

# Modern Dwelling

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## 1 Heidegger's notion of 'dwelling'

In 1951, in the aftermath of the Second World War, Martin Heidegger attended a symposium in Darmstadt on the subject of *Man and Space (Mensch und Raum)*. These so-called *Darmstädter Gespräche* formed a colloquium on the subject of the reconstruction of the big German cities, most of which were devastated by allied bombardments. Architects, engineers, policy makers and government representatives talked about the acute problem of housing shortage in Germany at that time – a conversation in which philosophers also frequently participated. Not only Heidegger but also Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and José Ortega y Gasset were present once or more than once. If we are to believe the account that Harry Berghs has collected, Heidegger's lecture at the conference was not very well received. When other speakers delivered their address, the audience showed a clear interest (either approval or disapproval, but interest nonetheless) by its agitation: shifting of chairs, laughing, cluttering or applauding half way. None of this befell the words of Heidegger: apart from a polite applause at the end, the audience sat still throughout his lecture (Berghs, 1991, 28). In spite of this poor reception, when the lecture was later published under the title *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken* it became an influential text in the second half of the twentieth century.

In his lecture, Heidegger argues that man *is* insofar as he *dwells* (Heidegger, 1971, 349). In his prototypical vernacular, he states that the *built thing* belongs to the *essence of dwelling* (p.353). Such a thing constitutes a *location* in *space*. This space, however, is not space in the mathematical sense - in which every point in space is identifiable by describing it in terms of a Cartesian system of coordinates. In this system, every point is interchangeable with every other point; there is no inherent quality in certain point that differentiates it from another point. For the physicist, what happens on earth could also be happening lightyears away. The notion of space that Heidegger is referring to is, however,

of a different kind. This space does not exist beforehand, not before we humans encounter it, not before this space is being ‘founded and joined’ by building (p.360). It is, effectively, the thing, the building that *makes* the space: by making room in space the building becomes a *location* (pp.357–358).

Furthermore, the spaces that are thus established by buildings are not something external that *faces* man, not an *opposite*, nor just some internal experience (p.358). Instead, they form *locales* that have a specific meaning for particular men and other meanings for other men. It is through his relation with these locales that man is able to dwell:

Man’s relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially. (359)

These buildings, in their turn, are never on their own: they are not something to be looked at or experienced without any reference to other buildings. A building marks a locale which in turn makes other spaces and locales. The Palace of Westminster, for example, is not just a building. It relates to other buildings in London, to the tradition of British democracy, the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the people who work there and to their mores; it forms a landmark of London itself and as such relates to the London Eye and the Tower Bridge. All these things together form what in *Being and Time* (§18) is called an *involvement whole*: they refer to each other in the same way that hammers only make sense in relation to nails and eventually to the whole workshop of the carpenter (Dreyfus, 1991, 92). For the Members of Parliament, the secretaries or the concierges, the Palace of Westminster with all its relations form a *meaningful totality* within which they feel at home and where they, eventually, dwell.

The specific meaning that we attribute to a locale is intimately connected with the stories we tell about it. When we tell each other what has transpired at a certain place, this place loses its anonymity to become a meaningful landmark for that event – sometimes even provided with commemorative plaques and information boards. By telling stories to each other, people create a bond between themselves, their predecessors and descendants, and their surroundings. A group of people, be it an extended family in the neolithic, all the workers at the Houses of Parliament, or the complete population of Scotland, become a community when and in so far as their most basic stories are known and shared by all members – a familiarity that makes them feel at home in a meaningful totality (Anderson, 1983, 37–46).

This phenomenon comes to the fore when we consider the way we use our tools. To anyone who is capable to use a certain tool in a skilful manner, possibilities manifest themselves that remain closed to the one that lacks them. One who does not know how to use a screwdriver, a bicycle, or a bulldozer, is seeing reality in a different way than someone who is proficient in either of those. Learning a skill, Hubert Dreyfus tells us, is learning to see the world differently, to be able to see what is worthwhile and what is irrelevant, to talk about it in a specific way; not to *generate* meaning, but rather to cultivate the skill for discerning the meanings that are already there (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, pp.207–208). Skilful coping creates an *openness* or a *room for play* (*Spielraum*) for potential meaningful actions – the potential (*die Möglichkeit*) is therefore, Heidegger states in §7 of Being and Time, higher than reality (*die Wirklichkeit*).

## 2 Game space

At the beginning of this century, Espen Aarseth notices that computer games “are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation” (Aarseth, 2000, p.154). Eight years later, Stephan Günzel even states that this increased focus on space is constituting a Kuhnian paradigm shift: game studies no longer find their main focus on ludic or textual properties, but “space is the one category that has come to be accepted as the central issue of game studies, and the one in which all previous categories are integrated” (Stephan Günzel, 2008, p.171). The space we are encountering in our games is, however, a space that has the ability to be “actively manipulated” (ibid.), thereby making a different kind than the isotrope space of physics and mathematics. Indeed, even more than the physical realm the game space does not exist before a human encounters it, before it is being ‘founded and joined’ by interaction.

This emphasis on spatiality and interaction poses the question in what way (if at all) Heidegger’s analysis of space can be transposed to game space. Is it possible that in skilful interacting with the game space we discern a meaning that is already there? Do we constitute ‘game locales’ that open up a *meaningful totality* in which we are able to dwell?

As we have seen, one of the main properties of locales is that we know the stories that are told about them. Related to games, one would perhaps be inclined to transpose this phenomenon to the question whether a game tells a story or not: a question that, in the words of Michael Nitzsche, has ‘been the point of much debate’ (Nitzsche, 2008, p.41). However, this debate (the so-called ‘ludologists/narratologists-debate’, (Murray, 2005)) is not a stake. To

change anonymous game space in a meaningful game locale, the question is not whether a game tells a story, but whether *we* tell a story *about a place in the game* that makes us understand this game in a better or different way. Though, as Henry Jenkins (2004) points out, ‘the experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story’, in order to understand what is happening when we engage with a game world, we need to connect it to ‘some form of comprehension that can be triggered and affected by the game world’ (Nitzsche, 2008, p.42):

Narrative is a way for the player to make sense of the in-game situation. The main process happens in the player, but it can be evoked and directed by evocative narrative elements, formed by encounters or situations in the game that prime some form of comprehension. [...] Evocative narrative elements encourage players to project meaning onto events, objects, and spaces in game worlds. (Nitzsche, 2008, p.44)

In the same way we are at a stranger in a culture whose habits and rituals we are unfamiliar with, whose *narratives* we do not comprehend, the possibilities of a game space will never reveal themselves to us if we do not know what the (virtual) things we encounter *mean*. We have to arrive at a nuanced and fully understanding of what it means, in the words of Daniel Vella, ‘to inhabit a virtual environment’ (Vella, 2013, p.2):

Through inhabiting this space, familiarizing ourselves with it by working out paths of traversal and testing out the possibilities for action it allows, we translate it into a meaningful place – a process which necessarily involves the drawing of boundaries that delimit it, as a defined locus, from the infinite extent of space. (ibid.)

This understanding, this testing out of possibilities, is not to be confused with acquainting oneself with the rules of play. When we evaluate a game of chess that we have just finished, we are of course referring to the different pieces. We probably talk about the attack on the queen at a certain point, the failure of the bishop to move all the way, or the length of the endgame. We know the meaning of all the pieces, their possibilities and restrictions, and the value they have at certain positions. This meaning is, however, completely independent off the physical implementation of the chess set used. We could have the exact same discussion whether we used a traditional wooden set, a Star Wars chess set, or even played completely by heart (Stephan Günzel, 2008, p.181). We talk

about the game, but we would in all probability not see ourselves as *inhabiting* the chess board.

On the other hand, when I use a VR set to drive a few laps in *Dirt Rally*, my whole being is transposed to that virtual space where I encounter objects whose effects I am immediately familiar with: waterpools that make the road slippery, a rock formation that is to be avoided, or a guardrail that tells me about the abyss on its other side. The cognitive structure I experience whilst driving reflects my ‘embodied sense of being in the physical world’ (Vella, 2013, p.5):

The process by which the game world becomes intelligible to the player, as an object towards which thought (and, inseparably, action) can be oriented – and hence precisely as a world - is precisely the same process by which the player is virtually embodied in the game world. (ibid. cf. Leino (2013, pp.2–3) Jones (2013, p.2))

The fundamental point here is that as I become more skilled in driving I familiarize myself with the world of *Dirt Rally*. I remember specific turns in the road, I see the signs which tell me when to hit the breaks or to put the pedal to the metal. I know which parts of the track are easy and which are tough, where the public is shouting and at what points I broke through the guardrail in previous runs. While playing, the meaning of this (virtual) environment starts to make itself manifest to me, which enables me to navigate more fluently through this game space. The initial uncharted territory of the game is starting to make sense – it is becoming a meaningful whole.

The meaning I attribute to certain places in the game world of *Dirt Rally* can perhaps be equated with an increased skill at this game – in the same way a hammer shows its possibilities only when I know how to interact with it in a skillful manner. The role of a narrative is, however, not to be ignored. There are ample examples of events or situations that connect a story to an in-game place, that thereby becomes a meaningful locale with which certain people find some kind of bonding. One such example is the *Ironforge Bank* in World of Warcraft, that starred in the *machinima A Day at the Ironforge Bank* (Daddar, 2005). Even though robbing this bank delivered no in-game bonus, when this crime transpired it did change the meaning of this virtual place:

The Ironforge bank is worth looting because of the cultural significance of the space and its relevance for the player community. [...] The functional space of the virtual bank becomes a cultural connotation because a story is associated with it. (Nitzsche, 2008, p.200)

By surrounding a place in the game space with specific stories and meaning, player(s) let it stand out of the void, thereby changing the (in-game) cultural relevance of it:

Game places grow with the emerging history of the virtual spaces that help to reference and localize the interconnected memories of a player community. [...] Placeness is not a quality of a virtual space per se, but one that can be achieved for it through the inhabitants: the game's players. Virtual placeness has to be earned. (ibid.)

By becoming navigable, game places are capable of forming a meaningful whole. In their proficient game play, game players know how to discern what is worthwhile and what is relevant. The players create and get to know the habits and rituals surrounding the objects they encounter in the game place, through which they form a bond with themselves, other players, and their surroundings. All these aspects open up possibilities which enables the game players, at least during the game session, to dwell in this game world.

### 3 Dwelling in crisis

The importance of space in game studies resonates with the statement by Peter Sloterdijk that contemporary society is best analysed by studying the way man thinks about space (Sloterdijk, 2006, p.11). The earth-globe is being swaddled with glass-fibers and circumvented with satellites; it has been divided in a Cartesian system of longitudes and latitudes, creating an homogeneous and isotrope mathematical space in which every point is identical with every other one – an infinite three-dimensional space that can be easily controlled by technological means. After Magelhaes and Armstrong, there is no longer any reason to view our birthplace as special: every place is comparable and interchangeable with every other one (Sloterdijk, 2006, p.47). René Boomkens, among others, concurs when he states that globalization basically comes down to a radically changed perception of space and place (Boomkens, 2006, p.47).

Both Sloterdijk and Boomkens, as well as Daniel Vella, base their observations on Heidegger's lecture with which we opened this essay. The point Heidegger is making in this lecture is that modern man has forgotten how to dwell – a problem that has, according to him, a more profound impact on mankind than the housing shortage that formed the occasion for the *Darmstädter Gespräche*. Thus, Heidegger notes, modern man is unable to dwell in his locales – he never encounters buildings. It is this situation that is the real *plight of dwelling* (p.363).

A confronting and illustrative example of this plight comes to the foreground when we look at Venice. Today, less than sixty thousand people inhabit the city that at the time of the Doges was one of the most populous cities in the world. This small number of inhabitants is annually confronted with more than thirty million tourists – five hundred tourists for every inhabitant. These tourists are brought to the lagune by the thousands via the nearby *Aeroporto di Venezia Marco Polo* or, increasingly, by enormous cruise ships that block the water ways and destroy the sea life by their draft (Racké, Q and H. Muskens (dirs.), 2005).

Venice is a city that is on the bucket-list of many a tourist: the carnival, the museums and bridges, the nice restaurants and morning coffee at the San-Marco – and of course a romantic cruise in a gondola. For the tourist, the Doge's Palace is a building in itself, not imbedded in any local traditions or stories. He stands in awe in front of the *Bocca di Leone*, he marvels at the beauty of the *Sala dello Scudo*, and shudders in sight of the *Piombi*. At the museum shop, he buys a book with nice photographs of the palace which he perhaps (though probably not) will look at at a later moment. Since the duration of his stay is limited, a few weeks at most, he has neither the time nor the wish to get acquainted with the associated stories these buildings tell to the autochtone Venetian. Even if he *does* read some background information about the *Ponte di Rialto*, even if this means that he has more knowledge about its history than the average Venetian, it remains an isolated information-bit; his experience of this bridge is not linked to the direct quotidian surroundings of the city, to the role it plays in getting from north to south, to the felt, lived experience that the townsmen feel.

The relationship between the bridge and the Venetian has grown through the years she lived and worked in her city; with time and patience, it became an intimate part of her daily life. To the tourist, on the other hand, the bridge forms one of many isolated experiences that, chained together, form his experience of his holiday of holidays. Alessandro Baricco has introduced the term *sequence* (*stringa*, "sequenza") to describe this kind of 'trajectory of experiences' – always moving, always touching the surface, never settling down to create an intimate familiarity with the habits and rituals of his surroundings (Baricco, 2006, p.95). Thus, the possibilities of these surroundings will never reveal themselves to the tourist, since he does not know what the buildings he encounters *mean*. The cities he visits will always remain closed to him, valued for their beauty and for the role they play in his holiday, but only as systems he passes through (*sistemi passanti*, p.97), never as a world: the tourist will never  *dwell* in Venice.

Momentarily, as a result of technological and societal developments, a lot of cities throughout the world are facing the same challenges Venice has expe-

rienced the last couple of decades. Cities like Amsterdam or Berlin (but also small villages such as Grou in Fryslân) are putting forth legislation in an attempt to put an end to the increasing tourist influx through sites such as Airbnb, Wimdu or 9Flats, which is cutting into a limited property supply and driving up rents. The resulting erosion of the local habits and rituals, the connected change in meaning of the buildings encountered by the autochtone inhabitants, makes these inner cities increasingly uninhabitable.

## 4 Conclusion – a new man

If we follow Heidegger’s claim that the most profound problem faced by modern man is his lost ability to dwell, the question about coping with this problem presents itself.

Globalisation and technological advances evaporate the need for local defined habits and rituals. As the example of Venice shows, the global traveller (or even the local tourist) is blind to the *meaningful totality* that is probably immediate evident to its autochtone inhabitants. To the tourist, in his never ending quest for sequences of new experiences, the skills that are required to live in a certain place are the same as the skills required to live at any other place – a result of the scientific world-view that sees the earth as a totality of isotrope and homogeneous coordinates.

However, the navigability of game space perhaps points us in the direction of a new form of dwelling – one that is technological driven and independent of the physical surroundings, but based on a meaningful totality nonetheless. If contemporary society is best analysed by looking at the way man interacts with space, perhaps the notion of dwelling in game space teaches us something about the direction this analysis could take. When we see habits, rituals and stories emerging from the game space into the physical realm, when we see people bonding offline because of their shared online experience, perhaps we see a glimpse of the direction our society is heading.

In *Zum Planetarium*, the last essay of his *Einbahnstraße*, Walter Benjamin is observing that man as a biological species is already at the end of his evolution, but that the development of *mankind*, organizing his physics as technology, has only just started (Benjamin, 1955, p.125). Perhaps in the navigable game space, we see the earliest form of this development, of the future of our species.

In 2006, the Dutch poet Ilja Pfeiffer stayed half a year in one form of this future, corresponding from his experiences in the game Second Life. One of the things he notes is that even there, in this game world, art works are erected



to form a critical reflection on this world. One of these works (by Kharis Forti and exhibited in Second Louvre in the Second Life city of Tompson) consists of a series of statues that show the development of a *prim*, the most basic building blocks of all the things in Second Life, to a complete avatar, somewhat like the famous drawings of the evolutionary development of our species. Perhaps, Pfeiffer states, this work shows us something about the next step in this development:

The monkey within you remembers the smell of grass. But in your second life, no monkey is to be found. When I thought about this, another visitor moved to the right of the statues to have his picture taken, with him being the last stadium in this evolution. That's not the point, I thought. You are the beginning. Everything is just starting. Everything is just about to get started. ( Ilja Pfeiffer (2007, p.56) trans.BB)

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