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Proposed Question

How has Surrealism been reinvented and used in online culture and game development?

The three words that this proposal will be investigating are Surrealism, concept, and digital in relation to art practices. I will be inspecting these three themes through the lens of internet culture and game development, using these to develop an understanding which will improve the creation and illustration of ideas. Additionally, my focus will be drawn towards how concept art is specifically created for video game projects; instead of alternative media. My key words and the material I research will be utilised in my practice for my third-year project, informing my thinking in a vital manner as I go on to develop concept work for a fictional video game project.

Surrealism

One's life as a social being is caught up in the constant generation of new "things," a never-ending stream of objectivations—and at a particularly frantic pace, in the Internet age. This, however, is the very battlefield upon which Surrealism sets itself the task of generating things that further its own ends: love, desire, the marvelous.

Hansen, 2016, p. 73

Surrealism was a French art movement that developed in the very early years of the 20th century. Born from a branch of the Dadaist movement (founded in Switzerland) which was shaped into a new genre by André Breton through the creation of his extensive manifestos on the subject (Kuščević and Brajčić, 2022). Within one of his first

manifestos, Breton, in the October 1924, went on to define Surrealism as “Pure psychic automatism” and “Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation.”



Figure 1: Remedios Varo, *La creación de las aves*, Oil, 1957

Surrealism evolved drastically from the initial manifesto, with the movement taking on a life of its own. The Surrealists themselves “...were receptive to such notions of magic and magical objects...” (Atkin, 2023, p. 1-16), beginning to stray from Breton’s initial idea of automatism by inventing and imagining, in detail, concepts such as alchemy and sorcery. While these topics were non-sensical, the surrealists painted

these themes in a way that gave the concepts an adequate amount of tangibility, making the artworks seem as though the topics depicted held conceivable sense and reason. An example of this is Remedios Varo's work, as pictured above in *Figure 1*. Everything feels as though it comes from somewhere instead of being more of a collection of figures, as demonstrated in Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (seen in *Figure 2*).

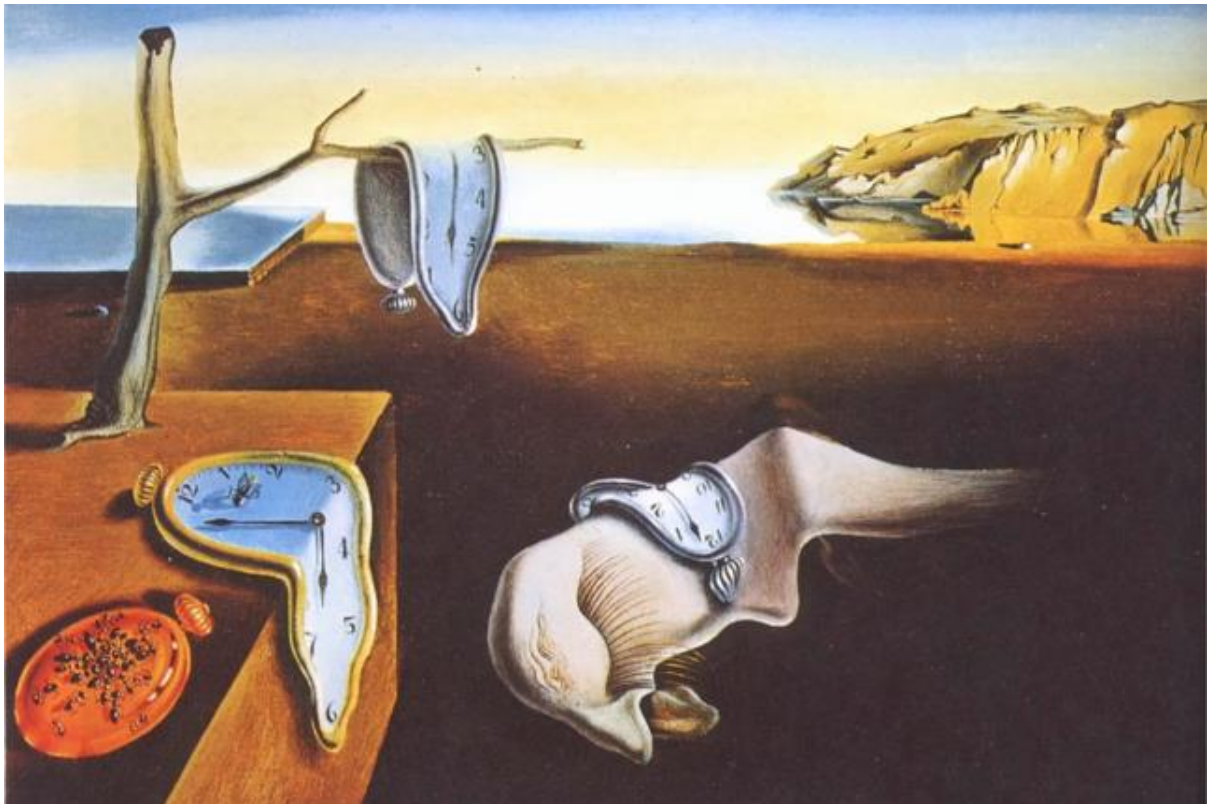


Figure 2: Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Memory*, Oil, 1931

Within the five years following Breton writing his initial manifesto Surrealism was shaped by the artists who took part in it. Due to this, Breton thought to redefine his

movement, to the point where “The year 1929 was one of crisis and redirection for Surrealism” (Rubin, 1978, p. 107). In Breton’s updated manifesto “Virtually nothing was said about automatism, which had been a central tenet in the original manifesto” (Rubin, 1978, p. 109), while this suggests that Breton was open to the idea of his movement changing, he desired Surrealism to be isolated to a closed off group who would instead evolve the movement amongst themselves (Alexandrian, 1976, p. 218), for it to become something that “...sought to appeal only to adepts...” (Alexandrian, 1976, p. 218).

Breton’s success in isolating the Surrealists was promptly destroyed when the movement was practically reinvented in the early ages of the internet. Weirdcore, and other “aesthetics” that followed the same naming convention (-core) dramatically spread in the early 2020s (Aesthetics Wiki, n.d.). Weirdcore itself, and it’s “sister aesthetic” dreamcore, adopted the philosophy of producing work that looked as though it was from a “half remembered dream, or from a memory that doesn’t belong to you” (Adobe Express, 2025) but with a technology and internet themed twist. It “draws heavily from early 2000s internet visuals, analogue tech, and low-resolution photography” (Adobe Express, 2025), and has become the new Surrealism for many internet artists.

The imagery being produced by the creatives of Weirdcore and Surrealism follow a similar line of thought, with both holding their interest in “... the subconscious,

unexpressed states of the human spirit...”, they all lean into “contradictions, dreams, hallucinations, and fantasies” (Kušćević and Brajčić, 2022, p. 85) resonating with the viewer in odd ways. An example of this is seen in *Figure 3*.



Figure 3: Weirdcore Collage by Water_Fowl on Pinterest

The themes of Weirdcore and Surrealism are important to consider when it comes to seeing how these genres find their place in the visual of video games. A

pioneer in the Surrealist and strange video game genre is *LSD Dream Emulator* (1998), described as “what you would call an ultimate surreal experience” (Hilmy S, 2025).¹



Figure 4: Osamu Sato, *LSD Dream Emulator*, 1998

Osamu Sato’s *LSD Dream Emulator* (as seen in Figure 4) is meant to be perceived as more of a piece of “interactive art” (Hilmy S, 2025) instead of a game. The visuals it holds in its gameplay, which consists of walking from location to location, went on to inspire other games and creatives who began to lay down the foundations of

¹ “Hilmy S” is the authors username on the platform the article was published on, and not a mistyped citation.

weirdcore. Copying the look and feel of this late 90s surreal-feeling game became the blueprint for further games of the same genre.



Figure 5: Kikiyama, Yume Nikki, 2004

Yume Nikki (as seen in *Figure 5*), translated directly to “dream diary” (Hilmy S, 2025) is a 2D game that follows the same progression as *LSD Dream Emulator* with a darker twist. It is “heavily praised for its dream-like environment that sticks to the players mind” (Hilmy S, 2025) and projects as another inspiration for the weirdcore aesthetic that follows surrealism, with a notable influence from dreams.

Leaning into the absurdism of Surrealism is another game called *Hylics* (seen in Figure 6). *Hylics* takes its art and narrative direction down a unique path. Non-Playable-Characters speak in randomly generated nonsense that tries to seem as though it means something, despite being different in each playthrough (Johnston, 2024). Meanwhile, the visuals were crafted by combining photo imagery, 3D modelling, and layered texture, with it being said that “No other game looks like *Hylics*” (Johnston, 2024); but what exactly goes into the look of a game?

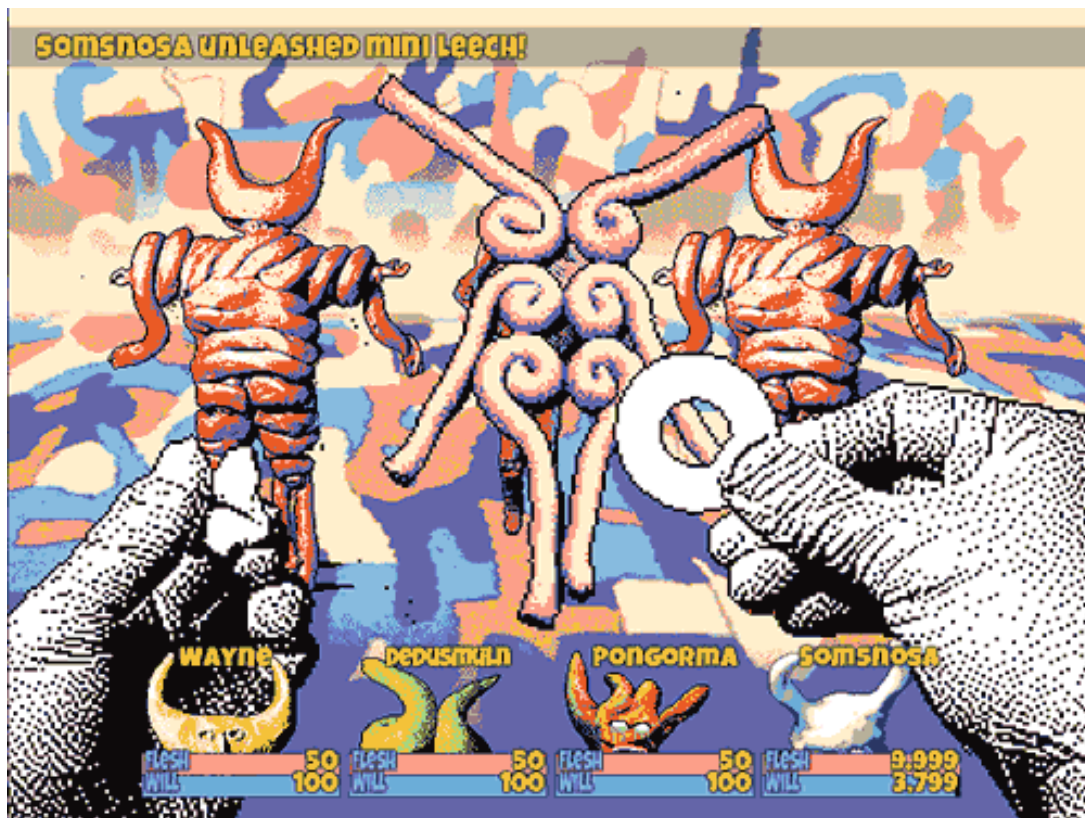


Figure 6: Mason Lindroth, *Hylics*, 2015

Concept

As a world builder, you need to provide enough content through extensive brainstorming, sketching and research to give storytellers or games masters a boundary and direction, but without being so broad as to leave them with too many options.

Macbain, 2018, p. 69-75

It would be impossible to discuss creating a set of concept art without investigating the topic, those who practice it, their advice, and their work. Concept art is about delivering ideas in a way that allows others to instantly understand more about the idea and the world it is set in without having any background knowledge (Macbain, 2018, p. 69-75). Concept artists do not have to worry about creating visually exceptional pieces and should instead just be “focusing on telling the story through the image” (Macbain, 2018, p. 69-75).

Concept artist Gary Evans gave advice to *Imagine FX* in 2019 relating to pursuing a career in concept art. Evans says that “You get to live in your imagination” (2019, p. 19-25) but that “You need to be a great communicator” (2019, p. 19-25). This separates concept art from hobbyist character design, bringing in a higher level of responsibility to communicate to the audience instead of just delighting in self-indulgence. In the article Evans also references Christian Alzmann (visual effects director, illustrator, and concept artist; work seen in *Figure 7*), Evan’s paraphrasing Alzmann’s words as “it’s not uncommon to work on a design for months, only for it to be cut from the final film”

(2019, p. 19-25), this shows that being too precious about ideas and trying to force them to work can be detrimental to workflow and morality. Continuing the trend of brutal honesty about the profession, Evans goes on to state that “Concept art is labor-intensive. Concept art is hard to get good at and harder to get a job in” (2019, p. 19-25). While this highlights the reality of being a concept artist, this statement also serves to inform readers of the approach in mindset that this field needs.



Figure 7: Work by Christian Alzmann, 2010

Other professional concept artists tend to offer more general advice which could be applied to most forms of design, but hold special weight when it comes to concept art. Statements such as “Study the brief and begin collating your ideas” (Imagine FX, 2024 p. 76-81) and “Good concept artists spend as much time researching and thinking as they do drawing” (Griggs, 2025, p. 85) put stress on collecting information before committing to developing ideas, echoing Alzmann’s sentiment around having to throw ideas away if they do not fit into the project's needs; comments like this also suggest that the concept artist should take initiative over research instead of waiting for an art director to tell them what to do. Artists also suggest methods such as style studies (Imagine FX, 2024 p. 76-81), planning a basic idea of the characters all at once so that the characters feel from the same world (Macbain, 2018, 69-75), and fundamentals such as perspective and lighting (Evans, 2019, p. 19-25) as a way to greatly improve output and enjoyment.

Despite research into the works of others and photography being a major part of the development process, studies have shown that creatives generate better ideas out of their own minds instead of pulling and reinventing the ideas of others (Williford, 2023). Macbain, a concept artist previously mentioned, advises that “An excellent way to make your worlds believable is to reference things that exist in real life” (Macbain, 2018, p. 69-75), but this is advice that must be taken in moderation. With Evans confirming this a year later in 2019, reiterating that one shouldn’t make “...derivative works of other people's interpretations...” (p. 19-25), and that “...it's better to go to the

source material and interpret it for yourself” (p. 19-25). Williford’s article on a study from 2023 explicitly states that those conducting the study “found that people are more creative when they generate their own preinventive forms as opposed to building off of pre-existing ones” (2023, p. 1-7), yet some participants thrived when given basic shape silhouette to build from, with the explanation being expanded on as “Ambiguity has long been considered a useful tool in the creative process for designers, artists, and other creative professionals” (2023, p. 1-7). Each creative’s process is different, and the way they execute their art is unique, shown by how some enjoyed the ambiguity of the shapes while others preferred brainstorming their own ideas. The mediums that are implemented by artists also differ, and this proposal will investigate one of the popular choices.

Digital

There is no set date that marks the birth of digital art as a medium. For many, the medium emerged out of a long, asynchronous history, first from avant-garde movements of the 1970’s including minimalism and conceptual art, and later, performance and pop art.

Gilbert, 2018, p. 575

Digital art is a new (as far as art mediums go) and developing medium that has a lack of documented history through an academic viewpoint, the book *Critical Digital Art History* investigates this, reflecting that “there often seems to be a lack of interest or awareness of the theory around digital art within the field of DAH [Digital Art History] today” (Wasielewski and Näslund, 2024, p. 11). DAH also seems monumentally difficult to document as “Digital technology has touched not only every aspect of artistic practice over the last twenty years but also every aspect of the art world” (Wasielewski and Näslund, 2024, p. 13), making it a burdensome topic to separate and archive. Tansym Gilbert, a sociologist, poses the question of “What are the boundaries and scale of digital art?” (2018, p. 576), yet nobody seems to have been able to provide a solid answer. Despite questioning the solid boundaries of digital art, it “was defined in the 1990s as artwork that takes the digital as its primary medium (a difficult boundary to determine, as noted)” (Wasielewski and Näslund, 2024, p. 12), and that “Digital art often does not fit the model of a singular, discrete work that is easily photographed and slotted in as a database entry” (Wasielewski and Näslund, 2024, p. 11).

Digital art has gained popularity across most demographics for its accessibility, the tools to create digital art are “... faster, better, and cheaper every day” and that “it may even be safe to say that there isn't a dream or creative vision that is beyond realization” (Warnock, 2010, cited in DTotal.com, 2010). While beforehand most creative works were made almost exclusively by professionals (Lopez, 2010, p. 70) this newfound accessibility has brought new artists in, expanding the range of resources

available for those who want to learn.



Figure 8: “Horse Faction” by Tomasz Jedrusek, 2018

Tomasz Jedrusek (work seen in *Figure 8*) is a freelance illustrator, concept artist, art director, and teacher. Jedrusek’s work often explores fantasy and historical spaces within fictional settings, and he has produced work for games such as *Magic The Gathering* and *Flesh and Blood*. In DTotal.com’s book *Digital Art Masters: Volume 5*, Jedrusek gives the advice of “Never be afraid to lose sight of the idea if you feel there could be a successful solution: It always pays off in the end” (2010, p. 187), encouraging those picking up digital art to keep going with their ideas, improve on their talents, and see them through until their eventual end product.

My Practice & Proposal

These three themes that have been investigated throughout this proposal (Surrealism, concept, and digital) are significant to the project. I will be creating a set of concept art visuals for a fictitious game titled *God Race*. *God Race* will be combining themes of the digital and real world in a way that takes from weirdcore and Surrealist aesthetics, developed through a digital art form. This will feature characters and settings of different stylisation (as demonstrated in *Figure 9*) to emphasise the surreal inspiration offering a uniquely intriguing world.



Figure 9: God Race illustration by Evie Canny, 2026

Throughout this proposal I have been inspired by subjects that originally brought me to digital art and how they have gone on to influence how I create artworks and develop ideas. I found myself exploring the odd corners of the internet as soon as I had a device in my hands, and the strange independent projects I found while delving deeper into internet rabbit holes. The styles of artists my own age who seemed to be creating content of a quality vastly greater than my own inspired me and my early illustrations to a point to where they are ingrained as part of my inner world. Building on this vast and constantly evolving world, which has followed me throughout my creative journey, and finally giving it imagery which alludes to a larger world is the next step in creating this large project. I hope to then continue *God Race* past the concept stage outside of university work.

I will be creating these pieces digitally, and they will be including developed ideas for two to three characters, an environment, a creature, and a prop. This is to cover areas that I am unfamiliar with and to guide me into growing my skills in imagining and producing illustrations and concept art.

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