

Repurposing Concept Art: Video Game Art Books as Industrial Reflexivity

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Video game industries do not only create games as their core products, but also reflect on the development process in various self-reflexive texts. This *industrial reflexivity* (Caldwell 2008) is common in cultural industries, which use it to showcase artistic achievements, establish professional hierarchies, or satisfy fans' interest in production trivia (Jenkins 1992; Klinger 2006). Some of these texts and materials, such as postmortems (see O'Donnell 2009; Petrillo et al. 2009; Whitson 2020) or official behind-the-scenes documentaries, tend to be shared freely with audiences. Others, like art books, present further opportunities for commodification. In this submission, we look at video game art books as a specific genre of industrial reflexivity, which highlights visual aspects of games and the artist professions of game development.

By definition, art books focus only on one part of video game development, albeit one that is generally considered to be among the core three areas, alongside game design and programming/engineering (Tschang 2005; Whitson, Simon, and Parker 2021; O'Donnell 2014). We use the case study methodology (Flyvbjerg 2011) to show that art books can present video game production in several different ways. Paradigmatically, we capture two basic approaches to art books: (1) artwork collections without much added verbal description and (2) art books that feature making-of information. In both cases, we focus on coffee table publications sold as separate products.

The first category is represented by two books: *The Art of the Mass Effect Universe* (Dark Horse Books, 2012) and *Bloodborne Official Artworks* (Kadokawa, 2016). The second category is represented by three books: *The Art of Horizon Zero Dawn* (Titan Books, 2017), *The Art of God of War* (Dark Horse Books, 2018), and *The Art and Making of Control* (FuturePress, 2021). With this selection of case examples, we cover different regions of game production, namely: Canada, Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, and the U.S.

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Our analytical approach combines multimodal social semiotic analysis (Kress 2010; Norris and Maier 2014; Van Leeuwen 2005) and thematic analysis (Ayres 2008). The former allows us to address the interplay of visual and verbal components, typography, or page layout. The latter guides our analysis of verbal contents of art books regarding their representation of video game production and the video games as such.

What all these art books have in common is their extensive reliance of concept art, which this way finds additional use besides serving as a reference during development and sometimes as promotional material (Taylor 2007). In this regard, the books from the first category are relatively simple to make. While layout and structure have to be created specifically for these publications, the artwork already exists. Still, the accompanying verbal material and captions are the main differentiating factor between the analyzed books.

Our findings show that art books can indeed be considered a genre of video game industrial reflexivity even if their treatment of production trivia can differ significantly. Some, like *Bloodborne Official Artworks* and *The Art of the Mass Effect Universe*, relegate artists to the anonymity of the so-called *below-the-line* work (Caldwell, 2008, 2013), while others, including *The Art of God of War* and *The Art and Making of Control*, showcase their artistic achievement and authorship by crediting them for individual images and giving them space to share their creative vision through direct quotations. This specific focus, although it is not always realized, gives artists an opportunity to publicly claim credit for their work, something that other professions in video game development might not have an opportunity to do in such a visible manner.

For fans and players, art books offer a range of fun facts and trivia, but the information they provide is only piecemeal and fragmentary and can hardly teach production literacy. *The Art and Making of Control* is an outlier in this sense as it goes to great lengths to cover various areas of game development, even those that are less visually impressive, while still maintaining its appeal as a coffee table book. Even if some of these books are written by external collaborators, they are still an official merchandising product and generally avoid the discussion of workplace conflict and labor issues, except for minor creative differences. The same concerns about the pretend openness of postmortems (O'Donnell 2009; Petrillo et al. 2009; Whitson 2020) apply here as well. While art books commodify production trivia, which otherwise tend to be shared for free as part of promotional campaigns, the collector value of these publications lies in the high-quality printed reproductions of concept art.

For game production studies, art books represent a valuable if inconsistent resource. The information presented in these publications have to be considered carefully and critically as *promotable facts* (Klinger 2006). Yet, the treatment of concept artists and other professions can help scholars analyze how studios value individual authorship. The lack of a standardized approach might make it more difficult to compare these art books, but at the same time it gives its publishers freedom to highlight what they deem important. Similarly to the unregulated practice of in-game credits (Švelch 2022), the treatment of authorship in art books is a deliberate choice unconstrained by norms and regulations. Art books thus engage in symbolic negotiations about the worth of game development roles and professional hierarchies. While it is arguably the art and the attachment to popular video game titles that sell these books, they can at the same time serve as a vehicle of industrial reflexivity, defining the role of concept art in the complex processes of video game production.

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