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Description
Review of *Game Art. The Graphic Art of Computer Games* / Dave Morris and Leo Hartas. Game Art. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2003.

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Game Art. The Graphic Art of Computer Games

Posted on **March 1, 2005** by **Editor**

Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>

Dave Morris and Leo Hartas. *Game Art.* The Graphic Art of Computer Games. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2003.

The authors of this work believe that "…video games are the art form of the 21st Century." (p. 6) While it is a bit early to be quite so definitive, as we must presume that undreamed of forms still lie ahead of us, it is certain that video art has had a major impact. And many are only vaguely aware of it, perhaps as a threat carrying the germs of violence or the dreadful appeal of pornography. To most of us, it probably is seen at best as a time-wasting entertainment, akin perhaps to the critical reactions to the song-sheet "penny broadsides" of the 19th century era. [1]

As many have argued in our pages, however, video games are now a major industry and the major pastime of an increasingly larger percentage of the population. [2]   Gaming would be significant if only because the continuing increase in numbers of participants comes largely at the expense of the broadcast television audience, and is Hollywood's loss as well.

The art of video gaming has also drawn increasing attention. To one who remembers (with appropriate feelings of guilt) the impact of *Playboy's* modest nudes in the 1960's, and then its increasingly less veiled subjects of the '70's, to see that the October 2004 issue featured "pixilated vixens" ("Contents") comes as something of a shock. The female characters of games (and presumably the male ones as well) have become objects of desire. [3]

One of the questions that must quickly occur to anyone who spends any time at all in a video game, particularly in the currently widely popular "massively multiplayer role playing games" (MMPRPG) such as the well-established "Everquest", the currently much discussed "World of Warcraft," or the forthcoming "Guild Wars" is a very simple one: "How do they do that?" [4]

In these games, fantastic scenes unfold in real time as fast as one's character or "avatar" can run. The detail is becoming so persuasive that one now has the feeling of interacting with real people or fabulous beasts while participating in one's own totally gripping virtual experience.

And this experience is happening simultaneously to hundreds of thousands of people, hundreds of who are, in fact, interacting with you in your collective virtual experience.

We know, of course, that the answer to the above question is simple: "computers and the World Wide Web." But Morris and Hartas give us a much more satisfactory answer by detailing the development of the medium of computer-mediated graphical arts within a broadly historical context.

That is, with gorgeously reproduced pictures, we see early attempts to create believable (or at least gripping) virtual environments, then move forward to the state of the art as of publication in 2003.

While the relatively early date of the book is a problem as the technology has developed so rapidly, to the extent that the drive for more processing power, better graphical cards and ever-more blazing speeds essentially now drive the growth of the personal computer industry itself, the process of development has not changed.

The authors' discussion (based on many interviews) of the process of developing particular "looks" to specific games offer great insight into creative processes. In addition, they show us the divisions of labor and creativity necessary to bring these concepts to a desktop near you.

If one is interested in the sheer technology of creating believable characters and environments, the discussions in the text are also useful. A reader will soon better understand the market for the numerous complicated graphics programs that work with such mysteries as "skins" and "maps."

And the very basis of all forms of art, the key elements of human vision, light and shadow, are as might be expected, critical. It would be hyperbole to say that Michelangelo would enjoy this book, though Leonardo might well. The comparison does not seem farfetched after reading *Game Art.*

It might seem that *Game Art* would be of interest to a very narrow group of enthusiasts. We believe, however, that it gives essential insights into a very important impact of the Internet, and is worthy reading for all interested in that impact.

Any work incorporating a large number of graphics, must meet additional tests for a reader, of course. Such books are invariably expensive, though the 29.95 cost of this work puts it well toward the low end of the "coffee table" genre. The graphics are, however, beautiful and highly detailed.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Barlow
Editor, *Interface*

Footnotes

[1] See Prioleau, Phoebe "A Penny for a Song

Broadsides Give a Glimpse of Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture"

http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2004-09/broadsides.html

[2] See http://www.google.com/search?ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&q=video+games
&btnG=Google+Search&domains=bcis.pacificu.edu&sitesearch=bcis.pacificu.edu
for a partial listing of past pieces relevant to this review.

[3] The issue was (un) covered in CNN's site "Money." See Chris Morris, "Video game gals take it off for Playboy"

"Silicon will meet silicone in October issue of men's magazine" August 25, 2004.
http://money.cnn.com/2004/08/25/commentary/game_over/column_gaming/
This site includes graphics of the various pixilated vixen, which often seem at least as realistic as did the early "Playmates."

[4] For *World of Warcraft* see:

http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/index.xml

For *Everquest* see:

http://eqlive.station.sony.com/

and for *Guild Wars*, see:

http://www.guildwars.com/

A measure of the success of these games is that a google search on *Everquest* alone returns almost three million hits, that is there are nearly three million distinct files on the WWW relevant to this game. *Guild Wars* google hits are very close to these, and as of this writing, *Guild Wars* has not even been released, but rather interest has been developed from a very sophisticated series of "beta events" in which millions of participants have, in effect, become beta testers for the game, while paying for the privilege. It should also be noted that, in fact, the most popular games are played not in English, but in Korean.

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