How to make characters fit with the Environment

Part 1 by ThermiteFe8

- Making cartoon/anime characters fit with their background is hard to do, especially when they're drawn in completely different artstyles
- This is often the case in most animations, since the backgrounds are static and can be colored in any style, while the characters themselves are drawn more simply
- So I thought it'd be helpful to give a guide/showcase on how you can easily make your cartoon characters fit with ANY style of environmental art

*NOTE - this guide isn't as useful for static digital paintings/drawings where the same artist is likely drawing both the character and the environment. It's a given that they'll fit together. This is moreso a guide for easy/procedural ways that you can make the character fit with its environment when you aren't sure who's drawing the background and who's drawing the character

Technique 1 - Foreground Elements

✓Yes

✗ No

- The most straightforward thing to do - put objects in front of the character
- Just make sure to avoid clipping weirdness

Technique 2 - Tone/Tint Match

Overlay

- Make the character's general tone/tint match the tone of the environment
- For lighter scenes, use the Overlay blend mode

Multiply

- For darker scenes, use the Multiply blend mode

✗ No

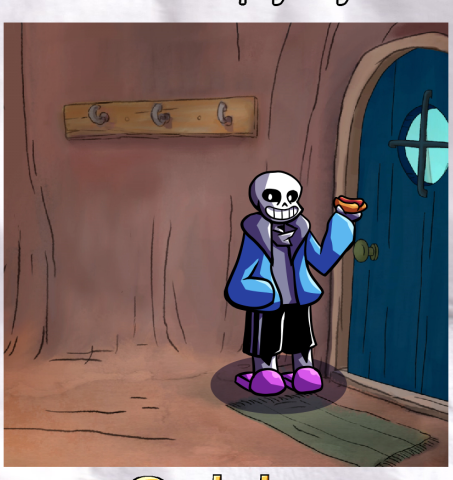
- Note that if you match the tone/tint wrong, it's worse than doing nothing at all

Technique 3 - Drop Shadows

- Two main variants: Platformer and Directional

✓Yes

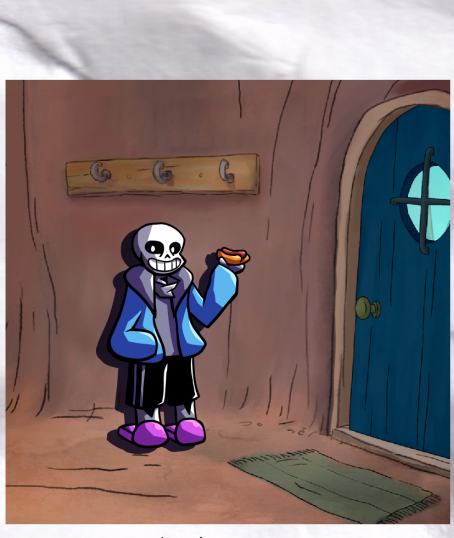
- For the Platformer variant, draw a short oval of a dark color on a multiply layer at the character's feet



Odd...

- NOTE: Making the shadow too big risks the edges creeping up on nearby walls/surfaces strangely
- Keep it close to the size of the character

✓Yes



✗ No

- For the directional variant, make a copy of the drawing of the character, turn it into a dark/cool color, put it under the character and set the layer to multiply.
- Move the layer depending on the light source
- NOTE: this works better with closer/cropped shots

- To make the wall look further away, you can either blur the shadow or move it further from the initial drawing.

Odd...

- If you blur the shadow, make sure to move it. Otherwise the character looks very flat and pressed right against the wall unnaturally

Background credits in order:
ThermiteFe8 (Fruit Punch), Steven Universe (CN),
ThermiteFe8 (Undertale), We Bare Bears (CN)

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Technique 4 - Lighting

✓Yes

- Take a darkened version of the character, then make another layer with the shape of the character cut out
- Clip the shape into the character on an add layer and move it around based on the direction of the lighting

- You can play it somewhat loose with the direction of the lights. You can also use multiple light sources.
- I prefer using one light source, however

Add

Odd...

- You may also blur the shape - this makes the characters look more 3D, but can also look cheap
- Blurred lighting tends to look better on an Add layer

Odd...

Odd...

- These effects look better underneath the lineart but if your current workflow makes that impossible, you can keep the lighting over the lineart.

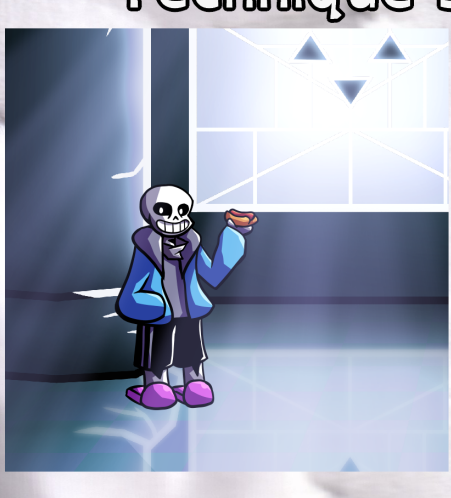
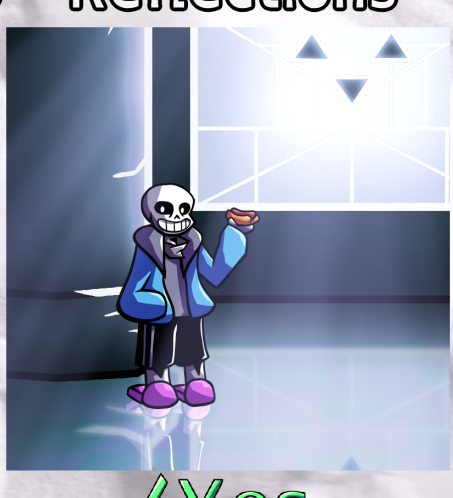
Handdrawn

- Handdrawn lighting always looks better because you can make more interesting shapes and give more depth to inner details that the cutout technique can't reach
- However, it's almost always more time-consuming and the automated version is close enough

✗ No

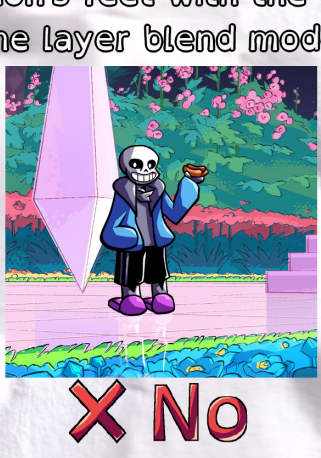
- Making the lighting come from the wrong direction or tinting it the wrong color makes it stick out more than doing absolutely nothing

Technique 5 - Reflections

✓Yes

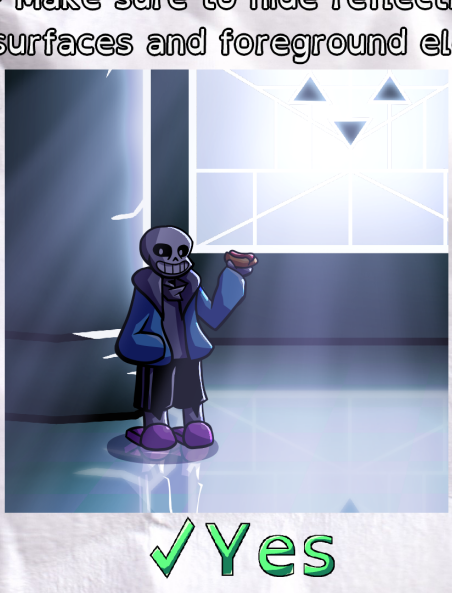
- Copy the character, flip them vertically, and overlap the reflection's feet with the character's feet.
- Set the layer blend mode to screen and adjust opacity



✗ No

✓Yes

- Make sure to hide reflections behind non-reflective surfaces and foreground elements



✓Yes

✓Yes

- This can be easily combined with other techniques

Technique 6 - Overlays

- By far the most effective - it works so well because both the character and their enviornment will be placed "under" whatever you're overlaying the scene with, making them look like they're intended to be together
- I won't show off all overlays/filters - the possibilities are literally unlimited here

- You can combine this with all the other techniques for maximum immersion

Background Credits (in order):
ThermiteFe8 (Undertale), ThermiteFe8 (Undertale), Steven Universe (CN)
ThermiteFe8 (Fruit Punch)