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The Land of Five Races: An Illustrated Exploration of an Imaginary World

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Abstract

Yunnan Tao, Illustration, Syracuse University

The Land of Five Races: An Illustrated Exploration of an Imaginary World

The aim of this thesis is to explain my illustrations of an imaginary world with five different races. It will explain how other artists inspired me in illustration, and how I further developed skills creating these illustrations. This thesis will also introduce my concept on how I made this background world believable to support these illustrations.

In the first part I will explain how I started this project. It will also include artistic inspirations and cultural influences on my personal art style and where my ideas came from.

The second part will describe my painting skills. It will explain how I use light sources and forms to make the illustrations more realistic. It will also describe how good visual composition and intricate gestures enhance the storytelling aspect of the illustrations.

The thesis then introduces the concept of my work. It describes the world I created, where technology and magic exist together and merge. There are five different races in this fantasy world: humans, demons, elves, dragons, and easterners. Each race has their individual characteristics, relationships, technologies, and societies. The thesis will examine how real-world objects inspired the designs of these characters and their backgrounds, and explains where the above elements exist in the illustrations.

In conclusion, this thesis will introduce the imaginative thinking, style, and technique of my artwork, giving background to my illustrations, to help the viewer to interpret and understand them.

The Land of Five Races
An Illustrated Exploration of an Imaginary World

by
Yunnan Tao

B.F.A, Sichuan Fine Art Institute, 2017

Thesis Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Illustration.

Syracuse University

May 2020

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Table of Content

List of Illustrations	v
Introduction	1
Inspiration	3
Concept	11
Painting Skill	19
Conclusion	23
Bibliography	24
Vita	25

List of Illustrations

Figure 1, Yunnan Tao's Character Design, 2019

Figure 2, Cover Girl, Katsuya Terada, 2013, February 2013 "Living Dead" issue of Eureka, issue 623

Figure 3, 10th Anniversary of League of Legends, Kim Junggi, 2019, Riot Games

Figure 4, Cover for Last Exile, Range Murata, 2003, Gonzo K.K.

Figure 5, Disguise, Zeen Chin, 2016, ArtStation

Figure 6, Miaow2, Ruan Jia, 2018, ArtStation

Figure 7, Rooster Girl, Xi Zhang, 2018, ArtStation

Figure 8, Map of the Land of Five Races, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Figure 9, Robot Driver, Yunnan Tao, 2020

Figure 10, Dragon Girl, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Figure 11, Easterner Soldier, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Figure 12, Demon Warrior, Yunnan Tao, 2020

Figure 13, Elf: Water Elementalist, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Introduction

I started drawing when I was young. During my early life, since I did not have a specific purpose when drawing, I tried many different techniques and directions of art. I did still life paintings, watercolor, and sculptures.

I got my B.F.A. degree at the Sichuan Fine Art Institute(SFAI), which is a famous art academy in China. During the five years of learning in SFAI, I made great progress in basic drawing skills, which have been the foundation of my drawing career. My major in college was sculpture. When making sculptures, I always had to take care of shapes of objects, texture of materials, reflections of light sources. All these trainings helped to build my technique of realistic art. When I was in college, I learned about digital painting for the first time. I was fascinated with the beautiful illustrations in video games and board games. For the first time, I knew that they were created digitally. Meanwhile, I made a professional goal of becoming a concept artist. When I started learning digital painting, my painting skills provided me with great help. I am very skillful at portraying realistic characters and scenes with the help of my modeling ability. I am good at grasping the changes of light and shadow as well. Through long-term training, I have mastered my own unique method of characterizing details.

My illustrations always show my unique style in character and atmosphere. I have done a lot of character design, especially female characters. Besides I combine many fantasy and science fiction elements in my design process. I always try to describe the softness and elegance of my characters, making them authentic and attractive. Most of my characters have elegant body shapes and pretty faces, although I can also draw characters with extremely exaggerated characteristics. I am also good at depicting machines and robots with strong Steampunk style.

In the process of illustrating, I think mature skills are as important as brilliant imagination. They both help build the unique style of an illustrator.



Figure 1. Yunnan Tao's Character Design, 2019

I continue to develop my digital painting skills towards becoming a concept artist. A concept artist is a designer who visualizes and creates art for characters, creatures, environments and many other assets. Concept artists always do illustration to visualize their ideas. Some also do 3D products, animations. They work for films, video games, animations, comics, and many other industries.

For my thesis project, I invented a fantasy world of my own. I created ten individual illustrations to depict five different races in this world. Each race is introduced by two illustrations of the appearance, living environment, culture, architecture and clothing of that race. Each illustration is created patiently, showing my personal style and techniques as a concept artist.

Inspiration

During my career, there are many great artists who have deeply influenced me.



Figure 2, Cover Girl, Katsuya Terada, 2013, February 2013 “Living Dead” issue of Eureka, issue 623

Katsuya Terada is an outstanding Japanese illustrator and comic artist. His illustration collections and comic series *The Monkey King*, are famous in this field. He is also a concept designer for video games and anime series.

Katsuya is a master of fantasy art and science fiction art. His design of monsters, machineries, and biochemical bodies has shown his bold, dark art style. He is not afraid of depicting adult elements such as sex, blood, and horror. His artwork shows the creativity and energy of Asian artists to the world, and also lets people know that Asian artists can be as brave and radical as Western artists.

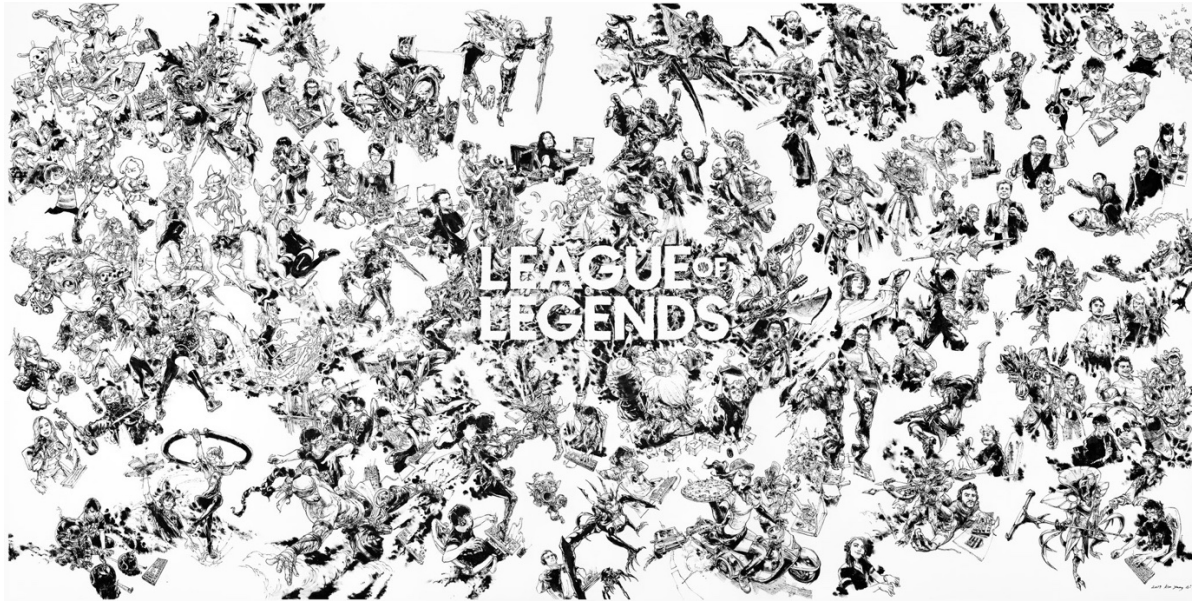


Figure 3, 10th Anniversary of League of Legends, Kim Junggi, 2019, Riot Games

Kim Junggi is the one who led me into the world of illustration. He is famous in both the Eastern and Western world for his illustrations and comics. Kim is not an expert on coloring, but his lively and fantastic line drawings amaze his audience, every single page of his artwork tells a story with his rich imagination.

Kim likes to use traditional materials to draw. He can combine many interesting stories into one fascinating scene on a page of paper with only a single black marker, and he usually does not have to prepare a draft. Most sketches are already formed in his mind before he picks up his marker. In his illustrations, he shows us his accurate grasp of the characters' dynamics, with compact narrative compositions.

People always think of Kim as a talented illustrator, while he thinks this is like denying his efforts. All his achievements are built with his years of practice. Kim has influenced many young illustrators like me, and encourages us to keep drawing to finally find our career goals.



Figure 4, Cover for Last Exile, Range Murata, 2003, Gonzo K.K.

Range Murata is a Japanese artist and designer, known for his unique style. He worked as a concept designer for many Japanese anime series in 1990s and he is still active in the new millennium. In late 1980s and early 1990s when he began his career, many Japanese artists began to create artwork combining Eastern and Western cultures, rather than obsessing about depicting traditional Japanese culture. Range Murata is one of them, he creates characters with Japanese anime elements that meet the aesthetics of Asians, combining with Western fantasy elements and Dieselpunk.

He, with many other Japanese anime artists and comic artists in his time, like Daisuke Igarashi, Yoshitaka Amano, Otomo Katsuhiro, have deeply influenced many young artists and promoted the fusion of Eastern and Western art.



Figure 5, *Disguise*, Zeen Chin, 2016, ArtStation

Zeen Chin is an illustrator and concept artist based in Malaysia. He also designs toys and other products. When he was younger, he worked as an illustrator for the card game *Legend of the Cryptids*. In recent years he has started more personal projects and gradually built a unique personal style. He has published a personal album named *Rechild*.

Zeen Chin's artwork is popular in East Asia and Southeast Asia for his perfect utilization of East Asian and Southeast Asian cultural elements in his designing. His characters are decorated with ornaments, totems and clothing symbolizing East and Southeast Asian culture. He also likes to put the image of ghosts and gods from East Asian culture into his artwork. He also likes to add modern objects in his designs, even cyberpunk elements. You can even see from

his artwork that ancient Chinese culture has been reinterpreted in modern Asian art after thousands of years of evolution and spread among other Asian countries.

Zeen Chin has his own thoughts about painting techniques. He is a skillful sketchbook artist; his characters are always beautiful and vivid. With his interesting character design, his artwork can easily catch audiences' attention. He likes to use intrinsic colors of objects to depict them and describe the change of space and atmosphere by changing the saturation of colors: the visual center and light receiving parts always have higher saturation. Many artists will build a basic tone for a new artwork at the beginning of the painting, while most of the time Zeen Chin does not let the undertone restrict his palette, so his artwork is always very colorful. He likes to use bright pure colors on necks, chins, and other joint parts which are usually rendered darkly, this distinguishes his unique personal style.

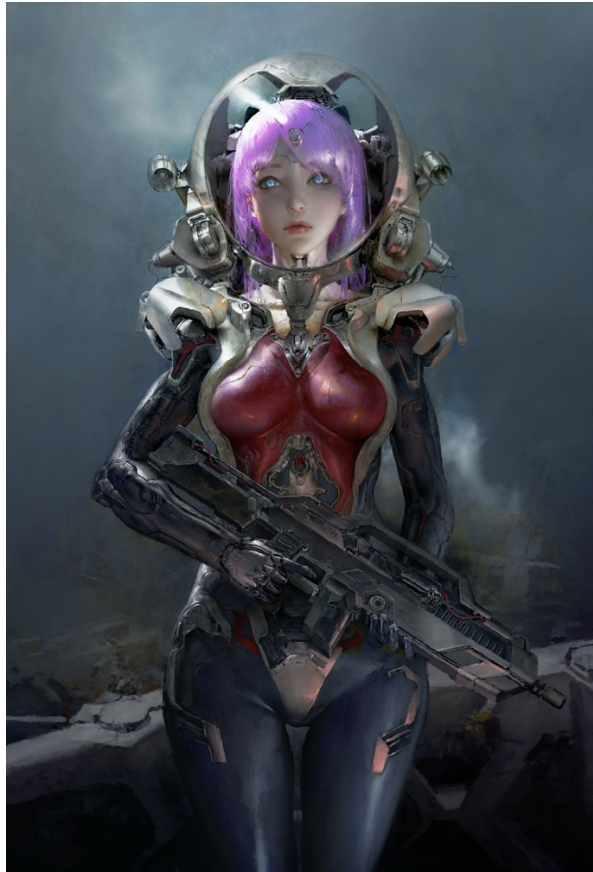


Figure 6, Miaow2, Ruan Jia, 2018, ArtStation

Ruan Jia is well known by every artist who does concept art. He is known for his exquisite design and spectacular painting skills. He mainly paints digitally, although his artwork looks more like oil paintings. Since he is so young, it is incredible for him to have such a remarkable achievement.

Unlike artists mentioned above, Ruan is an expert in atmosphere design. He is good at designing architectures, machinery, and biochemical organisms. Ruan's most incredible achievement is his strong understanding of light. As a realistic artist, Ruan is not afraid of using white, while most artists will try to avoid using pure white, black, and gray. Since white is the color closest to sunlight, using white helps him approach the feeling of natural environments. Ruan likes to use colors in low saturation but varied hues. He can catch each tiny change of hue on objects, which can be a reflection of light, or color of texture.

As a realistic artist, Ruan has a great ability to draw details. He can capture textures of different materials accurately. He only use colors but not lines to build shapes. Thus his artwork is very delicate and attractive to audiences.



Figure 7, *Rooster Girl*, Xi Zhang, 2018, *ArtStation*

Xi Zhang, as known as Dousanxian, is a young Chinese illustrator and comic artist. He is very talented and respected in this field. Xi has a rich experience creating commercial art. He makes illustrations for *Magic: The Gathering*, *Legend of the Cryptids*, *League of Legends*, and many other board games and video games. He also has a personal comic series named *The Castle of Rooster*. Xi is a master of digital painting, while he is also experienced with sketchbook art and watercolor.

Xi is also deeply influenced by Range Murata; his characters can show the influence of some characteristics that can also be found on Range Murata's artwork, for example, pretty big eyes and attractive body shapes. Xi has also developed more his own unique style on this. His characters are often overexaggerated in their actions, body shapes and facial features but audiences do not feel weird or uncomfortable with them. He has very creative ideas on character design, like personifying objects, or switching genders. Audiences can see his unique understanding of beauty on his artwork.

He is experienced with coloring and lighting when depicting atmosphere. He likes to use side light and point light, thus his characters are sometimes partially illuminated and most are in darkness. He also likes to use a light source from behind characters, so these characters have highlights around them but their face and bodies are in the dark. This kind of composition is very dramatic. In conclusion, good application of light can make illustrations more dramatic, and is more helpful to storytelling in illustrations.

Xi is the first artist who showed me that illustrations can be so pleasant. He combines commercial illustration and personal creation, and finds a perfect balance.

Concept

Based on the former fantasy artists who influenced me, I invented a new fantasy world of my own, from which I created these ten pieces of artwork. This world is full of magic and technology existing together. Five dominant races are the main constituents of the world's population: they are: humans, elves, demons, dragons, and easterners.

Like other fantasy worlds, you can see different design elements combined in this world.

You can see Steampunk style Giant robots driven by humans, Medieval style castles of demons and elves, and easterners' Postmodern style biochemical organisms exist together in this new world. Different living environments contribute to different cultures and directions of development. Humans don't have strong bodies, thus they need strict social compositions and highly developed technologies to help them survive. Dragons are magical creatures themselves, they are strong and powerful, surviving for them can be easier, which means they can stay primordial. Elves live with the water element and they seldom interfere with other races, so they can spend more time on their clothes and buildings. Demons are the strongest race, you can see their strong blue bodies and their powerful furnaces providing endless energy to them, they are always ready to fight. Easterners always modify their own bodies to adapt to wars.



Figure 8, Map of the Land of Five Races, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Here is a map that roughly shows the distribution of the five races, and the geographic circumstances of their regions. Different races are distributed on these continents, and their distribution causes cultural differences, which is like our Earth in reality.

Humans occupy the most central and resource-rich part of continent, so they have obtained the natural advantage of developing technology and their economy. Humans are highly developed in both magic and technology. They develop technology not only for protecting themselves, but also for gathering wealth. Thus they are most wealthy race in this world and have the most magnificent cities. With the development of science and technology, the distribution of wealth is gradually inclined. Social classes are gradually solidified, then they start to be rigidly stratified. Magus and scientists are highly revered and have high status in the society. They control most of the wealth. Most poor people have no chance to touch the upper class. Humans don't have strong bodies. To make up for their lack of strength, they always drive giant robots. These robots are usually huge and have different shapes to

assist them in their daily work and national defense.

Basically, the design of humans is focusing on their interaction with their high-tech giant robots. The illustrations describe how they drive their giant exaggerated Dieselpunk style mechas. These robots are designed based on modern vehicles and weapons, combining elements of tanks, aircrafts, and battleships. Among these elements, they also have some biological characteristics, such as frogs, turtles, and mankind. These robots will remind audiences of characters in 1980s and 1990s Japanese anime films.



Figure 9, Robot Driver, Yunnan Tao, 2020

Dragons are distributed in the mountainous areas of the north. They rarely participate in trading activities and political exchanges, so they can maintain a more primitive lifestyle, but they are not isolated. Different from the powerful, terrifying and divine position of dragons in other fantasy worlds, dragons in this world are just a normal race. They are kind of like ancient Africans, powerful but often overlooked due to lack of communication. When dragons are born, they look like humans but have tiny wings and tails. When growing up, their dragon features gradually appear. The symbol of a dragon growing mature is that he or she can completely transform to a dragon. The older a dragon is, the larger its shape is. Dragons always live as groups. The different shapes of infant dragons and mature dragons are obviously seen in my illustrations, and you can see how a young dragon transforms herself into an adult. The illustrations describe their natural primitive living environment.



Figure 10, Dragon Girl, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Easterners have the same looks as humans do, but they are facing a very terrible environment. They live in an independent continent in the east with many aggressive species, such as giants, gargoyles, and many wild animals. To survive in cruel wars, they are highly modernized, developed their society, cities, and weapons. Their soldiers are always armed with biochemical armor, and automatic weapons. Easterners will modify their own body into cyborgs, so technically they are totally different from humans even though they have same looks, humans only drive robots but don't modify themselves.

Easterners can be the unluckiest race, because they are facing the most cruel environment and they are not strong and have no magic. To survive monsters and other savage creatures on their land, they have to arm themselves and even remodel themselves, thus they can even evolve to a very high level, inventing biochemical armor.



Figure 11, Easterner Soldier, Yunnan Tao, 2019

The unique biochemical armor is a main element of easterners. The armor combines with Cyberpunk style and textures of animal skin. Their helmets are well designed. To make their armor precise, I did a lot of research on structures of human bodies and tried to describe human muscles and skeletons in mechanical form. Thus this biochemical armor is depicted believably. Gloomy tones show the cruel environment that they are facing.



Figure 12, Demon Warrior, Yunnan Tao, 2020

Demons live in the south of the mainland, they have a very ancient culture. They are all driven by fire, so they are not like normal organisms. Demons have smooth blue skin and are extremely strong. They don't need food or water. Each one of them has a furnace inside them, they will not die until the furnace burn out. They are not very technically developed, but the spirit of fire provides them with strength and power so that they can confront invaders. Their strong power prevents other races from invading their culture. Their bodies and architecture are beautifully decorated with many ancient European and African elements, to emphasize that they are a very old race.

My designs of demons were inspired by Medieval European and African graphics. They have majestic stone castles with exquisitely decorated windows. Their strong bodies, smooth and blue skin, and furnaces on their bellies all hint at their excellence as fighters. Their furnaces are carefully decorated with totemic symbols, and they wear jewelry with a European classical style. Their weapons are also carefully decorated, showing that they are fastidious in their belligerence.



Figure 13, Elf: Water Elementalist, Yunnan Tao, 2019

Elves have the highest achievement in magic. Their looks are like humans, but smaller, and they have larger eyes, long ears, and silver hair. They live in an independent continent. Thus they don't always communicate with other races. Their distribution is somewhat similar to the ancient Native Americans, they developed their culture almost completely in

isolation until the other races stepped on their land. They developed their own unique culture. They live in a very pristine way, embracing nature. They absorb magic power from nature, which makes them outstanding magicians. The unique culture of elves contributes to their magnificent palaces and clothes.

My illustrations of elves are focusing on their exquisite palaces and clothing. They have an ancient culture, but unlike belligerent demons, they are more elegant. These illustrations emphasize their graceful figures and appearances, and their connection with water. Green tones and soft light are very helpful for depicting their dignified temperament. Different races have totally different backgrounds, so each of their design elements will be somehow different. But, on the other hand, they have many common grounds, to show my personal style. They all have pretty faces and graceful body shapes, thus they are really fascinating and attractive. I try to add more expressions and movements to the characters, to make each illustration more narrative. You can see the perseverance of the young dragon from the expression in her eyes and her clenched fists. The smile of the young robot pilot shows his confidence. In another illustration, the strong demon is eager to fight with his eyes staring at the front and his hand holding an axe firmly.

Painting Skill

For commercial illustrations, clients have a high requirement for painting skills and they always require polished completed pieces. Sometimes a strong personal style is not required, artists have to find a balance place between personal style and the client's demands.

My painting style is influenced by realism. I enjoy painting detail, this is my advantage in this field. I try to present my techniques and style in my artwork. This thesis project has shown my achievements in painting skills.

Light sources play an important role in the painting process. In realistic paintings, light and colors are the best elements to depict shapes, and linework is minimized. Good light design helps create a better atmosphere in an illustration, making the illustration more narrative, it also makes the artwork more authentic and believable. I use different light in each of my illustrations to make the different races have different characteristics.

Normally, there will only be one main light source, while in the two illustrations for demons, I gave them two light sources to show their furnaces. The two light sources are opposite in temperature, since the furnace emits warm red light, the second light source, the strong light behind them, is cold white light similar to sunlight. Even their skin is cold blue, red reflections are hinted around their furnaces, because strong light sources can affect the surrounding environments.

Before starting a new illustration, I always set a basic color tone for it. Then the whole illustration can be unified with this tone, so that the colors will not look chaotic and disordered. I add a lot of secondary colors to this basic tone. If the tone is in a cold color, I

will add some warm colors. If the tone is in a warm color, I will add some cold colors. If there is not enough of a color change, the painting will look like a sketch. Basically, two of the three primary colors can be dominant on one illustration, but there should not be a third one. For example, if the illustration is in a blue tone, and I draw a red light source as a secondary dominant color, then yellow can still exist on the illustration but only as tiny embellishments. The light-receiving surface and the backlit surface of an object generally shows opposite tones. The dragon girl has a warm orange light source from the her left side, so I added a little blue and purple on the right side of her body to make her more stereoscopic. The same thing happens to my illustration of the elf, she has a strong cold light source from behind her, so her body hints a warmer red. If the light source is strong enough, the light-receiving surface of an object can be the color of the light, its backlit side should be its own intrinsic color, but if it is surrounded by reflective objects, the backlit side will be hint at colors of the reflective objects. If the light source is not strong enough, reflections can be weaker. Reflections create a lot of color changes in my artwork.

I use five different tones for my five races to distinguish them, also to show their characteristics and living environments. Both illustrations of humans are in daylight, the only light source is the sun but the light is not very strong. This makes the colors of the characters not strongly influenced by environments, so you can see their intrinsic colors and little reflection can be found. The dragon girl is also in daylight, while the light source is much stronger so she can be more reflective to colors from the environment. You can see bright yellow color on her light-receiving side, and hints of blue color reflected from surrounding mountains on her backlit side. Demons are in a blue tone with cold white light from behind, but the dominant light is from their furnaces. To emphasize the tone of their

furnaces, I put them in a dim environment. Their skin, accessories, and weapons are reflective to the warm red light from their furnaces. Elves are in a green tone, with a single light source from behind, which makes most of the image is backlit. Light passes through hair, skin, and clothing, creating changes in brightness and temperature. Easterners are in grey and dim tones, even though there can be a warm light source, it cannot warm the whole image. The illustrations are full of colors with low purity and low brightness. This kind of coloring describes the cruel environment they are facing.

In my illustrations, characters do not stand straight in the middle of the screens, there is usually a dynamic composition. For powerful characters like demons and easterners, I place the viewpoint under them to look up at them, which makes them impactful and oppressive in the illustrations. In illustrations with horizontal composition, main characters and backgrounds are often combined into an L-shaped composition, the blank part in the middle of the L makes the picture less crowded, while this does not apply to strong characters. The male demon occupies the dominant position of the entire picture and almost fills the whole space, the crowded composition makes him look even stronger.

I attach great importance to the accuracy of structure and shape, including body, machinery, and architecture. I believe that only accurate structure can make my characters more credible and the picture more vivid. In my illustration of the dragon girl, she is pulling her hands out of the ground. It is a very exaggerated posture but natural, you can even see her toes curl to keep balance. Her wings and tail are inspired by bats and lizards. I have used many references from animals in designing my characters, not only this dragon girl. The

robot driven by a human has a pair of canine-like legs with wide soles which are like sleighs, to make them more steady. The body of the robot, meanwhile, is inspired by a turtle, thus it looks firm and safe.

One of the highlights of my artwork is my description of details. I am good at distinguishing different textures. When creating the biochemical organisms of easterners, I used a lot of highlights, reflections, and sharp edges to depict their smooth metal bodies. The giant robots of humans are also made of metal but more rough, so they do not have such highlights and do not reflect surroundings obviously. Demon skin is smoother and more solid than other races, there can be more cold color highlights, while the soft skin of other races cannot reflect light spots and appears warm with the color of blood. When light passes through this kind of skin, it appears warmer and brighter red, which is the color of blood vessels.

I spent a lot of time depicting expressions and facial details of these characters. Although most of them have similar characteristics such as wide set eyes, the appearance of each face is different. The face of the male demon is wrapped in muscles, the tight muscles making this face show a gruesome expression. The dragon girl is looking up, the muscles around her mouth are tight, showing that she is trying to pull her arms up. The difference of the eyebrows of the human girl and the elf shows their totally different moods. The eyebrows of the human girl are horizontal and tight, because she is very nervous, while the eyebrows of the elf are also horizontal but looser, showing that she is relaxed.

I am still trying to find the balance between commercial demands and my personal style. I have made some efforts in this thesis project, but this is only the first step in a long process.

Conclusion

As a concept artist, I have high achievements in painting skills, developing techniques, and designing creativity. This project has provided me an opportunity to show audiences what I can do. The card game industry and video game industry will be potential fields where I can show my ability.

I built a fantasy world and created many pieces of artwork in this project. I also accumulated a lot of experience in character design. I believe the game industry needs my creativity and imagination. I can help build the world of a game, design creatures and characters. Whether I work as a freelance illustrator or work for a game company, I will continue to create fascinating artwork throughout my career.

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