

POP-UP CITY

URBANISM, ONCE THE STUFF OF GLASS, CONCRETE AND STEEL, IS NOW AS LIKELY TO EXIST ON YOUR PALM-TOP, SAYS DUTCH ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE STUDIO POPCORN

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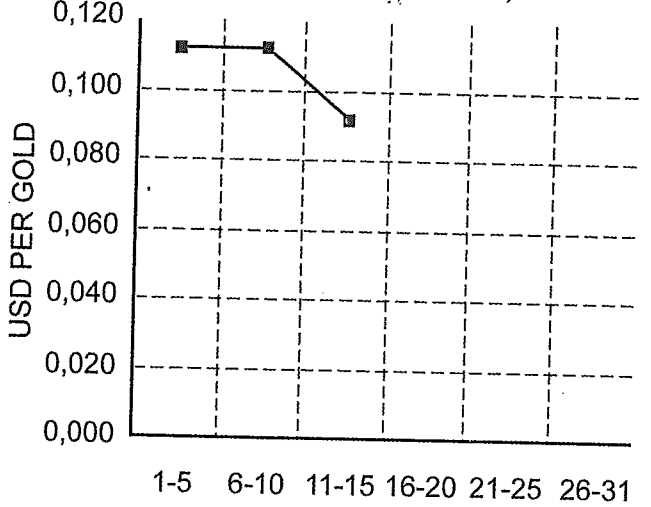
Housing estate near Sha Tin, Hong Kong, 1988. Photography by Bill Hocker. Courtesy of www.billhocker.com



IN ONLINE GAMES SUCH AS *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*, MILLIONS

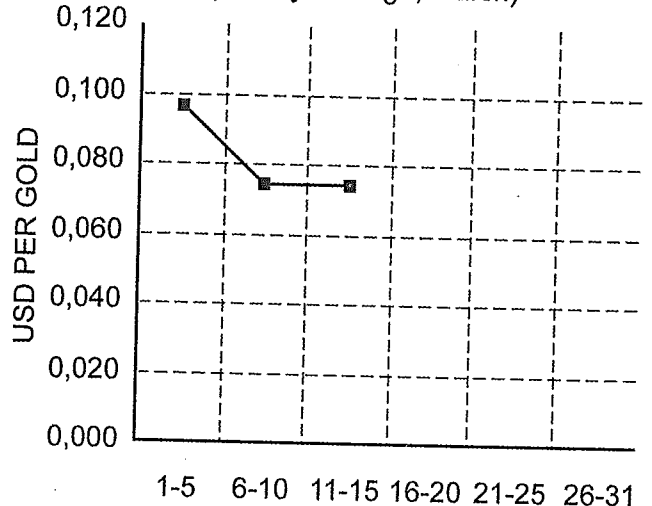
OF PLAYERS HAVE DEVELOPED A VIRTUAL GLOBAL ECONO

Exchange Rate of World of Warcraft to USD
(weekly average, March)



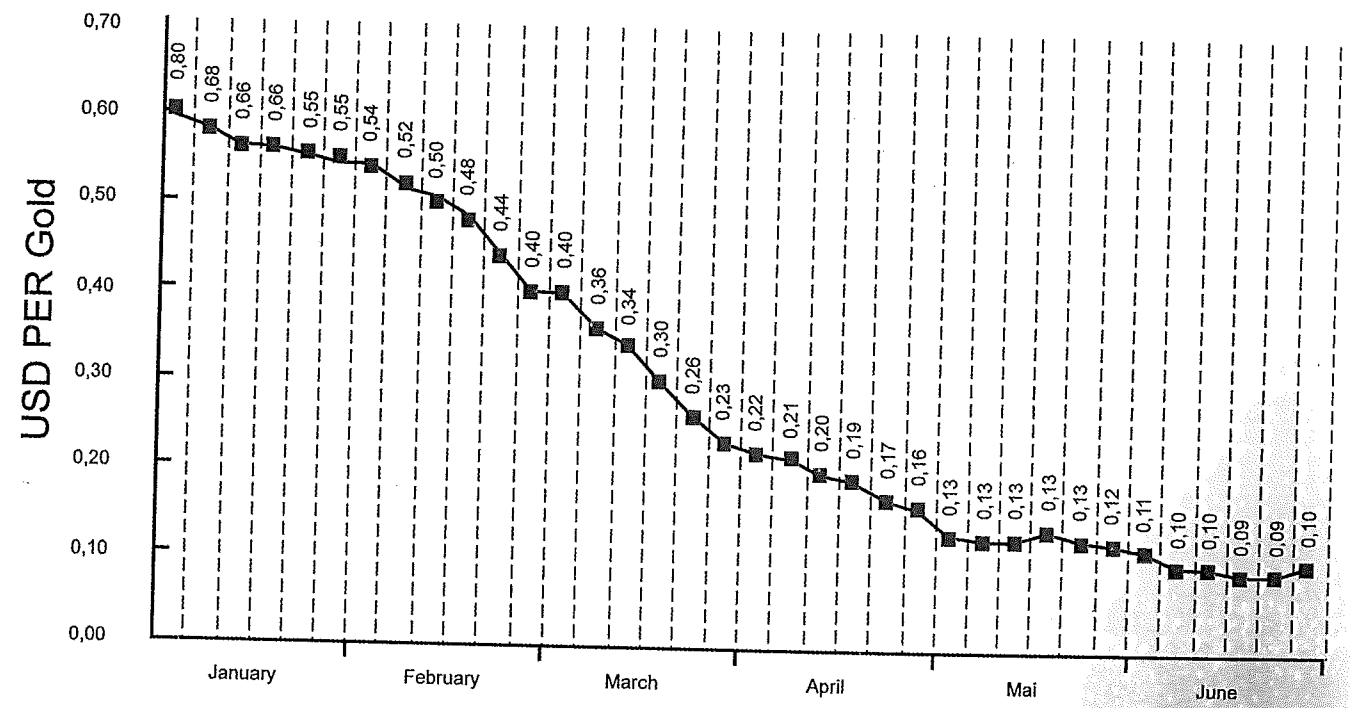
WOW EUR

Exchange Rate of World of Warcraft to USD
(weekly average, March)



WOW USA

Trend of Exchange Rates of WoW Gold to USD
Weekly Average, the first half of 2005



WHAT CAN WE learn from video director Hype Williams' observation, "Whatever continent you're on, the cool kids have the urban look?" Do cool kids only live in cities? Or has urbanity become a "look" in a fashion shoot the size of the globe? After losing the word "house" to dance music, planners and architects have to admit that another essential component of their professional vocabulary has been colonised by more frivolous domains. "Urban" has moved elsewhere. Look at it as a combination of different "mediascapes" and you will begin to understand where it has gone.

MULTIMEDIAILITY

Where once the light show that is New York's Times Square was a rare example of media presence, nowadays most metropolitan centres are wrapped in electronic screens. The average person's senses are continuously triggered, stimulated and enhanced by digital messages beaming out the latest denim frenzy of Levi's, the thirst-quenching promise of Coca-Cola and the cool chic of D&G. Blown-up TV screens and message boards inform us non-stop about news and weather. Long before we reach our destinations, we know which roads have traffic jams and which car parks have vacant bays. There are also analogue images: slogans, stickers, graffiti and posters on every possible surface. All are battling for our attention. The city is now a collection of media that have merged into each other. These mass-medial qualities prove that the classical concept of "the city" has become problematic. How can we form an image of a city when a constant flood of information and (recycled) images destabilises our perception of our physical environment? It is unclear what the city we live in is really like. It has become a bastard landscape in which everything is continuously transformed and re-mediated. As the city has turned into a hybrid place in which several spatial conditions merge into each other, can we do anything other than treat it a mass medium in which we now happen to live?

VIRTUALITY

To say that the urban has become a mediated bastard is not enough. Our habitat also reaches into virtual space. "The city" is increasingly comprised of the virtual "scapes" of different media. In Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), a new world has emerged that exploits the possibilities of broadband internet. In games like *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft* and *Project Entropia*, millions of players worldwide meet and interact in three-dimensional neighbourhoods. A global economy has developed in which virtual houses, hotels and land are traded between users. In 2004, a gamer bought a virtual space resort, complete with mining and hunting taxation rights, for \$100,000. Such "properties" are sold on special websites like mygamestock and internetgame. On eBay you'll encounter a virtual economy that rivals those of some first-world countries. The developers of *Project Entropia* have taken another step in mixing the virtual gaming world with the "real world," announcing that it will soon be possible to use ATM machines to trade in the money used in their online game environment for "real" money. Ten *Project Entropia* Dollars (PED) will represent \$1. In an environment in which actual and virtual collide, the future is always present.

CONNECTIVITY

The virtual worlds of online gaming show that nobody cares that your real name, gender or age is not the same as that of your avatar. Having sex with a 50-year-old male chemist who looks like a 28-year-old female model is no big deal. Authenticity is of no importance. Although nearly every MMORPG offers players the possibility of marrying online in a wedding chapel, complete with rings and a priest, lasting relationships are a rarity. Outside the traditional city, new social environments have developed. In mediated realms, "thin" communities, not based

on strong ties, are the norm. An MMORPG is not only a form of gaming, but also one of socialising. As a consequence, several game developers draw upon the man-hours and intelligence of their audience by offering them roles in the design of the environments they inhabit. The 18th-century idea of the isolated genius has turned into a "scenius," in which the intelligence of a group of individuals is mobilised and made productive. This social reality is developing away from historical and geographical ties and is completely saturated by global popular culture. Connectivity causes a "mediaspora" of public spheres that all have local connections. As a result, with the electronic globalisation of pop culture, we witness an unfolding of ever-changing togetherness.

INTERACTIVITY

Being in the city means having a continuous interaction with our environment. Interactivity has become our very essence. New York rap star Fat Joe was wrong when he told us to "lean back." Now we lean forward, over our keyboards, mobile phones and game consoles, embracing technology in a post-paranoid state of mind. No mobile phone: no business. No laptop: no friends. The urban exists in nodes, access points, where closed systems meet. Interactivity, the marker of urbanity, is an entrance into different settings, spheres or neighbourhoods, "real" or virtual. Interactive systems also mutually influence each other. Therefore interactivity should be approached in terms of its social context, and architecture's logical function will be as a connection, allowing us to move from one closed-off environment to the other. Restraining some people from, and allowing others access to, a certain point will be the most important function of architecture in this version of the future.

(E)SCAPING THE CITY

It is essential to understand the city in terms of its medial qualities. The discourse of the city has long been denied a true media theory. Vibrant and energetic human conurbations only exist when they are connected: to you, to me, to your house, to the street, to the next city, to fashion, to magazines, to TV. We need to detach the word "urban" from "the city." A city is only urban when it mixes a vast range of media, has a strong virtual infrastructure and combines splintered public spheres in an interactive space. So, to find the city, we have to start seeing it as a node where multimedia, virtuality, connectivity and interactivity strengthen each other. This place is not given; it can be actualised - here and now. We call this assembly point "Nodal Urbanity." Nodal Urbanity destroys our idea of the city as an inhabited place of a particular size and in a location that you can find on Google Earth. Nodal Urbanity is not another attempt to deconstruct the notion of the city. It puts forward a new kind of city that is no longer stuck in a physical domain. It is a relational space that has been stripped of inherent qualities and stable structures. This dynamic space is unstable and contingent. Combine the four mediascapes and urbanity pops up anywhere and any time.

Alex de Jong and Marc Schuilenburg are Studio Popcorn. Their book *Mediapolis: Popular Culture and the City* will be published by 010 Publishers. www.studiopopcorn.com www.010publishers.nl

