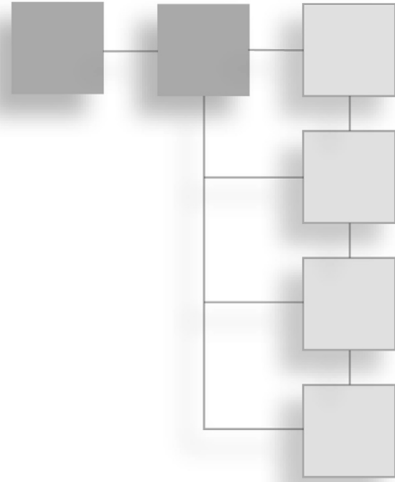# CHAPTER 9

CREATING CHARACTER ILLUSTRATIONS

Character sketches are great, but they don't give the development team any information about colors. They also don't contain enough detail for the development team to accurately create the character. For that, a more detailed full-color illustration is needed.

This chapter is about creating full-color character illustrations. It will cover what character illustrations are and how they are used in games. It will also give you some tips for creating good character illustrations, as well as examples of creating a simple color character illustration and a more detailed character illustration.

This chapter is a continuation from the last chapter and will build upon some of the concepts covered in that chapter.

Character Illustrations

A *character illustration* is a full-color, detailed painting of a character. It can be done in almost any color medium that the artist prefers, as long as there is sufficient detail for the design team to use the illustration to create the character for the game. The character illustration is similar to the environment illustration in that it does not have to be absolutely accurate, but it does have to have a higher level of accuracy than the environment illustration. A character illustration is used more directly by the development team in creating game art than an environment illustration is.

Character illustrations are works of art that focus on a single character to define not only the look of the character, but his disposition and nature as well. When creating a character illustration, the artist must take into account the character's personality. If the character is

a small, cute mouse, the illustration should convey that concept. If the character is a large enemy alien, the illustration should be very different from the mouse illustration. Part of the character illustration's purpose is to help the design team understand the type of character they are creating. If the character illustration can convey the message of the character's personality, the chance of the development artists' success increases dramatically.

Character templates will be introduced in the following chapter. A *character template* is a scale drawing of a character for use in building the character model. A character illustration is not used as a template for creating a 3D model; rather, it is used as reference for creating the model.

How Are Character Illustrations Used?

A character illustration is a multipurpose work of art. It is primarily used to communicate to the development team information about the character, but it has many other purposes as well, including inspiration, promotion, and funding.

The primary purpose of a character illustration is to give information. The development team uses the character illustration for reference when creating the game artwork and animations for the character.

The character illustration is also used as inspiration, similar to the environment illustration. Developing characters for games is an interpretive process. Game characters move and react to events in the game. As technology has advanced, the complexity of the game character personality has expanded. The character illustration is a snapshot into the personality of the character. It should inspire the development team to create and animate the character.

Many character illustrations are used to promote the game. Often a character illustration is used in the advertising or promotional material because it is usually the first finished piece of artwork available.

The character illustration is one of the first things a review committee might look at when determining the funding for a game. The characters in a game have a profound impact on a publisher's acceptance of the game for publication. Having very good character illustrations in the game design can be a plus for getting the game funded, while poor character illustrations can stop the funding very quickly.

Character illustrations also are often used as the basis for creating templates for the model construction of the character.

What Makes a Good Character Illustration?

It takes many things to create a good character illustration. The first and most important aspect of a good character illustration is that the illustration should capture the look and personality of the character. There needs to be enough detail for the development team to see how to build the character and any clothing or accessories that he might be wearing or carrying. It should also indicate how the clothing might move about the character or how the character might move. If the character is an old man with a cane who moves very slowly, the character illustration needs to show the old man bent over the cane, obviously having trouble moving.

Because character illustrations are often used for promotion or funding of the game, they need to be well designed and clear to the viewer. The artist should take some time to plan the character illustration so it demonstrates good composition.

Ambiguity in a character illustration is not usually a good idea. If the illustration does not show the detail of the character clearly, it can cause misinterpretations when the character is built for the game. A good character illustration also should not use harsh lighting that obscures parts of the character.

A good character illustration should have correct anatomy. Many problems in building a character can be avoided if the character's proportions are drawn correctly. Most characters in games are 3D, so if a character is out of proportion or the limbs are not reasonable for movement in the game world, it can create many problems for the development team.

One of the basic components of a character illustration is that it is in color. Often the character illustration is used as the color reference for the development team because character templates don't always have color, and character sketches also aren't in color. A good character illustration needs to have the correct colors for the character.

Simple Character Illustrations

Not all character illustrations need to be finished to the same level of detail. Most character illustrations are detailed color sketches only used in the design document for the development team. If there are no outside purposes for the illustration, the level of detail does not need to be as high.

This example of a simple character illustration will show you how the majority of character illustrations are created. Later in the chapter, I'll give you a more elaborate example.

The first step in creating a character illustration is to start with a good character sketch. Figure 9.1 shows the base drawing for a female ranger in a fantasy game. The drawing should be detailed but not shaded; the shading will be applied in the painting.

The media for this painting are airbrush and hand-painting. The airbrush is used to lay in a simple background for the illustration. The background colors are applied to the entire surface of the drawing. As the painting progresses, the background colors in the character will help unify the colors of the painting. Figure 9.2 shows the first pass of color applied to the painting (although it is difficult to see in a black-and-white book!).
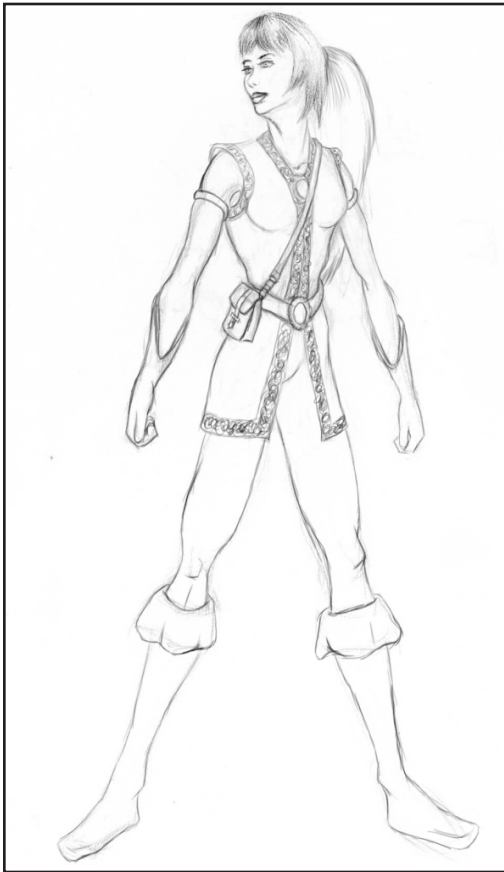
Figure 9.1
Start with a drawing of the character.

Figure 9.2
Add the background color to the painting.

In Figure 9.3, the background is enhanced with darker colors around the edges of the painting and a lighter color directly behind the character. The design principle here is to focus the attention toward the center of the painting. The lighter background color will be contrasted with the darker colors used in the character. Figure 9.3 also shows the beginning of the flesh tones added to the painting.

When using an airbrush, you move from one area of the painting to the next. The areas that are not being painted are masked off so you can apply paint only to the appropriate areas. In Figure 9.3, the face and arms were left uncovered while the rest of the painting was masked.

In Figure 9.4, the lighter pinks of the flesh are added. The mask remains the same, but the colors airbrushed over the area change. (Again, this is difficult to see in the book; however, you can check out the full-color illustration on the book's CD-ROM.)

Figure 9.3
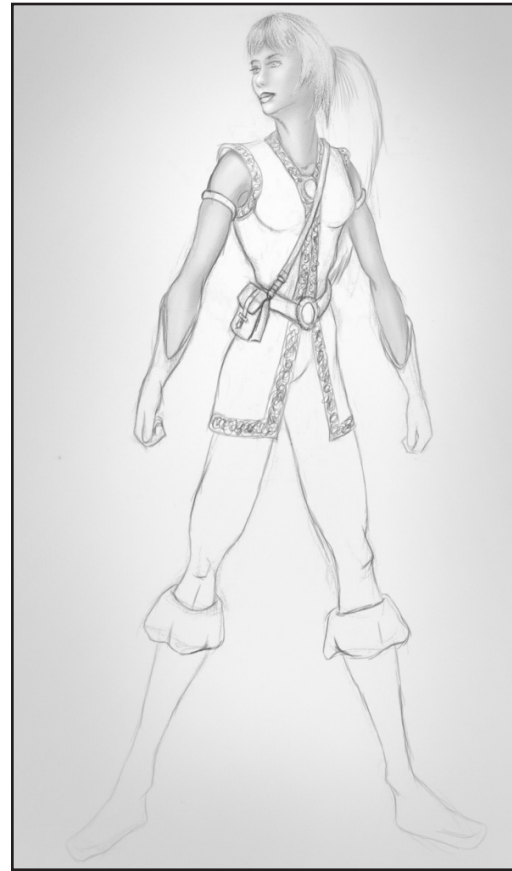Use the background to highlight the character.

Figure 9.4
Paint the colors of the skin.

The next mask will isolate the character's hair. The character will have blond hair, so the basic shades of light to dark are applied with the airbrush (see Figure 9.5).

The airbrush does not do a very good job on individual strands of hair. To get a good representation of hair, use a small brush to apply the darker and lighter areas by hand. Figure 9.6 shows the progress of the hair. (Again, the full-color images on the CD-ROM will better demonstrate this.)

Figure 9.5
Mask around the hair and airbrush the basic colors.

Figure 9.6
Paint the dark and light areas of the hair by hand.

The character has a long ponytail, which is also painted in using the same technique as the hair on the top of her head (see Figure 9.7).

After the hair, the next area to paint is the character's tunic. This area is masked off, and the airbrush is used to paint the darker areas, and then the lighter ones (refer to Figure 9.7).

The borders of the tunic have some golden embroidery. Just like with the hair, the airbrush does not do a very good job of creating the embroidery. The base darker color is painted in with the airbrush, and the finer detail is then painted in by hand. Figure 9.8 shows the results.

Figure 9.7
Paint the ponytail and the tunic.

Figure 9.8
Paint in the finer detail of the embroidery by hand.

Several other items need to be painted by hand because of their size or detail. Figure 9.9 shows the addition of these areas. The facial features are painted in, as well as some of the arm jewelry. The pouch strap and collar brooch are also painted by hand.

The only elements that remain to finish the upper body of the character are the pouch belt and gloves. These are painted in the same way as the other elements, with the airbrush laying in the base darker colors and the finer detail painted by hand (see Figure 9.10).

Figure 9.9
Paint some of the smaller items by hand.

Figure 9.10
Paint the gloves, belt, and pouch to finish the upper portion of the character.

Next the legs are masked off and painted using the airbrush. There is little detail in the character's leggings, so they are completed with just the use of the airbrush (see Figure 9.11).

The last step to finish the character is to airbrush in her boots and clean up some of the pencil lines that are still showing. You can remove the pencil lines using an opaque paint that is the same color as the background. Figure 9.12 shows the finished character illustration.

Figure 9.11
Next, airbrush in the legs of the character.

Figure 9.12
Finish the illustration by cleaning up the remaining pencil lines.

Notice that the contrast of the background brings out the character as the focal point of the picture. There is greater detail in the upper part of the body, so the focus is on that area. The subtle touch is that the character's lips are red. They are the only really red part of the picture. The illustration is made up of mostly a blue/yellow scheme, so the use of red on the character's mouth draws the eye to that area. Check out the image on the CD-ROM to see what I mean.

The character shows confidence and strength by her stance, with her legs braced apart and her arms at a ready position. Her jewelry shows her to be a woman of substance, as does her embroidered tunic. She has an athletic, elongated build.

This illustration is not a full, finished character illustration. With a little more planning and a lot more detail, the illustration could become a full, finished illustration. The next example will show you how a full, finished illustration is planned and completed.

Detailed Character Illustrations

A detailed, finished character illustration takes more planning and time to create than a simple character illustration. In many ways, the detailed, finished character illustration is the closest thing to a finished work of art that a concept artist creates. In fact, many character illustrations of this nature could adorn the walls of a gallery.

When approaching the detailed character illustration, the artist already should have gone through the process of creating a character sketch. Because of the time involved in creating a detailed illustration, the artist might have several sketches and thumbnails of the character. There should be quite a bit of refinement of the character before the work starts on the illustration. It would be sad to finish a detailed character illustration only to find out that there was a major problem with the character.

The following example is a character illustration in oil paint on a panel. The color medium is unimportant, but oil paint has the advantage of not drying quickly, which allows the artist to blend colors on the surface of the painting.

The first task is to rough in the basic forms of the character on the panel. Figure 9.13 shows the initial construction lines of the drawing.

A detailed line drawing is then created. The line drawing does not have any shading because its purpose is to guide the painting. The shading will be added later. Figure 9.14 shows the base line drawing.

This character is your run-of-the-mill knight on chicken back. The circle behind the knight is a design element to help keep the focus on the character.

Figure 9.13
Rough in the basic construction lines of the drawing.

Figure 9.14
Create a detailed line drawing of the character.

Before you go to the trouble of starting to apply paint to the panel, it is a good idea to work out the color scheme of the painting. You can create a small color painting with the basic color and value information. This small painting will then be the guide for painting the illustration. Figure 9.15 shows the small color rendering.

Figure 9.15
A small color rendering helps you plan the colors and values of the illustration.

In the first example in this chapter, you used a mask to shield the painting. In this example, a mask is used to protect the character from the background. The mask will protect the area where the character will later be painted. That way, you can paint the background without having to work around the character. Figure 9.16 shows the background painted over the top of the character.

After the background is painted the mask is removed, revealing the drawing of the character. The drawing can then be used as a guide for painting the character. Figure 9.17 shows the mask removed from the painting.
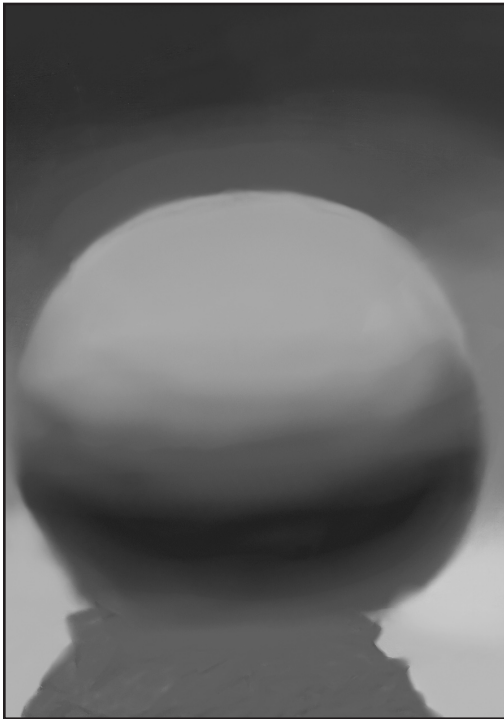
Figure 9.16
The background is painted over the character.

Figure 9.17
Remove the mask from the painting.

Using the small color scheme as a guide, paint the base colors in flat tones. Figure 9.18 shows the head of the chicken roughed in using color. The drawing is used as a guide for applying the tones.

The rest of the knight and chicken is painted in flat tones, like the head shown in Figure 9.18. The entire painting should now have paint on it. The advantage of painting in all the tones before moving on to painting detail in any area is that the artist is able to see whether the basic composition and values of the painting work. At this stage of the painting, it is easier to change something wrong than it is to change it later, when a lot of work has gone into it. Figure 9.19 shows the painting in flat tones.

Figure 9.18
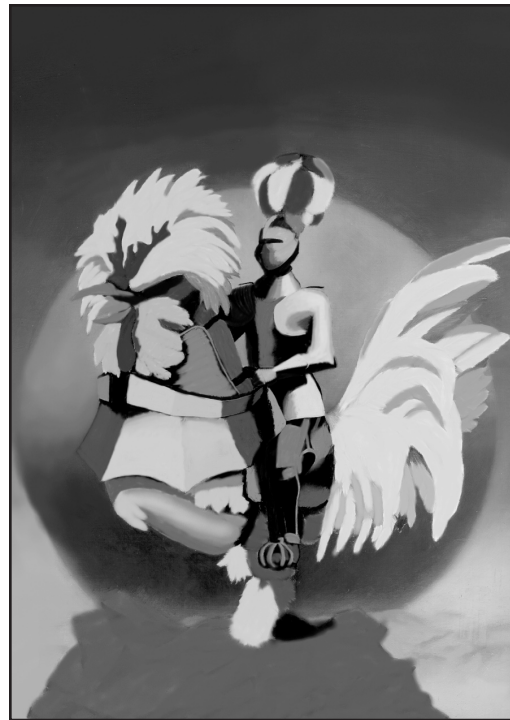The head of the chicken is painted in flat tones.

Figure 9.19
Cover the entire panel with the base flat tones.

Now that the flat tones of the painting are down, you can begin the detail work. Starting at the bottom of the painting, paint the rocks next because the chicken will stand on top of them and it is easier to paint them and then paint the chicken's feet on top of them. Figure 9.20 shows the rocks with the beginning of the chicken's feet on top of them. Also, paint the knight's lance behind the chicken's head.

Next, paint the knight, who is encased in armor. The armor is decorated with etched metal. To achieve the look of etched metal, paint the basic colors and values of the armor, and then apply the etching in a darker color using a fine brush. See Figure 9.21 for the results of the work.

Figure 9.20
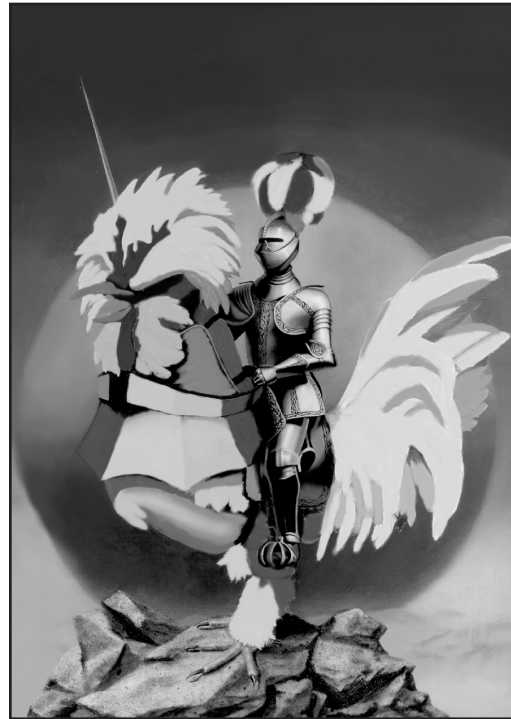The rocks are brought to life beneath the chicken.

Figure 9.21
Paint the knight next.

Following the same procedure as you used for the knight's armor, paint the chicken's barding, as shown in Figure 9.22.

When you are working on the chicken's feathers, the nice aspect of painting in oils is that you can brush the lighter white paint into the darker gray paint. You can then paint the feathers relatively quickly and with good effect. Figure 9.23 shows the detailed work around the chicken's head. Some orange is added to a few of the feathers to tie them into the environment.
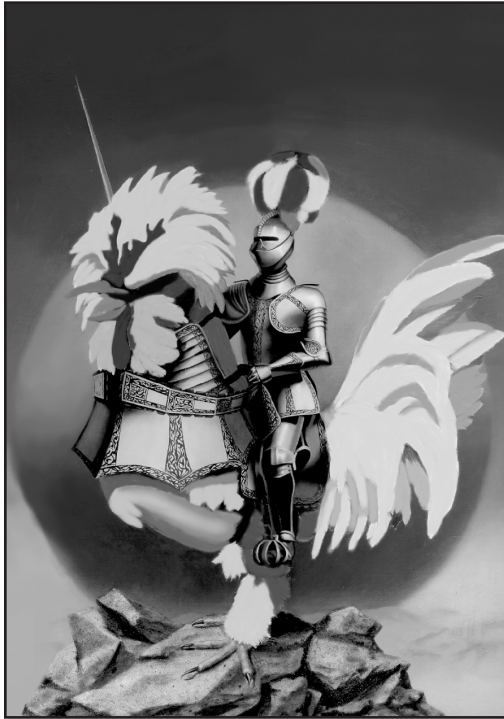
Figure 9.22
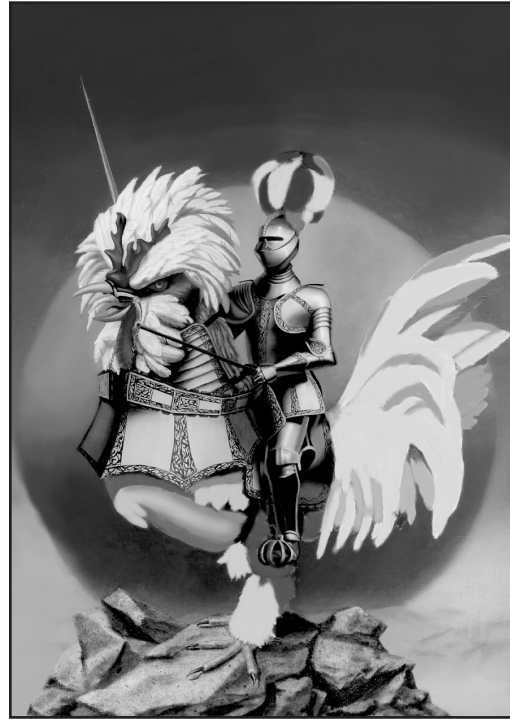Paint the barding using the same technique you used for the armor.

Figure 9.23
Paint the detail of the chicken's head.

Working from left to right, paint the lower feathers and legs of the chicken (see Figure 9.24).

Now the only thing left is to paint the tail feathers. Like you did for the other feathers, add yellow and orange to tie the character in to the environment. Figure 9.25 shows the finished character illustration.

Figure 9.24
Continue to paint the chicken, working on the lower body and legs.

Figure 9.25
Finish the illustration by painting in the tail feathers.

Summary

The last two chapters covered many aspects of character sketches and illustrations. This chapter dealt with character illustrations. A character illustration is a detailed, full-color painting of the character. The illustration should be well designed and well rendered because it is not only used for design information, but also for promotion and funding of the game. The character illustration is usually the most refined and finished piece of artwork in the game design.

In this chapter, you should have learned the following concepts:

- The difference between a character illustration and a sketch
- The definition of a character illustration
- How character illustrations are used in game designs
- What makes a good character illustration
- How to create a simple character illustration
- How to create a detailed, finished character illustration

Questions

1. What is the difference between a character sketch and a character illustration?
2. Must a character illustration have greater accuracy than an environment illustration?
3. Should a character illustration convey the character's personality?
4. Are character illustrations generally used as templates for creating 3D characters?
5. Other than to provide information for the development team, what other uses are there for character illustrations?
6. Why are character illustrations used in promotional and advertising material for games?
7. What is the most important aspect of a good character illustration?
8. Why is ambiguity usually not a good idea for character illustrations?
9. Why are colors in a character illustration so important?
10. True or false: All character illustrations need to be finished to the same level of detail.
11. How are character drawings used to create character illustrations?
12. Should character drawings used to create character illustrations be shaded?
13. Why is an airbrush a poor choice for painting strands of hair?
14. Why should an artist take more time to plan a detailed character illustration than other concept art?
15. What advantage does oil paint have over many other types of color media?

Answers

1. Character illustrations are detailed, full-color paintings, and character sketches are usually drawings.
2. Yes.
3. Yes.

4. No.

5. Inspiration, promotion, and funding.

6. Because they are usually the most finished artwork in the design.

7. That it capture the look and personality of the character.

8. Because ambiguity might cause misinterpretations when the character is created.

9. The character illustration is often the only color reference the design team will have when creating the character.

10. False.

11. They form the guidelines for the concept artist to add the color to the painting.

12. No.

13. Because an airbrush is not very effective for painting fine detail.

14. Because the character illustration is often the most finished piece of artwork the artist will create.

15. Oil paints allow the artist to blend colors on the picture.

Discussion Questions

1. What uses can character illustrations have?

2. Why are character illustrations more finished than other concept art?

3. What are the characteristics of a good character illustration?

4. Why are good character proportions important in character illustrations?

5. Why is it important to plan a detailed character illustration?

Exercises

1. Create a simple character illustration of a young child for a kids' sports game. Make the child athletic yet cute.

2. Create a simple color illustration of a character for a military game. The character should look strong and carry some kind of menacing weapon.

3. Create a detailed character illustration of a character for a street skateboarding game. The character should have a modern look and fit into an urban environment.