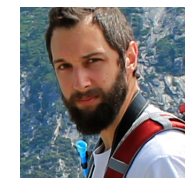


The Artist



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Software Used:
Photoshop

James Wolf Strehle is a concept artist and illustrator. He works for Volta where he is afforded the opportunity to create art for some of the biggest games in the industry.

Fantasy fundamentals: the conclusion

James Wolf Strehle reviews the series so far and discusses the final touches needed to polish and perfect your artwork ▶

Learn how to clean and sharpen your work to give it a polished finish...

It's been a journey but we have finally reached the end of this five-part series on the fundamental elements of creating a great fantasy piece! In this final article I will talk about adding in the final touches as well as providing a review of all of the previous articles leading up to this point!

Over the course of the past four tutorials (featured in *2dartist* issues 133-136) I have shown you how to develop an image that

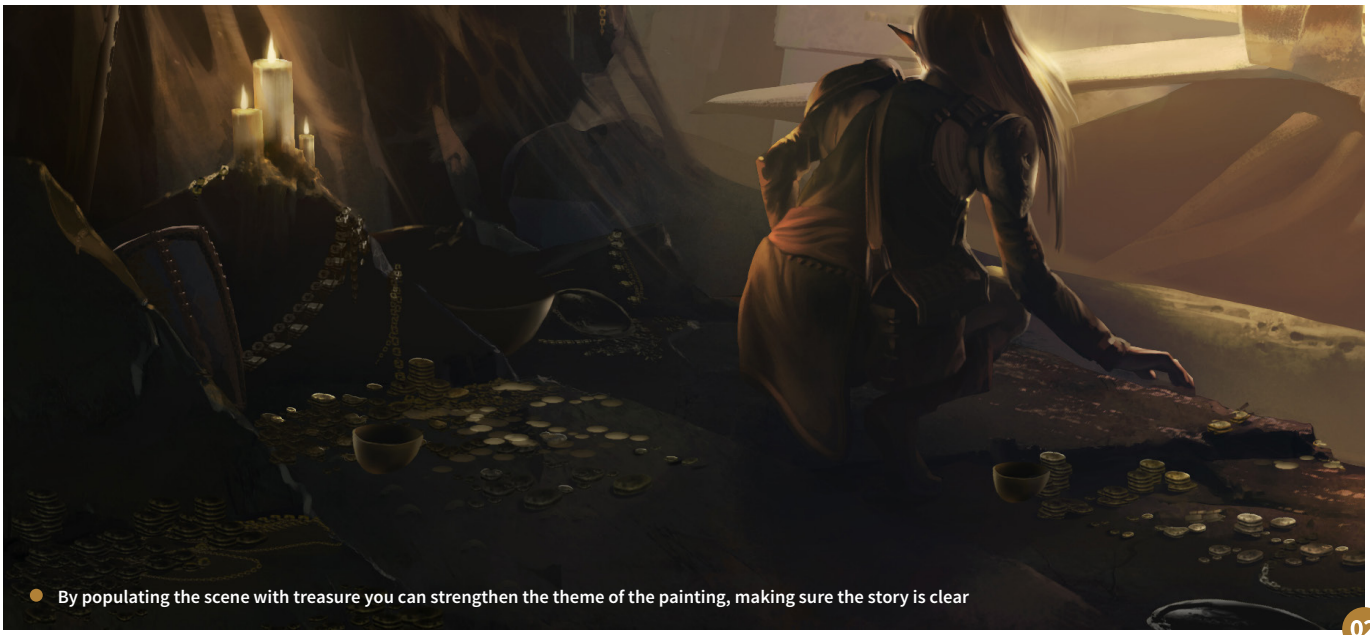
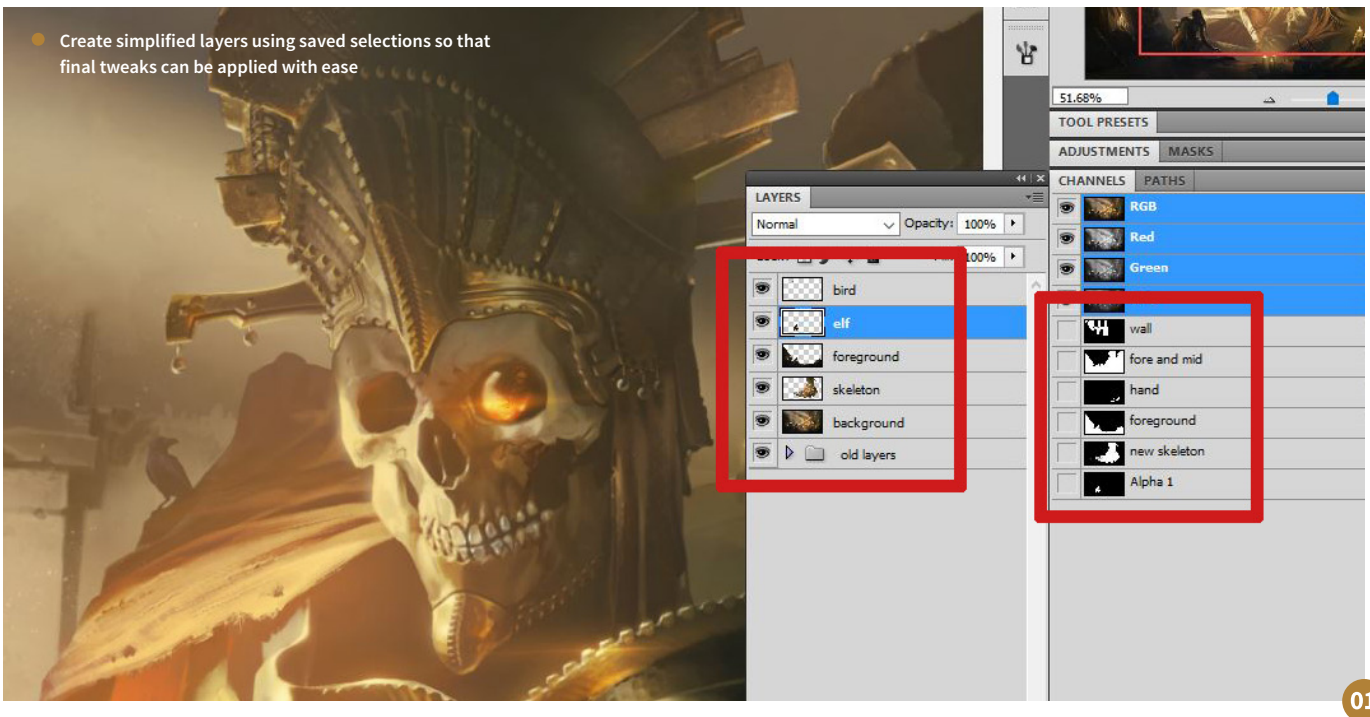
makes use of composition, perspective, values, and FX. Now it all needs to be cleaned up and tweaked before you can give it the seal of approval. I will go over how I clean layers before making adjustments. I'll talk about how to properly sharpen an image, explain why there needs to be more treasure, and show you how I go about fixing colors. I'll then give a brief overview of the previous articles by picking out the most important aspects of each.

It's been a lot of fun producing this series and I am quite happy with the result. I hope this final part will give proper closure to the image

and give you the necessary information to go off and produce a fantasy piece of your own!

01 Cleaning the image: Before reviewing the previous tutorials I have a few final touches that need to be applied before I can consider the image complete. Some color adjustments need to be made and a few story elements should be strengthened. When I get to this stage I like to do a little clean-up first because it will make things much easier when applying these final steps.

If you are mindful from the beginning the clean-up can be a fairly painless process but it can get

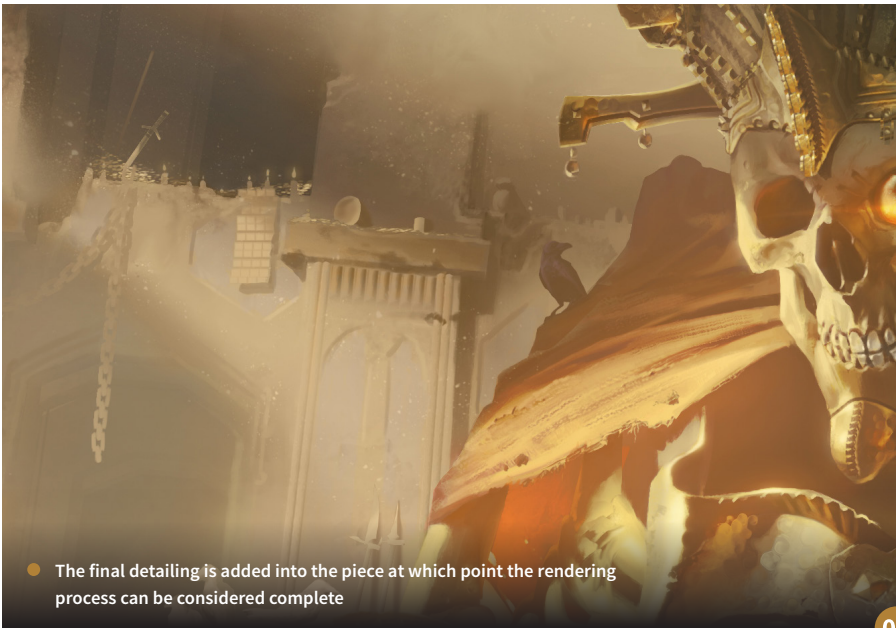


a little messy if you are using multiple overlays and layer effects. To remedy this, duplicate all your layers and merge them into one layer. Then copy out the foreground, mid-ground, background, and other essential objects using the saved selections you have been making throughout the painting's creation. If you want you can apply the adjustments to the merged layer but I prefer to have a few separated layers to give me a little more control. With this done you can move forward with greater efficiency.

“Duplicated bowls and plates can be squashed and stretched to fit the perspective better with use of the Skew transform option”

02 More treasure!: To make it clearer that the thief is fixated on the glistening eye, I decide to litter the scene with various treasures to emphasize his unwavering focus. Even with all the spoils around him, his interest remains solely on the eye. The other reason for adding in more treasure is to clarify that the thief is looting a tomb, not confronting an enemy.

To add in the treasure, simply render it as you would with any other part of the image. Quickly fill the scene by copying and duplicating various items. Duplicated bowls and plates can be squashed and stretched to fit the perspective better with use of the Skew transform option (Edit > Transform > Skew). Continue adding items in until you are happy and your purpose



is fulfilled. In the close up image you can see the various treasures I add into the scene.

03 Color adjustments: Now that all of the elements are in place you can do a final pass to make sure all of the colors are as effective as they can be. I want the colors in my image to be harmonious with each other so that the viewer is not distracted.

Sometimes when you are using many overlays the values and hues will fall out of line a little. To fix this you can use the Darken, Lighten, and Pin Light layers to bring them back into order. The Lighten and Darken layers will help you take care of the values. For example if you use

a Multiply or Overlay layer the dark tones can easily drop below the values that you intend. A Lighten layer blanketing the image will fix this.

I use a Pin Light layer to give either the dark or light tones a slight color tint. Sometimes the shadows can look flat, so a little tinting can bring the life back into them.

04 Adding minor details: At this point I am almost finished but after flipping the image I notice a few areas that could benefit from some minor detailing. The background is a little too plain in comparison to the rest of the image which draws unwanted attention due to the stark contrast between the detailed skeleton ►

and barren background. I also adjust the jaw because it looks slightly incorrect. Basically at this point I am looking over the image in search of areas that could use some more work.

Once you are content with the image, flip it back to make sure the edits have not caused undesirable results. This is the last bit of rendering I do so I take a break at this stage and come back to the piece at a later date. A piece can often become too familiar and a little time away can help you come back with a fresh set of eyes and a reinvigorated mind.

“I want to sharpen the skeleton because, not only is it the center of attention, but it has become blurry from all of the other atmospheric elements”

05 The Sharpen tool: One final adjustment I occasionally make is to sharpen specific areas and occasionally even the whole image if need be. For this piece I want to sharpen the skeleton because, not only is it the center of attention, but it has become blurry from all of the other atmospheric elements. To do this go to Filter > Sharpen > Unsharp Mask and adjust the sliders until you are happy with the effect. You do not want to over-sharpen the area because it can create unwanted edge contrast or add a grain to your image.

Once the skeleton has been sharpened I add a mask to the layer and paint out the regions where I prefer less sharpening, such as the shadows. In my image you can see the original, sharpened, and over-sharpened

samples. Too much sharpening can ultimately damage the image instead of aiding it.

06 Reviewing composition: Now that the image is complete let's review the steps taken in the past articles to get to this

point. First up was composition. In this stage I discussed how it allows you to control your viewer's eyes, which as a result makes your image more engaging. I also talked about balance and how important it is for keeping those eyes on the page, the rule of thirds, and the Golden



05



06

Ratio which are the classic tools you can use to help you create appealing compositions.

These were just a few of the talking points within this step but in short, composition allows you to take control of your viewer's eyes. You can use composition to guide the viewer around the image in a way that reveals to them the story you are trying to tell. In my piece I want to focus attention on the relationship between the skeleton and the thief. I use the Golden Ratio as well as lines and a triangle theme to accomplish this.

07 Perspective: In the second tutorial I discussed perspective, which is the technique used to represent a 3D object in 2D space. Linear, atmospheric, and planar perspective were the main points raised because these perspectives play a major role in emulating true perspective. One-point, ►

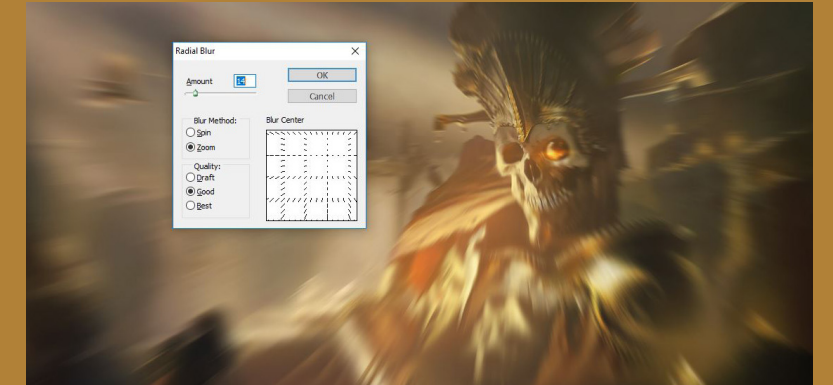


07

PRO TIPS

Finding previous filters

I use filters a lot so being able to get to them quickly saves a lot of time. By hitting Ctrl+Alt+F, (or Cmd+Option+F if you are using a Mac) you can view the last filter you used. This is especially helpful when you apply the same filter in varying degrees on different layers. You can also repeat your last filter by simply hitting Ctrl+F (Cmd+F for mac). If the effect is not strong enough or you want to apply the same effect on a different layer, hitting these two keys is a lot faster than fiddling with Photoshop's menus.



two-point, and three-point perspective were explained within linear perspective which makes it possible to place your objects at various angles, effectively tricking the eye.

Getting your perspective correct is important if you want to project a sense of reality into your work. Without it your viewers will have trouble imagining your scene as part of a living, breathing world. Perspective helps you to layout your scene accurately and without it the piece would not have a sense of depth or space needed to give key elements, such as the skeleton in my scene, the presence it requires.

08 Values: Values are very important to a successful artwork as I discussed in the third tutorial. They define the light in a scene and allow you to distinguish surfaces from one another. I talked about contrast and how it should be placed in the areas you want to draw the most attention too. Volume was also discussed because it defines the lighting on an object and gives it a sense of three-dimensionality.

I discussed shadows as an element of value because they help to place an object in space and support the lighting of the scene. Values can be very challenging however. In the process of creating this piece I have frequently gone back and adjusted the lighting dynamics of the skeleton and background. Sometimes it will take a little back-and-forth for you to get the values in your image just right.

09 FX: FX is a wide ranging subject and my article focused on a few specific effects that apply to a typical fantasy piece. These include particle effects, candle lighting, bloom effects, blurs, and more. FX are a great addition to a piece but it is important to know when and where to place them. A properly placed effect can really enhance a painting but an incorrectly placed effect can just as easily derail it.

I like to use FX to strengthen story elements. The dust in the air, for example, is important because it helps to convey the idea of a long forgotten tomb. The gem in the eye is also important so I make sure it looks as if it is gleaming. FX are the icing on the cake so take the time to make sure they are implemented correctly, and if you need to, take a step back to reflect on your piece as a whole.



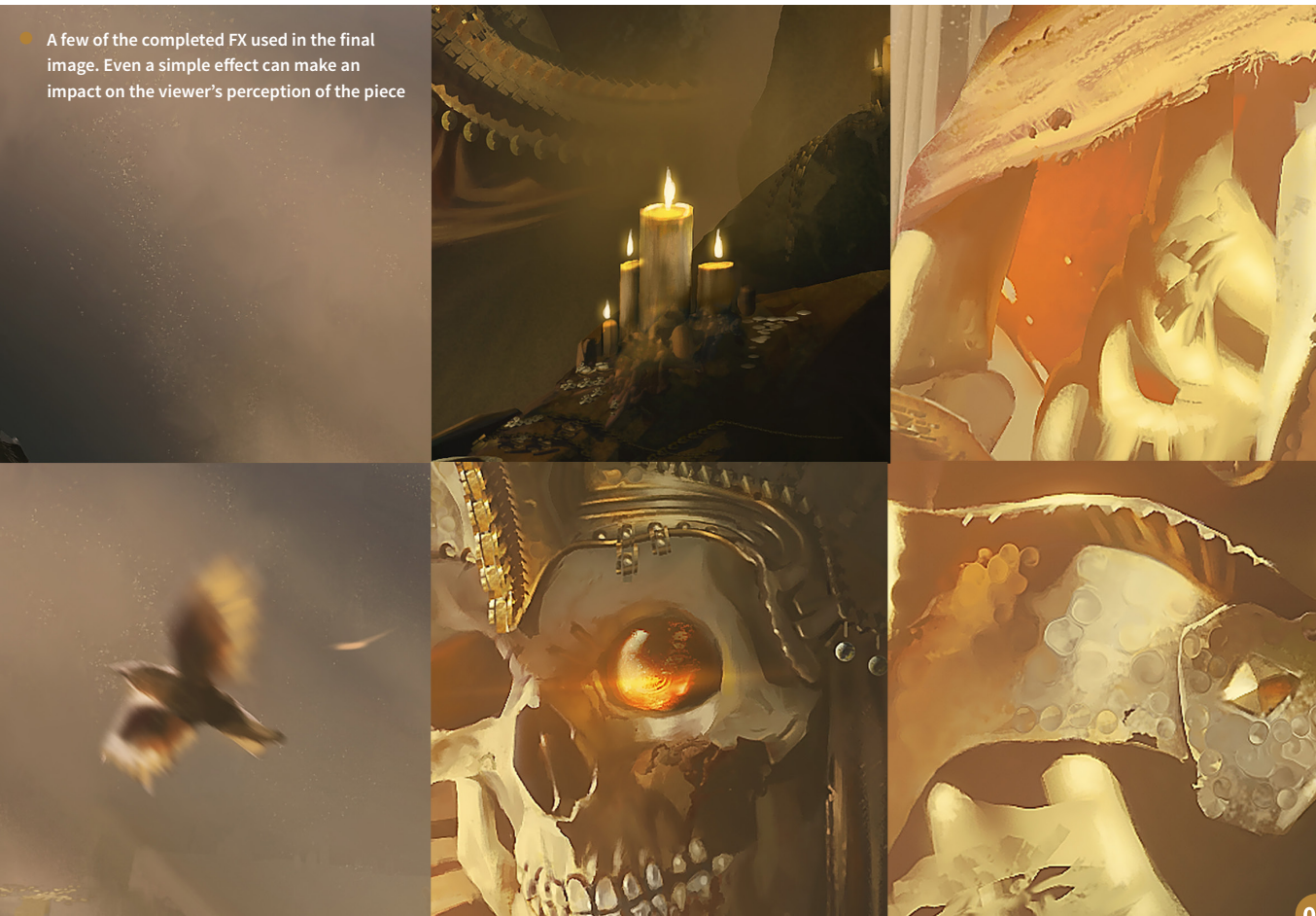
10 Concluding *The grave robber*: Creating an eye-catching fantasy painting takes time and a bit of know-how. Composition, perspective, values, and FX are all fundamental pieces of what makes an image successful. It is important to balance each so you can ensure they work together to support your vision. In

this series I've laid out in-depth knowledge for each topic that I not only feel are important to know in general, but are also things that I use personally to help me create my fantasy images. It has been my pleasure to write these articles and I hope they have been of some value to you! ●

PRO TIPS

Full Screen mode

It can sometimes be helpful to get a clear view of your work without the tools and menus as a distraction. To do this simply hit the F key to switch screen modes. Keep hitting F until you get to Full Screen mode. This mode lets you see your image without distraction just as it might be viewed in a gallery setting. While in this mode, you can hold down the space bar and then hit F again to scroll through different colored backgrounds. This will give you an idea of how your piece will come across in a final presentation.



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