

1 NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS

ImagineFX



LEARN TO PAINT **DOOM** THE DARK AGES

Battle your inner demons
and slay complex scenes
with our **expert guide**

EXCLUSIVE
ARCANE:
SEASON 2
Concepts from the hit
show's finale revealed

PRO INSIGHT
BECOME A GAME
CONCEPT ARTIST
Inside secrets of the
misunderstood craft

WORKSHOP
ILLUSTRATE A
DEADLY DINO

Discover shading techniques
for the ultimate T-rex texture

FUTURE
ISSUE 254

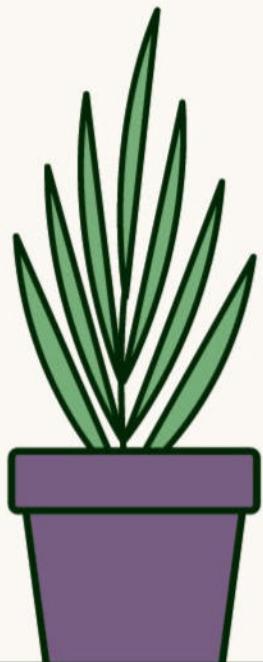
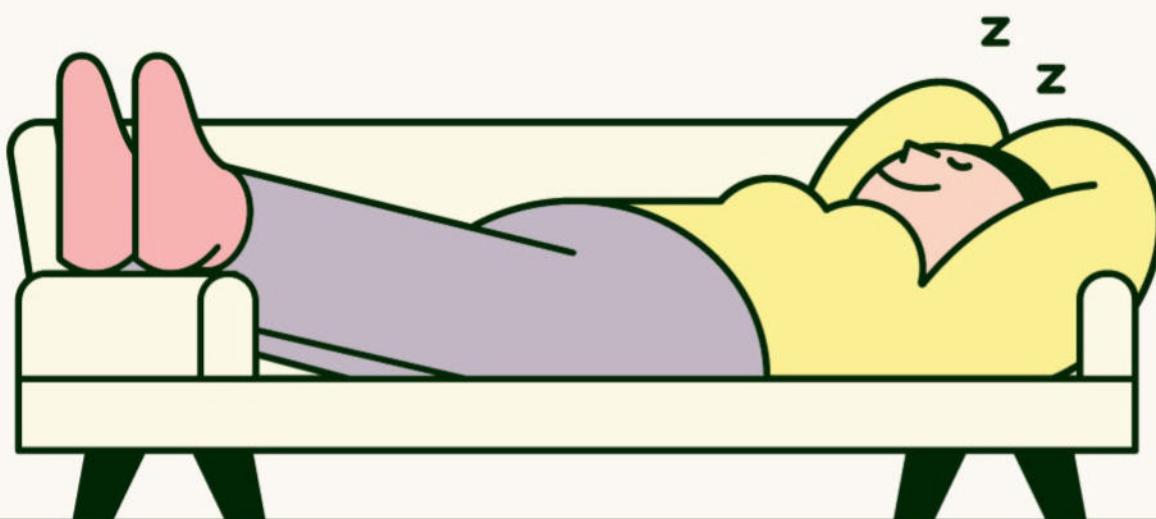
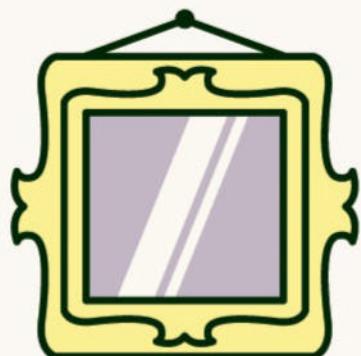
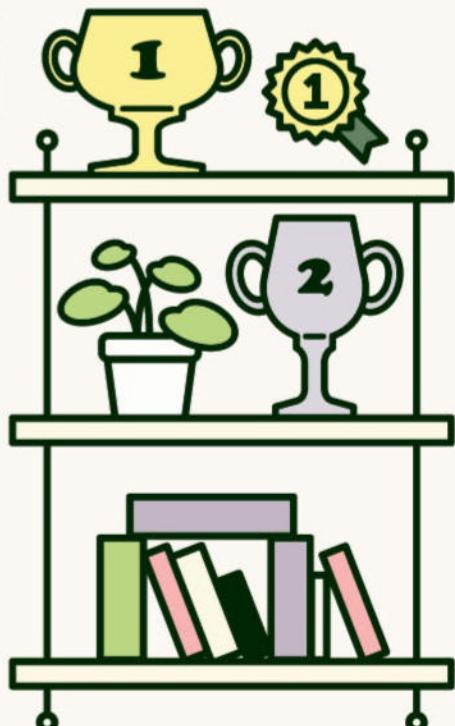
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HOW INDIE GAMES MIX
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Welcome to... NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX



This month our focus is on the world of video games, with features, training and more for you to get stuck into as you while away the long summer evenings, learning some new skills or discovering the latest interesting projects and art.

We're led by the hellish

Doom: The Dark Ages image on our cover with a full tutorial from artist Thomas Elliott. For more insight on game art, head to our features on how atmospheric indie game worlds are born, and a look at the ins and outs of crafting new concepts.

For the animation fans among you, check out our feature on the second season of Arcane to discover how the team behind the Netflix hit pushed the show's finale to new heights.

There's more workshops too, with a look at painting personality into characters and drawing deadly dinos with a flash of colour. I've recently made the move to a motorised sit and stand desk and really felt the benefits. Read my findings, along with more of the latest gear, in our review section.

Enjoy the issue!

Rob

Editor

Rob.Redman@futurenet.com

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Paint characters with personality

Delve into the finer details of Sean 'Ridd-Li' Abbott's One Piece fan art as he picks out the key elements.

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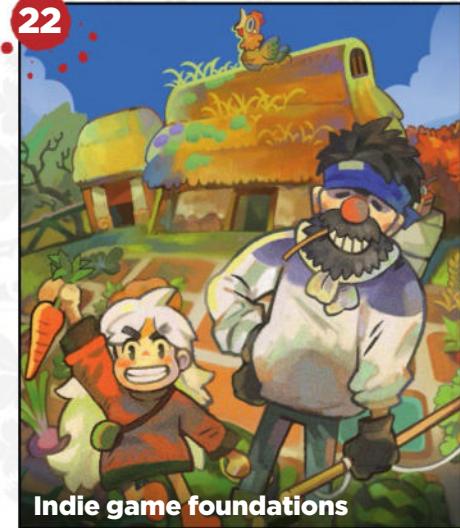
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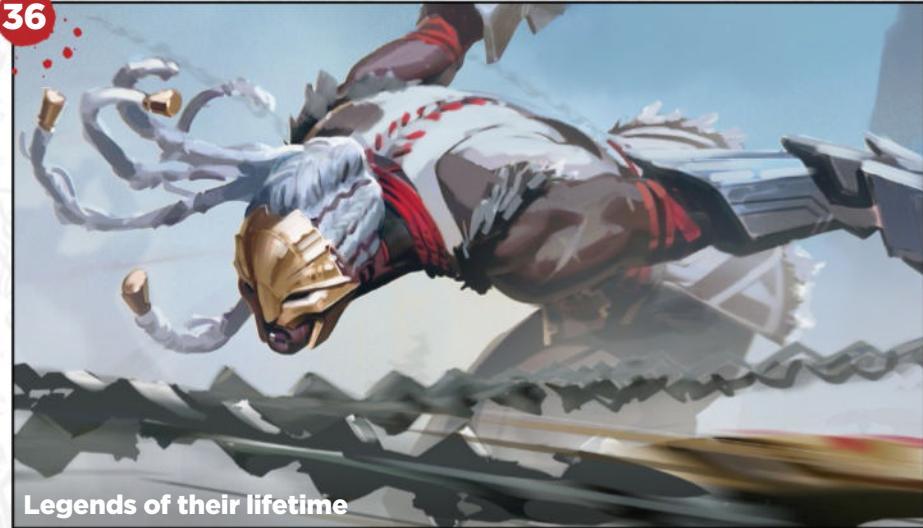
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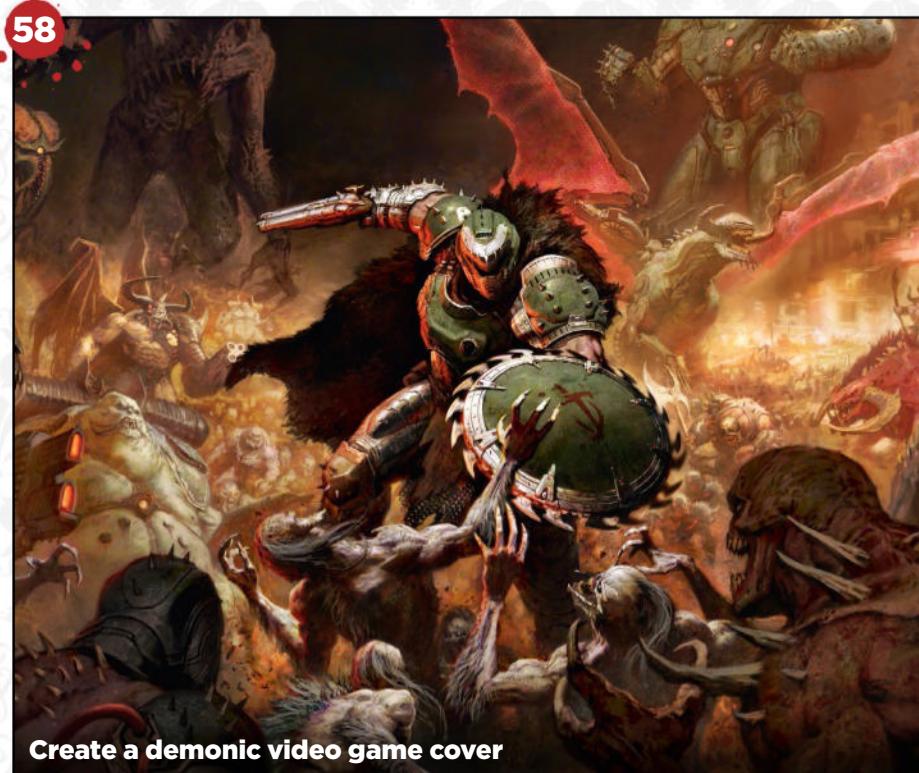
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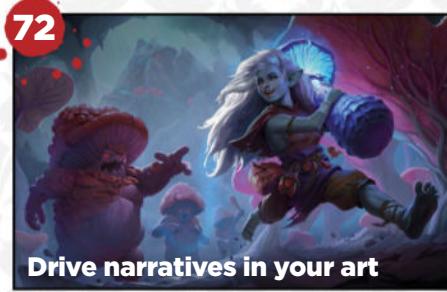
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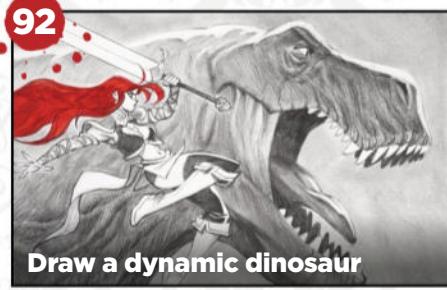
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Type this into your browser's address bar.

<https://ifxm.ag/doom>

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Next month

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Next month in...
NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

50 EXPERT TIPS FOR PROCREATE

Boost your skills with a bumper batch of
pro advice from five awesome artists

Craft chilling charcoal beasts

Learn how to turn
abstract shapes into
devilish monsters
with Eric Messinger

Gothic anime secrets revealed

Behind the scenes
on Castlevania:
Nocturne's second
season of horrors

Inside a studio full of nostalgia

Forrest Imel takes
us on a tour of his
workspace packed
with gaming gear

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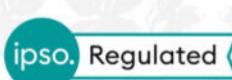
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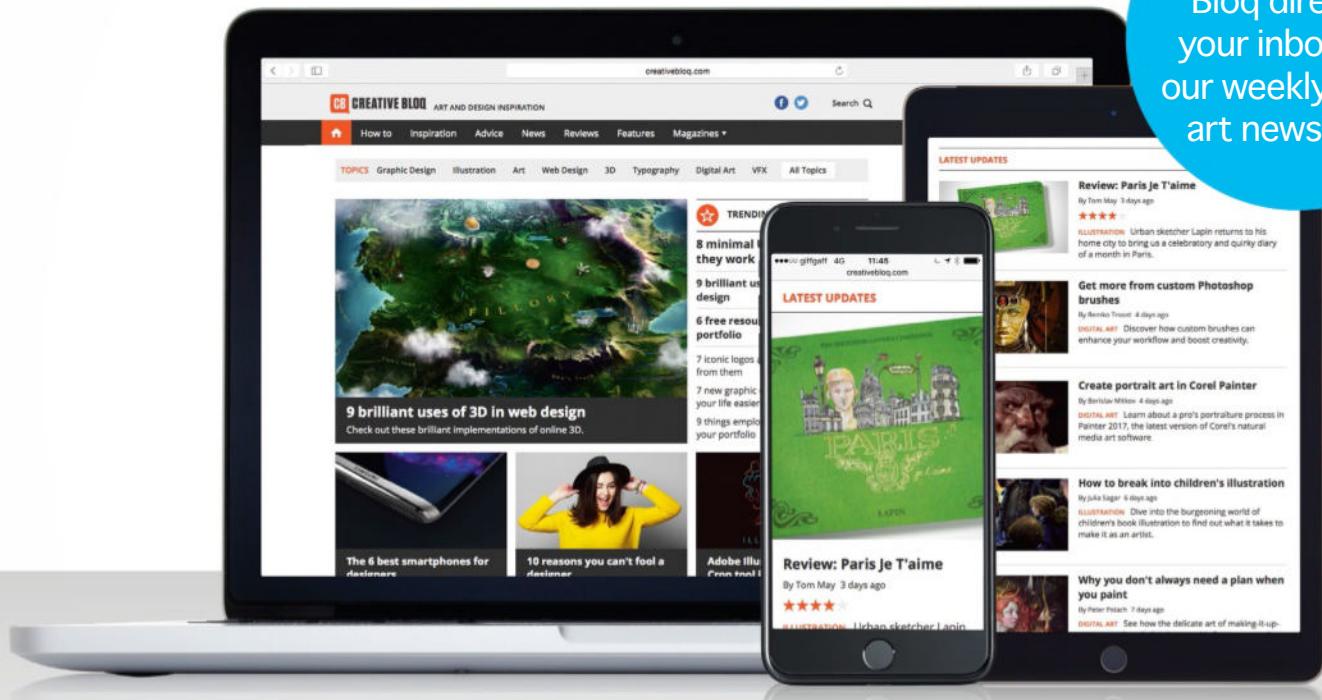


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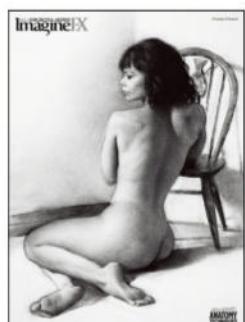
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THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART

1





Boo West

LOCATION: England MEDIA: Photoshop, PaintTool SAI WEB: www.sphinxmothra.com

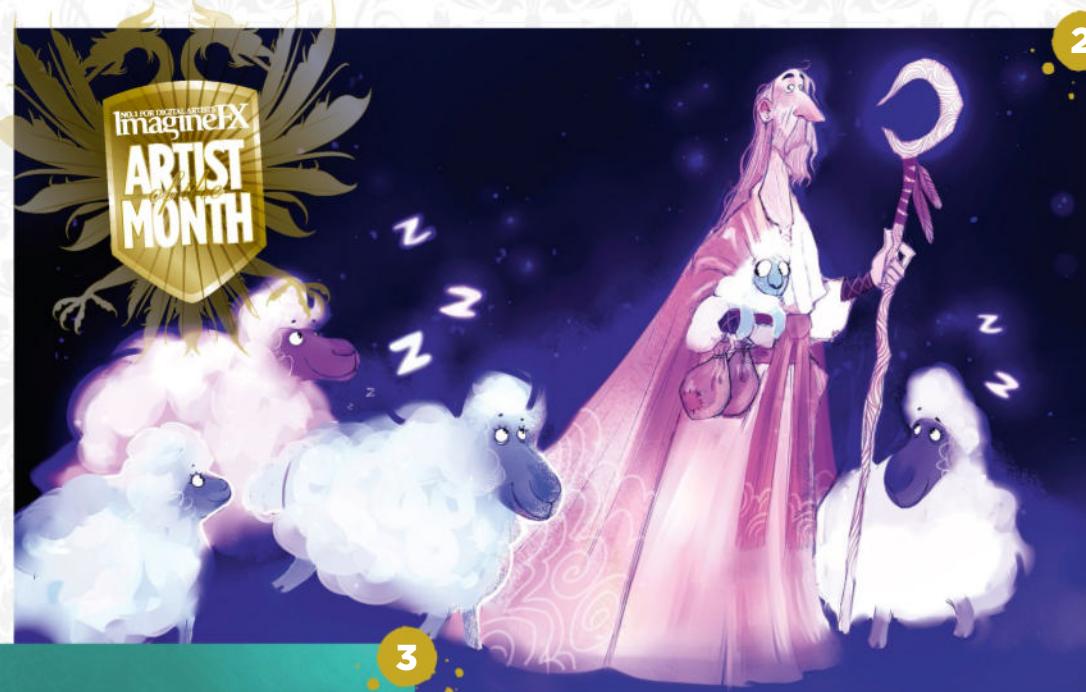
Boo is a character designer for animation and a stop-motion puppet fabricator. She loves crafting expressive characters with a playful, mysterious edge that also have a sense of humour in her illustrations.

1 THE RINGMASTER

"I wanted to have fun with bold lines and big energy. The circus theme gave me an excuse to draw two of my favourite things: bold characters and big cats in the spotlight."

2 WANDERING SHEPHERD

"This dreamy sandman figure guiding his flock was my take on the 'Wandering Shepherd' prompt for the Character Design Challenge. I loved blending softness and surrealism, and playing with a gentle atmosphere."



3 COMMON CEASG

"This piece from my zine on the folklore of British mermaids means a lot to me. I was drawn to the ceasg, a mythical salmon-mermaid from Scotland, and leaned into her quiet, eerie beauty."

4 AMDIS AND MYSKA

"A fun, sketchy dive into two vampire characters that I keep coming back to. It's less about polish, more about catching their vibe, fashion and personality. Plus a bit of bite!"

Sewoong Kim

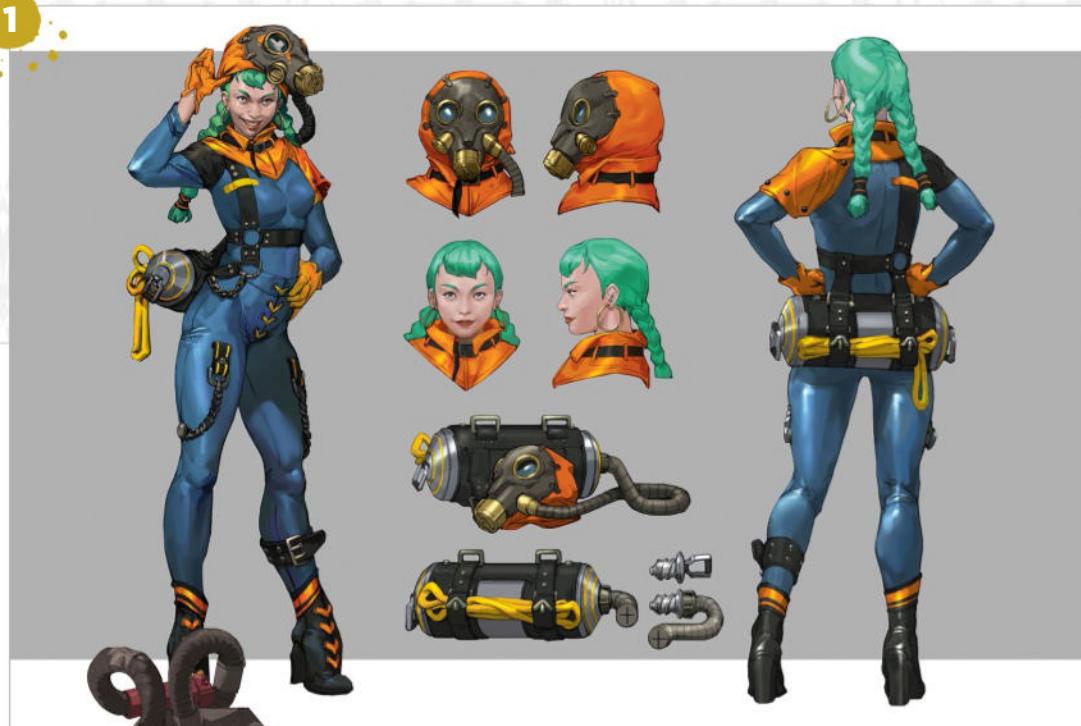
LOCATION: South Korea MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: www.artstation.com/sewoong

Sewoong is a character designer who focuses on capturing personality. Their work explores expressive poses, subtle emotions and visual storytelling through clever use of costume and silhouette. "My goal is to give every character a soul."

1 GAS MASK

"A quirky and stylish adventurer who wears a gas mask as part of their signature look. This piece plays with contrast - dark gear meets playful attitude."

1



2 JOSEON FANTASY

"A collection of unique characters inspired through traditional Korean aesthetics. This piece blends history and my imagination to create a diverse fantasy cast."

2



3

**3 CUTTER**

"A brawler character who fights with blades mounted on his arms. His rough silhouette and aggressive stance highlight raw strength and street-style combat."

4

**4 DUO**

"I wanted to design a team of two contrasting but complementary characters. Their chemistry and distinct traits tell a visual story of unity and individuality."





Daniel Chang

LOCATION: US MEDIA: Photoshop, Procreate WEB: <https://danillust.com>

Daniel is a Korean-American designer and illustrator. He graduated from College for Creative Studies with a degree in entertainment arts and draws inspiration from childhood experiences, culture, and the simple things in life.

1 DOOM CORE

"At this time, I was going through heartbreak and other personal obstacles, and I wanted to create a piece that could capture the state of my emotions and frustrations."

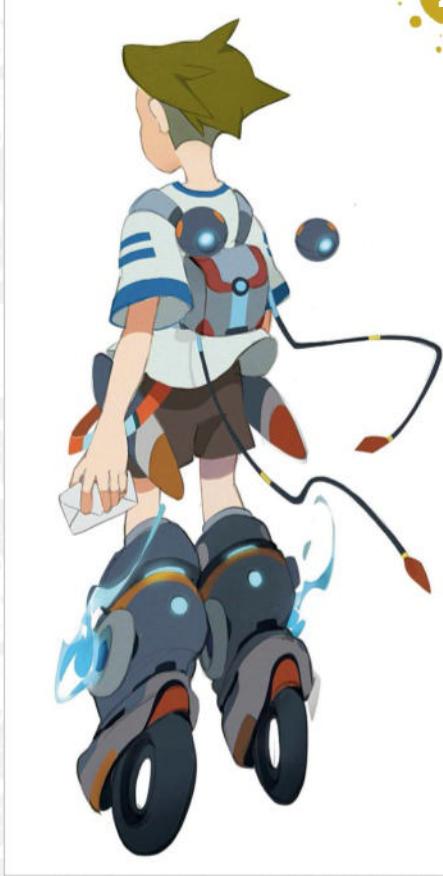
2 MAIL BOY

"A fun design inspired by the US Postal Service. I wanted to show the future of the postal service while keeping it grounded in modern simplicity."

1



2



3



3 QUIETLY BLOOMING

"This was part of a mini illustration series where I was experimenting with rendering and vibrancy by using only black backgrounds. I was deeply into bubbles, for some reason."

4 THE ORACLE

"Slightly borrowed from The Little Mermaid story. I wanted to portray the character as more empowering and triumphant with a delicate and expressive shape design."





Patri Balanovsky

LOCATION: Israel MEDIA: Photoshop, Procreate, traditional materials WEB: <https://patribalanovsky.artstation.com>

Patri is an experienced character designer, illustrator and art director who works mostly in the animation and game industries. He is versed in all sorts of styles and genres, and is particularly fond of cartoons and old films.

1



2

1 PINK BUNS

"A character design where I was aiming for a more casual look, something that was very stylised and simple. The expressions sheet was just me goofing around"

2 FELICIA

"This character design is a Darkstalkers fan art. I wanted to emphasise her feline-like, playful attitude rather than sexiness."

3 SUPER GREEN

"An homage to the movie The Fifth Element. I was trying to create a cartoon interpretation of a fun and larger-than-life persona."





Jessica Liu

LOCATION: France MEDIA: Procreate, Clip Studio Paint WEB: <https://zelyphia.carrd.co>

Jessica is a self-taught freelance artist who specialises in illustrations and character art. Her work is often fantasy themed, with a particular focus on shape and colour to make it look pleasing while telling a story.

1 FAITH

"An illustration that I was commissioned for by an amazing RPG game master. This is Faith, a powerful symbol of strict justice and revenge who once was a human that was betrayed by all of her loved ones."



2 THE FAIRY AND THE TIGER

"I'm the daughter of two Chinese parents, so have always had huge Asian influences. Here I wanted to show my fascination with those Asian aesthetics, in particular the tiger, which is my lunar zodiac sign."

3 SOLARPUNK - HARMONIE

"I aimed to convey peaceful happiness in a perfect world where technology grew without destroying nature, and where the humans and animals can all live together in perfect harmony."





4



5



4 SINABON'S BIRTHDAY

"Another commission, for a VTuber named Sinabon. I love the dynamic angle I went for with this piece. Commissions have made me improve the most over the years, so these artworks are important to me."

5 PANDEMONIUM - FRÉNÉSIE

"This was inspired by Joseph Tomanek's masterpiece Fire Dance. I wanted this artwork to feel powerful with a sense of madness, as if the dancers are offering their soul to the demon they're summoning."

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



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The End Is Nigh

YEAR CREATED: 2024 MEDIA: Photoshop

“In what is a seemingly peaceful world, technological advancements have made human life more beautiful, but behind this tranquillity lies an ancient evil force. And this force is about to awaken, signalling the impending destruction of the world. The hero has fallen, his heart clutched in the demon's grasp, declaring their arrival and the despair to come. Will new justice rise, or will the world await its doom?”



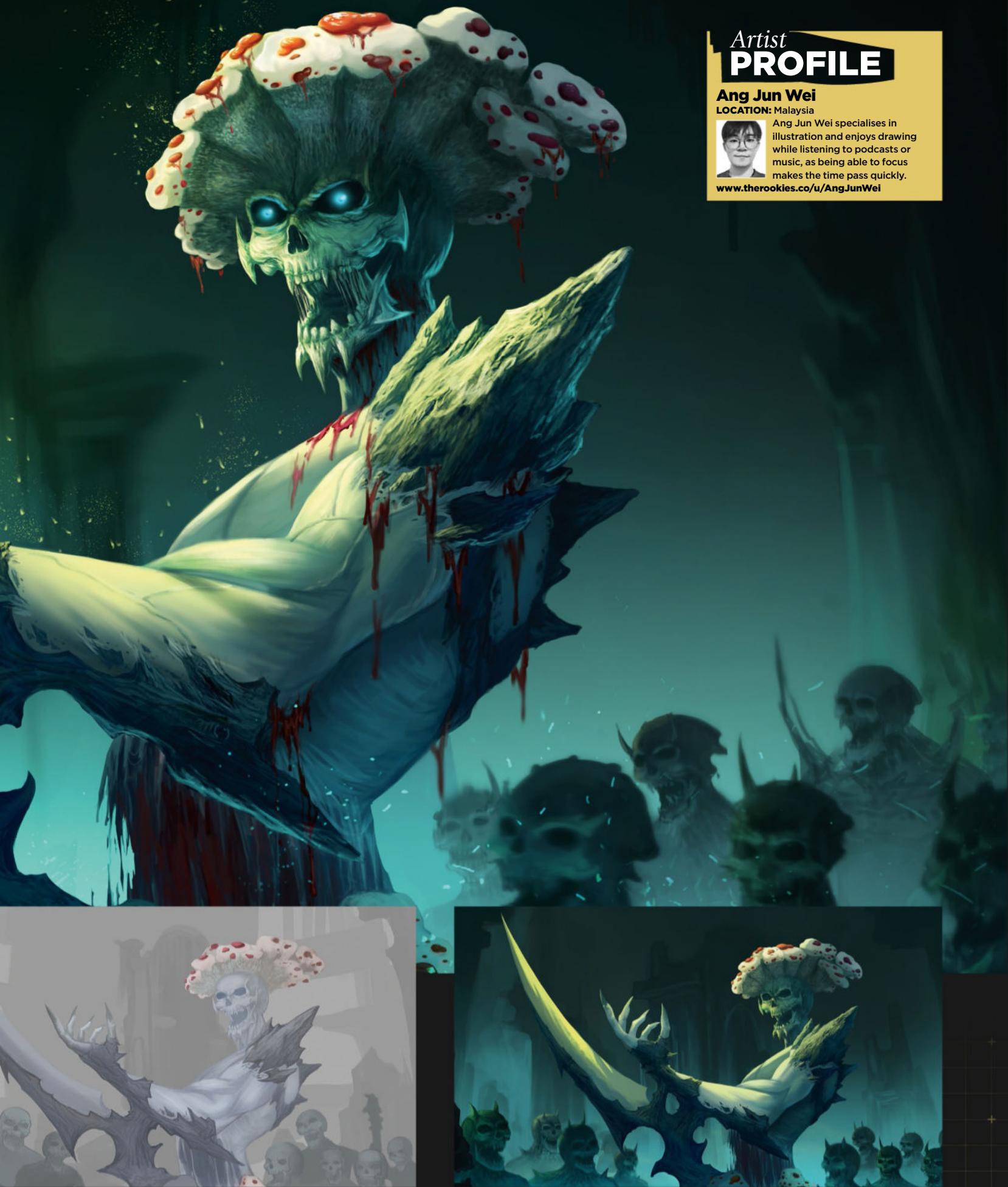
Artist PROFILE

Ang Jun Wei

LOCATION: Malaysia



Ang Jun Wei specialises in illustration and enjoys drawing while listening to podcasts or music, as being able to focus makes the time pass quickly.
www.therookies.co/u/AngJunWei



ARTIST NEWS, SOFTWARE & EVENTS

ImagineNation

AT THE CORE OF THE DIGITAL ART COMMUNITY

"In Eastward, we felt it was important to tell a story of the relationship between a parent and child in a world that feels increasingly dangerous," says Hong.



"The Night is Grey's story makes the player ask a lot of questions, and the most important is the one you'll ask yourself when you finish it," says André.



Indie game foundations

Setting the stage **Tanya Combrinck** discovers how artists build tone and weave emotion into narratives

Drawings and paintings take on a whole new dimension when they're used to create a game world. As emotive as animated films and TV shows can be, there's nothing as special and engrossing as being immersed in a setting where you can dwell on and influence a moment rather than watching it pass by.

Sometimes the atmosphere, emotion and mystery of just one piece of artwork is enough to inspire an entire game concept. Japanese-styled RPG Eastward was conceived when artist **Hong Moran** sketched a "weird monster dormitory building" that resembled the once infamous Kowloon Walled City of Hong Kong, an overpopulated, anarchic and hellish-sounding enclave that was demolished in 1994.

"We got excited about the design and came up with a game that would

fit around the aesthetic," says Hong. "Eastward unfolds within a cruel and unforgiving world, where every individual is forced to confront the pressing issue of survival. The storyline delves into the depths of our human existence, exploring the characters' hidden secrets and their burdened pasts."

JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

The highs and lows of the story take the characters into moments of joy, sorrow and shades in between, but instead of guiding players on an emotional journey, Hong prefers to let them find their own way. "I feel

“Rather than leading the player, it's about sharing an experience with them”



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Jeremy says: "Some of the most valuable tools are colour, shape and composition. We need to ask, 'What are we trying to convey? What should the player feel?'"

that rather than leading players, it's more about sharing the experience with them," he says.

He focuses in particular on colour and fine details in his artwork as a way to help the player experience the characters' emotions. "We've put a lot of effort into the details because they make the story more believable and our characters' emotions more nuanced," Hong adds. "This makes ➤



RIFTBOUND TO LAUNCH

Riot Games reveals new details about its upcoming League of Legends trading card game Riftbound, with a selection of awesome card art on display.

Page 28



FUNCTIONAL WORKSPACE

We take the grand tour of comic artist and illustrator Greg Staples' new studio, which he has built with exclusive spaces for all his epic artistic endeavours.

Page 30



DRAGON ART TAKES FLIGHT

The latest ImagineFX Art Challenge set down the task of creating a piece for the theme of The Last Dragon Rider. We've selected all our favourite entries here!

Page 34

© Whitethorn Games



"Wytchwood's art is grim and gribbly, and we didn't try to shy away from the comically grotesque," says Jesse.

An early sketch made up of densely packed buildings that Hong created to inspire the aesthetic of Eastward.



"We took inspiration from Japanese anime like Cowboy Bebop, Porco Rosso and Akira," says Hong.



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Planet of Lana centres around a young girl, Lana, and her companion, Mui, as they travel across a beautiful but dangerous planet on a quest to rescue Lana's sister, who has been taken prisoner by an army of machines.

© Thunderful/Super Rare Games

it easier for players to immerse themselves in the story."

Planet of Lana, a platformer and puzzler combo created by Wishfully Studios, is another game underpinned by one piece of art that encapsulates the mood of the story and the relationship it's centred around.

"The game originates from a single image I drew back in 2017 and that we still use as the main key art," says creative director **Adam Stjärnljus**. "I had an idea of this side-scrolling sci-fi puzzle adventure with a young girl and her creature companion, and drew an image to represent the idea."

The artwork he created attracted collaborators and kick-started the game's production. "The reaction I got when showing the image to people pushed me forward and made



me realise that the game could be something special," Adam recalls. "Over the course of the next year, I had a lot of extremely talented people join the project, and then in 2019 we collectively started Wishfully Studios with the goal of releasing our first game, Planet of Lana."

Adam was influenced by games from the 80s and 90s that he grew up with: classics such as Oddworld, Another World and Prince of Persia, as well as more recent cinematic platformers like Limbo and Inside, and the film Spirited Away.

He adds: "The art style was heavily inspired by Studio Ghibli and I tried



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"During production, I maintained goals for each space with regard to ideas such as shape, colour, readability, composition, and so on," says Jeremy.

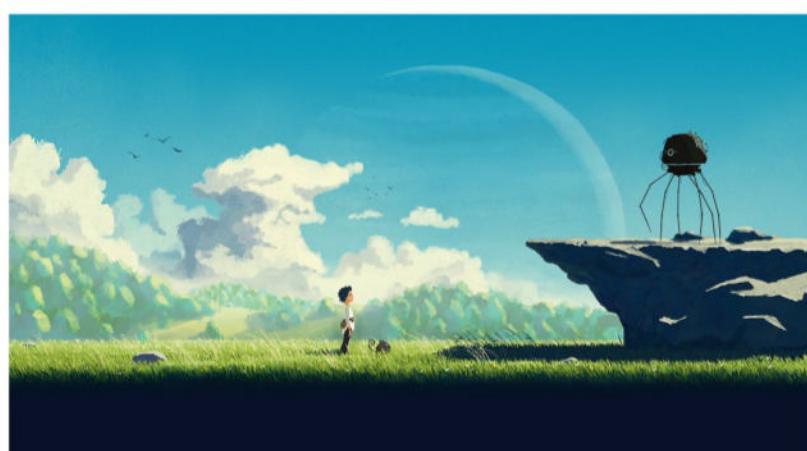
to find a unique expression in the contrasts of a painterly environment, and with characters and creatures that have a simple flat-shaded look, combined with the black foreground that makes you feel as though you're kind of looking into a theatre stage."

SECOND TAKE

Working on a sequel presents an interesting challenge for game artists, in that they have to work with and develop an existing art style rather than crafting a new one.

When creating the look for Moon Studios' *Ori and the Will of the Wisps*, art director and story lead **Jeremy Gritton** sought to stay true to the visual vocabulary of the game's predecessor, *Ori and the Blind Forest*, while leading the art team to find new ways to put their own spin on the follow-up.

"This began by deconstructing the original game; really studying it to understand what they'd done,



"What Lana and Mui can do, separately and together, and how the planet and creatures react individually, is the key to the gameplay," says Adam.

© Thunderful/Super Rare Games



Artist news, software & events

"We're all huge fans of 90s JRPGs like the EarthBound series and Dragon Quest, but also nostalgic games like *Boku no Natsuyasumi*," says Hong.

© Chucklefish/Pixpix



© Whitemhorn Games



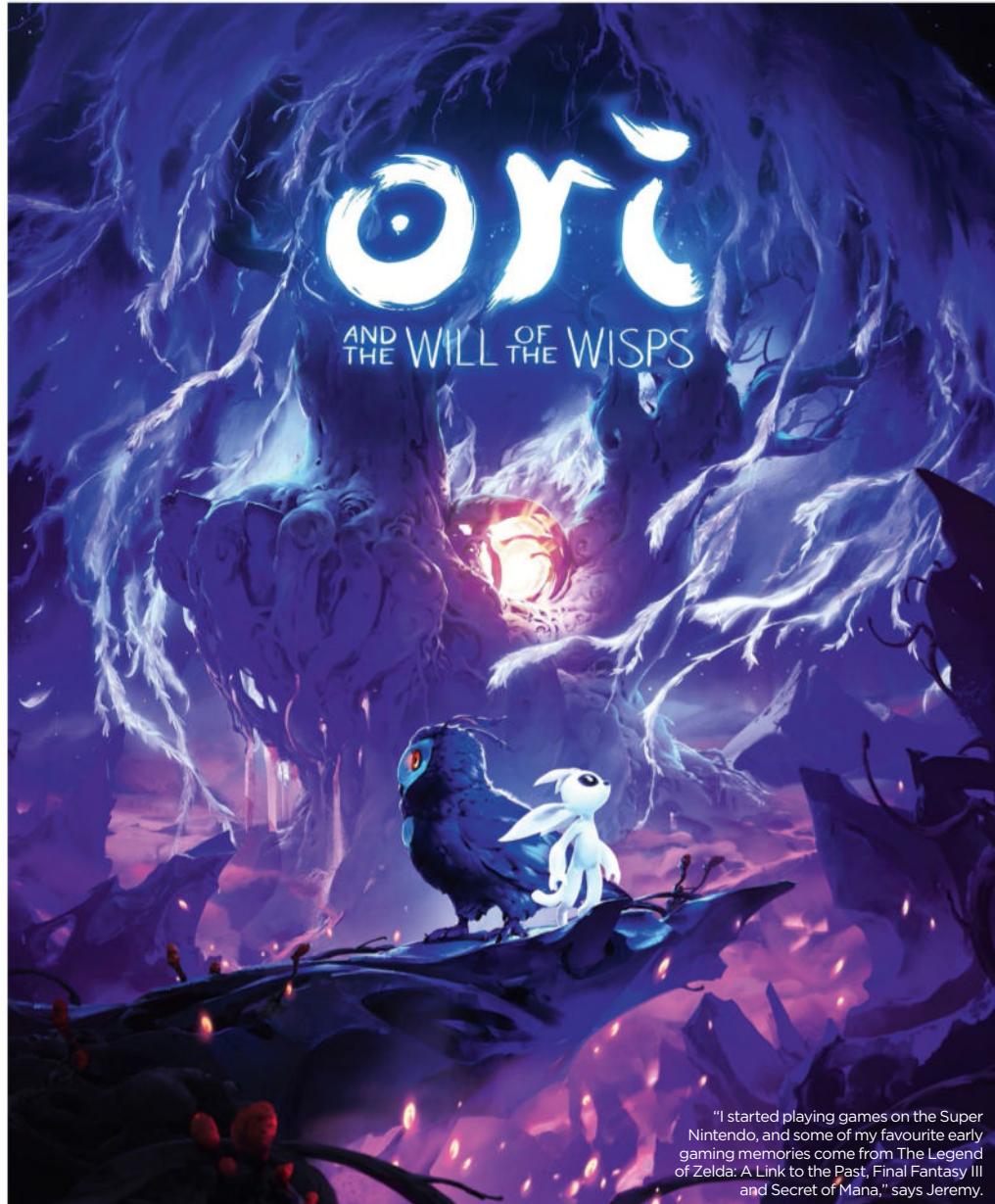
"The tone of Wytchwood doesn't take itself very seriously, and relies on terrible puns," says Jesse.

and why it worked," Jeremy explains. "Deconstruction is a very useful tool to go from appreciating something to understanding it. You might play a game and think, 'I like the way this looks', but breaking down all the components brings insight into the techniques that were used to elicit that feeling. If we were to follow in Blind Forest's footsteps, we had to understand what they did and why it worked, so that we could both emulate and evolve it."

Jeremy's process for creating art for a level begins with making mind maps of ideas related to the core concept of the location, followed by a round of concept art to explore those ideas. "Defining a unique shape language is important, along with the chosen colour palette, because we want to create a memorable identity for each area," he says.

"It's difficult to dial everything in perfectly on the first pass, so I'm usually searching for something in our team's work that grabs me, ➤

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"I started playing games on the Super Nintendo, and some of my favourite early gaming memories come from *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, *Final Fantasy III* and *Secret of Mana*," says Jeremy.



"The main gaming influences for The Night is Grey were the Broken Sword and Myst series," says André.

Jesse says: "We punched up the colours and cartoony characters, but kept lots of gross little details."



© Whethorn Games

► whether it's the shapes or the colours that capture the feeling we want. As long as the potential is there in the initial concept, we continue iterating to develop the rest around the core element that was working.

"Story and art are a combination that's very closely connected for me, so we always look for opportunities to inject environmental storytelling into our spaces. Striving to tell a story with



"It's vital to craft an experience where the player cares about the world and characters," says Jeremy.

“Some of the technical limitations actually ended up enhancing the art style”

visuals can provide another layer of heart and depth to the artwork."

COMBINED VISION

For games that have a more diffuse starting point, in that they're not part of an established IP, and nor do they emanate from a single stroke-of-genius artwork, the aura of the world is often built out of a collection of different influences.

For psychological thriller The Night is Grey, creative director **André Broa** and his team found inspiration in sources from other eras to feed the game's dark atmosphere. "From the very beginning we liked the idea of The Night is Grey having the same vibe as children's illustrated fairy tale

"The player character is a witty old witch with a cauldron on her head," says Jesse.



books, as well as classically animated cartoons," he says.

"The style of Don Bluth influenced us a lot when we were children and we wanted to bring that mix of cartoonish yet moody and kind of scary, like the tales of The Brothers Grimm. Those were the main themes, but lots of other works influenced us, from John Carpenter's gore in The Thing to the painted background art style of Studio Ghibli."

Exploring those earlier aesthetics was also the route taken by Alientrap creative director **Jesse McGibney** as his team went out in search of inspiration for Wytchwood, a game about playing the witch character in fairy tales.

"We looked to classic sources like medieval woodcut illustrations and the original fairy tales. We also looked at contemporary and familiar tellings of those stories, such as early Disney



"We wanted to capture the feeling of exploring a vintage cartoon, while creating a good mystery with balanced puzzle-solving," says André.

Artist news, software & events



Hong advises: "Think about how to complete levels quickly under limited conditions. Sometimes, managing efficiency and pursuing perfect design are equally important."

movies and character designs from Jim Henson's *Muppets*," Jesse says.

"We did a lot of mood pieces, concept art and sketches while in pre-production, as well as developing our tool pipeline to figure out what would and wouldn't work. Some of these technical limitations actually ended up enhancing the art style, such as the fact that everything is drawn on 2D cutouts, making the game look more like a pop-up storybook."

Hitting the right artistic notes for a game level is more of a process than a destination. "Like most kinds of art, there's no real point of completion, only a point at which you have to put it down and stop fussing with it," Jesse adds. "For game art especially, we're constantly creating or improving our tools, which can mean we have to go back and redo previous sections of the game. Sometimes a level will start with a piece of concept art that we're aiming to hit, or it might just be iterating on an idea until it feels right.

"For me, the most important thing I can do if something isn't hitting right is to take a step away and come back to it later with fresh eyes. A lot of times, the things I have problems with will become more clear or will reveal themselves to not really be problems at all. But a lot of times you just have to call something done. Pretty much everything could be done better, but not if we ever want it finished."



Jesse says: "We tried to mix a bit of the dark and spooky with the whimsical and goofy. Like reading bedtime fables during a rainstorm; cosy, but a little scary."



"It all needs to come together to deliver an emotional impact; the art, music, gameplay, sound design and story," says Adam.



Legendary characters including Jinx, Lee Sin, Viktor and Yasuo will be taking centre stage in Riftbound when the TCG launches later this year.



Cards on the table

The upper hand Riot Games reveals new details for Riftbound, its League of Legends trading card game set to launch this year

Trading card games have been a staple of gaming culture for decades, with giants such as Pokémon, Magic: The Gathering and Yu-Gi-Oh! the dominant names in the scene.

Now video game powerhouse Riot Games is entering the arena with Riftbound, a brand new trading card game (TCG) based on its biggest IP, League of Legends. The first set, named Origins, will launch with 300 cards featuring a mix of champions, legends, spells, gear, runes, units and



Not only will League of Legends characters be introduced, but iconic spells and weapons will also get their own cards.

battlegrounds. While the final designs and gameplay mechanics are still in development, the team at Riot has been actively incorporating community feedback.

“We’ve been incredibly humbled by the excitement and interest from players around the world who can’t wait to play Riftbound,” says **Chengran Chai**, the TCG’s executive producer. “We’re grateful to the growing Riftbound

illustration of Jinx revealed, alongside other iconic champions from the League of Legends universe being announced, including Annie, Garen, Lee Sin, Lux, Master Yi, Viktor, Yasuo and Volibear. And just like Magic: The Gathering, the cards will be illustrated by a roster of talented artists and studios, including Slawomir Maniak, who painted the moody, unnerving Deadbloom Predator.

Riftbound – codenamed Project K until its recent reveal – will first launch in China this summer, with an English-language release following in October. For updates, art previews and more, visit riftbound.leagueoflegends.com.

Riot Games also has plenty more in the pipeline to expand further on the League of Legends universe. Upcoming projects include 2XKO (formerly Project L), a tag-team fighting game; a new film and series project set in Noxus following the conclusion of Arcane season 2; and the long-anticipated League of Legends MMORPG.

“Feedback encouraged us to level up the experience by revisiting design decisions”

community and the TCG players who’ve jumped in early to share their feedback – including calls for more original art and refined UI.

“That feedback encouraged us to level up the game experience by revisiting some of our design decisions and conducting more playtests to ensure we’re delivering a game that our players will love.”

We’ve already had a taste of what’s to come, with Sugar Free’s striking



Since its debut in 2009, League of Legends has become one of the most-played PC games in the world. And now artists like Slawomir Maniak are bringing its iconic characters and creatures to life in an entirely new medium.

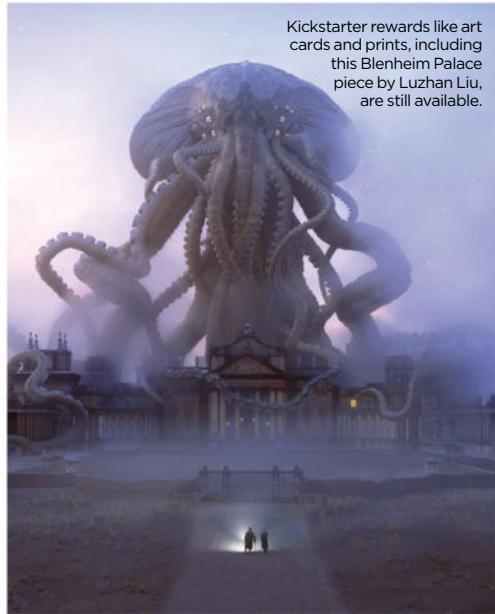


The skeletal ghost of a cetiosaurus haunts Bliss Mill, a former tweed factory, in Damir G. Martin's art.

The Cotswolds is known for its magical beauty, but Alex Andreev brings a darker narrative to the book.



Derek Winslow blends He Sun's photos of Castle Combe with 3D models to depict a 12th-century castle.



Kickstarter rewards like art cards and prints, including this Blenheim Palace piece by Luzhan Liu, are still available.

Lost in the mists of time

Dark matter Fantasy novel Cotswold Mist weaves myths, ghosts and beasts into the heart of the English countryside's heritage sites

The Cotswolds is world-famous for its chocolate-box villages and quaint pubs, but new illustrated cinematic fantasy novel Cotswold Mist aims to turn that image on its head.

Written by cinematographer Inga Teder, the book takes readers on a journey through the picturesque towns and villages of the Cotswolds, nestled in England's south west, where historical events and mythical entities come to life. The team behind it also hope to boost cultural awareness and heritage through regional folklore and artistic storytelling.



Thomas Walker has brought author Inga Teder's vision to life with a thrilling book cover.

Inside Cotswold Mist, 28 full-colour illustrations have been beautifully crafted using a variety of techniques, from digital painting and 3D modelling to traditional hand-drawn elements, taking inspiration from some of the area's most iconic sights. Featured artists include Alex Andreev, Stefan Koidl, Damir G. Martin, Luzhan Liu, Derek Winslow, Eren Arik, Edouard Groult and Thomas Walker.

The book has been successfully funded on Kickstarter, but you can still make a late pledge and claim available rewards at <https://bit.ly/4k3n0ds>.

ImagineFX quick quiz

Find out if you're an artistic brainbox!

1) What makes raster different to vector?

- A**) Pixels vs paths
- B**) 3D vs 2D
- C**) Stills vs animation
- D**) Colour vs black and white

2) What does the brush opacity setting control?

- A**) Smoothness
- B**) Transparency
- C**) Colour intensity
- D**) Thickness

3) Which tool is commonly used to blend colours?

- A**) Dodge
- B**) Lasso
- C**) Smudge
- D**) Marquee

4) What is turpentine used for in oil painting?

- A**) Mixing colours
- B**) Cleaning brushes
- C**) Underpainting
- D**) Adding details

5) What do you call colours opposite on the colour wheel?

- A**) Complementary
- B**) Offending
- C**) Triadic
- D**) Analogous

6) Which of the following pencil grades is the hardest?

- A**) 7H
- B**) F
- C**) HB
- D**) 2B

7) Which of these is NOT a technique used in art?

- A**) One-point perspective
- B**) Linear perspective
- C**) Hexadecimal perspective
- D**) Atmospheric perspective

8) In what year was the original Wacom Cintiq released?

- A**) 1998
- B**) 1999
- C**) 2000
- D**) 2001

9) What is the main benefit of non-destructive editing?

- A**) Reduced eye strain
- B**) Keeps original file intact
- C**) Reduced file size
- D**) Easier to print

Answers: 1A, 2B, 3C, 4B, 5A, 6A, 7C, 8D, 9B



ImagineNation Artist in Residence



Greg Staples

Dream space The comic artist and illustrator tells us how he planned out a studio for all occasions



I've been working in this studio for around three years now, and I feel pretty lucky to own it. My previous studio was a loft I converted, but it was a relatively compact space.

My wife and I walked past this house often and then saw it up for sale. We'd always admired it, partly because of its size, privacy and history, but for me I always loved the look of the outside studio, which had a twisty staircase on the exterior of the house leading up to it. At the time it was being rented as a studio apartment, before that it was an Airbnb, and even earlier was used as a full-size snooker room. ➤



I've loved working with Macs for many years. I find they work in unison with my creativity.



Vice Press did a wonderful print of my Dredd vs. Death painting. It was a nice connection and we've collaborated on many poster projects since. I highly recommend checking them out.

A page from Slaine: The Horned God. In my opinion it's Simon Bisley's best work and I'm still blown away that I have this page next to me while I work. I try not to be too influenced by it though, as I prefer my work to look like my own. Still, it's one of my favourite things in the studio.

My Mabef easel, where I do the majority of my painting. I like standing while I draw and paint, as it keeps the art from becoming too stiff.

“I always loved the studio’s exterior, which has a twisty staircase on the outside”

I bought this little paint organiser from Home Bargains for a few quid. Art equipment can be expensive, and while I’d always recommend quality materials, there are many cheaper options for things like this.

I mostly use Rosemary and Co brushes these days. While they may be a bit more expensive, I find they last so much longer than others so you save in the long run. Plus they’re just so lovely to use!

I made a side table using an old easel and a plank of wood. Sometimes you can reuse old equipment in creative ways!

An Iwata airbrush compressor. I occasionally use an airbrush, mainly for underpainting and a bit of glazing if needed. This compressor is easy to use and low maintenance, which is important when I’m working towards a deadline.

I saw a tattooist using one of these daylight lamps. The flexibility and light is great for mixing the right colours. You don’t need an expensive lamp though, daylight bulbs in an old lamp work just fine too!

This Julian side table has a cool little pop-up side board when I need more room. It may be a touch extravagant, but I use it all the time. It’s full of things I need fast access to like paints, palettes, and even a hairdryer to dry paints quickly.

ImagineNation Artist in Residence



Following a battle to the finish we got the house, and after moving in I got to work planning the layout of the studio I wanted to create in. My aim was for it to be a very functional working studio with separate areas for the various mediums.

I divided it into a drawing area, a digital area, a painting area, and an area for cutting, packaging and so on. I also have a small library featuring functional books such as anatomy, workshop technique and reference.

My drawing area is where I do the majority of pencilling and inking, and it's lit with a draughting daylight lamp and a small table for equipment at the side. It's an old Admel draughting

“The aim was for it to be a functional studio with areas for my various mediums”

Serra Angel is probably my most recognisable Magic: The Gathering painting, and one that I'm still fond of.

drawing board that can adjust to an upright position if I need it. A perfect space for those busy deadlines!

Next to this is my computer, which is a 64GB Apple Mac Studio M2 Max. I don't do any 3D work so that's enough to run Photoshop and Corel Painter. I tend to always do as much traditional work as I can, but usually do my colour roughs in Painter as it feels traditional and is quite good for matching the feel I want once I move across to paint it traditionally.

FREEDOM TO PAINT

Alongside is an old restored plan chest for storing paper, art board and original artwork, with an old A3 Epson scanner on top. I'm not the greatest at scanning and colour correcting though, so I've started using a local art gallery as their scanning is incredible.

My painting area features a large Mabef easel with a daylight lamp I can move around. There's no way I could do large paintings in my last studio, but this easel enables me to. I've also

got a Julian studio cabinet where I keep my key paints, plus a large set of old drawers that came with the house where I keep oils, colour pencils and watercolours, with all my brushes, mediums and everything else on top.

Behind is a large packing and cutting table. I keep any packing board, knives and tapes there with a cutting mat on top. This was such a great buy, I use it all the time, even for wrapping Christmas presents!

I have a nice little outside place to relax and take breaks. Anything that makes coming to work a pleasure is something I appreciate a lot these days. And rounding off the studio is a bathroom with a shower – handy for long days – and a kitchen for tea, coffee and washing brushes.

I have art on the walls, mostly from artists I know and love, plus a couple of my own prints. It's always inspiring being around talented people I know, and having their work around helps to keep me motivated.

Greg began his career drawing Judge Dredd for British comic 2000 AD. He has since worked on a variety of projects including concept design for film, television and games, as well as creating a host of work for Magic: The Gathering and founding his own VFX company. www.gregstaples.com

Artist news, software & events



© Hammer Films



© Albatross Funny Books



Draconic legend Our five favourites as readers put their spin on the theme of The Last Dragon Rider



Rodrigo 'Digo' Salazar

Web: www.instagram.com/digo_doodles



Randy Lillegaard

Web: [www.randylillegaard.com](https://randy-lillegaard.com)



Andrew Law

Web: www.andrewlawart.com



Amanda Esplugues Fuentes

Web: www.instagram.com/ulksyart



Juan Pedro Testa Web: www.instagram.com/juando.art

Challenge accepted Keep an eye on our social media channels for all the latest ImagineFX Art Challenge info and you could see your art in a future issue! **Visit page 3 for all our social details**

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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Feature
THE TOP 19 PHOTOSHOP ALTERNATIVES

Confused by the endless options for image editing software on the market? We've got you covered with a breakdown of the best options for you.

Top 19 Photoshop alternatives

PROCREATE

With Procreate, you can create digital art on the go. It's a powerful app that offers a wide range of tools and features, including a variety of brushes, layers, and selection tools. It's perfect for artists who want to create digital art on the go.

SAI

Sai is a digital painting application that offers a wide range of tools and features, including a variety of brushes, layers, and selection tools. It's perfect for artists who want to create digital art on the go.

Ditching Photoshop

Hi guys. I just read your latest issue and it's really opened my eyes. I've been a Photoshop user for years and have felt it was the best option for my art. I'm not a fan of subscription-based software but didn't really think I had any other options. I knew other apps were out there but I'm really grateful you showed them off in more detail. I think I can now make the move to something new and bin the Adobe subscription.

Alex, via email

Rob replies Hi Alex. Thanks for getting in touch, and I'm very pleased to hear you found that round-up useful. Other than finding the best way to use your budget, I think exploring other software can be artistically interesting; different methods, new tools, and varying workflows can all breathe new life into your work.

Characterful creations

ImagineFX 253 was a real corker! As an aspiring character designer, I'm on a continuing mission to learn as much

Grab a copy of issue 253 to check out our expert round-up of the leading Photoshop alternatives available right now.



DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE?
Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 253 at ifxm.ag/single-ifx.

Traditional Artist Workshop

in-depth Fantasy illustration

CRAFT INTRICATE FANTASY DRAWINGS

Traditional artist workshop – learn how to create traditional art using a variety of media and techniques. This workshop is perfect for those who want to learn the basics of traditional art.

in-depth Fantasy illustration – learn how to create intricate fantasy scenes using pen and paper. This workshop is perfect for those who want to learn the basics of fantasy illustration.

Mateusz Lenart shared his process for intricate fantasy scenes using pen and paper last month.

as I can and Yona's tips for making characters distinctive was exactly the kind of thing I'm looking for. Some of them weren't new to me, but they were told in such a way that I now better understand what I should be looking out for when I'm drawing. A huge thank you to Yona, and to you guys!

Natalie, via email

Rob replies Hi there Natalie, it was a fantastic read wasn't it! Yona did a great job with those tips and really helped give some understanding of the key concepts for adding a little extra to character art. Lots of his advice can also be used for products and environments, so there's plenty to be learned if you think about expanding your horizons too.

Epic details

Mateusz Lenart's workshop last month was so good – I thought the art was absolutely stunning. I adore real detail and texture but find it can sometimes look too "busy", if you know what I mean, but he really showed how to get those elements in while keeping the image readable at a glance. It's nice seeing artists hands in the images too, as I sometimes struggle to work out what the scale is when looking at an image, so that really helps. Thank you!

Rebecca, via email

Rob replies Lovely to hear from you Rebecca, and I'm glad you got so much from Mateusz's workshop. I couldn't agree more about the quality of his work. That image is truly epic and showcases an understanding of techniques including the composition, material rendering, lighting and so much else. I totally get what you mean about size and scale too. I often wonder about canvas sizes and the like, so I agree about how useful it is to see.



New works that have grabbed our attention



Adam Roberts
[@adamrobertscreative](https://adamrobertscreative.com)



Ishali Page
[@ishaliart](https://ishaliart.com)



Fernando Méndez C
[@fernandomendezc](https://fernandomendezc.com)

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

LEGENDS



The creative team behind smash-hit Netflix series **Arcane** reveal how they pushed the show's animation even further for the second season...

DREAM TEAM

Pascal and Alexis feel lucky to have worked with loyal artists at Fortiche across both seasons of *Arcane*.

The expectations were high for the second season of Arcane. The series, which is set in Riot Games' hugely popular League of Legends universe, was an instant hit with fans of the franchise and new viewers alike when it was first released on Netflix in 2021. To give audiences the pay off they deserved, the creative team wanted to take every aspect of the show to the next level for its follow up.

The success of Arcane can be put down to its gripping plot, engaging characters and stunning visuals. This is also true for the second season, which first aired in November of last year and topped the Netflix charts in over 60 countries. The result of eight years of production work, Seasons One and Two were produced almost in one continuous cycle, with work on

JOURNEY OF GROWTH

By working together closely across both seasons, the animation teams have grown consistently and pushed their own creative boundaries.



All images © Riot Games

Season Two starting before the first had even been broadcast.

French animation studio Fortiche was there from the very beginning of the journey, and its ever-expanding number of talented, dedicated artists are the ones to thank for bringing Arcane to life so beautifully. Having grown together and pushed creative boundaries higher throughout the

production process, they were determined to carry that momentum forwards into Season Two.

"For the second season, we wanted to elevate Arcane's visuals even further while staying true to the elements that captivated audiences in Season One," says director and Fortiche co-founder **Pascal Charrue**. "Riot gave us significant creative freedom, allowing us to collaborate with extraordinary artists."

This decision includes the watercolour sequence found in Episode Six, which was created in partnership with Éléa Gobbié-Mévellec, the acclaimed director of The Swallows of Kabul.

"At Fortiche, our ambition is to create 'animated concepts'

in every frame," Pascal adds. "We're deeply committed to delivering a unique viewer experience, crafting stunning visuals, and evoking strong, relatable emotions through immersive directing. Our goal is to transcend traditional animation, offering viewers an entertainment experience that feels closer to live-action through

IN THE LAB
Season Two integrates more experimental animation approaches with stunning results.



Words by **Dominic Carter**

a blend of impactful and one-of-a-kind aesthetics."

Arcane already established a signature style that blended 2D and 3D elements in Season One, so for Season Two Fortiche wanted to push boundaries by integrating more VFX and alternative artistic directions such as watercolour, charcoal and comic-style rendering. ➤

F THEIR LIFETIME



Feature

SHOWDOWN

Ambessa lets rip in this dynamic piece of concept art for the finale.



“As you’ve likely noticed, we love to create a seamless integration between the music and the visuals,” says animation lead



Alexis Wanneroy. “In Season Two, we leaned into this approach even more, treating certain sequences like music videos. This not only provided editorial breathing room but allowed us to experiment with unique visual treatments, giving each episode its own flavour while maintaining the essence of Arcane.”

THE FORTICHE TOUCH

Mixing artistic techniques is a part of Fortiche’s DNA, so much so that some artists refer to it as the Fortiche Touch. This approach is a reflection of the diverse artistic backgrounds behind the studio’s founders, and is best exemplified by its unique visual style that combines drawing, 2D painting and 3D animation.

“We’re deeply detail-oriented, and believe that even the smallest touches



add up to make the world feel more grounded and authentic,” Pascal explains. “Our approach to artistry is rooted in emphasising the human gesture. While 3D renders can appear sleek and overly polished, our goal is to create visuals that feel hand-shaped with the natural imperfections that bring them to life. By blending 2D and 3D, we achieve a distinctive look in

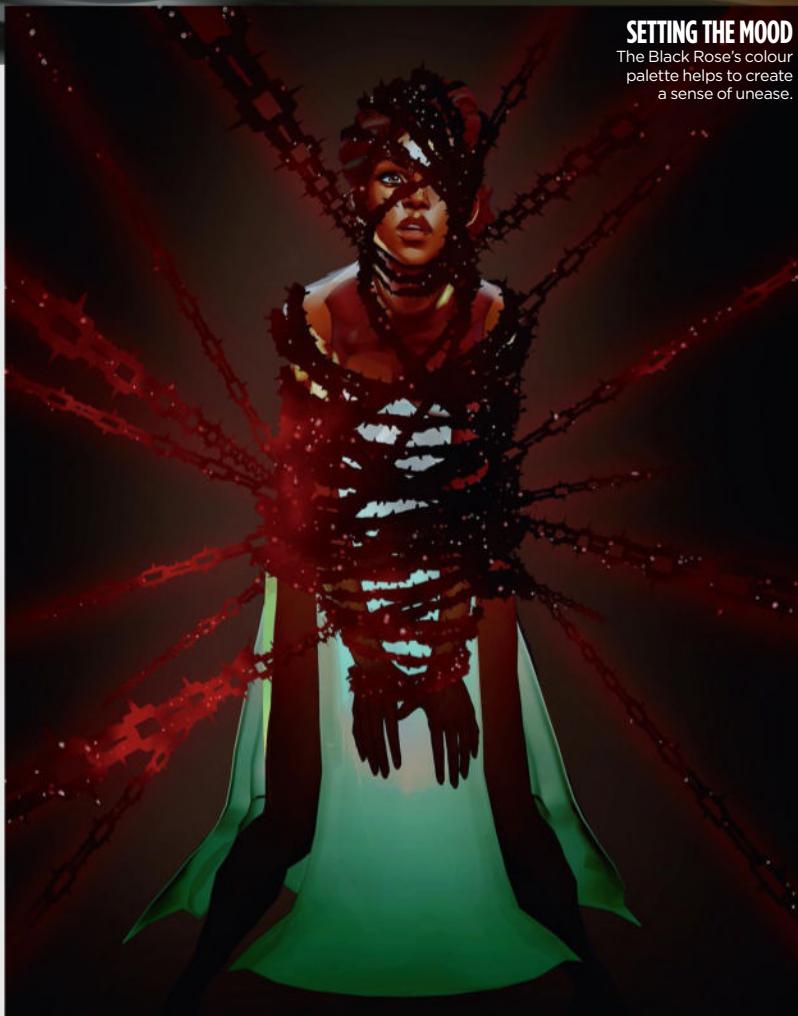
VARIED INFLUENCES

Arcane’s locations referred to everything from art deco design to Alphonse Mucha’s *The Slav Epic*.

the visuals – an authenticity that feels personal and handcrafted.”

This experimental approach can be seen from the start of Season Two, which opens with a funeral sequence animated in melancholic charcoals. It’s just one of many times during the season where mediums are taken in a new direction to reflect the action or the feelings of the characters.

“Even the smallest touches add up to make the world feel more grounded and authentic”



SETTING THE MOOD
The Black Rose's colour palette helps to create a sense of unease.

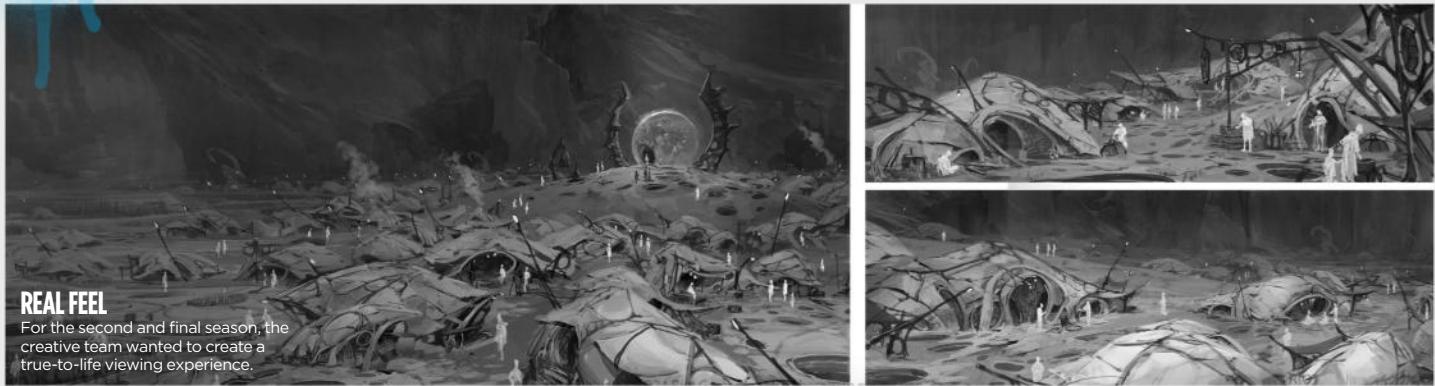
DEVELOPING A CHARACTER IN ARCANE STYLE

How Fortiche created new designs appropriate for the show's universe

Season Two of Arcane saw the introduction of lots of new characters, including Steb, Lest, Isha and Maddie. Each one went through meticulous design processes that required close collaboration with Riot Games, especially when working with characters that already exist in the League of Legends lore.

“Each design begins with Riot’s creative guidelines, which we build and iterate on closely with their team to ensure authenticity and alignment to the universe,” Pascal explains. “The process starts with rough exploratory sketches where the team tests out different archetypes, body types and styles. This phase allows us to explore a variety of possibilities. Once we’ve honed in on a direction that resonates with the directors, we dive deeper into refining the concept in more detailed and polished designs.”

Once the artistic direction is approved, the team moves into a technical design phase. Pascal adds: “This involves adding close-up details, annotations and technical notes, such as how specific elements of the character move or function. We also make comprehensive turnarounds with back, side and profile views that will guide the 3D modelling and animation teams.” This layered approach ensures each character is visually compelling, grounded in the narrative, and technically feasible for the screen.



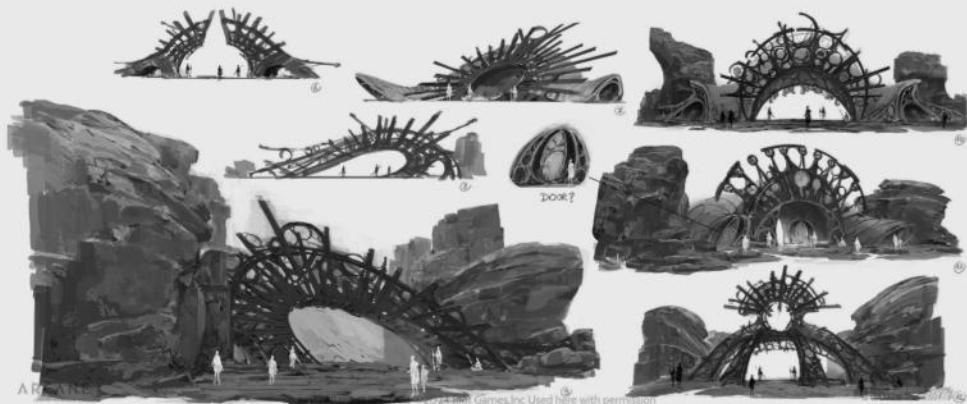
REAL FEEL

For the second and final season, the creative team wanted to create a true-to-life viewing experience.

“These intros enabled us to explore more art styles and go all-in on intricate visuals without alienating audiences,” says Alexis. “The different styles also helped us showcase the feelings of the characters and really anchor the narrative. For example the charcoal, almost black and white intro in Episode One helps the viewers feel Vi’s grief. These visuals are a way for us to push the boundaries even further, but we never lose sight that they have to serve the narrative.”

FAMILIAR FACES

Speaking of characters, the look of the show’s leads, sisters Jinx and Vi, also changed. “In Season One, only Jinx really became as powerful as she is in



FOR THE FANS

The details in every scene were repeatedly refined in order to live up to the expectations of Arcane’s fans.



EMOTIONAL BACKDROPS

As well as telling a story, the visuals communicated the emotions of the characters.

“The different art styles helped us to showcase the feelings of the characters”

League of Legends,” says Pascal. “In Season Two, we gradually made the champions look closer to their in-game counterparts by evolving the design of their clothes and weapons.

“For instance, a fight between Jinx and Vi happens early in the season, with Vi dressed in uniform to embody everything Jinx hates. Meanwhile Vi has always been a protector, but she starts Season Two without someone to look after. Her world has become black and white – literally – and we felt she would hide all her distinctive features, like hair and tattoos, to focus on what she’s good at: fighting.”

For Fortiche, Arcane’s second season was all about making the characters evolve. Time skips in the narrative gave the animators the opportunity to develop the look of the characters even further, while the musical sequences at the start of each episode helped to convey where they were emotionally in their story. ➤



THE LOOKS OF LEGENDS

Familiar faces like Jinx resemble their video game counterparts more closely in the second season.

Arcane Season 2

DESIGNING WITH PURPOSE

Understanding the wants and needs of each character helped the animators to settle on a final look.



CONSISTENT STORYTELLING

It's important to remember how the actions of characters help to communicate their world.



NOT JUST FOR GAMERS

An elegant visual language makes Arcane relatable even to people who have never played League of Legends.



CONNECTED CAST

Arcane stays grounded, even in magical moments, thanks to the relationships between its characters.



SENSE OF PLACE

Research helps to communicate to the audience how Arcane's various locations work.



► To stay true to the art style of League of Legends, Fortiche worked closely with showrunners Christian Linke and Alex Yee. "Christian and Alex are both great experts of League of Legends' world and lore," says Alexis. "They know Runeterra like the back of their hands. But they are also open to feedback and allowed us to explore the world and make it our own on the animation side.

"The production of an animated show is often very segmented, with the script being locked way before the animation process starts. But this very close relationship we had with Riot enabled us to actually make the story evolve throughout production. It's truly a collaboration between writers and artists that go forward together."

WINNING FORMULA

Adapting a video game is far from easy, but Arcane effortlessly made the leap and attracted a new audience in the process. This is thanks in part to Fortiche's creative approach, which made sure that even someone who has never heard of League of Legends can understand and enjoy the series.

"On the art direction side, we make sure that our references are grounded



to make it easier for a newcomer to understand what is at stake and how the world works," says Pascal. "For example, we looked at Art Deco and Art Nouveau as inspiration for Piltover. It contrasts greatly with Zaun's dark, seedy and almost cyberpunk look. Even if you don't know the game,

TESTING THE LIMITS

Creative freedom from Riot allowed Fortiche to push their designs to the very limit.

you'll be able to tell how these cities work in relationship with one another because it stays grounded.

"It's the same for the character relationships and feelings, such as Vi and Jinx's complicated sibling relationship, and Jayce and Viktor's friendship. They are still very human even in this magical world that's very different from ours."

Focusing on depth, backstory and visual storytelling are at the heart of creating rich worlds and characters like those in Arcane. For artists hoping to replicate this success, Fortiche stresses the importance of building characters with clear motivations, unique personalities, and histories that influence their actions.

"For the world itself, think about its rules, culture and environments – how do they shape the characters and narrative?" says Alexis. "Every decision, from the character's design to the compositing, should serve the story and help communicate the themes you want to explore."

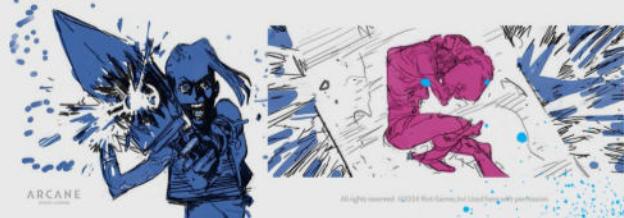
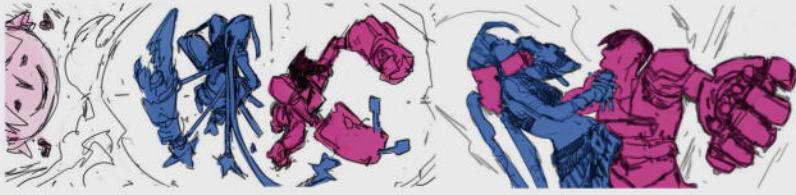
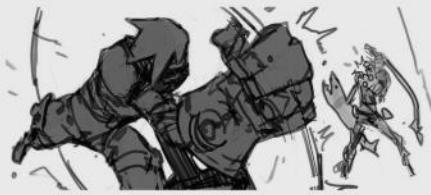


BACKING TRACK

Music videos provided inspiration for the look and feel of sequences in Season Two.

CLEAR GOAL

Creating “animated concepts” in every frame was the top ambition for the animation team.



ARCANE

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IN THE ACTION

To communicate action and emotion, Fortiche relied on immersive direction.



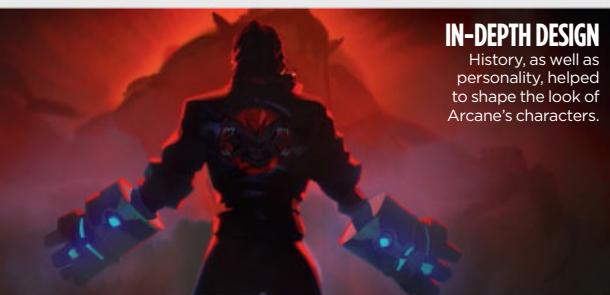
UNIQUE TASTES

Careful attention to the direction helped to give every episode a distinctive flavour.



STEPPING UP

The positive reception to Season One was a formidable motivator to raise the bar in Season Two.



IN-DEPTH DESIGN

History, as well as personality, helped to shape the look of Arcane's characters.

INSIDE THE SERIES' ANIMATION PIPELINE

Making the show was a collaborative process with the animation and story influencing each other

During the early stages of creating an episode, the Fortiche team would share mood boards with Riot to establish the look and feel of locations, characters and scenes. These mood boards then evolved into detailed storyboards.

The storyboarding process plays a critical role in helping animators understand the intentions behind both the acting and the shot itself. Each camera angle is chosen with purpose, ensuring composition, mood, intent and the overall

cinematography are precisely crafted to support the narrative.

A significant amount of time is spent in storyboarding to lock down these elements, allowing the animation department to focus their efforts on delivering authentic and believable performances. By respecting the groundwork laid out by the storyboards, the animators can ensure that every frame stays true to the original vision while elevating the characters' acting to bring the story to life.

ALL GROWN UP

Pascal and Alexis look forward to tackling more mature stories in their next animated projects.



Sketchbook

Andrew Cheng

Heads up! Watch out for the game artist's latest sketches as he experiments with new characters and fresh ideas

CHARACTER SKETCHES

"I usually like to keep things simple when it comes to brushes - Hard Round all the way, baby! It keeps me from getting distracted by which brush to choose when I'm trying to convey an idea quickly."



FLOATING HEADS

"I went for a stylised approach with this batch. As someone who gets bored easily, I'm always trying to experiment with styles and subjects. I was also trying to test my abilities after doing a bunch of studies."

STYLISED WARRIORS

"A couple of Chinese-inspired warriors where I tried to push shape and proportions. Turns out laminar armour is fun to draw!"



MECH SKETCHES

"Friendly neighbourhood mech boys. I wanted to give these guys rounder, World War II-style shapes inspired by *Maschinen Krieger*."



“As someone who gets bored easily, I’m always experimenting with new styles and subjects”

Artist PROFILE

Andrew Cheng

LOCATION: Canada

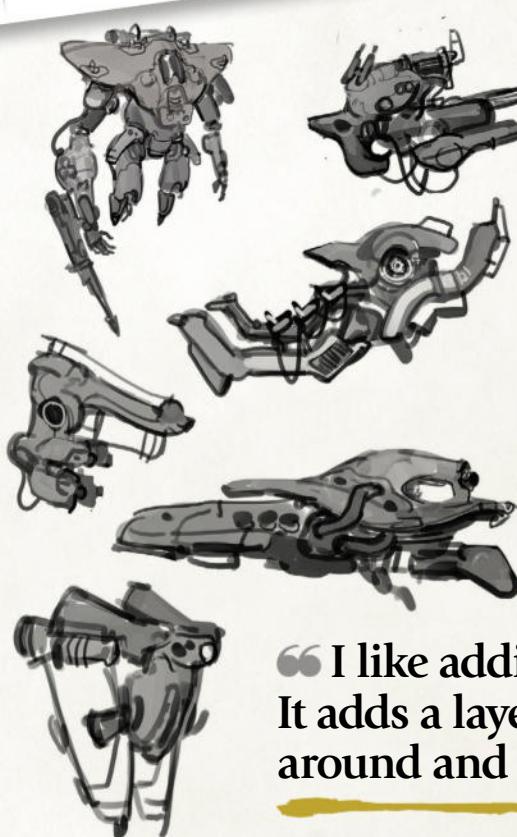


Andrew is a concept artist and illustrator who has been working in games and animation for around four years. He's passionate about creating characters, props and creatures for his work, putting to use a strong foundation in human anatomy and colour theory. Andrew is also an keen gamer, noodle connoisseur, and a fan of movies and anime.

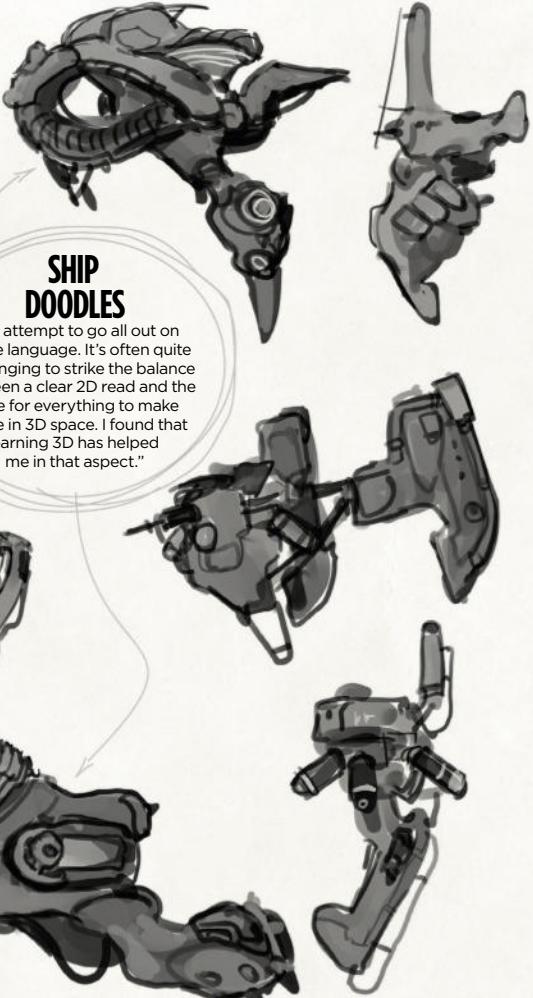
<https://andrewchengart.com>



Sketchbook



“I like adding scars...
It adds a layer of ‘f**k
around and find out’”



SHIP DOODLES

“My attempt to go all out on shape language. It's often quite challenging to strike the balance between a clear 2D read and the urge for everything to make sense in 3D space. I found that learning 3D has helped me in that aspect.”



NOH CREW SKETCHES

“A selection of character explorations for a personal project. These guys belong to a 16th-century Japanese pirate crew whose captain is obsessed with the theatre. These are so fun, I can sit and do them all day!”



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

Designing Dreams

Alan Wen speaks to three concept artists about the varied and iterative processes that make up one of the most misunderstood crafts in the game industry

Even when video games were little more than rudimentary pixels on a black screen, art has played an important role in sparking players' imaginations, whether it's what decorates the side of an arcade cabinet or the illustration on a game box. While there are huge advances in technology in how games can look today, that vision still has to take

shape from somewhere, which makes the concept art an essential part of game development. Yet it's perhaps not always that well understood as a profession, especially as the very

term of "concept" may have you assuming it's primarily only a focus at the start of a development cycle.

"I think it's probably one of the least understood jobs," says **Paul Scott Canavan**, who has worn a number of hats in his career as a creative director, art director and artist, but has always been hands-on with concept art,

including 2023's narrative-based adventure *A Highland Song*. "Concept art encapsulates a lot of stuff. It's like the broadest range of art styles you can basically do as an artist."

It's a skill set that can also cross over to other lines of work, as **Maxime Desmettre**, a concept artist for action RPG *Eternal Strands* that released earlier this year,

“Concept art encapsulates a whole lot of stuff. It's like the broadest range of art styles that you can do as an artist”

Become a concept artist

ENCLAVE WALL

Eternal Strands initially took inspiration from medieval aesthetics, as you can see in Maxime's exploration of the city and its surrounding walls.



ABYSSAL THRALL

Paul's concept art for Destiny 2 included designing the look of Abyssal Thrall enemies, and distinguishing them from the game's standard Thrall.

also does occasional art in films, book illustration, collectible card games and tabletop role-playing games. But while we may associate concept art with hand-drawn sketches and illustrations, his interest in game art began with early pixel art. "I enjoyed copying backgrounds and characters from arcade games of the time like Street Fighter 2," Maxime reflects.

Even then, concept art can also be easily conflated with anything

of an illustrative nature, especially if the game itself is 3D. When comparing with other mediums, **Ibrahim Idris**, a concept

artist on the BAFTA-winning Tales of Kenzera: Zau says game concept art is much closer to industrial or product design. "For games, you have to be more detailed presenting characters or environments; you have to explain the intricacies," he says. "If it's a mech, you have to show the workings, how the joints combine and move, and its materials. If it's an animated character, you have to know how they deform with different expressions."

STARTING LOOSE

As broad and varied as the role can get, we can nonetheless start at the beginning because concept art still ➤



WHY IT'S NOT ALWAYS A PRETTY PICTURE

Paul Scott Canavan on the unglamorous side to concept art that doesn't get seen by the public



"Concept art runs from the absolute beginning of production all the way to the end, but the job shifts throughout production. So in the early stages pre-production is basically blue sky - go off and design what this thing looks like, what characters look like - and it's often very ugly. People rarely see any of this work because it looks like garbage, and it's often photobashed and using assets from other things."

"Honestly, that's the biggest misunderstanding people make about concept art. It makes sense because that stuff isn't sexy so we don't put it in our portfolios very often. A lot of what you see in concept art is actually called key art. Take all those really cool paintings that you see in Guild Wars 2, or any game where the loading screen is this gorgeous piece of art. That's key art, which is sat in this weird space between concept art and illustration."

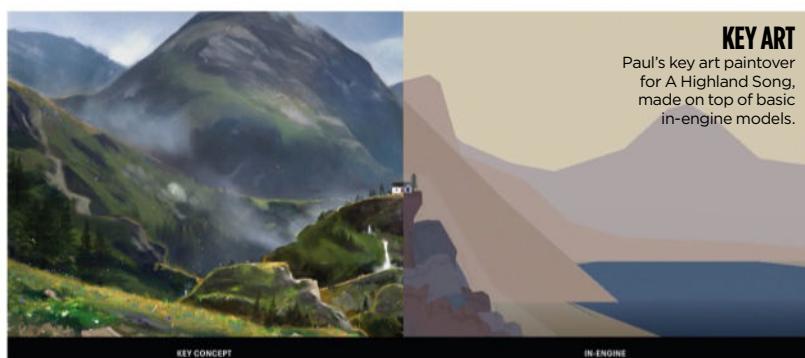


► fundamentally involves bringing a brand new game idea to life visually and concretely. It's not uncommon for there to be references to existing games or other sources of inspiration, as it can also be anxiety-inducing creating something from nothing.

"A huge amount of what we do is research," says Paul. "The people who do best as concept artists have a real lust for learning new stuff and not being completely stuck on one genre that they're really obsessed with."

With those early ideas, the first phase, pre-conception, involves more general explorations and establishing shots just to convey a feeling of how the game might look and play when it's realised in 3D. It's often a little loose and vague but will also be iterated upon based on the director's vision, and you should expect plenty of ideas to be discarded.

"If you can work fast, it's handy when exploring possibilities; the more to show the better," says Maxime.



KEY ART

Paul's key art paintover for *A Highland Song*, made on top of basic in-engine models.

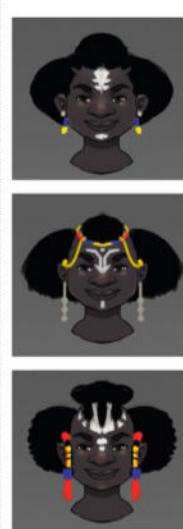
MOIRA VARIATIONS

Paul pitched designs for *A Highland Song*'s protagonist Moira, although she would ultimately be designed by developer Inkle's artist Anastasia Wyatt.

"Part of the work won't make it to the final version of the game, but it will most likely contribute to discussions that evolve the project nonetheless."

Although it's often useful to receive some instructions, such as whether the game is going to be stylised or realistic, Ibrahim says he's often free to explore ideas early on. "Most of the time, people tell me they don't want to influence my creative process, so you have total freedom to go crazy," he explains. "After the first iteration, [the directors] can reel it in, making adjustments, and you might start getting more specific."

Paul adds that it's not dissimilar to painting, which also starts with very loose interpretations before the details start being added in. But while game concept art can often appear more impressionistic, to the extent that some people may feel there's a disassociation between the concept and final product, the reality is that the former actually has to be much more specific and detailed in order to serve the artists realising that in 3D.



NAMBE

Character studies created by Ibrahim that focus on facial features and a range of black hairstyles, which are lacking in games.

BROAD SKILLS AND SPECIFIC TASKS

Creating assets is one of the most labour-intensive and expensive aspects of game development, and as such, the

Become a concept artist



SENTINEL REMAINS

Maxime's concept shows an early version of the sentinel Arks in Eternal Strands before any other visuals existed.

THE SKILL OF DESIGNING FOR INTERACTIVITY

How Maxime Desmettre got into game concept art and how the role differs from working other jobs



"I've always liked video games. As a teenager I read an article in a French magazine about how video games were made, and that's when my passion for them translated into the excitement of making visuals based on and for games."

"Starting with pixel art back in the 90s, it gradually led to making artwork for technical demos and game prototypes, and allowed me to get my first contract with a game studio as a general artist for textures, 3D levels and VFX. I switched to concept art later down the line when the artist's task started to become more specialised so that I could keep working on the different aspects of environment design."

"Where concept art in games can differ the most from many other forms of concept art is that we design assets and locations based on the game world and its thematics, but we also need to consider the gameplay component in the process. That's because of the navigation of the player and how enemies will occupy the world, how much space is needed for them to move around to fight, and so on. It's also important to consider elements that are recognisable and that will serve as a beacon for the player to not lose track of their bearings, like having landmarks or specific structures."

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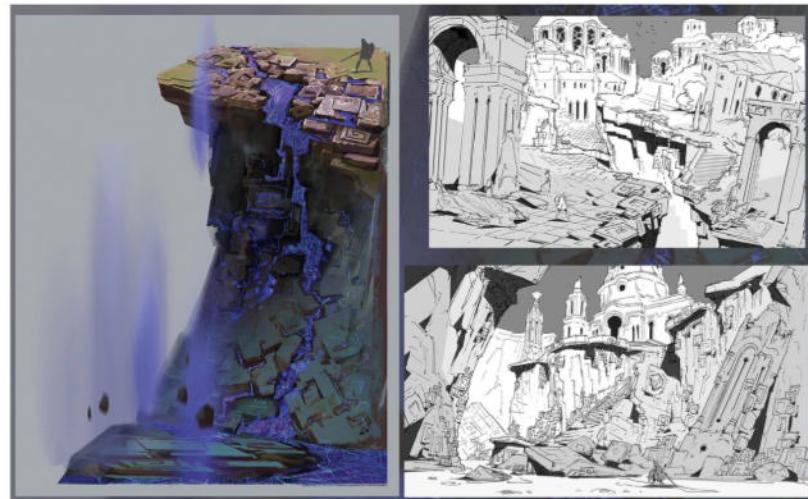


ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED

Concept artists can be required to create other 2D assets, just as Ibrahim designed the achievement icons for Tales of Kenzera: Zau.

MAKING MAGIC

"When designing the impact of magic on environments, you have to come up with an explanation that makes it look more credible," says Maxime.



COLOUR SCRIPT

Paul's concept for a cinematic in Destiny 2 is a colour script, which outlines the lighting and mood for the shot.



© Bungie

“People who do best as concept artists have a real lust for learning new stuff and not being stuck on one genre”

most cost-effective way of making changes and iterations is through concepting first. For instance, Ibrahim explains that when designing the protagonist Zau, he initially gave him a long scarf until during production, when the animation lead told him it should be cut above the knee due to deformation issues in 3D. "It's safer and easier to make a concept with one or two iterations with a quick turnaround before sending it to 3D."

It's especially true of cinematics, typically outsourced and which Canavan has also worked on in his career, including trailers for Destiny 2

and Guild Wars 2. "A lot of concept work is identifying what textures things might be because we're working with 3D artists, so we're trying to ensure they understand what we're doing," he explains. "Cinematics cost an astonishing amount of money, so studios have a lot of creative control because it's the first thing people usually see of their game in trailers."

Conversely, the most important aspect of concept art is in the most technical and specific art, referred to as model sheets, when it becomes much more of a design role. "These are basically technical drawings" ▶▶



STUNNING SETTINGS

Paintovers for various environments in Zau. "They are designed to be flexible so they can be used for loading screens or UI transitions," Ibrahim explains.



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AUTHENTIC INSPIRATIONS

Ibrahim Idris on designing an African world in *Tales of Kenzera: Zau*



"The biggest inspiration we originally had was from *Ori* in terms of the map design and the kind of colours we used. Then most of the time we're gathering references from different African tribes.

"At that time, we had a fantastic art lead in Michaela Dawn, who went above and beyond to guide us in the

right place to look to gather information. We took that, watched some videos, and looked at how the different tribes lived their life, hunted, what they wore; everything. That gives us a really strong foundation to start our work and make sketches, ideations and variations.

"Coming from an African perspective, I have a bit more of an advantage because I'm in Nigeria, so I can go out to

the local museum or check out photos. But that doesn't mean everything I see will actually fit with other tribes in Africa. You don't want to make that kind of mistake, as the game is actually focused on Bantu culture, which is more East African. So you have to look at that region, do your investigations and research, and then come back and present your ideas for concepts."

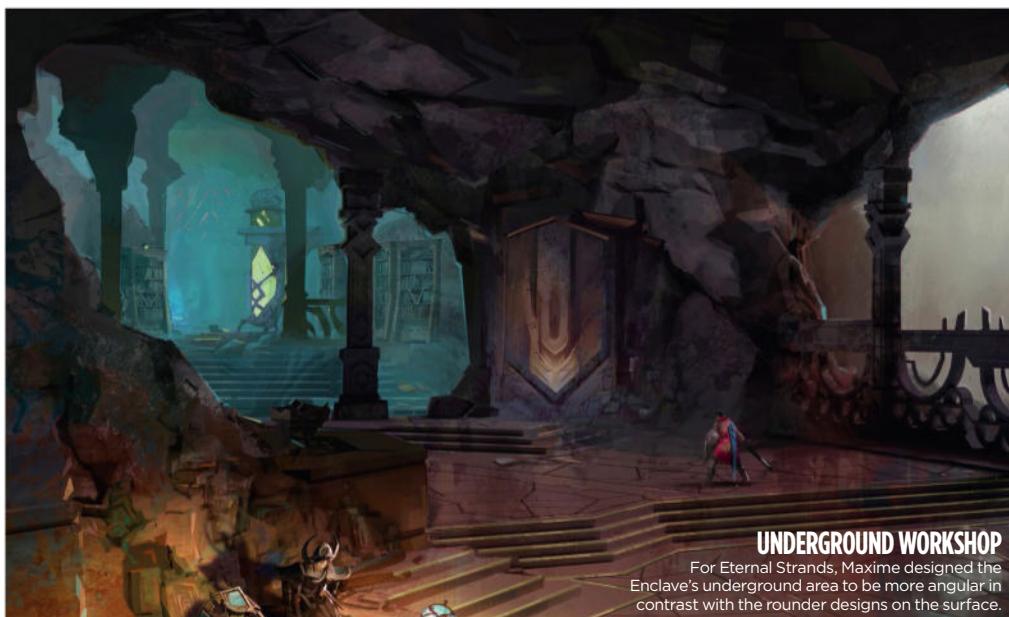
that are given to the 3D artists so they can sculpt exactly what a character's face looks like, or their props," Paul continues. "Much of the artwork in games is outsourced, so a lot of the concept artist's job is trying to make designs as clear as they can to give to a 3D artist they've never spoken to, who might speak a different language, so they can look at this character and their templates, and then go ahead and start sculpting."

From there, a concept artist's role can get broader still in other 2D assets, such as designing posters, labels, menu screens, or even the in-game achievement icons. If you're in a small indie studio, it's all the more essential to be getting hands-on in different aspects rather than specialising.

Another job for concept artists that occurs near the end of a project involves paintovers. "A concept artist will refine the work already available in the engine, by painting over a screenshot that was taken in the game editor," Maxime explains. "This enriches the visual to help guide the 3D artist in further refining their work. Complex games require this phase to ensure the best quality of the project in its final version."

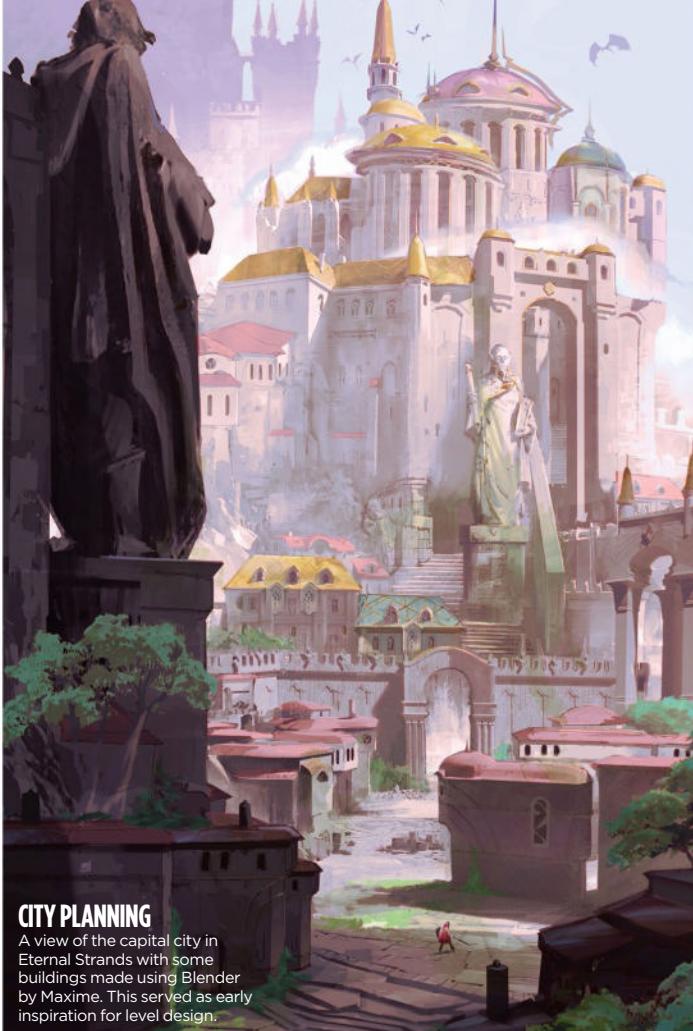
COMMUNICATION IS KEY

While working on concept art obviously requires good technical ability in drawing, there are no limits on tools to go about this, whether it's sketching, painting, sculpting or Photoshop. Despite being considered



UNDERGROUND WORKSHOP

For *Eternal Strands*, Maxime designed the Enclave's underground area to be more angular in contrast with the rounder designs on the surface.



CITY PLANNING

A view of the capital city in Eternal Strands with some buildings made using Blender by Maxime. This served as early inspiration for level design.

“A 2D field, Paul says 3D software is often helpful too. “It makes sense as we’re dealing with designing spaces, so having some kind of blockout makes it much easier for us,” he adds. “When I worked on Destiny, I’d do blockouts in 3D that were absolutely terrible. But I would be able to pass them across to the environment team so that they could at least understand what I was doing.”

What's most important, as is often the case working in other roles, is maintaining good communication. That's not just with providing detailed model sheets to external artists, but

also in regular meetings within the development team, ensuring that the concept art is aligned with the narrative and gameplay, but also the work of other artists. Speaking of his time working on *Zau*, Ibrahim recalls: "We'd usually have team meetings every week, where we would share all of the artwork with the rest of the team and feedback is welcome. Then

“ Mimic projects you’d love to be part of... Imagine that you’re a part of their team ”



DEEP FORES

DEEP FOREST
Visual explorations of
Eternal Strands' forest
area made by Maxime,
including potential
points of interest.

Become a concept artist



ENVIRONMENT TRIAL
A landscape test by Paul that
also incorporates photos to
explore what the final look of
A Highland Song should be.



SABULANA

Concepts for the shaman Sabulana in Tales of Kenzera: Zau. "I wanted her presence to feel calm, wise and grounded like a forest energy," says Ibrahim.

there's also constructive criticism on the designs so that artists can go back and act on them."

In a healthy working environment there would also not be competition between artists, as usually they will be allocated different tasks, while any problems that arise can involve having another artist pitching in to help.

So what can aspiring concept artists looking for a way into the games industry do? Maxime highlights the importance of building your portfolio. "Practice by mimicking projects you'd love to be part of," he says. "Imagine yourself as part of the team, and work on tasks that you know are necessary for such projects, like developing a location, its props and surroundings. That's a way to remain inspired and it gives you clear goals as to what to practice to increase your chances of attracting attention."

Concept art is ultimately about the process more than the final product, which is something Ibrahim stresses as being important to share in your portfolio. "Don't just show the pretty pictures, but show how you get to the pretty pictures," he advises. "Most recruiters are the directors, so when they look at your portfolio and see your referencing, ideation and sketches, they can be like, 'this is how this guy thinks'."

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Thomas Elliott shows how he painted a brutal demon battle for *Doom: The Dark Ages*.

64 Give direction with shadows

A fitting composition gives Jenny Brozek's demon-hunting character a stand-out look.

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Gabriel Tan goes in search of references for an *Assassin's Creed Shadows* castle concept.

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A D&D character takes on new life as Max Weber develops a dynamic storytelling scene.

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One little insect is a huge inspiration for Longque Chen and his futuristic machine.

Photoshop CREATE A DEMONIC VIDEO GAME COVER

Discover the process masterful battle artist **Thomas Elliott** followed to create an epic shot for *Doom: The Dark Ages*



Doom has been a massive inspiration throughout my career. I love the blending of sci-fi and organic elements with religious imagery, everything looks heavy and badass, and the soundtracks always gets me in the mood to paint.

So it was a dream come true when Bethesda contacted me to work on the cover for its latest title, *Doom: The Dark Ages*. This was going to be a big project and time was tight, so efficiency was the name of the game.

The *Dark Ages* takes the franchise in a new direction with an overtly fantasy setting. The Doom Slayer has his classic array of guns but is now accompanied by a shield and mace. Stressing the fantasy aspect of the game through the cover was important, so right off the bat we looked at the work of classic fantasy artists like Frank Frazetta to inform the composition and flavour. We briefly toyed with the idea of doing an oil painting for a real retro fantasy vibe, but time wasn't on our side so we went for full digital.

The brief described the Doom Slayer fighting his way through an army of hellish demons. With this many figures, I knew from previous battle scenes that if I got locked into rendering details too early that the piece would become a huge time sink. The key is to have the image look punchy and impactful from the compositional, tonal and colour decisions alone, and it will then look even better when it comes to adding details. The key here is to manoeuvre the workflow to achieve this, which I'll explain in depth.



**Artist
PROFILE**

Thomas Elliott

LOCATION: England

Thomas is a leading sci-fi and fantasy illustrator known for his intense battle scenes and grisly monsters. He worked at Games Workshop for over five years and now freelances for a range of major clients.
<https://bit.ly/3TLy7Ou>

Workshops



1 Read the brief and adjust the initial composition

Before starting any picture, make sure you're crystal clear on the brief and everything the client wants. Don't be afraid to ask questions; it's much quicker to figure something out verbally before you begin than to get halfway through the painting and then having to fix it. I was provided with an approved thumbnail showing the layout and composition Bethesda wanted for this piece. From there, I began tweaking the pose of the Doom Slayer to get him looking as dynamic and action-packed as possible.



2 Create colour thumbnails first

Colour is vitally important as it defines the mood and tonal balance of a piece. Getting this down first gives you a clear idea for the direction of the painting and means you can work in greyscale with greater confidence.

3 Colour thumbnail changes

At this stage it's important to check in and make sure the brief is being fulfilled. My first colour thumbnails had a strong blue background. This looked interesting but wasn't communicating the fantasy vibes the brief stressed. Moving forward I went for something warmer, earthier and more traditional-looking that was in line with the hellish setting of the game.



4 Sketch out the characters for a guide

This picture features dozens of unique monsters that need to be accurately depicted. To get everything in the right place and know where the shadows would go, I made a loose sketch over a greyscale of the thumbnail. The layer was kept on top of everything from this point on.



5 Block in the values

The key factor here is readability. With so much going on, it's essential that the attention is on our central group of figures. I kept everything that wasn't important either dark or rendered using two values so that the Doom Slayer would pop out above anything else.



7 Shape the shadows

Knowing what's in light and what's in shadow is crucial. It defines the shape of the figure, can save you lots of time rendering, and looks great! If you find that your pictures are looking soft and mushy, try painting figures in just two values, shadow and light, and see how it can offer you a more painterly and dynamic look. ➤

Workshops



8 Place light against dark for clarity

To help the characters read clearly, make sure that everything is either dark and framed against a light object, or visa versa. Doing this across the image allows your figures to stand out and be distinct from each other, especially in a busy, chaotic image such as mine.

9 Add the initial colours (right)

I use a combination of overlaid photos on various blending modes and Hard Light, Overlay and Multiply layers to add colour to the greyscale painting. Check back with the already approved colour thumbnail to guide your decisions here. Don't worry if everything looks too intense or isn't precisely right at this stage, as you'll be painting over the piece moving forward.

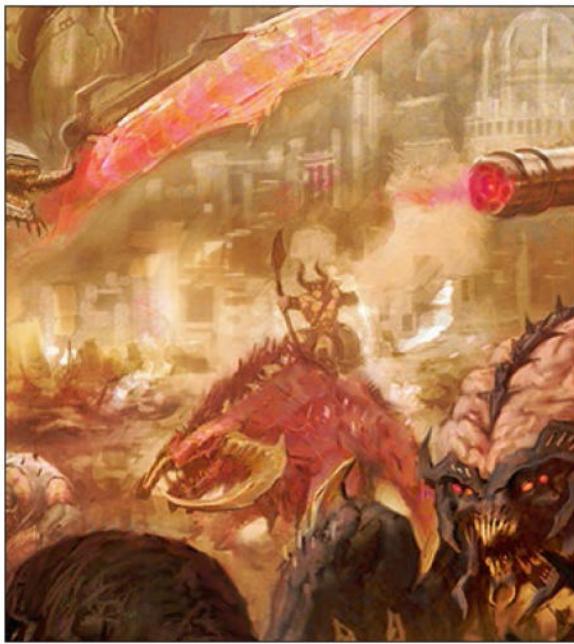


10 Refine your palette

Now begin perfecting the colours, and smudging and knocking back areas so they don't shout over parts we want to be noticed. I find that blending and glazing in this way while keeping what's underneath visible gives a satisfyingly traditional look to a digital painting.

11 Use colour to control the focal point

Colour is one of the many options you can use to focus the viewer's attention on the right parts of the picture. Here I shifted the tone of the Imps below the Doom Slayer to a blueish hue in order to contrast with the rest of the picture.



12 First rendering pass

At long last we arrive at rendering! A lot of the information has already been established through the greyscale and colouring process, so it's just a matter of breaking down the larger shapes into smaller shapes. I like to alternate between smudging and placing opaque marks to give a nice painterly look to this stage.



13 Keep the focus in check

As a rule your eye will always go to the brightest point on the image, so my plan was for the only pure white to be on the Doom Slayer. However, at some point I realised that the creamy colours in the top-right of the sky were pulling the viewer's attention too, so it was necessary to knock that area back.



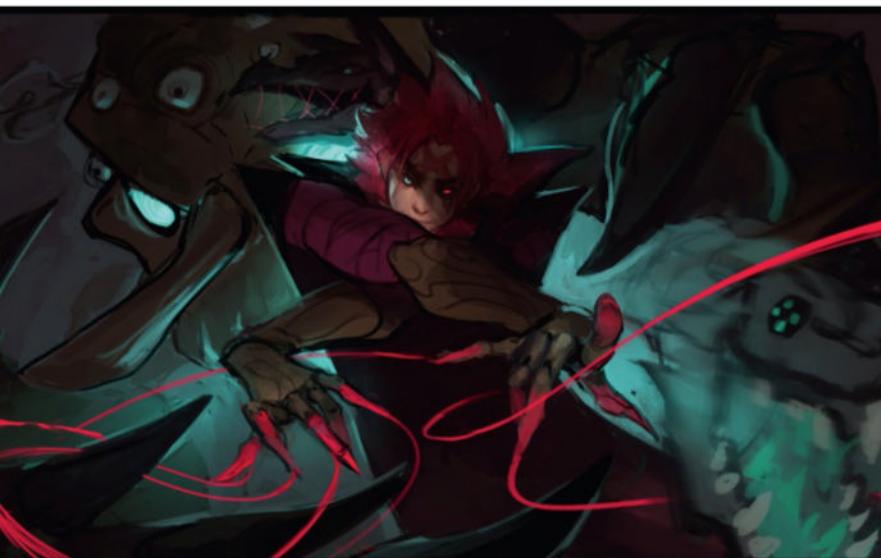
14 Create background figures

One of the satisfying things about painting battle scenes is that you can suggest dozens of background figures very quickly. To do this, imagine how the light would fall on them and just paint the highlights. This allows you to efficiently suggest lots of figures.

15 Last adjustments

I bounce around within the picture addressing anything that needs fixing. This could be defining or softening silhouettes, sharpening details, or just adding information. If the painting has been built up properly these shouldn't make a huge difference overall, but it's always good to do nevertheless.

Workshops





Technique focus

GIVE DIRECTION WITH SHADOWS

Jenny Brozek guides the eye to her character's face with the assistance of some sharp wedges

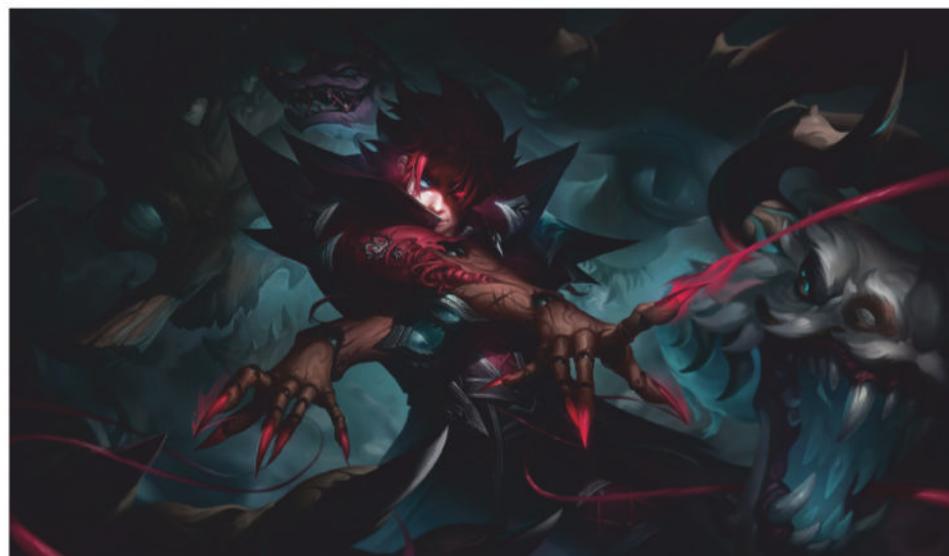
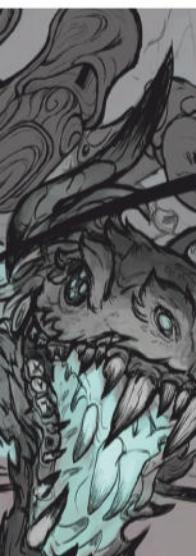
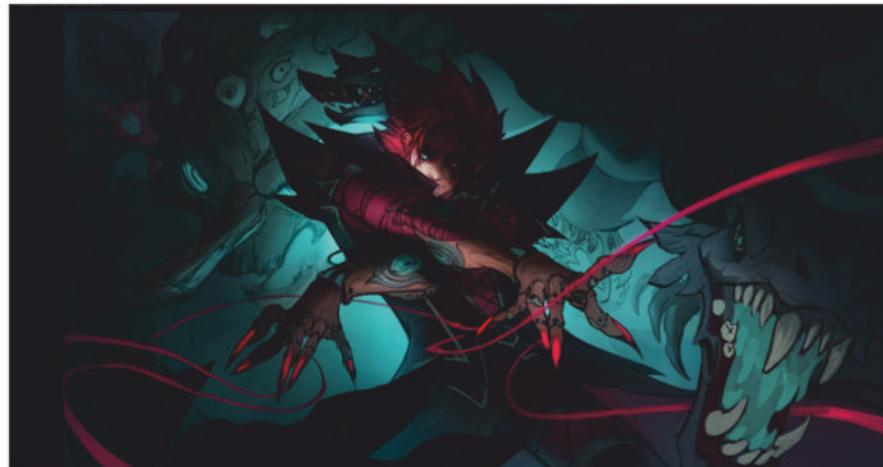


"This artwork features my character, X, who is a puppeteer on a mission to capture escaped demons. I created this piece during a workshop at Underpaint Academy with Victor Maury, where I explored the various techniques that are used in League of Legends splash art.

One of my goals was to design a strong composition that subtly forms the shape of X's name. Although

there are four characters in the scene, I focused on making X's face the clear focal point. I used wedges – sharp shadow shapes that accentuate form – to guide the viewer's eye. His face and hands have the highest contrast and detail, while the rest of the painting supports the flow without competing for attention.

This project was a jump into cold water for me as I'd never dared to try this type of illustration before, but I learned so much in the process."



Artist PROFILE

Jenny Brozek
LOCATION: Austria

Jenny is a concept artist who loves to paint whimsical characters and magical worlds for video games. With her detailed, colourful environments, she always aims to make players feel like they've stepped into a dream.
<https://bit.ly/420FXd9>



Clip Studio Paint & Photoshop PAINT CHARACTERS WITH PERSONALITY

Sean 'Ridd-Li' Abbott delves deep into his skill set to create dramatic fan art featuring Big Mom from the One Piece anime



This commission was created for Pam Dougherty, the English voice actress of Charlotte Linlin, also known as Big Mom, from One Piece. I was asked to take inspiration from a scene within the anime where Charlotte goes on a rampage!

Artist PROFILE

Sean Abbott

LOCATION: Barbados

Better known online as Ridd-Li, Sean is a self-taught illustrator and concept artist from a small Caribbean island. A lifelong consumer of animation and video games, he now works to grow within those industries as a creator. <https://bit.ly/3S81vwr>

However, this brief had a unique request. The

art was to be created in a style I hadn't used in

three years! Several factors had seen me migrate

to a more line-art dependent style for client

work and now here I was, asked to use a process

I wasn't convinced would be used commercially.

I was initially concerned about how rusty I'd

be but was relieved to see how much of my skill

remained in muscle memory. I even managed to

adapt some of what I'd learned from my regular

commission style into the creation of this image.

In the end, the client was thoroughly satisfied

and I was grateful to have the opportunity to

attempt something different and challenging.

BIG MOM'S RAMPAGE

Hair styling

Setting the chalk brush to my Smudge tool lets me quickly suggest strands within the hair. The level of detail you add with this will depend on the amount of realism you hope to achieve. Don't overdo it, as the Smudge tool can get messy if you overwork an area.



RESOURCES

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

CLIP STUDIO PAINT

CUSTOM BRUSHES: LINE BRUSH

This is my sketch brush. I set stabilisation to a high value and draw away.

GET YOUR RESOURCES

See page 5 now!

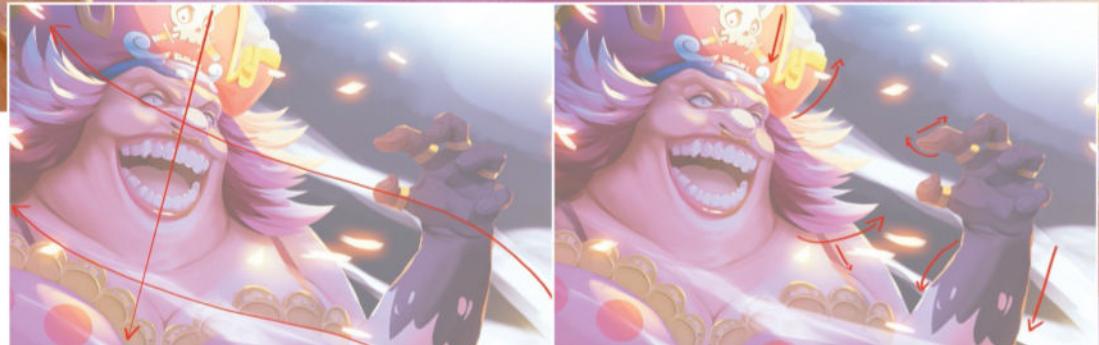


Sell the scene

Even in small areas like the eyes, I like to have some of the environment reflected within them. It's a very tiny detail, but little touches like this help to sell the surroundings even more. Environments with strong light sources are an excellent opportunity to take advantage of this.

Give it real feel

Contrast is important for creating believable artwork. I've touched on contrast in values, but just as important is the contrast used in the shapes and movement. Curved lines versus straight lines are a motif that I try to incorporate if possible. The flow of environmental elements over Big Mom's resolute figure also helps creates contrast.



Complementary glow

I usually paint my highlights on a new layer above everything and use a subtle outer glow to develop a feeling of illumination. Make sure you choose the colour of the glow carefully; it's a handy way to complement the terminator (the boundary between the zone of light and form of the shadow).

Background

The flow direction of the smoke and cinders here also serve as a way to lead the viewer across the image towards her expression, while the variation in the depth of field also provides some measure of scale to the environment.

Suggest a wider environment

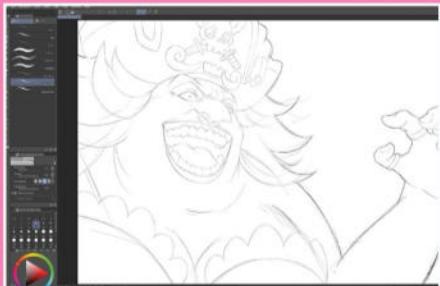
I like particles and effects such as smoke and cinders, both of which I've used here. It can be a good way to suggest an environment's existence even when it isn't shown, as was the case with this image. The random movement of these elements is also great for visual interest.

Hand gestures

The shadows across the hand do more than create contrast; they're also a neat tool for adding a sense of expression to the fingers. The use of both curved and straight lines like this also add to the tension of the character's expression.

How I create...

DRAMATIC CHARACTER ART



1 Early sketch

My sketching work is done in Clip Studio Paint. I use quick, loose strokes with the Line brush to create a rough base for the pose. Next, I lower the opacity of that layer, creating a new layer above where I then recreate the artwork, keeping the final lines and adding any last necessary details. After that I merge the layers.



2 Make it greyscale

I avoid colour at first. Sometimes removing that distraction allows me to see my contrasting values more clearly. If your image isn't coherent in greyscale, colour won't make it any clearer. I take time to separate light from shadow and foreground from background. A lower background contrast helps the foreground stand out.



3 Add the colour

After creating a new colour layer over my greyscale, I work on getting a basic palette going. Colour layers don't always give you the colour you need, so you may have to tweak the hue or saturation slightly. Once you're at a point where you're happy, you can merge the layers and paint in all the subtle little variations in colour.



Technique focus

SAVE TIME WITH KEY RESEARCH

Gabriel Tan looks at the past to find important historical details for Assassin's Creed Shadows



"This piece of concept artwork is an early exploration of Himeji Castle for Assassin's Creed Shadows. After researching the location and time period, I mapped the castle's layout to get an idea of the different spaces and their functions.

A 2D sketch helped me figure out the composition. For this shot, I wanted a high angle to give the

player a view of the layout and the different options for infiltration. I then worked in 3D to block out the castle's basic shapes. This enabled me to understand the spatial design of the castle, which is an important factor for the gameplay. The image was then taken across to Photoshop where I added illustrative details.

By conducting proper research of the castle, I was able to save a lot of time during this process."



**Artist
PROFILE**

Gabriel Tan

LOCATION: US

Gabriel is an art director at Ubisoft who has worked on Assassin's Creed titles including Valhalla and Shadows.
<https://bit.ly/44WlpB4>

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Photoshop

DRIVE NARRATIVES IN YOUR ARTWORK

Game artist **Max Weber** explains how he uses composition, detail and more to push the storytelling within his images





Workshops

Artist PROFILE

Max Weber

LOCATION: Thailand

After ending a 12-year marketing career, Max transitioned into game art, where he discovered his true passion and continues to grow as a narrative illustrator. <https://bit.ly/3YFAFQg>



This piece tells the story of Nix, a deep gnome druid of the Circle of Spores. She was originally a Dungeons & Dragons character that my wife played in one of our party campaigns. Nix is a chaotic soul; she's messy, disorganised, obsessed with mushrooms, and constantly drawn to strange and dangerous places in search of rare fungi. This illustration captures one of those adventurous moments.

I begin by designing the character, experimenting with the outfit and personality cues. Nix usually wears a fully covered outfit, but I imagined her forgetting her cloak in a rush to chase a particularly rare mushroom. Next I dived into research, studying the Underdark and its inhabitants. Myconids, mushroom-like creatures, felt like the perfect addition, both visually and thematically.

From there, I worked through composition, colour palette, lighting, and eventually the final rendering.

Though the story may seem simple, narrative illustrations are a multi-layered challenge. It's not just about creating a beautiful image, it's about telling a story that can be read with just a single glance.

I used to struggle with cluttered compositions, weak focal points and narrative threads while learning. But over time, I developed a checklist that helps me stay on track. Whether you're a beginner or an experienced artist, it's easy to get lost in the complexity of narrative artworks.

Concept brief

Idea: In the depths of the Underdark, a young gnome girl has stolen a sacred mushroom and is now fleeing from its relentless keepers.



Setting: Fantasy

Location: Underdark

Character: Female deep gnome

Class: Druid

Flaws(?): Mushroom thief

Background: Hermit

Enemies: Myconids



1 Write down core elements

You might think that creating an illustration simply begins with picking up a pencil and drawing. But diving straight into a concept from your imagination, without a written brief, often leads to disappointment. That's why I start by outlining the core idea: what's happening, where and with whom, who the protagonist is, and who or what opposes them. Choosing a clear setting is vital, and the time spent crafting this brief will always pay off later.

2 Use references as a starting point

Once you have a structured plan, it's easier to visualise what you need to draw. I usually spend another hour or two gathering references for key elements of the illustration. This fuels my inspiration and fills gaps in my visual knowledge. I'd never drawn mushrooms before, especially not giant ones, so studying real-life photos was essential. New creative ideas often surface during this research, enhancing the scene's richness.

PHOTOSHOP

RESOURCES

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

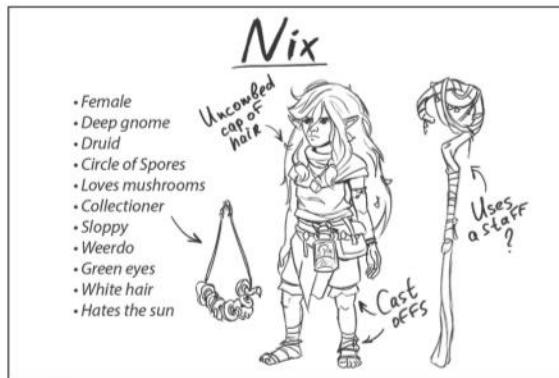
CUSTOM BRUSHES: MAX WEBER'S BRUSH PACK



When sketching, I prefer a brush that mimics the texture of pencil strokes as it keeps the process loose and expressive. I also use various textured brushes when painting surfaces like rocks, dust, smoke or grass.

3 Make the protagonist feel real

Whether for video games or tabletop RPGs, we need to develop a believable protagonist. I approach character creation like building a party member for an RPG – defining their appearance, world view, habits, history and backstory. In this case, I already had a developed concept from a Dungeons & Dragons campaign, which made it easier to imagine scenes that were grounded in the character's nature. Even when creating fan art, the character should be placed in situations that reflect their unique life story.



4 Decide on the tone

Choosing the genre of the illustration plays a huge role, as the same scenario could be interpreted as comedic or dramatic depending on its visual elements. I usually base this on the personality of the protagonist. A mischievous gnome thief like Nix would probably find themselves in a comical scenario, whereas a grim dwarven warrior who lost their comrades in battle calls for a tragic tone. Either way, the viewer should be able to feel the vibe of the drawing, whether that's danger, triumph or the tension of the moment.

GET YOUR RESOURCES

See page 5 now!



5 Develop the characters in detail

At this point, start visualising your ideas in the form of more detailed concept art. I usually create several full-body sketches of the main character, designing the outfit, proportions, hairstyle and accessories. Each of these elements affects the final composition; how much space the character occupies, which elements overlap, and what moves with the character. This principle applies to the antagonists in your story as well.



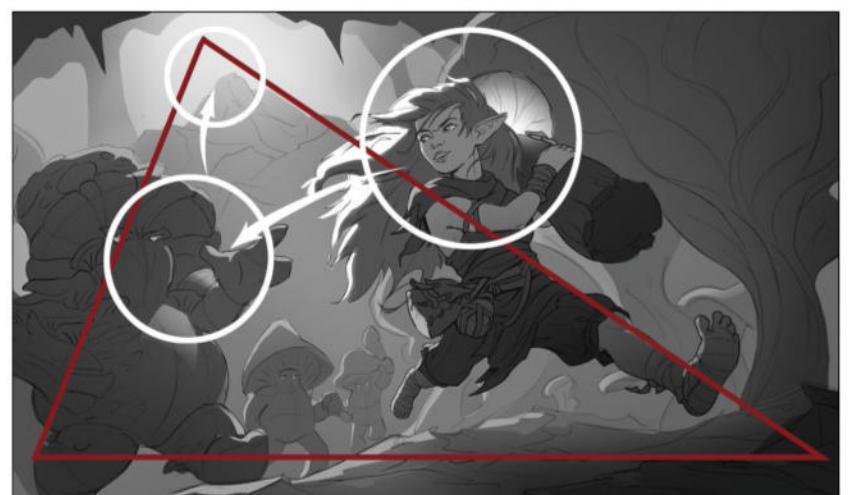
6 The first idea is rarely the best

Typically we'll begin with a rough mental image of how a scene might look, but when transferred to the canvas that vision often doesn't hold up. That's why I sketch at least four quick thumbnails of the scene expressing the same concept but varying in background, pose and camera angle. These variations help identify the version that best tells the story and brings clarity to the final composition.



7 Turn it into a thoughtful sketch

Now we'll bring our ideas to life on a larger canvas. Sketching should go smoothly as we've already planned the character and enemy designs, a rough composition, and the key environmental elements. The environment is a storytelling tool too and viewers should sense where the action takes place. I added a glowing mountain deep inside a cave where rare mushrooms grow. One has clearly been stolen, and now the protagonist is fleeing through a forest of giant fungi, pursued by its guardians. This environment makes the route clear, adds fantasy scale, and supports the story's mood.



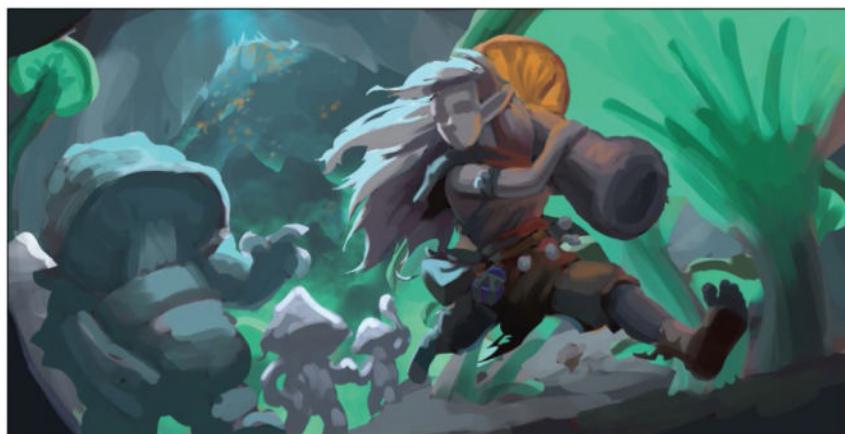
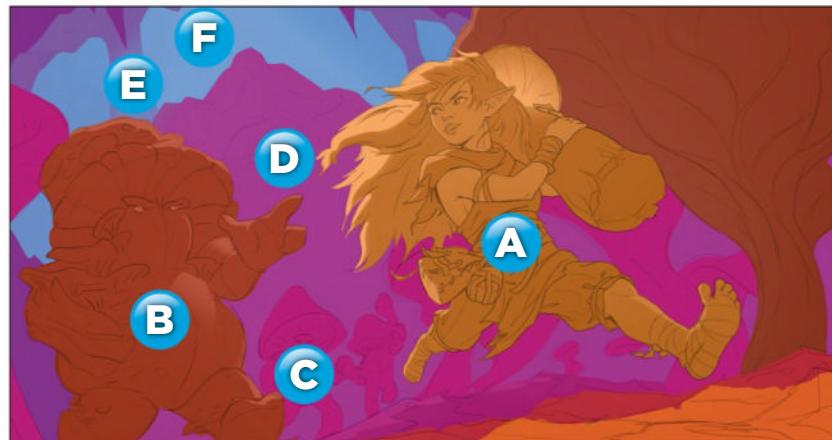
8 Guide the viewer's eye with composition

The protagonist is the focal point, so I placed them near the centre and used the brightly coloured mushroom cap to draw attention. I wanted to keep the viewer's focus within the image, so avoided distractions. From the protagonist, attention moves to the pursuer and then, using natural visual lines created by shapes along the left edge, the eye travels to the glowing mountain. On the right, curved lines guide the viewer back to the centre for a seamless visual loop. ➤

Workshops

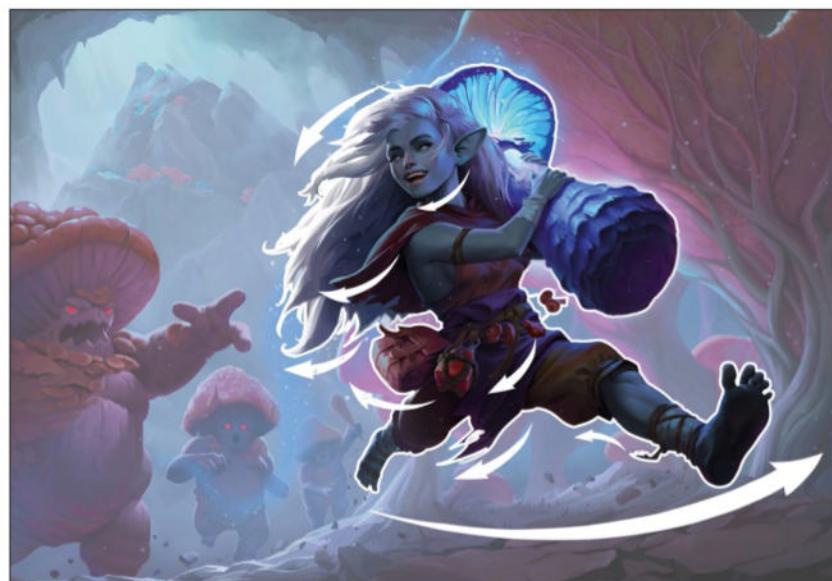
9 Add depth to draw the viewer in

I love using layered compositions to build depth and usually place one or two foreground layers (**A, B**), a middle layer (**C**), and two to three background layers fading into the sky or cavern shadows (**D, E, F**). Let the viewer's gaze explore the environment and these layers immerse them in the scene. Start experimenting with this concept during the thumbnail stage, as it's a great space to push creative boundaries and add atmosphere.



10 Use light and colour to establish mood and atmosphere

One of my favourite stages is bringing the world to life with light and colour. Sometimes you'll know exactly which palette you want, but you can test several combinations with colour thumbnails. Colour is subjective but lighting is strategic, as it guides attention, enhances volume, and defines mood. Use light to sculpt the scene, highlight focal points, and support the emotional tone you want the viewer to experience.

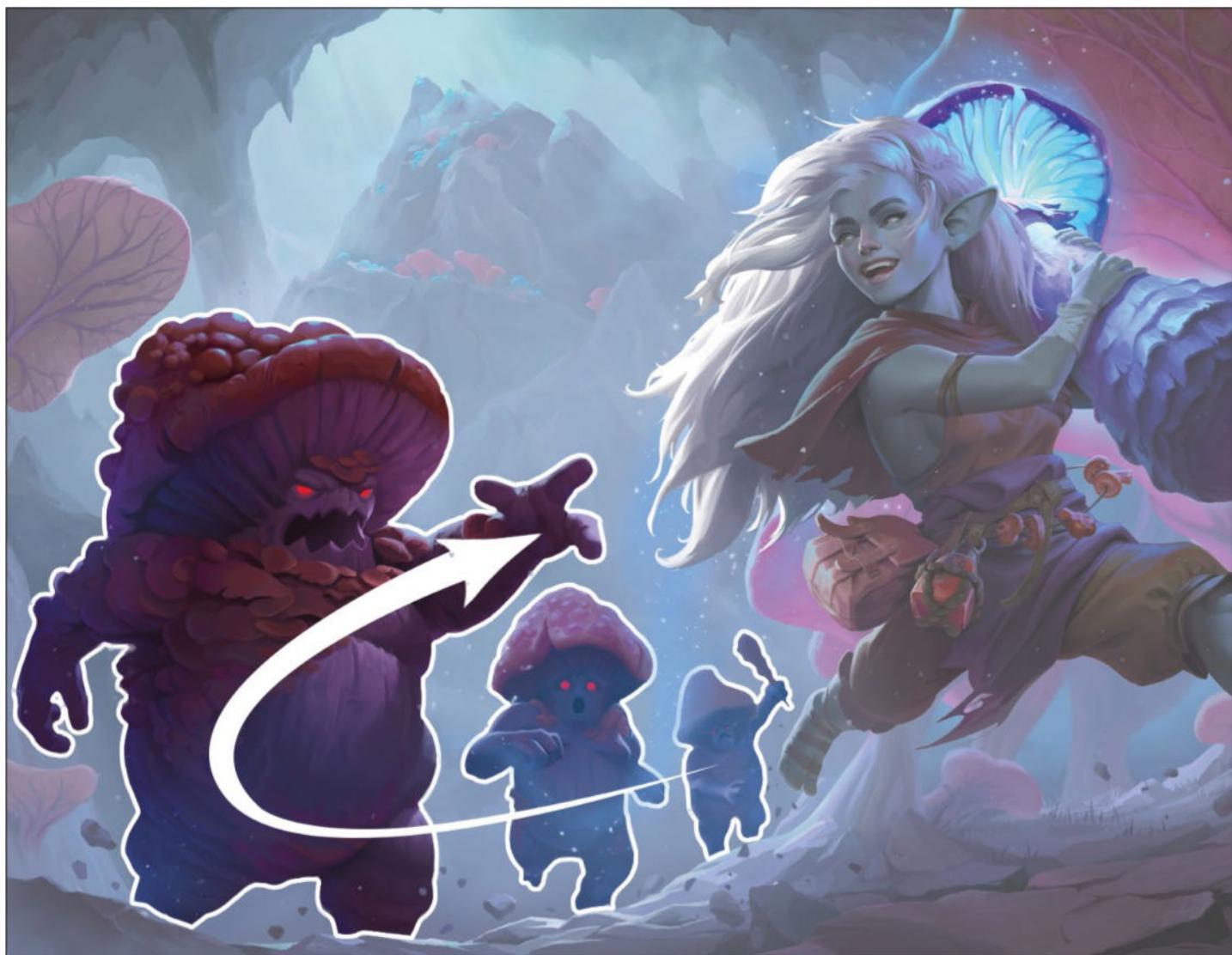


11 Render with purpose and care

From this point, begin rendering and adding details to the illustration. Strategic detail placement helps to direct the viewer's focus. The most detailed part of an illustration is typically the character's face, most often the main focal point. Also carefully render accessories and clothing that express personality or status. Secondary characters can be drawn with less precision and any background elements are kept more abstract. This way, the viewer knows where to look first while still sensing a fully realised world around the central action.

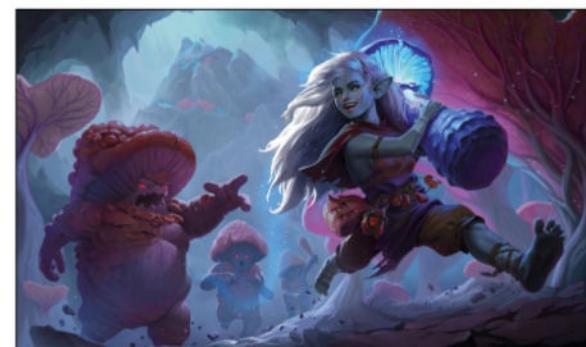
12 Create a sense of movement

Everything about the character should reinforce movement, so I exaggerated Nix's running pose to make her motion feel more intense. Her hair and clothes flow, her pouches bounce, and dust and stones scatter underfoot. The more visual elements used to suggest motion, the more dynamic the character appears.



13 Switch focus to the supporting characters

I added three intelligent mushroom creatures, the myconids, as Nix's pursuers. Each moves in its own unique way despite similar builds. Their staggered positions add variation and emphasise urgency, while they all follow the same direction, which amplifies the chase's energy.



14 Develop the environment

I tilted the camera slightly upward to place the horizon at an angle, which is a common trick to add drama and urgency. Meanwhile, giant mushrooms and stones with flowing lines further enhance the scene's sense of motion and chaos.

15 Know when to stop

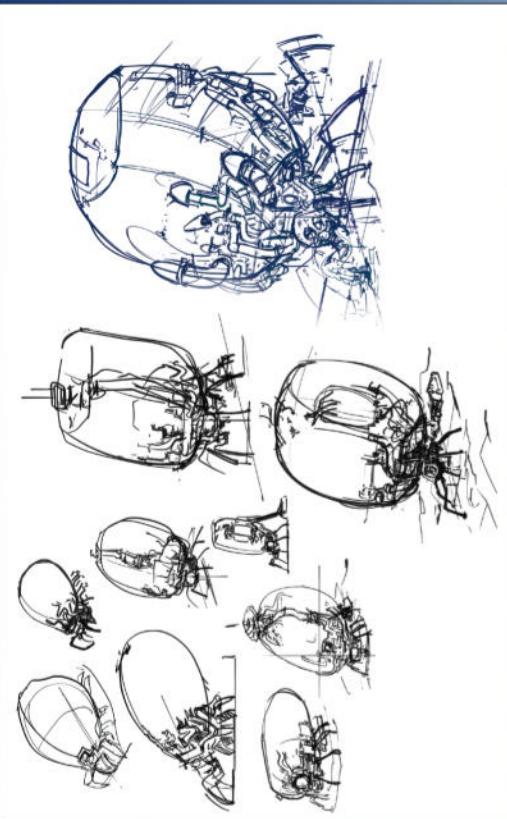
I used to overwork my illustrations, especially at the final stage. I'd zoom in and polish brushstrokes that no one would ever notice. Thankfully, I've learned to let go. Now I check off a personal list: composition, lighting, clarity and narrative. If everything aligns, I call it done and move on. As Jake Parker, the creator of Inktober, wisely says: "Finished, not perfect."

Workshops

Artist PROFILE

Longque Chen
LOCATION: US

Longque Chen is a senior concept artist with more than seven years of experience. He loves drawing subjects with hard surfaces such as weapons, vehicles, machines and mechs.
<https://bit.ly/3yYEA1>



Technique focus LOOK TO NATURE

Longque Chen ticks off the important features as he delves into the real world for mech innovation

"This piece is personal concept art of a mech inspired by a tick. I like how real-life ticks feed on a creature's skin, so I wanted to imply that in the design of this TICK mech taking energy from the land. I started with a drawing study where I figured out the proportions, head details and body forms of ticks. Then I worked on an ideation sketch where I made these into functional parts of the mech. Finally, I added huge metal pipes to the body so the whole mech looks like a complicated piece of walking equipment that's sucking energy from the surface." 



Tech Focus Natural inspirations

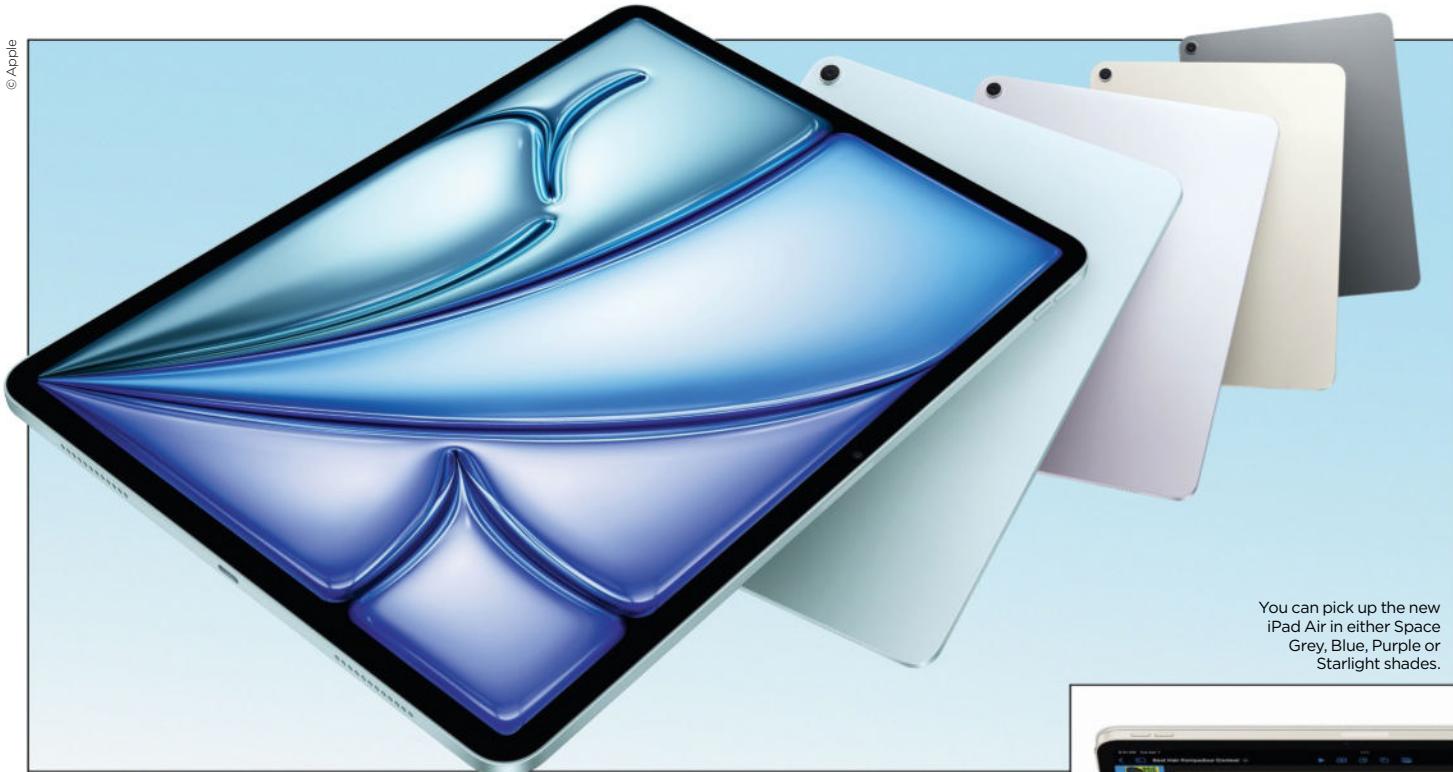


Reviews



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

© Apple



You can pick up the new iPad Air in either Space Grey, Blue, Purple or Starlight shades.

Apple iPad Air M3

BREATHE IT IN Desktop-class power comes to one of the finest tablets on the market for creatives thanks to an updated chip

Price From £599/\$599 (11-inch), £799/\$799 (13-inch) **Company** Apple **Web** www.apple.com

The 2025 edition of the iPad Air, its 13-inch incarnation at least, feels like an iPad Pro. It has the same flat sides and heft in the hand but has the powerful M3 chip inside.

The extra processing grunt means apps like Affinity Photo and the iPad versions of Photoshop and DaVinci Resolve absolutely fly, and the Apple Pencil Pro makes it ideal for sketching. There's a keyboard case that turns it into a kind of laptop, and the USB-C port means there's no scrabbling for a compatible charger. It's not cheap, but with a surprisingly reasonable starting price (though you're going to want to upgrade the base specs, which gets

expensive fast), this might be the best tablet for creatives right now.

TOP OF THE RANGE

Apple makes great tablets. There's no need to say anything else. The 2025 edition of the iPad Air retains the design of the 2024 model, with flat sides and rounded corners.

It's a restrained design, with all the attention focused instead on the screen. As your primary method of interacting with a tablet, this is to be expected, and the rest of the iPad fades into the background when you're engrossed in the display. The edges of the iPad Air are broken by the little plastic sections that denote

Apple's Magic keyboard is easy to hook up to the tablet.



© Apple

the points at which antennas pass through the metal to get a better signal, and there are four speakers split between top and bottom. The USB-C port sits where you'd expect it to, and there are the usual volume rocker and lock buttons too, the latter doubling as a fingerprint reader.

The 13-inch iPad Air is lighter than a laptop but heavier than some other tablets, though it is quite large, which immediately means it will weigh more

The Air's processing power means you can have a whale of a time working on projects.



© Apple



Both versions of the Apple Pencil can be linked up for the best digital art experience possible.

The device is relatively skinny, but weighs more than some tablets that we've tested out.



Charging and external connections come via a single USB-C port included on the border of the tablet.

and require a bag that can fit a thin, light laptop. Apple doesn't say what type of glass covers the touchscreen, but the entire build feels stiff and assured in the hand. There's no IP rating however, so it might be best to keep it dry and clean.

EXCELLENT ACCESSORIES

Most of the iPad Air's features are software-based, as the tablet itself is bare apart from a single USB-C port. It doesn't have Face ID for unlocking, relying instead on Touch ID through the lock button, and there's only a single wide-angle camera lens.

But it's not all doom and gloom. All these things are perfectly acceptable on a tablet - the USB-C port still does video out, and 10Gbps is fast enough for all but the highest resolution images and video files. Using a tablet to take photos is a sub-optimal use at best, so adding in tele and ultrawide lenses would be largely redundant.

“The processing grunt means apps like the iPad version of Photoshop absolutely fly”

© Apple

The Air is compatible with Apple's Magic Keyboard and both types of Apple Pencil; the Pro model brings in a new twist sensor and a squeeze gesture for quick changes, as well as having customisable haptic feedback, but costs more. The Magic Keyboard sports a trackpad so it's possible to use the iPad more like a laptop.

The OS itself has improved since it split from iOS, but of course you get Siri voice control and iCloud for your documents. It still feels like working on an oversized phone rather than a desktop OS, however, which may put some off, but if you're prepared to operate within its constraints it can do almost anything a laptop can.

POWERFUL TECH

The M3 is an excellent chip. The iPad Pro may have made the leap up to M4, but it also costs twice as much. In 3DMark's Steel Nomad, a graphics test for high-end mobile devices that

scales its 1440p action to the native screen resolution and looks like a modern console game, the M3 Air managed a sliver under 20 FPS, which is just about a playable framerate but not exactly smooth. The same is true in Wild Life Extreme, a 4K benchmark that is considered too heavy for most phones and tablets, so the Air is doing well to get 33 FPS on average.

In Geekbench, the Air's score in the multi-core benchmark is just slightly below that of an AMD Ryzen 9 5900X, a 12-core desktop processor from 2020; an excellent result for a tablet. So we're looking at a top processor that's slightly weak in the GPU area, but no more than most chips that use integrated graphics.

The problem with iPadOS for creatives is the software: you've got versions (with missing features) of Photoshop, Lightroom and Illustrator, plus the full Affinity suite, Procreate and more. If those are good enough, or you're prepared to learn something new, then Apple has a productivity powerhouse. If not, a traditional laptop may be more appealing.

Battery life is tricky to evaluate on a tablet, as none of the standardised tests we typically use are available, but Apple claims 10 hours of endurance out of a charge, which feels a little high but not too far off the mark. It will last all day, but the battery life is down compared to M1 and M2 models.

The base price is deceptive, as once you've added the Apple Pencil Pro and Magic Keyboard it's suddenly over £1,000. Then as you upgrade the storage, the price climbs even higher. That means the iPad can be a tricky recommendation - Apple makes excellent creative machines, but the price can be daunting. 

Ian Evenden

VERDICT

The Air M3 is an iPad Pro in all but name. It can serve as a laptop replacement for when you need to do office work, and a sketching pad when you don't. It runs pro-level apps, though the selection is limited. While iPadOS has its shortcomings when compared to a full Mac, if you can work around them it makes for an ideal everyday companion.

Pros

- High-performance
- Lots of creative apps
- Apple Pencil and Keyboard compatible

Cons

- Gets expensive
- iPadOS limitations
- One USB port

Rating



The slimline MacBook Air is only 11.5mm thick, over 50mm thinner than the MacBook Pro.



© Apple



It's hard to fault Apple's build quality. The smooth aluminium casing of its laptops feels lovely to touch.



There are just two Thunderbolt 4 ports plus a MagSafe port on the Air, which feels lacking.

Apple MacBook Air M4

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED Feather-light and punching above its weight, the latest Air makes for a stellar machine with its new chip

Price From £999/\$999 (13-inch) / £1,199/\$1,199 (15-inch, model tested) **Company** Apple **Web** www.apple.com

This has to be Apple's best laptop. It's not the most powerful, but there's nothing quite like the MacBook Air for wow factor when you pull it out of the box.

The M4 chip refresh brings with it 16GB of RAM as standard and a slight price drop when compared to the M3 model. Ultimately the Air is a superb laptop, but won't cope with heavy workloads as well as a MacBook Pro. As such, it's ideal for the travelling artist or 2D designer; highly portable, yet immensely capable.

The 15-inch MacBook Air we put through its paces wasn't a graphics monster like you'd find in some PCs, but its 10-core GPU is still a little better than the chip that's housed in the lowest-level 13-inch iteration, which only has eight of them.

“The new M4 MacBook Air is ideal for the travelling 2D artist or designer; portable yet immensely capable”

In our GPU benchmarking, that 15-inch M4's Geekbench OpenCL mark is a little short of that posted by the GeForce GTX 1650, a card from 2019. That said, in the Cinebench 2024 benchmark, it scored almost 600 points (or 16.8 per cent) higher than last year's M3-powered MacBook Air.

The M4 performed well in the CPU testing, especially when you consider it's passively cooled. Its single-core score in Geekbench 6 beat the Intel Core i9-13900KS, though the multi-core score was more modest due to it not having as many cores.

The screen has a good resolution but lacks the anti-reflection coating and 120Hz refresh rate of the Pro laptops. But you do get 500 nits max brightness and DCI-P3 colour coverage, which beats many Windows machines. Colour reproduction was

The MacBook Air is not an expensive laptop by the standards of many pro machines, but still performs impressively.



great as well. With the screen in P3 mode, it displayed 100% of DCI-P3 and sRGB, and 88% of AdobeRGB.

Battery life is excellent. Apple has been claiming 18 hours of use from its MacBook Airs for several generations now, and while that's perhaps a little optimistic, there's enough juice here for a full day's use with some left over.

Sequoia, the latest MacOS version, can be disorientating if you're used to older versions (or Windows). It feels complex and the screen has a notch at the top around the webcam, which app menus are arranged around. But it provides a nice level of security, asking for fingerprint authentication to install apps and unlock.

Ian Evenden

VERDICT

The combination of Apple's thin and light laptop and the M4 processor leads to a machine that's only just behind the low-end MacBook Pro, and which has had a price-cut too.

Pros

- M4 processor power
- Thin and light
- Great screen

Cons

- It could have a few more ports

Rating

We think the Master Rex is a good option for a mixed setup of desk work and gaming.



Boulies Master Rex

WORK MEETS PLAY

A gamer's throne with ergonomic comforts

Price From £410/\$480

Company Boulies

Web <https://boulies.co.uk>

RATING ★★★★☆

Boulies is a brand that offers a range of chairs catering to both the office and gaming markets. Among them is its new **Boulies Master Rex**, which offers a good deal of comfort, support and features at a competitive price.

The integrated lumbar support can be adjusted to align with the spine's natural curve, promoting better posture and reducing the risk of back pain. There's a reclining range of 95-165°, accommodating various activities from focused work to relaxation and, of course, this can be locked. However, it was a tad stiff and we'd have preferred lighter recline and tilt functionality.

We particularly liked the "4D" armrests, which can be adjusted in four ways: up and down, front to back, side to side, and rotationally. There's also an integrated leg rest that can be extended from the bottom; perfect for sitting in front of your favourite TV show. The attachment on the leg rest is a bit flimsy though, and we found the extension motion a little clumsy, but it's not a deal-breaker for most people in an office environment.

Jacob Little

HP Omnibook X 14-inch

MARATHON MACHINE It looks like an ordinary laptop, but this Snapdragon-powered release is an endurance runner

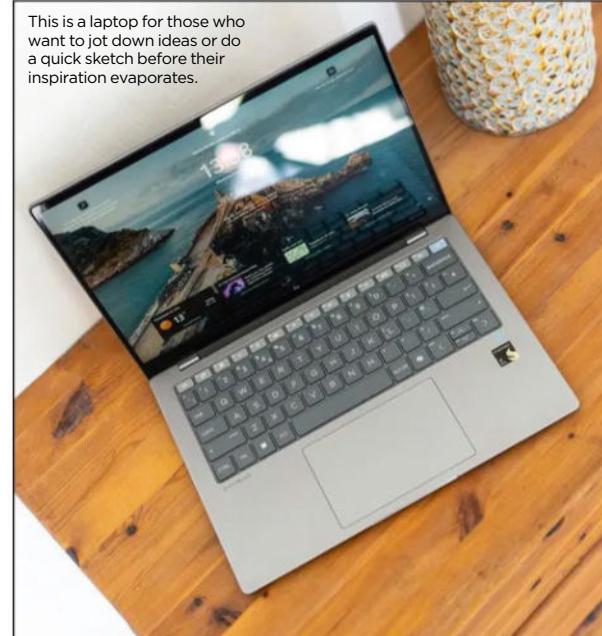
Price £1,350/\$1,450 **Company** HP **Web** www.hp.com

Capitol+ productivity laptops are a vibrant sector of the PC market right now, new Snapdragon processors proving they've got what it takes to stand next to Intel and AMD.

With the 12-core Snapdragon X Elite on board, the HP Omnibook X doesn't have to worry about CPU power, but its GPU suffers from the same lack of power as we've seen in other PCs with the same chip. Luckily it's well-built and easy-to-use, providing enough power for everyday tasks without spectacular performance.

Snapdragon software remains an issue, though things have improved in the past year. Open the Creative cloud app, click on the Graphic Design tab, and you'll find Photoshop and a beta version of Illustrator, but still no InDesign. There is a version of the layout software in the Beta tab, but it hasn't been promoted to the main page yet. Outside Adobe's ecosystem you can find CorelDRAW Graphics Suite (version 2024 onward), and Affinity from version 2.5. Other apps run with Windows' Prism compatibility layer, but so long after the release of Snapdragon PCs, it's disconcerting to see Adobe apps still in beta.

This is a laptop for those who want to jot down ideas or do a quick sketch before their inspiration evaporates.



The Snapdragon processor makes for a nippy laptop, but it lacks graphics bite.

VERDICT

While it suffers from the same GPU issues as other Snapdragon machines, the HP Omnibook X 14 pulls a rabbit from the hat with its extremely long battery life, even when compared to other ARM-based machines. This means it's ideal for the travellers, bed and sofa workers, or late-night creatives.

Pros

- Amazing battery life
- Solid screen
- Portable build

Cons

- Usual weak Snapdragon GPU
- Lacks ports

Rating

★★★★☆

Ian Evenden



The MagVida has plenty of space for all your peripherals with plenty of room to spare.



Boulies MagVida

UPS AND DOWNS An electronically controlled, height-adjustable desk could bring health benefits and give your productivity a boost

Price £680/\$800 **Company** Boulies **Web** <https://boulies.co.uk>

Many of us spend extended periods working at a desk, sitting for hours on end daily, and that can have significant effects on our health such as energy levels or severe muscle and joint problems.

A height-adjustable desk is a great way to combat this and there are options available, from desk toppers with adjustable sections to be used on an existing desk, to fully motorised desks, such as Boulies' MagVida here.

You receive everything you need including the tools to put it together and a short but clear manual. The build quality is excellent. Everything fits as it should, the construction is flawless, and the desktop finish comes with a slight texture that looks and feels premium, as well as stopping items from sliding around too much.

The whole system is tidy and aids in decluttering, especially underneath. The cable tray is more like a strong



Cable storage isn't a problem, which is all the more important considering the desk's adjustable height.



The controls are simple and enable you to store up to three heights.

fabric hammock, which is much better than a fixed, solid shelf, as it can be made to fit your needs. A variety of accessories attach to the underside by strong magnets. That includes options for cable management and storage such as a drawer.

The top is deeper than a lot of desks at 70cm (and 140cm wide) and has a rounded edge. This extra depth allowed our reviewer to work in a way they preferred with space for both a Wacom Cintiq and their keyboard.

Most importantly, you can pick your perfect height with the adjustment options, whether that's the ideal seated height for your proportions and chosen chair or standing up. The main benefit is that you can get on your feet while still being productive; some studies show standing desks can increase productivity and we felt the physical benefits too. Handily, you can also store three desk positions in the control's memory.

Rob Redman

VERDICT

We can't imagine going back to a static desk after using the Boulies MagVida. The magnetic accessories, cable management and textured worktop are all fantastic on their own, but being able to get up on your feet, with all the benefits that provides, is worth every penny.

Pros

- Large working area
- Strong and quiet
- Good adjustable height range
- Magnet system

Cons

- Heavy

Rating



The bizarre-looking Redmagic Go has been created with a rather science fiction aesthetic.



Redmagic Go Power Bank

CHARGE ON THE GO

This versatile piece of kit offers an electric combo

Price £60/\$80

Company Redmagic

Web <https://redmagic.gg>

RATING ★★★★☆

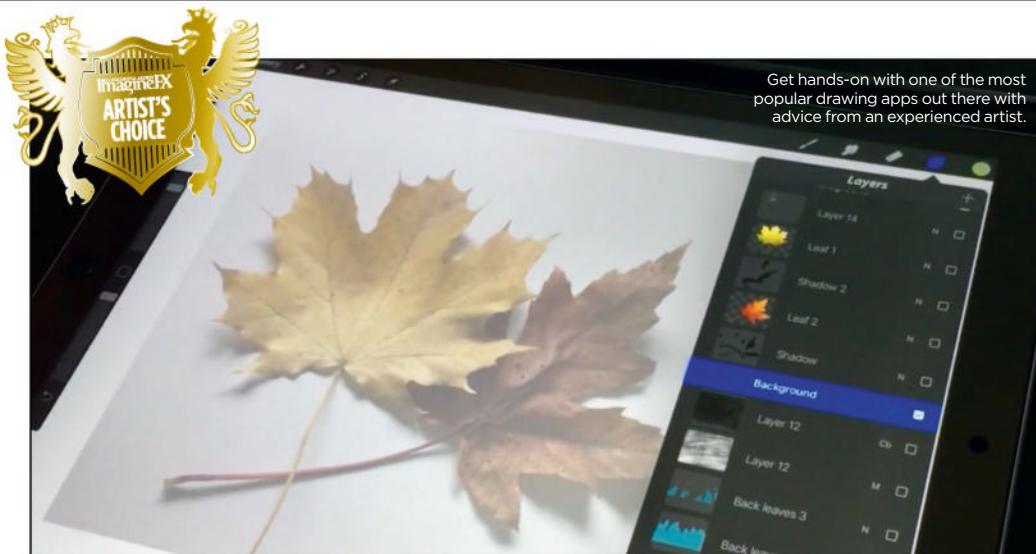
Power banks and chargers aren't the most exciting bit of equipment for a creative on the move, but they can be essential.

Redmagic is a brand that's made a bit of a name for itself selling Android phones and tablets, but its entry into the power bank market couldn't be further from a plain rectangle - it looks like something straight off the set of Star Trek. It's a compact object, and can be used to charge devices both at home and on the move. It is, however, only currently available with a two-pin US plug.

Alongside the captive USB-C cable/carrying handle, there's a single USB-C port to charge the bank. You get 65W of direct charging while plugged in, with 20W PD when using it as a power bank. The 5,000mAh battery holds enough power to juice up your phone or mirrorless camera effectively, but is a bit of a stretch for a laptop. Still, it'll do in a pinch, and the ability to supply 65W means you won't have to wait around too long.

The manufacturer says it will last for 1,000 charges before dipping below 80 per cent capacity, against an industry average of 300 cycles, thanks to battery tech inherited from electrical vehicles.

Ian Evenden



Drawing and Painting on the iPad with Procreate

TABLET MASTERCLASS Want to know everything about how to work with Procreate? Brad Colbow's course could be your answer

Publisher Udemy **Price** £60/\$120 for course or Udemy Personal Plan £15/\$20 monthly
Format Online **Length** 5 hrs 17 mins **Web** www.udemy.com

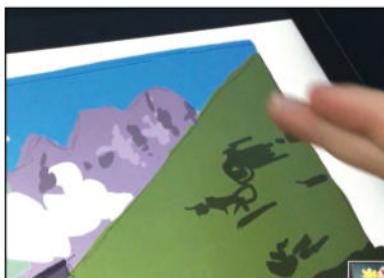
Brad Colbow is an artist and YouTuber we've been following for more than a decade now. He's always been consistently excellent in his extensive range of reviews, guides and opinions about all the tools, techniques and equipment needed to be a digital illustrator.

That's why we were pleased to see this Udemy course from him, which dives into every aspect of how to use Procreate. The course structure begins with an introduction to the software's basics and features. Brad doesn't actually start drawing until around 30 minutes into the course.

Some may think his descriptions are too in-depth, but we felt his style of explaining "everything with side notes" was helpful, as it shows an instructor who actually knows how to use what he teaches professionally.



You can expect detailed explanations on the ins and outs of Procreate during the course.



with real-world, messy experience, which often reveals a lot of important under-the-hood tips.

Brad is a comic artist by trade, and though his art style may not be exactly what everyone is looking for, that would be missing the point. This course isn't about any single style, it's about how Procreate can be best used for your artwork.

For example: did you know that you can rasterise text in Procreate? It's not often used, but the option is there, tucked away within the comic drawing section. In this way, there's so much to be learned here.

The course is updated for Procreate 5, and Brad is upfront about that from the start. It sounds like the course will be updated again when Procreate eventually moves to version 6.

Mike Griggs

Brad's lessons can be applied to virtually any artistic style.

VERDICT

This course from respected artist Brad Colbow delivers an easy-to-digest deep dive into Procreate. Every facet of the app is covered and allows artists of any skill level to get to grips with its variety of options.

Pros

- Brilliant and clear instruction
- No stone unturned in walkthroughs
- Brad has a clear, illustrative style

Cons

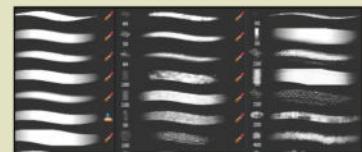
- Doesn't cover alternate genres
- Some may find he covers too much

Rating



Brushing up...

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



Affinity Photo Custom Brush Pack

Artist Art Design Studio
Software Affinity Photo/Designer
Brushes 180 **Price** £10.94/\$14
Rating

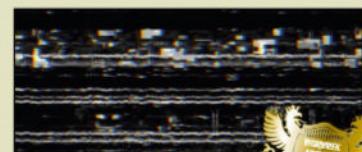
A massive set of pattern and paint brushes for both Affinity Photo and Designer. They are raster brushes only, but with the combined workflow this shouldn't get in the way. Be aware they haven't been tested on mobile or tablet. <https://bit.ly/4jU1MyT>



Krita Brush Pack V1

Artist Missoonii
Software Krita
Brushes 13 **Price** Free
Rating

A great set of starter brushes for everyone's favourite free art package Krita, which are easy to install and use with excellent results — and available for free, they're hard to beat. <https://ko-fi.com/s/ae840a75c3>



200+ Glitch Photoshop Brushes

Artist Resource Boy
Software Photoshop
Brushes 200+ **Price** Free
Rating

Weirdly, having a set of brushes that can be used to 'break' images is handy, so this pack of over 200 high-definition glitch brushes is useful when an image needs to be given a high-tech look, a unique camouflage pattern or more. <https://bit.ly/4IUYrV>

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Traditional Artist

Inspiration and advice from the best pro artists

92



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This issue:

88 Traditional FXPosé
Discover this month's selection of the finest traditional art, which has been sent in by you!

92 Draw a dynamic dinosaur in pencil
The king of the cretaceous meets a Red Sonja-inspired character in El Gunto's illustration.

98 First Impressions: Manelle Oliphant
The artist reflects on her fairy tale influences and teases her upcoming children's book.

FXPosé

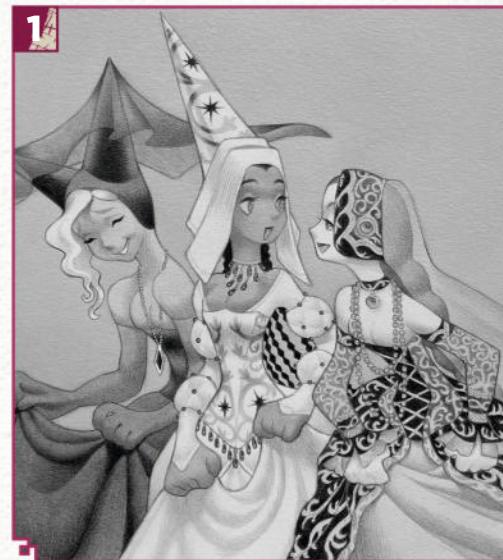
SHOWCASING THE FINEST TRADITIONAL ARTISTS



Sarah Koudelka

LOCATION: Canada MEDIA: Mechanical pencil, gel pen WEB: <https://bit.ly/4dgI6UZ>

Having grown up between Europe and Canada, Sarah's drawings are inspired by medieval architecture, lush landscapes, and her lifelong passion for fantasy.



1 MEDIEVAL BADDIES

"Serving looks and side-eye, these wealthy medieval women blend historical glamour with a playful edge. Bold pencil work and fine fabric details capture their elegance, attitude, and an unshakeable sisterhood."

2 DREAM LAMB COMMISSION

"A coastal dreamscape where memory meets fantasy. The concept and characters came from the client, and I was inspired by English cliffs. This piece weaves softness and nostalgia into a surreal yet comforting world."

3 GROGGY MORNINGS

"A sleepy angel cat starts the day in their cosy, cluttered home. I love illustrating quiet rituals and the feeling of morning stillness. I drew inspiration from the manga Haibane Renmei and the European countryside."





Roberto Ricci

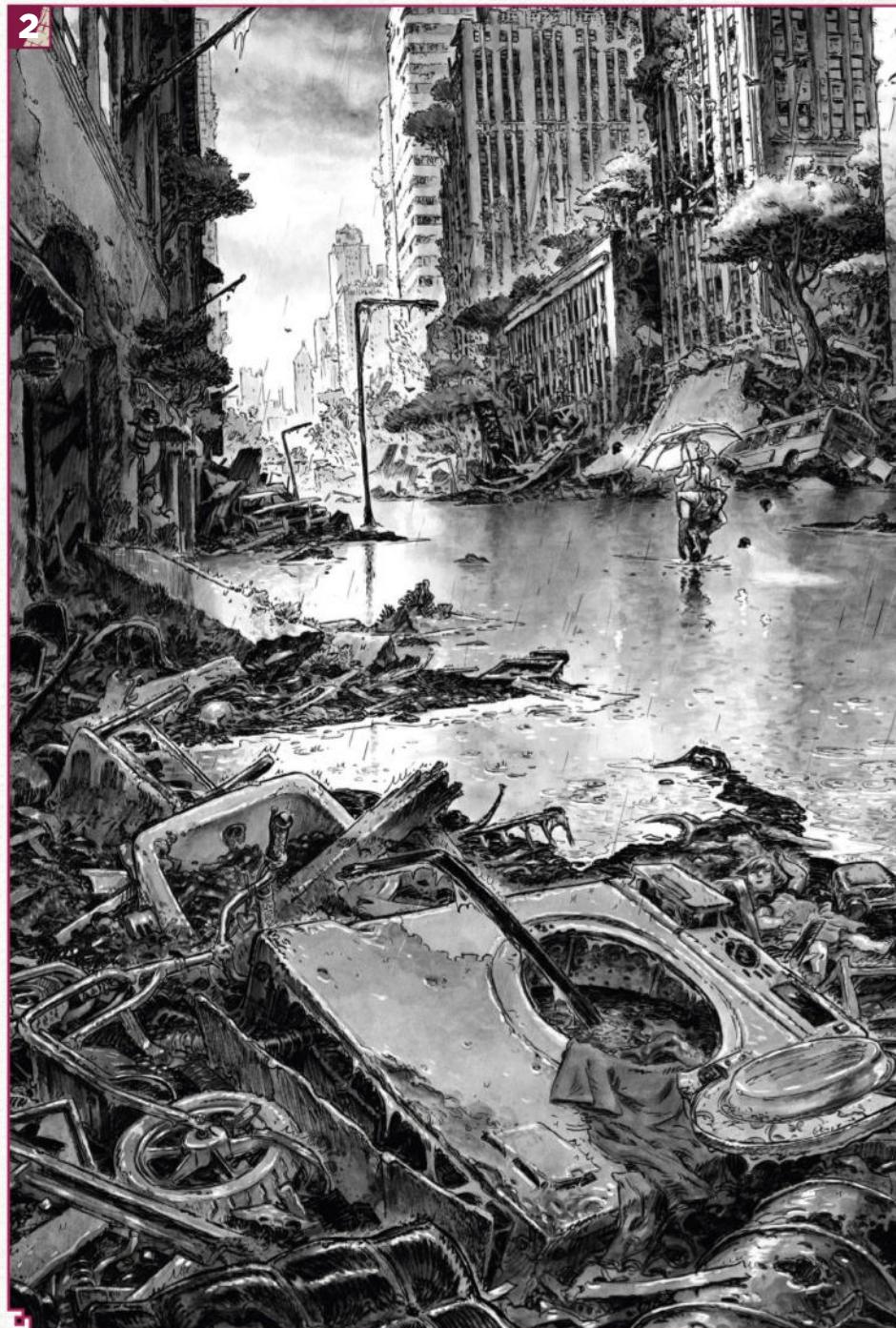
LOCATION: France MEDIA: Ink, watercolour, acrylic, gouache WEB: www.artstation.com/robertoricci76

Roberto is a self-taught comic artist who works in publishing, video games and movies, as well as teaching. He is particularly inspired by Metal Hurlant authors, and his latest clients include Dark Horse Comics and Activision.



1 EDWARD SCISSORHANDS

"Made for the Edward Scissorhands 20th Anniversary Tribute with Gallery Nucleus. Inspired by Tim Burton, and the techniques and colours of illustrator Arthur Rackham."



2 URBAN BOOK 4

"The cover for the fourth book in my Urban series, which are published by Futuropolis. The final version was digitally coloured, but this is the ink version."

3 MALEFICENT

"An image for the book Méchants, published by Hachette, this is a tribute to the villains of cinema and pop culture. Maleficent is my favourite Disney character."





Pencil Photoshop

DRAW A DYNAMIC DINOSAUR

Find out how **EL GUNTO** improvises a T-rex from scratch, using contrast, shapes and more for a striking illustration

For the last 20 years I've worked almost exclusively with digital tools for commissioned jobs. At the beginning, I would be sketching my art on paper, scanning and then colouring with Photoshop. Later on I had the chance to get a Wacom Cintiq tablet, and at that point paper and pencils basically disappeared from my life.

But since AI-generated art has become so prominent, a few months ago I decided to go back to basics in protest, and to feel the texture of the paper, the sound of pencils scratching, the dirty hands, and working without the safety net of being able to hit Ctrl+Z.

Each time I start a drawing with pencil and paper, I feel like a total newbie. But I love how the final results – and the accidents that

happen along the way – are all unique and something that a machine won't be able to replicate.

So I invite you to see how I take on these artistic adventures, working up a rough initial composition using Photoshop before swapping over to traditional tools to create the final image itself, adding a little blast of vibrant colour along the way.

Whenever I sit down to create, I honestly don't always know what the result will look like. But as we're so often told, it's not about the destination, but the journey we take there... and the dinosaurs, of course.



Guillaume Poux, also known as El Gunto, is a French freelance illustrator based in Spain. He works for many publishers and animation studios around the world. See more of his art at www.instagram.com/elgundo.



MATERIALS

PAPER

■ Canson Imagine 200GSM

PENCILS

■ Bic Criterium 2mm
■ Koh-i-Noor Versatil 5347
■ Koh-i-Noor Progresso

■ Faber Castell Precision eraser pen
■ Faber Castell kneader eraser

In depth Draw a dinosaur



Traditional Artist Workshop



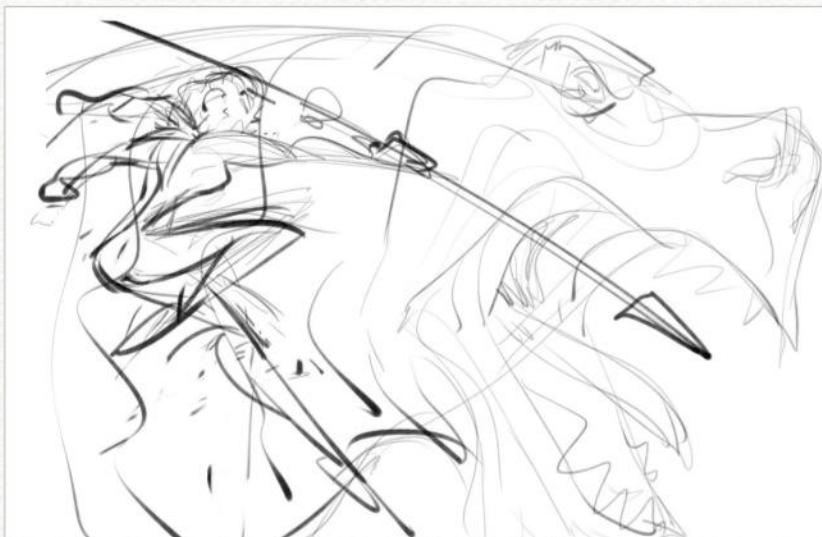
1 Lay out a basic composition

I haven't completely erased digital from my art; 20 years of Photoshop doesn't disappear just like that! After getting an idea, I work digitally on a simple composition with silhouettes and shapes. Two characters mean two silhouettes with different proportions and values for contrast, and an interesting composition.



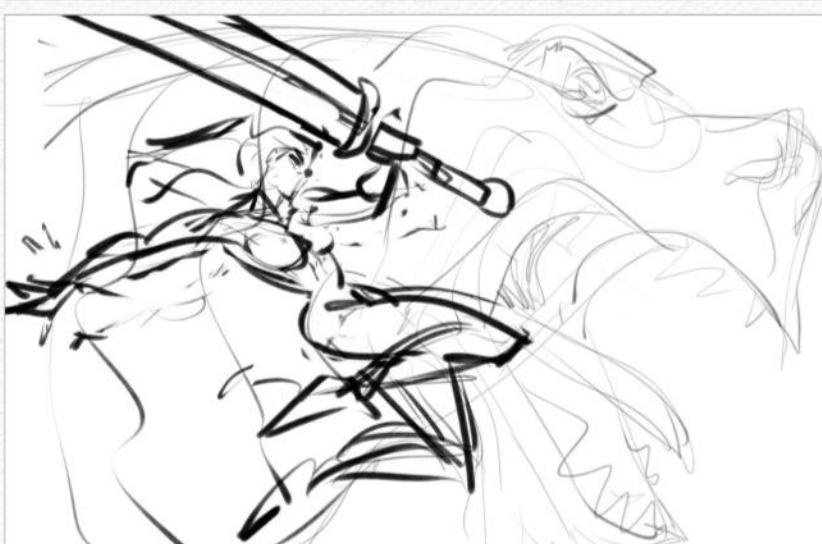
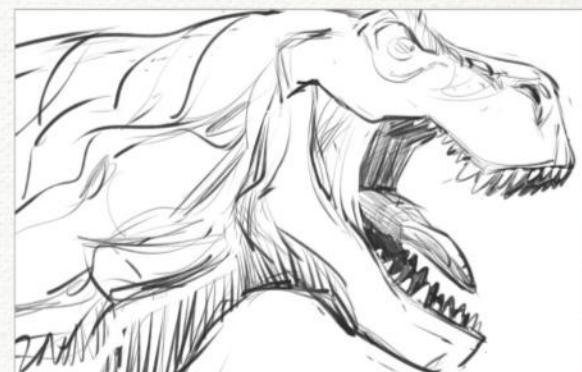
2 Make a rough sketch

Now that we have a primary composition, it's time to roughly sketch the different parts of the illustration, which I've done in Photoshop while still ideating. Begin with a swift sketch of the main shape of the illustration, in my case the T-rex. This character brings dynamism to the image as the main source of movement. You only need a few lines at this stage, so don't worry about details.



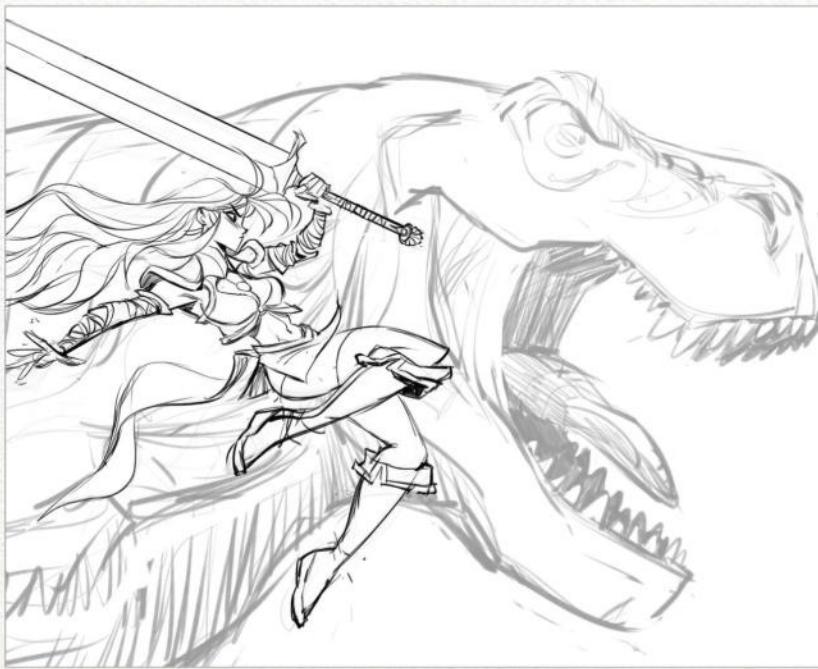
3 Silhouettes and shapes (left)

Next we want an interesting silhouette for the foreground character. With Photoshop, it's easy to draw on a different layer and try out different versions without altering anything else. Play with the silhouette to make something interesting and appealing. In the two poses here, one seems more dynamic and readable than the other. The first is interesting, but the spear can be confused with the T-rex's tongue. I preferred the second pose, with the contrast between the character and the sword, plus the movement. The right leg is a bit difficult to read, so I'll be careful drawing the final character.



4 Add the details

Now that we've chosen our characters' poses, it's time to sketch in the details. Again, I began with the dinosaur, using photo references to make it more realistic. This can be tricky, as sometimes adding details and anatomic realism can diminish the dynamism of the character, so you need to find a balance between the realism and the style to maintain the movement. What's important is that the viewer believes what you draw, even if you cheat with the reality a little.



5 Build up the second character

This is a bit easier for me as I'm used to human characters. While adding details, try to keep the dynamism of the figure. For any good illustration, the character must have interesting contrast and be easily readable. Asymmetry is the key, especially with a dynamic pose like this; straight lines versus curves, fat shapes against thin ones, avoiding parallel lines, and so on. This is also a great time to design and refine the visual aesthetics of the character, like the clothes and hair.

6 Plan the shading

Let's test the contrast of the illustration by quickly adding some shading. While doing so I had an idea: why not add some colour to the drawing? I'm a huge fan of Red Sonja and her vivid hair, so I decided to give my character bright red locks. As I said, I had no idea where the illustration would go when I began drawing. After testing this out, I found that the bright colour helped the character pop out of the image.



7 Prepare for traditional drawing

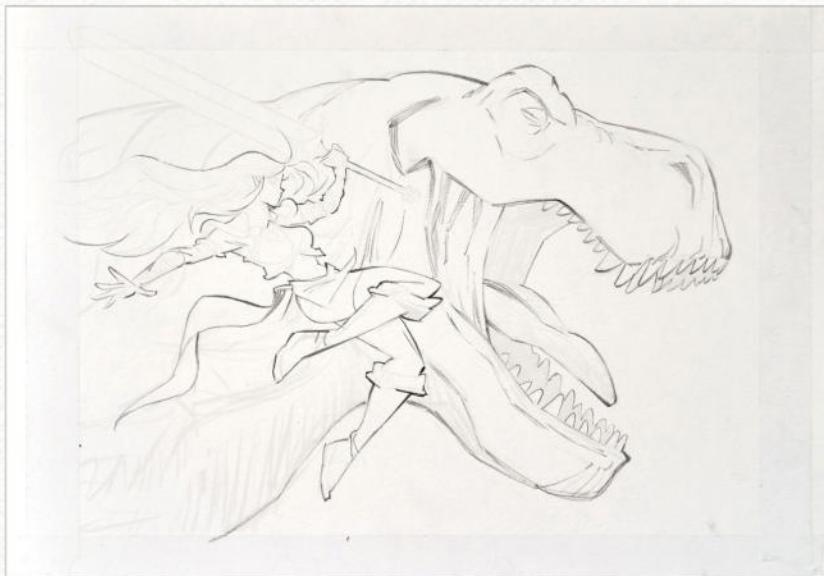
Print out your line-art, which will be the base of our final pencilled illustration. Pick your paper wisely as it's more important than it might seem. Some paper can be difficult to draw over. Sometimes it's too smooth and lacking the typical sensation of using a pencil, and others can be too grainy, making thin, consistent lines a challenge to draw. This can be different for everyone, so you'll have to experiment first-hand with different types of paper to find the one that best fits your style and technique. I'm still looking for the perfect paper for me.

For this piece, I went back and forth between smooth paper and a more grainy type with a warmer tone. After quickly experimenting with the options, I settled on the grainier one, although this is ultimately subjective and merely a personal preference for me.

8 Tape your paper

Stick down the perimeter of your illustration to give the edges good definition and a touch of contrast with your curvy lines. It also gives a sensation of cleanliness, and it's incredibly satisfying when you peel the adhesive tape from your paper. Before you get going, it's also wise to print out your digitally shaded version to check the values as you draw the final illustration. ➤

Traditional Artist Workshop



9 First traditional strokes

And now it's time to have fun! Start off by drawing out the line-art, for which I used a mechanical pencil to keep my lines as clean as possible. This needs a lot of focus, so I suggest switching off your music, screens and smartphone; it's only you and the drawing now, almost like meditation. This flow state can be difficult to reach when you work on a computer as there's always a notification popping up or something distracting to watch on YouTube. Without noticing, you'll quickly find you've lost 30 minutes drawing the line-art. In my opinion, traditional drawing requires a lot more focus and dedication than working digitally.



10 Choose tools carefully

When you draw with pencils, I'd advise having at least two different sizes and grades of lead, with HB (harder) for the line-art and 2B to 4B (softer) for shading. The harder the pencil lead is, the finer the line. I also use a woodless graphite pencil, which is a bit soft, for hatching and can be tilted to draw thicker lines if needed. For erasing I like to use a thin mechanical eraser and a putty rubber, and last but not least my toolbag also includes three different blending stumps.



11 Add shadows and smaller parts

Start to work on the background and the T-rex by adding some shadows. Use hatching before blending the pencil strokes with the blending stump – it's better to use a stump than your finger as it's more precise. You can add some details in the shadows too, for which I bring out the smallest blending stump.

12 Work on the lighting

Use a mechanical eraser for the rim lights and other lighter parts; they are super precise and work perfectly with lead pencils. I used this to separate my T-rex from the illustration's background.



13 Create textures

Even when blending the shades, try to keep some of the hatching textures while adding volume where needed, such as my dinosaur's neck. I don't like it when the shadows are too blurry, as it softens the drawing and in my opinion is overdone. Hatching gives more strength to your drawing and you can enhance volume through the direction.



14 Contrasting characters

In contrast to the T-rex, I wanted to keep my human flatter so they stand out. I kept some parts white with almost no shadows or volume to provide a more 2D aspect to the character, which makes them pop out against the 3D dinosaur.



15 Give it a flash of colour

The bolt of vivid red in my human character's hair was simple, done with a Tombow marker. I love the contrast of it against the grey pencil laid down across the rest of the illustration. Next I draw the details in the hair using my mechanical pencil to create a feeling of movement and dynamism. For hair, try to vary thickness, and avoid parallel lines to create a wavy, flowing effect. I used an orange pencil to slightly lighten the hair after.



16 Looking back

And with that, the drawing is done! On reflection, I'm not completely satisfied by some parts of the image, but that's almost always true. The hair came out a bit too dark for my taste and the rendering could be improved in places. But that's the great thing about art: no matter the end result, there's always something learned, and your next drawing is always the best one yet! 🌟

First Impressions

Manelle Oliphant

How the magic of fairy tales set the artist's course



What is your main source of inspiration?

So much of my inspiration comes from stories. Old fairy tales have often inspired me and given me ideas to play with. Lately, I've been working to improve my watercolour painting, so I've also been creating many landscapes, which helps me focus on technique. Seeing what other artists have done also gives me a lot of ideas.

As a young artist, were there fictional worlds that gave you a desire to create your own?

There was a TV show that my parents would record onto VHS tapes called Shelley Duvall's Faerie Tale Theatre, and a lot of my love for fairy tales came from watching it. I enjoyed seeing how they could tell the story of Cinderella in one way, and Disney could do it in a whole different way.

As I got a little older, I'd go to the library and check out beautifully illustrated books of fairy tales. Trina Schart Hyman and P.J. Lynch both worked in watercolour and created such magical artwork, and I wanted to be like them.



MISS BOUGHTON

If you can't tell, Miss Boughton loves cats. To her mother's dismay, she insisted that I include them in her portrait.

“Some stories are better told with ink, or just feel right painted digitally”

RACCOON HOUSE

This watercolour started as a sketch, but once it was finished, I knew it had to be painted.

Are there any challenges working traditionally over digitally?

There are always challenges to working in traditional media rather than digital, and there have been times I was told that I wasn't hired because my work was traditional. I stick with traditional media because I love how it feels. It also helps me commit. When I draw digitally, I tend to mess about more, and my line quality isn't as nice as when drawing on paper.

But I actually use both traditional and digital tools in my process, even in my watercolours. It's much easier to refine sketches and clean them up using Procreate, even if I started the sketch on paper. Once I have a sketch I like, I print on watercolour

paper, which gives me some confidence because if I mess up, I can print another and start again.

How has the industry changed for the better since you started?

When I graduated from school, everyone considered self-published or independently published books rubbish – and they usually were. It was hard to self-publish and people often did it if they didn't know how publishing worked or didn't do the work to make their book good.

However, over the last 10 years the internet has made independent publishing more accepted. And while it's true that there are still a lot of crappy books published, I love that this opens up opportunities for amazing books that maybe don't fit into the mainstream publishing world to get in the hands of readers.

Do you tend to stick to a single medium, or mix and match?

Watercolour is my favourite medium, but ink drawing comes in a close second, and I also enjoy digital painting. I like to switch it up depending on the project. Some stories are better told with ink, or just feel right painted digitally. And sometimes I change things up just to try something different.

Do you have any passion projects?

I do have a fun long-term project I'm working on. I also like to write and am working on a novel for ages 9-12, all about hunting unicorns. The main character is a girl who must hunt them to help feed her family. The plan is for a heavily illustrated book with medieval-inspired art. I have an agent, and we're almost ready to send the book out on submission. It's fun to see the story and art coming together.

Manelle's love of art and stories began with the books and movies she enjoyed as a child. After earning a degree in illustration, she has worked on many children's books. See more of Manelle's work at <https://talesfantastic.com>.



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