

## Photoshop

# COLOUR COMPOSITION

Michael Dashow shows how layer organisation can give a wide variety of options in defining a palette

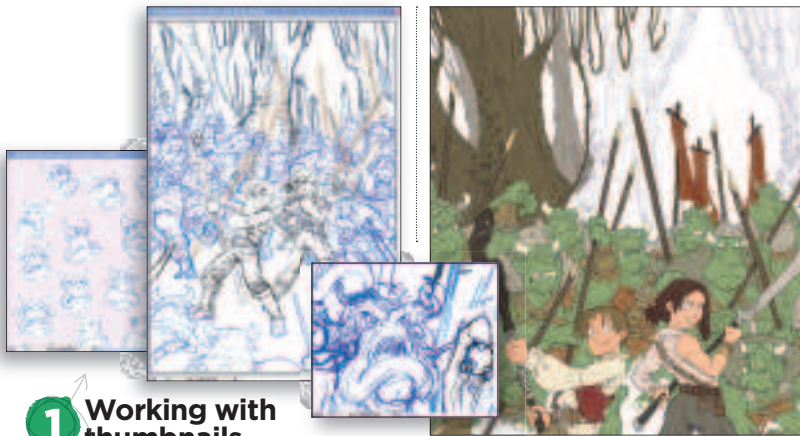
**C**olour is one of the most essential tools an artist has for setting mood and conveying emotion. Every colour choice you make affects how a viewer interprets your work. In fact, you could render the same illustration with a new palette and get a painting that feels utterly different. I often take this approach when I'm testing out colour schemes and it's what I'm going to demonstrate in this workshop.

Rather than diving into one colour scheme, I enjoy experimenting with

several options first. I spend a lot of prep time setting up Photoshop's layers to give me the maximum possible versatility in adjusting colours. The reward for this mode of working is that it offers enormous latitude in determining the piece's final palette.

Here, I'll share my workflow with you, paying the most attention to how I use layers to compile my palettes. Along the way, I'll discuss colour in general and take a look at the different ways that various hues can be used to help set a mood in a painting. So let's get started...





## 1 Working with thumbnails

I begin with a pile of thumbnail sketches and rough concepts. I cut and paste the sketch fragments together in Photoshop, making liberal use of the Free Transform tool (Ctrl/Cmd+T) to rotate and adjust pieces until they fit. From there I draw over them, refining everything until I have a final composition.



## 2 Final line art

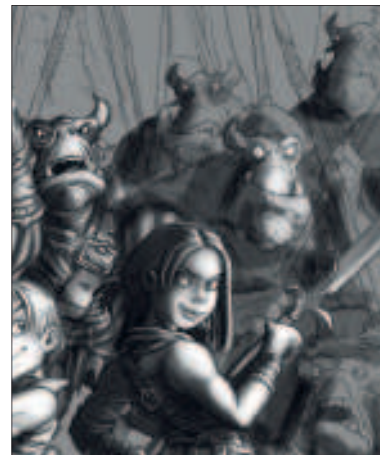
I print the image out and trace it on to 55lb vellum. Scanning the illustration into Photoshop, I clean up the levels. I set this layer to Multiply, so that any layers underneath it will show through the white areas.

## 3 Blocking in the colour

Using a round, hard-edged brush, I fill in the entire painting with solid colours. I create one new layer for every single item or colour that I use – there's one layer for the Trolls' skin, one for their fur, another for their cloth, and so on. The separate layers will make it easy to change those colours later on. I can isolate a



single layer and adjust the colour in it without affecting anything else. I use many layers, so it's essential to organise them efficiently with layer names, colours and groups.



## 4 The lighting pass

I work on my values in a separate file – it's like rendering a lighting pass on a 3D model without viewing any of the materials. This lighting will be layered on top of the previous colour pass. Using the same line art, I create a new file. Underneath the Line Art layer, I fill a layer with 50 per cent grey. In greyscale only, I roughly draw in all of the shadows and highlights using a Round brush with 50-65 per cent Hardness. This isn't a value study – I don't paint elements such as the ground or the leather belts darker because their darker values will come from the colour file. With smaller brushes, I refine the lighting and I use custom brushes of scattered dots for the fur and the kids' hair. As I paint, if I need to focus on any particular area, I can load its selection from the colour file that I created earlier.

## Artist PROFILE

**Michael Dashow**  
COUNTRY: US



A 17-year game industry vet, Mike is now the art director at

Meez.com. He spends his spare time creating light-hearted and humorous fantasy and science fiction illustrations both digitally and in good old-fashioned watercolours.  
[www.michaeldashow.com](http://www.michaeldashow.com)

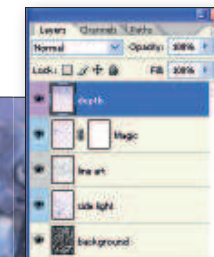
## DVD Assets

The files you need are in the Michael Dashow folder in the Workshops section.  
**SOFTWARE:** Photoshop CS3, Painter X (demos)



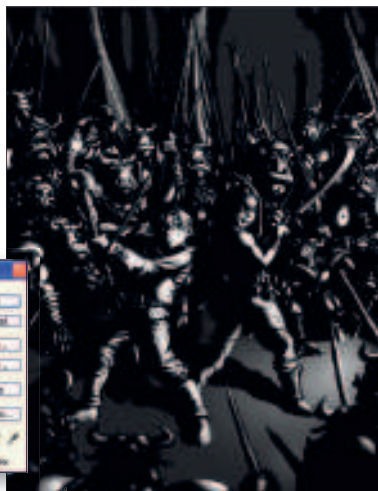
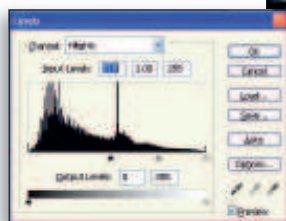
## 5 Adding a second light

I want two light sources for this image: a main light source coming from the right balanced by a magical light coming from the boy's staff on the left. Two light sources round out the shapes well and add more visual interest to a piece. I create a new layer called Side Light. With a single shade of blue, I paint the light that the staff casts on the scene. Because it's on a separate layer, I can modify its colour later on. The magic effect itself goes on another layer above the Line Art layer.



## 6 Adding the depth colour

The last colour affecting the scene is the depth perspective. This effect should match the colour of the sky... but that's still up in the air, so to speak. I create a new layer named Depth. I choose a blue and add large, flat, low-opacity areas of colour. The foreground characters are completely left alone. As other characters and objects get closer to the horizon, they are covered with more of this depth colour. ➔



## PRO SECRETS

### Adding detail

It's essential not to get so bogged down in details that you can't see how your paint strokes affect the image as a whole. Whenever I'm working on painting details, I open a second window of my image using Window>Arrange>New Window for File. I keep this window zoomed out so that I can simultaneously see the close-up area and the entire painting.

## 7 Separating light from shadows

Now I want to separate the shadows and highlights into their own separate layers, so that I can change their hues independently. With just the lighting layer visible, I duplicate the Red channel twice to make two new selection channels, one for highlights and the other for shadows. I adjust the levels on one so that just the highlights are white (selected) while the rest of the image is black (unselected). I do the opposite with the other channel, inverting it so that only the shadows will be selected.



*Shortcuts*  
Merge visible layers into a new layer  
**Ctrl/Cmd+Alt+Shift+E**  
Handy for quick captures of a colour test.

## 8 Creating the coloured lighting

I create two new layers: Highlights and Shadows. For the Highlights, I load the highlight selection and fill it with a pale yellow. I set this layer to Overlay mode. In the Shadows layer, I fill the shadow selection with a desaturated purple and set this layer to Multiply. Cool shadows and warm light convey outdoor lighting really well.



## 9 Combining the layers

I drag all of these lighting and depth layers over to the colour file. Now I get to see how these colours interact. It's immediately apparent that my first colour choices were not the best ones – pretty blue skies and warm sunny lighting isn't the most gripping setting for a confrontation with trolls. We need more drama, so it's time to change the colours!



## 10 Changing the palette

I select the Sky layer and use Adjust Hue/Saturation to shift the sky to pink. The atmospheric haze must match the colour of the sky, so I adjust the Depth layer too. The shadows on their separate layer also need to be warmer. I use Adjust Hue/Saturation because it offers a fine degree of control, enabling me to experiment and stumble upon unexpected colour combinations. I warm up the ground, tweak skin and clothing hues, and create a more complementary magic light. Once finished, I've adjusted nearly every layer and have a completely different looking piece.



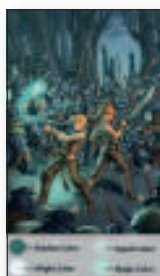
## 11 Spin the colour wheel again

Let's explore some different extremes before settling on one palette. I'll start by taking the warm colours much further: intense reds can increase the heart rate and are the colour of anger. Reds indicate danger, as with emergency lighting and warning signs, so I try adding an angry red sky and glowing red magic. It certainly has increased the dramatic tension in the painting. My illustration now looks more like the cover of a horror story rather than a children's book!



## 12 A muted palette

An alternative way to depict horror is with muted colours, as though the life has been drained from the environment. I try a pallid colour set and accent it with a more subtle red this time. This palette conveys seriousness and dread particularly well, giving a spooky feel to the painting. It's certainly more subdued than the last colour comp, but it's still not appropriate for this particular piece.

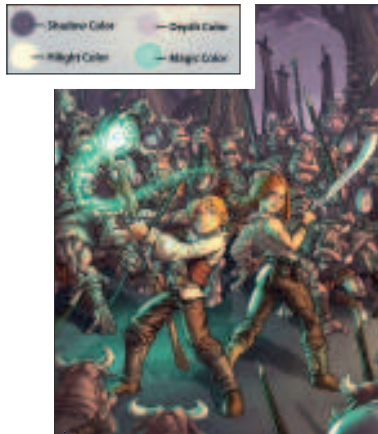


## 13 A cooler choice

Blues and greens are calming colours. They slow down the heart rate and have a soothing effect on us. That's why hospitals often rely on cool hues in their colour schemes. I redo the colours to emphasise cool tones. Now the overall feeling is much calmer than it was with the reds... Too calm, in fact.

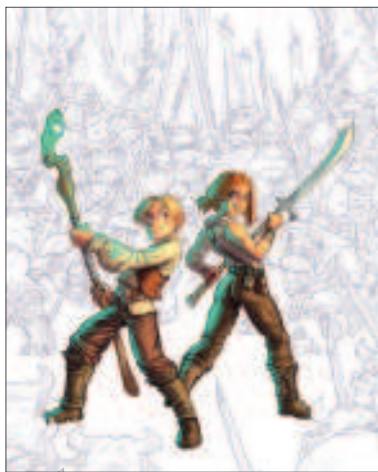


*Shortcuts*  
Adjust Hue/  
Saturation  
**Ctrl/Cmd+U**  
Adjust your colours with sliders. Clicking Colorise makes everything a single colour.



## 14 Working with secondary colours

I decide to focus on a triadic palette using the secondary colours. Purple and green are terrific colours for magic because we never see those hues in natural light. I test out several variations before choosing the primarily purple composition. The green magic looks great against the purple, attracting the eye and shaping the forms well. The orange is used sparingly and helps the main characters pop nicely against the cool background.



## 15 Flattening the layers

It's finally time to flatten all these layers. I flatten all of the kids' colour-blocking into a single layer. Then I constrain the visibility of the lighting layers to just this layer by Option-clicking between the layers. I use Ctrl/Cmd+Alt/Option+Shift+E to duplicate the result – the kids with all of their lighting – on to its own layer. Then I repeat the process with the trolls, the trees and the ground. When I'm done, I'm down to a handful of workable layers... It's time to paint!

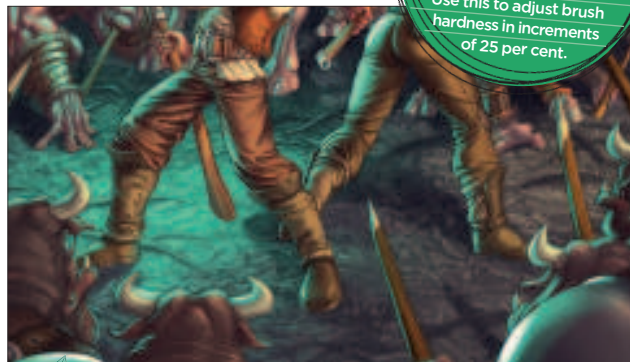
## 16 The paintwork

I set the Line Art layer to 50 per cent Opacity and turn off the staff's Magical Glow layer to better see the forms underneath. I refine the brush-work using a Round brush with Hardness set around



65 per cent. I constantly change the paintbrush's Opacity while I work, anything from a subtle 20 per cent to add more cheek colour to 100 per cent for sharp highlights. I use fuzzy-edged brushes for

blending. I add more shadows and subtle details to the trolls' faces, touch up the armour highlights and incorporate some reflected light. As the protagonists, the kids get the most attention. I spend the most time on their faces, which is what the observer will connect to most.



## 17 Adding ground detail

To make the ground look like a forest floor, I search through free texture websites to find a leafy ground cover. I convert it to greyscale and paste it into a new layer, set to Overlay, above my ground layer (this is why I kept it separate from the rest of the background). I use Free Transform to adjust its perspective and the Fresco filter to remove unnecessary detail. I give this layer a low opacity and merge it down. Then I paint over all of it. I start with large, loose strokes and then refine the details and add roots with smaller brushes.

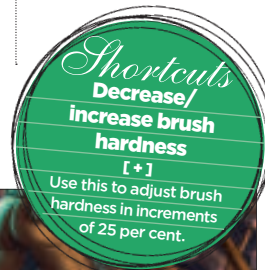
## 18 Cloudy skies ahead

To paint the clouds in the sky, I go to the bottom-most layer, which I have kept separate from the rest of the background. I use a custom brush captured from the noise generated by the Render Clouds filter. I refine the clouds using increasingly smaller brushes, but I try not to get too finicky – this is backdrop and I don't want to add so much detail that it detracts from the foreground.

## PRO SECRETS

### Tidy layers

Working with this many layers, it's vital to keep them well organised. Fortunately, Photoshop has several layer tools to help keep things tidy. Editing your layer names makes sense, so you don't have to hunt for the right one. Changing the colours of your layers via the Layer Options box can help to tell layers apart from each other at a glance. And grouping layers into folders that can be minimised helps reduce on-screen clutter.



## 19 Incorporating texture

I'd like to add some texture to the armour. I grab a metal texture and desaturate it, and set the new layer to Overlay. To constrain this texture to just the armour, I load the opacity for Troll Metal from my original colour-blocking file. When I click on the Add Layer Mask button, my texture is hidden from all areas except the armour.



## 20 Adding more depth

Even with my careful colour selection process at the start, I realise that adding more blue into the background would give the painting an even greater sense of depth. I load the selection area of the Depth Map. In a new layer, I fill this area with blue and set it to Colour.

## 21 Final touches

Before I'm done, I want to shift the colours of the line art to fit the mood better. I select just the line art around the kids and use Adjust Hue/Saturation, clicking on the Colorise check-box. I turn the lines a warm red-orange. I invert the selection to choose the other lines in the scene and colour these a subdued purple. On a layer above the line art, I paint some rim lights, glows and magical embers. I also add a bit of noise over the top of the image. With those last touches, it's finished! ●

