VIII

SimCity: Where the City Ends

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Introduction

The newest title in the *SimCity* franchise, published in 2013 and named *SimCity 2013*[1], is the first multiplayer version of the widely acknowledged city builder game. This specific genre focuses on delivering players two things: an advanced virtual simulation of economy which governs the game world and, specifically, the city; and the ability to plan, construct, erase, and control particular elements of the virtual city (types of roads, city transport, terrain designated for commerce, housing or industry, tax system etc.).

This chapter aims to present an analysis and interpretation of the specific conditions of the existence of *SimCity 2013* as a tool to create virtual utopias. The questions posed in this part are strictly linked to the manner in which the rhetoric of the game's newest expansion called *The Cities of Tomorrow* functions to present and advertise it, not only as a city builder but also as a utopia builder:

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[1] To avoid bias and misunderstanding, I have decided to always utilize the full title of the game *Sim City 2013*, as the whole franchise is also differentiated by the year of production of every *Sim City* title. It should also be noted that *SimCity 2013* is analysed here also as a represent of the whole franchise but due to the subject chosen in this text there will be no historical analysis of how certain elements of the game were changing over the course of its development. Such analysis could be used also to present how certain neoliberal economic myths and visions of utopia change in one specific medium.

> What kind of future will you build for your city? Will you build a utopian society underpinned by clean technology, allow a giant corporation to feed your Sims' insatiable consumerism, or build into the sky with enormous multi-zone MegaTowers? (SimCity.com 2015).

> Unlock two new city specializations that allow you to build a resource-hungry mega corporation powered by a low-wealth workforce, or an urban utopia that develops clean technology and is controlled by the rich (SimCity.com 2015).

The text will utilize the philosophical reflection about the city presented by Jacques Derrida in the article *Générations d'une ville: mémoire, prophétie, responsabilité* (Derrida 1992) to formulate critical questions about the status of a virtual city and its utopian claims. Moreover, the main argument is to prove that *SimCity 2013* is an ideological dys-utopian tool which depicts a world where the only possible utopia is a neoliberal one. Thus, the neoliberal utopia begins with the end of the city (as memory, prophecy, responsibility).

SimCity—A Neoliberal Utopia

To start analysing the city-builder game, it is imperative to see its relation to the utopian framework. Lyman Tower Sargent in his well-known article writes that:

> Utopia [is—M.K.] a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space [...]. Eutopia or positive utopia [is—M.K.] a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived (Sargent 1994: 9).

This definition allows us to enumerate certain features of the society of Sims (the inhabitants of every *SimCity*), which perfectly fit Sargent's definition. Firstly, *SimCity 2013* is a simulation of a non-existent society located in a time and space of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, or as in the case of the *Cities of the Future*, as it suggests—in the near but unspecified future. Secondly, the main selling point of the game is the level of detail put into simulation of the city life which is designed and governed by the player—the game simulates, for example, traffic, economy, social atmosphere, problems of unemployment etc. Third, and probably the most important utopian aspect of *SimCity 2013*, is the assumption that the player has to deal with all the socio-economic problems of the city for it to be ideal, perfect, and better than any other city in the world. Moreover, the player is tested as a responsible mayor because the city exists as long as the player can afford to sustain it,

therefore, in a long run, one cannot neglect unemployment, lack of green spaces, healthcare or crime rates, otherwise the Sims will pack their bags and leave. Thus, this simulation model promotes players-mayors who take care of their subjects needs in order to sustain a stable flow of cash into their city treasury.

To conclude, *SimCity 2013* is a tool which quite clearly outlines the conditions one must fulfil to create a utopian city, where everyone is happy, has a job, never falls ill, is protected from crime etc. All that, in turn, is converted into profit for the player and further ability to expand the city or build new ones. At the same time, *SimCity 2013* can take a dystopian turn when the city drowns in garbage, crime, disease, and is eventually consumed by flames (if one does not care to build a fire brigade). All dystopian cities end the game quite fast, as they plunge the player-mayor into insolvency and debt.

This short analysis shows that *SimCity 2013* tests players on several levels such as economy, social responsibility, planning, creativity etc. It also depicts the axiom, underlying the simulation of a perfect utopian city, namely that the only good decisions are the ones which generate profit. This leads to a conclusion that *SimCity 2013* promotes thinking about a city in general as an enterprise focused on profit, and a form of neoliberal utopia (Boelens, Getches, Guevara-Gil 2010: 27-52). One can argue that it is obvious to think about a city as an enterprise, but I do not. David Harvey wrote in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism* that:

> We can, therefore, interpret neoliberalization either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites. In what follows I shall argue that the second of these objectives has in practice dominated (Harvey 2005: 19).

Harvey explicitly points up to the fact that neoliberalism can be understood as both a political or a utopian project. I believe that these two interpretations are somehow interconnected and cannot be simply divided. Moreover, in *SimCity 2013* the utopian project can be perceived as a way of reproducing the political ideology. Thus, the neoliberal vision subjected to the analysis forms a kind of a double helix in which the utopian project mirrors the political one—and I do believe that these two are just different names for the neoliberal utopian program (Jameson 2005: 2-5) and its totalitarian realization (Berardi 2012: 95).

SimCity—Where the City Ends

In *Générations d'une ville: mémoire, prophétie, responsabilité* Jacques Derrida states that "a city is a memory and promise which never coincide with the entirety of what is currently visible and constructed, and which can be represented or inhabited" (Derrida 1992: 44). The main point of Derrida's article is that cities are no longer complete topological entities—*poleis* understood as public things, and thus we should accept the fact that no city will ever be "complete" as a city-state. He presents an interesting and very important aspect of cities in general, which Fancesco Vitale also points out in his translation:

> A city must remain open to the fact that it does not know yet what it will be: it is necessary to inscribe the respect of this not knowing into the architectonic and city-planning science and skill, as it were a symbol. Otherwise what else would one do but carry out some plans, totalize, saturate, suture, suffocate? (Vitale 2010: 223-224)[2].

According to Vitale, the point Derrida makes about the "axiom of incompleteness", presented in the quote above, is the politics of architecture which enables the community to be at the same time opened and ambivalent towards the other whom it designates in order to confirm itself (Vitale 2010: 224). Thus, Derrida tries to write about the architecture of a city as a part of an ethical system. This will be our point of departure into the depths of *SimCity 2013*, understood as a tool representing specific ideological and ethical goals. But how does the simulation of the utopian neoliberal city relate to Derridean axiom of incompleteness? The first and foremost problem with *SimCity 2013* is the fact that it is a tool to build city-states, however, it does not allow anyone to build a city within a state (a country with a specific economic and social system). The city in *SimCity 2013* is and must be self-sufficient as far as it produces and spends money within and outside its borders—on a global market. This of course results in rethinking Derrida's ideas about the contemporary city:

> Questions such as: "what is a city" and "what is a capital?" have additionally a melancholic or eschatological character nowadays, as—in my opinion—and this would be the untold hypothesis of this text—the agglomeration, metropolis, *polis*, city-state are no longer strong, finished topological units, units of habitation, work, communication, strategy, trade, that is, in a word: society and human politics, politics

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[2]   In this fragment Vitale both translates and paraphrases Derrida, therefore, the author chose to relate to Vitale and not to the exact Derrida's text.

which should change its name, since city as a *polis* or *acropolis* does not reflect the meaning of *res publica* (Derrida 1992: 45).

Thus, *SimCity 2013* with its city-state model not only harbours the futuristic and neoliberal dream of a city-enterprise, utopia of capital, but it also represents the longing for a complete and finished topological unit of one politics. This, unfortunately, cannot be said about the meaning of *res publica*, which Derrida posits as an ethical axiom of the ancient cities. *SimCity 2013* does not see the city-state as a republic, but as a corporation (in American English understanding) which is a: "large business or company, or a group of companies which are all controlled and run together as a single organization" (Collins Cobuild 1994: 316). That is the reason why the player is given god-like privileges such as creating and destroying habitable, production, and commercial zones as one pleases whether they are occupied by the inhabitants of one's city or not. Furthermore, the social services such as police, fire brigades, hospitals, and schools can be turned off or destroyed, as they formally belong to the mayor. This of course translates to the whole thinking about the city as an enterprise: if the city does not earn enough through various taxes or export, the player may shut off a school or a police station to lower the costs of maintaining his business. No income? Shut down that university. Low on money? Get rif of this hospital. The most important buildings and facilities in the city which we deem absolutely necessary in our contemporary world, e.g. public transport, schools, police stations, fire brigades, hospitals, and universities, are loss-generating, expensive, and financially dangerous institutions. *SimCity 2013* represents them economically as a necessary evil and financial nuisances. From players perspective, the social spending is a struggle for their growing enterprise. These problems are present in *SimCity 2013* and are all linked to the fact that it is a city-state builder; moreover, this particular city-state runs in accordance with the neoliberal idea of profit encrypted in the games mechanics. How does it relate to the Derridean axiom of incompleteness?

Firstly, *SimCity 2013* promotes cities which are industries that generate stable profit, meaning that change is only required to a certain level beyond which the city cannot make more money. The game does not end with a creation of a perfect utopia, it just stops needing the player, as a perfect neoliberal city is in a state of stillness[3],

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[3]   Oswald Devish also pointed to this fact in his analysis of *SimCity 4*: "From the moment that the game's rules are known, the game becomes predictable. At this point, the player cannot get any better, thereby removing the reason for playing" (Devish 2008).

and literally becomes a self-sustaining machine to generate money. That is why the best profit-making cities in the game are the ones founded on huge corporations either governing tourism, hazard and gambling, producing and trading the natural resources or, like in the *Cities of the Future*, expanding the influences of Omega—an ideal Ubik-like substance (Dick 1991: 77-85)[4]. The corporations are absolutely crucial to every city, as by placing them, the player unlocks additional buildings which are helpful in generating profit. Taking all these things into consideration, one may see that the city in *SimCity 2013* has to follow neoliberal rules in order to strive and at the end of each struggle it turns into a finite and completely planned city-state enterprise. *SimCity 2013* as a project forms itself on the rejection of the axiom of incompleteness as it is never a republic, it is a centralized tyranny of the capital.

SimCity—Memory, Prophecy, Responsibility

Why does one talk about Derridean memory, prophecy, and responsibility in case of a city-state utopia building simulator? This question must be posed in the light of a trend started at the beginning of the twenty-first century to try and incorporate various iterations of the *SimCity* franchise into city planning education. These ideas have been present since 1998, also in the article *Teaching and Learning with SimCity 2000* (Adams 1999), and through such works as: *A CITY IS NOT A TOY: How SimCity Plays with Urbanism* (Lobo 2005), *Simulating Planning SimCity as a Pedagogical Tool* (Gaber 2007), *Should Planners Start Playing Computer Games? Arguments from SimCity and Second Life* (Devish 2008), *Toying with the City? Using the Computer Game SimCity™4 in Planning Education* (Minnery, Searle 2014) and many more—the positions mentioned above were based on Google Scholar list of appearances funded on number of citations. Moreover, among other papers worth mentioning would be an empirical study: *Simulated real worlds: science students creating sustainable cities in the urban simulation computer game SimCity 4* (Nilsson 2008). Let us just quote the concluding comments, which point to the fact that *SimCity 4* is an interesting teaching tool; Elisabet Nilsson writes:

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[4]   It cannot be excluded that the OMEGA substance in *SimCity 2013 Cities of Tomorrow* is a direct reference to Dick's UBIK and thus an interesting intertextual context, but so far there are no other confirmed similarities between the two substances/products except for their mythologised and simulacrum-like properties.

When reflecting upon their cities the students applied (correctly or incorrectly) scientific concepts, and discussed scientific phenomena appearing in the game. Also processes of reasoning and balancing were observed, e.g. when laying down the different city zones, or when choosing power sources. When deciding which power plant to install the students considered relationships between cost, amount of power generated, and environmental damage. They got to experience consequences of their actions and how they influenced the development of the city, e.g. citizens moving in or out, level of pollution, budget and tax problems, factors that in this paper are referred to as simulated real world problems (Nillson 2008).

As we can see, *SimCity* as a franchise is perceived here and in other works as a valuable teaching tool, but most importantly, it is evaluated as a tool that quite adequately "simulates real world problems". What Nilsson shows us is that this simulation game teaches responsibility and prophecy (in the Derridean sense), which may be utilized to depict the cause-effect side of the city planning decisions. Moreover, the empirical study she conducted explicitly showed that *SimCity 4* reproduces the Western (US and European) value system in the game rules and mechanisms. It might be worth noting that the students were given the task to construct an ideal city of the future, which seems relevant in our analysis of the game as a utopia-builder. This task also depicts the fact that there is a clearly visible example of Ernst Blochs utopian impulse (Jameson 2005: 2) that can be noticed in both the game itself and in the teaching programs which try to utilize it. Nilsson concludes the realization of the utopian task given to the students with an interesting remark that most of them felt that the game system and rules were too restrictive in limiting the futurization of their cities. This of course shows that the prophetic tool can only give a predetermined prophecy, and the future is sealed within its prescribed mechanisms. This is the true paradox. The future is impossible within the *SimCity* franchise as a closed and finite simulation model which cannot surpass itself into the unknown, as the future has been turned into an aesthetic artefact but not an unknown possibility. As the simulation is always self-referential, it cannot go beyond the future it already made into a concrete and finite entity. To conclude, *SimCity 2013* as an example of the whole franchise of *SimCity* games offers the responsibility of planning but without the unknown future or—as Derrida would say—"the axiom of incompleteness". This responsibility turns into finding the one, perfect, and logical outcome given by various factors present in the given system. *SimCity 2013* at its core, through its mechanisms, turns all future into finitude and all responsibility into exploitation of the system—which Nilsson called in her analysis of *SimCity 4* the "meta-strategy" (Nilsson 2008).

The other problem of Derridean triad of memory, prophecy, and responsibility in the case of video simulation is how *SimCity 2013* turns all cultural landmarks, artefacts, and elements of heritage into tools for earning money. For example, it is possible to build a Globe Theatre or an Eiffel Tower in any given city. But these buildings do not have an aesthetic function *per se*, they are a part of the greater financial system which counts how many people visited them and balances their maintenance costs against their earnings from tourism. If the Eiffel Tower is ruining a city's economy, it can be turned off or destroyed. Is it not here that we touch upon an absolutely crucial problem of memory? Writing about Prague, Derrida points to the fact that the city of Prague is not a monolithic unit that it was, but it is and always will be in the process of making:

> With what is it possible to identify a subject, identical in itself throughout discontinuous history, which wandered the epochs: gothic and baroque architecture, demolition of ghetto, establishment of Czechoslovakia, first German, then Soviet protectorate, The Prague Spring, normalization and subsequently the latest revolution in the making? (Derrida 1992: 47).

Could we say these things about the city in *SimCity 2013*? No, we could not. The only history we could write about each unit in the game is the history of its economy, as the economy has become the only possible way of writing the history of the simulated city. This can be seen in various graphs and mathematical formulae depicting the growth of the city's capital. It is of course possible to describe various stages of the city's growth (from a small town into a metropolis), but these are purely economic and number-based technical information. The status of the Eiffel Tower is, therefore, different as it ceases to be a part of the identity of a historical city-persona and turns into what Roland Barthes calls a myth (Barthes 1991: 110-115) or a sign of fashion (Barthes 1990: 213-224). We shall understand a myth as a connotation (metalanguage) which turns the sign of the first semiological system into a signifier of the second one and adds its own signified into this new structure. By the sign of fashion, we will understand the object which lost its pure functionality or denotation and has been transformed into a sign-object with a superficial meaning and function invested with the rhetoric of the new social communication. The game describes the Eiffel Tower as follows:

> Gives your city a large dose of French style! Standing over 300m tall, the Eiffel Tower is open 24 hours a day and also serves as a shop. French-style high wealth, medium density houses and shops will develop in residential and commercial zones around the Eiffel Tower (Simcity2013wiki.com 2015).

The in-game definition of the Eiffel Tower describes it as both a mythological construct and a re-functionalization, according to the game rhetoric. Firstly, the myth takes the sign: "the Eiffel Tower equals French style", turns it into a signifier and completes it with a signified from a different order: "24h shop, wealth, and commerce". The Eiffel Tower is now not only a symbol of France, it has been transformed into a myth signifying the French high-class, economy, tourism and social order, not to mention the never ending consumerism. Secondly, the game turns the Eiffel Tower into a fashion sign-object and functionalizes it anew. From this perspective the Eiffel Tower in *SimCity 2013* is: a sign of status—it is only obtainable as a part of Deluxe Downloadable Content the player has to pay for; a re-functionalized in-game object rising the price of terrain, earning money and transforming its surroundings architecturally; and an ideological sign-object grounding the belief that culture and history serves economy and is otherwise unnecessary. The Derridean argument about the memory of the city is irrelevant in this situation, it only shows that the city in *SimCity 2013* turns the artefacts of history and memory into functional objects of fashion or mythological objects of ideology. In this sense the simulation of the city brings the end to city itself as a living entity, as a persona.

SimCity—A City of Death

Thinking about the ethics of planning a city, Derrida writes:

> Desire to comprehensively solve all the city problems during the lifetime of one generation, not giving time or space to the future generations, not leaving it for them as a heritage, that is a catastrophe to the city plan, because for «the ones who know», architects and town-planners, it seems that they know in advance what tomorrow should be and they replace the ethical and political responsibility with their own techno-scientific programming (Derrida 1992: 49).

In this part I would like to focus on thinking about tomorrow and future generations which seems very problematic in case of *SimCity 2013* as the game does not factor any demographic variables (except for immigration and emigration) into its mechanics. As a result, a paradoxical situation arises when the detailed simulation of the city economy and social system assume that the only way to gain citizens is to bring them from the outside of the city-state. No life was or will ever be born in *SimCity 2013*, it can only migrate into it. The city in *SimCity 2013* does not "produce" life as a part of its economy oriented mechanics, but it can and will induce death if

poorly managed. The society of Sims is plagued by fires, disease, crime and catastrophes if the player does not invest in education, healthcare, security and clean technologies. Of course, the education functions here as a factor in lowering the Sims tendency to cause fires and causes them to recycle more trash, allowing the player to invest in recycling which can be very profitable. But the most fascinating thing is how the pinnacle of education in *SimCity 2013* is organized. The university—a very expensive building—has five possible departments-expansions: Business, Engineering, Law, Medicine, Science. No humanities, history, philosophy, social sciences— no, these would not fit in the general purpose of the university in *SimCity 2013*, as its main and only function is to unlock patents like new power plants, fire, crime, and disease prevention facilities and upgrades for the industry. In a nutshell, the education in a perfect society of immigrants is only needed to produce patents, or as a prevention from littering the streets and setting fire to their own belongings...[5]. What *SimCity 2013* does with university as an institution is interesting in the light of Derrida's deliberations on future generations and in the context the previous parts of this chapter which concentrates on the cultural artefacts, memory, and history. The exclusion of humanities from the university in *SimCity 2013* is in perfect harmony with the fact that this specific society does not need to know its identity, does not need to write its own history, does not have any existential problems (it can always move out), does not need to change the rules of its own functioning, and finally it does not know anything about natural death. That is why *SimCity 2013* is such a great tool for projecting neoliberal ideology of profit and accumulation—because it avoids the real cycle of life and death and substitutes it with a utopian vision of eternal life governed by the eternal economy of gain. Jean Baudrillard criticized this vision in his *Symbolic Exchange and Death* writing that:

> Our whole culture is just one huge effort to dissociate life and death, to ward off the ambivalence of death in the interests of life as value, and time as the general equivalent. The elimination of death is our phantasm, and ramifies in every direction: for religion, the afterlife and immortality; for science, truth; and for economics, productivity and accumulation (Baudrillard 2000: 147).

Baudrillard's thesis helps to understand that *SimCity 2013* excludes both "natural" death and humanities as a part of one cultural project. Moreover, it also depicts

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[5]   This would be funny if contemporary humanities were not in crisis because of the neoliberal tendency to privatize general intellect, but that is a different problem.

why the city in *SimCity 2013* is unethical in Derridean terms. The power to plan the perfect city and to govern its eternal inhabitants is in fact the power coming from the elimination of death of both the citizens and the player-mayor, whose only demise comes with insolvency. The city in *SimCity 2013* has never needed the future generations, it has never needed to leave any heritage because it promotes the almighty city-planners and a vision of a city complete with all its problems solved, a profit-generating enterprise where death does not take place—a neoliberal utopia.

But this vision itself is a vision of a necropolis, a dead city or a city of the dead, because without the future generations and without anything to leave to the ones from the future, the city turns into some sort of a caricature, a machine, or a mechanism where citizens live, being only puppets and sustaining the city economy. An eternal city of accumulation is a city of the living-dead, a place where nobody is born and nobody dies. Thus, the neoliberal vision of the city turns into an anti-utopian warning that the city ends precisely in the very moment in which it excludes its own death and rejects the possibility of becoming a heritage for future generations.

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