



JUSTIN GERARD
ILLUSTRATION



October 2022

“Painting The Gloomwald Swamp” STEP-by-STEP GUIDE

Painting and Detailing a Fantasy Battle Scene



“The Gloomwald Swamp Battle”

Step-by-Step Guide

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By Justin Gerard

In this article I will be describing the process I used to take “the Gloomwald Swamp Battle” from the barely coherent scribbles of a mad man, to a fully-painted and highly-detailed battle scene. I will be covering some of the tools, techniques, and thought processes behind this journey from madness to sanity, and offering some tips for managing the mayhem!



the GLOOMWALD
Habiti quercus

Monster of the Month
for OCTOBER 2022 (Rev. 2)
JUSTIN GERARD

INSPIRATION

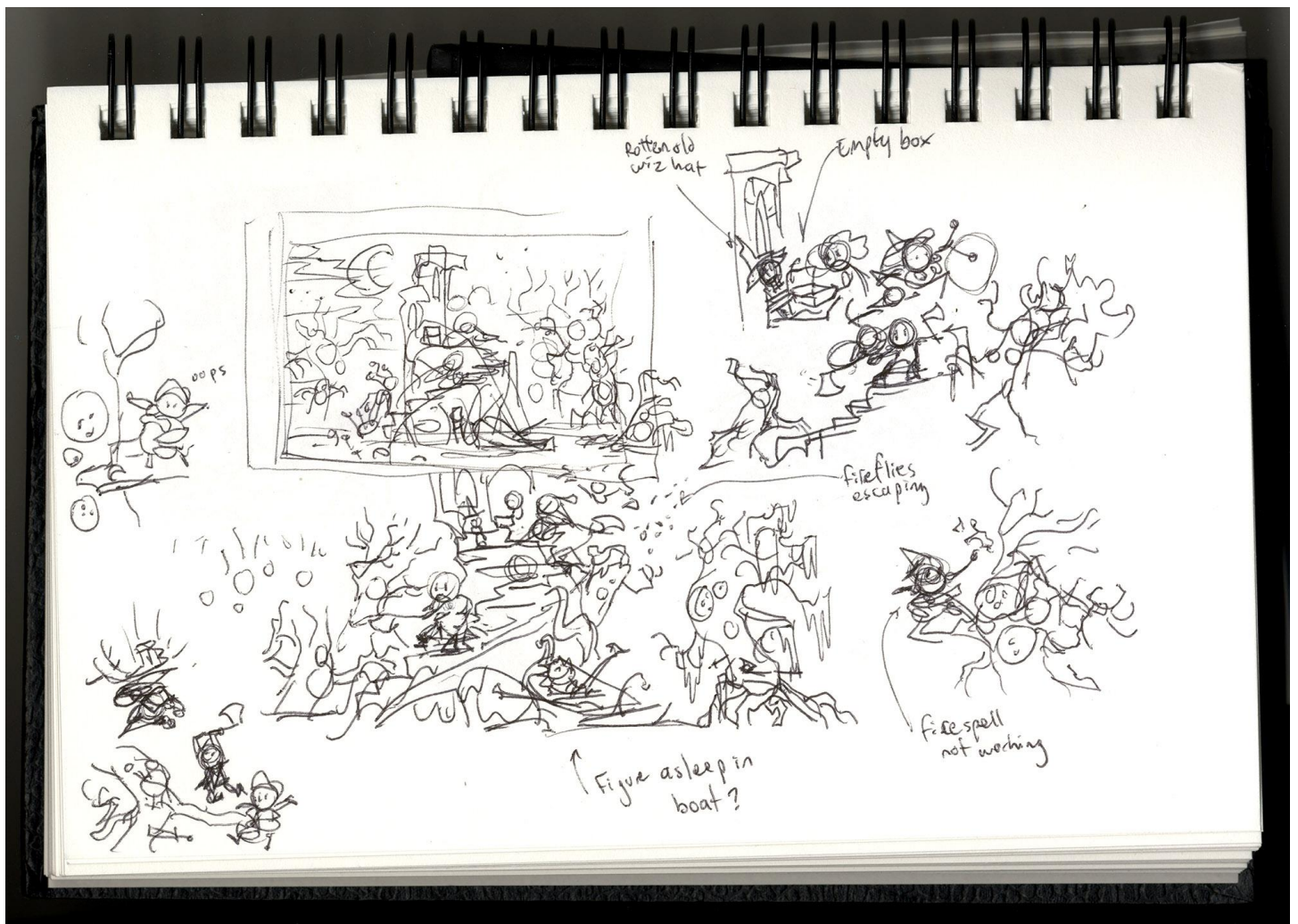
As with the other battle scenes in the Monster of the Month Series, this image began with an idea for a monster, loosely related to halloween. In this particular case, what would a zombie tree look like?



I love drawing rotten, twisted, old trees. *And the more mushrooms the better, I say.* In 2021 I painted one I called “the Gloomwald.” It was a particularly evil old rotted tree, which still harbors a terrible grudge against the wood-chopping humans who left him with some mementos many years ago. I had wanted to do a full painting involving a forest of these characters, but hadn’t really found the right setting.

Earlier this year my family and I took a trip to Jekyll Island, off the coast of Georgia, which features some fascinating and beautiful old swamp oaks. These trees and the swamps around them provided the basis for both the monsters, and the setting for this scene. I love basing my fantasy scenes on real places. It helps ground everything in reality, keeping the scene relatable and believable to the average viewer.



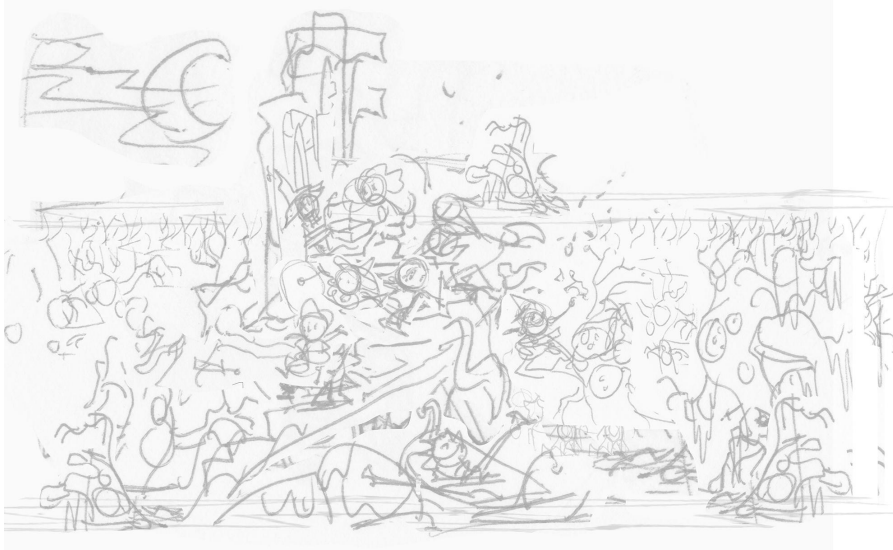


The Mad Scribbles of a Deranged Lunatic

The greatest fun to be had when making a scene, is all in the sketches! Sketching out your illustration and its characters is a wonderful chance to watch your story unfold, and explore all the possibilities for scenes that it might offer.

While the above sketches may not make much sense to most sane and rational human beings, to me they are filled with color and movement and action. They were created in a feverish panic, on the sketchbook nearest to hand when the idea hit me. They offer only the most basic of passes at the composition and characters, and most of the sketches end up being terrible ideas that are thrown out. But all it takes is one gem in the midst of all the chaos and you have the basis for a truly great image. I consider these rough, garbage sketches to be the real heart and soul of an image, and the most vital part of the image-crafting process.

As I sketch, I try the scene from a variety of angles to see which works the best. Once I have some that I like, I rework the design a few times to try and arrive at the best version of it.



As I progress, the mess doesn't necessarily get any cleaner, but it begins to make more sense in a mad sort of way. I know where my horizon line will be, I know who my characters are and where they are in relation to one another.

Eventually I arrive at an arrangement that makes good use of the space and offers opportunities for the little moments of action I'd like the scene to have.

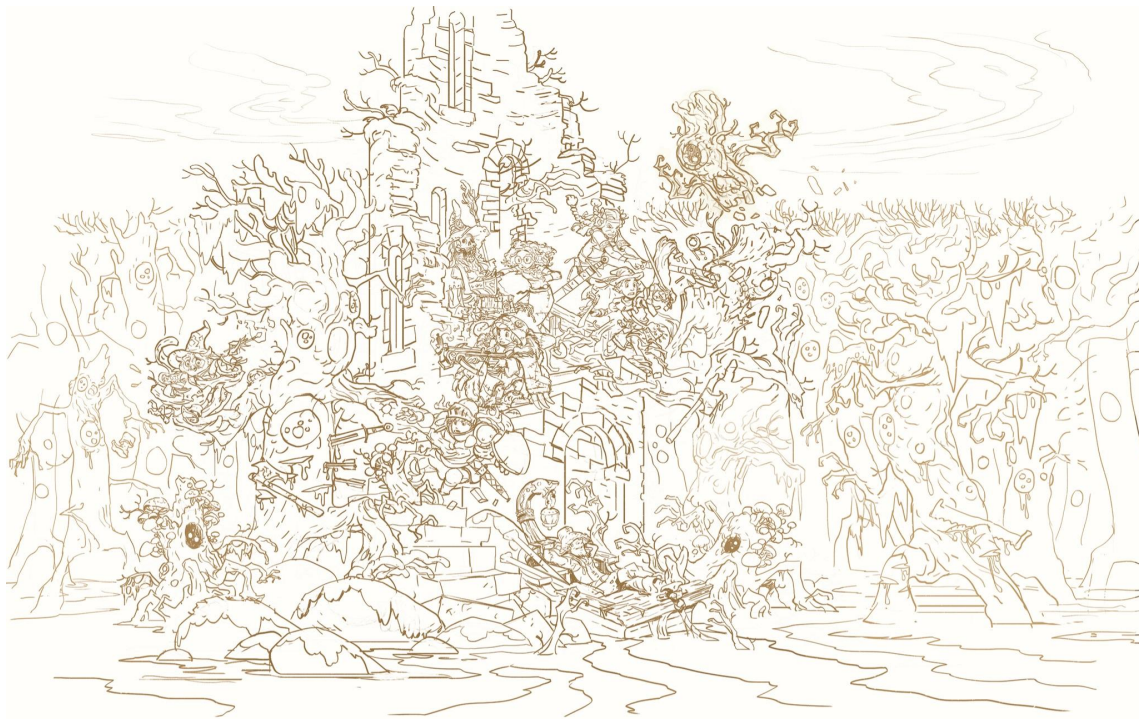
As I go along, I am picturing the scene like a movie, and the various focal points as moments the camera will focus on as it switches between scenes. The only difference is that here, all of the action is seen all together at once. The effect is that the audience can wander around in the scene, and watch the film play out at their own pace. They can dwell on certain moments longer than others, as their interest leads them.

Once my composition is established, I start sketching out character studies. I know the poses and angles I generally want, so now I just have to wrestle the figures into place.

I don't do this with every detail in the scene, only the characters that are still murky in my mind, or that will be such major focal points.



THE TIGHT DRAWING



With my character studies finished, I now do a clean line drawing of the whole scene. While this can be done digitally or traditionally, for this one I wanted to try out some new digital brushes I had developed specifically for drawing larger scenes.

I generally tend to prefer the look and feel of traditional drawing, but digital is nice in that it allows for extremely easy reworks as well as cutting and pasting as you cobble the design together. I was very pleased with the results of this digital drawing so I decided to forgo my usual pencil drawing and proceed directly to color.

THE COLOR COMP



Another vital stage once we have established the drawing, is the color comp. It is vital because in imaginative realism, *we are painting that which does not exist*. If it did exist, we could just take a photo of it and be done. In the absence of solid, concrete reference, it is worth it to do some studies in color, which will offer us some guides on our color arrangements when we begin painting, helping us avoid constant repainting later on.

While value is the intellectual content of the image, color is the emotional. If we choose a bright, highly saturated color at mid-day, this will offer a completely different feel to the narrative and image than if we chose a more somber palette of neutrals at night.

I know that I am wanting something a little more eerie, but at the same time, pleasing and vibrant. It will be a tough balancing act.

It can be hard to know where to begin when diving into color. An easy start is to begin with local colors and then build other colors off of them. In this case, I know there is a red cloak, red leaves, and green moss. I start with those, and my time of day, and am off to the races.

I try 3 different approaches: A night scene, with silvery moonlight, A dusk scene with warm light on a hazy horizon, And a morning scene

with our scene set in mist. In the end, I wasn't satisfied with any specific one of these, but there were parts of each that I found interesting. So I did a fourth combining many of the aspects I found most successful.



THE PAINTING

THE UNDERPAINTING

With my tight drawing and color comp ready, it's time to start painting! I begin by creating a warm underpainting to establish my values before proceeding to color.

First I lay in soft shadows and murky tones using highly textured brushes. After that, I carve out a mask for some of the major shapes of the scene, such as the tower and the main zombie trees.

After I have painted in the soft texture and shadows, I move on to much harder shadows. I use a very hard brush for this, and try to focus on knocking shapes from what is behind them. This will help them read more clearly in the scene.

Lastly, I add lighting. I use screen and soft light layers to slowly build up my lighting effect which adds drama to the scene. I don't try to get too sharp with my lighting details here, as most of what we see here will get partially covered in the layers to follow. I plan to add tight detail after we have established the colors. I do focus on clearly defining what parts of my scene are brightly lit versus which are in full shadow.



THE CYCLE

Now we dive into color! As I have described in previous articles, I use a repetitive process to add layers and layers of detail and nuance to a painting.

The 3 major steps that I repeat over and over again are:

1. **Light**
2. **Color**
3. **Render**

We have already established our first step, “Light,” in the underpainting phase. In the first frame we can see transparent colors being added over the underpainting. When working digitally I add these colors using multiply layers, which work very much like traditional watercolor. I paint with the actual local color of the object in this first pass. Multiply layers are transparent so even if I am using a bright, saturated color, a little of the warm tone of the underpainting is seen through these local colors, keeping the painting unified and the palette consistent, (even when painting the tremendously garish pink of the bunny suit!)

In the next frame, I begin to render the scene. This is always a perilous time in the painting process, which I sometimes call “the ugly stage.” It is when I first see truly bad errors in the



drawing and have to wrestle with the designs to correct for those errors. If I have done a good job on the drawing there are hopefully very few of these.

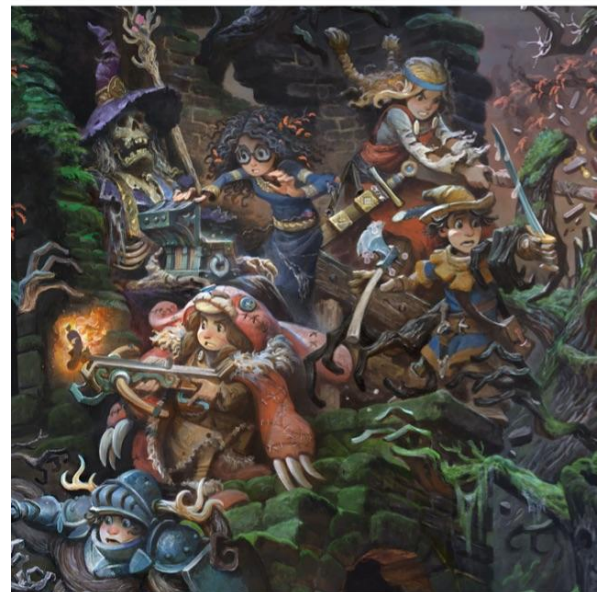
I don't get too discouraged if I do have to make corrections or alterations at this stage. It is important to allow myself the room to make changes as they come up and take advantage of new and better opportunities as they arise.

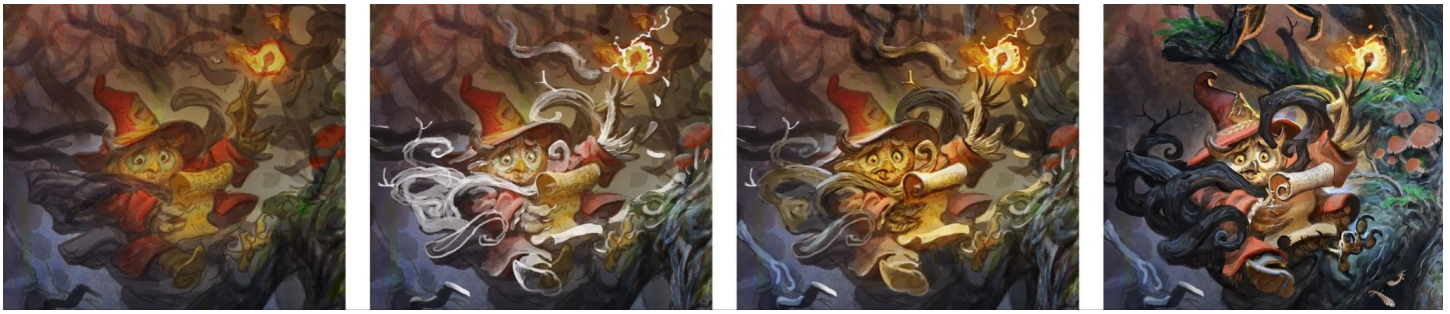
In this next iteration of the rendering cycle, (Frame 1 on the right) I have used a normal layer to carve in new highlights and details into the painting. Each time I add this "Light" layer, I work in new details. Here I have added the fur trim of the rabbit suit, the rim-light on the axe-girl's hair, the decorative gilding on the dead wizard's chest. Each new iteration is another opportunity to invest the scene with new detail and narrative interest.

In the second frame, I add color back in, once again using multiply layers. This time, I add a bit of black into the colors as I paint them, which deepens the shadows, enhancing the lighting effect and giving the objects in the scene more heft and weight.

Finally, in frame 3, I add more detail. I use very soft, semi-transparent brushes to push back some of the overly harsh areas and give nuance and subtlety to the color passages. I also use mixer brushes to blend areas together that look too "digital". (Digital brushes are often rigidly locked into a size, shape and pattern, and generally lack the organized chaos of physical brushes. As such, it is easy to pick out the shape of the brush a digital artist used, because it lacks much variety. Taking the time to blend them can help a digital painting appear less synthetic.)

Once I have completed this phase, I can now rinse and repeat if I want to add more detail.





CHARACTERS

For the bulk of the painting I repeated the cycle of rendering about 3 times. But for some of the major characters, I will do a few extra passes so they stand up to even closer audience scrutiny.

In the above example, we can see Phineus the Owl Wizard as he starts with the first color pass in frame 1. In frame 2 we begin the “Light” phase, and we can notice some dramatic changes: The shape of the limbs, the orientation of his right foot, the shape of the scroll, and many other small details. In frame 3, “Color” I have added color back in, which kills that unnatural white, and adds further detail. In frame 4, I blend it all together using soft brushes.

In the example below, I begin the process again, but this time with less focus on heavy reworks, and more focus on refinement. In the first example, our lighting step (Frame 2 above) is a heavy-handed rework of many of the details of the character, whereas in the lighting step for the next iteration (Frame 2 below) I have made almost no changes, instead focusing on enhancing the lighting effect and details.

The same occurs with the Color phase, as I add very little correction, and instead focus on pushing the shadows and colors so they offer more nuance and depth. Finally, in frame 4, the character has had a very light color glaze applied, (using a very light brush on a normal layer). This gives an interesting look of dense, subsurface-scattering to the character.



With that second iteration complete, I move on to another cycle of Light, Color, Render to add further detail and interest. With each pass, there are less corrections, and more refinement. With each pass I also zoom in closer and closer, using ever smaller and smaller brushes to add sharp details. Work big to small!



The final details I add here are done on Soft Light layers, using primarily bright, highly-saturated colors to punch up specific colors: the owl wizard's cloak, the magic, the eyes, the fireflies, and the mushrooms. I try to leave most of the rest of the image alone as too much equally-high saturation flattens the image out!

Lastly, I mirror the image back and forth to make sure to correct any errors in proportion before sending the image off to the printer!

FINAL THOUGHTS



At first, complex scenes can appear daunting. It is important to remember that everything can be broken down into small, manageable chunks, which, if handled one at a time, can be more easily processed and overcome. Don't let big scenes scare you! Just tackle each problem one at a time and remember, anything worth doing is worth doing well! (This image took about 15 days!) Take your time, and don't beat yourself up if you are having to rework and refine an area over and over again. Most of the characters in this scene required some kind of detailed rework in some area. It is just part of the process. In the end, reworking and refining the image will make it stand out and will offer the viewer something packed with interest and detail!



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Thanks for joining me for this tutorial! I hope you've enjoyed it. If you have any questions, spot any errors, or have any suggestions for future tutorials, please message me on Patreon at www.Patreon.com/JustinGerard or email me at studio@gallerygerard.com.