

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX



TRIBUTE TO DREW STRUZAN

The community honours
the king of film poster art

WORKSHOP

MASTER MOODY GAME VISUALS

Level up your world-
building workflow

CONCEPT ART
ASSOCIATION
2025 AWARD
WINNERS
REVEALED!

3D Artist

16 PAGES OF 3D ART
TRAINING AND INSIGHT



FEATURING
WORKSHOPS, GALLERIES,
BACK TO BASICS AND
PEDRO CONTI INTERVIEW

PAINT CUTTING-EDGE CONCEPT ART

Bring your original character designs to life with
Sora Kim's colour and contrast masterclass!

ALSO INSIDE

HOW GAME ARTISTS ARE
SURVIVING LAY-OFFS

35 ANIMAL-INSPIRED
CHARACTER SKETCHES

TOUR A CREATIVE'S
SERENE HAVEN



MACIEJ KUCIARA THE AWARD-WINNING ANIMATOR ON STAYING EXPERIMENTAL



Black Friday Sale

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Welcome to... NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS **ImagineFX**



The nights may be long, but for many of us that frees up more time for creativity and practice, and this month we have an abundance of inspiration and knowledge to share with you.

On top of our usual FXPosé and newly added 3D galleries we also showcase the winning entries from this year's Concept Art Association awards. A big congratulations to all of them! See if you can spot artwork that helped bring your favourite film, TV series or video game to life.

If you're looking to add some new skills to your tool bag then head to the workshop section, where you'll discover the best way to approach your concept art for video games, put colours and contrast to their best use with our cover artist Sora Kim, paint a lush fantasy scene and much more.

Finally I'd like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to one of the greats, who inspired so many artists with his iconic movie posters. Drew Struzan is a hero to the whole community and our thoughts go out to his friends and family.

Enjoy the issue!

Rob

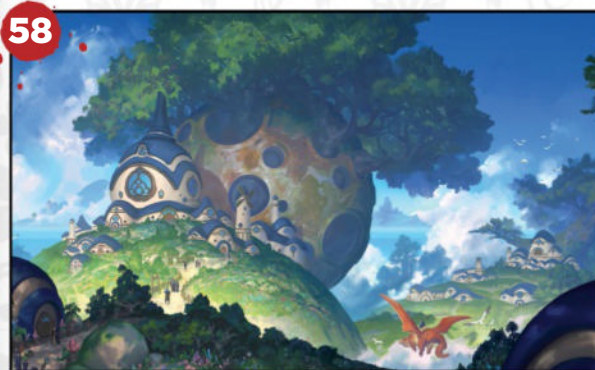
Editor
Rob.Redman@futurenet.com

EDITOR'S CHOICE Three of my top picks this month...



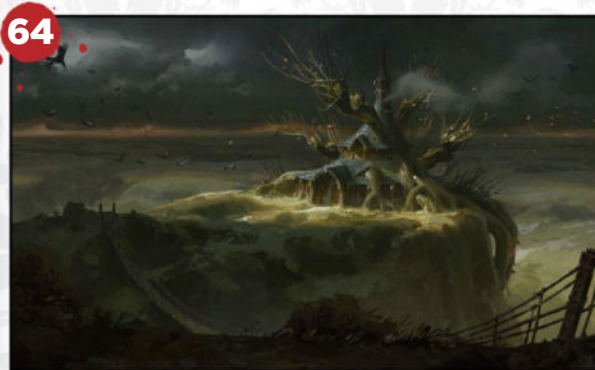
Ashley Stegon's sketchbook

Explore Ashley's sketches, fuelled by Dungeons & Dragons sessions and her love for drawing animals.



Paint a verdant fantasy scene

Richard Lay shares his process for designing an unusual landscape featuring an alien object, using Photoshop.



Designing a fantasy tavern

Grady Frederick shows a typical workflow for creating fantasy environment and architectural concept art.

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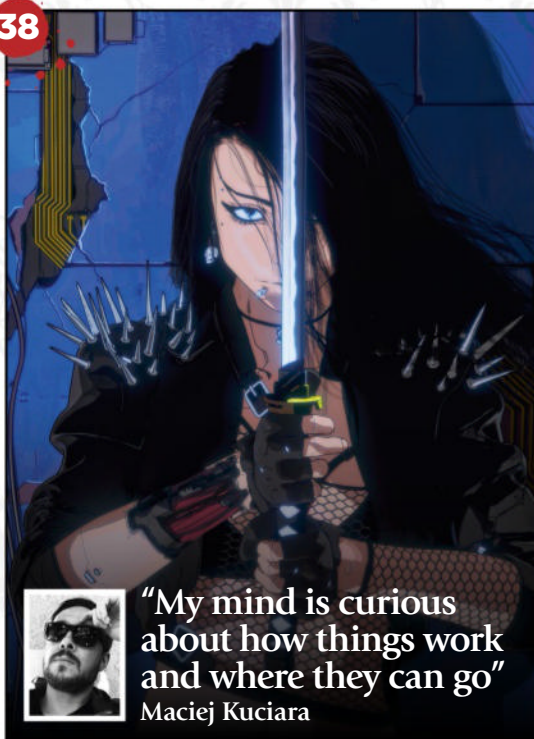
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Artist in Residence: Whitney Travis

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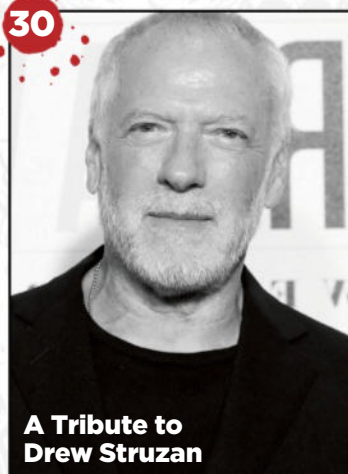
Sketchbook: Ashley Stegon

FXPosé
THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



See page 10 for the best new art ➡

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A Tribute to Drew Struzan

Photo by Omar Vega/Invision for The Hollywood Reporter/AP Images



ImagineFX

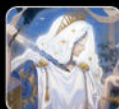
FANTASY & SCI-FI DIGITAL ART ImagineFX Workshops

Advice and techniques
from pro artists...



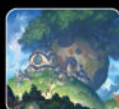
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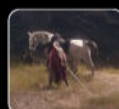
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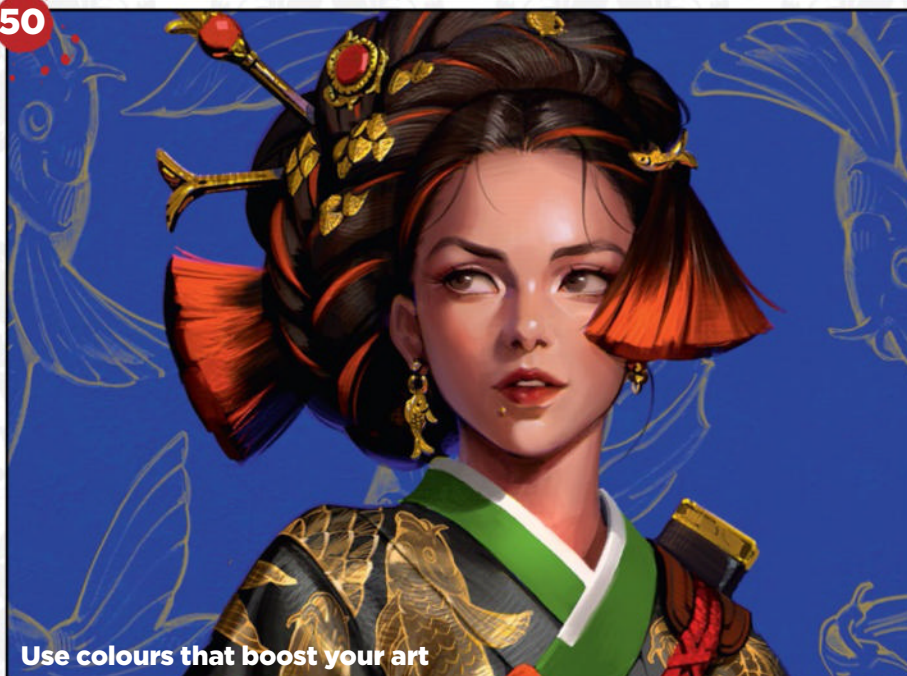
Paint a verdant fantasy setting

62



2D and 3D shortcuts to success

50



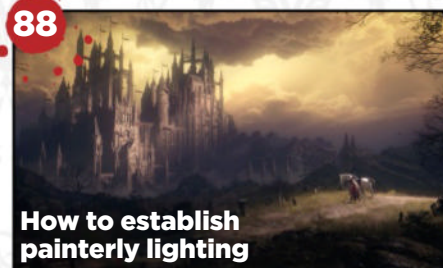
Use colours that boost your art

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Crafting a sense of presence with contrast

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How to establish painterly lighting



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Type this into your browser's address bar.
<https://bit.ly/cuttingedgeconcepts>
- 2 Click the download link**
Find your files ready for download.
- 3 Download what you need...**
Save the files or watch the videos.

Next month

© Matthieu Sarazin

Next month in...
NO. 1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX
**MIX YOUR
DIMENSIONS**

Develop a killer workflow and add 3D
to your toolset for ultimate efficiency

*From atmospheric
depth to details*
Misa Steinmetz
shows you how to
recreate our epic
2D and 3D cover.

*Cars, mechs and
characters galore!*
Wynton Redmond
takes time out from
the Spider-Verse to
show off his sketches.

*Draw and render
a tiny creature*
Discover the visual
language behind
Matthieu Sarazin's
fantastical critter!

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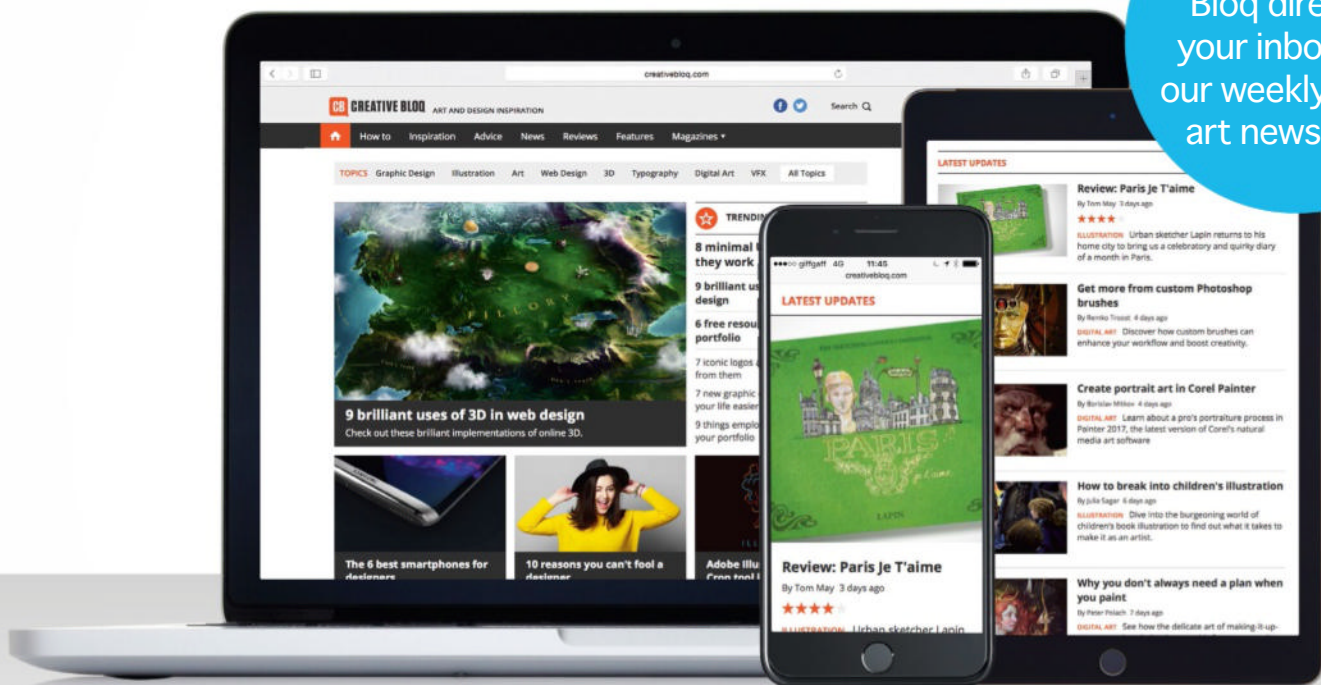
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Artwork by
Alex Alexandrov

FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART

ImagineFX
ARTIST
MONTH

1



JDR

LOCATION: US **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender, ZBrush **WEB:** www.artstation.com/jdrconceptart

JDR's art journey began in 2022. Influenced by films like *Requiem for a Dream* and directors such as Paul Thomas Anderson, he aims to create images with the same emotional energy and impact.

2



10

ImagineFX

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



1 HI-SCORE

"I focus on energy and movement, using bold brush strokes over a 3D base to shape lighting and depth. This piece is inspired by childhood arcade memories."



3

2 HAINANESE CHICKEN

"This was inspired by the small food restaurants that I visited in Singapore. I wanted this piece to feel lived-in and honest, like a place you'd return to for comfort. I always order Hainanese chicken rice."

3 MOVING IN

"I wanted to convey the uneasy feeling of moving — how everything feels slightly off-balance and temporary. The warped car and tilted perspective push that sensation of discomfort, emphasising that you haven't settled yet."

Youyou Wta

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Procreate **WEB:** www.instagram.com/youyou_wta

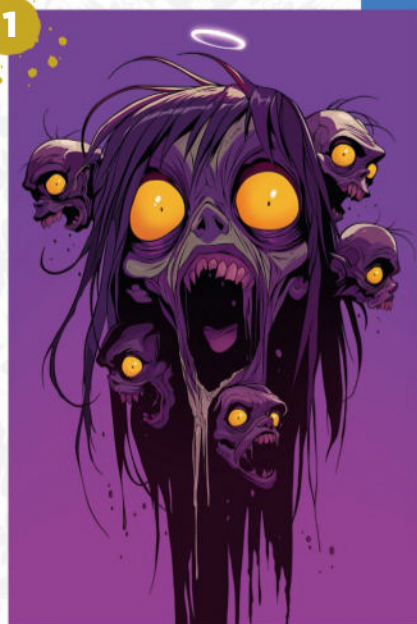
Youyou is a self-taught, multi-discipline artist who divides his time between digital illustrations and traditional paintings on city walls. Inspired by comics and cartoons, his work is mostly focused on character design.

1 VIEUX DEMONS

"This personal piece illustrates the old demons that can suddenly resurface in each of us at certain times in our lives."

2 BABAT

"The Bat refers to the graffiti artists who wait for nightfall to take over the train carriages like vampires."



3 TOTOF

"This character is inspired by photographers who hunt for the slightest new piece of graffiti that appears on walls or trains and rush to be the first to publish it on Instagram."

4 SHOWTIME

"Beetlejuice is one of the characters that marked my childhood. I still remember watching this cult film for the first time in the early 90s after my visit to the video store."



Aleksa Stajsic

LOCATION: Serbia **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Clip Studio Paint **WEB:** www.artstation.com/lionsden

Aleksa started out as an architecture student and a barber before moving into illustration. He's inspired by the video game cover artwork that he loved as a kid, as well as art history and modern works.

1 FIRE DWARF

"I was drawing a tiger and wanted to add a rider to the image. This led to it becoming made out of fire, metal and bone thanks to the input of friends."



2 ALPHARIOUS

"I wanted to draw the primarchs from Warhammer 40K as stylised characters. This also gave me the opportunity to play with one of my favourite colours."



3 BOOMSTICK

"I had so much fun painting this dwarf's face, beard and gun. Finding things that you enjoy drawing helps to enhance these types of images."





Vorueg

LOCATION: US **MEDIA:** Photoshop **WEB:** www.instagram.com/vorueg

Vorueg is an illustrator and concept artist who has been working with digital tools for six years. He particularly enjoys making painterly fantasy art based in the medieval era. "The more painterly, the better!"

1 BAD DOGE

"Dogs always seem cute and playful on the outside, but who knows - maybe they're not as sweet as they seem."

2 EVOLUTION OF ART

"Art has come a long way technologically. But no matter the period or the tools, we will never stop making fancy, painterly brush strokes."





3 MERCENARY DUO: GRIM & PICKLE

"This pair may be clumsy and wonky, but they are an inseparable duo. Grim is a strong brute, Pickle is an agile sniper and together they'll get the job done for as little as five gold coins."

4 GUARDIAN OF THE WILD

"Sir Bear helps frogs cross the lake, cracks open hazelnuts for squirrels with his iron gauntlets, shields the baby birds from those villainous snakes, and sometimes the bees award him with honey for his good deeds."



Mari Yamazuki

LOCATION: Japan MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: <https://maripoleon.tumblr.com>

As an illustrator, Mari's work blends the new and the traditional. Her artwork, which spans book covers, manga and game character design, vividly portrays humans and beasts, in particular wolves and cats.

1 WHISPER OF THE WOLF

"Through the still mountains, a traveller encounters a mystical wolf spirit that shifts between a human form and a graceful beast."



2 THE NEW MOON SABBATH

"A hidden sabbath sits beneath the new moon, where the silver witch flaunts her towering black wolf with pride."



3 CIRCE'S COLLECTION

"Circe is a captivating collector. Her treasures are mostly animals, but when a man arrives, she smiles. Perhaps her collection will grow once more."

4 MAY & MII

"May and Mii, the mischievous Nekochi - a cat-like species - are inseparable. They are always side by side and are ready to cause playful mischief."

Renoiz

LOCATION: Taiwan **MEDIA:** Clip Studio Paint **WEB:** www.instagram.com/renoizon

Renoiz blends anime aesthetics with graffiti energy in order to explore vibrant colour tensions and emotional depth. "I'm inspired by J-pop and modern culture. My aim is to expand into character design and commercial illustration."

1 I AM (NOT) SORRY

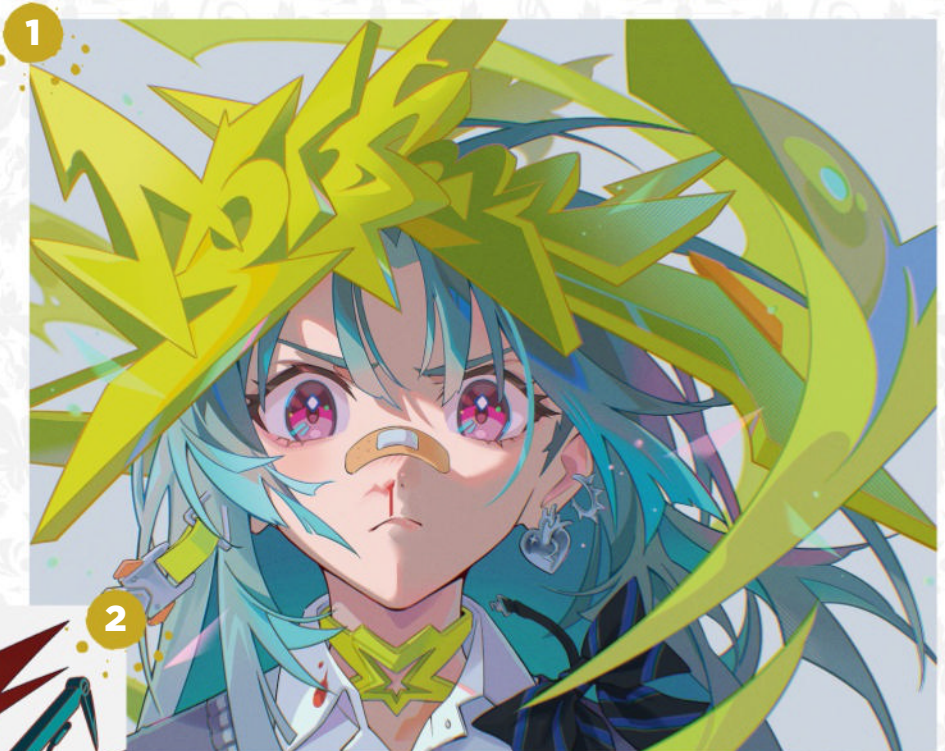
"The first piece of the (Not) series. The brackets reflect self-questioning and duality. Even with scars, I won't say sorry for being who I am."

2 I AM (NOT) LAWLESS

"A clash of order and chaos, of colour and contrast. I used youth and the spirit of rock as symbols of creative rebellion, turning them into a loud, surreal, visual outburst."

3 (IN)-LIGHT

"My first graffiti-infused work, inspired by Splatoon. Paint splashes reveal my name, its letters melting into liquid colour and motion."



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



THE
ROOKIES

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The Windwalkers: Drakha Village

YEAR CREATED: 2025 MEDIA: Photoshop, Blender

“Through this project, I wanted to express my love for sci-fi universes. I took inspiration from The Horde of Counterwind by Alain Damasio, the Star Wars films and the recent Dune adaptation. My goal was to create a visually pleasing world, playing with the giant scale and addressing one key question: ‘What if the population needed to adapt to the planet’s permanent strong winds?’”



Artist PROFILE

Antonio Marianne dit gérard

LOCATION: France



Antonio is 26 and comes from Réunion Island. Fresh from finishing the concept art classes at New3dge in Paris, he's now keen to realise his dream of working in the film and video games industries.

www.therookies.co/u/antoniomarianne



"People who love this craft won't give up on the industry so easily," says Sandra Duchiewicz.



Inside the game industry lay-offs

Testing times Tanya Combrinck finds out how five artists working in the video games industry are coping with the current turmoil

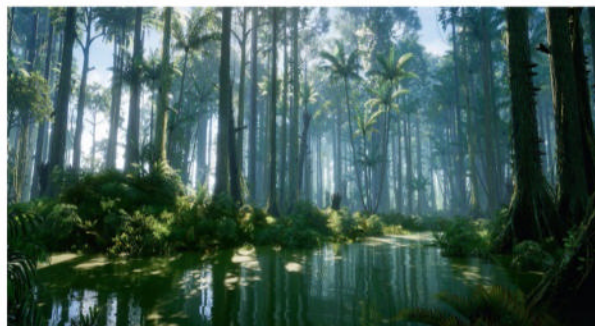
Over the past three years, creatives working in video games have been relentlessly battered by wave after wave of industry lay-offs, with tens of thousands of people losing their jobs. There are multiple reasons behind it: overhiring when demand for entertainment spiked during covid, a preference for investing in AI, and the global economic slowdown are just a few. It's a complex picture, but one thing's clear: it's tough to be an artist working in games right now.

Sandra Duchiewicz, a character and creature concept art specialist, is working as a freelancer. She describes the situation as "bleak": there are fewer projects to work on, budgets and therefore pay are lower, and there's a much larger

pool of other artists competing for the same work. "It's still doable, but only the most stubborn people stay in the industry," she says.

Sandra tells us that all artists she knows are affected. Even those who aren't hit directly by job losses still suffer, as repeated rounds of redundancies take their toll on morale.

"I try to pick smaller companies now, to avoid situations where profitable companies are closed by investors," says Michal Gutowski.



During her time working in games studios, Sandra has seen artists burn out because lay-offs reduce headcount but not workload. The same amount of work still has to be done, just by fewer people. Yet even in a state of burnout, some people cling to their studio jobs because they don't believe they'll find another one.

UNPLEASANT ATMOSPHERE

As multiple rounds of lay-offs create a sense of scarcity, tensions start to rise between staff. Sometimes a hostile atmosphere develops if newer employees are retained and long-standing staff are let go – something that Sandra has experienced at two different studios. She says: "I've seen lighthearted people turn serious and toxic. I can't blame them, though." ➡





VICTORIOUS VISUALS

We bring you the results of the Concept Art Association's annual contest to highlight the best concept art produced over the past year.
Page 24



THE LOSS OF A LEGEND

Artists pay tribute to Drew Struzan, the master illustrator who for decades captured the essence of our favourite films in a single poster image.
Page 30



WEATHER WATCHING

When she's not painting Whitney Travis likes to gaze out of her floor-to-ceiling windows and enjoy the weather. Preferably when it's raining or snowing!
Page 32



"Companies may rely on AI for short-term savings, but in the long run, they will realise that authentic, soul-driven art is irreplaceable," says Arya Hou.

“The climate feels like a long storm season that we cannot control”



"It's either time to reinvent yourself, or keep hustling and improving your skill set," says Sandra.



Vita Shapovalenko says, "Client perspectives on AI vary widely. Many are actively implementing it for visual content production, while others still prefer traditional methods."

INDUSTRY INSIGHT EMBRACING CHANGE

Arya Hou on the closure of the developer Ready at Dawn

How have you been affected by the lay-offs and the current climate in the industry?

For nearly three years, I watched projects we poured years into get cancelled one by one, and when our studio finally shut down, it broke my heart. I kept asking myself: "Without these projects, who am I?"

The climate feels like a long storm season that we cannot control, so I turned inward. I began exploring different methods to create more freely with curiosity. Out of that came works I truly love, shaped by intuition rather than pressure. Now I know my true compass is love for creation itself.

How have your colleagues been affected?

Three waves of lay-offs hit us hard, but Ready At Dawn has always been full of smart, resilient people, and that spirit showed even in upheaval. We built strong comradeship, helping each other land new roles, or starting fresh with new studios, projects and small businesses. Creativity and solidarity remain alive.

Do you have any advice for fellow artists?

Follow your intuition, and allow yourself to explore many paths. What you knew belongs to the past, both you and the world are always changing. Storms will always pass, and when they do, you'll already be stronger, ready to bloom again.

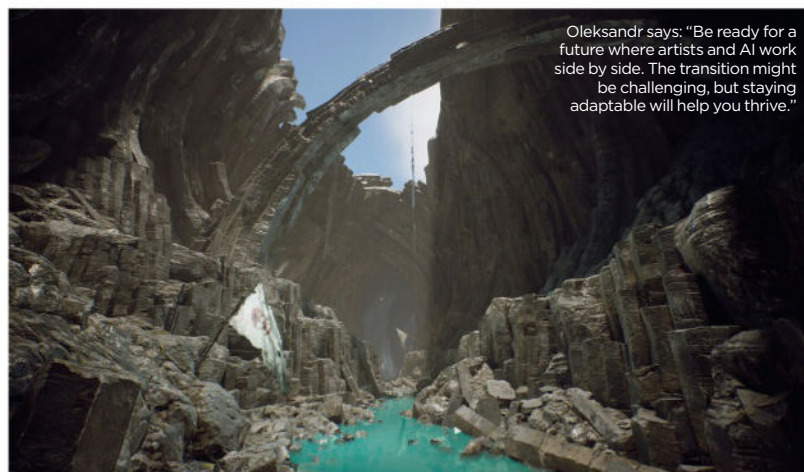


Arya is a senior concept artist, sculptor and illustrator with a decade of experience in the games industry.

<https://aryamonster.com>



Arya says: "Human artists bring depth, years of training, unique perception, lived experience and vision. That's what truly touches an audience."



Oleksandr says: "Be ready for a future where artists and AI work side by side. The transition might be challenging, but staying adaptable will help you thrive."

➡ Another source of strife is AI tools. "Those who call themselves 'AI evangelists' and are using this technology might think they're getting ahead, but they are openly hated in the work environment," says Sandra. "That sort of moral wound is a fast track to burnout."

Furthermore, the fact that the axe has now been swinging for three long years is wearing people down and creating an attitude that Sandra calls "lay-off fatigue", where people are resigned to the situation.

She explains: "When you create a hostile environment where moral conflict happens daily, where the pride that comes from authorship and craftsmanship is removed, and also make people believe they can be fired

at any moment, then artists eventually stop caring for the project they're working on. That apathy is a coping mechanism that's eating the teams from the inside out. People get detached from the work, and passion for game development dies."

LACK OF SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Another worry is that with fewer junior roles, the cycle of training is being broken, which doesn't bode well for the future. "I fear this might start a 'skill atrophy', because today's teams are neglecting the responsibility of creating an environment that can spawn future experts and leaders in their disciplines," says Sandra.

She has also noticed that fewer young people are interested in



"Ideas, originality and a strong artistic voice are more valuable than ever," says Vita.

"Doing something offline in the real world helps you learn new skills and get experience that may be needed in the future," says Michal.

pursuing game development as a career, because they see how the passion of the generation above them has been exploited. "Gen Z is looking at us, and they don't like what they see," she says.

As the industry becomes less stable, many digital artists are branching out



into more traditional forms of creativity as a back-up plan. **Michal Gutowski**, a 3D generalist who creates environment and concept art for games, recently opened a pottery studio as a sideline.

Michal's intention to set up an alternative income source was born a few years ago when he noticed how specialised art roles in games were becoming, and didn't like the idea of having to retrain. Eighteen months ago, with studio closures and lay-offs in full swing, the time seemed right to put his plan into action.

Michal now runs the studio alongside his career as a games artist. "I can switch to this source of income fully if I have problems with game-dev jobs by increasing my prices and running workshops - then I'll have a full-time job in the studio," he says.

“It's made me consider applying my art skills to things like decorative wall designs or other physical mediums”



David Gynspector
MICHAL GUTOWSKI
michalgutowski.pl

TOTAL WAR
WARHAMMER

GAMES WORKSHOP SEGA & CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

"We all believed in the potential of the Black Panther game, so the sudden shutdown hit everyone hard," says Oleksandr.

For many, the emotional whiplash of lay-offs comes from them being so unexpected. Even projects that appear to be thriving can be shuttered, leaving staff both stunned and devastated.

Senior environment artist

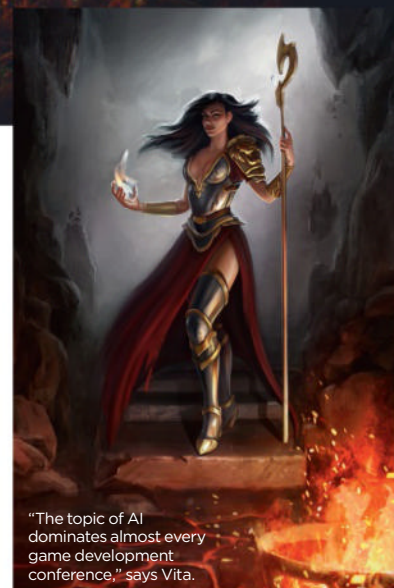
Oleksandr Sychov was a casualty of a high-profile studio closure in May of this year. He tells us: "For the first time in my career, I was directly impacted by industry-wide lay-offs – something I hadn't anticipated while working at Cliffhanger Games on the Black Panther title. It was an incredible experience collaborating with such a talented and passionate team.

"Unfortunately, despite the momentum and creativity within the studio, both the project and the studio were unexpectedly shut down. It was a sobering reminder of how volatile the current climate in the game industry can be – even for high-profile projects."



"I'll never change as a creator. Creativity and storytelling cross all platforms and mediums," says Arya.

"Try to have hobbies that are different from what you do in game art," says Michal.



"The topic of AI dominates almost every game development conference," says Vita.

Fortunately, Oleksandr has found another job in game development, but the experience has prompted him to consider exploring other creative paths, and like Michal, he's thinking of traditional art forms. "I've always enjoyed working in ZBrush, and realised that sculpting with plaster and clay feels very similar. It's made me consider applying my art skills to things like decorative wall designs or other physical mediums."

TOUGH AT THE TOP

Concept artist **Vita Shapovalenko** had a similar experience when a project on which she was art director and team lead was shut down. This left her looking for work in a competitive job market.



Vita has considered her adaptation strategy since the early days of the

AI boom. At first she shifted her attention to 3D, which seemed less affected at the time, but now that AI has expanded into that area as well, her background in traditional art and mural painting is always in the back of her mind as a fail-safe. "But in truth, I love working in game development and CG," she says.

Vita emphasises that while AI may reduce the need for larger art teams, it will never replace creative people. "I believe that with the right mindset, we can get through this transitional period and even thrive by adapting to new creative pipelines," she says.

"As artists, we've always adapted to change. What matters most is to keep creating with intent, to keep evolving with curiosity, and to remember that no matter how powerful the technology becomes, it's still our ideas that give it meaning."



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The Concept Art Awards 2025: **Winners**

Visionary work Through its annual contest, the Concept Art Association salutes the best emerging talent in conceptual art. Here are this year's winners!

The Concept Art Association's yearly awards go to concept artists who push the boundaries of their craft. Creatives who worked on live-action films, animated features, and tabletop and video games were all up for a prize.

If you attended LightBox this year you may have seen the Concept Art Association team announcing the winners. But if you couldn't make it, here are the artists who came top in their categories. Well done everyone!



© Marvel Studios

Live Action Feature Film – Keyframe Galactus introduction,
The Fantastic Four: First Steps by Thomas du Crest www.artstation.com/thomasducrest

© Universal Studios

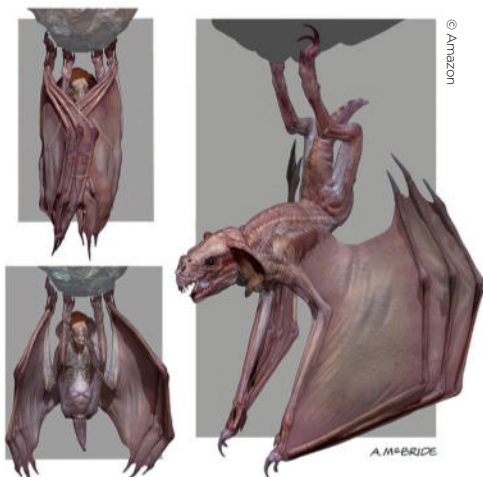


Live Action Feature Film – Character
Elphaba, Wicked by Darrell Warner
www.darrellwarner.co.uk

© NBC Universal

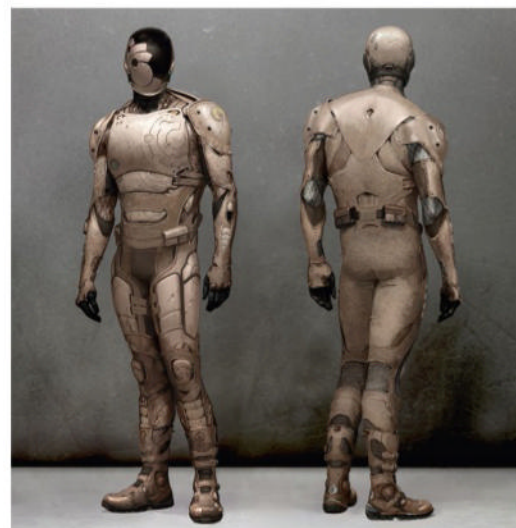


Live Action Feature Film – Environment
Munchkin Land, Wicked by Oliver Beck
www.artstation.com/professormeowington



© Amazon

Live Action – Creature Blind Bats, Rings of Power Season 2 by Aaron McBride
www.artstation.com/aaronmcbride



© Paramount/Apple TV

Live Action Series – Character
Murderbot, Murderbot by Tommy Arnold
www.tommyarnoldart.com



Live Action Series – Environment
Coruscant Seedy Commercial Strip,
Andor Season 2 by Chester Carr
www.chestercarr.com

© Lucasfilm



© Marvel Studios

Live Action Series – Keyframe
Kiss, Agatha All Along by Jana Schirmer
www.artstation.com/janaschirmer



© DreamWorks

Animated Feature Film – Character
The Billionaire, The Bad Guys 2 by Julien Le Rolland
www.artstation.com/julienlerolland



© Sony Pictures Animation

Animated Feature Film – Color Key
How it's Done, KPop Demon Hunters by Nacho Molina
www.instagram.com/nachomolinaart



© Sony Pictures Animation

Animated Feature Film – Visual Development
Kpop Climax, KPop Demon Hunters by Scott Watanabe
www.scottwatanabeart.com



© Sony Pictures Animation

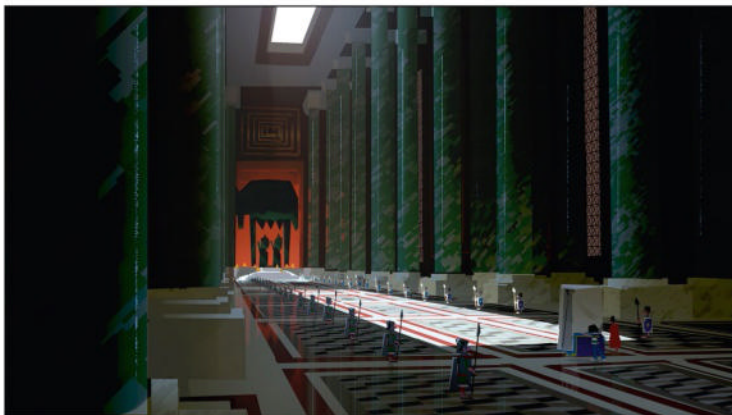
Animated Feature Film – Environment
First Concert Stage, KPop Demon Hunters by Celine Kim
www.celine-kim.com



© Marvel Animation

Animated Series – Character
Noni, Eyes of Wakanda by Uzoma Dunkwu
www.artstation.com/uzomadunkwu

© Netflix/TAT animation



Animated Series – Environment Caesar's Palace, Asterix & Obelix: The Big Fight by Aurelien Predal www.aurelien-predal.com

© Marvel Studios



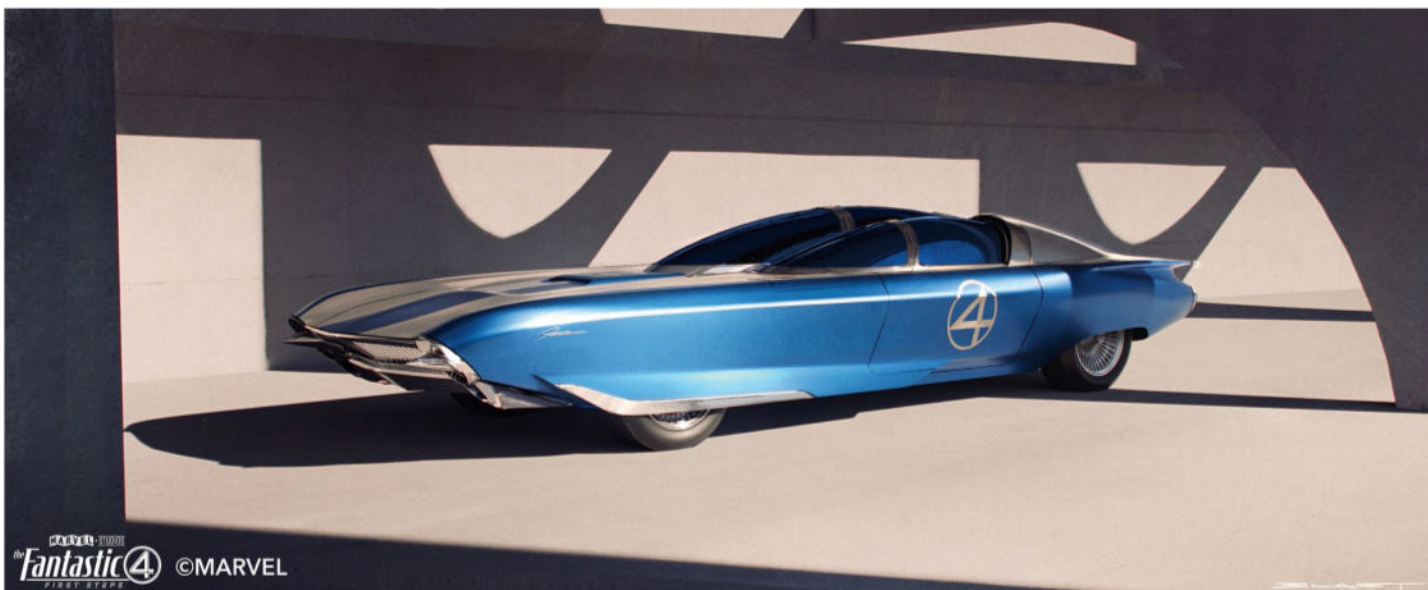
Prop Baby Carrier, The Fantastic Four: First Steps by Mark Button www.markbuttondesign.co.uk

© Wizards of the Coast



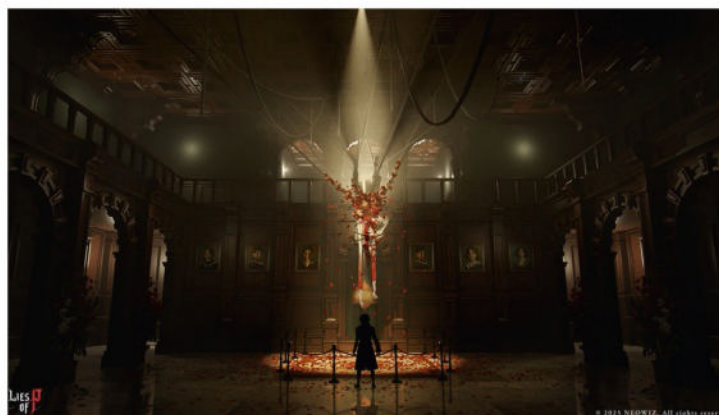
Tabletop – Key Art Silver Dragon, Dungeons & Dragons by Campbell White www.campbellwhitedesign.com

© Marvel



Vehicle Fantasticar, The Fantastic Four: First Steps by Benjamin Last www.benjaminlast.com

© NEOWIZ/ROUND8 Studio



Video Game – Environment Lobby of the Rose Estate, Lies of P: Overture by Hyeon Kim www.artstation.com/hhhhyeon

© Tripwire Interactive



Video Game – Creature
Chimera, Killing Floor 3 by Hamid Shah
www.artstation.com/hamid_shah

© Wizards of the Coast



Tabletop – Concept Illustration
Arch Hag, Dungeons & Dragons by Allie Irwin
www.allieirwinart.com



© Digital Sun Games

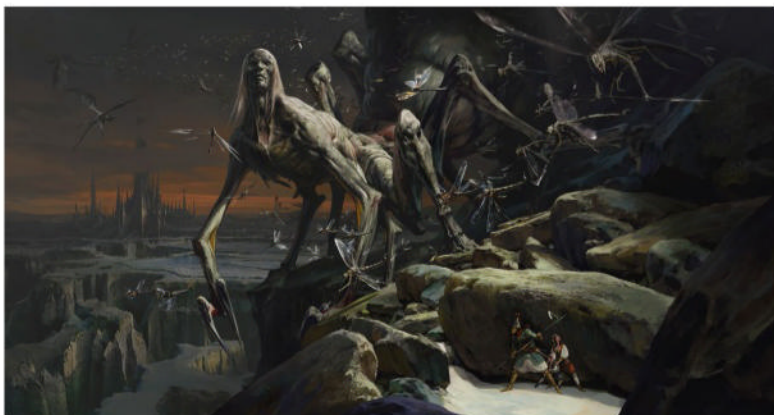
Video Game – Character
Iris, Cataclismo by David Aguado Aparicio <https://davidaguado.com>



Beacon Awards – Character Gravitas by Robbie Trevino www.artstation.com/robbietrevino



Beacon Awards – Environment L.O.E by Jonathan del Rosario www.artstation.com/jdrconceptart



Beacon Awards – Creature
Warden of the Mount Bārangūn by Sina Hayati www.artstation.com/sina_hayati



© DreamWorks

Animation Storyboard
Kitty and Diane Fight, The Bad Guys 2 – Maxime Delalande
<https://mxdelalande.com>



Live-Action Storyboard
Temple Sequence, Jurassic World: Rebirth by Mario Alberti www.marioalberti.com



Student – Environment

The Blessed Highlands by Mirel Shalari, New3dge Concept Art School www.artstation.com/mirel_sh



HLL/Imazins/Getty Images

Lifetime Achievement

Tim Burton

www.timburlton.com



Student – Character

Nocshire, Lady Monochrome by Jiun Qi Tan, The One Academy www.instagram.com/jiunqi



Albert L. Ortega/WireImage/Getty Images

Lifetime Achievement

Stan Winston

www.stanwinstonschool.com



Sipa US/Alamy

LBX Luminary

Maggie Kang

www.instagram.com/nutmags



Rising Star Award Ant Qui <https://antqui.myportfolio.com>

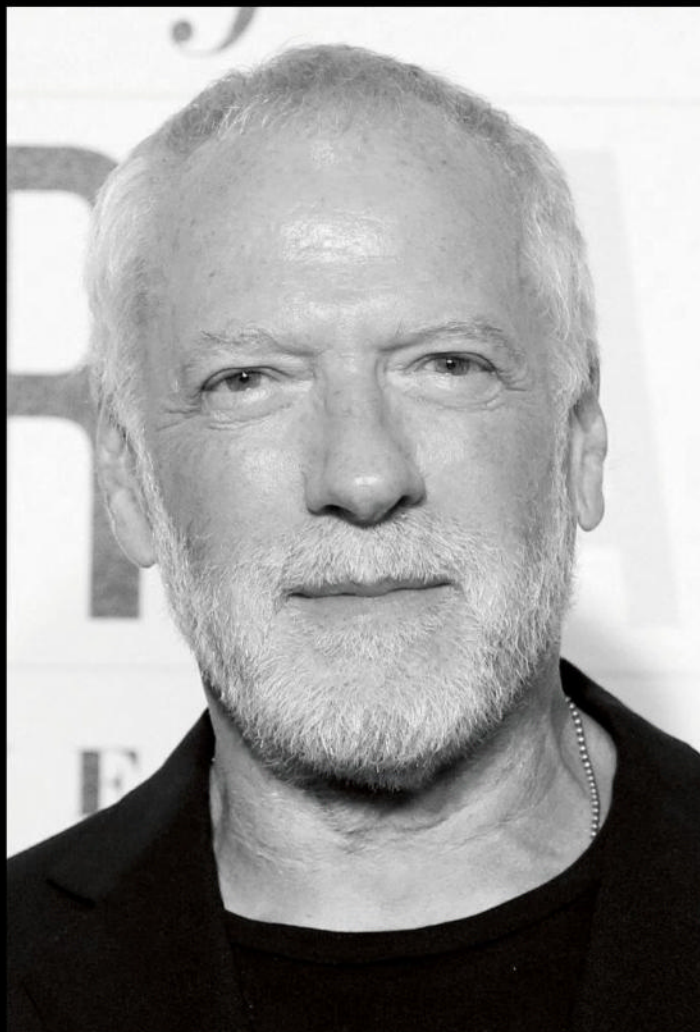


Earl Gibson III/Penske Media/Getty Images

Lifetime Achievement

Chris Appelhans

<https://x.com/dairysnake>



A Tribute to Drew Struzan 1947-2025

Movie magic We celebrate the artist whose brushwork led to a golden age in film posters

For over 40 years, Drew Struzan painted our cinematic heroes. But his talent for also capturing the emotion of a film shaped our childhood dreams.

From the quiet strength of Indiana Jones to the shock of Marty McFly, Drew's art spoke to

generations of movie goers and aspiring artists alike, many of whom you'll find comments from on these pages, singing their praises for an artistic and, in many cases, personal hero.

The ImagineFX team wishes the very best for Drew's family.

I cannot emphasise how unbelievably gifted the legendary artist, Drew Struzan, was. His iconic movie posters, capturing the likeness of our favourite actors, using textures and palettes that conveyed the mood of visionary directors, was phenomenal. And all designed in an exciting, joyous composition that is so incredibly hard to accomplish.

I tried to emulate his dynamic work for my gift to the Spiderwick film crew back in 2008 only to learn how complicated his art was and how alive, energetic and effortless he made it look

Godspeed, Drew. You've inspired so many.

Tony DiTerlizzi

With the passing of Drew Struzan, the prolific movie poster illustrator leaves behind a legacy of iconic film visuals from Star Wars to Indiana Jones and beyond.

Lucasfilm

Just heard Drew Struzan passed away. His incredible work has given me and countless others so much awe, joy and inspiration!

I had posters of his work as a teen, I began using colour pencils because I thought he used them too. Always inspired by him. RIP Drew Struzan.

Karla Ortiz

When I was in high school my ambition was to be an illustrator of album covers, so my artistic heroes were Roger Dean, Derek Riggs, etc., but above all of them was Drew Struzan... R.I.P.

Staz Johnson

RIP Drew Struzan, best of the best.

Jeff Simpson

When I think of "Art", his is what I see in my mind. It's no coincidence that one of the best illustrators of our time was named Drew. He drew alright, he left his mark on the world.

Rob Duenas

You defined an age and inspired a generation. Thank you for all the beauty, Drew. Godspeed

Tyler Jacobson

A true legend. Inspired me tremendously.

Andy Park

One of the most inspiring artists ever. You will be greatly missed!

Dan LuVisi

He brought my childhood to life with his art, and his legacy will live on forever.

Pernille Ørum

Drew, you were an absolute inspiration to myself and countless others as we grew up loving cinema and the covers, posters and packaging that went with them. I wouldn't have even been interested in many movies initially (in child- and teenhood) if not for your stunning work depicting them. I would stare at your work for countless hours as a kid and young adult.

I remember doing studies of your posters in art school and still there was some sort of wizardry behind it I could never quite comprehend. You were a legend and your legacy will live on. Thank you for all the years of inspiration, rest easy.

Robbie Trevino

Monumental artist.

Karl Kopinski

R.I.P. to one of the best to ever do it, the amazing and warm @drewstruzanart. What an inspiration. Sending love to his family and friends.

Jock

Heartbroken by the passing of Drew Struzan. Drew was a lovely person, an incredibly talented artist and an inspiration to artists and movie fans worldwide.

I was fortunate enough to get to know Drew over the past couple of years, and I treasure those memories talking about

Photo by Omar Vega/Invision for The Hollywood Reporter/AP Images

how he created some of my favourite posters and showing him how I make my own.

My heart goes out to his wife Dylan and the rest of his family. Rest in peace Drew, you are a legend.

Kyle Lambert

One of the greatest movie poster artists and illustrators of our generation passed away yesterday. Everything he drew was epic and magical. Rest in peace, Drew Struzan. Thank you for sharing your talent with the world.

Frank Cho

Drew Struzan, an inspiration and absolute movie poster legend passed away yesterday... absolute respect for his amazing craft. His posters are cemented in so many people's memories of my generation.

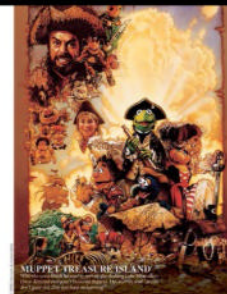
Ken Coleman

So saddened to hear about the passing of a legend in the art world. Drew Struzan. Such an inspiration. I was honoured to have him at my physical art school I had for an event where we posed in front of a few of his posters. The Bogart is the one original I own of his.

Stephen Silver

Our friend and colleague Drew Struzan distilled movie magic into a single iconic image, often the one audiences saw first. Our hearts go out to the Struzan family.

Industrial Light & Magic



Drew Struzan

Star Wars, Blade Runner, ET, Star Wars again. For 30 years there's been only one man to call if you need a movie poster

Drew Struzan, in his own way, became a Hollywood icon. Over a long, influential career his splendidly rich artwork has become the poster companion to countless blockbuster movies. But there wasn't always cinema in his life. Struzan's father, a Hollywood producer, was a hard-core fan of the New York Yankees. He was a true Yankee. Struzan, however, was a fan of the Yankees. "I was just a kid," he says. "I didn't know anything." Now his work connects with millions of moviegoers.

EARLY LEARNING Struzan's ability to create a movie poster was honed from a young age. When he was still a child, his parents were so amazed by his drawings that they sent them to be inspired by the posters at the Museum of Modern Art. "They liked my work," he says. "They liked my style. They liked my sense of what they'd want to see."

INTELLIGENT DESIGN When he graduated, most of his classmates headed for New York, but Struzan stayed in Los Angeles and worked for the movie industry. "They liked my work," he says. "They liked my sense of what they'd want to see."

Collector's Source: **imagineFX**

I don't have words to express the magnitude of his abilities nor the depth of the loss we all feel as the result of his passing. My deepest condolences to Dylan and Christian, to their family, friends and his loved ones.

Bill Sienkiewicz

Incredible talent is an understatement, he was one of the nicest people I have met. Sending love to his family and friends.

Ken Lashley

Very heartbreaking to read this and to wrap my mind around the finality of it all, of an amazing man and the legacy of incredible work. He has left us all with so much beauty to

enjoy for generations to come. I know the past few years have been especially difficult and I can only hope that this gives him and all of his loved ones some sense of peace. RIP Drew.

J Scott Campbell

One of the greatest of all time, a true inspiration to so many of us. Condolences to all his loved ones.

Tony Daniel

The greatest.

David Nakayama

Drew, you changed the course of illustration forever. Thank you.

Dan dos Santos

Rest in peace His art will continue to inspire forever.

Chrissie Zullo Uminga

What an amazing vision we've lost, illustrator and designer demi-god. We grew up seeing his work everywhere and I'm sure I'll see his influences in art for rest of my life.

Devon Cady-lee

I honestly don't have the words, I'm feel so deeply sad. What a loss to the world and such a kind man. We corresponded a few times after I wrote to Empire to nominate

Drew introduced the concepts of fine art to the film business: "I brought a different sensitivity to the market, which changed it and made it a different place to be." We couldn't agree more.

him as an unsung hero, which was recognised by them and they wrote a nice piece about him. He's a huge influence too. My very deepest sympathy to his family.

Greg Staples

May his essence live on through us all. Sending much love to his friends and family during these difficult times.

Warren Louw

Thank you so much for the endless inspiration that will endure forever. You were THE artist of my childhood and all my favourite films. Thank you for the joy and wonder. There will never be another like you. Rest in peace.

Dylan Cole

Thanks for everything, Drew. A powerful inspiration, willing to share your knowledge, process, or a great story.

Proko

When you saw one Drew Struzan illustration, you immediately wanted to see more. You had to consume all of them. He was a master. Rest in peace.

Robert Liefeld



Back in issue 57, Drew Struzan broke down his creative process for composing, drawing and painting the artwork used for Guillermo del Toro's 2004 film Hellboy.

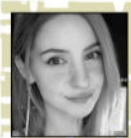


The shelves came with the unit, and are considered built-ins. One of the selling points of the space is that it provided extra storage for my art supplies.

This is an album cover that was gifted to me by my sister, I collect album covers and use them as artwork!

Whitney Travis

Cosy club This artist has curated a serene haven where imagination and creativity can really flow



I fell in love with this space immediately! The entire building hints at 1950s Greek revival architecture, and it has presence. The space could very easily be a spare bedroom, but it became my sanctuary.

The floor-to-ceiling windows flood the studio with natural light. It's perfect for any traditional media conquests and even better for watching the weather in Buffalo, NY, with a hot coffee in hand. One of my favourite things is gazing out at the rain or snowfall – it keeps me productive!

I juggle a lot of hats – part-time student, freelancer and late-night professor – plus a full-time ➡



“The floor-to-ceiling windows flood the studio with natural light”

My iPad travels everywhere with me: campus, work, hometown. Anywhere I go, it goes, serving as a digital option for quick life sketches.

I always have a space heater near me – it increases the level of cosiness and productivity.



These items are stored in the studio on one of the shelves, but I had brought them out for Inktober. Winsor & Newton is my favourite brand of drawing inks. I was experimenting with combining the drawing ink with gold mica paint for some interesting effects.

When I experiment with gouache, I bring out the butcher tray. I learned at Proko a method of preserving gouache for a time by spraying a damp paper towel, setting it inside the tray and spraying the gouache lightly with water as you work.

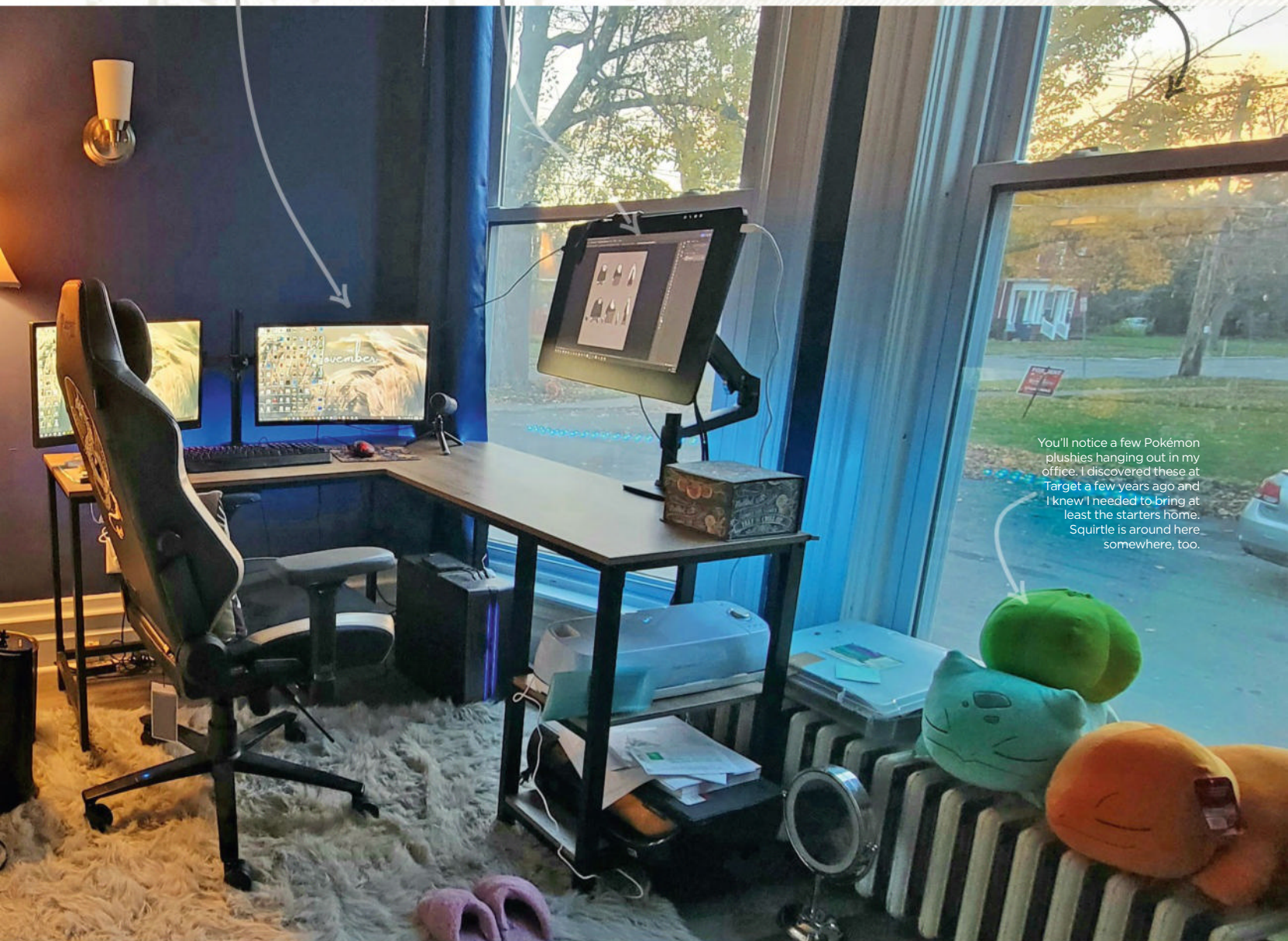


Artist news, software & events

Shown are two monitors that I was recommended to use by fellow artists, but downsizing to one would prove to be more efficient for me and my workflow!

After I upgraded to a larger Cintiq, I really wanted it mobile to work from multiple angles. I can also tuck it up and away when I'm working traditionally.

The view is absolutely stunning in fall/winter. The houses in the area also have vintage charms, and large trees showcase their colours when the weather shifts.



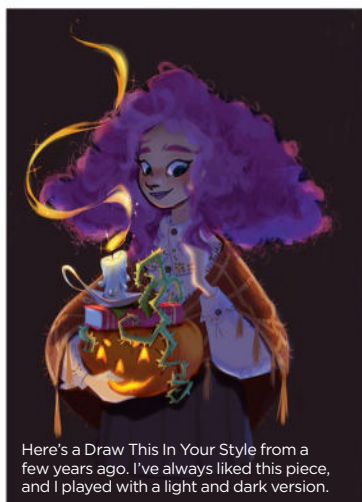
You'll notice a few Pokémon plushies hanging out in my office. I discovered these at Target a few years ago and I knew I needed to bring at least the starters home. Squirtle is around here somewhere, too.



A collection of studies for an independent film project I'm working on, set in the fictional town of Hearth.



A few characters that are based on 1950s retro Americana Christmas décor.



Here's a Draw This In Your Style from a few years ago. I've always liked this piece, and I played with a light and dark version.



No-Face sits on one of my bookshelves overlooking the workspace. There's no story about him, just that he's No-Face and deserves a spot in the studio.

Another accent to make the space feel cosy, and faux plants suit my busy lifestyle perfectly with their aesthetic and durability!



➡ overnight job so I can take classes in the day (it's a lot!). It doesn't leave me with much room for personal art, but if I've got a spare moment, I'm here.

If I had an ideal time in the day to be creative, it would be late evening into the early morning. This is when inspiration hits the hardest. When the world is silent, I'm alive. It's nearly impossible to sit down with a project in the middle of the day, and summer is my least productive season for art.



This is a small collection of album covers relating to animation or just art I like in general. They make for great art pieces and look good in the studio. I absolute love the pink elephant on the cover of the Nutcracker Suite. Stylistically, it's representative of the concept art Mary Blair brought to Disney.

This is my old boy Hiccup who passed away aged 12 years old earlier this year. He spent a lot of time in the studio, either to hang out with or reminding me to take him outside.

I've since downsized from two monitors to one to regain some desk space. Turns out that fewer screens mean fewer distractions and way better focus. I swapped my 13-inch Wacom Cintiq to a 24-inch beast, and it was a game changer. My best upgrade was my chair. I had a rescued but worn relic from a college campus that was upgraded to an ergonomic Secretlab TITAN. If you're spending that much time sitting, you gotta be proactive in saving your back and knees.

RELAXING SPACE

The odds and ends around the studio are just accents to keep it cosy – the space where I can retreat and take a breather. I usually decorate for the season, and a matching candle is a must (apple spice in winter, pumpkin

for fall, floral for spring... you get it!). This helps me relax, and the less troubled my mind is, the better I can concentrate and create.

I always have a throw blanket on my chair. Sometimes I'll take a quick nap between classes/work if I don't want to move to my bedroom. My plants are mostly faux (I'm infamous with my mom for killing ferns). I've got a small collection of album covers – mostly from animated films – adding a bit of colour and cinematic flair (did I mention I'm a huge cinephile?).

I shared this space with my precious corgi Hiccup who unfortunately passed away earlier this year, and my sweet English Angora bunny Kaori. I would leave the door open and the two would turn into a comedy duo like Abbott and Costello and keep me entertained between projects.

Whitney creates children's work and fantasy – both animation and illustration. She loves visual storytelling, deep conversations and cold days. You can see more of her work at <https://whitsketch.carbonmade.com>.

“Late evening into the early morning is when inspiration hits the hardest”

Artist news, software & events



A still of Kiki from Kiki's Delivery Service, still in its original packaging. I bought this and a Howl's Moving Castle still a few years ago. To this day I guiltily haven't framed either one!

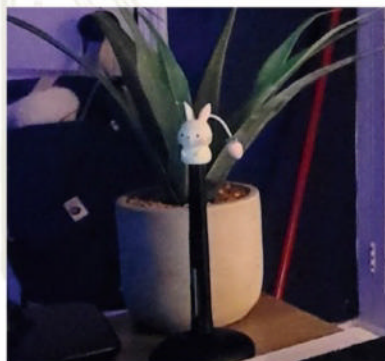
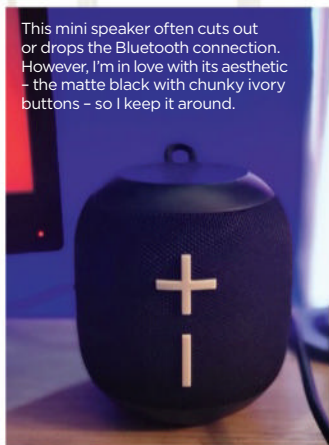
All my coworkers were getting either a Switch or a Steam Deck. I may have been slightly pressured into buying a used one to hop into Animal Crossing. I don't regret the purchase, but I don't have any time to play!

I love Bulbasaur, and a friend had given me a 3D printed succulent vase for my birthday, and then coincidentally, my mom had bought me another 3D printed vase for Christmas that same year.

A pumpkin spice latte plushie rests on a box of important documents. I had spent way too much on this at an amusement park that I visited from childhood. It spices up the space in the fall, though.

I found a used CAMEO printer to eventually make some stickers and bookmarks to sell and offer as add-ons to my illustration packages. But shortly after I got it, my bunny chewed the power cord!

This mini speaker often cuts out or drops the Bluetooth connection. However, I'm in love with its aesthetic – the matte black with chunky ivory buttons – so I keep it around.

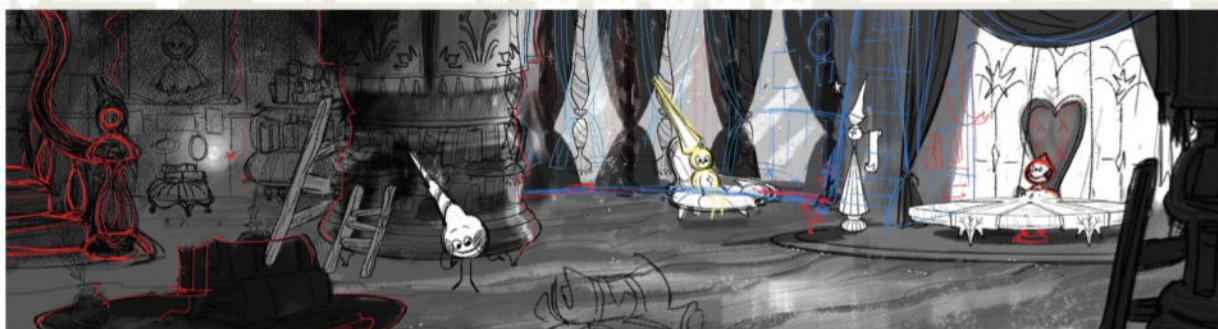


My bunny pen topper was a parting gift from a dentist when I was working as a dental assistant. I was leaving the practice to 'hop' back into art. I've kept it on my Cintiq pen ever since.

Tipper / Tocket Bad - character design



Design exploration, pose and turnaround for two characters in my winter film/story. They're assistants to another character dressed in pink, pictured top right.



This is a location in my winter film/story that has the rough, unfinished quality I enjoy and retains a sense of charm and character.

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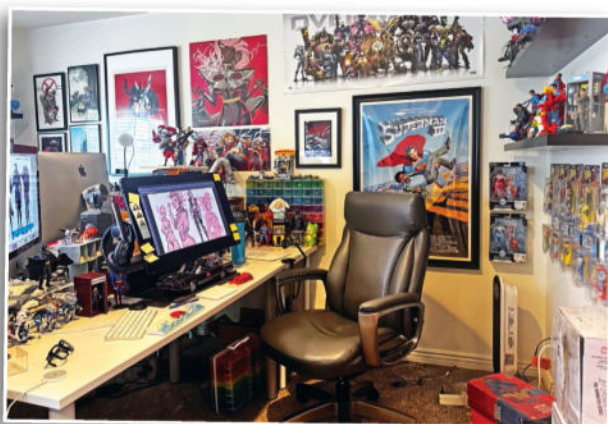
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instagram.com/imaginefxmagazine



Hero worship

Hi Rob. Huge fan of the magazine and new issue day is always a good day. Your last issue was a cracker. I particularly liked Jerry Gaylord's studio tour. His art is great so I was very interested to see what it's like inside his studio. Jerry has built up a great collection of toys and art which I've avoided doing, not wishing to be influenced by other people's work.

Looking forward to seeing more of these 'through the keyhole' moments.

Gerard, via email

Rob replies Hi Gerard. Thanks for writing in. Always good to hear from our readers. I totally get what you mean about being unduly influenced. I don't think that should be too much of a worry, though. Almost all our Artist in Residence articles show collections of art, reference materials, toys and so on. I think it acts more of a tool to get you in the zone than something that will be copied. Plus, it's healthy to take a break now and then – what better way to do that than to read your favourite comics over a coffee!

Jerry Gaylord's studio in Los Angeles is packed full of art inspiration.



DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE? Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 259 at ifxm.ag/single-ifx.



One reader got a lot from Carla Cordelia's workshop, which revealed her approach towards environment art.

Transformative tips

Hello Rob. I'm writing to say how much I enjoyed Carla Cordelia's tips in your last issue. I got a lot out of it and it's changed my approach to my art, getting rid of an artistic block I've had for a while. I adore her style too, so it was lovely to see a nice range of her images. I hope to see more like this.

Anna, via email

Rob replies Hi Anna. Thank you for reaching out and I agree. Carla's art has a whimsical feel to it that I really like. I'm also really pleased to hear that she helped you get through your mental block. Sometimes all it takes is a little key advice from someone.

Extra dimension

Hi Rob. I've just read the latest issue and need to say thank you. I've been thinking about using 3D to start laying out a scene for painting. I imagined that it would be far more efficient than drawing and underpainting but had no idea how to even get started, so I'm very pleased to see ImagineFX start to cover this kind of thing. I'm really excited to learn more and hopefully it will make my questionable perspective lines far more accurate.

Jasper, via email.

Rob replies Hi Jasper. Good to hear from you and I'm so glad that our new 3D section is helpful to you. Our aim is to make it really easy for you all to start adding 3D tools to your workflow.

Being able to block out a scene and then move a camera around for the perfect point of view can be both fun and useful. I'd suggest using a sky and sun system to nail where shadows might fall, too. Good luck with it all and keep your eyes peeled for more 3D insights in upcoming issues.



New works that have grabbed our attention



Kat Taylor
[@kat_taylors_art](https://twitter.com/kat_taylors_art)



Wagner Orabmag
[@wagner.orabmag](https://twitter.com/wagner.orabmag)



Neri
[@nerimitsu](https://twitter.com/nerimitsu)

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

THE ART OF MACIEJ KUCIARA

Dominic Carter talks to the concept designer and director about creative discipline and how he develops his craft

Having worked on projects such as *The Last of Us* and *Cyberpunk 2077*, Maciej Kuciara is proof that artists don't need to attend expensive, prestigious schools to make it big in the industry. We caught up with him to hear how he developed his skills with rigorous discipline, what artists need to keep in mind if they want to improve, and the secret to keeping work and life in balance.

Please tell us a little about your background as an artist. How did you get started, and what has your career been like so far?

I'm a Polish-born artist and director who grew up on 90s VHS tapes and anime. I began as a self-taught artist in 2003 and landed my first concept art job in 2004 at People Can Fly.

Artist PROFILE

Maciej Kuciara



LOCATION: US

FAVOURITE ARTISTS:

Otomo Katsuhiro, Hayao Miyazaki, Mamoru Oshii, Kentaro Miura, Akira Kurosawa

MEDIA: Photoshop, Blender
WEB: www.kuciara.com

After a decade in games (Crytek, Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us*), I transitioned into film, working with major Hollywood studios on numerous tentpole projects (*Avengers*, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and *Ghost in the Shell*, among others).

In 2021, I met my creative partner, Emily Yang, and we co-wrote and directed *White Rabbit*, which earned worldwide recognition and an Emmy.

Which artists have inspired you most and why?

As well as legendary talents from Japan, such as Otomo Katsuhiro, Hayao Miyazaki, Mamoru Oshii, Kentaro Miura and Akira Kurosawa,

I also admire cinematographers such as Roger Deakins, Emmanuel Lubezki and Greig Fraser. Then there are the Old Masters like Caravaggio, Leonardo da Vinci and Leyendecker. I could go on forever because there are so many brilliant artists, directors and creative minds. Every year I discover new ones who continue to inspire me.

Which tools do you use to create your work?

I used to paint digitally in Photoshop and eventually moved into animation and 3D for my artistic work. I love Blender, but there are many other tools that do an equally good job of helping me bring the ideas in ➡

THE FABRIC OF EXISTENCE

Maciej's work poses existential questions, such as whether people share the same reality any more.





Maciej Kuciara

“I’m a Polish-born artist and director who grew up on 90s VHS tapes and anime”

SHOWTIME

Making images like this one in Blender formed the basis of the White Rabbit pipeline.

IMAGINEFX



Interview

➤ my head to life, including digital cameras. I'm a big fan of Fujifilm.

How has your art developed over the years and what's driven those changes?

I never settle into any mould – I like to explore, experiment and see what works. My career began in digital painting. I'm self-taught, but I've explored every adjacent area, including traditional art – I drew a lot as a kid but only learned ink and pencil seriously later – photography, 3D, animation and recently, AI.

My mind is curious about how things work and where they can go. I love seeing artists create incredible work, and having that mix of inspiration and envy drives me to keep improving.

You've always been a disciplined artist, having previously juggled your creative work around a day job and family obligations. How do you keep yourself on track? Is it difficult?

I used to believe in dogmas: work-life balance, working hard, working smart. I kept journals, planned my days by the hour, built routines.

But over time I realised we all try to fit into familiar moulds and group-think, when in reality we're all unique. Looking back on 20 years of successes and failures, I see there's no mould for me, only intuition guiding where my work or loved ones needed attention.

Balance is a constant act, built on hard compromises. True happiness, I've learned, comes from that delicate dance between wants, needs and musts – and sometimes, doing what you don't want is what sustains it most.

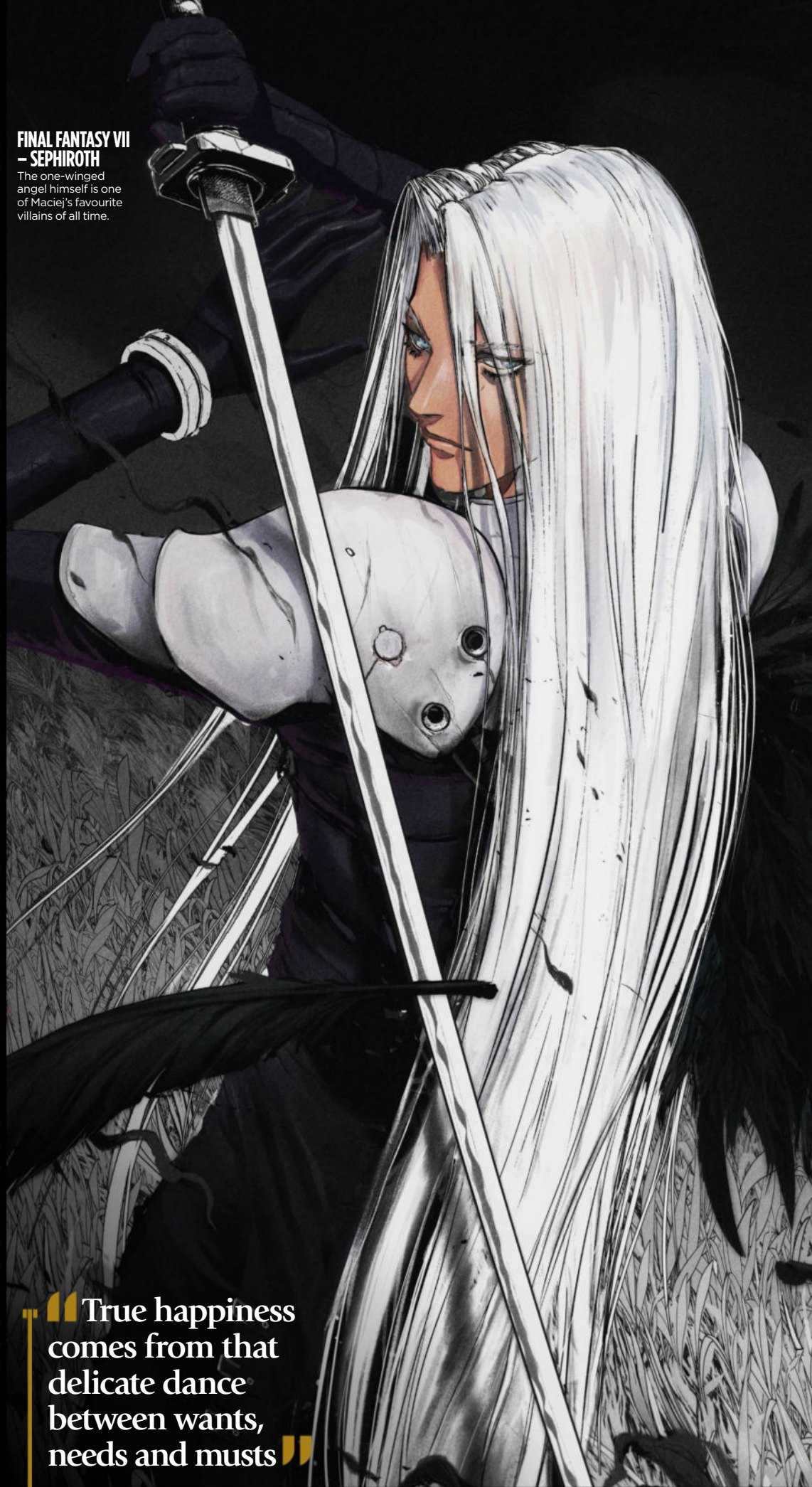
As an artist, you've said you're constantly climbing an infinite staircase when it comes to achieving new goals. How do you go about deciding which goal to pursue next, and what's the most valuable lesson these goals have taught you?

My career has always come in waves of intensity. When I first entered the film industry and was landing one blockbuster after another, I thought each project would top the last.

There was one particular project that I got offered to work on, which back then I felt would've been a life-changing experience on top of what I'd already managed to achieve. I was euphoric and had really high hopes where things would go afterwards, and... it simply didn't work out. Bad timing, bad fit. I was disappointed, but it taught me a lesson: curb expectations and

FINAL FANTASY VII – SEPHIROTH

The one-winged angel himself is one of Maciej's favourite villains of all time.



“ True happiness comes from that delicate dance between wants, needs and musts ”

WHITE RABBIT – MIRAI

Mirai, the main character in White Rabbit, was named by the community that supports the show.



focus on the present. I stopped caring whether the next thing was the right thing and started caring whether it was with the right people. That shift turned success into a pleasant surprise rather than a source of disappointment.

You work across both films and video games. What's the biggest difference in terms of working on these mediums?

They're similar in spirit, but also different at the same time. On a technical level they're the same: you use the same tools and go through the same creative process, with similar rounds of feedback. The differences emerge in why you make what you make, the purpose behind the work.

Games are about systems and interaction; film is about emotion and control. In film, everything is authored, composed and timed. In games, you design a world where the player becomes part of that authorship. Film teaches you to build emotion through imagery; games teach you to build meaning through experience.

Projects you've worked on such as Ghost in the Shell and Captain America: Civil War were collaborative efforts. What's the secret for working successfully as part of a creative team? I would say leave your ego at the door. Collaboration isn't about proving how good you are. Instead, it's about



helping the project become the best version of itself.

When you work with a team – directors, VFX artists, designers – your ideas are just one thread in a much bigger tapestry. The key is to stay open, flexible, and yet still bring conviction to your part. The best teams I've worked with were full of people who respected each other's craft and shared an obsession with quality.

You're hired because the director, production designer or producer sees how your expertise can elevate the project. Being collaborative and dependable is just as important as being talented.

WHITE RABBIT

The show follows Mirai on their journey of self-discovery in a strange dream world.

You're the co-founder of Learn Squared, Inc. What sets this online art education platform apart from others? Did you have a unique approach you wanted to take?

When we started Learn Squared, the goal was simple: to make art education taught by working professionals accessible to anyone, anywhere. To show how professionals learn from one another and to reveal that pattern to students: what experienced artists focus on and what they discard.

It was something you didn't see in online education up until then. To get that elsewhere, you had to attend ➡

BOMBER JACKET GIRL

Maciej still makes time for personal work. This artwork was done while streaming with concept artist Eytan Zana.



STRONG SUPPORT

This year, White Rabbit was nominated for Best Community Engagement at the Webby Awards.



MASKED VENGEANCE

Like a lot of Maciej's work, this scary, sword-wielding character is built on a 3D base made in Blender.

TECH PROGRESS

As well as identity, White Rabbit also explores themes of artificial intelligence.



➤ highly sought-after and extremely expensive art schools.

We wanted to create a gateway to the professional world for a fraction of that otherwise prohibitive cost. It all stemmed from the fact that all the founders of Learn Squared were self-taught artists and we knew the pain of finding quality education without going hundreds of thousands of dollars into debt. I think that's what made it unique.

Of all the work that you have created, what's the project that you're most proud of, and why?

White Rabbit, without a doubt. Not because it won awards, but because it was the first time that I fully put myself into something which was truly mine.

It was co-created with my friend and creative partner, Emily Yang, who brought so much of her own vision and soul into it. Working with her reminded me how powerful true collaboration can be, just like when I started Learn Squared, when both people are equally invested in the story and the message behind it.

The project came from a deeply personal place and was built completely independently, with people we love and respect. It represents everything that I've

“My entire career is built on failing forward; every mistake was a lesson”

learned over 20 years: storytelling, art direction, discipline, but also everything I've unlearned – letting go of control, trusting others and embracing chaos.

What is next for you? Do you have any exciting projects coming up, or are there areas you would like to explore?

I want to keep developing my art and my soul – directing, creating and pushing new projects forward. Some things are already in the works that I can't talk about yet.

I'm also exploring what AI can do to empower artists and trying to find the right place for it in the creative process.

What advice would you give to other artists thinking of becoming concept artists and illustrators?

Don't chase style; chase substance. Learn the fundamentals, but also learn who you are.

The industry changes fast, tools evolve, trends come and go. What stays is your curiosity, the experience you build over time by making your own choices (good and bad), and your ability to solve problems creatively.

Don't be afraid to fail. My entire career is built on failing forward; every mistake was a lesson, including some harsh ones. And success tastes different when it's earned, especially through failure. ●



OUTSIDE INPUT

White Rabbit Chapter 4 was the longest to date, with users able to shape how the lore develops.

Ashley Stegon

Reference photos, myths and D&D sessions fuel the sketch work of this illustrator, who has a particular fondness for animal art

Artist PROFILE

Ashley Stegon

LOCATION: US



Ashley has always loved animals, and believes that watching a lot of Animal Planet has made her a better creature designer.

She graduated from Gnomon School of VFX and is now a character artist at Squanch Games. Ashley continues to learn, create and explore the world with her fellow artists, and her personal work reflects her love and passion for animal and character design.

www.instagram.com/stegoneggs

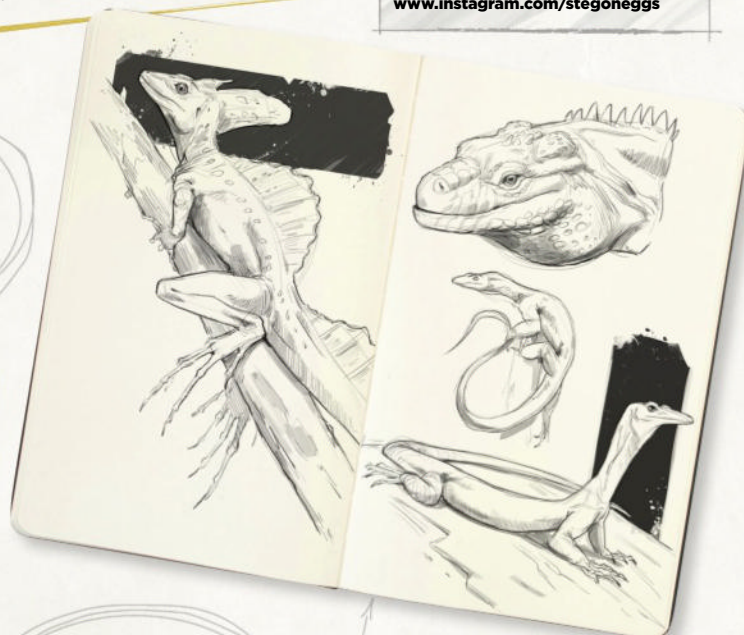
KNARLA THE BARBARIAN

"A character sheet done for a D&D campaign of mine. I've recently been playing barbarians and they're super fun to draw. I love being fired up by the people I role play with, which in turn lets me create a fun character to play, and eventually draw."



LIZARD SKETCHES

"The world is filled with unique-looking animals and I'll usually warm up by doing real-life studies before diving into my own creature design work. It's a great way to find more interesting looks for something like a dragon."

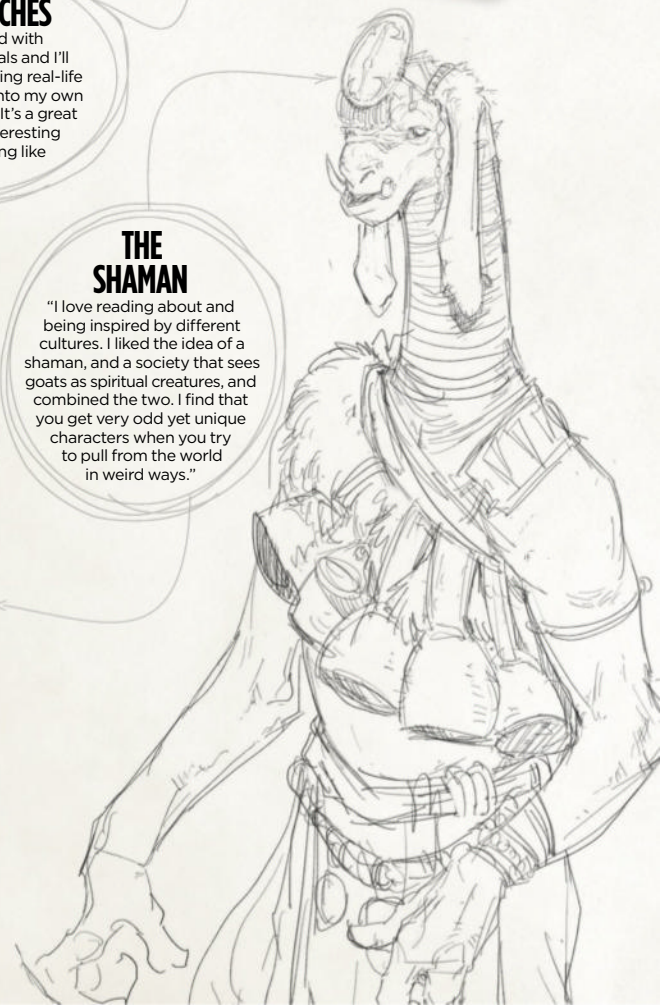


THE SHAMAN

"I love reading about and being inspired by different cultures. I liked the idea of a shaman, and a society that sees goats as spiritual creatures, and combined the two. I find that you get very odd yet unique characters when you try to pull from the world in weird ways."

VAGABOND

"I'll often gather just two or three reference sources that have nothing to do with each other and create a design from them, drawing on their colours, textures or small shapes. I think this was from photos of a pilot's G-suit and a weird dragonfly lamp."





CHARACTER WARM UP

"This was me using a reference for the pose, and looking at costume pieces on a site like Pinterest to just play with a character design. This would have required a lot of iteration if taken further, but most of my sketchbook contains ideas that'll never see the light of day. They're just for me and practice."



AHKLUT

"When I get inspired by other artists or games coming out, I'll try to design or mimic their style. Hopefully it's obvious that I love Monster Hunter! This was a design sketch I did on the idea of the Ahklut - a mythical Inuit creature that's a mix of orca and wolf."



ONI SKETCHES

"This is an idea for a character of mine. I'll usually go through many costume variations before finding the right look. I'd love to be able to draw a graphic novel one day, so I try to keep in mind that I would need to draw its characters over and over again, which also plays into the complexity of the design."

KNOCK KNOCK... TELEGRAM!

"This guy probably isn't going to give you flowers... or a telegram. I drew this while on a plane. On short flights I try to spend the time sketching and finalising an idea. It's a great way to focus on drawing. What else are you going to do when strapped to a seat, flying through the air?!"

“ On short flights I try to spend the time sketching and finalising an idea. It's a great way to focus on drawing ”





ROLL DICE AND DRAW

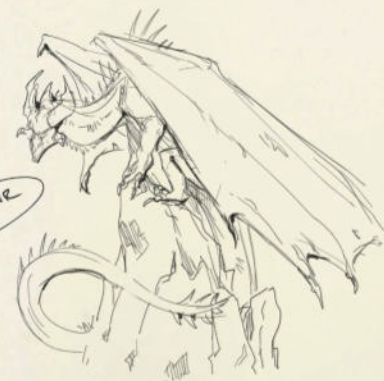
"I always have my sketchbook open when I play D&D with friends online. Sometimes I'll draw our characters or moments that are happening. It's a great way to visualise and capture the story. These are sketches of my character who goes full beast mode while raging... literally!"

HERE BE DRAGONS!

"Dragons appear more than any other animal in my sketchbook. I think they're some of the most enjoyable creatures to create and draw. This would be an example of my 'comfort' page - I never tire of these awesome mythical beasts."

THE SHACKLED CREATURE

"I wish I could remember what I was listening to when I drew this. I think it was a short story I found. This drawing came from a visual I had while listening to the narrator."



YAK MEN

"Just for fun, I like to take one reference image and challenge myself to generate multiple designs from it. It's a great way to create a palette, a design language, and limit yourself when ideating."

SAMURAI SKETCHES

"These are studies from some reference, but then pushed a little more into the fantastical. It's a good technique for warming up and finding unique designs for characters."



ORCHID DRAGON

"A good example of a more finalised drawing, taking inspiration from lizards and combining it with the praying mantis. Specifically the orchid mantis, which camouflages itself like an orchid in order to attract its prey. I thought that a small, dragon-like creature could do the same."



EARTH GOLEM

"I don't really develop environments, so what better way to practise drawing rocks than to put them into a creature-like formation. I'm kidding! This was just a prompt - 'earth golem' - and I thought it would be fun to take a more animalistic approach."



“I enjoy putting comic bubbles as notes to my characters. It makes the drawings personal”

ANGRY CENTAUR

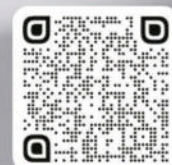
"Here I was looking at different types of ungulates and getting creative with what my version of a centaur could be. I also always enjoy putting comic bubbles as notes to my characters - it's a way for me to have fun and make drawings personal."



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

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*Illustration by
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Advice from the world's best artists



This issue:

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Create illustrations with high saturation and strong contrast to catch the eye, with Sora Kim.

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70 Art imitates Brazilian life

Filipe Pagliuso's rat characters have enough visual details to match their backstories.



Photoshop

USE COLOURS THAT BOOST YOUR ART

Create illustrations with high saturation and strong contrast to catch the eye, with concept artist and illustrator **Sora Kim**

Artist PROFILE

Sora Kim

LOCATION: South Korea

Sora has been a concept artist and illustrator since 2014, working on many fantasy games while developing a versatile range of styles. <http://bit.ly/3J4AgCp>



I have often designed suits of fantasy armour using animals as motifs. For this personal project,

however, I wanted to use an animal that rarely appears in my work. The koi, a type of carp, is an ornamental fish raised in Korea, Japan and China. This series actually started

with a plate armour design. Although the armour had a Western form, I used Asian-style strings to connect the armour plates and swords.

This time, I took the concept further by including traditional Korean elements, drawing a female character wearing a hanbok (traditional Korean dress). I wanted the overall silhouette, to evoke the shape of a fish, not just

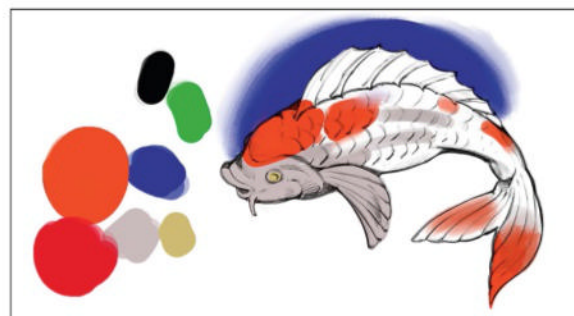
the decorative details. As part of a series from the previous artwork, I maintained a strong contrast in light and shadow and used rich primary colours, adding various textures to prevent the image from looking flat.

In this workshop, I'll show you my process and explain how to create and apply your own texture patterns from a photo.



1 Taking elements from the koi armour

I decide to incorporate graphic elements from the previous work: strong contrast, high saturation, rich colours and primary colour usage. I also decide to use the flat fish line drawing from the piece. Although I change the armour to a dress, I keep the three swords and the Asian-style armour ties.



2 Colour palette

I prepare a high-saturation colour palette, knowing that I'll need to control the amounts used to create visual emphasis and an eye-catching image. For this illustration, I'll mainly use orange and red, with ultramarine – the complementary colour – for the background.



3 Sketching with a silhouette in mind

I designed a fish-shaped helmet for my previous armour artwork. This time, I want a more indirect fish-like silhouette. I transform the traditional Korean hairstyle (gachae – a large wig) into a fish silhouette. I also tie up the skirt to resemble a fish's fin. ➡➡





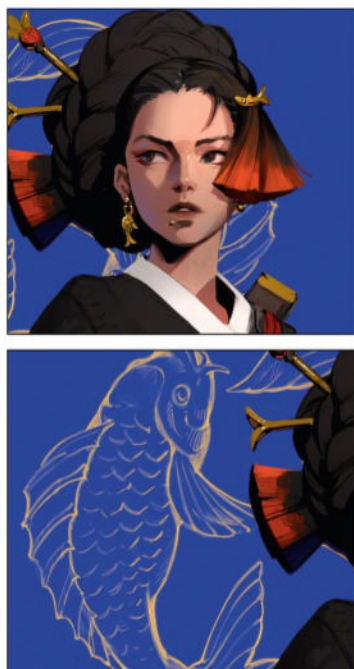
4 Establishing dark shadows in the sketch phase

I apply the black values for contrast during the early sketching stage. I decide to make this character look stronger, so I give her a sword to hold in her right hand – previously the figure's skirt was being held by this hand.



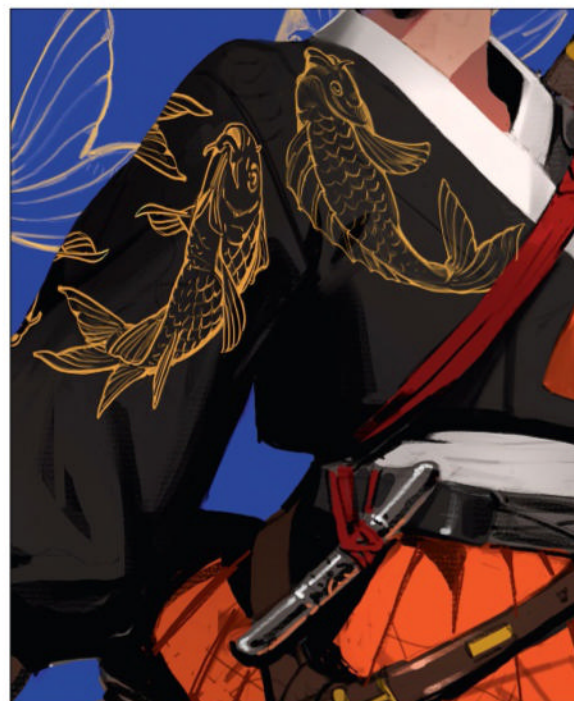
5 Understanding the tonal value by laying down flat colours

I block in the colours, focusing on the orange/red hues of the koi. This step helps me understand the overall colour scheme. I recommend exploring various colours during this step, creating many options before deciding. I now decide on the primary colour, and I plan to add richer primary colours later on, such as blue, gold and green.



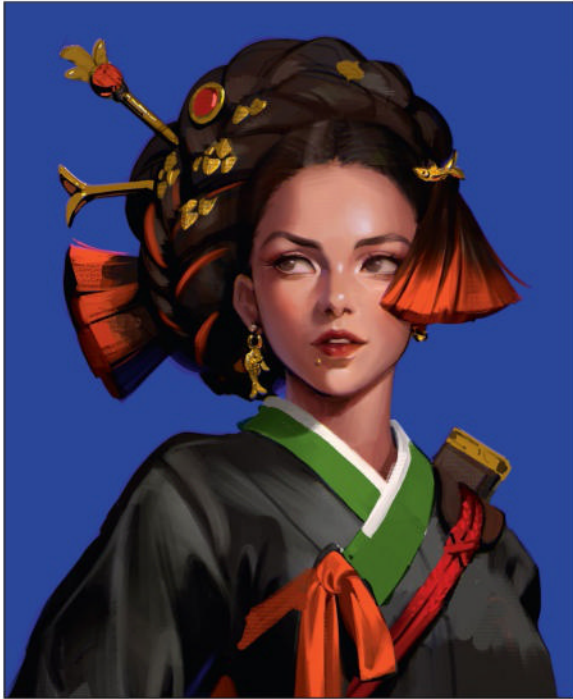
6 Refining the colour scheme

I want to add a bold colour to the background, and because the main motif is a fish, blue seems like a good choice. I keep the background on a separate layer and merge the sketch and colour layers to prepare for rendering. The contrast between blue and orange is a key technique for drawing the viewer's gaze towards the character's face. However, the background's darker value simultaneously makes the figure and the background appear poorly separated. To fix this, I emphasise the contrast by further brightening the light areas on the face and skirt.



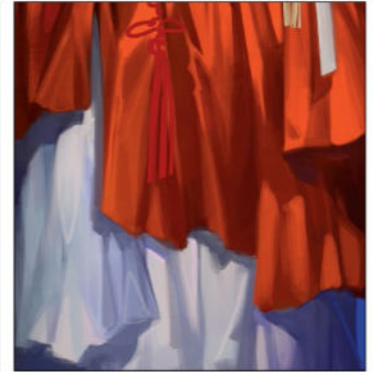
7 Temporarily apply patterns to the character's clothing

The overall look is missing a sense of luxury, so I add gold trim to the top. I also arrange the line drawing of the fish design I made in the previous artwork. I keep the pattern on a separate layer and work with a Clipping mask to avoid mixing it with the clothing's wrinkles.



8 Detailed rendering

I paint reflections from the background's blue light onto the character. I also add green to the collar for a richer colour palette. If you establish the colour palette in advance, you can easily apply it. I experiment with various brushes, making sure not to break the main forms.



9 Boldly changing the design

I add more decorations and render them in detail. I also paint a white petticoat under the skirt to create the appearance of a rich, flowing fin. This change also obscures the shoes, making the character look even more like a fish!



10 Drawing the clothing pattern

After finishing the rendering of the wrinkles, I refine the fish pattern. Working with a separate layer and a Clipping mask makes this step easier. Compared to the black or green fabric texture, the gold embroidery is described with a wider range of values, ensuring it stands out. ➡



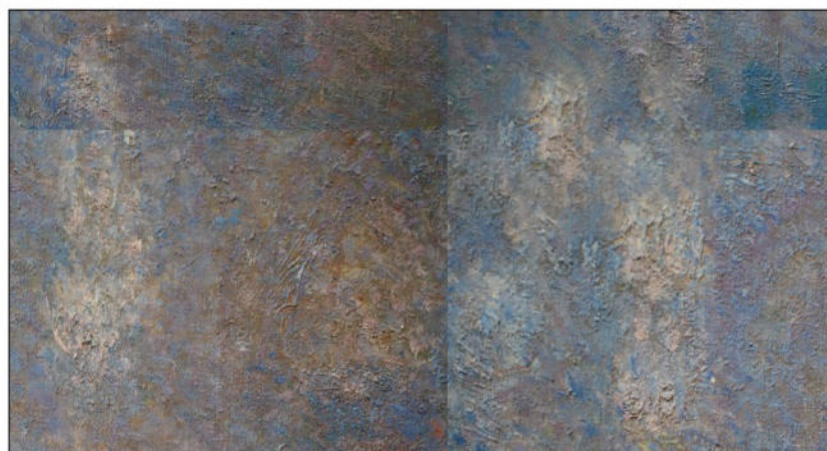
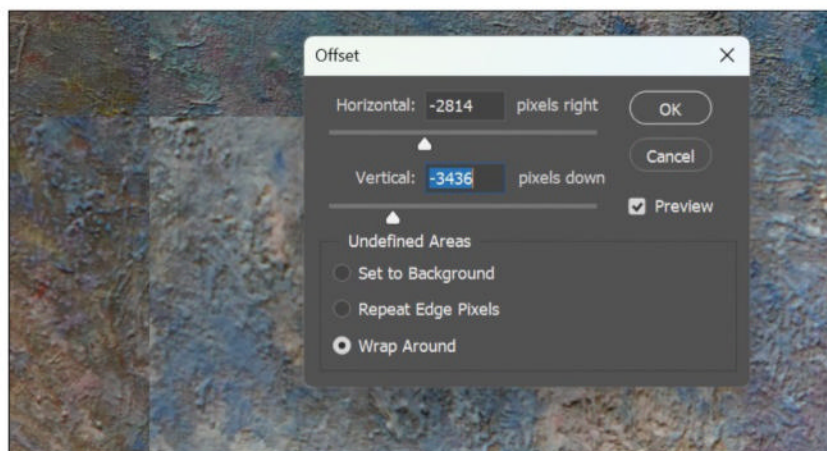
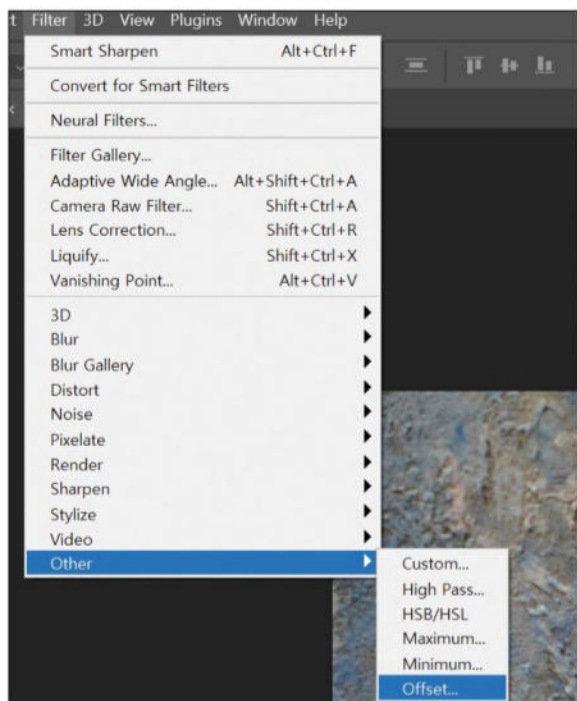
11 Finalising the character details

I render the accessories further and pay attention to the folds to complete the skirt. I make the outer orange skirt look like a silk texture. I use the blue, green and orange colours used on the accessories to let the rich colours spread throughout the composition. I also add strands to hair to the figure's head, which is the focal point.



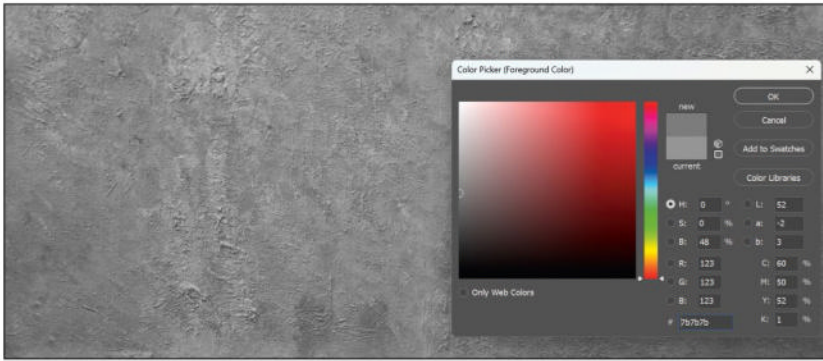
12 Photographing an oil paint texture

I want a straightforward way to introduce a painted feel to my artwork without compromising either the contrast that I've created or my choice of highly saturated colours. I decide that the solution is to take a texture from an old art piece and apply it to my brush. I crop a section from a photo that I took at the Getty Center in Los Angeles of a painting by Claude Monet, entitled The Portal of Rouen Cathedral in Morning Light. I used a photograph, but if you're skilled with oil paint then you could also paint the texture yourself.



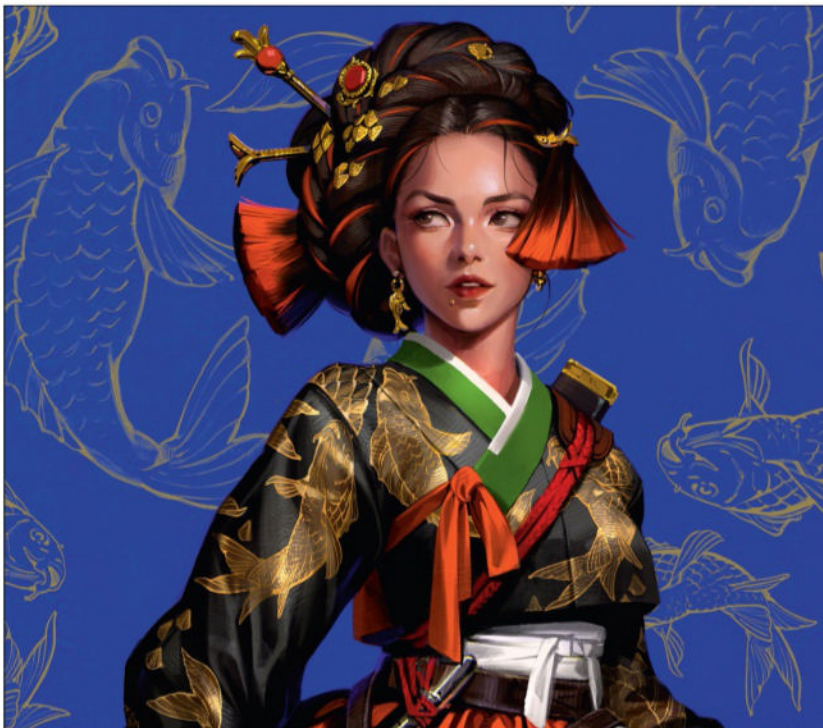
13 Adjusting the photo

In Photoshop, I use Filter>Other>Offset to shift the image vertically and horizontally. Next, I use the Clone Stamp Tool to blend the edges, creating a seamless image. It's also a good idea to adjust the lightness to a mid-range value. Adjust the saturation and colour to your preference. I prefer to make it highly saturated.



14 Registering and using the pattern

I register the finished seamless image as a pattern by selecting **Edit>Define Pattern**. Next, I return to the Tools menu, find the Pattern Stamp Tool and select the pattern that I've just registered. I apply this pattern in **Soft Light** blending mode with 50 per cent Opacity, which gives the illustration a textured feel.



15 Give the artwork a final polish

I lightly apply the pattern to the character and check the overall balance before finishing. During the final finishing stage I apply **Sharpen**, **Chromatic Aberration** and **Noise** filters to achieve a result that's both sharp and raw/gritty. Before calling the artwork complete, I make sure that the high saturation, strong contrast and rich colours I planned at the beginning are all clearly expressed on the canvas. ●





Technique focus

CRAFT A SENSE OF PRESENCE WITH CONTRAST

Kiuyan Ran illustrates a stylish-looking Lady Justice that conveys the god's inner strength



"This illustration is a personal piece inspired by Lady Justice, who has her origins in Roman and

Greek mythology. I've always been drawn to how the figure symbolises fairness and impartiality through her scales (for weighing up evidence and arguments) before she dispenses

swift justice with her sword. My goal was to portray her not as a rigid figure but rather more ethereal, so that the classical icon takes on a sense of mystery and reverence.

White and gold contrasts against deep blue highlight her presence, while flowing drapery and celestial details add elegance without diminishing her solemn strength."



Artist PROFILE

Kiuyan Ran
LOCATION: US

Kiuyan Ran is an illustrator who creates work that bridges myth, fantasy and visual storytelling across games, books and exhibitions. She is currently a senior concept outsource supervisor at Blizzard Entertainment.
www.kiuyanran.com

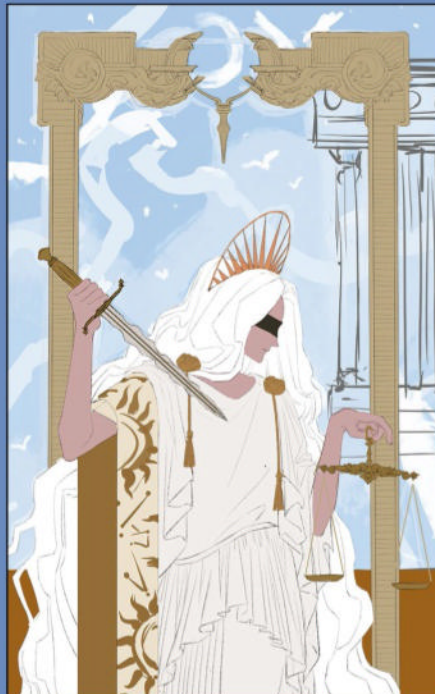
How I create...

AN ELEGANT DEPICTION OF A DIVINE BEING



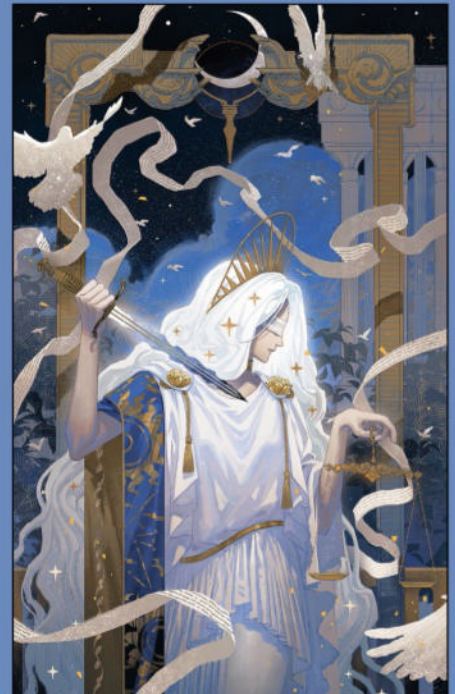
1 Composition sketch

I prepare a complete sketch early on, including colour, light and atmosphere. The focus is to set a clear mood and tonal balance. Seeing the near-final impression up front prevents major revisions later and ensures all subsequent steps move with confidence in the desired direction.



2 Colour blocking

Loose lines define forms precisely, locking in anatomy, drapery and architecture. Large, flat colour blocks are then applied to organise zones for painting, keeping the silhouette's clarity intact. This stage prioritises readability and proportion, making later rendering more fluid and focused.



3 Detailing and texture

Following the sketch's guidance, finer elements such as hair strands, metallic shine and fabric folds are rendered. Decorative motifs and golden accents enrich the visual focus. Each detail is integrated to enhance balance, leading to an image that feels polished yet fluid.



Photoshop

PAIN T A VERDANT FANTASY SETTING

Richard Lay shares his process for designing a fantastical landscape through the use of various painting techniques



Artist PROFILE

Richard Lay
LOCATION: US

Richard was born and raised in California, and grew up watching anime and other media. That was the inspiration and motivation to create his unique art, which captivates thousands of followers across his social media accounts. <http://bit.ly/4hrxt2S>



I had an image in my mind of a wide, expansive landscape showing a large amount of depth.

I wanted to paint a scene with an alien-looking object of interest to help draw the viewer into the fantastical environment and give them a sense of wonder.

The final image looked a lot different from my initial concept of the landscape, as I expanded my ideas on the canvas to really sell the

space and depth of the piece. I knew what I wanted to achieve overall, but much of getting to the final image was a case of figuring things out as I went along.

I wanted the alien object to be curvy. This is echoed in the design of the round dwellings, to help with the overall flow of the piece. The people who live here made the structure their place of refuge and built their homes on the land surrounding it. I wanted to heighten this contrast by indicating that the town and the

alien object are constructed from two distinctly different materials.

Turning my attention to the colours. I wanted the piece to convey the sensation of taking a deep breath of fresh air. With this in mind, I incorporated mainly vibrant colours – greens and blues – to show the presence of nature and that invigorating outdoor feeling that we can all relate to. I placed a small orange dragon in the mid-ground to serve as an accent colour, just to finish off the overall look.

BUILDING A WORLD

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PHOTOSHOP

CUSTOM BRUSHES: CLOUD BRUSH

My primary brush for this image. Mainly used for small details and noise.

TEXTURE BRUSH

I painted the surface of the alien object with this brush. The results differ, based on Pressure.

CHALK BRUSH

A build-up brush I use for blocking out big shapes. It has a fuzzy edge that allows for quick colour transitions.

The hand-crafted look

To continue creating visual interest I try to make every circular object within the scene a different size, as well as ensure that all the designs in the windows are different. I don't use the Ellipse tool because I don't want the windows to have a 'copy and paste' feel. Instead, I paint each circular window frame imperfectly, to give each one a unique and individual look.

Economical painting

Sometimes there are a lot of details that need painting, but time is short. In this situation, prioritise what you want the viewer to see. Focus on tackling key elements by introducing more details to those areas and less to others. A small illusion here is achieved by giving a bit of detail to the flowers in the foreground and using a simple Round brush to depict the remaining flowers in the background.

How I create...

AN UNUSUAL SETTLEMENT

1

Building up my house designs

I rough out the architecture. I want the houses to be made from the surrounding materials: wood, clay and stone. As I build them up I use bigger, chunky brush strokes to feel out my shapes, staying loose and not committing to anything until my final comp is set. Initially, my main focal point is a big house. Perhaps someone important lives there.



In depth Cohesive composition



Object placement

Including a variety of different circular elements can help push not only the visual interest, but also the depth of a piece by having the same object in the fore-, mid- and background. This technique enables the viewer to grasp just how big certain elements are in a scene, from their placement alone.

Focal points

You can lead your viewer towards points of interest in your composition. This is achievable by having elements flow into one another, maintaining a constant sense of movement within your piece and having points of visual interest at major stopping/resting points. This ensures that the piece feels whimsical.



Vary your visuals

There are many ways to achieve certain effects. I achieve the texture for the alien object by using a textured brush over a basic ball. I then fade the edges to blend the textures in. With the Selection tool you can pick a value range of colours and shift them around using the sliders in Photoshop to produce a range of interesting looks.

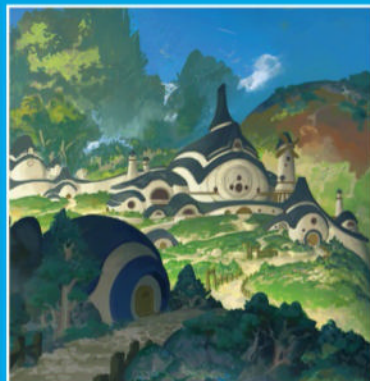
A sense of scale

It's important to keep track of micro compositions – areas in an image that can be viewed in isolation – in a painting. These details really help to bring an image together. In this example I place the man riding the dragon next to the birds to indicate scale, by having large and small creatures near each other. Different levels of scale can be achieved depending on how you arrange such elements in your scene.



2 Time for a rethink

The composition has changed quite a bit. I'm happy with the houses that make up the town, but the vastness of the world itself isn't represented as well as I had hoped. The solution is to expand the scope of the scene. I move my colours in a more vibrant direction by pushing the saturation in the greens and blues. To create more visual interest I place the round alien object right in the centre of the composition.



3 Finishing touches

I make sure everything reads and flows together as a whole. I alter the shapes of the mountains, trees and houses to help create visual rhythm, add people and birds to give a stronger sense of scale and highlight a few things such as the blue window to call attention to the main building.



Technique focus

SHORTCUT TO SUCCESS

Artist PROFILE

Luis Carrasco

LOCATION: US

Luis is a senior concept artist at Sony Pictures Animation who has previously worked with Industrial Light & Magic on films such as Noah, Jurassic World and The Revenant.
<http://bit.ly/3WhEMjN>

Luis Carrasco reveals how he uses 2D and 3D tools to place the viewer trackside at a futuristic contest



"I made this piece in Blender, using add-ons such as HardOps, Node-It, and preset assets to speed up my workflow. I started by blocking out the scene with one main light source and atmosphere to keep it feeling natural. From there, I used Photoshop

to layer in photo textures and details, making sure to balance realism with a painterly style. To finish, I broke up the 3D look with the Dry Brush filter and tweaked the colours with Hue/Saturation layers. My top tip is to really take the time to learn your tools. Knowing the shortcuts and add-ons can save a lot of frustration."

How I create...

THE START OF A RACE EVENT





1 Figuring out the story

I think about what needs to be in the shot to sell the story. I look at references to establish the mood and composition, then block out my scene and play with camera angles. I add some atmosphere and take a couple of screenshots, including a solid-view 'clown pass' for masking later.



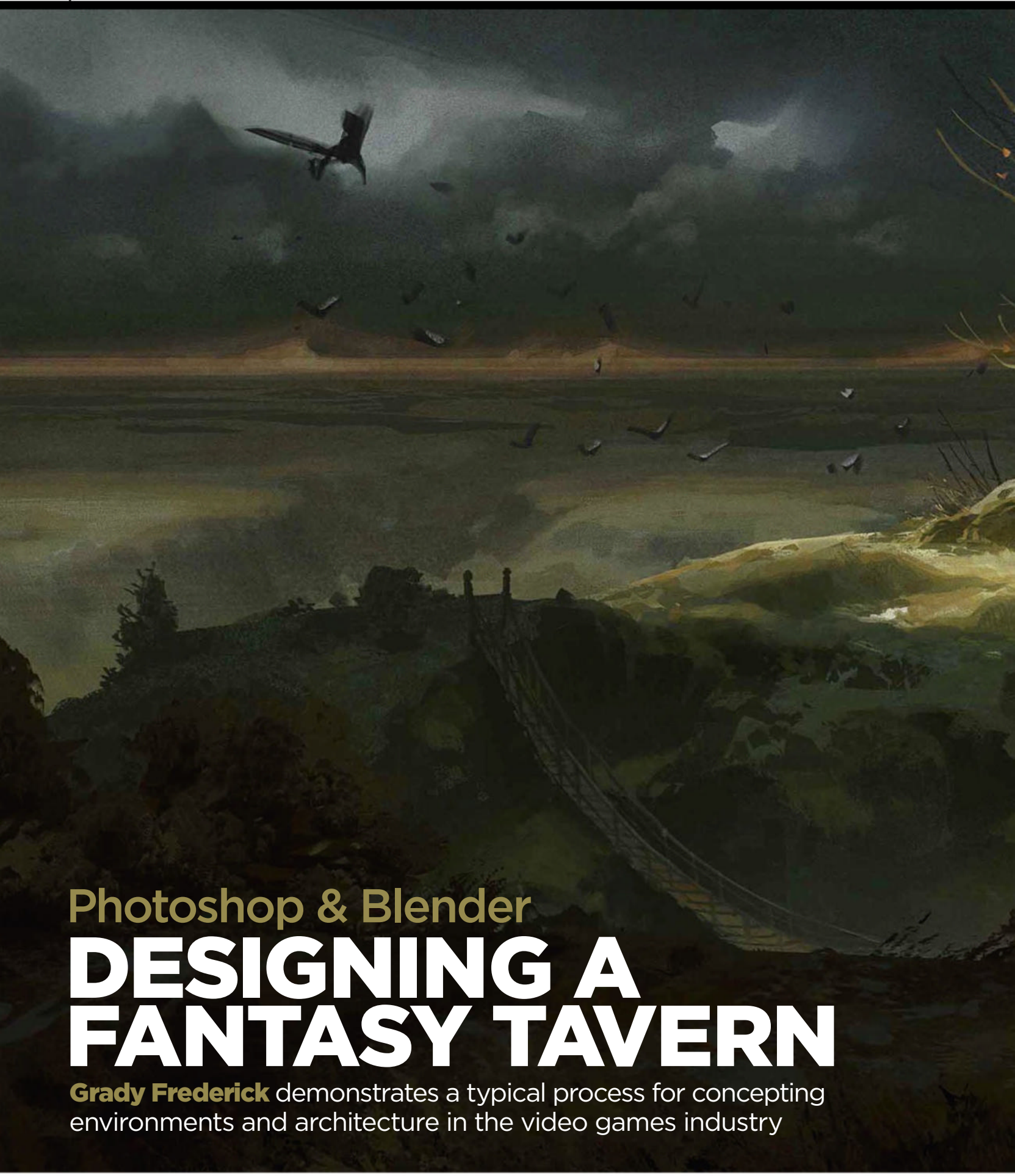
2 Adding detail in Photoshop

In Photoshop, I usually do a rough paintover to figure out what areas need more work, then go back into 3D to add extra assets. After taking new screenshots, I start painting over them again. I mix in photo textures and paint on top to make things look more detailed.



3 Colour tweaks, final polish

I use the Dry Brush filter to break up the 3D look and create a painterly feel. Once it all feels balanced, I use Hue/Saturation layers to shift colours, and brush in changes. For the final pass I copy-merge, apply a 3.4 High Pass, then set it to Hardlight, Overlay or Soft Light around 35 per cent Opacity for sharpness.



Photoshop & Blender

DESIGNING A FANTASY TAVERN

Grady Frederick demonstrates a typical process for conceptualizing environments and architecture in the video games industry

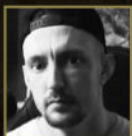


Artist PROFILE

**Grady
Frederick**

LOCATION: Canada

Grady's a senior concept artist and illustrator working at Eidos-Montréal. He also creates art content on his YouTube and Patreon channels.
<https://bit.ly/3KTzCYZ>

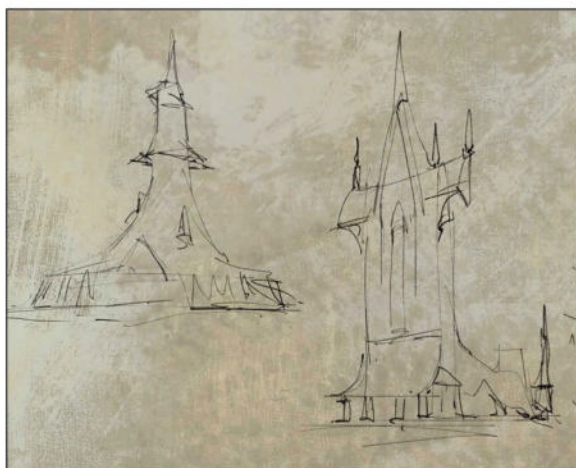


This image was part of a community concept art challenge I created for my members on Patreon. Here you'll see a method I use regularly in my professional work to quickly iterate

and refine ideas, which can be helpful in a production setting.

I'll show my design process that involves developing a standalone architectural concept, which is useful for the creation of video game assets. I'll then produce a final mood

illustration to show the design in the context of its environment. This helps with the story, the atmosphere and tone of the location, and – in a studio setting – hopefully inspires the rest of the team by showing them a clear vision we can all work toward.



1 Visualising an idea

I sit down and open Photoshop with nothing more than the idea for a tavern in a fantasy setting. I begin with rough scribbles as I attempt to generate an idea as a starting point. I don't have references yet – I'm just trying to create some interesting shapes that might help when looking for suitable reference material.



2 Sketching fantasy details

I know I want to design a tavern, but I want to push the fantasy aspect to make it slightly "unbelievable". I start adding more extreme shapes and elements such as a tree growing right through the middle. As I work, I do little drawings in the margins to clarify some details and make sense of things: how the windows are made, what the wooden supports look like, any ornamentation on the structure and so on. This enables me to gather some online references for inspiring architecture.



3 Work up the details and create a concept with clarity

Once I've chosen one of my sketches I start refining the design, combining some of the other ideas that I like. Whereas the first sketches are really about rough and gestural ideas, here I'm beginning to be more clear about the details. This is an example of the type of process I use at work as a concept artist. It's important to be quick, but also create a clear-enough concept for the 3D artists to refer to when they make assets. I like doing all the problem-solving here, so when I'm painting the final illustration I don't have to resolve the design of the building.



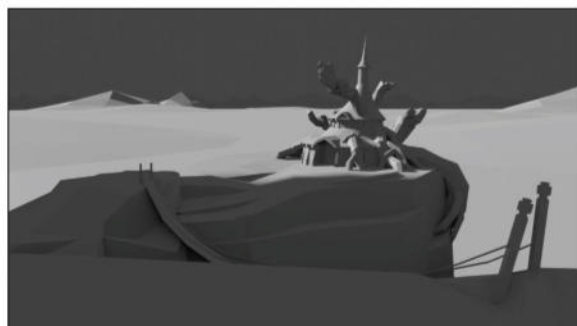
4 Common shape language

I paint the design to show materials and the local colour palette. When I'm designing the motifs I consider how to bring cohesion to the overall look, and add carvings depicting twisting vines, branches and leaves. Even the iron braces on the door will conform to that shape language.



5 Thumbnails and Notan sketches

With my design established to a sufficient detail, I start creating environment thumbnails (bottom) in my sketchbook. These are really small and take between 30 seconds to a minute each. Once I like a few I start experimenting with Notan sketches (top) to plan where my dark and light shapes will be.



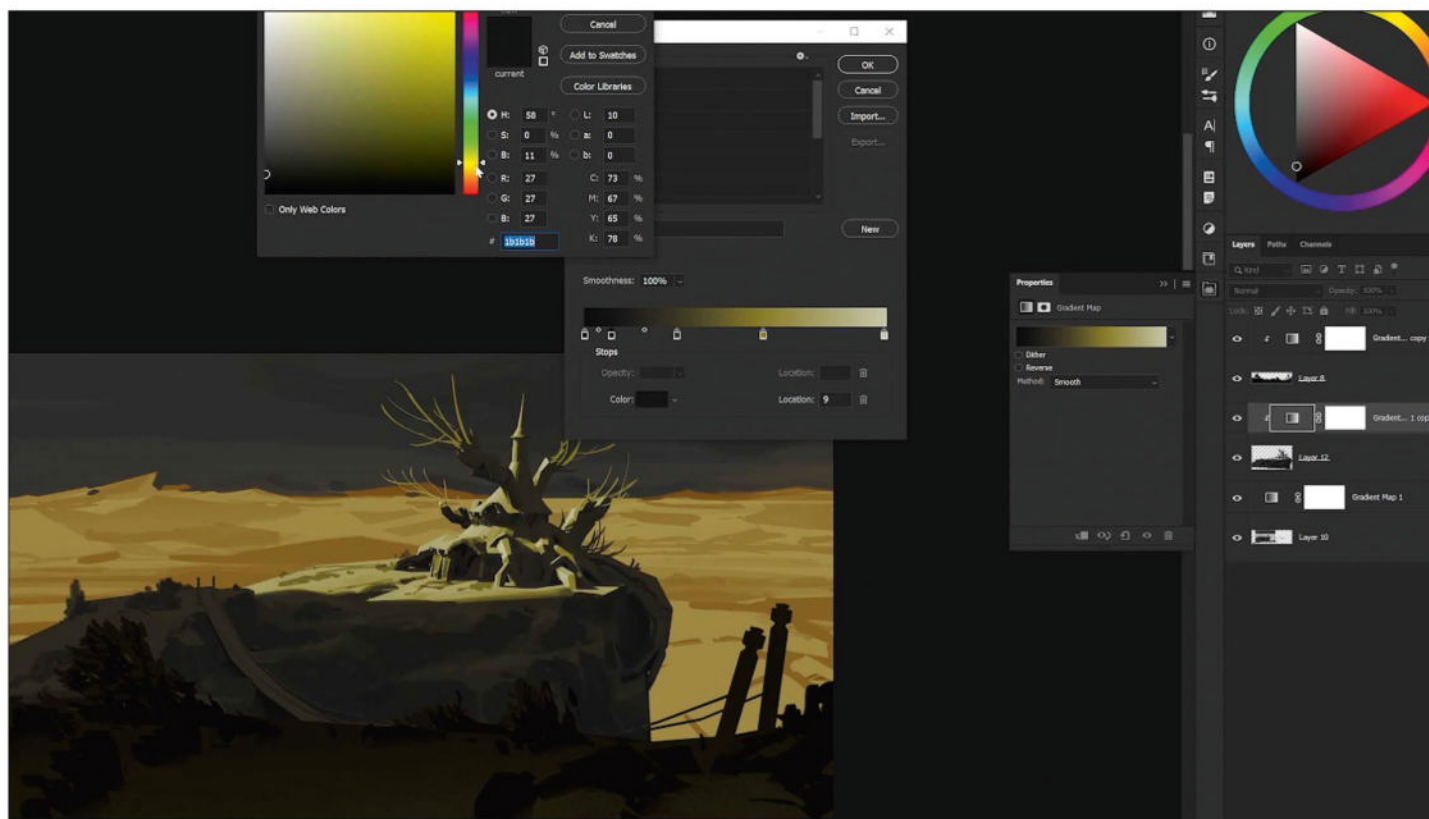
6 Blocking out the scene in Blender

Once I'm satisfied with one, I start blocking out a scene in Blender. The reason for using 3D here is that it'll give me a perspective guide for the scene. I just have to make sure that the composition is aligned pretty close to my intention from my thumbnail.



7 Separate out the render in Photoshop

Once I'm happy with the basic composition and lighting, I take the render into Photoshop and separate it into layers: fore-, middle- and background, and the sky. From here I just treat it like a value sketch, painting out the blocky shapes, adding elements such as foliage and texture, and adjusting some local values. This is because the whole 3D scene is made of the same grey material. ➡



8 Assign colours to values

Next, I use a Gradient Map adjustment layer to assign certain colours to all of the different values in the scene. This step enables me to draw up a very basic colour palette. Then I'll usually start painting directly on top with a new layer.



9 Enhance the chosen colour palette

I paint directly onto a new layer, adding some colour variation, local colours such as the blue/grey roof, and generally try to enhance the colour palette that I established in the previous step.



10 Refining the image

From here it's really just a lot of small refinements. I try to get the whole image done as early as possible in a very rough state, and keep it as a backup to ensure I stay on track as I refine further and add details. I want to get better at leaving things be, and one day I hope to find myself working very simply, efficiently and feeling less chaotic in my process.



11 Create colour variations

With the image in a good place, I create iterations to test small colour variations. This helps me pick stronger colour palettes. Often, when seeing new options next to my first version, I realise how the colour could be improved. This is much harder to do if I continually make colour adjustments in my working file, because I have nothing to compare it with and it can be hard to see things objectively.



12 Final detailing

Now I'm starting to be a lot more precise about the rendering, and really thinking about the final details. I introduce atmosphere and lighting effects, and the addition of complementary details such as the birds to help lead the viewer's eye through the scene.



13 Simplifying where possible

Now I make yet another set of colour iterations, this time testing some luminosity adjustments, as well as determining whether I can darken the non-focal areas to simplify the values. I'm all about simplifying, or at least trying to simplify. In general, I always try to maintain a value hierarchy. I don't want the lit areas to all be lit equally strongly. I want to be intentional about where my strongest values are, and have a natural falloff or slightly more subdued values elsewhere.



14 Concentrate on the focal points

I always think about the most important parts of the image, and try to spend most of my painting time there. I don't want to bring every square inch of the canvas up to the same level of detail as the focal point. Not only does it not help the intention of the image, but it can weaken an image. Bringing up those areas will simultaneously bring down the impact of your focal areas. Once I feel satisfied with the most important parts of the image, I call it finished. ●



SEU RATENÔR

The owner of the local grocery store. Nobody knows his real age or even where he came from, because he's always telling different and absurd stories about his life to everyone.

BETO RATO

A lovely, talkative middle-aged rat who's a bit conceited and addicted to cheese. He's quite naive and has a huge heart, although his belly seems even bigger!



RAIMUNDO VAN DER RATO

A great inventor... or perhaps not! He is Beto's cousin and is a source of great pride for him. Generally, most of his inventions don't work properly, even though he claims otherwise.



Technique focus

ART IMITATES BRAZILIAN LIFE

Filipe Pagliuso's anthropomorphic rats have enough visual details to match their backstories

"Meet Beto Rato, his wife Rita and their friends! They're the main characters of a personal project that my wife and I work on together, who represent intimate aspects of our beloved Brazilian culture. Our initial idea was to create a private universe where we could make our own

internal jokes. In the first year of their creation I applied them to a Christmas card I made for my wife, and since then they've appeared on an exclusive new card every year. We keep expanding the universe by adding new characters that represent our experiences together." ●

RATATINHA

Rita's best friend and her confidant. A funny and stylish hippie mouse who owns a charming candy shop.



RITA RATO

Beto's life mate. She's gracious, very happy, quite charming and a flower lover. Rita is Beto's inseparable companion and is the perfect match for him.



RATOLINO

Beto's best friend. He is a street mimic, but he spends most of his time being apathetic and demotivated. Even so, he does his best!



Artist PROFILE

Filipe Pagliuso

LOCATION: Brazil

Filipe is a character designer and illustrator based in the city of Ribeirão Preto who has worked for Games Workshop and Magic: The Gathering.

<http://bit.ly/4hkh9kn>

The Gallery

SHOWCASING THE FINEST
TRADITIONAL ARTISTS



Arthur Randolpho

LOCATION: Brazil **MEDIA:** Digital and traditional watercolours, pencils **WEB:** <https://arthurrandolpho.com>

Arthur is an illustrator who has worked across comics, games and books, and aspires to be a character designer for animation projects. His biggest inspirations are Carter Goodrich, Nico Marlet, Matías Bergara and Cory Loftis.

1 ALICE IN WONDERLAND
"Let's hunt that Jabberwock, baby!!" I just wanted to do a fun drawing of Alice riding the giant Cheshire Cat going to kill the Jabberwock."

2 MR. SPIDER
"This was my entry for a monthly Character Design Challenge. The theme was Animal Monsters, so I created the tarantula detective. He's a good man despite his frightening appearance."

3 FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER
"The theme for this Character Design Challenge was Cinema Monsters, and I wanted to create my version of Frankenstein's monster. He's scary, but just wants to be loved."

4 HELLBOY
"He's a character I draw quite often. I like his design and the concept of him being the devil himself fighting against demons to save humanity."



ImagineFX

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





Xavier Ortiz

LOCATION: US MEDIA: Watercolour, charcoal, pastel WEB: www.instagram.com/builtfromsketch

Xavier is a traditional watercolour artist based in Sacramento, California. His paintings often explore surreal and darkly imaginative themes, drawing inspiration from complex emotions, history, nature and early photography.



1 THE CULLING

"This painting explores the consequences of burying problems instead of facing them. It tells the story of three evil, immortal figures who are buried beneath a tree, their presence slowly destroying it. The piece reflects themes of greed, destruction, deceit and the loss of control."

2 NIGHTS

"An ancient vampire oversees the moon and celestial cycles. A recluse, he appears only at night and wields a two-pronged spear to guide the moons. He serves as a quiet, timeless caretaker of the night."



3 HUNTRESS

"Huntress was once a follower of a dark organisation. She escaped and now fights for herself and a brighter future. The light she carries is a symbol of hope, perseverance and freedom. Her mission is to make up for past mistakes."

4 CROWN

"Crown is a motherly witch and spirit who protects the Earth. She ensures there's balance and life. She brings water to nurture and cleanse, clears the skies for sunlight, and mourns the damage humans have done. Crown embodies Nature's nurturing strength and sorrow."



Reviews



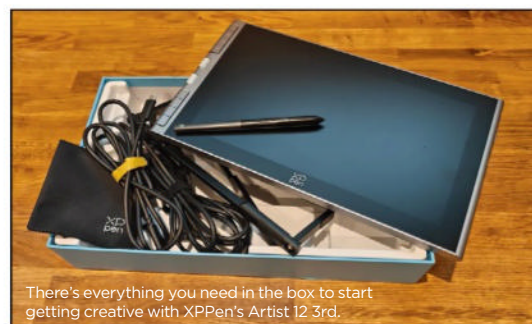
The latest digital art resources are put to the test by the ImagineFX team...

Artist's Choice Award
Art resources with a five-star rating receive the ImagineFX Artist's Choice award!



The XPPen Artist 12 3rd will suit those artists who are just starting out, or are on a budget.

© XPPen



There's everything you need in the box to start getting creative with XPPen's Artist 12 3rd.



The tablet has a magnetic holder for securely storing the stylus in between drawing sessions.

XPPen Artist 12 3rd

SMART CHOICE Are you looking for a mid-range drawing tablet with some premium specs at an affordable price? Then look no further

Price £190/\$240 **Company** XPPen **Web** www.xppen.com

The third generation of the XPPen Artist 12 arrives as a subtle but meaningful evolution in the brand's affordable pen display range. It's the first model to ship with XPPen's new X4 Smart Chip Stylus, together with a complete redesign that promises faster response, tighter precision and a lighter touch.

Paired with a slimmer, magnetically equipped tablet body, XPPen has seemingly studied its higher-end competitors, such as Wacom's Cintiq Pro and Huion's Kamvas Pro, and reimagined them for hobbyists and students who want pro-grade drawing at a more accessible price.

XPPen has been generous with what's included. Alongside the 11.9-inch drawing display, you'll find the new X4 Smart Chip Stylus, 10 spare nibs, a nib replacement tool, a glove, a cleaning cloth, and, importantly, a foldable stand. You also receive both a USB-C to USB-C cable and a 3-in-1 cable for power and connection, as well as a quick-start card for driver downloads and warranty registration.

HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

It's the kind of setup that enables you to start drawing immediately, without requiring extra purchases, which is something Wacom rarely offers at this price. That said, the packaging feels

VERDICT

This is one of the best-value, mid-range drawing tablets on the market, and a sign that XPPen's smart chip stylus tech is catching up fast.

Pros

- Very accurate stylus tech
- Display impresses
- Lots of features for your money

Cons

- Latency drift at screen edges
- Feels brittle and plastic

Rating



fairly basic, and the cables could be more compact for travel. Still, it's a solid unboxing experience for a mid-range tablet.

Lightweight and portable, the Artist 12 3rd weighs just 719g and measures 327.2 x 189.1 x 12mm. It's roughly the size of an iPad Pro but a little thicker, and feels easy to carry around or set up on a desk. The plastic frame does make it feel somewhat brittle compared to aluminium-clad rivals, and the shortcut buttons and central X-Dial 'roller' controls have a 'clicky' tactility that won't be for everyone.

That X-Dial, though, is surprisingly useful. It can adjust brush size, scroll through layers or zoom the canvas,



The Artist 12 3rd's screen has an anti-glare and anti-fingerprint coating, and features a subtle texture that's ideal for sketching.



The plastic surround, with its two 'clicky' roller controls, is one area where XPPen's cost savings are evident.

although the zoom only shifts through preset levels, which makes it less intuitive than a pinch or stylus-based control. There are eight programmable buttons, four above and four below, all responsive and easily customisable.

The 11.9-inch laminated display runs at Full HD (1920 x 1080) but is clocked at 60Hz refresh compared to 120Hz of some larger displays. This screen does offer 99% sRGB, 97% Adobe RGB and 97% DCI-P3 coverage; impressive colour fidelity for this price. Brightness peaks at 260 nits, which is decent indoors but a little muted under strong daylight. XPPen's AG nano-etched glass and AF coating reduce glare and add a subtle, paper-like texture that

“For its size and class, the Artist 12 3rd performs beyond expectations”

The X4 Smart Chip Stylus has 16,384 levels of pressure – a huge improvement over the previous generation of stylus from XPPen.

gives just enough resistance to make sketching feel natural.

The tablet also introduces a magnetic stylus holder built directly into the frame. This is a first for XPPen and it's surprisingly well implemented. The stylus snaps into place securely, adding a touch of design flair that feels both practical and premium.

The X4 Smart Chip Stylus is the star of this release. Compared to the older X3, it doubles the pressure levels to 16,384, lowers the activation force to 2g, and cuts the first-stroke response time to just 30ms. The results are immediately noticeable, with the stylus capturing light taps and micro-pressure changes with impressive precision.

The pen is capable of creating the smallest dots and faintest strokes with no perceptible lag, and its new nib structure, now with reduced wobble, keeps lines steady and natural. The lightweight design might not appeal

to everyone; it lacks the adjustable grip and solid feel of Wacom's Pro Pen 3, but it's still a pleasure to draw with once you get used to the balance.

FINE LINE-WORK

Tilt recognition remains accurate up to 60°, and line flow feels smooth and organic. In long sessions, the reduced starting pressure and improved accuracy make fatigue less of an issue. The only hiccup came when working toward the tablet's edges: we noticed a little drift and latency, especially in ArtRage, where the palette sits far out on the canvas. It's minor, but something XPPen could iron out with future driver updates.

For its size and class, the Artist 12 3rd performs beyond expectations. The laminated screen eliminates parallax nicely, and strokes appear cleanly aligned under the nib. Line tracking is consistent, and pressure response remains stable across the active area.

That said, setup isn't always smooth. The XPPen driver app remains functional but slightly clunky; adjusting the workspace and calibrating the pen area can take a few tries. Once configured, though, the tablet behaves reliably.

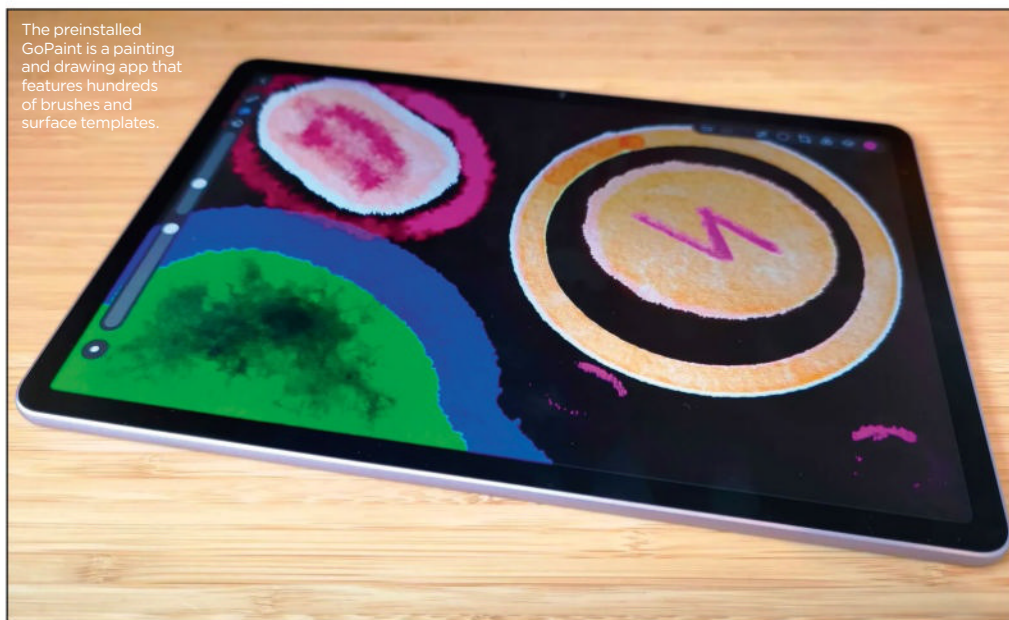
The screen's colour accuracy and brightness hold up well for illustration, design and light photo work. There's no HDR or ultra-wide gamut support like you'd get from Wacom's Cintiq Pro 16 or Huion's Kamvas Pro 13 (2.5K), but that's a fair trade-off given this tablet's price and portability.

If you're a pro illustrator who already owns a Cintiq or Kamvas Pro, the Artist 12 3rd Gen is a strong secondary option. It's light enough for location sketching or client previews, yet capable enough for proper illustration work. Its combination of portability, magnetic storage and colour-accurate display makes it a smart everyday tool for sketching, inking or experimenting.

The XPPen Artist 12 3rd is a thoughtful, well-balanced tablet that understands its user. It doesn't overreach or overpromise, it simply focuses on nailing the essentials: a bright, colour-accurate screen and a genuinely impressive stylus, all for under £200. Yes, the plastic frame and clicky buttons reveal its budget roots, but XPPen has spent its attention, and your money, where it counts. ●

Ian Dean

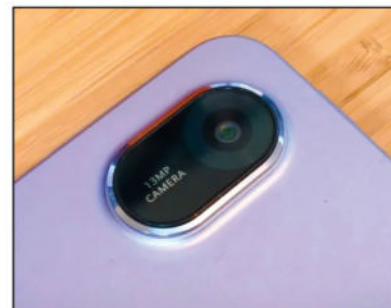




The preinstalled GoPaint is a painting and drawing app that features hundreds of brushes and surface templates.



Huawei's tablet is marginally bigger than the 11-inch M4 iPad, and at 6.2mm, slightly thicker too.



The MatePad comes in a choice of two colours. We preferred violet over a corporate-looking grey.

Huawei MatePad 11.5''S

MATE'S RATES The 2025 version of Huawei's tablet has a beautiful screen and comes with a stylus. But you'll need to be creative to get hold of your fave apps

Price £399.99 (with optional keyboard) **Company** Huawei **Web** www.huawei.com

Huawei has started making its own chipsets, suite of apps and software. In the Huawei MatePad 11.5''S (2025), the most polished – and additive – of the lot, this makes it worth the purchase all on its own.

The MatePad line-up has always been well built, and this model is no different. The metal chassis is sturdy yet at 510g isn't too heavy, and the texture of the back makes it comfortable to hold. It comes in two colours – grey and violet – and we picked up the much prettier one, the violet, to test.

The screen, unlike many others, is not an OLED or AMOLED, but it comes with a feature that many other tablets lack. The TFT LCD (IPS tech) screen is a 10-point multi-touch offering, and the near-3K resolution is nice and sharp despite not being an OLED display. It's pleasant to look at and use for extended periods of time thanks to the PaperMatte coating. Glare is

drastically reduced, which makes it ideal for drawing and artworking because you're not fighting reflections, even in bright light, and the texture of the screen becomes more realistic, especially when using watercolour, and oil paint canvases and brushes.

Artists will love the preinstalled GoPaint, but Huawei's native app store contains thousands of apps and games of all types (there's no access to the Google Play Store). Many have been 'inspired' by well-known applications, but you can also get hold of the originals if you're willing to put in a little detective work. Track down APK packs for your desired apps, unpack those and then install, and you should be able to mostly replicate your usual Android experience here. Clearly it's not a perfect solution, and that lack of ready Google access will be a deal-breaker to many.

Despite promises on the packaging of "PC-level performance", the spec sheet will put a quick stop to any

VERDICT

In its latest guise the Huawei MatePad 11.5''S is as nice to use as any of Huawei's tablets in recent years – as long as you're happy with either forgoing many of your favourite apps and easy Google access, or getting creative in finding them. It's not particularly powerful, but the touchscreen is a delight, it comes with a decent stylus and optional keyboard, GoPaint is better than ever, and the price is competitive.

Pros

- Sharp screen is pleasant to use
- GoPaint is so fun
- Competitive price

Cons

- Geopolitics
- Not quite PC performance as advertised

Rating



You can choose to buy the Huawei MatePad with or without a keyboard, which adds £50 to the price.

3D-modelling-on-my-tablet pipe dreams. To be fair to Huawei, with 8GB of RAM and an octa-core processor (Huawei's own development, branded 'Kirin') along with 256GB of SSD storage, it matches similarly priced Chromebooks and entry-level Windows laptops, but anything above basic productivity, on top of artworking and drawing, will be a stretch.

Huawei's site lists the MatePad 11.5''S PaperMatte and keyboard for just under £400 (£50 less if you can do without the keyboard). It's a fair price as long as you realise what you're buying this tablet for (and perhaps more importantly, what you're not buying it for). The Huawei brand is not officially available in the US, unfortunately – you can blame geopolitical tensions for that.

Erlingur Einarsson

“Despite promises of PC-level performance, the spec sheet will put a stop to any 3D-modelling dreams”

If you're running multiple devices then Anker's device may be just the thing for your set-up.



Anker Nano Charger

ON IT With six ports you'll be hard pressed to max this thing out

Price £59.99/\$59.99

Company Anker

Web www.anker.com

RATING ★★★★★

Desktop chargers are one of those devices that you didn't realise you needed until you have owned and used one. If you're fed up with cable switching, then Anker has a fantastic solution called the Nano Charger.

The device delivers a total of 130W of power through six ports: four USB-C and two USB-A. Users can take advantage of 100W charging from the first USB-C port, 65W from the second, and 20W from the third and fourth.

At 93 x 98 x 19mm this charger is compact, hardly taking up any room on the desk. However, it weighs 320g, which isn't bad but too heavy to make it truly portable.

Anker has included ActiveShield 2.0, which performs three million temperature checks daily. When testing the unit got a little warm but certainly not to a temperature to be concerned about.

The Anker Nano Charger is capable of powering a range of different devices. In operation it was perfectly balanced, never struggling to distribute power even with multiple devices connected. If you're looking for a well-made, high-performing charger, then this Anker Nano is worth every penny.

Paul Hatton

BenQ MA320U

SILVER LININGS This 32-inch, 4K monitor is geared towards Mac users, but is perfect for all creatives

Price £599.99/\$729.99 **Company** BenQ **Web** www.benq.com

The BenQ MA320U is one of the best graphic design monitors we've come across. Purpose-built for Mac users, this 32-inch, 4K display delivers perfectly matched colour reproduction through BenQ's Mac Color-Tuning Technology, while its USB-C connectivity will help keep your workspace clean and cable-free.

It's ideal for those who divide their time between creative projects and everyday productivity. The monitor combines vibrant visuals with intuitive Display Pilot 2 controls, enabling smooth integration with your computer's keyboard (we tested the MA320U with a MacBook).

The ergonomic stand is well thought out. It offers height adjustment, tilt, swivel and a full 90-degree pivot. The screen is also a joy to work on. Its anti-reflective and anti-glare coating makes a huge difference if you're working in a bright room. It also has good viewing angles, keeping the colours consistent.

The ports are, for the most part, ideal. They include a USB-C with power delivery charging, so if you're using your MacBook, you don't need to scramble around for a power outlet to charge it up. It also has an additional USB-C port, two HDMI's, and a USB-A. The only blip is that



there's no Thunderbolt 4 – as a Mac user this would have been a sensible addition – but it's certainly not the end of the world.

The BenQ MA320U really shines when it comes to features. It uses Mac colours, which means what you see on your monitor matches exactly what your MacBook's screen shows you. This isn't a gaming monitor, so the refresh rate being capped at 60Hz doesn't make much of a difference. The key takeaway from BenQ's monitor is that you get an accurate, Mac-friendly display with exceptional colour consistency.

The BenQ MA320U sits firmly in the premium 4K monitor bracket. Yet even if you're not in the Apple ecosystem, this is still a brilliant device that will suit any creative and productivity work.

Rachael Penn

The monitor can be tilted, swivelled and pivoted. Its height can be adjusted, too. If you're feeling flush, a £120 desktop monitor arm is also available.

© BenQ



The 32-inch screen has a 4K resolution of 3,840 x 2,160, and has an anti-reflective and anti-glare coating.

Artwork by Rob Green

VERDICT

The BenQ MA320U has been purpose-built for Mac users, offering exact colour matching for MacBooks and Display Pilot 2 software with Mac keyboard integration. It's not the cheapest 4K monitor out there, but if you're a pro-level creative who's locked into the Apple ecosystem, it's one of the best monitor choices you can make.

Pros

- Exceptional colour accuracy
- Mac integration with Display Pilot 2
- USB-C power delivery

Cons

- Poor internal speakers
- Lacks a Thunderbolt 4 port

Rating

★★★★★



Photographs © Lenovo

The ThinkPad's keys are well-sized and spaced, but there's no trackpad nub in the centre of the keyboard.

Lenovo's latest device meets MIL-STD protection standards, as has become common for the ThinkPad line.

Lenovo ThinkPad X9 Aura Edition

SLIMLINE TONIC Ultrathin and ultralight, the Lenovo ThinkPad X9 Aura Edition is a masterclass of a Windows laptop that puts office productivity front and centre

Price From £1,230/\$1,739 **Company** Lenovo **Web** www.lenovo.com

There are plenty of laptops that achieve a light weight, but that isn't enough to be premium. Enter the ThinkPad X9 Aura edition, which looks to make productivity sexy.

It comes with an all-metal build, a fancy OLED display, biometrics, a new Intel processor and more. It's thin at just 17mm and with a weight of 1.1kg, it can easily be lifted with one hand. In a backpack, the Thinkpad feels as though it's barely there at all.

The laptop stumbles on its selection of ports. If you have specific needs, a dongle will be a necessity.

At over 3K in resolution, that OLED display is pin-sharp given the relatively dinky dimensions of the panel. It supports full HDR and is Dolby Vision-certified. It's certainly a pleasing option for watching video, with a 120Hz refresh rate. Peak brightness was also just about enough to battle sunlight, although the slightly glossy nature of the panel meant that reflections were sometimes an issue.

With 100 per cent coverage of the DCI-P3 colour space, it will also suffice for photo work for some. However, if you have specific needs in this area

VERDICT

The Lenovo Thinkpad X9 Aura Edition is a reinvention of a line going back three decades, and one which is carried out with aplomb. It has enough power for most tasks, a great display, a brilliant keyboard and can be carried anywhere. Plus, it has the battery to make it through a full day of work. But for a better port selection, it would be a slam dunk. If you need a machine to satisfy all of your office needs, you should look no further.

Pros

- Very portable
- Great display
- Powerful CPU

Cons

- Bad at GPU-dependent tasks
- Limited port selection
- Slightly useless AI inclusions

Rating



then you'll be best served with a calibrated external monitor.

There are two USB-C slots with support for Thunderbolt 4, a 3.5mm headphone jack and an HDMI port. Connectivity options are WiFi 7 and Bluetooth 5.4. Finally, a pair of speakers are tucked into the hinge of the screen.

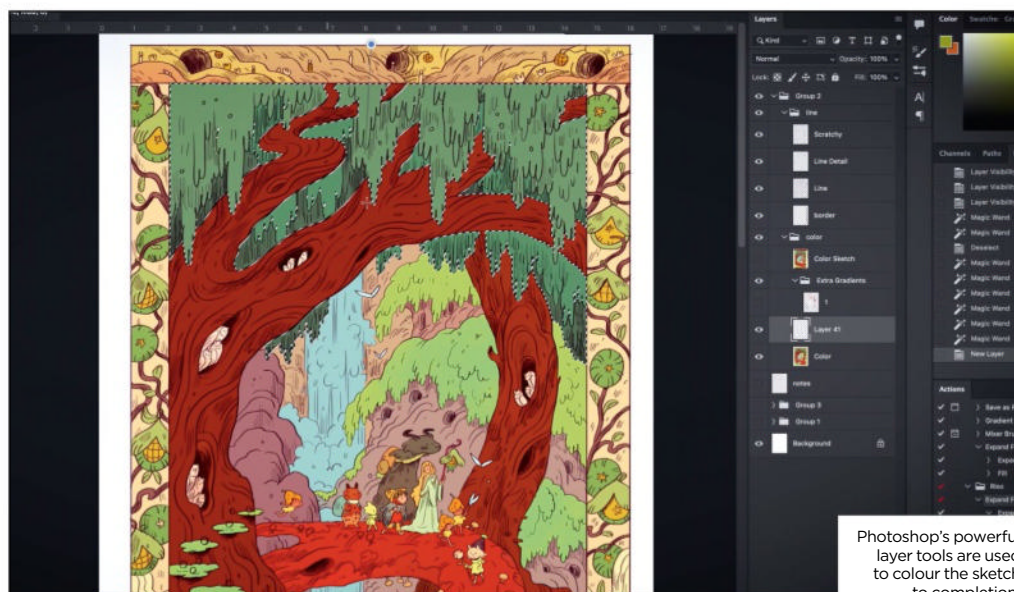
The X9 Aura runs the latest Core 7 Ultra processor and is fitted with 32GB of RAM by default and a 1TB SSD. Its Geekbench 6 single-core score of 2,684 keeps up with the likes of more powerful H series chips from Intel. When things become more complex the Aura is capable of tasks that are graphically intensive but it takes a while to do so and gets hot, too.

The Lenovo Thinkpad X9 14 Aura Edition is a well-honed laptop that's clearly targeted at the business professional. It will fit into almost any workflow, provided that said workflow doesn't also require a GPU. It's about as close an answer Windows has to the MacBook Air, which is no small praise.

Sean Cameron



“At over 3K in resolution, that OLED display is pin-sharp given the relatively dinky dimensions of the panel”



Photoshop's powerful layer tools are used to colour the sketch to completion.

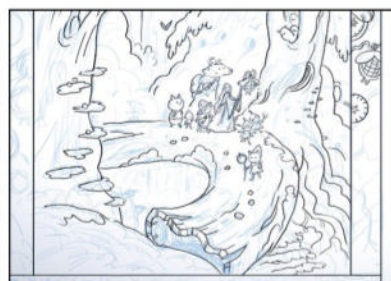
Forest Fantasy Illustration in Procreate & Photoshop

NATURE TRAIL If you go down in the woods today... you'll find a brilliant entry-level course from Natalie Andrewson

Publisher Domestika **Price** £39.90 (but can be found on discount) **Format** Online
Length 3hrs 44mins **Web** www.domestika.org

This is a lovely course from Natalie Andrewson that's both an examination of her career and sources of inspiration (the film composer John Williams was a surprise!) in illustration. A key reason why this course stood out is that it uses Photoshop and Procreate; that said, the illustrator stresses that the course is software-agnostic.

Natalie starts with a reference-based workflow and explains, for example, why a walk from Indiana Jones is important. She also demonstrates useful techniques to loosen up creatively, such as adding elements to existing artwork for inspiration rather than staring at a blank page. Ideation is a focus,



Natalie's arboreal artwork takes shape in Procreate, before being worked up in Photoshop.

with Procreate used as the sketchbook tool of choice.

When the sketches are moved to Photoshop for finishing, it becomes more software-focused, but the techniques are applicable to any drawing app that can handle a layer-based workflow. The relaxed nature of Natalie's style lends itself well to this kind of tutorial, as it feels more like meditation than exact copying. That said, once the Photoshop work is fully ideated, there follows a strong inking and colouring section, with an excellent video on adding detail. With a final section on how to share on social media, this low-pressure course could be a creative gateway for many.

Mike Griggs ★

VERDICT

A simple and caring workflow is explored in this course, which is as relaxing as looking at Natalie's collection of work. If you're new to ideation then this is an excellent, easy-to-follow starter course that will still provide enough within its lesson structure to create a complete artwork.

Pros

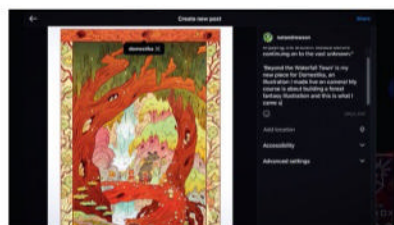
- Simple but effective workflow techniques
- Strong section on inspiration and how to use it
- Less than four hours

Cons

- Natalie's style may not be for everyone
- Software training is effective, but aimed at beginners

Rating

★★★★★



As well as illustration insights, Natalie provides advice on sharing the artwork on social media.

Brushing up...

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



Organic Elements

Artist True Grit

Software Procreate & Photoshop

Brushes 47 **Price** \$12

Rating ★★★★★

Another great selection from True Grit of natural textures such as leaves, grasses, trees and shrubs. The Photoshop pack comes with the most assets, but the number of brushes is the same no matter which program you use. <http://bit.ly/4nyjoSu>



Fine Liner Brush & Pattern Tool Kit

Artist Artifex Forge

Software Affinity Designer

Brushes 53 **Price** \$24

Rating ★★★★★

A great set of brushes and patterns that enable a classic ink-and-line style and enhance the already strong drawing tools in Affinity Designer. For the value offered, the price is great as well. <http://bit.ly/4hAnKaf>



Environment Brushes for Photoshop & Procreate - Landscape Painting Tools

Artist Maddy Bellwoar

Software Procreate & Photoshop

Brushes 128 **Price** £15.66

Rating ★★★★★

A huge selection of brushes for all your environment-creation needs in Photoshop and Procreate. The best thing, though, is the nearly hour-long tutorial video that comes with this pack. <http://etsy.me/4oyYqEB>

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3D Artist

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inspiration and know-how

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HOW TO ESTABLISH PAINTERLY LIGHTING

Philémon Caron applies luminism-inspired techniques to his fantasy landscape art

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The best 3D art around
Explore fantastical characters from Daniel David Merticariu and Roumen Filipov.

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Atmosphere over detail
Rostyslav Zagornov depicts a hi-tech research facility without cluttering the scene.

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Back to basics
We break down a three-point lighting setup and explain how a polygon model works.

98



Five minutes with...
We chat to Pedro Conti about how music rather than art was his first creative outlet.

3D Artist Showcase

BE INSPIRED BY THE BEST DIGITAL ART AROUND

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Daniel David Merticariu

LOCATION: Romania **MEDIA:** ZBrush, Maya, Marmoset Toolbag, Substance 3D Painter, XGen, Arnold, Unreal Engine **WEB:** www.artstation.com/doide

Daniel is a 3D character artist with 11 years of experience. He likes to infuse his work with things that were brought to life in different mediums, and hopes for a future in which game art has a place in contemporary art museums.

1 THE MAN WHO LAUGHS

"This character fuses together three different mediums: a digital painting, the 1869 novel of the same name by Victor Hugo, and the Joker."



2 MARIO INCANDEZA

"This artwork was based on a drawing and a character from the David Foster Wallace novel Infinite Jest. I wanted to bring the character to life in 3D while referencing scenes from the book."



3 THE WITCH OF THE WASTE

"A character inspired by Hayao Miyazaki's movies and a drawing by John Patrick Gañas. I wanted to develop a freehand style with this piece that's detached from the technical constraints of game art."



4 DRYAD

"Another character whose main purpose was to develop a freestyle approach. I wanted to follow the pattern of the wood and to be directed by the happy accidents that arise when using a more grungy brush."







Roumen Filipov

LOCATION: Sweden **MEDIA:** Maya, 3ds Max, Blender, ZBrush, Substance Painter, Photoshop, Unreal Engine, Unity, Marmoset Toolbag, After Effects **WEB:** <https://roumenfilipov.artstation.com>

Roumen is a 3D artist who works across archviz, animation and games. He combines advanced texturing and rendering with hand-crafted models to create stylised and dramatic characters.

1 OWL AIRGUNNER

"I love Aleksandr Nikonov's work, so I decided to make a 3D version of one of his concepts. My goal was to get the same painterly style with soft lighting."



2 CRIMSON REAPER

"This character is a personal project. I wanted to produce a fully rigged, game-ready asset while exercising some advanced, hard-surface sculpting."



3 NYX (HADES FANART)

"After many nights spent playing Hades, I had to do my own version of the best character in the game. To me, she's the strongest presence in the game."

4 ADAM, DARK PRIEST OF THE SUN

"This is based on Lin Chang's concept art. I decided to experiment with a painterly style and real-time physics for this character."



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 mail@imagineFX.com



3D Artist Workshop

ADVICE FROM THE WORLD'S BEST 3D ARTISTS

Unreal Engine & DaVinci Resolve

HOW TO ESTABLISH PAINTERLY LIGHTING

Lighting artist **Philémon Caron** shares how luminism-inspired techniques can help create atmospheric, painterly 3D environments

**Artist
PROFILE****Philémon
Caron**

LOCATION: France

Philémon is part of the team at video game developer Arkane Studios. He also teaches lighting in art school and has a strong interest in medieval dark fantasy, storytelling and atmospheric worlds.
<http://bit.ly/47i9leb>



In this workshop, we'll explore the process of relighting a 3D environment in Unreal Engine, taking inspiration from luminism and the Hudson River School. Rather than aiming for strict realism, this project focuses on translating some painterly qualities of light into a digital space, with attention to atmosphere, emotion and storytelling.

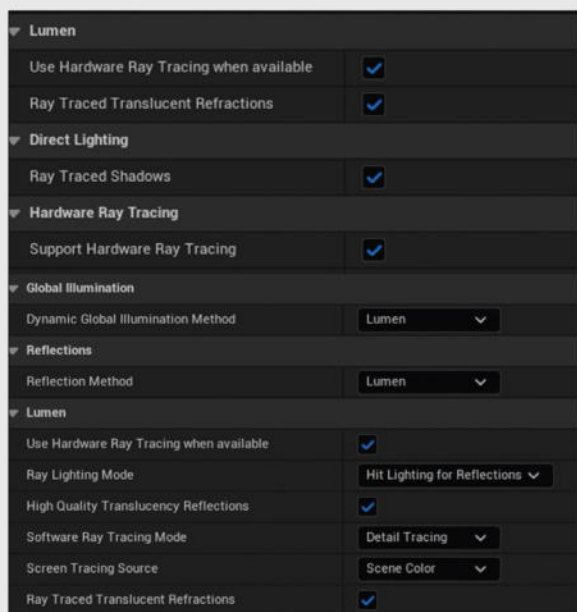
Luminism, a 19th-century art movement, is known for its serene

landscapes, clear and tranquil light, and contemplative mood. Painters of the Hudson River School, such as Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt, conveyed vastness and depth while maintaining calm and harmony. Here, we'll consider how some of those visual approaches – soft transitions, balanced compositions, and subtle interplay of light and atmosphere – can inform the lighting of a real-time environment.

We'll go through the main steps of preparing a scene, shaping light

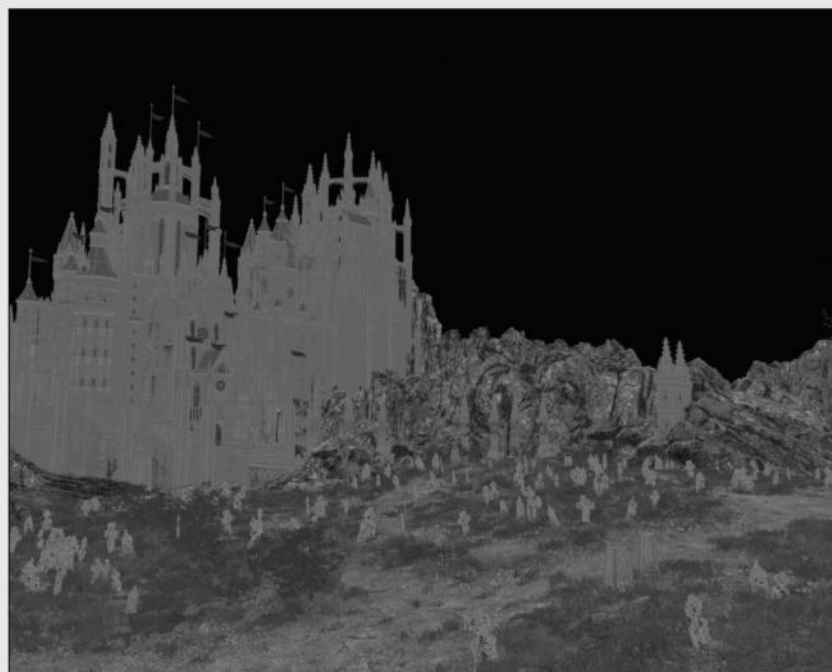
sources, balancing colour and contrast, and introducing atmospheric effects to unify the composition. Along the way, we'll discuss the artistic considerations behind each choice, offering suggestions and observations that you can adapt in your own work.

The goal is not to replicate a historic style perfectly, but to explore how lighting can extend beyond visibility and realism, serving as a tool to convey mood and engage the viewer in a thoughtful, immersive way.



1 Set up an Unreal Engine project

Before diving into lighting, it's important to properly set up your Unreal Engine project. In the Project Settings, enable Hardware Ray Tracing and tweak Lumen for higher quality results. Next, head to the Plugins menu to activate a few key tools that will be useful later on: Screen Space Fog Scattering, HDRI Backdrop and Movie Render Queue for final rendering.



2 Check your materials

Once the project is ready and the scene is open, I check that materials react properly to light. I start by verifying albedo values, avoiding textures that are too dark or too bright, especially when placed side by side because they can become under- or over-exposed once lit. I also inspect roughness, metallic and normal maps for consistency. To do this, I select Lit>Buffer Visualization in the viewport.

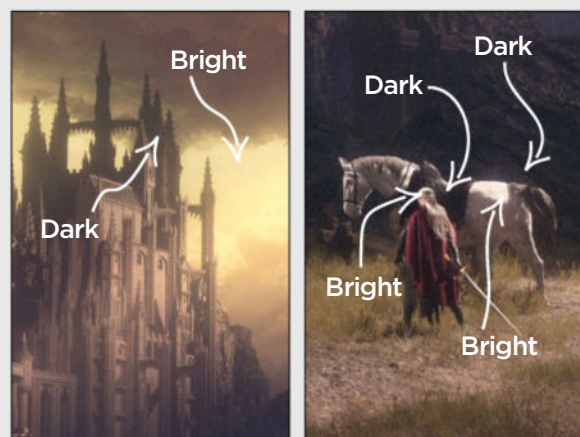
3 Building a narrative foundation

A strong lighting setup often begins with a story. Who will enter this place? What will they do here? Which elements should attract attention? These questions can help guide your lighting decisions. In my case, I want to portray a knight about to enter a castle. Thinking narratively early on helps visualise light direction and emotional intent.



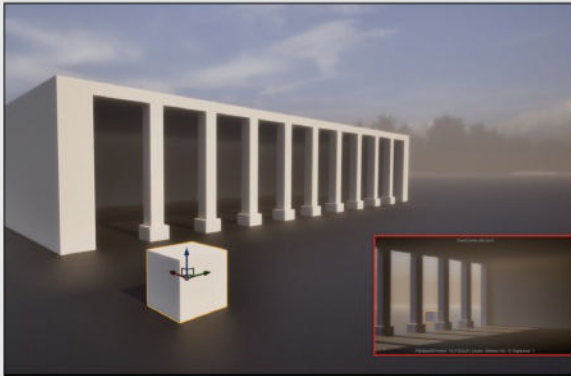
4 Gathering references

References are a valuable foundation for any lighting study. For this project, I gather paintings from the Hudson River School to study how Luminist artists captured depth, softness and atmosphere. Good references can help define tone, storytelling and emotional intent. Tools like PureRef or Miro are great for building organised moodboards and keeping your visual direction consistent.



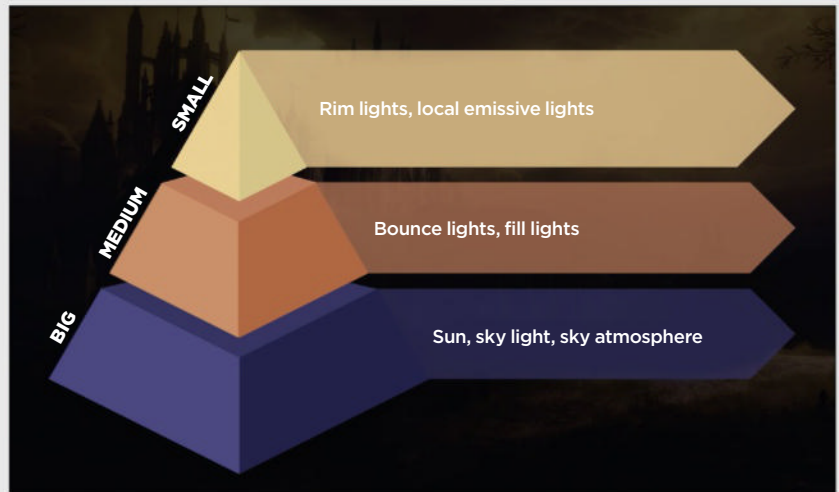
5 Applying counterchange

A key concept I keep in mind for better readability is counterchange, which involves creating contrast by placing dark shapes against bright ones, and vice versa. This principle enhances depth, clarifies the composition and naturally guides the viewer's eye toward the focal point. In this project, I use it to make the castle stand out by keeping its top in shadow against the bright sky.



6 Establishing the camera

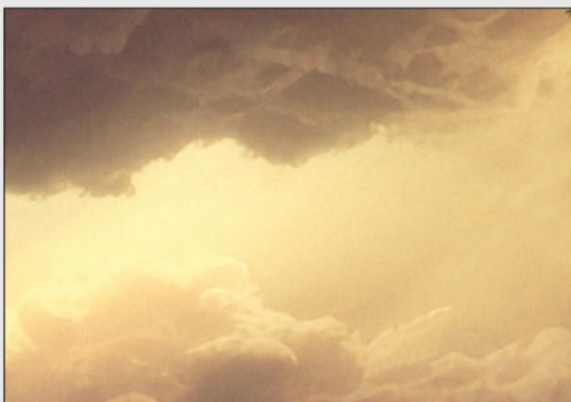
Whether you're lighting a game environment or crafting a standalone visual piece, establishing a main camera is usually very helpful. It serves as a consistent reference point to evaluate progress and visual balance. I regularly take screenshots from this camera to compare iterations and track improvements. Using a Cine Camera Actor is particularly useful, because it simulates real-world lenses, depth of field and focal lengths, helping me to achieve a more photographic result.



7 Apply the BMS principle

When tackling lighting, I like to follow the Big, Medium, Small method. It consists of starting with the most dominant light source, then progressively refining secondary and tertiary ones. This approach works like a funnel, helping you notice early on when something feels off. In outdoor scenes like this one, I usually begin with the sky light, as it defines the global illumination balance and ambient direction.

PD-US and PD-UK



8 Sky light essentials

Placing the sky light establishes shadow direction and ambient tone. For this project, I use a dramatic sky texture made by Velarion. Although the sky itself is predominantly yellow, I apply a subtle bluish tint to the sky light. The contrast in colour between the warm highlights and cool shadows reinforces both depth and harmony. The idea here is to emphasise the divine and epic feeling often found in Albert Bierstadt's paintings, for instance, in *Among the Sierra Nevada, California*.

BEFORE



AFTER



9 Key light setup

Next comes the directional key light. I use a warm, low-side-angle sun to simulate late-afternoon light, enhancing architecture and shaping volumes with softness. For this still image, I enable Raytraced Shadows to refine definition and realism. Adding a Cookie Texture as a mask on my light introduces natural irregularities in illumination, evoking the soft, uneven lighting you might see when clouds drift across the sun. If your shadows are too sharp, increase your light's Source Angle to soften them. ➡➡

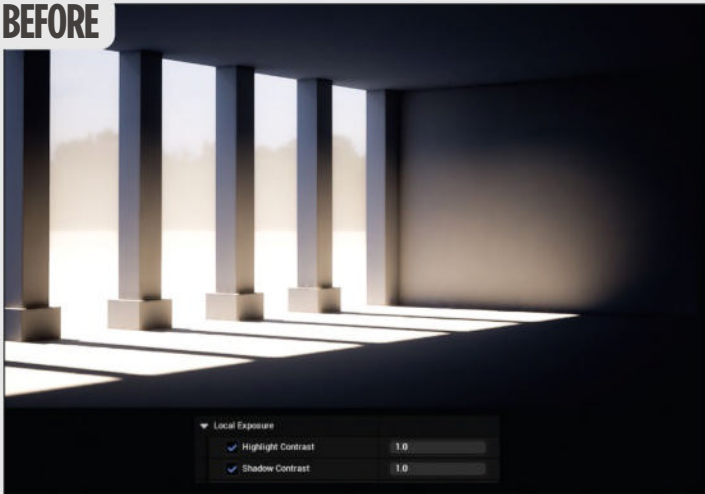
BEFORE**AFTER****10 Introduce Fog Scattering**

Atmospheric fog is key to visual depth. I use an Exponential Height Fog volume set to Volumetric mode, with a soft bluish tint and slight start offset to preserve foreground clarity. The Screen Space Fog Scattering plug-in (made by Dmitry Karpukhin) enhances how light diffuses through mist. It simulates a subtle haze effect that adds cohesion and a painterly softness across the different layers of the environment.

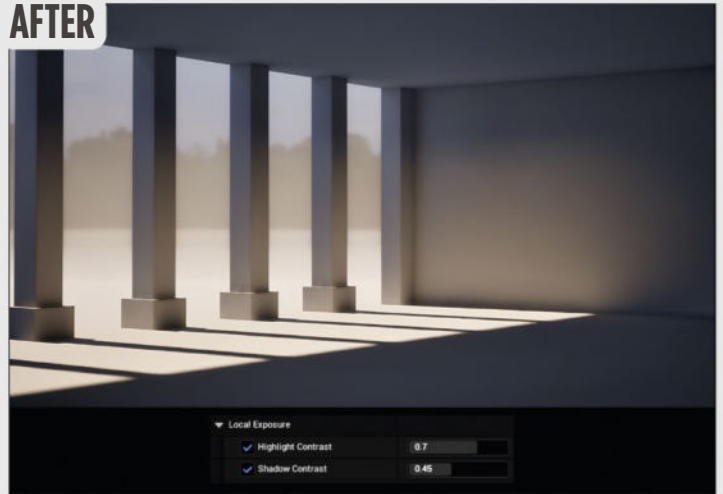
BEFORE**AFTER****11 Place Fog Cards to create depth**

To strengthen the sense of separation between foreground and background, I place semi-transparent fog cards at various depths, recreating a valley-like layering effect. This method is inspired by the atmospheric perspective seen in luminist paintings. For this scene, I used EasyFog by William Faucher, which blends naturally with volumetric fog. Be cautious, though: too much opacity can easily reduce credibility.

BEFORE



AFTER



12 Colour grading and Post Process Volume adjustments

Inside the Post Process Volume, I begin by refining local exposure to preserve detail across the full tonal range, avoiding crushed blacks and blown-out highlights. I then move on to colour grading: cooling the shadows with subtle blue tones, and lifting midtones and highlights to strengthen contrast and focus hierarchy. This helps reinforce a pyramidal composition, giving the overall lighting a coherent and narrative balance.



13 Using Convolution Bloom

Bloom plays an important role in this piece, reinforcing its soft, dreamy character. I carefully increase convolution bloom intensity to create smooth light diffusion across bright areas, inspired by how luminist painters rendered radiant skies. The key is restraint: too much bloom flattens contrast and reduces depth. Subtle adjustments preserve readability while giving the scene its luminous, almost ethereal glow.

BEFORE



AFTER



14 Final adjustments in DaVinci Resolve

At this stage, the image is about 95 per cent complete, but I like to polish details in DaVinci Resolve. I add a touch of film grain, a faint glow and light rays to accentuate the 'divine' aspect. These effects aren't necessary, but they can help bridge the gap between a digital render and the softness of a luminist painting.



Technique focus

ATMOSPHERE OVER DETAIL

Rostyslav Zagornov conveys the hi-tech tone of a research facility without cluttering the scene

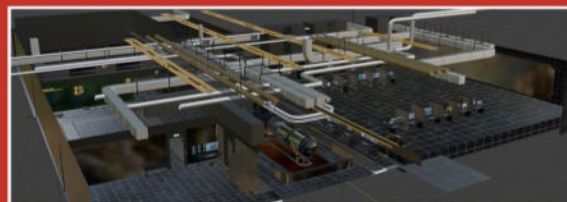


"For this sci-fi interior I started by tackling the overall plan, beginning with general blocking in 3D, before moving on to specific details. I created the room layout, placed several cameras to create an overall sense of the result and

marked a few key areas of interest. My goal wasn't to produce a perfectly detailed interior down to every switch on the wall, but rather to convey the overall atmosphere and style while keeping it believable. The best designs are grounded in what the viewer already knows, which ensures they can believe in their functionality."

How I create...

A FUTURISTIC LAB



1 Adding details

Once the basic detailing is in place, I produce several PBR renders to look at how everything interacts with the lighting inside the lab, adding a few light accents if required. It's now time to choose one or two favourite angles and move them on to finalisation.

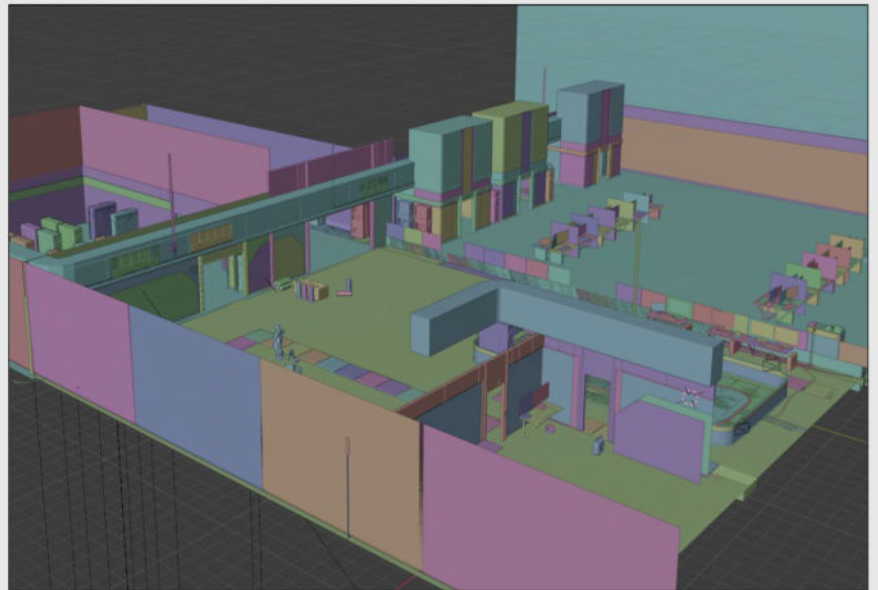


Artist PROFILE

Rostyslav Zagornov

LOCATION: England

Rostyslav is a concept artist and director who has worked on Blade Runner 2049, Spider-Man: Far From Home and Dune: Part One. In his spare time he enjoys running and photographing wildlife. <http://bit.ly/4ou5vWf>



2 Fine tuning

A lot of details are added at the final stage simply to fill in empty space, create a reasonable visual noise and inject a sense of realism. To save time, I use practical methods like photo-texture projection on low-poly models: objects or people far from the camera don't require detailed modelling. To create visual complexity, I might also use reflective surfaces or small local light sources.

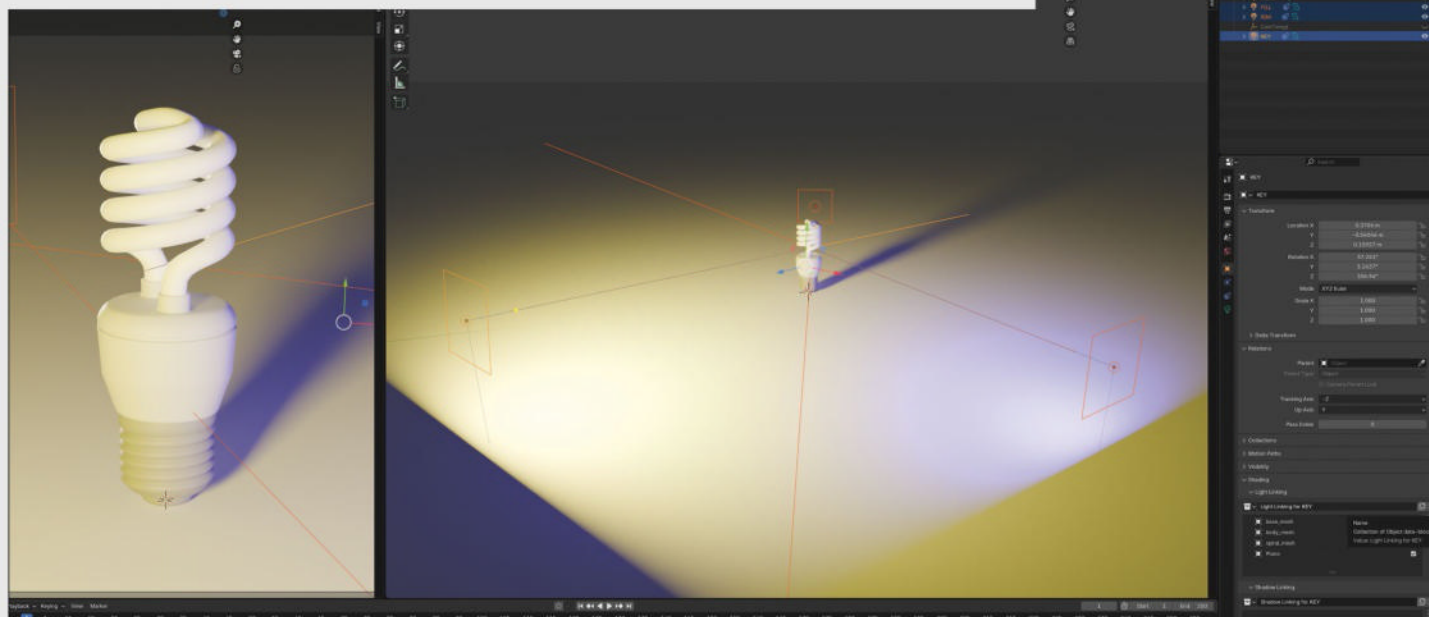


3 Post-processing

After scattering all necessary elements throughout the scene, I render it and move to Photoshop, where I paint in additional depth. Then I slightly soften the image using filters and start painting more details on top of it. This brings the image closer to a more painterly style, which I enjoy.

3D Artist Back to basics

OUR 3D EXPERTS ARE HERE TO SHARE THEIR KNOWLEDGE...



Learning how to master a three-point lighting setup is key to creating professional-looking 3D renders.

LIGHTING IN 3D APPLICATIONS

Don't be daunted by how to handle key, fill and rim lighting in 3D. It's just like lighting a scene in real life, only better! **Mike Griggs** explains the three-point setup



If you've ever used a flash, studio light, or positioned a subject to catch the sun, you're already most of the way to understanding 3D lighting. The remaining knowledge is connecting the dots inside your chosen application.

The foundation of lighting is the three-point setup. The key light is your main source, positioned just off-camera, defining the primary direction and shadow character. The fill light, placed around 60–90 degrees from the key,

enhances shadows. The rim light sits behind the subject, separating it from the background with an edge highlight.

Experimenting with the power, position, colour temperature and size of these three lights teaches you lighting fundamentals quickly and effectively. Study how real photographs and film scenes are lit and you'll often find this same three-point approach, which makes translating those real-world setups into your 3D work much easier.

Once comfortable with the basics, explore 3D tools such as light targeting and light linking. These enable you to point lights at specific areas, adjust falloff curves, and "cheat" reality by switching off shadows for individual objects or controlling which surfaces receive illumination in ways impossible with physical lights.

Mike is the founder of Creative Bloke and has experience in content creation, workflow design and emerging creative technology. See www.creativebloke.com.

Breaking down the three-point lighting setup

1 The key light

The key light sets your scene's illumination direction. It establishes shadow direction and the colour temperature of the lighting. In Blender, use an Area light renamed



'KEY', positioned behind and to camera left, coloured yellow at around 25 Power. This creates illumination, but will appear harsh without additional lights to balance it.

2 The fill light

The fill softens shadows created by the key light. Even outdoors there's always a fill component caused by the sun's rays bouncing around, so a shadow is rarely black.



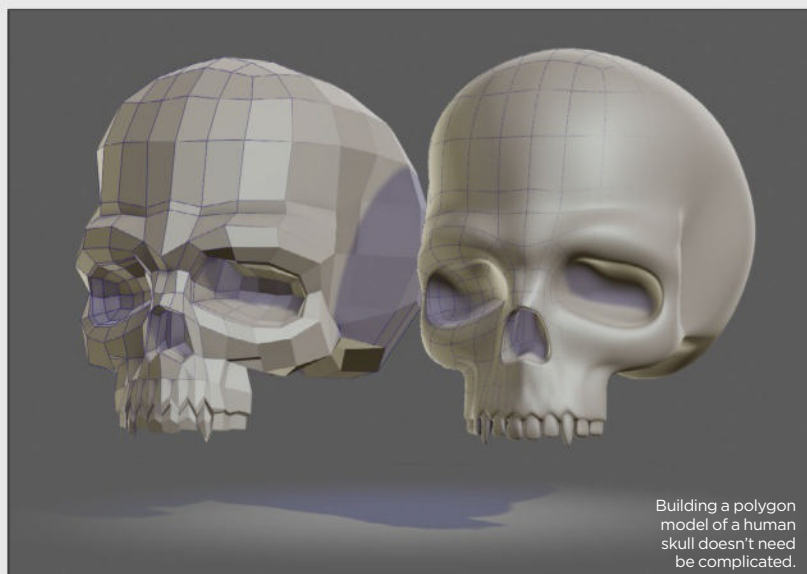
Position your fill light to gently lift shadows without competing with the key. Keep its Power setting low and use it to fill in the gaps and create natural-looking contrast.

3 The rim light

The rim light separates your subject from the background with edge highlights. Position it behind and slightly to the side so it defines the silhouette. Balance its intensity



with the key to avoid overpowering the edges. A larger area light yields a gentler wrap around the object, while a smaller light source gives a crisper, more defined outline.



BUILD A POLYGON SKULL

You can create anything from a few vertices, edges and faces... or rather, a skull, says **Ant Ward**



Digital art touches every part of our lives, even when you don't realise it. For example, the film

you're watching probably has polygons involved somewhere, whether it's a creature or character, or something less obvious such as the scenery.

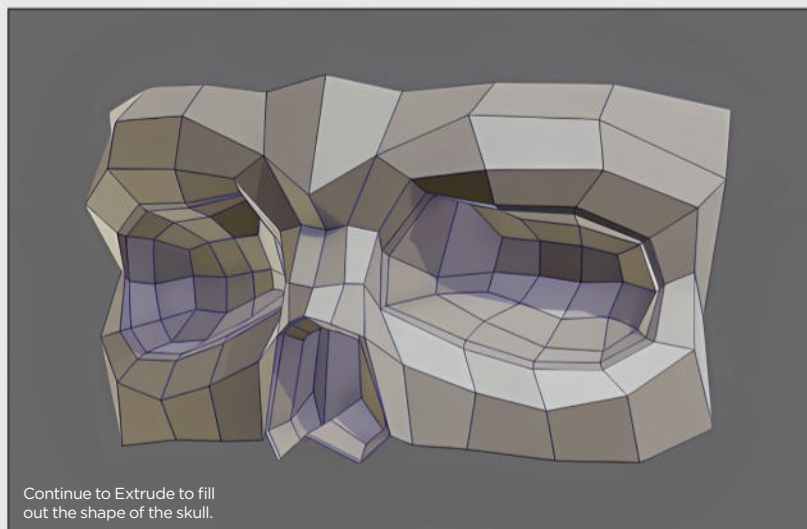
Video games utilise 3D to generate the characters and environments. Even ones that appear to be 2D based, like Angry Birds or the Hollow Knight series, are actually using flat polygon planes to render the artwork rather than direct, hand-drawn images.

Then there's the passive influence 3D has. The phone in your pocket or

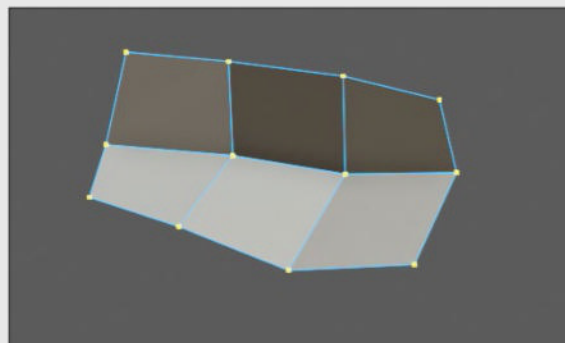
the car you drive were designed using 3D software, just like pretty much everything else around you.

We would be in a very different world now if polygons had never been created, so with this short tutorial I'll share how you can take the base elements of a polygon and add to it to create a 3D skull. Any polygon model can be broken down into components. The points are vertices, the lines connecting these are edges and the flat area between them all are the faces.

Ant runs antCGI, which supplies quality digital art, game art, rigging, animation and illustration services to a wide range of clients. Learn more at www.antcgi.com.

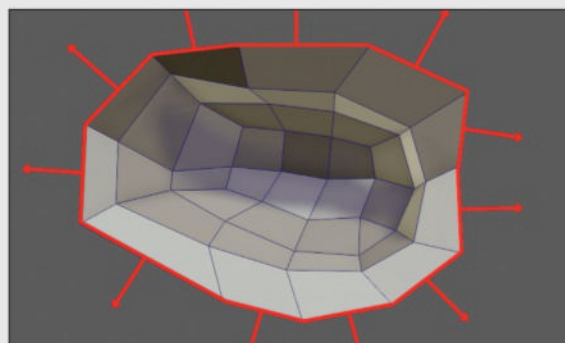


Quickly build up a low-polygon skull



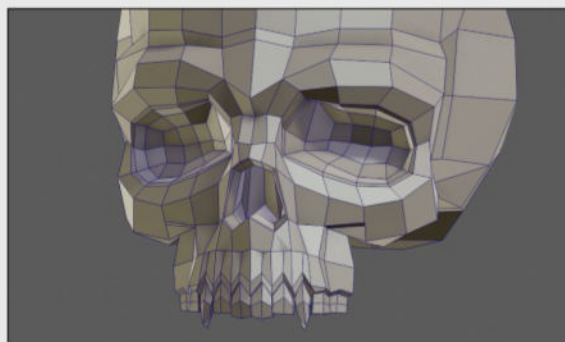
1 Starts simple

To build our skull we begin with just a few simple shapes, forming the area where the eyes would sit. We can then continue to build out from this foundation. In most 3D apps you can begin by creating a polygon plane: a flat square that can be divided into sections. You then move the vertices to start forming your shape.



2 Extrude and shape

Build on your starting point using the Extrude tool, which will let you select a component and pull it out of the model. With a single or multiple edges selected, you can extrude them to create a new ring of geometry that's connected to the original selection. Repeating this step will give you more vertices to help shape the eye socket.



3 Weld and refine

Where extruding doesn't work is when there's a hole or a gap to fill between edges. Here, you'd use the Weld tool to combine, or weld, vertices together: pulling them to the same spot and making two vertices become one to close the gap. This process will quickly build up the skull shape, and it's the basis for most 3D models.

FIVE MINUTES WITH PEDRO CONTI

The director, production designer and 3D vis-dev artist reveals that music was his first creative outlet...



Where did your artistic journey start?

In Brazil, when I was just a kid. My first passion in art was music. It felt like a safe place where I could connect with myself in a meaningful way. Throughout my childhood and teenage years, I went from playing the flute to the trumpet, then the acoustic guitar, and finally the electric guitar. It was in high school that I discovered drawing through two friends, which led me to 3D animation in 2005.

What's your main source of inspiration?

It's life as a whole. Making art isn't a choice – it's my way of processing and navigating life. It started as a lifestyle and eventually became my work. I'd say people, architecture and everyday routines are my biggest sources of inspiration.

What plays in the background while you work?

Music is definitely a big driving

force behind my creativity. Lately, I've been listening to a lot of different artists, but the ones I keep coming back to are Tom Misch, Emicida, Loyle Carner and Ben Howard. I enjoy more laid-back music. It helps me relax and get into the right atmosphere to create.

Is making a living as an artist all you thought it would be?

I think there are way more possibilities in this field than I ever imagined. Honestly, I had no idea which path I was going to take when I started. It's been a rewarding experience overall, and even though there are challenges in the industry, I'd say it's a pretty amazing area to work in. I really can't complain. There are so many ways to use our talents and creativity, and there are no real limits, since visual language transcends barriers and communicates with anyone around the world.

“Making art isn't a choice – it's my way of processing and navigating life”

Do you tend to stick to 3D, or do you sketch and draw as well?

If so, what and why? I think that I struggled with this in the past, since there was always such a clear, structured path for how to make 3D: first you need a concept, then you model, then you texture it. However, I now feel that I've managed to break those barriers and go straight into 3D.

I've been directing a lot lately, and I'd say 3D has become my main tool for storytelling. Sometimes I even

TAMO JUNTO

This is a poetic animated short that explores connection, empathy and everyday human moments through vibrant visuals and heartfelt storytelling.



GARI

This was inspired by São Paulo and its people. It began as a design exercise, observing the city and its inhabitants to explore and push my own style.

skip storyboards and go directly into 3D layout. I think it's important to find your own ways to express yourself and not get stuck in “traditional” methods. 3D is such an incredible medium to explore as a primary artistic tool.

Do you have an ongoing passion project?

I have a few projects at the moment. I'm working on a new music video for Emicida, which feels like a passion project, and I'm also about to release a short film called Cartas ao Mar, which means Letters to the Ocean. Those are the things I'm putting my soul into and hopefully will be released soon.

If you were starting out now, what words of wisdom would you most appreciate?

Go for it! I think it's an amazing way to get to know yourself better and connect with others. I like to say that art is a way to connect with people and find common ground with those you admire. On top of that, there are ways to make a living from it if you truly dedicate yourself. It definitely comes with challenges, but I believe it's possible to turn it into a sustainable career.

Pedro, from São Paulo, creates animations inspired by urban life, hip-hop and everyday stories. He focuses on character, lighting and storytelling, crafting work that he hopes resonates with people around the world. You can see more of his work at www.pedroconti.com



HOPE
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URGENT APPEAL



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

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

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Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material and emotional

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Please quote **FP22 - Tec** when making your donation.

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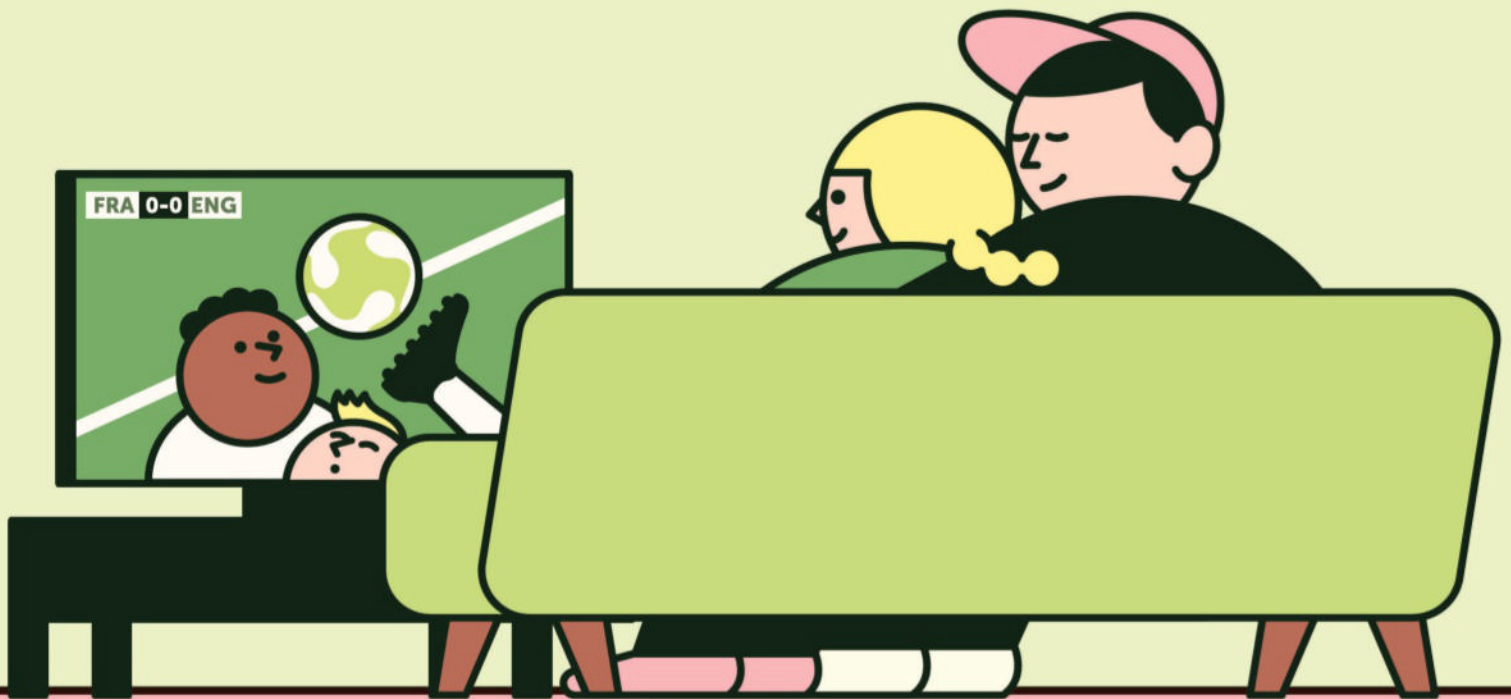
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