



# Concept Art for the Entertainment Industry. Graphics for the Evocation of Imaginary Spaces

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**Abstract.** Nowadays, the entertainment industry relies on a massive visual development which employs all kinds of representation modalities and technologies. Especially as regards the design of imaginary worlds or fictional reconstructions of past eras, there is a huge need of prefiguration in order to visualize an idea before it can be transformed into the final ‘on screen’ product. The concept artist is now a key-figure in the industry, who has the complex and hyper creative task to condense the atmosphere, the mood, the feeling and the peculiar features of an environment in a single bi-dimensional image. Such kind of evocative artworks are not far from the scenographic designs in use in theatre ever since the Renaissance, which also exploit the possibilities offered by traditional representation techniques like perspective and value composition. These means are used in an imaginative and illusionistic way to serve the visual prefiguration need and to provide a ‘vision’ of the setting. The paper reflects on the centrality of representation techniques in the conceptualization process of environments for the entertainment industry (videogames, movies, TV shows etc.) and on the similarities between concept art and scenographic design, which are both powerful visual communication tools characterized by the strict, consequential relationship between the concept and the *mise-en-scène*.

**Keywords:** Concept art · Environment Design · Entertainment industry · Graphic communication · Graphic visualization · Scenography

## 1 Introduction

“With their continuous exchange, imagination and reflection can still build new pieces of reality, by modifying and enriching the world of our experiences”.

(Gregotti 1992)

The term concept art has gained popularity only in recent years. It is debatably believed that the term may have been coined at Disney in the 1930s, during the production of *Snow White* (1938) (Ghez 2015). It refers to production artwork used in video games, movies, animation, TV shows and similar forms of visual entertainment, which is created to help visualizing and designing environments, settings, characters,

creatures, props, outfits and anything else that builds the ‘visual architecture’ of a project. Concept art increasingly became a more focused and independent job in the late 1970s through the 1990s with movies like *Star Wars* (1977) and *Blade Runner* (1982) and point-and-click adventure games like Lucasart’s *Monkey Island* (1990). Back then, concept art was realized with traditional techniques and mainly served as a basis for the construction and staging of the sets where the scenes were to be filmed (i.e. *Star Wars*, *Blade Runner*) or as backgrounds in animation movies and adventure games (Figs. 1 and 2).



**Fig. 1.** Environment designs for *Star Wars* (1977) by concept artist Ralph McQuarrie.



**Fig. 2.** Environment designs for *Blade Runner* (1982) by concept artist Syd Mead.

As the idea of entertainment art grows further every year and is constantly changing (many Hollywood art-related jobs didn’t even exist 10–20 years ago), concept art revolves around a fast-growing industry and today it can be considered the most crucial stage in conceptualizing and driving the production process of a film or a video game. The concept artist is now a key-figure and a well-rounded professional in the business, having the heavy duty to imagine worlds and shape them through his artistic skills in the form of breathtaking illustrations. It is an exploratory sky’s-the-limit approach to ideas, within the borders of a story or a gameplay. Besides, the formal and figurative research has been increasingly supported by digital technologies, which helped to stunningly accelerate the rendering of the mental processes that take from the idea and its immediate visualization, from imagination to sudden representation (Florio 2012). The images that a concept artist creates are the spark of the visual development carried

out by the rest of the production team, that will eventually end up “on screen”. A concept artist employs different artistic media, both traditional and digital, but mainly exploits the incredible potentialities of digital technologies (e.g. pen tablet, drawing/photo editing/3D modeling/3D sculpting software etc.) to visually represent ideas. The result is a bi-dimensional image, although 3D material is often used and mixed with 2D media in the process. Indeed, concept artists are cross-disciplinary in the medium they work since they not only digitally paint in 2D, but they are also adept in sculpting, 3D modeling, perspective drawing and photography; they are versatile designers in control of several communicative and graphic tools, mixing life drawing, digital painting/drawing, digital sculpting, 3D modeling, photo bashing, lighting and much more. Given the high level of specialisation reached by the entertainment industry and the demand for more and more refined products, concept artists often specialize in a specific branch/genre of concept art such as Environment Design, Character Design or Props Design, although they generally must be adept at any style, any genre and any subject in order to be competitive on the market. In this paper, we will focus on Environment Design, which presents many similarities with the practice of scenography sketches for traditional theatre. Even if the world portrayed in both fields is fictional, unreal or utopic, it always retains ties – no matter how weak they are - to reality: this is the reason why concept artists still refer to real, existing elements and combine them together in new, unexpected ways. For this reason, it is highly important for them to have a solid visual repertoire, which is mostly based on a library of photographic references, along with a grounded artistic background and a steady knowledge of fundamentals such as colour theory, lighting, perspective, anatomy, composition, painting and sketching techniques. Everything is aimed at visually conveying a proposed idea of “look and feel” - without words - by portraying environments realistically and dynamically (Lilly 2015). The paper highlights the importance of concept art as a visual communication tool in the earliest phase of the development of an entertainment product and its analogies with scenographic design, which is also characterized by the strict, consequential relationship between the concept and the *mise-en-scène*.

## 2 Concept Art as a Visual Communication Tool

Concept art is primarily a visual communication tool within the visual development team - linking the idea to production -, while the concept artist is a professional who works on bringing visual ideas forward, thus giving others refined images to expand upon. Despite the connotation of concept art having a heavy visual emphasis, its aesthetical value is placed secondary in favour to its design aspects. This is why concept art must be clearly distinguished from illustration, although they are often mistaken. While illustration’s main aim is to be visually appealing, concept art’s prerogative is to be visually communicative, in order to guide the production team. Concept art can be referred as phase one in the visual development process towards the final product, while an illustration is the final product itself. Moreover, concept art serves as a means to prefigure ideas and consequently it doesn’t necessarily need to be excessively refined (like an illustration) as long as the communication of an

environment design is effective and clear; in other words, it's not all about being the most skilled painter or sketch artist. Of course, the ability to draft an idea, the so-called design skills, is important to give a more correct or accurate visual representation of one idea (Pantouvaki 2010). However, concept art is primarily about imagination and iteration, that is the ability to make many different versions/visions of the same idea until the best one rises to the top. There is no sense in having a finely finished piece of art that offers little new in terms of design, mood and feel: this would result in a considerable waste of time and effort. Therefore, a rougher, looser sketch that sparks interest and promotes discussion is favourable as its artistic flaws will be quickly overlooked (Pickthall 2012). These images will be used to create the mood, personality, and style of a film or game project (Nice 2018), so that modelers, animators, and VFX department can make these ideas ready for production (Fig. 3). They essentially represent the guidance and the fuel for the development team that will take it from there and carry it out. Therefore, a concept artist provides a broad range of interpretations based on the storyline - most being in the form of sketches, speed paints, 3D overpaints and matte paintings - among which the final design will be chosen. The artist, while working on the definition of a form, immediately becomes aware of how many forms he is simultaneously excluding and how many won't even see the light in his designing process (Pierantoni 1999). Being a flexible, versatile instrument, concept art can result both in finely polished images and rough sketches; however, it can communicate the same amount of information in both cases - no matter which is the artwork definition - as the final goal is to offer visual support to bring an idea to life. Drawing is then again an irreplaceable explicative moment and an event of knowledge 'exchange' (Florio 2012) whose value and quality lie in the intrinsic potential as a moment of synthesis, that is a moment of communication and manifestation of the ideational elaboration. Also, in the case of concept art «representation aims at the arrangement and *mise-en-scène* of those conflicts deriving from the need to pose the essential structural features of the visual concept again, through two-dimensional elaboration and three-dimensional hints» (Florio 2012): the same applies to architecture, as well as to landscape or scenic design.



**Fig. 3.** *Final Fantasy XV* (2016). Environment concept art (left) and final in-game rendering (right)

### 3 The Art of Designing Imaginary Spaces. A Parallel with Theatrical Scenography Design

How does a concept artist achieve his goals? In the entertainment industry the ‘designer’ is, of course, given a screenplay, a storyline, a description of the setting in which the story takes place, which can be either based on real-life historical subjects/events, like an original interpretation of a certain era, or be purely fictional, not based on anything existing, such as a dystopian world or a utopic one. These environments are hardly the outcome of one’s pure imagination; they mostly have their hidden roots in real life imagery. If it’s true that everyone sees what he knows (Munari 2001), it is also true that everyone re-presents what he sees and, in a wider sense, what he knows according to the modalities of his experience of knowledge (Florio 2012). So, the first step in the concept artist’s workflow is certainly a rigorous analysis of the script and a comprehensive research and thorough referencing. Indeed, being a concept artist requires the constant renewal of one’s visual library to ensure they are able to recall interesting visuals to combine, as a database of ideas to use as a starting point of their visual research for a specific project. Having a rich visual library of forms and aesthetic themes to pull from is crucial to create interesting imaginary, hybrid environments in perspective. Such kind of images reminds of the works the XVII and XVIII century landscapists (e.g. Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin), Piranesi’s *Carceri d’invenzione* or Canaletto and Belotto’s *capricci*, but also the Futurist drawings series *Città nuova* by Sant’Elia (Fig. 5). The basic representation tools employed by a concept artist are linear perspective (one, two or three-point), value composition and atmospheric perspective, which are also fundamental for the first, exploratory phase of their work: thumbnail sketching. Thumbnailing consists in quickly sketching environments’ main masses through freehand perspective supported by value composition and atmospheric perspective to make depth perceivable (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Thumbnail sketches by concept artist James Paick [www.jamespaick.com](http://www.jamespaick.com)



**Fig. 5.** A collage of concept art and traditional artworks. From top left: Sant'Elia's drawings and a *Blade Runner* (1982) concept (center) by Syd Mead; an engraving of the XVIII century *Carceri d'invenzione* series by Piranesi; *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) environment design by Fernando Acosta; Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Revelations* (2011) environment design; Bernardo Belotto, *Capriccio with ancient ruins* (XVIII century); Canaletto, *Capriccio with classical ruins* (1723); Bernardo Belotto, *Capriccio with Campidoglio* (1742); Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (2010) environment design.



As it can be easily noted, the means and purpose of concept art are not so distant from those of traditional scenography sketches – i.e. *bozzetti di scena* – used in theatre since the Renaissance. At the beginning of the XV century, art experienced a fundamental passage from medieval *perspectiva communis* to *perspectiva artificialis*: this transition happened thanks to artists-scientists like Filippo Brunelleschi, Leon Battista Alberti, Piero della Francesca, Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci. As a consequence, scenography's main aim became to re-create the illusion of depth and the atmosphere of a certain setting through a single overall picture (Pagliano 2002). The Baroque period, in particular, produced a significant deal of theatrical scenery characterized by compositional, dynamic, temporal and spatial strength. The scenographic design draft, which is traditionally carried out in linear perspective to simulate human vision, contains all the necessary data to stage a scene that will reflect the initial concept. Therefore, the project of a theatrical scenography can be considered as the 'spatial translation' of a bi-dimensional image (the *bozzetto*), which was conceived by the imagination of the artist-scenographer-painter (Pagliano 2002). Again, the design is the visualisation of an idea, i.e. a scenographic design has a specific scope: to communicate visual ideas to all those who are involved in the process of making a performance (Pantouvaki 2010). Therefore, a set design acts as a visual messenger between the director, the choreographer, the lighting designer and other members of the team, as well as all the technical collaborators who use the design as a visual guide throughout the realisation process (Howard 2009). In that sense, a theatrical *bozzetto* is not an independent artwork: it is, instead, 'the visual ambassador of ideas' (Pantouvaki 2010), just like a concept art piece.

The Baroque theatre was the triumph of illusion, especially thanks to the works of the Bibiena family, who introduced angled two or three-point perspective to confer extreme dynamism to the scene. Through angled perspective, scenography abandons the typical Renaissance one-point central perspective in order to reject the viewer's gaze and make it wander inside the environment spreading out in front of his eyes. At the beginning of the XIX century, Alessandro Sanquirico introduced the expedient of leaving the foreground elements in the shade to convey the spectator's gaze towards the bright perspectival views of the painted background. Such artistic devices are fully exploited by concept artists, too; scenographic designs and concept art share the same evocative power and the role of visual guide in the construction of the stage setting, on one hand, and in the realisation of the environment where the cinematographic action or gaming experience will take place, on the other (Fig. 6). Moreover, both scenographers and concept artists master perspective in a functional and creative way. Indeed, perspective is not a sterile or mechanical means that artists apply in a flat way. Instead, it expresses all its dynamism in the contrast between rule and derogation whenever an artist makes a personal choice or invention to indulge the visual communication purpose. In addition, the dimension of the human presence provides the scale and majesty of the architectural and landscape elements that form the environment. Representation, therefore, never sacrifices creative freedom or the artist's personal vision of the world.



**Fig. 6.** A collage of concept art and scenographic designs. From top left: design for the 1846 edition of Gioacchino Rossini's *Attila*; environment design for Dol Guldur in *The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies* (2014) movie by Gus Hunter; *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) concept art by Karl Simon; Giuseppe Galli Bibiena XVIII century stage design; Alessandro Sanquirico stage design for *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (XIX century); *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (2010) concept art by Donglu Yu; environment design for *Exodus* (2014) by Luigi Marchione; two stage designs by Lorenzo Guidicelli for Gioacchino Rossini's *Semiramide* (XIX century).

## 4 Conclusions

In this paper we presented concept art as a steady growing art field with the concept artist being an independent professional figure whose role is crucial in the creative process of modern entertainment franchise, acting as a blueprint for other designers to use throughout the project. Just like a scenographer, the concept artist aims at conveying the overall design vision which will be developed by the rest of the production team in the creative pipeline towards the final product. Theatrical stage designs and concept art share the same drawing techniques and representation artifices to evoke imaginary settings, even if the corresponding 'output' is different. Scenography is in charge of creating the physical, on stage 'world' where the action will take place.



Together with the director's choices, it defines the form, colour, proportion, perspective etc. of the theatrical image (Pantouvaki 2010), which is exactly concept art's role in a movie or video game production. To some extent, concept art can be viewed as the evolution of scenography, one that adjusts to the demands and pace of the present entertainment industry. Digital art techniques enhance and speed up concept artists' workflow, helping them to keep up with the overflowing requests and fast course corrections of production. The reason to reflect on these themes is to encourage the encounter of different fields of representation which too often move along parallel tracks, as if they were separated and distant worlds. Instead, mutual contaminations can enrich both fields and trigger creative synergies.

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