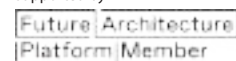




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Storytelling Architecture

VOJTĚCH RADA

FA Platform

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The goal of the workshop was to learn to use tools of architecture to create interactive audiovisual experiences describing structures which no longer exist. Main focus of this application was on the former town hall of Tirana, which was demolished in 1981 to clear room for current National History Museum. The process involved finding out the plans of former town hall, recreating it as a 3D digital model and make it part of interactive application using Unity Game Engine. The result were five applications, showing real history as well as fictional stories, four graphical collages and a text.

The Objective was to create several interactive applications, which were supposed to tell a story of former townhall of Tirana. The base structure was set up as a two to three scene narrative, beginning with an introduction with prehistory of the plot, than moving to the site from 1930s with newly constructed building and finally up-to-date situation. The important point of the workshop was to realise that architects have powerful tools, which are great not only for projecting of the future ideas, mostly buildings, but also to project structures which were long gone, or architecture, which was never meant to be built. This approach of using architectural tools like 2D digital drafting and modelling opens a new room for possible development of the whole architecture profession. One of the tasks was to recreate as precisely as possible the former building of Town Hall of Tirana. However, the information at dis-

posal was quite scarce, so the students had to face struggles, which were new to them. They were suddenly asked to do digital models not because of the building they are designing, but because the building was demolished. For this reason it was not only sufficient to use former plans, which were not very detailed anyway, but also to use old photos and videos. By using this photographic material and with tools for 3D digital modeling students were able to create more detailed model. They were simply asked to act as a software architects, to build architecture for use in software. The objective of the research group was to not only find an information from the internet and books, but also to pick the important ones which could be relevant to the history of the building. Important objective was to divide the history in scenes, where the most important events took place. The self-initiated objective from this group was to create a 2D graphical collages, which were supposed to serve as an illustration to the events and texts. This showed another possibility of how to tell a story of the former Town Hall of Tirana, which does not necessary have to be told by using interactive game engines, but uses calm, clear and very traditional way of how to tell stories – simply with a text. Images themselves were compositions of photos from the past as well as today, combined with graphical elements and patterns, resulting in the clash between real, fictional and documentary approach. This imagery was later also used directly in the application, which

helped a lot to support the storytelling. The objective of the last group was to deal with the software for the development of computer games and interactive application known as Unity.

Since none of the students had any prior experience with the latter, the task was to do a simple first person application, where the potential player could go through and eventually experience the story of the former town hall. The goal was to get along with the program, than to use standard assets, import objects like 3D models, bitmaps, JPGs, sounds etc. Then there was a request to create a simple script, allowing the player to change the scenes. Other tasks involved how to use rigidbody components, basic physics, and systems of colliders. It was fundamental to find out how to use standard assets, which are free to download from Unity store. These assets were used mainly for purposes of creating a first person character and basic audio listener. Setting up the final scene was done in very simple way, since there was no time left to tweak things such as lightning and materials. For this the objective was to use the simple presets from Unity and main task was just to position them correctly. One of the struggles was to create an easy understandable transitions from a scene to another. This was mostly done by some very visually attracting piece of geometry, usually together with some lightning. Some students made their own research and they looked up for other free to download objects from Unity store, such as explosions effects, cars, or trees. These things were also used in the final application. Than other objective was to create an audio guide which would let the player know what was the whole story about. This was also done in very simple and fast way, simply by recording it on the cell phone. Finally they learned how to export a game so that it can be executed on any computer running windows operating systems.

The students were divided into three groups. First group was supposed to do research and find valuable and important information about the history of the former townhall of Tirana. Their task was to think in two or three scenes, in order to make an narrative of the buildings prehistory, actual appearance after it was built, its demolition and current building of the museum. Second group was asked to find out as much information as possible about plans of former town hall and create an 3D digital model. Than the group moved on to create additional 3D digital models, which were supposed to show the ruins after the building was demolished, the surroundings of the plot in 1930s, 1980s and contemporary one. The last group was in charge of the game making, and they were asked to stitch the models and props from 3D group together with the story which was developed in research group. I have devoted myself most of the time to students in Unity group, since none of the students had any prior experience with the software. The important method focused on how to create 3D models for software application is to learn how to export it properly, so the scale and the orientation of the model stays same in 3D modelling

software as well as in gaming engine. For that we used files like OBJ, with a special setting to preserve axis in -90 degrees, in order to maintain the desired position. The other special task was to create a ruins of the former townhall, after it was demolished in 1981. Since there was no special footage and other real proofs of how the site looked like, the method was simply to create a destroyed model from the former 3D digital model. The group which was supposed to oversee the research for the whole story was first working as an ordinary researchers, reading texts and finding videos of the building. They have later moved on to create 2D collages in image manipulation software. This method was great to be accompanied by final interactive application, because it offered more detailed and thorough insight in the history of the plot. The method of the group which was in charge of using the software was focused on putting the results of the work done in storytelling group and modelling group. The main aim was to learn to use the Unity software as fast as possible. This was done by showing examples of my previous work, what methods have I chosen and why. Other source was the Unity manual, which allowed us to learn the fundamentals of the software, as well as to tackle various flaws and mistakes which we have encountered. Then most of the learning was done by explaining the things on the projector, and than just by going from student to student to explain individually what has to be done. Than some more skilled students were asked by me to explain what I told them to others. Some of the them were also researching the program and how to use it online, using sources like youtube tutorials as well as official channels like unity learning hub. Some of the students were asked to write a text, which should describe the history of the former town hall in Tirana. This was done in very simple and ordinary way, so that the potential visitor had very clear information of what was happening.

The resulted applications were spanning from strict history storytelling, across the half fiction half documentary approach all the way to complete fictional, poetic and even humorous results. A core analog part of the final outcomes were digitally crafted collages accompanied with text, explaining a history of the former Tirana town hall. Some of the interactive applications were explaining the traveling between the scenes by using the so called time traveling booths, others were using simple objects, or lightings, which were just standing out, so they could attract the player. The final interactive applications were displayed on big TV screen and were offered to interact with during the final presentation. One of the ideas was to open a conversation with experts on current challenges and possibilities to the digital world and to invite people in the digital world to help, or give advice and expertise as a way of making sure what we were doing and how our research was working. I've also always been a skeptic person, and I think we all have to be, and I think it's very important that we do that.

But I've also been very clear that this isn't going to change the way we do work and the way we do policy. It's going to be something that just happens as a natural byproduct of getting more people more involved and using technology more effectively. The visitors were mostly able to go through all the scenes, however some of them were not waiting till the audio in the background finished. There was no time to tweak the interactivity of the applications, like adding the invisible walls to constrain and keep the player in desired area, there could be done more to prevent falling in infinity, and if so, there could have been an option to restart the game. Also, other option to add would be an interactive menu, with an option to choose from different applications and scenes, as well as to see the graphical collages. I am however aware, that this was not the goal of the project, nor was there a time to make this happen. So to make a summary of the whole process, I believe that students had an opportunity to learn how to design an interactive computer application, which could eventually serve as a tool to explain historical events describing the architecture which no longer exists. The final point of it all is that we all have the right to know about current structures that could have been. My hope, and the hope that many of you have since, is that history will be accessible to us all and the history of architecture will be a source of curiosity.

So when we put out our final reports, we should strive to produce information that will help the public understand this work, and I hope that we can all help ensure that that happens. I would say that in doing so, they had an opportunity to study and understand the development of our architectural heritage, or at least the nature of our modern day one. And, perhaps, they learnt that no matter what happens, a heritage project can only ever be successful through its design. I think it is a great idea not to be an architect. This is something you have to think hard about. It is very good to be an architect, as it is very important in the development of cities and for the development of the economy, but it is not always an advantage. Architects, with the exception of a couple of well-known architects, do not really have the same reputation for being good at designing projects as some of the other professions of the country. There are a few more architects than there used to be. But, even today, I have heard many of my contemporaries from other professions, including artists, say that their professional practice is their love of architecture. It is all about architecture, and not so much about their work, but only about their art. The problem with this approach is that it is a very self-indulgent way of living. It does not offer the person the means to be an architect or to appreciate the value of architecture. It is an excessive, almost frivolous obsession; it is based on the assumption that architecture is a matter of lifestyle. This is a dangerous attitude because it has the effect of keeping one stuck to one place and one field. One needs to move on to other things if one is to find a true professi

Vojtěch Rada studied not only sculpture, but also architecture and game design, which he was able to interconnect and expand into a very special final form of his graduate work. In a beautiful old villa in Prague's prestigious neighbourhood he modified the whole ground floor with various interventions, which can be further perceived through computer simulation as well as by a book, read by two performers in overalls of "geodets". Between these different types of descriptions and levels of reality, and also between cross-references across them, a whole new world emerges with its own rules.