In the Spotlight

Christian Hecker

Meet artist **Christian Hecker**, or as some may know him – 'Tigaer', whose love for movies, media, and technology drove him to enter a career in CG!

Christian has worked on a number of projects throughout his career, but there's no doubt his focus on creating stunning sci-fi and fantasy scenes has put him on the map!

Check out what Christian has to say on everything from how he got started, what his experience is with VUE, where he gets his inspiration and more in this Spotlight Interview!

e-on software: What is your background?

Christian Hecker: I guess my current status would be defined as freelancer. I'm generally interested in all kinds of fields related to CGI. What initially drove me to become, or do what I do today, is my love for movies and everything media and technology. I always loved the Matte Painting work in movies. Especially films of the 70s, 80s, and 90s. When I was growing up, watching movies, I intuitively knew when I had a fantastic and grandiose scene in front of me.

I just enjoyed looking at them and, at times, they were the reason I'd watch a film over and over again. Later I learned how most of these shots were done and was hooked. May it be landscapes, alien worlds or futuristic cityscapes, I wanted to be able to create stuff like this too. Now I'm not the most talented guy when it comes to drawing and painting – the traditional things. So, I focused on how 3D could help me balance out my traditional art weaknesses. I tried a lot of things and VUE turned out to be an invaluable asset in my arsenal of tools.

I can enjoy all kinds of projects, as long as I'm doing something fun that allows creative freedom. Mainly I've settled with creating scenes showing Sci-Fi or fantasy landscapes or cityscapes. So it's mostly exterior based. In the past years I ventured into interior based artwork too.

The Unknown Huntress, 2018

As a freelancer you are kind of your own boss. It gives you a certain freedom with how to structure your day. Sometimes you have a little more spare time, and sometimes you work up into the wee hours of the night. When the creative flow has you in its spell… it's hard to stop. So what I enjoy the most is that feeling when a project finally comes together. When you see how each part of the puzzle falls into place, especially when it's a scene that gave you a rough start and where it took a while to figure out the right approach.

e: What is a typical day like?

CH: That really depends on what kind of project I work on. If it's a commission, I work pretty much all day up into the later evening. I take small and short breaks scattered throughout the day. Whenever I'm doing a test render I try to use that time to catch a break. Not getting much fresh air in that time! =) When it's a personal project, I have more

freedom of course, and I tend to give myself a lot of time to really get the maximum possible quality out of the work. I do that too with commissions of course, but deadlines can be a limitation in that department.

As I continue my career, I hope I'll be able to continue to let my creativity roam and use it to help interesting projects come to life. Who knows what the future brings? I certainly always listen when someone knocks on my door.

e: What is your experience with VUE?

CH: I've use VUE for more than 10 years now, I think. As I mentioned before, I started using it (among other tools) to balance out my traditional art weaknesses. It served me very well over the years, and I am very proud of some of the work I was able to create with it. What I like the most is its ease of access for the most part. And it can get very complex if it needs to for certain things, which is good and gives the depth to really fine tune your scene.

I'm most proud of my involvement with Galactic Civilizations 3. I created a number of scenes for them and learned a lot in a relatively short time. I've also written for magazines and books and conducted workshops that I'm fairly happy with. Then there are particular personal projects like "*Journeys of An Unknown Huntress*" or "*From Here I Can Almost See the Stars*" – which I'm very proud of.

e: How do you organize, plan, and prioritize your work? What other software do you use?

CH: When I begin my work, I mostly start to play around in VUE and block out the scene. Trying to find a good composition and lighting setup. When it's a commission, I try to follow the descriptions as close as possible but also try to bring in my own twist to make it look cool. Once the main elements of the scene stand, I go in and add detailed elements and dive into mirco-composition to really bring in detail that rounds out the overall look but isn't visible at first glance. Next, I render the scene and move into Photoshop. Here I overpaint and fix stuff. Add additional detail – sometimes through painting and sometimes by rendering out additional elements. Multipass rendering is a big help. Last but not least, I move the scene into Lightroom and play around to finalize the color grading. Besides VUE there is Adobe Photoshop, World Machine, Gaea, DAZ Studio, Cinema 4d, Adobe Lightroom and Plant Factory in my main arsenal of tools.

e: How have you integrated PlantFactory into your workflow?

CH: PlantFactory certainly is a part of my workflow, yes. It's a very complex tool that gives you so much freedom. I wish I would have more time to go a little deeper with it. Right now I'm mostly only using it when I require certain foreground elements and the flexibility to adjust everything to my needs.

e: Do you have any advice to share?

CH: The easiest answer is to work on your skills as much as you can. Sometimes you even have to force yourself to learn stuff you're not interested in. You never know when you'll need it. When doing personal projects, try to always incorporate something that requires you to learn something new.
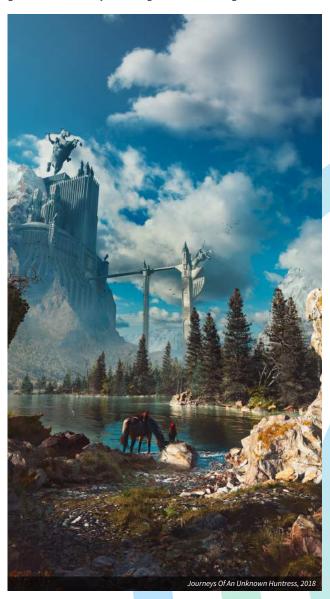
I like to call these project "benchmarks". Go to your limits. There will be failures, and you know what? That's good! Failures are as important as successes. And even if the competition is very hard and will most likely grow even harder, only a solid portfolio will help you to go forward. If you have the means and drive to learn new things in a constantly changing environment – go for it!

As for learning a new tool, YouTube is a good start! It's insane how easy it is now to work yourself into a tool you haven't used before. It still takes time and drive, but it's so much easier than 10 to 15 years ago, when I started. Then there are still a lot of websites with written tutorials. Social media is a good starting point as well. In the case of VUE there is the VUE Galleries group with lots of cool people who are there if questions are posted. I learned things by myself and the Internet was a big help. But again, you need a certain drive to push yourself further. Today there are many more schools with a focus on entertainment industry related courses than back when I started. These can help to learn the basics a little quicker. So, there are multiple ways to gather knowledge nowadays.

e: Where do you get your inspiration?

CH: Generally, movies, books, tv shows, work by other artists, or things I observe around me. It can literally come from anything. Sometimes it's enough to see an interesting architecture or a simple shape… suddenly you have an idea and a picture starts to form in your head. How the great Freddie Mercury once sang: "It's a kind of magic"!

Into The Distance, 2018

e: Would you recommend VUE to other artists, and why?

CH: Absolutely I would! The fact that it's used in high budget movies down to hobbyists, who just want to have some fun with their creativity, shows how versatile it is. I would recommend it to everyone who is interested in creating landscapes and environments. VUE comes with all tools needed for that. In combination with PlantFactory, it's quite a powerhouse.

Journeys Of An Unknown Huntress, 2018

The Eternals, 2014

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