

Many highly skilled artists are charging less for commissions than they could be, and are making less income as a result. I have been helping artists with commissions for a few years, and I hope this thread will expand to others and help them as well.

1/

Let's start with something interesting, what companies are paying.

FF pays \$100 per illustration (v low)

Paizo pays \$150 per character (v low)

DnD pays \$500 per character

MtG pays \$1k-3k per card

Artifact paid \$2k per card

Hearthstone pays \$1.5k per

Riot \$3k-10k

2/

Most companies are unfortunately closer to Paizo and FF, as provided by @SHelmigh 's blog

<https://suzannehelmigh.artstation.com/blog>

These rates are very low, paying 3x-10x less than individuals who just want their character drawn.

3/

Practical lessons. First, take at least 50% of the payment up front, no matter what, nonrefundable. Don't send the final until after it is paid in full. Not all clients will burn you, but some will. Contact the client before you start theirs- make sure they're still around

4/

You don't need a long queue of commissions. You only need ~2 commissions lined up at a time. The one you are working on now, and the one you are working on next. The rest are in the future and whether you have them now or in the future, it doesn't matter.

5/

If you get commissioned for 20 pieces at \$200 each, that's \$4k, great, right? If you can only complete 10 of them this month that's \$2k + 50% of the other 10- that's \$3k, and \$1k of that is basically a loan, you now have to do the others next month for \$1k.

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That means you have to get more commissions next month that you won't be able to complete until future months... It quickly becomes a treadmill that's hard to get off of.

7/

Having a long queue, or instantly getting several commissions when you announce availability, are signs that your prices are too low. Since you only need ~2 on your list at a time, price higher so that you are getting the most out of your time that you can.

8/

Never give group discounts. They're asking you for more work, don't charge less for more work. They are buying your time, which is finite and in demand. Party commission requests are common, but most won't pay when they do the math of $\$500 \times 7 + 500$ for a background
9/

Many companies like Paizo or FF will lowball rates, knowing that someone somewhere will take it. Private clients will pay 3x-10x as much as they do. Better paying companies don't care about your resume or college education, you can skip those steps, just have the skill level
10/

As for how much you should charge, start by timing how long it takes you to complete the things you want to offer. There will be some variation, keep track of what things make it take longer for you to complete, we'll get to that later.
11/

Take the baselines, minus the things that made them take longer, multiply that number of hours by \$30. That should be the starting point. As your skill increases, so too should the \$ number that you multiply the number of hours by, or simply increase the price in general.
12/

The things that make you take longer, how much longer do they take you? What %? Keep note of them, so you can adjust the price when someone asks you how much that, or something similarly complex, will cost.
13/

As your skill improves, so too will the quality, and/or the speed at which you complete pieces. Don't lower your rate to match increased speed. Speed is a valuable quality that means quick turnaround times, ability to meet tight deadlines, or make revisions (if applicable)
14/

What price number is 'too high' to be reasonable? It's a spectrum, the higher the number, the fewer number of clients will like that price. There are more clients that will pay \$100 than \$200, than \$500, than \$1000, etc. But there *are* still a lot of them at each
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There are indeed a lot of people making \$100k+ per year that play DnD, or are furrries, or both, and will pay an artist that they like \$1000 to draw/paint their character, even if that artist doesn't do official DnD/MtG/etc art. They have expendable income.
16/

Just because the artist cannot afford the prices that they are charging, that doesn't mean the prices are too high. "We are not our clients". Here is the income distribution pre-pandemic in the US

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/203183/percentage-distribution-of-household-income-in-the-us/> That's ~100m households making \$100k+.

17/

Also calculate the day rate that you need to make to cover your expenses with this calculator https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XrsFYPUCNDa1ykUyHCzW2EkjDQiigKyGAI_JPb5RVEs/edit#gid=0 this is the *minimum* that you should be making in order to survive.

18/

If you live in a low cost of living area, charge as if you don't- try putting in \$2.5k/month for rent and \$1.6k/month for savings. Living in a low cost of living area means that you can *work less* or work the same amount and *live better*.

19/

You are able to charge as if you're living in LA while living anywhere in the world. Some artists will even leave their country to live in Poland, Thailand, etc, so they can charge the same amount, work less and/or live more comfortably. nomadlist.com

20/

If you feel that the price you came up with earlier is too high because you spend dozens of hours per character, this is a skill issue that you can work to resolve. Aim for no more than 6 hours for a full body lines + flat colored, 15 hours for a fully painted character.

21/

If you feel that the quality of your work isn't high enough to warrant hundreds/thousands of dollars, it may be true, or you may be undervaluing your work. Look at the artists on [reddit.com/r/fantasyartists](https://www.reddit.com/r/fantasyartists) all of them are charging at least \$100 per character and \$30/hr

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Your work doesn't have to be as good as the best there, but is it as good as *something* in that feed? If the answer is yes, you may just need to advertise yourself more places, or otherwise improve your marketing strategies.

23/

If the answer is no, then consider pushing through and practicing/learning more to bump up your skill level. There are more free resources than ever to guide you, and then it comes down to putting in the time/work. I'll make a future thread about this later.

24/

To get more clients at higher prices, you need to learn business and marketing. I took down notes of the top 10 marketing tips from my friend who is a director of marketing at a major studio https://docs.google.com/document/d/14gCgMkflHmleEv1_QZef_qAauH_zHXiyBmt-H8x4pls/edit
25/

A few of the points in his top 10 list come from this video, which I highly recommend to watch about once a year. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHHg99hwQGY>
26/

Clients will hire you to make things similar to what they see you have already made. Make art for your portfolio that displays the work you want clients to hire you for. Don't include things in your portfolio, or share on social media, you don't want to make more of
27/

There are two methods to get clients, 1) having the clients find you, or 2) go to where your clients are. Instagram falls into the first group, and it's a pain. If you plan to go down this path anyway, here is everything I learned about Instagram https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Eqm3YPPQ9wVe_9pP6g3tqeEivFIR5cWjB7hDQo_X04s/edit
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Alternatively you can try to grow your Twitter, TikTok, YouTube or other social media platform. You'll be fighting with an algorithm for the attention of your followers in order to reach new eyeballs, whichever path you choose.
29/

Facebook Groups, Subreddits and Discord servers have communities where many of the users are looking to buy work, and all you have to do is find them and post there. Each place will have their own rules of varying restrictions, follow them.
30/

You don't have to make a price sheet, you can have a conversation with those who wish to hire you. Learn negotiation tactics from other industries. Have a made up "assistant" that handles your emails/negotiations for you if it makes you feel more comfortable.
31/

If you are being bombarded with inquiries and cannot have conversations with those seeking commissions because there isn't enough time/energy in the day for that- that's when a price sheet begins to be worthwhile.
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Conversations would give the chance to increase how willing the client is to spend more. Letting them know that you're excited to work on the project, making them even more excited to hire you. But if you don't have the time/energy, price lists are fine

33/

When you are charging a reasonable rate, most people that inquire about hiring you will ghost after hearing your price quotes. That's normal, and expected. These are not viable clients, you didn't lose a sale, you don't need to lower prices to accommodate them.

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It is reasonable to feel like you are losing money when someone reaches out but doesn't hire you, and this can lead to feeling like your prices should be lower, or that your work isn't good enough. It's not you, it's them.

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They either don't have the available funds, or don't value art enough. That's fine, they don't have to, everyone is different. I can't justify paying for a Tesla Model 3, that doesn't mean Tesla should lower the price for me? No, there are plenty of people who would pay.

36/

Some horrible people will try to tell you your work is bad after finding out that they cannot afford you, either out of spite or as an awful negotiation tactic. If they can lower your self esteem, they can get better prices. Nuts to that.

37/

It can be difficult to not tie personal self worth to your work and how others treat you. It's a very common issue in the industry, and is why many artists see therapists. Therapy can be great for your career, don't avoid it when it's called for.

38/

Part of doing commissions is posting actively on social media, which can be a nightmare for mental health. There are jerks and algorithms, outside of your control. You'll see others being successful- don't compare your behind the scenes to other people's highlights

39/

Share the work that you are comfortable sharing, including WIPs. For some reason sketches will often get more reach than finished pieces. Perhaps it is because people like to finish the piece in their head, which subconsciously lets them feel some pride/ownership of it?

40/

Try not to let it get to you when the sketch gets more likes than the finished version. It happens, it doesn't mean the finished version is bad. Talk to other artists about it, they'll likely have similar experiences and other input.

41/

You will also likely get unsolicited critique, and they'll expect you to appreciate it. You can either ignore it, briefly thank them for their input, or etc. Getting into a fight with them about why they're wrong probably isn't worth your time or energy.

42/

Weirdly on social media, any interaction helps the algorithms, so if it helps, them inserting their unsolicited opinion may have helped you. But it's probably not worth giving them too much attention for it.

43/

Worse are people who will rant about your prices when you post them, these people are why many artists don't post their prices publicly. They're not going to buy art, they just want to tell other people not to hire you. If it's a subreddit or FB group, report them.

44/

People that reply to publicly claim that you are too expensive are just trolls, ignore them if you can't get them deleted or otherwise dealt with. If you give them more attention, they'll just talk more, which is just more annoying for everyone. Don't feed the trolls

45/

One interesting tidbit found over and over- the more the artist is charging, the nicer and more understanding the clients are. May sound counterintuitive, but it's true time and time again. Not all high paying clients will be good clients, but more of them will be.

46/

Some clients will want to manage you or backseat draw- unless they're a professional AD, don't let them. You don't even have to send them the sketch for them to give feedback before continuing on to finish. They may feel they have to make changes because you offered it.

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They may specify the design/color of every item on the character, and it will look like garbage. You are allowed to communicate with them that you will be changing the colors and designs to make it fit together- ask them what is most important. The product reflects on you.

48/

Sometimes you can simply have a version that you give to the client and a version that you share with the public that is slightly different and deviates from the client's prompt.

49/

You should have an explicit contract and a terms of service. Make sure that any revisions you allow for are included in the initial cost. You do not have to provide free/included revisions. If they want substantial revisions, make them pay more. Spell it out in the docs.

50/

Here are some example contracts you can start from. You are allowed to edit them as you see fit. <http://artpact.artisfy.com/Contracts/>

51/

Situations may arise where the client insists that you do things that you are not comfortable with, or communicates in a disrespectful or otherwise unbearable manner. You are allowed to fire them and keep the 50% deposit for the time and effort that you had invested.

52

As long as it's in the contract, it is well within your rights to terminate the contract for behavior that ruins the production. Producing art is difficult enough without the client making the situation unbearable. Take care of yourself.

53/

Some clients will not want to wait for their spot in line, or will have a deadline. Charge them more. 50% of the total to skip to the front of the line, and if the deadline is close enough that it would be a burden on you to fulfill in time- an additional 50% is warranted.

54/

If you are unable to hit the deadline, let the client know as soon as you believe you won't. Often it will be fine, and they will have more of a buffer than they provided. If it's a gift for the specific date, they may wish to cancel. Keep the deposit or contract kill fee.

55/

In US copyright, the artist who created the work maintains copyright unless the contract states otherwise. If they wish to share copyright so they can redistribute it for their products, charge them more. Some artists go with an additional 50%, similar to rush jobs.

56/

If they want sole ownership of the copyright, meaning that you cannot share it, or use it later for anything, bump up the price considerably, anywhere from 3x-10x. Additionally, strongly consider a time limitation on exclusivity, so they have to come back and pay more later.

57/

We're almost to the end, here are some example price lists and commission queues. People are getting work at decent rates. Steve has been doing commissions for about 5 years, these are his prices, modifiers and terms

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1g4zJRq_pY58Nq3pOd1aEvzpUQNNzcrbSykd2xQoTUE0/edit

58/

And this is his commission list and list of completed commissions (towards the bottom)

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1N5Ymb_CwlaB8LWIHmaD31n1vJLTx6GijNUbJLqdSaNg/edit

59/

Blake is a friend who switched to commissions after his graphic design employer screwed him over last year. He was able to pivot quickly by going to where the clients were, and people finding him on Twitch.

<https://www.blakedart.com/commissions>

queue -

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1-rXh7qx6XHULIdqL3Q6zBSP2-T15x_JsHPrfOmeF5nY/edit

60/

You can see how both artists have different processes, which allowed them to have distinct offerings, which hit different price points. This allows them to appeal to a wide range of client budgets with different amounts of work for a single full body character.

61/

Oh, and there certainly are artists who charge more. There are clients who will pay to get the artist that they want. You're not competing with every other artist on the internet, you don't need lower prices than everyone else.

https://twitter.com/Miles_DF/status/1281631606227247111

62/

Commissions are a good starting point, but they are a treadmill, they pay for today's bills with today's work. It's hard to make 'passive income' off of the results of commission work. Consider what products you can make that will continue to sell for the rest of your life

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Products that will continue to make money long after they are first created are how you will go from worrying about money month-month to living more comfortably, and having more time for personal work or leisure.

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There are countless avenues for art heavy products that artists can look into producing. Look around Kickstarter, what other artists are selling? Get ideas from YouTube videos on artists' avenues for income. What gels with your background/interests/skillset?

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Want a second opinion? Check this document for advice that was given to publishers for commissioning art. It should help educate some artists, too.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_yirvbOeJKbeXVJMGkxcjllQWc/view

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Want this all in one document? Here you go.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xspSxCRhLyXTm8OI1awjZN03qVqSI6gO7JCpjDa7ikY/edit>

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I cohost a weekly art business podcast with [@joby_dorr](#) on his Twitch channel, Sundays 2PM PST. You can find previous episodes on his YouTube page

<https://youtube.com/channel/UCPeCkGG7C3naz5BN8DNjp8w> or on Spotify/Apple under "Art Condition".

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