

MCKENZIE WARK –

Capture All: *SimCity*, Gamespace, and Play

Play was one of the great themes of the postwar avant-gardes. Sometimes it appeared as chance, or the drift, or the challenge, or as what the situationists called *détournement*. You could even call it hacking. The idea was that there could be some kind of practice for making worlds other than labor, and which unlike labor might not yet be totally subsumed under the sign of the commodity.

But it is in the nature of avant-gardes that their most successful attempts to change life end up being recuperated back into the commodity form. What were once forms of non-labor have been retooled for the purposes of labor again—one needs only look at the clichés of startup office layouts to see this in effect—and the commodity rules even over forms of praxis that are not labor.

There are two sides to this dynamic. Play was not simply recuperated into commodity production—in the process it modified commodity production as well. Maybe this is not even capitalism at all anymore. Maybe it is something worse.

From the point of view of the avant-gardes of the very late twentieth century (with whom I was a mere fellow traveler), we won the battle but lost the war. Information wants to be free but is everywhere in chains. [1] Information really did escape the narrow bounds of a thing-based property system, partly as a result of the combined efforts of avant-gardes and social movements—but only to be recuperated again at an even more abstract level. Data, like everything else under the reign of capitalism, has become commodified, and the science that drives its distribution ascribed exchange value.

Let's have done with those old romanticisms of a great outdoors. Much radical thought, in the late twentieth century through to the present, still draws its energy from a longing for an outside. It celebrates the virtual, or the glitch, or the break, or the exploit. There is a persistent desire to break on through to the other side. But what if there is something irredeemably romantic, even theological about this desire for an outside? What if the challenge of the times was really to start thinking entirely within a system of constraints?

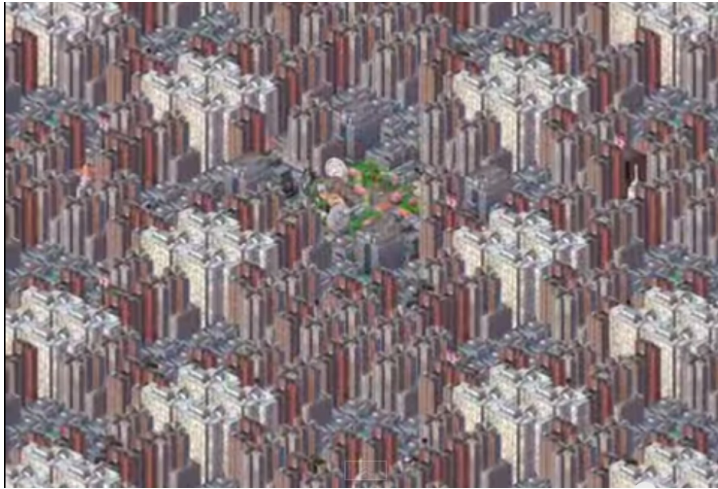
There is no outside anymore. The planet is now a badly designed World Game, one that captures all resources and plays at transforming them all into the commodity form. This era of the anthropocene is the end of that romantic longing for an outside that can be obtained in some Promethean leap toward

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[1] See McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) and available here: http://monoskop.org/McKenzie_Wark. For the version of the late '90s avant-garde I experienced, see <http://monoskop.org/Nettime>.

a world of pure objects or pure concepts. So instead of the virtual or romantic beyond, a gamer theory of trifling with the interiorities of dysfunctional systems might be an aesthetic and conceptual practice more in tune with the times. [2] To think through what such a practice can do, I want to look at two examples that both use my favorite game—*SimCity*.

The first is quite well known: Vincent Ocasla's *Magnasanti*. [3] Ocasla built *Magnasanti* with only one objective in mind: To maximize the population of his simulated city. One of the ways he did this is by eliminating transport. The city is a bleak repetition of identical units. There are no fire stations, schools, or hospitals. The pollution is terrible. The Sims only live to about fifty years. And yet Ocasla claims the city ran with a population of 6 million for 50,000 sim-years.



[2] See McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street* (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2011).

[3] See Mike Sterry, "The Totalitarian Buddhist Who Beat SimCity," *Vice*, (May 2010).

Vincint Ocasla's *Magnasanti*, screen capture from YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTJQTc-TqpU>.

Magnasanti is a beautiful kind of atopia. If utopia is a no-where, atopia is a non-place, a kind of placelessness perfected. But surely, one might react, *Magnasanti* is a dystopia? Its Sim-citizens' lives are nasty, brutish, and short, each lived in a tiny radius of a city that is the same everywhere. But perhaps there's a certain residual humanism in that line of thought. Who ever said that the gamespace of a commodified earth is supposed to be an optimal world for humans?

In this sense, *Magnasanti* is an allegory for the perfected state of our own world, a world so poorly run from any human point of view that its rulers insist we judge them only by their enemies and not by their results. We are supposed to be grateful the Islamic state is not throwing us off cliffs or chopping our heads off. That's how low the bar is now as far as the ruling class is concerned. For the reality is that we live inside a *Magnasanti* whose goal is a bit different from Ocasla's but no less mad: not to maximize population, but to maximize the transfer of value upward to those who already own half the wealth of the entire planet.

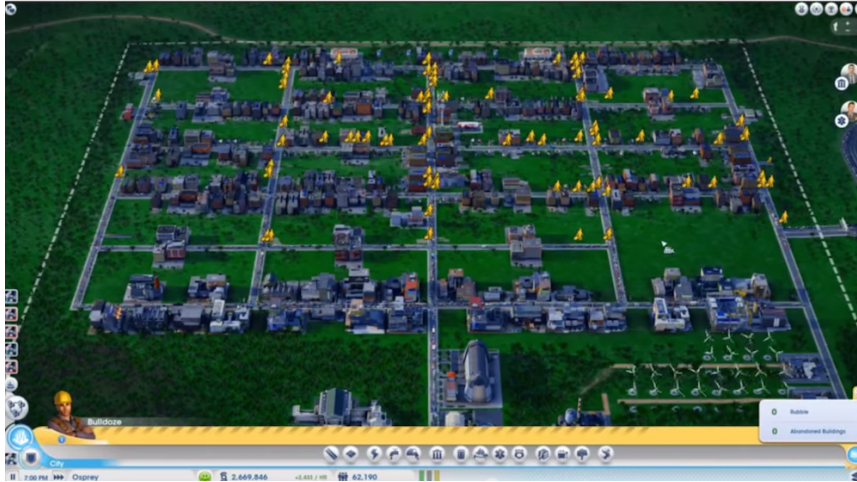
A more recent *SimCity* work sheds further light on this kind of gamer theory practice. Matteo Bittanti recently published a fantastic work of conceptual literature called *How to Get Rid of Homelessness*. [4] Bittanti has worked in and around San Francisco, and clearly saw the homeless problems in *SimCity* and in that actual American city as intimately related.

His two-volume work, running to 565 pages, gathers comments from

[4] Emanuel Maiberg, "Is *SimCity* Homelessness a Bug or a Feature?" *Vice*, (January 2015).

online forums ranging from Reddit to Simtropolis about the appearance of little yellow “homeless” Sims within the game. The threads open with statements of the problem: “My gambling town became freaking INFESTED with homeless people,” or “I have 0 percent unemployment so it appears these sims are oddly choosing to be homeless. I don’t know if this is a bug...” [5] What follows are discussions of the likely causes and proposals for solutions that run from the pragmatic to the whimsical via the sinister. There are also occasional comments that connect *SimCity* to the real world or that reflect in broader way on the nature of the game.

[5] Matteo Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, (San Francisco: Concrete Press, 2015) 32, 74.



Homeless Sims, screen capture from YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZ_7aFC5eiE.

It puzzles some players that they have homeless people when there’s no shortage of jobs, prompting some to see their algorithm-generated agents as lazy bums. Others look deeper into how that algorithm actually works: “The job statistic is a lie now, as it’s based on if there’s job in the local area of their home.” And hence: “Job placement is much more important than the number of jobs.” The problem is not just jobs, it is also “traffic: they never get to a job and back in a reasonable time.” This leads at least one player to think a bit more about the relation between the game and its reflexive representation of data: “The data you see is not facts that all your people have jobs; it’s just a theoretical overview.” [6]

[6] Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, 79, 86, 151, 151.

The homeless phenomenon can be an opportunity to dismiss the non-expert player: “If they bother you, you should learn to avoid creating them.” Or to inform her or him: “Zoning commerce with residential will help tremendously. Sims are hired first come, first served so it’s best to have commerce on every block [that is] residential.” Some are not sure if it is a problem to be prevented or if it is an inevitable effect that one just has to deal with: “Do I try to provide more low-income housing or jobs? More jails?” [7]

[7] Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, 45, 126, 129.

Police and buses to whisk them out of town are popular after-the-fact solutions. Some are more inventive and include “a secret government agency that goes out and ‘takes care of’ the homeless people,” ... “wifi hotspots?” ... “I usually drop a meteor on them.” ... “Sell them on the global market.” ... “turn off your clinic that will speed it up” ... “get all your homeless together [and] drop a tornado on them, will have some collateral damage...” ... “create low wealth housing for them” ... “Can you build a room with no doors around the

homeless and then set it on fire?” ... “a good siege tank with precision laser sighting” ... one contribution is a picture of six different rifles, and the caption, “choose one.” [8]

Sometimes the language slips from that of the game—“low wealth housing”—to that of other worlds. “Keep those ghettos.” ... “You need to zone for the trailer homes” ... “Take care of your taxpayers first!” ... “A natural disaster that targets them...ps this in no way reflects my thoughts on real life homeless people.” Sometimes players seem surprised that what their real-world expectations might suggest as a solution doesn’t work: “Craploads of police haven’t resolved the issue.” Nor are lower taxes a panacea: “Don’t over think this. Unemployment is a bad thing. A worker shortage is a good thing. Keep business lean and the population fully employed.” [9]

The comments often oscillate between Sim world and real-world frames of reference. One player says, “I don’t want low income Sims, as my city is pretty much middle and upper class.” Why would one not “want” them? There is one hint of an Occupy Wall Street perspective: “First, have your banks sell high mortgages to those who cannot afford them...” Fox News talking points are a little more common: “Welfare recipients receive 65k a year in benefits in the USA. The more you know.” [10]

Some players have suggestions for improving the game by making it appear to mimic an actual city more by including a homeless shelter, or “maybe agents could have a mental health attribute.” Whereas for others, “the homeless thing is a bug.” There’s an aesthetic question here: Is an algorithm “better” if it models a known world in a more complex way, or is it better if it is simpler and more elegant? And if the algorithm is a game, then its uselessness can be part of its appeal, and the emergence of apparently suboptimal phenomena can be a feature. “If you look at the game as a huge gigantic mess it’s a lot of fun.” [11]

What doesn’t happen much, but might be the point of Bittanti’s work, is thinking about the homelessness as a necessary product of the algorithm itself. If the goal is rising property values, then the homeless population is just one of the effects—and not one that matters. *SimCity*, and the actual cities of the overdeveloped world, are real estate games about capturing surplus value in the form of rent. A city that succeeds does so by doing something other than what one might think a city does: maintain a place where people can live.

Bittanti and Ocasla offer works that are allegorical doubles of the world, although not quite in the way narrative works are allegories. They are more of the order of algorithms, which here might be taken to mean a procedure with a beginning, a transformation, and an end state. As such, the algorithmic is emerging as a major object of critical and creative attention.

Ian Bogost reminds us not to make a fetish of the algorithm, or of big data, or any other such figure, although where Bogost would point beyond them to a world of “objects,” perhaps what lies beyond such a fetish is more of the order of the organization of work and play. [12] Algorithms don’t operate on their own, as if by magic. Here, Bittanti and Ocasla’s works are helpful in the way that they ask questions about what happens to the figure of the human within the algorithm.

Let’s pursue this a little further, by thinking first about cities, and then about systems. *SimCity* has certain limitations as a game in that it only models

[8] Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, 11, 46, 47, 48, 109, 97, 55, 80, 131, 177.

[9] Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, 76, 124, 59, 95, 97, 143.

[10] Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, 65, 19, 45.

[11] Bittanti, *How to Get Rid of Homeless, Volume 1*, 6, 137, 159.

[12] Ian Bogost, “The Cathedral of Computation,” *Atlantic* (January 15, 2015), <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/01/the-cathedral-of-computation/384300>.

one city. Even in the 2013 version, in which your city can be adjacent to other cities run by other players, there remains an outside. There's somewhere to displace your problems. The homeless, for example, can take a bus someplace else. So it is with actual First World cities, the cities of what the situationists called the overdeveloped world.

To make matters even more perverse, a successful city in the overdeveloped world is one that zones for real estate that most of the time nobody lives in at all. According to a story in the *New York Times*: "In a large swath of the East Side bounded by Fifth and Park Avenues and East 49th and 70th Streets, about 30 percent of the more than 5,000 apartments are routinely vacant more than 10 months a year because their owners or renters have permanent homes elsewhere, according to the Census Bureau's latest American Community Survey. In one part of that stretch, between East 53rd and 59th Streets, more than half of the 500 apartments are occupied for two months or less." [13]

In short, success in the game of *SimCity* that is the actual New York City includes not just homelessness, but the opposite as well, fabulous homes with nobody in them at all. What kind of game is this? A version of *Magnasanti* whose goal is not maximum population but maximum real estate fortunes. And the kind of city it builds is no less weird.

Let's think about this from the point of view of an old-fashioned "kitsch Marxist." [14] One might say that this is what happens under capitalism, where the game is value, and its form oscillates between use and exchange. Ultimately, exchange is the dominant value and production is not geared toward human social needs but is geared toward the accumulation of money. One might also point out that such a regime thinks of all value as commutable, divisible, exchangeable, and infinitely expandable, as if labor's encounter with the natural conditions of production imposed no necessities. [15] Such an analysis can tell you a lot about the crazy gamespace within which we are all Sims. But is this complete mapping of just how weird the game has become?

Like the rest of us, Marx was a creature of his times. Early on, he saw labor much as the Hegelians did, as a praxis that infuses matter with spirit. Later, he turned toward a more scientific materialism, seeing labor in thermodynamic terms, as expenditure of energy. In this he moved with the advances in science and technology of his era. [16]

But Marx stopped short of a theory of labor—or of human praxis more broadly—within an understanding not only of matter and energy but also of information. While he was attuned to the effect of the telegraph in expanding the space and accelerating the time of the world market, it was not yet possible for Marx to think in terms of a theory of information and its organizational functions.

Thus, for Marx, the world appeared as a vast accumulation of commodities. He wanted to look behind the spectacle of consumer products to see the labor that goes into them—energy working matter—but not the information that organizes that labor. Marx could imagine the heat-death of capitalism as the energy it pumps through the social body dissipates. He could not imagine the negentropic role of information, which would both counteract its tendency to expiration but which might also transform it into something else—for better or worse.

[13] Sam Roberts, "Homes Dark and Lifeless, Kept by Out-of-Towners," *New York Times* (July 6, 2011).

[14] A term of abuse borrowed by Reza Negarestani from the notorious right-wing troll David Horowitz. See Reza Negarestani, "Labor of the Inhuman, Part One: Human," *eFlux Journal* 52 (February, 2014), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-labor-of-the-inhuman-part-i-human/>.

[15] See Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

[16] Amy Wendling, *Karl Marx on Technology and Alienation*, (London: Palgrave, 2011).

There is the stub of a theory of information in Marx, a place to start at least, in how he thinks about value. For Marx, money expresses exchange value in the form of a general equivalent, a commodity that can stand for all the others. But what if, besides the general equivalent, there was also a specific equivalent? And beyond that, a general non-equivalent, and a specific non-equivalent?

This fourfold scheme more comprehensively accounts for the forms of information within which use value is organized and expressed and controlled. The four forms of information would then be, respectively, general equivalent (money), specific equivalent (data), general non-equivalent (culture) and specific non-equivalent (art).

Use value might then exist in relation to other kinds of information than exchange value. That might be only one kind of information in the world. Even if exchange value, the general equivalent, is dominant, the use value of things also has a relation to the general non-equivalent of culture, with its repetitions and permutations on the narratives and images of dreams and desires. Use value might even be caught up from time to time in the specific non-equivalent that is art, which struggles to introduce non-equivalence, or genuine difference, even if it gets reduced in the end to the artwork and thus to exchange.

Use value might even have to contend with the specific equivalent, which in these times of big data is a real-time map of the displacement of things as fast and as extensive as that of exchange value, rather like the data readouts in *SimCity*. We can know a lot more about the things in motion around the world now than their unit price.

The problem might then be reimagined not just as use value's subordination to exchange value, but rather the inability of our current deployment of all four kinds of information value to direct production toward human social needs in the form of use value. There might be a more general pathology to the way matter and energy are set in motion by information. One might even imagine a key part of that pathology to be the separation of these forms of information as value, and the subordination to the general equivalent of the other three.

Hence it is not just that exchange value excludes and subordinates the specific non-equivalent, which for Theodor Adorno was art. Nor that it excludes and subordinates the general non-equivalent, which for Raymond Williams was culture. Rather, the front line may now be the struggle over the relation between money and data, or the general equivalent and the specific equivalent. For if there is an institutional ideal-form of the specific equivalent it is neither culture nor art; it is science.

Here, we need turn to some forgotten figures, such as John Desmond Bernal and Joseph Needham, who were engaged in the struggle to preserve the scientific methods of assessing the data of the specific equivalent from corruption by either the market or fascism, or in our terms, by the general equivalent or the general non-equivalent. [17] In our times again, this may turn out to be a critical struggle.

Today's ruling class wants to turn data into a form of unequal exchange and control subordinated to exchange value. Inconvenient data, then, has to be excluded. For example, actual scientific data about climate change or other examples of metabolic rift. The struggle then is to rebalance *all four*

[17] See Gary Werskey, *The Visible College: The Collective Biography of British Scientific Socialists of the 1930s* (New York: Holt and Harry Winston, 1978).

modes of information value, and come up with a more complex organizational form for the relation of information to use value than the accumulation and upward redistribution of capital. Perhaps one way of reading the conversations Bittanti documents is as an inability to even think how these four kinds of information might form a coherent relationship.

Perhaps this is not capitalism, but something worse. This mode of production not only subordinates use value to the general equivalent, and has not only fully subsumed the specific non-equivalent of art and the general non-equivalent of culture, but it is also rapidly transforming the specific equivalent of data – basis of any science – into nothing more than a means of reproducing unequal exchange.

One of the more absurdist signs of this is that in the United States congressional Republicans have decided that the Scientific Advisory Board of the Environmental Protection Agency should no longer allow scientific experts to report *on their own area of expertise*. “Experts” employed by industry, however, will now be given a free hand. On the face of it this seems absurd, but only if one thinks that the specific equivalent, data and its interpretation, is in some sense a matter of science.

But in this mode of production, the specific equivalent is to be fully subordinated to the general equivalent. Data only exists to produce inequalities that can be monetized as exchange value. That this is rapidly rendering not only most humans but most other species homeless on their own planet is not a sign of failure, but a sign of its success.

SimCity was not the most popular of the Maxis simulator games. After a bit of a slow start, *The Sims* became one of the all-time great popular games. But the least successful was probably *SimEarth*. Its problem was a lack of externality. There wasn't an outside onto which to throw the homeless. It fairly accurately modeled what happens when you subordinate a whole planet to some industrializing mode of production and start excreting a whole heap of extra carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere. The best you could hope for was to leave the planet and look for another one. In that sense it did have an outside; it did participate in the romance of an elsewhere, just not a very believable one.

It seems we all now live in a *Magnasanti* whose governing algorithm is to capture all work *and* play and turn them not only into commodities but also into data, and to subordinate all praxis to the rule of exchange. Any data that undermines the premise that this can go on and on for 50,000 years, has to be turned into non-data. If there's work and play to be done, then, it's inside the gamespace that is now the world. Is there a way that this gamespace could be the material with which to build another one?

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