Designing a Visual Aesthetic

TERMS

pixel (n.) The illuminated, colored squares that produce images on a digital display.

pixel art (n.) A 2-D visual style that uses pixels to render and animate the characters and environments within a game. Pixel art styles often reference early video game aesthetics popularized by consoles such as Atari, Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), and Sega Genesis.

low-poly (n.) A 3-D visual style based on the simple, blocky shapes produced by meshes with a low polygon count. Low-poly styles are less graphically demanding and more stylized than their high-poly counterparts.

high-poly (n.) A 3-D visual style common in high-quality animation that uses high polygon meshes to produce realistic, complex shapes and structures. High-poly styles are graphically demanding and tend to achieve a sense of realism.

Today, even the average home PC is capable of rendering highly detailed, realistic 3-D models. But visual style is about more than realism or fidelity. Your visual aesthetic helps define your game language and should impact your design.

1. **Discover the visual aesthetic of your game during the research phase of the design process.** Don't just look at other games, but research art and material cultures throughout history. In his research for *Spore,* Will gathered hundreds of pulp sci-fi comic books from the 1960s for visual inspiration. Use a similarly broad, research-based approach to finding a visual aesthetic in your own game.

2. **Use bold color choices and shallow depths of field to highlight game nouns.** Consider how certain animation choices influence the feel of your game verbs. Don't underestimate the extent to which visual choices can influence the psychology and guide the behavior of your players. The look of your game should direct particular kinds of player behaviors while discouraging others.

"Visual style reflects the language of your game."

3. **When looking for artistic collaborators, seek out people who understand your vision** as a designer, but who can also produce work you can't. If you have a very particular style in mind (pixel art, for example) find someone who specializes in that style. If not, you should find a generalist who can help you ideate and develop the visual style of the game as it progresses through various design stages.

LEARN MORE

- Play *Return of the Obra Dinn* by Lucas Pope at 3909. Analyze his mix of 2-D and 3-D assets. Think about how his visual aesthetic references, but also exceeds, the styling of puzzle games on early PCs.

- Play *Hylics* by Mason Lindroth. Consider how a visual aesthetic can be the central element of a game experience rather than just a supporting one.

- Play *Crawl* by Powerhoof. Notice how the chaotic, pixel-based visual style influences your gameplay during crucial moments.

- Study the book *Halo: The Great Journey...The Art of Building Worlds* (Titan Books, 2011) to get a sense of how concept art can influence visual design and worldbuilding on a large game project.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Create a mood board that displays the visual influences of your Capstone Game. For a digital mood board, use Pinterest or Evernote to collect images that fit your theme. Alternatively, create a physical mood board by printing out images and either attaching them to poster board or affixing them to pages in a notebook.

- Add a link to or a photo of your mood board to the Aesthetic References (3.b) section of your GDD. Write a few sentences describing the general aesthetic you are trying to achieve. Is it 2-D or 3-D? Will you use a low-poly or high-poly style? What feeling and emotions will the visual style evoke in the player? How will it influence their gameplay?

- Develop work for the Concept Art (3.c) section of your GDD. Draw these yourself, or work with your artist to produce sketches of characters, environments, and enemies that will eventually appear in your game. Study concept art from your favorite games to see how early visual designs eventually translate into game objects.