

Workshops

“A concept design job in games means being able to communicate ideas clearly and effectively”



↑ BOTTOM-LIGHTING

Artist insight THE 20 RULES OF GAME CONCEPT ART

The games industry's concept designers come from many different professional and educational backgrounds, but certain required traits and skills are universal, says **Francis Tsai**

A question I often hear from people who are not in games or art-orientated industries is: "You get paid to play games all day?"

Obviously the answer is "no", but it is possible to be paid to design and draw all day, which is just as good, if not better. "How do I become a

concept designer for the games industry?" is another question I'm often asked. There are many different paths you can take to achieve this goal, but they all involve certain common elements. I'll talk about some of those, but probably the main thing to remember is that the job is principally about *design* -

yes, illustration and rendering skills are very important, but they make up only half the equation. Getting a concept design job in the games industry means being able to define and solve problems given varying amounts of information, and being able to communicate ideas clearly and effectively.

1 EDUCATION

Concept designers come from many different educational backgrounds - fine art, illustration, industrial or product design, architecture or some other profession altogether. There's going to be some imbalance or deficiency that you'll have to make up for on your own. You have to be a skilled generalist, well versed in many different areas of history, science, art, sociology and psychology - the more the better.

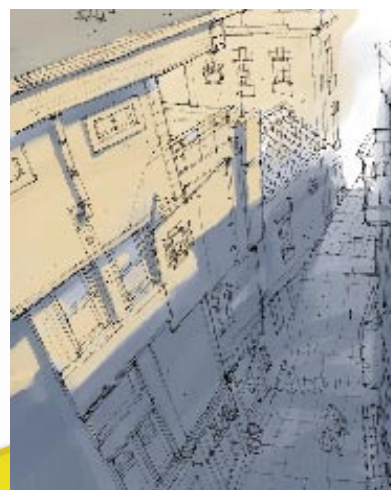
2 DEFINITIONS

Above and beyond rendering skills, concept design is about defining a problem, formulating an interesting and elegant solution, and graphically delineating that design solution as clearly as possible. Rendering skills are the tools that enable a concept designer to do his or her job. I read

somewhere once something to the effect of "concept design is a subset of illustration." It would be more accurate to say that illustration and concept design overlap.

3 THE ROLE OF THE CONCEPT ARTIST

Steven Olds, a talented artist and art director who taught me a lot of what I know, told me once that a good concept designer is also by definition a good role player - he or she should be able to hide their own artistic idiosyncrasies in order to best serve the project, similar to the way a good actor can portray any type of character.



4 VISUAL VOCABULARY

Travel, experience life, see different environments, pay attention to the different ways people build things, put stuff together, eat, gather and relax. As artists, we tend to draw what we know - expanding that database of "what we know" makes us more versatile, giving us a broader range of stuff to draw from (pun intended).

Artist
PROFILE

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COUNTRY: US
CLIENTS: Playboy, Rock Star San Diego, Eidos Interactive

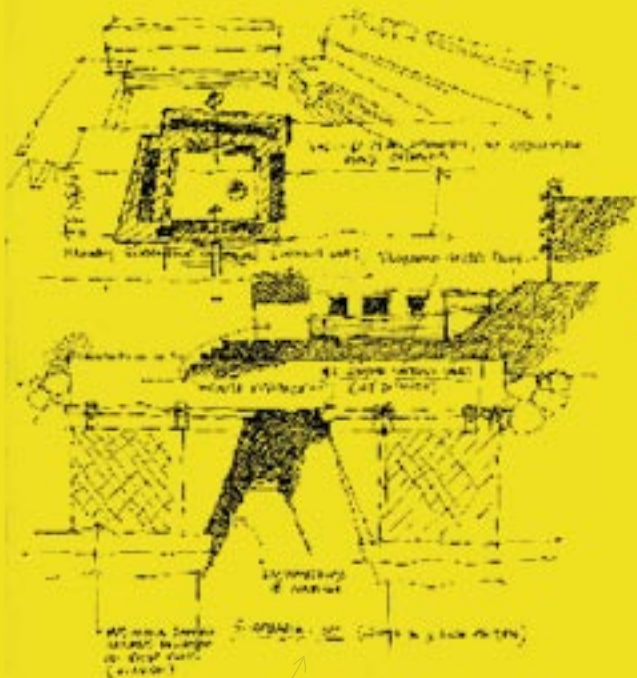


Francis works as a conceptual designer and illustrator in the entertainment industry. He has a lot of games experience, working on titles including Star Trek Online, Darkwatch, SpyHunter 2 and Tomb Raider: Anniversary.
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Build up an extensive mental databank of reference material - architecture is a good start point.

5 REFERENCE

Accurate photo reference is essential. For real-world material in particular, if you just rely on your memory the best you can realistically hope for is to get it close; it's guaranteed that somebody somewhere will know more about that thing you're drawing than you do, and will know you haven't done your homework. Short of going somewhere to see something first hand, finding and using photo reference is vitally important.



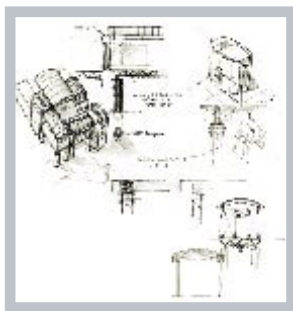
Don't just look at people, objects and environments, analyse them.

6 ACTIVE OBSERVATION

Studying and sketching your surroundings (people as well as objects) trains your observational skills. This helps to build up your mental visual vocabulary, as well as something I call "active observation skills", which means *analysing* what you see. For instance, rather than simply noticing that a column has some bolts, study the structure to understand *why* the bolts are there.

7 FORM AND FUNCTION

In the real world, function is a prime component of design - you've all heard the term "form follows function." Personally I'm a fan of that, especially as it pertains to architecture. I love buildings that express their structure and utilities. In entertainment design, the main issue is "does it look cool (and solve the design problem)?" You're not restricted by real-world physics constraints; of course, designs are more convincing if there is some nod to real life.



In games artwork, form isn't so strictly bound by function as in other disciplines.



8 NO ANIME, PLEASE

Just my opinion, but avoid putting anime in your portfolio. If you *must*, make sure what you do is so good it can cure cancer. Unless you're adding some interesting new spin, it has the effect of giving your work an 'amateur artist' stigma.

9 BIG PICTURE

As you begin a project one of the first things to establish is the 'big picture'. Your client may have some ideas about mood, or a certain character. As the concept designer you have to be able to take a step back and perceive the project as a whole, so you know what parts are truly important, and what obscures the big picture.

10 BREAK THINGS INTO CHUNKS

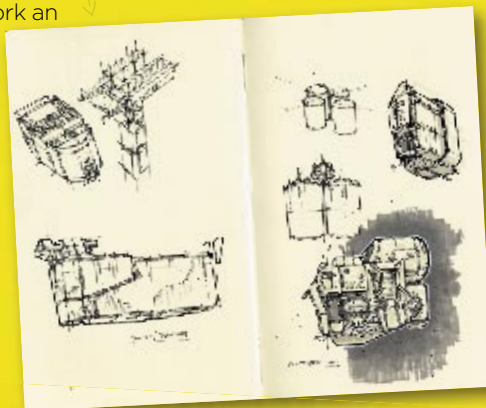
One approach to design that I have had some success with is to break down the design task into manageable chunks - separate silhouette studies from pose studies from texture and material studies. The odds are against you hitting a home run on all those different aspects with one single drawing.

11 SYNTHESISING VS ORIGINATING

Consider the balance between synthesising and originating. By originating I mean coming up with something unique. It's almost impossible to pull off, and you run the risk of alienating your audience. Synthesising means combining different familiar elements that are rarely used together, providing a familiar link for your audience.

12 LINE QUALITY

The primary purpose of your drawings is to communicate an idea, so be clear and concise. Eliminate unnecessary noise and clutter, use heavy lines sparingly to indicate important outlines and lighter lines to indicate details and textures.



13 PERSPECTIVE

In ImagineFX issue 16, I wrote an article on the convenience of using 3D as a concept design tool, but it's still important to have a grasp of perspective to be able to sketch environments convincingly and



quickly. Again, it's a matter of keeping the big picture in mind - with 3D it's too easy to get bogged down in small details that don't serve the big picture.

14 DESIGN DRAWING

Design Drawing is a term that refers to the process of hammering out and refining a design on paper. This process might involve drawing different views, 'x-ray vision'

shots and handwritten notes. Typically this isn't something you show your client, and it will often end up looking messy and almost incomprehensible. The goal with this type of drawing is to explore different options and then work up and refine that initial design idea.

15 HIERARCHY

Certain drawing conventions help achieve successful visual communication. Line weight hierarchy was discussed earlier; the idea of hierarchy can also be extended to value, concentration of detail, and texture. Using all of these ideas in conjunction, and eliminating extraneous noise and clutter from your sketches can result in a simple, clear sketch that conveys your design ideas.

16 SILHOUETTE

For games, character design depends heavily on silhouette, which is also sometimes referred to as the 'initial read' of a character. I've emphasised the importance of silhouette in character design before, but it's important enough in the context of the concept design profession to bear repeating.



Where to add detail? That is the question. Well, it's one of the questions you should ask yourself.

17 INDICATION VS DETAILING

There's another balance to be struck in terms of when and where to put detail. As mentioned before, creating focus is a game involving colour, lighting and detail. Implying detail often does the job as well as carefully rendering every bit of it. In some cases, it's actually preferable, so that you don't focus undue attention on places you'd rather not.

18 LIGHTING AND MATERIALS

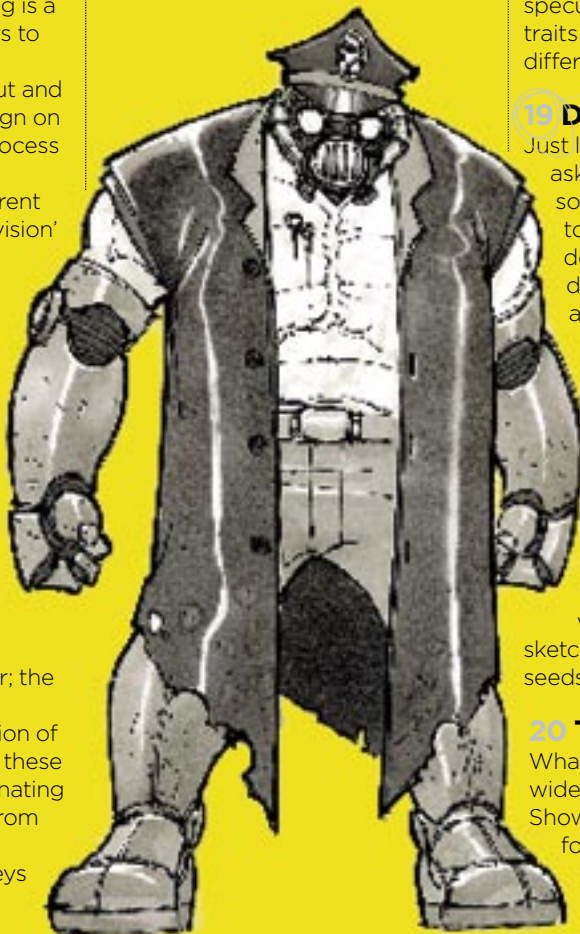
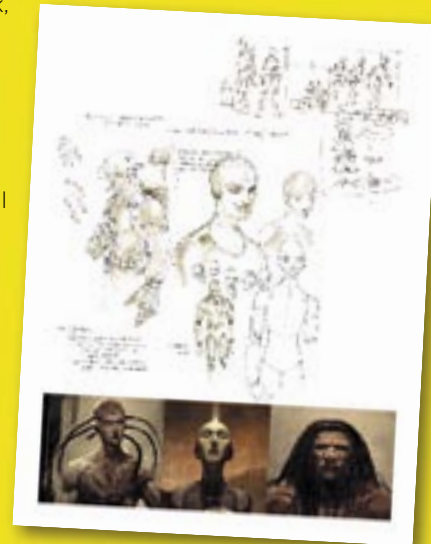
One of the basic visual communication skills is the ability to render different lighting conditions and different materials. The key to indicating materials lies in how different ones react to different lighting conditions - reflectivity, specularity, grain, texture are all traits that can be affected in different ways by lighting.



The key to differentiating materials in your concept lies in how they react to lighting.

19 DESIGN PROCESS

Just like in school, when you were asked to show your work, sometimes it's helpful to provide some documentation of your design process. Notes and sketches like this can form a valuable part of your personal library - ideas can be reconfigured and reused in other situations as the need arises. I wouldn't recommend using finished designs this way, but preliminary sketches can provide seeds for new ideas.



20 THE PORTFOLIO

What should go in your book? Show that you can handle a wide range of subjects, time periods, styles and moods. Show some of the process stuff discussed above, so we can follow your thought process. Show pride in your work by packaging it in a professional manner. Make sure your stuff is badass. Simple, isn't it? ●

