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Getting The Reality You Deserve

After a decade of idleness, it is useful to contrast the similarities and differences of the cultural and political markers relevant to the topics of this chapter — video gaming, the city, and representation of racial, ethnic and class-based conflict therein — over the time between when this chapter was first researched and written in the early 1990s and the early post-millennium of "now" — around 2004. In the next few pages, I would like to provide an introductory framework for this chapter by briefly sketching out what I see to be relevant changes in the nature of the city and video games over these years.

I have two reasons for doing this. The first is to note the ways both video games and the city have become expansive, growing in significance and consequence over this time. It is generally well-known that the city has grown, most obviously in terms of population densities and the sheer volume of people migrating into them on a daily basis. It is also well-known that video games have become an enormously popular and economically prodigious cultural artifact. More relevant in the context of this chapter, though, video games have also become a mechanism for critical cultural expression and scholarship that scarcely existed if at all when I first researched and wrote

this material. At the time of the original writing and publication in 1995, it felt necessary to move toward a critical analysis of a video game by going through film criticism, hence the sections on dystopic science-fiction films that have as their backdrop an urban setting (Bleecker 1995). Today, critical studies of video games are a growing cottage industry for academic publishing houses, and there are curriculums within many university critical theory, film theory and media studies departments worldwide where video games are analyzed with the rigor of other credible cultural artifacts.[1]

My second reason for this introduction is to help contextualize the core of the chapter in the odd case where an anachronism may appear. Rather than doing extensive revisions to bring the material "up to date", I think it is useful that there remain certain political and cultural signposts that serve as useful reminders as to the writing's original milieu.

Introduction — The City and Video Games, 1994-2004

With the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989, the city in the United States was just emerging from fear of nuclear destruction by missiles fired from Communist Russia. In 2004, the fears that envelope cities worldwide are

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1 cf (Newman 2004; Gee 2003; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004; Wolf and Perron 2003) and the Ludologica series of books that take as their theme an individual game for critical commentary: http://www.ludologica.com/pages/11/. Of the universities containing relevant curriculums, include, to name only a few: University of Southern California Interactive Media Division and Critical Theory program; The University of Melbourne; Monash University; IT University of Copenhagen; University of California, Berkeley; Carnegie Mellon University; New York University.

best represented by the image of jumbo jets repurposed as high-speed fuel-laden missiles, eroding civil liberties coupled with unprecedented degrees of surveillance, suicide bombers exploding in public markets, and jerry-rigged, portable nuclear devices detonated in city centers. A constant between the early 1990s and 2004 has (always) been destructive rioting and skirmishes arising from tensions surrounding race, class and social identity. In the U.S. in 1992 this was the uprising in South Central Los Angeles. Today, the Gaza Strip and too many other locales underscore an inability to mitigate the violence that arises because too many people have not been enlightened to the virtues of difference.

In the early 1990s, the image of the city in popular science-fiction films such as *Blade Runner* (1992), and *Demolition Man* (1993) was dystopian, barren and ridden with criminal elements. This image resonated with a general sense of urban despair and decline. The keyword that captured this urban decline was "white flight" — the trend of financially comfortable white workers to the suburbs. Now, the trend is markedly in the opposite direction. A 2003 report from the UN's Human Settlements Programme indicates that people are flocking to cities at extraordinary rates (The Challenge of Slums: Global Report on Human Settlements 2003). From the perspective of an optimist, this trend could be interpreted as a revitalization of the city in a way that indicates a cyclical move away from the dystopian image of from the early 1990s and towards a lively, flourishing urbanity. The video game SimCity2000, as I argue in what follows, represents such an

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optimistic interpretation of a modestly utopian game/simulation of the near-future city. A less optimistic, perhaps more realist interpretation of the population growth of cities indicates that the trend will result in tragically strained physical and social infrastructures that will not withstand the enormous needs of large numbers of people living in a constrained physical space (Davis 2004).

In the early 1990s, the United States military was involved in a major war against Iraq at the orders of President George H.W. Bush that stopped short of the capital city of Baghdad. In the early years of the second millennium, the United States military is involved in a major war against Iraq at the orders of President George W. Bush, and quickly entered the capital city of Baghdad, where it remains entangled at the time of this writing. This problematic historical symmetry is noteworthy at many levels, but what is particularly relevant is the fact that the former engagement stopped short of the city, whereas the latter is situated almost exclusively in the city — Baghdad as well as others major cities in Iraq. According to a recent report, urban warfare is expected to become consequential in the new millennium, in part due to the fact and the United States military had been designed to win conflicts in which armor — tanks, artillery and so forth — were the mechanism for establishing superiority (Press 1999). Such weapons are designed for engagements in the open terrain not the tight, confined quarters of a city where these weapons are difficult to maneuver and prove

indiscriminate in their lethality. This point, together with the increasing

urbanization of the world, have elevated the significance of the city in an

altogether new and frightening way. The city has become the only viable

battlefield for those who would engage in a military conflict with the world's

only superpower.

> *There are reasons to believe that America's future conflicts will involve more urban operations than those in the past. First, the world is becoming more urban. About half of the world's population lives in cities today; 70% will live in urban areas in 25 years. As the number and size of cities grow, so will the frequency that overseas wars involve urban fighting. Second, cities are the political and economic centers of modern countries. Whatever America decides to fight for in future decades, the chances are good that it, and the people who control it, will be located in cities.*
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> *Finally, Americans will frequently be drawn into cities because no enemy's military can compete with U.S. forces in open terrain. Urban terrain, for reasons described below, negates many U.S. advantages and capitalizes on America's unwillingness to kill non-combatants. Enemies will put their forces -- conventional or guerrilla -- in cities to fight on the most advantageous ground possible* (Press 1999).

The video game industry works in symbiosis with the military industrial

complex. It would take another research project to reveal with precision

the linkages between militarism and video gaming, and to understand how

and why the two industries are tied together. While conducting research for

this project on entertainment technology in 1994 I went to the 76th annual

trade show for the International Association of Amusement Parks and

Attractions. Here I was only somewhat surprised to see companies that one

might assume are part of the military industrial complex selling entertainment

products, like Hughes Aerospace a major defense contractor. In the case of

Hughes, they had simply repurposed their military jet flight simulation

apparatus and changed the content from a practice bombing run to a fast sluice down a ski run.[2] Conceptually, the instrument — a simulator that can either be at the service of the military, or of entertainment — is able to make the translation nearly effortlessly. I would argue that this is possible because armed conflict and entertainment are such that they intersect in ways that are historically, culturally, politically and ideologically similar, even identical. So inextricably entangled are they that it makes more sense to refer to the pair as a single cultural idiom best captured by the neologism, military industrial light and magic complex.[3] I have suggested elsewhere that the fundamental ideology at work in both armed conflict and the popular genre of action-themed entertainment is death-defiance. This is at least one consequential aspect of the ideology that bridges these two idioms and blurs the boundaries between the entertainment industry and the military.[4] Perhaps the most empirical item to indicate the way these two cultural idioms are inextricably entangled is the case in 2003 when Sony's entertainment division trademarked the phrase "shock and awe" on the eve of the bombing of Baghdad for the purpose of employing it in a now abandoned video game project (A war of words over Iraq video games 2003).. "Shock and awe" was the phrase the U.S. military used to describe their intensive bombing campaign on the night that the 2003 Iraq war began.

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2 cf 76th Annual IAAPA Convention – Review:
http://www.techkwondo.com/publications/iaapa_review_1994.pdf
    3 cf http://www.techkwondo.com/publications/dissertation_prospectus.pdf

For this ideological cohesion, video games in the 1990s were more likely than not to have a violent, militaristic theme, as they are today, in 2004. SimCity, SimCity2000 , SimCity3000 and SimCity4 are notable and successful exceptions. In part, this was my reason for identifying the game as a stand-out worthy of cultural critique.

Figure 1 SimCity2000 Retail Box (bottom)

My original inquiry was made using SimCity2000. Since the time of my original research, the game has continued its extraordinary popularity. The latest version of the game is SimCity4 and its range of features is significantly beyond that of SimCity2000. The most notable distinctions between SimCity4 and SimCity2000 are the level of detail that is provided, particularly visual detail. SimCity4 gives the player the ability to navigate the visual world of the city down the scale of an individual "sim-citizen." For instance, you can track a sim-citizen as they drive to work, or not if they're unemployed.

Figure 2 SimCity4 Box (top and interior)

SimCity4 offers an impressive array of structures which include animated details, such as kids playing basketball at the park. SimCity2000 was impressive at the time and, in my experience, equally compelling to play, but SimCity4 significantly raised the bar of visual, animated and simulated detail. SimCity4 includes the ability to manage multiple cities linked by ports, roads and other transportation networks. It also has the ability to create your own buildings and other structures as well as share cities on the Internet, which has encouraged a burgeoning network of SimCity enthusiasts.

In the early 1990s, video games were just barely considered to be a credible topic of scholarly inquiry. Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power In Movies, Television and Video Games*, and Eugene F. Provenzo's *Video Kids*:

Making Sense of Nintendo, both published in 1991, were two of the earliest

book-length inquiries into the ways in which video games represented a

distinct kind of cultural idiom and a new kind of media literacy worthy of

close, scholarly investigation (Kinder 1991; Eugene F. Provenzo 1991). In the

years that followed the publication of these books, the enormous, multi-

billion dollar economies that flow alongside and through the video game

entertainment industry have bolstered the viability of studying and

researching video games and the cultures that surround them.[5] Now, there

exists a hearty buffet of video game related books, mostly related to player

strategy or video game design, but increasingly one is able to find credible

scholarly books from media theorists, cultural critics, anthropologists, and

cinema and film theorists.[6]

Video games have creatively moved beyond the province of coin-

operated entertainment games found in pizzerias and shopping malls, and the

home gaming console in the family room, into the realm of establishment art

museums and galleries. The 2004 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American

Art in New York City included *Velvet Strike* (2002) by Anne-Marie Schleiner,

Brody Condon, and Joan Leandre. *Velvet Strike* is a modification to an

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[5] Hard numbers are tricky to come by, particularly as there is a cottage industry of
research companies who sell industry economic reports for exorbitant fees. A January 2004
Press Release announcing just such a report gives away some rough indications as to the scale of
the industry when it says that "video game sales break $7 billion in 2003."
    http://www.connectedhomemag.com/HomeTheater/Chapters/Index.cfm?ChapterID=41565
[6] A few examples include (Newman 2004; Gee 2003; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004; Wolf
and Perron 2003).

extraordinarily popular networked shoot-em-up video game that is notable for its vivid violence and the visceral character of the first-person point of view one assumes while playing. In the *Velvet Strike* modification, one "shoots" mostly anti-war graffiti that, rather than killing other players. This graffiti decorates the walls of the game's virtual world. The authors of the game note that they were particularly motivated to counter President George W. Bush's "War on Terror" when they conceived and developed the game.[7]

Figure 3 Schleiner, Condon and Leandre - *Velvet Strike*.

Cory Arcangel was another artist featured at the 2004 Biennial with his piece *Super Mario Clouds* (2003). He and other members of the "Beige" art-technology collective modified the popular Super Mario Brothers™ (c. 1985)

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7 See http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/about.html

game from the original Nintendo Entertainment System™, erasing all graphics elements except for the clouds, resulting in a very pacific reinterpretation of an otherwise frenetic action game. This piece was also exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City as part of the "Seeing Double: Emulation in Theory and Practice" exhibit in 2004.
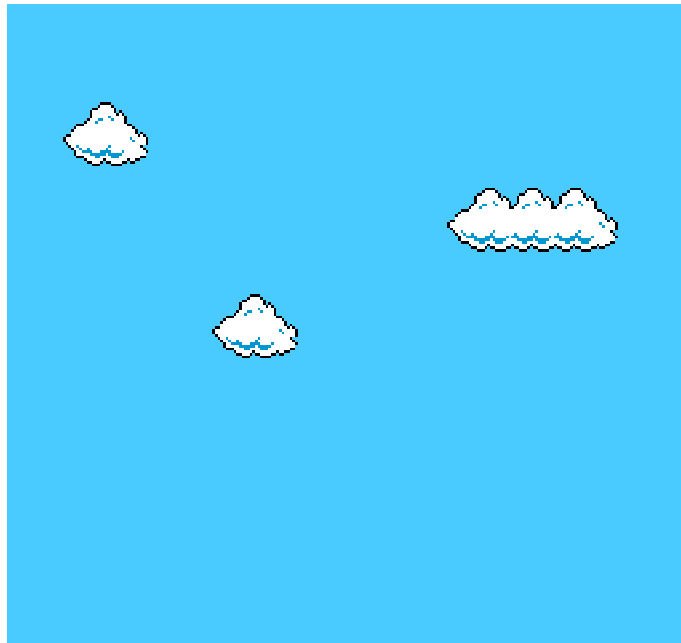

Figure 4: Cory Arcangel / Beige - *Super Mario Clouds*

Other artists have appropriated video games to shift the political and emotional point-of-view by re-narrating the games' "original" story. Eddo Stern is a Los Angeles-based artist who, with the C-Level art-technology collective, has developed a series of such appropriated games.

Figure 5 Eddo Stern - *Sheik Attack* (1999-2000).

In "Sheik Attack" (1999-2000), snippets from several video games —
Settlers III, SimCity, Nuclear Strike and Red Alert — were recorded on video
and pieced together to create a fictional documentary about the formation,
utopian idealism and, ultimately, the heavy militarization of Stern's Israeli
homeland.

> *The projected sequence of short vignettes, linked by graphics that make each scene clear as a historical phase (or a different "level" in a game), provides visual metaphors for real events. In opening scenes, for instance, construction workers erect a single building in an empty landscape, representing the nation's folk origins; later, a seemingly boundless cityscape signifies a burgeoning Tel Aviv. Yet nothing is now so intuitively correct about the piece as its episodes circling violence. One gorgeous scene depicts a single assault helicopter lifting off the desert floor before drifting behind a dune; Stern incorporates cinematic dissolves to underscore the poetry of the machine's turn ing blades. In the final moments we're presented with cold-blooded shootings in a domestic habitat* (Griffin 2003).

Cultural producers like the "Velvet Strike" team, Arcangel and Stern have channeled their enthusiasm for video gaming by appropriating and modifying the original context in which these games were designed to be played and re-authored the narrative point-of-view. Others have gone in the direction of creating their own games, developed from scratch to sit within an ideological framework that is decidedly against the grain of most commercial video games.

The growing ease with which it is possible to author games since the early 1990s — a result of access to inexpensive and relatively easy-to-use tools to create video games — has spawned a growing cottage industry of art-technologist and scholars who create games that are themselves a form of didactic, critical inquiry into various political and social arenas. For instance, Rafael Fajardo, a professor at Denver University, has created a game called *Crosser*™ (2003), a serious yet tongue-in-cheek reworking of the hit video game *Frogger*™ (c. 1981). In *Frogger*™, the challenge was to help a frog cross running rivers full of all manner of adversaries and pitfalls including hungry snakes, quickly moving logs, and amicable turtles that just might

accidentally drown you when the submerse. As described in Fajardo's

critical essay that accompanies the game he developed with his students:

> *Crosser™ puts the player in the position of attempting to cross the Rio Grande from Mexico into the United States. The path is obstructed by detritus floating down the shallow river and by Border Patrol agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (known in spanglish as "la migra"), both of which move with uncompromising regularity. If a crosser should meet up with any of these obstacles, she will be sent home — most of the time. Occasionally a migra-man will turn a blind eye to the crosser and allow her to pass. The challenge is to get across unscathed and to reach the green card at the other side. Can you make it? (Fajardo 2003)*

Figure 6 Fajardo – *Crosser* (2003)

Crosser™ is paired with *La Migra*™ which positions the player as a US Border Patrol agent determined to prevent illegal aliens from entering across the Rio Grande in a Space Invaders™ style shoot-out. Together the pair of games simulate the reality of the US/Mexican border, but do so for the purpose of developing a critical instrument, not primarily an entertainment product.

> *[Crosser*™ *and La Migra*™*] deal with the (il)legal human traffic at the most densely populated international boundary point on earth. The games exist as two complete works which provide a broader insight when played/experienced together. They present a concrete effort to deploy video games as vehicles and venues for cultural commentary and criticism. The reality at the US/Mexico border is a game. The game is one of chance, where the stakes are survival. The author of the games intends to present the development and context for the games, in particular, the novel strategy of repurposing old school digital video games to the ends of commentary and criticism* (Fajardo 2003).

Other of these critical, didactic style of games include *UnderAsh*, in which one assumes the role of a Palestinian youth in the West Bank, positioning the Isreali's as an occupying force that one must oppose (Kasmiya 2003). *Escape from Woomera* depicts the plight of an asylum-seeker in Australia held in a detention facility modeled on a problematic real-world facility (Escape From Woomera 2004).

What I have attempted to briefly describe are certain relevant considerations as to how the meaning and cultural valence of the city and video games have changed over the last 13 or 14 years. When the chapter that follows was originally written and published, the video game had little undergirding scholarly material with which to bolster my arguments.

Likewise, the city, while well considered for decades by urban theorists and social geographers, had scant material relating it to dynamic, computer-based simulations. The advantage I hope to offer the reader is a better sense of my inquiry into the complex manner by which a video game is able to represent a racially and ethnically fraught social space such as the city. At the time of the original writing, addressing this topic and putting it in the form of a critical argument was a challenge. I am thankful that the conditions for this kind of scholarship have improved.

Urban Crisis: Past, Present and Virtual

What possible relationships could there be between racial tension and virtual reality? This question was nearly impossible to ask in the spring of 1992 when the uprisings in South Central Los Angeles gave my studies temporary pause by forcing me to consider how my scholarly work - cultural studies of the virtual reality phenomenon - could speak to this seemingly unrelated problem.[8] The answer came shortly and indirectly from a computer graphics industry trade journal reporting on a South Central redevelopment project at UCLA's School of Urban Planning:

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8 See Julian Bleeker, *Coherent Light: Virtual Reality, Cultural Politics, and the New Humanism in Science*, MS Engineering dissertation, University of Washington, 1992.

In the aftermath of [the spring 1992] riots, there's no question that things in south central Los Angeles haven't been working, and a new set of [computer] graphics boards is playing an important role in shaping the area's economic and social recovery.

These computer graphics worlds are compelling for their technical virtuosity; who would not want to visit the future of South Central on a computer?[9] These worlds also knot together a formidable network of social meaning — computer graphics, urban rebellion, computer-mediated representation of space, the declining city, Rodney King, virtual reality, Daryl Gates — that gave some denotation to my search for connections between racial tension and technoscience; these connections are made apparent by the vivid and productive explorations conducted in the study of science, technology, and society.[10]

Through these computer graphics visualizations meaning is made of social spaces like South Central LA. Computer graphics visualizations of these sorts create a linkage between engineering as a social practice and the lived

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9 Which is almost the same as asking *who* would visit South Central without the vicarious aid of a computer? I do not mean this question rhetorically or facetiously. I might hazard a speculation that South Central is equated easily with the threat of violence and harm in the minds of many. This equation renders South Central particularly suitable for computerized (i.e., virtual) urban planning in the safe, cloistered labs at UCLA. The threat of South Central can be generalized to include the urban inner-core in the abstract. This was the threat operating when, in an oral reading of the representation of the perilous side of the city's inner-core through *Bad Lieutenant* (1992), a critic made two suggestive slips of the tongue when describing urban despair, criminality, and the omen of the inner-city: "Black Lieutenant" and "Bad Lieu-tenement." Both of these slips reveal the way the discursive field of general fear, paranoia, and decrepitude surrounding the inner-city are marked racially and spatially.

10 The rich literature on the intersections of science, technology, and the social — with which this essay is in conversation — makes an explicit investment of social meaning into the technoscientific object. Thus, herein, technology means much more than a box composed of a collection of parts; rather, it is presumed that a complex understanding of technology as a social artifact reveals the intricate manner in which it shapes, and is shaped by, the world wherein social relations matter.

world of South Central Los Angeles.[11] The technical instrument ("graphics boards") become semiotic, meaning making devices through its ability to discursively invoke the social, political, and mythical space called South Central without missing a beat (Haraway 1992).

How does a computer graphics workstation congeal seemingly disparate nodes of meaning into a cohesive network that is neither "just" engineering nor "just" social practices? What I would like to do in this essay is to make some sense of the network of meanings between technoscience visions of the urban future and the question of race within these future visions.[12] My contention is that many virtual visions of the urban future, such as that constructed through SimCity2000™, cannot but be intimately bound to a racially marked, present day urban inner-core, at least insofar as they respond to the contingencies of racial tension.

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11 By "technosemiotic" I am referring to the complex network of social meanings that corporate signifiers such as RealityEngine™, SimCity™, SimLife™, SimEarth™, SimHealth™ and SimFarm™ all program. These signifying elements are persuasive catalysts for the simulation of worlds of the (virtual) past, (virtual) present and (virtual) future. In the chapter, "Virtual Reality Effect", I introduce the RealityEngine™ as a technosemiotic node among this network of world-building for it means both technological artifact *and* meaning-making apparatus; it renders the problems of South Central LA bare fact through its hardware and on its computer monitor. The awe-inspiring power of its technology gives these renderings the air of believability. Technosemiotics is a rich conceptualization of artifice to the extent that it is about cleverly maneuvering technological objects to touch upon, and give meaning to, questions of race, gender and class, imagination, play and fantasy, the military, industry and media. As I describe in "Virtual Reality Effect", by naming their technological artifact "RealityEngine™," the Silicon Graphics® corporation ingeniously allows it to encompass a wide and varied network of influence that includes South Central LA and all its heated particulars. This particular corporate signifier implies the engineering of reality (or, a bit more provocatively, an engine for producing or manufacturing reality.)

12 Haraway makes sense of what counts as "technoscience" and the meanings of technoscience worlds. Technoscience is meant to suggest a hybridization that is neither science or technology, nor simply both as a single fused entity. Technoscience transcends science and technology, both in their historical construction and in their separate epistemological and ontological grounding. It is, as Haraway puts it, "a kind of visual onomatopoeia" that is carefully designed to disrupt the binarisms between nature and society, the natural and the artefactual, subject and object. c.f. (Haraway 1997).

The Ghetto and Representations of Urban Decline

"Urban decline" is a key phrase that describes the state of the city both in the United States and throughout the world. Before the early 1960s, debates about urban problems were imprecise and lacked a cohesiveness. Dilapidated housing, blight, crime, and exodus to the suburbs were variously singled out as evidence or provocations of the city's declining state. Since the early 1960s the "ghetto" has been the locus of attention for describing the crisis of urban decline. The pivotal year, according to Robert A. Beauregard, was 1963, when racial uprisings in Birmingham, Savannah, Chicago, and Philadelphia brought together the previously vague arguments on urban decline and centered the problematic on questions of race and racism (Beauregard 1993).

Images of the urban ghetto as a burnt-out, riotous and crime-ridden zone, marked distinctively by thick masses of people of color, were employed profitably by Hollywood during the early 1990s. If ever there is the need for a bleak, blighted backdrop to add a dingy and exotic edge to a film, a ghetto is fabricated on some studio backlot. Hollywood designers for near future science fiction films have also found the ghetto to be a fruitful source of inspiration for dreary urban images. One would only have to attend Hollywood's offerings of the late 1980s and early 19902 — *RoboCop* (1987), *Demolition Man* (1993), *Batman* (1989), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), to name but a few — to catch a glimpse of racially

marked, "ghettoized" and criminal image of city living at the end of the last millennium.

Far fewer images of livable and hospitable urban space have made their way into the circuits of popular consciousness. In the 1990s, that dystopia was the viable framework for describing future urban worlds. A notable exception to the prominence of urban dystopic visions has recently appeared in the form of a computer game, SimCity2000™. SimCity2000™ is a simulation technology that allows game players to build custom virtual city spaces. This game provides a way to imagine and author distinctly utopian possibilities for urban futures partially, I argue in what follows, by evading the contingencies of urban racial tension. SimCity2000™ presents an enticing and compelling alternative to the more insistent bleak images of urban decline. The game suggests an answer to a problem that, for over a quarter century, has seemed insurmountable. SimCity2000™ provides its challenge within the more or less general state of crisis that the city connotes, the impossible task of creating a hospitable urban environment. Such is its lure; who would not want to take a crack at solving such a formidable problem as urban decline?

SimCity2000™ might be applauded for providing a response to prevailing dystopian images. But I cannot help wondering *how*, specifically, the game is able to articulate its response. I am wary of the binary operating between the Hollywood film-inspired urban dystopia and the response articulated by this simulation of a utopic city. Which is to ask what, alongside the narrative

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logic of Hollywood's blighted urban future, produces a utopic urban future in SimCity2000™? How does the choice between dystopia and utopia get to be posed as the dominant one? What, precisely, is the distinction? Upon what categories does the binary "dystopia versus utopia" pivot?

Admittedly, the terms "utopia" and "dystopia" have been thrown around somewhat carelessly. They are not in any sense timeless categories, and have particular meanings in the context of late twentieth-century urbanity that needs to be explored closely, particularly if we are to escape from their impoverished, unidimensional binarism. For the purposes of this work, the distinction pivots on the contingencies of race in the urban context where what counts as utopia or dystopia hinges on associations between people of color, poverty, and the squalor imagined as proper to the ghetto. This inscription distinguishes itself through a white racial imaginary in which a vision of an ordered social structure eradicates the possibility of difference and situates racial otherness as an absence, as something to be overlooked or dismissed as aberrant. To specify the terms of this distinction, I will describe the distinguishing characteristics of urban utopia and dystopia through near future science fiction film. From an understanding of how this binary becomes meaningful in these films, it will be possible to make sense of the utopic response given by SimCity2000™.

There are many ways to discuss the future of urban space and the ways it is imagined. For instance, one could look to urban planning discourse to

see the ways in which city spaces are reconceived, debated and discussed. For the purposes of this chapter I am more interested in the future of the city as an imagined space rather than a particular goal to be achieved through rational planning. Thus, examining a less specialized, more popularly articulated vision of what counts as the urban future will be appropriate. What is of interest are the imaginary visions of urban futures, the ones that create popular conceptions of what urbanity might become. Given that near future science fiction film provides one of the more conspicuous, imaginative, and dystopic visions of urban space, it will serve as one source of future conceptions of the city. Thus, one node of the network I am navigating will be science fiction film and the way it constructs knowledge and understanding of the city; virtual worlds technologies will be another node. Other nodes are race, urbanity, utopia, and dystopia.

With this network topology I can phrase my argument bluntly as an equation: if near future science fiction film creates its dystopic edge by extrapolating from the racially tense present day inner city, then a *utopic* simulated virtual reality of the near future city is one that necessarily refuses to acknowledge the question of race.

This, then, is an chapter about the ways in which technology is employed to make social worlds and how these worlds get to count as either utopic or dystopic. It is also an chapter that argues that technology should provide other kinds of inhabitable social worlds not on the flat continuum between euphoric splendor and dark purgatory.

The Dystopic Future: How The Future Came To Be

Many visions of "how the future came to be" have pervaded the circuits of the popular imaginary through science fiction film. On the one hand are images of the post-apocalyptic landscape made popular during the anxious years of Reagan's reign, perhaps best exemplified by the post-nuclear war scenarios narrated by the *Mad Max* series of films. On the other hand are visions of the near future in which some untold events - ecodisaster, economic collapse, moral decay - leave us with a blighted and festering world, as in the Los Angeles depicted in *Blade Runner*.

Pessimistic visions of the future such as *Mad Max* and *Blade Runner* garnered a fair portion of the popular cultural market place at a time when the threat of nuclear annihilation became an apropos signpost of a more or less general state of international sociopolitical emergency. Even if the threat of nuclear war was not always tangible in the 1980s, ecodisasters, urban unrest, recession, immigration, hate crimes, domestic violence, micro wars, and so on certainly created a profound paranoia.

Outside the cineplex, the contemporary social problems that gave these future visions some meaning were certainly salient. While the specter of nuclear annihilation contributed to this paranoia, the zones of urban space were experiencing their own potent blend of localized apocalypse, as racial tensions were abetted by federal and municipal governments', that

systematically ignored the economic and social status of the city and its inner core.

Soon enough, the post-nuclear film became tired; science fiction has cast aside the story of The Bomb quite noticeably. Science fiction author Bruce Sterling in an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* entitled "Get the Bomb Off My Back" suggested that science fiction had become bored with the post-nuclear scenario and begun depicting a more realistic near future vision (Sterling 1991). Popular film quickly turned its attention to the blighted urban core. Nuclear apocalypse — since the Cold War a favorite narrative prop — was given up in favor of vaguer catastrophes that brought about slow decay, decadence, and ruination in a racially marked urban setting (Sponsler).

There is an important distinction to be made between the films that narrate a post-apocalypse story and the films that leave the audience with a more ambiguous description of what disaster has left the world in decrepitude. Claire Sponsler describes the indeterminacy of the bad near future succinctly:

> *In cyberpunk, angst and ambivalence are replaced by acceptance of the ruined state of the landscape; destruction of the natural environment and decay of the urban zone are givens that are not lamented but rather accepted. There is no reflection on the past that caused the apocalypse and little on the future that lies beyond it.* (Sponsler,p.253)

As Sponsler describes it, the lack of specificity given to the blighted urban backdrop strips the destruction of any moral or epistemological

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import; rumination derives from "off-stage cataclysms" of "profound indifference."

A response to the impreciseness Sponsler identifies would be to consider the specificity of present day urbanity extrapolated into the "non-nuclear scenario" near future science fiction film. What, precisely, makes it possible to use urban blight as a plausible setting for near future film?

Representations of present day racial turmoil create the backdrop for decrepit urban settings in film. Conversely, one could argue that the problem of racial tension is the largest challenge to imagining a hospitable future urban space. It is not racial turmoil presented explicitly as such, but rather implications of this tension that can be read through poverty, decadence, and decay, which signify anxieties around the problem of racial difference in an urban context. Notably, little attention has been paid to interrogating the racial economy of near future science fiction film.[13] This is surprising given the disposition of science-fiction to extrapolate contemporary living to the future; it would seem that the implied critique of contemporary urban space would draw some attention. Science fiction is a valuable discourse that helps to make sense of present conditions and, possibly, to put things on the track *away* from cybernetic gloom. A race-conscious theorization of science fiction would then allude to ways out of

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13 For the purposes of this paper I have limited the scope of my analysis to film which, of course, does a great disservice to the contributions of science-fiction literature that respond to

the purgatory it depicts as the urban future. If, as some theorists maintain, science fiction film operates "instrumentally," "operating within a network of meanings...which extends beyond the films themselves" in the expression, enactment, and production of ideologies, then it is crucial to theorize how race is constituted in the fictional urban future (Kuhn 1990). Which is to say that it is high time for a cultural critique of science fiction that audits the representation of people of color in a way that responds to the challenge of imagining urban futures that run against the current grain of despair and racism.

Such a comprehensive critique is of course beyond the scope of this chapter. At this point I am interested in asking more formative questions about race as it figures in the representation of urban dystopias and utopias. Much recent science fiction film, including the two films I include in this analysis, include components of both utopia and dystopia, thus making the inquiry problematic. A grounding feature, though, is that they similarly articulate apprehension of particularly racialized social identities (Wolmark 1994). Given this, I will look — all too briefly — at recent films that represent urban and world purgatory as contingent upon questions of race and ethnicity.

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the ideological, political, social and economic specificity of race. I am specifically thinking of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delaney's works.

Demolition Man

Marco Brambilla's film *Demolition Man* (1993) begins in Los Angeles in the year 1996—a criminally-infested urban hell with para-military law enforcement. Simon Phoenix (Wesley Snipes) is a maniacal criminal sentenced to a deep freeze incarceration of indeterminate duration. In the year 2032 he is reanimated, only to find himself in the Los Angeles of the future, now known as San Angeles—a benign, albeit fascist, "New Age" society where foul language is ticketed like illegal parking, violence is indescribable, and advertising jingles from the 1980s and 1990s are a favorite "retro" musical genre. Through these narrative features, San Angeles is presented as an ironical incarnation of the utopic future.

In the first few moments of Phoenix's post-incarceration parole hearing, he manages to unshackle himself from his restraining harness and to commit three homicides, the first in 16 years. Here we see the corruption of the "perfect" — if fascist — future urban space at the hands of the African-American criminal. Thus, Phoenix brings the most racially marked notions of criminality to the mid-twenty-first century, disrupting the totalitarian and technocratic utopic urbanity of perfect order and efficient similarity.

As the drama unfolds, we find that San Angeles' ordered polis is threatened by a cadre of underground rebels who defy its strict codes of morality and proper conduct. Even in this (outwardly) heavenly vision of the urban future, the menace to society is the differentiated element: in

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Demolition Man represented mostly as people of color, living in the catacombs of San Angeles that were once the streets of Los Angeles. The rebels' style, desires, and sensibilities are flatly incommensurate with the predominant ideology of San Angeles' surface world; as such, the rebels are marginalized to the city's sewers.

   Demolition Man's depiction of what counts as dystopia obtains in the threat posed by a differentiated Other which cracks through the orderly surface of a white suburban fantasy. This is the ever present problematic of orderly social structures insofar as it cloaks the symptomatic contradictions lurking liminally below the surface. In the end of the film, the order of San Angeles topples upon its own inherent fissures, and the underground rebels rise to the surface in celebration, promising to whoop it up with cold beers, festive gunshots, and plenty of graffiti—back to the good old bad times of the 1990's. Such a jubilant return to the comfort of our historical present runs against the grain of such science fiction films as *Blade Runner*, in which the future returns to the present only in the form of a commentary on the destructive force of racism.

Blade Runner

   Ridley Scott's vision of the future Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* read into the threat of a nightmarish urban space, rooted not in the threat of nuclear annihilation, as was familiar in early 1980s science fiction dystopias, but in the threat of nonhomogenous communities. Far too little attention has been paid to the dense polyethnic hybridity of the street zones below the Tyrell

Corporation.14 These zones that are the salient determinants of future

technodystopia, determined by what must be read as a fear of

nonhomogenous ethnic and racial markers.

In order to capture an othered backdrop for the *Blade Runner* street

zones, the production team relied on top-notch consultants and advisors.15

The texture the film sought to convey was one of cultural hybridity,

exoticism, and dark regions splashed with burning neon light. Mixing these

elements allowed the designers to extrapolate a compelling and plausible

depiction of contemporary Los Angeles into the future. In order to achieve

this pessimistic vision of LA, the design team situated their imaginative skills

over the "Third World":

> *It was sort of an exotic, technological interpretation of a Third*
> *World kind of country, in a way. So everything looked sort of junky*
> *because you had to add things to it constantly to make it work.* [16]

As represented in the film, then, the future urban purgatory is precisely

the place a white imaginary would associate with people of color—the "Third

World.". An "exotic" space — with the marks of ethnicity suggested by the

Third World — is one that is often attributed to the dilapidated inner city. It

is a space that evokes a sense of nervous tension, claustrophobia, and fear

for one's life and property. It is also a space that often counts as dystopic,

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14 Mike Davis makes this point in *(Davis 1992),* specifically with respect to the polyethnicity represented in *Blade Runner*.

15 Designers of the filmic ambience included Ridley Scott (besides being a film director he is also an artist and graduate of The Royal College of Art), Lawrence G. Paull, and the industrial designer Syd Mead (credited as the film's "visual futurist").

particularly from the vantage point of a white outsider who would read the imagery as exotic and unfamiliar. This is not a new image of urban despair; its representation as the plausible future of urban street zones is, though, flatly nihilistic This dystopic space of panic and nihilism is precisely the effect orchestrated in the street scenes of *Blade Runner*.

The plight of the replicants provides the central thread that weaves the film's narrative. Replicants, built by the ominous Tyrell Corporation, are genetically engineered androids designed as a supplementary compulsory labor force for dangerous work on the "off world" asteroid-mining sites. We learn that they are seen as a threat to life on earth and are hence banned as "illegal aliens" and restricted to their work zones. The illegal status of the replicants is a curious allusion to the problem of "illegal immigration," particularly in the context of the film's setting in Los Angeles. That *Blade Runner* raises the specter of a different sort of illegal immigration is interesting by itself; that these future illegals are represented as Anglo, even Aryan, is far more provocative. It is also a reminder that invoking the rhetoric of "illegal alien" only thinly veils fears of difference through the threat imposed by an integrated, ordered social body.

An analysis of the whiteness through which an illegal immigrant acquires meaning in *Blade Runner* must take note of the mechanism by which distinctively othered signifiers — the notion of the illegal immigrant and the differentiated social element — are grafted onto an apparent whiteness.

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16 Audio tape transcript of an interview with Syd Mead, distributed by Marco Barla and

What sticks out oddly from the replicants is the manner in which these signifiers of otherness graft onto replicants who have characteristics distinctive of such otherness, notably, their remarkably white features. The replicants are slave labor, sent to interstellar outposts to perform menial and dangerous work, fight wars and perform the services of sex workers. In this way, their social and class status marks them as non-white in the context of colonialism and slavery.

A peculiar tension is invoked when the audience is simultaneously reminded of these sort of signifiers while, at the same time, the replicants we see in the film are all white. This, is the mechanism by which race is invoked through the presence of an absence. First there is the invocation of some distinguishing signifiers of otherness (illegals, rebels, slave laborers) which is then veiled by powerful visual signifiers of whiteness. We will see this same sort of mechanism of eliding race in the analysis of SimCity2000™.

What I have tried to show is how many popular images of the future of urban space pivot the distinction between utopia and dystopia on the category of race. What counts as urban dystopia is represented by a kind of tension, hatred, and criminality that is heavily racialized. Similarly, utopia is that which excludes the possibility of considering racial and ethnic difference as a salient characteristic of urban experience. Although always, as suggested in *Demolition Man* and *Blade Runner*, lurking absent-mindedly

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Associates, Inc. to promote the film, cited in (Deutelbaum 1989).

below the narrative structure of such utopic aspirations as, for instance, a Los Angeles free from the contingencies of urban racism, or a race of beings designed as a compulsory labor force, is the presence of race as a social category; an absent presence that acquires meaning through the long history of discriminatory practices. The absent mindedness of such a logic refers to the inability to summon forth a coherent articulation of the place of racism in an urban context. Such is the difficulty of talking about an urbanity free from racism, as racism has become an integral and necessary component of urbanity itself. In its specificity, racism in an urban context neither preceeds the urban experience, nor stems from it, but has become, in complex ways, a force of coexistence of urban social relations.

SimCity2000™ and the Virtual City

Urban dystopias as represented in science fiction film provide a plausible, if discouraging, extrapolation of contemporary urban conditions and lend credibility to the narratives. The dystopic urban backdrop provides a compelling filmic setting for the rough edge of these films because the contemporary urban inner core has been represented in the discourse of urban decline as a tense and threatening space. What makes the films so plausible and compelling is the discourse of urban decline, which suggests that racial tension, if left unchecked, will only increase and bring about

these dystopic images. The "Negro problem" is the harbinger of the bad,

dystopic future (Beauregard 1993). Racism runs deep, particularly in the US,

and might indeed count as an institution with a firm grounding that will not

soon be uprooted. As Beauregard notes, the city is often represented as

condemned and beyond the point of saving:

> *Not surprisingly, given the great alarm and fear generated by inner-city riots, fiscal instability, and the combination of federal governmental inattention and local government ineffectiveness, numerous commentators went beyond merely representing the cities as simply decayed. For them, the cities were doomed (Beauregard 1993,p.198)*

Precisely because of its dogged unsolvability it seems certain that the

problem of racism and urban decline will bring the city to the decrepit vision

depicted in science fiction film.

What makes the simulation game SimCity2000™ so attractive is that it

presents the player with the opportunity to address urban decline, albeit

with only oblique references to the racial dynamics of this crisis. Players,

when aware of the general representation of cities as a site of profound

predicament (and scarcely anyone would be unaware of this representation),

are able to boldly face a challenge that has thwarted the strategies of urban

planners, politicians, civil rights activists and presidents. SimCity2000™ allows

players to confront this threatening, doomed social space from the comfort

of their own home computer. The game is also an experiment that involves

analytic thinking, strategy, ingenuity, creativity, and savvy aesthetic design.

SimCity2000™'s compelling graphics allow players to build dazzling cityscapes

that can be whimsical, outlandish or practical depending on the player's preference and skill.

Finally, then, SimCity2000™ is a technosemiotic workstation that provides good fun in the form of a puzzle that complexly articulates the contingencies of urban social space through technology. But, in order to remain true to the form of the puzzle, a solution must reside somewhere. Which is to say that whether or not the puzzle can be completed (in the plain sense), there must be the opportunity to reach some sort of closure — a state of the puzzle where some useful meaning about the situation being pondered may be extracted, thus revealing some previously unknown insight apropos to the epistemological context proper to the puzzle. A precise analysis of the ways in which players make meaning of their engagement with the game will have to wait for a richer ethnographic analysis. Nevertheless, through SimCity2000™'s various features it is possible to draw attention to the meanings of urban space that are offered with more urging than other possible meanings.

SimCity2000™ manages to construct a set of features, such as managing a budget and building an infrastructure of industrial, commercial and residential regions, through which the player may articulate a personal response to the impasse posed by the larger and more general discourse of urban decline. What is curious about SimCity2000™ is that it does not explicitly address the contingencies of the racial dimension of urban crisis; but my argument here is that the game need not do so to still count as

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challenging. The discourse of the racial dimension of urban decline since the early 1960s has been so far-reaching that city management is *about* managing this decline, whether the racial context is explicit or not.

In what follows I will consider the way SimCity2000™ is able to make possible a utopic urban space in its explicit erasure of the category of race. I should say from the outset that I am not interested in criticizing the game *per se*. Rather my intent is to use SimCity2000™ — a notable popular cultural artifact — as a lens through which to see what might count as an urban utopia and how this utopia is articulated through the discourse of urban decline.

This is also a project about making some sense of what are loosely called "virtual worlds" technologies. As I mentioned earlier, SimCity2000™ is a simulation technology, one that provides worlds that may be inhabited and created by the imagination of the game player. For many players this is an accurate, robust and realistic simulation of the contingencies of urban space. The larger question, and one that this chapter will orbit, asks how a simulation like this comes to count as "realistic" despite its explicit denial of a crucial category of the object it purports to simulate.

The Challenge of the Virtual City

Playing SimCity2000™ is somewhat of a challenging task, although familiarity with what counts as urban space makes it less than daunting. Indeed, from my own experience and from insights of other players, the

game is quite engaging. There are two ways to start a game: one may either start from scratch, "terraforming" a terrain, adding forest groves, waterways, lakes, and hills, or one can start with a predesigned game—either one of those included with the package or one exchanged from another player. In the former case the stage of terraforming is followed by constructing initial "zoned" regions that will sprout loosely or densely packed commercial, industrial, or residential areas. As with the other elements that create the infrastructure of the city, zoning costs money and is paid for out of the city's municipal budget. Some of the prepackaged cities, including ones found archived on computers throughout the Internet, give the players the opportunity to try their hands at managing (or decimating) real cities such as New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Seattle, London, Philadelphia, and Chicago.[17] These cities are designed carefully to replicate the terrain and building clusters of the actual cities.

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[17] These cities and others are available in the form of expansion packs that can be downloaded or purchased and opened from within SimCity2000. Many players also create their own fanciful cities and make them available in such ways.

Figure 7 SimCity2000 – Detail of a London Simulation

Visually, the game is notable for its compelling detail. Buildings, roads, cars, even small figures representing citizens of the sim-city are all visible and animated. The point of view that the player has is what's refered to as "isometric," which is as if a god's eye view originated at the location of the sun at 2pm. This angle gives structures in the city a sense of three-dimensional depth, while also making it possible to represent the various layers of infrastructure of a city, such as underground sewers and subways.

Travel is particularly important in SimCity2000™. After zoning a few initial regions, the player must lay down some means of transit. Typically, roads are built as the principle means of transit, although railways and underground subway systems provide alternative forms. These transportation modes must

be designed carefully and with some foresight as a haphazard knot of roads spells only disaster for traffic.

After an initial network of roads or rail is constructed, the next stage is to build a power grid. The player has multiple options for the sorts of power plants to be constructed, including coal, hydroelectric, oil, gas, wind, solar, nuclear, with microwave and fusion being the two speculative, science fictional power sources. The variety of power plants allows the player to experiment with possible powering schemes and to express his or her ecological sensibilities. Constructing the power grid entails placing (and paying) for a power plant, then weaving a network of power lines that feed into each of the previously zoned regions.

At this stage of play the city is simply a terrain with a transportation system, a functioning power plant, and a power grid. If all of the main, initial infrastructural challenges have been met, residents will start building houses and apartment buildings; factories, warehouses and office buildings will be constructed; and shopping malls, movie theaters, bed and breakfasts and churches will appear.

Although the city is now "alive," so to speak, keeping it contained in this modest state is not nearly as exciting as pushing it to see where its limits lie. The player will almost certainly want to explore the myriad possible game elements. At the infrastructural level, building a bus, rail, or subway system can be a quite rewarding (and quite expensive) means to meet the challenge of commuting efficiency and combating pollution from private cars. There

are also the options of building a high-speed freeway; opening an airport or seaport; installing a water system complete with pumps, desalinization plants and water towers; and constructing parks, stadiums, marinas, schools and colleges, hospitals, museums, libraries, and zoos, all appropriately priced. These optional elements open up the possibilities of investigating possible urban designs, with the experimental results indicated by the prosperity of the city and its residents.

From the perspective of the player, who is given the title of mayor — but is more properly an autocrat — building an elaborate and prosperous infrastructure determines how successfully the city avoids the perils of urban decline. If the residents are employed, healthy, and well-educated, and have venues for leisure, the mayor's popularity ratings only increase, an indicator that the player has averted decline. Should the categories of prosperity be deficient, decline is imminent—ratings drop, the population becomes restless and complains, and, in extreme cases, residents will take to the streets and riot.

The player has a large catalog of surveys and indicators to determine the degree of prosperity for the city and its residents. Indeed, a significant portion of play can be spent sifting through the many tables, charts and maps that register the levels of particular social and economic indicators, which include GNP, unemployment, average education levels, population, traffic, pollution, employment in industry or commerce, land value, and

prime lending rates, among other metrics. Throughout engagement with the game, the players receive feedback on their accomplishments, or lack thereof, through avenues other than graphs and charts of the city's status. Newspapers give the players feedback on their progress and reveal various goings-on in the city, including unemployment, status of the educational system, complaints on traffic, crime and taxes, weather, disaster reports, and so forth. Adding to the realistic nature of the game, the newspapers also include "international" reports that, finally, have no direct bearing on the affairs of the city. "Extra!"s also appear in case of a suitably newsworthy event, such as a "natural" disaster or crime wave.

Economic viability is measured not only by the size of the municipal budget, but also by the amount of money garnered from taxes. This, like the detail provided in the aforementioned graphs and tables, is quite extensively determined. The player must decide individual tax rates for residential, commercial, and industrial property, as well as for specific industries such as aerospace, electronics, petrochemicals, steel and mining, finance, travel and many others. This can be tricky business, as over-taxing any particular industries can result in their failure or departure from the city, with a consequent increase in unemployment. There are also the usual alternative means of financing the city, including the issuing of bonds, which, of course, must be paid back with interest.

Funding and budgeting the city is complex, but even more so when it soon becomes obvious that in order to grow, add zones, and develop novel

infrastructural objects, plenty of money is required. Notably, not too long after the game was released players found a cheat function (called an "Easter egg" in the idiom of computer game aficionados, for the elaborate and sustained "hunt-and-find" computer hacking required to find it) that adds $500,000 to the budget each time it is engaged. Considering that a typical SimCity2000™ game begins with a budget of roughly $50,000, this extra cash leverages the game in the player's favor quite significantly.[18] The cheat is also a way to insure that the city is never challenged by fiscal burdens and easily meets the demands and needs of the population.

Managing the city can be an arduous task, not just from an infrastructural and economic perspective, but also from a policy standpoint. Referendums and ordinances can be introduced that either directly enhance economic viability (e.g., legalized gambling, sales tax, and parking fines), increase the welfare of residents (nuclear bans, literacy campaigns, smoking bans, free clinics and neighborhood watch groups), or promote the city (annual carnivals, city beautification and travel advertising.) Each has its cost and it is up to the players to determine how the introduction of an ordinance might make sense in their own particular gaming strategy.

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18 As with most cheats, a discourse of "purity" has developed with players complaining about others "cheating" to construct elaborate cities—a form of censorship that restricts "cheat cities" from being entered in contests.

Figure 8 Detail of a Monster "Disaster" in London

Another challenging and "realistic" feature of the game is the occurrence of disasters, which range from fires, floods, air crashes, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes, nuclear meltdowns, riots, to the occasional destructive romping of a godzilla-like Monster. Players must respond accordingly, such as by dispatching the police to round up rabble-rousers, in the case of riots. Each disaster is prompted by appropriate and specific conditions partially or wholly out of the payer's control. For instance, climatic disasters are determined by the weather, which the player has no influence, while riots may be precipitated by high crime, unemployment, or a heat wave. Once the disaster has subsided or been appropriately responded to, the player must rebuild the infrastructure of the disaster area.

As this description suggests, playing SimCity2000™ can be a challenging full-time job. There is seldom the chance to merely sit back and watch things happen, as budgets must be balanced, disasters contended with, and residents appeased. This constant burden is an integral part of SimCity2000™'s challenge; in order for the game to realistically simulate city management it must, in one way or another, emulate its salient aspects—in this case, its laboriousness. As will be described in the latter part of this chapter, other far less mundane challenges — such as addressing oneself to the problems associated with racial difference in the city — are expressed through nervously suggestive traces of their presence. Much as the signifiers of racial difference graft absent-mindedly onto the replicants in *Blade Runner*, SimCity2000™ invokes the possible presence of people of color through the *presence of an absence* of such a possibility, whereby signifiers of otherness are thinly veiled by a particular whiteness that constitutes and structures the possibility of otherness. In the case of SimCity2000™, otherness is that which lies outside of the whiteness evoked by suggestive middle-class imagery, like bed and breakfasts, shopping malls, and marinas.

SimCity2000™'s Utopia

What counts as the "ideal" urban environment? An idealist dream might make the assumption that, soon enough, the latent possibilities of technology would realize its full potential and individual needs, wants, and desires would be satiated. These dreams of a technological delight would

have erased the contingencies of class and racial conflict and the roots of competition for material needs.

Like most of the other Maxis™ games — SimLife™, SimEarth™, SimAnt™, SimFarm™, SimHealth™, and SimCityClassic™ — SimCity2000™ is pitched as educational. Unlike in the typical shoot-'em-up computer game, there is no pre-determined goal to capture a homicidal maniac or kung fu one's way to a martial arts championship. Playing SimCity2000™ is meant to be an instructive experiment, a study in strategic thinking, or simply good fun (Abate 1994). Nevertheless, despite the game's lack of an explicit goal, it seems clear that the players' implied objective is to create the most fantastic and beautiful city possible.[19]

As stated earlier, SimCity2000™ does not suppose that urban spaces of a plausible future will be without their points of contention, but that these contingencies do not construct a dystopic urbanity. According to the narrative logic of SimCity2000™, the city of the future will be fraught with the problems typical of urban living. In the game, such problems are representative of what one might expect in a city context. For instance, it simply does not seem plausible that a future urban space will be free of such things as traffic jams, mediocre education, unresponsive emergency services, water shortages and unemployment. Indeed, it would be hard to take SimCity2000™ seriously if it did not force the player to labor with just these

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19 There have been worldwide contests for the most beautifully designed and elaborate cities and more are sure to come. In one book on SimCity2000™, color photographs feature some truly amazing designs — see (Dargahi 1994).

sorts of contingencies, particularly for how they help narrate a sense that one is really simulating the contingencies of the city. This is not to say that SimCity2000™ does not offer the player more challenging crises to handle Although traffic, a problem that is actually impossible to solve in the game, is one of the more perpetual emergencies that occur; a whole menu, literally, of potential disasters haunt the player.[20,21]

Although the last time a monster invaded a city might be hard to document, it can still be safely argued that the disasters in SimCity2000™ round out a seemingly full imaginary of urban living and provide a degree of realism that makes the game that much more engaging.

Disasters also serve to delineate the absent-minded invocations of race with respect to the white imaginary, which obtains explicitly in SimCity2000™. For instance, the intractability of traffic problems might be thought of as a stand-in for racial tension; traffic thus provides an incessant, nagging dilemma that resists the most determined player's efforts to derive a solution. In SimCity2000™, traffic is arguably an acceptable proxy for the incessant, nagging problems that arise because of many peoples' inability to accept those others who are racial or socially different from themselves. Disasters draw a line between elements outside of the order of human social

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20 It may be that the problem of traffic is the more insistent crisis and, indeed, unsolvable in *SimCity2000*™; players must simply try their best to stay one step ahead of a general infrastructural failure. This speaks to the sort of verisimilitude I am addressing. The representation of traffic congestion as simply something that must be handled, not eradicated, is a more or less accurate representation of how traffic problems are understood.

life — most plainly, the eventualities of phenomena proper to nature, like floods, tornados, and earthquakes — and elements tightly bundled to the social experience of a smoothly functioning urbanity invested heavily with a white urban imaginary: industry, commercial business, and productive, prosperous residential lives. From this perspective, airplane crashes and nuclear meltdowns fit more comfortably under the menu of natural disasters insofar as they belong *outside* of an ordered, efficient social structure, which necessarily situates such calamities as contradictory to the desire for an efficient and prosperous urban life. Similarly, riots firmly organize the boundary between the white imaginary and the other. Falling in alongside those eventualities coupled resolutely to nature-as-outsider, riots are carefully and expediently oriented outside the fold of an ordered urban social lifestyle. Monsters, perhaps the most telling disaster, serve as a catalyst for the constitution of otherness in SimCity2000™ to the extent that they suggest both a wrathful supernatural response to the evils of humanity and the wickedness associated with deviation from the norms that structure an ordered social fabric.

Although SimCity2000™ manages a carefully articulated distinction between what counts as a component of the ordered urban experience and what lies outside it, certain contradictions to this order stick out conspicuously. Notably, the apparently white urban imaginary that undergirds the possible SimCity2000™ worlds — complete with bed-and-

21 When disasters are turned completely off—one of the advantages of playing city mayor in

breakfasts, shopping malls, and private automobiles — belies the experience of anyone who has explored a city, which typically involves a melange of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. In this regard, what proves most paradoxical is the simultaneity of such an unrealistically homogenous account of urbanity and the impressions of many players who describe the game as one of the more realistic simulation games they have experienced.[22] Invoking certain key signifiers of salient urban features — features considered too controversial for an explicit accounting — without categorically acknowledging them, the game laminates the connotative aspects of these features onto itself; thus SimCity2000™ invokes traces of a richer, more complete and realistic image of urbanity. Although there are a number of aspects of the game that, when subject to analysis, constitute this kind of paradox or contradiction, riots serve as a clear and revealing example of the presence of racial difference through its very absence.

The Virtual Riot

In its constitution of an urban imaginary anchored to a perceivably homogenous, utopic, racially unmarked whiteness, SimCity2000™ distinguishes itself from recent and prominent representations of the city. SimCity2000™ proved an exception to the dearth of habitable visions of urban life in the

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a computer simulation—growth of the city continues unfettered by annoying riots or floods.

22 In the early 1990s, there was a dialogue amongst players on the Usenet Newsgroup *comp.sys.mac.games* and the electronic newsletter *sim-list* about discussions of the full line of Maxis simulation games. The extent to which SimCity2000™ is accepted as a compelling and

early 1990s. Following decades of federal neglect, topped off by 12 years of Reagan-Bush, visions of urban living were decidedly bleak. SimCity2000™'s utopia, complete with New Age background music, is simply at odds with the images of urban space produced in popular representational mediums such as near future science fiction film.

Given that most of the constituent elements of what a city means must necessarily be addressed by a simulation that counts as realistic, it is important to consider the peculiar ways in which race figures into SimCity2000™. This is to say that SimCity2000™ does not (and could not and still appear realistic) deny the saliency of racial difference in an urban context, but rather that it apprehensively suggests the contingencies of race through the possible occurrence of such racially marked contingencies as riots.

Figure 9 SimCity2000 Detail of a Protest/Riot

utilitarian simulation of urban space is undergirded by its use by some urban planners, both as an experimental and pedogogical tool.

When considering the realism of each of the disasters offered in SimCity2000™, riots stand out as particularly dependent on a social and, in the dim shadow of the LA uprisings, a racial contextualization.[23] SimCity2000™, though, offers no explicit acknowledgment of race or ethnicity. Despite the complex associations between race, ethnicity, class and the phenomenon of urban uprisings, riots in SimCity2000™ are explicitly "raceless." It would seem then that in SimCity2000™'s utopian idiom, riots, as long as they are not "race riots," are one of the plausible artifacts of a "realistic" utopia. Of course urban riot *implies* a riot due to racial, ethnic or class strife. This implication is leveraged in the simulation — the explicit acknowledgment of the origins of urban riots need not be made. Such an implication summons forth the rich history and meaning of urban unrest without having to map such meanings directly onto the game.

Presenting riots as divorced from a racial context performs what Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller call "disaggregation", a "narrative technique that narrows the perception of the range of illegitimate racial power by divorcing particular episodes from their larger social context"(Crenshaw and Peller 1993). Disaggregation, as Crenshaw and Peller describe, was the technique employed by the defense when the video tape of Rodney King being beaten was shown as a sequence of freeze-frames or

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23 It should be noted that the decision to introduce riots as a disaster was a last-minute one, perhaps, I might speculate, in a suggestive response to the contingencies of the uprisings

"isolated stills" that could be "reinterpreted through a benign narrative of justification." In SimCity2000™ a similar sort of re-interpretative strategy is made possible when the riots are given no explicit racial context. The conditions that trigger a riot include high heat, high crime, and high unemployment, all desperate allusions to life in the inner city ghetto. Through the disaggregation of race, the player is able to construct a more "benign" narrative justification, all the while the specter of a racial context remains implicit.

The meanings of a riot are themselves constructed through ideology, politics and power, all of which are threaded together in a narrative that, for each individual player, invests riots with particular meanings. In the context of SimCity2000™, riots must not mean "race riots" in order that the city simulation count both as pleasant and as a puzzle unhampered by such "insolvable" problems as racial tension. Indeed, when one looks closely at the rioters marching about his or her sim-city, it becomes apparent that the placard-carrying agitators are more properly *protesters*, which suggests remonstrative liberal democratic display, rather than the spontaneity associated with civil unrest in an urban setting. Although the protesters become intemperate and can only be disbanded with the aid of police and fire services, even under the racially marked banner of Riot one must note the manner in which the game insists on anchorage in particular ideologies and values exclusive of an explicit audit of racial difference.

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that flashed across the United States in response to the not-guilty verdicts of the LA police

What is important to consider is that the simulation provides a compelling ground upon which to fantasize a hospitable urbanity, and anything that might intervene in the fantasy may be absent-mindedly ignored. So, for instance, if imagining one's sim-city as harboring a disenfranchised, angry, tense throng of people of color disrupts the fantasy, the reinterpretation of what the riots might mean (e.g.as simply the outcome of a non-race-specific unemployment) allows the fantasy to continue unabated. This is to say that a specifically utopic fantasy of urban space is precisely that which demands racial and ethnic homogeneity. The most troubling insight is that riots in SimCity2000™, stripped of an important social contextualization, get to count as realistic.

As I have described, part of the uneasy tension around questions of race and ethnicity is precisely that explicit depictions of these categories are avoided. The game yields to *implications* of the racial and ethnic predicament of urban space. Riots in the game, for instance, cannot but be considered as a response to the uprisings following Rodney King, not to mention the long history of urban riots contingent upon the problem of class-based, racial and ethnic strife. Relying on the player's recent experience and knowledge of the racial and ethnic specificity of urban riots allows the game to avoid an explicit acknowledgment of these categories much less than their interaction. This is the situation where the uneasy and

officers accused of beating motorist Rodney King.(Dargahi, p. 282.)

nervous tension I am discussing manifests itself. An explicit acknowledgment might be deemed too risky for the designers of SimCity2000™; *implying* the specificity of race and ethnicity allows for simulated riots and, hence, a realistic virtual city.

Conclusion

Few twentieth century artifacts are as able to cloak the turmoil around race as well as technology, particularly simulation technologies. Revealing the ways in which technology is always already a question of the manufacture of social relations like race, gender, and ethnicity is no easy task as, conceptually, technology is not often understood as one of many analytic tools employed in the interpretation of the very worlds within which these social relations inhere. This interpretive mechanism proper to technology might be understood as "making meaning" insofar as certain technological tools like SimCity2000™, produce renderings of the world that are then interpreted in complex ways by the technology user. These meanings graft onto the user's knowledge about the rendered worlds and, at the human-machine interface where interpretation and meaning-making occurs, the user constructs new and developed stories whose narrative orbit is elliptically bound to the seduction of technology. At the same time that SimCity2000™ restructures the player's knowledge and understanding of city dynamics, the player's prior knowledge of urban space becomes an integral part of shaping the structure and meaning of the simulated city.

In a player's entanglement with a SimCity2000™ simulation, meaning is produced that beyond that which can be created by the logic of a computer's program. The player's prior assumptions, experiences, understandings of the city are intricately and inextricably weaved amongst the computer code and its "output" manifestations — visual, aural, experiential. My argument has been that *race happens amongst the entanglement of computer code and the player* — this is the place where the city simulation takes on meaning.

In a 1994 article in the *Village Voice*, Mark Schone describes SimCity2000™'s instrumentalized logic as ignoring the contingencies of race (Schone 1994). Although Schone provides a compelling analysis of the ideology that inheres in the game, he does not consider that playing SimCity2000™ might produce other interpretations (or what it might mean to have contrasting interpretations) even as he acknowledges the enormous number of people who play the game. Schone's analysis only considers the logic of the game's programming. In contradiction to this particular point, my argument is that SimCity2000™ only takes on full meaning at the user interface, in the player's engagement where his or her understanding of what the city means fills out the shallow SimCity2000™ narratives of urban riots.

There is an important and necessary mechanism by which race and ethnicity are evoked that requires a particular absent mindedness on the

part of the player; a rich analysis of this mechanism would yield important insights as to the manner in which technologies kin to SimCity2000™ facilitate self-evidently realistic renderings of their virtual worlds. As I have suggested herein, such a mechanism relies on a particular illusion operating between the player and the game, at the interface between the human and the machine. The crucial illusion facilitated by these kinds of technologies is *not* their ability to render the object of analysis in a sufficiently complex and hence "accurate" or "realistic" manner. Rather, the illusion proper to the technosemiotic workstation consists in a mechanism of displacement, for instance, the displacement of racial markings onto other things in such a way as to present race, a necessary component of the city, through its absence. In SimCity2000™, this is the illusion that undergirds the simulation's verisimilitude.

It is from this perspective that one can fruitfully determine the ideological stakes of the technosemiotic workstation. Too often in the analysis of virtual worlds technologies criticism focuses on the way a kind of "false consciousness" is constructed, whereby the virtual world represents a masked and mediated version of "real social relations." Schone's analysis of SimCity2000™ is an example of this kind of analytic tack, wherein the problematic proper to virtual realities is their ability to insidiously mask the "real" world. Although this approach reveals the apparent contradictions in the gap between what the virtual world describes and what we "really" know to be "true," what remains wanting is an analysis of why, specifically,

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people rely on, actively engage in, and, particularly in the case of SimCity2000™, enjoy such virtual worlds. What is suggested in this essay is the manner in which SimCity2000™ provides a space that accommodates the fantasy of a living space free of the contradictions that inhere in the city. These contradictions and inconsistencies may be explicitly overlooked in the interests of expediently organizing the enjoyable experience of imagining a city unhindered by the complexities associated with racial difference.

Herein lies the ideology that undergirds the "reality effect" of SimCity2000™: despite the fact that the game avoids a *denotative* nod to racial or ethnic difference, there exist enough game elements to compel the player to absent-mindedly *connote* the existence of racial difference such that the game appears to be an accurate and "realistic" city simulation. In other words, the game avoids a direct confrontation with the issue of urban racial problems, yet maintains its urban verisimilitude by oblique references to the possibility that such problems lie latent within the structure of the game. The fatal flaw in analyses of "virtual" technologies occurs in Schone's chapter: an emphasis is placed on the machine side of the human-machine interface, the moment before a player is allowed to make some sense of the game. Such analyses highlight the ideology of a purely artifactual structure — that of a piece of computer code — rather than the content of thought that leads the player to produce meaning. In SimCity2000™ it is the player's engagement with the program that reveals the ideology supporting the

game's realistic qualities. While Schone maintains that the game is incomplete for its failure to account for race, I would hold fast to the argument that the game must be complete, if only because it appears so to an enormous number of those who play it. Still, and despite the compelling verisimilitude of the game, SimCity2000™'s completeness lies on fissured ground to the extent that it does not address racial difference in a manner as forthrightly as many of us would desire. But one can *not* say that it simply and plainly *misses* the category of race; race is misplaced, yet latent.

Thus, the ideology that undergirds the almost pernicious "reality effect" of SimCity2000™ is such that the game "presents" a totality set on effacing the traces of its own possibility, rather than, as Schone contends, a flawed or incomplete partiality that overlooks the totality of social relations, including those introduced by racial difference. In other words, SimCity2000™'s avoidance of a direct and forthright articulation of race in an urban context would seem to precipitate its own failure as an accurate simulation of the city.[24] Yet for many it does count as an accurate simulation and, hence, maintains its structural completeness. From this perspective the deleterious side of the game, the aspect that turns its back on the struggles against racism, is its ability to quietly and effectively erase the category of racial difference while still appearing realistic.

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24 Schone takes to the extreme the game's *possible* failure and argues that its attempt to simulate a city fails. Adding some precision to his analysis, I might say that it is not the *game's* failure (as any discussion of a game must necessarily take stock of the player's engagement), but the actual program code that fails to compile the feature of race.

Finally then, the ideology of SimCity2000™ resides within its mechanism of making a city that facilitates the *possibility* of its own unmaking while still appearing to be an accurate and realistic portrayal of the city. Such an unmaking would obtain were basic social "antagonisms" truly not featured in any guise or representation (e.g., if there were no traffic, riots, disasters, no police to combat crime, etc.) Were no social antagonisms present, the game would collapse upon itself as there would be no challenge; indeed, it would be impossible to describe such an antagonism-free structure as a city. If, according to Schone's analysis, SimCity2000™ is structurally distinct from what one knows to be the "real" city, why do players engross themselves with it as if it were like a "real" city? Why doesn't SimCity2000™ fall apart under the weight of its own flaws and inconsistencies? Because of the symptomatic traces of antagonism—the traces of racial difference invoked through their effacement, through their absence; thus, through the long shadow cast by riots, the player absent-mindedly maintains the structure of the sim-city in such a way as to make it appear homologous to the antagonism-fraught "real" city.

Throughout this chapter, a distinction is implied between those technological artifacts that are limited in the scope of their cultural import and those that intervene resoundingly in important debates where such antagonism puts lives on the line. Hidden within this analysis is an argument stating the impracticality of considering technology as a disinterested

window through which objective interpretation of the world may be produced. Through the trope of the technosemiotic workstation, technology must be thought of as a weaving together of the technology user's knowledge — one's experiences, politics and desires — that, finally, creates worlds. But it is not simply the large-scale "big science" technologies — such as the Space Shuttle, Biosphere II, or the Stealth bomber — that must be considered as producers of worldly meanings. To a significant extent cultural artifacts like video games, which have become *de facto* trappings of the living room entertainment center, are both technologies *and* producers of cultural meaning. Which is to say that video games, of which SimCity2000™ is but one example, cannot be considered as simply diversions or, in more normative terms, just toys. Video games are complex cultural artifacts consumed by huge numbers of people from an incredibly large range of socioeconomic backgrounds.25 To consider video games as artifacts that produce culture is to acknowledge that they exist alongside other important sites of cultural production, including the large percentage of homes that have televisions, lobbies of movie theaters, shopping malls, and neighborhood hangouts, to name but a few sites. All of these sites have been considered worthy of sophisticated cultural analysis, although at one time they were seen as less than "sophisticated." But when

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25 While scholars of popular culture rushed to assess the latent meaning in the Hollywood movie mega-hits of this decade, they evidently missed another contender in the prize fight for the world's entertainment dollar: the video game industry quietly lapped the movie box office take by a cool $1 billion, cresting at a 1993 year-end gross of $6.5 billion in the Unites States, fully one quarter of the entertainment industry's revenues.

what counts as a video game is a "realistic" simulation of the city, or when

we see video games authored by Daryl Gates, the ex-Chief of Police of Los

Angeles, it no longer makes sense to consider such things as mere toys

unable to produce worldly meaning. [26]

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26 I am referring to a game put out by Sierra™ called "Daryl Gates: Police Quest IV, Open Season" which is the focal point of another analysis I have done on violence in video games. In Police Quest™ the player assumes the role of a homicide detective investigating a series of homicides against police officers. Gates was actually an instrumental member of the development team in several respects. He helped author the narrative of the game, along with a producer from the reality television show, "America's Most Wanted." Gates also coached the video game's actors and actresses (the game includes actual video recordings integrated in the various scenes) in proper police stances and so forth. Also, and perhaps most interesting in the context of the analysis of SimCity2000™'s realistic qualities, Gates submitted the full meaning of his name as the brutally pragmatic champion of the burdened officer of the law.

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