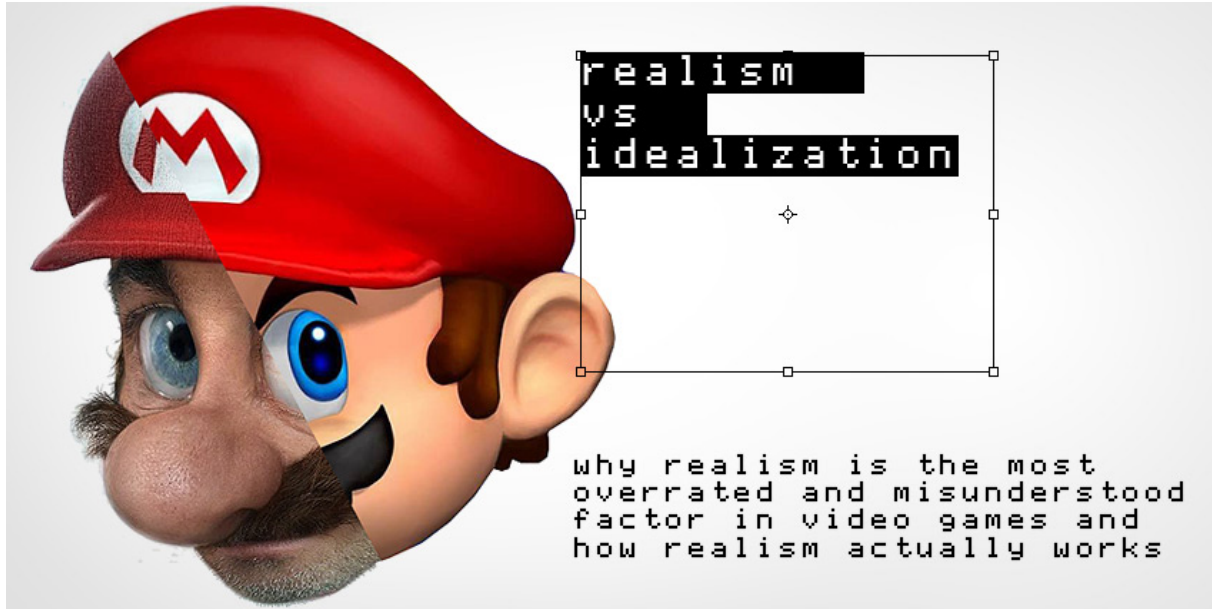




, November 10, 2010 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=1271>] by Anjin Anhut.

This tweet is filed under [game semantics](#). 2 Share 3 Like 25



## What's Up?

Well, when talking games with my colleagues, online or with my students, I often find myself in discussions about realism. The funny thing is, that everybody, especially in regards to gaming has a different understanding on what realism actually is. The fact, that the people who write about games professionally and those who sell them, don't treat realism properly and elevate it to some sort of key quality, is not helping either. Games get hyped for realism, while it is in fact believable idealization what makes them so much fun. Games get dismissed for a lack of realism, while it is a unique style what makes them different. And on and on and on.

Time to get things straight!

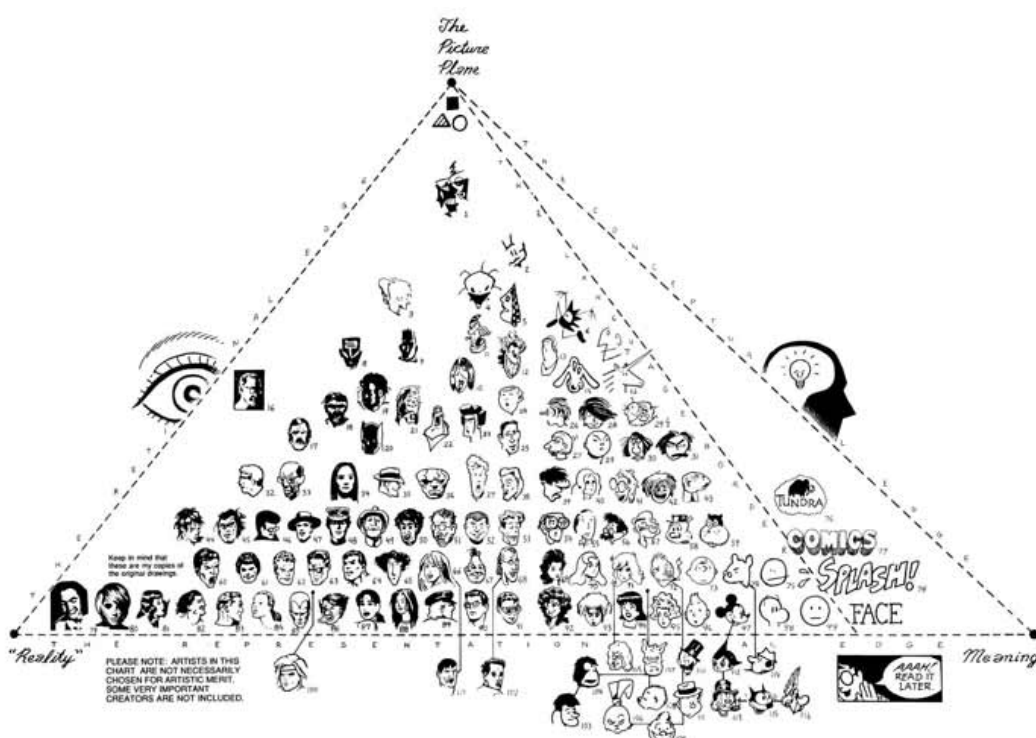
## How Realism Became Dominant, When Talking About The Art Of Video Games.

The Thesaurus defines realism as *(art, literature) the ability to represent things as they really are.*

Various websites also (including [thefreedictionary.com](http://thefreedictionary.com)) describe it as *the representation in art or literature of objects, actions, or social conditions as they actually are, without idealization or presentation in abstract form.*

So bottom line, we end up with three approaches to creating art: Realism, Abstraction and Idealization. You probably are already familiar with Scott McCloud's famous triangle, where he mapped comic art characters in relation to Reality (realism), Meaning (idealization) and The Picture Plane (abstraction) from his book *Understanding Comics*. If not, stop reading and [go here immediately](#). (I will prepare a full book review soon. This one is a must read!)

Anyway, the three approaches displayed in McCloud's triangle represent art styles. As a comic production company, you could end up on this map, wherever you want to be. You would just need to hire an artist with the necessary skills and artistic vision. In arts, finding your place on this map, is a matter of skill and choice for centuries now.



Not so in video games. Video games started in the absolute top corner of the triangle and any move towards realism or idealization heavily depends on the available technology. In the early days, pixel art was no choice, it was a law of nature. No matter how impressive your artistic skills and mind blowing your vision was, you are forced to work with a certain degree of abstraction by the machines. Understandably, technologic development focused on breaking free from the top corner limitations. Bit by bit (see, what I did there?), technology allowed for less abstraction and more realism and idealization.



Artistic ideals are diverse and there are many. Artistic ideals are mostly depending on cultures and sub-cultures, are heavily debatable and therefore not suited to be a mutual standard to measure technological progress. But reality is. The engineers and programmers responsible for creating the next console, engine or graphic processor had to focus on achieving realism.

Unique to video games as an art form, possible realism can be measured with numbers. We count bits, pixel resolution, polygons, processor speed and so on. An artistic quality and approach, which in other art forms is subject to style, suddenly became scientifically measurable. So marketers started selling systems and games by also focussing on realism, a non-debatable mutual standard for graphic quality. If my system got more bits than yours, my system's graphics are better. It's as simple as that.

So we end up with an industry that considers abstraction as a thing of the past and ignores idealization as a worthwhile quality. Weirdly enough we maneuvered ourself as a community into the realism corner and now we are stuck there. Developers are bound to sell realism now, as they were bound to use abstraction back in the days. Though, many japanese franchises and indie developers aren't bound to this artistic limitations, since the described realism fetish is not as prominent as with most big western publishers for example.

#### So Realism Is King! Or Is It?

Now I would like expand the discussion, to include gameplay also. Not everything branded with realism is actually realistic. Companies try to sell us games, arguing with realistic graphics, realistically destructible environments, realistic

lighting, realistic physics and realistic gameplay. But it's a lie. A marketing trick. In fact they are creating and selling something way more awesome: an ideal version of reality.

Lighting is not meant to look realistic, it's meant to be beautiful. The destruction of the in-game environments is not meant to be realistic, it's meant to be spectacular. Gameplay is not meant to be realistic, it is meant to be streamlined, smooth and comfortable. Believable idealization is what makes images, gameplay and narrative ideal for us and most attractive.

### The Real Role Of Realism In Games Creation

Realism is an imposter. Realism is not the quality we seek, but just a component of it. And a component to handle carefully also. The more the better does not apply to realism, no matter how much marketers and journalists try to convince you otherwise.

I'd like to quickly elaborate on three well documented principles to illustrate my claim. Escapism, suspension of disbelief and the uncanny valley.

According to wikipedia, escapism is mental diversion by means of entertainment or recreation, as an "escape" from the perceived unpleasant or banal aspects of daily life. You can find many similar definitions of the term, but in essence it all boils down to the wiki one. This is why we play. We want to be entertained and have a break from whatever boring, demanding, scary or even painful elements of our reality we have to put up with. We need a decent dose of realism to make our escape believable. But we don't want to face the aspects of reality, we desire to escape from in our games. So, creators don't just ramp up the realism level, but try to carefully select what needs to be represented in a realistic fashion and what needs to diverge from reality. Selective realism is idealization.

Like print, tv, canvas and cinema, video games by nature never can be a 100% realistic. Maybe in the future there will be some direct way to plug fully fleshed out experiences directly into the mind of the player. But until then, players will always be aware of the fact that they are still in their living rooms and not really in Azeroth, as much as moviegoers will always be aware of the fact that they are sitting in a crowded theatre.

To still enjoy their moment of escapism, players need to get active. They have to suspend their disbelief. Suspension Of Disbelief is a commonly known principle of storytelling and worth having in your mental library, even if you don't consider games a storytelling medium. Anyway, video games need to be realistic enough to be believable, plausible and immersive enough to allow the player to suspend his disbelief. The funny thing is that consistency is a way more important aspect in this equation. Audiences don't necessarily need a high degree of realism to believe, they just need a consistent presentation. In a life action movie, special effects need to be photorealistic, while in a way more abstract and idealized animated feature film, they can be hand-drawn.

When it comes to believability going for the realistic route can be quite dangerous. Realism is a commitment and anything you add to your product needs to be consistent with the early establish realism standards. One principle illustrating this danger is the so called uncanny valley.

Originating as a concept in robot technology, the idea is simple: Adding realism to a depiction of a humanlike character increases its lifelikeness. When the lifelikeness gets too close to the real thing, the depiction is rejected by the beholder for being a "broken" or "fake" human being. A lot of our natural rejection of corpses or sick people and a lot of xenophobia come into play here. There is a way to acceptance again, but for that the depiction and lifelikeness need to be perfect. Basically, the audience can always connect to a stylized character like Mario and to a perfect simulation of a real human. But in-between there is the uncanny valley, a negative-zone, where the audience rejects the flawed fake human. It's an interesting psychological concept and very important to understand by game designers and artists. Check it out, if you are not familiar with it.



From Wally to Cameron, I guess you can see where the creepy uncanny valley lies and where the perfection begins.

### Anyway, to wrap it up, I just wanted to articulate 3 things:

1. Realism is only a standard for the power of the available game technology, not a standard for artistic expression.
2. Realism is not the key to a convincing experience. It is just one ingredient to create believable idealization.
3. Realism therefore is not the king quality, many claim it to be and we need to stop judging games by the degree of perceived realism.

ps: the header image is a montage of Nintendo's and Pixeloo's Super Mario.

## ONE THOUGHT ON “REALISM VS. IDEALIZATION”

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