

Moving Images – Static Spaces: Architectures, Art, Media, Film, Digital Art and Design

AMPS, Architecture_MPS; Altinbaş University
Istanbul: 12-13 April, 2018

Melancholic Architectures: The case of Video Games

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983, Electronic Arts published an advertising manifesto with an innovative approach, in which they were declaring: “Can a computer make you cry?”. This challenging question was introducing new aspects of the videogame industry which risked to tackle with issues that relate to the ‘touchstones of our emotions’, through the use of the idea of ‘software artistry’, but also of a ‘language of dreams’ - a language which, in other words, employs the potential of a computer to communicate with its user on a mental dimension.

This former provocative position is still contemporary and well-timed as digital culture has become widespread and ubiquitous in the contemporary world. Especially, the new generation, which Marc Prensky aptly called ‘digital natives’¹, has grown up fully familiar with the use of new media and on a daily interaction with computers, smart phones, tablets, and other kinds of interfaces, that both encourage and facilitate the ‘habitation’ of the digital-analog reality.

Focusing on the video game industry makes this observation even more explicit. Recent statistic data verify that the number of players worldwide has exceeded 1,8 billion since 2016², while the video game industry has outgrown in number the powerfulness of the grand film industry. Videogames are nowadays a complex cultural phenomenon which is open to numerous interdisciplinary approaches. Researchers explore videogames as an educative or training tool, as an entertainment industry, as a cultural product, as a media expression, or as an innovative technological field with exponential growth. In all cases, the video games’ ability to generate emotions is of high importance.

The Mental Landscape of Digital Experience

One can observe a multiplicity of psychological experiences that evolve through the use of digital technologies. The modern manifestation of contemporary digital ‘selves’ is related to fragile, ‘visceral’, deeply personal experiences of mental landscapes, stemming from interactivity with electronic or virtual environments³. At the same time, the current notion of the ‘self’ is transformed and mutated, permeated by the contemporary digital culture that reflects back to the subject fragmentary aspects of a world with new dimensions. Individuality meets the cultural sphere and adopts the ‘symptomatological’ characteristics of this new era.

Focusing on the context of videogames, contemporary players are offered the opportunity to explore and immerse in a plethora of novel environments, each with a distinct and unique atmosphere, forming the ideal ground for new mental experiences to evolve. Undoubtedly, videogames constitute the ideal fruitful ground for the design of new experiences – their powerfulness lying in the game characteristics themselves. Designers make use of game elements such as human interactivity, narrative features,

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decision making, or the overall player's sense of immersion as potent tools for the creation of a unique experiential and emotional architecture.

Nowadays, it is a well-established fact that there is a strong relationship between design aspects and digital, interactive spaces that are capable of affecting their users on an emotional level. Players nowadays are experiencing extremely complex and exciting emotional states through the act of gaming, and their psychological profiles are affected in a short-term as well as in a long-term distance. This fact is also underlined by the evident association of videogames, and especially the most contemporary titles, with art. Games generally, make use of elements deriving from music, film, literature, "mediums that have been long used for inspiration, emotional stimulation or representation of inner mental states, since antiquity"⁴.

Additionally, the experience emanating from the interaction between the player and the video game environment can be read as an act of reading poetry - it lies in the meeting of the reader with the poem, in the same way Jorge Luis Borges describes "the taste of the apple lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself"⁵. And carries on stating that "...what is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading."⁶ This observation is underlining the importance of the player's subjective experience, which manifests an expression of the individual's encounter with the world. "In essence, games are artificial constructions based on the real world. We come to them armed with a set of pre-set responses learned from the real world, and we apply them to the fantasy. [...] Games confirm our ability to understand the world in emotional and practical terms."⁷ Therefore, emotional design in video games can be regarded not only as an act of creating tailor-made experiences which offer stimuli for a multiplicity of emotions, but also as a composition of affective artefacts capable of delivering a fertile context for potential subjective and mentally driven interactions.

The Art of Melancholy

One of the most popular emotions in video game environments is melancholy. Especially recently, many games have been in dialogue with melancholic atmospheres, addressing issues such as societal problems, psychological conditions, sadness, sublimeness, beauty, utopia and dystopia, and other mature content. Melancholy is a timeless concept, as well as a phenomenon with philosophical, scientific artistic, or even clinical implications. Over the centuries, the melancholic condition has been translated as a sin, a disease, a type of idiosyncrasy, an expression of geniusness, or a source of inspiration.

Either stemming from a philosophical discourse, or from a theological, medicinal or artistic discourse, the phenomenon of melancholy raises interesting issues of spatiality and perception which share a common ground. The melancholic condition has an inherent relationship with space, since its expression is manifested through spatial metaphors and vocabularies. It also refers to a kind of symbolical or anthropological space, a space that is unmeasured and inconceivable. Thus, in this study, the role of design is explored from an architectural point of view - "architecture elaborates and communicates thoughts of man's incarnate confrontation with the world through 'plastic emotions'⁸" - posing the question of how melancholic literature can be collocated to video game experiences in order to showcase multiple spatial, temporal or narrative characteristics that are capable of instructing the user's experience.

In this context, spatiality is discussed as a potential factor of melancholic experiential design, making reference to a series of common melancholic features that can be employed in terms of representation, concept design, audiovisual language, or interactivity processes of video games. Thus, the notion of 'space' forms the guide through which the 'art of melancholy' is translated, revealing examples of

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elements that the melancholic phenomenon introduces such as ‘shapes’, ‘materials’, ‘structures’, ‘relations’, ‘transpositions’.

Darkness

The melancholic phenomenon is rather commonly expressed through the metaphor of darkness. A dark, undecipherable, or unclear environment is usually related to a strong personal experience of sadness, grief or despair. Peter de Brune connects the use of light with that kind of architecture that affects the most imperceptible and unconscious dimensions of human existence. «Light affects the state of mind in a way that goes beyond its simple functional role»⁹. Besides it is known that “in intense emotional states and deep thoughts, vision is usually suppressed”¹⁰. Similarly, any absence of light, or death, blindness, blackness and the night seem to ‘haunt’ many videogames, which thus render the awesome internal processes of a melancholic condition. For example, in video game ‘Inside’, space representation is dark and mostly silent, making an interesting association with its title, which reminds of Minkowski’s description of darkness as a deeply personal space. In this case, melancholy, is just like darkness, “dark space envelops me on all sides and penetrates me much deeper than light space”¹¹.

Shadows

In other games, melancholy is translated as a lack of color. In ‘Prune’, a colorless representation forms the setting for growing up beautiful trees that struggle to overcome obstacles and finally move from shadow to light and finally blossom.

The use of shadow in melancholic representations is very popular in games that make use of silhouette and layered design. Games such as ‘Limbo’, make use of a plethora of shadows as gestures of atmospheric design that denote the melancholic ‘presence of an absence’. Shadows can be interpreted as memories, bearers of thoughts, artefacts related to inwardness, rites, mysteries or quietness.

In video game ‘Where shadows slumber’, which takes place in a shadowy, abandoned world, shadows are interestingly taking part in the transformation of the character as well, denoting a sense of creative use of darkness itself: “Anything that is not touched by light has the freedom to change [...] After all, if you are not touched by the light, you - too- can change. What will you become?”¹²

Descent

Another spatial translation of melancholy is the use of descent. The idea of descending refers to a psychological state of moving downwards, either in the context of depressive emotional state, or towards the depths of one’s soul - in other words “a retreat from the void of the external world”¹³. In ‘Alto’s Adventure’ the player can enjoy the uncommon experience of a continuous descent during which evolves a melancholic feeling of awe and inspiration. The case of ‘Silent Hill 2’ also employs the feature of descending in a deliberately disproportionate amount of time during the game. “James (the character) is constantly moving in a downward direction.” [...] The amount of time spent descending is, from a purely logical standpoint, impossible.”¹⁴

Dysfunctionality

‘Survival horror’ video games, frequently depict places and entities that confuse and confound¹⁵, spaces that are dysfunctional, uncertain and sometimes unreal. In the same way, the melancholic subject is regarded as a haunted being: ‘the beast’, ‘the dragon’, ‘the blue devil’ are some of its symbolisms that depict its flaws and failures.

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One of its phenomenal dysfunctions is a sense of rigidity of movement, heaviness or even paralysis of the organic body, states which at the same time underline the vigor of the melancholic mind. Through this lack of action, the subject delves into the thoughts, ideas, associations. In 'Heavy Rain', action is not really advancing through this technique, "everything is balanced to take the player down to passivity, to almost non-activity, obliging him/her to take the time to feel the emotional experience the game is proposing"¹⁶ - almost driving him/her to inhabiting a kind of slow time, a kind of pause.

Wilderness

This kind of melancholic experience is sometimes accompanied by the idea of silence. Or other times it is translated as a symbolic representation of a deserted world. The use of wilderness always evokes a sense of melancholy, since it manifests the absence of activity, life, or interaction with other human beings. In 'Journey', the player enjoys a unique process of wandering in a vast desert which makes an interesting association with the journey of life. It is interesting to note that if he/she finds a companion it is impossible to communicate with speech. In 'Dear Esther', a lost man explores an uninhabited island, with shipwrecks and dilapidated structures, listening to a series of letter fragments about his wife who is gone. The solidarity of the hero meets the solidarity of the island in a melancholic atmosphere that blends present and past, life and death.

In all these cases, the landscape is reflected back to the self, stimulating a kind of psychological transference of the spatial features. According to Freud¹⁷, the subject internalizes his/her relation to the world projecting it inwards. In dystopian or postapocalyptic games, the wilderness or ruins of space are additionally combined with a melancholic narrative that comments on loss, transience or vanity of existence.

Remembrance of Death

This 'memento mori' effect is also achieved through the use of spatial representations that include historical, temporal, mnemonical artefacts. The melancholic aura usually refers to a nostalgic absence which is distant in the past or even in the future. Thus, Bowring describes melancholic spaces as both retrospective and prospective.¹⁸ Space either takes the form of a relic of the past, or manifests an obsession with the inevitable end of things, death. The melancholic subject meditates on the impermanence of life, almost following a Baroque tradition of futility that reconciles us with mortality through videogame paraphernalia like skulls, tombs, poisons, morbid figures dust, bats, and hourglasses. This is the reason why beautiful environments stimulate a sense of melancholy – Alain de Botton describes that melancholic zealots "those most in thrall to beauty who will be especially aware of, and saddened by, its ephemeral character"¹⁹ Additionally, features such as liminality or seasonality emphasize on this emotion. Bowring explains that melancholy "inhabits the liminal, the times and spaces of transition, the threshold places"²⁰ – or the threshold between seasons, which, in an anthropological context, can be translated as well as a ritual passage. Any passage can refer to a season, an age, or a life stage. This experience of transition can be interpreted through elements of nature, such as the twilight, the sunbeam on a window after the rain, the touch of the wave on the shore, the eternally moving shadows of all objects. The homonymous game 'Passage', directly comments on the transience of life by condensing the journey of life in just a few minutes of deeply emotional gameplay.

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Weather conditions

Weather conditions, and especially the use of rain or snow are strongly related to melancholy. In video game ‘Heavy Rain’, “the weather changes right after the rupture, from being very sunny to being very rainy, lasting for the entire game and so giving the game its name. The father’s apartment is smaller than the previous house with much darker light and almost no colour; everything seems grey.”²¹

Contradiction

All melancholic characteristics offer an ambivalent feeling of combined joy and grief, genius and demonization, nostalgia and relief. Pensky refers: “melancholia appears under the dialectic of illness and empowerment”²². In ‘That Dragon Cancer’, an autobiographical game about a young boy who was diagnosed with terminal cancer, the use of spatial dipoles and contradiction is crucial in the expression of the narrative. Also, in ‘Entwined’, the player experiences a journey to unite the souls of a bird and a fish, two souls that are mentioned as ‘always together, forever apart’.

CONCLUSION

The study attempts to translate the abstract melancholic condition into a readable spatial structure, which aims to capture and therefore shed light on the almost ‘sacred’ interior landscapes of the subject during gameplay. This entails the externalization of these emotional landscapes, their hermeneutic decoding, their placement in a more objective and accessible world of ideas, their further juxtaposition in the end with physical spatial experiences as well as important design issues.

This presupposes the introduction of a new vocabulary that experiments with spatial perception and its relation to the new psycho-composite individual experiences in digital environments. This vocabulary is necessary in an ever changing and rapidly evolving digital world. Nonetheless, the art of the gently sad expression of ‘mono no aware’ - the ‘pathos’ of things - is interestingly placed next to the almost immortal and fleeting nature of digitality, outlining a new form of melancholy: one that reconciles ephemerality with permanence, emotion with choice, or video game environments with rather fluid mental states.

This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund- ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning» in the context of the project “Reinforcement of Postdoctoral Researchers” (MIS-5001552), implemented by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY).



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