

ENVIRONMENT AS EMOTION:

Understanding the way we experience space during times of isolation

“Locations carry a great deal of narrative potential for us, even in everyday life. Locations carry meaning in themselves and communicate temporal significance through their changes.” (Bembeneck)

As a 3D animator with a focus on environmental design, I often spend a lot of time within my practice contemplating the way fictional worlds need to be built in order to aid the narratives of the projects I work on. However, since the covid-19 pandemic started, I began to question how the environment I inhabit affects my inner experience.

The introduction of social distancing measures as a way to combat the spread of the coronavirus meant that most of my life has since been spent within the four walls of my bedroom with not much social contact besides the daily group chat phone calls shared with my friends from back home.

Seeing that during this time my everyday life was seemingly composed of only two elements - my bedroom and the phone calls - I began to consider how I was personally affected by this situation, which in turn begged the question: How can we explain the emotional experience of an environment during times of physical isolation, when our only connection with the outside world happens virtually?

I have identified four elements of inquiry, which I will define in order to explore the research question: the environment, the emotional experience, the influence of isolation, and the visual implications of sound.

the environment

First of all, how do we define an environment? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term ‘environment’ as “the circumstances, objects, or conditions by which one is surrounded”. In its most literal sense, we define the environment as the sum of the elements that surround an entity or event.

Mary Jane Porter argues that individuals, objects, elements and systems interact to various lengths with their surroundings, meaning that we cannot conceptualise the environment without taking into account its dependence on the relationships it forms with the entities that constitute it. “Individuals, objects, elements and systems influence - and are in turn influenced by - their surroundings. [...] Thus the ‘environment’ may be regarded as a

‘space’ or a ‘field’ in which networks of relationships, interconnections and interactions between entities occur.” (Porter)

This means that an environment is defined not only by the entities that exist within it, but also by the relationships that they share.

the emotional experience

We humans tend to create a strong bond with our surroundings, such that our actions have a spatial aspect attached to them that becomes part of our emotional experience. (Gupta)

An emotional experience is explained as the relationship between the representation of the outer world and how the world is experienced by the person. This means that we can define the emotional experience as the sum of what we interact with and the meaning we give to it.

“Place attachment” refers in environmental psychology to an emotional bond between a person and a place, or when we attach meaning to a place. Studies have shown that our interaction with an environment happens on three levels: cognitive - our understanding of it, behavioural - its perceived function, and emotional - our attachment to it. The emotional connection was proven to be the strongest of the three. (Kalia)

For a long time, visual perception and emotion have been considered separate domains of study, however recent research is arguing that, in fact, emotions routinely affect how and what we see. (Zandra, Clore) Scientific experiments have illustrated how emotion can alter our perception, attention and memory, by focusing them on specific elements that make up the environment. (Brosch)

This kind of research shows us that the extent to which emotion and cognition are related is great, and they can in fact be considered inseparable.

the influence of isolation

Isolation messes with our sense of time. (Bond)

Moreover, “place attachment” research indicates that when we attach specific meaning to specific places, we create a mental map that helps us retain things better. This may be an indicator that explains the shapelessness of time and memory during the pandemic, when all experience feels like one experience.

In the article “The Perils of a Life in Isolation”, McAndrew states that “alone in an unchanging environment, the sensory information available to us and the ways in which we process it can change in unpredictable ways.” We spend most of our time processing external stimuli from the physical world around us. However, faced with a lack of external stimulation from our environment, our attention turns inward, within ourselves.

This means, in my opinion, that the influence of the physical isolation faced throughout the pandemic added another layer of subjectivity to our experience of space. Perhaps the lack of external stimuli influenced and enlarged our perception of the stimuli that were available, such as the spatial elements and the virtual ones.

the visual implications of sound

Dr. Petra Vetter, from the Department of Psychology at Royal Holloway, studies the relationship between the visual and auditory systems us humans have. During her research she discovered that the visual cortex is sensitive not only to information that we see, but also to auditory information. This research therefore shows that we use auditory signals to prepare our visual system for what we expect to see.

This means that before we actually see an object or event that we hear, we already create the mental image of it.

Perhaps, being faced with a lack of external stimuli, our inner perception of an environment relies more heavily on the auditory signals we receive to construct a more complex mental imagery of our experience.

my artistic process

The artistic process of my project was informed by the question of how to visualise the way I emotionally experienced my personal situation during the pandemic.

I found that focusing on the elements of inquiry I discuss in this paper, I could properly relate my experience in a way I could only do artistically, in a very specific way. My emotional experience of the situation was informed by being isolated to an environment where the only changes in my perception was influenced by the visual implications of the sound on the other side of the call, which I interpreted visually within my project as elements that breach into my personal fictional realm.

Using animation, I managed to recreate a series of narrative landscapes that belonged to my inner experience of the struggle of physical isolation and virtual connectivity.

Conclusion

To conclude, I think that the way we perceive a physical place is an extension of our emotional experience of it, becoming subject to our inner interpretation of it.

Being physically isolated due to the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic meant that my emotional interpretation of the space I experienced daily was influenced by a constant spatial construct and an undefined perception of time, defined only by the auditory information processed from the calls shared with my friends.

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