SAID ZAMZAD

Art Directing for Games

CONTENT

In this document I will take you through my process of creating Art Direction for these three titles.

DARKBORN

Entering a game with art production in place.

The game was already in production phase and the tech was established.
This created challenges to raise quality of the visuals.

RAISE QUALITY

To figure out areas that lacked quality.

This was a project I entered when much of the vision of the art had been established as well as a lot of the production pipelines where in place. Characters had rigs and animations where pretty much set. However the player characters and the NPC's were not quite fitting the narrative and had no emotional connection to the game.

As the artists where having difficulties to translate the high level key arts to actual 3D characters, there was an additional attempts being made to the concepts. Here you can see how the team attempted to make the connection to the mother tree Yggdrasil, but somehow lost those beautiful beastlike features from the key art.

These where the first high level key art made for the game. Although beautifully made and evoking that creature like feeling across to the viewer, they where not connecting to the core narrative of the game, which is about showing how a child progresses toward becoming adolescent and then later to a big elder facing the horrors of the Vikings.

These where the result of those attempts running in game.

NEW DIRECTION

Raise the quality and bring purpose and meaning

PLAYER AVATAR

The aim was to improve on what we already had.

I had identified that the player avatars lacked quality and emotional connection to the player. The child didn't feel like a child and it was difficult to feel empathy for that character. As the rigs and animations where done, I had to work smart and improve on the existing base.

It was vital to make the player feel emotionally connected to the child beast, as when a dog owner does to its first puppy. For that I had to bring on the cute facial features and make the child look adorable before moving on to the other characters.

After the child was finalized in concept, I had to then focus on the progression and also the implications that the narrative had on the characters. In this case these creatures having a very close bond to the mother tree Yggdrasil.

Concepts by Joakim Hellstedt

VIKINGS

As the player avatars quality was being raised, same had to be done with the NPC's

Here again I had to work of the base and improve what was already there. In this scenario I also had to think about not just different classes like range combat and close combat but also the representation of the different families.

Apart from the player avatars, the game's NPC's where not fitting the overall quality and the lore of game. The aim was to get the Vikings feel genuinely fitting the story of the game and look less like a generic Viking character.

These Vikings came with distinct backstories, so the key was to bring the backstories of each family across through their choice of clothing and ornamentation. In this case we have explored the Stag family that carries stag inspired ornaments on their helmets and fur from stags.

The Stag Family progression – From Grunt, to Sergeant to end Boss.

Concepts by Joakim Hellstedt

TECH-ART
To increase productivity and quality.

We managed to create a vast organic world, with little resource, retaining quality without loosing performance.

The mission was to push the boundaries of what Unity could deliver, at the time unity wanted to show off their cutting edge tech and our team where in the forefront to deliver that. We made massive investments into tech art due to our limited resources. Utilized libraries such as Megascans along side with clever shaders to create a cohesive and yet varied organic Nordic environment.

The rock to the left is straight from Megascans, this rock's albedo would later be used to create the artist created rock bed to the right. Thus, giving the artists the power of creating rock fitting our environment but with the use of one single albedo base texture.

This is a compilation of multiple different rock shapes using the same shader with one single albedo base.
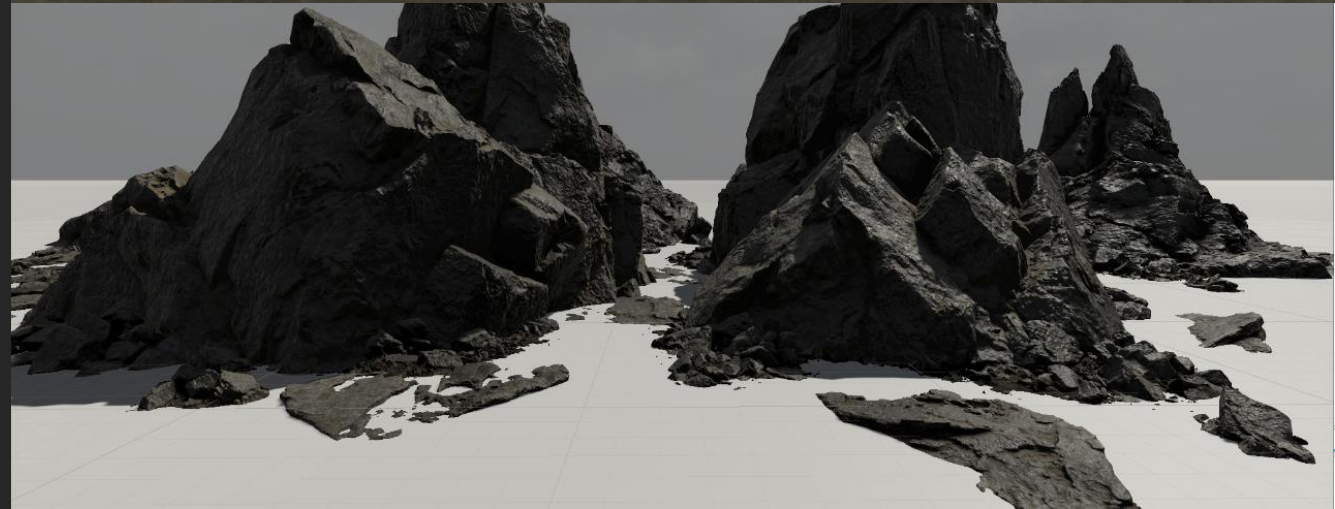
TERRAIN

Quality based on player camera view.

The playable camera was quite close to the ground, in fact it was almost as crawling in a traditional first-person game. Quite quickly did I realize that a lot of effort had to go into tech support on terrain creation. This was after all a very lush and organic environment, the player had to feel that they were crawling around in a nature.

YOUR DARKBORN KIN

Find your Darkborn kin by following the blood tracks

Vegetation was also key. Very thick and realistic vegetation, which was also used as a stealth mechanic in the game. It became very important to support the dense foliage to make the stealthiness of the creatures believable.

Extensive use of high+quality Megascans textures with an enhanced terrain tessellation tool was the winning formula.

The blend of high-quality ground textures with actual rock geometry, brought that realistic ground look that I were looking for. In this example there is an assembly of rock meshes seamless blending with the terrain
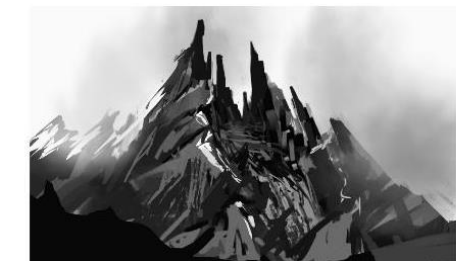
CONCEPT ART

Directing high quality concept pieces.
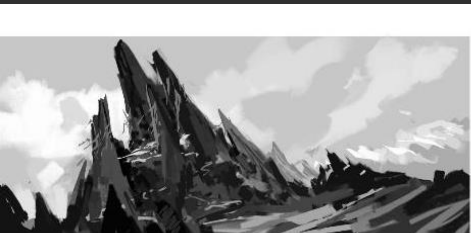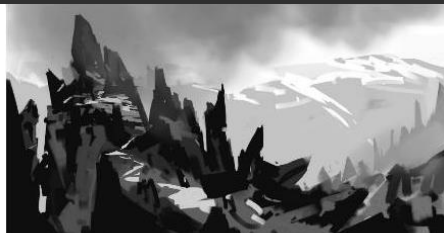
Quick and fast iteration in small thumbnails based on a creative brief. To find best composition and feeling across the pieces. For an exercise like this I would ask for a big board with lots of thumbs with a varied composition.

Then move on to some detailing and rough colour comps to get that emotional connection across. Again very iterative and quick process here, not locking to hard on anything yet. After a couple colour variations then start to define which direction fits best the tone of that game.

Final move, to fully render the most appealing composition. This piece was for the very end game of Darkborn. Our creature was about to face the most horrific scenes of the last Viking settlement, ascending upwards but entering hell.

Paintings by Tom Garden

ENVIRONMENTS

Some examples of the environmental concept art

The home of the beasts which the Vikings had invaded

A Scandinavian inspired wild forest with a cave opening

A creatures den inside the forest cave

A creature den invaded and destroyed by Vikings

Paintings by Tom Garden

METAL HELLSINGER

Create a fresh Art Direction for brand new IP.

Creative director pitched a hell-themed fps with metal music at its core
with this image as its high level vision.

INITIAL STEPS
To get the project approved.

Brainstorming and Research – Reference Gathering
Alignment of creative team, game director, art director and lead designer

_____

Art Vision
Create high-level Art Direction to pitch to publishers

_____

Beautiful Corner
Create a playable environment showcasing game

RESEARCH
Understanding the game and aligning with the Game Director.

Game Direction:
First Person Shooter
Hell theme
Emotional tone driven by
Metal genre music

GD and AD alignment:
AD was pushing for
something broader
appeal

What is the game and
the art vision?
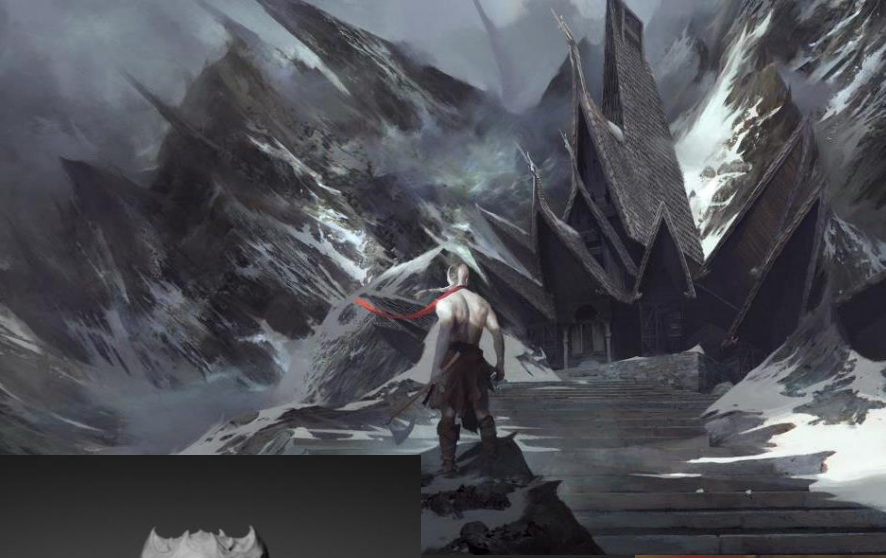
Niche Game:
The visuals didn't
have to be

Competitor Analysis:
The visuals had to NOT
look like DOOM

Researching the
trends:
Looking at what was
"hot" at the time

Gathering references:
To convince GD of the
art vision

ART VISION
Building on key take-aways that emerged to support the high-level image.

Hell - From Frost to Fire.

This was going to be one of the key areas that would differentiate Project Metal visually against its main competitor DOOM.
I wanted to explore the idea of giving the players a hellish experience in cold landscapes.

Stylization in a realistic world.

Based on trends, and successful games at the time that had established strong visual identities, we agreed on pursuing a painterly approach to create surface details but keep intact what made a realistic world in terms of anatomical, structural and natural proportions. Very similar to how uncharted represents its visuals; the borderline realistic surface detail. This again was a step to move away from the look and feel of DOOM.

Spectacular and Grim characters.

A corrupted and disfigured take on characters. A hellish world that have destroyed the nature of these beings and made them to its own liking. In constant pain, agony and anger, these creatures should have a classical emotional connection to hell.

Epic and unearthly experience.

A world bigger and grandiose than gameplay space. A sense of a world without end.
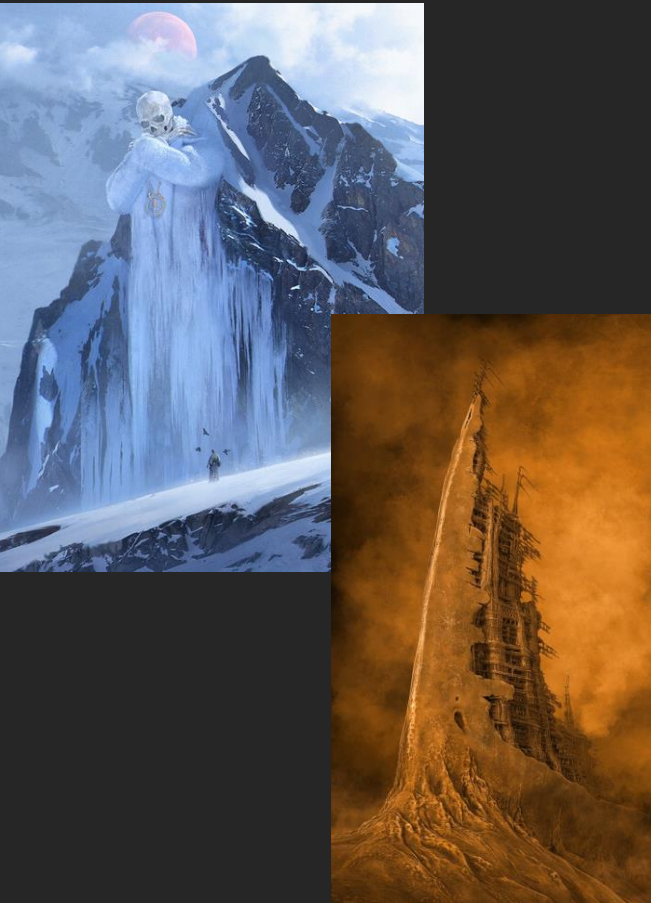
KEY DRIVERS

Identifying key visual drivers that will solidify the art direction

FROST & FIRE

The colour journey that takes the player through the different layers of hell.

BONE

A living organism that is the foundation of all creations of hell.

METAL

The key visual ingredient to connect to the music genre as well as everything interactable in the world.

CORRUPTION

The key ingredient to showcase how hell has influenced everything living.

NOT DOOM

Even with similar thematic, the key drivers had to push away from the core look and feel of DOOM.

NOT – SCIFI/TECHY

Bone and corruption should be strongly present and setting the visual tone of game.

NOT – OTHERWORLDLY HELL

Instead introduce a hell connected to our world, through a distinct colour journey.

NOT – MANMADE

A world that is created by supernatural forces outside of the realm of mankind.

NOT – CHUNKY

Use organic and shard-like silhouettes. Especially in characters and interactable objects/weapons.

MOOD BOARDING

High Level mood board to support team – these images captured the goal for the beaty corner.

With limited resourced and no concept artist, I had to produce a high-level mood board that the environment artists could get inspired by and start mocking up a 3D space from. These images where hand selected to support the key drivers of the visuals

THE CHALLENGE
The team had to deliver a mind-blowing beautiful corner to ensure the survival of studio.

Limited inhouse capacity (5 artists)
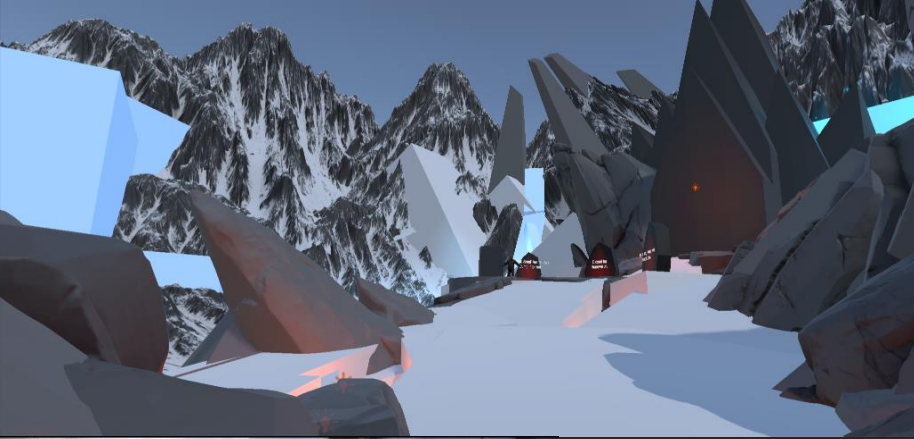I had to work towards our strengths, and rely a lot on previous developed tech art

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New art style
With a complete new style, the artists had to be re-trained

———————————————

Less than 2 months delivery window
I focused on the key visuals which would make biggest emotional impact

3D - ENVIRONMENT
Rapid 3D iteration working in conjunction with concept art.

The environment for beautiful corner was quickly blocked out to find the shapes and composition of space. All done in the engine.

The space was given to a concept artist to explore and paint over. In the meantime, the environment artist was working on the technical aspect and nailing the look and feel of hero assets.
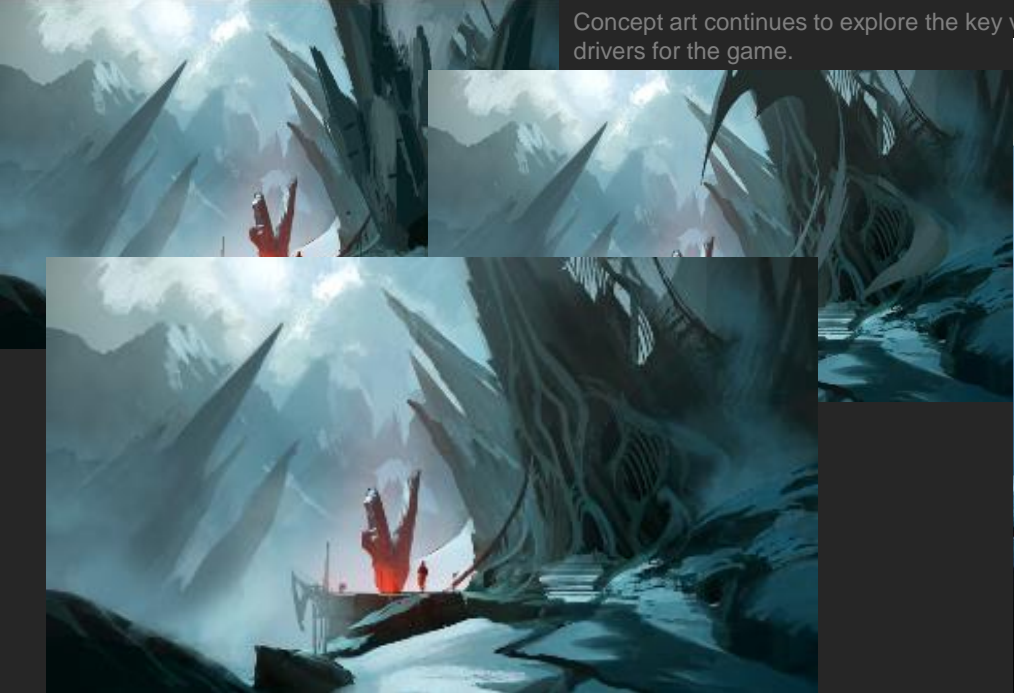
Concept art continues to explore the key visual drivers for the game.

The key components of the visuals start to shape up.

Paintings by Tony Holmsten

KEY ART
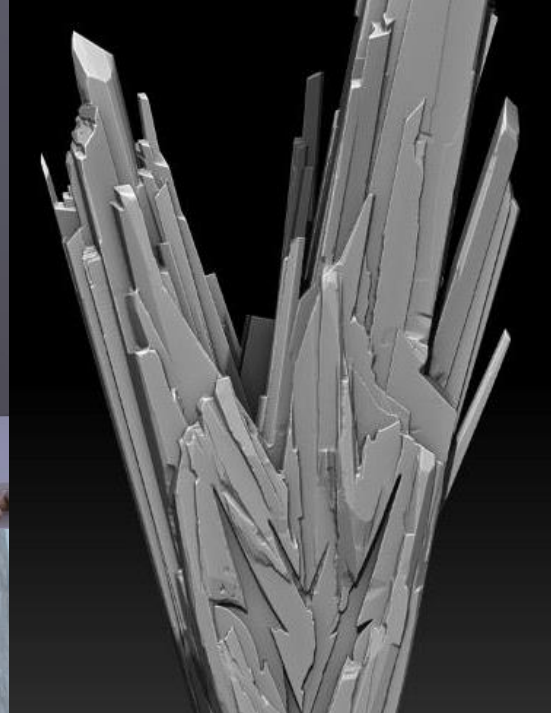
The painting for the beautiful corner
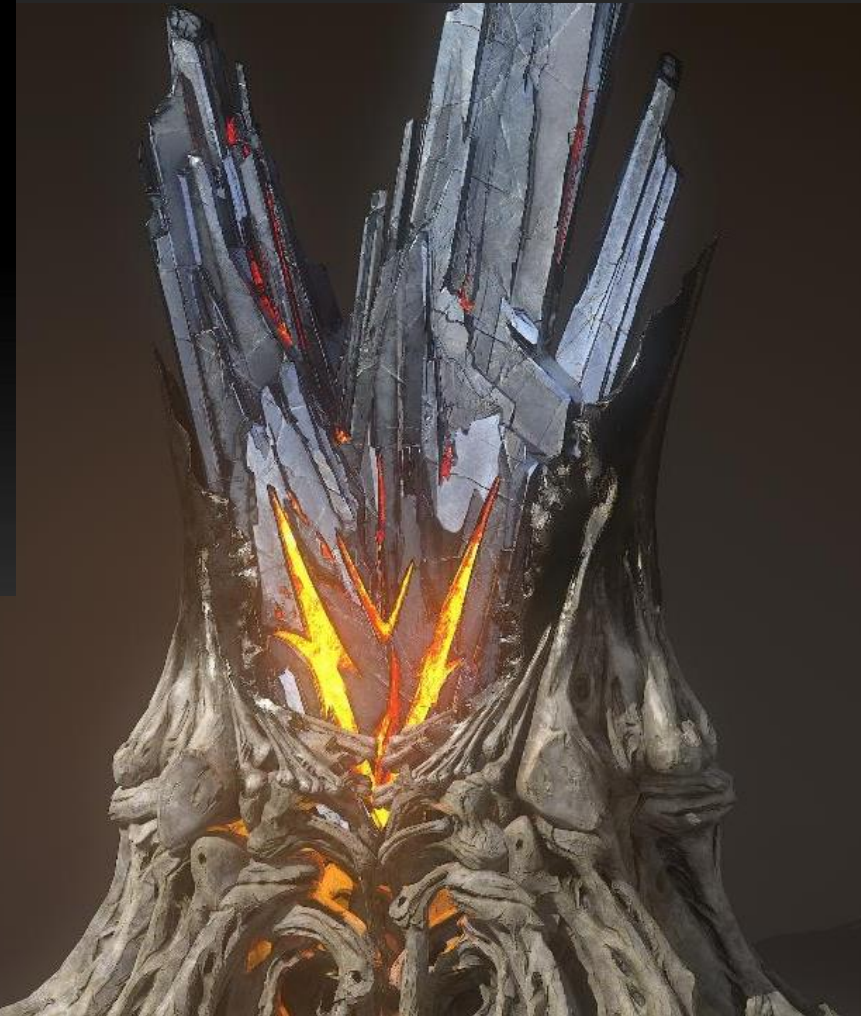
Painting by Tony Holmsten

3D - ITERATION

Delivering Hero prop and main assets.

The Key Visual Drivers

For the first time we started to see the key visuals drivers appear in 3D.
Corruption, Bone and Metal in particular which where the main drivers for environmental art.
Then also visualizing how frost and fire have a relation to each other.

Realistic Rocks – Hand painted

Hero prop iteration, to find the perfect balance between the elements and nail the look.

HERO PROP

In-Game Shot.

FINAL COMP

In-Game Shot.

METAL HELLSINGER

The Art Direction

PROOF OF IDEA

With the beautiful corner complete, these ideas had to be proven for entire game.

Creating moodboards to explore and test the art vision.

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Using moodboards to respond to creative director's vision.

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Solidifying an art understanding that captures the games identity.

MOODBOARDING

Each environment had to had a high-level visual direction attached to fit the emotional connection.

Key beats of the game experience with the moodboards, driven by the CD's Creative briefs.

An iterative collaboration between AD and CD had begun, with AD providing mood boards fitting each world described by CD. This was a time-consuming phase, but it had to be done to give the game that unique identity it was looking for.

FROST TO FIRE

After the mood boards where finalized, they then got assembled to create the emotional arc of game.

The vision of hell in its entirety

VISION OF HELL

Key art of Metal Hellsinger and its protagonist.

- Painting by Tom Garden

MORE PAINTINGS

Key Art has a central role to achieve many things.

Providing key art for each level

Supported by the mood-boards and by the GD's creative briefs

Making an emotional connection

The colour journey should be felt and experienced by the player

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Inspire and engage the entire team

All members of the team focused to deliver the creative goals

FROM FROST

Early level Key Art examples.

Exploration of frosty areas, influenced by mankinds history.

Painting by Tony Holmsten

Going further through the crust of this world, introducing hotter environments.

Paintings by Marco Gorlei

TO FIRE

Hotter level Key Art examples.

After exiting the crust of the planet, the player exits on the other side, which is the start of the most hotter areas of the game.

Painting by Marco Gorlei

The last level of hell, the residence of evil itself which the player has to face and defeat.

Painting by Marco Gorlei

An even hotter place, with the cog wheel of corruption. The engine of creation of hell and everything it is reshaping to its liking.

Painting by Tony Holmsten

CHARACTER ART

What is a character for this game, and how much focus is it on the characters?

To understand the world of Hell and the story behind why the player was doing what it was doing, it was important to deep dive on the characters, both the player avatar as well as the enemies it was facing.

The player was a rebellious demon, going against the rules of hell and facing the very minions that they where at some time in their past

But the character side of things didn't stop just there, I realized that even the weapons played an important part of the story. Thus, the weapons that were in the players view most of the time had to be treated like characters with a story line.

The weapons, being corrupted collectors of souls had to look and feel unique against the main competitor DOOM.
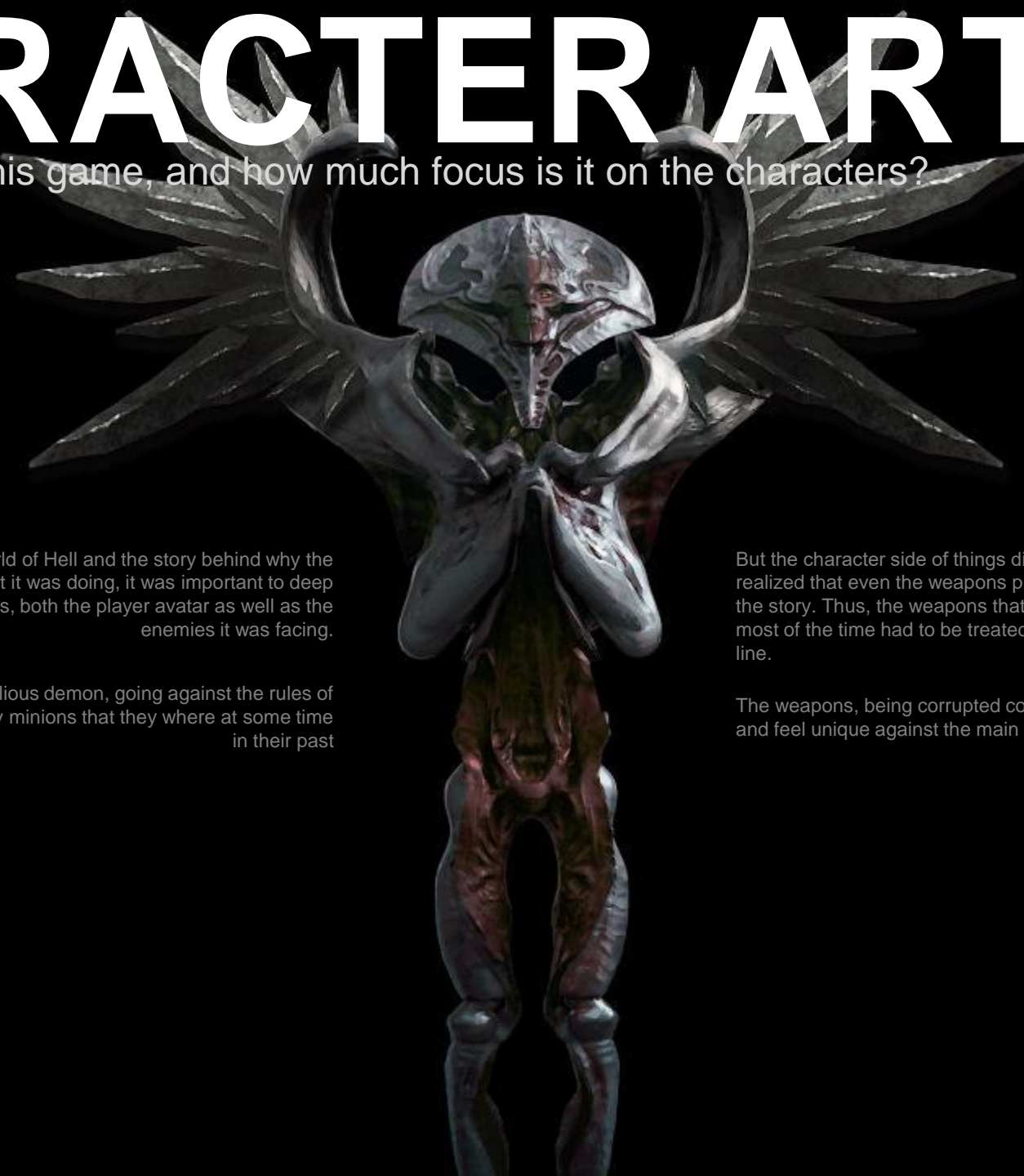
PROTAGONIST

The Gamer Director needed a monster that was challenging Evil itself.

THE UNKNOWN

After some explorations in figuring out the shape language but also the identity of this creature. It had to come off as like-able by the player but at the same time fill the need of being a beast of hell. A corrupted being that was in the end just looking after themselves and their own motives.

The final look of the Protagonist. A fallen beast that was about to go against the mobs of hell and de-throne Evil itself.

Concepts by Vladyslava Hladkova

ENEMIES

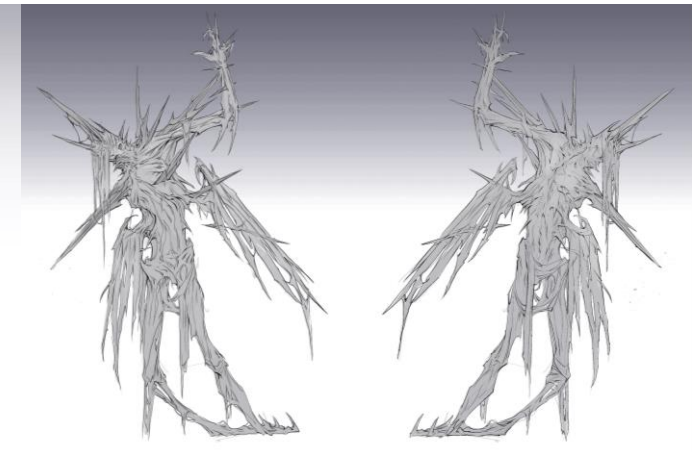Explorations of the mobs of hell.

EXECUTIONER SERAPH

Corrupted – Grisly – Twisted – Angelic
These creatures where created based on the keywords. An important factor was to embellish the corruption into these creatures and show how the worlds of Hell is creating them. Again, very important to stay distinct from DOOM character design.
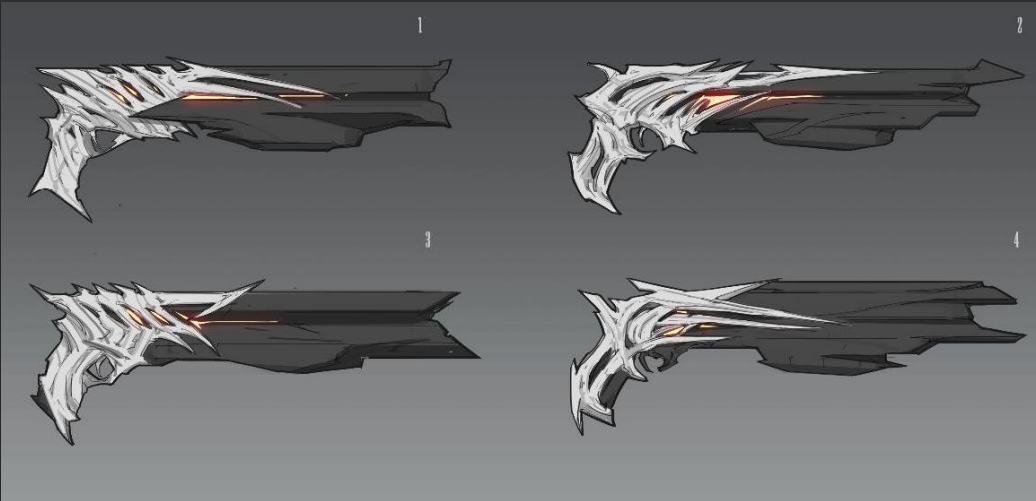
BEHEMOTH

THE MARIONETTE

The final look of one of the main enemies of the game, the Executioner Seraph. This creatures head would later become an end boss of every level to complete.

Concepts by Vladyslava Hladkova

WEAPONS

Key visual drivers for weapons were the same as for all other characters.

Because the weapons and the characters where in fact all characters of this world, they had to have the same key visual drivers Bone and Corruption. However, for weapons and all interactable assets I made sure to introduce a third visual driver which was Metal, literal hard metallic surface.

Concepts by Vladyslava Hladkova

Early explorations of what a shotgun in the game could look like. Although the details of the weapon might look fantastical, we had to stay true to the general shape of what a realistic gun looks like to be identifiable as such.
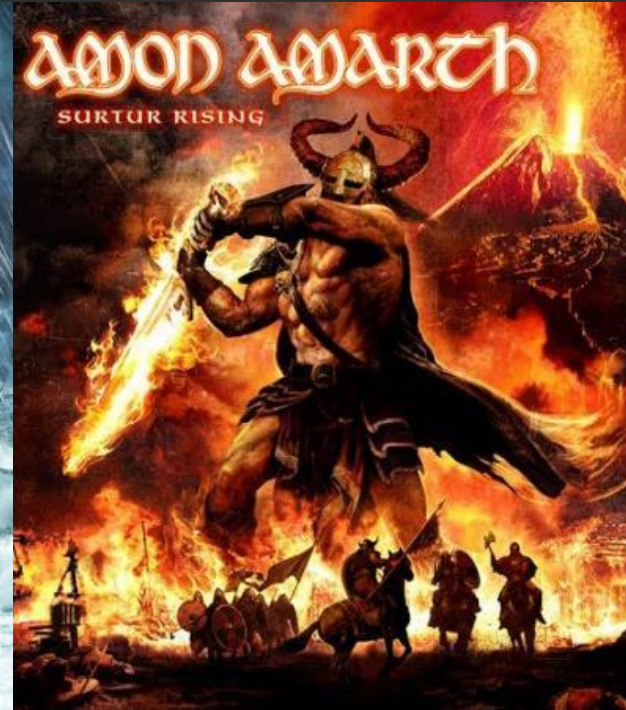
UI ART

This is where the Metal music genre was going to reside.

UI was the one of the bigger challenges to create a readable and contextual art direction for. I knew this was where I didn't have enough knowledge and expertise in.
I brought in a UI art director to work along with the game art direction and support the team in achieving a high-quality UI art.
The game's UI had to have heavily influenced from metal album covers, as the metal music genre was going to be a substantial part of the games experience.

UI ASSETS

The challenge of bringing in core elements of game into UI.

SELECTED

OPEN

LOCKED

CLEAN

LOCKED

IDLE

CORRUPTED

LOCKED

REVEAL - SEAL OPEN

REVEAL - GLASS SHATTER

IDLE

Some high-level example assets infused with metal album cover art and with key components "Corruption" built into them to connect the players experience with the game.

SCORE

THE BURNING VOID

1,500,300
REGULAR KILLS

1,500,300
HEADSHOT KILLS

1,500,300
OVERKILLS

1,500,300
TOWER HEALTH

1,500,300
DESTROY SCORE

1,500,300
DAMAGE DEALT

STAGE SELECT   **REPLAY**   MAIN MENU

FINAL LOOK

In-Game screenshot.

BEAT STREAK
5
LONGEST: 27

16x

60,200

8   32   3
102   4

OLD SCHOOL RS

Modernizing the look

Of all games I had the opportunity to do Art Direction for, this title was the toughest. Not only because it was a live MMORPG title and the fact that it have had a long history of being live and accumulated lots of fans throughout its lifetime – But the fact that the visuals had stayed pretty much untouched. It opened up a whole new waves of challenges that had to be tackled.

RESEARCH
A historical game had to be researched before any conclusion was made.

Understanding the culture
It was vital to get a good grip on how the culture in game was as well as amongst the developers

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Understanding the game's evolution
I also had to understand why the game hadn't evolved much visually over the past 20 years

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Understanding the data
The data was going to help and navigate how I could proceed to appeal the market

USER TESTING
The data showed that there was an appetite for modernizing the visuals of game.

BRANDING

The first wave at testing the waters with the users

The idea was to try out the new art direction on marketing assets and see how the players would react. This due to the low cost and low impact on production. As well as it would give a good first indication on how the new visuals would be perceived.

I also wanted to create an identity for Old School RuneScape, something that had been lost over the years by the overshadowing of its counterpart game RuneScape. A lot of creative decisions that were made prior to my involvement in the product was made from a RuneScape point of view and then trickled down to Old School RuneScape. In the end this cause confusion for the users as they were faced with marketing materials from both games that looked very similar and thus users were not aware which game, they were signing up for playing.

Below you can see a mix of different marketing art that was created for both titles. The similar art style of these artwork didn't guide the users to pick the right game for them.
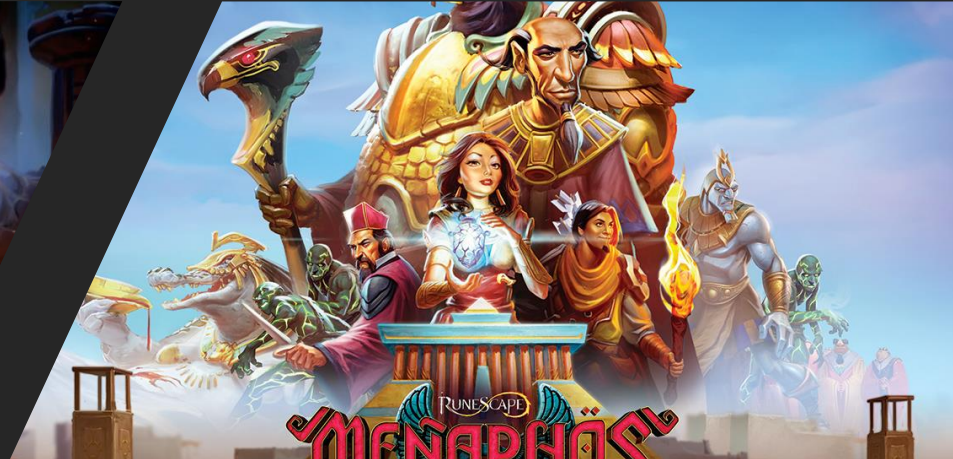
NEW DIRECTION

A Diverse style for every taste

RAISE QUALITY
How to keep an established game recognized as art improves.

Staying true to iconic look and feel
Improving this area with data driven approach

_____

Focus on the most broken areas of game
To prove the new direction

_____

Giving the game its true visual identity
Re-establishing the representation of the game

DEEP DIVE ART
To understand the visuals I had to do a deep dive into its history and DNA.

As I understood that a game with so much history and culture couldn't be re-shaped without a deep understanding of its evolution, I had to do a deeper research into the game and how it had evolved over time. From that research I created four Art Pillars that would set the foundation for the New Art Direction.

Retro – Low Poly Aesthetic
This was the key to the look and feel of the game

European Medieval History
Everything was inspired from this era of human history

Story Driven Fantasy
The game had many stories to tell and art had to deliver that

Rooted in Realism
The world was created with realistic scale and proportions

CURRENT AVATARS

The first biggest challenge – the most broken visuals of game.

The player avatars were created long time ago. It was time to improve the look of them to make them connect with the players even more.

The new look had to be very considerate of what the current avatars looked like. This is due to the fact that we were dealing with a very old game with an established player base who had already accepted the looks of these avatars for years.

We also knew that new players didn't find the visuals that attractive, and we wanted to attract new players to the game.

I needed to find a good balance to appease a wide range of market reach.

With that in mind, the best test case to improve art quality for an MMORPG like this was to tackle the player avatars. Because that is the very thing that players are connecting with deeply and emotionally and keep improving on and progress in.

Also, we were dealing with an old proprietary engine, which didn't really allow for too much room in improving the visuals. We had to preserve what was already there as the base of the characters and improve on the existing underlying tech.

CURRENT BEASTS

The next challenge – other visually broken aspects of game.

Another big visual feature of MMORPG's are the mobs that you as a player fight. One of the most iconic dragons of Old School RuneScape was the three headed dragon King Black Dragon. It had evolved from This three headed

CURRENT WORLD

A mix of texturized world with polygon coloured surfaces.

NEW AVATARS

Improving the visuals but retain the DNA of the game.

Key here was to keep the scale of the characters the same as the original base character. The proportions could not be changed to support the underlying rig and all animations already in game.
The disconnected hands to the arm was part of technical demand which must be upheld.

A couple iconic features had to be kept intact, such as the black eyes which is very recognizable in the game.
The low poly aesthetic was another look I had to keep true, as the game is and looks very low poly.

IN-GAME TEST

An in-game prototype running with the new character.

NEW BEASTS

Creating a modern King Black Dragon.

This was as mentioned one of the most iconic dragons for the game. The pursuit for this art direction was to treat it in the same way as we treated the characters. Recognize the iconic features of the dragon, keep the low poly aesthetic intact and bring more correct overall anatomy to its shape. The idea here was to create a dragon that could anatomically function and move in a believable way.
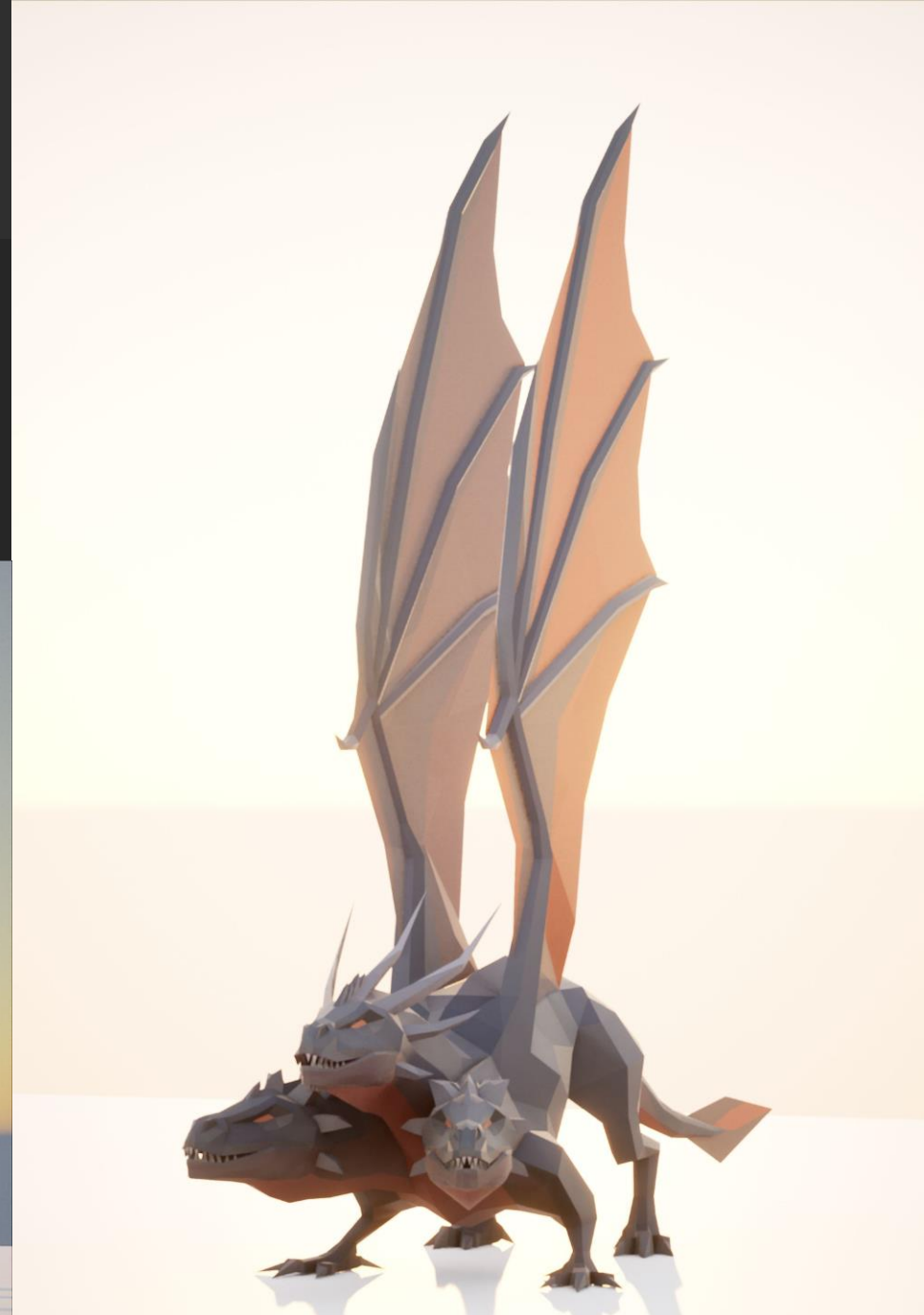
NEW WORLD

To elevate the visuals of the iconic castle of Lumbridge.

This was the new art direction's environmental push. Again, looking at the visual ques and features that were significant for the look and feel of the original castle of Lumbridge. I wanted players to instantly recognize this castle as the original one but at the same time see how it had been modernized and improved immensely. The goal here was to not use any textures as the majority of the game was colored by poly-colors and yet get a very interesting brick work and realistic feel to the color values chosen.

THANK YOU

Said Zamzad – contact@saidzamzad.com