

Convention for the Protection of Virtual Architectural Heritage

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The members who subscribe to this document believe that:

Given that an architectural heritage is developing in synthetic virtual worlds, both single and multiplayer, and that this heritage is evolving in a creative and chaotic form that is not being adequately documented and archived;

That the virtual architectural heritage of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) constitutes an extraordinary expression of the many facets of the digital cultural heritage of the world and must be preserved, being a great expression of the society of the XXI Century; and,

Recognizing the importance of preserving the architecture and the environments that constitute the basis for these synthetic worlds, for the purposes of historical record and as a basis for the development of future synthetic worlds.

It is recommended that:

Article 1

The Purpose of this Convention

1.1

Since the Renaissance there has been a strong desire for ideal cities and imaginary architecture. They often were idealistic and utopian visions that traced new directions for architecture. Some were avant-garde architectural projects, while others reflected the social aspirations of a particular culture. From the painting of *La città ideale* in the Urbino Palazzo Ducale to the drawings of Lequeu and Sant'Elia, these paper and canvas representations of architecture tell us a great deal about a historical period.

Now there is a new form of ideal architecture, that of video games, either single player or multiplayer networked video games. This architecture is not physical and indeed is immaterial but these constructions are not completely imaginary, as they can be considered a form of architectural drawings. In a certain sense, they exist as real architecture, but not on a normal physical plane. They exist only inside the computers that run them, and the storage media that contain their data.

In particular, in the last decade many new synthetic worlds have been born, the so called MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Games) and MMORPGS (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games). In these new worlds one can find many new forms of architecture. Some are based on designs that recall the architectural forms of real life, there are also worlds of a wholly original style.

For this reason, they are original and evolutionary expressions of art and must be preserved. In fact, in these worlds there is an intense and chaotic urban development, largely uncontrolled by any form of authority, and there is the risk that architecture and environments created to populate these worlds will disappear and be lost forever.

At first glance, the architecture of synthetic worlds is more abstract than the paper blueprints and representations of traditional architecture, but in fact they are just as real, because people live in and interact with these constructs just as they do in the real world, though in a manner reflecting the differences between real-world and synthetic-world.

Traditional drawings and representations of imaginary architecture are not inhabited, and thus are static beyond changes that the original designer may make. The virtual architecture of video games, particularly MMOG's, either are or have the potential to be constantly evolving. The architecture of single player games is also dependent on the people who play them and subject to modification and addition by these same players.

Here is a crucial point: some will say that we don't need a convention for the protection of the virtual architectural heritage, because the videogames are already collected by some institutions that keep a copy of every video game published, as for the movies, etc. There is, however, a strong difference: here we don't refer to the video game itself as a whole creative product, but to the architecture and environments contained within the video games, believing that they represent valid and new aesthetical forms that reflect the spirit of our time and that they are also an example of the new directions taken by contemporary architecture.

All this theory will result clearer in the next future, when (at least is believable), famous architects will begin to create projects for video games. When outstanding architects will begin to create video game architecture, they will gain a different reputation and also the already existing "in game" architectures will increase their value.

1.2

A central concept for the architecture of video games is that they are part of the action. They live together with the characters. They are often theatrical architecture, with traps, moving walls, pitfalls, etc. They respond to every move of the player: in that way, they are living, organic creatures. But they also live because they are visited, admired and interacted with by people.

1.3.1

The first problem is to determine what architecture and environments are worthy of being preserved. In fact, not all the architecture of video games is interesting, and we must define some aesthetic rules. These rules do not necessarily need to reflect the rules applied to art and architecture of the real world. It is a whole new form of architecture, with its own chronology and some new typologies.

1.3.2

The architecture of video games is not necessarily the same as that of the physical world. In general we find some fairly divergent architecture. Here are some of the most recurring architectural typologies:

- Offices with air conditioning systems (these represent a labyrinthine parallel space in historical architecture)
- Scientific laboratories
- Space bases
- Fortresses
- Caverns
- Warehouses and other storage facilities

For these typologies we must enucleate some examples that define the milestones of this new aesthetic.

Here we could choose three ways:

1) First way: chronological.

We assume that the very first video games are the reference from which descend all games that followed. So the lines of Pong become the equivalent of the Menhir, the labyrinths of PacMan are the parallel of early Greek architecture and we arrive to the baroque architecture of Syberia and Final Fantasy.

2) Second way: stylistic

We assume that in video games there are some excellent architectural achievements from which descend the other architecture. For example, the Black Mesa Research Complex in Half-Life is unequalled and can be considered a reference that establishes the aesthetical canons for all the buildings of this kind that followed, while drawing on earlier games implementations of similar architecture

3) Third way: mixed.

One could say that the aesthetics of video games are an evolution of the real life aesthetic and designers utilize some real world architecture as references.

Article 2

Definition of the virtual architectural heritage

2.1

For the purposes of this convention, here are the properties to be preserved.

Monuments: all buildings and structures of artistic interest. In this group there are: houses, hotels, resorts, disco, bars, nightclubs, mad doctors laboratories, regeneration points, teleporters, labyrinths, space bases, air conditioning systems, churches, castles, etc.

Sites: areas that are topographically definable and have a special interest either for social or artistic sense either for the gameplay.

2.2

We had to establish a classification for the architecture to be preserved.

In this classification we must consider different points, for example:

- aesthetic interest
- social interest
- gameplay interest
- economic value of the building (specifically related to MMOGs)
- theatrical devices (see point 1.2)

2.3

We must create documentation of the architecture in specific games, as well as the overall architectural trends in synthetic worlds as a whole.

We should consider initially documenting designated sites with high-quality screenshots from multiple angles. We should also include, if necessary, information on where in the game the shots were taken (maps for MMORPGS, level names and maps for single-player titles).

Ideally, we would seek to also collect raw models, textures and other data for the structures, allowing closer study on demand, outside the context and gameplay limitations of a specific game.

2.4

The ideal solution would be to create a sort of "digital architecture museum", wherein people could walk around and through exact recreations of the digital architecture.

It is not enough to collect beautiful views of the architecture, as that would be only a small part of the real experience. Just as actually visiting the Eiffel Tower or the Pyramids of Giza conveys a completely different effect than simply looking at a photograph, so too must videogame architecture be experienced to be fully understood. Imagine a Duke Nukem or a Quake

structure: it's nice to look at, but the architecture is designed to be interacted with by a player and thus must be actually played to be enjoyed. As already said (point 1.2), video game architecture is not abstract, and must be taken as a whole.

So, we had to think how to restore these sensations. If you show the architecture of a video game abstractly, you tell only part of it's story: to truly appreciate it, you must show how this "machine à habiter" works.

Article 3

Formation of a scientific committee for the protection of virtual heritage

We must define a scientific committee to write an aesthetic for the video games, so that people can understand and evaluate what objects and environments are really interesting architecture. In this international committee, we could have art historians, architects, game designers, video games art directors.

The committee should reflect the fact that digital architecture is the work not only of level designers, but texture artists, background artists, programmers, sound engineers, modelers, and more. Level design and digital architecture are very similar to set design in film; it is not the work of one, but a major collaborative effort.

Article 4

Identification of the heritage

The scientific committee will also contribute to prepare an inventory of the most relevant places, architecture and environments in MMOGS, a sort of atlas that will be constantly updated.

We should not limit ourselves just to the structures that exist within a game-world, but be sure to include the entire game-space. That is, if it's part of the world architecture, be its landscape, structure, model, creature, or sound effect, we should endeavor to recreate it and capture it when we do our recreations

Article 5

Agreements with the programmers

One of the main purposes of this convention is that there will be an artistic authority recognised by the programmers, who will consent to have supervision. By this way, the suggestions of the scientific committee of the convention will be submitted to the programmers.

Article 6

Uniqueness of a building and crossover potential

In a video game will not be allowed to create replicas of already existing buildings or sites. At the contrary, it would be desirable in case one would like to realize a video game like Civilization inspired by the story of all the video games. For this purpose, one could dispose of the most famous video games architecture, to create an historical world where, following the chronology, there are the XIX Century Steampunk architecture, the contemporary and the futuristic ones.

By the way, it would be desirable to create a videogame based on crossovers, where one can see the best video games architecture and to meet different characters, from different videogames. For example, Lara Croft would meet Duke Nukem or Gordon Freeman. And at the same time, in a video game you could experience different video games architecture and locations.

Article 7

Protection Procedures (Part 1)

To prevent the disfigurement or demolition of protected properties we propose that any such changes:

- a) Require the submission to a competent non-governmental authority of any scheme for the demolition of virtual architecture which is protected.
- b) Require the submission to a competent non-governmental authority of any scheme which involves substantial alterations of protected architecture.

Article 8

Protection Procedures (part 2)

In case of a misfortune ,such as a server failure, mechanical or electrical fault, disaster or a malicious attack would destroy part of the environment, causing damage or loss of a building or environment, or in case a player decided to destroy a building he made, the developers must rebuild the protected properties or provide for the relocation or recreation of the property if deemed necessary.

Article 9

End of a World

In case a virtual world is closed by the developer(s) or publisher(s), a digital archive of the virtual environments of that world will be prepared, allowing recreation of the world on non-official servers for purposes of study. Alternately, a program could be developed that would allow exploration of the world itself on

an individual computer without being able to connect to a larger world, thus allowing exploration of the world, but no interaction with others over a network.

There should also be as much documentation made of the "live" world as possible, including movies and screenshots with descriptions.

The protection of single-player worlds is more straightforward, since all that is needed is a valid and up-to-date copy of the game. In order to facilitate this, when a game reaches a certain age, a non copy-protected version of the title should be made available to archivists, allowing for the distribution and play of the title when it is no longer a competitive commercial product and/or the agreed-upon time limit after release has passed.