

# Workshops



## Photoshop

# VIDEO GAME CONCEPT ART

Black & White 2 Art Director **Christian Bravery** reveals his image creation secrets...

### Artist PROFILE

**Christian Bravery**

COUNTRY: UK

**CLIENTS:**

EA Canada, EA Criterion, SCEA, SCEE, Kuju Entertainment, Microsoft, Stormfront, Lionhead Studios



Christian worked for several years at Lionhead Studios,

being involved with titles including Black & White 2. Since leaving Lionhead, he has set up Leading Light Conceptual Design and created concept art and design solutions for several companies.

**URL:** [www.leadinglightdesign.com](http://www.leadinglightdesign.com)

### DVD Assets

The files you need are on the DVD.

**FOLDERS:** Screenshots

**SOFTWARE:** Photoshop CS2 (demo)

**L**et me tell you about the thought processes that went into creating this piece of concept art. Much of what we'll discuss is applicable to any example of conceptual art, while some of it will be specific to this design. Taken as a whole it'll offer insight into how the process might be approached.

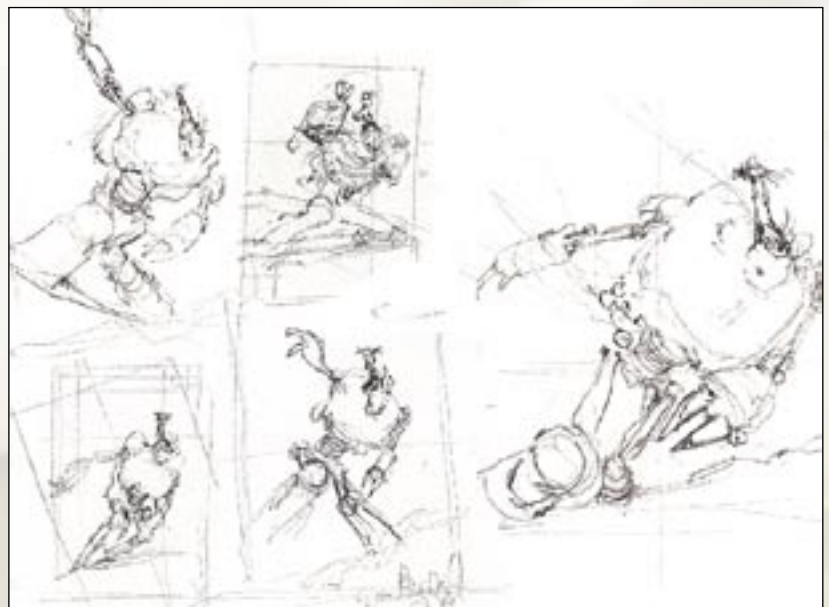
So let's set aside the image at hand here for a brief moment, and talk about what happens before we fire up Photoshop and grab the Wacom pen.

A concept artist will usually receive a brief specific to the job at hand. The accuracy of this can vary widely but it's really up to you to try to get the most out of whoever is directing you. If the brief is detailed, fabulous – you can launch into it with gusto. But if it's vague then it's down to you to at least try to clarify it with the art director.

The only brief here was to create a workshop piece, so I could do pretty much whatever I pleased. I wanted to produce something that would encompass character and environment visualisation, coupled with elements of action and narrative.

I chose some mainstream sci-fi subject matter: a giant robot in a ruined cityscape with our hero winning through against terrible odds. Archetypal stuff, but fun to paint and the kind of action shot that publishers always love.

I always start with a pencil sketch. There's no substitute for good old pencil and paper for quickly realising ideas and getting things going.



### 1 Quick sketches

In the shot I have in mind, our hero will have defeated his enormous adversary; I want him tearing the electronic brains from a gargantuan robot. The important thing at this early stage is to convey this moment and some of the story behind it through a series of sketches. The robot monster has been terminated by our hero, so its pose is limp, he's off balance and is in the process of falling to the ground in defeat. Our hero, on the other hand, is alive with tension, heaving the robot's brain aloft in a triumphant victory pose that clearly completes this simple narrative.

### 2 Evolution

After working through some quick drawings, I eventually settle on the one that's closest to my vision, and the brief of course. Some people like to refine the drawing before they start painting, but I'd rather refine as I go. I like the creative process to be an ongoing evolution, rather than a step-by-step process. I learn more about the image as it progresses, and it tells me what it needs as I go. Speed is also an important factor, and as this is a painting – in which pretty much all the drawing will eventually be hidden – I won't waste time working on something that will never be seen. ➔

## 3 Perspective broken

I'm breaking all sorts of perspective rules here: I want to have the looming robot and our hero in shot and easy to make out, so correct perspective has to take a back seat for the time being. If this shot was an environment concept, proper perspective would be top of the list, but in this case it's less crucial.

## 4 Underpainting

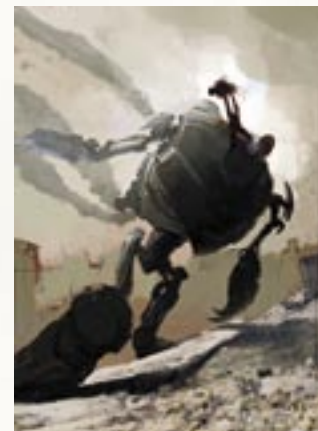
I scan the sketch and open it in Photoshop. The next step is the underpainting, for which I've chosen a bright, rusty orange. As I develop the image further I let some of the orange colour bleed through in the borders between painted elements. This gives a certain 'pop' appearance to the overall shot. Over the orange ground I add noise with some scattered FX brushes to break up the flat area and add interest and some colour multiplicity.



## 5 Begin blocking

Next, using a Hard Round brush with pressure-sensitive opacity (tick Other Effects in the Brushes window), I block out the image. Here I'm thinking chiefly about the value composition – the juxtaposition of light, dark and mid-tone areas. The aim here is to present the image as clearly as possible, defining the elements and their relationships within the overall design.

Naturally, I create the most contrast around the victorious figure of the hero standing on the robot's head, which will help to draw the viewer's eye towards the centrepiece of the image. I've opted for a pretty basic red/green complementary palette: warm, lit areas being predominantly red; cool, shaded areas being mostly green. Think of this as a rule of thumb, rather than the law. Equally, you can have warm greens and cool reds if the situation requires it.



## 6 Let there be light

I want the main light source positioned to the left of the group, out of shot. I'm starting to think it's going to be a near-sunset shot, like a low winter sun that strikes the left-facing surfaces with direct light. That's where I'm going to put my brightest highlights, but not just yet. First I'm going to start modelling some of the shapes in the lit area of the robot, his right shoulder and arm, adding some detail here and there but not getting carried away. It's important to always work on the image as a whole, not concentrating on any specific area, gradually bringing the whole image into focus.

## 7 Brightening up

At this point I decide the image is looking too drab, I want more saturated colour. So using Curves I tweak the RGB values separately, increasing the dominance of the green and to a lesser extent the red channels until I'm satisfied with the result. The image is now predominantly green, and the orange underpainting is popping through the edges and adding depth to the colour range. We'll work to enhance this further as we go.



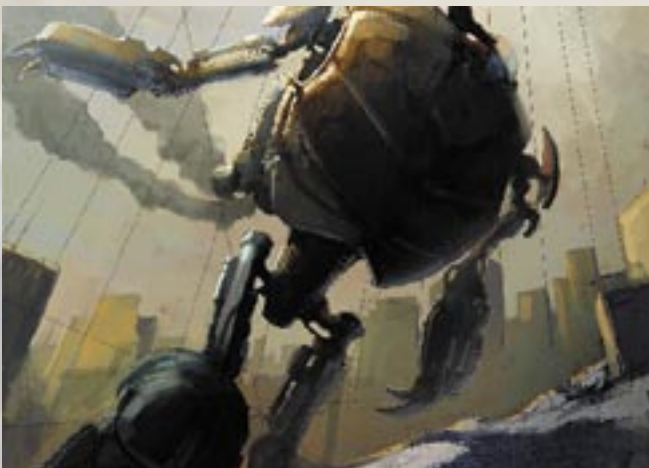
## 8 Background

It's time to pay some attention to the background elements. I use Quick Mask to protect the work that's been done on the robot. This way I can continue to use loose strokes to block out the background cityscape without needing to be too careful. Generally, I don't use masks very often; I like colour and tone to bleed from one element to another, avoiding crude divisions except where a hard divide supports the vision.



## 9 City building

I quickly add a series of vanishing lines on a separate layer to block out the cityscape in the background. Sticking in general to the red/green palette, I paint in the buildings – again keeping it loose – using low chroma green for the shadows and warm orange for the lit faces. I've also added noise and colour multiplicity to the sky using some scattered FX brushes that give a stippled effect.



## 10 Adding texture

We're going to use a bit of photo manipulation to add texture to the buildings. Using some images of buildings I found online, I take them into Photoshop and paste them into the image, setting the layer to Soft Light or Overlay (try them both, see which one suits the situation). I then position them over the buildings. Using Free Transform I resize, distort, rotate and flip them and finally erase the unwanted parts till they fit, working through each building or group in turn, painting here and there on a new layer to get them to sit comfortably in the image. Remember you want your most important area, the star of the image, to have the highest value and chroma contrast. So make sure your background elements don't start to take control and keep them as subtle as you can.



## 11 Composition correction

Taking a step back and flipping the image (always a useful thing to do), I notice that the composition is awry. It's too bottom-heavy and it feels like it's slanting to the right – it just generally seems a bit awkward. The solution is to add the huge, smoking guns, which instantly help to add dark weight to the upper portion and give contrasting diagonals that help balance the feel of the shot. Not only that, but big guns are pretty damn cool. I've been careful to leave them as loose as I can, as I absolutely don't want them to draw the eye away from our hero.

I've also gone in at this point and painted the head of the robot. You'll notice that the bright lit areas are balanced now by a cool blue/green bounce light on the lower right side of the forms. This enables me to model the forms in shadow and helps make everything feel much more solid. ➔



## 12 Sharpening up

Next I add some foreground detail, using a combination of the techniques already outlined: loose blocking-out of forms and laying in the areas of light and shadow, adding some photo texture on Overlay and repainting additional detail over that, before finishing with a dusting of scattered rich colours to soften and connect it all. At this point I like to sharpen the image using Filter>Sharpen>Unsharp Mask. To do this I make a copy of the complete image then paste it back into my file. Now I sharpen the new copy layer, playing with the settings to see what works. Personally I like a very sharp image, unless there's a lot of fast movement in the shot where some blurring might take preference.

## 13 Electric shock

We're getting close now! Next up I add the FX that forms the centrepiece to the shot, the electrical charge as the computer brain is ripped from the robot's head. I set a new layer to Colour Dodge and paint in the blue/green charge using bright yellow – this will make sense when you try it. I also detail the figure of the hero very simply, just adding light to create the form: orange from the main light source on the left side and blue from the electricity at his feet.

## 14 Implied brain detail

Again, I add a few extra bits of photo texture here and there. This one is from some holiday snaps of Cape Kennedy – it's part of a rocket and bits of it will be great for adding some implied detail to the robot's brain and shoulder. Paste the photo into a new layer, set it to Soft Light and play with Free Transform, erasing what's not needed.

## PRO SECRETS

### Material world

I think the important thing to remember is that experimentation is a vital part of the creative process. To keep fresh and to avoid turning yourself into a production line, it's always good to be open to trying something new. The beauty of working digitally is that you can be reckless in your experimentation safe in the knowledge that if it doesn't work, there's always the undo key.



## 15 Finishing tweaks

I collapse the image and make a copy of the layer, set the top one to Screen at 15-20 per cent opacity, then give it some motion blur angled from top left to bottom right. This subtly implies movement and also helps to soften the image. I erase this layer here and there – in the foreground and also parts of the sky where the softening effect is removing detail.

Finally, I merge the screen layer down, then using the Polygonal Lasso tool I select an area around the hero and the head of the robot, not getting too close to either. Now I feather it (Select>Feather) setting the range to 200 pixels. I go to Curves and ramp the contrast up judiciously, creating an 'S' curve by dragging the light section of the line up and the dark section down, making sure to be subtle. What I'm looking for is more contrast in this area without being too obvious about it. Lastly, still in Curves, I go to the red channel and ramp that up a tad. I merge that all down and we're done. ●