Space Scrabble

Author: Matthew Higgins

Keywords: <Keywords>

Category: CDP: Creativity and Design Process

Type: Studio project

Level: Undergrad – second year

Duration: Two classes

Abstract: Space Scrabble is an innovative teaching tool for entry-level interior design students, which forms part of a broader program focusing on the promotion of critical thinking skills. It consists of 24 separate elements, each set within a square. These can be rotated, reflected, or overlaid to create an almost infinite variety of shapes that together form an abstract building plan. The ambiguous nature of the plan allows for different interpretations depending on the student's underlying vision for the design. It can be seen as the architectural equivalent of a Rorschach test, providing the visual armature for a spatial narrative.

This teaching tool has been developed in two formats – a manual version with the square elements printed onto acetate, and a digital version using specially developed software.

Learning Objectives: Space Scrabble has several practical objectives: it introduces the grid as a tool of spatial composition, and it encourages students to break down plans into a modular set of defined components (walls, columns, openings). Most importantly, it validates an approach to design based on play and storytelling, rather than as the outcome of functional or programmatic drivers. Students are also encouraged to embrace chance and happenstance as important elements of the design process, leading to outcomes that could not have been envisaged

at the beginning of the assignment. Building in this element of chaos and unpredictability also reflects the unknown parameters that define real-life design commissions.

Criteria:

Entry-level courses present significant challenges for interior design educators. It is difficult to develop content that combines critical thinking and technical skills in equal measure. Too often the student's natural urge to create is channeled towards assignments that are little more than problem-solving exercises. After a time, students come to believe that the essence of design is to find empirical solutions framed around a set of functional requirements, and are fearful of proposals that challenge the premise of the brief, or deviate from established precedents. Space Scrabble addresses these issues by placing the design narrative at the forefront of the assignment, with a focus on experiential descriptors to evoke the quality of the designed spaces.

Process:

For the manual version of Space Scrabble, each student received a randomly selected set of square elements, or tiles. These are printed on clear acetate so that the tiles can be flipped over or overlaid several times over. The number of tiles in the set depends on the complexity of the assignment.

In the first trial, students were asked to design a house not exceeding 960 square feet using up to 30 tiles, where each tile represented 64 square feet (8 feet by 8 feet). The introduction of dimensional constraints encouraged the students to think 'in scale', which is a difficult learning process for entry-level design students.

In the second trial, the scale was retained but the function was left unstated. Students created an initial plan layout as an abstract proposition, and then interpreted it as a space with a particular purpose – examples included a garden, meeting area, restaurant, and contemplative zone. The objective was to emphasize the importance of narrative in interpreting a spatial concept.

For the digital version, students used a specially commissioned software program consisting of a 10 by 10 grid and a set of tool buttons. To insert a scrabble element into one of the grids, the student presses the button marked 'New Tile'. It will select one shape from the tile set (192 pieces including all rotations and reflection variants of the original 24 piece Space scrabble set). The student can then either move on to another grid square and repeat the process, or add a second scrabble element to the first grid square using the 'Layer' buttons – this can be repeated three more times to give a maximum of five overlays.

Inserted scrabble elements in any grid square can be selectively deleted using the 'Burn' button. This means that the design is not simply an accretive process – it can be edited and adjusted at any point in its development.   However, the selection of a replacement element will still be random, keeping chance and happenstance as intrinsic aspects of the design process.

Once the design is completed to the student's satisfaction, it can be exported as a PDF file for inclusion in the final presentation.

In the trial, the students were asked to develop three separate designs in one session (two hours). Each design had to be based on a linear, focused or clustered spatial arrangement. The function of these spaces was left to the students' discretion, but their presentation had to include a written description of the selected function.

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The author is happy to provide a beta version of digital Space Scrabble (Mac OS only) to any school interested in utilizing the tool. For the manual version, individual squares can be cut from printed acetate sheets using the template files provided in the attached documentation.

Presentation Method: Finished designs are presented on 17"x 11" sheets, together with a 150-word description of a journey through the spaces. Supporting images could also be added to help explain the interpretive approach.

Evaluation: The assignment is predicated on the fact that there is no 'right or wrong' way to create the design, or interpret the outcome as a spatial experience. Projects completed for the various trials were therefore graded on a credit/no credit basis. However, in response to peer feedback I think it would be beneficial to include a reflective component to the assignment. This would give the student an opportunity to consider the merits of this conceptual approach and how it may contribute to the development of an individual design methodology.

Credits: This work represented 5% of the total course grade.

References: No course reading was required for this assignment.

Documentation: Introductory Lectures (manual & digital version of Space Scrabble)
Student Work Examples (manual & digital version of Space Scrabble)
Acetate Sheet Templates, PDF format (manual version of Space Scrabble)