PIXEL ART: COMMON MISTAKES

We've all been there: you learn a few things and it all seems so simple, but when it comes time to make something yourself, it doesn't look right! In this tutorial, we'll start with some "beginner's pixel art" and we'll make edits to it in order to show off some common mistakes and their solutions. One of the hardest parts of making art is self-critique - we're often too close to our art to look at it objectively. Asking other artists to edit your work by way of feedback can be a great way to illuminate problems that you may not see. (But keep in mind that it's considered rude to create an edit of someone's work unless they specifically asked for one.)

This is a follow-up tutorial to PIXEL ART TUTORIAL: BASICS.

REWORKING NAIVE PIXEL ART

What I've done here is create a little scene that looks like a lot of early attempts at pixel art. Don't get me wrong, this type of work can be very charming, which is why I use the term "naive". But it also looks flat and stiff and it lacks readability. Furthermore, part of what I enjoy about art is admiring **craftsmanship** - the skill and knowledge of the artist at work. Naive art can evoke strong emotions, but I'll always miss the feeling of awe as I marvel at someone's technical mastery.

Ultimately, my favorite artworks reveal a unique and genuine vision but also display strong craftsmanship. The former requires a lot of personal exploration and is hard to teach in a tutorial, so we'll focus on the latter! What I'll do here is rework this scene over a few big steps and along the way we'll try to understand what makes this work naive.

1. SIMPLIFYING AND RECOLORING

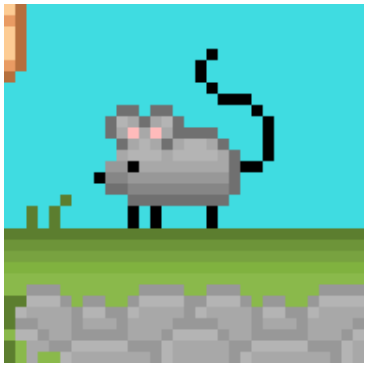
To begin with, I won't change any of the outlines. Instead, I'll remove the shading and, at the same time, reduce the color count and increase the contrast of those colors. You'll notice this immediately improves the readability of the various objects in the scene.

THE PROBLEM: TOO MANY SIMILAR COLORS

We want each color to have its own identity so that it can do as much work as possible. The efficiency of each dot is what makes pixel art unique as an art form and why we continue to work with limited palettes and limited resolutions even though it's not necessary in the modern day. When colors are too similar, pixels begin to blend together and get lost. Sometimes this may be an effect you want - for example, it might make sense

for a background image to look more indistinct so that your characters stand out better against it. But we want to make sure that it's something we're doing intentionally.

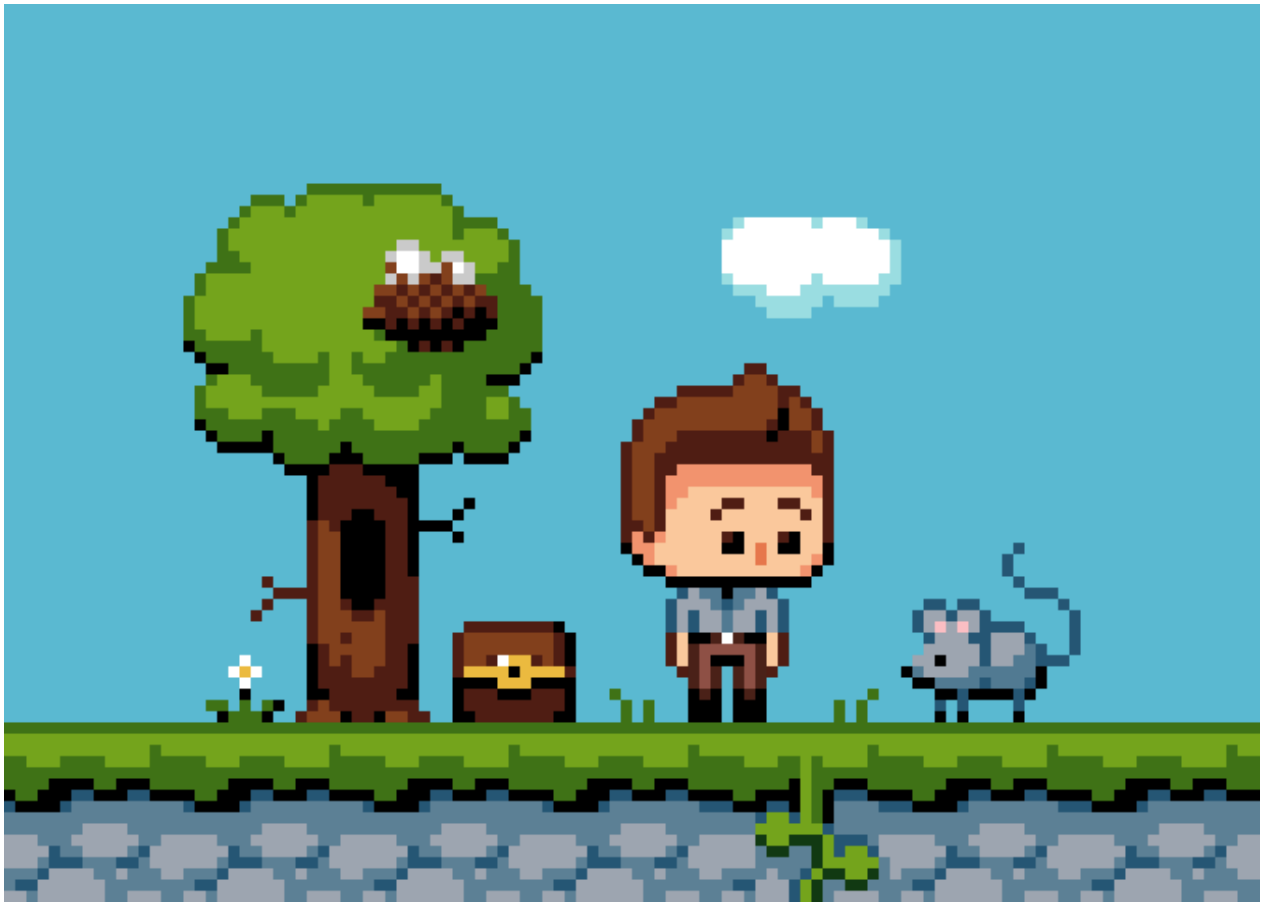
THE PROBLEM: NAIVE COLORING



When we start out drawing, we tend to think in terms of what color something "should be": leaves are bright green, the sky is bright blue, rocks and mice are pure gray, etc. In reality, color is rarely pure and reflected light can cause colors from nearby objects to mix with one another, adding complexity.

This doesn't mean that one needs to study hundreds of hours of color theory to make professional-grade pixel art. You could, for example, use or modify existing palettes. Or simply be observant and do some trial-and-error color picking, testing out varying levels of brightness and saturation until you arrive at a pleasing combination. In short, experiment!

2. CREATING FORMS WITH VOLUME



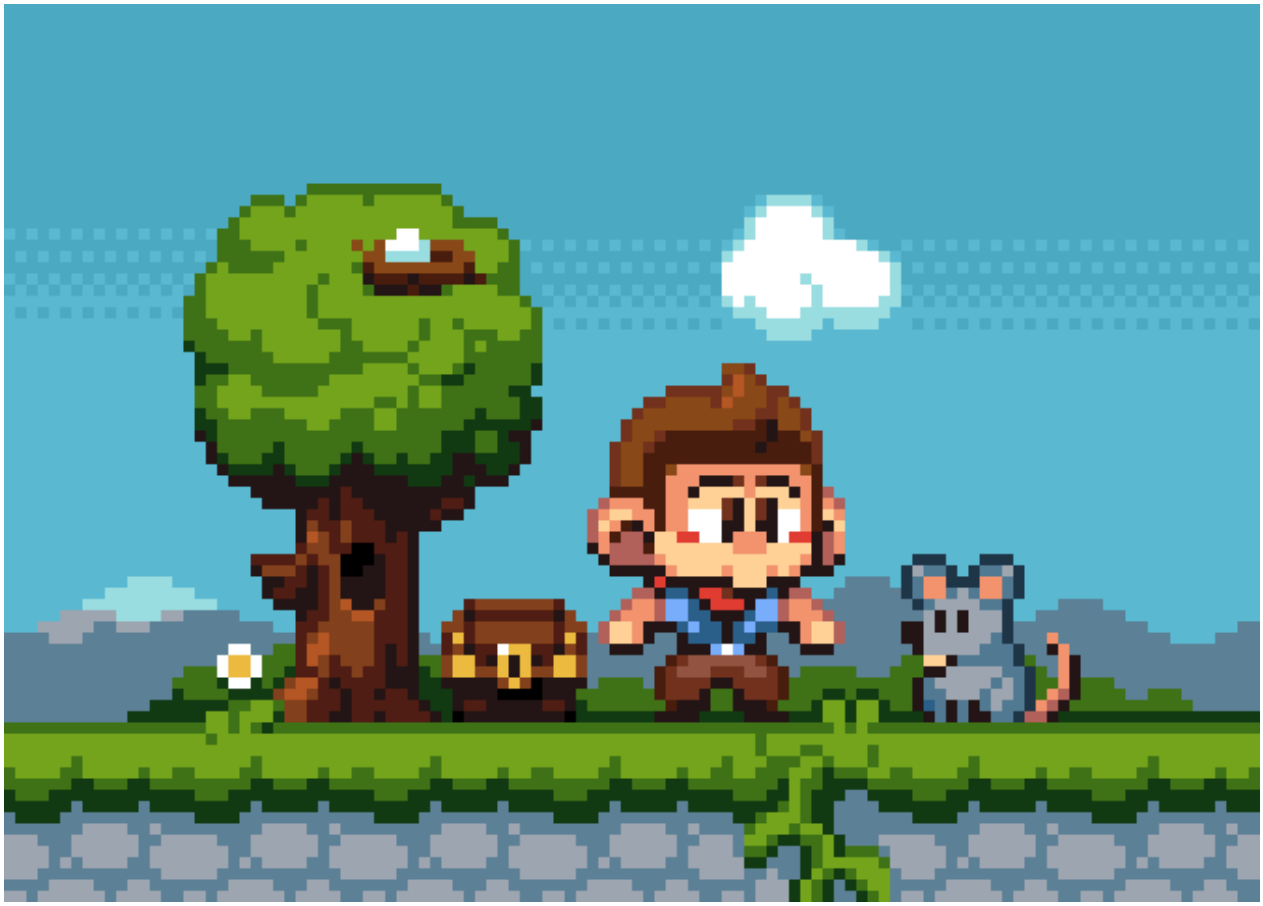
In PIXEL ART TUTORIAL: BASICS, we talked about thinking in terms of forms that have volume (i.e. they take up 3D space). The best way to express volume is to add realistic shading and most objects can be reduced to a simpler shape when thinking about shading so that the basic form does not get lost in too many details. For example, a treetop could be thought of as a few green spheres glued together instead of as thousands of tiny leaves. Or a bird's nest could be thought of as a brown bowl instead of a bunch of small twigs.

THE PROBLEM: PILLOW SHADING

Pillow shading refers to shading from the outline inward, creating a "pillowy" effect. This type of shading almost never occurs naturally in real life and tends to make the object look blurry and indistinct. It's often paired with the

"too many similar colors" problem.

3. DYNAMIC CHARACTER DESIGN



We can do a lot with color and shading, but stiff and flat designs will prevent us from doing more.

THE PROBLEM: CARDBOARD DESIGNS

With pixel art, we're making artwork on a grid, and it's easy to let that grid force us to design along straight lines. Again, thinking less in terms of lines and shapes and more in terms of forms with volume can be very helpful in that regard. Also, try to bring out the

personality of each object - imagine them moving around and exaggerate the features that best represent them. The more "alive" your artwork feels in your head, the less constrained you'll feel by the medium.

One loose rule I try to follow is to avoid rendering anything with only a single pixel of thickness - I call this my "Chunky Pixels Rule"! New pixel artists tend to make protrusions like arms and legs (and tree branches) very thin. This makes them hard to shade and consequently hard to sculpt into three-dimensional forms. As a result, they feel flat and flimsy.

4. BEFORE AND AFTER

Using the slider, you can compare the Before and After images. What do you think? Is the final edit an improvement? It's okay if there are things you genuinely like better about the original - my

ultimate goal isn't to get you to make pixel art like me but to get you to start thinking about what looks good to you and why. Every time you look at pixel art, whether it's your own or other people's, ask yourself what stands out about it, good and bad. What could be improved upon? What seems "wrong" but adds something to the work regardless?

Self-evaluation is one of the many hard aspects of being creative. Try too think about it as an ongoing personal journey instead of a competition. There's no end point, just the enjoyment of making art and learning!

That's the end of this tutorial!

Click on the hand to check out my **PIXEL ART GALLERY** and study some master-level pixel art from the 90s and early 2000s.

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