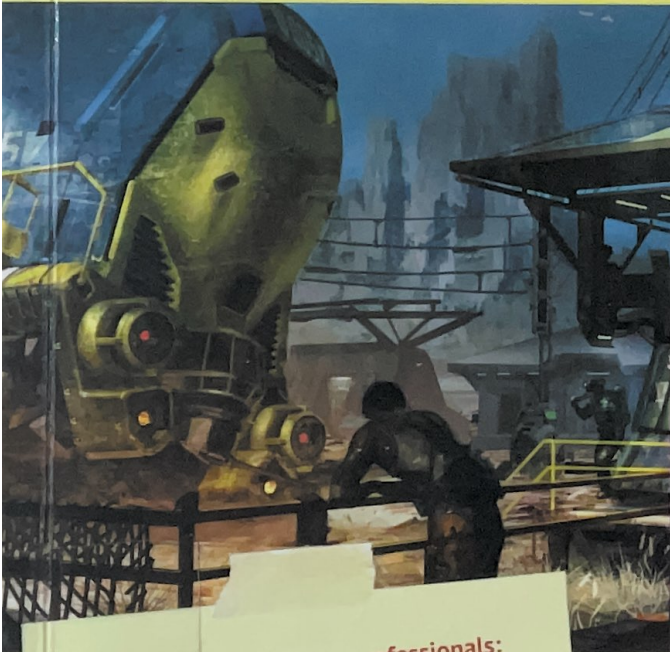
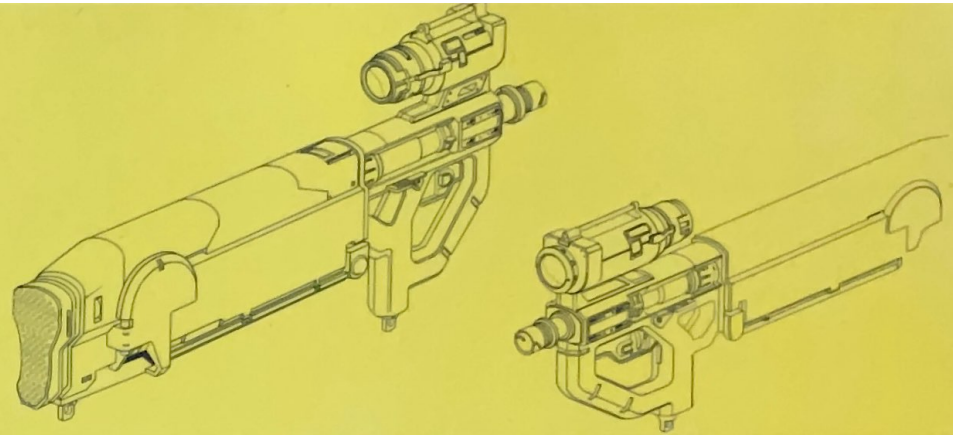


THE **BIG** BAD WORLD OF **CONCEPT ART** FOR **VIDEO GAMES**



Interviews with industry professionals:

- Nicolas "Sparth" Bouvier
- David Levy
- Stephan Martiniere
- Ben Mauro
- Farzad Varahramyan

An Insider's Guide
for Students



by Elliott Lilly



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CONCEPT ART
FOR **VIDEO GAMES**

An Insider's Guide for Students

Eliott Lilly

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An Insider's Guide for Students

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Printed in China
First edition, May 2015
LCCN: 2015931336
ISBN: 978-162465020-8

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the big bad world of concept art.

It's not all that "bad" really (once you know what you're doing), but finding out exactly what you are supposed to be doing, and when, can feel like a daunting challenge to students who are just starting out.

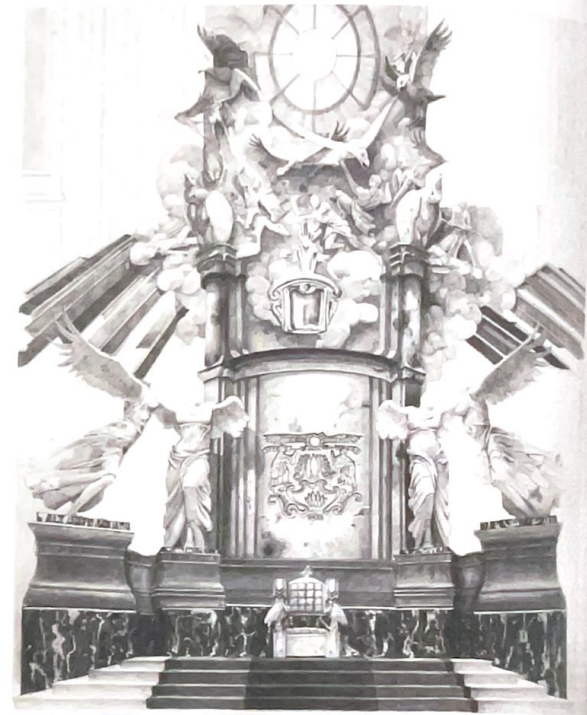
This book is the culmination of what I have learned, witnessed, and experienced as a professional concept artist working in the video game industry for almost a decade. Most of what I write about is heavily rooted in opinion and personal experience rather than in facts. While I DO NOT consider myself to be an expert in the matter of concept art, I believe every statement I have made in this book to be true. To the individuals who do not share my experiences or opinions, I say, "Everyone is different. This is what I had to do to get to where I am today, and these are the steps that I had to take."

I have taken the time to document the process as honestly and unflinchingly as possible. I have already learned a great deal worth sharing, but will continue to develop and hone my opinions over time. As such, I consider this document to be a "work in progress," one to be expanded upon and refined over the course of my career.

And in this book, you won't only hear from me. I have asked prominent artists who, like me, have experienced their own success and failure in the industry, to share their own insider tips and lessons learned. These additional points of view offer helpful insight and paint a broader picture of the industry.

Lastly, I hope our experiences and advice will not only educate, but also help to answer some lingering questions. What we have to say may be very basic to some and common sense to others. However, if the lessons we've learned will save someone a bit of grief, then the pages in this book may be invaluable. Since everyone is at a different stage of development, to not cover some of the basics would be a disservice to all.

Please keep in mind that while following the advice in this book will better prepare you for a career as a concept artist in the video game industry, I also hope it will help you position yourself in a positive way to take full advantage of any opportunity that awaits you.



Throne room, age 20

If the lessons I've learned will save someone a bit of grief, then the pages in this book may be invaluable.

TIP:

Consult my Recommended Resources section at the end of this book, on pages 136–139, when conducting your own research.

Although this book focuses on concept art, a lot of the ethics and lessons hold true for other art-driven industries. A good work ethic is a good work ethic, no matter your field of expertise. Whether you're a 2-D artist or 3-D artist, the steps to break into this industry are similar.

Organization of book

The bulk of this book is organized around the basic steps that need to be taken in order to succeed as a concept artist—and by “succeed,” I mean maintain continued employment within the field. At the beginning of each chapter, I will share a brief explanation of the topic at hand, followed by relevant subtopics that will further explain the larger issue.

Also scattered throughout the book are notes, tips, and cautionary tales that offer good advice along with my personal stories, to help put the topic into perspective. I also showcase my student work at various ages so that you can get an idea of what I was doing at your age and understand that one doesn't become “awesome” overnight; it's a long process. By viewing my student work, I also believe that you can see firsthand the benefit of following the advice that I offer in this book. There are valuable lessons to be learned not only from my successes, but my mistakes as well.

The last chapter of the book also features early work of some leading designers in the industry—Nicolas “Sparth” Bouvier, David Levy, Stephan Martiniere, Ben Mauro, and Farzad Varahramyan—alongside their must-read dos and don'ts.

When reading, it is in your best interest to be honest with yourself. The sooner you can address the things that you do poorly, the faster you can improve upon them. My first piece of advice to you, therefore, is to read each chapter, understand how it pertains to you, and take action where necessary. Don't just read the chapter about keeping a sketchbook and say to yourself: “Yeah, he's right, but I'll do it later.” Do it NOW.

To close the book are a number of references designed to help you become informed and educated. Make sure you don't overlook them.

THE ORIGINAL SKETCHES OF:

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J O H N S O N

L I L L Y

A little about me

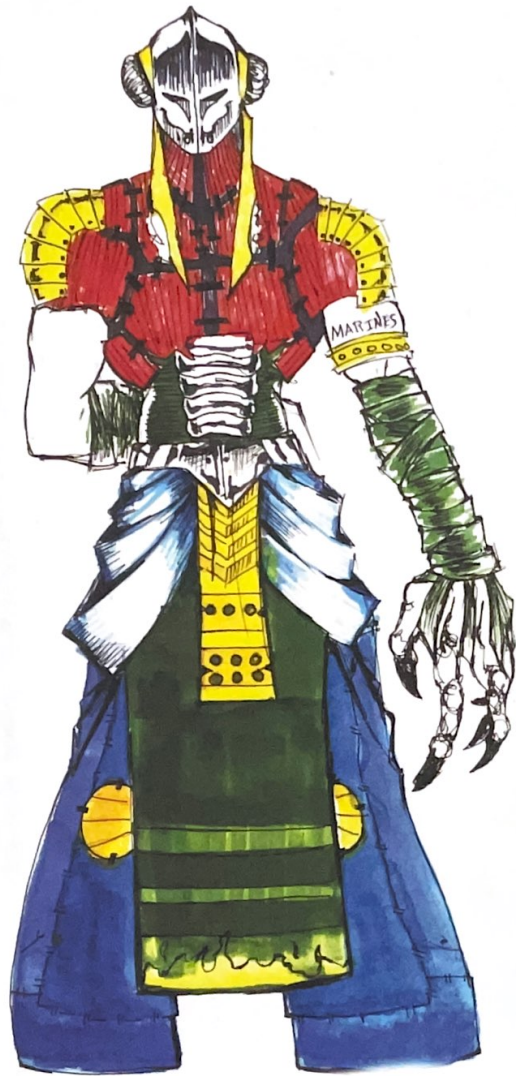
original work, age 27



I've been drawing for as long as I can remember. My father, a professional artist and teacher, is probably my greatest inspiration. He is also the toughest teacher I have ever had and I continue to learn from him in a never-ending class. He began helping me with my art at a very young age and I quickly developed a natural knack for it.

I consider myself fortunate that both of my parents support my talents wholeheartedly, and push me to "be the best." They taught me early on that success is "when preparedness meets opportunity." I was constantly compelled to achieve, and once I saw that I was very good at art I knew then, that I wanted to do it forever. I was all lined up to become a commercial artist like my father, until one day I found this thing called concept art.

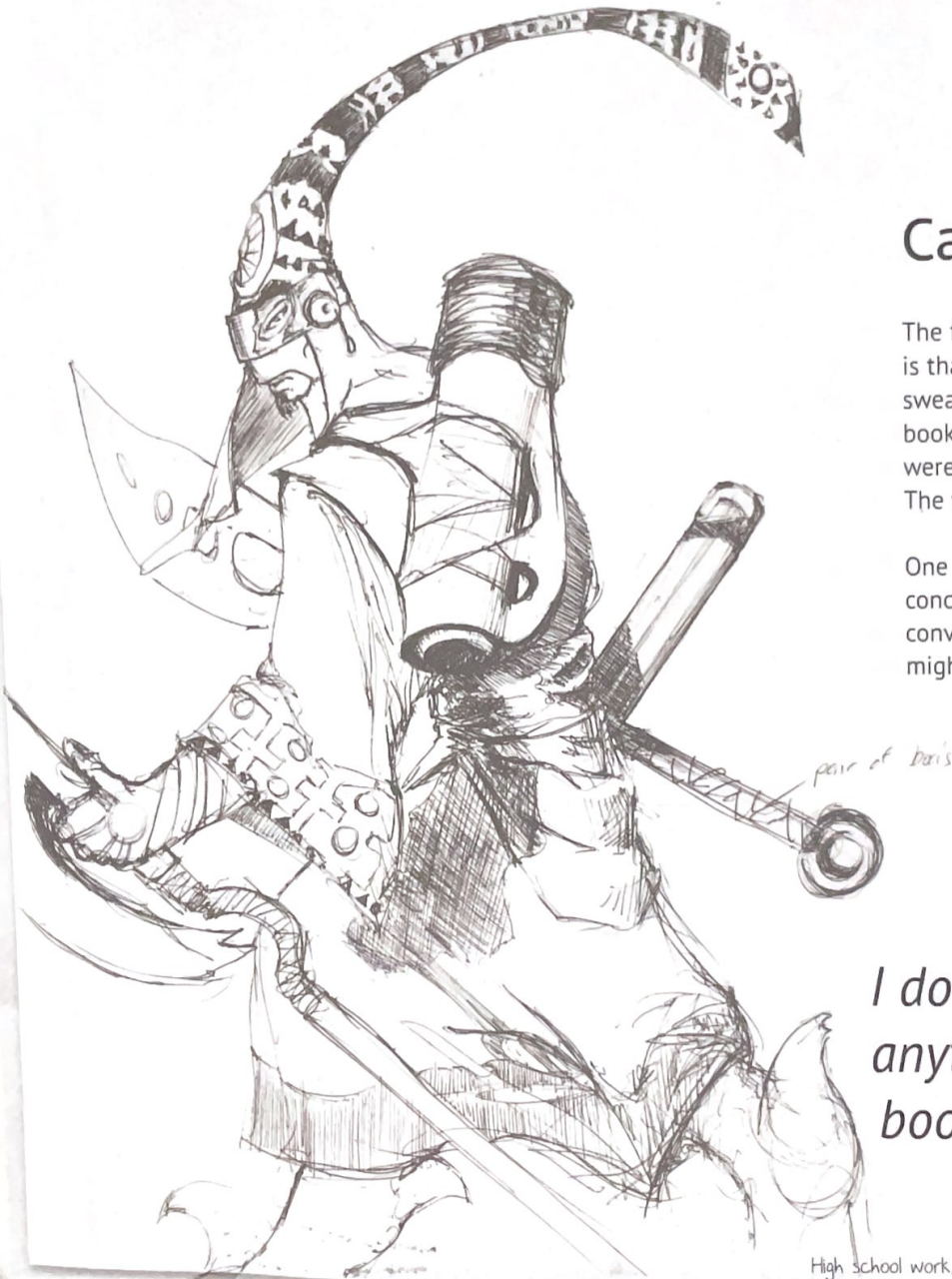
After leaving the School of Visual Arts in New York City with a bachelor of fine arts (2004) and master of fine arts (2006) in illustration, I spent several years as an in-house concept artist for various game studios. I have lent my talents to the visual development of several projects on last-gen (Xbox 360/PS3) and current-gen (Xbox One/PS4) consoles, most notably *Rage*, *DOOM*, *Call of Duty*, and *F.E.A.R. 3*. Currently I am a full-time freelance concept artist in the video game and entertainment industries. My main focus is science fiction and I tend to specialize in environment, vehicle, and weapon designs.



High school work age 17



Graduate work, age 21



Candor

The first thing you should know about the video game industry is that it's very informal. We don't wear ties to work. Most of us swear like sailors and are addicted to coffee. I am writing this book with the same tone and honesty that I would want if I were new to the industry. I do not want to sugarcoat anything. The whole point is to get you ready!

One thing that may not be obvious yet is that a successful concept artist leans on his or her fellow artists for good conversation, trading tips and tricks, and sharing resources. We might as well start out that way.

I do not want to sugarcoat anything. The whole point of this book is to get you ready!

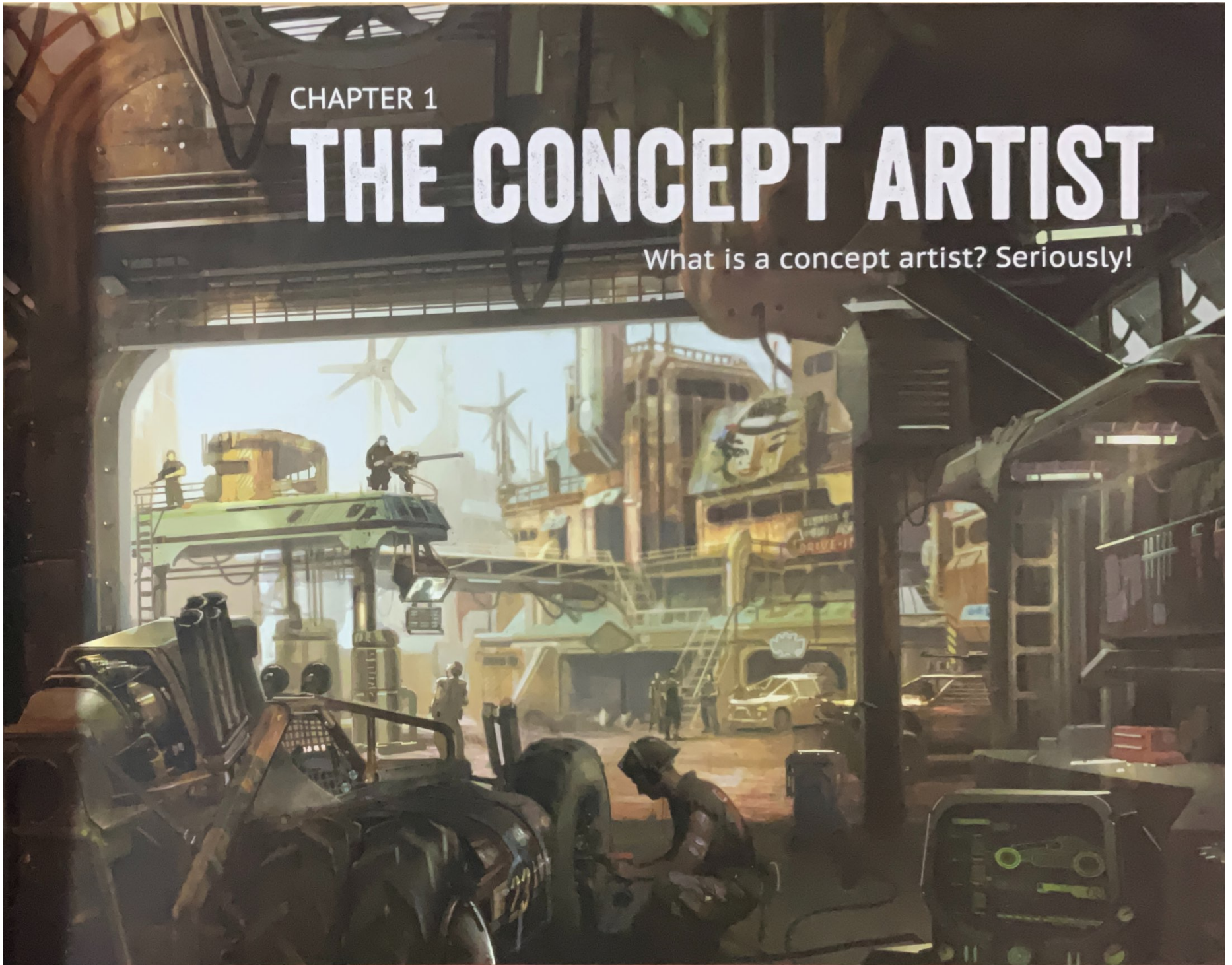
High school work, age 17



CHAPTER 1

THE CONCEPT ARTIST

What is a concept artist? Seriously!



What is a concept artist?

A common definition of a concept artist is an individual whose primary goal is to create images that flesh out ideas and designs of a particular subject matter that does not exist yet. Through several rounds of iteration and elimination, he or she begins to narrow the focus of the subject matter into a singular, coherent vision. This is usually done to ensure efficiency in the production process of films, video games, animations, and sometimes even comic books, because it is faster and cheaper to design that idea at the sketch phase than during full production. Outside of that simplified definition, however, are several realities that one should also be aware of.

Working with the "big picture"

Working closely with an art director and relying on their own talents, viewpoints, and experiences, concept artists are the first link in the production chain. They must first understand the overall goals of the particular subject matter in the context of the entire project. Then they must be able to resolve the tricky issues such as visual design, function, and purpose. Doing so successfully will play a huge part in breaking down the big picture into visual blueprints that can be scheduled and built.

Visual communication expert

Up until this point, the big picture has only been described, therefore everyone on the team will have his or her own idea of what it looks like. By presenting a tangible medium that the whole team can see and agree upon, the concept allows for the discussion of the same idea (not the perceived idea) of the big picture. It eliminates any doubt and says: "Not that, *this!*"

The salesperson

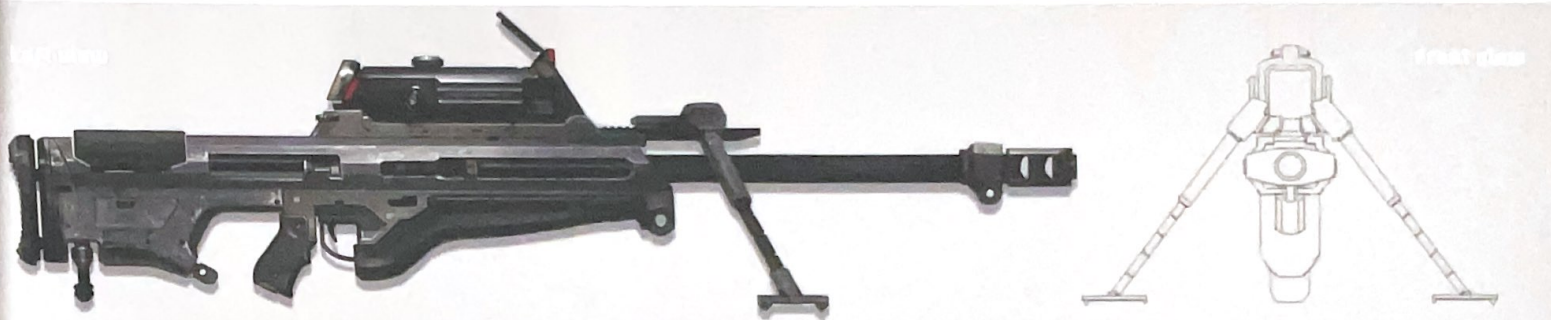
Your role as a salesperson is never more apparent than when your art director asks you to make the coolest, sexiest image possible to help sell the game to the publishers. This side of concept art is less talked about, of course, but is still equally as important. I've seen it happen often enough to believe in the power of fully realized concepts swaying decisions about multimillion-dollar projects.

I've also seen how concept art is displayed around the office, and you can bet that when there are important visitors in the studio, they get the tour—you guessed it—right toward the concept art. Having art on the walls not only makes the studio look competent and visionary, but is another way to show off the talent at the studio and, in part, the worth of the studio.

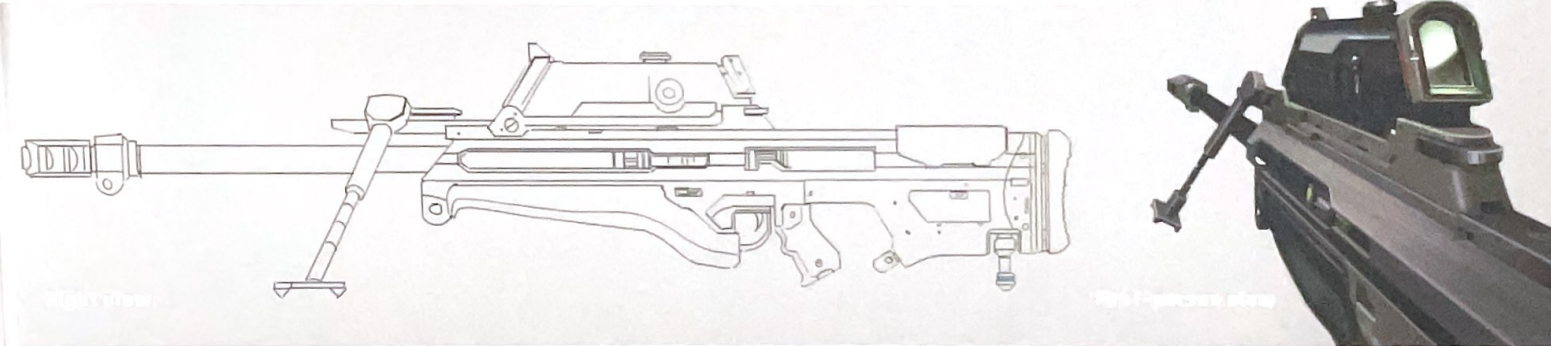


High school work, age 17





001-Maternal Sniper Rifle



A concept artist may be tasked with non-concept-related work, like doing "turn-around views of an object" (which is more on the production art side of development).



Personal work, age 28

Other times, he or she may be asked to provide a shot that "sums up the game in one image." This is more of an illustration than a concept.

As a concept artist your primary objective is to establish the visual design of a subject. That means it is more important for you to develop a solid design language for your costume, creature, or prop than to fully render an image.

What's the difference between a "concept artist" and a "concept designer?" Concept artists and designers both produce concept art but concept artists traditionally have a background in illustration and fine art while concept designers typically are trained in industrial design.

Because the job of a concept artist falls between that of a production artist and an illustrator, there is often overlap from both professions. The best concept artists are those who are versatile.



How a concept artist interacts with the rest of the team

UI/HUD department

A concept artist has very little interaction with the UI/HUD (user-interface/heads-up display) department, except for the occasional mock-up design that may be needed from time to time.

Art director

Usually a veteran of the video games industry, the art director is the primary point of contact for the entire art team and works very closely with the concept department. He or she is responsible for managing scheduling, delegating tasks, and ensuring the overall visual integrity is maintained throughout the game.

3-D modelers

After the concept has been drafted and approved, it is then passed on to the 3-D modelers to be built. It takes consistent collaboration between concept artists and modelers to ensure that the final in-game 3-D model effectively matches the expectation set by the concept.

CONCEPT ARTISTS

Concept lead/senior concept artist

This title is usually given to the concept artist who has been in the industry for many years and, because of his or her experience and know-how, is trusted to do the "heavy lifting" of the concept art. He or she may even take on a leadership role within the concept art team.

Jr. concept artist

Usually young and inexperienced, junior concept artists are typically students just out of school or new to the industry. This term is mainly used only when a senior concept artist is present.

Quality-assurance department

There is no interaction.

Programmers

Expect very little interaction with programmers.

Designers

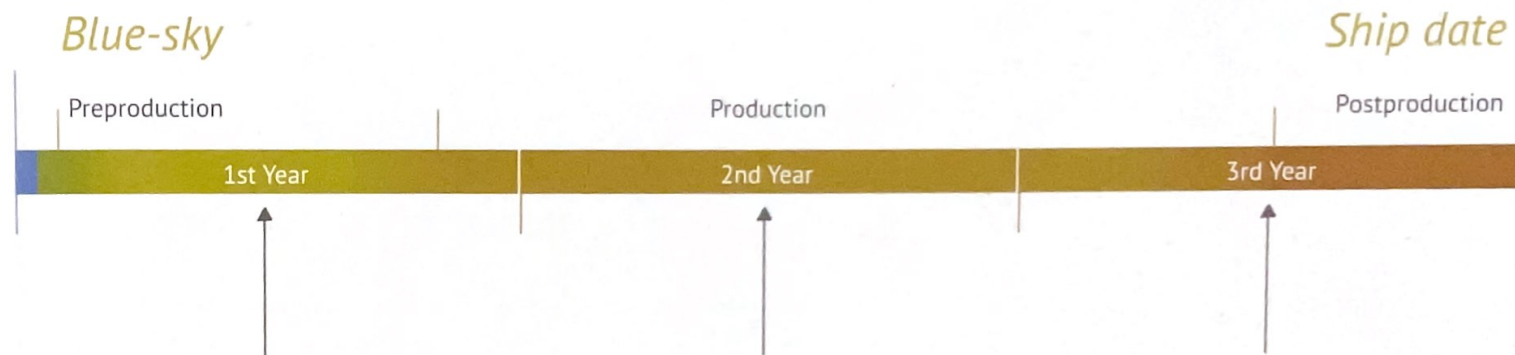
Designers write the documents that concepts are based on. The two disciplines need to work very closely together to ensure that the best ideas float to the surface.

Animators

Concepts are usually needed to quickly demonstrate where the moving parts on any given object are and how they function. Oftentimes, concept artists will work with animators to ensure that the concepted object is behaving as expected on screen.

The video game production pipeline for a concept artist

Chart is based on the average production time of three years. The "blue-sky" phase is at the beginning of most projects. That term refers to "the sky is the limit" or "anything goes." During this phase, the studio will give the artists creative freedom to explore specific game-related ideas without too many restrictions put on them. Alternatively, artists may even be allowed to pitch their own ideas to the team as long as it pertains to the game somehow.



A concept artist is extremely engaged during the preproduction phase. Words and ideas are realized into visuals, discussed and reiterated upon, then end up as approved art direction. This phase usually lasts six months to a year, but if the project suffers from a change in upper management or a "reboot," the time line can grow longer.

During production, efforts shift from fabricating designs to assisting the team where necessary. This can range from supplying "paint overs" of level "block outs" (a rapid way to prototype and test out a game level before entering development) and addressing lighting issues to designing props and set pieces.

As concept needs for the project begins to wind down, most artists begin to roll off onto the next upcoming project. Those who remain will likely help with such tasks as marketing needs, screenshot cleanup, UI/HUD elements, and achievement icons, among others.

Supplies and tools of the trade

While a lot of concept development today is done digitally, it is not uncommon for ideas to start out with traditional mediums, such as paper and pencil, before they are scanned in and colored on the computer. Another creative process growing in popularity is the method of concepting in 3-D, (using computer software like 3ds Max, Maya, and ZBrush) then texturing and finishing the image using Photoshop or Painter. Every medium and process has its advantages and disadvantages; use whatever tool you can to get the job done as best and as quickly as possible.

You should also keep in mind that there are things you can do with traditional mediums that computers will never be able to fully emulate, just like there are digital manipulations and happy accidents that occur on the computer that would take you forever to replicate by hand. By being open to all mediums, you will increase work-flow productivity and stave off boredom.

The specs of the hardware that I use have varied from job to job, but the tools themselves have always stayed the same. Here's a quick rundown of the tools that I currently use:

My tools at work

HARDWARE

PC (not a Mac, go figure)

Intel Xeon CPU @ 2.53 GHz
12 GB RAM
64 Bit Operating system
500 GB hard drive

Monitors: 30-inch Dell display LCD screen in tandem with a Wacom Cintiq 21 UX

Scanner: Nothing fancy, I have a \$30 Hewlett-Packard. It gets the job done.

Printer: Epson Photo Stylus 1400

SOFTWARE

Photoshop CS5: Photoshop is the main program I use on a daily basis. When creating environment concepts, I work within a 16" x 9" aspect ratio at 350 dpi. (That's print resolution, just in case). For all other images, the image size may vary, but the resolution stays the same.

3ds Max, Modo, and ZBrush: If I ever need to design a complex shape or quickly establish a tricky perspective for my image, then I may turn to 3ds Max for help. While it is not necessary to use 3-D programs to be a concept artist, it does help to speed up the process a bit. Like any tool, it is there to make your life easier, but it does not make you a great artist. You have to do that part yourself.

I've found that many of my coworkers in the studio know Max and can answer my questions; thus, I have gravitated toward it. I've also dabbled with Sculptris, Modo, and ZBrush, but I'm pretty terrible with each.

Personal story:

When I first started in this industry (a little over nine years ago), I was drawing everything out with pencil and markers. To support my concept needs, my company provided me with hundreds of dollars' worth of traditional materials and supplies: everything from large sheets of paper to complete marker sets, paints and brushes the works.

Partly due to time constraints, but mainly because I saw the power of "layers" and "undo," my preference quickly changed from traditional to digital mediums. Four months after buying those supplies, there were unopened paints and markers sets collecting dust in the corner. My company wasn't too happy about that.

Choose your tools of the trade wisely.

High school work, age 17



My tools of choice at home

Considering it to be an investment in myself, I make it a point to have the same or better setup at home as I do at work. When selecting your own computer, if possible, make sure that it has the speed and processing power that you need to run the various programs you use efficiently.

Because technology is constantly improving, specifications listed will be outdated in six months, but the point is to get the most out of your computer as possible. Currently, this is what I'm using:

Hardware: PC

Custom-built PC
Intel Core i7-2600k CPU @ 3.40 GHz
16 GB RAM
64-bit operating system
1 TB hard drive

Hardware: Monitors

24-inch Dell display LCD screen in tandem with a Wacom Cintiq 21 UX. The more screen real estate you have, the better.

Hardware: Scanner

Another inexpensive HP flatbed scanner

Hardware: Printer

Epson Stylus Photo R200 (This is an old printer, and I never use it more than to print Word documents.)

Hardware: External TB hard drive for backup storage

If your computer has ever had a virus and you've had to reset it to factory settings, you will understand why having a backup copy of your work is important. EVERY ARTIST who works digitally will suffer a catastrophic computer failure at some point that will cost them their work. Invest in a digital backup solution and save yourself the headache.

Hardware: Wacom tablet or Cintiq?

While I enjoy my Cintiq at home, it is an unnecessary luxury. A normal

Wacom tablet suited me fine for years. I decided to get a Cintiq because I use it at work. Out of convenience, I wanted my home setup to be identical to my work setup (down to the brushes in Photoshop), so it's easier to transition when I come home after work and need to use my computer.

Hardware: Tablet PCs

Tablet PCs are growing in popularity. While the devices themselves have their own pros and cons that you will have to weigh yourself, the main factor in determining what kind of work station you should setup, will be asking yourself this: How mobile do you need to be?

If you are traveling a lot, or going from school to home then back, and/or you are used to using laptops, then a tablet might be preferred. If you work primarily at home, then a more permanent desktop computer might be preferred.

I have both a tablet PC and a desktop computer at home. Personally, I find it very restrictive trying to use a tablet PC for my professional work (I've been spoiled by my tri-monitor desktop PC), so I use it mainly for casual drawing, and it's great.

Software: Photoshop CS5

After years of using CS3, I finally upgraded to CS5 when I started missing some of the cool features that I had access to at work.

Software: Google Sketchup

Google Sketchup is a great and easy program to pick up and use for 3-D modeling. It's also free.

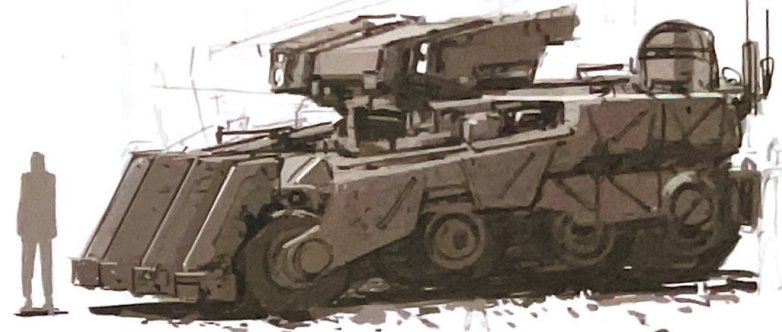
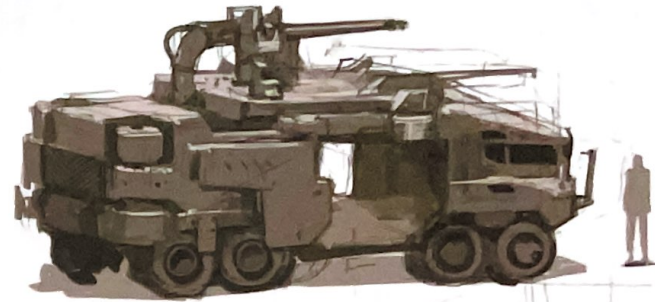
Reference library

Over the years, I have gathered a digital collection of reference images that I have found useful, inspiring, or just interesting, and I have carefully organized them into categories. At some point, every artist should do this. See pages 71-72 on how to build your own reference library.

Traditional tools

Occasionally I will use traditional mediums for my projects or life-drawing classes. I still find it faster and more natural to sketch thumbnails out on paper first and then scan them in if necessary. To be honest, though, most of these tools are relics from college and therefore sit and collect dust in a corner. In my possession, I have:

- An art table with two overhead lamps, one of which has a magnifying glass built into its top
- Dozens of loose and complete pencil sets, pastel sets, colored pencils, and a variety of gummy, kneaded, and electric erasers
- Different types of graphite and charcoal sets
- Several marker sets (mainly Prismacolors) and stands to match
- Variety of India inks and calligraphic and colored ink pens
- Gouache and watercolor paints and brushes
- A variety of right-angled triangles, T-squares, rulers, French curves, ellipse stencils, and other drawing instruments
- Transfer paper



"TRUCKS 02"



By being open to all mediums, you will increase workflow productivity and stave off boredom.

What can I expect as a concept artist?

Interacting with multiple disciplines, a concept artist needs to understand and be aware of certain restrictions in order to assist the team effectively. Below are a few examples of constraints that you can expect to face on a daily basis.

Art direction

Usually the art director will have a vision of what he or she wants you to draw. While you, the artist, may be teeming with great ideas that you wish to pursue, you must keep in mind that you are there to illustrate someone else's idea. You may provide alternate ideas, but only after your art director's requirements have been met. If you're asked to deliver a concept of an old, beat-up battle tank, and you hand in a futuristic spaceship instead, you may find yourself having a chat with your boss about future employment with the company.

Game engine limitations

Whether it is a character, a vehicle, or an environment, it is always best to plan your design around the practical limitations that the game engine can handle. They will vary from studio to studio, as each uses different software, but, generally speaking, there are certain dos and don'ts to be heeded.

Limitations aside, it's always easier to go way out there with your initial design and then scale it back down to chewable chunks that your team can digest, than to try to improve upon a lukewarm idea. With the right expectations of what can and can't be done "in game," you will be less likely to be disappointed with the feedback you receive from the team.

Deadlines

In the video game industry, your bosses will always want more than you can give. They may pressure you to deliver the maximum number of concepts in the least amount of time, which tends to put great strain and stress upon you. I am sure that the inner critic in you wants to do the best job possible. However, I recommend that you do what you can in the time you are given. In these cases, you need to keep in mind that every image cannot be a masterpiece and sometimes a simple line drawing will suffice.

Personal growth

If you are fortunate enough to work with other concept artists or have a mentor at the job, then you might learn a few new tricks here and there. However, learning and trying to be creative under the pressures of deadlines and strict guidelines may not be the best time to experiment.

At home is where you are free to find your voice and seek artistic fulfillment. It is a much more relaxed environment, and you can be as imaginative and creative as you would like on your own schedule. That is when I do my best creative work.

What does a concept artist really do?

There are a few misconceptions floating around out there about what the role of a concept artist is and what it entails. Here are a few of my favorites.

A concept artist has carte blanche to draw whatever she or he wants for the game.

That statement is only partially correct. The “carte blanche” is usually reserved for a specific period of game development called the blue-sky phase, when anything goes, at the beginning of most projects. All kinds of ideas are suggested and heard by the studio. If you want your idea to shine, this is the time to do it. This period of bliss is usually short-lived. Outside of this phase, you are generally required to draw what other people want (in most cases, the art director or lead) from you, following specific guidelines—not what you want.

If you draw something awesome, it will end up in the game.

Not exactly. First of all, it has to be relevant to the game’s needs. Assuming that it is, there are usually tweaks and changes to fit the parameters and limitations of the game engine. Rarely have I drawn a concept that has been correct on the first try. The more your idea changes, the less it resembles your original intent.

Every image has to be fully rendered and polished to be a successful image.

Not so. A concept is used as a visual dialog between several disciplines to enhance the pipeline and sell an idea to the team. Therefore, as a concept artist, you only need to render an image as much as it takes to sell that idea. A rough pencil sketch of a strong idea is of more value to the game than a fully rendered image of a bad idea.

If you have a great idea, it will get into the game.

Ideally, yes, that would be true, but again, it’s not always the case. A good idea can die a premature death for several reasons: if it’s presented at the wrong time, if you didn’t sell it well enough, or if you weren’t in the room to explain it when it was up for discussion. All it takes is the right person to say, “I don’t get it,” and it’s dead.

Keep in mind that concept art is the by-product of the video game-development process. It is not meant for public viewing and therefore has little value outside of the studio. While there are individuals who collect concept art books, the majority of consumers don’t care about the artwork; they only care about the video game.

Every assignment will nurture my creativity and will challenge my artistic know-how.

If you like a good challenge, then concept art will keep you on your toes. You may find yourself drawing things that you have never drawn before or envisioning worlds that do not exist. That's the cool part of the job. Then sometimes you get those assignments that seem mind-numbing to you, but the image must still be made. That's the bad part of the job. Once you get past the initial blue-sky phase of a game, it may become less glorious.

All or most of the images created by a concept artist will be used in the game.

Due to the nature of concept art, there will always be several images left unused for various valid reasons. They may be too ambitious for the current deadline, or they may be good ideas, but not perfectly suited for game play, etc. It could also be that the concept simply isn't a good fit with what is needed. Additionally, you may need to draw several versions of a single concept for only one to be selected.



High school work, age 16

I can display my concept work for an upcoming video game title on public forums to show off my skills.

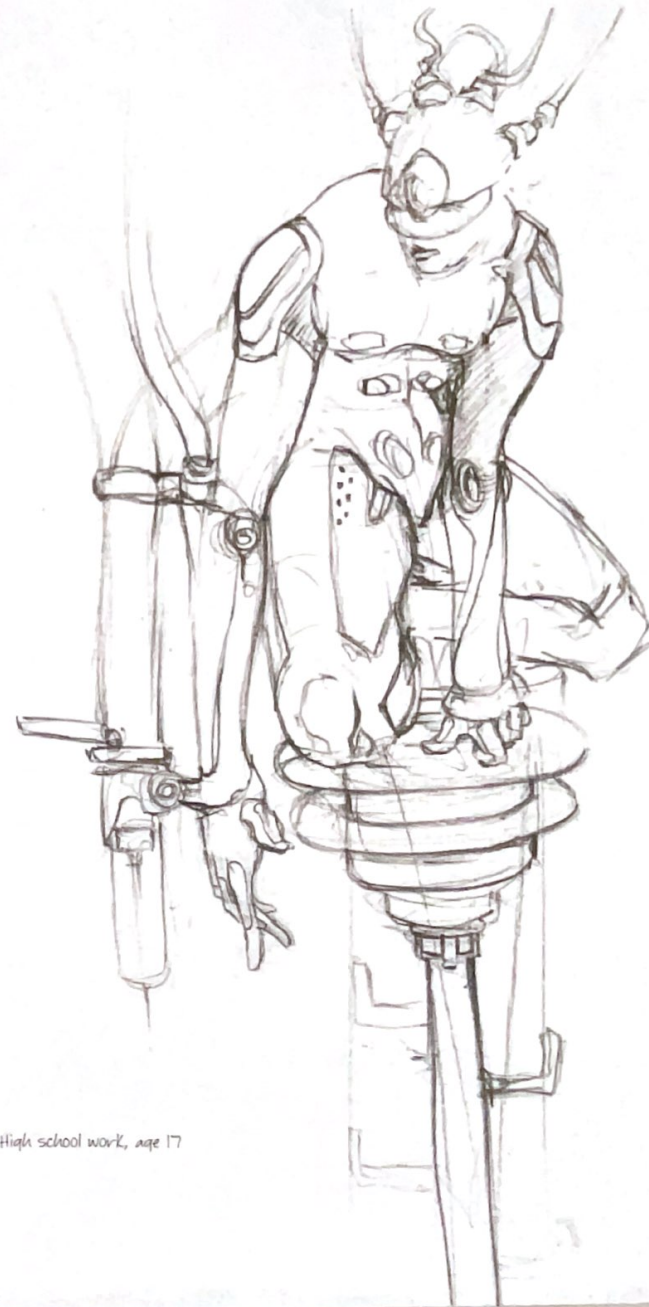
Under certain circumstances, concept art is released to the public to generate buzz and hype for an upcoming title, but it will rarely be up to the concept artists to decide which images are chosen and how they are displayed. The marketing department will likely spearhead that task.

If you try to post your own work while the game is still in production, there will be serious repercussions since that would be giving away company secrets and ideas. Video game websites such as IGN or Game Informer trade front-page real estate for exclusivity on any story. If you have already posted or leaked those concept images on public forums, they are no longer exclusive and the buzz those images generated is long gone.

IGN or Game Informer then may not want to feature your game on their front page, and for a website that gets so much traffic, not having that kind of exposure can seriously affect game sales. You can get fired for leaking images.

I can display my concept work for a video game title that has already shipped on public forums to show off my skills.

Well, yes and no. When you first start working at a video game studio, you will likely have to sign a contract that grants the studio ownership of any work that you produce while employed there and all of the rights to that work. Therefore, your artwork is no longer your own. If you want to display any work that you did while employed, you will need to ask permission from the company first. They may not always say "yes." There are a lot of unused concepts, and some studios will want to keep those confidential in case a sequel is made and those ideas are repurposed. At best, you can hope to post the work that actually made it into the game. Posting work without being given the go-ahead is a sure way to get fired.



High school work, age 17

Daily life of a concept artist

What's a typical good day?

The image that I am working on is needed for an important Friday morning meeting. Today is Thursday, and I've arrived at work around the standard starting time, 10 a.m.

My art director (AD) gave me my task way in advance along with all of the supporting design documents that are needed to craft my image. It's a "good day" because all of these elements mean that I am fully able to do my job without any surprises or setbacks.

I'm pretty much left alone to refine my image, unless I have a meeting, breaking occasionally to check my e-mail, goof off with coworkers, or test out our video game. Occasionally my AD stops by to check on my progress, answer any questions I may have, or update me on the status of the project. Usually around 3 p.m., the team gets together and hosts multiplayer testing matches, and if I have time, I like to participate in those. I might have a meeting afterward. If not, I just continue to refine my image until I am satisfied that it conveys its intended idea.

As it turns out, I am so on schedule that there is even enough time to deliver additional concepts. When permitted, I like to give them my ideas as well as what they asked for. I enjoy exploring multiple iterations of the same idea. Even if they go unused, the concept may be resurrected later.

Satisfied with my initial concept and also pleased with the alternate variations that I have provided, I leave work around 6 p.m. Today was a good day.



What's a typical bad day?

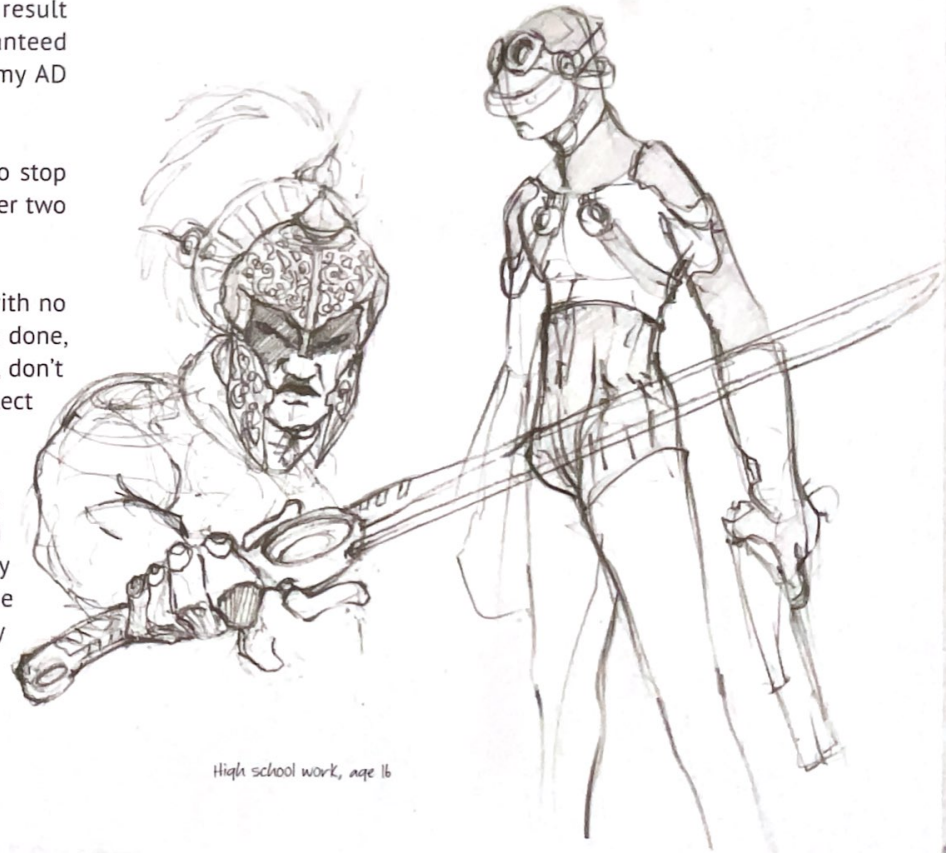
The image that I am working on is needed for an important Friday morning meeting. Today is Thursday. On Wednesday evening, my AD tasked me with two additional concepts that are needed for the same meeting. To make matters worse, the ideas I am concepting are so new, there are no design specifications to them yet, therefore very little information to work off of. I tell him that severe time constraints and a lack of information will likely result in these concepts being irrelevant as they are almost guaranteed to change in the near future. Despite my best arguments, my AD insists that these three images need to be concepted.

Arriving before 7 a.m. to a dark and empty studio, I decide to stop working on my initial concept until I am able to bring the other two up to the same level of readability.

I knock out the first image by lunchtime, eating at my desk with no breaks. Later in the afternoon, with the second image almost done, my AD presents me with new design specs that, unfortunately, don't match what I've drawn. I need to readjust both images to reflect these new details, which sets me back even further.

With the adjustments made, I continue finishing up the second image and begin on the third. It is late in the evening when I realize that stress has caused me to grip the Wacom pen tightly all day. As a result, my hand aches and is cramped. With the threat of carpal tunnel looming in the back of my mind and my inability to draw any more, I leave the dark and empty studio around 11 p.m.

Early Friday morning, I am back in the office at 7 a.m. again, trying to finish the remaining image. The deadline arrives, and I need to submit my work, regardless of the level of completion. Hopefully, I've done my job well enough that the images are readable. Later that day, when I ask my AD how the meeting went, he says, "Oh, it was postponed."



High school work, age 16



High school work, age 17

So how many good days vs. bad days are there?

Well, that all depends. As deadlines get closer and closer, you can bet the bad days will start to add up. Almost every studio has crunch time—a time period when longer work hours are needed to meet deadlines. These days usually come with lots of stress and headaches.

For a concept artist, the amount of crunch time will vary. You can expect to put in extra hours during the preproduction stage of video game development since the entire studio will be looking to you to establish a visual language for the game. There is also a high demand for concept support later in the game's development cycle, as levels come online, to support the needs of modelers and level designers.

Also, as the project gets closer to its ship date, you can bet that there aren't enough hours in the day to put out all of the fires around the office. You know the saying: "Things will only get worse before they get better." That pretty much sums up the last six months of every video game I've ever worked on.

The trick, I've learned, is to manage your time as best as possible, remain focused during the day, and never promise more images than are realistically feasible. There will be days when things get dropped in your lap, and all you can do is handle them the best way you can.

The ups and downs of the video game industry

Like anything else, working in the video game industry has its ups and downs. A lot of your experience will be determined by the people you work with, the work pipeline you will be a part of, and the contract you sign when you join a studio.

Upsides

Culture

Each studio has its own culture, but in general, studios will foster a very cool working environment for their employees. You may find yourself surrounded by video game posters on the walls, life-size statues of game characters, and video game consoles that can be used in the break room, for instance. They make it quite fun to work there.

Junk food

To keep people happy and comfortable while working, the studio will likely even provide snacks, sodas, and the occasional free meals to its employees.

Morale boosters

Video game companies understand that making games is no easy feat. In fact, they also understand that people need to feel appreciated from time to time, and with that spirit in mind, they host social events and company outings such as movie screenings, picnics, holiday parties, and birthday celebrations.

Camaraderie

People who work with you likely share your passion for video games. They may like a different type of game than you, but striking up a conversation with your fellow coworkers is as easy as asking, "So, what good games have you played recently?"



Benefits

Video games studios, especially the larger ones, usually offer some form of additional benefits besides your initial salary. You can look forward to affordable health insurance, vacation time, 401 (k), and tax write-off programs like a flexible-spending account.

A free copy

Yes, you've earned it. If at the end of the video game cycle you are still standing, you will receive a free copy of the game that you have worked on for the past few years. Sometimes, if your studio is owned by a larger company, then you may even be entitled to a free copy of whatever game the larger company is making as well.

Bragging rights

You've also earned the right to say that you worked on that game. If the game does well, you can even brag a little. If it flops, well, you may want to keep your involvement a secret.

Bonuses

Studios will often extend gestures of appreciation for hard work in the form of financial bonuses. These payouts happen once or twice a year. In theory, the size of your bonus is directly proportional to the success of the game and the amount of effort you contributed. So, if your game was widely successful, and you contributed a lot, then in theory you can expect to receive a very nice bonus.

Sometimes studios will offer bonuses based on the game's overall review score, promising X number of dollars if the game gets reviewed higher than, let's say, a 90. Although I have never been fortunate enough to experience this, I have also heard of royalty-based bonuses, where the studio promises its employees a percentage of the profits from the game. Even if that percentage is some small decimal of a number, when games sell millions of copies, that translates into thousands of dollars for you.



Mask studies, age 17

Downsides

Crunch time

With a great deal of work remaining to be done within a short period of time, your studio will often ask you to work longer hours during the day and even come into work on weekends to meet the fast approaching deadline. Because of the high amount of stress this generates, tempers flare, emotions run rampant, and morale tends to drop. This can be a grueling experience for some, and if not kept in check, can snuff the creativity out of the most talented individuals.

High level of stress

If the fact that it's common for video game studios to throw social events in their attempt to improve company-wide morale doesn't raise a red flag in your mind, then you might be missing the point. Working in the video games industry means you can expect a high level of stress and scrutiny on a daily basis.

Junk food

Sitting at your desk all day eating free snacks will likely lead to weight gain and potential health issues. If you keep long hours at work, oftentimes those free snacks become your breakfast, lunch, and/or dinner.

Relocation

Not always, but depending on what studio you want to work for, you may need to relocate every few years to find your next job. This could mean you move one state over, or as far away as another country. Personally, I have moved from New York to Chicago, then to Texas over the span of seven years.

Frequent layoffs

You hear about it all the time on video game news sites. This company lays off this many people, and so does that other company. There is the potential threat of layoffs after your game ships or if it is cancelled. Even if you do everything right, poor management can sink a game and a company.

Sometimes to meet an aggressive ship date, studios will bulk up their employee count and hire artists to help get the game out the door on time. Once the game has shipped, however, there is no real need for those employees anymore—thus, the frequent layoffs.

An incestuous industry

Because it's a relatively small industry, and because every few years employees hop around from studio to studio, it's almost inevitable that you will run into your old coworkers again. When you apply at a new studio, these ex-coworkers may be positioned to approve or deny your entry into their studio. Yikes. So be careful who you upset.

The migration of talent also means a migration of ideas. This can affect projects and sometimes is the reason why games are so similar, unoriginal, or stale.

Gender bias

This is also a male-dominated industry. While there are female concept artists out there, I know of very few. That is not meant to discourage anyone, only to make you aware of the reality.





What's yours is mine

Everything you do on company time is owned by the company, even if it's a sketch done at lunch on your work computer. If it was created using company tools, then it's theirs. Depending on the contract you sign when joining a new team, sometimes everything you do on your personal time is owned by them, too. They can even control your freelance work, limiting who and what outside projects you can work on.

Gossip and rumors

Because game development is so competitive, employees within a studio will constantly worry about how their game will fare against current titles on the market. They will also be concerned with how upper management is handling the project, and subsequently about the fate of their jobs. As such, there will always be quiet rumblings within any given studio spreading the "have you heard" rumor around.

Lack of free time

Often the long work hours will put a serious strain on any relationship. The company you work for requires you to work for a minimum of eight hours per day, but they may ask you to work 10. When crunch time comes around (and it always does), you can expect to spend anywhere from 11 to 14 hours at work per day. My personal record is 16.

Bonuses

Usually there is no direct amount of money you are promised up front, and oftentimes the amount you receive is never as much as you expected, nor as much as you think you deserve. Unless you worked on a highly profitable game, at best, the bonus will simply compensate your salary for the overtime that you put in during the crunch months.

High school work, age 17

Am I cut out for this?

If you have read this far and are already put off, then a career in video game concept art may not be for you. That's okay. There are other art-related jobs in the video game industry that are still viable and may be of interest to you. Plus, if you start with these, they may springboard you into other areas of video game development one day. Here are some other career options for you to investigate.

Character modelers (high and low poly)

Create characters (human, alien, creatures, etc.) using 3-D software programs such as Max, Maya, and ZBrush. This person usually works from a preapproved concept image, but the job requires a good level of technical know-how to be effective. When done successfully, having memorable characters who look great on screen benefits the game immensely. Note that it's not always the case that the same person who makes the high-poly model also makes the low-poly model. Unfortunately, there is a lot of competition in this field.

Environment and prop modelers (high and low poly)

Do the exact same thing as the character modelers, but focus on environments and the props that fill it. Since most people prefer modeling the cool characters and creatures over, let's say, a fire hydrant, there tends to be less competition in this field and therefore a higher demand.

If you've read the good, the bad, and the ugly of being a concept artist, and you still want to pursue it as a career, read on!

Texture artists

Create realistic and detailed textures on 3-D models, bringing the model to life. They are responsible for creating materials, wear and tear of an object, and are needed on every project.

Effects artists

Create the special effects needed in almost every game, such as smoke particles, muzzle flashes, and fire, to name a few. If something looks flashy, chances are the effects artist had a hand in it.

UI artists

The user-interface artists create all of the on-screen art in games. They are the graphic designers of the video game industry, creating a variety of things, including the heads-up display elements, in-game messages, and interactive menus. This job is always in high demand.

Make sure that concept art is your passion first before investing time and money into it. Going to an art school is just like going to a medical school or law school. You must be committed! It's all that you're being trained to do. Sink or swim.





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Chapter 2

WHERE TO BEGIN

Education and training



How to choose the college that is right for you

Colleges and institutions are structured to teach you about deadlines, time management, cooperation, discipline, and more. Those same skills will be crucial to your success in the workplace. Therefore, you want to attend a school that will best prepare you for this field of work. Finding the right school will have an immense impact on your future, so here are a few things to consider.

Know the college's priorities

Does the curriculum cater to your needs as an artist (or concept artist)? If you go to a school that specializes in fashion, will you learn the necessary skills to create environments for the game industry? (Probably not.)

Have you heard of the school before?

Is it a world-renown and well-respected school? Have any of the concept artists you admire attended this school? Is there anyone you know who recommends the school? How is the school reviewed online?

Check out the Recommended Resources section on pages 136 for a list of schools that specialize in concept art.

Find out which schools your favorite concept artists attended and research them. You may want to consider attending one of those as well. If you are bold, you can even contact the artists about their experiences.

Resources and opportunities

What kinds of connections can you make at the school that will further your career? Is the school affiliated with any video game studios through internship or mentoring programs? Do they have an office of career development? If so, contact them and find out the success rate of students who graduate and obtain jobs in their area of study.

Art school environment

Is the school competitive and challenging? The more the school challenges you, the better it will prepare you for the real world. Look at the other students' work. What is the quality of their work on display—can you do better? Is there growth and progress from the first-year students' work to the graduating students' work?

While there are a few really good specialization schools, there are unfortunately many more "video game" schools with poor facilities and instructors who aren't working professionals. In these cases, it is crucial that you check their standards and reviews before giving them your money.

Location, location, location

Don't overlook a school if it is outside of your state. You might be missing out on great educational opportunities. Going to school out of state will also prepare you for a career in which you may find yourself constantly moving from place to place every few years. In fact, it may be worth looking at schools in areas where video game and film studios are in abundance, like California, because you are likely to be taught by professionals in your field, and you'd be in a good position to interview for an internship or job.

The faculty

Once you have narrowed the list of colleges that interest you, find out if the faculty members are working professionals. A school is only as good as its teachers, and it is imperative that they be active and proficient in the fields they are going to teach, so that the information they give you is current and relevant.

If you are feeling adventurous, shoot them an e-mail asking a few questions about their classes. Do they take the time to respond, and can they communicate well with you in a clear and patient manner? Establishing a healthy relationship with an instructor may mean good connections and opportunities in the industry later on.

If possible, visit the school to meet key instructors in person and check out their facilities. Sit in on a class and observe.

Teachers who are currently in the industry know what it takes to "make it" by today's standards. A good instructor can steer you straight, or tell you if you are wasting your time and your parents' money.

The facilities and curriculum

Talk to current students and professors at the school and get their honest assessment of the facilities. Make sure that the school offers the most up-to-date versions of hardware and software in their computer labs and that you will have access to them in your major.

Make sure that the curriculum covers the core fundamentals that you will need as a concept artist.

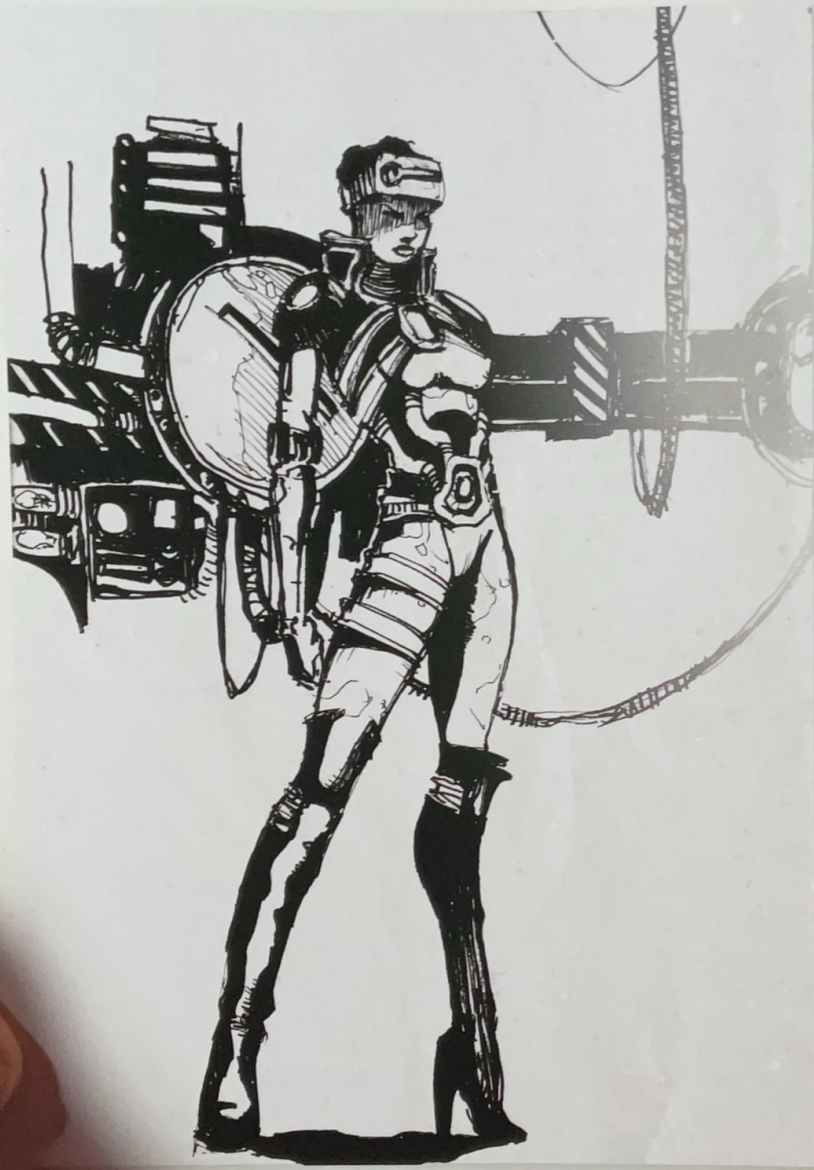
The fundamentals are:

- 1-, 2-, and 3-point perspective: You will need this for everything, but especially if you are interested in concepting landscapes, vehicles, robots, and hard-surface objects.
- Human form/figure and anatomy: If you find yourself interested in creatures, then add animal anatomy to that list.
- Light and shadow
- Form and volume
- Color theory
- Life drawing

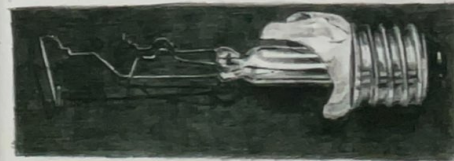
Personal story:

I've had a lot of art schooling. A lot! My father, being a commercial illustrator, exposed me to art at a very young age. He taught and mentored me for years and set his expectations very high early on.

I went to a junior high and high school for the arts and also took three years of summer art classes that prepared me for college. After graduating art college, I received my MFA in Illustration as Visual Essay. That's 15-18 years of art schooling (depending on how you look at it). Not everyone has to have as much education to be a successful concept artist although it doesn't hurt.



With repetition of assignments you begin to learn how long it will take you to complete them, and build confidence in your own skills.



It reasons that in order to get a good education, you need to be serious about it. This means discipline and ambition are needed on your part.

A cautionary tale

Debt from art school can be enormous. I've had friends go through four years of art college and accumulate \$90,000 worth of debt, only to graduate jobless and settle for whatever work they can find. In those cases, all of that schooling was a waste, and they struggle for the rest of their lives trying to repay that debt.

To avoid a similar fate, you will have to seriously evaluate each school and its quality of education, and then determine if you can achieve your career goals through its curriculum.



High school work, age 17

Personal story:

Many years before I knew I wanted to be a concept artist I had been planning to attend either a traditional fine arts college or a cartooning/illustration college. I had attended a fine arts campus, taken a few classes there, and generally liked the staff and facilities. I was all set to sign up for the fine arts college when, one day during a life drawing class, I doodled a superhero on the side of my sketch pad. When my teacher saw it he took a fat red marker, drew a line through my image and wrote (I swear I'm not making this up because I remember it clear as day!) "F-WE DON'T DO THAT HERE!!"

When I asked the advisor at the school if it was indeed true that there was no cartooning program for students, she confirmed that school was not the place to "draw such silliness."

It was then and there that I realized that was not the school for me, because the school's goals and priorities did not align with my own. Instead, I chose to attend the School of Visual Arts, a school built around its cartooning and illustration departments, because that school was better suited to nurture my goals.

Frequently asked questions about college

What subject should I major in at college to be a concept artist?

Study illustration or industrial design. Both majors have overlap, and each will teach you the fundamentals that you will need. At the end of the day, it comes down to what you want to get from your degree.

In illustration, your training will have a heavy focus on landscape painting, technical drawing skills, and figure anatomy. You will also be encouraged to experiment with different mediums, copy the old masters, and explore self-promotion.

An industrial design major will teach you about production art, with a heavy focus on problem solving, visual communication, and development (How does X work?). There is less of a focus on self-expression and voice than there is in illustration.

Should I take computer classes or traditional drawing classes?

Take both if you can. The computer is great, but it is not an “easy” button. If you can’t master the core fundamentals developed in traditional drawing classes, then all of the Photoshop tools in the world won’t save your bad drawing on the computer. Computer software is only a tool to help aid your creative efforts. I suggest that you take those traditional drawing classes first, then import what you’ve learned to Photoshop.

Even if your major doesn’t allow for access to the computer labs, find a way to get it. Make friends with the person who runs the computer labs, or argue your case to your advisor, explaining why you need access. Oftentimes, the reason is that the labs have the latest and greatest versions of software and hardware that you do not have access to at home.

Will an arts degree be enough to get me a job as a concept artist?

In the field of concept art, a degree does not matter. What matters is what you know and how well you can demonstrate what you’ve learned to your client or boss. While degrees aren’t all equal, the more you learn, the better off you will be. You can learn from anywhere, whether it is a four-year school or training videos and the Internet. Ultimately, it is your portfolio that will land you a job as a concept artist.

Do I need to go to a concept art–focused school to be a concept artist?

From my own experience, the answer is “no,” but I can see the attraction. If they were as common back when I was in school as they are now, I would likely have attended one.

Specialization schools are designed to teach you everything you need to know about concept art and to equip its students with the skills necessary to obtain a job in this competitive industry. Because they do not clutter your curriculum with irrelevant classes and distractions, two years spent at a very good specialty school may be equivalent to four years in a regular art college.

Also, the industry professionals who teach at these schools will be able to give you honest, unbiased feedback about your work and the chances of making it in this industry. In addition, the assignments they hand out will likely give you a realistic taste of real-world expectations and stress. If nothing else, they can serve as contacts in the industry.

Are bigger schools better? Will they have better teachers?

A school can be world-renowned and still not be a good fit for you. It's very important that you align yourself with a school that shares your goals. In the end, much of your success may come down to how you connect with your professors and the quality of the instruction and guidance they offer.

Do I need to go to an accredited school, or can I get my education at an unaccredited one?

Attending an accredited school doesn't guarantee you an excellent education, only that the school follows certain governmental standards. With any school, there is always that chance you may have an unsatisfactory experience. To avoid this, look at what each type of school has to offer. Then determine what your needs are, and choose the school that can best accommodate them.

If a school is accredited, this means that a group of qualified evaluators (approved by the U.S. Department of Education) have reviewed the school's education quality, institutional integrity, and educational improvements in order to assure the public that the school in question adheres to a high quality standard. Accredited schools can also participate in government-funded financial-aid programs. (Unaccredited schools cannot).



High school work age 17



How to make the most of your education

Even if you go to a prestigious art school, you will encounter teachers, classes, and perhaps even friends who will distract you, ambush your time, and hinder your artistic development. The best advice I can give here is to prioritize and identify early on what you need to learn and

use your discipline to achieve your goals. You are responsible for your own education. If you are not getting what you need from school, then it is your responsibility to make a change.

While studying in college, you may come across these challenges:

Problems

You find yourself in a useless class that has nothing to do with your major.

You tried dropping the class, but, for whatever reason, you couldn't.

You're in a class that kind of pertains to concept art, but you don't really care for it. What should you do?

Solutions

If you can, drop it. It does you no good as it does not progress your learning. Instead, replace that class with something that you can actually use, or manage your time so that you can focus on the classes that matter more.

If you can't drop the class, have a serious talk with your advisor. Ask your advisor to explain why this class is relevant and how it will benefit your desire to be a concept artist. If he or she can't, then that is reason enough to exchange that class for another one that is more suited to your needs.

If your advisor refuses to talk to you, or adjust your curriculum, find out your school's requirements for graduation or check the course catalog to get an idea of the types of classes you are expected to take. If you see a repeating pattern of useless classes, then you may be in the wrong major, or even the wrong school.

Try figuring out how to make each assignment pertain to your goals and advance your learning. For example, if your assignment is to draw a bowl of fruit, instead of suffering through a still-life exercise, think of it as an opportunity to study light, color, and form. You can apply what you've learned to your own personal work later.

Problems

Solutions

Your professor insists that you take his or her class seriously, even though you know that you have no use for it.

Believe it or not, your professors don't always know what's best for you, and sometimes they forget that they are there to prepare you for the job YOU want—not the job they want you to have. In those cases, you will have to teach, debate, and educate your teachers. Tell them loudly and clearly what your goals are and remind them that they are there to help you obtain those goals. Wrestling power away from them won't be easy, but it is crucial to making the most of your education.

There is a class that you want to take, but it is not in your major, or the class is already full.

Don't let that stop you. Talk to your advisor about how to go about taking classes outside your major or department. Ask the professor with the full roster if you can unofficially sit in on the class regardless of whether or not you get a grade for it. You can even talk to the registrar's office about taking classes at other schools and transferring those credits. The important thing is that you get as much education as you can.

You want more time to do your work, but you need to work a part-time job.

Well, this is tricky. If you have to hold down a part-time job to make ends meet, then there may not be enough time or energy at the end of the day to practice drawing. Financial needs are serious, and each household will have to address them differently.

If you have to work, schedule the bare minimum hours necessary to make ends meet. If possible, consolidate your hours into the fewest days possible, rather than having to work five days a week. The goal is to budget your time to get the largest uninterrupted chunk possible.

You can't find the time to commit the necessary hours to your homework or artistic growth.

1. STOP PLAYING VIDEO GAMES.
2. Omit anything else that is a distraction from your career goals.
3. Set a strict work schedule, and stick to it.

I'll be honest. I played a lot of *Halo* when I was in college, but I did so at the expense of sleep. I found myself up at ungodly hours trying to get my work done. That's a bad habit I wish I'd never started.

There is a misconception among students that school is hard, but once you get into the “real world,” things will be easier. In fact, it’s really the opposite. While you are in school, your teachers are giving you a small taste of what it’s like in the real world, while allowing you the freedom to explore, create, and fail on your own.

Once you are out of school, however, there is that constant pressure and expectation for you to perform. Each job you take not only defines your career, but also puts your ideas out into the world in front of millions of people, beyond the walls of your school.

But know that not all concept art is fun and exciting. In fact, it can be repetitive and grueling at times. However, if you can learn to love the dull assignments, you will be able to get through them quicker. Do whatever it takes to engage yourself.

TIP:

If you find yourself attending a school that is not teaching you what you think you should be learning, then you need to assess the situation. You may find that you are taking the wrong classes, studying the wrong major, or attending the wrong school.

See the Recommended Resources section on pages 136-139 to learn more about specialty schools or scan the QR code to be taken to most updated school information on my website at www.eliottlillyart.com/BBWCA_Resources.



A professor of mine shocked the class by stating that the majority of students who go to art school will not hold a job in their major five years after they graduate college. The fear of being one of those students scared me straight.



High school work, age 17

Why is all of this necessary?

To put this in perspective, here's a personal story:

While attending college, I noticed that when asked, most students answered that they might spend from 2 to 10 hours on each homework assignment and that was good enough for them. I spent 20-plus hours on each one, and it showed. I wasn't more talented than the other students, and we were all learning the same skills at the same time, but because I was able to spend longer hours developing my talent, I quickly distinguished myself from the rest of my classmates.

Trying to maintain the highest level of respect from my peers meant I had to constantly prove I was the best in the class. When I was challenged by the other talented students, a friendly artistic rivalry was born. By my senior year, I was spending 40-plus hours on each assignment.

From that experience, my confidence level grew. I developed some of my best work, and I established new relationships with like-minded students. Seeing my rapid progress, teachers began to recommend me for jobs. That early job experience really helped to prepare me for things to come. To this day, I still keep in touch with those people and respect their work to the fullest. None of this would have been possible if I only did the bare minimum.

You should remember that your classmates (the serious ones, anyway) will be in the industry with you. Therefore, the bonds you form in college are the first opportunity you will have to network, so align yourself with like-minded people to increase your success later on. For example, if your buddy gets a job in the games industry and his boss asks him if he knows any other talented artists to hire, hopefully he will recommend you for the position and you would do the same for him. That is a positive working relationship.

Personal story

In my third year of college, I realized that I wanted to be a concept artist but my portfolio did not reflect that. It contained all the wrong pieces, such as still lifes and portraits, and was more of an illustration portfolio than a concept one. It therefore failed to demonstrate any of my conceptual abilities or design iterations. An art director looking at this wouldn't know what to do with me. The only thing it does well is convey that I have some talent.

This is the body of work that I had in my third year of college. This portfolio is all over the place and lacks focus and a voice.





These images look too much like class assignments and should have been omitted entirely from my portfolio. And, yes, that's anime. What was I thinking?!?!



Panicked, I knew that I had to come up with a solid body of work that reflected my conceptual skills ASAP. So in a desperate attempt to get the most out of my education from my last academic year, I shifted my priorities, changed my classes and altered my daily schedule. I attended four really good art classes and treated each assignment as a portfolio piece (because it was). That meant that I had to spend 20-40 hours on each assignment to bring it up to portfolio standards. Notice the difference in quality and content. These are successful examples of personal work that incorporate the lessons I learned from class, but do not look like homework assignments.



By the time I was done with my senior year in college, my concept art portfolio began taking shape. It was a good start, but I knew there was more work to be done.



Despite my best efforts and clever planning, the school still mandated that I take two additional elective classes. Knowing this, I selected ones that I thought would be the least challenging with the least amount of homework so I could focus on my main priority: the portfolio. I was stuck with an English Poetry class and a History of Comedy class where, every Monday morning at 8 a.m., we watched silent black-and-white films of Charlie Chaplin.

Doing the bare minimum (aka, showing up and barely participating in class) meant my grades in these two classes suffered. I received a "B" in the English class and a "D" in the history class. However, I had received an "A" in all four of my art classes and, by the end of the semester, had developed the body of work that I needed for my portfolio. My overall GPA dropped to a "C" which was a shame on paper, but my portfolio looked GREAT.

Looking back

One of the best decisions of my life was my choice to honestly evaluate my own work, admit to myself that it would not get me the job I wanted, and develop a plan to address this problem. Embracing the monumental amount of work I had to do in a very short time quickly forced me to be focused and disciplined. I wasn't just shooting for a mediocre body of work with lots of images, but rather a smaller batch of very high quality images. It was a lot of work, but in the end, I think it was well worth the reward. (I got the job I wanted! Hooray!)

Developing my personal projects and schoolwork simultaneously allowed me the chance to explore different areas of concept art and to learn what I liked and disliked doing. It gave me a sense of direction when the time came to build my actual portfolio so I knew which areas of concept art I wanted to pursue. For example, I knew that I didn't like concepting characters as much as vehicles and environments, therefore, my portfolio would reflect that.

The students who end up as the "best" in their school are usually there not because of some innate talent that they were born with, but because they spent hours upon hours each week practicing their art. Those students are the ones who purposefully and single-mindedly push themselves with the intention of getting better. If you want to be the best, then you will need to commit to that level of dedication.

Although it is possible to be a professional concept artist without ever having to set foot on a college campus, going down the self-taught route may be grueling if you are not extremely focused and determined. Students and teachers can push you to do better work than you may push yourself working at home in isolation. They will also prepare you to work in a team environment.

Other methods of learning

Colleges may be the primary tool to prepare you for the working world, but there are additional resources meant to nurture, educate, and guide you in your artistic growth. Because most of these resources tend to rely on you already knowing the basics, you should use them in tandem with your schooling, not as a substitution. Here are a few common methods of learning you may want to consider.

Online art schools and complete courses (that focus on concept art)

These programs can be really helpful at developing your fundamental skills and portfolio. Classes are usually taught by industry professionals who bring their insight, know-how, and experience. Courses can last several months with homework to match, so make sure you have the time to fully commit before enrolling. Otherwise, you may just be wasting your time and money.

How it works

Starting each week, the student usually gets access to a full video lecture from their instructors, along with an assignment description. After the assignment has been turned in, the instructor provides feedback, and the students are given a chance to interact with the instructor via a live question and answer session. Because take-home assignments are a large part of how the student learns and interacts with the teacher, it must be done each week in order to complete the course successfully. By the program's end, you will likely graduate with a better understanding of yourself and a solid portfolio to match.

Online workshops and streaming tutorials

Workshops and live tutorials generally tend to be short, virtual lessons aimed at improving a specific skill, for example, anatomy drawing, environment sketching, or vehicle design. They are a great way to witness an industry professional in action. The downside, however, is that your time with the instructors is very limited.

How it works

Instructors will record their lesson (which is usually a few hours in length) and upload it to a website's server. Students can then log on and view the lesson, and are permitted to ask questions through a live chat, messaging service, or e-mail.

Live workshops

Taught by industry professionals, live workshops are classes that you attend in person and are usually hosted by an organization at a convention or school for your educational benefit. They can range dramatically in class size (a few people to 100 or more) and class length (a few hours or several days). The value of attending a live

workshop is that you have access to the instructor and can ask them to repeat or explain something in better detail. Take advantage of this: **ASK QUESTIONS.**

Prerecorded tutorials and instructional DVD videos

The advantage of buying these is that, unlike streaming content, they are typically high quality, you own them forever, and can watch them over and over again. Unfortunately, there aren't too many retailers currently producing tutorial DVDs. Buying several at a time can become costly on a student budget, but the information gained may be invaluable to you.

Books and magazines

A monumental amount of books out there are worth reading with subjects that vary from techniques to personal theories. Magazines also offer a lot of information in articles. They often feature interviews, tutorials, and lectures from various artists within the industry and are easy to understand and quick to the point.

Your artistic growth is measured through slow and steady improvements. If you have learned one new thing from that book you just read, or the tutorial you just watched, then you are moving in the right direction.

See the Recommended Resources section on pages 136-141 for my list of reputable schools, tutorials, books, and more.

In this industry, the pressure is always there to get better and faster, but don't obsess over this right out of school. Your speed will develop in tandem with your confidence. The best way to improve the quality and speed of your work is to practice more often.

Internships for students

In general, internships work as an exchange between a student and an employer. The student exchanges cheap or free labor to gain on-the-job training in his or her field of interest. It is a great opportunity to see what people in game development actually do and to immerse yourself in their working environment. Some internships can even lead to permanent employment after school is over.

How do you find internships?

Well, that can be a challenge—there is no centralized list of internships.

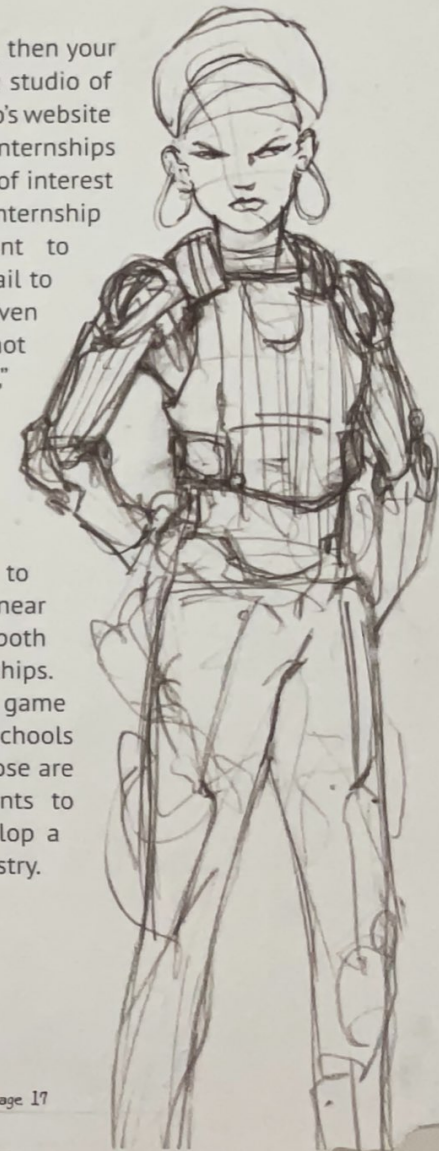
Most game development studios aren't really searching for interns. They are looking for qualified people to ship their upcoming title. In fact, having an intern present means that someone in the studio will have to stop working on that upcoming title to mentor and manage the student. A company, therefore, will need to have the time, personnel, and money to train one or two interns, and it's a gamble. If the intern decides he or she does not want to work at that studio, then it may be seen as a waste of company time and resources.

My theory is that the companies that do offer internships (usually larger studios) will get enough applicants without having to advertise the position. If they did advertise, they would likely receive far too many applicants and, as a result, would have to spend more time and money sifting through them all. Therefore, very few requests for interns make it to public job boards and forums.

When looking for internships, your best bet is to first check with your advisor and the school's career development office or human resources department to see what connections, if any, they have to the video games industry. There may already be programs and staff members in place to work directly with game studios.

If that yields little to no results, then your next best option is to contact a studio of interest directly. Check the studio's website for job listings—you may find internships listed there. If there is a studio of interest that does not list an official internship opening, then you may want to contact them via phone or e-mail to inquire about opportunities. Even if their answer is "No, we are not accepting interns at this time," you've got nothing to lose. When waiting for a response, you may need to be patient, but persistent.

Another solution might be to approach schools located near game companies, then call both and ask if they ever do internships. It's not uncommon for artists at game companies to teach at local art schools or make guest appearances. Those are great opportunities for students to make an impression and develop a network of contacts in the industry.



High school work, age 17

How do you prepare to pursue an internship?

First, find out the studio's requirements. If they participate with your school in an internship program, then chances are you will need to follow and meet whatever instructions are given to your school. Seek your advisor for help. If you have found a place that is not affiliated with your school, but has their own internship program, then follow whatever guidelines the studio provides.

Regardless of how you get there, the requirements will likely be that you need to submit a cover letter, resume, and portfolio. You may also need a list of references, letter of recommendation, or even a copy of your transcript. Read the directions and qualifications carefully.

When should I apply for internships?

Studios that are not affiliated with a school may list openings on their websites year-round, while others pop up on chance occasions. Thus, it can be hard to predict availability.

If the studio works with your school, they may offer internships only during the summer, or in accordance with school breaks. You would need to seek out your school advisor for these answers. In general, however, if you have decided that an internship is worth doing, then research and apply as soon as possible to avoid being grouped in with the crowd later on.

How long is a typical internship?

They can be relatively short, usually only a few months or so, but the experience will help you to assess if this is indeed a career for you.

Will I get paid?

The pay is usually bad, ranging from nothing to minimum wage at best. The real payout, however, is being smack-dab in the middle of game development, where you can see how game production is

handled. You get firsthand access to artists who are doing the job you want to be doing. If you are smart, you will be using them as a vital resource, getting feedback on your personal work, advice and anything else that they may offer.

Will I receive course credit?

That depends solely on your school. If that is important to you, then you should speak with your school and employer beforehand about the process.

Will I get offered employment upon completion of the internship?

Nothing is promised at the beginning of an internship, but if you play your cards right, you may get an offer to stay at the company when the internship ends.

Even if the studio doesn't extend an offer of employment, you can still list the company's name and the skills you learned on your resume. This may put you a step ahead of the students who don't have industry experience.

Do I need an internship to get a job in the video games industry?

Not at all. In fact, most professionals whom I've asked have never had one. It is up to you to weigh the benefit of an internship to see if it is something worth pursuing.

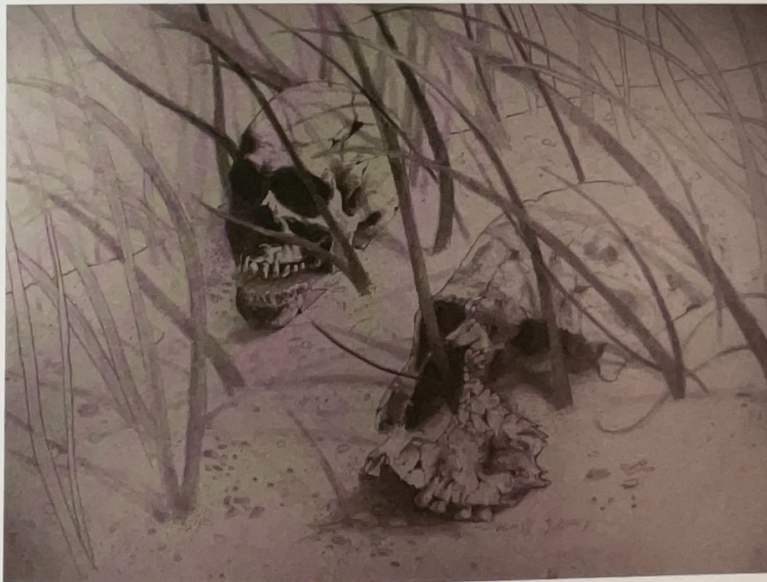
What does an internship entail?

In the United States, there are federal laws which state that, as an intern, you cannot do the job of a paid employee, nor can your efforts be used to benefit the company. As a result, students who find themselves in unpaid internships may not be doing any real conceptual work, but most likely menial grunt work: gathering reference images for artists, filing artwork, or even getting coffee.

If you have the unfortunate luck to partake in such an internship, then you may want to rethink it. Your time may be better spent polishing up class assignments, learning new techniques, or developing portfolio-worthy images. In my opinion, those things would benefit you far greater.

WARNING:

There is a limit to how creative and aggressive you should be when pursuing internships at studios. **DO NOT SHOW UP IN PERSON UNANNOUNCED!** This has happened at every company where I worked. Nobody likes stalkers, nor the awkward situation they create. Doing so is the fastest way to get a "NO" from any studio. If you can't get a response by e-mail or over the phone, then I am afraid it just will not happen.



Study of a skull college work age 19

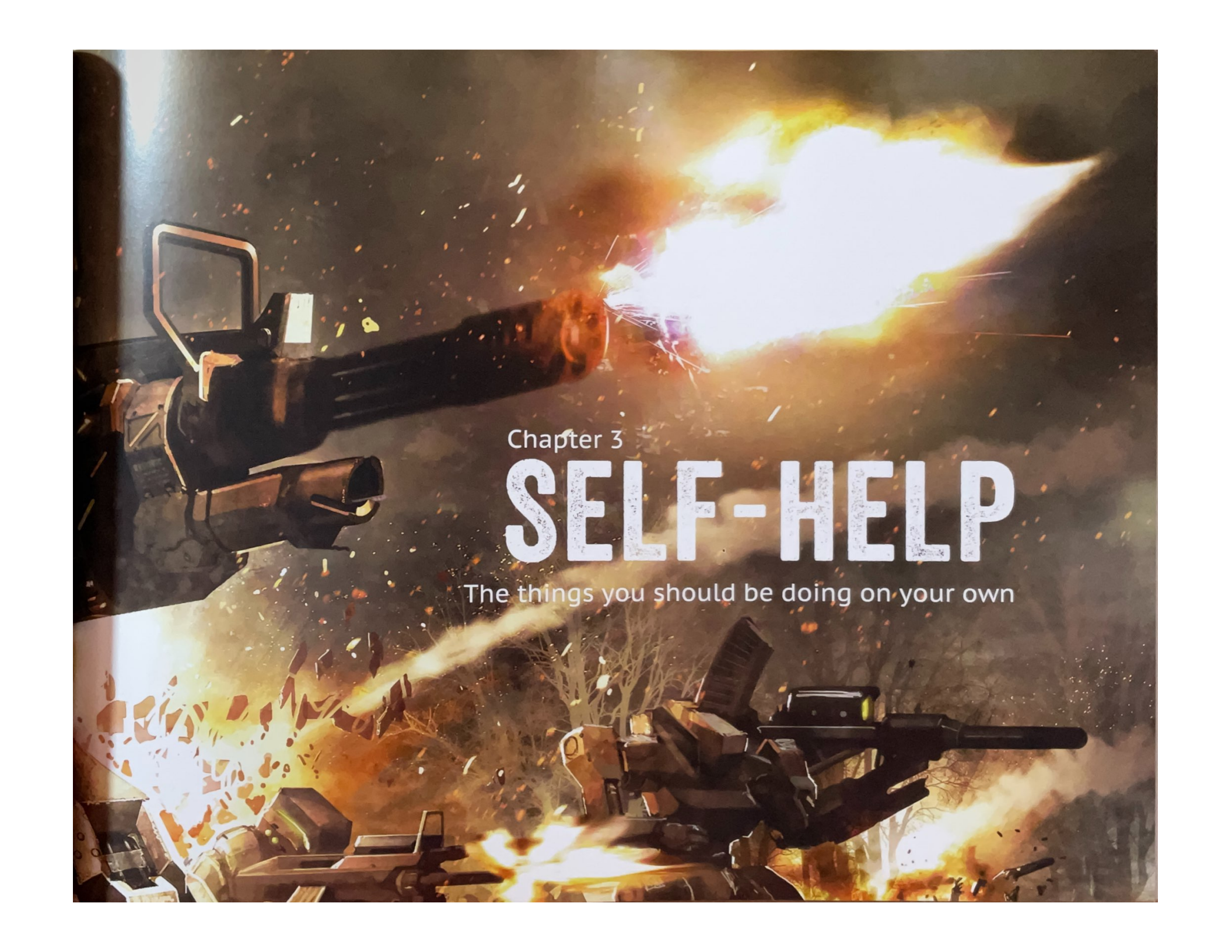
More internship leads: Another effective way to search for an internship might be through a campus event or job fair geared toward the entertainment industry. If there aren't any events at your school, find a school nearby that may be hosting one. Meeting a representative face-to-face makes a powerful first impression and will likely put you ahead of your competition.

Also, don't forget to utilize your teachers. If they are industry professionals, it is likely that they may have contacts or insight into companies that are looking for interns.

TIPS: Stack the odds in your favor

- Applying for an internship as a senior may put you at an advantage above freshmen and sophomores, as you have the potential to stay full-time past college. This makes any studio's investment of time and money worthwhile.
- Keep in mind that studios typically consider local talent to fill internship positions. If they are in a different state or country than you, chances are you will have a tougher time getting admitted into that studio. Be selective about which studios you apply to first.
- The students who have great attitudes, the strongest skills, and best work ethic are the ones most likely to be considered for internship positions.





Chapter 3

SELF-HELP

The things you should be doing on your own

The importance of drawing from life

Drawing for the sake of drawing is good. Drawing with the intent and focus to learn is even better. Here are a few things you can do on your own to improve your artistic skills.

What you should be doing and looking at—and how often

Draw as often as possible! On the train to school, during your lunch breaks, sitting on the toilet—whenever. Draw from life and the things that you see around you, such as people, buildings, cars—anything. What is important is that, through practice, you train your eye to be observant while your hand grows steady and confident. You should be filling up a sketchbook every few weeks or so.

If you find yourself gravitating toward drawing the same things over and over, try alternating your subject matter. Identify your weak areas (usually the things that you hate drawing, like hands or feet), then practice that the most. When looking at a hand, pay close attention to its form, structure, and details. Don't just assume the fingers are identical. Look for the differences that make up each finger—from knuckle placement, to thickness, even down to the folds of skin. Draw them over and over until you can understand them from all angles and can accurately draw them from memory.

Why it is important

Once you become familiar with your subject matter, you can store it in your visual library forever (although you may need a refresher course from time to time). From there, you can call upon it as needed, which will speed up your work flow, creativity, and thinking process.

Drawing from life will also teach you about yourself and your interests. If you find that drawing certain types of vehicles is more interesting to you than others, then try to understand why that is. It may be overall aesthetics, shape, or specific details, like a front bumper, that speak to you. Take note of these reasons, which should be drawn, documented, and properly stored in your visual library.

How does it benefit you

The larger and more sophisticated your visual library is, the more real-world reference you will have to pull from when you are making your own images. If you ever find yourself drawing something like a sci-fi hover car, you can reference your visual library to seek those vehicle details that you liked and implement them in your working sketch.

*When drawing from life, draw exactly what you see, not what you **THINK** you see.*

How to build up your visual library

I can't stress enough how important your visual library will become to you. It not only will be your predominant source of reference material on the fly, but it will serve to jump-start your curiosity and creativity. Therefore, feed your visual library all of the knowledge and information you can. Here are a few things you should do to build your library:

Read

Books have the greatest potential to serve as visual stimulators because they offer graphical descriptions that are left up to your own interpretation. When you read, you visualize the story in your head as it unfolds, and those visuals may spark images worth drawing.

Go outside

Spend some time in the streets just people watching. Look for dynamic postures, captivating facial expressions, and colorful and interesting clothing. Take note. Visit the zoo and watch how animals move and behave. Try to understand the dynamics of animal relationships and evolution so you can use those details and reasoning in your own personal work.

Go explore

Travel as much as possible to see sights and sounds beyond your own imagination. Visit different states or countries and compare how life there is different or similar to life back at home. Even something as simple as taking a different route to school each day will expose you to new spaces and environments. Take mental snapshots of the interesting things you see along the way.

Time travel

Visit museums and galleries to explore old time periods and find visually interesting elements from all ages. Behold creatures, objects, and events from a time past that you can't find anywhere else. Bring your sketchbook and camera to document your findings.

Stay current

Be aware of the current trends in the entertainment industry (but not a slave to them) to make sure that your drawings and designs aren't outdated or unoriginal. This doesn't mean you should spend hours and hours playing video games and watching movies. It means watching trailers, short YouTube clips, or whatever will give you just enough information to understand what's out there, but not enough to distract you from your main goal: learning.

Stay inspired

Keep a visual bulletin board of pictures torn from the pages of magazines with imagery that fascinates you. Surround yourself with this so you are constantly inspired.

Things to avoid

Copying others and manga art

There are times when studying another artist's work can be beneficial. However, doing fan art or manga art is not one of those times. It is not productive because you are copying someone else's already established design. You are not challenging nor accessing your visual library, therefore, you aren't developing any further as an artist. Instead, use what you have witnessed yourself, and make your own version of a character who fits in a world similar to that of the fan art or manga.

Too much TV

Don't watch mindless TV (especially reality shows) as they are, in my opinion, counterproductive. Instead, watch shows that can stimulate your mind on networks like Discovery, Animal Planet, and National Geographic. This way you are at least learning something about nature, cultures, science, and more.

Focusing on improving artistically doesn't mean that your life will forever be boring and dull. In fact once you have broken into the industry, you can go back to playing games, watching dumb TV, the works. It doesn't matter because all of your effort up to that point has paid off: You have made it.



College age 21

How to properly draw inspiration from reference

While drawing from life is always best, sometimes you just can't travel to those faraway places pictured in a photograph or have access to the subject matter at hand. In those cases, drawing from a photo can offer you the next best thing. Photos can be incorporated into your work a variety of ways, but here are four of the most common uses.

1. Directly copying photos

This is not a form of tracing, rather an exercise meant to strengthen your hand-eye coordination by depicting detail for detail what you see in the photo. Once you have drawn it, the thought is that you will better understand it and commit the details to your visual library, so you can call upon them at a later time.



Junior in college, age 20 Guache



The goal of this college exercise was to take an existing photo (on the left), then match and replicate its colors (on the right). By the time the image was done, I had gained a thorough understanding of how to mix and blend colors, their relationship to one another, and value shifts, among other skills. It is an example of how copying from photos can be a great teaching tool.



This is one of my first Photoshop attempts that demonstrates a quick way to get an idea across. You can clearly see the difference between the unaltered part of the image (the stairs and ceiling) and the rest of the image.

Personal work, age 23

2. Using photos as inspiration and paint overs

Sometimes you will come across a photo that contains an element that you really like, but the rest of the image is off. Using the photo as a base, another technique is to paint over it in Photoshop (or whichever program you choose), altering the elements within the image as necessary. This gives you the freedom to utilize the element you like as a springboard for new ideas and development.



Professional work age 30

3. Photo mashing

This is a technique usually done on the computer, where you mash up or combine several photos together (almost like a collage). It may be used for a variety of reasons, primarily to speed up the process of painting or to add texture to your image. This is an advanced skill set, oftentimes serving as a shortcut for professionals who are under time constraints.

I did not start using the technique of using photographic elements as a shortcut until I was a professional.



Photo mashing: A cautionary tale

If I were painting the side of a brick building, I could sit there for 30 minutes, detailing each brick. Or I could just Google "brick wall," find a good photo, import it into Photoshop, and manipulate it to fit into my image all in the span of two minutes.

As students, however, I would discourage you from using this technique. Even something as menial as drawing a brick wall can be a good teaching tool because it trains the hand, probes the visual library, and assists in reinforcing such fundamental skills as perspective, light, and shadow. Therefore, denying yourself this opportunity means you will never learn how to draw it on your own and those core skills will suffer. You are actually stunting your artistic growth by photo mashing.

When photo mashing is done poorly

Oftentimes the image will rely far too heavily on the photos to do all of the work. Worse yet, the photos will be overlaid in such a way that the values are crushed, causing everything in the image to go straight to black, and the image itself becomes unreadable. In these cases, the artist is using the photos to hide his or her own inability to demonstrate the core fundamentals.

Remember: All of the Photoshop tricks, gimmicks, and shortcuts in the world will not make up for your poor implementation of composition, readability, and design.



This is an example of photo mashing done poorly. The perspective, lighting, and values are all inconsistent, making the image hard to read. In this case, the photos are damaging the image.

4. Using photos as reference

"Reference" means using the information contained within an image as a resource. It fills in the blank areas of your visual library, ensuring that you get the full picture of what it is you are trying to draw. Using it wisely can be the difference between having a decent image and an amazing image. This technique will stimulate your brain, improve hand-eye coordination, and fuel your imagination and creativity—plus, when it's done, you can put it in your portfolio.



To better understand how light bounces and reflects off surfaces, I created my own clay model reference. I lit and photographed it, then applied what I learned to my pencil drawing.



Senior in college, age 21

How should photo references be used?

To use photos as reference correctly, you must first have a solid idea of what it is that you want to draw; then you can begin to gather reference. If you dive blindly into reference gathering too soon, you may waste precious time looking for unnecessary or even incorrect reference.

Once you have found, extracted, and incorporated the desired elements from your reference into your own work, you can put the photo down; it's served its purpose. You can refer back to it from time to time as needed.

Good reference and its implementation

In order to succeed with good designs, your concept needs to tastefully blend real-world elements with your own ideas, anchoring your image to a familiar but different reality.



Using photos as reference: A cautionary tale

In art, if it looks right, then it's right! If it looks wrong, then it's wrong! Knowing what to look for in reference is just as important as knowing which details to omit when using it. The human eye picks up on imperfections and oddities all the time, but because they are in a photo, the brain will accept it as a fact. If, however, you draw that same weird imperfection in your image, it may stand out as being wrong and the brain will have a hard time ignoring it.

Foreshortening of the human form is one of those things that may look right in a photo, but horribly wrong in your image, especially if you don't understand what it is that you are drawing. In situations like these, use your artistic judgement. If something looks wrong in your photo reference, then you may need to find another picture that looks right.

The downside to using photos is that what you see (or can't see) is what you get. If a photo doesn't offer enough information or details, then seek new ones for clarity.

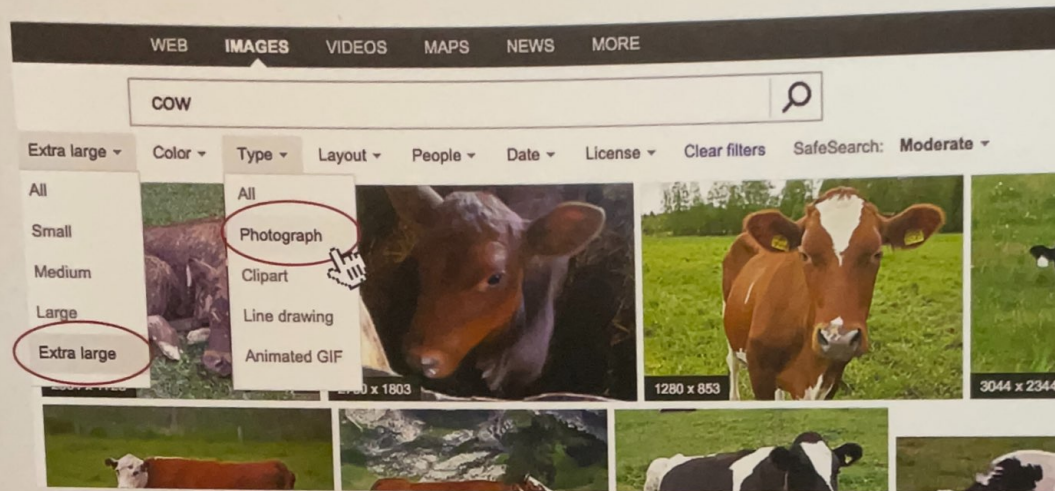
TIPS:

- Committing to reference too early because you have grown attached to it can stifle your creativity, making you a slave to it if you aren't careful.
- If you use terrible reference material that is blurry, pixelated, too dark, or perhaps even reference that you can't understand, then there's a good chance you will mistakenly repeat any imperfections in your image.



How to find and spot good reference

Don't just settle for the first image that pops up in search results. Make sure that your search parameters will yield the best results.



Very important:

Make sure you have these kinds of parameters turned on when searching.

What constitutes good reference?

- **Large size**
If digital: 800 x 800 pixels or greater
If in print: the bigger, the better
- **The image must be clear and easy to read and understand.**
Color is a plus but not always necessary. Having several pictures from different angles of the same subject matter is extremely beneficial.
- **Having a tangible photo is great** because you can keep it next to you while you work, away from your computer, and it can be stored in a file or folder somewhere.

What constitutes bad reference?

- **Small in size**
- **Grainy, unclear, or hard to see**
- **Stained or smudged**
- **Pixelated or containing camera imperfections**
- **Washed-out or blown-out lighting or too much contrast**

The best thing you can do is to take your own photo references.

Bring your camera with you wherever you go to document anything of interest. Then return home and organize the photos you captured. (I'll show you how to create a reference library in the following section!) As you become more advanced, you can ask your friends to pose for you and include additional lighting, costumes, and alternate locations in your photo shoots.

Because the subject matter is at your disposal, you can take as many pictures as you like, at any angle or position, while avoiding potential legal trouble.

Be careful when choosing to use photo reference from the Internet. Avoid images that depict a person's likeness, or contain an established intellectual property. Using those types of images without drastically altering them or without authorized permission, can get you in legal copyright infringement issues.

Graduate work
age 23



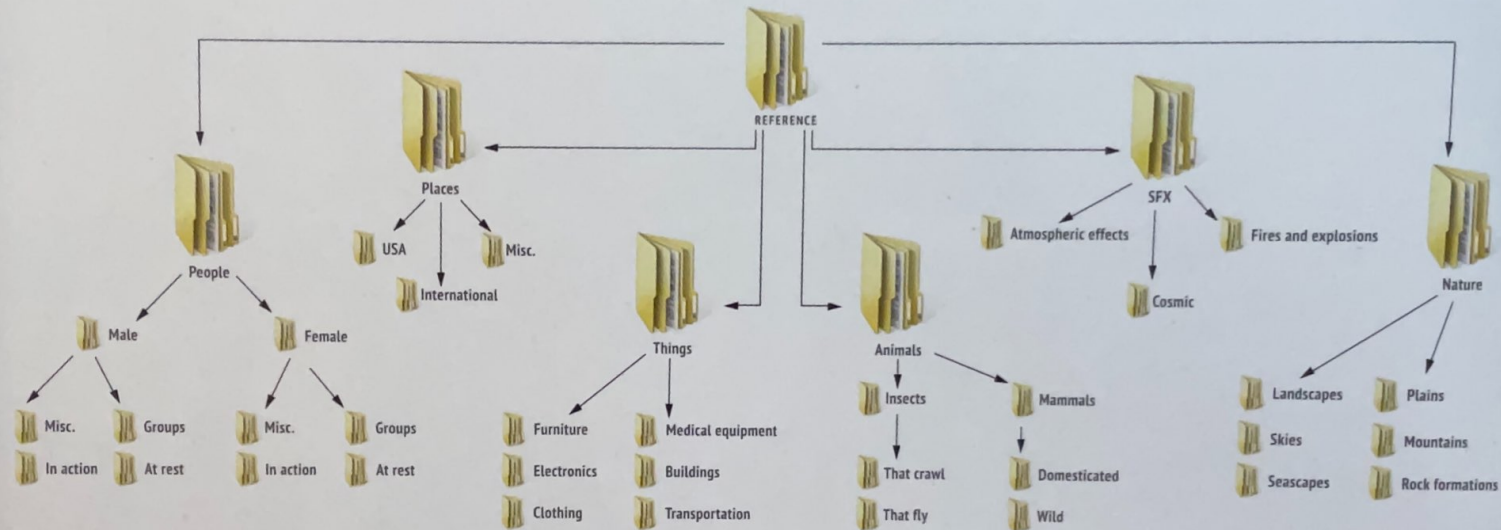
How to create a reference library

Once you have amassed a collection of saved photos on your computer, it helps to organize and store them in such a way that makes them easy to access on demand. There is no standardized filing system here, because the way one artist sees an image and files it may be different than another. Picture associations are like word associations in that they can mean different things to different people.

Keeping that in mind, I can show you a good way to start. Where you go to from there depends on your artistic needs.

First, create a "Reference" folder. This folder will hold all of your reference materials.

You don't have to follow this exact framework, but this is a good way to start your collection. You can come up with your own categories.



Within that Reference folder, create six subfolders with the following headings: People, Places, Things, Animals, Nature, SFX

Break each of those six headings down into subheadings

People > Male/Female

Places > USA/International/Misc.

Things > Furniture/Electronics/Clothing/Medical equipment/Buildings/Transportation

Animals > Insects/Mammals

Nature > Landscapes, Skies, Seascapes, Plains, Mountains, Rock formations

SFX > Atmospheric effects/Cosmic/Fires and explosions

Expand those six subheadings further

People > Male > Misc., In action, Groups, At rest
 Female > Misc., In action, Groups, At rest

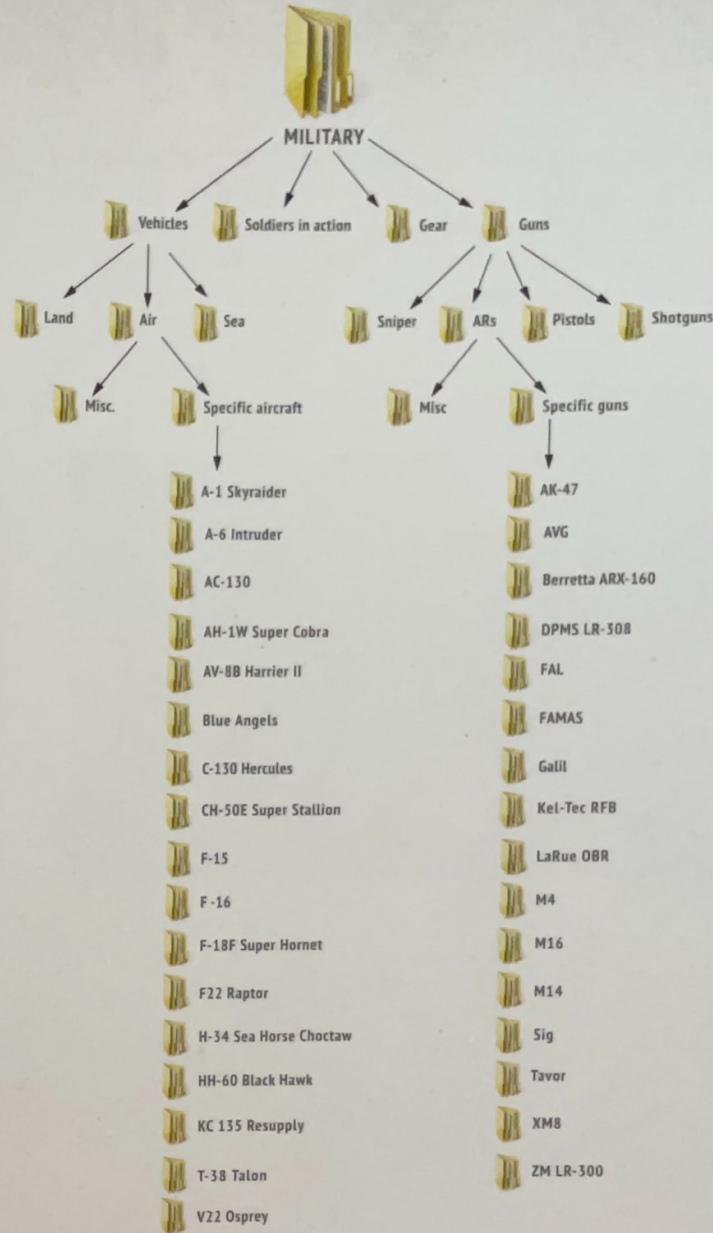
Places > USA > Cities, Country, Suburbs, Misc.
 International > Cities, Country, Suburbs, Misc.

Things > Furniture > Indoor, Outdoor
 Electronics > Household, Industrial, Misc.
 Clothing > Costumes, Fashion, Modern, Retro

Animals > Insects > That crawl, That fly
 Mammals > Domesticated, Wild

If you get hundreds of photos in one category, then it may be time to subdivide again to make life easier. Find the repeating trends, and make those the new headings for your next series of folders. You can continue this process indefinitely, getting more specific with each level.

Remember: The more subdivisions you have, the fewer photographs you have to go through, and the more specific the selection should be. You can get as specific as you like. Here are alternate examples of file organization. Do what works best for you.



How to learn from film studies

One method of learning involves recreating a scene from any movie in the hopes of learning from it. This technique is very similar to copying directly from photo reference. Because any given moment within a film will likely be a well-composed shot, this exercise will teach you about lighting, mood, color balance, composition, and storytelling.

The way to do this is to take screenshots of any media playing on your computer and then save the image to a destination of your choice. (There is a variety of software that will do this. I use VLC media player.) To get the most from this exercise, refrain from using a "color picker" tool. Try matching colors by sight only. If done correctly, you should end up with an image almost identical to the movie.



Film studies, personal works, age 24

The importance of a sketchbook

Keep a sketchbook. It has been said a million times, but that's because it's crucial. What kind of person would I be if I didn't reinforce the importance of keeping a sketchbook in this book? The sketchbook is a space designed for an individual to practice technical skills and to investigate his or her creative curiosity, and it serves as a visual diary of day-to-day problem solving. It is the beginning of a venture, when you set out to try new things and, therefore, may often hold your most embarrassing secrets.

Use your sketchbook daily with the intent to constantly improve

Consider it a tool used to aid in your growth, iron out technical skills and imperfections, and improve your hand—eye coordination. Every image doesn't have to be a masterpiece, but at some point, you should be able to compare a new image to an old one and see slight improvements. If you can't, then you aren't learning.

Don't get too personal

If you are the type of person who keeps a very private and secret sketchbook, then I suggest you start a second one that is purely educational so you can show it to your peers for feedback and constructive criticism.

Avoid drawing the same superheroes over and over again (and poorly at that)

Drawing the same character repeatedly in your sketchbook does not require you to think or problem solve. Instead, challenge yourself by drawing things outside of your comfort zone. This will constantly force you to practice and hone your skill set while creating a visually interesting image.

For example, if you are in the habit of depicting a fictional character in the same pose and facial expression every time, then find creative ways to break from that norm. Put him or her in an environment where he or she is actively doing something—then add any additional props that may explain his or her backstory. By actively defining your character, you are not only grounding him or her in reality, but you are also utilizing your perspective and narrative skills, challenging your hand, and reactivating your brain.

This is an example of how a setting can add depth and complexity to your character. Use it to aid in the storytelling and visual interest of your image.

Graduate work, age 23



Personal story:

As artists, we tend to be hypersensitive about our work. I used to shy away from showing my sketchbook in fear of people passing judgement on my work and, in turn, me. I would hide my mistakes by scribbling over or simply tearing out the offending pages in my sketchbook, but I have since learned not to do that.


One day I decided to open up and show my book to a friend who immediately saw the things that I was bad at doing and offered some advice. He said, "Oh, you know what might help you? Try doing it like this . . ." He showed me what I was doing wrong and how to fix it. I have been drawing it his way ever since.

I am currently of the opinion that one shouldn't hide those secrets, rather keep them as a reminder of how far you've grown. They are stamps on your time line of growth that should be cherished just the same as your proudest images. Who knows? One day your friend may offer helpful advice that will steer you straight.

Graduate work, age 23







Chapter 4

THE PORTFOLIO

Spend the time. Do it right.

How to get started

At the end of your time at school, you will likely have amassed a large collection of class assignments, but putting them all into one book does not make it a portfolio. A good portfolio serves as your voice and speaks on your behalf to clients, declaring your interests and demonstrating your skills. Your work on display will tell them what you are passionate about and what you do well. It will also give them an idea about how they can use your services at their company. Unless you want to get a job painting still lifes and nudes, don't include them in your portfolio. Instead, you should build your portfolio to express your interests.

Nowadays, having an online portfolio is a necessity as it's what art directors review when they are considering someone. But a classic portfolio in book format would be for in-person opportunities such as job fairs and trade shows. (Though you may also show your portfolio on a tablet PC.) Here are a few things to do and consider before you select the images that will make up your portfolio.

Get feedback

First and foremost, you can't build a portfolio without knowing what materials you have to work with. Have your work evaluated by your teachers, at portfolio reviews, or by industry professionals before deciding on which images to use. You are looking to receive an honest, unbiased, and consistent opinion of your work to determine your best pieces. Have your work evaluated by your teachers, or by industry professionals at portfolio reviews. Avoid asking family members or close friends because they tend to be less objective and may tell you only what you want to hear. A teacher or professional is better qualified to give you correct advice.

If you show three people your loose images, and they all say that X, Y, and Z are the strongest ones, then you can bet that they will make solid additions to your portfolio.

Tailor your portfolio

Once you know which images are the strongest, you may begin to see a pattern that reflects your own strengths and weaknesses. If you see that most of your character work was rejected by teachers and professionals, but your vehicles and environments all got thumbs up, then it may become clear that you are better at vehicles and environments than characters. Therefore, you may want to check the job boards for those types of jobs.

Understand where you fit in

Some companies will need an employee who is proficient and specializes in one specific area of concept art, like characters or environments, while others will be looking for the candidate who is well rounded and can dabble in a bit of everything. It all depends on the current needs of the game or studio.

Generally, however, it is the bigger video game companies with larger teams (100-plus employees) that will hire the specialists for their talents and keep them in that role. Conversely, it is at the smaller companies, where staff is limited, that you may find concept artists who are like Swiss Army knives, doing a little bit of everything. Thus, when preparing your portfolio, you should be conscious of those two different approaches to concept art and understand where you fit in.

The generalist approach

Being fresh out of school, it may be safer to generalize your portfolio. If you are able and willing to fill any concept discipline at a company, then you are more likely to get hired. Once hired, the thought is that you can steer your career toward a particular specialization and get

experience doing that. With that experience under your belt, applying for the next job should be easier. For most students, this is the approach I suggest you take. Pursuing the generalist approach means you can do a variety of the following disciplines.

Characters

- From various time periods (medieval, modern day, futuristic, etc.)
- Across different genres (sci fi, noir, military, steam punk, etc.)
- In motion (doing activity, looking tough, fighting, etc.)
- Orthographic view* ("A" pose, "T" pose)

Creatures

- Two-legged, four-legged, winged, horned, etc.
- Friendly, aggressive, evil, etc.
- Varied textures across surfaces
- Varied sizes
- Isometric turnarounds (side, front, and back views)

Environments

- Interiors and exteriors
- Varied scale
- From various time periods
- Across different genres
- Landscapes vs. city scenes vs. space, etc.

Props

- Everything and anything that supports a character, creature, or environment, such as magical staffs, garbage cans, billboards, etc.

Vehicles

- Varied transportation (trucks, trains, transports, etc.)
- From various time periods
- Varied sizes, number of occupants, etc.
- Isometric turnarounds

Weapons

- Knives, blades, guns, etc.
- Isometric turnarounds
- 3/4 view (sexy render shot)
- For guns, show in first-person view as well (foreshortened perspective)
- Show detailed operational callouts (How does it work? Any moving parts?)

Here are a few not-so-common, but still in-demand concept needs:

Matte painter/sky box

- Photorealistic landscapes
- Photorealistic skies (moody, evil, sunny, etc.)
- Varied time of day
- Varied season

UI/HUD

- Varying heads-up display designs
- Decorative design elements
- Logo treatments and varied knowledge of typography

Storyboards

- Visual storytelling
- Sequential panel art
- Narration and expression

Textures

- Props before and after textures have been applied
- Varied texture examples and treatments to surfaces
- Show alpha channels and masking layers

TIP:

Organization is the difference between your portfolio being judged as versatile versus confusing. I recommend that you demonstrate no more than four disciplines and keep each one grouped together for consistency.

* "Orthographic view" is the representation of a three-dimensional object in two dimensions by illustrating the front, back, and side views of said object.

The specialist approach

If, however, you have found your stride mainly in one or two disciplines, and your instructors have said that you have the talent and work to back it up, then when building your portfolio, you may want to take a specialist approach.

The specialist approach is most suitable for the student who spends most of his or her time drawing only one or two disciplines (for example, fantastical creatures). That student has spent years focusing his or her efforts to understand human and animal anatomy, behaviors, defense mechanisms, and bone structure and has practiced making creatures over and over again. The student understands the chosen subject like the back of his or her hand and, when asked to draw something cool on demand, can whip out a dynamic concept on the spot.



Graduate work, age 23



Unfortunately, this student is not as strong at everything else. He or she can't draw vehicles or weapons, doesn't really understand perspective nor have any interest in it, etc. In those particular instances, I might recommend that the student take the specialist approach.

This tends to be a bit risky when applying for jobs, because if the company doesn't have a job opening for the few things that you do well, then you may be out of a job. The upside, however, is that if they do have openings, you are exactly the type of candidate they are looking for—and, if hired, you will be getting paid for the things that you love doing.

Class assignments vs. portfolio pieces

You don't want the images in your portfolio to look like homework assignments, because any professional will be able to look at them and see a student level of work, instead of a young professional's.

The trick to a portfolio-worthy image is to hide all of the things that you have learned from school within the image, demonstrating your abilities, but compose it in such a way that the piece doesn't look or feel like a homework assignment. Consider reworking these pieces to be as stunning and impressive as possible.

WARNING: I don't recommend the specialist approach for 90 percent of students out there as you may really lose out on some great opportunities. But for those certain students (and you really have to know who you are), the specialist route may be for you.

Multiple portfolios

If you have two areas of interest (e.g., 3-D modeling and concept art) and want to showcase them both, then I would advise you to make separate portfolios for each. Since the areas of interest are independent, then showcasing them separately makes the most sense. With two well-crafted, independent, and solid portfolios, you have more opportunities at your disposal since you can apply for two jobs instead of just one.

Keep in mind that companies are looking to see if your portfolio demonstrates your ability to meet their needs and qualifications. Therefore, anything in your portfolio that doesn't support those qualifications serves as clutter. If you lump your different areas of interest together in the same portfolio, you run the risk of an art director who is viewing your work to wonder, "Why is this modeler applying for a concept art role?"

The only time I would group your several areas of interest into the same portfolio is when the job you want requires you to have those additional talents. For example, if you are a graphic designer who mainly focused on product design, then having samples of your design work next to samples of any product photos you've taken would benefit you. The client would be able to see that you can design a page layout AND take your own photos with the correct lighting and composition as needed. In this case, having multiple talents (both design and photography) directly benefits and qualifies you for that job.

TIP:

The reality is that unless both portfolios are stunning, you will likely only be hired for one of them. Determine which one is stronger and spend most of your energy and effort promoting it.

Before making alternate portfolios ...

The first thing you should do, assuming you haven't already, is compare and evaluate your several talents and see which is your strongest. (Ask your teacher again.) Promote your strongest area first and most often. You need to have a body of work in both areas that is high enough in quality to meet portfolio standards, and you will need enough of these high caliber images to warrant a portfolio.

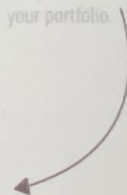
If you are making a physical portfolio, make two separate ones. If you are doing an online portfolio, have a separate section for your alternate talent or a link to a completely different website.

Things to avoid in your portfolio

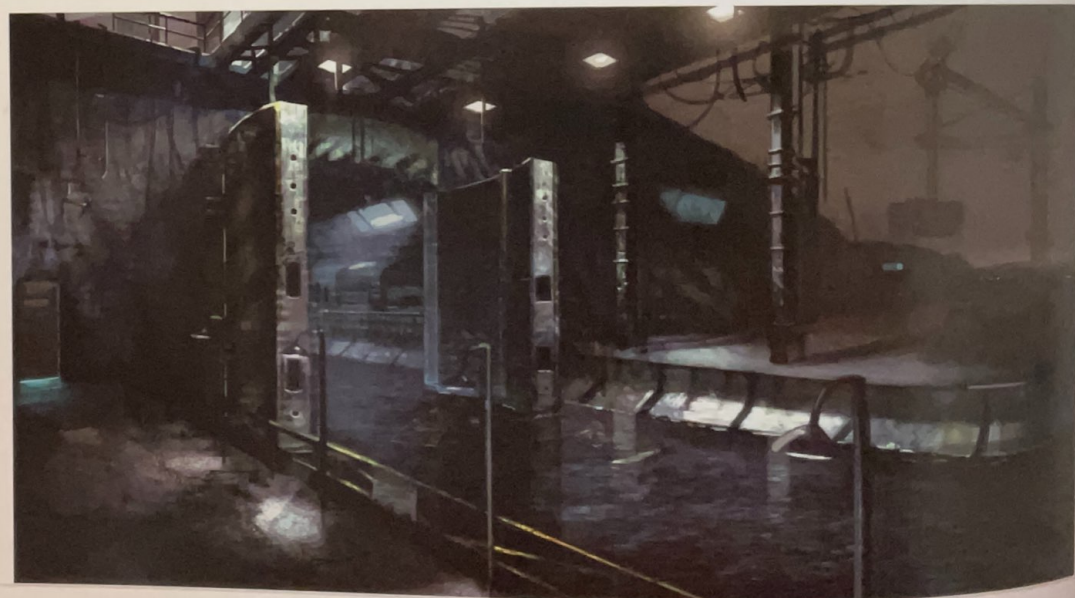
- Fan art
- Any image that depicts nudity in a potentially vulgar fashion
- Drug paraphernalia, usage, etc.
- Graffiti
- Copyrighted characters from already established franchises
- Copying of other artists' artworks, likenesses, etc.
- Manga
- Traced work
- Images that rely too heavily on photo mashing or photo paint-over techniques. Any professional artist can spot the visual discrepancy between the photos and the rest of your image and may hold that against you.



Remember this poorly photo-mashed image? DON'T use an image that looks like this in your portfolio.



If you want to use it in your portfolio, then you must first clean it up. DO redraw or alter images developed by photo mashing so that it does not rely on the photos as much. This is a better way to convey your design and artistic capabilities.



How to develop your portfolio

If you are asking yourself, "How many images should my portfolio have?" then you are asking yourself the wrong question. The number of images is irrelevant. What is more important is making sure that your images feature subject matter that you enjoy doing, and that each image is of outstanding quality. Your portfolio speaks to the client on your behalf, and it needs to say, "This is what I am good at doing, and I can deliver this quality of work over and over again." So, the correct question you should ask yourself is "Which of the images at my disposal say that confidently?" Those are the ones that should go into your portfolio.

A working theory: The rule of five

While there is no right number of images to show in your portfolio, I believe that it takes at least five solid images of the same subject matter to convince any viewer that you are competent in that area. Each of those images should be top notch, demonstrating technical skill, execution, and your ability to deliver a consistent level of quality. Any additional images will help to solidify that notion (and I strongly urge you to include more), but having fewer than five may not be enough to erase any doubt in the viewer's mind.

TIP:

When designing your portfolio:

- Demonstrate what you want to be hired for
- Play up your strengths/downplay your weaknesses
- Showcase strongest work first and last so you start and end on a good note

If, after searching through your portfolio-worthy images, you realize that you do not have five solid pieces that demonstrate the kind of work that you want to do, don't panic. Either develop additional images of the same caliber to accompany the existing ones, or switch the focus of your portfolio to an area where you have more outstanding work.



Physical portfolio presentation (book format)

Your first impression is everything. Even before closely viewing your individual images, a person looking at your portfolio can get a sense of what kind of artist you are, how much you value your work, and, in turn, how much they should value your work, just by its

overall presentation. Your initial presentation immediately sets their expectations high or low and can be one of the contributing reasons why you get the job or not. Spend the time. Do it right.

DO...

- Make sure it has enough pages to hold all of your work. Loose images in the back are not okay.
- Make sure that it is large enough to accommodate your images, but not so big that it becomes cumbersome.
- Select a book that is utilitarian and practical. Ideally the book will be expandable with removable pages so it can be updated and tailored with ease.
- Place your work against a colored piece of paper. Black is most common, but a neutral gray or brown works well, too. I shy away from white, as it attracts too much attention and tends to make the images look extra dark against it.

TIP:

To ensure that each of your images in your portfolio is top notch, listen to your instructors. If they say, "This image is great except for this one area over here," then if possible, correct that area before placing it in your portfolio. If you leave it as is, people viewing that image may be soured when they see that flaw—and that can hurt your chances of getting the job.

DON'T...

- Spend on a fancy handmade portfolio imported from a foreign country with pages crafted from the finest spider silk. Keep it simple and clean. The more elaborate the portfolio is, the more potential it has to detract from the art.
- Include original pieces of artwork; high-resolution copies of your work are fine.
- Overcrowd a single page with too many images.
- Include images that don't show well: 1) content wise, meaning potentially offensive or distasteful images; or 2) physically, such as images that are faded, of poor print quality, or too small (anything smaller than 4"x 5" will be difficult to appreciate).
- Include dog-eared, stained, or torn pages, or any drawings on napkins or ruled paper. Use common sense.

Portfolio layout

Through personal experience, I have learned that people tend to have the strongest impression of the first and last thing they see in your portfolio. Unless they really stand out as striking or different, images in the middle of your portfolio will likely begin to blur together. The first few images will set the expectation and tone for the rest of your portfolio, while the last few images will be what the person looking at the work actually remembers and takes away. As such, I am a firm believer that your portfolio needs to start and end strong.

What you should do: Assuming you are going with the generalist approach, first evaluate each of your images and group them into their respective disciplines (characters, vehicles, environments, etc). Then figure out how many disciplines you have in your portfolio and which ones are your strongest. Start your portfolio with your strongest discipline first.

Place your best image on the first page of your book, followed by four additional images to support it. (Remember: The first five images in your portfolio have to wow the viewer.) From there, you can add as many images as you like as long as they are all of high quality. Make sure that your last few images are as impressive as the first, so that the viewer ends on a solid note. Once that entire discipline has been exhausted, switch to the next one.

Repeat this process throughout your portfolio, keeping in mind that your last discipline should be your second strongest one, ending your book on a good note.



Graduate work, age 23



Changing course

If you find yourself with a portfolio that doesn't reflect your desire to be a concept artist, then you need to take action! I suggest you take an online class or two in the areas that interest you (environment design, character design, vehicle design, etc). This is the quickest way to learn about those areas of interest and to become proficient in them. By the end of the course, not only will you have gained a few crucial skills but hopefully will have a few solid portfolio pieces to show. That's a step in the right direction!

Graduate work, age 23

LAYOUT TIPS:

- Consider each discipline to be its own chapter in your portfolio. Show character concepts next to other character concepts, for instance, vehicles next to other vehicles. This serves to quickly establish confidence and continuity in your work.
- If you find that you are lacking the minimum number of five images per discipline, see if there is overlap in a different field. For example, a concept of a person standing by a vehicle can either be put in the vehicle or character discipline. (Usually a concept is placed in whichever theme is more dominant.) Reshuffle your images if possible to obtain at least the minimum image count.
- If you have loose images that are random, but still worth showing, put them in the middle of your portfolio. It is good to show that you have variety, but chances are that those images aren't the "meat and potatoes" of what it is you love doing.
- Where possible, try to maintain the same orientation of images. If the book is horizontal, keep it that way for as long as possible before showcasing an image that reads vertically. This will stave off neck fatigue from the viewer and add an additional touch of professionalism.
- Try to establish a flow or harmony between images that is pleasing to the eye. If you place a very dark and moody image next to a very bright image in your portfolio, the contrasting images will fight each other, making it difficult for the viewer to concentrate or focus on either image. Instead, when possible, place darker images next to each other for the viewer's comfort.
- At the end of your book, add a "thank you for your time" note. It is a small touch, but may have a profound impact. Being polite can only help your chances at getting that job.



Personal story.

I received my bachelor of fine arts in Illustration, but decided to go back to school for another two years to get my master of fine arts. The degree wasn't what I was after, rather more time to really hone my skills and develop my concept art portfolio. I wanted to take full advantage of everything my school had to offer me, and four years just wasn't enough time.

By the time I graduated from my master's program my portfolio looked like this.

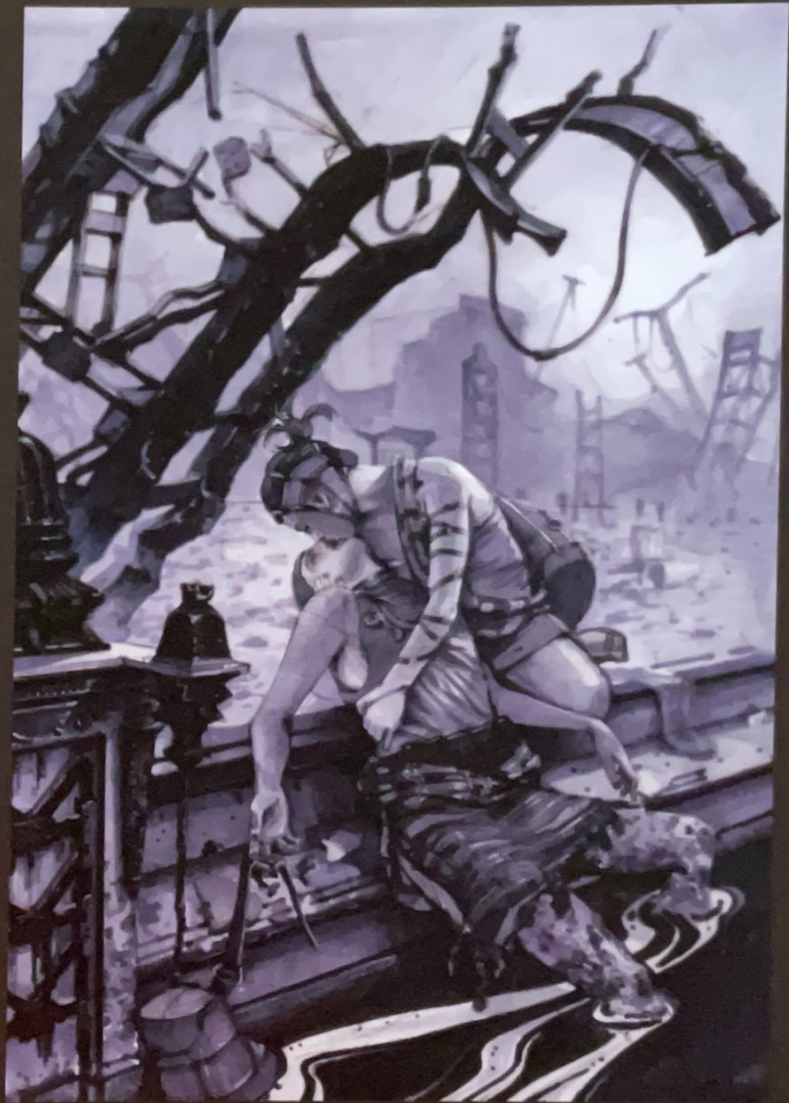
This portfolio landed me my first job in the video game industry. My work was held in a simple 8.5" x 11" spiral-bound pleather case with removable black paper sleeves. On the next few pages, I will layout the images as they were presented in the book.



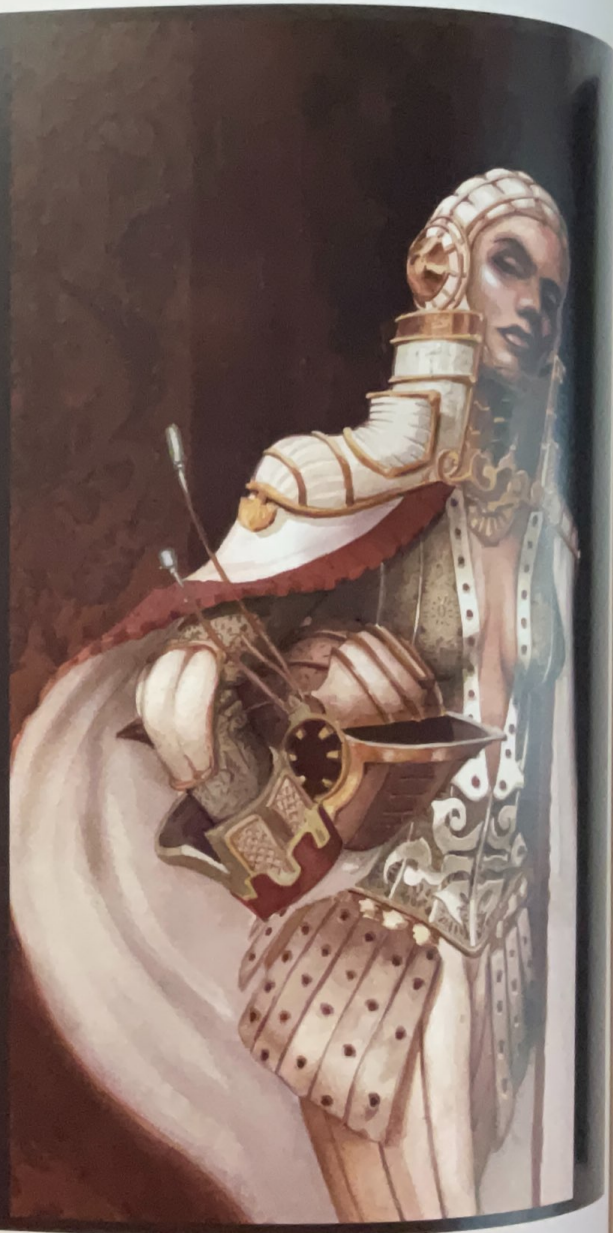
A double-page spread starts the book off strong with a compelling image of two characters.



Follow it with several strong character illustrations. Notice I place vertical images next to each other.



Observe the compositional flow between images. The image on the left leads your eye to the image on the right and vice versa.



Again, note my attention to the flow between the two images. My character image leads your eye directly into an environment image.



My portfolio now switches themes to focus mainly on environments. For visual impact, I feature several more double-page spreads below and on the following pages.



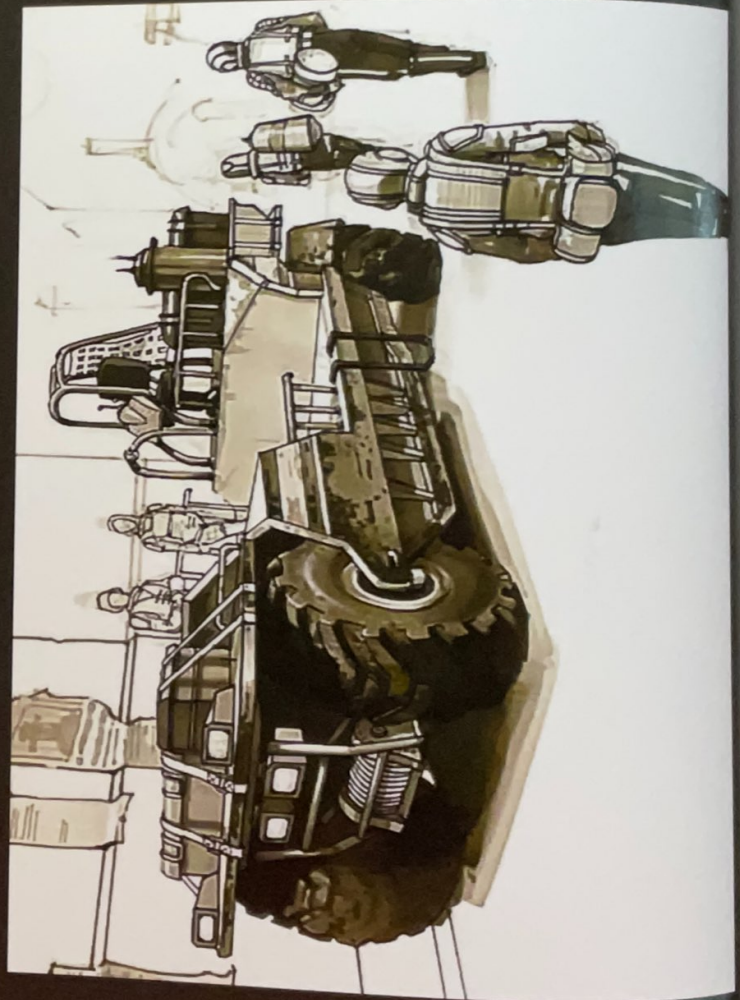




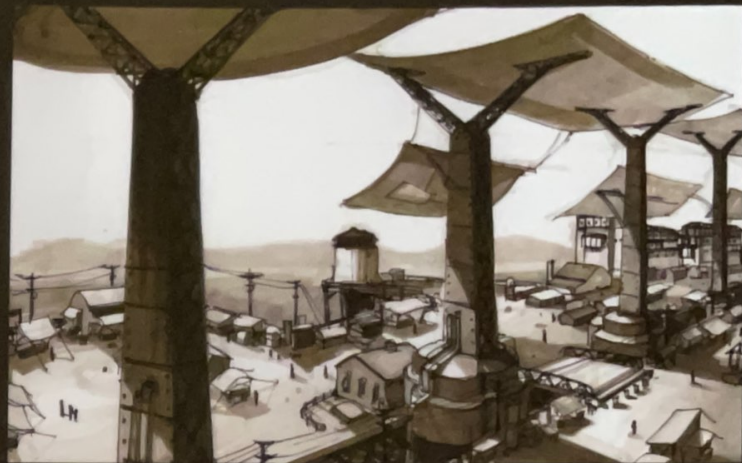
Now that the sexy color illustrations have grabbed the viewer's attention, the book switches gears to focus on my concept work. For easier viewing and consistency, I rotate these images counterclockwise and group them together.



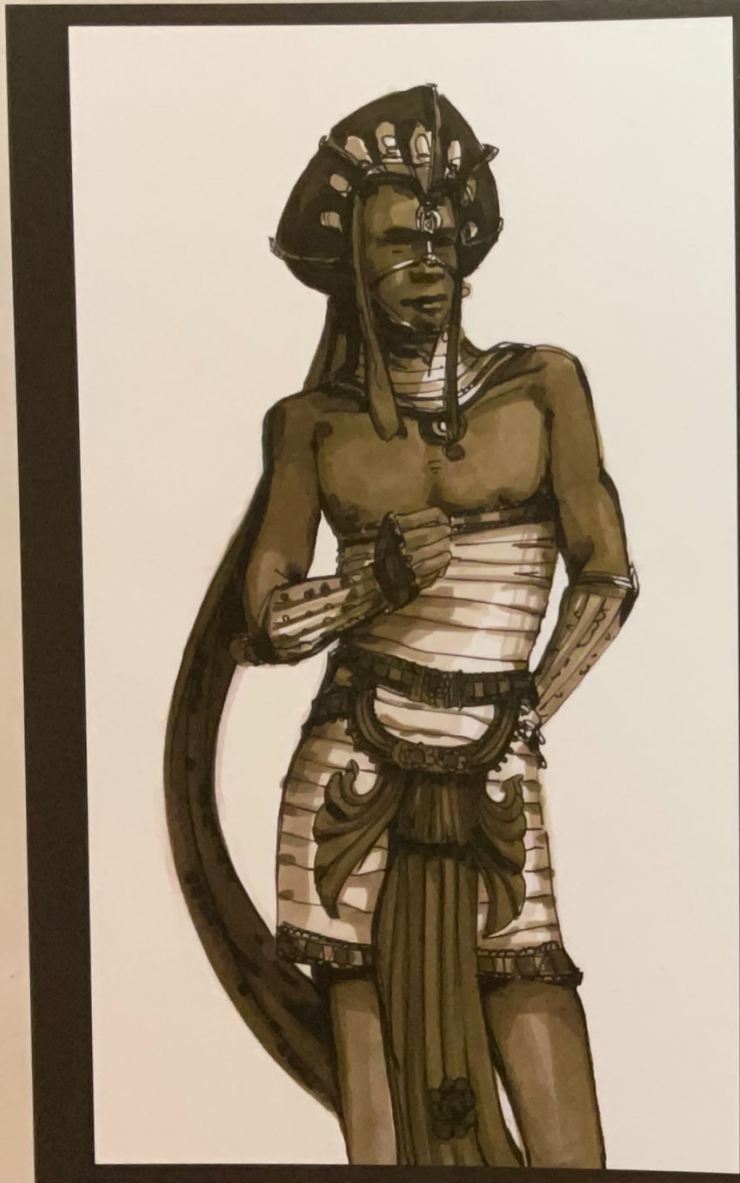
Even though this is my only vehicle concept, I felt it was still worth showing. Because it was a stand-alone image, I put it in the middle of my portfolio.

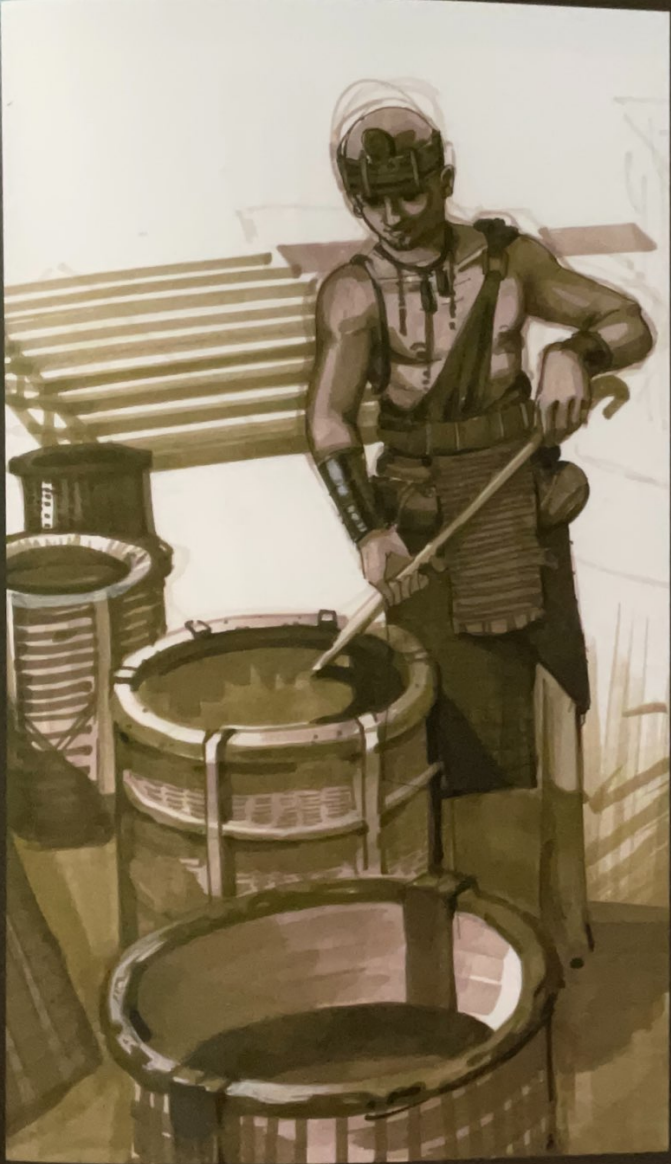


This is where the book flips back to its normal vertical orientation.



With environment concepts out of the way, I begin to display my character concepts.









The book ends with a handwritten "Thank You" on the last page.



Through a consistency in quality and repetition of disciplines, I make my interests, environments, and characters clear to anyone looking at my portfolio.



Graduate work, age 23

Tips for creating your online portfolio

As you begin to make your way into the professional world, there are certain rules that should be followed in order to meet industry standards. You will have to give thought to where your online portfolio is hosted, what kind of content is on there, and even the ease of navigation. Your online portfolio should not send the message that you are a student, rather a young professional looking for work.

Where to host your site

Build it yourself

The most common option considered industry standard is to host your own customized website through reliable and affordable web hosts. Do your research about services offered, cost, and customer support and compare your options here.

The benefits of paying for your own website

- You get a unique domain name of your choice that is a direct link to your work. Use a ".com" for your domain address as it's the most familiar extension and tends to rank higher in search results.
- You have full control over your site's content, design, and layout in order to ensure that it directly benefits you and makes you look like a competent and capable artist.

The downsides

- You will need to design and build the website yourself, seek out a friend who can, or pay someone to do it. All these options can take time to do correctly. Ask friends or colleagues for referrals to web hosts, websites, or designers they've used to produce their online portfolios.
- You will have to pay a company to host your site.



Use a site with templates

There are several reputable content management systems available that may fit your needs. Some are even specifically designed to host art galleries and will provide you with an easy template to follow when uploading your work. See the reference section for a list of recommended options.

The benefits of using a content management site

- They are usually free
- With templates and set guidelines, it is usually much easier to upload and maintain your work than a personal website.
- Because all of the legwork has been done for you, a gallery of images can be set up and running within a matter of minutes.
- They are somewhat acceptable in the industry.

OR

The downsides

- Keep in mind that some free sites were designed to build an online community and may not be structured to host a personal portfolio.
- You will have less control over page layout and design.
- Some sites tend to look less professional, with advertisements, banners, and buttons everywhere.
- When using free sites, domain names can be lengthy: It's often `www.yourname.companyname.whatever.com`, which is a lot of text for a potential client to type.
- If the site that hosts your portfolio features a community of artists, you run the risk that your client may see someone else's artwork that they like better and navigate away from your page to that person's. You just gave away your job.

What to display on your customized website

A solid collection of your work

Again, it is very important here that the quality of work on display is consistent. I would omit anything from your site that isn't your best work.

Contact info

Your website should contain your e-mail address (as this will likely be how a client will get in touch with you) and phone number. I have seen artists put their home address on their site, but that is giving out too much personal information in my opinion. Leave the postal address for your resume.

Resume

Make sure your website contains a link to your resume. Better yet, have a downloadable PDF document of your resume directly on your site. This will make it easy to view. If you are not comfortable sharing that information, make a note at the bottom of your site that is easy to read and says, "Resume available upon request" (or something to that effect).

Biography

This is optional and purely at your preference. If you do decide to write one, be sure to include additional information that isn't found within your resume. Also, make sure to write it in the third person as it appears more professional that way.



Graduate work, age 23

How to display content

Unlike your physical portfolio, the image order on a website doesn't matter as much because there is no guarantee that the viewer will go through each image as planned. Therefore, the number of images on display and how they're laid out is up to you.

DO...

- Make sure your site is easy to maintain and update.
- KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid): Be consistent with presentation—keep it simple, straightforward, and tasteful. If you have a great portfolio but a convoluted and poorly designed website, then you have nothing at all.
- Keep navigation simple and load times down to a minimum so you can showcase as many images as possible in the least amount of time.
- Make sure your disciplines are easy to find on your website.
- Evaluate the number of images you have and organize them accordingly. No one likes to sift through dozens of images to get to the subject matter they actually care about.
- Lump disciplines together like chapters, keeping the character concepts with other character concepts, vehicles with vehicles, and so on.
- If you include sketches, make sure they are actually good ones demonstrating a skill, not mediocre doodles.

If you need help or inspiration, look at other concept artists' websites to see what they do (or other art portfolio-related sites, for that matter). Find a site that you like, see how many images it features, and see how they catalog them. This can give you some insight about how many images you should share and how to design your own website. Regardless of what you do, there are definitely some dos and don'ts that you should adhere to.

DON'T...

- Have more images on your site than are necessary. Fewer strong pieces are better than several mediocre ones.
- Include distractions such as music, animations, bright flashy colors, or the like.
- Keep sketches and finished works in the same section; each should have their own clearly marked sections on your site.
- Have pixelated or low-resolution images.
- Have huge image sizes that take too long to download.

Posting portfolio images on more than one website

The more your work gets out there, the better the exposure and the more potential opportunities for you. That said, make sure you have a primary website that is listed on any promotional materials (business cards, e-mail signatures, stamped at the bottom of your image, etc.). No one wants to go through 25 websites to see your work.

TIP: To ensure that your name will always be associated with your work, make sure that you include the following on each of your digital images:

- Name
- E-mail or website address
- Date (optional)



Helmet study, age 19

MORE WEBSITE TIPS:

- Do not host your portfolio on networks like Facebook, Flickr, or even DeviantArt because they are not the right platforms to do so. Those communities are meant for other things and are not intended to be used as professional portfolio sites.
- If you have to use a free content management site, it is better to associate yourself with a professional art community rather than a student one.
- Include your name (not your online handle) for your website. In fact, it is best if your domain name is your actual name, e.g., www.eliottlillyart.com. If your name is taken, add "art" or something comparable to the end.
- Make sure your name is written in type (versus solely as a graphical image) somewhere on your webpage so that it will be recognized by search engines.
- Don't include links to other websites or galleries on your portfolio page. Links can redirect someone's interest, and potentially take work from you to someone else.
- If you are bilingual and want to do a website in another language, make sure you have a link to the English version as well.
- Do visit my site for inspiration on how to design your site. Just scan the QR code, or visit www.eliottlillyart.com to take you directly to my online portfolio.





Graduate work age 23

Worth knowing:

In general, art directors don't have much time to look at portfolios because it takes their attention away from managing the studio's project. Taking time out of their busy schedule to review dozens of applicants with mediocre work is not how they want to spend their afternoon. Sometimes they even put it off all day because of its low importance and they are about to head home when they realize they still need to review submissions. With patience low and time short, they may try to sift through them all as quickly as possible. Therefore, the reality that you face is that your portfolio may be overlooked because it took too long to load or because it did not captivate the art director quickly enough.

I check the traffic on my website through Google Analytics and see that the average time spent on my website is two minutes. That means that I have two minutes to introduce, pitch, and sell myself through my art to respective clients. If my website was full of advertisements, distracting banners, music, and all other kinds of nonsense, I may lose that person's interest and any potential job they may have offered. And I'm a professional! My work will be of a different caliber than that of a student.

As students, you will likely only get seconds before the art director moves on to other applicants. This is why it is crucial that your online portfolio be simple, easy to navigate, and direct. Cool load screens and flash animations are unnecessary.

Things you should do

Six months before you graduate

As graduation approaches, you will inevitably start to think about finding gainful employment at a video game studio or company of your choice. The sooner you start this process the better, because being prepared and having a strategy will put you ahead of your classmates and offer you a better chance of reaching your goals.

Six months will give you enough time to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your portfolio, do research on various studios, and formulate a plan of action, while you still have the buffer of school in your favor. If you wait until you graduate to do these things, then you will be in the same boat as everyone else looking for work and will no longer be ahead of the curve. Also, once school is out, access to the tools and resources at your disposal will be limited, if not gone, making things even more difficult for you. Here's what you should do.

- Have your portfolio reviewed**
If you haven't already, start showing your portfolio to as many teachers and professionals as possible. Listen to their feedback and make changes as necessary.
- Post your work**
Also post your work on concept art-related forums in the "needs help" section to get constructive criticism on your work. Not all of it will be helpful or even relevant, but if you learn something new, then it may be worthwhile. Doing so is also a good way to start up a social network between artists.
- Know your competition**
Visit online concept art-related galleries to see the level of talent that is out there. Hopefully that will motivate you to really push yourself to do your best. If there is an artist that you like, look him or her up and see if he or she has a tutorial floating around anywhere that you can learn from.
- Develop your online portfolio**
Start thinking about your professional website and its design. Visits other artists' sites for ideas on how to approach your own.

● **Make contacts**

Create an account on professional video game-related social networking sites and post samples of your best work. Invite your friends to do the same. The more people you invite into your social network, the greater the chance that someone will know who's hiring.

● **Be aware of current events**

Start taking interest in gaming news and events. Visit gaming information websites to get the latest news and details about the field you are about to enter. Make a bookmark of those sites and visit them for a few minutes each day, skimming articles. During interviews, it helps if you know what the current trends in the industry are, so you can talk about them when asked.

● **Research studios of interest**

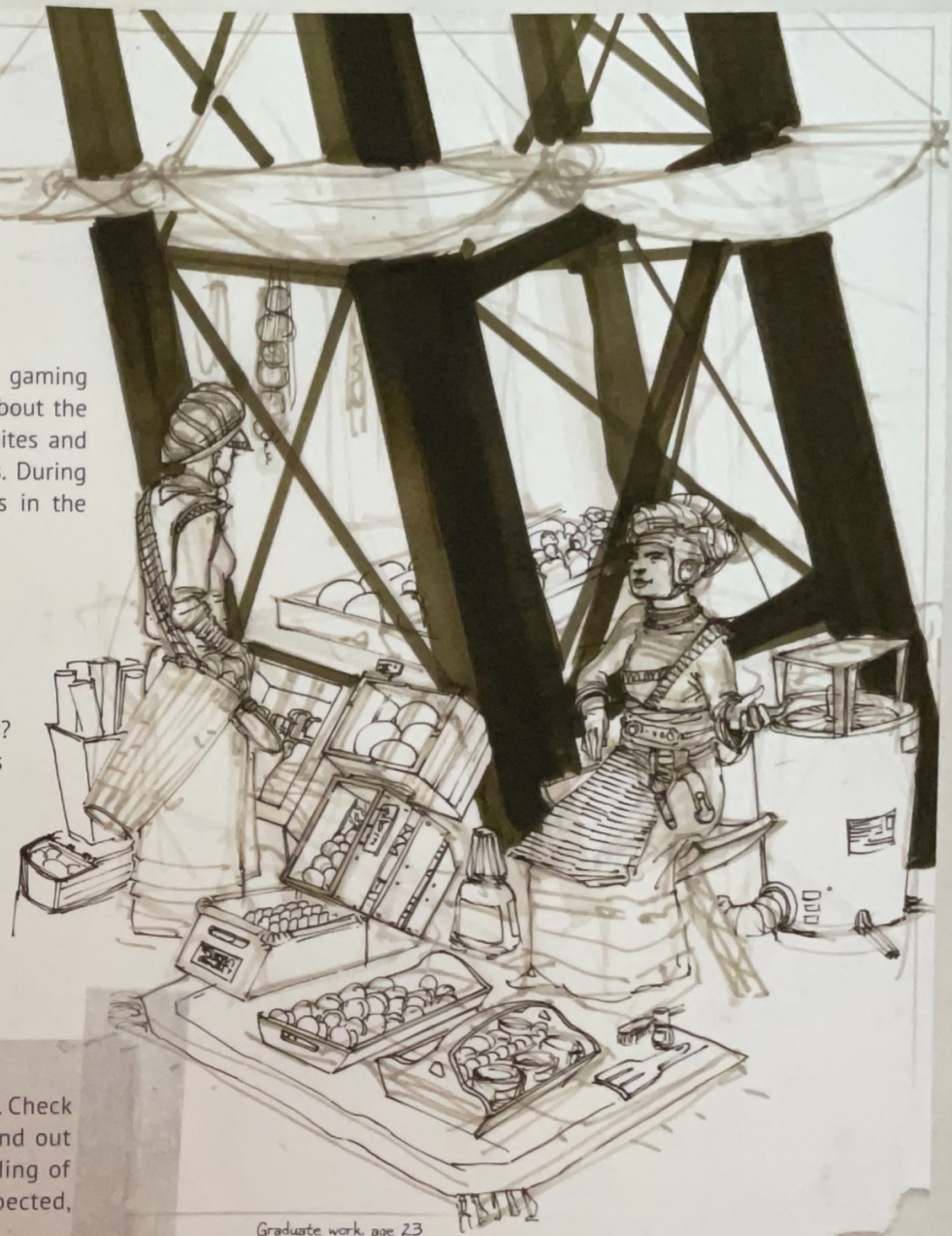
Make a list of the top 10 studios you want to work for. Ask yourself: What kind of games do they make, and does my portfolio reflect that? Look up the artists who work there and see what their artwork looks like. Does your work look similar? Does your portfolio contain similar things? Make any changes as necessary.

● **Seek guidance**

Introduce yourself and get familiar with your advisor. Take a look at the job boards and see what the minimum requirements are for job opportunities. Do you meet those requirements? If not, what can you do to change this?

TIP:

Research the concept art department of your "dream" studio. Check the company website to find the employee names, then find out more about those artists. This will give you an understanding of who will be interviewing you, the quality of art that is expected, and potentially who you will be working with.



Graduate work, age 23

Things you should do

Three months before you graduate

- Finalize physical portfolio**

Ensure that it is as strong as it can be. Replace your old images with the newer ones you have done in the past few months. Begin thinking about which images will fit with what studios. Ensure consistency between website and portfolio, so that the same images are shown on both.
- Showcase your website**

It should be up and running by now, but you will need to test it on different computers, operating systems, and web browsers to make sure it displays correctly. Have your friends and families visit the website and ask them to give you feedback on ease of use and navigation.
- Resume**

Before you can begin to apply, you will need to create a resume and cover letter that must be tailored to each studio. Make sure these are as professional looking as possible. NO TYPOS! Get help if need be.
- Begin the job hunt**

With your list of the top 10 companies you want to work for, systematically see if each one is hiring. Also start looking at job listings and forums on a daily basis. If a job strikes you, apply! Not every job is right for you. Look up game studios and their track record. See what kind of titles they put out and make sure your talents would be a good fit.
- Get organized**

Keep track of which studios you have contacted and with whom you have spoken to. If you begin to send different images to different companies, then also keep track of which samples of art you sent them. Also keep notes of any comments or feedback that they may have given you. Trust me, after submitting your portfolio a dizzying number of times, you will easily lose track of your points of reference.
- Formulate a plan**

Identify and list the remaining things that need to be done before graduation, then create a schedule to keep track of them. If you see that you have not hit your goals by a certain date, then you know you need to kick it into high gear.
- Utilize facilities and resources**

While you are still a student, take advantage of as many student versions of software as you can get your hands on. Some schools offer severe student discounts. You may not need them now, but you might later on. I was kicking myself for not buying a student version of Photoshop before I graduated.
- Enter into public competitions**

This is optional, but if you are really up for a challenge, another good way to push yourself is by entering into public competitions. Doing so will give you a taste of real-world deadlines, restrictions and pressures. A foreboding of things to come. Hehe. Even if you don't win, you may end up with a portfolio piece from it.



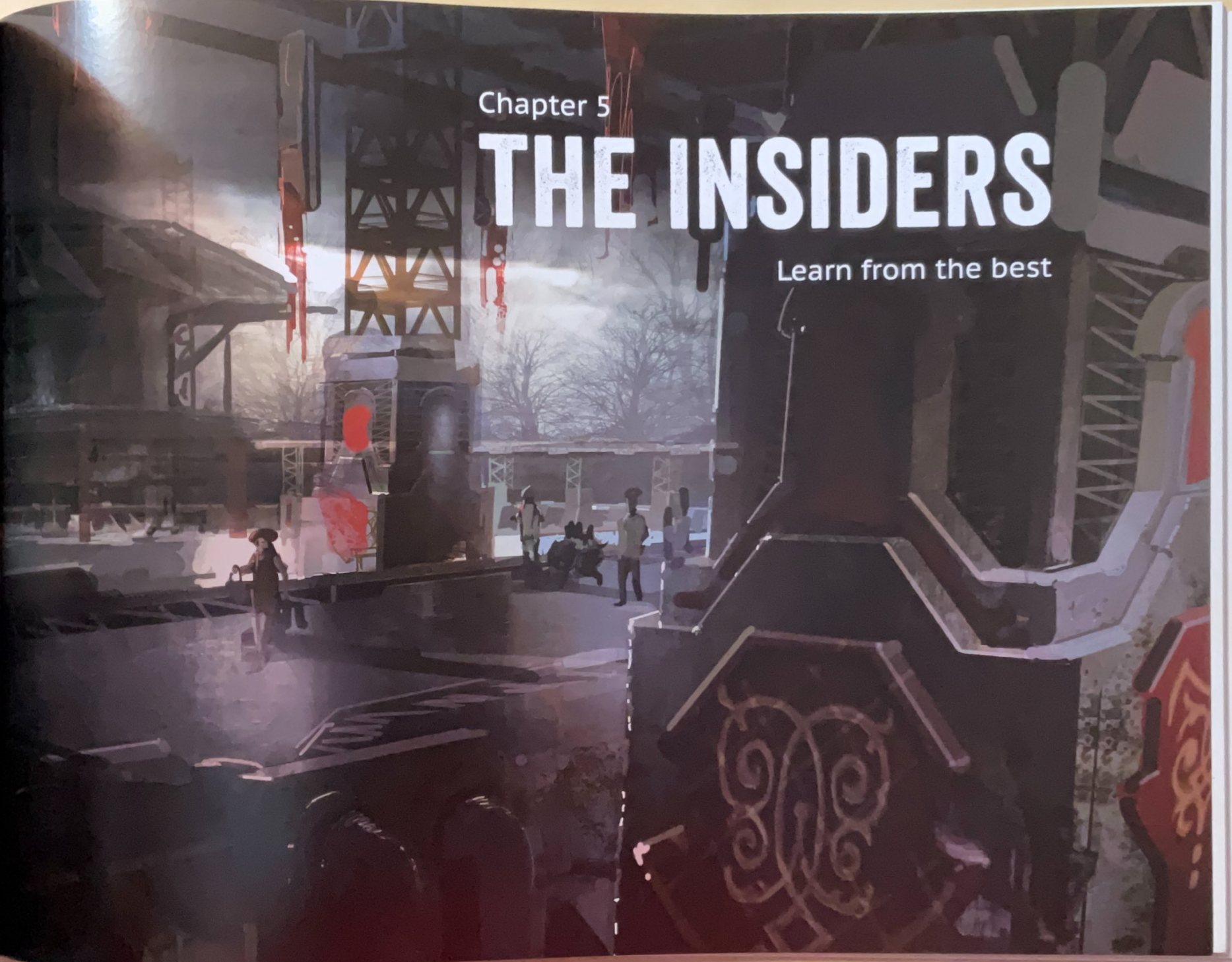
Graduate work, age 23

TIPS:

- Your best bet is to apply to the companies whose product closely matches the type of work you love to do. If you have a very cartoon-centric portfolio and send samples to a company that's known for gritty, realistic modern-day war simulations, there's a good chance they won't even bother to send you a polite rejection letter.
- Don't be afraid to apply to studios two or three months before you have graduated. Most interviews will take several weeks if not a month to finalise, and your start date can be negotiated during this process. Depending on the studio's schedule and needs, they may be willing to wait a few months for you to graduate.

Scenario: If a potential employer can't wait and needs you to start working as soon as possible, then you have a decision to make. The whole point of college is to prepare you to get a job, but if one presents itself at an inopportune time, then ultimately you will have to choose between the two.





Chapter 5

THE INSIDERS

Learn from the best

Elliott Lilly



If you've read this far, then you've only heard my side of the story. While I promise that I've done my best to steer you straight, you shouldn't just take my word for it—a lot can be learned from others.

In this chapter, you will hear stories from some of the best talent in the video game industry. Each of these artists had to start somewhere on the road to success. Keep in mind that the lessons they learned along the way may vary, but their additional perspectives will offer unique insight beyond my own.

It takes a certain kind of artist to share his or her failures and successes with the public, and I am thankful to each of them for contributing. I hope that their stories will further educate you about the industry and the job, and better prepare you for things to come. But first, just a little more about me and this big bad world of concept art...

Q&A

What made you want to become a concept artist?

Star Wars, or more specifically, *The Art of Star Wars, Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* by Jonathan Bresman. That book changed my life. Before I saw it, I wanted to be a set and/or stage designer for Broadway shows. (That was the only profession I knew of that would

allow me to design costumes, creatures, and characters.) As soon as I saw that book, however, everything clicked and I got super excited. I knew right then and there, that this thing called "concept art" was what I had really been looking for all along.

What inspired you to write this book?

Over the years I have received dozens of emails from students across the country, asking me the same questions. The common theme was that they were desperate to get as much information as they could about becoming a concept artist, and they all needed a bit of guidance to achieve their goal. Sadly, there was a lot of confusion about the job, what it entailed, and their expectations of the industry.

I quickly realized that the questions they were asking me were almost exactly the same questions I had been asking MY teachers in college years ago, and no one had any answers then, either. I started jotting down a few notes, and before I knew it, I had pages upon pages of information worth sharing. Someone jokingly said, "You should write a book." I agreed with him—so I did.

Why did you decide to include your student work?

I wanted to go beyond merely explaining the steps necessary to become a concept artist in the video game industry. It is important to put each step into context by framing it with real-world experience through imagery that is relatable at high school and college levels.

As a student, it can be overwhelming to compare your skill level to that of a professional. I personally found myself flustered, thinking: "I'll never be as good as them." By showing my student work and sharing my own experiences, I hope to bridge that gap. I believe that my actual body of student work is a powerful teaching tool

that allows students to see what a professional artist was doing at their age.

Why did you choose to write the book this way?

I wanted to offer a brutally honest look at the job and the industry so students have a realistic understanding of what they were getting themselves into. This is something that I never got. Had I known then what I know now, I may have done things differently. We all have learned things that we wish our teachers had taught us in school ... I am hoping that this book covers those things.

Realizing that students have little time or patience to drudge through long-winded lectures or implement complicated procedures, I wanted the advice and strategies offered in the book to be written concisely for easy reference and review. My hope is that by making it an "easy read," students will actually enjoy it.

Now, onto the "insiders."



Graduate work, age 23

Conversation with artistic director and concept designer

Nicolas “Sparth” Bouvier

Sparth has been an artistic director and concept designer in the gaming industry for almost two decades. Born in France, he studied illustration at Paris's École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (E.N.S.A.D.) and had the privilege to travel extensively at an early age to such places as Singapore, China, and the United States, where he enjoyed observing people and making note of all the tiny details of life that he witnessed. His varied influences are largely responsible for his many creative passions, which range from space and buildings to robotics and beyond.

Professionally, Sparth worked for six years at Darkworks Studio, the Paris-based game studio responsible for *Alone in the Dark 4: The New Nightmare* (2001), before leaving for Montreal in 2003 to join Ubisoft on their ongoing projects, *Prince of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed*. He then left Montreal for Dallas in 2005, where he spent more than three years working for id Software. Finally, in early 2009, he moved to Seattle to work on *Halo* adventures with Microsoft's 343 Industries, where he currently serves as art director of *Halo 5: Guardians*, the next installment in the popular series. Sparth has contributed to the development of several other games since 1997, including *Cold Fear* (2005) and *Rage* (2011), and he has also published more than 80 book covers in France, Canada, and the United States.

Q&A

What made you want to become a concept artist?

Simply put, I have not stopped painting and drawing since I was five years old. I just couldn't have been anything else than an artist. Concept art for the movie and video game industries was still pretty new two decades ago, so I was mostly interested in book illustration at first, orienting my studies toward this specialization. Destiny brought me straight into making images for video games, mostly because this was where the demand was.

What are the biggest misconceptions you think students tend to have about concept art and pursuing it as a career?

First of all, a lot of students become frustrated because of a supposed lack of style in what they do. Style issues come back often. And it's definitely the wrong approach to focus on early on. Style should never be rushed. It naturally comes with hard work, observation, and a profound knowledge of perspective and anatomy. In other words, it's when you stop worrying about acquiring a style that you finally see it appear and grow.

When it comes to the concept art world as a viable industry for starting artists, I believe there are misconceptions about how complex it is to reach the expertise art directors or filmmakers are expecting. Starting artists should be very lucid and conscious of where they stand and



Photo credit: Lorene Bouvier

what they can provide. Unfortunately, some of them often lack the perception and training to successfully evaluate how good their images are. It takes a lot of time! You often need years to develop great eyes.

“Focus on what’s important: foundation skills, composition, color, and the impact of your final images.”

On the positive side, the world of entertainment in games or movies has become so big, it’s easier to find more humble spots to train and get better. The indie game industry can also offer a lot of extremely valuable opportunities.

Was school important to your development as an artist?

I graduated from E.N.S.A.D. in 1998. I finished my last year in 1995, but didn’t pass my final exam until three years later in order to obtain my diploma. I was already working in a video game studio, so having my mind focused on these exams was a challenge for sure!

Despite some frustrating moments during all those years at E.N.S.A.D., mostly due to the fact I wasn’t always satisfied with some teachers’ advice or lessons, I

must admit it helped me forge my art personality. I was, for example, able to have access to digital tools as early as 1993. Painting on a tablet was a bit like jumping into the unknown, everything was so new! Truly, I hated it at first, and it took me years to master it.

Concept art wasn’t even a profession back then, and artists using Photoshop were extremely rare. In short, we did not have a lot of references to rely on. The computers at school as well as the classes were mostly available to learn 3-D tools or graphic design, and the idea of doing full digital paintings of professional quality was something we were not even thinking of. But the whole experience was nonetheless very insightful. I spent years perfecting my skills in perspective and anatomy, which helped me enter into the professional world with confidence.



Sparth's work for *Alone in the Dark 4: The New Nightmare*. © Darkworks Studio and Infogrames, 1999-2001

What was your first job after school?

A friend of my family was a renowned research scientist working for different laboratories. He was in need of images for his conferences and publications, and asked me if I was interested in giving shape to some of his ideas. I, of course, accepted with excitement and I ended up working with him on a lot of illustrations. One of the very first works I did for him representing a human cell ended up on the cover of a scientific magazine in 1990.

Very early on I was using different airbrush tools as well as colored pencils. I would describe my style as illustrative and graphic at the same time. I think I was already quite good at making strong compositions that had a snappy feel at first glance, and I am sure it played a role in my career later on.



Sparth's personal artwork
2003

As an art director, you've been in a hiring position. What is the biggest mistake people make when presenting their portfolios?

I have been in various management positions for more than 15 years, which allowed me to review a lot of different portfolios and artists. I think that the biggest mistake is always a bit the same: Artists often aren't using the best judgement with some of their images. They can include a nice series, followed by a less successful artwork that will diminish the overall impact of their work. Developing a keen eye is the key to making sure that each piece is a valuable addition to a portfolio.

SPARTH

DO...

- **Show some versatility within your portfolio** especially when it comes to subjects and narrative themes, but limit the number of styles. You want to be recognized as different and specific, but not overly versatile stylistically.
- **Become an expert in one specific field.** It is your key to success. Becoming good in all fields is, of course, important, for example, a concept artist should be able to concept environments, characters, and vehicles, put them together in a single piece of art, and all this with his own twist! It's already a challenge, but what is even more important is to become a top-notch expert in at least one of these fields. Why so? In order to become what I would call an "irreplaceable" artist, the "go-to" artist companies will always go back to for more expert requests or tasks.
- **Be talented and diplomatic.** I have always insisted on two key words when it comes to hiring artists: talent and diplomacy. Talent comes as an obvious requirement. Diplomacy can be as important, though, especially when you need to insert yourself into a team and learn to work jointly with other artists and art directors. True, the portfolio is your main tool, but an adaptive personality is also important to your success.

DON'T...

- **Forget what you're most passionate about.** Remember that the best art is always coming out of your own passions. If you are passionate about cars, become a car expert. Do not try to go against your own flow. What you like will probably determine a lot of your career choices.
- **Ever fall into the conventional trends.** See the world with your own eyes, bring references from outside the concept art world! This is where things get rich and original. The "outside-the-box" type of thinking will always be a huge advantage, even more today as the concept art industry has grown exponentially. Keep an open mind, and observe the world with interest.
- **Close the door to learning and perfecting your art education.** Always keep within yourself the will to experiment.
- **Include anatomy sketches in your portfolio.** Leave anatomy sketches and studies outside your presentations. They simply don't belong there.

See Sparth's current work at www.sparth.com.

David Levy

David Levy studied industrial design and architecture at the European Design Institute in Toulon, France, and Maastricht Academy of Fine Arts in Maastricht, Netherlands, respectively, and moved to the United States in 1999 to begin work in the video game industry. He has contributed to many video game platforms and worked on the development of Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *Prince of Persia* (2010).

He continued on to the movie industry in 2008 and has worked as a senior concept artist and art director for such major motion films as *Tron: Legacy* (2010), *The Thing* (2011), *Prometheus* (2012), *Ender's Game* (2013), *Tomorrowland* (2015), and the *Avatar* sequels. David's interests and unique skills in video games, film, and industrial design make him a sought-after expert in his field.



Photo credit: Benny Haddad

Q&A

What made you want to become a concept artist?

It was a succession of decisions that led me to concept art. I began as a kid drawing sailboats nonstop whenever I had the time to do so. By doing plan views and technical drawings, I began to understand forms in three dimensions and it gave me the taste for designing volumes while still being careful about proportions and shapes. At the time, in the '80s, I did not even know what a concept artist was, but I was extremely excited to become a naval architect or windsurf sails designer!

Even though I always felt more or less bored at school, I kept filling sketchbooks and sometimes during lessons, too, which my parents were not too happy about. Thankfully my mother recognized I had a serious interest in design and she began looking around for art schools, which were pretty much nonexistent at the time in southern France. She finally got me to pass a test at one of the few, and once I began, I knew I had found my vocation. I was so happy to find like-minded people who pushed me.

What do you like most about your job?

What I like most about my job is the constant fluctuation of what is needed in order to answer multiple complex problems all at once. You never know what the next day will bring! I think the biggest challenge is to always allow for evolution in your work and keeping it fresh by developing yourself as a person. Sometimes it is difficult to manage both a very busy work life and a good life outside of work as well. I guess it comes with experience and patience.

“Planning your career is as important as having tons of energy to realize it! An artist’s life is more like a marathon than a sprint.”

How has the concept art industry changed over the past decade, and can colleges keep up?

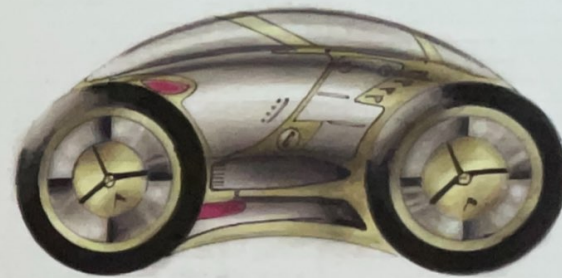
It seems that after the boom of concept art schools we have seen, there will probably be a reduction of them, following a selective process of the best ones staying alive, but who knows? Maybe I am wrong and many new entertainment forms, which we do not know about yet, will be discovered that will create more employment possibilities.

Where did you go to school?

I joined the European Design Institute in Toulon, in southern France, where a great set of teachers allowed me to blossom technically in a great campus atmosphere. The ability to be a student among like-minded people is invaluable, and allowed for friendships that are still lasting today. Also, the fact that I acquired a second diploma in architecture after industrial design was key for me to be hired in the United States.

What were your first jobs as an artist?

I got my first job in the industry as an intern first in a food-processor design office. There I learned a lot thanks to an amazing boss. Then my second job was at a video game company in Paris. I think what interested people in my portfolio was the fact that it was very eclectic in style and mediums. Since I was interested in everything I was automatically a good potential hire at a company where all the projects were very different. For a first job it allowed me to move from project to project.



David

David's work,
age 12



Left and opposite: David's work,
age 17



DO...

- **Always keep an open mind** and keep a hand on society's pulse at all times. Knowing what is new is understanding what preceded it.
- **Look in the past for inspiration** and not only in the present. Humanity was built on people who were able to see history as an example or counter example so we could move forward. Design follows that rule, too. Learn about past artists and projects so you can understand your own future.
- **Be dedicated.** I remember very clearly the first time I understood that the amount of time you invest into a work has a direct effect on the quality of the output. As soon as I realized this, my curiosity was simply unquenchable!
- **Try all mediums.** I had to constantly learn new things and try new techniques as I knew they would help me prepare for my future career. Things such as sculpture, watercolor, and photography were some of them, which allowed my art to develop in directions I had never predicted originally.
- **Find a mentor.** When you are young, you think you know everything. Having a mentor is a great way to keep your feet on the ground.



DON'T...

- **Limit your outlook.** If there is one piece of advice I can give, it is that coming from industrial design allowed me to always potentially find jobs either in the virtual world (like games and movies) or the real world by working for manufacturers, for example, which is always something that will be needed. Concept art can create a great base for many other job possibilities.
- **Expect success to happen overnight.** I think that the biggest misconception that young artists have is that they believe that an artist's career happens overnight. That is far from being the case. Becoming a concept artist takes years of repetitive work sometimes, and also thinking intelligently about your future and what is next.
- **Have a portfolio that is unbalanced.** A common mistake young artists make is creating a portfolio that is too unbalanced in terms of quality. It is always better to show less work and be more selective than showing everything and have a bad apple spoil the rest of the portfolio. The usual advice is to start strong, the middle can be more casual, and end strong. The first and last impressions are always the key ones.

See David's current work at www.vyle-art.com.

Stephan Martiniere



Stephan Martiniere is an acclaimed, multi-award-winning science-fiction and fantasy artist. In the past 30 years he has become known for his talent, versatility, and imagination in every entertainment field, including feature films, animation, video games, and theme parks. He received his education in Paris at the art school L'École supérieure des Arts Appliqués Duperré (ESAA Duperré) and the animation school les Gobelins.

Stephan was the art director for the visually acclaimed id Software's *Rage* (2011) and the visual art director for the Ubisoft and Cyan games *URU: Ages beyond Myst* (2003), *URU: The Path of the Shell* (2004), and *Myst V: End of Ages* (2005) and Midway Games' *Stranglehold* (2007). He later served as creative visual director of the concept department for several other Midway games including *Blacksite: Area 51* (2007), *Blitz: The League* (2008), *NBA Ballers* (2008), and *Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe* (2008).

He has also worked on numerous blockbuster movies over his career, including *Total Recall* (2012), *Tron: Legacy* (2010), *Star Trek* (2009), *Star Wars: Episodes II* (2002) and *III* (2005), *The Astronaut's Wife* (1999), *Titan A.E.* (2000), *The Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), and the upcoming *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).

Q&A

You've worked in the industry for a long time. How did you get your start?

I started in the animation industry in Japan when I was 19, then from there my career took off. I went from animation to theme parks, then film and publishing to eventually the game industry. It has been over 30 years now.

Would you recommend school to aspiring concept artists?

I think it depends on the level of the artist to begin with, but if you start from scratch, I would say getting the basic artistic foundations first—such as perspective, anatomy, color, and light—is a must. After that, choosing a school that specializes in concept is tricky. "Concept" is a broad term and an aspiring artist might want to find out if his or her interests lie more in character, creature design, environment, matte painting, mechanical, or industrial design. Specializing early on could be a big cost savings, and there are schools that do offer these specialties with classes on site.

Some excellent training may also be available with professional teachers through streaming video, and aspiring artists on a budget have the option to learn from DVDs as well. Regardless of the training choice, I would say learn from people who are actively working in the entertainment industry. Check the schools track records, talk to former students who have attended these schools and, when in doubt, I would strongly suggest contacting a professional artist and simply ask for guidance. I always found my peers to be very approachable and the best source for advice.

Did you go to art school?

I did four years of art school in Paris, I learned all the artistic foundations: perspective, anatomy, sculpture, painting, you name it. I was also fortunate to be in a school that offered many classes in various professional fields including advertising, fashion design, architecture,

photography, and many other subjects, even animation and comic book. My two majors were advertising and interior architecture, and my elective was comic book. After that school, I did one year at les Gobelins to focus specifically in animation. I was supposed to do two years, in fact, but after the first year, I got my first gig in Japan to work on *Inspector Gadget*.

“Art directors like myself are looking more and more at the creative level of an artist: the ability to come up with something that’s not been done before—that’s a big challenge.”

What’s the best advice you can offer to people who want work in the industry?

I would say, first, know your industry. Find out what the entertainment industry is all about, what it is to be a concept artist in different fields such as game or film or animation. Imagine yourself 5 and then 10 years down the line as this could clarify your goals and what really interests you. Ask yourself: What game or other companies would you love to work for? Who is working in this field already? Who is my competition out there? This will provide a frame of reference.

Secondly, do the research. Most, if not all, of the necessary info is available on the Internet these days. Attend shows such as Comic-Con, SIGGRAPH, Dragoncon, CTN Expo, or any other similar conventions in the United States or in other countries; these events are all over the world. Make contact with the professional artists you admire and seek their advice.



Stephan's work, age 19

What are some tips you can give to people to make their portfolios stand out?

You should always tailor your portfolio to the clients you are approaching. I suggest students prepare several portfolios if they are approaching different types of clients. Most likely Disney won't be interested in zombies and gore, and Blizzard won't be interested in cute teddy bears. Only include both genre and various styles if you know the client or company you are approaching creates films or games in these styles and genres. Again, it's about knowing your industry and knowing your clients.

The next step is to present your portfolio in a way that will show the art director that you understand the process and what is required of a concept artist. Concept art is a lot about solving problems as well as creating compelling and original ideas. Concept art can be done quickly or be detailed and polished. As an art director I am always looking at both the skill level and the breadth of ideas an artist has.

Is there a magic number for how many images you should have in your portfolio?

No, there is not a magic number, but any good art director out there can pretty much tell how good an artist is by looking at 5 to 10 images. Sometimes even one image is going to tell you what skill level an artist is and how strong and original his ideas are, to even where he comes from and where he learned his trade. In general, I tell artists to put their best work at the beginning and organize by section, for example, environment, creature, vehicle, and so on. What is more important is to put artwork that is relevant and shows an understanding of the process.

Do you have any tips for students on how to get their portfolios seen by the right people?

The challenge is always to get your portfolio seen. It is always more efficient if you can reach the art director directly, but that is not always easy. If you can, e-mail a short, well-written letter of introduction

with a link to your website or blog. People are busy and do forget, so follow up every few weeks or in a month.

Attending conventions and showing your work there can make a big difference as well. I have hired more than one artist through a convention. Always make sure to have a brochure or some sample of your work you can give to an art director.



Stephan's early work for *Ghostbusters* animated series, age 24

DO...

- **Your research.** As they say in real estate, location, location, location. For video games, I would say, research, research, research. The most important thing in order to get a good start is to know your industry.
- **Know your potential clients.** Also know exactly whom you're going after and the people who are doing the hiring. Know the type of games the companies are doing. Learn their particular style, guidelines, and what they expect. Find people who have been there so they could give you feedback. That kind of research was almost impossible 15–20 years ago.
- **Have both a physical and online portfolio.** The more your work can be seen the better. The Internet has become the place of choice and can offer a creative way to introduce you, as well as conventions.
- **Learn other skills.** A concept artist who knows 3-D (modeling, rendering, and animation) would be much more valuable to a production as it is becoming more and more part of the concept pipeline. I would strongly recommend any aspiring artist to learn 3-D tools as much as possible. I found that they not only allow me to visualize space in a very effective and efficient way, but also allow me to explore complex ideas that sometimes are almost impossible to achieve in 2-D.

DON'T...

- **Skip the basics.** There's absolutely no chance of success for any potential concept artist if you don't have your basic artistic foundation. From perspective to anatomy to color and light—these are musts, and the more basic training a student can have before starting to tackle concept art the better.
- **Just follow—strive to reinvent and challenge.** The more games and films that are being produced out there, the harder it is to come up with compelling and original concepts. It becomes super important for an artist to understand and learn what makes a good concept. Never assume you know and create from memory alone, but instead research your subject. Always be curious and keep current with the many other artistic fields such as architecture, fashion, advertising, and industrial design. All these fields cross-pollinate and influence each other. The more a concept artist knows, the better and more relevant he or she will become.
- **Save the best work for last.** Always, show your best work first on your website or portfolio. Some art directors may have only a few minutes to give you, because they may have 10 other portfolios to review. Make it easy for them. Put your strongest work in their face right away so that in a few seconds they know who you are.

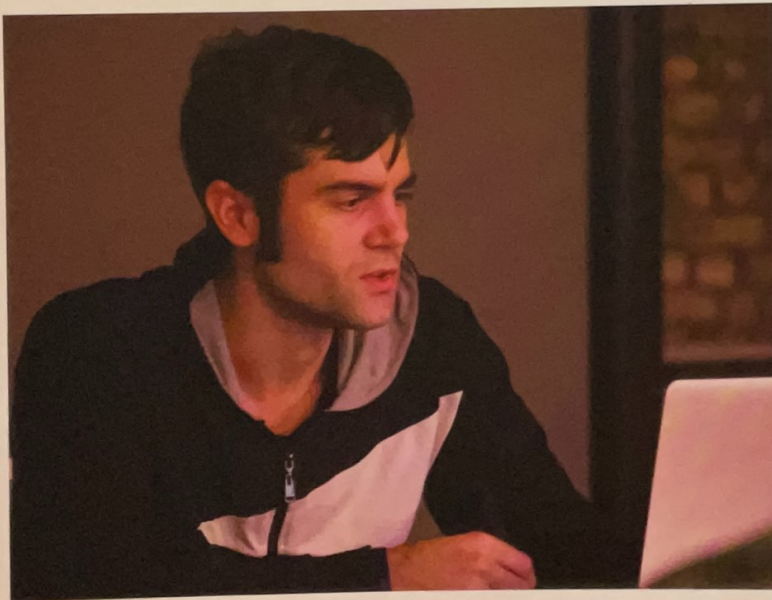
See Stephan's current work at www.martiniere.com.

Conversation with concept designer

Ben Mauro

Ben Mauro is a concept designer working in the entertainment industry who studied industrial design and entertainment design at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. After college he relocated to Wellington, New Zealand, where he worked at Weta Workshop from 2009 to 2013. Over that time, he contributed to a vast array of film, television, and video game projects such as *The Hobbit* trilogy and *Elysium* (2013) among many others.

He is currently working as an independent freelance concept designer, offering his design services to clients around the world, including Boston Dynamics, Treyarch, Sledgehammer Games, MPC, Legendary Pictures, Lucasfilm, Rhythm & Hues Studio, Activision, EuropaCorp, Universal Pictures, Sony Pictures Animation, Insomniac Games, Design Studio Press, and Syfy. Video games he has worked on include *Ratchet and Clank Future: A Crack in Time* (2009), *Resistance 3* (2011), and *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014).



“The most important thing to have are problem-solving skills, being able to come up with original solutions to design problems all day, every day. If you get good at this, you will never be out of work.”

Q&A

What made you want to become a concept designer?

I originally wanted to be a level designer for the gaming industry, hoping to one day work on game franchises like *Halo* or *Unreal Tournament*, which I enjoyed. I really liked the sci-fi architecture and spaces/levels designed in the games and thought that would be a fun and challenging job to do. That led me to a school in Seattle called DigiPen, where I started to study 3-D animation, learning 3ds Max and other more technical programs for modeling and rigging.

After a few years, I had a change of heart after meeting and talking with a lot of the local artists who guided me down the path of becoming a concept designer. I could finish school and get a job that would have most likely amounted to modeling other people's ideas, OR I could go to Art Center to study industrial design and entertainment design to become a qualified concept designer, where I would have a much brighter future and attain a skill set that I could do many things with.

What do you like most about your work?

I really enjoy solving problems, and that is our main job as designers working in this industry. Our clients have a product (game/film/toy) that they need to have visualized and we work back and forth with them to come up with unique original solutions to their design problems. The process is the same, but the outcome is different based

on the clients' needs. It is an endlessly rewarding and challenging experience that never gets old.

How did you get your first job in the industry?

The first big job I remember as I was leaving school was probably with Insomniac Games. I met the lead artist of Insomniac at the time, Darren Quach, at a class at the Concept Design Academy. He asked if I was looking for work over the summer, so it was a pretty easy transition.

What challenges did you experience when you first started working?

The biggest challenge when I was starting out would be having to come up with cool, original, and fresh design solutions all day, every day. At first, this was really challenging to do consistently, but the longer you work and the more design problems you solve the easier this becomes.

It's easy for students to focus on techniques and creating pretty pictures as their top priority. But if all you can do is photobash some robot soldier holding a gun that looks like 1,000 other "photobashed" robot soldiers, and the client needs you to design a new alien life-form that no one has ever seen before, then you are screwed.

Can you share a personal story about a hard lesson that you learned during your career?

When I started to branch out on my own and become independent, I learned a lot of things the hard way in terms of the business side of the industry. I left a job for what I was promised was a higher salary, shared ownership of a new company, profit sharing on my own intellectual properties, and paid living expenses, among other things. But I was lied to about every single point in order to get me to commit to this new job. It was an experience I hope no other artist has to live through.

I now make sure to get everything in writing in a contract and have everything double-checked by a lawyer. If someone is hesitant about putting all their promises into a legal document that you both sign,

then they were very likely going to screw you over and you just saved yourself from a terrible experience.

Do you think it is necessary to attend a concept art-focused college in order to be successful?

Having a portfolio more focused on this industry will help you land a job easier, but I don't think there is any right path. I think getting a foundation in industrial design is essential to being a good concept designer. This will allow you to draw and render forms accurately from imagination, which is at the core of what we do. For me, going to Art Center was very helpful to achieve this goal and the friendships and connections I made were invaluable to get me where I am today, though I have seen self-taught artists go very far as well.



Ben's childhood artwork
age 10

Besides the fundamental art classes, what classes do you think students should take?

I think everyone wanting to get into this industry should get an industrial-design foundation to understand how to draw and render forms from imagination. Outside of technical classes, I would recommend learning as much about the world as possible, take history of industrial design, architecture, car design, nature, biology, typography, graphic design—the more you know about the world the better. Build your visual library one day at a time.

What training did you get outside of school?

I did internships over the summer and took extra classes at Concept Design Academy to supplement what I was learning at school and also to get different perspectives on how to solve problems. I would also read books to fill my head with new ideas and build model kits of cars and other machines to get a better idea of how things are built. I also tried to take life-painting classes to help improve my painting and color understanding.

What exercises do you think can help a young artist hone his/her craft?

After you get a good handle on foundation industrial-design drawing and rendering, then I think the most important thing is to start developing your tastes and range as a designer.

What makes something cool? Elegant? Macho? Fluid? Futuristic? Ancient? What makes some designs timeless 50 years after they were created and others look dated and out of place two or three years later? For me, this meant studying the history of design, doing master copies, anything I could do to develop my understanding of design and understanding of good versus bad design.

How can aspiring artists best help themselves prepare for this field?

I think having a good head on your shoulders and being realistic about the career path and the effort it takes to get there. I think if someone told me how much work I would have to do and how hard it would be for so many years, I probably wouldn't have done it, but in hindsight I am glad I did. I personally don't feel that I was particularly gifted in art or design when I was younger. I got to where I am through hard work, dedication, and sheer willpower—I wasn't going to give up.



Ben's machine designs for Architecture 2 class assignment at Art Center, age 24

DO...

- **Make sure you REALLY love to do this for a living** because it takes everything you have to do the best work in this field, especially when you are starting out. You will have many years of late nights ahead of you. Also remember to be a good person and leave your ego at the door and you should be fine.
- **Take care of yourself!** At the end of the day, it is still a job. Having a life and hobbies outside of art is very healthy and it all feeds back into what we do.
- **Focus on ideas, not style or technique.** The quality of the ideas being presented and the originality of the thinking are things that I think make portfolios stand out. Some portfolios can have a really interesting illustration style, but the ideas being presented are very generic.
- **Triple-check with others about a job, company, or individual before getting involved.** Personally I am a very trusting person and take people's word as their bond, but unfortunately there are some very sleazy people in this world who will use this against you, so be careful out there!

DON'T...

- **Make your designs look like everyone else's.** Be yourself and have a portfolio full of new ideas covering a broad range of ideas and topics showing that you are a versatile designer.
- **Isolate yourself.** You need to have people skills and a large network of friends to survive in the industry outside of just having the technical skills to make art. Being in a classroom environment helps everyone learn how to communicate their ideas to others and build a network of friends and artists who can all help each other out later on down the line.
- **"Grow up."** I think it's important, no matter if you are just starting out or 10-plus years into this job that you find a way to maintain an almost childlike curiosity about the world. Question things, study things, and dream about what could be.
- **Get discouraged.** Personally I think anyone can do this job if you really want it, so don't get discouraged too easily if you think you are too old, too young, or whatever doubt is keeping you from going down this path. If you really love this job, go for it and don't look back.

See Ben's current work at www.artofben.com.

Conversation with director of visual development

Farzad Varahramyan

Farzad Varahramyan is a director of visual development with 20 years experience as a multidisciplinary artist, art director, intellectual-property (IP) visual developer, and team leader in console games, mobile games, film, marketing art, and print art. He studied industrial design at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and industrial design/art history at the University of Alberta in Canada.

Farzad has developed original IPs including *Darkwatch* and the Appy Entertainment portfolio of mobile games, and was fundamental in the visual development of the *Oddworld* series of console and PC games. He also contributed concept art for such films as *Jumanji* (1995), *AVP: Aliens vs. Predator* (2004), and *Race to Witch Mountain* (2009). He attributes his good fortune in games and film design to former teachers, mentors, and his parents. However, the biggest influences in Farzad's life are his wife, Vera, son, Maxwell, and daughter, Isabella.



Photo credit: Emmanuel Valdez

Q&A

What made you want to become a concept artist?

Like a lot of my peers, it was because of watching *Star Wars* in 1977.

How has the concept art industry changed over the past decade?

The main change I've seen in concept art the past 10 years is the very high skill level of artists. Most know how to paint beautifully, but there is also the growing inability to resolve

design issues visually. Most of the new wave of concept artists sketch directly in Photoshop and that's great. Though I personally believe the multiple "undos" in Photoshop have caused some of this inability to think critically. When multiple undos removed the personally experienced "pain" of a wrong choice, the mental paradigm for the designer switched from "I think this is what it needs to be" to "I'll know it when I see it."

The trend I see with art and design colleges is that it's much easier now to technically teach a student to paint beautifully than to actually develop that student's discerning eye as a designer, and to teach them to be problem solvers with good taste. The great design colleges teach the latter at the core of their curriculum.

What are the most common misconceptions you think students have about concept art?

I think these days the students may be under the impression that it's all about the big flashy paintings, probably because that's what they tend to see a lot of online or in art books. So much focus has been put on the big paintings that they do not realize the majority of the job is designing and problem solving. The great paintings that have actual memorable content are usually based on a much deeper design process.

Photoshop and Painter have been great equalizers in helping most artists reach a similar technical level and proficiency when painting or illustrating. However, the real value is in the design content. There are a lot of great painters out there, but fewer great designers.

Are you self-taught or did you go to school to develop your skills?

As a child it seemed I was predisposed to art, so my parents always made sure I had art supplies and, later, art classes to help me grow. After high school I attended the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, where I was first exposed to industrial design, and lots of hand-building of our own designs. In 1992, I then pursued a second

degree at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. I also studied industrial design there because, at the time, there was no "concept art" major anywhere that any of us were aware of.

Both schools required us to build what we designed, which meant through repetition we got experience in what will and won't work and experienced the failure of building something that did not perform its intended function, which was very painful, but a lesson learned. At Art Center, specifically, our amazing instructors were working professionals in the industry, and they taught us how to actually draw, sketch, and design like professionals. Those instructors and their dedication are a big part of what made me who I am today.

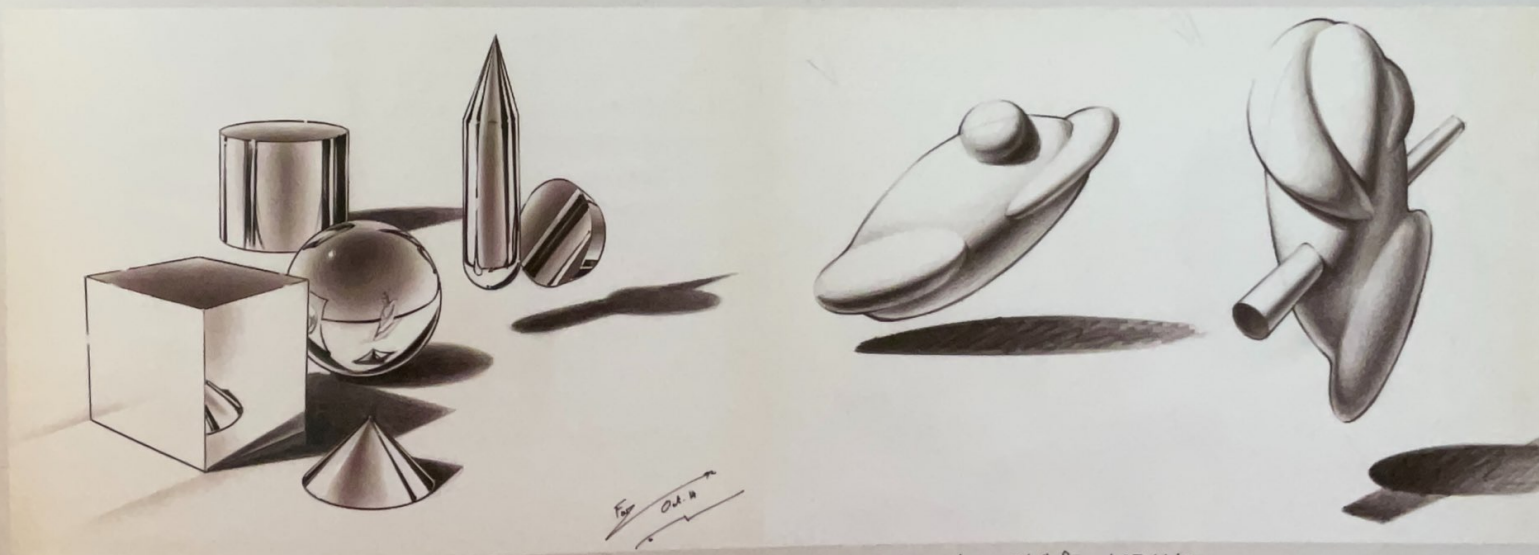
What class helped you more than you thought it would?

It was my least favorite at the time and I can't believe I'm saying this, but if you can, take art history classes. You need to understand whose shoulders you are standing on, and how those shoulders can help you.

How did you remain disciplined and focused in school?

My first patrons were my parents, and they deserve a huge debt of gratitude because they supported and nurtured an artistic son when they could have easily just pushed me into any number of other "safer" career choices. So staying focused in school was very easy: My parents and I were paying a lot of money for my education so failure was not an option at any level, and the competition at school was very high but friendly in most cases.

"Throughout your career—and definitely at the beginning—you have to clearly place yourself outside your comfort zone if you wish to grow and become better."



Farzad's Art Center work, age 24 (left) and 23 (right)

How did you get your first job in the industry?

I was lucky. I was recruited before I even graduated by a former instructor of mine. He gave me a great opportunity and it helped set me on my path to having a very challenging, fun, and fruitful career in video game development. I think the reason he singled me out was that, at the time, I was one of a handful of students who had maneuvered, debated, and convinced my curriculum counselors and instructors in modifying our class assignments in order to have content that was more film and game concept related. Additionally, I was valued not only as a designer, but as a person. This just means my former instructor liked who I was, my conduct, and thought he could work with me for 40, 50, or 60 hours a week.

Can you share a lesson that you learned when you first started out in the industry?

A great lesson I learned as a recent graduate was that at your first job you do not want to be the best designer in the building. What I mean by that is that if you are the best at any job, then your personal growth is entirely based on your own limitations. My first job was a great



one, with great people, but as a concept artist I was alone, and there was no mentor there to push me further than I could push myself.

Within 10 months I noticed my skills stagnating, while some of my peers were clearly surpassing me. Cosmically, at the same time, an opportunity came up for me to work with two masters who went on to mentor me: Steven Olds and Lorne Lanning at Oddworld Inhabitants. Steven taught me how a professional concept artist works and how to solve complex problems with visual solutions, while Lorne showed me how to art direct and how to get the best out of other talented people.

What are your tips for building a strong portfolio to land that first job?

Reviewing portfolios and hiring designers and artists has been a big part of my job over the years. There are a lot of variables, but if we focus on the portfolio only, there are a few things you can do to help:

- *The important thing to remember is your work will tell most of the story, you can't really fake it.* A good art director will know exactly what you will be capable of doing by looking at your work. The other key deciding factor is YOU. Make a great first impression in person and be genuine.
- *Do your research.* Research the company you are applying to, and see if you can custom tailor a submission of your work that shows them you can work in their desired genre and style. Show them the work that would closest fulfill their need.
- *To a lesser extent, also show work that shows range and talent in other dimensions you possess.* This will give you added value if they have multiple games and multiple genres. Game companies vary, and so should your approach to what you show them: do your research.

Farzad's senior project with with Mo Davoudian at Art Center, age 25

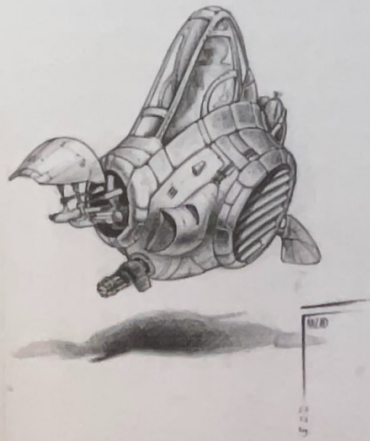
ARZAD

DO...

- **Be a good and decent person.** You should do this anyway because we are all human beings, but you'll be surprised at the short-, medium-, and long-term benefits of being a good, honest, and kind person.
- **Find a mentor** that will take you to the next stage in your development, no matter where you are in your career.
- **Think ahead in your work.** People today are not as good at problem solving or being able to look ahead 10, 20, 30 steps to see possible problems or issues just over the horizon.
- **Listen to your peers.** When I was starting out, in the pre-Internet and YouTube world, the best source of learning outside of school was my own peers. We would meet and exchange experiences, advice, and carefully listen to who just learned something new on the job.
- **Be patient.** Over time you gain something very rare and valuable, and it's earned only over time: Experience.

DON'T...

- **Just study concept art.** Broaden your base of experience and study any number of diverse fields of interest, as well as art and design. That broad or specific base of experience will be what you will be drawing upon as a designer to make your work stand apart from everyone else.
- **Limit your learning to school.** My internships were critical in learning skills that were just not taught in industrial design schools at that time, such as creature design, character sculpting, and bringing story and life to characters.
- **Think you can do this alone.** I don't think any of us go through life and achieve things alone. We must remember to be thankful to those who gave us the tools and opportunities to build this fantastical life as designers and artists. As a professional I am who I am specifically because of my teachers, mentors, and friends in the craft. If I named them all, I'd take up half the book.



Farzad's vehicle design for senior project at Art Center, age 26

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

In this section, I've assembled lists of resources that by no means represent the entire spectrum of those available to you. These are the popular ones that I am aware of that have been recommended to me by my peers, or that I have researched myself.

To view my most current recommendations with clickable links and helpful descriptions, use a smartphone or tablet to open a QR Reader app and scan this QR code, which links to my Recommended Resources webpage.



No smartphone or tablet? No worries. Just visit this URL:

www.elliottlillyart.com/BBWCA_Resources

Schools that specialize in concept art

These brick-and-mortar schools are effective at preparing students and professionals for their careers in the entertainment industry, and the classes are taught by industry professionals in a real studio setting. They may or may not be accredited, but are usually cheaper than four-year schools.

Concept Design Academy
Pasadena, California
www.conceptdesignacad.com

Feng Zhu School of Design
Singapore
www.fzdschool.com

Gnomon: School of Visual Effects
Hollywood, California
www.gnomonschool.com

Red Engine School of Design
Los Angeles, California
www.redenginestudios.com

Online Courses

Online courses can be taken in tandem with your main education. If they are offered by educational institutions, they may count toward your degree; if offered by individual professionals or professional groups, they may not be accredited, but the courses will still be of value if the information taught is relevant. Whichever outlet you choose, make sure that the instructor is a working professional with an art style that you like. You can find suggested courses on my website or peruse these school's offerings.

Computer Graphics Master Academy
www.cgmwonline.com

Gnomon: School of Visual Effects
www.gnomonschool.com/programs/online_training

Schoolism
www.schoolism.com

Other helpful links

Video game industry websites

www.gamasutra.com

www.gamesindustry.biz

www.gamecareerguide.com

www.kotaku.com

Concept art galleries

www.creativeuncut.com

www.primeportal.net

Stock photography

www.gettyimages.com

www.corbisimages.com

www.shutterstock.com

www.istockphoto.com

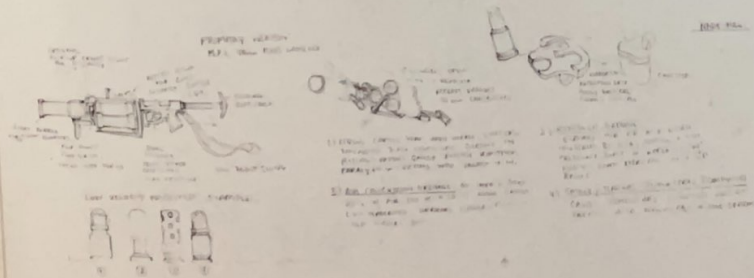
Texture websites

www.cgtextures.com

www.lostandtaken.com

www.texturewarehouse.com

www.freestocktextures.com



Retail DVDs

The Gnomon Workshop

www.thegnomonworkshop.com

From their collection, I highly recommend:

The Techniques of Dylan Cole, Volumes 1-3 (2005)

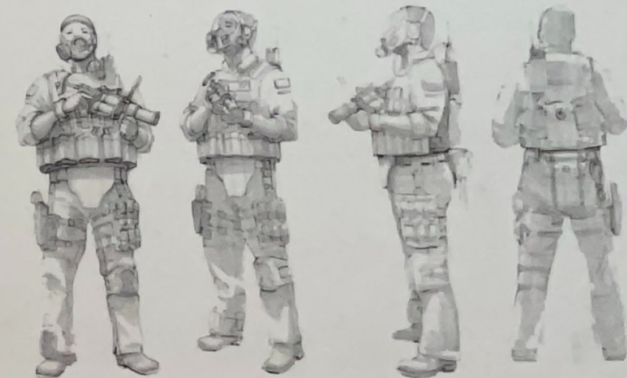
The Techniques of Scott Robertson: Creating Unique Environments (2005)

The Techniques of Ryan Church, Volume 5: Rendering Architectural Interiors (2004)

The Techniques of Dusso, Volume 2: Digital Matte Painting Fundamentals (2004)

From Speed Painting to Concept Art: Adobe Photoshop Custom Brush Technique with David Levy (2006)

See interview with David Levy on page 120!



Books

On anatomy and life drawing

Dynamic Anatomy (1996)
by Burne Hogarth

Bridgeman's Complete Guide to Drawing from Life (2009)
by George Bridgeman

An Atlas of Anatomy for Artists (1957)
by Fritz Schider

Henry Yan's Figure Drawing (Techniques and Tips) (2006)
by Henry Yan

Perspective Drawing (1990)
by Kenneth W. Auvil

Dynamic Wrinkles and Drapery: Solutions for Drawing the Clothed Figure (1995)
by Burne Hogarth

Animals Real and Imagined (2010)
by Terryl Whitlatch

On design, form, and function

How to Render (2014) and *How to Draw* (2013)
by Scott Robertson and Thomas Bertling

How to Draw Cars the Hot Wheels Way (2004)
by Scott Robertson with the Hot Wheels Designers

Mechanika: Creating the Art of Science Fiction with Doug Chiang (2008)
by Doug Chiang

Sketching: Drawing Techniques for Product Designers (2009)
by Koos Eissen and Roselien Steur

On concept art

The Art of Star Wars, Episode I - The Phantom Menace (1999)
by Jonathan Bresman

The Art of Star Wars, Episode II - Attack of the Clones (2002)
by Mark Vaz

The Art of Star Wars, Episode III - Revenge of the Sith (2005)
by J.W. Rinzler

The Skillful Huntsman: Visual Development of a Grimm Tale at Art Center College of Design (2005)
by Khang Le, Mike Yamada, Felix Yoon, and Scott Robertson

On artistic growth

The Visual Story: Creating the Visual Structure of Film, TV, and Digital Media (2009)
by Bruce Block

Vertex (2009) e-book
by Ryan Hawkins

The Perfect Bait (2010)
by Bobby Chiu (Also an iPhone app)

How Successful Artists Study: Effective Learning Ideas and Knowledge for Artists (2011)
by Samuel Adoquei

My personal favorites

Icon: A Retrospective by the Grand Master of Fantastic Art (2003)
by Frank Frazetta and edited by Arnie Fenner and Cathy Fenner

Mucha: The Triumph of Art Nouveau (2009)
by Aurthur Ellridge

Overload: The Art of Juan Gimenez (2000)
by Juan Gimenez

Intron Depot, Volumes 1-4
by Masamune Shirow

Where to buy:

For most books, I visit Amazon (www.amazon.com) first because they tend to have the cheapest prices and shipping. If it's obscure, I may have to dig a little deeper. Bud's Art Books (www.budsartbooks.com) or Stuart Ng Books (www.stuartngbooks.com) tends to carry a few of the more obscure titles. If I'm looking for anime mech or manga inspiration, I turn to AnimeBooks.com (www.animebooks.com). I've also found a great blog that contains hundreds of comprehensive book reviews both upcoming and currently on the market: Parka Blogs (www.parkablogs.com).

The following books are in Japanese, but the pictures say it all.

Master Art Work of Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of The Patriots (2009)
by Softbank Creative

Armored Core: A New Order of "Next" (2011)
by Famitsu

Industrial Divinities (2006)
by Junji Okubo



Personal work, age 31

For a more in-depth look at pursuing a career as a concept artist, look out for my next book:

The Big Bad World of Concept Art for Video Games: How to Start Your Career As a Concept Artist

Here are some featured topics:

GETTING STARTED

- The difference between a job and a career
- Setting long-term goals
- How to develop your artistic identity and find your voice

DEFINING YOURSELF AS AN ARTIST

- How to build your professional portfolio
- Marketing and self-promotional dos and don'ts
- The importance of networking

STARTING THE JOB HUNT

- Where to look for jobs
- Picking the right job for your career
- The importance of working for like-minded studios

UNDERSTANDING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

- What to expect during different types of interviews
- Interview dos and don'ts
- Advice on mastering art tests

PRICING YOUR TALENTS

- Knowing your worth
- Understanding salary negotiations and contracts
- How to negotiate and make counter offers

STAYING ON TRACK

- How to align each job into a successful career
- Asserting yourself
- Maintaining a critical eye

And much, much more ...



Acknowledgements

Thanks to those who have helped me gather, organize, and arrange my thoughts in this book and took the time to offer honest feedback. You guys rock.

Thanks to:

Tim Coman (my first AD/best AD), Alex Bostic, Phu Giang, Brian Hsia, Tony Hyunh, Jéhan Whittaker

My mom, Edna Johnson, for all of her support over the years and for encouraging me to follow my dreams.

My dad, Charles Lilly, who constantly pushed me to be the best. I didn't understand it then, but I understand it now.

Special thanks to:

Kimberley Deng, who did an awesome job designing this book.

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NOTE:

If you have a question about a topic that I have not covered thus far, please send it my way via e-mail at me@eliottlillyart.com. If I have the time, I will do my best to answer it!



Graduate work, age 23

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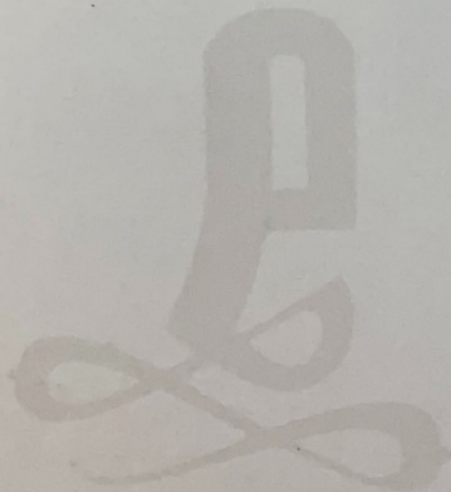
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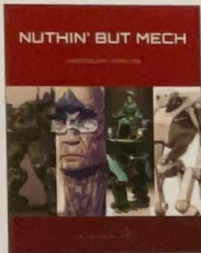
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



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Elliott Lilly is a highly sought after concept artist with nearly a decade of experience in the video game industry. He has worked for such prominent game companies as id Software, Treyarch, and Activision, and he has contributed to several popular franchises including *Rage*, *Doom*, and *Call of Duty*. Also an educator, Elliott teaches introductory concept art classes to college students.

With his firsthand knowledge about the ins and outs of the video game industry, Elliott Lilly is an exceptional guide who can help prepare you for the long journey toward realizing your ambitions.



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