



CHARACTER DESIGN QUARTERLY

**FREE  
SAMPLE  
ISSUE!**





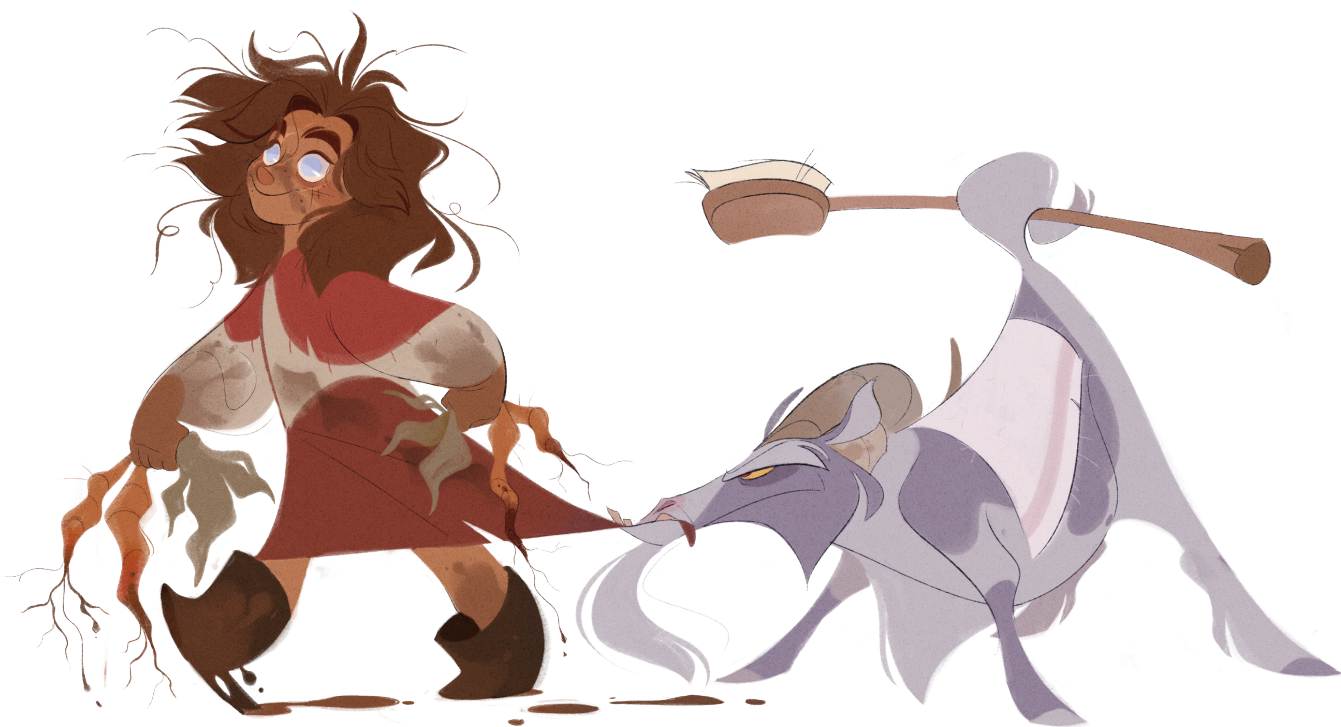


Image © Saira Vargas

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## WELCOME TO THIS SAMPLE ISSUE OF CHARACTER DESIGN QUARTERLY

Packed within this sample issue of CDQ are some of our favourite tutorials and interviews from recent issues of the magazine. Learn how to create exciting new designs with in-depth tutorials by Greg Baldwin and Melany Altuna, explore the secrets of adding personality and emotion to your characters with Felipe Rodriguez, and explore the secrets of lighting with Lynn Chen. We also take a peek behind the doors of Muti Studio, and speak to Sandro Cleuzo and Meike Schneider about the secrets of their character designs, and their careers so far.

## SAM DRAPER EDITOR



Image © Johanna Forster

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### FRUIT WITH FEELINGS

Johanna Forster shows us how to express emotions, creating a character with a fruity twist!

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We speak to veteran animator Sandro Cleuzo about his 35 years working in the industry

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Learn how to draw a stunning robot from scratch with this in-depth tutorial by Greg Baldwin









# STYLIZED ANIMALS: GUINEA PIG AND WOLF

MELANY ALTUNA

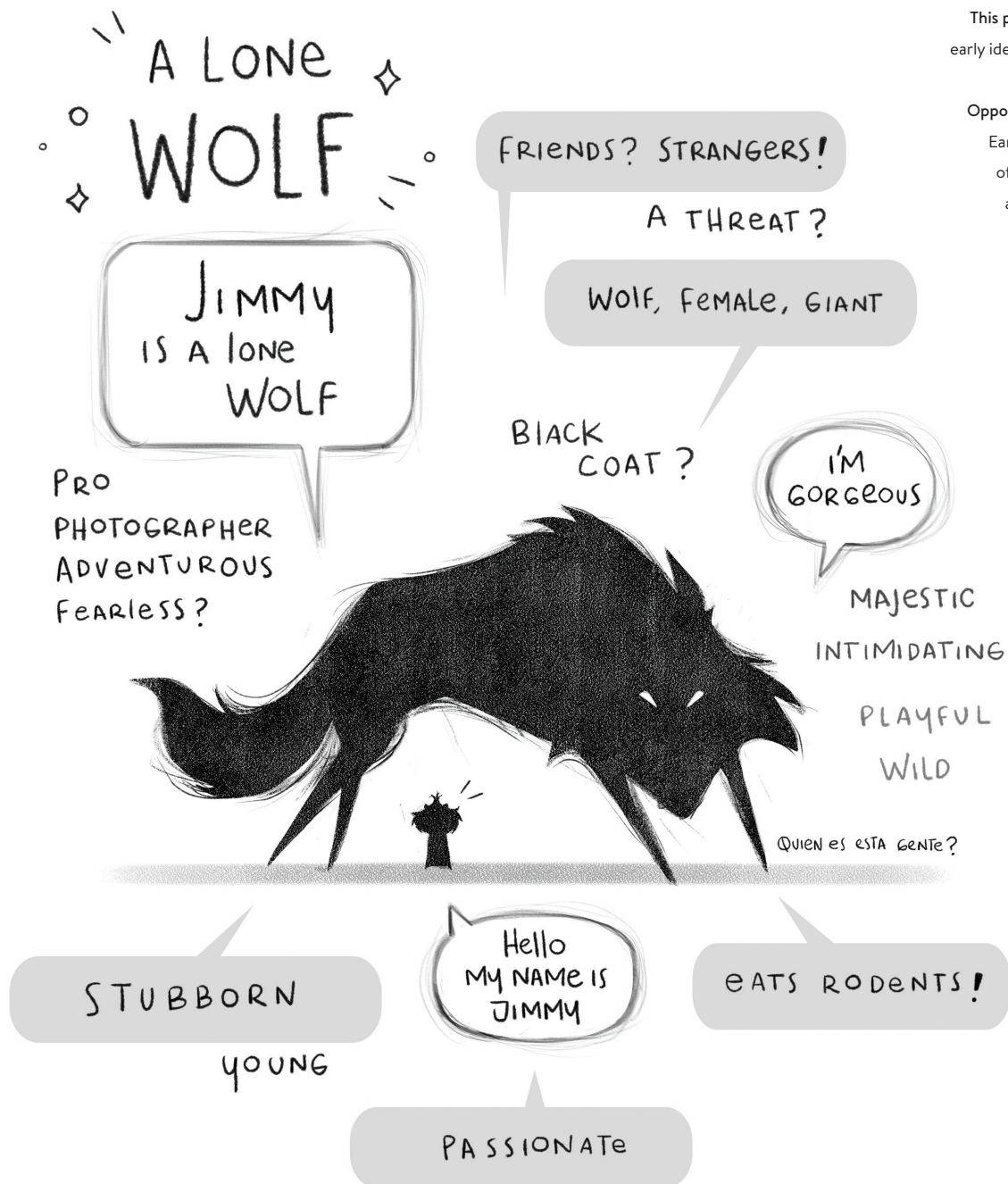
I'm going to share with you my process for creating appealing, stylized characters. For me, designing a character has always been like solving a puzzle, with many, many pieces. If I look at the whole project at once, it's easy to become overwhelmed, and my creativity will be blocked. If I split the work up and focus on a few pieces at a time, then progress will be fun and give us great results.

So, what are the pieces of the puzzle that make for good character design? Well, there's balance, flow, rhythm, appeal, shape language, and much more! And at the same time, we need to focus on the story and the character's personality – it's a lot to think about!

I will be working with traditional pencils and a sketchbook to warm up, and then my professional tools for research and character development – a Wacom Cintiq, an iMac, and Photoshop.

"SO, WHAT ARE  
THE PIECES OF  
THE PUZZLE  
THAT MAKE FOR  
GOOD CHARACTER  
DESIGN?  
WELL, THERE'S  
BALANCE,  
FLOW, RHYTHM,  
APPEAL, SHAPE  
LANGUAGE, AND  
MUCH MORE!"





This page: Sketching early ideas for my story

Opposite page (top): Early explorations of the guinea pig and wolf design

## FINDING THE STORY

The brief for this project is very open – we will design two characters, a guinea pig and a wolf, and that's pretty much all we know about them. It's important we create a backstory for the characters first which will guide the rest of the process.

Looking online for references is a good starting point. Search for things that grab your interest and get your ideas flowing. Inspiration can come

from anywhere. I was online shopping for outdoor clothing for my next camping trip before this project, and that sparked an idea. I want my main character to be a guinea pig and I want to focus the story on him. Let's call him Jimmy. Jimmy will be a professional photographer that has a unique encounter with a giant wolf. His job is to take the best picture of the wolf possible, but that might be easier said than done!



## ASKING QUESTIONS

With our characters in place, now we need to get a better sense of the 5 Ws – Who are the characters, where are they located, what do they want, when is the story taking place, and why? These questions are a great place to start your research that will help you find all the visual elements needed to make your characters unique. I know this might seem like it takes quite a lot of time, but it's an important step in the process, and one you should never skip!

## LET'S START SKETCHING!

When I draw animals, I like to start by sketching from photo references. I go online and collect lots of pictures of wolves and guinea pigs of all shapes, sizes, and colors. This helps me get a feel for the shapes that make this animal unique. Don't worry too much about making anything pretty at this point – just try to experiment, learn, and pay attention to the proportions and characteristics. You never need to show this step to anyone if you don't want to. Keep that in mind and the pressure is off – enjoy the process!





"I CONSIDER THE BALANCE  
BETWEEN THE BODY AND FACE AND  
HOW LARGE, MEDIUM, AND SMALL  
SHAPES CAN AFFECT THE DESIGN"

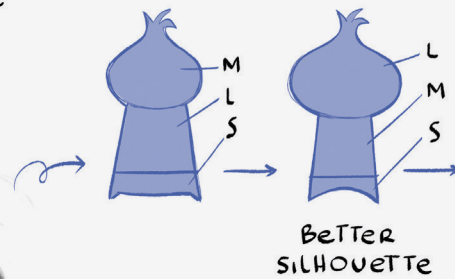


# SHIFTING SHAPES

After warming up in the sketchbook I like to look at all the drawings and find a few that I really like, then start playing around with the proportions and shapes. I consider the balance between the body and

face and how large, medium, and small shapes can affect the design. I push the shapes and play with size to find an appealing look.





## BALANCING THE DESIGN

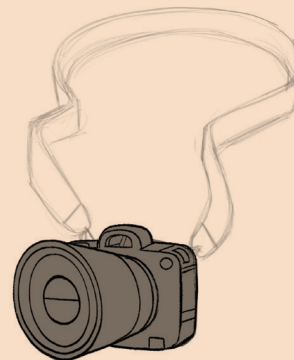
I like to make sure I simplify the details to create a clear silhouette, so the character can read well from a distance.



BALANCE SHAPES



PROPS  
CAMERA  
GLASSES  
BACKPACK?



Opposite page: The first explorations of Jimmy's design

This page (top): Creating a clear silhouette

This page (bottom): Adding props that support the story

## PROPPING UP THE STORY

Adding props to a character can help express a little more about their personality. In this case, we need to make it obvious that Jimmy is a photographer on a mission, maybe by adding a camera or backpack. I also give him some glasses to compensate for his tiny dot eyes and to help the audience understand who he is right away.

Working on this step I notice that people may mistake Jimmy for a tourist, and that's not the look I want for this character. I need to make sure I stay away from anything that suggests "tourist" when moving on to color and poses.



## COMPLETING THE JIGSAW

Previously, I mentioned how I view the process of designing a character like putting a puzzle together – the more you practice, the faster your brain will start to put the pieces together all by itself. And just like with

a jigsaw or puzzle, if you get stuck then the best thing you can do is take a break! Go for a short walk, clear your mind, and when you come back try a different approach.

FLAT  
COLOR



## DRESSING JIMMY FOR THE JOB

Time for color! At this point I go back to my references and look for consistent colors in their clothing. Looking at online stores helps you know what's on trend at the moment and what look could stand out. It might even help you to find a more unique color combination than you originally imagined.

I want Jimmy to have warm colors in his hair – a mix of medium browns will look really pretty. We can then use the hair as a base and choose

colors for his outfit that complement him. While working through different variations I start to notice that certain color combinations will make Jimmy look older than I want. Keep in mind the story you are trying to tell at every step of the process – every visual element influences what the audience will take from your design.





## THE WOLF AT THE DOOR

Now, let's start working on the wolf. Again, I pick my favorite early sketches and start pushing shapes to create a good balance. I want the wolf to feel big and elegant – I'm looking for a rhythm that flows from the tip of her foot to the last hair on her tail. I'm imagining the final design as almost a full silhouette, with bright eyes and lots of texture, so I focus on poses that read easily.

Keeping a small silhouette of the other characters in your scene close to hand can help build contrasting shapes and keep a nice sense of scale.

## STEPPING AWAY

To be honest, I wasn't happy with how any of my first sketches of the wolf turned out, so I take a break and go back to it the next day. Stepping away from a project can sometimes help with your perspective – when you go back to it you can see it with fresh eyes. I start thinking of the overall shape and pose, and drawing the wolf starts to become easier. Thinking about straight vs curve, line of action, and simple vs complex helps me get a better silhouette for the wolf. When I'm happy with the overall shape, I start getting into the face and hair details.

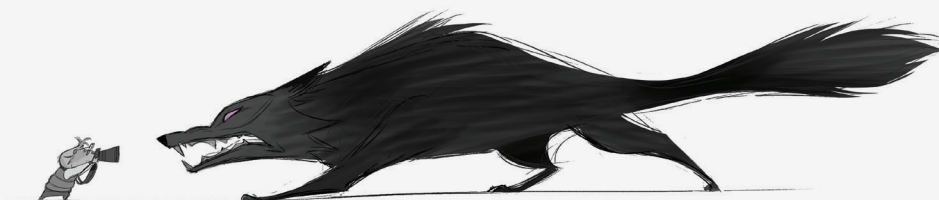


Opposite page:  
Finding a color  
palette that's  
right for the story  
I want to tell

This page (top):  
Exploring the  
design of the wolf

This page (bottom):  
Finding a nice  
silhouette







"WHEN CLEANING THE LINES, WE WANT TO MAKE SURE THE ENERGY AND OVERALL FEELING OF THE SKETCH DOESN'T GET LOST"

Opposite page:  
Experimenting with  
posing Jimmy and  
the wolf together

This page: Cleaning  
up the characters for  
the flat color layer



## TELLING THE STORY

Now we know how both characters look, we can start playing with posing them. I want the poses to show who they are and what's going on in the story. Try to start this step really loose – think about the energy and the story moments more than technicalities right now. I decide on a few poses to show – I want the characters face to face. I want to see how they look running from one another, and I want the wolf to catch Jimmy! Just feel free to play with different ideas, keeping in mind who the characters are and what they would do in any given situation.

You can take this step as far as you like, making as many poses as you want and picking your favorites. You can even clean them up and color them, but this step isn't about creating anything clean and perfect – you just want to tell the story and keep the characters on model.

It's important to remember that character design should always be in support of the story. Without a story, a design can look good, but it won't be a real character.

## CLEANING UP AND COLORING

When cleaning the lines, we want to make sure the energy and overall feeling of the sketch doesn't get lost. It can be hard, and a bit frustrating, but if you make sure you keep the important pieces, you can make it work. You can do the clean-up with just basic shapes to prep for the render, or with line art.



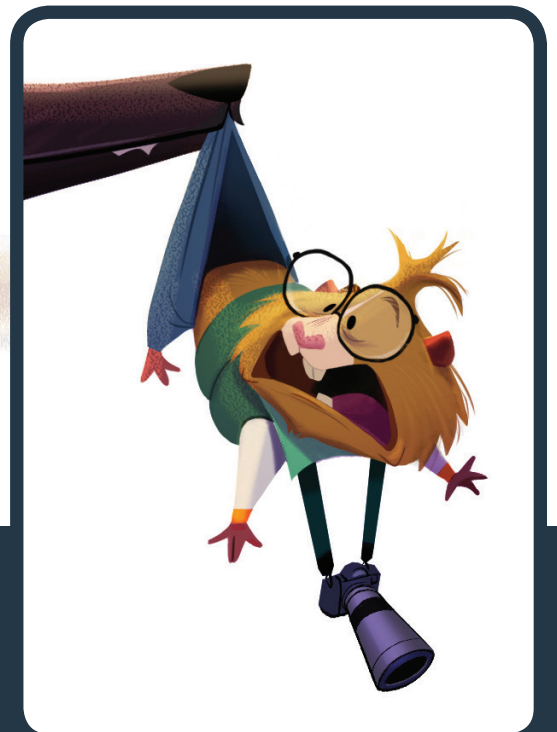
## A COLORFUL ENCOUNTER

Once we're happy with the flat color shapes, we can start adding textures, detail lines, and shadow and light. I like to keep it simple and not get too crazy with the rendering when the shapes and expressions are already reading well. I add a close-up of Jimmy so the audience can see him better, without losing the contrast in size between him and the wolf.

And that's pretty much it! I love the story and characters I've come up with and will continue drawing them and see where the story ends. I hope Jimmy makes it out of the situation and manages to deliver his work on time!



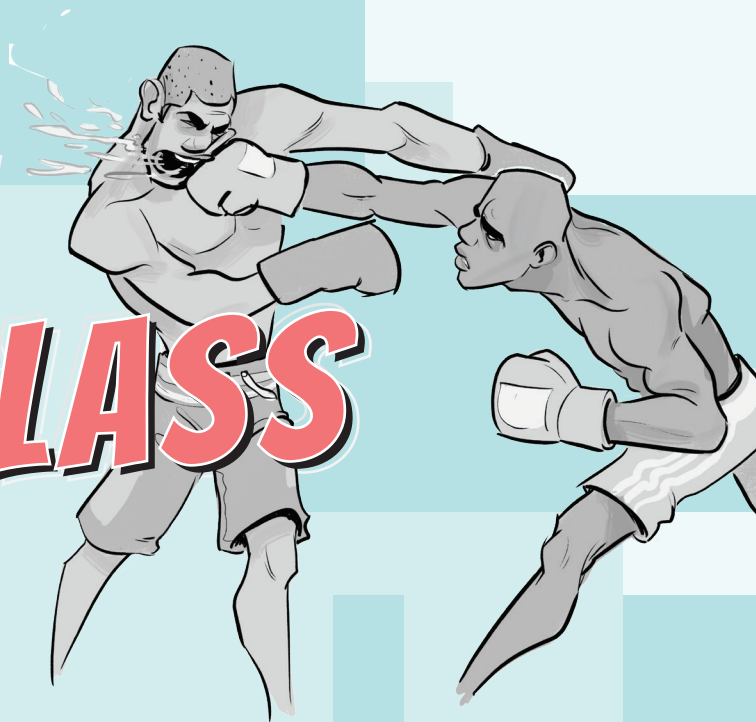




# A MOTION MASTERCLASS

JOAKIM RIEDINGER

Our whole universe is in constant motion – flowers grow, trees sway, people walk, and everything is always evolving. Movement is at the center of our lives, but how do you express this energy in your work? Let's look at a few principles that will help to translate force into movement in drawings.



## DRAW SMALL, QUICK THUMBNAILS FIRST

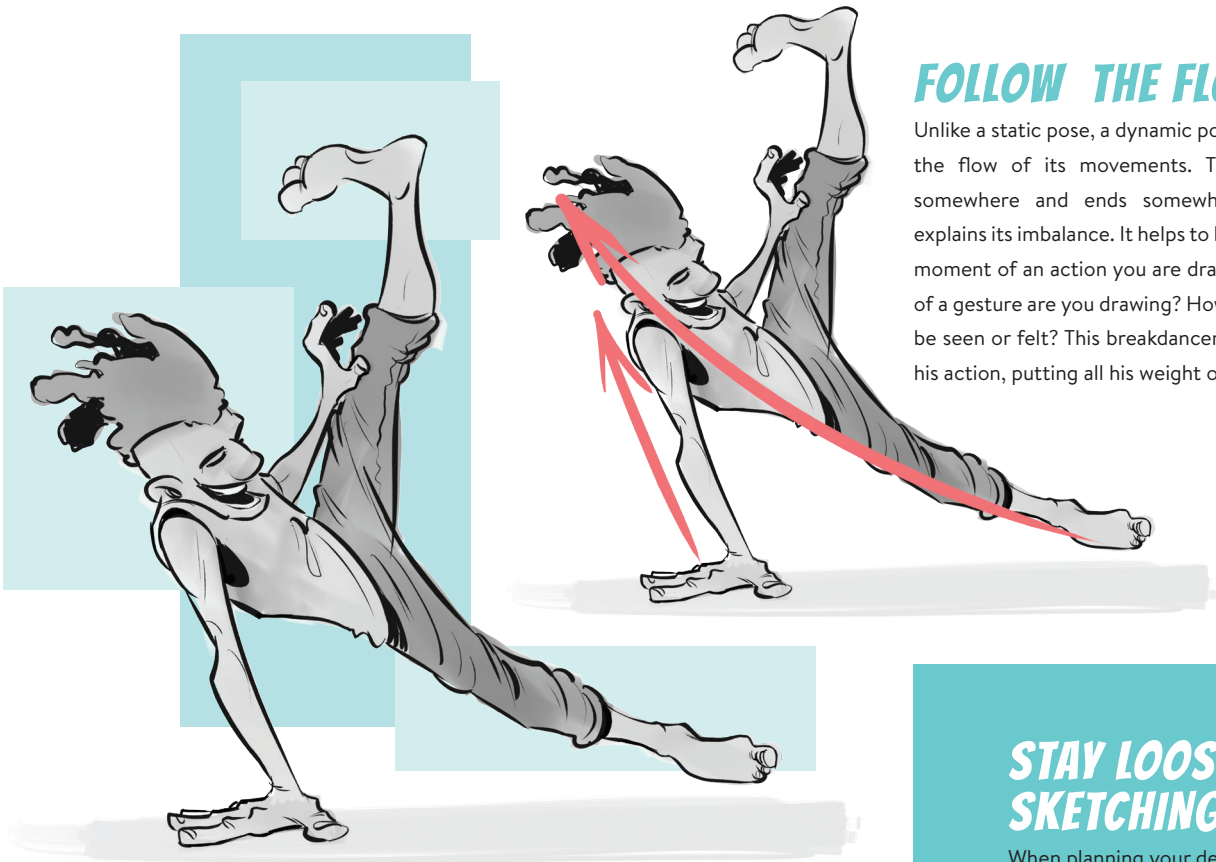
Drawing small thumbnails allows you to think about the overall design, silhouettes, and action lines, rather than focusing on small details. It's also much faster to generate a lot of ideas when they are done in a few seconds.



## STARTING STATIC

To create the illusion of movement and motion in your drawing, you need to avoid symmetrical poses. They tend to stiffen a drawing and seem unnatural – unless, of course, you want to convey that someone is firm and strict, like this police officer.





## ***FOLLOW THE FLOW***

Unlike a static pose, a dynamic pose always follows the flow of its movements. The action starts somewhere and ends somewhere else, which explains its imbalance. It helps to know which exact moment of an action you are drawing: what phase of a gesture are you drawing? How much force can be seen or felt? This breakdancer is at the apex of his action, putting all his weight on one arm.

## ***THE EXTENSION IS THE MOTION***

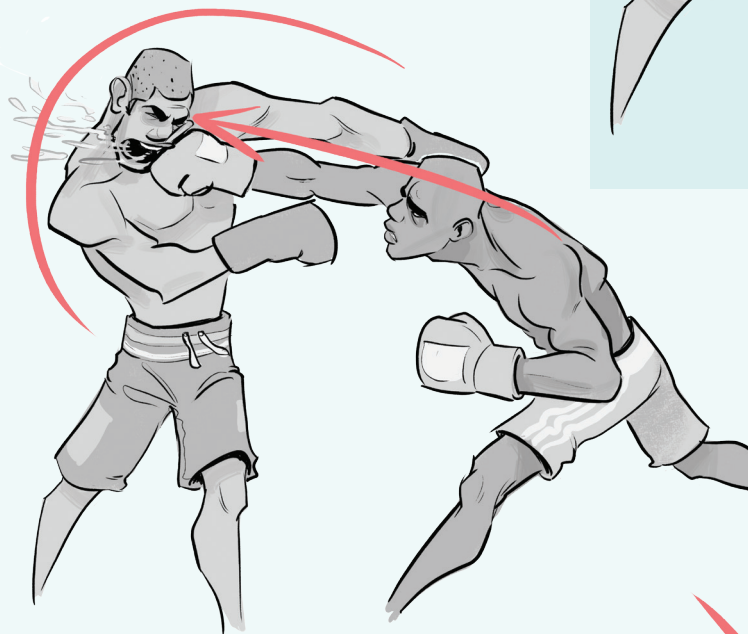
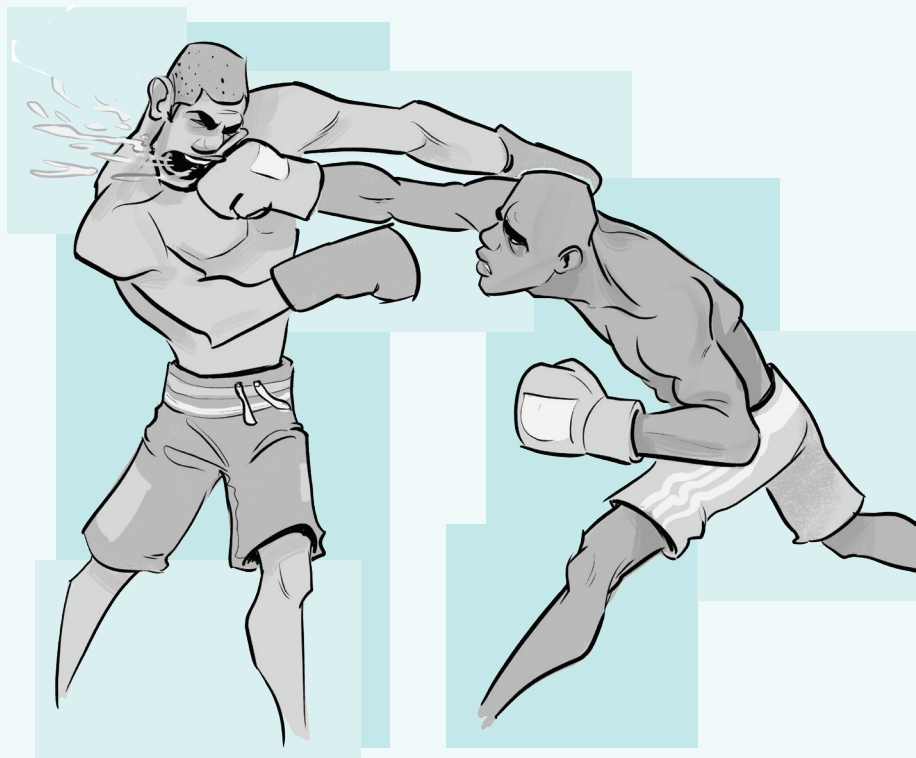
To generate maximum force, a muscle chain must reach an extension, which is why all limbs line up and follow a line of action. It helps to include this physical principle in your drawings to show a sense of weight. This bull is heading in one clear direction, and his whole body and movement mirror that.



## ***STAY LOOSE IN THE SKETCHING STAGE***

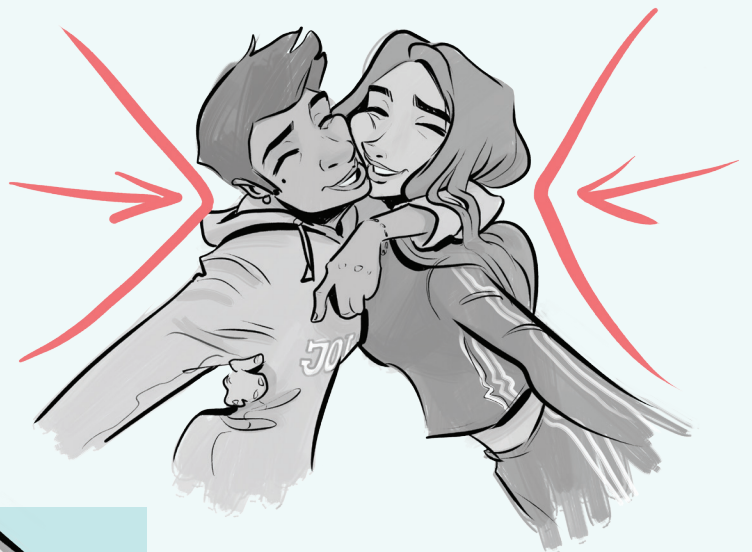
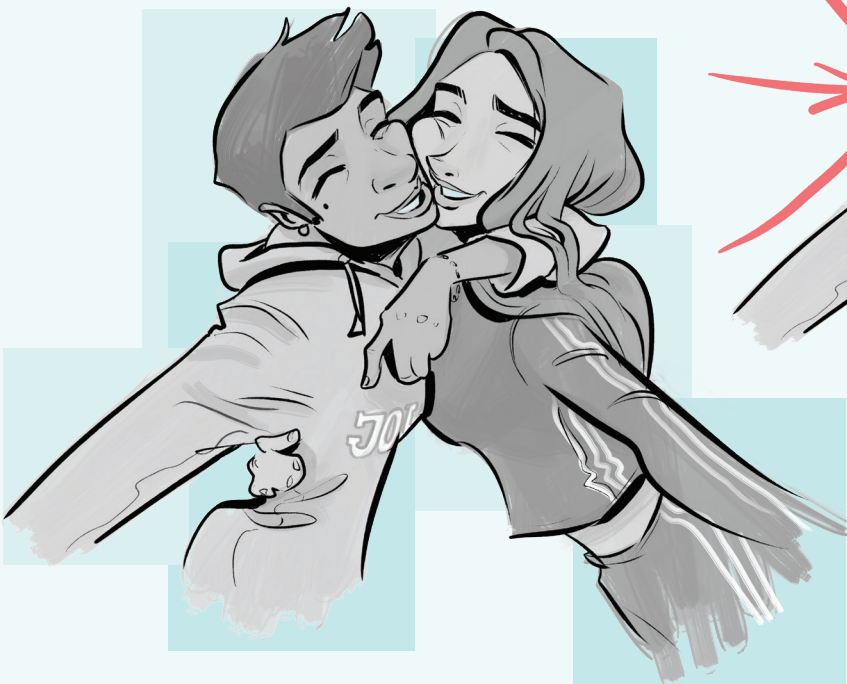
When planning your design, stay relaxed and try to draw quickly – energy will naturally flow from you.

**“WHEN A FORCE IS APPLIED  
TO AN OBJECT OR A  
CHARACTER, AN OPPOSITE  
REACTION MUST ALSO  
BE APPARENT – ACTION  
MEANS REACTION”**



## **ACTION AND REACTION**

When a force is applied to an object or a character, an opposite reaction must also be apparent – action means reaction. This principle makes the two parts more related to each other. Look how the force of one boxer has an extreme impact on the face of the other boxer, and his line of action. In the other example, the hug of two friends looks almost magnetic. Use this principle to emphasize your characters' situations.





## LAYER AND INCREASE ACTION LINES

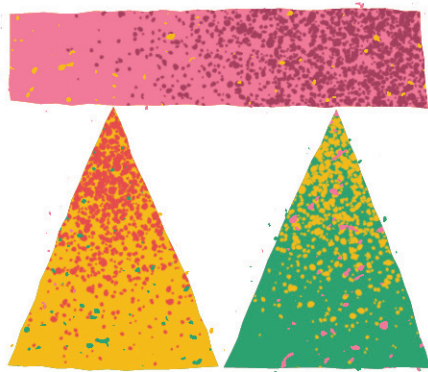
To make a gesture more textured and interesting, try to introduce a multitude of patterns that align with a consistent overall direction. Look at the contours of this dancer's pose – not only does her dress show curvy movement, her body does, too. This multiplicity of curvy lines will enhance the sense of rhythm and fluidity in the action lines, and adds a certain grace and elegance to your character.



## SUBTLETY IS POWERFUL

It is not always necessary to draw extreme fights or other intense actions to show dynamism. Emotion flowing through the body can also be expressed in subtle ways. In this case, the body of the man is still, his arms are close to his body, and his eyebrows are pointing upward – the emotion is subtle, but no less effectively conveyed.





## STUDIO SPOTLIGHT: MUTI

This multidisciplinary, creative South African studio, based in Cape Town, has its talented fingers in many pies. Known for their bold, colorful designs, the Studio Muti artists have worked with top-level companies around the globe, including Google and Nike. We caught up with them to ask how the studio started and how it operates today, and for their advice to budding character designers wanting to get into the industry.









## Thanks so much for chatting to us today. Can you tell us a bit about the studio and how it started?

Thanks for having us! Muti started in 2011 when we (Clinton Campbell and Miné Day) joined forces after previously working together on an illustration team. Our first projects were self-initiated – we tried to create a style that would capture the attention and delight of the visual community. From there, clients started to approach us, and with that both the style and team became more varied. In 2013, Brad Hodgskiss joined as the third creative director, after gaining success designing his own T-shirts. Since then, we have continued to develop both self-initiated and client-based projects with our ever-growing team of talented staff. We're now a dedicated team of illustrators, designers, and animators who are passionate about producing original and inspiring work, from lettering to icons, digital painting to animation.

## Is there a preference to the types of projects you work on as a studio?

We've worked on a vast array of projects, including garments, publishing, advertising, apps, and branding – so there's no specific industry or client we focus on. For us it's about doing great work, no matter what the application or who the client is. As long as a brief pushes the right buttons for us, we're happy! We love the variety of projects that come into the studio and the challenges some of those projects present. We always have the opportunity to level up our skills with every new project that comes in.







"We've worked on a vast array of projects, including garments, publishing, advertising, apps, and branding"

Opposite page: Character designs for our first animated short – *Los Magos*

This page (top): Originally created as a short looping GIF, this sassy sausage knows who's boss!

This page (bottom): 3D style test





### Due to the wide range of projects you take on, how do you decide who works on each project?

Each of our 12 team members has a different skill set and focus, so assignments are based on what the project requires. If a client comes to us with a very clear direction in style, inspired by something we've done before, then we make sure the person whose work was referenced has a heavy hand in the project. Alternatively, when we receive a project that requires visual direction from us, we work up a few "style tests," with the work going to the team member whose style test resonates most

with the client. We have such a varied mix of folk in the studio, so there's always a chance to put together different approaches and get different opinions on potential work.

### You worked on a large collaborative piece called *One Last Song*. Could you tell us a little about the project and if there were any challenges along the way?

*One Last Song* is a fantastic book written by Mike Ayers, in which he invited 30 musicians to consider what song they would want to accompany them to the pearly gates. We

created illustrations for each chapter, matched to the song chosen. It was challenging to pull out the relevant aspects of each piece and we spent a lot of time working through various possibilities. As this was such a personal subject matter, we wanted the musicians to feel we had truly captured the essence of each of their choices and the stories behind them. In the end, we went for a mixed approach, where some were portrayed quite literally and others had a more conceptual interpretation. Because we linked the styles and color schemes throughout the book, these various approaches still worked together as a cohesive collection.





Opposite page (top left):

From *One Last Song* –  
Sam Beam of Iron & Wine

Opposite page (bottom left):

From *One Last Song* –  
Run The Jewels

Opposite page (right):

From *One Last Song* –  
Andre 3000

This page:

From *One  
Last Song* –  
The Decemberists



**"We take full advantage of opportunities to do projects that sit outside our usual wheelhouse"**

**On the whole, you create quite bold and colorful designs. Was this a conscious decision or a general style that has developed over the years?**

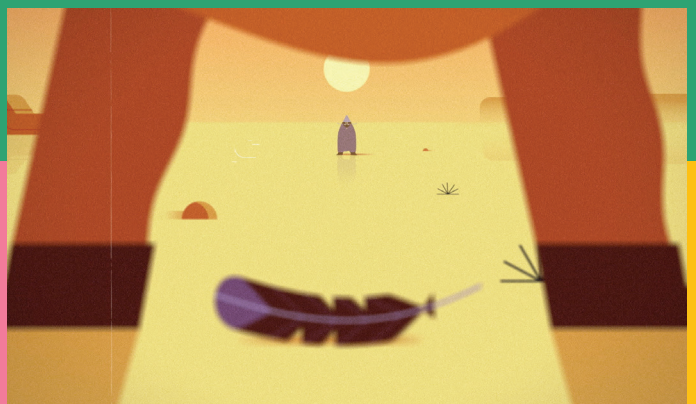
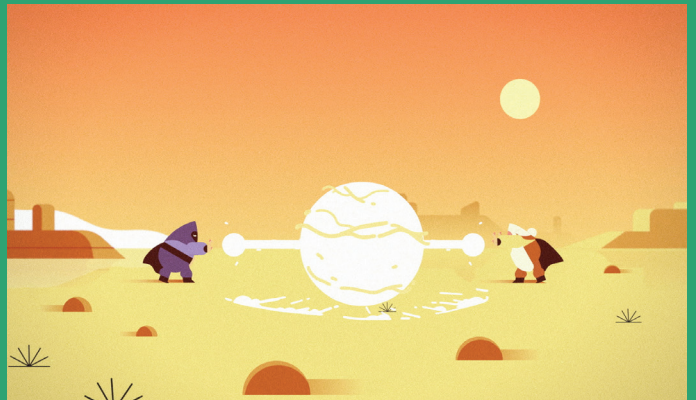
It's probably a bit of both. Muti's early work was all about boldness and color, and as that's what clients approached us for, over time it's become a recurring theme in many of the briefs that come our way. Thankfully, though, we see a lot of variety in the work we receive. We take full advantage of opportunities to do projects that sit outside our usual wheelhouse, and love the chance to work on more subdued, intricate work.

**What do you consider to be most important when creating character designs?**

The aspect we prioritize the most is personality. The pose, clothing, facial expressions, and even accessories or background elements all have an impact on how the viewer reads and understands the character's personality. It's immensely satisfying to render a character and have others immediately recognize and relate to them. You want the viewer to say, "Ah – yes! That's how the character moves, that's how they see the world and react to things."

**This page:** Stills from our animated short, *Los Magos*

**Opposite page:** Created for the Quaranoids series, showcasing different personalities in lockdown







### Which character-design projects are you most proud of?

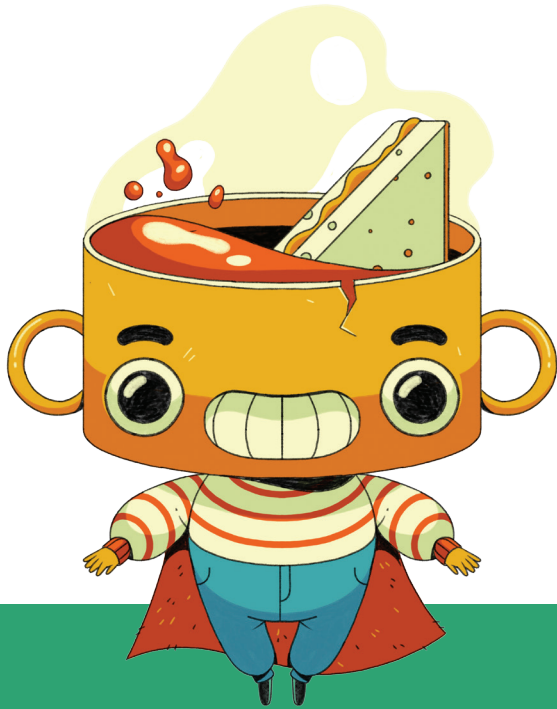
We're particularly fond of our first animated short, *Los Magos*, which we finally released at the end of 2020 after it was accepted to a number of film festivals. It was our first foray into bringing our own characters to life in a longer format (well, longer for us!), and it

was a great chance to collaborate with our team and work with some friends in the sound production field.

It's a 60-second animated short that we actually created way back in 2019. It depicts two sorcerers that come face-to-face to settle a quarrel, in a test of skill and strength in a desert wasteland. We didn't have any grand

plans for the short – it started as just a fun in-house challenge to create something entirely from scratch. We sat on it for a while before deciding to try our luck, entering it into a few film festivals and releasing it online. So far, we've had a really positive response. We're well aware how difficult it can be to be accepted into festivals, so we feel very grateful to have been recognized.





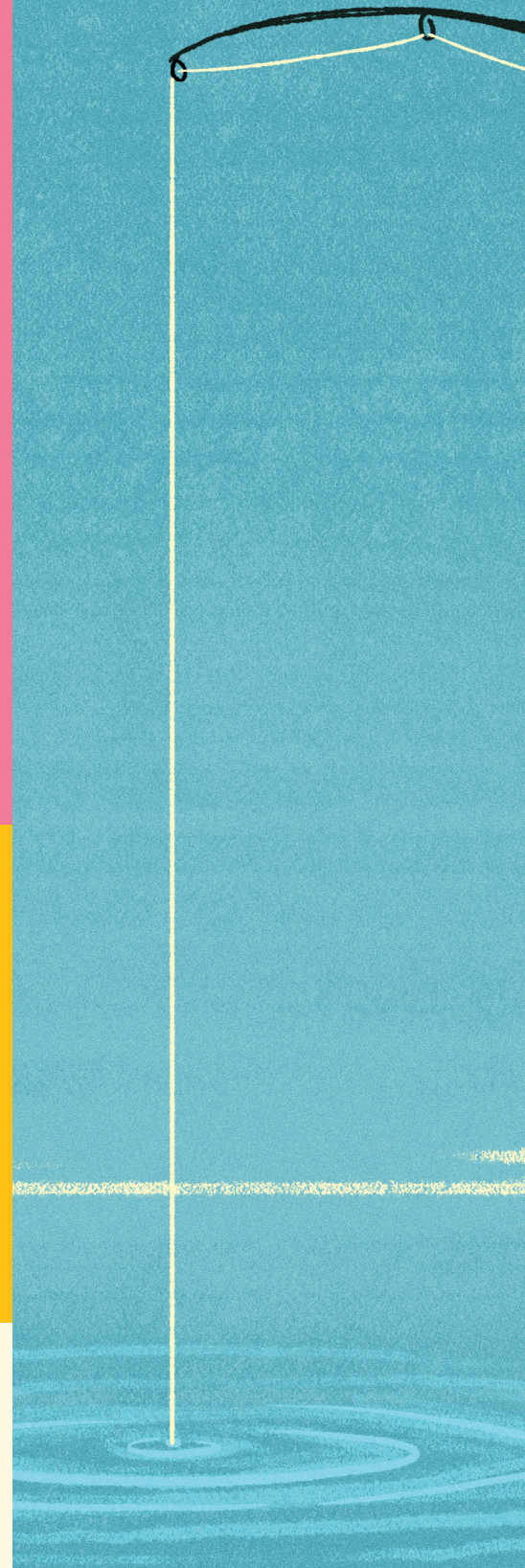
### **Many people might associate design studios mainly with America or Asia – what is the scene like in South Africa?**

There is so much talent in South Africa! There are many studios that focus on illustration, design, animation, and character design, and some of them are incredibly successful. Your readers have probably seen more things than they might have imagined that have come from South Africa's creative community. From time to time, we do get the opportunity to work with our fellow studios here and that's always exciting, but more often than not, we work on all elements of a project in-house.

### **What advice would you give to budding creatives who might want to join a studio like Muti?**

Play, play, play! Keep trying new things, expand your skill-set, take influence from a variety of sources, and don't restrict yourself to only being inspired by other illustrators. Constantly mix and match skills and techniques to find where your strengths lie, and how best to use them. It's a good idea to learn how to be flexible in terms of style, but try to always hold yourself to a higher standard of consistent quality. Flexibility and high standards are two things we look for in portfolios from potential employees.

When it comes to character design generally, it's all about playing around. People don't realize how much they can learn from their own faces or people around them. Pull faces, move around, observe people at home or out and about – this will help you understand how your character moves and poses. We also find that our most successful designs start with an idea with a back-story or wider context. So, try to develop a story for your characters to really understand them.





Opposite page: A quick in-house  
character test – Souperman

This page: A fisherman based on  
the many characters you'll find  
on our local beaches and jetties





# THE PERSONALITY TEST

## ILSE HARTING

As character designers, we all aim to create authentic characters that are expressive and full of personality. Here are a few tips on making that happen. I've created a couple of new characters to showcase the important steps. Let's get started!



### STRAIGHT INTO THE ACTION

When designing a character, choosing the right shapes to match their personality is key, and making a note of how they carry these shapes is perhaps even more important. Whenever possible, I start sketching new characters mid-action, as this helps to visualize the range of motions and expressions they might use. The girl in this drawing is a simple sketch, but by drawing her in motion I can already get a sense of what kind of person she might be.

### COLOR BLOCKING

It's a good idea to block in the character with colors as soon as possible, so you can read their shapes and silhouette better. I always give the character what I consider their primary color first, and from there I have a general direction for the color palette to evolve as I move forward with the design.



## < ADDING COLORS STEP BY STEP

This is where choosing one primary color helps! Instead of giving a character four, five, or more colors right from the start, try beginning with a single color and slowly adding more as you go along. Every color I pick is based on my original choice of orange. By doing this gradually, you won't get overwhelmed with color choices, and the design won't become too busy.

## ALL THE PAGE IS A STAGE

Viewing your characters as actors auditioning for a part in a play is a good method for getting a little deeper into their personality. Ask your characters questions beyond the role you've assigned them. What interesting quirks do they have? What troubles them? What strengths and flaws make them unique? Once you've formed a rounded personality, see how these decisions can affect the character's design. By going back and forth between developing the personality and the physical traits again and again, you can turn the most generic design into something truly original.

## DRESSING UP YOUR CHARACTERS

Pinterest is often cited as a great source for reference material for all sorts of projects, and rightfully so. But when looking specifically for clothing, I like to search for references via online clothing stores. Browsing a store's catalog can lead you to a wide range of variations on different designs, and better still, the quality of the photos can be excellent. With close-ups, different angles, and sometimes even 360° videos where you can see how the model moves in the garment, online stores can be extremely helpful when trying to find that perfect outfit for your characters.



## STRIKE A POSE

This sketch is of a woman who decides to leave her stressful life as CEO of a successful magazine and live her life as a farmer. Before this change she is clearly not happy, and I want to express that mood with a single pose. I start by making her look unapproachable and reserved, her hands stuffed deep into her pockets, her body turned away, and a judgmental expression on her face. I want her to come across as no-nonsense and maybe even a little arrogant. This look can also read as insecure – she doesn't trust anyone and isn't even comfortable standing still. The dynamics of these personality traits are interesting elements to play with while posing the character.



## INTERACTING WITH THE STORY

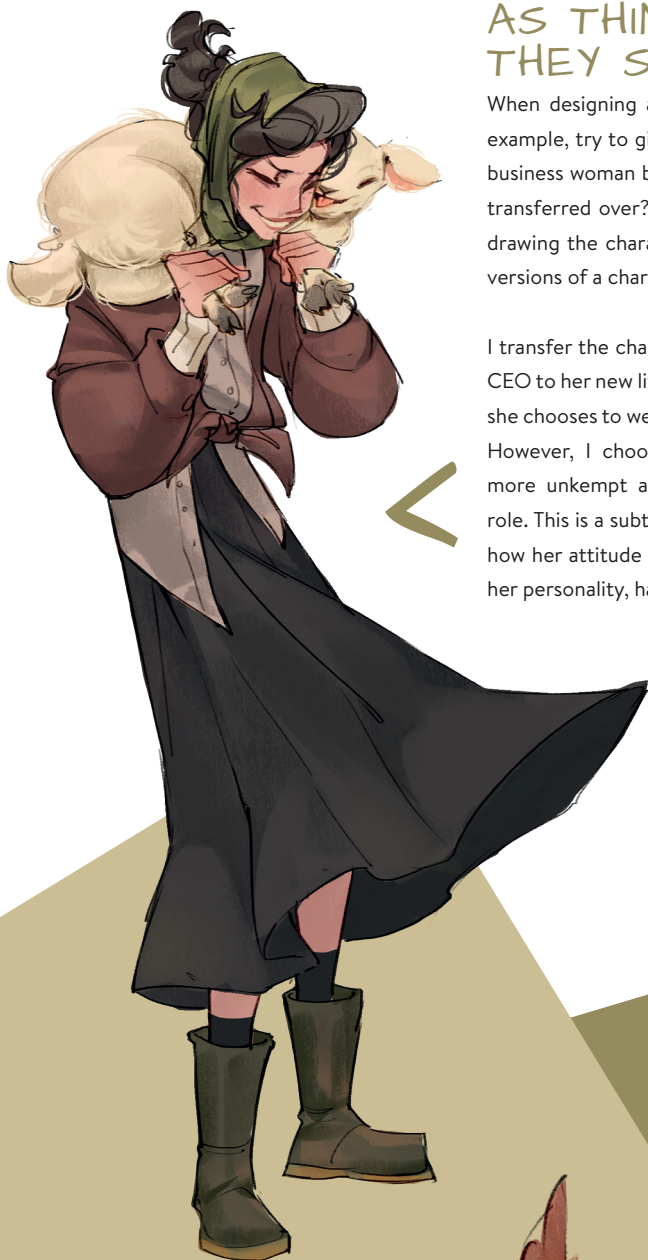
As we start to develop the character and know the beats of her story, we can introduce interactions with other objects or characters to further display her personality. Alongside movement, interactions are a very helpful technique for exploring the unique quirks of characters – have fun and see how different characters interact with one another. I made the ex-CEO interact with her animals since they are a key part of her story.



## AS THINGS CHANGE, THEY STAY THE SAME

When designing a character that fits a certain role like the “farmer” chosen for this example, try to give them a past or future to aspire to. This character was an ambitious business woman before she became a farmer. How much of her old ways and habits get transferred over? Clothing, hair, and mannerisms are all things you can play with while drawing the character in different stages of their lives – similarities shown in different versions of a character help lead the viewer through their story.

I transfer the characteristics of the woman’s previous career as a CEO to her new life as a farmer. Just as with her business outfit, she chooses to wear mostly muted colors with a baggy fit. However, I choose to make her look slightly more unkempt and carefree in her new role. This is a subtle way of communicating how her attitude toward life, and therefore her personality, has changed.



## CEMENTING IDEAS

Once you have a good grasp on the concept behind your character and their general look, it’s time to draw, draw, and draw some more! By redrawing characters in different poses and scenarios again and again, you will start to subconsciously simplify the design through reiteration.





MEET THE ARTIST:

# SAIRA VARGAS

Saira Vargas is a character designer and visual artist from Seattle, Washington. We're big fans of her colorful and expressive creations here at CDQ, so we caught up with Saira to ask about her journey into the industry, her inspirations, and the wonders of dramatic lighting!





**Hi Saira, thanks so much for talking to CDQ! Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your journey in character design to date?**

Hi CDQ! I'm Saira Vargas, a character designer from Seattle, Washington. I recently graduated from Art Center College of Design's animation track. My journey started where nearly every character artist's did – in front of a television set! I absolutely loved watching Don Bluth's films growing up, his characters blew my mind. He wasn't afraid to get ugly or scary with his designs and that, even at a very young age, stood out to me. Even now, at the age of twenty-two, I'm still studying his work with admiration and wonder.

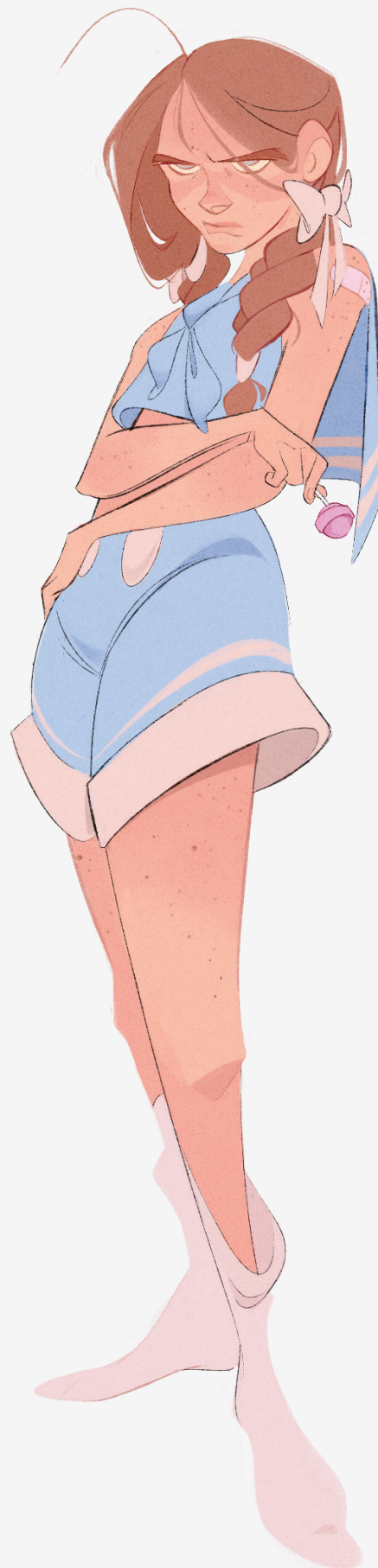
When I started at middle school it was brought to my attention that people could actually make a living drawing, and it was all over for me from there! I spent more time drawing than sleeping, dreaming about getting accepted into any of the wonderful art schools located in SoCal.

When I got accepted into Art Center I was elated, but I had no idea what I wanted to do there. It wasn't until my first character design assignment that things started really making sense.

**Your characters are so dynamic and expressive. A lot of that seems to come from your use of curved and straight lines – what part do they play in your approach?**

They play a *huge* part in my approach – they're the basis of every design and character interaction I create! Everything starts with a strong line of action. Once I figure that out, everything else falls into place. If a character is going to read as confident or scared, if they're sneaky or at ease, it all begins with a curved or straight line.

The outfit and props (or, as I call them, "the bells and whistles") that complete a character are less important than the initial design. I ask myself, if the character were to be stripped of all these extra bits and pieces and were left with only their expression and posture, would you be able to understand what kind of character they were at first glance? That's where those curved and straight lines come in!





These pages: Certain expressions can tell us a lot about a character's personality and attitude



**"IT WASN'T UNTIL MY FIRST CHARACTER DESIGN ASSIGNMENT THAT THINGS STARTED REALLY MAKING SENSE"**





### How do you work so much personality into your character designs? What research do you do to make them feel more authentic and original?

The simple answer is that I draw with a mirror nearby and close my shades to avoid my neighbors seeing the faces I pull when I draw! A lot of the characters I design are heavily inspired by nature and what I see around me. I always say the best character designs already exist within the natural world. Everything is laid out so perfectly — all I have to do is observe. I love watching people and animals. People don't realize the little idiosyncrasies they have, but it's what makes us all so endearing. Animals are even better because they're never worried anyone is watching them or what anyone thinks. Authenticity is everywhere, ready to be stolen and replicated in drawings — you just have to look!

### Was there a point when you suddenly felt character design clicked for you, or a piece that stands out as being a turning point?

My epiphany regarding character design came to me relatively late in life. I always loved drawing characters, but I didn't know there was a profession with a name attached to it.

I entered art school with a very loose idea of what I wanted to do in the

animation industry. It wasn't until my second term when I took Bryan Sims' visual development class that everything started to make sense. We had an assignment that required us to design ten variations of a character and it was like someone switched a light on in my head. It was the first assignment I completed that didn't feel like work.

### Our readers are always looking to improve their own designs. What advice would you give to artists trying to develop their skill set?

I'd encourage them to get a firm grip on the fundamentals before really going wild. Study real figures and specimens in order to understand what makes them recognizable as people or animals. It's like eating your vegetables before dessert! I know my style is about as far from realism as you can get, but in order to push those boundaries I had to know what the boundaries were to begin with.

When you're comfortable with your style, the next step is to simplify, simplify, simplify! The quicker someone can read your design, the better. Once you know how a character should fit together, you can start omitting superfluous details in order to get a clear, appealing silhouette. Less is always more!

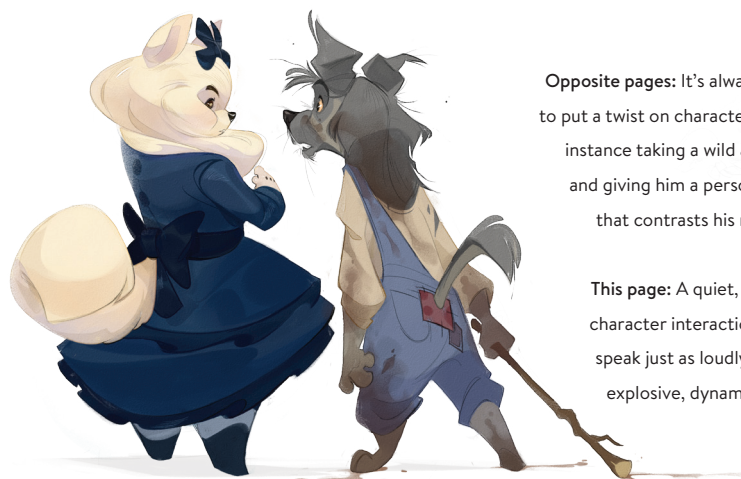












**Opposite pages:** It's always fun to put a twist on characters, for instance taking a wild animal and giving him a personality that contrasts his nature

**This page:** A quiet, subtle character interaction can speak just as loudly as an explosive, dynamic one

There are so many amazing character designers showcasing their work on social media — with so much amazing art freely available how do you ensure you are developing your own distinct style?

It can be hard. I think of social media as both a blessing and a curse; a curse in the sense that the overwhelming amount of talent on display can be disheartening at times, and a blessing because you have the opportunity to learn from all these great artists, as well. Artists still struggling to find their own style often ask me how I found mine, but there really isn't one solid answer. I simply saw what I liked, and tried to find ways to incorporate it into my work.

If I see something within another artist's style that I find appealing, I try to figure out what exactly it is that's drawing me towards their work, their lineweights, their shape language, or their color usage, for example. I try to learn from those with different skills to me. The truth is we are all learning from each other and growing together — we might be at different stages in our artistic journey but we're all on the same path!

**Now your formal education has come to an end, what comes next? How do you plan to stand out from the crowd and find your first professional position in character design?**

Having just recently graduated, it's my goal to get my foot in the door of the entertainment industry. What I am told by my peers in the field (and from veterans, too) is that getting noticed seems to be a combination of luck, timing, and skill. Obviously, skill is the only one of these three components I can control, so I'll continue to work on my portfolio showcasing what I'm good at, and continue to build on my knowledge. Additionally, being active on social media platforms doesn't hurt; it's a great way to have my work seen by folks far and wide. Keep your fingers crossed for me, CDQ!

**This pages:** It's a fun challenge designing characters who are related, finding ways to make them look similar but also unique enough to stand out



**How often do you find that inspiration and traits from real-life interactions can be found in your character designs, and do you feel it's important to incorporate such elements?**

Of course, there are bits and pieces of my friends, family, and even myself within my designs. Sometimes it's a conscious choice, and sometimes it isn't! Regardless, it's important for me to feel a deeper than surface level connection with the characters I make — after all, if you can't connect with your own characters, or find some aspect of them that is familiar, then how can you expect your audience to? This familiarity can be positive or negative, but it should be something that rings true, even vaguely.

**And finally, if you could travel through time and work on any animation, which one would it be, and why? How would your designs differ from those in the movie?**

It's a really hard choice, but I think I'd have to go with Disney's *The Jungle Book*, from 1967. I loved that movie so much growing up, but

I also had an equal amount of love for Rudyard Kipling's drastically different original book. It feels almost blasphemous to go against the mind-blowing designs of Milt Kahl, but if Kipling's characters were in my hands I would take heavier inspiration from their book descriptions — Shere Khan sporting a lame paw, Kaa being a wise, ancient force to be reckoned with, Baloo being a philosopher rather than a bumbling jazz hound, and I would include Tabaqui the jackal. There are a lot of different ways to explore these characters in opposition to the interpretations we've come to accept as classic. I think it would be a lot of fun!

**Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us, Saira. We've loved looking at your work and wish you the best luck in your career.**

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to showcase my work and talk about what I'm truly passionate about! CDQ is always a source of inspiration and insight — it's been a privilege speaking to you guys! I can't wait to dive into the industry and hopefully be part of a group of people just as enthusiastic about storytelling and design as I am.



**"I CAN'T WAIT TO DIVE INTO THE INDUSTRY  
AND HOPEFULLY BE PART OF A GROUP OF  
PEOPLE JUST AS ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT  
STORYTELLING AND DESIGN AS I AM"**



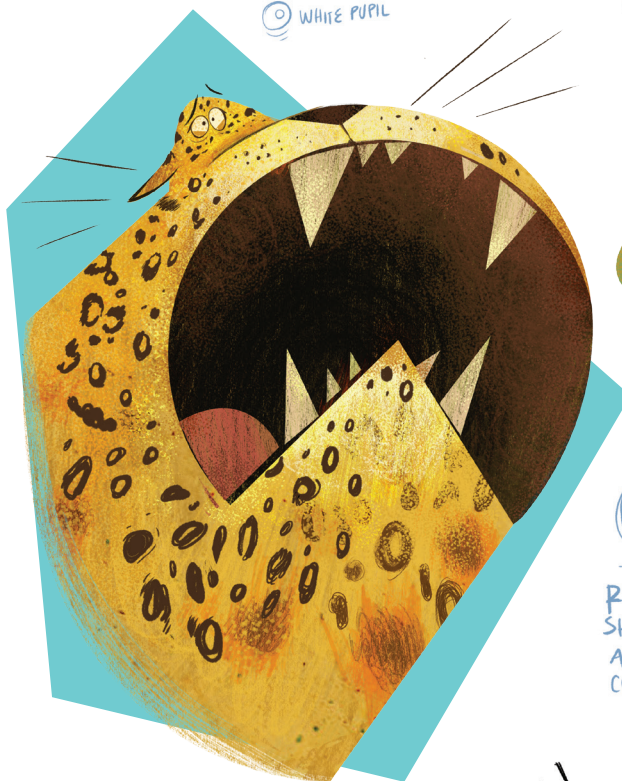
This pages: Having two characters  
with contrasting personalities  
interact is always a fun opportunity  
to exaggerate their differences

# expressing emotions: **TRUST AND FEAR**

**FELIPE RODRIGUEZ**

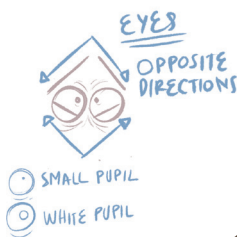
To explore the emotions of characters, you must first understand the shapes the design is composed of and modify and break them according to the intensity of the feeling. In animation, each character plays a specific role, so each must have their own way of expressing themselves – your main character's fears may be different than your villain's. The tone of each emotion is also important – feeling trusted and arrogant can be different from feeling trusted and relaxed.

## **FEAR**

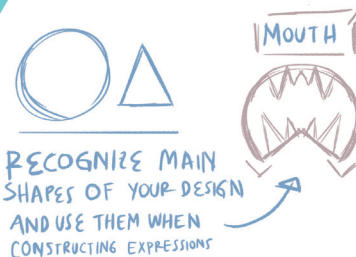


## **RECOGNIZE THE MAIN SHAPES**

Start by analyzing the shapes that make up your design in its simplest form and combine them according to expression. If you have triangles and circles as your main shapes, use them repeatedly in both facial and body expressions.



THE JAGUAR

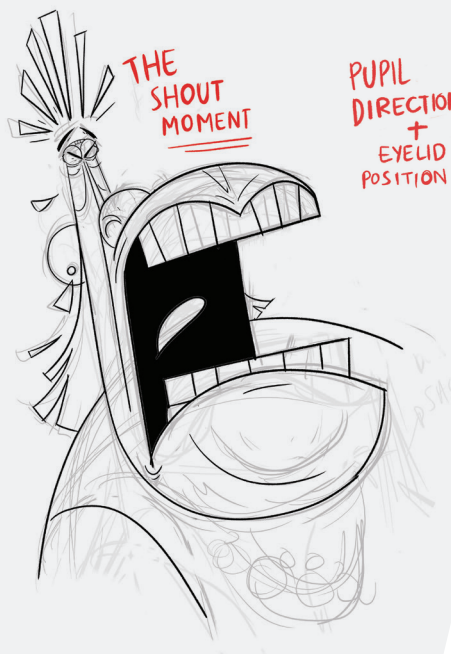




# FEAR

## THINK ABOUT THE SITUATION

To recognize the different tones of an emotion, imagine the situation and the moment of reaction. Your character's expression of fear may be different when they are anxious something bad might happen, from when that bad thing is actually happening!



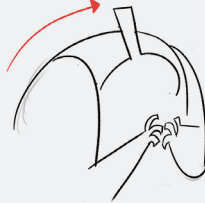
PUPIL DIRECTION + EYELID POSITION



MOUSE FEAR

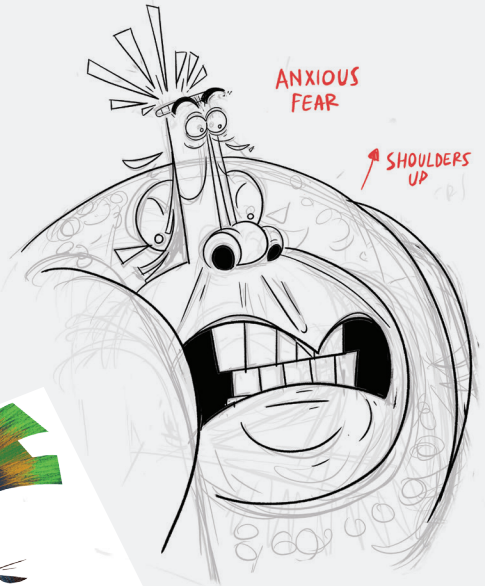


COLUMN DIRECTION



ANXIOUS FEAR

SHOULDERS UP



TOOTH MISALIGNMENT



## LEARN FROM FILM

One of the main resources for understanding how characters act is cinema. Look for actors and actresses that relate to the personality of your character and extract from them ways to express emotions. Film language can also help you understand how to place your character in front of the camera.

# THE photographer



## FEAR

SQUASH & STRETCH BY SHAPES



SMALL DRAWS TO EXPLORE LEVELS OF EXAGGERATION



STRETCH UP

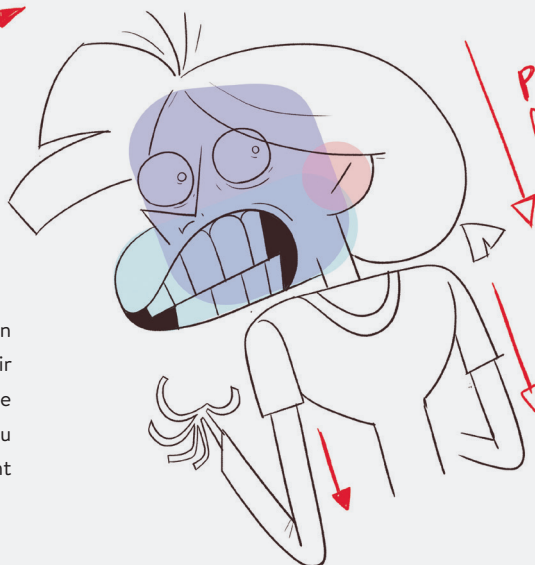
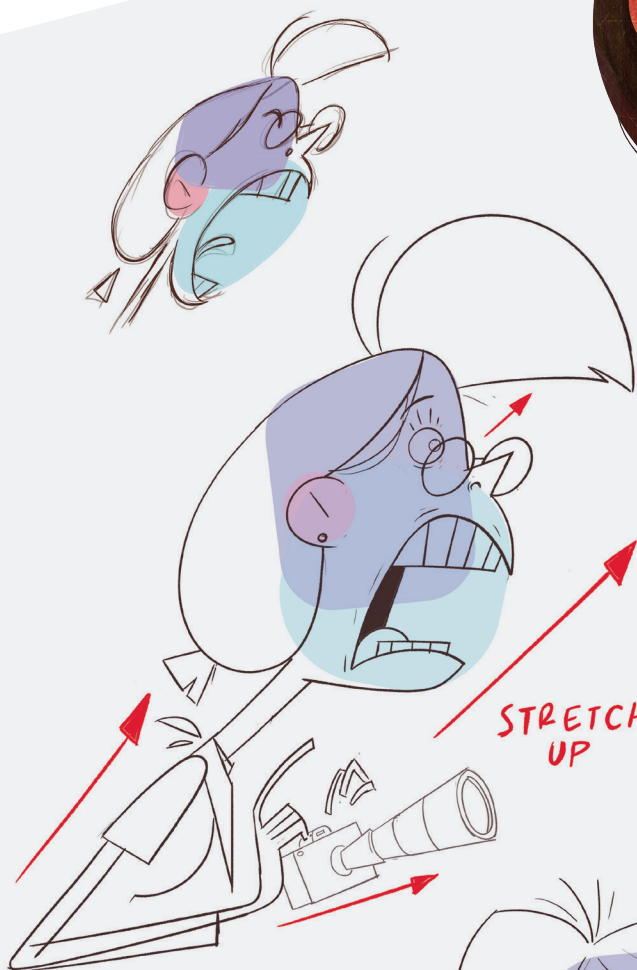
PUSH DOWN



USE HANDS  
THINK IN SHAPE  
BEFORE STRUCTURE

## PUSHING SHAPES

Push the shapes in your design according to the direction of their reaction. Contract and stretch the shapes individually – this will allow you to concentrate the emotion at different points on their face or body.





## THINK THE EMOTION IN MOVEMENT

HOW IS THE CHARACTER  
BEHAVIOR?

### EMOTION THROUGH MOVEMENT

Understand how emotion would affect your character's behaviour and movements. Even the way they walk can tell the audience a lot about how a character feels.

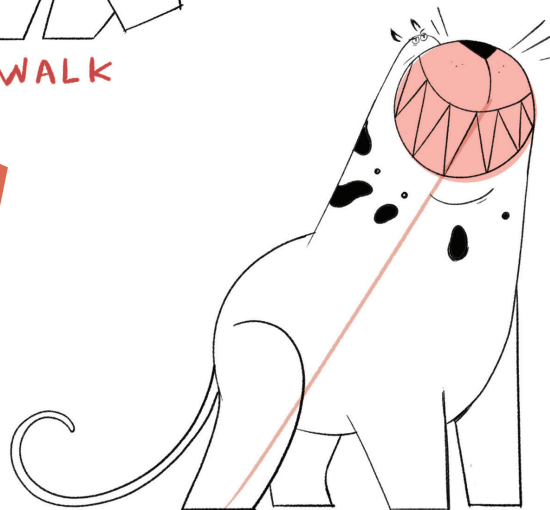
THE  
JAGUAR



JUMP WALK



WALK



STAND

### THINK SIMPLE

Start with simple shapes that express the emotion you want your character to feel. Once you have this essence of the emotion in place, then add layers of complexity. It can be useful to make miniature drawings very quickly to find the emotion that's right.

## TRUST



LINE OF ACTION  
TARGETS FACIAL  
EXPRESSION

## COMBINE EMOTIONS

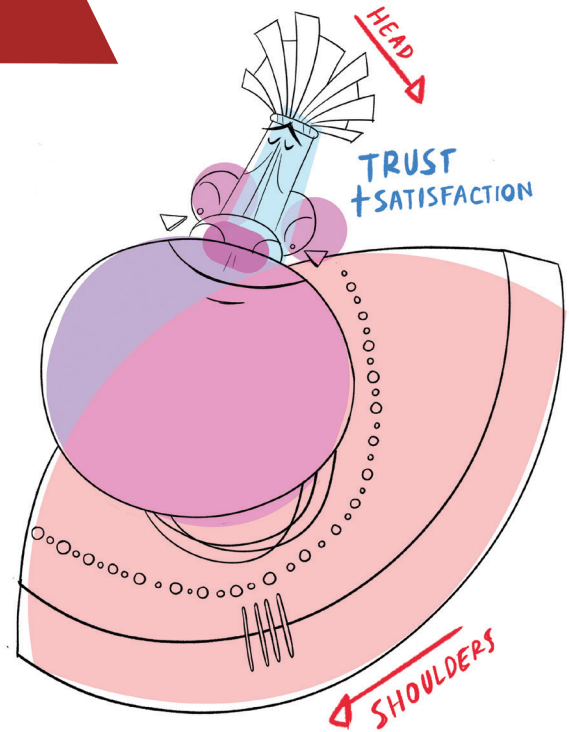
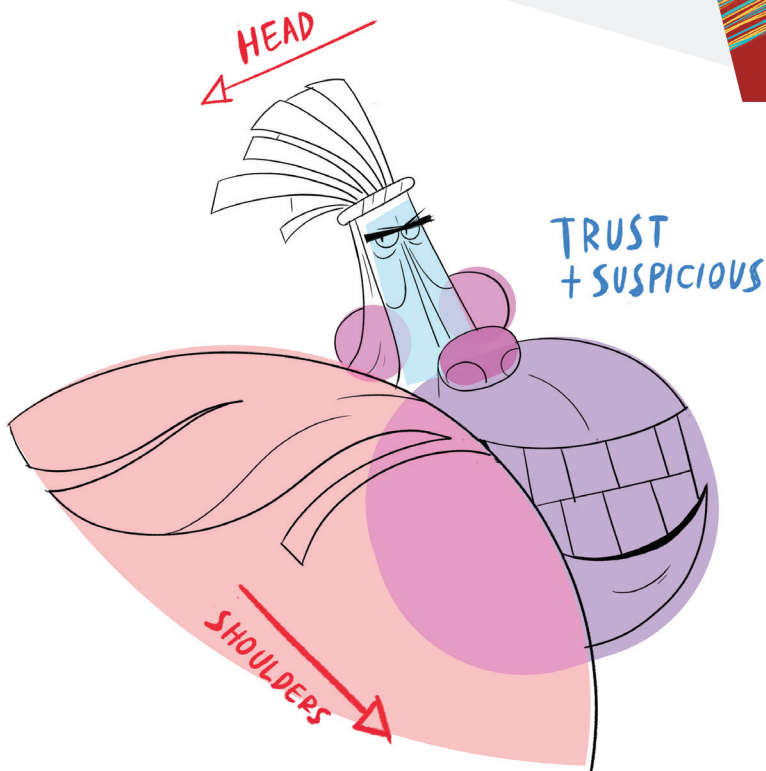
# TRUST

## COMBINING EMOTIONS

Blend several emotions together to find new ways for characters to express themselves. Tilting the head and shoulders can add different tones to emotions.

CHAMAN

## USE HEAD + SHOULDERS DIRECTIONS





## ENJOY IT!

Put yourself in the role of your character – if you want them to laugh, then you should try laughing, too! Acting out the emotions will help you get closer to the character and will make the whole process more enjoyable.

TRUST  
+ THREAT

THE  
photographer

# TRUST

## SHAPES, SHAPES AND MORE SHAPES

When your character needs to react with a more extreme emotion you can reiterate shapes in the design to exaggerate their expressions. Don't forget, your character is part of a story and the shapes that are part of their design represent their unique role and help them stand out.

FRENETIC  
LINES TO  
INDICATE  
CRAZINESS

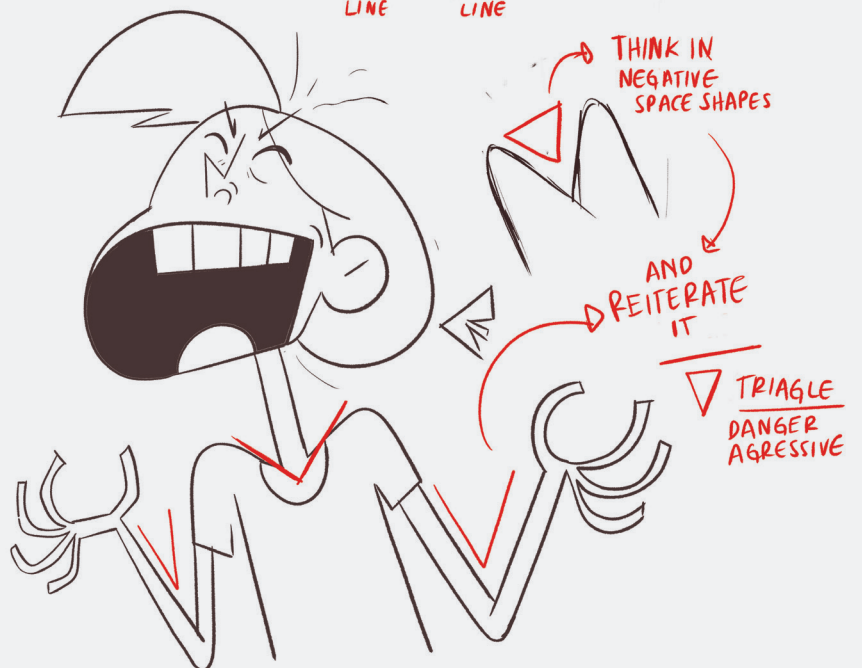
SCHEMATIC  
LINE

FRENETIC  
LINE

THINK IN  
NEGATIVE  
SPACE SHAPES

AND  
REITERATE  
IT

TRIANGLE  
DANGER  
AGRESSIVE



CHARACTERIZE THIS:

# VILLAINOUS VEHICLE

ARCHINA LAEZZA

As a children's illustrator, I focus on creating characters that are appealing and fun for kids and trying to give them as much life as I can. Let me show you how to create a character from a simple two-word brief in a quick and effective way. I'm using Procreate on my iPad — let's begin!



villainous vehicle

angry expression  
punk/rock vibes  
shabby/broken parts

a flying vehicle/a car  
vintage/futuristic

## BRAINSTORMING BEGINNINGS

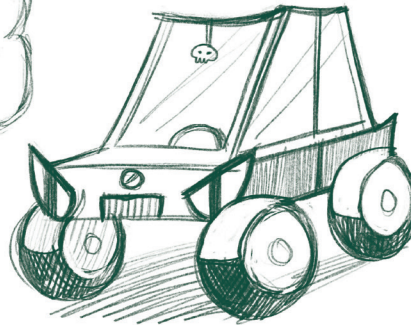
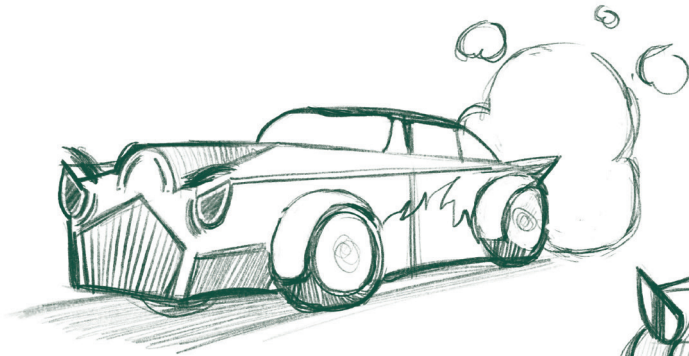
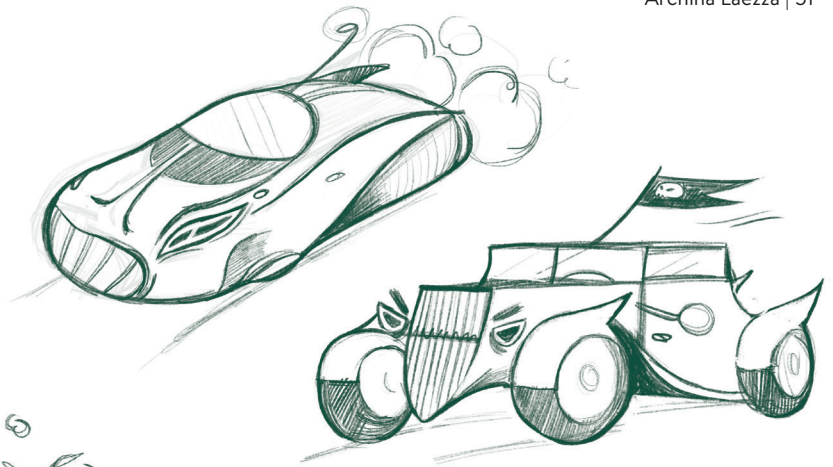
The first step is take your brief and write down everything that comes to mind. Writing out your thoughts will help to organize your ideas and give a clearer mental image of your characters even before you start to sketch. And when I say write down

everything, I mean everything, even things that seem trivial or off topic! Write it all down so you can free those ideas from your mind and move on to more original thoughts.



## PICK A CAR, ANY CAR

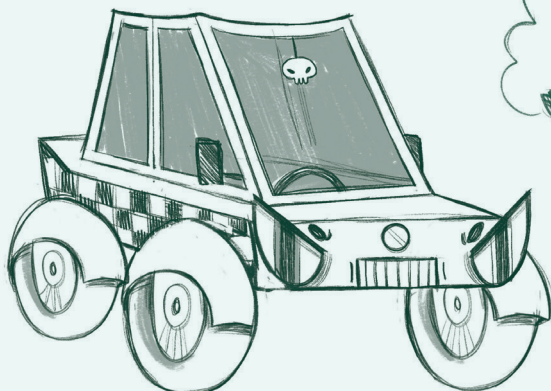
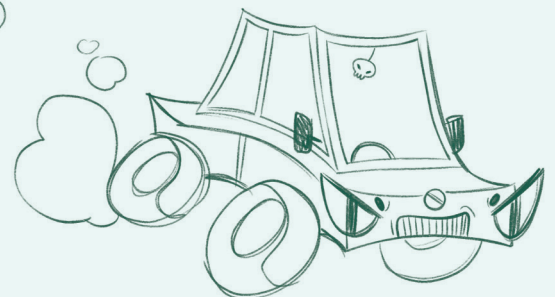
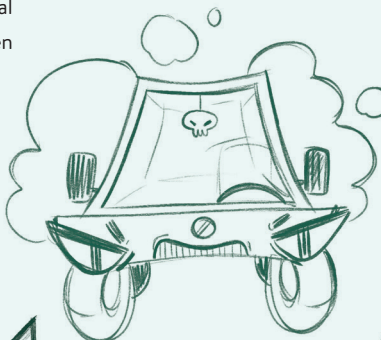
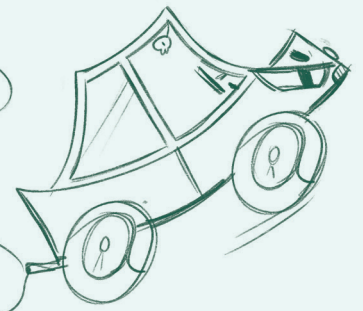
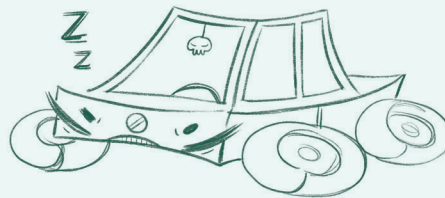
Even if you have a clear idea of what your character is going to look like, sketch different options just to make sure you explore all possibilities. Often, I've found myself choosing a design that was in no way similar to what I had originally imagined! Play around with different shapes and start noticing which sketch appeals to you the most, and what is most fitting for the brief.



**“OFTEN, I’VE FOUND MYSELF CHOOSING A DESIGN THAT WAS IN NO WAY SIMILAR TO WHAT I HAD ORIGINALLY IMAGINED!”**

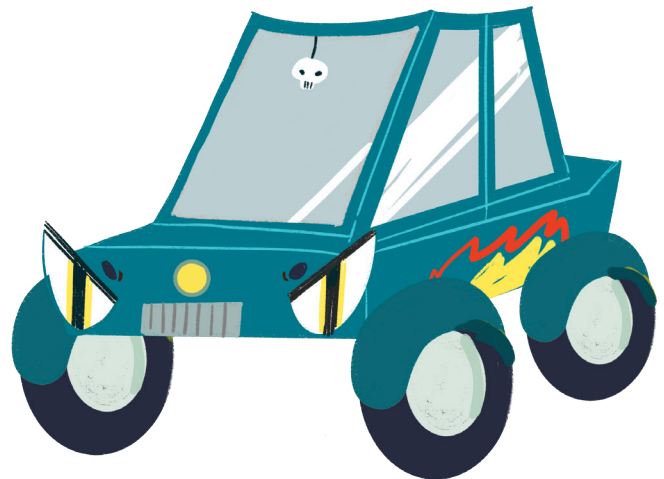
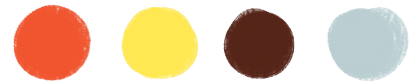
## PLAYING WITH POSES

Choose one of the sketches and redraw it in different poses and with different expressions. This helps you understand whether or not the character will work from different angles. It will also help you make it more dynamic and expressive. “Dynamicity” is a crucial element of any character design, especially so when designing for children.



## CHOOSE A PAINT JOB

When choosing the colors, create at least three thumbnails with different color palettes and compare them to see which one works best. Choose one dominant color for each palette, one dark color, one light color, and a color that contrasts with the dominant one. Be careful not to use too many colors during this phase and don't get lost in the details — the thumbnails need to be useful, not pretty!

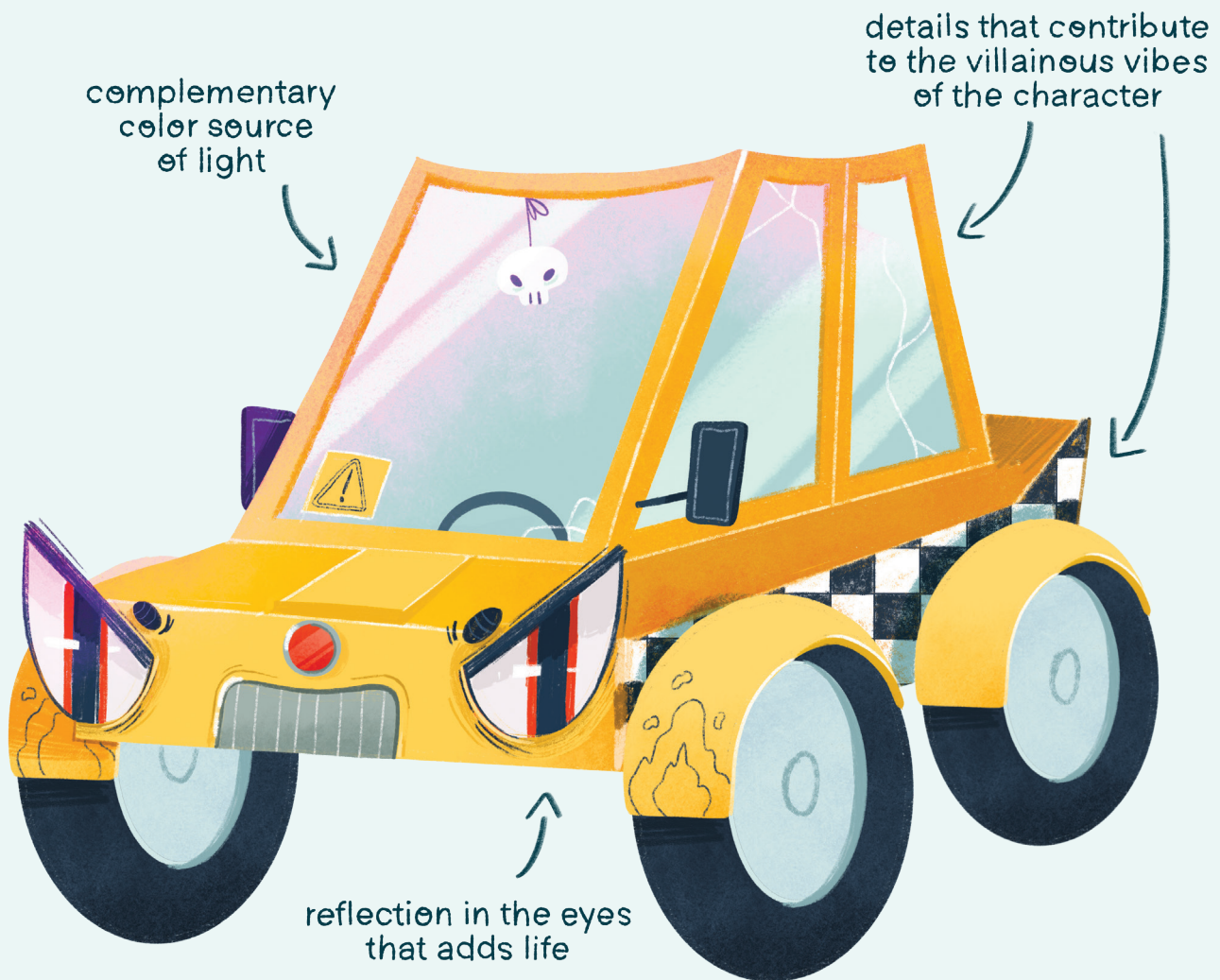


## KEEPING IT WHEEL

With a color palette chosen, we can now lay down the flat colors accurately, and start to add textures and shadows to give the character dimension.







## A CAR IS BORN

All that's left to do is bring the character to life! Have fun with this last step, adding quirky details and captivating lights and shadows. Look back at the notes you wrote at the start of the design

process and incorporate the best keywords into your design. And there we have it — in no time at all, we've taken a simple, two-word brief, and created a brand-new character from scratch!





# FRUIT... WITH FEELINGS!

## JOHANNA FORSTER

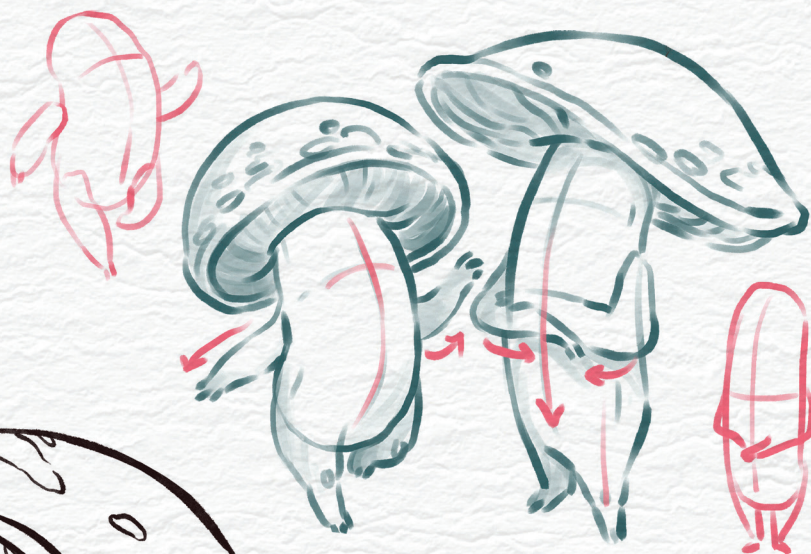
My most popular characters are probably my Grunlings – cute, anthropomorphic fruit and vegetable characters. They are spirits of nature and a great help in the garden if you befriend them!

To create your own expressive yet minimalistic characters like these, you need to break down the body language of an emotion to its essential components. When working on

the initial sketch, imagine the character's body parts as being soft and flexible beans! Depending on the tension of a pose, they will lean in specific directions. By looking at some opposing emotions, we can see how playing with body parts can lead to strikingly different results. I'll sketch out six characters with different characteristics, and then refine the designs into line drawings.

### SILLY CHAMPIGNON, SERIOUS SHIITAKE

For a playful pose push the character's chest forward confidently and throw their arms and legs in different directions. Their body language should be very open. In contrast, a serious pose will need a straighter design, with body parts stiff and directed towards the center of the body.



### CLEANING UP THE FRUIT AND VEG

Now we have the basic postures we're happy with, we can add additional layers of detail for a cleaner line drawing. At this stage, decide which details from the sketch to keep and further accentuate the shape of the characters.



## SHY STRAWBERRY, BRASH BLUEBERRY

A self-confident body stretches outwards, with face and torso pushed forward and open to the world. To show a shy posture have your character hide his torso, pulling his arms, head or both inwards towards their center.



**“START BY DEPICTING THE  
FACIAL EXPRESSION YOU’RE  
AFTER IN DETAIL, AND THEN  
REDUCE DETAIL AND REMOVE AS  
MANY ELEMENTS AS YOU CAN”**



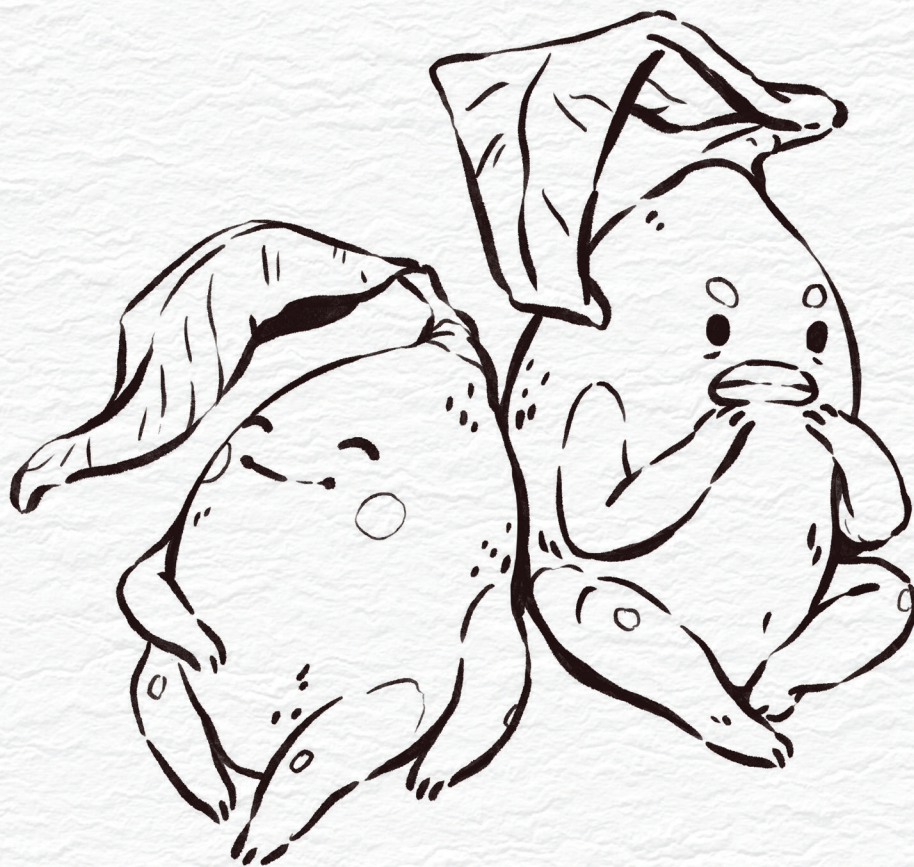
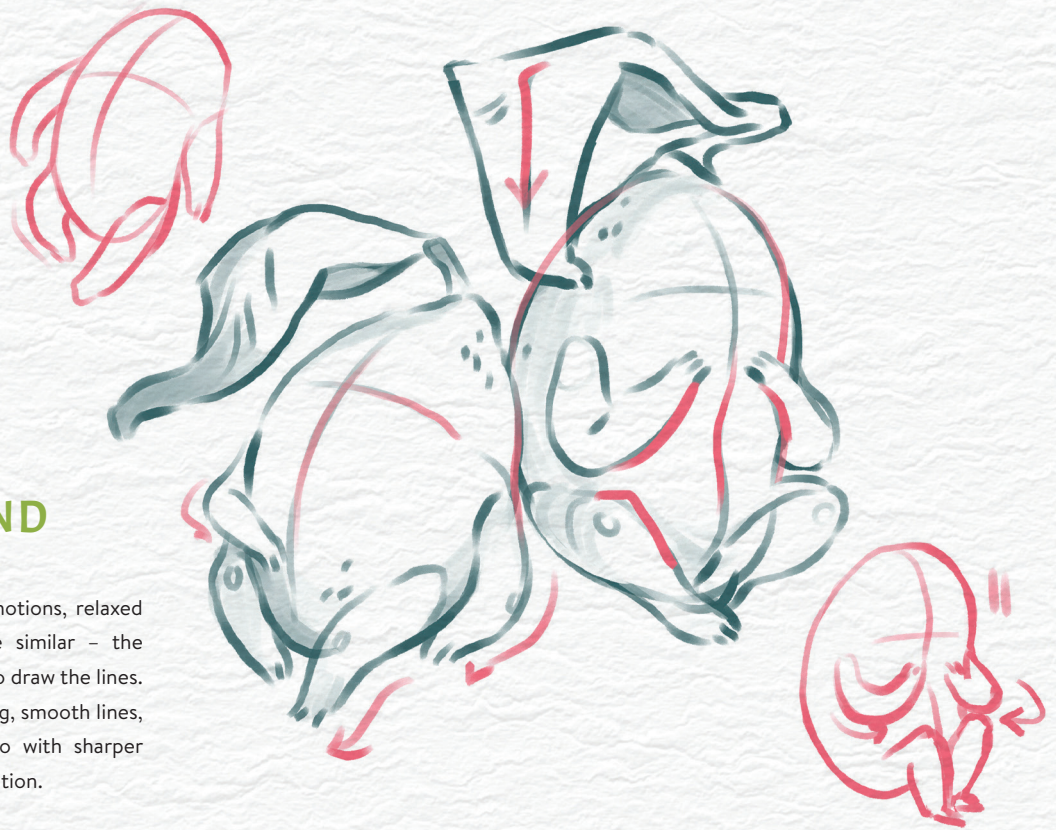
## MINIMALIZING EMOTIONS

For minimalistic facial expressions, experiment with possible options on a separate layer. Start by depicting the facial expression you’re after in detail, and then reduce detail and remove as many elements as you can while still conveying the desired emotion.



## LOOSE LIME AND TENSE LEMON

Despite being very different emotions, relaxed and tense poses can be quite similar – the difference is in how we choose to draw the lines. For the relaxed figure use flowing, smooth lines, and for the tense character go with sharper angles and a more defensive position.



## CUTE FRUIT

For an extra cute facial expression try moving your character's mouth close to their eyes, and put more weight on the corners of the mouth. Reusing the bean shape from earlier for the eyebrows will also help!

## STAY LOOSE

It's important to avoid adding detail to your drawing for as long as possible, trying out several quick bean poses and facial expressions until you are happy the basic design captures the emotion you're going for. It helps to use a big, soft brush for the early iterations and only switch to a hard, ink-like brush for the final drawing.



## EXPRESSING EMOTION IN HUMANS

The bean sketching technique I've used in this tutorial is best suited to minimalistic, chubby characters (like my fruit and veggies!) but it can also work with human proportions – just integrate a more detailed shape for the head and draw the limbs bigger.





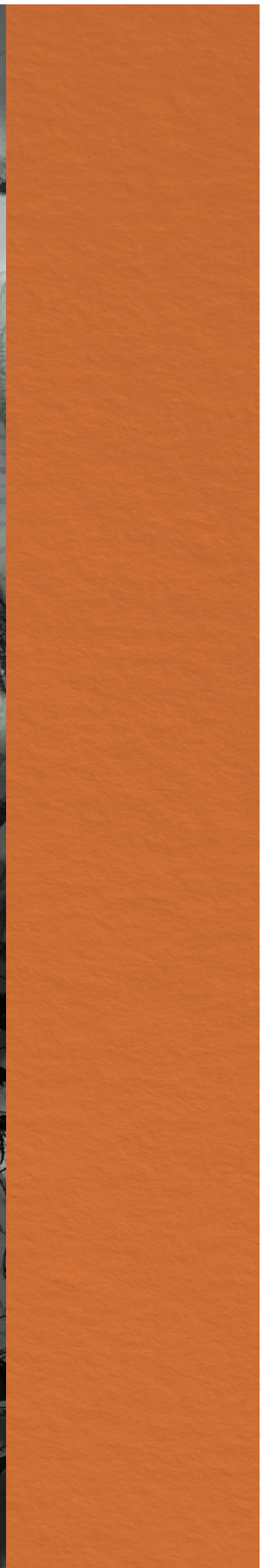


MEET THE ARTIST:

# SANDRO CLEUZO

Sandro Cleuzo is an incredibly talented Brazilian animator and designer who has been working in the industry since 1985. His work has taken him all around the world, creating characters and animation for all of the big animation studios. We sat down with Sandro to find out how he got started in the industry, what his favorite projects have been, and what has changed and stayed the same throughout his long and illustrious career.







**Hi Sandro, thanks so much for taking the time to talk to us. Could you tell us a little about yourself and what you do?**

I'm a character designer and animator, and I've been working in the industry for 35 years. I started my career at a very young age, back in 1985, when I was hired at one of the most important animation studios in my hometown of Sao Paulo, Brazil – I was 15 years old. The studio produced hand-animated TV commercials and was an amazing place to learn my craft. After four years there I was hired at Don Bluth Studios in Dublin, Ireland, working on animated feature films, which had always been my long-term goal. In 1997 I fulfilled a lifelong dream by moving to Walt Disney Feature Animation and began contributing to the rich legacy of animated Disney features. Today, I work as a freelancer for many studios, as either an animator or character designer. I've worked for Disney, Bluth, Sony, Laika, Warner Brothers, Paramount, and many others.

**What first interested you about character design and why did you decide to follow that career path?**

I've always loved to draw, since I was very young. My parents told me that as a small child I would ask my aunts and cousins to pose for me! I would draw all sorts of things around the house, like furniture and appliances. I also loved watching animated cartoons. We had a channel in the early 80s that showed all kinds of cartoons from Japan, America, and Europe, so I was so exposed to many different styles from a young age. I used to watch the shows with paper and pencil in hand and would copy the characters, trying to learn how to draw each of them.

At that time I had no idea I would be able to work in animation, nor that there were studios producing shows right there in São Paulo. However, I knew there were comic books published locally, so I started drawing my own. One day at school, I finished a geography test



This page: *Two Ladies and a Cowboy*

Opposite page: *Small Feet Joe*

early and, with time to spare, pulled out my pencils and started to draw as I waited for the rest of the class to finish. My teacher saw what I was doing and asked if she could borrow the books I'd finished so far. I excitedly agreed, but didn't ask why she would want them – only later did I realize she had sent them to the biggest and most famous comic-book studio in Brazil, Mauricio De Sousa! De Sousa created the most popular comic-book characters in Brazil, many of which are still popular today. They liked my comics and offered me an internship there. I was only 14 years old and would go to the studio every day after school.

The switch from comics to animation happened by chance. While on my internship at the comic-book studio, I met a lady who was an animator for the same company – their animation department was in a separate building, so I had no idea they even existed. I showed some interest and so she took me to visit their studio and the whole experience was magical. It was the first time I saw the equipment that animators used and how their desks were different. I remember, she grabbed

a stack of paper from her desk and started flipping through the pages – on each page a character was posed slightly differently and, as the pages flashed passed my eyes, the drawing came to life. Right then and there I knew this was what I wanted to do – the animation bug had bitten me!

When I returned to my desk at the comic-book studio, the supervisor called me into the office. She had heard that I had visited the animation department and wanted to work there, so she fired me on the spot! She was so mad that I wanted to switch to animation. I was surprised how badly she reacted and felt devastated for being kicked out – I felt like I had let my parents and teachers down. Little did I know it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I found the perfect job at one of the most prestigious animation studios at the time, Briquet Films, and there I began to really learn my craft. Without leaving the comic-book studio, I may never have had the chance to work there, so everything turned out for the best in the end!







**You have worked in this industry for a while. How has the industry changed since you started your career?**

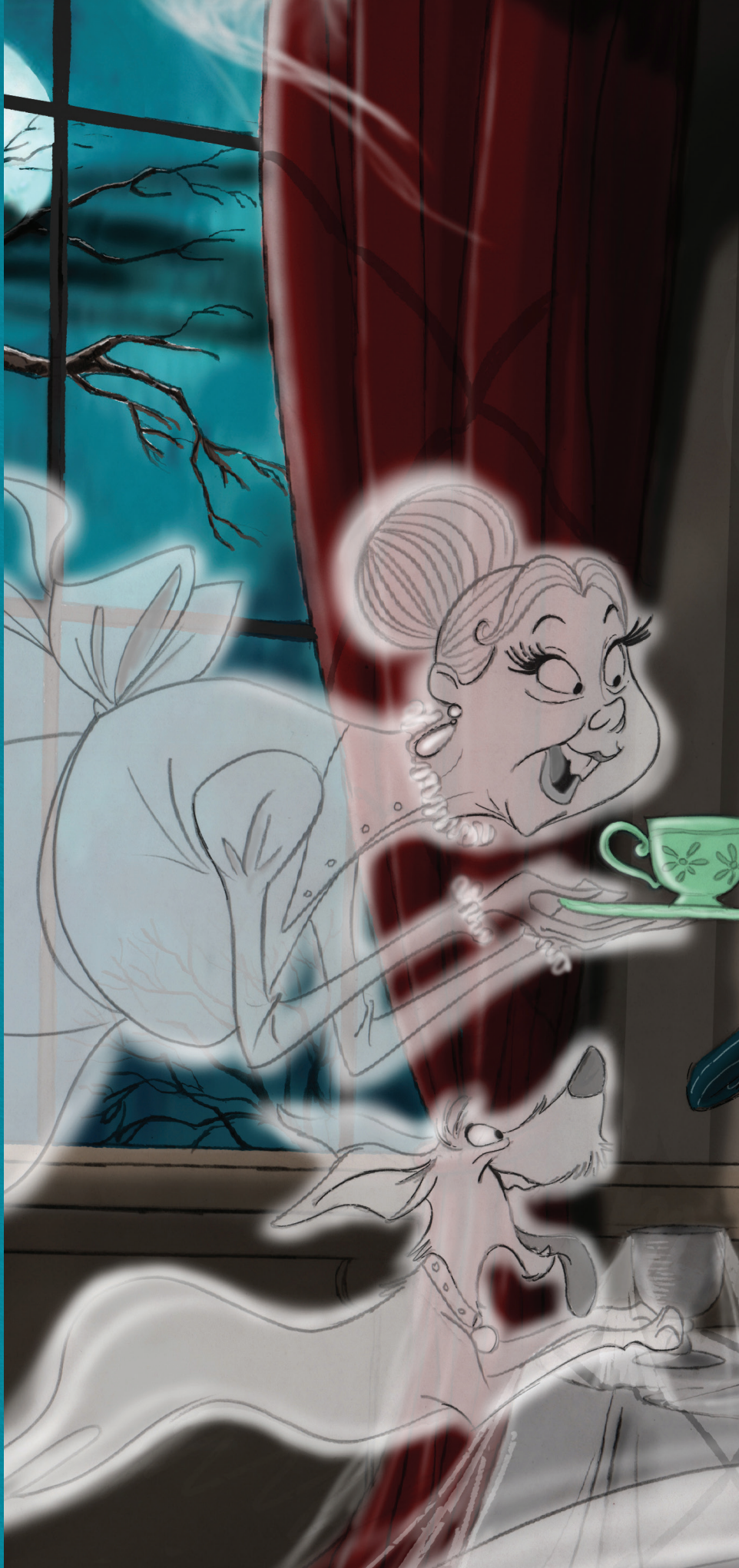
To be honest, it has changed quite a lot. When I started in the mid 80s, we produced all our work by hand, no computers at all. All the animation was done on paper and transferred to acetate cels, painted by hand and then shot on camera with film. When I moved to Don Bluth Studios and worked on feature films, we were still using the acetate to paint the artwork and were still shooting on film, but we were starting to add some computer backgrounds here and there. This was the early 90s and computer animation was still very primitive at the time – any complex backgrounds were painted traditionally on paper with acrylic paint.

Back then, we'd also have a traditional, physical portfolio, usually black leather bound, where we kept our best work. When we were applying for positions, we would physically ship the portfolio to the studios and were forever afraid of it getting lost in transit! These days, artists have their work online and some are even hired on the strength of their work posted on Instagram or Facebook.

Another major difference is that nowadays you can basically create your own animation project from home, with a computer, a digital tablet, and a few programs. When I started it was simply impossible to do it all by yourself.

As much as the technology has changed, the creative challenges are still very similar. We are still drawing characters on paper or digitally, and when animating them we are still thinking about the acting and storytelling in the same ways.

This spread: *The Visit*



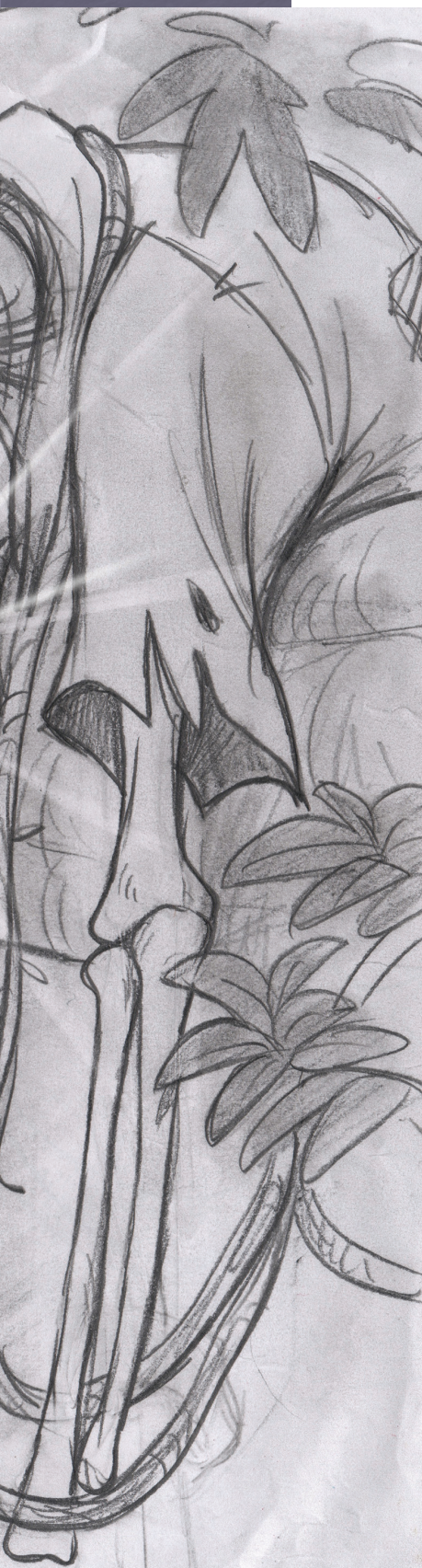












**Besides Disney, what are the other notable studios you've worked with, and have you noticed a difference between how they operate?**

I've also worked for Laika, Sony, Paramount, Dreamworks, and Warner Brothers. Each studio has its own culture and way of doing things, but it doesn't really change the way I work – I'm still drawing or animating, and I approach it in the same way. I also love to change styles, and working for various studios allows me to do that.

**What is your process when working on an animated sequence for a movie – the penguins in *Mary Poppins Returns* for example?**

On *Mary Poppins Returns* I was an animator only. We did it all on paper, the way we used to do it,

and I approached the project the same way I always have. I would be issued a shot and would talk with the animation director to understand what the scene was about and what specifically they were looking for. Next, I listened to the soundtrack and started planning the animation by doing some small thumbnails. When I had something I thought worked, I started doing the actual animation drawings. I would do the main key drawings in rough and do a pencil test to show the director and get their feedback. With their approval, I would then do a second pass where I brought the drawings on-model, adding all the final details, and then do a new test and get approval again before moving on to the next shot. A shot with all four penguins in would take a couple of weeks to do.

**Opposite page:** A character for a personal project in the style of Indiana Jones

**This page:** *Grandma*



This spread:

*Don Quixote*

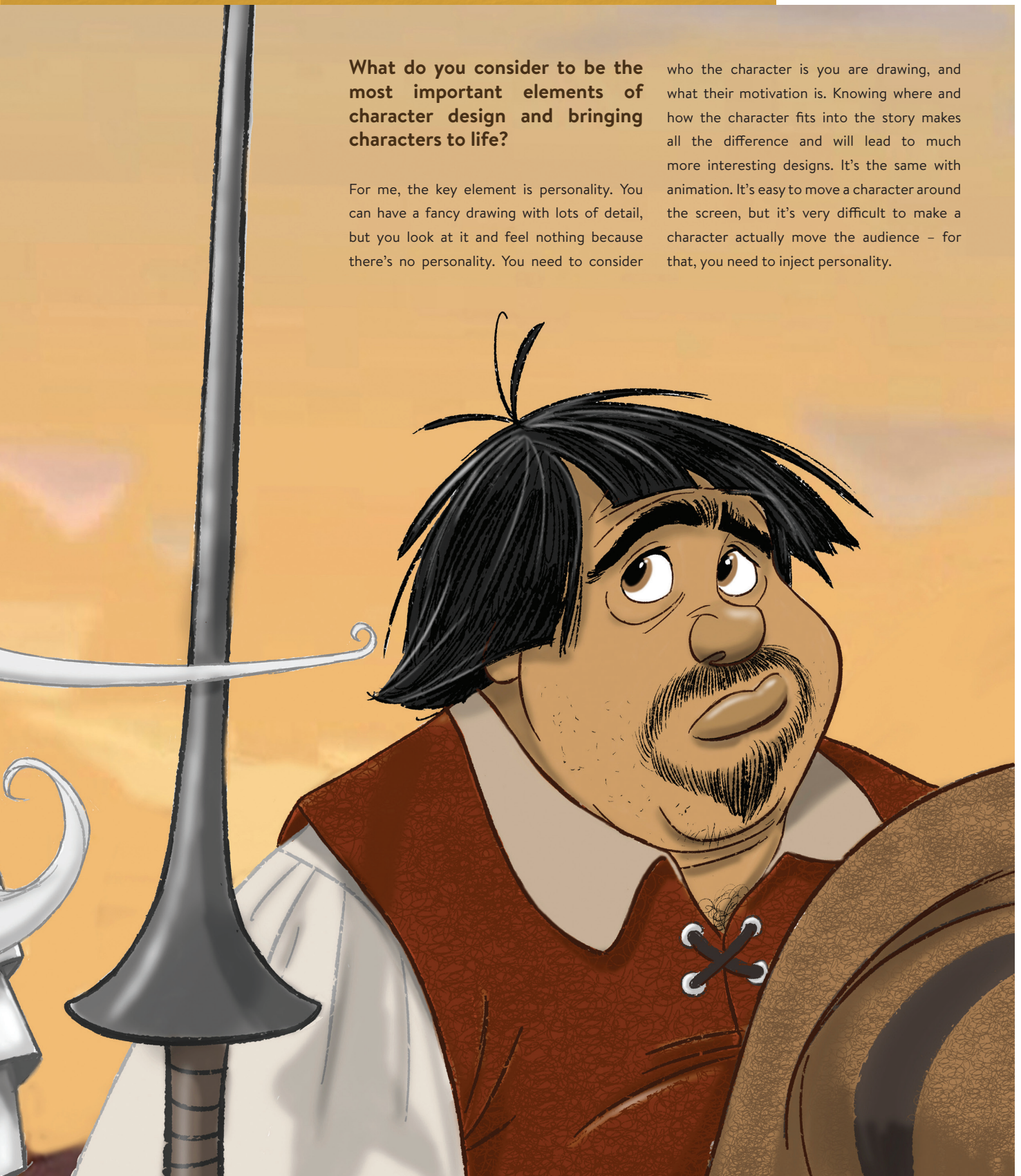




**What do you consider to be the most important elements of character design and bringing characters to life?**

For me, the key element is personality. You can have a fancy drawing with lots of detail, but you look at it and feel nothing because there's no personality. You need to consider

who the character is you are drawing, and what their motivation is. Knowing where and how the character fits into the story makes all the difference and will lead to much more interesting designs. It's the same with animation. It's easy to move a character around the screen, but it's very difficult to make a character actually move the audience – for that, you need to inject personality.







**What are the independent challenges you face as someone who has seen the industry develop as much as it has since you first started your career?**

For me, the challenge is always the technology – there's always something new to learn. Also, competition is at an all-time high and you need to make yourself seen, especially if you're a freelancer. You have to be engaged with all the social-media platforms, posting your work constantly which, for me, is not easy. Animation work also tends to be on a project-to-project basis these days, so you constantly need to be thinking about where you're going to work next.

**If you could go back and give your younger self a piece of advice, what would it be? Was there a project you wish you had taken, or something you wish you had done sooner rather than later?**

If I could, I would force my younger self to make his own animated short film. It's something I miss and I would still like to do and get it out of my system. As for a project I wish I had taken, I would say Disney's *Zootopia*. I was offered a role as part of the design team, but I couldn't take it at the time. That film is absolutely the style that I love to work with.

**What new projects should we look out for in 2021?**

Make sure to look out for Warner Brothers' *Space Jam: A New Legacy* and a beautiful Brazilian animated film called *Perlimps*, from the director of *Boy and the World*. The latter is a very artistic work and a totally different design style than mine, but as I said before, I love to change styles when I can.

This page:  
*The Meeting*

Opposite page:  
*A new friend*







# CHARACTERIZE THIS:

# MOON,

# HAIR

## ISAAC JADRAQUE

In this article I will explain the process I have followed designing a character from the following prompts: hair and moon. From the start, I looked for inspiration from classic characters, such as the werewolf, and in stories associated with the mysticism of the moon. All the work was completed digitally, specifically in Photoshop and Procreate. Join me on this short, but intense, journey.



### IDEAS, COME TO ME!

To start it's good to draw or write what ideas, concepts, and associations come to mind. I liked the idea of a beard "coming to life," so I needed to draw a character with a very long beard, to give me room to play with this concept.



### LET IT BREATHE

When you get stuck with an idea or design, stop looking at it for a while. Get up, go for a walk, have a drink, or even save it for the next day if you have time!



## WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY?

Look for the pose that best tells the story or situation of the character at a particular moment. Pay attention to making sure the silhouette is clear and readable.

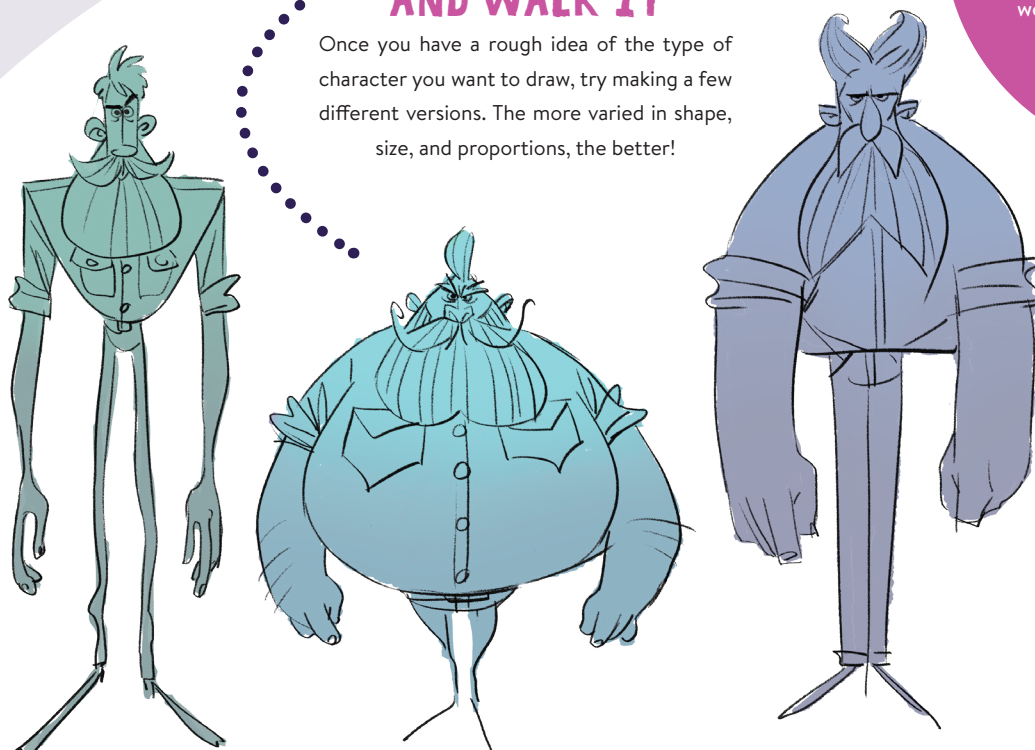


## FIND YOUR WORKFLOW

Not all designers follow the same steps, or in the same order. Find a workflow that combines creativity and efficiency, and suits you.

## CHOOSE A PATH AND WALK IT

Once you have a rough idea of the type of character you want to draw, try making a few different versions. The more varied in shape, size, and proportions, the better!





## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Even if you aren't going to animate your character, I recommend you draw a front and profile view, to get a general idea of the volume. You don't need to do a full turnaround, these two angles should suffice.



## DON'T GET HUNG UP ON COLOR

There are great designers who rarely put color in their designs (e.g. Carter Goodrich). In character design, although color can sometimes be key to a brief, it is more important to focus on the rhythm, silhouette, and emotions of the character.

## WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

Whenever you can, try to add more detail to the character's backstory. I wanted to do some scenes and expressions that would show what it would be like to fight with your own beard. I think this could lead to some funny situations!





**HIPSTER!  
MONSTER!**



## **A HAIR-RAISING FINALE**

For the final design I usually try for a fairly organic look, halfway between sketch and a highly polished finish. I add some textures and backlighting, and the Hipster Monster takes flight!







# REIMAGINING MOTHER NATURE

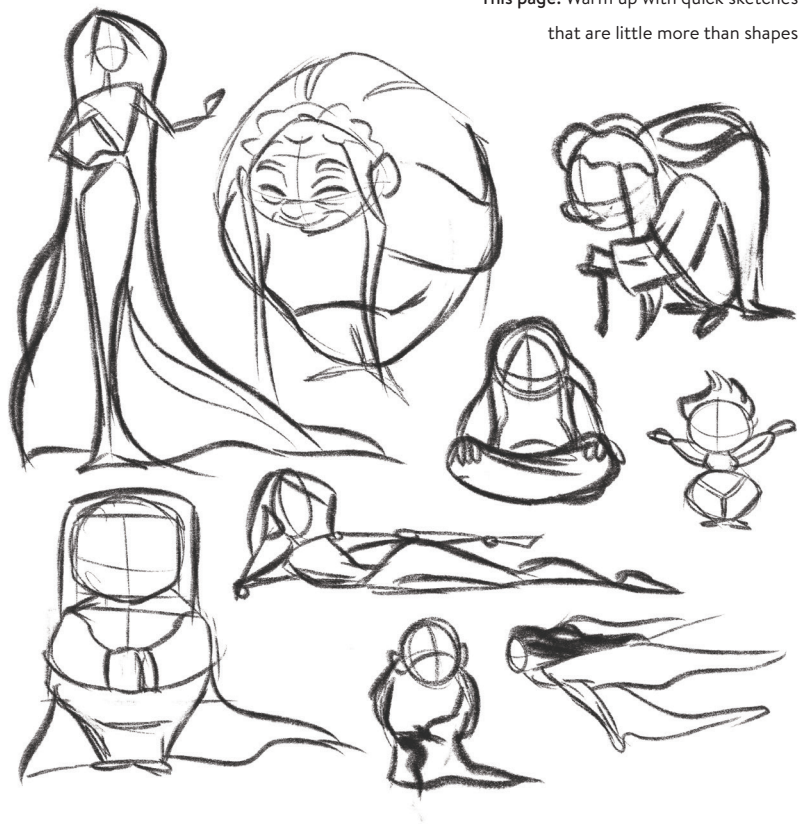
## MARGANA (AKA MARTA GARCÍA NAVARRO)

Being able to re-imagine characters is one of my favorite things about being an illustrator. When you hear a story or read a book, your mind can't help but imagine how the characters might look. That's the magic of reimagining a character – even though there may be many drawings or interpretations of Red Riding Hood, for example, you can always change whatever you dislike and redesign the character as your imagination desires. In this tutorial, I'm designing a new take on Mother Nature, and I inevitably have *Moana's* goddess Te Fiti in mind. But I start thinking about my own design. Mother Nature has always been there, right? She must be old...

### THE SAME, BUT DIFFERENT

When I design a character that is not originally mine, I always do some research on the various interpretations of them already covered. For example, take Hansel and Gretel – you can think of the innocent little siblings or the older witch-hunter movie version of them. We're doing the same with Mother Nature. As I said, I have Te Fiti in mind, but we want our character to stand out and be different from other designs. With that in mind, I try sketching different basic shapes, from rectangles to circles, from tall to short. I don't waste time with details at this stage and just draw quick, rough sketches of the idea and let my mind wander.

This page: Warm up with quick sketches that are little more than shapes



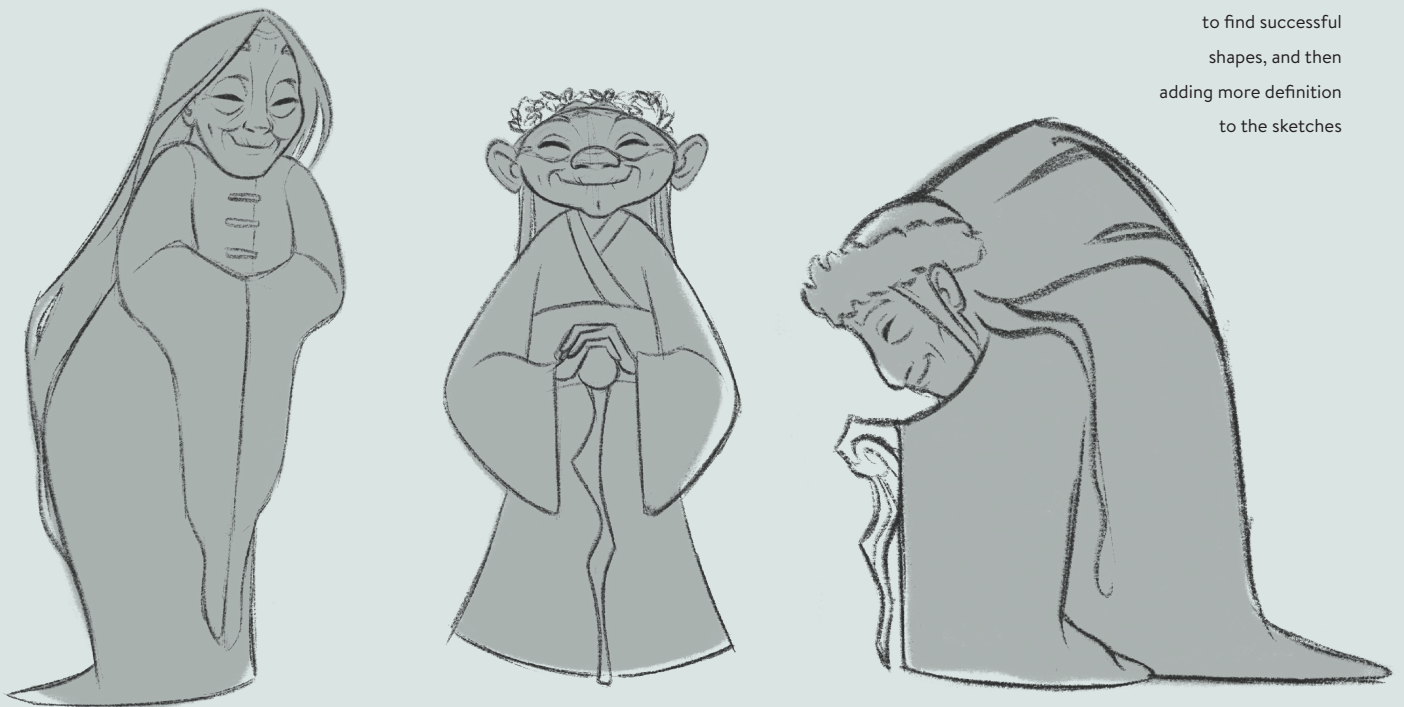


## AN IDEA TAKES SHAPE

When you're creating a character, you have to be open to extreme shapes. Try the silhouette technique, which involves drawing random opaque forms to use as the character's outline. This practice allows you to expand your possibilities when looking for the perfect design – it's an easy and very popular technique used by many illustrators and character designers. I always start with basic shapes (as shown in step one), but now I try to add a little more detail to them, defining limbs and hairstyles. Don't be afraid of extremes with these early sketches; try drawing unproportioned shapes and experiment with various sizes of the character.



This page: Using the silhouette technique to find successful shapes, and then adding more definition to the sketches





## UNEARTHING MOTHER NATURE

Now that I've drawn several sketches and silhouette ideas for the character, I choose one or two I like best and create thumbnails based on them. At this stage, it's fine to draw different poses and add props, for example a walking stick, but I still need to keep things simple. Do I want Mother Nature to be big or small, tall or short? Does she have wings, or wear a kimono? I want to create a unique and original take on the character, so I need to take all the preconceptions of Mother Nature and flip them on their head to make her stand out from other designs. I decide that I want her to look like a wise old grandma.

**This page:** Drawing thumbnails and settling on a general design idea



## THAT CERTAIN SOMETHING

"Appeal" is that essential something that every character must have. I don't mean "pretty," but interesting to look at. Think of The Little Mermaid's villain, Ursula. She's not conventionally attractive, but she has that special something that makes her an interesting character from a designer's point of view. Her curves, pointy hair, colors, and tentacles

all combine to make her appealing. For this step, it's important to use references. If you find yourself having trouble drawing an expression, for example, do some research and base your drawing on a reference photo or picture. And don't worry, it's not cheating! In my opinion, looking is the best way to learn when drawing.



## EXPRESS YOURSELF!

Now I want to capture the expressions that come to mind when I think about my character. Having a background story in mind is useful when trying to make them look more believable. This is a very important part of the process, because choosing an expression for a character determines their personality and shows part of their story. In this instance, I have no story or description to work from, no brief from an agency or studio describing how I need to reimagine Mother Nature, so it's up to me to decide if I make her good or bad... It all depends on the story you have in your head! At this stage, I usually draw four different expressions from different angles.



## HAIR-RAISING IDEAS

Hairstyle could be considered a small detail, but actually it can say a lot about a character. A Mohawk could imply the character is a punk or a biker for example. Even if I have a specific hairstyle in mind, I like to draw several and compare them on the canvas. I want Mother Nature to have wild, long, white hair, so that's the first hairstyle I draw. But then I draw a second and third and I like them better – it's always good to get out of your comfort zone, you never know what you might discover!

This page (top): Expressions start to bring the character to life

This page (bottom): Different hairstyles can change the whole look of a character



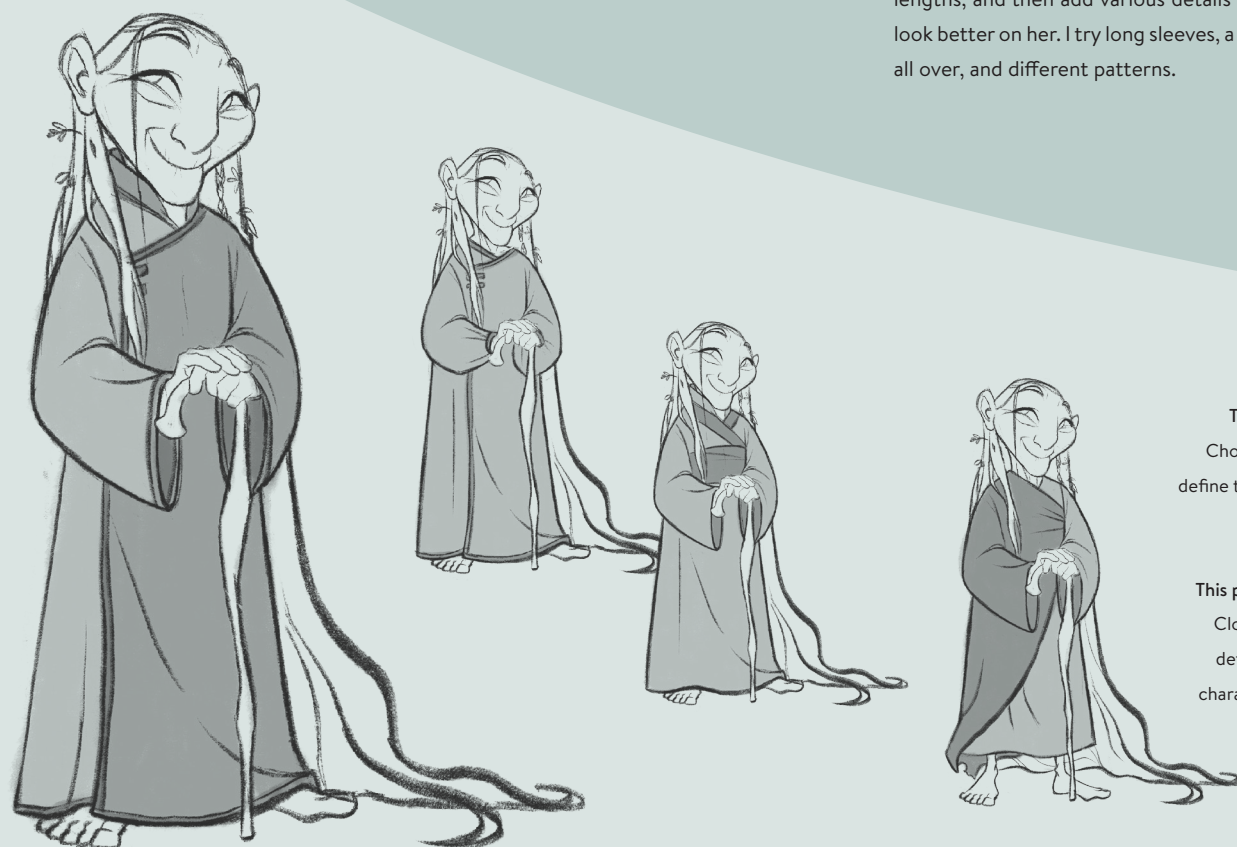


## STRIKE A POSE

Like hairstyles, the pose is a key aspect of a character's personality. If you want a character to look shy, you can't draw them jumping with their arms and limbs wide open. The pose has to be in keeping with the character's personality and what you want to show about it. Of course, a character's personality can change throughout their narrative, and it's up to you to decide what particular moment you want to show. My Mother Nature is calm, patient, and slow, so I try drawing her in both standing and seated positions to reflect those characteristics.

## DRESSING FOR THE OCCASION

Clothing can convey a lot about a character's personality and the story you're trying to tell. Maybe a character is forced to wear a dress for a special occasion, even though she hates wearing dresses, for example. When choosing an outfit, I start by drawing a simple design and then gradually start adding details. I want my Mother Nature to wear a dress, so I draw basic lines with different lengths, and then add various details to see which look better on her. I try long sleeves, a sash, flowers all over, and different patterns.



**This page (top):**  
Choosing poses to define the character's personality

**This page (bottom):**  
Clothing can be a defining part of a character's identity



## IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

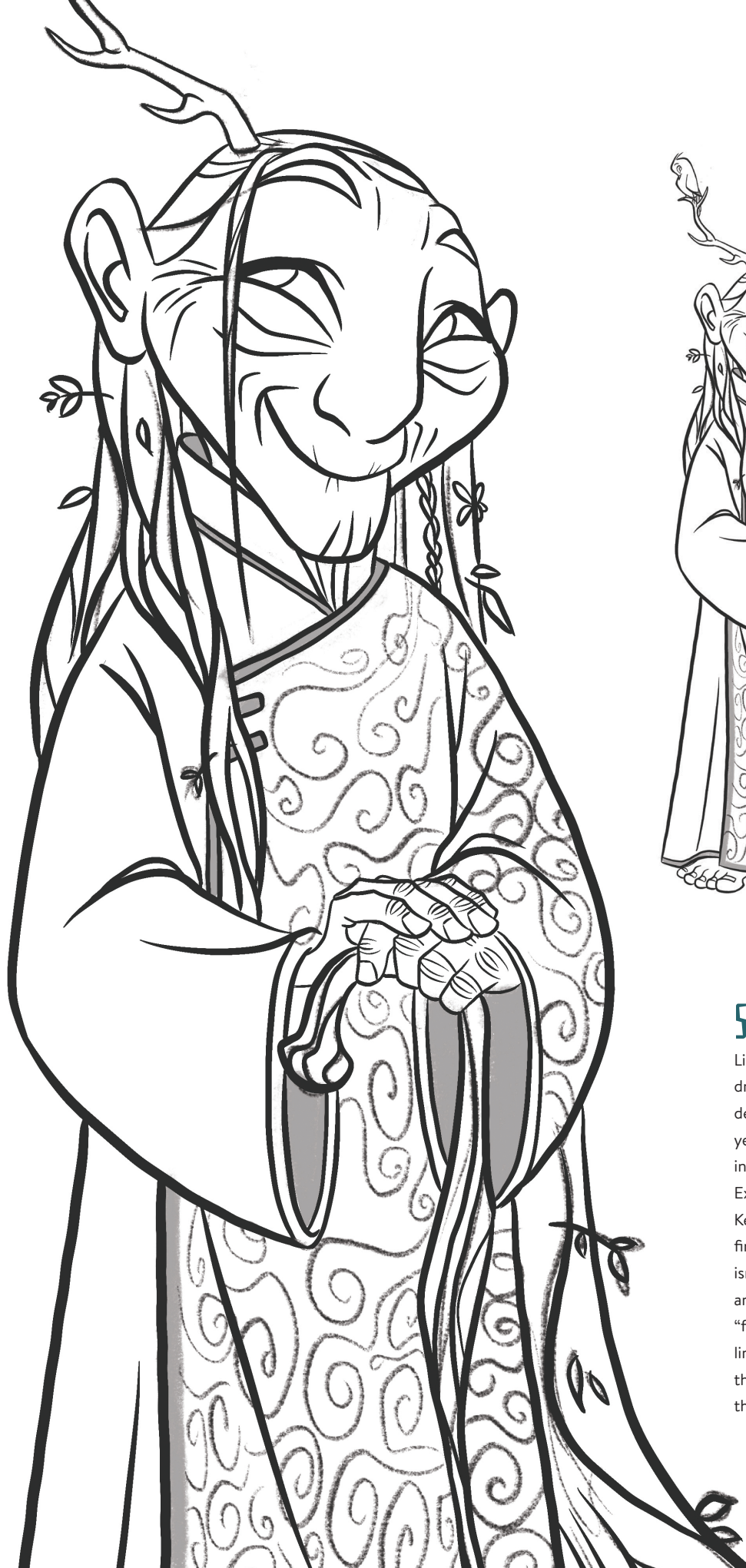
Now for my favorite step in the process – adding details! This is where we really start to make the character look unique. I always start with the face, because there is a lot of information there. At this stage, the character is almost complete. All the basic information is already there, the details are what can add that “special” touch. Remember the “appeal” I spoke of earlier? Here’s where we get to make it happen. I draw a lot of wrinkles to make my Mother Nature look elderly and to give the audience more visual information about her. But I don’t just want to stick to the face, I add detail to the body, clothing, hair.... I also want an antler to come out of her head, as though she is part stag. This way, although she looks like a woman, her gender will be more ambiguous.

## A FLYING COMPANION

Props and pets are very useful when designing a character, because, again, they can say a lot about the character’s personality and story. Props are often grouped in with the other “details” of a character, whereas pets would be considered separately, as they are living characters with their own personalities. This doesn’t mean the animals need to be humanized (like in Disney’s *Robin Hood*), they are more like the doves that perch on the gargoyle Laverne in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* – they don’t talk, they just complement the actions of the main character. I want my Mother Nature to always be accompanied by a bird that sits on her antler.



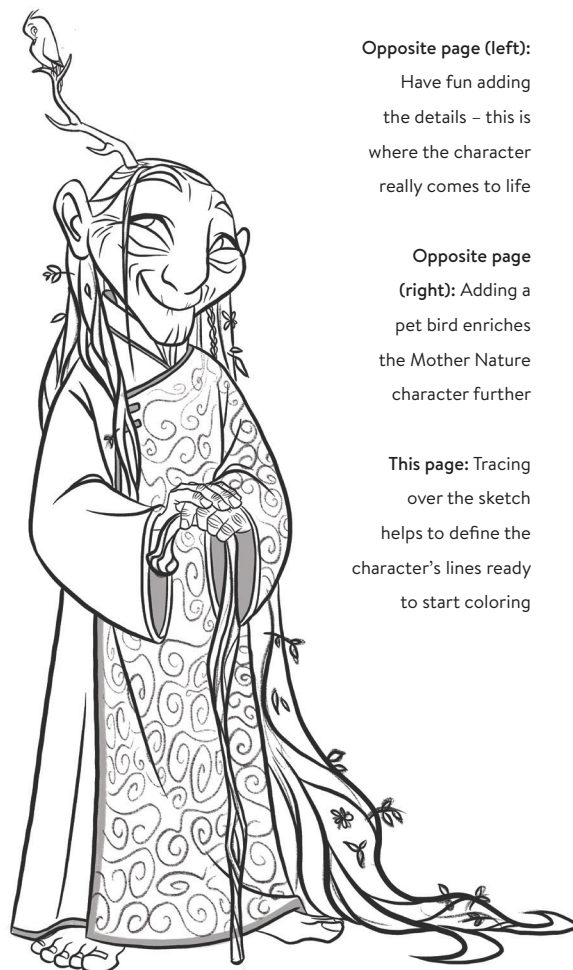




Opposite page (left):  
Have fun adding  
the details – this is  
where the character  
really comes to life

Opposite page  
(right): Adding a  
pet bird enriches  
the Mother Nature  
character further

This page: Tracing  
over the sketch  
helps to define the  
character's lines ready  
to start coloring



## STEPPING OUT OF LINE

Lines are the most basic shape to use when drawing – however, sometimes illustrators decide to do without them. In my case, a few years ago I decided I wanted to get rid of lines in my final artwork to make them look cleaner. Experiment with both, but the choice is yours! Keeping the first lines of an illustration in the final piece makes it look sketchy, but that isn't wrong, it's just a different look that many artists use. If you want a piece to look more "finished" you can trace the sketch with clean lines, and maybe color them. Sometimes I use the "selective lines" technique, and only leave the lines I think the illustration needs.





## MORE THAN JUST COLOR

Colors have meanings. We identify the villain of a movie because their color palette tends to be dark and cool – purples, deep reds, and blacks. On the contrary, the heroine is presented in bright pastel colors like red, white, pink, or light blue – think of *The Avengers*. So, when choosing the colors for Mother Nature, I need to consider what they will represent. I want to keep her neutral, so I choose grays and a low-saturated green. If I wanted her to be a loner, I'd choose a blue palette, or if she had a temper I'd go for reds. Of course, you don't have to follow these rules, and breaking them can be rewarding – Batman wearing all black and his nemesis Joker's bright suits neatly invert the stereotype, for instance. However, changing something established can lead to confusion, so if you are going to go against type, make sure you have a strong reason to do so.

## ONE COLOR, ONE LAYER

When coloring a drawing, always separate each part of the illustration into different layers. When coloring a person, color the hair on one layer, the skin on another, the clothes on a third, and so on. When coloring pets, color them entirely in their base color and then add details using a clipping mask. For example, if I'm drawing a Dalmatian, first I color its silhouette in white and then create a clipping mask to add black spots over its body.





## ADDING DEPTH

Now we need to focus on shadows. Shadows make our characters pop out from the page, thanks to the volume they provide. In my drawings, shadows are essential as they separate the parts of my lineless characters. Lighting and shadow give information about the environment, too. For example, if I use a pink light and a purple shadow on my character, you might think she is close to some magical place at night. The hardness of the shadow can also tell us something about the setting – making it more dramatic if the shadow is almost opaque, or making things seem calmer and friendlier if the shadow is less noticeable.



**Opposite page:**

Choosing a basic color palette for Mother Nature

**This page (top):**

With depth added via shadows, Mother Nature starts to come to life

**This page (bottom):**

Secondary lighting gives further volume to the character

## LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Lighting and shadows are always connected, but that doesn't mean you have to see them both on an illustration. I find lighting more important because without light, there would be no shadows, but I don't always capture light in my illustrations, whereas shadows are fundamental. Light is always present in a drawing, even if you don't actually draw it – shadows suggest light where they are not. However, we can add a secondary light – a supporting light that, like shadows, makes the character pop from the page.





## EYE POSITION

The position of the eyes can change a character completely. I always draw them on a different layer and put them in various positions to see which suits best. When I draw kids, I tend to place the eyes further apart than I will with an adult. If you try moving them around you will quickly see how different a character can look. This tip also works when deciding how big the eyes should be.

## A NEW DAWN

Mother Nature is colored and the lighting and shadows are placed correctly, so all that's left is to add the finishing touches. Ideally, these are what give the illustration a 3D effect. I use different brushes to create textures, adding gleams on the eyes and the top of the nose. I also like to add redness on the character's shoulders, elbows, and cheeks to make their skin look more natural and realistic, and not so balanced. This can make a character look cuter as well, especially when they are babies. And with that, Mother Nature is finished!

**This page:** The finished character with final touches to give her a 3D look

**Opposite page:** The finished character with a simple background added







# LIGHTEN UP!

LYNN CHEN

The use of light is invaluable when telling a story in your designs. It's important to know how to design lighting scenarios and use color temperature, pushing warm and cool light to enhance the overall mood of your image. I will show you how to set up simplified lighting structures with key light, ambient light, and bounce light, to help you start sculpting forms. I've used Photoshop, but the same techniques can be applied to any software.

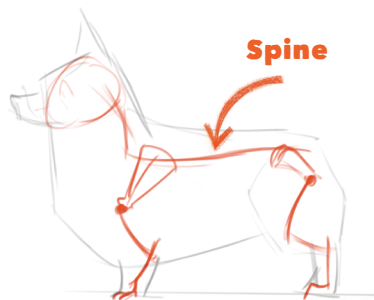


## INSIDE/ OUTSIDE

When creating illustrations, a solid base for your design goes a long way, so it's necessary to learn and analyze your subject's anatomical structure first. Even stylized characters benefit from this – it helps the design look more believable, especially if the character needs to be animated. One of the easiest ways to achieve this is to use the “inside/outside” method. To do this, you need to simplify the “inside” by imagining the skeleton within the body and locating the spine – this is your “line of action.” Then sketch the “outside” forms to create dynamic gestures. Once you have established this basis you can refine the sketch, but at this stage still keep it loose.

Connections

Joints/  
Skeleton



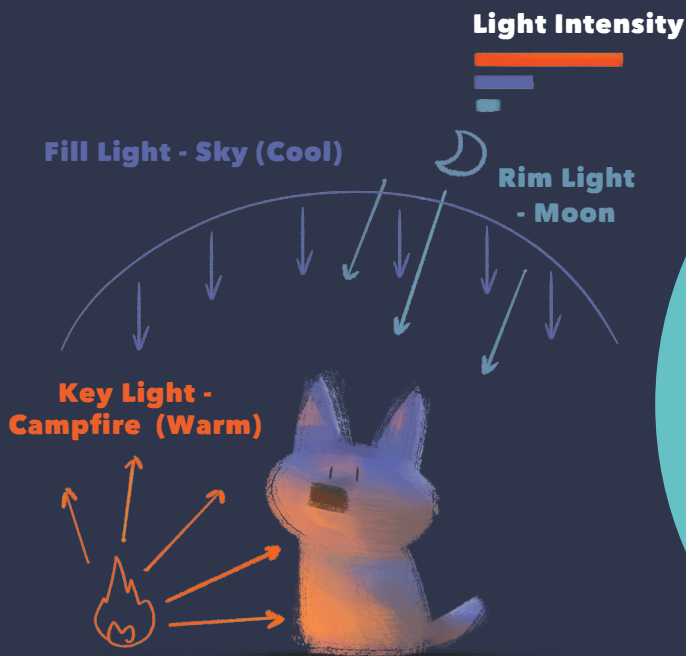
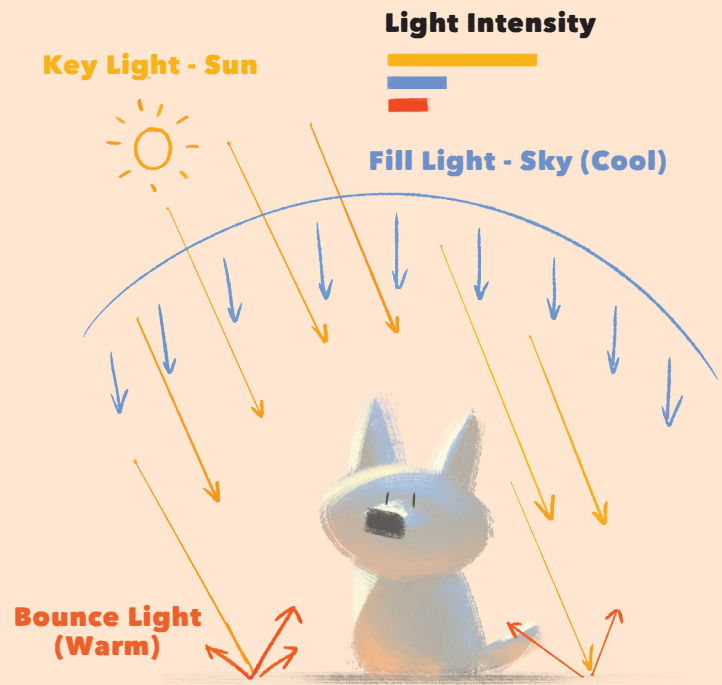
## BLOCK IN SHAPES

In this image, I use neutral colors to block in the shapes, with each color on its own layer. I add in some details and secondary characters to create a story and make the image more interesting. Remember, when choosing to add details, that they should complement the main character and not be too distracting. Keep flipping the canvas back and forth to check the balance of your design.



## LIGHTING PLANNING

Before you start painting, it's a good idea to plan out your lighting setup. Break down each light source and assign them a warm or cool color. For example, in this particular design the sunlight and bounce light are warm and the fill light is cool. Try designing lighting with different temperatures coming from opposite directions – this will create volume and make the image appear three-dimensional. There are other things to consider, such as overcast lighting where the colors are mostly neutral, but even then you can paint in subtle color variations so that the colors appear rich rather than plain gray.



**"TRY DESIGNING LIGHTING WITH DIFFERENT TEMPERATURES COMING FROM OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS - THIS WILL CREATE VOLUME AND MAKE THE IMAGE APPEAR THREE-DIMENSIONAL"**

## COLOR PROOFING

Painting light directly, without referring to a black-and-white thumbnail, can be difficult, as the values (light and dark) can get lost during the painting process. To avoid this, it's crucial to use grayscale mode to check your values throughout the process. This can be easily done by

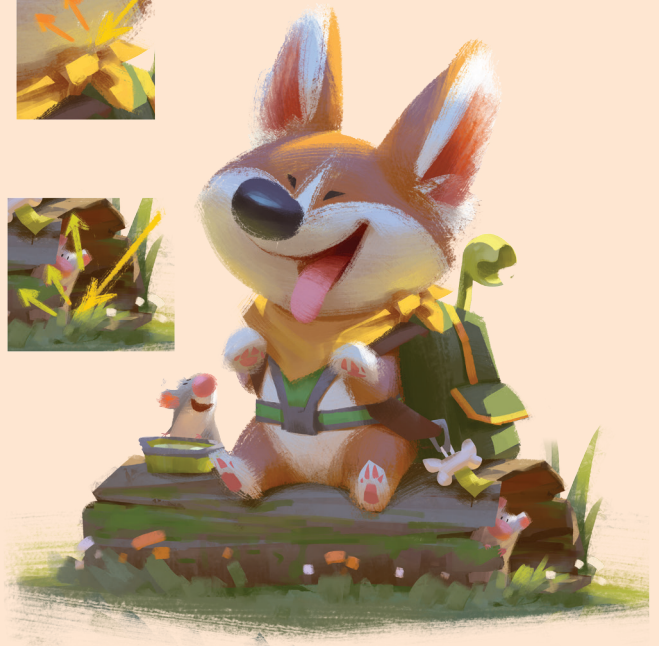
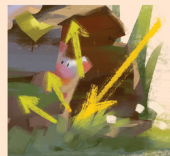
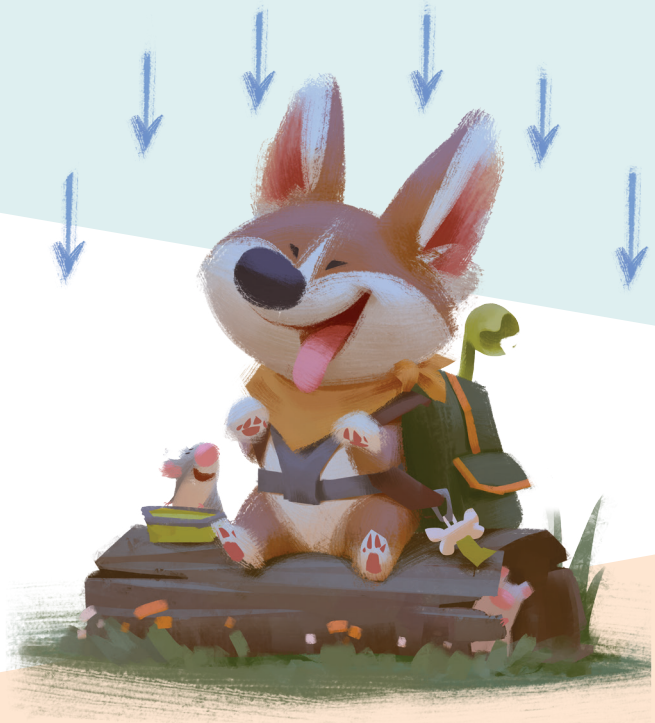
"color proofing" within Photoshop. Go to Menu > View > Proof Setup > Custom. Then, under "Device to Simulate," choose "Gray" and click OK. Now you can toggle between normal and grayscale color proofing by pressing CMD or CTRL + Y.



## SCULPTING WITH LIGHT

Building on the base colors, start painting in one light at a time. The blue light comes from the sky, so all the surfaces facing upward will be affected by this light. To achieve this affect you can shift the local color toward a brighter, cooler color and apply it on all these surfaces, giving

the appearance of being lit from above. Then move on to the secondary light source, and so on. This way, we can focus on the forms and have fun “sculpting” the character.





## STAY BALANCED

When it comes to adding a background to your image, be aware of maintaining good contrast between busy and less-detailed areas. In this case I have blurred the background so the eye is drawn to the character. Try to avoid having very detailed backgrounds, as your character may get lost in the scene. Adding some simple details, such as a blade of grass peeking out from behind a log, will help establish the environment without going overboard.

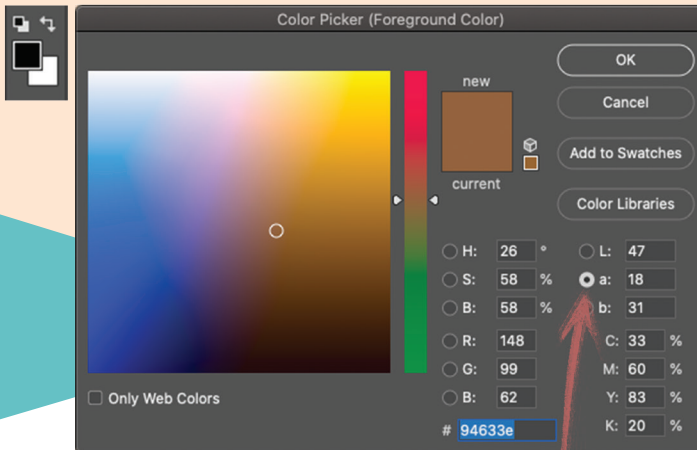




## PUSH COLOR TEMPERATURE

When selecting colors to represent warm and cool light, try using a LAB color picker instead of HSB. Visually, it is a more straightforward way of selecting warmer and cooler colors. As long as each color has a similar amount of

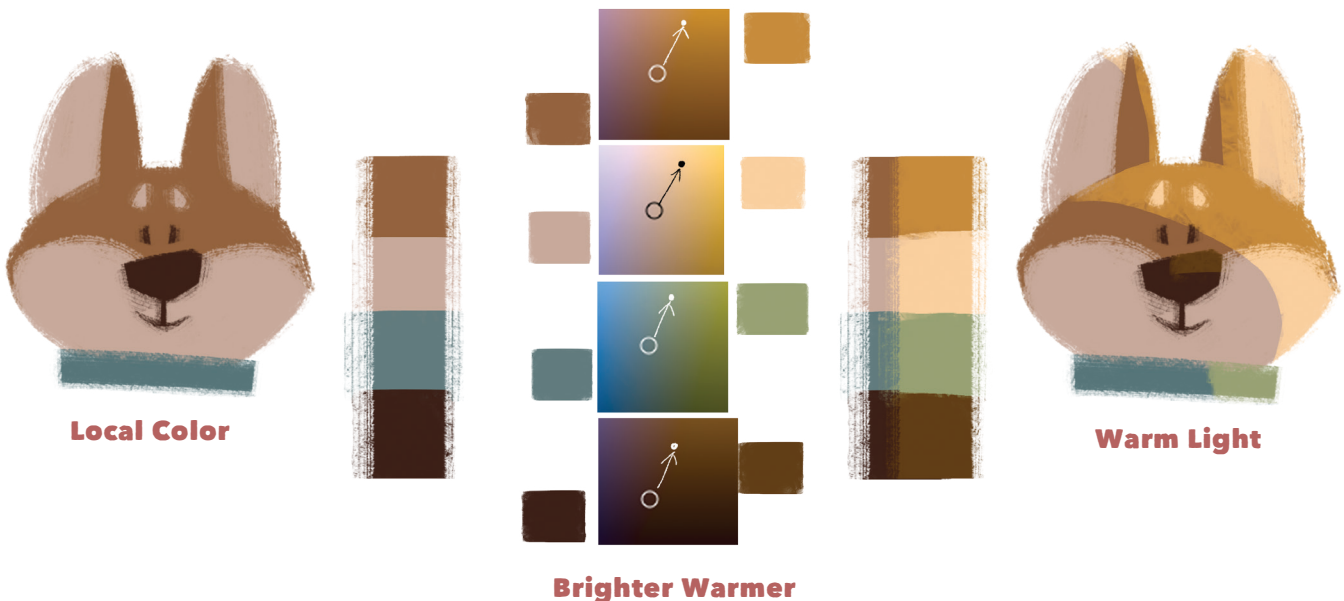
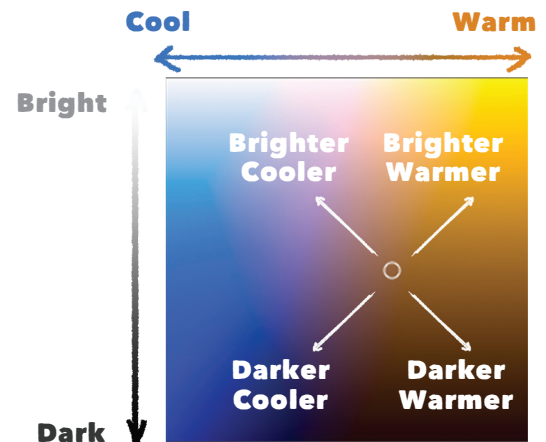
color shift, the light will look consistent across the image. In Photoshop, the panel shown appears when you select the foreground color – I also have a shortcut set up for this panel for easy access when painting. Give it a try!



**LAB COLOR:**  
Lightness, A-axis  
(green to red), and  
B-axis (blue to yellow)

Choose "a" in LAB  
color panel

**HSB COLOR:**  
Hue, Saturation,  
and Brightness







## NIGHT TIME

I can now create a “night time” version of the image. It can be useful to experiment with light plans when you are undecided on color variations for your final design. In order to make this “night time” version, we need to adjust the base color and paint in ambient shadows, with a cool skylight contrasting the warm “day time” version. The warmth within this design instead comes from the campfire. Compared to the sunlight, the campfire has a smaller cast, and therefore the light diminishes as the forms get further away from the light source. To increase this effect, make sure the areas closest to the light are brighter than those further away.











## MEET THE ARTIST:

# MEIKE SCHNEIDER

Meike Schneider is no stranger to the pages of *CDQ*, having provided a fantastic tutorial in our last issue. A popular and prolific presence on Instagram, Meike's iconic character designs have been featured in children's books and even a fashion line. We caught up with Meike to discuss her unusual introduction to the industry, the pros and cons of social media, and much more!



## “I HAVE BASICALLY BEEN DRAWING SINCE I COULD HOLD A PENCIL IN MY HAND”



**Hi Meike! It's great to be able to interview you for CDQ. Could you introduce yourself to the readers and tell us a bit about your career to date?**

Hello, thanks for inviting me! I'm a 3D artist, character designer, and illustrator based in Cologne, Germany. I mainly work in animation, design, and publishing, on projects such as children's books, character designs, product packaging designs, and sometimes even in fashion design.

I have basically been drawing since I could hold a pencil in my hand. My early work was

heavily influenced by my favorite childhood TV shows, games, and movies. I still remember the day I watched the making of Disney's *Tarzan* on TV, seeing how Glen Keane animated the iconic character.

That was the first time I realized that being an animator is an actual job! From that moment on, I knew it was what I wanted to do. However, as time went by and the industry moved on, hand-drawn animation was mainly replaced with CG animated movies, so I adjusted my childhood plans slightly and wanted to become a 3D modeler. After I graduated and worked as a 3D Artist for a while, I wanted to do more than just model characters based on other

people's concepts and designs – I wanted to design my own characters and worlds, using my own ideas and imagination to create something that didn't exist.

I started learning digital painting and began to develop my 2D skills. I spent all my weekends and free time after work improving, and eventually I got my first few jobs in visual development and character design. Those jobs then led to other opportunities, and I was eventually able to quit my full-time job to focus on my freelance work. Today I am still working in 3D, and I teach 3D Modeling at a school, but most of my freelance projects are illustration projects.





**Opposite page:**  
I created this piece  
for a tutorial that  
was published in *Art  
Fundamentals: Theory  
in Practice*, a book by  
3dtotal Publishing

**This page:** This is a  
redrawn version of a  
digital painting from  
2019 – I still love this  
character design,  
but my style has  
changed and can see  
a few things I would  
do differently now



**You have a broad spectrum of experience, taking on projects in illustration, look development, and advertising. How does your approach to character design differ from project to project?**

My approach always depends on how the client likes to work, but most of the time I suggest my way of working and the client agrees, or prefers a similar approach. Almost all my designs go through four stages during the process of creation: draft and layout, clean-up, color thumbnail and shape blocking, and the final render.

During the draft/layout stage, I start sketching various different rough characters, the client can then mix and match their favorites. After that, I always create a character sheet with a front, side, three-quarter and back view — this is so important and useful for later in the process, especially when out of your comfort zone and designing characters that don't look like your regular art style. You need to get used to drawing any new character correctly from each different angle and staying in "style." A character reference sheet helps so much with this! After that, I usually give the client different pose variations or camera perspectives (in case a background is included) during the layout stage.

Once the design or layout is approved, I usually start cleaning up the outlines next. I try to be as accurate as possible to avoid changes later in the coloring stage. I then block in colors super roughly with a bold brush. Sometimes, I'll give the client several different color variations, as the scheme can change the atmosphere of the entire image. Once they pick their favorite, I start outlining and filling shapes, although everything is still on separate layers so changes are easy to make. The last stage would be the final rendering of the image. Depending on the project, I skip or repeat certain steps, but the overall structure always stays the same.





**Opposite page:**

I contributed this mermaid to Tom Bancroft's MerMay 2020 Art Exhibition at Gallery Nucleus in Los Angeles

**This page:** I drew

this mermaid for the #MerMay challenge this year, focusing on simplicity and shape

I'd say the workflow is very similar for each different type of project I take, but obviously you are always designing a character to suit the specific audience. When working for children's books I have to keep the age range in mind. Children's book characters are mostly very stylized and colorful, while a character for package design needs to be simple in terms of shapes and details, and instantly recognizable.

**It's rare that we come across a character designer that is also a skilled 3D artist. How does the one skillset help the other, and do you have a preference?**

Yes, common wisdom is to pick one particular skillset and be really good at it, rather than being okay at multiple. However, learning 3D Animation as a student helped me a lot to improve my illustration and character design skills. I'd also say my art skills and style improved the most during and right after my 3D Animation studies. I still remember how creepy my first cartoon character

model looked even though I thought I was a skilled traditional artist at the time! That was when I finally realized how important a basic understanding of anatomy is, and that there's still so much to learn — especially when it comes to characters in motion. How muscles move in certain postures is crucial for being a good character designer. Most traditional artists gain this knowledge from life-drawing classes, but I learned most of these skills from 3D modeling and using references. In 2D you can sometimes hide things, as the viewer only sees characters from a certain angle. However, in 3D every little detail needs to be perfect, as you will usually need to be able to show your model from every angle.

Even though I work mainly in 2D these days on the freelance side, I still use 3D as an aid when creating 2D projects. For instance, when working with a publisher for a children's book, it's very convenient to create a simple maquette for a character design, so you have a clear reference sheet from all angles. I also like creating very simple blockings in 3D to

easily make changes to the perspective or even the base model. It allows the client more options for making changes as well, and helps them get a better idea of the shapes and perspectives I'm working with. And best of all — changes are super easy! For example, if I'm at the layout stage of a project, I can use my 3D blocking to give the client some different options for camera angles. Without a 3D model it would take me much longer to get the perspective right and make the image look visually appealing with clean outlines. Some of my clients aren't artists, so it's much harder for them to imagine how the sketch could look once it's fully rendered with proper outlines.

It's also very convenient to use the 3D image as a reference and just draw over it. Some might think this is cheating, but I think it's smart and saves plenty of time too! This technique also helped me to understand light. You can set lights in 3D and use this as a reference for accuracy — the more you use it, the more you understand how light behaves in 3D space.





**I wanted to ask you about your amazing workspace. I've honestly never seen such an organized and calm looking studio. How does that impact your working day and help you as a character designer?**

I'm a very organized person and I simply can't function when my workspace looks messy with things all over the place! My art studio is the room I spend most of my time in, so I want it to feel cozy and inviting. I feel much more inspired and motivated when surrounded by other artists' artworks and art books. As an artist you have good days, where it seems like every sketch turns out perfectly within minutes, but there can be bad days as well. You'll try to draw something and it always looks strange or simply wrong! Sometimes you don't even feel motivated or inspired at all. On days

like that, I love sitting on my sofa and flicking through art books by people who inspire me — my motivation always comes rushing back.

As I came to digital drawing later in life, I've managed to gather a whole load of traditional art supplies. A few years ago, I purchased an incredible, huge storage-solution cupboard, which really helped me organize my studio. It's called the Dreambox by Create Room and it is an absolute dream for people who love to be organized. I'm so glad I can finally stop searching endlessly for stuff I need — plus, it looks absolutely beautiful too!

**Shape and color seem to be so important in your art. Are you very conscious of that, or is it something that comes naturally after years of practice?**

Today, it probably comes naturally — well, perhaps just more easily rather than naturally! When I started with digital drawing, I tried to learn one thing at a time. I think that's a very efficient way to learn as it staves off any frustration. All these fundamentals can feel overwhelming for a beginner, I found it much easier to split disciplines into smaller portions and focus on one thing at a time until I felt confident in what I was doing.

I used the same technique with colors and shapes, too. I studied color schemes, looked at many examples, and tried to understand how to make very different colors look good together — for example, by using different saturation levels. After a while I felt much more comfortable and my color schemes seemed to be way more pleasing to the eye. The same goes for shapes — I spent time focussed on



**“ONCE I WAS  
COMFORTABLE  
WITH THE  
FUNDAMENTALS,  
I STARTED TO  
BREAK THE  
RULES”**

simplifying my characters, and then once I was comfortable with the fundamentals, I started to break the rules. Playing fast and loose with “proper” anatomy by using very soft and bended arms or legs can help create a nice dynamic flow in your characters. I guess what I’m trying to say is: experimenting is key! And, of course, tons of references. There’s no better way to learn than to understand exactly what you like about certain artworks, or to get a pose right by studying a photo.

Opposite page: A mermaid created for #MerMay

This page: A self-portrait I use for my social-media profiles





**It's really interesting to hear about your diverse route to becoming a professional artist. What advice do you have for artists struggling to find their artistic calling?**

Do what you love, and focus on becoming really good at that one particular thing. Having a specific interest is super important for beginners — the more experience you gain, the easier it is to learn new skills and expand on your existing skills. For instance, if I'm really good at character design and I want to try integrating more environments into my artworks, then that's only one challenge to tackle at a time. If you try to do everything when you're a beginner, it's easy to become overwhelmed and you'll be slow to improve across every discipline.

For me, as an artist, it is very important to work on projects that I like and where I can see a chance to evolve. If I feel like my work is getting repetitive and my skills aren't developing then I'll try to change direction, maybe learn something new in order to open up fresh opportunities.

**You maintain a very active Instagram account. How do you find it useful to further your professional career?**

I've never been a person who's been super active on social media — in fact, up until a couple of years ago I didn't know much about Instagram at all! I lived in my own "art bubble," which is still a nice way to work, but I felt like my art changed and evolved much faster when I discovered Instagram and found other artists. I began to be inspired by other artists' techniques — maybe the way someone uses a texture or a brush, or perhaps the way another might draw certain facial features. Everyone is borrowing ideas from one another, and adding their own individual signature style to it. To be honest, most of the time this process seems to happen unconsciously.



**This page:** The cover of my mermaid calendar and a #DTIYS (draw this in your own style) I hosted during MerMay 2021

**Opposite page:** A mermaid created for MerMay

The Instagram algorithm is constantly changing, and it seems like it's only ever getting harder to get recognition, but I'm still very grateful for the platform as it's given me many opportunities. Almost all of my clients find me via my Instagram, or my website, and now I'm in the enviable position of being able to say no to projects I don't feel comfortable working on.

I must admit that I don't post all the work I do for clients on my social channels — the artwork I post to Instagram is mostly things I create on my own time, between jobs. Instagram is all about consistency and recognition. I like to experiment with my style in my posts occasionally, adding more extreme

lighting or something similar, but I would never post something as radically different as a photorealistic portrait, for instance. It's important to stay focussed art-wise on social media, as the audience wants to connect with a consistent style.

**Thank you so much for answering our questions, Meike. It's been a pleasure to have your amazing art in CDQ again.**

Thanks so much for having me! It's been a pleasure, I hope some of your readers can take something useful from my journey.









# MECH-ING A SCENE

GREG BALDWIN

Given the choice to design any character, I will always gravitate toward an unwitting mech caught up in an existential crisis, or stumbling into some terrestrial predicament it has absolutely no place being involved in. Something appeals about the theme of an “outcast” that makes me revisit it often. For this design, I imagined the aftermath of a little critter commandeering a battle mech to make its escape. Typically, when designing a character this way, I consider how the final piece will be used. This concept could serve not only as design reference for modelers or animators, but also as an aid to help set the personality and mood for the character in a final production.





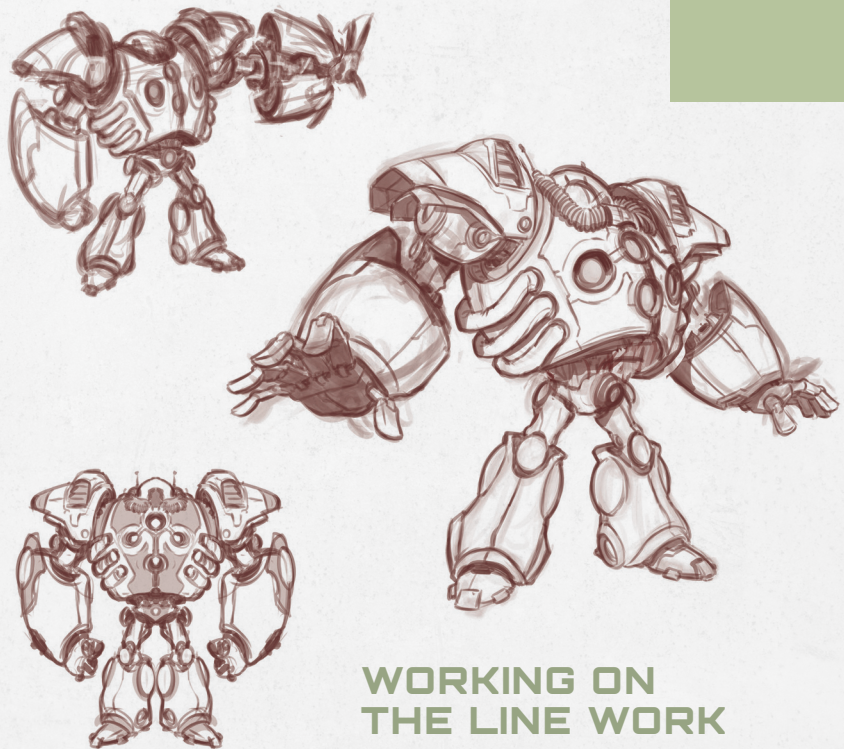


## DESIGN STUDIES

I like to start with some initial loose design studies. These are often very rough and serve primarily to spark an emotional reaction, positive or negative. It's not uncommon that I will stay at this stage of the process for numerous rounds of review until the "vibe" captures the character's specific personality or abilities. The number one goal is to convey the character's intentions and personality at a single glance. Is the character fast, creepy, imposing? Are they a friend or an enemy? Do they seem hungry? Do they want to eat me? These are all questions I want to try and answer at this stage.

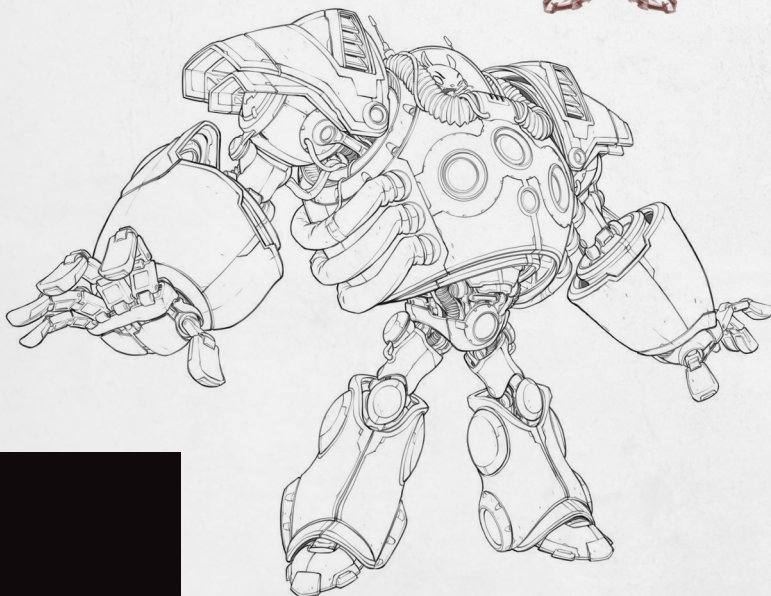
## ROUGH POSE AND CONSTRUCTION

Seeing the character in space with volume helps to solve any potential construction issues the initial sketch didn't take into account. Still working as loosely as possible, I block out a pose that epitomizes the character's personality, as well as shows off the entirety of the design. If too many of the important details are obscured by the pose, then additional drawing may be necessary for production. In this case, a three-quarter front pose works well, but most likely a reverse angle will also be needed if the character has unique design elements that can only be seen from the back – like perhaps the newest Fission-Core Long Distance Thruster Pack with Sub-orbital Trajectory Assistance.



## WORKING ON THE LINE WORK

I prefer to work out the specific details of any character using line work first, refining every detail and contour until the flow and functionality all feel believable and accurate. Solving as many design elements as I can, especially on a more complicated character, assures me that anyone else tasked with implementing the design has as much information as possible. I find I get the most satisfaction at this stage – I put on my headphones and just sink into the fun little details knowing the structure and overall design are solid. Now I can focus on bringing this brute to life.





## “A SETTING CAN REINFORCE THE VISION OF WHAT THE CHARACTER COULD FEEL LIKE IN THE WORLD IT FINDS ITSELF”

**Opposite page (top):**

A handful of loose studies can help to hone in on a promising design

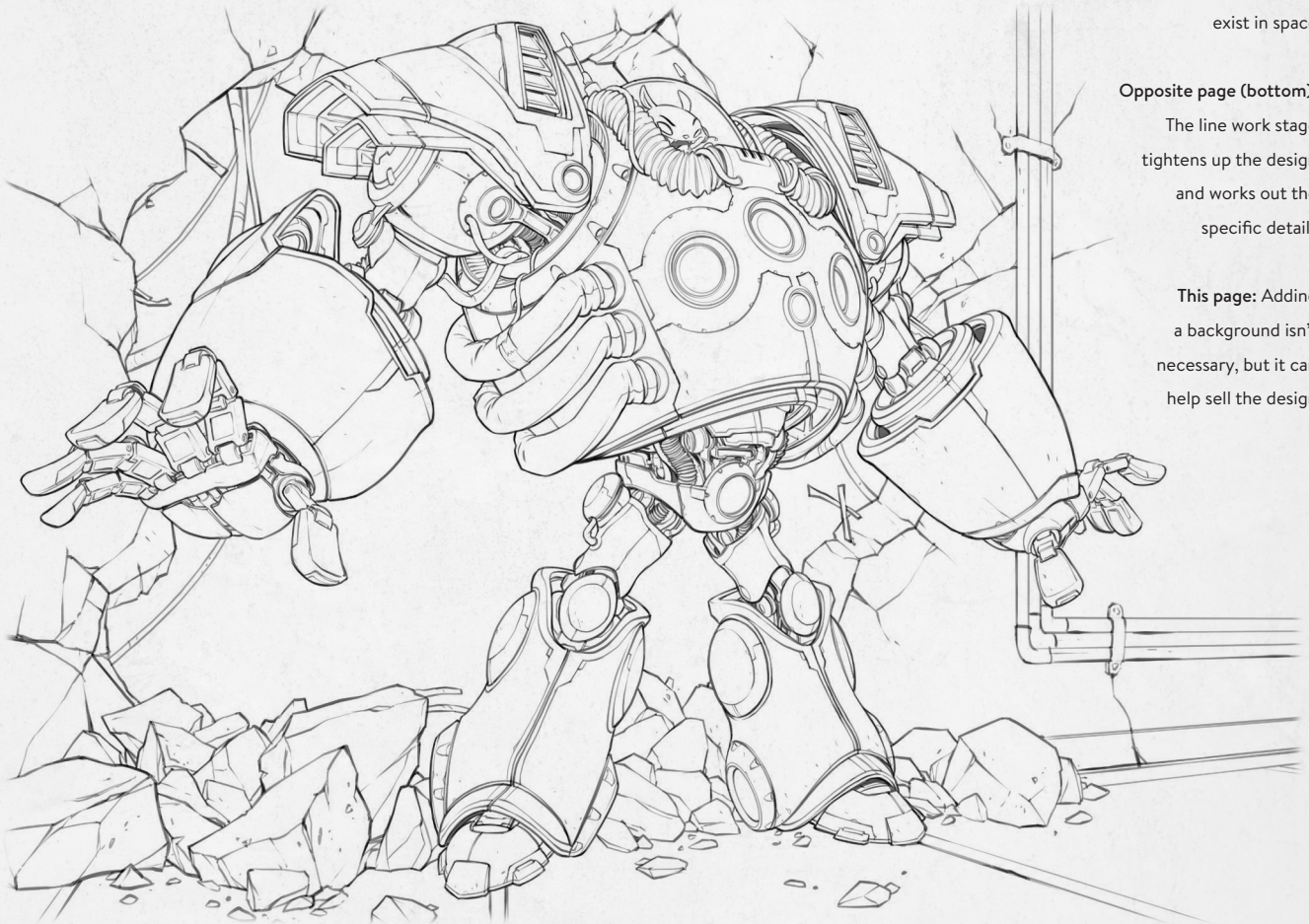
**Opposite page (middle):**

Using your initial sketches, work out how the design will exist in space

**Opposite page (bottom):**

The line work stage tightens up the design and works out the specific details

**This page:** Adding a background isn't necessary, but it can help sell the design



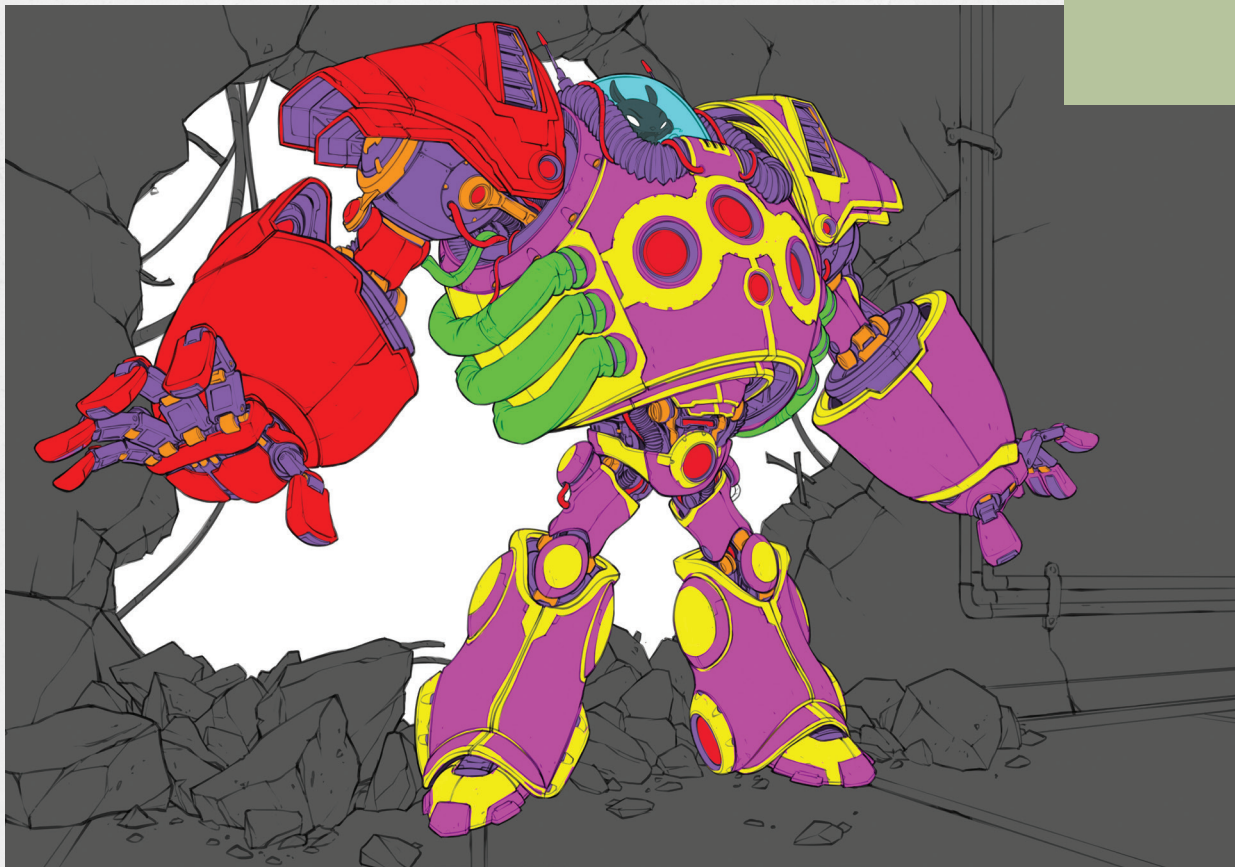
## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Obviously, adding a background is not required when designing a character. However, like adding a gentle pose, setting the tone for the character goes a long way to bringing

them to life. A setting can reinforce the vision of what the character could feel like in the world it finds itself. Any steps I can take to help the team get to

know my creation and its unique situation means that its story will be told more accurately in the end.



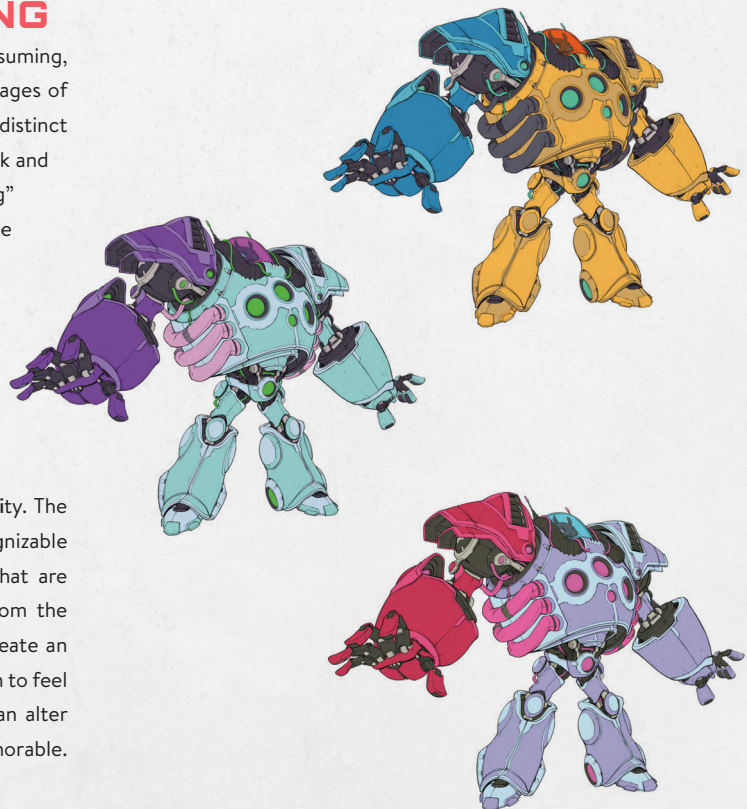


## THE BENEFITS OF MASKING

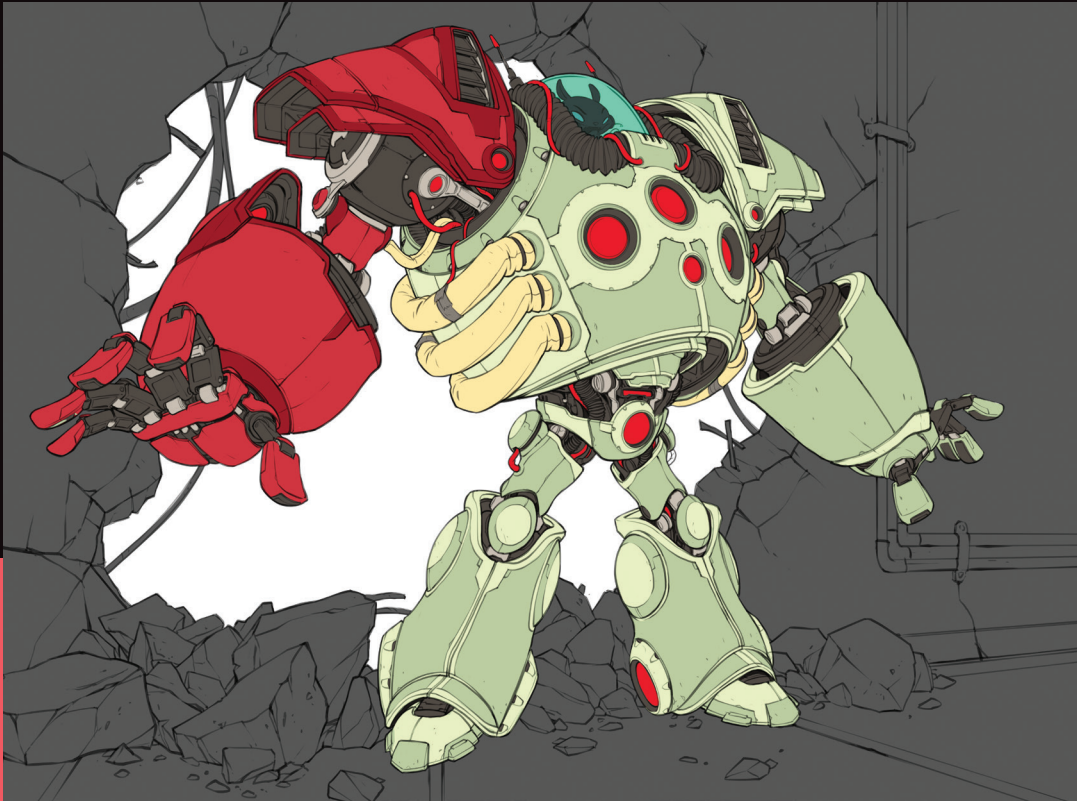
Taking the time to set up masks seems laborious and time consuming, but I find that I more than make up the time spent in future stages of the design. I keep each mask on a separate layer using random distinct colors – this makes loading and reloading crucial selections quick and accurate during the upcoming “Color Palette” and “Rendering” stages. This simple solution allows a lot more freedom to make changes and experiment more easily. Don’t forget to name your layers.

## FINDING THE COLOR IDENTITY

A huge part of the character’s design is their basic color identity. The most popular characters on the planet have immediately recognizable color palettes. This is a major part of designing characters that are intended to be iconic and unforgettable. Using the masks from the previous step, I can quickly try different palettes to try and create an identity that suits who I want the character to be. Do I want them to feel utilitarian, fashionable, alien? Creating various color options can alter the character’s story and persona just as much as it makes it memorable.







**Opposite page (top):**  
Masking out the major elements helps with rendering, as well as color exploration

**Opposite page (bottom):**  
Creating base color palette options helps to establish different identity possibilities

**This page (top):** The final color palette reinforces the character's persona

**This page (bottom):** Adding elements like decals to the character helps establish the world it inhabits

## A COLORFUL NARRATIVE

I decided this mech should have a subtle military-issue look, augmented with a replacement arm – possibly scavenged from another mech that was an arena fighter in its previous life. Juxtaposing the saturated red of the arm against a more subdued green body reinforces the varied histories for a more complex and intriguing backstory. I tie them together with the red lights and uniform mechanical substructures to help create a cohesive whole. Finally, by using a bright teal on the glass dome, I create a strong focus on the pilot to complete the story I'm trying to evoke.

## CREATING DECALS AND GRAPHICS

Adding decals and other graphics conveys a sense of the character's past and how previous events have impacted its life up to this point. I designed this decal sheet specifically for this character to reinforce the notion that the mech was built from mismatched parts. The decals for the main mech are reminiscent of a fighter jet, while its red arm has more of a menacing past. I prefer to layout the decals on a single sheet so I can keep the design language consistent and take advantage of fonts and other design tools.





## SMART OBJECTS

When applying elements like graphics and decals, one way to keep things adjustable is to utilize Photoshop's Smart Objects. Convert the decal to a Smart Object before any Warp or Transform modifier is applied. This essentially saves a mini file inside the main file. After modifying it and adding adjustments to it, double click

on the layer to open the mini file – any changes made within will be updated with all the modifications added to it in the main file after it's saved. Once this is set up, changing decals and graphics out becomes dead simple, and super fun.

## DECORATING WITH DECALS

One of the most important aspects of placing graphics on a character is to set the correct scale. I like to think of the intended function of the decals or, in this case, who built the mech. The cockpit size suggests the pilots were fairly small, so the labels need to reflect that. With the help of a Warp tool or a Lattice Modifier, the decals can be distorted to follow the forms of the character which will give them a more realistic appearance.

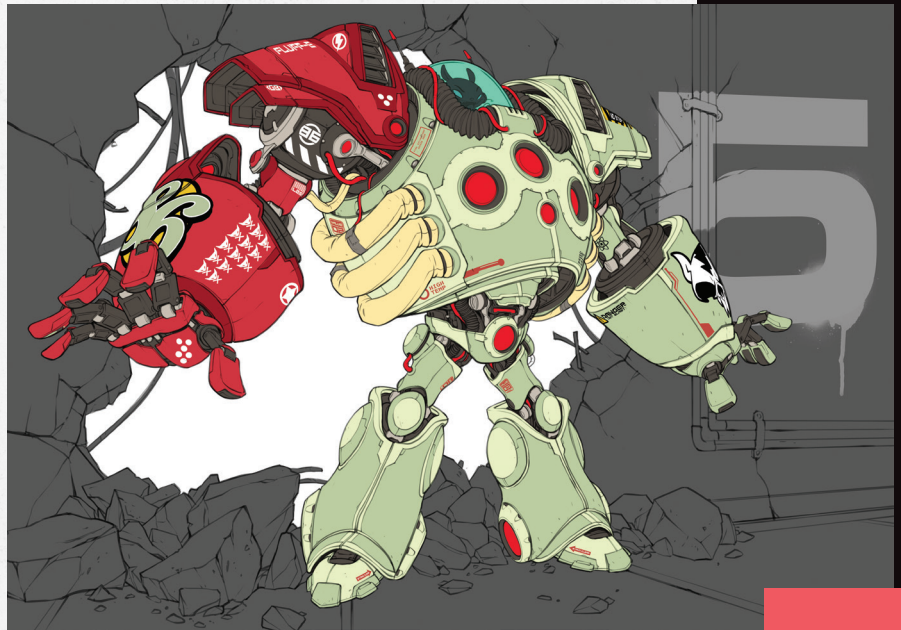
## WEATHERING SURFACES

A character's past often leaves a mark – if this mech was right off the production line, crisper highlights and pristine paint would work well. But this mech has been through a lot and so chipping up the paint, adding dirt into tiny nooks, and dripping oil from its failing hydraulic lines felt more appropriate. Going back to the masks, I can load selections of the painted areas and then use various dirt and scratch brushes to paint in exposed metal.

**This page:** Applying the decals adds history and a strong sense of scale

**Opposite page (top):** The amount of weathering and aging emphasizes how old or worn out the character might be

**Opposite page (bottom):** Shading is the most effective way to show the volume of different forms



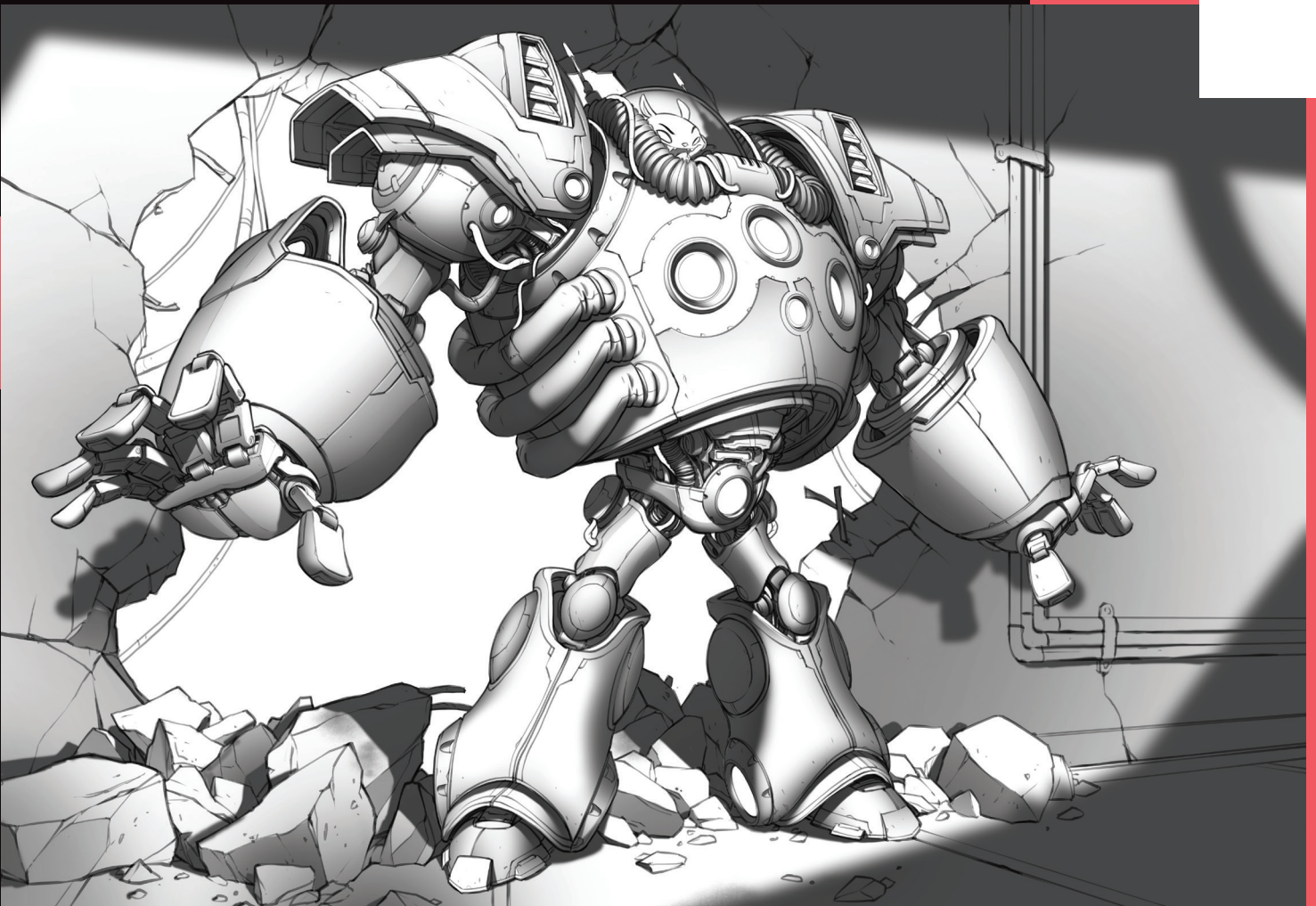
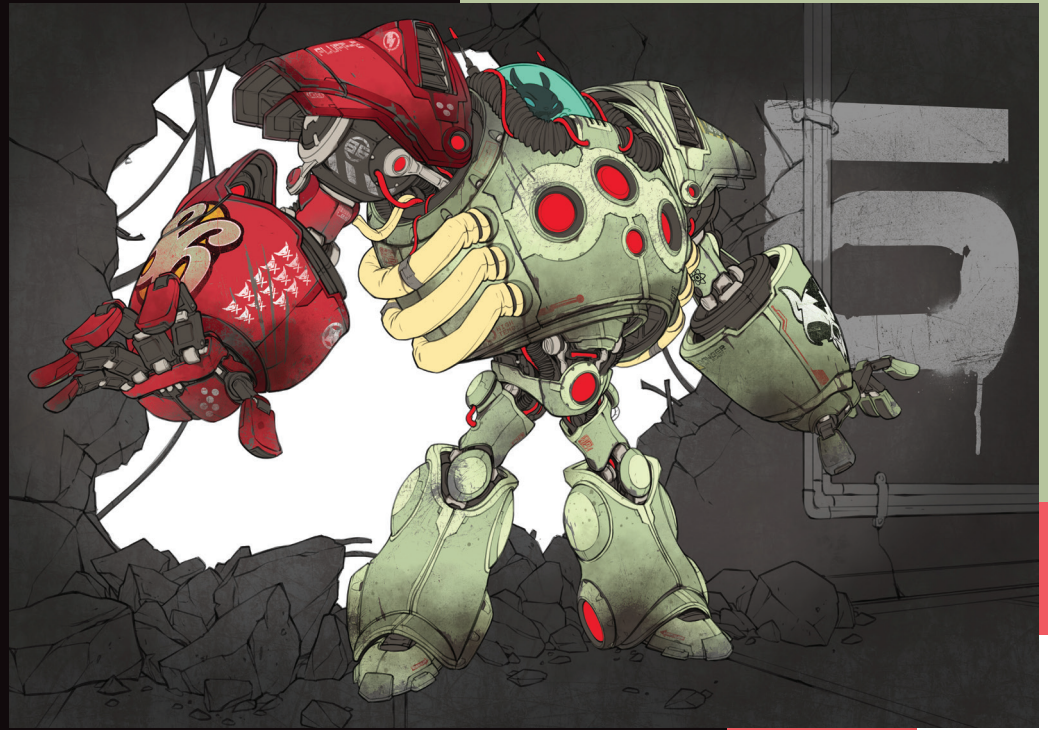
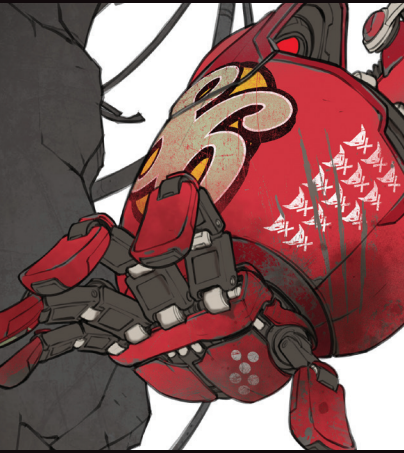
## SHADOWS AND LIGHT

Shading the character not only makes the design look more believable, it also indicates the general volume and distance between parts. This step is a bit like doing a math equation, which can be daunting. I tend to start off looking for an easy part, like the shoulder that in this case is a basic sphere, and use it to guide the rest of the light logic on everything else. The two most important parts of shading in my mind are how shadows fall across the form, and how blurred the shadow becomes based on the distance from the source to the cast surface. These two aspects of shadows can indicate so much useful information – plus, it looks pretty wicked.

## BASE METALS

Use the masks to create a selection that includes all the areas from which the paint will be chipped and worn away. On a new layer above the paint layers, create a mask from the selection. After filling the layer with a gray, use rust and dirt colors to paint the metal so it looks aged and grimy. Use this layer during the weathering stage and the revealed metal will have lots of interesting detail wherever it's exposed.



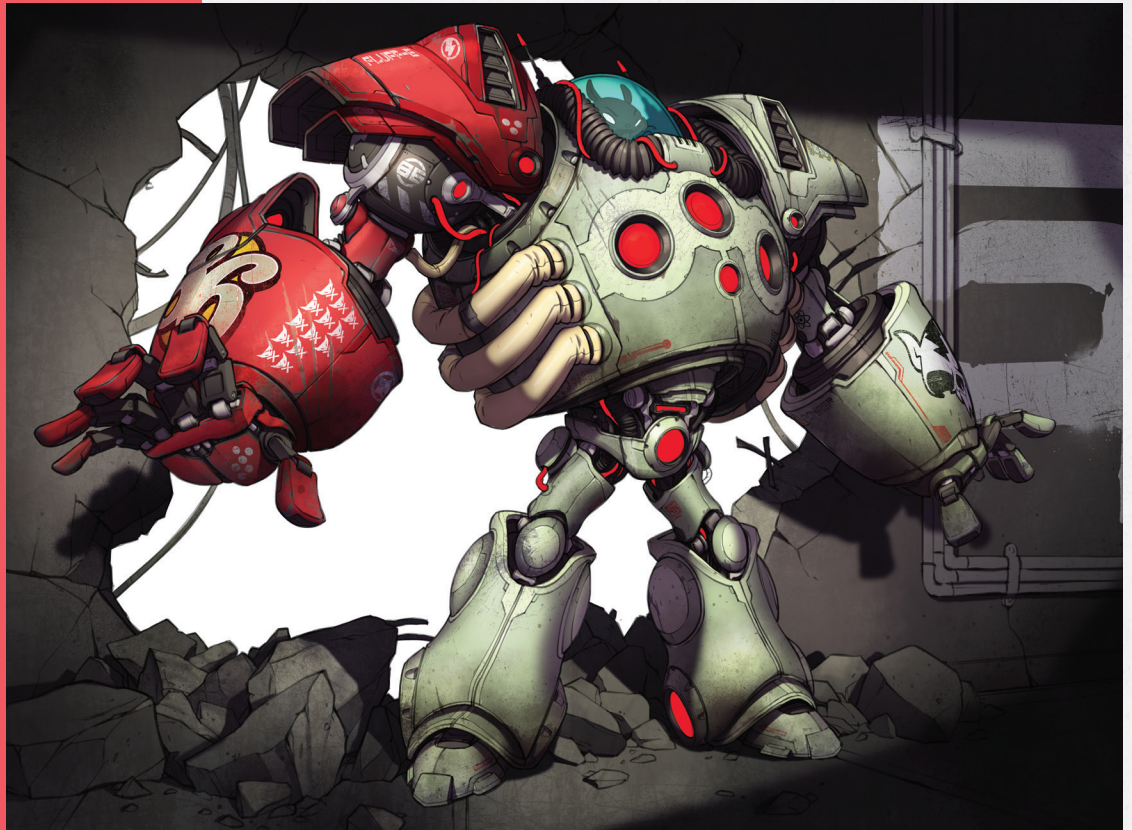




This page (top): Adding the shadow and base highlight layer rounds out the forms

This page (bottom): Reflections and lights define how the character is reacting to the world around it

Opposite page: Rim lighting can help to add further volume and enhance the silhouette





## APPLYING SHADING AND BASE HIGHLIGHTS

The basic ambient light color is reflected into the shadows, so I like to tint the shadows accordingly before setting them to Multiply over the color layers. This tends to make the shadows look less muddy. I then turn my focus to the highlights with an initial subtle pass where the lit areas of the forms are brightened up using either Overlay or Add layer modes. At this point, the design has everything required to be a useful concept – but let's bring it to life.

## LIGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

Adding reflections to the various shiny elements helps to show how the character's surfaces are reacting to the world around them. It also helps to distinguish how rough each surface is. I like to make sure there is a balanced amount of highly reflective and less reflective surfaces, like rubber and matte paint, to add visual variety. Adding glows to the lights and cables that are intended to be lit adds a lot of energy to the character, even though it's just a static pose.

## RIM LIGHTING

With my designs I like to use a rim light or back light to help emphasize the volumes and silhouette that have become obscured by the primary light angle. In this instance, a brightly lit hole in the wall is doing the job. This light allows me to identify obscured parts, like the distant arm and leg, and plausibly enhances the form's readability. It also adds a nice level of drama depending on how it's used. Keep this in mind the next time you find yourself having just broken through a meter-thick concrete wall if you want to look cool doing it.





**“BY USING  
SUBTLE  
EFFECTS LIKE  
FOG, FLOATING  
DUST, AND  
SOME GENTLE  
COLOR  
OVERLAYS  
THAT BRING  
COHESION TO  
THE ENTIRE  
DESIGN, THE  
CHARACTER  
AND  
ENVIRONMENT  
ALL BECOME  
UNIFIED”**

## **ADDING ATMOSPHERE**

The last step is to tie the whole piece together using a bit of atmosphere. Every previous step has been about creating a sense of believability for each individual part of the design. By using subtle effects like fog, floating dust, and some gentle color overlays that bring cohesion to the entire design, the character and environment all become unified. And with that, this little escapee is free to explore the world in the safety of his newly acquired battle mech. Safe travels, and don't forget to charge those batteries!

**These pages:** Use atmosphere to unify all the disparate elements into a cohesive design















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