BIRKHÄUSER

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SPACE TIME PLAY
COMPUTER GAMES, ARCHITECTURE
AND URBANISM: THE NEXT LEVEL

THE NEW MENTAL LANDSCAPE
Why Games are Important for Architecture

I am naturally interested in the relationship between games and architecture.

I've long been an inconsistent and capricious player of computer games. I well remember *Dark Castle* (1986), which I played often with my son Raffaele when he was three and the Mac jumped to 512K of RAM from its original 128. In the year 2000, I had a rather profound relationship with *L'Amerzone*, designed by Benoît Sokal (1999). It belongs to the genre of adventure games, and I found it beautiful. For years, I would occasionally dream about some scene from *L'Amerzone*; I have mentioned Sokal's game in several public venues, and some of the game's screenshots have appeared in serious books. In 2001, I started to play *Myst III* (2001), certain of whose subterranean biological worlds I found beautiful, but which is overall a less emotionally involving game than *L'Amerzone*. So there you have it: my experience as an electronic player.

Now let's address what appears to me an interesting question: why are games important for architecture? There are architects like Lars Spuybroek, Marcos Novak and Kas Oosterhuis for whom the analogy between games and architecture is rather direct. Games are in several ways similar to the type of architecture they design. Games establish a set of rules that govern different forms of behavior. Architecture that employs this same rules-based approach can be just as mutable, changeable and interactive as electronic games.

But the question still remains: why should we be particularly interested in this?

To try to answer, we must introduce a key concept that can shed some light on the matter. I call it the "mental landscape" concept. In a word, "mental landscape" refers to the fact that architects of the new generation are working to make an architecture that draws upon certain aspects and characteristics of the virtual world. More specifically, architects "born with computers" are trying to spawn a new era of architecture that incorporates some of the mutable and interactive characteristics of electronic environments in general and electronic games in particular. For them, the importance of virtuality and information technology lies not in how they can help create newer, better *virtual* worlds, but in how they can *be returned to materiality and inspire a new type of architecture*!

Of particular interest to these architects is the generation of games that afford users the possibility to create their own environments. In such games, explains game designer Katie Salen,

> "You can see the relationship between the role of creation and imagination and... architecture development...Games on one side, and interactive and mutable architectures on the other, share methodology, share techniques, share possibilities to orient the practice of architecture towards understanding and shaping buildings as contexts for user interaction." (Salen 2006)

By allowing them to create their own space, games inspire players' imaginations and open their minds to the many possible configurations, spaces and behaviors that can ignite architectural thinking.

But imagining is a rather dramatic act, particularly when it is used for artistic purposes. In the minds of today's forward-thinking architects, imagination represents a means to negate the past industrial and mechanic paradigm in favor of an informational and interactive architecture. In this way of thinking, imagination is not just about creation, but also about negation and breaking rules. This, however, presents an interesting contradiction.

Imagine Marcel Duchamp, a key person in this discourse. "Why is he so important?" you may ask. For two reasons: For Duchamp, imagination is on the one hand all about breaking the rules (think only of his famous urinal!). But, on the other hand, Duchamp is the man who did nothing for several years but play chess, a game that is all about moving *within a set of rules*. Hence the contradiction: breaking the rules through active negation of artistic convention (e.g. the urinal) but then living almost as a virtual slave to rules (e.g. playing chess). It sounds incredible, but this is exactly the contradiction that we as architects *must face*. We must make use of imagination's ability to inspire new art and negate convention and at the same time accept a well-defined set of rules. Architects must operate like a pendulum swinging between these two opposites.

When considering the moment in which "games" became important for architecture, one must take into account a very serious crisis – namely, the moment when the modernist functionalist approach to architecture revealed itself as no longer useful for addressing contemporary artistic crises, and, as a result, the CIAM broke down both as a paradigm and an institution. It was at exactly that time – i.e. in the 1950s – that games assumed an increasingly important position in architecture! I am thinking of Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck, whose ideas originated from an anti-CIAM approach. The key to architecture for van Eyck, as well as for Alison and Peter Smithson and other members of Team X, was no longer a mechanic relationship between function and building. For these "new" architects of the 50s, architecture had to relate to anthropology. Their approach was a kind of new humanism to which the physical and psychological presence of man in space was integral. Games became an extremely interesting area of study for these architects.

Let us turn to another Dutch artist, Constant, and to the European Situationists generally. Naturally, the whole Situationist way of thinking focused on "how to break" certain rules of functionalistic and mechanistic cities and architectures – how to open the door to completely new visions. In the 60s, Constant and the rest of the Situationists ensured that the architectural discourse was confronted with the idea of creating a whole new set of rules within which new behaviors and new adaptable architecture could grow.

Given that games are unquestionably relevant to architecture and always have been, the above discussion hardly seems adequate (as you may have noticed, I didn't even touch on the most well-known syntactic approaches to game-architecture relations – namely, Wright's Froebel construction blocks and van Doesburg's neoplastic planes!). In other words, it is necessary to rethink the historical role of

games in relation to architecture. More importantly, we must focus on the future intersections between the two. Naturally, there are environmental, user-community-related, modeling and constructive aspects of architecture that may benefit from games, but what I find most important is the *aesthetic* dimension. (And by aesthetics, I do not mean style, but a form of synthetic denotative knowledge.) Try for a second to imagine the modernity of functionalism and rationalism without their aesthetics. What would the modernist approach be without its aesthetic vision? Aesthetics was the blood that gave life and strength and direction. Coming back to the original question: why do we need to use and think about and elaborate upon games? Why are games important to contemporary architecture? I present my answer as five points:

Because games incorporate the recursive, changeable architecture of our electronic mental landscape.

Because games leave the construction of the environment to the users themselves.

Because through games, it is possible to address crises (*L'Amerzone* is all about addressing crises!) and move the imagination in new directions.

Because games share some performative aspects with music but are also task-oriented and based on algorithms.

Because games incorporate metaphors and interactivity, which represent the mainstays of the electronic esthetic of our times.

The list, of course, remains open and is sure to be lengthened in due course.

◆ *Dark Castle* (1986), developed and published by Silicon Beach Software. ◆ Salen, K. (2006), "They Must First Be Imagined," in K. Oosterhuis & L. Feireiss (eds.), *Game Set and Match II*, Episode Publishers, Rottderdam. ◆ *L'Amerzone* (1999), developed and published by Casterman/Microids. ◆ *Myst III* (2001), developed by Presto Studios, published by Ubisoft.