# DISCO ELYSIUM


DISCO FEVER

*Dedication*

To the Furies at home.

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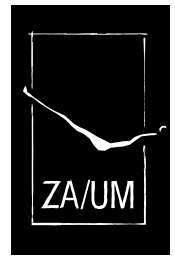
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# DAY ONE

*From: Robert Kurvitz*
*Subject: First day one-pager + costs*
*Date: 16. November 2014 at 19:26:29 GMT*
*To: Kaur Kender*

*Initial working title: "Torson & McLaine"*
*Being a video game for PC, Mac and tablet computers.*

*AD&D meets 70s cop-show, in an original "fantastic realist" setting, with swords, guns and motor-cars. Realized as an isometric CRPG – a modern advancement on the legendary "Planescape: Torment" and "Baldur´s Gate". Massive, reactive story. Exploring a vast, poverty-stricken ghetto. Deep, strategic combat.*
*Be a cop. (You´re a cop, Harry!) Choose what kind of cop you are – good cop, bad cop, lady cop, man cop, a socialist revolutionary disguised as a cop. A criminal mastermind disguised as a cop. You can even be a real lazy cop, who doesn´t wanna be a cop. Solve cases however you see fit. Uncover an over-arching mystery; shoot gang-bangers in the face.*
*"How many people have you killed, John?"*
*"Fifty four."*
*"!!!"*
*"Yes, but they were all bad."*
*Fail at human relationships.*

*Featuring: serious moral themes; socio-economic depth; the greatest fantasy setting ever conceived. Beautiful, hand-drawn graphics - a never-before seen art direction. Blood-pumping, toe-curling, skull-crushing combat. Level up your ability to dream. See in the dark.*

*Torson & McLaine.*
*The Role-Playing Game.*

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*Previous spread: (1)* Key art used for *Disco Elysium's* main menu. *This spread: (2)* A rare look at a *Disco Elysium* that might have been if it had taken a more tactical *turn*


WHIRLING·IN·RAGS







# INTRODUCTION: WRITING

BY ROBERT KURVITZ

*Disco Elysium* was an *awe-inspiring* writing challenge. Meaning: I was *afraid* of it. Pretty much every night I went to sleep. What if it doesn't come together? What if we prove the opposite of what we set out to prove: this kind of game *can't* be made – it's *not* fun. Or, what if it works – but we just can't get the bugs and logic errors out of the text? "It was an interesting idea," they'll say (I hate interesting ideas) "but sadly a clanky mess of Eastern European jank-ware."

Head bowed in shame, the lowly Eastern European jank-master walks down the street. His quests are unfinishable. There are logical inconsistencies. His journal system doesn't work. We came very close to that last one, by the way. We designed a terrible journal system that needed a complete overhaul one year before release. This caused *considerable rewrites.*

"Considerable rewrites" – words no game producer likes to hear.

Some numbers: The original release of *Disco Elysium* was 1,000,000 words long. It took us five years to write. Quite a few RPGs have scripts above a million words and they take two, maybe three years to complete. Why, then, did it take us five to write *Disco Elysium* (plus one more for *The Final Cut*)?

It's because of the rewrites. About 70% of the game is a rewrite. About 50% is a rewrite of a rewrite. There are large portions of the game that are triple-distilled, quadruple-distilled, or even quintuple-distilled. (Rewrite of a rewrite of a rewrite of a rewrite...). You'd think this results in a perfect, polished script, but large parts of *Disco Elysium* are bloodied and rough around the edges. We didn't lick one version of the text endlessly, we analyzed why it didn't work and then wrote an entirely new one. Entire

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*Previous spread: (3)* Key art used for marketing the game.

*This spread: (4)* An illustration for *Sacred and Terrible Air* , a novel by Robert Kurvitz, set in the world of Elysium.





scenes and versions of characters were cast aside. Some were rewritten four months before release, spring 2019. There wasn't time to polish, we just wanted each character and scene not to *completely suck*.

"Make it so that it doesn't suck" was an oft-used instruction.

This constant rewriting is not how it's usually done. It doesn't make for a smooth production. Large parts of the company have no idea what the writers are doing. It seems they've lost their minds. *I hear Argo is* rewriting *Rene. Again!*

What it does make for are scenes and characters that are *true*. You fight to get to the true version of Rene. What he'd actually say. What he'd feel. We tend to think of our characters as real people. They have real dignity we need to look after. Real hearts we need to get across to the player.

Another unusual part of Elysium's writing is the *micro-reactivity*. We did some spooky things with reactivity in this game, which required devilishly intricate writing. We decided every playthrough should include some examples of what we call "mind reading" – moments where you feel like a real Game Master is reacting to your choices. Especially the small ones. Micro-reactivity is the game reacting to a minor choice you made long ago. For example: you have the gardening gloves from Elizabeth the Gardener, and now, many hours later, in the middle of a completely unrelated quest, you're considering what hobby to take on. Kim should say: "Why not gardening?"

This is *cross-quest micro-reactivity* and developers who aren't brain damaged don't have it in their games. Those moments are a double-edged sword. The player starts noticing when it's not happening. Why doesn't this guy react like that guy did? Why can't I do this because I did that? Suddenly your whole RPG is one giant logic error that can only be corrected with endless writing. We had to write a mad amount of small content that few players will see – a big no-no in any kind of capitalist endeavor. You want to convert budget into customer enjoyment. That is: the enjoyment of the *median* customer, not the outlier who wants to talk about Contact Mike at the "appropriate" time.

Rewrites and micro-reactivity are why it took us over half a decade to write *Disco Elysium*. Also, we did it in a program called Articy that's slow as hell. Our monstrous, quadruple-distilled clusters of micro-reactivity were crashing the program. We still love Articy, though. It's so indelibly *green*. A green garden of cute little looping arrows – that's what our minds became for half a decade. However bad it got in production, there was always something so nice about that green garden of visual programming nodes. The promise it represented, this sprawling Alhambra pattern that was becoming our lives' work.

"They're gonna f-n love it!" We were also quite sure of ourselves, I remember.

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*This spread: (5)* Sunset over Jamrock Quarter (Eminent Domain).





And each other too. Writers are quite wonderful. They really care about people. They take responsibility for what happens in a stranger's mind when it reacts to text. They care about the feelings that are summoned. Don't let anyone tell you writers are self-centered assholes. I saw so many of them work so selflessly to elicit a single giggle out of a stranger huddled over a laptop screen at 3 a.m. It was never about ego, it was all about *You*. That abstract unknown entity *Disco Elysium* is constantly addressing. *You* see this. *You* do that. We hope *You* are delighted.

"Oh, wow! I can *nod* till I die?"

In case you're a writer yourself – I wanna close this off by saying something strange and megalomaniacal. (Megalomania is what happens when you're starved for success for 35 years.) I think the cycle of novels – *The Rougon-Macquarts*, *The Lord of the Rings* – is no longer the biggest writing challenge out there for a writer. I think that's now the Role-Playing Game. The colossal word count, the immense intricacy, the co-writing challenge – incorporating *ten writers'* voices into a single text – is just so much larger than a cycle of novels. It's harder to accomplish. And the payoff is greater. Strangers at night behind blue screens will be grateful to you – and there are *many* of them.

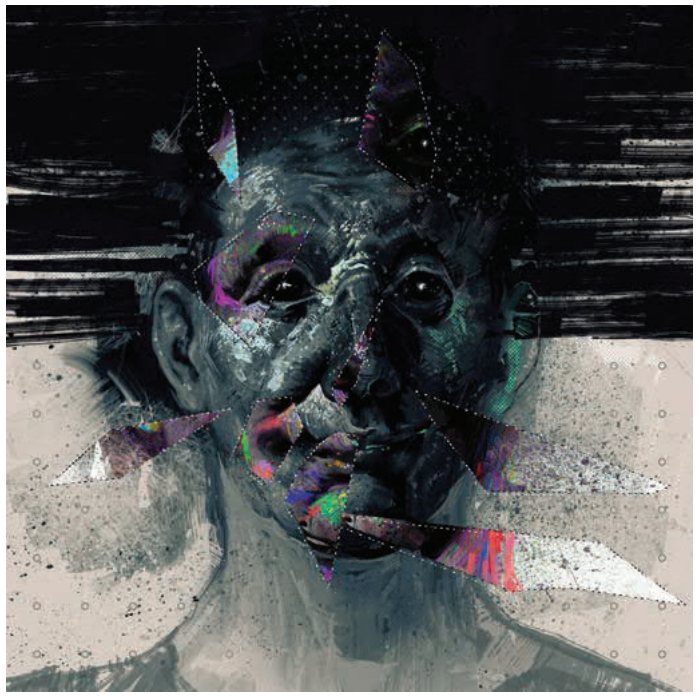
Games spread like wildfire over the world, in a way novels never can. They cross national borders, languages, ideologies, age cohorts – in a matter of months. They change minds. They make minds. They're so new it's almost impossible *not* to innovate in them. In short, dear beleaguered colleague, consider dropping book-writing for game-writing. It's worth it.

-

*Robert Kurvitz, lead designer / lead writer*
*Brighton, England*
*December 2020*

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*This spread: (6) The airship Harnankur.* Illustration for the novel *Sacred and Terrible Air.*






DISCO ELYSIUM










# INTRODUCTION: ART

BY ALEXANDER ROSTOV

*Nothing exists in a vacuum, not even video game art. Every individual is a product of their material conditions and historical context and sometimes it is interesting to trace it all back to a few specific events.*

I grew up in the post-apocalypse. Amid the ruins of the Soviet Union, a newly born land of arms deals, rapid financialization, and cowboy capitalists killing one another in public squares. In these interesting circumstances, the traditions of figurative art were, to put it lightly, interrupted.

The neoliberal zeitgeist which emerged from the ashes of the Great Project had little appetite for frivolities of painting. In art circles, it was declared that mankind had overcome and thus abandoned drawing and painting, much as it had slavery or speed limits on the Autobahn.

In its place, an aggressive conceptual art was taking the soap-in-a-sock to all other forms with what appeared to be vengeance. Nothing short of a complete reset of all truth and institutions of art. In painting, little else remained besides serious abstracts for bank lobbies, financed by the banks, abstract and serious themselves.

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*Opposite, top row: (7)* An experimental digital portrait by Rostov that curiously vibes with Alex Kanevsky's colors and textures;
*(8) Disco Elysium's* look parallels Alex Kanevsky's painterly brushwork and carefully arranged color accents;
*Opposite, bottom row: (9)* Ziggy, a pivotal member of ZA/UM posing with a neon *Disco Elysium* sign, a respectable monstera plant, and *Discourse*, an old oil painting of Rostov's that depicts three generations of writers duking it out over serious literary matters;
*(10)* Paolo Troubetzkoy – influential for the surface treatment of our character models;
*(11)* Flowers, pretty flowers???

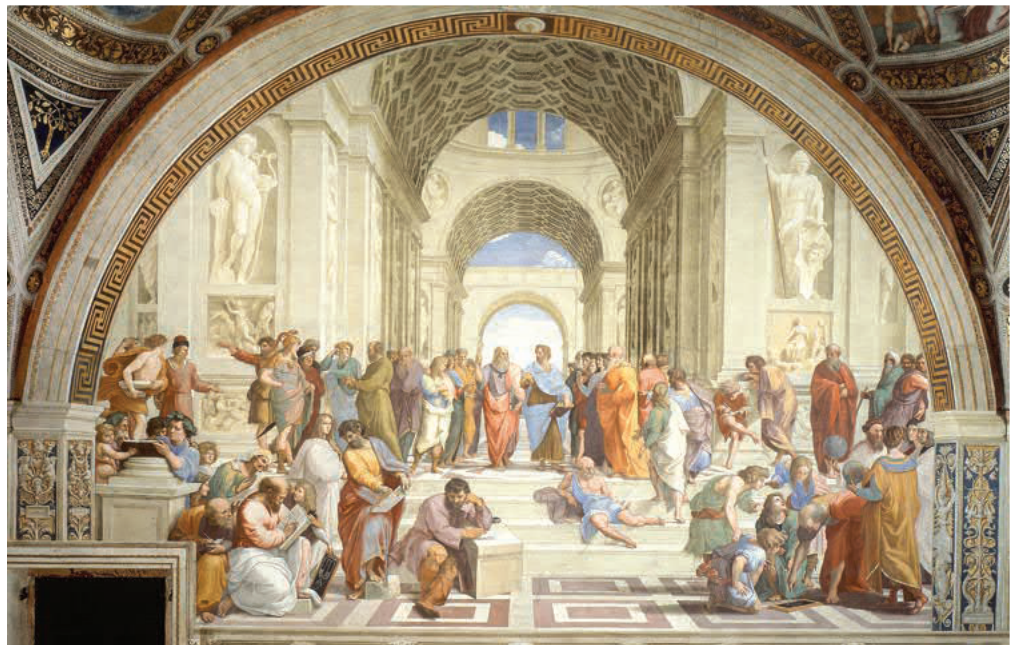
*This page, from the top: (12)* Rostov composing himself in front of a Jenny Saville painting – her work is one of the key inspirations behind the art of *Disco Elysium*;
*(13)* A very early poster for a yet unknown video game by an altogether unremarkable video game studio.
















The world, it seemed, consisted mostly of fast loan ads, alcohol, and imaginative varieties of potato chips.

Sketchbooks were not among the commodities available in stores. I'm sure you could see how a young man obsessed with painting would find this world bleak and worthy of contempt. Fortunately, my father could bind books and made for me a few to draw in.

This is the cultural context that the art of *Disco Elysium* emerged from.

The next illuminating moment in the synthesis of the art of *Disco Elysium* was discovering the works of Craig Mullins (*see p. 20, image 16*). His work was my first serious exposure to expressive brushwork and what you might loosely call impressionist or expressive painting and it completely blew my mind. I spent an entire day in furious thirst after this, for me, never-before-seen quality of pure distilled skill, downloading Mullins' complete works one-by-one via what surely must have been dial-up internet. For a young artist, this was the discovery of the first master to emulate. There were many others in the years to follow, but the first one is the sweetest.

In a visceral way, what really hits in the works of Craig Mullins is how the image seems to come together without much hassle. In truth, of course, this loose brushwork and seemingly effortless manner actually take a lot of effort. In there lies the appeal of mastery, of understanding how to work the material, how to handle the brush and color. But also in understanding optics, how to accurately model by intuition and mental calculus the way light illuminates a scene. Perhaps most strikingly, an intuitive understanding of how much needs to be depicted to trick you into seeing something that's not entirely there. It is painterly anarchy on top of rigid and true fundamentals.

It immediately struck me as the most intellectual mode of painting.

Not only was Craig Mullins my first introduction to serious painting, he's also historically remarkable. Mullins was there at the advent of early Photoshop and Wacom tablets, one of the first to drop gouache in favor of the digital round brush. Digital art tended to have the surface finish of airbrushed marshmallows before Mullins introduced texture and bravado. Any future history books on the art of painting that omit his name can be considered incomplete.

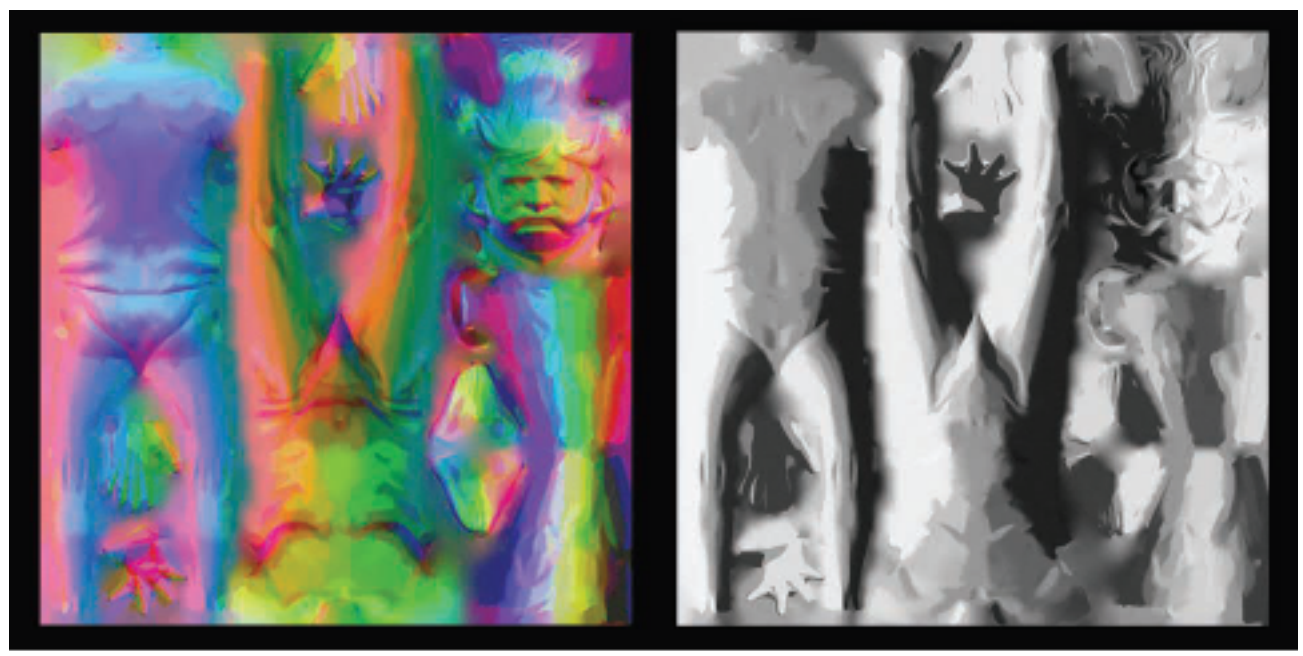
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Influences galore.

*Opposite, clockwise: (14)* Enviably tight drawing in Wesley Burt's sketchbook is a prime example of technical mastery young artists should aspire to;
*(15) Orange, Red, Yellow* by Mark Rothko;
*(16)* A couple of examples of work by Craig Mullins. Goodbrush, Influencer;
*(17)* Rostov's old sketchbook filled to the brim with diligent anatomical studies.

*This page, from the top: (18) The School of Athens* by Raphael – Neoplatonists and their fascination with perspective...; *(19)* Screenshot from the revered *Planescape: Torment* by Black Isle Studios. A stark contrast with Raphael's fresco. *Ka-chunk!*;
*(20)* Screenshot from *Alpha Centauri* , a 4X video game from 1999 developed by Firaxis Games. The beautiful stylized icons of the finished research or project screens were an inspiration for the Thought Cabinet splash screen you see in *Disco Elysium*.






DISCO ELYSIUM


IN/ RAINBOWS
IN RAIN/BOWS
IN RAINBOW/S
IN RAINBOWS/
IN RAIN BOWS
RADIOHEA_D
_RADIOHEAD



Suffice to say, post-apocalyptic conditions were hardly ideal for the study of art, and in isolation, one develops an uneven skillset. At the same time, these early difficulties and mistakes led to idiosyncratic approaches which have ended up influencing the art of *Disco Elysium* in fundamental ways. The autodidact must find ways to cover for their shortcomings and put forth their strengths.

An example: One prominent technique that arose from these conditions is the use of abstract flashes of color, splats of paint, and aggressive use of edge hierarchies which are necessary to make up for shortcomings and impatience in composition. Where I fail to lock down the image in its early stages I tend to use abstraction to finish it later. It is a bit like constructing a house on a shabby foundation and propping it up with flashy scaffolding when it threatens to tumble over. As far as learning how to paint goes, I do not recommend this approach – after a while, you start building tilted houses on purpose.

Truthfully, though, it is fortunate that my natural proclivities for expressive work fed so well into the subjective nature of the story told with *Disco Elysium*. If I were a true-blue realist, some of the wilder excesses might not have come together the way they did.

The video game took five years to make. This is a long time for an art project. Luckily it didn't take us quite as long as Ghiberti on the *Gates of Paradise*. He got to witness the transition of what we've come to recognize as the Gothic period to the Renaissance while stuck working in a style that fell out of fashion during his own lifetime. Such are the artistic risks with protracted projects. If I allow myself the vanity, I hope *Disco Elysium* reflects not on the collapse of something, but instead on the tendencies of an incoming new age of more bold and eccentric works of art.

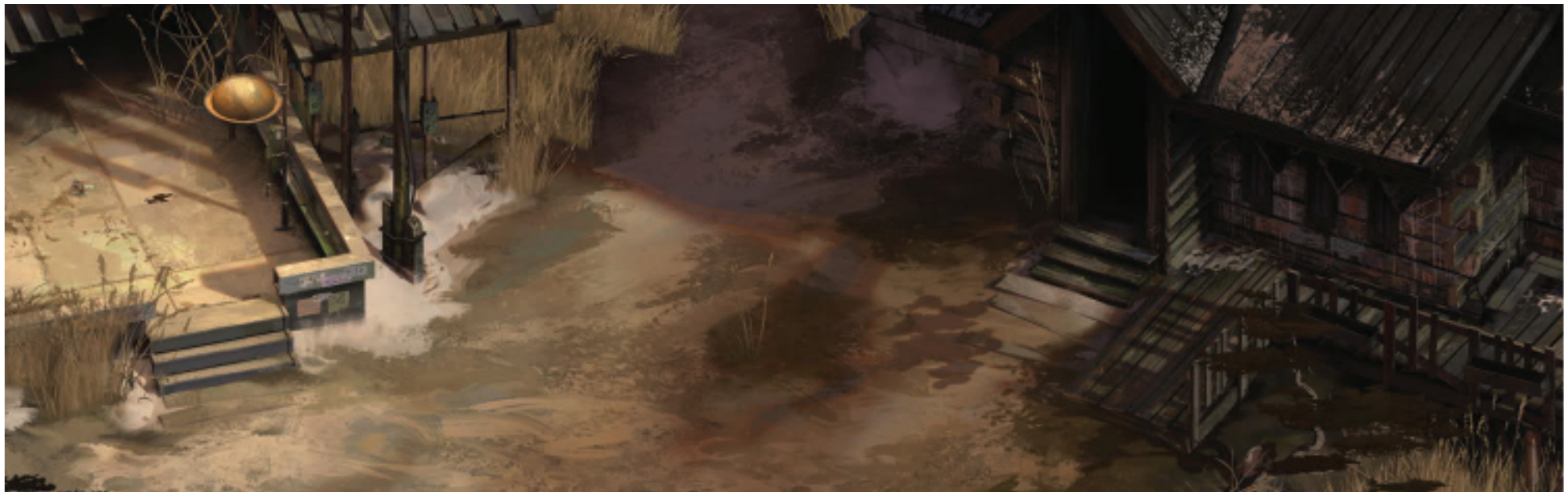
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*Aleksander Rostov, art director*
*Brighton, England*
*December 2020*

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*Opposite: (21)* From flat colors to expressive brushwork, a guide;
*(22)* Harry's sculpted physique splayed out as a hand-painted normal map. An experimental take on blending the 3D characters with 2D backgrounds;
*(23) Disco Elysium's* cover art vibing with *(24)* Radiohead's *In Rainbows* album art created by the artist Stanley Donwood. His experimental work was the initial inspiration for a prototype design for the Thought Cabinet, later discarded.

*This page: (25)* Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise.*









# INTRODUCTION: TECHNICAL

BY SIIM RAIDMA

*Disco Elysium* was not made by game developers. In 2014 there were barely any game developers in Tallinn, and there certainly weren't any at ZA/UM. Now, hear me out. Making video games is very hard. Imagine you're playing an Ancient Egyptian version of *Zork* using nothing but the Rosetta Stone. It is difficult and time-consuming with a team of expert Egyptologists and linguists; it is almost impossible without them. Building a game this way will take a long time and you will fail many, many, *many times*. That is what we did with *Disco Elysium*.

Any ambitious project in these circumstances would have been doomed to fail if the studio had been founded by techies trying to build the next big thing. Instead, ZA/UM was founded by *writers and artists* trying to build the next big thing. Here's the crucial context for all technical decisions in *Disco Elysium*:

ZA/UM is a writing and art studio first, all else follows from that fact.

What made the project viable was recognizing and playing to our strengths while being passably adequate in other fields. *Disco Elysium* is driven by a story written by someone with a published novel, illustrated by someone with an Actual Arts Degree, designed by avid tabletop role-players and cobbled together by appreciative developers who preferred spending their waking hours creating art to, say, improving a retail management system's efficiency at closing a sale by a hundredth of a percentage point.

*Deep exhale.*

I was brought in as the first technical hand to get started on the execution of this unlikely project. Even at that early stage, while the role-playing systems

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*This spread: (26)* A collage of screencaps describing the three times of day nearby the Boardwalk and Church: morning, midday, evening, and morning again.









were being built and prototyped on paper, I realized I had been dropped into a more fleshed-out world than the one I had been introduced to in Robert's novel. There was already a lot to take in, but the game writers were at it and Elysium had begun expanding faster than cosmological inflation.

The first months were filled with intense technical experimentation. I was learning shader programming on the fly to a chorus of reverent praise directed at the fabled Infinity Engine-era games as well as more recent titles like *Kentucky Route Zero*, *Consortium*, *Life Is Strange*, *Undertale*, and *The Beginner's Guide*.

Early on, I was given a build of the recently published *Pillars of Eternity* – the prettiest isometric game released at the time – to play, but also to dismantle and learn from. We had decided that we wanted to imitate its use of pre-rendered backgrounds that were somehow dynamically lit by a dark and unknown magic. My job became working out how they did all that, then to do it better, while helping the art team push whatever "it" was into the domain of the painterly. Our ambition was to create something that resembled animated oil painting rather than another pretty video game in an ocean of video games.

That video game had to look *even better* than *Pillars*, they said. (*Audience gasps in unison.*)

In this closing paragraph, I should say that while I believed in the prospect of commercial success for *Disco Elysium* from the moment I heard the pitch, it seemed inevitable that the project would likely fall flat in the execution phase and become one of those mythical unfinished cult hits, vaporware. And yet the studio was full of fire, fueled by the infectious passion and ambition of ZA/UM, a cultural movement, a breeze of fresh air, and a welcome change to whatever else was going on at the time.

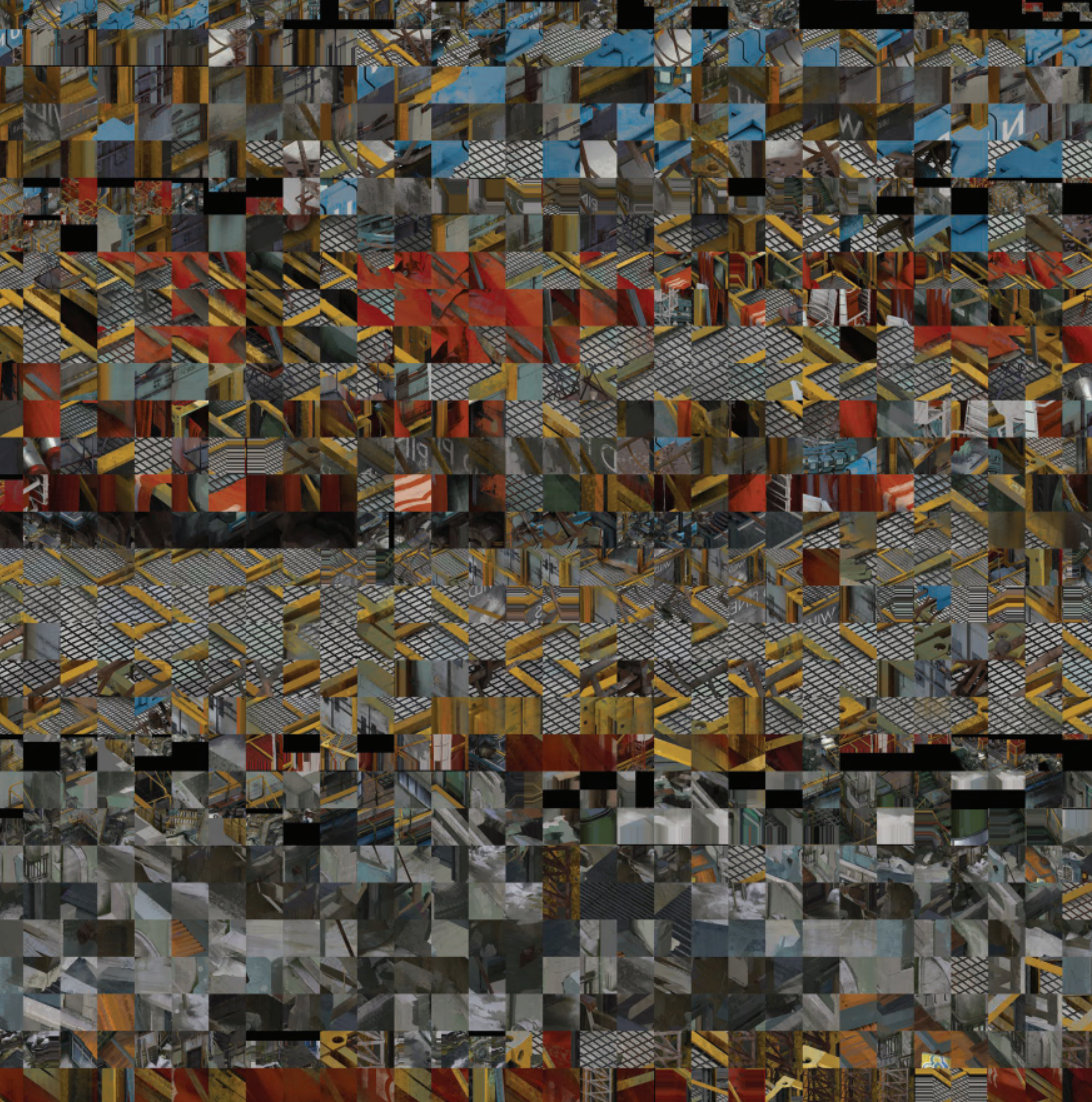
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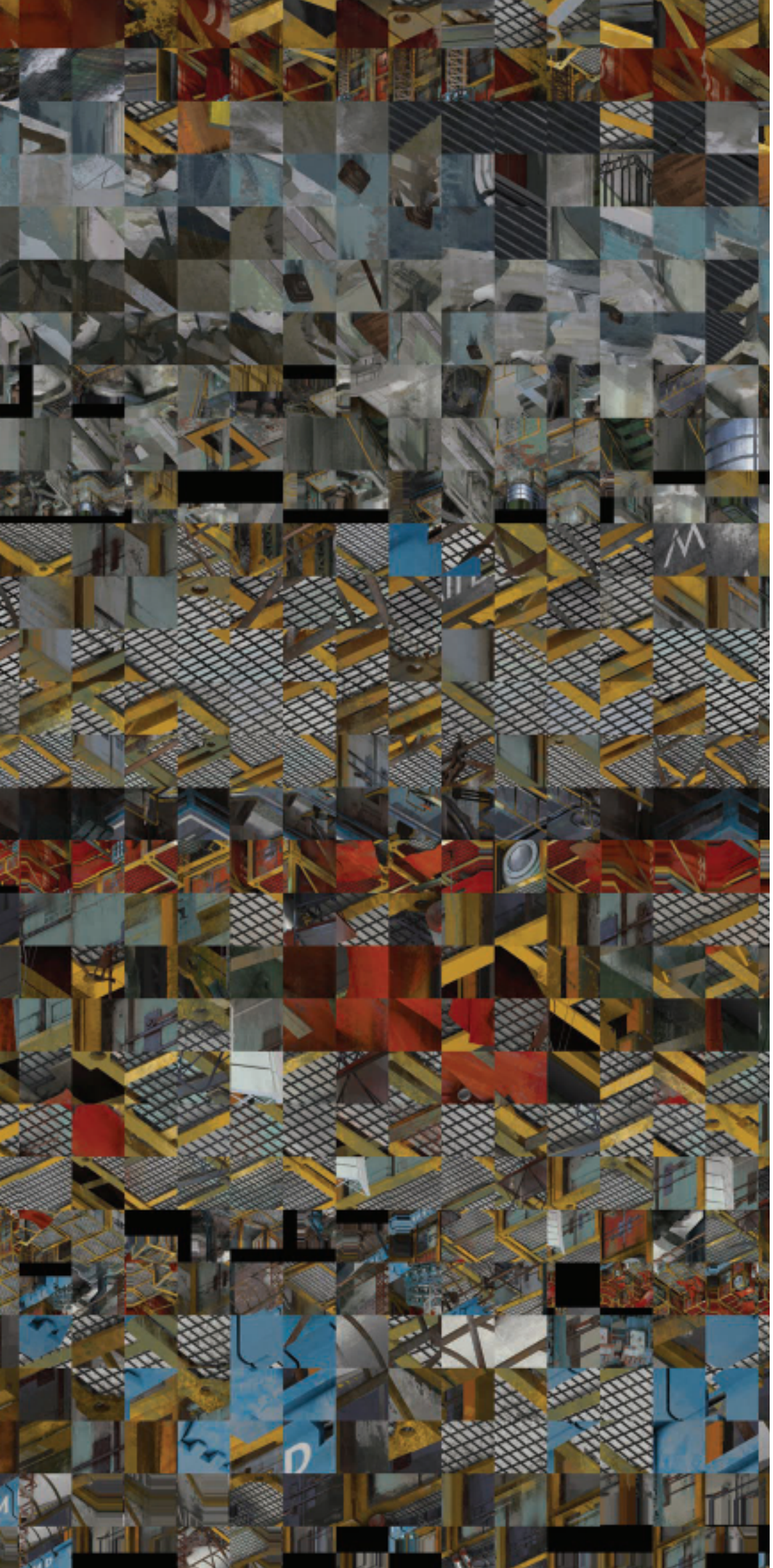
*Siim Raidma, technical artist*
*Tallinn, Estonia*
*December 2020*

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*Opposite: (27)* Snow tech in action and *(28)* The gradual transparency of the seawater shader.

*This page:* Screenshots of the various shader effects: *(29)* Shallow water at sunset; *(30)* A smoke plume climbing in the morning sun; *(31)* Lamplight holding back the inevitable dark.





# TOOLS

A good tool can make a hard task easier and the impossible feasible. Game engines make building games less impossible and a good engine can help you make it through to the end and see the game to its release. Without the nonproprietary game engine, we would only ever get to play another installment of our favorite blockbuster franchise and the occasional remaster for the nostalgia market. It would be a world where games like *Disco Elysium* do not get made.

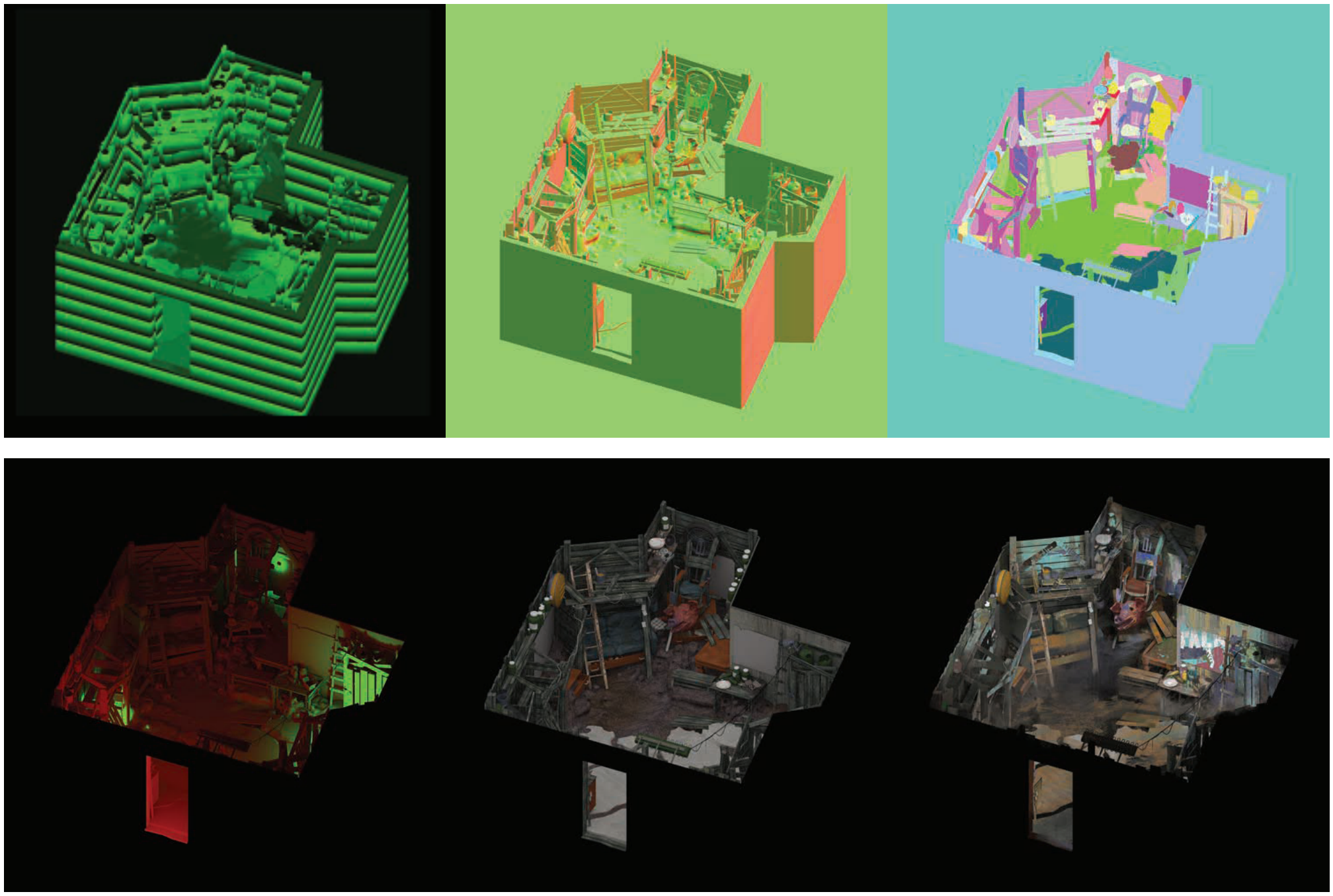
What a game engine like Unity gives to a game studio is a solid 10 years of head start and a long-enough pole to vault over the entry barrier. It gives small studios like ZA/UM the chance to tell a story before the resources run out and we get shoved back into the endless loop of the everyday commercial reality where you need to provide immediate monetizable value to a business to eat food.

Unity gave us the chance to spend the first year experimenting with gameplay and rendering. Its platform reach fostered hope that one day *Disco Elysium* might well end up on many more platforms than our own PC workstations. The separation of the game from platform implementation is a technical convenience but also has a very liberating and inspirational effect: We could at least imagine building a game for everyone instead of just the chosen few.

Blender is an odd one in the world of art-creation software. It's a 25-year-old open-source project that has had slow but steady growth while competing with commercial software in a way that no other non-technical open-source project ever has. It was an obvious choice for a starting studio and it still keeps up, even though we added Maya, ZBrush, and other commercial software into the production pipeline.

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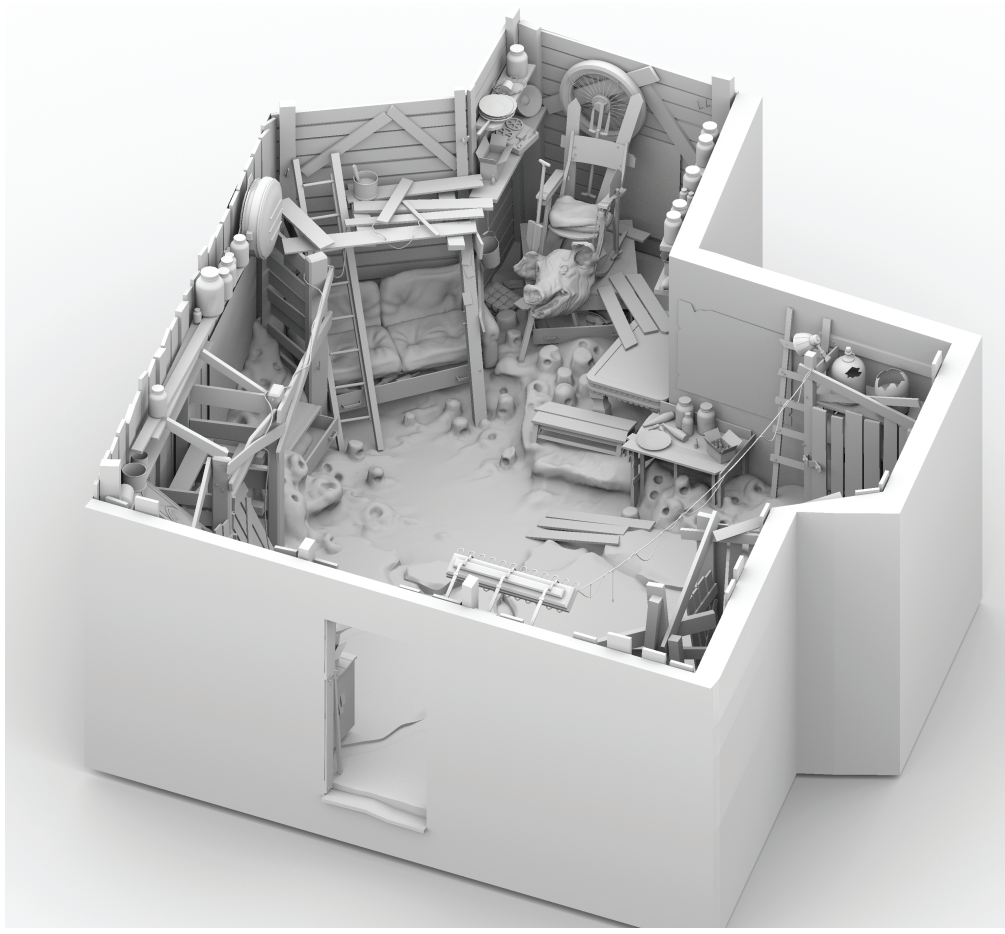
*This spread: (32) Can you tell which area these texture maps belong to?* A composition.



*This page:* Cuno's hidden shack deconstructed. Starting from the top left corner we have the height map *(33)* that tells the game engine which objects should be rendered in front of or behind others. Then we have the greenish normal map *(34)* that tells Unity which way the many surfaces of the object are facing – this helps with lighting a scene dynamically in real time. A crowd favorite, the clown pass *(35)*, aids in color selection for whoever is painting the backgrounds (it was always Rostov).

The gloomiest of the set is the shadow map *(36)* in the lower loft corner. In an outside area, a single channel of such an image would carry the shadow information for a specific time of day: morning, midday, or evening. The neutral map *(37)* carries flat color information. After that, we have the paintover map *(38)*, Aleksander Rostov's bread and butter.





In the prototyping phase, we started using Blender to bash out scenery: render odd information into images to try them out in the game engine. The original environment-rendering pipeline scripts have served us from the very beginning with hardly any modifications.

It was one of the axioms that we were making an isometric RPG with pre-rendered backgrounds. The decision did not stem from technological considerations, it was an artistic choice. We chose isometric to deliberately engage with the greats of role-playing games. Isometric isn't nostalgia for us, it is continuity with *Fallout* and *Planescape: Torment* *(see p. 21, image 19)*. Some of the decisions regarding the art style were made with an eye towards history.

Following that era, around the millennial changeover, we saw RPGs move into interesting new directions. Adapting themselves into three-dimensional formats, third-person views, first-person views, action-oriented gameplay, and so forth. *Mass Effect* introduced *Gears of War*-style cover-based shooting mechanics to an RPG story and skills framework. Bethesda figured out a glass of water can cover a large surface if you make it shallow, but also that it allows for sprawling epics people can get lost in by goofing around. For the most part, role-playing games have been on this continuous tradition of expanding on previous design techniques and ideas with each new game.

Of course, we would be remiss not to mention that besides these mainstream advances in game mechanics, you can also identify historic RPG designs in games that deliberately eschew modern sensibilities and attempt to tap into a sort of clunky nostalgia. Using obtuse user interface design and mechanics which feel distinctly like a "video game."

There's a particular magical feeling when around forty percent of your screen is filled with complicated arabesque UI elements that go *ka-chunk* when you click on them. It can be very exciting. A little like the feeling familiar only to a kid growing up in Eastern Europe in the 90s when they're eyeing the single imported video game magazine in a kiosk window, under the cigarettes and next to the bleached decks of playing cards with pictures of naked ladies on them. They can't afford to buy it.

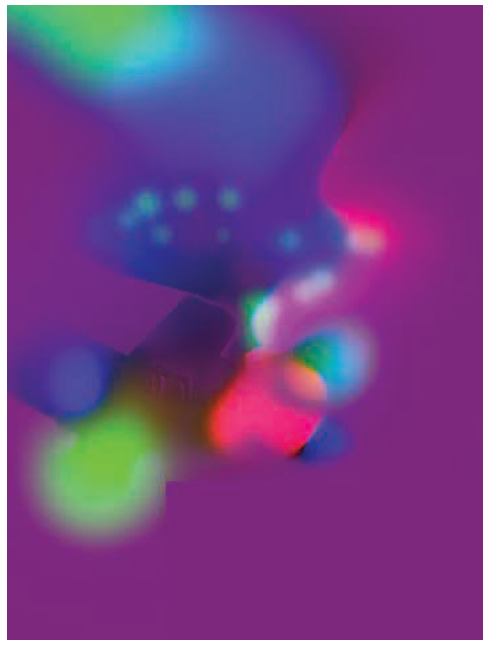
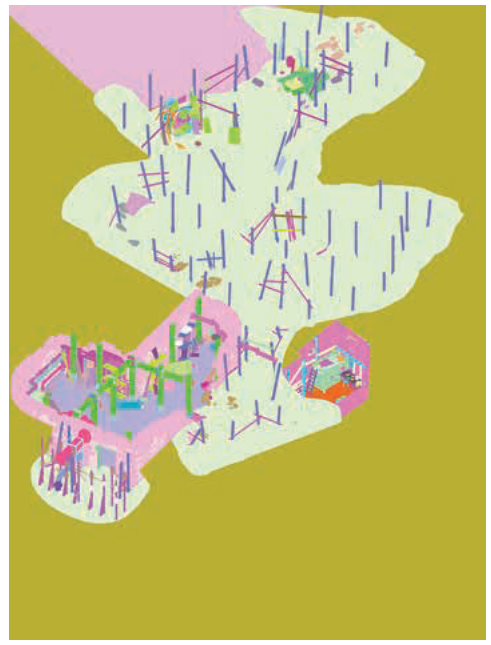
*Ka-chunk.*

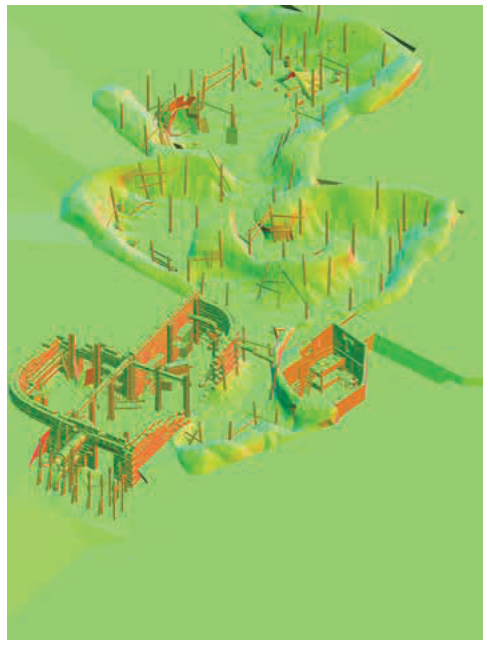
While our user interface design is not quite as extreme, shooting for this sense of wonderment is the reason we chose to include a prominent UI stretched across the screen instead of going for a more modern minimized presence.

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*This page: (39)* The top image is the paintover map *combined* with the shadow map. This gives us a lit environment that is very close to what the player sees in the game. Just add an in-engine light or two, sprinkle some dust, fix the navmesh one more time, and voilà! Bring in the characters. *(40)* Below that is a pristine whitebox render, which is a useful map to quickly test an area inside the game engine at the halfway stages in the environment design pipeline. Often this is where detail is added in 3D and scenery objects get shifted around until we're satisfied. After Rostov touches brush to screen it gets exponentially more frustrating to make any changes.




For us, the association with Infinity-era games was not nostalgia. We wanted to build a role-playing game that would feel as if the genre could have bifurcated in the 2000s. Next to the action role-playing games that we got, there could have also developed a genre of literary role-playing games, as if *Disco Elysium* had come out on the coattails of *Baldur's Gate* 2 and *Planescape: Torment*. In this way, we were materializing an alternate history.

Partially we chose this approach because we knew we were capable of executing it with the resources available to us. It allowed us to get comfortable with older, easier, and simpler technical standards for video game art. Lower polycounts to build up our competence over time.

The restrictions and opportunities of a fixed camera and no vanishing points give you a very different approach to art direction and production than the modern way of texturing three-dimensional meshes and rendering everything in real-time. When we give up the Michael Bay camera action and the entrenched real-time 3D look, we gain kilometers of creative headroom for all other kinds of artistic expression. There's a natural meeting ground of the flat painterly sentiment and practicalities of 3D art in video games. Isometric is where the finer techniques of classical painting can take the lead and pre-rendering the scenery is how we can make the actual painting come alive.

Let us go over the procedure, which allows us to produce the kind of environment textures we used in *Disco Elysium*.

Following an artist's sketch, we model the scene in Blender with a high-enough polygon count that captures the shapes and general blocks of the color of the space. These we render into square tiles via an isometric camera that scans the whole scene and renders multiple layers of high-resolution textures. The camera captures the color, shadows, surface normals, absolute height, and other technical information. Those maps are later used to light up our painting in the game engine.

The rendered color map of every tile in a scene gets a robust coating of digital paint by Rostov, all done in Photoshop. Even though the 3D renders contain both color and texture information, the only thing to consider while painting is the geometry edges necessary for lighting the scene.

For convenient object selection in Photoshop, we also rendered a color key map, or "the clown pass" as we like to call it.

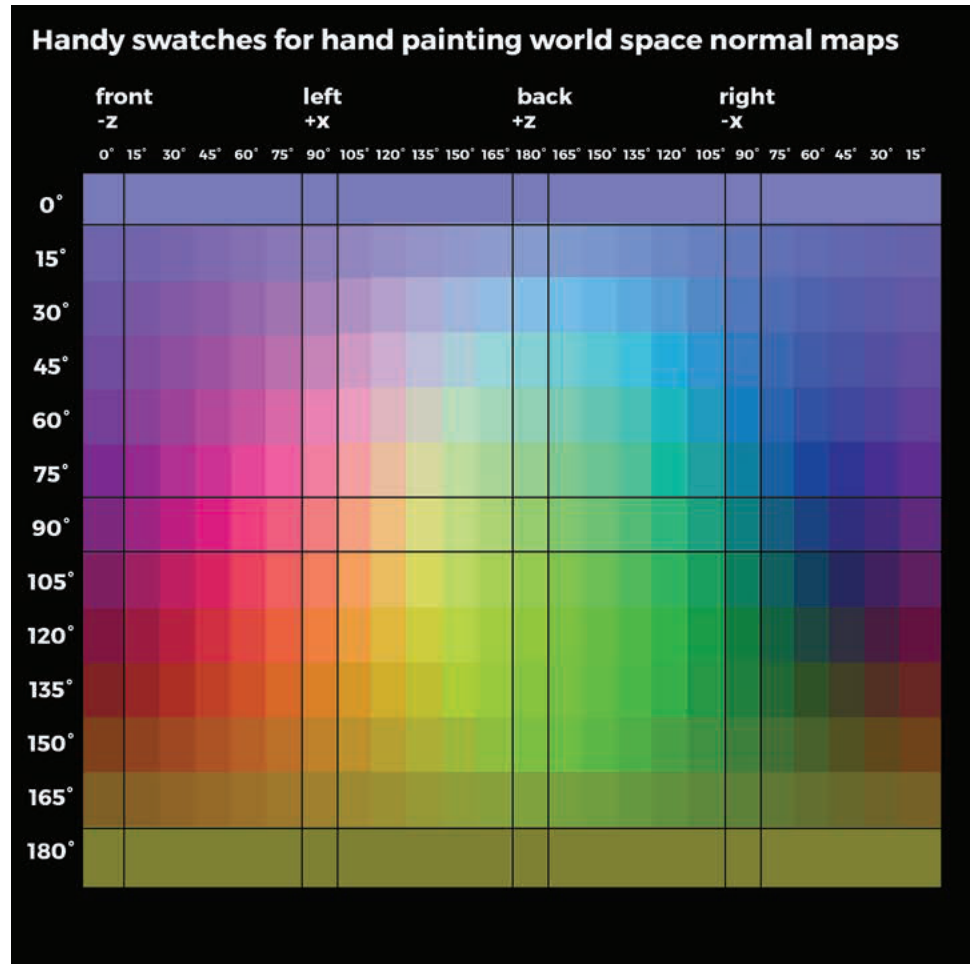
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*Opposite: (41)* Instigator's Lair. A point of no return. This late-game map is a difficult one to find. Upon entry, the player finds themselves right under the boardwalk and it took us ages to figure out the best way to implement the beautiful light shafts that flicker over the character as they navigate this area.

*This page: (42)* Another collage of the renders we feed to our shaders. The image in the top left that looks like a view of the northern sky in some parts of the globe, is the light field map – this helps the game engine to determine the direction of the light that hits the character as they move around in an area.






Handy swatches for hand painting world space normal maps
front
-z
left
+x
back
+z
right
-x
0° 15° 30° 45° 60° 75° 90° 105° 120° 135° 150° 165° 180° 165° 150° 135° 120° 105° 90° 75° 60° 45° 30° 15°
0°
15°
30°
45°
60°
75°
90°
105°
120°
135°
150°
165°
180°







The art team committed a perhaps forgivable sin of pushing the environments beyond their original scope. From the artists' perspective, there was not enough "air" in the world. At one point everything was sort of packed in too tightly and the artists ended up forcing the writers' hand to add an extra character or two, to type up even more content to fill out the casually expanding world. Half of the stuff inside the Capeside Apartments building is there simply because Kasparov wanted to make a cool indoor area and ignored the panicked cries coming from the writers' room to commit-pull-push. ◀

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*Opposite: (43)* This collage of three eye-poppingly bright images demonstrates the hand-painted normal maps we were experimenting with at some point during development. The grid of color swatches is handy when you need to figure out which direction a certain hue of color would be facing in the game engine.

*This page: (44)* Our main heroes' 3D models with plain computer-generated normal maps in comparison to the hand-painted normals.



























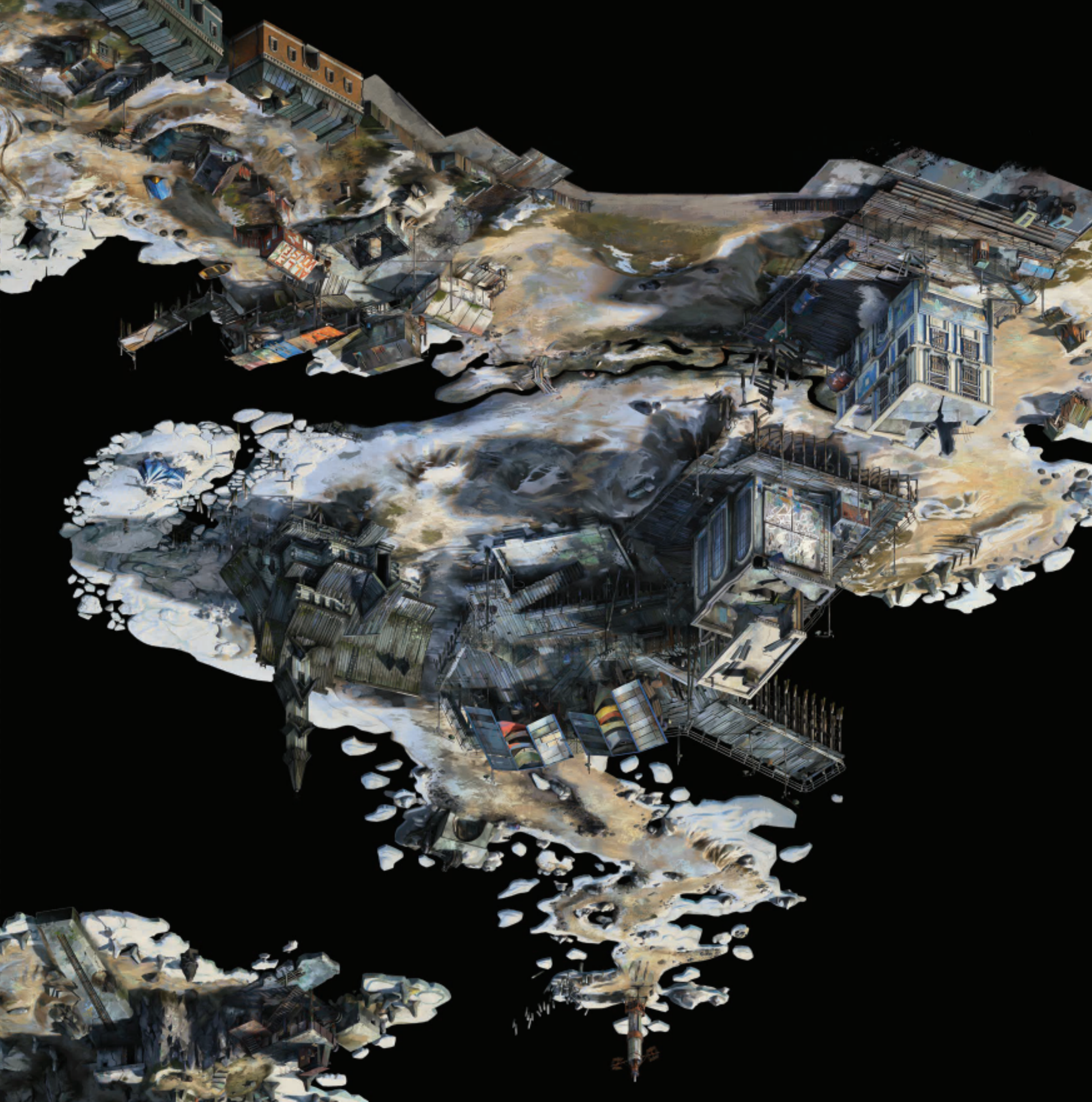


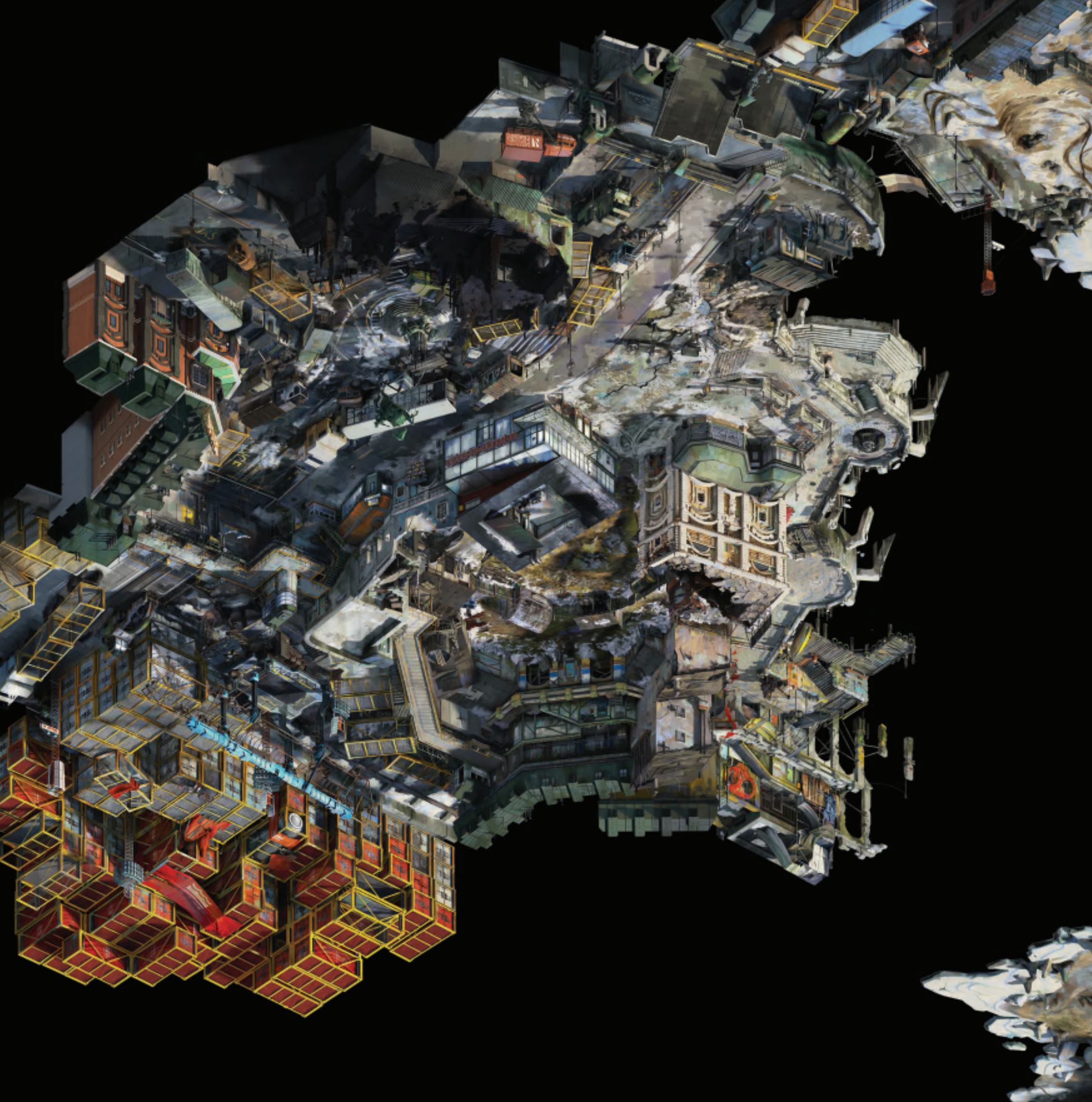




*This spread: (45)* Breakthrough! After endlessly messing around in Photoshop, we realized that detailing characters in this way is not sustainable in the long run. We opted to try sculpting instead and here you can see the juicy results. These character models were sculpted by Pavlo "Pasha" Guba.

*Next spread: (46)* This is pretty much the entirety of the exterior map in *Disco Elysium.* Along with all of the interiors the painting of this demanding yet crucial undertaking occupied Aleksander Rostov for the better part of the game's development.










# BODIES

For a fledgling video game studio like ZA/UM, it is a matter of survival to have an immediately recognizable look. There are so many games out there that it is genuinely difficult to pick out any single one from the rest.

Isometric is an especially dangerous look since it tends to dominate the aesthetic, it can sometimes be hard to differentiate between screenshots from different games. It's essentially "advanced pixel art" in how it represents a chapter in the development of computer graphics, laden with similar baggage.

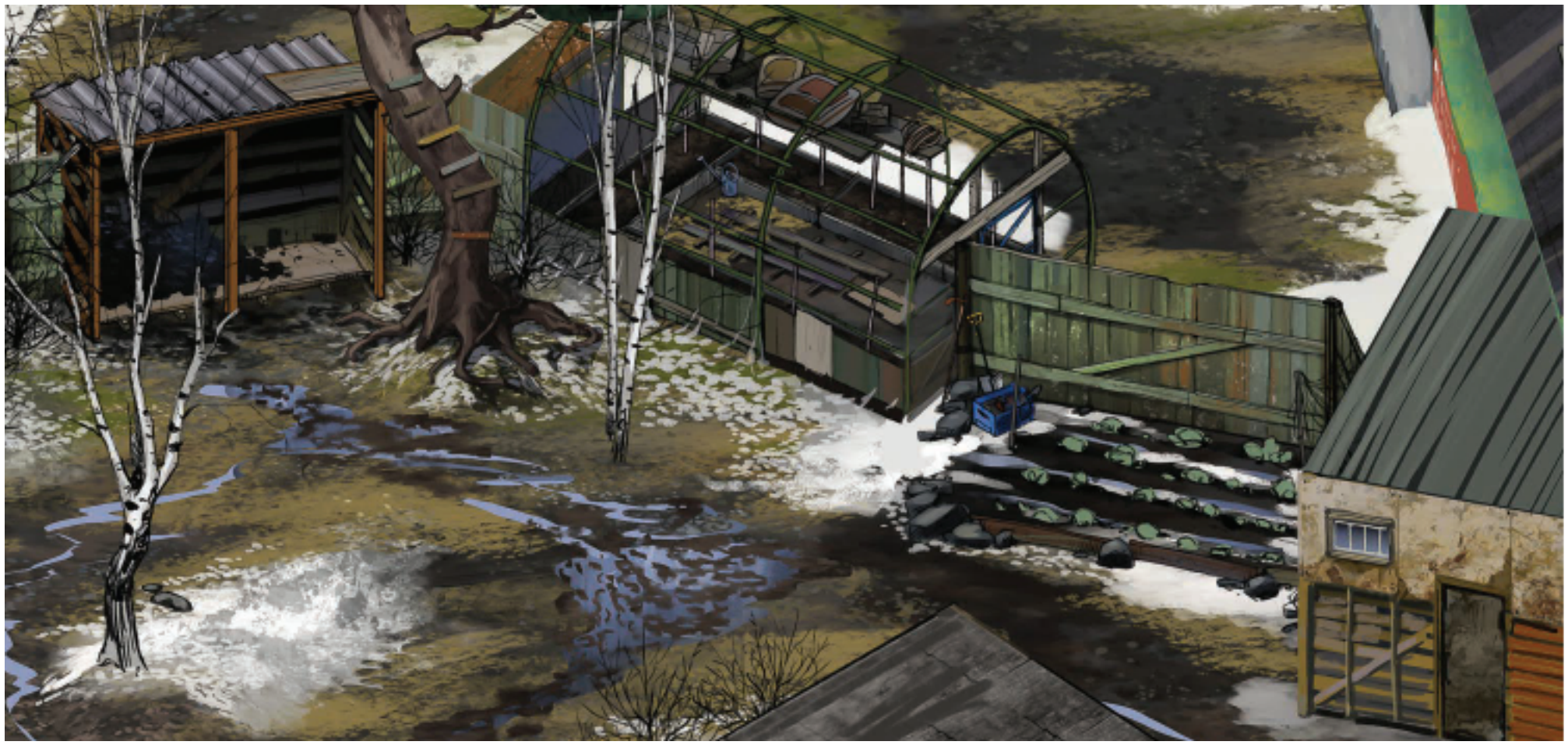
Isometric art is also a towering middle finger aimed at Neoplatonists *(see p. 21, image 18)* for whom the convergence of perspective was a triumph in artistic technique and the ticket into high society. The very birth of the idea of the artist as an intellectual. Everything converging into a single point was seen as a serious manifestation of the nature of God in geometry and art and thinking about such things marked you as a serious individual. However, it is 2020 now and perspective doesn't have to converge anymore.

*Disco Elysium* had to look like something you'd want to pick up even before you had enough time to process what this elusive *something* was. We could not afford to hold back on cheap parlor tricks and flashy displays of technique.

An artist alone lives a miserable life. The secret ingredient in the art of *Disco Elysium* is the people. Underneath all the art the player sees – among which Rostov's work is front and center – is the toil of multiple talents. ZA/UM's small team of artists comprises curious minds combined with a morbid dedication to the craft.

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*This spread: (47)* The courtyard between the Whirling-in-Rags and the Capeside Apartments. This important area was one of the very first to be put into the game, but we kept tweaking and adjusting things right up until the last minute.






FUCK THE
POLICE






Siim Raidma's technical shader voodoo made both rain and sunshine and he assembled pretty much everything you see on the screen as you click your way along the Revacholian coast. Even before the earliest prototypes, there were the drawings of strange vehicles and architecture and crime scenes meticulously etched on paper by Jüri Saks. The innards and hide of the beast that is Martinaise were sketched out by Kaspar "Kasparov" Tamsalu. His designs were granted an extra dimension in the hands of Rauno Somelar, who modeled everything from pale-touched lorries to fading coastal settlements. Markus "Marx" Härma served as an irreplaceable link between Blender and Unity and back again. Animator Eduardo Rubio made our protagonist shuffle, limp, and jump. A particularly challenging character's visage was conjured up by muralist Mehdi Annassi while the character pipeline transitioned from unlikely nonsense to beautiful sculpture around the time when Pavlo "Pasha" Guba, got involved. Timo Albert cut our trailers and animated the unholy cacophonous horror that is the Thought Cabinet, which was drawn straight out of a nightmare by the mysterious Anton Vill.

Mikk Metsniit might identify as the Head of Publishing today, but even he had his humble beginnings in the ZA/UM artist pit. Namely, he was the first 3D modeler to join the art team. His test job of a modeled-and-textured water tower stood out from dozens of other applications – with the attention to detail evident in the varying widths of the wooden planks – despite him having spent a whole weekend powering through YouTube tutorials to finish it on time.

Mikk was not alone in having to devote late nights and long weekends to the search for the clearest instruction the internet could provide. At the beginning of the project, none of us felt very confident in our knowledge of the various tools of digital artmaking, but by the end, most of us had familiarized ourselves with the workings of 3D modeling and texturing, basic animating, and assembling all of the above into assets in the game engine.

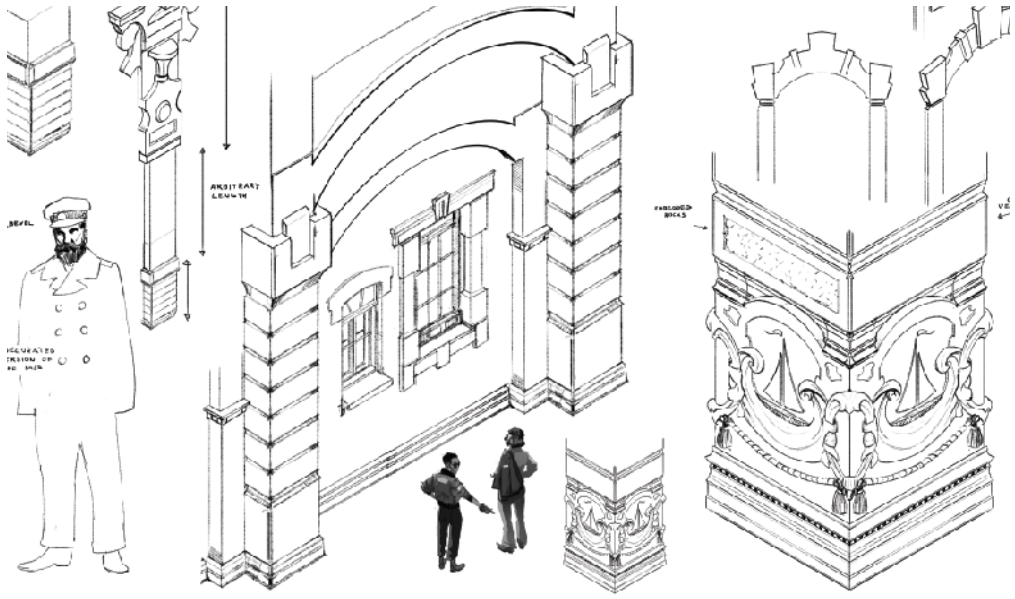
The very fact that production took so long gave all of us many opportunities to learn and develop our skills. To keep our minds sharp and inspired, we maintained a list of books and podcasts and YouTube subscriptions on topics as wide-ranging as math, woodworking, video essays, computer graphics, popular science, economics, history, literary analysis, city planning, infrastructure, sound design, documentary filmmaking, engineering, geopolitical analysis, law, art, civics, and so on. It is trivial to be

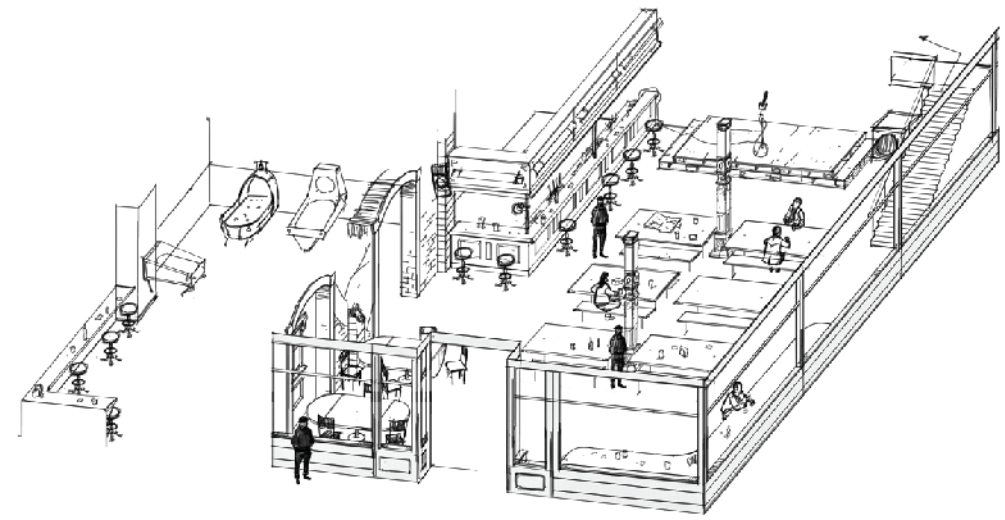
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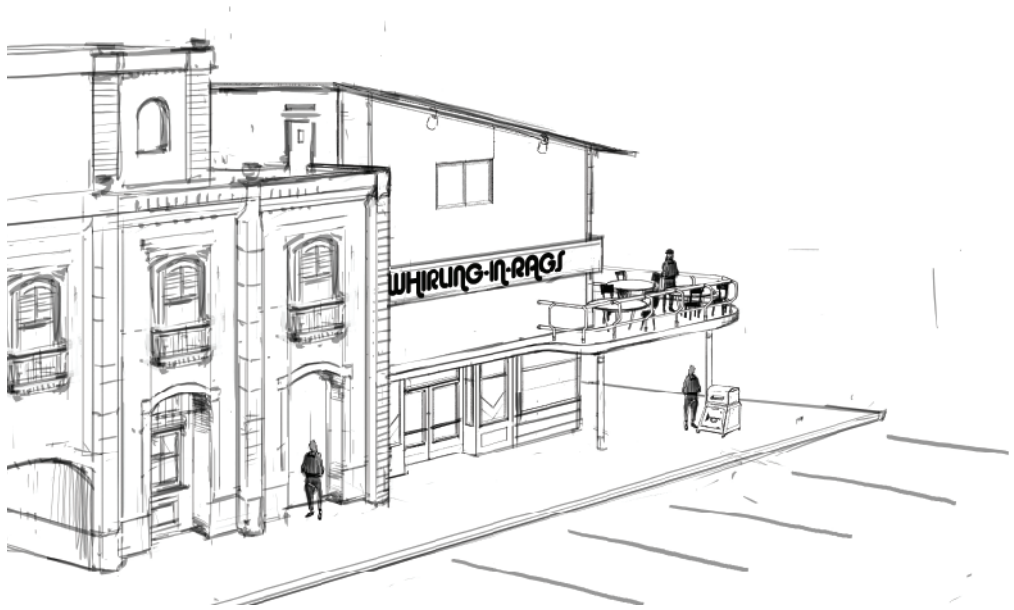
*This spread, top row: (48)* A closeup of an early detailed mockup painting done in Photoshop. The shaders were still very much a work in progress and our modeling pipeline still a draft in some text document; *(49)* A variation of the mockup painting seen on the opposite page. This one explores the graphical elements that aid in interacting with the world: the orbs spread around all over the game, that give the player various bits of information when clicked on, as well as outlines indicating objects that can be investigated more closely.

*This spread, bottom row: (50)* Gauging the soul of a dead man – the photograph our investigators take at the original crime scene; *(51)*The coal smokestack required an overhaul after the wall in front of it was designated the Mother of All Walls. It used to be a vaguely circular and uninspiring structure, but because it is the site for a momentous experience for the protagonist, it needed to have more character; *(52)* A closeup of the far building in the courtyard – a way to texture the game environments.


FALN








a Renaissance man in our day and age, just press play. We made a habit of visiting museums and galleries and having furious fights about the artistic or technical qualities of various artworks. Always we found ourselves pulled down the same rabbit-hole of a question: What makes art good?

What makes that question so appealing and maddening is that the answer is very simple: You just know, really. That immeasurable and unnamable quality of "goodness" is a sort of byproduct of artmaking that appeals to how the human brain processes visual information. It isn't determined by how well the artist has followed any set of rules.

Rembrandt "has it" while other Dutch painters of his time do not. If you study their handiwork side by side it becomes immediately obvious which one is "better." You can talk all you want about how Rembrandt's portraits seem to possess an "inner glow," but that is an almost trivial effect. With a bit of study and intent, anyone could paint in that way. In the end though – you look at the artwork and you know. To distinguish and appreciate such an effect is a skill to be honed all on its own.

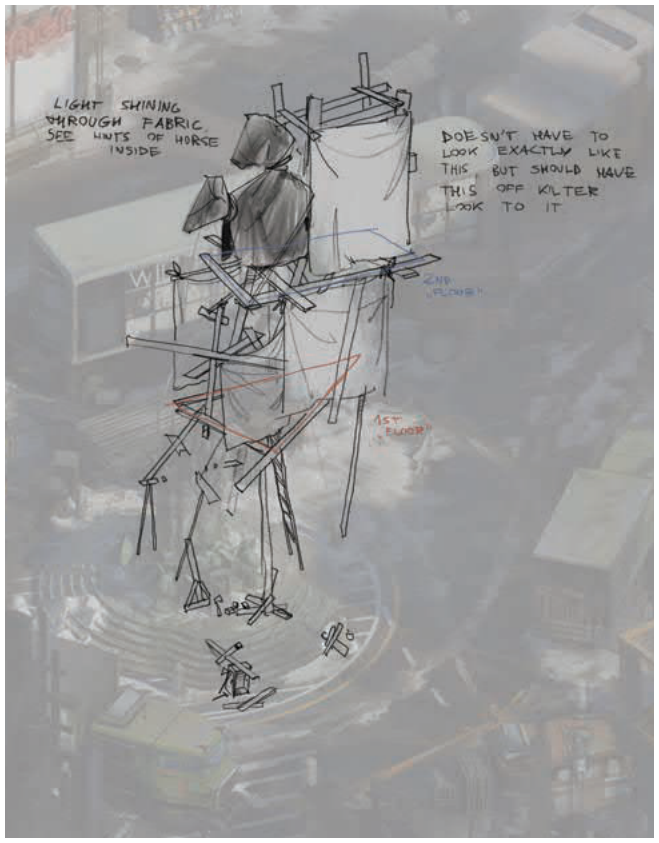
An important part of ZA/UM studio culture was hosting life-and-gesture drawing events at least once a week. With the help of designer Toon Vugts, we held a public weekly community event where some twenty people, professionals, and hobbyists alike, would regularly come and draw with us. Our studio happened to share the same decrepit building as a small bookstore, and the two young women running it kindly invited us to use their back room for these events. Together we worked towards reestablishing a tradition of figure drawing. ◀

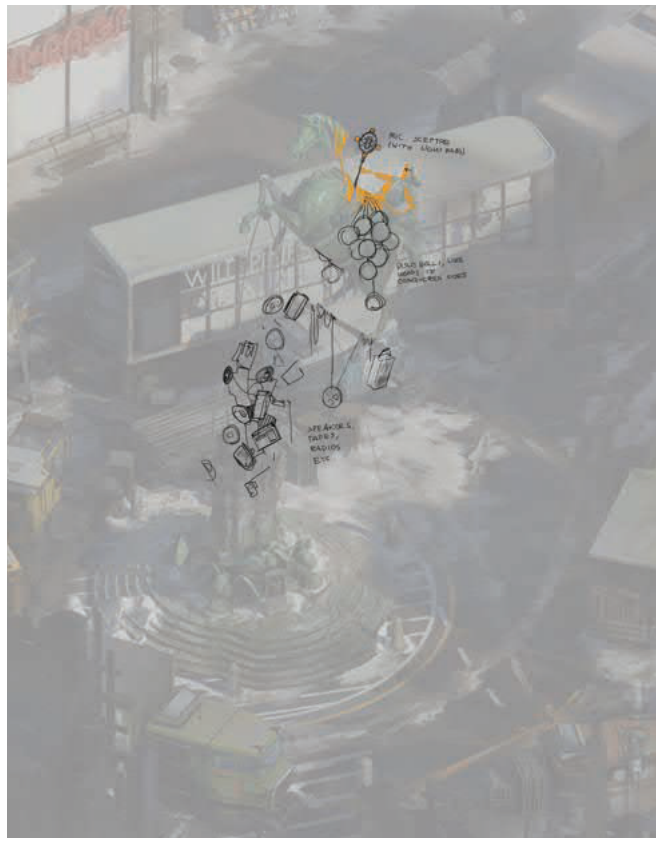
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*Opposite: (53)* Mockup painting of the first dream sequence. The seawater has risen to overtake the streets of Martinaise and the tree inside the courtyard has sprouted a nightmare.

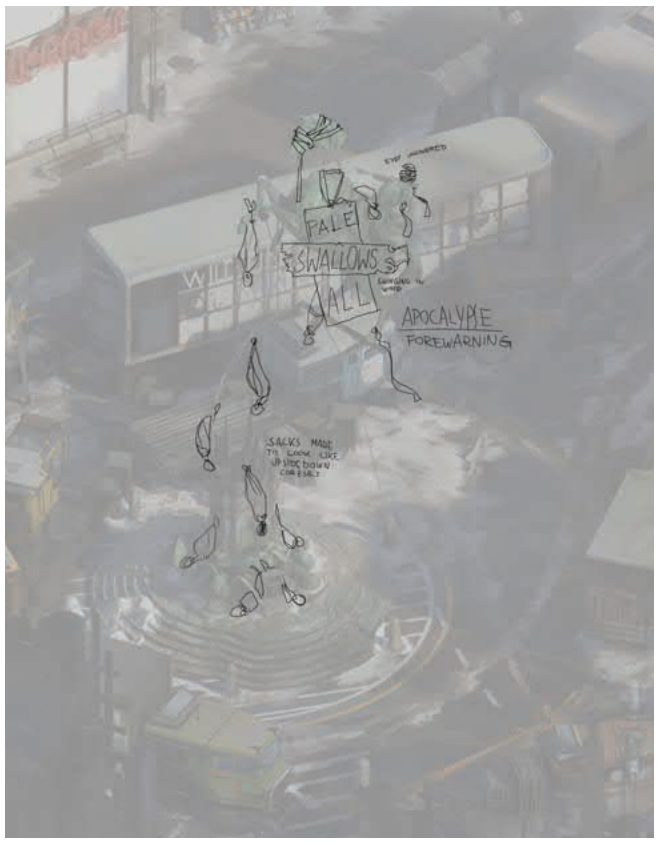
*This page: (54)* A collage of exploratory sketches. In the beginning, we were considering assembling most of the buildings from modular pieces of architecture, but moved away from it as the designs for Martinaise proper were starting to take shape. The bottom two sketches are explorations for one of the key locations in the game – the Whirling-in-Rags.

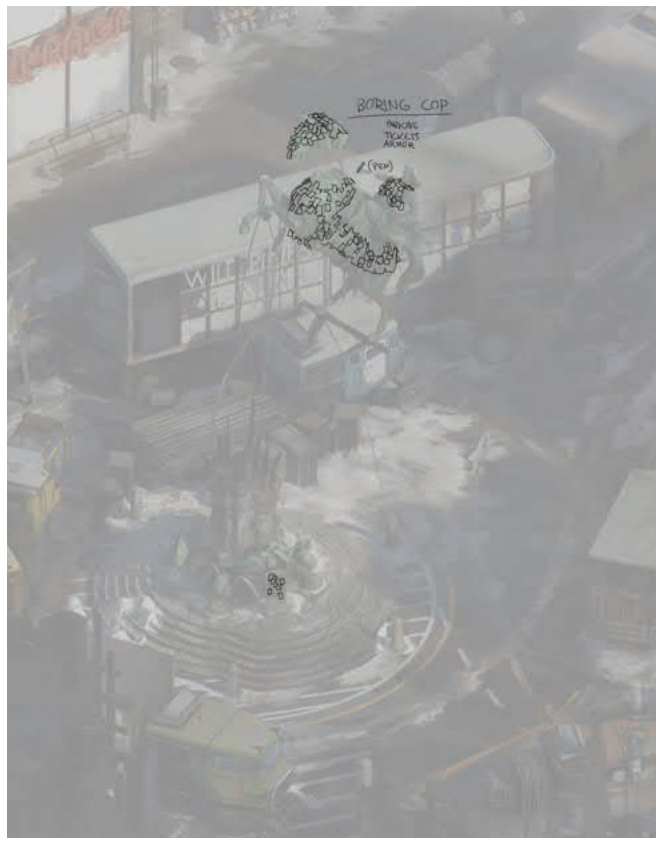








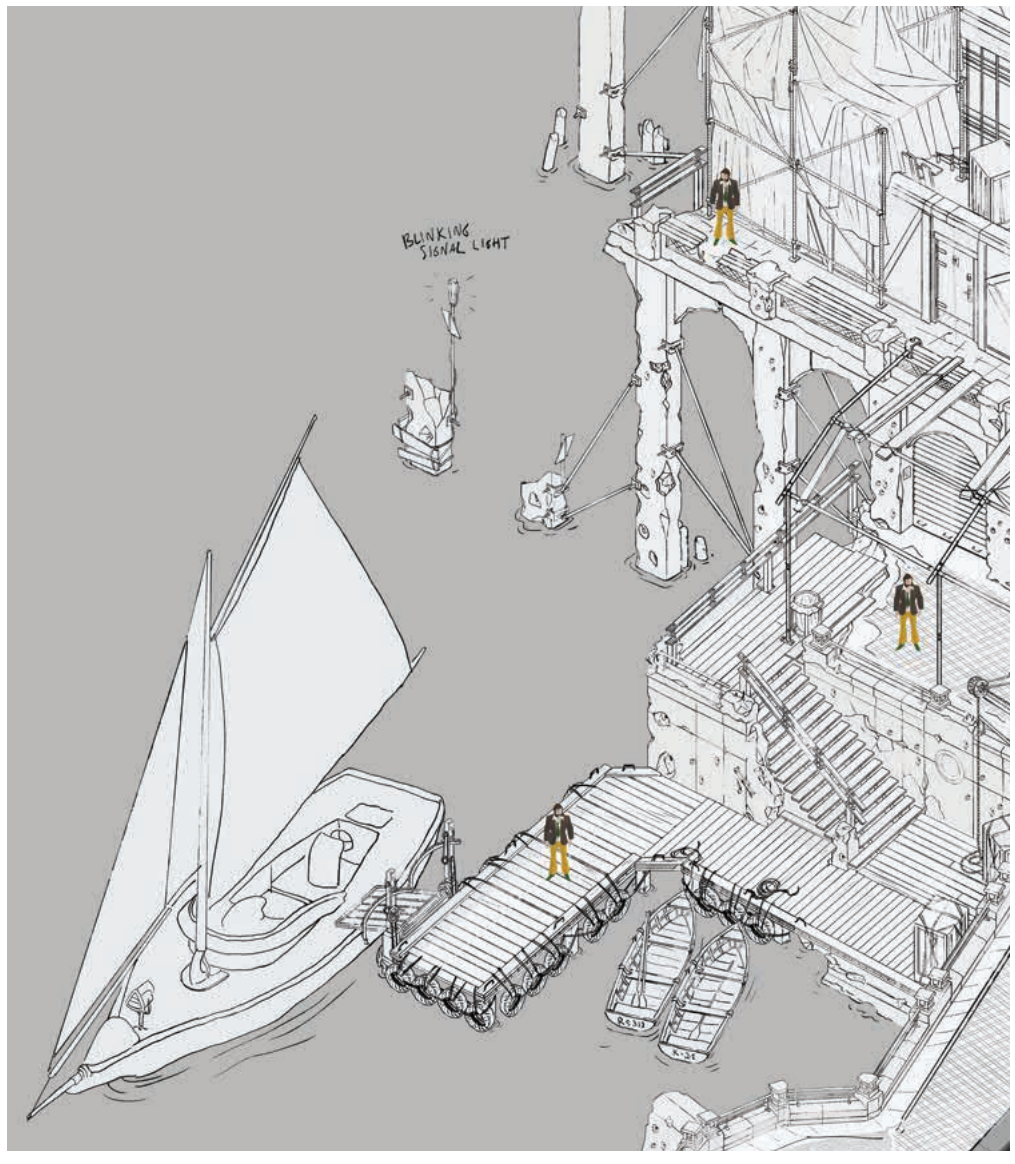


*Opposite: (55)* The Jam, a maze of steel, canvas, and rubber encircling the equestrian monument of Filippe the Squanderer.

*This page: (56)* Contemplating the world and its inhabitants brings about changes in the player character, but the protagonist's actions can reflect on the world in turn. Pursuing a more personal quest can result in any of these modifications to the monument's design.








# STROKES OF HIERARCHY

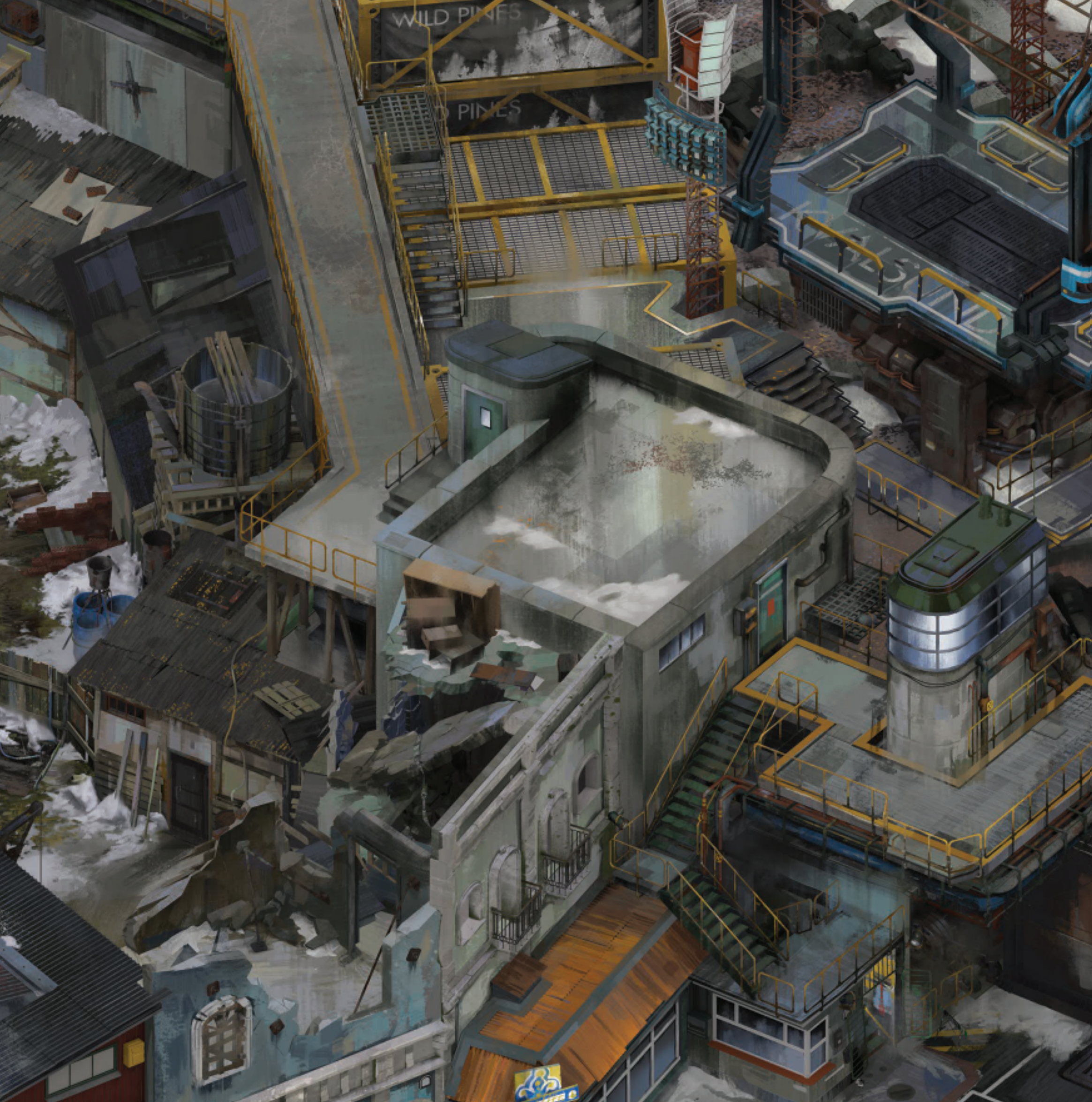
The great unsung hero of art techniques is edge hierarchy. Virtually unknown to the layman and criminally understudied by even serious artists, edge hierarchy means understanding which edges need to be sharp and which need to be soft or lost entirely. This can be observed in the edges where distinct objects intersect or even in the edges between individual brushstrokes. Turns out varying edges is not a side consideration but rather one of the foundational pillars of good picture-making.

For instance, let's look at the area between the water lock and the traffic jam. If you peer into the darkness inside the ruined buildings just east of the vendor, Siileng, you'll find only the odd discernible edge – almost everything is a subtle gradation of one color blending into another. Near the foundations of the Pawnshop, the edges between wall and ground are very soft, and if you inspect closely the front wheels of the lorries parked around Siileng, or the bright red Delta Logistics Company vehicle blocking the player's progression into the industrial-looking courtyard, you'll notice that the painted edges between ground and vehicle are often lost. It is less discernible in the more natural areas like the dunes near the Fishing Village or the ice floes stacked haphazardly near the Church. Painting the backgrounds this way allows for a more unified whole. You can find examples of this all over the game.

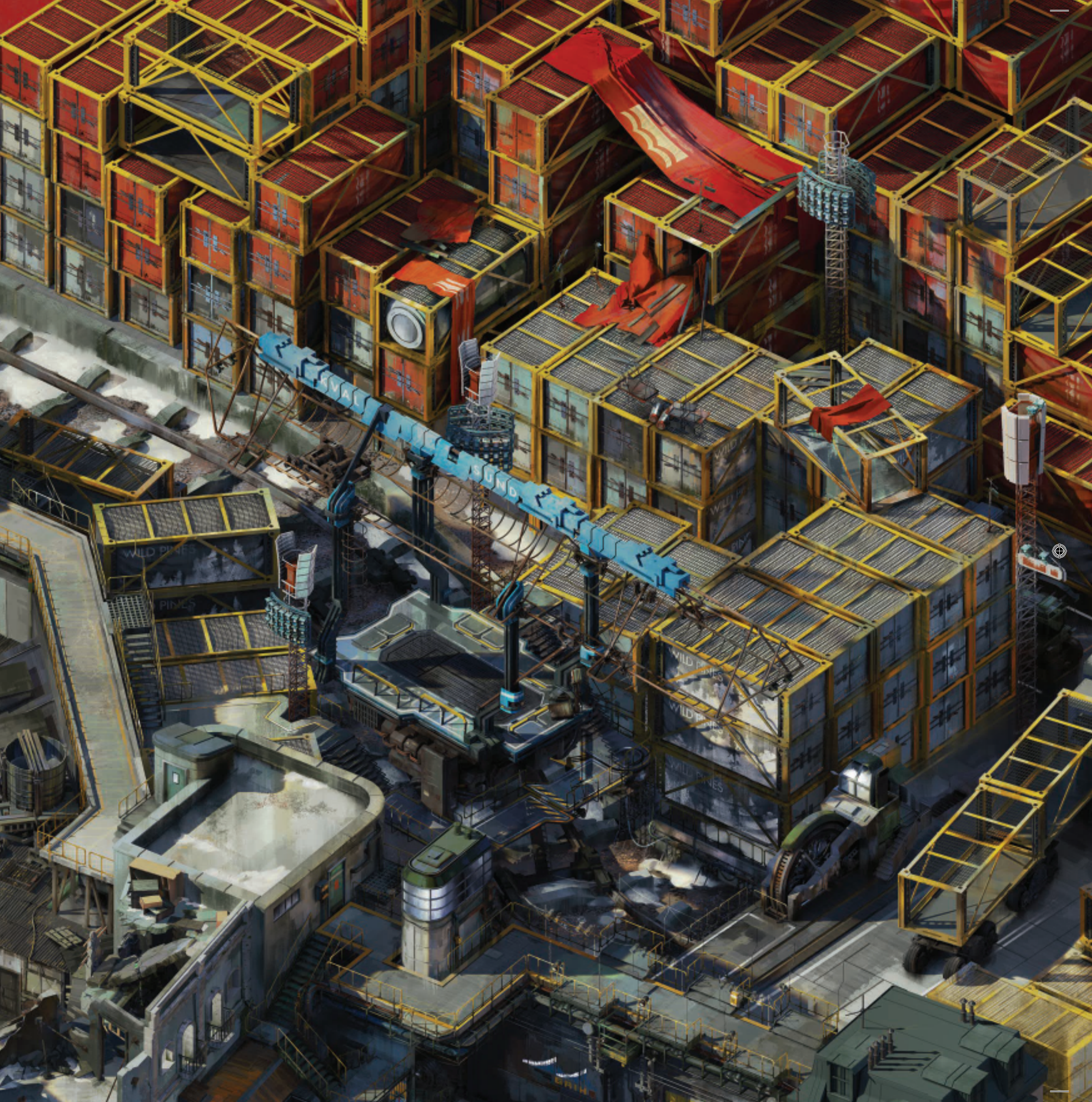
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*Opposite: (57)* The waterfront walk leading up to the Capeside Apartments, a prominent scar on the face of Martinaise suggesting a rich but complicated history of the area.

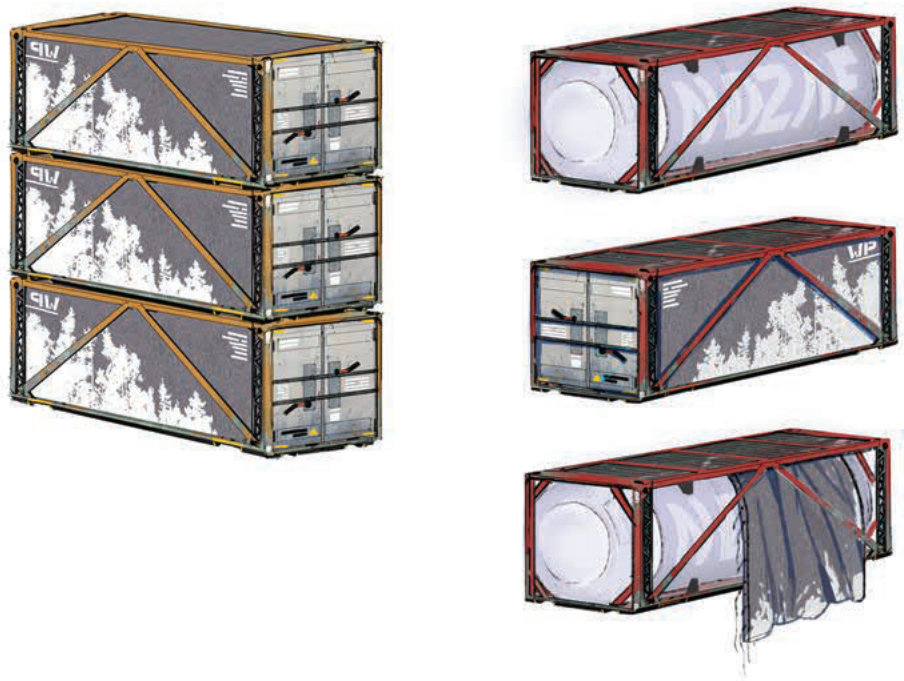
*This page, top: (58)* A sloop, the private vessel of Joyce Messier, the representative of the Wild Pines Group. We were impressed by the ships we saw in previews of *Pillars of Eternity II: Deadfire* that were circulating the Web and tried to capture some of that visual magic ourselves.
*This page, bottom: (59)* Concept for the small dock and the crumbling masonry of the Capeside Apartments building. After this drawing Kasparov began leaning into more painterly concept art to better capture an area's mood. He laments the decision to avoid designing a better crane that is holding the freshly painted boat over the small dock.


WILD PINES


WILD PINES
WILD PINES
WILD PINES
GRIH


KVAL
SUND
WILD PINES










At every stage of the painting's development, the painter takes a wider view of the image and decides: Is this good (enough)? Some of the brush strokes are very deliberate, some are random flights of fancy. Sometimes you're not sure how to make it better but you're sure you're not there yet. So you throw something else at it, an act of desperate randomness, an unexpected color, or a false brush stroke. In the very next moment, you're already systematically including it in your calculus of the image as a whole. When you lay down the last brush stroke everything somehow sits exactly where it needs to be. At a certain point, you just know, it is right.

Randomness both does and does not exist. In a naively technical way, you could say that a painter follows the following flow chart:

Put down a stroke of paint → Evaluate: Is the image ready? If yes, set it aside. If not, lay down another stroke of paint.

Much like critiques of capitalism, acts of randomness in painting get subsumed into the image itself.

We feed all of these rendered and painted game background maps to a shader in Unity, which gives us the final look of the scene. A shader is a tiny little drawing program for your graphics card. In search of the prettiest resulting piece of code, writing and rewriting that shader – and many others – has been the largest part of the visual development process of *Disco Elysium* over the whole development period.

In essence, the program is blindingly simple: It takes in information about height, direction, color, and shadows from the pre-rendered maps and tells the graphics card to spit out pixels of the right color onto the display. The program remains relatively simple even when you consider physical effects like Fresnel reflections or surface roughness, but the more you start injecting *art school ideas* into the code, the more it tends to veer off into unintelligible insanity.

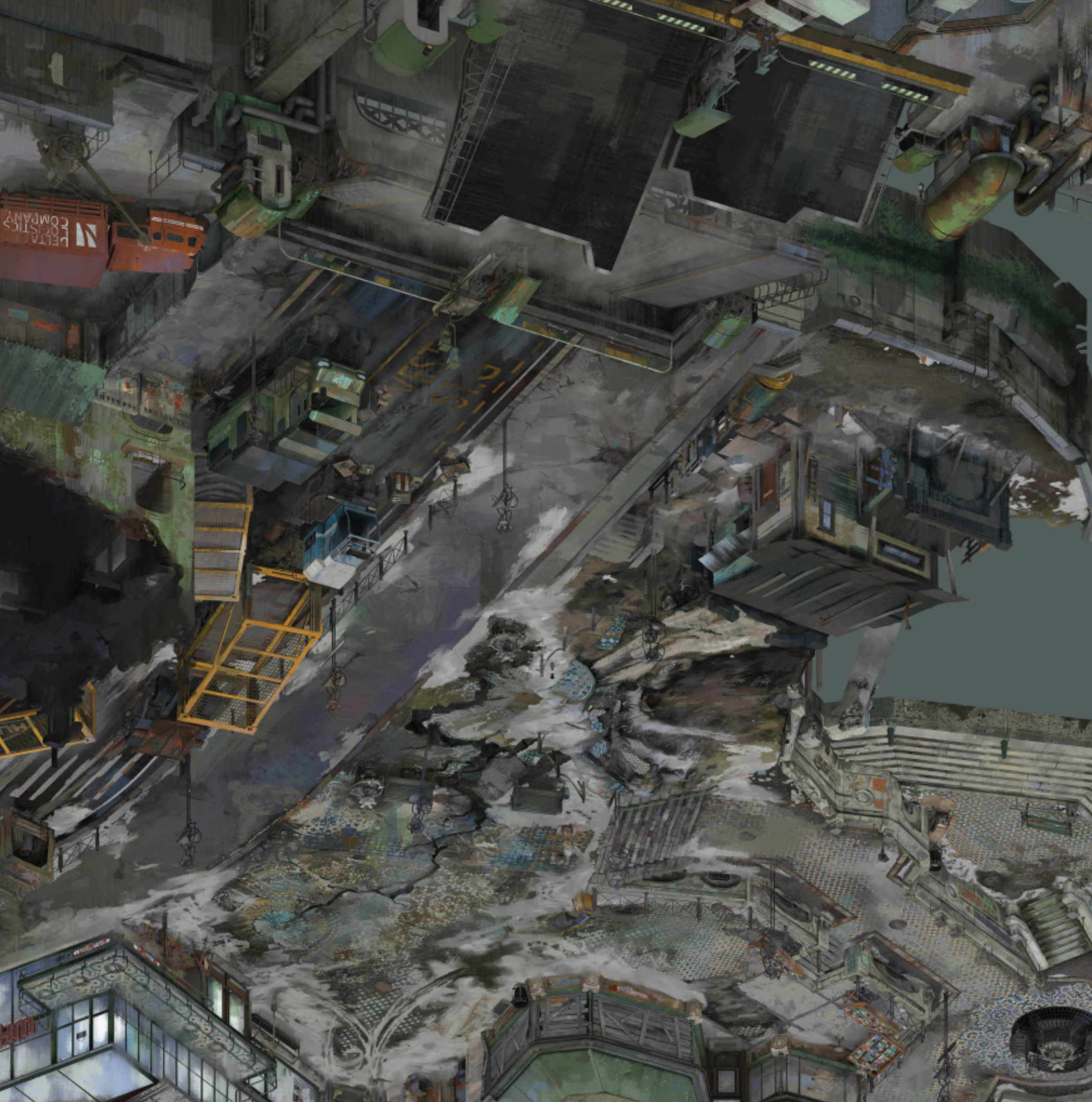
"Let's make the foreground fade into a darker color! And more desaturated! Now make the tops of buildings slightly foggy! But only when you're not standing on the roof! Oh, and we can turn up the contrast when it rains! But only in the areas unmasked by the rain mask! Here, I've made a seamless texture you can threshold for animated wet spots on the ground when it drizzles!"

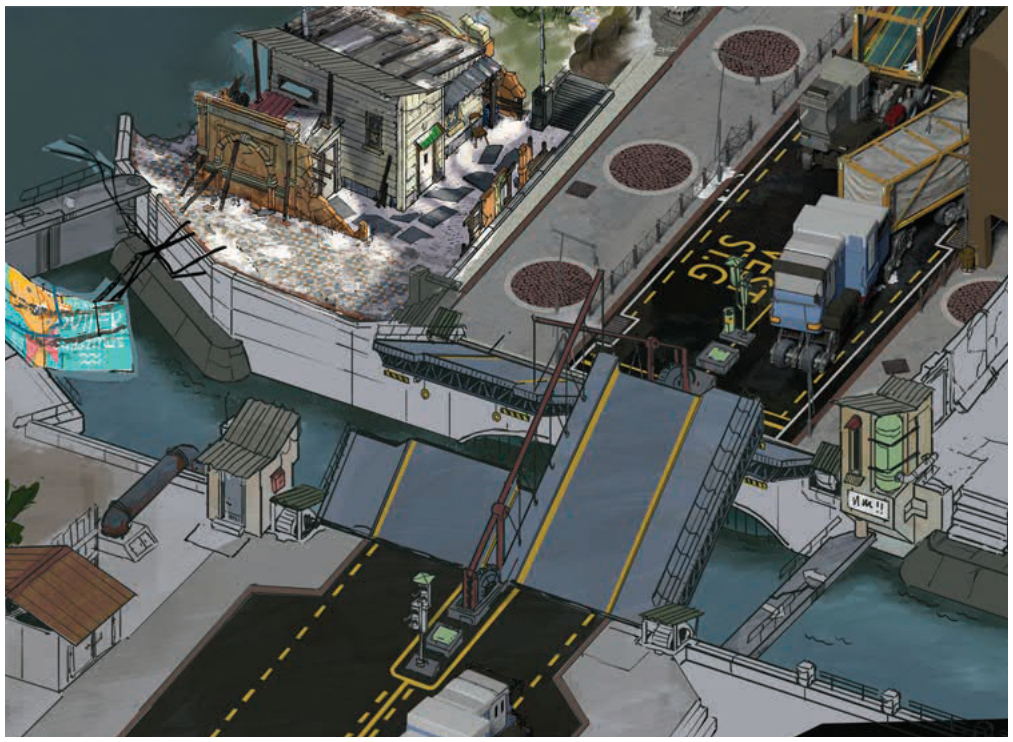
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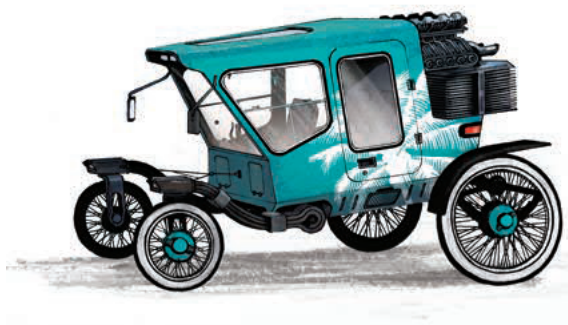
*Previous spread: (60)* A wide-angle and unlit view of the Harbor area, or Containertown; the base of operations for the Dockworkers' Union led by the Claire brothers. This area went through serious development hell and numerous concept drawings were scrapped before we settled on this one.

*Opposite: (61)* This look at the Harbor has the paintover and shadow maps combined.

*This page, top: (62)* Concept art for the containers stacked all over Containertown.
*This page, bottom: (63)* Painted concept art of the vehicle that our protagonist has misplaced in addition to losing his badge, paperwork, service weapon, and grip on reality. Original design by Jüri Saks.


DELTA
LOGISTICS
COMPANY







The amount of information we feed into the shaders is manageable for a single tile. It is still manageable for several tiles when we're working with an average interior scene, but when we started building the Great Outside, we quickly stuffed graphics memory like a Thanksgiving turkey. A seasoned game developer would have split the world up into separate area maps and been done with it, but there was to be no talk of loading screens while exploring the coast of *Martinaise*.

Here comes the most Triple-A technical feature in *Disco Elysium*: Texture Virtualization. If you played any video games around the year 2011, you might have heard the buzzword *Megatextures*. It was a method of streaming textures that made id Software's Rage Engine run on 256MB of video memory. That is a colossal game-world rendered in real-time using a tiny amount of memory. Virtual texturing takes advantage of the fact that the amount of pixels rendered on a screen is typically far smaller than the number of pixels in the actual textures loaded into computer memory. Our world map ended up being ten gigapixels of texture information. That's 10,000,000,000 pixels. That is one with ten tens. If you're wondering, that is a great deal of information.

Virtual Textures were missing from vanilla Unity so we partnered up with Amplify Creations to use their Amplify Texture 2 plug-in and to eventually bring the feature to more gaming platforms with *Disco Elysium*.

To implement Virtual Textures, the position and angle of the camera tell you which textures you need to render and at which scale, and then fetches from the hard drive only the bits you need. The speed of a gaming system's hard drive acts as a bottleneck here and that would explain the blurry textures popping in unevenly while playing *Rage* back in the day as well as in the initial release version of *Disco Elysium*. Virtualization is a beautiful first-principles method for presenting complex content. It is only now starting to be generalized for other types of content in Unreal Engine 5 and as games are constantly getting visually more complex, other game engines as well.

Lighting the outdoor environments is a fairly straightforward task: consider the surface direction of all the objects in the game world, take the direction of the sun and the information provided by a shadow map, then use maths to calculate which pixels to light up in juicy sunset peach and which ones to darken to indigo-tinted shadow. Sprinkle a bit of spring snow on the surfaces facing upward and you have an atmospheric isometric game world that can appear intense, calm, or threatening at any time of the day.

Indoor environments, on the other hand, have some more complex processes going on under the hood. Enclosed spaces are usually washed

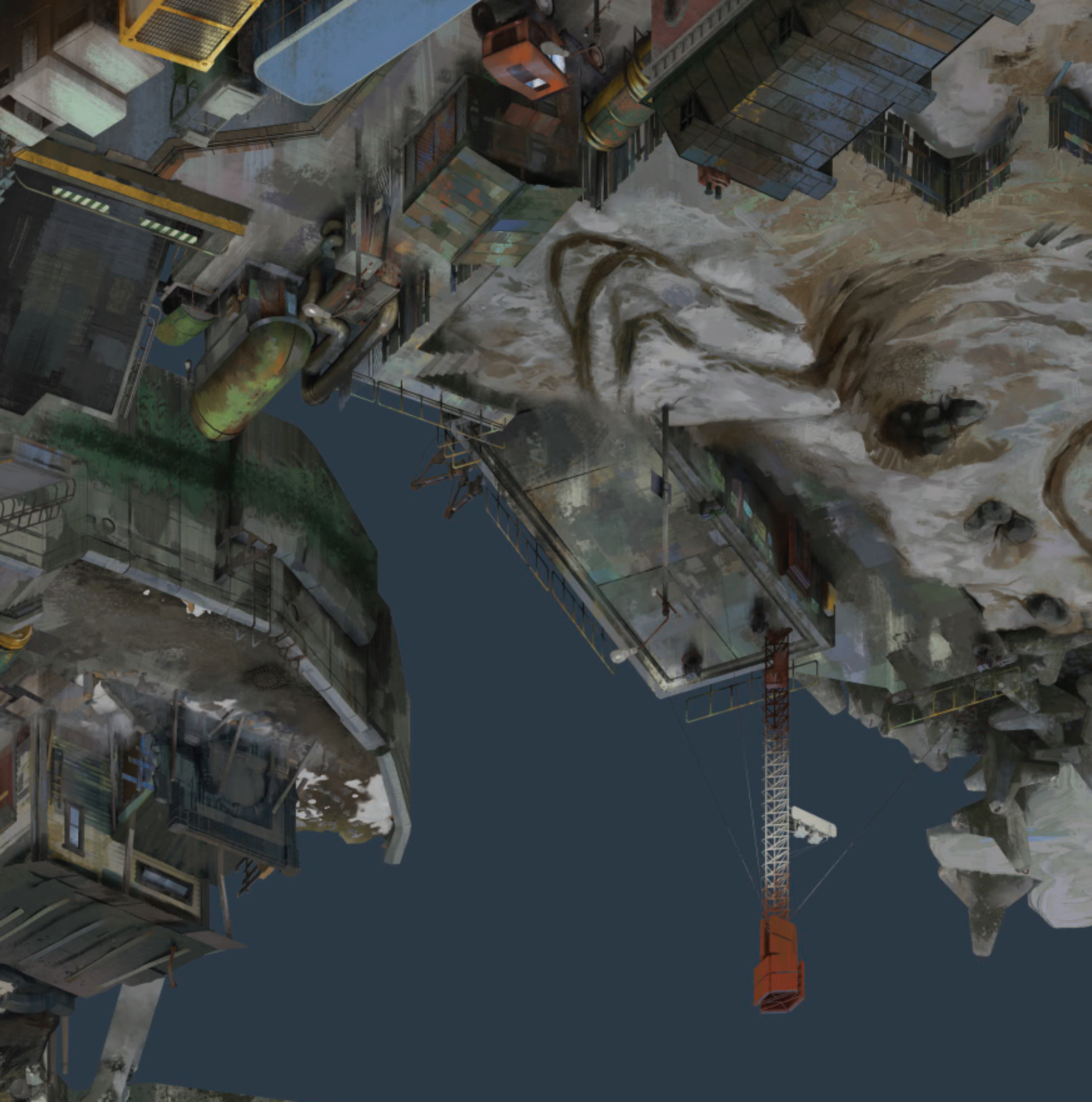
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*Opposite: (64)* The Waterfront and Canal.

*This page, from the top: (65)* Concept art for the operable water lock and movable bridge (not actually movable); *(66)* An alternative paint job for Kim's ride. Proposal for a DLC; *(67)* Early concept for the Pawnshop and the scene for an important Visual Calculus check.

*Next spread: (68)* A scenic beach landscape leading up to the Fishing Village.






ALLEZ VOUS
SHHH


ALLEZ VOUS





with reflected light and have very little direct illumination even with an uncovered window or when lit with lamplight. It only makes sense to handle such cases differently from outdoor environments.

To imitate sunlight coming from the outside, we introduced a special map we call the Light Field map. It is low resolution and painted by hand, and as per the original definition of a light field, describes the direction of light at every point on any given map. Each pixel on this map gives us a sense of where the closest window is, and the direction and intensity of the illumination. Any artificial light sources are rendered in a separate rendering pass that gets added to the illumination of the sun (or lack thereof).

In classic isometric computer RPGs like *Planescape: Torment* *(see p. 21, image 19)*, character models are drawn as pre-rendered animated sprites, while in more modern games – such as its 2017 spiritual successor, *Torment: Tides of Numenera*, as well as Obsidian Entertainment's *Pillars of Eternity* – animated content is rendered as real-time in-engine three-dimensional geometry.

By repainting the game environments by hand – thus distancing *Disco Elysium* from that distinct look of 3D geometry – things suddenly became much more complex. We were faced with the problem of making three-dimensional characters look and feel like they belong in a painted environment.

Since the representation of painted form is very rarely physically correct, coherently adhering to Euclidean geometry, or continuous, the algorithms commonly used in the industry are a poor fit for more extreme stylization. We began looking for solutions that would allow us to ignore the laws of physics and would give our artists the most amount of freedom in creating the objects and characters for *Disco Elysium*. Our first solution was based on Rostov's experience as a painter. In technical terms, we set out to paint our character normal maps by hand. The idea here is that by simplifying the surface normal of the three-dimensional model into planes you're coercing the computer to calculate light and shadow in a way not unlike how an illustrator thinks. This is a way to inform the computer where you would prefer light and shadow to break.

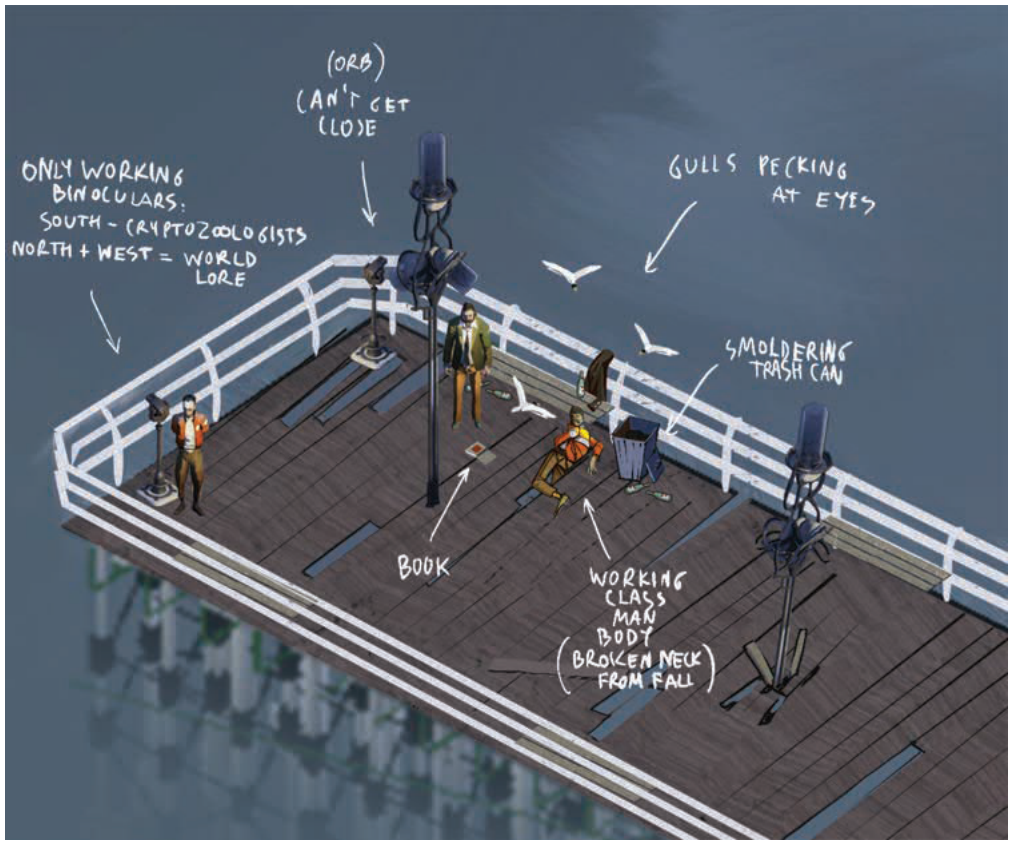
What makes this approach so special is that a normal map is a *computer-generated* texture which – in addition to the mesh geometry itself – describes the direction of a surface in relation to the light source. Saner developers use normal maps to add detail to larger surfaces without the need for expensive polygons. We're talking wrinkles on the back of a hand, bark on a tree, folds in the fabric. Mesh geometry on the other hand takes care of the larger volumes and the general silhouette of an object. Adding

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*Opposite, from the top: (69)* A concept painting detailing the opposite shore from the Pawnshop leading all the way to the Fishing Village; *(70)* This detailed illustration was the first look at the Fishing Village on the far coast.

*This page, from the top: (71)* Residential buildings with million-reál views onto the coast overlooking the run-down Fishing Village; *(72)* Freshly tarred motorboat; *(73)* A motor carriage.









the equivalent high-resolution mesh, and so the humble normal map has a firm place in most 3D titles since the year 2003 onward.

When you look at the math, there is no reason a normal map couldn't be the sole carrier of surface direction information. Once you realize it is just directional information encoded into RGB colors, nothing is preventing you from using them to paint in Photoshop. Painting in directional space requires a special palette and some mental gymnastics but it does seem within human capability and yields beautiful, confident, and well-defined brushstrokes in the game engine.

We finished several character models by applying this method, including the leading duo, Kim and Harry before it became apparent that this was not a feasible long-term solution. This process, a weird cross between sculpture, painting, and technical computer graphics, takes a long time to produce. In addition to the unintuitive thinking required, painting a texture like that requires endlessly switching between Photoshop and Unity. That's what eventually killed the idea. With dedicated software, not unlike a digital sculpting tool, the method does seem to be production-feasible, but alas, building software for digital content creation was not in scope for *Disco Elysium*. As far as we know, painting normals by hand is a novel technique and perhaps in the future, there will be a developer crazy enough who'll make it work for their game.

The solution for characters revealed itself in studying digital sculpture, which led to our return to the tried-and-tested sculpting pipeline where we started with a high-poly mesh and baked the difference onto a normal map on a mesh with a lower polygon count. Further experimenting led us to an approach where we sculpted our characters in a deliberately rough way to get large simplified and flattened forms that fit the expressive brushwork of the painted environments. This was partly inspired by impressionist sculptures such as the works of Paolo Troubetzkoy. His bronze sculpture of the two boys is a perfect example of this with a fine balance between the smooth modeling of the youths' skin and the expressive, almost abstract shapes of their hair and the folds in their clothing *(see p. 18, image 10)*.

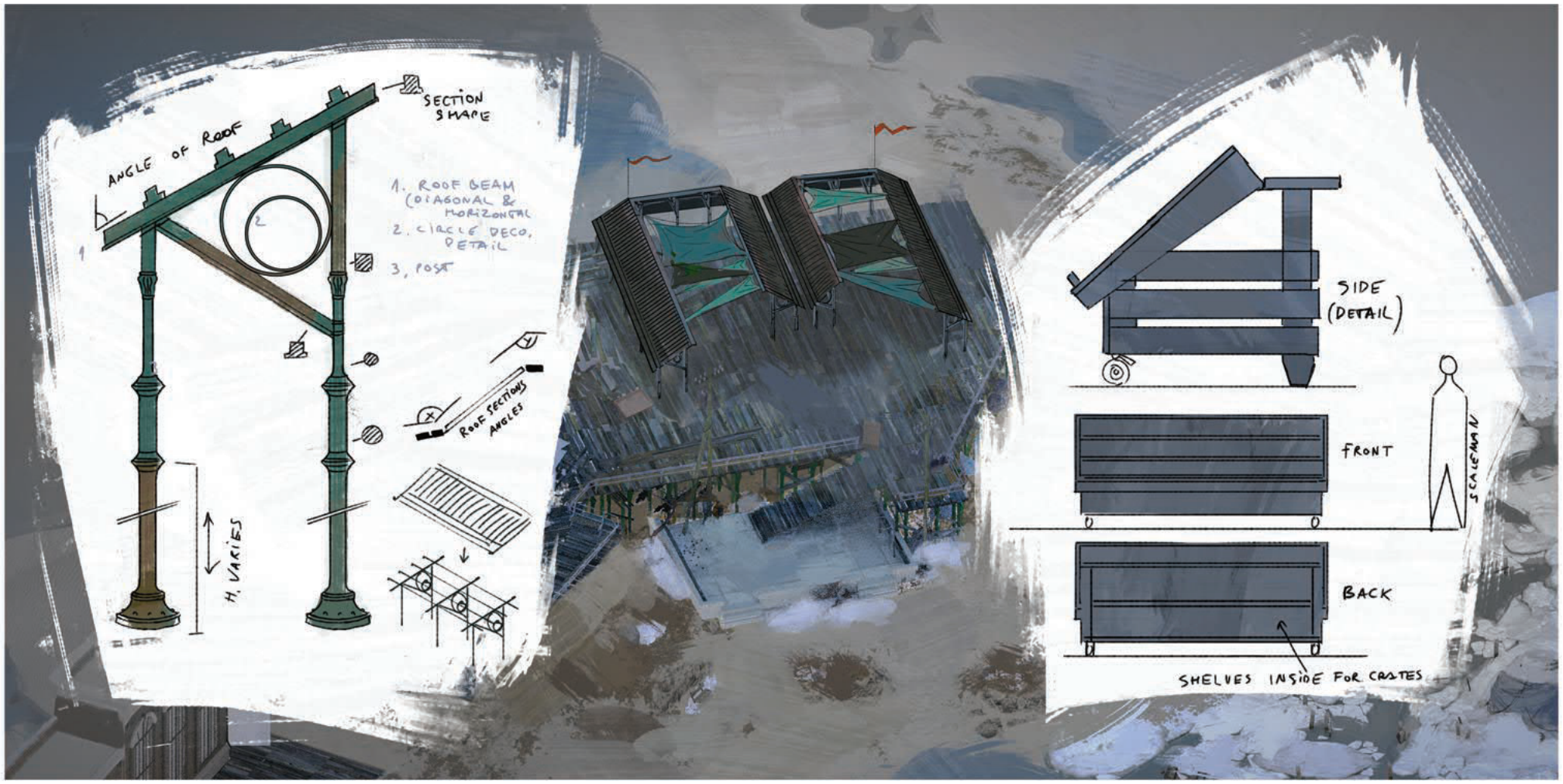
To the trained eye of a fellow artist, it is perhaps apparent that some parts of the game are rougher around the edges. As we were learning on the go, we never got around to bringing everything quite up to the same quality we had achieved at the later stages in development, ourselves by now feeling only mildly more competent in the field of game development.

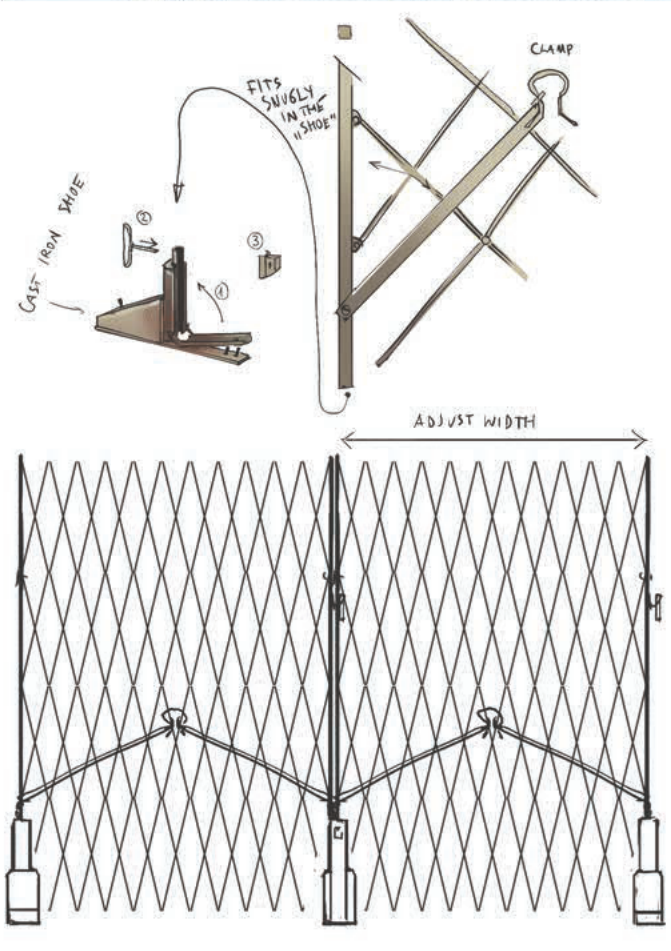
We find solace in the fact that the journey of learning and discovery has been incredibly rewarding and we're in a much better position to undertake any future projects. ◄

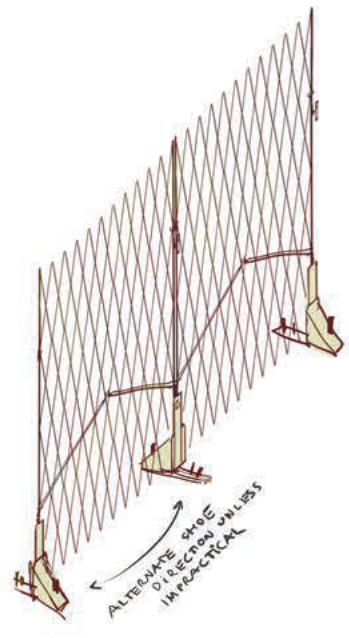
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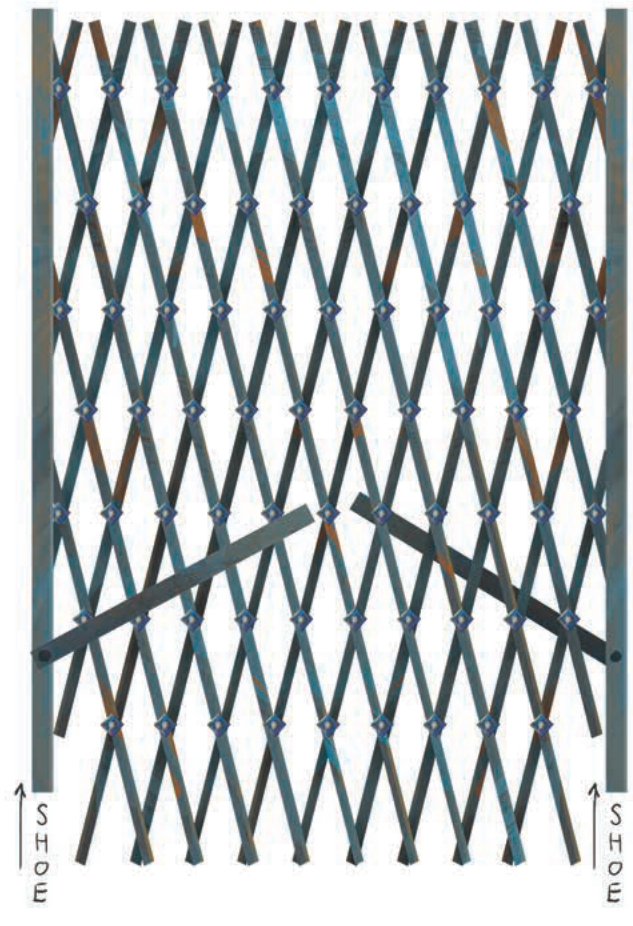
*Opposite: (74)* Further down the coast the player comes upon a ruined Boardwalk with an ensemble of crumbling buildings that used to house Feld Electronics.

*This page, from the top: (75)* An illustration of a grim scene on the pier; *(76)* Notes to explore feasible character progression along the far coast.

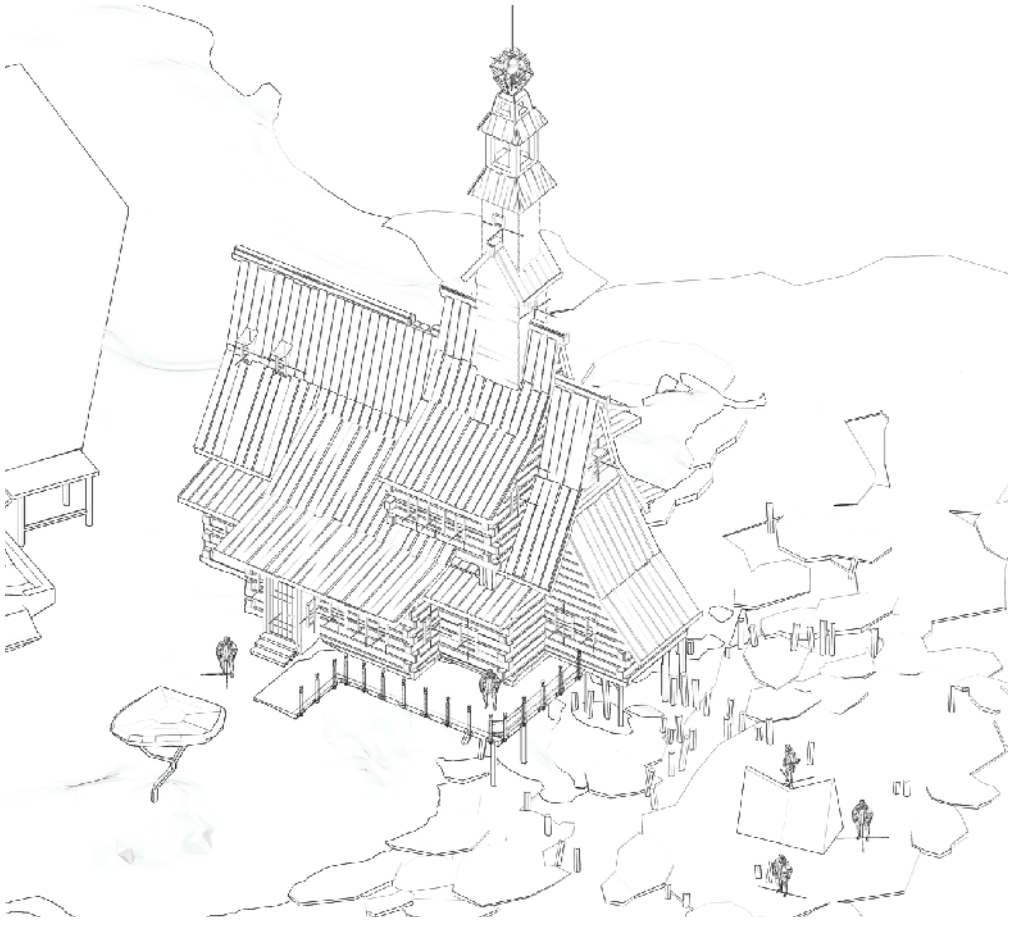

ANGLE OF ROOF
SECTION SHAPE
1. ROOF BEAM (DIAGONAL & HORIZONTAL
2. CIRCLE DECO. DETAIL
3. POST
ROOF SECTIONS ANGLES
H. VARIES
SIDE (DETAIL)
FRONT
SCALE MAN
BACK
SHELVES INSIDE FOR CRATES


CLAMP
FITS SNUGLY IN THE "SHOE"
CAST IRON SHOE
ADJUST WIDTH

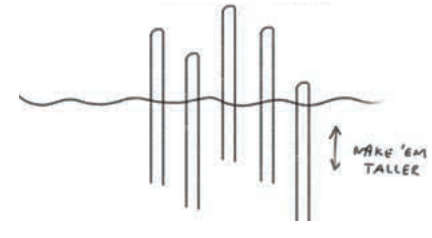

ALTERNATE SHOE DIRECTION UNLESS IMPRACTICAL


SHOE
SHOE







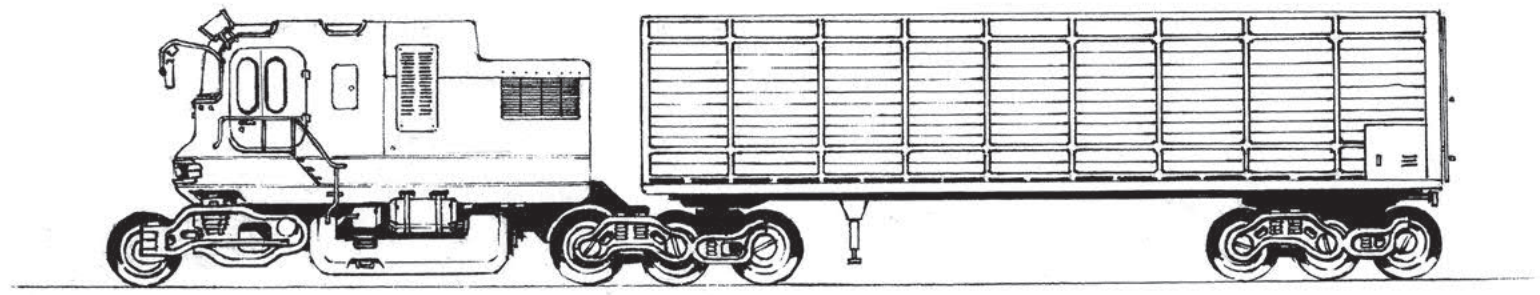

*This spread: (77)* A collage of the Boardwalk and its surroundings in various stages of development with an assortment of sketches detailing smaller assets used in the environment. Halfway through development, we introduced the flashlight as an item the protagonist can wave around however and wherever they please. This decision led to all kinds of unexpected dynamic lighting situations. Because of it, the articulated fence had to replace all chain-linked fencing – shadows from the latter turned out to be too detailed to be rendered in real-time.

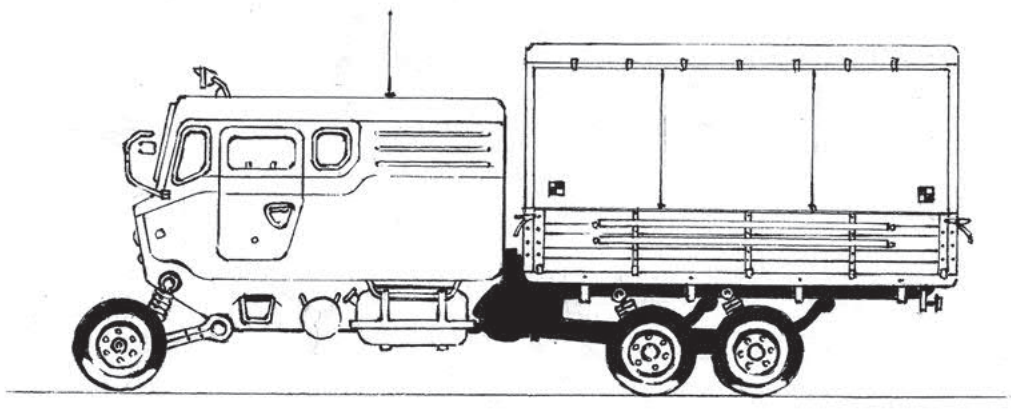


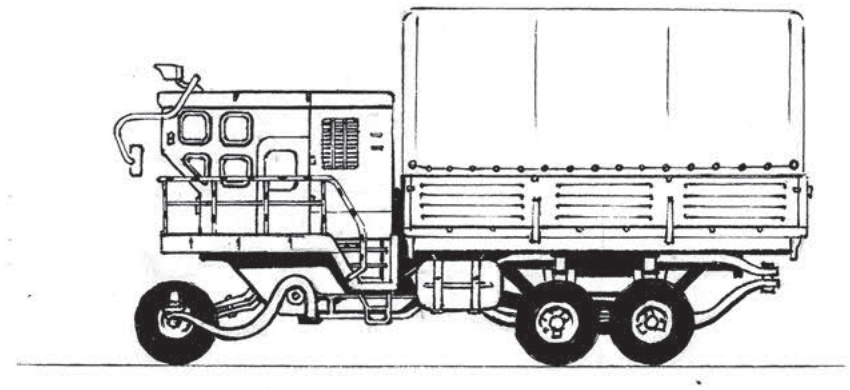



ALLEZ
VOUS EN







*Previous spread: (78)* A very early mood painting of the Church on the coast by Rostov.

*Opposite: (79)* The Church is a locus of a lot of activity in the area and its design went through numerous changes. *Numerous changes.*

*This page, from the top: (80)* Initial thumbnails Kasparov developed from Rostov's painting; (81) Motor lorries got their distinctive look from Jüri Saks.

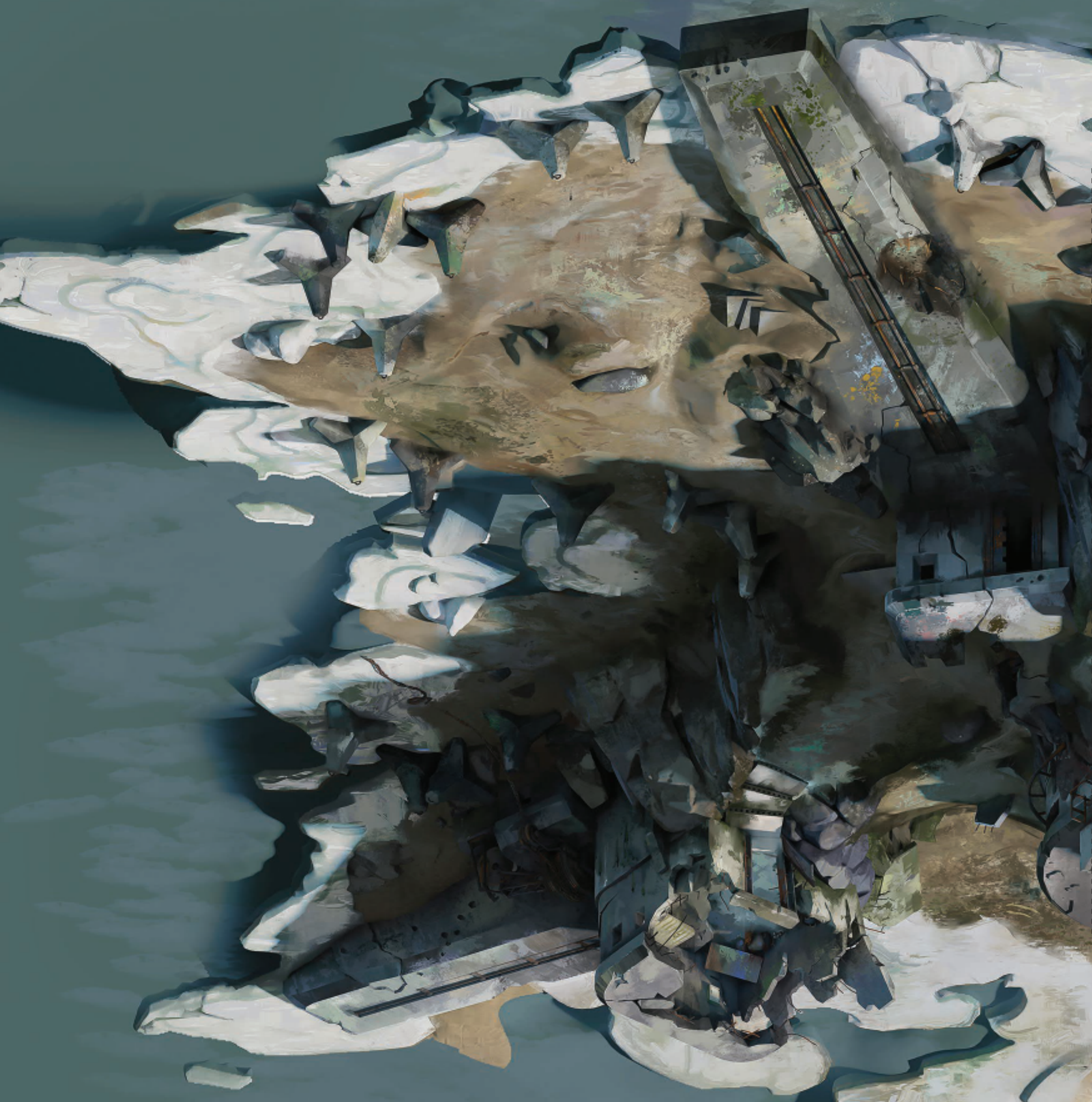





*This spread: (82)* Land's End with a closer look at the old Fish Market; *(83)* Concept art for this area.

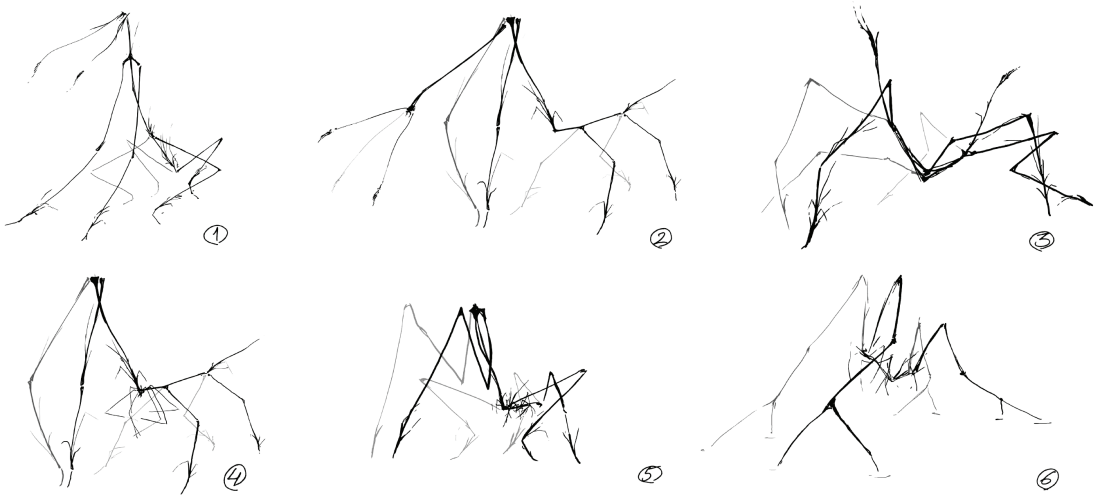
*Next spread: (84)* The cracked shell of a seafort tells a story of broken dreams and broken promises.







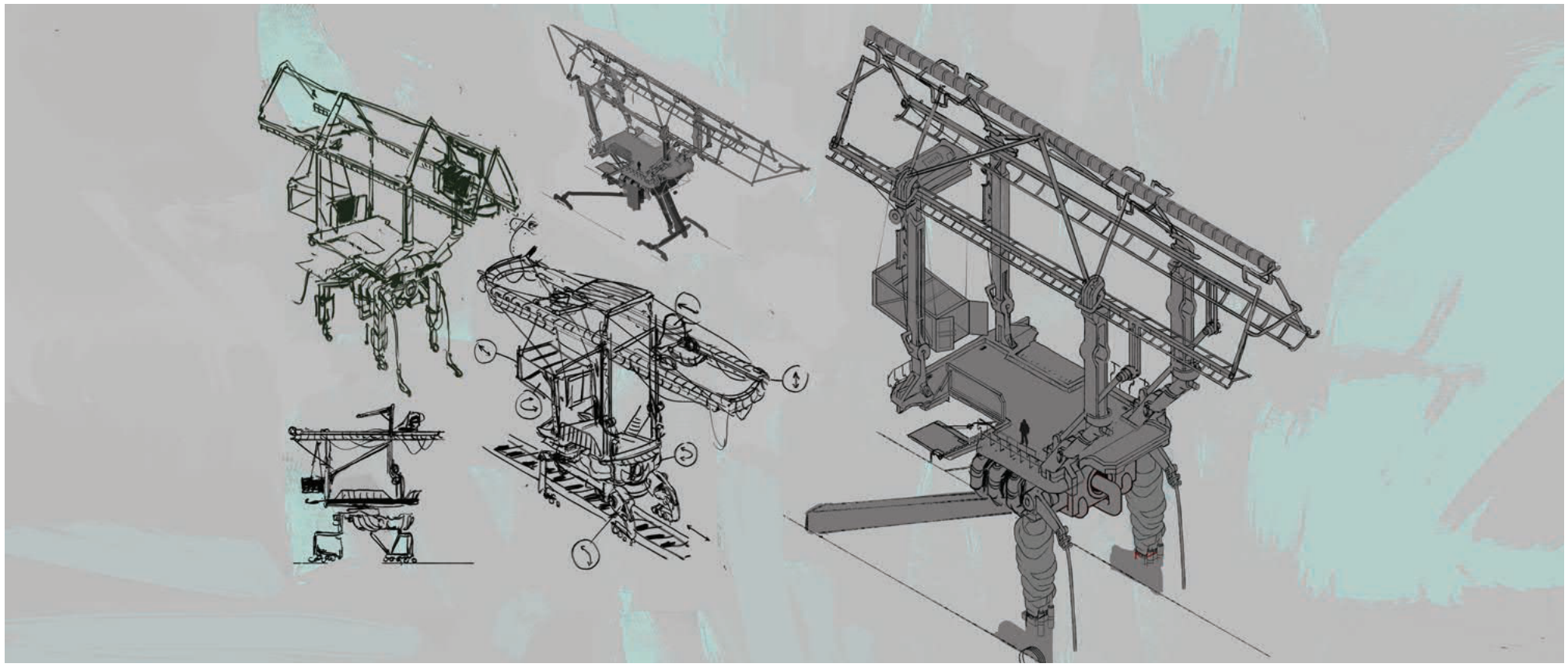


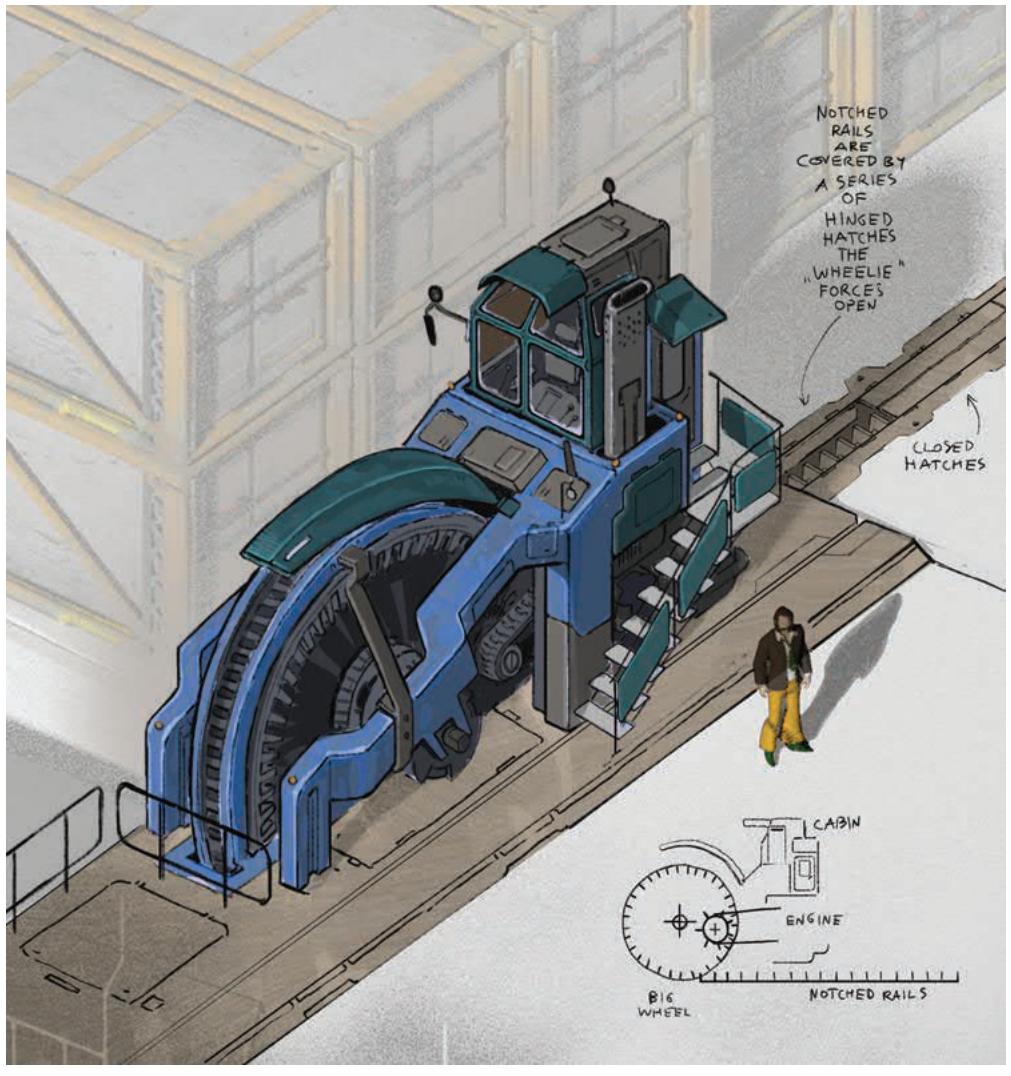


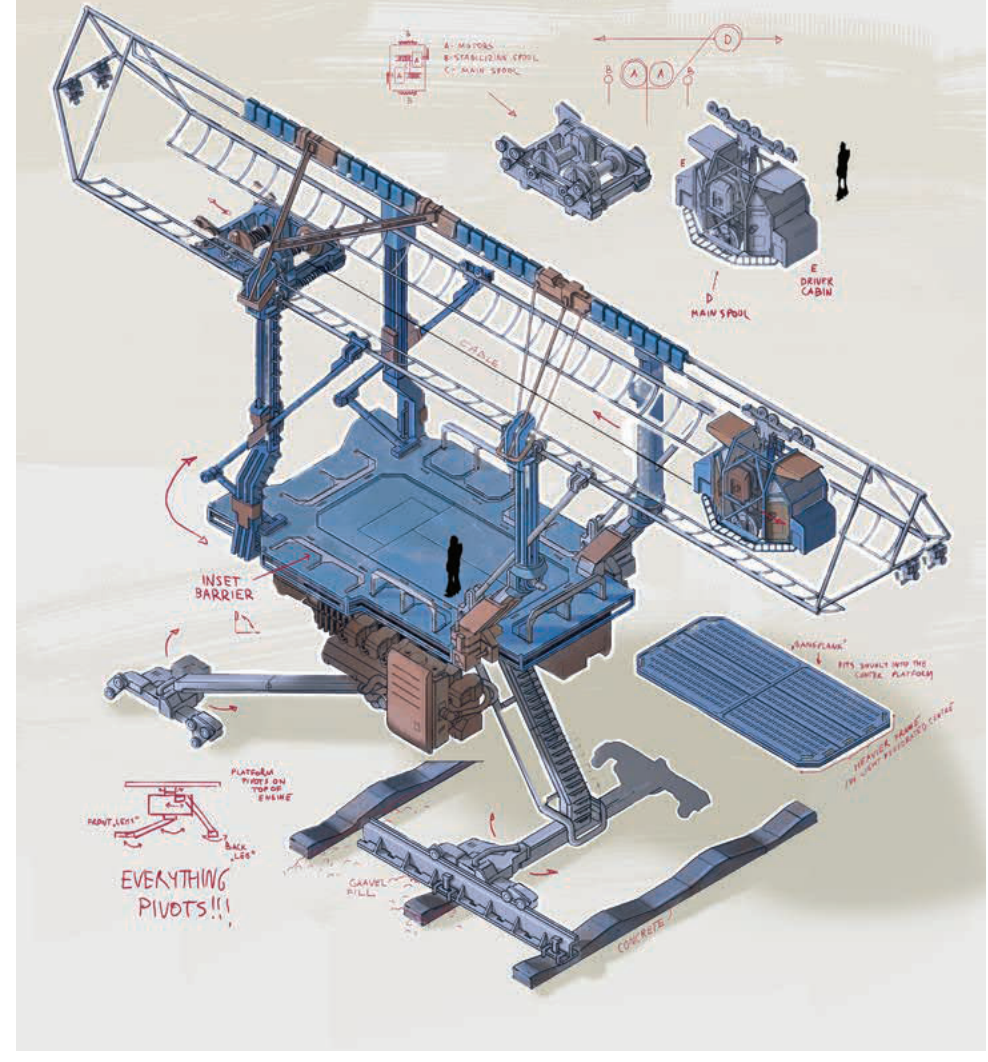


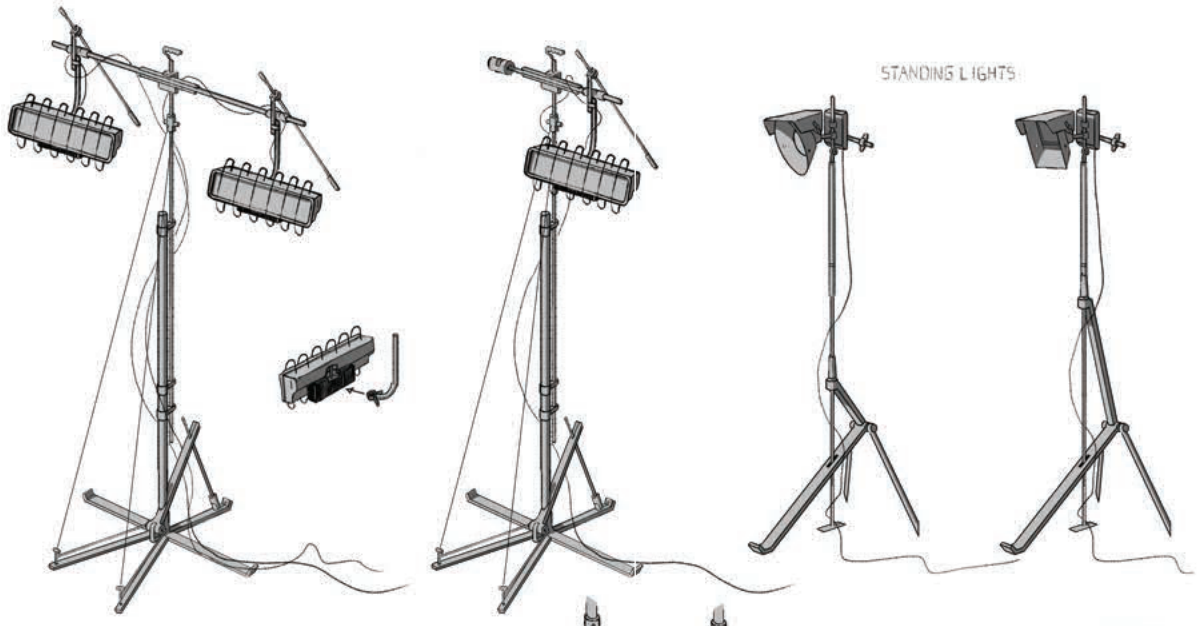
*Opposite: (85)* The Seafort is the very last area the player gets to explore.

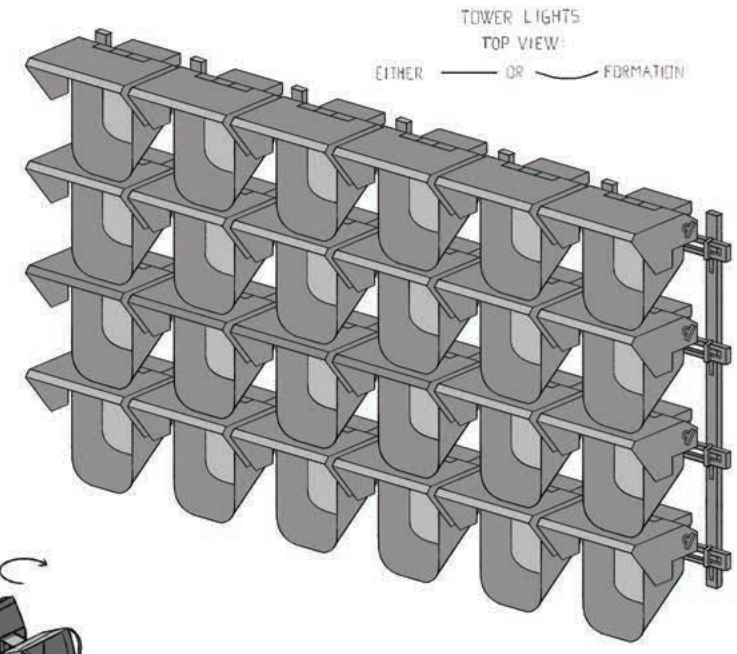
*This page: (86)* The concept for the island traveled between Rostov and Kasparov before settling in its current state; *(87)* The cryptid phasmid's falsely unassuming stick figure was designed by Rostov.




NOTCHED RAILS ARE COVERED BY A SERIES OF HINGED HATCHES THE "WHEELIE" FORCES OPEN
CLOSED HATCHES
CABIN
ENGINE
BIG WHEEL
NOTCHED RAILS

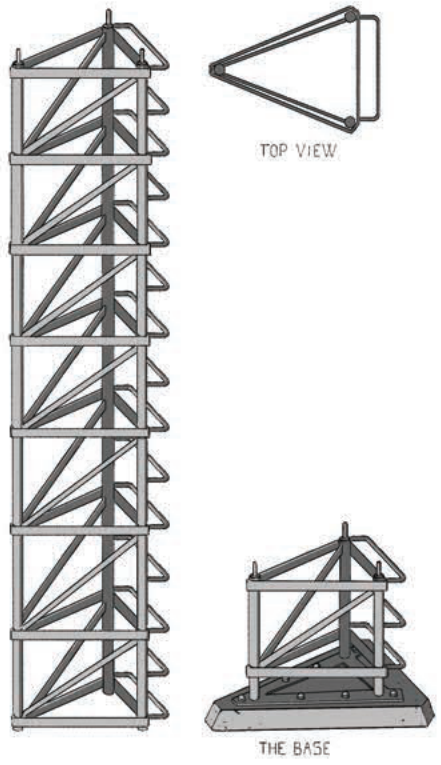

A- MOTORS
B-STABILIZING SPOOL
C- MAIN SPOOL
D
A A
B
E
D
MAIN SPOOL
E
DRIVER CABIN
CABLE
INSET BARRIER
"SAND FLAGS"
PLATFORM PIVOTS ON TOP OF ENGINE
FRONT LEGS
BACK LEGS
EVERYTHING PIVOTS!!!
GRAVEL FILL
CONCRETE

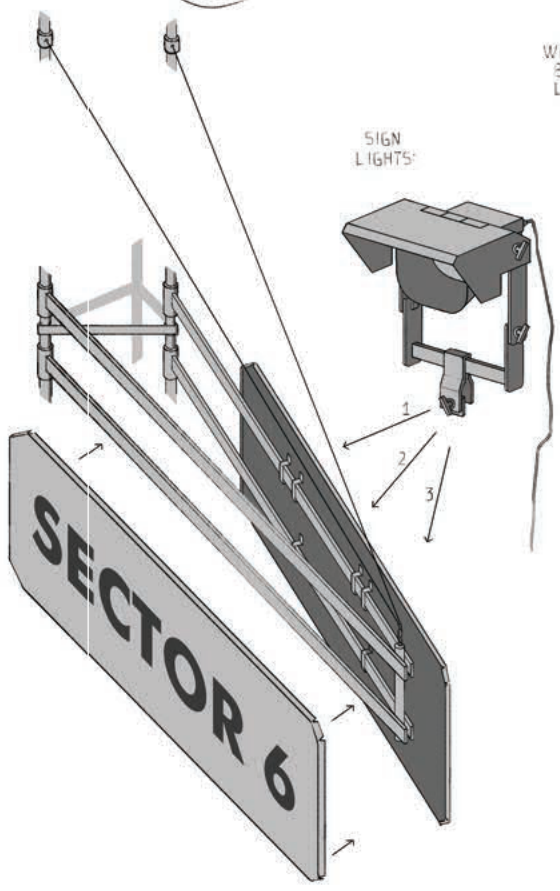


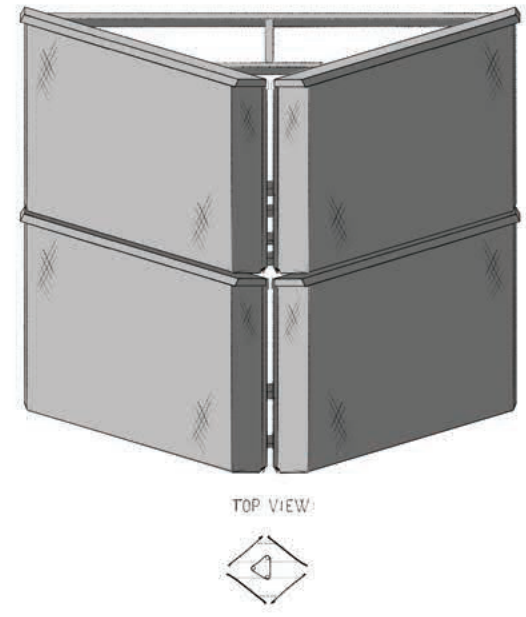









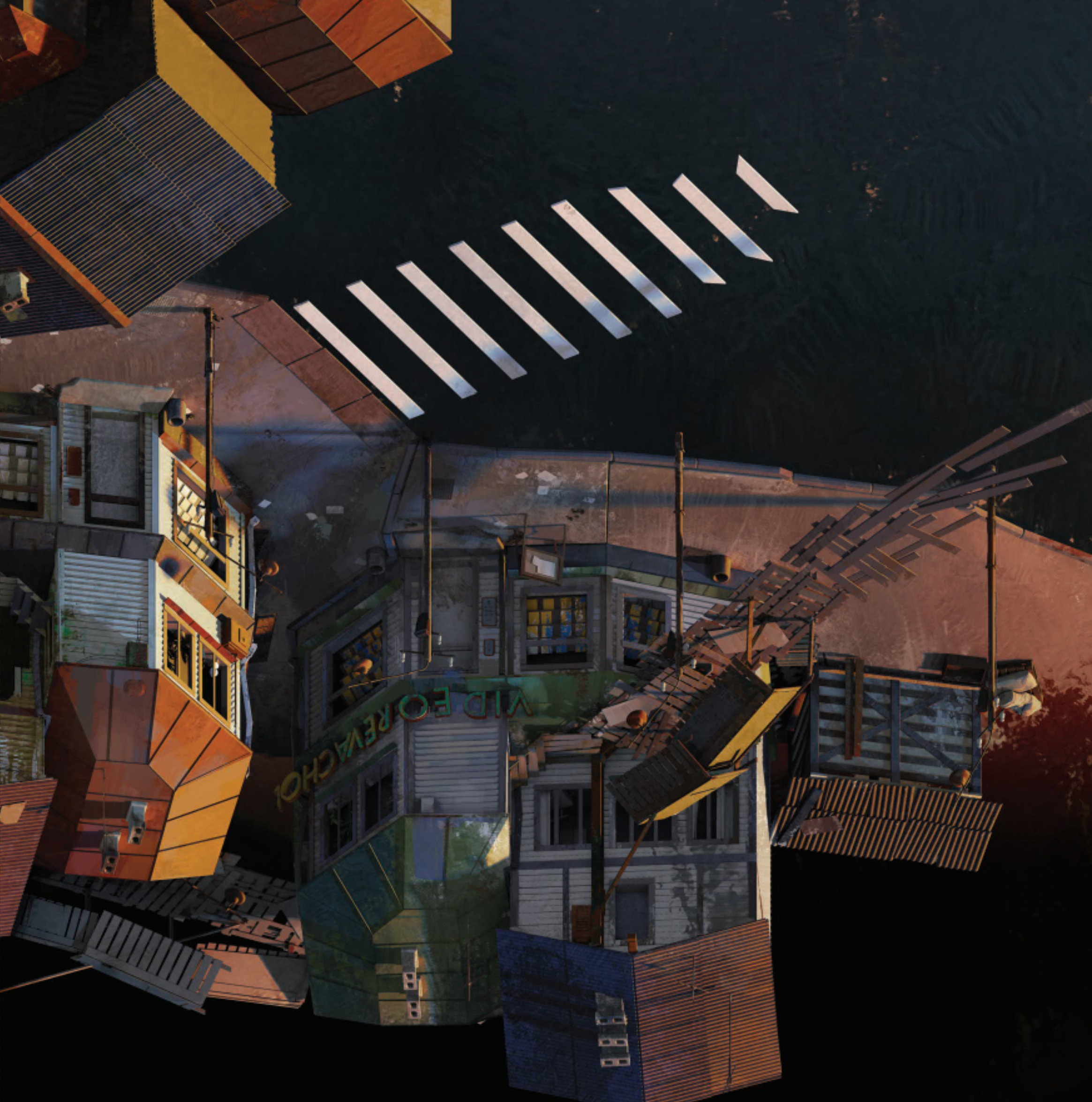



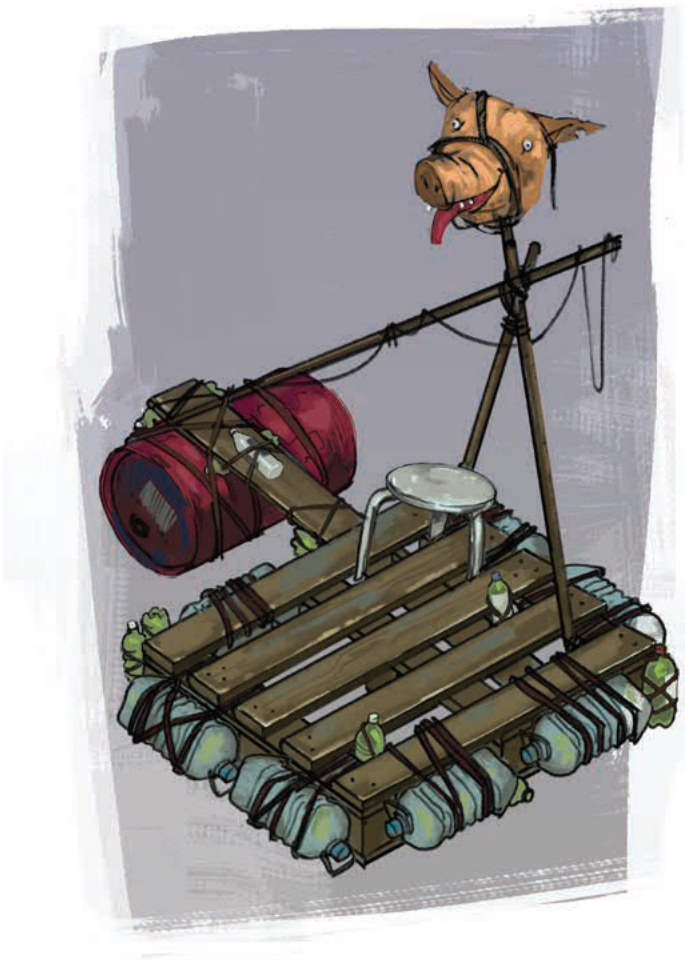




*This spread, clockwise: (88)* We wanted the rest of Elysium's industrial design to feel as strange and different as Jüri Saks' motor carriages and lorries. The enormous crane in the Harbor took ages to figure out while the monowheel-powered drawbridge came together in a day; *(89)* A collage of various greebles detailed over Rostov's quick notes on early Harbor concept sketches and the Whirling-in-Rags' trash container in the bottom corner.







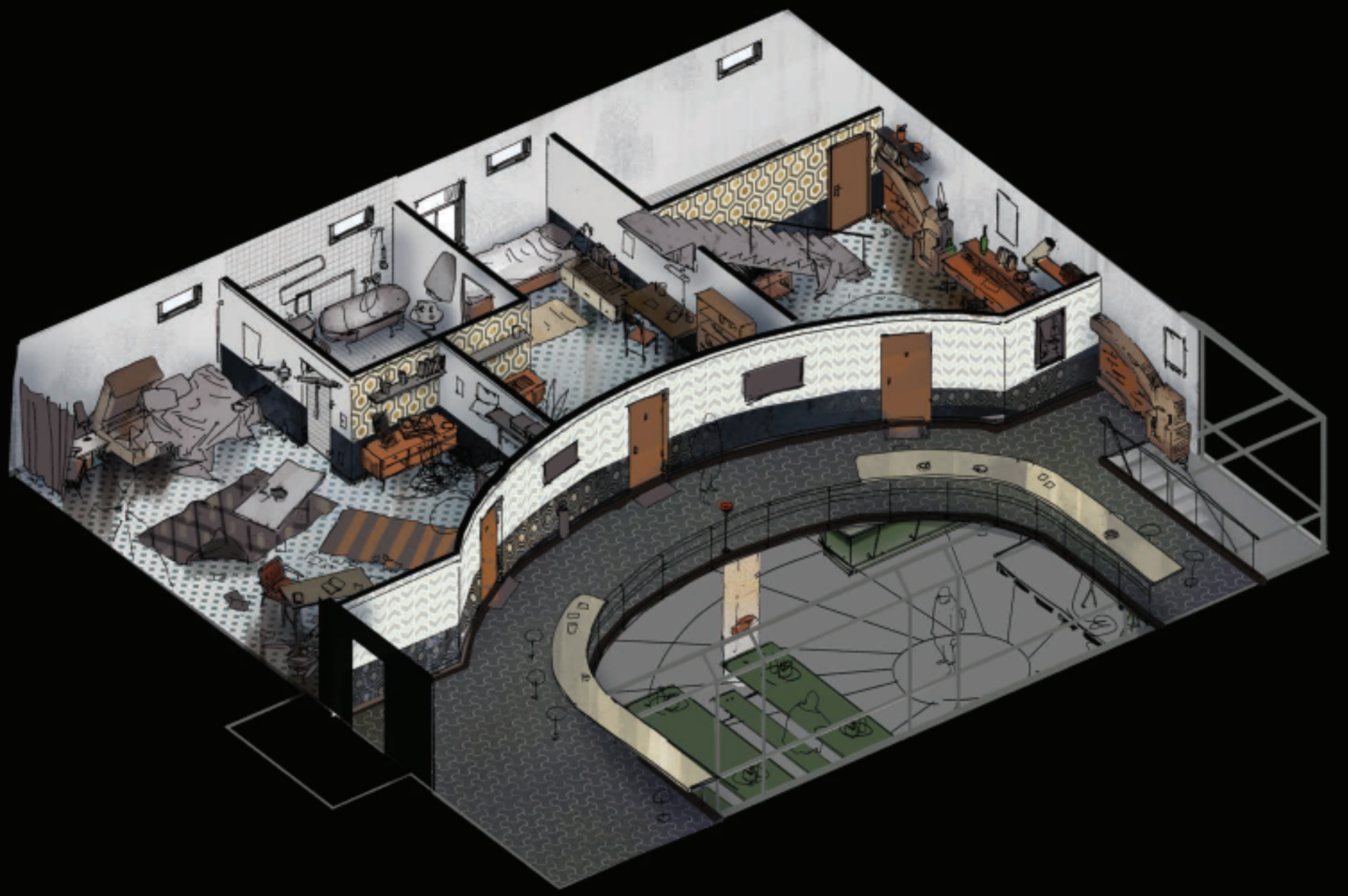



*This spread, clockwise: (90)* A set for a dreamlike encounter both out of place and out of time; *(91)* It was a fun little assignment to figure out the design for Cuno's raft. Despite the mouthy kid's attempts to try convincing the player otherwise at every turn, he is just a kid, and his unique and personal transport across the bay had to reflect that; *(92)* The first and very basic drawing for the location of the dream sequence. This one matured almost in its entirety in Blender. It was not *the most difficult* area to work on, but it did pose a challenge initially because the scene takes place in a part of Revachol that is outside of Martinaise and has its own distinct look.



*This page: (93)* The second floor of the hostel and cafeteria Whirling-in-Rags. This one was truly the most challenging area to design. This map is the very first thing the player sees when *Disco Elysium's* protagonist comes to after their expedition into the sweet black oblivion of their drunken subconscious (and beyond).

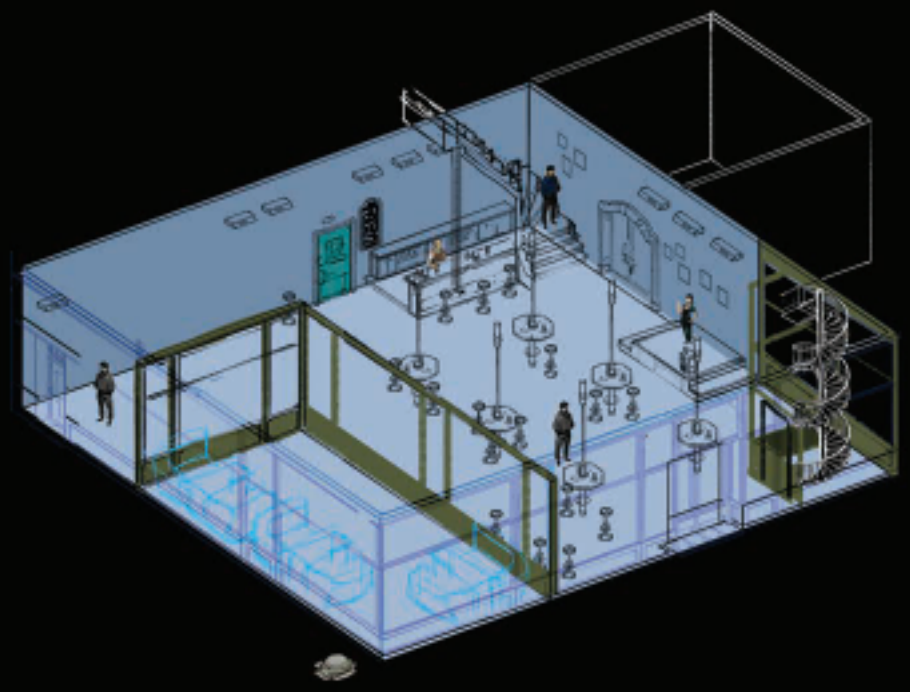
This map had to operate as an important and interesting mid- and late-game area as well as serve the function of tutorializing the basic interactions the player can have with the world. Whirling-in-Rags is akin to a kind of Chinese puzzle-box that the player must to solve, little by little, as they progress through the entire game.

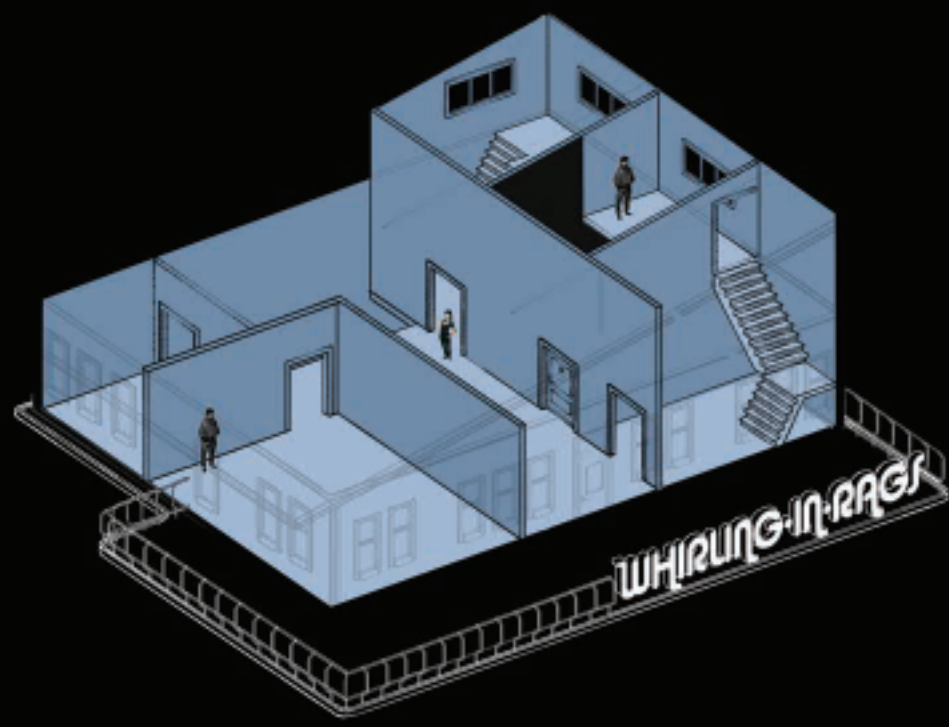


*This page: (94)* This concept drawing depicts either the third or fourth variation of the building's second floor interior. Around a third of this map had to be improvised down the line because deadlines were already on our heels by the time we began work in 3D.

The gallery that looks down on the cafeteria on the ground floor became an important feature for the space and it posed some interesting challenges for Siim, our technical artist. In the end, it came together beautifully once the light field maps were in place. The British Sea Power's music playing downstairs acts as a siren song beckoning the player to explore further.

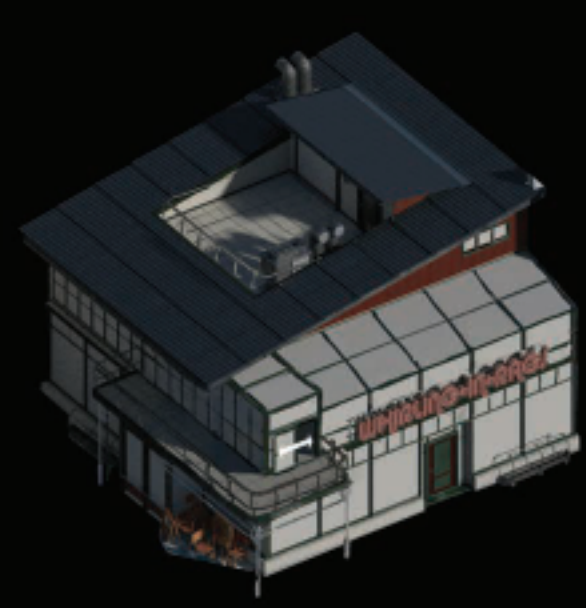








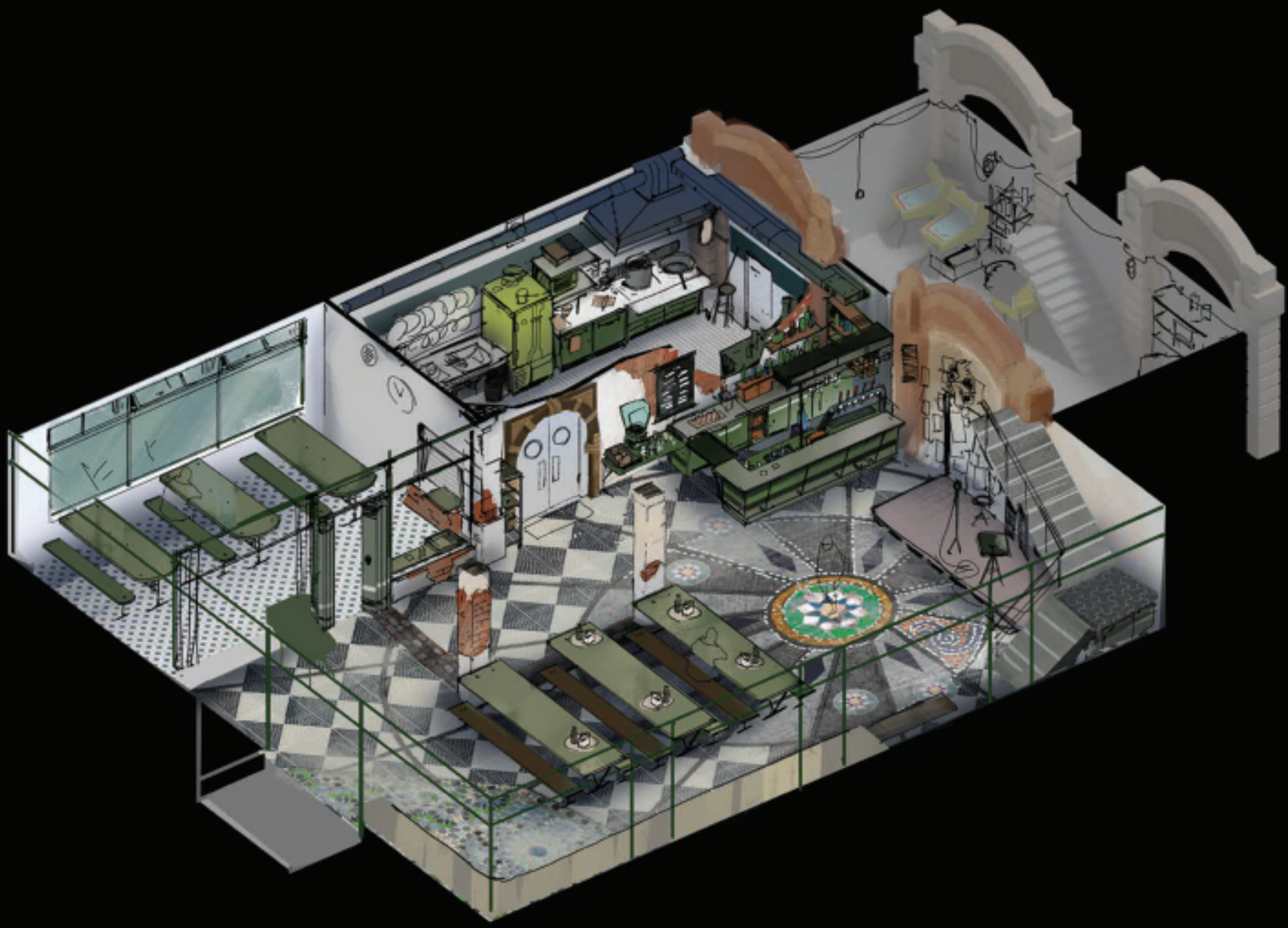





*Opposite: (95)* This is a finished render of the map that was in use in the technical demo build of the game navigable by a clunky early version of Harry's character model. We abandoned this whole design because we deemed the layout of this map impractical for the story we wanted to tell. If we're honest, these shapes look plain boring too. This took place around a year and a half into development. We can only hope that our players agree with the decision.

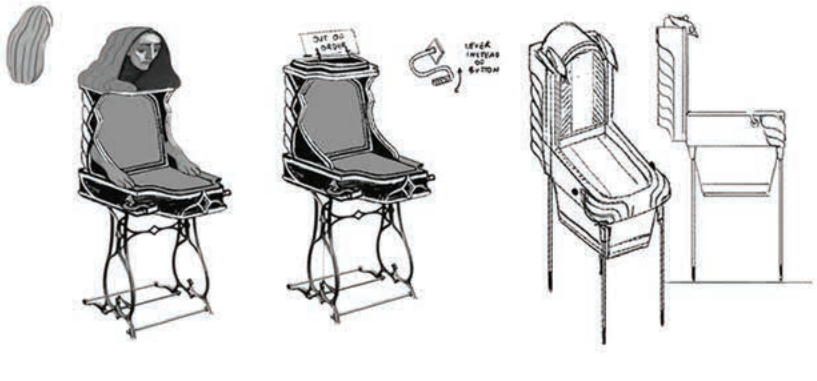
*This page: (96)* A collaged selection of the earliest sketches for the Whirling-in-Rags' interior and exterior: the ground-floor cafeteria and bar with the karaoke stage and the second floor with Harry's and Klaasje's rooms. Luckily we did not get too far with modeling the latter before scrapping the whole patchwork monstrosity.





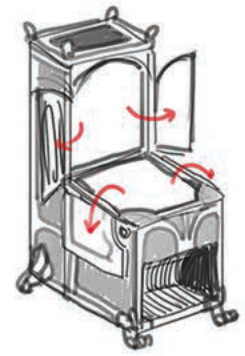
*Opposite: (97)* The final painted and lit map of the cafeteria area with the kitchen and storage space in the back;

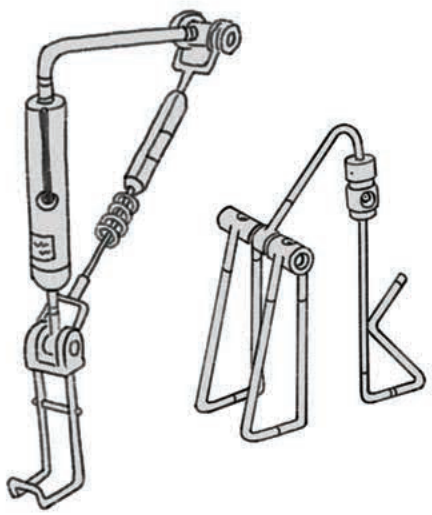
*This page: (98)* Probably the last concept drawing made for this floor before it went into *modeling*.

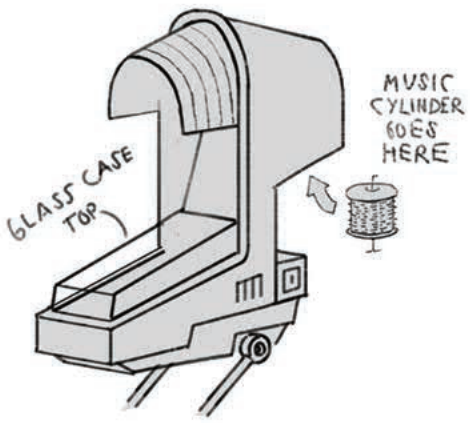

OUT OF ORDER
LEVER INSTEAD OF BUTTON

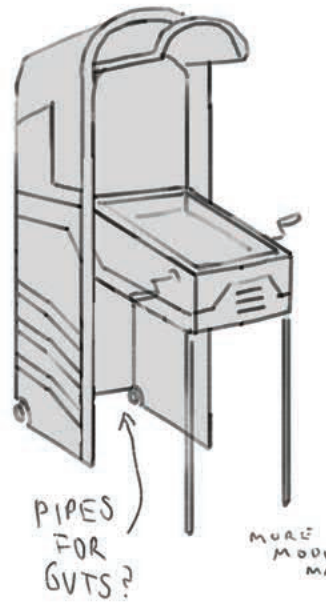

REARING HORSE
RUNNING HORSE
CRASHING WAVES UP FRONT

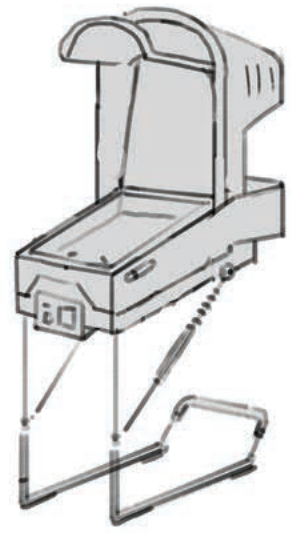


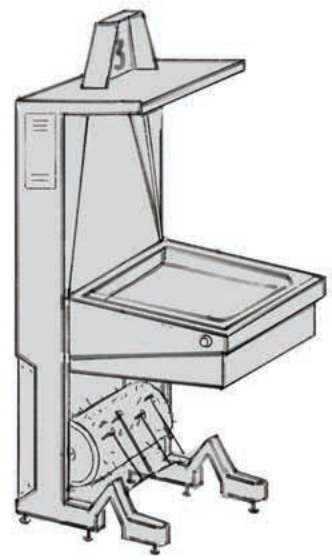




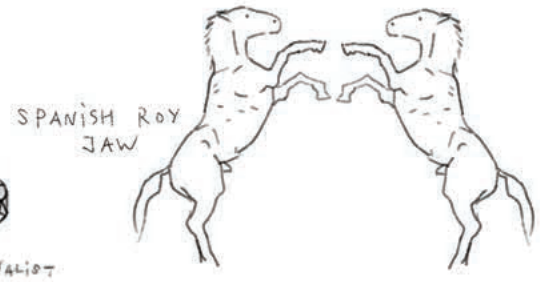

MUSIC CYLINDER GOES HERE
GLASS CASE TOP

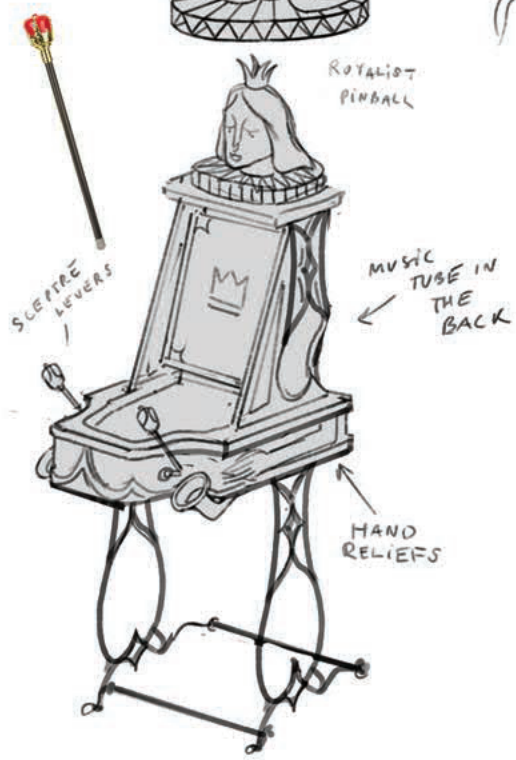

PIPES FOR GUTS?


MORE MODERN MACHINES

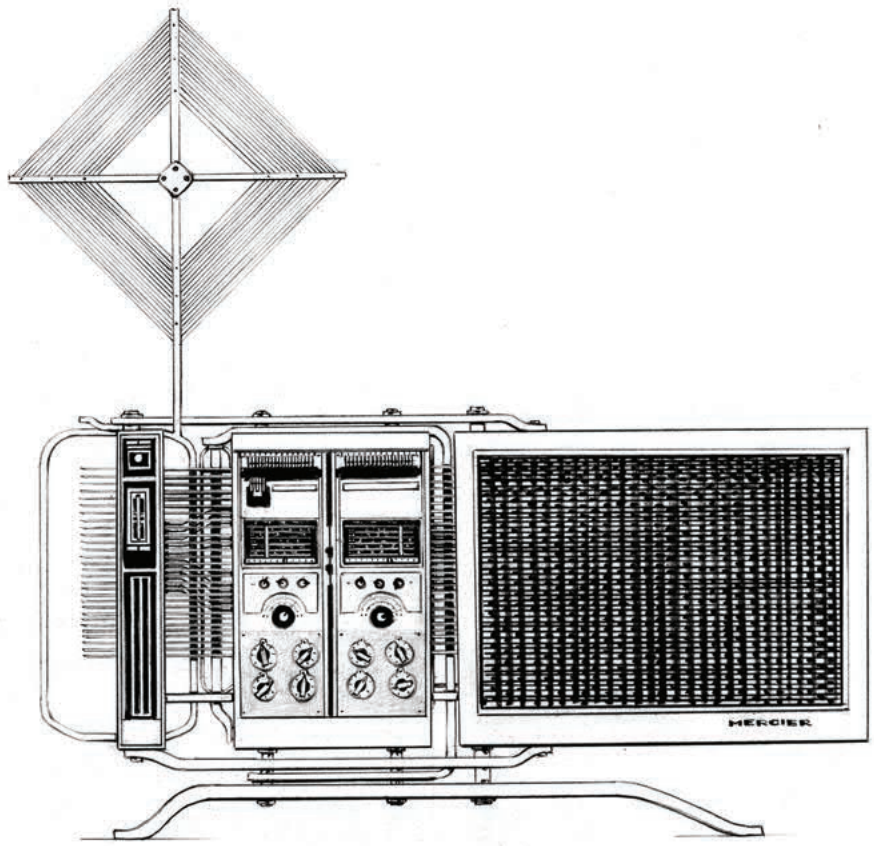


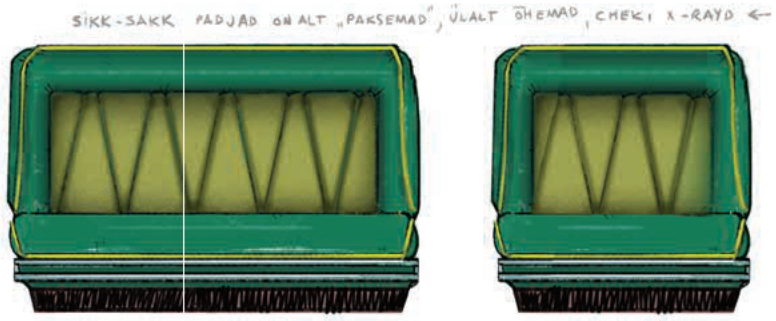


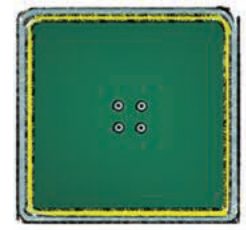

SPANISH ROY JAW

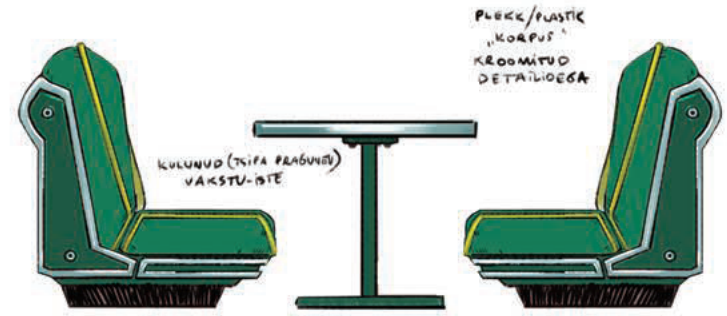

ROYALIOT PINBALL
SCEPTRE LEVERS
MUSIC TUBE IN THE BACK
HAND RELIEFS


HORSES TOUCH THE GROUND? (BIGGER?)


MERCIER

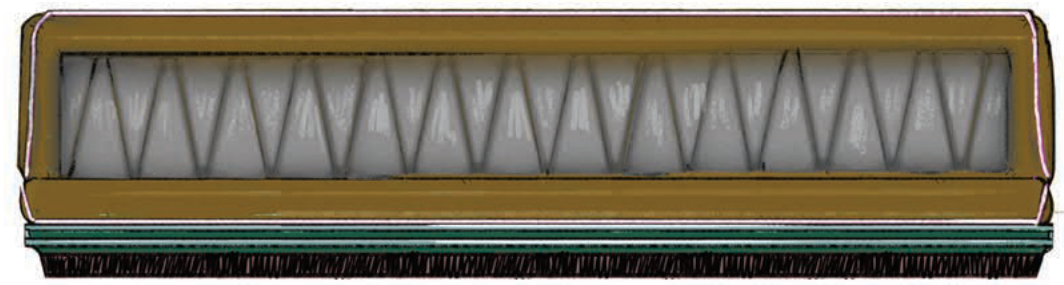


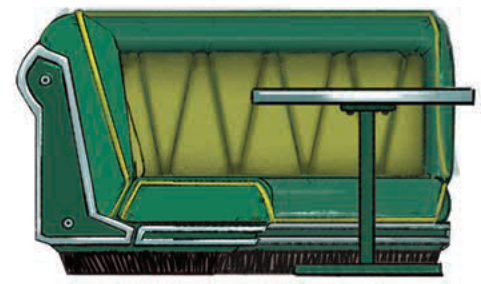



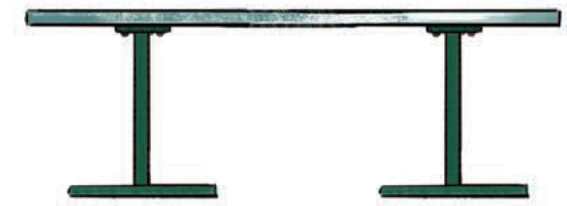


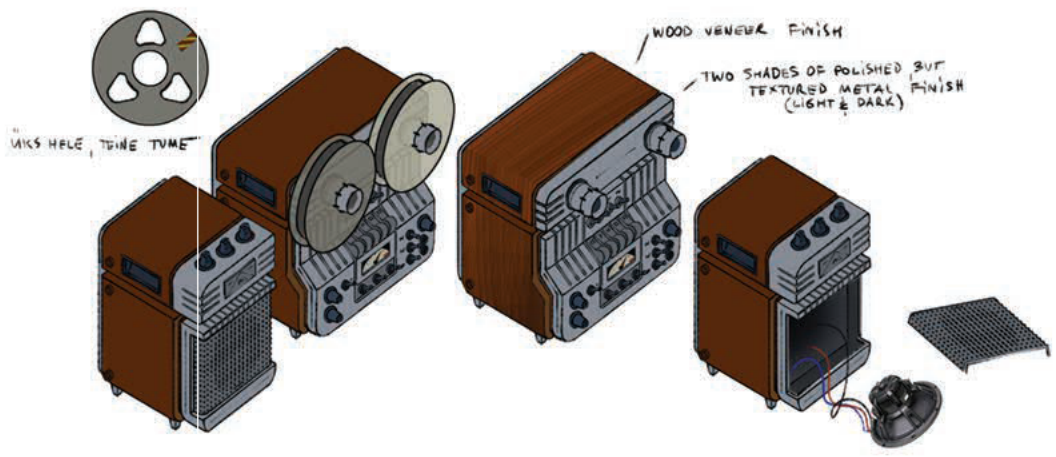


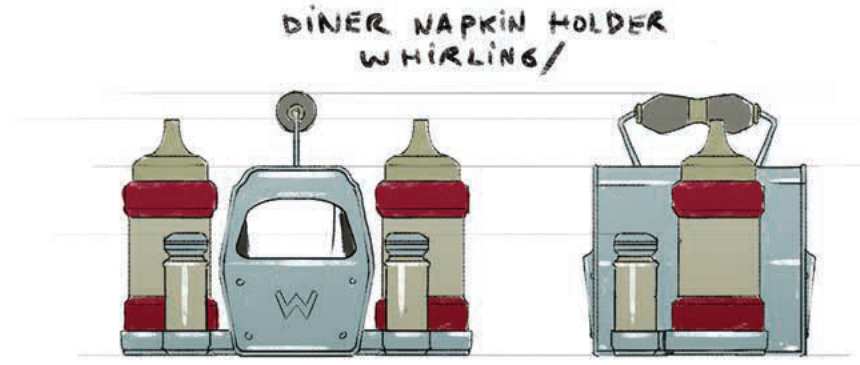









*This spread: (99)* A collage of the various pieces of furniture and items integral to the story that were drawn for Whirling-in-Rags. The drawing of the radio was done by Jüri Saks. Some of these were later placed in other locations and some were redesigned or discarded entirely. We have a fair share of this kind of cut material that does not need to see print.



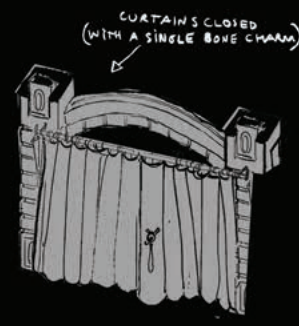
*This page: (100)* The Bookstore (aptly named "Crime, Romance, and Biographies of Famous People") operates near the Plaza and serves as a repository for a wide range of lore. In the dusty back room, the player can discover a locked door that leads further into the Doomed Commercial Building.



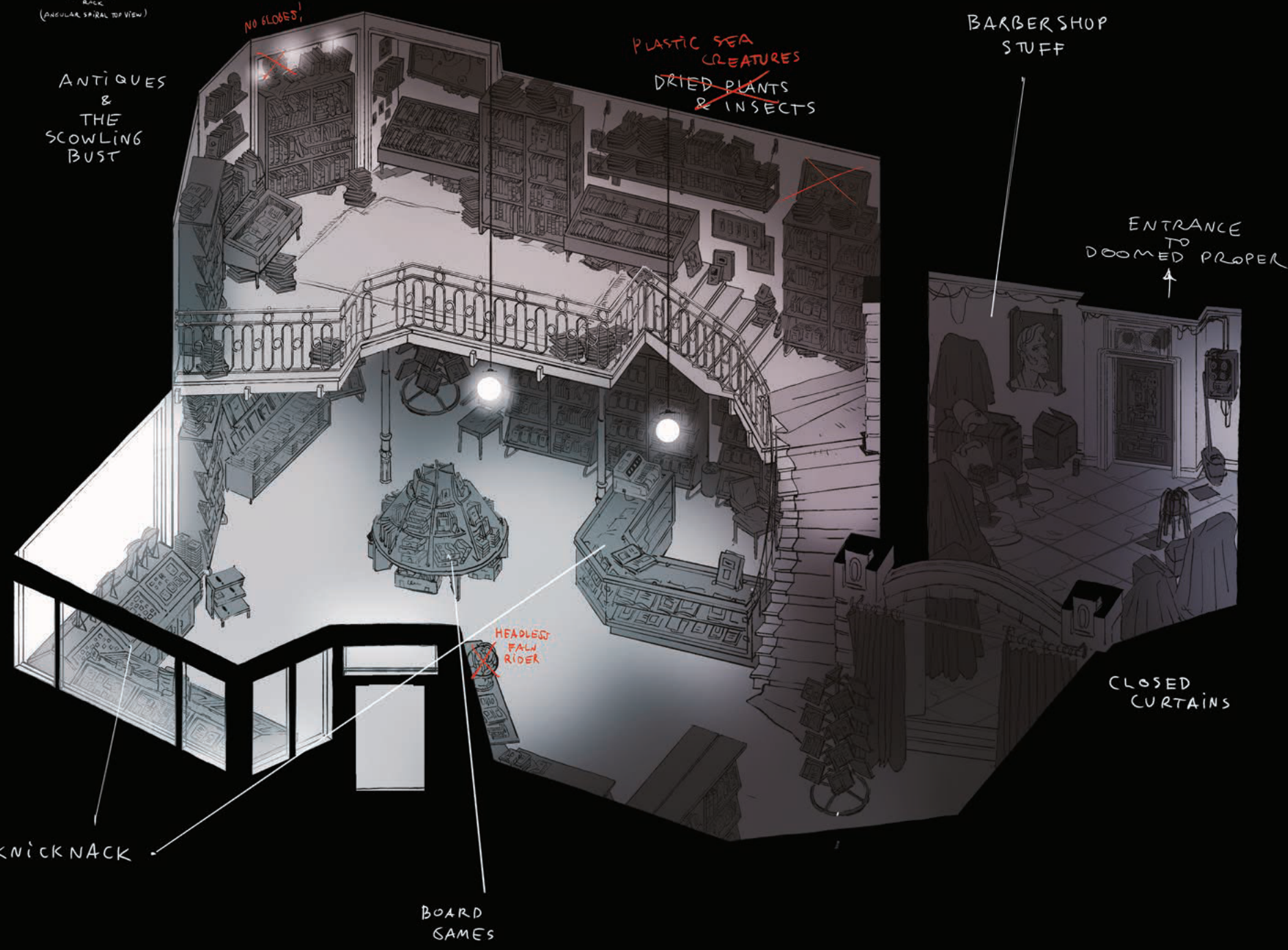
REVOLVING MAGAZINES RACK (ANGULAR SPIRAL TOP VIEW)



DOOR INTO THE DOOMED CO. PROPER




MAP OF REVACHOL




*This page: (101)* Drawing concept art for the Bookstore was mostly just fun. Around that time Kasparov had been looking at the weird shapes and silhouettes of the maps in *Planescape: Torment* and thought it would be a good idea to divide the map in two with a wall that is 100 percent vertical. While it sure looks interesting, he did not try this again anywhere else.

*This page: (102)* The bright and beautifully painted map of the Frittte (sic) kiosk.

In this area, we were experimenting with*Kim-parking* . Namely, for the longest time, we had trouble with Kim's character model getting stuck in certain places on the navmesh in the game engine. One of the "hotfixes" we tried was giving Kim a parking spot in some of the smaller areas. When the player enters the map, Kim would step away from Harry and go to his spot and return to his side when Harry leaves.*Kim-parking* did not become a thing, though, because that navmesh issue was (almost) solved soon after. It does, however, make this map stand out from the rest.




*This page: (103)* By the time he developed this concept, Kasparov was finally feeling confident enough drawing on the computer and started adding values to his wonky line art.

The map was already modeled and in the game when we decided that the windows were too bare and we added flowers and potted plants to enliven the space. These two images offer a good opportunity to spot the various tweaks made during 3D modeling as well as the effect broad brushstrokes can have. In later areas, Rostov got bolder with those as well.






*This spread, clockwise: (104)* The Harbor Secretariat (otherwise known as Mom's Office, for reasons the player may discover) is one of several ways into the Harbor, but it is the only way out of it; *(105)* This concept piece was a milestone for Kasparov because he started adding color to his designs to better indicate ambiance. This way, the artwork could be referenced directly at later stages in development. Before, the notes about a certain map were spread out between various Word and Notepad documents, Confluence wikis, Jira tasks, and scraps of Post-Its all around the studio.

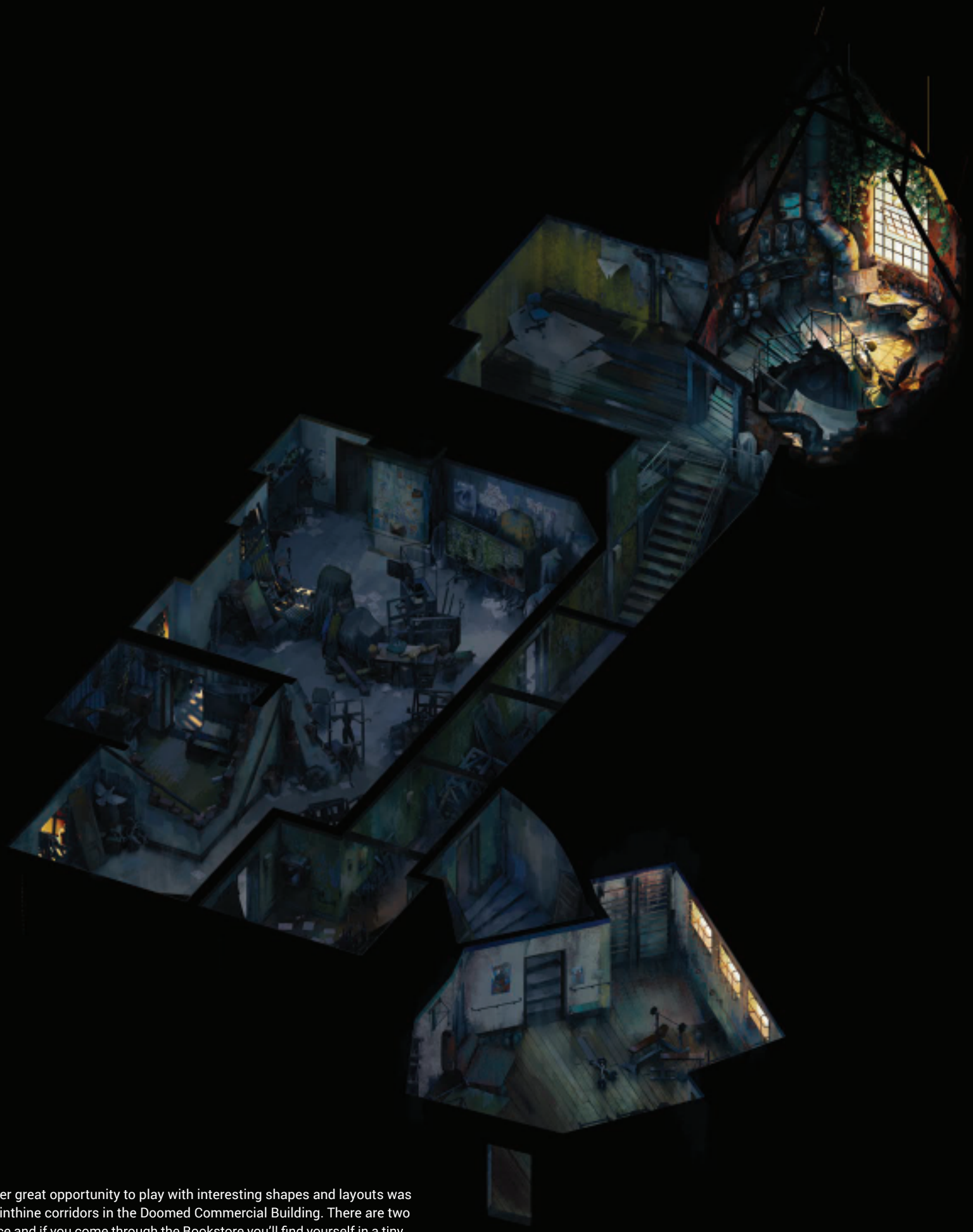




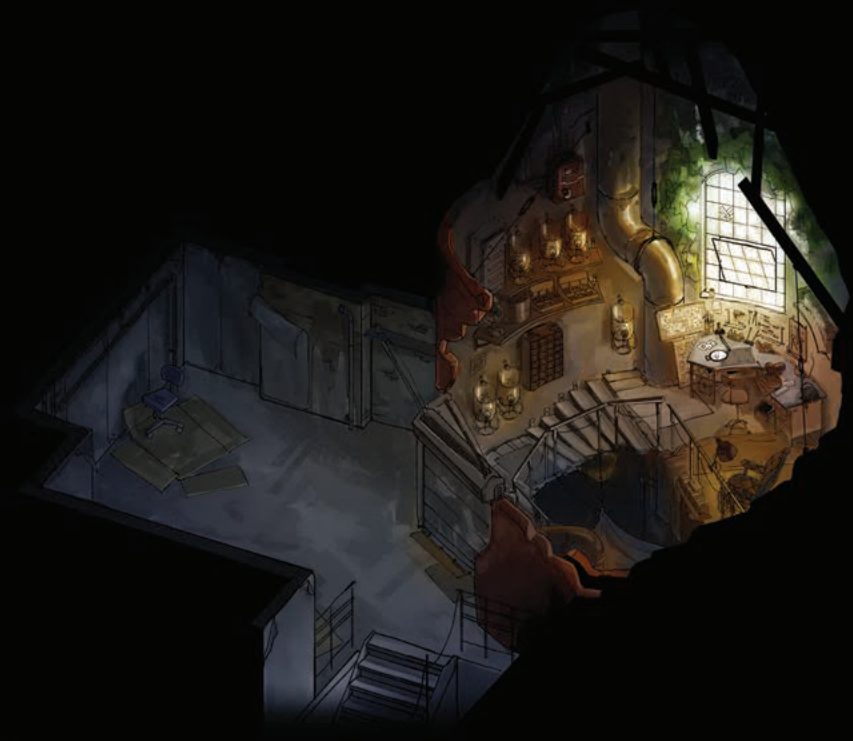


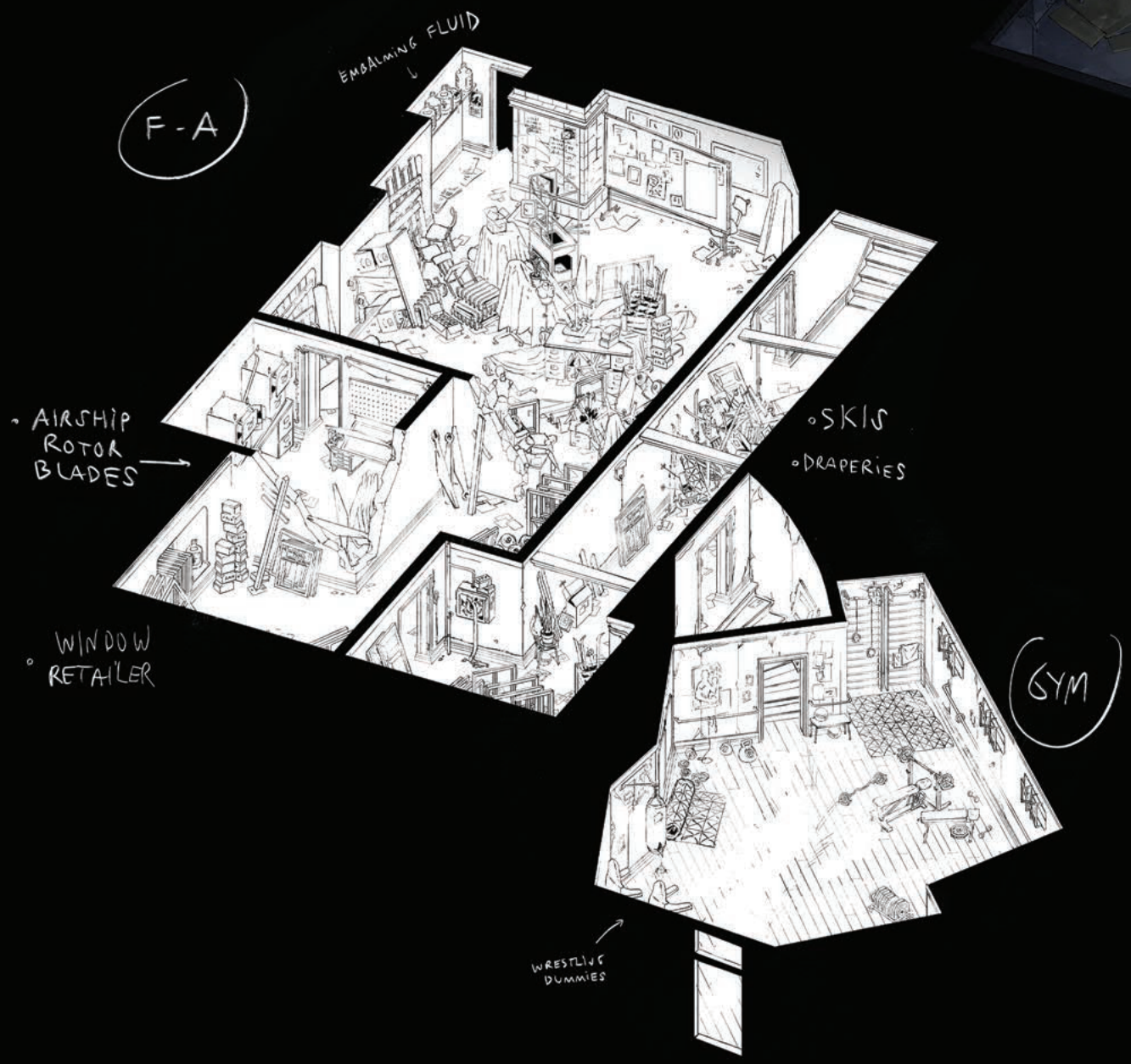

*Opposite: (106)* Before the player can leave the Harbor, they must go and have a talk with Evrart Claire, the leader of the Dockworkers' Union. This is his office; *(107)* A single container that houses an easy-to-miss encounter with another memorable character. Also, in the game it looks nothing like this painted version.

*This page: (108)* Working on this concept was fun, because the nature of the Harbor area allowed for the use of a less-common layout and more interesting shapes and lighting. The map itself is very unique, and one hopes, memorable, but it is widely reported that the character of Evrart Claire is what hits it home.

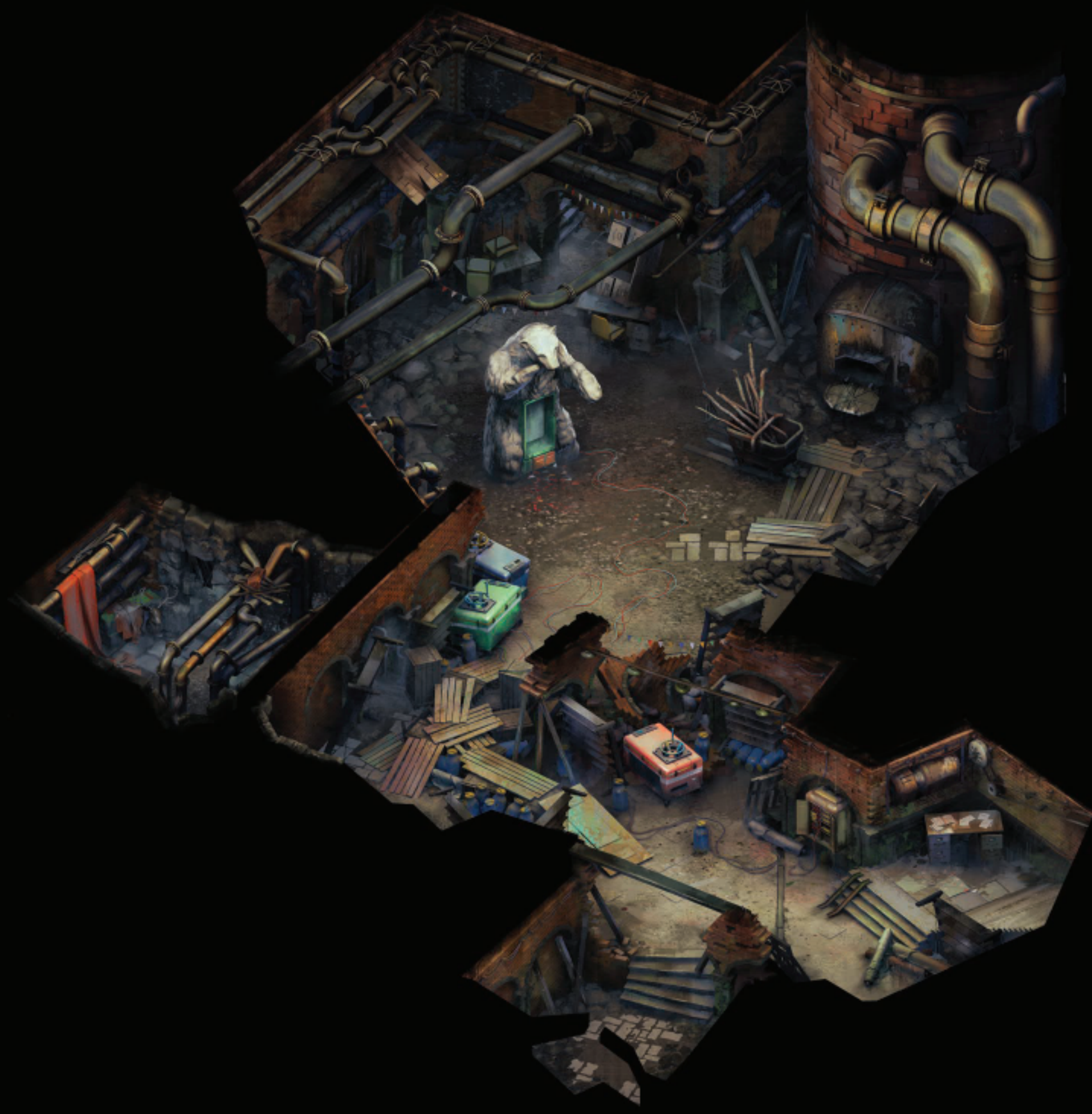


*This page: (109)* Another great opportunity to play with interesting shapes and layouts was presented by the labyrinthine corridors in the Doomed Commercial Building. There are two ways to reach this space and if you come through the Bookstore you'll find yourself in a tiny abandoned gym in the lower right corner of the map.

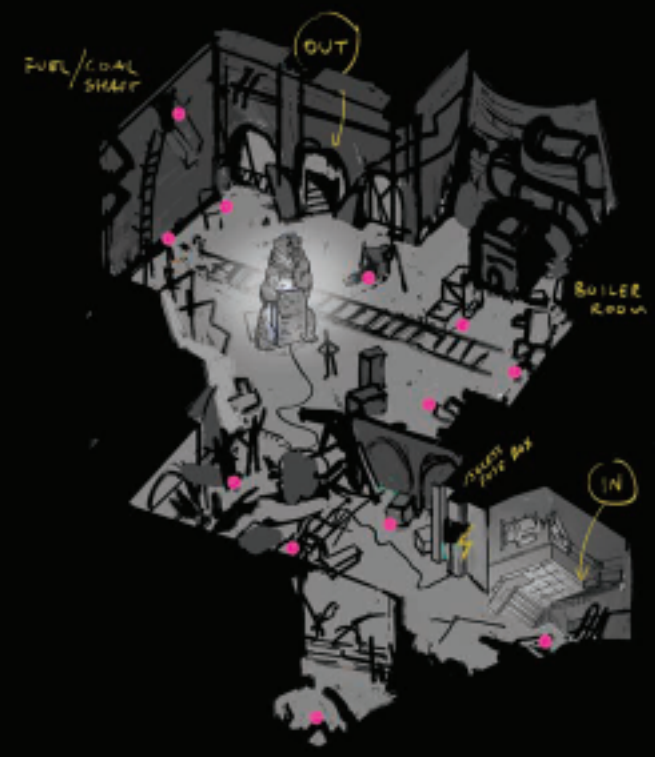




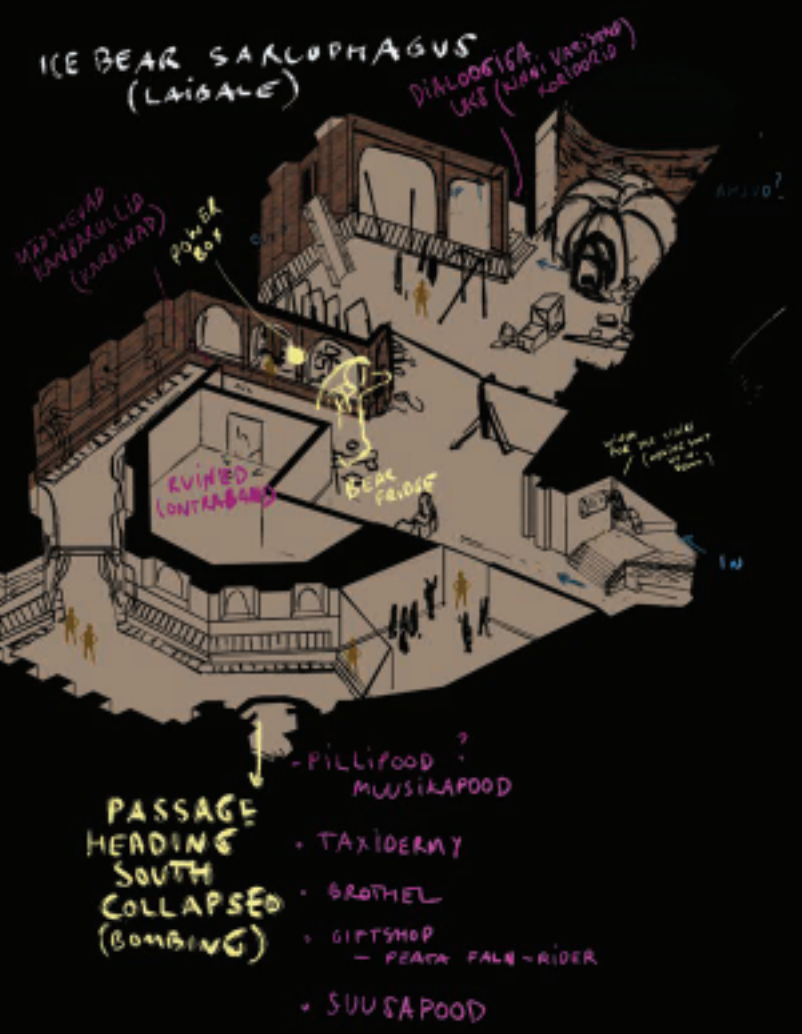

*This page: (110)* DCB is a special area for a couple of reasons. For one, it is a very personal space for our studio. Clever players can figure out the Easter Egg. Second, we introduced darkness as an impediment to the player in exploring its dusty spaces. Cue the flashlight which the player can have Harry wave around. This posed a set of new problems. There are multiple 3D meshes hidden in the clutter all over this map that we call the *shadow casters.* Without them, using the flashlight in this space looked very glitchy. In most areas, we have fewer of them and they're composed of simpler shapes. Also, in the larger central area, our programmers had to write a unique piece of code just for that one spot that would allow the flashlight to function more naturally in Harry's hands.

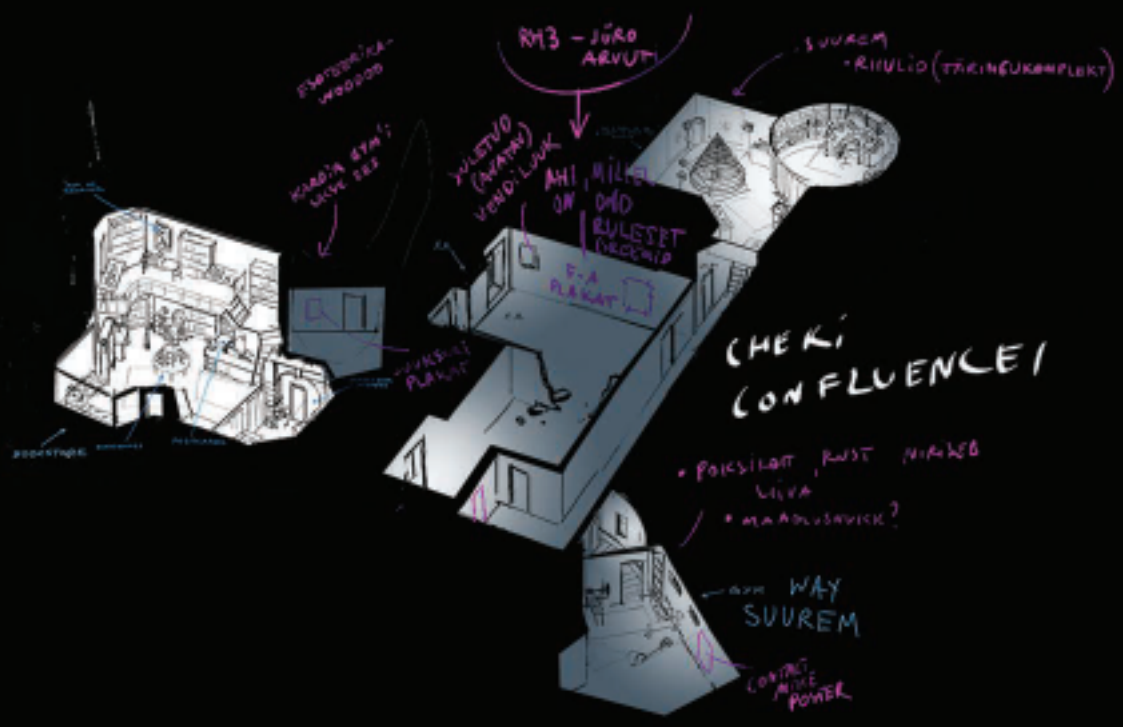




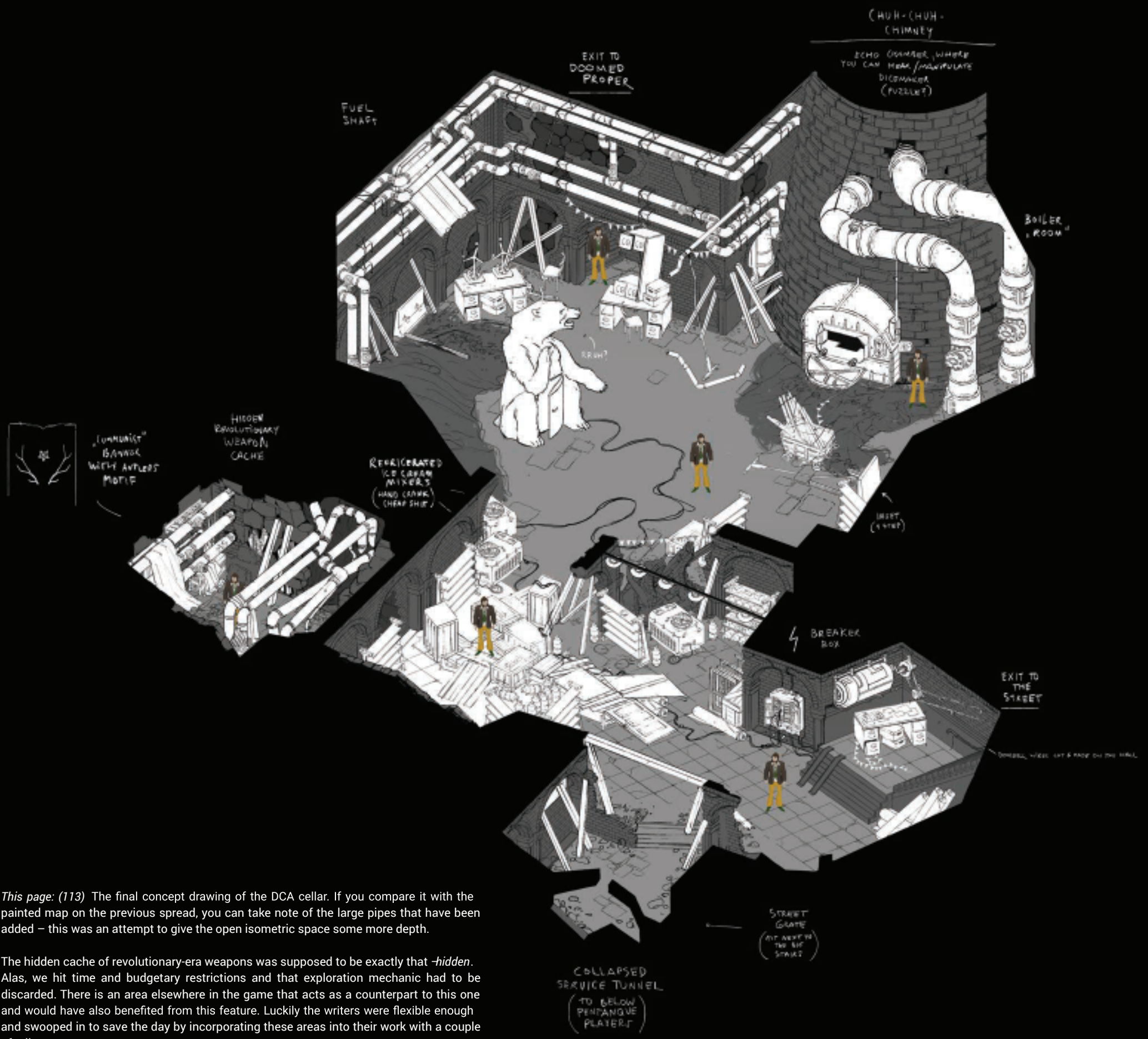


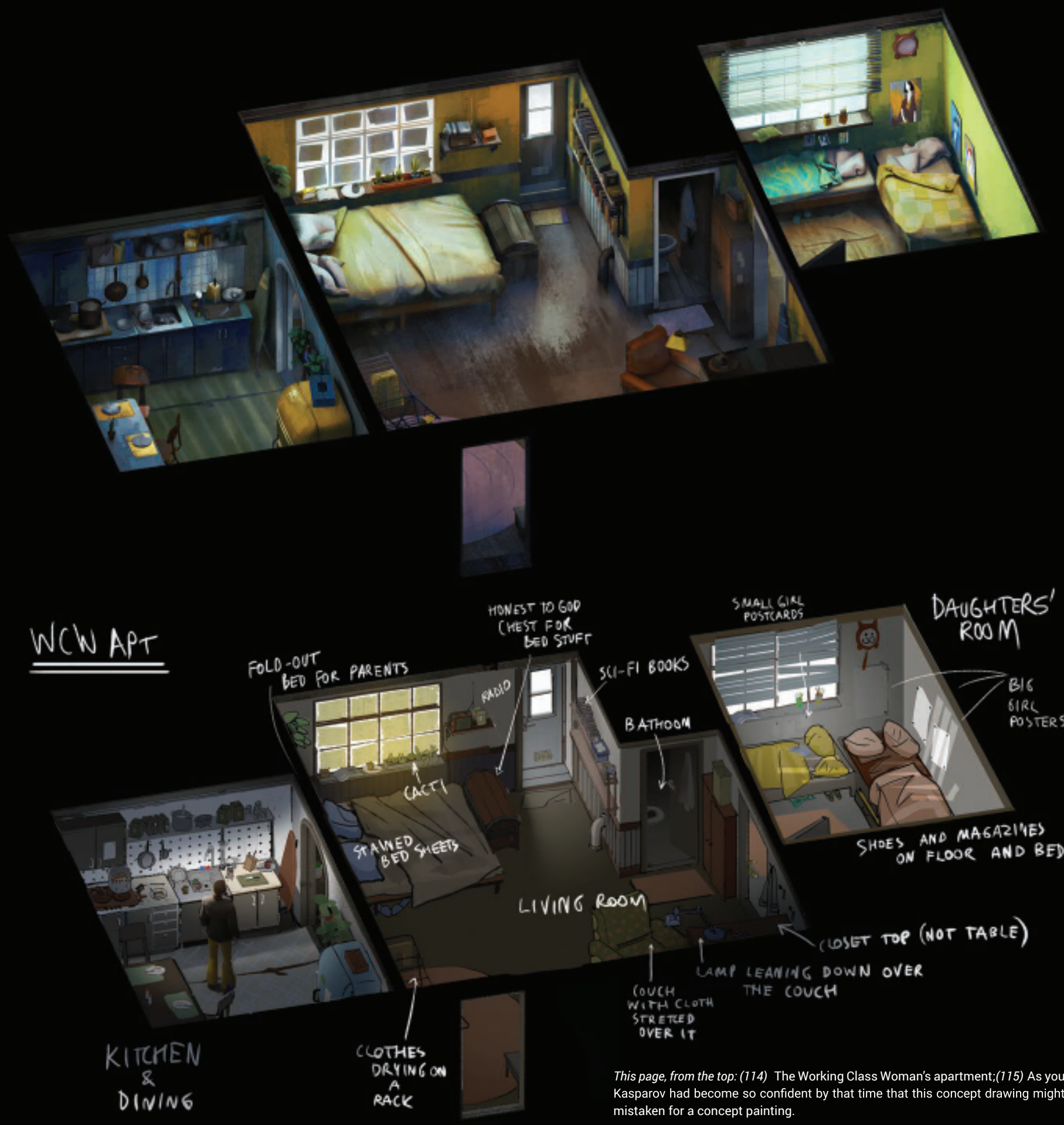

*This spread, clockwise: (111)* The cellar, another maze-like map, under the Doomed Commercial Building. Taken together, these comprise the Doomed Commercial Area, which, as a whole, ties in with multiple other areas of the game in very important ways. Designing DCA is a good example of the freedom our artists had and the impact their work could have on the game and its story. The art began with a prompt from the writers, but then the writers took cues from the art. The new writing, in turn, influenced later drafts of concept drawings. This dance went on for a while;

*(112)* As you can see from this collage of sketches in various stages, the DCA expanded and contracted multiple times during the concept phase. The collapsed archway in the lower-left corner of the cellar map is the only indication that at some point the player could have explored a whole network of service tunnels that ran under the Plaza right up to the shelling crater by the water.



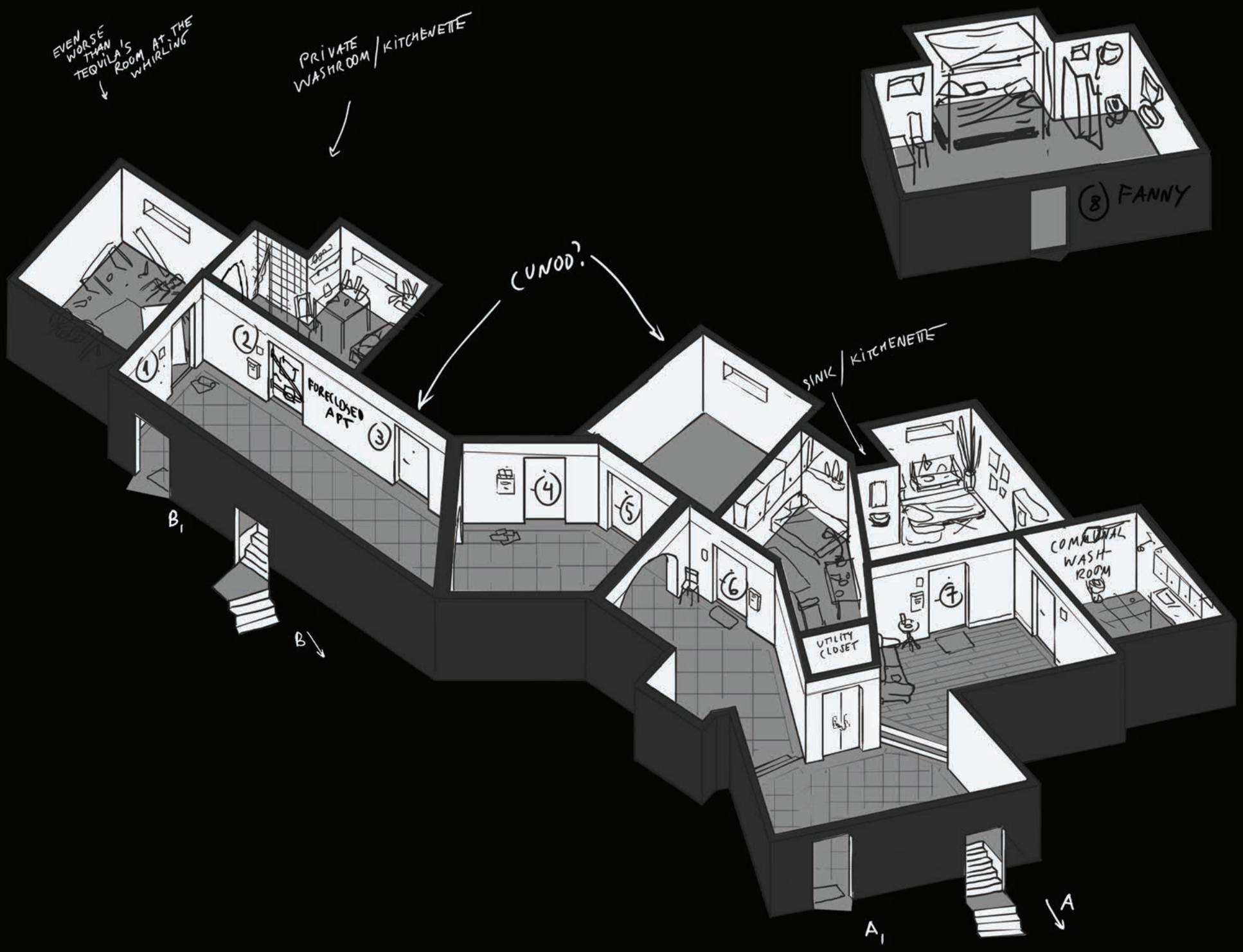

*This page: (113)* The final concept drawing of the DCA cellar. If you compare it with the painted map on the previous spread, you can take note of the large pipes that have been added – this was an attempt to give the open isometric space some more depth.

The hidden cache of revolutionary-era weapons was supposed to be exactly that – *hidden*. Alas, we hit time and budgetary restrictions and that exploration mechanic had to be discarded. There is an area elsewhere in the game that acts as a counterpart to this one and would have also benefited from this feature. Luckily the writers were flexible enough and swooped in to save the day by incorporating these areas into their work with a couple of adjustments.




*This page, from the top: (114)* The Working Class Woman's apartment;*(115)* As you can see, Kasparov had become so confident by that time that this concept drawing might even be mistaken for a concept painting.

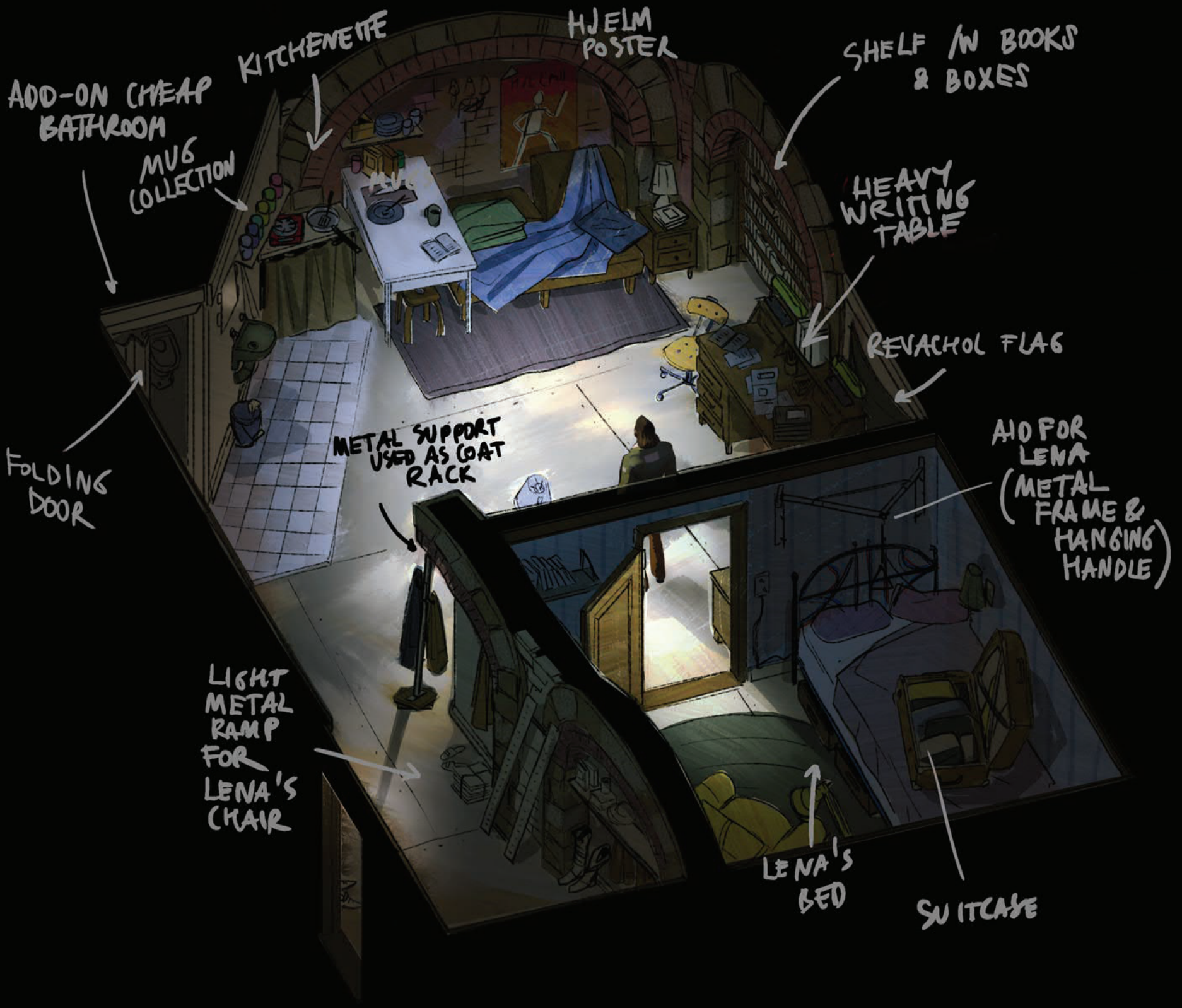





*This spread: (116)* The painted map of the main area of the Capeside Apartments. If you look closely, you'll see some excellent expressive brushwork by Rostov in this one;

*(117)* Kasparov saw this map as another opportunity to play around with "interesting shapes" and experiment with the level design pipeline (already a good few years into development) by working on the design mostly in 3D in Blender. He got so carried away with adding rooms that he created several weeks' worth of extra work for the writers who were already pressed for time. He also spent way too much time placing ceramic tiles and tiny pipes by hand in an unlit bathroom hidden behind a locked door.



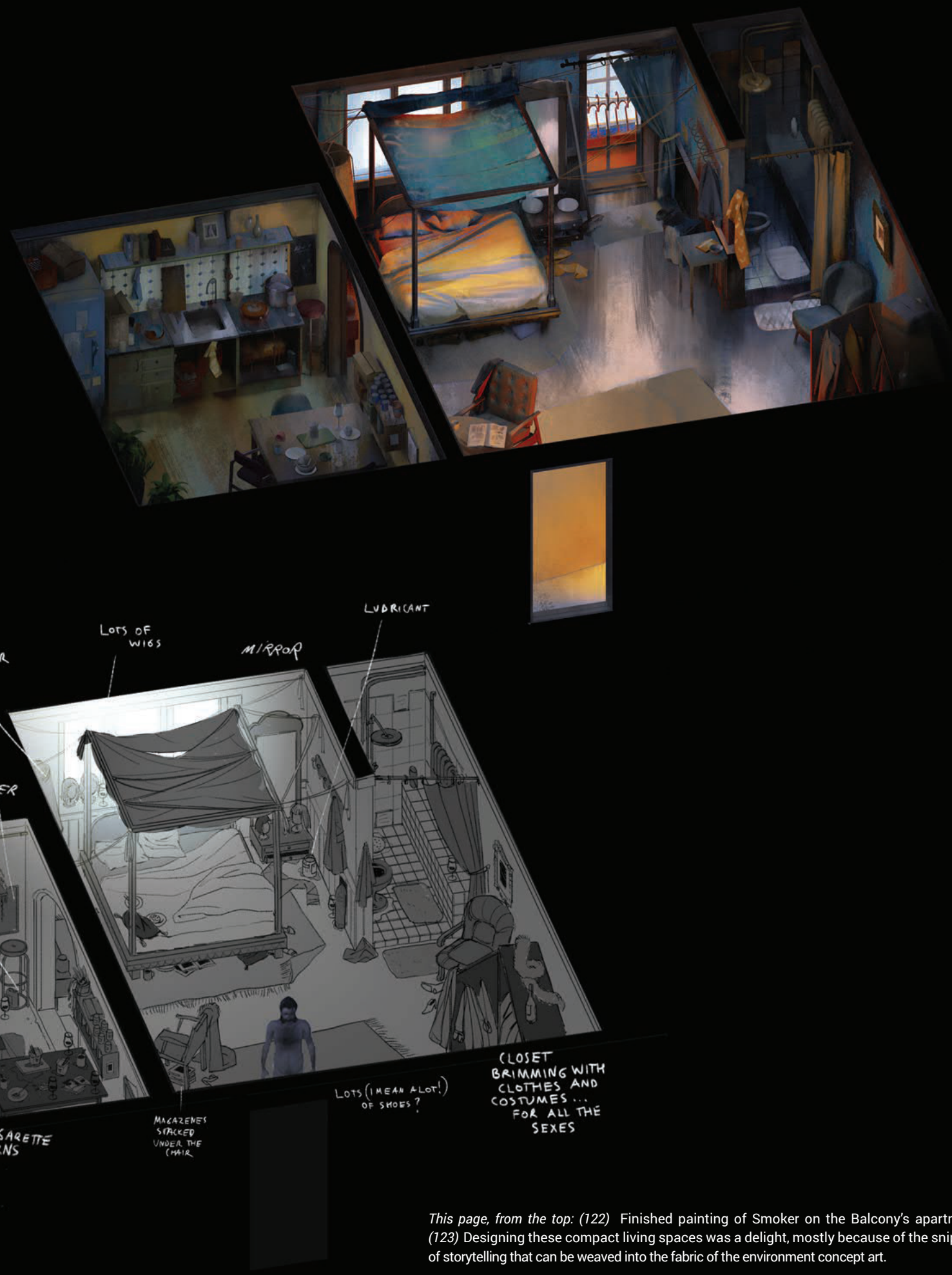



*This spread, clockwise: (118)* The painted map of the Cryptofascist's Apartment;*(119)* By this time in development, the level design workflow was solidly in place: depending on the number of edits requested by the writers, Kasparov could draw up a small map like this one in a day and Rauno would model the whole thing in another day, after which it would go to Rostov for the paintover.



*This page, from the top: (120)* The Coal Chamber could have been cut from the game, but once again the writers swooped in and saved the artists' asses;

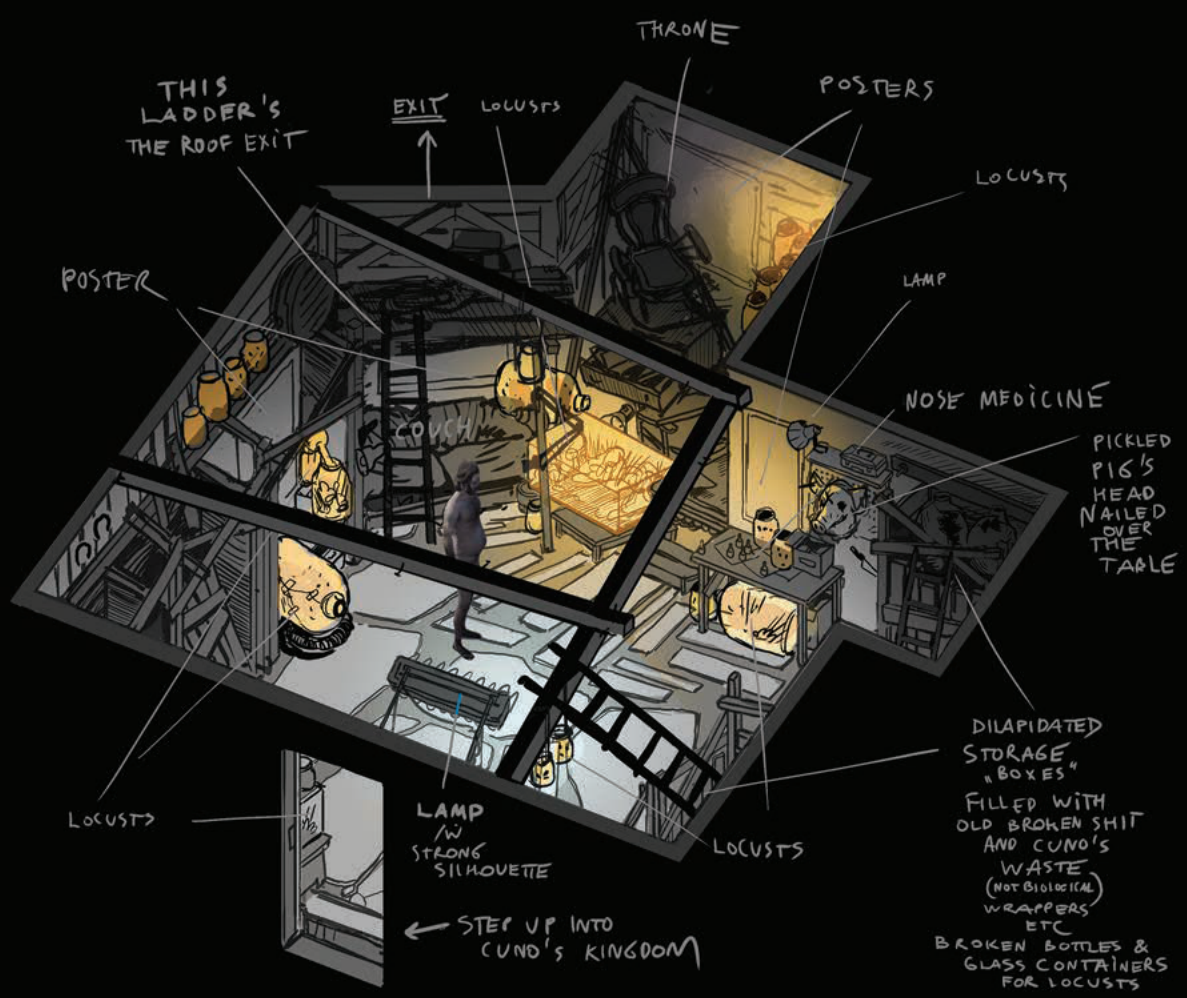
*(121)* Kasparov was working on this sketch on his own time with the express goal of wanting to try his hand at painting an environment. He imagined it as basically a plain map with just a couple of orbs for the player to click. What happened instead was that painting the art for an exponentially growing number of inventory items started taking up more of his time and this map was left an orphan. In the end, it was still Rostov that gave it the necessary lick of paint and the writers made sure it tied in with the rest of the game. Teamwork!




*This page, from the top: (122)* Finished painting of Smoker on the Balcony's apartment; *(123)* Designing these compact living spaces was a delight, mostly because of the snippets of storytelling that can be weaved into the fabric of the environment concept art.

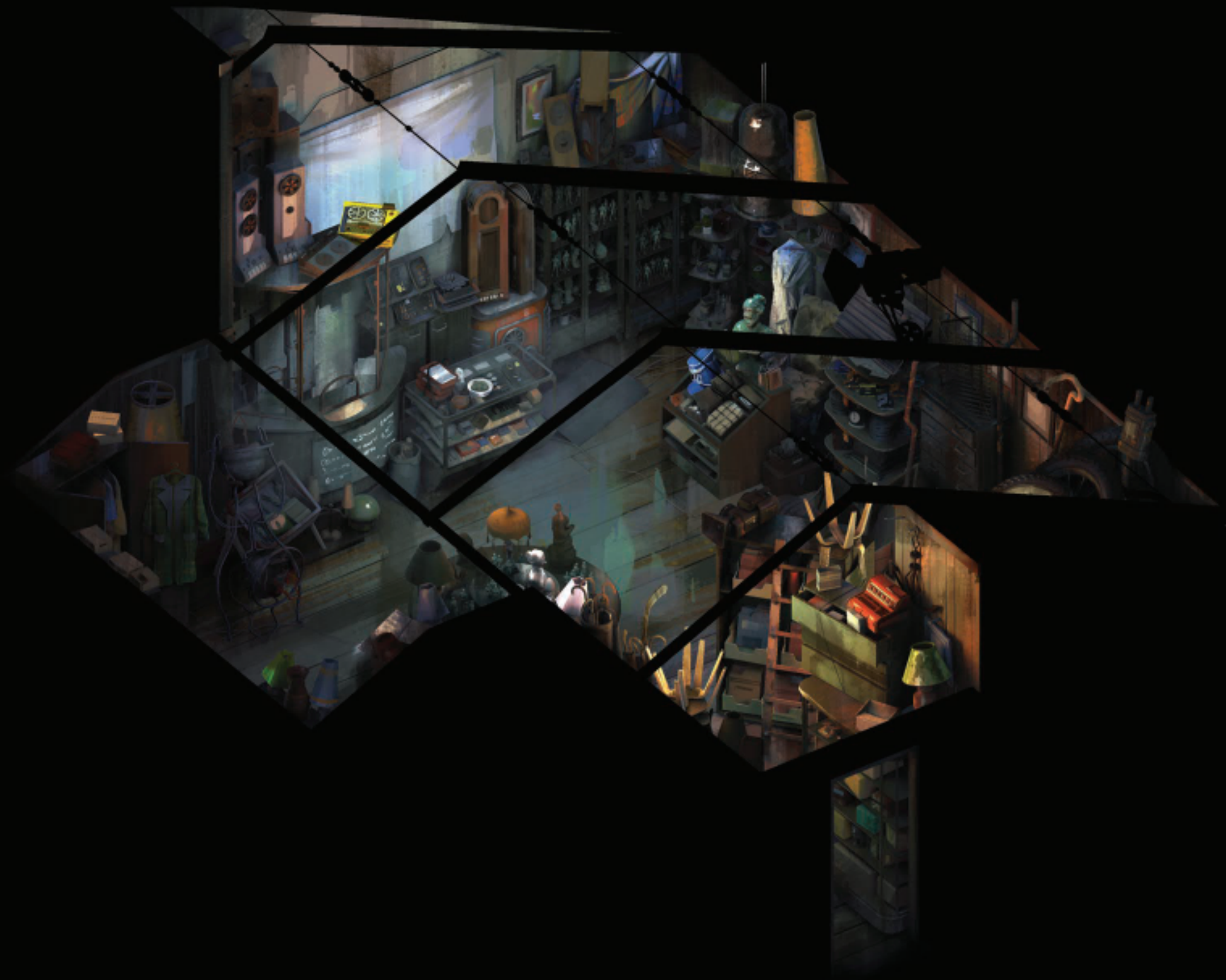


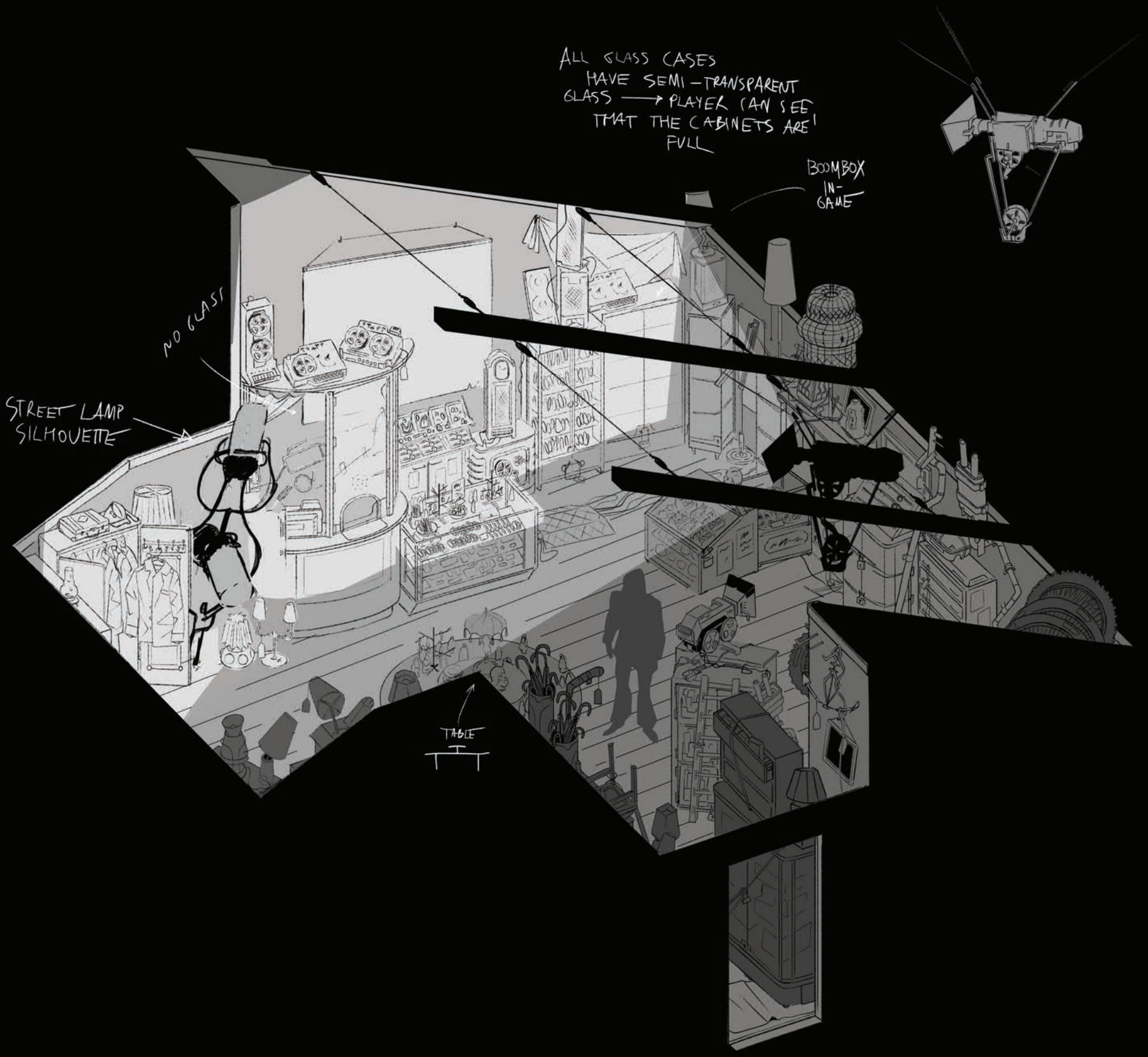



*Opposite: (124)* The painted throne room of King Cuno.

*This page, from the top: (125)* The final concept drawing for Cuno's Shack; *(126)* An earlier draft of the same map with the distinction that Cuno was supposed to be keeping locusts in brilliantly lit glass containers. It would have made for a pretty striking effect, alright.






*This spread, clockwise: (127)* Pawnshop, painted and lit; *(128)* On this map we wanted to experiment with lighting. The shape of the space is already pretty interesting, but the unique touch is the projector hanging from the rafters painting the wall with shifting light and graphics.





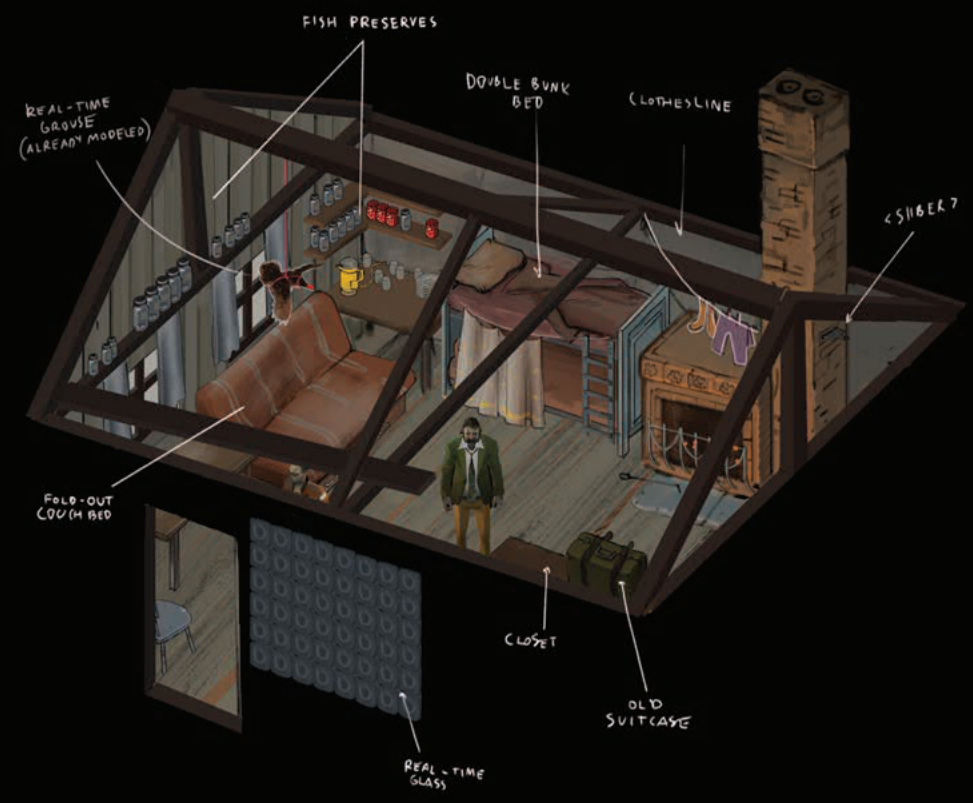
*This spread, clockwise: (129)* The final painted map of the third floor of the Whirling-in-Rags, the bane that made us redesign the whole building again and again and again. This space had so many requirements dictated by the game's story that, combined with the restrictions of an isometric fixed-camera view, proved to be almost insurmountable hurdles for the inexperienced level designer;

*(130)* Rostov's environmental concept paintings already have a ton of atmosphere. Once again, certain changes have been made at a later stage in 3D, by adding necessary detail and elements to fill out a space like the empty balcony or replacing the descending steps with a service elevator.

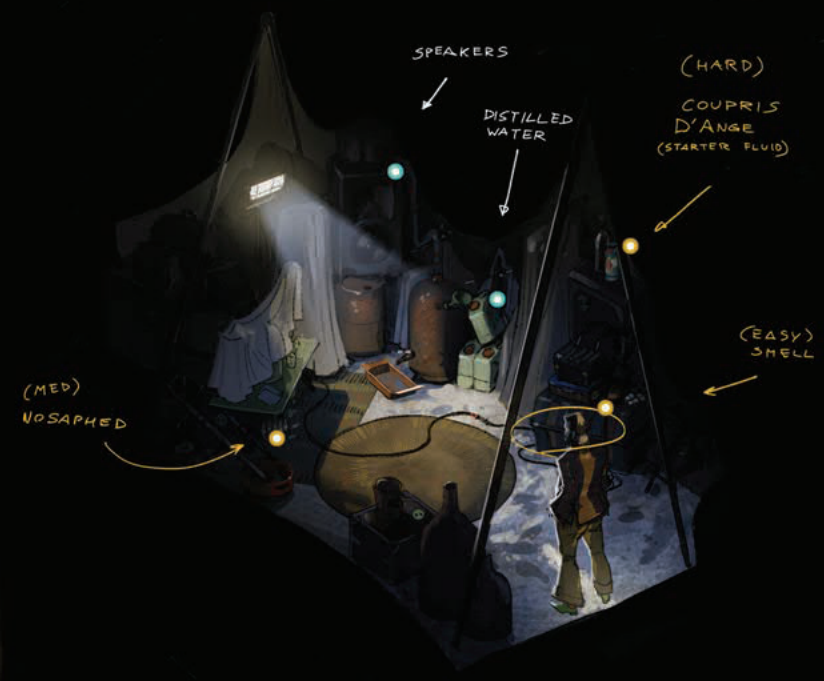







FISH PRESERVES
REAL-TIME GROUSE (ALREADY MODELED)
DOUBLE BUNK BED
CLOTHESLINE
<SIBER?
FOLD-OUT COUCH BED
CLOSET
OLD SUITCASE
REAL-TIME GLASS

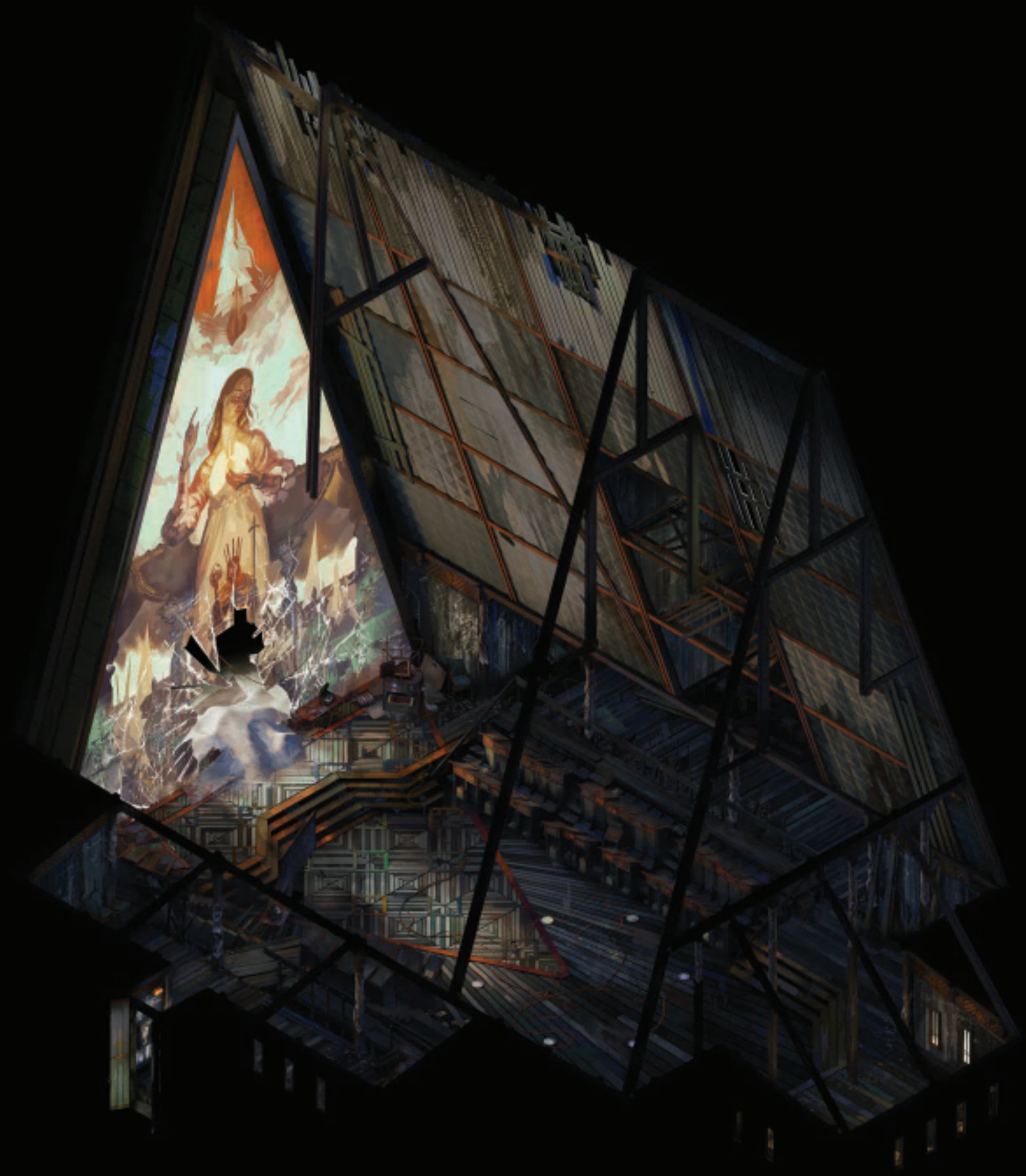




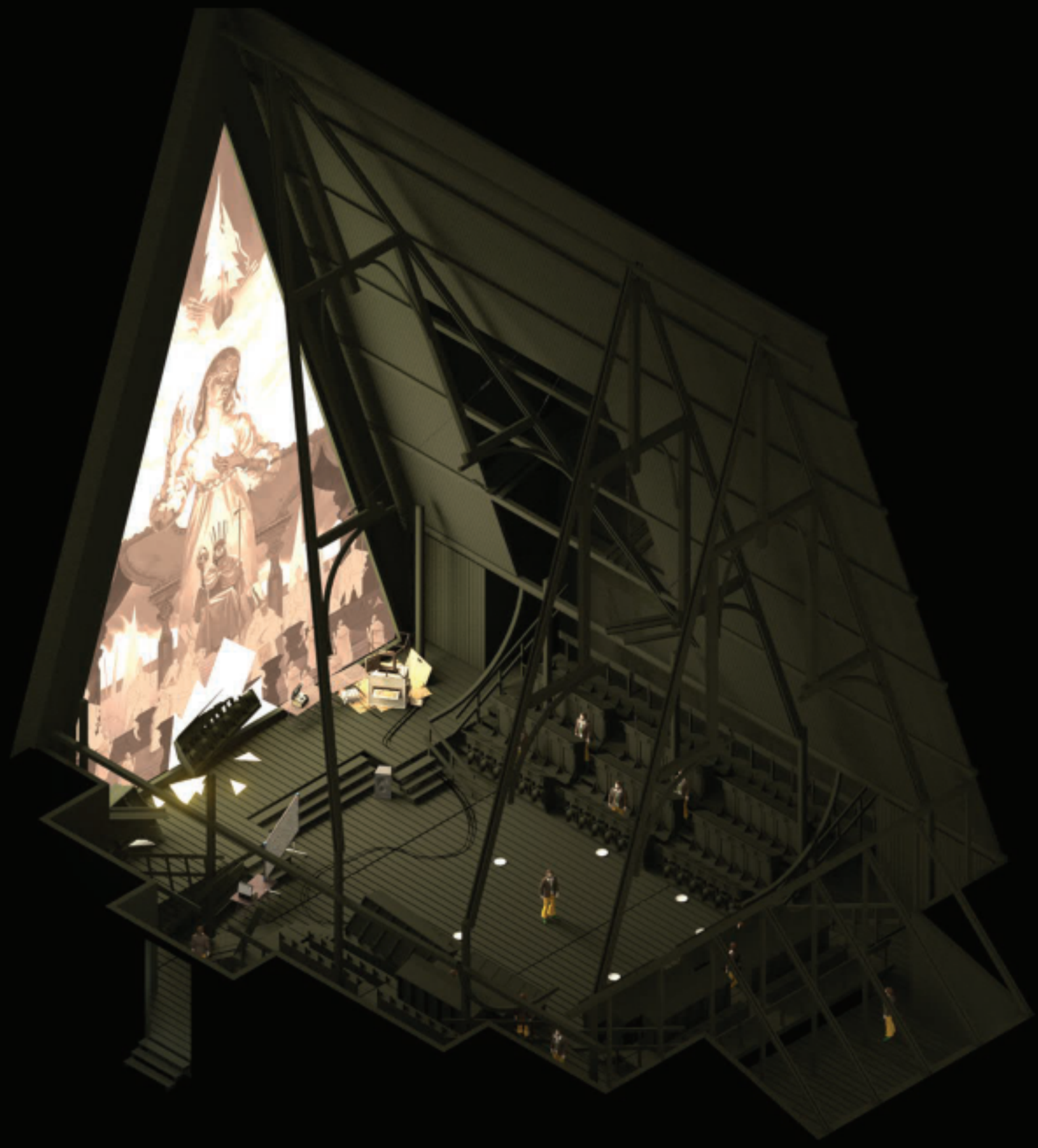



*This spread, top row (131)* The painted map of Harry's second home, situated in the Fishing Village; *(132)* Concept art for this map. We tried to make it bare, but cozy and warm with the cold early spring light washing in through the small windows*(133)* The painted map of the Ravers' tent on the ice by the Church;*(134)* Moody concept art for the tent.

*This spread, bottom row: (135)* Rostov's paintover for Lilienne Carter's little home, also in the Fishing Village; *(136)* Concept art for the small home; *(137)* A minor location somewhere on the coast.

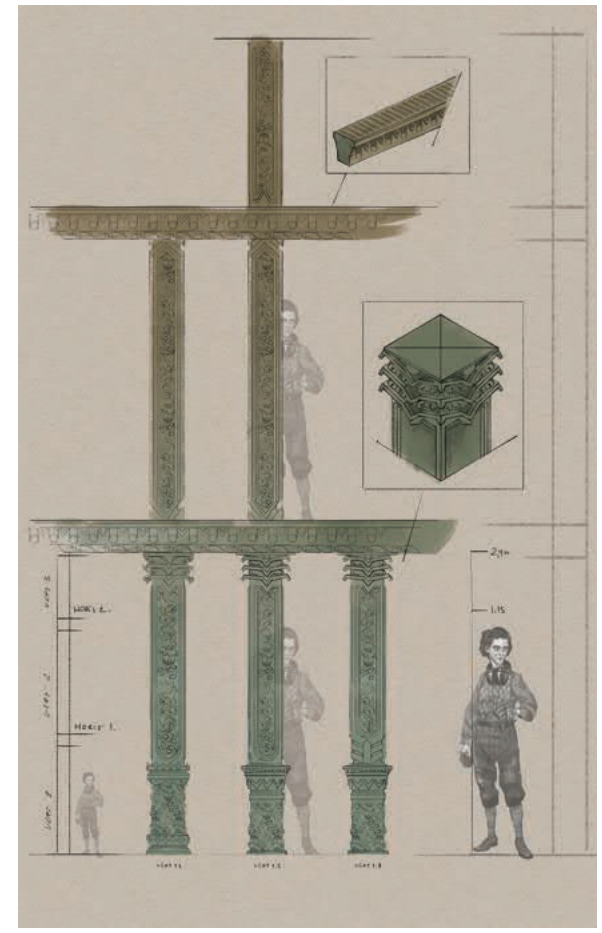


*This page: (138)* The finished painting of the Church interior. After the arduous process and countless redesigns that went into the Whirling-in-Rags, this area was the *other* problem child.

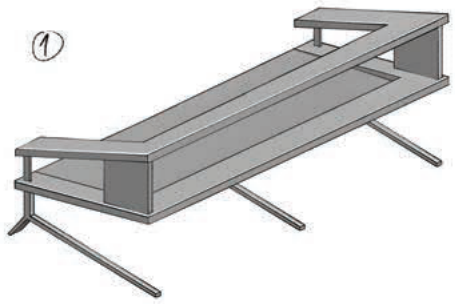


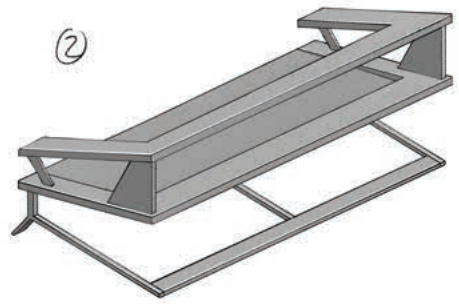
*This page: (139)* One of the probably hundreds of test-renders we did for this map. Almost there, though! If you compare it with the painting on the opposite page, you'll see only minor differences between the two images.

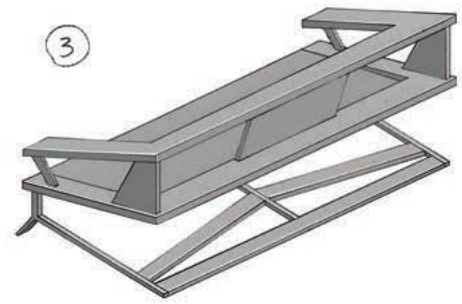

FIG.1
FLIP HORIZ.
FIG 2.
FLIP
HORIZ
FIG 2.
Y.
FIG 1.
X.
Y.
Z.
Z.
X.
Y.
X.
X.
Y.
2.1
2.
1.
2.1
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3.
1.1 = FLIP 1. HORIZONTALLY.

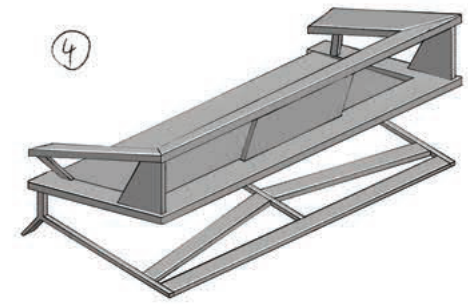


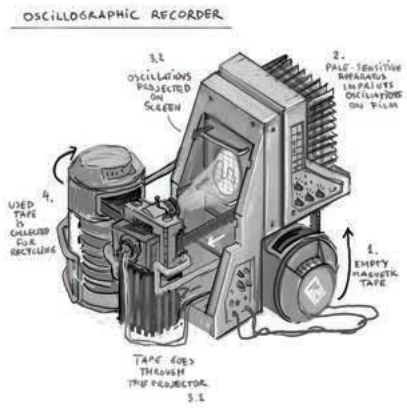


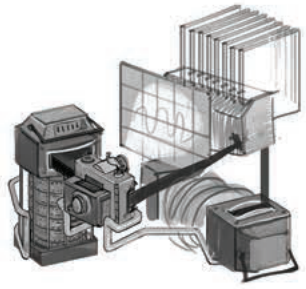


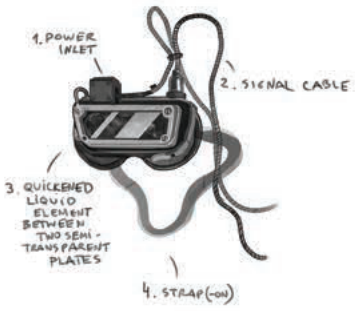



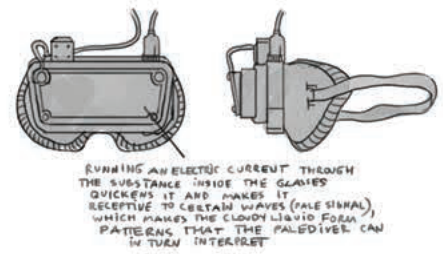



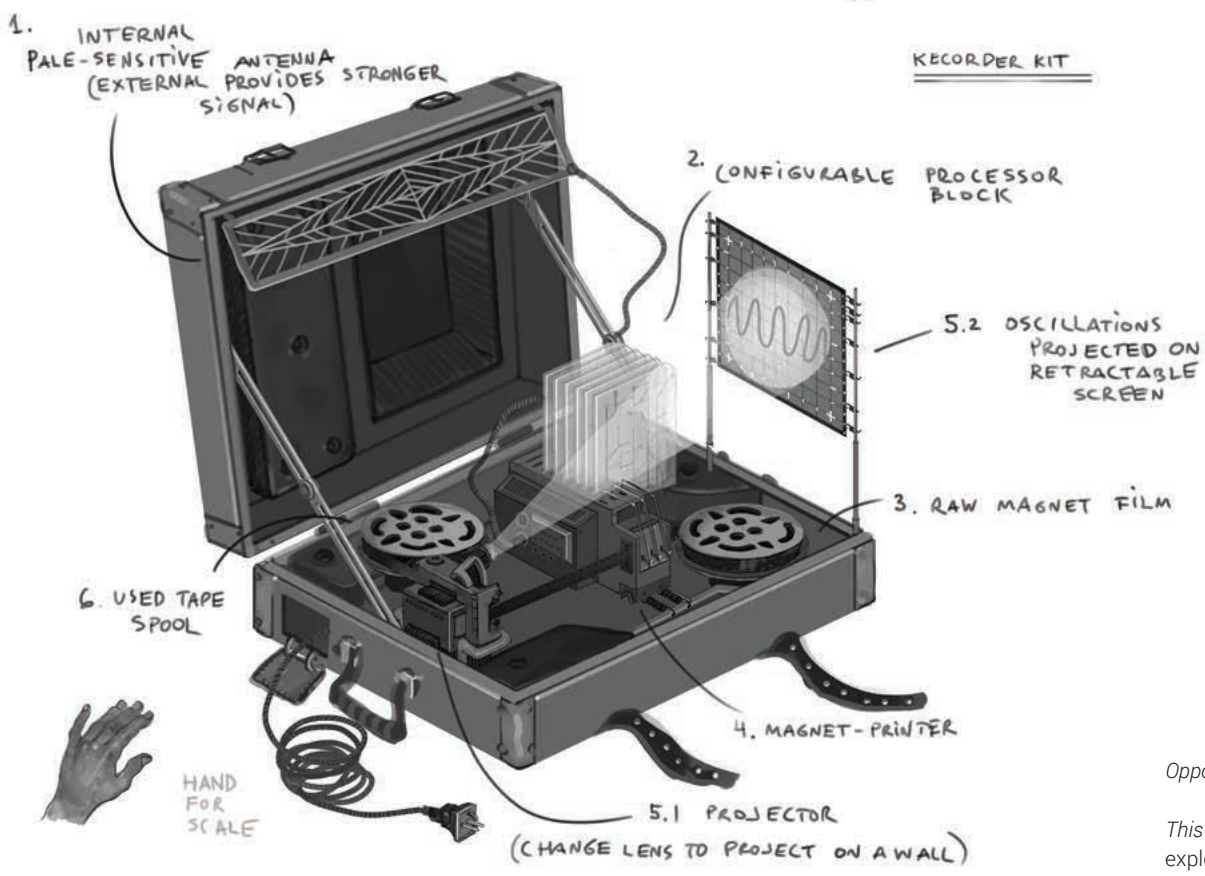



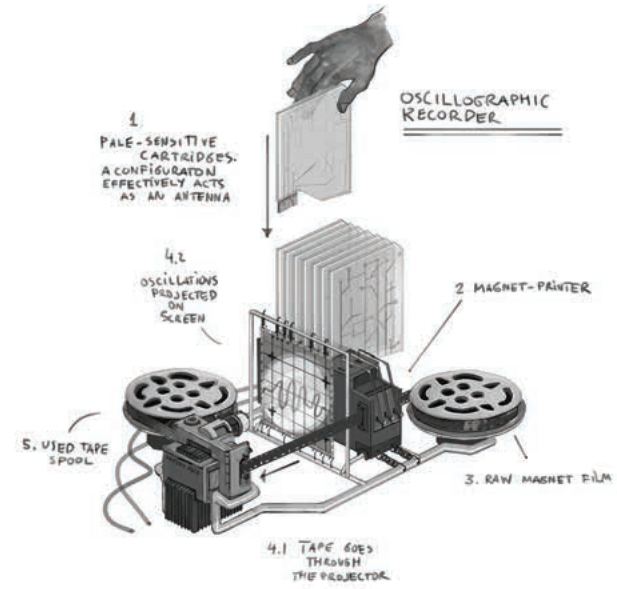







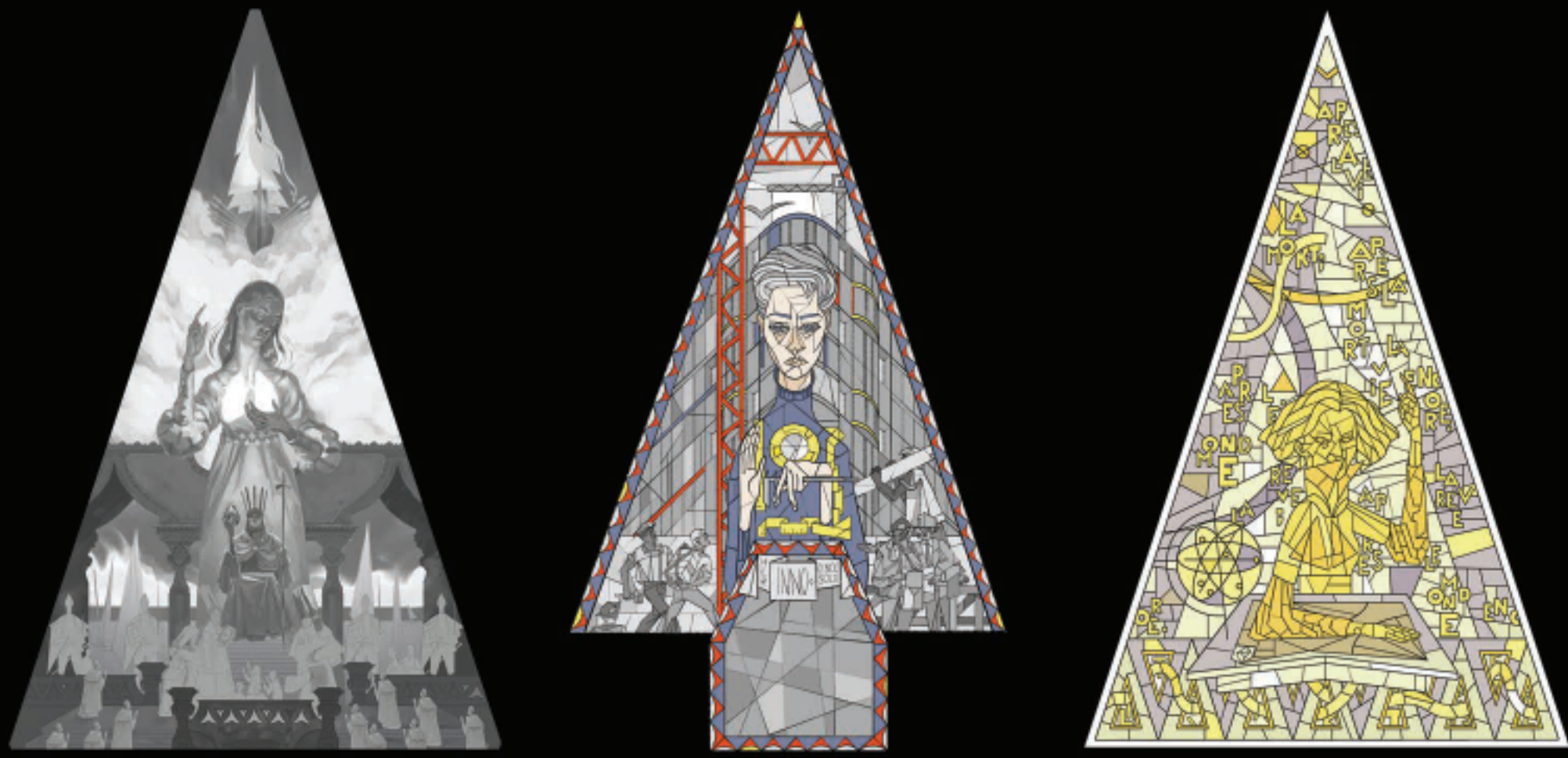




*Opposite: (140)* A collage of variations on the wooden pillars inside the Church.

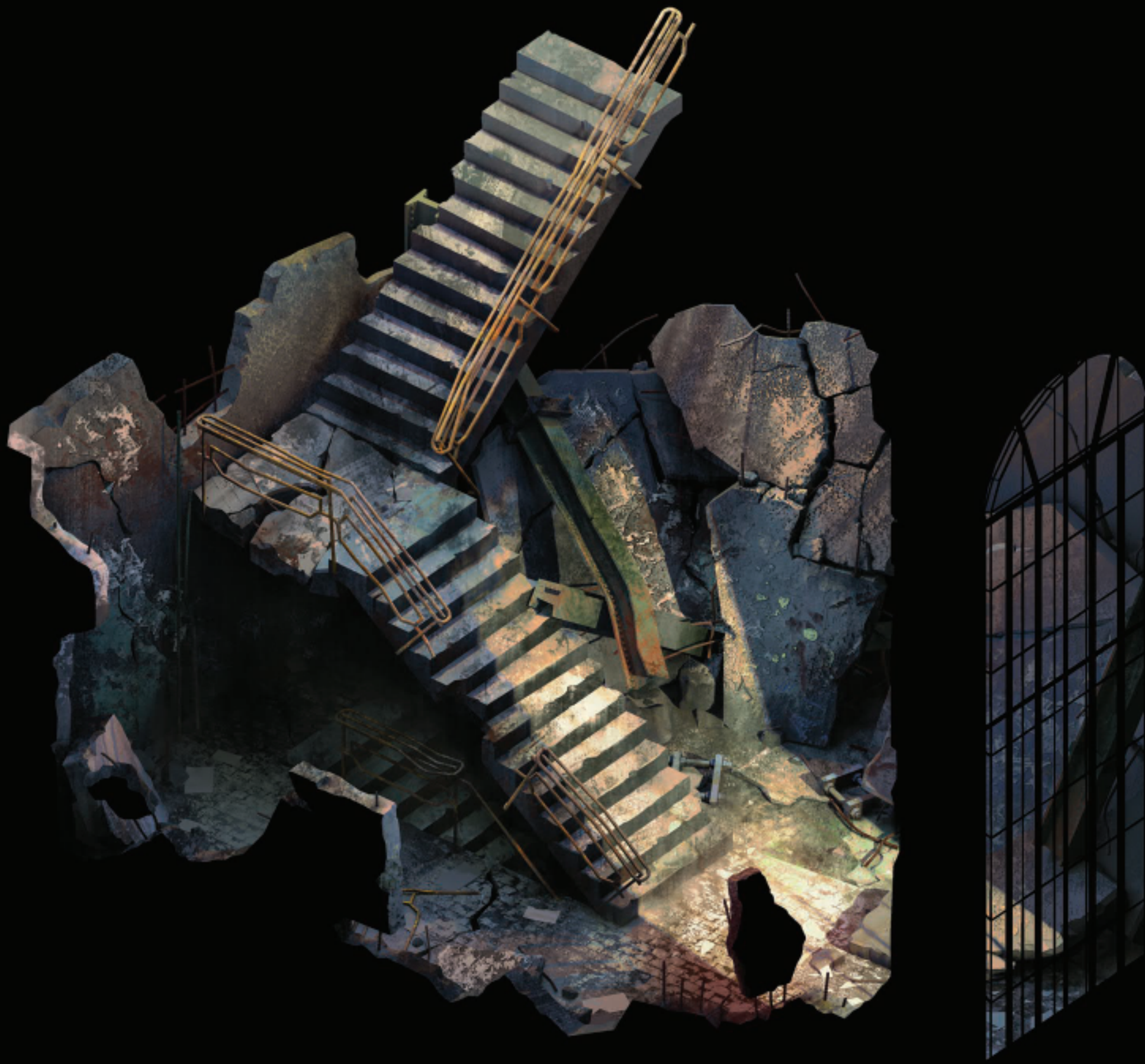
*This page: (141)* A collage of the various props that went into the Church, including explorations for Soona's oscillographic recorder.

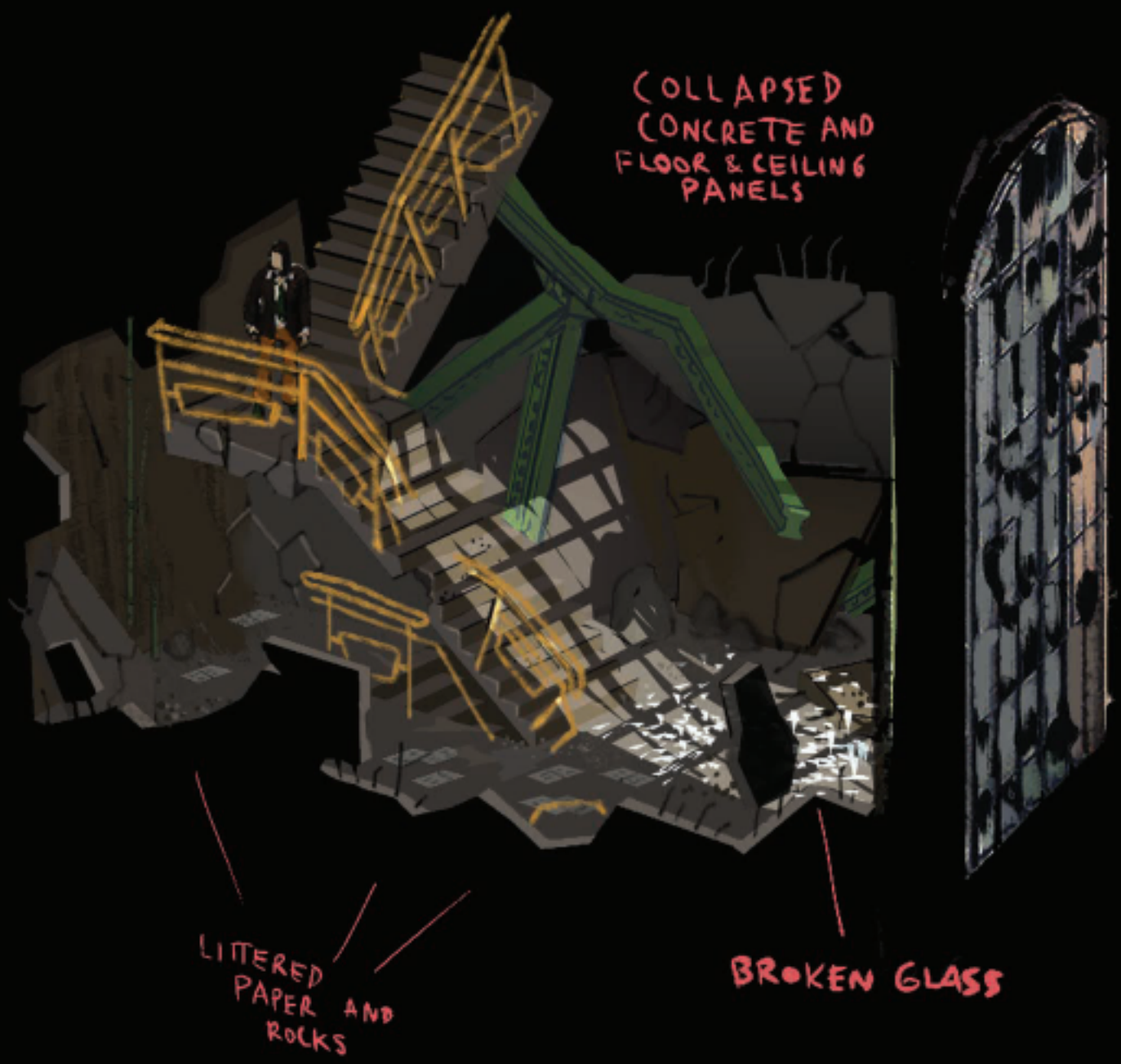


*This page: (142)* The painting for the stained glass window depicts the innocence of interisolary travel and the connected world, Dolores Dei, whose figure towers above Irene La Navigateur, Queen of Suresne, for whom she acted as principal advisor around three hundred years before the events in the game.



*This page: (143)* A collage of the various concepts for the window and for the church interior. Aside from all the story requirements for the area, what made designing the Church so time-consuming was that the writers were working on this part of the story simultaneously. For example, the images in the top right corner of this page depict the innocence Sola, not Dolores Dei. The three bottom images are of concept sketches where we tried to figure out the distinct look of the Church. While Kasparov is still not entirely satisfied with the result, Rostov's paintover pulled it all together nicely



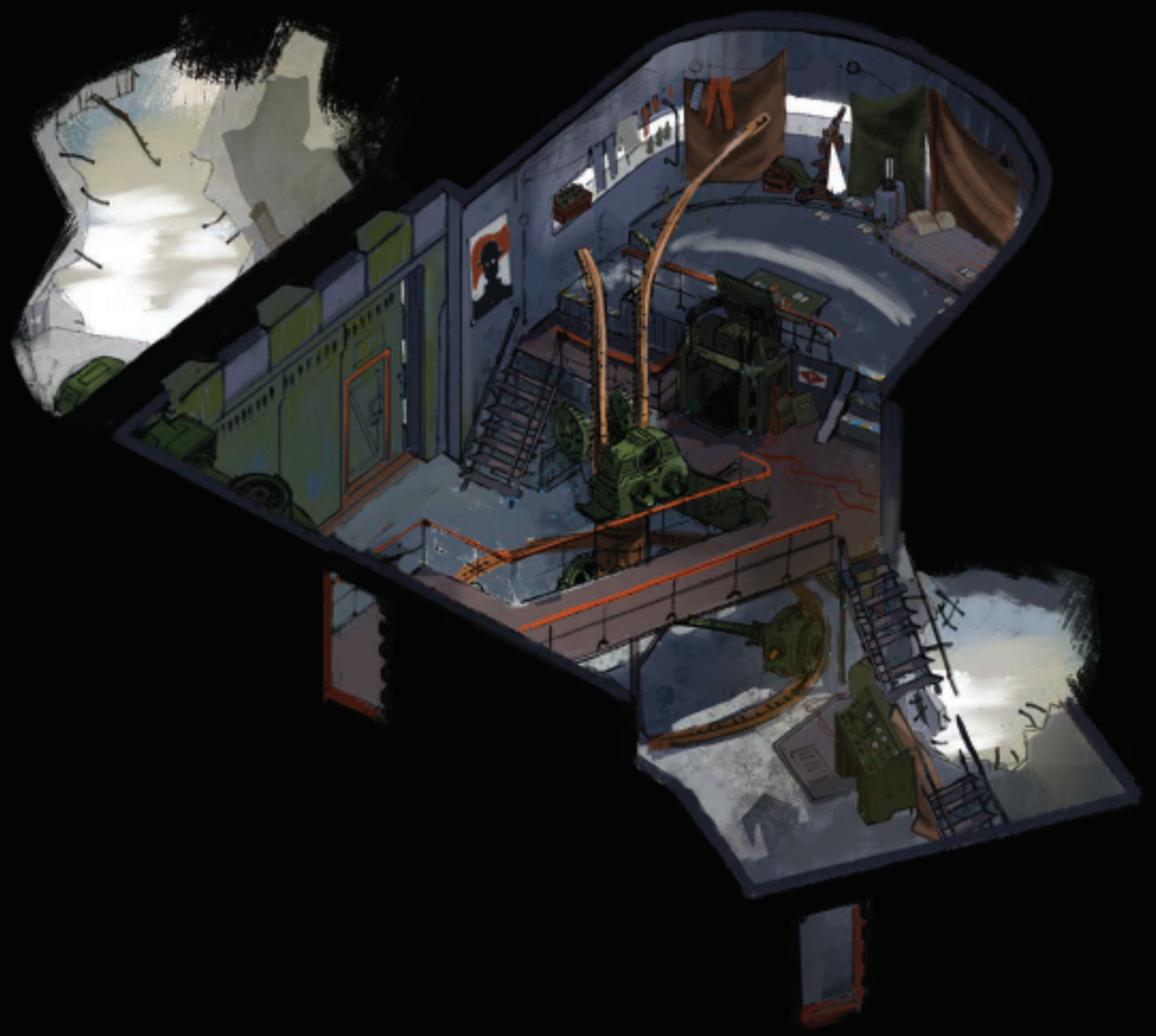



*Opposite: (144)* The painted interior map of the Feld building that once housed a now-defunct computer engineering company.

*This page: (145)* The quick concept image Marx modeled the map after. Initially, this area wasn't planned for, but we felt that it acts as a convenient interlude to Harry's descent through the building and implies that there is more to the large structure than a collapsed roof and an airless cellar.

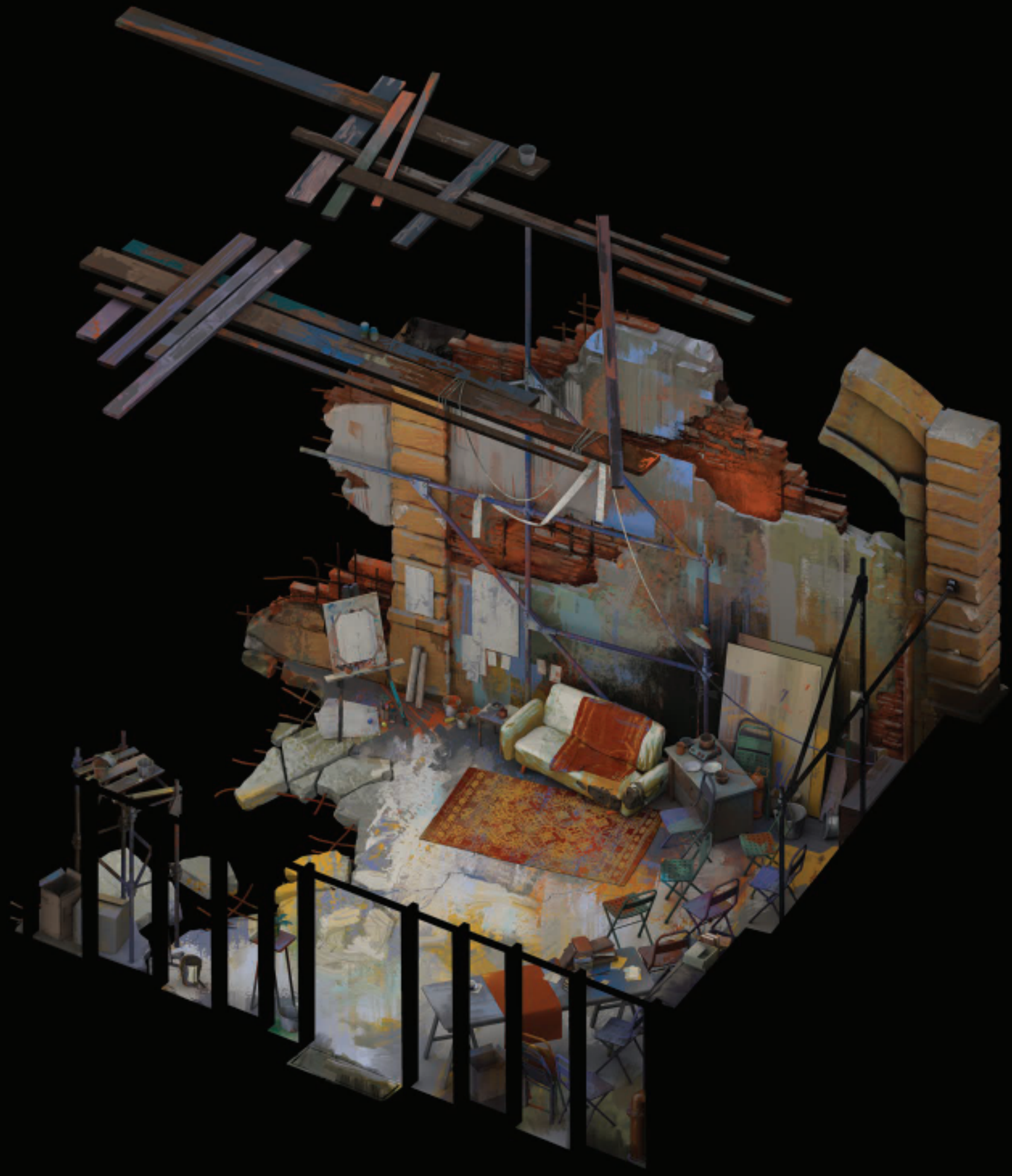


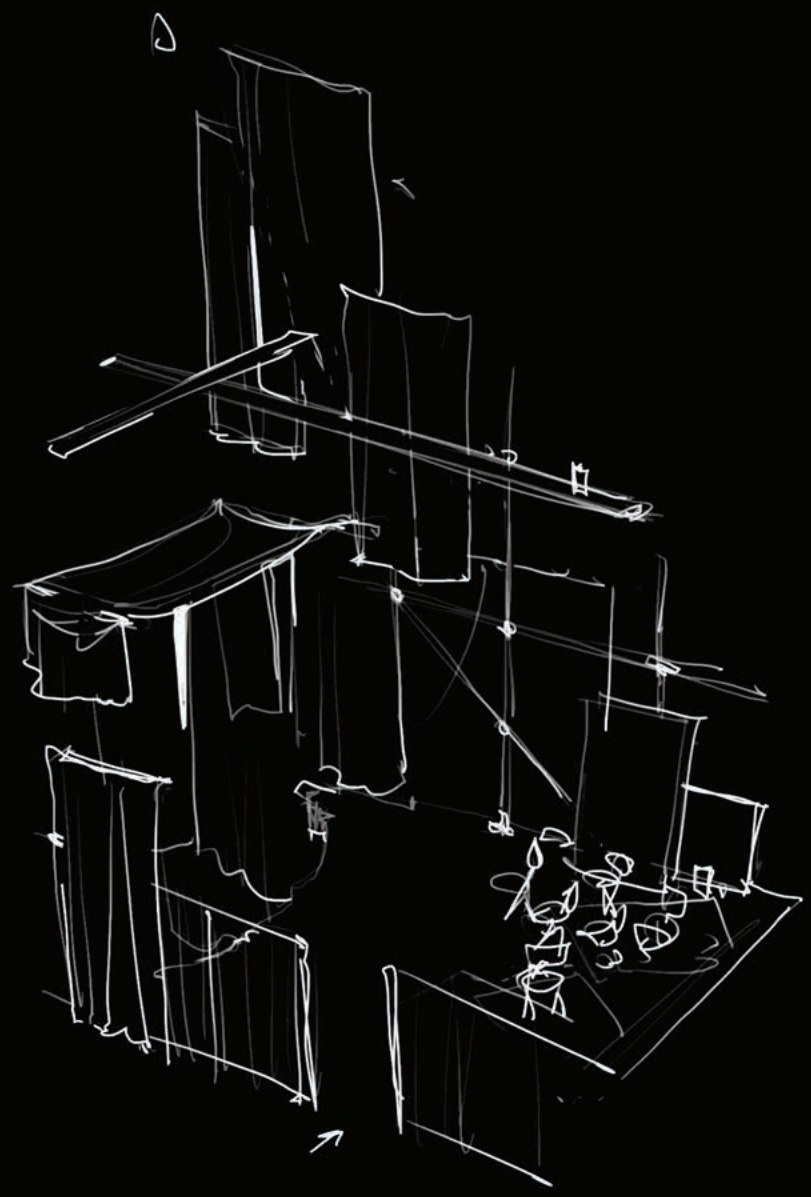


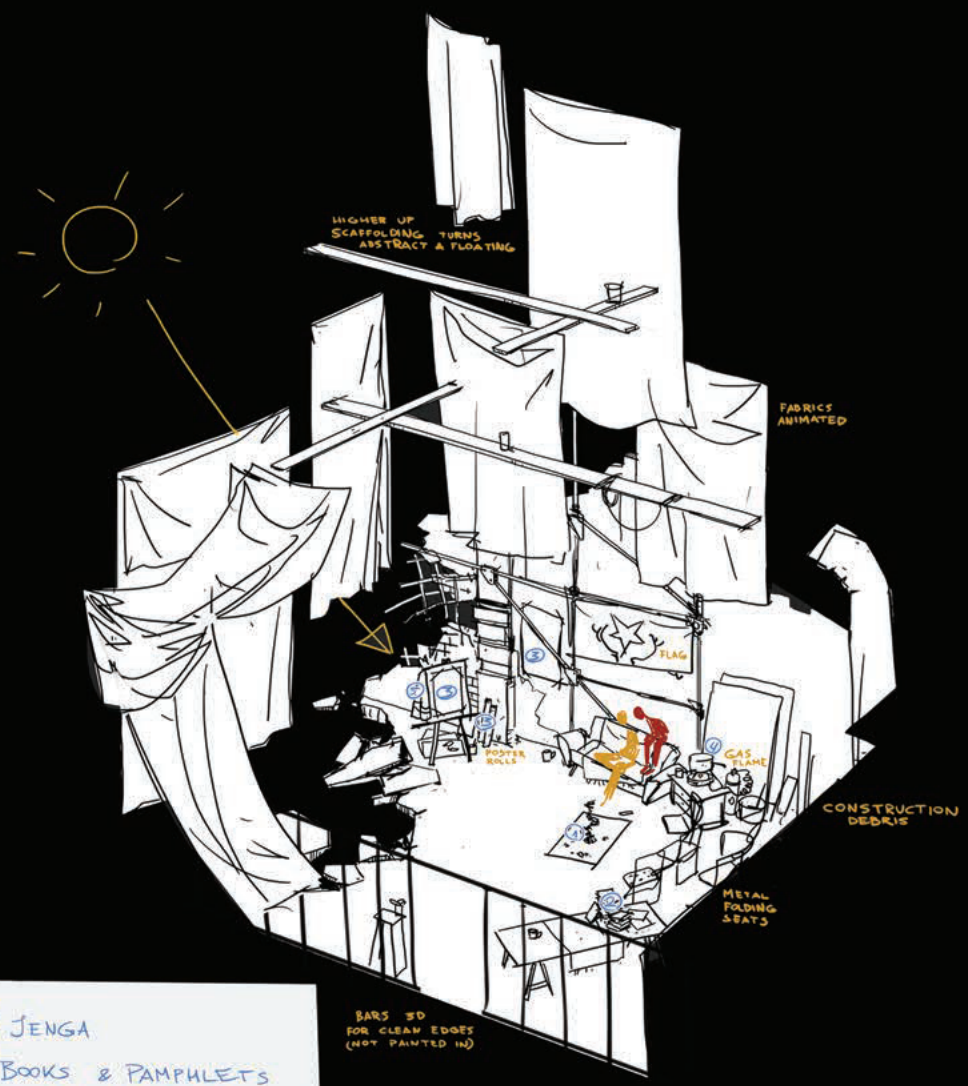



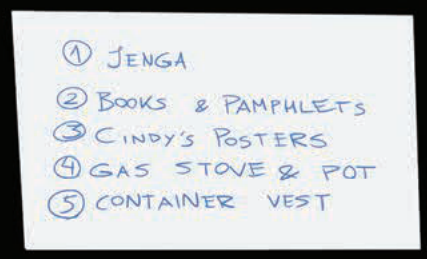
*Opposite: (146)* The painted map of the interior area of the Seafort that the player can reach in the later stages of the game.

*This page: (147)* This concept art for the Seafort map is a more detailed version of one that was done pretty early in development. If you compare this painting with the finished one on the opposite page, you'll notice a better silhouette in the finished piece. Also, Marx drew up and added a metal hatch in the lower right section to fill out the unnecessarily empty corner of the map.








*Opposite: (148)* Painted map of the Underground Reading Room (actually aboveground) somewhere in the Capeside Apartments.

*This page: (149)* Evolution of this area's design.





# CHARACTERS WITH STYLE

There is design overlap between painting and video games. The main thing that artists work with beyond mechanical competence is sensitivity. It is being able to notice *and articulate* feeling in addition to perceptions. How it feels to enter a particular room, compared to how it feels when you follow a narrow alleyway into a courtyard that in turn opens onto a waterfront promenade. What it feels like to see an ugly photograph of an attractive person and vice versa. How it feels when there are people standing to the left of you. How it feels when these people want something from you. How is it different from the feeling of when you want something from them?

Even though everything is obviously contingent on knowing construction, anatomy, understanding perspective, the real essence of work both in art and in designing video games begins when you purposefully apply that sensitivity. Earlier, when you looked at the image of flowers (see p. 18, image 11), did you notice the scissors left lying next to the vase? Don't they exude incredible violence, suddenly? Did you think of that before reading this?

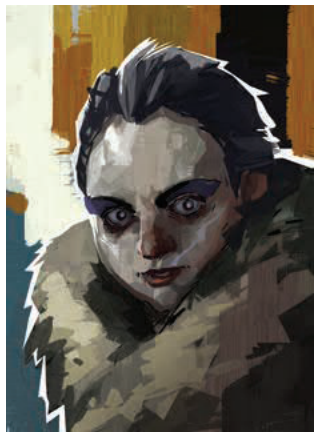
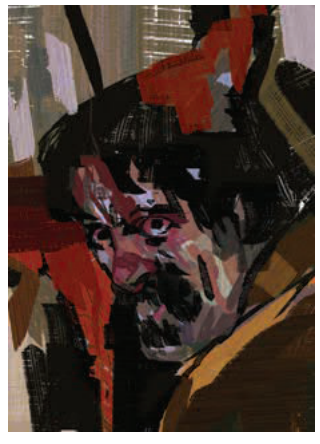
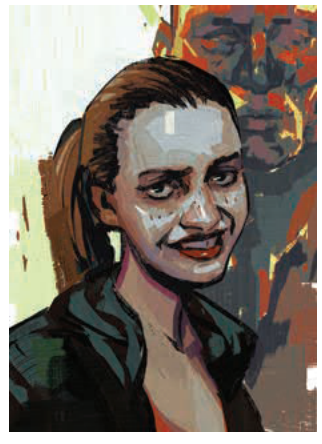
This is important. This is what gives you material. If you notice these things you can incorporate them into your work, handle it in a way to induce a particular sensation in the observer.

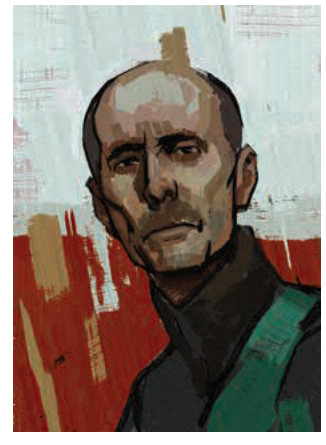
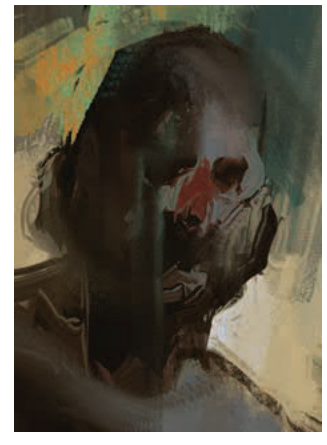
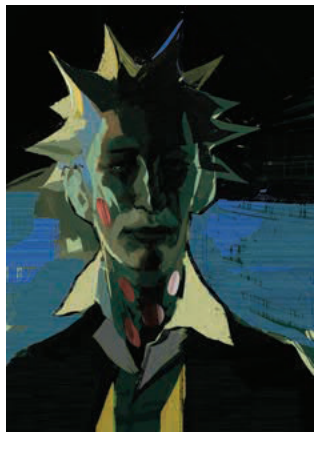
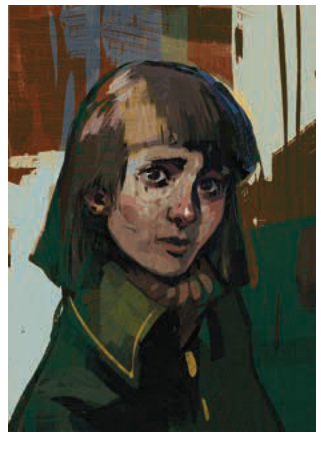
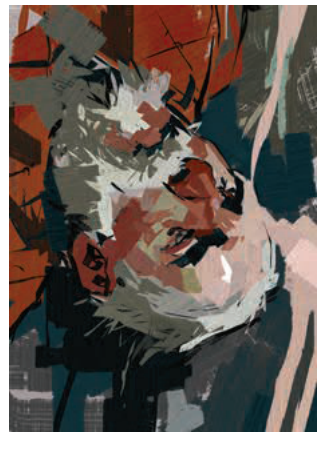
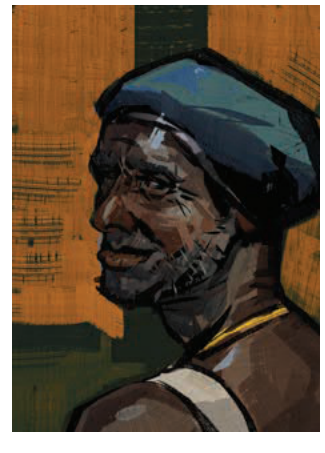
Eyes are direct, unmediated input to the brain. You like or dislike something before you have a chance to reason about it. It affects you emotionally without offering you a chance to throw up intellectual defenses first. Witnessing death and good art are materially equivalent experiences: they are visual information transmitted straight to the centers of emotion by way of the eye.

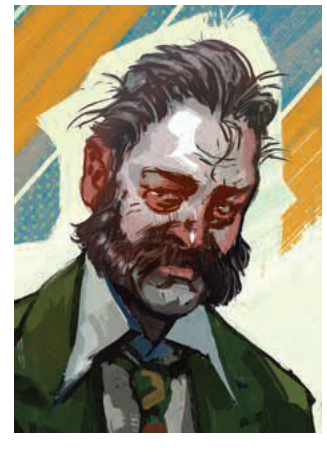
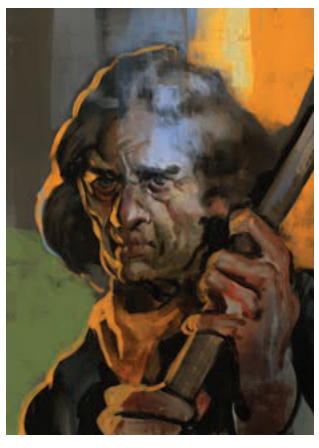
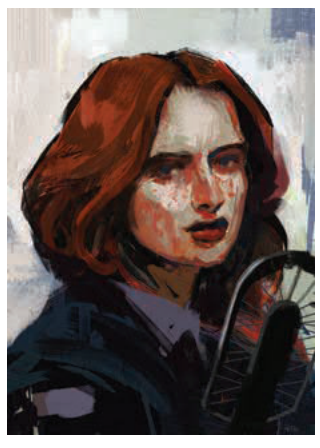
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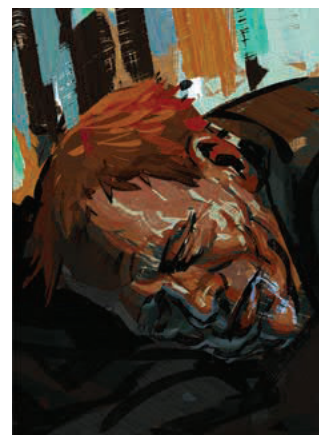
*Opposite: (150)* The Expression. When the player is not careful and Harry catches a glimpse of his face from a reflection.

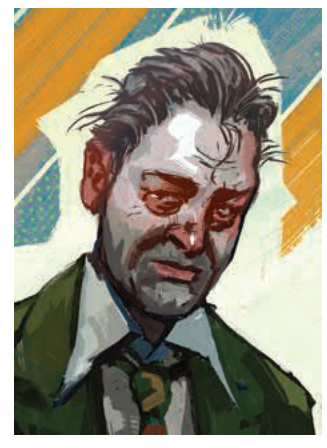
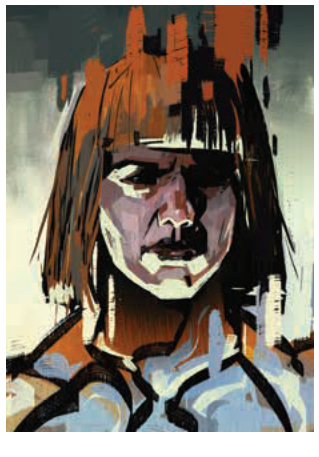
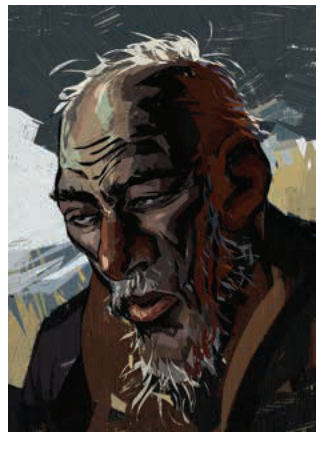
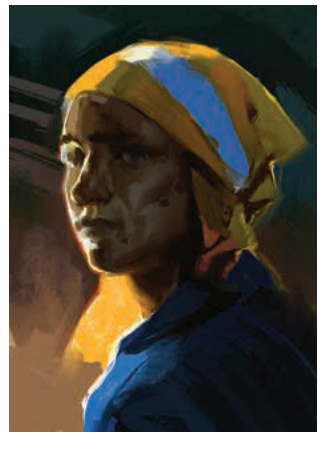
*This page: (151)* Superstar cop. Harry rocking the mike.

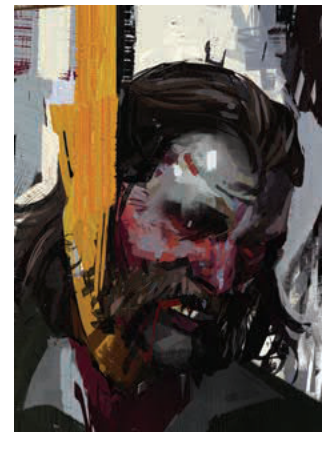








*Opposite: (152)* A collage of portraits featuring various characters the player can meet in the game. Often they differ from each other stylistically for a couple of reasons: first of all, they were painted over several years, secondly, the portraits in *Disco Elysium* are intended to convey a little something about each character's personality. This was achieved by using distinct color schemes and varied brushwork for painting the individual characters.

*This page: (153) Disco Elysium* is a game that prides itself on affording the player a great many choices that have far-reaching consequences. There are instances in the game where the player can interact with the world in ways that not only lead to new content or grant Harry improved skills or new and interesting thoughts, but also change his appearance – and his portrait – beyond a simple change of clothes.

This might explain why a person could tear up in the presence of a Rothko painting. If you're a sensitive enough instrument, seeing his *Orange, Red, Yellow* (*see p. 20, image 15*) in real life feels intense. It doesn't work on a computer screen though, you're just staring at some bright pixels imitating the appearance of the painting the same way seeing a dead person is different from seeing a picture of a dead person.

There is an ongoing old couple's bit between Rostov and Kasparov. It seems somehow that almost all of Kasparov's colors revolve around and play off of violets and reds, while all of Rostov's colors dance around greens and cool grays. As it happens, these colors are complementary.

The color red can be both spooky dark and impassioned. There are also subtle differences in varying color temperature, cold green contrasted against a warm blue. The human eye is remarkably well adapted towards distinguishing between hues of green: pastel absinthe, garish bitter lime, somber moss green, neon *Akira* green, dull teal, painful poison green, barely saturated velvet green, mid-century modern toaster green, that weird gray-green that's on the underside of some specific types of leaves, *green* green, dried up nearly brown green, and so on forever and ever.

We adjusted the color of the outlines and bits on the information layer of the game's UI to a striking bright artificial green because of this.

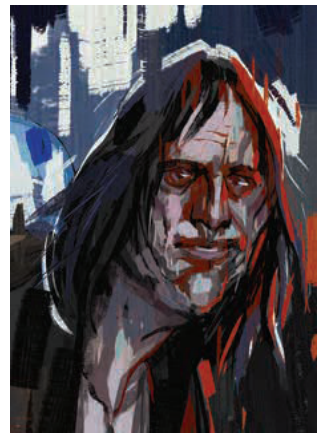
There is also the *weird*, in artmaking. Let us consider, what happens if you paint hair by moving your brush *across* the direction of the falling hair instead of *along* that direction? It is the artist's responsibility to constantly make notes about what they see and feel, then use these observations in service of their art. It took us several years to really work out the character portraits and another year to figure out the portraits for the skills.

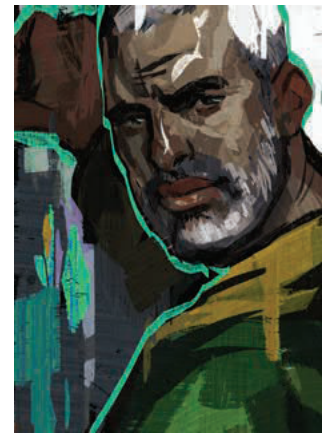
Now let's turn our attention for a few moments to the question of style. "Style" in art is notoriously difficult to talk about. The critical language has been poisoned and you need to carefully measure your words so you don't accidentally turn on the Random Bullshit Generator. In truth, style is merely the collection of techniques, shorthands, conventions, and habits that an artist develops over time. With that in mind, it's important to explore new ways of picture-making while taking note of how certain techniques, visual and semantic juxtapositions, and compositions might affect the viewer intellectually and emotionally.

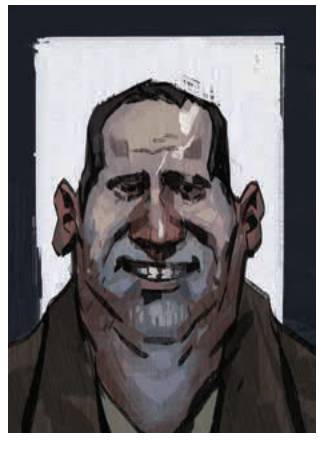
A good portion of art-making is accidental, but the artist needs to claim the credit. Vaguely, it's also about deliberately positioning yourself in a way that you can claim credit for as many seemingly accidental revelations as possible.

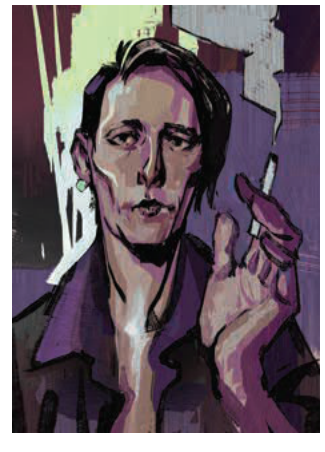
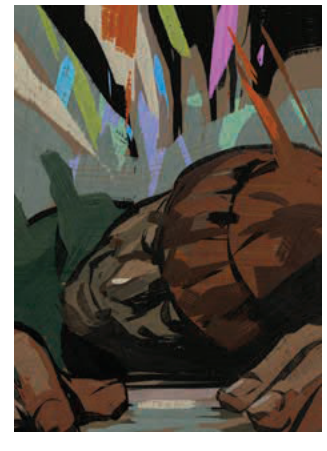
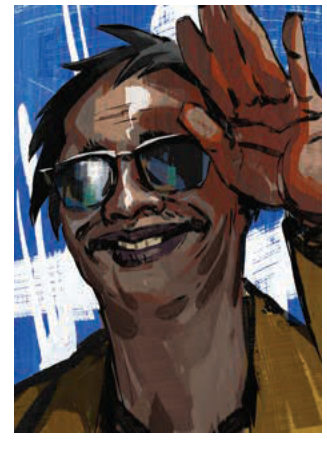
Having decided to leverage our strengths in expressive painting for the project that was not yet called *Disco Elysium*, we faced the fearful challenge of achieving a painterly quality in a real-time video game without falling into the common pits of cel shading or shader-side "paintification." Put another way, we didn't want the game's art style to dominate the art itself.

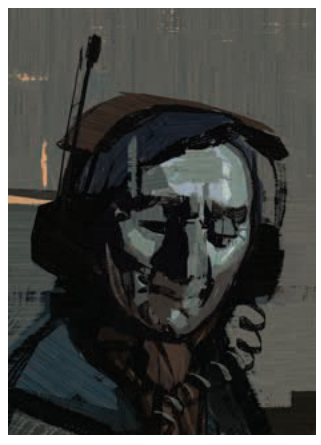


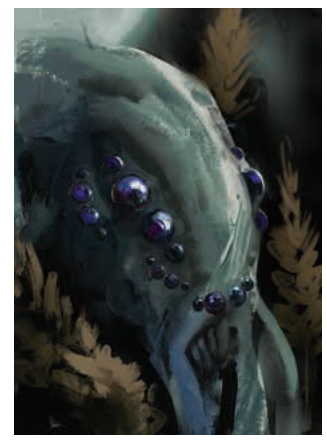
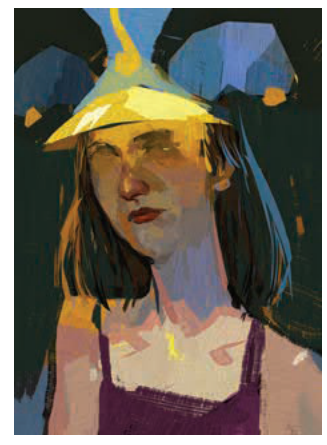
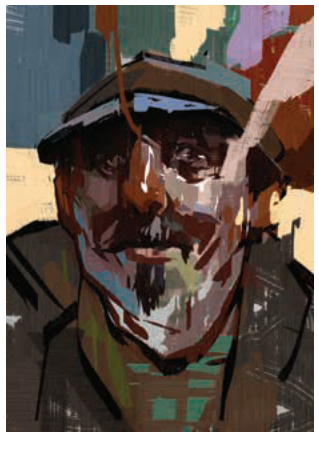






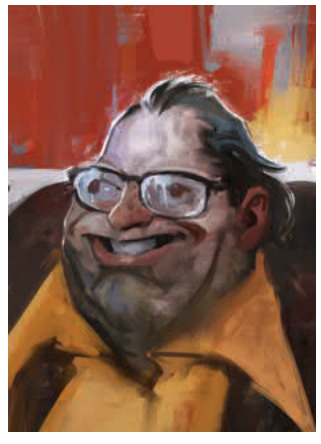










On *Disco Elysium*, we approached art-making with comedic levels of self-seriousness. Figuring out how something should look was not just a mercenary exercise in picture-making, where an illustrator could rely on a combination of fundamentals and best practices to arrive at competent imagery. Instead, we got really art school with it: Berets, nude people hanging out among the workstations, smears of paint on unshaven legs, and, of course, that unhealthy lingering smell of turpentine.

Our approach to the non-player character portraits was partly informed by a considered necessity – speed. Every character was to have a portrait and for the benefit of our writers each character's portrait needed to be completed as early in development as possible. It is much easier to conjure up a character's voice if you have their face to study. Every painted mark matters and there is little time to lose on rendering.

With that constraint established, we get to move onto the more interesting bits.

Good art does not simply illustrate the text. It tells its own story. To that end, every individual character portrait must have unique expressive qualities also embedded in the technique. This allows us to suggest different aspects of each character's persona and story using just the mechanics of how their portrait is painted.

Idiot Doom Spiral, a colorful and peculiar alcoholic, has a portrait that is disintegrating at the level of the brushstroke, a visual metaphor for the way his life has fallen apart. Contrast this with Sylvie, presented as a simple person with a simple life and a straightforward portrait, deliberately boring in its professionalism to reflect how our protagonist perceives her. You have no access to the depth of her soul.

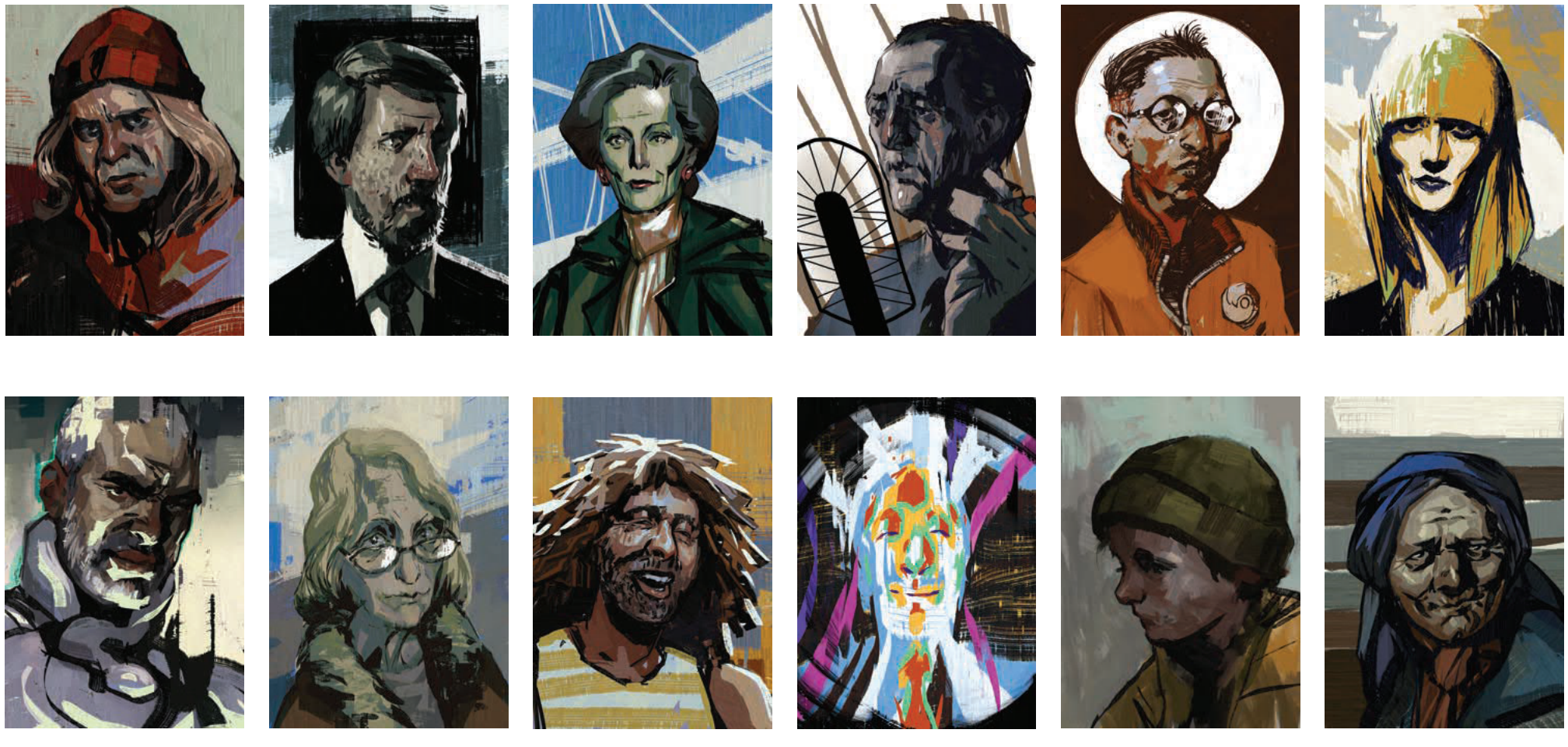
All the Union members' portraits have red as a shared motif repeating in their backgrounds. The unknown portrait you start with before looking in the mirror is a ghastly parody of Francis Bacon, ominous in anticipation of its own unveiling. The technique itself expresses something about the person. Most portraits in the game have little exercises in symbolism embedded in them, and we've taken great joy in watching people online attempt to decipher them.

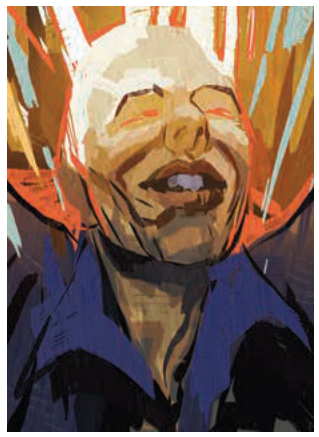
Do real estate agents even have souls to depict? Sometimes figuring out the approach to an individual portrait takes ages. Sometimes the execution takes just half an hour. Other times, you sit down with one portrait for days and go through iteration after iteration as pressure builds.

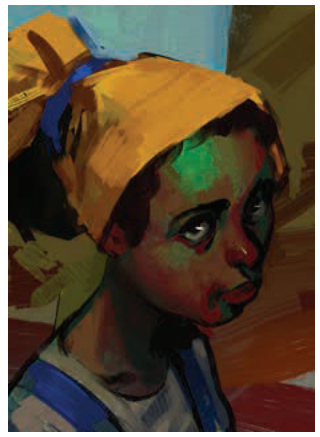
There is an interesting detail we noticed in some of the art for Kim Kitsuragi. It appears that he has an abstract touch of blue on his forehead both in his in-game portrait and in the painting made for the game's cover art. This is not because Kim should have a blue forehead per se, or that he is somehow meant to be painted this way. It seems that the internal logic of how Rostov

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*This spread: (154)* A collage of even more character portraits from the game.











processes colors ends up needing to add that bit of something cold just about on the forehead area to freshen things up. Kim is all dressed in warm colors so it makes sense for you to need something cold for balance. This also results in a wonderful touch of characterization: Kim with the cold calculating mind. Kim, the cool and refreshing counterpoint to Harry's sweat and fever.

The skill portraits are deliberately different and much more measured. The aggressively hard edges that dominate the portraits for very physical characters have been replaced with softer, gentler, almost ephemeral brushwork for others. It's important the congress of your psyche feel immediately different from the material world.

The one massive innovation during development that came from the art department happened with the skill portraits. Here the interplay between the different creative departments had its moment in the sun and is just a feel-good game development story.

"Your skills talk to you!" has become one of the primary slogans bandied about around the game. That was not in the original design brief. Our first intent was to have the skills interject in a laconic manner by feeding you simple practical information without any characterization, lines like "It's hard to tell, but he's probably lying."

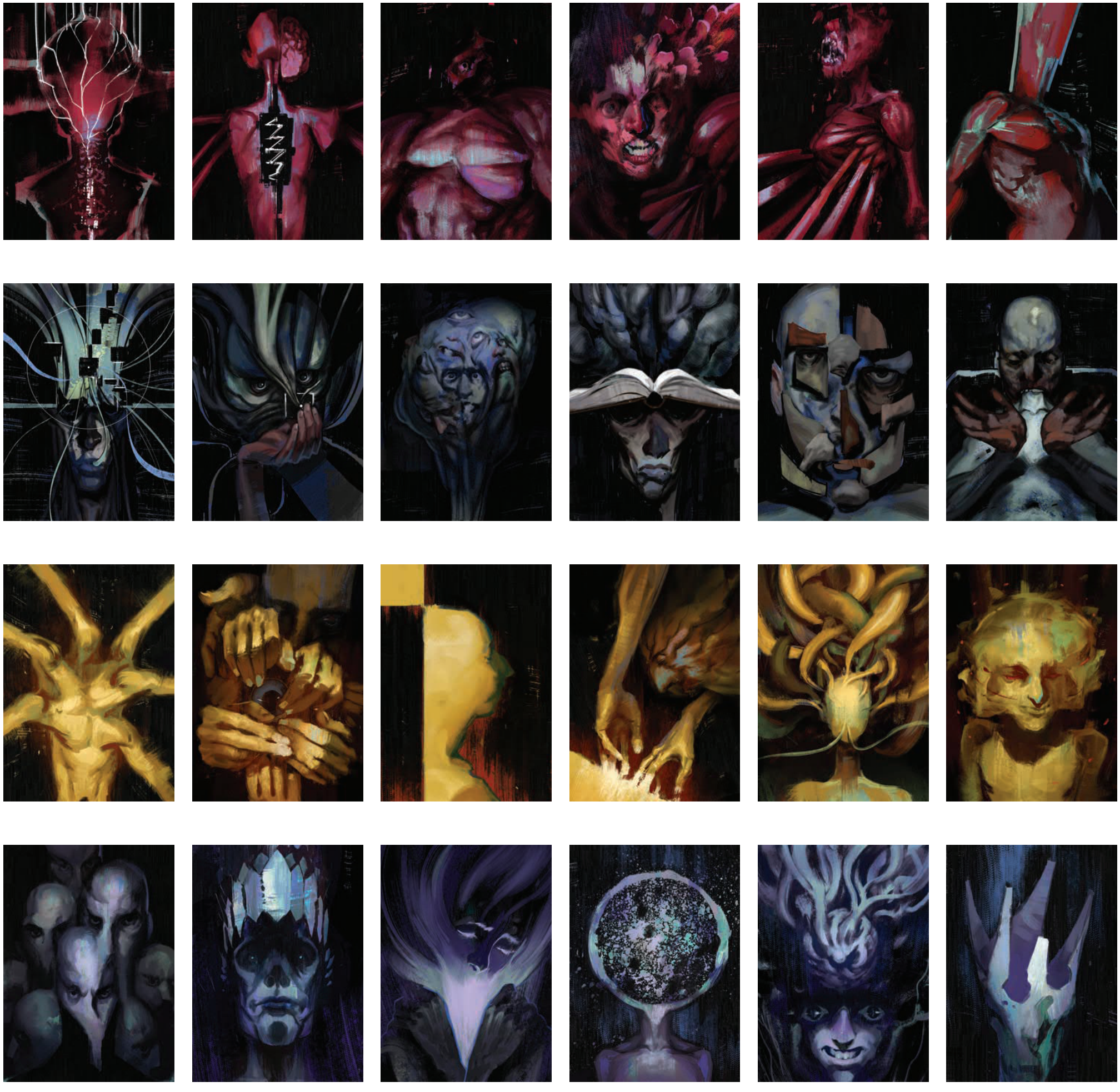
For a long time, we went back and forth on what the skill "icons" should look like. We even considered having skills be displayed in a square format as opposed to the tall portrait frame. One evening like halfway into the development of *Disco Elysium*, Robert came over after a long day at the studio to catch up on the latest and greatest of funny images online – the only moment of respite for many of us in the Great Grind. We quickly lost interest though and started discussing the issues of the day. Probably something like "Screw it, let's just give them, like, weird portraits?" was said and the next day Rostov started working on the skills as you've seen them in the game.

After the portraits made their way into the game and Articy – a veritable Photoshop for digital narrative the writers use – the skills started becoming distinct characters one by one. Suddenly they had faces! Bulging eyes, mouths agape, projecting emotion, and *personality*. And slowly "It's hard to tell, but he's probably lying," became the obnoxious and beloved "Sire! One may not be certain but we may be in the company of falsehoods." ◀

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*This spread: (155)* A collage of portraits from the game. There were a lot of characters and all of them needed portraits, you see.

*Following spread: (156)* All of the skills the player can develop and talk to. They talk back too. These are the updated versions made for the *Final Cut*; *(157)* The large painting is of Reaction Speed.











# INTERFACING

When we began thinking about UI design for *Disco Elysium* – the menus, HUD elements, buttons, and various graphics – we started out illustrating mockups for a recognizable, classic computer role-playing game. This felt stale. Suddenly, there was talk about *something something* Feld and various elements started falling into place – celluloid tape reels with chemical defects, minimalist graphic elements contrasting with expressively painterly yet intentionally stylized elements.

Because reading and managing your inventory and thoughts are such an integral part of *Disco*, we knew this area of the game's design could not be overlooked. And yet we somehow managed to ship *Disco Elysium* without a dedicated UI/UX developer on the art team. (In fact, to this day we still don't have one, though we may have to rectify that situation in the future). We put on our investigator's pants and pored over tons of material: video games we liked, video games we didn't particularly like – but which had good design – video art, all kinds of graphic design, and original mechanics.

A particular challenge was the dialogue window. Many of our predecessors – other studios that had put out text-heavy role-playing or adventure games – consigned their text to a horizontal dialogue window aligned to the lower center of the screen. This design might be functional, but not ideal for reading the long, frequently discursive blocks of text the writers were producing. With our word count growing by the day, this became an interesting challenge. We knew we wanted to avoid waves of text drowning the reader while also using the real estate of the horizontal screen to its fullest extent. We took heart from a few successful examples that broke the horizontal mode, namely Harebrained Schemes' *Shadowrun Returns*.

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*This spread, clockwise: (158)* Readymade character archetypes for a new player to choose from. The first one is the Sensitive type: empathetic, fragile; *(159)* The dynamic reddish figure is the Physical type: even his hair follicles are attuned to his immediate surroundings. He can be scary at times but gets your foot in the door. Or through that door. Or perhaps over a wall; *(160)* The blue one is the Thinker: smart, rational, a little boring, perhaps.


INVENTORY
MENIX PEPPERBOX
DMG: 2
ARM: 1 ds
RNG: Med
LOAD: 2 shots
RELOAD: 2 ds
CAL: 9mm
A small sidearm manufactured by the Menix enterprise.
QUICKDRAW
inch




At some point, Rostov disappeared for a week and returned with a folder full of design proposals. What followed was a lot of helicoptering around his desk accompanied by heated discussion. Rinse. Repeat.

While we were inching closer to a look we could call *our own*, we still faced the problem of exhausting our players with a seemingly endless torrent of (vertically aligned) text. The solution had been staring us in the face the whole time. A certain multi-billion dollar social networking service, in constant development by a multinational conglomerate, had already spent astronomical sums of money becoming *the best* interface for handling and presenting exorbitant amounts of text. Why not coast off their lavishly funded efforts? When our writers began formatting the text as bite-sized, easy-to-read paragraphs, we finally saw we were on to something. The fertile, VC-watered soil of Silicon Valley did not disappoint.

A similar procedure was followed for every other piece of menu design we had no business in reimagining.

If you've played *Disco Elysium*, you'll notice how the overall aesthetic you see in the Inventory screen mockup reproduced here anticipates the final art, but it took us a good minute to figure out how all the pieces really fit together, what elements needed to be animated, and *how*. ◂

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*This spread: (161)* A legacy mockup screenshot for the Inventory screen from the early days in development when we were just beginning to figure out what would make the game's UI distinctly *Disco*. What's an ATTACK CYCLE, though?

*Following spread: (162)* What follows is a spread of assorted items, or rather, icons for the inventory items. Some of these the player can drag and drop onto their character to wear or equip, some they can interact with in other ways: sniff, imbibe, snort, smoke, read, throw away, or put on their face.

Nailing down the aesthetic balance between clear and easily recognizable shapes and interesting painterly brushwork did not happen overnight. It is the result of months upon months of painting. There are around two hundred distinct items in the game. Or are there more? We've lost count.

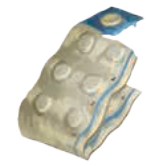

DICK MULLEN
DICK MULLEN
FALN
Oranjenrijk
WIRRAL
WIRRAL



RCM
19823


A PRIMER
FOR SMALL KIDS

KVALSUND



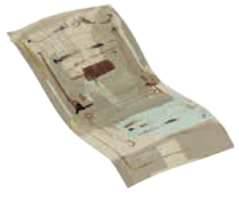








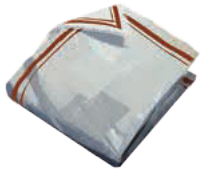


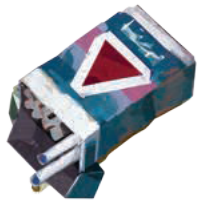


















Suzerainty
Suzerainty















*Opposite: (163)* A monochrome etching of Kim dating back to the early days of pre-production. Kim Kitsuragi, a fan favorite, a man of the people. Kim's design was a slam dunk from the get-go.

*This page, top: (164)* An array of body shots of our hero: Tequila Sunset, or is it Raphaël Ambrosius Costeau? Kras Mazov himself? Harrier Du Bois. Hobocop. Apocalypse Cop. Boring Cop. Art Cop. The player gets to decide. Unlike Kim, Harry went through a number of re-designs. Sure, the basics remained in place, but as we were rethinking our approach to the character creation pipeline, Harry started changing along with it.;

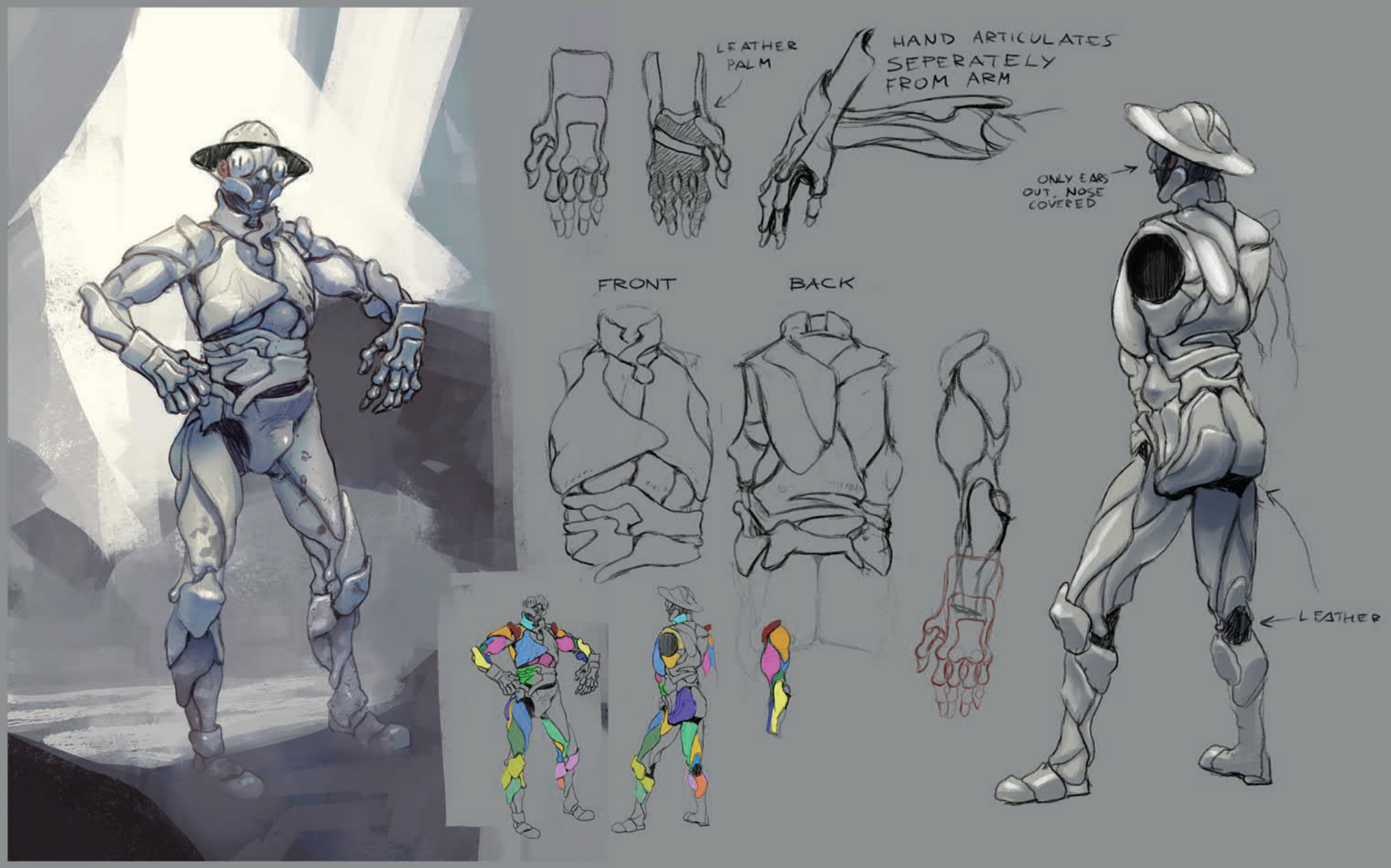
*This page, bottom: (165)* A painting of Kim; *(166)* HOBOCOP.












There is a wide assortment of clothing that the player can discover, trade for, or steal. Each article of clothing affects Harry's attributes in some way and gives some mix of penalties and bonuses to various skill checks. A few special articles also open up entirely new branches or conversations.

*Opposite, top row: (167)* The Polar Anorak. It keeps you warm and looks cool. It also gives you a bonus for your Shivers skill; *(168)* Design for the Interisolary Two-Piece set. Comprising a suit jacket, matching trousers, and dress shirt. For a true sartorialist. It makes you look*smart*. Dress to impress!

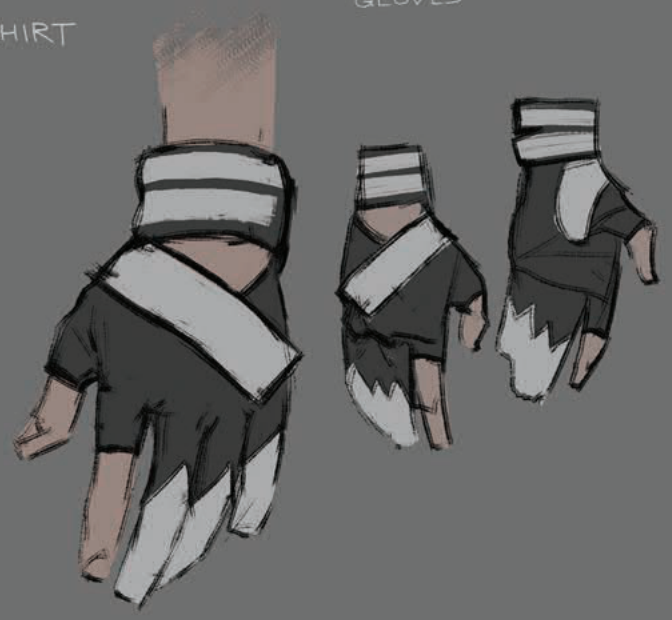
*Opposite, bottom row: (169)* Harry posing in the classically double-breasted Signal-Blue Naval Coat. Second-hand; *(170)* A Party Dragon's Silk Robe. Very decadent, a tad culturally insensitive.

*This page: (171)* A detailed concept painting with a clown pass guide to the modeler for a suit of Fairweather T-500 ceramic armor. A special, difficult-to-find set of protective gear. Doubles as character art for Ruud Hoerkloewen, a mercenary soldier you'll meet later in the game.


1


2


FALN
„ARROWER" SHIRT


FALN „ULTRA"
GLOVES

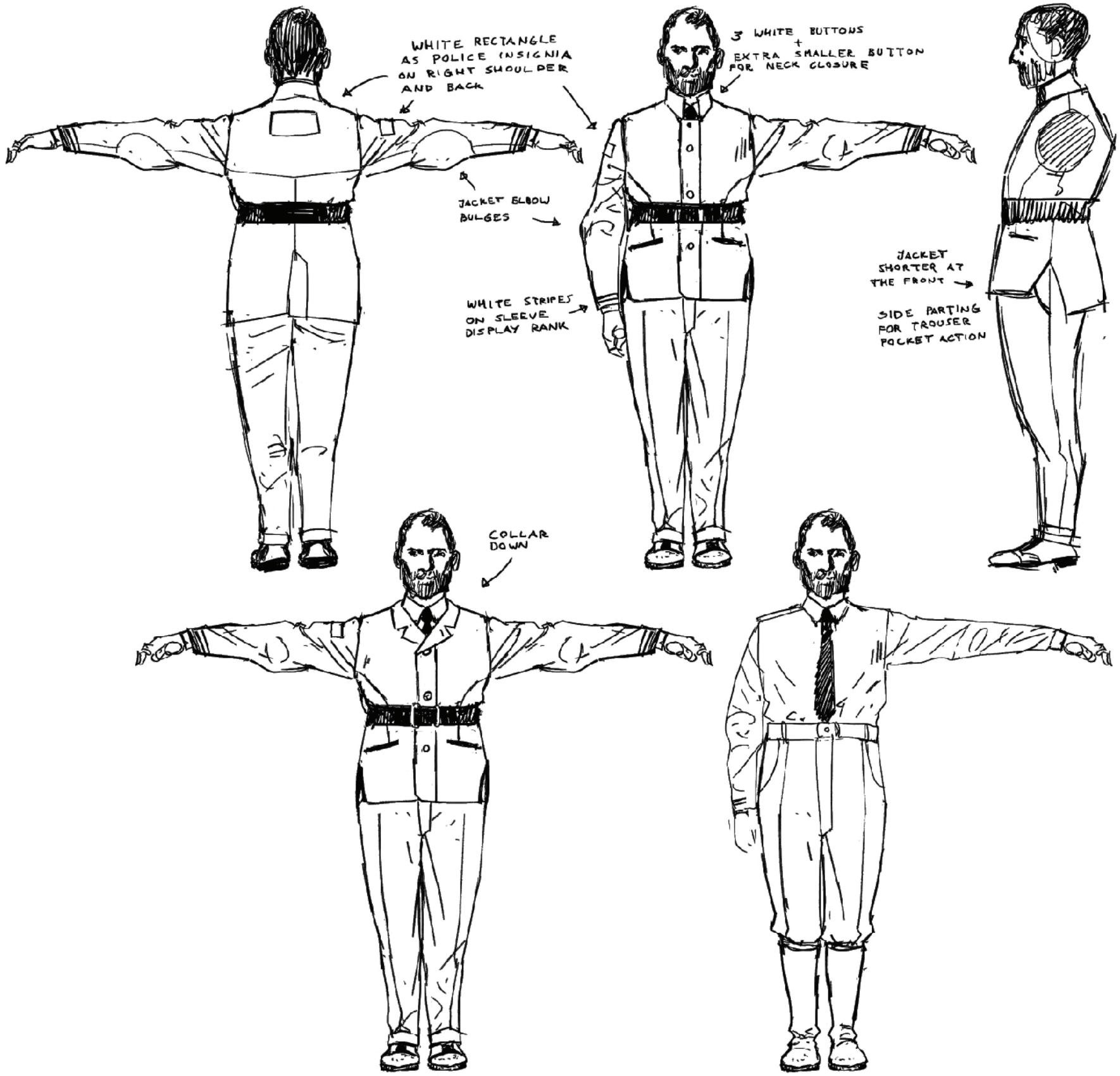

FALN „FALN"
WINDBREAKER


FALN
„PIPO"
" HAT


3


4






*Opposite: (172)* Explorative sketches for the FALN tracksuit. We needed to get this one right.

*This page: (173)* Costume design for the RCM officer's uniform.






















*Opposite, clockwise: (174)* A pinup of Cuno's mid-development redesign; *(175)* Smoker on the Balcony, a character who's painfully impenetrable even to Superdetective Harrier Du Bois; *(176)* A first jab at Cuno and Cunoesse.

*This page, clockwise: (177)* The Gardener, another character who is more than she seems; *(178)* A pinup of Lily, Lilienne's daughter, with Lamby, her stuffed toy animal; *(179)* Concept painting for Lilienne, the Net Picker; *(180)* Final concept art for Bird's Nest Roy and a selection of images from the design phase. Only a few characters went through such a rigorous process.
















*Opposite: (181)* The long-suffering colleagues Harry has forgotten all about. Some of the very first art made for the video game project.

*This page, clockwise: (182)* The Pigs. You'll have to meet her, to understand; *(183)* Paledriver, a long-haul lorry driver; *(184)* The final design for Joyce Leyton-Messier, representative of the Wild Pines Group; *(185)* Gary. He's got something you'll want. It's pretty obvious.


TRIIKSÄRK, HELKURVEST, ÕHUKE PARKA
ÜLAKEHA MANNATOPSI TATOKAGA KAETUD
HELKUR TATT
SUURED VIIKARID
VILLASED SOKID
















*This spread, top row: (186)* Concept art for Andre, a raver with a plan; *(187)* Character explorations for Call Me Mañana; *(188)* Titus Hardie, leader of the Hardie boys.

*This spread, bottom row: (189)* Character art for the clerk at the Frittte kiosk with a couple of exploratory sketches; *(190)* A collage of exploratory sketches for Tommy Le Homme, the lorry driver who's far from home; *(191)* Acele. She has a problem with hats.


MEASURHEAD 1
VARIANTS 1


MEASURHEAD 1
VARIANTS 2


MEASURHEAD 1
VARIANTS 3


A
B
C
D
MEASURHEAD 2
VARIANTS


A
B
C
D
MEASURHEAD 1
VARIANTS




MEASURHEAD 1
TATTOO 3-1


MEASURHEAD 1
TATTOO 3-1


MEASURHEAD 1
TATTOO 3-2





*Opposite: (192)* A collage of concept design variations for Measurehead; *(193)* Concept art for one of Measurehead's Babes, this one by Rostov.

*This page, from the top: (194)* Mehdi in his painting getup; *(195)* Mikk Metsniit admiring Mehdi's mural in London.

# MEASUREHEAD

It was the summer of 2019 when we had to accept we were stuck with Measurehead. He was like a parody of a man – complete with the wrong voice and a dubious design. But the writing around him was monumentally good and it felt like a massive waste to leave him half-baked. The problem was none of our artists had a second to spare to breathe some kind of life into him.

We needed someone new. Someone with fresh eyes and the time to give the character the power he demanded. Moroccan artist Mehdi Annassi was our first choice. By happy coincidence, he was set to travel to London the same month to paint a mural in North Kensington.

So we met. We talked about the character. He agreed and immediately started drafting. Rostov was really happy for the help and together they nailed it. Measurehead was alive and kicking within a month.

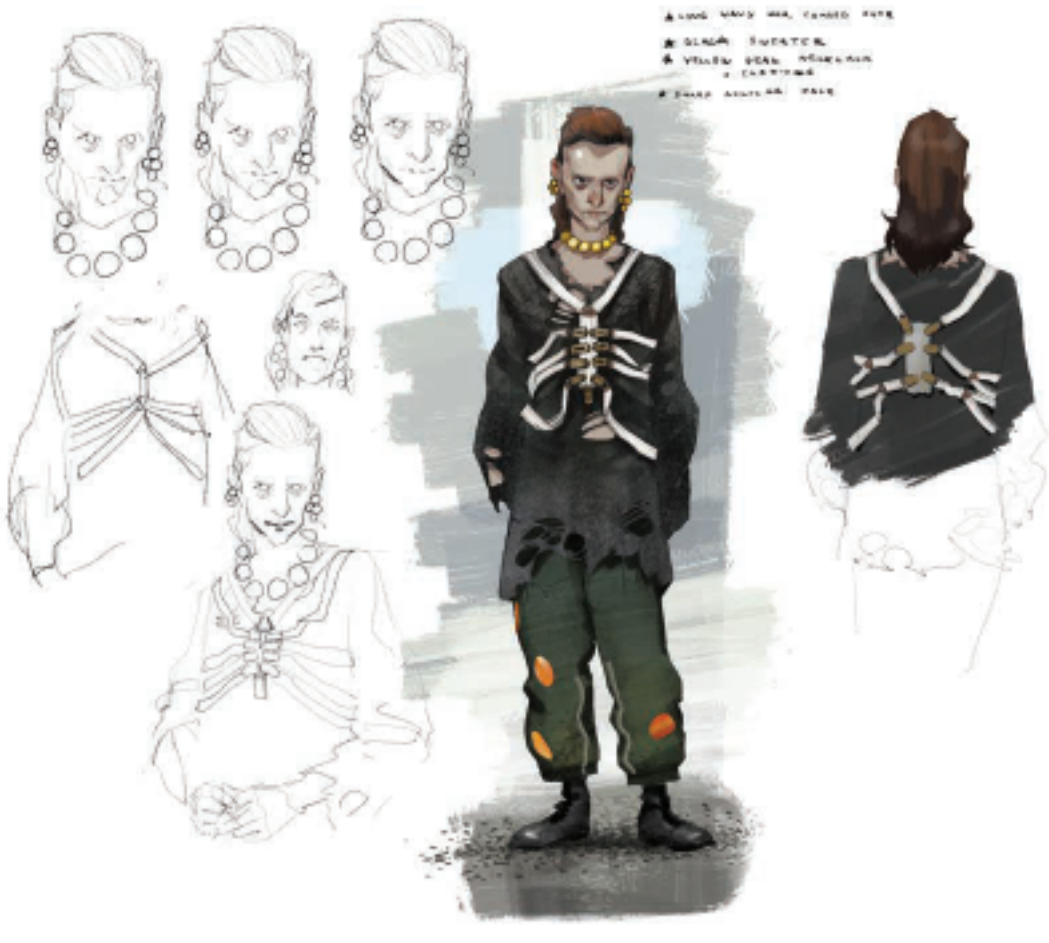
Mehdi helped us beyond that, too – he hooked us up with Moroccan rapper Dizzy DROS, whose voice acting infused Measurehead with raw energy and pure fun.

Looking back, I feel super happy that we were stuck at that time. Working with both of these great guys made *Disco Elysium* so much better and richer.

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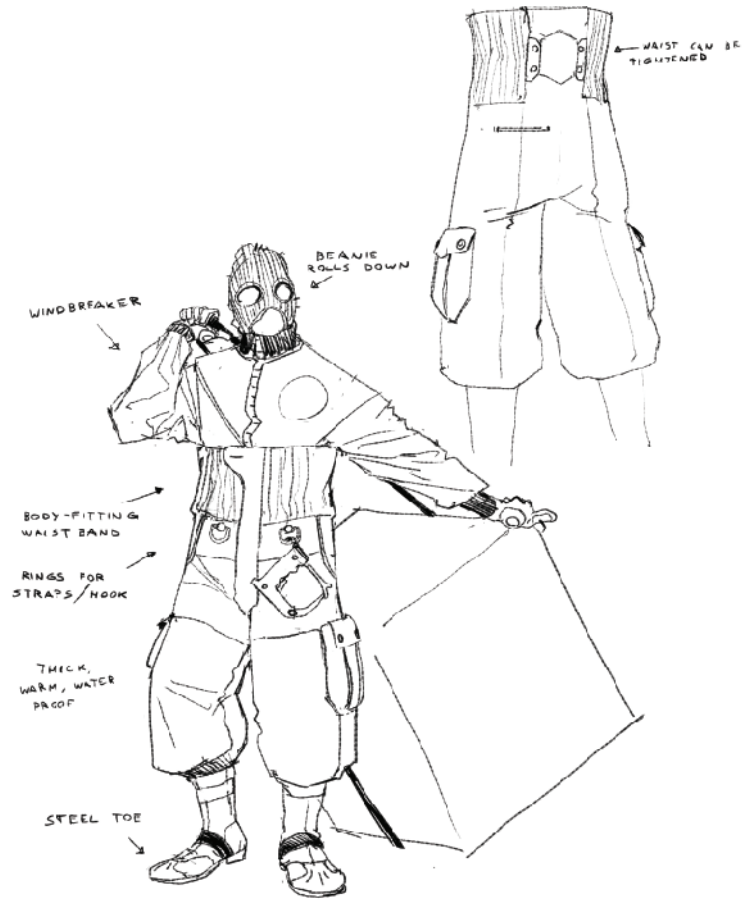
*Kaur Kender, executive producer*
*London, England*
*December 2020*


1 SUPER TIGHT SEVERAL SIZES TOO SMALL WINDBREAKER STRETCHED OVER A WELL-TONED ANGULAR TORSO
2 SLEEVES WAY TOO SHORT
3 RIPPED & SOLID BODY IN CONTRAST WITH THE BAGGY OVERALLS
4 BAGGY ONE PIECE OVERALLS ROLLED DOWN TO THE WAIST AND HELD UP WITH A BELT
5 EMPTY SLEEVES LIKE SOME KIND OF "EVANGELION" MECHA PROTRUSIONS
6 BOOTS PROTRUDING FROM HANGING FOLDS














*Opposite, from the top: (196)* A turnaround of the Scab Leader the player can encounter in the Jam. And later, under rather different circumstances; *(197)* Character design spread for Noid with a scrapped drawing to the side.

*This page, clockwise: (198)* Concept art for a scab; *(199-200)* Explorations of the dockworkers' attire; *(201)* Washerwoman. She'll take you in.


RAPIST
OLD MILITARY COAT
WORN BACKWARDS










*This spread, top row: (202)* Plaisance, owner of the Bookstore; *(203)* Soona Luukanen-Kilde, the (former) Lead Programmer of Fortress Accident; *(204)* Tiago, the blind (former) banger with an enviable physique, now preoccupied with more… spiritual matters; *(205)* Young Anette, Plaisance's daughter; *(206)* An early concept design for the game's other iconic duo: Pissf****t and Fuck the World.

*This spread, bottom row: (207)* A page of character exploration for Cindy the SKULL. She's an artist.


SHEEPSKIN "EXPLORER" JACKET & SWEATER
FLEECE BLANKET
SLIP-ONS










*Opposite: (208)* Concept art for Lena, the Cryptozoologist's wife.

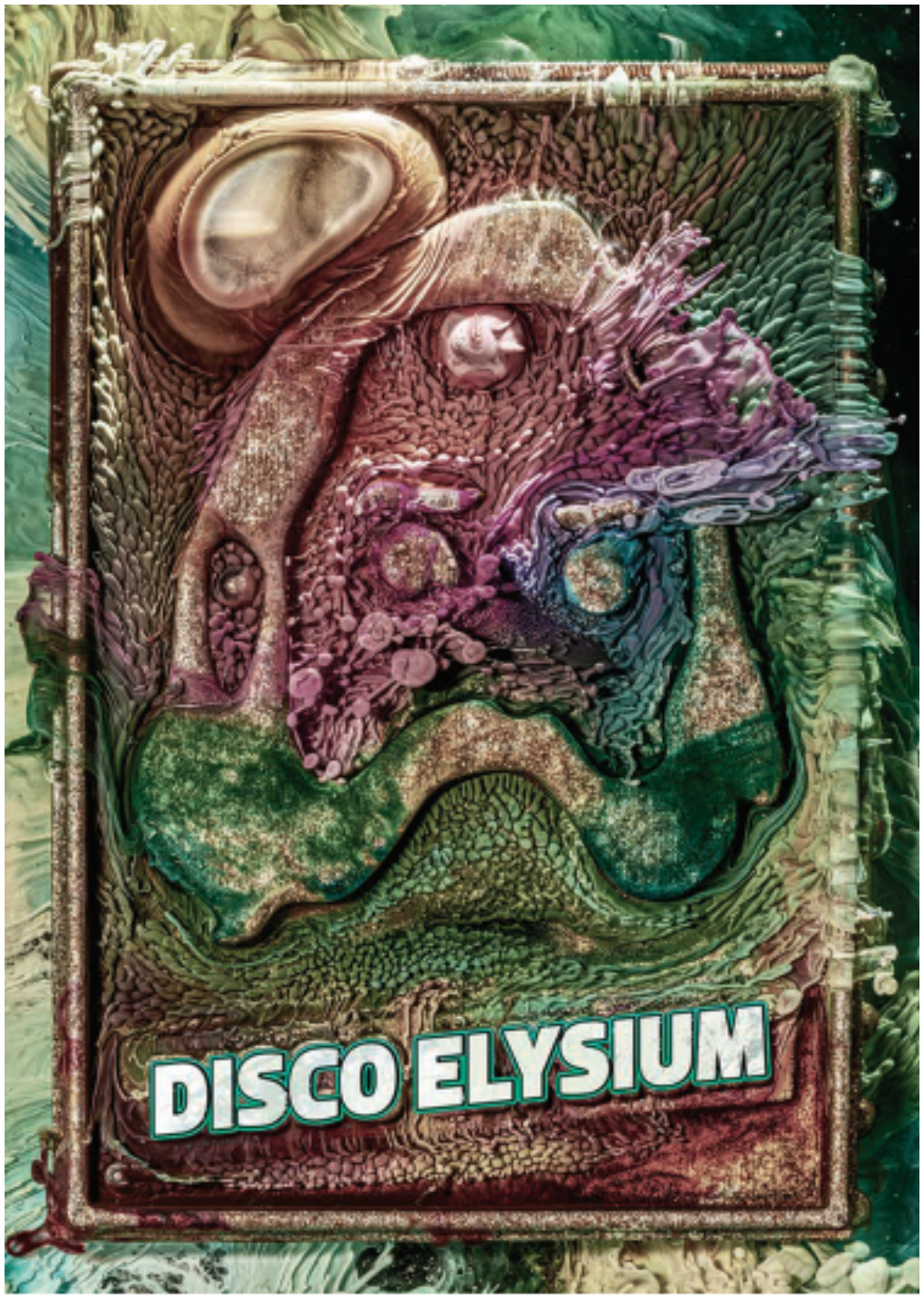
*This page, top row: (209)* As it says in big blocky letters: THIS IS EVRART CLAIRE. He runs the Dockworkers' Union during the events of the game;*(210)* An early exploration of Joyce; This page, bottom row: *(211)* The decorated war veteran René Arnoux and rival (or closest friend), Gaston Martin;*(212)* Idiot Doom Spiral. Could it be that this man is even more down on his luck than our hero?








@19Gecko






# INFLUENCE

In our youth, we were enamored with the pencilwork of Wesley Burt *(see p. 20, image 14)* and the illustrations for early *Degenesis* drawn in expressive charcoal by Marko Djurdjevic. Later, we got into the distorted and evocative portraits by the British painter Jenny Saville *(see p. 19, image 12)* and the abstracted brushwork and stylized use of color by painter Alex Kanevsky (see p. 18, image 8), the sinister use of material by Adrian Ghenie, and the stupid fun of Dadaist collages. We've always held in high regard the virtuoso skill demonstrated by artists like Anders Zorn and John Singer Sargent, Ilya Repin, and Mikhail Vrubel. Our influences are almost too numerous to mention but these should give you an idea.

Influences work in multiple ways. As an active artist with skin in the game, what you like is at times less important than what you dislike. The list is long, but in brief: the crudeness of high modernism in Cezanne (his genius sense for design notwithstanding), the over-rendered porcelain surfaces of Ingres, and maybe most importantly, the self-importance and vacuousness of the contemporary art scene. The latter has long since given up any pretense of being the custodians of what is historically relevant art of and for the human endeavor.

More than the works of any individual artist, whether beloved or hated, we are influenced by our friends and comrades in the studio: Learning together, doing 12-hour life drawing marathons, sharing ideas and techniques, shitting on bad art in private conversation, and generally pushing one another to the edge of our capabilities. Seeing other serious artists at work is a life-changing experience.

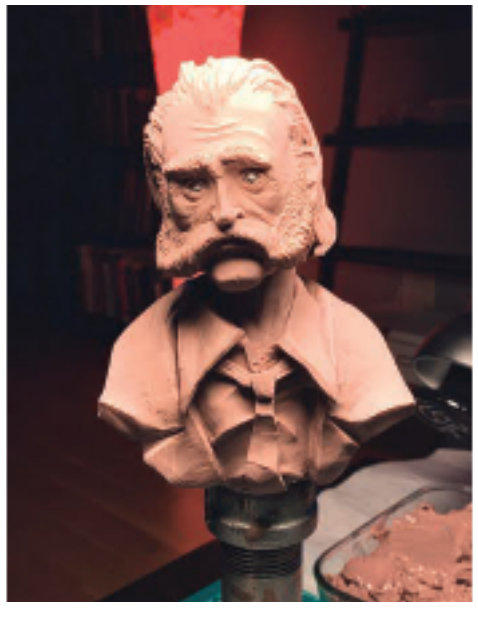
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*This spread, top row: (213) Cuno and Cunoesse* by Nanna Stahlschmidt; *(214) A Detective Tabletop RPG* by Tom Lightfoot; *(215) Electrochemistry* by James Fox.

*This spread, bottom row: (216) Nosey2* by Gecko; *(217) Glasses stay on during the investigation!* by Yan Mayfire; *(218) Nosey1* by Gecko.


41
41
57
57

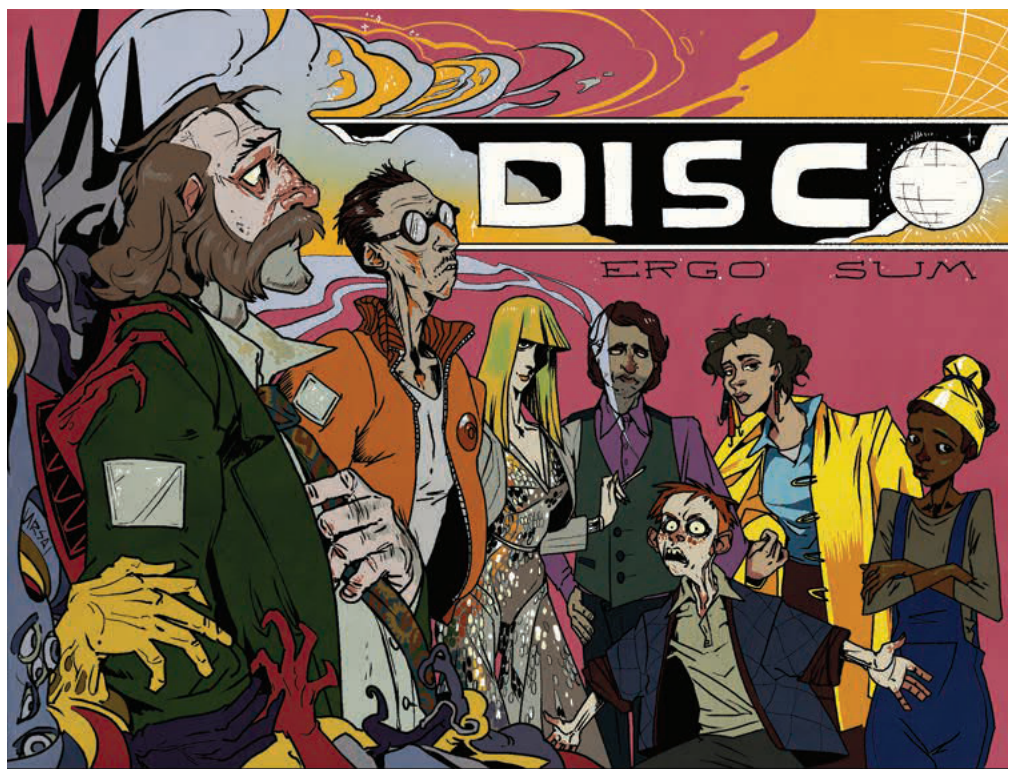







I AM THE
HARBINGER
OF RUIN




Also, seeing how our work has inspired others in turn is an inspiration all on its own. Ever since *Disco Elysium* launched the internet has been flooded with fantastic fan-fiction and fan-art. We've included a mere sample of some of the images we like, but in all honesty, there is enough of it out there to curate a whole book. It is mind boggling that there are also fan-*games* out there. We are humbled and we are grateful to our fans! ◀

*This spread, top row: (219)* **パチンコ** by **人肉包子**; *(220)* I *can give you half of what I have* by Nye; *(221)* Disco But Russian by Asd4486.

*This spread, bottom row: (222) Clay Bust of Harry* by Michael Langlois; *(223) Kim Kitsuragi Calf Tattoo* by Katherine Krapf, inked on Jessica Smith; *(224) Harbinger of Ruin* by Ohsheeps; *(225) Disco, ergo sum* by Arkady Ehrlich.




THIS IS
FINE


SKR
SKR







*This spread, top row: (226) After work* by CreamyGhost; *(227)* Sviatlana Pazhytkova; *(228) Hysteria of Siberia* by Nye.

This spread, bottom row: *(229) Kitsuragi* by Artyom Trakhanov; *(230) Kim Kitsuragi amigurumi* by Polina "Capreola" Dovgal; *(231) You are my medicine* by Nye.





# ROOM FOR THOUGHT

As a counterbalance to Rostov's looser, more generalized brushwork – partially attributable to his natural impatience – Anton's approach to the Thought Cabinet is incredibly interesting to study. The balance between refinement and stylized generalization can be guided by the artist's temperament but is usually dictated by compositional considerations.

Designing the Thought Cabinet was an arduous process. But what an idea! There were many iterations and ideations before we ended up with the final one. A prominent discarded idea was that thoughts would correspond to specific stats. You would've had purple thoughts for Psyche, thus aligning your Thought Cabinet with that kind of character build. Or so we reasoned.

It turns out that running around with pockets full of ideas that are not meant for *you* is not fun. It's also not quite how ideas work.

At some point, the Thought Cabinet art was envisioned as clean as Swiss graphic design. We were enamored with the promise of simple geometry and looked to Russian Futurism and the tech tree of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* *(see p. 21, image 20)* for inspiration. This would have served to offset the more loose and expressive art in the rest of the game and to put it more into a distinct UI-space.

At some point, we considered an aesthetic of kaleidoscopically mixing colored liquids, meaning that thoughts, which you might conceptualize as the mixing of ideas, would look like differently colored chemical compounds bleeding into each other, based on the aesthetics of hydrophobic emulsion and the repellence of oil and water. These explorations were informed

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*This spread: (232) Revolutionaries* , a Disco Elysium poster illustration in full color.





by the series of artworks made with wax and various inks artist Stanley Donwood created for *In Rainbows*, the infamous album by Radiohead *(see p. 22, image 24)*.

But it still didn't feel right. It wasn't visually exciting enough. We sat on this for a long time, tried this and that, and never got anywhere with it until Kaur thought to ask Anton Vill. To our delight, Anton agreed.

Now, if Anton were a regular person, we would add here his own account of how he came up with the art for the Thought Cabinet. However, Anton is not a regular person. Anton is a mad ascetic monk, you see, sworn to conspiracy and silence, his only enjoyments in life are painting, walking his dog, and conversation (but only in person).

Consider the refined concentration of detail in Anton's Thought Cabinet. On the one hand, suffering from complete and conspicuous horror vacui, he applies laborious amounts of detail to every inch of the canvas. There is never a moment's rest when your gaze wanders over it. But when you pay closer attention, you'll notice how the mad monk subtly suggests where to look and what to slide over by carefully arranging the amount and complexity of detail.

The same principle of varying the degrees of interest in a picture can be found in Rostov's approach to loose brushwork, his is just a bit easier on the eyes to look at.

A successful image nearly always modulates between refinement and generalization. And when it doesn't, it's a CIA-funded *-ism* specifically about not doing it. And even then you're doing it a little bit. ◄

*This spread: (233) HorseyHorse* , a *Disco Elysium* poster illustration.





*This spread: (234)  Polycarpeum* , a Disco Elysium poster illustration in full color.









*Previous spread: (235)* A fragment of the final Thought Cabinet art created for the game.

*This spread: (236)* Pencils for *Polycarpeum* , a Disco Elysium poster illustration.











# OUTRO

BY ROBERT KURVITZ

*Disco Elysium* is an extremely unlikely object: a full-length RPG built not by a software company, but by a cultural organization. Not just *any* cultural organization! A *roaringly* unsuccessful group of writers, artists and political thinkers – from Estonia. A dark, tiny, angry, improbably stylish place where Tarkovsky filmed his undying masterpiece *Stalker* and Nolan also tried to do something with *Tenet*.

By the time development on *Disco Elysium* started we were full-blown pariahs. What's a village idiot who's not harmless? The village leper? We were that. Fresh off an unsuccessful "occupation" of a national cultural magazine – a suicidal manoeuvre that constituted the pathetic crescendo of our national careers, an unremovable stain, an unforgivable sin – we were somehow both far left *and* neoliberal. Here's the jiffy, Bob: We had help from the governing neoliberal party. The Minister of Culture resigned over the affair. It was Big Shit. And we were *in* it. *Inside* Big Shit. An unholy alliance of neoliberals and communists! Everyone who despised neoliberals, and everyone who despised communists, despised us. Which was everyone.

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*This spread, top row: (237) ZA/UM 2013* , Aleksander Rostov, Robert Kurvitz, and Helen Hindpere. Helen didn't like how she looks in this photo, so we Photoshopped Siim "Kosmos" Sinamäe in to keep the casual energy of the photo going*(238)* The smell of turpentine and the year is 2012. On the wall are sketches for*VIOLENCE* , a project titled *Mercutio Dallasz & the Twelve Koijkos* , a comic book project set in the world of Elysium that never took off. On the easel, *Discourse* awaiting a few finishing touches.

*This spread, bottom row: (239) An artist sandwiched between two writers,* Robert Kurvitz, Aleksander Rostov, and Argo "Arks" Tuulik braving boreal winds on a coast somewhere; *(240) ZA/UM 2011: Philosophy On The Eternit or The School of ZA/UM,* if you like. A friend, Aleksander Rostov, Robert Kurvitz, and Martin Luiga in the middle of a debate on the rooftop at Lubja 9a in Tallinn, Estonia. The historic building where Rostov and Robert shared a studio/living space has been demolished by now, asbestos and all *(241)* Budding video game developers, past, present and future: Ruudu Ulas with writers Helen Hindpere, Robert Kurvitz, and Martin Luiga.

Let me tell you, to be despised in Estonia is not "cool." Estonians don't despise you in an overt and sanctifying manner. You're not a martyr, you're a joke.

So no, not a sound move. A comrade described our situation circa 2013 in his typically irreverent phrasing: "Can't get laid by my own mother."

So why did we destroy our careers commandeering a pitifully small piece of journalistic jetsam? (The fabled Cultural Magazine had a weekly print of 1,500 units!). The truth of the matter is, we did it because I was drunk. *I was drunk*, I posted something on our blog. Something-something. Gulp. Facebook. The passage of time smears the rest; all I'm left with is the memory of opening a bottle of champagne in the headquarters of that weird little newspaper. Thinking: *This is history*. And: *I should get more champagne before the store closes at 10.*

It wasn't exactly the October Revolution.

After the Not-October Revolution, our little group was facing a big problem. We couldn't do anything in Estonia any more. Probably ever. What had been an uphill battle had become sheer impossibility. You're left with an unsolvable puzzle. You can't write in your own language any more. And the lovely people you've spent your whole life concentrating under one flag have nothing to do there, because it's the flag of leprosy.

We had just one thing left to do – build a revolutionary cRPG. Okay, not just *one* thing. We also had to learn to code, write in English, raise millions in financing, learn to produce software, QA software... wake up at 7 a.m. for five years straight. Take two months off over *sixty* months of work. Hire people, lay off people, watch the entire development team *and all the producers* walk out six months before release leaving us with one heroic programmer and one Polish white-label company to QA a million-word long RPG.

During those indescribable years our little Organization, ever fond of slogans, flew such mottos as: THE MAGNIFICENT UNDERTAKING, READ FIRE!, and TEN BRAINS HYPERTHREADING. The hyperthreading – the multitasking challenge of writing, leading a team of writers, designing, and participating in the leadership of the company – felt like it was literally making my brain bleed. I felt lesions, forming under my own skull. Others in the Organization reported similar sensations. We developed a lifetime of mental disorders, machine-like loyalty, and a martial adherence to sobriety. (The champagne train didn't make it far into production).

On October 12, 2019, we released *Disco Elysium* to a 90+ Metacritic score. In December, we won four Video Game Awards. In 2020, PC Gamer placed






*This page: (242) Mens sana in corpore sano.* A prime example of interdepartmental cooperation: programmer Mikk Luige, writer Arks, animator Eduardo Rubio and intern Silver Kompus are lugging sacks of wood pellets to the studio. These fed the cast iron stoves we used to heat the studio; *(243) Last days at Narva maantee,* Helen, Martin, and Robert at Rostov's apartment/studio.





*Disco Elysium* at number 1 in their "100 Games To Play Right Now" list, just ahead of *Divinity: OS 2* and *The Witcher 3*. We got Mac Game of the Year, PC Gamer Game of the Year, three BAFTAs. Incredible fan effort helped translate *Disco Elysium* into Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, German, Korean, Russian, and French... Because *you* went on Steam and bought *Disco Elysium*, we got to pay back our investors. We also produced a perfected *Final Cut* edition of the game, for consoles, with "too cool to have in the original release" political quests and full VO.

For us, in our small lives, *Disco Elysium* is a miracle. Because what are extremely improbable things, if not that?

That miracle started in the headquarters of that absurd little cultural magazine in 2013, where we – in the words of the Swedish indie band Kent – "destroyed our lives with our friendship." We would *not* have done it otherwise. You don't reforge the tattered remains of your cultural organization into a blood-and-grinding-gears video game company because it's nice. And natural. You do it because you're utterly out of options. The pitiful absurdity of our national disgrace, and our vehement reaction to it, marks a point of divergence from fate. Something went wrong in the sequence of events. We lost our shit. In hindsight, it's almost as if we self-destructed strategically. Perhaps we did? I certainly saw little worth in my life, other than to smash it against the wall of the Magnificent Undertaking.

There is this mysterious moment in Werner Herzog's Antarctica documentary *Encounters at the End of the World*. I'm talking, of course, about the Deranged Penguin – a solitary penguin who, for no apparent reason, takes off from its flock, waddling off toward an imposing Antarctic mountain range. A solitary black spot. Receding. Thousands of miles of nothingness ahead. Herzog asks, in his guttural German accent: "But *why*?"

Here's why: the Deranged Penguin was depressed. There was a chemical state in its head that gave the penguin *suicidal intuition*. An entire framework of possibilities that was unavailable to its kin – with their precious lives – became available to the Deranged Penguin. Within this vast and nothing-filled framework it tottled off on a fatal adventure. With a vanishing chance to become one of those strange penguins who suddenly appear on a beach in Australia – ready to start a new species.

2.

Desperation and willpower alone would not have delivered us from the bigness of the shit we were in. We also had Elysium – a collection of ideas in the form of another world, a *paracosm* we'd been working on since the turn of the millennium when we were about 15.

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*This page: (244) Art department*, Rauno Somelar, Rostov, Siim "Xiim" Raidma, Kasparov, and Markus "Marx" Härma. This is the closest we've come to getting all of the artists in one place at the same time; *(245)* Life drawing events at ZA/UM. This photo was probably taken in 2018. In the foreground is Toon Vugts, the architect behind the local Drink & Draw life drawing sessions.

In child psychology, a paracosm is a mental construct developed by (often lonely) children and early teenagers. It is a fantasy world secluded from ours, featuring new words for common and novel phenomenon, intricate taxonomies of nations, animals etc. Emily Brontë had one. Henry Darger had one. Children tend to forget their paracosms as the Real World imposes its terms (around 13-15).

That did not happen to Elysium. Elysium was always going to be massive. Large enough to blot out our entire reality. Messianic. Transatlantic.

Elysium: the Crown of the World.

Elysium: the Real World is an embarrassing fantasy construct and Elysium is real.

Hence, Elysium survived contact with the Real World through *competition*. It had its genesis during the turn of the century as a high fantasy setting. With – I would say – "some interesting ideas." Back then we were over the moon about it. We wrote incessantly. Mostly spells, hundreds if not thousands of them, each exactly one page. We visited Elysium via pen-and-paper role-playing, using a proprietary system that later became *Disco Elysium's* Metric. "We" were a group of 5-10 highschool dropouts called The Overcoats (it was terribly cold outside and we wore thick coats), anarchists of some sort, with the motto: "Today we drink tea; tomorrow we rule the world."

Unironically, we intended Elysium to be the vessel of this conquest.

After all – it was all we had. Truancy means vagrancy, unemployment, an assortment of mental illnesses. Seeing your friends go off to University to become "real people" and have things like a PC to play *Baldur's Gate 2* on. The need for a paracosm did not dissipate as the Aughts rolled on – it intensified. With nowhere to go and -22 centigrade temperatures outside, we knew we had to become "artist-people" of some sort to survive. Yet it was hard to write anything in this "fallen world," as early Christians put it. The names themselves seemed compromised, a catwalk parody: London, Milan, Paris. A shudder of loathing still overtakes me as I write them.

Revachol, Mirova, La Scala del Mesque – now *that* I could write. An implacable air hung over the states and cities. The cold light of the mind. Grand. A quality we've come to call *elytical*. Even basic terms for everyday machinery needed to be changed to preserve this intangible quality. Motor carriage. Graffito. Sprechgesang. (What they call rapping.)

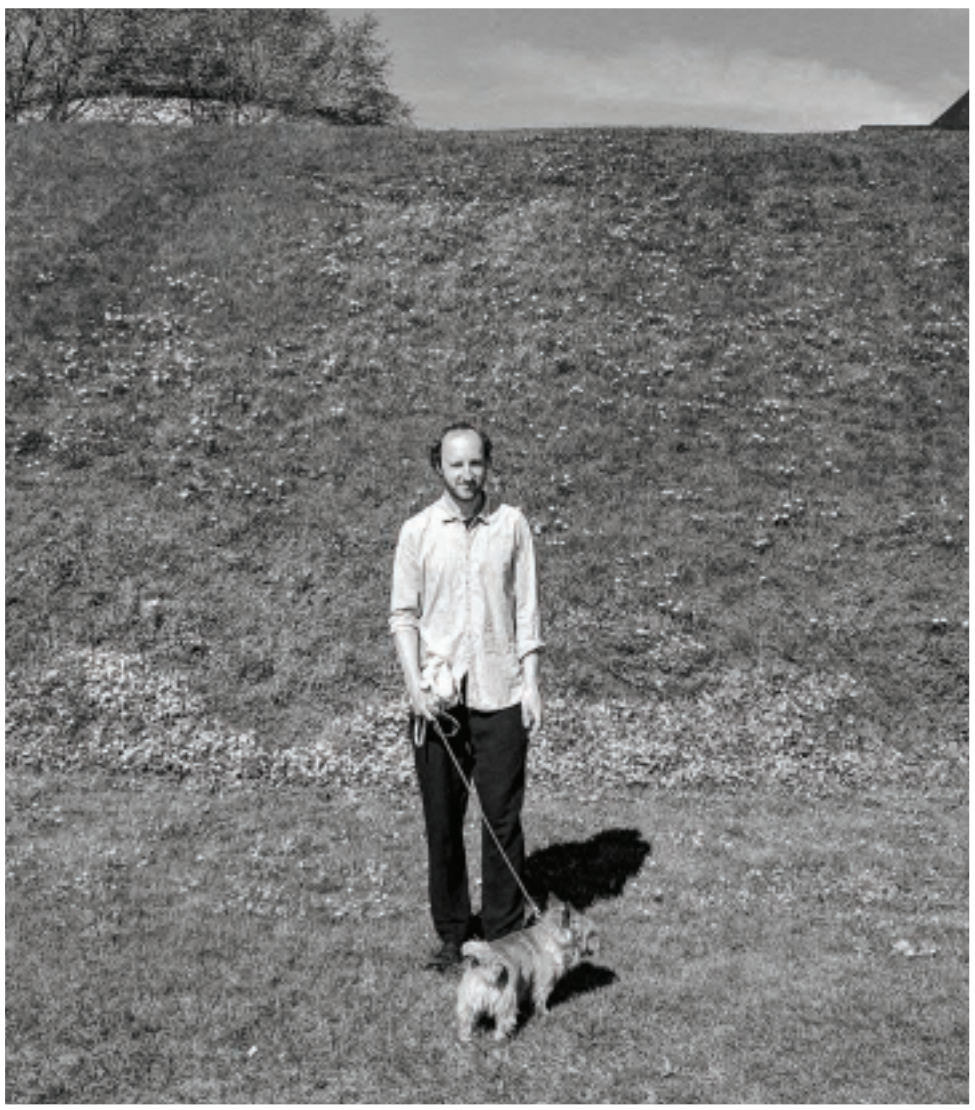
However, the version of Elysium we had then was not that. It was "Revachol, something-something, name missing, something lame." After a year or two of spell-writing the result was deemed "weak." Naive (which it was). We couldn't bin it, however – it was too big to fail. So we started replacing things: names, concepts, characters. Everything smaller and





*This page: (246)* Aleksander Rostov; *(247)* A candid shot of Siim Raidma at his workstation.





less credible than reality had to go. Circa 2002, we invented the pale. By 2005, we'd discarded medievalism, the pseudo-renaissance, and the industrial revolution, replacing it with modernity: plastic telephones, cops, communism, the international currency.

(The spells, too, had to go. A term you have yet to encounter – *extraphysics* – pushed them out. Magic, we realized, needed to remain a complete unknown.)

The world around us was getting larger and darker. To keep up, Elysium needed to be even larger and *more* terrifying. Moreover, *the world that ends all worlds* ought also be more *beautiful* than reality. More extreme. We were anarchists, after all – growing into hardboiled Marxist-Leninists on empty stomachs. The alternative need not only to outgrow, but also to *outclass* the Real World and its satanic complexes.

It quickly became apparent that in order to go "further than Pärnu" (Pärnu is a tiny beach town 100 kilometres from Tallinn) we needed to *outdo* History.

3.

Around then we started reading philosophy and history to supplement our missed educations. So as to not "remain idiots." Confession time: I did not know what "left" and "right" meant in politics until I was 20. Wikipedia, I remember, was an immense tool at the time (for those with internet access, which was not everyone). Soviet-era dialectical materialist works were also indispensable, along with newer translations.

Therein, a picture began to unfold before us: The Real World and its 8,000-year history were not so small and easy to outdo. There were obscure wonders, like the settlement of Piramiden in the Antarctic, or Sir Francis Younghusband, alongside grand central events like the French Revolution. This – by way of Soviet-era philosophy textbooks – led us to the central principle of Elysium's worldbuilding: Hegelianism.

The grand, impenetrable system of G.W.F. Hegel – the philosophy of history – taught us two things. First, any truly believable world not only *has* but *is* history. Second, the only believable history is progress. A domino-tumble of opposing ideas has led us here. Yet built worlds exist in stasis. They are theme parks where the past is not at all different from the present. The Old Republic is precisely like the New Republic: lame as balls. It's *almost* as if they barely had the imagination to come up with one version of their cosmos and were unwilling (or unable) to imagine it in motion. Commercial paracosms are static, reduced versions of reality. *Just the space nonsense, please. I'll have the cyberhacker and nothing else.*

We did not want a commercial paracosm. It was un-Hegelian. We wanted a quasi-sacral object complex. All that is interesting and terrible about

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*This page: (248)* Kasparov learning how to art on a computer; *(249)* Anton Vill and Peti.

history – and *only* that. Magnified. Rarified. Spreading outward from reality, like a dark grey solar corona. The crowning ceremony of the world.

So we took the previous, discarded versions of Elysium – the bronze age and the Age of Sail and the industrial revolution, even the medievalism – and turned them into historic periods *within* the setting: Palm & Pine, the Franconigerian Century, the LGM (Last Glacial Maximum). This allowed for distinct esthetics, which in turn informed each other. Across two centuries the oily black gold of Franconegro melted into the cream of Dolorianism. The bright colours of Palm & Pine are still visible, faded underneath Modernitas – the present horizon of Elysium.

Circa 2007, this became Elysium's *innocentic system*. A procession of World Spirits on horseback – Polycarp, Dolores Dei, Her Innocence Sola. The innocentic system and the layers of history that came with it – an Elysium that suddenly and vertiginously expanded into the fourth dimension – was the final touch. Eight years and many pen-and-paper campaigns later it was finally time for the world to meet its Triumphant Adversary. Read it and weep, Asia. Greet the great, America.

This encounter would, of course, come in the form of a novel. In Estonian, a language (badly) spoken by one million people. *Sacred and Terrible Air* took five years to write. When we released it in 2013 it was read by one thousand people. But wait – not all is lost! I was recently informed a national literary magazine voted it number 2 in the "debut of the decade" category. It lost (by a long mile) to a young poetess who I'm sure is exquisite.

In the "not debut – actual top novels of the decade" category, it was not mentioned.

Still, even after all these honours, *Sacred and Terrible Air* did not make a dent in the international culture market. *Star Wars* was not de-throned.

4.

In 2013, after the release of *Sacred and Terrible Air*, "the international culture market" and "the Western culture monopoly" were the subject of much talk around the Organization. Something had happened. Around 2009, we relaunched as ZA/UM, an altogether more ambitious formation. ZA/UM was formed by first-phase Elysium-builders Robert Kurvitz (lead writer/un-official figurehead), Martin Luiga (writer/chief ideologue) and Jüri Saks (concept artist/spiritual recluse) – to the tune of DJ Tiesto's remix of "Adagio for Strings" one rainy afternoon.

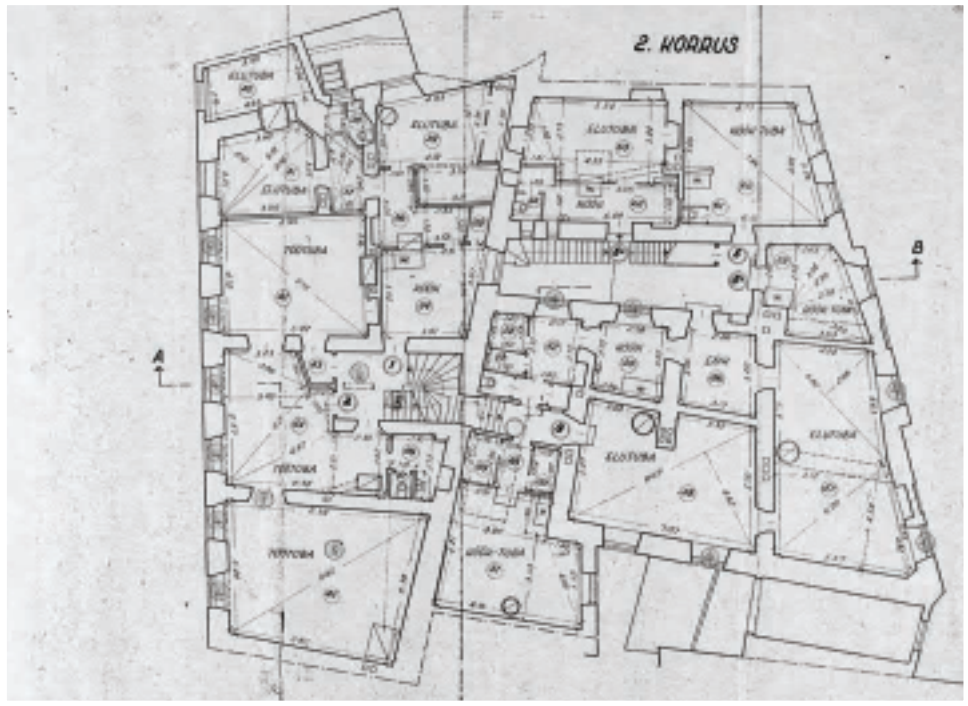
We had recently come to the realization that we were losers. Cast-offs. Excluded from the core of society by our inability to play ball with the education racket. And other "preconceived systems" like having a job.





*This page: (250)* Another meeting on another rooftop, this time at Müürivahe 30, the ZA/UM headquarters during the development of *Disco Elysium*. From the left: Jüri Saks, Kasparov, Siim Raidma, Robert Kurvitz, Lembit "Lemps" Jürgenson, and Mikk "Mikk" Metsniit *(251)* Kasparov, Jüri Saks, and Rostov caught in the artists' room.






Culture was hegemony, we declared – that's a cool word for "power" – and we had none. Power came from organization and organization came from people. We had *some* people. In lieu of a career we'd been building friendships and ideas. Argo Tuulik (writer/car mechanic) and Aleksander Rostov (art director/art director) quickly joined – both were former Overcoats and hardened veterans of the Elysium project.

Together, we set out on a talent-grab. An eponymous blog – ZA/UM (both "for the mind" and "from the mind" in Russian) – became our beacon. We were doing some serious numbers. Two-hundred daily visitors. Sometimes 800. Success of this magnitude was bound to attract talent hungry to share in the limelight – and so it did. Our growing ranks included four crucial talent-acquisitions: Jim Ashilevi (VO director/vaguely familiar theatre-person), Ruudu Ulas (producer/visual artist with low self-esteem), Kaur Kender (producer/disliked '90s relic), and Helen Hindpere (writer/child prodigy – she was 14 (!!) when she joined our doomed cabal).
Yet with all our weight we could not move more than 1,000 units of *Sacred and Terrible Air* off the shelves.

I don't know, man. Maybe the book just isn't that good?

Either way, we lost our patience when it failed. We were hungry, angry, drunk, high, and desperate after 12 years of destitution. So, when the opportunity for corruption presented itself (as it often does where art and politics meet) we commandeered a national cultural magazine. I said I was mostly drunk and I stand by it, but I'm afraid "changing society" was also a motivation. (We had our Guy Fawkes masks on so tight they were squeezing our brains out of our noses.)

Aaaaaaaaaand it was a clownish disaster! So clownish, in fact, that it shifted us from "completely ignored" to "dark joke of the year" mode. Several desperate and unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation later, personal belongings were sold and the private sector was met with an *enticing* opportunity. *Maoist wildmen* ZA/UM are making a... (am I reading this right?) computer role-playing video game?

At this time, we were reluctantly joined by a handful of professionals who wanted to make a video game and were relatively uninterested in Maoist-Guzmanist cultural politics. Siim Raidma (technical artist/semi-failed rock-person) and Kaspar Tamsalu (concept artist/wannabe Russian).

Our pitch – to ourselves, as much as to the world – was that we see a chink in the armour of the international culture market. A way past Pärnu. After the Soviet Union fell, Eastern European culture-people thought everyone

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*This page: (252)* From the archives: a photograph depicting the entrance to the building at Müürivahe 30. This photo is from 1983, a few decades before our time. The façade has not changed much in the interval;*(253)* The floor plan of the building at Müürivahe 30, the foundations of which hug the medieval battlements of Tallinn's Old Town, predating by a century the maritime expeditions led by Columbus to discover a westward route to the Indies. ZA/UM studio emerged in 2016 as a single room in the southwestern corner of this building and over the next couple of years spread throughout the building like a kind of benevolent tumor, as more and more people joined the cause.

in the West was just dying to buy their brown paintings and books about how bad Stalin was. The CIA was going to keep financing their little dissident movements forever – only now against the ills of capitalism! *Here in the United States our art is so banal – if only Kalev Mark Kruzhinski and Yana "Polki Molki" Karisoo came and showed us what culture* really *is.*

Surprise! The colossal culture monopolies of the West depend on their produce for prestige, capital gains, and planetary-scale psychological conditioning. They are quite happy without Polki Molki.

Unless, it turns out, Polki Molki is a video game.

I sound cynical, but I'm not. (I just like saying "Polki Molki" because it reminds me of my childhood, and of girls with hair like moonlight). Our intention was sincere. Hegel says there is a World Spirit. It is on the march toward Absolute Knowledge. As Soviet artists – perhaps the *last* Soviets artists – it was our duty to add to the relay. To keep history moving. Onward to the outer cosmos and the stars.

Now, imagine you really believe this to be your duty. Something you have to do, or you've failed as a person. The Soviet project was always about messianic salvation. Soviet artists took on insane responsibilities: to fight against Heat Death, or to build a new God. The horizon was always millions of years in the future. We inherited this condition from our heroes: Arvi Siig, Tõnu Trubetsky, Vladimir Mayakovski.

Built worlds were clearly the biggest thing out there. And we had a *really* big one: Elysium. So, with a pickaxe in hand, we hacked loose the financing for a AA/indie role-playing game and kept making it until its Metacritic score was predicted as 90+ and thus it was safe to launch.

THE END

If this all sounds like quite the ride then that's because it *was*. But let me impress on you, in closing, what it was not: chaos. Bohemianism. Rock-and-roll delinquency.

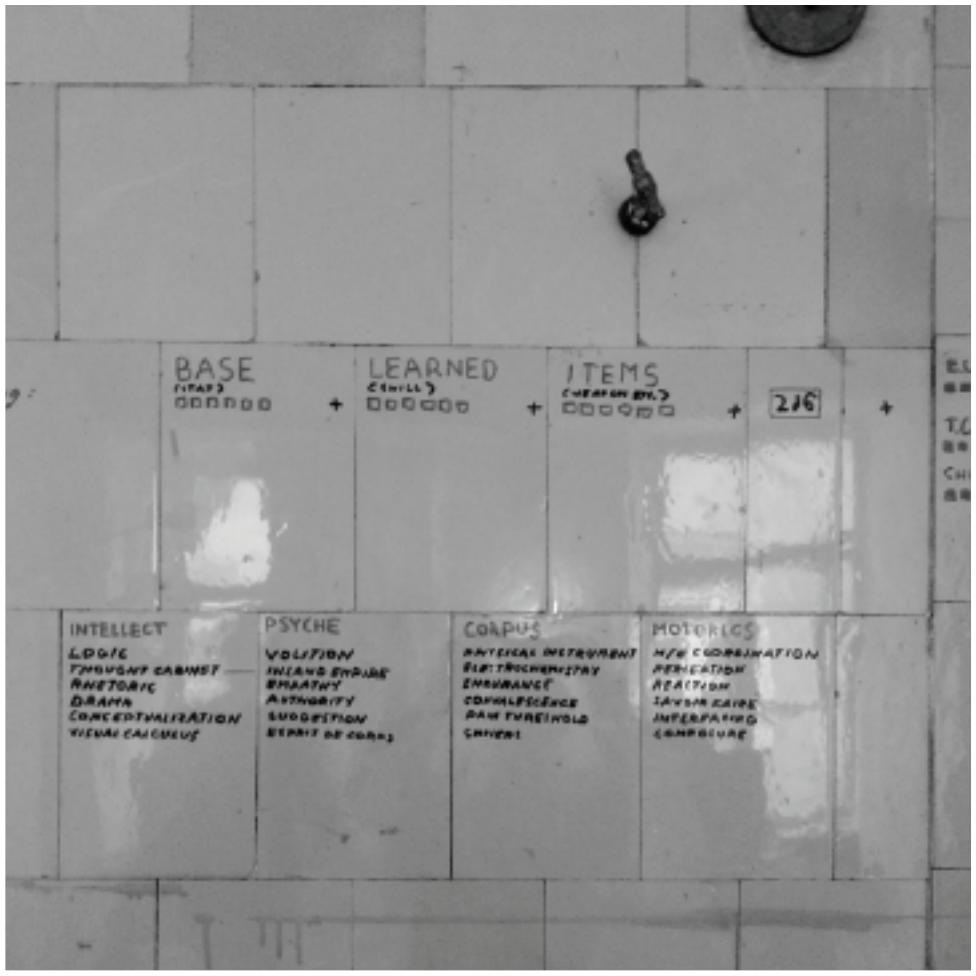
Software production is not impossible. It's not magic. It's scalable, quantifiable – a beginner *can* do it. But it's also meticulous, mentally taxing, and almost *psionically* psychological work. You have to wield yourself to an improbable degree, like a chess piece. You have to forgive and move on from things it does not feel natural to move on from. And you have to manage an immense amount of fear and paranoia.

It was crisis after crisis, but – in the end – I'm not surprised we were able to handle them. Production on *Disco Elysium* began in 2000, not in 2014. For 14 years we built the world and the organization. Even (and especially) under capitalism the most precious resource is access to talent. Talent is





*This page: (254)* A pencil sketch of Martinaise on a sheet of copy paper;*(255)* Rostov, Jüri Saks, and Robert reviewing a rough draft of what is probably a map of Revachol and its various districts.






attracted by other talent – and is kept together by principles. You collect talent for it to collect talent. The critical mass appears to be around 4-10. Then it's about keeping it together before everyone self-destructs, while agents of competing talent-drives (private enterprise and Universities, mostly) try to steal them away from you with lures of income and social prestige – things you don't have. Against public *and* private power, the lonely utopian offshoot is always at a disadvantage. It takes a real *idea* to counter-pull against the dual abyss. (It doesn't hurt to be corrupt either – go for it! Be as corrupt as possible. Those who want you to remain lily-white have no ideas and no principles to compromise for.)

For us, Elysium was that idea. It kept us together and gave us something to work on. We couldn't say *someone else can do this*. The object was unique and we its guardians. We felt otherworldly promise in that interisolary mass, connected by invisible lines through the pale. Seol, Khasht-Kor, Innu NR, Marel-Över-Världen... 4.6 billion people, after all, are not easily let down.

Elysium is a collection of ideas into which we poured all of our love of the world. And its history. It's what we think is worthwhile in all *this* – recollected, resequenced, and reconceptualized. Its people are heroic even when they're jokes. Its failures are majesty and terror. It's large. It is a geopolitical dream seen by non-entities. Nobodies from nowhere. Its value is inversely proportionate to our own size.

So far we've only managed to show you a tiny, insignificant corner of it: the district of Martinaise in Revachol West, on Insulinde. I can not begin to tell you how introductory it is. ("Disco Elysium" means "I learn Elysium"). It's small. A matchbox world. It's all we had money for.

Yet because of *You* – you angel, you legend, our comrade in arms – because of your interest in our idea, we get to see more of it. Jamrock, I hope. And then to other isolas.

Thank you. We hope you enjoy the *Final Cut*.

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*Robert Kurvitz, lead designer / lead writer*
*Brighton, England*
*December 2020*

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*This page: (256)* Before we had whiteboards we used this antiquated masonry heater covered with glazed tiles to jot down notes. Workable;*(257)* Your eyes are not deceiving you – this is a photo of a plastic ruler on a computer screen being used to judge perspective in a digital drawing. We call this pre-production.





# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to everybody who contributed to the making of this book, either with their writing or by fishing through our chaotic archives and old photo albums for these artworks and photographs. My special thanks go to Kristiina Ago and Ruudu Ulas for making sure I didn't stray too far off the track and to Alex Tutty who assures us that everything is by the book. Justin Keenan helped preserve a fine balance in the writing between the necessary Eastern-Europeanisms and the unnecessary ones. It is now a much smoother read. I like to think that Kristi Tuurmann's sharp design and minimalist layouts make this book stand out from the other video game art books out there. Additional thanks go out to Bailey Moses and Anna Bihari and the rest of the iam8bit family for their help in making this book into an actual *thing*.

I'm sure that I can speak for all of the artists involved when I say that creating art for a game like *Disco Elysium* has been a bucket-list-tier experience. We cannot thank enough the people who helped drag this project across the finish line, or the players who have made this undertaking worthwhile. Thank you!

-

*Kaspar Tamsalu, editor / artist*
*Tallinn, Estonia*
*January 2021*

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*This spread: (258)* Pencils for *Revolutionaries* , a *Disco Elysium* poster illustration.

# IMAGE CREDITS

Numbers in *italic* refer to illustration numbers.

ARTWORKS:

*1-7, 9, 11, 13, 17, 21, 23, 38, 39, 41, 46-50, 52-57, 60-64, 66, 68, 70, 73, 74, 77-79, 82, 84-87, 89, 90, 93-95, 97-100, 102, 104, 106, 107, 109, 111, 114, 116, 118, 120, 122, 124, 127, 129-131, 133, 134, 135, 137, 138, 144, 146-164, 167-174, 176-178, 180-192, 197-200, 202-209, 213* Aleksander Rostov.

*45* Pavlo "Pasha" Guba.

*51, 58, 59, 65, 67, 69, 71, 72, 75-77, 80, 83, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 96, 99, 101, 103, 105, 108, 110, 112, 113, 115, 117, 119, 121, 123, 125, 126, 128, 132, 136, 139, 140-143, 145, 147, 154, 162, 175, 179, 196, 201, 210-211* Kaspar "Kasparov" Tamsalu.

*81, 99* Jüri Saks.

*192* Mehdi Annassi.

*232-236* Anton Vill.

Technical art for *Disco Elysium* was done by Siim "Xiim" Raidma.

Concept art and design by Aleksander Rostov, Kaspar "Kasparov" Tamsalu and Mehdi Annassi.

3D modeling for the game environments was done by Rauno Somelar, Kaspar Tamsalu, Markus Härma and Mikk Metsniit.

3D modeling for characters was done by Rauno Somelar, Aleksander Rostov and Pasha Guba.

UI design by Aleksander Rostov.

Thought Cabinet tapestry by Anton Vill.

Game animations done by Eduardo Rubio and Markus Härma.

Motion graphics done by Timo Albert.

OTHER ARTWORKS:

*8* Alex Kanevsky. *Models Painting Themselves*. 2016.

*10* Paolo Troubetzkoy. *Children*. 1900.

*12* Jenny Saville. I*n the flesh: Fulcrum*. 1998.

*14* Wesley Burt. 2009. URL: http://wesley-burt.blogspot.com/

*15* Mark Rothko. *Red, Orange, Yellow*. 1961.

*16* Craig Mullins. URL: www.goodbrush.com

*18* Raphael. *The School of Athens*. 1511.

*19* Developer: Black Isle Studios. *Planescape: Torment*. 1999.

*20* Developer: Firaxis Games. *Alpha Centauri*. 1999.

*24* Radiohead. *In Rainbows*. 2007. Album art created by the artist Stanley Donwood.

*25* Lorenzo Ghiberti. *Gates of Paradise*. 1425-52.

FAN ART:

*213* Nanna Stahlschmidt. *Cuno and Cunoesse*.

*214* Tom Lightfoot. *A Detective Tabletop RPG*.

*215* James Fox. *Electrochemistry*.

*216* Gecko. *Nosey2*.

*217* Yan Mayfire. *Glasses stay on during the investigation!*

*218* Gecko. *Nosey1*.

*219* 人肉包子 . パチンコ

*220* Nye. *I can give you half of what I have*.

*221* Asd4486. *Disco But Russian*.

*222* Michael Langlois. *Clay Bust of Harry*.

*223* Jessica Smith. *Kim Kitsuragi Calf Tattoo*. Tattoo Artist Katherine Krapf at Skull and Rose Tattoo Studio.

*224* Ohsheeps. *Harbinger of Ruin*.

*225* Arkady Ehrlich. *Disco, ergo sum*.

*226* CreamyGhost. *After work*.

*227* Sviatlana Pazhytkova.

*228* Nye. *Hysteria of Siberia*.

*229* Artyom Trakhanov. *Kitsuragi*.

*230* Polina "Capreola" Dovgal. *Kim Kitsuragi amigurumi*.

*231* Nye. *You are my medicine*.

PHOTOGRAPHY:

Unless specified otherwise, all photos reproduced in this book are from private collections of the members of ZA/UM and their friends.

*194-195* Mehdi Annassi.

*240* Ruudu Ulas. *ZA/UM 2011: Philosophy On The Eternit or The School of ZA/UM, if you like.*

*245* Viktoria Sipilova. *Life drawing events at ZA/UM.*

*252-253* Pärnu mnt 4/Müürivahe 30. Arhitektuuriajalooliselt väärtuslikud detailide ja väikevormide inventariseerimine/2589 Tallinna vanalinn, I-II a tuh-muinsuskaitseala/ERA.T-76.1.11337

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