

Research in Concept Art for the Animated Movie Industry and Techniques to Consider

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In this essay, I will be exploring the idea of illustration concept art, for animated movies. In the first half I will conduct research into the industry itself to understand exactly what concept art is and its importance to the making of an animation. I will also research various concept artists, what they do and their processes when working on a project. In doing so, I hope to develop my understanding of the industry as it is a potential path I may take as an illustrator. The second half of this essay will include research into various techniques and skills artists use to illustrate characters and scenes with a narrative. This exploration is vital as to be a successful illustrator or concept artist, you need the ability to portray a story through visuals using various techniques and skills. Through researching art books such as 'The Art of (movie name)' and 'Pitch Bibles' I hope to gain knowledge and further examples of these techniques in play from professional and successful concept artists.

Concept art is a refined visual interpretation of an idea and the development of a coherent vision through various stages of idea generation and illustrations. This is to demonstrate an idea ready for the application in (but not limited to) animation, films, video games, or graphic novels and comic books. It includes the creation of characters, creatures, environments, objects, clothes and even architecture and more (Shamsuddin, et al., 2013). "*Concept art is the heart and soul of your animation*" (Wydra, 2017) is a statement in which many agree to as it is the starting point. This is where everything begins and evolves through clear communication between artists, design teams and clients, and further states that they act as "*Blueprint(s)*" for others to use throughout the project (Wydra, 2017). According to '*MAGES institute of Excellence*', they express that concept art is not only illustrations, but is a visual aid and reference that supports movie makers throughout the production process (Mages, 2019). The work and developments are the fundamental ideas that the rest of the production team will reference and will continue to look back on throughout the entire process ensuring that their edits and end visuals do not stray to what the concept, whether it be character, creature, prop or environment may be.

There are always certain processes artists must go through when creating work, especially for projects. Concept artists are also subjected to this as a way of developing and ensuring the appropriate steps are made, as without them there is a chance of losing those interesting ideas. For example, when creating a scene, it isn't wise to just sketch one idea, and move on, doing the same when applying colours and final details. This way, only one thought process and concept is made, whereas a range of sketches, thumbnails and compositions allow for various ideas and can weed out exactly which fits best to the brief the client has made. These first steps of sketching are often just a *"stepping-stone"* and it is common to see more thumbnail designs of about 50 or more (Kar, 2019). In this stage, these sketches are often simplified but ensure that they are specific to the brief at hand. Being efficient is also vital, as these are often tight deadlines and need to include a variety of different ideas which is then overseen by other designers and animators to ensure that they can be created in its animation format (Wydra, 2017). In working with the client, they will then choose particular sketches and thumbnails in which they will want to take forward. Here, the artist will then develop and enhance these sketches. For example, if various character thumbnails have been chosen, the next step is to *"enhance and emphasize"* (Kar, 2019) to work on the development of aesthetics and details such as facial expressions, clothing as well as props and items the character may have on them. This is where they can start to visualise who the character is and in what setting (Kar, 2019). Furthermore, various portraits will be made like a character turnaround which includes a side, front, and back profile ensuring all angles are drawn out and an additional shot of the character in their environment. These angles and illustrations support the animators who will recreate these from scratch. All of these previous stages are often created in black and white and so in this final stage the artist experiments with colour theory in coordination with the theme and mood of the animation. Like the sketching phases, these are created with a multitude of colour themes to choose from (Kar, 2019). Finally, these illustrations are then taken to the designers and animators themselves to be remade into animation.

“The key to becoming a successful Concept Artist is to digest as much art as you can, learn from your peers, and put in the pencil mileage!” states Tyler James an Award-winning Concept Artist (James, 2020). The ability to be open-minded in order to learn as much as you can is important as an artist, due to the industry’s massive consumption of concept art. Tyler James suggests, to think of traits like a *“power meter, a bar of skills”* and try keep them all equal (James, 2020). Having a broader understanding of various subject matters and styles will allow an artist more opportunity to contribute to various projects and concepts. He also states that the three vital areas of study are *“design, anatomy and materials/lighting”* (James, 2020). Ensuring these skills truly allows an artist to be able to create illustrations for any concept whether environments such as oceans or desserts, props and objects such as leather books and stone tables and even creatures and characters – those with fur or moustaches and even a range of ages from young to old. Of course, there are concept artists who specifically specialise in these areas separately, but as the industry is ever growing, it may be important to be able to delve into all of them.

A concept artist should be able to generate a sense for characters, environments and objects, according to the journal *‘Evaluating Content Based Animation through Concept Art’* these can be in the form of worlds and characters that are sometimes fictional giving the viewer a sense of wonder and fantasy and an experience in which they could never have themselves (Shamsuddin, et al., 2013). As an artist it important to consider how to portray certain moods, atmosphere and character personality as you want the viewer to fully understand what that character is like, not through descriptive words, but visually. In illustration there are various techniques and tips that artists use in order to portray a story or a narrative for the viewer.

One tip to consider is to *“Design with your arm but draw with your wrist”* (Serrano, 2018). This key discipline is to support in drawing loosely for those initial sketches as there can be a *“dynamic balance of freedom and control”* (Serrano, 2018) as the arm works loosely and the wrist controls, creating is sort of design language that works well. Without the use of the arm, sketches tend to seem

lifeless and have a more static feel. As an illustration student who also takes a Life Drawing module, I consider this as a key discipline as drawing from only your wrist does not allow for larger drawings and tends to limit the lines created thus only able to draw small and compact sketches. Drawing with both arm and wrist in mind allows for a more loose , open and organic sketch which can then be controlled.

An example of one technique that concept artists use, is when drawing a person who is assertive and strong-willed , the idea of illustrating them with a strong posture, chests out and a grin, would depict them as such. This type of technique is the use of narrative in characters in which the artist chooses various gestures, expressions and positions to show the viewer what a character is like (Loomis, 1947). Telling a story through characters can be made from other points such as clothing and props they may hold to add a little more storytelling to the scene.



Figure 1

(Feguson, 2010, p. 8)

Here is an example of this character sketch of Gobber, created by artist *Nico Marlet* for the concept art of '*How to Train your Dragon*' (Feguson, 2010). As you can see the use of narrative techniques through character can be seen from the scruffy viking-like posture with weapons and tools at his disposal. With the addition of wooden prosthetics, fur and leather clothes and even those horned

helmets, as a viewer you would understand that this character is a Viking. Furthermore, little details such as his wonky teeth, stretched out clothing and even torn strings can tell a person that this character may be a bit reckless and brave. It's the combination of those little details and narrative ideas that gives the viewer a good sense of what the artist is going for in a character.

Composition is a term in which artists need to consider in their work. Without it, scenes may feel boring and lifeless as not much thought had been made. This term, however, is not just a standalone in which describes an arrangement, it includes a variety of other fields such as *"perspective, value, staging and colour"* (Serrano, 2018) all in which allows a story to be told efficiently. Perspective is the idea of where the camera is placed in the scene and even what type of camera lens. This keeps the viewers' attention through various dynamic angles instead of the same style view for every scene.



Figure 2

(McDonnell, et al., 2017, p. 67)

A play on perspectives can also be seen in the concept book *'Steven Universe Art & Origins'* as it shows Steven in the grasp of a crystal creature. The use of perspectives in this scene works very well especially since there is a lot of movement and dynamic action poses. It immerses the viewer into the scene as the closer the characters are to the 'camera' the bigger they become and thus the further they are, the smaller they get. Using perspectives has a *"strong physical effect on the viewers' perception"* (Serrano, 2018) and various angles may depict different moods and atmospheres. For example, looking up at a character can suggest that they are confident, they have strength and looks invincible. However, having an eye-level view of the character can give a sense of normality and is relatable to the viewer as this is the way that we perceive each other most of the time. Finally, a shot from the top or an eagle eye view can suggest a sort of weakness and vulnerability (Serrano, 2018). The bottom illustration of Steven in their room shows the effects of perspective as this does give the viewer a sense of relatability and depicts the character as a normal being in this scene.

"Your value composition will determine the success of your colour composition" states artist Armand Serrano, as every colour will have a value and their lightness or darkness will depend on the amount of lighting given to the colour (Serrano, 2018). Ensuring values in an illustration is important as they can control focal points, give an illusion of three-dimension when a surface is hit by light as well as the shadows. Furthermore, adding values can create depth by altering the range of dark and light thus creating distance (Serrano, 2018). The use of values is the indication of shadows and highlights, where the light source is and how this would translate into a piece. For example, depending on the intensity of the light, it can portray environments that are hazy or illustrates clear sunlight levels (Loomis, 1947, pp. 82 - 83).

Colour theory is also a fundamental technique that concept artists use as it is the relationship between colours and the psychological impacts portrayed through the use of certain combinations (Cherry, 2020). As a concept artist, the ability to convey emotions, atmospheres and overall mood of a setting or character can rely deeply in the colours used. This is because, through life experiences we pick up colours that incite various emotions as growing up we see them everywhere in marketing, advertisements and instinctively connect them. Some colours may even have multiple emotions or connections to certain things due to the various perceptions and interpretations. For example, when we see the colour red, we connect it to love, warmth, excitement or anger and when we see the colour blue, we connect it to the cold, feeling down and even a sense of calmness (Cherry, 2020). Artists can use this colour psychology within their work to incite certain feelings and more.



Figure 3

(Ferguson, 2010, p. 25) 'Red Death'



Figure 4

(Feguson, 2010, p. 98) '*Dragon Cave*'

In this illustration of the dragon '*Red Death*' and the '*Dragon Cave*' (Feguson, 2010, p. 98), the artists have included the use of cool and warm tones, cool signifying the dark stormy weather and the warm portrays a sense a danger to the scene, a bit of fire lighting up the sky or a hellish depth. Within these scenes these colour representations instantly portray to the viewer that these places are dangerous and even has a sense of evil to them. Incorporating the right set of colours and palettes will ensure that the theme or mood is portrayed through the work.

In conclusion, although the concept art industry in animation is a massive one, with the right techniques, skills and plenty of experience and practice, one may be able to find themselves there in the future. From conducting this essay, I have learnt a great deal about concept artists, their deadlines as well as the amount of work and skills needed when working on the concept art of an animation project. However, this has only peaked my interest and fuelled my enthusiasm to develop my skills as

an illustrator and continue learning and applying those techniques into my own work. From what I have researched, I am now aware of the importance of narrative, composition, colour theory and creating values in the work in order to have a successful colour composition. I have also been able to analyse professional artworks and compare these with the techniques I have uncovered through research and can now apply them to my future illustrations.

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