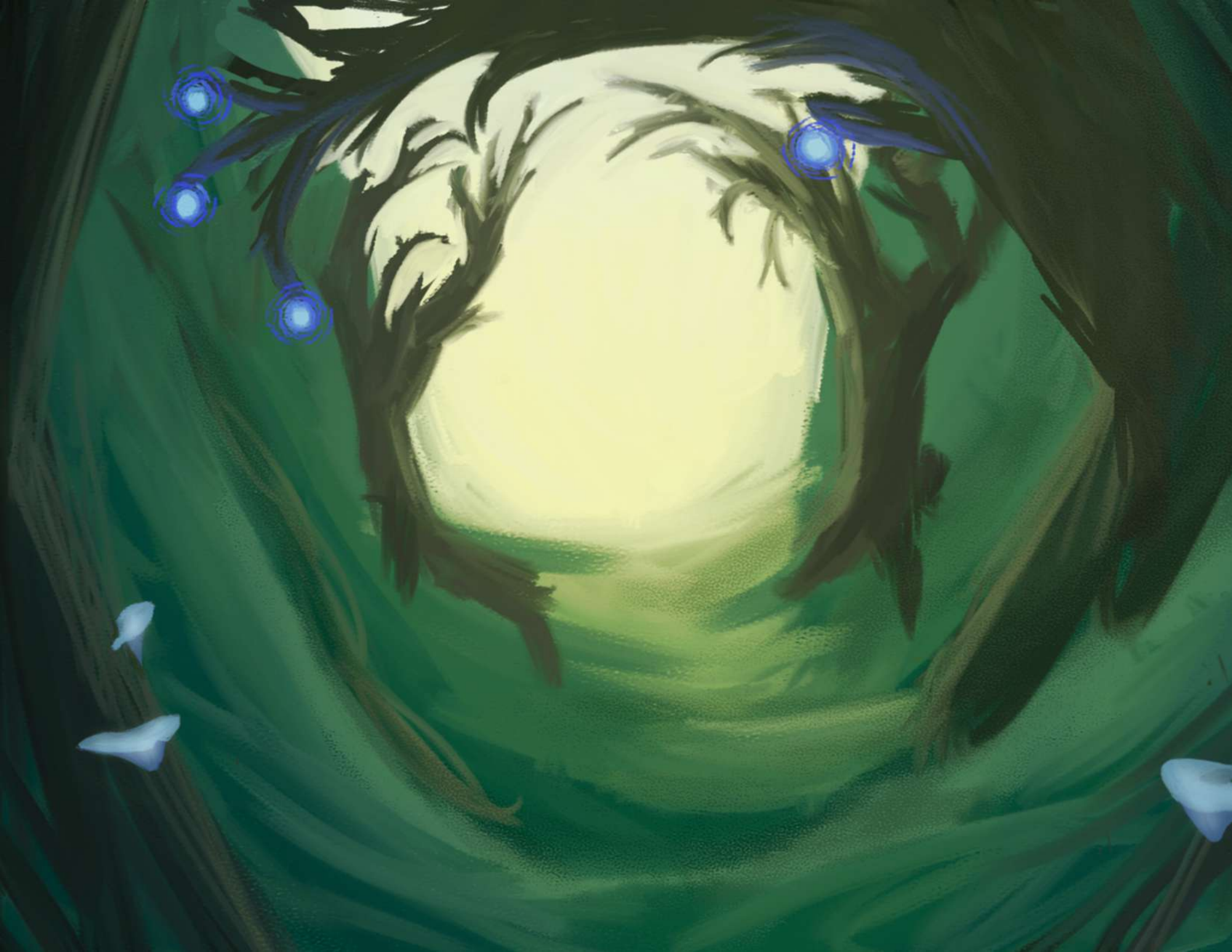






01 - A... cartoon? world.

People keep asking me if I consider A Widescreen tale to be a live action series. Not wanting to go into a tirade about how the "live action" label has been completely arbitrary for decades, I usually tell them I don't mind either way. Lately I've been refining that statement. A Widescreen tale is what happens when animation people try to make live action projects. Of course, that makes it sound like the choices made here are merely accidental, or a consequence of habit.

So I guess I'm still workshopping that.

-Tommy from Widescreen, creator.

→ 0: The very first piece of concept art ever made for A Widescreen tale.

Visible seams

Wanderlost is a constructed world. It's fake, and very aware of that fact. Whenever visual elements are combined, the seams are left in plain sight so that the audience can appreciate the different techniques used.



"It's bad compositing, technically. The rule is, if people can tell that you did something, then you're not doing your job well. [except here it's fun to know. I used to love rewinding movies and trying to figure out how the cool shots were achieved. With newer films it's much harder to do that. Next time you're watching the show and something catches your eye, try to figure out how it was done. Chances are everything you need is right there on the screen" -T

1: Original shot, taken out the window on a bus ride near Barcelona.

2: The final frame, complete with a silhouette foreground and art by guest artist Beepapersword.

Rendering for the camera

The camera is treated as center of the universe. As things get farther away, they flatten out into forced perspective, then miniatures, then paintings. Skies are almost always painted. Similarly, foreground elements lose their inner detail, becoming blurry silhouettes.

The type of frame also matters. Close-up and detail shots have painted backgrounds, to simulate an out of focus effect. These can go from quasi-realistic to complete abstraction, depending on the type of lens and the general demands of the scene.



3, 4: Close-ups from the original pilot.

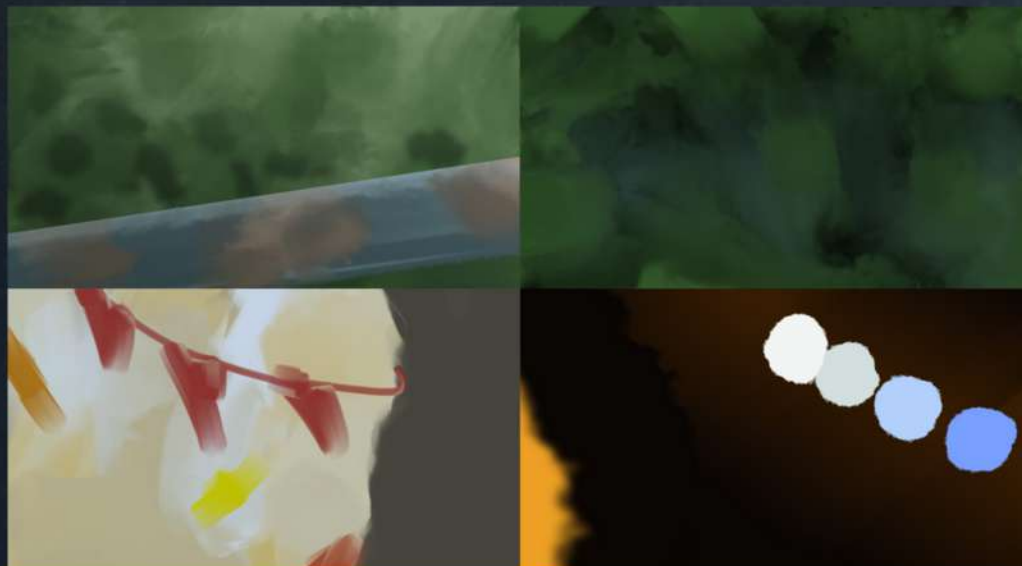
--> 5, 6: Close-ups from Episode 1, with the "improved" background technique.

"The initial idea was to simulate old low budget cartoons. Often, when the camera was close enough to a character, they wouldn't bother to make a background. They'd just put a solid colour or a gradient behind them and call it a day. I tried that on the original pilot and it looked terrible. Turns out you can't remove that much detail without the shot looking like it's missing something. So from [Episode 1] onward, the backgrounds were custom painted to add some of that detail back in. It's a lot more work, but I'm sure the audience appreciates it. So much more interesting to look at than a simple gradient." -T

"It's also a good reminder not to overuse shots like these. It's very easy to shoot everything up close, with the background blurred out, because it's pretty. But then every scene starts looking the same, and you never get to see the beautiful sets. And of course, there's the emotional aspect. When you push in, you enter the character's mind. You need to be saying something with that. Otherwise it won't mean anything when you do try to use it for a reason." -T

7, 8, 9, 10: Several unused backgrounds for deleted scenes. The tighter the shot, the more the background abstracts.

11: Foreground overlays.



Right in front

Foreground elements, which would typically be out of focus, are often turned into paintings. Although not a strict rule, they often lose detail the less important they are to the frame. If an item is inconsequential, chances are it'll be rendered in black, acting more as a diegetic frame than an integrated element.

"I like to give people exactly as much visual information as they need in order to understand what's going on clearly, and not one bit more. That sounds dumb, because I'm pretty sure every cinematographer does that. But of course, most cinematographers aren't allowed to cheat like I do." -T

Interdimensional beings

Applying these rules inevitably means that some elements have to exist in multiple mediums. Most buildings have a real location, where the actual scenes are filmed, and a miniature version, for wider angles and establishing shots. People and puppets are almost always kept live action, even when the scene seems to demand otherwise.

Whenever an element is recreated, precise measurements are avoided and proportions and sizes are eyeballed. One exception to this are CG doubles of the cast, used in action sequences or impossible shots. These are kept as close as possible to their originals in order to preserve visual consistency and immersion.



The party section at the mall is an example of an environment that exists as a physical set, a smaller floor set, a full diorama, and a series of paintings. These elements are combined depending on their position in the frame.

12: The real life set was little more than a single wall. Ignore the babies.



13: Digital double of the Bip2, the main prop that represents Tubippa.



14: The mylar balloons on display in the party store include several inside jokes and references.

15: First test of the full store diorama.



Silhouettes

The series makes frequent use of silhouettes to tell the story. But not all silhouettes are created equal. Many foreground elements are rendered in pure black, to act as a frame and avoid unnecessary detail. Sometimes it's part of the guest style, like in Episode 2's Reininger-esque sequences, cut out of black card. Often, it's a way to show heightened emotions and intense action, while avoiding the classic shaky camera.

Not every shot can be accomplished with the existing cast. Often, entire puppets or props must be created for those few extra seconds of footage.

→ 16: A stop motion creature being animated in Lotte Reininger's style for a running sequence.

17: Purpose-made puppet with glowing eyes, nicknamed "H. Snuggles". ←

→ 18: The final shot from the original pilot.



"As things get heated, the world abstracts. The backgrounds get more surreal, and everything but the essential details starts disappearing. I'm a big fan of Ralph Bakshi's fantasy films, and a lot of the action in those was shown through silhouettes. Of course, it was done to beat the budget, but it also has a wonderful stylistic charm to it." -T

Guest artists

About 45 independent artists are set to work on the series as guest artists. Guest artists contribute to a single episode each, painting key moments or even entire sequences in their own style. This decides much of the art direction for that episode, which is carefully matched during filming.



19: Camera test with makeup designed to match guest artist Mio's pencil sketch style.

20, 21: The same miniature, with backgrounds and art direction by two different artists.

"I try not to do things just because; and I try especially hard to have the style changes be motivated by something in the story. But I'd lie if I said I don't sometimes go 'Hey, this looks cool. Let's put it in the show and think of a reason later!' Still, we try to use everything as much as possible. I'm always asking 'Is there a particular gag, or story beat, or character design that we can only do in this style?'" -T

Hybrid species

Puppets are great. But they're not always the solution. The show features no shortage of elaborate rigs and clever setups, but some things are simply impossible to achieve without some post-production help.

Sometimes, this leads to fully hybrid creatures that blur the line between puppet and animation.

The Daki trap's long, frog-like tongue would've been impossible to achieve with traditional puppetry. While exploring multiple digital enhancement options, it was eventually decided that the tongue would look best as plain 2D animation.

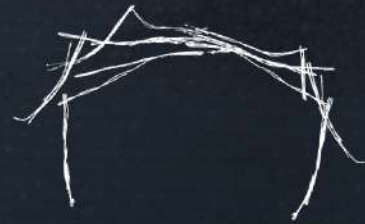


22: First test of the Daki trap concept.

Some creatures are designed with a particular style in mind. Soundmites, for example, were only ever supposed to exist in the sketch-like darkness of the mall's tunnels. But the true rarity is for an animal in this universe to be fully animated. Even the elusive, light-avoiding soundmites were built on real footage of a wire puppet, made to look like sketch lines. Eagle eyed viewers may even be able to spot the black gloves in the final image.



23: One of the Soundmite puppets.



"I'm pretty confident I could've made a realistic frog or maybe chameleon tongue in Blender, and it would've looked close to perfect. [Especially for something that's only going to be on screen for a few frames. But I like the idea of some things being inherently mixed. A creature that's always two different styles, that's pretty cool. Of course, it's also more dynamic, and the audience can see how it's being done." -T



Superhumans

In *Wanderlost*, humans and puppets live together in... Well, they try their best. The human characters are given subtle "enhancements" to better blend in with their larger than life companions. This leads to elements like Meno's infamous hair, which reacts to his mood; or some characters' features being drawn on.

"Because it's puppets, you're allowed to ham it up a little. I try to adjust my performance depending on the type of shot we're doing. I love being physical, but there's things you just can't do when the camera's half a meter from your face. If it's on the other side of a field, and you're a tiny black shape, by all means cartoon yourself up." —T

2D FX

The final layer of compositing in an episode is the 2D FX: extra bits of digital 2D animation that help "punch up" the visuals, make them more dynamic, and help with readability. These range from stylized motion lines to impact frames, to general beauty and polish elements.



"Nobody is 100% human, everything's kind of a mix of digital and art and then underneath there's the acting."

—Alexander Cuenin, actor, Xurr, Yurr and Zeke.

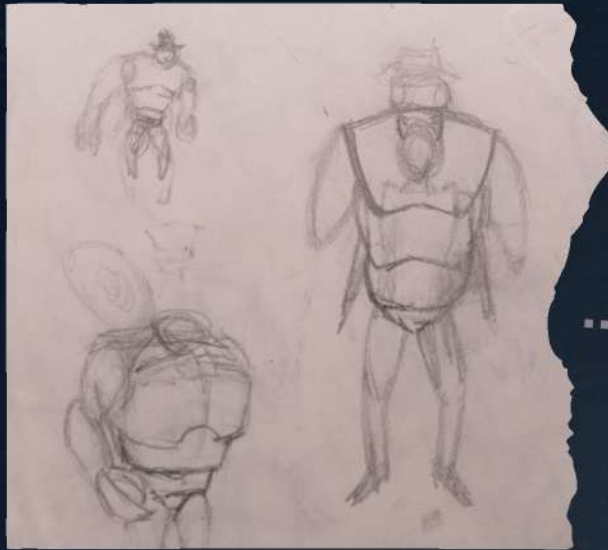


➔ **24: BtS shot from Episode 2. Less detailed styles require a completely different type of performance in order to read the same.**

"Everything's a conversation. Should Bob's feet detach from his body when he's running or should he remain a single unit? One's more dynamic, the other feels more grounded. How much can our characters store in their pockets? How tall of a fall should they be able to survive? The worst part is when you think you have the answer and then three episodes later you're beating yourself up over not choosing the other option." —T

Character designs

Whenever it's not veering off into alternative styles, the series' visual identity is characterized by the contrast between hyperrealistic textures and cartoony shapes. After every puppet's initial design as a 2D character, a lot of care is put into making them look as real as possible on a surface level, while still drawing from the original concept.



25: Initial sketches for Episode 3's "Cowbug".

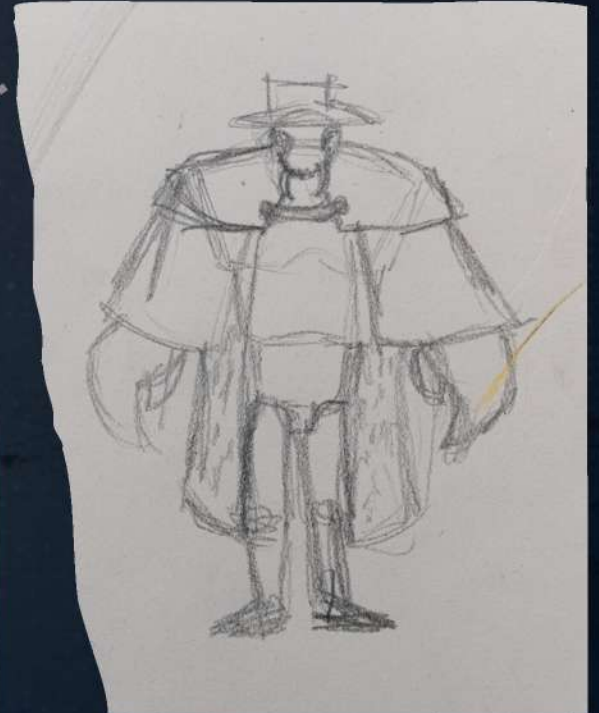
"Everything is designed as if it's going to be animated, then built and finished like it was real all along. It's like making the most faithful live action adaptation for a cartoon that never existed." -T



26: Testing texture patterns for the Cowbug's shell and coat.

27: The final Cowbug design.

"You can see a yellow line by the claw, that's from me striking the paper with the back of the pencil. I was real excited to have figured it out." -T



28: Close-up of the final texture on one of the Cowbug's shell plates.





29: The original concept for the sebuchap was a lot more Hensonesque.

30: Eye positioning tests for the sebuchap heads, a lot closer to their final design.

31: Second batch of sebuchap design sketches, made halfway through the sculpting stage.

Mutations

Despite the design process, most characters find the majority of their identity during the puppet making process. Proportions and details are shifted around, sometimes adding entire features that render the character unrecognizable.

"My favourite method for sculpting is I start out with a light sketch on paper. Then I completely ignore it and sculpt whatever feels right. Once the idea is clearer in my mind, I may sketch it again, and use that as a guide for finishing and characterisation." -T



32: Not every design is a win.

