

Why Art Direction Matters More than Graphics

What is Art Direction for Games?

Broader Definitions

Visual style

- A game's 'visual style' refers to all the aesthetic and artistic choices that shape its presentation
 - This presentation shapes gameplay mechanics and is integral to blending visual design with interactive storytelling
- A game's visual style does not only shape its external appeal, but also the genre of the game itself
 - There are many artistic stereotypes/standards for different genres. Violating these standards means you risk misrepresenting your game or confusing your audience
 - Visual stereotypes are not cliches, stereotypes aid in the functional design of your game world
 - Visual stereotypes help establish player comprehension by taking advantage of preconceptions players may have; these are storytelling shorthands
 - You have a limited time to grab player attention
- Think of visual style in 3 main categories: realistic, stylized, abstract
 - Triple-A studios champion realistic visual style
 - Think of COD, TLOU, Alan Wake II
 - A stylized visual style can refer to 3D cel-shading/exaggerated anatomy, 2D pixel art, or 2D hand-drawn games
 - Think of Gris, Hollow Knight, BOTW
 - An abstract visual style is for casual games with limited immersion, often with a focus on geometric shapes
 - Think of Geometry Dash
- Depending on which of these visual styles you use, players will perceive your game differently
 - Players expect games with cartoonish graphics to have easier gameplay, and more realistic art styles are associated with more realistic gameplay
 - Games with more depth and complexity tend to have more realistic art styles
- Nevertheless, rules are meant to be broken. Sometimes, it'll serve your game well to create some sort of dissonance

- Visual style is foundational in influencing how people first perceive your game; beyond that, though, it shapes how players interact and experience the game world
 - Different art styles are more suitable for conveying different emotions, they also help convey the theme of your game/narrative

Art Direction & Its Goal

- Art direction is the process of guiding the development of a game's visual style
 - This means spearheading the aesthetic choices that shape its presentation
- The goal of art direction is to manage the elements of a game's visual style to create a unified visual language that is legible, emotionally resonant, and visually appealing
 - Legible
 - Clearly communicates the game's main themes and messages
 - Emotional resonance
 - Forming visual associations to evoke desired emotional reactions from players
 - Visual appeal
 - Keeping players engaged through the art style
- Any artistic choice made in the development of your game's visual style will often involve some type of trade-off between these pillars
 - Stop sign example



- - Legible, less emotionally resonant



- - Less legible, more emotionally resonant
- Designing with only one of these pillars in mind will often sacrifice the effectiveness of the other pillars. It is important to maintain some sort of equilibrium.

- Abstraction is often valuable in letting the players *experience* your art style, interpret it uniquely, and, thus, become more enamored by it, but this may come at a cost of legibility
 - When making art for a game, you need to make sure you're still guiding and informing the player, legibility is essential when it comes to core features
- Designing visual style is all about **balance**, managing between legibility, emotional resonance, and visual appeal - good art direction is defined through harmony

Art Direction Vs. Graphics

- Gamers perceive graphics as how 'good' a game looks, usually in relation to visual fidelity
 - Visual fidelity refers to resolution, camera quality, rendering power, etc..
- Whether something looks 'good' doesn't mean it's better at conveying tone
 - Making something photorealistic doesn't give it an identity
- Art direction is essential in elevating your game so that it's visually engaging, memorable, and artistically profound
 - Forspoken and Elden Ring
- Aim for unique, not graphical fidelity

Elements of Art Direction & How They Relate to Game Design

We've broadly discussed the definitions of visual style and art direction, as well as how they relate to graphics. We've mentioned that art direction is the process of making aesthetic choices that guide the development of visual style, but what are these choices centered on?

Elements of Art Direction

- Character Design
 - Creating visually appealing, memorable, and thematically relevant characters
 - This encompasses animation, attire, appearance, and how personality is conveyed through these things
 - Characters tend to be the focal point of games, you limit how memorable your game is if the characters themselves aren't memorable
 - Implementation/example
 - Shape language - squares, circles, triangles
- Environment design
 - Creating atmospheric environments that shape the overall mood and tone of your game

- Provide players with a sense of place and context through cohesive, immersive landscapes
- Environments take up the majority of the screen space and are the playing field wherein the user can exercise their virtual freedom
 - This means that the environment must engage the user both visually and within the context of gameplay as well
- Implementation/example
 - Alan Wake, dark place vs real world
- Textures and Materials
 - How the different components of objects and characters are presented
 - These often play a big role in shaping how realistic your visual style is
 - Implementation/example
 - Consider cel-shading vs. realistic PBR materials
- Lighting and Color
 - Using lighting and color to set mood and tone
 - Lighting and color palettes can significantly enhance the visual experience; they are also essential in guiding players and highlighting important elements in the environment
 - Implementation/example
 - Lighting style and color, warm vs cool, beauty vs rim
- UI Design
 - Good UI design will improve player comprehension, making navigating the environment and interacting with gameplay mechanics intuitive
 - UI Design involves menus and HUDs, however, some games work better by being completely diegetic. It is important to consider what themes and mood you're seeking to convey when designing the user interface of your game
 - implementation/example: Deadlock vs Marvel Rivals





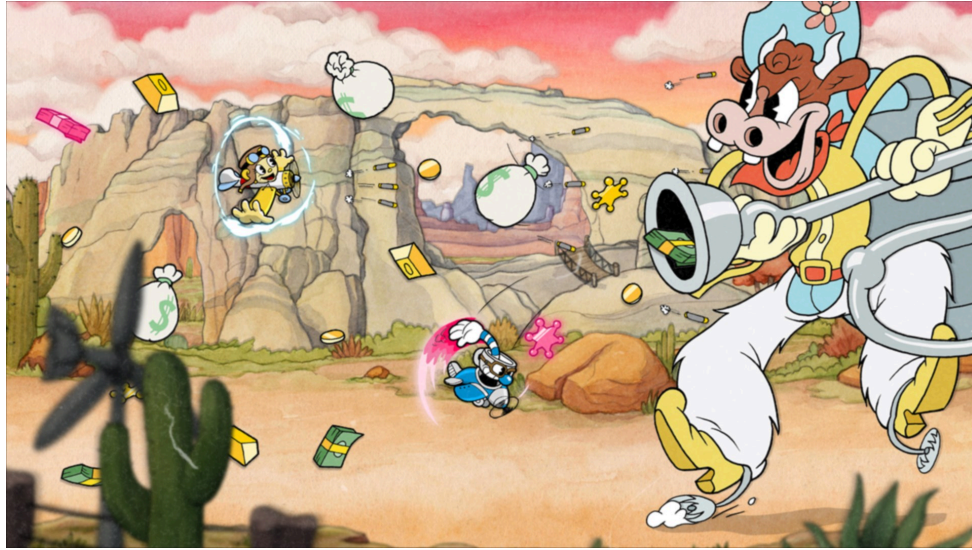
Art Direction and Game Design

- Art direction and game design are interconnected; the two disciplines complement one another, and their harmony is essential in creating a fulfilling gameplay experience
- Visual Storytelling
 - Everything about the colors, environment/character design, composition, and lighting will convey narrative elements of your game
 - People judge with their eyes before their minds. Ensure that the art direction conveys a desired introduction to your narrative
 - Art direction will continue to shape your game's atmosphere, it's vital that narrative tone shifts are complemented by visual changes
 - Dissonance between your narrative and art direction will harm the quality of both
- Gameplay Mechanics
 - Effective art direction is required to make gameplay mechanics intuitive and engaging
 - Affordances and signifiers are artistic choices that elevate level design
 - Affordances are the innate features of an object that contextualize how it can be used by the player
 - A ladder for climbing
 - A button for pressing
 - Signifiers are visual and/or auditory cues that indicate *where* an object can be used by guiding players to affordances
 - Shimmering lights or yellow paint to highlight that an object is interactable
 - Gameplay mechanics are conveyed through effective art direction, and your game's visual style will inform players how they can interact with it
- Player Engagement
 - Providing satisfying and relevant visual feedback is important in maintaining player engagement
 - Games should strive to be as mentally stimulating as possible. To do so, we cannot focus solely on targeting the brain through clever design choices, but also on providing more immediate satisfaction through art direction

- Games like Balatro are engaging largely because of the time and effort spent cultivating satisfying visual and auditory feedback

Case Studies in Art Direction & Visual Style

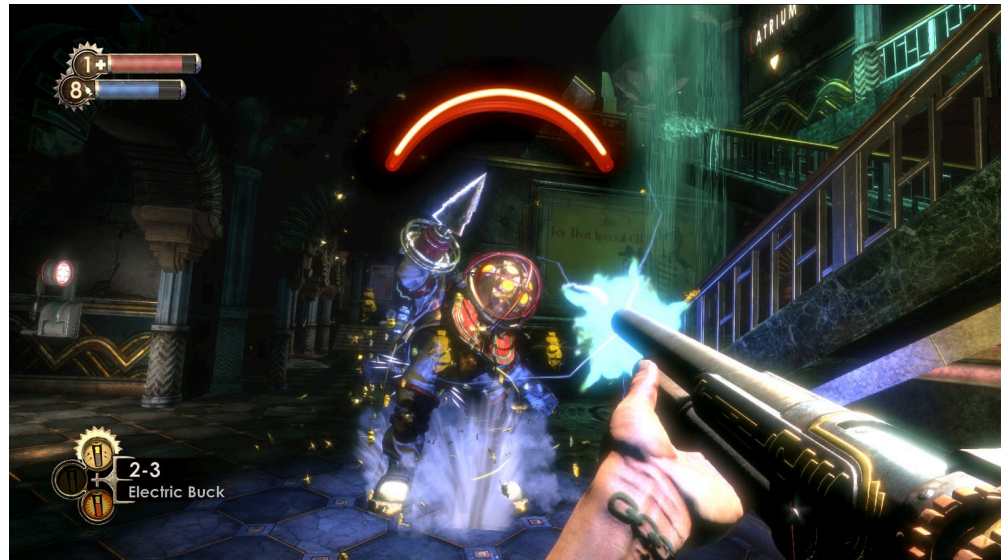
- We'll look at three games in a variety of visual styles. For each, we'll go over the use of art direction in relation to the concepts we covered
- Cuphead (Hand-drawn 2D)



- Visual Style
 - What does the art style suggest about the gameplay?
 - Unrealistic, fast-paced, exaggerated, cartoonish violence
 - What visual stereotypes are employed to convey the game's narrative and themes?
 - 1930s cartoon style tells me that the game has an old-school vibe. I can expect bendy limbs, dramatized cartoon violence, exaggerated facial expressions, and other characteristics reminiscent of old Disney animations.
 - The use of money as a weapon suggests that the game explores themes like the perversion of wealth. Maybe I play as someone trying to get rich? Maybe I'm fighting the 1%?
 - What emotions/conceptions does this image evoke?
 - The clutter of objects on the screen, coupled with the 'rubber hose' art style, suggests that the game will be high-stress and fast-paced
 - The size of the antagonist (who is clearly an antagonist due to their depiction and placement on the screen) tells me that I will feel like an underdog when playing the game, suggesting that it is high difficulty
- Elements of Art Direction

- Character design
 - Anthropomorphized objects and animals further detract from the realism of the game
 - The hands on the plane suggest an arbitrary demarcation between the animate and inanimate
 - The characters emphasize the rubber hose art style
 - This animation style cements the temporal and physical setting of the game
 - The **cow**boy suggests that the game employs playful irony in its personality
 - The characters with their intricate and unique design are immediately memorable and distinct from most other games
- Environment design
 - Hand-painted backgrounds reminiscent of hand-drawn animations with static backgrounds, thus reinforcing previously established visual themes
 - This suggests that the player cannot interact with the background or foreground elements
 - The arid natural formations and cacti in the environment suggest an Old West theme for this level
- Textures and materials
 - Flat colors, very cartoonish, no shading (except in background)- this suggests a simplistic art style that heavily exaggerates its stylization
 - There is a very slight layer of film grain applied over the image, accentuating its vintage, cartoonish style
- Lighting and colors
 - Everything appears bright, thereby establishing a lighthearted tone
 - Light colors and a vibrant color palette further emphasize the cartoonish style and suggest that the game is friendly for younger audiences
- UI design
 - No visible UI suggests that gameplay isn't very complex - one can assume limited navigation, controls, and a fundamentally simple combat system
- Art Direction concerning Game Design
 - Visual Storytelling
 - Based on the established art direction elements, I can assume that the game takes place in a vintage setting, highly capitalizing on the rubber hose animation style
 - I can further assume that the game is centered around money or the abuse of wealth in some way

- I can assume you play as underdog characters and are challenged by menacing bosses that come in the form of heavily stylized anthropomorphized animals/objects
- Gameplay mechanics
 - I can assume that the objects I can interact with are the ones with flat colors and rich outlines because they are visually distinct from the rest of the scene
 - The pink objects are out of place, suggesting they have an added gameplay purpose - **signifiers**
 - The planes are **affordances** that suggest I can fly between the top and bottom of the screen
- Player engagement
 - The trails and movement surrounding the planes suggest that actions will be accompanied by clear visual feedback representing what my character is doing
- Evaluating Art Direction Goals
 - Legibility
 - The game's main themes are communicated
 - Emotional Resonance
 - Art style evokes certain emotions regarding the narrative tone and gameplay style
 - Visual Appeal
 - Art style builds on widely known visual stimuli, ensuring its visual appeal
- BioShock (Stylized 3D)



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- Visual Style
 - What does the art style suggest about the gameplay?
 - The gameplay will be somewhat realistic, I can expect some challenge

- What visual stereotypes are employed to convey the game's narrative and themes?
 - Art deco architecture suggests that the game takes place in a luxurious (or once luxurious) setting, post WWI era
 - The enemy attire resembles an antique diver suit, further cementing the time period of the game and implying that there is an underwater segment to it
- What emotions/conceptions does this image evoke?
 - The lighting and art style make me feel tense; there is a horror/survival aspect to this game
 - The size of the antagonist in relation to myself suggests that I will face disadvantaged odds in the strength and number of my enemies
 - The vastness of the background makes me feel as though I'll be experiencing a journey through an intricate and storied world
- Elements of Art Direction
 - Character design
 - Characters seem to be human suggesting they are grounded/realistic
 - The antagonist's diver suit and sheer size suggest he is a stronger enemy, perhaps a boss? The style of the suit also aids in establishing the temporal context of the game
 - The harpoon attached to the enemy implies the use of primitive/fabricated weaponry
 - The wrist tattoo on the player character hints at some type of character lore - personal backstory? Maybe the main character is part of some group or association?
 - Suggests that the character isn't just some generic no-name
 - Environment design
 - The Art Deco architectural style implies luxury
 - The weapon design is steampunk, suggesting some type of alternate history
 - Textures and materials
 - PBR materials highlight that the game is going for a more realistic feel
 - You can expect gameplay more akin to real life than in Cuphead, for instance
 - Stained posters and cracked walls help emphasize the abandoned/worn state of the environment
 - Lighting and colors
 - The lighting suggests that you are navigating the ruins of some type of abandoned community
 - Intentional lighting guides the player to the explorable areas

- The general bluish tones of the lighting and color palette establish an eerie, unsettling atmosphere
- UI design
 - The HUD establishes that there is some sort of inventory system
 - You can switch guns
 - There are throwables
 - The two bars on the top left
 - Red is health
 - Blue is mana - so the player has some type of magic powers
 - The numbers next to the bar suggest that you can pick up items that replenish your health/mana
 - The gear icons delineate steampunk visual themes
- Art Direction concerning Game Design
 - Visual Storytelling
 - I am playing as a solitary protagonist exploring an abandoned luxury location in an alternate history post-WWI setting. There are underwater themes
 - Gameplay mechanics
 - Hit markers suggest that you can tank a decent bit of damage from long-range, the game informs you when you're being shot at
 - Affordances/signifiers combo with the well-lit health station on the left of the screen
 - Player engagement
 - Muzzle flashes and recoil - visual feedback for using your weapon
 - VFX surrounding the enemy depict that he's gotten hit, stumbling animation confirms this - visual feedback when successfully damaging an enemy
 - The quantity and variation of particles can even allow me to assume that I used one of my throwables on the enemy
- Evaluating Art Direction Goals
 - Legibility
 - The game's main themes and narrative tone are communicated
 - Emotional Resonance
 - Eerie, unsettling, solitary
 - Visual Appeal
 - Building on an art movement that is not often depicted in games and combining it with aquatic themes is refreshing
- Crysis (Realistic 3D) - **BAD ART DIRECTION**



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- Visual Style
 - What does the art style suggest about the gameplay?
 - Realistic, combat-based
 - What visual stereotypes are employed to convey the game's narrative and themes?
 - Standard armed forces weaponry suggests the shooter genre - military combat
 - A tropical island suggested by foliage and coastal scenery
 - What emotions/conceptions does this image evoke?
 - I play as a military/combat unit who's killing things in fast-paced island combat
- Elements of Art Direction
 - Character design
 - Nothing stands out
 - Environment design
 - Nothing stands out
 - Textures and materials
 - Realistic PBR materials suggest grounded gameplay
 - Lighting and colors
 - HDRI lighting, this image has little intentional or noteworthy lighting
 - Realistic color palette
 - UI design
 - Suggests that the focus is on combat mechanics - there is energy and health
 - The minimap suggests that the game will have me moving between destinations to fulfill my goals
- Art Direction concerning Game Design
 - Visual Storytelling
 - Almost nothing

- Gameplay mechanics
 - Completely genre-dependent, little unique gameplay mechanics can be gleaned from the image
- Player engagement
 - This looks like any other first-person shooter
- Evaluating Art Direction Goals
 - Legibility
 - I know this game is an FPS and likely follows the basic conventions of one
 - Emotional Resonance
 - none
 - Visual Appeal
 - None outside of graphical quality/visual fidelity

The Importance of Strong Art Direction





You recognize all these games based on cropped screenshots because they have phenomenal art direction. Art direction makes games memorable.

Let's summarize why Art Direction is important in Games

Immersion

- Through effective and cohesive art direction, you can immerse the player in your game world, making them feel more connected to the narrative, environments, and characters.

Storytelling

- Art direction sets the foundation of your game's narrative tone, mood, and atmosphere. Visual storytelling is integral in emphasizing story beats, providing context, conveying emotions, and increasing the player's understanding of the narrative.

Brand Identity

- Unique art direction will distinguish a game from competitors, making it more recognizable and memorable

Player Experience

- Good art direction elevates player experience through rewarding visual feedback, aesthetically pleasing art, and an intuitive representation of gameplay mechanics

The process of Art Direction: Developing a Visual Style for Your Game

Choosing an Art Style for a Game

- As we previously mentioned, the proper art style for your game should depend on its genre, complexity, target audience, themes, and even difficulty
- Consider the following factors when deciding on a game art style:
 - Theme
 - Consider the narrative theme of your game, and create art that conveys this theme
 - A morbid horror game would usually benefit from a realistic art style
 - Audience
 - Different art styles attract different audiences
 - If you're developing a game with more mature audiences in mind, it might be worth exploring more realistic or artistically profound designs
 - On the other hand, if you're developing a game for younger audiences, possibly experiment with bright, simplistic, colorful designs
 - Complexity
 - Art style tends to indicate the depth and complexity of gameplay

- Realistic art styles suggest to the player that gameplay will be more complicated and nuanced, the inverse is true as well
- Mechanics
 - Certain art styles may be more conducive to depicting your gameplay mechanics than others
- Vision
 - How do you picture your game in your head? Why do you picture it like that?

Implementation Steps

Pre-Production

- This is where you establish the vision of your game's visual style through concept art, mood boards, style guides, etc.
- Research the aesthetic and art style you are interested in, and ensure your game emulates it well
 - Improves cohesion and immersion
- Research similar games, what does their art look like?
- What themes do I need to depict visually?
- How have other art mediums depicted this theme? How can I adapt these depictions for my game? (visual stereotypes)
 - Films
 - Visual arts
 - Real life
- Create an art bible that outlines all the distinct qualities of your game's visual style and a general list of assets you'll need
 - This includes environmental assets, characters, animations, etc.
- By the end of the pre-production phase, you should have a clear artistic vision to guide the development process

Production

- Actual creation of assets in the visual style established during pre-production
- It is not uncommon for there to be overlaps between production and pre-production during the development process, iteration is natural and desired

Pre-Production

- Refine and polish your game's art to elevate its visual qualities
- Color-grading, VFX, making things more satisfying

Moving Forward

- If you're aiming to learn more about effective art direction:
 - Watch dev logs and BTS content
 - Watch GDC talks
 - Look through the art books of your favorite games
 - Explore different types of media
 - Play and Question
 - Create, get feedback, experiment

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