

Loish talks The Little Mermaid and capturing real femininity in games

Interview: The new Dutch master on designing for *Horizon Zero Dawn*, and why thin eyebrows won't exist after the apocalypse.

Some digital artists may be big and all on social media, but some can be actually big in *real life*.

This was my first thought at this year's Playgrounds conference in Eindhoven when seeing all the creatives lining up to meet Dutch digital artist Loish, books in hand ready to be signed like the ones on sale at her stall.

Realising the young age of her many fans, I wondered how many were in or had just come out of art school, remembering that Loish – real name of Lois van Baarle – had once said she felt attending art school didn't really play a part in her present day success.

I asked the artist about this when sitting down with Loish the next day backstage of Playgrounds, along with questions delving deeper into her fantasy-tinged, almost watery world of young women and phosphoreal colours.

Find her answers below along with her stunning portraiture; you can follow

Giacomo Lee: So what are your feelings on art school these days, Lois?

Loish: "I got a lot out of art school but it wasn't what I wanted to get out of it. I wanted to be challenged, but I

didn't find that it did in the end.

"Most skill development that occurred during my art school years were self-taught, doing my own thing. But I did get to know other artists, and as a result I have a pretty good network of friends and colleagues from the school that are really important to me. So they're my close friends, and my partner I met at school. There's people who work in the field and help me out finding work. I help them out finding work. So that was really important from my time there."

Photo by Willeke Machiels

"I was also challenged by my teachers to defend my ideas so they would kind of criticise what I was doing but not with the goal of bringing me down. More like, 'Why did you make this creative choice? What was the underlying idea here?' And then

you learnt how to explain it. So that's something that I did get out of it.

"I don't know if that's worth all the four years and all the money that goes into it. So it wasn't totally bad, but it's more like, I think there are just so much better alternatives nowadays, like online art school. Like mentorships that you can do through Skype."

You also have for artists to learn from your expertise.

"Yeah my Facebook group is like an exchange. I don't post as much myself in there as other people are sharing with each other and giving tips to each other. I'm kind of moderating it; I do have plans to like structure the content a little more, but for now I'm just approving posts.

"It's really meant as a way to create a supportive setting for artists and get advice to help each other out."

How are digital artists now to when you first started out?

"I notice that there are super skilled people, which is crazy compared to 10 years ago or 15 years ago. The level of skill in young people now is insane, *insanely* good.

"They're getting tons of information from tutorials, from other artists; they're picking up the information a lot faster, have more resources. But they don't know what to do with it.

"It's not as clear of a path that exists for each field, or what you're going to do. So when I went into art school it was like, 'All right, you want to be an animator? We're going to teach you animation. Then you go to an animation studio.' So

it was a kind of path that you were expected to follow.

“Now I feel like art schools can’t keep up with all the changes that are happening. Like artists are selling their stuff at comic cons. They’re setting up a Patreon. They’re exploring fashion design, concept art and all different kinds of media production. So there’s so much going on. It’s like impossible to say, ‘Oh with your art, this is what you need to do.’ And I think that gives them a lot of possibilities.

“But it’s also scary for them because it’s all changing so fast. There are a lot of older art teachers who are like, ‘Well I know what you should do,’ but they’re usually wrong. And they usually make people feel like they are not doing the right thing.”

They've also grown up with iPads.

"They have much more tools available to them. When I was younger, tablets were ridiculously pricey."

What tools do you use these days?

"Usually I have a Cintiq and Photoshop, Windows. So that's like my set up."

"I'm also drawing a lot on the iPad, but it still doesn't feel natural to me entirely. So I'm still fighting with it because it's not Photoshop. I've been drawing in Photoshop since I was 15, so like 2002 or something."

Did you prefer to draw women since back then?

“Yeah. I’ve always been mostly inspired by Alphonse Mucha, the art nouveau poster artist who did these very beautiful female figures. I’m also really inspired by Disney princesses and *The Little Mermaid*, I grew up watching that.

“Almost all my art has like a ‘floaty’ kind of quality to it, because I’m always thinking about that underwater feeling.”

“I’ve noticed I’ve approached to draw female characters a lot. People would be like, ‘Yeah we have trouble getting our male artists to really capture a kind of femininity that isn’t sexualised, that isn’t objectifying.’ So that also became sort of a calling for me, to try and design female characters that are approachable for men and women. That aren’t sexualised and made just for male audiences, especially in games.

“You see that female characters have had that throughout history. And now you have more and more female characters that are like meant for both men and women to identify with. Not to objectify, but to really identify with them.”

How do you approach that kind of brief?

“The brief is never like, ‘Oh, draw a female character that everybody relates to.’ It’s much more like, ‘Oh we have this female character, here are some challenges that we’re facing right now with this character.’ And I noticed that a lot of the time, there’s hairstyles, or clothing styles, or specific things that are extremely impractical from a female perspective.”

Oh really?

“So for example, post-apocalyptic games where the female characters have very thin eyebrows, that kind of thing. I’m like, when does she have time to pluck her eyebrows?

“Nobody’s eyebrows are very thin naturally. Right? Not to point fingers, but I think female and male artists do that. But it stems from like a male perspective tradition to style women in a way to make them beautiful. But that beauty is not always attainable for the setting that the story takes place in.”

“So it’s little details like that, trying to arrange the facial features to make them appealing but not sexy. Friendly and approachable. I just draw and I see if it’s going in the right direction.”

What recent projects have you taken on?

“I’ve done character designs for a 3D virtual reality space for Amazon Web Systems (below), this project where they have these hosts and they’re sort of stock characters, but they’re supposed to have something interesting about them. But at the same time they’re very generic. Like they should be sort of blank in a way.”

Like Alexa.

“Or similar to *Westworld* was the example. They’re there for you as a person to interact within a virtual space. They needed to have some elements that made them likeable and memorable, but not become too specific.

“But something like *Horizon Zero Dawn* where I worked on Aloy, it was super specific. Aloy needed to be memorable and that was a big thing.”

How did you make her memorable?

“It was the level of detail. Trying to get a lot of

recognisable details on her, and then have some elements that set her apart from the rest.

“She had red hair. Things like that help, like a *Little Mermaid* braid. But she needs to be rough, tough. So it was a question of playing around.

“Really, a lot of client work stuff is like focus test-based. So you make something and then ask the target audience is this working? And then they’re like, ‘No, she seems too young to me. She’s like too fragile.’ And then we go back and explore the opposite, and then wait until we land on something that fits the vision and people resonate with it.”

Are you getting a lot more briefs for female game characters these days?

"I've noticed that I'm getting involved in projects with a semi-realistic, *Overwatch* kind of style. They want a little bit of cartoony and a little bit of realistic.

"I think it helps that I'm not a gamer because then I have more of an animation perspective. That bring a fresh perspective to the design process."

For your personal work, and maybe professional work, how important is it to draw realistic representations of the female form? Do you like to vary the shape for your characters, your heroines?

"I think it's important to have diversity without breaking the style. I like to keep my stylised look, but then see within that how much I can sort of push it. Because you see sometimes that, for example, really good comic artists, that draw these extremely muscly, super fake characters? If they were to draw an overweight character it would look maybe like a caricature, become kind of a joke. Their style doesn't apply so well to less 'perfect' kind of people.

"I really like styles that can accommodate a wide variety of different types of people, different ages, different kind of body shapes without turning it into a character while still keeping the sensitivity of the style. And that's something that I'm not so great at because I tend to stay in my comfort zone, but it's something I do explore. I think it's important for art work to show diversity in different types of people.

Have you learned any tips to make

sure you can break out that comfort zone?

“It helps a lot to draw from reference and kind of explore different looks from reference with sensitivity.

“When somebody draws a totally different type of person from a completely different culture, or a totally different kind of look or physique then it becomes like a caricature, because they’re just noticing how different something is to what they’re used to drawing.

“But if you look at it in a sensitive way, in a humanising way, then it works.”

You've grown up in a lot of different cultures: Europe, the States, Indonesia. Has that played any influence on your style? Would you say that there's an exotic climate that still stays with you when you create? Your work has this feel away from the everyday.

"I don't know. I think going to international school was very positive because my teachers were like super encouraging. The Dutch culture is very conformist; we have a saying called, 'doe normaal, je bent algek genoeg.' Which means, 'act normal, then you're already crazy enough.'

"So, don't show off. Don't think that you're better than anybody else. It's an egalitarian, kind of Calvinist attitude. And you can really notice that in the artists here. They struggle because they are not really pushed to excellence.

“You don’t want to be too arrogant even though you’ve achieved all that you achieved. But that’s something you can be proud of. It doesn’t meant you’re rubbing it in anyone’s face.

“But yeah, that’s a thing that I noticed here, that people are a little too humble, and a little too careful. And if you’re humble and careful your entire creative career, you’ll never excel.”

<https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/illustration/lois-h-talks-little-mermaid-capturing-real-femininity-in-games/>