

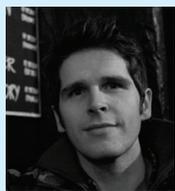
Adobe Illustrator

Create a captivating background

Alexis West shows you how to add depth to your character by building a convincing environment

Every character needs a good home. An important aspect of designing a successful character involves giving your creation a sense of solidity and grounding: it needs a backstory and purpose. I find that including these in your thought process will significantly improve your character design.

The second part of this extended project, which started on page 48, explores how to use different aspects of your character's personality to create a solid and relevant environment for it to exist within. Ask yourself: where does it live? What does it do? Once you've got the basics nailed, you're ready to create an environment for your character, and a stunning piece of artwork for your portfolio.



Alexis West

A Cardiff-based designer by day and a freelance illustrator by night, West has a creative preference for all things involving character design. www.theswingingseesaw.com

On your disc

— You'll find an original scan of the background used in this project on your cover disc, in the Resources section

Skills

— Make a custom Scatter brush
— Master the Gradient tool
— Add detail with pattern swatches

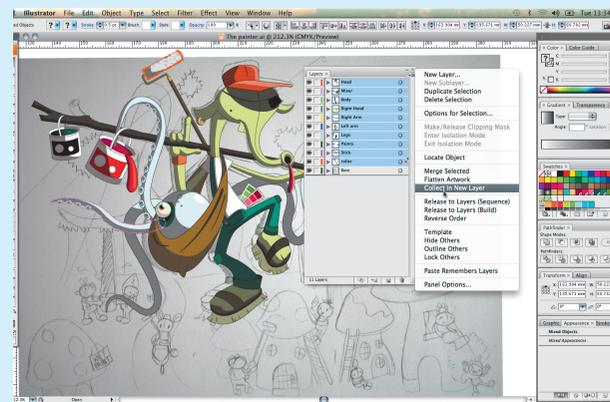




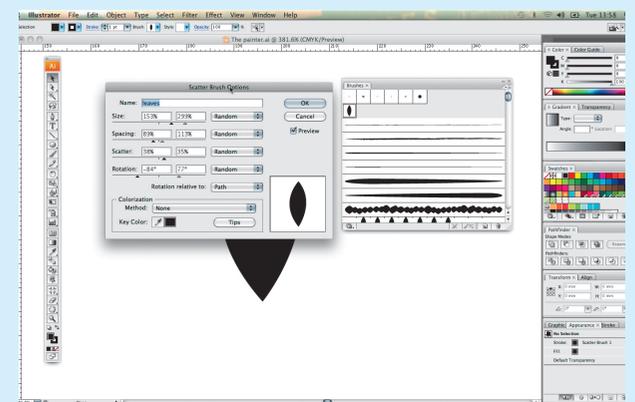
01 After creating your character, it's time to get the pencils and paper back out and think about a backdrop for it. Consider your character's personality traits, what its purpose is, and how you can link it into an environment. Once you're clear on the purpose, start sketching out additional characters that will help reinforce this. My character is selling paint, so I thought about who – or what – might want to buy its wares.



02 Now think about what sort of environment they might exist in. My primary character is travelling the fringes of damp woods to trade his paints to the mushroom people, who are preparing to spring-clean their homes. To convey this, I decided to sketch a small wooded glade, with small characters filling up pots of paint so they can colour the tops of their mushroom houses red with white spots.

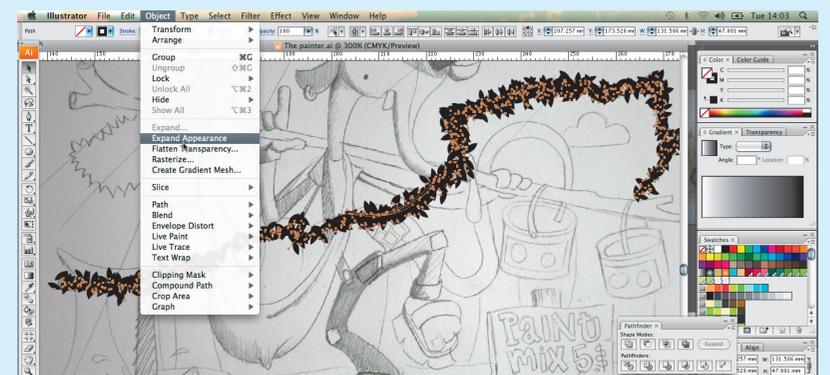


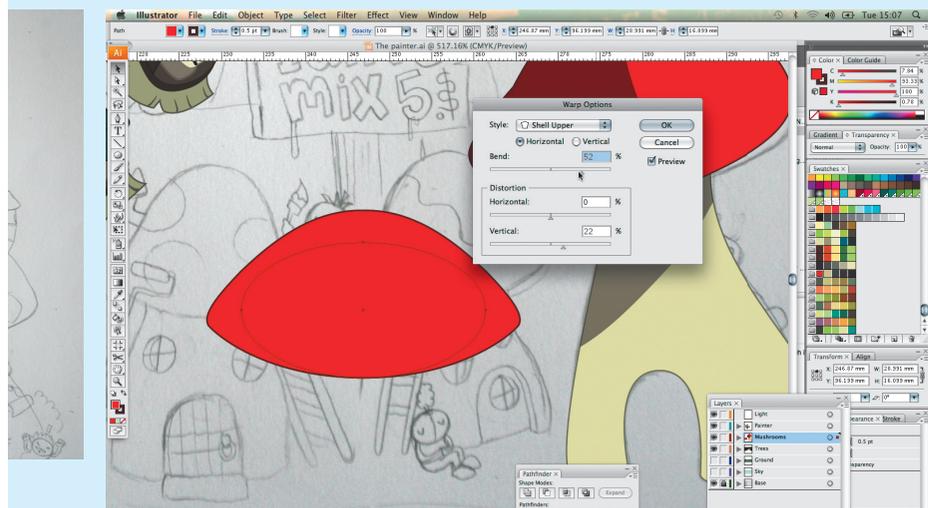
03 Having finished your character in the previous project, return to Illustrator, and unlock and delete the Template layer. Now select the remaining layers, click on the drop-down menu in the Layers palette, and select 'Collect in New Layer' to neatly nest all the layers into one. Name the layer, create a Template layer at the bottom, and import your updated character image with the background, then position it neatly to your character.



04 To create the fringes of the trees, use a brush. Draw a leaf shape with the Pen tool, ensuring the Fill is set to black. Drag it into the Brushes palette, and select New Scatter Brush. Set all the values that appear in the Options window to random, and use the sliders to create a maximum and minimum value. This will enable your brush to behave randomly, giving a different result every time you apply it to the piece.

05 In the Layers palette, turn off the Opacity of the character layer, and create a new layer named Trees. Using your custom scatter brush, follow the leaves, making individual brushstrokes to create a random leaf pattern. When you've finished, select all the leaf brush strokes, and go to Object > Expand, to transform them into shapes. Keeping them selected, go to the Pathfinder palette, and select 'Add To Shape Area'. The solid leaf shape can now be merged with any other shape to create a mass of leaves.

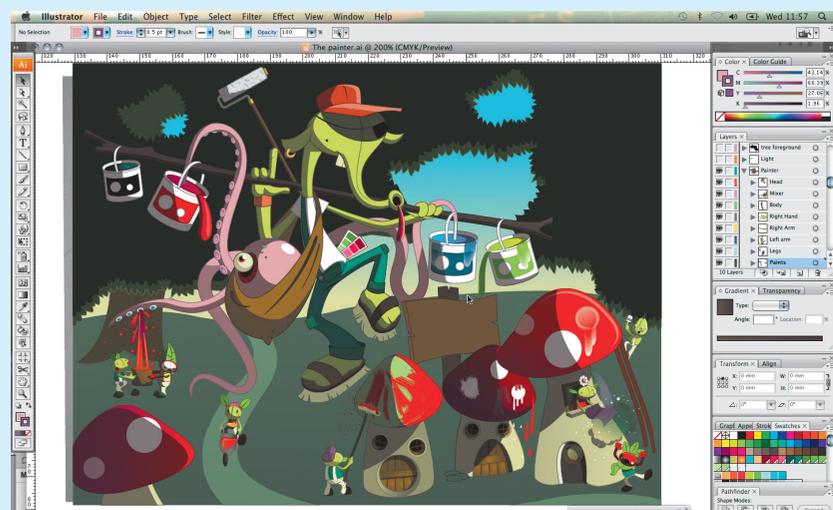




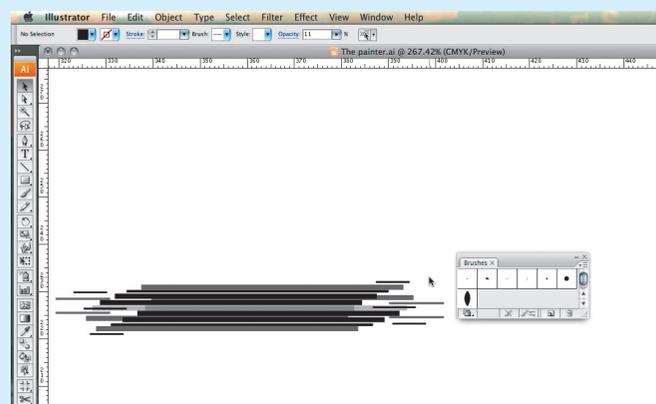
06 Select the Ellipse tool to create the tops of the mushrooms. Draw a circle or an oval, select the shape, and go to Effect>Warp>Shell Upper. In the Warp Options window keep Horizontal selected, move the Bend value to around 50%, and the Vertical Distortion to around 22% to create a dome-shaped effect.



07 To avoid the scene becoming repetitive and mechanical by just using the same shape for the mushroom domes, repeat the Shell Upper method for each mushroom. You can alter the values and add vertical distortion to create less geometric and more organic-looking shapes.



08 As you build up the scene, regularly check how the image is working in relation to your character – don't forget that this is the main focus. Experiment with the colours to ensure your creature has maximum standout.

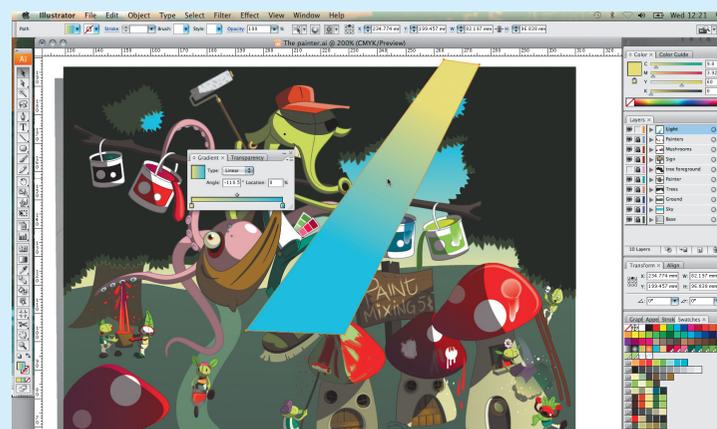
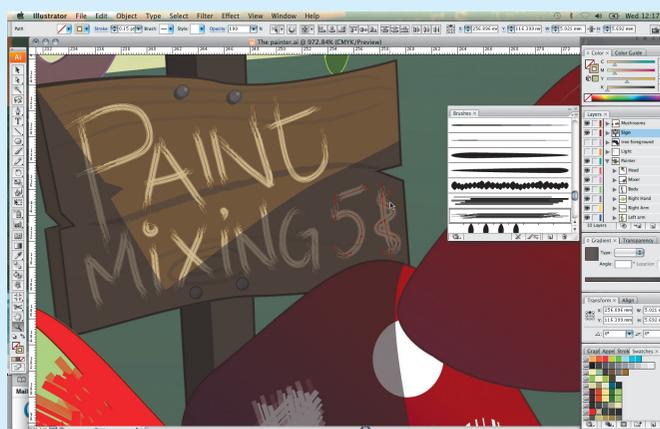


09 Since the scene will have lots of painting going on, you need to detail this in the image. To create a brush that will give a streaky effect, select the Rectangle tool, ensuring the fill is set to black, and draw a variety of staggered rectangles – of all different lengths and widths – and change the opacity of some. Select them all, and drag them to the Brushes palette to create a new art brush, ensuring the colour Method is set to Tints.

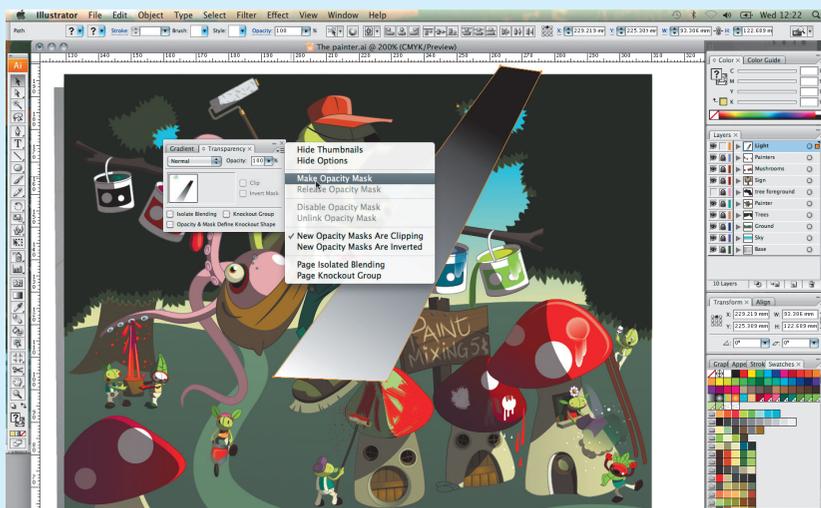
Add other characters

Creating other characters for your primary character to interact with helps to define your character's purpose, and will engage the viewer in your illustration – so pack in as much extra character detail and activity as possible.

10 Select the Brush tool, and practice writing out the message on the sign. Use a series of single strokes as opposed to a flowing curve, as the single lines will give a better impression of brushstrokes.



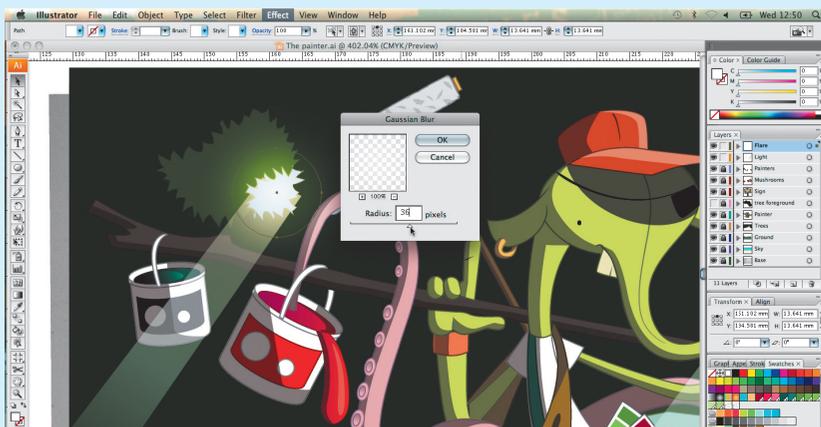
11 Create a new layer at the top of the Layers palette, and name it Light. Go to Window>Gradient, to call up the Gradient palette. Using the Pen tool, draw an offset rectangle shape that looks as though it could be a beam of light. Select the fill as a gradient, and in the Gradient panel change the gradient swatches to a blue and a yellow.



12 Select the beam of light, and go to Edit>Copy>Paste in Front. In the Gradient palette change the swatches back to the default black and white, ensuring that the white area is covering the top of your shape, and the black area the bottom. Select both Gradient shapes, and go to Window>Transparency. Click the drop-down options menu, and select Make Opacity Mask, to create a transparent gradient.

Save time with pattern swatches

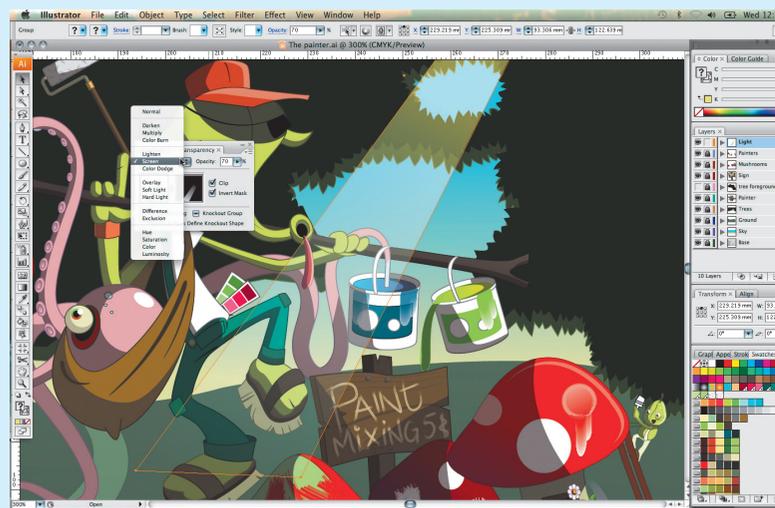
Creating pattern swatches are a great way to add detail to your illustrations. A carefully crafted pattern swatch can give the impression of a painstakingly detailed pattern in a few clicks.



14 To finish off the light shafts, select the Ellipse tool, and on a new layer draw a circle with the Fill set to white over the sources of light. Go to Effect>Blur>Gaussian Blur, and set the value to around 36px. In the Transparency palette set the Blend Mode to Overlay; keep the layer locked, as Gaussian blur often has a large transparent radius that compromises the selection of other objects.

Don't over-repeat

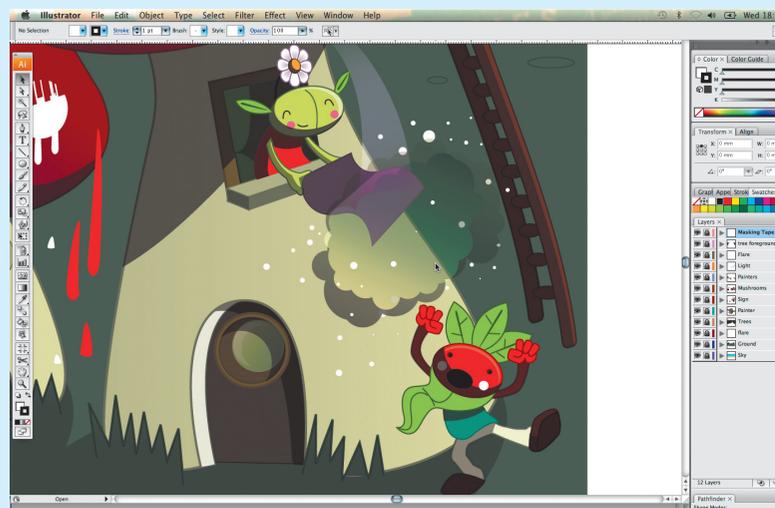
When creating several similar items or similar characters, be frugal with the amount of times you repeat them, as this can make the image look mechanical and mass-produced. Certain elements will obviously need repeating and the Symbol tool is great for this. When repeating items, however, be mindful of how they may sit in new places, such as areas of shadow or highlight.



Expand your brushstrokes

Expanding a path such as a brushstroke will open up a wealth of opportunity when you're creating your illustrations, by turning a keyline, a brushstroke, or a combination of paths into a fully editable shape.

13 The opacity mask is a little harsh as a lighting effect, and reducing the transparency makes it weak for a beam of light. So, in the Transparency palette, use the Blend Modes in the drop-down menu to create your desired effect – either Screen or Overlay usually work best. Repeat these steps to create a series of shafts of light.



15 To create the dusty effect from the rug, select the Ellipse tool, and draw a series of overlapping circles in an off-white, to create a cloud effect. Select the circles, and in the Pathfinder palette click 'Add to Shape Area'. Set the Blend Mode to Overlay in the Transparency palette, copy the shape, and paste it offset over the existing one, setting the Blend Mode to Multiply.



16 To complete the image and bring the character and environment together, add finishing touches such as shadows, particles and other relevant details. Carry on until there's no more room on the canvas, and you'll have a striking character illustration in a convincing scene.