They are quiet but not silent; forgotten virtual structures stand as reminders of a moment in the past. Undisturbed creations that had given life, now serve as outlines of what once was. Characters, interactions, ideas and desires forever linger, impressions of moments from a different time.

The spaces that make up the online virtual world *ActiveWorlds* are now invaluable relics. Like ruins in the real world, they are as telling of the time in which they were built as those who created them. Observing, exploring and recording these unchanging places reveals their role as snapshots of online minutiae from as early as the simulated environment's creation in 1995.

Whilst much of this online world is now devoid of human activity, the space itself persists. The feeling of a living place ensues in the mere impression left by what was once a bustling community. What remains is wholly artificial, yet unmistakably human.

Any virtual city can teach us about its offline counterparts. In the case of 'AlphaWorld' – the first and most extensive of *ActiveWorlds*' online spaces – the emergence of an urban sprawl is evident. A cluster of streets and buildings, largely constructed at the software's inception, disperse outwards into fragmented suburbs and later, veins of highway stretching towards sporadic rural constructs.

Equally, there are social and physical differences to consider. AlphaWorld started as a completely level field; in this world, all was supposedly created equal. The vastness of this flat, featureless plain is challenging. To walk from the centre point to one edge would take roughly 40 hours.[1]

Unlike the modern city, AlphaWorld shows no signs of modernisation or gentrification. A set of system-wide rules ensure it stays this way; territory is claimed and becomes a permanently private domain.

The landscape is shaped and remains in that form, unless the original builder sees fit to make changes. As such, AlphaWorld's geography is interspersed with incomplete structures and impenetrable negative space; land claimed but left unused. Much of the virtual space remains uninhabited and in the absence of aesthetic features we find, in essence, its wilderness.

AlphaWorld's purpose is not to house or produce. It is founded on a notion of 'freedom'; to offer an undesigned territory in which creative and social endeavours can take place. Through this notion of a malleable, idyllic nothingness, we find the colonial traits inherent to any system concerning the assimilation and development of space.

That a space in which little creative restraint is placed on its inhabitants has taken the form of a traditional Western-style city – gridded by roads and highways that, due to the use of tele-portation as a primary mode of movement, are rendered redundant in terms of their navigational function – is testament to the nature and desires of its inhabitants to capture a balance between normality and fantasy.

The extensive use of teleportation throughout AlphaWorld has greater implications for its spatial design than what might be immediately obvious from the ground. In an oversized space where all surface is equal in constructional terms, memorable coordinates have determined where inhabitants have come to reside above all else. The landscape has come to be described by some as hosting 'tele-portation architecture'; like the contrast between the '50km/h architecture' of roadside advertising and '5km/h archi-tecture' of the high street shopfront, the locations where users have built and by extension what they have built are defined by the manner of movement taken by those interacting with the surroundings.[2]

What results is a radial form geo-graphically comparable to the ideals of the garden city movement of the 19th and 20th centuries[3], but architecturally representative of a duality that exists within *ActiveWorlds*' social identity; its role as a simulation of reality and as a self-contained reality of its own.

In *ActiveWorlds*, self-expression occurs primarily through construction. As each area of claimed land is des-ignated solely for its inhabitant, there are no restraints as to the style or scale of what can be built. Neighbourhoods have little architectural consistency; what ensues is an often brutally eclectic composition of ideas. 3D structures are interspersed with 2D decorations. Basic shapes and repeating textures collide, an erratic storm of colours and ornamentation forming where polygonal gestures stand immersed in photorealistic foliage. Images and text levitate above the ground, flashing and spinning so as to invite interaction.

Much of the construction in AlphaWorld is arguably postmodern; spaces designed primarily for social reasons, yet drenched in the symbolism of a material, commercial or thematic function. There are no restrictions on movement in ActiveWorlds and all places are inherently public, even those that adopt the symbolism of being private. In the absence of people, the shop, the fortress, the church and the space station become purely ornamental, and in functional terms completely equal.

The visual character of the world is, in reflection of its user-base, dominated by a view of the civic landscape of the United States. A general West-ern-style appropriation of form is evident throughout, sourced equally from fantasy and reality. You will pass the flat-roofed strip mall en route to the frontier town and its plethora of unmoving horses. The pagoda, complete with human-sized chess board and star-spangled banner, stands merely a street apart from the fairytale-themed Roman bathhouse and its pixellated erotic sculptures. Patriotic references to the US and its armed forces are almost habitual; dot-com bubble-era aesthetics offer some distorted comfort amidst a social and political climate shaped by the war on terror.

Like AlphaWorld's redundant grid structure, the topology of architecture within the simulation again raises the question of why such a municipal form has come to dominate a space unburdened with the real world's regulations, politics, economics and – most significantly – scientific realities that prevent the construction of experimental or even impossible spaces. The assimilation of civic design can be viewed as an expression of local identity in a simulation that, through the internet, takes on a social vastness that far transcends the physical limitations of the real world.

Naturally, many of the buildings found in AlphaWorld and beyond are founded on identity, locality and familiarity, adapting the tastes, desires and real world surroundings of the individual into a virtual space. Alter-natively, they are often attempts to portray some notion of skill, experience, power or personality not unlike that seen in the suburban American 'McMansion'.[4]

The duality of *ActiveWorlds* as a social venture is once again addressed in this adaptation of the the fantasy and reality of the user; a multi-faceted manner of expressing 'this is me' to the virtual world. Today, *ActiveWorlds* continues to exist as something almost ethereal. It maintains a physical presence in the form of data and processes collected on computers, but the interpersonal relationships that once gave it life beyond the screen have gradually faded. Users have drifted on, to other worlds or other moments in their lives. Some, as structures left in the world suggest, have passed away.

But still, there is some noise. The artificial world refuses to fall completely silent. As the servers continue to run, the world lives on. 25 years after its creation, anyone with access to the right technology can witness it for themselves and con-tribute to its sprawling, discordant tapestry of identity-driven architecture.

Through incremental improvements, the simulation's creators continue to support the handful of individuals who have taken the world-within-a-world as their online home. By simply continuing to exist in such a space – almost entirely uninhabited, archaic in design but allowing for a permanence of ideas and self-ex-pression – the few remaining citizens of *ActiveWorlds* live amongst and con-tribute to the relic radiation left over from a long history of virtual, incidental moments.

[1] Brent Ryan (2004) *AlphaWorld: The urban design of a digital city* in Journal of Urban Design, 9(3):292

[2] Mikael Jakobsson (2007) *Activity Flow Architecture: Environment Design in ActiveWorlds and EverQuest* in Friedrich von Borries, Steffen P. Walz, Matthais Böttger (2007) *Space Time Play: Computer Games, Architecture and Urbanism: The Next Level*, 164

[3] Ralph Schroeder, Avon Huxor, Andy Smith (2001) *ActiveWorlds: Geography and Social Interaction in Virtual Reality* in Futures, 33:576

[4] Ryan (2004) *AlphaWorld: The urban design of a digital city*, 302
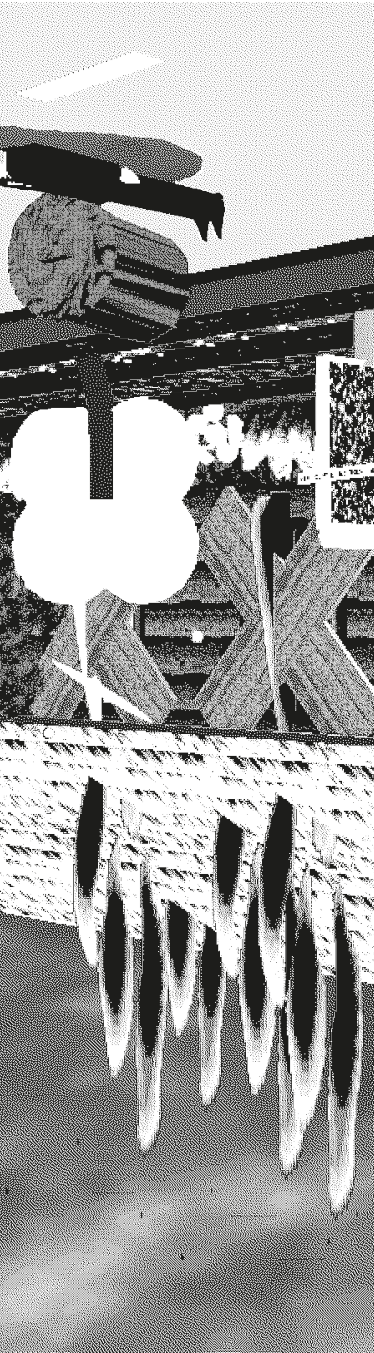
Small stories about video games + the world

▓ PLAYSTYLE

VIDEO GAMES + THE WORLD

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of my Mother