

STARDATE INTERVIEW

DAVID R. DEITRICK

David R. Deitrick is among the most prolific and best-known color artists in the gaming industry today. Approximately 60 of his works can be seen on books, supplements, and adventures for such companies as Fantasy Games Unlimited, FASA Corporation, and Game Designers Workshop. In September 1987, David graciously granted STARDATE magazine an exclusive personal interview, as he shared some of his views on art, gaming, and life in general.

Q: *You have been known for being a gaming artist. Are you concerned about being stereotyped as one?*

A: I'm moderately concerned about it. I like doing gaming—yes, I am concerned about it. I have run into problems from publishers—talking to book publishers—that their first reaction was, “Well, I don’t know if we can see you, I don’t know if the kind or art used in gaming art is always appropriate.” Or, “I don’t know if it can trade over.” I kinda tend to disbelieve this; I think the sales of the two *BattleTech* paperbacks that I’ve done will rebut that, hope it will rebut that. They’re both selling quite well, and they’re both a semi-nontraditional design and rendering.

Q: *What makes a Deitrick piece a Deitrick piece?*

A: Things that characterize my work—a Deitrick piece will have the following features. . . my pieces usually have unity of design, they have function, good use of color. My work is upbeat.

Q: *You do both color and black-and-white work. Do you prefer black-and-white illustrating, or color art?*

A: Color. It pays a heck of a lot better, and I can do a lot more. Color’s my best ammunition, or my best weapon. I can use color a lot to evoke a mood where without that, I—I guess I’m not clever enough to do it with black-and-white work. I do very little black-and-white work anymore.

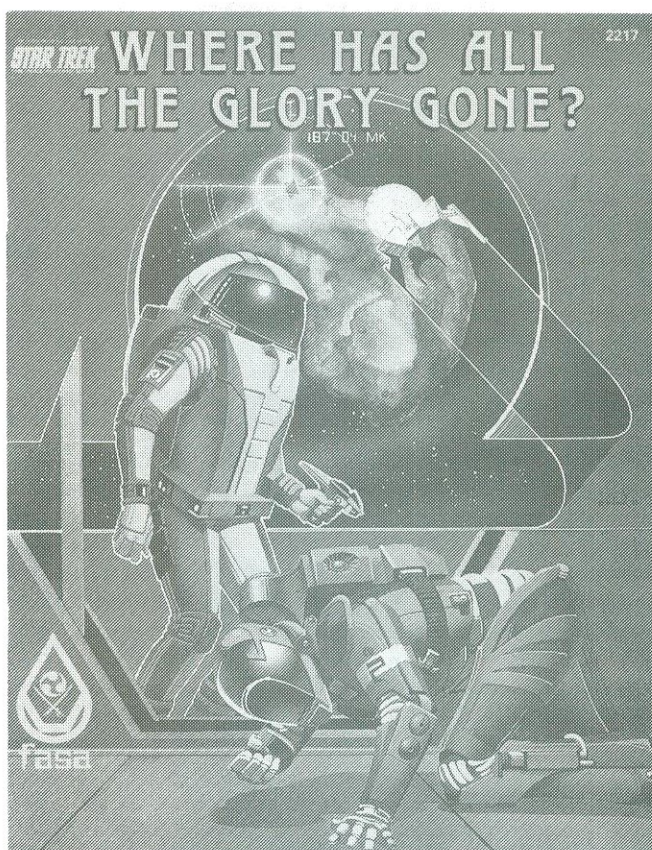
Q: *In a Deitrick cover, how much of the cover concept is Deitrick, and how much of it is instructions from the publisher, or the art director, or the author?*

A: Depends on the company. Ninety percent of the time, I’m given a plot outline or a general scenario. Like if it’s a gaming supplement, they’ll say, “Okay, this is the situation”. . . and with gaming especially, most of the time there’s a linear scenario, you know, that because it is a gaming product, there’s not a set plot. So you can’t really illustrate a climax to the action because that’s something that the gamers are gonna produce, okay? So the idea is to pick some event that’s probably gonna happen during the course of the game, you know, and illustrate something that might happen. Or sometimes there’s just a theme that you want to illustrate. . .

Where Has All the Glory Gone? is one of my favorites, of piece of artwork that I like the best. After I looked through the information, it was fairly wide open on what could happen but I thought the idea was that these Federation guys run into a Romulan outpost, kind of a secret outpost, and the Romulan people are in bad trouble. . . to me, the feeling that I got was probably the closest I’ll ever get to a Stephen R. Donaldson feeling of despair.

The original [cover] concept for the game was this member of the landing party in a spacesuit going by an open door with just kind of an outstretched hand, kind of grasping, okay, and the figure wasn’t shown at all—the idea being is that I wanted to save that impact, the idea that this was a Romulan outpost . . . you know, “Who are these guys?” Well, the art director felt that it kind of had a “come-hither”

look, like the hand was beckoning—it was like, “Come in and see me!” . . . he didn’t feel it was obvious enough that there were these people in distress, so that’s where we came up with this crumpled, space-suited figure inside the doorway, with the guy with the phaser going by.



My favorites . . . the favorite people I have to work for, or my favorite art directors, leave me as much latitude as I can have. Scott Bizar is probably the best example, out at Fantasy Games. He’s constantly amazed when I send a rough into him for approval. His philosophy is that artists can paint much better than, you know, than he can; he figures, well, do what you want to do ‘cause you’re gonna do it the best, so he just kinda leaves you alone, lets you do what you want to do. Jordan Weisman from FASA is also good in that aspect, in that he leaves me a lot of leeway; there are others, too, I’ve worked with before.

I’ve had some other art directors, especially out of the market, advertising people, who’re real hard this way. Part of that is because they’ve already got a preconceived image of what they want and you’re basically in there to render it out. Your know, the creative designer, creative director, or the art director has already come up with the concept for an ad campaign and he just wants you to do all the hard stuff. Advertising pays much better than the gaming art does, but it’s a lot more restrictive.

Q: *Who were your influences, and did other artists in the gaming industry shape your style?*

A: If you were to pick out three or four artists—two or three—and say, “Is your work a synthesis of these people?” It would have to be Bob Peake—he’s a mainstream illustrator now. He does marquee posters, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, all the *Star Trek* pictures, *Rollerball*, *Apocalypse Now*—probably mostly for the way he uses color, because I noticed his style’s a lot more looser than mine is. Roger Dean, he did a bunch of record album covers, he did the Yes covers. I like his work from the standpoint that he’s a designer first, an industrial designer, and his stuff is all functional and fun and he’s got these neat images that kind of last on you. He did the covers for

Osibisa, it's a—not rhythm and blues—but like a Jamaican steel drum band, with these flying elephants going through the jungle. I didn't like the music, but I loved the covers.

As far as people in the gaming locker right now, the two people I like the best are Jim Talbot from Victory Games, he does the *007 Role Playing Game* - beautiful stuff. Angus McBride for Iron Crown. When I die and go to heaven, or when I grow up, I want to be Anjus McBride, okay? Beautiful stuff. I first saw his work in the *Osprey Men-at-Arms* books, and just love it. The guy's a master. When I found out—in fact, I think it's part of the reason I've not pushed Iron Crown a lot to do work . . . I just have this tremendous amount of respect for this craftsman that does this.

Q: *You finish a piece of art. Five years pass since you've finished that piece of art. You look at it again?*

A: Moths fly off of it, it's terrible. I make a jump in my ability and rendering about every—I like to do it about every year, usually it happens after a big convention. I go and I scope and I look at everybody's stuff, and I go, "Oh, this is how he did it," and I go back and I try to apply it. Conventions are also good because they pump me up, and I realize—it's a good time for introspection, and say, "This is what I'm doing." But yeah, old stuff just terrifies me.

There are some in particular that were extremely terrible: *Security Station* that I did for Metagaming is enough to almost make me lose my cookies sometimes. *The Vanished* cover for the *Star Trek Role-Playing Game* by FASA was another one that I thought was gonna be oh-so-good, and it was oh-so-bad, especially going back and looking at it later. (Ed. note: *The Vanished* was originally released with cover art by Mitchell O'Connell, and re-released with a Deitrick cover. The second release was not as extensively distributed.)

Assault—it's modern combat boardgame for GDW—was another skeleton in the closet. There are some terrible covers out of the *Traveller* series, too—*K-kree* and *Vargr* are two terrible, terrible, terrible covers. Oh, there're a couple of 'em floating around that I'm afraid someday somebody's gonna hold up and say: "Did you do this, too?"

Q: *Are there any that you are still fond of, after having completed them some time ago?*

A: My very first cover—well, "Kiddie" *Traveller* was good—that's the *Starter Traveller*, the first boxed *Traveller* set. It was also the first one that I had to do completely over because the original art was terrible, they didn't like it, so I had to do it over with. I'm kinda fond of "Kiddie" *Traveller*, not so much, not so much that it was that good, I think it was just a lot of collateral things. The fact that it was my first *big* game, as opposed to the micros I'd done for Steve Jackson and for Metagaming. And it was the first time I'd sat down and really tried to craft something well all the way through.

Q: *Among your audience, among gamers, do you have name recognition? And if so, what do they usually associate you with?*

A: I've got better name recognition amongst them than I do amongst literary people. Most of my recognition right now is amongst people—gamers, or people who game or know the industry; it's starting to be some publishers. And then, I've gone to a limited number of conventions since 1984, and I'm starting to get some recognition in that aspect, too. Again, like I said, I think there's a little bit of backlash against the gaming industry from the public. There's sometimes, you know—that might be a factor or not in getting more name recognition in New York, or with the paperback people, or whatever. As far as what I'm identified with, although I've done probably more *Star Trek* work than anything else, most people have called me a *Traveller* artist, you know, which kind of surprised me. Like I've said, I've done lots and lots and lots of *Star Trek* stuff; most of the time when I introduce myself, I'll say I do the FASA *Star Trek* line, and the kid'll go, "Oh, yeah! The *Traveller* artist!"

Q: *A game is a game; you're playing out the text of a scenario or relating information in the supplement. Of what value is*

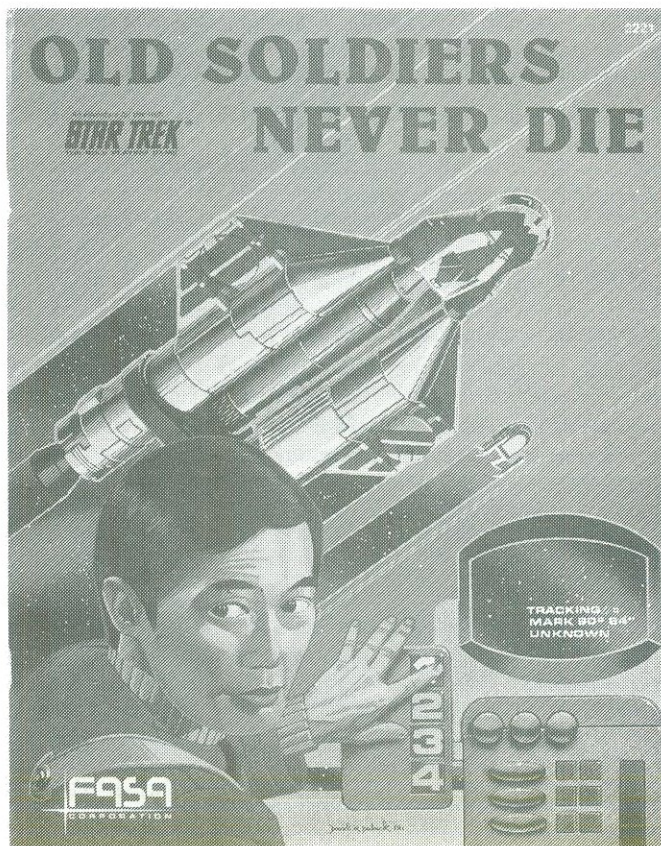
the art?

A: I really don't understand why there's a schism between gaming and literary science fiction. It floors me that I can't understand why there is, because when you're gaming, you're using your imagination, okay. And what you're basically doing is kinda playing out, a little bit more actively, what you do when you read a book. And I don't understand, there seems to be a caste system—and I'm not just talking about artwork; I'm talking about the whole convention kinda talk out of the side of their mouth about the "gamers." "The gamers this," you know. By the same token, a lot of gamers are ignorant about what's happening in science fiction and literature. Well, you know, they're ignorant about—I don't know, everything seems to be so parochial. That don't know what's going on. A person might be Joe Science Fiction Writer and Joe Science Fiction Author, but he doesn't know who Tom Clancy is, wrote *The Hunt for Red October*, and these marvelous books, weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list. And they don't know who he is, you know. I don't understand why that is.

Q: *Are you interested in continuing your current career primarily as a gaming artist?*

A: "Where am I going from here?" That question is valid, okay. We're at a real pivotal time in our life. We've had some real hard events hit us in the last year or so, I've had a lot of illness, we had some financial problems, some completely unrelated with our work, that have caused us to reassess how we look at life. We have children, we've got an eight-year-old and a six-year-old, and I'm 34, and although that doesn't mean I'm old, it doesn't mean that I'm real young either. (Ed. note: David's wife, Lori, is also a commercial artist.)

There are a lot of options open to me right now. We're not tied down to a house or a location because we're house-sitting for my parents for the next year, or so, and after that, you know, it's pivotal. I've thought about teaching at the college level, there's an opportunity for working for the Department of Defense in a couple of different capacities. I might stay freelancing, it's just—it depends. We're in a wait-and-see mode right now.



I'll always paint, I'll always do stuff, but it might not be as intense as it is right now. Quite frankly, too, a lot of it depends on, you know, what kind of work I come up with in the next year or so. Gaming art—I like gaming art, but in a lotta ways there's not a lot I can do after this. I don't know if I'm gonna be able to make much more per piece than I am now. And unless I can get into, find a project or a company that does something completely different that I could really get excited about, I don't know if gaming is where it's gonna be forever.

I'd love to do a fantasy line. I started doing fantasy stuff, my first inspiration for art was in 1959—I was sitting in the Del Oro Theater in Grass Valley, California, sitting through six showings of *Sleeping Beauty*. That's why every painting I do has magenta and turquoise in it; 'cause I still remember the fight over the cake and the dress.

Q: *Are you also a writer? Would you like to write?*

A: I've got a lot of ideas and I would like to write. I'm better at plotting something than I am fleshing it out. I think that is because I spent a lot of time in military writing operations orders and writing scenarios. I was a battalion staff officer and a battalion intel officer, and I did a lot of—it was kind of like being a DungeonMaster grown up, you know. You get to create—these bad guys are gonna fight us, and we've gotta go down and bomb them, or whatever, and you had to do that.

I'm a good gamesmaster, too, as my wife can attest to. I've had some excellent games, usually known for their Alistair MacLean-ish plot twists and, yeah, I'd like to write, I just—in fact, I started out as an English major. I wrote a little bit, oh, a couple news releases for a little paper in my hometown, and I was considering writing—historically, or whatever—about the time I decided to be an artist. Every one of my paintings usually has a story behind it, too—I'm talking about my non-pay stuff. . . .

I've got one painting in particular that shows an Indian look, a very native American-looking guy with a real light rifle and a motorized hang-glider over the top. And yeah, it's fun, it's got a nice feel, but what people don't realize is that character is out of an alternate universe that I've thought up all by myself. I'm a real big alternate-history nut. To me, that is the highest form of speculative fiction, taking and devising an alternate history. [H. Beam Piper's] *Lord Kalvan of Otherwhen*, that's a "Walter Mitty" dream of mine, that you can be propelled into another world where history went differently, and "I know how to do things right."

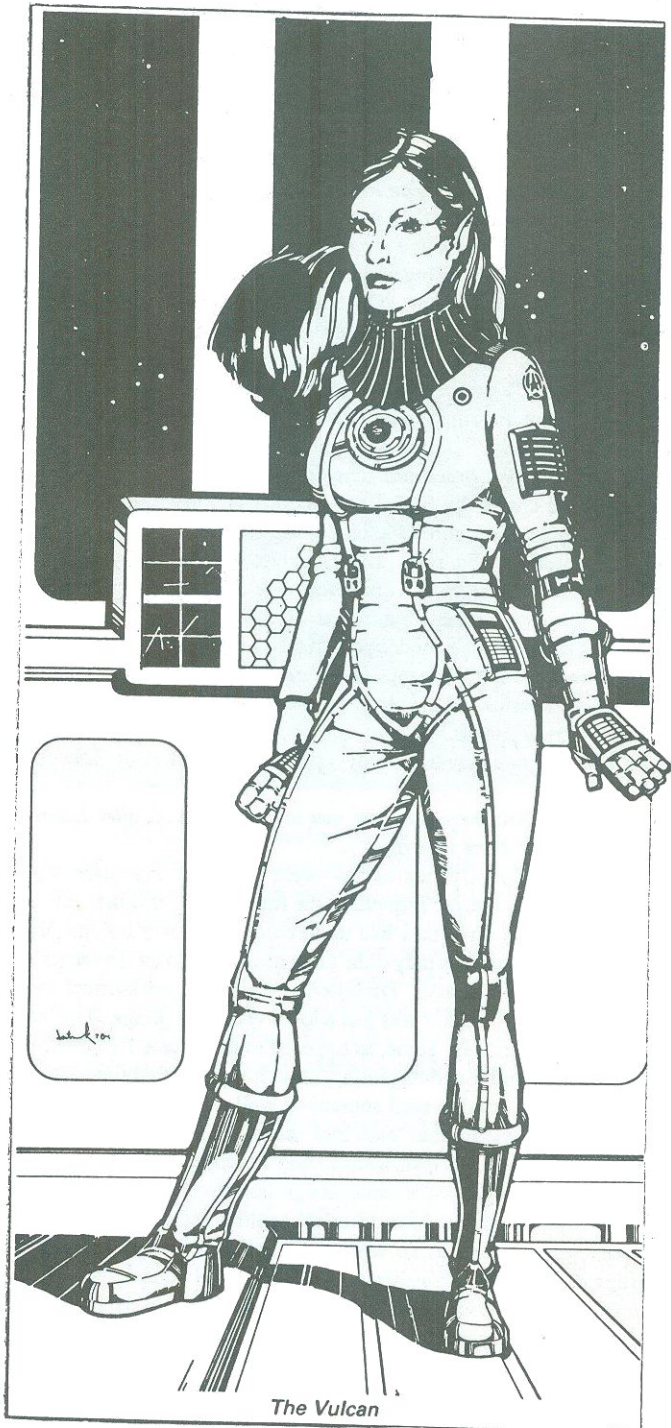
Q: *Do you have any advice for would-be artists in your line?*

A: Oh, in art in general?

Q: *Well, art in general, or art in the gaming industry?*

A: I used to really hate to hear this when people would tell me this, because I always thought it was a real egotistical thing, you know: and that is, "Don't do it." I used to think that the guy that said that thought he was hot stuff, because he was making it now, and none of us mere mortals were tough enough to make it where he had. But, upon looking, you know, in retrospective, looking back—okay, I won't say, "Don't do it." What I will say is: "Be as clever as you can in assessing just exactly the price you're gonna have to pay, because it's awfully high." It's an extremely—it's a high-intensity, stressful field to get into. It's extremely competitive, and it's gonna take a high toll on you emotionally and physically. And mentally. I would rather jump out of an airplane again, you know. If I—finishing a painting is as bad as jumping. (Ed. note: David is also a former paratrooper.)

On the other hand, there are intangible benefits to this job. It's true that being a free-lance illustrator and producing artwork is the hardest work I've ever done in my life. But I have never had as much satisfaction out of anything I've done as I do when I finish a painting and I know that it sings. I guess it's a matter of degrees—if you want your life to be like a mashed-potato milkshake, go to work for IBM, you know. But if you want to have some spice in your life, be a free-lancer; you're either up all the way or you're down all the way.



The Vulcan