Interview with Senior Maddy Leja

When and how were you first exposed to making art on a computer? What drew you to it then? Is it the same thing that has kept you there since?

When I was 11, I spent most of my time writing. I would dream up fantasy characters and spend all of my free time jotting down backstories for them. My parents saw that I loved to be creative and decided to try and encourage me to become interested in the visual arts by gifting me a Wacom Intuos Pro, a pen tablet.

I vividly remember how disappointed I was when I received the gift. I wasn’t a visual artist; I was a writer. I set the tablet to the side and didn’t touch it for two years.

What finally brought me around to using the tablet at age 13 was my access to the Internet. At around this age, my parents allowed me to browse the Web, so I spent a lot of my time searching up fantasy creatures I had written about in my stories. I stumbled upon some of the most amazing art pieces I had ever seen. These works inspired me to want to pick up visual art, but I just wasn’t enjoying working with a pencil and paper. I wasn’t getting the level of pristineness and polish that I wanted thanks to ghost marks made when erasing and mistakes made when lining. This is when I remembered my old drawing tablet. I dusted off my tablet and quickly fell in love with drawing digitally.

To this day, I remain a digital artist for the same reason I became one: the undo button. Such a tool eliminates the most frustrating parts of working on a traditional piece and allows one’s art to attain a level of polish not possible when working traditionally.

Were you creating artwork conventionally prior to making art digitally?

Yes, but not often. Before I started working digitally, I would draw only when I wasn’t bored of writing, and oftentimes, I could write for hours without becoming bored. I would use simple tools since I wasn’t that interested in art yet and hadn’t invested much in materials. All my doodles were done in pencil in an art notebook I had found lying around. Occasionally, I would outline my drawings using sharpie and color them in with colored pencils I had bought for schoolwork. You don’t need expensive materials to produce amazing art. Knowing how to effectively use your chosen medium is what matters, not the medium itself.

Nowadays, I rarely do traditional art, but when I do, my favorite materials to use are Bristol Paper, an empty fountain pen paired with a bottle of black ink and pro white, and Copic Markers.
I have taken a handful of art classes. At my old school, Roosevelt Middle School in River Forest, we all took one art class that was mandatory, and we would have it either once or twice every week depending on a rotating schedule. This mandatory art class was mixed media, so I learned the basics of drawing, papercraft, printing, etc. Later, at Parker, I took a drawing class, a mixed media class, a computer animation class, a 2D art class and a painting class. I came to Parker already having taught myself many art skills, so it was exciting to get to work with art teachers who were willing to work with me one-on-one to improve my skills. Last semester, I worked closely with Ms. Silva in Exploring 2D art on adding meaning to my art to prepare for creating portfolios later in life.

The summer prior to coming to Parker, I took a mixed media art class at Latin. Later, during the summer leading into my junior year, I took a class on inking and comic creation at the School of the Art Institute. This is the class that solidified my preference for using fountain pens and ink when lining rather than microns. It also encouraged me to begin illustrating more comics and eventually apply for and receive the position of Weekly cartoonist during my senior year. In my free time, I also like to take advantage of online art courses. Draw A Box has been the most helpful free source of classes I’ve used for learning the basics of shape and form. YouTube is also a treasure trove of art tutorials.

I am completely self-taught when it comes to digital art. The computer animation class I took consisted of independently working on a project of your choice throughout the entire semester, so I used my existing skills in Adobe Animate to create an animatic. I was also able to work digitally in Exploring 2D art. Digital art often appears complex at first since most programs feature a stunning number of tools, but it becomes easier when you realize you will never use most of the tools. I normally figure out the programs I use by experimenting with different tools and brushes to see what they do. By the end of this process, I am left using only a few tools and brushes consistently.

*What program(s) do you use to create your current work? Has this changed as time has passed? If yes, why?*

When I first started digital art, I used a program called Manga Studio Pro, which I now believe has been rebranded to Clip Studio Paint. I remember having access to a variety of tools and brushes within the program, but because I was still a beginner artist, I didn’t know how to effectively use most of them. I paired this program with my first drawing tablet: a Wacom Intuos Pro.
A few years later, after I had become more invested in my art, my parents agreed to pay for a Creative Cloud subscription for me, and I started using Adobe Photoshop as my main drawing program. For Christmas, I was given a Wacom Cintiq, which is different from an Intuos in that it’s a display tablet rather than a pen tablet. Unlike a pen tablet, a display tablet allows you to see your artwork on the tablet screen. It’s essentially a computer monitor that you can draw on.

Eventually, I moved away from Photoshop and my Cintiq, too. I wanted to do digital art on the go, but both my Intuos and Cintiq were too big and clunky to carry around with me. So I decided to invest in an iPad. I kept my Creative Cloud subscription and used Adobe Sketch and Adobe Draw interchangeably for quite a while. When Adobe released its new drawing app, Adobe Fresco, I switched to that. Eventually, a friend of mine recommended Procreate. I had heard great things about the app, but was reluctant to learn a completely new program after being familiar with Adobe products for so long. However, I decided to give it a shot and instantly fell in love with the app. I have been working exclusively in Procreate now for a year.

**Where do you draw your creative inspiration from? Has this changed since March 2020 and the quarantine?**

I have always been primarily a fanartist, and my favorite pieces of media are my main inspirations. I love to draw the characters from the video games that I play and the shows that I watch and will mirror the art style of whatever media I am currently interested in.

The first few digital drawings I ever created were of characters from the show *Ninjago*. After I lost interest in this, I became invested in the show *MyStreet* after having it appear in my YouTube recommended list, so I drew the characters from it for a while. This was around the time I started posting my art online, and my fanart accounts became mildly popular by accruing several hundred followers. I also produced a live podcast surrounding the show that I had to produce all the assets for in Photoshop. Next, I switched to Final Fantasy 14 after a friend recommended the game to me. I spent more time playing the game than I did drawing the characters from it, so my progress lagged at this point. During January of last year, I bought the game Sonic Mania and quickly fell in love with the Sonic franchise. For the next few months, I spent my time doodling Sonic characters and playing through as many of the games as possible. I started up yet another art account during this time, and it’s the one I still post to today. During quarantine, I became invested in a Twitch series, and I’ve been
spending a lot of time drawing pivotal moments from it and creating unique designs for each of the
characters.

Fanart is absolutely a reliable way to grow an audience as an artist on any social media platform.
People are more likely to engage with a piece containing characters they recognize than they are with
a piece of an original character. I respect artists who use fanart as a way to grow their audience for
their original works. However, this isn’t the reason I create fanart. I genuinely enjoy drawing the
characters from the media that I love. And since I don’t yet have a career in art, the only thing that
matters to me when I create is that I enjoy what I’m drawing. Most of my pieces are fanart for this
reason.

I also believe there exists a career in fanart, and that is another reason I put so much effort into my
fanworks. I would one day love to work as a concept artist or cartoonist for SEGA or Square Enix,
both of which have been known to hire artists popular within their respective fan communities.

Anything you want to make sure people know about you, your work or anything else?
I thought it might be fun to provide a quick list of “fun facts” about my art and artistic process.

Being an artist does not equal having good handwriting! I have terrible handwriting.

- I have 1,100 pieces of art saved to my art folder on my iPad. In 2020 alone, I produced 448 of
  these pieces, 30 of which were fully-rendered works. A fully rendered work tends to take me
  about 20 to 30 hours depending on complexity.

- In September of last year, I developed a coloring style that I like to call “pencil painting.” It’s a
  combination of cell shading and blend shading and involves creating the illusion of an
  authentic blend shade by layering multiple cell shaded sections, all of which are a similar
  color, on top of each other. All of the cell shaded sections are drawn in using the 6B pencil
  tool in Procreate, which can’t blend but can produce a rough stroke. This enhances the illusion
  by making the lines between the cell shaded sections less clear.

- I love to create sticker sheets! I draw the art for the stickers in Procreate and then die-cut the
  stickers using a machine called a Cameo Silhouette.

- When I draw, I either listen to music or watch YouTube videos.
• I hate drawing backgrounds. Characters are my favorite thing to draw, and it’s the reason why I want to become a character concept artist.

• I also enjoy video editing in Premiere Pro and After Effects! Every year I try to edit together a compilation of my art that features speedpaints of my best pieces.

• I used to do art streams live on Twitch. I once streamed myself working on a piece for seven hours, from 10 at night to 5 in the morning.

• My pen name is Lazeolus, so all my pieces are signed “Lazeolus” instead of “Maddy.” I got the name from an original character I created when I was nine.

• I like to draw late at night when everyone else is asleep so I don’t get distracted.

• I am currently one of the heads of Phaedrus and the cartoonist for the Weekly. You can always find at least two of my pieces in every Phaedrus issue.