

# Ambient and Liminal Spaces

Ambient space, also known as hodological space (from the Greek word 'hodos', which means "way") refers to the space of possible movement. (Wikipedia)

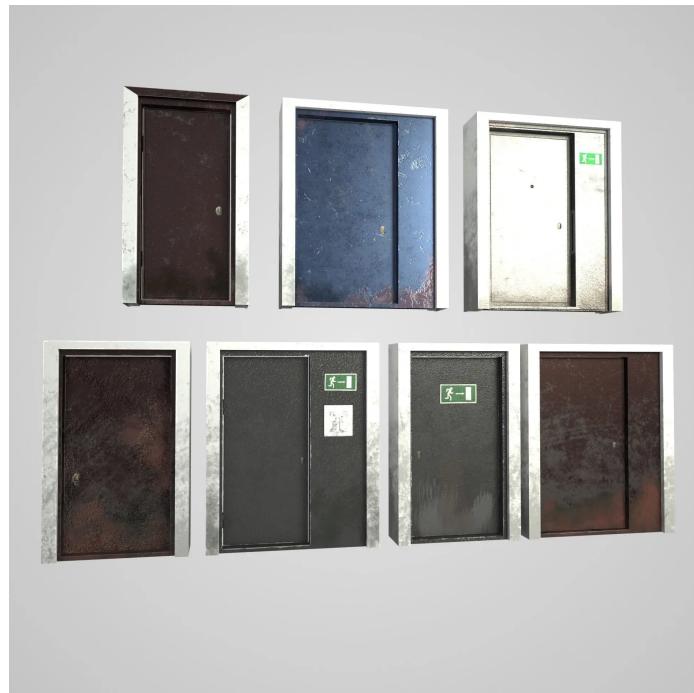
Something I think about a lot is the effect that space has in directing our emotions and the way we approach the world. How does the way a space is designed, whether it is interior - somebody's home, a restaurant, a school; or exterior - the entrance to one's apartment complex, a city park; or digital, direct emotions and cognition? This is something that architects, interior or industrial designers and other professions consider all the time. The way that a building is constructed and the colors used in any structure have effects on our subconscious. For a psychological example, the interior of hospitals are typically white, which gives an impression of sterility, which in turn gives patients and visitors the image of safer medical care. A more direct example of the way space and the way things are designed is hostile urban architecture - benches that have spikes on them are a very clear and direct way to indicate that people are not welcome (to sit) there. It directs us to understand that the city does not provide infrastructure for homeless or disabled people (contains some nuance).



An example of hostile urban design. (Image credit: weburbanist.com)

However, I want to change the topic of discussion onto digital spaces. Digital spaces are typically thought of as anything that is on a screen and programmed in some kind of way. Our computers, phones and other devices have become integral parts of our lives and it is difficult to imagine our lives without this kind of technology. We have curated online images of ourselves and interact with other images of people. A reflection of physical reality. As this paper that I really think it important to this subject states, "the current notion of digital space is dominated by the approach of mimicry of physical space that surrounds us" (Kilian, 2000). A lot of social media is designed to mimic the interactions that we have on our day to day lives, face to face with people. As much as it was meant to reflect reality, the way we approach it is different. The digital world (not necessarily online!) has become a completely separate world, existing parallel to the physical world.

A crucial component of navigating the digital world is interactivity. We interact with the digital world through the screen, using our fingers or a mouse. We listen to audio through headphones, and communicate using a keyboard. This inherently changes the way that we approach digital spaces. The things that we can interact with are typically obvious: we understand that a handle on a door is meant to be interacted with (the sole object on a flat slab of wood). Similarly, we know that a button on a website that says "click here" is meant to be clicked on. Making these small interactions obvious and seamless to the user is its own discipline, called interaction design. And these interactions are becoming more and more synonymous with the real world. The advent of VR (virtual reality) allows people to bring snippets of physical reality to their digital world as a navigable 3D space.



Doors are meant to be opened and serve no other functional purpose. However, symbolically they are portals - they represent transitions. Our screens are doors, opening us into digital worlds.

The physical world has been sculpted and built upon by humans as much as it could be, but we are still limited by the laws of physics and mother nature. The digital space, on the other hand, is programmable and able to be infinitely manipulated. Whether it is a website or a 3-dimensional navigable environment (such with VR), digital spaces become spaces of possibility. And with this possibility comes exploration in two different directions: bringing our physical reality into the digital spaces, and making the digital space something entirely of its own.

Computer graphics and programming have been developed to the point that sometimes it is impossible to discern between what is "real" and what is not.

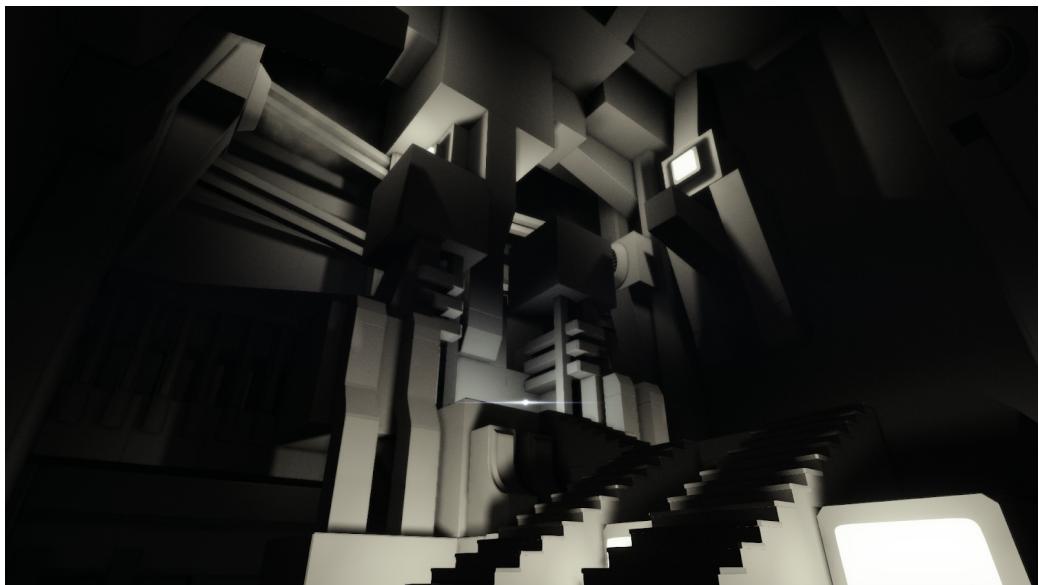


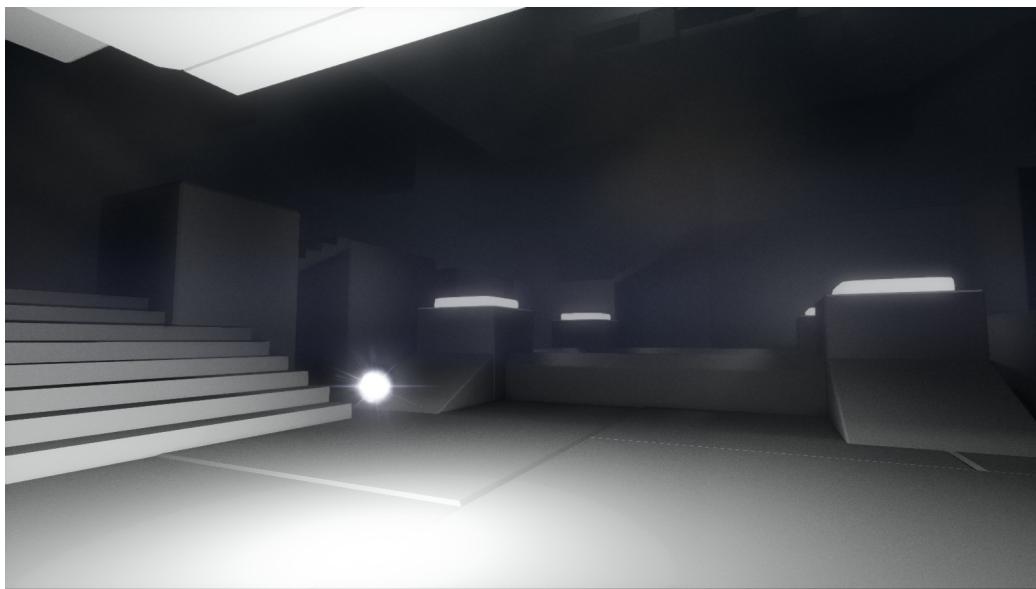
A Sony Walkman TPS-L2 modeled in Blender. (Artist: Reza Mortazavi)

The other direction that was taken with the development and evolution of digital spaces and tools were not to create worlds that mimicked our own, but instead gave us completely different realities. With infinite possibilities came the creation of fantastical worlds. Fictional worlds exist in literature, in television and other mediums, but one medium that I find fascinating is games.

Games provide interactive experiences like no other. They are immersive and are able to elicit emotional responses. I've written about the emotional effects of games in a previous class, specifically the therapeutic applications that horror games could have. In that essay I wrote about the effects of interactivity (or agency, having control over the movement and direction of experience) and that "part of it is due to the games giving a player a mediated enactive experience through which to identify within a virtual world, and then experience such senses as presence and autonomy, thus inducing greater emotional response(s)". By giving us complete agency not only on where to go, and what actions to do (as players) but also in the spaces that we create, many extremes can be explored. These physical spaces now no longer have to follow the laws of physics, but also be able to reflect other things. Architecture and environment become a medium for expression.

The design of the architecture and landscape in NaissancE a great example of this. The entirety of the game is set in non-textured basic forms that slowly complicate into monolithic structures, stretching for distances beyond comprehension. The only thing that exists in the game is the player, who is left to explore and make their way out. It is a complete rejection of world-building as a process of expressing history and information through space. So instead of the world and architecture conveying an inward connection and structure, it instead provides you with no frame of reference, forcing one to turn outwards. It is a lonely yet somewhat comforting experience that is amplified by the architecture and the design of the space.





The only sense of direction that is given by following the orb of light, which constantly moves at a faster pace than the player, leaving them behind.

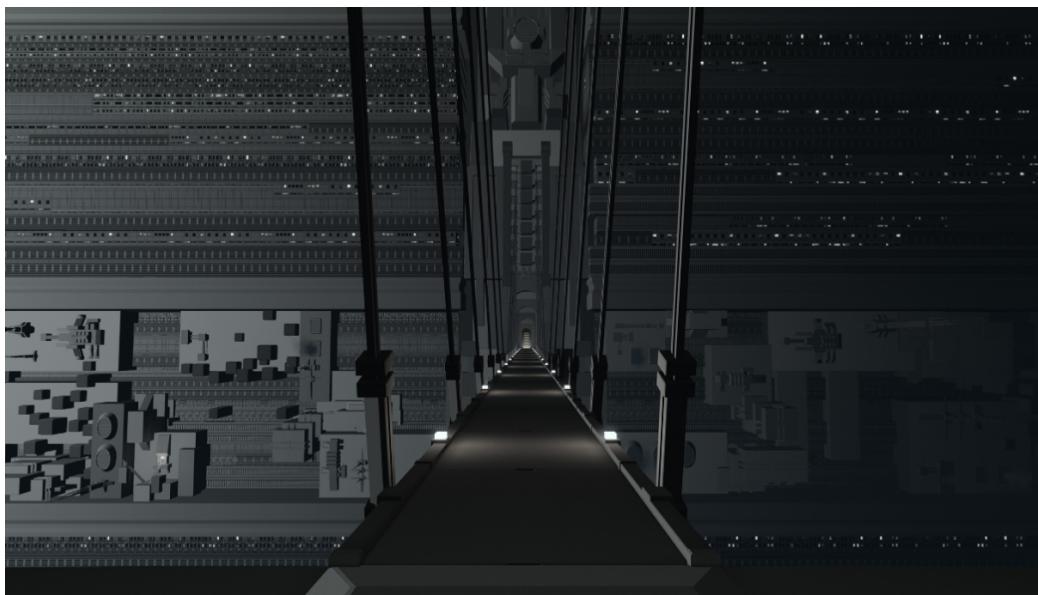
Where on the Earth would we be able to experience this sort of shift in perspective?

We have built our cities and land to accommodate us and our stories, and we can build our digital spaces to accommodate us. but what happens when the structures around us no longer are meant for us? Navigating the architecture in NaissancE is extremely difficult and frustrating, as the structures aren't really meant to be explored. Often times you will fall into a vast nothingness, because the game expects for you to be able to cross a gap that is almost impossible. This repetition of wanting to navigate a world that obviously has something to show but the very structure limiting ourselves, trying to traverse a world that is somehow so familiar yet hostile very precisely lays down the difference between wandering through architecture and space and engaging with it.

Just by making your way through vast structures that actively reject your explorations, it makes you feel quite small. It forces one to shift perspective and think about the universe and space as its own thing. We don't know where we are, what we are, where we are coming from, or what is beyond what we can observe or deduct from our universe. Even if we think we understand, we never know exactly what is outside or inside - only what we can observe.

The reason that the in NaissancE, the space and architecture is the main caveat to evoke emotion is precisely because spaces dictate and direct our cognition. We express our emotions and stories through building our world, and while there are some things that we don't make, it is largely our own creation. Especially in games, architecture ends up playing a large role in our experience, as they are usually about going from one point to another. A progression through space. But instead of the objective being getting to a certain point, the journey itself is the objective. The space between. A liminal and ambient space.

Liminal spaces, is used to describe a place or state of change or transition; this may be physical or psychological. Liminal space imagery often depicts this sense of "in-between", capturing transitional places. (Wikipedia)



# Some Notes

I would like to note that this paper is not only an analysis of digital spaces, but also an exploration and a process of self-realization of the art and practice I would like to develop.

When writing this paper, I wrote down a couple of key words and phrases that popped into my mind:

greyness

exploration of boundaries and borders

portals

interactions between the natural world and the digital world -- not bringing the digital world into the natural world but bringing as much of our reality into the digital space

ambient spaces where two things can be true simultaneously

Doors/portals and interactivity

A peek into reality inside digital spaces

NaissancE

Open tabs are cognitive spaces

an electric calm

hyper-reality and space

liminal spaces?

transience

I defined *ambient spaces* above as the space of possible movement. I believe ambience to be a very important subject, both by itself and also in my art. A lack of an obvious definition leaves meaning to be interpreted by the viewer, who could be me or any other person. Another word that would describe the spaces and structures I create can be *liminal*, of which liminal spaces have been a popular topic on social media over the past couple years. I believe liminal to be a state of transience, when one thing ends and another is about to begin, but you are not quite there yet. An exploration of borders and boundaries. Being in a state of limbo is often very unsettling and uncomfortable, but that uneasiness is strangely comforting to me. While it causes uncertainty (and we humans like certainty), it also opens up possibility and new perspectives, thoughts and visions.

# Bibliography and References

## Essays

Note: are.na links contain pdfs

Archetectonics of Game Spaces: The Spatial Logic of the Virtual and Its Meaning for the Real --

<https://are.na/block/20487089>

Defining Digital Space Through a Visual Language --

<https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/33801/48022976-MIT.pdf?sequence=2>

The Coming Age of Calm Technology -- <https://are.na/block/11968748>

The Psychology and Therapeutic Application of Horror Games --

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/13LBJqZjeLMG1NS-k\\_zg7PhTMzwoAmE63/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/13LBJqZjeLMG1NS-k_zg7PhTMzwoAmE63/view)

The Terminal Space (from Heterotopias Zine Issue 002) -- <https://www.heterotopiaszine.com/002-2/>

What never lived cannot die: Alienation, architecture, and Naissance -- <https://caneandrince.com/alienation-architecture-and-naissancee/>

## Images

Hostile Urban Design -- <https://weburbanist.com/2018/01/01/hostile-urbanism-22-intentionally-inhospitable-examples-of-defensive-design/>

Sony Walkman TPS-L2 -- <https://www.instagram.com/mortazavii/?e=265b84ed-b4c7-4485-ab6a-e4a3139e4d23&g=5>