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Game Art Books: Elevating the Art of Virtual Worlds or a New Form of Monetizing for Additional Game Content?

Abstract

Art books for digital games are a special form of artistic expression that offers players and fans a deeper insight into the creative process of game development. This phenomenon is becoming increasingly popular, as game developers use art books not only to present artwork and conceptual designs, but also as effective marketing and monetization tools. Their roots can be found in the history of illustrated art books, a tradition dating back to the 16th century, whose purpose was to disseminate works of art and ideas. Contemporary game art books continue this tradition, but at the same time exhibit characteristics that differ from the original concept of *livres d'artiste*. The study focuses on the research question of whether game art books represent an authentic extension of the artistic dimension of digital games or rather a new model of charging for additional content. The aim of the study is to define the formal and content characteristics of game art books and to highlight

their value for the professional public, creators, and collectors. The research uses the method of content analysis of selected art books, focusing on four categories: available versions, methods of acquisition, presentation of authorship, and content focus of the publication.

Key words

Art Book. Collectors. Concept Art. Game Editions. Monetization.



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Introduction

Game art books represent a specific category of publications that focus on the visual presentation of artistic work with added artistic, informational, and collectible value for readers. The content of art books usually includes illustrations, concepts, storyboards, character designs, scenery, and objects. Where necessary, the visual material is supplemented with texts that allow readers to understand the ideas and intentions behind individual artistic designs. Within the digital gaming industry, they provide designers with inspiration and a behind-the-scenes look at development, documenting the current state of this creative industry (Švelch & Švelch, 2023). In terms of content, they often offer a glimpse into the creative process, from conceptual art to the final form of a digital game. In addition to capturing this process, they can also showcase the work of creators who rarely receive public recognition (Caldwell, 2008).

Many, especially large commercial digital games, are similar to Hollywood film productions in terms of artistic creation, as from dozens to hundreds of people can be creatively involved in their creation. Authorship is thus often understood as a process and participation in the creation of a work (Cho et al., 2022). As Valderrama (2021) points out, art books serve as a testament to the talent of creators who often go unnoticed. Art books most often take the form of a book of various

formats and forms that can be viewed digitally or in printed form. It is the printed versions that become part of the collections of game fans, thus becoming bearers of the symbolic and status value of their owners. Simply owning some of the less accessible art books increases the owner's prestige within the fandom community (Oliveira & Juvêncio, 2025).

In addition to their artistic and documentary value, they can also serve as an additional form of monetization for materials from the production of a work of art that would otherwise remain part of internal archives (Plunkett, 2023). Art books thus serve not only as a means of disseminating art and knowledge, but also as a tool for strengthening brands, creating links between consumers and products, and as a valuable source of inspiration for artists and creators. While they expand fans' knowledge of the gaming world, they allow developers to draw inspiration from the creative processes of other projects. There are many different types of game art books on the market, depending on their focus and pricing. They range from supplements to special editions of games, to separately sold products and to limited editions. Their price and production depend on their content, with more luxurious versions sometimes costing more than the games themselves. This article deals with the significance of art books in the context of visual culture, their function in conveying artistic intent, and their importance

in the monetization process. The aim is to define the formal and content characteristics of game art books and to highlight their value for the professional public, creators, and collectors.

1 From Artist's Book to Game Art Books

In human civilization, visual art is an important and integral part of expression, knowledge, and the preservation of ideas, values, and traditions. With the growing number of works of art, there was a need for their systematic recording, which led to the emergence of art bibliography. Its roots can be traced back to three traditions: merchant catalogues, general bibliographies, and private library catalogues. Merchant catalogues, such as the 16th-century Messkataloge, were among the first to list books of art in their own category (Sorensen, 1986). In addition to cataloguing, the books also served as sales tools. For example, the Leipzig Messkataloge played an important role in the book trade of the 18th century and influenced the distribution of symbolic goods (Pilz, 2024).

The 19th century saw a significant boom in the publication of books of art. This trend was supported by growing public interest in art and technical advances in printing, particularly the reproduction of illustrations (Fawcett, 1992). Illustrations became an integral part of publications, and the view that the artistic past was represented by the works

themselves rather than their authors became increasingly prevalent (Vermeulen, 2010). An enormous innovation occurred when Stratis Eleftheriades reversed the traditional order of book creation by writing the texts of these books only after the main visual designs had been created. This approach challenged the previous meaning of the term “illustration” (Rabinow, 1995). This understanding of the connection between text and image gave rise to the genre of “livres d’artiste”, an idea developed by the collector and publisher Ambroise Vollard. His goal was to promote artists through books containing original graphics (Sakhno, 2016). Before the advent of photography, these books were the only way to convey the artistic past (Vermeulen, 2010). In the 18th and 19th centuries, they became a popular collector’s item and a means of disseminating artistic and philosophical ideas (Sakhno, 2016). After World War II, they experienced a significant boom and also became an investment commodity (Rabinow, 1995). The tradition of *livres d’artiste* is reflected in many aspects of contemporary game art books. They share a dominant visual form, limited editions, and potential investment value. Like artist’s books, art books are often published in limited editions as part of collector’s editions of games. Their value lies in high-quality reproductions of conceptual art (Švelch & Švelch, 2023), with the text usually being created after the visual part has been completed.

In the process of creating a digital game, much content with artistic qualities is created but not included in the final work in its original form. We are talking about conceptual art, which is one of the first steps taken by artists who strive to create a visual representation of words describing an idea or concept (Mevada, 2023). Conceptual art refers to artistic works of production that are created to aid in the visualization and design of environments, characters, creatures, props, clothing, and everything that makes up the so-called “visual architecture” of a project. This approach became particularly widespread in the late 1970s to 1990s with films such as *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977), *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), and *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) and point-and-click adventures such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990). At that time, conceptual art was created using traditional techniques and served mainly as a basis for the construction and staging of sets in which scenes were to be filmed or as backgrounds in animated films and adventure games (Ansaldi, 2020). For example, in *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings – Artbook* (CD Projekt Red, 2011), some of the illustrations shown in the development process served only to capture the atmosphere:

“Some of the illustrations found on the following pages are not a precise representation of places found in the game. Many of them serve to give an idea of the nature

and climate of a location. In these cases the artists did not focus on details but on presenting the atmosphere of a scene.” (CD Projekt Red, 2011, p. 8)

A large number of such visuals are created during the development process, especially in the pre-production phase of the game, depending on the size of the studio and the project. Regardless of their quality, these works are not released to the public in the game itself. The term “below-the-line workers” from the film industry also applies to these creators, who worked hard on the project but did not receive sufficient recognition (Caldwell, 2008). As Vermeulen (2010) points out, artistic history is measured more by works of art than by artists. In the case of digital games, which are often the work of a collective of authors, there are few cases where an author has made a name for themselves among the mainstream audience through their work. It is common practice that if the development of a digital game title is cancelled, non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) do not allow its creators and authors to present their work, even in their portfolios. Authors often have to wait several months or years after the game’s release before they can legally use their work for their own presentation. One way in which these works reach players and fans is through art books (Plunkett, 2023).

Švelch and Švelch (2023) perceive art books as a form of reflection on the digital gaming industry. Some present works collectively and anonymously, while others also present the creator and give them space not only to sign their work, but also to express their creative vision (Švelch & Švelch, 2023). *Livres d’artiste*, Vollard’s original idea to promote the artist of a work through a book, is also used in art books, in which the authorship of a specific visual idea can be publicly attributed to a specific author (Švelch & Švelch, 2023). For example, the art book *The Art of Blizzard Entertainment* (Carpenter, 2013) contains a register of artists, where each illustration is assigned to a specific author. In addition, there is space for the author to express their thoughts alongside the illustrations. In some cases, the works are presented together, as is the case with *The Art of Kingdom Come Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios & Xzone, 2019), where no specific author is listed for the illustrations, but in which the artists are listed as part of the conceptual art team in the book’s imprint.

2 Game Art Books as Marketing and Monetization Tools

However, the primary motivations of game studios and publishers may not always be to thank the creators, as stated in the forewords of art books (see: Naughty Dog, 2020a; Ubisoft, 2021). By creating an illustrated book or collection of graphic content from the pre-production phase of game

development, it is possible to monetize this process as well. Art books thus commodify production details that are otherwise shared free of charge in promotional campaigns (Švelch & Švelch, 2023) or are not presented to the public at all. For example, *The Art of Far Cry 6* (Ubisoft, 2021) includes comments and descriptions from the creators accompanying the illustrations, in which they acknowledge and highlight the team design process: “The team always looks for twisted ideas to pack into ‘Far Cry’” (Ubisoft, 2021, p. 40). For players and fans, art books expand their knowledge of digital game titles, thereby strengthening their connection to the product and brand. The conceptual art creations that are mostly contained in art books are valuable, not only artistically but also informatively. Art books often capture the creative process from the idea and inspiration, which can further inspire other artists and readers of these books (Valderrama, 2021). In the digital gaming industry, such a behind-the-scenes look is valuable for both novice and experienced developers seeking inspiration for creating games or other content. As Freedman (2025) points out, art is communicative and helps people understand aspects of the world that they would not otherwise have access to. For players and fans, artbooks expand their knowledge of the world, characters, and storylines of digital game titles, thereby strengthening their connection to the product and brand.

The tradition of artist’s books is also reflected by public interest, especially among collectors and art lovers (Sakhno, 2016). In the case of game art books, it is gamers and fans of specific games who also collect accessories for popular games (Švelch & Švelch, 2023). Game art books are published as standalone products and as supplements to certain game editions. Those that become supplements to digital games play a key role in strengthening the relationship between the consumer and the brand. According to Roggeveen et al. (2021), creative supplement offerings and innovative merchandising strategies contribute to brand identity, which improves consumer engagement and brand loyalty. The monetization strategy for game art books is applied in various ways depending on the quality of workmanship, method of distribution, size, exclusivity, and licensing rights.

The cheapest way to distribute art books is to include a digital version with the game or embed it directly into the software. Another way developers charge for and make their work available is to sell a digital version of the art book as DLC or to sell a more expensive edition of the game that unlocks the art book directly in the game. Printed versions of art books are most often provided by larger, global book publishers focusing on digital games, such as Dark Horse Comics in Portland. Smaller digital game projects or locally produced titles may also be published by local book

publishers such as Xzone in the Czech Republic, which, for example, published art books for the Czech games *Kingdom Come Deliverance I and II* (Warhorse Studios, 2018, 2025), *Creaks* (Amanita Design, 2020), and *Mafia Trilogy* (Hangar 13 et al., 2020). A specific example of distribution is *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), which was available in two versions. The printed version was

only available as a supplement to the collector's edition of the digital game of the same name. Later, the game publisher made the digital version of the art book available free of charge to every owner of a game license. The limited number of collector's editions of the game made the printed version of the art book highly exclusive. At the same time, it allowed fans of the game to download the art book and enjoy

the conceptual art and ideas of the authors free of charge. The printed version of this art book became an exclusive product, which made it possible to recoup the costs associated with its creation via the increased price of the collector's edition.

A more product-oriented form of monetization is represented by the art books for *The Last of Us*

Table 1: Overview table of research categories for art books

Title of art book	Research categories			
	Available versions	Method of obtaining the art book	Authorship	Content
<i>The Art of Blizzard Entertainment</i>	Physical	Stand-alone product	Individuals	Illustrations with commentary by three game developers.
<i>The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings - Artbook</i>	Physical	Part of a collector's edition	Collective of authors	Illustrations with authors' notes. Quotations from the literary work by A. Sapkowski.
	Digital	Free with game		
<i>The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Artbook</i>	Physical	Part of a collector's edition	Collective of authors	Illustrations with authors' notes. Quotations from the literary work by A. Sapkowski.
	Digital	Free with game		
<i>The Art of Naughty Dog</i>	Physical	Stand-alone product	Collective of authors (impressum) Individuals (fan art)	Illustrations with authors' notes. Information about the study and fan art.
<i>ARTCADE: The Book of Classic Arcade Game Art</i>	Physical and digital (PDF)	Stand-alone product	Individuals	Illustrations with notes. Interviews with game creators.
<i>Far Cry 6: The Official Art Book</i>	Physical	Stand-alone product	Collective of authors (impressum)	Illustrations with authors' notes.
<i>The Art of Kingdom Come: Deliverance</i>	Physical	Stand-alone product	Collective of authors (impressum)	Illustrations with authors' notes, historical contexts.
	Digital	DLC for game		
<i>The Art of The Last of Us Part II</i>	Physical	Stand-alone product	Individuals	Illustrations with authors' notes.
	Physical deluxe	Stand-alone product (alternative cover, litography)		
	Physical (mini)	Part of more expensive editions of the game	Individuals	Illustrations only.
	Digital (mini)	Part of more expensive editions of the game		

Source: own processing, 2025

2 (Naughty Dog, 2020b), which were released in two sizes: small and large. In addition to size, the method of obtaining each type also differed. The small art book was only available as part of more expensive editions of the game and was available in digital or more expensive printed versions. The large art book was a separate printed product available in bookstores and specialty shops. It was released in classic and deluxe editions. The price of the classic edition of the large printed art book was more than 50% of the price of the digital game, and the price of the deluxe edition with exclusive covers and additional supplements was even higher than the game itself in the most expensive editions (see: Bayliss, 2020; Lemoal, 2020).

In many cases, the size of an art book reflects the amount of illustrations and text it contains. Art books that come as supplements to digital games tend to be smaller, currently corresponding in size to the physical packaging of the games so that they can be easily stored together with the game in a single package. Their content consists mainly of illustrations. Larger art books have more space for text accompanying the illustrations. The text section may include creative processes, inspirations, ways of thinking, goals, and interviews. In many cases, art books go beyond their artistic and monetization function and serve a documentary function. Švelch and Švelch (2023) divide game art books into artwork collections, which do not contain much added description, and art books, which

also contain information about the creative process. In our opinion, however, these two types represent more of a spectrum with a ratio of image and text content. The ratio between illustrations and text varies in different art books and can be purely visual or, conversely, minimize images and focus on interpreting the artists' ideas. This is also related to the focus of the art book itself. In terms of content, it can focus on a single work, a digital game series, various works from a single game studio, or, as in the tradition of *livres d'artiste*, it can focus more on artists of a certain period, e.g. *ARTCADE - The Book of Classic Arcade Game Art* (Nicholls, 2016), which, in addition to original graphics, provides background information on the artists through extensive interviews. In this way, art books can expand their potential audience beyond fans of a particular game.

Conclusion

Game art books represent an important phenomenon in contemporary visual culture, situated at the intersection of art, design, documentation, and marketing. As a specific type of publication, they follow in the tradition of art books, especially the concept of *livres d'artiste*, reflecting not only aesthetic values but also the cultural and economic aspects of creative processes in the digital gaming industry. Their visual dominance and structure, where the creation of visual content often precedes the creation of text, points to a paradigm shift in the understanding of the book as a medium - from a text carrier to a medium of visual cognition and artistic record.

The significance of art books can be perceived on several levels. First and foremost, as an artistic artifact that aestheticizes and preserves work that would otherwise remain hidden in the internal archives of game studios. Art books document conceptual art, storyboards, environment designs, characters, and objects that are essential to the visual identity of games but often do not appear in the final product. In this context, they also serve as a tool for recognizing the work of "invisible" creators, artists, designers, and illustrators whose names rarely go beyond the boundaries of the development team. Art books thus play an important role in acknowledging authorship and conveying the artistic vision of both individuals and entire teams. At the same time, art books fulfill an important documentary and educational function. They allow professionals and the wider public to gain insight into the creative process, inspiration, development of ideas, and aesthetic decisions behind the development of digital games. In this respect, they are of exceptional value to students and professionals in the fields of design, game art, visual communication, and other creative disciplines, offering them authentic material for study, analysis, and reflection. Art books thus create a kind of "visual archive" of contemporary pop culture and digital art.

The third aspect is their commercial and strategic potential. Art books have become an established tool for marketing and monetization.

Publishing art books as part of collector's editions, limited series, or standalone products expands the monetization possibilities of other outputs from the digital game creation process. At the same time, they strengthen the loyalty and engagement of the fan community, which perceives art books not only as an aesthetic experience but also as a symbol of status and relationship to the brand. The collector's value of printed art books, especially in limited editions, takes on the character of an investment.

The variability of forms and processing, from digital versions and small game supplements to extensive publications with exclusive designs, shows that game art books are not homogeneously defined by genre, but are a dynamic phenomenon that reflects the diversity of the gaming industry, authorial approaches, and the expectations of target groups. The ratio between the visual and textual components, the manner of presenting authorship, and the focus on a single work or an entire studio influence the final form of the art book and its position within visual culture.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that game art books are a unique intersection between a work of art, a document, and a product. Despite their primarily visual nature, they are an important medium of knowledge, memory, and cultural reflection. They transcend the scope of fan merchandise and become carriers of the visual memory of the digital age. Their importance

is growing not only as aesthetic collectibles, but also as tools for recognizing authorship, mediating creative processes, and strategic means in the cultural industry. Therefore, it is necessary to examine them not only in the field of game studies, but also in the broader context of media, cultural, and visual studies.

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