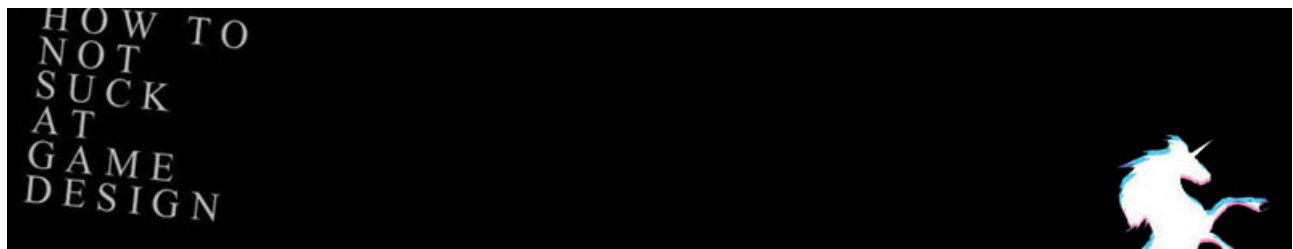This is a PDF backup of articles from 2012 and 2010. It contains captures for part 1-5 of my art direction analysis of Arkham City and an earlier bonus article. To check out more and current writing visit http://www.howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com. Cheers.

GAME DESIGN, ART, RESOURCES, RESEARCH, CRITICISM, TUTORIALS & STUFF BY ANJIN ANHUT.

This article is filed under *game semiotics*.
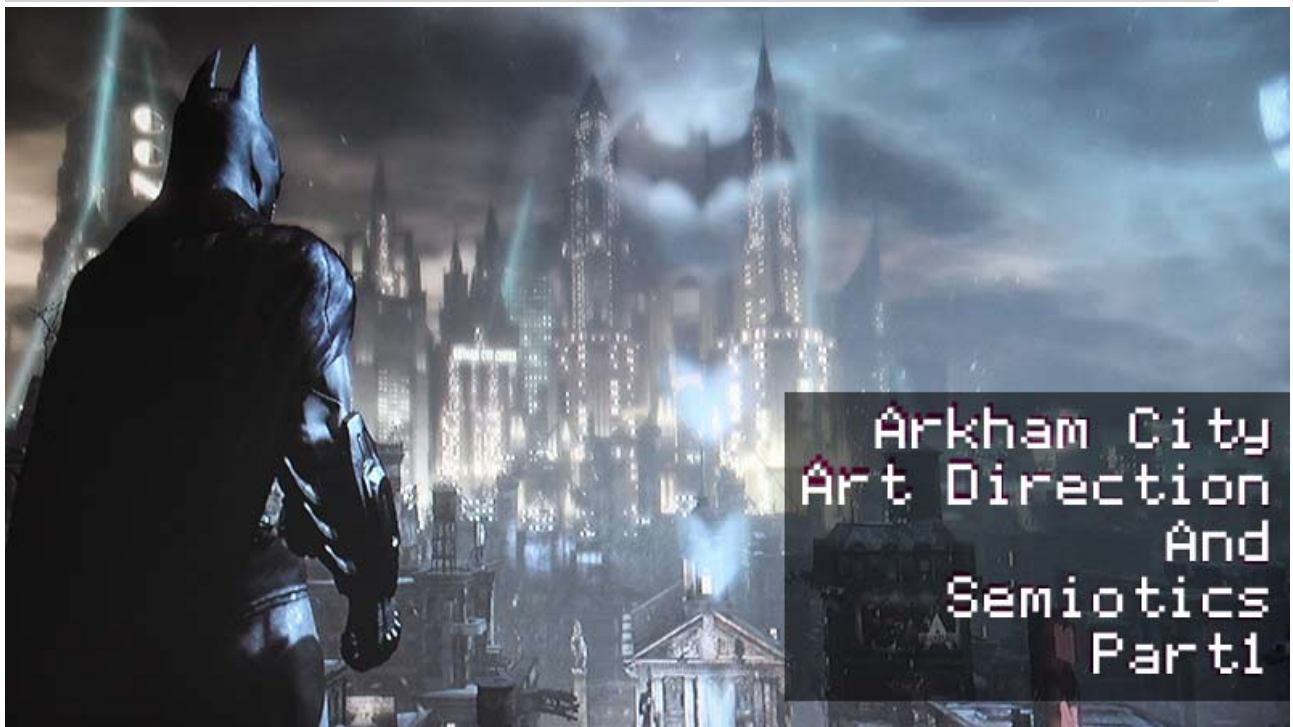
all images © DC Comics and Warner Entertainment, except otherwise stated.

An introduction to semiotics for game designers and artists, and a detailed analysis of Batman Arkham City's complex and effective visual language.

Semiotics What? Why?

Why care about semiotics and what is semiotics anyway?

In short, semiotics is the study of how humans interpret visual language and how they use signs to communicate with each other. Here is a more elaborate quote from wikipedia, which is actually quite an accurate description:

"Semiotics, also called semiotic studies or (in the Saussurean tradition) semiology, is the study of signs and sign processes (semiosis), indication, designation, likeness, analogy, metaphor, symbolism, signification, and communication. Semiotics is closely related to the field of linguistics, which, for its part, studies the structure and meaning of language more specifically."

For anybody creating visual media, semiotics, in my opinion, is a must know and important tool. It is basically a way of understanding, analyzing, cataloguing and utilizing visual language. Yeah, knowing semiotics is like having a thesaurus for images.

Video games are largely communicating with the player through visual means. In-game graphics and GUI (graphical user interface) together with sound, music and occasional controller rumbling are used create the actual playing experience. While just screenshots, trailers and promo art are used to drum up interest for a game in other media, like websites, television or magazines.

Getting your visual communication right is key for the success of any type of video game. And especially when working in teams, consolidated terminology and goals are key to have everybody push for the same effective imagery.
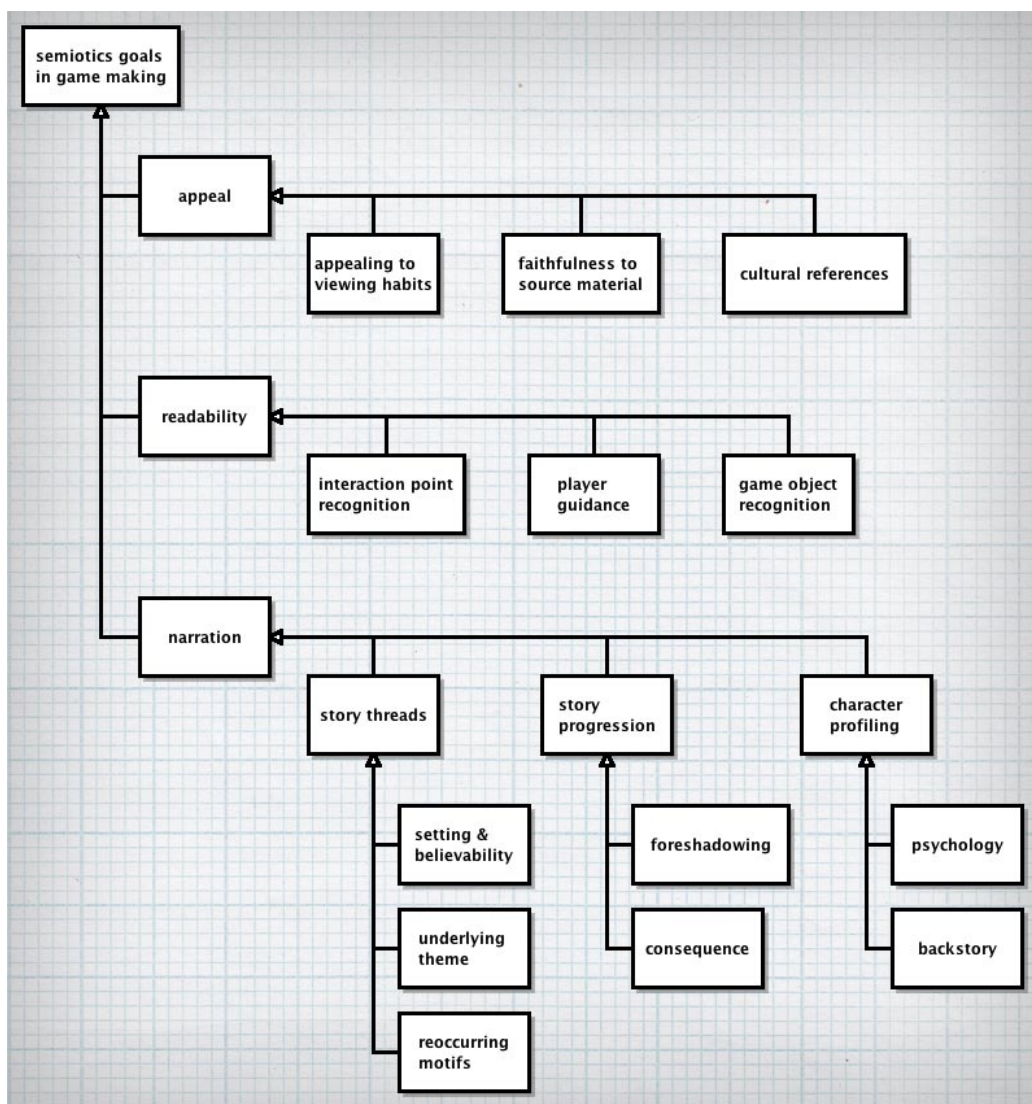
A map of goals to achieve by using clever semiotics.

Categorizing Signs

A sign is any piece of visual information in the widest possible sense of that term. Signs are not only images we recognize are made by other humans, but also accidental visual occurrences and visible natural phenomena. If you can see it and process it as information,... it's a sign.

In semiotics we differentiate between 3 categories of signs:

Icon – a graphical or photographical depiction of a visible thing **Symbol** – a graphical substitute for an invisible concept **Index** – a piece of visual evidence for an occurrence

A sign fits a certain category, depending on the intention of the sender (if there is a sender at all) and the interpretation of the viewer. Considering the fact, that the intended meaning of a sign and what it means to the viewer isn't always congruent and considering that many indexes actually have no sender whatsoever,... categorization of signs is kinda arbitrary.

Here is an example of multiple ways to categorize the image of a lightning bolt:

images © cgtextures.com

fig 1: This is an **icon** of a lightning bolt. A simple graphical abstraction of what a lightning bolt looks like.

fig 2: This is a **symbol** for danger and high voltage. The lightning bolt is used as a graphical metaphor to visualize electricity and the yellow triangle base (which is a sign itself) is used to help the viewer recognize the image as an official warning sign.

fig 3: This is a photograph of a lightning bolt. The lightning bolt is an **index** for a thunderstorm.

To be needlessly specific, fig 3 is of course technically an icon of a lightning bolt, since it is just a photograph of a thing, not the actual thing itself. Like René Magritte's not-pipe. But since images are the only thing I can put up here, we have to ignore that fact for now.

While the warning sign above can be viewed as an icon or symbol, or both. The actual lightning can not be viewed as either of those two things. Icons and Symbols are always man-made, indexes not necessarily. So as long as you don't believe Zeus is using lightnings to tell us how angry he is, the lightning in the photograph above is an index. What the viewer thinks who made the sign and why factors into the interpretation as much as the actual visual information itself. Content is key and so is context.

Here are a few contexts and sign combinations, that give even more possible semiotic properties to the image of a lightning bolt:

lightning bolt + Frankenstein monster = symbol for life force
lightning bolt icon on costume of The Flash / DC Comics = symbol for speed
lightning bolt icon striking an icon of a specific body region = symbol for pain
icon of a hand holding a lightning bolt = iconic depiction of the greek god Zeus
icon of a lightning between two poles = symbol for connection
icon of a lightning bolt above a button on a camera = symbol for flash photography
scar resembling lightning bolt on Harry Potter's forehead = index for traumatic occurrence

So you see, while the meaning of a single individual sign is arbitrary (some would say even non-existent), combining signs and providing context allows us to guide the viewer's interpretation. You can never be a 100% certain, that your viewer understands your signs in the way you intended. But you can get pretty close, if you know who your viewer is, what his viewing habits are and what his surrounding cultural conventions for the meaning of images are.

Why differentiate between icons, symbols and indexes?

It allows us to understand and optimize how well a sign is read by the average viewer. Icons are the most widely understood signs, since they just replicate how things actually look. Visual reception in general is not dependent on cultural conventions like for example spoken language totally is. Symbols on the other hand need to be explained and rely on a similar cultural understanding between the author and the viewer. Written words for example are arrangements of symbols and understanding them heavily depends on being able to read in the used language.

Looking at the two emergency exit signs above, which one do you think is understood in more languages? One is iconically showing somebody running to a door, while the other one is showing an arrangement of symbols.

Now using an index always has a component of time, cause and consequence in it since it displays the current state of things. The viewer sees the current state of a thing and then can either comprehend the current situation, deduce what happened before or anticipate what may happen next.
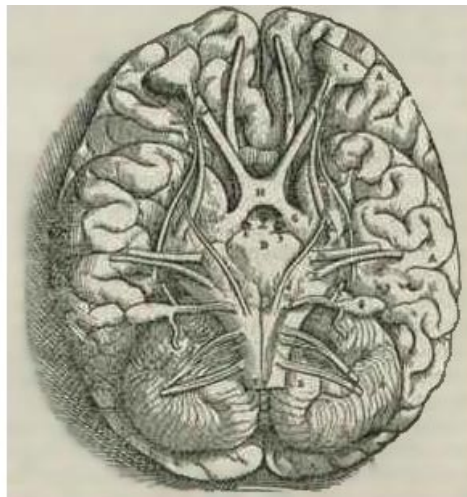
Cognitive Principles


image from wikipedia commons / wikimedia

Before the viewer can make any conscious or subconscious attempt at deciphering your sign language, the sign has to grab the necessary attention from the viewer first and secondly appear to be of significance. I wont dive into cognitive psychology here. This would be too far off the subject at hand. But you can go here to learn more. Big recommendation.

The thing is, especially in interactive media, you have to make any sign a point of interest to the viewer before(!) the viewer actually starts understanding it. To achieve this, a sign must visually stand out from the rest of the screen to catch the eye

and also instantly indicate significance to warrant further investigation.
I already wrote a couple of articles about using colors, contrasts and viewing habits to grab the players attention here and here.

Analyzing Batman – Arkham City
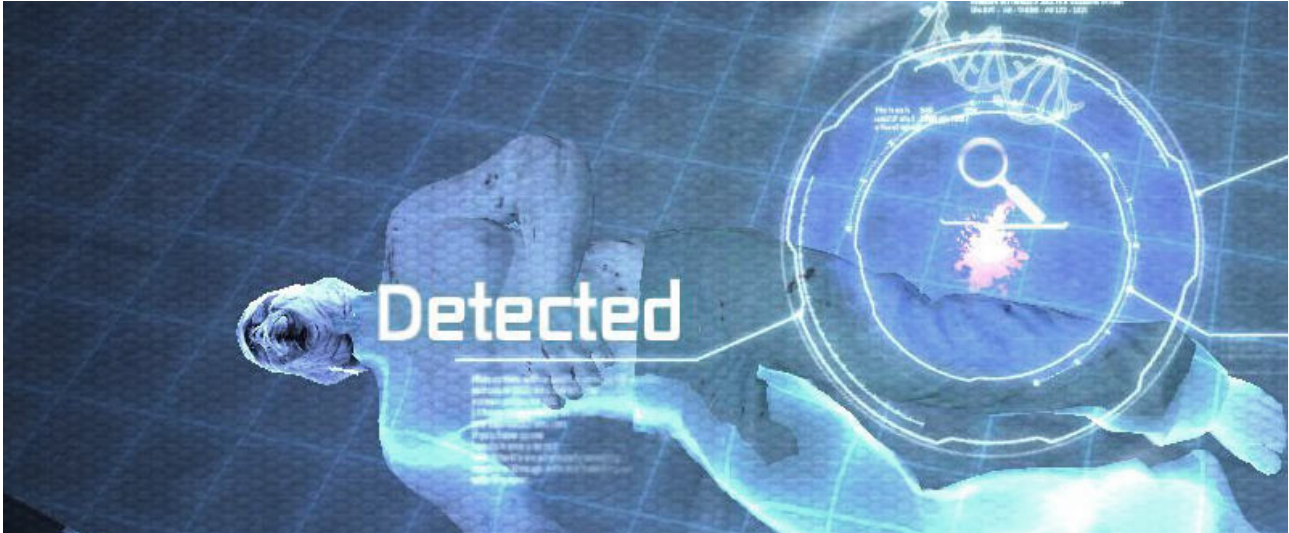
Let's enter detective mode and fire up the evidence scanner, shall we?

So, what are we going to do now?

Following the semiotics goals I defined earlier, we will explore the complex network of sign language of AAA games, comic books, the Batman universe and related pop-culture, we will explore the narrative themes behind it all and we will examine how Rocksteady implemented said sign language using semiotic principles.
For this we will dig through the characters and locations of the game (I took tons of photographs) and analyze what is there using three simple methods:

Step One: Scout for seemingly important images.

This is a cognitive task. A filter. Recognizing patterns and recognizing emphasized images is the first step.
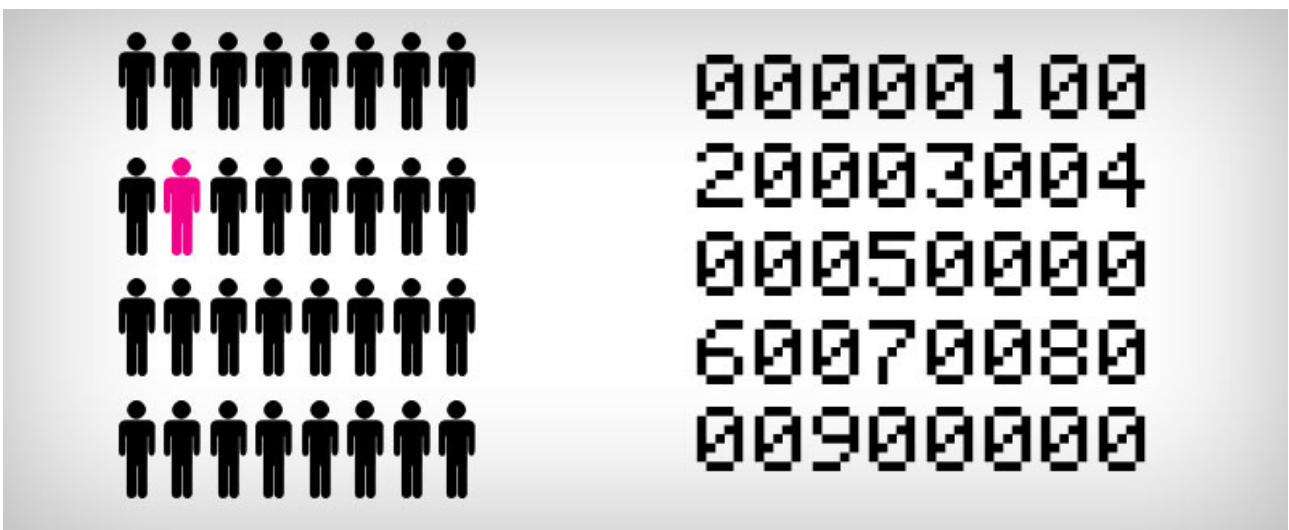
Standing out visually suggest significance. And signs appearing as recognizable patterns do as well.

Usually, if images appear in patterns, meaning there are dots to connect, it is a pretty good hint at those images being of significance. In Arkham City, some patters are easy to spot others require a lot more attention to detail.
When it comes to emphasized images, we see something that appears to be created to catch our attention. When we feel that somebody created the image to convey information to us, it immediately becomes significant. Special colors, arrangement of elements, camera focus, written descriptions, all those things can make an image seem to be a direct message, even if we not yet know what it means.

When I was taking photographs, I already was applying this filter by only shooting stuff I found to be significant. Though impractical, it would be per definition correct to examine every single little piece of visual data, since every element was placed there by an artist, lending it significance. But we keep it practical here.

Step Two: Assign images to themes.

Now, once we've collected all the images we deem to be important, it's time to search for themes. This is basically refining the process of pattern recognition by not only using your cognitive capabilities but also some additional back knowledge.

The way we establish themes and assign the available images to them is completely a matter of personal interpretation. But this personal interpretation can be more or less substantiated by knowledge about already popular themes in the source material and our culture.

Assigning images to themes is a guess basically and, if done properly an educated guess.

Themes are the context in which we assign meaning to images. The theme we pick for the images to be part of heavily influences what we think it means.

An example:

Bare cognitive skills make us recognize that there are a lot of bat images in Arkham City. A guy in a stylized bat costume is on the box cover and always the centre of attention, the word"bat" is in the title of the game, bats are part of the GUI, the protagonists weapons are icons of bats and an icon of a bat is on his chest. So it's natural to attribute some significance to bats here.

Without resorting to any back knowledge, the only theme we could extrapolate from this pattern would be"a guy likes bats". Knowing how Bruce Wayne decided on picking the bat as his totem animal of choice (see part two of this series) allows us to establish the theme"the bat is a symbol that strikes fear in the heart of criminals". Suddenly throwing boomerangs shaped like bat icons is no longer just a gimmick. It becomes psychological warfare.

Now, let's say, somebody doesn't know who Batman is (just roll with it, fanboy!) but sees him and is reminded of Dracula. The bat fetish, prowling at night, cloaking himself in a black cape... it's not too far off to draw a connection. The theme would easily shift to be"vampirism" and justifiably so.

Though Batman is not a vampire himself, vampirism is a popular theme around him, often depicting him showing similar mannerisms to iconic vampire characters like Bela Lugosi's Dracula (far left, © Universal Pictures)

In many Batman appearances, especially the popular Dracula crossovers, he officially turns into a vampire or at least pretends to be one.

Almost per default, most characters in pop-culture who sport bat iconography or have the appearance of a half man half bat being are related to vampirism. Assuming Batman is a vampire too is rather natural. Except if you actually know what the character is about. (Baron Blood © Marvel Comics / Bram Stoker's Dracula © Columbia Pictures / Morrigan © Capcom)

You see, knowledge of popular themes decides what connections we can draw. Having a vast mental library of themes and images helps a lot to understand signs in the most objective and reliable way. So, do your research and read some classics from time to time. As designers, once we have confidently decided on a theme for our own work, we can use this theme as a pool of signs to incorporate in creating further designs. And keeping close to widely known and popular themes increases the chance of our sign language resonating well with our audience.

Step Three: Re-evaluating signs using themes.

Now that we deduced which themes to look out for, we can revisit the material and analyze how and how well the designers articulated their themes.

Which icons are used to convey the theme? Which indexes and symbols are used? How often are they used? Where are they used?
Are there enough relevant signs to allow the player to easily recognize the theme? What methods of sequential storytelling are used to convey the theme?

How much viewer attention is wasted by images hard to assign to any theme? Are there images that contradict the theme?

All those questions help to judge the quality of the presented visual communication, art direction and visual narration.

Reverse Engineering

Finally, why is all this useful?

Well first, understanding the signs of the Batman universe is always nice trivia on nerdy parties and enhances your viewing pleasure when consuming batman media... your welcome. But, wait! There is more!

Reverse engineering themes and the ways to convey them from impressive case studies like Arkham City gives you the tools to convey your own themes. And conveying themes is half the battle in all your visual storytelling efforts (the other parts are staging and sequential methods).

Check out the following parts of this rather massive article series and find out how that works. We of course begin with dissecting the dark knight himself and his nemesis the clown price of Gotham.

all images © DC Comics and Warner Entertainment, except otherwise stated.

Part 2 of this series. Again diving into semiotics and Batman Arkham City's complex and effective visual language. This time dissecting the dark knight himself. Hit the Batman tag for all articles of this series. Please go and read part 1 first. It might explain a few things here.

Themes in Super Hero Comics

Before we turn our attention to the dark knight himself, let's talk about super heroes in general.

The appearance of a protagonist from a regular super hero comic compared to a protagonist from a regular western AAA game or movie can be quite silly and theatrical. A nickname and matching costume and custom gear seem to be a standard set up for any super hero or super villain. Why is that?

Well, comic super heroes have evolved from the so called masked vigilantes, which can be found in crime stories and western stories in old pulp novels. The idea of a fearless man, breaking the law to spread justice. Those outlaws needed to keep their real names secret to avoid getting caught. But they also needed to be a recognizable entity to be a beacon of hope for the innocent and an agent of fear for the guilty. And the best way to become infamous enough is by featuring a strong theme in your substitute identity.

Several masked vigilantes inflicting terror using their insignias. Zorro © Tristar Pictures / The Phantom created by Lee Falk / Lobster Johnson © Mike Mignola / and Batman.

Even if the masked vigilantes never considered giving themselves a fancy name, local newspapers, superstitious criminals and chatty townsfolk did it for them and for their super villain counterparts as well. Like with the"Zodiac Killer" or the"Mothman", people are quick to nickname anonymous evil doers, myths and also their heroes. It is no coincidence that people from the press so often play a big part in super hero stories. They provide a handy plot device to make a super hero or super villain name official.

Newspaper reporters Knox and Vicky Vale from the 1989 Batman movie, Lois Lane reporting for the Daily Planet and J. Jonah Jameson from the Spider-Man movies © Columbia Pictures. In the movies Jameson was the one naming two of the villains – the Green Goblin and Doctor Octopus.

Within their respective mythologies, the idea of a masked vigilante establishing some sort of brand for himself actually makes kinda sense. But there is a good real life reason too: Marketability. Strong narrative themes, like"the guy with spider powers" in combination with strong graphic themes like"red and blue costume with spider icons" make for a very recognizable character. A character easy to communicate and offering lots of distinctive features that can easily be abstracted. And after all, popular super hero trademarks are cash cows for their holders.

See how Spider-Man's iconic and symbolic features, the red&blue color theme, the spider theme, the big white eyes and the iconic way of web-shooting lend themselves to be abstracted into all sorts of licensing products. Spider-man © Marvel Entertainment

Yes, that is a Spider-Man costume for a dog.

So, to recap:

Themes are used by the super heroes and villains themselves to replace their civil identity with something that scares their opponents and inspires their followers. Themes are also used by the creators of super hero and villain characters to establish recognizable brands and increase the applicability of their characters regarding licensing and transfer into other media.

Batman Symbolism
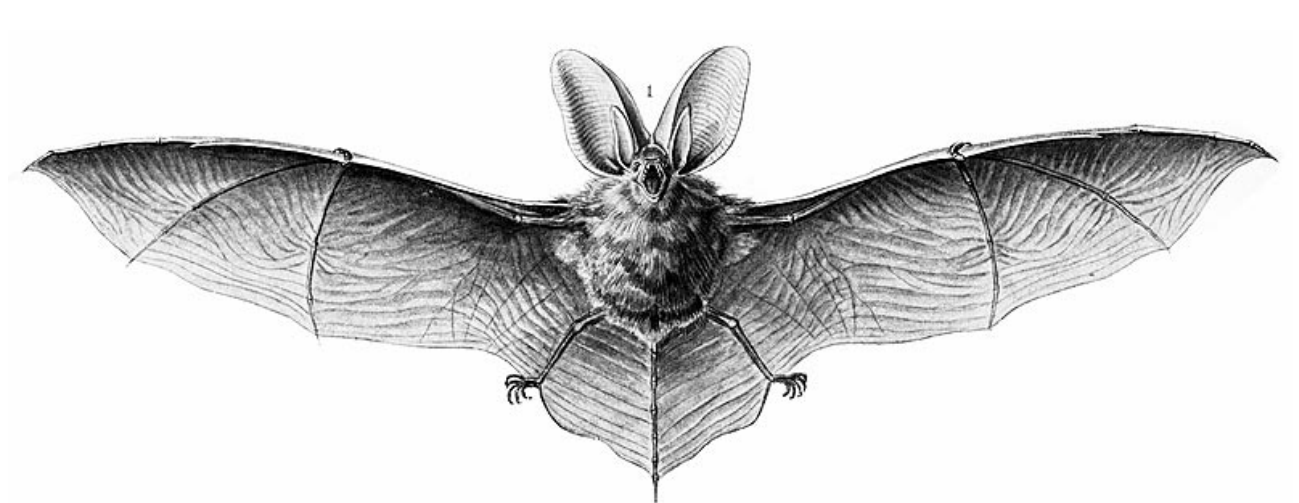
from wikipedia commons

The strongest theme in all designs around Batman is obviously bats. But what does the bat iconography tell us? Why bats?

When we examine the symbolic qualities of a bat, there isn't much to connect to Batman mythology. Batman is not a vampire (eastern european mythology), nor is he a familiar of a witch (western folklore) and drawing from Chinese folklore, the bat is a symbol for good fortune and luck, which is so not Batman. He also doesn't do anything particularly bat-like, so the bat is not a symbol for his powers or techniques, which is normally very often the case with super heroes and villains.

There is some native american folklore using bats as a symbol for being able to see through lies and treachery, due to their ability to"see" in the dark. The character of Daredevil would therefore be far better agent for a bat creature totem. He is a blind person, but is able to see by using a sonar radar, which is exactly how bats see in the dark. And Daredevil is also able to recognize when someone is lying, due to his ability to hear someones pulse, which also perfectly fits the native american reading of a bat symbol. But I digress.

Daredevil seeing in the dark using his radar sense. © Marvel Entertainment

In the 1989 Tim Burton movie the script writers attempted in adding a symbolic quality to the bat thing by having Bruce explain"They are great survivors." Glad he didn't decide to have his survival skills represented by a cockroach. Surviving is not something specific to Batman, so this doesn't get us very far. Again, why bats?

In one of the earliest descriptions of Batman's origins, written and illustrated by Batman creator Bob Kane, the character himself describes what the bat represents in his view... a black terrible creature of the night. And come to think of it, how many nocturnal creatures do you know, who are also kind of scary? A bat is actually a pretty good pick.

An alternative animal to symbolize the nightly predator theme would be an owl. No wonder, many characters referencing the Dark Knight are carrying the owl totem. Owlman is Batman's evil version from another dimension called Earth 2. Night-Owl is the Batman-Character from Watchmen and Hawk-Owl is a Batman parody from Marvel Comics' ultimate universe.

The bat in Batman stands for"nocturnal" and"frightening". This gives us two themes to follow. A graphical theme in which we can exploit the iconic features of a bat and a narrative theme in which we can have a character be all threatening and spooky at night time.

Suddenly the vampire mannerisms, the hiding in the shadows, the blackness of all his stuff, all of it makes sense. And so does the inflationary use of bat icons. It transports the message of"fear me at night" anywhere.

The bat-signal calling for the caped crusader and the bat-plane placed against the moon. Both from the Burton movies.

Batman spreading his wings to glide through the air, closely resembling the insignia on his chest.

Batarangs and the bat-mobile are just some of the many gadgets bearing the fear inducing bat-symbol.

In some Batman stories the bat-like appearance is actually making people doubt, if he is a human or some sort of demon. But most of the time the use of bat icons is just a way for Batman to display his commitment to being a terror of the night. Like war paint. In the case of Arkham City, it is clearly the latter. Goons piss their pants no the less.

In Batman Begins the bat-demon theme got explored a bit when the character of Scarecrow was hallucinating from his own fear- gas. Interestingly the hallucination resembled a burned Batman, which is a throwback to an earlier encounter in the film, where Scarecrow was able to set Batman on fire.

Batman Iconography

The character of Batman originated in 1939, more than 70 years ago, and was re-imagined quite often. Many changing lead artists on the comic books, many incarnations in tv-shows and movies and games together make up for quite an impressive library of character variations. Interestingly most variations stayed true to some of the most iconic features of the original design.

We got a tight grey dress with black panties, gloves and boots. On his chest we got an icon of a bat silhouette with spread wings and a cape and cowl, which together resemble the icon on the chest. And finally there is a yellowish utility belt.

The cover of the first book to ever include a story about Batman.

The strongest variation to be frequently found is the black parts of his costume sometimes being displayed in blue. The story behind that is not design decisions. It's printer problems. For the printers of the time (middle of the last century) it was quite difficult to print dark grey tones. So the color designers replaced the dark grey in the black parts with blue. Using blue to articulate the bright areas of black material was quite common those days. From this point the blue cape and cowl design emerged by artists like Bill finger reducing the black spaces in their drawings.

Fun fact: the problem of properly printing grey is also the reason why the color design for the incredible Hulk turned from grey to green.

A few recent examples of tons and tons of Batman incarnations resulting from licensing deals.

The blue cape and cowl version often is used for commercial goods aimed at small children, like the Fisher Price action figure above (center), which also features a friendly face and softened ears. Note how the Lego Batman kept is lack of colors, grim eyes, expression and sharp features. This is because Batman Lego, like Star Wars and especially Indiana Jones Lego is aimed at adult collectors too and not only at kids. And see how the Batman Begins version kept the yellow utility belt, though everything else fell prey to the ever-present black leather biker look which dominates most super hero movie appearances.

Over all, the character of Batman is a pretty iconic design, which allows toy companies, game publishers and movie studios to re-create the character for vastly diverse audiences and still keep it recognizable.

The Batman Of Arkham City

The Arkham City version of the caped crusader keeps most of the original design elements in place and sports a soft blueish tint on his mask and cape. The utility belt features just enough yellow tint to keep the color theme accurate. The mask design is a derivative of the popular mask design by Alex Ross. Overall the designers were comfortable creating a Batman that would feel right at home in the comic books of the source material.

Rocksteady, Ross, Rocksteady, Ross.

Check out the armored and tech-heavy gloves. Marcus Fenix could wear those and nobody would question it.

But there are of course also big concessions made to please the AAA gaming audience and their viewing habits regarding Unreal Engine visuals. Batman is considerably beefed up and his suit is unusually heavy on combat gear and technology elements. Keeping enough elements from the comic and adding just enough AAA gaming visual influence makes him a very solid hybrid design, aimed at pleasing both audiences.

Key Images And References

There are quite a few cleverly spread images and references in the game to keep the Batman fanboy happy.

Most noteworthy are references from the most influencing publications, which include the famous Frank Miller comics"The Dark Knight Returns" and"Year One", the two Tim Burton movies, the Bruce Timm 90's animated Series (Batman, Joker and Two-Face have the same voice actors in the animated series and in Arkham City) and the Nolan films of course. Later for characters like the Joker, Alan Moore's"A Killing Joke" sure belongs on this list too. All of them are must reads and must sees of course. ;)

Here are three picks of iconic bat-verse images, which found their way into the game:

Crime alley, the place where Bruce Wayne's parents got shot. Note how the two corpses were lying on top of each other. It is a clever index for both of them being very close to each other when it happened, enforcing the idea that they were a loving couple. Also note the red rose, which could be a reference to Bruce Wayne visiting crime alley in the 1989 movie. Far right, the actual aftermath of the iconic event from "Batman Year One".


The first look at Batman's gear in one of the key sequences of the game and in Batman Returns. Batman's costume often is displayed in this way to symbolize Batman as a standalone entity often being in conflict with the man Bruce Wayne.

A new move in the game let's Batman somehow crouch on wires. An obvious reference to one of the covers of the hugely influencial "Dark Knight Returns" saga by Frank Miller.

Well, I'm going to stop right now or I wont get any sleep. There is almost no end to the references to classic Batman iconography in almost every aspect of the game. GUI, combat moves, gadgets, cut scenes... everything is cleverly connected to the bat-verse and closely following the themes around the caped crusader.

See you soon with more. Still a lot of stuff coming: The Joker, Gotham, Two-Face and other characters are already in the pipeline for this article series. Check the Batman tag for all related posts.
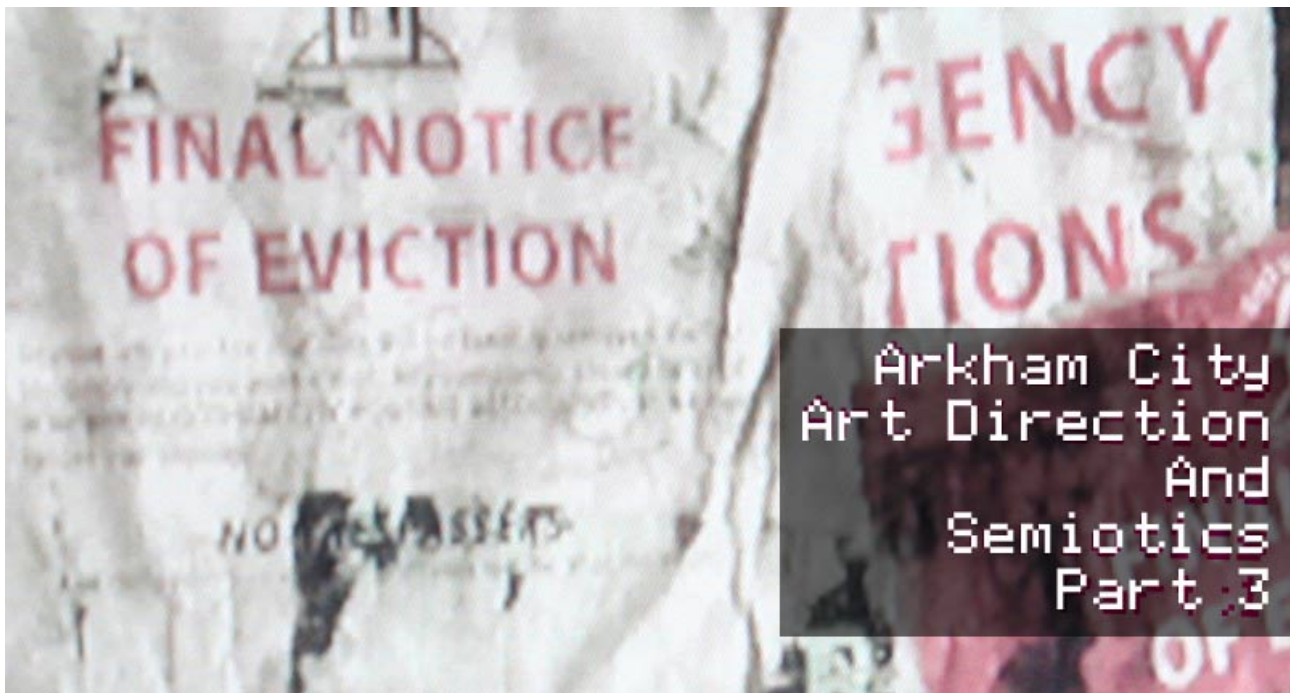
all images © DC Comics and Warner Entertainment, except otherwise stated.

Let's talk environment design. In Part 3 we look at Gotham City and Arkham City, and check out semiotic principles applied to the creation of game worlds. We will explore the concept of believability in environment design and the concept of core narrative themes in storytelling.

We dive into the story and specific scenes from the game. So consider this a spoiler warning! As always, check the Batman tag for all related posts and previous parts.

Indexes And Believability

Especially in video games, where the audience is asked to imagine themselves actually being in the depicted virtual world, the world needs to be believable. That whole immersion thing. Believability on a visual level is achieved by using indexes (see part one to learn more about sign definitions).

A viewer constantly scans his environment for indexes to form a working model of the world around him and to assess the situation he is in. This goes for his actual physical environment, a virtual one and figments. He scans faces to recognize people and assess their emotions, scans rooms for spacial awareness, scans his own body for self-awareness, scans the diner plate in front of him to assess where to stick the fork in and so on.

Most of the scanning happens subconsciously: the viewer sees something and the brain automatically tries to reconcile it with the working model the player already has. If an index is deemed to be a commonplace part of the working model, it stays in the subconscious, so the brain can start evaluating the next index. But two kinds of indexes get promoted to being processed consciously: indexes being relevant to the viewer and indexes appearing to be implausible. (check up cognitive psychology to learn more)

So, depending on how the viewer assesses the indexes presented to him, we end up with three types of indexes:

A – fundamental indexes:

Self-explanatory and unremarkable indexes, which add up to a working model of the world in the subconsciousness of the viewer.
B – relevant indexes:
Indexes, which are visually pleasing and/or hint at something of interest for the player, but are always compatible with the subconscious working model.

C – implausible indexes:

Indexes, which are clashing with the working model of the viewer.

Suspension Of Disbelief

Fictional worlds always have a big disadvantage against the real world, when it comes to being accepted as true. They aren't. They are fictional.

Still, we as game makers want the player to relate to the events on screens as if they were actually happening or at least a close approximation of that. Fortunately, the player wants the same. He wants to feel immersed in a fictional world, wants to feel aggression towards a virtual foe, feel relief from virtual healing, feel rich from an image of a pile of gold and get scared by a monster, that will never actually do him harm.

Every worthwhile piece of storytelling is always a successful co-production of the storyteller and his audience.

When it comes to any piece of fiction, in any medium, the audience is always willing to do its part in achieving the necessary level of believability to make it an engrossing experience. For the time being, the viewer is willing to suspend his own working model of the world and have it replaced with the working model presented by the designer. This concept is referred to as *suspension of disbelief*.

Looking again on the three types of indexes, this is how the designer can achieve high believability and immersion, by best supporting the viewer in his attempt to suspend his disbelief:

A – fundamental indexes:

– need to be coherent enough, so they can be combined into a coherent working model of the virtual world. This includes every possible object, character, location, vehicle, piece of dirt or door knob.
– need to be dense enough to not leave questionable holes in the virtual working model.
– need to be analogous to the indexes of the viewer's own working model, to make the virtual working model and its interrelationships easy to understand.

B – relevant indexes:

– need to be rewarding for the viewer, so he stays invested.
– need to be visually prominent, so the viewer doesn't miss his reward.
– need to pop up unexpectedly from time to time, to keep the viewer curious.
C – implausible indexes:
– need to be avoided, so the viewer is not reminded of the fact, that the working model he accepted is actually fictional.
– need to be hidden, if they can't be avoided.

That's it. Believability in a nutshell: Craft a coherent collection of easy-to-understand indexes to establish a working model of your world, make it rewarding to explore that world and avoid anything clashing with the established model.
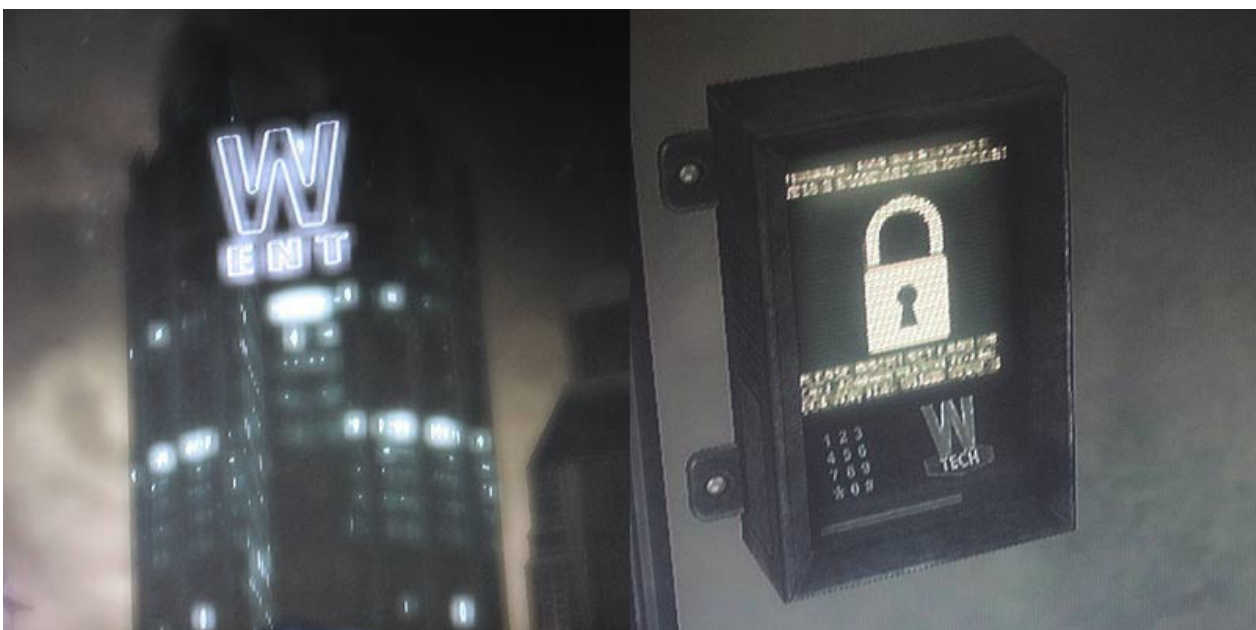
Coherence: Connections, like the wayne tower in the background of the scenery and the Wayne Tech label on security panels make elements seem to be part of the same cosmos.

Coherence: The steel mill, occupied by the Joker's gang, belongs to the industrial Sionis family. Inside the facility, many objects carry Sionis logos and marketing elements.
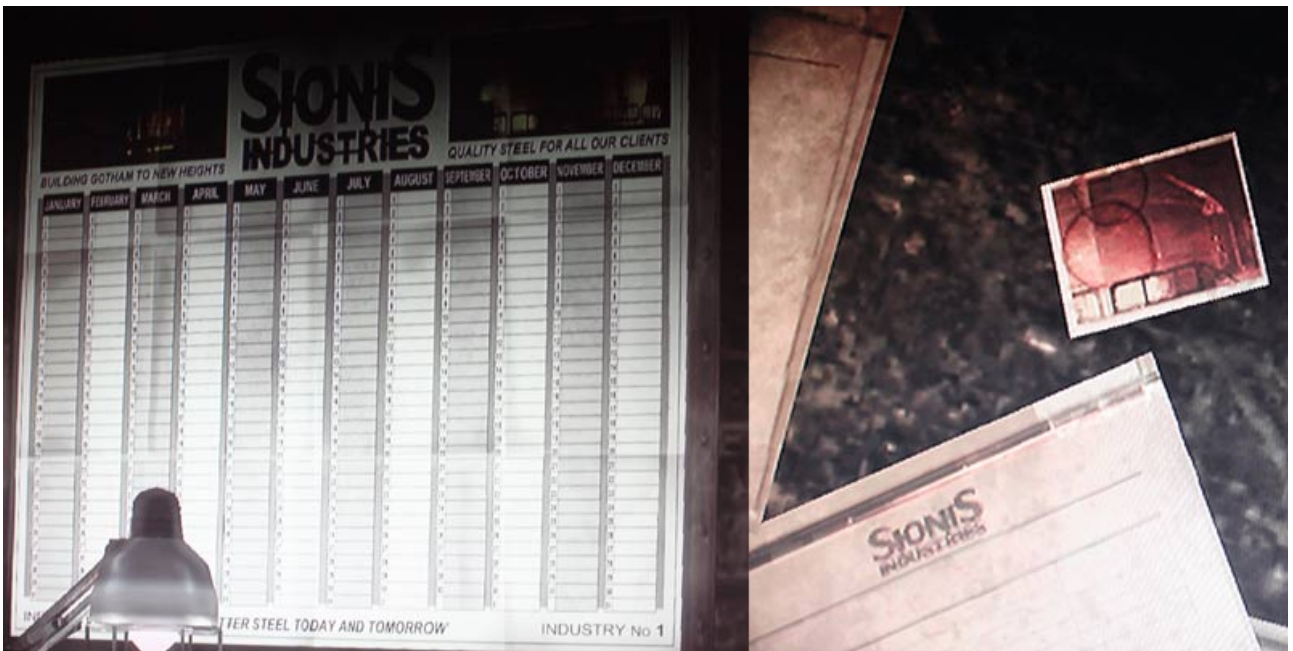
Coherence: Sionis calendars with company slogans and Sionis letterheads on the ground add up to a believable image of a fictional company.

Coherence: To make everything feel interconnected, even outside of the Sionis facility, scattered over Gotham, you find steelworker products branded with the Sionis name. The engraving on this random grate says: "SERIAL 08-751 SIONIS INC. MANUFACTURED IN AMERICA".

Making Arkham City Believable

It's no small feat to wrap all the outrageous elements of the Batman franchise and the plot of Arkham City into one convincing package.

Rocksteady tackled this problem quite well by betting on themes. Rocksteady establishes easy-to-understand themes (many of them carried over from the comics) and sticks to them. The themes guide the designers in their selection of signs and guide the player in reading them. Rocksteady's commitment to always first establish a theme and then never deviate from it, means both the designers and the players are always speaking the same visual language from start to finish.

When you now also add the painstakingly detailed and dense richness of fundamental and relevant indexes, and the almost complete lack of implausible indexes... you end up with quite an impressive piece of art direction and world design.

The themes around Batman got already discussed in the last article and many of the villains in Arkham City will follow in future installments. Today we will have a look at, what I consider to be the core narrative theme of the game, *appropriation*, we will look at *Gotham City*, the backdrop of the plot, and finally check out the district of *Arkham City*, the actual scene of the events.
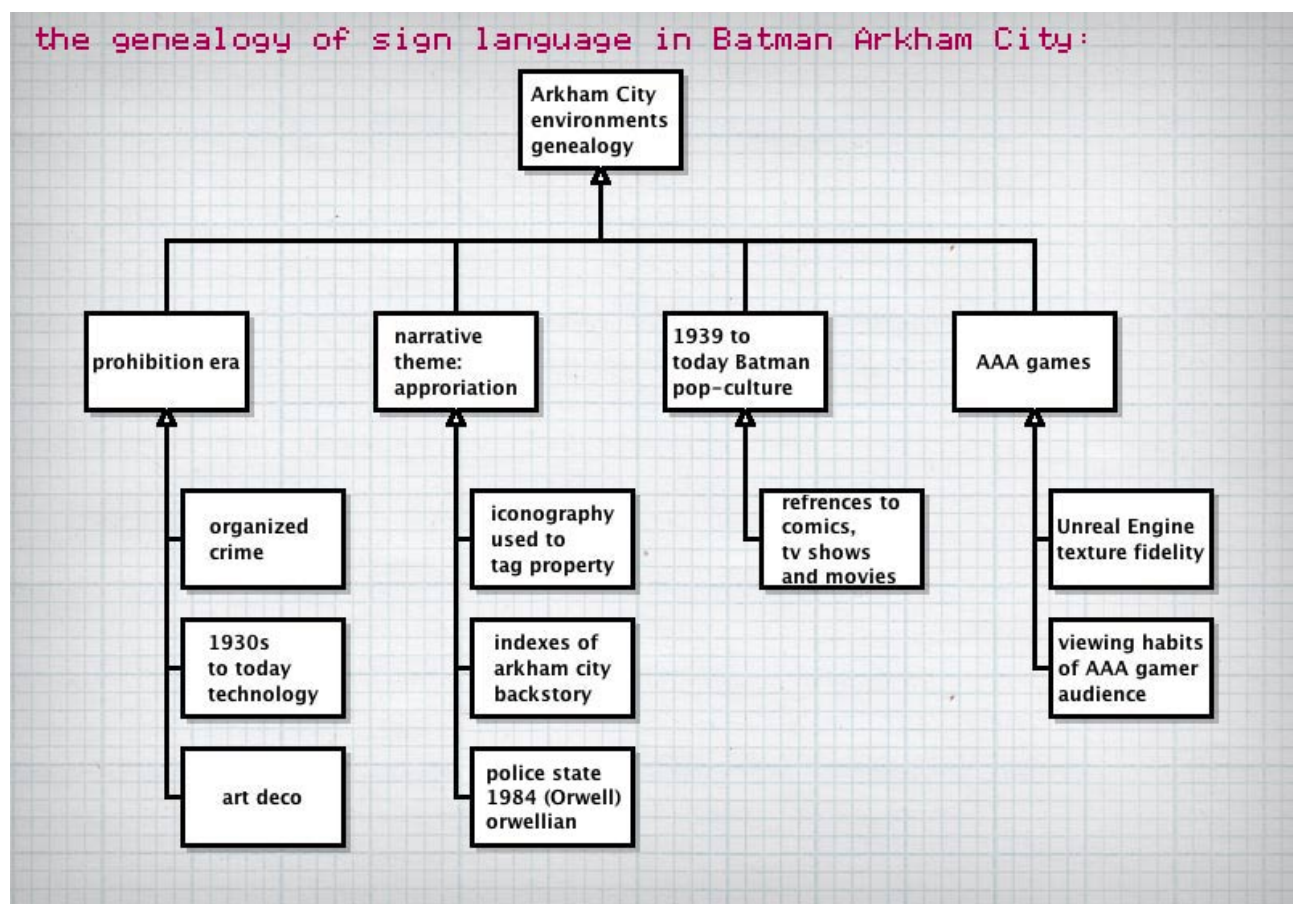
The genetical heritage of Arkham City's visual language.

Gotham City

Let's have a look at the source material first. Gotham is fictional city. This gives writers and artists a lot of creative freedom to spin crazy stories, show spectacular vistas and still keep it believable. Fictional cities are a big tradition in all DC comics. Metropolis, Gotham, Central City, Coast City... super heroes in the DC universe usually fight and live in cities, which can be depicted in any way without clashing with any sort of real life counterpart. Though the cities should all have an american appeal.

Marvel Comics on the other hand bets on realism to achieve believability, by having most of their key players roam New York City. This limits design decisions to go a long with a public perception of New York. But this public perception also makes the location very familiar and relatable. Gotham is always the town you never been to and the town you don't even know from all the movies.

Batman's home turf is a time capsule for the prohibition era. No, alcohol is not banned but all the classic Mafia themes are in place and some technology somehow also just froze around 1930. Batman originated in 1939, Al Capone was still alive, Zeppelins were used for transportation and Fedoras were still in fashion. So the design was rather contemporary.

Over the decades the design of Gotham got updated to resonate with new generations of comic readers. But the 1930 flair was always kept as part of Gotham's identity. Giving us strange mixups of 1980s hairstyles for women and 1930 dress codes for men in the first Tim Burton movie and having the Gotham City Police Department still patrol the city via zeppelin in Batman Arkham City.

High tech helicopters and zeppelins from the early 1900s. Gotham's era schism in full display.

Pillar of the collective Batman pop-culture memory, the 90s animated television show borrowed heavily from 1930 visual themes, especially in costume design and the Art Deco style used for props and background design. But the design team around Bruce Timm still flavored their show with high tech gadgetry, modern air crafts, laser guns and robots.

left and center: two cars from the 1930s (both from wikipedia) and on the right side: a toy replica of Bruce Wayne's limousine from the animated TV show in the 1990s.

While the opening cut scene of Arkham City deals with a TV broadcast press event, once inside the complex, we get set back to an pre TV era (1930-1945) in which radio is the dominant form of broadcasting.

The prohibition era town theme was also kept in most Gotham incarnations for narrative reasons. It serves a justification for Batman to even exist. Gotham needs to be tightly in the grip of godfathers and gang lords, and the police needs to be helplessly outgunned and corrupt, so a masked vigilante even becomes necessary.

Prostitution and gambling, still illegal in many US states are iconic types of the criminal business associated with the mob. In Arkham City, they remind us of the criminal bane of Gotham.

Art Deco Architecture

A few comparisons between real world Art Deco architecture and Arkham City architecture.

Art deco building photo from wikipedia.

New York public library (photo source unknown) and the Gotham national history museum.

Rockefeller Center in New York (left,from wikipedia) and a reference to the character of Maxi Zeus from Arkham City.

Core Narrative Theme: Appropriation

When closely looking at the story design, it gets pretty apparent, that the main narrative theme in Batman Arkham City is"appropriation". Also including some specific forms of appropriation, like takeover (appropriation of somebody else's resources), theft (appropriation of some else's property), occupation (appropriation of space), abduction (appropriation of people) and such.

This is how the theme is driving the story:

–Professor Hugo Strange, the government and Tyger Security appropriate a district of Gotham City to turn it into prison complex.

–Strange's master-plan is to appropriate more districts in other cities similar to what he did to Gotham.

–Bruce Wayne speaks out against it and gets abducted as a political prisoner, therefore entering Arkham City.

–Each super villain appropriates a section of the district (now called Arkham City) and makes it his territory.

–The inmates get appropriated by the super villains to be soldiers in territorial gang wars.

–Significant buildings in the district get appropriated by various entities and repurposed as head quarters.

–Medical teams occupy the church to set up a makeshift hospital.

–The Penguin's sole motivation is the acquisition of stuff for his newly reappropriated museum.

–Mr. Freeze's motivation is driven by the fact, that first he, then his stuff and then his wife get abducted/stolen.

–Catwoman's motivation and mission goals are various variations on"stealing her stuff back".

–The riddler appropriates a lot of places and people in the district to make them part of a giant scavenger hunt.

–Batman comes in and takes down every single self-appointed proprietor, while being totally untouchable himself. The end.

This theme also heavily drives the overall art direction of Arkham City and the selection of signs.

Gang Wars

A big part of the constantly visible appropriation theme are the gang wars going on between the different super villains and their goons. In the comics, goons have a long tradition of sporting derivatives of the iconic looks of their leaders.

Catwoman's goons in the 60s live action TV show and Two Face's goons in "Batman Forever".

In real life, when gang affiliation is a serious matter of life and death iconic graffiti tags, tattoos and clothing are used to mark people and locations as gang property.

Territory tags using black spray paint and gang tattoos (both from wikipedia). Right: a promotion still from the movie "Warriors", which featured gang iconography as a core theme in its design.

In Arkham City, inmates regular jumpsuits get customized with super villain iconography to signal their gang affiliation. Sometimes in multiple layers, when inmates switch affiliation or get drafted. Some inmates also get tattooed, meaning their live now belongs to their super villain gang lord.

Left: regular inmate clothing from Arkham asylum or Blackgate prison. Right: customized clothing and masks to signal Two Face's property.
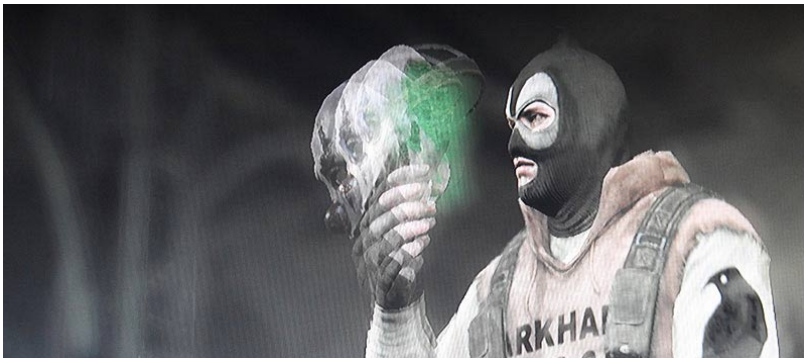
A Penguin goon about to add another customization layer to switch over to the Joker.

Penguin goons re-appropriated by the Joker and Twoface. Note how the penguin hood was the first layer and by using clown make up and scorching one half of the outfit, they added a new one.

This raw form of customization also can be found in the environment designs of Arkham City. Whenever you are in a territory belonging to a specific super villain, you see tons of related iconography used to mark that territory.

Ice cream trucks re-appropriated to become markings in Joker's territory.

Material of Harvey Dents district attorney campaign, used to mark the gated entrance to Two Face's territory.

Attention to detail: a black spray paint can, used to mark territory and customize gear.

Backstory

The player gets dropped into Arkham City when it is already standing. And we know it was a regular part of the city, with citizens, businesses and daily life before. Cleverly placed indexes for the process of appropriating a district of Gotham and turning it into a prison complex tell the player what happened before.

An abandoned newspaper stand. The frozen moment of when the Arkham City location became public.

Eviction notes plastered allover Gotham tell us about the forceful removal of people from their homes

The backstory of the government sanctioned forced displacement of citizens from their homes and businesses is a story of overreaching government. The inhumane conditions under which the inmates are held in Arkham City, the political prisoners and the government sanctioned mass execution of inmates, are a story of oppressive government.

The designers at Rocksteady seemed to be quite aware of that and placed anti-tyranny symbols in their game. Some obvious, some are quite subtle. Like this one:

Giant painting of a dragon devouring a snake in the national history museum.

It took me a bit to find a meaning to that symbol, which fits the Arkham City narration. Dating back to medieval times, in England, the image of a dragon fighting/eating a snake is a symbol for kings and noblemen taking from their people to keep their people small and weak. It's a symbol of oppressive rulers bleeding out their people. The snake is viewed as a young and weak form of a dragon, and the dragon eats it before it becomes too big.

Later the symbol got used by the Boston Tea Party, depicting themselves as dangerous poisonous snakes to not be stepped on and defeating the dragon (representative for the British empire). Today the symbol is known as the Gadsden flag.
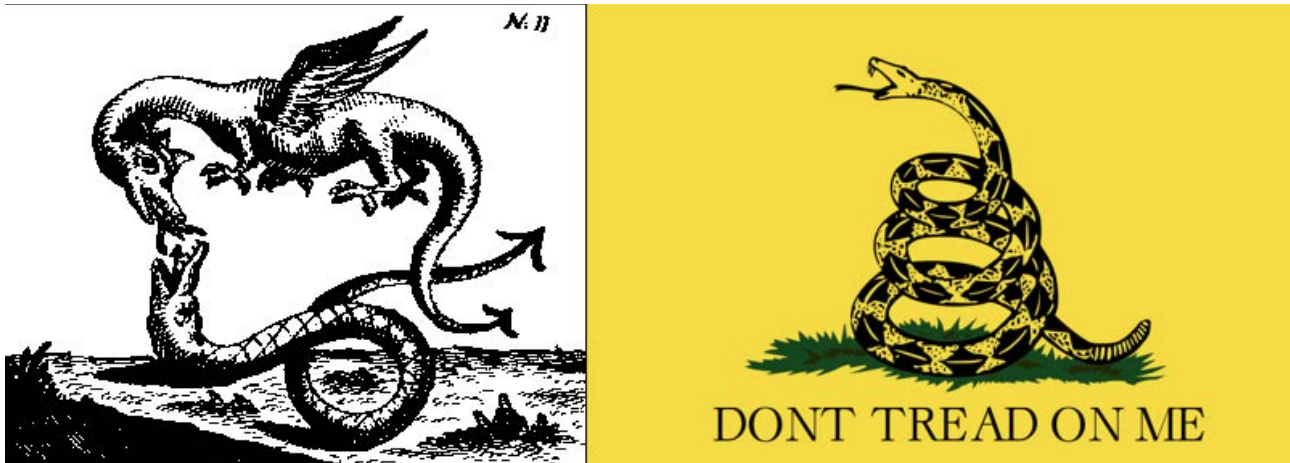
left: medieval depiction of the dragon eating a snake, including fancy royal crown. right: Gadsden flag.

Orwell's 1984

Less subtle but the more stronger is the use of Orwellian imagery to articulate the oppressive government theme. George Orwell's famous novel *1984* spawned several movie versions, which featured a distinctive style of visuals and the catch phrase "Big brother is watching you!" became part of western pop culture as well.

The surveillance state nature of Arkham City and the human rights infringing way of treating the inmates allows to draw quite a few comparisons to the INGSOC, which was the oppressive force in the novel.

Rocksteady based many of their designs for the organizations behind the prison complex (Arkham Asylum and Tyger Security) on so called Orwellian imagery.

Typical re-appropriated billboards featuring oppressive messages in Arkham City. And a visual to the Orwell novel, far right. Note the similarities in message, print style and colors.

Another billboard. This one depicting Hugo Strange as our watching Big Brother.

left: movie posters to the British movie (released 1984), center: still from the same movie showing the logo of INGSOC, and finally the Arkham City logo turned upside down.

Closure

I never though this one would take so long. I thought. I maybe loose a few sentences about believability in environment design and share a few examples. But Rocksteady did so much considerate design work, I took so many photographs of interesting locations, it became a challenge to decide what not to show.

But I hope you got some insight in principles that can guide great environment design and the principles and themes that found their way into this masterpiece of art direction.

As always, check the Batman tag for all related posts. Next in the pipeline: the Joker. Promise.

…until then, how about some oppressive regime sanctioned noodles!

all images © DC comics and Warner entertainment, except otherwise stated.

Today we talk about juxtaposition. And the Clown Prince of Gotham is the perfect case study to do it. We also dive deep, very deep, into what makes the Joker so compelling to modern audiences. Coulrophobia anyone?

Juxtaposition

From the latin words *iuxta* ("in close proximity"/"next to") and *positio* ("place"/"position") comes *juxtaposition*. It describes the state of having two things in a close spacial proximity to each other. Or in terms of art: the act of putting two signs next to each other to create a new separate meaning.

Everything is next to something. Just having things close to each other does not make a juxtaposition significant. Like with any other type of sign, significance can be intended by the creator, but eventually the viewer decides, if the juxtaposition is significant to him. So like with any other type of sign, the creator has to understand his audience and guide their attention towards something of importance to them.

Some unintended juxtapositions, via failblog.org. The meaning solely gets attributed by the viewer here.

Without considering any context, which of these three juxtapositions, you think has the most significance to most people:

– police man with a gun – baby with a toy – baby with a gun

Police men have guns, babies have toys... there is not much too those juxtapositions. Adding a gun to a police man only supplements the image of *police man*, maybe tweaks it to *armed police man*.

But a gun close to a baby, that's something. The juxtaposition drives us to look for a connection, and that connection is not self-explanatory. It's weird, possibly dangerous, a contrast of violence versus innocence or death versus life, a mystery, all sorts of things. The juxtaposition of the two images emerges as a sign itself and suddenly both images, the baby and the gun, become supplements for this new established sign.

Juxtapositions can come in multiple forms, which are significant to the viewer. See the examples here and consider what connotations each juxtaposition has for you:

desired proximity

The prince and the princess, the pirate and the treasure, Popeye and spinach, and so on.

undesired proximity

The surfer and the shark, the victim and the killer, the thief and your money, Superman and Kryptonite, and such.

randomness / surrealism

The melting clock and the desert, the plumber and the mushroom, the carpenter and the walrus.

unlikely proximity

Sonic and Mario, a DeLorean and a western saloon, Darth Vader and Cervantes, Batman and Scorpion (Mortal Kombat).

resemblance

Mario and Wario, Batman and Batgirl, Laurel and Hardy.

contrast

Big Daddy and Little Sister, a giant and a mouse, a baby and a very old man, ugly duckling and beautiful swan.

conflict

Heaven and hell, cats and dogs, Jedi and Sith, black rook and white rook.

Juxtaposition Of Conflicting Forces In Pop culture

Juxtaposing two conflicting entities is a very very popular component in most narrative publications. Conflict is a potent driving force for any story and adds multilayered qualities to characters and situations.

Whole genres are dedicated to the juxtaposition of conflicting entities and concepts, like romantic comedies or buddy cop movies, where we have 80 minutes of two people being the complete opposite of each other and final 10 minutes of getting together. But by far the most successful juxtapositions are any variation of the theme of good versus evil.

The basic thing is to have two opposing entities (characters and/or factions), so the viewer can quickly see the side to root for. This setup makes it easy for the audience to separate friend from foe (except the occasional traitor) and sort character actions into categories of *just* and *unjust*. Defining a faction or character as good and another as evil makes for a clear cut narration, where story development takes a backseat, so that the action can take center stage. This black and white cut is very useful for video games with limited storytelling resources and ambitions.

Like in many other action heavy games, the differentiation between good guys and bad guys is simple: If I can hit it, it's evil. Ghouls'n Ghosts © Capcom

Where it gets really interesting is, when the conflict is shown within one single entity. The anti-hero, the tragic villain, the torn nation, the likable bad guy, the split personality, the half man half beast. These kind of characters, when written and illustrated well, give a juxtaposition of good and evil, that adds depth to an entity and demands investigation before the viewer is allowed to judge.

One perfect example for this is the currently and, let's be honest, ever popular vampire. Well done vampire designs juxtapose various conflicting elements, such as:

humanity and animalism life and death
pleasure and pain
love and hate

fulfillment of sexual desire and violent rape physical attraction and physical thread beauty and fearsomeness

Remarkable vampire characters in pop culture often end up being objects of female desire, while still being murderous monsters. From left to right: Edward Cullen © Summit Ent./ Lestat © Warner Bros/ Spike © Warner Bros, created by Joss Whedon

Another very popular theme, which is driven by juxtaposition of good and evil within one entity (character or fictional world), is the idea of twisted children and twisted children's stories. This idea especially resonates well with young adults. Many are currently moving away from their childhood values and roles, sometimes even rejecting them, and the life of that young adult recently became drastically harder and less whimsical. So having childlike imagery twisted and corrupted is pretty analogous to that feeling of loss of childhood.

Juxtapositions of twisted imagery include:

playful activity and objects of violence / violent activity and toys children and objects of violence / children and evil
demonic features children's characters or mascots and monstrous features
comedy and sadness
popular children's stories and adult themes
fun activities and torture
innocence and corruption

From left to right: Santa Claus from Mcfarlane Toys' "Twisted Christmas"/ Monster High from Mattel, as a twisted version of their own Barbie franchise/ Red Riding Hood from Mcfarlane Toys' "Twisted Fairytales"/ Little Sister © 2K games.
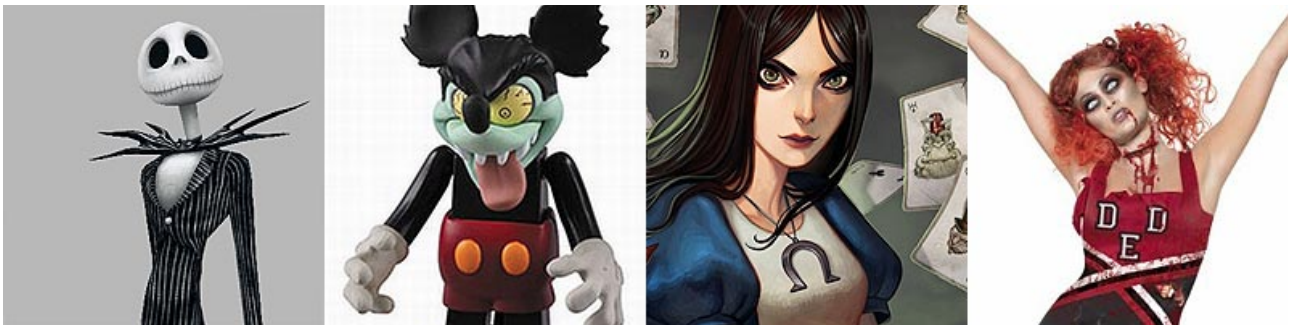
From left to right: Jack Skellington from "A Nightmare Before Christmas" and a zombie-version of Mickey Mouse, both © Disney Ent./ Alice © Spicy Horse/ and a zombie cheerleader costume, from an unknown source.

From left to right: Child's Play © United Artists / Corpse Bride and Red Riding Hood @ Warner Bros / Teddy Bear plush, unknown creator

Genealogy Of The Joker's Sign Language

Now we finally made it to, what in my opinion is the core of Joker's appeal and the driving theme of all related design: *juxtaposing excitement and horror*. He is sexually attractive, in twisted kind of way, he is a playful guy in a twisted kind of way and he is completely horrifying. His iconography is constantly juxtaposing conflicting signals, similar to themes of vampirism and the twisted kid's stuff theme. With components like this, he is everything but boring.
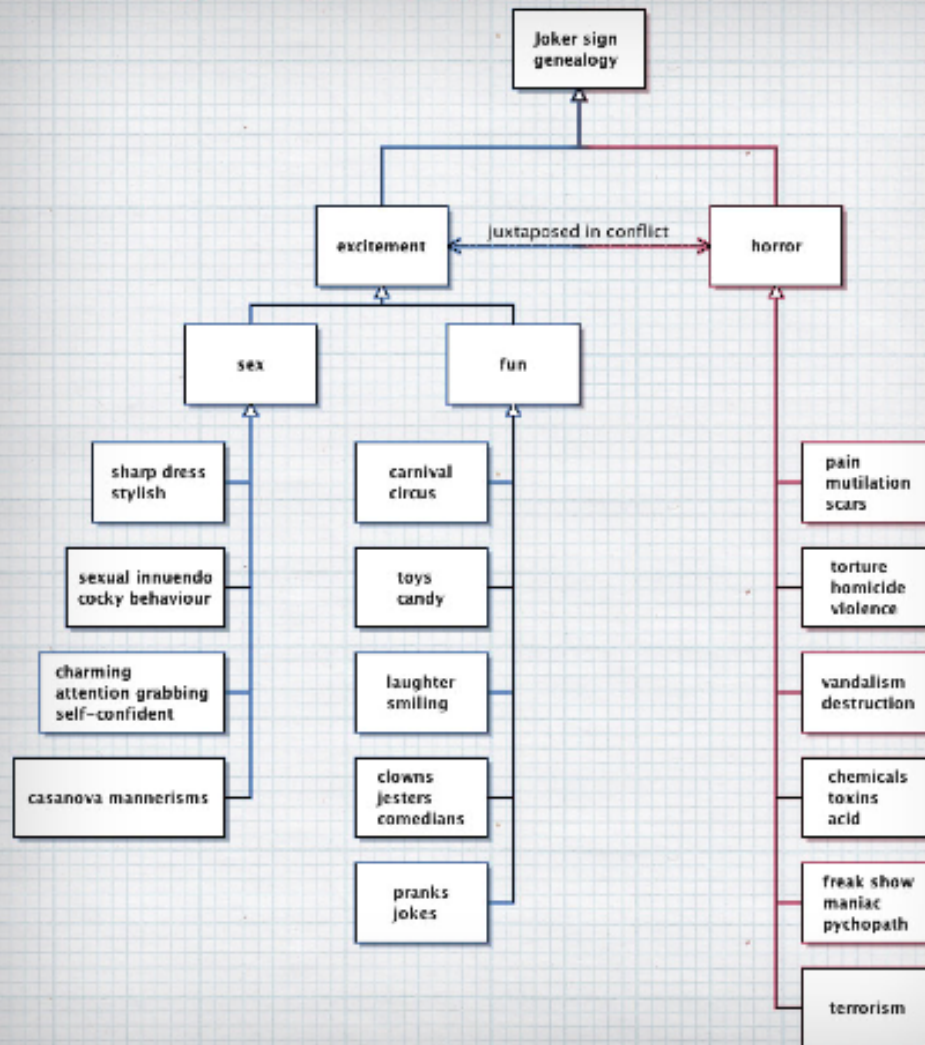
I personally approve the decision by Rocksteady to not attempt re-vamping or modernizing the character for the game series. With the character of Harley Quinn, I thought the revamp backfired and made her less of what she is in the source material. They played it very very straight with the Joker here. And if they would have wanted to modernize him, they would have had to compete with the "Dark Knight" Joker, which is so god damn spot on and brilliant, that I think it would have been a loosing battle.

A collection of documented inspirations for the creation of the Joker from "Batman – The Complete History" by Les Daniels.

The character of Joker first appeared in 1940, in the very first issue of Batman's own comic book. Up to this historic publication, the Batman was only featured in anthology format books or newspapers. When the Joker was first designed, his genealogy wasn't that complex. According to "Batman – The Complete History" by Les Daniels, his design was inspired by playing cards, advertisements for fun parks and a movie from 1928 titled "The Man Who Laughs". But today's visual genealogy of the Joker is much more complex, due to +60 years of pop culture and multiple re-incarnations and iterations of the character.

the genealogy of sign language of the Joker:

Joker sign genealogy

excitement ← juxtaposed in conflict → **horror**

excitement

sex
- sharp dress stylish
- sexual innuendo cocky behaviour
- charming attention grabbing self-confident
- casanova mannerisms

fun
- carnival circus
- toys candy
- laughter smiling
- clowns jesters comedians
- pranks jokes

horror
- pain mutilation scars
- torture homicide violence
- vandalism destruction
- chemicals toxins acid
- freak show maniac pychopath
- terrorism

The Man Who Laughs

In this 1928 silent movie lies the visual and somewhat spiritual inspiration to the appearance of the Joker. Part of the plot summary from wikipedia:

Taking place in England in the year 1690, The Man Who Laughs features Gwynplaine, the son of an English nobleman who has offended King James II. The monarch sentences Gwynplaine's father to death in an iron maiden, after calling upon a surgeon, Dr. Hardquannone, to disfigure the boy's face into a permanent grin. As a title card states, the King condemned him "to laugh forever at his fool of a father."

It is confirmed, that the film's protagonist served as reference for the comic character. But even if not, the uncanny likeness would make a relation seem very likely.

Promo image, a still and the poster from the movie.
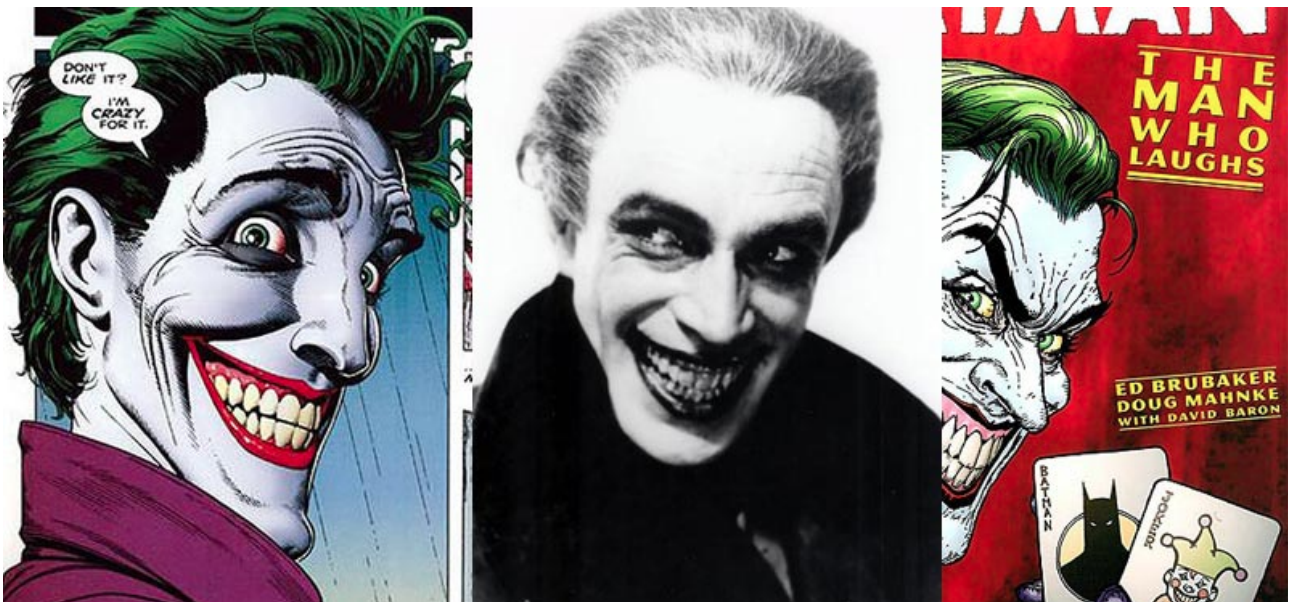
Comparison between a comic panel by Brian Bolland and a promo still from The Man Who Laughs. Right: Comic cover with a title reference to the movie.

The Joker's origin in the comics is debatable. There is a version of his backstory, which is considered canon, "The Killing Joke" by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland, where he was a failed comedian before turning into the Joker. Though there are more versions of that story in the DC comic books. In the movies, it's either a completely reworked story (Burton film), or the character doesn't seem to recall it himself (Nolan film).

In the comics and most other incarnations, one thing is clear: He got dropped into a vat of chemicals, which hideously transformed him, since then forces him to laugh and smile (similar to the 1928 movie) and eventually turned him insane. But instead of having this gruesome tragedy tear him apart, he decided to roll with it and became *The Clown Prince Of Gotham*.

The Joker after emerging from the toxic waters and the first noticeable building from Arkham City. ACE Chemicals is the building the Batman gear gets dropped. It's the place where Bruce Wayne becomes Batman in the game and the place where a jobless comedian became the Joker.

And this is the key defining moment of this character. The moment when he accepted, that suffering and tragedy are a reason to laugh and be happy. This twisted judgement is since then the driving force of his actions, his visual language, his effect on his environment. He wants to bring suffering and tragedy to the world, because you are supposed to laugh at it. Let's put a smile on that face!

Joker's trademark killing method: Joker venom or sometimes called *Smilex*.

Smile scarring triptych: The 1989 Nicholson Joker about to fall into the chemical, bearing severe tissue damage around the cheek area / Ledger Joker without clowns make-up / Martha Wayne, as an else world Joker, with self-inflicted scars.

The Wildcard

Promo image from the "Dark Knight" movie and animation still from the 90s TV show.

The original gimmick of the Joker was, that he is based on a playing card, the wild card. Wild cards (and any card game imagery for that matter) are not only a strong part of his iconography, but as it turns out are also of high symbolic value for the Joker.

In the games, a joker has no affiliation to any party. He is neither spades, clubs, hearts, nor diamonds. A joker card is drawn at random. A joker also can do anything he likes and most of the time is there to circumvent the rules.

The behavior of the card is perfectly analogous to the character. In contrast to most villains, the Joker has no goal except to cause havoc. He does not want to get rich, he does not want to have anything, he just wants to completely derail your psyche. Nobody, no good guy, no bad guy, can trust him. And there is no rule in life you think a sane or insane man must follow, which will not be broken by the Joker.

Coulrophobia

I once was at a circus and two clowns performed. I was around 10 years old. One guy just drew a revolver and unloaded its barrel on the other guy. He touched his chest to check for wounds, but didn't feel anything. Relieved that nothing happened, he treated himself to a cold glass of water. He swallowed it and the water poured out of the holes in his chest. Everybody was laughing and applauding. That's clowns.

Clowns. Are. Horrible.

No really. With the exception of the occasional balloon animal, all they do is indulge in violent or purposefully harmful behavior. They punch, whack, smack and kick each other, use guns and knifes and heavy machines, or cause life-threatening accidents. There is just one tiny thing keeping these acts of cruelty from actually being gruesome... it's clowns.

By default, all stuff clowns do is in good fun. It's a prank, a trick, a false threat to create excitement and tension, and in the end we all will laugh about it. When a clown points a gun at us, we trust something funny to happen. But what if we can't trust the clown?

Oh, and then there is the faces. Coulrophobia, the irrational fear of clowns, mainly relates to the visual appearance of clowns. And considering what a clown face is, it's not so hard to grasp, why it triggers heavy fear reactions in some people. A clown face first is a deformed face with enlarged features and pale skin. And then there are emotions burnt into the face. Many classic clown make-ups feature a wide grin and tears, which is already a conflicting emotional signal, add the actual facial

expression of the person below the paint to the equation and a face can become completely unreadable or even monstrous to some people.

Twisted clowns. From left to right: Jigsaw © Lionsgate/ The Crow @ Miramax/ Doink The Clown © WWE / Stephen King's It © Warner Bros.

From left to right: Sweet Tooth, mascot of the Twisted Metal series / *Clown* (yeah, that's his name) from the Spawn universe.

From left to right: House of A 1000 Corpses / clown fatality in the 2011 Mortal Kombat / Krusty doll on murdering spree in the Simpsons.

The evil clown, killer clown or sad clown is a great horror trope. Twisting a clown turns pretend violence into real violence, which is an effective trick to make the pretend violence of horror stories feel just one bit more real to the viewer.

Also coulrophobia is an entertaining fear (for those not suffering from it), with a big potential for great twisted images and crazy scenes.

Evil clowns are the ultimate betrayal of trust and innocence. We lower our defenses, expecting fun, only to be severely punished for just that. The Joker is just exactly this kind of clown, but with one key difference: He does not think the clowning stops, when the hurting begins. He just thinks you don't get the joke.

Why so serious? I just put a knife in your mouth.

Twisted clowns. Real life killer clown, John Wayne Gacey. Left an original photo of the serial killer and right a section of the related horror movie poster.

First it's funny, but then there is a real bullet exploding her head. First it's funny, but then it is not water squirting in your face, it's acid.

The Harlequin

The famous harlequin of german folklore Till Eulenspiegel / a Joker card, specifically designed for the DC character / the harlequin character in Disney's The Hunchback of Notre Dame

A common motif on joker cards in many decks is a harlequin or jester. When it comes to symbolic qualities, there is not much to go on here. There are some characters from german folklore, Till Eulenspiegel and Casperle, which could be viewed as harlequins, but that's a very loose connection.

But the iconic qualities of a harlequin are actually quite strong. Strong enough to serve as a gimmick to base a full character on. Harley Quinn originated as a side character in the 90s animated TV show and catapulted to popularity, making her way into the comics and even getting her own series.

The story behind the character is, that she, Harleen Quinzell, was a psychologist, who thought she could deal with the Joker. Session after session, she got more enthralled with his personality, which then switched over into complete unconditional emotional and physical devotion to her former patient. Imagine agent Starling getting the hots for Hannibal Lector.

Harley Quinn's original design as illustrated by 90s TV show lead designer Bruce Timm.

Arkham City: Harley sports several Joker tattoos, proving her lifelong commitment to her beloved.

Arkham City: Harley's new outfit, still not very clownish, more goth girl fetish, but at least kept the color pattern straight. Destructible objects, which work like collectibles in Arkham City, include fun park coin-op machines with the original Harley Quinn design (right).

She has very special place in the DC universe. Harley is victim in a very abusive relationship, with the Joker. She gets physically abused and often left to die (which then eventually doesn't happen). Still, she keeps going back to "Mr.J.", and the Joker from time to time rewards her with gestures of affection. (Which is really sad to watch.) What makes her special is, that she is the only person, the Joker is truly connecting to. She gets the whole laugh because it hurts joke.

She also is used in stories to display the Joker as a very sexual character. Rare in comics, but even rarer in anything licensed from kids TV shows, Harley and Joker 's love is heavy on sex. Joker turns her on like crazy and she offers a great target for the Joker to aim his charms at.

Comic panel and still frame from the "Mad Love" comic and related TV show episode. "I know how to make some smiles, puddin.." Harley being aggressively sexual.

Vampire Features

Complementing the idea of twisted sex appeal, are the uncanny and often played similarities between the Joker design and stereotypical vampires. His pale skin, dark hair, tailcoat dress and the emphasis on teeth put him just two pointy teeth and a cape away from a classic Dracula look.

Joker figure compared to an action figure version of Dracula © Universal. Note the similarities in clothing and facial features.

Iconic image of the Joker by Alex Ross and two Dracula movie posters.

Considering all the sexual tension, that comes with the character, casting attractive and compelling actors of the time makes absolute sense.

Joker's Fun House

Following the juxtaposition themes of the Joker and the narrative core theme of Arkham City (appropriation), let's end this installment by exploring the Joker iconography found in Arkham City.

The entrance into Joker's twisted mind. Just step into his mouth, guarded by dancing bears and prepare for fun and thrills. In line with the overall narrative themes in the environment design (see part 3) the Sionis steel mill get appropriated to be Joker's new fun house.

Joker's Fun House is a popular motif from the animated series and in the comic books. Left: screenshot from the stellar *Adventures Of Batman & Robin* on the SNES.

It's a common theme in fun parks and fairs to feature attractions, which overtly threaten you with their names and catchphrases. Ghost trains and thrill rides, haunted houses and such are perfect playgrounds for the Joker.

I so love this detail. The lion is re-appropriated fun fair decoration, customized or vandalized to look like the Joker, including green hair. The sign in its original environment would be an invitation, created to make visitors curious. But juxtaposed with the violent side of the Joker it becomes a warning sign.

In a key battle with the Joker and his goons, we fight in an abandoned Ghost Train building. The big sign is very traditionally made, and stunningly similar to the vintage looking designs of Carnesky's Ghost Train.

A few more clownish details. Note how the rotten state of things hints at corruption, how sometimes anger and pain is evoked and how images of death and hell are sprinkled in.

Another twisted and popular image is the use of tin soldiers. Tin soldiers are gallant gentleman warriors and also kids toys. In Arkham City and several other publications they serve as deadly opponents or eerie corpselike entities.

The Joker's thugs in Arkham City all carry references to other Joker appearances. Note how similar the masks are between the game and the Nolan movie, and note the similarities of the emblem of *Bob, the goon* jacket in the Burton movie and on the thugs hoodie. I also dig the vandalized Arkham logo, which now is an icon of a dead clown and an "A" for anarchy symbol.

Thanks for reading. There are still two more parts in the pipeline. Next time we explore symbolic creativity with Two Face, where we check out insane environment designs, which I have saved for that one.And lastly we will round up some of the other villains and some odds and ends. I also will wrap up this series by giving some great sources and book recommendations.

I hope you enjoyed the ride so far and like and share. Thanks. As always, check the Batman tag for all related posts.

all images © DC comics and Warner entertainment, except otherwise stated.

Today, in part 5 of 6 of this series, we tackle Two Face. This character had relatively little screen time, especially without the Catwoman DLC gameplay. Still, Two Face serves as a great showcase of how character-driven environment design and cinematic design can round up a character design beyond the actual character model.

Who Is Two Face?

First we have to take a look at the character himself and his origin. Let's gather the narrative bits, that need to be expressed through visual design here.
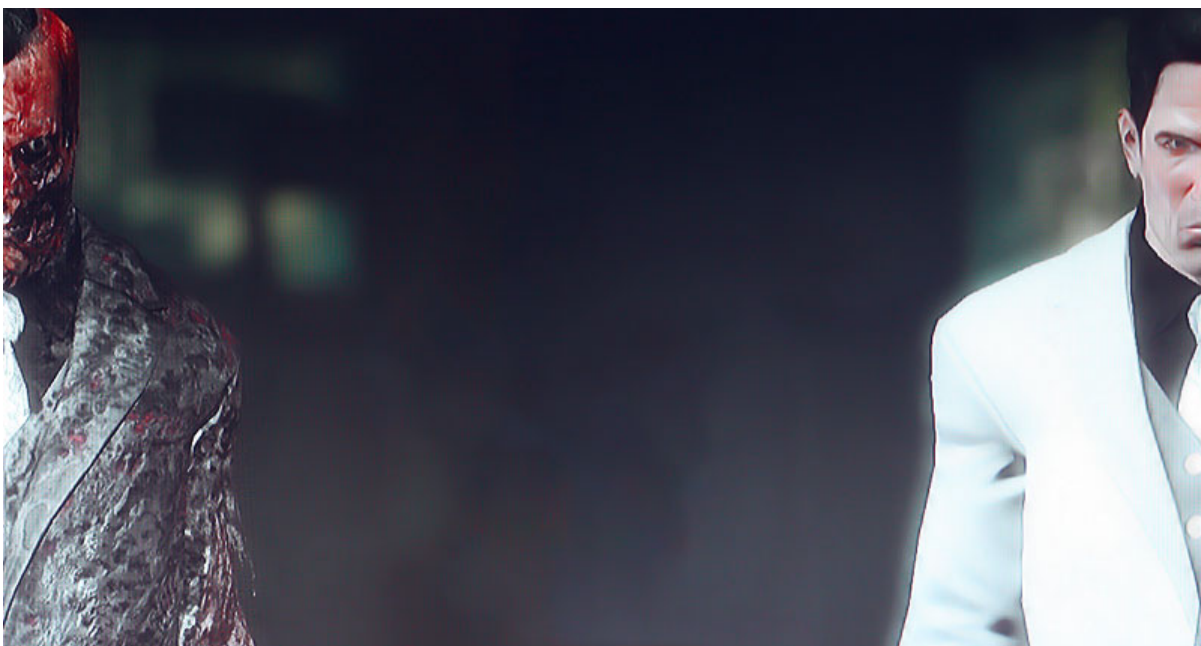
Both faces of Harvey Dent. Broken and whole.

Two Face's civil name is Harvey Dent. Dent was one of Gotham's most rigorous district attorneys. The citizens gladly elected him DA and criminals feared him. Though he was cracking down hard on organized crime in Gotham, he always did it by the book. Laws, rules, and regulations where kind of holy to him. And he was not only popular for his stance against crime, he was also revered as a very good looking man. In the press, this earned him the nickname "Handsome Harv".

So far so good. We got a strong combative crime fighter, who holds rules above everything else and is popular for his good looks. How did that got flipped around? Let's dig beyond the public appearance. His written origin includes him being abused by his father on a regular basis. Every evening his dad would flip a coin, and if the wrong side came up, it would end in a severe beating for little Harvey. Also, Harvey Dent has dangerous anger management issues. Always on the edge, he is suppressing his urge to physically hurt criminals and is encapsulating this violent anger in a second self.

All we need now is a catalyst event to set this bomb off! Catalyst events are a big theme in Batman stories. Bruce Wayne's parents got killed, he becomes Batman. The Joker became what he is through a chemical accident. Victor Fries, lab accident makes him Mr Freeze. Poison Ivy – accident, Zsasz – parents get killed, Penguin – loss of fortune, Robin – parents get killed, Oracle – crippled by Joker, Clayface – getting assaulted with experimental chemical, Man-Bat – failed lab experiment, Bane – lab experiment and on and on.

These film references influenced the creation of Two Face, as stated by Bob Kane himself. Note the split face depictions and similarities in characterization.

When it comes to the catalyst event spawning Two-Face, this is where the multiple incarnations of the character massively differ. Not only can't writers settle on when and how his face got scarred, they can't even settle on what the nature of the tissue damage is. In some media it was an acid attack in the court room, some claim chemical accident, some claim the face is burned...

Anyway, Dent looses half of his face, his public standing and his purpose. Subsequently everything about his character flips to the direct opposite. Handsome Harv becomes a disfigured man, the crime fighter becomes a criminal, the agent of laws and rules becomes a coin flipping agent of chance.

This character profile and backstory give us plenty of themes to explore visually:

struggle of opposites:

order vs chaos
reason vs insanity calmness vs fury
law vs chance

duality:

the duality of man
ying and yang
two sides of a coin
schizophrenia, split personality

criminal justice system:

courthouses and trials, including related props and language "blind" justice
jury, judge and executioner
elections for district attorney

the number 2:

twins
mirrors
doppelganger
anything, that comes in pairs
double or nothing (gambling)
anything starting with "double", like double barrel shotgun for example.

Guilty or innocent. The process of providing evidence and proving someones guilt to a jury following complex rule systems, is now a simple flip of a coin.

The intricate play of black and white spaces in Dent's suit can be viewed as analogous to the visual qualities of the ying yang symbol. It definitely would fit the character.

Arkham City's Two Face

Two things are always constant with Two Face designs. His face is split in half – one side whole, the other side damaged – and his suit is split into similar halves. But other than that, the looks for his dress and the ways his face is damaged, come in many styles.
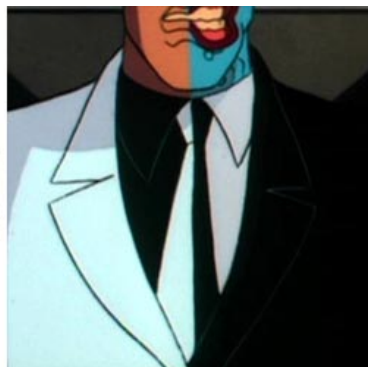
A selection of some of the many official and diverse Two Face designs.

Rocksteady was quite clever in picking the right appearance for Dent. They looked beyond the comic reader crowd and styled the character in way, that resonates with TV watching and movie going audiences as well. Combining the TwoFace from the very successful 90s animated TV show with the Two Face from the also very popular Chris Nolan Dark Knight movie. Good pick to appeal to a wide audience.

From left to right: Arkham City, The Dark Knight, Batman The Animated Series, Arkham City.

Character Design Through Environment Design

The first thing we see of Two Face is his district attorney office. After beating up his goons (who sport Two Face iconography, to express their allegiance), we get a chance to look around in this place. You might notice that the right half of the room is in slightly poorer condition than the left half. This is of course analogous to the design of the Two Face character model.

Dent's office in the first sequence of the Catwoman DLC campaign.

When we turn around and look to the other side of the room, we discover the split to be way more obvious. We are also treated to two sculptures. A gallant steed in battle with a monstrous snake. Strong symbolism for the fight of righteousness against wickedness within Dent.

Same office, different angle.

Carefully scanning the office allows us to find some artifacts of his campaign for district attorney and more symbolic references to his duality and damaged half.

A painting of Cain and Abel, titled "The Duality of Man". It's used to cover up Dent's wall safe.

Super small detail on his office desk: A button from Dent's campaign for district attorney.

Dent's gang territory is separated via fortified gates. Note the two different panels used as doors for the gate and the literally ripped in half campaign banners (uncle Sam style). We can also see the court house already.

Front gate to Two Face's territory in the Arkham City district.

In Dent's territory we find those nice vignettes: Harvey Dent's campaign office. Here also the right half is in slightly poorer condition than the left. Or note the custom propaganda poster.

Dent's campaign office and a customized propaganda poster.

The outside of the court house sporting one-sided damage and disfunction all the way. Also part of the symbolism here: the court house itself as a place for justice (throwback to Dent's former occupation) and more Dent campaign propaganda.
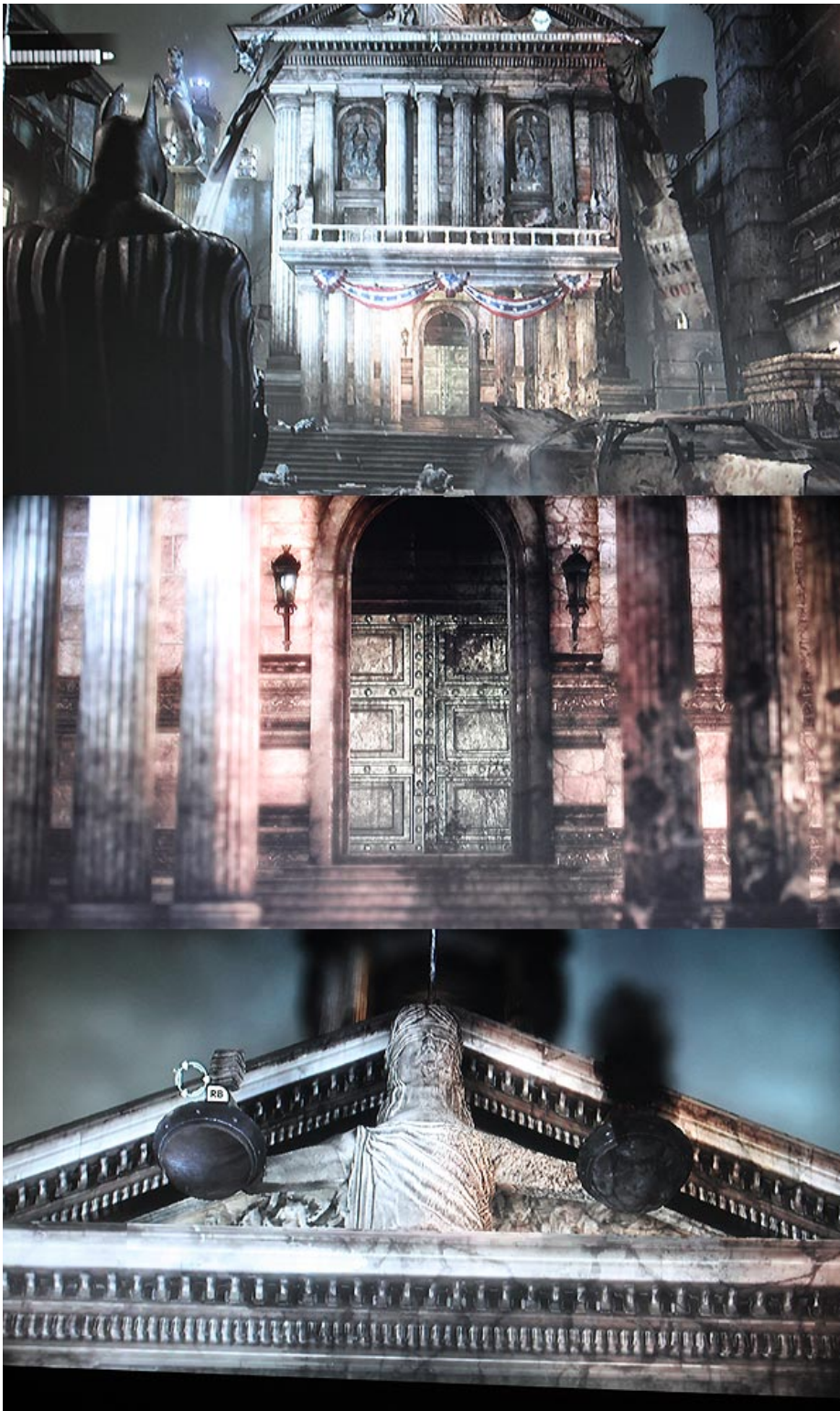
The court house exterior.

Inside of the building the theme of the broken right side not only continues but intensifies with more severe destruction and corruption. The inside and the outside of the court house both show a statue of Justicia (or Lady Justice) – roman goddess of justice – balancing two vessels (like a scale). A symbol for the struggle to balance the whole and the broken side of Dent's personality. Also note that the corrupted side holds a burning vessel, symbolizing the burning anger or destructive energy of Dent's evil side.

Note how the green light in the "whole" side of the room is an index for a save way out (emergency exit), while the green light on the "broken" side comes as a signal for gruesome death (acid vat). The acid vat as a method of killing is a very fitting stylistic choice for the acid victim Dent. And the gallows pole holding Catwoman's body suspended above the deadly fluid, is a great symbol for brutal death penalty (reference to justice system).

The court house interior.

One very nice gag in the level design of that early sequence is the tightrope spanned across the room. If you put Batman on that rope and carefully adjust the camera, you can use the rope to cleanly cut the room into two sides. The cut is so clean, it looks like a montage.

Carefully adjusting the camera angle allows you to perfectly cut the room into two halves, using the taut wire.

The 180° Rule

Lets talk cinematic design. An old and tried and true rule of cinematography is the so called 180° rule. The gist of it is, that when using multiple camera angles in a scene of two people interacting with each other, you stay on one side of the interaction, keeping your camera angles within this 180° radius. Otherwise you risk creating the appearance, that the characters switch sides during the scene or risk ruining the geographical orientation of the viewer completely.

You can however use this geographical confusion as a storytelling device. With just one character monologuing, you can create the appearance of two characters being physically present. You do that by deliberately breaking the 180° rule.

You may remember this scene from Peter Jackson's Lord of The Rings:

Rocksteady used the same trick in this early cinematic, where the character of Two Face has an argument with himself. Now to up the ante, the environment design and character design massively enhance the impact of this cinematographic maneuver. With every cut we do not only get the appearance of the character switching his physical form, the backdrop of the court house also switches the same way.

Whenever Dent talks reason, we see his good side, superimposed onto the whole side of the hall. Whenever Dent talks violence, we got his burned side superimposed onto the broken side of the hall. A full and complete switch between opposites, through all layers of the presentation.

As a bonus, here is some commentary on the 2010 Trailer:

A couple of days ago, mouthwatering screenshots of Arkham City surfaced. The game is the sequel to the impressive Arkham Asylum and is highly anticipated by gamers and comic fans alike.

Today I take a look at some of the screens and point out the really interesting bits, what they might mean for the upcoming game and some random trivia.

You can have a look at all the screens in their HD beauty at Kotaku.

The Dark Knight

Batman's balancing act on the wire is a direct reference to the cover of The Dark Knight Returns paperback. Frank Miller's masterpiece is widely considered to be one of the most influential and most popular Batman comic books ever. Judging from this tiny detail, we can expect much appreciation for the source material again. Fan service FTW!

Homicidal Artist

In comics and movies, one constant theme surrounding the joker figure is vandalism, another one is chaos. The Joker, in many of his incarnations, considers destruction, chaos and violence to be a form of creativity and artistic expression. It is nice to see, that the developers articulate that in their second Batman game again. Also note, how the green circle turns the Arkham logo into the anarchy symbol. Nice.

Coulrophobia, Anyone?

In Arkham Asylum the Joker's goons only had little time and resources to dress and style in reference to their leader. So a clownish face paint here and there was all we got to see. In the city, there is obviously quite some time past since the Joker gained control over the area. Clothing, face paints and even elaborate masks hint a brewing culture of Jokerism, making the environment appear more deranged and hostile. It's cool to see how much effort the developers put into making the goons look less alike.

Déja Vu

There are obviously new moves available in the sequel, but I still have a strange sense of déja vu. When playing Arkham Asylum I was strongly reminded of the 1993 Batman Returns game, in which you were brawling hordes of street clowns also. Now when I see the head smash move and urban environment in the new screens, the resemblance gets downright creepy.

Fashion Victim

Hm, not as far off as the Harley design from Arkham asylum, but still not even close. Harley Quinn (yeah, her name is a bad pun version of harlequin) was created by Paul Dini (who was lead writer on Arkham Asylum also), for the 90s animated series. She is a psychiatrist, who fell in love with the Joker. Nothing about the original character has anything to do with underaged goth chicks. At least they got rid of the ridiculous nurse costume. I'm also happy to see that they used the red-black color pattern and the diamond shaped icons on her costume.

My Fair Lady

The Catwoman, on the other hand, is spot on. Her look is a direct copy of her current look in the Dc comics, from the suit down to the red goggles. Originally designed by Jim Lee for the Batman:Hush books, cover artist Adam Hughes defined her to be a look-a-like of Audrey Hepburn. Thankfully it turned out quite sexy, not the typical balloon breasts, common in video games. Check the horrendous Mortal Kombat Vs. DC Universe Catwoman for comparison.

Burned Child

Two-Face's halves are a clever combination of two popular representations of the character. The undamaged half, with the dark hair, white suit and black shirt is akin the the 90s tv-show version, created by Bruce Timm.
Harvey Dent's damaged side is obviously taken from The Dark Knight movie. In comics, previous movies and tv-shows, Harvey Dent got scarred via acid burns. Here and in the Christopher Nolan film, he got scarred by fire. Note how his head is burned in the same way in both incarnations. His ear is gone, his cheek is opened except of on string of muscle, his eye has no lids and his suit is burned. Both versions are very similar in appearance.

Overall the screens hint at another impressive AAA Batman ride. As a big fan of Arkham Asylum and comic nerd myself, I can't wait for 2011 to play this beast.