WORKSHOP

BRING YOUR COMICS TO LIFE
Master key techniques for visual storytelling

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Create a magical scene with dramatic mood

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The famous artist behind Gorillaz and Tank Girl

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DIVE INTO ROCK D'S EPIC CHARACTER SKETCHES

PAINT A CHIC SAMURAI WITH WATERCOLOURS

THE EXPLOSIVE RISE OF **AFRICAN COMIC ART** AND ITS AUTHENTIC STORIES

ONES AND ZEROS.

You will hit a wall.

It may be before you even start and there is a blank canvas. Maybe in the middle of a piece that at first was so inspiring, but fell flat after a few late nights.

All the challenges of balance, light, depth and composition appear overwhelming and unconquered.

It's breaking through the wall that pushes you creatively. Those are the times when process and willpower prevail - when the energy returns and the piece becomes human.

It's good to be human.

Don't be ones and zeros.

VISUAL ARTS PASSAGE

Welcome to…

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

In this month's issue we have a broad range of content, with a particular focus on the world of comic art, an area that so many artists dip into or make a career out of. There's expert advice from comic pros, plus a deep dive into how some truly iconic characters were recreated for video game Marvel Rivals, which has become wildly popular since its December release.
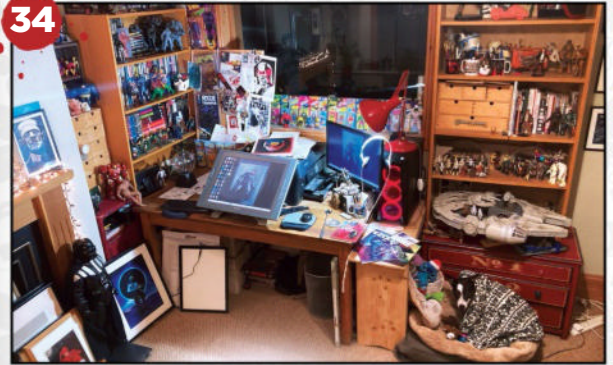
On a different note, the art community is fantastic and something I'm proud to be part of, and never more so than recently. Karl Kopinski, a huge talent and much-loved artist who has featured in ImagineFX, recently went public with the sad news of some serious medical issues that mean he's currently unable to work. This is awful news for him and his family, so I urge you to support him if you can. He has started a GoFundMe campaign at **https://ifxm.ag/kopinski** to support himself and his family. I worked with Karl at Games Workshop many years ago, and he is one of the loveliest people that you could hope to meet. I wish him a speedy recovery and all the best for his family.

Rob

Editor
Rob.Redman@futurenet.com

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African comic scene

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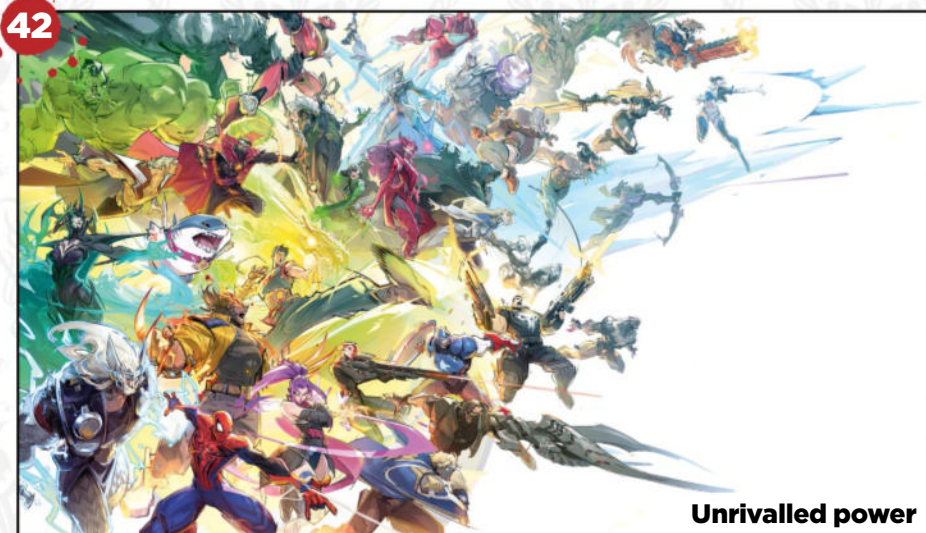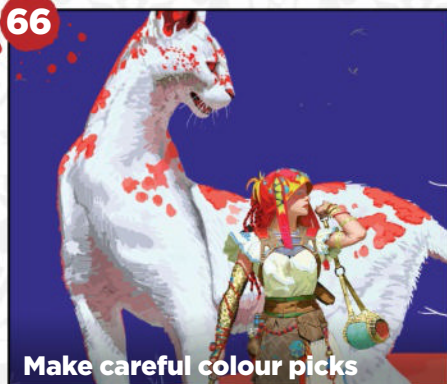
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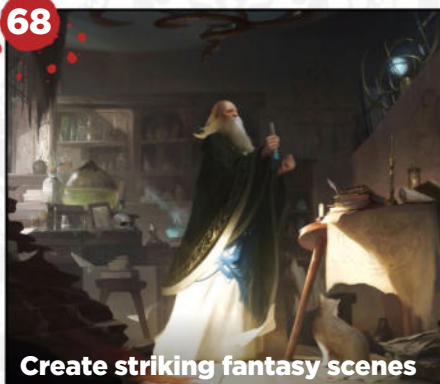
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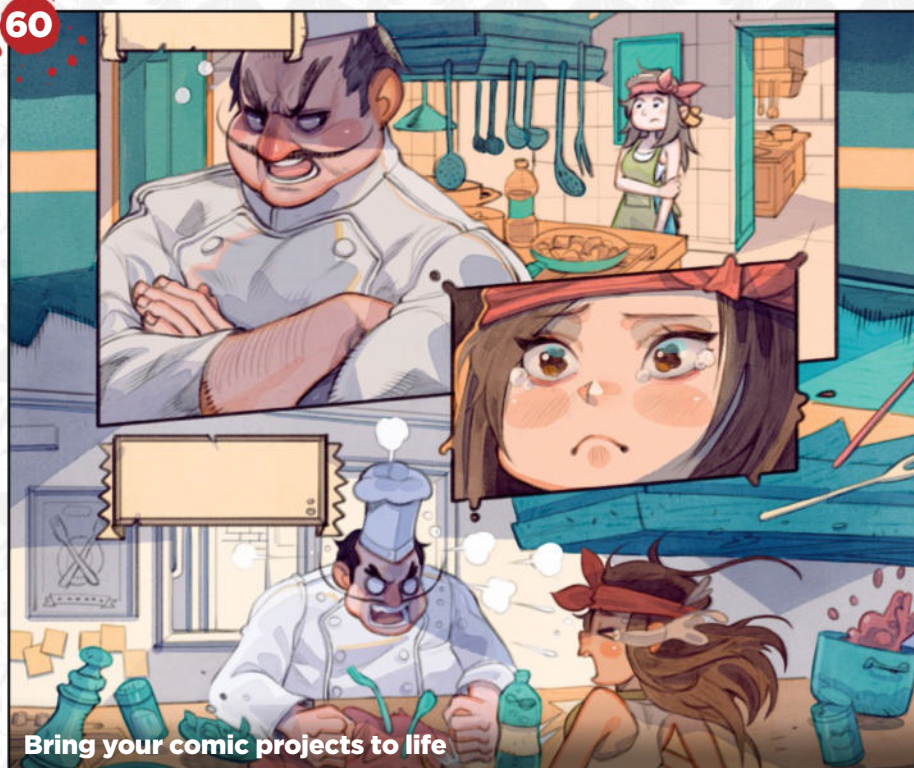
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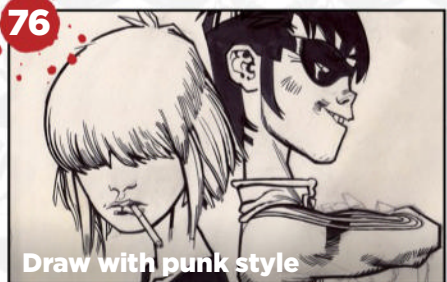
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SOFTWARE SHOWDOWN

Find the best Photoshop alternative for you as we check out 2025's top digital art apps

Create mystical glowing scenes
Learn how to paint luminous light and colour with concept artist Pauline Voss

Explore stylish sci-fi doodles
Braden May reveals the fascinating bots and beings found in his sketchbook

Get physical with fantasy
Take your designs to a new medium with sculptors the Shiflett Brothers

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FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART

Amy Nguyen

LOCATION: Vietnam **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Procreate **WEB:** www.instagram.com/amynian

Amy enjoys using simple strokes, minimalism and storytelling, with poetic and magical themes both common in her art. In the past she has collaborated with Pixar, Disney and Penguin Books.

1 SHE CREATES THE MOON AND STARS
"In this artwork, more than anything, I wanted to tell the story of Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul, as well as learning how to use textures more effectively in my work."

2 YEAR OF THE SNAKE
"I made this artwork to celebrate the Lunar New Year, and to express Vietnamese culture through my own style."

3 MAGGIE
"This artwork is inspired by a portrait of the legendary actress Maggie Smith. In this piece, I explored different techniques to the ones I normally use."

4 GRIEF
"I wanted to capture the pain of loss with the red spider lily, which is known for its association with death. I also used colour in a way that was contrasting yet harmonious."

4

FXPosé

Natcha Ngamtweerat

LOCATION: Thailand **MEDIA:** Procreate, Blender **WEB:** www.artstation.com/natchangamtweerat

Natcha is a concept artist and illustrator inspired by Disney animations, especially those with Medieval settings such as Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. She starts by modelling in Blender, before painting over in Procreate.

1 THE ALCHEMIST'S STUDY ROOM

"This room is located in a castle tower and tells the story of a king with an interest in learning alchemy and magic."

2 KING ANHEG'S STUDY

"My take on the study described in David Eddings' book The Belgariad: Pawn of Prophecy. It's a study for a curious king with many interests, located within the Cherek Palace tower."

3 THE PAINTER'S BEDROOM

"This is the portrayal of my dream room when I was an oil painter in college. The wall in the middle is a barrier to prevent the paint fumes from entering the bedroom."

4 THE WHEELWRIGHT'S WORKSHOP

"This depicts a wheelwright's workspace that's weathered and worn down by time. It's located deep in some damp woods to create a cluttered and homely, yet eerie vibe."

FXPosé

Axel Sauerwald

LOCATION: Germany **MEDIA:** Photoshop **WEB:** www.instagram.com/axelsauerwald

Axel began his career at Atomhawk Design in 2018 as a concept artist and illustrator, before transitioning to freelance work in 2020. Since then he has collaborated with Activision Blizzard, Wizards of the Coast and more.

1 FIRST RIDE

"This started as a tiny scribble in a journal and evolved into one of my favourite pieces. I've been sketching and painting dragons since childhood, and this is one of my more successful attempts at bringing one to life."

2 SLEEP TIGHT

"This was originally created for a contest. I experimented with a painterly style here, drawing my inspiration from the great masters John Singer Sargent and Anders Zorn."
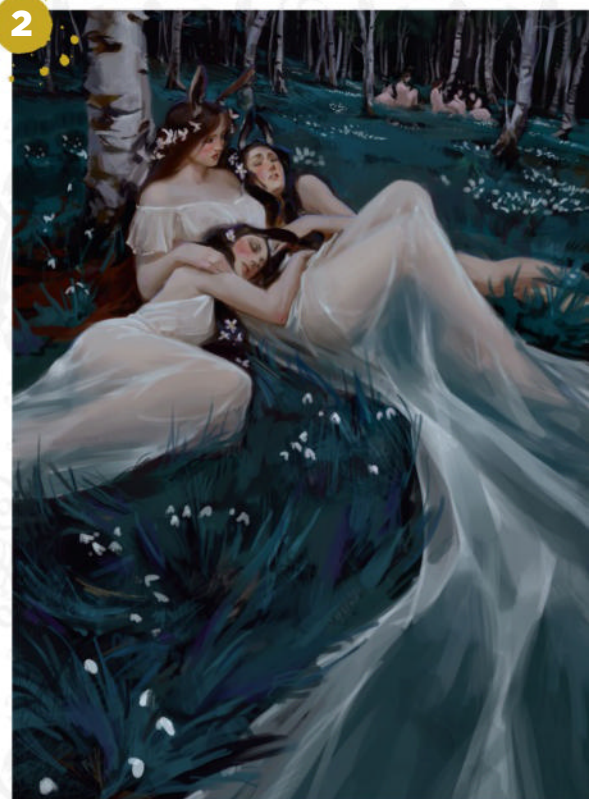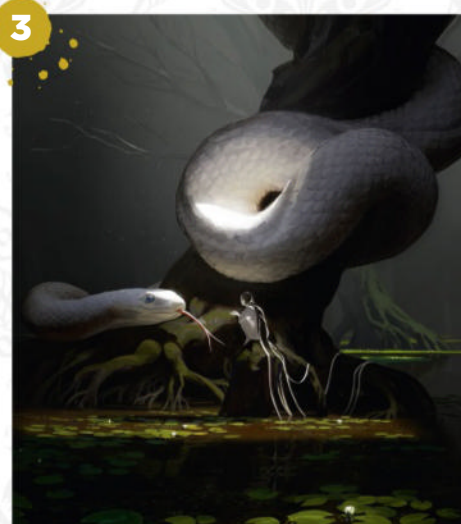
3 WHITE SNAKE

"I created this artwork as a tribute to my very own pet snake!"

4 AM ALTEN BAUM

"I had the opportunity to contribute this artwork to CODEX Obscurus, a book project started by Spiridon Giannakis."

FXPosé

Raphaël Silva

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Krita **WEB:** www.artstation.com/r2g

Raphaël started drawing when he was eight, then took it seriously 10 years later. Back then he was inspired by League of Legends splash art, and today storytelling is the most important aspect of his illustrations.
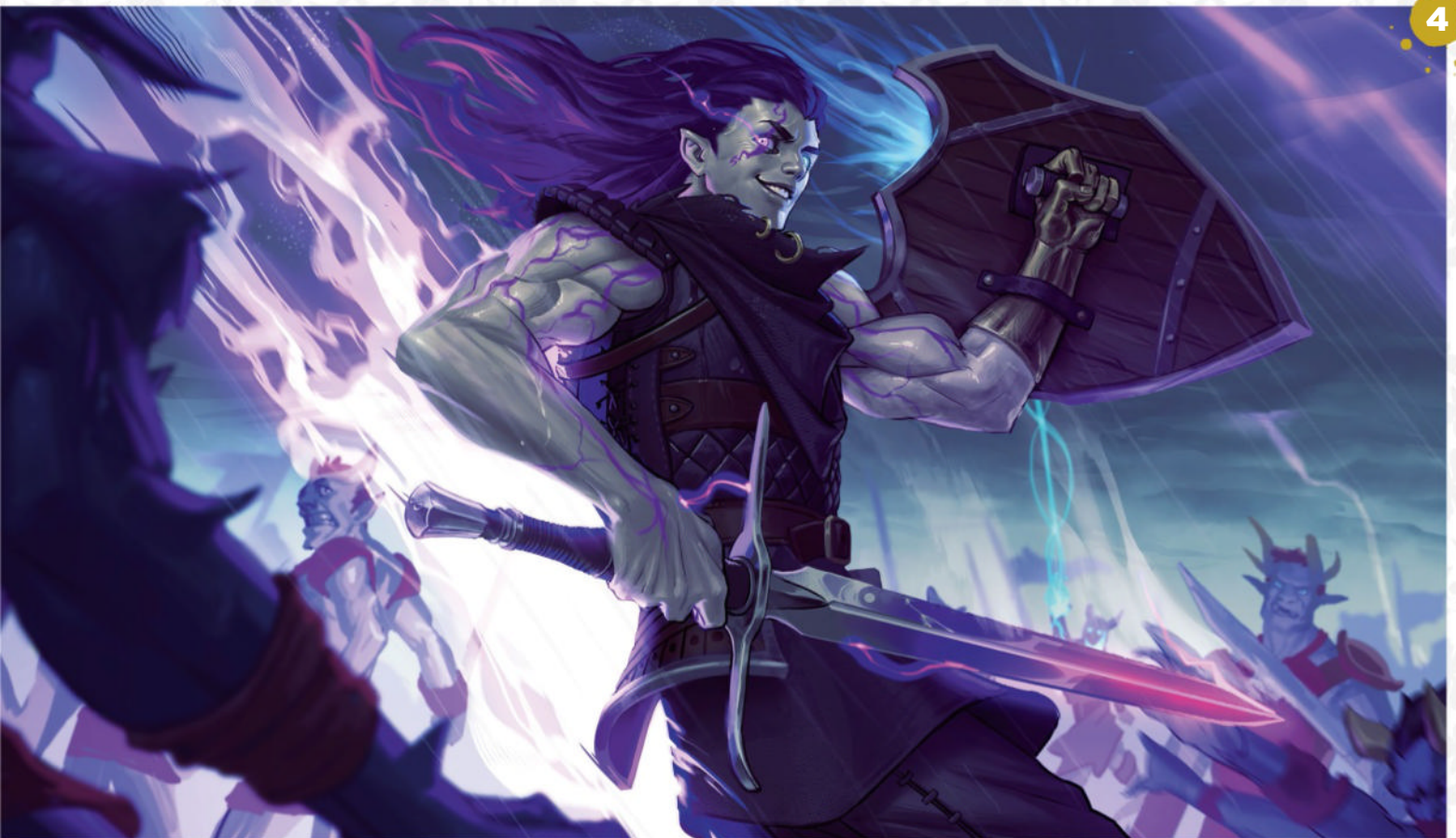
1 D&D COMMISSION – RUKIA
"Here's a commission I did of a winter witch. I like it because I feel as though the line-art was well implemented on the fur. I can easily make interesting shapes that way."

2 ALADDIN
"This is the culmination of a huge personal project where I wanted to rethink the whole Aladdin story from the ground up. The Arab world was the main inspiration, especially Morocco!"

3 WHISTLING BEAST
"The goal of this illustration was to create a gloomy and threatening feeling. I also tried to go further with my style and have bits of line-art showing in particular areas of the image."

4 D&D COMMISSION – TROMOS
"Another commission I liked. The goal was to make the character arrive at a battle in a bombastic way. I wanted this piece to have realistic VFX-style lighting."

FXPosé

Luca Ioli Siméone

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender **WEB:** www.artstation.com/peppino

Luca began his creative journey by studying video game art, inspired by the likes of Sergey Kolesov and Adrian Bush. He's passionate about concept art, visual development and illustration. "I'm eager to expand my skills."

1 LEAF
"This is part of the many practice pieces that I've created during my training sessions with friends. The artwork started as a nature study."

2 MOMENT
"I've been practising painting, dedicating a few hours each day with friends to focus on what drives us to become better artists and to continuously improve our skills."
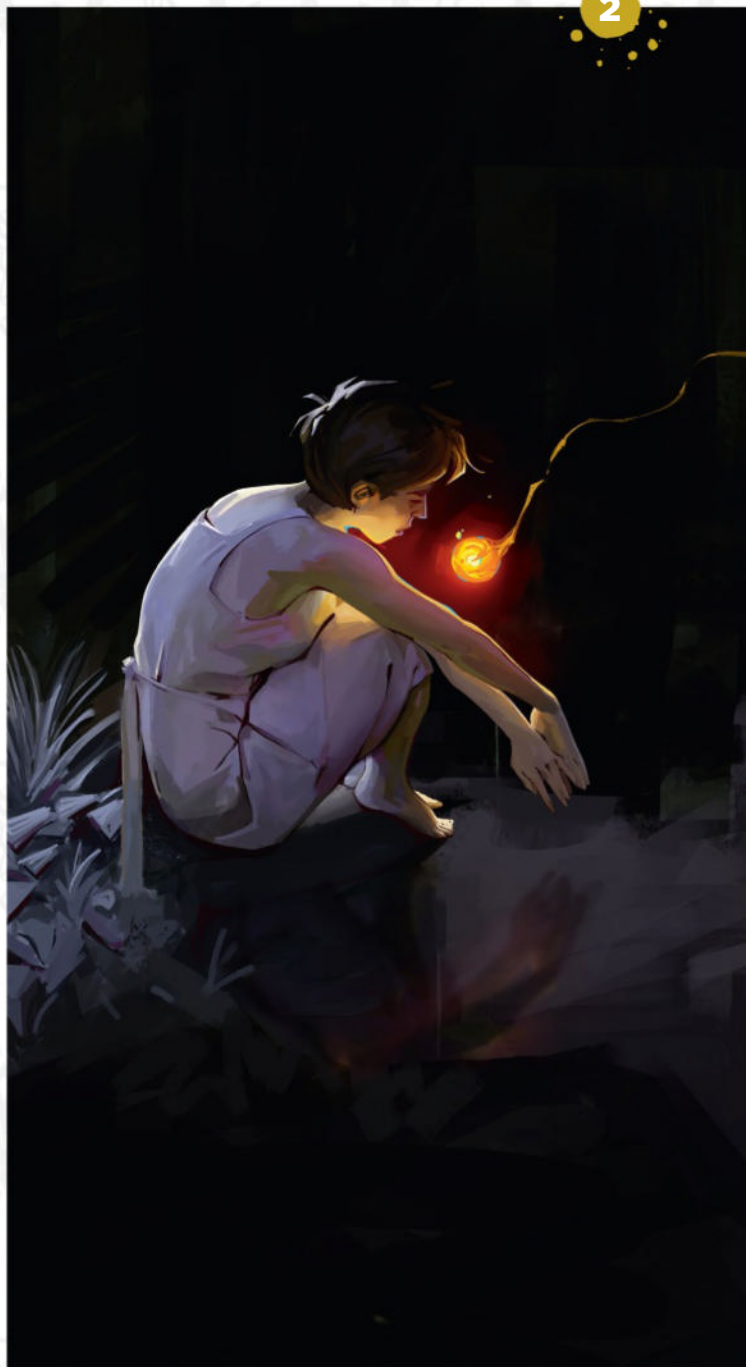
3 METRO
"The goal here was to create a narrative image using a fisheye lens and vibrant colours, capturing the magic of a metro scene where only one person notices the extraordinary."

4 UFINYANZI
"Artwork inspired by Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal was to design an environment using 3D modelling and overpainting. The focus was on quickly developing concepts."

Alexandre Allmendinger

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Procreate, Blender **WEB:** https://bit.ly/4inXUFD

Alexandre is a self-taught concept artist who has a soft spot for sci-fi and fantasy, and likes to combine colour and dynamism. He enjoys unleashing his imagination to create props and set pieces.

1 AXOLOTL TEMPLE BOSS
"The aim for this artwork was to create a fairly dynamic composition to illustrate the boss character's abilities in a fight scene."

2 AXOLOTL TEMPLE ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS
"These were inspired by the Aztec culture with elements such as jade and bronze – I took a few liberties – and the symbolism of the axolotl with curvy, aquatic designs."

3 AXOLOTL TEMPLE PROPS
"A research board for the entrance to the temple. The idea here was to start defining the various set elements and working on the artistic direction."

4 ENTRANCE TO THE AXOLOTL TEMPLE
"The dungeons found in the Zelda game Ocarina of Time influenced this piece. I imagined my heroine in a similar situation and wanted to recreate the atmosphere."

Do you want to see your art on these pages? Then email five pieces of your work and a short explanation about each artwork, along with a photo and a few details about yourself, to **fxpose@imaginefx.com**

Leur Melodie

YEAR CREATED: 2024 MEDIA: Photoshop

+ + + + + + + + + + + +

"This image is a shot from my graduation short film, which I co-directed with Joanne Denquin-DeVroë, Laureline de Maupeou, Maxence Lalouette and Antoine Musset. I did the whole background and the colours, while Joanne worked on the character for the shot. This is the part of our film where our main character, Faël, loses his husband. He's mourning and alone in this big home where they used to live together and share their love. We wanted him to express his loneliness and pain in this shot."
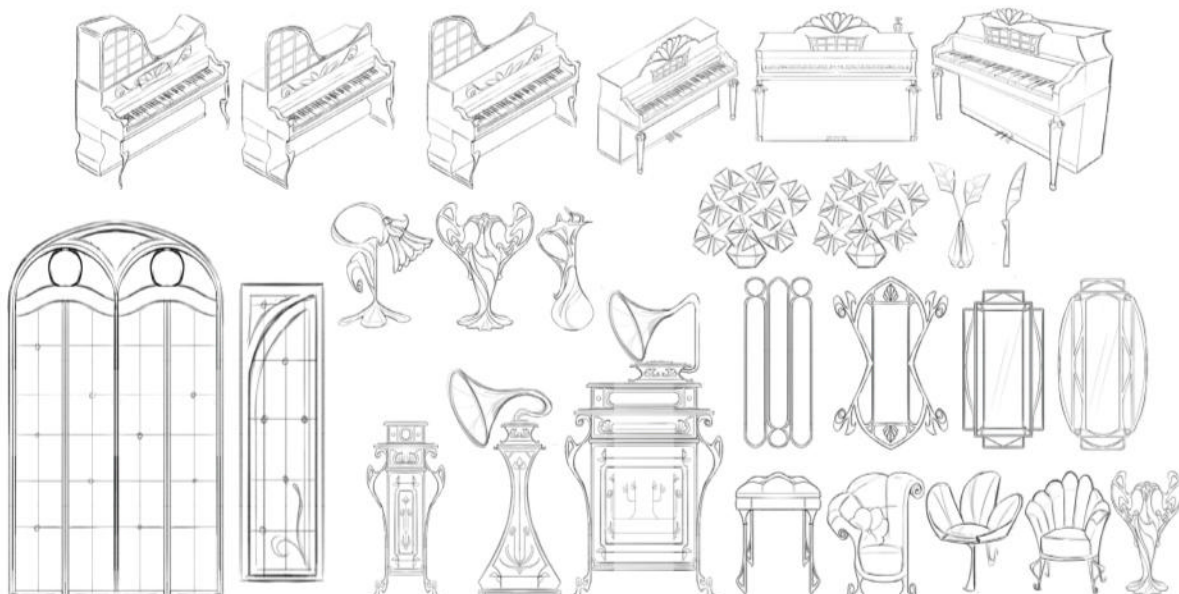
Artist
PROFILE

Elise Bironneau
LOCATION: France

Elise is a 2D background artist who graduated from Bellecour École, Lyon, in June 2024. Curious and a hard worker, she draws to captivate her audience.
www.therookies.co/entries/31931

"Egyptian art is where the tradition of summarising detail into style began," says Paul.
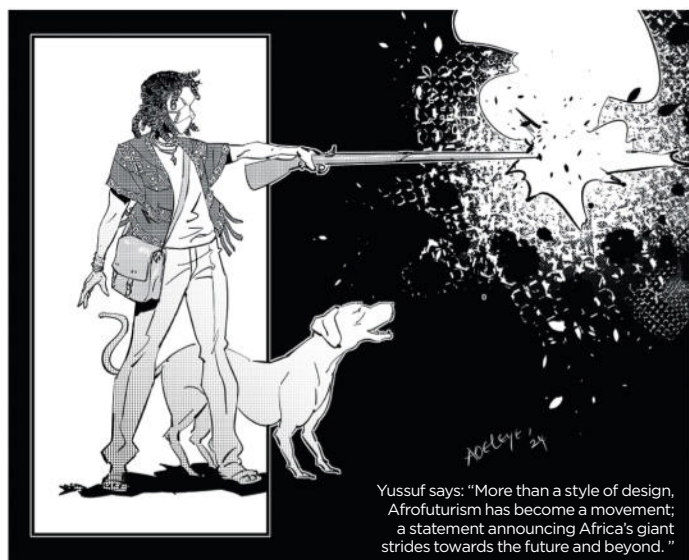
Yussuf says: "More than a style of design, Afrofuturism has become a movement; a statement announcing Africa's giant strides towards the future and beyond."

"Every design choice I make reflects the spirit of oral tradition, making the world both mystical and lived-in," says Gbenle.

Inside the booming African comic scene

A new world of legends **Tanya Combrinck** discovers the fresh art styles and authentic stories being created within the continent's growing comic culture

Ten years ago, if you looked for African comics, there weren't many big titles and the scene was fairly niche and underground. Today that has all changed.

Not only have comic publishers sprung up all over the continent, but the last decade has seen artists from those companies collaborating with the likes of Disney to produce animated series such as the Emmy-nominated Iwájú (Disney+), Kizazi Moto: Generation Fire (Disney+), and Iyanu: Child of Wonder (Cartoon Network, HBO Max).

"African comics have exploded in the past five years," says **Paul Louise-Julie**, creator of Yohance, an African space opera comic and soon-to-be-unveiled animated short film. "I started doing this back in 2015. At the time, African comics weren't really a thing. Then all of a sudden, I started noticing other creators coming up parallel to me,

"I want to show an ancient Northeast Africa that looks as majestic as what we'd see in modern fantasy today," says Paul.

such as Kugali in Nigeria and Avandu in Kenya. It was really invigorating for me to see these distinctly African visions, emerging like phoenixes all across the continent."

As a freelance comic artist who has worked for a number of African publishers, **Yussuf Adeleye** tells the same story: "What started as a small, tight-knit group

of comic book enthusiasts has now rapidly developed into several massive communities. You can see this when you attend any one of the comic conventions such as Comic Con Ibadan (Oyo state, Nigeria), Comic Con Africa (Johannesburg, South Africa) or OtakuKon (Harare, Zimbabwe). Major conventions like these, along with the growing number of local publishers, have been instrumental in bringing African comic book fans together."

ON THE RISE

The flourishing of the comic scene can be credited with providing a means for African artists and storytellers to reach other creative mediums and even larger audiences. "In the next five to ten years, we'll see more animated adaptations, gaming crossovers, and stronger industry backing," says **Gbenle Maverick**, an artist who works for Kugali, the

> ❝ **African comics are here – and they're shaping the future of storytelling** ❞

CREATING A DISTINCTIVE COMIC STYLE

Adedayo Erivic talks about devising his Afroblot pattern

What are the distinguishing features of African comics?
African comics aren't just trying to entertain. They're trying to retell the African story properly and redefine what history has said about the African people.

What is Afroblot?
Afroblot draws from several old comic books from different regions in Africa. It's a pattern of comic book making that uses the colours black, white, grey and red, a stylised panelling, and a different serialisation. I developed it as a response to the production and distribution issues restricting the growth of African comics. Afroblot can potentially give African comics a distinct identity, and use of the pattern is slowly growing in the Nigerian comic book space.

Can you tell us about your approach to Afrofuturism?
I'm not more of an Afrofuturistic creator yet, as I believe our rich, regal past hasn't been properly told in stories. We need to know of our past to project well for the future. With Afrofuturistic worldbuilding, designs and stories, I'm not fixated on the buildings or tech, I'm inclined to stories of a society where people have better leaders and youths can properly harness their potential. This way, we can make sense of the advanced technology, architecture and music without painting a picture of an unrealistic utopia.
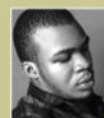
Comic artist Adedayo Erivic is founder of Comics Archive Africa, which promotes indie black and African comics.
https://bit.ly/4iiXJMq

Nigerian-founded media company that collaborated with Disney to make Iwájú. "African comics are no longer emerging – they're here, and they're shaping the future of storytelling."

What's exciting and distinctive about African comics is that they are based on a body of cultural material that hasn't yet been translated into new mediums, and is unfamiliar to audiences outside of Africa. The

"I want people to see my work and immediately think of the African people; I want to show that we have a rich pre-colonial history," says Erivic.

author and illustrator **Cassandra Mark** tells us: "Readers will find stories that feel new. Mythology that hasn't been rehashed a thousand times. Heroes shaped by ancestry, tradition, and landscapes that breathe magic. African comics bring worlds that feel different."

For both fans and creators, there's a sense that the genre has reached ➼

"We've gone from niche to unstoppable," says Cassandra.
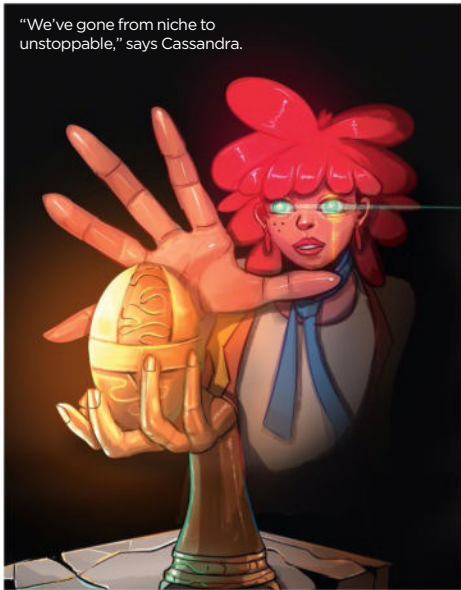
"More eyes are turning towards African comics because they offer a unique perspective," says Oz.

"Our mythologies are crafted with a certain gravitas and cultural aura – each tale a lesson, hidden and veiled," says Tobe.

➡ a special moment in its history: it's established, so lots of artists are active and engaged, but it's also still new, so there remain huge swathes of untouched creative territory to be discovered and developed.

"I think because many Eastern and Western storytellers have found their voice – a prevalent style honed over decades – it has shaped the way that their stories are told," says **Tobe Max Jaeger Ezeogu**, a creative director at the Nigerian publisher Comic Republic.

"Africa, however, is still in the process of discovering its artistic voice. We have a unique opportunity to witness the evolution of a new player in the field – one shaped by a vast tapestry of diverse social norms and cultural influences, a voice that has been silenced for too long and gone largely unheard within the creative space. Because of this, it feels like discovering another world, another galaxy or dimension, as it unfolds before our eyes."

NEW STORIES

Tobe has collaborated with his brother, illustrator **Oz Ezeogu**, on comic books such as the supernatural horror Eru, which is about an immortal entity of fear who has a day job lecturing at Nigeria's University of Lagos.

"African comics offer a unique interpretation of mythology and stories that reflects a different

Àkọ́bí: Firstborns is a fantasy story set in the modern world where hidden clans wield ancient powers.

"The kind of intimate storytelling that you can achieve in comics is very difficult, if not impossible, to do in film," says Paul.

value system," says Oz. "Since we're at a point where the African storytelling dynamic is still being introduced to the world at large, there's a vast well of untapped stories and different perspectives that bring a new way to tell these stories. You can see this in how the characters are developed. They're largely tied to their community, ancestry, and social responsibility rather than just the individuals' growth. Here, the hero's journey in large part is usually shaped by the community."

As well as a rich seam of traditional stories to take inspiration from, African culture also provides artists an abundance of visual influences for their work. Oz continues: "One of the things that makes the African art style distinctive is the emphasis on representing African features authentically — whether it's the hairstyles, the complexion, the facial structure, or clothing inspired by

66 There's a vast well of untapped stories and different perspectives 99

"I have been heavily inspired by the beauty of manga over the years," Yussuf reflects.

"Storytelling in our comics is as vibrant as when it was done orally," says Gbenle.

"I love exploring ancient political themes, power struggles, love and friendship," says Erivic.

Cassandra says: "Magic is a theme in my comics; the kind that lingers in bloodlines, and forgotten stories."

Oz says: "In African culture, masks serve specific spiritual and cultural functions. I try to make sure they carry purpose – whether as a tool, a status symbol, or a conduit for something greater."

specific ethnic groups. There are also influences from masks and wooden carvings.

"An example would be using some of the patterns that we observe on traditional clothing to create shading patterns, or using traditional African masks to inspire facial expressions. These are things that a lot of artists outside Africa don't get to live around or have as a direct source of inspiration for their artwork."

DIFFERENT PASTS

The fantastical element of the comic genre gives African creators a chance
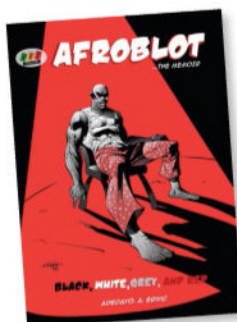
"In 5-10 years time, African comics will be on a different level, potentially rivalling comics from globally renowned publishers," says Erivic.

to explore alternative histories, and consider how things might have unfolded without colonialism. Paul explains: "African comics give insight into the African imagination, which has been completely ignored since pre-colonial times. These rich and vivid fantasy stories are like a golden bridge for Africans to rebuild the heritage that was destroyed by colonialism and walk into a bright future that is integrally theirs."

One of the dominant themes in African comics is Afrofuturism, where traditional, rural elements are interwoven with futuristic technology in a way that makes it appear as

though the two things have evolved together organically.

When Paul was building the universe for Yohance, he found that ancient African art lent itself quite naturally to being combined with more futuristic designs. "I wanted the universe to be exclusively inspired by African cultures," he explains. "The project evolved into an experiment to see how I could make Africa look futuristic without having to rely on any Western elements.

"The more that I dug into my research, the more I realised how complex and futuristic African art traditions were. I began to ➤➤

"Every idea I have begins with 'What if?'" says Tobe. "I keep pushing and questioning in my own way."

"African comics have evolved from underground passion projects to global recognition," says Gbenle.

"There's a growing focus on African representation in the gaming industry, which has also had a direct influence on comics," says Oz.

➤ incorporate this into my designs as a way to simulate the artisans and designers of my ancestors. The result is Yohance. Every single element is derived from real African art."

FEELING THE RHYTHMS

Paul explains that although art styles can vary widely between different countries in the continent, it's fair to say that hyperstylised expression is a distinctive trait of African art styles.

"African art can appear simple, but upon closer inspection there is so much detailed information that has been condensed into a swift and masterful shape," he says.

"If you want to understand African design, learn about fractals. Africans absorb the world around them and understand it in terms of patterns and rhythm. That's all fractals are: repeated rhythms in nature. Once you understand that, you know how to

> ❝ Magic for us isn't fantasy, it's history. Every panel rebels against erasure, and is a celebration of African culture ❞

Bill says: "I deal with identity, community, and the duality of self. And often wrap that in the theme of 'ubuntu', an Nguni word meaning 'I am, because we are.'"

Captain South Africa is a modern-day political sci-fi by Bill Masuku.

summarise it. And once you know how to summarise what you see without losing detail, you can choose how much you want to say, and how you want to say it. That is the definition of style."

It should be noted that while African comics are inspired by aesthetics and themes particular to the region, African artists have also been immersed in Western media and are strongly influenced by it. **Bill Masuku**, an editor at Kugali and storyboard artist on Iwájú, explains: "I'm Zimbabwean so I pull from Southern African cultures, traditions, and spiritual practices while pushing my imagination beyond the limits of the Western pop culture and Japanese anime influences that I've consumed my whole life."

Paul also tells us that he grew up on Star Wars. "That was a huge influence on the type of escapism I like to create. I also love the vivid use of lighting and shadows that you see from 80s and 90s aesthetics such as

"African comics are set apart by authentic stories rooted in culture, history and myth," says Yussuf.

A panel depicting the titular character in Bill Masuku's comic Captain South Africa.

"African comics are raw, dynamic, and unafraid to break the rules," Cassandra says.

those found in Blade Runner or The Fifth Element."

Bill says readers of African comics will find a window looking at African culture, history and experience, "not from the lens of the outside looking in, but the inside looking deeper".

And Gbenle says they are a show of pride. "African stories have the chance to resurrect forgotten legends and remind the world that black excellence isn't new, it's ancient. Magic for us isn't fantasy, it's history. Every panel is a rebellion against erasure, and a celebration of African culture." ●

"My comic books speak on topics from corruption to questions about what Africa can, could and should be," says Bill.
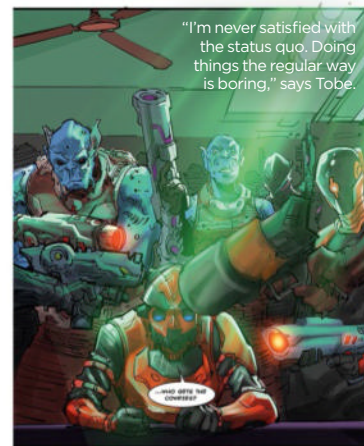
"I'm never satisfied with the status quo. Doing things the regular way is boring," says Tobe.

The Recruiter, one of the playable card characters featured in the board game.
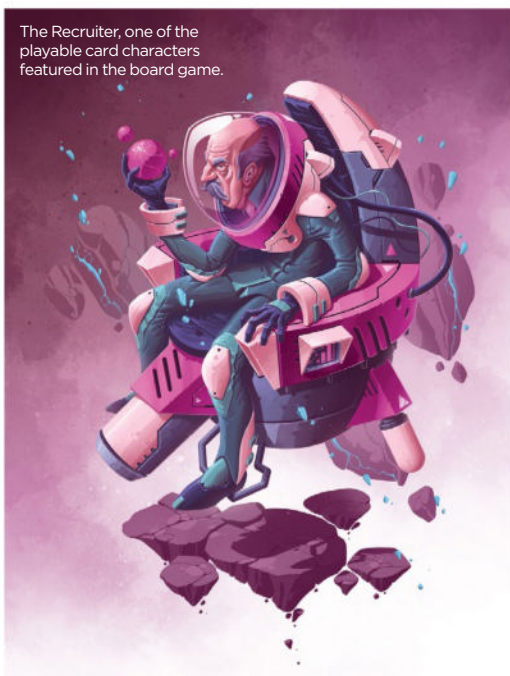
Derek says: "The result was a colourful, playful, somewhat fantastical and more modern look and feel that leans heavily on my own personal aesthetic."

Derek not only designed all the characters, but also painted illustrations for the guides, box covers and game boards.
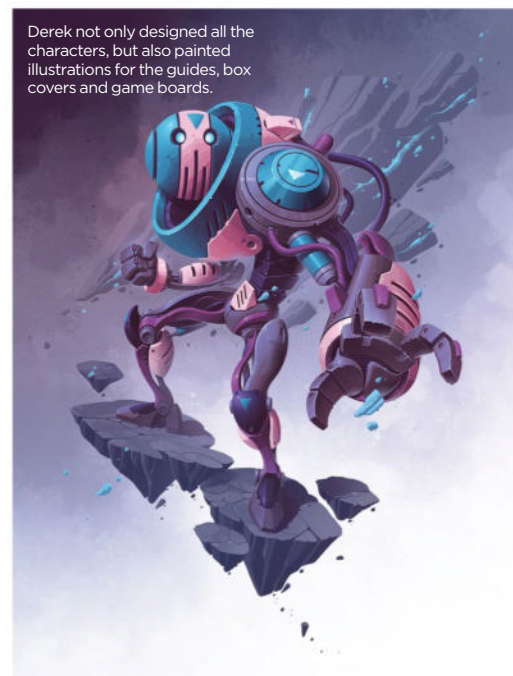
A new mission to Mars

Blast off! Sci-fi illustrator Derek Stenning teams up with French publishers Matagot to remake board game Mission: Red Planet

Acclaimed illustrator Derek Stenning has been teasing stunning artwork for his latest collab with board game publisher Matagot – a remake of the popular title Mission: Red Planet, which is expected to hit the shelves in May.

To celebrate the game's 20th anniversary, Matagot has moved away from the original steampunk aesthetic in favour of a retro sci-fi theme. "From the outset, they wanted something different," says Derek. "When Matagot sent me the design brief, it included a couple of playful, somewhat cartoony, comic book-style images, but the majority of the references were my own artwork, both personal projects and commercial work that I'd done. So I pretty much started from scratch and had the freedom to lean heavily on my personal style."

Derek is no stranger to commercial projects, having previously worked with Nintendo, Sega, Activision and

© Matagot

Each character card, including The Saboteur, had to be presented with different colour variants.

> ❝ I pretty much started from scratch with the freedom to lean on my personal style ❞

Marvel Entertainment. While he had been focusing more on worldbuilding and location design in recent years, returning to character creation for the updated Mission: Red Planet was a refreshing challenge.

Although Derek's work is typically known for its muted, atmospheric colour palettes, adapting to a more vibrant scheme for the project wasn't too difficult. "Most of the concept art I do is for

Derek didn't have the opportunity to work directly with original creators Bruno Faidutti and Bruno Cathala, but they reviewed his work, provided feedback, and ultimately gave final approval for the project.

Box art for Mission: Red Planet, which is being released next month.

projects with a more saturated, playful style, so it wasn't unfamiliar territory," he explains. "I do tend to favour more muted colour schemes, but my art director, Maxime Erceau, helped to keep me on track.

"We initially went with a red-dominant colour scheme, but decided to shift towards a red-magenta-violet palette for the main imagery while incorporating more player-based colours for the character art. This meant adjusting a lot of the materials I'd already created. Not challenging, just a bit time-consuming."

Mission: Red Planet is available for pre-order now and will launch in May. For more details, head to **https://matagot-friends.com**, and to see more of Derek's artwork visit **www.borninconcrete.com**.

The famous flying monkeys take to the skies over Oz.

© ILM/Universal
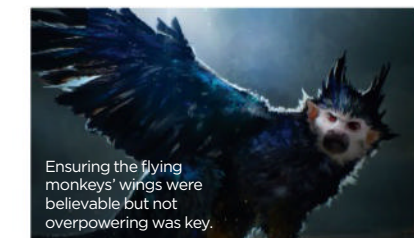
Ensuring the flying monkeys' wings were believable but not overpowering was key.
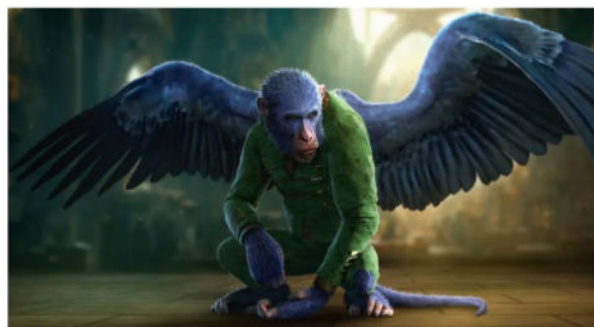
Individual elements helped Chistery to stand out among the other monkeys.

The concept art released includes both stunning scenery and character designs.

The art behind Wicked

Spellbinding ILM and director John M. Chu share their bewitching vision for the hit film by revealing a treasure trove of concept art

Wicked has already smashed it at the box office, earning over $700 million, and won both Best Costume Design and Best Production Design Oscars in February among its 10 Academy Award nominations.

But what did Wicked look like before its magical VFX was applied? Above you can see how the film's spellbinding effects were created in its earliest iterations, as ILM shared a host of its beautiful concept art. These paintings were created with 2D and 3D programs, before 3D artists, animators, matt

The film picked up two awards at this year's Oscars, including Best Costume Design.

painters and more took inspiration from them for the film's final scenes.

We picked out some of our favourites here, including early iterations of the film's famous flying monkeys, visions of the stunning environments and more.

There may be more concept art on the way in the future too, with sequel Wicked: For Good, which covers the original musical's second act, slated for release this November.

To see all the concept art released by ILM, head to our sister website at **www.creativebloq.com**.

It was the heat of the summer and I felt like painting something refreshing and magical. It also gave me the chance to play around with water effects.

A portrait of…
Inna Vjuzhanina

Doing it my way! The fantasy artist explains her artistic journey and the joys of working with creative freedom

Can you pinpoint any early influences on your artwork?
I grew up in Ukraine, which has incredibly rich and vibrant folk art that really influenced my love for bold, vibrant colours. As a 90s kid, the only kind of entertainment you got was what was playing on TV. My childhood TV shows included Xena: Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Charmed, so I reckon my love for magic and strong women who pull no punches certainly stems from there.

How about now? Have you found any new inspirations?
Films and video games have a major say as well. I'm an empath, so strong emotions and powerful stories are things that always have great impact on me. When a particular story or a

A tribute to my love of gardens. I was preparing my own for winter, and those very last blooms always feel so special.

character connects with me, I get this immense reservoir of energy that I need to create an outlet for. "Painting out the feelings" is what I call this process of channelling that energy into my artwork.

Is there a single piece that had a particular effect on you?
Yes! It was actually a 3D render. I was still dabbling in various creative branches at that time. And then I came across the work of Nicobass on DeviantArt. His Tomb Raider artworks impressed me so much that I knew I wanted to pursue art for sure. That's how it started for me.

What do you remember about your first paid commission as an artist?
That commission was a gig to illustrate a graphic novel for a self-published author. The project was drastically underpaid and never finished, but I'm grateful for it. Thanks to that commission I was motivated to quit my office job and start pursuing art. It also made me realise that I never, ever want to illustrate labour-heavy projects like a graphic novel again, and that I prefer singular illustrations to creating sequential art.

My self-brief for this piece was to keep the character powerful and mysterious.

I'm fascinated how some flowers keep blooming during the first weeks of cold. That's where you get magical frost effects!

As someone who loves greenhouses and gardening, I painted this witch while waiting for spring in real life.

Moving into the present, what have you been working on recently?
My latest paintings are a series of Arcane-inspired character portraits. That franchise is incredibly dear to me so working on each piece feels like paying a tribute to an old friend.

An emotional connection to the subject is incredibly important to me, which I only realised upon some self reflection down the line. So right now my main focus is personal art, and I'm only taking commissioned work if the subject matter connects with me.

How does life as an artist compare with what you first expected?
It's way better than I imagined! I thought I'd be living from commission to commission, doing private gigs and company work, hoping the big clients would notice me one day. But upon realising that freedom of creative expression is vitally important to me, I worked hard to break away from that and started doing my own thing. This

I wanted to experiment with combining a painterly meadow and a realistic character. I just love how the two clashed together.

> ❝ **I don't see 'mistakes' as something to be avoided or to be guided away from** ❞

has its own set of challenges of course, but I'm waking up excited every single day, and that's how I know I'm on the right track.

Looking back, what would you say to your younger self?
Honestly, I'd tell her to do exactly the things I did, with all the chaos and pitfalls along the way. I don't see "mistakes" as something to be avoided or to be guided away from. Trying different things with various outcomes is what gives you valuable experience and knowledge. It may seem like stumbling in the dark at

times, but in hindsight it's always a great lesson that you grow from.

Do you have any thoughts on the art world and industry today?
I definitely enjoy the part that social media is playing now. I remember when I was starting out, the main art hub was just DeviantArt. You would comment on each other's art and try to make friends, but there were a lot of limitations to it. But right now you have so many platforms that allow you to connect with other artists, companies and fans.

Personally, I really enjoy seeing the aspects of everyday life of my peers and favourite artists. It allows you to see the things you have in common, better understand a person and the challenges they're facing, and simply connect on a human level. And not to mention that social media gives you the opportunity to be noticed by major companies without even reaching out to them.

Is there a character or scene you've painted that you most identify with?
Oh that's a tricky one. I actually wouldn't pin it down to just one piece, simply because the human soul is such a multifaceted being that no one painting or a character can capture enough of it to truly be a significant representation. Every painting I've created showcases one or a few aspects of my own personality, so I really can't pick just the one.

What are your plans going forward, personally or professionally?
I've always been curious about art conventions but never took the time to do any, just because the whole process felt way too overwhelming. In 2023 I was guest of honour at the aniMUC convention in Germany – my much-needed push to dive in!

It was such a phenomenally fantastic experience that I knew I wanted to do more from that point on. I already did one local convention afterwards and 2025 promises to be very interesting in that regard too. I'll be announcing everything on social media, so stay in touch!

Inna is a fantasy artist based in Ukraine. She focuses on personal work and funds her journey as an independent artist through her print store and Patreon. https://linktr.ee/vjuzhaninainna.

Growing up in the 80s was fantastic for figures, cartoons and lots of commercial tie-ins with TV and merchandise. I loved everything from The A-Team to He-Man, and while the Dungeons & Dragons cartoon was great the toy line wasn't quite the same. As a kid I had no idea the toys were actually based on the RPG rather than the cartoon series!

I'm lucky to have received handmade gifts from my son and daughter. The paintings are by my son, who's currently studying illustration at university.

The hinged lamp has a daylight bulb that helps when I paint. Another use for the lamp is lighting reference, as it gives strong shadows.

Now and again I like to use a rubber-skinned mannequin, which is great for lighting reference. It has a poseable metal-framed skeleton. I have a few different body shapes but still haven't bought heads for any of them yet.

Trying out some acrylics on a Judge Dredd painting, when I'd normally use watercolour and gouache. I'm not sold yet, but next time I'll use a nice paper rather than a canvas.

My first lightbox was about 8cm thick, but my new one is controllable and much brighter while only 1cm thick, which makes it so much more comfortable to use. Much better than having to use the sunlight with paper taped to the window.

Working as an art droid was my lifelong goal as a kid, and I've been proudly appearing in the pages of 2000 AD and Judge Dredd Magazine for around 18 years. But I've only recently done my first 2000 AD cover. Each week's cover is now available to buy as a print, so my other half kindly framed my complementary print of the Rogue Trooper cover I did. What's nice is that I may be able to entice her to see the film when it hopefully comes out this year.

Around 2022 I did a Kickstarter to help create a 100-page artbook called 337, collecting random sketches and other bits. It was successfully backed, so I recently decided to do a second Kickstarter for 337-2, another book collecting more bits of my art.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

I found an old inked drawing of Judge Dredd from a while ago and decided to colour it up digitally for a pin-up or cover.

Lee Carter

Inspiration station The comic artist shares his love of the fantastic in a studio filled with awesome trinkets

My first 2000 AD cover. It features Rogue Trooper; Dave Gibbons' classic blue-skinned, bio-engineered clone.

The dog is guarding my art supplies: inks, watercolour paints, gouache, acrylic paints, markers, coloured pencils, French curves, rulers and lots of paper. Her bed is there so she can do two things at once... or just sleep.

I worked for 13 years with games developer Bizarre Creations in a studio with over 200 people, but now I'm going into my 14th year of working from home as a freelancer.

For 13 of those years, my dog has been a constant companion and is currently hogging my chair as I try to perch on the edge. She has a bed, but it's cold and she cares not how comfortable I am.

It's a joy not to commute, and not having an alarm ring in the morning makes for a much easier start to my work day. After a dog walk I switch on my ancient 21-inch Wacom ⏩

At the desk with my old Wacom Cintiq. It's starting to do odd things as it's old, and I dread every Windows update as its no longer supported.
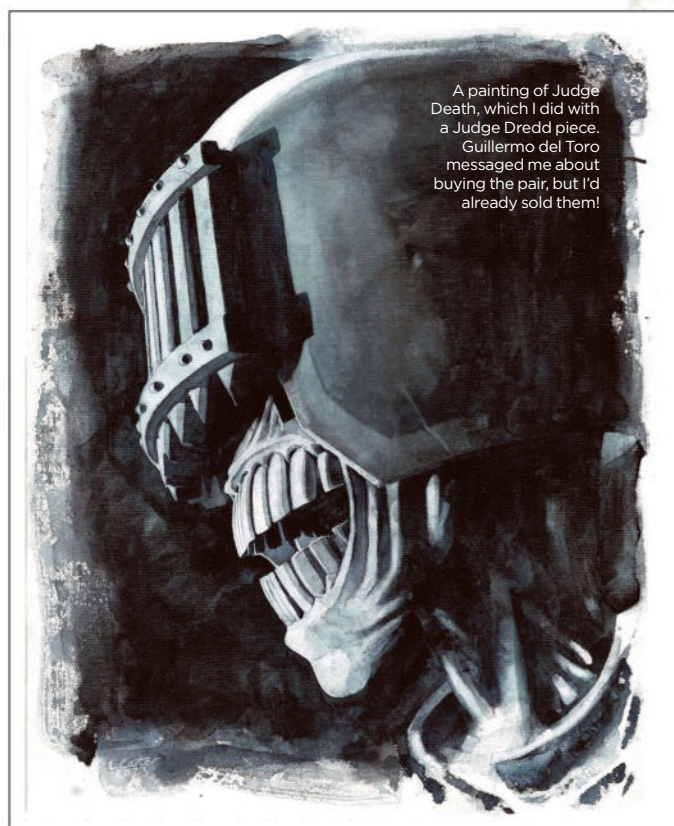
A painting of Judge Death, which I did with a Judge Dredd piece. Guillermo del Toro messaged me about buying the pair, but I'd already sold them!

©2000 AD, 2025 Rebellion

My son is currently at university studying illustration. While he was in his first year at art college, he got to try out different mediums. I particularly loved the ceramic tiles he made based on Mike Mignola's drawings.
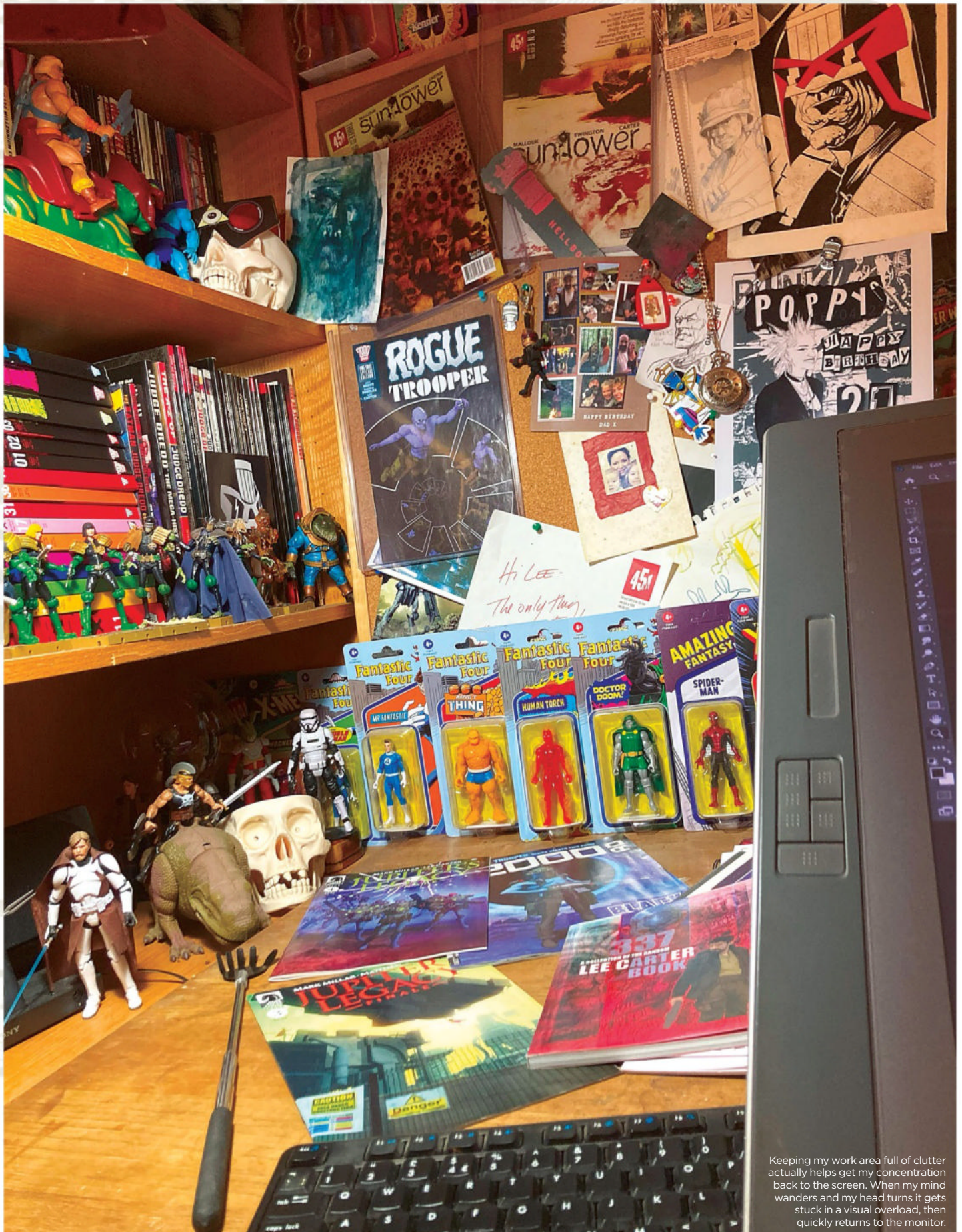
Keeping my work area full of clutter actually helps get my concentration back to the screen. When my mind wanders and my head turns it gets stuck in a visual overload, then quickly returns to the monitor.

The dog guards a work-in-progress piece for Absolute Batman. I've used gum strip and stretched the paper so it stays flat as I chuck watercolour paint at it.

I'm a huge fan of Mark Millar's comic work, and it was a real honour to draw the last issues of Jupiter's Legacy: Finale.
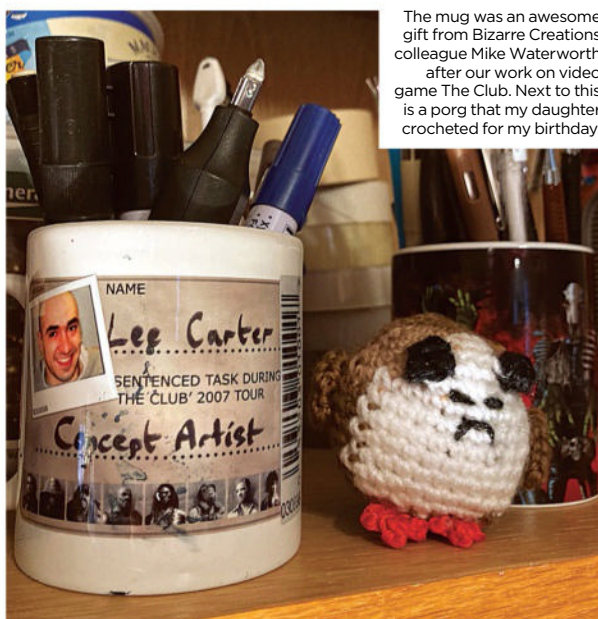
The mug was an awesome gift from Bizarre Creations colleague Mike Waterworth after our work on video game The Club. Next to this is a porg that my daughter crocheted for my birthday.

↠ Cintiq and hope the Windows drivers still boot up.

Working both traditionally and digitally doubles my workspace needs, partly due to the size of the Millennium Falcon I got for my 50th birthday, which meant I had to move my drafting table to another room. This was also due to me spending a long time working digitally on the Jupiter's Legacy comic, so I didn't have much time to get the paints out.

For professional jobs that will be printed, I like to stick to digital art using Photoshop, Maya and a bit of ZBrush, so everything I need is available on my computer. The aging Cintiq has served me well with over 15 years of daily use, and has outlived many computers in that time.

Now and again I take on private commissions, which I work on using watercolour and gouache. To make sure my paintings don't warp, I have to go through the process of stretching the watercolour paper on a wooden board, so tend to need a bit more space than my desk offers. Really I just need to get rid of the printer and scanner that hogs the majority of the desk space. Scans are rubbish and the ink costs a fortune.

MY COLLECTION OF JOY

What space I do have, I like to fill up with a few bits of joy and inspiration.

I did have a nice drawing desk to the right of my computer setup. Unfortunately I needed somewhere for my Millennium Falcon to dock.

I got the honour of drawing the Judge Dredd strip in one of the 2000 AD Christmas specials and wanted to do a really good job, so I made a 3D model of Ben Willsher's Lawmaster design for reference.

Figures from 2000 AD, Marvel, DC, Star Wars and more fill my shelves. I've also a done a bit of toy design for Hasbro's Marvel line, so it's part of my work, honest! My favourite comics, artbooks and a lot of art materials are all close by. Plus my 60GB original iPod is still going strong, although I should really update my playlist.

Under the desk is a place of darkness, I don't go there. It's a place for stuff that's not needed but needs sorting, especially the seven large boxes of comics that I sorted out for selling, but are still down there a couple of years later.

Obviously the dog has a large bed to the right of me, but she often finds a way to jump up and hammock herself into my jumper, making work a bit harder, but more cosy.

Lee is an illustrator working mainly as a comic artist, but also has worked on numerous video games as well as movies, toy design and private painted commissions. https://mrleecarter.artstation.com.

I've always loved horror movies, but only ever the fantasy side. Werewolves, vampires and zombies are great, but slasher movies and serial killers are too real for my liking. I do like my improvised pen holder though!

❝ My favourite comics, artbooks and art materials are all close by ❞

Letters

YOUR FEEDBACK & OPINIONS

Contact the editor, Rob Redman, on **mail@imaginefx.com** or write to ImagineFX, Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, England

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Photoshop & Blender
PAINT BELIEVABLE ENVIRONMENTS

Edward Barons showed you how to craft stunning environments using Blender and Photoshop in issue 251.

New horizons

Hey Rob. Manga is completely my bag, making your latest issue my favourite in a while! But as well as all the manga articles, I also learned a whole bunch from the other training too. I haven't really played with 3D much, but was excited to try out Blender for some new projects, so thank you to Edward Barons for introducing me to that. I hope you do more of these themed issues.
Ali, via email

Rob replies *Thanks so much for getting in touch Ali. It's always a pleasure to hear from our readers and to learn what you're getting from the mag. Edward's workshop was a great insight into how you can combine different tools, learn new skills and open up creative ideas you might never have had before, so I'm really pleased to hear it's sparked something in you.*

Stepping out

I, like many artists I'm sure, tend to be quite a homebody, staying in and sitting at my desk for long stretches, and I have

DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE?
Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 251 at **ifxm.ag/single-ifx**.

Creature designer Florent Desailly shared his sketches in our reader-favourite showcase slot.

never thought about taking my art outdoors before. That has all changed now, which is a bit of a shock, but something I'm getting used to and starting to enjoy. James Gurney and Thomas Kinkade's recent workshop on drawing on location has really inspired me. I don't draw traditionally, but my iPad and Procreate make this even easier, so thank you very much!
Jules, via email

Rob replies *It's so good to hear this Jules. James and Thomas are great sources of inspiration, and I'm very glad that they've got you out of your comfort zone and thinking differently. Good luck, and do show us some of your location work!*

Sketchbook special

Hi Rob. I loved your last issue, even though manga isn't my main interest. There was loads of interesting info but I really loved the Sketchbook showcase, my favourite part of the magazine. Last issue was particularly interesting to me. Florent Desailly's creatures all looked odd but like they could still exist, which I often don't think is the case with sci-fi and fantasy designs. Keep them coming! Fingers crossed for another Sketchbook Special edition soon as well.
Dianna, via email

Rob replies

Hello there, Dianna. I'm glad you found lots to love, even when manga isn't your thing. There are so many transferable skills to learn, ideas to add to your pool of resources, and so on. We love checking out artists' sketchbooks too, so it's fantastic to hear you enjoy them, and I totally agree about Florent's work. He has a knack for designing believable creatures, that's for sure. And don't worry, we'll be doing more Sketchbook Specials at some point.

New works that have grabbed our attention

B.C. Maxwell
@illumax.art

Michelle Webb
@lionart.studio

Nicolas Jamonneau
@nico_jam

If you've created art that you want us to shout about simply tag us on X or Instagram, and use the hashtag #imaginefx

UNRIVALLED POWER

Marvel Rivals art director Dino Ma talks to Alan Wen about creating a unique comic book style for the hit superhero shooter

Marvel may have a permeating presence in pop culture, but its forays into video games isn't always a guaranteed slam dunk, be it 2020's blockbuster flop Marvel's Avengers or 2017's thoroughly disappointing crossover fighting game Marvel vs. Capcom: Infinite, with their uncanny adherences to the MCU leading to uninspiring character designs that fall short of their big-screen counterparts. Marvel Rivals has, however, smashed expectations since its launch last December, having already reached 40 million players worldwide as of this February. That's no mean feat given that it's a team-based PvP shooter, a genre that faces fierce competition where only a few emerge victorious.

Arguably one important contribution to its success is that it's the most visually stunning Marvel game ever made, reinvigorating a rich history of comic book superheroes and supervillains in the same ➤➤

ROSTER WARS

Marvel Rivals launched with 33 playable characters, but it's easy to imagine NetEase mining the IP to expand that well beyond its close rival Overwatch 2 for years to come.

A FITTING HEROINE DESIGN

Dino Ma on crafting and incorporating one lesser-known hero into Rivals

"From the outset of Psylocke's design, we envisioned her as a master assassin who wields psionic weapons. For her outfit, we chose a striking blue and white colour scheme, which is complemented by a red scarf and waist sash. She wears a blue haori jacket that exposes her right shoulder, with a form-fitting bodice wrapped in white bandages underneath. Overall, her attire is lightweight and combines Japanese elements with modern aesthetics in a tailored design.

"In addition to her striking appearance, Psylocke possesses powerful telepathic abilities, allowing her to manifest various weapons from psychic energy, including katanas, gauntlets, hand crossbows and shurikens, all of which she wields with expert proficiency. As a master assassin, she can also quickly conceal her presence and create a secondary butterfly-shaped energy form for assistance, which gives her the flexibility to turn the tide of battle.

"The overall design and abilities align perfectly with our vision of a duellist character within the team. Ultimately, we translated her design concept into both her role and gameplay mechanics, which is the exact foundation of how we approach character design."

EASTERN DESIGN
Despite her complicated history, Psylocke retains her popular ninja design in Rivals.
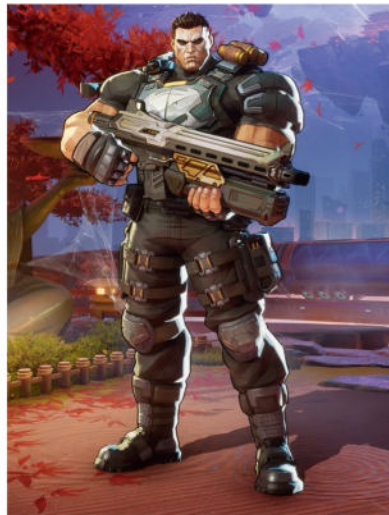
PUNISHING HERO
Wielding a gun might seem very conventional in a superhero game, but don't tell the Punisher that.

➤➤ way Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse has affected the animation industry. And just like Sony Pictures Animation's films, Rivals combines the most cutting-edge technology with hand-drawn comic book aesthetics, while also having Marvel's rich history and catalogue to dive into.

We sat down with the game's art director **Dino Ma** to share how this unique artistic style and visual system, referred to as "Dynamic Comic Style", was created.

It's not the first time Chinese studio NetEase has made games with the Marvel license, having previously

SPIDEY'S IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD
Ma on Spider-Man: "We aim to portray the familiar, enthusiastic, and sunny boy from Queens... the large eyes give a lively and cheerful appearance."

developed two titles in Marvel Super War and Marvel Duel, though these were for mobile and only ever released in a few select Asian territories. Rivals, however, was an opportunity to work on a larger canvas, while being realised with the latest Unreal Engine 5 tech on current-gen platforms.

"I believe that Marvel Rivals stands out with its distinct gameplay mechanics," says Ma. "In developing the visual style, I not only focused on the overall aesthetic, but also

> ❝ I not only focused on the overall aesthetic, but how it aligns with the gameplay ❞

SWEET SIX
Marvel Rivals' teams consist of six heroes, also originally the team size of Overwatch before the sequel controversially reduced it to five.

ROCKING NOSTALGIA
Cosmetic skins mean the ability to mine plenty of designs from history, such as Storm's badass mohawk from tapping into her punk rock look from the 80s.
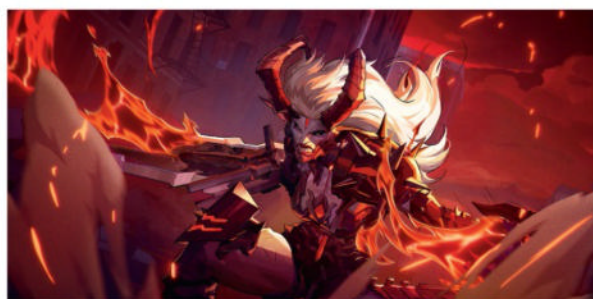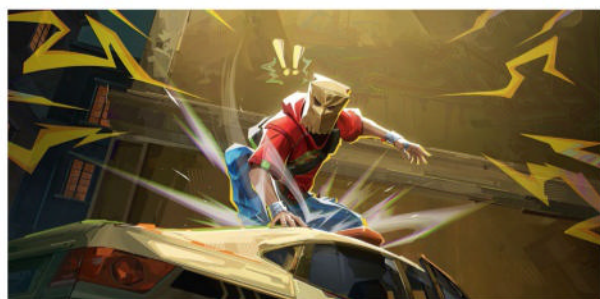
TO THE MOON
Scarlet Witch's Moonlit Witch skin was a reward for the eager players that took part in the game's alpha.

VILLAINOUS DUO
Team-Up abilities can be triggered between certain characters, including arch-rivals like Spidey and Venom.

considered how it aligns with the genre and gameplay dynamics."

ICONIC COMICS

It's worth noting that while fully licensed to use any of Marvel's IP from its 85 years of rich history, the MCU still provided "a wealth of inspiration" alongside the comics themselves, the game recreating in its animation style sequences and camera movements that are direct nods to iconic moments from the films. It's also perhaps no coincidence that the narrative sees Doctor Doom causing a 'timestream entanglement' after clashing with his 2099 counterpart, the multiverse being the current trend while Doom is set to be core for the next phase of films.

Yet this doesn't mean attempting to ape a photorealistic style, much to the detriment of past games that have done so. It also doesn't mean simply selecting the most recognisable heroes for its roster. "Marvel Rivals has its own unique world and narrative, where each hero plays a specific role and fulfils their own missions within the story, while we also take into account the gameplay roles that

DEEP PAPER CUTS
As also demonstrated by the Spider-Verse films, there's no reference too obscure to bring back to a new audience, even if it's just a paper bag.

each hero embodies," Ma explains. "While we definitely want to include iconic characters like Hulk and Iron Man, we're equally excited to introduce some lesser-known yet fascinating heroes, such as Jeff, into our game. Our hope is that players will not only enjoy Marvel Rivals, but also come to discover and appreciate all of these characters."

Likewise, developing Rivals' Dynamic Comic Style didn't just come from referencing Marvel, as you can also describe the aesthetic as a blend of East-meets-West. After all, China has its own long tradition of comics and illustration, manhua, as well as ACG, a term to describe the ➤➤

HERO ICONS
Hulk and Iron Man may be synonymous with the core Avengers, but they're presented distinctly in Rivals.

Feature

➤ region's subculture of animation, comics and games, comparable to otaku culture in Japan.

"At the early stages of developing the overall visual style of the game, I drew inspiration from various sources, including anime, animated films, and graphic packaging," Ma explains. "By incorporating elements of expressionism, we aimed for a vibrant palette with bold brushstrokes, while emphasising the primary colours to enhance the visual energy."

Evidently, this expressive and exaggerated aesthetic lent itself to portraying heroic characters with superpowers, which also evokes "more intense visual emotions". Ma adds: "Subsequent elements like the game interface, cutscenes, promotional videos, merchandise and marketing materials are all extensions of this visual system, ensuring a cohesive look across all aspects of the game."

TAKING PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps the greatest challenge was retaining this ostensibly hand-drawn and painterly aesthetic from the concept and illustrative stage when translating them into 3D character models, which Ma is also conscious of. "I've observed many products that are quite unique in the concept phase but lose their expressive quality during the 3D execution," he says. "So I'm grateful that as we developed the 3D visuals, we were able to maintain the original 2D stylistic expression.

"The real key to our success was keeping a 2D mindset throughout the development process, adhering to the stylistic characteristics and aesthetics of 2D art. This approach helps our hero characters feel more like they belong within an anime world, providing players with a sense of both familiarity and novelty."

This was also important in how the team utilised Unreal Engine 5,

PLAYING THE VILLAIN
There are only a handful of villains on the roster, but the ones that make it are truly iconic, such as Magneto.

❝ By incorporating elements of expressionism, we aimed for a vibrant colour palette with bold brushstrokes ❞

SUPER VINYL
The official soundtrack for Rivals, titled Galactic Tunes, was released the same day as the game's launch. The vinyl art features K-pop superhero Luna Snow.

UNIFIED STYLE
It's not just that Marvel Rivals' aesthetic is so unique, but it's kept consistent throughout the experience, from gameplay to menus.

WORLDBUILDING
There's a sense of scale to the game's wider world, such as the Yggdrasil world tree towering over Asgard.
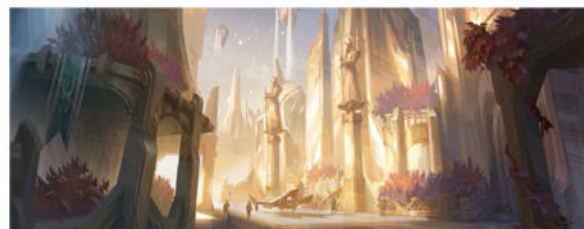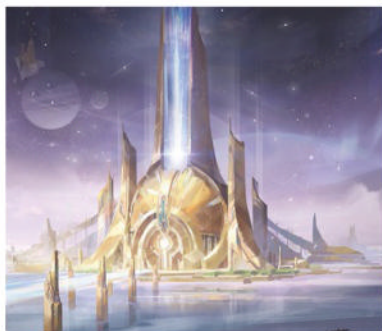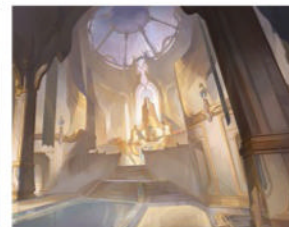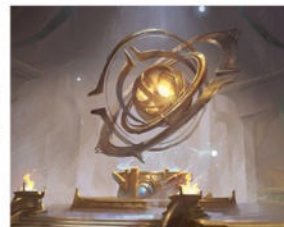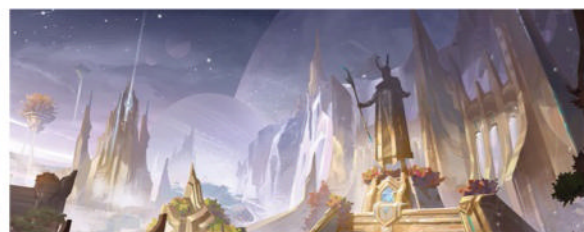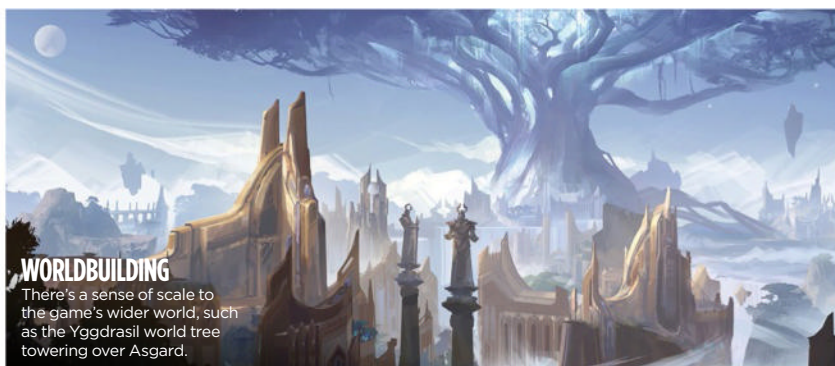
a game engine that's usually highlighted for its ability to render extraordinary levels of photorealism. While, for instance, Unreal's Lumen global illumination system is useful for providing dynamic and realistic lighting effects, it was still modified so that its lighting and rendering pipeline was in service of enhancing the anime feel of the visuals.

Ma explains: "When it comes to materials, we decided to focus on maintaining a genuine texture without compromising colour information. By combining stylised textures, we're able to strike a balance between physically based rendering (PBR) and non-photorealistic rendering (NPR), resulting in materials that showcase the fine detail of next-gen graphics while still adhering to a stylised artistic vision. In skill design, we incorporated anime techniques; elements such as character shapes, effects, movement and speed lines."

For players, the fantasy of Rivals is embodying these superheroes. But

STRATEGIST LOKI

GREEN MISCHIEF
We've seen Loki in many variants in the Disney+ show, but in Rivals he sticks to his more recognisable look.

within the parameters of the shooter genre, is there a danger that this is reduced to a shooter with superhero skins? It's arguably why the gameplay is played in a third-person perspective, the camera pulled back so that you can see your chosen hero's form, which
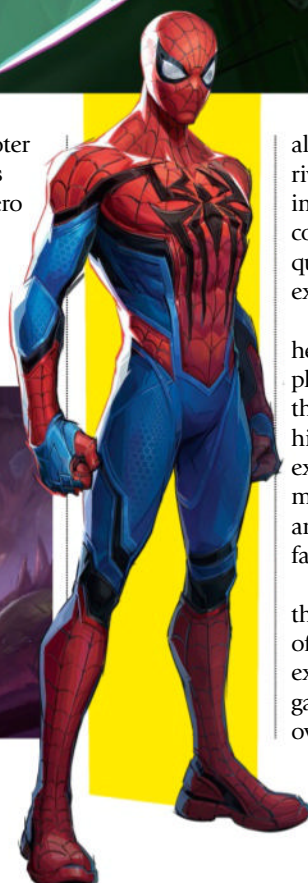
also helps set it apart from its closest rival, Overwatch 2. It's also equally important that the way each hero controls is unique to their inherent qualities and personality traits, expressed through the visual design.

"Taking Spider-Man as an example, he possesses a leaner, more muscular physique and when he dons his suit, the defined muscle lines complement his agile and swift character traits," Ma explains, adding how the costume's mixture of the iconic spider emblem and innovative cuts evoke both familiarity and a sense of freshness.

"In our skill design, we emphasise the unique abilities and iconic actions of each hero," he continues. "For example, we incorporate Hulk's gamma energy, Storm's control over wind, rain and lightning, ➤➤
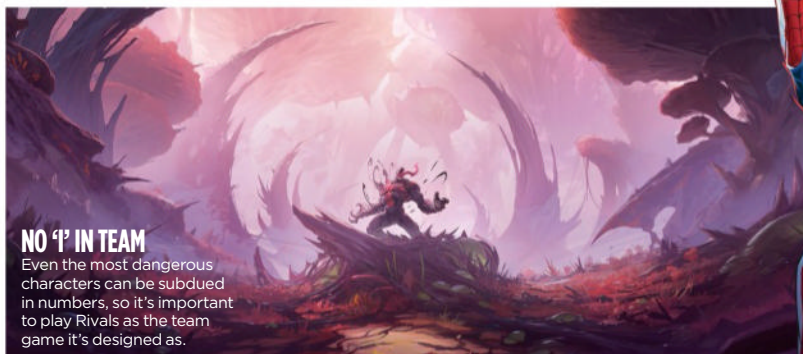
NO 'I' IN TEAM
Even the most dangerous characters can be subdued in numbers, so it's important to play Rivals as the team game it's designed as.

ACROSS THE MULTIVERSE

Dino Ma discusses the inspirations behind designing dynamic and destructible environments for Rivals' epic battles

"In the initial stages of scene design we committed to introducing dynamic changes into the game environment, enhancing the variety of options and strategies. This focus on variability led us to the concept of environmental destruction. Within the expansive Marvel universe, various heroes possess formidable destructive abilities, so destructible environments are a coherent extension of the overarching narrative and enable richer interaction between the characters and their surroundings.

"To implement a destruction mechanism that complements the aesthetic style of each map, we tailored environmental destruction to align with the thematic elements of those maps. For instance, the destruction in Yggdrasil draws inspiration from Norse mythology and Marvel's narratives. When Surtur lays waste to Asgard, magnificent structures crumble and the world is torn asunder. Following the cataclysmic event known as Ragnarok, Loki employs his magic to reconstruct Asgard.

"For the Tokyo scene, the art team took inspiration from the iconic Battle of New York in Marvel's stories. The metropolis suffers devastation during the conflict, mirroring the intensity of the battle and transforming the environment from a backdrop into an active participant in the story. We even crafted a unique web-breaking effect for the Spider-Islands map, which seamlessly integrates the narrative of the scene so that the gameplay and storytelling enhance one another."
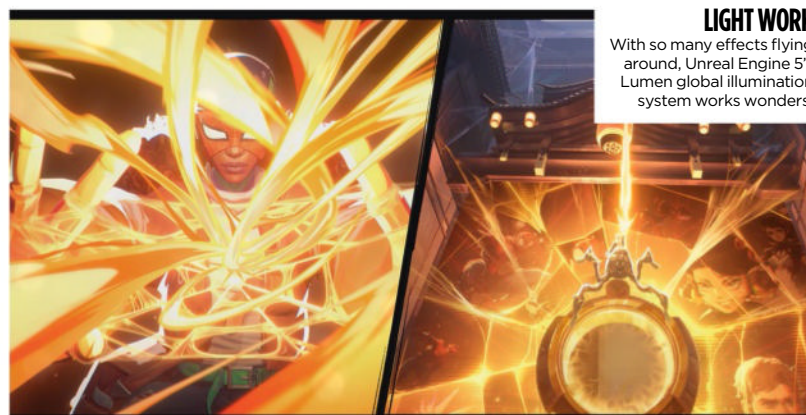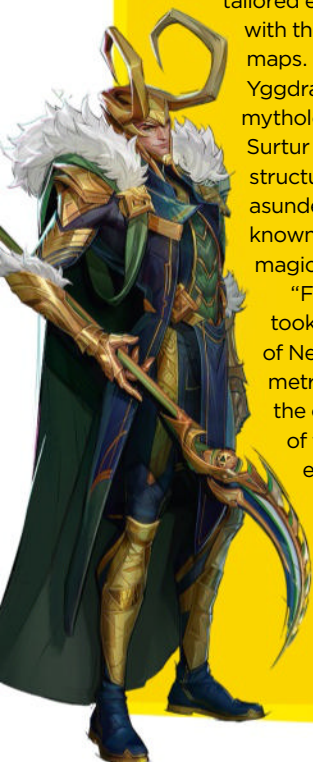
LIGHT WORK
With so many effects flying around, Unreal Engine 5's Lumen global illumination system works wonders.

ART ATTACK
Promotional materials used for Marvel Rivals allowed creative interpretations of characters and action.

MAPPING OUT
Ma says: "We diligently research materials to ensure final presentation reflects the core values of authenticity, grandeur and innovation."
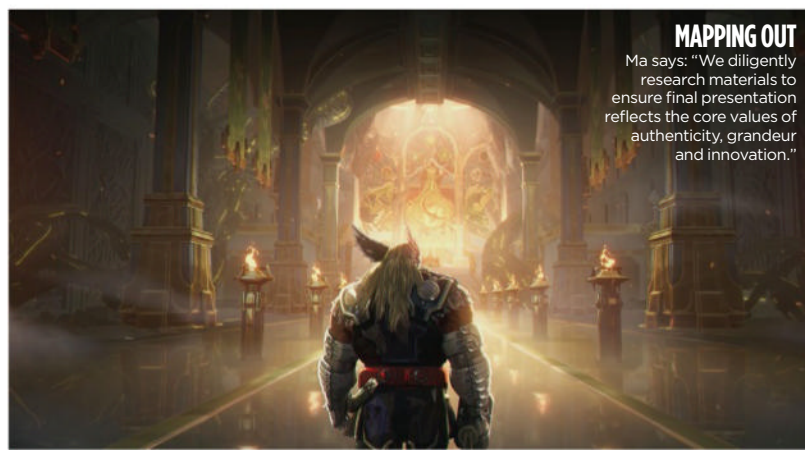
➤➤ and Spider-Man's webs and acrobatics, among others."

THE LONG GAME

As a live-service title, Marvel Rivals' continued success will of course involve an ongoing roadmap that introduces more content beyond the 33 heroes playable at launch. And key to that will also be that the existing cast of heroes have more costumes that can be unlocked.

Indeed, customisation through cosmetics is the biggest appeal for these games, which means no resting on their laurels for the art team, who are coming up with a mixture of original designs and drawing deeper from Marvel's vault, while conforming to the game's aesthetic as well as seasonal themes. For instance, Eternal Night Falls, the official first season of the game, focused thematically on Dracula and the vampire legion, so featured many new costumes centred around vampire hunters.

"A crucial element of our costume design process is how to quickly find unique and innovative design ideas," says Ma. This involves creating a mood board with keywords and reference images, as well as collaborating closely with the Marvel Games team to finalise key iconic imagery essential to the costume design. "In practice, mood boards not only allow us to quickly hone in on our creative and essential design ideas, but they also serve as an effective tool for team communication and alignment on design concepts. We'd encourage

HELA YES!
The canon of Marvel superheroes is so vast they include individuals who don't have their own superpowers to actual gods, which you might claim isn't fair.

NEW ENERGY
If Rivals gives the chance to unearth lesser-known heroes, it's in tandem with the characters given the spotlight in recent Disney+ miniseries.

> **❝ A crucial element of our costume design is to find unique, innovative ideas ❞**
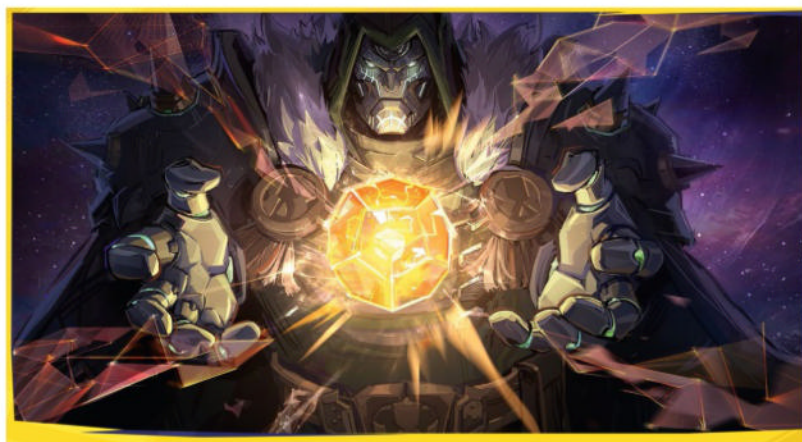
others to give this approach a try if they find it beneficial."

It will be interesting to see if other developers will take a leaf from Rivals' visual style, although for now it certainly seems Western studios are sticking to the trend of photorealism when it comes to developing cinematic storytelling, as with the upcoming Marvel 1943: Rise of Hydra. Yet Ma is also keen to emphasise Rivals' art being in service to the narrative, which may seem surprising in a fundamentally fast-paced competitive game, where you're not necessarily stopping to admire the narrative components being thoughtfully woven into the environments.

"Everything in Marvel Rivals stems from the intense rivalry between two Doctor Dooms, each striving to outdo the other and assert their claim as the rightful master of the timelines," says Ma. "Their conflict reverberates across various dimensions and locations, so consequently we place great importance on the significance of each scene within this narrative. Marvel has an incredible 85-year history, during which different authors have continuously reimagined these heroes' stories across various eras. I believe we are the storytellers of this generation."

More than just a shooter in debt to fan service where you can have the world's most iconic heroes duke it out, Rivals then has the substance to contribute to the Marvel canon too. You might say the game's future looks as bright as its aesthetics. ◆

STRANGER THINGS
The multiverse is a concept that dominates the Marvel universe, with its influence bleeding into other parts of pop culture.

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Sketchbook

Artist PROFILE

Rock D
LOCATION: Canada

Rock D is a video game industry concept artist who lives for character design. He previously served at Riot Games, Phoenix Labs and many other studios, working on AAA games including Overwatch, League of Legends, Fortnite, Borderlands 3 and Halo Infinite. He's also an avid gamer and a hobbyist kung fu enthusiast.
www.artstation.com/rockd

Rock D

Get inspired for your next character design as we check out the video game artist's fascinating range of unique sketches

THE CRYSTAL-BRAINED SAGA

"I wanted to create characters with crystal-like heads, allowing them to not only have distinct silhouettes, but also showcase different technological and career elements."
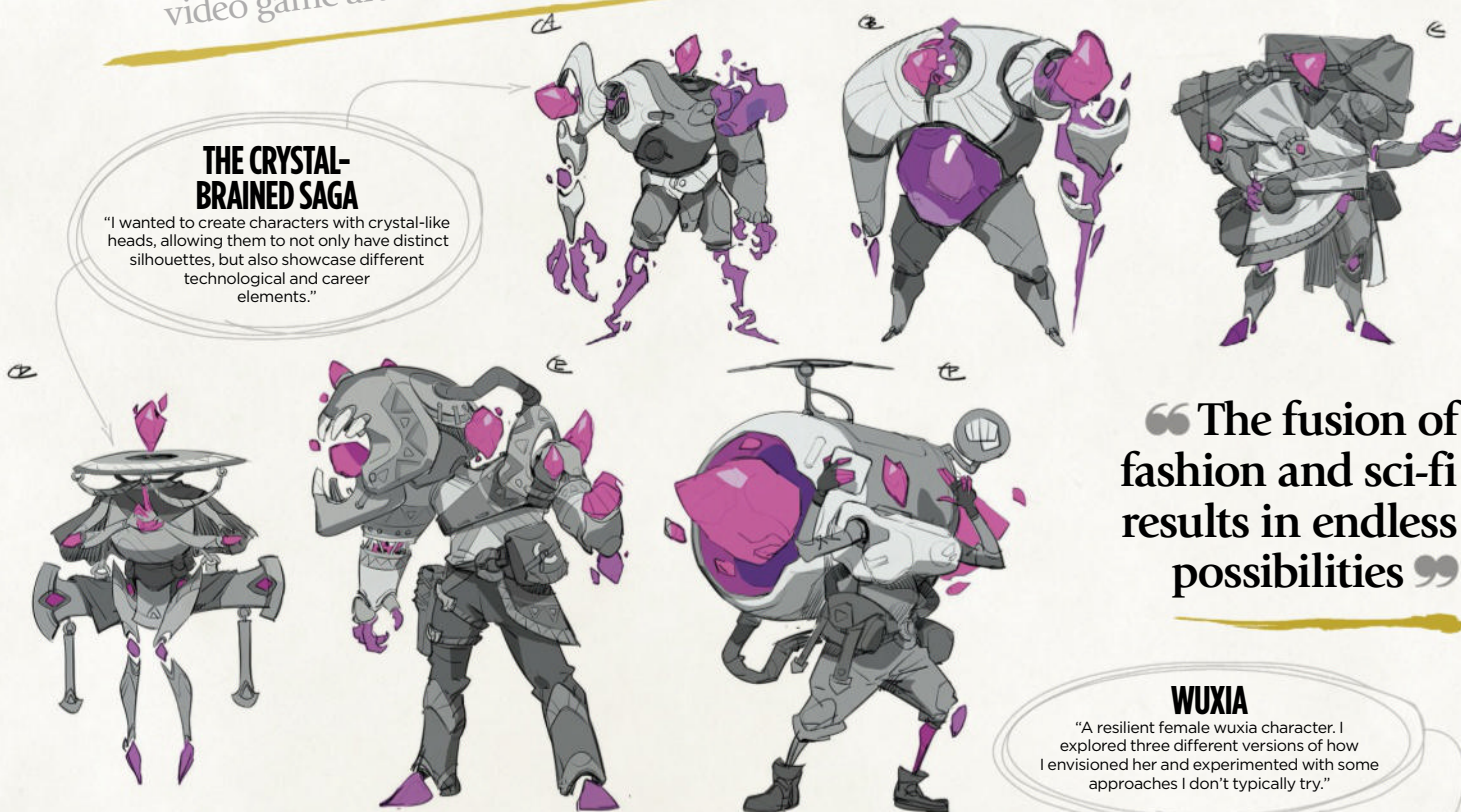
> **The fusion of fashion and sci-fi results in endless possibilities**

WUXIA

"A resilient female wuxia character. I explored three different versions of how I envisioned her and experimented with some approaches I don't typically try."

DISORDERED

"Whenever I have some free time, I immerse myself in creating these quick, loose, yet interesting ideas, many of which have a disordered feeling to them."

WHISPERING MERCHANT

"He looks like an unremarkable character you might encounter in a black market. In reality he hold countless secrets, selling them to those in need."

SENTINEL

"The fusion of fashion and sci-fi always holds endless possibilities – after all, who says robots don't care about style?"
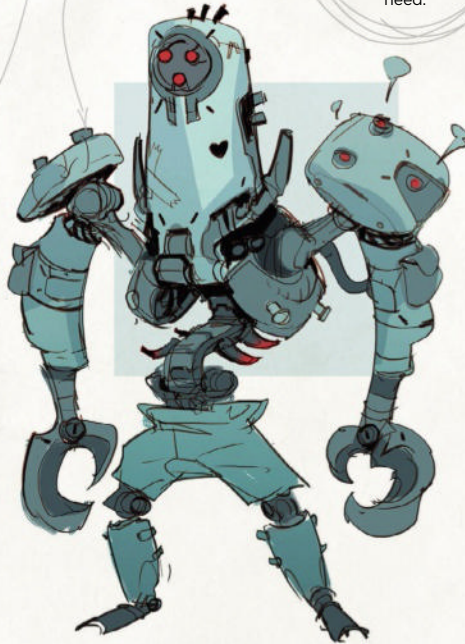
COVER MY BACK!

"After revisiting the Mafia video games, I created these partners to experiment with how to portray a duo with intense conflict in such a specific setting."

Sketchbook

> **I had a lot of fun pushing the silhouette to the extreme**

WRAITH GEISHA

"I had a lot of fun pushing the silhouette to the extreme and am really happy with the result! The design embraces extreme asymmetry, portraying a killer who's both chaotic and eerily calm."

NPCS FOR EXORCIST

"This is a series of characters I created for my personal project Exorcist, aiming to showcase potential NPC ideas with diverse personalities and professions from that specific universe."

THE KING OF !

"Playing around with weird ideas is always so fun for design practice. Sometimes you don't even need to give it a head, or it doesn't have to be a typical head."

CYBER BEAST

"Bold and cool-looking sci-fi characters are one of my favourite subjects to sketch. They help clear my mind and allow me to better face the work ahead."

Sketchbook

* SAVE POINT AREAS THAT PLAYER CAN INTERACT WITH IN THE GAME

EXORCIST

"Here is a series of designs I created for my personal project Exorcist, including save points, enemies and ideas for the main characters. I had so much fun!"

SHARK BROS
" Two shark characters with contrasting traits: one adventurous, the other destructive. They came to me while visiting the aquarium with my daughter."

> ❝ A random idea pushed me to create a colourful yet slightly comedic character ❞

BUMBLING KING
"A random idea pushed me to create a colourful yet slightly comedic mechanical character. By the way, whose trousers are these?"

INQUISITOR
"An initial design idea to create a bond between weapon and character, which I found interesting when expressed in more religious form for a mysterious, cold and intimidating vibe. "

Do you want to share your sketches with your fellow ImagineFX readers? Send us an email with a selection of your art, captions for each piece and a photo and bio of yourself to **sketchbook@imaginefx.com**

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Advice from the world's best artists

This issue:

Artist insight
BRING YOUR COMIC PROJECTS TO LIFE

From adding a dash of humour to choosing the perfect panels, **Simone Ferriero** shares his advice for creating fantastic comics

Artist
PROFILE

Simone Ferriero
LOCATION: Italy

Also known as SimzArt, Simone is focused on illustration, comics and character design. In the past he has teamed up with Riot Games and Wacom, and streams regularly on Twitch.
https://bit.ly/3QOwrI0

When a comic book artist is confronted with a script and a blank page, they have the challenge of translating the actions described into images. Everyone has their own way of doing so, developed over time and through some staple techniques for bringing a comic page to life.

Although many artists might say there are set rules and techniques for creating comics, the truth is that anything can work! There are no limits, beside ourselves, in how artwork will look, or how it can be approached. This doesn't mean rough comics don't exist, but that it all depends on the final result the artist is aiming for.

When we set ourselves free from any rules and restrictions, I'd still argue that some best practices can be beneficial, if we have specific goals in mind. For example, if we want to make our characters consistent, or if we're aiming to make everything readable, following an approach that's been proven to work feels like a good choice.

Giada Moneri — Human Fighter
Ludo Flask — Halfling Sorcerer
Pahsk Sogl — Elvish Bard
Rose Burdock — Half-Orc Barbarian
Onekah Syneco — Human Witch
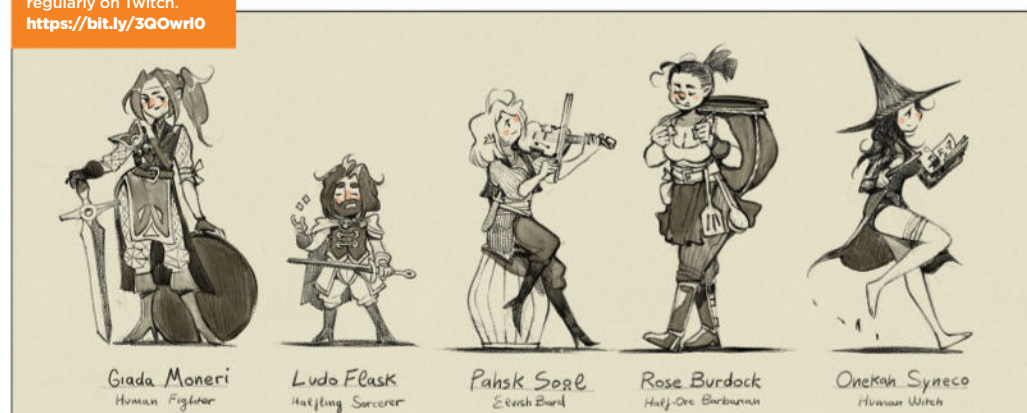
1 DESIGN UNIQUE CHARACTERS

It's important to make a character memorable in the eyes of the reader. Besides the style, the most vital quality is how distinguishable they are from the rest of the cast. A good practice is to draw a cast with strong differences in shape, silhouette and mannerisms. Avoid the classic static pose when designing a character and try to give them personality early on. This will help get the gist of how memorable they're going to be.

2 FIND REFERENCES

Utilising a vast visual library depends on an artist's capacity for recalling the details of something not in front of them. When creating a comic, it's common to deal with subjects you've never seen before. The best way to do this is by collecting references, either in person through creating sketches of the object, taking a photo, or by finding necessary references online.
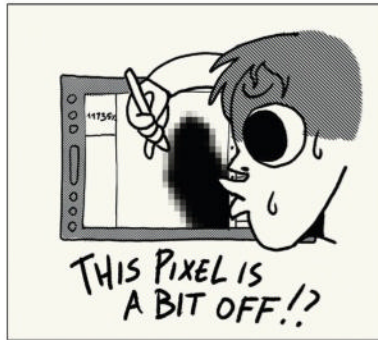
3 HAVE A LAUGH

Sometimes adding a bit of comedy or making funny comic strips can be an interesting exercise – stories don't always have to be serious or deep! When I'm told the story for a comic, the writer or artist often focuses on the lore, the characters' connection and the worldbuilding. Those are vital aspects of a project, but humour is also important and can create a nice rhythm between intense areas and more light-hearted ones. For beginners, working on short comics or strips that involve comedy can be a nice exercise. Being funny can be as challenging as conveying action and drama.

4 TRY DIFFERENT STYLES TO INFLUENCE VARIED REACTIONS

An artist's style is deeply connected to their beliefs, experiences and personality. In a comic, however, this style could be a limitation when faced with stories that don't match it. For example, a colourful style could be detrimental to a fearful mood in a horror story. In an action story, delicate line work will struggle to communicate a sense of energy, drama and power. Adapting our style to the story is a great way to make sure the audience knows exactly what to feel while reading a comic.

5 SHAPE SHIFTING

With the advent of the internet, comics are being shared online in new formats that sometimes reflect the traditional methods, but also in unexpected ways that take advantage of the devices they're shared on, or the host website. Using the right panelling style and understanding the medium your comic is going to appear in is a key factor. Each format creates different expectations and it's important to use the tools to the best of their capabilities, maximising the spaces and playing with the format itself. ➤➤

> ❝ Being funny can be as challenging as conveying action and drama ❞

6 COLOUR AND MOOD
How your palette influences the audience's reaction

A Why it matters
Colour greatly affects people. Similar to the soundtrack playing in an action movie, colour can completely change the perception of a scene. In this example the colours are light and give the character a sunlit look that could fit an outdoor scene set in the morning.

B Use the science
Colour theory is deeply connected with psychology, and an artist can take that into account when colouring their work. In this version the red tones give the art drama, and are a better fit for an intense moment. Highlights also drive the reader's attention to specific areas of a design.

C Start experimenting
Try out different colour palettes for a scene and be sure to find the right one. In this third example the tones are blue and desaturated, which would help to communicate an unsettling moment, a particular time of the day, or perhaps the character's internal struggle.
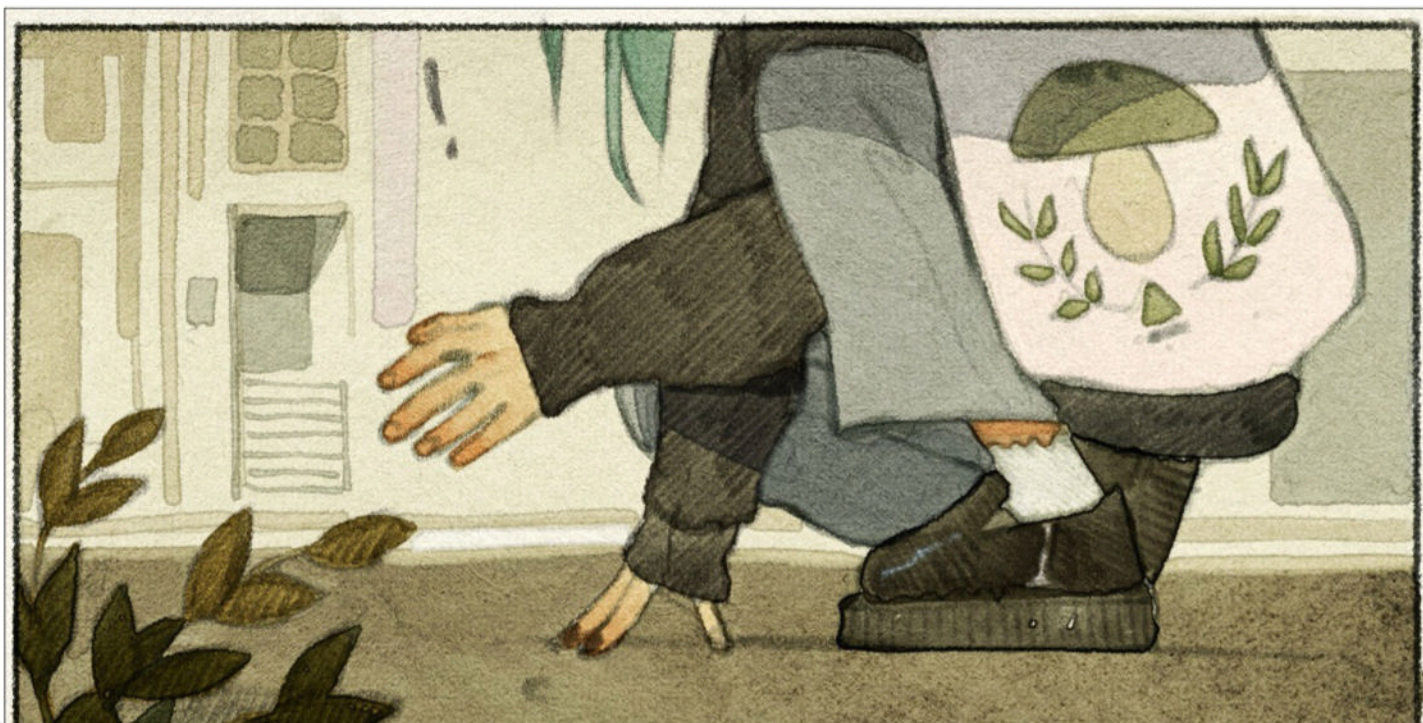
7 USE TRADITIONAL TEXTURES FOR A CLASSIC FEEL
Digital art tends to be extremely polished, clean and sharp, while illustrations made with traditional media are often more rough and organic. Depending on the project, our preferences, and what we're trying to achieve, we can pick one or the other. However, a hybrid is also worth considering. For instance, when working digitally, adding textures or using textured brushes can give back some of the sensations often found in traditional media, without losing the power that digital tools bring to the creative process.

"Colour theory is connected with psychology, and an artist can take that into account"

8 PICK YOUR PANELS WISELY

Panel shape is one of the most prominent aspects of a comic page. They come in any form and shape, each translating to the reader in a different way. While keeping the art inside the panel can produce an easy-to-read experience, a page with characters that pop out of the panels could fit an action comic. Each choice comes with a trade-off; equally spaced panels can work well for a graphic novel focused on dialogue and story, and more exuberant panel shaping could suit a superhero comic.

9 LETTERING AND SPEECH BALLOONS

In professional comics, lettering is often a task assigned to a professional. But this isn't always the case, and like anything else in comics it's a tool that can be used to send a message. Using handmade balloons or perfect shapes and handwriting versus fonts are choices that will influence the reader's expectations. There's no set rule and I like to invest time choosing the right aesthetic to best suit the project.

10 TEST OUT YOUR COMIC CONCEPT

Before any long, intricate and tumultuous comic comes the initial concept. When I'm faced with trying to describe my ideas to publishers or peers, I like to use a simple approach. I try to draw a short, poignant scene that best describes the idea I have in mind. Think of it as the comic artist's version of an elevator pitch. This short comic or panel sequence will give the reader a perfect idea of where I'm heading, what the story is, the style, and the mood I'm going for. It's a great way to receive feedback on your project! ➤➤

11 GIVE YOUR CHARACTERS A HUMAN SIDE

The storyline of a comic often ends up being intricate, detailed and convoluted. The characters move across areas, pages and scenes all the time. Every time I write a story, I try to remind myself to give them time to breathe and be human; the plot development can wait. Sometimes a small action, expression or dialogue works better than 1,000 plot points. The depth of a character is given by how well we see them overcoming their struggles and gaining experience. This is what makes a character relatable for the readers.

12 BE YOURSELF

What's your style? How did you find it? These are some of the most common questions I'm asked. It's a great compliment, and I feel a sense of pride knowing that my work makes people wonder. My advice here is to just relentlessly be yourself and show it in your work and life. I learn from and get inspired by others of course, but I also take a step back from them and self reflect; questioning my beliefs, trying to figure out what I like, what makes me happy, and where I'm heading. This gives my art and stories a voice that's deeply tied to me as a person, which helps it to feel more real.

13 STAY UPDATED

I often turn into a hermit. Drawing requires an enormous amount of time and I find myself sitting in my workspace longer than I'd wish. This often leads to an alienating pattern that makes me unaware of what's happening around me. That's why I try my best to stay up-to-date with the comic world. I try to get in touch with communities and figure out the newest trends, what people are up to, and so on. New experiences, maybe travelling or a small hobby, can help make our artwork more relatable.
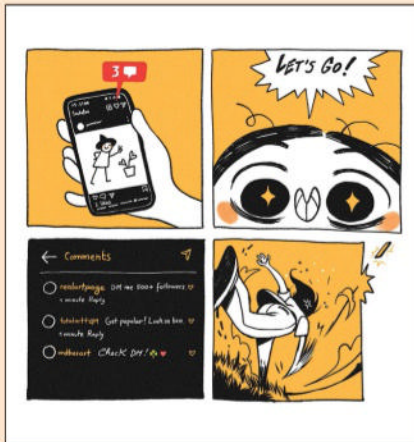
14 GET THE BEST FEEDBACK POSSIBLE

We don't always work by ourselves and having collaborators is a common thing, especially when dealing with publishers. I enjoy being helped in the creation of a comic, for example having the story written or the editing done by a professional. This is where layouts are game-changing. A rough sketch with a couple of lines can be okay to get the idea across if I'm working alone, but when I need feedback, creating something readable is mandatory. Find the right balance between speed of execution and clarity.

> ❝ Just relentlessly be yourself and show it in your work and life ❞

15 KEEP YOUR HEAD UP

Not everything we do will be well received. I always imagined that if someone liked my art, they would like everything I do. Obviously that's not the case, and many times what I create isn't well received. This doesn't always mean my art is disliked, but that it's not interesting for the audience, and that's okay! Learning from underwhelming experiences is what makes us grow as artists. Understanding what went wrong and deciding what to do with that information is what will make you an expert comic artist. 🔶
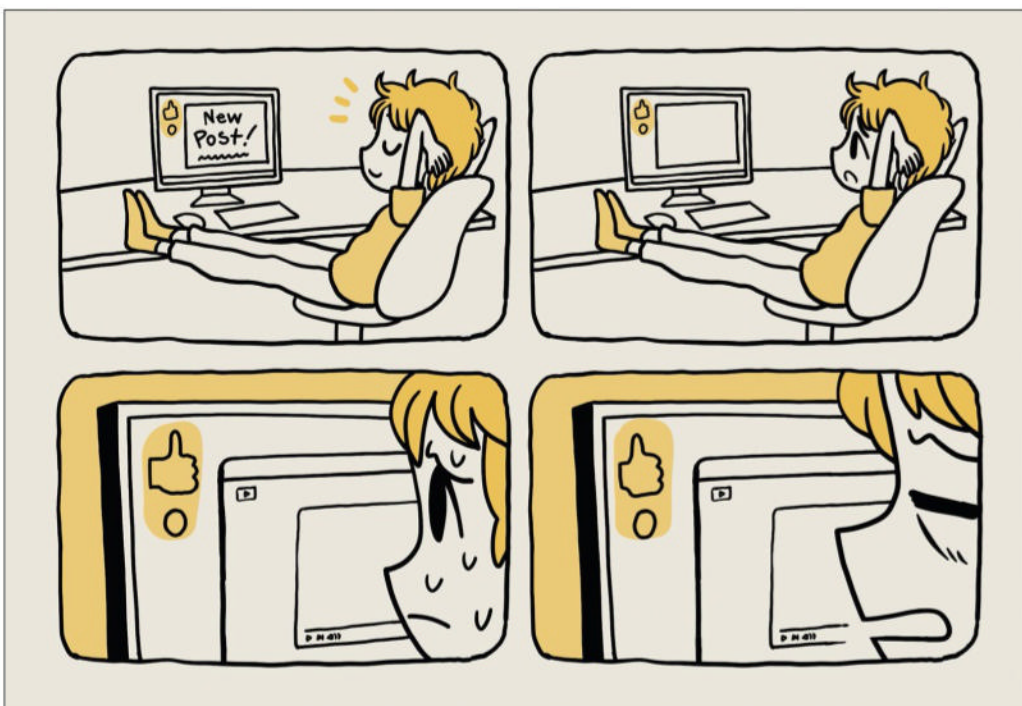
Technique focus

MAKE CAREFUL COLOUR PICKS

Find out why **Yohann Schepacz** makes precise decisions on his colour palette

"This illustration offers a glimpse into the life of a hunter from the Red Plains tribe within the Cat Empire. It depicts Sibelle and her Koikhat, named Orfax, in the middle of a hunt, as she guides her feline companion using precise swings of her golden whistles. The scene balances realism with whimsy, heightened by vivid colours against a deep blue sky to evoke tension and an otherworldly feel.

I paint exclusively with a round, 100% opaque brush, hand-picking every single colour along the way. Subtle shifts on the colour wheel create unique progressions, which helps to shape my style intuitively. It's a process that I find both deliberate and comforting."
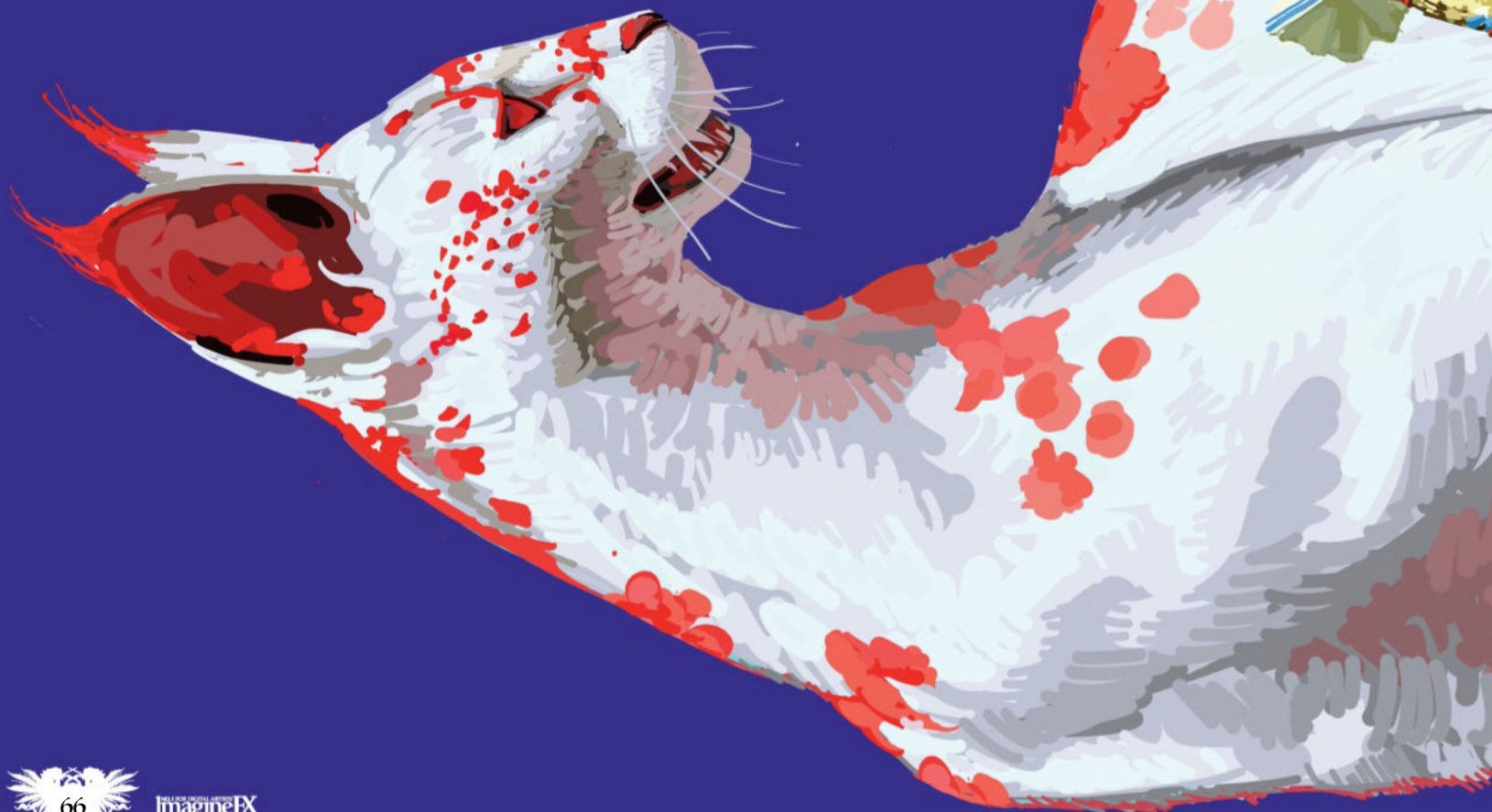
Artist
PROFILE

Yohann Schepacz
LOCATION: Japan

Yohann is a French illustrator and concept artist living in Tokyo. He's known for his Cat Empire fantasy artworks and making diverse contributions to film, animation and games.
https://bit.ly/3DyAGOI

CONCOCT STRIKING FANTASY SCENES

Games artist **Vwei** goes into detail on his process for creating
a magical scene filled with dramatic lighting, shadow and story

Artist PROFILE

Vwei
LOCATION: China

Vwei is as a games artist whose work has featured in Magic: The Gathering, Honor of Kings and Total War: Warhammer.
https://bit.ly/4kwXi2w

Sometimes art can feel like alchemy, starting with a blank canvas and creating gold, of sorts. I'm not sure that's quite what the alchemist in my scene is doing, though.

For this tutorial, I'll be breaking down my process for creating this image, with my workflow split up into four main parts. The first is to establish the overall direction I want for the painting, which will require

finding references that match up with the style I have in mind.

Next comes sketching out the initial line drawing. In order to see the structural relationship between the characters and the scene, I like to keep everything as relaxed as possible at this stage, which helps me stay open to new possibilities.

The third step is to shape the light and shadow within the scene. This is where the authenticity of the space is important; it's where the characters

and elements are placed, and where we achieve an accurate relationship between them all.

Lastly comes making final adjustments and adding more details to improve the believability, all without changing the important relationships that were developed during the previous step.

Out of everything, I find the most important aspect is to have realistic references to make sure I'm creating a world that people can believe is real.
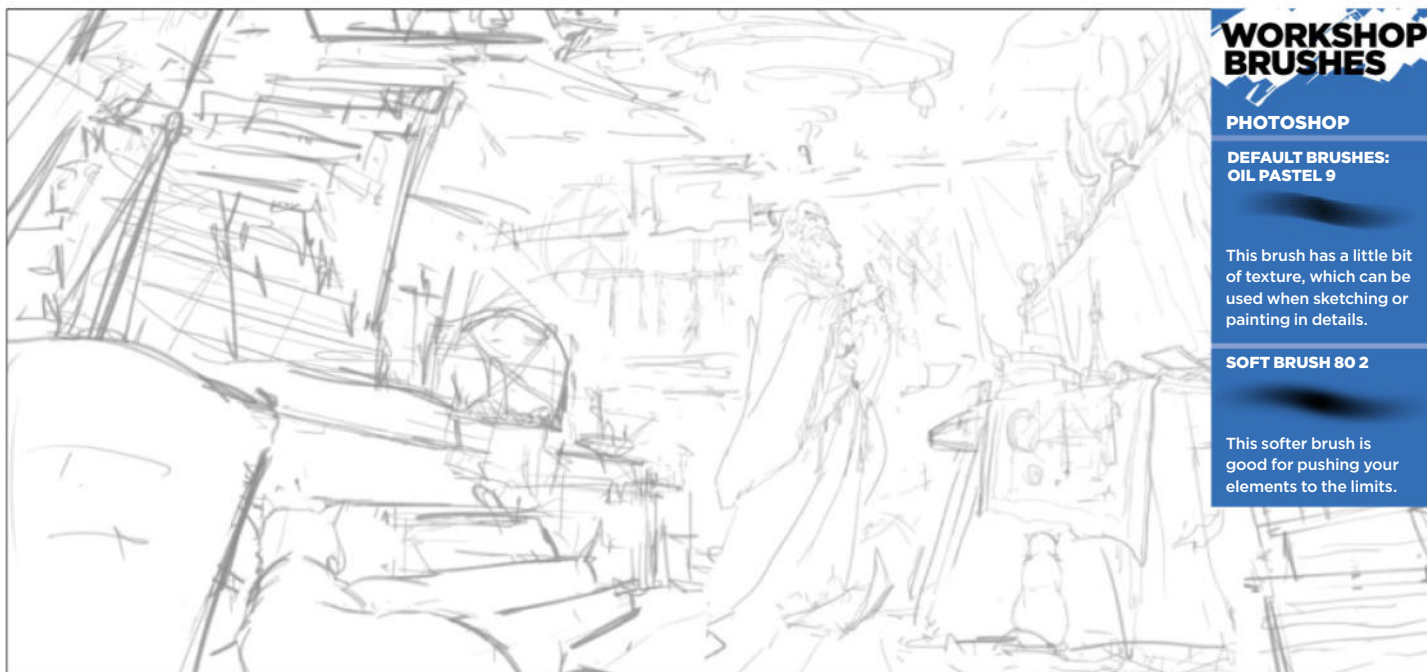
1 Find references and start sketching

First of all, have a long look for some good movie stills and other references that match with your design direction. Find images to inspire your composition, the light and shadow, colour and objects, all within indoor environments similar to ours.

Determine how the light and shadow will appear, most likely from a source outside a window. Use this on the protagonist and to guide the audience's attention within the composition. With the help of your references, develop the elements within the composition. Don't worry too much about size, rhythm and density at this point.

2 Create your hierarchy in black and white

The space, light and shadow are marked out by the simple relationship between black, white and grey. This means the contrast on the protagonist can be weak in the early stages and remain fairly close to the rest of the scene. The foreground can be dark, as at this stage the contrast isn't particularly important; instead, we're mainly relying on the space and using each object to separate everything. We can make some elements clearer however, such as the medicine bottles and pieces of flying paper.

3 Overlay colours

Let's start adding colour to the image, taking our lead from the existing shades of black, white and grey. First decide the basic colour of each object while maintaining a unified tone; I've gone for a slightly dark, warm colour system, as the main scene takes place in a wooden building. The primary light source is a strong light coming through the window, with a colder, weaker light above the table on the right. Be careful not to destroy the previous black and white relationship previously developed, as it risks damaging the overall contrast.

4 Add complementary elements

Because the basic colour contrast has been decided, now's the time to check whether the overall picture is lacking some elements, or if any shapes need adjusting. Here, the table behind the character has been changed, while the floating cloth above is larger and the medicinal materials are being hung on the wall.

5 Tweak the character

Before I started working on the details again, I wanted to adjust the dynamics of the character so that he looks more nervous and expectant, which helps to make the image's overarching story clearer.

BEFORE

AFTER

6 Enhance the light and shadow

To draw the audience's eye, we'll push the lighting further. For my scene, the light shining through the window and onto the floor is warm and strong, which helps to make the cold-warm temperature contrast more powerful. ➤➤

BEFORE

AFTER

7 Develop the character
Continue to adjust and improve on the protagonist. Work on facial details, saturation and contrast, and push the lighting and design of the focal point.
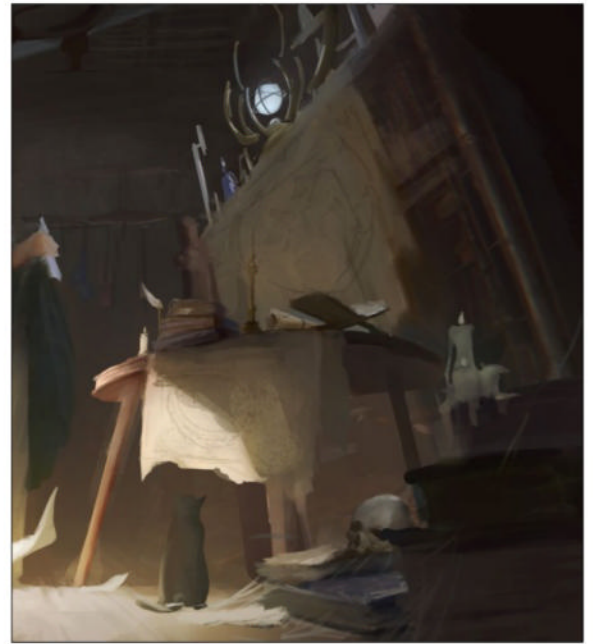
8 Highlight important objects
Pump up the visual interest within the whole scene, not just the key areas. I made tweaks to the space between the objects on the table and the fabric behind, while adding some cabinets also made the area richer.

BEFORE

AFTER
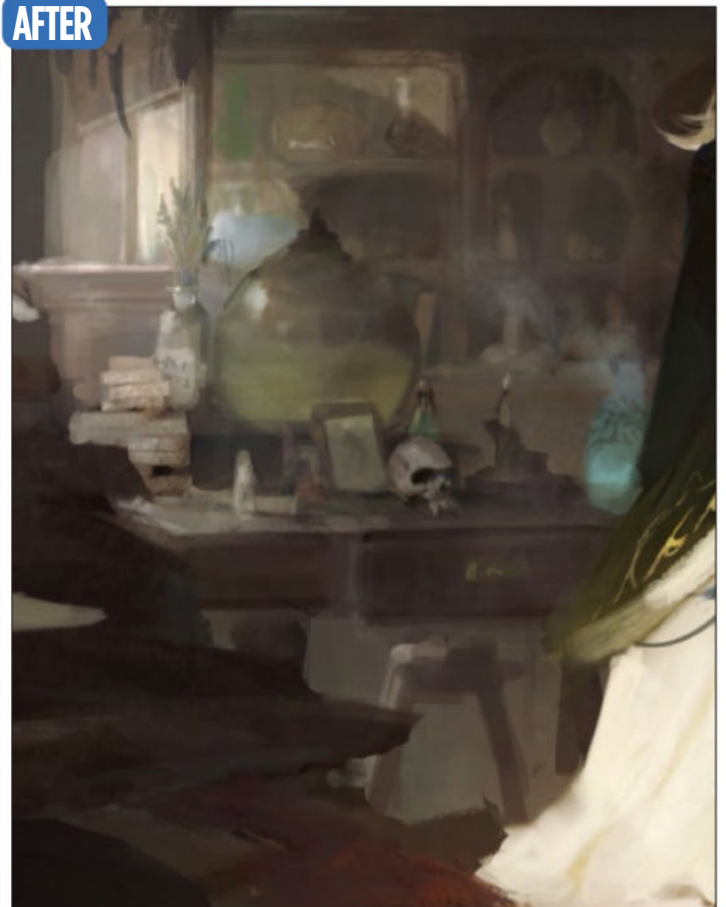
9 Make the background more interesting
Next we want to bring in some extra details and objects to visually enrich our background. For example, I decided to place a brighter blue medicine bottle on the right of the table behind the character, in order to make the space around them feel more alive.

10 Perfect the piece
We're now getting to the point where our image is almost complete. I adjusted the perspective of the table behind and added more items to the table, as well as the flying paper and chair. The stairs were also painted, while the contrast relationship was given an adjustment.
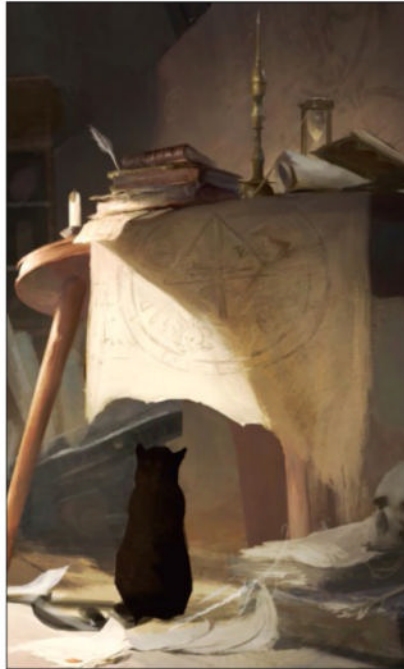
11 Work on the contrast
Continue developing the scene by strengthening the contrast of light and shadow on your details, and perhaps make some tweaks that help to focus the viewer's vision on the image's key elements.
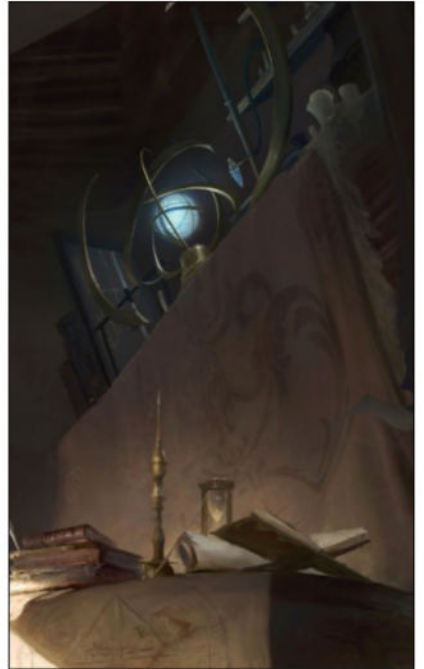
12 More small changes
Other areas that could be worked on include the outline of the protagonist, the colour, and the spacing of the composition. I played with the outline of the table behind, opened up the spacing around the characters, and adjusted the appearance and dynamics of the alchemist's furry feline companion.

13 Making a late addition
I felt the staircase was a little empty, so added a new character with a potion who's looking towards the protagonist to further guide the visual direction. At the same time, the overall contrast was adjusted before I focused on the protagonist, and then weakened the background with some cold light to finish.

Technique focus

USE CONTRAST TO MAKE IMPACT

Derek Stenning on why it's vital for the light and dark elements of his work to play off each other

"This piece is from my ongoing personal project titled EK. My personal art contrasts with my professional work, not in terms of technique, but in approach. There are no narratives, no gameplay requirements, just images that appear in my head that are then transcribed with varying degrees of accuracy.

I started this piece by creating a tight 2D sketch to capture the overall composition and design, then the background elements were blocked out in Blender. These were then taken into Photoshop and painted over to complete the image.

I like to use muted colours, so contrast is an important factor. The lighter aspects of the character rest on the darker parts."

DRAW WITH PUNK STYLE

Mat Wakeham breaks down the key elements of Gorillaz artist Jamie Hewlett's energetic creations

Artist PROFILE

Mat Wakeham
LOCATION: England

A writer, producer, and creative director, Mat has worked on design, film, and TV, including as senior art director in Jamie Hewlett's Zombie Flesh Eaters studio. He curated the Phoo Action: Silver Jubilee coffee table book celebrating 25 years of the cult cartoon, and has also collaborated with top artists and designers to bring iconic comic art to new audiences.
https://bit.ly/4bMrVgA

Jamie Hewlett's art has always thrived on a combo of energetic chaos and meticulous craftsmanship. From his early Tank Girl work to Get the Freebies, Phoo Action and Gorillaz, his art has captured punk irreverence and kinetic storytelling.

Over the decades, his process has shifted dramatically – from ink and markers on artboard to fully digital compositions. As someone who has worked closely alongside Jamie and overseen the 25th-anniversary Phoo Action Silver Jubilee book, I've had a front-row seat to this evolution.

My name is Mat Wakeham. I'm the co-creator of Phoo Action and have been close friends with Jamie since his Tank Girl days. We first crossed paths at art school, and over the years have collaborated on comics, design, music and TV, from Fireball and Phoo Action to Gorillaz. I was a lead creative on Gorillaz Phase 1 and a key part of Zombie Flesh Eaters, the design studio Jamie and I founded.

This article explores both the traditional and digital techniques behind Jamie's Phoo Action artwork, offering practical insights for artists interested in refining their own processes. Whether you're working with pens and ink, alcohol-based markers, or a tablet and stylus, these tips will help you navigate composition, layering, texture and dynamic visual storytelling.

All of these tips are accompanied by some extraordinary examples of Jamie's techniques in action.

1 MASTER PEN AND INK LINE WORK

Jamie's approach to inking is all about precision and control. He doesn't rely on loose or gestural strokes – his pencil work is already deliberate before he even picks up the ink. I'd recommend using a mix of calligraphic-nibbed pens, fineliners and markers to achieve a similar effect. Jamie varies pressure to add weight and flow, making each line feel dynamic while keeping the composition tight. High-contrast blacks against stark whites are the key to his bold, high-impact style, giving Phoo Action its sharp clarity and energy.

2 USE WHITEOUT TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

One thing I've noticed about Jamie's process is that white-out isn't just for fixes – it's an active part of his artwork. He uses it to sharpen edges, create highlights, and add texture, making his illustrations feel even more dynamic. It's clear that for him, white-out is as much a drawing tool as ink. I always notice how his layering white over black introduces a crispness that elevates the composition. Whether you're working traditionally or digitally, applying highlights brings extra depth and refinement to an image. Of course, it's also great for fixes, whether adjusting a line or correcting an overworked area.

3 THE POWER OF ALCOHOL MARKERS

I can't help admiring Jamie's use of alcohol-based markers in his early Phoo Action work to create rich, layered colour. Alcohol-based markers like Copic and Pantone markers allow for smooth blending when overlaying colours, and Jamie built the tones gradually, letting the translucency create depth. What stands out is how this technique gives his illustrations a painterly quality while also keeping the crispness of his line work intact. I would definitely recommend using this technique if you're eager to prevent your illustrations from looking flat.

4 PHOTOCOPY FOR A CONTROLLED WORKFLOW

Back in the late 90s, Jamie would photocopy his inked line work onto a marker-friendly board before adding colour, rather than working directly on his original inked artwork. This ensured that he could experiment freely without putting a singular copy of the final piece at risk. I think this approach is a great way to work non-destructively while using traditional mediums, as it keeps the line work intact while allowing for bold colour choices to be made. And in a digital workflow, duplicating your layers before applying the colour achieves the same level of control and flexibility.

5 KNOW WHEN TO BE LOOSE

One of the things that makes Jamie's work so instantly recognisable is the way he balances razor-sharp precision with a kinetic, expressive energy. His line work isn't just about technical skill; it carries humour, personality, and a sense of movement that makes his storytelling feel alive. He knows exactly when to let a line be loose and when to rein it in for maximum impact. I often marvel at how a simple, deft stroke can suggest speed, emotion or chaos, and that ability to channel spontaneity while still maintaining control is what gives his compositions so much life. ➤➤

6 COMPOSITION TRICKS FOR DYNAMIC PAGES

Jamie's compositions are a perfect mix of chaos and control. There's a frenetic energy, but always carefully structured. His pages feel alive because he uses strong diagonals to guide the eye, overlaps characters to create depth, and uses exaggerated perspectives to make scenes more immersive. That's key to why his work is so full of momentum – every element has a sense of movement, even in static panels. If you want to inject similar energy, experiment with pushing perspective, layering foreground and background elements, and letting characters break out of panel borders.

7 TRY GOUACHE AND PENCIL FOR FINISHING TOUCHES

I observe time and again that Jamie's traditional work doesn't just rely on bold inks and markers, he often refines pieces with gouache and pencil, adding depth and texture. Gouache has a rich, velvety quality that sits on the surface of the paper, making highlights feel tactile and organic. He also uses pencil to delineate form, reinforcing structure while keeping the energy loose. I think that's key to why his work feels so alive; those final touches sharpen details without stiffening the composition. A white Posca pen or digital brush can replicate this effect.

8 ACHIEVE A HANDMADE LOOK IN DIGITAL WORK

I always point out that one thing Jamie does so well is maintaining a raw, organic quality in his line work, even when creating digitally. To mimic real ink strokes, he uses textured brushes in Procreate or Photoshop that avoid the overly smooth, artificial look digital tools can create. Retouching work for the Phoo Action Silver Jubilee book, I found that varying brush opacity and pressure helps replicate the subtle imperfections of pen on paper. The slight irregularities make digital work feel just as dynamic and expressive.

> 66 One thing that Jamie Hewlett does so well is maintaining a raw and organic quality in his line work 99
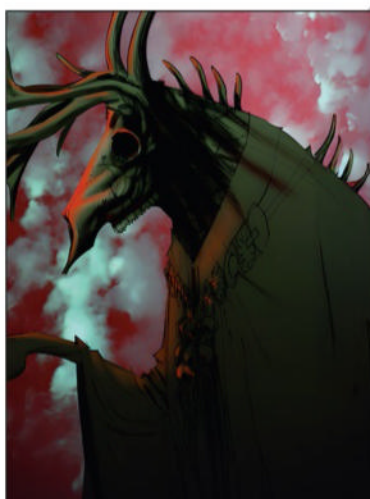
9 EXPERIMENT WITH BLENDING MODES

A crucial part of Jamie's digital process is how he uses blending modes to build depth and texture. To mimic the richness of traditional media, he often works with Multiply and Overlay layers, allowing colours to interact dynamically rather than sit flat on the page. This creates a more layered, painterly effect while maintaining the boldness of his line work. To replicate this, I'd suggest testing out the different blending modes to add depth, soften shadows, or intensify highlights in your own work.

10 INTEGRATE PHOTOGRAPHIC TEXTURES

From working on this project, I've picked up on how Jamie uses photographic textures in a way that enhances the mood without overwhelming his artwork. He subtly integrates elements like clouds, mist or grunge overlays to add realism and depth to otherwise flat colours. A great example is how he used a dirt texture to mimic the bumpy surface of a basketball. These details create atmosphere, making scenes more tactile. You can get a similar effect by playing around with layering textures and adjusting their opacity for a seamless blend. ➤➤

11 CREATE A CUSTOM HANDWRITTEN FONT

To maintain an authentic, personal touch, I had a digital font created from Jamie's original hand lettering. We extracted letterforms from his early comics and developed two font styles: 'HEWLVETICA Wonky' (based on his earlier work) and 'HEWLVETICA Book' (from later issues). Each letter had a duplicate to ensure a handwritten feel. We then plotted them into a grid in Photoshop and used free font-making site Calligraphr. This allowed us to incorporate his signature lettering perfectly into the original work. You can compare the two above.

12 USE GRAIN FOR A GRITTY FINISH

Jamie often adds a final grain layer to digital images that replicate the imperfections of analogue printing. This subtle texture enriches flat colours and helps unify different elements, blending drawn lines with collage textures for a cohesive look. This technique helps him to achieve a raw, tactile quality that makes digital work feel less sterile. Have a go with grain overlays or noise filters to avoid overly smooth digital finishes and add that extra layer of depth and character.
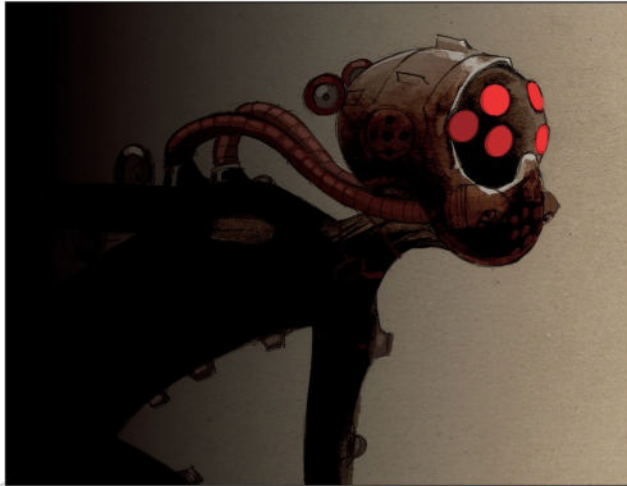
13 EMBRACE COLLAGE ELEMENTS

The punk-fanzine aesthetic still runs through Jamie's work. Even in his digital pieces, he blends photo montages with digital paint, layering scanned textures, photographic, or found elements to create an authentic, tactile feel. A crucial part of this process is ensuring these elements don't seem separate from the illustration. He works them in flawlessly, using blending modes and colour adjustments to unify the composition. Experiment with layering and manipulating photographic textures to add depth and grit to your work.

14 COMBINE DIGITAL AND TRADITIONAL

Jamie may work digitally post Phoo Action, but he still keeps the raw, anarchic energy of his hand-drawn art. Key here is blending a photo montage with digital paint, integrating different photographic elements with hand-drawn texture to create both depth and vibrancy. What stands out to me is how he seamlessly merges the two, all while making sure the collage never overpowers the illustration. You can get a similar effect by playing with layering photographic elements beneath or over your digital painting, and then using blending modes and adjustment layers to unify the composition.

15 COMPLETE A COHESIVE IMAGE WITH LAST ADJUSTMENTS

Before finalising an image, Jamie makes subtle tweaks to bring everything together. This includes refining contrast and adjusting saturation so that all the elements are consistent. These final adjustments help to balance the raw, spontaneous energy of his art with the flexibility digital tools provide. A strong finishing pass ensures the piece looks cohesive, vibrant, and true to his distinctive style.

Reviews

The latest digital art resources are put to the test by the ImagineFX team…

The sleek silver look remains for the Mac mini's latest iteration.

Apple Mac mini M4

MEGA IN MINIATURE Small but mighty, powerful but affordable, the latest Mac mini is everything many creatives will need on a daily basis

Price From £599/$599 **Company** Apple **Web** www.apple.com

The Apple Mac mini M4 is the latest, and tiniest, addition to Apple's computer line-up (until the reported M5 models arrive, that is), and the reason we're excited about it is that so many creatives all around the world have grown to appreciate and rely on Apple's pocket rocket machine for their work and hobbies.

The new Mac mini is sure to replace the previous model among the best computers for creatives, but will it draw more users away from bulkier tower PCs or underpowered laptops, or stand as a better alternative to the astronomically powerful but pricey Mac Studio? It may just be that good.

The look of the Mac mini M4 won't be a shocker to anyone who's seen any of the previous models. It comes in the same extremely compact form factor as before, measuring in at only 5x12.7x12.7cm to easily slot into any desk setup, no matter how cramped or small it might be.

It's got the same silver colour as before, with the same aluminium

You'll now find two USB-C ports handily placed on the front of the Mac mini M4.

The machine will fit discreetly into pretty much any desk setup.

exterior and polycarbonate topping, which Apple assures us is now made from more consumer-recycled materials than before.

REASSURINGLY FAMILIAR
On the front are two USB-C ports and a headphone jack, while the back hosts the power socket, an HDMI port, Ethernet port and three Thunderbolt 4 ports, or Thunderbolt 5 if you're getting the M4 Pro model.

It's lightweight at 670 grams too (730g for the M4 Pro), making it extremely portable. It's as solid as ever, but there are no innovations

All images © Apple
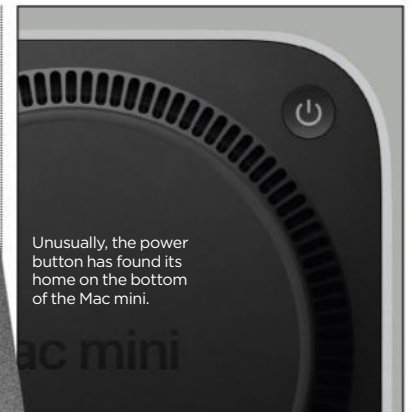
Unusually, the power button has found its home on the bottom of the Mac mini.

here. It will either look and feel reassuringly sturdy and familiar, or boringly samey, depending on your tech religion. For the big changes, you'll find those inside when you switch the little nugget on.

On the inside, we get the Apple-patented evolution over revolution, with a step up in processing memory being the most immediate takeaway. Gradually, and finally, disposing of limp 8GB base models, the entry-level Mac mini has 16GB of RAM, with 24GB on the M4 Pro and configuration options up to an impressive 64GB available for those willing to fork out the considerable upgrade cash. Hard disk space begins at 256GB, with configuration options available here as well, capping out at 8TB of precious SSD real estate.

It supports up to three monitors this time, but with a spec proviso or two: two displays with up to 6K resolution

at 60Hz over Thunderbolt, and one display with up to 5K resolution at 60Hz over Thunderbolt or 4K resolution at 60Hz over HDMI. And if you have an 8K monitor, this max drops to two: one display with up to 5K resolution at 60Hz over Thunderbolt, and one display with up to 8K resolution at 60Hz or 4K resolution at 240Hz over Thunderbolt or HDMI. It's an improvement from previous models though, and the 60Hz refresh rate maximum isn't a deal-breaker, as you were never getting a Mac mini for gaming or 3D processing anyway. Of course, as with all mini PCs, there's no screen attached here, so you'll have to sort that out for yourself.

The CPU scores in Geekbench and Cinebench are among the best for any machine in the Mac mini's price range, so that alone qualifies it for a full house in this category. You're absolutely

There are a range of options for hooking up monitors, among more connectivity choices.

getting your money's worth with the M4 processor on board, and then some, with a little extra sprinkled on top of that. The Geekbench multi-core testing outdoes the Mac Studio M2, to give you just a little reference point as to just how freakishly impressive this tiny machine is. With the unified memory structure in the Mac, all app startup is blazingly quick and stable too, as long as the software itself is stable.

The Mac mini M4 isn't intended to be, or indeed sold as, a 3D or gaming machine, so the fact that the Geekbench GPU score is a relatively pedestrian 37,000 points shouldn't be taken as a slight. For integrated graphics, this is a respectable score, and is more than enough for you to blitz through any image-editing work or light video editing and non-3D graphic design tasks.

BUILD YOUR MAC

The Mac mini M4 starts at a ridiculously affordable £599 before discounts, while the M4 Pro starts at £1,399 before adding configurable extras or upgrades. Of course, you can choose upgrades that put you well over £2,000, but the £799 model offers the best out-of-the-box balance of value for money, and will be a desktop computer that can serve you well for several years.

In our view, this is the perfect desktop computer for 2D digital artists and photo editors, as well as graphic designers and video editors who won't require cutting-edge graphics performance. Do keep in mind though that if you use CAD or AutoCAD software, that you've made sure it's compatible with macOS before pressing the order button.
Erlingur Einarsson

> **❝ You're getting your money's worth with the M4 processor on board, with a little extra sprinkled on top of that ❞**

VERDICT

Apart from the lack of high-power dedicated graphics, the Mac mini M4 might be as close to the perfect machine for most people as any can get. It's tiny, but packs enough power for any creative task outside 3D processing or heavy video renders and, unlike many Apple products, offers great value your money. Rival mini PCs may be getting closer to the Mac mini, but the M4 version proves they still fall well short.

Pros
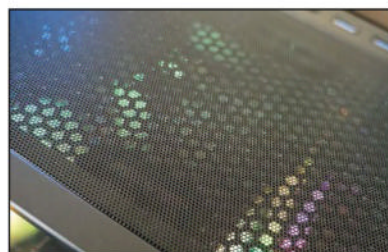■ Great value power
■ Super small
■ Excellent macOS UX

Cons
■ No dedicated GPU

Rating
★★★★⯪

The case is roomy and provides good airflow without dominating a studio workspace.

Despite its name, the Aqua uses air cooling, which helps to keep the build's price down.

Easily accessible controls and ports on the top can be reached with the tower under a desk.

ABS Cyclone Aqua

MULTIPURPOSE MACHINE While it's a gaming tower at heart, a 40-series GPU and reasonable price make this good for creatives

Price From £1,300/$1,700 **Company** ABS **Web** www.absgamingpc.com

Buying a pre-built gaming PC can be one of the most cost-effective ways of acquiring a computer for creative work – they usually come with top-end CPUs, lots of RAM and a decent GPU board, all things that Photoshop and Blender will relish as much as the latest games. Vitally, they can be cheaper than something tailored for professional use.

The ABS Cyclone Aqua may have been built as a machine for gamers, but it has a lot to offer creative users too. While the GPU may not be the latest, it's capable of pushing the likes of Photoshop to much greater heights than an integrated graphics chip, and the benefits of a desktop-class

Some of the built-in RGB lighting can be turned off, but the trippy fan lights will always remain.

processor and a case with enough airflow to keep it cool can't be overstated. Add the 32GB of fast RAM and roomy 1TB SSD, and you've got something that may suit many students and be a fit for new studios.

We're not fans of PCs that use integrated graphics, wishing they'd use a dedicated GPU to give Creative Cloud apps and all other pixel-pushing programs a little boost. And this PC just goes to show it really is true. Denoising high-ISO images with Lightroom is a grind on the sort of GPU bundled with a CPU, but even a card as modest as Nvidia's 4060 Ti seen here can bring the time it takes down enough that running it on multiple images is less of a problem.
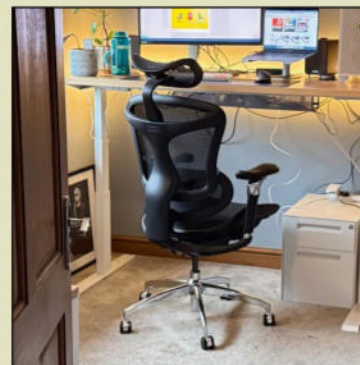
The 20-core Intel Core i7 14700F CPU is a workhorse too. Desktop i7s from recent generations have been potent chips, more than capable of holding their own, and this one speeds through workloads. It's air-cooled, so you'll hear a bit of noise from the PC when it's working hard, but a benefit of a larger case like this is that airflow can be increased, and a water-cooling loop would have upped the price.
Ian Evenden

VERDICT

PCs used for creative work don't have to be sleek, minimal things. This gaming PC isn't the largest we've seen, but with its larger case and desktop-class components it can power through the kinds of workloads that would gum up a lesser machine.

Pros
■ Pre-built for convenience
■ Affordable price
■ Capable graphics processing power

Cons
■ Not the latest-gen graphics card

Rating
★★★⯪☆

You'll have to work for your throne, with the assembly taking around 30-40 minutes.

Sihoo Doro C300 Pro

SOLID SITTER What it lacks in looks, this chair makes up for in comfort

Price £710/$700
Company Sihoo
Web https://sihoooffice.com

RATING ★★★★☆

Sihoo office chairs aren't always the prettiest, or most comfy on first sit, but they always offer plenty for the asking price. The C300 Pro is almost a case in point. Sitting in it for the first time felt awkward. With a few adjustments, of which there are many, it ends up a really enjoyable experience.

Sitting on the Pro is comfortable indeed, and that's only increased by the many ergonomic features. The back and base are made of mesh that offers a firmness with a bit of spring, so you get a great sink-in feel. The lumbar support is one of the more comfortable we've tried. Some manufacturers seem to think lumbar support needs to be stiff and hard to be taken seriously. Not so! It's to support your back to stay in its natural S shape, not bend it into submission. The armrests are the star though, moving up/down, left/right, and offering a little tilt.

Sihoo has long excelled at offering budget chairs that don't particularly look great, but are comfy and ergonomic, and that will be fine for many users. At full price the Pro feels a little expensive, considering its looks. However, if you can find it on one of Sihoo's regular sales, it's excellent value.
Beren Neale

Despite only being an hour long, the course is nevertheless informative.

Images: iStock.com/Yakovliev, Kelly Sikkema

Understanding Concept Art Design

KNOW YOUR ROLE This short course provides an interesting intro to the fundamental responsibilities of a concept artist

Publisher Udemy **Price** £20/$25 **Format** Online **Length** 59 mins **Web** www.udemy.com

This introductory course by James Leiske should be seen as no more than a brief introduction into the fundamentals of what a concept artist actually does. He doesn't teach any practical skills as such, but what is provided does give a good insight into what the job of being a concept artist actually involves.

The fact that this course is short is to its benefit; it could have been shorter, as some of the points are repeated, and an audio edit wouldn't have hurt. But for those who like creating concept art as a hobby, this course doesn't disguise that being a concept artist professionally does come with responsibilities.

It offers facts such as being more useful to a production if you understand the entire production pipeline, which could require learning
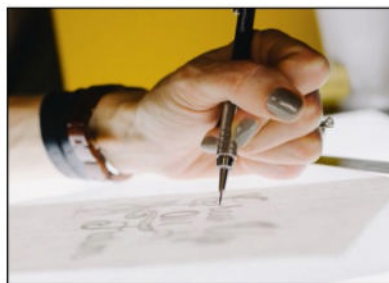

Figure out whether the life of a concept artist is the one for you with James Leiske's insight.

software outside of your comfort zone, or in fact just learning software for artists who use analogue media. There's the fact that a concept artist might just be brought on board to match an existing style, rather than create a unique look, or even more scarily manage other artists and integrate with design teams.

Leiske is personable, sells the job of being a concept artist well, and is realistic in his breakdown of how to be found as an artist. That said, it's also worth noting that the course was made back in 2019.

While it may seem like an expensive course for the single hour of video, hobbyists of any skill level would do well to watch it, just to see if they want to make the professional jump or be happy where they're at with their art.
Mike Griggs

The course details the facts of the job and what burgeoning concept artists should be prepared for.

VERDICT

A basic course that could have done with some audio editing. But as a grounding in what a professional concept artist actually does, this still provides some invaluable insight to artists of any level wondering if making the leap into a career in concept art is worthwhile for them.

Pros
■ Works for digital or traditional artists
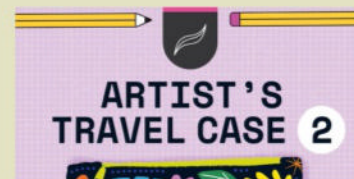■ Honest breakdown of the concept art job
■ Value for money

Cons
■ Can be repetitive
■ Shows age a little

Rating
★★★☆☆

We put three packs through their paces to find out whether they're worth downloading

Artist's Travel Case Vol. 2

Artist Esther Nariyoshi
Software Procreate
Brushes 15 **Price** £8
Rating ★★★★

This pack brings together a useful set of core brushes. Among them are useful custom brushes such as washi tape and texture streaky, which are great for grunting up your art.
https://bit.ly/3DEMO0s

The Nitty Gritty Brushbox

Artist Lisa Glanz
Software Procreate
Brushes 50 **Price** $19
Rating ★★★★★

A beautiful set of tools with a focus on character design and illustration. Includes brushes, tutorials and various patterns for a reasonable price. Perfect for illustrating a children's book.
www.lisaglanz.com

Brush Pack 3: Drygoods

Artist Retro Supply Co.
Software Procreate
Brushes 23 **Price** £15
Rating ★★★

A great set ideal for chalk signage, text and illustration, all with differences in wear and tear for easy personalisation. The only caveat is the high price for a style that could have limited use.
www.retrosupply.co

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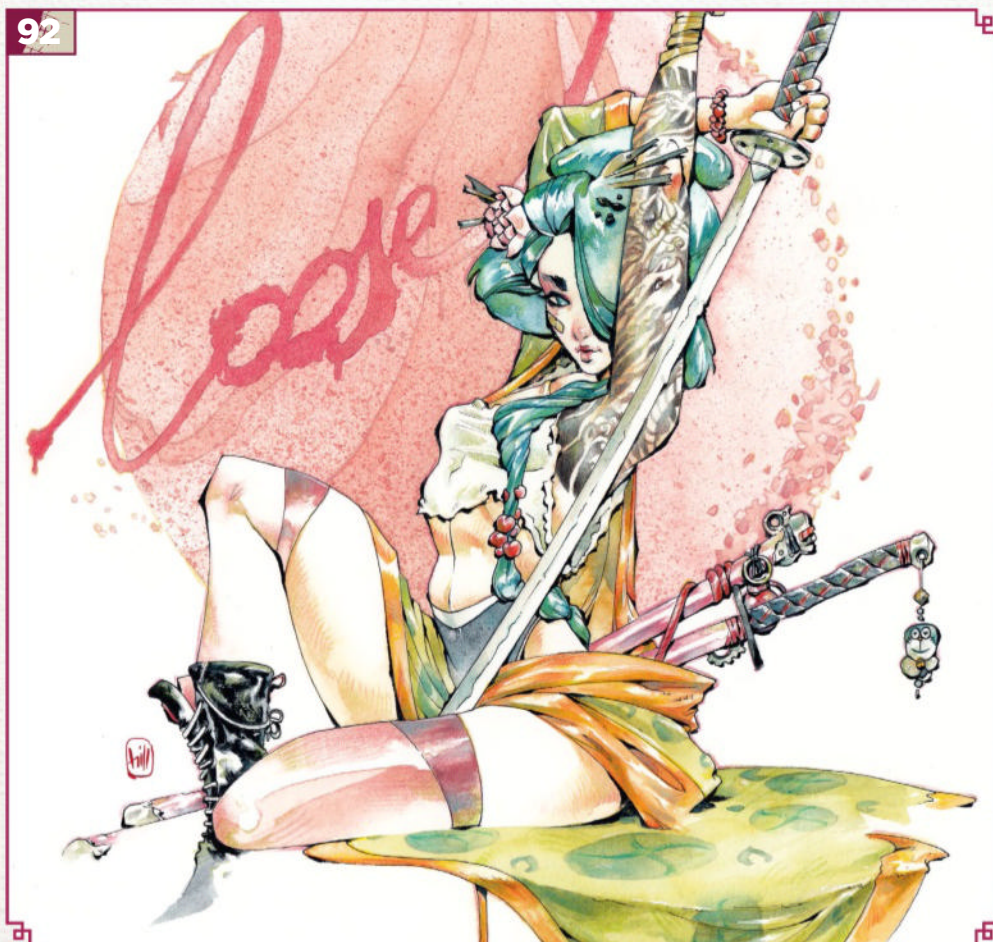
ORDER ONLINE: IFXM.AG/BINDER

Traditional Artist

Inspiration and advice from the best pro artists

92

98

88

This issue:

FXPosé

SHOWCASING THE FINEST TRADITIONAL ARTISTS

Julie Warnant

LOCATION: Canada **MEDIA:** Gouache, watercolour, ink, pencil, Procreate

WEB: https://owlyjules.carrd.co

Fairy tale illustrations are some of Julie's many influences. She wants to create a calm and romantic feeling in her work, but with a touch of spookiness.
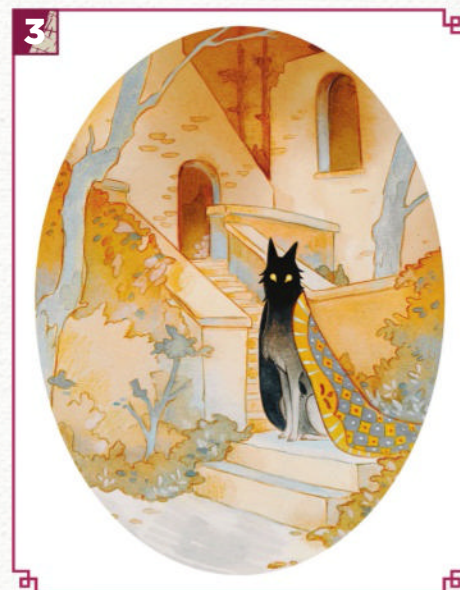
1 A FRIEND
"Using my favourite dark inks, I was inspired by observing birds from a distance, where their shape might be distorted and it can take a moment to understand what you're seeing."

2 CALLING FOR THE STARS
"Painted for the 2024 Gallery Nucleus Postcard Art Show. I lean towards warmer tones, so challenged myself to use brighter pinks, purples and oranges to add a fantastical element."

3 THE LAST VESTIGE OF A MAGICIAN
"A small reference to the work of Russian illustrator Ivan Bilibin. I attempted to smoothly transition from darker to lighter areas to promote a mysterious air."

4 GREEN SWANS
"This is from a favourite sketchbook of mine. This piece was not pre-planned, but I'm so fond of its dreamlike atmosphere where the brushstrokes and blending errors occur."

Traditional Artist FXPosé

Sébastien Michel

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Ink, pencil, watercolour **WEB:** www.instagram.com/artseb26

Sébastien is inspired by strange worlds where anything is possible, especially places people have abandoned and nature has regained control. His biggest influences are Ian McQue, John Howe and Jacquelin de Leon.
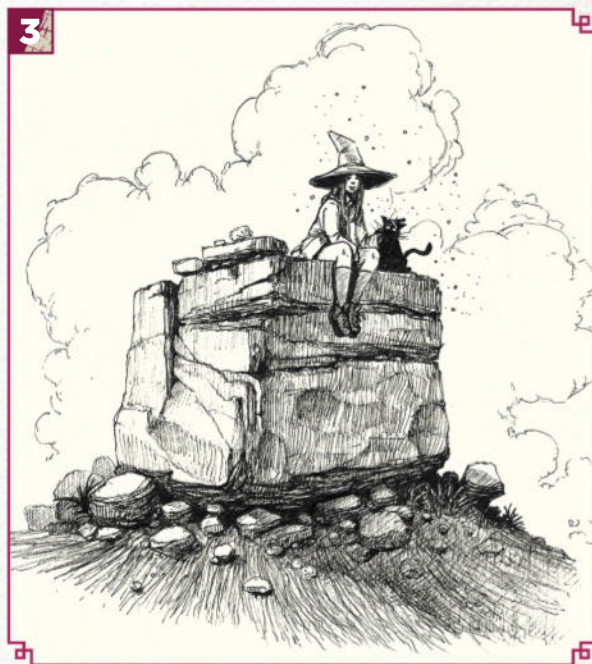
1 OCTOPUS GIRL
"A girl and her friend were a bit invasive. Here I used a mechanical pencil for a different rendering."

2 ASTRONAUT OWL
"Two owls take refuge in this abandoned helmet before the rain. Made with lots of cross-hatching."
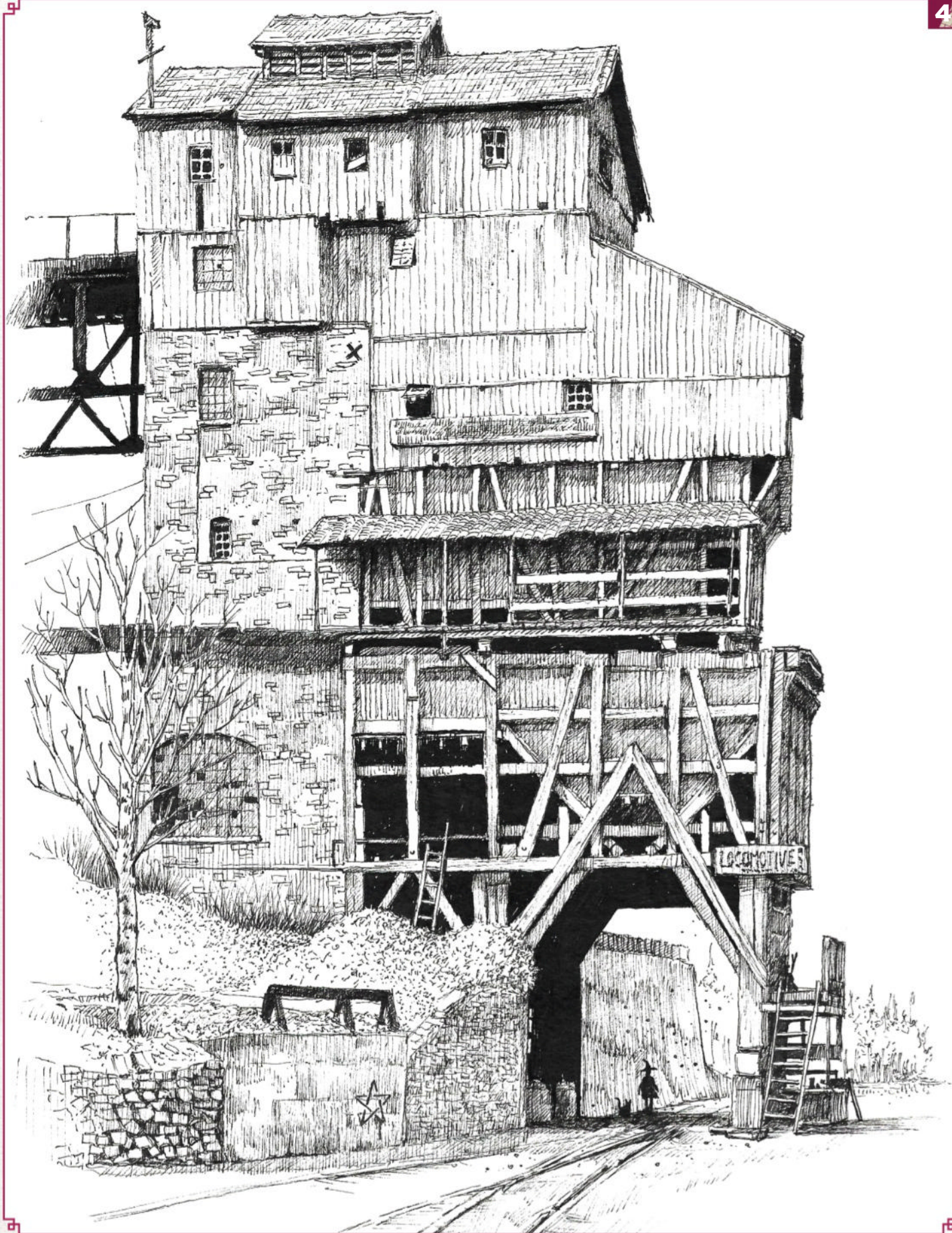

3 WITCH
"A little rest after a long walk. Here are the characters I often draw; you can follow them throughout their trip."

4 WOODEN BUILDING
"The little witch and her companion have found a place to spend the night. Probably very noisy and active once, today only the wind and the creaking of its wood remain."

Want to submit your work? Visit http://ifxm.ag/getinifx

Watercolour

PAINT AN EXQUISITE SAMURAI GEISHA

Illustrator CHUMA HILL explains his process for crafting a stunning character in watercolour, with a little help from some extra traditional techniques

Watercolours are a beautiful medium and create such stunning, delicate art. Here I'll work on a geisha character, while also giving her my own personal touch. I imagined a strong, self-confident woman wielding a katana, and enjoy merging the traditional geisha figure with all the samurai symbolism to create a brand new combination.

I usually work traditionally, with watercolour my speciality. I usually combine it with other traditional techniques such as ink, coloured pencils, markers, and so on. The fusion of these techniques in a single illustration provides the tones and textures I find attractive for telling the stories I want in an image.

I also use digital retouching tools in my work as a cover illustrator. They offer a final step that's essential for the narrative of each illustration.

GUIDED GEISHA

In this tutorial I'll show you how I typically work through a simple illustration. We'll go step-by-step through each phase of creation, from the initial sketch through to making the final touches.

Something important to keep in mind is the choice of materials, in my case 100 per cent cotton paper to maintain moisture for longer, and a satin grain so the flow of the line isn't hindered by the grain of the paper. The colours can be of higher or lower quality, but what's most important is that I feel comfortable

with them, so I always look for resistant, fluid colours that mix well.

The brushes are no less important; I like to use brushes that have a great colour-loading capacity. These are often those with natural hair, though there are synthetic alternatives that will get you good results.

During the course of this painting I'll use two cans of water. One of them for rinsing the brush and the other to load it with clean water. On top of that, I'll also have a palette of colours for mixing, coloured pencils, and ink markers.
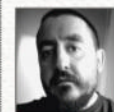
Chuma Hill is an illustrator based in Madrid. He has been an illustrator for over 25 years and is currently working on covers for US publishers. www.instagram.com/chumahill.

Traditional Artist Workshop
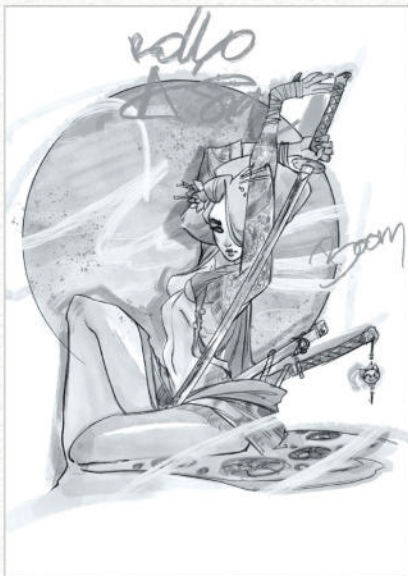
1 Sketch out your ideas

When I started working on this idea, I made it easier on myself by using Procreate. When you have several sketches, put them next to each other to see how they work and then clean up the lines on the final sketch you choose.

2 Transfer with a light table

Once the sketch is printed out on paper, place it on a light table and trace the entire drawing, line by line, onto watercolour paper. To do this, I like to use a blunt, medium-hard graphite pencil.


3 Draw lines

On top of the pencil lines, start to ink them in with a calibrated marker. Before you use a pen, make sure it's waterproof so you avoid any problems working with watercolours further down the line.

4 Fix paper onto a backing

When working with wet techniques, I place the paper on a rigid support such as a wooden board. This provides a flat drawing surface, the possibility of moving the support, and prevents the paper from wrinkling or warping.
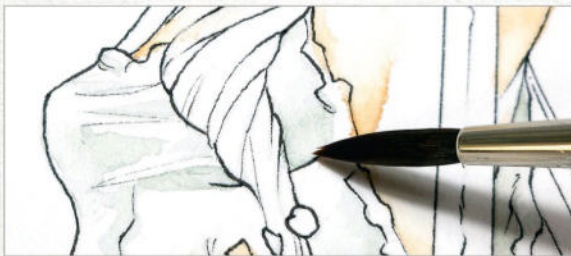
5 Prepare your paint and paper

Time to get your colours ready on a palette and make the necessary pre-mixes to speed up the working process. Before starting, moisten the surface of the drawing with water so the colour expands. You'll also want to avoid flooding the paper.

6 Colour the clothes and body first

Once the mixture is done, I'd advise testing it out on a piece of paper to ensure it's what you want. Now you can begin to apply it, with the help of a thick brush for larger surfaces and a fine brush for smaller areas.
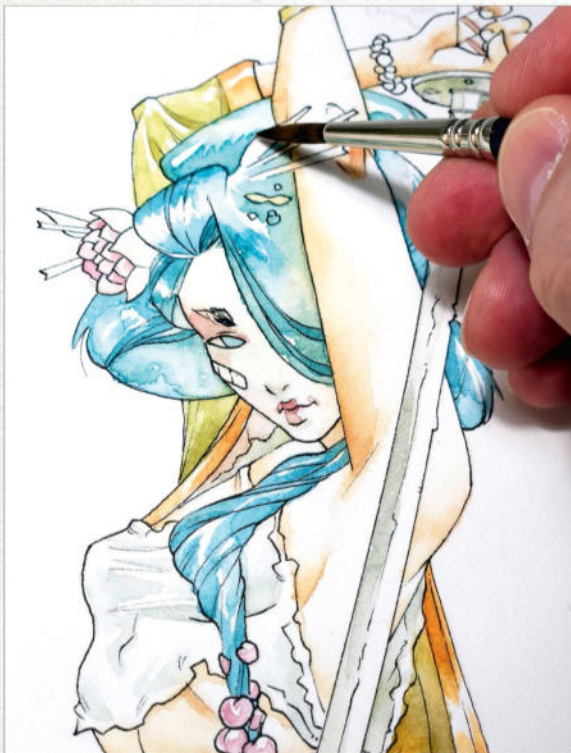
7 Move on to ornaments and hair

When the paper is almost completely dry, start putting down the colour on the rest of the details and the hair. This way we get more detailed traces and prevent the lines from melting away completely.

8 Add the background

Moisten the drawing area with a flat brush, and add a layer of colour using a large brush. Remove pigment with kitchen roll before taking a wet brush and throwing drops of water onto the colour before it dries. ➤➤

9 Create detail, contrast and texture

It's time to make some contrast and detail in the areas that look too light by choosing stronger tones and applying layers of colour with a thin brush. I also use a homemade brush to create textures in some areas of the drawing.

10 Protect your work with a mask

To work on some areas without the colour affecting the rest of the drawing, use a transparent adhesive film for masking. Cut a sheet of film to the approximate size that you're going to cover.

11 Cut the mask

I use a scalpel to very carefully cut the masking film and uncover areas I want to be exposed in the drawing, then remove the excess film. I have to be mindful of the pressure I'm cutting with to protect the art.

12 Make paint splashes

Also cover parts of the drawing with recycled paper to prevent any staining and mix the colours with a flat brush. Next, gently tap or flick the brush with a finger to create small drops of paint over your artwork.

13 Remove the mask

Once the watercolour has dried, the next step is to remove the masking film. Take care that the drawing isn't damaged by any of the parts. To do this, I use the scalpel and remove the mask extremely carefully.
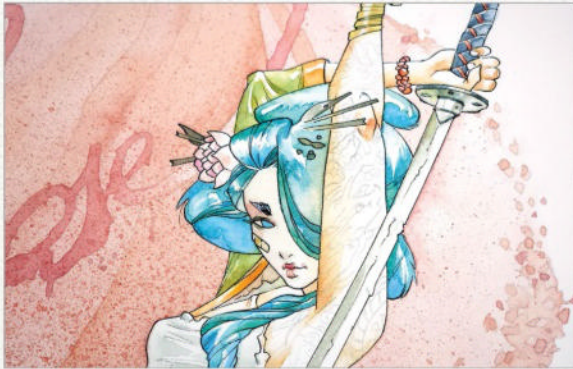
14 *Trace fine details*
Wait until the paper is completely dry. Remove the drawing from the wooden stand and then trace the outline of fine patterns, such as this tattoo. I use a registration mark on the paper so everything aligns.

15 *Colour the small elements*
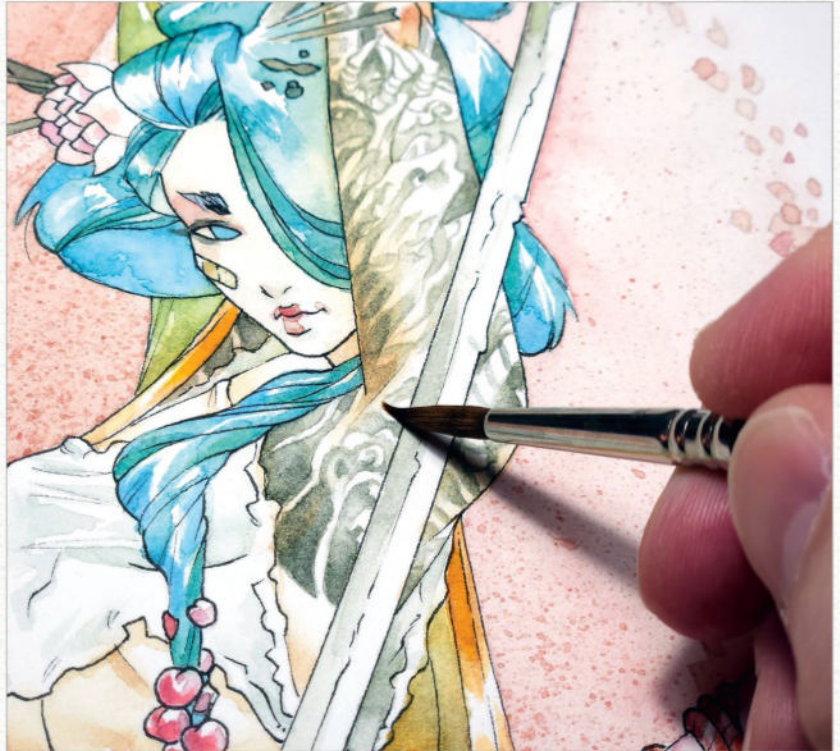Carefully fix the watercolour paper to the wooden support with masking tape, making sure that it's completely taut and wrinkle-free. With the watercolour, outline and fill in each of the parts until it's complete.
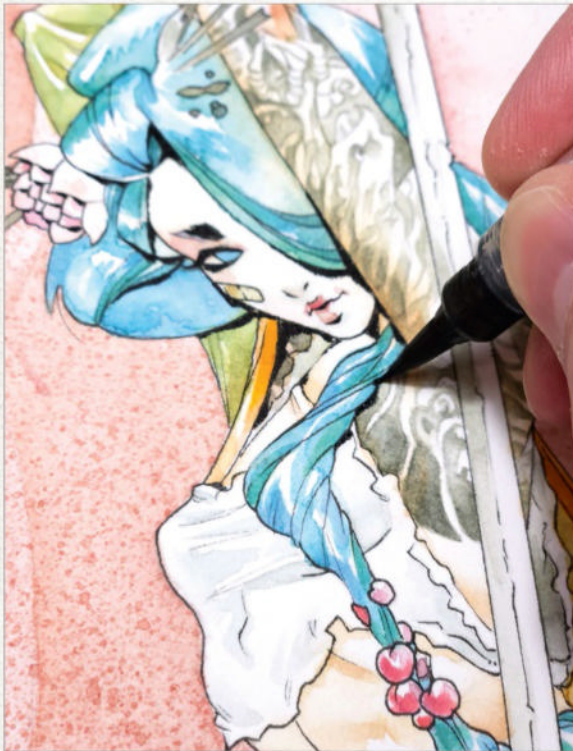
16 *Ink the lines*
With the help of a black ink brush marker, reinforce the lines of the drawing to help bring out the illustration. This prevents the image from being completely flat and adds a level of dynamism.
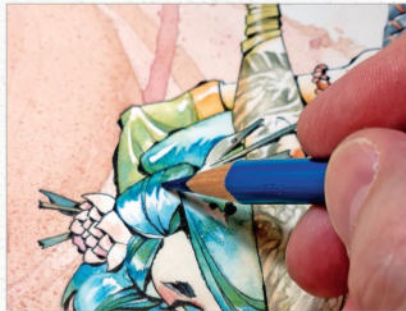
17 *Give it volume*
By choosing tones that contrast with the base colours of the drawing, we can define and reinforce each individual part. Gently add several layers of colour so that the tones begin to appear little by little.

18 *Wrapping up*
When you've finished with all the details and given the colour more volume in pencil, move on to using a white ink pen to mark all the highlights and reflections, and gradually finish up with the small details. ◖

First Impressions

✳ *Yuka Sakuma* ✳

How manga and Japanese classics moulded the artist

What, outside of traditional art, has most influenced your work throughout the years?

Manga and anime, which are, of course, two of the most popular cultural institutions in Japan. I grew up watching and reading so much of them from an early age. The shapes of the characters, the beauty of the lines, and the contrast between black and white found in manga have all had a major part to play in my art and its development.

Is there a painting you saw in your formative years that changed everything? What was it?

When I began studying art seriously, I remember being struck by Shinsui Ito's beautiful, highly technical piece Finger at a museum. It's one of the artworks that became a significant influence on my art.

Tell us about your first paid commission. Does it stand as a representation of your talent?

My graduation project in college was a turning point for me. I received so many invitations to exhibit from gallerists who saw it, and it was the

THORN IN MY HEART
I love Batman, and used the bat in this piece as a metaphor for courage.

> ❝ **I've never actually had any other future in mind than painting full-time** ❞

A STORY OF HAPPINESS
A group of swallows wrap a girl up with ribbons. Created with traditional Japanese ink.

work that launched my career as a painter. It has since been added to my university's art collection.

When did you decide that you wanted to be an artist?

My goal was always to become a professional artist, so I've never had any other future in mind than painting full-time.

What advice would you give to your younger self to aid you on the way?

Getting started isn't the hard part; the most difficult thing is to keep on creating. While it's vital to hone your painting skills, it's important to have the understanding and support of loved ones. You have to keep putting yourself in the right environment to continue painting.

EVEN IF MORNING NEVER COMES AGAIN
The unbroken stare is a hallmark of the characters throughout my artworks.

How has the industry of art changed for good since you've been working in it?

Not long after I began painting, social networking sites exploded. Now an artist's personality is often more important than academic background, and so on. For me, the possibility of connecting with audiences and opportunities outside of Japan has also increased, just like this interview! Even though I can't speak English, I'm grateful for the chances that are presented by living in a more connected world.

Can you tell us a little about the subjects in your art?

I always empathise with the girls in my work. I paint in the hope of removing the anguish from them.

What character, scene or style do you most identify with?

Ukiyo-e is one of the most famous genres of Japanese art, where artists created woodblock prints and paintings. So many wonderful ukiyo-e pieces have been created, among them bijin-ga, which are portraits of beautiful women. I'm a painter who produces contemporary bijin-ga pieces, and hope that my work will encourage more people to look at Japanese art, whether that's ukiyo-e or beyond.

Yuka Sakuma is a painter and illustrator based in Nagoya, Japan. Working in the Japanese nihonga style, her work has been exhibited at home and abroad. To learn about Yuka and see more of her art, visit www.instagram.com/sakuma.yuka.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

URGENT APPEAL

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

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HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN ♥

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