Patriotic
Colors
Digital Painting with Photoshop

WAR PATRIOT

"War Patriot" by Todd Cowden

PATRIOTIC COLORS

A Brief "Hello"

"Hi". My name is Todd Cowden. Among other things, I'm a character illustrator. You could say I specialize in super heroes and villains.

I've had a lot of people ask me how I go about coloring my illustrations. What's my process? What software do I use? How long does it take? I put together this tutorial hopefully to answer a few of those questions.

This tutorial focuses on one of my favorite techniques for coloring a digital painting in Photoshop. The entire coloring process took about nine hours. The result, hopefully, is a richly colored image that still maintains a "painterly" feel to it.

Where do we start?

I start with the inked black and white art as a base for the image. I created the inked drawing in separate layers to make it easy to separate one object from the next. Starting with the bottom layer and working my way up, there's the white background, the inked shadows of the flag, the base outline of the flag, the inked shadows of War Patriot, and the base outlines of War Patriot.

I separated the layers in this way because while I was creating the initial art I hadn't decided if the flag in the background was going to be too "busy" for Patriot to be in front of. It also made it easy to pull out the hero all by himself if I wanted to create a desktop pattern or other graphic element with him.

I drew the "shadows" on their own layers because I knew I wanted the flexibility to easily revert back to the base outlines without shadows. If the coloring style were going to be more "comic book" I'd leave the shadow layers on and most likely carry

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BASIC STEPS

1. Block out the main elements in shades of gray.

2. Work in shading by painting highlights and shadows, still in gray scale.

3. Apply color to the gray scale image and work your way into the details.

4. Add any finishing touches.

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all the inks through to the final image. But since I'm going for a more "painterly" approach, the inked lines are going to vanish before the final piece is done.

Setting Up The Document

To set things up, I'll first turn off the visibility of the "shadow" ink layers, for both the flag and War Patriot. I'll use the shadow layers strictly for reference.

I set the opacity of the base outline layers for the flag and War Patriot to about 35% and the layer blending mode, in the layers palette, to "Multiply". This will insure that as long as any new layers are beneath the outline layers, and not completely 100% black, the base outlines will always be visible.



① *Step 1*
Blocking the Elements

The first thing I do is block out the main elements on their own layers. What I mean by "blocking" is that I'll create a 100% opaque shape of each of the main elements. This makes it easy to select each of the elements later. It's also gives the image it's starting values of light and dark. I'll be working purely in gray scale through the first part of this process. Color will come later. The really nice thing about this type of approach is that it pretty much ensures that you have a nice range of tones throughout the image. The bad thing is that you're basically working the entire image twice, once in gray and once when you add the color. So it may not be the most efficient method, but it seems to work pretty well for me.

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I create a new layer, below the inked outlines and set up my brush with 100% hardness, 100% opacity, 100% flow and a pretty large size (which will vary depending on your resolution and image size). Also be sure to set the "spacing" of your brush to a very low number, 5-7 gives a nice smooth line. My brush size here is 57 pixels. It's a nice solid, round brush to quickly fill in each of the elements.

It looks like it will be best to break this image into four base elements, which consist of the background, the flag, War Patriot and his "power" effect that he's charging up in this hand. I set my foreground color to 50% black and begin filling in War Patriot on a new layer. If the brush is set correctly the edges should be crisp and the color should be solid.
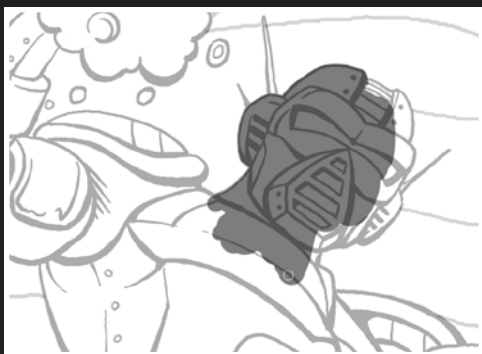
Once my brush is set I color in the main figure, War Patriot.

I color the entire figure before selecting a darker color, creating a new layer and doing the same thing for the flag. Once the flag is filled in, I create a new layer on top of the War Patriot layer and fill in his power effect. For the background I create a new layer below everything and fill the layer with a dark gray.

Now I've got each of the main elements separated on their own layers. For the record, in situations where a layer is not visible because it is behind another layer (like the areas of the flag that are behind War Patriot), it's up to you whether or not you want to fill them in completely or not. In the mood I'm in now, I've decided not to.

It's a good idea to zoom in and look over the image for any tiny 'holes' in the tones now. You defiantly don't want them popping up later, when they will be much more visible.

Once I'm convinced there are no gaps in the pieces, I'll select each layer and set its "lock transparent pixels" flag to "on" (make sure it's checked). Now may also be a good time to name the layers, just to be helpful…but it's totally optional.

② Step 2
Shadows and Light

Next, I want to give our flat tone areas a wider range of darks and lights to help identify where the light and shadows will fall. This is done in the broadest possible terms with the gradient tool. Usually I'll set the tool to draw a gradient (either linear or radial, depending on the purpose), from the foreground color to transparency. In the case of War Patriot I used linear gradients across the flag and the main part of his body while I went back with a radial gradient to accent the light sources coming from his power effect and the rocket boots. What I'm shooting for is the illusion that the flag is being lit from below with a surrounding ring of lights as War Patriot performs a fly-by of the flag.
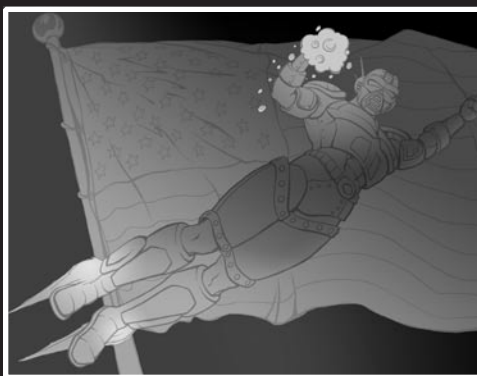
Now that I've got a good idea of where the light is coming from, it's time to start filling in the details. I'm going to start off with our hero, followed by the flag and then any extra environmental elements I may need The next few steps are pretty simple, and I go through them several times with each part of the image until the whole thing looks the way I want it to.

First, I'll create a new layer above the layer I want to add detail too. Next, I'll mask off any areas of the image I don't want to effect with a marquee. Then I'll paint in shadows and highlights, building them up slowly. Depending on the look I'm going for I may combine the newly shaded layer with the base layer and smooth out any rough areas in the shading. Once that's done, create a new layer and start all over again, this time working up the detail in the areas I'm working on. I highly suggest working up the detail of the entire image at the same time and not focusing for a long time on any one particular portion.

The key piece to this type of workflow is setting up your brush. Everyone will have his or her own personal preferences so you'll just have to play around until you discover a setting that work for you. As for me, I'm more of a "build up slowly" kind of painter. I'm not big on the load up your brush and throw a glob on the canvas type-a-guy. I work up the details with my opacity set to 40%, my flow set to 3-5%, with a round brush with a crisp hard edge. Set your foreground and background colors to the default black and white and use the "X" key to toggle which color you're painting with to work between shadows and highlights. I mapped the "X" key to one of my tablet buttons to speed things up a bit.

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Start with a really big brush and reduce the size of the brush as your detail increases.

I begin with Patriot. I create a new layer on top of Patriot's base gray tone. Next, I <ctrl-left click> on the image of Patriot's layer in the layer palette. This should create a marquee around only War Patriot. This way I don't have to worry about "staying within the lines" of what I'm drawing. But the animated marquee is distracting to look at so I hit <ctrl-H> to "hide" the marquee, you can also select View>Extras from the main menu.

On the newly created layer I'm now set to start shading, experimenting, and playing around with different light and modeling effects. I build up the values slowly and toggle back and forth between shadows and highlights with the "X" key, or the remapped button on my tablet. Since the shading is on it's own layer, if something goes terribly wrong I can just erase the bad section and start on that one area from scratch. In this way, it's actually a pretty fearless way to work.
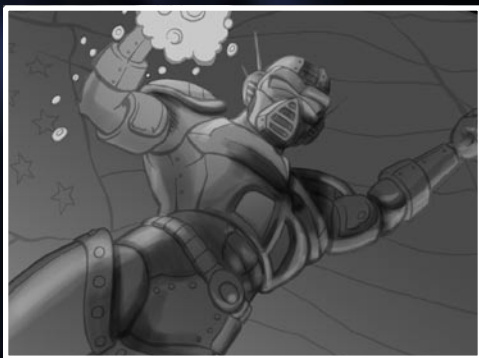
The strokes are still kept pretty loose at this stage and I don't concern myself with the streaks that pop up. After a short while, what started out as flat elements begin to take on a much more "painterly" feel.

I'll work over the entire character in this manner until I have a solid illustration of the basic lights and shadows. I'm not focusing on super fine detail yet, just forming a better idea of light and shadow.

Once I've covered War Patriot I merge the base gray layer and the shaded layers together by <shift-left click> the base "War Patriot" layer and the new "shading" layer in the layer palette and hit <shift-E> or select Layer>Merge Layers from the main menu. This combines the two layers into one. After you do this, you'll need to turn "preserve transparent pixels" back on, on the merged layer.

Now I take a good look over the Patriot to make sure everything's coming together as it should. I spot a few places where the "streaking" of my shading doesn't quite represent the material it should be. His metal-plated armor should be much smoother than the streaks are showing so I go in with the smudge tool, set to 37% hardness and blend away any unwanted streaks. The result, if all goes well, is smoother armor. Be careful about using the smudge tool near the edge of a transparent border (in this case the edge of War Patriot's body), as you may get some unexpected results.
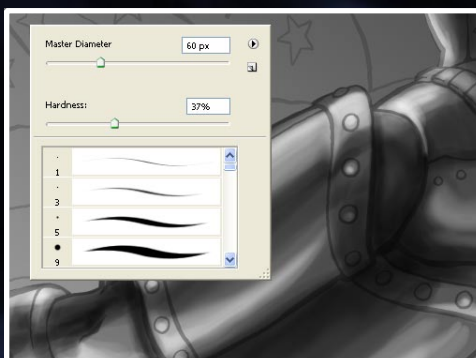
Now that I've got a base for War Patriot it's time to move on to the flag. I create a new layer to hold the shading for the flag. Then I <ctrl-left click> on the base flag layer, which creates a marquee around the flag. I work the shadows and highlights just like I did on Patriot, starting in big general moves and fine-tuning as I go.

I managed to get a very nice reference shot of a flag online. The lighting is all wrong on the flag, but it gives me a good idea of the way the wind moves through the fabric.

Since the flag only has three basic colors I create a new layer to hold the shape of the blue field, and another for the red stripes.

To help establish the illusion of a ring of lights below the flag I paint on a few light rays emanating from below the picture. I put each of the light rays on their own layer so I can easily adjust brightness and position, and set the layer's blend mode to "linear dodge".

With a ring of lights below Patriot, my guess is that he should be casting some kind of shadow on the flag. I create a new layer between the flag and War Patriot, and then paint a solid, hard edge shadow across the flag making sure to go well past the boundary of the flag. Next, in the layer palette, I change the opacity of the layer to around 70% and I change the blend mode of the layer to "multiply".

A couple more steps and we'll be done with the shadow. First, from the main menu, select Filter>Blur>Gaussian Blur, and set the options to soften the shadow. I set my blur to 30 pixels. And finally, with the shadow layer selected, <ctrl-left click> the flag layer which will create a marquee around the flag shape. Now, in the main menu, select Layer>Layer Mask>Reveal Selection. This will hide any part of the shadow outside of the flag marquee. Taking a step back and reviewing every-

thing, I think I'm ready to call this part of the process "done", and I'm ready to move on to the really fun part, adding colors. At this point there is a moderate level of detail in the image, and there's still plenty of room for more detail to pop up as we work through the image.

③ Step 3
Adding Color

Things are coming along pretty well. I'll begin coloring with the flag only because we already have the blue box and red stripes on the flag separated on their own layers, which kills the need to make a mask or new alpha channel.

In the layer palette, I locate the layer that just holds the blue box shade of the flag. I <ctrl-left click> on that layer which masks off the blue area. Then I <ctrl-alt-left click> on the layer that contains the stars which subtracts the stars from the current marquee selection. Now I hit <ctrl-u>, or Image>Adjustments>Hue/Saturation on the main menu, which brings up the Hue/Saturation option window. I click the "Colorize" box and adjust the "Hue" and "Saturation" sliders until I get a nice blue color on the flag.

Coloring the stripes is even easier since no marquee selection is required. I simply select the stripes layer, hit <ctrl-u> to bring up the Hue/Saturation option box again, click on the "Colorize" check box and move the sliders until the red stripes are the proper color.
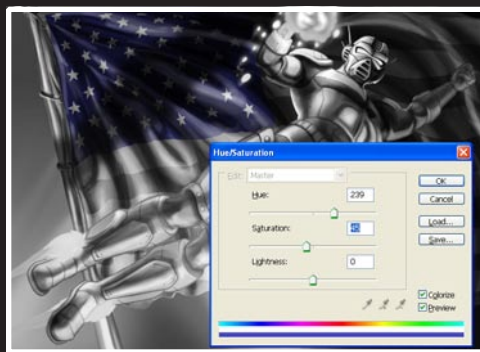
I'll use this same technique to layout the base starting colors for all parts of the background. I'll also give War Patriot a

cooler non-gray base color.

To give War Patriot the rest of his base colors I'll need to create alpha channels, which mark off his main colors. For those that aren't aware what an alpha channel is, it's a gray scale image that has a variety of uses. They can be used to hide areas of a layer, or in this case, store marquee selection for quick access. I'm going to create an alpha channel to mark where Patriot's red, blue, black, and white colors are on his costume.

There are a lot of different ways to create an alpha channel, in this case I'm going to use the "Quick Mask" in Photoshop to paint the alpha channel with my brush. The "Quick Mask" button is located directly below the foreground and background color swatches on the tool palette. Normally it looks like a white circle on a gray rectangular background. Once you click on the "Quick Mask" mode any time you draw on the canvas with your brush, you'll be painting a mask. It will appear that you're painting a transparent red color, but that is only to show where you've painted.

I set my brush to a decently large size, and make sure the opacity, flow and hardness are all set to 100%. Then I begin to paint all the parts of War Patriot that are going to be blue, starting with his helmet. Again, don't let the red color fool you, it's only used to show where you've already painted.

Generally I'll use a very large brush to quickly fill in the large solid sections, before going back with a smaller brush to touch up the details, edges and corners.

Once I've painted all the blue areas of his suit I hit "q" which toggles Photoshop from "Quick Mask" mode to "Normal" mode. Magically, the "red" areas that I painted are now masked off with a marquee. The only problem is that the selection is reversed for what we want. To fix it I simply hit <ctrl-shift-I>, or Selection>Inverse from the main menu, which inverts the active marquee selection. And finally, to create the alpha channel I click the "Save Selection as Channel" button at the bottom of the "Channel" palette.

And with that, I've got a black and white alpha channel that I can use to instantly select the blue portions of War Patriot's costume. This alpha channel allows me to quickly select all the blue areas on Patriot's costume simply by <ctrl-left clicking> on the thumbnail image in the alpha channel palette.

Next, I'll use the exact same process to create an alpha channel for the red areas of Patriot's costume.

Once that's done I use the newly created alpha channels, to create marquee selections around each of the main colors of his costume. Then I use the same Hue/Satura-

tion colorizing method that I used on the flag to give Patriot his base colors.

It's at this point that I want to begin to eliminate the comic book style, black and white inked lines. In the layer palette click on the inked lines layer (still at 35% opacity), then <shift-click> Patriot's layer, then either hit <ctrl-e>, or select Layers>Merge Layers from the main menu.

Now comes the task of using the smudge tool and some careful painting with the brush to remove the hard edges of the inked lines one-by-one. Again, be very careful when using the smudge tool near the outer edge of Patriot's body or you could get some unwanted results.

With all this done, there's only one more item to be given a base color, the flagpole. Since the flag pole has a more geometric shape than Patriot, I'll use the pen tool to create a path around the pole pieces, then I'll convert the path to a marquee selection and save that as a new alpha channel.

Enhancing Colors
So we've got the basic colors for the image, and he doesn't look half-bad, but we still need to work in a lot more detail and do something to make the colors, and the image really "pop".

I use two primary methods for creating deeper, richer colors and they come in pairs of opposites. They are the "screen" and "multiply" brush blend modes, and the "dodging" and "burning" tools.

Screen and Multiply
When it comes to adding hints of color

usually from things like glows, bounce lights, reflections, or colored lights setting your brush mode to "screen" or "multiply" is the way to go.

I set my brush to around 40% opacity with a very low flow, between 4-8%. For Patriot's suit, a high-specularity metallic surface, I set the brush hardness to 100%. The blend modes are found in the brush attributes section. It's labeled "Mode" and by default it will be set to "normal".

I'll use the "screen" mode for painting highlights of color, such as adding a light blue highlight to Patriot's right shoulder and glove.

I use a red brush set to "multiply" to add a warmer tone to the shadows in his legs and front torso. I'll also use it on the back of his right leg to throw in some blue reflective color (from the blue field on the flag).

Dodging and Burning
The dodge and burn tools, found in the tool palette, are best at highlighting and darkening areas without adding new color to them. They will however, increase the saturation of any color already present

which is something to be aware of.

The flag pole is the perfect place to dodge and burn the highlights and shadows. To get those really "metallic" specular highlights select the dodge tool and set its "range" to "highlights" then simply work the highlight areas is a hard edged brush and watch what happens.

④ Step 4
Finishing Touches
Once I feel I've completed the initial painting there will usually be an element or two that may not gel with the rest of the world the way I'd hoped. The color may be a little warmer or colder than the rest of the environment, I may have decided at some point to change the color of the ambient light in the image after I had already painted an element. I may even decide to shift the entire mood of the piece by shifting colors.

Some of these decisions might seem daunting, but by choosing Image>Adjustments>Color Balance from the main menu and pulling up the color balance options you'll find it's really quite

easy to make both subtle and major color shifts. For War Patriot, I wasn't happy with how the blue of his costume clashed with the blue field on the flag. I also wanted to give Patriot a warmer tone to reflect the warm lights shining on him. I quickly made the necessary changes using the Color Balance menu and he was good to go.

Glows and Bloom

I admit it, I'm a sucker for bloom and glow effects. It's finding the right balance that's the tricky part. In this case I add a nice red glow to Patriot's visor and a few more to his power effect, rocket boots, and front torso area. I also add more subtle bloom effects to the brightest specular highlights on his armor and the tip of the flagpole.

All-in-all, it may be a little heavy in the FX department but hey, he's a flying suit of metal a few feet away from a halogen light source.

My final step is adding an appropriate border to help frame the picture, and a title for the characters name. I admit, I'm stepping out of Photoshop and into a 3d application called Maya for this one.

It was faster...sue me.

Keeping War Patriot on his own layer proves useful again when placing the border element. I'm able to very easily place Patriot in front of the frame so it appears he's flying right out of the picture.

Wrapping Up

And that will do it for our all-American hero War Patriot. I like using this method for coloring in Photoshop because it guarantees a nice range of tones across the image and it takes advantage of so many of Photoshop's tools. I also like the flexibility if provides both in terms of shading and coloring. It gives you the freedom to really get in there, play around, and experiment with things without the fear of having to save out a million separate versions of the same file.

I welcome anyone that's read this far to drop by my site www.toddworld.com or my Deviant Art site toddworld.deviantart.com and say "Hi". Or, if you happen to play City of Heroes on the Justice server and you happen to see "8 Baller" online, send me an invite.

Thanks for your time. If you were able to pick up even one small tip from this, then I'll count this mission a success.