THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY

The Brief

"Create 1 character from concept to final game ready art. We will be looking for evidence of the various ways you have attempted to approach the brief. With this in mind please include rough sketches, notes and doodles that might have led to the final development.
When designing your character you should keep the following in mind
1. The game genre will be an "endless runner" type game
2. The setting for the game is the French revolution
3. The Art style should be light hearted and feel suited to a mass audience, typical of the mobile games space.

The purpose for the test is to see how you explore the development of an art style. Other than point "3" there is little to direct the style of this piece of work. I have done this intentionally to give you as much creative room to work with as possible. If you do include sketches or any other development pieces try to note down the time spent at each stage and finally - have fun with this!"

Understanding The Brief

Sometimes easier said than done, understanding the brief is the most important first step in the development process.

As I have experience with the Endless Runner genre, I also had to find a balance between using my knowledge gained and treading new ground for an exciting idea. The brief seems to be as much about developing a style and the reasons behind the result as it is showing artistic and technical skill. This is a fantastic opportunity to get really creative in a theme that doesn't immediately lend itself to the genre, especially with the reference material provided.

Caricatures? You can clearly go quite cartoony with this theme. However, would said cartoons be hard to relate to a contemporary audience?

I'm not sure a lady with baring all is right for an endless runner but it does point to a lot of possibilities with gender, age and class. The painting is very dramatic, making excellent use of dulled blue and yellow tones. The only bright colours being the shocking red and blue of the French Flag.

Vive La Runnerlution! I'm not sure this is the game to get very political. However, the times were extraordinary and produced some very interesting characters. The clothing is flamboyant and stylish and uses a mixture of bright and duller colours.

Thoughts on The Brief

I realised quite early on that this was going to be a combination of using my Endless Runner Development experience and finding a decent art style that works for the theme. I think one of the difficulties with The French Revolution(ary) as a theme is that it might be quite hard for a contemporary player to relate to it. Of course 2012 saw the release of Les Misérables which has proven to be excellent reference and should still be quite fresh in the collective consciousness when thinking about French Revolutionary times.

Because of the nature of Endless Runner titles, they do not have time or space to fill in back-story or set the scene. Any interuption to play is just another reason to stop playing the app, which we quickly discovered in testing after putting in a short intro animation on Agent Dash. After playing every Endless Runner I can get my hands on I think the longest intro I can find before gameplay is around half a second. Temple Run has a camera pan as your hero (who nods heavily to Indiana Jones) is chased by demonic monsters. JetPack Joyride shows the hero smash in to a secret lab, Subway Surfers shows a street-smart kid dash off camera etc. The point behind this is that successful Endless Runners rely on collective experiences, expectations and familiarities to set the scene. Agent Dash needs no introduction because for all intents and purposes he is James Bond. I think games like Running With Friends have less of an impact because you're not really sure why you're meant to be there.

I decided that the best way to tackle this brief was by treading reasonably familiar ground and providing purpose and authenticity to the character. Les Mis creates some fantastic characters and develops a clever colour scheme of muted ruddy reds and blues that draw people in. The Hunchback of Notre Dame by Disney, allbeit set earlier in time, shows Paris in a brilliant cartoon light and has several character archetypes that people can instantly relate to: The hero, the smart and tough heroine, the gangly villain, the stocky comedy character with exaggerated proportions.

I think that it makes sense to create the main character for this brief, although I have loosely thought up secondary characters. I also think that because of the theme combined with the genre of game, I should create a character who wouldn't be lost in an animation, not too stylised but fun and cartoony enough to not be serious.

Reference Gathering -
The French Revolution

I don't think I'm alone in saying that I don't know an awful lot about the French Revolution other than the usual Storming of the Bastille and Madame Guillotine. I took it upon myself to research the French Revolution and gather reference to get a better feel for the theme.

Very comical and colourful characters from Les Mis. They could provide some light humour although my experience in Endless Runners suggests that the comedy characters are usually secondary.

Some drawings of revolutionary dress. They are simplistically drawn and nicely styled. I especially like the use of single large blocks of colour as running characters need to be as least distracting as possible. I can definitely push out proportions and stylise the body shape more.

Could I make the runner a soldier? I think they look pretty cool. There are problems though: Silhouette, accuracy, empathy (do you care if he or she just looks like everyone else? Plus they've already picked a side..) Also from a gameplay point of view, customisation!

TOILETTE DE COUR LOUIS XV.

These old illustrations are quite good for reference. Their use of simple blocks of colour works well, although I think this is a little too ornate.

The Scarlet Pimpernel! He definitely could be a very cool character to base the game on. The Brief is the French Revolutionary but I think it could stretch to this. Is there enough appeal?

This is a very epic scene with lots of characters. It is interesting that it seems to use the same dull red and blues, it certainly seems to be a theme. Perhaps it synergises with the tricolour. There is a mix of loose and form-fitting clothing and most people appear to be quite thin.

I could go quite comical and make a very pompous French Monarch dressed in metallic-looking fabric, they certainly do have an appeal.

I really love something about this character. Ok, she looks a bit like a pirate but that's mostly the hat. It has a good mix of characterisation, cartoony proportions and modern feel but doesn't feel out of place at all. I think if I could go along this route it could work well.

Reference Gathering - Endless Runners

I decided to gather some reference of Endless Runners to have a look at what types of characters are most common-place and see if there are any general themes that underlie them.

Barry from JetPack Joyride is a great character because he is cool and has appeal. You can also customise him a lot which adds ways to monetise. He has a body more suited for 2d though and sometimes its hard to see the cosmetic items you've bought because they're so small.

Agent Dash I think has a pretty likeable and playable main character. Obviously owing a fair bit to James Bond, he's instantly recognisable. I think his stylised proportions make him interesting.

Clumsy Ninja isn't quite an Endless Runner but is quite a nicely designed character all the same.

Running with friends are cool characters if a little boring. They are the same to save on dev cost as they all use the same rig and assets. This is definitely something to take in to consideration.

Sonic Dash is an ever popular game. It needs no introduction as everyone knows Sonic. Still, he's a very well designed character with a brilliant silhouette.

Last Knight is a beautiful looking game. Sadly I don't think it's been as big as it deserves. The main character has the problem of looking brilliant from all angles but behind..
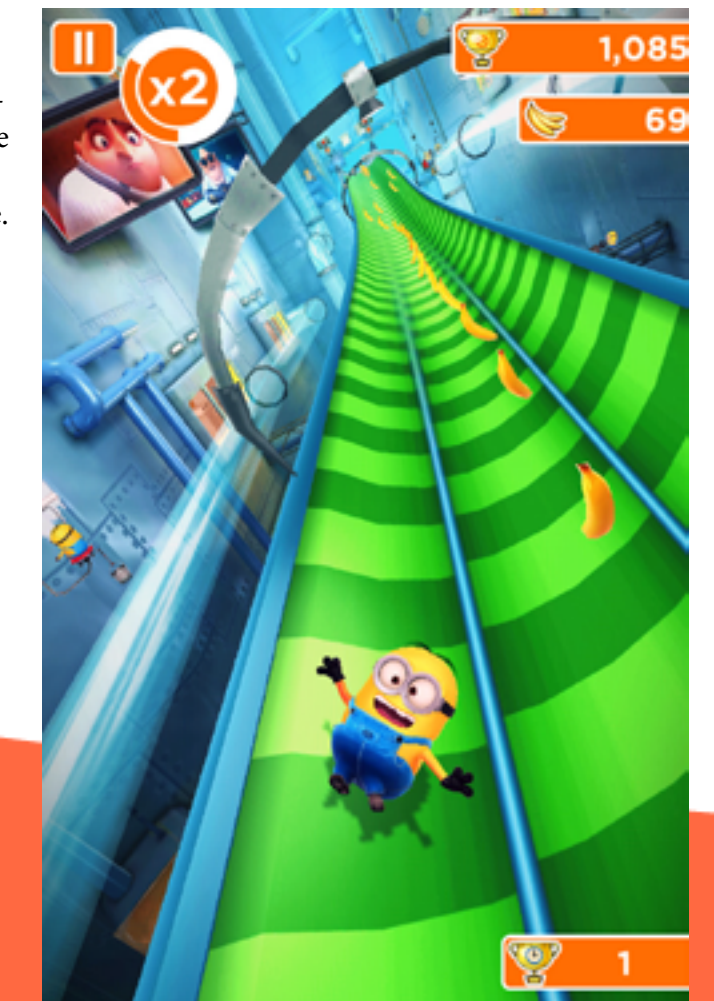
The subway surfer characters are fantastic because they're cool, very customisable and easy to make. I think when they first started they had limited appeal but constant updates and reworking has made them some of the best around.
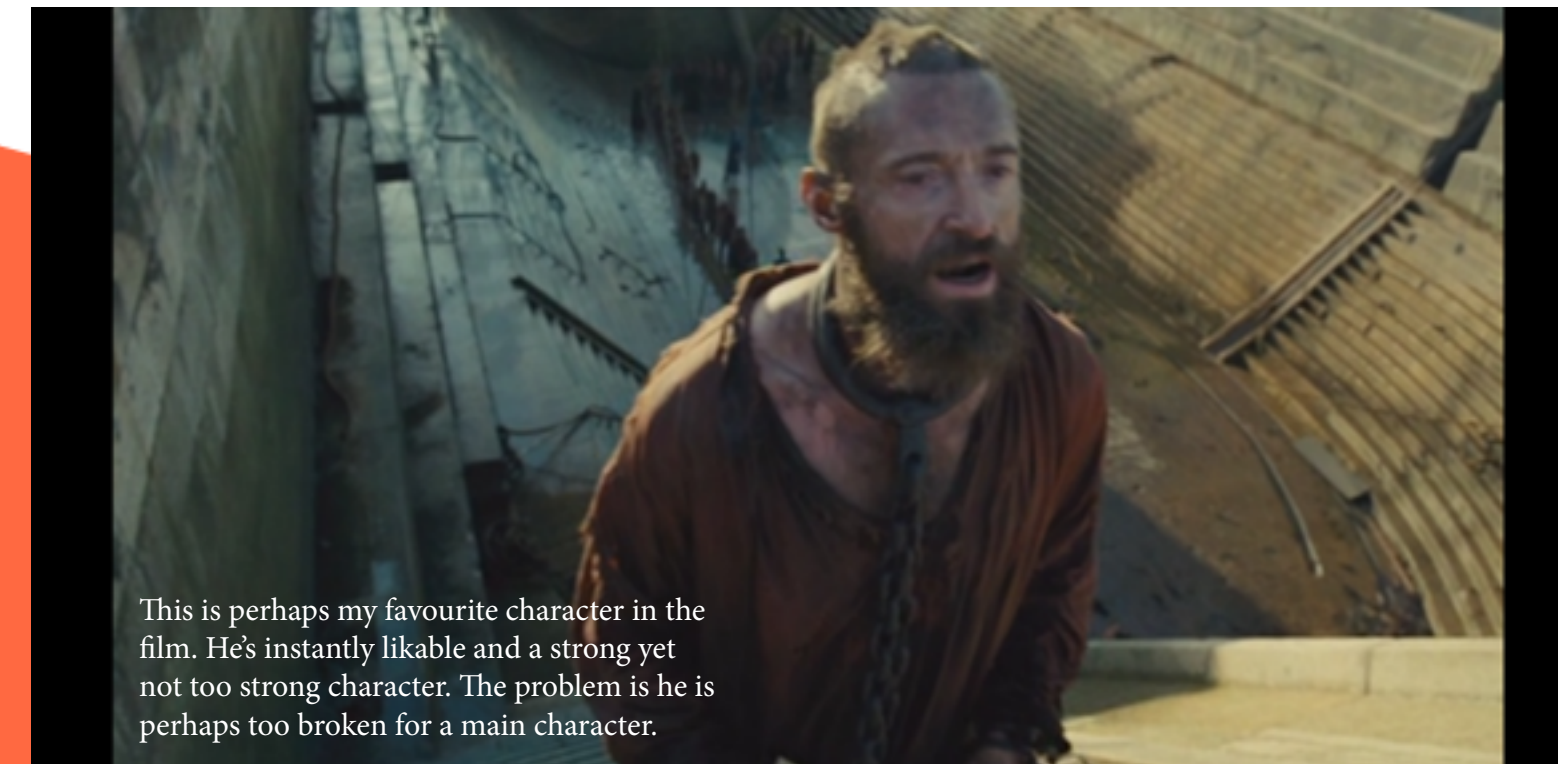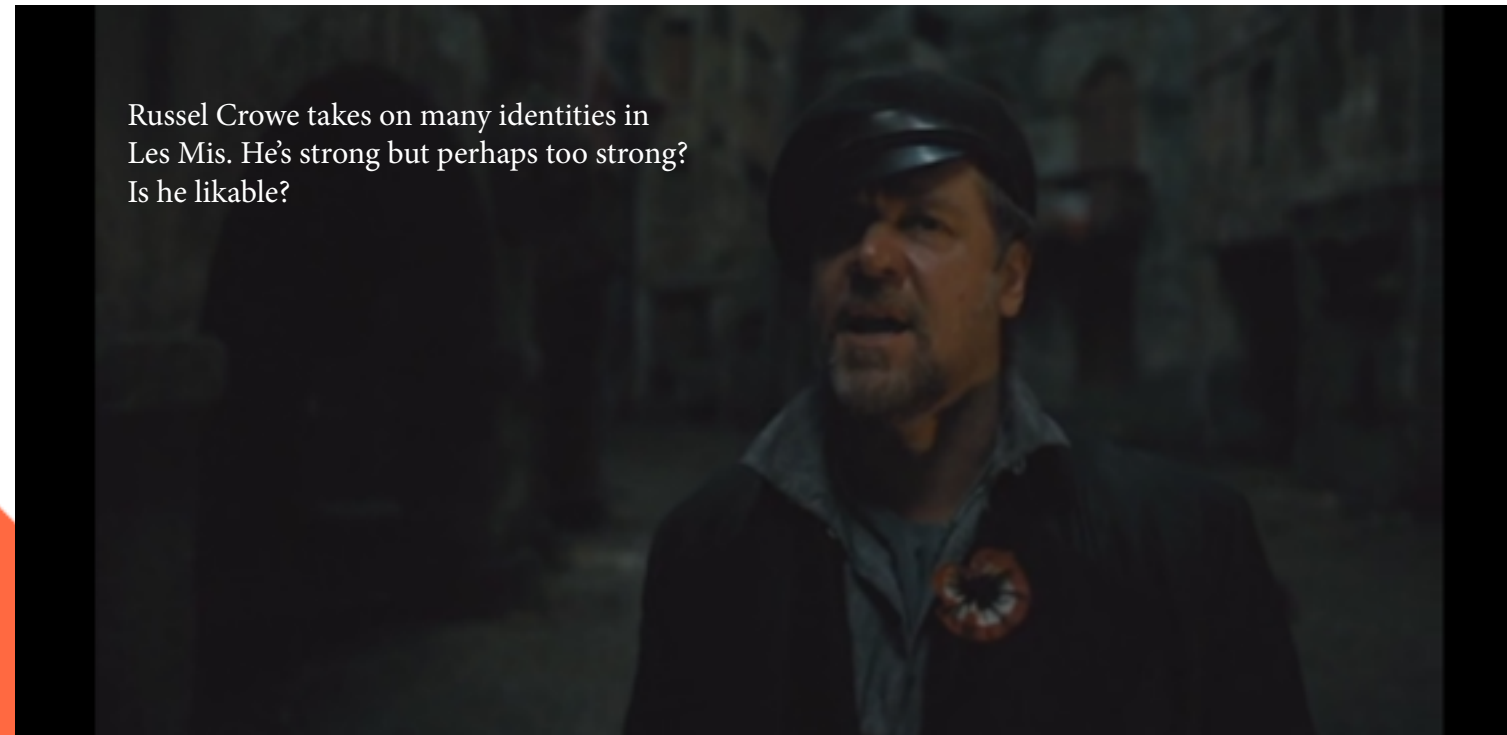

Temple Run has the boast of being the first big Endless Runner out there. I think they have done well to use an Indiana Jones style character although the execution isn't all that great. The silhouette is a little plain and the character could be a lot more interesting. Still, they must be doing something right!
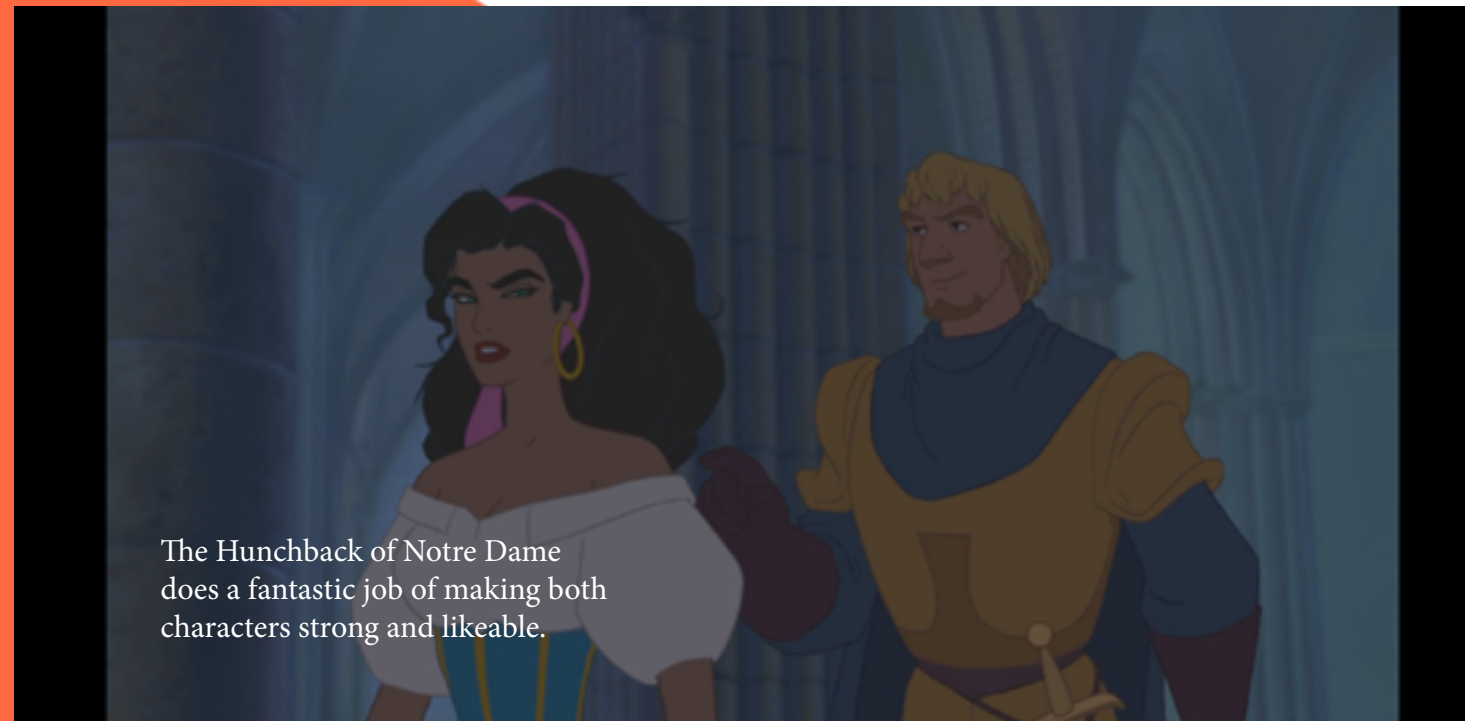

Minion Rush is a great little Endless Runner, made easier by having recognisable characters from the movie Despicable Me. They all fit the same rig and are endlessly customisable.

Coming up with a character idea- Reference- Les Mis

Russel Crowe takes on many identities in Les Mis. He's strong but perhaps too strong? Is he likable?

I really do like the characters of Marius and Enjorlas. They have appeal to both men and women, they are stylish yet masculine and are blank enough canvases for customisation.

This is some pretty crazy dress! Despite the fact he's on a horse (which might complicate the rig..) it could be pretty interesting.

I could work with this..

I like this style a lot too. It's very everyman and allows for customisation. Is he heroic enough though?

These characters are fantastic but I think too comedic and strange for a main character.

A very strong character but perhaps a little boring. The long coat makes the silhouette not work. Is he too old?

This is perhaps my favourite character in the film. He's instantly likable and a strong yet not too strong character. The problem is he is perhaps too broken for a main character.

Coming up with a character idea- Reference- Hunchback of Notre Dame

Classic Disney yet somehow a little different.

There are definitely two different types of character here.

Heroic Male, Strong Confident Female

The Hunchback of Notre Dame does a fantastic job of making both characters strong and likeable.

Evil and gangly. The hero only looks more heroic next to him.

Excellent expressions and use of block colour. It's clean and uncluttered. Endless Runners need little to no distraction.

Coming up with a character idea

There are lots of character archetypes that could work well in a themed Endless Runner. I have however decided to go with the Heroic Male character.

Why? After researching and testing characters for Endless Runners, I found that the main character has to have several appeals:

- Be cool and desirable to play
- Be a strong and reasonably attractive man or woman - but not too strong!
- Be mainstream enough to have a wide appeal
- Be an open enough canvas to be customisable with new clothing items and cosmetics
- Set the theme for the game and open up the possibility of more extreme characters

With a few exceptions, Endless Runner main characters are cool and desirable. They need appeal to be recognisable and leave a lasting impression. Temple Run Brave and Minion Rush slightly break this but they are already established characters.

It doesn't particularly matter if the character is male or female but I have decided to go with male as I think with the theme a female character has the potential to be a lot more extreme in design (for instance crazy-dress Marie Antoinette or leather-straps and razor blades Madame Guillotine). There's also nothing wrong with having a child as the main character like Subway Surfers although it could make developing more characters a little more difficult.

They should be strong but not too strong! Why? You want someone with a little attitude and punch as you the player is controlling the character running through hazards and collecting items etc. If you're controlling a pushover then why bother playing?! Similarly if your character is too strong then why do they need your help? I think there is a fine balance that for instance Temple Run gets spot on (by copying Indiana Jones). He's strong and tough but human enough that he needs help.

The character should be an open canvas. That is not to say they shouldn't be styled and have appeal, once again it's a balance. I think the character has to be mainstream enough though in style and proportions that they can be customised with clothing and cosmetics etc as they are one of the key monetisation factors in the genre.

I think that the main character should also be a benchmark for the other characters in the game. In Agent Dash, the two main characters are more normal-looking and the secondary characters get more extreme. This is to make them new, exciting and desirable but they are only this because of the grounding provided by the main character(s).

One important thing to bear in mind is the silhouette. Silhouettes are important in any video game, but especially in Endless Runners. A long coat looks great from the front or side, but when all you see is their behind, it can be pretty boring!

Soldiers always cut an impressive figure and decent silhouette. The only problem is that with the them they might be quite divisive. There's also not much room for customisation.

There are so many clothing possibilities with this theme, it's going to be hard deciding which to go for.

Some kind of high-wayman or slightly mysterious character could be very cool. I like the mid-length coats too as they break up the silhouette and make it interesting to look it.

Coming up with a character idea
The Heroic Male

Gaston or John Smith? Gaston is certainly Heroic but John Smith wins every time. Why? Because he's strong but not too strong, he's not a brute and he has a kinder and more handsome face.
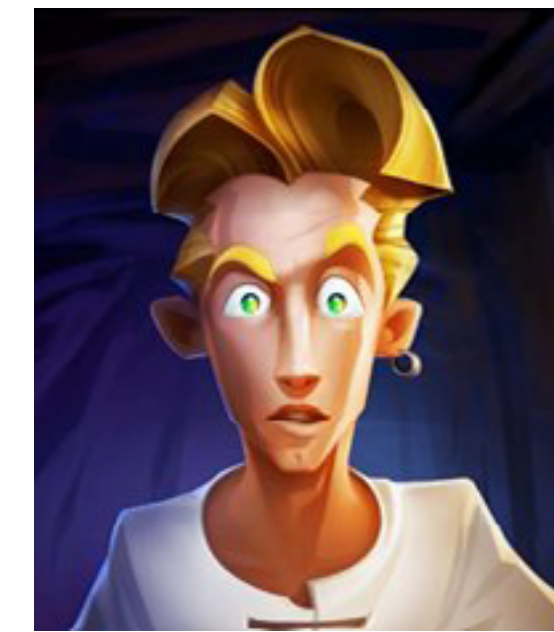
Contemporary ideals of the Hero certainly were a bit different!

I quite like this Danger Dash character design. It's a little generic and obviously a Temple Run clone, but the concept artist has done a nice job in stylising the character.

How do you make Guybrush look more like a hero? Cheek and jaw bones!

A hero doesn't have to be a muscle man.

New and cool meets classic facial structure.

Uncharted does a great job of the classic hero.
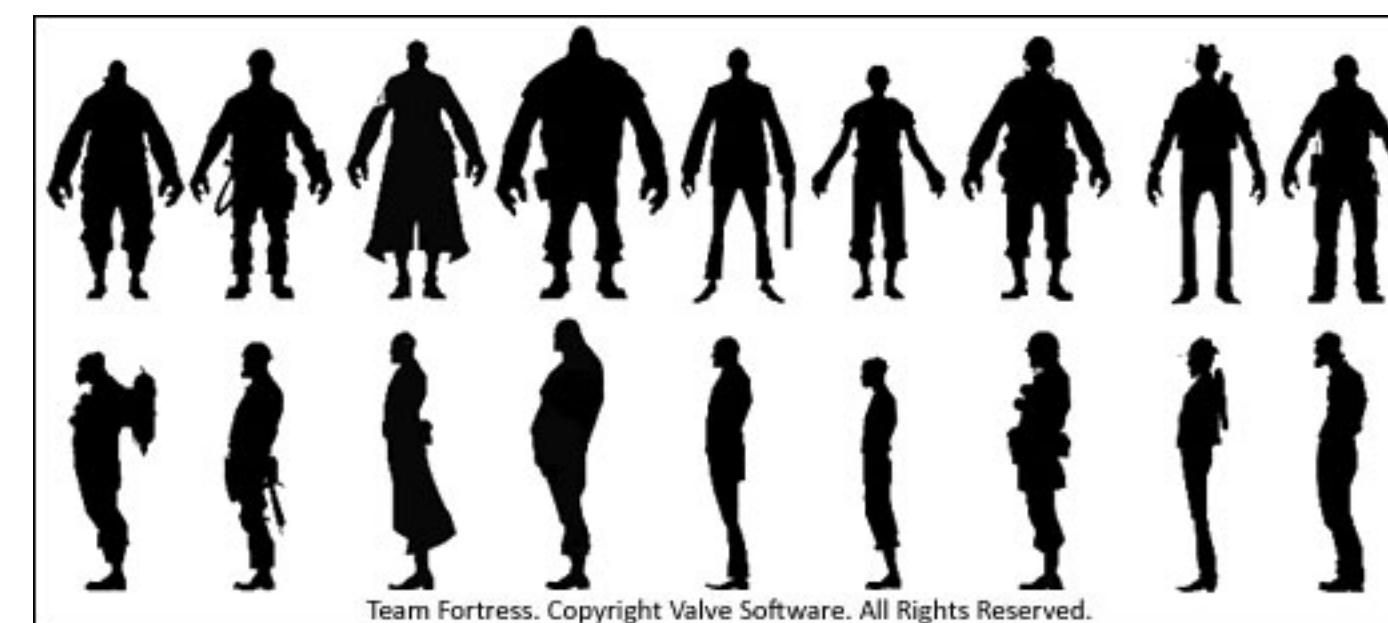
Team Fortress. Copyright Valve Software. All Rights Reserved.

I love the way Valve plays with silhouettes getting the strongest looking characters from all angles

Coming up with a character idea
Lessons from Agent Dash

Working on Agent Dash, I was able to create several stylised characters that have a decent cartoon style and fit preconceived stereotypes. Changing the body shape and silhouette alters the personality of the character dramatically. You can tell a lot about them just by looking.

I decided that I wanted to stylise my character and get as best a silhouette as I could. By playing with proportions and features you can get a much more interesting character.

Clearly I don't want to retread the same ground, but rather learn from my experiences and build on them.

Early on in development we made the decision to change up the art style a little. The faces were made more cartoony and consistent with the style of their bodies and diffuse textures.

It taught me several lessons:

Cartoon is often much more fun! You can also get away with more when using a cartoony style. You can make serious topics and themes light-hearted and you can suspend disbelief.

Cartoony characters are quicker to develop, which may sound cheap but Endless Runner games are products which must be updated extremely regularly with new goals to aim for and unlockables to gain.

I also think they look a lot better!

The lesson here is: Stylisation, Characterisation, Consistency and quality. The character must fit the theme and fit in to the game's environment with no questions asked. The character needs a strong silhouette and be instantly recognisable but not jarring. Adding this to my ideas about a heroic character, I decided to start concepting.

New Agent Dash

He has a much more consistent look and is quicker in development.
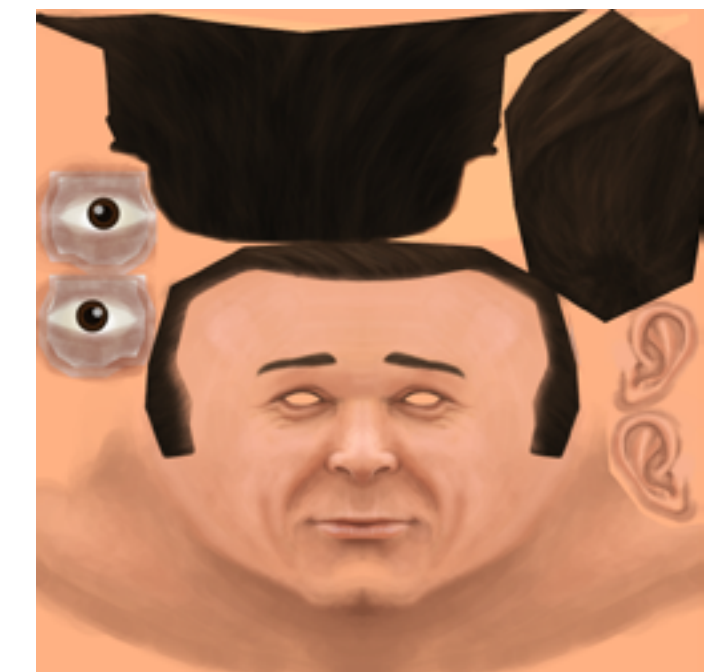
Earlier more realistic versions of the Agent Dash characters. The body shape and silhouette remained very similar but the face and features were changed to be much more cartoony. I think a strong, consistent art style is very much key in makling a decent game.

Older Agent Dash

Clearly borrows from multiple James Bond actors and takes longer to create. Much of the detail can be lost when facing the other direction!
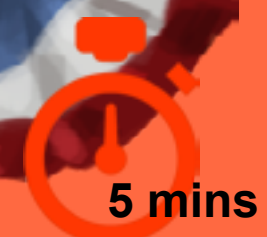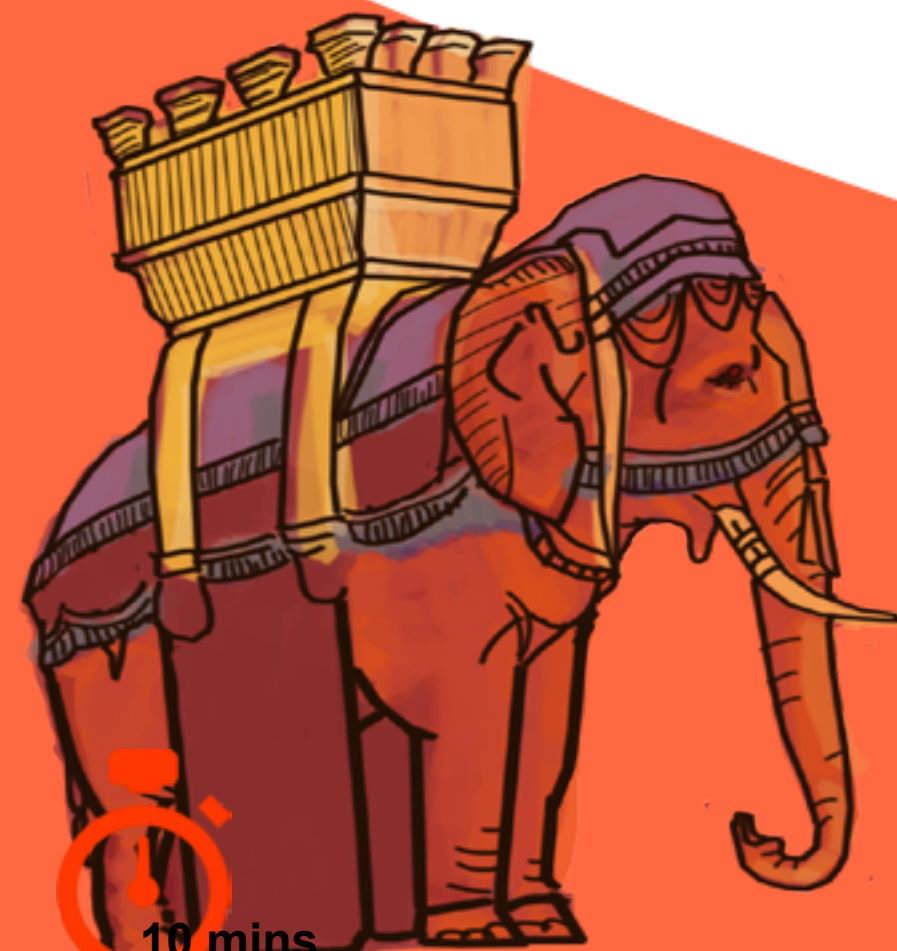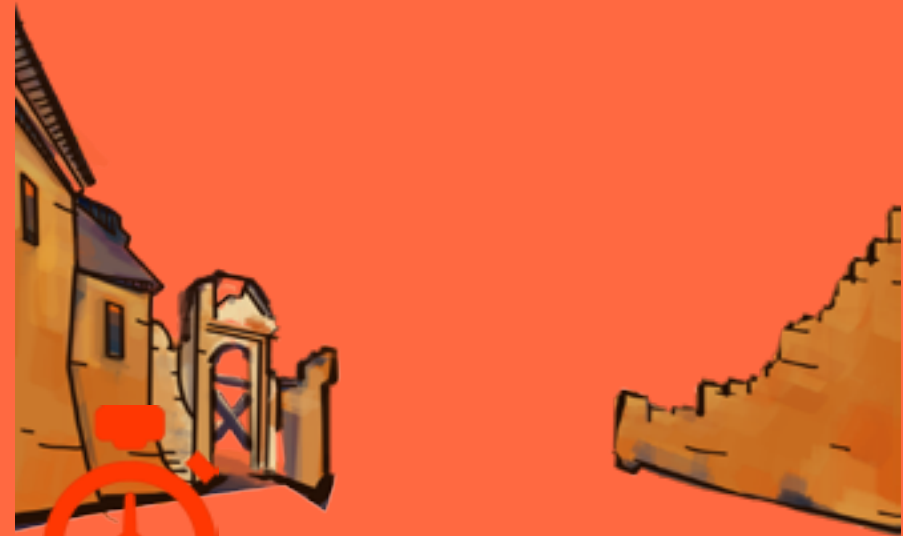
__Concepts__

20 mins
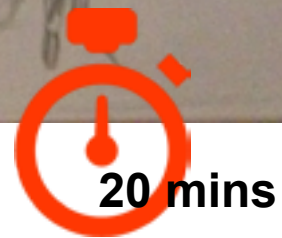
I first started to riff off of the reference and try to come up with some art pieces that helped me get in to the French Revolution mood.

The sketches on the left were some caricatures of Robespierre, King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. I decided quite early on however that they were a bit too obscure.

After watching Disney's The Hunchback of Notre Dame, I decided to create some famous revolutionary landmarks in a cartoony and colourful style.

This was really only as a test exercise with the possibility of becoming a stage for the 3d character but I decided eventually that they don't really fit the final style and would detract from the final presentation. Still, they were helpful for becoming more familiar with the theme and trying out different styles.

10 mins

10 mins

5 mins

60 mins

Concepts

Taking in everything I learned from research and experimentation, I decided to put digital pen to digital paper and start some silhouette concepts.

I still wasn't sure which direction I wanted to go with proportions and look and feel of the character.

Eventually though after a lot of trial and error and gradual improvement I think I found a design that works well.

boing?

Too butch

60 mins
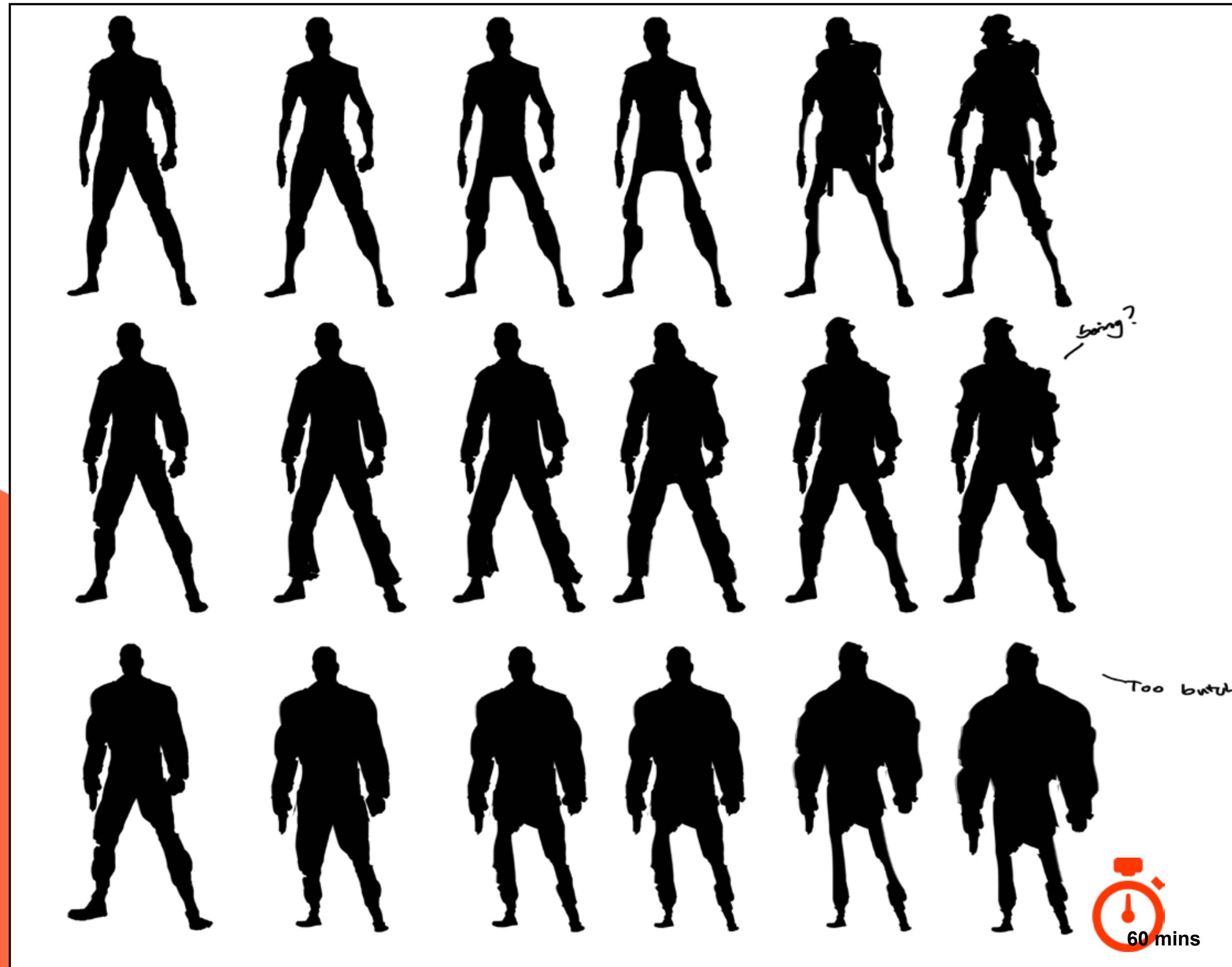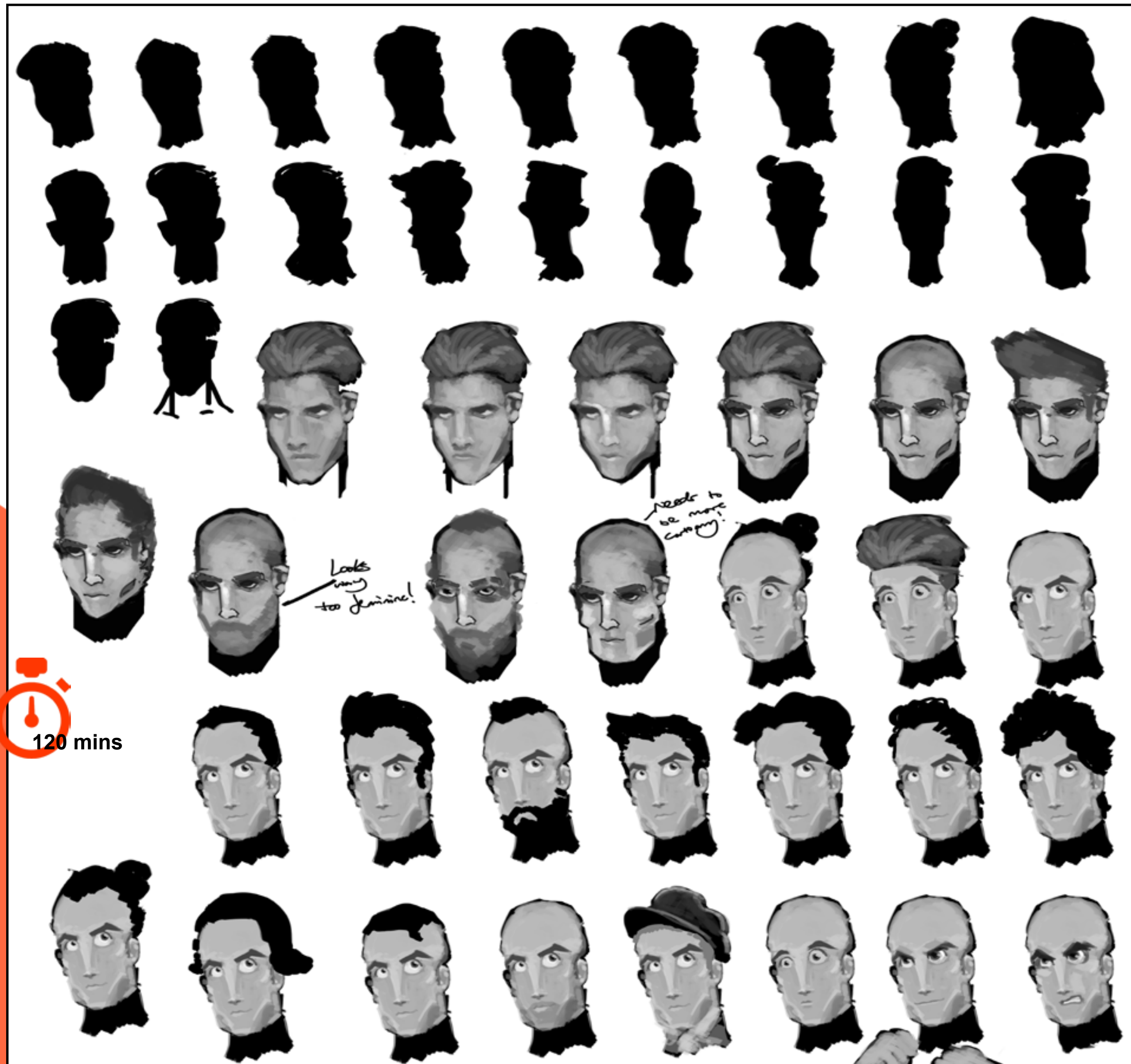
Concepts

I then started to concept some head silhouettes, playing with hairstyles and jaw lines. I then worked up a little sketch of a stylised younger male like Marius or Enjolras but found that it looked a little too feminine and "posery"

I took the parts of the head that I liked and reworked it in to a new sketch that is much more cartoony and stylised but more traditional in masculinity and fits a wide variety of styles and expressions.

On the bottom right I think I have demonstrated that the face I came up with works with multiple hairstyles for monetisation and is cartoony enough to have broad appeal.

I loved the stylisation of some of the reference pieces but the broadness of Disney. Hopefully my design fits somewhere in the middle.

120 mins

10 mins

Concepts

After choosing my favourite silhouette I decided to start brainstorming costume ideas. Although I had my favourites from the Les Mis reference, I decided to draw lots incase something else stood out.
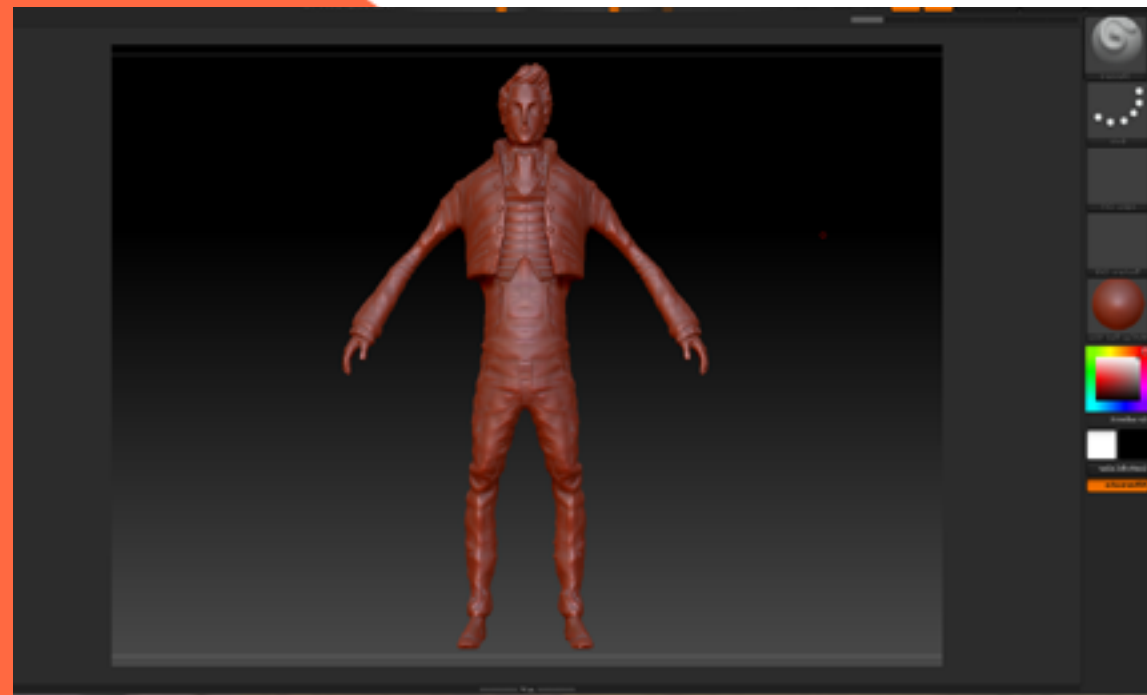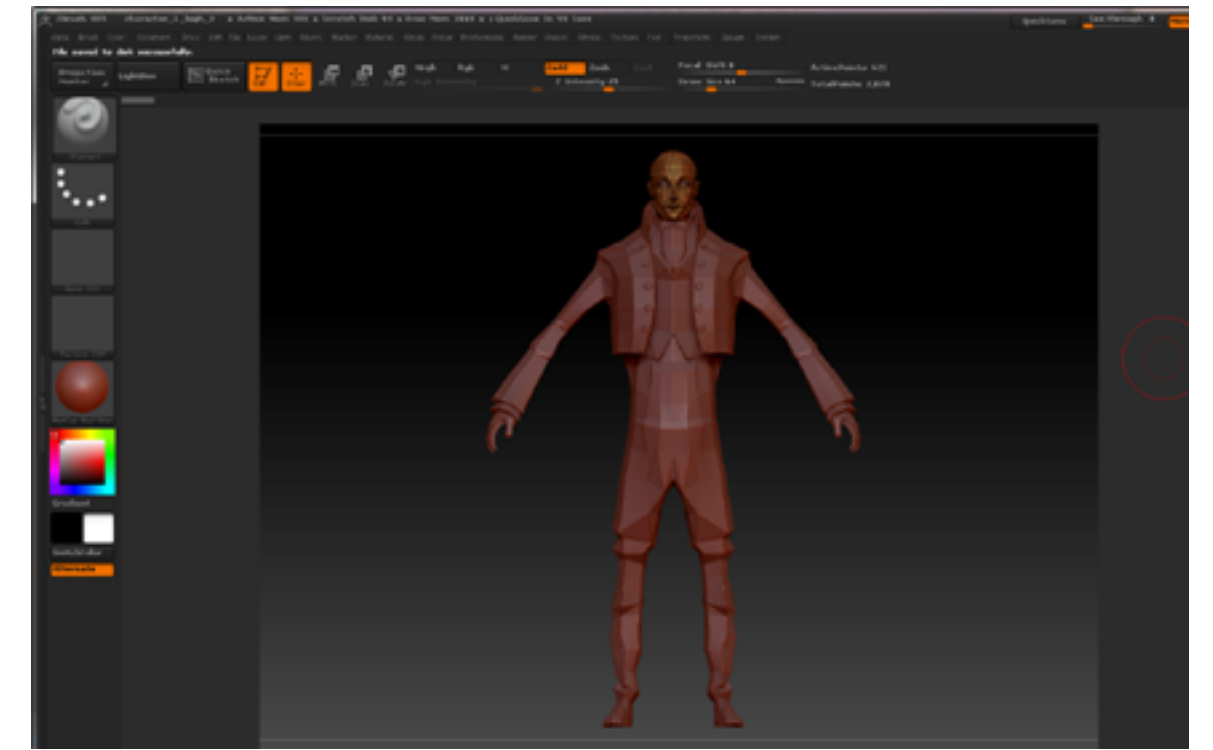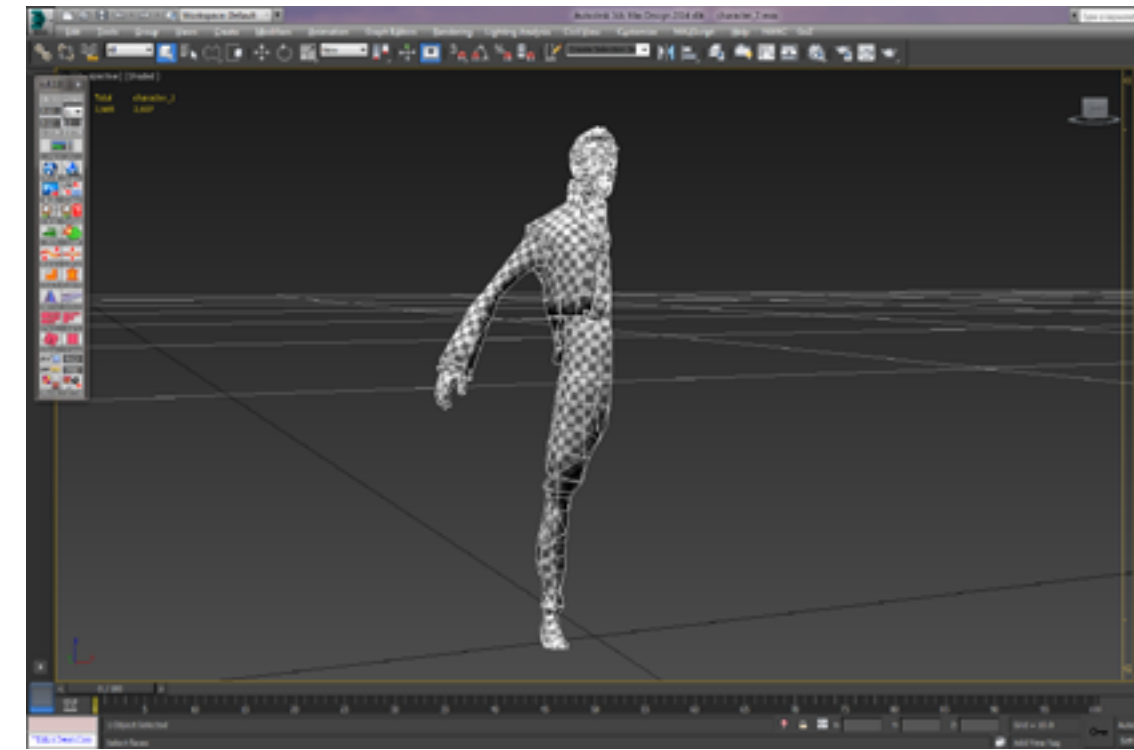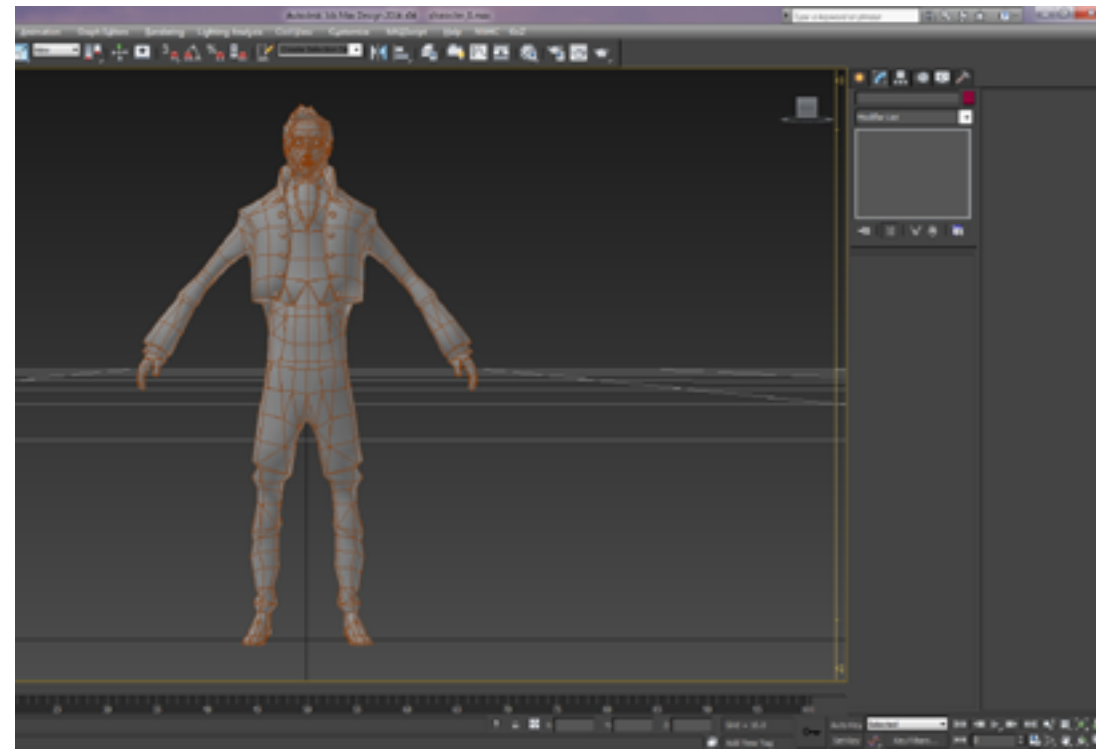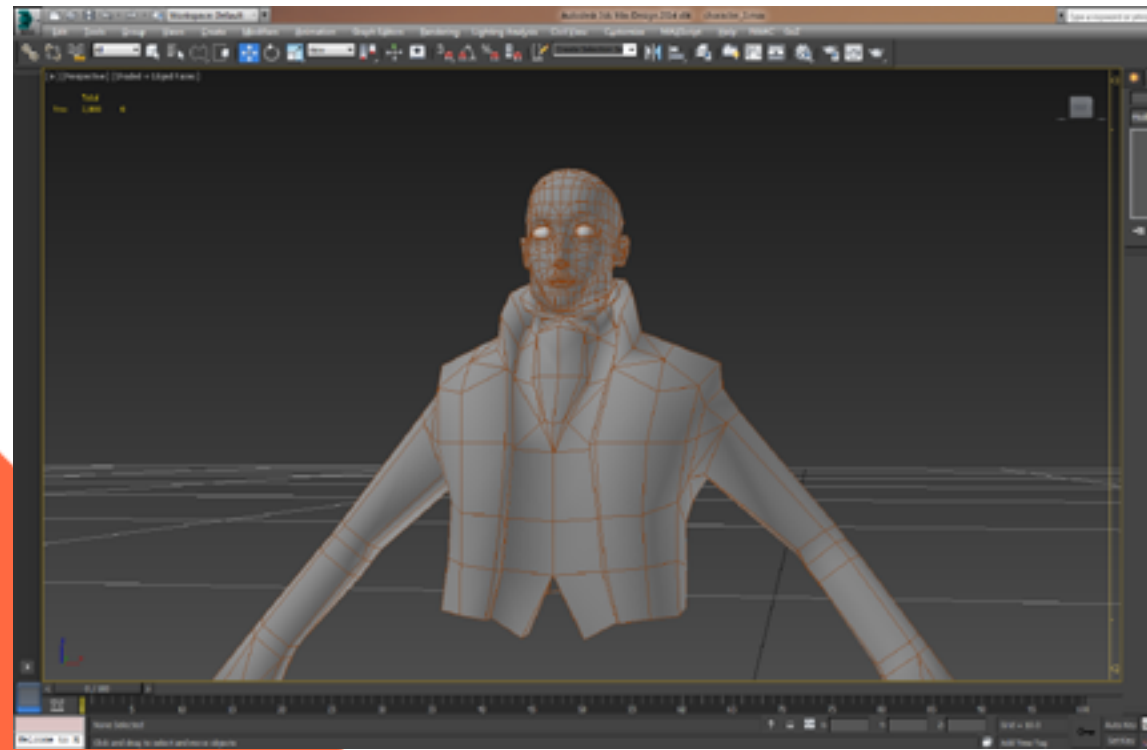
I felt that the simple costume of thirds with interesting jacket and long trousers could work really well with cartoon blocks of colour.

I then worked it up a little and played with the proportions a bit more. The long trousers look better even longer, which thins out the rest of his body.

I finished up with a quick T-pose and reigned in the style a bit.

45 mins

25 mins

3d Modelling

3d Modelling went quite speedily thanks to the concepts. Of course, the design changed a little, it always does when you build it in 3d, but I like to think I captured the essence of the concept pretty faithfully.

I created a high poly to use a normal map and bake the shadow information in to the diffuse map, but on later inspection I'm not sure that it is needed for the art style.

The final plan for shippable characters would be simplistic morph-target facial animation and customisable props and accessories.

Texturing
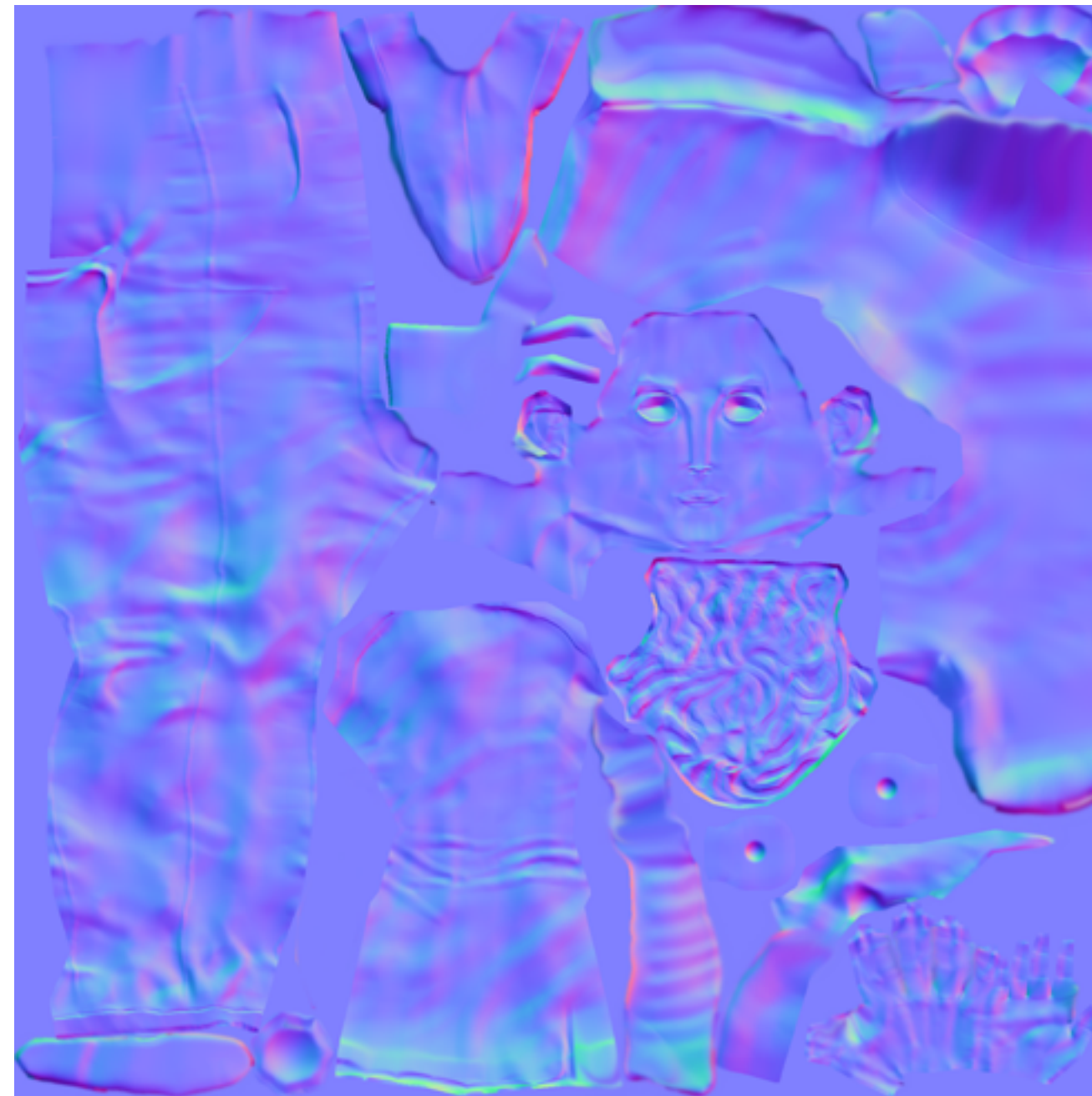
Texturing is always a fun process. I like to hand-paint a lot of textures so it was especially fun to draw in this cartoon style. I tried to keep the stylisation of the concepts but bring the character to life through colour.

After my research in to contemporary art and films like Les Mis I decided on muted reds and blues, which seem to fit the theme well. They also give connotations of the Tricolour, which I have mirrored through rosette particles.

A normal map and specular map have been created in addition to the diffuse map, although
depending on final style, they may not be needed as I added a fresnel shader to highlight the edges and silhouette.

When texturing this character I followed a few design philosophies.

The first, which you can see on the right, is to include a subtle gradient in to the texture. This serves to direct player attention to the most important parts of the model, (and as a factor be less distracted by fast moving feet and legs!). It also breaks up the texture a little which is important in a solid and quite flat cartoony style.

I added a fresnel shader to the model to serve as a rim light. This will help the character pop from the background, which will help the player spot hazards and obstacles. It also gives more depth to the flat diffuse.

I tried to stick to large blocks of colour, keeping the reds at the top to go with skin and brown hair, then white dividing the red and lower blue portion of the body. Kind of looks like a French flag right?

Valve Dota 2
Concept showing Gradient
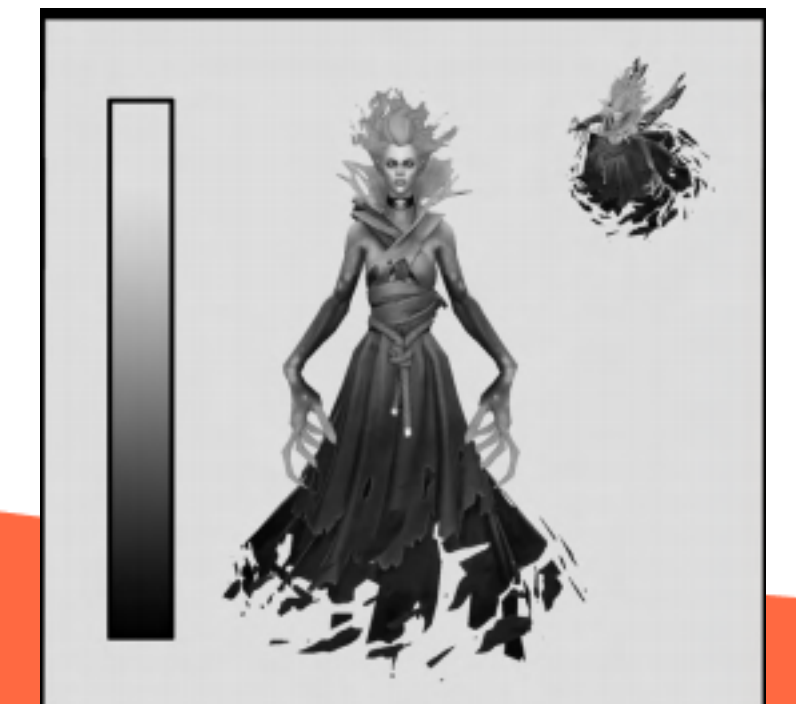
Unity Web Player

Click here to launch
Unity 3d Model Viewer

« created with Unity »