

**DAY TO DAY  
of a...**

**BACKGROUND  
DESIGNER**

# The Basics:

- A **background designer** is the artist responsible for designing all the bgs and environments of an animated television series.
- Background designers use their **knowledge of perspective** and their considerable **draftsmanship** abilities to flesh out the bgs within the storyboard, as well as help better articulate the world in ways that reinforce the story. Their backgrounds serve as integral guides for the vendor animation studio.

# To Paint or Not To Paint

The scope of a background designer's role is extremely dependent on the particular studio and production. In some studios, background designers are also responsible for **painting the backgrounds** while in others, this is an entirely different job belonging to a **Background Painter**.

**For the purpose of this series, I will be discussing the BG Designer and the BG Painter as two different jobs... but there is a lot of crossover between the two!**

As always, it is important to remember  
that the role of a ***background  
designer*** can change from  
project to project...

**And with that,  
let's talk backgrounds!**

# Pre-Design

At the beginning of each episode, the Director and Art Director decide what designs need to exist **BEFORE** boards are launched. These designs, both character and bg are called **Pre-Design**.

While it depends on the production, a lot of the pre-design for environments are done in the form of **visual development** to give the Director and the story team a rough idea of what the location will look like.

On some shows, the **Director** will provide **Top-down layout maps** to the Art Director and the bg design team so that the designers are putting things like doors, furniture, windows, etc in the places that **work best for the vision of the story the director has in mind**.

# Pre-Design

[continued]

While quite a few character designs are done during pre-design, the MAJORITY of background designs are done after boards in television animation.

This is for the simple reason that the storyboards dictate what angles and backgrounds will be necessary for the episode. **Above all, designs are meant to serve and reinforce the needs of the story.**

During Pre-Design, a lot of the background rough layouts are done by either the Art Director or the Storyboard Director... though a background designer may be pulled in at this stage too !

# Primary Locations

Another aspect of Pre-Design and one that will DEFINITELY involve the background designers is *designing the primary locations of the series.*

For shows with recurring sets where the majority of the episodes will at least FEATURE one primary location, the Art Director and background designers will begin work on these designs very early in production...

often well before the storyboard artists or Directors even begin!

*For example:*

*On Final Space, the design of the main spaceship was created before the production fully started.*

*These designs are created as part of the overall series development, and exist well before any of the story team is brought on. The primary design serves as reference for the story team.*

# Rough Backgrounds

Once the storyboard is finished, that is when background design REALLY begins.

Using screengrabs from the storyboard, the Art Director and Show Runner launch the background designer on different backgrounds.

The Art Director will give any information that is not abundantly clear/legible in the board to help guide the background designer. This is also the point that they can throw out their own ideas.

*For example:*

*The Art Director might say something like, "Add some books to that rectangular shape in the foreground so it reads as a table." or maybe, "Let's try making the background wall exposed brick."*



# Rough Backgrounds

[continued]

Sometimes, the backgrounds in boards are quite descriptive and sometimes they are very vague-- it all depends on the artist involved.

Whatever the level of render in the board, it is the job of the background designer ***to create a clear design of the space in the shot that utilizes accurate perspective and also adheres to the style and shape language of the series.***

Often, background designers will create a background that combines the features of several shots in order to show what the ENTIRE SPACE looks like.

***For example:***

*If there is a scene with a close up of a door, followed by a shot of the entire back wall including the door, the bg designer will create **1 master design** that shows both the door and the back wall in one design.*

# Time to Review

Once the designer has done a rough version of the background, they will show it to the Art Director, who will give their first pass of notes.

Often these notes from the Art Director are concerned with *keeping the design within the style of the show*.

Once the Art Director signs off on the rough, it is time to show it to the Show Runner, who will also give their own notes.

The background designer will take the notes from both the Art Director and the Show Runner and apply it to the design.

# Shapes and Lines

*On the subject of style, different shows obviously have different design needs and languages... but there are usually two primary style types when it comes to backgrounds:*

**SHAPE-BASED:** These are more painterly backgrounds where the bg designer will **NEED** to incorporate gray tones in order to create the background. Often these look like **black and white paintings**.

**LINE-BASED:** These are backgrounds that exist mostly in the form of *hard lineart*. While bg designers can and often do still use gray tones, **this background can be drawn in the form of purely linework**.

# Clean-Up Time

Once the Art Director and Show Runner have signed off on the rough design, the background designer heads back to their Cintiq and takes the design to CLEAN.

In more shape-based designs, this means really finessing the tones, adding light indication and polish-- basically making the design as FULLY FLESHED OUT as needed so that the background painter can understand the basic black and white value of the set.

In more line-based designs, the background designer will also really tie-down the accessories and line work and may also go in on the gray tones in order to provide the painter with an extremely legible background to work color into.

# One Design A Day

In general, it should take a background designer approximately one day to draw one background.

Of course, this can depend on the complexity of the background. An open sky might take an hour to draw while a complex boiler room may take several days.

In a normal production where there are about 30 MAIN BG DESIGNS per episode...  
And usually about 3 BG DESIGNERS...  
design would have 2 weeks to finish all 30 designs.

Each designer gets 1/3 of the work, so 10 designs.

So they should average 5 background designs per week... or 1 a day.

# Your Own Process

Different designers may have their own process and of course the Art Director and production will affect how the designer works as well.

Some designers do “roughs” that are closer to clean. Some will finish each bg to clean before moving onto the next while some may do the sketches for all their bgs and then do all the cleanup-- it just depends on the artist.

Talking to your Art Director about how you like to work best and asking how they like things to go is always a good call when you begin a new production.

# Key BGs

Because most studios incorporate a separate animation production house in some capacity-- known as the **VENDOR STUDIO**-- the in-house design team does not design **EVERY BG**.

Usually, the in-house designers will design only the key backgrounds and leave all the other backgrounds to the vendor studio.

**For example:**

*If there is a scene that takes place in a classroom, the in-house designers will design a key background that shows the desks, the windows the blackboard.*

*The storyboard will have shots that need a close up of the blackboard... a close up of the desk... a closeup of the window--*

*but all of that **INFORMATION** will be provided in the key background. **So the vendor studio will create the additional bgs, using the key bg as a style guide.***

# Draw it All Out

One way to really make the life of the Art Director, Painter and the general production easier is to draw EVERY OBJECT [or the majority of them] as something that can be turned off and on if needed.

Because of the nature of TV production, things can change suddenly and sometimes very late in the game.

Making it so that the objects and furniture in your background ***exist as seperate elements that can be removed or moved if needed*** makes it so much easier to handle those last second changes!

## **For example:**

*If you are designing a bedroom, making the bed on it's own layer that can be turned off to reveal the backwall and floor of the room makes it so that it will be easy to move the bed to the opposite side of the screen!*



# Who Do I Work With?

As with character designers, bg designers work closest with the **ART DIRECTOR**.

The Art Director is the foremost person in charge of the over all look of the series, and guides the background designers in **keeping the designs consistent and adhering to the style of the show.**

BG designers will also receive notes from the **Show Runner and Supervising Director.**

Background designers may communicate with **BG Painters** to discuss their ideas for the color and light treatment in certain backgrounds.

# Who Do I Affect?

Because Backgrounds are usually built out FROM STORYBOARDS, **BG designers are greatly affected by storyboard artists and Directors.**

Directors and Storyboard artists have to be very careful with their shot choices [especially on 2D shows] or they risk **making too many backgrounds for the show's designers and budget to handle.**

*In addition, the better the perspective in the board, the easier on design the background will be.*

**BG designers affect the vendor studio** primarily, since they are creating the guides and key bgs the vendor studio's design team will need to rely on in order to make the rest of the backgrounds/assets.

# Tools of the Trade

For the most part, BG designers in TV animation work in **ADOBE PHOTOSHOP** [or similar programs such as Procreate].

Photoshop provides a tidy UI to both sketch and polish designs and is a software any aspiring background designer needs to be very fluent in.

# Advice for the Aspiring Background Designer

If you are interested in BECOMING A BACKGROUND DESIGNER, here are some good things to consider!

## #1) PERSPECTIVE ABOVE ALL!

*Good background designers need to REALLY understand perspective.*

*Whether the design is a line-based bg or a more painterly shape-based bg, Art directors are looking for portfolios that show you have a command on perspective.*

*More than this though, they are looking to see that you can **utilize perspective in a way that doesn't look overly academic--** they are looking to see you have developed a shorthand and a style so your bgs don't feel stiff.*

# How to Hone Perspective

The only way to really get good at drawing things in proper [or at least believable] perspective is to ***PRACTICE PRACTICE PRACTICE!***

You have to learn how to do perspective correctly before you can learn how to stylize it, so practicing your ***1 point, 2 point and 3 point perspective*** and really **training your eye and your hand to visualize 3-dimensional space** is a great exercise for the aspiring background designer.

## #2: Composition

Even though in TV animation, **much of composition will be dictated by the boards**, it is still a good idea to practice creating tidy compositions.

Practicing drawing backgrounds with different objects at various depths in the frame will show the person looking at your portfolio that you **understand how things behave when they are closer and farther away from camera**.

# #3: Light and Value

**While this is more important to shape-based backgrounds than shows with more line-based backgrounds, work that showcases your understanding of how light behaves within a space goes a long way to show an art director that you not only know how objects work in the world, but how objects ARE AFFECTED by the world itself.**

*For example, bgs with open windows that show light pouring into a space and bending across various furnishings; things that glow/light sources-- these can show you really understand 3-dimensional space.*

# More Tips from Design Pros

## #4: LESS IS MORE

***A handful of strong pieces that show you have a command over perspective and draftsmanship....is more impactful than a large collection of not-as-strong designs. Keep your portfolio selective to your strongest work!***

## #5: SHOW ADAPTABILITY

***While most Art Director's can gauge whether a prospective bg designer can tackle work outside of their normal style just from looking, it is still a good idea to have a little bit of variety. For example, maybe something really complex and sci-fi and something more cartoony and slice of life. This shows you have range.***

## #6: HOARD IMAGES

***Much like character designers, bg designers do plenty of research in order to build up their inner-mind [and Desktop] reference library! It is a good idea to study different types of environments and spaces... and collect images you find interesting!***



# More Tips from Design Pros

## #7: KEEP YOUR LAYERS ORGANIZED

*Especially in BG design, keeping Photoshop files manageable is SUPER IMPORTANT.*

*Because one Photoshop file is passed from artist to artist, a messy layering system can **BECOME AN ABSOLUTE NIGHTMARE** for whoever touches your files next!*

*Always strive to be organized when setting up your Photoshop files so that you are kind to the painter, art director, or whoever has to deal with it next! :)*

## #8: CHECK-IN EARLY

Once you are a background designer, a good habit to foster is checking in with your Art Director **BEFORE you tie down the bg too far**. This will make it easier on the art director to point out things they would like changed... and also make it easier for you to implement their changes!

# More Tips from Design Pros

## #9: DRAW DRAW DRAW

Like most design positions, **Draftsmanship** is extremely important in BG design.

And the only way to get better is to do it more!

Practice creating designs based on various concepts, and **use your understanding of perspective as well as your understanding of the story** to experiment.

**This will sharpen your design skills, and give you the chops to create literal worlds!**

**And that's all  
I've got!**

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