

Games as Provinces of Meaning

Andri Gerber in Conversation with Silke Steets,

March 20, 2019 (Skype)

Andri Gerber: You are a sociologist working on a wide array of topics, ranging from architecture to urban design, and more recently, on religion. It seems that the subject of video games is still not heavily researched in sociology, or at least many bemoan the scarce literature in this field.

Silke Steets: There have been some interesting insights into how “games” in general can be described sociologically. This was done, for example, by Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman (1922-1982) in his book *Encounters. Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction* (1961). Goffman, among others, reflects upon the difference between the sphere of everyday life and the sphere of games. Both are characterized by a specific state of mind: Whereas we have a pragmatic interest in “surviving” in the sphere of everyday life, we can strip off that “seriousness” in the sphere of games. Still, and somehow paradoxically, games need to be taken seriously, in order to create their own immersive world. Another example from the sociology of games is the notion of “gamification,” which presents investigations into how games and competitions have been applied as neoliberal strategies within the framework of our economic system and structures.

Gerber: You recently published a great book, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der gebauten Welt* (2015), in which you consider architectural objects as “social realities,” following and seemingly inverting the theories of Peter Ludwig Berger (1929-2017), Thomas Luckmann (1927-2016), and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), among others. When we consider architecture in video games, it is supposed to mimic reality, but in doing so, it is obviously a construction. My first question is in relation to this topic is: How would

you describe the nature of architecture in games? By games I mean not only video games but also board games or simulation games.

Fig. 27: Silke Steets, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der gebauten Welt*, 2015



Steets: I think that when we speak about architecture in the context of these games, we are discussing their emblematic and symbolic character, rather than their material nature. The function of architecture in gaming landscapes is to provide orientation within the game, and to allow to act according to its rules. The function of architecture is thus to steer the process of orientation, and if we translate this back to our reality, then we reduce it to its sign-nature. This reminds me of Kevin Lynch's (1918-1984) book *The Image of the City* (1960). He describes the way one deciphers

orientation in space through landmarks, which are designated by objects, architecture, and buildings. In video games, it seems to me that architecture is largely reduced to this function.

Gerber: Speaking to how we perceive architecture in our every day life, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) described this as a *Zustand der Zerstreuung* (a condition of distraction)¹, because we use architecture without consciously looking at it. I have the feeling that, in video games, architecture is perceived more consciously, precisely because of its central role in providing orientation, and because one has to find a path through it.

Steets: I'm not quite sure. The experience of architecture in video games seems to be similar to the experience of architecture in Disney theme parks. What accounts for this relationship is the fact that games and theme parks are both about telling a story, leading you through its spaces. This is not new; the garden of Wörlitz, for example, which was the first English landscape garden in Germany, started doing the same thing in 1769. Visitors are—in a very Benjamin-esque condition of distraction—smoothly guided through the garden by its spatial and architectural organization. While walking from one visual axis to another, a story is being told. This seems to be very similar to video games. Going through the story is at the same time the act of telling the story. In both cases, as one is moving through a story, the dimension of time is eminent.

Gerber: This reference to landscape gardens is significant. When you mentioned about Wörlitz, I was reminded of the *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles*, which was a set of instructions Louis XIV (1638-1715) had prepared for his son—and worked over many times between 1661-1668—about where to walk and where to look in the Versailles gardens.

Steets: At the same time, this is only implicitly communicated in games. You do not get instructions: move from point A to point B, then turn left, and so on and so forth. Games give you the impression of freedom, even though you are obviously strongly bound to a limited space. There are very “hard” algorithms behind the supposed freedom of movement.

Gerber: It would obviously be very interesting if in such a game, you were suddenly and constantly confronted with verbal instructions telling you what to do and what to avoid. Imagine that in *Mario Bros.* (1983). That

1 | Walter Benjamin, “L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5 (1936): pp. 40–66.

would be very revealing about the freedom you have—and also quite disturbing [laughs]!

Fig. 28: Connecting bridge in the garden of Prince George, Dessau



My impression is that games do not so much restrict space but rather open a landscape. Even if you are inside a closed room, you have the feeling because of this constant flow of movement, that you are in a field, in a landscape.

Steets: There is a very similar experience in real space: the bodily practices of skateboarding or parkour. There is a really good book by Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City* (2001)², in which he describes the skateboarder's experience of urban spaces as a landscape of obstacles that need to be "handled." Even more impressive is the documentary film *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001), by Stacy Peralta, about the invention of vertical skateboarding in California in the 1970s. The film shows how skateboarding de-

2 | Iain Borden, *Skateboarding and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford: Berg 2001).

veloped from surfing: the landscape of ocean waves becomes a landscape of concrete obstacles, yet the imagination of a parkour-like experience remains the same. This seems to be aligned with what you experience in video games, where you move from obstacle to obstacle. In gaming and in skateboarding, it is all about learning how to overcome obstacles and develop a specific flow. In my eyes, this is one way of creating a connection between the experience of space in the real world and that of video games.

Gerber: This reminds me of the music video for *Californication* by Red Hot Chili Peppers, released in 1999. Here, the elements of the band move, or rather, fly through a typically video-game world reminiscent of California. One line of this song even says: “Space may be the final frontier but it’s made in a Hollywood basement.” Space is a container; it has to have boundaries, otherwise it is a continuous landscape. Although their landscape sometimes appears to be infinite, games have boundaries, which normally remain invisible. Even the space of one of the most “open” games, *Minecraft* (2009), eventually ends; it is not infinite. At the same time, there are a lot of thresholds and crossings in games that structure this landscape.

Steets: Well, the earth is a globe [laughs], and at least theoretically it is without borders. One could turn endlessly in a circle. It is probably possible to design a game—and perhaps it exists already—in which space just goes on and on endlessly. This exists on some webpages today; as you scroll down, new content is constantly appearing. One never reaches the end of the webpage.

Gerber: Yet if space was endless, there wouldn’t be a game anymore! Games have to end somewhere, don’t they? And wouldn’t this be extremely boring?

Steets: Borders are interesting. I would not define them as the end of space, but rather, as a mode of relating two spaces with each another. One space ends as another one begins. Borders structure space. In games, you often move from one space to the next, when you go from one level to another. In games, the dimension of time is crucial and bound to space.

Gerber: Time is a very important issue, both in games and in architecture. Architecture is the creation of space, but the dimension of time is often neglected.

Steets: “Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move.” This is a famous quote from Bruno Latour (*1947) and Albena Yaneva³ about the application of actor-network theory to architecture. This is an attempt to underscore the process-like nature of the building. Architecture is always part of networks of meaning and action, part of associations, and consequently, its meanings constantly shift. This includes the life cycle of a building and its changes in use over time. I would agree with you, that this is not an explicit focus of most professional architects, who typically focus their attention on the making of the objects themselves. From my point of view, it would be fruitful to more thoroughly consider the “aging” process—the use of a building over time—and to try to include this perspective in the design process.

Gerber: Space is always political; or at least in the architectural discourse, this possibility is strongly emphasized. Yet there are different positions between those who believe that space needs borders in order to have difference—and thus a political dimension—and those who believe that borders epitomize the absence of such a political dimension. When we transpose this to game spaces, there are games designed with strong political content and a political message. Yet, at the same time, there are games that remain devoid of social conflicts, even when Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. While these games imply the virtual exchange of many people, they nonetheless cannot be defined as political spaces in the Greek sense of the word “politic,” from *poleis*.

Steets: Perhaps it is helpful to consider a game as a “finite province of meaning,” as defined by Austrian philosopher Alfred Schütz (1899-1959). With this concept, he distinguishes between the reality of everyday life we are living and different “provinces of meaning,” such as the theater, a dream, or a game. Each of these “provinces” suspends a specific aspect of everyday life. In a game, for example, the seriousness of life is suspended. You can do things without consequences; you can play with different identities and try out all kinds of crazy things. Moreover, in games, we die all the time without having to die in real life. This makes the game a non-political sphere; on the other hand, if we think of the game in its

3 | Bruno Latour and Albena Yaneva, “Give me a Gun and I will make all Buildings move: an ANT’s View of Architecture,” *Explorations in Architecture: Teaching, Design and Research*, ed. Reto Geiser (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008), pp. 80–89.

relationship with the reality of everyday life, it can also be read as a sphere in which we visualize utopias, make them intelligible and even tangible, which can then have an influence on reality. Take *Second Life* (2003), which emerged very early; it was all about creating a harmonic utopia. As such, it could release fantasies that might possibly have an influence on “reality.” I would define the political, instead, as a relationship between a game and reality, and how the former can influence the imagination of the latter to act upon it.

Gerber: The history of architecture is full of utopias; in almost all cases, the difficulty of conceiving another kind of architecture or urban environment for a different society is evident. In the end, everything just becomes bigger, or the houses are built in gold, but they are not really different formally, because it is so very difficult to escape our conventions. If we look at games, while there is a desire to reinvent the world, the players also need to have something they will recognize, something that creates a relationship to reality. So, there is a tension between utopia as something completely free of any reference, and the necessity of relating to reality.

Steets: A utopia is a very radical form with which to critique the everyday. Pragmatically, I would examine the motifs that are suspended in reality and realized in utopia, and what can then be learned from these motifs. There is never a one-to-one relationship between reality and utopia.

Gerber: You mentioned the death of the player. If we look at the theory of Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), stating that reality is a fiction constructed through media and communication, this presents an interesting chiasmus with which to consider games spaces: games try to simulate a reality, which, according to Baudrillard, is nothing but a system of simulations, or a *simulacra*. If we read Baudrillard’s early theories, he postulates that one of the few ways to escape the system of simulation that surrounds us is death.

Steets: Dying is very interesting in the context of video games. First of all, it is a metaphor for the “game over.” It limits a game in terms of time, and in relation to its boundlessness, in terms of space. We could once again quote Schütz: the passage from everyday life to this finite province of meaning and back is always a very hard cut, a shock. In theater or the movies, it is the moment when the curtain falls and the lights go on. All of a sudden, you’re immersed in real life again. Death is obviously the hardest form of a passage from one world to another, and probably the hardest possible confrontation with reality. I do not know if Baudrillard

had this in mind when he wrote about the ways to escape the system of simulation. My own work is based on Schützian phenomenology and social constructivism—an approach that considers a world made of things that we as humans can manipulate and which at the same time manipulate us. As I prefer to rely on social facts, my work does not typically reference Baudrillard. I do not think we are operating in a vacuum of pure language-based communication; we are all human beings, with a physical body and a specific history in the material world. From my point of view, Baudrillard focuses too strongly on narratives and fiction where the world is dissolved. From a sociological perspective, it is interesting to see how people deal with reality, and what forms of use or manipulation develop as a result of this relationship.

Gerber: We talked about the cut, the end of the game. The possibility of such an end implies a mediation between these two worlds, a mediation which is governed by many instruments, such as a joystick, a console, and so forth. If we examine the architecture of games, one of its major flaws compared to reality is the fact that it is completely devoid of a bodily, haptic experience. To what extent does this interface, which is also made of body-dependent techniques, provide us with a different means of accessing architecture, for example, by touching the doorknob of a house?

Steets: It would indeed be fun to invert the perspective of the screen and look at people playing through the screen. What we would see would be very reduced, or—to put it more eloquently—very nuanced and fine-tuned body-techniques: the movements of their fingers, of their heads, following the movement of their eyes, et cetera. However, I remember playing tennis on a Wii with a friend of mine, and the day after, I had muscle soreness even though no real ball was played [laughs]! But in general, one can say that these devices and interfaces transform and digitalize materiality into signs and symbols. We are then in a digitalized world. So, once again, we have returned to the symbolic nature of architecture. Body-dependent techniques in games work as a manipulation of symbols, not of matter—although the buttons that we press are still material.

Gerber: We could say that, in architecture, there is a direct link between body and the experience of architecture, while in the game there is a transformation of the body into signs. Along these lines, the next development worth discussing would be the experience of virtual reality, in which the illusion of being immersed in the world of virtual reality is quite extreme.

Steets: Indeed! And we should also consider the affectivity of games. When we play games, we develop feelings: we hate, we love, we kill and get killed, and so on. There is not only a cognitive, but also an affective dimension at work when we are playing a video game. This affective or emotional dimension also affects our body. It is all about feelings, and a total immersion into virtual reality enhances these feelings. In a video game, we are confronted with signs and we have to deal with them cognitively. Yet at the same time, we are also involved emotionally! And this involvement is much stronger with virtual reality.

Gerber: At the moment you are researching religion. You mentioned *Second Life*—it is interesting that these kinds of alternative realities are often accompanied by a predilection for the quasi-religious. Furthermore, a lot of games build upon religious motifs: the “sacred geometry” of *Monument Valley* (2014), or the religious narrative in *God of War* (2005). How can we relate this to traditional forms of religion?

Steets: In the 1960s, the dominant trend in the sociology of religion was secularization theory. The core argument was that the more modern a society becomes, the less religious its members will be. According to this theory, religion had been pushed aside and reduced to something people would only discuss within the four walls of their home. As a consequence, religion would lose social acceptance. Today, this position has been relativized: it is true that traditional churches continue to lose both their significance in society and their members. At the same time, a strong parallel has arisen in alternative forms of religion, forms of spirituality such as television preachers or New Age philosophies, even yoga. Video games as a form of religion, are nothing special—they are just another mode of these new forms of popular spirituality.

Gerber: At the end of these interviews, I always ask whether my interview partner plays video games. You mentioned having played with a *wii*. Are there any other games you play?

Steets: Normally I don't play at all [laughs]. Most of my knowledge about video games comes from my nephew, who regularly plays video games—but I am definitely not a gamer!

