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# Jodorowsky's Dune and Xenosaga: The Death of Art

I had the pleasure of finally catching *Jodorowsky's Dune* (2013) in a small art house cinema in downtown Rochester on a stale Sunday afternoon. The theater was sparsely populated, with only a handful of tired people eager to watch Frank Pavich's year old documentary.

The film recounts and explores Chilean-French director Alejandro Jodorowsky's notoriously unsuccessful attempt to film an adaptation of Frank Herbert's monumental science-fiction novel *Dune* (1965) in the 1970s.



*Concept art for a ship from Jodorowsky's Dune project*

## Jodorowsky and Dune

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original “midnight movie,” the latter, produced by Beatles manager Allen Klein, with production money given by John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Jodorowsky was granted a large sum of money for a new film. He chose to adapt *Dune*, despite, as he admits in the documentary, never actually reading it.

Still, Jodorowsky saw *Dune* as a spiritual story, one concerning the entirety of the universe and the whole of mankind. Even forty years later, Jodorowsky speaks of his film with a sense of mystery and excitement. His *Dune* wasn't quite Herbert's *Dune*, and was somehow even larger and more all-encompassing.

Jodorowsky, as the documentary recounts, quickly burned through a large portion of his production money as his ideas and goals grew to enormous, unrealistic proportions.

He sought to collect a group of “spiritual warriors,” including prog rock bands Pink Floyd and Magma, H. R. Giger, Jean Giraud, Dan O'Bannon (of later *Alien* fame), Orson Welles, Mick Jagger and even Salvador Dali (who would only appear in the film if he was “the highest paid actor of all time”) to help with and act in the film.

Jodorowsky insisted on making the film as large as possible, and he needed a specific kind of energy and spirit from his cast and crew. Jodorowsky even rejected special effects supervisor Douglas Trumbell, of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), who had immense talent and fame, because he did not have the right energy and spirit.



*Alejandro Jodorowsky (on left) with crew*

Jodorowsky's final script would result in a "14-hour film," which would simply be unprofitable and possibly unwatchable (in retrospect, I wonder why no one ever considered turning it into a trilogy, which is a popular form of storytelling today, and is what became of *Star Wars*).

Jodorowsky's project was eventually shut down, and the rights to *Dune* would eventually fall to David Lynch, who directed a critically panned version, released in 1984.

What is most striking about the documentary is Jodorowsky and the crew's belief that, if the film had been filmed and finished, it would have changed the way science fiction was thought of, as well as transforming the action flick into something more spiritual and philosophical. At one point, Jodorowsky claims that the film would have rivaled *2001: A Space Odyssey* in terms of importance and influence if completed. And while it's certainly difficult to imagine sitting in a theater and watching a fourteen hour film, I genuinely believe Jodorowsky's assertions.

Despite all of Jodorowsky's energy and insight, by the end of the documentary, one feels as if he has been to a funeral. The film centers on such a deep tragedy, a missed opportunity for life and for greatness. To put it in hyperbole, the film is about "the death of art."

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~~After the film, I was immediately recalled to Xenosaga, a PlayStation2 video~~  
game project from the mind of Japanese game designer and writer Tetsuya Takahashi. The parallels between Jodorowsky's *Dune* and *Xenosaga* are striking and worth exploring.

Some background: Tetsuya Takahashi began his mature career at Square, where he, along with his wife, Soraya Saga, proposed a script idea for *Final Fantasy VII*, but the script was deemed too dark and complicated for Square's flagship series. The producers, including Hiromichi Tanaka, liked Takahashi's work, though, and offered him his own game. *Xenogears*, a complex character study with religious and psychological themes, was released in 1998 and became something of a cult classic among Square's other JRPGs.

The game was monumental, with a colossal sci-fi fantasy plot, a diverse, worldly cast, and a theme of universal grief. Fans and critics alike would go on to cite the game as having one of the greatest stories ever told in a video game, amid a deep seated backlash against the game for being too convoluted or pretentious.



*Xenosaga Episode I*

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project, are mired in mystery, rumor, and scandal. A year after the game was released, Takahashi left Square to form his own studio, Monolith Soft, taking many of Square's brightest developers with him, including art director Yasuyuki Honne, Koh Arai, and Hiroshi Uchiyama.

Yasunori Mitsuda, the musician that Takahashi worked with on *Xenogears*, would also compose the soundtrack for the first *Xenosaga* game. Masato Kato, the script writer for *Chrono Trigger* (1995), expressed interest in leaving as well (and would, eventually), but was asked to direct *Chrono Cross* for Square instead.

Like Jodorowsky, Takahashi sought to collect his own “spiritual warriors,” and both directors experienced a kind of cult of personality among their peers. The nature of both mediums forces the directors to find and be able to work with a large cast with varying talents. Large-scale games and films are difficult to create, and thus need a group of “apostles” to complete.

Now partnered with Namco, Takahashi led the development of his highly anticipated epic, *Xenosaga*. Focusing on a theme of universal fear, Takahashi's goal was to explore mankind's history through a six-part game series, a series with three major story arcs, and one game which was originally believed to include a remake of *Xenogears*. It would be a story on a scale that was (and still has not) been seen in video games, a space opera that would be crushing, full of spiritual and philosophical ideas.

Takahashi, like Jodorowsky, wanted his project to expand his audience's mind, to act as a prophet, and to be larger than life. If both teams were apostles, then this prophet analogy is even more apt. In both cases, nothing



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*Xenosaga Episode I: Der Wille zur Macht*, a reference to Nietzsche's "The Will to Power," was released in 2002 in Japan, and 2003 in the US. Reactions were mixed, one of the biggest complaints relating to how long the game's cutscenes were, and how the game talked too much for its own good. Fans and critics noted that Takahashi's ideas were interesting, but that the medium was not right for telling the kinds of stories he wanted. This notion mirrors the idea that no one would want to sit through a fourteen hour film, no matter how great it might be.

Sales were disappointing, and after the game's release, no one, Takahashi or otherwise, ever referred to a "six part epic" again. Even worse, *Episode I* seemed to not even barely cover its portion of the three planned story arcs. Takahashi briefly flirted with a "four part series" in some interviews afterward. For *Episode II*, Namco seniors reorganized Monolith, and Takahashi stepped down from being the series' director, only serving to write the original script, which barely survived development anyway.

*Xenosaga Episode II: Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (2005) was a mess of a game, both in terms of gameplay and narrative. It was clear that Namco had tried to significantly change the series, and it would not be a stretch to say that *Episode I* is to *Episode II* what Jodorowsky's *Dune* is to Lynch's. Soraya Saga was very vocal to her fans about the way Takahashi's original ideas were bastardized, and that she felt he and she had been shafted.



For *Xenosaga Episode III*, Monolith seems to have worked closer with Takahashi's original material, and while the game was critically well received and popular, the entire team, along with Takahashi, were sick of *Xenosaga* and no longer wanted to work on it. The six-part epic had been pared down to a still grand but average trilogy, and it was obvious Takahashi was unsatisfied with the final product.

Takahashi's *Xenosaga* and Jodorowsky's *Dune* were too large for their respective mediums to encompass. Both projects had extreme financial problems and time issues, and while *Xenosaga* did at least get three games, neither project was ever completed.

## Reflection

Fans have often questioned why Takahashi did not write a novel instead of making a game series, and certainly a novel would have been more feasible and definitely cheaper to produce. Jodorowsky could not make an adaptation novel out of a preexisting novel, but he could have taken his story into other mediums. In the documentary, Jodorowsky does note that some of his concepts for *Dune* would later show up in his graphic novels. Novels may seem like a less grand and theatrical medium, but they can be as long and as wide as their authors see fit. Would a *Xenosaga* novel have been adequate?

Thematically, *Xenosaga* and *Dune* are very similar. Both are concerned with the organization of the universe and man's place in it, concerned with

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mind. While Jodorowsky's *Dune* was never conceived, these statements can easily be inferred about the film.

And possibly most striking is that both artists sought to have their art act as a prophet for their audiences (kids watching movies and kids playing video games). There is a long history of art as modern religion, and while it would be a stretch to claim that someone like Takahashi was “trying to make a religion,” it is worthwhile to refer back to Richard Wagner’s (1813-1883) ideas of the theater as a kind of new church, the total art, a modern gospel.



*Xenosaga Episode III*

For Wagner, traditional religion had been made shallow and tired by greed and modernization, and thus needed to be reformed. As an opera composer, Wagner believed that through music, story, and visual art, he could reach the sublime and expand his audience’s mind through the largeness and spirituality of his work.

Several decades later, Jodorowsky (and even later) Takahashi, a filmmaker and game designer, working in their own mediums, want to do the same thing, turn their art into something large and spiritual. And in a similar vein to Wagner, some portion of the world would be impressed and affected, but



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It would be simple to reduce the situation to a claim of “big business doesn’t care about art,” or, as director Nicolas Winding Refn said in the documentary, “they’re [the Hollywood producers] afraid.” But both instances of the artists begs to differ. Jodorowsky refused to not have Dali star in his film, no matter the cost. Takahashi’s work was deemed too dark for a *Final Fantasy* title, but Square still gave his script a greenlight for a new project anyway.

Rather, the time, money, and the nature of the mediums are what held the two artists back from achieving a new scale of grandiosity. They were akin to architects seeking to build an entire city, and like with Oscar Niemeyer and his vision of Brasilia, the world was not ready or able to accommodate their large ideas.

In a sense, both works were “too ahead of their time,” yet, both works would only truly have had the right effect during their times, making their true value lost in limbo forever. Both artists would go on to lead successful careers (Jodorowsky continues to make films and enjoys his status as a cult classic director, while Takahashi’s *Xenoblade Chronicles* won several highly esteemed game awards in 2011 and 2012), but these failures to produce are a true loss to both mediums.

With the recent popularity of crowdfunding, especially through Kickstarter, with which various entities (Zach Braff, Spike Lee, and Marina Abramovic, to name three) have financed large scale projects, as well as the advent of social media, it’s curious to wonder if either project could have benefitted from a different financial organization. Creators are learning that through intelligent and thoughtful advertising, people and fans, rather than

~~Perhaps a slightly scaled down version of either project would have easily~~  
been crowdfunded, but even that is not ideal.

Unfortunately, even for industry greats like Jodorowsky and Takahashi, everything runs on time and money, of which there never seems to be quite enough. Looking further outward, the issue is with the physicality of the human experience, the fact that ideas are not products, and that human bodies can only do so much. It's a spiritual, existential qualm, and an important one, one that would, in some way or another, be addressed in both pieces, with some unintentional irony.

Mankind is matter, but he (and she) is also mind and soul. The physicality of art is its most difficult (and absurd) burden. This is especially true with film and games.

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**Nilson Thomas Carroll**

Game writer, Frank O'Hara wannabe, perfect Wagnerite, Pokémon obsessive, surf punk

Edited by Jordan, Misagh.