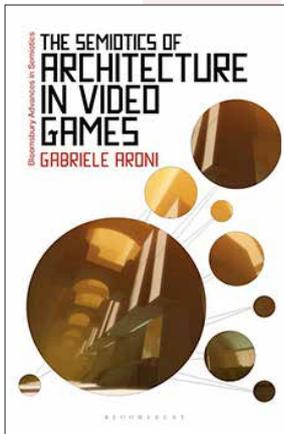


Architecture and ludosemiotics: Exploring the meaning of the built environment in digital games

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Gabriele Aroni

The Semiotics of Architecture in Video Games

London: Bloomsbury Advances in Semiotics, 2022, 192 pp.,
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The book *The Semiotics of Architecture in Video Games* by Gabriele Aroni was published in 2022 and is one of the most recent examples of academic research in the field of semiotics of games – or, as I prefer to call it, *ludosemiotics* (Thibault 2020). In particular, it appears to be part of a series of scattered yet fruitful attempts to apply traditional semiotics to video games and other forms of play that began to gain traction in Italy in the 2005-2015 decade. While similar efforts emerged in other countries (e.g., Sebastien Genvo and Laurent Di Filippo in France, Pablo Molina Ahumada in Argentina, Dominic Arsenault and Maude Bonenfant in Canada, etc.), Italy seems to have produced a particularly strong interest in the combination of games and semiotics, embodied by the work of many researches, some of which mentioned in this book (Massimo Maietti, Marco Benoit Carbone, Enzo D’Armenio, Vincenzo Idone Cassone, Dario Compagno) and some not (Patrick J Coppock, Agata Meneghelli, Gianmarco Giuliana, Stefano Bartezzaghi...). This was possibly due to the influence of Umberto Eco on Italian academia, as he both popularised the study of semiotics in Italian universities, and ensured that *popular culture* – of whose academic interest he was a strenuous defender – remained a viable topic of semiotic inquiry.

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However, unlike many of these names, Gabriele Aroni brings a different perspective to the topic: architecture. The threefold connection between meaning-making, video games, and architecture, then, is the key focus of this work.

In order to do justice to this book, it is important to start by clearly defining what this book is – and is not. Despite a possible interpretation of its title, this is not a handbook of the semiotics of architecture in video games. That is, the book does not propose a range of semiotic approaches and methods for studying the role of architecture across different kinds of games.

Firstly, this is because the author makes a clear and motivated choice to focus only on a very specific kind of games: those that present a 3D environment. As Aroni explains in the last chapter, focusing on different kinds of games (e.g., 2D environments) would probably require a different approach.

Additionally – and this might require a bit more argumentation – while the work is undoubtedly semiotic, its engagement with semiotics is somewhat fluctuating. Aroni mentions many key authors in semiotics, both those central to the discipline and those who have worked more specifically on games. Nevertheless, some of the authors on whom the book relies are problematic from the perspective of the discipline. David Meyers, for example, despite writing a book entitled *The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis* (2003), dismisses quite quickly both Saussure and Peirce, and decides to found his semiotic theory on George Spencer-Brown's work on mathematical logic – and therefore departs significantly from the discipline. Similarly, Brian Upton, a game designer, after a brief explanation of Saussure and Peirce, concludes that their models are inadequate for describing complex meaning-making and instead proposes a new model anchored in neurons and synapses (2015). Both authors (as is too often the case in the English-speaking world) take the concept of semiotics very literally and focus only on signs, seemingly assuming that the discipline ended with its founding figures (despite occasional nods to Roland Barthes). Both authors also seem to (wilfully?) ignore that structuralism ever existed, while at the same time trying very hard to propose new formalist systems, while simultaneously flirting with neuroscience in ways that are borderline reductionist.

Some of their conceptual contributions to Aroni's book, then, are questionable (like the concept of 'ludic sign'), while others are more interesting, but could have possibly been explored based on a more solid semiotic foundation – such as the idea of 'anticipatory play,' which could have been easily anchored in a Greimasian or Echeian approach to narrative.

On the other hand, when engaging with semiotics proper, Aroni readily identifies relevant angles, especially D'Armenio's highlighting of movement in interaction (2014) and, more importantly, Eco's work on semiotics and architecture. The book is, in fact, mostly grounded on using Eco as a mediator between a Peircean use of the

concept of 'iconicity' and a Barthesian use of 'connotation' and 'denotation.' Aroni, in particular, advances the idea that, in video games, the denotative meaning of architectural signs concerns their role in gameplay – that is, the affordances they offer players from a ludic perspective – while the connotative meaning focuses on the narrative layer of the games. While this concept seems to echo formulations originated in Game Studies – such as the idea of a rule-based 'core' of games wrapped in an outer, narrative-based 'shell' (Mayra 2008) – here, semiotics is used to offer more depth and nuance in the relation of these two sides of the medium.

This is, of course, one possible semiotic approach among many, and it could have been interesting to see how other approaches to the semiotics of architecture (maybe based on Lotman or Lagopoulos' work on architectural space) could have been applied to digital games. However, as I mentioned above, this is not what this book is about.

So, what is this book about? In my opinion, Aroni's work offers two main contributions. The first one is a continuous dialogue between semiotics and architecture. The book engages with a vast body of work on architecture, spanning from Vitruvius to contemporary research, and addresses topics ranging from the communicative characteristics of architecture to the built environment to architects' capacity to formulate visionary proposals capable of reshaping imagination. Aroni also repeatedly draws parallels between traditional architecture and the digital architecture of game worlds, highlighting both their similarities and their differences.

The second contribution comes from the chapters 3-5: a systematic exploration of different ways to represent architecture in video games – and their semiotic and ludic entailments. In fact, Aroni's most interesting theoretical contribution is probably his articulation of three different categories (I would maybe even call them discursive strategies) used by games to relate to architectural space. The first is a 'representative' one, in which the game attempts, to some extent, to reproduce all or part of an architectural environment in digital form. The second is 'fantastic,' indicating the creation of a fictional narrative world in which most architectural elements remain clearly inspired by real-world ones. Finally, the third category is 'visionary,' referring to games that use architecture in unconventional ways, making the most of the affordances of the medium, and representing architecture in a way that can be radically different from the real world. This distinction, while not strongly grounded in theory, resonates with Eco's work on possible worlds (1979) and offers a way to examine the different things that games (or game designers) can do and say with architectural elements. This is the basis for the analytic work on three different case studies, the most interesting part of the book.

The first case focuses on the 'representative' strategy and, in particular, on *Assassins' Creed 2* and the attempt of the game to recreate Florence (and other cities) – an

attempt that is often more rhetorical than factual, but that participates in the *raison d'être* of the game. In this case, Aroni deploys the History-Game Relations Framework (Idone Cassone and Thibault 2016) to support his analysis.

Secondly, he focuses on *Final Fantasy XV* and on the 'fantastic' category. This case study examines how a fantasy world is constructed, drawing on ludic necessities and representations of real-world architectural elements that support world-building. The analysis, in this case, resembles a closed reading, where different fictional cities are described and linked to real-world elements.

The third case study, an example of the 'visionary' category, is *NaissanceE*, a plotless indie game whose gameplay requires players to navigate intricate, largely impossible virtual architectural landscapes. Here, Aroni conducts a more rigorous comparative study of the game's space and what he calls the 'visionary tradition' in architecture.

The case studies are enjoyable and insightful and do a good job of supporting the book's main claim, that "architecture constitutes a central signifier in digital games" (p. 141). Nevertheless, when we reach the conclusions, they seem to limit themselves to reiterating the book's premises. While the case studies help us better understand the games analysed, they do not support the refinement or development of the theoretical argument.

Overall, then, the book leaves us wanting more. Aroni was so preoccupied in arguing about the similarity between architecture in the real world and in video games – and hence of the relevance of the first to understand the latter – that it left some of the differences underexplored. While he programmatically focuses on architecture alone and not on spatiality more generally, Aroni also inadvertently dismisses a potentially revolutionary aspect: that all space in video games is always architectural. There is no nature in virtual worlds: everything is planned, constructed, and built. In this case, how is a digital tree different from a digital house? The semiotics of architecture in video games, then, could extend beyond traditional architecture and focus on a digital space in which the demiurgic power of their virtual architects is nearly infinite. What would then be the scope of this virtual architecture? And how could semiotics describe its novel way to construct meaning?

This line of inquiry, however, might mean getting too far ahead of ourselves. Despite numerous contributions, ludosemiotics remains far from mainstream. Much work is still needed to establish it as a subfield of semiotics, and as an element that other approaches to digital games – including architectural ones – would find valid and useful. I believe that, in this sense, the value of this book is clearest: it is a significant step forward in establishing the credibility of ludosemiotic approaches and an open invitation to architecture researchers to join the conversation.

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