

Installing Imagination as a Skill

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Martin Engler absolved his master's degree at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design Bratislava, the Studio of traditional printmaking and illustration. He focuses on illustrations for games and concept art, digital and analogue-based techniques for painting, drawing, sculpting, designing. He worked as a freelance concept artist and illustrator, is co-founder of the Pomimo magazine focusing on comics in Slovakia, lecturing and teaching art and design focused on games for four years. Currently, he is a PhD student at the Department of Digital Games, Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. He teaches 2D and 3D game art, concept art, fundamental art skills, visual development and creative thinking, as well as works within Hemisfera (Level UP) – game dev for high school students and indie game developers.

Imagine that we could all see the way one perceives reality. A thoughtful process with image and sound. Complete, with emotional and informational value. Pure and true. This has been happening throughout history by people with their own imaginative gift interpreted in all different media. Growing equally with the growth of our civilization, science and technology.

First of all we must clarify the position of imagination itself. Imagination goes hand in hand with fiction. It is the process of creating a thought, and taking shape in the real world simply by believing in its existence founded on one's knowledge. Even though, it may not be real, it fills a special space in the memory of its inventor. Fiction is also usually very tempting due to the fact, that it is something entirely new. Therefore it attracts observers to the story to be understood and to live its own life in their imagination. This is a very fascinating part, because it is not only a demonstration of human behaviour to create such fictions of possibilities that lead to creating ideas of religions, ideologies, utopias, mechanisms and constructs, but it also leads to its materialization in the physical world.

At our present time it leads to creating complex stories in complex environments mostly used in the game or movie industries, called by the name concept art. As complex as a new reality created by the rules of our world. This creative potential leads to questions: What is the true potential of a human mind? Why are we teaching people to absorb information, instead of teaching them to understand the core, therefore to create shapes (forms?) from chaos? Can we increase the potential of the human mind by using imagination? Throughout history we have witnessed that imagination has its special part in building civilizations. People with a gift of seeing the truth, future, untouchable entities, witnesses to their own 'celestial' imaginations were worshipped and followed. People memorizing powerful fiction that took shape not only in the mental sphere but also in the various scriptures that influenced viewers (worshippers) of the respective religions. Gifted people were believed to be touched by gods or even seen as gods themselves simply because it filled other people with satisfaction and a unique feel of fulfilling transcendence. This is where powerful thoughts manifested in stories, religions and ideologies presented by art, begin to mix together.

We can witness such courses of events in any civilization with any religion: from caves like Altamira to the first civilizations, ancient Egypt, Mayans, Christians, even in ideologies we can find a strong relation between understanding and using powerful ideas through art. Artists maintained positions of gifted people, who can solely see divine unimaginable things and the things they created became the closest reference to fiction. Perfection in interpretation and aesthetics became valued as proof and truth compared to truth in newspapers. For instance we may follow the lives and art of great renaissance artists like Albrecht Durer or Leonardo da Vinci who were considered to be among the greatest artists in the world in those times. They lived their lives during the ages of very strong Christian religious influence, yet we can see that their artworks were worshipped as relics. There are certain texts that mention worshipping gods through their art or making talismans or protection against the plague such as *Four Horsemen of the apocalypse* by Albrecht Dürer. It says that fiction perceived by the senses, can be very convincing when witnessing a piece of divine or fantasy like imagery, words or sounds accomplished in perfection to please the viewer. It can be so powerful that the greatest and the worst things ever done were covered in their perfection or a constructed lie supported by the imagination of viewer. For instance symbols of religions, books written by dictators or propaganda posters calling to arms. This underlines how powerful and important a role it plays in our life. We do not seek aesthetic satisfaction only, as referred to in Antic philosophers theories, but we crave for a way to see behind the curtain and to see the future. This is the point where the modern perception of imagination is taking place.

There is yet another reason why I mentioned the great artist himself, Leonardo Da Vinci, who is by my perception, father of the present fiction in concept art. We may notice, that where strong imagination, brilliant artistic skills and very high intellect fuse in one person, great things are about to happen. There are many examples in his countless paintings dedicated to the Christian religion, sculptures, design, architecture, but also in countless devices, machines and other inventions and studies of anatomy, physics, mechanics, principles of animation etc. that he created during his life. Creating a new way of perception for the future generations. Here is a smooth transition to the early mentioned concept art. Where artistic skills, design, knowledge of world and working with fictions are being applied to movies and games. This type of art dedicated to fiction, was 'officially' born around the 60's, when the first mentions of word concept art started to appear in studios (Disney) dedicated to movies and cartoons. The term simply means, that art is created on behalf of a fictional story or in a different type of style than realism, where visualizations of the fictional world, things and characters in it, are made all in the condition of believability. This type of art is a beautiful lie which tells the possibilities or visions in such a high quality environment, where the viewer can easily immerse themselves into a fictional world and its story. The conclusion is not only pure amusement at unbelievable things turned to living shapes by patterns taken from real life made in perfect order. It's also a possibility to ask questions, which would never occur in everyday life. Pushing the boundaries of human cognition.

So how does it work? How can someone just activate imagination? Is it something you must be born with, or can it be built? The truth about natural predisposition versus hard work, is somewhere in the middle. Of course each of us has a better predisposition to something else and that hard work and dedication is the way that takes you to the result. We must not omit the fact there is a big difference between craft and art. Is art something untouchable, which is given by god? Or is it some kind of a module that is called imagination built on perception and rules, which drives us to create something different? What I learned is that we undergo a process of evolution from our birth to the very end of our lives. The process is most transparent during the juvenile years of a human being, but is it true that we stop evolving at some point and we will never be better?

What I think is that our physical and mental potential has had enough time to build its structure, but there is a possibility for us to go further. Connections with neurons are made perpetually by learning, creating memories, thinking, connecting and deepening our senses. It is a practice where you should try and develop or in other words program your mind and create different processes and connections, that helps you understand or push your mental boundaries. And this is, where art and especially imagination in my perception, has a huge role. Real art is some kind of a never ending riddle, where you analyse, learn and connect pieces together and you can create something from chaos. That means, that you are constantly changing variables and you are trying to reach a conclusion which could result in various possibilities. It is a game with passion for knowledge and beauty of truth in fiction that satisfies. I would also say that to understand reality through art is very close to a scientific approach. You cannot build anything without knowledge and to draw means to analyse and take form in visual notes.

So, does anyone have it? How can it be tamed or can we learn how to awaken it? I say yes! But it takes ones time, concentration and will to find a way. My opinion of how it all works and can be enhanced, is that it is a combination of 3 parts and for each I created experimental studies on myself during my artistic study, career and teaching. The first one aims to exercise the ability to imagine pictures or scenes. Imagination is a function of everyone's brain. It is commonly active, when you dream or think about your memories, trying to relive them. Thinking about the shape of something or someone. This is also the

key to how to use it when you are not sleeping. Learning to visualize your own dreams, being half-awake and lucidly changing them or to try store your own visual memory simply by looking at them. Analyse them and draw them on paper or you may close your eyes and try to draw them in your imagination. There is a thing that some artists mention from time to time and it could be called the inner eye. It is simply the ability to dream whilst awake and visualize things that don't exist. This ability of course grows with practice and it is good to visualize in different ways. In lines, in shapes and in forms. Each and every way is very important for us to push your brain to details.

The second point of my studies is learning how things work, first of all perspective in three dimensional space, physics like light or movement and your desire for knowledge of the things that inspire you. It is necessary to find a conclusion for every information to build constructions and ways to draw. Way of drawing should be a way of thinking and it should appear that way. Why is that? It's just the way things are, if you want to create something and you do not understand it completely, nobody would believe or even understand it. You can try this by drawing something from your memory. When your brain reacts to a certain memory in a picture, it goes in the direction of facts you know first or simply what is perceived the most. That is why when most people who do not know how to draw are drawing the eyes, mouth, nose and hair very large and clearly but disproportionately, while other things are drawn by their personal interest. Mostly when other parts are drawn, they are totally inaccurate with proportions sorted by their own importance.

I suggest that one of the best practices for this is connecting lines with the inner eye on top of real objects when walking anywhere any time. Try to practise with closed eyes and make studies on paper as much as you can and of anything you find interesting. But the important thing to be reminded of is that if you do not analyse the problem, you cannot move forward. When you cannot imagine, draw or write something down, it means you didn't make a construction from the information. You do not understand it, therefore you cannot make it real. This could be both very frustrating and helpful. It can help to develop, to understand problems and methods of how to deconstruct, analyse to the core and construct again. The more you know about the real world, the better you can visualize things from any angle, it deepens details and functionality.

The third thing to practise is the ability to realize and connect your memories, feelings and senses with knowledge. To create is to understand them completely and to understand is to feel. Feeling here plays an important role. In order to create fiction you must put yourself into the state where your brain feels the fiction. It is not only a method to trigger imagination but also to achieve visual believability and storytelling. To understand this part is to watch people, action and reaction, studying senses and emotions, feeling them on your own. Study situations and deduce the possibilities of outcomes. Recalling them by trying to feel that situation from memory. The immersion process is a very important part for everyone and it can be used as a powerful tool in creating fiction. Or to store any of your information with value by turning it into memory attached with feelings.

The ultimate goal for all of these is for someone to build their own library, to deepen their brain functions by connecting their memories, stories, feelings, senses, dreams with additional information and context. Therefore they can make new patterns, designs, create new stories, understand people or nature. Their potential is growing hand in hand with every connection you make. This is how concept artists think, this is how innovators think, this is how to find a way for figuring out anything. And to walk towards the future.