Invisible (Game) Cities

Andri Gerber in Conversation with Paolo Pedercini, January 25, 2019 (E-mail)

Andri Gerber: Let's start with an "easy" question: how do you become a "subversive game designer" (assuming you agree with this definition of your activities). What did you study? And to what extent was this planned, or did it happen by accident?

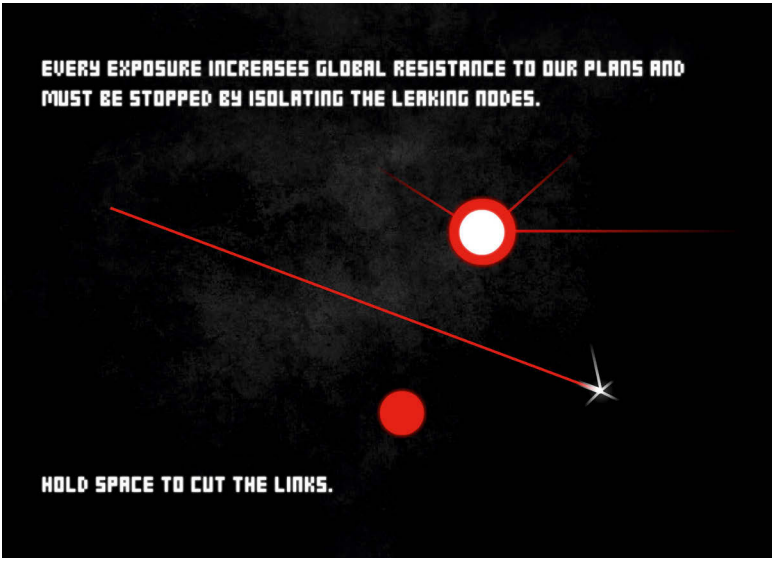
Paolo Pedercini: It was a bit of an accident. I made my first game for a political campaign. It was an extension of the rather traditional activist work I was doing at the time: making fanzines, setting up websites, designing flyers, and so on. Fifteen years later, I still do that kind of work for political organizations, but *Molleindustria* spun off into a more personal project.

Gerber: Religion, politics, economics … you tackle big issues with your games. To our understanding, video games are "world constructions." This is what we are particularly interested in: the fact that the game world appears to be a simplified version of the actual world, which enables a better understanding of all the norms, actors, and framework that control this reality. Simultaneously, they break down this complex system into something simpler. Would you agree to this definition?

Pedercini: You can see games as models, meant to capture certain aspects of the real world. Scientific simulations have a specific purpose: they are meant to investigate and predict a phenomenon, and have to be constantly tweaked and evaluated according to the collected data. Game simulations are much more open-ended: their purpose is to entertain or achieve an aesthetic effect. Basically, they represent the real world, just like other artistic forms. The main difference is that games employ rules and interactivity along with audio-visual and narrative strategies. It's dangerous to think that, by virtue of being dynamic and interactive,

games can produce a better understanding of real-world system. As Ian Bogost (*1976) claims, games make rhetorical arguments in a procedural form. You can accept their portrayals as truthful, or reject them when they clash with your own mental models. To me, the most valuable part of playing a game like *SimCity* (1989) is not that it explains how a city works, but rather, that it forces you to examine your own mental model of a city.

Fig. 12: Paolo Pedercini/Molleindustria, Leaky World, a Playable Theory, Screenshot, 2010



Gerber: If we consider contemporary video games, I would argue that we are faced with a great deal of irony—not sarcasm, as for example in *Fortnite* (2017)—but irony, as something that creates an ambiguous relationship between object and subject, while also leaving room for bitterness and understanding problems. Your work, I would say, is often very ironic in precisely this way. One is left with a sense of *amaro in bocca*, a sour taste. Is this something particular to video games, compared to other media such as film or literature?

Pedercini: Computers are quite literally technologies of control and measurement. Video games are constructed with these technologies and retain a certain cybernetic bias in their tropes, genres, and engines. If the

goal is to articulate a critique of power or of capitalism through video games, then the most obvious strategy is to subvert or problematize these phenomena. So I can give you power in the game, but I also try to point out how you may be subject to this kind of power in your everyday life. I can give you a system that is compelling to master and optimize, but also show you how that this ruthless instrumental thinking is destroying our world. If I want to avoid a preachy, moralistic tone, irony can be a valuable rhetorical device.

Gerber: This calls for a question about participation. In a video game you are actively playing, you have to make decisions, you commit yourself to it, which cannot be done with books or while watching a movie, at least not to the same degree. On the other hand, with *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, Netflix is trying something in this direction; I remember similar experiments in the television programming of the 1990s. How would you describe the specific form of "personal investment" when playing video games?

Pedercini: I think *Bandersnatch* didn't put any effort in making you care about the fate of the characters. It wants you to explore the limits of this agency, to break its structure, while pulling all sorts of meta-fictional tricks to avoid the problem of branching stories. The result is somewhat cynical and sadistic: you are playing God with the life of the protagonist, fiddling with this new (in the context of television) technology, but maybe it's YOU—the viewer—who is being duped. All of which is in line with the techno-dystopian themes of the series.

Gerber: I find it very interesting that you also design board games. As a player, you have a completely different level of engagement. Where do you see the differences between these two types of game media?

Pedercini: I often come up with small, non-digital games, and I talk a lot about board games in my classes, but I haven't designed, nor published anything significant. From a design perspective, tabletop or card games require a kind of mathematical intuition that very few people have—I certainly don't. From a player perspective, they require substantial commitment and emotional investment: you have to find the right game for the context, invite people over, explain the rules, etc. For political purposes, the social situation surrounding board games has the potential to create and deepen bonds within existing organizations. However, I don't think they work as well as other media: they are not agile and malleable enough to spread new ideas.

Gerber: This reminds me of *Le Jeu de la Guerre* (1965), by Guy Debord (1931-1994), the most prominent member of the Situationists, and Alice Becker-Ho (*1941). It is interesting, because the Situationists were primarily material, on site, yet this game is very abstract and is intended to teach strategic thinking to the players. Does it appeal to you?

Pedercini: The only notable thing about *A Game of War* is that Guy Debord made it. It's a rather old-style, Napoleonic Wars chess variant with one interesting design idea: you have to defend communications and logistical lines radiating out from certain units. Overall, it's rather awkward and old-fashioned, but Debord delusionally thought it was his ultimate masterpiece, and that it synthetized all conflicts ever to occur, so his academic fanboys took it quite seriously.

Gerber: You are working on a well-known reference to architects, the beautiful book *Le città invisibili* (1972) by Italo Calvino (1923-1985). You are planning a whole set frame of game cities, the first one being *Nova Alea* (2016). What is your inspiration from this book?

Pedercini: I always wanted to make an alternative, critical *SimCity*; after several failed attempts, I realized that the idea of a single, all-encompassing city simulation was problematic in and of itself. Cities are historical strata, socio-economic processes, or states of mind as much as they are built environments. That's the reason why Calvino uses them as a starting point to talk about a memory, space and time, or semiotics. I definitely want to talk about cities and urban processes, but I'm inspired by Calvino's magical realism and the limited scope of each short story. Each invisible city is a nice read, but the work really makes sense because it is serial and has its internal relationships and resonances.

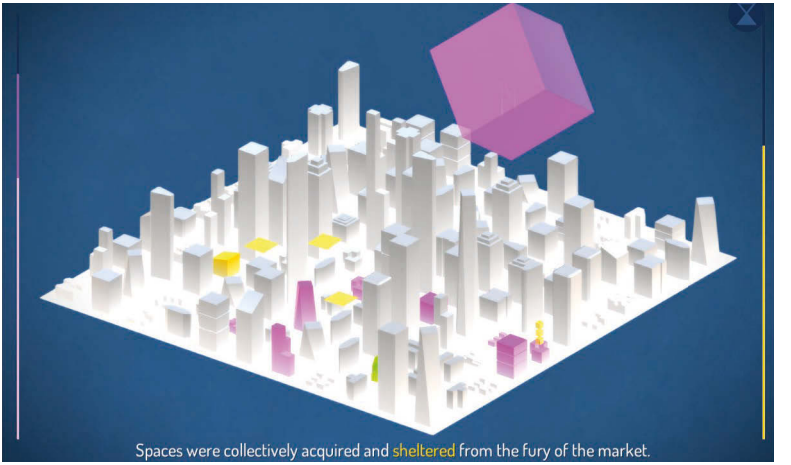
Gerber: Playing the game, the message you want to convey becomes very clear. Nevertheless, I was unsure how to play the game itself. I was missing some critical piece of information and got quite frustrated. Is this intentional or am I just a bad player?

Pedercini: I wanted it to be under-explained. Figuring out how it works was supposed to be part of the experience. Unfortunately, that approach clashes with the current design orthodoxy: the player is supposed to be told exactly what to do; all the components should have a clearly communicated function, and so on. I realize the process of rule discovery can be frustrating if you are not in the right mindset. There are a few games that can be cryptic in an engaging way: *Starseed Pilgrim* (2013), *Cinco Paus*

(2017) or many works by Stephen Lavelle, such as *Increpare (2010)*, but they are perhaps an acquired taste.

Gerber: Returning to Italo Calvino: the first lecture of his unfinished series, entitled *Lezioni Americane*, was dedicated to *leggerezza* (lightness). There he writes: "After writing *fiction* for forty years and after several experiments, it is about time for me to define my work; I would propose the following one: my procedure was mostly one of subtracting weight; I tried to subtract weight both from human characters, from celestial bodies, or from cities; I tried mainly to subtract weight to the structure of narration and to language".[1] To a certain extent, I would argue that designing video games is also about subtracting weight from reality. Would you agree to that? And to what extent do you think that lightness is an appropriate attribute with which to describe working in terms of video games?

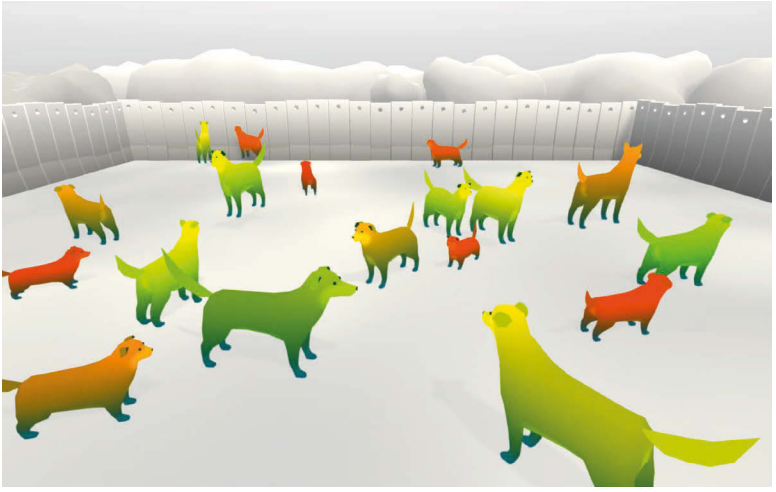
Fig. 13: Paolo Pedercini/Molleindustria, Nova Alea, Screenshot, 2016



1 |"Dopo quarant'anni che scrivo *fiction*, dopo aver esplorato varie strade e compiuto esperimenti diversi, è venuta l'ora che io cerchi una definizione complessiva per il mio lavoro; proporrei questa: la mia operazione è stata il più delle volte una sottrazione di peso; ho cercato di togliere peso ora alle figure umane, ora ai corpi celesti, ora alle città; soprattutto ho cercato di togliere peso alla struttura del racconto e al linguaggio." Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* [1988] (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1993), p. 7.

Pedercini: I don't know. When I look at the code of a game in progress on my other window, it's more like a Rube Goldberg machine made of space shuttle pieces duct-taped together. I see nothing lightweight and subtractive in video game development. A game can present itself as clean and minimalistic, but there is likely to be a messy misuse of technology behind the surface.

Fig. 14: Paolo Pedercini/Molleindustria, Dogness. Breed the Perfect Dog, Screenshot, 2018



Gerber: As an extension of this, you frequently speak of your games—maybe also as a form of understatement—as "tiny games". In architecture and urbanism, scale is a fundamental issue, particularly in relation to the scale of human beings. What is the difference between "tiny" and "big" games? Is it only a question of money, or also of content?

Pedercini: Perhaps architecture's relationship with the human scale is similar to video games' relationship with human time. Making "big" virtual spaces is trivial. Making virtual spaces worth spending time in is the real challenge.

Mainstream games developed a perverse relationship with scale and content. In order to please a core audience of teens with a lot of time and little money, they got bigger and bigger in terms of content. Today, if you want to sell a game in the triple-A bracket, you have to guaran-

tee dozens of hours of gameplay. This inevitably alienates young adults and people with less free time, who in turn are pushed toward more "Consumption-oriented" experiences like smartphone games. In order to be highly profitable, phone games need to be addictive and exploitative. An entire "dark science" has been created to keep players hooked into some idiotic match-three game. That is not good either. My simple proposition is to make games that are respectful of people's time and intelligence.

Gerber: Architecture and urban design are very much based on the experience of space. Virtual reality (VR) and extended reality devices are introduced in games, yet obviously the haptic dimension of the spatial experience gets lost. This is very problematic for us architects. You, too, have been very critical of VR, for example in your game *A Short History of the Gaze* (2016). Yet at the same time, one retains a fascination with the possibility of this medium. What are your thoughts on this?

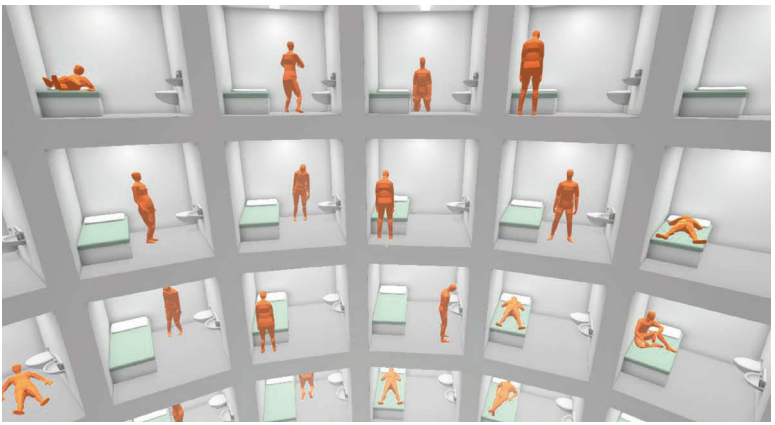
Fig. 15: Paolo Pedercini/Molleindustria, A Short History of the Gaze, Screenshot, 2018

Pedercini: My thoughts on VR can be briefly summarized.[2] The first wave of VR was visionary and utopian, but the technology was not ad-

2 | An expanded version of these thoughts is available online: http://molleindustria.org/StrangerPlaythings/

vanced enough. Today's VR is somewhat functional, but it's being developed by morally and creatively bankrupt Silicon Valley bros. These startups are already abandoning proper VR in favor of the next dystopian capitalist fantasy—augmented reality (AR), or whatever. We need to get over the idea that we will all work, socialize, and play inside immersive worlds in the near future, and instead reclaim this technology for rare, strange, niche, site-specific, context-specific experiences.

Fig. 16: Paolo Pedercini/Molleindustria, A Short History of the Gaze, Screenshot, 2018



Gerber: What kind of theoretical basis, in literature, would you suggest for a young scholar interested in becoming a game designer? Or is it more about being open to what happens around you and less about being able to run a specific program?

Pedercini: *Rules of Play*, although quite dated, is still a good primer.[3] A few recently published textbooks, such as *A Game Design Vocabulary*[4]

3 | Katie Salen and Eric Zimmermann, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

4 | Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark, *A Game Design Vocabulary. Exploring the foundational Principles behind good Game Design* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison-Wesley, 2014).

or *Games, Design and Play*[5], are appropriate for undergraduate students. Computer science is a possible entry point for game design, but there has been a tendency to dissociate the work of game design from game development, which is the technical implementation of game ideas. In my experience, the most interesting game designers come from adjacent backgrounds such as math, film studies, or art. A new wave of young designers is definitely emerging from game design programs, but I'm not sure we are effectively teaching how to not remake existing games.

Gerber: Do you read books on architecture, or where do you find inspiration for the buildings and urban spaces of your games? For example, when you include a panopticon in your games, where do you source the forms and spaces for it?

Pedercini: I don't typically use immersive spaces in my games, but I do teach courses about level and environment design, in which I use a variety of architectural examples.

I tell my students to read *101 Things I Learned In Architecture School*[6] and incorporate some of these principles in a level design assignment (greyboxing). Some concepts don't map at all on games, but others can be extremely generative, such as the notions of "implied spaces" or "denial and reward."

Engineering limitations aside, what makes virtual architecture fundamentally different from actual architecture is the non-utilitarian use. You don't really live or work inside a game. Rather you tend to use, abuse, or traverse the built environment with a specific purpose. We are more in the realm of Marc Augé's (*1935) non-places.[7] The gamer's relationship with architecture is closer to that of a skateboarder or a parkour athlete. In my game design classes, I also talk about "expressive" architecture: memorials, museums, monuments, churches, world expo pavilions, as well as playgrounds and immersive installation art (such as Tomas Saraceno

5 | Colleen Macklin and John Sharp, *Games, Design and Play: A detailed Approach to iterative Game Design* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison-Wesley, 2016).

6 | Matthew Frederick, *101 Things I Learned In Architecture School* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

7 | Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992).

(*1973), Yayoi Kusama (*1929), or James Turrell (*1943)). To me, these typologies are more useful for thinking about game spaces.

Gerber: This book is primarily written for architects who are interested in video games. We have actually realized that a lot of architects also work in this industry. Could you confirm this impression? Do you think they contribute any specific qualities to the design of video games?

Pedercini: I don't know about the private sector, but Eric Zimmerman (a game designer) and Nathalie Pozzi (an architect) have been collaborating for years on installation games that don't look and feel quite like anything else.

Gerber: Similarly, *Unity* has become very popular, also among architects, because the program environment is very close to that of 3D programs. To what extent has *Unity* enhanced the accessibility of designing games for laypeople?

Pedercini: It's an integrated environment, with a lot of ready-made components that just work. It's free, flexible, easy to pick up, and it has a robust community and ecosystem. *Unity's* acquisition of *ProBuilder* suggests that they are interested in providing more asset creation tools within the editor. The ability to draft spaces without going back and forth between 3D-modeling software and an engine such as *Unity* can be a real game changer.

Gerber: The gender gap is a big issue in architecture and town planning these days and there are several ongoing attempts to reconstitute the curricula and education of architects. Are there parallels in the game industry? Is it still a strongly "nerdy," male-dominated environment and are there discussions about better integrating women into the field?

Pedercini: Yes, this conversation has been happening for decades, and things have been improving significantly. *Gamergate* was a direct backlash against this trend of inclusion and diversification. Unfortunately, the industry is characterized by a high level of path dependency, as games and computers were marketed as toys for boys from the early 1980s through the late 1990s. Basically, we are missing a generation of women in leadership positions in the gaming industry, and in tech in general.

Gerber: Finally, I want to ask one last "nasty" question: Do you yourself play "commercial" video games? If so, what are your favorites?

Pedercini: I mostly play commercial games, if you mean games that are sold for a price. I rarely play the so-called "triple-A games," or free-to-play fads like *Fortnite* or *Candy Crush* (2012). They have little to offer and they require a great deal in terms of time. However, the remake of *Doom*

(2016), *Alien: Isolation* (2014), and *The Last Guardian* (2016) are excellent high-budget "commercial" games.