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Joseph Manning

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**PLAYING WITH REALITY: Visions of the Contemporary American City as explored  
through *Grand Theft Auto and SimCity*.**

Joseph Manning

May 2020

To be submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

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Adviser, Leonard Nevarez

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## **Chapter 1. Introduction to the Postmodern: reflecting on Changing media and Urban Landscapes**

### **What Drew me to this topic originally**

When thinking about topics I would like to explore for my thesis, I started to wonder where my interest in cities/Urban planning originally stemmed from. While I had always enjoyed going to cities like New York and Boston as a kid, as someone who grew in the rural areas of upstate New York next to a farm, I was divorced from the traditional “urban experiences”. Political discourse growing up was often set up as placing our small conservative town in opposition to the liberal politics of the city that dominated the state's politics. It was not until I received a copy of *SimCity 4* when I was about 8 or 9, that I became fascinated with the inner-mechanics of the city. I was drawn to the game because it advertised building a fantasy tourist destination as well as the ability to bring destruction to the city through disasters. But when I would actually play the game I became engrossed in cultivating my own community as well as understanding my own relationship with cities and planning. Even as a person from a rural area, the game gave a window in how we as humans are shaped by planning processes, and how we take part in larger systems that we are usually unaware of. Everything from factories and farmland, to school teachers and road networks are all vital to our function of society. This game allowed me to explore how the function of cities were often a microcosm of the functions of cities as a whole.

While the game created an interest for the functions of the city, I used this game mostly as a source of entertainment rather than an educational tool. It was not until when I was applying for college and thinking about potential areas of studies that I consider studying anything city

related. By looking at possible majors for college, I came across Urban planning and Urban studies, and realised that my fascination with this game could translate into a larger career. While I knew that there were probably many aspects of *SimCity* that were exaggerated for the enjoyment of the players, by exploring the field of Urban Studies further, I realized that it covered many other topics that I was interested in such as architecture and social sciences. By taking Urban studies and related classes at Vassar, my fascination with the field only grew, as I found it a useful lense for understanding many aspects of our current world.

I wanted to use this project to make use of my academic experience here at Vassar, to reexamine what drew me to cities in the first place. Does this game have any resemblance of accuracy to how cities are planned and governed? When I started to wonder about the academic value of *SimCity*, I also started watching my brother play *Grand Theft Auto V*, and realised how integral the environment of the city played into the larger game. Although I had minimal contact with this game growing up, I did have an idea of the popularity it had with kids my age, as well of its depictions of civilian crime. Paying closer attention to the game, I realised how much my classroom experience translated to a deeper understanding of the complexities of the game. Using the city of Los Angeles and its surrounding area as a blueprint, the game gives a visual and spatial representation of the modern American urban experience. While the game inflated negative aspects of city life, specifically crime and violence, for the players enjoyment, it is through these exaggerations that the game is able to expose many hidden realities of our culture.

With these further questions I was interested in examining both the *SimCity* series and the *Grand Theft Auto* series together to get a deeper understanding in the way cities are represented in gaming media. These games take very different approaches in its depictions of cities, with

*SimCity* examining it from a top-down perspective, while *Grand Theft Auto* depicts cities from the street view. It is through this duality of perspectives that come together to form what our idea of “the city” is, as representative of both the built environment and the people that inhabit the spaces. While famous landmarks and architecture play an important role in the imageability of the city, the people who inhabit are also important in bringing a diversity of cultural experiences that shape the city.<sup>1</sup> These dual perspectives also seems to be an essential tension in the field of Urban studies as a whole. For some urbanist scholars, the field of planning and the construction of the built environment are seen as the foundations for the success of the city. Other urbanists see that the citizens of the city should be centered through urban governance, and they are the ones that make a city thrive. While both of these games are not the most accurate depictions of urban life, when viewed together, they demonstrate the important interactions of both the natural and nonnatural aspects of “the city”.

The goal of this is to not look at these games to decide which is the “better” depiction of cities in gaming media, or even which game provides the most educational value. The goal is to use these games as a framework in studying how we see the city in the modern day. Putting the different perspectives of a “top-down” vs “from the street” view of the city, ignores the complexities and nuances that these perspectives have. It is because of these different approaches to city life, both *Grand Theft Auto* and *SimsCity* allow the player to explore a digital fantasy of the urban experience. While the “Planner/ Government vs. The citizen narrative so prevalent in Urban studies is compelling, it fails to show how the two parties impact one another. These games are arguably some of the most prominent cultural artifacts of the last 30 years; both

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<sup>1</sup> Cliff Ellis. “History of Cities and City Planning” in *SimCity Classic*. Will Wright. Redwood Shores: Maxis. 1989. Video Game.

playing a key role in forming the gaming industry, as well as capturing and shaping modern images of the city. By studying these two video games through an urbanist lense, I hope to understand the relationship between cities and digital media, as well as understanding the greater complexities of contemporary urban life.

### **Core Foundations of Game Studies, and how that is related to the modern medium of Video Games**

One of the main reasons why I was drawn to this topic, in addition to my personal connection with the games, was to explore video games beyond their intended use as entertainment. While I have encountered depictions of cities through various mediums through my academic experience, including literature, movies, and television, there was practically no mention of video games at all. Beyond this, there seems to be a great lack of information on video games in academia as a whole. In fact, when collecting research for this project, it appeared that the library had more books on the intersections of cinema studies and film studies, than it did on all of video games. The only real critique of video games that I had ever come across were around how the portrayal of graphic violence was affecting society, and how the overexposure would slow childhood development. These critiques are almost clichés at this point, and do very little to actively engage with the content presented in games<sup>2</sup>. The academic studies of video games is significantly behind that of film, and even television. While the

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Dyer-Whiteford & Greg de Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2009). p. 153.



medium of video games is more recent than that of books or film, it surpasses all of them in economic power.<sup>3</sup> It is time that academics can no longer ignore the cultural power that video games have.

This lack of academic information and respect of video games is not unique to the medium. Throughout history, the new main method of mass communication almost always struggled to get the respect by the elites of study as a worthy cultural institution. The popularity of the novel caused by the advent of print capitalism in the 18th and 19th century worried many scholarly elites in what it would do to the visual arts, specifically architecture. Victor Hugo famously wrote *Notre Dame de Paris* (Commonly named in English as *The Hunchback of Notre Dam*), saying: “concealed beneath those enigmatic words of the archdeacon: “This will kill that. The book will kill the edifice.”<sup>4</sup> German scholar Walter Benjamin, wrote about similar concerns of the transition of literature to film. He argues that photography and film just reproduce existing art from a single point of view that is “[lacking] its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”.<sup>5</sup> Although now English literature and Film studies are prominent fields in academia, there were concerns in how “the masses” relationship with them would impact class and social dynamics.<sup>6</sup> Now as Video Games rise in popularity, there are similar anxieties in how this new form of media will impact the masses. While hopefully in the near future the academic field surrounding video games will become more extensive, now it is important to bring down these barriers of concern to truly understand the nuances of video games and game design.

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<sup>3</sup> “Booming eSports and Video Games already bigger than Music and Movie industries combined” Bloomberg.com. October 14, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/press-releases/2019-10-14/booming-esports-and-video-gaming-already-bigger-than-music-and-movie-industries-combined> (Accessed January 30, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Victor Hugo. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Trans. Isabel F. Hapgood. [http://www.online-literature.com/victor\\_hugo/hunchback\\_notre\\_dame/24/](http://www.online-literature.com/victor_hugo/hunchback_notre_dame/24/) (Accessed March 27, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935-1938*. Ed. Howard Eilade & Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> “The Work of Art”, 121.

Since there is this gap in how we view and analyze video games, I feel that it is necessary to explore the background of existing academic work on video games. These works mostly come from the emerging field appropriately named “Video Game studies” or more commonly “Game studies”.<sup>7</sup> This field takes an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing video games, often drawing upon academic fields like sociology, anthropology, psychology, and economics to analyze the design and function of the video game. Game Studies looks at both the techniques the developers used to create an engaging game with an effective story, as well as the role that these games have in our larger society.<sup>8</sup> The field of Games studies takes much of its academic framework from cultural studies, an academic field that rose into prominence in the 1970’s and 1980’s using the theoretical structure from Marx and Gramsci to understand the complexities and nuances behind everyday realities. It formed to break away from existing academic institutions of cultural anthropology and ethnic studies to give a broader understanding of how to look at our ever-changing society.<sup>9</sup> Video game studies similarly attempts to integrate this element of pop culture and “the masses” into an academic setting, and seen as necessary for the making of culture.

The attempt to make game studies its own distinct field of academia is done to understand the unique complexities associated with video games. Although it draws heavily from the field of cultural studies, to the point that many in the field feel that game studies is a subgenre of cultural studies, many see it as separate from that field as it deals with topics and questions that are specific to the medium of the Video Game. Video Game scholars hope to explore both

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<sup>7</sup>David B Nieborg., and Joke Hermes. “What Is Game Studies Anyway?” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (May 2008). doi:[10.1177/1367549407088328](https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407088328). 131-132.

<sup>8</sup> Nieborg, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Nieborg, 133.

the significance of what information the game is presenting, but also the materiality of the game itself.<sup>10</sup> By asking questions of the material aspects of the game, such as exploring what went into production of the game or wondering about the value of ownership, academics show the importance of video games in the larger global economic system. These topics regarding the political economy are often unfortunately ignored in the field of cultural studies, and are seen as vital in understanding how Video games fit into our broader culture.

This multifaceted approach to the field of game studies has caused a distinct divide in the field between ludology and narratology.<sup>11</sup> Ludology, meaning the study of play, looks at the specific interactive elements that are present in the field of video games. Ludologists study video games in a similar vein of sports or board games; looking at the rules and strategies associated with games. Narratology, the study of narrative structure, looks at the function of the story and visual elements in the game and analyzes them in a way that is similar to film and literature. Some, like Jesper Juul, see these fields as completely separate from each other due to the apparent contradictions as the notions of plot and storyline are in contradiction to the unpredictableness and interactive elements of playing games. Other scholars, like Garry Crawford and Victoria Gosling, see narratives as essential in games as players always bring in their own experience when playing games.<sup>12</sup> I believe that both of them are necessary for understanding the complexities of the field of game studies, as while the interactivity and elements of play make it unique from novels or television, narratives are a part of almost all games even if the game maker is not explicitly aware of it. For example, the popular board game *Life* literally draws on common narrative events in the human experience for a sense of play.

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<sup>10</sup> Nieborg, 134-135.

<sup>11</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, xxvi.

<sup>12</sup> Dyer-Whiteford. Xxiv.

Conversely, Amy Tan drew inspiration from the rules and guidelines of the popular Chinese game Mahjong to structure her classic novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Story and play are linked together, and should be viewed together when understanding Game studies.

While I do recognize some contradictions between these two sectors, for the purpose of this project, I will look at both ludology and narratology as building off each other in order to help understand the functionality of video games. This is especially necessary for viewing Game studies as a successor of cultural studies, as ludology neglects the culture created by the game while narratology neglects the political and economical implications of the game. For *SimCity* a ludologic approach of analysis is more useful as the game operates as a sandbox game where common functions of storytelling are absent in the game. It still benefits from a narratological approach, as players often bring their own narratives in viewing the success and failures of their in-game actions. *Grand Theft Auto* benefits from a narratological approach, as the game has a plot with character development and uses many elements of cinematic storytelling. It is still necessary to understand the play mechanics and guidelines of the games for the player to progress through it. Seeing both narratology and ludology as both being essential aspects of game studies helps us see how our culture creates the mechanics of games, and how the games influence the players. This is especially necessary for understanding the symbiotic relationship urban studies and urban planning has with *SimCity* and *Grand Theft Auto*. For this, the medium of video games is reestablishing the importance of the edifice and the built environment.

## **Relationship between the field of Urban Studies and Cinema studies in the depiction of films.**

As there is very little information in how cities are depicted in video games, I feel that it is important to look into how cities are represented in film. To understand the role that the setting of the city has on the player and the game, it is useful to look at how the city has been portrayed in other visual mediums. The urban landscape is some of the first subjects ever captured on film, and cities and cinema have long had an intimate relationship throughout film history. The panorama, often considered the precursor to movies, would often capture cities due to their dynamic display of both buildings and people.<sup>13</sup> Other early work of film, like Harry Miles' *A Trip Down Market Street*, captured the ever changing landscape of the city. In addition to the benefits of the low-cost of filming, the city was seen as a prime subject to be recorded on film as the movement present in the city translated well on this emerging technology compared to normal photography and paintings. Even as film progressed to tell more narrative base stories, the city continued to play an important role in the medium. Whether it be Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* or *Sex and the City*, using the urban as a setting in film has almost transformed the city into its own unique character. Film allows to capture cities with such detail that it becomes more than the location where a story occurs, it becomes a place that defines the people in the movie.

One of the reasons that could explain this relationship between film and cities is that they seem to have a relationship that they both represent this change into modernity. The Industrial revolution in the 19th century brought upon a dramatic shift in the political, economical, and

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<sup>13</sup> William Uricchio, "Imag(in)ing the City: Simonides to the Sims". In *Work of Game: The Aesthetics of Game and Art*. Edited by John Sharp. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 2015.) 104.

social realm, bringing us to an era of modernity. This period of Modernism was seen as bringing together a central idea of what the state and society should be.<sup>14</sup> While cities had existed long before the Industrial revolution, the advent of new technologies caused shifted capital away from agriculture, placing more importance on cities.<sup>15</sup> This transition to an industrial based economy also marked a transition away from the aristocracy and towards a new bourgeois class to emerge in power.<sup>16</sup> This time period was marked with numerous technological advances done that were used to help further productivity. Many of these new technologies played a crucial role in extracting the man power of the laborers, causing many to feel alienated from their job.<sup>17</sup> As a result from this overworking of the laborer was the new free time that the owners of capital had, which caused the popularity of technologies for this new leisure class. The technology of film comes during this time of massive technological innovation, and while not specifically used in a factory setting, it becomes a useful tool for capturing the changing moment.

Both cities and film represent how modernity has changed our perception of time. In the pre-industrial agrarian based economy, daily life was often centered around the farm and domestic sphere, where the concept of time was focused on the weekly and seasonal cycles. With an industrial based economy, time became focused on a daily cycle, where the work day became extremely structured in order to maintain productivity guidelines. With such heavy focus on productivity and the structure of time throughout the day, many could no longer have time to reflect on their day, and could only look at the present and future moment. The ever brief moments of “downtime” that people had were usually in transition between work and home with

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<sup>14</sup> Nezar. AlSayyad *Cinematic Urbanism: a History of the Modern from Reel to Real*. (New York: Routledge Press. 2006), 124.

<sup>15</sup> AlSayyad, 20-21.

<sup>16</sup> “The Age of Art” 111.

<sup>17</sup> AlSayyad, 29-30.

strangers, having the gaze of the “protective eye” of being in the present moment.<sup>18</sup> Film and photography allowed for the capturing of a moment to preserve for future reflection. French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire saw the true function of photography to be “a place in the archives of memory”, as it relies more on our voluntary memory rather than involuntary memory.<sup>19</sup> While the city with its crowd of people fractured what our normal sense of time was, photography and especially film were seen as useful tools for us to reflect on past experiences.

One of the best examples of the relationship between the city, film, and time would be Ruttman’s 1927 film *Berlin: a Symphony of a Metropolis*. The film portrays Berlin over the course of a workday, starting with the train transporting commuters from the periphery to Berlin’s urban center. It then continues to show the chaos of the city mixed with shots from within the factory, before showing the end of the workday and transition into the vibrant nightlife. Ruttman uses the film to celebrate the modern idea of the cosmopolitan metropolis, with specifically focusing on the citizens creating the city of Berlin.<sup>20</sup> Andy Warhol’s 1964 film *Empire* takes a different approach to the relationship between space and time by simply filming the famous New York landmark of the Empire State building over a period of 8 hours. According to Warhol, its purpose was for audiences to “see time go by”.<sup>21</sup> While Ruttman’s piece shows the city with its people as some sort of controlled chaos, Warhol depicts it through the built environment as something that is both stagnant and timeless. These different

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Benjamin. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4*. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University. 2003). p. 341

<sup>19</sup> “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 337.

<sup>20</sup> AISayyad, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Blake Gopnik. “Andy Warhol’s ‘Empire’: Monumental Cast, But not much Plot”. NYTimes.com. Jan 16, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/17/arts/design/andy-warhols-empire-shown-in-its-entirety.html> (Accessed April 8, 2020).

perspectives on the city demonstrates the contradiction inherent to modernity, as both a creative and destructive force.

### **Video Games as a postmodern medium**

While film is representative of the society in the modern era, Video Games are more representative of the postmodern era. Modernity was seen as creating a single narrative of humanity and progress, which film was seen as a useful tool for capturing a unified point of view. Postmodernism, on the contrary, is indicative of a fragmented society. The nature of video games where the player has a direct impact on the environment of the game breaks this singular narrative of previous methods of storytelling and world building. The Modernist city was focused on the city center, which was where most of the jobs, services, and people were located, while the postmodern city is a landscape that is torn apart with the development of the suburbs and transition to global accumulation of capital.<sup>22</sup> Not only is the consumption of Video games indicative of postmodernism but also with the production of the video games. While the film industry has historically been centered in a few locations across the world, the internet has allowed for game production to be split across many different individuals across the world.<sup>23</sup> Video game companies use the postmodern city as just a part of a larger economic system in order to grow their brand and presence on a global scale.

The controversy surrounding video games as a both a popular medium of entertainment and art is indicative of anxieties as we transition into postmodernity. Postmodernism acts as a direct challenge to our own identity whether it relates to a larger national group, like a country,

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<sup>22</sup> AlSayyad, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Jason Sperb, "Game (not) Over: Video-Game Pastiche and Nostalgic Disavowals in the Post Cinematic Era." In *Flickers of Film: Nostalgia in the Time of Digital Cinema*. Rutgers University Press, 2016. Accessed January 27, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18kcvbh.11](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18kcvbh.11). 142.



and even to ourselves. Video games represent a larger shift in the age of the internet and global capitalism where our own identities and communities are being reshaped<sup>24</sup>. Digital technology creates a whole realm of existence of ourselves that questions what the essence of being human is.<sup>25</sup> The developments of these new technologies are seen as progressing society forward, but postmodernism examines who is left behind and what is sacrificed for this progress. Games like *Spec Ops: The Line*, *Halo*, and *Detroit: Becoming Human* specifically engage with these postmodern fears of the impact of technology and the militarized state will have on our concept of existence.<sup>26</sup> Further the popularization of video games centered around the military industrial complex, such as *Call of Duty* is a reflection of post-9/11 anxieties of the placement of the nation state in our contemporary era.<sup>27</sup> The popularization of Video games, as well as other digital and online media are a reflection of the global accumulation of capital that is a core tenet of postmodernism.

Although it may feel that our current society is being fragmented, prominent philosophers, such as Noam Chomsky, see this idea of postmodernism as “meaningless, because it adds nothing analytical or empirical” to our idea of modern society.<sup>28</sup> There are concerns that its methods of questioning reason and truth can obscure our perception of reality, in dangerous ways. There are also other philosophers like Albrecht Wellmer, who see postmodernism as a self-critical and reflex form of Modernism. While modernism entertains the collective idea of a

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<sup>24</sup> Alsayyad, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Alsayyad, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Deyer-Witthof, 83.

<sup>27</sup> Deyer-Witthof, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Chomsky's Philosophy. "Noam Chomsky-Postmodernism I". YouTube Video. 5:21.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjQA0e0UYzI>

Utopia, postmodernism entertains the idea of a dystopia due to a fragmented society.<sup>29</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I will not reject the idea of postmodernism, but also feel that it is necessary to look at the criticism of it in order to understand the role of the city in the contemporary moment. What does this mean for games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *SimsCity*? Do these games accurately reflect current ideas of the meaning of the city in the age of global capital? These games allow for the player to act on their own fantasies and create their own utopia, through very individualist means. This brings up questions of the role of utopianism in our neoliberal economic society, where the concept of the city becomes more obscure.

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<sup>29</sup> Albrecht Wellmer "Introduction". *The persistence of modernity : essays on aesthetics, ethics, and postmodernism*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press. 1991). p.3-4; Alsayyad, 123.

## **Chapter 2: *SimCity*: History and Depiction of the City in Transition**

### **History of the Game**

In the winter of 1989, a small gaming company Maxis released *SimCity*. The game had a simple premise, where the player would try to cultivate a successful city.<sup>30</sup> In this the player could start a community from scratch and transition it from a small agricultural town to a large metropolis. They could also play with different scenarios, where the player can attempt to deal with problems in existing cities in the game. The game was different from previous video games, as it had loose objectives without the sense of “winning” and “losing”, as what was considered “successful” was up to the player’s own objectives, as there was no official ending. All the players had to do was make sure that its citizens were happy and find a balance in the city between the needs of industrial, commercial, and residential zones. The creators described the game as a system simulation, where the game is coded with rules and functions, that are used to describe how a city can function. While there are specific rules that need to be followed in some way, there can be many ways in order for the player to achieve the city of their dreams.

For this while the game was originally marketed for leisure time by releasing on many of the most popular game systems of the time such as the Nintendo entertainment system, it was strikingly different from the games that came before which followed similar patterns. While the game was in development, the company struggled to get funding as their game did not follow into trends of gaming such as “defeating a boss” like in Mario, or racing against time like in Tetris.<sup>31</sup> Potential investors feared that the games lack of objectives would lower satisfaction of the players as they would not be hooked on winning, thus limiting engagement with the game.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alain Chiardia, and A.P.C.Y. "SimCity." *AA Files*, no. 28 (1994) [www.jstor.org/stable/29543928](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29543928). 86

<sup>31</sup> Chiaradia 87.

<sup>32</sup> LGR, “SimCity 30 Years Later”

The gaming media was similarly confused as to how to market the game, as the mundane aspects of the planning professions seemed to contradict the escapism that the video game market was used for. While digital gaming today covers almost any topic imaginable with a wide variety of users, in 1989 gaming media was thought to be reserved for middle class adolescent boys.<sup>33</sup> SimCity was thought of as having a hard time fitting into the genre of popular games of the moment.

The development of this game started from when developer Will Wright was creating the game *Raid on Bungeling Bay* in 1984.<sup>34</sup> The premise of the game was a typical first person shooter where a helicopter must attack certain infrastructure to stop the Bungeling Empire from building. Because of the important role that the city-scape played in the game mechanics, Wright did much research into urban planning. With this he saw cities as intricate systems that were vital for the success of the game rather than just set dressings for the story. The city, rather than just being a firm obstacle for the player to move in and out of, was rather dynamic in its nature as it morphed into a bigger threat as the game went on. He ended up becoming obsessed as he tried to create a more realistic gaming experience by studying the relationship that cities have to larger economies. Through this research Wright had more fun creating the environment for the game than the gameplay itself. As a result, he saw the potential entertainment value that world creation had and went out and started to develop what is now known as *SimCity* under the name *Micropolis*.<sup>35</sup> He was later forced to change the name due to the computer software company ,

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<sup>33</sup> John Gaber. "Simulating Planning: SimCity as a Pedagogical Tool." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 27, no. 2 (December 2007). doi:[10.1177/0739456X07305791](https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X07305791). 116.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Moss. "From SimCity to, well, SimCity: The history of city-building games". ArsTechnica. October 11, 2015.

<https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/10/from-simcity-to-well-simcity-the-history-of-city-building-games/>

<sup>35</sup> LGR, "SimCity 30 years Later"

trademarking the name for a graphics card. Later after struggling to find a developer to fund the project, he teamed up with fellow game developer Jeff Braun to form Maxis. Braun, who came from more of a coding background, was trying to develop his own wire frame jet fighter simulator, and decided to team up with Wright in order to be able to get more financial backing. Soon after forming the company they were able to distribute the game to the world.

When creating the game, Wright wanted to create a game that allowed the player to have the freedom that he and other game developers had when creating the games. He also needed to create an algorithm that gave parameters to the player so the game would have an element of a challenge to it. One of the first things mentioned in the game guide for the original game is that it is a “system simulator” where the player must try to juggle many different aspects of urban life that come together to make “the city”.<sup>36</sup> In this the player must be able to provide needs to simulated citizens stated as “sims” which do most of the work in making the city. The algorithm of the game provides the player with both rules and tools that provide a sense of structure in how the simulated city operates. The rules that serve as the foundation in how the city acts are stated as Human factors, Economic factors, Political factors, and Survival factors. The tools that the game provides that the player must use in order to navigate these factors is the ability to plan, layout, zone, build, bulldoze, rezone, and manage the city. The game uses these rules and tools to create an ever changing feedback loop for the player that creates a dynamic game-play experience for the player.<sup>37</sup> Whether playing an existing map, or creating a new city from scratch, the game system allows the player to have a unique experience every time they play.

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<sup>36</sup> Ellis, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, 5.

## Theoretical Inspiration

When Will Wright created the original game he had to draw on many existing research of the role of cities and Urban Planning. Through the various research he did he stated that *A Pattern Language*, *Urban Dynamics*, and the Seventh Sally as the most influential of the work in creating the game. Both *A Pattern Language* and *Urban Dynamics* were both non-narrative texts that were focused on reporting studies of the way a city's layout can impact its function. Both of these texts draw heavily on relationships between urban planning and computer science to help understand cities as complex systems. *The Seventh Sally* on the other hand was originally a polish science fiction short story about a man who makes a miniature city.<sup>38</sup> As a result of this he turns into a ruthless tyrannical king over his subjects resulting in the demise of his friendships. The story gives a glimpse into the moral questioning of what it means to play as a "god" as well as the notions of power.

One of the more clear objectives that was put in place by the creators of Sim City was a strong basis in language, specifically with its relationship with technology. While coding and computer science are crucial parts in the development of any video game, they wanted to bring this idea of language and coding for constructing a good city. This is seen in how Wright cited *A Pattern Language*, a large book that explored the inner workings of a functioning city.<sup>39</sup> For this they explore how a city has individual units, which can form together to form "sentences". In this they also mention just like our spoken language that can be shifted between prose and poetry, the "words" of the city can change around to have different effects. For example one of the units

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<sup>38</sup> LGR "SimCity 30 years later".

<sup>39</sup> Kevin Kelly, "Will Wright: The Mayor of SimCity". Weired.com. January 1, 1994. <https://www.wired.com/1994/01/wright/> (Accessed October 18, 2019).

mentioned in it is “a beer hall”, “places of residences” and “places of work”.<sup>40</sup> These units would then come together to form the relationship between the domestic life, and the work life, and citizens need places of leisure in order for a city to be successful. Taking city planning and urban design as a style of language, the game creators allow the city to change based on who is playing it, while still deterring a failed city (low population rates, high unemployment). It also allows for the players to create more “specialized” cities and communities that would allow the player to have a feeling of newness every time they play it.<sup>41</sup>

Jay Wright Forrester’s *Urban Dynamics* was seen as a key text as it linked the field of Urban Planning to the growing field of computer programming. Forrester, an MIT trained computer scientist, is often credited as the founder of system dynamics, which examines the nonlinear behavior of complex systems over time. It was through this that he was able to form the idea of the “Forrester effect” which examined the cause of fluctuation of supply chains and its effect of production and distribution for Industrial firms.<sup>42</sup> *Urban Dynamics* was the first time that Forrester used these ideas of system dynamics outside of the corporate setting to explore issues related to examining fluctuations of urban economies. Made in collaboration with former Boston mayor, John F. Collins, as well as the MIT department of Urban Affairs to help use his ideas to help understand why American cities were in crises. He and his team were able to create charts and graphs that demonstrated different aspects of the urban structure. Through this they were able to transfer the data onto an online language, called DYNAMO.<sup>43</sup> It is through this

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander, Christopher, Sara Ishikawa, Murray Silverstein, Max Jacobson, Ingrid Fiksdahl-King, Shlomo Angel. *A Pattern Language*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1977. 32-34.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander et. al, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Kevin Baker, “Model Metropolis”. *Logic Magazine* 6. January 1, 2019.  
<https://logicmag.io/play/model-metropolis/> (Accessed 10 November 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Baker.

language that played an important part of developing *SimCity* by allowing the game designers to see the essential functions of the city in coding form.

### **Impact and Success of the game**

The open-endedness is what made the game an unexpected success, as it allowed the players to have more creative control when exploring the gaming media. While sales for the game were slow at the start, the game became a sleeper hit, as word of mouth spread about the creative possibilities of what you could do. While video games have historically used the environment as a fixed obstacle for the player to overcome, this allowed the player to create new digital environments from scratch.<sup>44</sup> While on the surface, the premise of the game seemed boring and mundane, it allowed the player to “Play God” as they shift an entire environment from scratch. What had traditionally been considered part of the background of many games had now become part of the foreground. What had made the game a success was not adolescent boys putting aside Super Mario Bros in order to play *SimCity*, rather the game attracted a whole new demographic to play the game.<sup>45</sup> Both young children and older professionals of any gender began to play the game and saw its value as both entertaining and informative.

As a result of the success of *SimCity*, a whole new genre of game was created where the players were active agents in creating and manipulating environments through different lenses, such as *Roller Coaster Tycoon* and *Civilization*.<sup>46</sup> Other planning games began to emerge into the market in response to the success of *SimCity*. This included more surreal works such as

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<sup>44</sup> Chiaradia 88.

<sup>45</sup> Luke O'Brien. "Spore's Intelligent Designer." In *The Best Technology Writing 2009*, edited by Johnson Steven. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009. Accessed January 15, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq9ch.20](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq9ch.20). 188-189.

<sup>46</sup> Moss.



*MoonBase*, which had you build a moon colony, and *Utopia: Creation of a Nation*. There were also more historical lensed games with planning aspects, like the *Settler* series, which has the player create their own medieval village. With the letter game creator Sid Meir stated that he took inspiration in it as one of the first games that was focused on the creation of worlds rather than the destruction of them.<sup>47</sup> Spearheading this rise in simulated worlds was Wright himself through his Maxis company. In addition to the inevitable follow up of *SimCity 2000*, released in 1993, the company also released many games under the “Sim” Bracket ranging from *SimEarth* to *SimAnt*.<sup>48</sup> Between the games released by Maxis and its competitors, simulation games began to pop mimicking almost all functions of life. *SimCity* had opened the door of the possibilities of what gaming could do as a medium, in order to explore the intricate ways of how we think about the world.

With the unexpected success of *SimCity*, Maxis soon began to change strategies for the game in order to appeal to its diverse demographic. Soon they published kid specific games like *SimTown* that was geared primarily for children, which followed the same game mechanics but at a smaller, more accessible level.<sup>49</sup> They also published a card game modeled after the game which allowed the players to build cities in a solitaire style game. In addition to these new mediums of the game one of the biggest additions they did was publish manuscripts that were made for teaching *SimCity* in academic and professional settings. This ranged from teaching young children the principles of geography, to office settings where they learn about analyzing data and management. Drawing upon skills of thinking critically about the relationship of time

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<sup>47</sup> “SimCity 30 years later”

<sup>48</sup> Kelly

<sup>49</sup> “SimCity 30 years later”

and space, the game allowed for the expansion of a wide variety of both hard and soft skills.<sup>50</sup> It was through this, they were able to market the game to capture a wide array of people who were new to the video game medium.

The game was especially useful for students and professionals in the urban planning field. Learning about the intricacies of planning with zoning, transportation, and power grids may seem like a bore in a normal classroom environment, but the online simulation made learning about planning more accessible to players.<sup>51</sup> By seeing data in a more straightforward manner, students can learn how the many different branches of government interact with each other to form the city. With *SimCity* students could play the game and get a better grasp of the concepts they were learning in class. It represented a transition of learning from While playing the game doesn't supplement real world work experience, Academics who use it in their classrooms have found that because of how fast paced the game is, it allows the students to develop higher critical thinking skills in order to solve real world planning problems. In many ways the game signifies an evolution of urban planning into the digital age.

While a sequel to *SimCity* was inevitable due to the massive success of the game, the release of *SimCity 2000*, felt like a breath of fresh energy into the game series. Advancements in technology allowed the player to view their city from a dimetric perspective rather than a top down perspective, which made the city appear more dynamic than the games previous iterations<sup>52</sup> The game also introduced aspects like water lines, public transit, and a more intricate zoning to give a more layered aspect to city building. The game also introduced supervisors, and

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<sup>50</sup> Gaber, 117.

<sup>51</sup> Gaber, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Moss.

newspapers, that gave players a better idea how the digital citizens were impacted by the players actions. Future games in the series further developed onto these improvements by improving graphics to make the cities Three dimensional with more detailed gameplay. With the release of *SimCity 4*, players had control over an entire region, thus giving a more realistic aspect to the functions of cities.<sup>53</sup> This allowed the player to develop many communities, each with a different layouts and local economies, all interacting with each other.

The Finish game design company, Colossal Order, developed *CitySkylines* in 2014, as a spiritual predecessor to the *SimCity* franchise. Using *Cities in Motion*, their previous game which focused on creating efficient public transportation systems, the developers were able to create a new and detailed city planning game for players. The game was a huge hit, and gathered many fans who were disappointed in the Maxis reboot. They allowed the player to explore more freedoms while still remaining a realistic gameplay, that made the original *Simcity* games so successful.<sup>54</sup> The developers also used non-american styles of planning that focused on density and efficiency, allowing players to be creative in their urban design. The game was even used to design a new bus line for Stockholm, as urban planners saw it as a realistic program to test aspects of mobility.<sup>55</sup> The game used many aspects of what made the original *SimCity* successful, with more modern updates that makes the game feel like it's on the cutting edge for planning simulations.

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<sup>53</sup> Moss.

<sup>54</sup> "SimCity 30 years later".

<sup>55</sup> Jane Wakefield. "Tomorrow's Cities: Stockholm Turns Green". BBC.com. March 8, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-38404884> (Accessed March 10, 2020).

## ***SimCity* and the Capitalist Landscape**

One game that used the model of a city building games and the popularity of business simulation games of the time and the 1995 *Capitalism*, designed by Trevor Chan. In this the player must try to expand their own business in order to become the most powerful in the world. To do this players must expand their locations and merchandise while maintaining a profit and avoid being bought out by a competitor.<sup>56</sup> The game itself was heavily inspired by previous iterations from *SimCity*, not only in the look, but also the functions the player must take up. The city becomes an important part of creating a thriving business as players must think of their business in a spatial way, in order to truly corner a section of the market. Real estate and land ownership were seen as integral parts of forming a monopoly, thus “winning” the game. The game was widely well received, and while not a best seller, it did get a strong base of support from academics who used it in their classroom to apply economic theories to. Thomas Kosnik, consulting professor at Harvard Business School and Stanford University, stated that he used in the classroom because “Gamers not only learn the subtleties of growing an entrepreneurial business but also learn about leadership and team building necessary in any business situation.”<sup>57</sup> While the main objective of *SimCity* is to make sure its citizens are happy and *Capitalism* is to make more money, the similarities of the game demonstrate the roles that cities play in our global economic system.

While *SimCity* did not portray itself as a business simulator, in the same way that Trevor Chan did with *Capitalism*, the game did link the city environment to a larger capitalist system. Even Will Wright himself stated that one of the basic conceptual frameworks for *SimCity* was

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<sup>56</sup> Leon Bazil. *Business Simulation Games for Management and Economics: Learning By Playing*. (Hackensack: World Scientific Publication. 2012). 11.

<sup>57</sup> Bazil 12.

creating a game based off of a "capitalistic land value ecology".<sup>58</sup> Since the player of the game is in control of the city's finances they have to make sure the city does not lose all of their money that is acquired through their tax base. Unless they are playing in certain modes, the player does not have unlimited resources to just create the city of their dreams, and usually has to use critical thinking skills in order to think about the future of the city.<sup>59</sup> While the game guide states that the system in the "system simulator" is the city itself, this idea states that the idea of the city goes deeper than just a geographic designation of an area with a lot of people in it. This is where the "rules" or the factors that impact the feedback loop of the game play a greater role in creating the idea of what "the city" is. While the game states that the happiness and content of the digital citizen is the most important aspect of a city's success, happiness is awarded to the player through them paying taxes.<sup>60</sup> In addition to having the existing citizens happy, the player must also keep the land value of the city high in order to attract wealthier people who would pay more in taxes.

This political idea that the success of the city is based off of this mutual exchange between the player and its sims is rooted in the political idea of "the Social Contract". This idea popularized by 18th century philosopher John Locke, states that in order for there to be a successful society the citizens must provide labor and taxes to the government in order to make sure the government functions correctly. Coinciding with this the government must make sure it uses these resources properly in providing adequate services to its citizens to make them happy.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Starr, "Seductions of Sim: Policy as a Simulation Game," *The American Prospect* no. 17 (Spring 1994): 19-29. <https://www.princeton.edu/~starr/17star.html>

<sup>59</sup> Gaber 113.

<sup>60</sup> Ellis, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Fred D'Agostino, Gaus, Gerald and Thrasher, John, "Contemporary Approaches to the Social Contract", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

The game guide clearly speaks of how important this relationship is to fulfil the needs of the “sims” in the city, as measured by the public opinion score. In this the tax rate plays an important role, as the player can not raise taxes too high, or residences will be mad and move away. The player must also make sure the money gained through the tax base is allocated to the correct social services, such as maintaining public transportation infrastructure, funding social services like the police and fire department, and building infrastructure projects like stadiums for the people.<sup>62</sup> If the player merely pockets the money, the citizens will get angry and move and funding for the city will fall apart.

Further this expansion of the idea of a “capitalist land value ecology” seems to be directly linked to ideas set by 19th century Economic Philosopher, Henry George who thought that a single tax based on land ownership was the best way for the government to get money from its people.<sup>63</sup> This came at a time when the political power of the aristocratic elite was waning and being replaced by a new emerging bourgeois class, which gained power by owning the means of industrial production. This new class would also consolidate their power by owning the land and housing in which was needed for the factory to run.<sup>64</sup> This land value tax set up by George was seen as a way for the land owning bourgeois class to pay their fair share of their wealth. This was seen as a better alternative to income tax, as it would affect the working class less, while still promoting progress of these capitalists to develop the land for productive use.<sup>65</sup> It was through

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<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/contractarianism-contemporary/>. (Accessed February 28, 2020).

<sup>62</sup> Ellis, 30.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Hooper, “Henry George”. The Library of Economics and Liberty.

<https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/bios/George.html> (Accessed 8 March, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> David Harvey, “Land Rent and the transition to the Capitalist Mode of Production”. Antipode no. 14. (May 2016) 17-25. DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8330.1982.tb00035.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.1982.tb00035.x)

<sup>65</sup> Hooper.

this philosophy, that land and land value was seen as an important tool for capitalist power in the same ways that owning the means of production was.

In *SimCity*, the value of land is important, not only in the amount it is taxed to bring money to the government, but also as a way for viewing citizens content with their current living situations. The higher standard of living for an area, the higher the value of land. In the game proximity to both nature of forests, parks, and water, as well as proximity to the downtown raises the land value. The game manual for the original 1989 game states that “land value is one of the most fundamental aspects of Urban structure”.<sup>66</sup> It not only measures the resources there, but how accessible they are. The value of land is an important feedback loop in the success of the city, for as land values fall, crime rates begin to rise. Then as citizens become unhappy they move away and the localized economy for the area begins to fall apart, further accelerating the loop of lower land value and higher crime. But it is still important to have some areas that are affordable for lower incomes in order for all the jobs to be filled. With this in mind the player must make sure that the land value does not drastically shift, as it would cause blighted regions to form, but it's still important to have economic diversity across the city map.

The depiction of the political and economical system in *SimCity* has received some criticism for how accurately it depicts how cities run, and the narratives it produces of what makes “a successful city”. Paul Starr made critiques of how the pedagogical aspects of planning that was promoted by Sim City give an overly simplified process of the economics of planning, and what the underlying curriculum of the game was. He was concerned at the predictive nature of the simulation game, and that if the politicians and city officials were overly

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<sup>66</sup> Ellis, 39.

reliant on the simulation, that they would make irrational decisions that did not relate to what the people wanted. Starr was also critical of Wright's lack of formal planning background, and how that would affect an illegitimate idea of what planning is.<sup>67</sup> For him, as well as many people in the planning profession, the game promoted an idea of “quality of life” that was common by more fiscally conservative politicians like Rudy Giuliani. Wright, who has been a donor to Rudy Giuliani’s presidential campaign as well as a supporter of Republican John McCain in the 2008 presidential election, seemed to promote these ideas of urbanism.<sup>68</sup> Many see this game as an example of planning for the interests of the wealthy and big business, rather than the interests of all of its citizens.

### ***SimCity: American city in transition***

This element of the game reveals a reality of how urban planners viewed cities at the time of the game's original release; as economic centers whose primary goal was to provide jobs and maintain a healthy economy. In many ways the view of land as a spatial element with capitalist value can still be seen in modern cities. The city in the 1980’s was the center of an increasingly neo-liberal society. A shift away from the extreme top down model of planning that was seen in the 1950’s and 1960’s, there was a shift in allowing “the market” to run its course in shaping cities.<sup>69</sup> Many American cities found themselves in dire situations in the late 1970’s as white flight to the suburbs left many industrial cities to be left in disarray. As the cities were losing their tax bases from the whites who had left for the suburbs that caused many not to be able to adequately fund the programs provided by the city government. This was especially seen in the case of New York City, where on the brink of bankruptcy, the state was forced to bail out the

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<sup>67</sup> Starr.

<sup>68</sup> O’Brien.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, 46.



city which caused its power to be weakened. As a result of this many viewed these city governments as unable to take a role in controlling their city.

This distrust in municipal government is best exemplified by Ronald Regan's famous quote; "government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem". It was this thought process that made many people have a distrust in the government in how they governed, as people wanted to have more autonomy over themselves. In the aftermath of the view of New York city as a failure, Ed Koch was able to win the mayoral race on a platform that promised economic prosperity to the city by using a more hands off approach. Koch started his career by earning the good will of progressive activists such as Jane Jacobs, by promoting neighborhood preservation and queer and civil rights. He was able to use this to weave a more neo-liberal approach to governance that was positioned in contrast to the big governance power the city had under Robert Moses. Further cementing his popularity among more white moderates was that he ran on a "law and order" platform that put crime prevention as central for his turn around of New York.<sup>70</sup> While Koch is seen as responsible for turning the city around financially by successfully positioning it as a global center of culture and economics, his more hands off neo-liberal approach to governance is seen as responsible for deepening inequalities that is seen today with increasing threats of gentrification and a growing homeless population.<sup>71</sup>

Sam Stein documents this history of land value and how it shapes the urban environment in his book *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*. The critiques he makes of land-use planning in many american cities have created a system that exacerbates structural inequality in the United States. Now up to 60% of all assets and 75% of wealth in the world is

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<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Dagen Bloom. *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2012, [www.jstor.org/stable/23702560](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23702560). Accessed 12 Mar. 2020. 924-925.

<sup>71</sup>Bloom, 926.

ties up in the value of land.<sup>72</sup> It is how men like Michael Bloomberg and Donald Trump were able to gain so much economic power that was later used for political gain. Meanwhile as these real estate moguls gain wealth by buying up land, low income people of color are the ones most affected by rising rents and threats of gentrification. Much of this relies on ideas of American history as a colonial state, where land was directly tied to ideas of political power and expansion for the white colonizers. While the value of land was always seen as important, it was not until the 1980's when the "Real Estate State" began to rise in prominence under the Mayoralty of Ed Koch. It was then that the city government began to rely on public-private partnerships to shape the city rather than public governmental organizations.<sup>73</sup> Wright was creating *SimCity* during this time when ideas of urban planning and governance were taking place. While at the time it was seen as a logical step forward, we now know the negative impacts that a neo-liberal approach to governance has had on cities.

The section of the History of Urban Planning, as outlined in the game guide best exemplifies this tension that was occurring when the game was being constructed. At that moment the failures of Urban renewal were pretty evident in its association of rising crimes in the city, as well as its contributions to suburban sprawl.<sup>74</sup> The article written by Cliff Ellis documents the rise of both planning as a formalized profession in the past century as well as how early cities were laid out and planned. He examined how industrialization rapidly transformed cities, causing their populations to explode as they attracted immigrants and the rural population for jobs.<sup>75</sup> The popularization of the automobile, coupled with the decline of the industrial jobs

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<sup>72</sup> Samuel Stein. *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*. (London: Verso Press. 2019). Ebook. Loc. 53

<sup>73</sup> Bloom, 924.

<sup>74</sup> Stein, loc. 382.

<sup>75</sup> Ellis, 37.

were seen as the reasons for creating neglected areas of the central city. While Urban renewal attempted to revive the economies of several downtowns through “Manhattanization”, where several skyscrapers housing offices were built, it further disrupted existing communities and promoted more white flight to the suburbs with “hub-and-wheel” freeway projects.<sup>76</sup> This history documents that the failures of Urban renewal were the result of planners failing to see both the internal and external economic markets of the city. Planners now have to focus on the macro-economic function of the city for it to compete with other emerging markets in Latin America and Asia, as well as micro-economic function, where the city has to be an attractive place for people to live.<sup>77</sup>

One of the other critiques of the game was how the game oversimplified urban planning as a profession. Tied to this is how the games position of the player as “god” can have negative impacts on how cities should and could be planned by city governments. The game relies on detaching the player’s relationship to their digital citizens, in order to lessen the significance of their actions. While few would argue that the game is corrupting the player in the same way that is argued about other more violent video games, the enjoyment of the game relies on providing the player with a sense of power. The players gain this sense of power through the top-down model the game is based on, which positions them more as “all-knowing god” rather than a person planning for other people.<sup>78</sup> Critiques of this “top-down” style of planning is not unique to the game, but rather to the planning profession as a whole. Many cities are planned by a

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<sup>76</sup> Ellis, 45.

<sup>77</sup> Ellis, 46.

<sup>78</sup> Adi Robertson. “Playing God and Mayor with the first ‘SimCity’ game of the Decade”. TheVerge. February 15, 2013.

<https://www.theverge.com/2013/2/15/3990022/playing-god-and-mayor-with-the-first-simcity-game-in-a-decade> (Accessed March 8, 2019).

homogenous group of educated professionals, that do not represent the diverse people that live in the city. The dangers of Urban renewal and pro-business projects is that they reject the lives of the people who live in those neighborhoods, for the desires of a select group from the elite class.<sup>79</sup> *SimCity* is both representative of mainstream ideas of American planning, and gives power to the player to give them a sense of enjoyment.

With this these critiques on the oversimplification of Urban Planning that the game promotes demonstrates how arbitrary the notion of planning is in real life. The absence of racial politics, with little reference to social class politics is indicative of how many planners currently see cities. In Starr's critique of the game, he stated that the game focused too much on American styles of planning, with such a strong focus on single use development that ignored the implications of this method.<sup>80</sup> It ignores the progress that many European and Asian cities were doing to improve transportation infrastructure, to create more sustainable cities. The game also focuses on problems associated with "developed" cities ignoring real problems that many cities in the Global South face of inadequate housing and lack of funding for infrastructure. While Starr did not see it as overtly or intentionally a political game, he saw that the exaggerated feedback loop as creating a "caricature of reality" that did little to actually depict the realities of urban planning.<sup>81</sup> While the "New urbanism" movement in planning and municipal government has risen in popularity in recent years for making a more equitable and efficient cities, still many critique planning professionals for serving the interests of the elite over their everyday citizens.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Stein, Loc. 2220.

<sup>80</sup> Starr.

<sup>81</sup> Starr.

<sup>82</sup> Stein, Loc. 1133.

## Creating the Utopian Dream

This oversimplification of planning practices presented in *SimCity*, may promote too much of a utopian vision of planning that is not really practical to everyday lives. Especially considering how most of the players do not have backgrounds in planning, and attempt to create the idea of “the perfect city” from what they have seen from their own experiences as well as from ideas of cities through media. While utopian ideals of communities and cities had been popular for hundreds of years, originating with Thomas Moore in 1516, more modern ideas of planning were focused on visions of what the ideal city would be. Utopian cities were often created as an escape from the pressures of the modern world. Famed planner Le Corbusier outlined his idea of a perfect city as containing high density skyscrapers situated in park-like spaces. Famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright envisioned his perfect community as more low-density, based on American rugged individualism.<sup>83</sup> The failures of Urban renewal stem planners destroying existing communities in order for them to carry out their single utopian visions of what the city should be.

While it is worthy to critique the idea of utopianism in urban design as unrealistic and counterintuitive to solving real problems, the medium of the game allows for a diverse group to explore their own ideas of a perfect city. While the planning of cities has often been done by white men, *SimCity* allows for people of various backgrounds to participate in urban planning. The games’ objectives are clearly laid out in the game manual as “the main goal of *SimCity* is for you to design, manage, and maintain the city of your dreams”.<sup>84</sup> While the foundation of the *SimCity* franchise is one that stems from 20th century “top-down” styles of planning, the game

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<sup>83</sup> Ellis, 47.

<sup>84</sup> Ellis, 5.

has opened the possibilities of other games where players are able to create their own fantasies. The expansion of access to coding and modding to the public, allows players to insert alternative and non-western centric modes of planning by constructing cities through an East-Asian and Afrofuturist perspective. While the method of planning explored in *SimCity* and subsequent planning games rely on allowing the player to participate in the unequal power dynamic of planner and citizen, it also gives an opportunity to empower players that normally do not get to make these crucial planning decisions.

### **Chapter 3: *Grand Theft Auto*: History and Depiction of a fragmented urban landscape**

Grand Theft Auto, and the narrative that it produces about Urban life appears to be in direct contrast to that which is produced by the SimCity series. While SimCity gave the player a sense of power to create multiple iterations of their idealized world, with Grand Theft Auto the city is the place of setting, with the player having very little ability to make drastic changes to the built environment. Conversely, the player has more control over the characters and in Grand Theft Auto, which inherently gives the citizens more agency and nuance compared to SimCity. In SimCity the relationship between the player as “the planner” with the digital citizens is one of distance, with the simulated citizens only having randomized names and professions attached to them. The real only feedback the player gets about how the city was running was through “advisors” who would relay general opinions of what the player could do better in order to make the city more successful. With Grand Theft Auto, the player had direct control over how the digital citizens and characters interact with the city, thus giving the player a greater idea of the social nature of the city. While the game is not the most realistic depiction of urban living, with the gaming objectives focusing on social deviance, Grand Theft Auto is placed in direct contrast to the more Utopic objectives of SimCity.

The Grand Theft Auto series came about in a time as the video game market was rapidly gaining in popularity, and started to expand into the format that we know today. The video game market was expanding to have more 3 dimensional graphics, while themes of sexuality and graphic violence were beginning to take hold in many of the popular games being produced. With the development of the Internet, as well as greater access to new digital technologies, video

games began to rise in popularity among all demographics. As access to computers increased, gaming companies shifted their focus from producing niche and novelty content to games of a wide variety of topics. It was also through this rise in access to digital media that new gaming companies began to pop up, in conjunction with the greater economic trend of the “dot-com bubble”.<sup>85</sup> It was during this period that there was a sudden surge in investment in tech companies, as many saw it as the future of western technological practices. While many of these online industries never reached their potential and eventually collapsed under their own hype, the gaming industry has only exponentially grown since the turn of the millenium.

### **History**

The creation of Grand Theft Auto, like SimCity, came through the development of another game. With this the British software company DMA games, was trying to develop a high stakes version of the childhood game “Cops and Robbers” under the name *Race and Chase*.<sup>86</sup> With this game, the developers tried to use the childhood variation of the game tag, to explore the relationship between law enforcement and criminals in a playful manner. The developers used the cities of New York, Miami, and San Francisco for their influence in the built environment of the game. The developers thought that something was lacking from the gaming model as early tests for the game, the players felt a disconnect of the objectives of the game.<sup>87</sup> It was because of this that the developers looked at other game developers with the hopes of getting new creative energy for the game, eventually collaborating with BMG Interactive in London to make the game now known as Grand Theft Auto.

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<sup>85</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 13-14.

<sup>86</sup> Nate Garrelts. *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto*. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Publishings. 2006). 3-4.

<sup>87</sup> GVMERS. “The History of Grand Theft Auto”. YouTube Video, 55:38. Posted December 31, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bXMUBdqyVAE> (Accessed January 15, 2020).



For the first Grand Theft Auto game, the developers expanded on the ideas from the “Cops and Robbers” game to allow the players to move through an undescribed American city doing nefarious activities. The designers used the driving mechanics of “Race and Chase” as a base for this game, but made them more chaotic and aggressive in a way that was, while unrealistic, made it much more enjoyable.<sup>88</sup> The designers decided to get rid of the ability to play as law enforcement and instead encouraged expansion on the criminal behavior of the “robber” in order to make the game more enjoyable. To market, what at the time was considered a niche game, they used known British Tabloid muggle, Max Clifford for the marketing campaign to sensationalize the controversial aspects of the game associated with violence.<sup>89</sup> It was because of this that the game became a surprise hit in the UK, despite the fact that it used the increasingly dated top-down two-dimensional model of gaming. This hype allowed it to easily carry over to the US market where it quickly became one of the most successful games of all time.

After the second instalment of Grand Theft Auto failed to meet audience and fan expectations, the designers at Rockstar Games decided to fast track a new installment that would alter the game's design. It was at this time that David Jones, the co-founder of DMA games left the studio due to the high-pressure work environment he was under to meet deadlines.<sup>90</sup> The new team, needing to adapt to the graphics of games at the time, transitioned to a 3 dimensional model for the follow-up game in the series. This moved the player from looking at the city from a top-down perspective, to playing it through the eyes of the character on the street view. The Grand Theft Auto team began to use American cities as more than just inspiration for the backdrop of which these criminal activities take place, rather they are used deliberately to

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<sup>88</sup> Garrelts, 11-12.

<sup>89</sup> “The History of Grand Theft Auto”

<sup>90</sup> Garrelts, 7.

explore a facet of American culture.<sup>91</sup> This more detailed map, combined with the new perspective, allowed the player to explore the city in a whole new way. This shift in perspective also distanced it from previous iterations of digital cities, like *SimCity*, in order for the player to have a better understanding of the details of city-life.

With *Grand Theft Auto III*, the team used direct elements from New York city in cultivating Liberty City. The game developers used landmarks directly from the city to allow the players to use their preconceived notions of what the space they were playing in was. But it was during the development of the game the developers had to quickly shift their focus on its depiction of New York City. The events of 9/11 had a direct impact on the game development as the game used the city as such an integral part of the environment in the game.<sup>92</sup> The buildings that resembled that World Trade Center complex were removed from the game as a way to minimize the negative emotions still associated with the event. In addition the violence of the game was toned down, specifically violence against police officers and other first responders who were now viewed as heroes in light of the tragic event.<sup>93</sup> Despite fears from developers that the game centered around violence and crime would not sell well in a post 9/11 world, the game was a huge critical and commercial success that brought the game to new heights in the pop culture landscape.

The next games in the series *Vice City* and its follow up *San Andreas* dramatically shifted the game to incorporate a larger narrative structure that still exists in the game today. *Vice City* used direct inspiration from 1980's Miami to explore ideas of class, drugs, and violence in the United States. With this many scholars see as the effects of neoliberalism has had on the

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<sup>91</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 153-154.

<sup>92</sup> "The History of Grand Theft Auto".

<sup>93</sup> "The History of Grand Theft Auto".

American city, and how violent crime and trafficking cocaine are directly tied to this rise in economic inequality brought on by Reagen era economic projects.<sup>94</sup> This was also the first time the franchise had a specific characterization for the playable character, Tony Vercetti. *San Andreas*, released the year after, takes inspiration from Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas in the 1990's in forming the state of San Andreas. It follows the character "CJ" and explores his relationship with the presence of gangs and corrupt police.<sup>95</sup> While before the main character was left nameless in order to allow the player to project certain emotions and feelings onto the character, the specificity of the time period and setting warranted a more specific character.<sup>96</sup>

This implementation of narrative into the game was essential for allowing the player to have greater control exploring the city, as well as making the digital map feel more like a place that has character to it. While early games in the franchise took the top-down view that *SimCity* uses, the shift to bring the point of view down to the street level made the game more engaging, and made the consequences of the violence more impactful on the player.<sup>97</sup> Although you play the game through a character with specific traits may seem limiting in the point of view, it also allows the player the freedom to move throughout the digital space on their own terms. The game still maintained the rules and structure of the previous games, with the placement of the story and world building used to enhance the gaming experience. This goes against previous notions of Game studies, which sees stories as impeding the game experience. Taking a ludic and

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<sup>94</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 158.

<sup>95</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 165.

<sup>96</sup> "The History of Grand Theft Auto".

<sup>97</sup> Garrelts.

narratological approach to viewing *Grand Theft Auto*, you can see how both the rules and the characterization are both useful for building an exciting world that makes the game entertaining<sup>98</sup>

For the fourth installment, the developers decided to return to “Liberty City” as they continued to have a fondness for the city where their headquarters were, as well as returning to a game that takes place in the present time. It follows Nicko Bellick, a Bosnian refugee, as he struggles to survive in the criminal world while trying to achieve the American Dream.<sup>99</sup> While the game still did have its notorious satirical elements that picked at American culture and society, the game had more of a somber tone compared to its predecessors. The Liberty City depicted in this installment was different from the one depicted seven years prior in *Grand Theft Auto III*. New York had drastically shifted over the same time frame, as both the city and the country were drastically affected by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror. It also represents New York right before the 2008 financial crisis, where despite rampant inequality, the city was still seen as a place for economic opportunity.<sup>100</sup> The struggles and conflict that the character goes through is indicative in the reasons for crime itself; often it is not cheating the system to get ahead, but rather done out of necessity in order to survive.

For the most recent installment, *Grand Theft Auto V*, they returned to the setting of Los Santos which was first depicted in *San Andreas* about a decade earlier. With this they decided to focus on just the once city in the region, in order to pay attention to all the nuances that the city had, as well as position the city in a space that existed beyond what we consider as the normal Urban framework. The developers also developed multiple characters to act as a lead with shifting perspectives to further capture this nuanced view of urban life. While the previous

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<sup>98</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, xxvi.

<sup>99</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 170-171.

<sup>100</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 174.

iteration of Los Santos focused on the racial politics and tensions with policing that plagued 90's Los Angeles, this dealt with more contemporary issues of the city, such as wealth and spatial inequality. It also explores issues relating to increased fears of immigration/outside, the rural/urban divide, and anxieties of gentrification and unchecked development.<sup>101</sup> Although Los Angeles still faces problems of racial inequality, this updated version of the city gives a greater context in how Los Angeles fits into our larger context of American culture.

The way that these developers created the digital representations of modern American cities, is indicative of a shift in the way that we have seen how these urban areas shape our modern society. The top-down perspective that *SimCity* uses is indicative of a more modernist view of the city. The city is something that is manipulated from the powerful players, like politicians and planners, use the city as a template for the progress of the city.<sup>102</sup> The perspective that *Grand Theft Auto* is linked to the postmodern perspective of the city where the power in shaping the city is taken away from the public sector and onto the individual. The game mechanics and first-person perspective promotes ideas of neoliberal capital, as the player uses the environment for their character's capital gain, even if through criminal activity.<sup>103</sup> David Harvey best explains this connection between this shift to postmodernism as caused by neoliberalism as it "remakes the world around us in a totally different image".<sup>104</sup> The irony explored by *Grand Theft Auto*, is how under neoliberal capitalism, there is often a rise in crime as people use the shadow economy to make a living.

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<sup>101</sup> Middleside topwise. "GTA V's Anti-capitalist Message | MSTW presents." Youtube video, 14:20. Posted November 15, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8chqgtKuVY&t=1s> (Accessed December 28, 2019)

<sup>102</sup> Derek Wynne, Justin O'Connor, and Dianne Phillips. "Consumption and the Postmodern City." *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5/6 (1998):. Accessed May 17, 2020. [www.jstor.org/stable/43084035](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43084035). 845.

<sup>103</sup> Alsayyad, 125.

<sup>104</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 159.

## Los Santos: Depiction of the Postmodern City

With the modernist idea, the role of the city is one that is the center of society, it is the center of industry, business, culture, and capital. The postmodern city is one of decentralization, as capital transitions to a more global economic model. As a result the postmodern city must transition to centers of consumerism as traditional manufacturing jobs move abroad.<sup>105</sup> Los Angeles is seen as the perfect example as a postmodern city in the American context. Unlike other cities in the US, LA's capital production is fractured spatially over the entire metro area. As outlined in Kevin Lynch's 1960 study, *The Image of the City*, outside of a few sights like the Hollywood sign or Rodeo Drive, Los Angeles lacked the imagability that the cities on the east coast had.<sup>106</sup> The city and its surrounding metro had the reputation for being just a formless sprawl of low density housing connected by its various roadways. Unlike many of the older east coast cities, and European cities, LA was shaped by investors whose interest laid in the private sector, rather than the public good.<sup>107</sup> LA and the rest of southern California seem to be the embodiment of the Gertrude Stein quote, "There's no there there", which is the perfect visual description of a postmodern city.<sup>108</sup>

Viewing Los Santos as a stand-in for modern day Los Angeles, this iteration of *Grand Theft Auto* can make us clearly see how our transition to a postmodern era has affected the city. For many postmodernist urbanists, Los Angeles is the quintessential postmodern urban landscape because of its spatial fragmentation across racial and ethnic lines.<sup>109</sup> Unlike the visual

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<sup>105</sup> Wynn, 842.

<sup>106</sup> Kevin Lynch. *The Image of the City*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960).

<sup>107</sup> AISayyad, 125-126.

<sup>108</sup> Schneider, Robert A. "The Postmodern City from an Early Modern Perspective." *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (2000). Accessed May 12, 2020. doi:10.2307/2652038. 1668.

<sup>109</sup> AISayyad, 124.

representations of New York City under “Liberty City”, the creators always position Los Santos in a larger geographic context, by not just showing the downtown, but also the suburbs and the hinterland. The urban landscape of Los Angeles has “engulfed virtually all of Southern California, from the Mexican border to Santa Monica”, and depicting just what's inside the physical borders of Los Angeles would not be representative of the importance of the city.<sup>110</sup> The spatialization of the digital map depicts the urban political ecology of the area, demonstrating the need of natural and human resources in order to keep the city running. It also demonstrates both the divide of the urban liberal elite and the conservatives who inhabit the suburbs and rural areas surrounding the city, and the divide between the low income people of color in the inner-city and the predominantly white upper class.<sup>111</sup> This fragmentation of the city is encouraged in a postmodern society, as it is merely the market running its course.

Another way Los Santos resembles many ideas of a postmodern urban landscape is its depiction of the militarization of the police upon the people. The police play an important function in all of the games, as the original inspiration for it was the game “Cops and Robbers”, but are specifically demonstrated in *GTA: San Andreas* and *Grand Theft Auto V*. Nezar AlSayyad argues that one of the main attributes of the postmodern city is militarization and Surveillance. He states that the lack of a public sphere and focus on the private in Los Angeles, has allowed for it to turn into a “series of militarized camps’ !.<sup>112</sup> Coming especially through *San Andreas*, the map of Los Santos reflects the racialized space and criminalization of the black body that was occurring in Los Angeles in the 1990’s. As a result of the crack epidemic and rise of gang violence in black and brown neighborhoods, the LAPD became increasingly militarized

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<sup>110</sup> Schneider, 1670.

<sup>111</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 164.

<sup>112</sup> AlSayyad, 123.

and “waged low-intensity urban warfare” on people of color.<sup>113</sup> This is reflected in the game as the main character, CJ, voiced his distrust of the police and views them as just another gang within the city. There is also a scene that reflects rioting within the lower class black neighborhood, that was specifically drawn from the Rodney King riots in 1992.<sup>114</sup> Although these games use extreme violence in the urban setting, it is a reflection of fears of violence as the city has been decentralized.

The depiction of Los Santos is different in *Grand Theft Auto V* in comparison to *Los Santos*, as it reflects the aftermath of this militarization of the postmodern city. Unlike the previous game, which depicted a lower income African american male living in the inner-city, this game starts off with all three characters living on the edge of the city in middle and upper class living standards. The map depicts this “ecology of fear”, caused by the increased militarization to explore anxieties of capitalist fragility.<sup>115</sup> With the rising fear of crime in the inner-city Los Angeles during the crack epidemic, much of the white affluent population fled from the inner city to affluent suburbs and edge cities.<sup>116</sup> This coincides with the rise of surveillance technology, private security systems, and physical architecture to create a border of their homes from the problems occurring in low-income communities like South LA, or Compton.<sup>117</sup> All three of the main characters live away from “the inner city” and make use of these technologies to position their home away from the criminal activity that fuels their living standard. The game mechanics also put most of the criminal activity and policing to take place in lower income communities inhabited by poc non-playable characters. The irony of militarization

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<sup>113</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 165.

<sup>114</sup> Garrelts, 5.

<sup>115</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 168.

<sup>116</sup> Schneider, 1674.

<sup>117</sup> Alsayyad, 125-126.



in the postmodern city, is that it creates cycles of poverty for the people of color by enforcing systemic barriers, while the wealthy are able to accumulate capital over this crime.

The final mission of *Grand Theft Auto V* is the most clear engagement with how postmodernism has shaped our environment. It follows Franklin with the ultimatum of killing his partner Michael by two FBI officials, or his partner Trevor by billionaire entrepreneur Devin Weston. The player has the choice in the ending of the game, but if you choose to disregard both of these orders and save both of them, you interact directly with the impacts of security in postmodern America. Weston amassed his wealth through the real estate as well as having a majority stakeholder in Merryweather Security, a privatized military company and security contractor. Similar to for-profit prison companies in the United States like Corrections Corporation of America, Weston is able to amass his capital through government contacts and exploitation of human capital. The corporation functions on the “ecology of fear” by positioning themselves to legally use violence for the greater good of the country, thus using the militarized police force both abroad and in the US. If the player is successful in the final mission, one of the characters Michael says that Weston represents “the two great evils that bedevil American capitalism” as he outsources and exploits his labor while off shoring his profits to keep onto his capital. This final mission directly explores the irony of our military industrial complex and how it partakes in global economic systems.

### **Flaneur and Voyeurism for the postmodern**

The placement and role of the player in the game is similar to that of the flaneur of the newly industrialized cities of the 19th century. Although this figure of the flaneur came into

existence during “The modern era”, the medium of the game transitions this concept of the voyeur to the postmodern era. Urban analyst Mike David described the game as “allowing postmodern flaneurs to scroll the luminous geometry of urban cyberspace.”<sup>118</sup> The original concept of the flaneur was an upper-class male, who would stroll through the city aimlessly, usually in lower class neighborhoods.<sup>119</sup> Because of the digital surface, *Grand Theft Auto*, allows almost anyone of all classes to be a voyeur of the city. The medium of the video game, causes the player to gaze upon the city and its people through another character developed by another person, in a way it's a voyeur of a voyeur. It allows for the player to “adopt the persona of an urban underworld denizen”.<sup>120</sup> The player acts through the city and gazes upon the other non playable characters as an “other”, which creates distance between themselves and the “victims” of the crimes. In a way this separation between the experiences of the character and the people around them are a result of the spatial divide experienced in the city.

It is precious because of this othering of the victim that the game has been so controversial. Critics worried that the depictions of violence and sex in *Grand Theft Auto* and similar games would desensitize the young players to the effects of the violence because of the mass killings. One of the most prominent and vocal critics of the game was Jack Thompson, a lawyer from Florida. After making a name for himself in conservative circle for his critics of depictions of violence and misogyny in rap music, he began to attack the emergence of video games and their effects on real life violent incidents.<sup>121</sup> He would link incidences of mass

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<sup>118</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 154.

<sup>119</sup> AISayyad, 35.

<sup>120</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 155.

<sup>121</sup> Aphra Kerr. “Spilling Hot Coffee? Grand Theft Auto as Contested Cultural product”. Garrelts, Nate ed. Found in *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto: Critical Essays*. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company. Publishers. 2006), 23.

shootings and murders to the game in the media and would often bring lawsuits to the game manufactures, stating they sent a president for real life copycat crimes. For example in 2003 he filed a \$246 million lawsuit against the publisher, Take-two interactive, the consul manufacture Sony, and the merchant Walmart, for emotional damages in association with a murder by two teen brothers who were avid players of the game.<sup>122</sup> More recently he attempted to link the release of *Grand Theft Auto V* with the Washington Navy Yard shooting that claimed 12 lives.<sup>123</sup> With these various claims he made against the game, he was able to get a significant following of conservitive pundits who view the rising popularity of violent video games with the corruption of American youth.

The game has also been criticized for its depiction of gender and race in the game as well. With the release of *San Andreas* in 2003 many saw the main character “CJ” and its depiction of African americans as “digital minstrelsy” as it heavily relied on negative stereotypes of black men and their associations with criminal behavior.<sup>124</sup> It also allowed for the primarily white audience to exercise their own desires of criminality through the stereotype of the black body. The depictions of gender and sexuality has also been controversial, as there has never been a playable female character in the games existence, and its depiction of women has also been graded to stereotypes, and objects of desire.<sup>125</sup> Concerns over the graphic depictions of sex and sexual violence have caused controversy from political pundits on both the left and the right in how it impacts the behavior of the young impressionable minds playing it. In response to a

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<sup>122</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 155.

<sup>123</sup> Jon M. Chang. “How Violent Video Games fit into Violent Behavior”. Abcnews.go.com September 17, 2013.

<https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/navy-yard-shooter-played-military-style-videogames-relevant/story?id=20285169> (Accessed May 6, 2020).

<sup>124</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 167.

<sup>125</sup> Garrelts, 12.

controversial sex scene depicted in the game, Senator Hillary Clinton called for stricter restrictions of the video game industry by saying “video games increase aggressive behavior in adolescents the same rate that lead poisoning in children decreases IQ”.<sup>126</sup> The depiction of women as sex objects in the game raised concerns how the young players would view women in real life, and how it could impact the role of women in labor.

With these critiques of the game, one has to question how these controversial subject matters reflect real world issues. There are genuine critiques that can be made about the games depictions of non white men, and how it reproduces narratives that are both false and dangerous to these marginalized groups. But how much of these critiques of the game are scapegoats for problems that exist in the real world.<sup>127</sup> While it is true that there are correlations between exposure to violent media and violent actions, the blame of horrific acts of violence like murders and mass shootings should not be specifically blamed on games like *Grand Theft Auto*. The conversation should focus on our larger pro-gun culture, like lax gun laws for civilians and the militarization of the police that normalizes guns in our society. Developers say that the game really provides “a blank slate” for the players, and the actions that the players take in the game is more a reflection of them rather than the game itself.<sup>128</sup> As “digital voyeurs”, the players will take their real world experience to impact the character’s actions, even though the game mechanics promote the player to partake in criminal activity. Although the game is created primarily by a team of white men and that impacts the game mechanics, much of the game just magnifies real systemic issues that already exist in the real world.

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<sup>126</sup> Kerr, 29.

<sup>127</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, xxiv.

<sup>128</sup> Dyer-Whiteford, 181.

For all the controversy that the series has had over the past two decades, it brings up larger discussions of the impacts of gun violence, sex, gender and race depictions frame larger narratives. When studying the game as a cultural artifact in the same way as film or television it is important to dig deeper in how these representations are a reflection of American culture more broadly. Seeing *Grand Theft Auto* as a postmodern work, you get a better understanding of how these social ills that make the game so controversial are a reflection of an increasingly fragmented urban landscape.<sup>129</sup> The irony of some of these critics from prominent politicians and activists is that they are concerned about overly exposure to digital violence, but will do little to limit the capitalist systems that uphold gun culture in the real world. They are concerned about the depictions of sex and women in the game, but will do little to pass sex worker legislation or laws that dismantle systemic barriers for women. The game is far from a realistic portrayal of the urban landscape, but it does enhance ugly aspects of the urban landscape to satirize aspects of our culture.

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<sup>129</sup> Uricchio, 109.

## **Chapter 4: Concluding remarks: What is the future of the City and its media representations**

In comparing the methods in how *SimCity* and *Grand Theft Auto* explore the urban environment of the game, you can see how both of these perspectives have their strengths and drawbacks. As video games produced by large corporations, the primary function for both of them is to be a source of entertainment rather than providing realism to the player. This can create an essentialized and untrue view in the functions of cities. But when analysing these games together, you can understand how urban space is constructed by the collective imagination of everyday citizens. One allows for the physical manipulation of the built environment on a macroscale, while the other allows the player to manipulate the city on a microscale by playing with social structures. For planners and city officials, nothing can replace going studying real cities and knowledge in how cities run, both from the physical infrastructure and civilian level. These games do make concepts of planning and urban politics more accessible, as well as show the impacts of governance actions without having real life consequences. When viewing both of these games in a dialectic, you can see how these narratives of the city clash with each other, as well as how they fit into each other for understanding the concept of the city in our current postmodern era.

Because of the nature of how video games function, both of the games seem to operate on some level as a postmodern representation of the city. Even taking a perspective that mimics modernist functions of the city the interface as a single player game still means that the city can take many forms and function depending on the player and their wants. Both of these games turn

the idea of the “panorama” in viewing the city and turn it on its head, as the presence of online technology causes the change in perspectives.<sup>130</sup> Unlike original panorama’s which took a fixed perspective in viewing the city controlled by the artist, the players are now the ones visually mapping the urban landscape on their own accord. The panorama is still a unified perspective, but the player distorts this perspective in encapsulating a new view of the city. In *Grand Theft Auto* it manifests this through allowing the player to move through the map and look at the landscape from a new location. In *SimCity* it does this by allowing the player to manipulate the variables of the city which allows the image of the city to change over time.<sup>131</sup> Video games create a new sense of temporal and spatial relationships in their visual representations of the city.

One of the main contrasts in how these games are constructed is the perspectives in shaping the city, as one takes a bird’s eye approach, while the other takes it from a first person approach. This struggle between the macro and the micro, is one that planners and officials are constantly dealing with in the best way to see the future of the city. With a macro bird eye view, you can create a more stream-lined, more efficient way of running a city.<sup>132</sup> But this power can be exploited more easily, and there is more of a disconnect between the city officials and the citizens living in the city. The bottom-up approach can in theory empower the citizen more to impact the built environment through normal actions, but this weakening of government often leads to capital having the most effect in shaping the city.<sup>133</sup> This perspective is translated in *Grand Theft Auto*, as the focus on the autonomous power of the individual creates more paths for destruction rather than creating bonds within communities. These different perspectives that the

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<sup>130</sup> Uricchio, 105-106.

<sup>131</sup> Uricchio, 109-110.

<sup>132</sup> Wynne, 844.

<sup>133</sup> Ellis, 44.

games take represent a recent shift in how we view cities from at once larger singular entities, to now part of a larger global system.

The top down perspective that *SimCity*, and other planning games take is more akin to modernist views of the city. It views the city with transfixed boundaries, and allows the player acting as a “god” to have power in shaping the landscape of the city. It also promotes the economy to be localized, as the player has to make sure to have a diverse economy of industry, commercial, and office space.<sup>134</sup> Although the player has freedom to create whatever they want, the game mechanics cause the player to view the city landscape as a machine for continued growth. *Grand Theft Auto* reflects the city in the postmodern way, reflecting the problems of the city as the borders of the urban become blurred, as “the economy renders the fixity of capital, labor, and resources irrelevant”, as it moves to a global economic system. Now in the age of “flexible accumulation”, not only does the city become fragmented, but also the idea of the nation-state, as the success of the capitalist economy takes priority.<sup>135</sup> Crime becomes a means for personal economic growth, as corporations outsource their production in order to increase their profit margins.

While these games perspectives can be viewed in contrast with each other in the depictions of the city, they can also be viewed in how perspectives of the city have changed. Despite the fact that the first games in each of their respective series only came out within less than 10 years of each other, they seem to be representing different aspects of the American cities. Although *SimCity* was released in the late 1980’s as the effects of Reagan era economics were drastically morphing how we were seeing the city, much of the theoretical framework that

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<sup>134</sup> Wynne, 842.

<sup>135</sup> AISayyad, 124.



creator Will Wright used came on the heels of modernist planning. Books like Robert Caro's *The Power Broker* and Stanislaw Lem's "The Seventh Sallies" saw how absolute power in planning can have grave negative consequences, but planning was still seen as a necessary evil in order for the city to function.<sup>136</sup> *SimCity* represents the city in transition from the top down planning seen in the mid-century American city to the prominence of capitalist actors shaping the city through public-private partnerships, and business improvement districts.<sup>137</sup> The top down perspective relies on the player to exert their control to construct their own utopian society, even if it's through digital means. There are guidelines in the game that create a framework in making a "successful" community that creates a feedback shaping the city, but the nature of the community is up to the player.

The first person from the street perspective that the *Grand Theft Auto* series takes is not done much in conflict with the perspective that *SimCity* takes, but rather showing a continuation of the city. The game takes inspiration from postmodern views of the city to show how the urban landscape has changed, even in the last 50 years. Although the expansion of digital technology allowed for the success of this model in *Grand Theft Auto* in comparison to *SimsCity*, the change of model to first person emphasizes the autonomy of the individual in the changing urban landscape. The game focuses on creating what is essentially a business for the main character, where the city is used for their own gain, essentially following "the American dream". If *SimCity* is representative of the city in transition between the modern and the postmodern, *Grand Theft Auto* exists mainly in the postmodern, as the player transverses a seemingly formless urban landscape, fractured by heterogeneous communities.

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<sup>136</sup> "SimCity: 30 Years later".

<sup>137</sup> Stein, Locc 845.

One of the key contrasts between modern and postmodern cities that are highlighted in the game is the utopia/dystopia dichotomy. *SimCity* relies on the modernist idea of utopia, where they use a blank map in which they can envision the perfect community to keep the citizens happy. Early utopian thinkers saw the importance of the form of the built environment in both keeping its residences happy as well as making sure it was run efficiently. For example, French utopian socialist Charles Fourier came up with the concept of the Phalanstery as a large building that promoted social cohesion.<sup>138</sup> Even if the player tries to destroy the city by promoting a Godzilla attack or tornado, they still come from a unified vision. With postmodernism the concept of utopia is placed as impossible, as there is no “ideal city” as everyone has a different idea of utopianism. As a result the postmodern city is often situated in a dystopian landscape.<sup>139</sup> Although *Grand Theft Auto* is not a science-fiction dystopia, the focus on crimes, violence, and lawless activity creates a dystopian view of cities. Rather than creating a sense of community from the ground up, this bottom-up perspective leads to a sense of selfishness of both the player and the character where they dispose of other bodies for their own gain.<sup>140</sup> *Grand Theft Auto* is enjoyable to the player in the same way that *SimCity* is, in that they both give them a sense of power in shaping the digital landscapes. But the methods that they take create the distinction of one of destruction and one of creation.

If viewing *Grand Theft Auto*, as the quintessential postmodern landscape, it may seem concerning for the future of cities, where corporate power has a greater influence, and the concept of Utopia begins to diminish. Although the rise of neoliberalism has caused the

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<sup>138</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Projects*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard. 1999). 4-5.

<sup>139</sup> Alsayyad, 123.

<sup>140</sup> Dyer-Witterford, 162.

disruption of communities in the city, and often disregard the working class and communities of color, it is not hopeless for the future. The popularity of “New Urbanism” blends modernist ideas of utopia and creating sociable communities, while also including the role of the individual in shaping the city. Communities like Celebration, Florida or areas like pedestrian malls in cities use “New Urbanism” as a framework to create social cohesion while understanding the role of non-state actors. There has also been the popularity of tactile urbanism, where individual citizens can do small scale changes to their neighborhood that can impact the neighborhood in a positive way.<sup>141</sup> For example, in 2019 a 10 year old girl drew a “3D” crosswalk to create an optical illusion to slow drivers down and make it safe for the pedestrians in the neighborhood.<sup>142</sup> When looking at the future of our cities it is important to still use planning tactics of creating communities, while also understanding the city is not a homogeneous space, and it's important to take input from citizens.

These games are not supposed to be substitutes for understanding the inner-workings of the real city. An avid player of *SimCity* will not then be qualified to plan a real city, or a government official who plays *Grand Theft Auto* certainly doesn't have the tools for creating a policing strategy. The games are a worthy interface though to study in reflecting how cities and their problems manifest themselves. When dismissing these games as just forms of entertainment that are corrupting america's youth, you ignore how these games engage with larger conversations of reality. For example, playing *SimCity* you can have a basic understanding in designing and managing a city, even if the real world has much more nuances to urban

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<sup>141</sup> Stein, Loc. 1133.

<sup>142</sup> Matt Rocheleau. “Students convince Medford to install 3-D crosswalks at Elementary school”. Bostonglobe.com. April 22, 2019.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/04/22/students-convince-medford-install-crosswalks-elementary-schools/LolOjXXkyKBxBsB8vNJCNM/story.html> (Accessed May 8, 2020).

governance. Looking at *Grand Theft Auto* with a more critical lense, you can understand how capital shapes the city, and how this focus on the city as a capitalist production has negative consequences. I wouldn't say that the future of the American city is as hopeless as *Grand Theft Auto* and other postmodernists would think, as I do believe that planners and citizens can and should work together more for planning a city that is both diverse and cohesive.

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