



MICHAEL LICHT.
PHOTO ALEXEI TYLEVICH

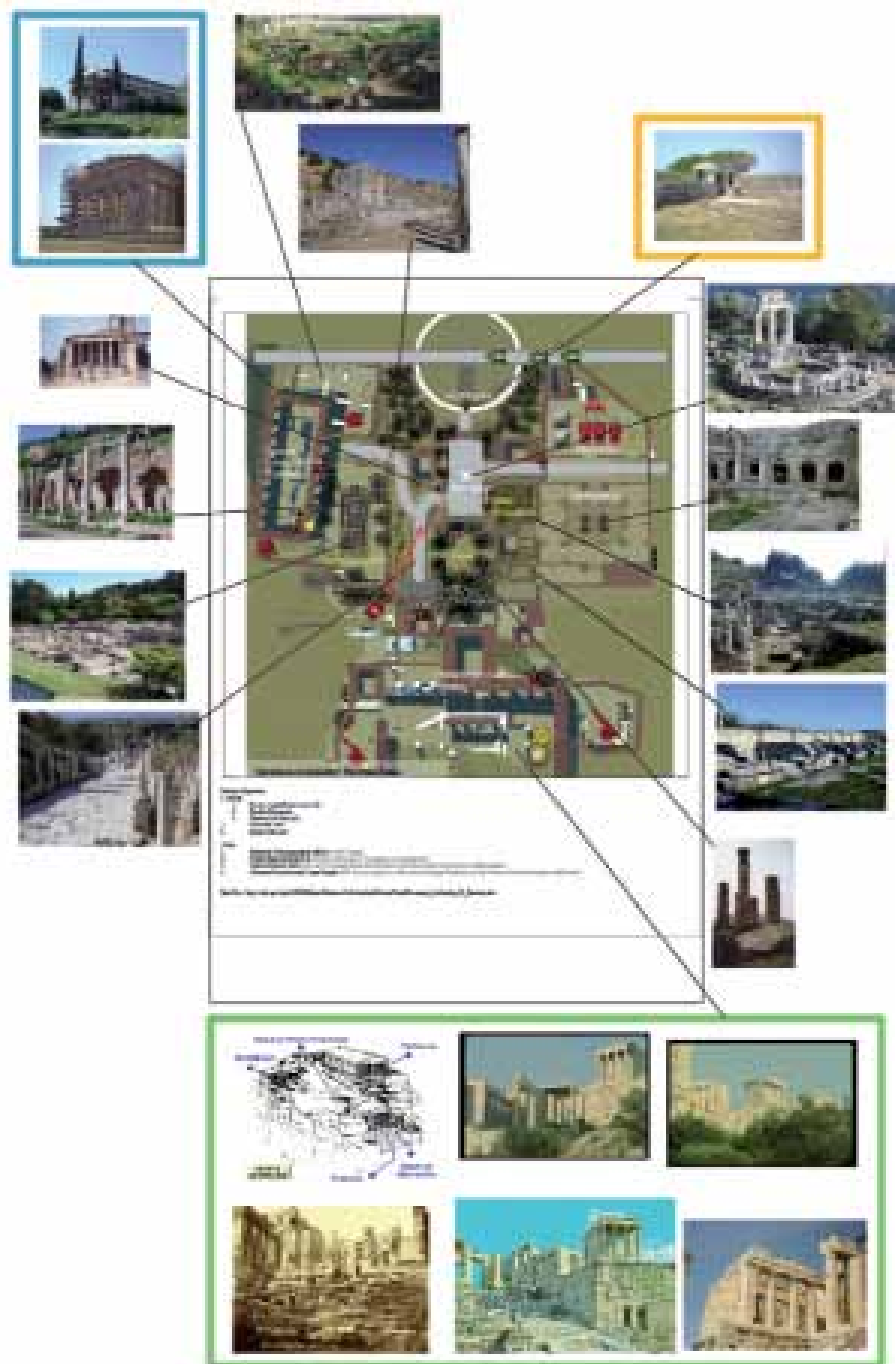
GAMEBOY

MICHAEL LICHT ACTS AS A
MEDIUM BETWEEN ARCHITECTS
AND ALIENS.

Text **Katya Tylevich**

Medal of Honor: Airborne

Airborne, an installment of the Medal of Honor series, is a computer game based on events of World War II. The main character is PFC Boyd Travers, a fictional paratrooper in the US 82nd Airborne Division and, later, in the US 17th Airborne Division. He takes part in various missions in Italy, France, the Netherlands and Germany. Michael Licht was involved in the design of Operation Husky (the Allied invasion of Sicily), Operation Avalanche (the landing at Salerno, a city southwest of Rome) and Operation Market Garden (the advance on the Dutch city of Nijmegen and the attempt to secure the bridge over the Waal).



Medal of Honor: Airborne Operation Avalanche

Licht: 'I was a designer on the Medal of Honor video-game franchise at Electronic Arts. The game is heavily inspired by historical events around World War II, and one of my areas was based on Operation Avalanche, the allied invasion of Italy in 1943. I was looking for interesting locations for my level, and I found Paestum. The area is beautiful. It has several large Greek temples, an amphitheatre and the remains of a city all around. During the war, there were stories about German communications being set up there, so, taking some creative license, I designed a story about Airborne landing in this area to disable these communications, as well as to disable shore artillery – an operation that took place nearby. I studied the temples and the layout of the site and moved things around a bit to fit them all into the confines of the playable area. I then designed the fiction and the events for the end-use experience. I also found some images that showed one temple under restoration, which I thought would make a very interesting play space if I were to re-create the scene. Using pretty typical schematic design methods, I started with a few simple plan sketches of the layout and, over a period of a week, came up with this schematic along with reference images to use as a basis for construction.'



Licht: 'This is a plan view of the same Paestum site from the schematic, but about two months later in 3D. You can see that there is very little deviation from the schematic design, since we worked out so much of it quickly on paper first – or, in this case, Illustrator. Therefore, my team had few surprises. We knew what we were making because I insisted on solid plans done in 2D first. I don't even break virtual ground until the plans are done.'



Often, I drive past the LA offices of leading video-game company Electronic Arts (EA). There are architects beyond those walls, I'm told, but good luck getting to them. Like other major game companies, EA is something of a fortress. A Kingdom of Gamedom behind a barricade of stucco, copyright law and PR. I want to know why architects at companies like EA and LucasArts choose to practise in the virtual world as opposed to the 'real' one. I want to know how these worlds clash or come together, and how such collisions shake the architect's brain. But either I can't approach these architects without a PR escort or they're reluctant to say much, wary about the work they can discuss or show me. They represent companies, after all.

Then there's Michael Licht, who represents himself. A former architect, now a video-game consultant and freelance designer, Licht works from home, which just happens to be near EA, his former employer of a half-decade. Prior to that, Licht worked at LucasArts for four years. He believes in sharing – information, experiences, connections – and he leaves a 'paper' trail. I find him after reading his essay, 'An Architect's Perspective on Level Design Pre-Production', which is published online. In it, Licht refers to himself as a 'videogame junkie with an architectural education'. He makes the rather provocative argument that 'a classic mistake architects make is designing for themselves'. Game on. Licht and I meet. We talk up how he stays friends with architecture despite the break-up, and how he deals with clients who come from outer space – and others who only seem to.

'Don't design for yourself.' That can't be a popular motto.
It's a very hard thing for young designers to learn.

In both gaming and architecture, I imagine.

One of the first books you read in architecture school is *The Fountainhead*. Very unfortunate. Students think, oh, I'm the 'artiste', and you get debutant behaviour from people just out of school. It makes them impossible to work with.

Do you think the 'artistes' of gaming should be tamed?

Look, unless you're funding a project and buying all the copies, you have to accept that this is for the mass market and make something that works and is going to sell. It doesn't mean making something you hate. Find a project you like. But you need to collaborate and really listen. I think most successful architects will tell you that being easy to work with and having a good attitude is key. I listen well, I'm good at convincing others of my ideas – then I throw in my creative flare.

Did 'Fountainhead think' drive you from architecture?

Part of 'challenge everything' is great. But professionally it makes for difficulties. I graduated from Virginia Tech in '96 and started working with HOK in San Francisco – it's this huge architecture firm, and we were doing, like, 90-storey skyscrapers in the middle of places with excessive money. The work was very disappointing after being in school for so long, where you're taught that architecture is a creative business. You get out and realize that about 1 per cent of the industry gets to be creative. The rest? They make efficient boxes for clients. I struggled with that. I love designing buildings, I love creating environments, and I wasn't getting that at all in the architecture industry.

'I HAVE NO
PATIENCE
FOR
AESTHETICS'

– Michael Licht –

Licht: 'This is another view of Operation Avalanche, Paestum. A bit of an exaggerated final location based on the Temple of Athena. We needed a 'grand finale' location, so I took inspiration from the temple and elaborated on the configuration to raise it up on two layers before adding the German shore guns.'

That's why your eyes began to wander?

Well, I was designing and building in 3D when nobody had really seen that kind of work before. But I was being pigeonholed. They once took my 3D models of a building we were designing, gave them to a renderer, and paid the guy 50 grand to render it out. You've got to realize, architecture's one of the lowest paid professions out there. That got me thinking: maybe there are other things I need to do before I settle in as an architect for the rest of my life. It so happens, I was also a hard-core gamer. I'm lucky I graduated; I was playing so many games. And I was always fighting that duality in my nature between games and architecture. In architecture, 3D work was a medium, but I also started applying for work at video-game companies. I knew that LucasArts, for instance, was hiring architects to design their environments.

So, you never really wanted a divorce from architecture.

No. I actually keep in touch with my graduate professors. We've even collaborated. But it's interesting; at this point I have almost no patience with aesthetics. It's really about: what is this design accomplishing? A video game is all about the experience and emotion. Yes, I design buildings, but I also design the events that relate to the buildings. My best work will always be grey.

What does that mean?

It means I don't let myself get distracted with ornament, with materials and other things architects in the real world start tacking on to make projects 'pretty'. I focus on: does it work? I think any good architect should be thinking this way. As soon as you start thinking, hey, that's pretty, without focusing on what it is a space »

Medal of Honor: Airborne Operation Market Garden

Licht: 'This is a final art image from Operation Market Garden in the Dutch town of Nijmegen, also featured in the film *A Bridge Too Far*. It was our job to recreate a portion of the town based on reference images, adjusting it to fit within the play space, and to reconstruct an assault on the bridge by Allied forces in their attempt to take it back from the Germans. We carefully studied the architecture and built entire city blocks to match the architectural style, as well as the destruction that would have been present at that time.'



Medal of Honor: Airborne Operation Husky

Licht: 'Also based on the invasion of Italy, this location was inspired by the Allied landings at Sicily during Operation Husky, near a town called Adanti. Based on photo references we found online and from an actual visit, we reconstructed this village, which already had a fortified wall on a hilltop – a German anti-aircraft stronghold.'



Licht: 'Architecturally, this was an interesting project. I got to study the local architecture and to rebuild entire sections of this town with as much detail as I could gather from reference images. This was a small area of the village that we defined as an Allied safe-landing zone. I designed additional external patios on an upper floor for the player to notice and land on, giving them access to the rooftops.'

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needs to accomplish, then it's not really architecture. It's sculpture.

Aren't you speaking like an engineer?

No! Not at all. The core user experience is really the responsibility of an architect. How is a person interacting with a space? How does it affect his day? That is architecture. My job is to draw a person through an experience. To bait and bring him in. To reward him for taking a chance, for going around some corner, doing something even when all he really wants is to hide or stay in one spot.

In the gaming world, if that experience is lacking, you get an immediate and 'democratic' avalanche of feedback – beware the bloggers. Architects don't necessarily get a similar swift and massive 'like, dislike' response.

An architect should never really be the judge of his own work. That's the great thing about level design: I can see people react right away. I throw people into rough ideas, and then I make adjustments. One of the first games I made got panned, badly. We never should have gotten to that point. We weren't doing the play-testing we should have been doing. Now I look for what I call 'war stories'. When someone on the forums goes, 'You know how I did this?' and someone answers, 'I didn't know you could do that! Let me try!' – at that point they're treating it like a playground rather than a linear experience.

Ostensibly, you're bound by fewer restrictions when designing in the virtual world. Does it follow that your designs should be more fanciful?

There's no gravity in the video-game world unless you make it. The rules of architects don't exist – except for the budget. Money's still

in the real world, right? But when designers say that no one cares if the beams are spaced properly or whether there should be a column in between, I always say, 'People may not know why, but they know when something's wrong.' When something doesn't feel right, the immersion goes right out the window. I've found that the more realistic the architecture, the more immersed someone becomes in the environment. I always harp on architecture. I always find real references. Research is a critical part of the work we do.

How do you make a fantastical world realistic? What do you reference when creating spaces that should be like nothing we've seen before – are you all over the latest architecture news?

For me, it's not about the sort of 'trendy architecture community'. It's about the context that best fits the world I'm designing. If I'm going to design a futuristic world, I might look at work by Grimshaw, Norman Foster, Peter Pran, Morphosis. There's one science fiction world in development now; I've been looking at it and showing it to my wife, who's also an architect, and it's just so childish. All the stuff you would expect a kid to do. These big mushroom buildings next to Corinthian columns – stuff that looks silly and fake and would never in a million years last for any length of time. There's no context or setting to the whole thing. But if you were to pull from some of the modern architects today, I'm sure you could design beautiful cities that nobody would challenge as being science fiction. Hell, even the Pompidou looks like science fiction. How can you deny it?

There's a parallel between your work and designing the next Pompidou?

The thought process is all the same. Only your client isn't a city or whatever; it's now 'The Emperor'. [Laughs.] What would he want in his city? For example, we work with intellectual properties. *Star Wars* was my first one. They said: 'Okay, you're designing the planet of Malastare. There are lots of cliffs and hills. The inhabitants walk on their hands and pick things up with their feet. They're really short. They're an agrarian culture. You're here to find and rescue someone. All right? Have fun!'

But ultimately your client isn't an inhabitant of Malastare walking on his hands; he's a guy playing the video game.

But that guy has to believe the environment he's in was built by the inhabitants of Malastare! It's their civilization. You know, the Wookiees from *Star Wars* all lived in trees. Looking back at that now, well, Wookiees are like bears – they're huge. Does it make sense that they live in these little huts in trees? You start thinking about these things when you enter an environment and see this 400-pound bear walking around on a little bamboo wood path. It just isn't right. A good designer would think about that. A player should always feel, wow, this is really their world.

It's an architectural project. I mean, there were plenty of projects in school like: you're building a house for your buddy. This guy likes music, and he likes natural light. Now imagine he's in a wheelchair. Or imagine he's blind. What are you going to design for him? Well, now imagine this guy walking on his hands and picking things up with his feet. Now what? A classic architecture question. «

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Imperials

Licht: In the case of the Imperials, we envisioned them as a very utilitarian and militaristic society that puts function and power far ahead of aesthetics. They would design to project a sense of authority and power in their architecture: buildings made to intimidate the masses. Notice the heavy and monolithic approach to their construction. All metals are cold – nothing soft or ornamental except for a single rose window in the emperor's stronghold. The buildings almost look like weapons. They have no home world, but are more of a government that roams the galaxy oppressing freedom.

EARLY STAGE**LATE STAGE**

‘AS SOON AS YOU START THINKING, HEY, THAT’S PRETTY, THEN IT’S NOT REALLY ARCHITECTURE. IT’S SCULPTURE’

– Michael Licht –

Naboo

Licht: Naboo is a fictitious planet in the Star Wars universe. Theed is the capital. The architecture references ancient Rome and other classical traditions. It also takes inspiration from Frank Lloyd Wright's Marin County Civic Center in California. The people of Naboo are peaceful, civilized and cultured. Education and the arts are important to them, so these things must be reflected in their architecture. They borrow from the colours of the earth and take pride in their craftsmanship. In early generations, there are no domes and ornaments. The buildings are more utilitarian, but some sense of aesthetic is apparent in elements such as the clay roofs. As the buildings evolve, domes start to appear, clay roofs are replaced with different metals, and other more sophisticated materials start to show up until, finally, Naboo has a very refined, beautiful architecture rich with ornament and elegance.

EARLY STAGE**LATE STAGE****Rebels**

Licht: The Rebels are the underdogs, a group of people who don't want to live under the Imperial rule, who exist on the fringe of society. They have little money and survive on what they salvage and on donations from people who join their ranks. They have a strong sense of pride and community, as well as a unified goal to rid the galaxy of the evil Empire. A society like this would have an eclectic architecture built by many different races. The buildings would feel very temporary, as though they could be disassembled quickly and moved if needed. Early-age structures would be extremely rudimentary, to the point of almost not looking like architecture but more like a junkyard of parts. In the final age, architecture might be more refined and fortified, capable of providing protection against the possible threat of attacks by the Imperials.

EARLY STAGE**LATE STAGE****Star Wars: Galactic Battlegrounds**

Galactic Battlegrounds, part of the Star Wars series by LucasArts, is based on another video game called *Age of Empire*. In *Age of Empire*, the player gathers resources to erect buildings, which in turn generate items the player needs. It's a strategic war game of conquest. As a participant

in the creation of Star Wars, Licht was asked to design the architecture of specific Star Wars factions (Imperials, Rebels, Naboo and Trade Federation) and to develop an architectural language that could be used to generate more buildings belonging to these factions. Each building has a specific use that is clearly visible to the player: buildings are icons, so to speak. Different versions

of each building represent how the building might change over time, evolving as the faction evolves and as the relevant technology is refined. Each building begins as a simple model that becomes more detailed or refined as it advances through the ages. The trick for the designer was to define how a particular faction and its architecture might evolve.

Trade Federation

Licht: The Trade Federation is a very powerful trade guild – a mega corporation. This faction has a personal army of robots, which was designed to protect its interests. We drew most of our inspiration for Trade Federation architecture from the robot and vehicle designs (the fabulous work of Doug Chiang, then an artist at Lucas-Film). The robots seemed to be made of brass and had elegant, almost 'streamline modern', themes. This is architecture with an elegant flow, sweeping domes and no hard edges – dynamic shapes that look as though they melt into the ground.

EARLY STAGE**LATE STAGE**