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"Fake" Worlds, Real Displays

A material culture and its associated culture of production rely to a heavy degree on cohesive presentation. In other words, the validity of a culture or an aspect thereof in the eyes both of members of that culture and of other cultures with which they interact depends on how well-unified its material culture is when displayed. This unification or cohesion is multifaceted. It refers to the perceived relationship between individual objects within a presentation of material culture, the perceived relationship between a material culture and its objects with members of its culture of production, and—perhaps most significantly—the comprehensibility of the display within other cultural contexts. This cohesion is critical for the perceived legitimacy of any display of material culture, but it is most apparent the active production of fictional, artificial, or reproduced material cultures for popular media such as movies, television shows, and video games. The success of such content depends to a certain degree on the content consumer's ability to "buy it," or to suspend their disbelief while experiencing the media and achieve a certain level of immersion.

This exhibition features a series of seven images taken from films and video games from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that exemplify a presented artificial or fictional material culture. Media was chosen for its ability to demonstrate how cohesion is necessary for the success of the content. The images were organized in an order that encourages comparisons between each piece of content and highlight recurring themes of cohesion. While an image or a screenshot of an inherently moving and temporal medium is limiting, the images selected present the most comprehensive examples of the topics discussed. Furthermore, by encouraging comparisons between a wide array of pieces and topics, the exhibition is meant to emphasize that the necessity of cohesive display for an immersive or legitimized experience of culture is not inherent to any genre or medium. The chosen examples all can be related to real cultural contexts, from the supposedly innocuous, like changes in popular tastes for fantasy, to the poignant and even damning, such as the continued effects of imperialism and racism on public consciousness.

Ultimately, this exhibition strives to provoke the viewer's consideration of objects and cultures on display. Modern technology provides access to the tide of popular consciousness on a massive scale, and our worlds is saturated with presentation. This exhibition—a display in and of itself—attempts to highlight how our own expectations and predispositions affect our interpretation of the displayed world, and how display creators unify their programs with our perspectives.

1: *The Seven Dwarfs*, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Dir. by David Hand, Pro. by Walt Disney Productions, Dist. by RKO Radio Pictures, 1968.

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Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a classic example of the popular image of a fantasy dwarf in the twentieth-century Western consciousness. The seven dwarfs wear floppy hats and simple, ill-fitting clothes. They are generally overweight, have large, ruddy noses, and white beards. Aside from their exclusive occupation as miners, "dwarfish" material culture in twentieth-century fantasy was not substantially different than peasant material culture, and was used for comedic effect in a genre more marketed for children than modern fantasy.
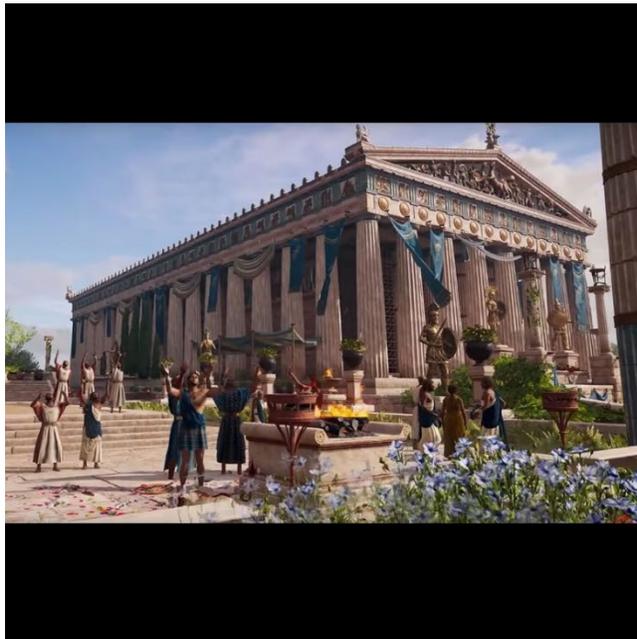
2: *Gimli*, from *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Dir. by Peter Jackson, Pro. by New Line Cinema and WingNut Films, Dist. by New Line Cinema, 2001.
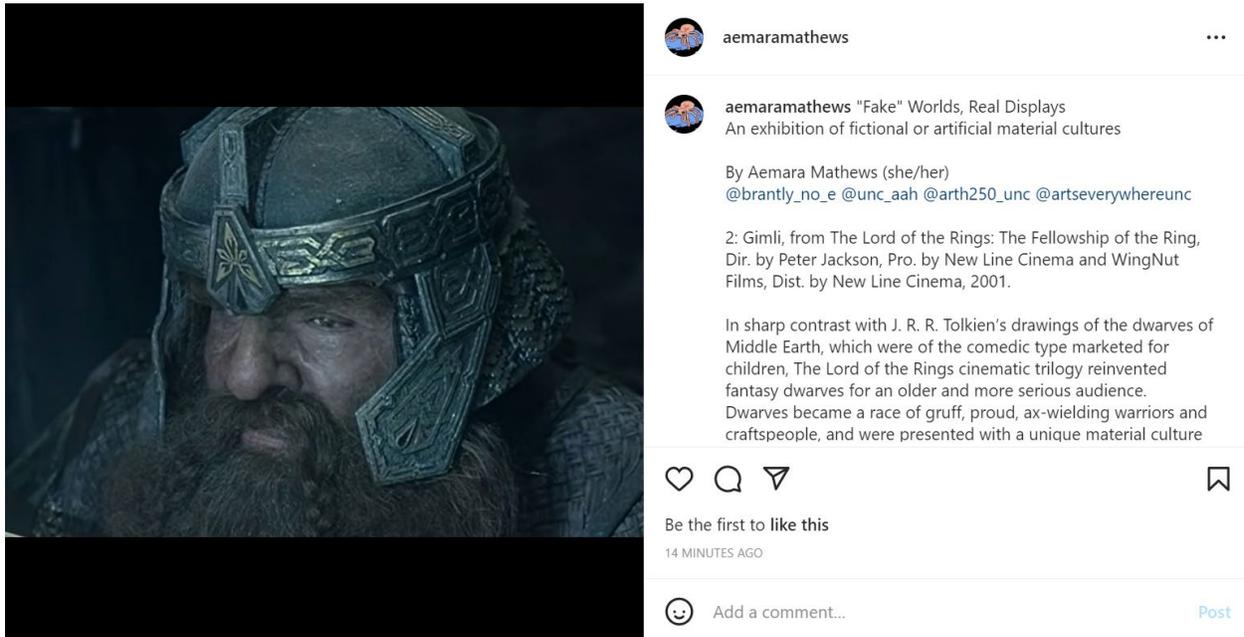
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In sharp contrast with J. R. R. Tolkien's drawings of the dwarves of Middle Earth, which were of the comedic type marketed for children, *The Lord of the Rings* cinematic trilogy reinvented fantasy dwarves for an older and more serious audience. Dwarves became a race of gruff, proud, ax-wielding warriors and craftspeople, and were presented with a unique material culture dominated by angular, geometric contours and interlace patterns, as seen on Gimli's helmet in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This aesthetic is now the expectation in twenty-first century fantasy, rather than a deviation.

3: *Reproduction of the Parthenon on the Athenian Acropolis, ca. 431-422 BCE*, from *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, Ubisoft Quebec: Ubisoft, 2018.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CgfZRrzASOO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

The *Assassin's Creed* video game series is known for digital recreations of its historical settings, in this case the Greek Golden Age, that produce a sense of realism and accuracy while playing. The "restored" Athenian acropolis is convincing because of a cohesive compromise between historical evidence and player expectation. The Parthenon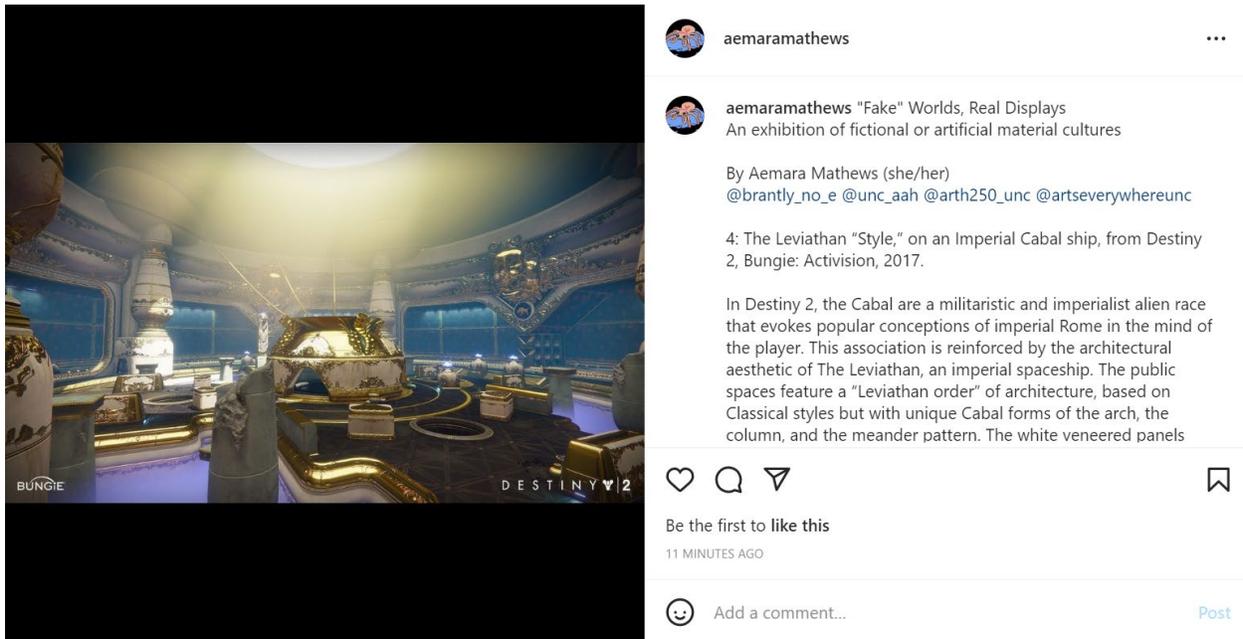 is depicted with polychromy, as it would have been in its heyday, but because the in-game Athenians are heavily associated with the color blue to make the game mechanics more accessible, the Parthenon polychromy emphasizes blue more than is likely accurate.

4: *The Leviathan "Style," on an Imperial Cabal ship,* from *Destiny 2*, Bungie: Activision, 2017.

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aemaramathews "Fake" Worlds, Real Displays
An exhibition of fictional or artificial material cultures

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4: The Leviathan "Style," on an Imperial Cabal ship, from Destiny 2, Bungie: Activision, 2017.

In Destiny 2, the Cabal are a militaristic and imperialist alien race that evokes popular conceptions of imperial Rome in the mind of the player. This association is reinforced by the architectural aesthetic of The Leviathan, an imperial spaceship. The public spaces feature a "Leviathan order" of architecture, based on Classical styles but with unique Cabal forms of the arch, the column, and the meander pattern. The white veneered panels

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5: *Hallway to the Discovery One Pod Bay*, from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Dir. by Stanley Kubrick, Pro. by Stanley Kubrick Productions, Dist. by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968.

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As one of the most influential pieces of science fiction, *2001: A Space Odyssey* helped form modern concepts of what a technologically advanced material culture should look like. The design of Jupiter-bound spaceship *Discovery One* features rectilinear shapes containing or broken up by diagonals, broadly monochromatic color schemes, and illuminated panels flush with the interior walls of the ship. This aesthetic became standard for high-tech material cultures in science fiction, and is now the expected aesthetic of future technology in the popular imagination.
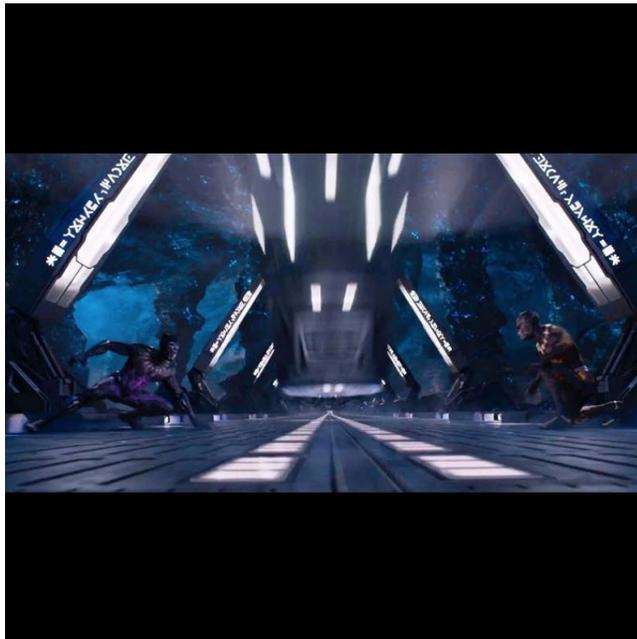
6: *Dark Continent motifs in Kijuju*, from *Resident Evil 5*, Capcom: Capcom, 2009.
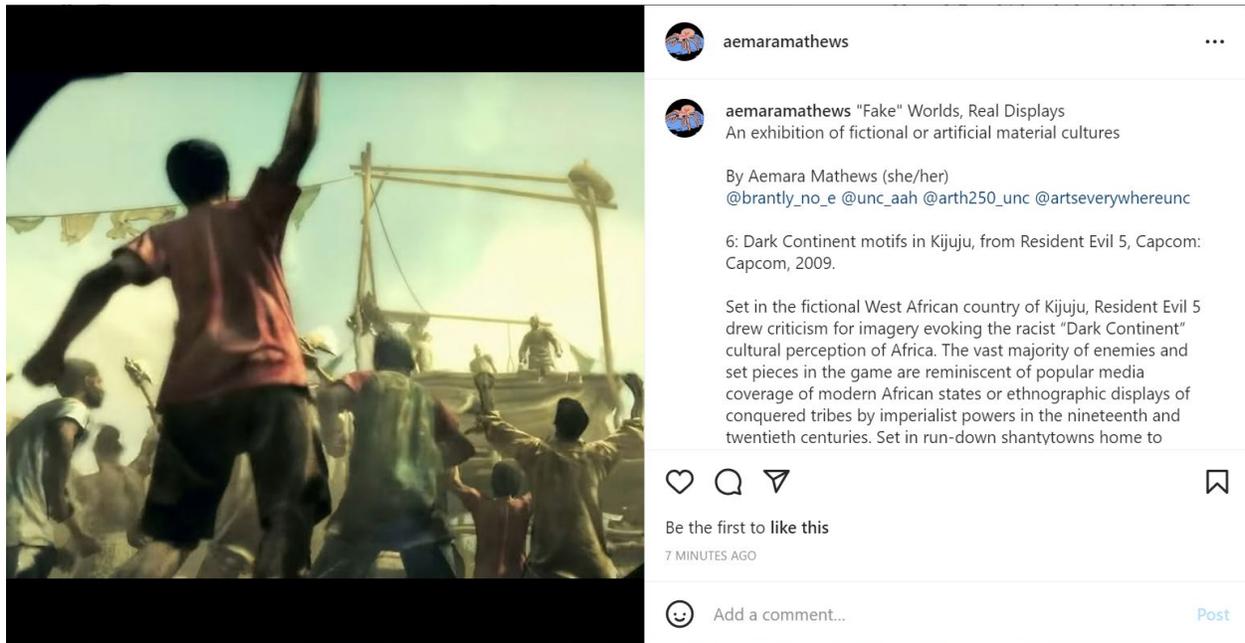
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Set in the fictional West African country of Kijuju, *Resident Evil 5* drew criticism for imagery evoking the racist "Dark Continent" cultural perception of Africa. The vast majority of enemies and set pieces in the game are reminiscent of popular media coverage of modern African states or ethnographic displays of conquered tribes by imperialist powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Set in run-down shantytowns home to violent mobs and thatch-hut villages of spear-wielding warriors, the game's environment presents a visual culture cohesive with popular stereotypes to make a fictional African country more realistically "African."

7: *Monorail in the Wakandan Vibranium Mine*, from *Black Panther*, Dir. by Ryan Coogler, Pro. by Marvel Studios, Dist. by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018.

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The film *Black Panther* presents an idea of the potential of an African country and people undamaged by the horrors of colonialism. By basing the Wakandan aesthetic on contemporary African material culture, it links that potential back to its real-life inspiration. This helps legitimizes African cultures in the eyes of the film's broadly Western audience, albeit by Western standards of technological progress. The monorail set piece, for instance, presents an advanced technology decorated by Wakandan glyphs, but in the high-tech aesthetic of Western science fiction standards with smooth, backlit, rectilinear and angular shapes.