

They're Alive!

Dinosaurs in Our Mind's Eye

Why is Chris doing all this?

For several years, Chris has been studying to become a self-taught professional paleontologist. He specializes in Dinosaur Aesthetics, or why we think dinosaurs looked the way we think they looked. Why do we think of them as being a certain color, having certain patterns on their skin, having certain postures, moving in a particular way, sounding a particular way? The way a dinosaur looks on the outside, the way it moves and acts, are a major part of what we think of when we think about dinosaurs. But these characteristics are exactly what we don't know about dinosaurs. Scientists study fossils, and make valid educated guesses about these subjects, but they sometimes disagree with each other, their ideas change over time, and there is always a limit on their ability to completely reincarnate the past. A second level of subjectivity comes into play when artists try to interpret the scientists' ideas whether for scientific illustrations or the entertainment industry. Artists have varying levels of knowledge about paleontology: some may be very up to date, some may still think about dinosaurs in terms of where the science was when they were a kid. Some may like science and use it as their defining priority, while others may have little or no interest in representing dinosaurs in an accurate fashion.

Of course, this can be helpful too--sometimes scientists get new ideas from the artists as well. But in the end, we all end up with our own ideas about what dinosaurs looked and acted like, based on what images we've seen over our lives. So in that sense what Chris is really attempting to do is find out what we think about dinosaurs, and why.

Analysis & Adventures in Dinosaur Aesthetics

What am I looking at?

These are all interactive projects Chris has been doing for several years. They are a kind of experiment to see what people think about dinosaurs. These projects are all intended to be fun for the participant, and are usually designed as some form of game, challenge, creative activity, or questionnaire. After doing the projects for a while, Chris collates all the data and makes charts that show what he has learned through his investigations.

Who cares about dinosaurs?

Everyone, apparently. If you can find chicken in the shape of dinosaurs, if there are towns where all the streets named after dinosaurs, then you know that they must mean something to our culture.

Why do we care about dinosaurs? Many people say that it's because they are big, scary, and dead--which is to say, awe-inspiring but safe. This makes a lot of sense. As can be seen in the data here, one of the strongest relationships people have to dinosaurs is on the visceral level --ferocity and power and fear. But it seems that we also use them in a different psychological way--that we think of them all as having different "personalities," in which one is the nice guy and another the tough guy, etc. The personalities we ascribe to them in movie after movie, book after book, are curiously similar to narrative archetypes in psychology, mythology, and novels. We automatically think in terms of these protagonist and antagonist roles, and have projected our selves on to dinosaurs, precisely because we have such little information about them. We know just enough to tantalize us, but also little enough for them to easily populate our fantasy life, to act as a target for our wish fulfillments in the same way that comic book superheroes do.

Chris Wildrick



Photo taken at the Calgary Zoo's Prehistoric Park

Are dinosaurs for kids?

Dinosaurs are definitely for kids, because kids know awesome when they see it. Dinosaurs are exciting, different, and come with a whole world of new information that is constantly being added to through new discoveries. Dinosaurs offer intellectual discovery, creativity, mystery, and a sense of adventure for anyone who engages them.

But dinosaurs are for adults too. As described here, the way we use them psychologically can tell us a lot about our selves. Dinosaurs also provide unique evidence about evolution and the history of life, especially in terms of their evolution into the birds of today. To give just one example, understanding the relationship between dinosaurs and birds has helped lead to the fairly important switch from using the Linnean form of systematic biology to the new use of cladograms.

Psychologically and scientifically, dinosaurs can change the way we see our world.

Who's Alive? How? What's a Mind's Eye?

While dinosaurs have been dead for 65 million years (at least the ones that didn't evolve into birds), they have experienced a kind of rebirth over the past couple hundred years, all through our efforts. We've restored their bodies from their bones, but even more incredibly we've recreated from nothingness an entire pop cultural multiverse of dinosaurs that live and breathe and interact with each other. They teach our kids to read, they eat us in movies, we play on playgrounds built in the shapes of their bodies, we read about them in comics and books and magazines of all types. We have created our own mental image of them--and not just what they look like, but how they act and sound--to such a degree of detail and complexity that dinosaurs are more alive for us than some actual living animals!

Our mind's eye is another term for our imagination, especially our visual imagination. This is where dinosaurs reside for us today. Since our--the general public's--mental image of them comes just as much from our minds as it does from their fossils, our imagination is truly the engine of their existence. Of course, science has a little to do with it too! Imagination isn't something that exists only within the arts. It is the combined imaginations and efforts of centuries of scientists, artists, storytellers, and everyday people who have created this new world of dinosaurs today, built out of our minds and out of our time.

The question is, why? This is what Chris' project is trying to investigate.

Chris would like to thank:

The Museum of the Earth, for this show and for hosting him several times over the past two years as he came in to do participatory projects with the museum visitors--and for giving him space at their booth at the New York State Fair!

The Interdisciplinary Committee in the College of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University, which gave Chris an Interdisciplinary Grant to fund this project. This grant has been fundamental to Chris' ability to complete this work.

Erwin Nursery School, Moses DeWitt Elementary, Fowler High School, the Say Yes! program at Bellevue Elementary School and McKinley-Brighton Magnet Elementary School, and the College of Creative Arts at the University of West Virginia, which let Chris visit their classes and do his projects with their students over the past two years.

Chris' parents, wife, and kids, who have all been a big support with their time, energy, and willingness to hear Chris read dinosaur books aloud over and over and over again. If they didn't know the difference between a pachycephalosaurus and a parasaurolophus before, they know now!

What's in the Show

What you see here are many different formats for presenting Chris' work on the same basic subject of dinosaur aesthetics.

There are several books, some of which contain large-format fold-out charts. There is an interactive computer display. There are two audio projects on an iPod. There is a continuously changing slideshow of all the dinosaur images on the web on another iPod. There are two videos looping on a TV. There are posters describing all of these tech-based projects. They're all here for you to look at and read.