Chapter 10

Moving Forward by Looking Back: Using Art and Architectural History to Make and Understand Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores art history to establish parallels between the current state of the game art field and historical art and architectural periods. In doing so, it proposes methods for both making and studying games that subvert the popular analysis trends of game art that are typically based on the history of game graphics and technology. The chapter will then demonstrate the use of art and design history in game development by discussing the Atelier Games project, which utilizes the styles and techniques of established artists and art movements to explore the viability of classic methods for the production of game art and game mechanics.

INTRODUCTION

Art assets that reference historic art and architectural pieces are not new in games. Throughout the history of the medium, visual intertextuality has been a selling point for games with “epic” themes such as Greek Mythology, Medieval battles, or sci-fi and fantasy settings. Games such as Defender of the Crown (Cinemaware, 1986) or God of War (SCE Santa Monica, 2005) directly represent the artwork and architecture of historic cultures as a way to build wish fulfillment. By utilizing elements of a culture’s aesthetics, that culture becomes a context in which players may embed themselves (Zimmerman & Salen, 2003) as well as a novelty for attracting traditional gaming audiences (Peterson, 2014.) However, these uses of intertextuality in games only scratch the surface of what professional artists, art historians, and architects would argue is the real potential of utilizing games as a cultural junction (Sollers, 1968) for art and architectural work.

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Critical examinations of game art have historically focused on how art production techniques for games reflect the technical evolution of gaming platforms in both state-of-the-art and retro aesthetics. However, games such as *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012) and *Dominique Pamplemousse* (Squinkifer, 2013) show potential new paradigms in art production. Rather than facing inwards towards established game art styles or themes, they look outward towards analog techniques established in fields such as the visual arts, graphic design, animation, and film. Likewise, studies such as Goodbrey’s *Hypercomics* (2000 – 2014) and Totten’s analyses of game levels through architectural theory (Totten, 2014) show that understanding these fields beyond their visual components can bring new insights for understanding games.

This chapter’s goal is to give working game developers, artists, and academics a frame with which to understand their work in the context of art and traditional media. It also seeks to explore the practicality of utilizing techniques – traditional in fine art and design but non-traditional in game art – for the production of digital games. To accomplish this, the chapter first analyzes the current state of game art, particularly concerning the types of art employed by large and small studios, and how game art culture has been affected by popular industry trends. The chapter then explores developments in art history to demonstrate how games may be understood through the lens of these fields for purposes of study and design. Finally, it describes how game artists may explore historic art styles, materials, and methods for the production of art assets and new game mechanics. In these ways, artistic intertextuality and architextuality become tools for researchers, students, instructors, and developers to understand and make new game types.

**BACKGROUND: THE STATE OF GAME ART**

Like in many industries, trends in game art dictate how artists earn jobs. Commonly, these trends are tied to the state of computer graphics technology in home computers and video game consoles. They can, however, also vary based on the size and structure of art teams for games. Large studios more closely mirror technological advancement, as they possess the resources to create “state of the art” graphics for games. Small studios, especially those identifying as “independent” – studios who create games without the backing of large publishers and often within a community of other independent studios (Crecente, 2013) – are more agile in adopting new styles, but are still subject to follow what is “in vogue” to meet consumer demand.

This section will establish art trends within the game industry and offer insight into how these trends are affected by studio sizes, technological trends, and accessible digital art software.

**Large Game Studio Job Listings**

As the studios most capable of creating high-fidelity graphics, large studios, often referred to as AAA, have historically set art trends in games. These studios employ several hundred developers, artists, musicians, marketing professionals, and others to create a game with budgets rivaling many Hollywood movies (Superannuation, 2014; Weber, 2013). Games produced by these studios tend to be among the best-selling and most well-known among game players and as such, jobs at these studios are in high demand. This demand allows AAA studios to set highly selective standards for art when considering applicants.