

The World After Pong

On the dynamic of video games and their parallel cities

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The city, yes, let's keep talking about it. But architecture, it's finished, over. Curtain.
Paul Virilio

Let the Source be with you

In the 'Open Source Definition', various criteria are mentioned which the distribution of software must meet in order to be 'open source'. The three most important criteria are: the possibility of freely distributing software, the availability of the source code and the right to create derivative work by means of modification. No one can dispute that this model has implications for the development of software. We have only to refer to the open-source revolution of GNU/Linux.¹ However, the open-source model is having a major impact on other media, too. Video games are a good example. In video games, the advantages of the open-source model are exploited to the full. Players are given the opportunity to build their own environments, as a result of which the distinction between producer and consumer virtually disappears. This means that video games are not merely for amusement. In a society based on informationalism, we do not hold an unequivocal instrumental view on media such as video games. They have an immediate impact on our daily social lives. Looked at from this perspective, they determine the city and give the city its characteristic layeredness. By charting the impact of video games, in which a link is made between concepts and urbanity, the interconnection between the city and games becomes clear.

The process of historical transition proceeds by absorption of preceding social forms by the new, emerging ones, so that real societies are considerably messier than the ideal types we construct for heuristic purposes.

Manuel Castells

Play till you drop

Some time in 2003, the multi-player game 'Star Wars Galaxies' is due to be launched. In multi-player games, a large number of players take part at the same time in the same game on the Internet. Verant, the company which is bringing out Star Wars Galaxies in association with LucasArts, is anticipating millions of participants and expects that at various points in time more than 300,000 players will simultaneously be playing this game. This is of a superior order. It is comparable to hundreds of thousands of people gathering in London's Trafalgar Square at the same time. Just how realistic these expectations are became apparent when we logged on to www.everquest.com at 1.00 a.m. on 10 April 2003. At that moment, 115,227 players were online in the EverQuest city. This practice, in which hundreds of thousands of people log on to a single multi-player game, is not, for us, empirical proof or an illustration of a new city. It does, though, have a direct impact on our concept of what a city or metropolis is. It shows that as a result of far-reaching technological developments, other meaningful constellations are emerging, which we experience as salutary on the one hand and as alienating on the other.

In the classical view of the history of the city, cities such as Paris, Berlin and Madrid, which form the political, cultural and geographic heart of a nation, came into being at the beginning of capitalism. In the post-capitalist society, another type of city emerged, which the

American geographer Manuel DeLanda calls 'metropolis'. The metropolis is not the centre of a nation, rather it is part of a trade network and as a result is often situated by the sea. Amsterdam, Hongkong and Venice are, for DeLanda, metropolises. In addition to these two models and variants of them based on cross-fertilization, there is a third model. This model becomes visible in the worlds of the multi-player games such as EverQuest, Unreal and Ultima Online. We call this model 'parallel cities'. The extent of their impact became clear recently in South Korea, where 24-year-old Kim Kyung-Jae collapsed and died in a toilet after having played video games nonstop for 86 hours in a PC Bang in Kwangju. 'The only breaks he took were to buy cigarettes or to go to the toilet,' according to the police in Kwangju. 'Play till you drop'; the parallel cities, too, are experiencing their first physical fatalities.

Tribes in cities without centres

The parallel cities are the harbingers of 'the return' to a form of tribal society in which players organize themselves in groups called clans. "EverQuest is a very group oriented game. We allow the players to form groups and guilds, and to share experience and loot, and to communicate globally," states EverQuest producer Brad McQuaid. A clan can vary from several to hundreds of players who train and fight together within a single game environment. Most clans in gaming exist around First Person Shooting games in which opponents are tracked down from behind the barrel of a gun and shot. The clans give themselves names (Zero Tolerance, Apex, Blood Runner, Blood Buddhas) and the members of these clans then add two or three letters to them. Clans, it appears, are regionally based, which shows that globalization and regionalization coexist. Admission from outside the region is only possible with demonstrably special qualities. In this way, on a parallel level, a type of urban community develops which is no longer checked by the physical limits of time and space.² In addition, clans are interest groups who defend their territory in the game space of the parallel cities. The sociality of this game space corresponds to the description the film-maker Martin Scorsese gives in his article 'Hearts and Guts of Gangs' of the political and economic situation in New York in the middle of the nineteenth century, where gangs, the police, the fire brigade and the maffia competed for power: "New York was like a collection of rival tribes, fighting for prominence." According to Star Wars Galaxies designer Raph Koster (game name: Holocron), these New York scenes are returning in a unique way in the parallel cities: "The dilemmas that players of Ultima Online wrestle with every day in the form of how reputation should work, what to do about harassment, etc., are the key problems of virtual reality for the next several years."

The punishment of exclusion

Parallel cities are not ruled exclusively by the law of the jungle, however. They present us with a different situation for the world of the clans is more complex than Darwin's 'survival of the fittest'. They have moved on to a subsequent stage which Alexander Bard and Jan Söderqvist call 'meme-Darwinist'.³ At first glance, the clans in the parallel cities appear to comply with the strict ethics of informationalism, which is called netiquette and *nethics*. These terms come from the hackers' culture, in which netiquette is a prescribed code of conduct on the Internet and *nethics* refers to freedom of speech and the protection of privacy. However, Bard and Söderqvist go further. They describe a complex system of rules and regulations which fits in with a dynamic they call 'the plurocracy'. In our view, the social relationships in which the clans operate can also be designated a plurocracy: a community without a centre where everyone calls the shots. In the parallel cities there are no governments to lay down and enforce rules and laws. The parallel cities do not fall under the regime of a representative body or the power of collectivity. Rather they have a cooperative

system of delineated rules and regulations which adapts to users in a dynamic way. In this network, sanctions do not therefore lead to a form of detention or confinement but rather to exclusion. Infringement can result in the ultimate punishment: virtual death through exclusion from the network. In our information society, this perspective will increasingly be translated into other punishments. By erecting invisible electronic walls, those who have been convicted of crimes such as 'shoplifting' or 'drink driving' will be barred from public spaces such as shopping centres and motorways.

Be God, Be Mayor ... Be You.
Simcity 4

The motor of Id Software

The development of Id Software's FPS games such as Wolfenstein 3D, Doom and Quake show how, in the early 1990s, communities came into being on the Internet, which collectively created environments for their 'deathmatches'. "We put out a press release in January of 1993 saying what our next game Doom was going to have in it. From January to December, all of 1993, the entire Internet thing was really growing and we had newsgroups about Doom already before the game was out," states John Romero, designer of Id Software.⁴ This development, which had begun with Wolfenstein 3D, shareware versions of which could be downloaded on the Internet, went so far in the case of Doom that not only could the various versions be obtained, but the code, too, was made partially available. In the later versions of Quake, not only the environments, but even the physical appearances of the players were adjustable. At the moment, players can use Id Software's motor to build everything themselves in an environment provided by the software company. Suddenly, everything is possible. In the words of Steven Poole: "We want to be shocked by novelty. We want to lose ourselves in a space that is utterly different. We want environments that have never been seen, never been imagined before."⁵ The upshot is that players in a multiplicity of places design their cities with castles, MadMax-like space stations and black pyramids. Changes arise which do not stand in isolation, but instead reinforce one another and so doing affect the functioning of the city. The game has become a community. For example, during the development of Star Wars Galaxies, the companies Verant and LucasArts set up an Internet site on which users played and commented on the latest releases. This approach has three effects. Firstly, the city receives constant attention and thus publicity. Suspense mounts: when will the city be available? Secondly, millions of man-hours of labour and knowledge is made available free of charge, as a result of which the city acquires depth and refinement. This addition of players' knowledge is fully acknowledged by the makers of the parallel cities such as Raph Koster: "Persistent world game designers are at heart community designers. Online game design is really a social system design." The moment they question certain decisions, these are presented to the players on message boards. And thirdly, players form a long-lasting attachment to a city: "Make them feel valued and they'll evangelise the product to their friends."⁶

***A dynamic space must be defined from the point of view of the observer tied to that space,
not from an external position.***

Gilles Deleuze

From genius to scenius

Buyers and sellers operate increasingly in circular processes. On their web sites, multinationals such as Nike and Audi offer customers the opportunity to determine the colour, imprint and accessories of their sports shoes or car. Here, too, the distinction between

producer and consumer is becoming increasingly blurred as a result of this involvement. It will now be clear that the parallel cities are leading the way in developing mechanisms for incorporating consumer involvement as part of production. According to game theorist Henry Jenkins, their sociality is facilitated by the medium: "Fans are not passive consumers of media, but rework elements from popular media in order to create their own stories, in a manner much like storytellers would before mass media." In other words, not the medium but rather 'the users are the message'. Roland Barthes spoke of the death of the author. Although in terms of autonomy, we undoubtedly need to jettison the romantic notion of the individual genius, autonomy as a practice continues to exist. In philosophical terms, this intentionality suggests that autonomy has become a collective stylization. Looked at from this perspective, the author is not dead but rather has assumed a different role. We welcome the scenius.

It is you the individual that has given birth to the collective. It is you the digital citizen, that has given birth to this, our Digital Nation.

Bad Company

Welcome in Mediapolis

If we relate this analysis of video games to the perspective of our present-day urbanity, then it becomes clear that the city is the 'level' where modernization takes place and where everything fragments: enduring connections, institutions, values. This fragmentation is not new. Society has always been fragmented. Only the constellations are new. The way in which the city is still theorized as a matter of course, despite the fact that it has become indefinable, portends its demise. The city exists in its diffuse way. And that's all there is to it really. Of course, it still has cultural, economic and political principles underpinning its organization. Only these ordering principles are now local. At best, what emerges from the theorizing is the image of a city as a mass medium, in which all manner of manifestations such as advertising, posters and graffiti jostle for prominence. However, the fact that the city has acquired a mass function is not enough. As a result, in theory the only thing that becomes clear is that the city is no longer primarily a territorial unit, but rather should be regarded as a sign or symbol. Put briefly, this is the responsibility of various mass media such as video games. Because of its immeasurability and intangibility, the city can no longer be represented without making use of media which allow us to experience the city as a bearer of meaning: an overarching whole with its own identity. From this perspective, the city is the actively created dynamic of and between various media. A derivative of that which is taking place elsewhere. So we can also say that the city is no longer tied to a particular place, but rather is media-bound. However, although there is no more exciting news than that the city is disappearing, the dynamics of the parallel cities described above are, for us, not metaphors for the emergence of new or virtual cities.⁷ Their beginnings, arising from the fact that the real world has become an inert and unwieldy environment, mean that the city can no longer be pinned down, as used to be the case. The emphasis is now placed elsewhere. We believe in amalgamations and carry-overs. We call this Mediapolis. Mediapolis is the phase in which the city finds itself when it behaves like a mass medium and the mass media generate a new urbanism. This means that everything will be rearranged, will be given a new order, will be subjected to other dimensions. Proceeding from this idea, the *open-source* model in video games enables new forms of production, consumption and sociality in cities to develop.

Notes:

1. G. Moody, *Rebel Code. Linux and the Open Source Revolution*, London (Penguin Books) 2002.
2. J.C. Herz, 'Gaming the System: Multi-player Worlds Online', in: L. King (ed.), *Game*

- One, the History and Culture of Videogames*, London (Laurence King Publishing Ltd) 2002, p. 93.
3. A. Bard and J. Söderqvist, *Netocracy. The New Power Elite And Life After Capitalism*, London (Pearson Education) 2002, p. 186.
 4. S.L. Kent, *The Ultimate History of Video Games: from Pong to Pokémon- The Story Behind the Craze That Touched Our Lives and Changed the World*, New York (Prima Publishing) 2001, p. 459.
 5. S. Poole, *Trigger Happy. The Inner Life of Videogames*, London (Fourth Estate Limited) 2000, p. 230.
 6. J.C. Herz, op.cit. (see note 2), p. 87.
 7. J.L. Nancy, *De Indringer*, Amsterdam (Boom) 2002, p.64.