

Mike Lim, otherwise known as "Daarken", is a talented illustrator and concept artist, well known within the digital community for his fantasy work. He has been working successfully as a freelance artist since leaving university with clients including Fantasy Flight Games, Wizards of the Coast and Mythic Entertainment.

"Creating art is a constant learning experience and one that I hope will never come to an end"



DAARKEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH MIKE LIM

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Could you begin by telling us a little about your background and the path you have trodden to get where you are now?

Sure, my name is Daarken and I grew up in a sleepy little Texas town where tumbleweeds and horses were aplenty. After attending the University of Texas at Austin for a year for computer programming I finally realized I didn't want to write code for the rest of my life. As a child I had always enjoyed carefully creating master copies of various comic book covers in pen and ink. The titles I drifted towards were of characters that had a mask of some sort: Spawn, Spider-Man, The Darkness, and anything else that I could get my hands on. The reason for this was because I couldn't draw faces... at all. Instead of facing (lol) the problem head-on, I just avoided them. It took several years before I was able to draw a decent face. Anyway, after I decided to become an artist, I



moved to San Francisco to attend the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. In 2004 I graduated Cum Laude with a BFA in traditional illustration. Three months later I received two phone calls: one from Fantasy Flight Games

and one from Wizards of the Coast. I have no idea how either of them found out about me; I probably should have asked. I will never forget my conversation with Wizards of the Coast. This is basically how it went:

WOTC: Would you be interested in doing some work for us?

Me: Yes!

WOTC: You don't even know what the project is yet. Don't you need to know more about it before you agree?

Yeah, I was a little green back then [Laughs]. Since then I have been freelancing non-stop. In 2007 I received an email from Mythic Entertainment wanting me to work on the game *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning*. A few weeks later I flew out for an interview and I have been with Mythic ever since.

It is great to have such prominent clients headhunting you. For anyone unfamiliar with these names what role do Fantasy Flight Games and Wizards of the Coast assume in relation to concept art and how easy / difficult has freelancing been since?

Well, most of my freelance work deals with illustrations as opposed to concepts. The work I do for Fantasy Flight Games and Wizards







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of the Coast has to do with collectible card game illustrations, book illustrations, cover illustrations, things of that nature. There are always advantages and disadvantages between freelancing and having a staff position. On one hand freelance gives you the freedom to have an open schedule, but the cheques are sporadic and you don't get any benefits that come with a staff position. Another thing that most people don't realize is that you have to pay estimated taxes if you are a freelance artist, so be sure to save 30-40% of each paycheck for taxes. Finding freelance work hasn't been hard for me, luckily I have a constant flow of clients to keep me busy.

How would you describe the development of your work over the last few years and what do you feel have been the key advances you have made as an artist?

I feel that I have improved tremendously over the past several years. I can't even stand to look at the work I was doing 3-4 years ago. I'm not really sure why anyone hired me back then. Working at Mythic has really helped me push my ability to resolve my images in more detail. Back when I first started my paintings were extremely loose. I think a big part of it was due to laziness.



"...one of the key things to remember when creating believable concepts for subjects that do not exist is to base them on things found in the real world"

My paintings have also progressed in terms of color use and contrast. I basically coined the name "Daarken" because my paintings were very dark. Not necessarily dark in nature, but dark in terms of contrast. Most of my paintings

were barely even visible; I can't believe my art directors let me get away with some of those paintings. Something else that I have been working on lately is pushing my compositions and incorporating more environments and backgrounds into my paintings. I am so used to working on very small print-sized illustrations, like *Magic: The Gathering* and *World of Warcraft*, that I tend to leave fairly vague and simple backgrounds so that the characters will read better. Creating art is a constant learning experience and one that I hope will never come to an end.

As a concept artist you are expected to create convincing images and designs that convey a certain sense of realism and plausibility, yet often focus on subject matter that does not exist. How, as an artist, do you regularly tackle this problem and what do you feel are the key principals involved?

I think one of the key things to remember when creating believable concepts for subjects that do not exist is to base them on things found in





the real world. Using the real world as reference can give your concepts that little sliver of realism that will push them from being something silly to something that is tangible. Another important aspect of concept design is the details. Little details can be an important factor in portraying a real object as opposed to a clearly made up one. For example, when I am designing armor I try and figure out how the armor is put together.





I think about where the straps should go that hold the pieces together, or where the rivets should go. Thinking about these things will translate in your concept and give people the feeling that it could actually work.

"One of the pitfalls that novice concept artists run into is they don't realize they have to work within the limitations of the available technology."

What have been the main differences and considerations you have had to take on board within the games sector compared to previous commissions?

First and foremost, as a concept artist your job is to envision what the art director wants and be able to execute a painting that is clear and precise so that the modeler can build it. In illustration work you can let light and shadow hide much of your painting; when doing concepts you can't do that. One of the pitfalls that novice concept artists run into is they don't realize they have to work within the limitations of the available technology. If you create some crazy outfit for a character you have to keep in mind that this design is going to have to work in the game itself. If the model can't support dangly bits hanging off the character, then you probably shouldn't spend time painting them in your concept. Is the clothing you designed going to cause a lot of clipping problems with the model? Are you going to cause problems by designing a character that is wearing heels when none of the current models are built to support that feature? These are all things you have to keep in the back of your head.

Your professional work and much of your portfolio fits within the genre of Fantasy. What do you feel are the most challenging aspects of working within such a popular genre and the main pitfalls that await the aspiring novice? Probably the most challenging thing about working in the fantasy genre is making something that doesn't exist believable. There









are a lot of people out there that tend to go a little too crazy when working in the fantasy genre, and thus end up with something that looks silly instead of something that could actually exist. Sure you want to come up with something that is new and unique, but you need to base things on reality. If you are trying to design a creature, look to nature for inspiration.

"The computer is just a tool; it won't teach you how to become a good artist"

I notice that you have a fine art and life drawing section on your website. How do you regard these disciplines compared to your digital work and do they form an integral part of your illustration and concept work?

Being able to draw and paint traditionally is extremely important for an artist. When I attended the Academy of Art University I learned how to paint traditionally before I learned how to paint digitally. You need to have strong foundations before branching off into the digital realm. All of the fundamentals you learn while painting traditionally can be applied to the digital media. The computer is just a tool, it won't teach



you how to become a good artist and it won't do the work for you. There is no all powerful filter that will make your illustration perfect; that is one of the things that many people fail to realize.

Who or what would you cite as your main influences and source of inspiration?

There are so many artists that have inspired

"I gave up on trying to find a style a long time ago"

or influenced me over the years. Some of the old masters that I look to are people like Sargent, Leyendecker, Cornwell, and William Bouguereau. Contemporary artists include Brom, Kekai Kotaki, Jon Foster, Todd Lockwood, Aleksy Briclot, Daryl Mandryk, and Justin Sweet. I always try to not be too influenced by another person's style. Early in my career I had a problem with looking too much like other artists. From one painting to another you could tell who I was looking at for inspiration at the time. I think I was so worried about trying to find a style that I ended up just looking like everyone else instead of just focusing on creating a good illustration. Style will come with time, it isn't something that you should force or intentionally go out and look for.

Style is a word one hears a lot and is something many seem to strive for, but what meaning does it have for you and do you think it is possible to develop a unique style?

I gave up on trying to find a style a long time ago. Most of the time an artist's style will come to them on its own. I just try to paint to the best





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of my ability, and if a style comes out of it, then I consider it a bonus. I personally don't think I have a recognizable style, but that is just me. Usually a unique style is a mishmash of other people's styles; a brush stroke from one artist, a color palette from another, you get the idea. Every so often a truly unique style will pop up, but within a few months or years you will see 50 artists with that same style.

From seeing your time lapse movies and tutorials it appears you have a very intuitive and fluid approach to your work. Do you find that your approach and the freedom of working digitally generates its own momentum and a dynamic that helps suggest a direction and therefore fuels the creative process, as opposed to drawing on paper beforehand?

Yeah, I think that working digitally gives you the freedom to explore more possibilities. It allows you to try things you would normally be too afraid to try with traditional media, but at the same time one could fall into the trap of repainting something so many times that you end up losing the initial punch of your sketch. I actually wish I had the time and dedication that the traditional artists do to plan out my illustration beforehand. Since I don't do any preliminary drawings or roughs I waste a lot of time trying to figure out the poses and composition as I am painting the final. On the other hand you end up with a lot of happy accidents when working digitally without any preconceived ideas.

And finally; if you were faced with a fearsome army and were forced to fight, which of your characters would you like by your side and why? Probably a daemonette. Nothing like having a half naked girl to distract the enemy while she eviscerates them!

Mike “Daarken” Lim

For more work by this artist please visit:

<http://www.daarken.com>

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