Interview with Jeff Willis, Cartoonist

Professional & Academic Perspectives of Cartooning

Jeff Willis has over thirteen years experience as a cartoonist, illustrator and graphic artist on a freelance and full-time basis. Since 1999, Mr. Willis has worked for KnowWonder, a Washington-based business, as a Tradigital Artist (combining traditional and digital mediums) in production art for animation and interactive game elements for licensed children's CD-ROM software programs. With KnowWonder, Mr. Willis has created background art for games and animated vignettes (mini-movies), icon art and animation production, including licenses for "Nickelodeon's Rugrats" and Scholastic's "The Magic School Bus". Through his career, he has also developed licensed properties for Looney Tunes, Major League Baseball, Disney, and the National Wildlife Federation, and he was Art Director for Pacific Cities Sportswear in Everett, Washington. He has created art for children's educational interactive CD-ROM software programs.

How did you discover you had a talent for cartooning?
I showed an interest at a very early age. I was drawing before I could read. One of my earliest recollections was in Kindergarten when I drew a picture of my cat with those huge kiddy-crayons. My teacher liked it so much she put it on the wall. I'm not sure, but I think she kept it.

I was influenced by cartoonists of different styles including, Chuck Jones, Walt Kelly and Charles Schultz.

Describe a typical day of work for you.
Each day is a little different from the next, but here is one example. With a huge cup of coffee at the ready, I might start by sketching some concepts of a background for a multimedia game. If the sketches are approved, I will then ink them in by hand, followed by scanning them. If the style calls for it, I will render the line art with a vector-based program.

From there I might import that art into a pixel-based program and add flat colors. If the colors are approved, I can move onto adding shading, patterns on walls, highlights and so on. Most games require navigation items (things you can click on, scoreboards, timers, etc.), so I might then sketch concepts of these next. Actually, all of this will usually go well beyond one day, but you get the idea. Another day, I may be working on inking, scanning and coloring animated characters.

What kinds of jobs are available for graduating students who specialize in cartooning?
Cartooning jobs can be found in websites, greeting cards, garment design, story boards, animation, 3-D art, computer games, toys, comic strips, graphic novels, children's books, the list goes on...

Is there anything else you can tell us about yourself, your career, or the profession that would be interesting or helpful to others aspiring to enter and succeed in cartooning?
Try to develop your own style! I cannot stress this enough. Many artists and cartoonists alike who are fresh out of school seem to adapt the style of their teachers, mentors and professors. I once worked with a team of artists who attended the same art school and took the same classes with the same teachers. Consequently, they all had frighteningly similar styles. In my case, I have adapted different styles to please various licenses (Disney, Warner Bros., etc.), but I still have a style of my own as well. Be yourself wherever you can.