

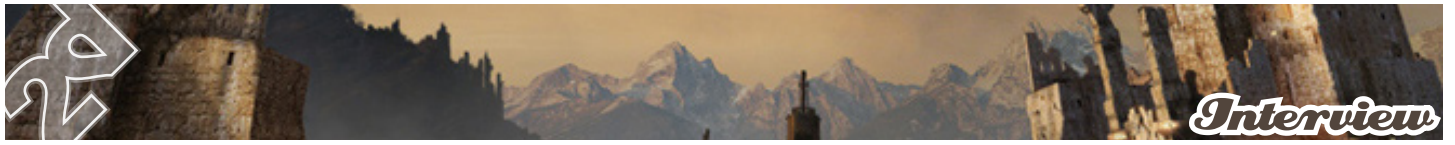
Dan is a concept artist and matte painter working in the entertainment industry, which helps him mix his passion for illustration and conceptual background, Photoshop experience, 3d interests, and his love for fx laden movies.

He takes time out to talk to us about himself and his work on the Prince of Persia series.

# wheaton

# dan





# an interview with dan wheaton

You state in your biography that you have worked as an illustrator and designer in the past. How did this lead into a job as a matte artist and what are the key skills that you feel have enabled this career shift?

Well, it's not the most direct path to becoming a matte painter, that's for sure. The thing is, a lot of the matte painters I know did the same thing, migrated from other areas and learned the craft. For me, having worked as an illustrator and designer meant that I'd tackled a lot of different kinds of projects, from print to interactive, motion graphics and 3d. Essentially I'm an illustrator who learned design and became a Creative Director. I've had to work in Photoshop at a high production level for years, since print shows every detail. I used 3d in a variety of capacities as an illustrator and designer (from illustration for books and CDs to designing things like the Academy of Country Music award). As an illustrator, you work on composition, mood, lighting, concept,





conveying story, character, etc. As a designer, you work at boiling visuals and information down to their essence, making dramatic impact, conveying ideas that are “sticky” people remember them. I found that all of those were very complimentary to matte work it's got its own set of technical requirements that you have to learn, but in the end, being a versatile illustrator who could handle many styles, subjects, and mediums, laid a good foundation for me. I always preferred the entertainment client work, so when I made the jump to matte and concept art, it was a good fit.

You mention that working in the entertainment industry is a good way to combine many of your interests and skills in both 2D and 3D.

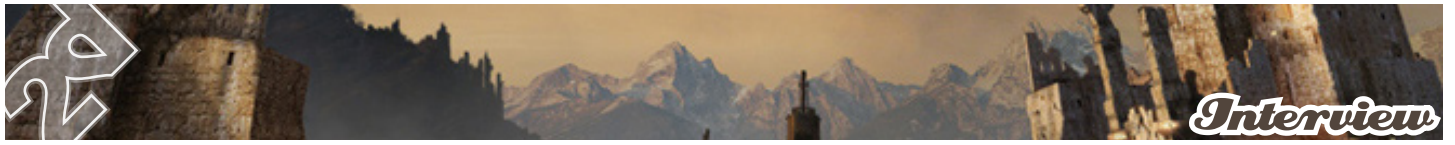
Could you elaborate on this and explain how your job utilises a variety of disciplines?

For sure. A matte painter has to be solid in Photoshop - which is the bread and butter, de facto tool for you. It's possible to be a 2d only guy, but to thrive and not just survive, you need to continually adapt and adopt new technologies. A matte painter that understands and works with 3d adds more to the equation, since their job is really to create the illusion of 3d using 2d. Working closely with the compositors is key too, and the more you know

about their job the better you can integrate with them. For me, I was essentially self taught in 3d with a variety of programs, so I would never consider myself a production modeller, etc. Matte work lets me integrate 2d paintings in Photoshop, and bring them to life with a combination of composite and 3d tools - and that I find very cool. Rather than isolating

myself into certain looks for 3d and 2d, you can blur the line and create a different reality. My experience with corporate and design work never really let me do that - there wasn't the outlet for it. I don't want to fall into the dark hole of technology and lose the artistic, but I like the results that the integration allows and creates.





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Could you go about describing the process of producing a matte painting for any readers new to the subject and describe the various elements involved?

Well, there are a lot of people who could explain it better I'm sure, but I'll give a basic take on what I did on Prince of Persia 3. I used two programs every day - XSI for 3d, and Photoshop for 2d. I would be given a shot that had cameras and scene established with low poly geometry that I would start with. I'd rip out any animations in it (not needed for my part), and then usually do some sort of quick and dirty texturing (rock for example using a cylindrical projection) This is going to be replaced in the matte, so it really doesn't matter too much. I would import a light rig given to me that was just a fast sim

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of Global Illumination, to get overall lighting with main direction included. I'd duplicate the main animated camera and setup my main projection with the duplicate. Then I'd render out a frame, usually at double final resolution. That frame would be used in Photoshop to begin my painting. Any textures that had been applied (if any) would be completely replaced in the painting... they were there only to break away from using a grey geometry base for painting. Once the main painting was complete, I'd project that image on using my dupe camera, then advance through the frames to the final camera position and check for holes that need to be patched by projecting with a duplicate of the final cameras' position. These are areas that the first projection can't

"see", and require smaller pieces to be painted



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and projected with alphas to add them to the main projection. The goal is a seamless camera move - the painting looks 3d as the camera moves. Sometimes this means creating cards to hold parts of the projection, or other geometry adjustments to make the matte render work.

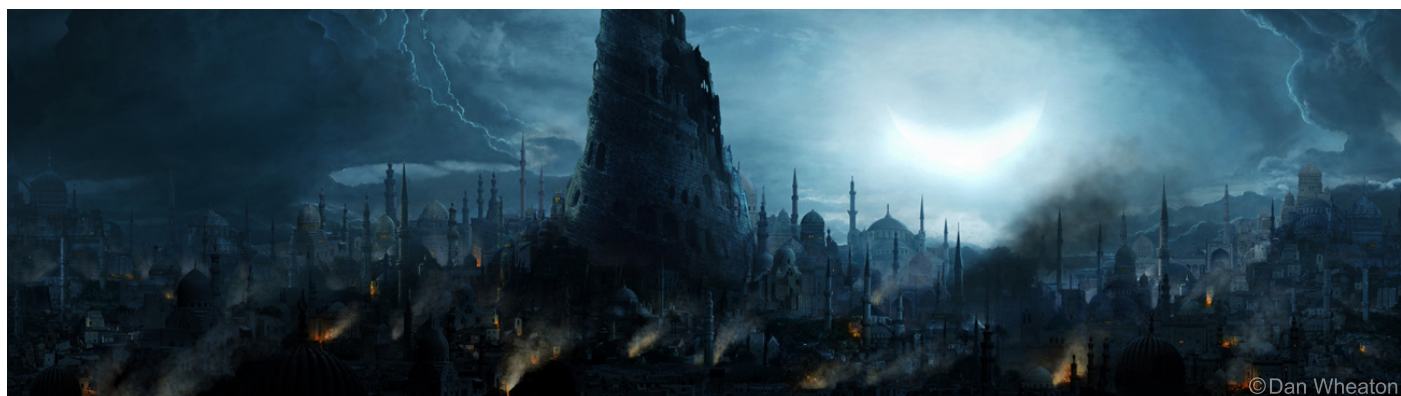
Once it looks good, I'd render the frames as a matte render, a water mask, etc. to give the compositors what they needed later on. Then, on to the next shot. (This project really required me to move fast, so there wasn't a lot of fat, and since it was at NTSC rez, you could work pretty quick).

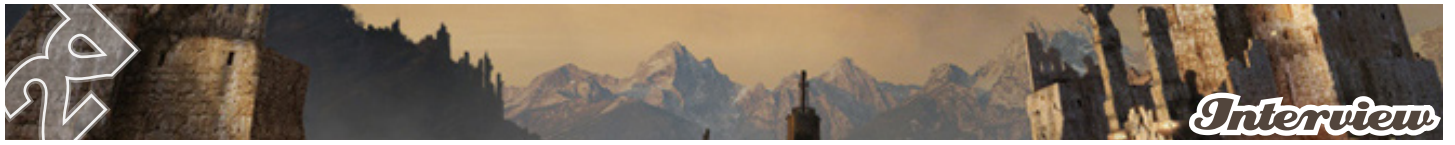
Could you explain a little how the elements of 2d and 3d are combined in a matte painting?

I think I've answered that ad nauseum in my long winded description of matte work, but the Readers Digest version is that 3d models have an image projected on them, making a convincing 3d world using 2d paintings. The closer elements are to camera, the more 3d you need, as matte work is really a support element. And if you are doing extreme camera moves, it may not be possible to matte project very easily... it has its limitations.

What are the most challenging aspects to your current job?

Hmm, I'd say the path is not exactly an easy one. Finding the right situation where you can progress, get great portfolio, and





balance income, hours etc is tough. The less "encumbrances" you have, the easier it is to pursue that. The area you live in may really restrict your options too - if you aren't in the primary entertainment areas, it's kinda like selling snowplows in the Sudan... there isn't a lot of value placed on it. It's also a fairly small community, which can be a payoff, but it makes it tough to learn for sure. There is also this horrible myth that since matte painters can 'paint', that they should be good at textures. Blech. Lol. I always explain that textures are the absence of light, and matte work is all about painting light - very, very different. And then after my rant, I help them on the textures, and then yell for a junior to be my texture jockey.

You mention that matte work is all about painting light - could you expand on this?

I'm definitely a work in progress here. Light tells us everything about the image - the form, color, material etc. You aren't outlining shapes; you are painting them as light defines them. Guys like Dylan Cole and Alp Altiner really were helpful to me when they both pointed out the Hudson River School artists like Church

and Bierstadt - they painted landscapes that were terrific inspiration for matte painting - and they used light in 'pools' to guide the eye around compositionally and make the emphasis clear. Texture painting though, is trying to paint materials with a flat even light - since all the real world lighting is handled by the 3d render. Matte painting needs to replicate the environment lighting in a convincing way, so it has main lights, bounce lights etc. all as part of the painting.

You mentioned a number of artists such as Dylan Cole and Alp Altiner - which artists are you most passionate about and in what ways

do you feel they have influenced your own work?

I like a variety of styles (my illustration background coming out), but I think we've had a small renaissance of artists in the digital era. Forums have really encouraged community and development; there are more teaching tools and DVD's out now than ever which is fantastic. When I look at matte





work from Yannick Dusseault, Dylan Cole, Deak Ferrand, Mathieu Raynault etc., I'm blown away. Concept artists like Syd Mead, Craig Mullins, Sparth, Vyle etc. are amazing. Classic illustrators like N.C. Wyeth were huge influences for me. I really appreciate how speed paintings capture the essence of the subject, with life and light and mood - they have so much energy and freshness that I love. Matte work takes you to the other end of the spectrum, down to the nitty gritty, 1 pixel brushes. With that level of detail, it's always good to have constant reminders to see the big picture, and not lose the life in it. These guys are inspirations with their gorgeous work. I'm a motivated self-learner, and I am continually trying to develop and improve... all it takes is to look at some great work, and I get fired up to improve and learn.

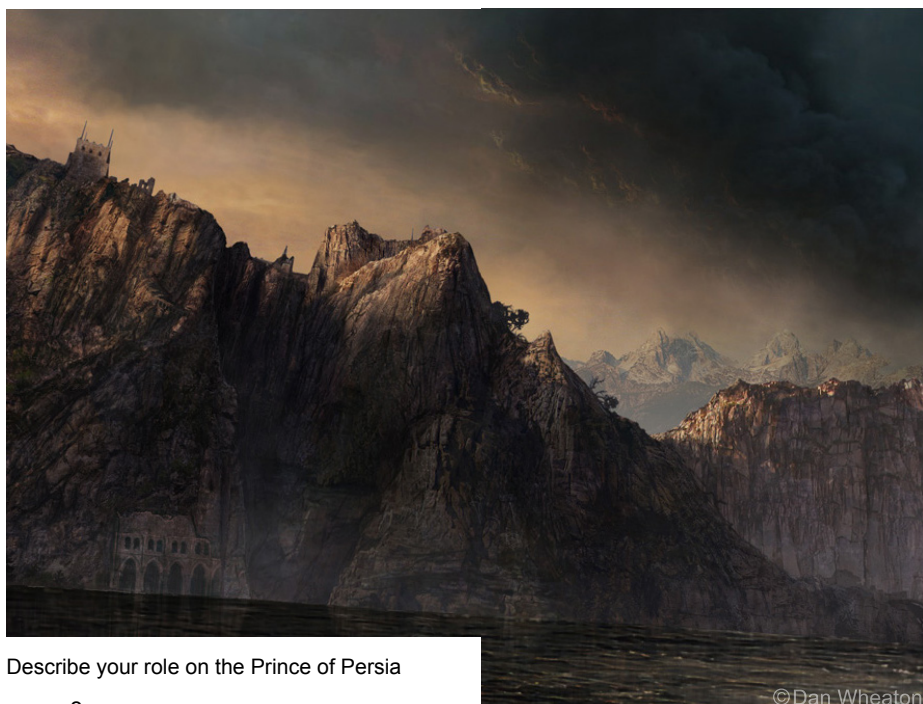
**What has been your favourite project to work on in recent years and why?**

I had a blast working at Ubisoft on the Prince of Persia 3 cinematics. That team was a lot of fun, really artistic, and it was great being in Montreal. Working with Benoit Ladouceur was great, and I got to meet Mathieu Raynault working on the project as well. (Mathieu is another example of what I like - "stars" who are great at what they do, but really great guys - not needing a posse to carry their egos around.

I've been told over and over how important it is in this industry that you have to be not just good at what you do, but good to get along with - or you won't get called back. Very true!) I'm also a gamer, and so it was a fantastic opportunity working on a stellar project like the Prince of Persia franchise. This has led to interest in me from other top game companies which is really cool (more of those decisions, as film and gaming constantly provide the coolest opportunities in the world for artists).



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**Describe your role on the Prince of Persia games?**

I was a matte painter on the cinematic team, along with Benoit Ladouceur. Mathieu Raynault was also in for some larger shots, and when they needed another matte painter, I was able to introduce them to a friend of mine, Jessy Veilleux, who came in and wowed them as well. Raphael Lacoste was the Art Director, and Kun Chang was the Director.



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What was the most interesting aspect to the job and why?

Well, the cool thing about the job in general is that you get to paint all day, and it ends up in the final product. I loved working with this cinematic team, because they are unbelievably talented and ambitious - that's a good situation to be in. Benoit and I really clicked - he's someone I'd love to work with again, definitely a strong player who knows his craft. Kun Chang (the Director) was great 'cause he'd be running by, see something we'd be working on, and want to get printouts up on the wall to get everyone pumped up and on the same page. Raphael is an Art Director with a photographer's eye - he really understands lighting, so it was great to work with him. Maybe he and I will collaborate on something personal - he does a lot of matte work as well, and is a very cool, talented guy. So the combo of fun work with good people is hard to beat. And if you've never been to Montreal (I think conceptart.org are going to be running workshops there), you don't know what you're missing... check it out!

In what ways do you feel as though games development is moving closer towards film production in terms of the creative demands now put on the art teams?

Well first off, gaming has moved into HD resolution, so you're talking about a big jump in level of detail. For all intents and purposes, it's the same as doing HD work for tv - it's simply a stylistic decision at that point. Personally I love the fact that it's gone higher rez - it places a higher premium on the art direction and execution, which is great for artists. PC games always looked better with higher rez monitors, but now the console games can look amazing too.

Pre-rendered game cinematics are few and far between since the game engine is often used for cinematics due to cost factors. But the potential for cinematics is terrific, and the talent involved is often working in both arenas - film and game, so you have a lot of crossover. If you are comparing game play art to film, I think game play art is placed under different stresses than film - it's often seen over and

over as a level is attempted - so that means a full 360 attention to detail.

And finally what project would you ideally like to work on and why?

For me, the project is important (remember: portfolio is king), but the people I'd like to work with are even more important. Projects like King Kong and War of the Worlds etc. are a really cool opportunity to do fantastic matte work, but it also means working with some of the premier people in the industry... and that's what attracts me, the chance to work with artists that can really push you and make you better.

To see more of Dan's work please visit his website:

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***Richard Tilbury***



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