

# Launch your career in digital painting

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Your guide to getting started in  
the entertainment industry

[cgspectrum.com](https://cgspectrum.com)



**cg**spectrum

# PURSUE A COLORFUL CAREER IN **DIGITAL PAINTING!**

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Digital painting—which combines traditional art with modern technology—is generally more flexible and convenient than using pen, paint, and paper, making it an attractive career path for artists.

Used to inform many pre-production, production, and post-production stages, the demand for digital painters in the entertainment industry, such as concept artists and digital illustrators, has increased.

While there are many fantastic job opportunities, there's also a lot of competition. So how do you get ahead?

This guide is to help you kick-start your digital painting career. Learn about different jobs, get portfolio tips, hear from industry pros, and more!

***“One painting changed my life. One piece of art could change yours—if you’re passionate enough.”***

**Eric Wilkerson, award-winning Illustrator and CG Spectrum Digital Illustration Mentor**



# ABOUT CG SPECTRUM

## *TRAINING THE NEXT WAVE OF DIGITAL ARTISTS FOR FILM, GAMES, AND PUBLISHING*

CG Spectrum is a global top-ranked training provider offering specialized programs in animation, virtual production, game development, VFX, and digital painting since 2011.

We inspire and train creators through personalized mentorship from industry professionals, small class sizes, and a unique online learning model that supports different learning styles.

We're an Unreal Authorized Training Center, Unreal Academic Partner, Unreal Connector, SideFX Certified Training Provider, and Toon Boom Authorized Training Center delivering programs worldwide.

### *SOME OF THE STUDIOS THAT HAVE HIRED OUR GRADS:*



# WHAT IS **DIGITAL PAINTING**?

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Digital painting is an art form using computer software such as Adobe Photoshop with a graphics tablet and stylus pen. An artist will operate their stylus like a brush or pencil to execute illustration and painting techniques within a software program using a computer screen or tablet as their digital canvas.

Digital painting is generally faster and more cost-effective than traditional painting, making it an ideal medium for the fast-paced entertainment industry. One of the many benefits of digital painting is its non-destructive work process—being able to save work, undo changes, and add/hide layers for different iterations.

Although digital painting is predominantly 2D, as the artform evolves, digital painters are now beginning to work partially in the 3D space. Using tools such as Blender and ZBrush, artists sculpt out 3D digital maquettes to use as a base for their work to help produce more realistic lighting and shading.

The term ‘digital painting’ covers a wide range of roles, including splash art, comic book art, movie poster art, concept art, digital illustration, and more (see jobs on [page 6](#)). Although digital painting is still used to mimic traditional art styles, it has also evolved to become a technique in its own right.

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### **LEARN MORE ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONCEPT ART AND ILLUSTRATION**

[What is concept art?](#)

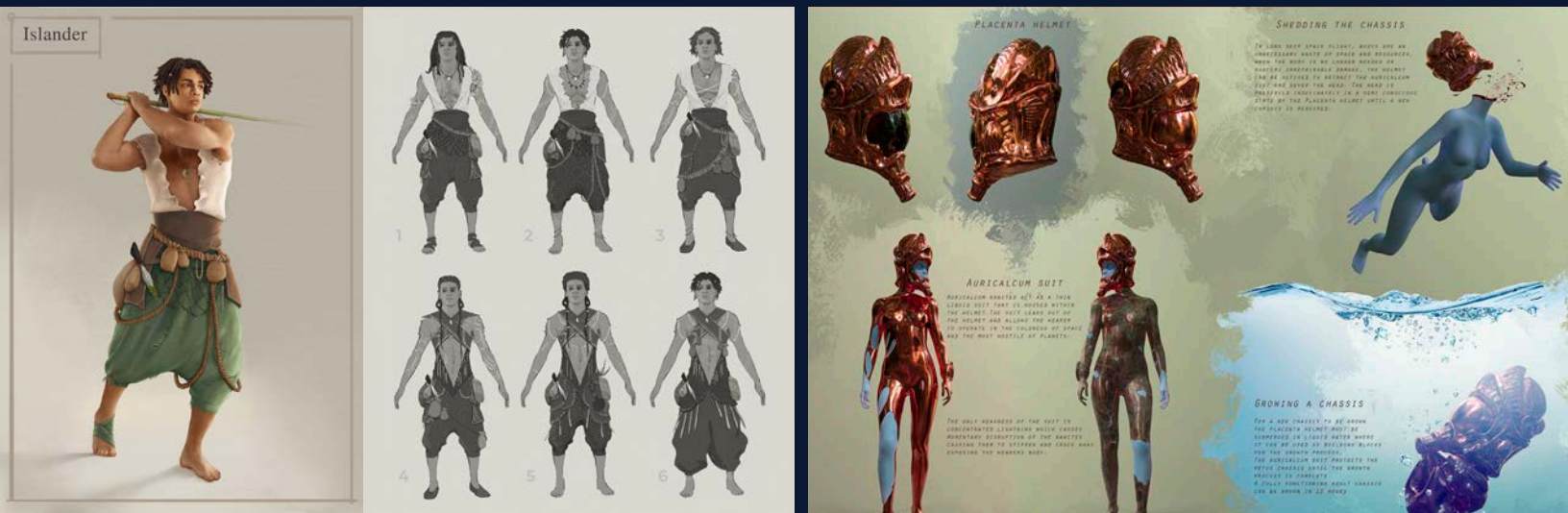
[What is digital illustration?](#)



# CONCEPT ART VS DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION

While concept art and digital illustration have some crossover, they represent two different aspects of visual storytelling.

Concept art is the depiction of how a character, environment, or prop might look, and illustration combines all those elements into one image to tell a story. For example, concept art could be a Marvel hero's costume or weapon from multiple angles while an illustration combines a hero and villain fighting in one image to tell a story.



Above—concept art by CG Spectrum students Nikita Heyland [left] and Winston Byrd [right]  
Below—illustrations by CG Spectrum students Tatum Cito [left] and Penny Gaubatz [right]



# JOB SUMMARIES



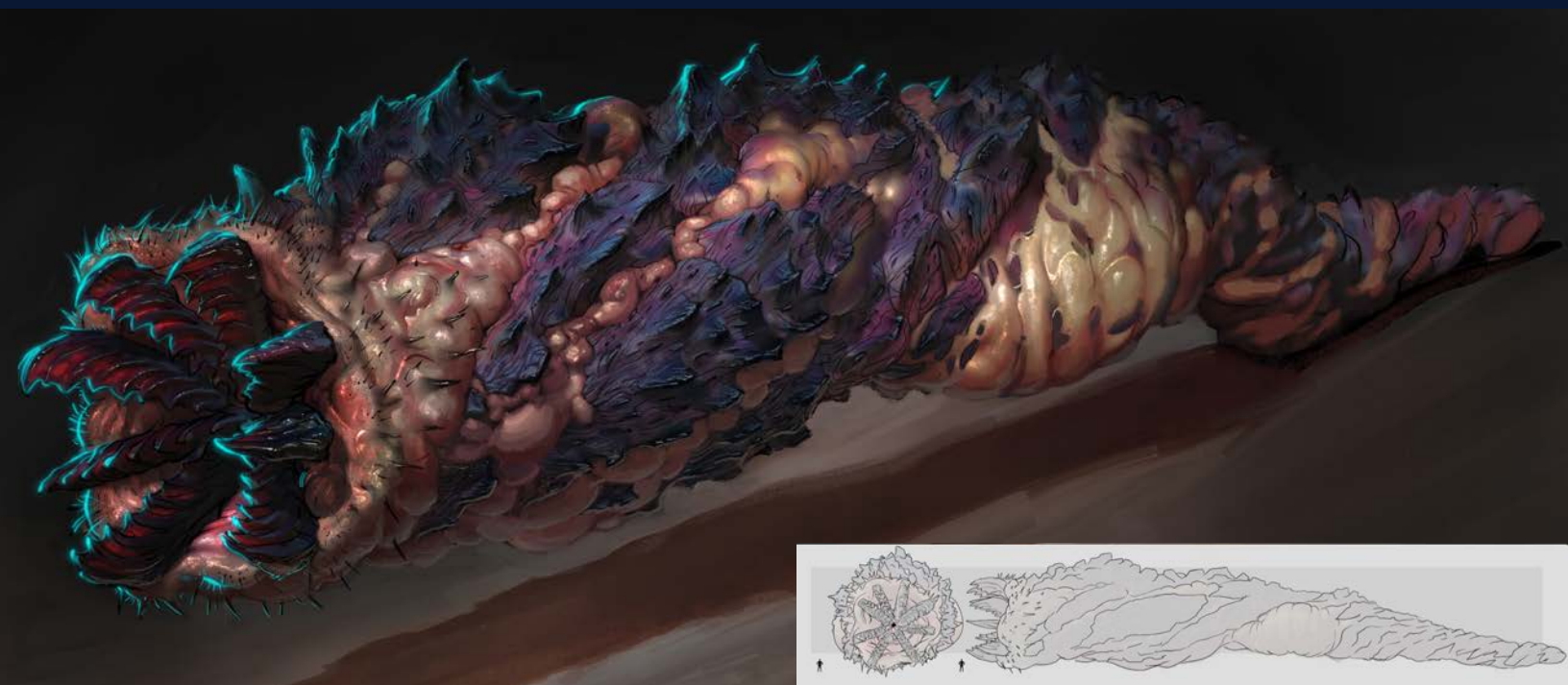
**ENTRY-LEVEL: \$31,000 USD**

**MID-LEVEL: \$68,813 USD**

**SENIOR: \$102,500+ USD**

ZipRecruiter

Digital painting covers a diverse range of career paths within many sectors of the entertainment industry. Here are some of the roles you can pursue.



## CONCEPT ARTIST ▲

Concept artists develop the initial visual concepts (characters, props, vehicles, environments) from a script or creative brief. They set the tone and style of the work, giving life to an abstract idea. Concept art is used as a reference point throughout a project's development.

*Above—concept art of a sandworm for CG Spectrum Dune-inspired commercial by CG Spectrum Dept. Head of Digital Painting Mentor Brandon Reimchen*





## DIGITAL ILLUSTRATOR ▲

Often working from a client/employer's creative brief, a digital illustrator creates a narrative image that tells a story, conveys an emotion or mood, or sells a concept or product.

*Above—digital illustration by CG Spectrum Concept Art Mentor Mike Thompson for Marvel's film, Captain America: Civil War*



## WHAT QUALIFICATIONS DO YOU NEED TO BE AN ILLUSTRATOR?

**9 skills to make illustration your career**

## COMIC ILLUSTRATOR ►

Comic illustrators create stylized images for comic books and strips. This genre uses visuals in a series of sequential panels to tell a story. Most comic art includes text not written by the illustrator, so they must learn to incorporate the text and font as part of the overall design.

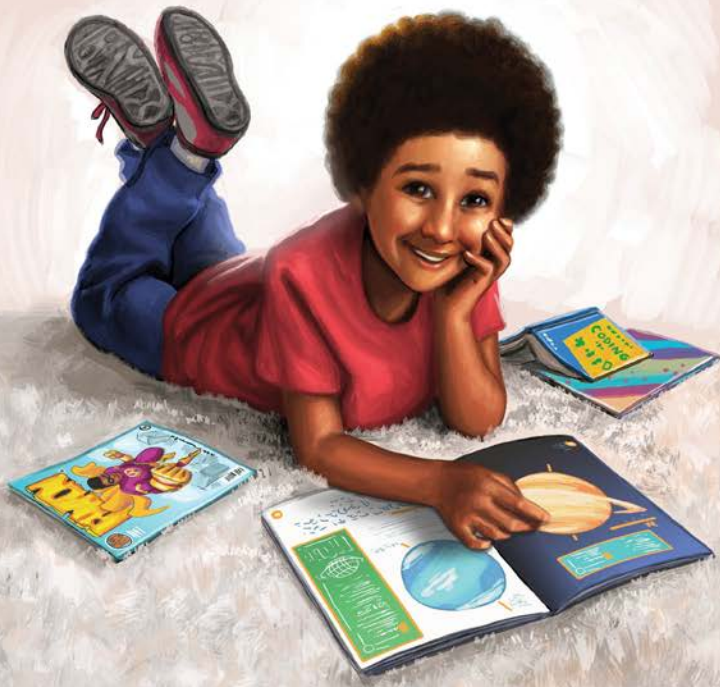
*Right—a comic illustrated for a Marvel game with art direction by CG Spectrum Concept Art Mentor Bernie Kang*





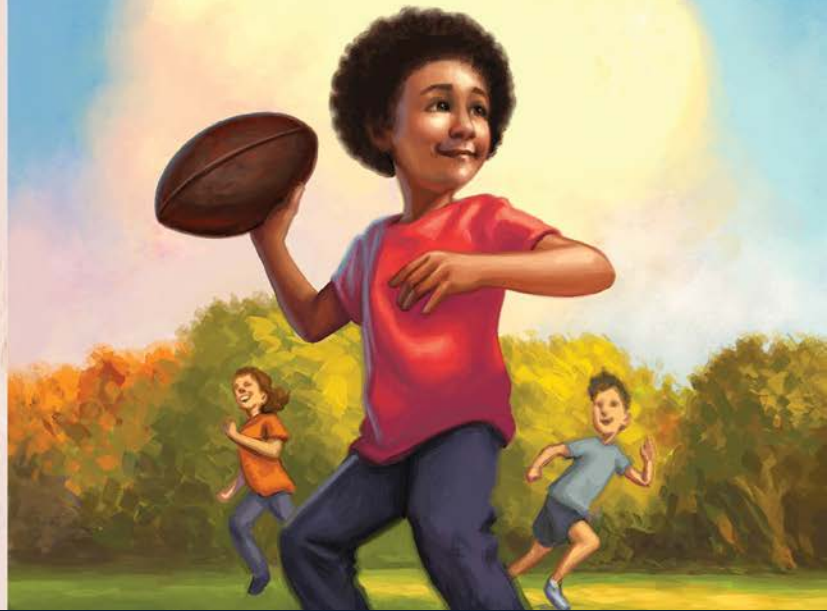
Hey, I'm Colin.

I read books.



I play sports and games.

And I have a lot of fun  
with my friends.



## BOOK ILLUSTRATOR ▲

Book illustrators work to a brief from a publisher or author to create images that accompany a story or text. Depicting characters and worlds based on descriptions, a book illustrator must think in terms of visual storytelling and forge a creative connection with the author. This role can be separate from a book cover illustrator, which is often a job on its own.

*Above—CG Spectrum Digital Illustration Mentor Eric Wilkerson's illustrations for the book I Color Myself Different by Colin Kaepernick*



## HOW TO BECOME A BOOK COVER ILLUSTRATOR

Hear from award-winning  
Illustrator and Book Cover Artist  
Eric Wilkerson about how to  
make a start in the industry.

## CHARACTER DESIGNER ►

A character designer (or character artist) conceptualizes characters, showing action, anatomy, and costumes from different perspectives that define and actualize them. They interpret a character's personality and physical traits from a brief into an expressive illustration, using subtle cues of facial expression, pose, gesture, posture, etc.

*Right—character design from the project War of the Wicked: 1945 The Allies by CG Spectrum Concept Art Mentor Jon Li*

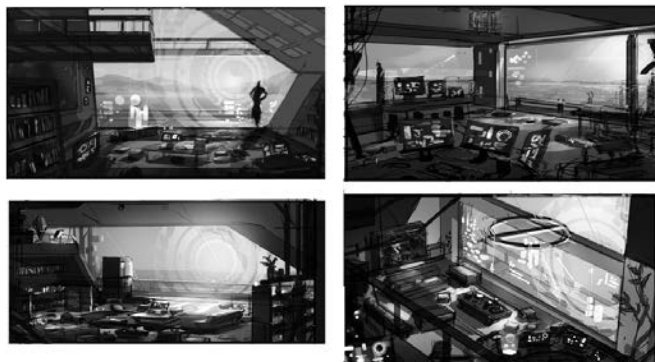




## ENVIRONMENT DESIGNER ▸

Environment designers (or environment artists) are world builders working from a design brief or script to bring an imaginary or realistic universe to life. They create a mood, express a style, and provide context. Their work is often used as a base for building practical and 3D virtual sets.

*Right—environment designs for the game Deus EX: The Fall illustrated by CG Spectrum Concept Art Mentor Humza Khan*



## KEYFRAME ILLUSTRATOR ▴

Keyframe illustrators sketch out pivotal scenes in a script to establish looks, timings, camera angles, and points of view, often sequenced as short storyboards. In filmmaking, they are a visual guide to how live-action films will be shot, especially complex scenes requiring special effects, chase sequences, tight choreography, etc. In animations, they identify how crucial or visually definitive scenes will play out.



### HOW TO MAKE A DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION PORTFOLIO IN 4 KEY STEPS

Learn how to create your most important self-marketing tool

*Above—a keyframe illustration pitch for the film The Darkest Hour by CG Spectrum Concept Art Mentor Imery Watson*



Tyler James / ARTofTY / 2018 © Blizzard Entertainment, All Right Reserved

## **SPLASH ART ILLUSTRATOR** ▲

Splash art is the digital art displayed between levels or loading screens in video games. Splash art illustrators are used for games that play individual matches (like *League of Legends*) or have frequent load screens. Splash art illustrators also create art for a game's auxiliary media (booklets, marketing, etc.).

*Above—splash art for Blizzard Entertainment's game Heroes of the Storm by CG Spectrum Mentor Tyler James*



### **WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A CONCEPT ARTIST: INTERVIEW WITH TYLER JAMES**

**Get advice from award-winning  
Concept Artist and CG Spectrum  
Mentor Tyler James**

***“The key to becoming a successful concept artist is to digest as much art as you can, learn from your peers, and put in the pencil mileage!”***

**Tyler James, Concept Artist and CG Spectrum Mentor**



## TRADING CARD ILLUSTRATOR

Trading card illustrators create artwork for trading card games or collectible card games. Trading card artists must match the tone and theme of the game or collection set, telling a story through composition, color, light, and shadows, assisting a card game with storytelling, world building, genre, and collectability.

*Right-trading cards illustrated by CG Spectrum Concept Art Mentor Brian Huang for the game Hearthstone*



**WHAT IS A TRADING CARD ILLUSTRATOR AND HOW DO I BECOME ONE?**

**Learn all about this exciting job**



## DIGITAL MATTE PAINTER

A digital matte painter paints believable, photo-realistic environments and backdrops (interiors and exteriors) on a computer that seamlessly replace live-action elements and/or improve existing live-action footage. Matte painters work with several types of content: live-action footage, digital still photography, CG elements, and digital painting software.

*Above-matte painting for the show Game of Thrones by CG Spectrum grad Anne Palm as part of the team at Method Studios*

# GET A JOB IN DIGITAL PAINTING

## DOWNLOAD SOFTWARE

Download free digital art software like [Gimp](#), [Krita](#), [Sketchpad](#), [FireAlpaca](#), and [ArtWeaver](#) to start practicing.

## PRACTICE

Sharpening your skills helps you grow and become more confident and reliable.

## BUILD SKILLS

Build the skills companies are listing on job sites. For more support, enroll in a reputable course. CG Spectrum's courses include mentorship from award-winning industry pros, an industry-led curriculum, and career services.

## WATCH TRENDS

Online tutorials, webinars, etc., can keep your skills fresh. See resources page.

## ATTEND CONVENTIONS

Use conventions to network, meet like-minded people, and be inspired. This is how award-winning Illustrator Eric Wilkerson got his first professional book cover illustration commission after college graduation.

## NETWORK

Networking is vital to getting your name and skills recognized and meeting experts who can offer advice or even jobs. Familiarize

yourself with the industry and build your community—publishing houses, authors, and illustrators.

## SHARE WORK

Social media is great for showcasing work, building an audience, having your work shared by others, and seen by potential clients and collaborators. See resources on [page 16](#).

## PRESENTATION

Your portfolio is how you will market your services. Make your work presentable and user-friendly to impress prospective clients.

## COLLABORATE

Know someone designing a game who needs character art? Collaborating with your peers is not only fun, but it can also help you create more polished work for your portfolio.

## INTERN

Internships at VFX, game, or publishing studios can help you break into the industry. It's one way to gain hands-on experience, network, and experience studio life.

## JOIN COMPETITIONS

Practice your skills and create portfolio pieces by participating in contests on platforms like [The Rookies](#) and [ArtStation](#).



# DIGITAL PAINTING IN FILM AND GAMES

Digital painters play an important role in film and games. Their artwork is required for numerous reasons during different stages of production.

## REFERENCE

During pre-production, digital painters help set the look and feel of a film by creating fully realized images that define settings, characters, props, costumes, lighting, color, etc. These images are referred to throughout production, guiding the look of practical sets, props, costumes, and even makeup. In post-production, their artwork assists 3D modelers, texture artists, environment artists, and lighters in creating production-ready final assets and shots.

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

In a 3D animation, the articulations of a character drawn by a character artist will first be used in the 3D modeling process, then later in the animation itself. In a 2D animation, these will be used as reference points from which to animate, and storyboard artists will refer to character design to express the story.

## STORYTELLING

In film and TV pre-production and production stages, keyframe artists map out shots and actions, assisting in developing

the overall story. In games, thematic splash art helps in a game's mechanics and enriches the narrative by depicting its characters, actions, props, etc. In a trading card game, when a player turns over a new card, the artwork builds intrigue or excitement and helps players understand their next move or what's at stake.

## WORLD BUILDING

In video games and trading card games, digital illustrators develop the look and feel of a game's world(s) and contribute to character arcs. World building helps immerse players into a game's story, often offering a more enjoyable experience. In film, concept artists realize new worlds, and digital matte painters help extend these worlds out from live-action sets, assisting with realism and immersion.

## POSTERS AND PROMOTIONAL ART

Digital painters have the power to persuade you to watch a film or play a game through movie posters and other promotional artwork! The entertainment industry relies on artists to get the word out about new releases.

# PORTFOLIO TIPS

Your portfolio should show you understand the foundations of art while also establishing your own personal style. According to professional Illustrator [Eric Wilkerson](#), your portfolio needs to demonstrate consistency while ensuring it's tailored to the right audience. Other tips include:



Quality over quantity!  
Revise older work to meet  
your current standards



Only include your  
best. Work in  
progress is fine



Seek inspiration from  
professional artists'  
portfolios



Center on one  
art genre for  
cohesion



If using a PDF,  
add chapters for  
easy viewing



Use a platform that allows you  
to update your work easily (e.g.,  
[ArtStation](#), [The Rookies](#), or [Behance](#))



Aim for a clean, intuitive,  
gallery-style website with  
enlargeable thumbnails



Don't overcrowd  
your homepage  
—5 images max



Optimize your  
images and ensure  
they load properly



Present each piece with a  
brief explanation (concept,  
rationale, brief)



Show process,  
sketches, roughs,  
and reference



Get feedback from at least  
3 mentors or industry pros  
before publishing



If necessary, create mock-  
ups of how your art would  
look in various formats



Triple-check for errors  
(layout, framing,  
spelling, etc.)



Feature both your  
commercial and  
personal art



Keep your 'about' page  
concise; it can be less  
formal



Share your finished  
portfolio on your  
social channels



# 7 SKILLS DIGITAL PAINTERS NEED

To be a successful artist, outside of learning digital painting tools and techniques, CG Spectrum's digital painting mentors suggest you:



Develop a solid understanding of art fundamentals—line, color, light, values, shape, composition, and perspective



Observe how stories are told through pictures—in film, ads, games, TV, or print



Nurture creativity—clients rely heavily on your interpretation for design needs



Be observant of real-world references like people, creatures, and places which you can use as inspiration



Learn how to interpret a brief and execute feedback



Familiarize yourself with the VFX and video game pipelines and how your work will be used



Regularly practice art fundamentals and digital painting techniques



**15 TYPES OF DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION TO HELP YOU GET STARTED**

**Refine your area of interest!**

# FREE RESOURCES

Additional resources to help you get started as a digital painter:

- Check out the [How to become a digital illustrator](#) webinar
- Watch [10 Must-Have Soft & Hard Skills For Artists Working From Home](#)
- Explore Adobe Photoshop's [free tutorials](#)
- Visit Matt Kohr's website [Ctrl+Paint](#) for info, reference, and tutorials
- Watch Sinix Design's [YouTube channel](#)
- Sign up to art and design website [Creative Bloq](#)
- Join Theoretically's Character Art School [discord channel](#)
- Use Anatomy for Sculptors' free [3D écorché reference tool](#)
- Warm up with Drawabox's [basic drawing exercises](#)
- Participate in [ArtStation](#) or [The Rookies](#)' art challenges to build up your portfolio
- Get inspired by [Imagine FX magazine's](#) showcase page
- Enter online competitions like [Spectrum: The Best in Fantastic Art](#)
- Read [Big Bad World of Concept Art for Video Games](#) by Elliott J. Lilly
- Read [Art Fundamentals: Theory and Practice](#)

***“Creativity is central to becoming a good artist, as your clients will rely heavily on your interpretation of the design needs. Of course, you also need to develop your technical skills to produce images that efficiently communicate information and inspire the audience.”***

**Brandon Reimchen, Concept Artist and and Dept. Head, CG Spectrum Digital Painting**



# READY TO START YOUR **CAREER?**

While there are lots of resources available to help you learn the tools and techniques of a digital painter, it can often be hard to find the most up-to-date and useful information and get professional feedback on your work.

Fast track your career with personalized high-end training from industry professionals. CG Spectrum offers specialized career training and mentorship from 170+ entertainment industry experts to get you job-ready sooner.

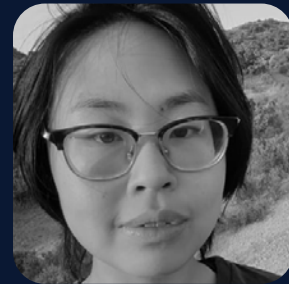
## ***LEARN FROM INDUSTRY PROS LIKE THESE:***



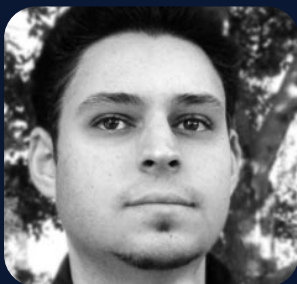
**BRANDON REIMCHEN**  
Dept. Head, Digital Painting  
EA, Activision, Capcom,  
Disney Interactive



**ERIC WILKERSON**  
Mentor of Illustration  
Wizards of the Coast,  
Wētā Workshop, Marvel



**ESTHER WU**  
Mentor of Concept Art  
Forza 6, Destiny 2, Call of Duty  
Black Ops 4, Back 4 Blood



**TYLER JAMES**  
Mentor of Concept Art  
Heroes of the Storm,  
Warhammer, Star Wars



**HUMZA KHAN**  
Mentor of Concept Art  
Call of Duty 2, The Division 2,  
The Sims

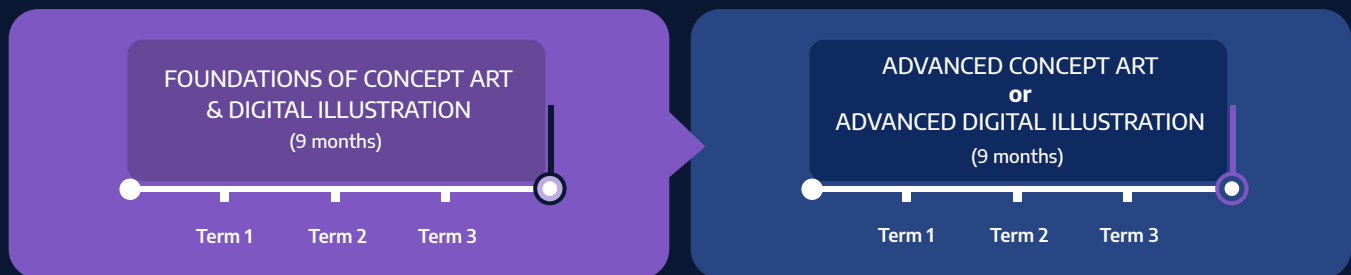


**MIKE THOMPSON**  
Mentor of Concept Art  
Marvel, Hasbro, HBO,  
DC Comics, Warner Bros

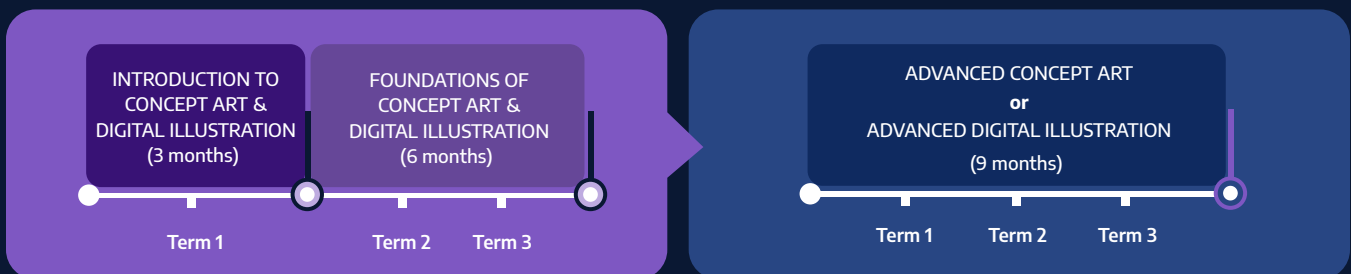
# OUR DIGITAL PAINTING COURSES

Get help landing your dream job with CG Spectrum's career-focused training and industry mentorship. Students receive a Certificate of Completion at the end of each course.

## ***PATHWAY 1 (BEST VALUE)***



## ***PATHWAY 2***





# BENEFITS OF STUDYING AT **CG SPECTRUM**



## **INDUSTRY MENTORS**

Learn directly from experts who have worked on major films and games.



## **FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING**

Plan your studies around your work and family commitments.



## **JOB-READY SKILLS**

Build practical and relevant job skills that studios are looking for.



## **PAYMENT PLANS**

Pursue your passion and start working sooner with flexible payments.



## **CAREER DEVELOPMENT**

Personalized support, portfolio/CV reviews, and interview prep.



## **VIBRANT ONLINE COMMUNITY**

Join our supportive community of students, alumni and mentors from all over the world.

# STUDENT SUCCESS

## **OLIVER H, DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION**



**"I have never experienced such an explosive evolution in my art since attending CG Spectrum."**

Being part of such an amazing program has opened my eyes to techniques that have streamlined my process and increased my confidence tenfold. Buckle up—this could be the course that changes everything for you."

## **FILIP R, CONCEPT ART & DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION**



**"The results of this course exceeded my expectations."**

Eric Wilkerson is by far my favorite art teacher. He is patient, super helpful, and encouraging. I had some self-discipline challenges, but when I started the course, he immediately set me on the right path, and I started drawing and learning every single day."

## **XIAOYA L, CONCEPT ART**



**"I chose CG Spectrum because I needed guidance in building my portfolio."**

CG spectrum's mentorship was crucial for me. My mentor was great at tailoring [lessons and feedback] to the different needs of his students."

## **ISABELLE D, CONCEPT ART & DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION**

**"Studying through CG Spectrum has been wonderful!"**

From helping me achieve a better workflow to improving on designing things out of my comfort zone, this course has given me more confidence as an artist. You can tell the mentors really put a lot of thought and care into helping you create your best work, as well as preparing you for success in the industry."

## **AHMED A, DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION**



**"Not just for people wanting to break into the industry, it's also for professionals."**

I am a concept artist at Paradox Interactive in Sweden and wanted to expand my illustration skills, so I decided to take the Digital Illustration Course. I am loving it! If you're a professional and want to learn a new skill, I would say go ahead!"

## **VICTORIA P, CONCEPT ART & DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION**

**"Thank you, CG Spectrum, for giving me exactly what I needed to get started in this competitive industry."**

Without CG Spectrum, I would never have been able to create a portfolio on a level that got me an amazing internship in Beijing."



# YOUR FUTURE IN DIGITAL PAINTING AWAITS!



Explore courses and apply at  
[cgspectrum.com](https://cgspectrum.com)

***“Don’t just blindly follow the crowds you see online. Keep making the art YOU like to make. Once you figure out who you are and what you want, the universe will get out of the way and open doors for you.”***

Eric Wilkerson, award-winning illustrator and CG Spectrum Digital Illustration Mentor



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Student work: Curtis Huang