

# Ludofuturism: Concept Art, World-Building and Studying the Speculative

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## Keywords

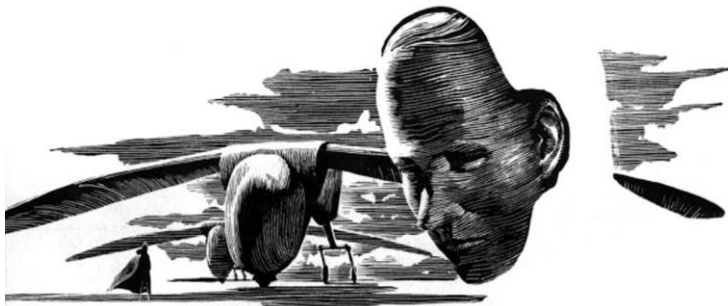
Concept art, World-Building, Dune, Dune 2, Dune 2000, ludofuturism

## Introduction

Concept art and world-building are practices which have been part of games history and pre-history since before the first microprocessor was etched. Game studies has largely cast both practices as pre-production methodologies in order to instrumentalise the topics, depoliticise itself and cut itself off from the arena of art and design culture. This paper will address the two practices as speculative and cultural, using a close reading of the *Dune* world-building process and the several digital and board games which utilise the *Dune* intellectual property. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of reading games as futurism, to expose games to the political questions surrounding general cultural futurism, and to entangle concept art and pre-production in the same political sphere.

## The World-Building of Dune

Frank Herbert's 1965 novel built a meticulous universe of dark majesty and justice, wild-eyed freedom fighters and relentless authoritarians. Underpinning the novel were years of assembled research and a complex, intergenerational tumult of hundreds of characters.



1963

John Schoenherr's drawings for *Dune World*, Herbert's story which appeared in *Analog* magazine in 1963, began the process of making *Dune* a visual tradition.

*Fig. 1. Interior illustration from Frank Herbert's Dune World by John Schoenherr, Analog, Vol 3,*

In the first sense, this kind of world-building process is a material, actual professional practice, drawing from fiction and theatre traditions. Second, it's a

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culturally speculative practice, and the cultural role of illustration is being reassessed in this light by popular design books such as *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming* by Antony Dunne and Fiona Raby. Science-fiction and illustration has a concrete and innate relationship, according to Dunne and Raby, as even finished illustration is ultimately a conceptual and imaginative invitation.

Dune's early illustrations went to heavily influence a range of other artists working across several media in order to both concretise and speculate on the Dune intellectual property. Under film financing option for two years, director Alejandro Jodorowsky's vision of a *Dune* film was underpinned by a vision of a relentless, brutal film. Stark, bulbous images emerged from the pen of famed French comic artist Jean "Moebius" Giraud. A huge world-building enterprise to match Herbert's own was slowly taking shape. But film financing would strip away hope, shearing away at the extravagance of Jodorowsky's project until it collapsed.

DUNCAN IDAHO, fencing-master, Duke LETO's servant and friend.



GURNEY HALLECK, warrior and troubadour, Duke LETO's friend.

Fig 2. Jean "Moebius" Giraud, designs for Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck, pen and ink, 1974

Five years later, as the process of the film fell apart, board game company Avalon Hill put together *Frank Herbert's Dune* using gameplay mechanics from an earlier hit game. This complex, multipart game with hundreds of tokens and negotiation gameplay also contained hundreds of illustrated elements by a team of artists, including painted frotispieces by Jean Baer.



Fig 3. Jean Baer, *Frank Herbert's Dune: Expansion Module*, unknown medium, 1978-9

The more anatomically restrained and lower-quality finish of the character designs - notable in their distended perspectives and double-line errors - look a great deal more like the *Dune* of David Lynch's film in 1984 than Giraud just a few years earlier.



Once established and codified by the Lynch film, future videogame artwork would riff and reference off the designs. Nowhere is this more evident than in Westwood Studio's Dune 2. The artwork has become austere, the characters stern. The context of the game makes the Harkonnen and Ordos more sympathetic.

Fig 4. Screenshot from Westwood Studio's Dune 2 (1992)

### Paratexts and Cultural Parhelia

Mia Consalvo's expansion of the definition of paratexts in several articles and her 2009 book *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* builds the case to see pre-release gaming ephemera as cultural objects in and of themselves. In an earlier paper on *Zelda*, Consalvo argued that walkthroughs were a narrative extension of the game experience, phasing player relationships between different stories.

Perhaps a world-building process such as *Dune's*, and concept art more broadly, can be partially interpreted through a cultural materialism approach like that evinced by Consalvo. But images also bounce off each other, and when those images are created for games, they are drawn, designed and performed entirely differently. The creators, techniques, processes and entire visual histories - even between film and games - are different and require different language to describe. If what all illustrative work does is produce both concrete and speculative outcomes for an intellectual property or idea, then game illustration and concept art has both concrete (to be used in game, or in the design process) but also speculates. This paper will introduce the concept of ludofuturism as a means to study game concept art and game world-building.

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