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ALIEN APPLE STUDIOS

Alien Apple Studios Ltd is a leading conceptual design studio based in the UK, with a creative team that lends their extensive experience to a variety of areas in the industry. In this month's interview Stuart and Donna Jennett talk to us about setting up their own studio, their approach to design and some of the projects they have worked on.

Thanks for taking the time to talk to us. First off could you tell us a little bit about yourselves and how you got started with digital art?

Donna Jennett: I started way back in the games business in 1993, using the first version of 3ds Max, so that's real old school I guess, compared to the packages we have now. I'd always had a strong interest in graphic design though and found myself naturally moving more towards UI and HUD design combining a lot of 2D and 3D software, although I did find myself acting as lead artist on *Twin Caliber* which was a fun challenge with such a small team.

During my time at Juice games, THQ and ultimately Alien Apple I've found my main focus definitely lies in the graphics side of things now. I really enjoy the challenge of designing a good brand identity for a project and how that is translated into the final product via the interface, HUD and marketing campaign etc.

Stuart Jennett: I started many moons back as a penciller for Marvel UK comics before finding myself working as a storyboard and concept artist in the games industry. My initial introduction to digital art was working in 3D, which I did for many years, providing in-game models for a variety of projects, although I still developed my concept work traditionally on paper. I think once I started using a Wacom tablet I started to feel myself wanting to shift to working digitally throughout the process. I guess it was a speed thing initially and when it came to color work you didn't have to fork out for expensive paints, brushes and art boards. It was all free and you always had the Undo option.

How did Alien Apple Studios come to be?

DJ: After THQ Warrington closed I think we, along with a few of our colleagues, decided working in a studio climate in which you have no control wasn't a place we ever wanted to be again and the thought of setting up our own studio had been playing in the back of our minds for a while. It did take a couple of deep breaths, especially in this current climate, but things are working out OK and we've worked on some great projects so far.
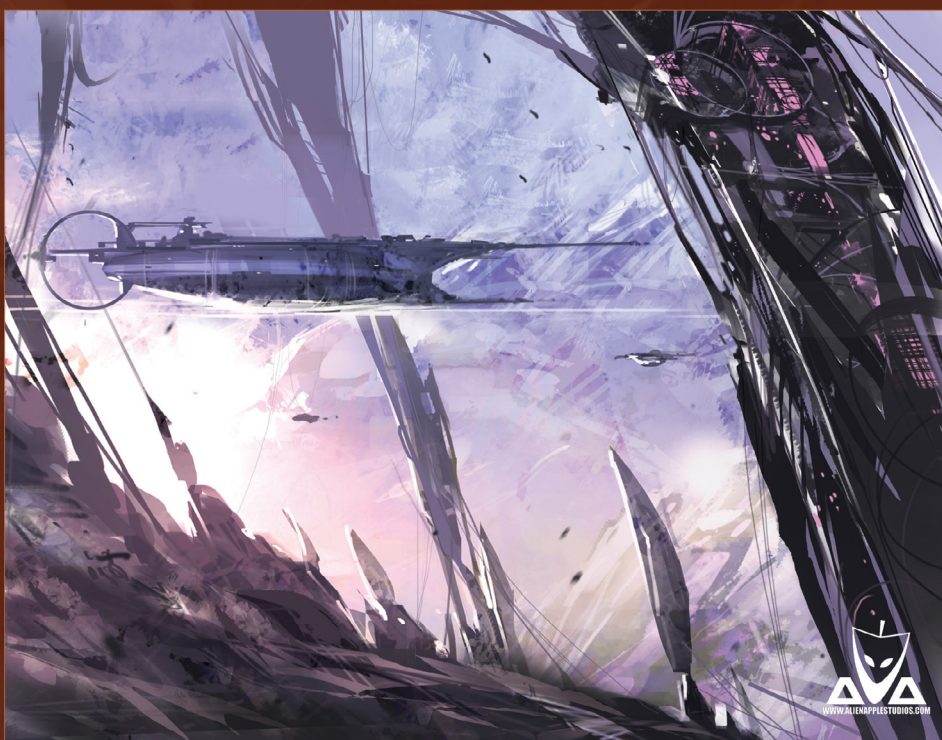
SJ: I also missed the freedom I had when I was a freelancer. Going back into a studio as an art director was a big decision for me and to be honest I found the atmosphere slightly restrictive on the creative front. Things seemed bottle-necked at every level and I was tired of having meetings to arrange meetings; I just wanted to keep my hands in on the art side of things. Things are just meant to be sometimes and I do see the closure of the studio as a blessing, as it's allowed us to open a lot of new doors so far.

It must have been a huge risk starting the company like that, particularly when you had just seen THQ Warrington close. Why do you think you have been successful in your endeavors so far? And is it liberating being free from a large company like THQ?

DJ: It was a very risky move, as by avoiding going into the employment of another studio you're obviously putting your financial security at risk. With the freedom of working across a broader spectrum of the entertainment industry, it's opened a lot of new opportunities for us and we wouldn't have it any other way now.

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Do you have any advice for people who want to get into the industry?

SJ: Be an artist first and foremost is my best advice. You should live and breathe it. The tools can be learnt; being an artist can't.

Also the job climate has changed dramatically in this industry over the last few years, with a lot of smaller studios springing up, so the need to be a strong art generalist is imperative – but long term you need to decide early on which particular skill you would like to specialize in.

Your studio covers a variety of areas; could you tell us a bit about the services you provide?

DJ: We can handle pretty much anything within the concept and design phase, be it character, vehicle or environment design. I personally specialize in UI (user interface) and graphic design, and can also help with product branding and identity if the client requires it. Stu also likes to do as much illustration/comic work as possible, just to keep him on his toes.
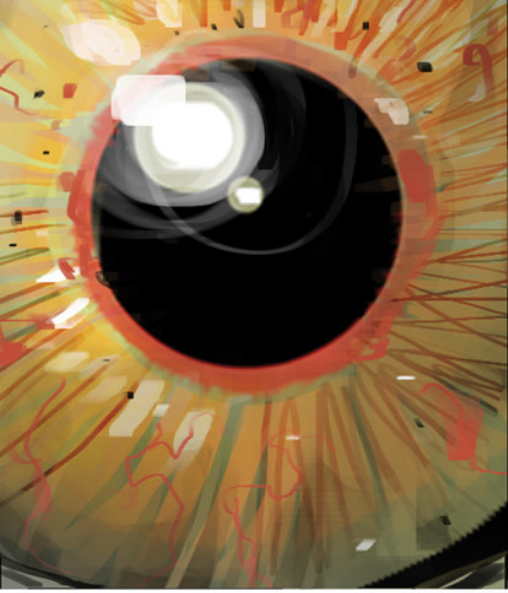
Do you each have a different style and workflow? Could you tell us a bit about your process?

SJ: I think there's a similar workflow across most disciplines in terms of generating an idea and then how that's refined to a final piece of artwork, regardless of what packages you use. Obviously Donna's skills are more geared towards the graphics side of things with UI design and general graphics work, whereas I'm more geared towards concept and illustration work. Each involves an initial rough sketch phase to simply get ideas down, and then when the client has picked a favorite we'll run a number of iterations on that, in terms of finish and presentation, until it has fulfilled the original brief.

What's your favorite type of design to do?

DJ: I really like getting involved in developing the look and feel of a new IP from the ground

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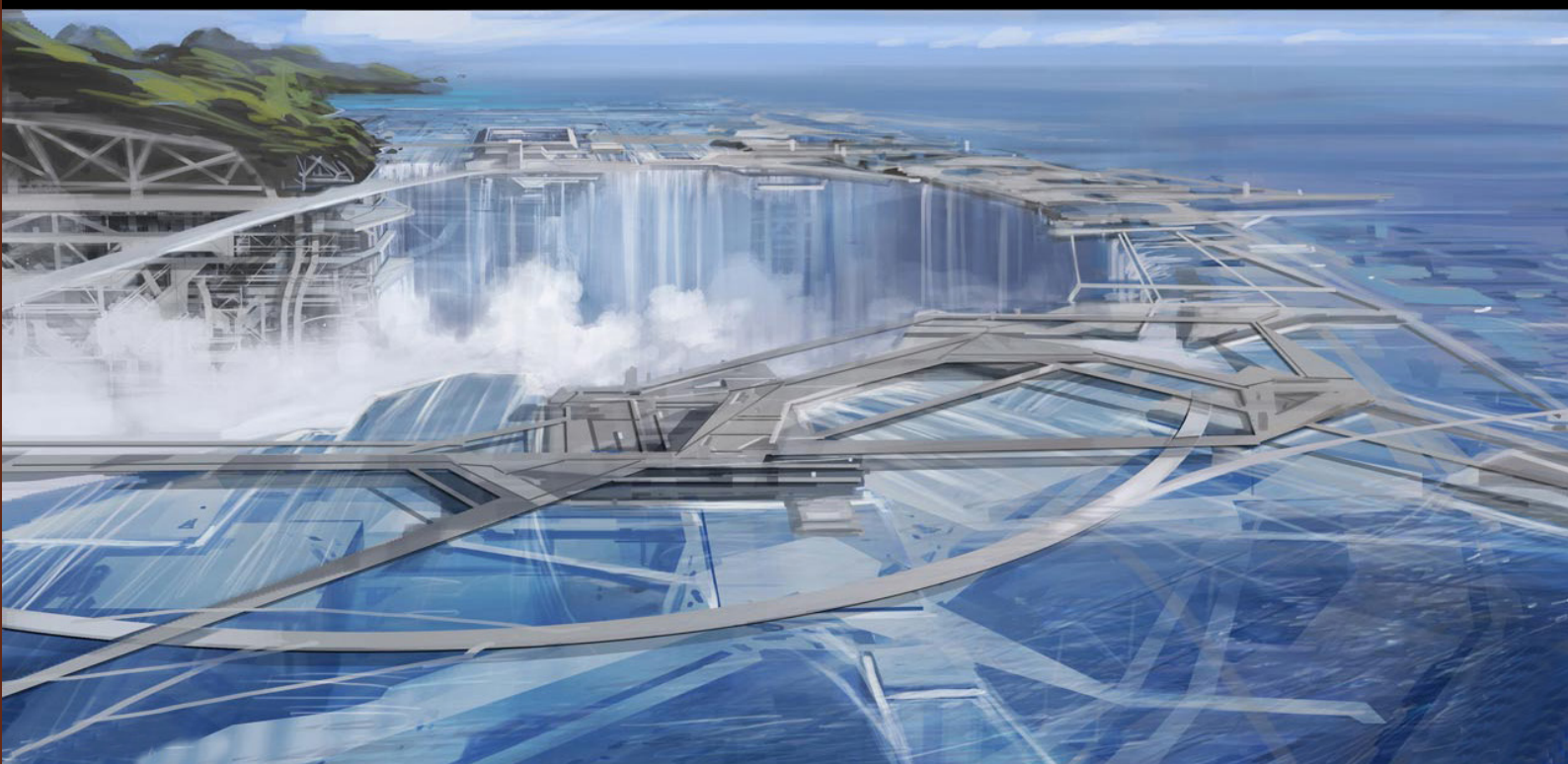
up. It means I get involved in all aspects of graphic design as the brand aesthetic develops, be it logo, UI or presentation design.

SJ: To be honest I enjoy designing as broad a range of subjects as possible, as each one brings its own set of challenges and helps me to push myself as an artist. I am prone to a little bit of sci-fi military hardware though!

What's the best project you have worked on and why?

SJ: Personally I've just finished working on the latest James Bond game for Eurocom, which was a good project to get my teeth into and I've also enjoyed working with the guys at Space Digital on a number of projects there. I even found myself storyboarding the title sequence for Gok Wan's new TV show, which was bizarre but fun to do.

DJ: I've just finish helping out Bossa Studios with the UI work on the *Merlin* game, which is based on the BBC TV show. I really enjoyed the challenge of that. I've also done a couple of other projects, which still seem to be languishing in development hell; hopefully they'll see the light of day at some point.

What plans does the studio have for the future?

SJ: Well I think we'd obviously like to grow as a studio a little more. We have some great artists interested in joining us and it's just a matter of the right time really, especially in this climate. We also have an internal project that we're very excited about; it's been in development for a while, but will finally see the light of day early next year. Watch this space.

Thanks for speaking to us and sharing your brilliant work.

Thank you, we really enjoyed the interview.

Alien Apple Studios

Web: http://www.alienapplestudios.com
Email: stuartjennett@hotmail.com
Interviewed by: Jessica Serjent-Tipping