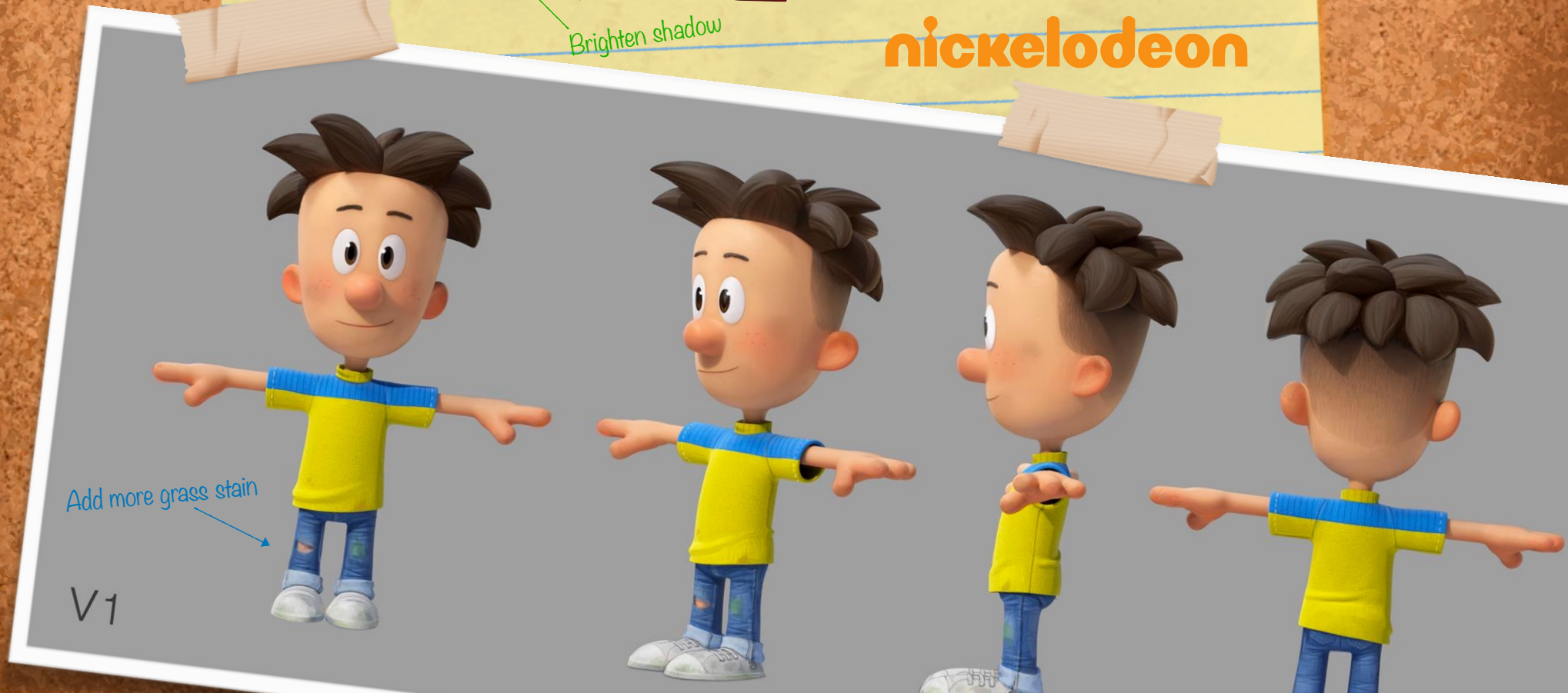
ON THE LOOK OF

BIG NATE

nickelodeon



Hello, Dear Artist!

Welcome to the team!

I'm David Skelly, Art Director on the brand new Nickelodeon CG-animated TV series "BIG NATE."

Thank you for contributing your time, talent, and expertise! I'm a fan of your work, and I'm very grateful you're here!

xo

David

"Big Nate is funny, big time."
—Jeff Kinney, author of Diary of a Wimpy Kid

BIG NATE ON A ROLL

"Big Nate is funny, big time."
—Jeff Kinney, author of Diary of a Wimpy Kid

BIG NATE STRIKES AGAIN

"Big Nate is funny, big time."
—Jeff Kinney, author of Diary of a Wimpy Kid

BIG NATE IN A CLASS BY HIMSELF

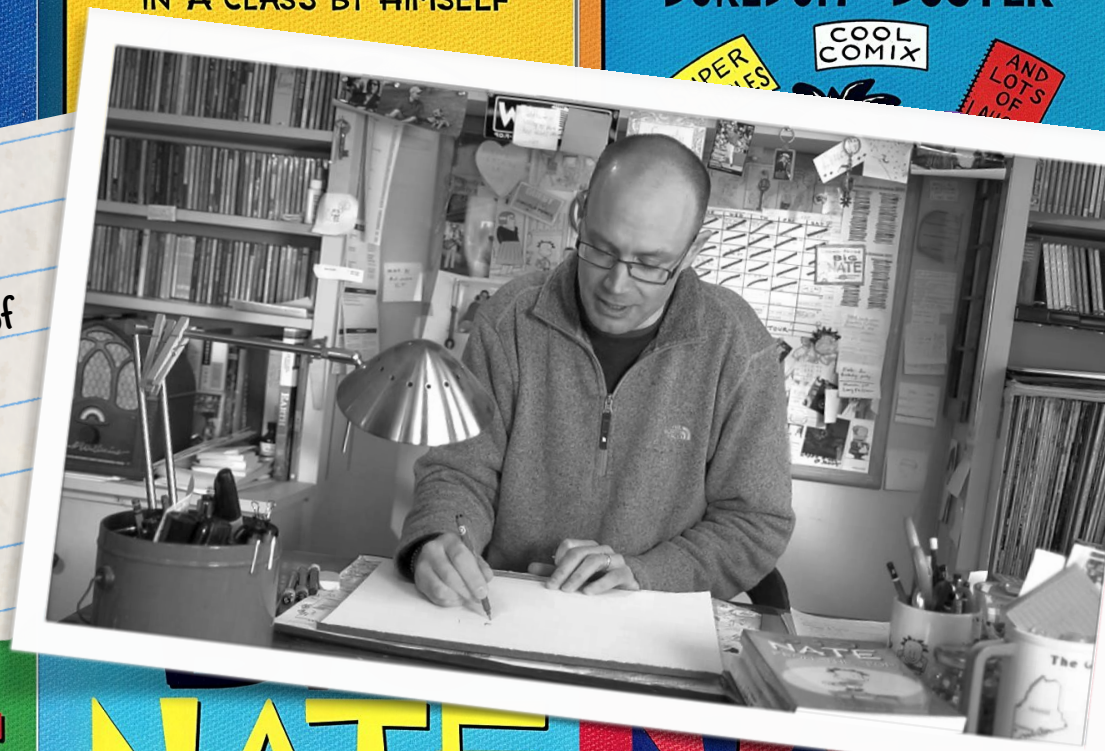
"Big Nate is funny, big time."
—Jeff Kinney, author of Diary of a Wimpy Kid

BIG NATE BOREDOM BUSTER

COOL COMIX

AND LOTS OF

BIG NATE is based on the long-running comic strip and international best-selling book series of the same name by author, artist, and humorist, LINCOLN PEIRCE.



BIG NATE WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?

BIG NATE GENIUS MODE

BIG NATE POSTER INSIDE

BIG NATE HERE GOES NOTHING

BIG NATE MR. POPULARITY

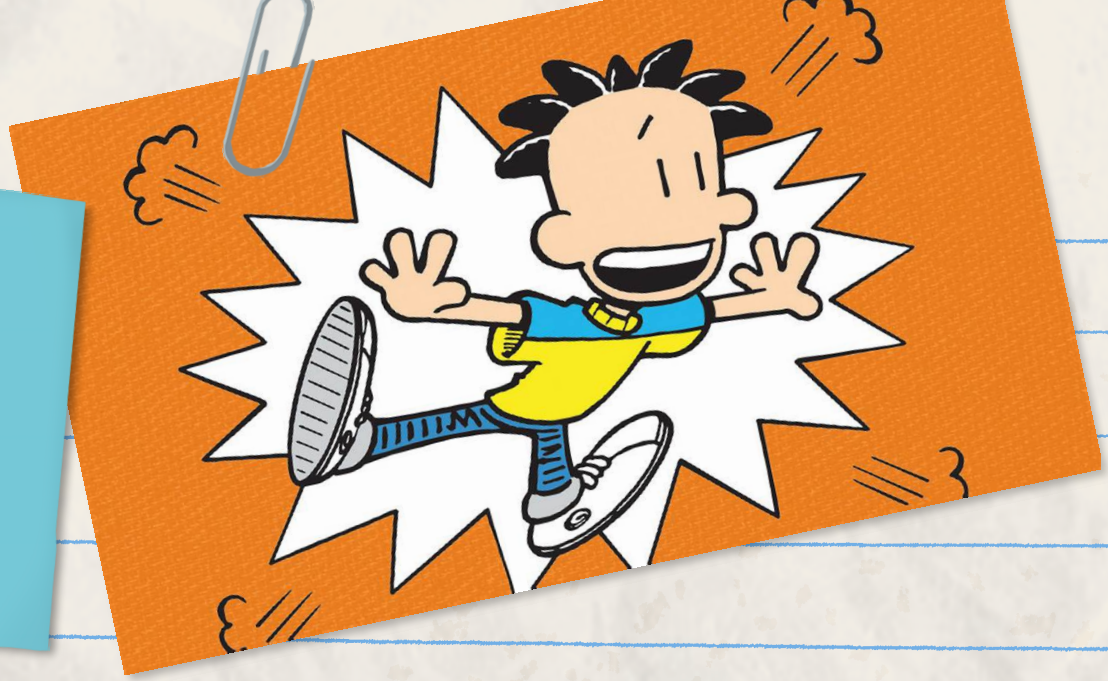
NATE

PRESIDENT

Check out the latest Big Nate comics at www.gocomics.com

(Peirce is pronounced "purse" BTW.)

OUR LOFTY GOAL:



Within the parameters of our schedule and budget, we're going to find new and ingenious ways to create FEATURE FILM QUALITY design, color, and lighting!

Our goal is to make an absolutely BEAUTIFUL series that totally transcends typical CG-animated TV fare — one that dazzles and delights long-time fans of Big Nate comics and books, and captivates a brand new audience of discerning TV viewers!

But how, you ask? And what will it look like?

Well, I'm very happy to answer all your questions and more — but before I delve deeper into this delectable discussion on design, it's essential we pause for a moment to ruminate on some important words concerning the tone, story, and star of the series from our Executive Producer MITCH WATSON:

INT. NICKELODEON - OFFICE - DAY

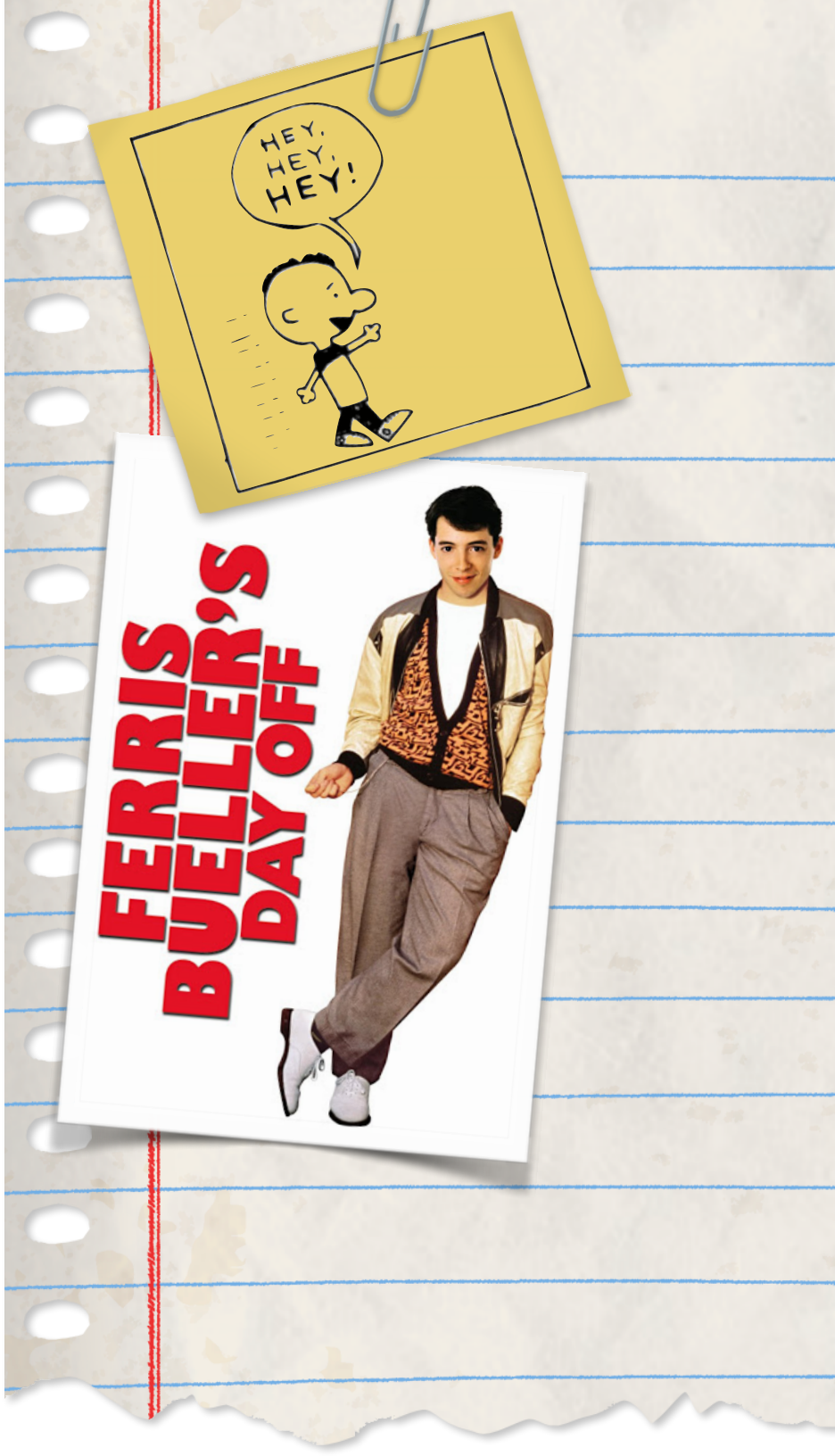
MITCH

Big Nate is a 22-minute comedy about a sixth-grade boy who has a desperate desire to prove his awesomeness to the world.

Tonally, think JOHN HUGHES MOVIES OF THE 80's. BIG NATE is FERRIS BUELLER'S DAY OFF, FREAKS AND GEEKS and UNDECLARED for 6th graders.

Nate Wright – our hero and narrator – believes he is AWESOME... at least that is what he will tell you. The truth is he has his doubts, but he is not about to let the rest of the world know that.

For this reason, Nate continually finds himself trying to prove his awesomeness to his schoolmates, usually resulting in some sort of disaster, detention, or both. Mostly both. But Nate doesn't care. He knows greatness is just around the corner waiting to embrace him.



Our Supervising Producer JIM MORTENSEN has this to add:

This is a COMEDY, first and foremost.

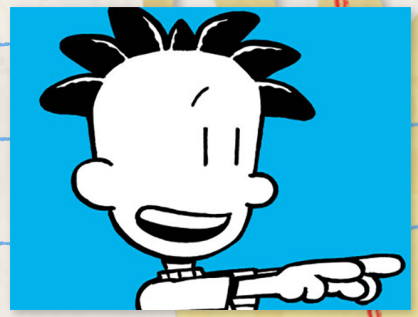
"It would be funny if..." is usually how conversations about design begin.

BIG NATE the comic is really funny. Our scripts are turning out really funny. We want the characters and world to be funny too! In every character expression you do, in every orthographic drawing, in every model, think... 'Will this support the funny?'

(Huh. This paragraph wasn't very funny. I'll work on it.)

– Jim

I hope these guidelines will help to inspire...



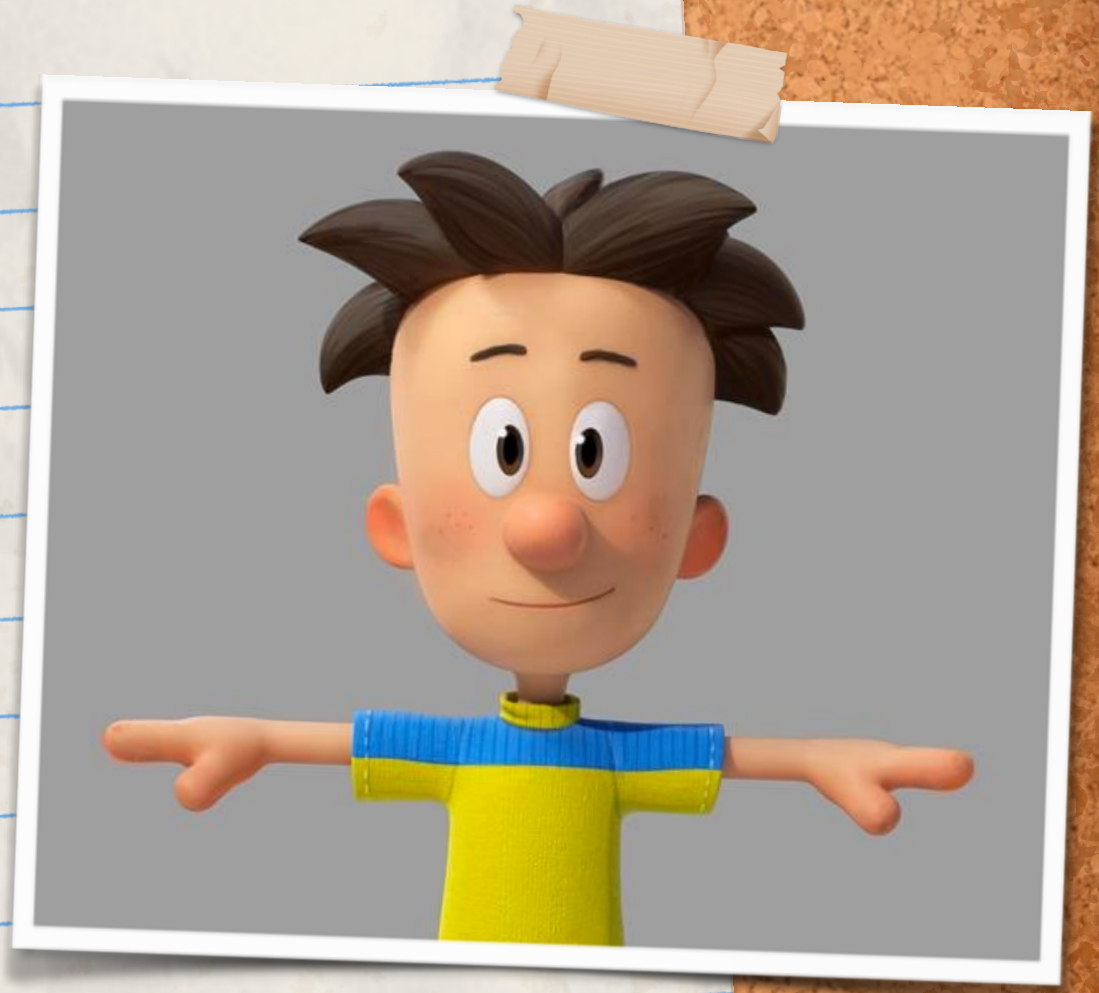
THE 7 GOLDEN GUIDELINES FOR BIG NATE

1. Thoughtful, faithful adaptations of Lincoln's work
2. Every character, set, and prop has the "Lincoln Line"
3. Simple, asymmetrical shapes
4. A color palette derived from the Sunday comics
5. Rich, painterly textures with visible brush strokes
6. Bold, bright, and well-defined lighting
7. A CG-animated TV series that looks like stop motion

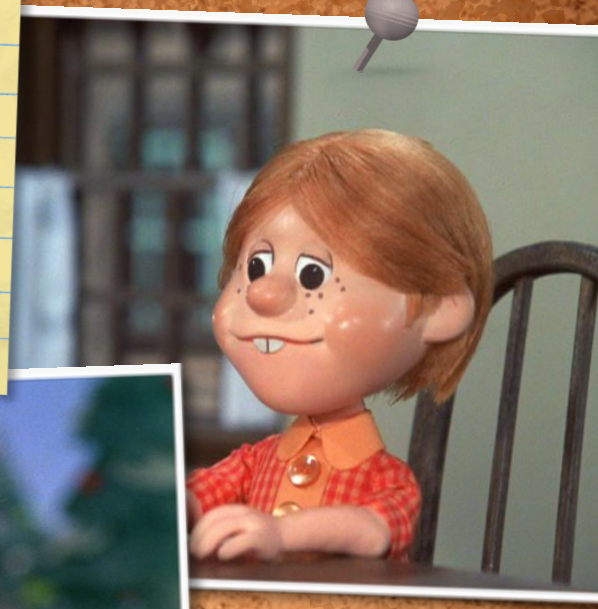
Wait, what? Stop motion? But this is a CG show, right? Yup!

We've set out to create a world - in CG - that looks as though we've filmed real objects, lit them with real lights, and animated them by hand.

Everything is made to look "miniature." Our characters are, in essence, 12-inch-tall puppets; their skin mottled resin, their hair painted foam, and their clothing woven fabric with oversized stitching and seams that subtly reveal their true size.



The puppet characters of Rankin Bass fame are a great touchstone: simple, charming, expressive... and fabricated.



Assuming our characters are 12 inches tall, then our PROPS are quite miniature indeed, made to look as though a team of highly skilled model makers sculpted them in clay, cast them in polyurethane, and painted them to look as real as can be. And because of their diminutive size, details must be minimal!

"Metal" is achieved by dusting a model with a virtual can of aerosol high-gloss clear coat.

And visible brush strokes, judicially placed, confirm these objects were painted by hand.

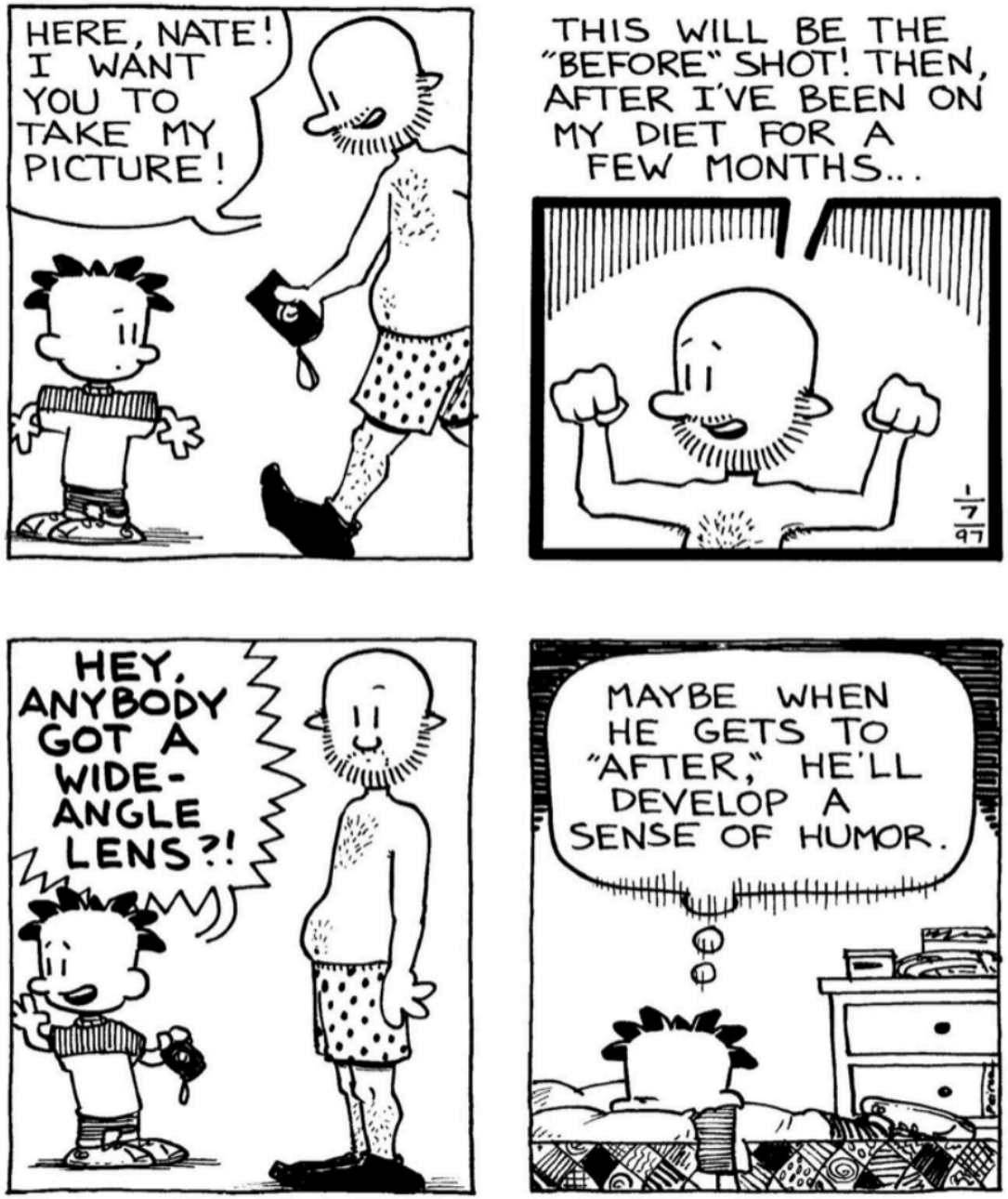
The "Lincoln Line"

THE "LINCOLN LINE"

There's a texture and rhythm to each stroke of Lincoln's pen; look at the lines of the panels themselves. At first glance they seem parallel, but upon closer inspection, they waver just a bit: organic, warm, playful.

Though we're creating CG objects without outlines, the edges of every object in our show will have the same handmade feel.

We will utilize some 2D lines, however, within objects to define detail — like the lines of the drawers in the filing cabinet on the previous page.



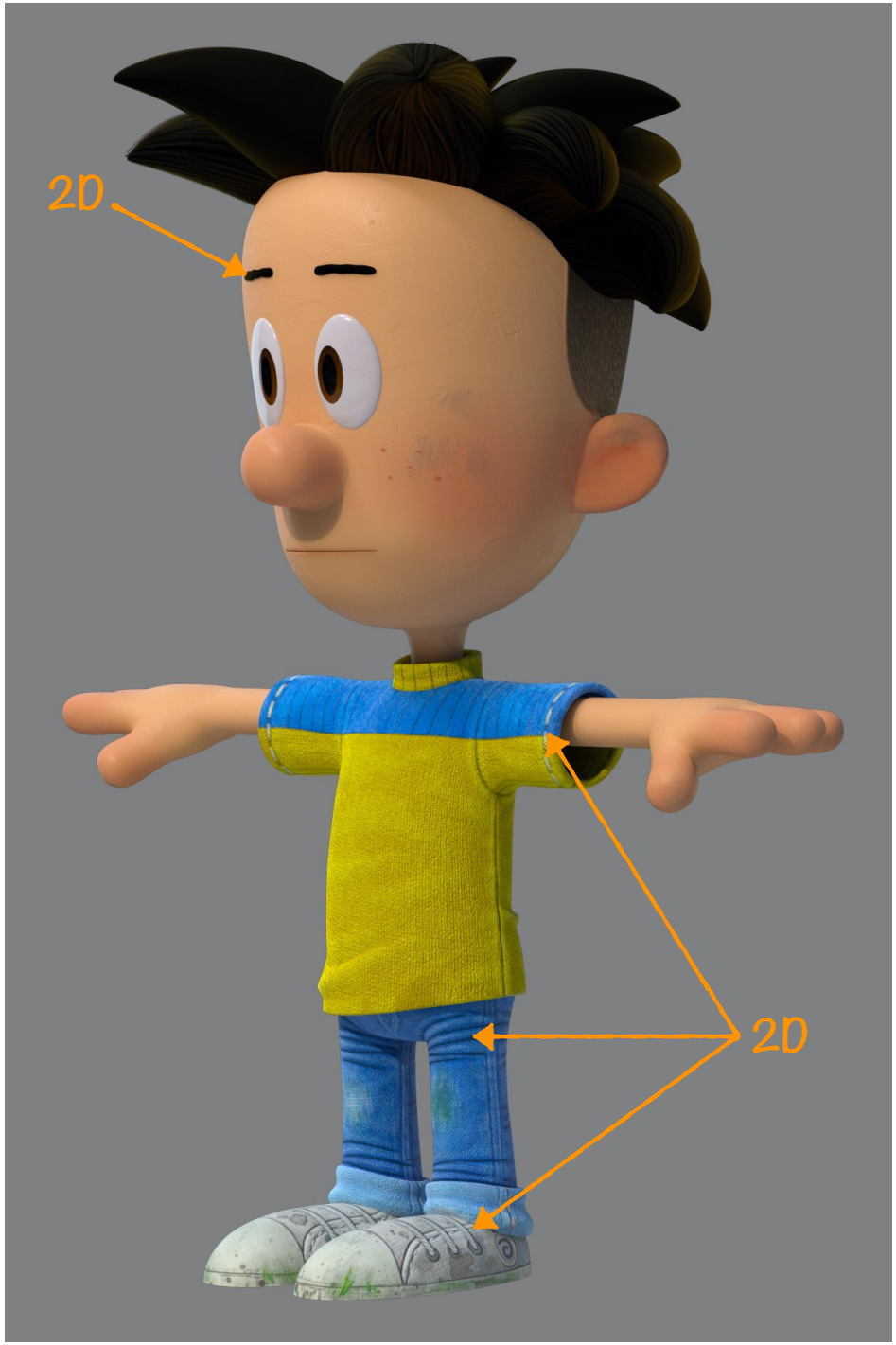
Tree bark, leaves, and grass will be defined with 2D Lincoln Lines.

Comic reference

Photo reference

Final design

Details on our characters' clothing will be 2D as well: patterns, stitches, wrinkles, zippers, shoelaces — even eyebrows will be 2D elements placed upon a 3D model.



Shadows will be augmented with lines like these.

Distant objects will be flat, 2D "cut outs" like these.

These are Lincoln's drawing tools: drafting pens of various sizes, a worn wooden ruler, a wooden template to outline the comic strip panels, and a pad of Bristol board.

The feeling of our show should should be that of pen on paper — as opposed to stylus on Wacom.

Let's make a CG show that feels handmade: perfectly imperfect!

Every character, prop, and set will have the Lincoln Line.

BUILDING ON A FOUNDATION

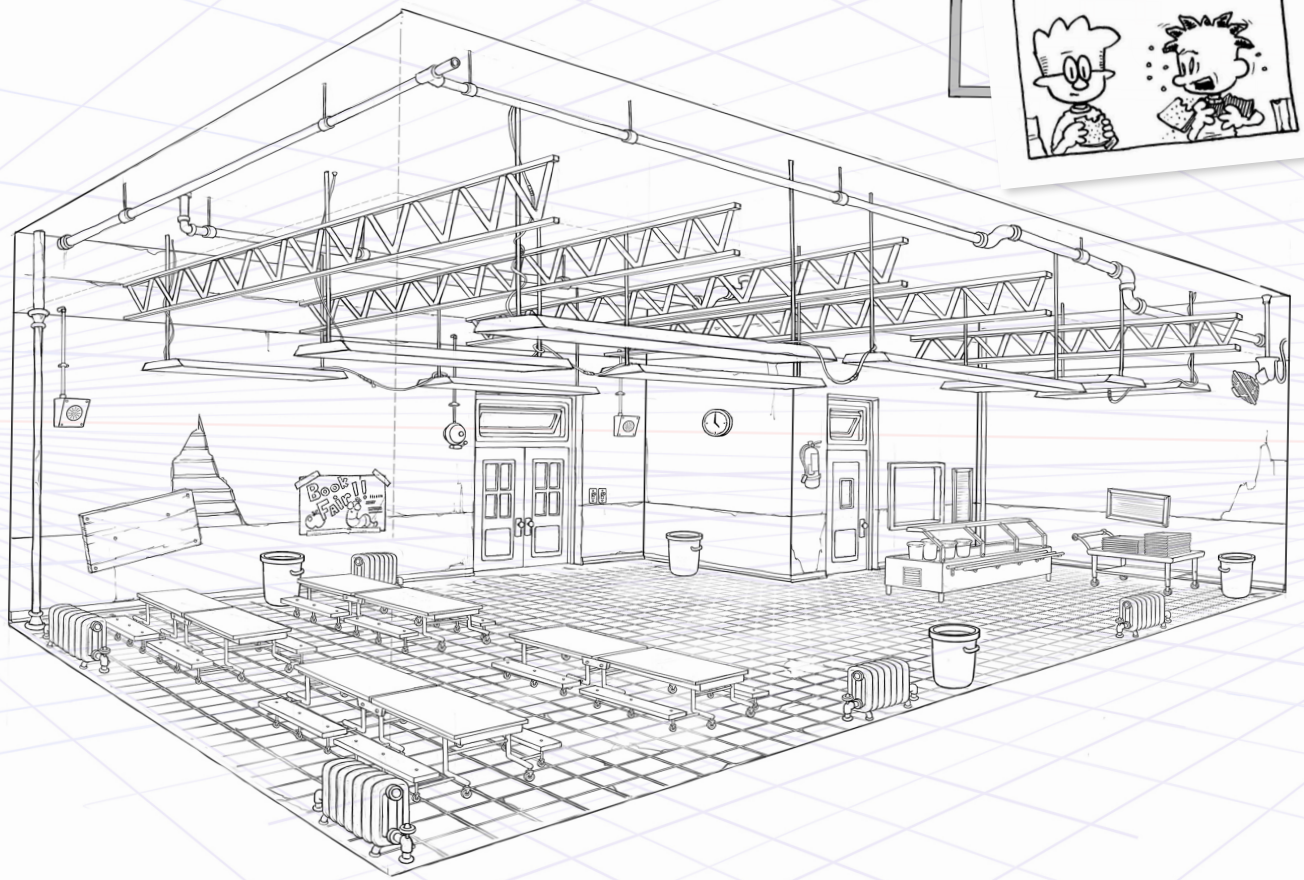
Our task is to create a world that reflects and respects Lincoln's work -- to build upon the foundation that Lincoln has spent several decades laying, one comic strip panel at a time!

The 1st Big Nate strip (1991)

Since the strip is, as comic strips are, judicious in its detail, it's up to us to flesh out the spaces – schools, homes, props, even characters.

I've likened this process to an archeological dig: we're uncovering bits of the world Lincoln has created...

School Cafeteria Interior



...and then piecing them together to create a place that his fans will recognize - but have never actually seen!

NATE_NATESHOUSE_BW_V007_01_NK

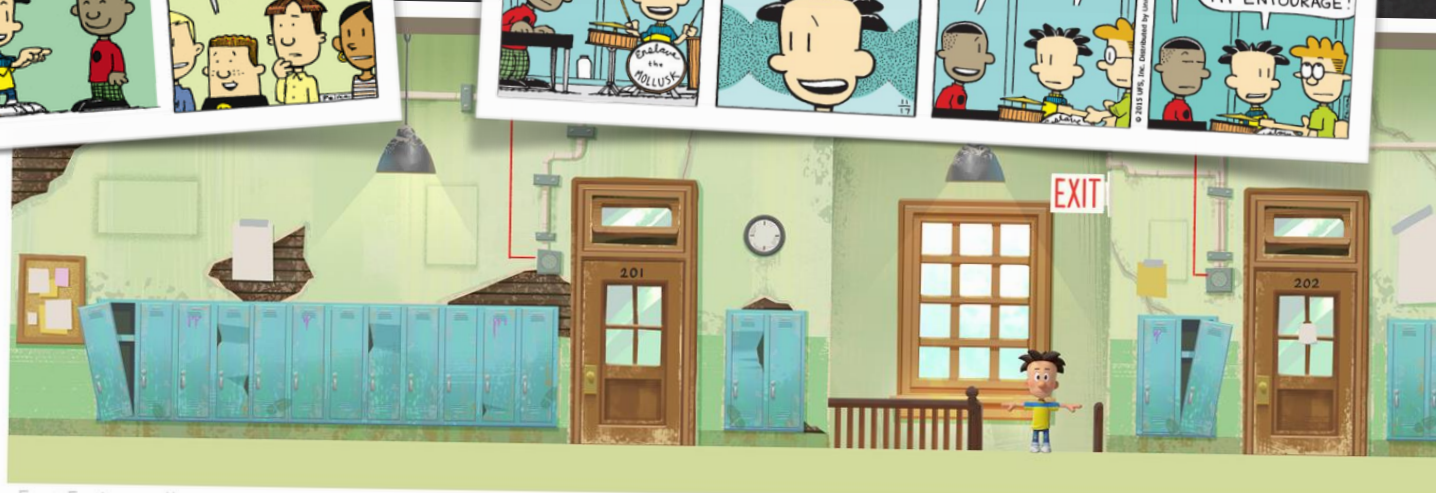
NATE'S HOUSE

BIG NATE

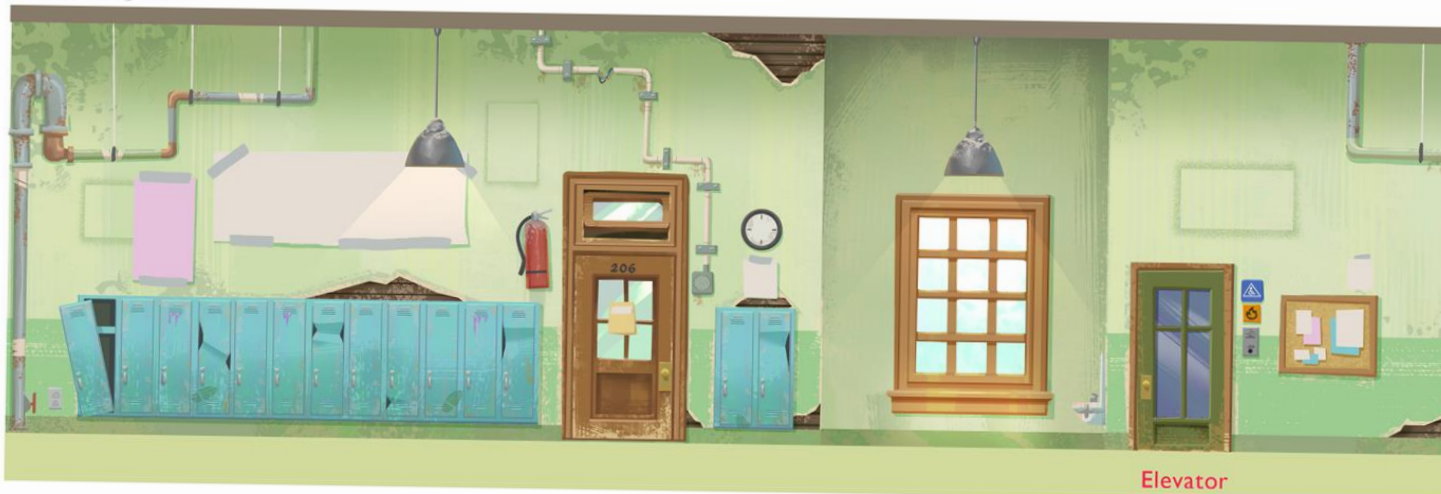
COLOR

Taking our cues from Lincoln's color comics, the PALETTE of our show should support the light, comedic tone of the story material.

BACKGROUNDS employ soft pastel and earth tones, while CHARACTERS have the most saturated colors so they pop from their environment – it's all about them!

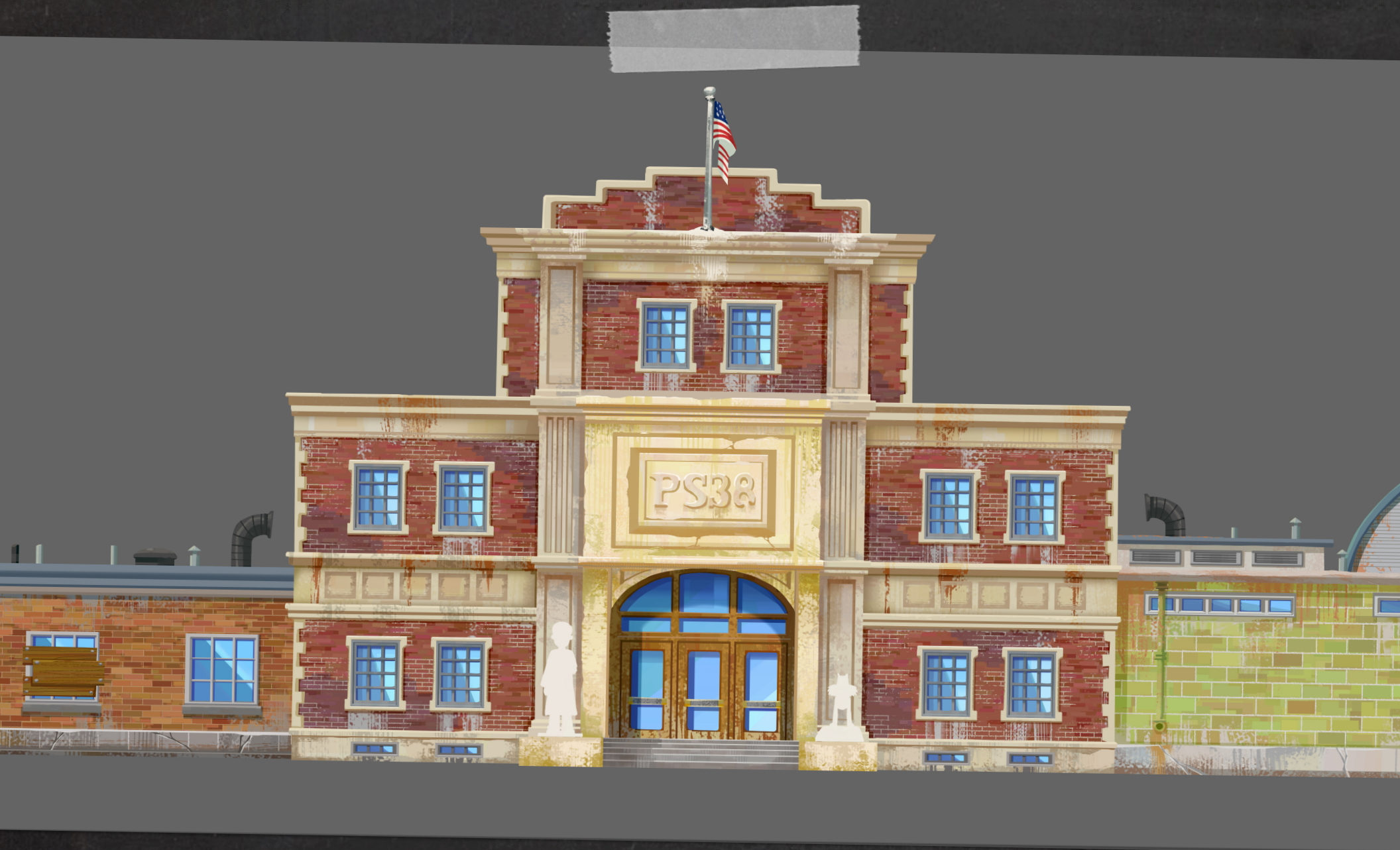


East Facing wall



Elevator

And while we're keeping the SHAPE LANGUAGE of our show very simple – we're leaning in to TEXTURE!



Detail of maypole

top

front

Use E
Rope

2D TEXTURE

- Playground Details

2. Detail of Fence

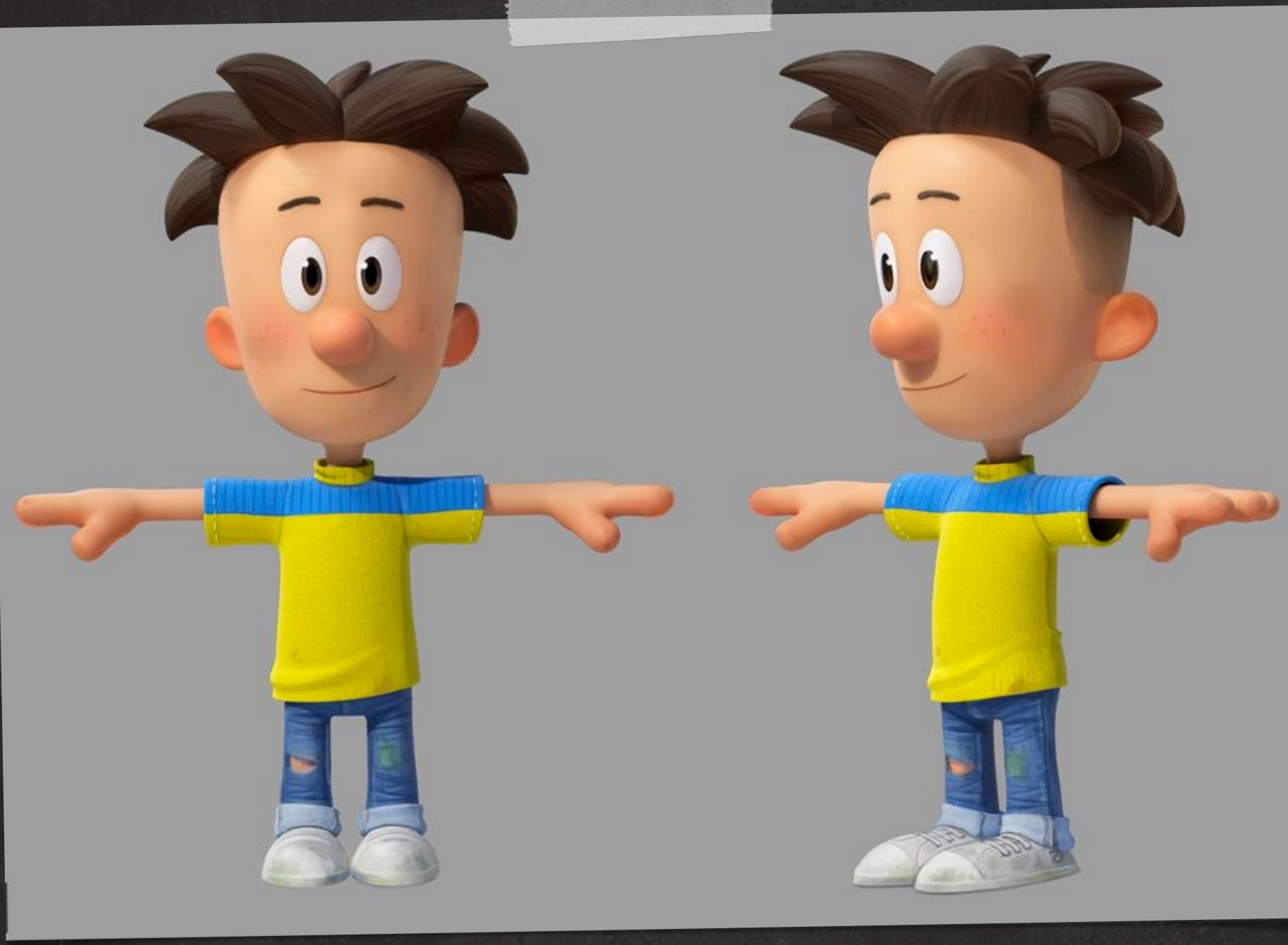
BiG NATE

1. Detail of slide

PS38 School Exterior - Playground Details

4. Detail of Handball Court

VANILLA
VANILLA



PROTOTYPES

BIG NATE will be a mixture of CG and 2D animation like the lavish-looking feature films THE PEANUTS MOVIE and CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS — and a smidgeon of the indelible SPIDER-MAN INTO THE SPIDERVERSE!

There's a charming and truly beautiful short film that Mitch discovered called COIN OPERATED the we should reference for palette, simplicity of form, and the use of shallow DEPTH OF FIELD.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5L4DQfVIcdg

And if you've yet to see the Disney short PAPER MAN, have a look at that as well!

The line, design, and LIGHTING of this show is a terrific source of inspiration!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jo_pJkWuUyQ

We're also taking some of our visual cues from the incomparable artist TADAHIRO UESUGI.

His playful, painterly edges, and illustrative use of LINE ON FORM is right in the pocket for the vision of this show!

The architectural lines in this illustration are parallel, but hand drawn - and therefore uneven.

That unevenness is subtle, organic, warm, expressive - and precisely what I'm looking for in our show!

The SHADOWS are anything but grey: they're luminous, colorful, and distinctly different than areas that are lit.

The LIGHT is bright, sourcey, well-defined, and directional.

The TIME OF DAY is distinct and apparent.

SHADOW is as much a part of the design, as visually important and STRUCTURAL, as the architecture itself.

Check out the playful, organic LINES of the windows and brickwork in this building from PAPER MAN...

...and the siding on this house from THE PEANUTS MOVIE.

The uneven lines in CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS are the right idea – but too exaggerated for BIG NATE.

We're going for something just a bit subtler. It's a small difference compared to THE PEANUTS MOVIE or the hand drawn line in Tadahiro's paintings, but a difference, nonetheless!

CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS remains an excellent prototype for us, however, because of its elegant simplicity of design. And silliness!

LIGHTING AND CAMERA

Because of limited time, budget, and resources, TV animation lighting is often neglected. Scenes, even entire episodes are lit uniformly; contact shadows are all that indicate time of day. An otherwise essential storytelling tool is relegated to afterthought.

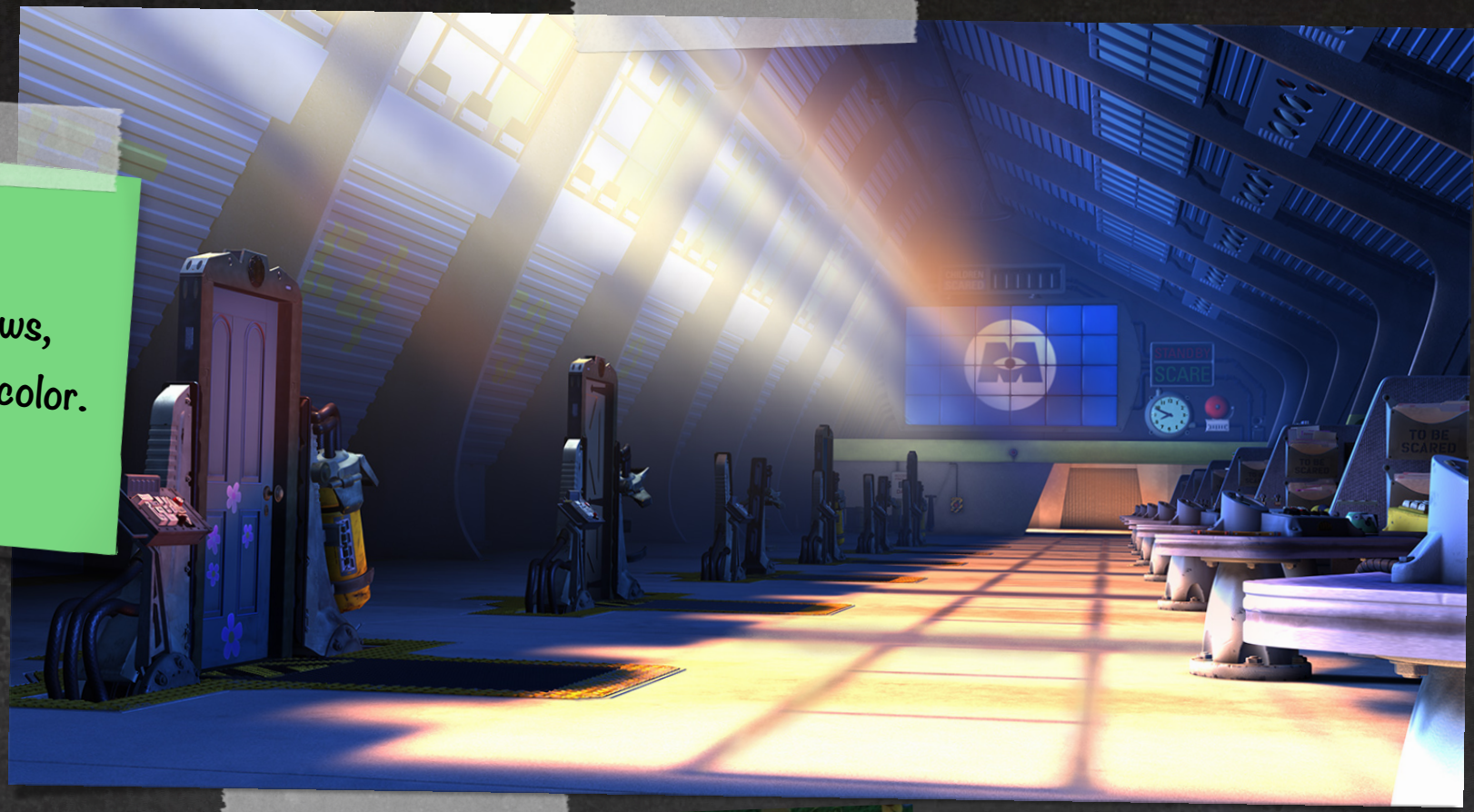
But lighting on Big Nate will be of paramount importance, and one of the many ways in which this series will rise above the rest!

We're going to regard and utilize lighting as the essential storytelling tool that it is; hallmarks of our show will be glowing windows, pools of light, long, luminous cast shadows, and hot rim lights. We'll know what time of day it is by the direction of the light, length of shadow and palette, and most importantly — we'll know how Nate is feeling based on the lighting.

To support the lighting, we'll often employ short focal lengths to blur the BG, and focusing our attention on our characters. And realistic camera movements with life-like ease ins and outs will give us a sense that a live-action camera crew were at work.

Plain and simple, the objective is to achieve the look of a feature film comedy. Here are a few examples from, among others, UP, MONSTERS, INC., and the short films FEAST and PAPERMAN.

Distinct shadows,
saturated with color.



Rich, "juicy" palettes.
Apparent time of day.

Glowing, "blown out" window.

Background "over exposed" to focus us on what's important: CHARACTER!

SUNLIGHT is imperfect; sometimes it rakes across the top of someone's head (or ears).

Check out this SOURCEY RIM LIGHT...

And the SOFT FOCUS on the background...

...resulting in a stark CONTRAST between subject and field.

DELICIOUS!

POOLS OF LIGHT and SHALLOW DEPTH OF FIELD help define two distinct SPACES...

...and two distinct EMOTIONS.

Shallow depth of field used to focus our attention.

Bold key light – even in a dimly-lit space.

IN SUMMARY:

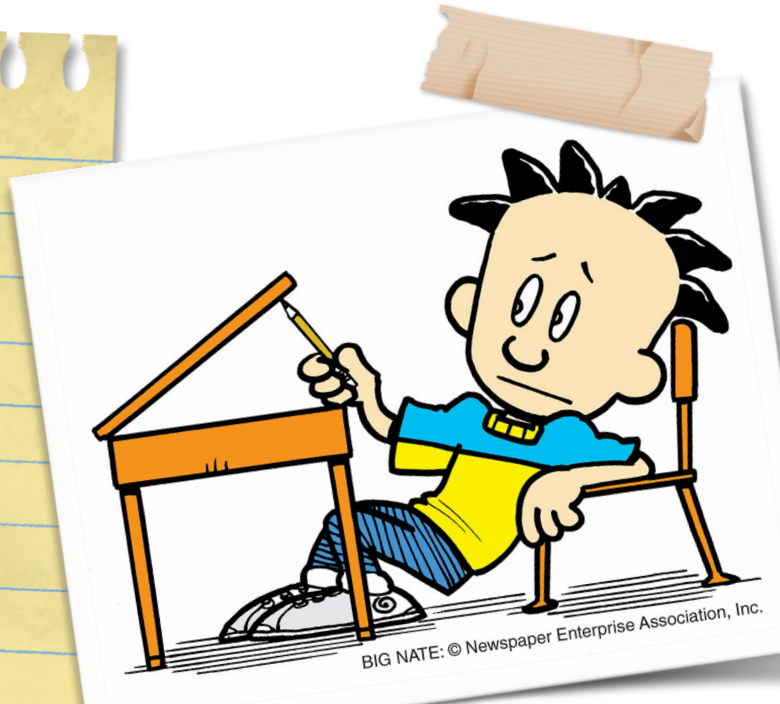
soft, but juicy palette,
shallow depth of field,
distinct and luminous
shadows, directional light.

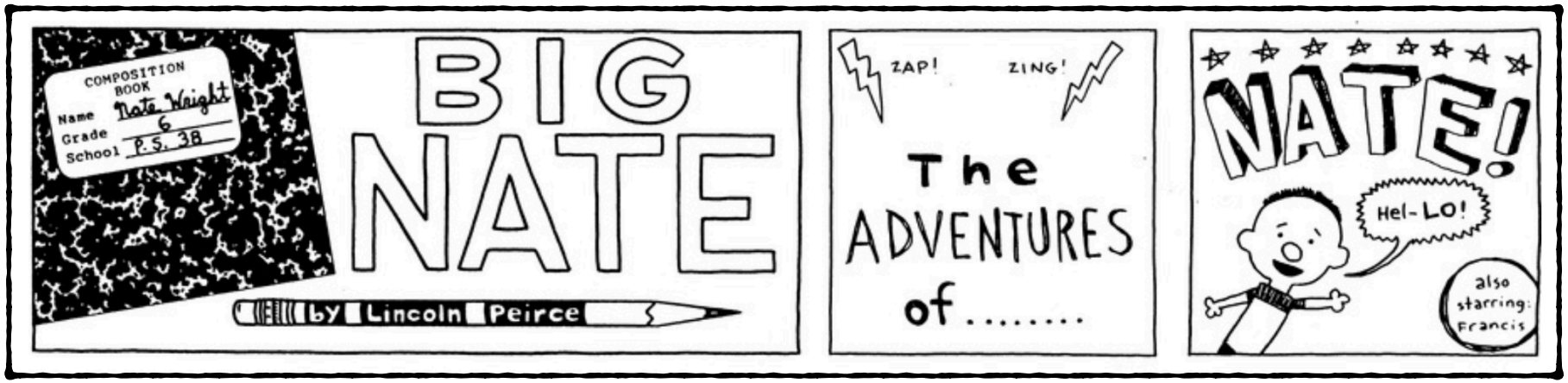
BUT WAIT THERE'S MORE!

This spectacular series will be stylistically stunning, and — VISUALLY VARIED, employing a number of simple and cost-effective but breathtaking looks! But why, you ask? Why not settle for one gorgeous style? Because our show is told from the perspective of a highly-imaginative, artistically savvy, self-delusional 11-year-old, prone to frequent flights of fancy, fantasy, and fiction! And, like all of us, Nate's perception of the world changes radically depending upon the situation, his emotional state, and the amount of external pressure applied to his otherwise puéril psyche. So, depending upon those circumstances, we'll employ 3 tantalizing techniques to visually describe the inner workings of Nate's nimble neurons — his 3 Realms of Reality!
(And if that isn't enough alliteration for you in one paragraph, I simply don't know what will suffice!)

THE 3 REALMS OF REALITY

1. Nate's COMIC STRIPS
2. Nate's DREAMS
3. Nate's P.O.V.

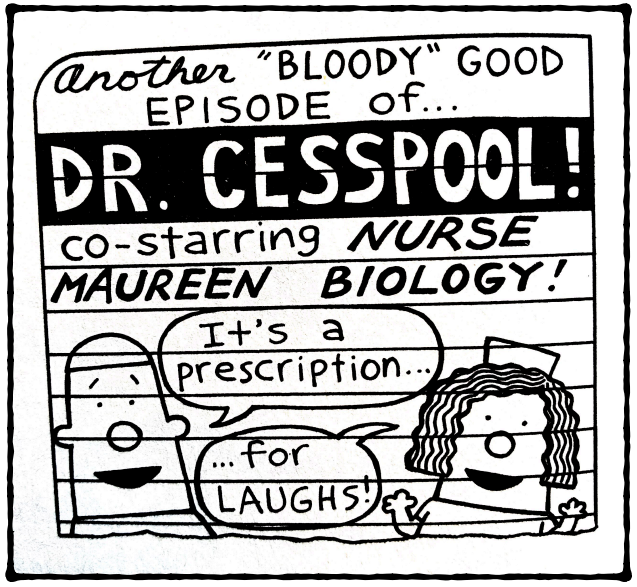


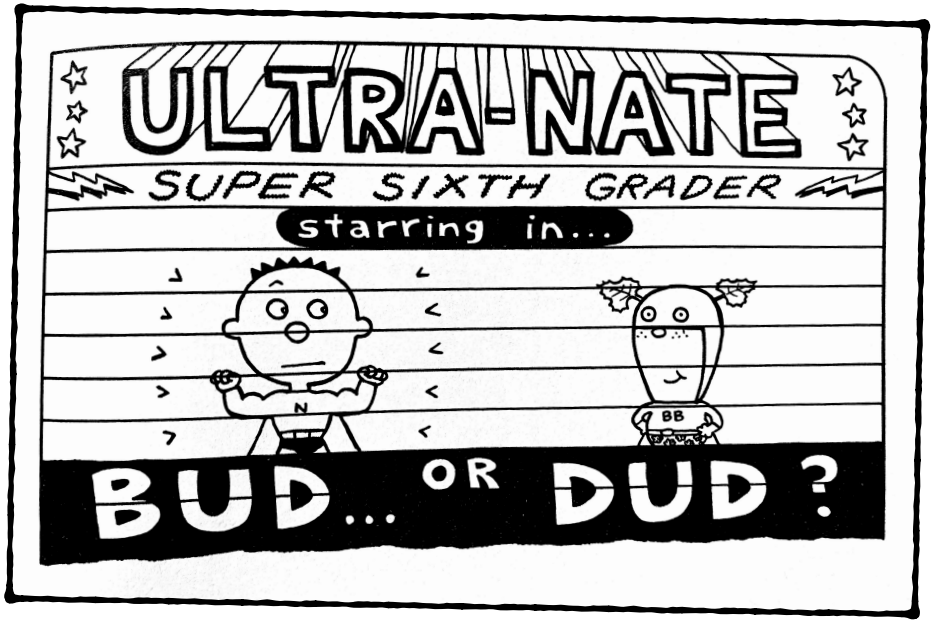


1. NATE'S COMIC STRIPS

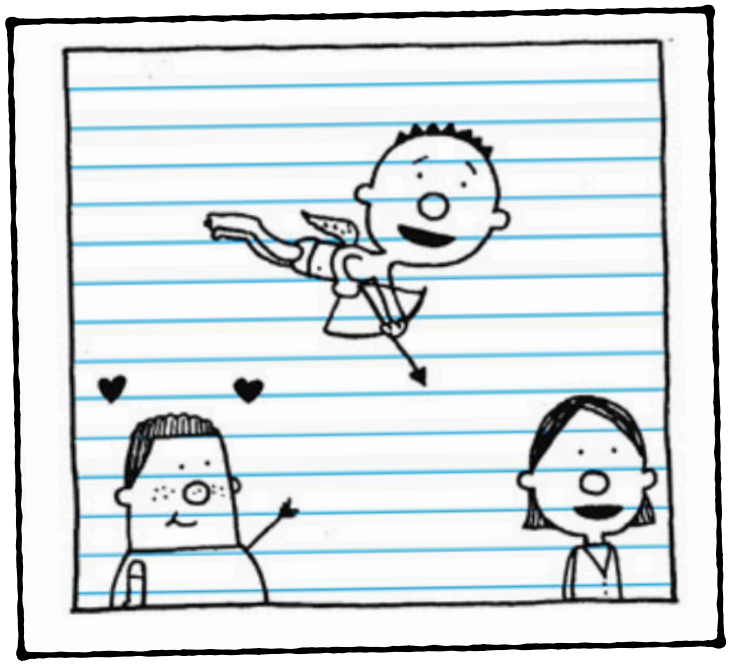
Within each 22-minute episode of Big Nate, there'll be about 2 minutes of 2D ANIMATION – Nate's very own hand drawn COMIC STRIPS come to life!

It's Nate's take on the world — and his own fictional creations as well — like the scandalous surgeon DR. CESSPOOL, and Nate's own alter ego, ULTRA-NATE.

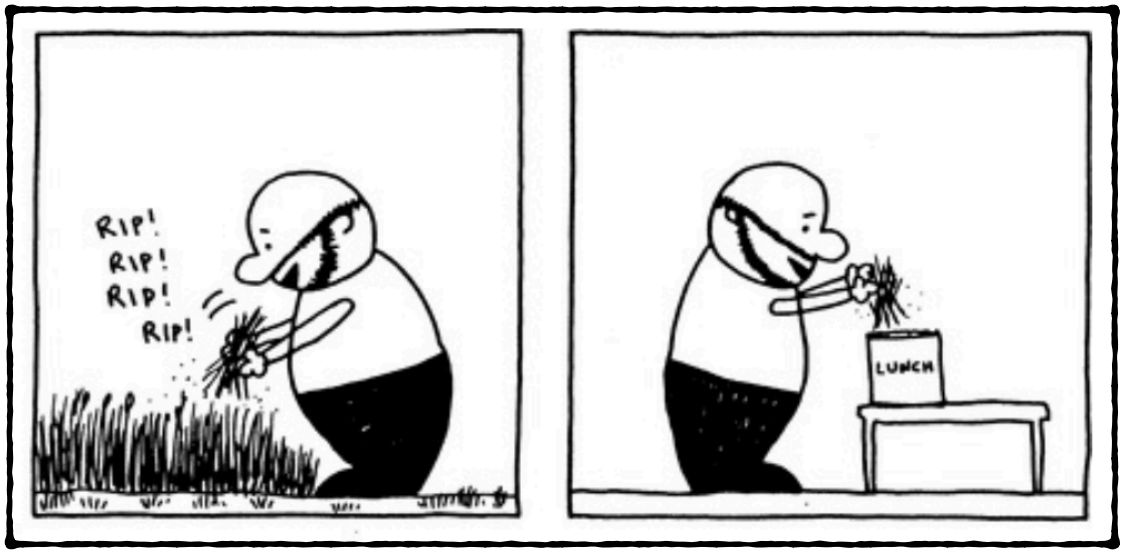




When Nate is at school, the BACKGROUND for these innovative interludes will be a blue-lined "college ruled" NOTE PAD...



...which may artistically FADE AWAY as the story demands, to reveal specific environs.



And when Nate is in his room at night, working on his latest comic strip, he'll use a nice smooth-toothed Bristol board like just like his creator, Lincoln Peirce.

The LINE WORK should appear to be made with drafting pens of various sizes, again like Lincoln's own tools — but drawn by a child; an imaginative, creative and talented 11-year-old, but a child all the same!

Depending upon the story there may be a limited palette of flat color applied to his line work — like UPA animation and print ads from the 1950s and 60s with BG color showing through form and figure.

But when Nate is pressed for time, he'll quickly lay in color with an assortment of wide-tipped markers, and highlighter pens.

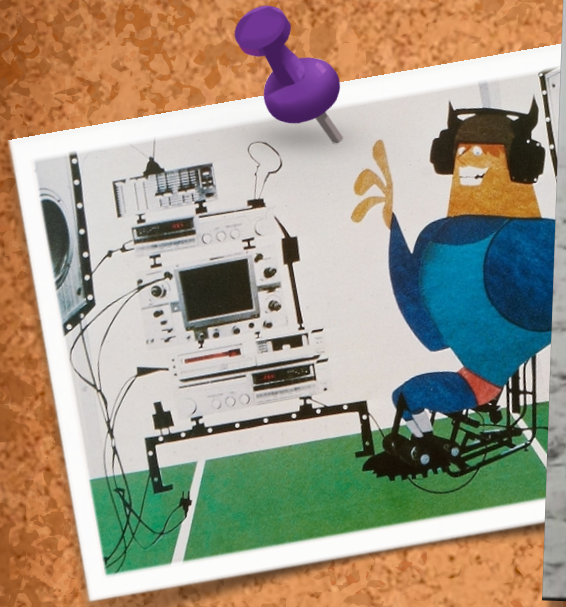
2. DREAM SEQUENCES

Like Nate's comic creations, his dreams will look and feel child-created, whimsical, and silly... but with a decidedly different visual style than the CG-animated segments — or the 2D animated "comic strip" segments — of our show.

Nate's waking, conscious imagination, while visually fantastical, is a different thing altogether than his unconscious mind, his dreams!

Dream sequences will feature our 3D cast of characters, but they'll inhabit a world made from a COLLAGE of 2D STOCK PHOTO ELEMENTS. Those elements will be animated in a very limited "table top cut out" fashion.

We'll be drawing inspiration from a variety of sources including Terry Gilliam's animations from MONTY PYTHON'S FLYING CIRCUS, the animated feature TWICE UPON A TIME, cheesy video toaster effects from the 1980s and 90s MTV music videos, old commercials, modern "magazine clippings", and a smattering of Picasso!

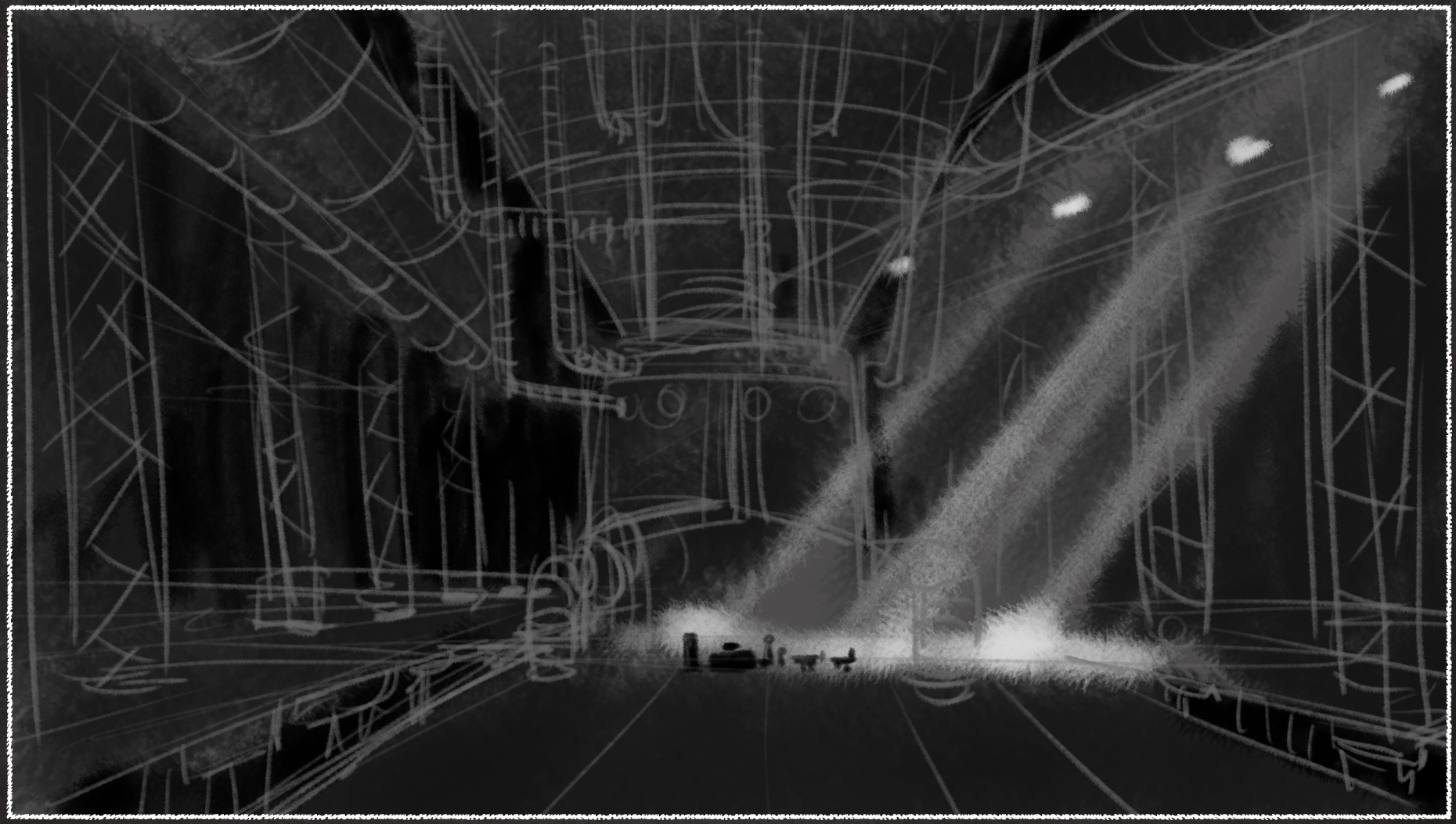


Deelite

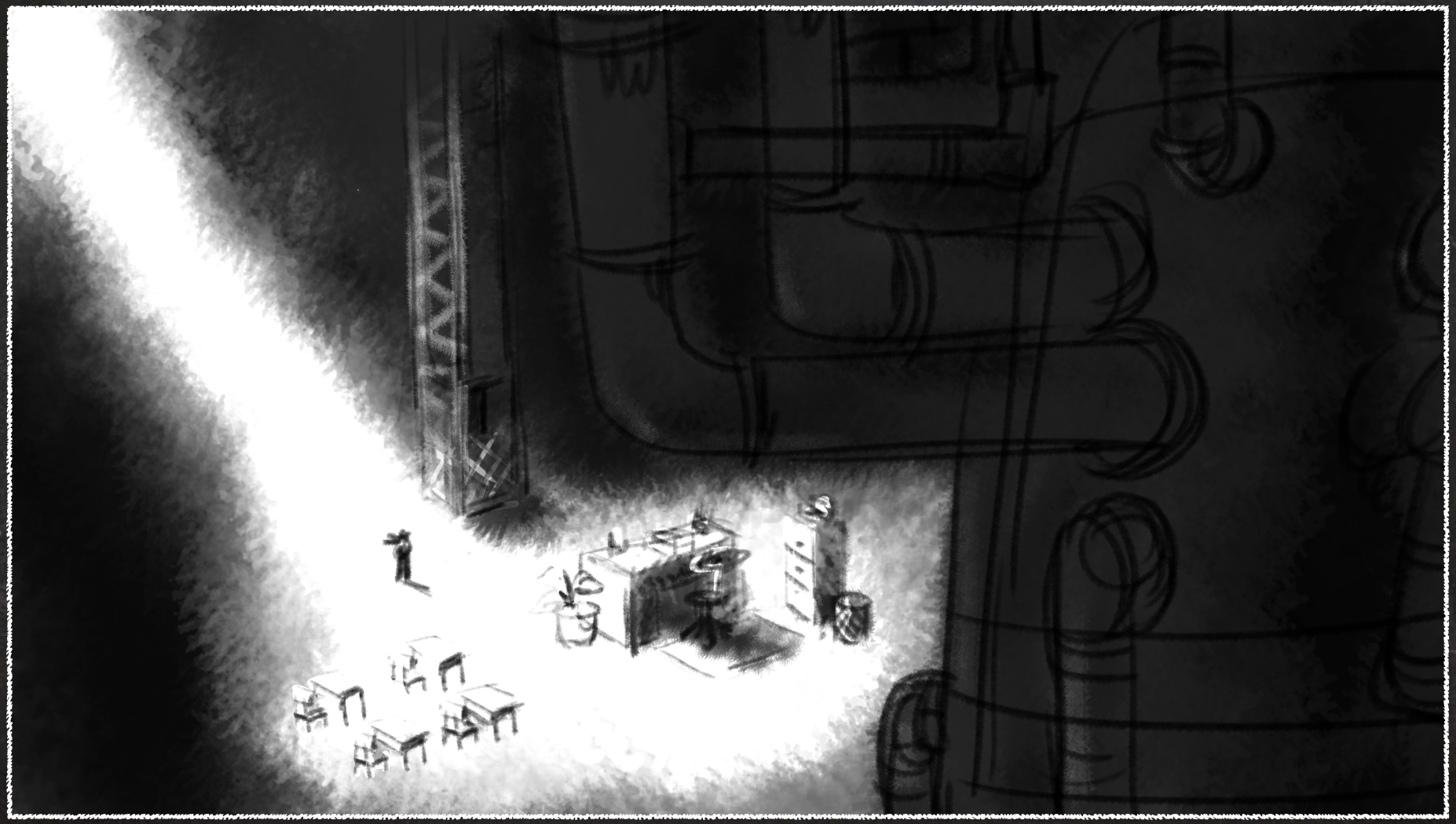
3. NATE'S P.O.V.

Every now and then, when Nate is under duress, we'll need to stretch reality juuust a bit to show the world as it seems to him – like when he's sentenced to detention, and has to descend into the deep, dark, underbelly of the school to serve his time...

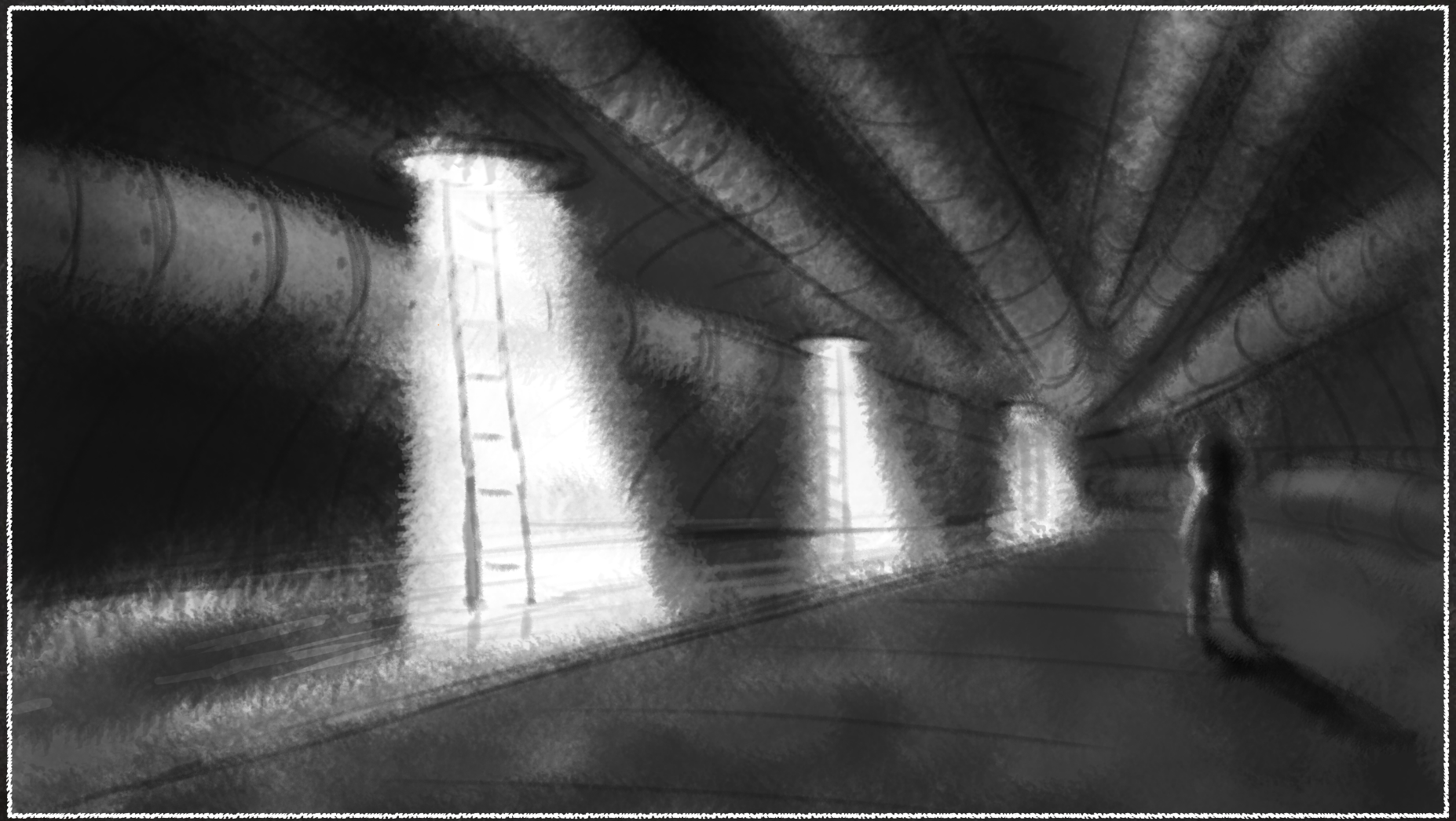
Like in HOME ALONE, the basement, and in particular the boiler room of PS38, takes on an otherworldly quality for the young star of our show. Scale expands, and color contracts. From Nate's POV, the basement is an infinite chasm, like the Mines of Moria in THE LORD OF THE RINGS, or the storage facility in the final, impossible crane shot of RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK.



Shafts of light illuminate the detention area: an otherwise normal classroom setting of desks, chairs, and a filing cabinet – but there are no walls... only a labyrinthian tangle of pipes and steel girders that recede into deep shadow and mystery.



And, to note, the sewer system of Nate's small city of Radcliffe is strangely expansive... and inexplicably connected to the basement of PS38.

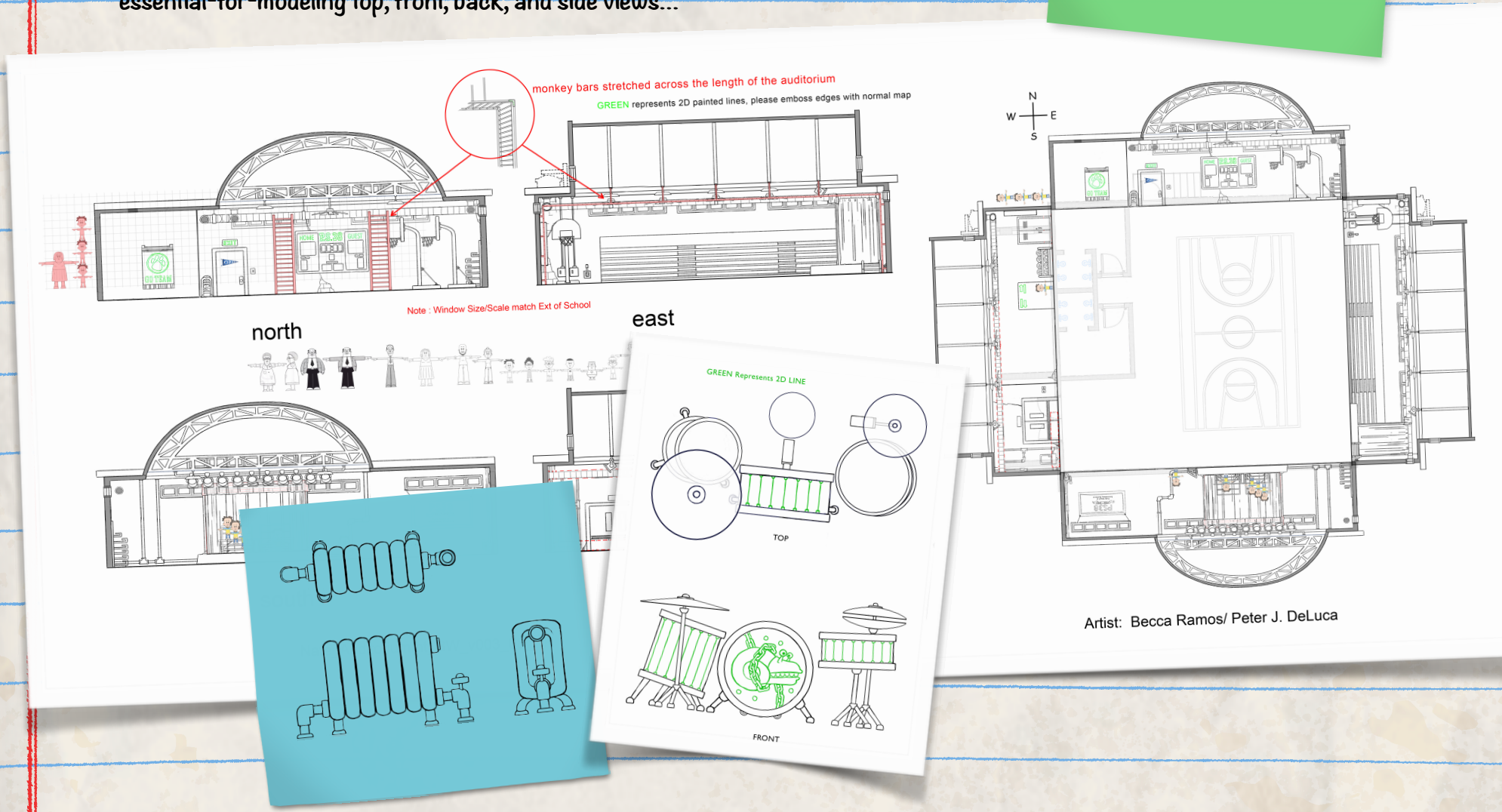


DESIGN TEAM DELIVERABLES

For each set, prop and character, I'd like enough information in our MODEL PACKS to set up our talented overseas partners for success, providing them with everything they need to make beautiful 3D models that are faithful to your concepts and designs. Our objective is to anticipate every question they may have.

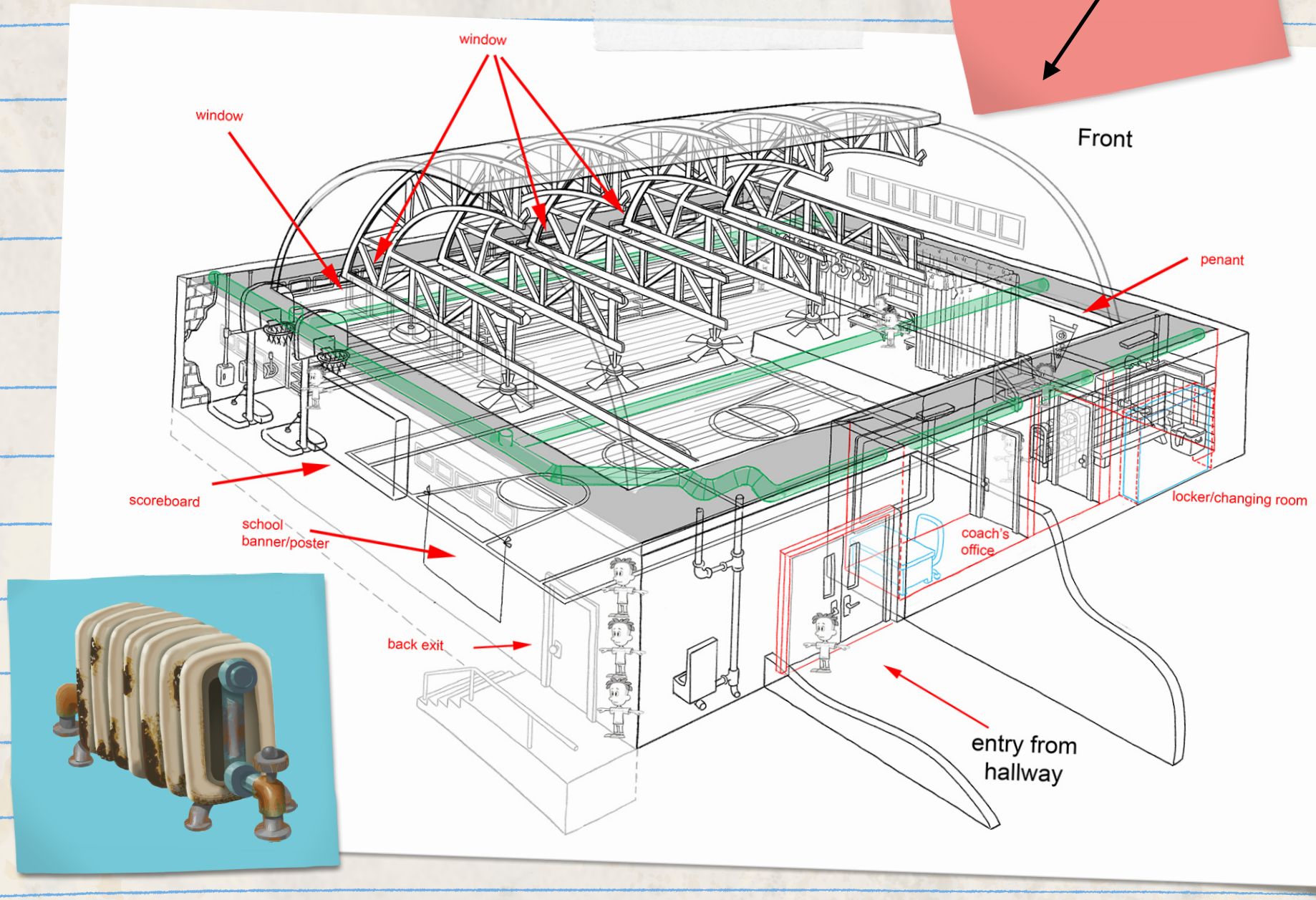
ISOMETRIC and ORTHOGRAPHIC views of each set and prop would be ideal. I always get those terms mixed up... "ORTHOGRAPHIC" meaning the absolutely essential-for-modeling top, front, back, and side views...

ORTHOGRAPHIC
or
"ORTHO"



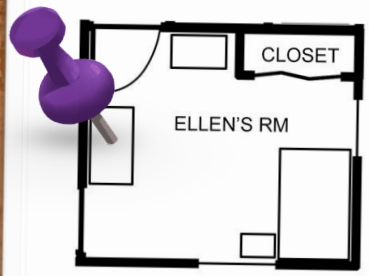
...and "ISOMETRIC" meaning the easier-to-imagine-ourselves-in-that-space, three-quarter view.

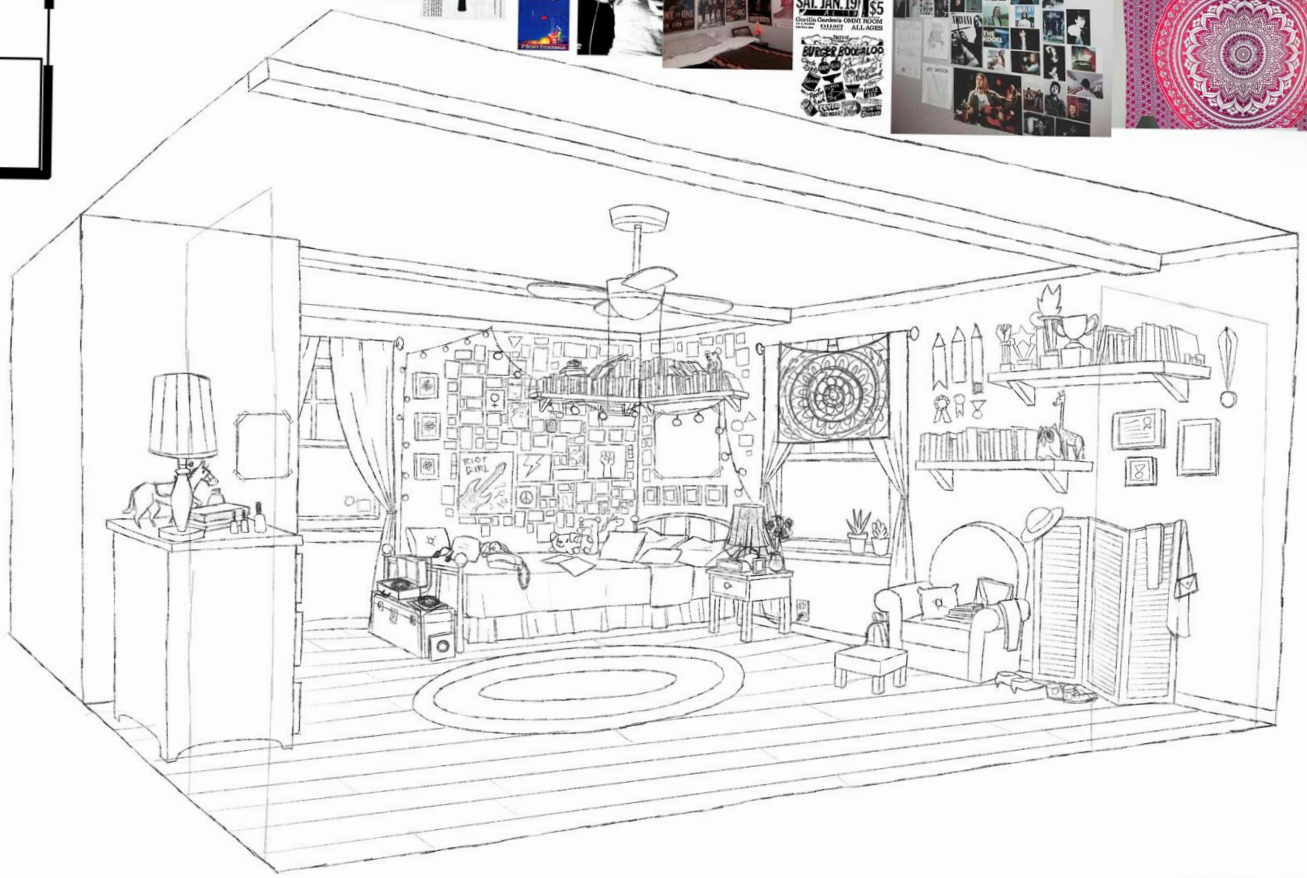
ISOMETRIC
or
"ISO"



For interior spaces, it would be ideal (as time allows) to have two iso drawings to illustrate both opposing angles of the room, including the important architectural details, large items of furniture, and some essential props. Once approved, those drawings are then painted.

Additional props in the set ("CALLOUTS") would be identified, and "TURNED," meaning drawn from several angles, and then painted as well.

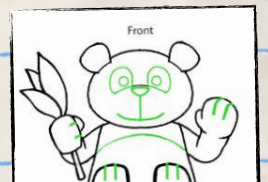




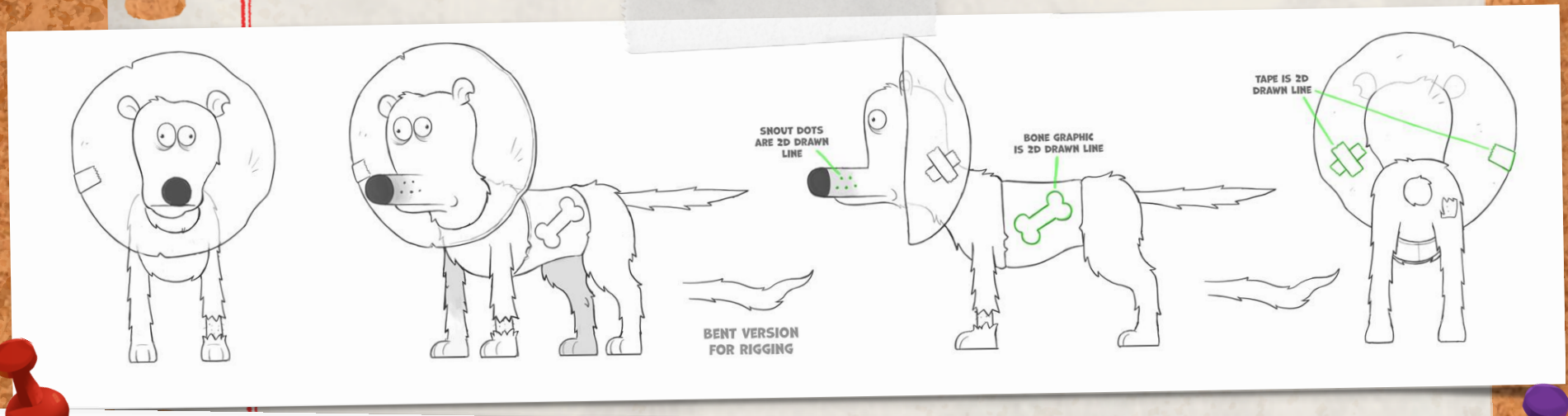
NATE_ELLENSROOM_BW_V002_01_NK ELLEN'S ROOM

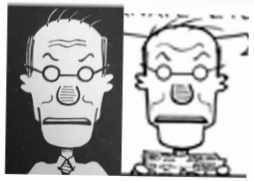
BIG NATE

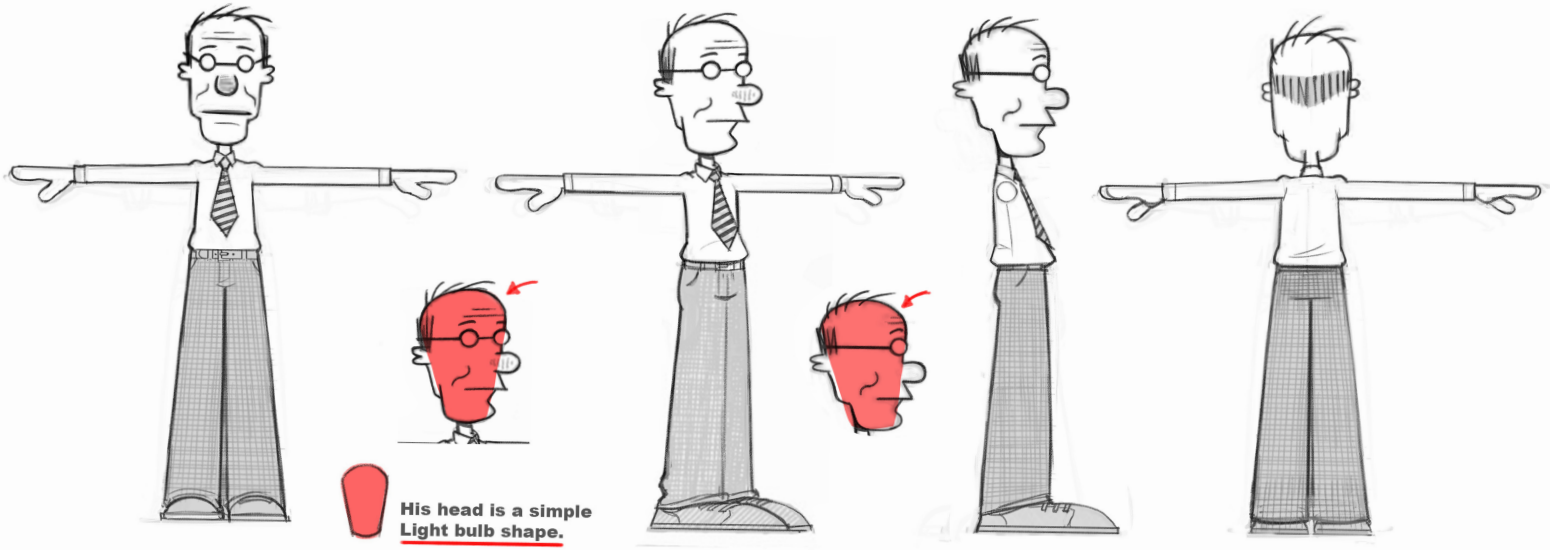
We'll try our best to determine what all those callouts would be at the outset, but sometimes fun brainstorming and "what-ifs" and "yes-and-ing" and "wouldn't it be funny if we had some stuffed pandas" might add a few items to the initial list.



Each CHARACTER DESIGN is turned as well: front, 3/4, side, and derrière.







An EXPRESSION SHEET is included with each character design to show the dimensions of their personality and the RANGE of their expressions — and also to help inspire our modeling and surfacing artists, story artists, and animators.

OUR SCHEDULE

Brisk, light, breezy – these are all words we could use to describe our pace on this show. But we'll simply do what we can do in the time we're given! (Prophetic, no?)

Here's a handy weekly calendar for your reference:

MONDAY: CAFFEINATION AND IDEATION

Let's start the week with a nice hot cup o' joe whilst perusing Lincoln's latest comic strips for inspiration and giggles at GoComics:
https://www.gocomics.com/bignate/

We'll meet as a group at 10:00 am to discuss the big picture, and then you and I will chat to review any musings, thumbnail sketches, relevant comic strips, and photo reference I've gathered for you.

Initially, I'd like to see very rough versions of whatever you're working on. I'm all about CONSERVATION OF ENERGY. And I am, if I may be so bold, a self-styled expert in deciphering even the scribbliest of scribbles; napkin, tablecloth, and sticky-note sketches are my speci-ality. I know you're a brilliant artist — this stage is all about uncovering the idea, basic shapes, and visual concepts... so rough drawings at this stage are ideal.

WEDNESDAY: PRESENTATION AND NOTATION

By Wednesday, around noon, the designs should be in a rough, but presentable form so we can share your ideas with Mitch and Jim and get their thoughts at our 2:00 review. (If you're freelancing, I'll present your work on our behalf so you can focus on your day job.)

We'll incorporate their notes, and by the end of the week (or end of the weekend, if you're freelancing) you'll bring your designs to a conclusion.

Inspirational quote of the day from our Producer, AMY MCKENNA:

"There's always a solution... we just have to find it."

FRIDAY: CELEBRATION AND INEBRIATION

On Friday around noon I'll gather up your work again so we can present it to Mitch and Jim at our 2:00 review. We'll incorporate their final notes by end of day, and voila! We've made it to the end of the week! A lot of hard work, yes, but hopefully effortless, because we've had so much fun together! And now it's time to celebrate! A drink, perhaps? A movie night with a loved one? Or a video chat with your cousin in Cleveland while chomping on Cheez Doodles. And then we slide into the plush valley of the weekend...

Okay, but what happens with our designs after we turn 'em in? Where do they go, and how do they turn into CG models? Great question! Glad you asked. To elucidate, illuminate, and otherwise shed some light on this elusive process, our CG Supervisor CHRISTINA LAFERLA has this to say:

"Adapting a 2D comic into a CG world is a group effort.

In keeping with Lincoln's comics and David's vision of miniatures, each step of the CG pipeline has an important part in building Big Nate's world.

By modeling in wobbly edges, adding surfaces and textures that look handmade, having "Lincoln Lines" incorporated into our shadows and backgrounds, and adapting rigs and animation to look like stop motion, we are contributing to something that is truly unique."

— *Christina*

And to model her modus operandi, Christina has provided the following pages as a visual guide for "The Life of a CG Prop"...

BiG NATE

THE LIFE OF A CG PROP

Air Horn Edition

"IT IS WRITEN..."

1) We go over the script to highlight new assets that need to be built in CG

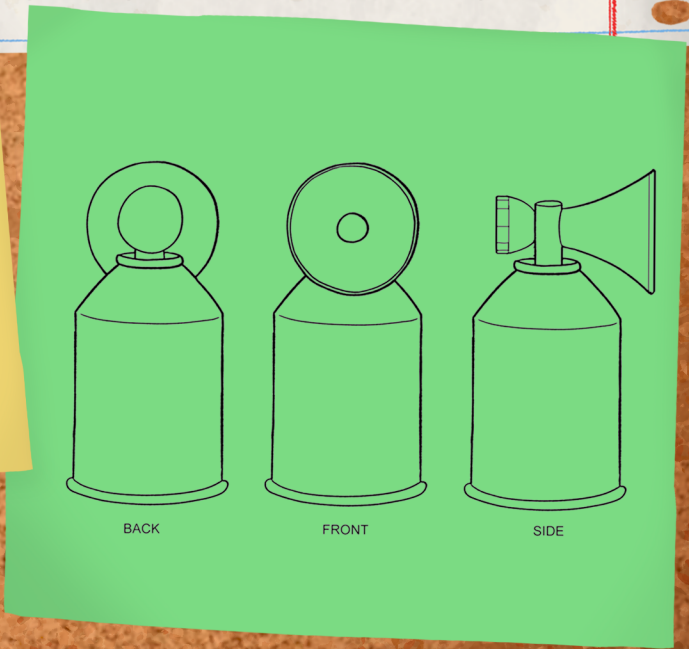
EXT. NATE'S BEDROOM/HALLWAY - DAY

Nate tiptoes out of his room toward Ellen's room holding a AIR HORN. He eases up to her door. Listens. Grabs the handle. Throws the door open ready to blast the airhorn--

Ellen is standing there with HER OWN HORN! SFX: HORN BLAST! Nate jerks backward, but isn't going to be stopped. SFX: HORN BLAST! Ellen cringes away, but isn't stopping either.

The two begin BLASTING each other making a horrible racket until...

2) The Design Team creates black and white drawings to guide the CG Modeling Team

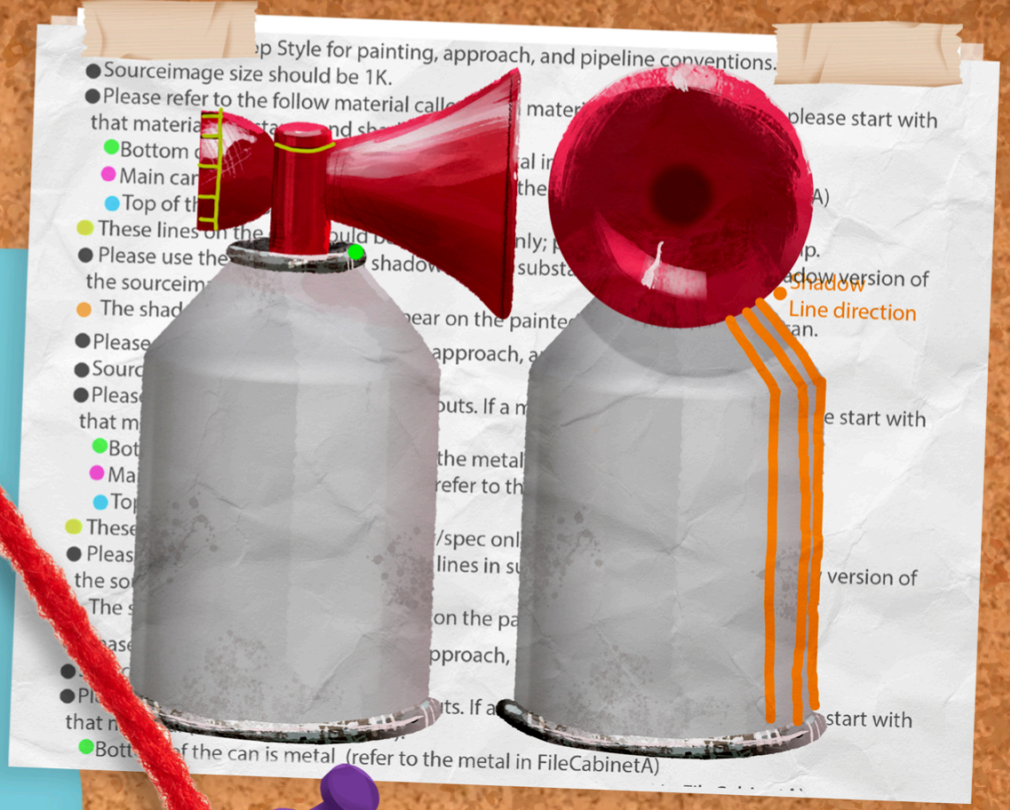


3) The Design Team creates color reference to guide the CG Texture Team

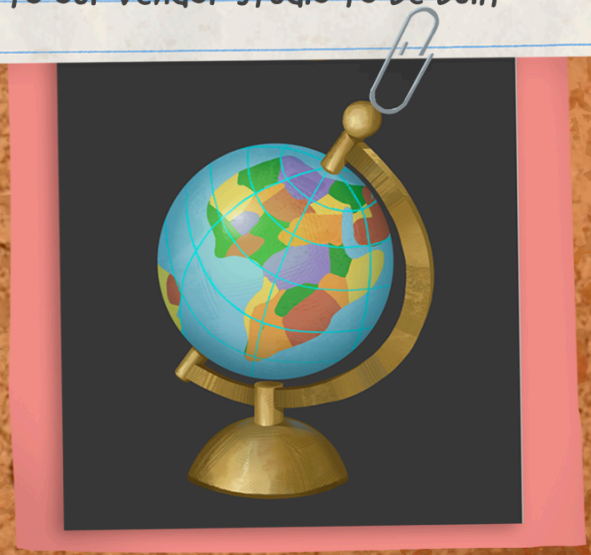
4) The CG Team reviews design, color storyboards to make notes to our vendor studio

Notes:

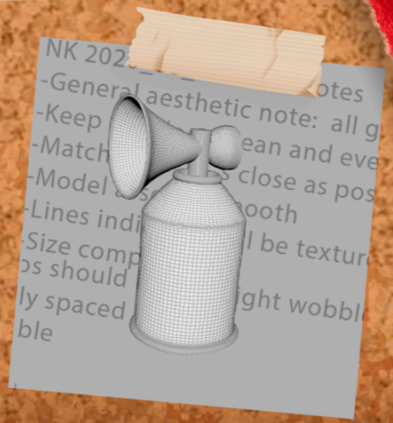
Model ☐
Color ☑
Rigging ☐

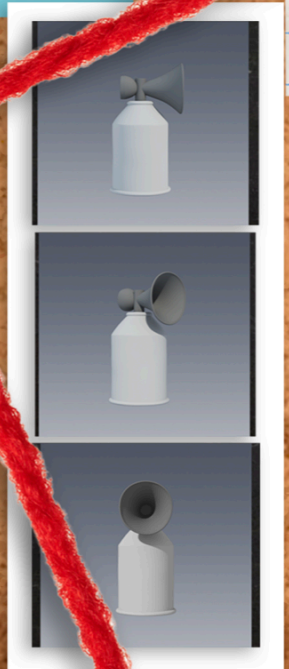


5) Design, Color and CG Notes are shipped to our vendor studio to be built



6) SOME TIME LATER...
Vendor Studio ships 3D Modeling scene file for review



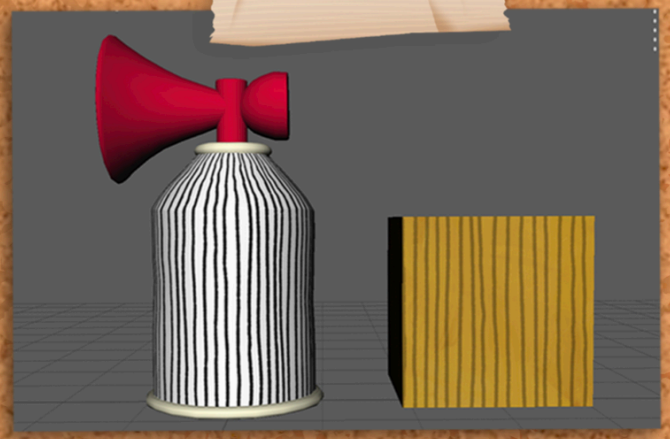


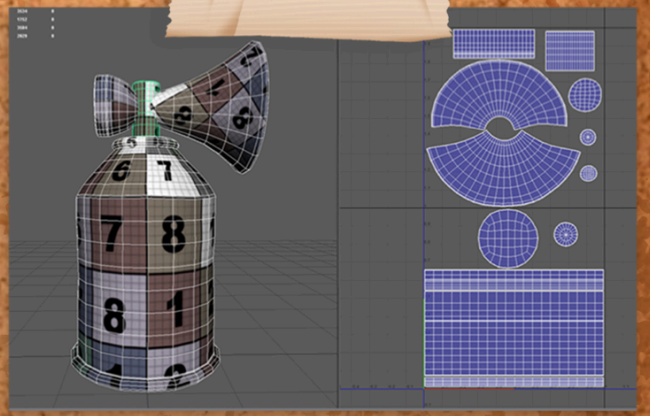
7) Model Approved Assets are ready for UVs

Maya UV

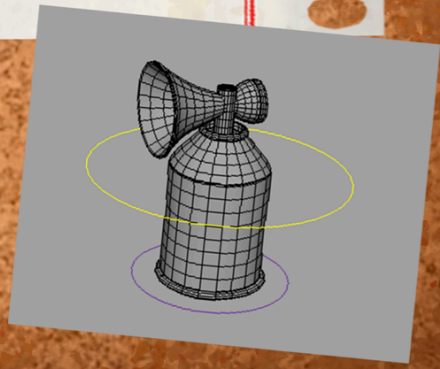
UVs (pronounced U-VEEZ) are two-dimensional texture coordinates that reside with the vertex component information for polygonal and subdivision surface meshes. UVs exist to define a two-dimensional texture coordinate system, called **UV** texture space. **UV**

8) UV Approved Assets are ready for texture





9) Approved models are ready for rigging & finaling

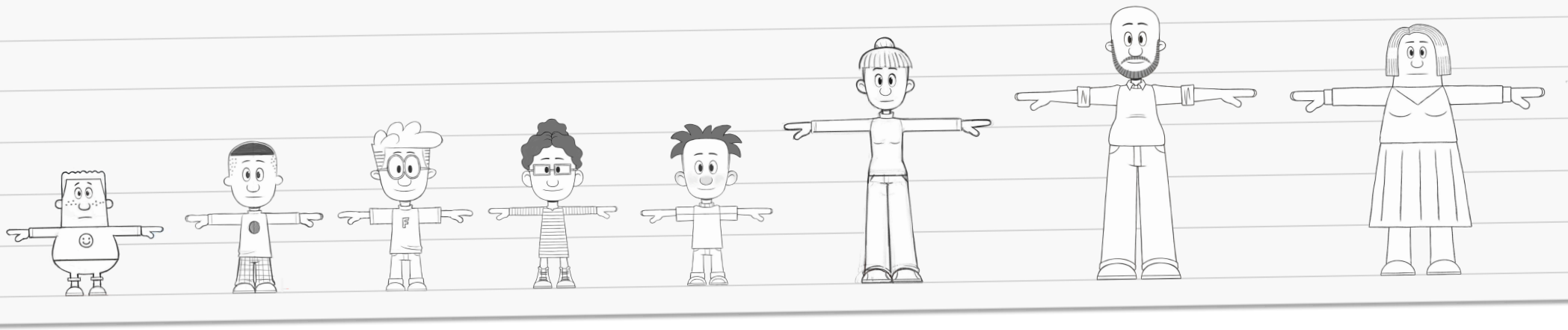


TO BE CONTINUED..

Ready for Animation

Whew! Who knew how much work goes into the making of one prop?!

Or how many people it involves! This truly is a group effort.



IN CONCLUSION

Let's go make a beautiful, whimsical, irreverent, silly, funny, crazy entertaining show together! Let's make Lincoln Peirce proud! And Mitch and Jim! And all the producers and executives at Nickelodeon too! And most importantly, our moms. Because whether they're still with us or not, we gotta make our moms proud, right?

With love and gratitude,
David

April 25, 2020
Los Angeles, CA
Earth

(Revised: Aug 11, 2020)

You still here? Well, how nice! As a surprise bonus for stickin' through to the end, here are a couple "key art" paintings — hot off the press! Enjoy!