

Introduction

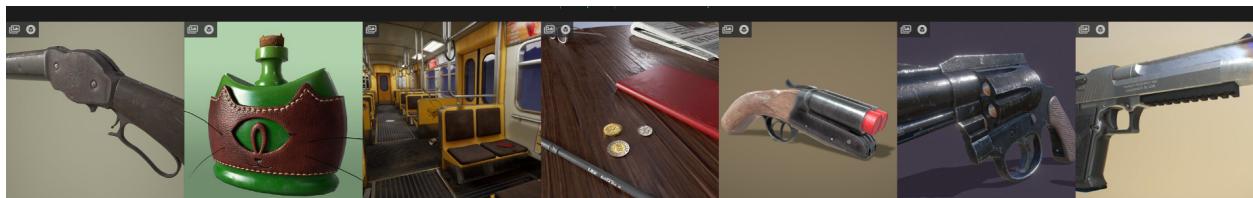
Hello! My name is Ashe Adam and I'm a 3D Surfacing Artist. This is a documentation of me fixing my 3D art portfolio in my time when I was the Art TA at VFS. One of the biggest reoccurring issues I see for art students coming out of the Game Design is their portfolios aren't quite accurately demonstrating their abilities. The goal of this documentation is to reflect on my mistakes to improve from and to educate people from making the same mistakes I made. I'd really appreciate if you didn't go around showing old artwork unless it's for instructive purposes as it's not indicative of my current level of work.

This is also a second revised version of this writeup. Most links have been removed at this point, I don't use the coffee shop props anymore as it's not indicative of my current ability.

You should be regularly updating your portfolio as you improve as an artist to reflect where you're at.

Critique

Jeff tore my portfolio apart with feedback that was mostly not his own, but that of one of his contemporaries. We'll call him Bob, a Senior 3D artist at Bioware. This was the portfolio that was presented to him; this was my Artstation as of September 23rd, 2020.



Now at a cursory glance this may not seem too bad to you. Or it might seem horrendous. I didn't think it was too shabby at the time. According to Bob the only two pieces that didn't immediately turn him off were the train car piece and the coffee shop props. All the guns and the potions were instant rejections due to their presentation, renders, thumbnails or lack of surface response.

Presentation

The biggest thing setting me back was my presentation. Jeff showed Bob a lot of my pieces in engine to which he said they looked good. Some minor gripes about texturing and storytelling here or there but nothing too major. However, my renders and thumbnails aren't doing my pieces any justice, even if they are up to snuff for a junior artist. Even if I have the fundamental skills required I'm not demonstrating them effectively.

Renders

As previously mentioned, my presentation was the biggest thing setting me back, and that was evident in my renders. This was the render I chose for my Extremely Sawed-Off Shotgun Piece.



Unfortunately, these renders don't do my piece any justice. They aren't showing any surface response that is visible in engine; it looks flat. Surface response is roughness contrast and normal variation that should be visible due to light. It also has no environment to bounce off of.

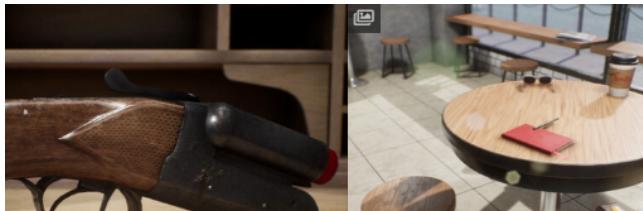
This render was done in Substance Painter Iray. Jeff frequently told me that I needed to put my pieces in engine to get the lighting right, but I was often lazy about doing so as I wasn't comfortable working in UE4 or Unity and wasn't willing to get over that hurdle.

I needed to start rendering properly in engine.

Thumbnails

Think of thumbnails for your pieces like YouTube thumbnails, you want to catch the eye of the person glancing over your work and entice them to look closer at it. Always choose a shot that best represents your piece as a whole from its best angle and try to have some kind of overall consistency in your thumbnails.

This is optional, but I add a UE4 logo to my thumbnails as render them; it makes them look way more consistent.



always add a UE4 logo that's what I use to make them look way more consistent.

Where to start

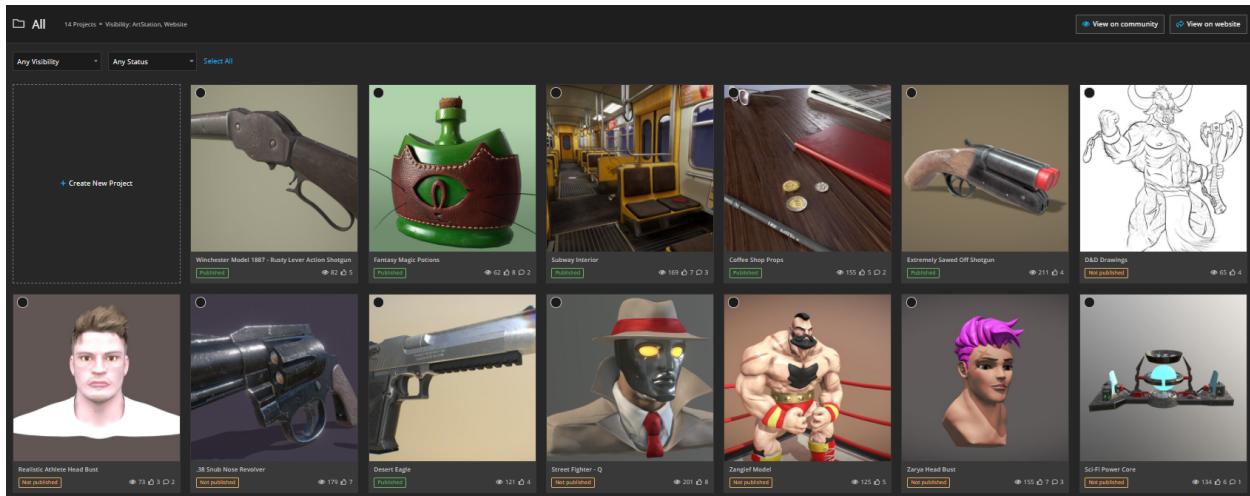
Not every piece was created equal, and unfortunately some of my more recent pieces are worse than some older ones. The first thing to determine after receiving my feedback was which ones just needed fat trimmed, which ones needed to be put in engine and lit properly, which ones needed to be reworked and finally, which needed to be scrapped.

Trimming the fat

Might as well start off with the easy stuff, right? Scrapping and fat trimming.

Scrapping is easier said than done however. It hurts to throw away pieces that you've put time and effort into. I know it sucks but ultimately your old work is holding you back, especially if your portfolio consists of what you created as a student.

You've likely already gotten much better since you started and you're only as strong as your weakest piece. Trust me when I say you're much better off hiding or deleting any of your work that isn't your best or conducive to you landing a job in your desired field. No one who's hiring you for a job in 3D modelling cares about your hobby drawings, save it for Instagram.



Orange means a project is hidden. This is where my projects go to die. And that's okay!

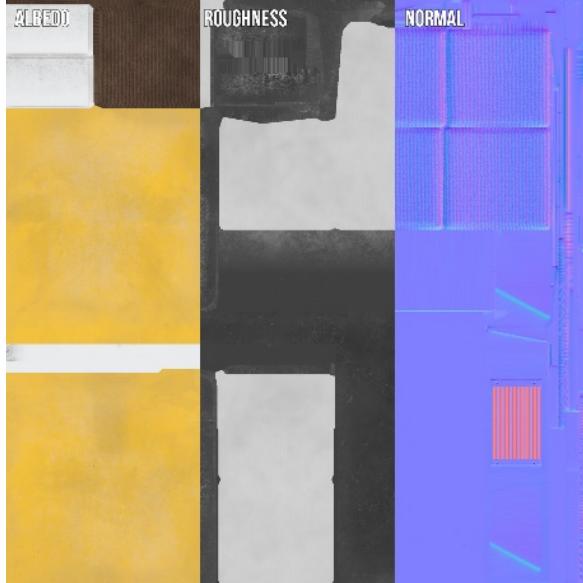
ArtStation makes it easy to hide your projects without deleting them. Just unpublish them and only leave your best art remaining. This way you can still look at old pieces to reflect or see how far you've come!

I hid everything except my train station scene.

Old Train Car

The train car scene was the one that needed the least amount of work. The only thing I needed to do was to update the thumbnail and get rid of the Sketchfab link and some extra pictures.

I had images that showcased the ads and decals I made for the scene:



These ads and decals are already visible in my render, and having this information only detracts from my work rather than enhance it. I also had this image showcasing the Normal, Roughness and Albedo. This one I could leave in if I really desired; I found it didn't necessarily detract from the piece, but it certainly didn't enhance it, so I cut it. Now my piece was just three minty renders that I was proud of.

Old Coffee Shop Props

The coffee shop was a project that had really good props and texture work but bad everything else. In particular the environment, lighting, rendering, and presentation needed some serious work.

Noticing a trend here?

My project on ArtStation had 3 renders, a Sketchfab link and picture of the textures.



Now, not everything is terrible. There's pretty good surface response in some of these shots and I do a good job of establishing three important camera angles: Establishing, Mid Res and Close Up.

The texture sheet also does a really good job showcasing some roughness and normal map work. Unfortunately there's only so much Iray can do. The close up also showcases the pen, coins and book which are too faceted and not using high enough texture resolution for the camera.

So time to fix it up, throw it into UE4 and get some actual lighting done.

New Coffee Shop Props

First things first: I needed an environment, so I grabbed some reference for how I wanted the general look and atmosphere of the coffee shop to be.

I unfortunately didn't take the time to learn the proper environment workflow for this scene and just faked it. This is something I'd address later, but as long as no one can tell and it still looks good, all the power to you. Fake it until you make it as they say.

I did a baked environment and made some additional props for the scene. Some parts of it looked better than others, so I used camera angles that hid the worst parts of my environment. I also grabbed an image of a riverbank and attached it to plane for the background and matched my lighting to fit that.

Once the environment and lighting were taken care of, I set up my camera with grid view to give my shots good composition. I used the rule of thirds and leading lines to help draw the eye to where I wanted it to. My main goal was to get the lighting to really showcase the different surface response on my work, most evident on the sunglasses, stools, and floor.

I set up some post processing such as depth of field, vignette, chromatic aberration, color balancing and bloom.

Like before, I set up three main shots in the same order: Establishing, Mid Res and Close up. Unlike last time for my close up, however, I would drastically upres the texture size to 4K and increase the poly count of the glasses, table, and coins.

It doesn't matter if it's inefficient, it's a portfolio piece, not a game asset.

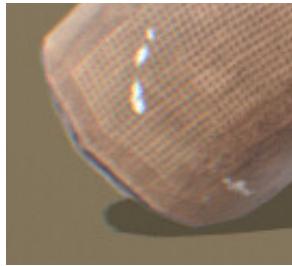


Old Extremely Sawed-Off Shotgun

As previously mentioned, this piece has some issues. There were some things I needed to fix with the actual model and textures. Once those were fixed, it would be the same as before: put it in engine, light it properly, have good composition, have an actual environment, take a good render, call it a day.

I originally made this piece when I was first learning how to properly bake so there's some clear issues. Let's go over them.

1. Bake errors because I used smooth mesh preview. Kind of hard to see in this example but trust me they're there.
2. Faceting. This is most notable around the handle. This is easy enough to fix, just add some cuts.
3. Metal texture being too dark and not actually looking like metal. It looks fine in Sketchfab, but when you bring it into an actual engine it becomes apparent how dark it is. PBR validate in Substance Painter helps with this.



presentation. I had a
with no surface response, a sketchfab link, a
wireframe and a texture sheet.

On top
of that
there
was
the
usual
bad
render

New Extremely Sawed-Off Shotgun

<https://www.artstation.com/artwork/ykldb9>

Originally, I had planned to make a whole new environment for this piece, I was going to make a car interior and match it to the scene of the movie that it was based off of. Unfortunately (or fortunately), I

got a job offer and I only had two pieces on my portfolio at the time because I scrapped everything. So, I decided to fix this up as an emergency third piece.

For fixing this I gave it an environment using free assets, a neutral light setup and then fixed those aforementioned problems with the model and texture. I also added some extra stuff like rust on the metal and I absolutely love the way the light bounces off of it.



The end result is only one render, but that's totally fine because it looks good. You're only as strong as your weakest piece so quality over quantity is totally acceptable.

Conclusion & Key Takeaways

I might sound like a broken record but I'm going to reiterate three key things that I want you to remember.

1. Make good renders: Bring it into engine with a proper environment, do a neutral light setup, and demonstrate good surface response. Please for the love of god don't use Sketchfab as a means to render.
2. You're only as strong as your weakest piece: Quality over quantity. Scrap your old projects if they don't serve you.
3. Presentation is everything: Use strong composition and eye-catching thumbnails.

I should clarify that a "proper environment" doesn't have to be elaborate like my coffee shop, you can just as easily use free assets like I did for my shotgun. As long as it looks good and you don't take credit for other peoples work.

Thanks and Links

A big thank you to Jeff and his colleague for helping me become a better artist, I'm grateful for everything you've taught and continue to teach me.

A shoutout to all my former colleagues at Mainframe who helped proofread this for me and provided feedback. Unicorn Academy forever <3

And thanks to VFS for giving me a space and opportunity to develop my skills to the point where I could return one day as an instructor!

Finally, I want to thank you for taking time out of your day to read this article, it means a lot to me and I greatly appreciate it.

If you found this article helpful perhaps consider sharing it to a friend.

Finally, if you have any additional thoughts, want to provide me feedback or just add a connection please shoot me a message through LinkedIn.

[My LinkedIn](#)

[My Artstation](#)