

Freelance Artist, Jay Darnell

Contributed by tara j. brannigan
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Jay Darnell is an upcoming freelance concept artist and all around cool gamer guy. I've watched his artwork progress over the past year or so from his trademark troll images to a variety of expressive and interesting characters each with very distinct sense of style. I recently got the chance to interview him about what he's up to these days, what his opinions are on a few game related topics, and the altogether pressing issue of which game he would choose out of a random grouping of unrelated games.

Name:

James (Jay) Darnell

Age:

27

Profession:

Programmer / Freelance Artist

Website:

<http://www.ethereal-imagery.com>

Art Samples:

Who are you and what do you do?

My name is Jay Darnell and I'm a concept artist? In short, my job is to take the imagined characters, or concepts, from a gaming company or individual and coax these images from the shadows of their imagination towards the digital canvas.

Would you classify yourself as a gamer?

Most definitely! If there was a single hobby capable of wresting me from my sketch book time and time again gaming would be that hobby. In fact, most evenings it's a toss up... play a game for a couple hours with friends, or draw pictures of the characters we play? Both are equally enjoyable ways to spend time.

What draws you to the world of concept art?

Simply put, the lack of boundaries. For every human being on the face of the earth theres an idea for a person, a place, or a thing swimming around inside their head just waiting to be tapped into... and thats where concept artists come in. We take that thing you've been imagining but unable to communicate to others for years, and bring it to life visually.

Favorite concept art series you've seen lately?

I'm currently following the developments coming from the art department over at Mythic entertainment for their upcoming MMORPG Warhammer Online.

<http://www.warhammeronline.com/english/media/conceptArt/>

What would you say are some of your biggest influences?

Hmmm... thats a tough question. Tolkien would have to be at the top of my list. The cartoon version of The Hobbit completely ensnared me as a child. I couldn't tell you what it was about the story or the characters that captured my heart, but I've been a die-hard fan of epic medieval fantasy ever since. This was around the time I began reading comic books, playing video games, and watching saturday morning cartoons religiously. Squaresoft's final fantasy series (before the PS2), Capcom's Megaman series, the X-men, Eastman and Laird's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and the Transformers followed suit, inspiring me to pick up a pencil and draw.

Do you have any personal heroes in the industry that you look up to? Who are they, and why?

The first one that comes to mind would have to be Samwise from Blizzard. I absolutely LOVE the style, attitude and energy he puts into all of his work. Samwise has a way of capturing a character in such a way that you can really get a feel for who they are, their personality, their strengths, their weaknesses. He's an amazing guy!

http://www.sonsofthestorm.com/gallery_samwise.html#header

How would you classify the role of art in game design?

Concept art is foundational to good game design, more now than ever! In the past gameplay was everything (and still top in my opinion) but graphics, due to the technological limitations of the time, were sub par. As such concept art while important had significantly less use. Look at the graphics for some of your old favorite 8-bit NES games. Would a beautifully colored, intricately detailed image of the games main character have much use if you could only render 256 colors with pixels the size of cheerios? No. But the games engines of today are beautiful by comparison, capable of taking an exquisite concept and rendering it in full 3D for our gaming pleasure.

How important would you say that artistic expression is in helping define the overall end product in relation to game design?

In my opinion, if a company wants to leave their mark on the industry their games need to have a difinitive look and feel to them in addition to having above average gameplay. While I'm only one gamer, and my opinion may not be the same as the norm, I found myself instantly turned off by the host of games released over the last few years that use the latest unreal engine. Now I'm not about to name names, but while pretty to look at, all of these games "looked" exactly the same. On the flipside, take Blizzard's latest World of Warcraft for example. The visual elements of the game are simple,

often over exaggerated, and vividly colored. Look at any screenshot from the game and you know the company by style alone.

What's your opinion on the 'Into the Pixel' exhibition?

Truth be told, I'd not heard of this exhibition prior to our interview. But I can tell you this much; having looked at the website just now I'm ready to buy tickets for next years showing. This is simply amazing! It's so awesome to see talented artists in the gaming industry recognized for their outstanding skills. I think it gives guys like me, who are just getting started, something great to shoot for!

What challenges do you see facing the gaming industry today? First and foremost, ignorant, uninformed, and negligent parents. Nowadays we're faced with the uncomfortable reality that more and more parents seem content buying the love of their children rather than spending much needed quality time with them. As a result we have parents buying games they've no firsthand knowledge of, giving these games to kids who may or may not be mentally able to appreciate them for what they are, and the resulting backlash when these children lash out at society and their parents lovingly point the finger at the industry rather than taking a look at the bigger problem. Parents need to have intimate knowledge of the games they purchase for their children beforehand, but most don't. In short, I don't blame the games for these behavioral problems... but thats a discussion for another place and time.

Predictions on the future of game design?

I think games like Dance Dance Revolution, Donkey Conga, and Guitar Hero are helping set the stage for the next generation of gamers. Now I'm not about to say that dance pads, plastic 5 key guitars, and bongos are going to replace hand held controllers anytime soon (though I will give up my controller for certain bongos... ahem) but I do believe the gamers of tomorrow will be much more physically engaged than those of my generation. And to be perfectly honest with you, I think thats fantastic. Anything to get rid of the pasty zit-faced toothpick who lives in his mom's basement stereotype is fine by me.

Describe your dream job...

Anyone know Chris Metzen? Yes another Blizzard employee. Yes I'm a bit of a fanboy. Truth be told Metzen is currently sitting in the chair I lust after. He's a creative writer and artist. The only thing I'm unsure of is how much coding he does. If I could find a gaming company that would pay me a fair wage to draw concepts and write storylines as well as design and implement in game functionality via code I'd have it made. I guess I really just want to do it all. :-D

What would you say your biggest challenge has been thus far? Having faith in my own talent and finding the time to get better. Some say I do amazing work, and I admit I've gotten better. But in short, there are a lot of extremely talented guys out there with a lot more experience under their belt and I'm just not there yet. Maybe someday I'll be one of the big fish. But for now I'm content to follow and learn from the masters.

So... what's with all the trolls?

A few years back I became discontent with my day to day job. Where I worked at the time is unimportant but I suddenly woke up one day and realized I'd not sketched anything for years. I was playing a Troll Shaman in Everquest at the time by the name of Jawnee Bravoh, (Cartoon network fan) and had recently stumbled upon the art of Jason Wages (<http://www.formula119.com>) I didn't know anything about digital art, or what it would take to create images like his but I wanted to try. So using my character Jawnee as a model I created my first photoshop character portrait, and it was all downhill from there. Since that day Jawnee has become my pen name, and in any game I play that offers trolls as a playable race I'm guaranteed to create one. It only got worse with World of Warcraft. I adore everything about the trolls of Azeroth!

Final question: Doom, Pac-Man, or Beyond Good & Evil. Which one, and why? Pac-Man, one guy, no arms, no legs, trapped in a maze full of ghosts with no weapon but his big mouth... does it get more classic than that?

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