

How I Make Backgrounds

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Step 1: Briefs, Constraints & References

A brief is a short description of the background. It describes the environment in general terms and may also note the atmosphere of the environment, the period it's set in, or highlight objects which must be present.

A constraint is something non-negotiable that you must include or accommodate in your work. These are things like the objects the client has specifically requested you include or the UI. A typical visual novel also constrains the angle of viewing — more on that later.

References are images that guide or inspire the creation of the background. Sometimes a client will supply these because they want you to use the same angle the image uses, sometimes they're more interested in the mood it conveys. It's worth asking what they like about it so you know where you can deviate.

In my experience briefs and references tend to be more suggestions than strict rules to follow. My clients typically aren't artists themselves (and almost never environment artists) so I don't expect them to have particularly interesting ideas or developed notions of what comprises, say, a good composition.

I try to push my designs in an interesting direction without contradicting the brief. Keep in mind that the pieces you're creating for a client end up in *your* portfolio! If I feel the client is making a mistake I'll tell them and explain why. This doesn't always work and sometimes you'll have to compromise.

Step 2: Making It Interesting

Once I know what I have to do I begin supplementing the client's reference images with my own. I try to find things that fit in the fiction of the world that are wacky

or unusual. In particular, I look for interesting shapes or color schemes. Sometimes I'll save a big image because a tiny part of it contains some neat idea or design.

Keep in mind that things can always be recontextualised. For example, anything can be a building: a toaster, a cat's ear, a yoga ball, a croissant, a weird-looking dildo, or a combination of those things. Anything can be anything. A design on the floor can be rotated 90 degrees and placed on the wall. And so on.

Another thing that guides my thinking is the style of the environment. Is it art deco? Late-georgian? Some combination of styles? Sometimes the client tells you but other times you'll need to decide. Things like "sci-fi", or "fantasy" aren't styles. Greco-Roman architecture and tudor architecture both appear in fantasy works, for example. Narrow it down.

A highly specific style gives you a bunch of recognisable motifs to work with. As you incorporate these into your background, remember that there are no rules for how big or small the motifs can be, nor what orientation they are in. They can be used in any context.

Step 3: Perspective

When I have some idea of what I'm gonna make I set the horizon line. I place it approximately a third of the way down from the top of the image to accommodate both sprite art and the text box.

The text box occupies roughly the bottom quarter of the screen. This means three things: firstly, you don't need to put much background detail here, save your energy for elsewhere. Secondly, important things should not be in this region — move that doll or trapdoor or whatever somewhere else. Thirdly, characters will be partly obscured. If you place the horizon line in the middle of the image the characters will look like they're peaking over the text box. This is fixed by moving the horizon to a third from the top. This can look weird by itself as it results in a lot of floor space but it will look right in context.

Sometimes an elevated horizon line means you're looking downward but in this case the image has simply been panned down. The point of view for visual novel

backgrounds should always be parallel to the ground to prevent vertical lines becoming tilted. Character art is drawn as if it's seen head-on — if you don't do the same for your backgrounds they'll look wrong when the two are combined.

As an aside, a big tell for me that a background started in a 3D application (even if it's later painted over) is that it has a horizon line smack-bang in the center. This can be fixed in the 3D application. I bring it up because some people view 3D as a way of cheating on perspective or even just skipping art theory in general. You still need to learn about perspective and art theory even if you use 3D.

Step 4: Start Big

I always start with the big stuff in a background first because this helps lock in the composition early. For an interior this is the shape of the room. If I can make the shape of the room intriguing in some way this will have a cascading effect. A room that has a curious shape will make you place furniture in a way you ordinarily wouldn't. Rectangular prisms aren't interesting. Why can't the room be rounded, diagonal, have an alcove, an outcropping, be split-level, or otherwise be irregular?

For an exterior scene it's a little harder. If you're going for an interesting design it gets a little tiring after a while. This is why "concept artist" is a role that's distinct from "illustrator." If you look at concept art it's usually not fully rendered — it's a *concept*. It's about capturing the idea. An illustrator (or 3D artist) then takes that design and fully realises it. My problem with exteriors is that you can see things right into the distance, unlike a room. So when I work on an exterior I design a few iconic buildings and place them so as to obscure as much stuff in the distance as possible. The rest becomes a problem-solving exercise of filling in the gaps. This allows you to keep the amount of designing you have to do under control.

When considering composition you want to keep in mind some general principles:

- **Codirectional lines that almost overlap look awkward.** A fence top whose edge is a hair's breadth away from the door frame edge behind it feels weird. This can't always be avoided but it shouldn't happen with large intersecting forms.

- **Overlapping forms and repeated elements creates distance.** Say we're in a gym looking into another room. If we draw an imaginary line between our eyes and the back wall of the gym we want it to occasionally pass through multiple things. Maybe there's a treadmill whose handlebars overlap the reception counter.
- **The detail of things should lessen over distance.** You should not be able to see an ant's eyelashes when it's sitting on the horizon. Simplify objects as they get further away from the viewer. This is another tell of 3D art — its density remains constant if you're not actively considering this.
- **Some compositions are suited to particular moods or subjects.** A head-on view of something has a few subconscious associations. They can be benign: looking straight ahead can feel official or formal, like you're in an interview. Other connotations are more unpleasant. Perhaps it feels like you're on trial. Perhaps it conjures images of fascist rallies with the camera looking straight at a dictator. Those are emotional connections. On a more matter-of-fact level the convergence of lines to the center makes the subject feel more important.