

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX

Become a GAMES ARTIST

Master **Blizzard** illustrator
Cole Eastburn explains how
he paints epic villains

Plus

BEHIND THE SCENES OF **WITCHSPIRE**

Envar Studio shares its
spellbinding visual secrets

PAINT
THIS COVER
IMAGE!

WORKSHOPS

BUILD YOUR UNIQUE STYLE

Morph references to
create a personal look

OTHERWORLDLY SCENE BUILDING

Render overgrown vistas
by combining 3D tools

DON'T MISS!

LEVEL UP YOUR ART WITH A NEW MINDSET

STEP INSIDE A FANTASY
ARTIST'S QUIRKY STUDIO

INSPIRATIONAL HARD SURFACE SKETCHES

FUTURE
ISSUE 269

SFB GAMES WE QUIZ THE INDIE STUDIO ON ITS WACKY MYSTERY SERIES

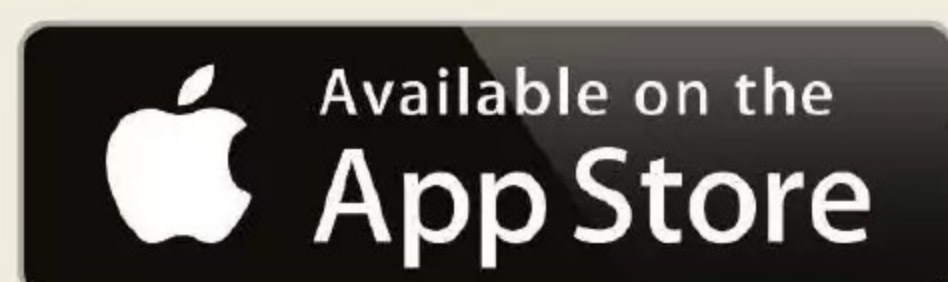
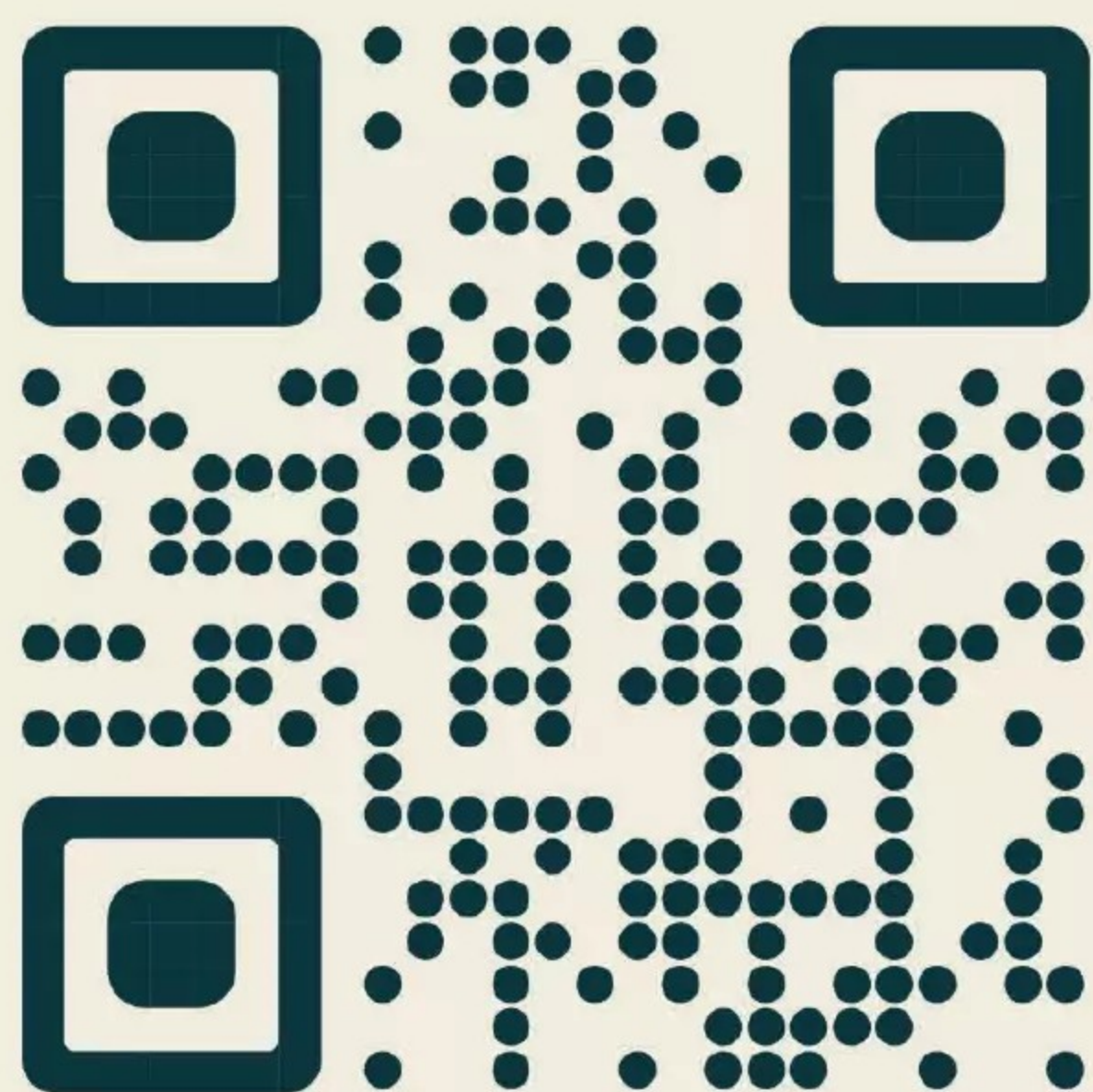
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Welcome to... NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX



As we enter our third heatwave of the year, at least here in the UK, many of us are closing the curtains to keep the rays out. So, what better time to drink in some extra inspiration and then break out the art tools to start working on something new? With that in mind, we

have a healthy dose of games development for you. We sat down with Sweden's Envar Studio to talk about the visual language of their bright and whimsical Witchspire adventure.

Following on from that, we chatted to SFB Games about their work creating stylish looks for their Detective Grimoire murder-mystery series.

Once you've had your fill of new ideas, head to our workshop section to level up your own projects, with training on everything from how you can merge different art styles to building otherworldly overgrown vistas in 3D.

Plus we have our regular studio tour, sketchbook and galleries, as well as reviews of the latest tech that could find its way into your studio.

Enjoy the issue!

Rob

Editor

Rob.Redman@futurenet.com

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

60



Paint epic fantasy covers

Illustrator Andrea Piparo shares how he approached the creation of his classically styled cover art.

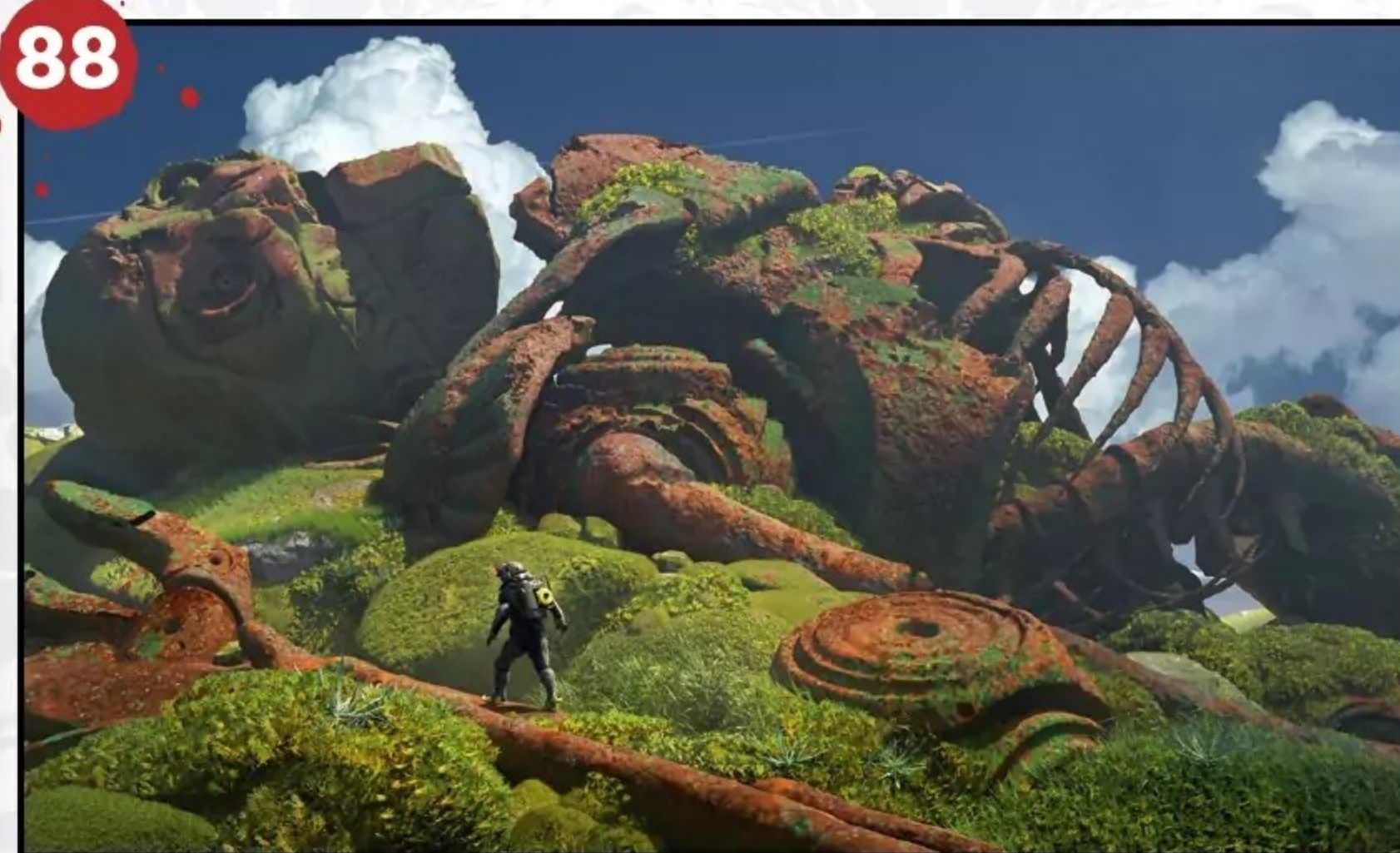
66



Combine artistic styles

Blend styles to create something fresh and unique with instruction from artist Tristan Tait.

88



Render strange vistas

Combine your 3D apps to create a strange, overgrown 3D scene with advice from Marcin Basta.

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NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX Contents

Your art

8 FXPosé

A round-up of digital art, submitted by you!

18 The Rookies

Up-and-coming artists share their work.

74 The Gallery

Get eyes on the finest traditional artwork.

News and events

22 Art epiphanies

Artists recall the moments of clarity that took their practice to the next level.

26 Artist in Residence: Gary A. Lippincott

The renowned fantasy illustrator shows us around his enchanting art studio.

Features

32 The art of Witchspire

Envar Studio reveals the secrets of its development work for the new game.

38 Development Sheet: Strange encounter

Meybis Ruiz Cruz explains how she began with a script to develop a scene.

40 Sketchbook: Himesh Anand

The concept artist shows off his futuristic devices from an advanced society.

44 Deducing dimensions

How SFB Games develops the art for its Detective Grimoire murder-mystery series.

Reviews

78 Hardware

81 Courses and brushes

Regulars

6 Next month

7 Subscriptions

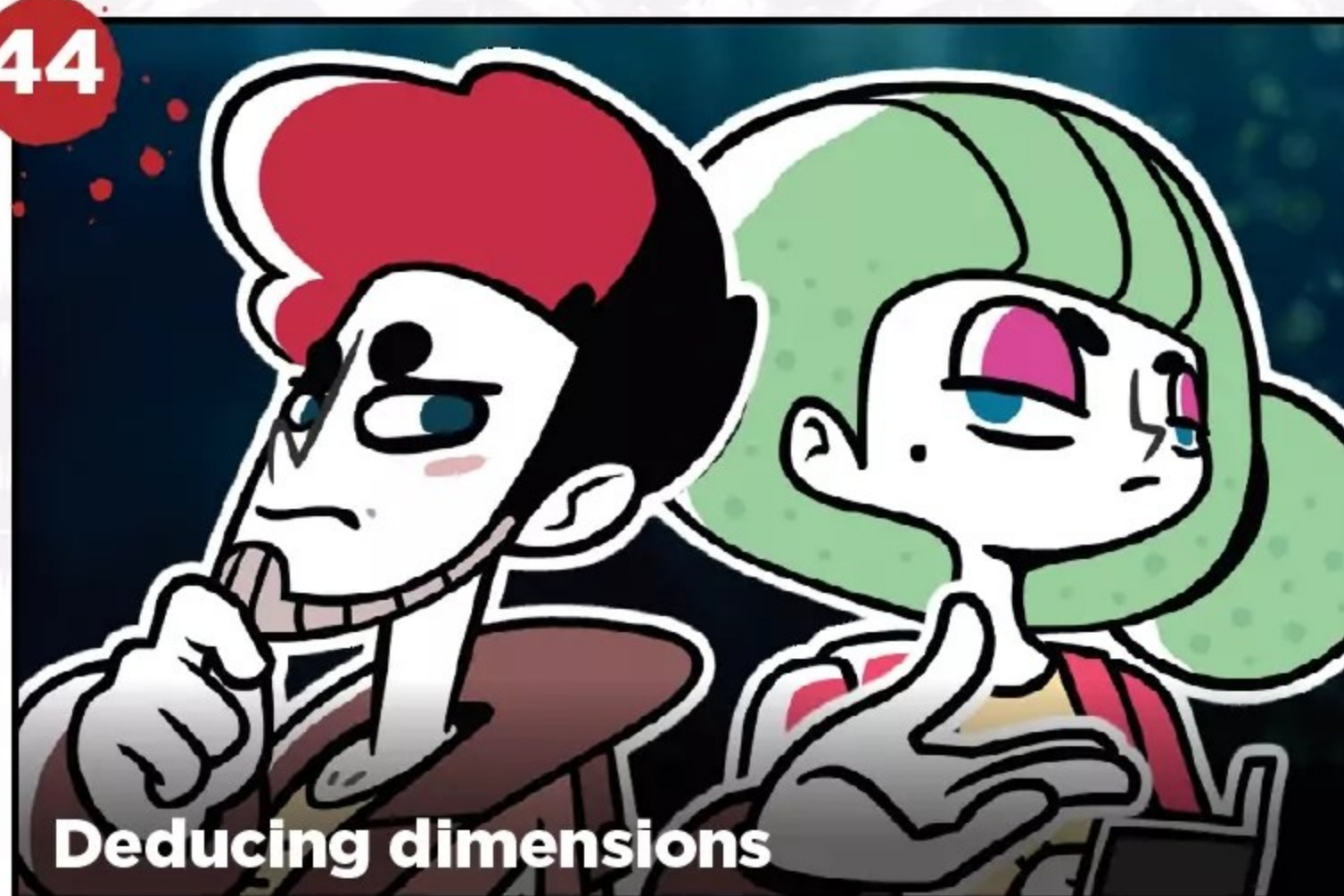
31 Letters

32



The art of Witchspire

44



Deducing dimensions

22



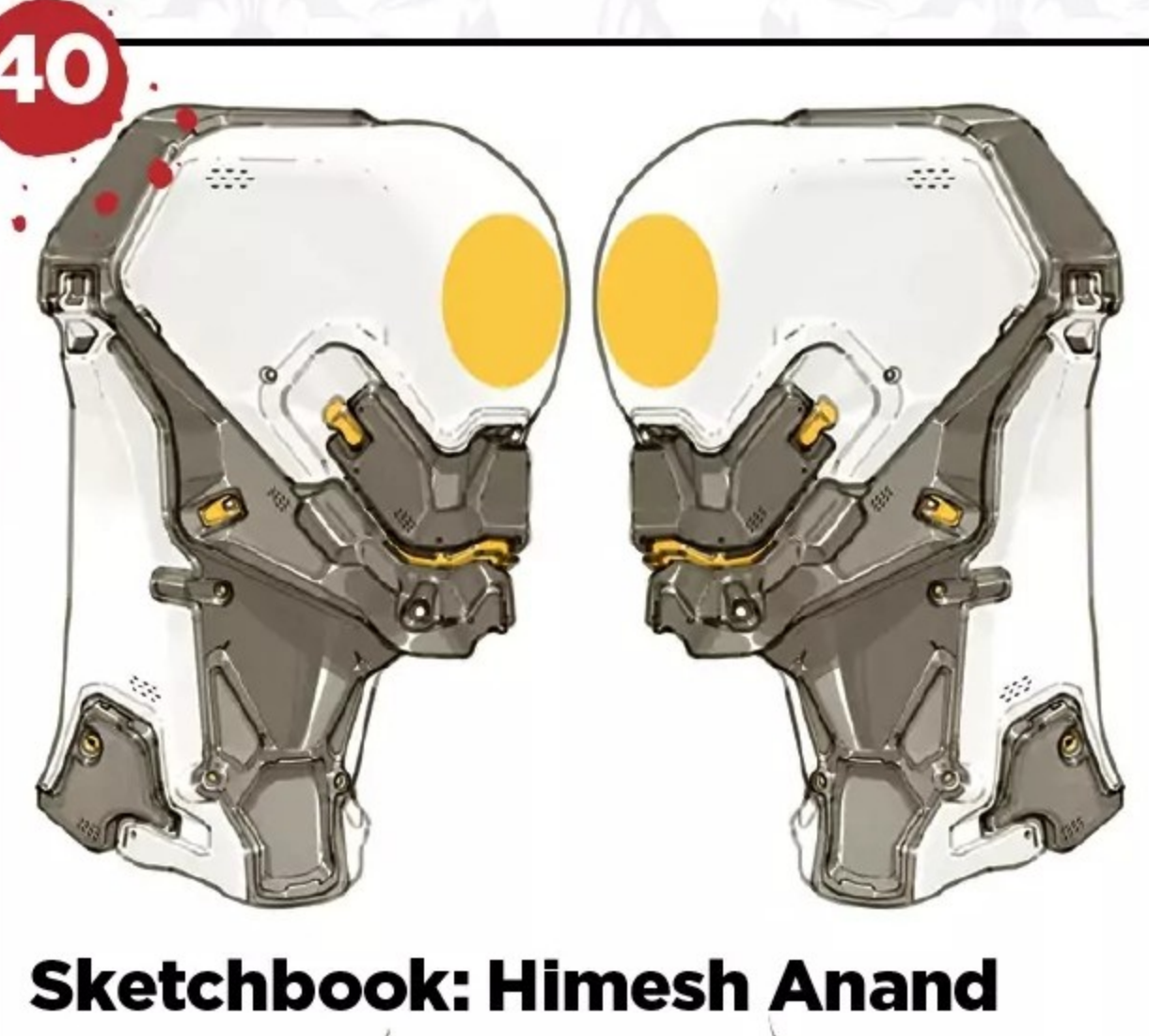
Art epiphanies

26



Artist in Residence:
Gary A. Lippincott

40



Sketchbook: Himesh Anand

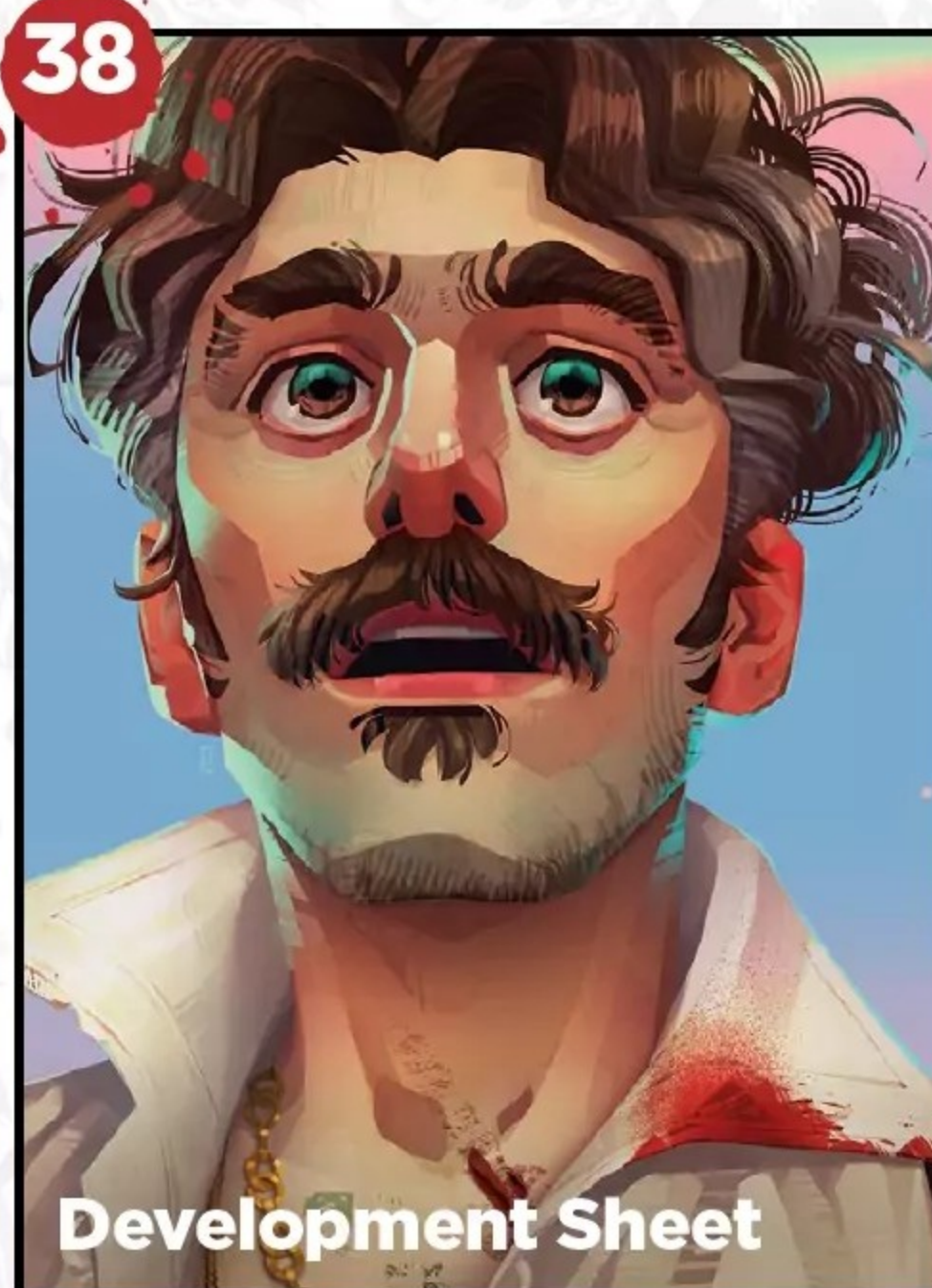
FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



See page 8 for the best new art ➡➡

38



Development Sheet

FANTASY & SCI-FI DIGITAL ART ImagineFX Workshops

Advice and techniques
from pro artists...



54 How to become a game artist

Cole Eastburn on painting
epic villains for Hearthstone.



60 Illustrate epic fantasy covers

Andrea Piparo shows how he
created a fantasy novel cover.



64 Defining a design early for storytelling

Thomas Bourdon on how to
tell a story through design.



66 Combine multiple art genres

Tristan Tait boosts creativity
by exploring other styles.



72 How to create scale with framing

Wojtek Fus on painting a
large-scale dramatic scene.

3D Artist

Industry experts pass on
their 3D art techniques...

88



84 Showcase: Reader 3D art

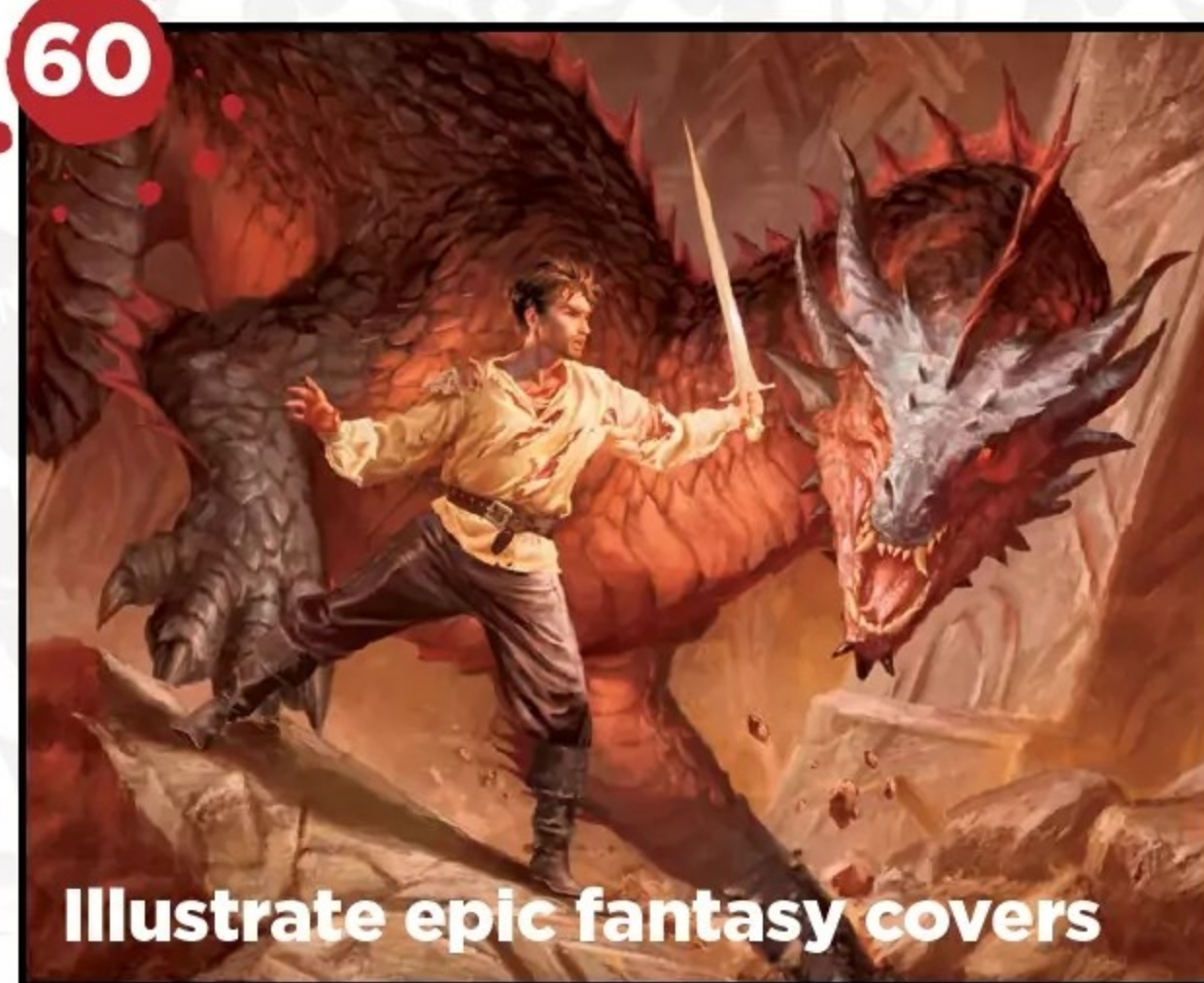
88 Build a strange overgrown vista of a fallen giant robot

94 Create a video game world

96 Back to 3D basics

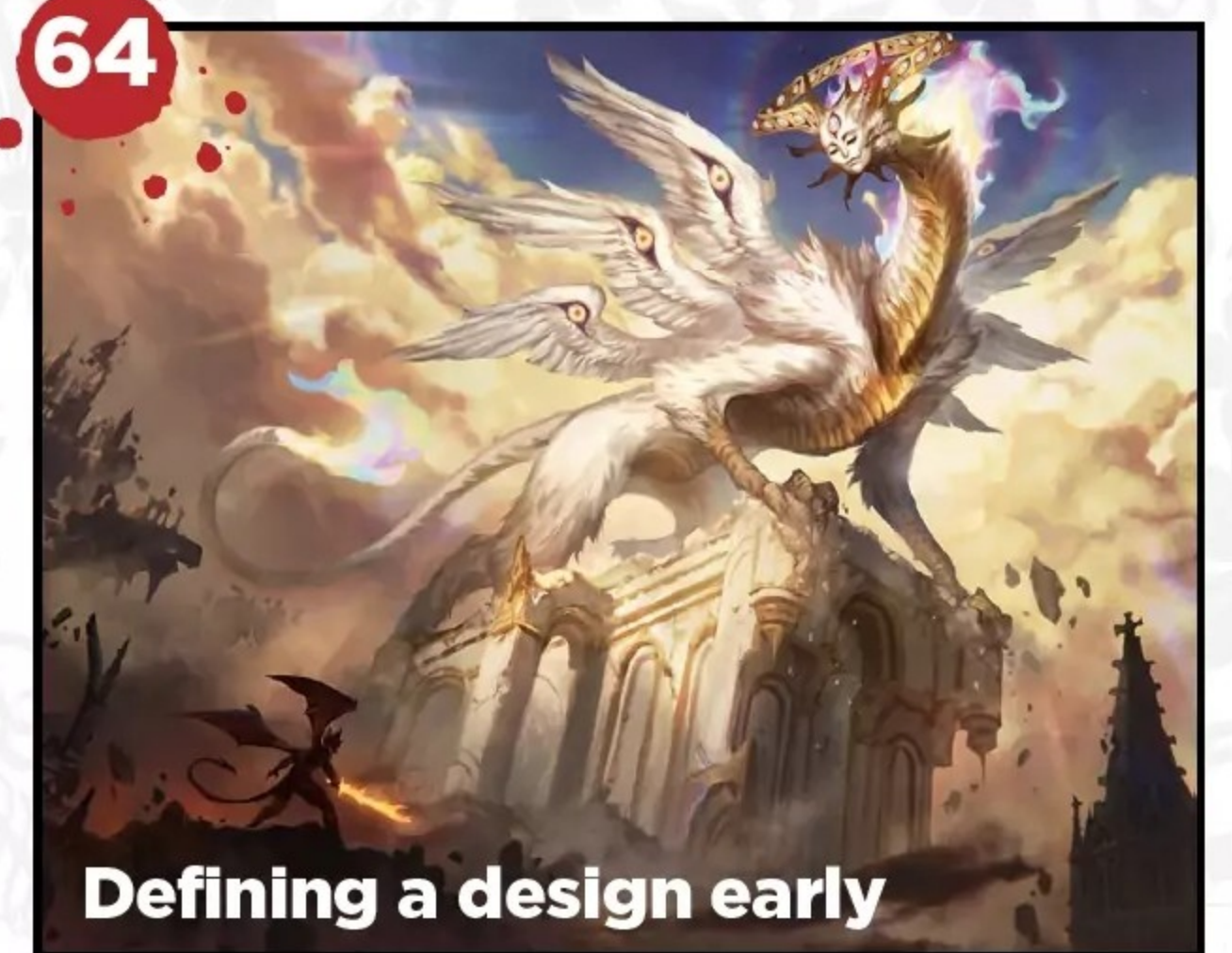
98 Five minutes with Tian Gan

60



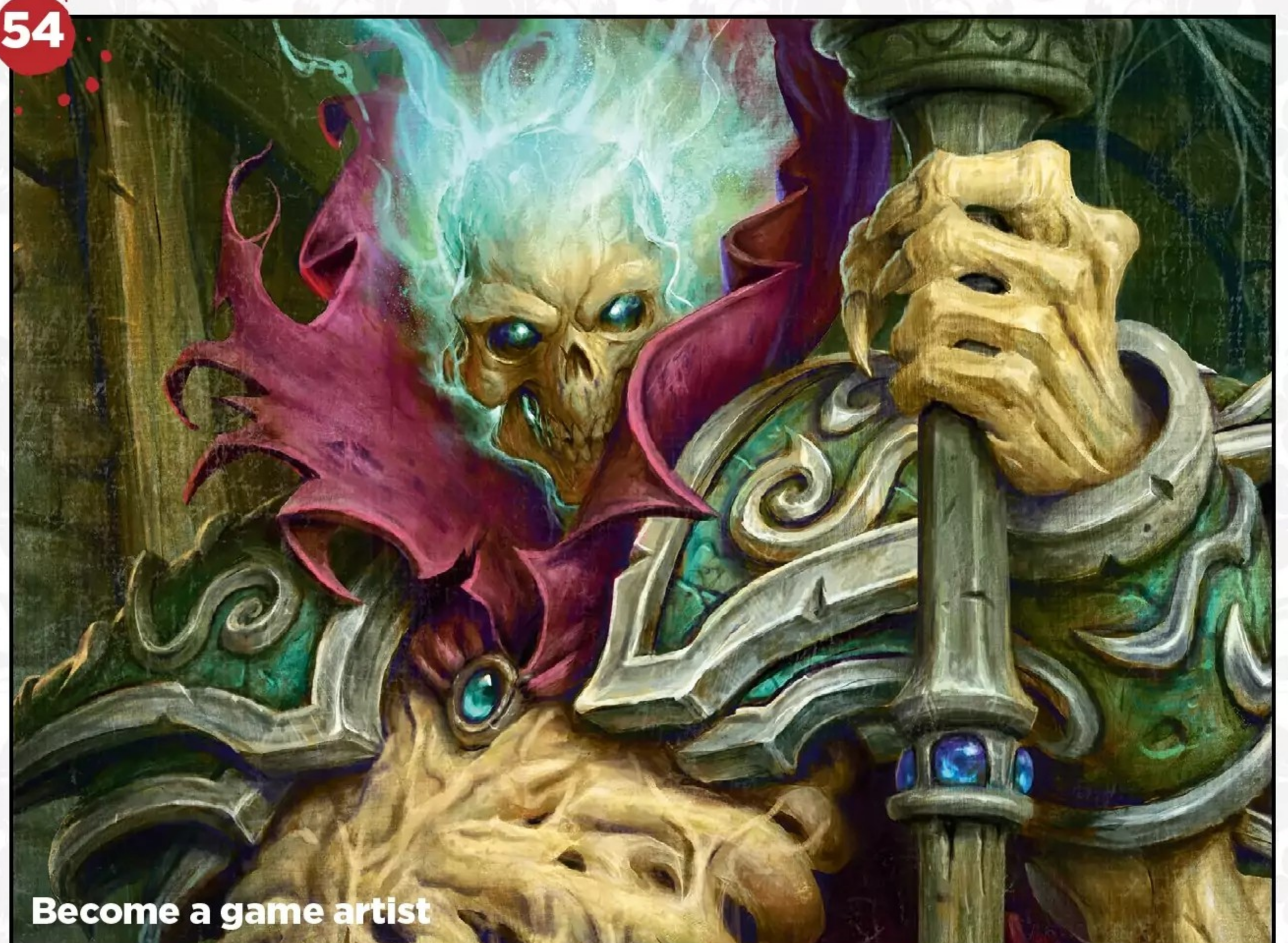
Illustrate epic fantasy covers

64



Defining a design early

54



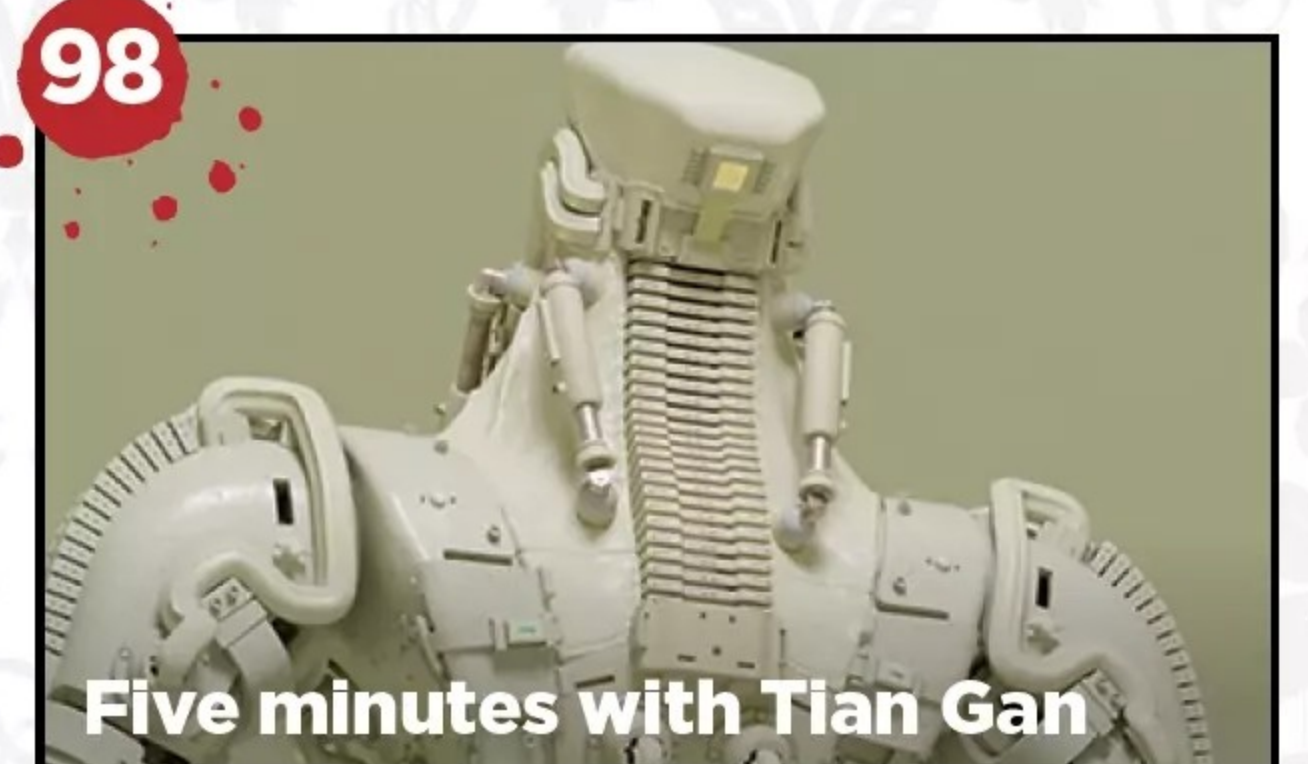
Become a game artist

66



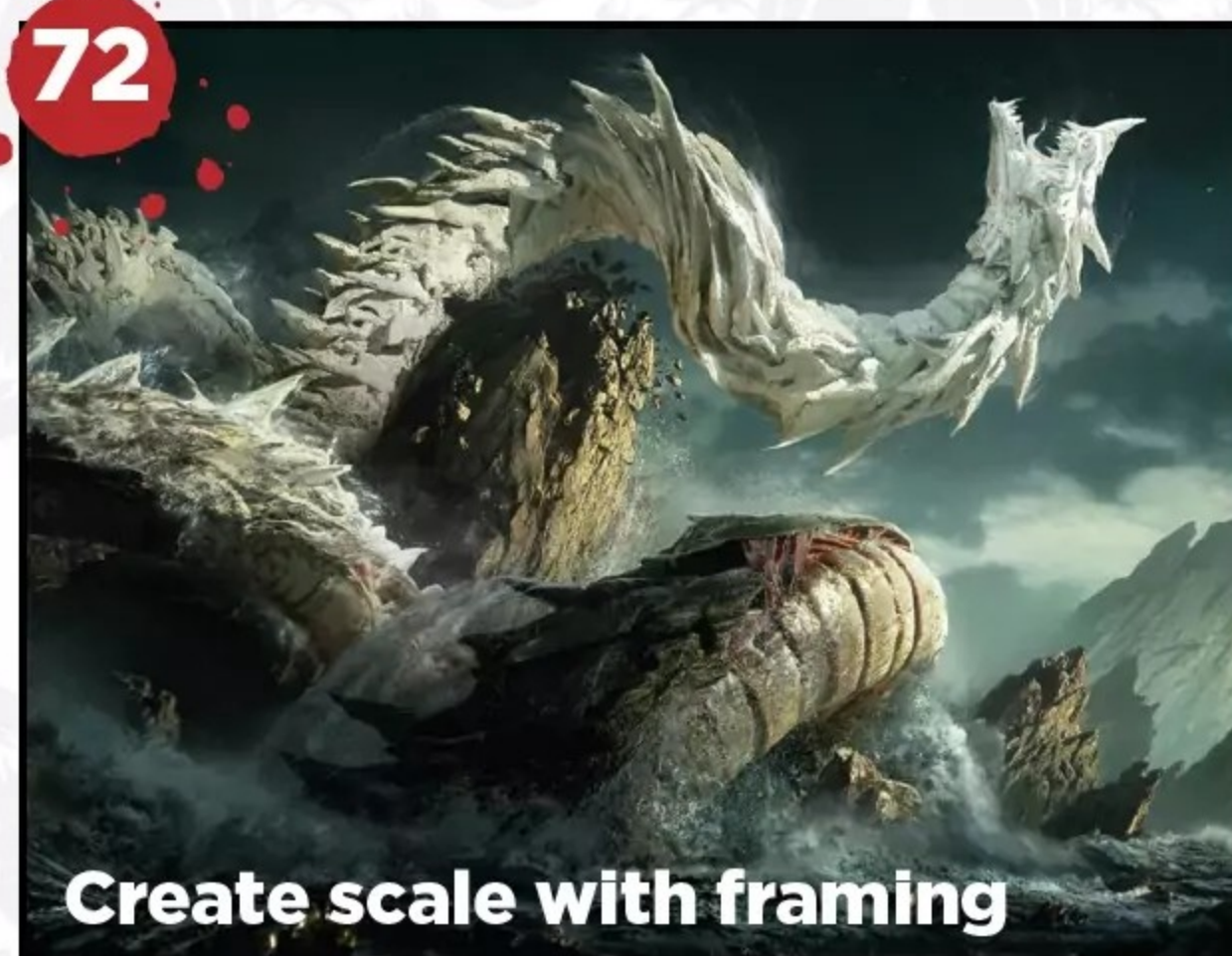
Combine multiple art genres

98



Five minutes with Tian Gan

72



Create scale with framing

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- 2 Click the download link**
Find your files ready for download.
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Next month

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ImagineFX

Editorial

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Next month in...

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ImagineFX

DITCH THE COLOUR

Maximise your monotores and get instant drama with expert advice from **Partha Sarkar**

Discover art full of enchantment

Bente Schlick talks us through her unique illustration and concept work

Create stunning game concept art

We start a new series on creating game art with Grafit Studio

From elves to diesel punk

Andrey Lazarev opens his genre-breaking book of sketches and WIPs

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Content of next issue is subject to change



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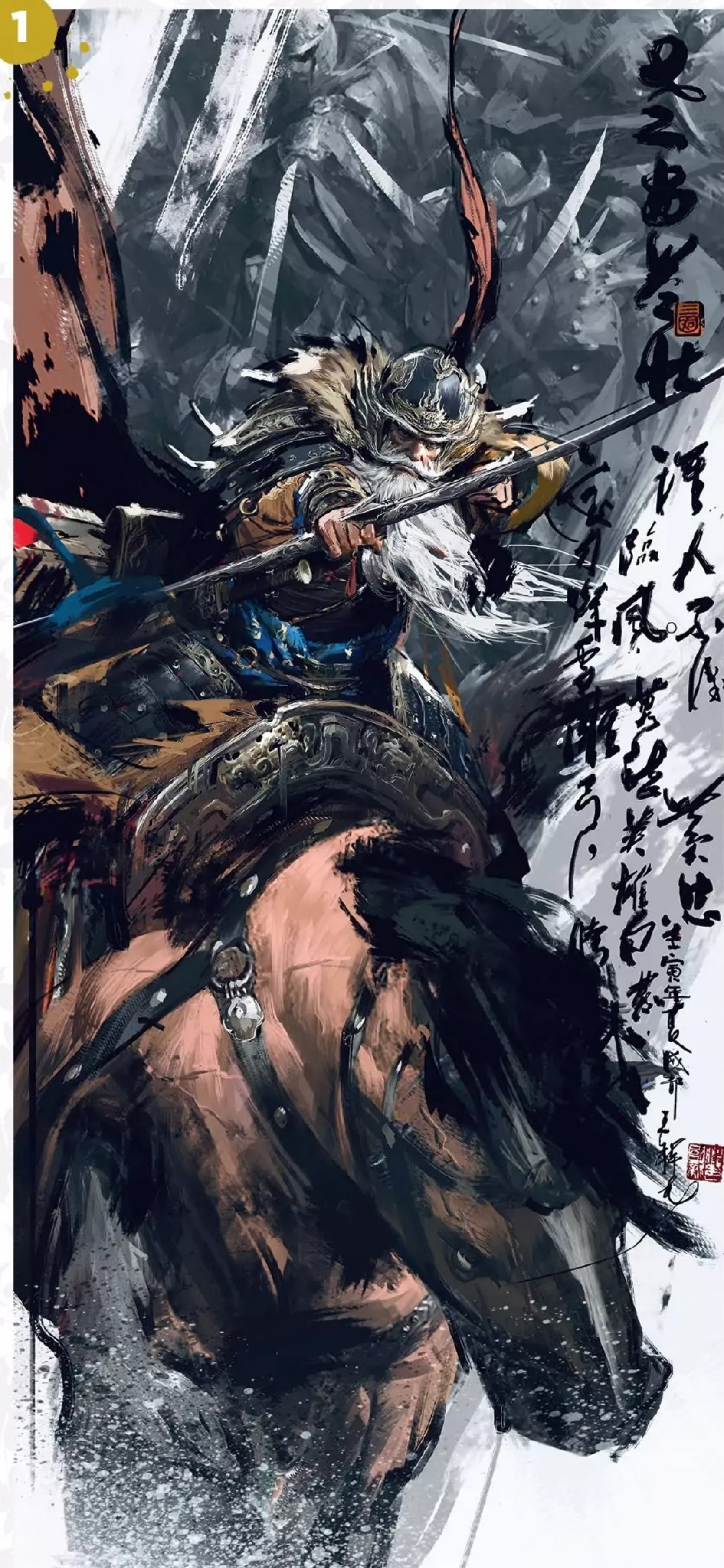


Xianglong

LOCATION: China MEDIA: Photoshop

WEB: www.artstation.com/xianglongwang

A concept designer from Chengdu, Xianglong blends traditional Chinese ink aesthetics with digital painting in order to create dynamic Three Kingdoms characters.



3

1 HUANG ZHONG: THE VETERAN WARRIOR

"This piece features the aged but formidable Huang Zhong, with mellow tones reflecting his fortitude and legendary archery skill."

2 ZHANG FEI: THE FIERCE VANGUARD

"I made use of bold brushwork here to convey Zhang Fei's fearless spirit, with ink splashes emphasizing his imposing battlefield presence."

3 GUAN YU: THE GOD OF WAR

"Here, I depicted Guan Yu's battlefield prowess, merging ink textures with dramatic light and powerful composition."

4 MA CHAO: THE MIGHTY CAVALIER

"This captures Ma Chao's wild cavalry prowess, with dynamic composition and ink shades highlighting his heroic charm."

4





Hassan Hameed

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Procreate, Photoshop, pencil, charcoal, ink, oil paint **WEB:** www.artstation.com/hsntabrizi

Hassan is a concept artist and illustrator who has worked with international clients in the games and entertainment industry. His work focuses on character design, atmosphere and visual storytelling.

1





3



4



1 THE BLACK RIDER

"An undead rider crosses a desolate landscape, carrying the weight of ancient curses. I focused on atmosphere and silhouette to create a sense of mystery and quiet menace."

2 MORVANE

"This piece began as a simple encounter between a rider and a creature. I was interested in creating a sense of unease and scale, allowing the atmosphere to carry the story."

3 NOMAD RONIN

"A samurai-like character alongside a mechanical being, exploring the contrast between traditional and technological forms. Organic and industrial shapes within a single design."

4 HUNTERS

"This piece is a character design exploring the visual language of fantasy hunters. I used colour contrasts to strengthen readability and create a clear visual hierarchy."



Pavel Yurev

LOCATION: Australia **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender 3D **WEB:** www.artstation.com/afteral

A 2D illustrator and character designer who has previously worked with Playrix, Pavel now works in-house at Grafit Studio. He specialises in fantasy creatures and is inspired by computer games and movies.

1 LICHTAR

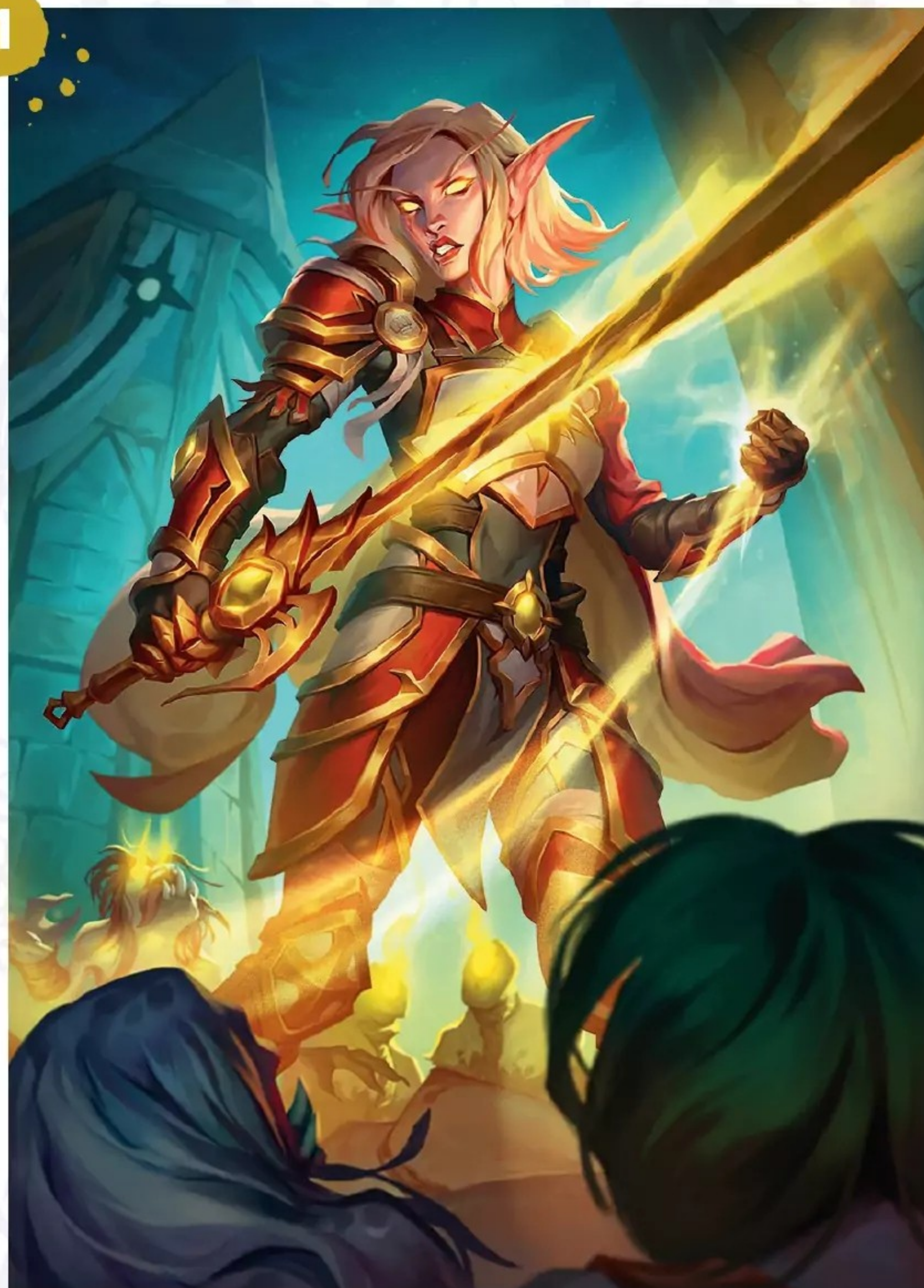
"Seen here, Lichtar is an original character. I did a lot of cards for Blizzard, so I wanted to make this for a friend who was going through a difficult time."

2 ELF

"This one is just a little character practice. I wanted to make something cute and warm that's lit with a cozy mood via light and colour."

3 STAR WARS SPLASH ART

"I'm always excited when I look at Riot Games' splash art pieces for League of Legends. I also love Star Wars, so I wanted to try something in the same style."





Andy Jauffrit

LOCATION: France MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: www.artstation.com/jauffritandy

Andy is a freelance illustrator who focuses on TCG-style card projects. His work embraces a painterly style, with fantasy as a recurring theme. "Above all, I strive to make viewers feel something through my images," he says.



1 SPIRIT FLYING THROUGH THE FOREST

"I wanted to create something poetic and elegant, with a sense of movement, as if a wave were breaking in the middle of the forest. For this piece, I chose to preserve the inking from my sketch and blend it together with the painting."

2 LE SCRIBE DE LA TEMPÊTE

"This piece began as a personal challenge: I wanted to draw special effects, particularly electricity. I found it more compelling to involve a mage casting a spell. Magic: The Gathering was a strong source of inspiration for this image."



Grayboxx Essennoir

LOCATION: South Korea MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: <https://grayboxx.artstation.com>

Grayboxx draws inspiration from traditional Korean attire, weaponry and folklore. Rather than viewing a whole forest, they focus on leaves and stems, weaving subtle narratives into characters and dark fantasy designs.

1 VOYAGER

"This piece depicts a retired Grim Reaper's life after leaving fierce duties behind. I placed him on a slow yet spirited ox with a delicious drink, enjoying some well-earned leisure time."



2



2 REAPERS' ORDER

"Captured here are novice Grim Reapers from Korean folklore, embodying a fresh yet tense emotion. The supervisor cat is watching from the front to ensure that these beginners stay on track."

3



3 INCARNATION

"Inspired by the bear from the Korean creation myth, this piece depicts a benevolent mother spreading mercy and peace. Buddhist monastic robes perfectly complement her serene and compassionate character."

4 JUSTICIAR

"Based on Hyunmu, a folklore creature of immense power, this character exudes soft warmth. Through his careful gaze, I emphasised the profound connection and tenderness shared with a tiny child."





Satoshi Kamanaka

LOCATION: Philippines **MEDIA:** Clip Studio Paint **WEB:** www.artstation.com/boxpleb

Satoshi is an illustrator who loves fantasy art and the Golden Age of illustration. “My work brings the two together. I mix fantastical subject matter with the designs and compositions of Golden Age illustrators.”

1 IRON GOBLIN

“Ideas for my art come from different places. In this case, I was inspired by an iron maiden paired with a goblin who takes great zeal in his work.”

2 HYDRA

“In this illustration, the focus was to create a dynamic feeling of a hero battling with a hydra, all while creating a flow and pattern with the shapes.”

3 TREE GIANT

“For this piece, I wanted to depict a giant that brought forests to life. I kept some of the initial drawing/line elements to create a somewhat nostalgic, illustrative quality.”



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

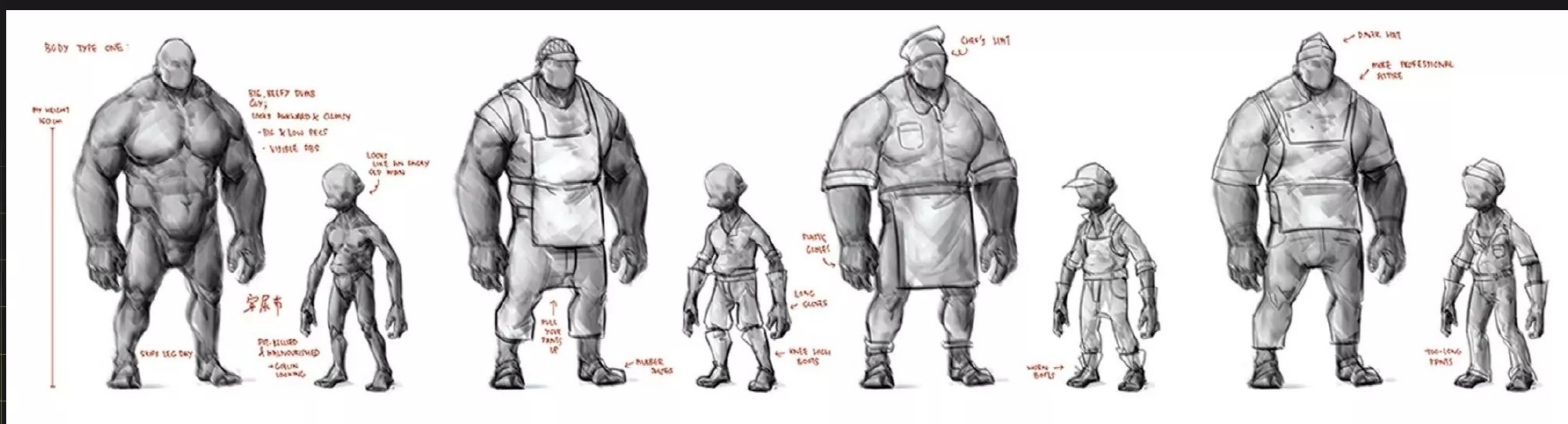
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WWW.THEROOKIES.CO

KGBros & Babes

YEAR CREATED: 2025
MEDIA: Photoshop

“KGBros & Babes exists because life is ordinary yet endlessly fascinating. Ceng wants to create characters who are simple in design and iconic, and full of small, strange joys. The idea behind this IP is to be dumb enough to be charming, relatable enough to feel real and utterly unique.”



The Rookies



Artist PROFILE

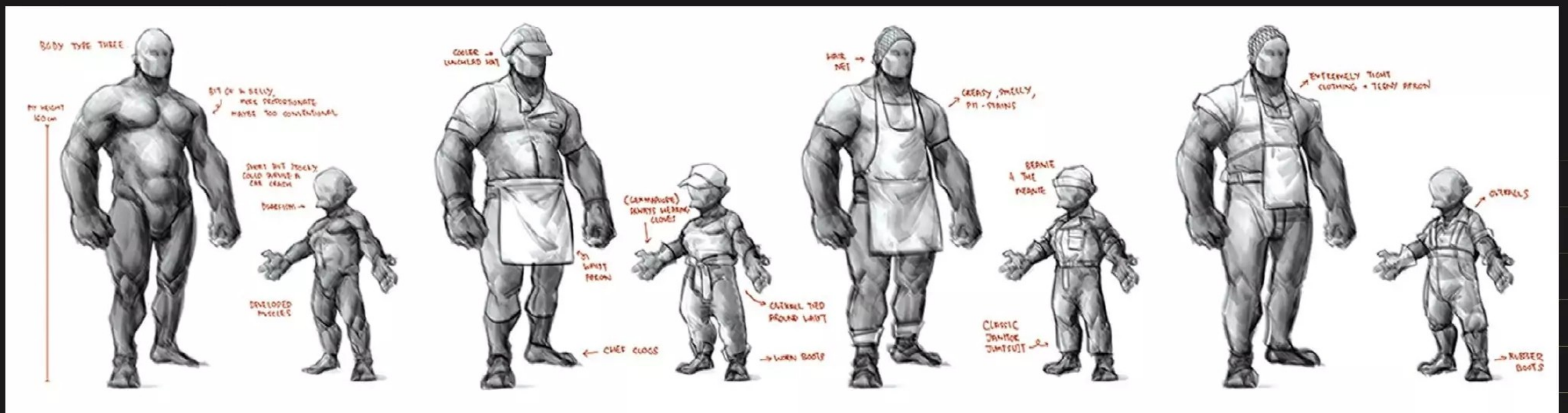
Wong Ka Ceng

LOCATION: Malaysia



Ceng is a fresh graduate from The One Academy who walks her own path quietly, yet remains unforgettable - always leaving lasting, meaningful impressions.

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Artist PROFILE

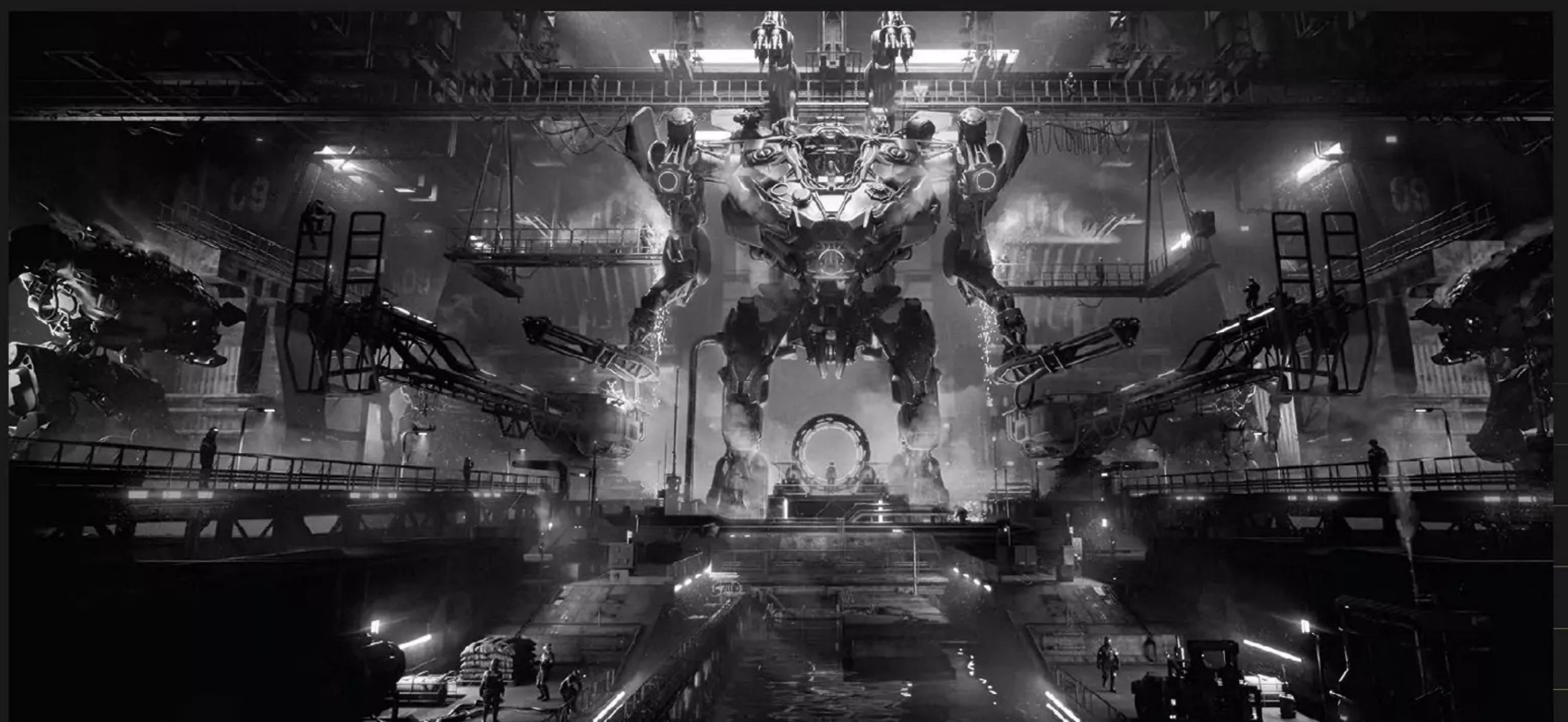
Diptangshu Debnath

LOCATION: India



Diptangshu works as a visual development artist, creating cinematic, emotionally driven worlds, storytelling, and using Unreal Engine to build immersive visual experiences.

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ARTIST NEWS, SOFTWARE & EVENTS

ImagineNation

AT THE CORE OF THE DIGITAL ART COMMUNITY

Chinook Winds by Serena Malyon: "A love letter to the place I grew up," she says.



Caroline Vos has worked as an art director and visual development artist in film and animation for over 25 years.



Art epiphanies

Moments of clarity Tanya Combrinck discovers the realisations that took artists' practice to the next level to expand the possibilities

Every artist's journey contains moments of clarity when things click into place and new forms of creativity are revealed.

For accomplished character



designer **Hugo Richard**, one such moment occurred when he finally hit upon a process for creating images that

resonated with him, after years of searching. "One day I noticed an artist making a super rendered piece starting from incredibly detailed line work and flat colours," he says.

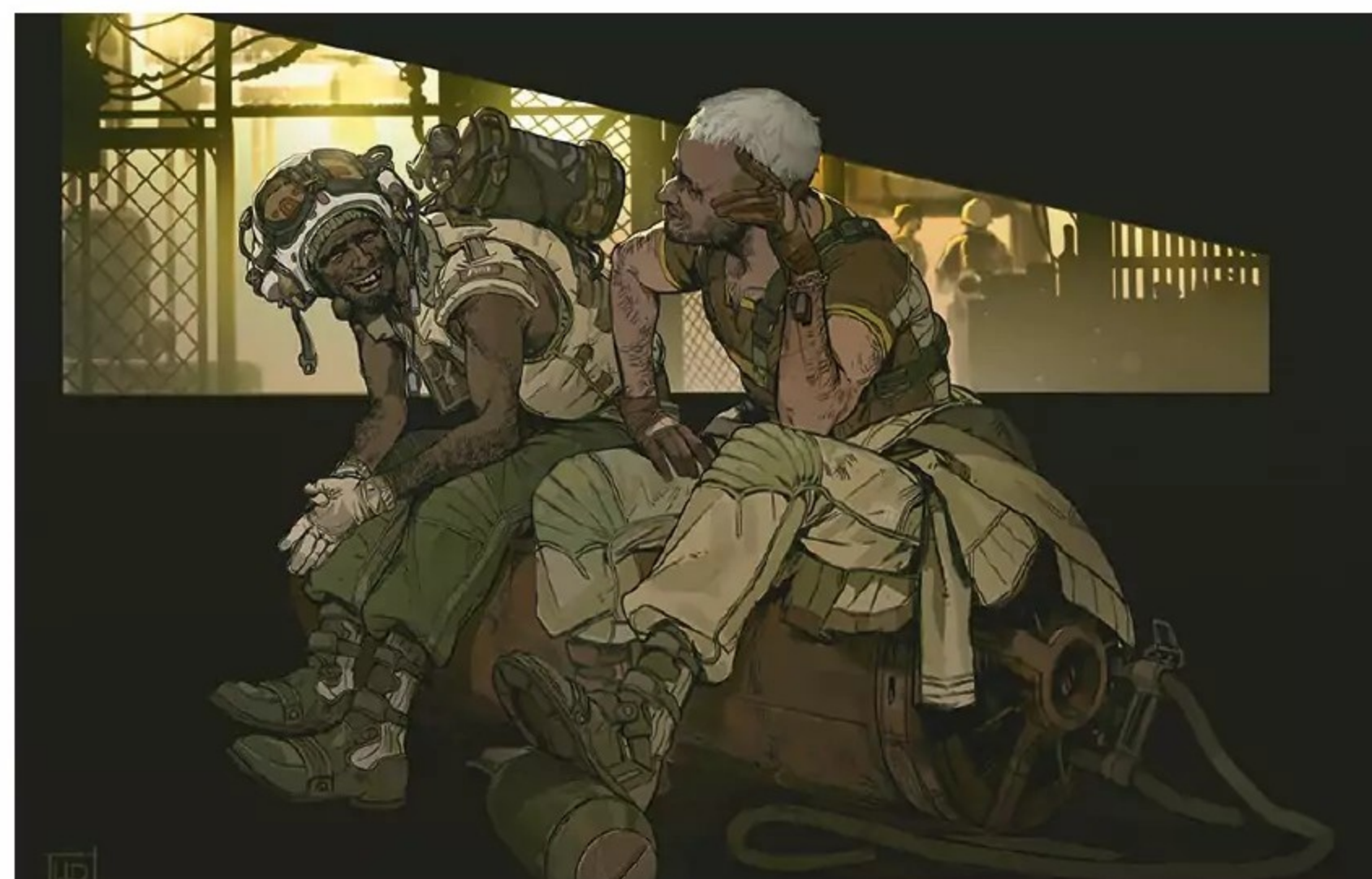
The technique suited Hugo immediately. "With flat colours, I learned how to control mood through saturation and temperature," he tells us.

When a friend noticed how important line work was to Hugo, he suggested he give it greater emphasis

in his work. To develop this ability he turned to the work of Charles Bargue. "I was truly impressed by how he was able to distribute weight just with simple lines, and to control the thickness of the line to show volume without any shading," he says.

Another step forward took place when he discovered a classic art

Expressive line work is a key element of Hugo Richard's art.



book published in the 1950s, *Drawing the Head and Hands* by Andrew Loomis. "At the time I had a basic understanding of building structure, but I didn't realise I could build a face in geometric forms," Hugo remembers. The book taught him fundamental art techniques related to volume. "It was my first confidence boost in trying to approach light and shadow from a geometrical perspective."

ADDING TO THE MIX

Illustrator **Serena Malyon** found that



mixed media was key to her evolution as an artist. "When I realised that I didn't have to be a

watercolour purist, and that I could combine different mediums to create the look I wanted, I started making some really weird and unique artwork," she says.

"I handle colour most easily in watercolour, so I do a base painting in that medium. Then I go over it with either traditional acryla gouache, or digital paint to refine it and fix mistakes. Allowing myself not to be a watercolour/media purist has given me permission to have a lot of fun ➡➡



FAIRY-TALE WORKSHOP

Fantasy illustrator Gary A. Lippincott shows us around his studio populated with fairies, elves, frogs and toads that help to inspire him to paint.

Page 26



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Page 30



READERS' ART AND OPINIONS

One reader was impressed by a tour of Mark Worst's tattoo studio while another extols the learning benefits of meetups with other artists.

Page 31

"Learning how to communicate my work, build an audience and create a sustainable creative career has been as transformative as any artistic skill I've acquired," says Sucharita Suri.



“With flat colours, I learned how to control mood through saturation and temperature”



Hugo's take on a modern Hattori Hanzō character design.

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

SUCHARITA SURI

On understanding the power of mindset for creative growth

Today, I am best known for my whimsical animals, but there was a time when animals were largely absent from my work. Despite decades of working as a creative professional, I carried an unexamined belief that painting animals was not one of my strengths. An early unsuccessful attempt had silently become a limitation I accepted as fact.

The breakthrough came when I recognised that experience does not automatically free us from creative assumptions. Once I stopped treating that belief as truth and approached the subject with curiosity rather than judgement, an entirely new body of work began to emerge. The animals I had avoided became the very subjects through which I found my most distinctive visual voice.

A similar shift happened with watercolour. I had dismissed it years earlier after a few disappointing experiences. Returning to it later, I realised the issue had never been the medium itself. I had mistaken unfamiliarity for inability. Approaching watercolour with patience and openness revealed possibilities I had overlooked, and it has since become central to my artistic practice.

That shift taught me a lesson that continues to shape my practice: creative growth often happens on the other side of discomfort. Many of the limitations we face as artists are not technical limitations but self-imposed ones.



Sucharita is a watercolour artist based in Mumbai who creates whimsical art inspired by nature, folklore and myth.

<https://sucharitas.world>

➡ and experiment in my work. I've found a way of working that feels the most authentic to me."

Art director and visual development artist **Caroline Vos** discovered a



whole new way of working when creative director Bobby Chiu told her that he uses his Navigator tool in Photoshop as a thumbnail for his art, to see if it's working at a smaller scale. "I built on the idea and started creating many small thumbnails on a single canvas," she reveals.

"It was a massive game-changer for working fast; not allowing myself to get bogged down in details, fleshing out compositions that worked; finding the big shapes and giving myself multiple options to choose from; as well as bagging some nice compositions for future ideas. The beauty of it is that you can resolve big issues fast and then increase the selected thumbnail to canvas size, knowing that the bones of the artwork are in place and working."

A simple tool that made a big difference to Caroline is a physical artists' colour wheel. "It's a little cardboard wheel with values and complementary schemes set up as sliding layers," she says. "I always use the wheel to establish the basis of my



Gokcen Yuksek finds that focusing on the feeling she wants from a painting can be better than obsessing over how to fix it technically. "As soon as I focus on the mood, the technical solutions become much clearer."

colour scheme and try not to deviate from it, rather than winging it and wondering what feels off."

NATURAL STYLE

Gokcen Yuksek, who paints in oils and



works as a digital sculptor, tells us that her work took a step forward when she realised during a life-drawing class that she didn't have to force herself to use a style that she struggled with; it was okay to use a style that came more naturally to her.



Sucharita realised that self-limiting beliefs can have more power than you think.

“Even when things are feeling good, I try to be in a constant state of change”



Sometimes you need to start over, says Gokcen: "If something is built on a broken structure, it doesn't matter how refined it is."



"It's like I've been trying to learn a language my whole life and I can finally speak it fluently enough to say something," says Hardy Fowler on finding his style.

"It made me understand the difference between challenging myself to improve and forcing myself into a style that wasn't really mine," she says. "Once I started drawing and painting in a way that felt authentic, improving became much easier."

She tells us that her workflow has completely changed over the years. "I used to paint directly onto the canvas in fine detail from the start. Now I build paintings gradually through layers and underpainting. I think the difference was that I started to be more patient, stopped worrying about the speed and the final result and started playing around with transparency, effects and process – basically having more fun with it."

After noticing several periods of stagnation when his art stayed the



same for a long time, concept artist and illustrator **Hardy Fowler** realised that "if your art isn't changing, it isn't

growing". He explains: "When something starts to feel like it's working, there is a tendency to take our foot off of the gas – to slow down and even stop growing. I have learned to fight that instinct. Even when things are feeling good, I try to be in a constant state of change."

"I try to add a new technique, workflow, brush or colour palette to my work at least once a year. It's

Hope Doe is an American artist residing in Japan, and she seeks to blend elements from both cultures in her work.



uncomfortable and difficult, but I always end up learning something new and my work is forever sorted into before and after that new spin occurred."

SETTING THE SCENE

Fine artist **Hope Doe** tells us that she learned how values work from a theatre production when she was at college. "I didn't know just how important it was to organise values to make a detailed mess readable. But something clicked while watching a play."

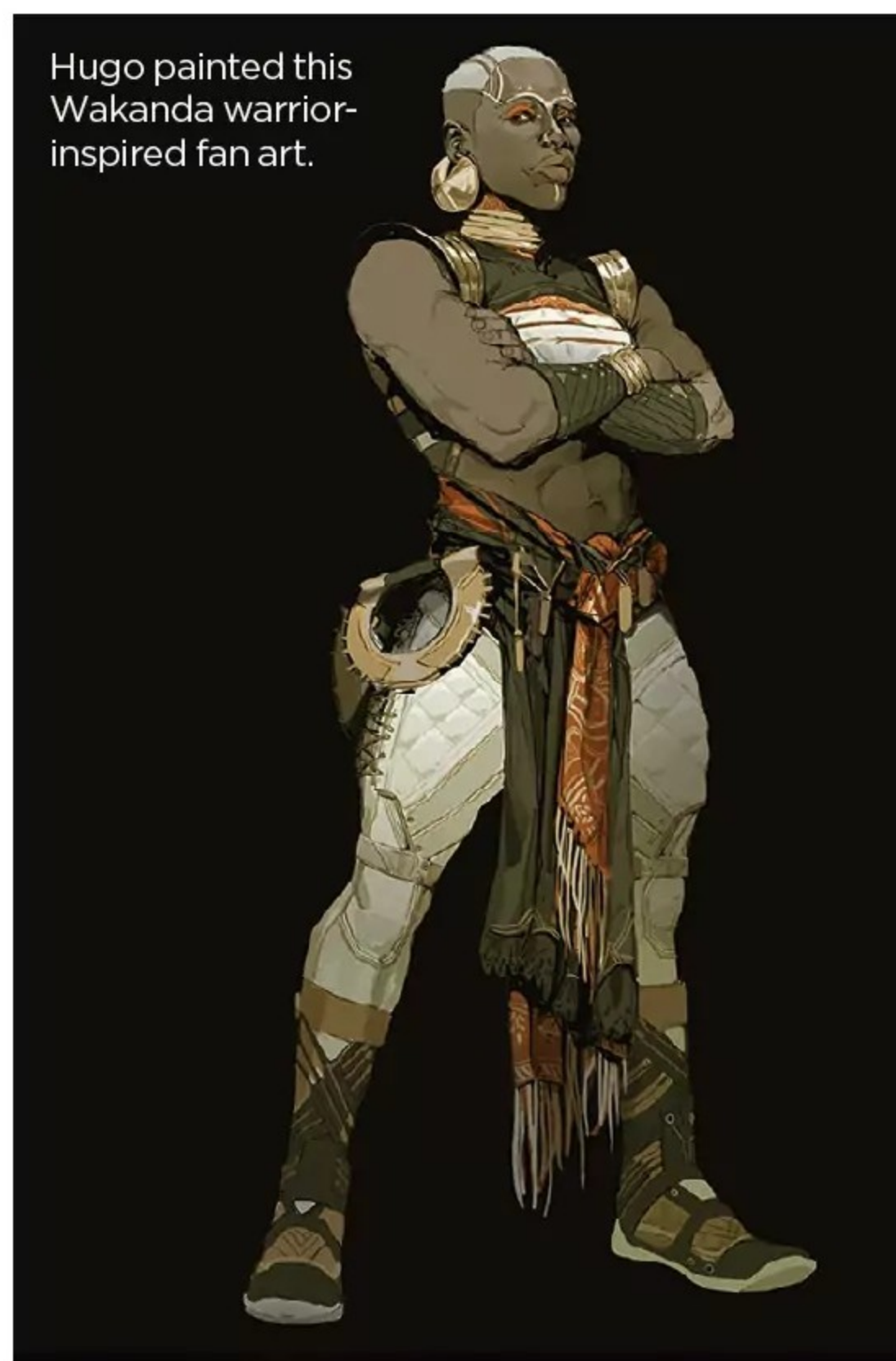


Hope noticed that the stage used foreground cutouts and a background painting to set the scene, with actors and props in the middle. "The movement and action were lit up the most, while the background was secondary and the foreground often appeared darker," she says. In this moment, she understood clearly how lighting can be used to guide the viewer's eye, and began to apply the technique in her paintings.



A big realisation for watercolour artist **Sucharita Suri** was how much her assumptions about her own abilities

Hugo painted this Wakanda warrior-inspired fan art.



constrained her art practice. When she challenged those assumptions and pushed herself to explore elements that she had dismissed, everything changed.

"Don't mistake a current limitation for a permanent one," she advises. "The moment I stopped defining myself by what I couldn't do and started focusing on what I was willing to learn, my creative world expanded dramatically." 🍷

Planning out compositions at thumbnail size was a game-changer for Caroline.

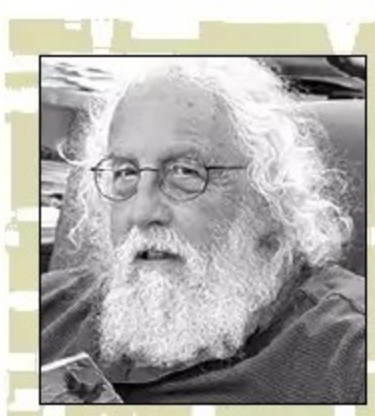




All artworks © Gary A. Lippincott; Photography by Frank Talarico and Aja Talarico

Gary A. Lippincott

Woodland studio The artist is surrounded by his oddball cast of characters and shelves of reference books to inspire the imagination



My studio is located above my garage on my property in Petersham, Massachusetts. It is set

back from the road and close to the edge of the woods that is backed up to conservation land.

I climb the wooden stairs along the back of the garage early each morning to begin my day. I attempt to avoid the enveloping tendrils of bittersweet that are determined to pull the whole staircase down some day soon. I know they need to be removed but they are just so enchanting-looking!

The large windows behind me offer a wealth of natural light upon my

stretch canvas. I use Windsor & Newton professional-grade watercolour paints; the tubes are lined up in my bright orange fishing tackle box. I use a combination of wet-on-wet and wet-on-dry techniques. Water, air, earth, fabric. The technique that is used depends on the texture of the material I am trying to capture.

WARM AND INSPIRING

The studio's tiny wood stove keeps me warm in the winter. Shelves line the walls' edges with reference materials, art books, fantasy novels, tiny figurines, ghoulish faces, puppets and photos of my family. When I have the time, I add a bit of detail to a large ➡

An interior illustration from the book *Come to the Fairies Ball* written by Jane Yolen.



The head of a work in progress puppet sculpture.

Artist news, software & events



A poster-sized example of a commission I painted of three best friends who wanted to be painted as fairies

Expansive oil painting in the backyard that I work on several times per year.

My son in law's camera set up to capture time lapses of the painting process.

My friend Gurty who pokes me in the back to keep me painting!

Pencil sharpener from the 80s that I use constantly.

A white mask I wore at a costume party years ago.

Brown tackle box that stores most of my Windsor & Newton paints.

“ I pretend it gives me time to let the fairies and elves rearrange the shapes in my brain ”

I've been asked to post videos of my painting process. I'm trying to get over the idea of having a camera behind my head for hours on end. My daughter says, "You have to do it for the socials!"



➡ oil painting that I've been working on for years, featuring a unicorn and small fawn running through the woods. I also occasionally work on sculpting and carving puppets.

I am always listening to music while I work. Movie soundtracks are common; Last of the Mohicans, Cloud Atlas. The odd circus-themed

“ I am always listening to music while I work. Movie soundtracks are common ”

Vintage 80s Boglin hand puppet keeping the Clive Barker collection protected.



sounds of the Cirque Du Soleil shows. I also listen to ambient, orchestral, natural-inspired sounds like David Lanz, Patrick O'Hearn. I enjoy the whimsical, fairy-like voice of Tori Amos and the earthy tones of Fiona Apple.

The old-school curly-corded phone, attached to a broken fax machine that no longer works, may ring once or twice during my work day. Can't answer if I'm using wet on wet technique!

COMFY OLD ARMCHAIR

At a certain point during the day I might sit in my big, blue armchair to rest my eyes. I pretend it gives me time to let the fairies and elves rearrange the shapes in my brain before I start painting again.

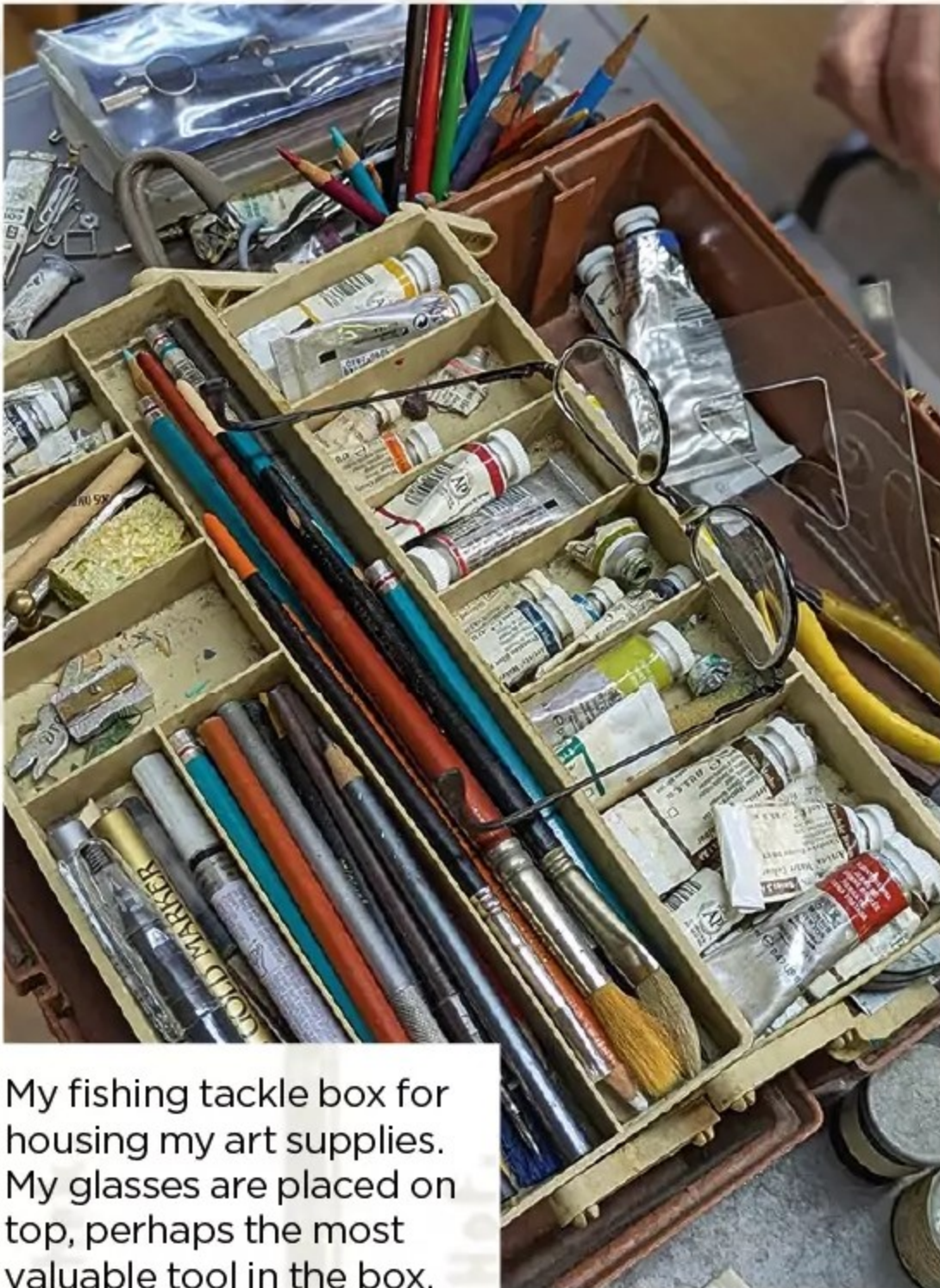


Collection of lanyards gathered from various sci-fi / fantasy conventions where I was the guest artist.

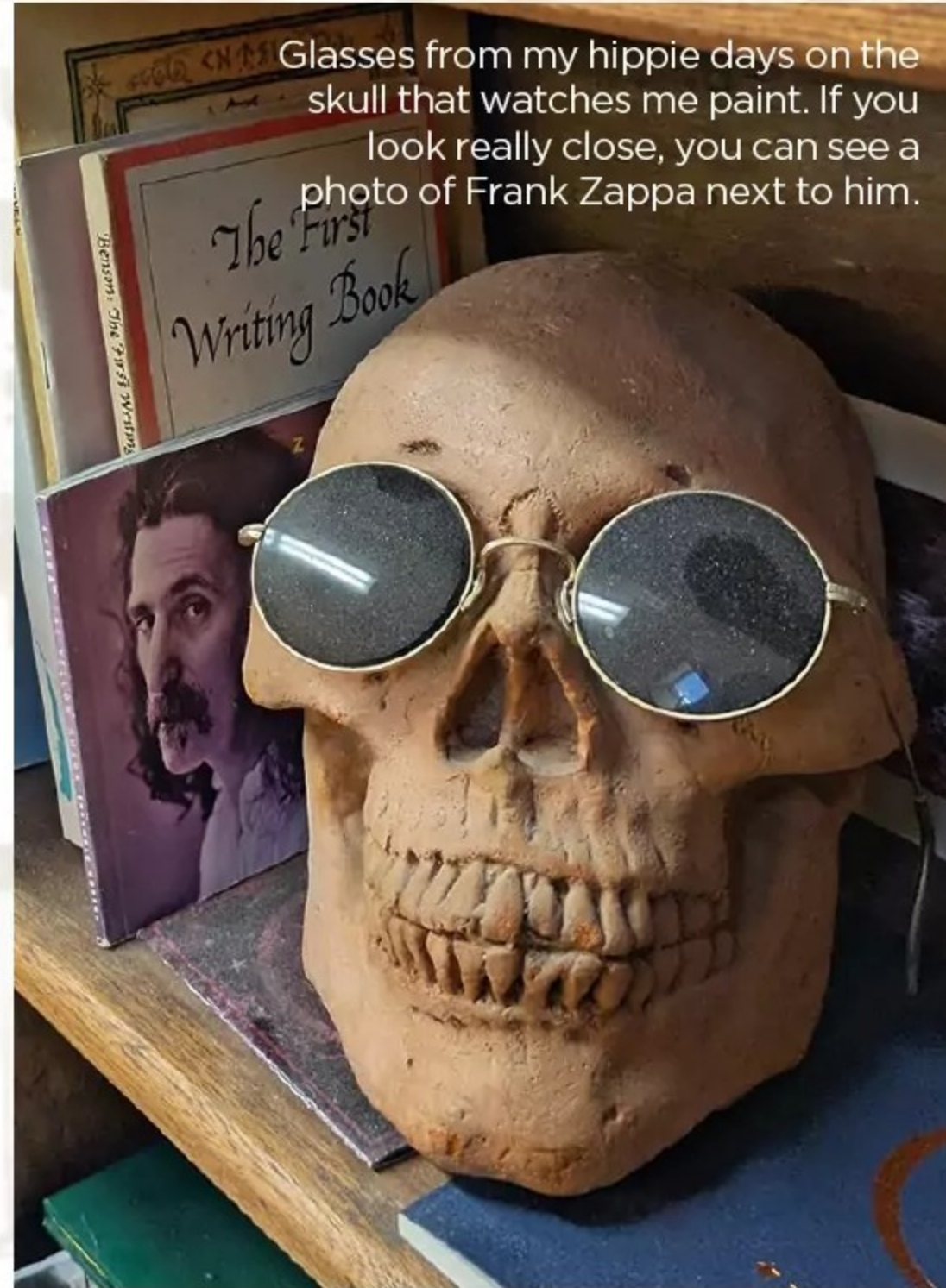
My Yamaha piano used to be up here. I never learned to read music, but rather play by ear. Now the piano is in my living room. Playing helps me unwind. A glass of red wine also helps. I like to say that I have the best commute ever: a short walk from my house, across the driveway and ahhh!, I have arrived at work, though there is nothing about this I would call 'work'.

Gary's delicate, highly detailed watercolours have graced the covers of books, and illustrated stories, hung in galleries, and have been purchased by collectors worldwide. His artwork has a style of old-world craftsmanship often found in folk and fairy tales. www.garylippincott.com

Artist news, software & events



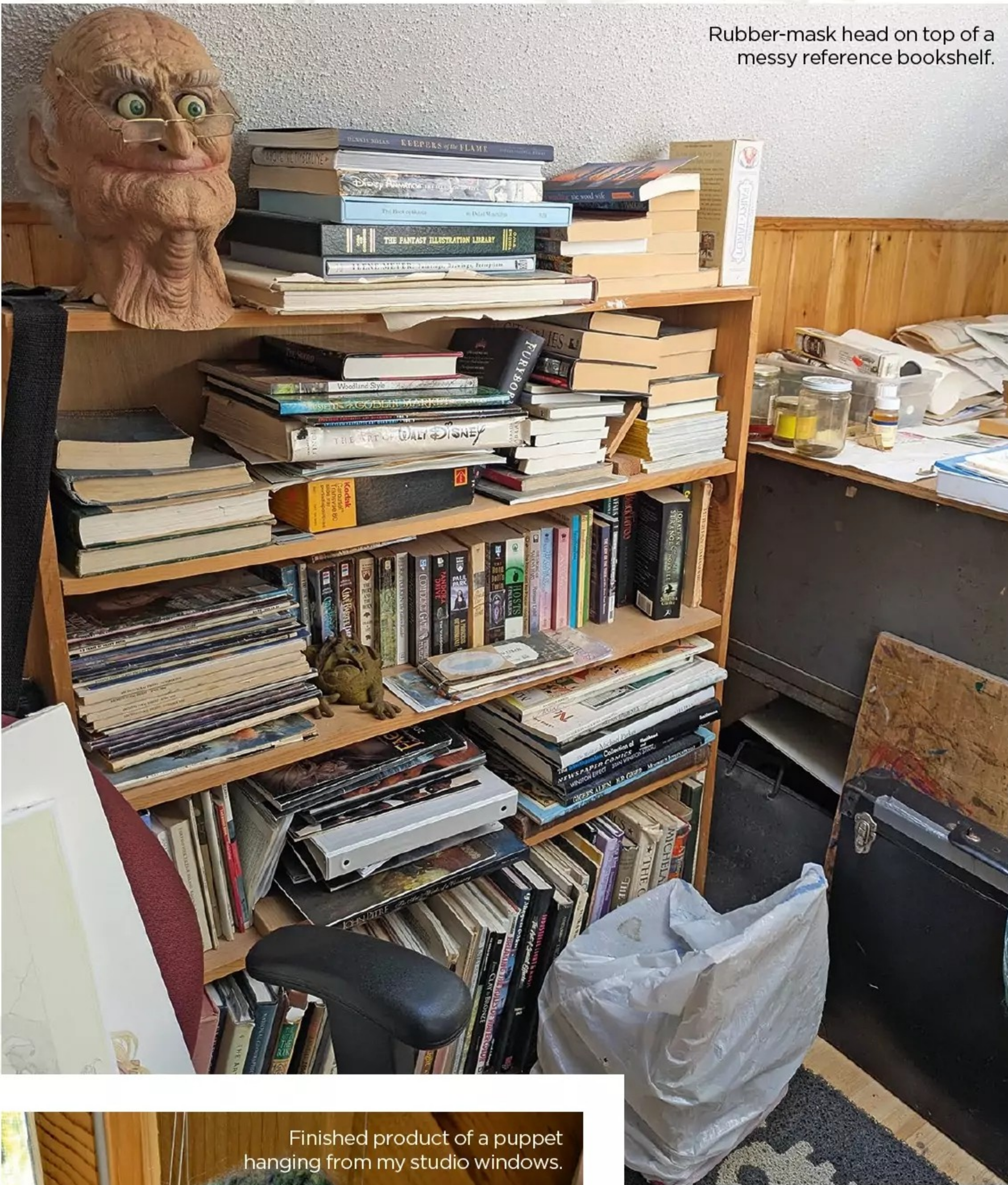
My fishing tackle box for housing my art supplies. My glasses are placed on top, perhaps the most valuable tool in the box.



Glasses from my hippie days on the skull that watches me paint. If you look really close, you can see a photo of Frank Zappa next to him.

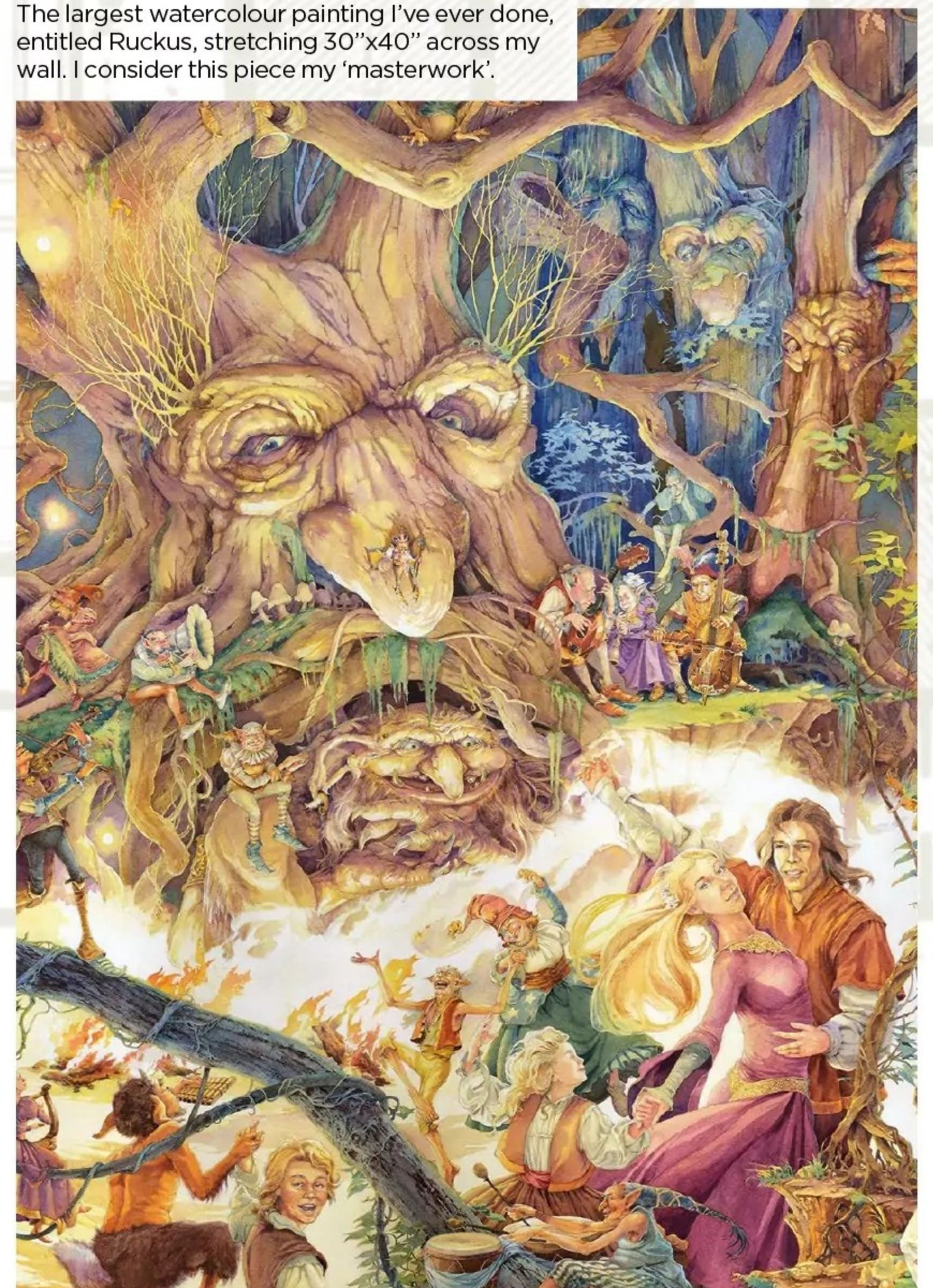


Fantasy book shelf. Collection of cards made by my grandchildren. A fantasy studio must have a stuffed crow somewhere in it.



Rubber-mask head on top of a messy reference bookshelf.

The largest watercolour painting I've ever done, entitled Ruckus, stretching 30"x40" across my wall. I consider this piece my 'masterwork'.



Finished product of a puppet hanging from my studio windows.



I have quite the collection of rubber toads and frogs around my property.

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No. 1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
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Letters

YOUR FEEDBACK & OPINIONS



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



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Community spirit

Hi Rob. I imagine quite a large number of artists spend a lot of time working away alone, without getting out much. That is very true for me, as I spend so long working, so it was a really interesting read last month, where you talked to people about the benefits of community. I think it exposed something a lot of us already know but don't always take action on, but I will for sure be making more of this fabulous family we are a part of.

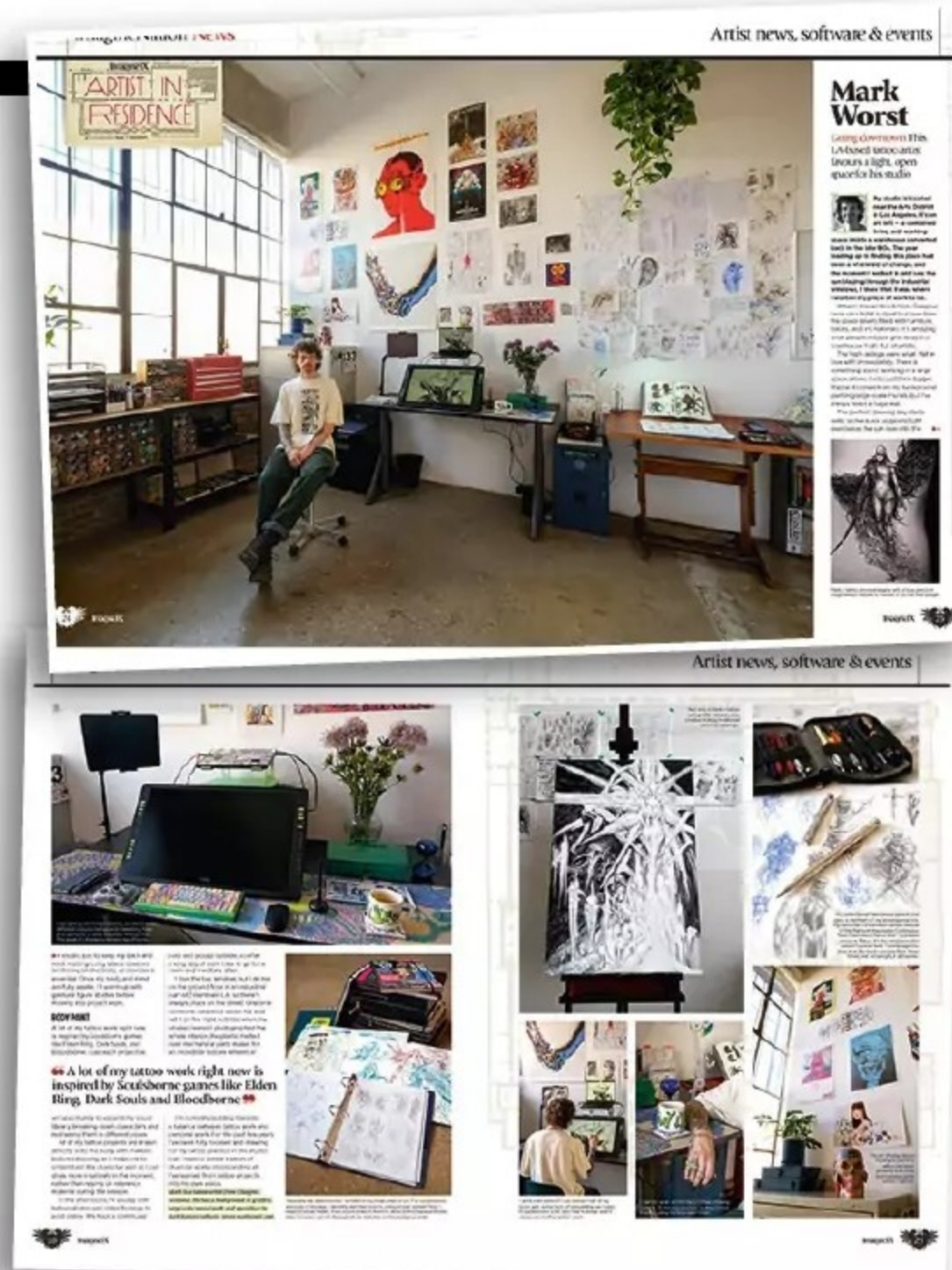
Edwin, via email

Rob replies Hi Edwin. It is so easy to get consumed by the tasks at hand, but I can see huge value in being an active member of the wider art community. It's good to bounce ideas off each other, inspire and be inspired, learn new things and simply take a break from the current project. This can be online, at an event or a smaller local group. Any interaction is one to learn from for all involved. I've attended meetups large and small, all over the world and they are truly inspiring.

Active community members and leaders talk about the huge benefits of getting involved in groups.



DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE? Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 268 at ifxm.ag/single-ixf.



Mark Worst gave a tour of his gorgeous, light-filled, loft-style LA studio, where he works on designs for his tattoo clients.

High value proposition

Hello ImagineFX. I've been learning how to draw and paint for a little while now and have heard the term 'values' a few times but never really understood what it meant, or at least how to make them a part of my work. Thank you so much for your tutorial last month on this very topic. After reading that, I fully understand what I was missing.

Jaq, via email

Rob replies Hi Jaq. Great to hear from you and I'm glad you learned something from that workshop. Louis made it really easy to understand and showcased exactly how to add all that light and depth for far more believable and engaging images.

Skin deep

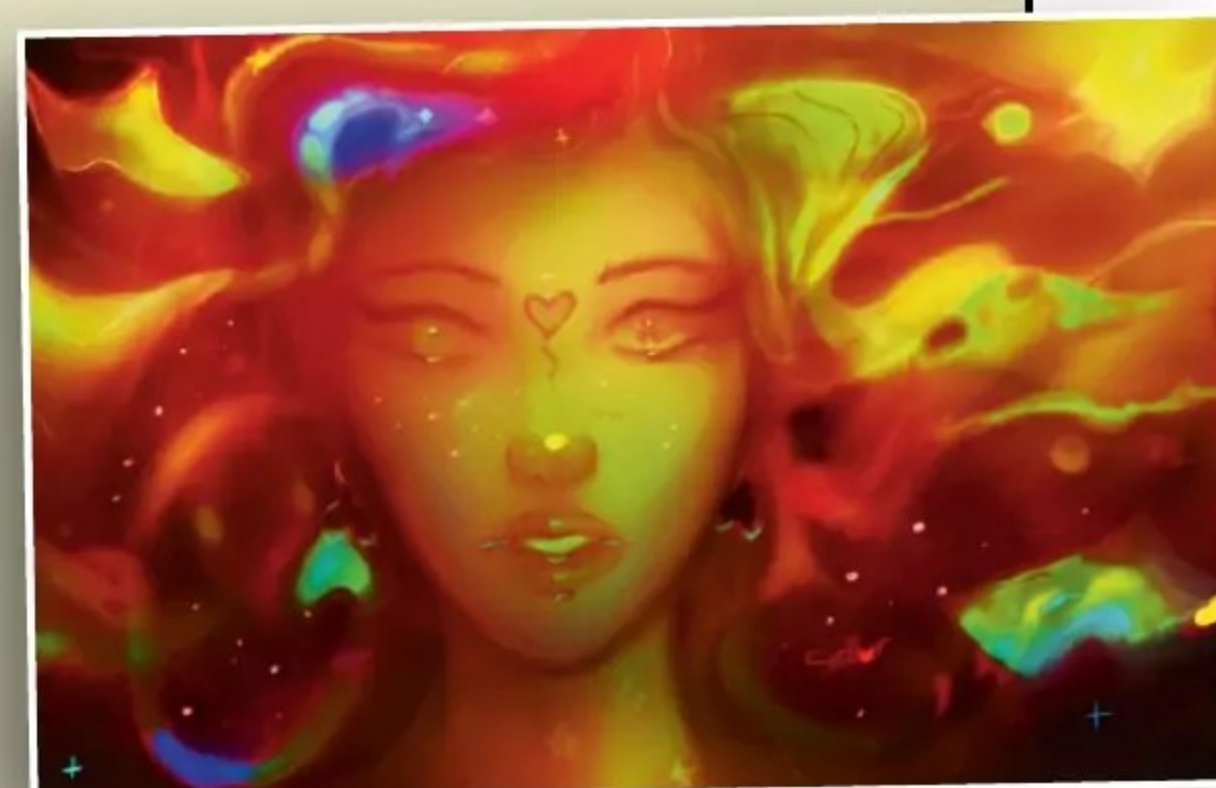
Hello. I want to say thanks for the tour of the tattoo art studio in last month's issue. I'm a tattoo artist myself and I think some people don't realise the art that goes into what we do, so seeing that put a big smile on my face. What a studio too! I think tattoo artists are often seen as dwelling in small darker spaces and Mark's is the total opposite. I adore those high ceilings and all that light. I'd be very interested to see how other people work, in other media.

Titian, via email

Rob replies Hi Titian. Mark's studio is lovely, isn't it? I agree that we don't often shine a light on people working in other media, focusing on the digital artist and on occasion traditional, so will definitely look into broadening the scope a little. While the end result may appear in a different context, the skill, artistry and dedication involved is exactly the same. I'm keen to hear from readers, so if you'd like more, write in and let me know.

FRESH PAINT

New works that have grabbed our attention



Estelle Chomienne
[@stella_artist_corsica](https://instagram.com/stella_artist_corsica)



Collin Chan
[@collinchan](https://instagram.com/collinchan)



Erotokritos Papis
[@erikpapis](https://instagram.com/erikpapis)

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

SPELLBINDING ARTISTRY

James Clarke talks to Envar Studio in Sweden and uncovers the secrets of its development work for the new game **Witchspire**



For game director Oliver Granlund and concept artist Louis Stillace, working on the visual language of *Witchspire* has tested invention and creative collaboration while also evoking a range of valuable aesthetic influences.

Oliver, what are your key responsibilities in the role of game director for *Witchspire*?



Basically, on some level, I'll be involved in most major decisions about the game – whether that's the art, whether it's gameplay,

or even technical decisions – asking, 'What are we doing?' and setting a direction for what we're making and what the choices are that we need to make all in the same direction. And what that means day to day is very different. It means a lot of playtesting. It means being in meetings with people, giving that overview, and acting as a compass. I'm not in every decision or every meeting,

POTION SHOP

Whimsy, wonder, and an aesthetic of light, colour, and harmony define this concept image by Louis Stillace.

“A fine art background is something that definitely helps me in my work”

but overall I'm setting that compass direction, pointing to north.

Louis, please give us an insight into your role on *Witchspire*'s visual development work.

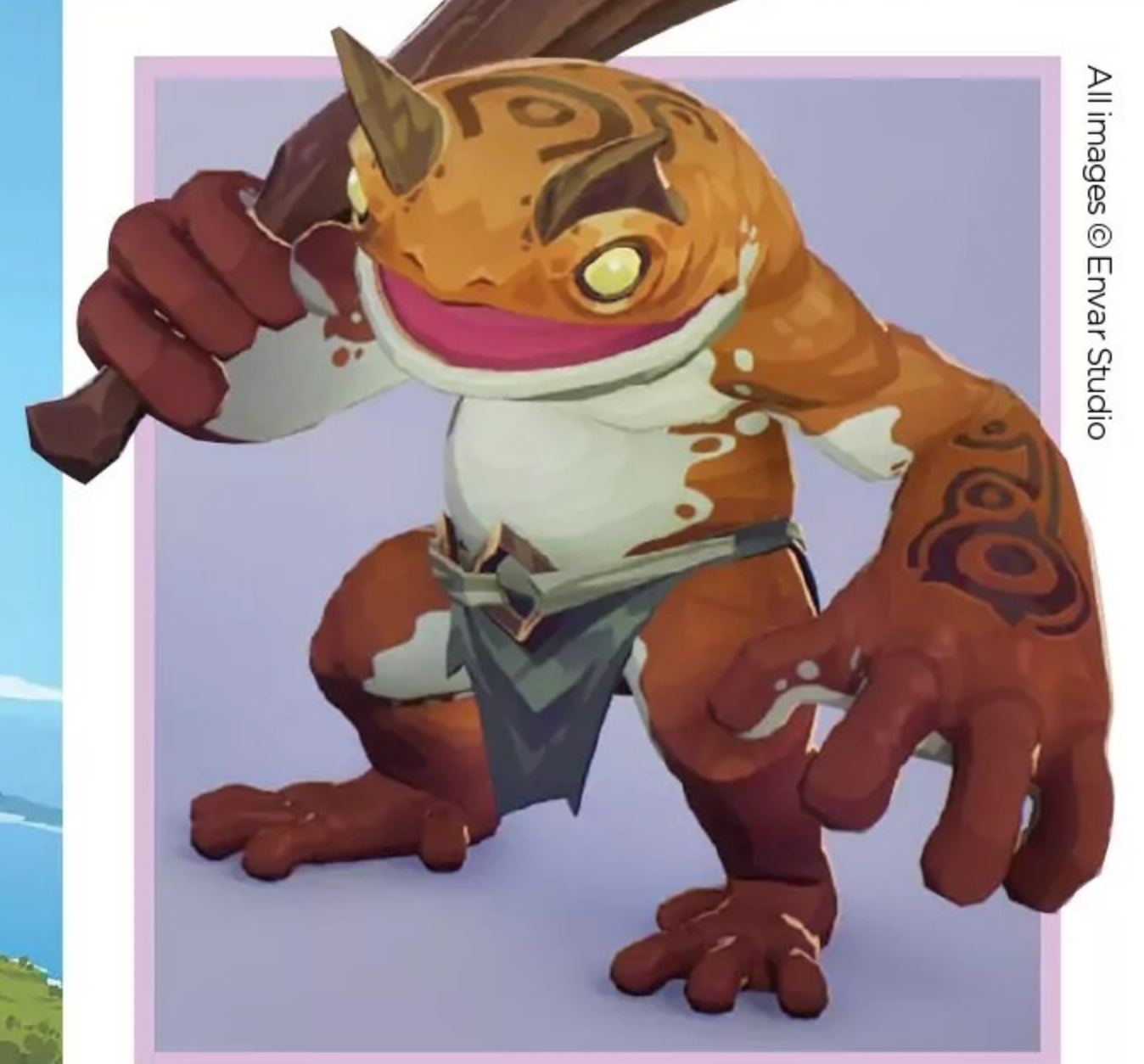


I was a junior when I started working on *Witchspire*. I was mostly focused on environments, but also assets. Now I'm a senior concept artist working at Envar. I'm in charge of working closely with the 3D artists, the animators, VFX artists, and game designers to provide a vision that fits everybody's needs. I'm doing illustrations, and I can ➡



A VAST, COLOURFUL LAND

In Louis' image, the expansive scale of Witchspire is evident, as is the influence of anime in the game's visual language.



All images © Envar Studio

CRAFTING CREATURES

This design by Andreas Eriksson demonstrates the game's emphasis on detailed surface work.

Feature

“I was a big fan of Breath of the Wild and Elden Ring, which influenced me a lot”

LOOMING LOCATIONS

Guillaume Normand's concept art showcases the scale, colour and diversity of locations in the Witchspire world.



➡ do very detailed illustrations, establishing shots, or very quick concepts for anything that's visually important in the game, from a magic wand to a castle.

Louis, do you still work with pencil and paper at any point as you develop ideas and then take it into digital tools?

Louis: I do it as a hobby. I love traditional art because I come from a fine art background, and that's something that definitely helps me in my work. I love to do it outside of work. But within the process of creating a game, working digitally is just so much faster.

Louis, what influences contributed to your work for Witchspire?

It's a blend of my inspirations, the other concept artists' inspirations, and the art director's inspiration. I knew from the beginning that Genshin Impact was a big influence. I was a big fan of Zelda: Breath of



A LIVING WORLD

Louis' visual design suggests a world with history in the enormity of its ancient ruins, shown in relation to a human figure.

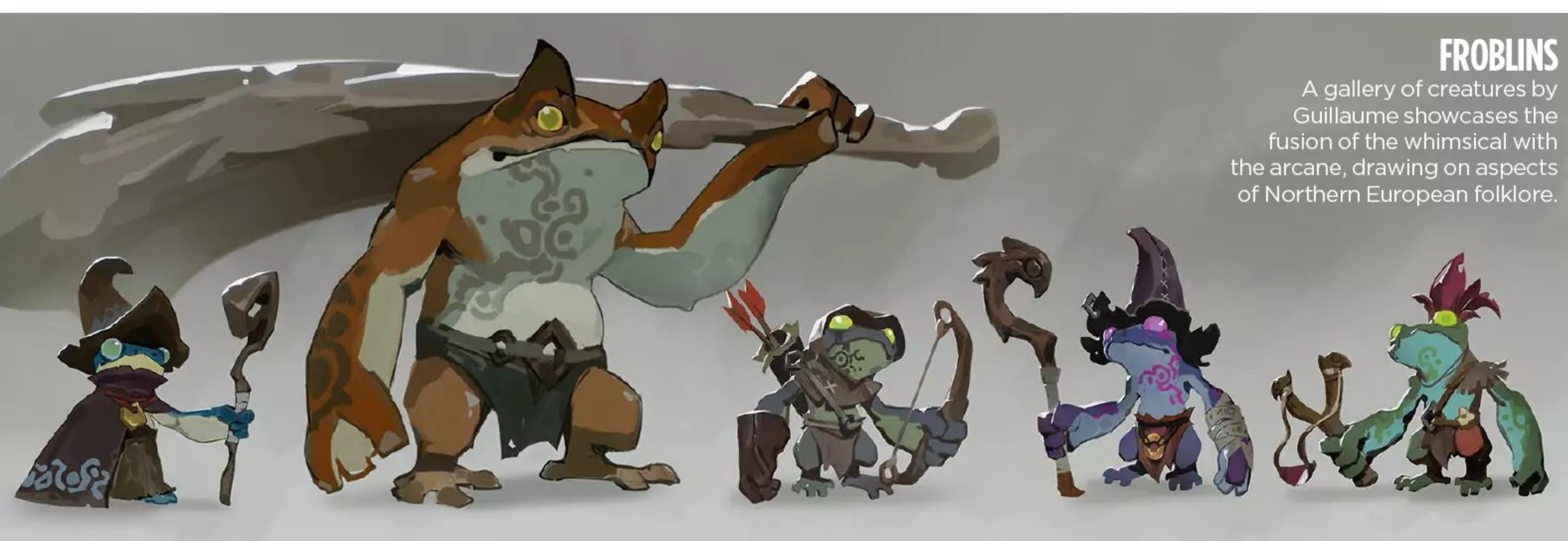
the Wild and Elden Ring, which influenced me a lot when I played it during the process of making this game. But also, very different things like movies or traditional arts. So that had a huge influence on my paintings when I was working on Witchspire. Some artists have a style that fits so much for the game. On my side, I think I had a darker style that, in a way, I had to adapt. It was a challenge to bring this light-hearted energy to

the project that we were looking for. In a way, it made me make a lot of progress in my own work as an artist.

How does colour work as a storytelling element in Witchspire?

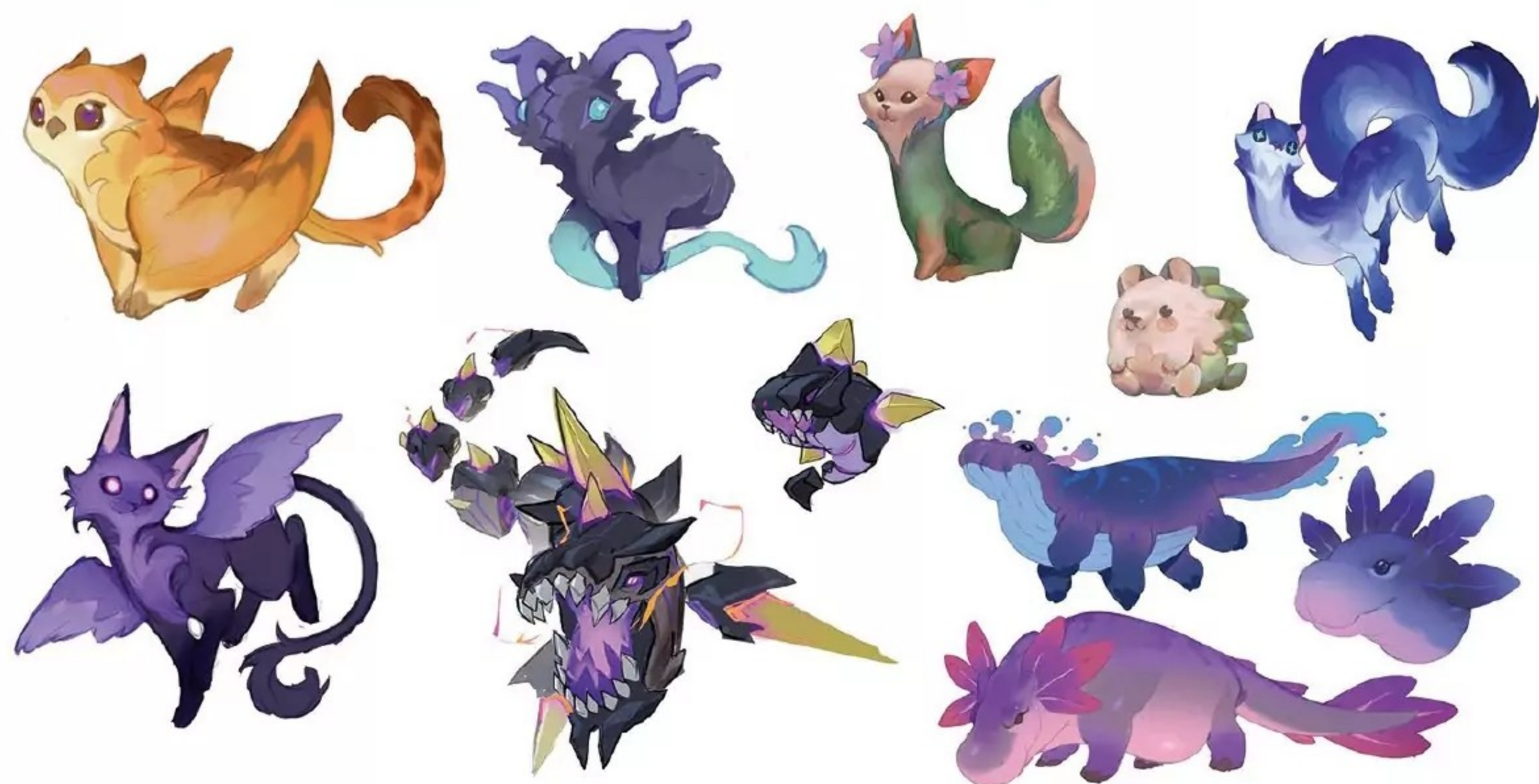
Louis: We knew that we wanted to push the [colour] saturation quite a lot. We wanted to have this intense and bright feeling for the game.

Oliver: Before we started making the biomes, we started with the idea of an ascending colour, like a colour script. That's harder to do in a game than a movie, because a movie has set frames. We could do general vibes, and you can see here sort of like choosing certain colours based on the easier biomes, the medium biomes, and so on. We started concepting after that. Both character and environment. When we started, we wanted a certain vibe. Sometimes it was just the colour was slightly off. I had creatures where they felt slightly too hostile because



FROBLINS

A gallery of creatures by Guillaume showcases the fusion of the whimsical with the arcane, drawing on aspects of Northern European folklore.



the shade of green they had read as
poisonous, not friendly.

Louis, is there a specific environment or asset you've developed that you feel particularly satisfied with?

I was very proud of an establishing shot that I did. It's supposed to be a massive picture with a very wide angle, and you're basically supposed to see what's going to happen in the world: what's waiting for the player as they're going to progress into the game.

So I did this shot development very early in the process. We didn't know what the game would look like, so I had to imagine the type of environment it would be. It was the opportunity for me to design the big spires and a big monument that you can see in the game. I designed it at this moment when I was doing the

establishing shots to have a point of interest. This was a task that I really enjoyed, but it was made in a short amount of time, like two or three days.

When we first started working on Witchspire, our team was three concept artists, and we were focused on environments. Every day we were doing different speed paintings, so it could be one, two or three maximum environments per day. They are super quick, and it was very hard in the beginning. But with time we learned how to be quicker in the process and more efficient. And my establishing painting is one of the pictures that started resonating with the artists' vision and the team. So we just decided to keep it, and it felt very satisfying as it was one of the first pieces that I created.

Could you talk us through the typical pipeline for developing a character or creature in Witchspire? ➡

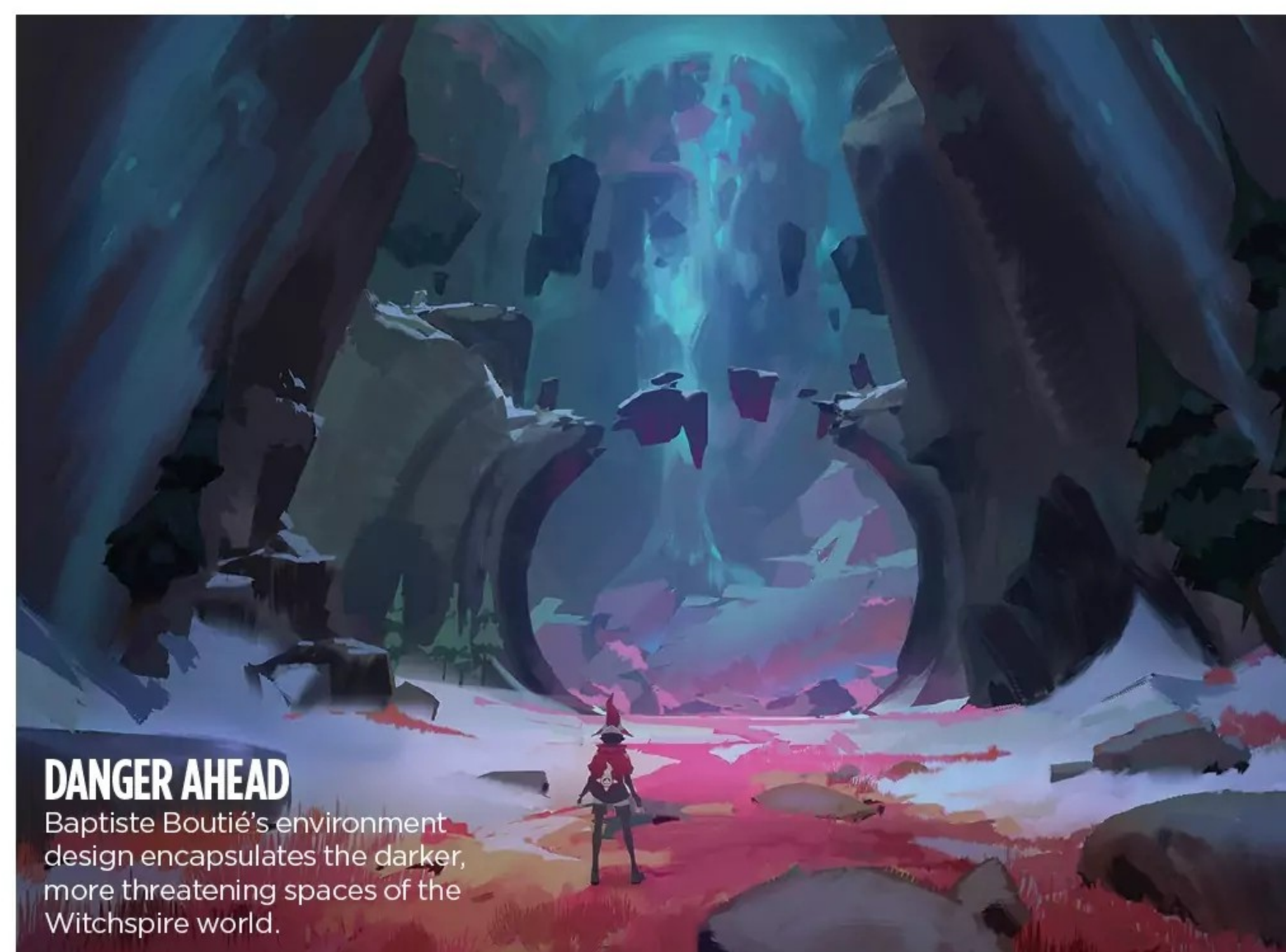
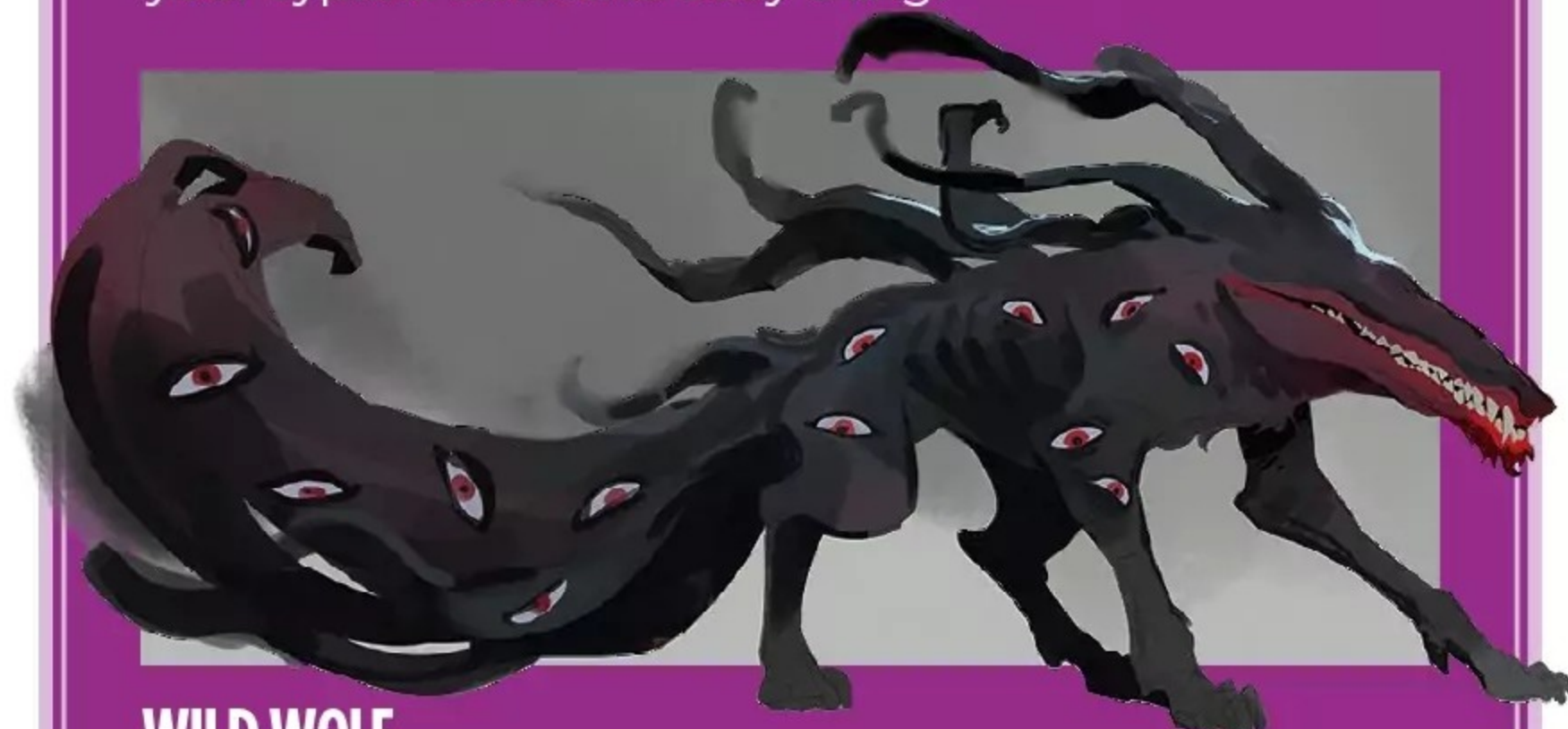
Witchspire



ALL EYES ON THE WOLF

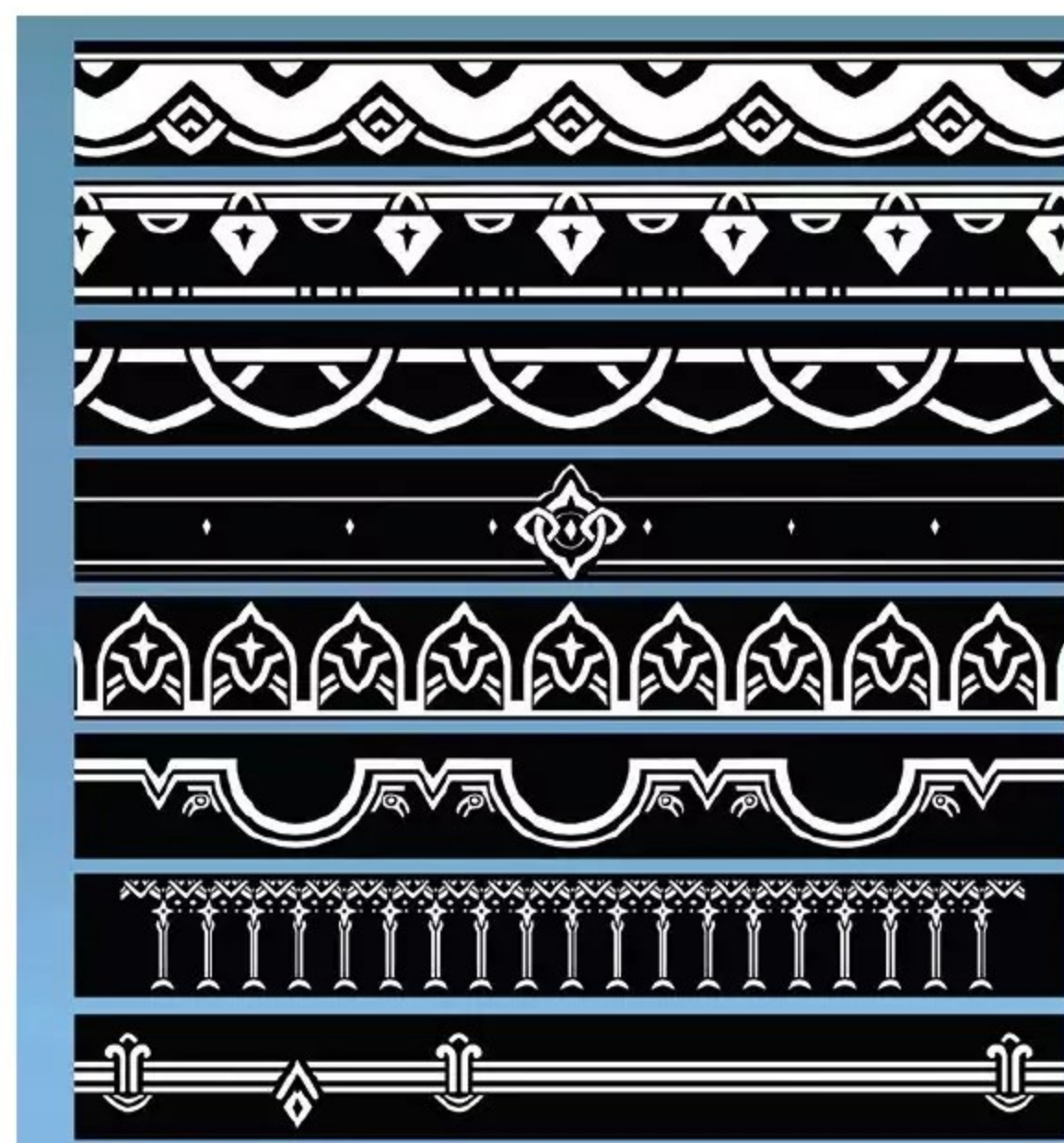
Oliver breaks down the visual development of the corrupted wolf

“This character is the corrupted wolf. In this very cute, whimsical game, we know a dark witch has created these corrupted creatures and is making them search. So, naturally, this idea of seeking eyes are symbolic metaphorical elements. This was made by Guillaume Norman. There was something so unsettling about it with its lack of eyes, lack of facial features, but it’s full of these ever-seeking eyes. We made an animated 2D trailer which helped us define how the corrupted wolf moves and how they look: how do the tendrils move and how does the jaw move when it opens? These things become quite important when you look at something. This is not your typical cute and cosy thing.”



Feature

➤ **Oliver:** After the 2D exploration for a character or creature, that's where 3D gets your hand. We'll be doing the rough blockouts, dragging them in-engine and asking, "Does the size feel right?" One thing you'd be surprised about, depending on what kind of camera you have in a game, is that things are going to feel very different. So, for example, if you have a creature and they're supposed to be large and menacing in first-person gameplay, they can look like a realistic wolf. That's going to feel pretty menacing. But in third person, they feel very small and



TEXTURED TOWERS

Ben Thiti Sukjit and Pierre Autissier's work explores architectural design and decoration in creating a plausible fantasy realism.

“It was a challenge to bring this light-hearted energy to the project that we were looking for”

tiny, so you might have to up the size by a factor of two just to get the same feeling. That's something we had some back and forth on in development.

Then, at the end of the process, we have the final render where this is all animated. The VFX is flowing from their bodies, and all of that is coming together. I don't know how many creatures I've counted, but this has happened for, at the very least, 50 creatures who had an initial concept, and then iterations, before we eventually landed on an approved

creature design. It's been like a pipeline where, as soon as one step is done, as soon as concept artists are happy, you're moving on to blocking them out and getting them in-engine. As soon as the 3D art is done, you're rigging that, and then you're jumping onto animating it. And to work with so many creatures, you definitely have to have a pipeline in place where that handoff goes quickly.

Louis: What I liked about the process that we used in the team was the back



PRE-PAINT

Andreas' 3D character models are then further enhanced and defined with paintover work.

COSY HOME

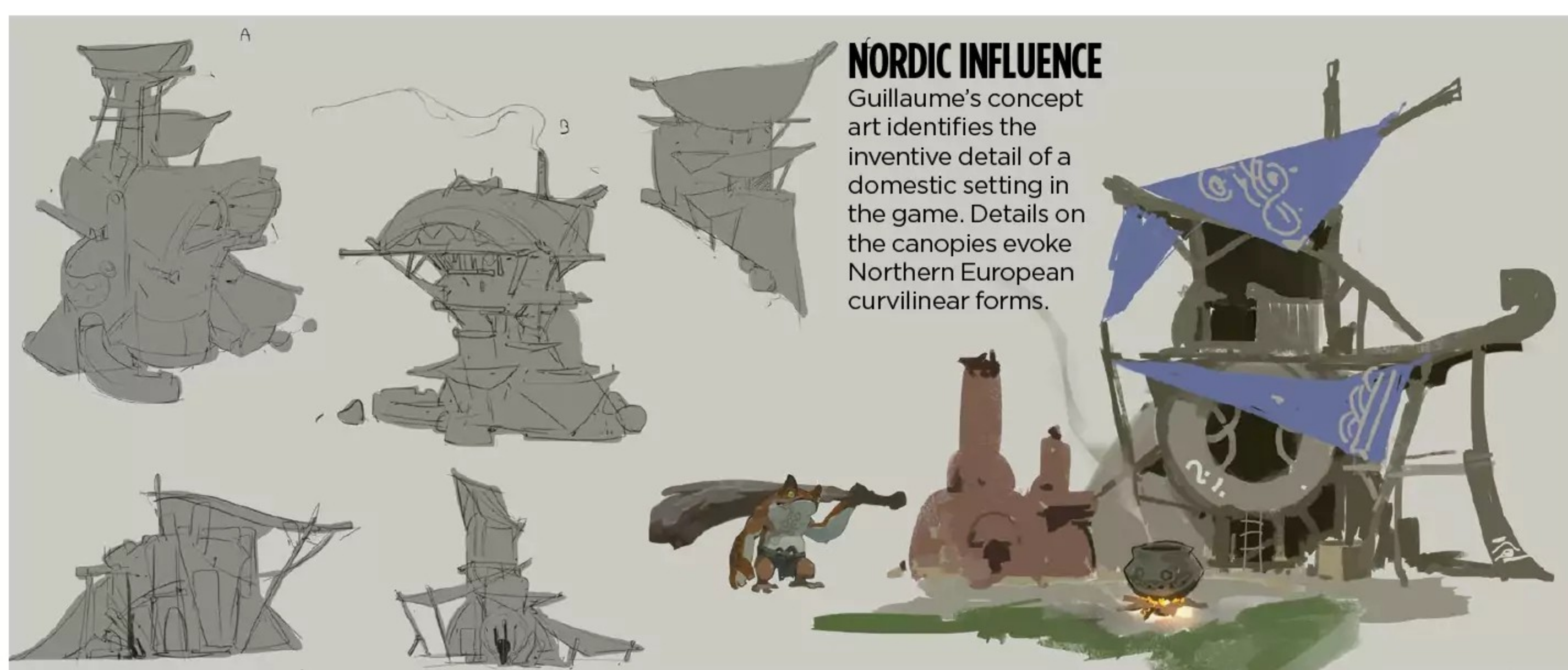
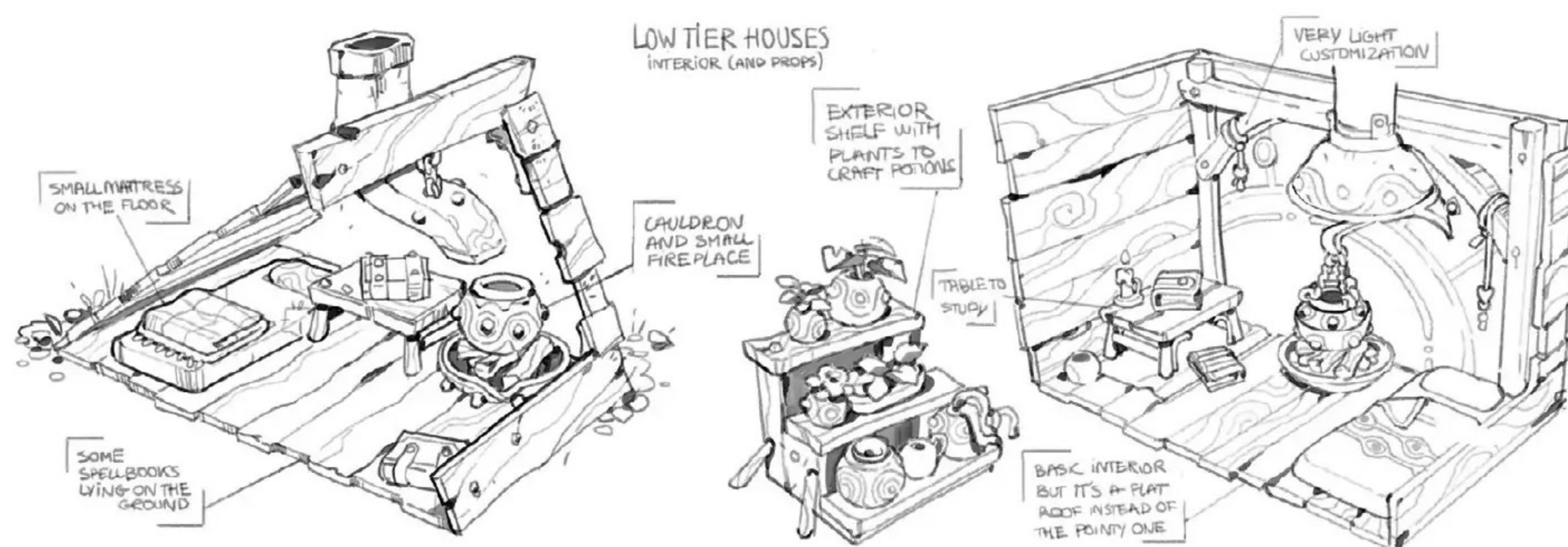
Camille's defines spatial layout for a domestic space, drawing on Northern European traditions that inspire the game's design.

and forth between 2D and 3D, regarding, for example, a house and its architecture. It all starts with a sketch that's not detailed at all, just to have the feeling of it. It then gets implemented into the game, and a 3D artist modernises it, but it still lacks various details. If it feels good with a very minimal approach, the artists are then asked to do a paintover of it. They'll take a screenshot of this 3D model and then refine it, either with a line art or painting, to add more details. Potentially, it can go back and forth a lot of times like this, which is super cool.

Oliver, what has been a particular challenge of developing the visual language for Witchspire?

I think one of the hardest challenges for this game is that we're going into a market with lots of different games already, and we want to make something familiar, but also something that was different.

One of the first things we had to consider was that we don't want to look like that other creature-collecting game. That was the first thing. A lot of the initial concepts maybe looked a little bit too simple with flat colours, and so we instantly said, "If we're making a creature collector, it needs to be our own."



NATURE LOVERS

In this concept art by Louis, the composition emphasises the bucolic aspect of the game and the beauty of nature.



COLOURING WORLDS OF WITCHERY



Louis discusses the importance of colour and space in the world of Witchspire

"Colour has a huge importance in the game. We started with characters and our environments, and we knew from the beginning that we wanted to push the saturation quite a lot. And we'd do it because we wanted to have this intense and bright feeling for the game. That was the goal for this type of very stylised game. It's the thing that you're going to recognise from far away when you're walking through a game. Shape is also super important, and so is where you scatter the points of interest, the details, and the rest areas."



BRIGHT VISUALS

Louis' art for Witchspire is informed by his formal art education and the ambition of the game's designers to push colour saturation across all environments.

One of the things that I pushed for was, "Let's make sure that these feel more like real creatures that you could find in a forest." The second one was, "Add more detail." We're not going for realism, but we want to make sure that they have a certain level of detail where they're not going to be these flat, simple shapes. These are wonderful, but that's not what we wanted to do. And that I'm very proud of, and I'm very thankful for the artists' work.

We've done a lot of work building this world, and my hope is that we get to expand that. I would like to see which parts could continue, be it in another game or other media. We've put a lot of groundwork into this, and I think it's something that truly resonates with people. I hope that we get to see more of it. 🍷

DELVING AHEAD

In this sketch, Louis suggests danger and discovery as part of the game's spirit of adventure.



Development sheet

Artist PROFILE

Meybis Ruiz Cruz

LOCATION: Germany



Meybis works as a character designer and illustrator for animation and video games. Though no longer a graphic designer, she describes herself as an "endless portrait doodler" and is very much still a typography nerd, in love with graphic design and visual arts.

blt.ly/4eWvouT

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
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PROJECT TITLE: ENCOUNTER

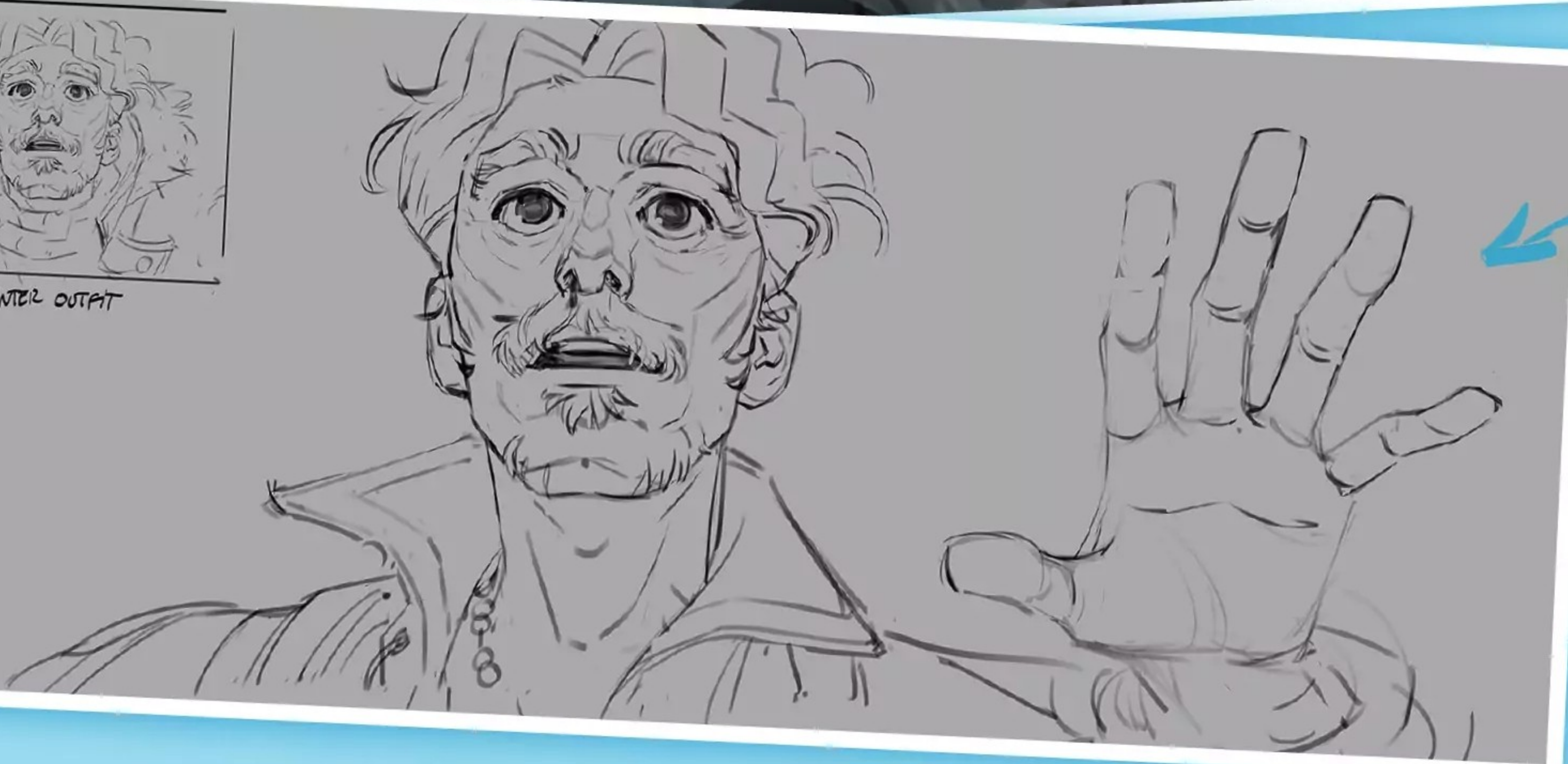
In a piece developed for Weta, **Meybis Ruiz Cruz** explains how she began with a script, creating thumbnails for different moments in a scene before developing one of them further

Thumbnail

This shot captures the moment where the character, right after getting thrown into a strange world, and out of a dangerous situation, has encountered something equal parts terrifying and awe-inspiring. There is tension, and it's about to break.



ALTERNATIVE WINTER OUTFIT



Cleaning up

With some references at hand I did a more clear pass, tightening the design and posing, and adding the hand reaching out to the unknown - curiosity replacing fear. This is someone out of his element, an impromptu explorer of sorts, shaken by this new world.



Mood colouring

A few colour thumbnails exploring the emotional tone. First I tried some dramatic lightings (back lit, side lit), but eventually decided to go for a frontal light, focusing more on showing his expression, which is the focal point of the piece.

Painting layers

I usually start with a colour base, before I build up the values by painting the shadows and the lights in separated layers on top. I like using selections so that I have a greater control on edges and a more graphical, stylised result. After that, I proceed to do some paint-overs, colour adjustments, and so on.



Final piece

It's always hard to finish a piece, forever finding things to improve. So I guess at some point you just have to let go, and be at peace with the fact that this is the best you can do today. Tomorrow you'll do better.

SEND US YOUR CONCEPTS!

Are you working on a fresh project or doodling your own development sketches that you'd like to share with us?

LET US KNOW! Email your WIPs and final images to mail@imaginefx.com

Himesh Anand

Whether taking a 'form over function' approach or just going with the flow, this concept artist creates devices from an advanced society

Artist PROFILE

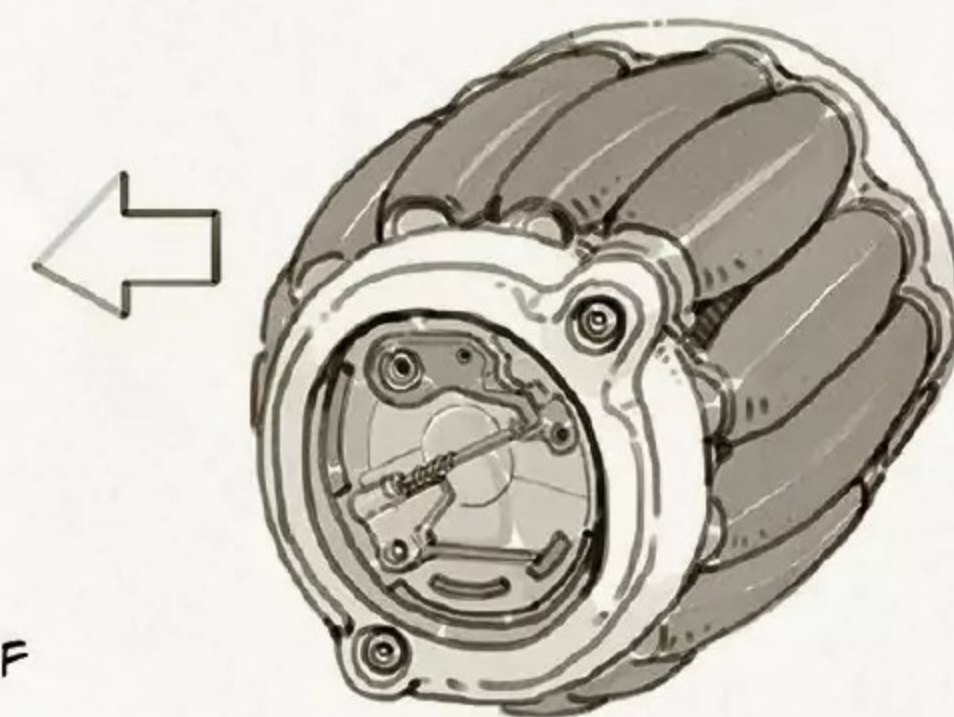
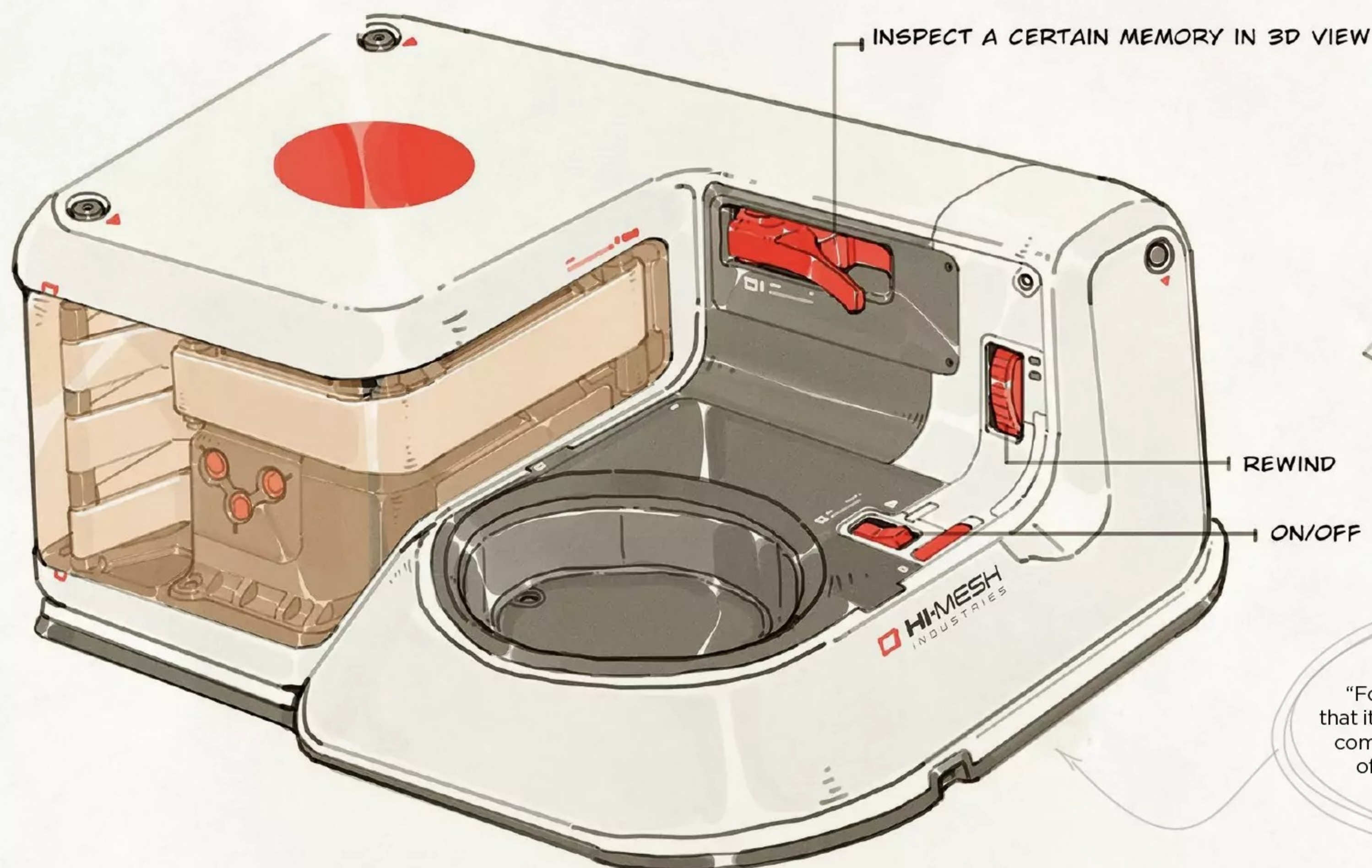
Himesh Anand

LOCATION: India



Himesh is a 26-year-old freelance concept artist who specialises in sci-fi and hard-surface design.

Since 2019 he's worked at studios including Shapefarm, West Studio and NetEase Games on a range of projects including Marvel Rivals. Self-taught and driven by a life-long interest in science and aerospace, he creates production-focused concept art that looks futuristic - and cool!
<https://bit.ly/4vWIOD1>



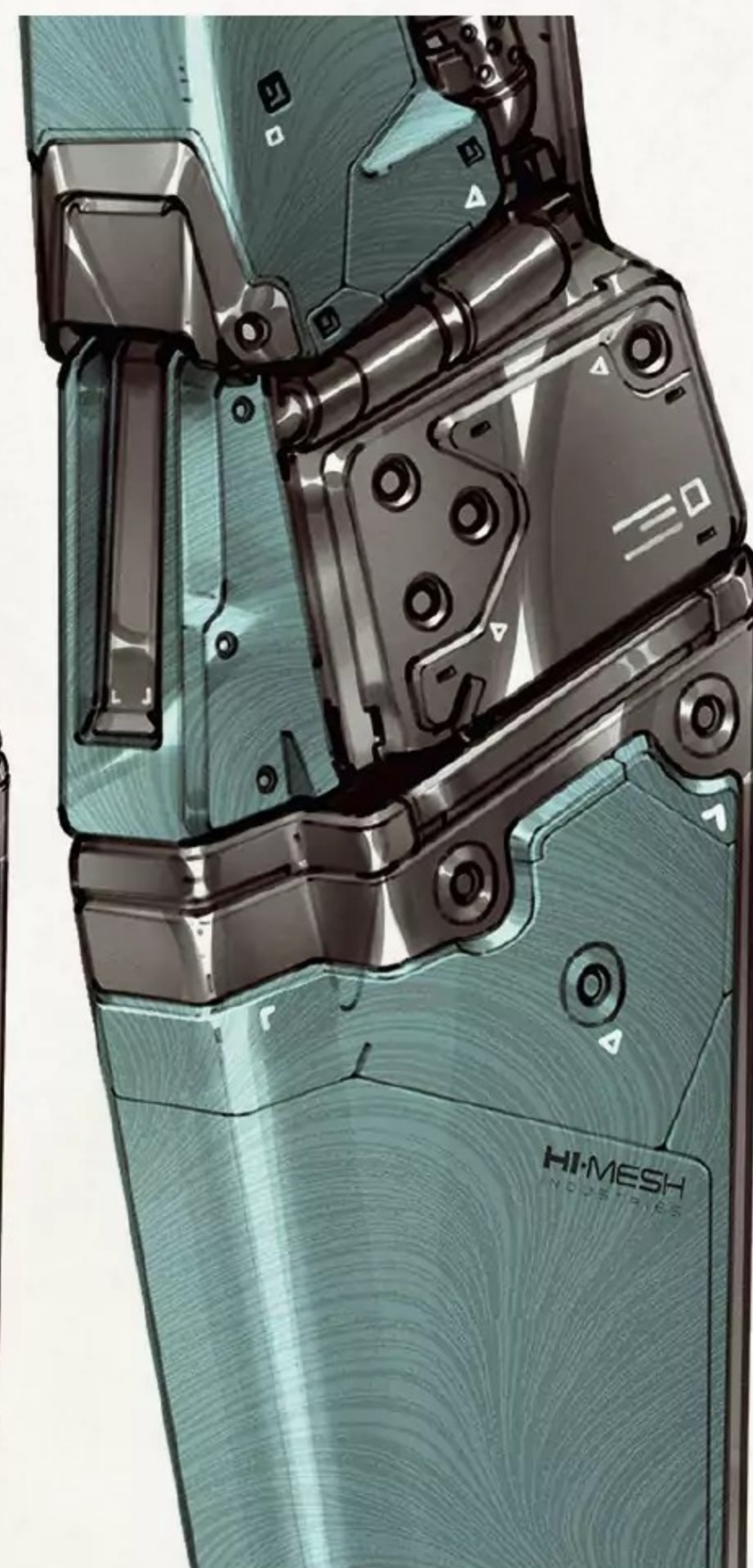
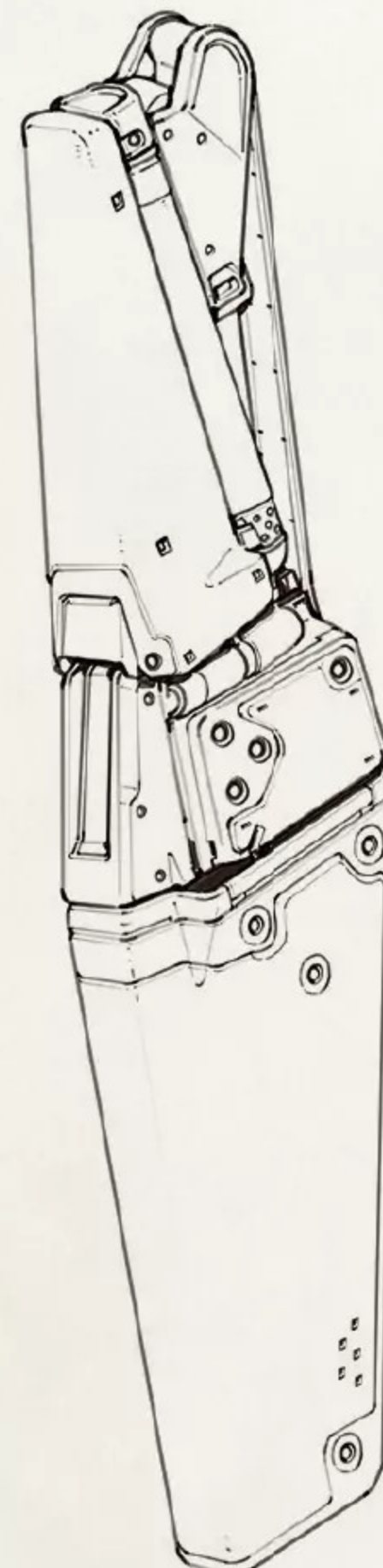
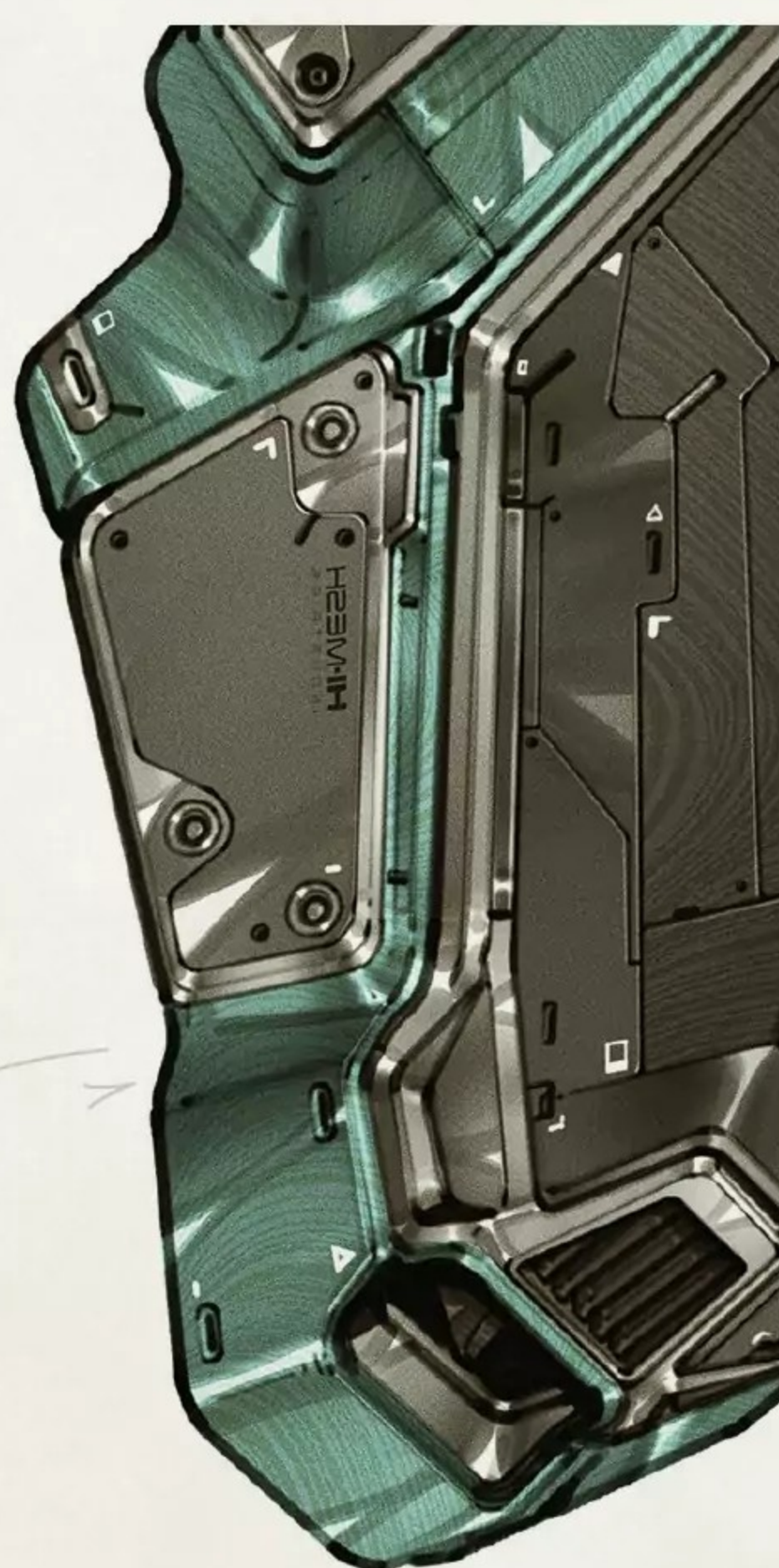
MEMORY PROJECTOR

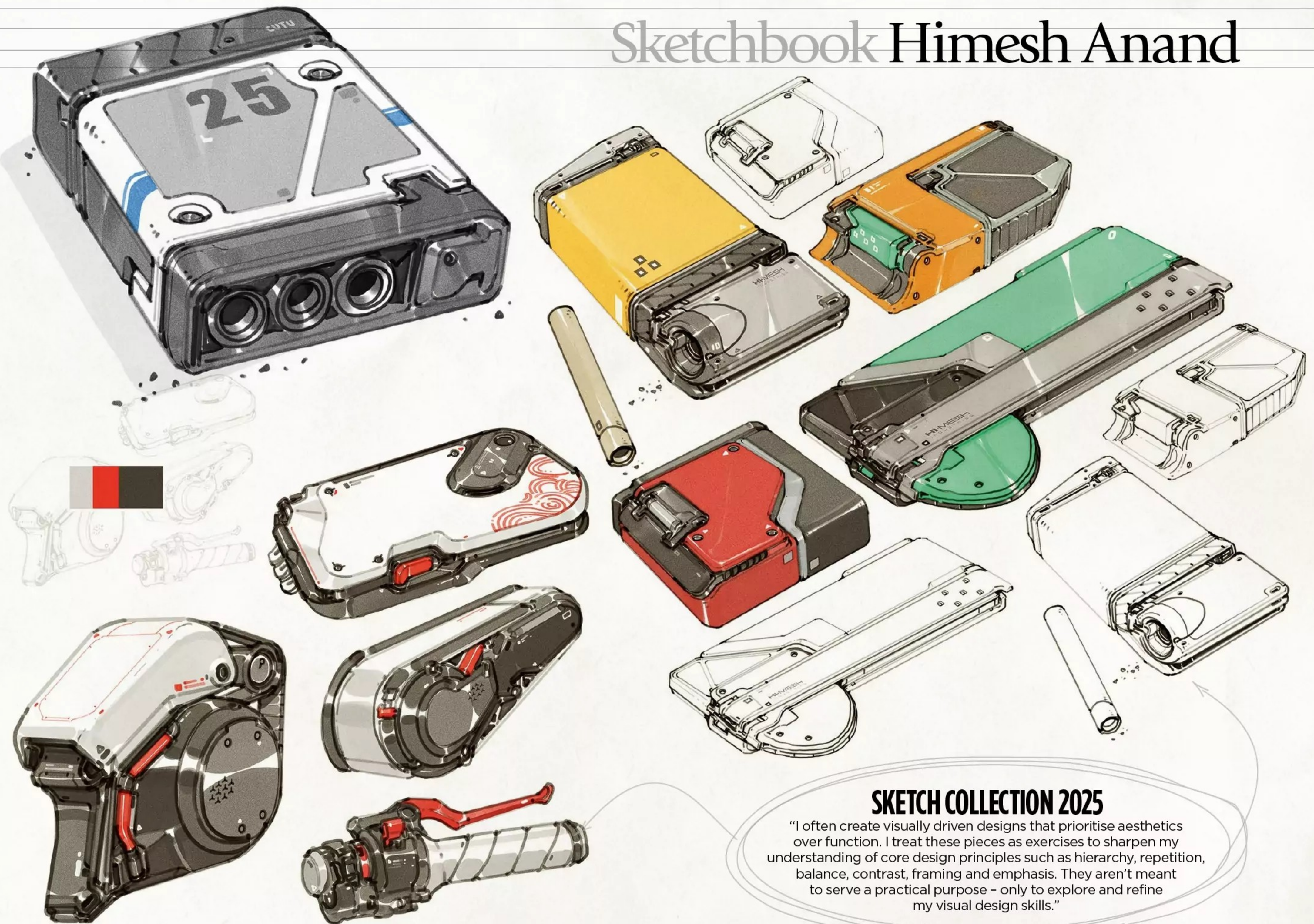
"For the backstory of this device, I imagined that it was developed by Tokyo's leading robotics company, Hi-Mesh Industries. It enables police officers to rewind and examine the details of a murder scene, or help in other criminal investigations."



SCI-FI DESIGNS

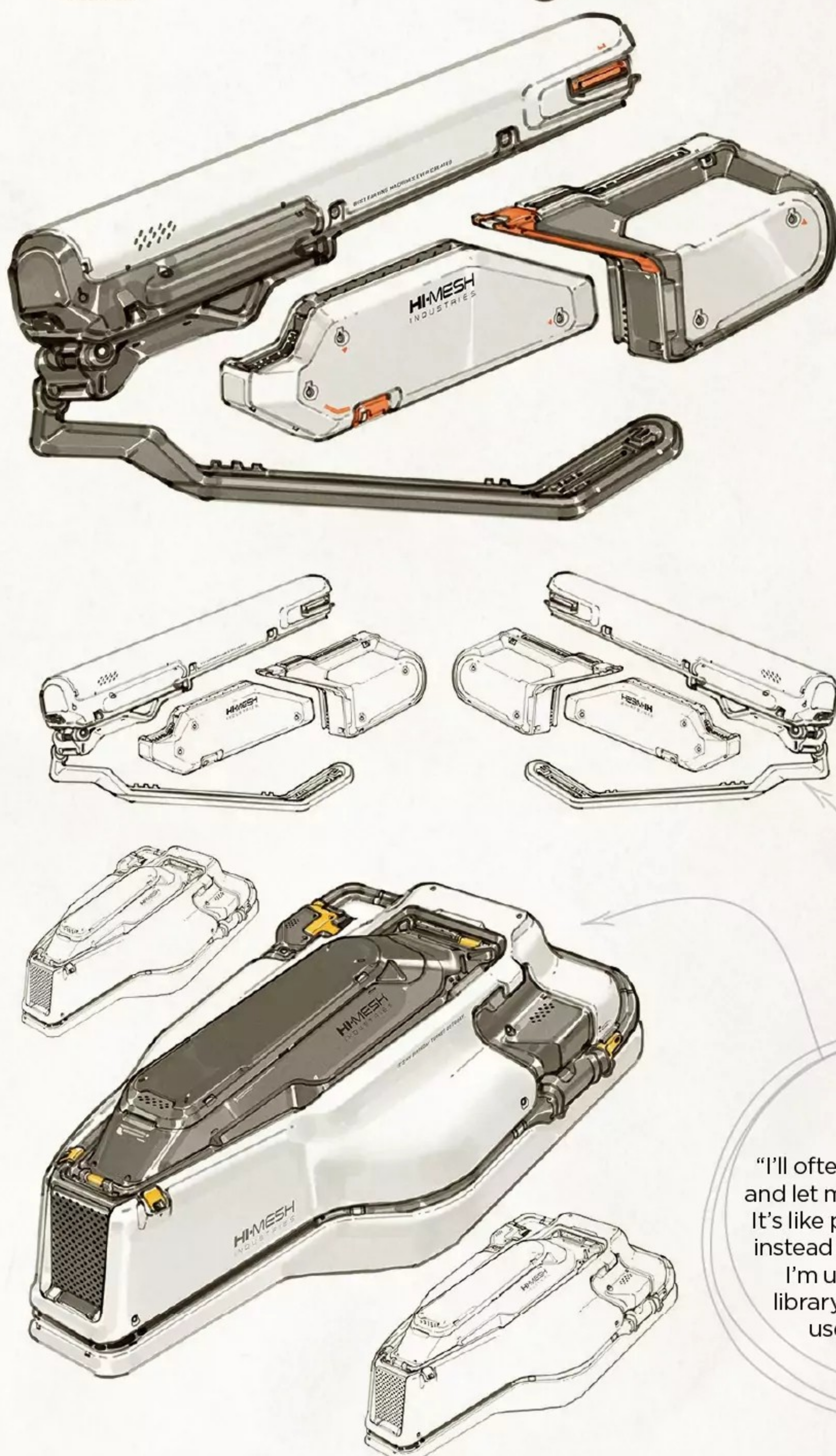
"My YouTube and Gumroad courses cover a range of tricks and tips to help you create polished practical and believable objects."





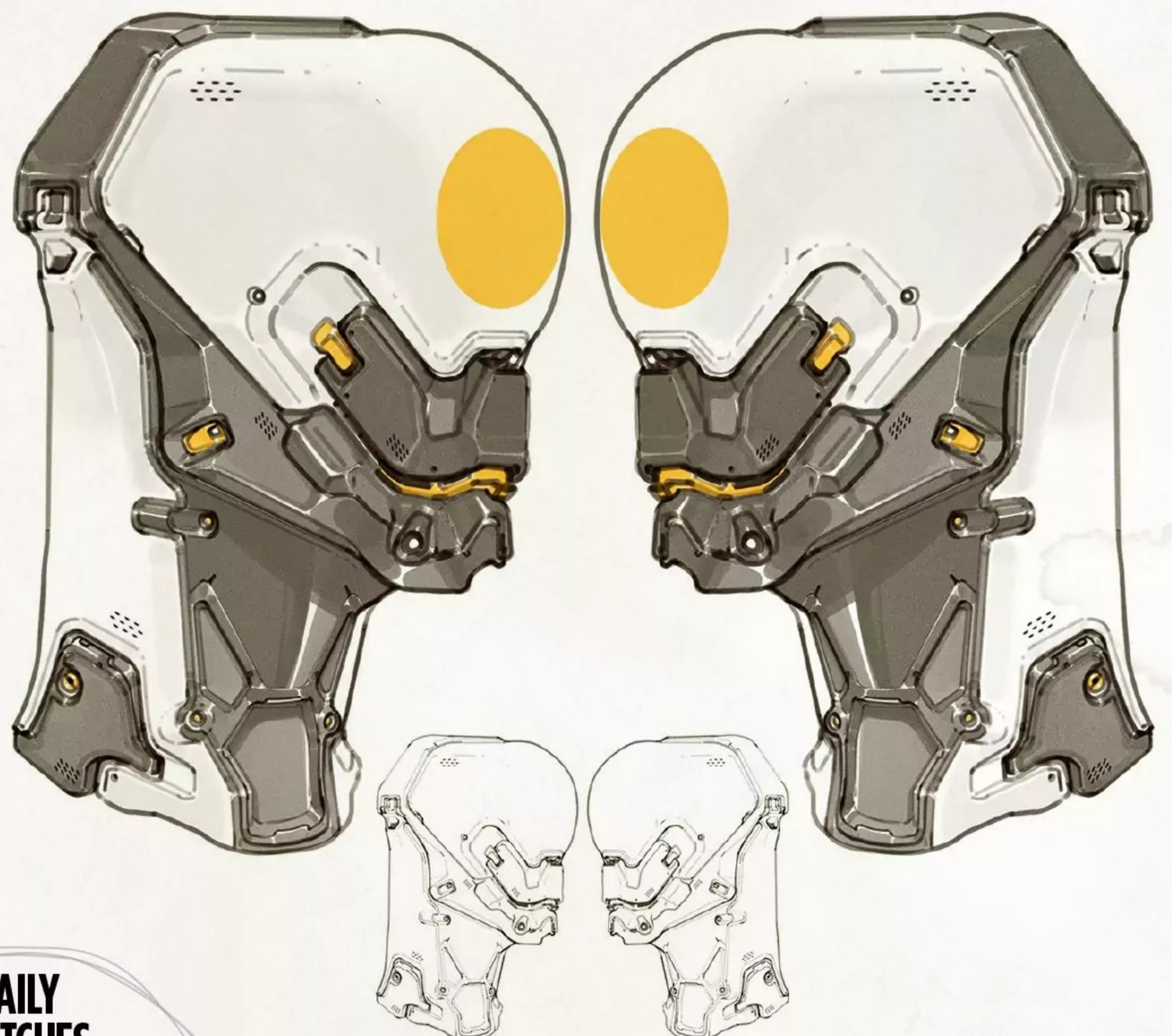
SKETCH COLLECTION 2025

"I often create visually driven designs that prioritise aesthetics over function. I treat these pieces as exercises to sharpen my understanding of core design principles such as hierarchy, repetition, balance, contrast, framing and emphasis. They aren't meant to serve a practical purpose - only to explore and refine my visual design skills."

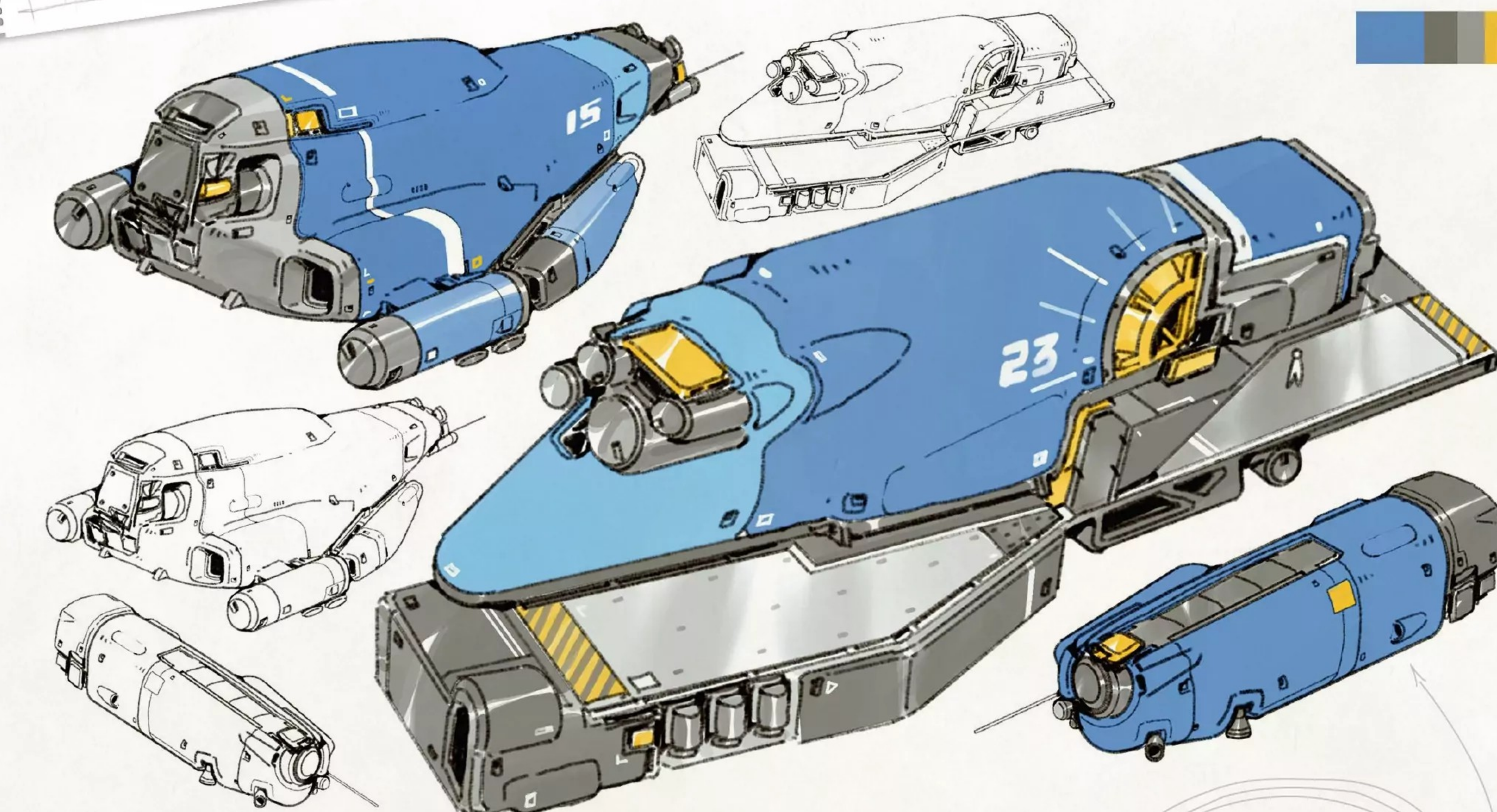


DAILY SKETCHES

"I'll often just go with the flow and let my imagination run wild. It's like playing with LEGO, but instead of building with bricks I'm using a limited visual library to find new ways to use the same shape or details."

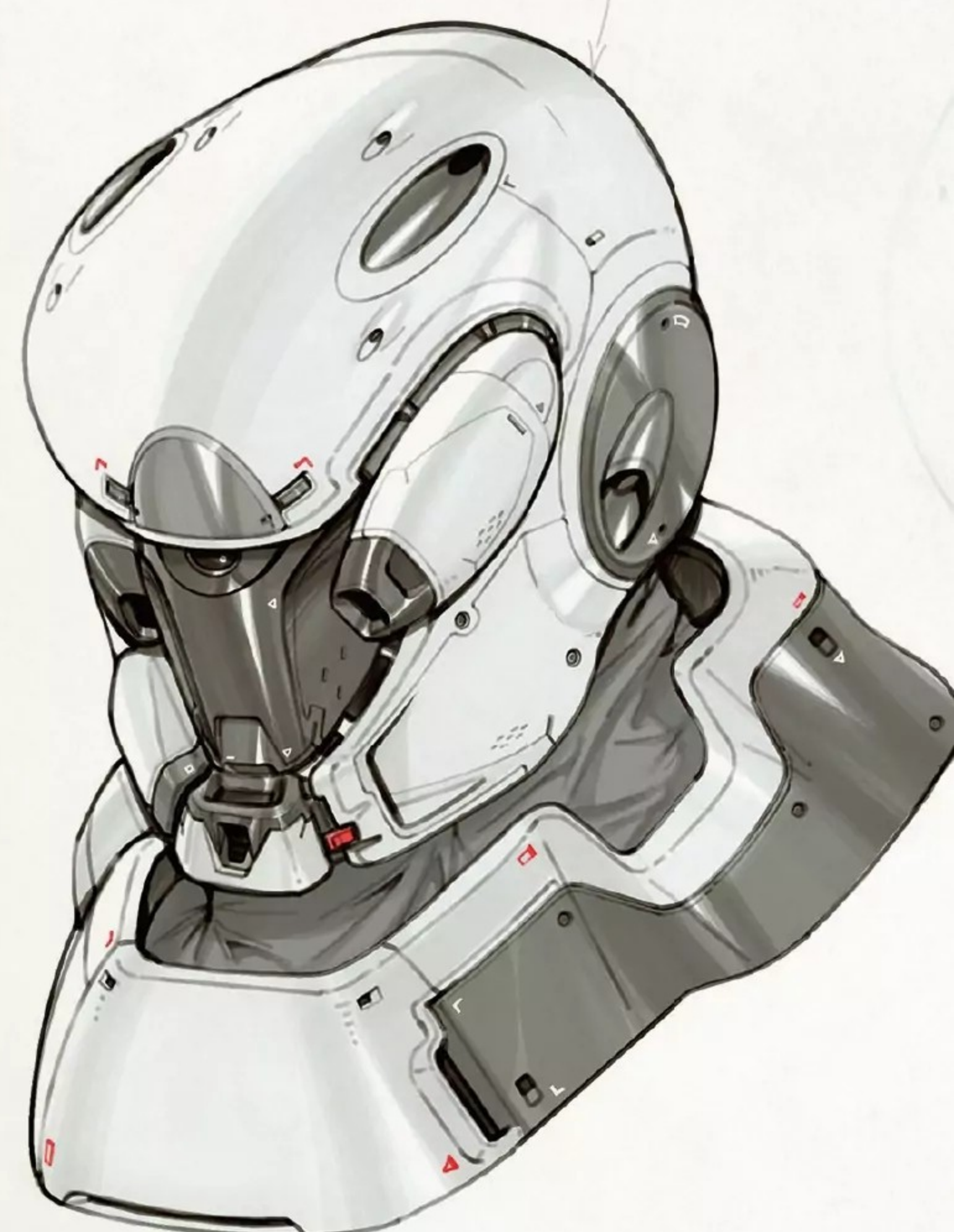
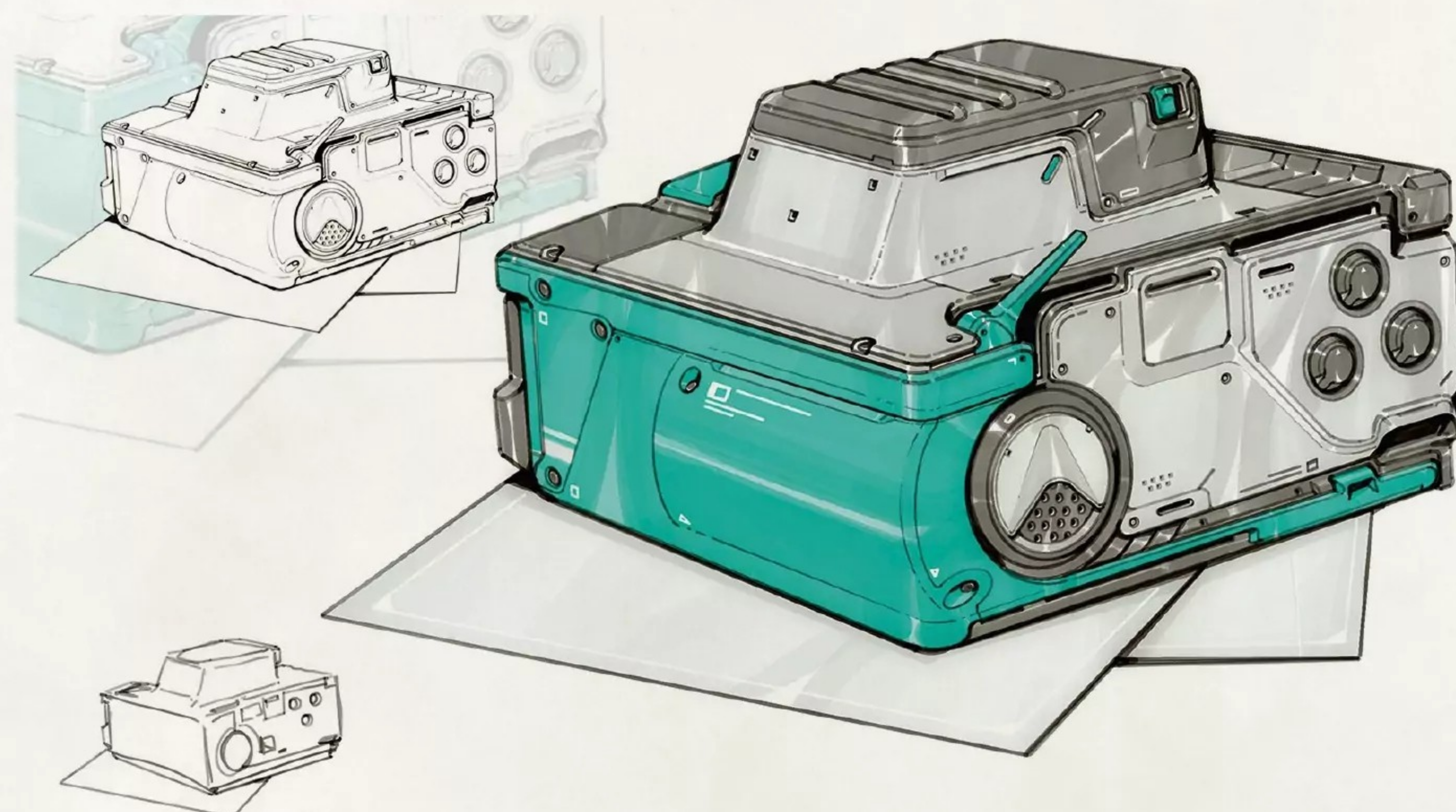
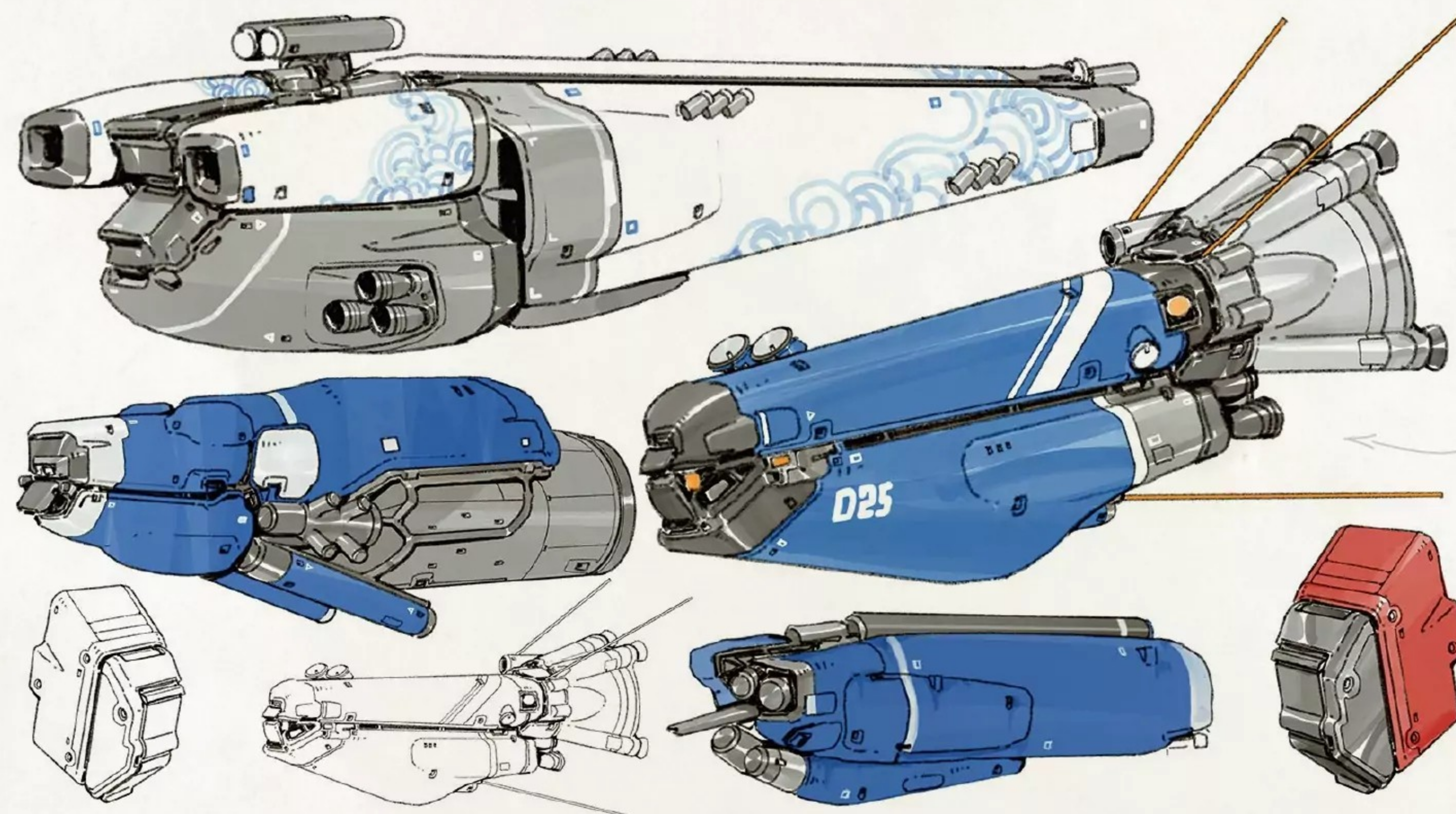


“ I'll often just go with the flow and let my imagination run wild ”

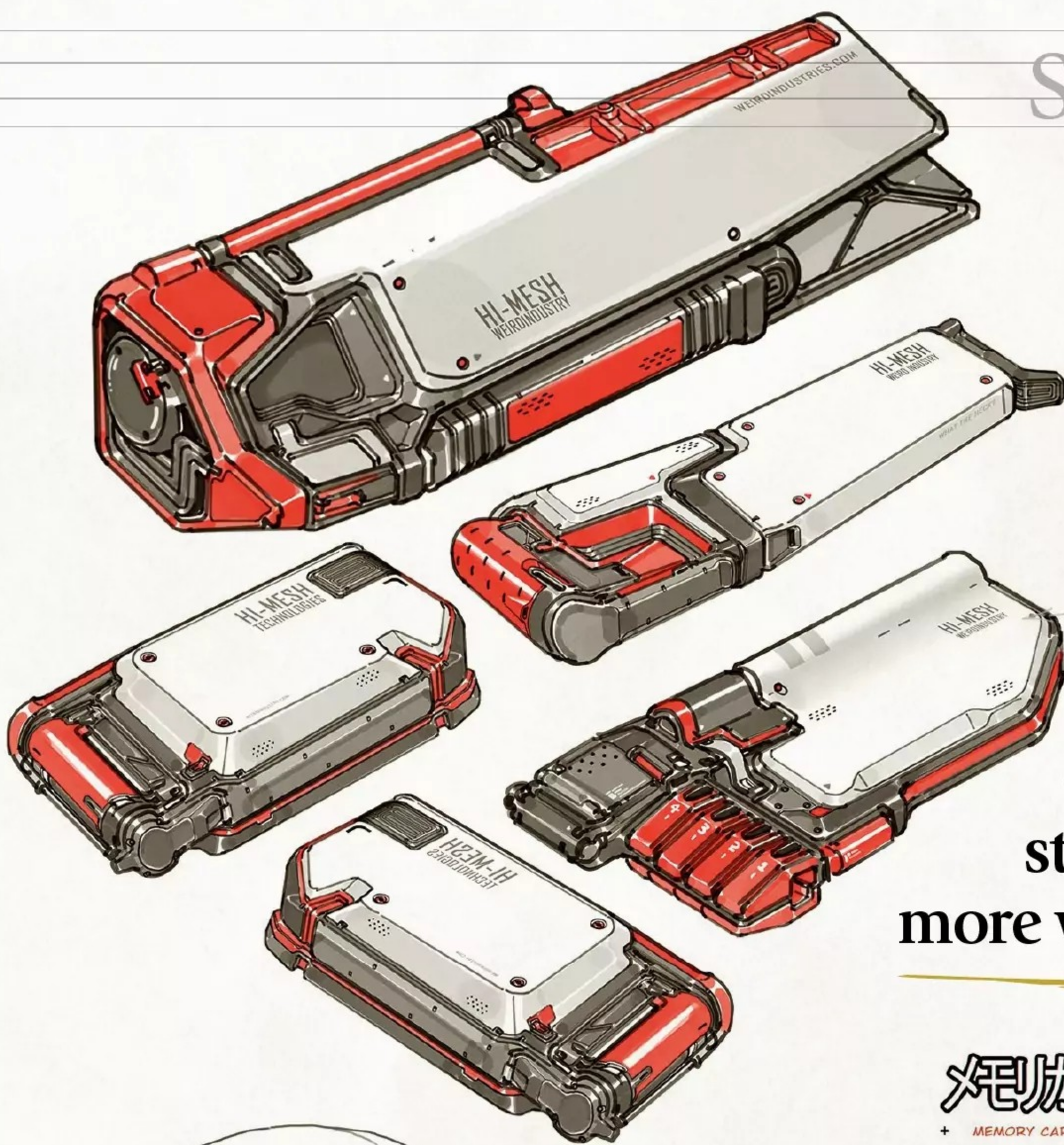


PROCREATE SKETCHES

"After recently buying an iPad I wanted to see whether the tablet can be used for professional-level work, and I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the visuals it can generate. I used Procreate to sketch spaceship and helmet designs, and developed some form-over-function artworks such as the radio. I think each design took me a couple of hours to complete - I hope you like them! Once I've installed some decent 3D tools I'll be able to transfer my workflow onto the tablet. It's great to see how fast tech is evolving for artists."

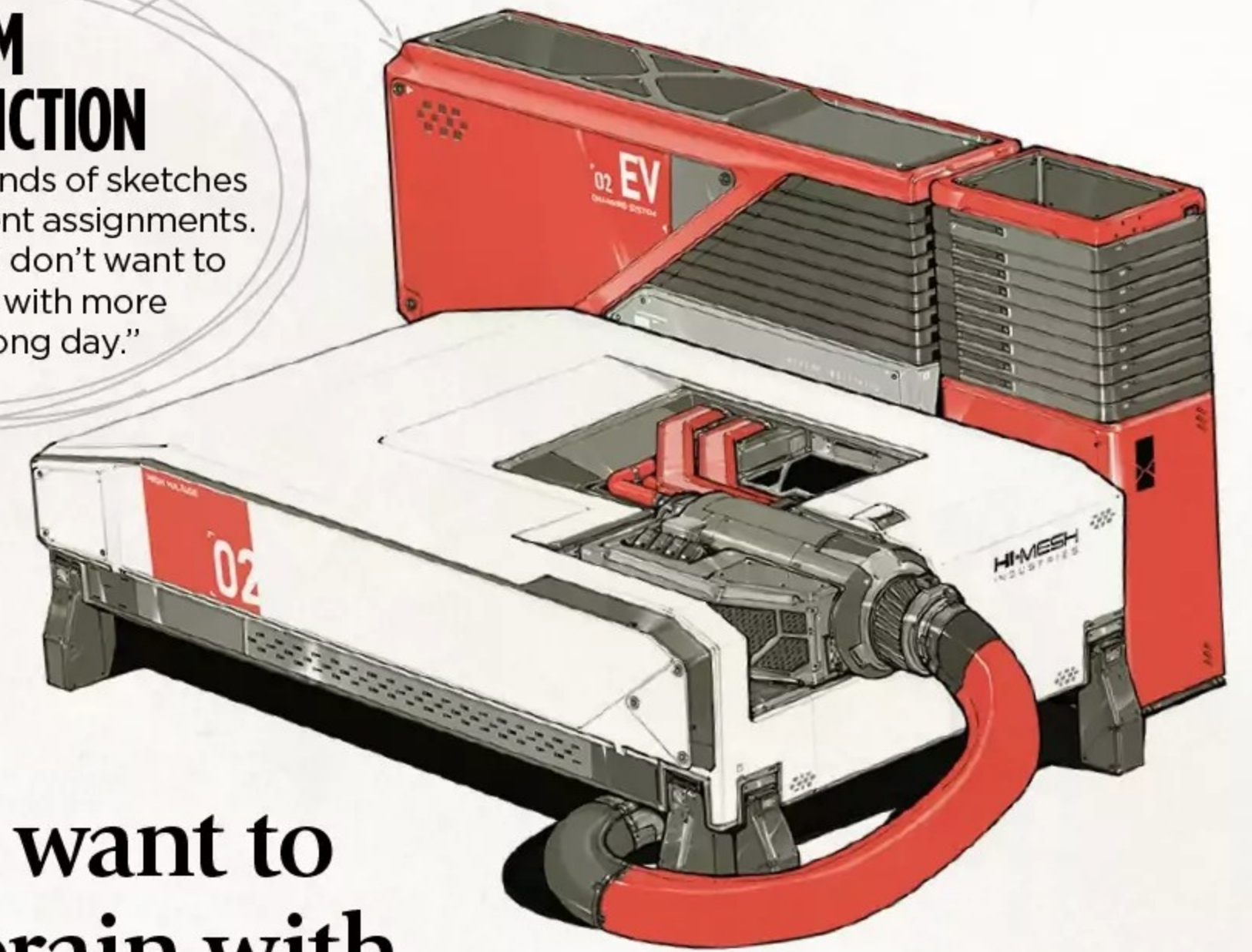


Sketchbook Himesh Anand



FORM OVER FUNCTION

"I usually do these kinds of sketches after completing client assignments. While doing these I don't want to stress my brain with more work after a long day."



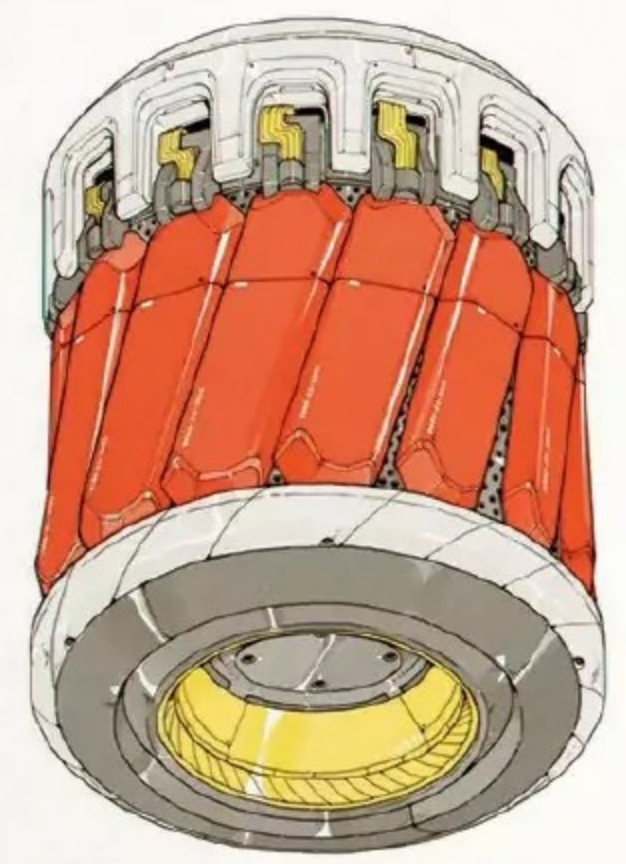
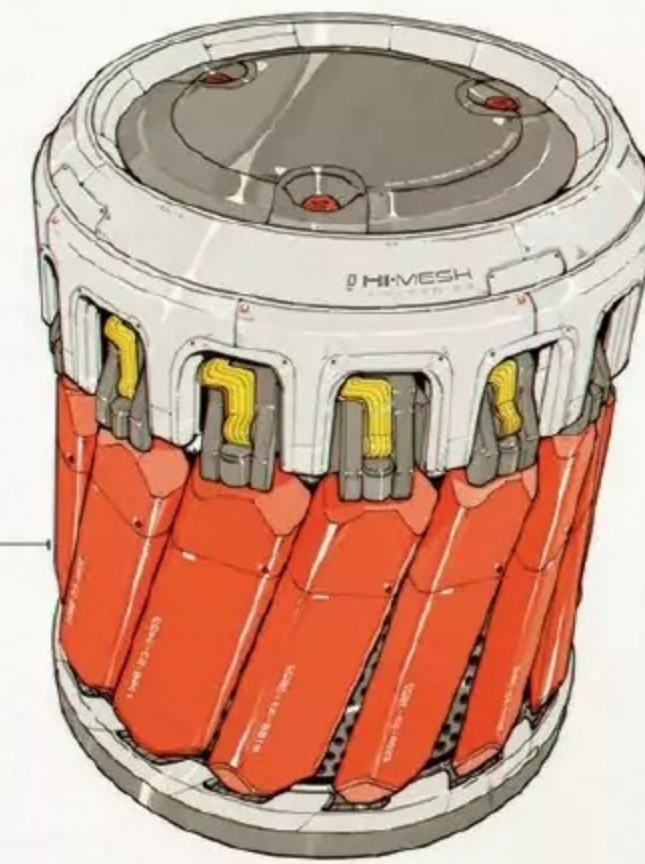
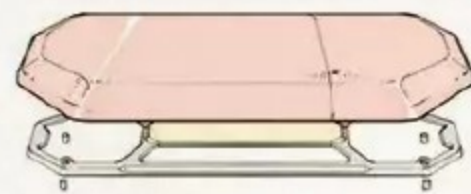
"I don't want to stress my brain with more work after a long day"

メモリーカード

+ MEMORY CARTRIDGE +

THIS IS A MEMORY CARTRIDGE WHICH IS DEVELOPED BY TOKYO'S LEADING COMPANY "HI-MESH INDUSTRIES". EVERY SINGLE LIVING BEING IN FUTURE HAS THIS INSTALLED IN THEIR BRAINS AT BIRTH. IT DIRECTLY TAKES INFORMATION FROM THE BRAIN'S NEURONS AND CONVERTS THEM INTO BINARY DATA WHICH CAN BE LATER USED BY THE MILITARY/COPS TO FIND CLUES IN A MURDER MYSTERY SITUATION. THIS DATA CAN ALSO BE CONVERTED TO A VISUAL VIDEO/HOLOGRAM FORMAT USING A SPECIAL PROJECTOR DEVICE CALLED "MEMO-VIS".

ALSO SPECIFIC MEMORIES CAN BE PASSED DOWN TO FUTURE GENERATIONS TO REMEMBER THEIR OLD PARTNERS/PARENTS TO MAKE THEM FEEL CONNECTED.

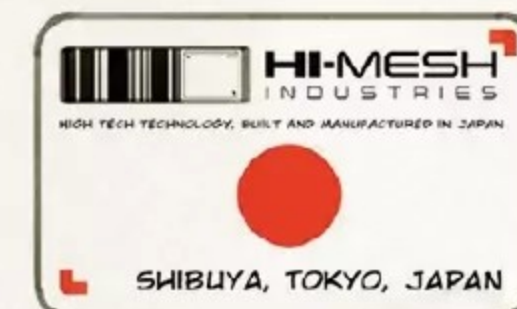
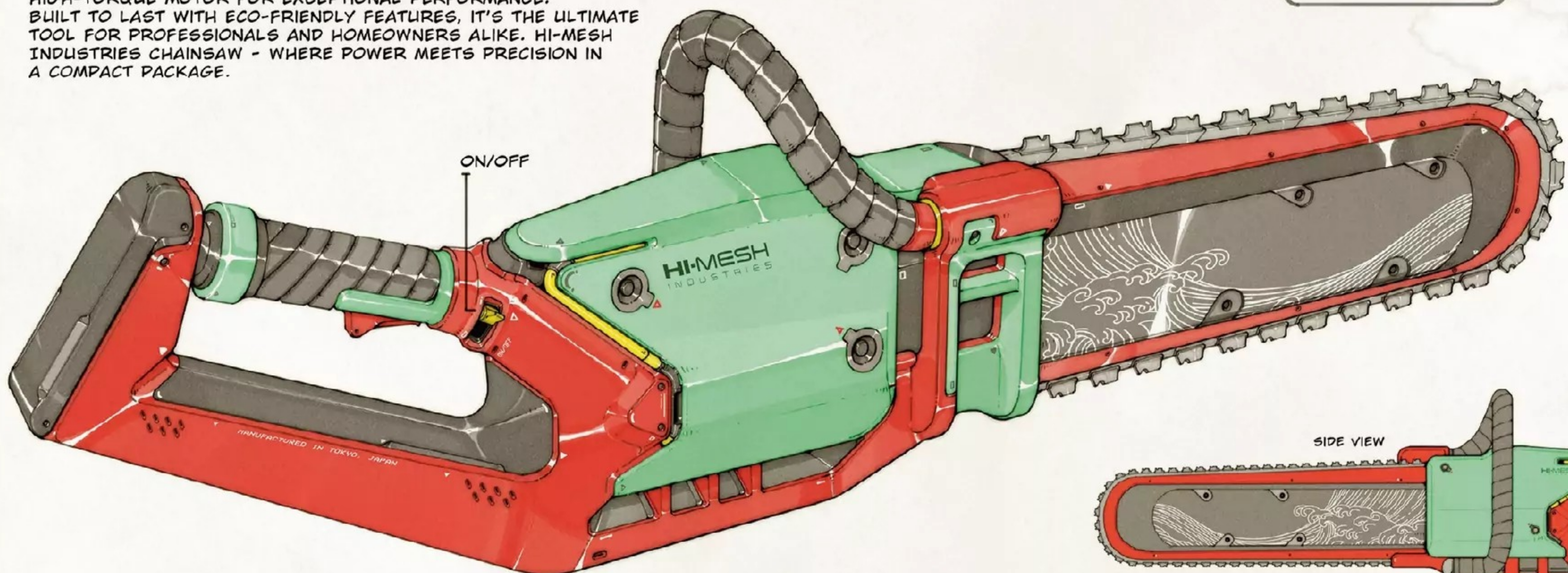


ARTSTATION CHALLENGE

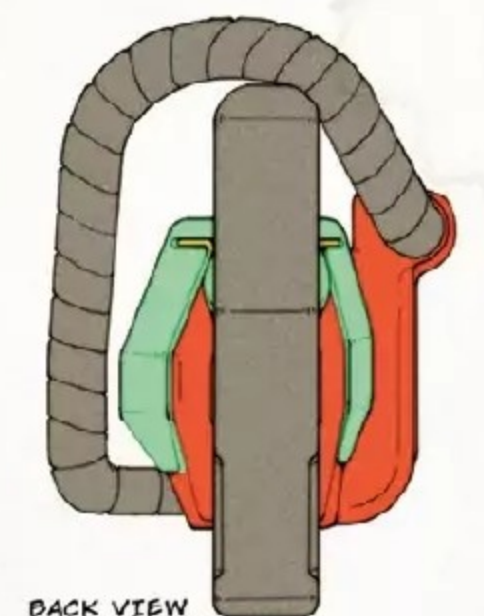
"These designs were done for ArtStation's Neo Tokyo: Exponential Reality Challenge contest, back in 2023. I imagined the prompt of a murder mystery story set in future Shibuya, Tokyo. It was a fun challenge to do! I got to learn a lot of things about storytelling and design."

chainsaw

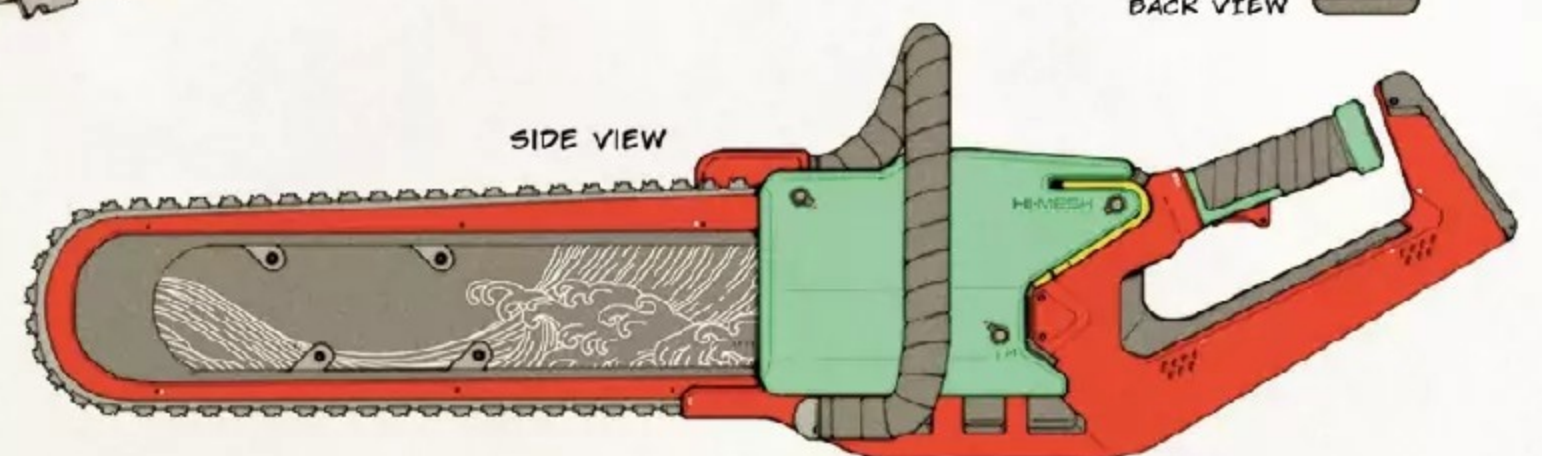
INTRODUCING HI-MESH INDUSTRIES CHAINSAW: POWER AND PRECISION REDEFINED. THIS COMPACT MARVEL COMBINES CUTTING-EDGE ENGINEERING WITH A HIGH-TORQUE MOTOR FOR EXCEPTIONAL PERFORMANCE. BUILT TO LAST WITH ECO-FRIENDLY FEATURES, IT'S THE ULTIMATE TOOL FOR PROFESSIONALS AND HOMEOWNERS ALIKE. HI-MESH INDUSTRIES CHAINSAW - WHERE POWER MEETS PRECISION IN A COMPACT PACKAGE.



HI-MESH INDUSTRIES



BACK VIEW



SIDE VIEW

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

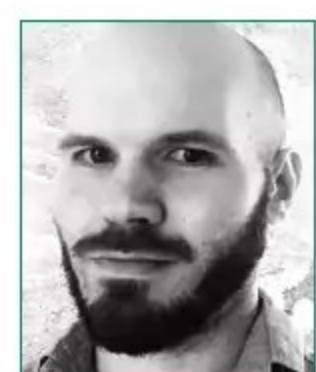
ROLE CALL

Detective Grimoire and the cast of his latest murder mystery, The Mermaid Mask, out now on PC, PlayStation 5, Switch 2 and 1.

DEDUCING DIMENSIONS

Adam Vian, creative director of SFB Games, talks to Alan Wen about developing the studio's expressive styles for its murder-mystery Detective Grimoire series

The history of video games can often be framed through technological advancement where developers move from low-resolution 2D to more realistic 3D creations. But it would be a mistake to place 2D art as nostalgic when it can evolve based on the artist's own developing tastes and influences, such as with **Adam Vian**.



Having spent more than 20 years making games with his brother Tom, from when they were still teenagers, he has made a large number of browser-based games and animations as the Super Flash Bros, before the two founded SFB Games where they have worked with major platform holders like Nintendo and Apple.

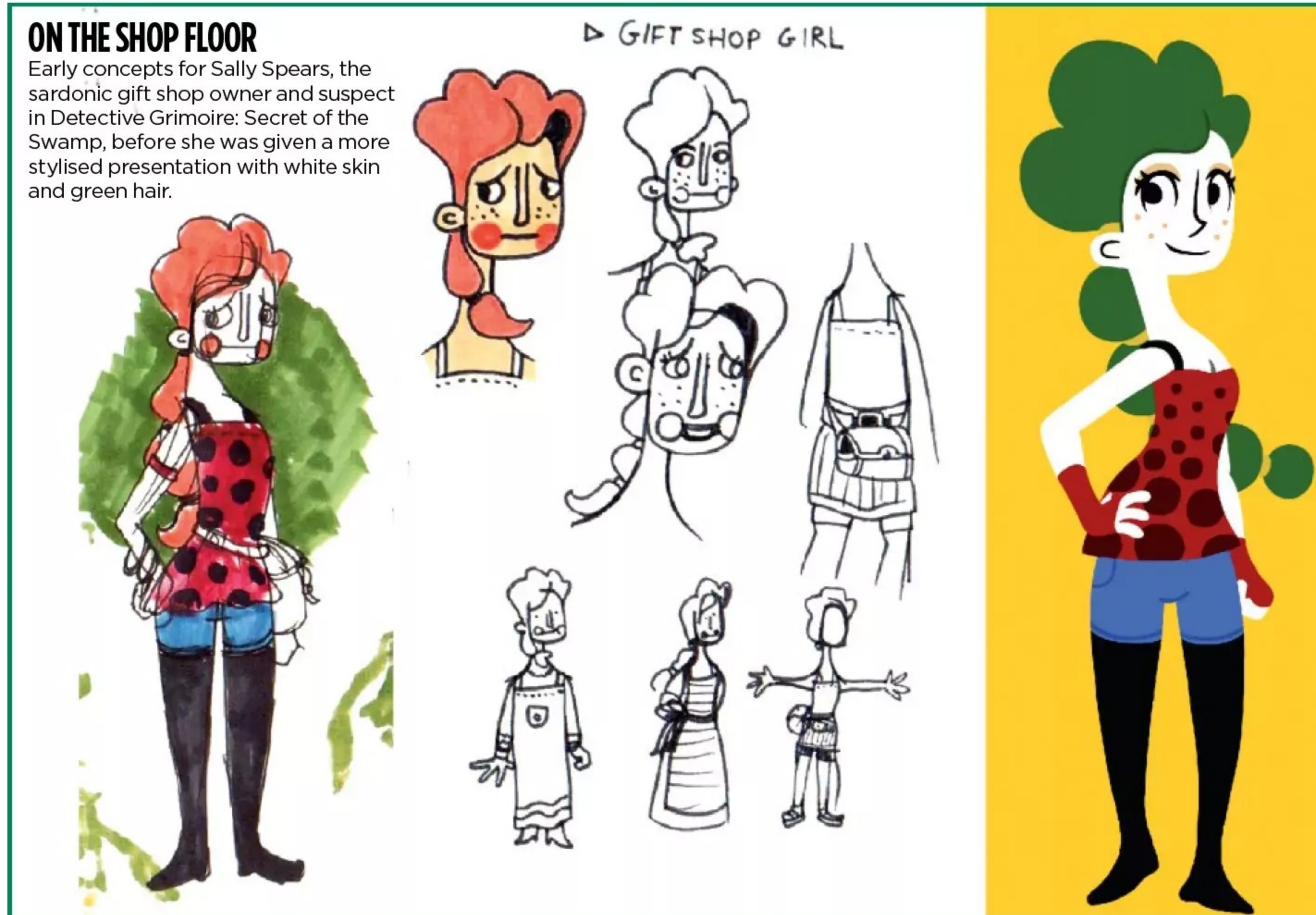
While the studio has tried its hand at different types of games, it also has its own series in Detective Grimoire, a murder-mystery adventure originally inspired by Capcom's Ace Attorney series. With the upcoming release of The Mermaid Mask, the fourth outing for the eponymous detective, Adam shares his insight into how this series' aesthetic has evolved over the years since its Adobe Flash debut.

Adam, how did you begin your career in games?

With my brother Tom, we got started with Flash back in the early 2000s on a website called Newgrounds. It seemed kind of accessible, like something a teenager could make. Video game parodies were a big thing, and the internet didn't have copyright detection, so you could just post stuff with copyrighted characters or music. Technically, our first game was called Kirby's Star Scramble, because Kirby is easy to draw, and it did okay on Newgrounds. Then we were making

ON THE SHOP FLOOR

Early concepts for Sally Spears, the sardonic gift shop owner and suspect in Detective Grimoire: Secret of the Swamp, before she was given a more stylised presentation with white skin and green hair.



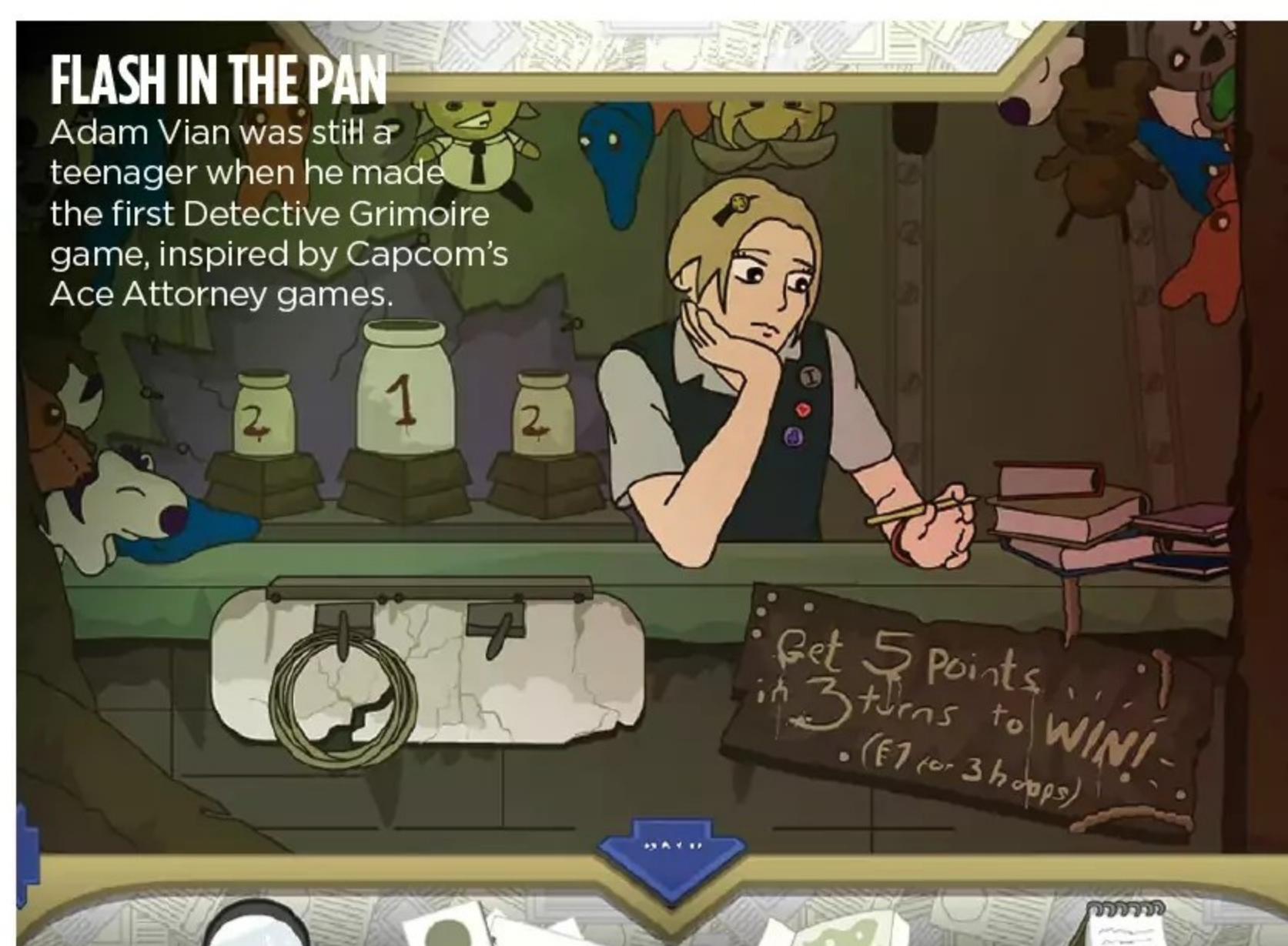
a game in a week, really quickly, with Tom as the programmer and me as the artist and animator.

How did making Flash games help you develop as both an artist and game developer?

It was a blissful existence because you could make a game quickly, throw it online immediately, and you start getting feedback and reviews that second. I always think that was this amazing kind of accelerant for us, where we got through all of our bad ideas really quickly. They say everyone has a thousand bad drawings in them and you have to get them out of the way before you can do a good drawing. For us, it's like everyone has

FLASH IN THE PAN

Adam Vian was still a teenager when he made the first Detective Grimoire game, inspired by Capcom's Ace Attorney games.



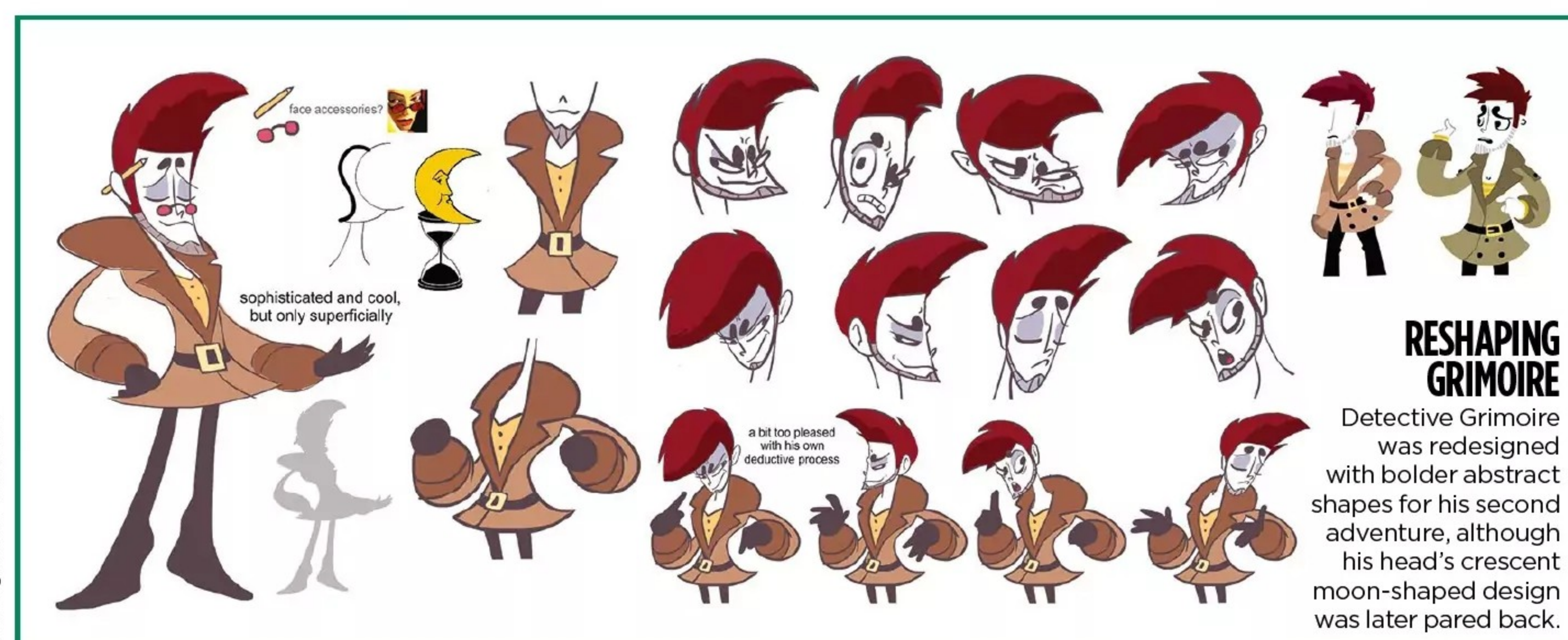
a hundred bad games in them, and we did them really quickly!

How did Detective Grimoire emerge from this prolific period?

We had just played Ace Attorney: Phoenix Wright. We'd grown up playing adventure games like Monkey Island and Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis, and then we played Phoenix Wright and thought it was amazing that this is a game where all you really did is click on things and talk to people, and the characters are wacky and it's funny, and we wanted to make something like this.

I was probably 17 when we started, and I wasn't very creative or pushing boundaries. The detective was just a guy in a brown trenchcoat with brown hair, just like the go-to protagonist probably inspired by Guybrush Threepwood and also Detective Gumshoe in Ace Attorney. ➡

“You could make a game quickly, throw it online, and start getting feedback”



RESHAPING GRIMOIRE

Detective Grimoire was redesigned with bolder abstract shapes for his second adventure, although his head's crescent moon-shaped design was later pared back.



CONSTANT GARDENER

Catherine Unger was responsible for the background art in the Grimoire series, such as this garden in Tangle Tower.

➔ How has the character design evolved since the first game?

When we made the first one, I was in foundation college, and I didn't have weird cool influences. I was just drawing whatever came to mind – a basic go-to cartoon style.

Then for the next three years, I went to art school [University for the Creative Arts] studying art for illustration and animation. My art style finally took in interesting influences. I also met amazingly talented artists, namely Catherine Unger, who came on board to work on every Grimoire game since. Not only is she a fantastic artist, but she's so useful to have around during pre-production. I basically use her as a sounding board all day, every day, on ideas, and then we'll bash them out together. That's a really healthy thing. Not only is she bringing her own ideas,

MYSTERY ENSEMBLE (ABOVE)

The cast of Detective Grimoire: Secret of the Swamp, the first visual overhaul of the Grimoire series after its original web/Flash debut.

but she's providing me with someone to bounce ideas off all the time.

What artistic influences characterise the Grimoire series?

I redesigned Grimoire completely because he needed to be more interesting and more funny. For Secret of the Swamp, the characters suddenly had this style with pure white skin, as I really wanted the characters to be cleanly visible against the backdrop. I think that was influenced by The Thief and the Cobbler, a famously unfinished film by Richard Williams. I was also really inspired by Genndy Tartakovsky, who created Dexter's Laboratory and Samurai Jack. His philosophy is that a good shape is



PRIVATE EYE

Grimoire still retains some of his original characteristics, including his detective's trenchcoat, brown hair, and being a bit goofy.

FROM NPC TO SIDEKICK

Sally went from a suspect to a co-star, though it's never really explained why she tags along with Grimoire. That change of role came with an altered appearance including a new hairstyle.

good character design, and that's all it is. So I really tried to push the shape of the characters, they'll be big, long, thin, heads up here and mouths down here, and all over the place.

When we did Tangle Tower, Catherine and I got better at art, and we felt Secrets of the Swamp had aged, so we started again, designing Grimoire with more colour, rounded the edges a bit, made it more blobby, soft, and cartoony. Then The Mermaid Mask is the first time that we didn't chuck out the art style – we were able

“I redesigned Grimoire completely because he needed to be more interesting and more funny”





HEADS UP

Earlier concepts for teenage inventor Fifi, where her huge red hair and eye-glass on the side makes it look as if she has the head of a poodle.

to just reuse the engine, character design and some animations. It's the first one that actually reads as a sequel in the sense that it's not starting from scratch in any regard.

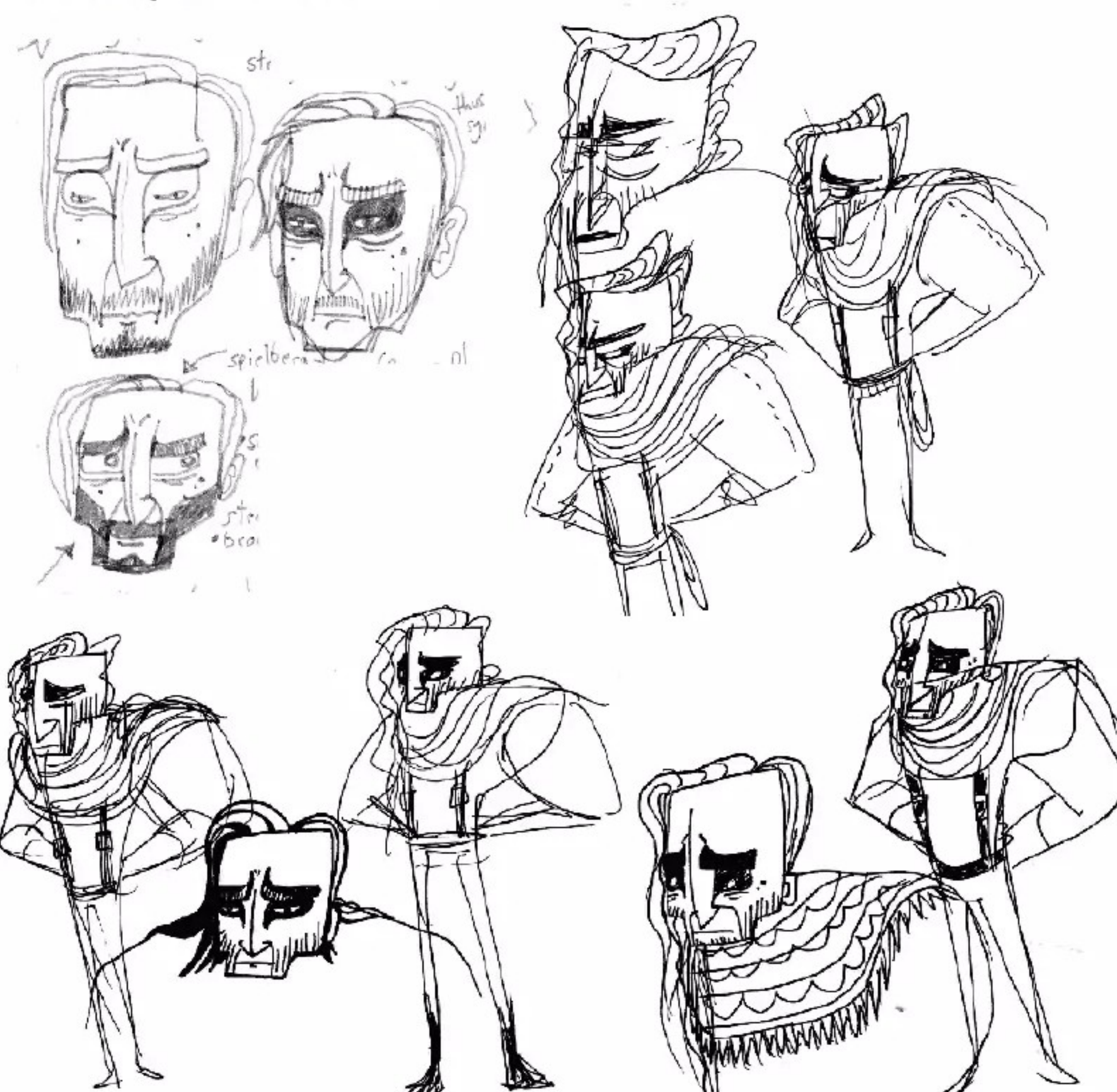
As creative director, how do you collaborate with other artists during development?

The Grimoire games have this long pre-production phase where we're designing the world, we're designing the story, we're designing the characters, and we're designing the clues, and it takes a long time, and a lot of iteration. We'll start with a vague location and basic ideas, then Catherine and I will start sketching what we think someone might look like, and we just draw loosely.

For this game in particular, we both independently went away to draw our idea of what the character would look like and didn't show each other until we have both done at least one drawing. Then we come together ➡

ABSTRACT ADVENTURES

The early concepts for Felix took a very abstract form where his face almost resembles a mask, though this was ultimately dialled back.

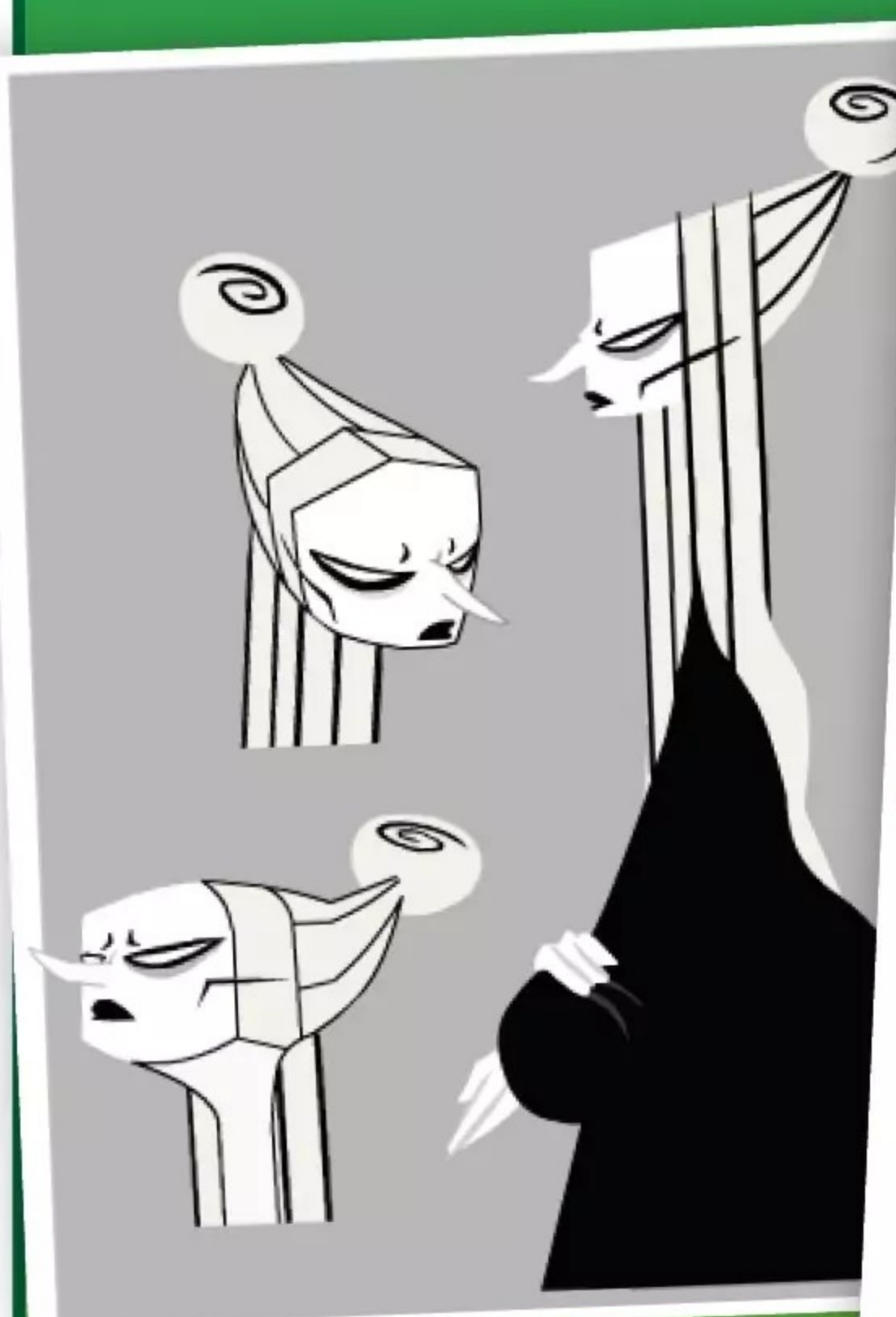


SHAPING THE LOOK

Adam reflects on the tension between abstract and more human character design within his games

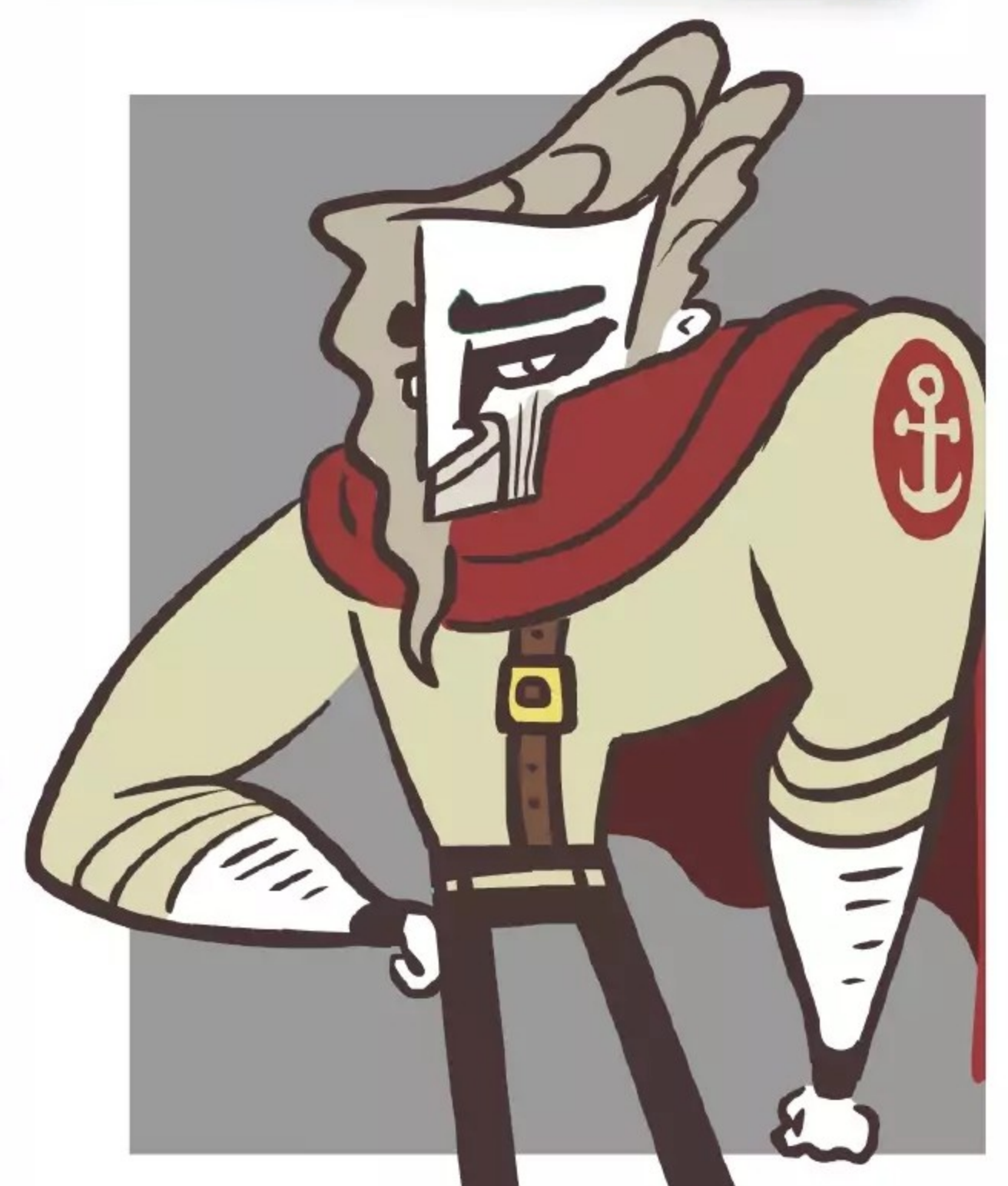
"In Tangle Tower, there's a character called Flora Fellow, and every time I see her character design, I go, how did we get away with this? Because she's just a triangle, then a really long neck, and this weird helicopter-shaped head on top. I had no idea what her anatomy would be if you could see it. It's always a lesson to me that you can push the designs further than you think, and once it's done, they just take on a life. The Mermaid's Mask's characters are more nuanced and sophisticated

in every way conceivable because we need them to emote more. It's a heavier game with heavier themes. It's more emotional, it's more involved, there's a lot more back story for everyone. So in many ways they are better, but I do think that in this desire to give them real human traits, we've slightly left behind some of the most abstract, shape-driven design that we had. When I look back at Poppy, Fifi, and Flora in Tangle Tower, those are really brave shapes."



FULL FLORA

Flora's minimal expressive concept stays boldly the same in her final form.



Feature

➡ and compare them. Then we both draw again, now being influenced by each other's thoughts, and create a sort of mix of the two. We go back and forth on that. Then the animator, Charlotte Harris, also draws the characters a lot because she has to work out how they'll look when they move, and what they look like from the side.

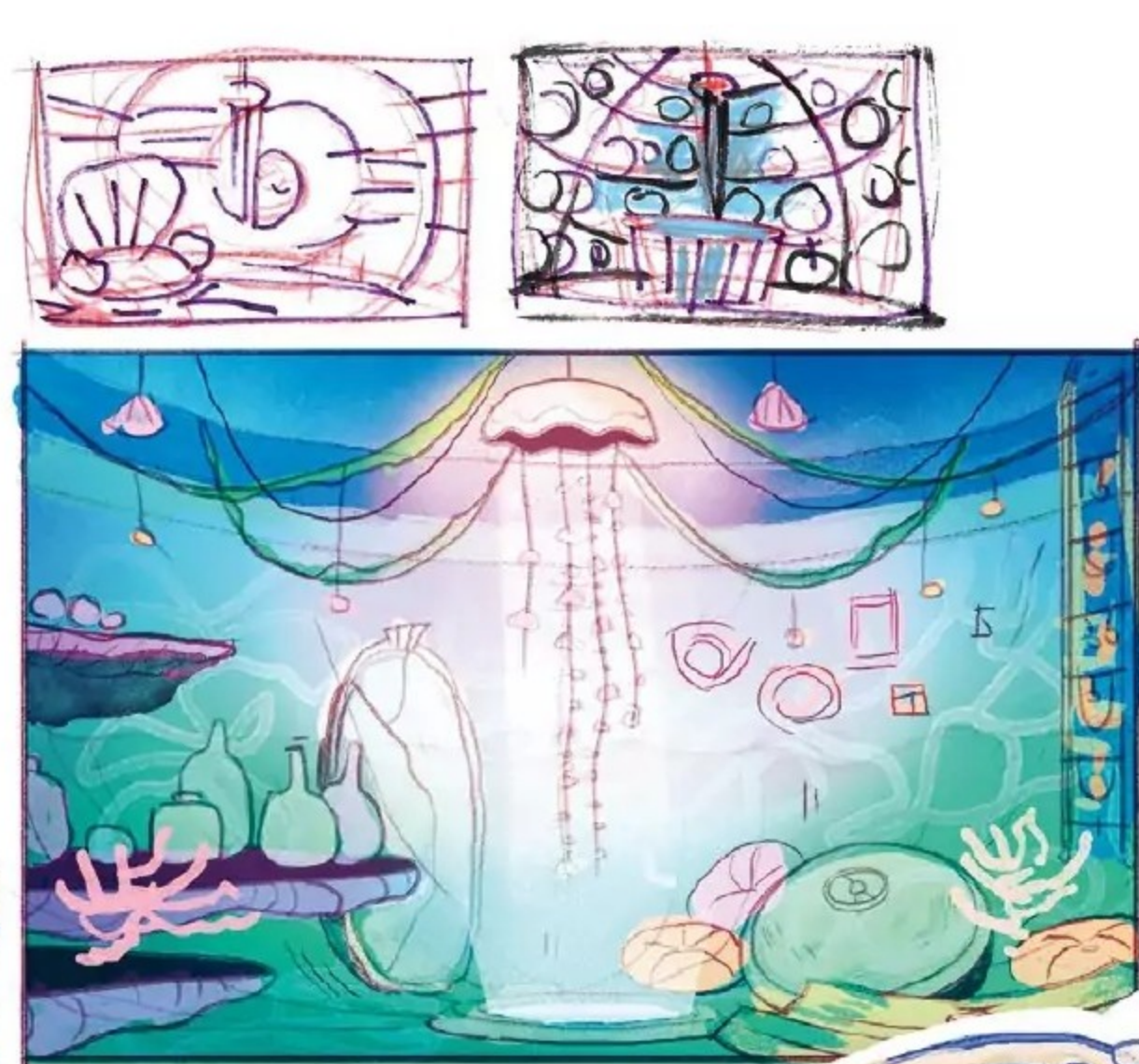
We had to basically design each character with a full range of emotion. How do they look when they blink? What do their teeth look like? The kind of body language they might have is so much that goes into the process of designing the characters because you end up staring at them for most of the game, so they have to be really complete and good.

“We had to basically design each character with a full range of emotion”

How did you introduce 3D into The Mermaid Mask without compromising the series' hand-drawn 2D style?

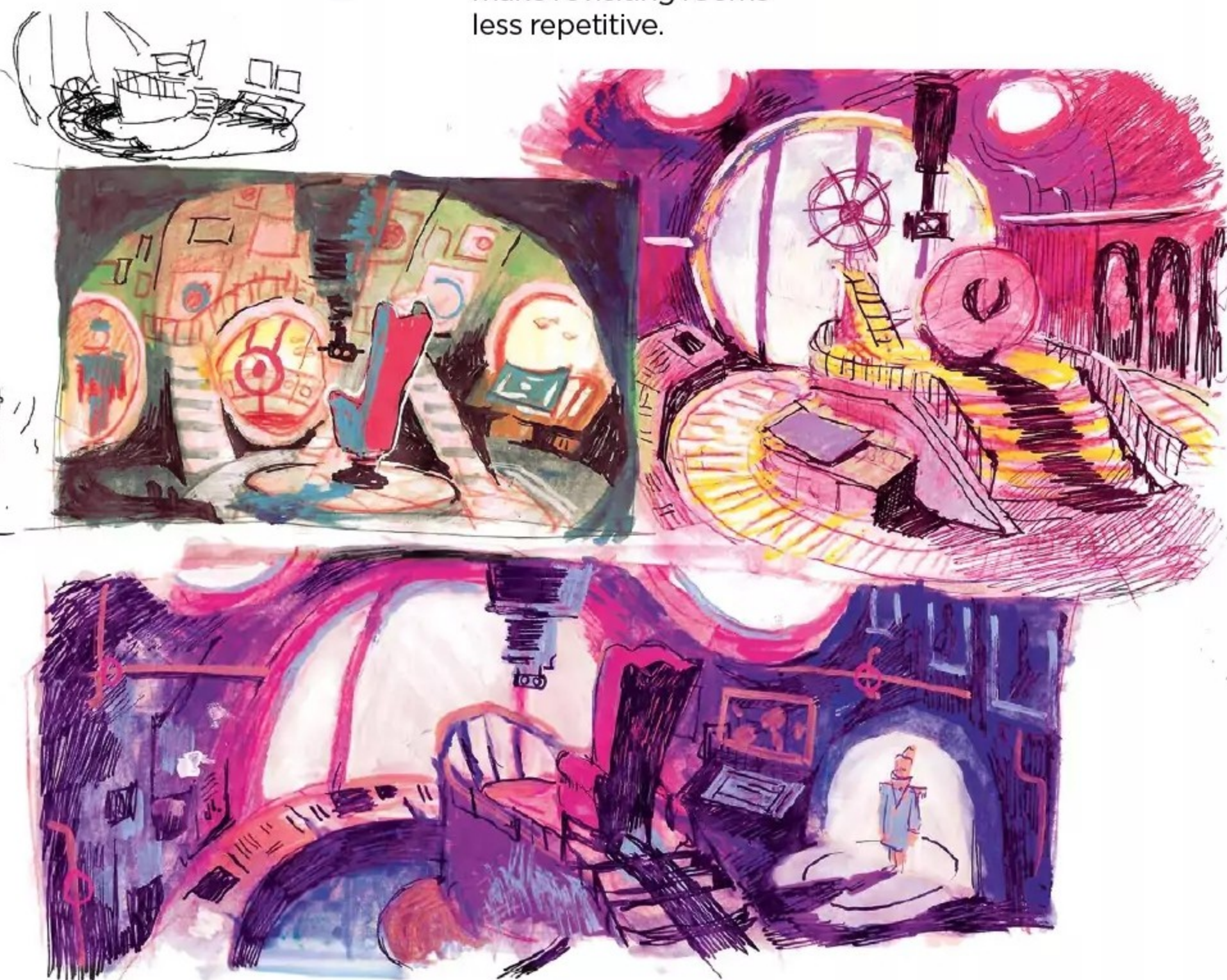
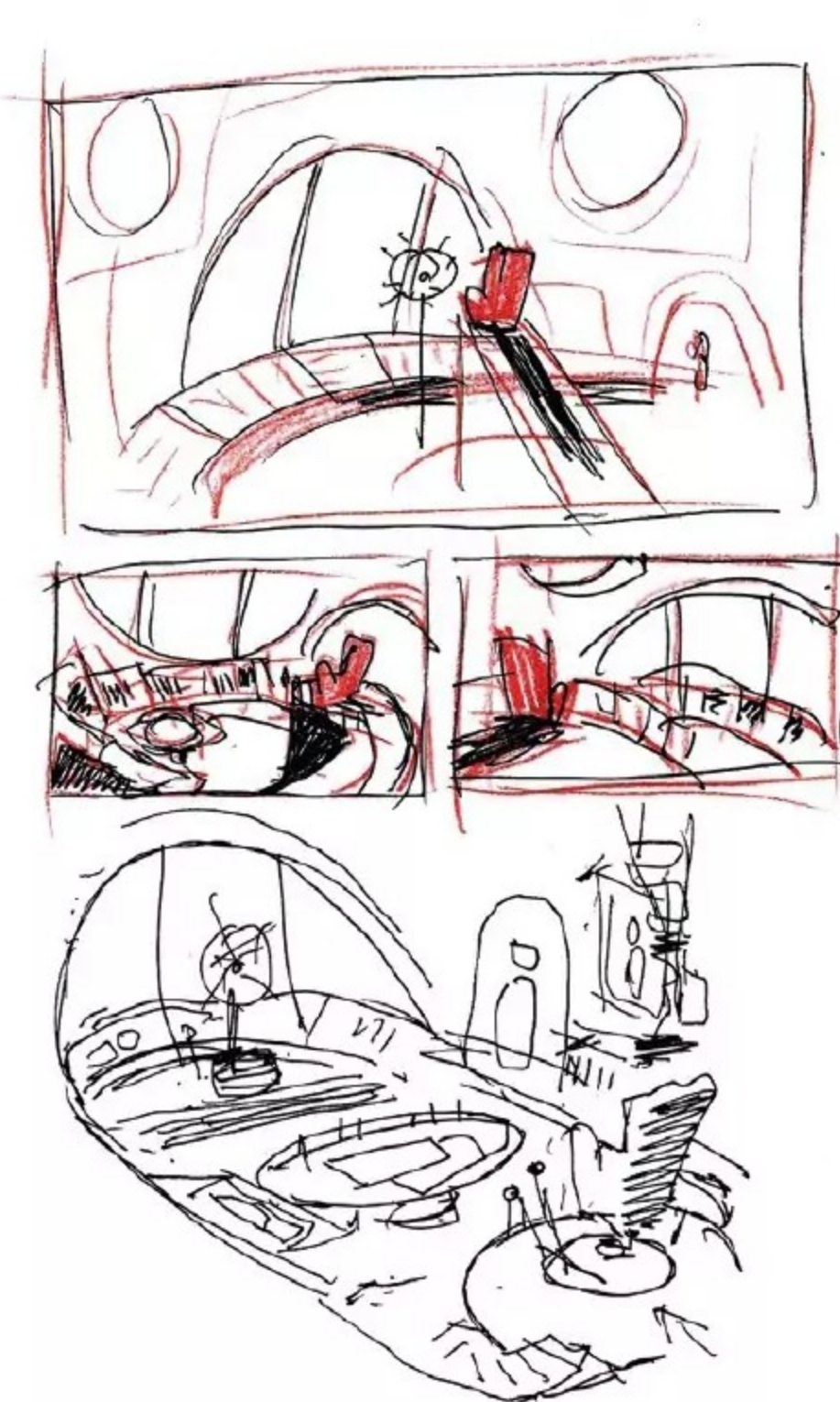
There were a couple of artists online who posted 3D fan art of Catherine's personal artwork, turning her painting style into 3D. We looked at those and were like, that's so cool. It was also born out of a desire to make the clues more interesting. In Tangle Tower, they're just one drawn picture, and that's it. But wouldn't it be more fun if you could look behind it, or if it's a book, wouldn't you want to open it?

We found a 3D artist called Kindra Dantone, and they matched Catherine's style exactly. So Catherine would paint



COLOUR AND LIGHT

The Mermaid Mask doesn't necessarily have more backgrounds, but time passing reflected in the change of lighting and colour tones can make revisiting rooms less repetitive.



the clue up to the final concept phase, and then Kindra would model it and paint a texture to match what Catherine would have painted. The final step is that Tom has programmed a bit of tech art that dynamically generates a coloured outline around the edge of the model, which is what it would have looked like if Catherine painted it, with a dynamic wobble to look like a brushstroke.

I really think the 3D clues are the big selling point in the game because there's so much juice in them. It's a lot

SYMMETRICAL DESIGN

The Mermaid Mask's youngest suspect, Symmetry (or Sym to her friends) was designed to appear delicate, as if she might get blown away by a gust of wind.



more like an interactive video game where you get a lot more hands-on rather than like a visual novel.

What advice would you give artists wanting to make games today?

I made lots of small games really quickly. That was the Flash game scene. An equivalent today might be making something in Unity, then putting it on itch.io for free. If you can make it so it's playable in the browser, you can link your friends to it on social media and they can play it and leave a review.

The best thing you can do to gain experience is to actually finish a project, because finishing something – getting it ready for release – is half the battle. So if you pick a small project, you get to that phase quicker and you actually experience it. The worst mistake is making your magnum opus too early and never finishing it. There are lots of people who have grand ideas, like making an open-world RPG, and it never ever gets made because they didn't have the skills, then they become frustrated and disappointed. ●



LAND, HO

Background concept of a town square illustrating how just one backdrop can still create a sense of depth, including something in the foreground.



BIGGEST SUSPECT

Concept art for parapsychologist Dr. Zephyr, whose flowing robes and large size made him particularly difficult to animate.

MURDER VICTIM

Every Grimoire game is a murder mystery, and in the case of The Mermaid Mask, the murder victim is the enigmatic and slightly vampiric-looking Magnus Mortuga, the ex-captain of the submarine that you'll be investigating.



FOCUSING ON THE FACES

Character-focused games need more expressive characters, as Adam tells us

"There's a million games that have a dialogue system where there's just a big portrait on screen, with a shrug and hands on hips, and I always find those woefully insufficient. We've gone the other direction where we put way too much work into ours so we can animate them fully. Each character has between five to eight poses. Then each of those poses has a range of faces where they can have 15 different eyes. Then we have two mouth flaps: a happy mouth flap when they're talking about something that makes them happy, and a mouth flap when they talk about something more serious. It's a lot of work. But because it's a game where you mostly just talk to people, we felt like we had to make it as entertaining and high quality as possible, because otherwise you just get bored staring at a character who's just standing there."



HALF-MERMAID

Deep-sea diver Madam Tadpole arguably leans closer to Tangle Tower's more abstract designs, notably her very particular head shape, although the supposed gills on her neck are in fact just a tattoo.

PAINTING A DOCTOR'S CHAMBER

Catherine Unger shares the design steps behind creating a point-and-click environment for SFB Games' new game, *The Mermaid Mask*.



This room belongs to a doctor who experiments on dreams. The goal was to create a space that felt like a blend of 18th century doctor's infirmary, a cabinet of curiosities, and a Frankenstein-inspired laboratory. The pink dream-like palette evolved because I introduced a surreal stained-glass dome above the whole room that symbolised a giant dreamcatcher.

Before an environment painting for a point-and-click game can be finalised, a significant amount of design work needs to align. The challenge is balancing the artwork with the practical needs of gameplay, ensuring everything interactive is readable and positioned to support environmental storytelling without making them too obvious. Achieving that balance requires a great deal of planning and iterating.

Artist PROFILE

Catherine Unger

LOCATION: England

Catherine was born and raised in London. She's provided artwork and art direction for numerous award-winning games since 2011.

<https://bit.ly/3QJxMx7>

Add definition

I create offset outlines by duplicating shape layers, adding a stroke, setting the Fill to 0, and slightly shifting them. It's an easy cheat that helps add definition throughout the piece while also helping it feel closer to a more traditional hand-drawn piece of art.

Textured layers

Nearly every surface of this image has a rich brushy texture that I incorporate using subtle low-opacity layers. Even smooth gradients are broken up with a textured brush. Flat colour is used sparingly to introduce contrasting visual breaks which guide the viewer's eye to key areas of the composition.

Leading lines

I used several methods to pull the eye towards the image's focal point. The shelving creates leading lines, while elsewhere light and shadow help to establish visual priority. Finally, the rug and sprawling wire help to bridge the gap between the foreground and background, but also guides the viewer to the point of interest.





Unsettling ambience

I wanted this room to feel unsettling, so juxtaposed the fruity colour palette with classic sinister imagery (skulls, chains and so on). I framed the scene with dark foreground shelves. This is a visual trick to make the viewer feel as though they're intruding and have stumbled across something they shouldn't have.



How I create...

A STRONG GAME ENVIRONMENT



1 Sketching ideas

Using researched mood boards and images, I sketch out a lot of very rough compositions. I prefer working on paper first, because it keeps me loose and takes away an element of pressure for it to look perfect at the start. Sometimes my most messiest thumbnails are where the final ideas come from.



2 Block out the scene

I begin the final background by blocking out the room with the Pen tool to build strong angular shapes. This base layer also gives me a solid starting point for balancing colours across the entire image. I often zoom out or squint to check how the artwork reads overall, ensuring that the composition feels balanced and the key elements stand out clearly.



3 Adding a final polish

Once happy with the foundation, I begin the long process of finalising the artwork, often using clipping masks on the original shapes. As this is for a point-and-click game, not a standard illustration where complexity is focused, the scene needs to feel rich, detailed and filled with elements players will want to examine.

Easy to process

Balancing richness and readability in a detail-heavy environment was challenging. A homogeneous palette helped flatten everything, but I added subtle colour accents to prevent it from feeling too monochromatic. Object repetition helped reinforce scale at different depths, while also reducing visual clutter and making the scene easier to process.



HOPE
AND
HOMES
FOR
CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



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

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

We must act now.

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

support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at:

www.hopeandhomes.org/donate. Or call **01722 790 111**

Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm.

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

In the event that funds raised exceed what is needed to deliver Hope and Homes for Children immediate and longer-term response to this crisis, we will use donations where the need is greatest.

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FOR CHILDREN



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NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

Workshops

**Workshop assets
are available...**

Download your resources by turning to page 5. And if you see the video workshop badge, you can watch the artist in action, too.



Advice from the world's best artists

54



60



64



66



72



This issue:

54 Discover secrets of a top game artist

Cole Eastburn takes you step by step through creating a villain's signature card for Hearthstone.

60 Illustrate epic fantasy covers

Andrea Piparo explains how he created an epic dragon battle scene for a fantasy novel cover.

64 Define a design early for storytelling

Thomas Bourdon reveals the process he takes when trying to tell a story through design.

66 Combine multiple art genres

Tristan Tait shows you how to boost your creativity by finding influence in art from the past.

72 Learn to create scale with framing

Wojtek Fus on painting a large-scale dramatic scene of a giant serpent frozen mid-death.

Photoshop, Clip Studio Paint & Krita

PAINT EPIC CARDS FOR HEARTHSTONE

Principal game artist **Cole Eastburn** teaches you to paint professional illustrations from start to finish

Artist PROFILE

Cole Eastburn
LOCATION: US

Cole has been an artist in the game industry for the last 22 years, including a long stint as a senior concept artist at Blizzard. <https://bit.ly/4vugthA>

In this tutorial I will guide you on my thought process and steps I take when approaching illustrations for clients such as Blizzard Entertainment, Games Workshop, Wizards of the Coast, and others. I

will go over the tools I use, brushes, layer types and much more, and the principles that I think about at each step to move me towards the finish piece. To discover more tutorials such as this, along with brushes and

the tools I use, visit my Patreon: patreon.com/cw/ColeEastburn. We have people of all different skill levels and love to help each other learn and grow on this life journey known as art!

RESOURCES

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PHOTOSHOP

CUSTOM BRUSHES:
PASTEL WET

Nice heavy texture stroke I will use for rough surface paint strokes.

BRISTLE FINE HAIR

I like this for going back into an area I painted and adding a stroke or two to give a nice painterly feel to some areas.

CHALK2

This is just a nice all-round general texture painting brush.

DUSTY TEXTURE

I like to use this as a nice soft base for metal, rock, leather, etc. Has a nice break-up and gives great shapes to paint from.

GET YOUR RESOURCES

See page 5 now!



1 The art brief

This is the very first step when working for a client professionally. You will be given an art brief with the goals of the piece, reference images you might need, and the mood that the art director or team is going for. From this, my mind tries to think of any and all things I can do to reinforce the mood and tone they want to sell before I even touch the paper. This brief called for 'Thalnos looking powerful'. A pretty nice broad description that gives us a lot of room to explore.

2 Thumbnailing

This step took me a long time to learn. Early on, I never gave thumbnails much thought: why do that when I can get right into the painting? I quickly learned don't do that. I paid the price later by having to rework entire backgrounds, or elements that should have been solved in the thumbnail. So for this stage, the main goal isn't to make a good drawing; it's to figure out major things such as big value groups, expression and tone, and to sell the story of the image. I think the first round of thumbs really just for me, they can look terrible, and like a bunch of scribbles. Remember the goal is problem-solving, not making a finished drawing here, so as long as you figured out you want a big dark scribble in front or behind the tree, and the tilt of the sword going left and up, that's the goal. Just make sure at the end, it is legible enough for the director to tell what the image will be. ➡➡

In depth Become a game artist



3 Different options

When thumbnailing, (depending on the art brief) I like to give different moods or feelings while still selling the tone or goal of the piece. For this one it was pretty much make Thalnol look cool. There are so many ways to do that. So, to help the client, I like to give them one that's an action shot, shooting magic at the viewer, or another of him looking down at you ominously, or a distant shot, floating above the land as a dark god. Try to not just have different angles with the same exact mood. Guy standing on cliff, guy standing on cliff three-quarter angle, and guy standing on cliff side-view. This will help the director decide much quicker because they will identify with the right mood, not so much 'do I like this angle more?'.



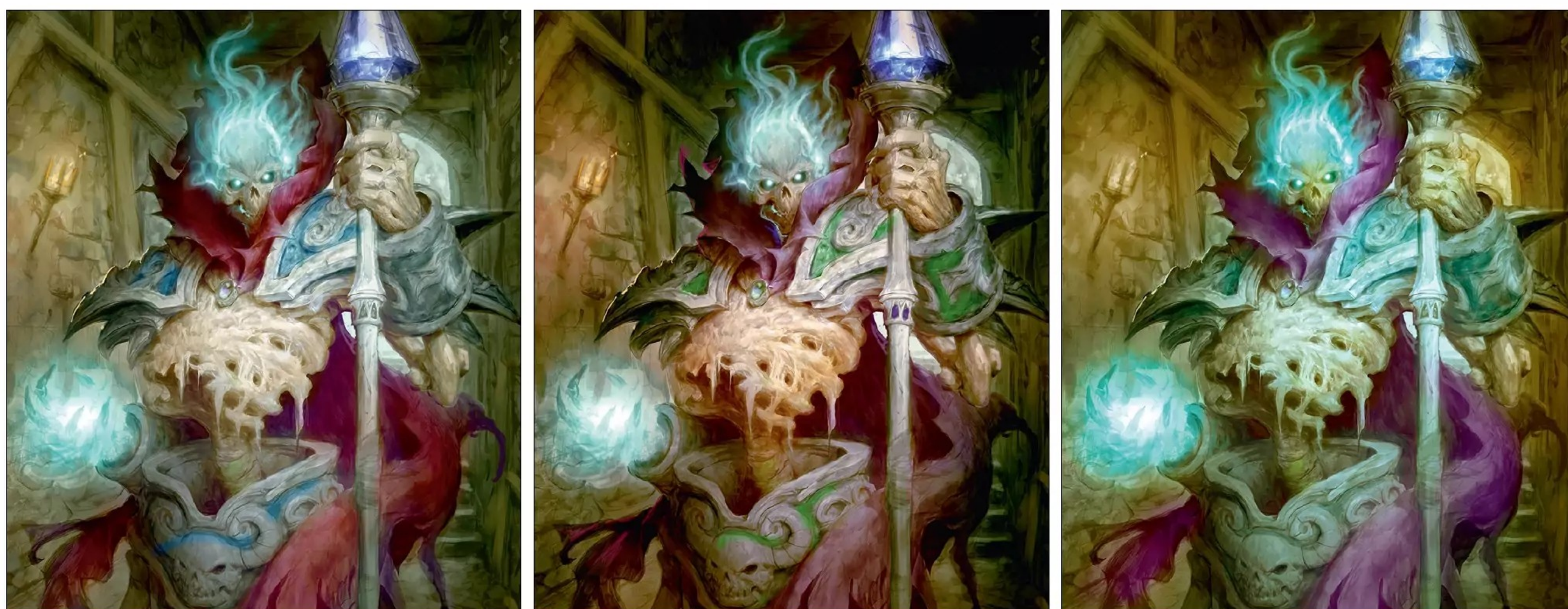
4 Rough sketch

Here I take the thumbnail and start to figure out what areas of my subject are in light, which are in shadow, and fix major drawing issues such as proportion or perspective. I do this in Krita, Clip Studio, or Photoshop, whatever you're most comfortable drawing in. In this stage we're just trying to make sure anatomy is looking correct, and things are placed in the right spot.



5 Rough value underpainting

I like to handle things with just value a lot of the time first, much like a grisaille underpainting. So here I start to render up my light and shadow shapes gradually. From my thumbnail, I know I want the skull and the hand to be my brightest points. So I need to make sure I drop the values down in the rest of the piece for that reason. I think about light direction, but I also don't care at the same time. If a cast shadow that 'would' be there gives me a shape I don't like, I leave it out. Remember, you're in control here.



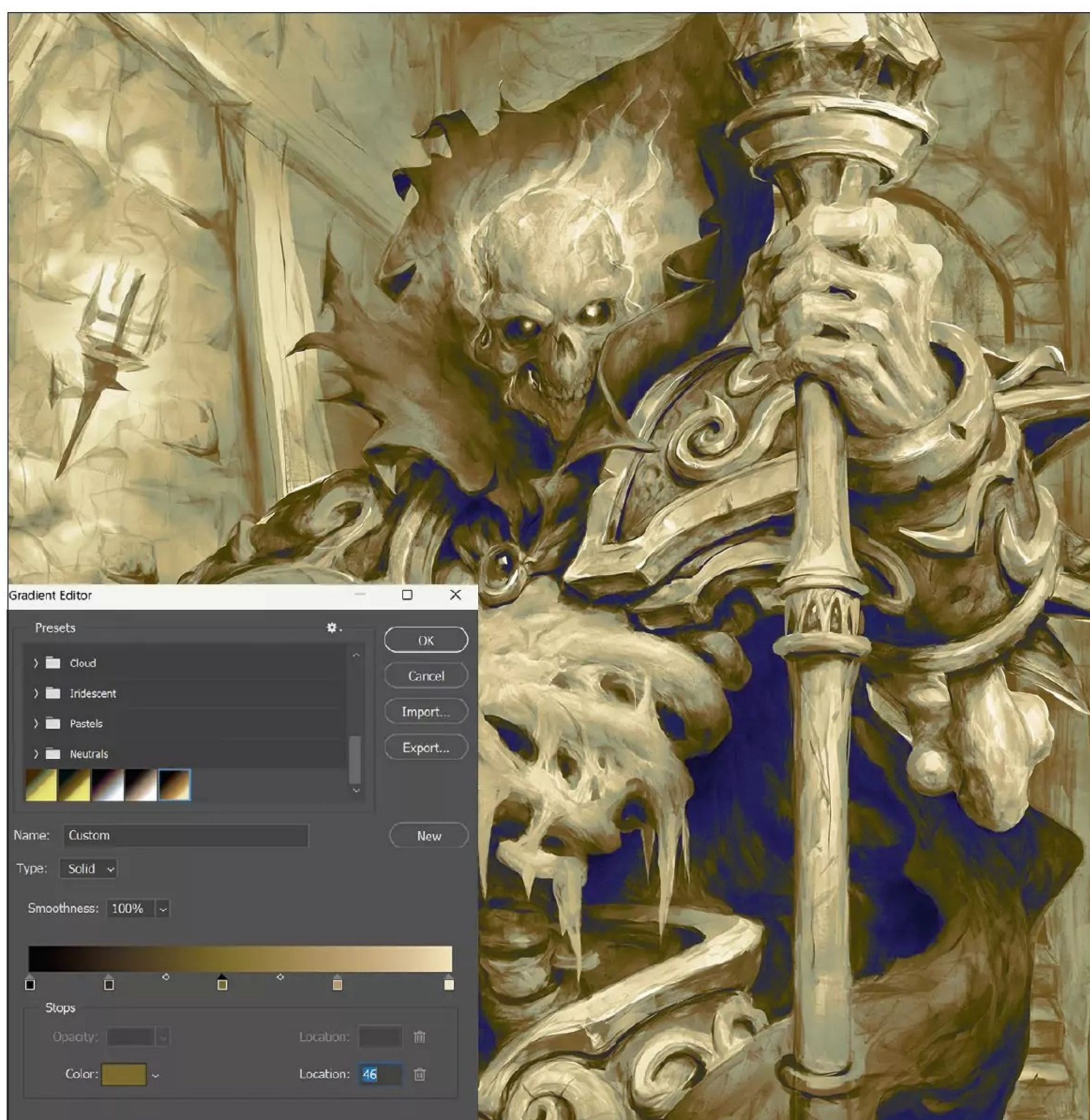
6 Colour roughs

After I get major values down, I sometimes do a very quick colour rough for the client. Honestly, I try to avoid colour roughs for clients because colour is so subjective, and I want the idea and mood approved without colour, and then add it after the value sketch approvals. But for colour roughs I try to just get the big three to five colours of the piece down. Not what every colour will be, just the big elements. Is this a big red dragon? And a blue wizard fighting in a dark grey cave? Yes, you can have some nice tiny hints of green algae on the rocks, and some subtle browns here and there, but my goal at this stage is to make sure the big, overall colours and values play nice with one another.



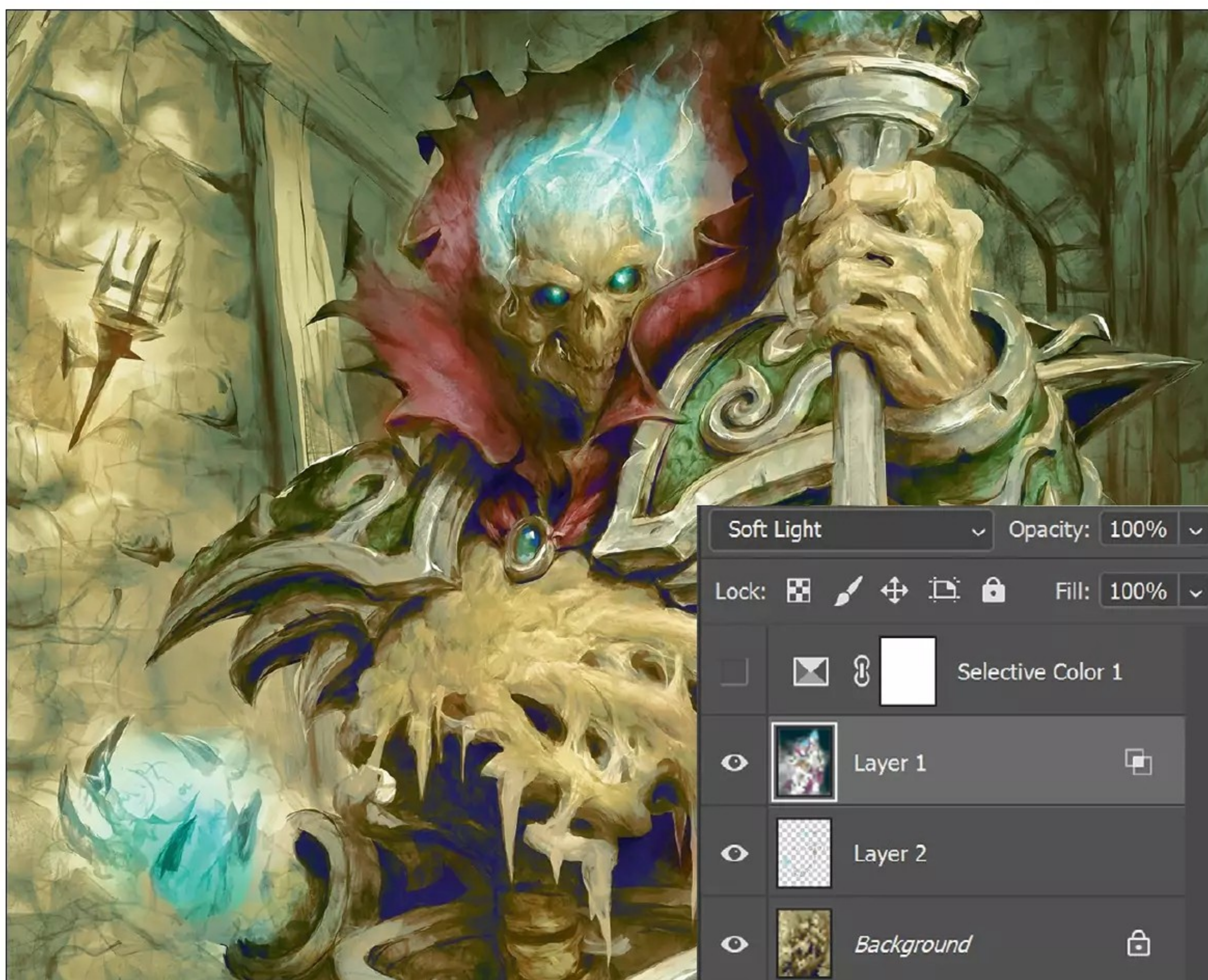
7 Value push

I keep rendering and pushing my darks and lights, careful to leave myself room at both ends of the value scale to come up and down as I continue to render. Here I really start thinking of that visual path I want the viewer to take, having areas of rest and areas of detail as they move through. Think of it as a small road trip: people need to stop and pee sometimes. Here, that rest stop is the inside of his cape, and the background behind him.



8 Gradient map

I then make a new gradient map layer. This is to get the underpainting away from just grey and black. This way, when I come in with colour layers, and soft light layers, it stays more vibrant and still has some colour information. This can be so many different combinations of colours. If you choose your complementary colour, it will have a neutralising effect on the glaze you apply. But with digital, you can cover completely, like it's oil that has already dried. ➡➡



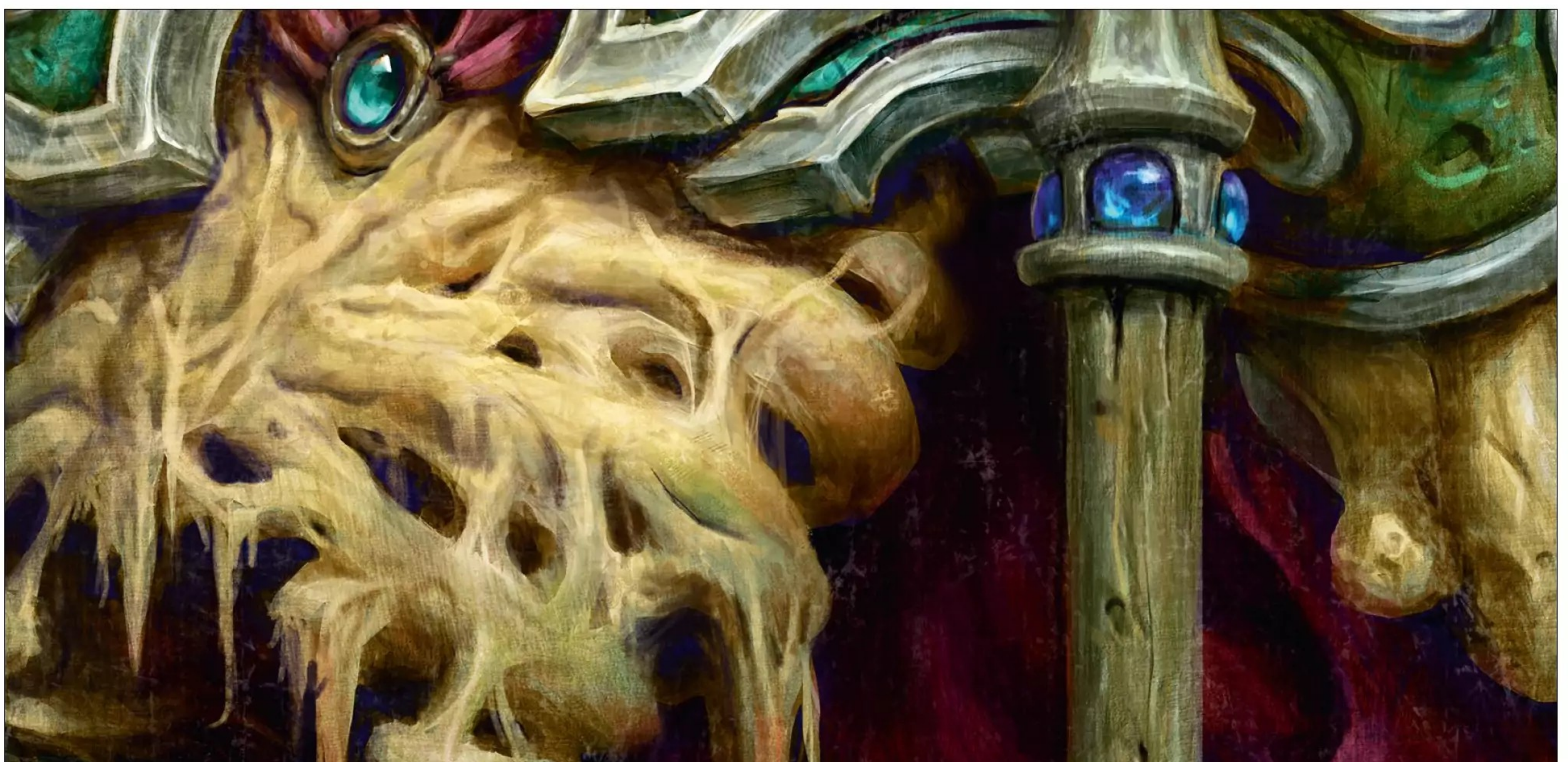
9 Colour, and soft light layers

Now I make a soft light layer and start to bring in my major colours. I know I wanted his cloak and bones to really stand out, so I went for two warm tones with the purple and neutral browns and yellow, making the rest of the image very cool. Try to think of colours as warms and cools, not reds and blues. Technically purple might be a cool, but when surrounded by blues it's quite warm. It's all about relationships with values and colours. Something is only light because it's next to something dark; something is cool only because it's next to something warm.



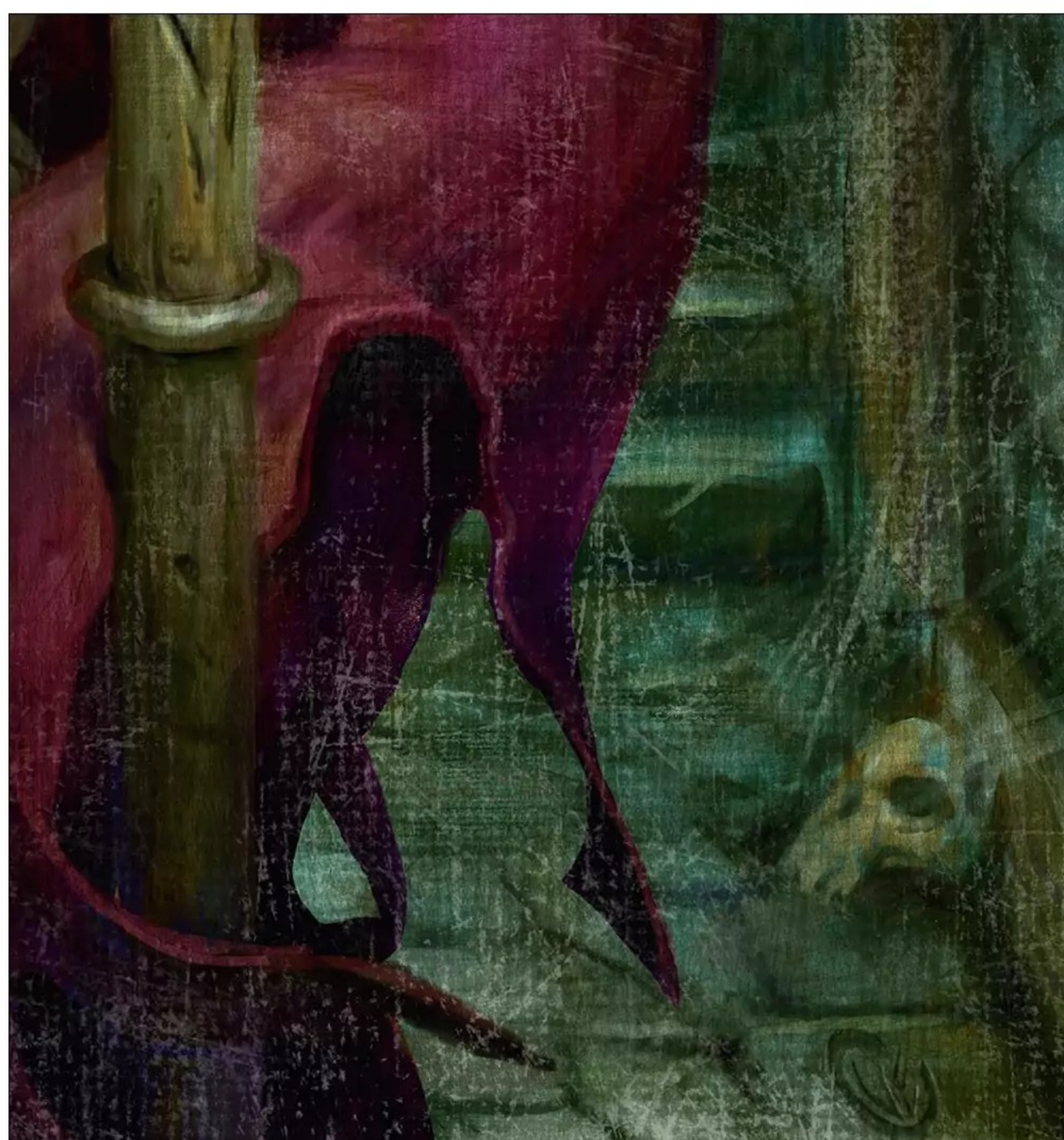
10 Overpainting

Now my major colours and values are figured out, it's time to start rendering. I usually try to focus on my focal area first, getting that to feel interesting and detailed as I want it, then move into the rest, still leaving room in my values to add those highlights and dark darks at the end. I try to introduce a pretty good amount of finish there so I can translate that to the rest of the piece.



11 Touch base

When I have the painting looking pretty decent, I like to send it back over to the client for mid-painting thoughts before taking it all the way to final. This way if they want a colour change, or things aren't matching the way they want, they have a chance to get in front of it, and less chance of being surprised towards deadline when they are typically getting a lot of other work coming in along with yours. If you are working for card games, they usually send things out in waves, so they will be more slammed closer to the deadline when all the other artists are turning in their work, and it might take them longer to get to your feedback. So it's always good to send things early if possible.



12 Detailing and story

Here I glaze the background down more into the value I need so that the bright blue magic skull shines with a low opacity multiply layer. I start to indicate cobwebs and skulls in the cellar in which this boss resides, figure out what kind of runes I want on the staff, etc... I try not to add too many big-contrast shapes in the background to avoid bringing too much attention there. You can add contrast, but just keep it on the small side; if you add a big light, or shadow shape you did not plan for, it may throw off that far read of your work.



13 Final details

Towards the home stretch I start bringing in my darkest darks and my lightest lights. I use some dodge tool on his glowing head and hand, along with Lucas Peinador's amazing LP Traditionalizer textures and brushes. This really helps give it the feeling of a little more of a traditional classic fantasy painting. This stage is all about making sure my edges are the way I want them. I use a hue saturation layer just to push and pull some of my colours to make them pop, and a contrast layer to make sure I am vibrant enough for the card to read. Think of this as a nice coat of varnish, like at the end of a traditional painting.



14 Final send-off

I send the piece back over to the client for final thoughts. They usually will have some subtle notes about maybe saturating some colours more, or increasing/decreasing darks depending on the print or what have you. After that, you just make those adjustments and get that sweet, sweet 'cheddah', or 'the bag' as the kids say nowadays. I hope this tutorial helps you with your future commissions and thank you for taking the time to read through. If you like tutorials like this and would like more of my brushes, and also behind-the-scenes of the art I make for clients, and personal work, please feel free to stop by my Patreon! Cheers! 🍷



Procreate ILLUSTRATE EPIC FANTASY COVERS

Andrea Piparo shares his painting process and the ideas behind creating fantasy cover art



The publishing house Armenia Edizioni commissioned me to create this cover for RF Obsydios's debut fantasy novel. I was asked to depict a young warrior, already scarred by battle, wounded, and with a torn shirt. He brandishes his sword, ready

to face a great wingless dragon, covered in scales in shades of red and black. The scene takes place in an imposing and gloomy fortress, characterised by large, vaulted columns and the ruins of the battle. The atmosphere needed to be inspired by classic epic fantasy. This aesthetic is what I grew up with,

meaning that it was easy for me to imagine a scene reminiscent of these types of covers, the works of the master illustrators who have always inspired me. The tone needed to be warm, with reds and oranges dominating; Joe Abercrombie's novel *The Devils* was recommended to me by way of an example.

Artist PROFILE

Andrea Piparo

LOCATION: Italy

Andrea has participated in numerous projects with publishing houses, creating illustrations for book covers, board games, and card games. He currently collaborates with Wizards of the Coast on Magic and D&D.
<https://bit.ly/4oRfc95>



How I create...

A FANTASY BOOK FIGHT SCENE



1 Start with a sketch

I don't usually make many sketches; at most, one or two, in black and white. I try to make my intentions clear through composition, lighting and volumes, so as to make the direction I want to take clear to the client.



2 Painting the figure

I started by painting the young warrior. I painted him separately in a larger format and, once finished, I resized and positioned him. This step allowed me to isolate him from the rest of the elements, so I could focus on painting him as best as possible.



3 Building the scene

For me, it's very important to first focus on the scene. So the warrior, the dragon and then the ruins they're moving through were the first steps in painting. I need to see if everything works, and only then can I begin to understand what's right and what needs fixing.

BATTLE SCENE

Forming the legs

Designing the anatomy of the dragon's hind legs was no easy feat. I wanted the body to express dynamism, and for it to form a curve that would draw the viewer's gaze toward the main scene. For me, this was the key aspect, and I did my best to bring this idea to life.



RESOURCES

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PROCREATE

CUSTOM BRUSHES: PEPPERMINT

The Peppermint brush is definitely my favourite for reproducing the look of pencil lines.

TAMAR AND SPECTRA



Interesting for depicting rough surfaces, like stone, tree trunks, or rusted metal.

SYRUP



A hard brush, difficult to blend. Excellent for definition. I use it notably for fine details.



GET YOUR RESOURCES

See page 5 now!



Creating the column

I had a lot of fun adding detail to the fallen column in the foreground, with its scratches and cracks, and conveying the roughness and texture of the stone through subtle colour variations and the use of 'dry' brushes. The fortress was intended to appear dark and gigantic. Its overall look and concept was inspired by the ruins of Moria.

To the side

To further accentuate the scene's sense of danger, I used a tilted shot. This angle is especially useful for emphasising the dynamism, or even, in this case, the drama, of what's happening in the scene.

References

Dragons are a favourite subject for many fantasy illustrators. To paint this one's head, I used a maquette I'd sculpted some time ago as a reference. This helped me understand how to manage light and shadow to give the creature three-dimensionality and volume.



Period detail

Over time, I've had the opportunity to purchase some historical-style clothing and some fabric scraps to make costumes. This has been very useful for taking photos and creating references, in particular lighting conditions.

Technique focus

DEFINING A DESIGN EARLY

Thomas Bourdon on the process he takes when trying to tell a story through design



"I created this illustration for an art contest organised by the studio Mooncolony. The theme was 'Boss Battle', so I didn't brainstorm for long and went for a dragon vs warrior type of scene. The key element of this artwork being the Boss design, this is where I started.

I established rough guidelines in the form of a concept sheet, using a lot of references for each design element I wanted to incorporate. With the design sorted out before the illustration, I was able to focus on storytelling through mood, colours and composition to make this showdown as epic as possible." ■



How I create...

AN EPIC BOSS BATTLE SCENE



1 Layering and composition

I started in 3D, since I was provided with some 3D hero assets for the main tanks and aircraft. The team at Greifenmaer also sent their initial in-game layouts to help kick off the creative brief. I quickly moved on to blocking out the full scene in Blender, building the environment and placing basic rigged soldiers.



2 Translating 2D knowledge into 3D

I had to plan all VFX effects and post-production from the start. Blender's Compositor lets me control and tweak colour balance, exposure, lens effects, etc. For most of the additional VFX, I used 2D image planes either with emission (explosions) or alpha planes (dust, particles). This saved a lot of resources.



3 Final steps

I could then render high-resolution passes in Blender and polish the image in Photoshop. I was given the creative freedom to introduce some 2D touches, like brushstrokes along the edges and subtle painterly effects to soften parts of the 'fake' 3D look.

Photoshop

COMBINE MULTIPLE ART GENRES

Tristan Tait shows you how to boost your creativity by finding influence in artworks from the past

Artist PROFILE

Tristan Tait
LOCATION: Australia

Tristan is an Australian illustrator and artist with over eight years of professional experience and a passion for creating unique worlds and exciting characters.
www.tristantait.net



Have you been feeling a little stuck with your art lately? Do you feel yourself churning out variations of the same thing over and over?

A good way to get out of this art block rut is to try a thing I like to call styleblending! Basically, we want to find two or more styles of art that seem quite different to each other and study their unique qualities, noting any similarities between

them. Then we take these qualities, throw them in a blender, sprinkle a little of our own personal style on top, and the end result should be something fun and original. Hopefully you've found a few new tricks to add to your creative toolbox for next time. Keep in mind that the more contrasting these styles are, the more interesting the results will be!

In this workshop, I'll be looking at 19th century Japanese art styles – most notably Nihonga and Ukiyo-e

woodblock prints, and the more western movement of Art Nouveau, then taking these and merging them with my own more modern approach to digital painting, which will be focusing primarily on form, lighting and detail.

While the nerd in me would love to infodump on what I've learned, I've only got the space here to touch on a few of the relevant key points. So feel free to reach out if you'd like to know more!

**RESOURCES**

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PHOTOSHOP

CUSTOM BRUSHES: HARD ROUND INKER



This hard round brush is perfect for blocking in solid shapes. With the smooth setting right up, it's great for curves.

TT_MAIN



My go-to brush for pretty much everything. Bristled with Flow and Opacity settings for easy painting and sketching.

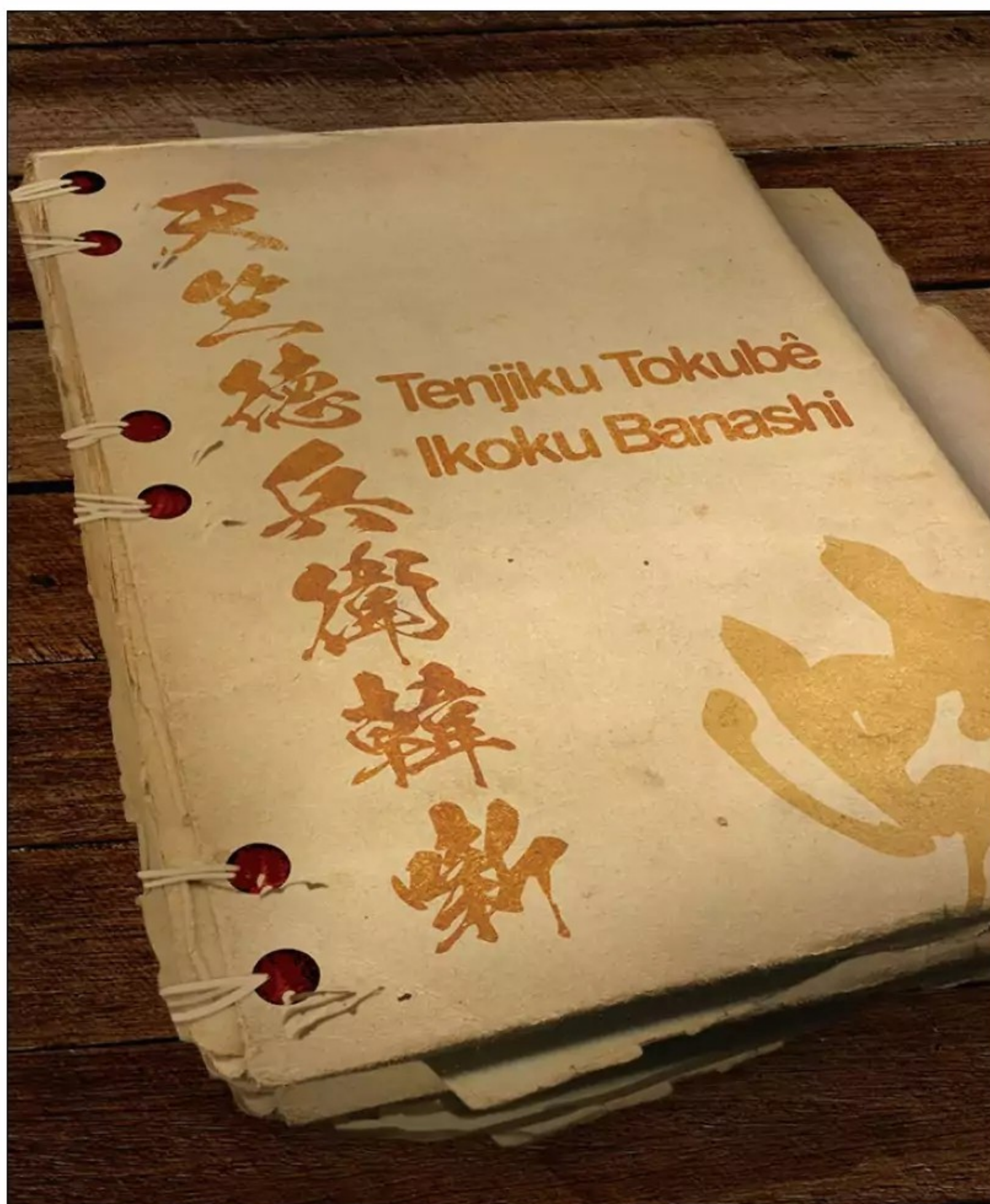
SOFT ROUND 01



A basic Round soft-edged brush with Opacity and Flow settings. Used to brush in soft lighting effects.

**GET YOUR RESOURCES**

See page 5 now!



1 Find your inspiration
I like to draw characters and creatures, and I knew I wanted to create something from Japanese folklore. Digging around I came across a famous kabuki play that tells the tale of Tenjiku Tokubei, an explorer who uses his magical abilities to summon a giant fire-breathing toad from a stone in an attempt to overthrow the Shogun. How is this not the coolest thing you've read?



© Fine Art Images/Heritage Images via Getty Images

2 Gather references
With this story idea in mind, I pulled up some 19th century Tokubei artworks and some other prints of the era depicting samurai, landscapes, frogs and other animals. Here, I'm making sure to choose references that include good examples of the shape language and dynamic line work that defines this traditional style. The Japanese styles have different ways of creating dynamic composition, whether through fluid curves and sharp angles as shown in their natural elements like clouds, water and fire, and through contrasting geometric patterns in clothing. These swirling shapes and dynamic lines feel quite similar to the whiplash lines and organic design of Art Nouveau. I keep those in mind. ➡➡





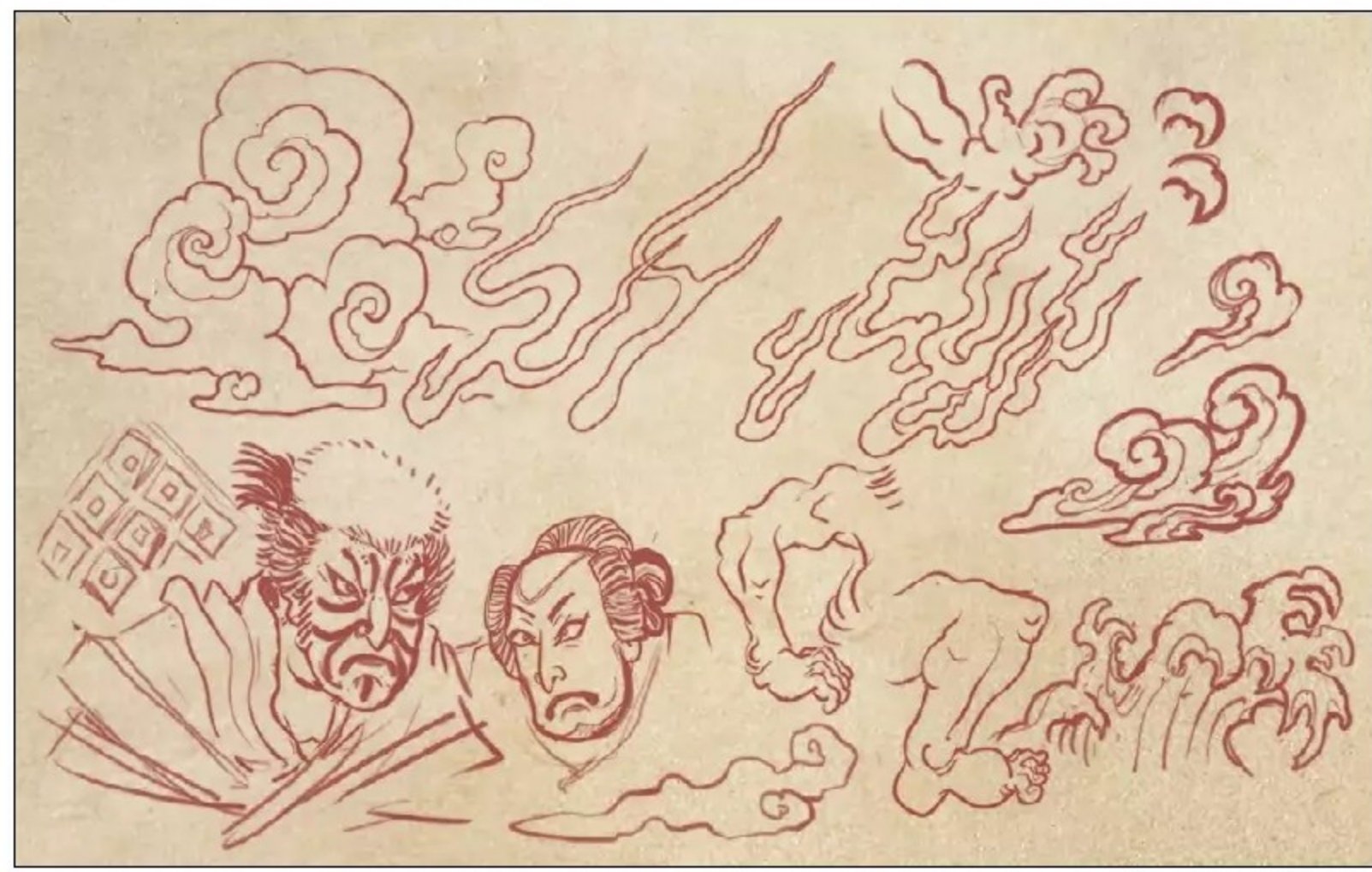
© Heritage Art/Heritage Images via Getty Images

3 And even more references!

Now, it's time to look at some Art Nouveau. While the obvious choice here was to pull up a whole bunch of Alphonse Mucha's famous posters (which I did), I also came across a lot of architecture that had me thinking how all of these shapes could be represented in different solid forms. This was

definitely going to inspire the way I wanted to render out the final image, and sent me down a bit of a rabbit hole, researching sculpture and masks, looking at ways these shapes and forms could be represented. I can't talk about the frames of Art Nouveau without talking about Mucha and his posters. He basically defined this look, and it's heavily inspiring

the composition I want to use. Nouveau is known for its use of dynamic whiplash swirls, organic shapes and floral patterns. Mucha's posters make use of these shapes, which are incorporated into solid frames around his subjects, utilising plenty of halo-like concentric circles and negative space to help break up the detail.



PRO SECRETS

Frog

The Japanese word for 'frog' (Kaeru) is the same word for 'to return' to, and is often associated with travel and good fortune. Frogs are used in connection with travel and money for this reason.



PRO SECRETS

Symmetry

Use the Symmetry tool to help with your borders and frames! If you add a stroke effect to your layer and turn Fill to 0%, you can draw clean lined areas very quickly (Hard Round Inker Brush).

4 Test it out

I took a minute here to get my hand comfortable drawing the shapes common in both styles: the Nouveau whiplash curves and soft botanical detail, and then the more simplistic and exaggerated forms common in the Ukiyo-e. I add some of the whiplash feel to the more erratic and natural shapes of the clouds and try combinations to see what works and flesh out some ideas. It's rough, but helps me to get my head in the right space.



5 Finally, we draw!

I decide on a famous scene, with Tokubei riding his giant toad, flames spilling from its mouth, shadowing the mansion. I block in a loose Mucha inspired frame in the background using the familiar circular patterns, separated with plenty of negative space. I blend the frame with a more hard-edged Japanese inspired geometric design to contrast with the curves and organic shapes of the flames and clouds at his feet.



6 Refine the sketch

I get excited here and add a sweeping curve through the background to round the top out, a combination of waves and botanical shapes, merging the two influences together. I add the Japanese characters (蛙) for frog in the centre circle and redraw the surrounding circles as coins above the mansion in the background. I tweak detail a lot while painting, so I like to keep my sketches quite loose. ➡

Workshops



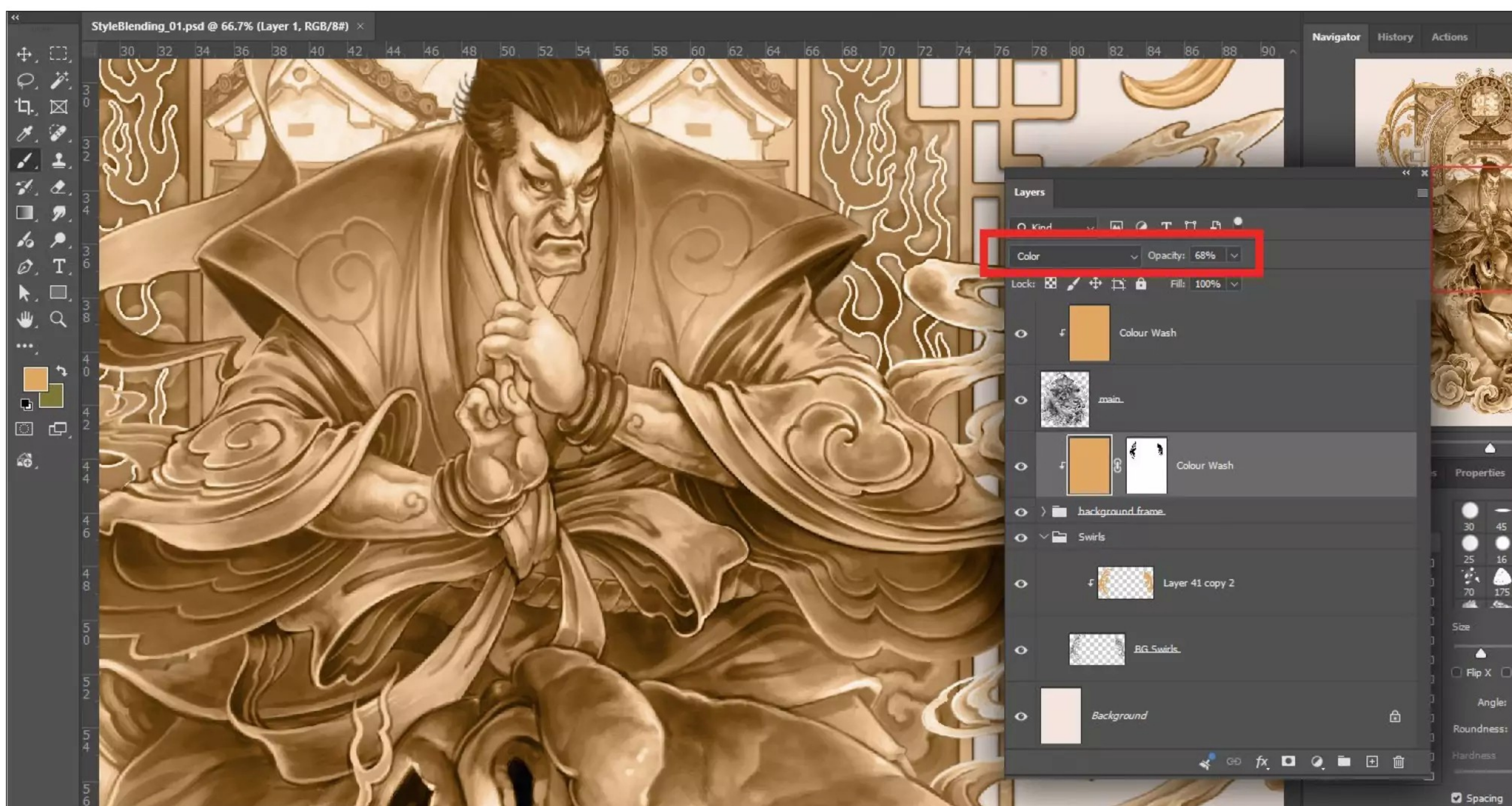
7 Split everything up

With the idea blocked out, I separate the sketch into layers (background, frame, foreground etc), and then block these in with a flat grey underneath. I will use these as a base for my mask layers which will allow me to detail and colour each part individually. This will help later if I need to make any further adjustments. Spoiler: I make some big changes.



8 Work those values

This is where I get to add my own flair while still keeping in mind the different styles I'm blending. Focusing on maintaining the strong line work that defines both styles, I think about how each segment could work as a 3D form, almost as if it were carved. While painting in detail, I focus on lighting, shadows and bringing an extra dimension to two styles known for having flattened perspectives.



9 Splash in some colour

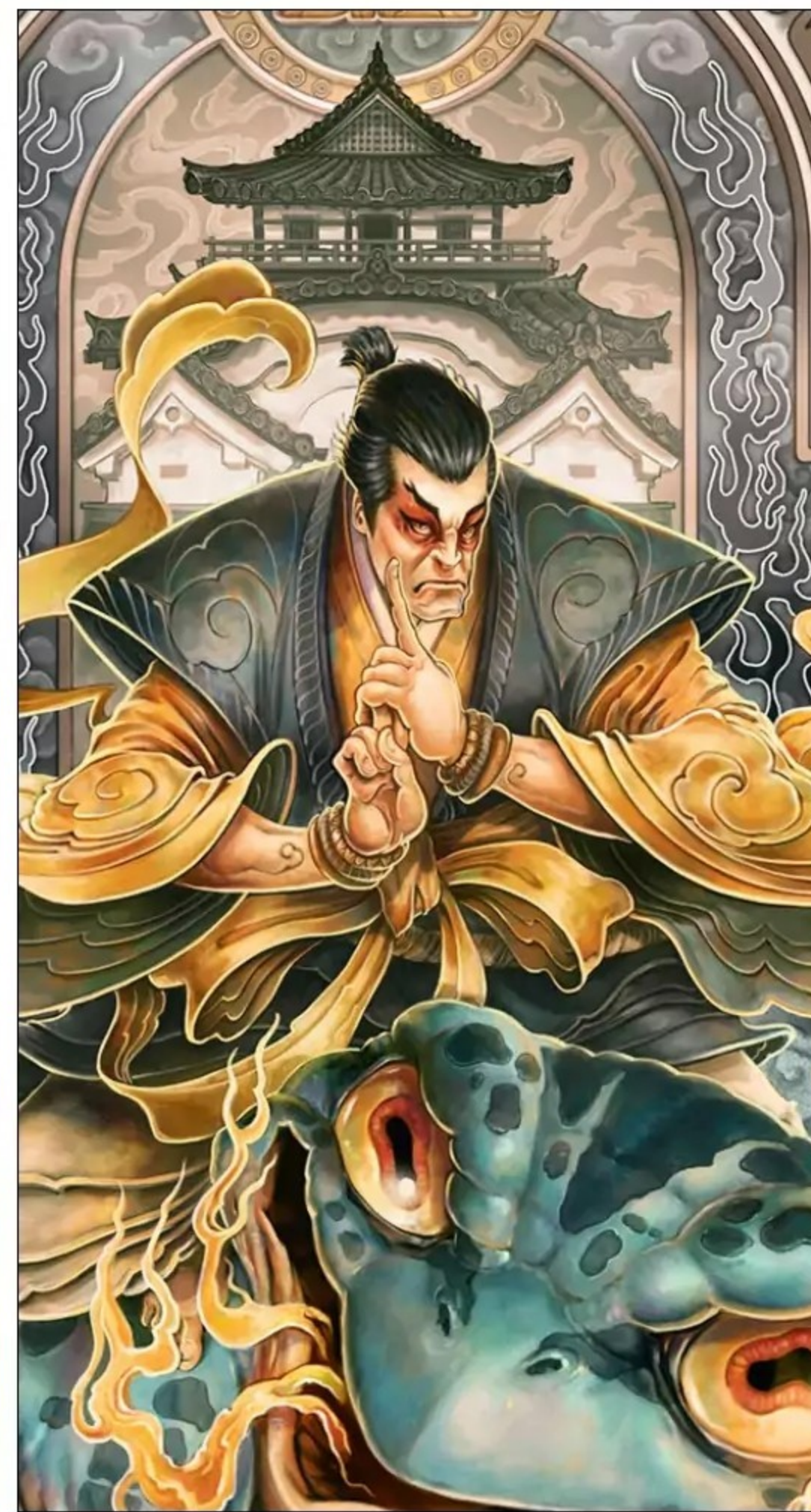
With the values and detail mostly down, I like to drop a colour wash over each section. I do this using a Colour mode layer and filling it with a warm sepia tone. On a new Overlay layer above this, I brush in my base colours with an opacity of about 50%, focusing mostly around the midtones on my image. I like to leave the wash showing though a bit to create some nice colour variations and to add warmth to the image.



Colour wash



Overlay Colours



Final colour pass



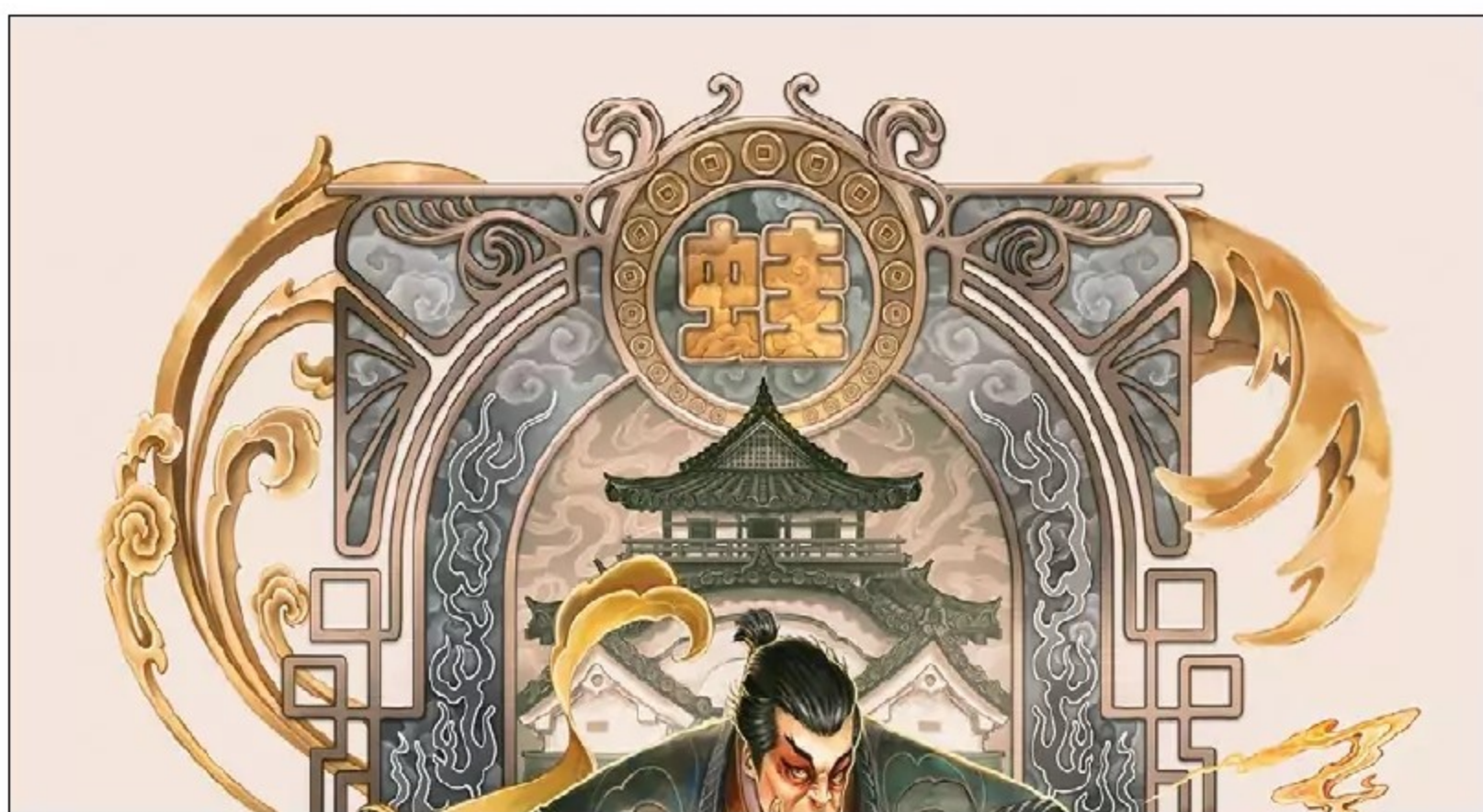
PRO SECRETS

Colour

I like to add vibrant splashes of colour to create variation and interest in key parts of the picture. Cool and warm tones can be used to help shadows sit back and create more depth.

10 Final colour pass

Over each section on a new Normal layer, I start painting over and cleaning up the final image. While using the eyedropper, I pick from the surrounding colours and start to blend everything together, adding more contrast where it is needed in order to help sharpen the image. I try replicating the idea of the strong linework from the original styles by including a bold rim light, which helps create some separation.



11 Don't be afraid to make some bold changes

Coming back a little later with fresh eyes, I started to feel the upper part of the image was way too busy and the balance was off. So I removed the background swirls and the mansion, lowered the frame and made the centre rings much larger, which now had it looking a lot closer to the classic Mucha halo vibe I was after.



12 Extra polish

Adding some leaves to the base also helped ground everything, while adding a touch more to the natural and botanical Nouveau vibe. To help add some more contrast, I dropped a darker parchment-like background in, using a combination of my soft round brush and some paper textures.



Technique focus

CREATE SCALE WITH FRAMING

Wojtek Fus on painting a dramatic large-scale scene without detracting from your focus



"I was brought on to Paul Coulthard's God of Bones project to help develop this key vista shot of a serpent frozen mid-death, calcified as it collapses into stone. The idea was to capture scale, weight, and a sense of halted motion, which the

initial compositions weren't fully achieving.

"Working closely with Paul, I refined the framing and atmosphere to push it to the final image seen here. The serpent design was supervised by Christian Bull and modelled by Laurens Rasti and Wilmar Ballespi of Shoot First."





How I create...

A LARGE-SCALE SERPENT SCENE



1 Concept sketch

The process began with a rough sketch by Paul. The goal was to establish mood, violence, and vast scale in a single moment, with the serpent caught mid death throes. This drawing defined the initial composition, rhythm, and motion, giving me a clear direction for how the creature should move through space.



2 3D layout in Blender

I began blocking the scene in Blender, building the environment and placing the serpent within a large-scale rocky formation. Paul and I worked together to balance readability, scale, and dynamism. The focus was maintaining the serpent's presence while keeping an intentionally unstable cinematic arrangement.



3 Rendering and final paintover

I rendered the scene and integrated photography and paint to add ocean spray, rock textures and atmospheric detail. I also refined the serpent's head calcification, a challenging effect to communicate clearly. At the end, we flipped the entire composition.

Artist PROFILE

Wojtek Fus
LOCATION: Poland

Wojtek is a director and concept artist working across animation and visual development. He creates cinematic imagery blending narrative storytelling with high-end digital craft.
www.artstation.com/fus

The Gallery

SHOWCASING THE FINEST
TRADITIONAL ARTISTS

1





Dan Gartman

LOCATION: Canada **MEDIA:** Watercolours, coloured pencils, acrylics **WEB:** www.dangartman.com

Dan loves everything analogue; he gets excited about handmade items with imperfections and stories. His work embodies this while being inspired by the crisp textures and geometric shapes of Cubism and Futurism.

1 ACHILLES

"This illustration was one that I made during my study of the Iliad, even though Achilles isn't my favourite character from the epic. It's a quick artwork that I did in one attempt using watercolours and a couple of green pencils."

2 KING OF CLUBS

"Someone has to reign the Club's suit, so bless the King! Made with watercolours and ink pen, this is part of my poker deck. I used a circuit-cutting machine to make a stencil so I could sponge on the gold emblem with straight edges and circles."



3 UNKNOWN WATER ANOMALY

"This is what you never want to face in the ocean! Where are all the lost ships that people cannot find? Well, I've drawn an answer using acrylic and watercolour paper."

4 TRIPLETS

"These guys (or is it one guy?) are a card design from one of my monster card deck collections. I used acrylic and watercolour paper, as well as a dry sponge, in order to add texture to the background."

1



2





Heather Castles

LOCATION: Canada **MEDIA:** Acrylic on vintage art surfaces (canvas or print) **WEB:** <https://upcycledvintageart.com>

Heather is a traditional artist who upcycles unloved and damaged vintage artworks by adding pop-culture fan art in the original artist's style, giving forgotten paintings a fun second life and a quirky modern twist.



1 HARVEST MOON

"I painted the 'moon' in soft colours to balance the warm details. The glossy original painting and the more matte, textured acrylic that I added created a lovely effect of texture and light that cannot be captured in print."

2 TO ISENGARD

"I couldn't resist adding in a portrait of the popular meme of a twiggy tree running to Isengard! I love that he's so tiny yet leading the way - much like the hobbits were eager to help their friends in battle."

3 AS YOU WISH

"I chose to paint this tender moment from The Princess Bride before they kissed, because when I watched this epic film as a kid, I always had the same disgusted thought: 'they're kissing again!'"

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

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!



Huawei MatePad Pro Max

DRAWING DELIGHT With a big, eye-pleasing matte screen and thinner, more attractive design than ever, this flagship tablet also has decent power

Price From £899.99 **Company** Huawei **Web** www.huawei.com

Another tablet release from Huawei, another proviso about the fact that Huawei is geo-blocked from the one thing us Westerners treasure most in life: access to the Google Play Store. Huawei has worked hard to make up for it and the company has made its cornerstone creative app, GoPaint, even better than before.

The MatePad has always been well built, and this model is no different. The metal alloy chassis covers a bigger 13.2 inches of screen than last year's 11.5S, but by thinmaxxing the construction, it's a gram less than its smaller predecessor, at only 509g.

The standard Folio Cover version comes with a free M-Pencil, as does the Keyboard version which bumps up the storage from 256GB to 512GB and includes a protective magnetic case and stand in one, with a keyboard that connects automatically. So you have everything needed to get going with what you want to do with the tablet.

The MatePad Pro Max has an OLED display, 3000 x 2000 pixels with a top brightness of 1600 nits, with a

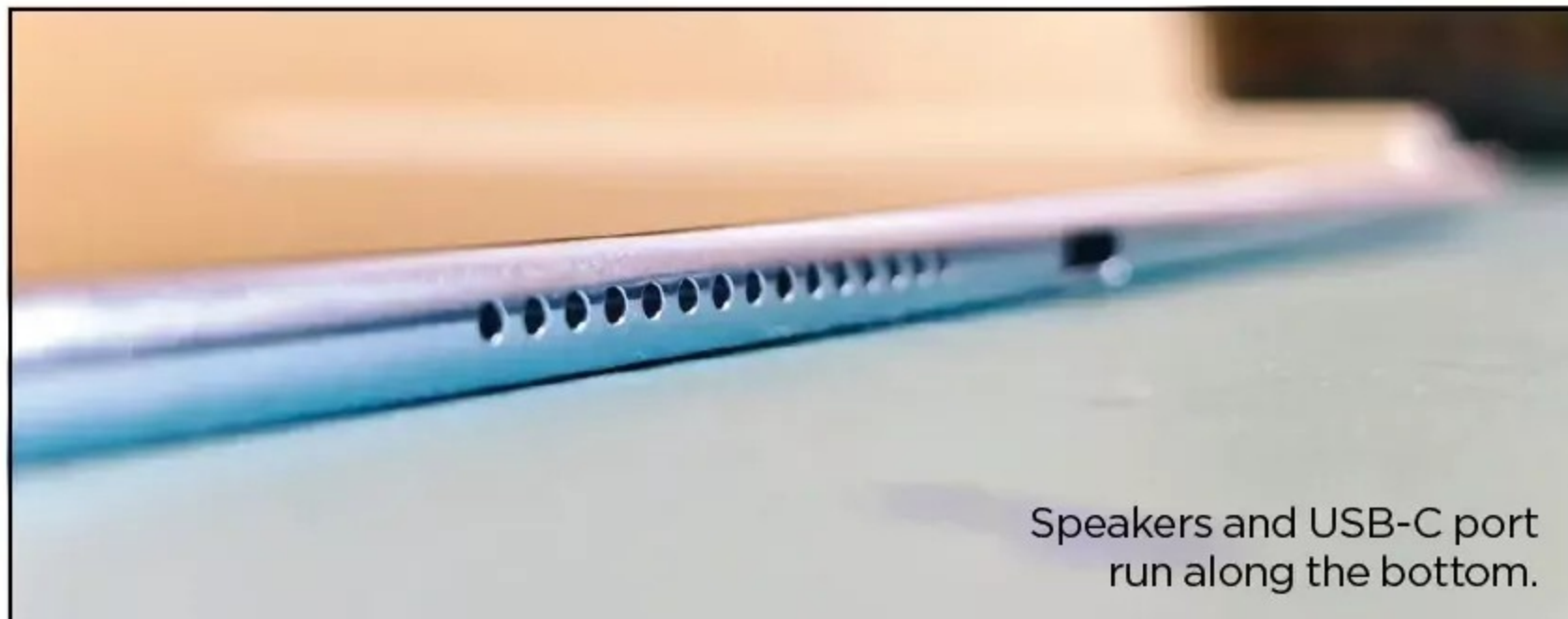
“A PaperMatte coating makes it pleasing to look at for long periods”

PaperMatte coating that makes it pleasing to look at for long periods, and to draw on due to its near-reflection-free effect.

Due to Huawei's limited access to mainstream Western software platforms – such as Google and many other widely used apps – the company has developed its own ecosystem of applications, including an app store, web browser, office tools, and creative apps. Among these, GoPaint stands out as an excellent painting, drawing and artwork application. It offers hundreds of brushes, surface templates and features designed to assist users who may struggle with hand stability. For instance, if you hold



The body has an attractive polished rim.



Speakers and USB-C port run along the bottom.



The keyboard stand makes for a laptop-like device, ideal for writing.

a rough circle for a second, it will round it into a smoother shape for you. Additionally, lines and paths can snap into place, and the app provides in-app tutorials for every feature on board.

The HarmonyOS loaded onto the MatePad is built on Android, and while it replicates the Android user experience in some detail, performance could still be improved. Geekbench tests place the Huawei tablet below Apple and Samsung models, so the MatePad Pro Max won't entice those wanting pure grunt. Instead, perhaps wisely, Huawei has focused on the superior visual experience here.

The Huawei MatePad Pro Max Keyboard version costs £1,099.99 in the UK, but it's worth the price tag as it offers a considerable step up in performance and feature set. Especially when you consider the fact you get the protective case, keyboard and stylus included in the purchase.

Erlingur Einarsson

VERDICT

Huawei's biggest, most powerful tablet yet. With a large 13.2-inch screen, it's still remarkably light at 509g, thanks to a remarkably thin design that makes it supremely portable. It's also more powerful than previous Huawei models, although it still doesn't match Samsung or Apple flagships. And with access to Western app stores blocked or hampered, it's still hard to recommend for users outside graphic and drawing enthusiasts.

Pros

- Big, sharp screen
- GoPaint has just gotten better
- Lightweight

Cons

- No US availability
- Not as powerful as many other flagship tablets

Rating



Fatal Fury/Garou Densetsu: The Ultimate History

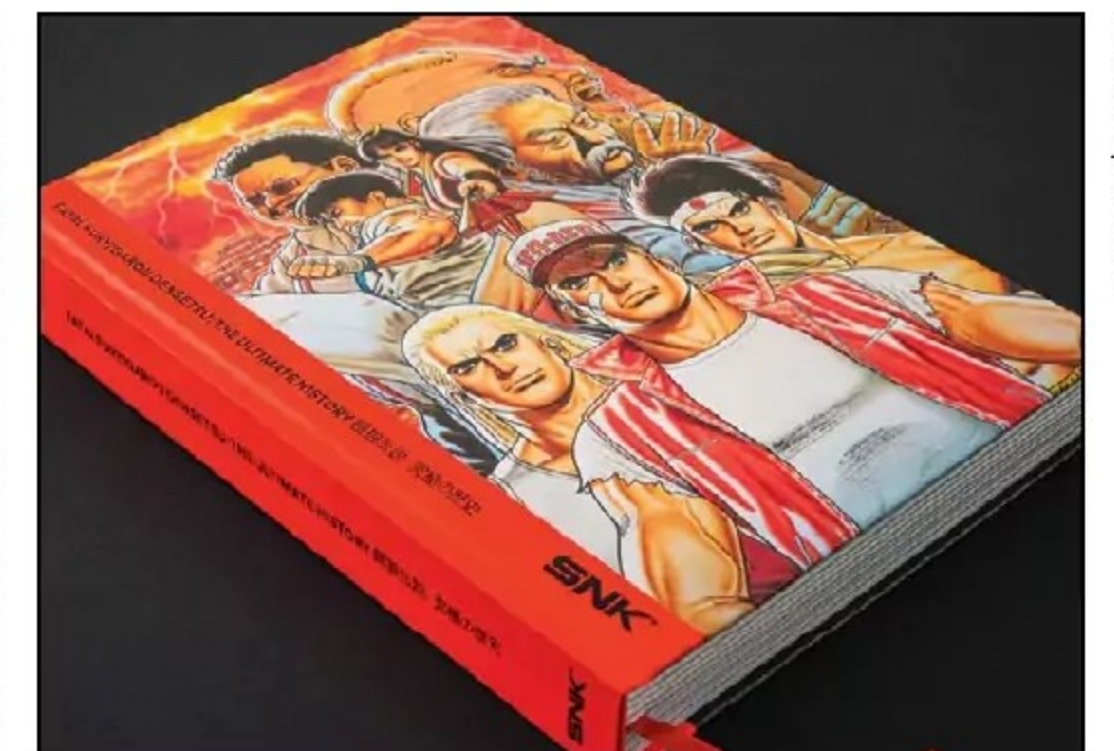
POWER UP This gorgeous retro gaming book explains why Fatal Fury deserves more respect

Price £35/\$45 **Company** Bitmap Books **Web** www.bitmapbooks.com

Bitmap Books excels in deep dives into retro gaming history and publishes some of the best game art books, and for this one you'll immediately want to flick through the pages, pausing at the screenshots and sketches until you realise you've accidentally spent half an hour staring at sprite sheets.

That's exactly what happened upon opening this new release, the hefty, weighty Fatal Fury / Garou Densetsu: The Ultimate History. To be fair, Bitmap Books makes it very easy to get distracted. This is another beautifully produced hardback, a large, heavy thing that feels substantial the moment you pick it up, packed with glossy pages, oversized artwork and enough SNK history to keep fighting game fans occupied.

Once you actually start reading, though, it becomes clear that the artwork isn't the main attraction, even though it's a big draw and what lasts. The standout feature is the interview with Takashi Nishiyama, the creator of Street Fighter and Kung-Fu Master, who later went on to create Fatal Fury for SNK. Later, other SNK talent have a say, but



© Bitmap Books

Discover the visual history of a classic fighting game series in this stunning retrospective.

Nishiyama is a draw and offers fascinating insights into how ideas evolve between projects. If you're interested in game design rather than simply gaming nostalgia, there's a lot to enjoy here.

This retrospective does a great job of explaining why the series mattered, how many ideas it introduced or refined as it evolved, and, indeed, why Fatal Fury has just as much right to a game legacy.

Visually, the archive material is fantastic. If you're buying this book primarily for the artwork, or you want to learn about game dev in the 90s, you won't be disappointed.

If you're a Fatal Fury fan, it's an easy recommendation, and you've probably already got it on order.

Ian Dean



A huge range of beautifully printed art fills the 460+ pages.

VERDICT

A beautifully produced celebration of Fatal Fury, balancing stunning artwork, rich history and invaluable developer insight.

Pros

- Unrivalled access to SNK devs
- Excellent quality
- Lots of nicely presented art

Cons

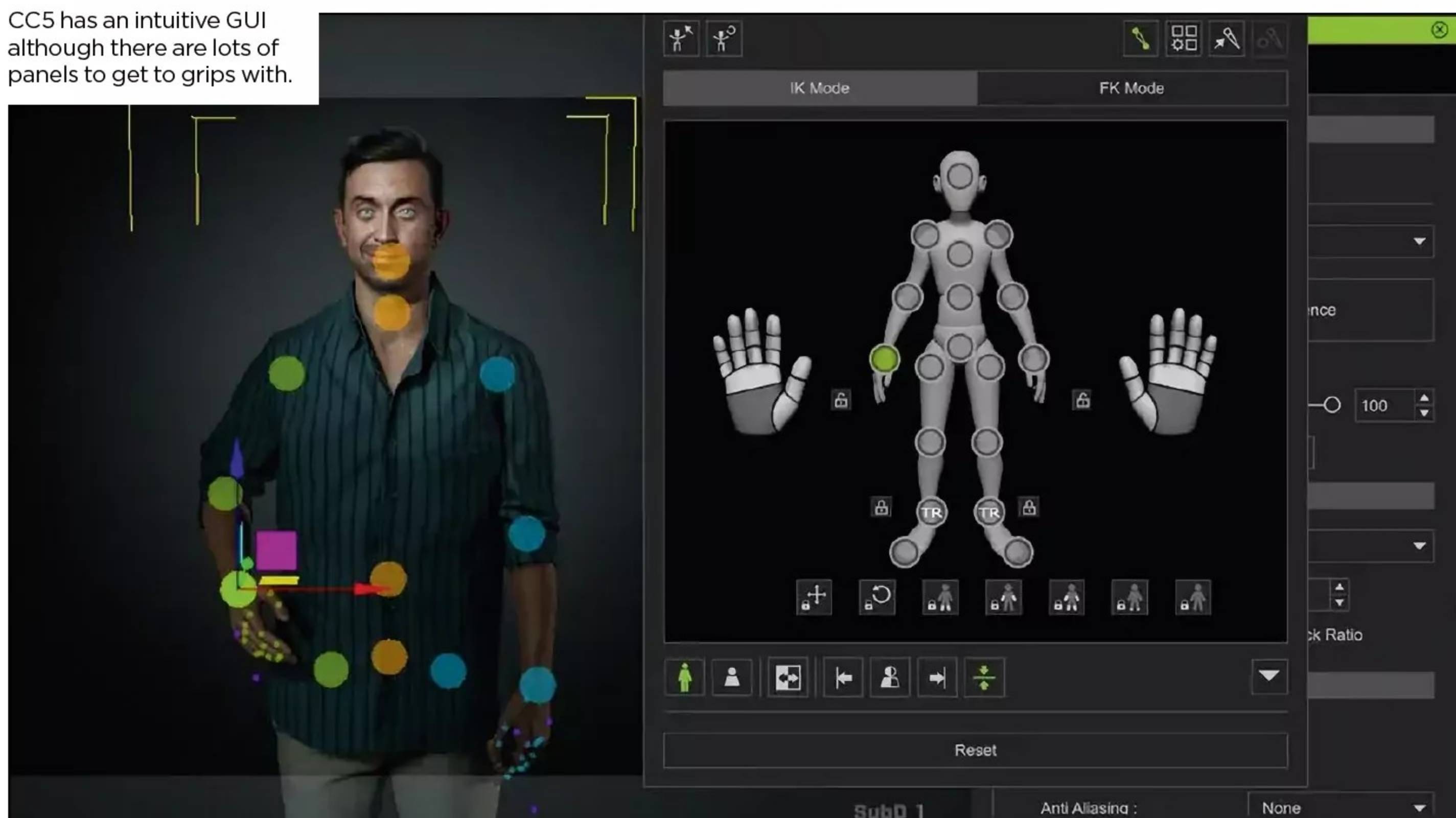
- Would have loved artist interviews

Rating



© Bitmap Books

CC5 has an intuitive GUI although there are lots of panels to get to grips with.



Character Creator 5

BAGS OF PERSONALITY Simple enough for novices, powerful enough for pro use in film production, game dev and more

Price From £6/\$8.25 per month or perpetual licence for £370/\$498
Company Reallusion **Web** www.reallusion.com

Reallusion's Character Creator 5 (CC5) is an impressive development in the world of 3D digital art, bringing hyper-realistic character generation within reach of the masses. The software means you can say goodbye (mostly) to tedious, manual edits and sculpting, and to locked-down, non-customisable character models.

CC5 introduces an upgraded HD character system featuring subdivision meshes, dynamic displacement maps and 8K skin textures. Alongside the new ActorMIXER tool, which lets designers blend, randomise and morph traits non-destructively, it acts as an all-in-one package for character design, look development and rigging.



It's easy to drill down into the fine details of any character you're creating, including materials.

CC5 introduces a next-generation HD base mesh that supports switchable subdivision levels zero to two. With full displacement map support, enhanced shaders and 8K skin textures, creators can seamlessly transition a character from a game-ready model to a cinematic, film-quality asset with real geometric depth for close-up shots.

A brand-new, non-destructive character generation tool allows you to freely blend different character styles, heads, bodies and skin types. Instead of starting from scratch, you can dynamically fuse stylised looks with photorealistic scans. It's simple to use and generates excellent results, although we would have liked a little bit more granular control.

The user interface was relatively easy to navigate with clear menus and icons, as well as panels which helpfully split up settings and workflows.

CC5 is designed for indie game developers, filmmakers and 3D animators. Its intuitive interface and extensive set of tools make it equally appealing to solo creators and small studios, allowing users to rapidly create, edit and export fully rigged assets to other parts of the pipeline.

Paul Hatton

Comfort and adjustability make this a top contender for long work sessions.



Hinomi's H2 Pro

BEST SEAT Perfect for those who love to dial in their comfort levels

Price £759/\$759
Company Hinomi
Web <https://hinomi.co.uk>

RATING ★★★★★☆

At first glance, Hinomi's H2 Pro looks like a padded, cushioned office chair, but closer inspection reveals that the material is actually a thick mesh tightly suspended on a curved frame.

With 19 points of adjustment, Hinomi has crafted a task chair that can be fine-tuned to the body shape of the user, making it a contender for one of the best office chairs for back pain.

Even before you've adjusted all the knobs and levers to get it set up to your liking, the H2 Pro is very comfortable. There's a little pneumatic give in the spring, and the mesh is engineered to have just the right amount of tension.

From the bottom up, the chair goes up and down, the seat goes back and forth and raises at an angle, the entire back section tilts back with adjustable resistance and the armrests rotate in every conceivable direction.

It's not a lightweight chair – all those adjustable bits bring the total weight to 24kg.

From the word go, the Hinomi H2 Pro feels like a chair that costs a lot more, plus a 10-year warranty is the reassuring icing on this cake of comfort.

Henry Winchester

VERDICT

Introducing massive workflow-enhancing upgrades, Character Creator 5 continues its successful integration with Unreal Engine and automated, animation-ready rigging. An invaluable, affordable powerhouse for indie game developers, filmmakers and 3D animators alike.

Pros

- Quick workflows with ActorMIXER
- Speedy and automated rigging
- Fantastic pipeline integration
- Realistic textures and displacement

Cons

- Limited to human anatomy
- Cost of extra assets can mount up

Rating

★★★★★

One of Alejandro's example works, created using the 'paint from the stain' method.



Creating and Painting Fantasy Scenarios in Photoshop

DRAGGING COLOUR In this best-selling course, concept artist Alejandro Burdisio crafts cinematic sci-fi worlds in Photoshop

Publisher Domestika **Price** £19/\$34.99 **Format** Online video course
Length 25 lessons (5h 39m) **Web** <https://domestika.org/courses/1746>

Alejandro Burdisio (aka Burda) is a self-taught Argentine concept artist with over 30 years in the industry, and this best-selling Domestika course is also a brilliant way to be introduced to his cinematic art style. It's pitched at artists of any experience level, and Burda's looser artwork appeals to beginners or any analogue artist wanting to make the leap to digital.

After finding out that Burda's background has a foundation in architectural visualisation, his influences are worth exploring, especially for those not familiar with the explosive creativity in South America. However, the course is less bothered about him and his influences – he just wants to show you how he works.



The first units are based on pencil and paper, so some drawing experience is required.



The opening units are all pencil and paper, and it would be useful to come to this course with some experience of drawing in perspective and basic composition.

The heart of it is his 'paint from the stain' method: you lay down a generous patch of colour. From there he drags that colour around to build every element, and then he does line work on top to work in the detail. The great thing about this method is that it also has the sense of atmosphere embedded within it.

Across 25 lessons and 5h 39m, with 21 downloadable resources, you get to see a working professional make decisions rather than push buttons. Even though Burda's course is Photoshop-specific, the composition methodology carries to any illustrative method, digital or analogue.

Mike Griggs

The course is specific to Photoshop, but takes you through the artist's workflow in great detail.

VERDICT

A no-nonsense, professionally grounded introduction to fantasy and sci-fi scene painting from a renowned artist. Burda teaches composition-first thinking that outlasts any software, and when it can be found on discount, as a way in for any artist it's genuinely hard to fault.

Pros

- Distinctive 'paint from the stain' method
- Composition-first workflow that carries beyond Photoshop
- 21 downloadable resources plus a final project

Cons

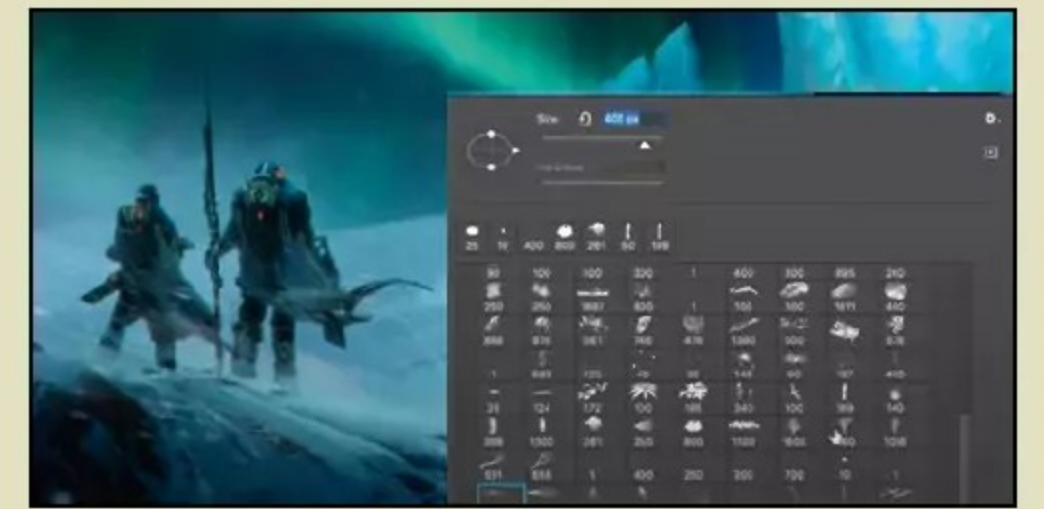
- Assumes that you can draw
- Photoshop-specific workflow shown

Rating

★★★★☆

Brushing up...

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



Evenant Brush Pack for Photoshop

Artist Walid Feghali

Software Photoshop

Brushes Not stated **Price** Free

Rating ★★★★★

Walid Feghali's popular set covers sci-fi and fantasy worlds, landscapes, architecture and figures with clean, effective brushes. Its full commercial use makes it an easy recommendation.

www.evenant.com/brush-pack



Bryn's Landscape Brushes

Artist Bryn Geronimo Jones

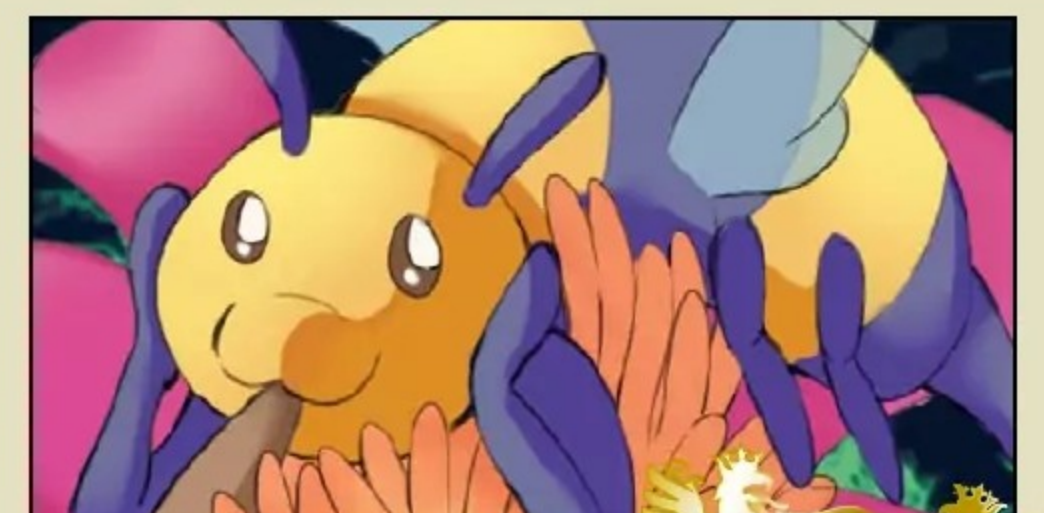
Software Photoshop, Procreate

Brushes 35 **Price** £7.50

Rating ★★★★★

A handy little landscape kit for both Photoshop and Procreate, covering clouds, rocks, foliage, mountains and water for quick scene-building. Good value and useful for landscape artists.

<https://bit.ly/3RbBD5Z>



ESSENTIAL Brushset V2

Artist FizzyFlower

Software Krita 5.0.2+

Brushes 400+ **Price** Free

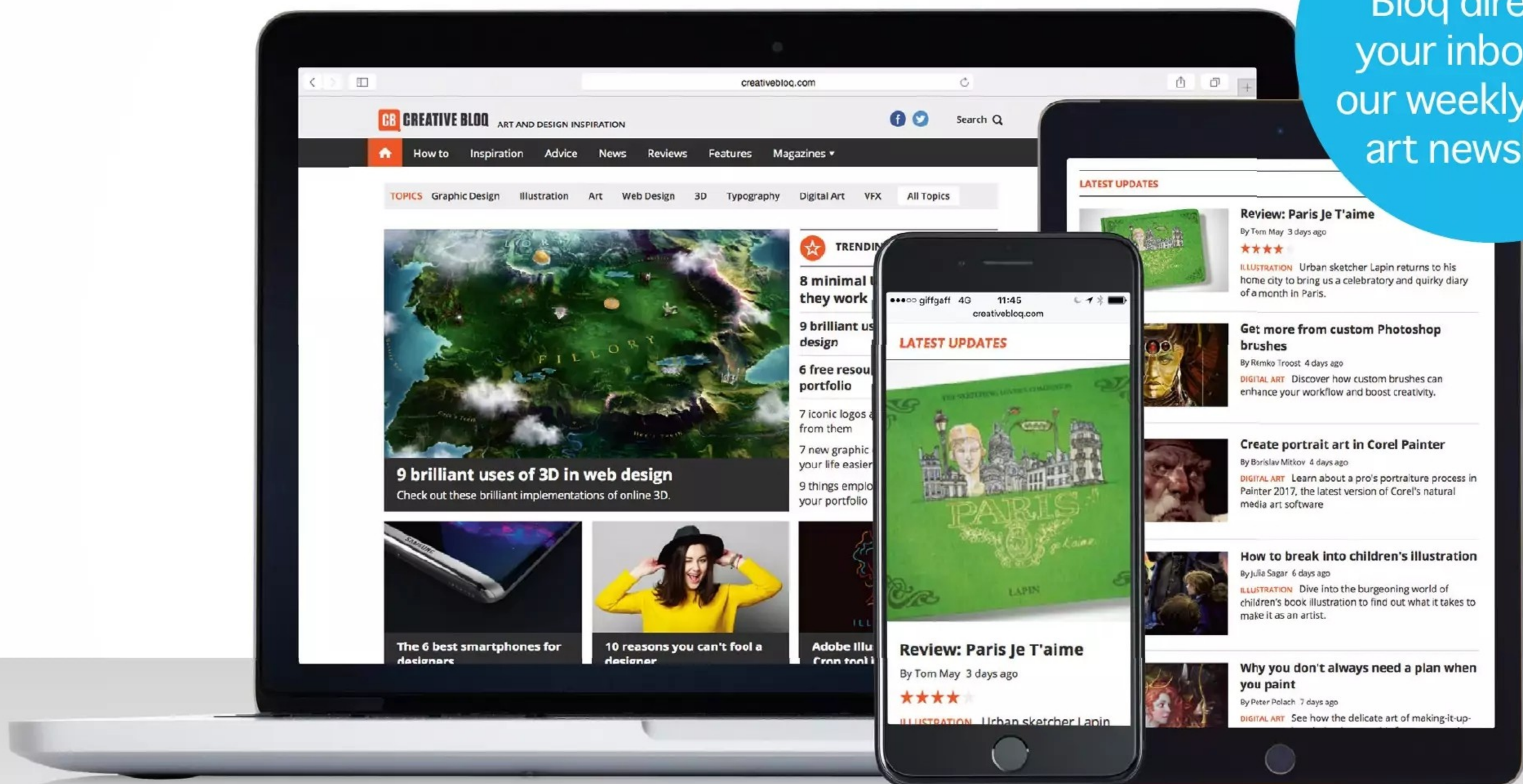
Rating ★★★★★

An astonishing 400-plus brushes, free, for Krita: clouds and smoke, foliage, fur, texture and FX. FizzyFlower calls them 'cheat brushes' for speeding up painting – that doesn't sound like much of a cheat. Essential for any Krita user.

<https://bit.ly/4pfnDoq>

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Your ultimate source for art,
inspiration and know-how

88



OVERGROWN EPIC VISTAS

Marcin Basta builds a fallen rusty robot covered in moss and grass

84



The best 3D art around
Explore the incredible work of artists Andres Zambrano and Emiliano Calderón.

94



Create a game world
Cyril Yong Zhu uses a hybrid 3D-to-2D pipeline to make a stylised game environment.

96



Back to basics
Discover how to move objects in a scene, and avoid the dreaded gimbal lock.

98



Five minutes with...
Tian Gan reveals how she was inspired to start creating her own game worlds.

3D Artist Showcase

BE INSPIRED BY THE BEST DIGITAL ART AROUND

NO. 1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX
ARTIST
MONTH



Andres Zambrano

LOCATION: US **MEDIA:** ZBrush, Maya, Substance Painter, Marvelous Designer, Unreal Engine 5, Blender

WEB: www.artstation.com/andres_zambrano

Andres is inspired by heroic figures with a dignified and elegant look. For him, the most important part of an image is to show a hand-crafted high level of detail on his characters. often with intense, dramatic lighting.



1 BLOODBORNE HUNTER

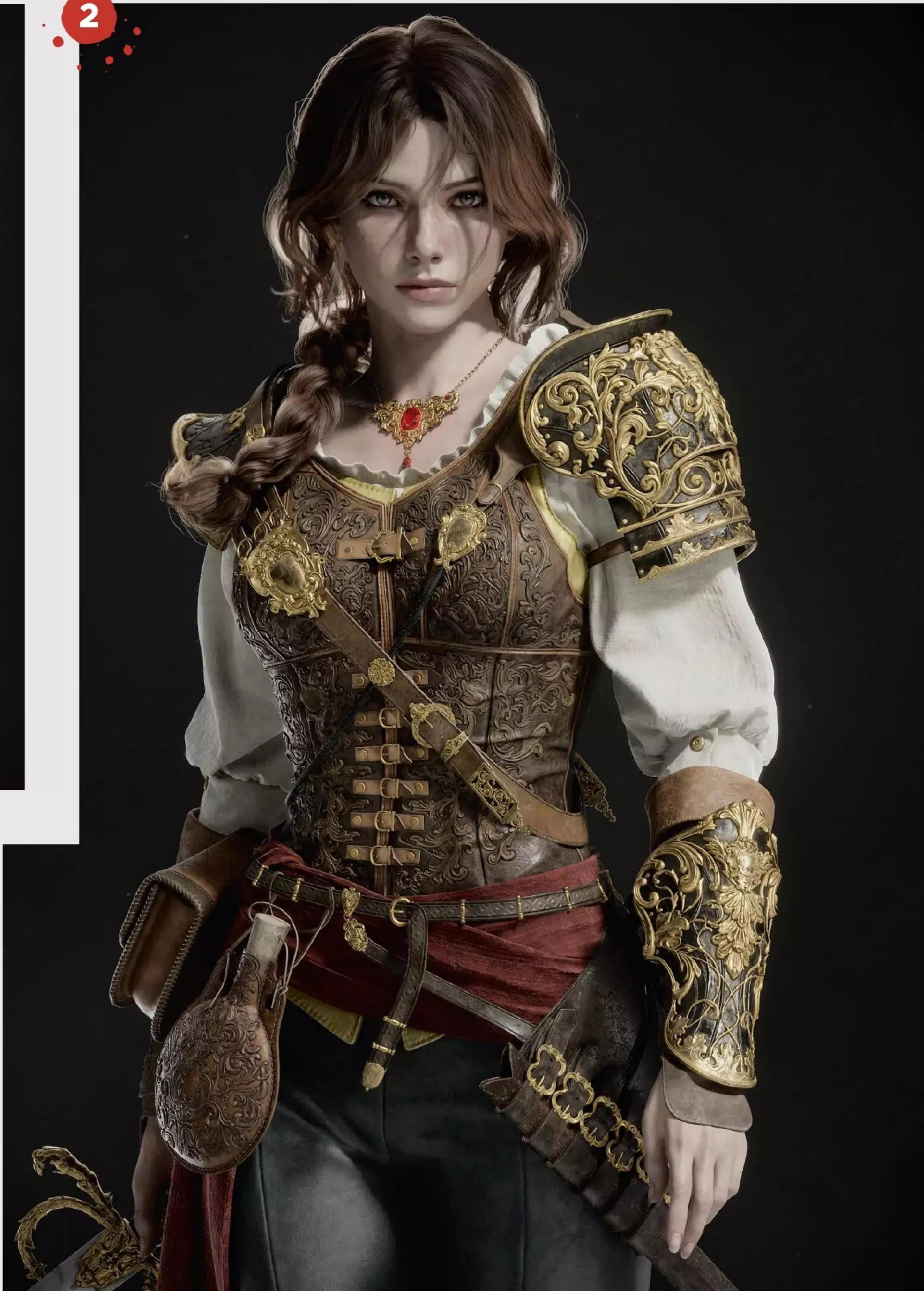
"One of my earliest works where I focused on realistically depicting different materials. The main focus here was on the cloth and showing the damage from constant fighting."

2 FANTASY ADVENTURER

"This piece was a way to practice designing my own character using the design language learned from previous characters. This one is a real-time character for Unreal."

3 LADY MARIA - BLOODBORNE

"A custom, slightly redesigned version of Lady Maria from Bloodborne. Here I wanted to emphasise more movement and a dramatic angle compared to my previous models."







Emiliano Calderón

LOCATION: Argentina **MEDIA:** Maxon, ZBrush **WEB:** www.artstation.com/huellacolecciones

A digital collectible sculptor with over 11 years of experience, Emiliano combines traditional sculpting with digital artistry to create detailed statues for Sideshow Collectibles, Queen Studios and Superkraft Lab.

1



1 HULK

"I'm motivated by creating dynamic poses and conveying a strong personality when it comes to sculpting. It's a fun challenge to remain faithful to the original character design."

2 VENOM

"Organic sculpting is my greatest strength. It allows me to emphasise the anatomy, fine surface detail, and texture."

3 SPIDER-MAN

"Digital sculpting allows me to achieve exceptional levels of detail while preparing collectible statues for physical production. Different materials enhance the sense of realism and quality."

2



3





Samuel Selami

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** ZBrush, Maya, 3ds Max, Marmoset Toolbag, Unreal Engine **WEB:** www.artstation.com/samuelselami

Samuel is a 3D character artist in games. He's inspired by dark fantasy and MMORPG aesthetics. His work blends believable designs with stylised shapes to create grounded, memorable characters.

1 THE MERCENARY

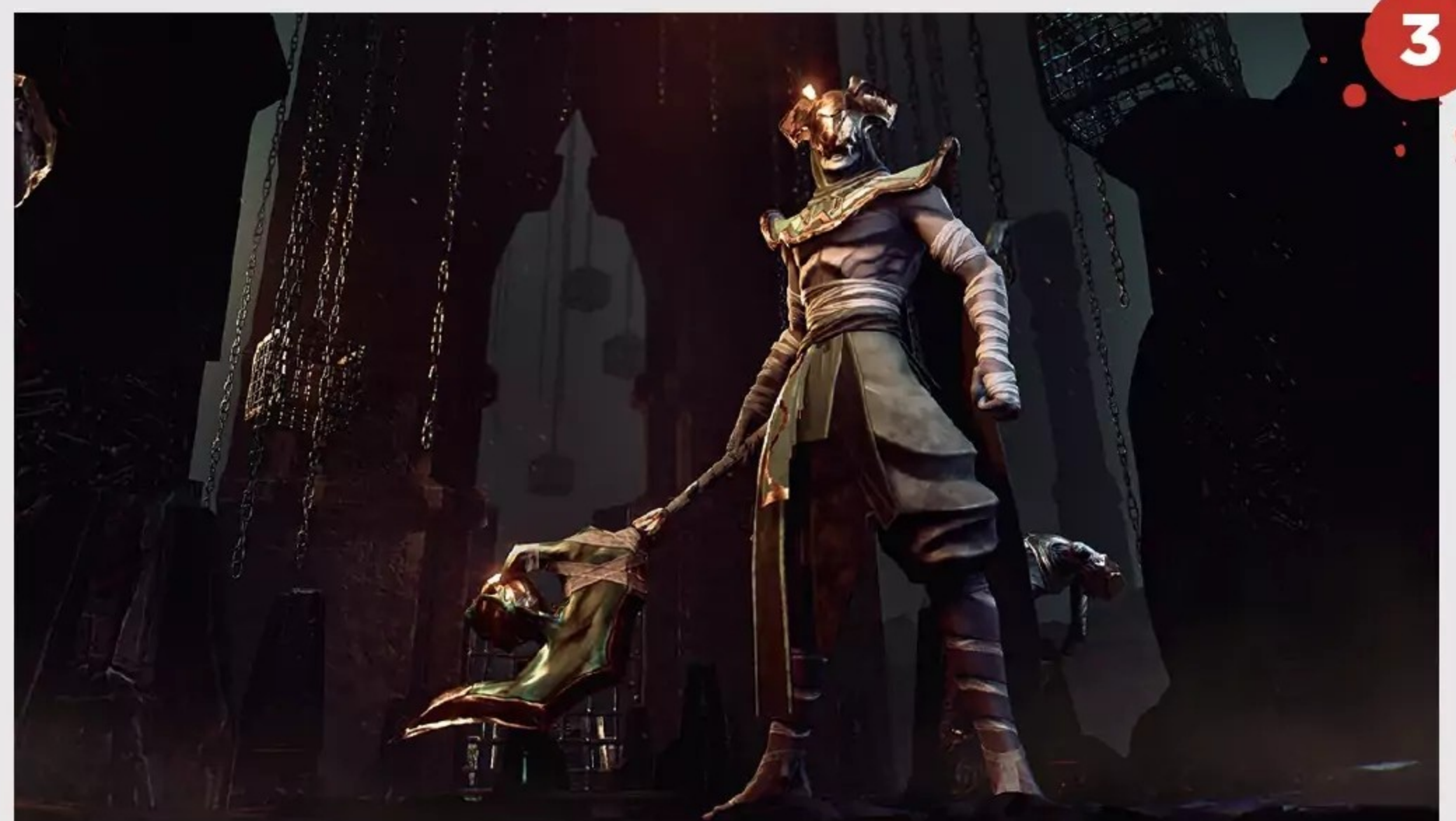
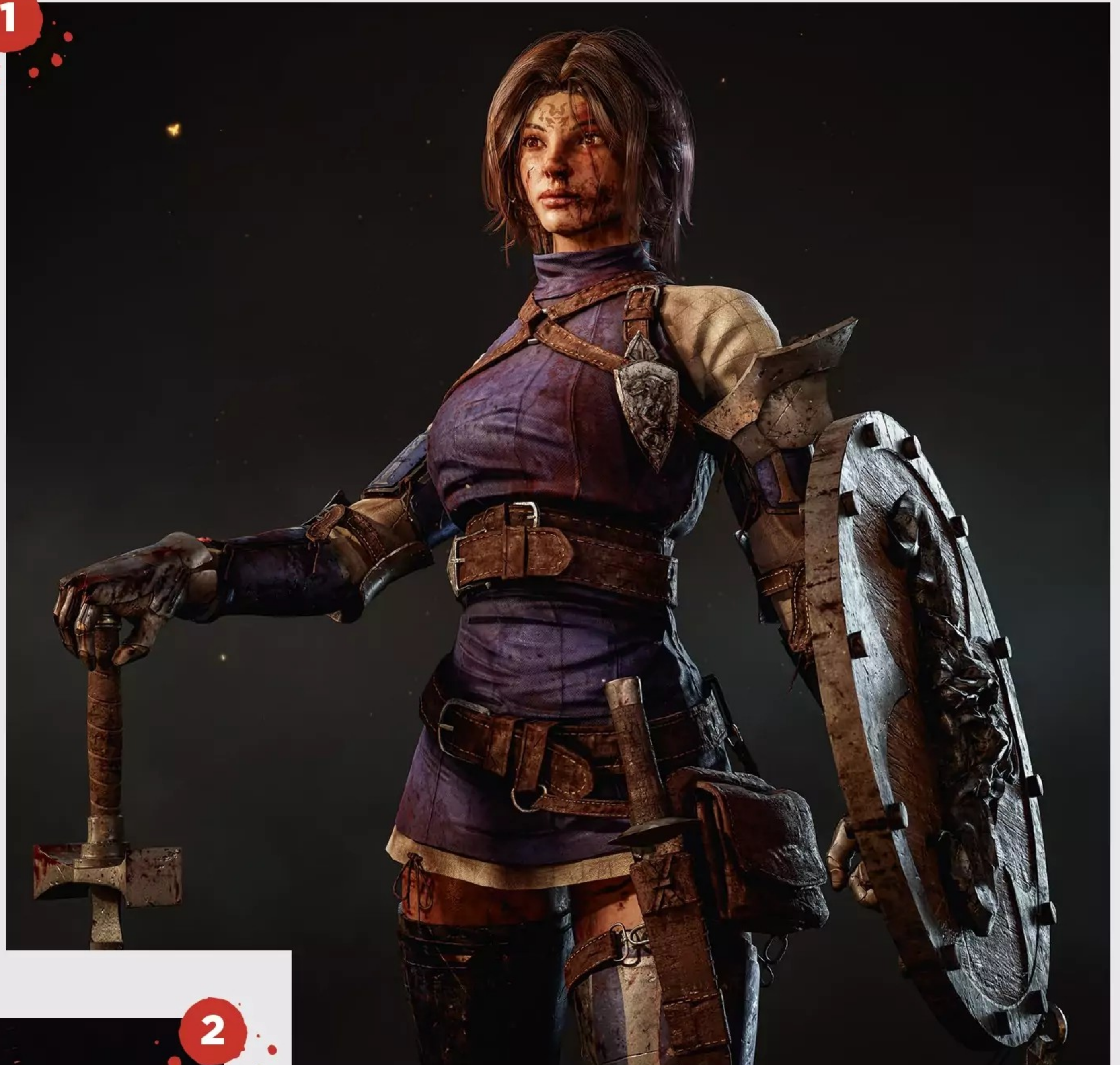
"Korean games and their character art direction played a big part in inspiring me to become a 3D character artist. With this piece, I wanted to recreate that grounded semi-realistic fantasy look."

2 FOLLOWER

"One of the biggest challenges with this character was balancing stylisation with horror elements. I wanted the creature to feel disturbing from far away while keeping a strong, recognisable silhouette."

3 ZEALOT

"This character went through many in-engine iterations to find the right silhouette and presence. I wanted the Zealot to feel instantly imposing and violent, marking a difficulty step in a stylised dark fantasy setting."



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



3D Coat, Quixel Mixer, Blender & Photoshop **BUILD A STRANGE OVERGROWN VISTA**

The process of creating an overgrown scene in 3D, from sketching, modelling and texturing to render, by concept artist **Marcin Basta**



Artist PROFILE

Marcin Basta
LOCATION: Poland

Marcin is a concept artist who likes exploring different genres through his use of characters, environments and short visual stories, currently working in moodvisuals studio in Copenhagen.
<https://bit.ly/4pd1WFD>



How to make 3D process fun? That is a question I have been asking myself for quite some time now.

Recent years of working in the gaming concept art field have shown me how valuable 3D usage could be for many clients and projects, but also for personal works. It provides the possibility of showing designs from different views, quickly iterate on lighting or materials and more.

For a long time, however, I did not enjoy working in 3D, as I was mostly used to – and preferred – 2D workflows, which felt more natural to me since I already had some basic drawing and painting skills learned at architecture college. But after noticing the strengths that 3D could offer, I started trying to find an approach – one that suited me better, and one that felt less rigid, which was something I had previously associated with 3D.

Only after discovering 3DCoat, and finding it surprisingly fun to use, it quickly became my software of choice. Its voxel-based workflow allowed me to create more freely and intuitively in 3D. Since then I've become more open to other 3D softwares, using 3DCoat as my base.

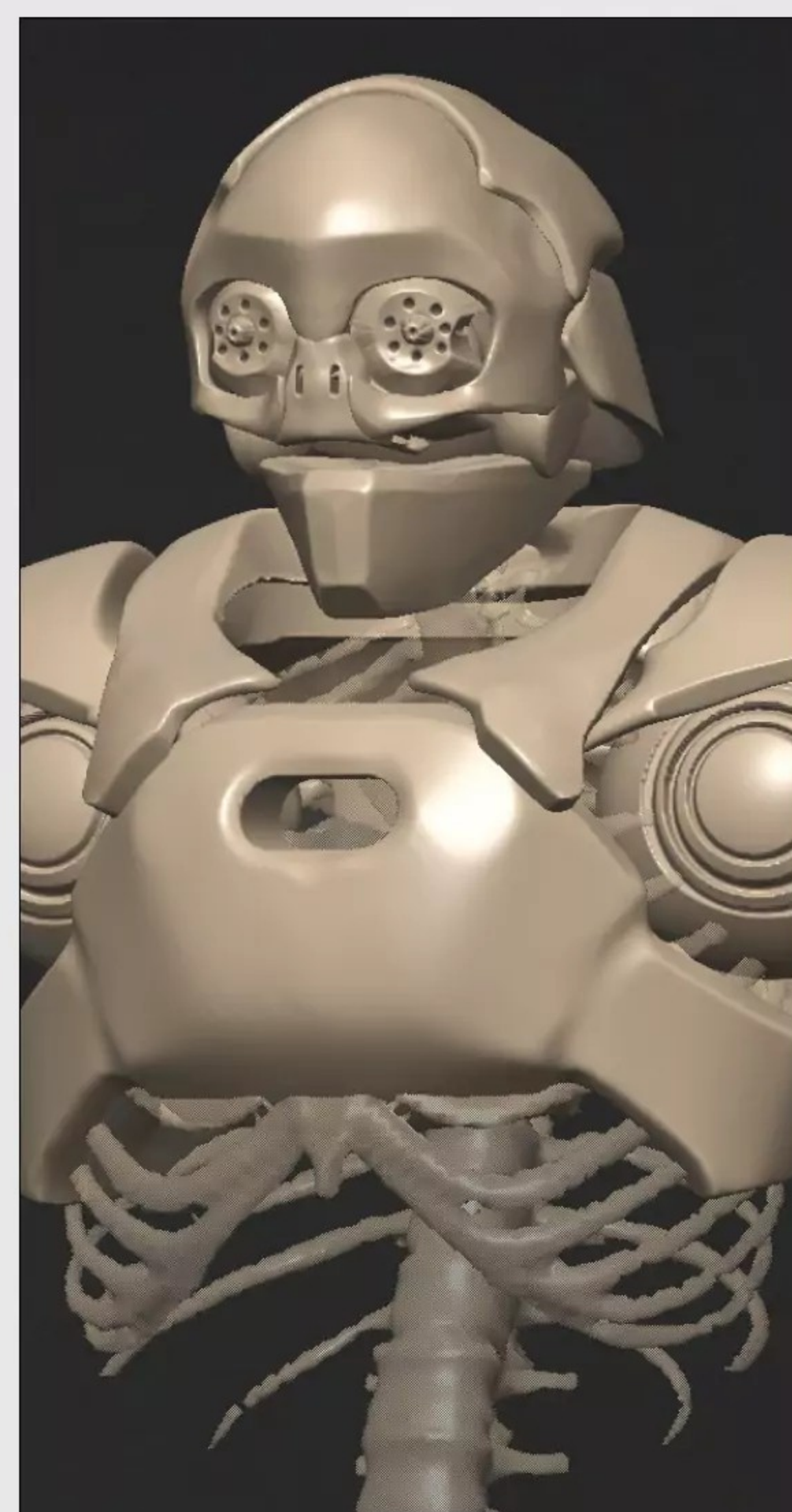
In this tutorial, I will show you how I create a 3D scene of an overgrown robot, mixing those tools. Hopefully you will find it inspiring enough to try yourself!



1 Initial idea and sketching

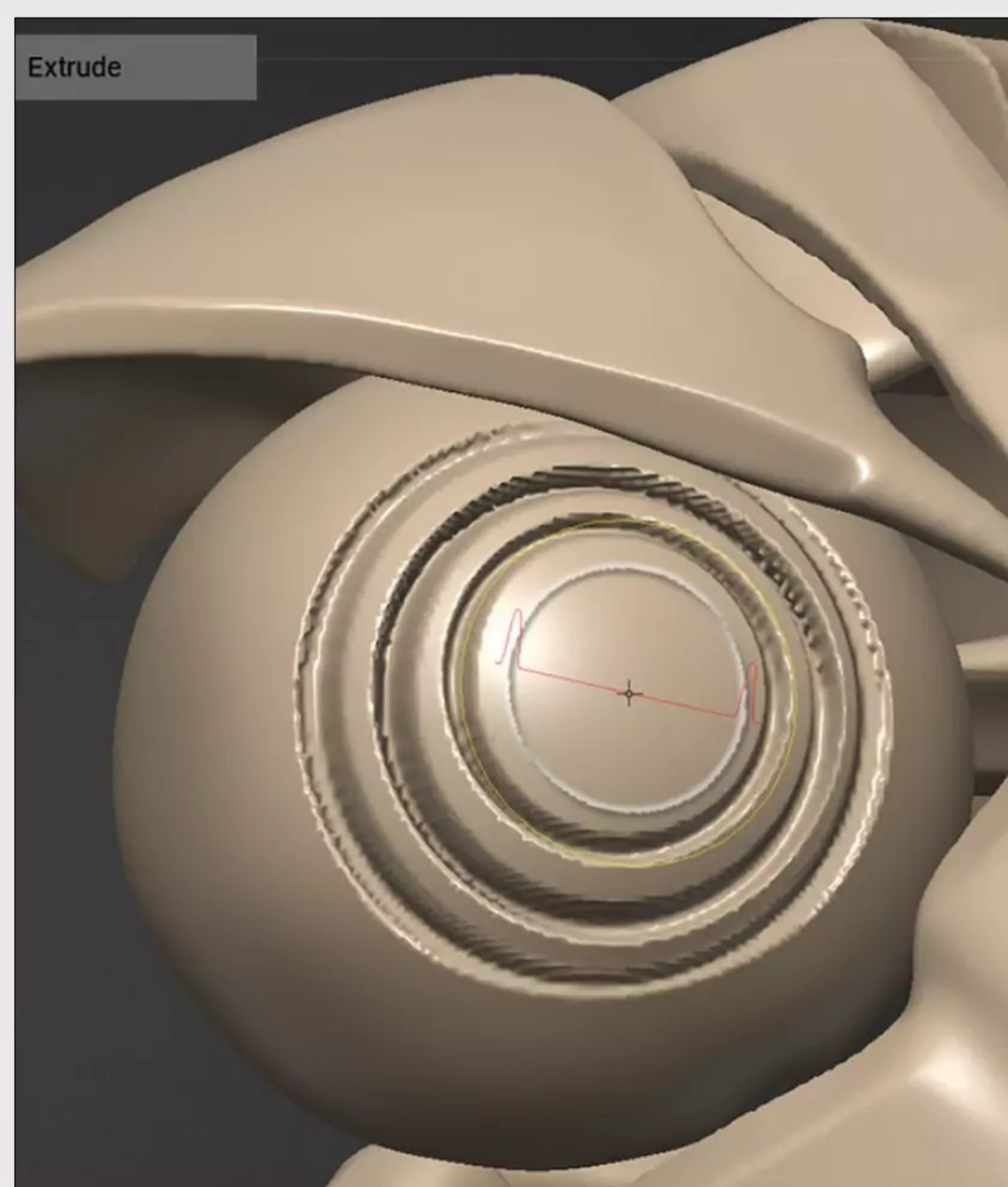
After having the idea of an overgrown site in my mind, I gathered a few references and quickly tried to put my thoughts onto “paper”. This is usually the most important step for me when creating any work, as it will provide a foundation for the rest of the image.

For this practice project, I chose something simple that would not overwhelm me along the way. I start with a composition sketch, trying to establish the idea through bold shapes, together with a simple sketch for the robot. I incorporate tribal features to make it more intriguing, like an old artefact from another world. At this point, I also already had a colour scheme in my mind – green for the overgrown part, and orange tones for the rusty robot.



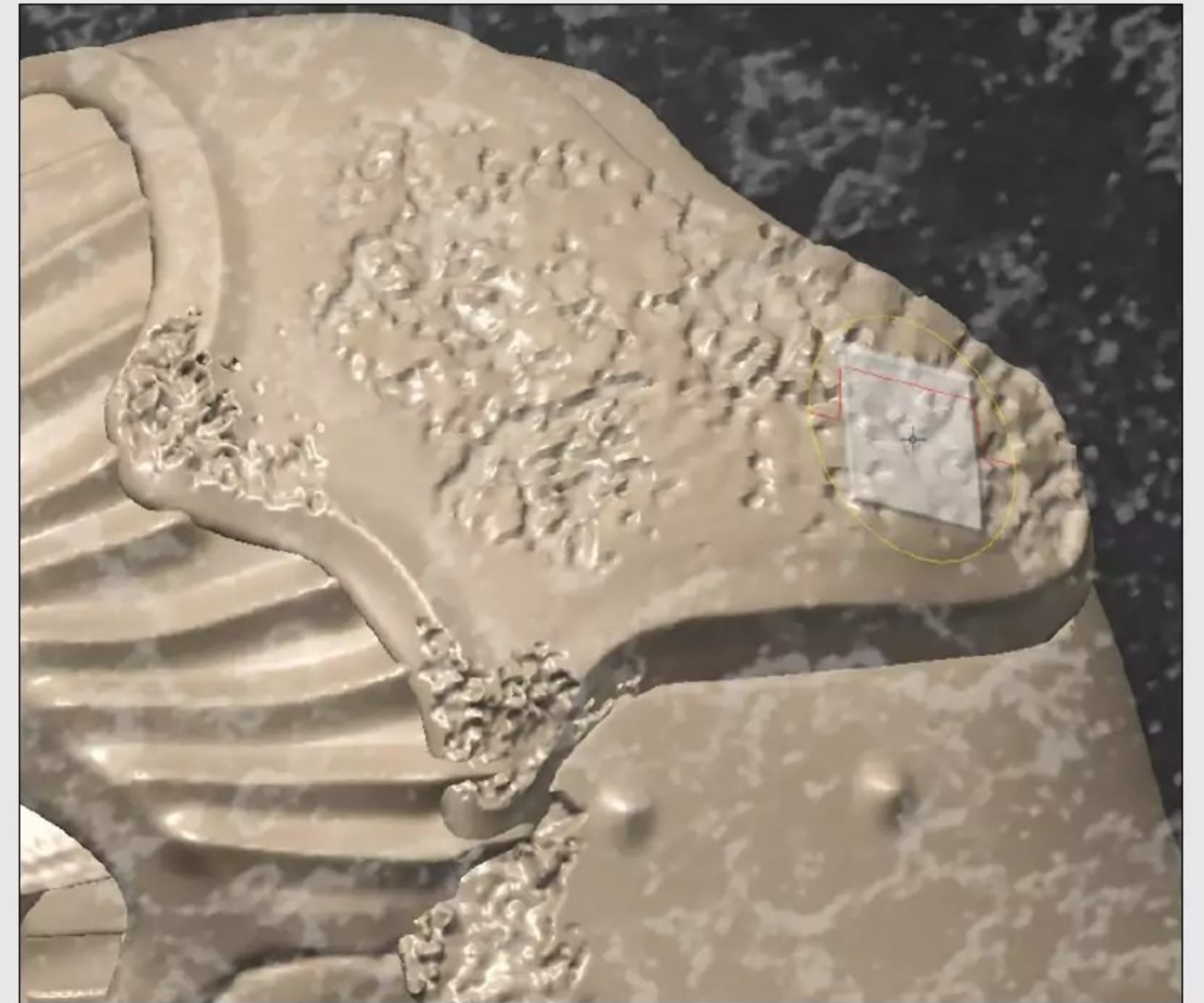
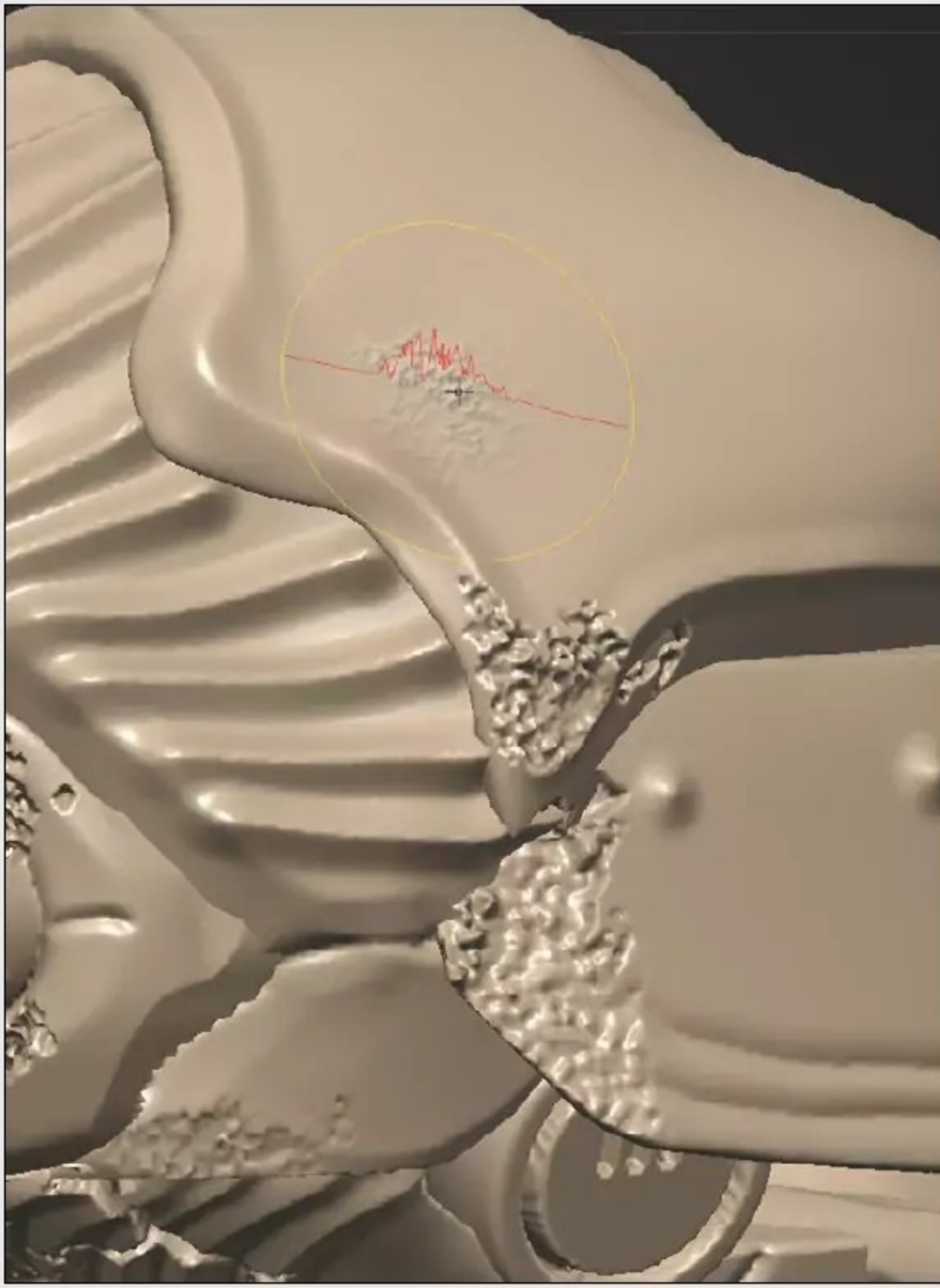
2 3D coat: sculpting main shapes

After figuring out what I want to create, I jump into 3D Coat (these steps can also be done using other software such as ZBrush or Blender). I start by importing a free skeleton model that I found on Sketchfab that serves as a base for the robot. Then I begin establishing basic proportions through large, simple shapes, using tools like sphere, clay, move, cut and pose. Try to keep parts of robot as separate layers – this will come handy later as they will be treated as separate objects.



3 Detail: phase one

In this phase, I add details that belong to the robot's design. As mentioned, I chose to add tribal features on the robot. Most of the details, mainly the repeated convex stripes and cutlines, were made using the surface pinch tool and the extrude tool with a simple circle alpha brush.

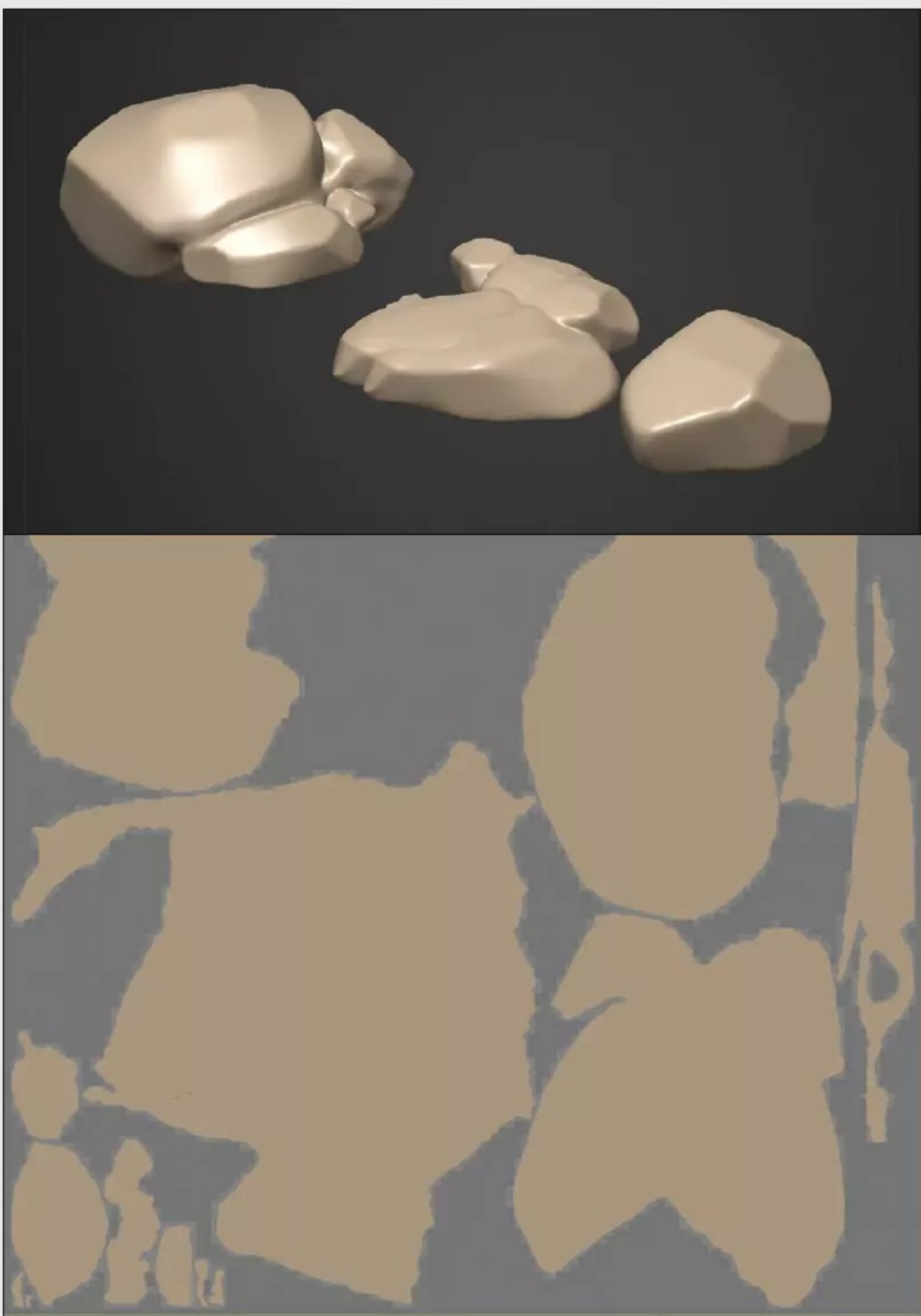


4 Detail: phase two

Here, I add a second lot of details that will make the robot look worn out, rusty and damaged. To achieve this, I use the extrude tool with a noisy alpha brush. I find this step fun, as I like to try different brushes and how they affect the surface, and it allows me to add detail quickly, though I try to not overdo it, leaving some areas intact so that the original armour design remains recognisable.

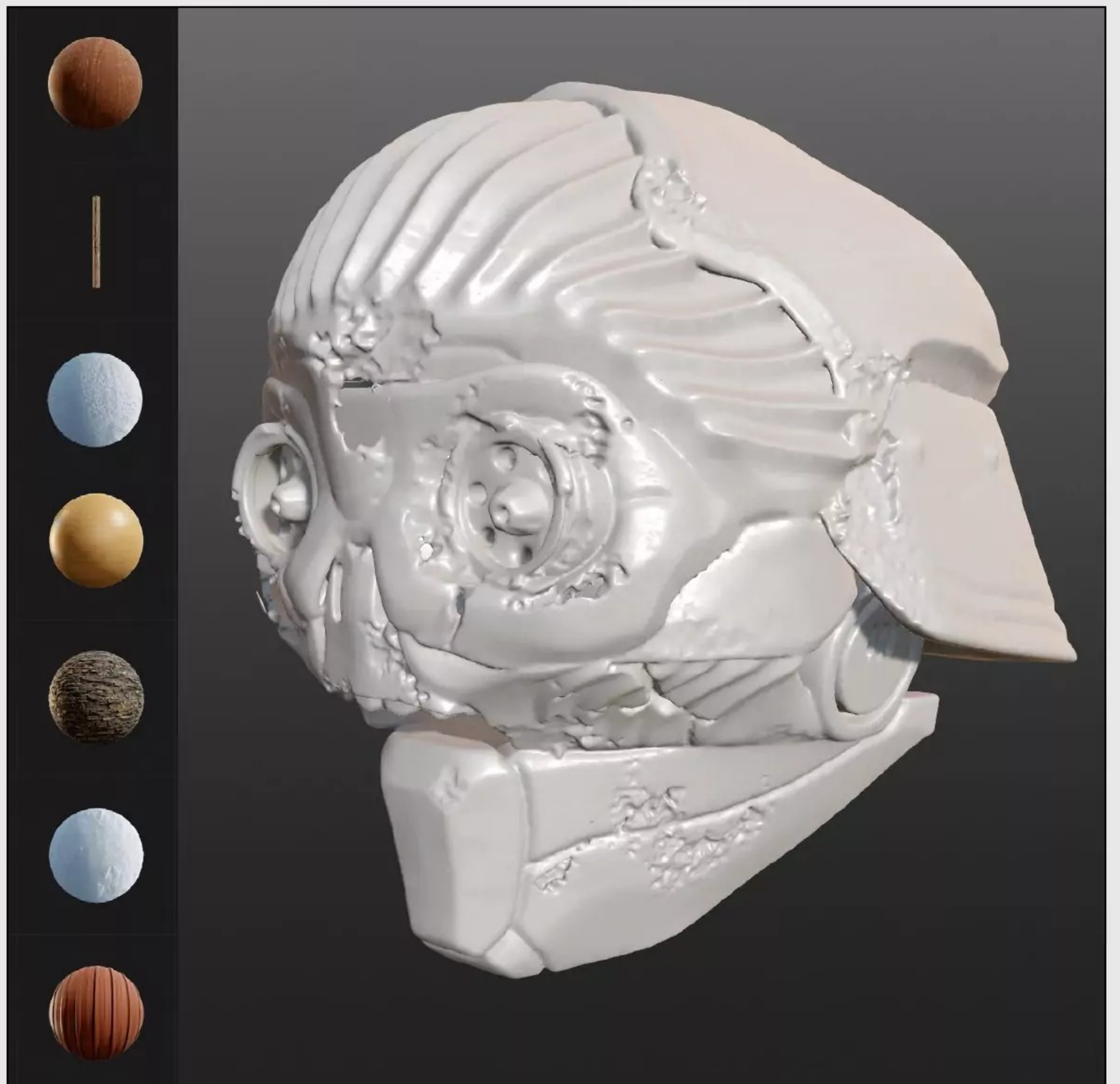
5 Add stencil masks

Another strong technique is working with stencil alpha masks. Some ways it can be used include to add another layer of surface details, or as a pattern to cut parts of the volume, as the tools will only affect the model over its white parts. This becomes even more powerful when working with voxels, as they allow you to create holes and complex cuts in the model easily.



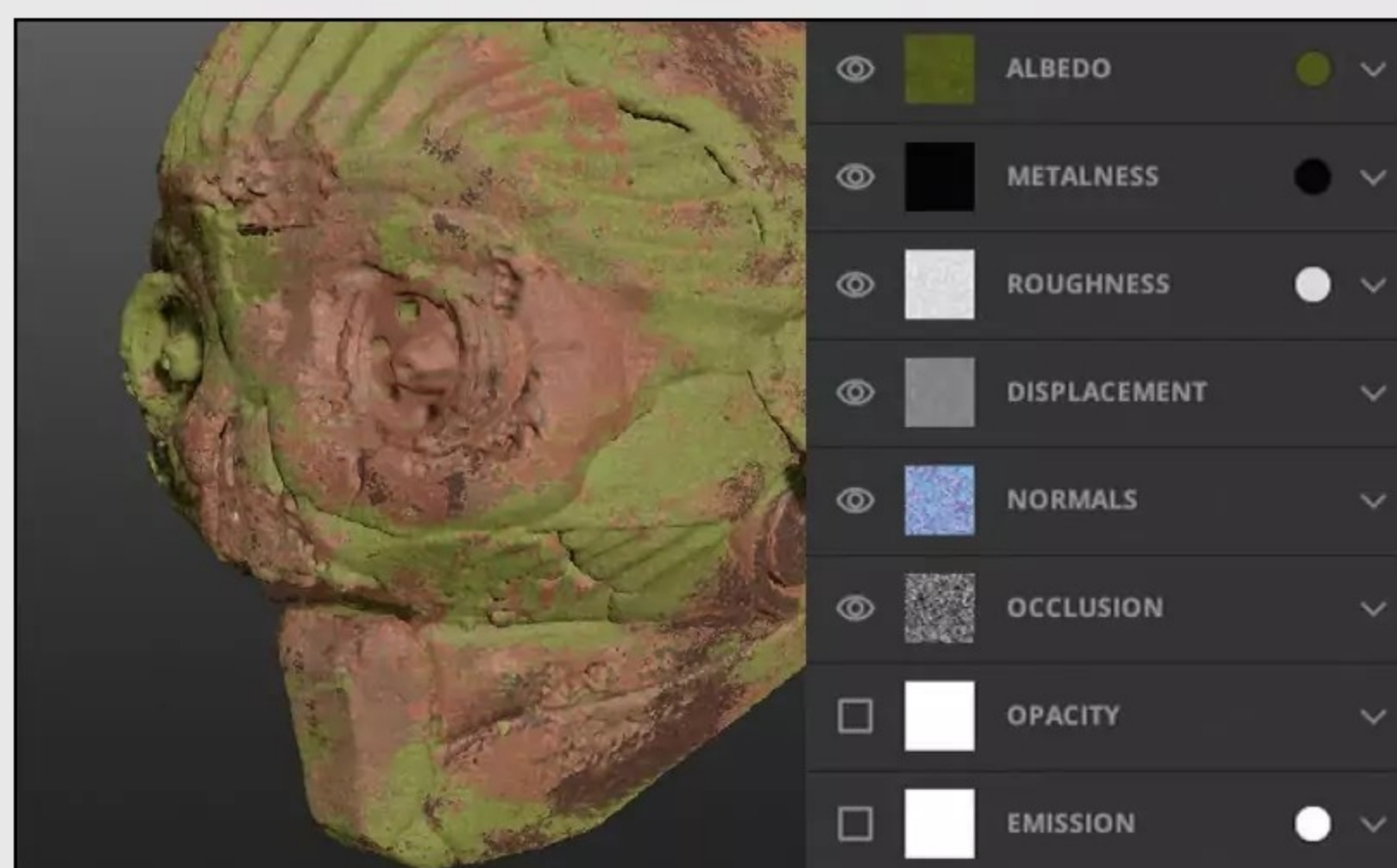
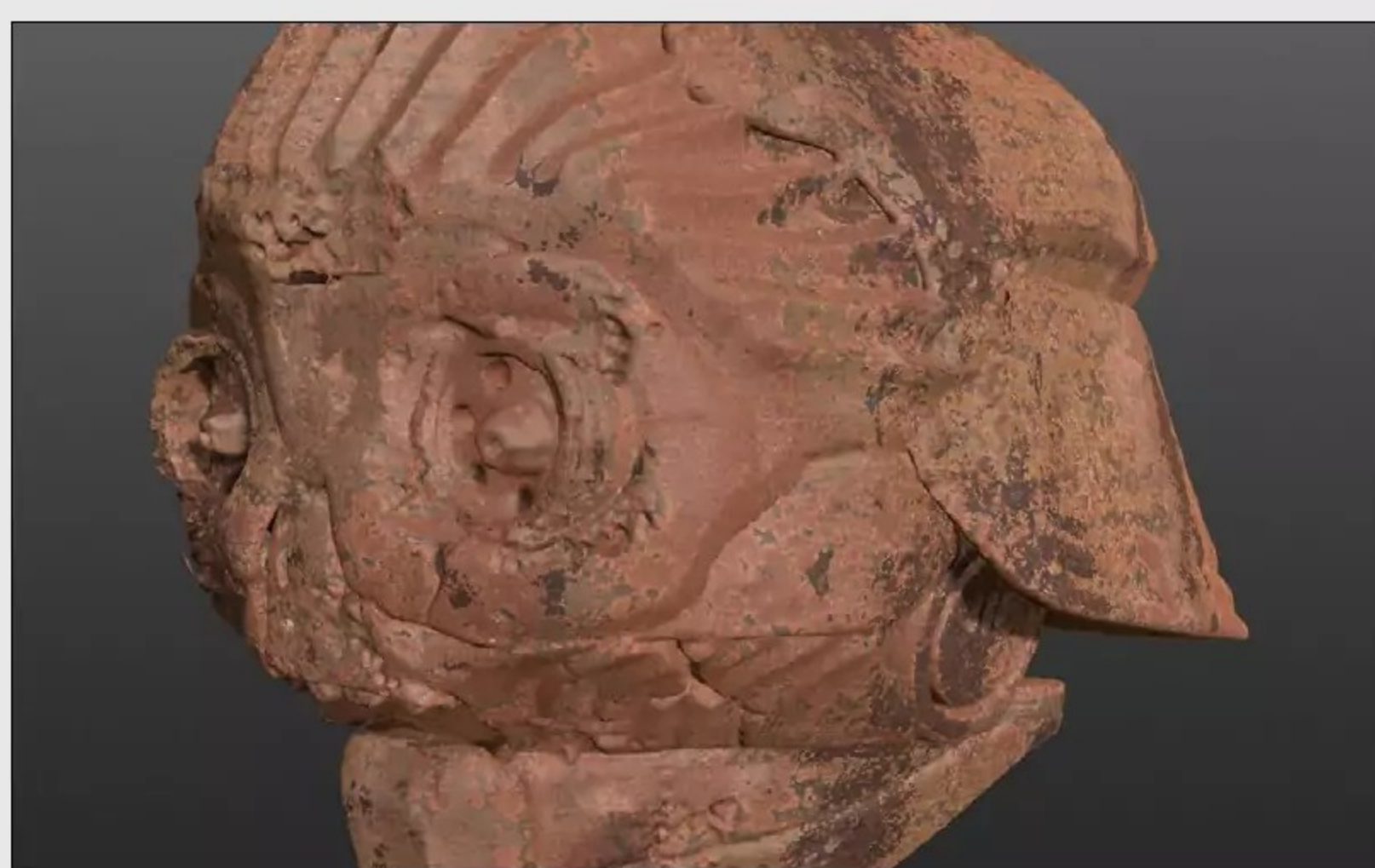
6 Rock and export

Once I am relatively happy with the main asset, I quickly create a few rock shapes that I will later use to build the surroundings. The next step is to retopologise our voxel model (that you can access by right-clicking on it and selecting 'autopo'), and create UV maps (available under the "bake" window in retopo workspace), which are necessary for the next step: texturing in Quixel Mixer.



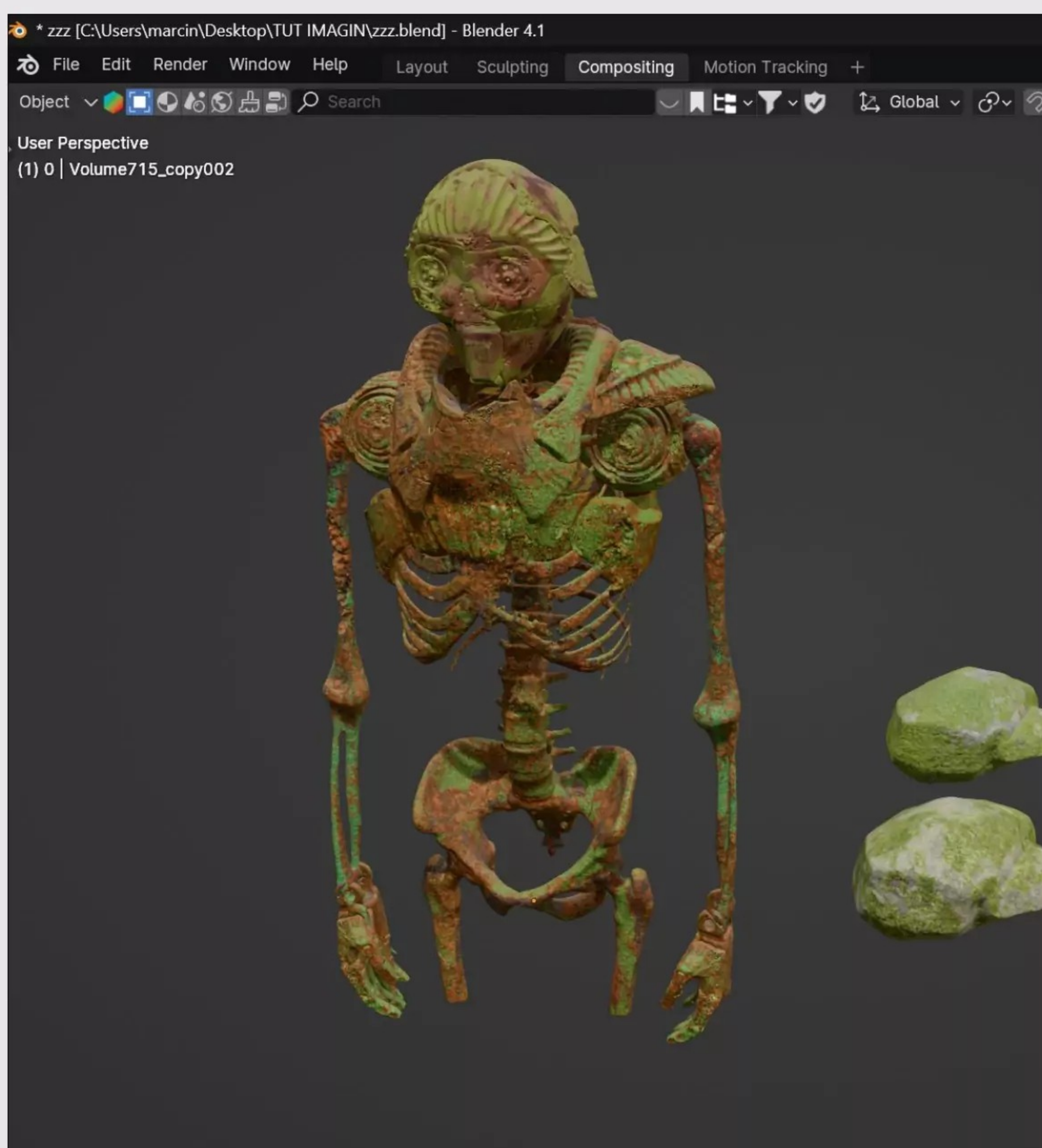
7 Bring model to Quixel Mixer

Using this software was one of the reasons for creating this piece, as I had just tried it for the first time and liked how simple and playful it is. Although it is not being updated anymore, I still think it's quite a powerful tool, allowing you to create textures based on scanned materials. It is free to use, with a default library of various materials that can be extended with Fab, but it's best if you claimed Quixel assets with your Epic account in the past. To import a custom model, go to the Setup tab on the top right, and select "custom model" under Type. ➡



8 Adding material layers

Now I add rust material layers that you can find in the Mixer library. With each material, you can set up its height, blend radius and opacity. By doing it over my main rust layer, I am able to create some interesting patterns of different materials mixed together, making the model feel more believable. In the same way, I am adding moss texture on top of my rust. By playing with the height and blending, I was able to find a level of coverage that I liked. I repeat the same process for the rest of the model, as well as for the rocks.



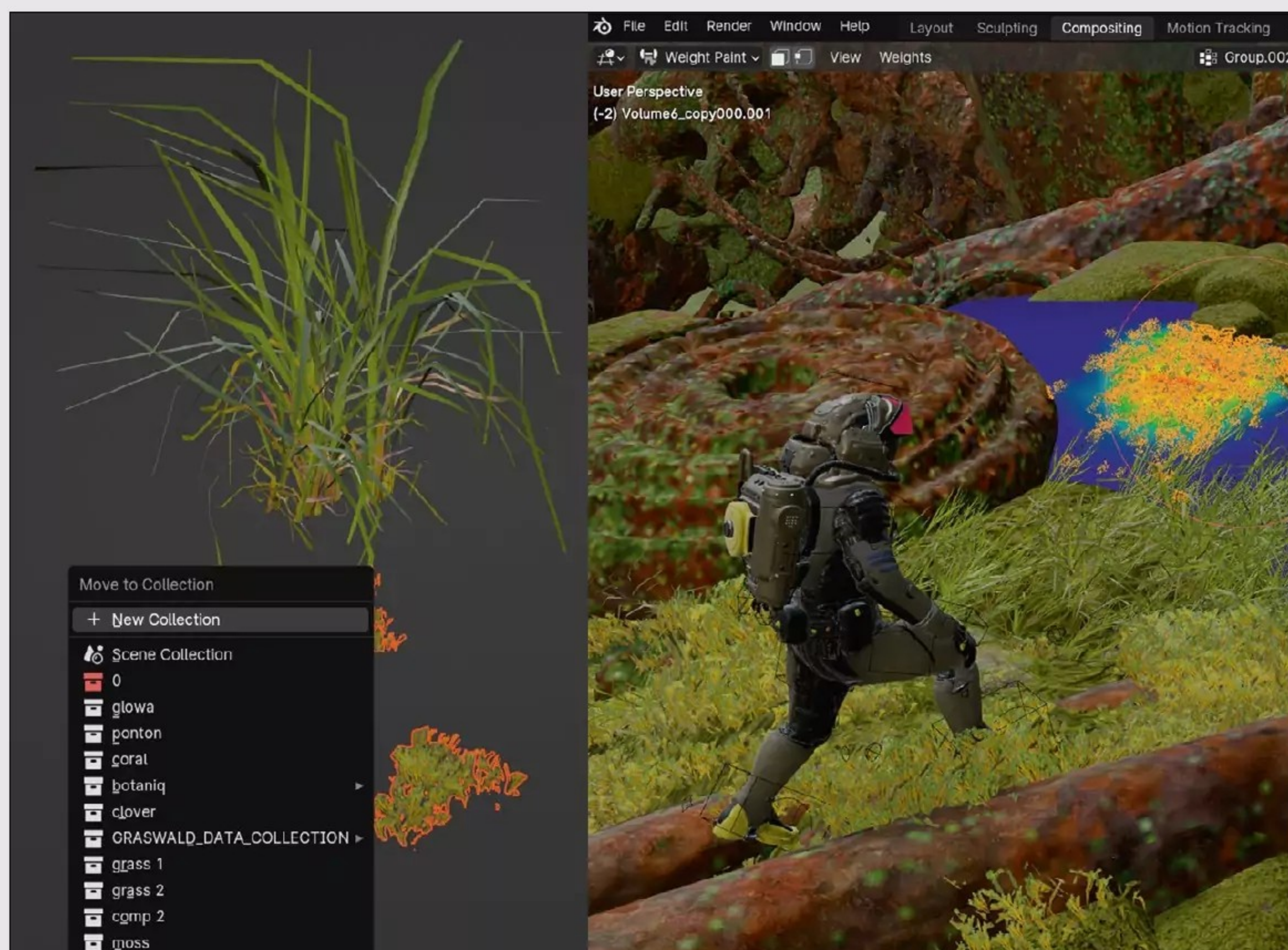
9 Bring everything to Blender

Now I move to Blender, where I build the scene, to set up the lighting and render. It will be composed mostly with those few assets that I created previously, with the addition of scattered foliage I then add later. As you can see, I create two differently textured rock sets in Quixel Mixer to add some variety.



10 Compose the scene

With assets brought into Blender, I put them together to create a feeling of a place that has been formed long time ago, burying the robot between mossy stones. Using only a few rocks, and by scaling and rotating them, I am able to achieve quite a natural looking structure. Having the robot's parts as separate elements also makes it easy place them in a way that feels broken, perhaps even defeated, in the past. During this step, I also check how everything looks in a camera frame that I set up, and roughly match it to the sketch.



11 Adding particles in Blender

Next, I add an extra layer of vegetation on top, to increase variety. To do this, I scatter moss/grass assets, using weight paint for better control. The assets that I use can be downloaded for free from <https://store.gscatter.com/assets>.



12 Lightening and render

Once I am satisfied with placement of the elements, and how they look in the camera frame, I lock in the lighting. From the beginning, I knew I wanted a bright and idyllic tone – something often seen in Studio Ghibli movies – and attempt to achieve this with a simple sun (with blackbody node at 5500 temp) and an HDRI of clear sky. While doing this, I also look for interesting shadow shapes, and a sun angle that helps the image and subject read clearly. I usually render additional passes, such as mist and light passes, that help me make changes later in PhotoShop. This is how a raw render from Blender using cycles looks.



13 Finish in PhotoShop

The biggest change achieved in PhotoShop is swapping out the sky with my own photo of clouds. The rest mostly involves cleaning up some areas and filling the vegetation gaps with the mixer brush (using a “dry” setup and scattering brush). Lastly, I apply the camera filter Raw (that you can find under the Filter window at the top), change contrast, values, and play with hue, saturation and luminosity of separate colours to balance the overall image.



14 Extra shots

As mentioned at the beginning, working in 3D has a lot of advantages – one of which is the ability to quickly create new shots using the same setup, showing different views. Here, I tried to compose an aerial shot that would tell us more about the layout, scale and the setting. Thanks for following until the end! 🍷



Artist PROFILE

**Cyril Yong
Zhou**

LOCATION: China

Cyril is a freelance concept artist based in Jingdezhen, China, with 12 years of experience in film and games. Serving global projects remotely and passionate about animation, he blends 3D objects and digital painting to create atmospheric, story-driven environments.
<https://bit.ly/4wtAtSn>



Technique focus

CREATE A VIDEO GAME WORLD

Cyril Yong Zhou on his approach to putting together stylised interactive environments



"The Dragon Sanctum is an environment concept designed for a stylised action-adventure game. My goal was to evoke a sense of ancient mystery and grand scale, drawing inspiration from classic JRPG worldbuilding and anime aesthetics. To achieve this efficiently, I utilised a hybrid 3D-to-2D pipeline. I used Blender to construct the cavern's massive multi-tiered architecture,

ensuring physically accurate perspective, complex bounced lighting and volumetric god rays. Once this 3D foundation was established, I transitioned to Photoshop for heavy overpainting. This workflow enables me to solve complex spatial and level-design problems in 3D, while the final 2D paintover breathes life into the scene, breaking the 'CG stiffness' and delivering a warm, traditional hand-painted illustration finish."

How I create...

A VIDEO GAME ENVIRONMENT



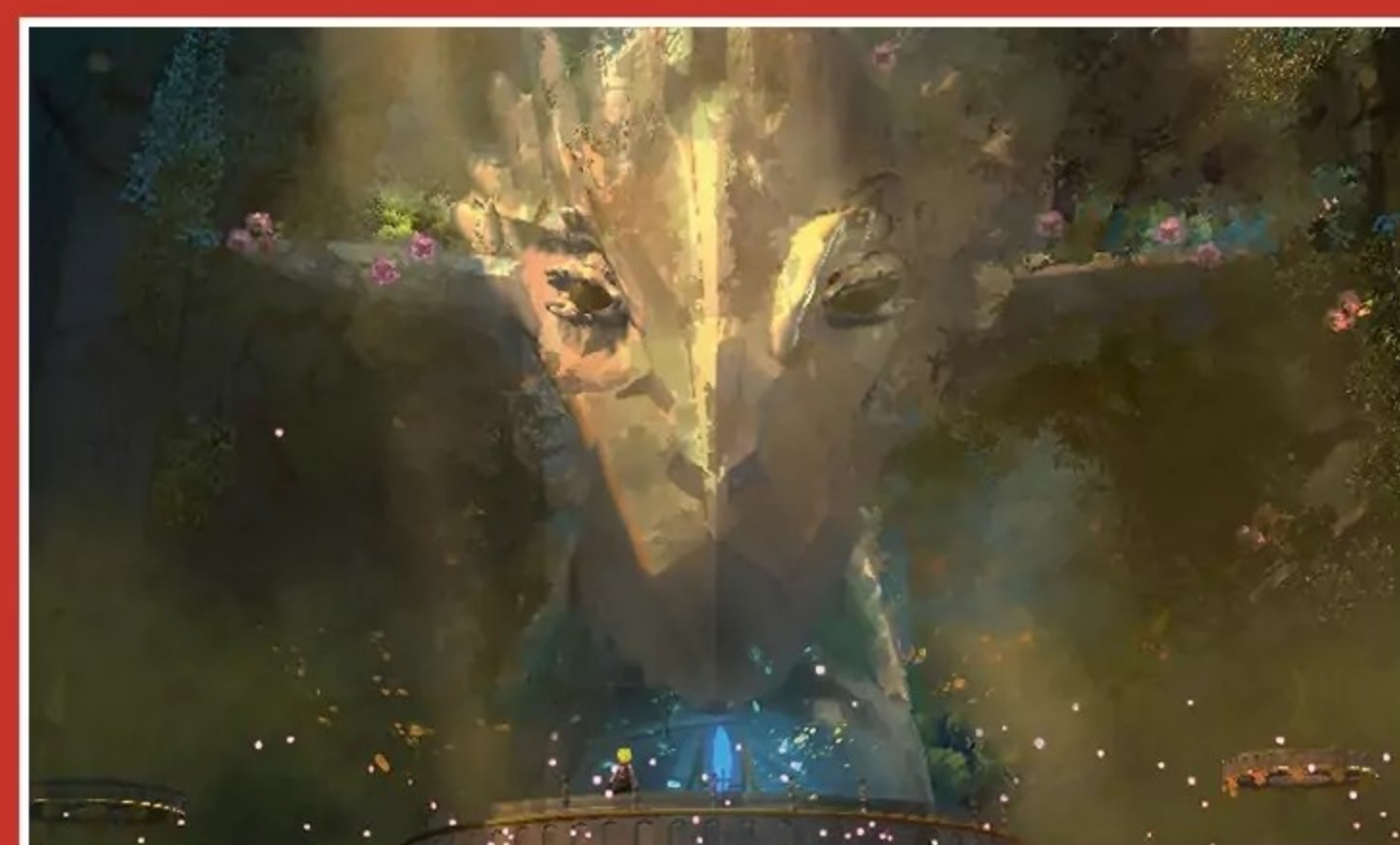
1 Composition and value

Before touching any 3D software, I always start with 2D black-and-white thumbnails to lock in the core composition and value groupings. Here, I explored different focal points and camera angles to ensure the dragon monument felt imposing. I also sketched a rough top-down map to plan the multi-tiered level design and structural hierarchy.



2 3D blockout and player flow

I then moved into Blender to build the structural blockout. Since this is a functional game environment, establishing 'player flow' is critical. I mapped out the walkable areas, bridges and the central sanctum platforms (Tier 1 and 2). This 3D phase guarantees that the monumental scale is correct and the layout is practically navigable.



3 Lighting and implementing the final 3D base render

With the layout complete, I set up cinematic lighting and dense volumetric fog in Blender to establish mood and depth. This 3D output provides perfect perspective and lighting information, serving as the foundation before transitioning into Photoshop for the final stylised overpaint.

3D Artist Back to basics

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

HOW DO I MAKE THINGS MOVE IN MY 3D SCENE?

Mike Griggs explains the three main methods for animating a 3D scene: by hand, by rules and by physics



Getting an object to sit still in a 3D scene is one thing, but the whole point of working with 3D tools, compared to 2D applications, is the ability to move around the model – to see every angle – and to also get the model itself to move.

There are, unsurprisingly, plenty of ways to move things in 3D software, and quite a lot of them can be automated to enable you to art-direct when needed, and retain the human element in terms of creating animation.

However, if you're new to the animation process, it's reassuring to know that the basics are there, such as keyframing – where a model, or parts of a model, are positioned at various points along a timeline, much as if you



The same object can be animated by hand, driven by rules or thrown around by simulated physics.

were animating stop-motion puppets. But whereas that involves moving for literally every frame of film, 3D software (like 2D animation software) can create movement between two keyframes that are seconds apart.

The only catch with animation in 3D is that the extra dimension can create weird, outlying animation, unless you are across your points of rotation (as we touched on in last issue's article).

Practically all 3D software will have some form of keyframing animation within it. Some have extra ways of

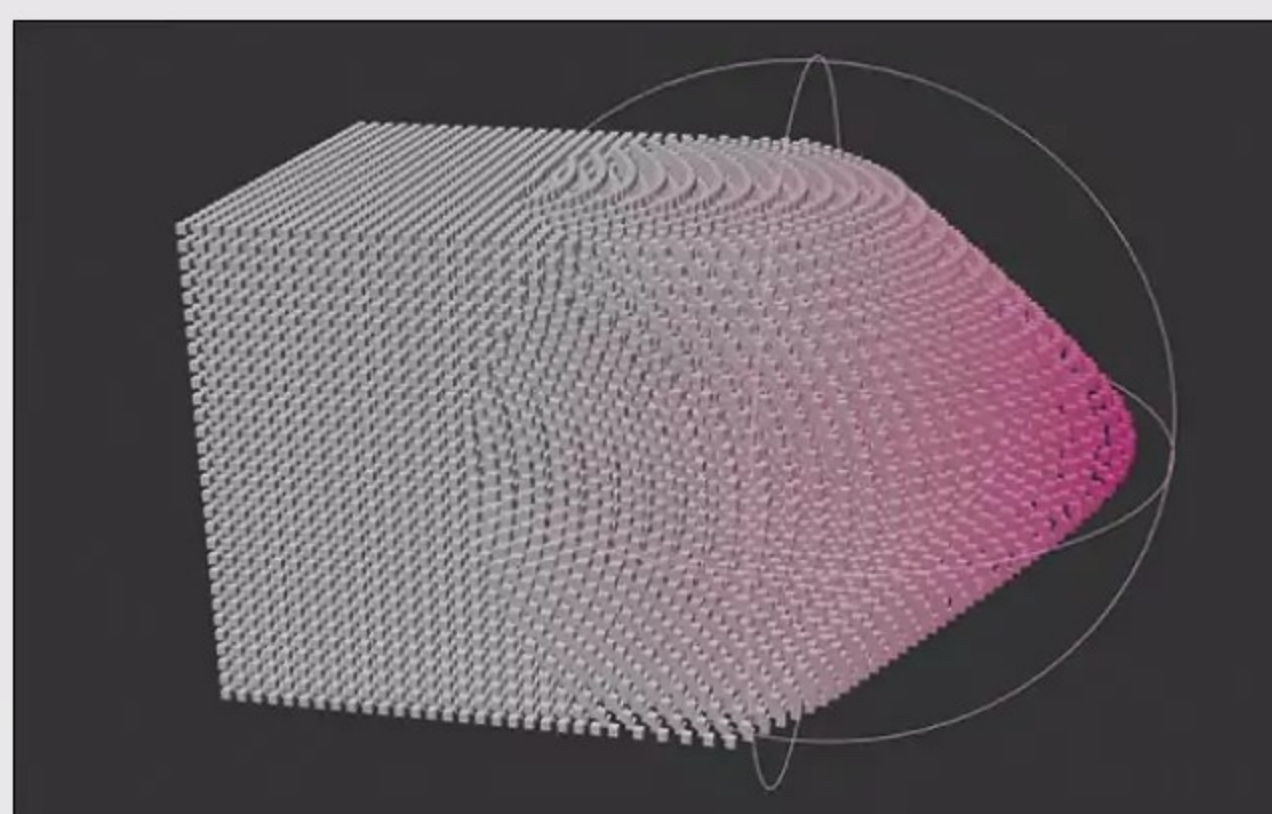
moving objects, such as motion graphics tools, which use a hidden object called deformers. The ultimate expression of this is the third form of motion: simulation. This is where the 3D software can automate the motion of water, cloth, explosions and so on, based on real physics. Although potentially complicated, it can be a huge time-saver for creating complex animations.

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

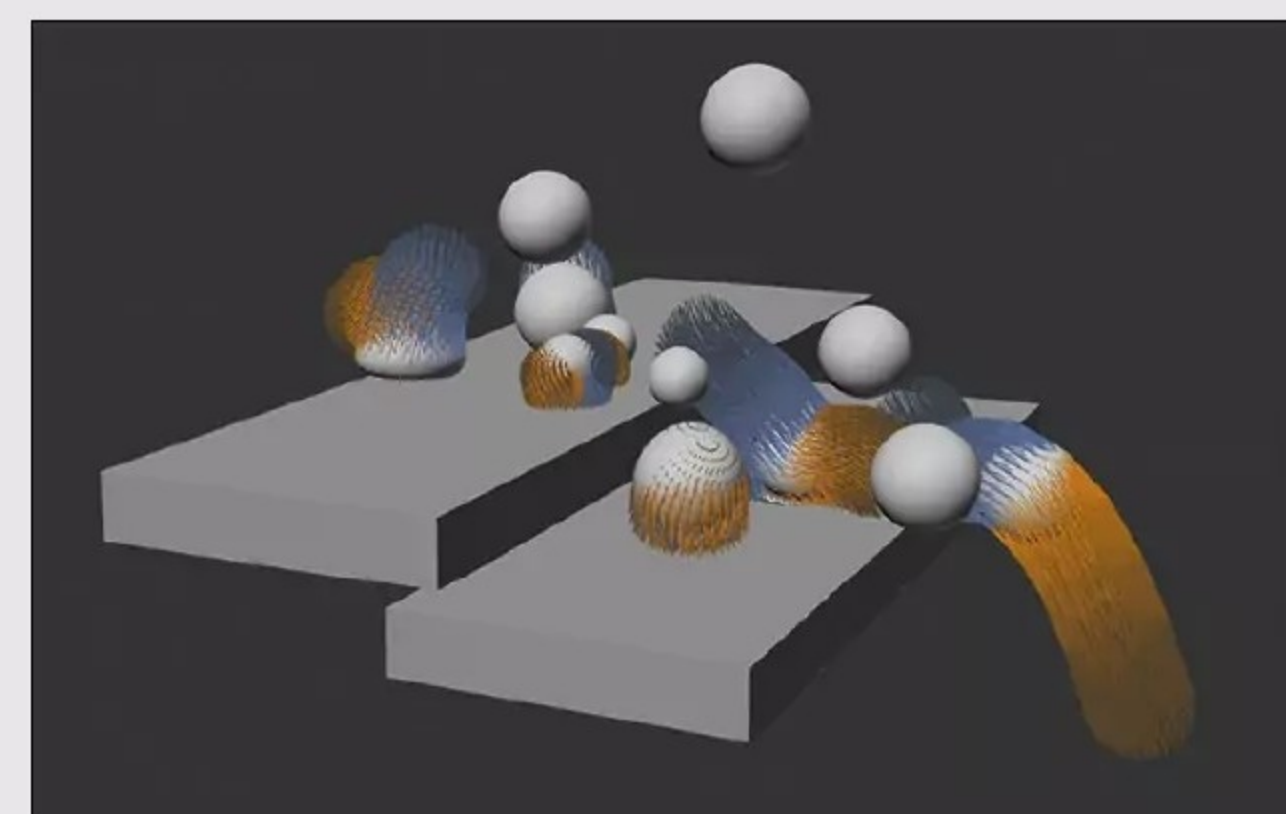
Different ways to animate objects in a scene



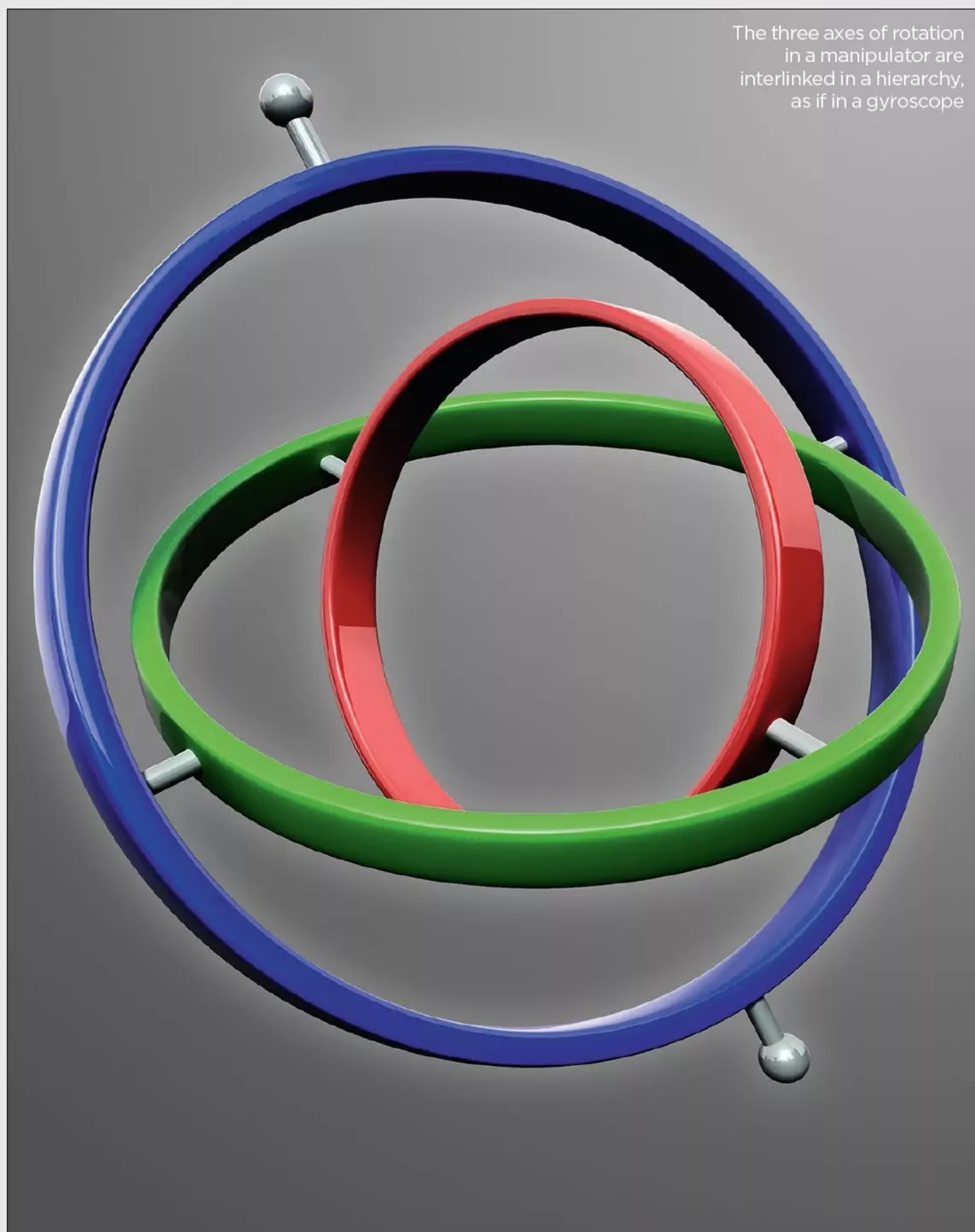
1 Moving things by hand
Keyframing is the most hands-on method: you set the object's position at one point in time, move forward, then set it again. The software calculates every frame between the two – what's called interpolation. In Blender you simply press [I] to drop a keyframe on the selected property. Start with just two keyframes and watch the motion before adding more.



2 Moving things with rules
When you need many objects to move together, animating each by hand can be 'a lot'. Software like Cinema 4D has tools that let you drive whole groups with rules. A field or effector defines an area of influence – objects inside it move, scale or rotate based on how close they are. Shift the field and the effect ripples automatically through the group, no individual keyframes required.



3 Letting science take over
Simulation hands the animating over to maths. Instead of telling objects where to go, you give them properties – bounciness, weight, a force like gravity or wind – and let the software work out the result. Collisions, cloth, smoke and falling debris all come from this. It's powerful but unpredictable, so save your scene before running a sim and expect to iterate the settings several times.



The three axes of rotation in a manipulator are interlinked in a hierarchy, as if in a gyroscope

ROTATION ORDER AND GIMBAL LOCK

Joints may seem simple, but a host of options can help avoid the dreaded gimbal lock, reveals **Antony Ward**



In this section we will dive a little deeper into joints and explore rotation orders. These are very important because they're used to help reduce gimbal lock.

So what is gimbal lock? As you rotate objects in 3D space, the manipulator will follow with all axes maintaining their positions, so the X, Y and Z planes appear to be fixed.

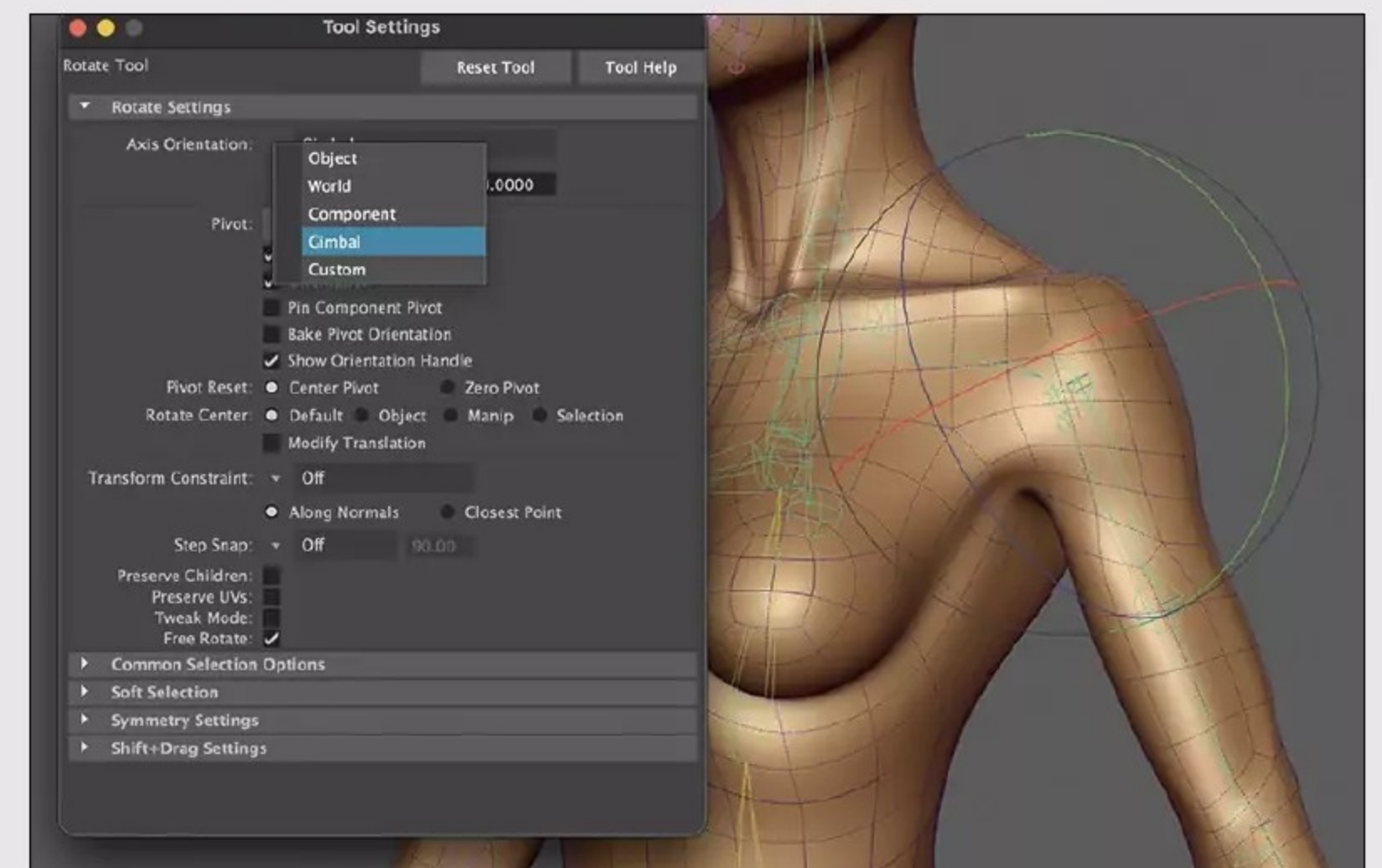
This isn't a true representation of the rotations, as you'll notice if you look at the attributes while you rotate an object. When working at an angle, rotating the X axis, for example, should only add to the rotate X attribute. However, it actually affects all three axes, so why is this?

Well, instead of thinking of the manipulator as a fixed tool, imagine it as more of a gyroscope where the X, Y and Z planes are sat in a hierarchy, with X being at the top. So if you rotate X, Y and Z follow, but if you rotate Y it only affects Z.

It's because the axes are separated like this that they can become aligned and this is what we call gimbal lock. There is a way to minimise this, and that is to change the rotation order. So let's look at that now.

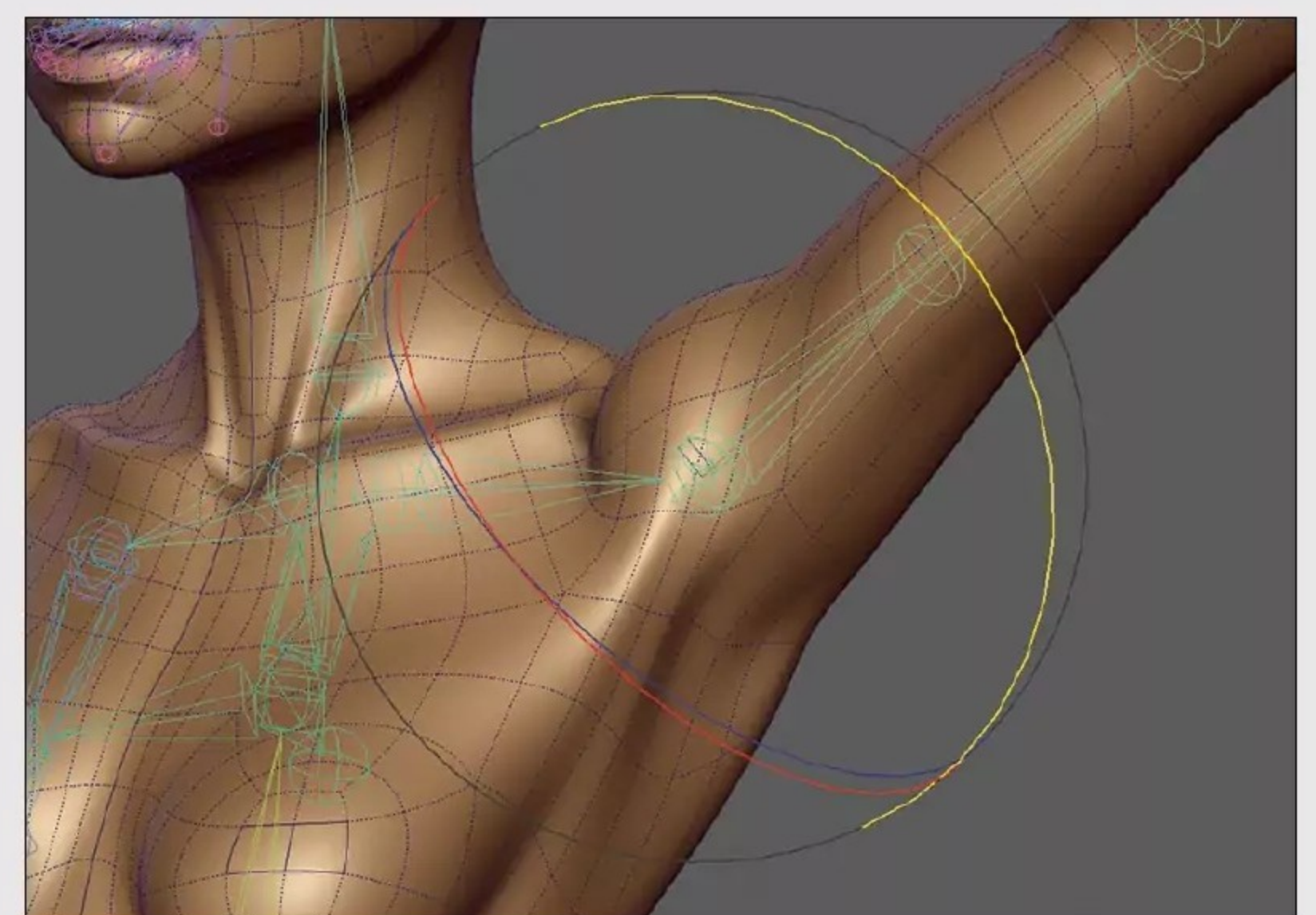
Antony Ward, aka antCGi, has been creating digital content for over three decades. Be it game development, rigging or recording in-depth courses for his YouTube channel, he boasts experience in most areas of 3D. <https://bit.ly/49BhX1n>

Three steps to make an arm joint move realistically



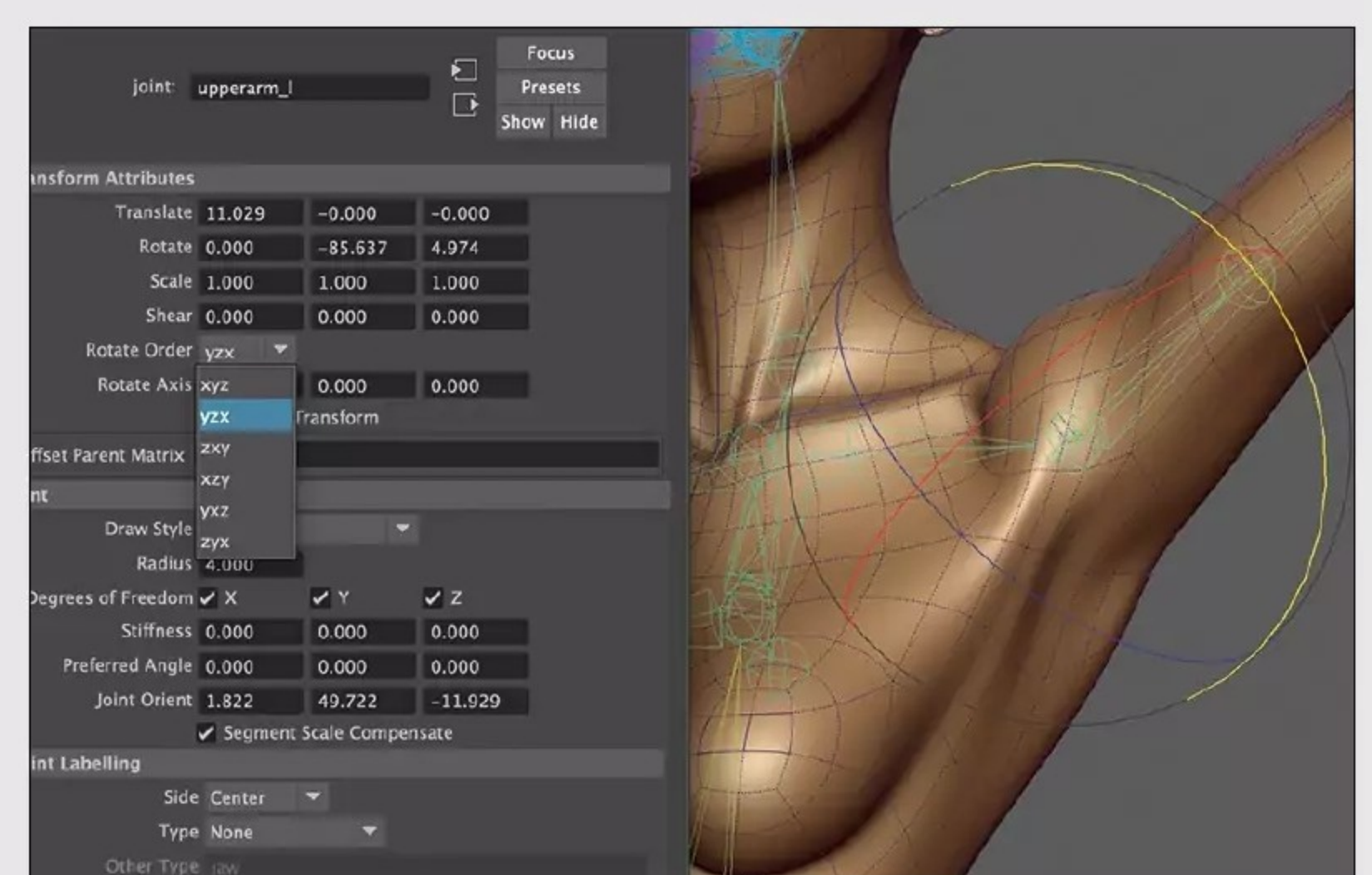
1 Swap to gimbal rotation

To get a clearer picture of your axes, make sure you swap your manipulator's rotate mode to gimbal. This will show you the true rotational axes and you'll be able to see if they overlap more clearly.



2 Test for minimum overlap

What you need to do now is test the rotations to find the axis priority order, and this is dictated by which will be rotated most often. So in the case of a shoulder, it may be the Y axis first as the arm moves forwards and backwards and then Z as it's raised and lowered.



3 Set your rotation order

The rotation order dictates the hierarchy of the axes, with the first letter being the primary axis. We know we need Y to be the main axis so the arm can move forwards and back, and then Z so it can raise and lower, so we use the YZX rotation order.

FIVE MINUTES WITH TIAN GAN

Final Fantasy VII inspired this artist to create her own worlds



Where did your artistic journey start?

In primary school, I asked my art teacher to teach me how to draw comics because I didn't have pocket money to buy them. They were terrible, of course, but that was probably the first time I felt the desire to create a world for myself.

As a young artist, were there worlds in movies, comics or art that gave you a desire to create your own?

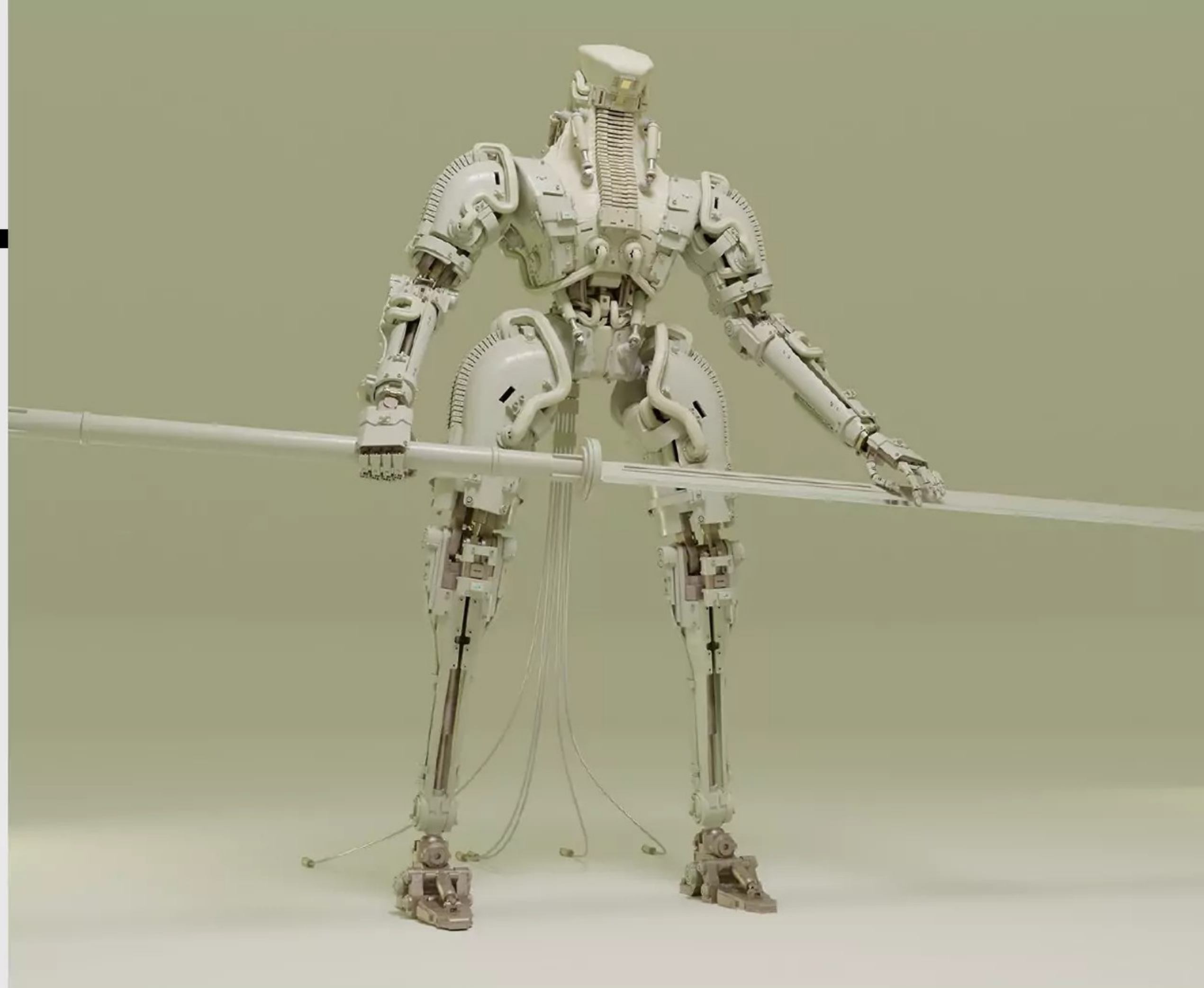
I have always loved games, so they have probably inspired me the most. StarCraft and Final Fantasy VII were the first worlds that really opened that door for me. I loved studying how their stories, characters, environments and cultures were constructed.

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

In many ways, yes. My main career is as a concept artist, helping build worlds for games and designing environments, vehicles, creatures and props. But my practice also extends beyond that. I am developing my own 3D short film, and I plan to release some of my self-made assets on platforms like Gumroad, hoping they might inspire other artists as well.

WHITE BOT

"A robot designed for my personal project Blue Room, with its form and pipe structures inspired by ancient Chinese bronze vessels."



Interestingly, one of my concept designs once inspired a sculptor, and I really enjoy that kind of cross-disciplinary exchange.

Are there any challenges to working in 3D?

I use 3D for concept design, and the biggest challenge is not getting lost in details too early. The overall silhouette can become weak or lose

“One of my designs inspired a sculptor. I enjoy that kind of cross-disciplinary exchange”

its uniqueness. I usually start with a quick 2D sketch, then block out the main forms in 3D with simple meshes, refining the big shapes before moving into details.

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

I use both. I adjust my style and process depending on the client or the project. Whether it is 3D or 2D, they are both tools for creating an

image. For me, the most important part of making compelling concept art is understanding the art direction deeply, or creating a unique visual style for the project. 3D and 2D are simply different ways to get there.

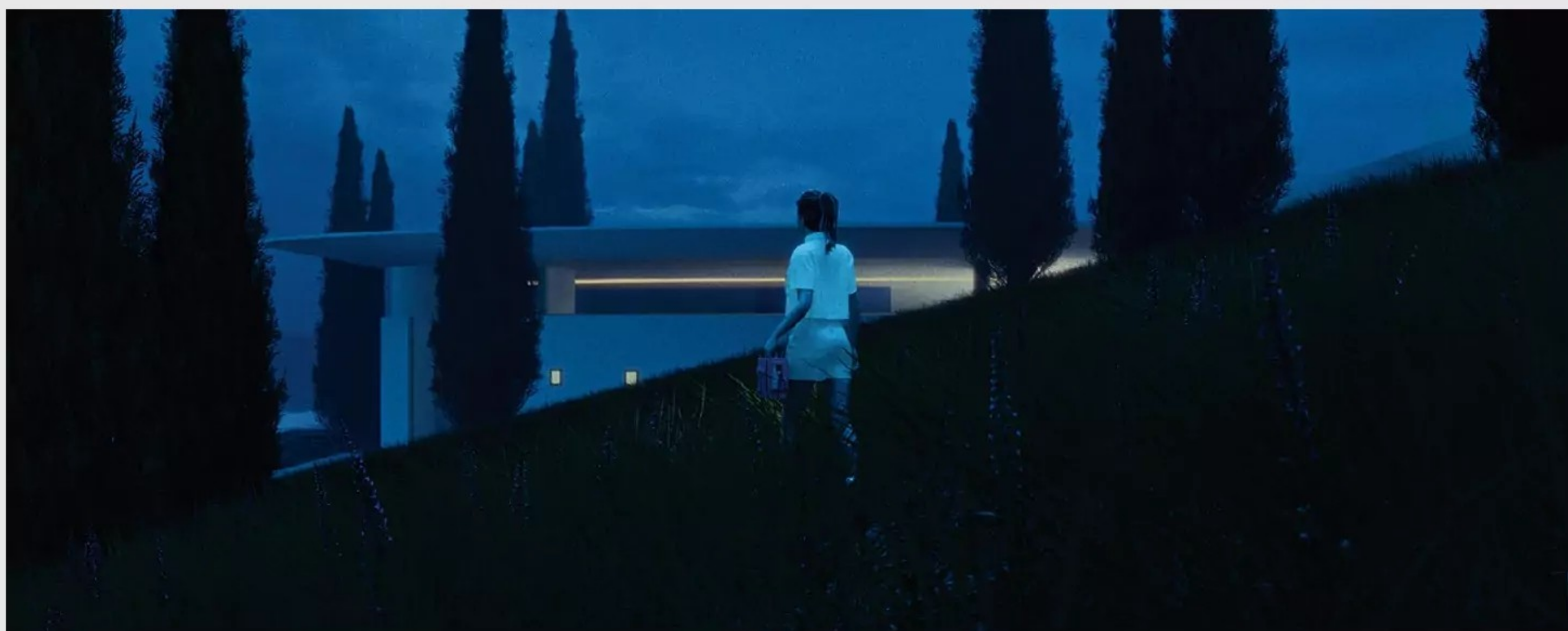
Do you have an ongoing passion project of any kind?

Yes. I am developing a series of short films inspired by birds. Each piece is based on a specific bird and combines it with a narrative scene, usually as a 30-second-to-one-minute film. So far, I have explored realistic, fantasy and sci-fi directions, because I want to experiment before finding the final visual language. The series was selected as a Chosen Winner in the Motion Graphics category of American Illustration, which encouraged me to keep exploring the project.

What is your next step in art or life?

I hope to work on more projects with different styles and formats, not only in games but also in animation or film. I enjoy solving design problems within a project, and I love helping create unique visual styles for interesting worlds. At the same time, I want to keep exploring my own artistic voice and boundaries, so my work can continue to evolve from one project to the next.

Tian Gan is a Senior Concept Artist at Bad Robot Games, with credits on 4LOOP, Echoes of Aincrad, and Atmosfar. Her illustrations have won American Illustration and Applied Arts awards.
www.artstation.com/kuku_gan





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age 11

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