets is a good way to be lazy, I sculpted one part of stone stairs and two pillars with different details on the faces, by combining, rotating and scaling them I could very quickly create a sense of temple architecture.

When modeling for your personal work, you create a library of objects that matches your sense of design, they might be created for a different project, but they tend to fit together very well. Kit-bashing is great for some stuff, but most of the time you run into the problem of either the parts are not designed at all and look like the real object; or the elements are so "designed" you can tell right away they belonged to this artist, or this particular IP; also the models can be of bad quality and cause problems when you render.

The good thing with building your own stuff is that there are many cases where you can use it for client work and you don't lose time creating, or endlessly googling for the right models. An important thing to keep in mind is to avoid time consuming tasks like putting the textures on a model, so for that make sure you put all of your textures in a folder that you won't move. Create a basic shader and export it as FBX file, what it should do for you is whenever you import it into Maya, 3Ds Max or Modo, all the basic shading is done and the model is ready to be rendered.

I tend to save all my models at a reduced version of under 50K polygons with UVs; the time you save by doing is multiplied by how often you use the asset.

Another thing that can speed up the 3D process is using displacements, transparency maps, and bump maps (I love using these):

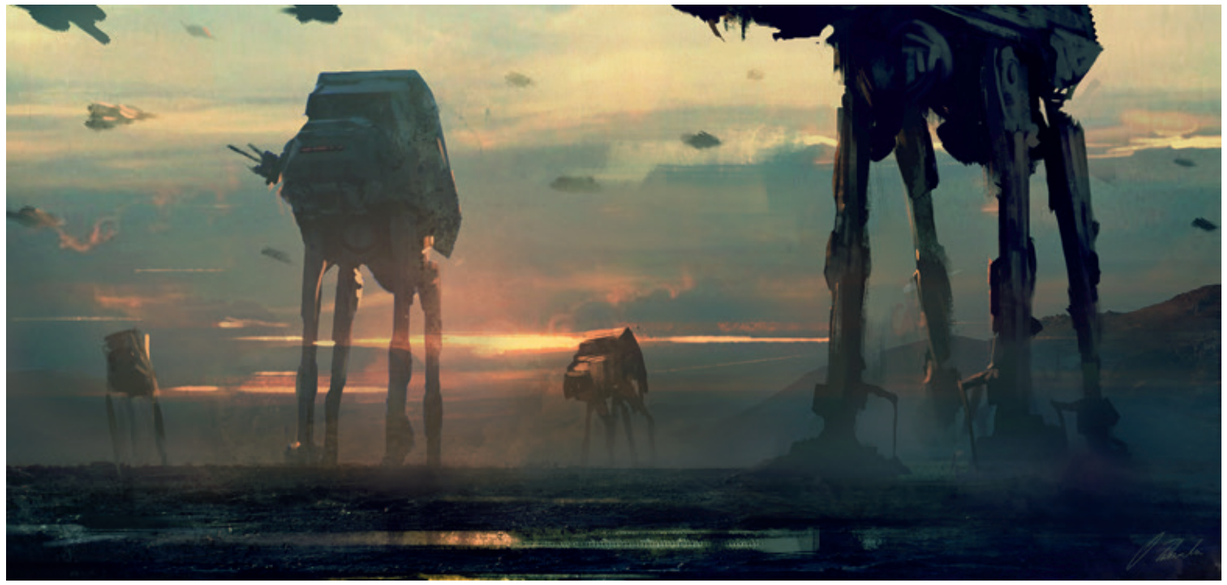
On the image above, simply plugging a black and white torn cloth image in the opacity slot and turning on translucency, can create a nice-looking destroyed cloth, then you duplicate it around, scale and mirror it to create variations. Paint a bit on top to break the repetition and you may only need one cloth piece to populate the scene

Displacement can save you a lot of time sculpting or modeling anything really, by automatically subdividing and deforming your model based on the photo, it works especially well when you're exploring shape language for the volumes of a landscape because, in Photoshop, you can just paint a grayscale image of your terrain in top view and get crazy with the shapes.

In a similar way, bump and normal maps can create a sense of detail on a character costume extremely quickly, fitting the texture to the character with UV mapping can be time-consuming. So if you're asked for only the front view, what about projecting the texture directly in a flat way, so you can create a very quick "look"? Focus on the design, then let the computer do all the lighting and rendering for you. It's all about being lazy, and efficient.

What I like the most about 3D is the way it separates the design process from the final image, since you can both render final image and quick mock-ups, it forces you to figure out the design from all angles, then present it, but you can make changes and adjust things that would require a complete redo with 2D workflow.

Knights Division © Darek Zabrocki



Imperial Walkers © Darek Zabrocki

Monkey City © Mark Molnar

D3bisHD © Geoffrey Ernault

Shadow of Mordor Concept © Monolith Productions – Scribble Pad Studios

The Chosen Island © Mark Molnar

Z-Train © Georg Loeschner

Rainy Night © Jonas de Ro

Riddick Promo Matte © Adult Swim – Boss Creatives – Mark Molnar

Matte and Background Painting

The original idea of matte painting was to create the illusion of a landscape or part of the set which did not exist in real life, or would have been too expensive, or impossible, to visit. Matte and background painters in the classic movies used various techniques to paint these locations to wooden boards or glass sheets and combined the painted parts with live action footage. From the early 90's this technique moved into the digital medium and nowadays all set extensions are created digitally.

You might think only movies need matte painting, but that's not the case. In animation they use exactly the same technique, just with a much more stylized approach and in video games they use both directions depending on the art style of the actual project. The main purpose of matte or background painting is to cut costs. In case of a real movie this means avoiding the cost of building the sets or moving the whole crew to a remote location, and in case of a video game it's about cutting memory costs, because it is much easier to handle a plain painted background than building the same thing in 3D and making it fully functional.

The job of a concept artist can be to create impressions and concepts for the matte painters, but most of the time we help out with the actual production work and create the final matte plates themselves. The most common matte painting technique is really similar to creating highly detailed key art. Normally the artist works on top of an already established rough 3D mesh and composites photographs on top of that. Today's matte painting techniques are less about painting actually, they are more about merging and retouching photos with additional 2D and 3D effects and models.

Producing a big game title takes years so there comes a point when all the concept work has been done, so concept artists will usually move on to matte paintings, virtual set extensions, redefining silhouettes, creating lighting concepts for the levels and mood pieces for the real-time post effects and grading are becoming the priority tasks.

In animation productions being a background painter is a totally separate job in itself. Modern 3D animation pipelines are using more and more 3D set extensions and generated vitas and particle effects, but painting set extensions or epic views are still much easier and cost effective.

The actual method for creating matte plates and backgrounds can vary from production to production, but the main rules usually are the same as in creating highly detailed environment concepts. The only difference is that your workflow and layer structure has to be planned out for use directly for projecting back onto the 3D geometry.

Tutorial by Gerard Dunleavy | www.gerarddunleavy.me

Last stop

I set out with a clear idea in my mind of the mood and atmosphere of this piece from the outset. I wanted to create an oppressive and mysterious subterranean world, a dystopia, perhaps ruled by a power-hungry dictator or privileged elite. The people living down there would be cut off from the rest of the world, their media controlled, and misinformed about the terrible conditions on the surface. The train station represents the only connection to the surface world, tickets are reserved only for the ruling class. However citizens have been known to sneak aboard, but never return.

My goal for this piece was to design and create a large environment in 3D, that would then be matte painted and could possibly passed to a compositor to be animated.

Step 01.

The first step, of course, was to nail down the concept. I began by blocking in shapes and ideas using chunky brushes in Photoshop, trying to stay very loose and fast so as not to put in unnecessary detail. My primary focus, at this stage, is on the content of the image and the rough design of the station.

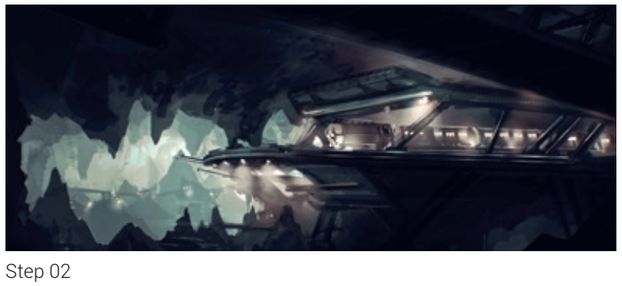
My design is inspired by Soviet futurism. I like the strong, bold shapes that jut outward and symbolise the style. As a story element, I also imagined the technology and culture of this civilisation being forever stuck in a bygone era.

Step 02.

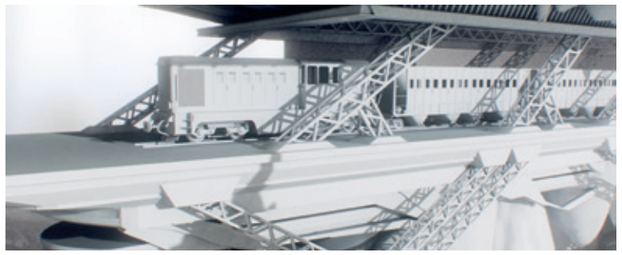
After establishing the basic sketch of the environment I quickly moved onto adding mood and color. These steps are really just rough painted notes for myself, or a potential art director, as the scene will be completely rebuilt in 3D.

It is still very important to have a strong concept before entering the 3D realm. In my experience if you don't have a clear vision of what you want to create you can get muddled and distracted by

Step 01



Step 02



Step 03

the 3D software, ultimately hindering the later stages by spending too much time with polygons.

Step 03.

Now it's time to build the scene. I use Maya for the majority of my 3D work but the same principles apply to every software package.

In the past, working as a 3D artist, I would have modelled this entire scene from scratch but in recent times I have focused on speed and efficiency rather than brute force modelling.

Step 04

I utilise stock models, old project models and a kit of custom parts I have collected to construct scenes.

For example, the base of this platform is bespoke modelled by me to fit the design, but the train and supports are a Frankenstein combination of parts from machinery, cranes, air-conditioning units, motorbike parts and a garden shed.

Step 04.

Utilising this 'kit-bashing' technique, I constructed the scene very quickly and was able to focus on other areas of the image.

I was not happy with the original composition of my sketch, I felt it was too flat and needed more interest. Now that I had a 3D scene and a camera to play with, I decided to move the camera to look upward at the platform, giving it a foreboding feeling and building upon the story that we are a citizen on the cave floor, longingly looking upward at the train, dreaming of the outside world.

Step 05

Step 05.

The texturing of this scene was very simple. I used tiling textures of rocks, concrete, metal and so on, that could be applied to objects quickly with a minimal amount of UV unwrapping. My texturing tip is to have good specular and bump maps that match your textures. These can add a lot of detail and realism to your scene very quickly.

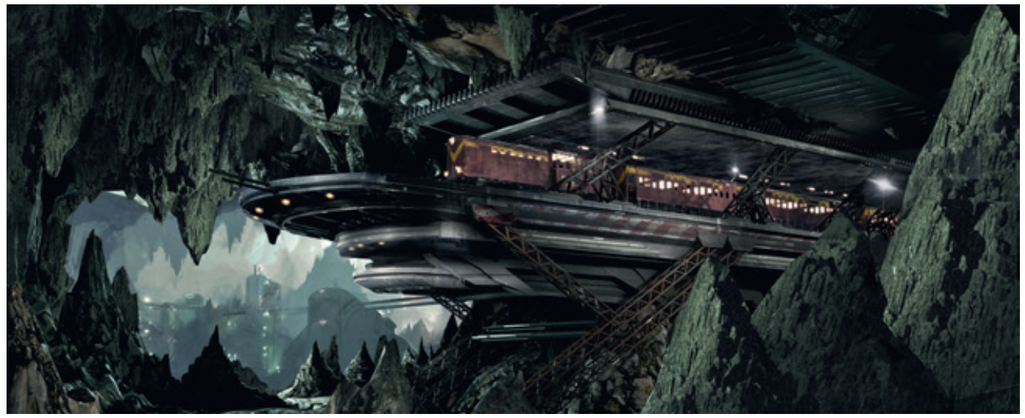
For lighting I used Vray because I love how lights and materials react, but you can achieve similar results with any modern rendering package. My advice for lighting is to go from big to small.

I started by creating a skylight with a cool blue/green hue for ambient light. I then hand-place area lights around the platform to simulate bounce light. I did not use Global Illumination for the bounce as manually placing lights offers much better control for interiors. Finally, I placed spotlights, with a warm hue, around the platform and on the front of the train.

The finishing touch was to add fog to the scene, which takes a very long time to render cleanly, but I love the mood and depth it adds to the image.

Step 06.

Once happy with the overall lighting in the scene, I rendered a high resolution still from Maya with many passes and masks to help me composite and paint over in Photoshop. I usually layer up the various passes to simulate the final render,



Step 06

thus enabling me to finely control and paint on individual components of the image (color, spec, lights and so on).

I used photographic elements of rock formations, rust and concrete to texture and enhance the basic render, being careful to stay within the silhouette and perspective of the 3D. Working this way allows me to project the image onto the original geometry for animation later.

Step 07.

Working methodically and regularly saving out versions of the image allowed me to quickly analyse and iterate on the look and feel of the piece. Once I felt the level of detail and design had come along far enough, I experimented with the final color grading of the image.

I am a massive fan of classic sci-fi films such as Blade Runner, Aliens, 2001 and the like, specifically for their beautiful cinematography and color grading. For this piece, I tried to replicate that look by using Fuji film color profiles, I loaded these into Photoshop with the color lookup function, and using this as a base I used levels/curves to crush the shadows and highlights to replicate the value range of film.

Finally, I added some subtle lens effects such as vignette and chromatic aberration as well as a real scanned film grain that I overlaid at the end.

All these little effects help balance and meld different elements of the image together, hopefully resulting in a visually pleasing image that people enjoy.

Origin Animation Background © BrownBag Films – Mark Molnar

Dune Wormsign Beacons © Mark Molnar

Nemo Cave © Gerard Dunleavy

Designing Motion

As a concept artist sometimes we are asked not just to create static images, but also design motion. These jobs are usually spread out through the production pipeline; some of them part of the early pre-production; and some are more important in VFX and post. This work can include designing how a creature moves to give guideline to the animators, designing the compositions and framing of various scenes for movies, animations or game cinematics, or designing effects, like transformations, explosions and even fictional user interfaces.

The first, and one of the most important, of these is storyboarding. Storyboarding is basically establishing all the shots, overall compositions, and the transitions between them for the entire project, whether it's film, animation, linear game or advertising. Some artists specialize in it, but most of the time the artist responsible for creating the key concepts also does the story-

HellBlade Transformation © Ninja Theory – Mark Molnar

Holo Room VFX © Mark Molnar

boarding. Only the biggest studios have in-house storyboard artists and it is much more common that they move from project to project or in smaller studios the in-house concept artists does this job as well.

The use of pre-production boards varies between art directors / directors, some of them like to plan everything ahead, some of them like to experiment more on the go. From this point of view, film allows the most freedom, then games and animation. The reason why they like to block in everything on storyboards in animation productions is that you have to plan everything ahead to create a visually coherent story and to make the workflow more effective.

Besides designing complex sequences and scenes, you can also create mini-storyboards for how things move during the pre-production

HellBlade Senuas Vision © Ninja Theory – Mark Molnar

phase of a project. This could be about how a weapon moves, how you can open an intricate lock, or how a spaceship can open up in different stages. These things are usually part of the prop or vehicle design process, but require an in-depth understanding of your subject. If you get a task like this, try to focus on the usability and ergonomics of the actual object and build your design around that. All the rest, like matching it to the character, time period, story, and so on, comes afterwards and can be handled as additional decoration.

Designing moving elements is also part of the post-production process and mostly means creating designs for visual effects. This can range from the actual design of effects, like smoke, explosions, magical elements, and so on, to creating the motion and behavior designs of virtual creatures: like the transformation of a werewolf or a zombie. It also can include designing the graphical elements and user interfaces, where needed.

The actual work in these cases can include using various skills from character and creature designs through the understanding of physics (and how the break those rules) to contemporary graphic design.

Tutorial by Michael Fong | michaelfongstory.blogspot.com

Storyboarding Basics

A short overview of storyboarding:

Underneath it all, storyboarding is a balancing act. Of course, the end goal is communication—to tell the story—but in order to achieve that, we have to juggle a lot of concepts and even disciplines. Storyboarding involves illustration, animation, writing, design, composition, editing, acting, and probably a few more. So, to me, the balance between these various elements is a big part of storyboarding.

In storyboarding, you're constantly trying to reconcile what the audience needs to know/feel with rules of film continuity, composition, visual communication, and any other film guidelines/mantras such as: "enter a scene as late as possible" or "don't break the 180 line". You are also thinking about how the character(s) would act/react and if your choices are consistent with the story. There are many, many "rules" to think about and all have their place when used in the appropriate situation or broken to achieve a desired effect. It is up to the story artist to prioritize and choose how and when to apply them.

At the end of the day though, the ultimate goal is to tell the story visually. Unfortunately, there are a thousand ways to tell the same story and that's where the juggling comes in.

My Storyboarding Process:

Everyone's process is a little different and there is no one right way. Like Bruce Lee once said, "Adapt what is useful, reject what is useless, and add what is specifically your own." Additionally, I believe that as you gain experience you augment your workflow and simplify steps as things become more ingrained.

That said, here is my personal approach to storyboarding: I try to decide on the main point or climax or whatever is important for the sequence. It could be a character's emotional turn, or just visual information like a close-up of something or just getting someone/something from one side of a room to the other. Then, I try to plan a way to get to that moment/point as elegantly as I can. (Note: the use of "elegant" is entirely subjective.) That's pretty much it.

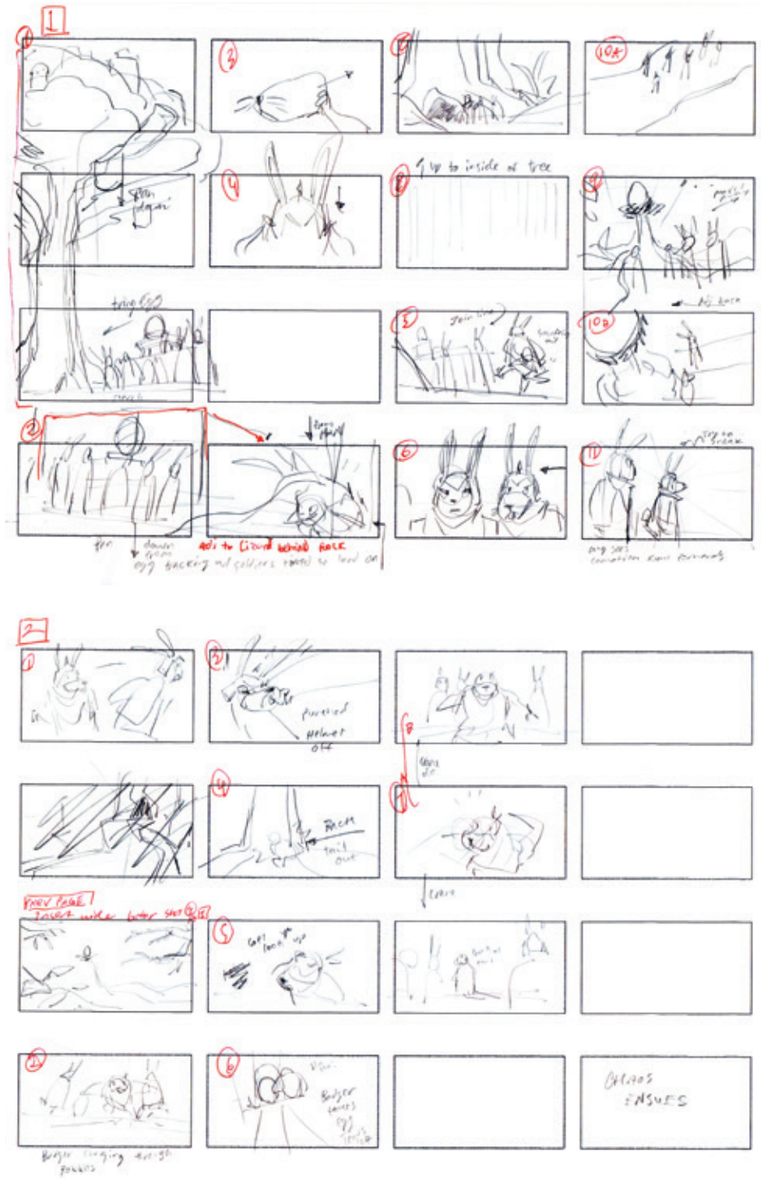
Here's an example workflow:

I start by writing a list of beats. These are the moments I need to cover in storyboard form. I do this whether working from a script or not. Listing the beats helps me visualize the order of the events. As a somewhat scatterbrained person I also like lists because I can just write down ideas that pop into my head very quickly. More often than not, writing is faster than drawing. Sometimes it is a mess but ultimately, nobody will ever see it but me (and now you). Here is a very simple list I made for a personal project storyboard:

- **Bunny soldiers transporting egg to tree castle**
- **Intercut gearing-up (mislead to be soldier)**
- **Lizard disguises self, and steps into line with Bunnies**
- **Soldiers store egg**
- **Lizard about to steal egg**
- **Badger barges in using brute force to grab egg – Lizard meets Badger**
- **Badger gets egg, runs off**
- **Lizard frustrated, disguise ruined**
- **Bunny soldiers kick off Lizard**

After I have a list of beats, I move on to thumbnails. Thumbnailing is arguably the most important stage. Using the beat list as a plan for the thumbnails, I try to best utilize what I know of composition and visual storytelling to move through the beats towards the climax. All the while balancing my decisions against the style of filmmaking the sequence/project requires.

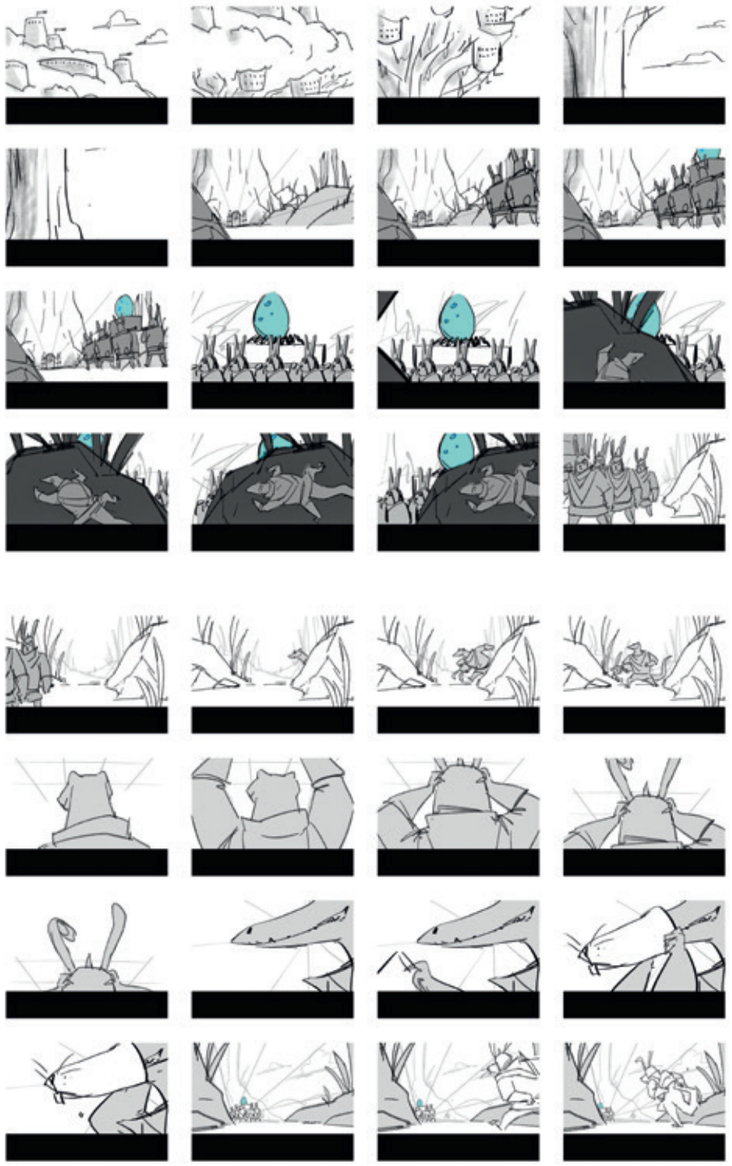
This is where we deal with camera angles and continuity. Here we choose the shots based on the needs of the story and we must arrange the shots in a way that will not confuse or distract the audience. What information is most important generally dictates how we should show it but there is a healthy amount of subjectivity, of course. We must balance the needs of the story

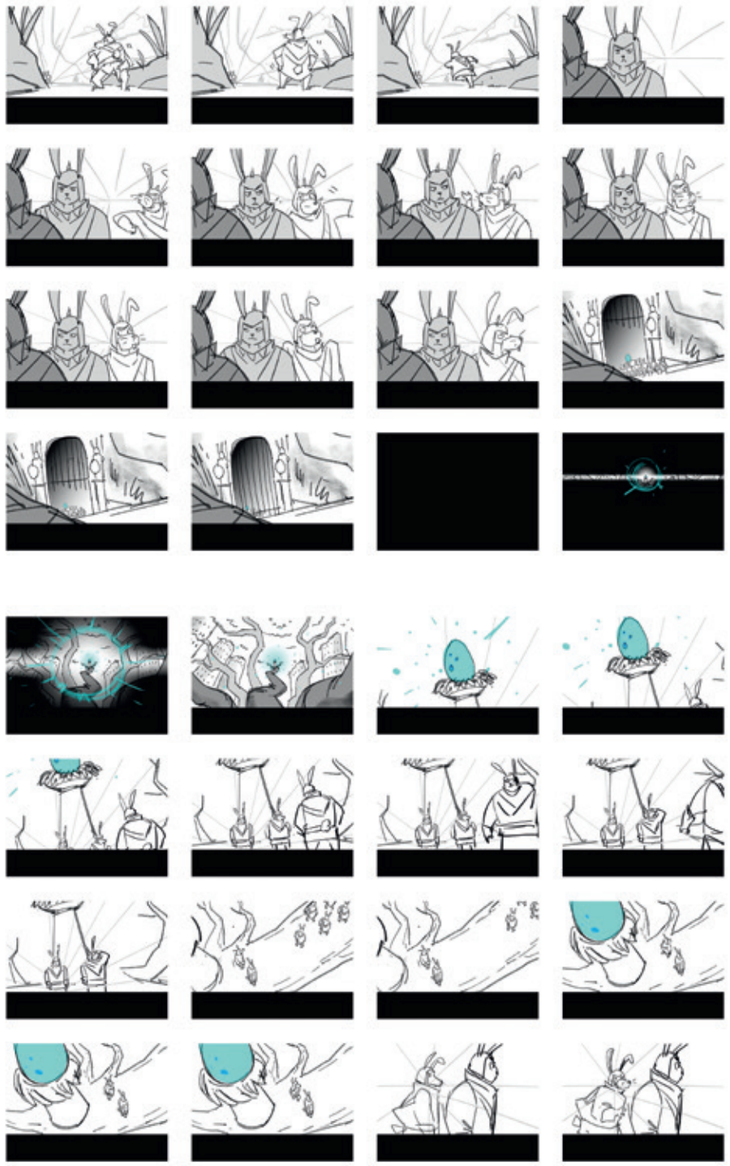


with the language of film. There are many books that cover the basics of film language and this is where it all comes into play.

Personally, I try to thumbnail every shot that I think will go into the sequence. I try to figure out all the hookups and continuity problems in thumbnails. Solving these problems at the thumbnail stage saves time later. I still draw on paper for thumbnails at this point because I can get my ideas out much quicker on paper, but you use whatever is best for you. Often it takes me several thumbnails before I get the shot or shots I think will fulfill the needs of the beat sheet. Here is a sample of my thumbnails.

It looks pretty chaotic. I draw extremely rough, all over the page, and not always in order. Afterwards I do a quick pass and number the shots I want. These thumbs are mainly about placing





the camera and setting up the staging for the characters. I don't do a lot of character poses for thumbs, just about one thumb per shot, and I'll write in the acting or camera move that I want. In a way thumbnails are just a more detailed list of what to do. However, many people can do thumbnails much cleaner and clearer and they will not do a thumbnail for every shot. They can just do the main beats and sew it together as they go into drawing up the full storyboards.

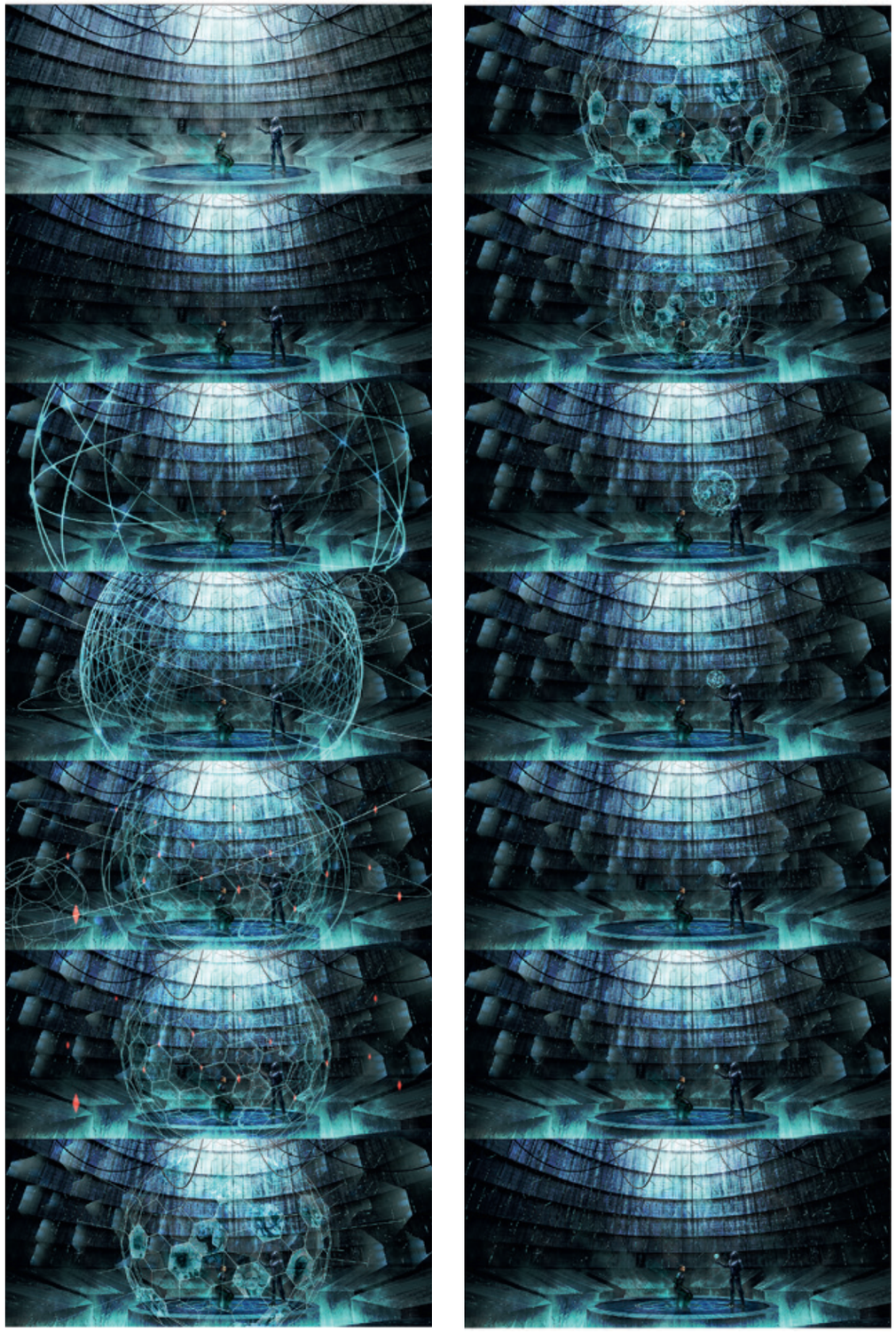
When I feel that I've gotten through my list of beats and solved as much of the visual problems as I can, I'll scan my thumbnails into the computer. I like to cut and paste them into individual files so I can preview the order of shots on the computer. At this point, most of the heavy thinking and problem solving is done and now the hard work of drawing up the panels begins. If I've done a good job during thumbs, things will look close to how I envisioned. That said it's not unusual to go back to augment the thumbnails in order to solve any issues that pop up unexpectedly.

In conclusion, here are the first few pages I boarded from the thumbnails above.

So that's the long-winded version. To boil it all down here's my process:

- **Writing: List what I want to show.**
- **Thumbnails: Solving the visual problems of translating words into pictures.**
- **Finish: Drawing out the thumbnails, adding the action and character acting.**

Mr. Wonderful © Peter Yong



Holo Room VFX – step by step © Mark Molnar

STAXX © Justin Goby Fields

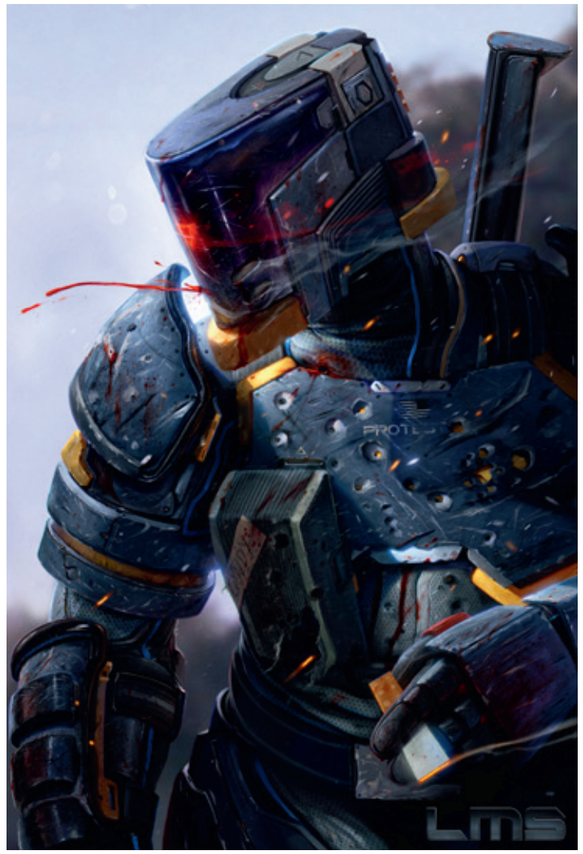
STAXX © Justin Goby Fields

Chapter 06:

Marketing and Promotional Art

Creating Iconic Imagery

Blood Eagle © Ninja Theory – Mark Molnar



Gabe Stand © Dan Luvisi

Venom © Mark Molnar

Creating iconic images is very similar to creating key art at the beginning of a production, but the process changes quite a lot during the production. As the actual production is getting to a more advanced stage, the content becomes more defined, giving the concept artists a more solid base to build on. From this point the creation is much more about matching all the content to each other and creating extra elements in the already defined visual style to enhance certain parts of the designs.

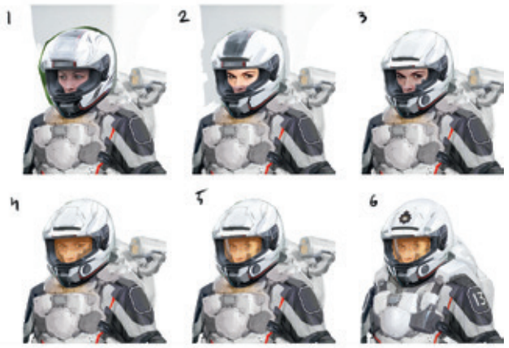
During the production the main task of the concept artists is not just to help the work of the production crew with detailed designs, but also to create inspiring images, that summarize the vision of the whole project. These can be iconic scenes and vistas or even characters in a pose or situation, that encapsulates their personality. You can help your art director / director with these images, they can be a great motivation for, and an overall guide to, the whole production team because these images encapsulate the final goal of the project.

In the case of a movie we usually have all the shooting finished and/or have a rough cut with most of the main VFX scenes at the final stage while, for a video game, the product is already at the beta-testing phase (at least) and the team is only working on the final polish of the gameplay and adding extras. We have the main characters or actors photographed or rendered, while the mood / colors / tones are decided. After this phase the job of a concept artist becomes more about illustration than design. As all the designs are established and final, the artwork has to be more about how to combine those designs to bring everything to the next level, but still keep the visual direction of the project.

Iconic images are not necessarily different from what we have already seen. They are more about showing something from a different point of view, adding extra meaning, or a twist to an already known subject. One of the best examples for this is maybe Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. It perfectly fits to the rules of portrait painting of its age, but the simple, yet effective, techniques he used made this painting iconic: He was one of the first to use aerial perspective and the Mona Lisa was one of the first paintings to show someone's portrait in front of an imaginary landscape. But the most unique is probably the facial expression that gives it the personal touch and creates the connection with the viewer.

Tutorial by Björn Hurri | www.bjornhurri.com

Bike Unit



Step 00.

I started by thinking about the character I was going to do and what it should do. I came up with the idea of a bike rider with magnetic locks on their exosuit, so that he/she could ride aggressively. I started gathering references that would fit the sketch direction.

Step 01B.

I found a great photo of a woman in a helmet, I copied her head, painted over it, and added other photos to see where that guided me. After balancing values and colours, and changing the silhouettes, I found something I liked. By continuously iterating that process I ended up with an interesting design.

Step 01.

By painting and using photos for certain elements I got a rough idea about where I was going though I knew there was still a lot of things that would be changed.

Step 02.

The bike was very faint by this time but acted as a general placeholder while I enhanced the character design – I would get to the bike later. I paid more attention to the smaller shapes and separating the materials with the aid of accents.

Step 03.

The character was at a stage where it was pretty much locked down. There were still some changes I wanted to do but I needed to work on the bike design in order to know where to take it all. I painted on top while playing with proportions and contrast.

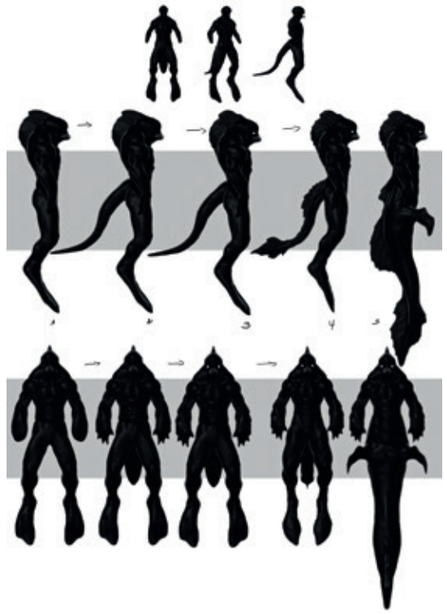
Step 04.

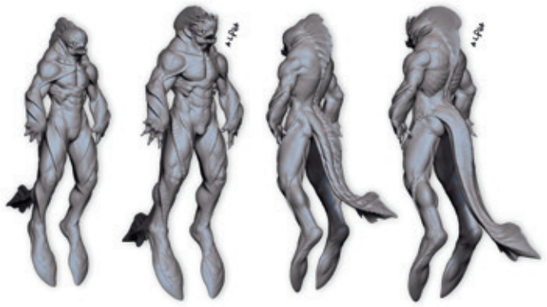
I used parts of photos here and there to further enhance the bike and character, while focusing more on the background where I used lots more photos and paint to make it work.

It's done. I removed the shoulder light plus further enhanced the design by tightening the render and giving it some post processing.

Tutorial by Salim Ljabli | salimljabli.artstation.com

The Alpha





I always try to have a silhouette that says as much as possible about my creature as possible especially if it's about a defined topic. I try to have some iconic and easy to read features that define my creature and most importantly to be able to read them from the silhouette, or at least to guess or say they might be this or that. This is very important while doing creatures for games, as most of the time you only have a few seconds to know what kind of monster you are facing in the game and how strong it is. Most of the time this information is extracted from the silhouette .

Use reference pictures to provide key features that define the look and feel of your creature / monster. Don't use other artists' work, just images from nature.

I keep myself away from any other artist's work on the subject matter I want to do, and that's the only way for me to come with something new and original.

I wanted to have a classic feel for this creature and not go fully humanoid in its face, so I kept some features from a deep sea fish which looks kind of stupid but dangerous at the same time. And those criteria fit the backstory of this creature very well.

This process is more about the decisions you make while creating a creature, sometimes you can go with some very extreme moves but if the overall look doesn't feel right or acceptable it doesn't matter how much effort you put into it, it will always lack something.

But when you just focus on the silhouette, the general design, and a correct anatomy the rest will follow easily.

So here are the steps I used to make this a creature/monster/character concept:

- **Title: "what is it?"**
- **Story: "the backstory and what differentiates this creature from everything else?"**
- **Gathering of reference on the subject matter**
- **Analysis of reference: "I try to get myself into the subject: time, place, and situation."**
- **Underline the key features that define the design and that fit the backstory well.**
- **I start doing some few sketches either in 2d or in sculpting.**
- **Add my elements, and chose which design best represents my story.**
- **Finalizing the concept.**
- **Pose it: "the pose should always represent the character, the personality, of the creature"**
- **Place it in its environment.**

This might sound like a lot but this process becomes fast and, in time, you won't even think about it. It becomes routine.

In the picture I've made an Alpha version of the creature from the silhouette and as you already know the alpha in a pack is the dominant male and the strongest. So I used the first concept as a starting point and exaggerated some features to make it look stronger, more aggressive and the kind of creature you don't want to have problems with but yet has much in common with the preview one.

There is something I always want to talk about: exaggerating muscles, bone structure or any feature from a character or a creature. It has a limit and that limit is a good balance that doesn't interrupt the functions or makes them less effective, so the exaggerations shouldn't put your character/creature out of balance unless it's done deliberately to be unbalanced.

Transhuman Explorer © Posthuman Studios – Mark Molnar

Minnie © Dan Luvisi

HellBlade Canyon of Hands © Ninja Theory – Mark Molnar

Illustration versus Concept Design

Marketing illustrations can get to a much bigger audience simply because of their nature. The bad thing about this is that a lot of young artists think that is what concept art is about. We have been through most of the phases of concept design in the previous chapters, but I think it is important to talk about the difference between design and illustration.

The level of finish in concept designs is usually very rough. This is not because the artists are lazy, but because that level of finish was enough to communicate a certain idea or direction to the director / art director. The character and environment designs we see in the 'making of' art books are mostly the final versions of the actual designs and we can never really see the hundreds of sketches and iterations created prior to final published piece.

The purpose of concept design is visual and creative problem solving, while the purpose of illustration is presentation. Of course there are many problems an artist has to solve in illustration as well, but those are solely focused on the image creation process, like composition, colors, focal points, perspective and so on.

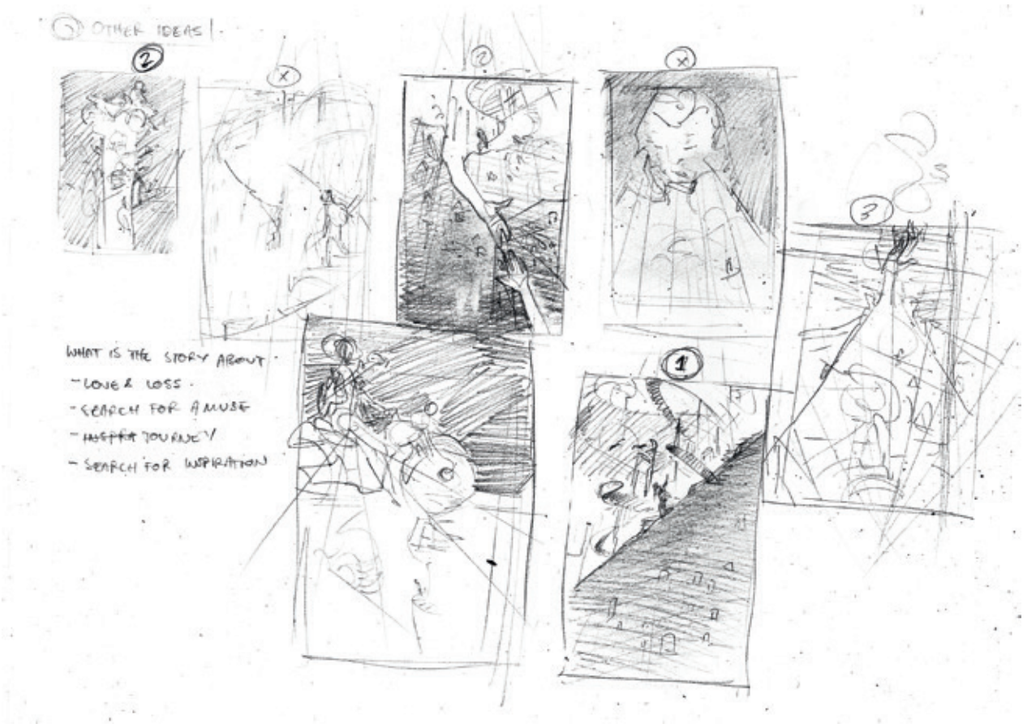
The concept design process is much more focusing on function. Function does not only exist in props and objects, but also environments, characters, costumes, monsters and so on. As concept artists we have to look at function from the viewpoint of the story and the entire production.

There are certain productions of course, where the polished digital illustrations are part of the final product. Mostly in games, but for movies these can be the backgrounds of animations, or animated 2D images as inserts in feature films for example.

There are entire game genres built on highly detailed static illustrations for their core visuals. Two of the most popular are virtual card games and the hidden object games, both using 2D artwork at almost marketing-level quality art.

Tutorial by Ben Leon | www.bleon.org

Orpheus Pitch



I took the story of Orpheus and Erudyce, reimagined it in a fantasy/sci-fi setting, and painted a promotional image for it as if it were to be marketed as, or pitched to be developed into, an indy game, or illustrated story, or some other incarnation in the entertainment industry.

In difference to a piece of concept art or design, the primary function here is to give an overall sense of the story (or the product), the mood and the big ideas that the project is about. The story of orpheus and Erudyce is a about a journey, a search into the underworld for the protagonist's muse and lover. The other ideas I wanted to clearly communicate were ideas of 'another world' and 'discovery', ideas related to sci-fi/fantasy.

First and most important is to think of a concept that will communicate these ideas that you have identified, and it is at this initial stage where there is a difference to creating concept art, because

we are not limited to making a literal image of a 'thing', designing a specific character/mood/vehicle etc. The purpose is to communicate an idea, you are not limited to literal representations.

With this in mind, and thinking of the main themes I wanted to communicate, I thought of illustrating the under/other world as an arm/hand reaching towards our world. Or, this under/other world seemlessly dissolving away under an image of the protagonist.

Working these ideas into sketches, I began to work out the mechanics of how I would visually represent this, as well as thinking of strong compositions, colour design, character poses, clothing and equipment, and other details that would relate back to the ideas I wanted to communicate.

Only when all this has been fleshed out with sketches do I feel that the image in my minds eye is not only adequately detailed so I know how to execute the final, but I am also sufficiently confident it will communicate the ideas I want it to (and hopefully look sweet as well).

_log:\
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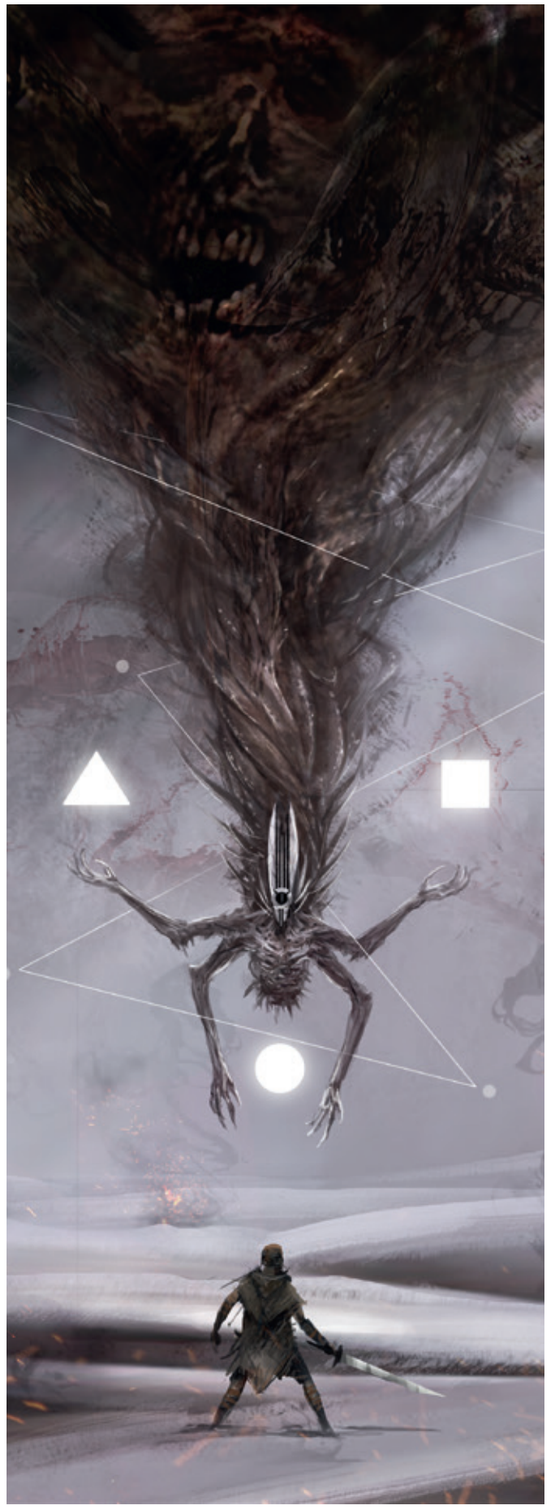


HellBlade Gatekeeper © Ninja Theory – Mark Molnar

Arachnus © Marc Simonetti

A Game of Thrones © Marc Simonetti

Naturalize for MtG © Wizards of the Coast – Scribble Pad Studios

Phantom © Marc Simonetti

The Kiss © Alessandro Taini

Ben Leon © Dirk Terril Production

Marketing Art

The final phase of most projects in the entertainment industry is the promotion of the actual finished product. As concept artists and digital painters / sculptors our job is to create easily recognizable images for the marketing campaigns. Although these images are less challenging for our designer mind, they are equally important.

These works can get to the widest audience and can alter the success of the film, game, animation, toy or whatever. Plus the average marketing cost of a big budget production (blockbuster movie or AAA game) is usually 3-5 times bigger than the actual production cost. This means these images are the most valuable to the production company, client or publisher.

The key thing here is to pick the most characteristic moments, gestures, facial expressions and movements from the entire production. Our task is to summarize the whole story in one image or a few key images. It's almost like creating a cover for a book. The most successful marketing images do not try to communicate everything, they just suggest what the audience can expect.

Most of the time we are not trying to sell the whole story, just the mood, the emotions or the journey. We have to try to show the actual experience the viewer will get from watching the actual movie, animation or playing the game.

These images are almost always character-oriented and centered on the hero or heroine. This is the easiest way to pull the viewer into the story and, based on our cultural knowledge, we already know what to expect. We know a lot of character types from fairy tales to the books we read, the movies we watch, and the games we play. All characters are based on certain archetypes that make them easily recognizable and understandable.

Besides selling the mood, we also have to create a visual language that separates this product from all the others in the market. This is probably the hardest part, as most of the times the client / production company would like to 'talk' to a certain audience / target group. For example, the fantasy genre has very recognizable visual characteristics from the shape language, from colors through to the typography. As artists and designers our main task is to create iconic images inside these limitations, that have the key features of the genre, but distinguishable enough to tell a unique story.

Tutorial by Alessandro Taini | www.alessandrotaini.com

DMC Flashback – Back to the past

For DMC we wanted to create a flashback that could represent Dante's past, and how better to represent the past than with classic paintings?

I loved the idea of using the expressive power and intensity of light in the paintings of Caravaggio to reflect the style of the new DMC perfectly. The painting I decided to use was "David with the Head of Goliath" because it's an image that perfectly integrates with the concept I wanted to express:

David shows an unexpected strength against a giant exactly like Dante in DMC.

With David being a young boy, I had to come up with a younger version of Dante. I used one of the first concepts I did of Dante as reference and then made few more to get the face just right.

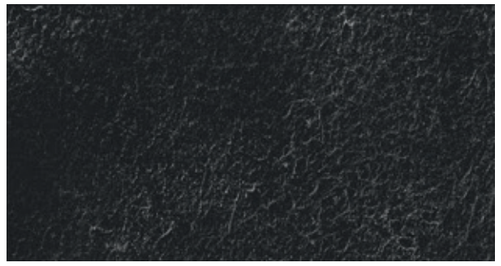
In this step you can see the difference between concept art and illustration. Concept art is a study, it's creating something that can be a character or an object. It can be more or less detailed, it may be in a pose, with an expression or not, what you create in the 2D concept will be built in 3D. But illustrations have a different function, they are used to show, in one image, the whole project, like the cover of a book.

Let's analyze the picture. For me it was very important to achieve in my painting the ancient feel, but in a modern context. So the first thing I did was change the key element of David in the original painting to more modern clothes, jeans and a torn shirt.

It was very important the main elements of the image, like the sword, the shirt and Dante's arm, followed the same lines of the original painting.

The drama of light is an essential part of Caravaggio's paintings. To achieve the same level of realism I decided to photograph a friend of a friend using the same direction and intensity of light as Caravaggio used, to provide a more precise reference.

To make sure the image got the ancient painting feel, it was important to use the same brush as in Caravaggio's painting and to smooth out the image contours.



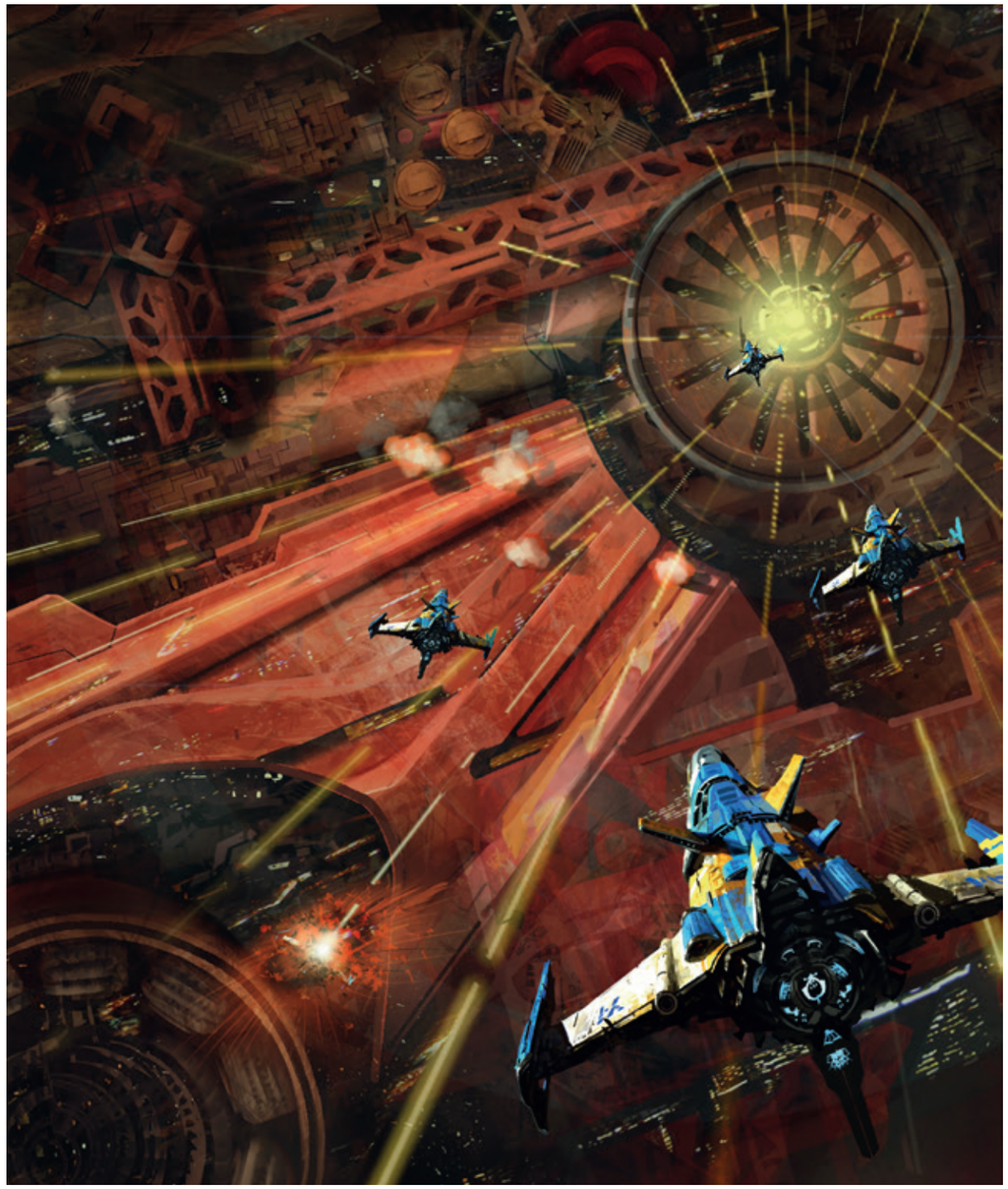
As a final step I overlaid a couple of textures across the entire image to get the effect of painting on canvas. One texture had the canvas pattern, while the other was a couple of painting strokes from an oil paint I did long time ago.

HellBlade Main Key Art © Ninja Theory – Mark Molnar

Ben Leon – The Journal of Aesthetic Nursing © Biofilms

Syfy Channel Wall © Alex Brady

Syfy Channel Wall © Alex Brady



Synchronicity War © Marc Simonetti

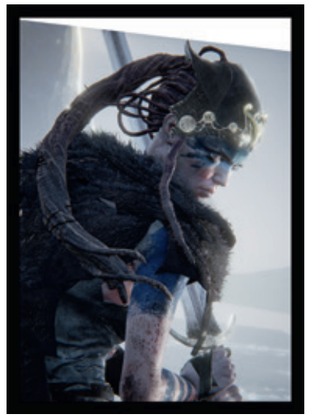
Cover and Box Art

The very final stage of promotional images are creating covers and DVD box art for the movie, animation or game. This final image is going to represent the entire project on posters, billboards, city displays, magazine covers and all other advertising platforms. This image can vary depending on the limitations and restrictions of the actual medium, of course, and can also have multiple iterations depending on location as well. Movies and games also have slightly different covers in different regions and countries; this mostly depends on legal restrictions and cultural differences.

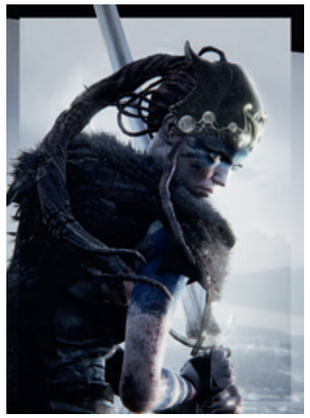
James Coyne – Abandoned Cover © Mark Molnar

Tutorial by Mark Molnar | markmolnar.com

Hellblade Cover



01



02

03

04

05

06

At Ninja Theory I had the chance to create an exclusive cover for the December 2014 issue of the Official Playstation Magazine. My task was to create an iconic image, what reflects our heroine`s personality and suggests the mood and style of the upcoming game.

(Art Director: Stuart Adcock,
Original Character Design: Alessandro Taini,
Character Sculptor: Claire Blustin)

01. After doing some sketches with my art director we settled down at a composition and created the pose with our in-game model and rendered it out from the engine.

02. Adjusted the lighting and contrast and composited the missing information from other in-game images.

03. Corrected some anatomical issues on the arm and started to paint over the character to make it more dynamic.

04. Extending the image to full size and adding color grading on adjustment layers, like overlay, soft light, color and color dodge.

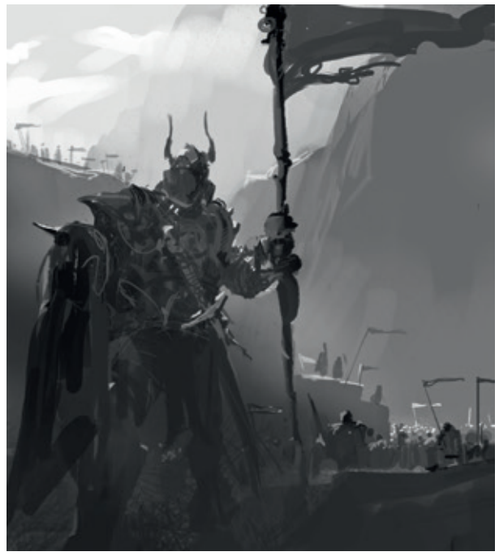
05. Main painting phase, where applied various textures first and then overpainted nearly the whole image to achieve a more rough and artistic look.

06. Additional texture work to bring back some more traditional media feel and to suggest blood splatters without showing actual blood or gore.

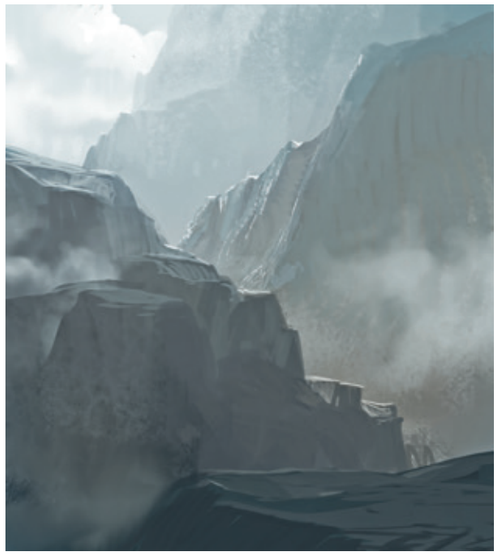
07. Final polishing with another painting and lighting pass and adding effects, like motion blur, smoke and flying debris.

Tutorial by James Paick | scribblepadstudios.com

Snow Warrior



Step 01



Step 02

Step 01.

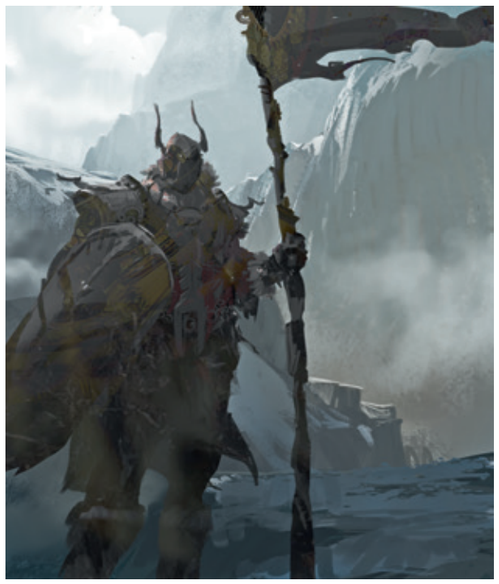
I start most of my images with a rough black and white compositional study. During this initial phase I keep the canvas at a thumbnail size view on the screen so I focus only on the important parts. Lighting, composition, scale, mood, these are all areas I try and resolve as much as possible in this early stage.

Step 02.

Once a solid idea is formed, I add in base color by introducing desaturated warm and cool tones, and build up the color saturation slowly as the painting progresses, saving the more saturated colors for last. Once I define the ground-plane, I now have a clear idea of perspective and depth. I can then start placing my main figure as well as any additional figures/objects in the distance.

Step 03.

Now that I have my setting in place, I block in a base silhouette for the hero figure. I had an idea in mind for this design, but I wanted to focus first on getting the pose and his proportions right. I wanted to give this character the sense that he's gazing at something off-screen. I like to include these mysterious story-telling moments, since it allows the viewer to use their imagination to figure out what exactly the warrior is looking at. It's really fun to invite your viewer to be involved in the narrative of the illustration.



Step 03

Step 04.

With the main elements of the painting in place, I can add in the rest of my supporting characters, as well as refine the main. To reinforce the mood, I added a bit of wind to the drapery of his clothing, as well as fog. Having a light fog layer on our main figure who is only a couple of feet away from us really helps reinforce the idea that the atmosphere in this region must be very dense.

Step 04

The repeated figures and flags in the background also give a better sense of scale and distance.

Step 05.

I shaved a bit of the canvas off the sides and started to refine details in the painting. I find it easier to work inside of silhouetted layers so I don't have to keep repainting my edges. I also cleaned up the edges on the background mountains for a clearer separation, as well as added contrast.

Step 05

Step 06.

Step 06

I wanted to play with the pose here seeing just how it would look if the figure was actually looking into the camera. It's never too late to explore the idea, especially since this is digital. All I would have to do if I didn't like the new orientation is turn that layer off and revert back to the old. Since we're getting close to finishing this, I also add in my effects layers, such as falling snow and a little more atmosphere.

Step 07.

Step 07

Here is a close-up shot of the shield. It wouldn't make sense to give the warrior a brand new shiny shield. I wanted to show he's been in battle before, and that those marks have been left on his equipment. Adding cracks, scratches, and weathering to his equipment is all beneficial to adding story and a history to this character.

Step 08.

In this close-up, you can see I've kept my background pretty loose. Since these figures are in the background, there's no need to render each and every one of them. A few indications here and there are all you really need when working on areas this distant in the painting.

Step 08

Step 09.

Step 09

I reverted his head back to the original pose, but played with the shape and design of the helmet a bit more. Removing the horns and altering the design puts the piece in a whole different time-era. Something as simple as this new design direction can play an important role in defining the painting. Warriors of any time period utilize the same equipment: armor and helmet for protection; some sort of ranged or close-combat weapon; and some identification/representation of what side they're on (uniforms, flags and so on).

Step 10

Step 10.

And here's the final painting. There wasn't really much else added besides a few more details, a couple of refined shapes/edges, and that's it. When you analyze the whole image, it really is about contrast. Dark figure on top of a light background, clean silhouette vs looser areas, cool colors in the distance with slightly warmer in the foreground, big foreground versus the smaller middle and backgrounds, and that pretty much concludes this painting. Thank you.

Couverture © Marc Simonetti

Redemption © Dan Luvisi

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"Concept Art. The phrase conjures up everything from medieval worlds to epic space battles. It is the culmination of 100 years of illustration, architecture and production design. Concept design evolved from an illustration service to being the blueprint for most virtual characters and environment designs. Its role has increased in visibility and prestige logarithmically. The speed and skill at which designs are derived nowadays is almost incomprehensible when compared to the days of watercolor set and costume design. But the key component in concept design IS design.

Is there an idea there? How does it evolve? What are its origins and endings? Join Mark and other industry professionals as they guide you through the various processes used in today's entertainment industry from the importance of early sketching to creating finished concept designs."

Robh Ruppel – Art Director at Naughty Dog