

Project $\alpha 2 \Omega$

A Dialogue on New Media Perspectives

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Keywords

A Dialogue on New Media

Introduction

This paper documents an initiative taking the form of a 'dialogue'.

The format which has been developed is somewhat similar to that of the 'conversation' which Mondrian conceived in 1919, taking place between two fictitious characters - A and B - discussing the new direction in art, which he called 'Nieuwe Beelding' and which contributed to the 'De Stijl' movement (the dialogue was followed later that year by a 'trialogue' between X, Y and Z on a virtual walk taking them from the countryside to the city).

This time the issue is not so much the evolution of a new artistic or architectural style, but the role of 'new media' in architecture...

The present dialogue takes place between two fictitious media proponents ('Alpha' and 'Omega'). They take turns questioning several issues and exchanging proposals...

What are the values - and the promises - of computer supported instruments in creative design - and research - concerning the art and science shaping the built environment?

How do the present applications measure up, how

do they compare to the expectations and ambitions expressed a number of years ago?

The form of a dialogue means that issues and ideas, which are not often aired within the confines of academic discourse, can be played back and forth and a measure of exaggeration was intended from the beginning...

This contribution does not in any way pretend to be all-inclusive. Rather, the paper is meant to put forward ideas and experiences - from the perspective of the Delft Media group, in practice, in teaching and in research - which may stimulate (or even irritate?) but will hopefully *activate*. The aim is to open up discussions, to allow other (hidden) agendas for the future to become more visible and to look for platforms for sharing concepts and fascinations, however improbable they might be...

Project $\alpha 2 \Omega$: the method

The previous dialogue is the result of an exchange of texts via E-mail. The two authors felt the 'chat' format might prove to be a suitable - *contemporary* - form for the exchange of ideas on *new media*. The ambition was to create a kind of 'intellec-

tual soap', recognisable to colleagues, but allowing for the two 'actors' to exchange experiences and ideas which should be considered *pertinent*, though at times possibly a bit 'over the moon'... The method adopted in this project was a kind of 'game'. The two 'roles' - Alpha and Omega - would exchange statements back and forth: an interplay of notions. Our two personalities were 'typecast' as a kind of present-day Narziss und Goldmund ². Alpha the more 'adventurous' and Omega the more 'reflective', although their characteristic traits seem to *revolve* as the dialogue gets under way... For this particular game a deck of 36 'cards' was created beforehand: a series consisting of complementary 'twin phenomena'; one half (18 cards) more or less characteristic for the Alpha character the other half the Omega side. Some examples:

α:	Ω:	
Technology	Philosophy	
Optimism	Cynicism	
Vulnerable	Efficient	etc.

For the full list of items see the azo website. In the text the 'card' words are printed both bold and italic. The idea of the game was that it should *not* be a 'win-lose' situation, with the 'opponents' attempting to knock each other out as quickly as possible. Instead, the idea was to create a 'win-win' proposition (a concept adapted from the game theory ideas of - amongst others - Robert Wright ³). This means both players are responsible for keeping the game 'in the air'...

This was achieved by letting the authors make successive 'moves', each consisting of *three statements* (a first statement for oneself, then one for the opponent and lastly on for oneself again. For instance:

α:	Ω:
> Move 1: α1, Ω1, α2	
	> Move 2: Ω2, α3, Ω3
> Move 3: α4, Ω4, α5	etc.

This concept of *overlapping patterns* proved to be crucial. Because each author had to enter a 'triad' of statements at a time, each was responsible for his own, *as well as* his partner's success! In the full dialogue these *triads* can be recognised by the space between the lines of text. Alpha made the opening move, Omega had the closing move.

Originally it was the intention to play a 'complete' game of 72 statements. This idea was abandoned during the process, when it was decided to go for a 'medium length' game of 48 statements. Therefore not all of the 36 cards have been used by each player (a fact the authors tried to compensate to some extent by both using two cards per statement in their last move). We presently see *four* basic games:

Short game:	Compact game:
- 4 'moves' each	- 6 'moves' each
- total: 8 moves	- total: 12 moves
- min. of 12 'cards'	- 18 'cards'
- 24 'statements'	- 36 'statements'
Medium game:	Long game:
- 8 'moves' each	- 12 'moves' each
- total: 16 moves	- total: 24 moves
- 24 'cards'	- 36 'cards'
- 48 'statements'	- 72 'statements'

Of course, all kinds of variations are conceivable. Just like with Mondrian's 'trialogues', games with more players are possible. Specific rules can be agreed on, for instance: that the word on the card should appear in the *first* sentence of a statement or, alternately, appear in the 'punchline'. Players can make up their own sets of 'cards', with a variety of themes. Also the method allows for variation and a certain amount of *cheating*, an aspect which is essential to *any* good game...

Conclusions and perspectives

The authors have found this a stimulating experience. It was exciting to think up moves and wait for the other's 'reply'. The exercise has led - for us at least - to some genuine surprises concerning possible *perspectives* for new media. We would like to invite others to express their ideas on the *promises* (and good and bad dreams) for the future from their experience with the *realities* of today and yesterday, by participating in similar 'mental experiments'!

Each player could take on whichever game 'alias' he or she wishes, playing any kind of role and exaggerating where necessary, but would also be identifiable by an E-mail address, so that Project a2W might simultaneously lead to new *professional* interaction.

We would appreciate it if you would send us a copy of any other 'dialogues' you might conceive, so we can create a 'gallery' of ideas...

Website Project $\alpha 2\Omega$:
<http://www.bk.tudelft.nl/media/a2o/>

Appendix

Project $\alpha 2\Omega$: the dialogue

Due to space limitations we are only able to present some *extracts*, a kind of 'trailer'. Please visit our website for the full text.

α : I am Alpha. I would like to talk about the future. I hope you are interested, because I expect my ideas about the future will eventually influence yours. I would like to focus on one of the oldest cultural expressions of mankind, the art of *building*. Buildings are the direct products of available means and human imagination. Though the development of building has apparently moved forward very slowly, I predict REVOLUTIONARY developments in the near future. Buildings will accommodate us like clothes, made to

fit, precisely meeting our wishes, designed and manufactured by computers and robots. Architects will explore the possibilities, but soon their role will be taken over by the consumer.

.... <http://www.bk.tudelft.nl/media/a2o/>

Ω : I've heard that one before, but the promises of virtual reality haven't come true - at least not yet. What I see is virtual *surreality*, pretty pictures with environments that seem to be made out of Formica, the same stupid cloud over and over again, cut-outs of people floating around without shadows!

You know I think that in the field of computation we've lost the plot altogether...

Everyone seems to be going on about this inevitable future with the computer as the only 'message'.

Nonsense: the computer is the METHOD!

α : Acting in a systematic way to reach a certain aim, that is my idea of method. You say the computer is the method? COMMUNICATION is the key to understanding and revealing patterns. Patterns can be imitated, calculated, initiated. I Ching and Feng Shui are precursors of this way of thinking. Or the Pattern Language of Christopher Alexander. Through communication more patterns will be discovered.

Virtuality is *part* of the method. Virtuality is also a result of calculations, a combination of patterns. We are still gaining speed, which will allow us to combine and calculate more and more patterns. Virtuality will become reality when robots start building *dreams*. Your dreams and mine...

Ω : My dreams and *robots*? It's interesting how you attempt to 'connect' our limitations and even our ignorance to a concept of 'richness'. That's a very positive - or might I say *positivistic* - approach. By the way, you're not tied up with some Guru or other are you? All this talk of Feng Shui and the like, personally speaking that kind of stuff makes my skin crawl.

.... Let me get back to these wonderful new 'slaves' of ours, these computers which - if you have your way - will soon be promoted to the status of *personalised* robots...

I've been more or less seriously involved with computers for some twenty years or so now. My first impression was of people sitting dumbfounded behind (or is it in front ?) of a screen, all they could say was: "huh?". That is still my experience today, people going "huh?" - and myself as well! Even now I find I can hardly send an E-mail without some form of frustration! How much frustration has the computer inflicted, and how much have we actually gained?

α: Omega you've been missing out! There is a global network of all kinds of people experimenting, exploring, inquisitive, thinking about improvements! And I'm serious: when I get onto the Net I can *feel* this energy. There will be more room for all kinds of individual fascinations which will somehow become real - the virtual IMAGE will become a 'personal reality'. That is why I predict that the computer will lead to a totally new kind of consumer...

Ω: You know, from a 'user' point of view, I think that I would be quite happy to just be a consumer. But for me that would only be the case if computer applications would be really efficient - 'user friendly' - leaving more room for my own imagination...

As for now, I'm intimidated by the COMPLEXITY of things which ought to be as simple as possible. Besides this my *aesthetic* pain barriers are constantly breached by the kind of the sleazy imagery which you apparently perceive as not only exciting, but the promise of things to come! I feel computers should become as *ubiquitous* as possible and totally 'direct' in the way they may be applied. It annoys me that I have to get involved into the workings of things I'm not interested in, in order to get things - which ought to be simple - to just *work* (either that or getting someone who is more of a freak (sorry, let's say 'enthusiast') than myself involved). Perhaps we *should* address the tool issue first...

α: I agree with you about the sleazy imagery, but you'll see that interfaces will get much better. Software developers and Internet providers are still, for commercial reasons, targeting young people. Gradually the new media will allow for new differences. We are moving into a phase where the interaction with computers will in fact be more like ART than technology.

..... <http://www.bk.tudelft.nl/media/azo/>

Ω: Actually I would prefer to follow the cue you have just given about *art*. The human species started learning from EXPERIENCE and became creative! That is where the 'detective' spirit can be put to use: discovery, but applied in a *methodical* way; recognising order but leaving room for surprises.

I feel we're been beating about the (digital) bush, that we are lacking a proper sense of direction. What do you say, shall we try to be a bit more systematic?

α: Well yes, you may be right. We can go on trying to impress each other with our extensive hang-ups and the scope of our 'dreams', but we are lacking an *agenda*. That makes us VULNERABLE. Let's get to work... Can I kick off? The one direction I have introduced earlier: the notion that we appear to have almost

forgotten the CAD-CAM aspect. I feel we ought to *extend* the current design support functions to manufacturing, not on a large scale, but on the workshop level: as 'made to measure' proposals. The other direction is the potential of computers in the *idea* phase, more as an 'early design' medium. Real conceptual 'sketching'. The programs we work with are too slick and time consuming. You know, I used to like those wireframes. I believe we have to develop ways which leave room for imagination, able to incorporate features like pattern languages and information from databases, if and *when* the designer wishes. How about you?

Ω: I would agree that those are interesting themes, although I foresee problems.

What I would really be interested in is the role which might be played by the computer as an instrument for creating order in the field of architectural *thinking*. The other thing is that I feel we ought to consider the computer more in terms of *multimedia*. There is still a tendency to throw everything away and start anew.

Instead of 'aping' proven working methods in a simplistic way, we ought to *learn* from, so called, 'old' techniques, and create platforms for collaboration. Of course we should also try to imagine radically *new* computer applications... Where would you like to start?

α: New applications, that's where I would like to start. I am an architect and, like you, I have about twenty years of experience in the field of computers. Before that I was pioneering in video. We called it 'visual poetry'. From the moment computers entered video productions, the poetry was killed. CYNICISM might have been ruling my life now but, like the boy I am, I started playing with this new toy.

But what do you propose?

Ω: Well, I'm not entirely sure yet, however it does involve the sort of DETECTIVE approach we talked about earlier on. In Don de Lillo's latest book⁴, one of the characters introduces the uniquely Italian concept of 'Dietrologia', which essentially means: understanding that which is behind an event. Usually this concerns the background of *sinister* events: bribery; corruption; the misuse of power for private benefit; crooked politicians. The sort of things your 'standard' detective would be busy with... But if we try to look at our *perception* - and indeed the *design* - of the built environment it would be a good thing to look for methods towards understanding 'what is behind' what we see, but in a positive sense.

My ideal would be to extend Dietrologia to a systematic *Dietrologica!*

α : I think we're on to something...
Your Dietrologica could be the name of the software I was trying to describe to you. Each 'layer' in 'our' software will be - or can be - 'dietro' the 'logica' of the other(s). You follow me?

The designer chooses. The software helps to choose. You would potentially be able to hold the leashes of a totally parametric field of facts, proposals and decisions. You could be in control of COMPLEXITY. The 'users' will update the software every time they 'save' a design consisting of a set of layers. The software should not interfere and be a dictator, but should allow for the *unexpected*. Our intelligence has to be challenged at all times.

Ω : You know, a *metaphor* just popped into my head and then I had to think of the experimental 3d SketchBoX project developed by a colleague of mine ⁵... A crazy idea: could you imagine a kind of information GEOMETRY in the computer that would not be flat, but 'spatial', with layers - or levels - in *different dimensions*?

α : I think what I have described is a 3 dimensional system! The interfaces (with the filters for database retrieval) are this extra dimension. Layers with depth. The software is the 'inter-medium' of a world-wide system. Additions could only be accomplished in 'their' layers and in strictly organised formats.

Ω : I quite agree, but I would like to try taking this a step further...

I don't think you quite understood what I was getting at earlier, when I suggested an interface in *different dimensions*. I didn't just mean layers on top of each other which you might shuffle like a deck of cards, I meant a real - or rather *virtual* - information SPACE! I am talking about a spatial configuration that you could move around in! Depending on where your interests lie you could 'enter' this information framework from different sides. Let's say you would get a cube which you could turn around virtually. One side might be the 'buildings' entrance, the other 'technology' and another one 'culture' (I'm just making this up as I go along). Then I could go *inside* and set off on a journey of discovery, navigating through a kind of 'data architecture'. I would be able to choose the information I need, connecting with interrelated layers in other dimensions, moving in and out of different dimensions whenever I want to...

What do you think, am I going over the moon?

α : Yes and no. I will explain...

What you propose sounds like a computer game - or a film, like the movie *Tron*.

Personally I would like to keep things more sober, pragmatic. I go for the simple interfaces, where work and game are separated.

But if I were to follow you over the moon, I would feel the urge to introduce a *central interface* for 'our' system, the 'crossing' of all the layers - a virtual space in which the building is actually 'built'. All bits and pieces are, as it were, *assembled* there. All layers concerning the PHYSICAL aspects of the building's design sharing this specific interface. A *real* building in a *virtual* world (you know they now design aeroplanes in such a way). I'm suggesting that you (and other participants through their own entrances to the system) would construct a building in SPACE with gravity, light, materials, geodetic conditions, sound, heat, wind, (even time?)...

Virtual bricks would behave like real bricks. Virtual steel as real steel, wood as wood, water as water, air as air ... After the building process in the virtual environment, the robots of the real world would 'only' have to be instructed to follow the 'script' attached to the components which they would build and assemble. Did I miss your point?

.... <http://www.bk.tudelft.nl/media/azo/>

Ω : Alpha, I feel that this dialogue of ours - via the Internet - has been like a 'spring cleaning' of my (pre)conceptions, even though we haven't got to the 'attics' and 'cellars' yet...

.... We could try to *patent* the idea, but I feel it would only really become something if it is *shared*. I somehow feel that this kind of interaction might be effective as a platform for INVOLVEMENT by others with interests similar to ours...

At the same time I think it wouldn't be bad to bring a bit more PHYSICAL interaction into a dialogue like this from time to time.

What do you think, perhaps we could get together sometime and have a *real* conversation?

Notes and References

- 1 Piet Mondriaan: **Gedurende een Wandeling van Buiten naar de Stad**, Haags Gemeentemuseum/Gravura, c/o Beeldrecht, Amsterdam, 1986 (in Dutch).
- 2 Hermann Hesse, **Narziss und Goldmund**, S. Fischer

Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1930. There are also some distant parallels with the author's *Glasperlenspiel*.

3 Robert Wright, **Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny**. The author in an article in *Time* magazine, January 24 2000: "Non-zero-sumness is a kind of potential, a potential for mutually bad outcomes or mutually good outcomes. And it is self-regenerating. The more of it you turn into win-win outcomes, the more new games are created."

- 4 Don de Lillo, **Underworld**, Scribner, 1997. Excerpt: "There is a word in Italian. *Dietrologia*. It means the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event, the science of what is behind an event".
- 5 Martijn Stellingwerff, **SketchBoX**, in: *Architectural Computing from Turing to 2000*, eCAADe conference Proceedings, Liverpool, 1999.

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