

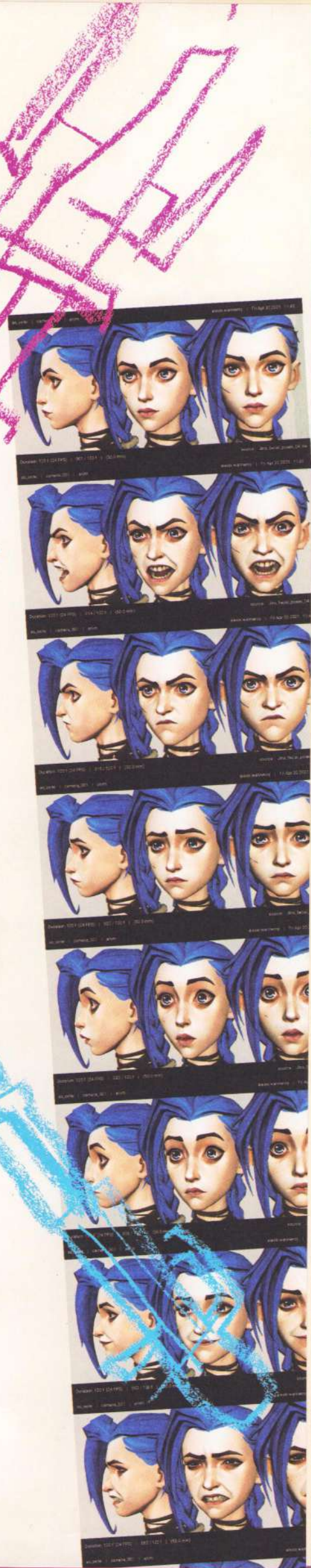
ACTION

The Art & Making of Arcane

Created by Riot Games & Fortiche Studios

S.1 11/06/21

S.2 11/09/24



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**PAGE 1**

3-D modeling for Jinx's facial expressions

**PAGE 2**

Posing explorations using Jinx's 3-D model

**THIS SPREAD**

Matte painting from Episode 101



# LETTING CREATIVITY COME FIRST

IMAGINE ANOTHER WORLD THAT IS A LITTLE BIT fantasy and a little bit steampunk, and yet not quite either. Imagine a place where it's hard to tell what is magic and what is technology. Now, get a little closer: Here are two cities intertwined in a double helix of creation and annihilation, inextricably at odds but also interdependent and not all that different from each other. Above is the resplendent, inventive Piltover, looking ever skyward in its dedication to science and progress. Below is the scrappy, rebellious Zaun, finding inspiration and community in its outsider status.

How this world functions, how the people of these cities love, fight, and dream forms the heart of the animated series *Arcane*, which is based on the juggernaut PC game *League of Legends*. Getting it off the ground was a yearslong odyssey, and the secret to the show's success was an American-French team that embraced a wildly ambitious dream, then proceeded to figure out how to make it a reality. *Arcane* ended up being the triumph we know and love because its creators never forgot their guiding principle: Creativity and artistry always come first.

When the show debuted on Netflix in November 2021, it was obvious that Riot Games and Fortiche Production had a worldwide smash on their hands: *Arcane* reached the Netflix Top 10 in a whopping eighty-nine countries. In an incredible display of unity, fans and critics declared it an artistic victory—that first season hit a rare one hundred percent rating from critics on the reviews aggregator Rotten Tomatoes, while the average audience score was ninety-six percent. *Arcane* would go on to receive numerous industry accolades, and it became the first streaming show to win the Emmy for Best Animated Program.

Three years later, lightning struck again when Season 2 was released in the late fall of 2024, bringing a number of epic stories to a close—with even more complex emotions, gut-wrenching battles, and characters willingly meeting their destinies.

With the benefit of hindsight, it would be easy to take the show's success for granted. "Well, duh," a peanut gallery might say, "*Arcane* is based on one of the most popular video games of all time, and a dominating presence in esports—of course it was going to be huge."



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Christian Linke and Alex Yee with Riot's founders Marc Merrill and Brandon Beck at the Emmy Awards

But "of course" did not come up very often during the making of *Arcane*. Rather, the show's lineage has been marked by leap-of-faith decisions made by a disparate group of people who, according to conventional Hollywood wisdom, would not normally cross artistic paths or complement each other so well.

Then again, following a well-trodden path does not foster creativity—a lesson that is one of the key takeaways in the complex story of *Arcane*.

On paper, the show looked like the kind of head-scratching assignment professors might give film and business students: "Create a big-budget TV series inspired by a narrative-light multiplayer online battle arena game. And here are some constraints, to make it even more challenging: To come up with those hours of original content, your team must start with a couple of young employees at the game's parent company who have worked their way up from customer service and have no experience in longform storytelling, working in tandem with a French animation studio well known for ads and music videos, but not television series."

*Arcane* succeeded because imagination, flexibility, innovation, tenacity, and creativity were always in its DNA, going all the way back to the birth and ethos of *League of Legends* and its vivid universe—which the show is integrated into, creating a sprawling multimedia lore.

In 2009, two University of Southern California students, Brandon Beck and Marc Merrill, and their young company released a game based on the concept of teams of champions trying to conquer each other's base. In a bold move for a fledgling gaming studio, Beck and Merrill's company, Riot Games, released *League of Legends* as one of the very first free-to-play games. They also refused to monetize access to power, thus keeping the battlefield even and preventing players from relying on pay-to-win strategies.

"At Riot we had a disruptive layer to everything that we did," said Alex Yee, who is the co-creator and co-showrunner of *Arcane* with Christian Linke. "The game itself was very different at the time and had the same amount of doubt around a lot of decisions for it. Free-to-play as a concept for games in the West at the time was madness. I don't think there were any AAA titles that were using that model. The way we handled esports was also similar: That was never really done as much

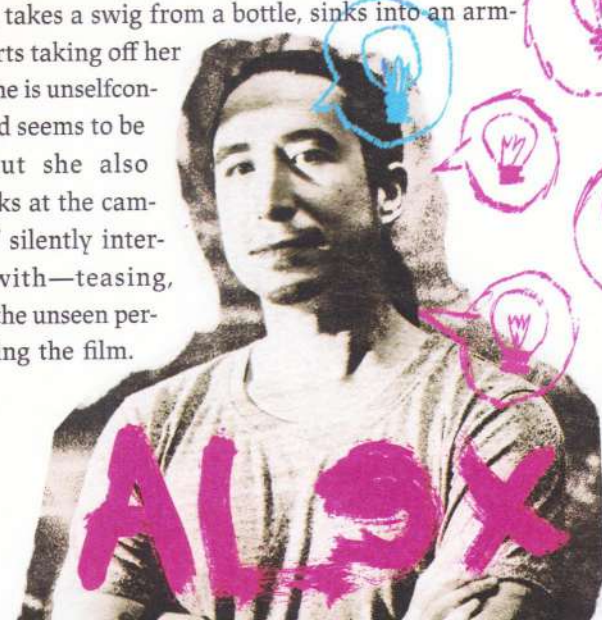
in-house as it was done at Riot. Also, the ambition that we've had for a lot of the things was not to do anything like what's already out there."

Yee and Linke's partnership at Riot goes way back. In the late 2000s, Linke had embarked on a promising career playing in a "somewhat successful" band, as he put it, in his native Germany. When he sensed he was hitting a creative and professional wall, Linke relocated to the United States to reboot his music career. Unfortunately, things did not significantly pick up; in need of a job, he answered a Craigslist ad for a customer-support position at an upstart game company in West Los Angeles—and his interview was with Yee, who ended up hiring him. "Maybe a year after that, I discovered he was actually a fairly legitimate European rock star right before he came to work with us," Yee said, laughing.

Riot was still fairly small at that point, and Linke and Yee segued to new duties. Yee had always been interested in *League of Legends*'s ever-extending lore so he stepped into that department in 2010, working on elements relating to story and narrative, as well as with the voice-over division. Linke had followed his inclination and skills toward the music department. By 2012, he had built up a formidable team there, helping to put together scores and songs for cinematics, spin-off albums and in-game music, and events like the annual *League of Legends* World Championships—a major esports event pitting teams from around the world against each other.

Linke also was scouring the web for potential partners with whom to work on short-form music projects, because he wanted to give some of the champions room to roam beyond the game's constraints. One day, he stumbled upon an animated video for "La Gaviota," an instrumental song by a French band called Limousine. "I had made it on a tiny budget, we had no money," said the video's director, Jérôme Combe. "It was a bit of a side project for us, something we did for friends."

The action in the video seemed simple, and yet it cast a languid spell. A young woman goes home, smokes a cigarette, takes a swig from a bottle, sinks into an armchair, starts taking off her clothes. She is unselfconscious and seems to be alone, but she also often looks at the camera, as if silently interacting with—teasing, maybe—the unseen person making the film.



On the surface, this is not the kind of material that feels like a good selling card for an action-packed game, but Linke was immediately taken by the atmospheric mood, worldly casualness, and sophisticated lighting. He saw that the short had been made by a Paris-based animation studio called Fortiche, and he reached out to ask if they might want to do something with Riot.

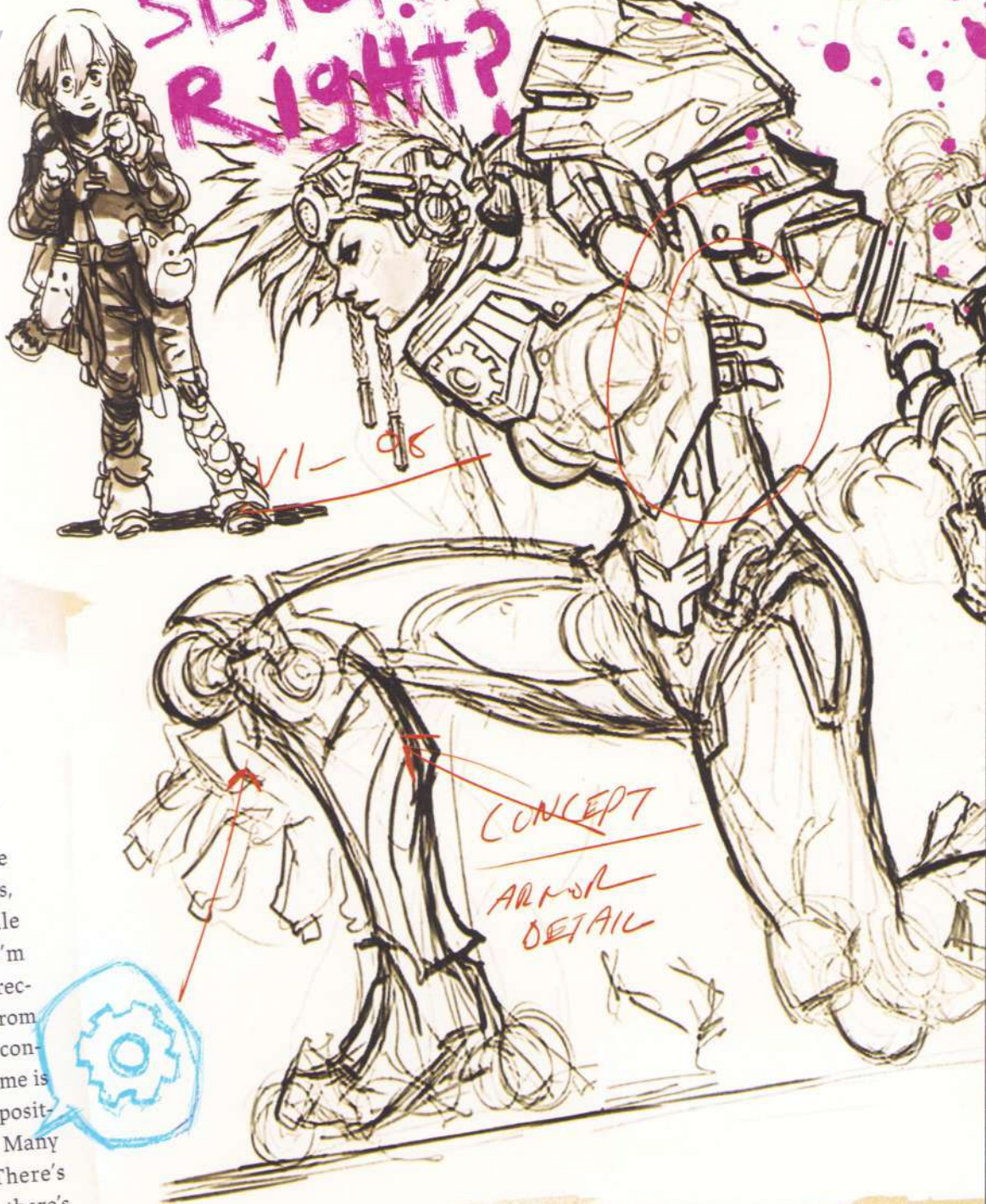
In 2012, Fortiche was just three years old and very small, essentially boiling down to its founders—Combe and his associates Pascal Charrue and Arnaud Delord—and a few employees. “It was a group of people working together rather than a proper company, at least in our minds,” said Hervé Dupont, Fortiche’s managing director. “There were twelve of us, working on ads and clips.”

With such a small team, Fortiche divided up responsibilities among skills, taste, and personal affinities, while keeping them fluid and reactive. “I’m more into preproduction, artistic direction,” Charrue said. “Arnaud comes from live-action videos and is really into conceptualization and editing, and Jérôme is into finalizing the project and compositing. Everything is linked, though. Many companies compartmentalize: There’s preproduction, there’s animation, there’s execution. Fortiche’s strength is to have three partners who know each other well, share the same tastes, and work well together. Part of creating Fortiche was being able to oversee the entire chain.”

As Riot and Fortiche got to know each other, the initial discrepancies of scale, style, and sensibilities were almost comical. “There were twenty people [from Riot] in a room, and there we were with our little webcam,” Delord said, referring to an early video meeting. “They asked if we knew their game and we said no. But Christian didn’t care whether we were familiar with the game or not: He just wanted to do something artistic.”

That “something artistic” turned out to be “Get Jinxed,” about the colorful *League of Legends* champion Jinx. While not technically part of

SISTERS, RIGHT?



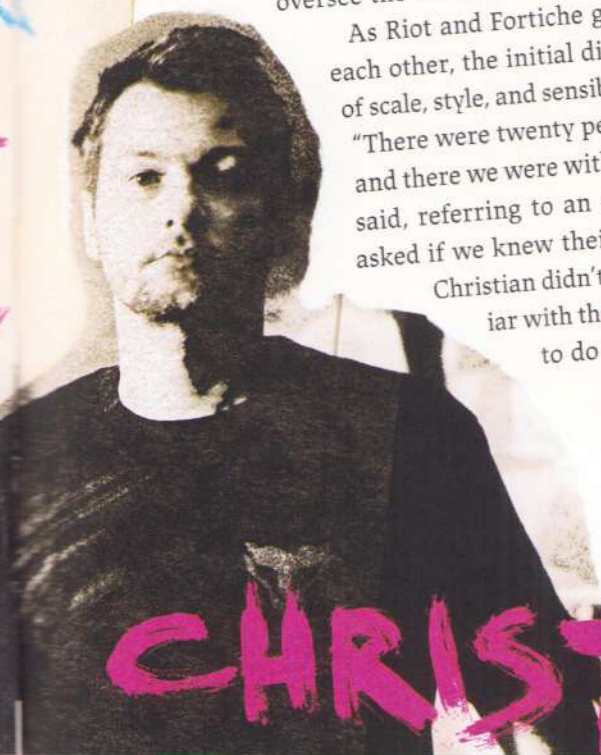
ABOVE  
Early concept art of Powder and Vi

BELOW  
Arcane creators Alex Yee and Christian Linke

*Arcane*, that music video from 2013 marked a key stage in the development of the show: It was the first exploration of Jinx’s personality and the first time Fortiche put its distinctive stamp on the *League of Legends* universe.

Right away, it was obvious that “Get Jinxed” belonged: It was different from previous *League of Legends* material yet complemented and expanded upon the game’s artistic horizons.

Eventually, Yee and Linke decided to get a little more ambitious—make that a lot more ambitious. “You’d only get these three-minute explorations of characters or their stories, and you’d never really sink your teeth into them fully,” Linke said of the videos and teasers he was making. “We were both wondering ‘How can we finally get to



CHRISTIAN

the champions' story? What do they do when they're not fighting? Where do they sleep? What do they eat? Who are their friends? Who are they as characters?"

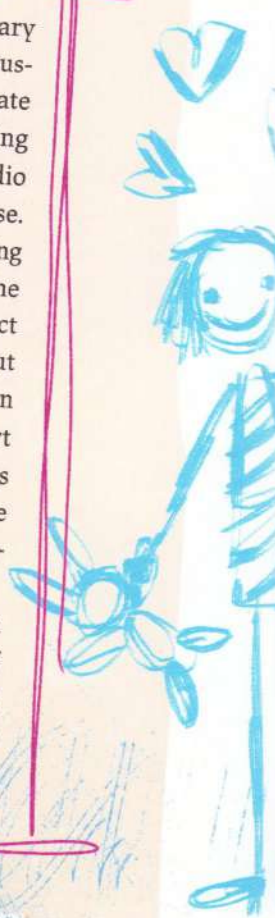
"We were lucky because everyone in the company was fatigued by the cinematics that we were making, which were big fight videos," Yee said. "Everyone was like, 'We want to see something that is grounded, something that has a story, something that's meaningful.'"

It also felt important—remember, both Yee and Linke's early Riot jobs involved directly handling players' queries and concerns—to reward *League of Legends* fans. "If you put in more time, if you put in more thought, if you drive for something that is deeper, it's giving something else to players," Yee said. "So it was a big agenda item for us going in to say, 'How are we going to counterbalance all this flashiness that we know about the characters with something that's going to make you lean into the show?'"

In 2015, the pair brought up the idea of making an animated series with Fortiche to the Riot leadership. The response was not as enthusiastic as they'd hoped, largely because neither Linke nor Yee had any experience in TV and Fortiche had never tackled anything that long.

The two men asked if they could do some preliminary concept artwork, and put together still frames and illustrations on a shoestring budget. They had Fortiche create a brief animation test showing Jayce and Vi battling on a rooftop in Piltover, and eventually the game studio warmed up to the bold idea of hatching a show in-house. Movie studios had approached Riot in the past, but nothing had ever come out of those talks. "You need to play the game to know the game," Linke said of the disconnect leadership felt with potential outside collaborators. But he and Yee immediately felt simpatico with Fortiche, even though their new French collaborators were not expert gamers. What the two groups had in common was just as important: They shared artistic sensibilities and the desire to push the boundaries of animation, both from a storytelling and a visual standpoint.

Staying close to home in terms of the show's production was as much of an outlier decision as giving *League of Legends* away for free. As a comparison, most projects involving iterations of an intellectual property are not handled directly by that I.P. holder—even if it is, of course, closely involved in making sure quality control and a



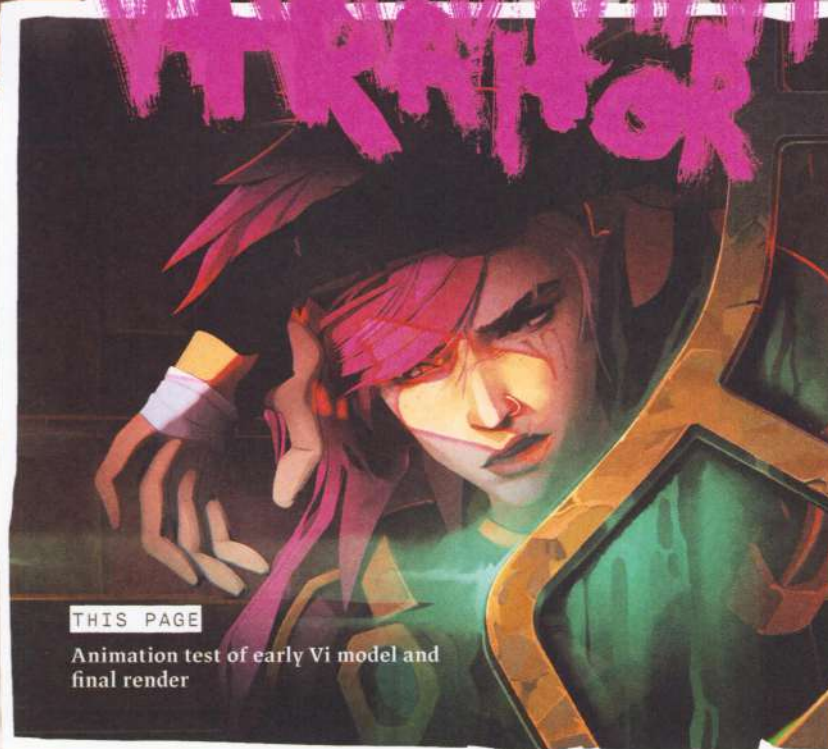
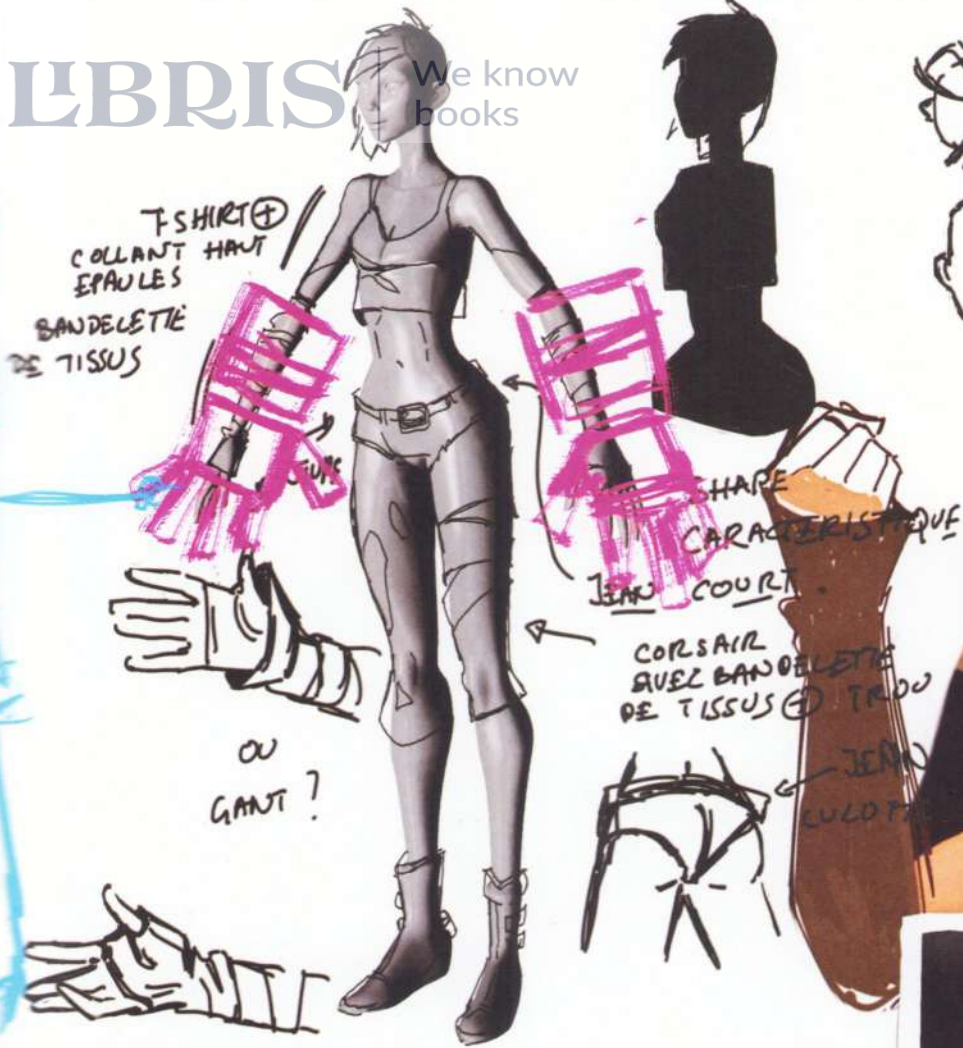
POW POW  
POW POW



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Early character, environment, and prop explorations for "Get Jinxed"



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coherent universe are maintained throughout all the new projects. Riot could easily have said “We’re a game company, we don’t do animated shows, let’s farm this out”—especially since it’s headquartered in Los Angeles, where you can find everything and everyone you need to make film and television. With *Arcane*, the call was made to avoid the licensing route and instead keep things in-house, with Linke and Yee co-creating the series and acting as showrunners in tandem.

At the same time, the stars were aligning in terms of the game world nurturing a generation of creative folks able to handle storytelling in different mediums. “It’s not that old of an industry,” Linke said. “We’re only now getting to a point where we have real adults who grew up with video games and are old enough to say, ‘Hey, I’m experienced enough as a leader to make something as big as a TV show or a movie.’ In the end, it definitely was a decision to say, ‘You know, we should just try to do this ourselves because it really hasn’t worked the other way around.’”

The decision was made to set the show in Piltover and Zaun, which sit between the Valoran and Shuriman continents of Runeterra, where *League of Legends* is set. Linke, Yee, and their new collaborators across the Atlantic went to work and created a pilot that combined the Riot Games universe with Fortiche’s distinctive style—which mixed the studio’s evocative, kinetic mix of 2-D and 3-D animation with live-action-inspired mise en scène (defined as the arrangement of scenery and stage before the camera).

As the two teams set up to make a pilot, Linke acted as the main conduit to streamline the process. “For the first budget meeting, there was only Christian sitting opposite me,” Dupont said. “We showed him a budget and he looked at his cell phone and said, ‘Okay.’ The meeting was finished within a quarter of an hour.”

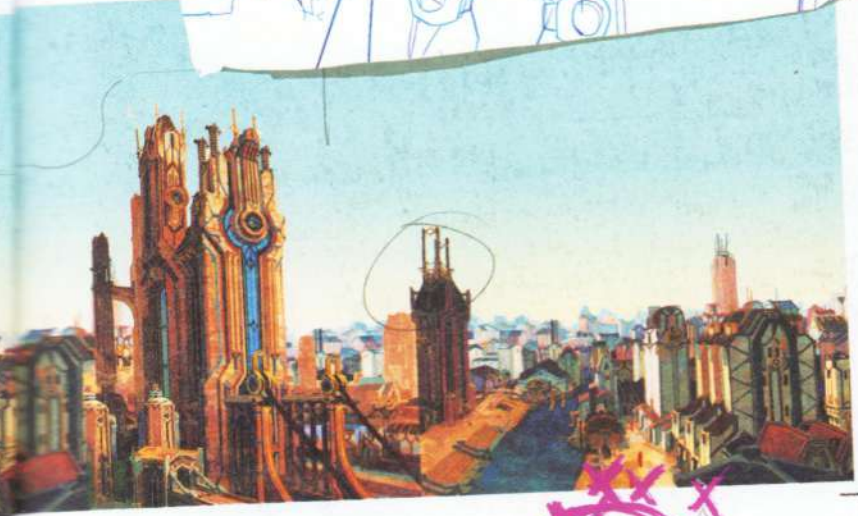
Everything seemed to require an astonishing amount of work—call it the price of perfection—and endless discussions ranging from minute details about a character’s outfit to the overall tone. “We had to really nail it,” Combe said. “Would it be like a summer blockbuster where you have a joke every two seconds, or would it be darker and more mature, and get us an adult rating? Our earliest storyboards had blood splattering

everywhere. We have violence, people who smoke—you have to manage all that. We had deep conversations about all that.” In this, as in pretty much everything related to *Arcane*, Riot and Fortiche were excited about exploring the limits: How much gore is too much? How can you make it feel as if the violence is earned rather than gratuitous, and impacts the characters? Everybody knew the stakes had to be high for viewers to care for the characters, and violence was a necessary part of that process.

As with all large-scale endeavors, the road was not always smooth. The biggest speed bump happened just after Fortiche delivered the pilot at the tail end of 2017. Riot pressed the pause button to rethink its approach, in terms of both production process and narrative direction. In Paris, the three leaders of the French studio used some of their downtime to articulate their aesthetic and directorial principles in an internal document titled *Directing the Fortiche Way*. When the teams regrouped the following year, it was on a healthier, more effective base built on mutual trust. “I can certainly imagine a much more fraught process with someone you’re new working with, or have a traditional vendor relationship with,” Yee said. “We really feel like we’re partners in figuring out how the story should evolve, and what’s going to look good in the show. Fortiche, they’re amazing at what they do even when what they’re saying doesn’t make sense in the room. You always have this piece of you that says, ‘I know that if they’re as excited as they seem to be, there’s something they’re seeing that I just can’t see yet.’”

“THE DECISION WAS MADE TO SET THE SHOW IN PILTOVER AND ZAUN WHICH SIT BETWEEN THE VALORAN AND SHURIMAN CONTINENTS OF RUNETERRA, WHERE LEAGUE OF LEGENDS IS SET.”





To further help *Arcane* cross the finish line, Riot hired producer Melinda Dilger in 2020. She devised an L.A. production pipeline in coordination with Hervé Dupont at Fortiche to complete the first season's nine episodes. It was around this time that Riot secured a distribution deal with Netflix. At the time the streamer's executives signed on based on the pilot and, really, not much else. That's because that one episode (which was further refined after the version delivered at the end of 2017) made the project's uniqueness evident: In less than an hour, viewers were introduced to a fully formed, visually and sonically sophisticated universe. Immediately, it established a sense of history and people you cared for, as well as a virtuosic mise en scène—the introductory parkour scene alone could be taught in film schools.

A major reason for *Arcane*'s success is that the show skillfully weaves seemingly irreconcilable perspectives and sensibilities into a cohesive whole. Think about it: A Los Angeles game company and an artsy French studio joined forces to create a series that delights players while also welcoming those who have never heard of Runeterra—or aren't into

OPPOSITE Vi animation test concept art

THIS PAGE Animation test environments; Jayce concept art



CHANGE DIALOGUE — TO SET UP STAKES & SEED IN WHY VI BROUGHT POWDER ESTABLISH THIS IS FIRST TIME → DOING SOMETHING THIS BIG  
 -ADD DANGER TO JOURNEY ENFORCER LOOKOUT?  
 -CLARIFY: STILL OPPRESSIVE TENSION BETWEEN PILTOVER AND ZAUN.



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Previsualization layout and animation for the pilot

PILOT

EXT. THE LANES (18)  
 POWDER FINDS BLUE STONE IN HER POCKET AFTER VANDER GIVES

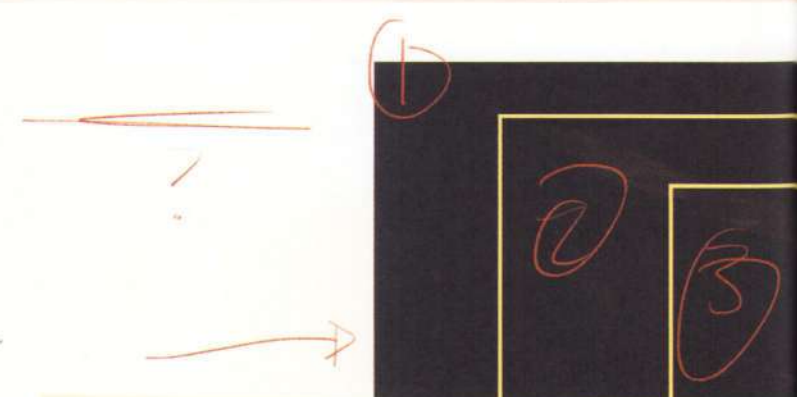


gaming to begin with. Dilger captured the mindset binding both teams: "I have always prided myself on working with people who know what they're doing," she said. "This taught me the really important lesson that you can get a new look, a new vision from people who are brand new to something. They're artists and they're not used to being pigeon-holed into any kind of formula. They haven't gone through the studio system, so they're not jaded at all. They just want to make something really cool, and different, and interesting. And you get that from Christian, Alex, Pascal, Arnaud, Jérôme, all those guys."

While the show's creators heavily drew from the painstaking worldbuilding (both internal and player-facing) that Riot had created over the years, *Arcane* also served as an opportunity to expand the Runeterra universe. Not only did Riot and Fortiche translate the *League of Legends* intellectual property into a two-season series that stands on its own, but over the years they have expanded the Runeterra universe by refining a creative

loop in which the various Riot video games and the show feed into each other to form a thriving ecosystem. Champions from the game reemerge into the show; characters created for the show are integrated into the game; storylines and design elements bounce across the two mediums harmoniously.

"To be honest, I think we didn't realize how big of an impact it was going to have on players," marveled Paul Bellezza, director of creative game production at *League of Legends* studios. "But it did, and it came from the heart."



WEIRD, MYSTERIOUS POV (1) OF SOMEONE WATCHING/FOLLOWING KIDS → VI CATCHES DECKARD

START OF FIGHT

POWDER

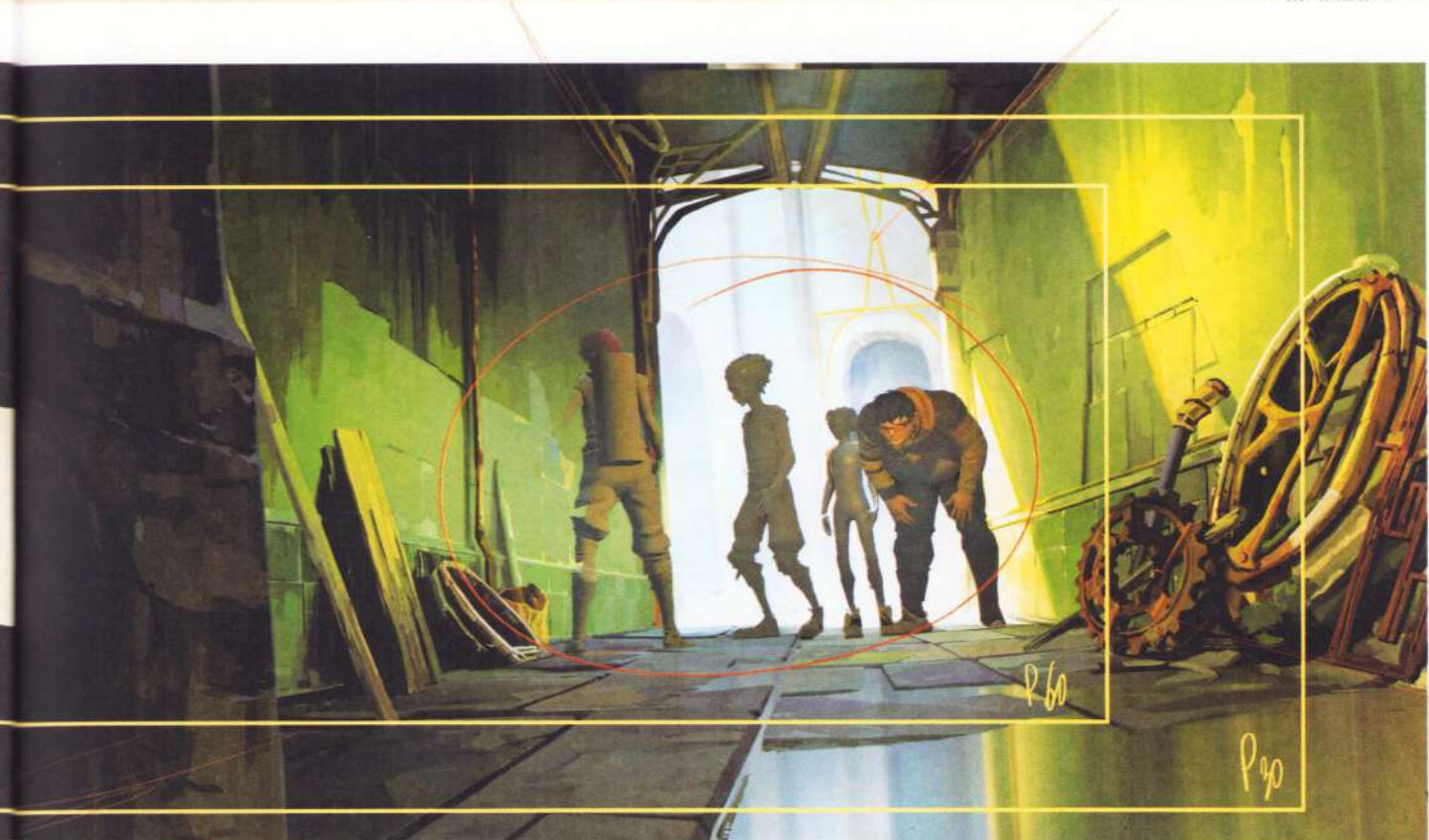
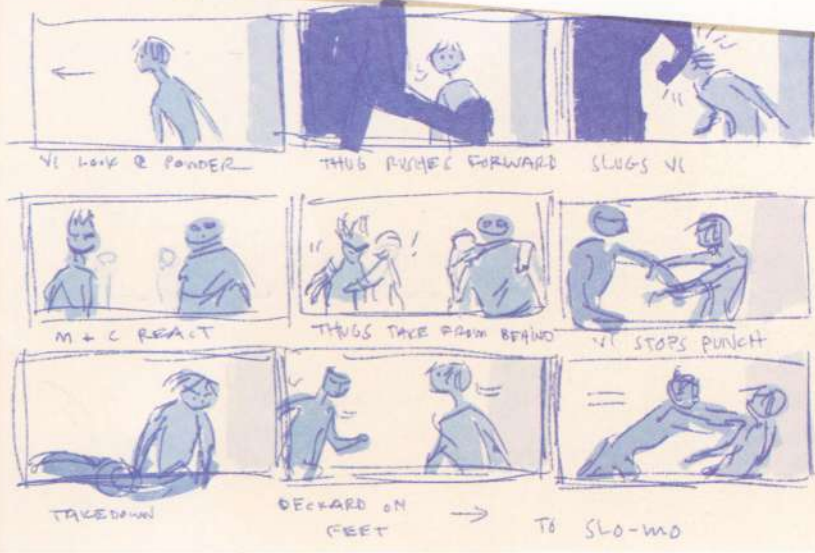
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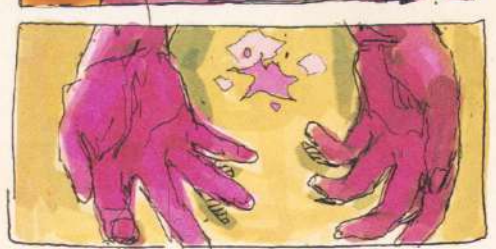
**RIGHT, FROM TOP**

Storyboards for Episodes 104 and 101

**BOTTOM**

Previsualization animatic for Episode 101





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We know  
books

# PAINT THE TOWN BLUE



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CAREFULLY PUNCH OUT THE PERFORATED PIECES IN THIS STENCIL.

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PLACE STENCIL ONTO YOUR SURFACE, USING TAPE TO SECURE IT IF YOU WISH.

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SPRAY PAINT OR APPLY LIQUID PAINT IN A DAUBING MOTION ON TOP OF THE STENCIL.

4

WHILE THE PAINT IS STILL WET, CAREFULLY REMOVE THE STENCIL THEN LET DRY COMPLETELY.