5   Managing the real: reading *SimCity*

SimCity [inc. *SimCity* (1989), *SimCity 2000* (1993), *SimCity 3000* (1999)] Management simulation. The game is played on a map grid containing randomly assigned geographical and topological features (hills, rivers, lakes, forests). The player oversees the development of a city within this landscape through control of a budget that allows the zoning of land areas for particular usage (residential, commercial, industrial) and the placement of urban infrastructure (power, education, transport etc.). Each calendar year in which the player sets budget controls represents one standard 'turn', but the player is allowed to intervene in such matters at any time. There is some attempt to reflect the development of technology over time with various possibilities only unlocked at certain historical points (nuclear power or airports, for example). Natural disasters may occur randomly or be instigated by the player. There is no clear end to the game or absolute objective to be achieved.

The focus on *SimCity* as the final extended example in this study may come as something of a relief for those readers who find the concentration on the representation of violence within the computer game to be either worrying or simply tiresome. *SimCity* does not allow its player to wage war on other cities except in the vaguest of economic terms, opportunities for death or glory are few and far between, and even the request that the military might be allowed to set up a base within the city can be rejected by the more pacifistic player. There is no 'fire' button hidden among the controls or keyboard shortcuts of *SimCity*. Perhaps for this very reason its inclusion alongside narrative game-fictions driven forwards by their move from moment to moment of extreme violence might

also come as something of a surprise. Forms of conflict and confrontation have always played a major part in the structuring of both games and popular fictions, after all. We know where we are, in story terms, where there is a loaded gun available and a slavering alien or shambling zombie in front of us. How we 'should', or how we 'can', read such a plot fragment is obvious.

Where *Tomb Raider* and *Half-Life* had obvious narrative pretensions in their reliance on the telling of lengthy 'quest' or 'escape' narratives with a strong drive towards the specific conclusion of an already emplotted story, and *Close Combat*'s campaigns showed its potential for the construction of an extended counterfactual narrative, any comparable narrative ambition in *SimCity* is less than obvious. As the manual for *SimCity 2000* informs the new player, this is a different kind of text: 'When you play SimCity 2000, you become the planner, designer and mayor of an unlimited number of cities. You can take over and run any of the included scenario cities, or build your own from the ground up.'

Even the use of the word 'unlimited' would seem to declare this to be anything but a means of constructing a clearly identifiable narrative. What we are being invited to construct is a model of a city, and not a story. In *SimCity* you adopt the role of a mayor who controls a city from the moment of its foundation, involved in the manipulation of far more financial and physical variables than were available, even, to the player of *Close Combat*. Variations would appear to be near-infinite in the extent of their possible combinations. This text is so '*scriptable*', to use Roland Barthes' term, that it may appear as almost unreadable as text. 'You' watch 'your' city grow and change over time, zooming in and out of the screen to observe the daily lives of 'your' citizens in as much detail as 'you' want. 'You' can even switch off the menu bars and watch 'your' city ticking over without being reminded that 'you' can intervene. There are no fights to win, no exploration to undertake, no puzzles to solve. *SimCity 3000* even disposes of those optional 'scenarios' of *SimCity 2000* that had demanded that the player deal with the after-

effects of recession, terrorism, flood, fire, or act of little green men in flying saucers. In *SimCity 3000* there might be pre-designed maps featuring already established settlements, but there is no obvious equivalent to the missions or battles of more aggressive games, or the scenarios of its precursors in the series. If there is a form of narrative identifiable within *SimCity*, and the argument throughout this chapter is that there is, then it does not write itself in big letters across the landscape, explain itself in the manuals, or make itself clear in the simplistic equation of gun-plus-zombies-equals-press-fire-button. Instead of negotiation within any recognisable plot, this kind of text concentrates on apparently handing over the responsibility of authorship to 'you' to such an extent that it no longer resembles traditional narrative at all. 'You' (the reader) are present, but there is an absence of any author. We have a 'beginning', and a 'middle', but to borrow Frank Kermode's phrase, we have no 'sense of an ending'.[1]

It is the intensity of this apparent liberation from any form of clearly emplotted narrative, its foregrounding of the 'open-ended' rather than 'closed' experience on offer that was only hinted at in the other game-fictions discussed so far, that is so fascinating in *SimCity*. In some ways *SimCity* is far more exemplary of this alternative open-ended method of engaging with computer-based texts than the other specific titles I focus on, and resembles traditional narrative forms the least. How this can be thought through as a form of narrative telling rarely possible outside of the game-fiction, rather than something other than narrative, and other than a somehow realist narrative, will be the focus of this chapter. In eradicating the singular ending that conditions so many of the meanings we acquire from our other forms of text, *SimCity* appears to be breaking a fundamental rule of narrative but remains, perhaps paradoxically, a readable text as well as a playable game. As such this chapter looks at this game-fiction as more than just an example of a specific genre or type of game (the management or 'god game'), but as representative of a basic difference between how story

might be told and read within computer games and how our other stories are read and told.

Both *Half-Life* and *Tomb Raider* have had their direct clones, but few have been able to compete with them directly in story terms, even when more advanced technology has been made available to designers who then ratchet up our visual and aural expectations. We recognise their stories because they resemble the stories we are exposed to in our other forms of popular fiction, and when we make aesthetic judgements we compare them both with those other stories, as well as with the stories offered in other computer games. As such they were chosen as particularly appropriate examples of their genres for the purposes of this study because they are texts where the narrative possibilities of game-fiction as a form were comparatively effectively realised. With *SimCity* we have relatively direct clones that offer minimal variation on the basic theme of city building and take it to the management of railway systems, theme parks, and space stations, among other social and business structures. But not only do we do see dozens of 'sim' games that can be seen to belong firmly in the genre that *SimCity* is representative of, but we see many more games within other genres take on board its central claim for free-form potential and 'unlimited' possibility. As with *Close Combat*, this is a narrative of enquiry based on the premise of the 'What if?' that operates through engagement with the world of the game 'as if' observation of the world can reliably inform our choices of intervention.

And yet by operating in this 'sim' universe with only a comparatively loose connection with the observed world, it is open to far more extreme departures from that world than had been possible in *Close Combat*. It is the apparent lack of constraint in disposing of any limits on the possibility of outcome that this chapter explores, and this implication that we have access, here, not to single texts but to a near infinite number of texts, that is interrogated. That popular fiction is essentially formulaic is a common enough negative observation – and *SimCity* is almost nothing but

a collection of formulae given graphical expression on screen. Even so, this kind of formula fiction is full of contradictions: formulaic, but unpredictable; open-ended, but always nudged in particular directions; visually unrealistic, but grounded in our understanding of the observed world; 'sim', but not 'simulation'.

The producers of *SimCity* hit paydirt early with their adaptation of one of the more prosaic uses of computers, the modelling of complex systems for economic or scientific purposes, for the basic structure of a game. *SimCity* is, in computer game terms, an old and venerable games franchise that has barely changed in its basic gameplay that relies on such computer modelling since its first release.[2] Despite a series of creeping improvements in the graphics over the lifetime of the series, it remains closer to those abstract models that are toyed with by academic and business economists than to what we generally think of as text. As an exceptionally (and perhaps surprisingly) successful series it established the basic mechanics of resource management that do not just appear in other 'sim' games, but are now often integrated as a part of many other games that then add a strong story element to it.[3] As the exploration of an exemplary text this consideration of *SimCity* is offered as a way of looking in detail at some of the claims made for game-fictions regarding their apparent freedom of possible outcome when they seem to depart radically from the linearity of the emplotted narrative. As a product of mass consumer culture, in a world where our politicians throw the word 'choice' around with abandon and our other forms of text emphasise a lack of closure and celebrate narrative uncertainty, *SimCity* appears to offer access to a plurality of choice and individual experience within the mass product of consumer capitalism. As the use of the term 'god-game' to describe such game-fictions implies, there is something about such management games that can be seen as empowering and liberating – we are not the passive consumer of this product of mass popular culture, we are allowed the illusion of not only 'human' but 'godly' agency.

The fact that we are playing a computer game, and that our 'godly' powers are incredibly circumscribed by the rules of its operation should not be forgotten, however. The fantasy of control it offers might even point up the powerlessness most of us experience in the world. As with *Close Combat*, we are not invited to 'immerse' ourselves in this text. Graphically, *SimCity* makes no attempt at any kind of visual realism. It has rather basic but jolly graphics that are colourfully exemplary of types rather than straightforwardly realistic, resembling the restricted but vibrant palette of the worlds of children's television rather than the contemporary city that we live in. In what sense, then, might it be meaningful to include *SimCity* among the other 'realist' game-fictions of this study that focuses so much on questions of narrative? In terms of realism, it might make the same kind of claim for accuracy of representation in its mathematical modeling that the economist might make of his or her computer model (of the balance between distance travelled and the attractiveness of a particular location for habitation, or the effect of high crime rates on property values, for example), but it does not seem to relate to the real in a clear way, and certainly not in a manner comparable to a game-fiction such as *Close Combat*. This is graphically and ideologically a game based firmly in the United States, whatever international landmarks are placed in the middle of the map, but it does not describe itself as such. What we have here is a 'sim city' located within a 'sim nation' populated by individual 'sims' who spend 'simoleons'. 'Sim' as a contraction or truncation of 'simulation' makes clear what the title of *Half-Life* had only hinted at – this kind of 'simulation' is not an attempt to elide distance between text and world, but is situated always at a distance, and in that distance 'between' rests its fictional possibility.

It also displays little of the visual sobriety already ascribed to *Close Combat*. In a sense this is a game-fiction that is inherently 'realistic' in the most basic of its workings, always insisting on the causal relationship between actions and never allowing the impossible leap or the infinite ammunition of Lara Croft's pistols in *Tomb*

Raider. The game's designers have not had to make this increasingly *more* realistic in its visual representation as processor power has advanced in leaps and bounds and graphics cards have shouldered some of the burden of computation, but *less* so than the technology allows, in order to signal the most fundamental point that this is a game that provides entertainment and diversion over unproblematic simulation. Where *Close Combat* had attempted to communicate its seriousness ('this is only a game, but it also has historical ambition') *SimCity* attempts to communicate its frivolity ('this is a serious management simulation based on the complex modelling of economic systems, but it is also only a game'). And the games designers have turned to humour as well as its graphical style to communicate that this is supposed to be fun. As with *Half-Life*, where the presence of humour as a strategy intended to disarm some forms of negative critique has already been alluded to in Chapter 3, specific examples of *SimCity*'s playfulness are hard to isolate for the purposes of a work such as this. Whether one finds the constant references to llamas in *SimCity* amusing or not, whether or not we find it funny that the number of pigeons perched on the civic statues of *SimCity* act as an index of our 'success', whether the potted biographies of the advisors we can consult raise a smile or not, and whether the 'sonic yapping-dog' aliens and the excuses for inaction made by the cowering scientists of *Half-Life are* amusing or not is as much a matter of individual reception as to whether one finds a particular comedian funny or offensive, brilliantly original or startlingly crass. What should be noted formally, however, is that all such strategies are obviously intended to amuse, that they communicate that this is not 'just' intended to be an accurate model of the real but that it is also a popular entertainment. This does not mean, however, that *SimCity* is unable to shed light on how the narratives through which we now explain the world to ourselves are beginning to change in their encounter with the computer and the computer game.

The many worlds of *SimCity*

To begin with a discussion of constraints rather than of freedoms, we should recognise that the player has very little direct control over the minutiae of events as they unfold on screen in *SimCity*, as they would in a combat-orientated real-time strategy game. The management of resources is not secondary to some sort of fast-paced action that happens elsewhere, but is the core activity of the game itself. There is no 'battle screen' to go to in *SimCity*, only the grid of the cityscape surrounded by menus and icons. Only when there has been some form of disastrous event that requires inter-vention by the emergency services does the player order individual resources into action. Even then, the speed of *SimCity 3000* runs much slower during a disaster than it does during the game proper. Unlike in *Close Combat*, or any other real-time strategy game, where much attention is given to the possible orders that might be given to each specific unit, and the ability to react quickly to events that haven't been foreseen on a unit-by-unit basis is essential to gameplay, *SimCity* only allows the player to place the police and fire units in proximity to event and let them get on with the job. We are deliberately distanced from the world of the game even more than we were in *Close Combat*. There is no attempt at the construc-tion of any illusion of immersion.

In another notable difference from many game-fictions, the city that is painstakingly crafted and nurtured in *SimCity* has no other function than to be itself. In *Command & Conquer*, *Sid Meier's Civilization II* (1996), *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* (1999), *The Settlers III* (1998) or *Age of Empires* (1997), all of which have elements of management built into their structure, there is a need to build something resembling a city or a state, but its function is purely to provide units and/or advance the combat potential of those units. In *Command & Conquer* all buildings, in some way or another, contribute to the war effort. One might research 'Wonders of the World' in *Civilisation II*, build non-combat related buildings

in your attempt to reach 'Transcendence' rather than achieve a military victory in *Alpha Centauri*, or build temples in *Age of Empires*, but they all contribute to military output, or at least to defeating an opponent, rather than to the creation of the game-fiction city as an internally satisfying analogue of a functioning city. The temples of *Age of Empires* produce militant priests who are a useful addition to one's military might – they do not minister to the poor or spend their time in good works. Even in a game with a deliberately laid-back and relaxed attitude to building construction where the detailed graphics themselves would not allow for any urgent army building, such as the various instalments of the *Settlers* series, the player still has to take his or her rather mellow military forces against the computer-controlled opponents at some point to win the game.[4] There is nowhere else to spend the accumulated excess capital of a *SimCity* city, no hover-tank upgrades or blazing arrows 'research' to be undertaken, no battle screen to move to where the excess accumulated can be spent as the player advances up the 'tech-tree', no final march upon the enemy that is the ultimate conclusion of the game.[5]

Instead one must balance the budget, invest wisely in infrastructure that degrades over time, and pay close attention to the demands of the citizens. The player can pass city ordinances and change tax rates, build roads and lay down railway tracks, allocate sites for garbage landfill and build schools. A 'news ticker' (a line of text with important 'headlines' detailed) informs the player of the citizens' desires, and petitioners ask for changes in policy. As players of another god game, *Black & White*, found out, such a need to pay attention to competing voices can be as frustrating an experience as keeping a live pet, as travelling 'god-like' over small communities in that game exposes the player to cries that 'we need wood' or 'food, food'. This aspect of management games, often referred to as 'micro-management' and rarely regarded in a positive light by those who hanker after the uncomplicated pleasures of combat, does not appeal to all players, comparable as it is to having

to spend your leisure time cleaning out the hamster cage only to be ignored for all your time and effort by a creature that does not understand that we consider ourselves to be engaged in a contractual relationship. Where's the plot? Where's the suspense? Where's the drama? Time passes, but nothing much happens. The closest analogy that springs to mind is the keeping of an ant farm, and, like the 1990s fad for looking after 'Tamagotchis' or playing with on-screen *Petz*, this can appear to be a rather absurd and pointless pastime that bears very little relationship to 'reading', 'solving', or even 'beating' the emplotted narratives of other kinds of game-fiction. The keeping of an ant-farm is hardly storytelling – we might tell stories about our ant farm, but we are unlikely to hold even the most polite audience for too long. This is exaggerated slightly for effect, but from this kind of description it should be apparent that to many players of more immediately satisfying games and game-fictions it can sound as if *SimCity* is hardly recognisable as a game at all, let alone something that might carry a recognisable narrative comparable to that of *Half-Life*, *Tomb Raider*, or even *Close Combat*.

But to substantiate the claim that *SimCity* offers a form of narrative specific to game-fictions, we must look for our comparisons elsewhere. An interesting parallel might perhaps be found in an unlikely source – not in the academic studies of the city or fragments of poetry and prose that the designers at Maxis have drawn upon and sometimes include as appendices in their manuals, but in popular fiction. The opening sections of Terry Pratchett's 'Discworld' series of novels, increasingly concerned itself with the unfolding of his own imaginary city of Ankh-Morpork and the emergence of artificial intelligence in the computer 'Hex', frequently turn to the consideration of matters of narrative form as well as the political, economic and social structures of the city. Pratchett consistently shows an awareness of the processes of textual construction that are implicit in the act of authorship, and sometimes touches on matters of contemporary theorising about how we explain the world to ourselves that even goes beyond narratological

theory in its reference. The opening of the novel *Men at Arms*, for example, makes reference to a model for understanding reality borrowed from theoretical physics (often referred to as the 'many worlds hypothesis') that might have some utility in the context of our examination of narrative and *SimCity*. In this novel a decision has just been made as to whether or not the remaining aristocracy of Ankh-Morpork will raise a rebellion against the current civil authority (neatly falling into the category of those privileged historical 'moments' that we are so keen on isolating in our historical narratives) that will have a profound effect on the unfolding of the plot that follows:

> In a million universes, Lance-Constables Cuddy and Detritus didn't fall through the hole. In a million universes Vimes didn't find the pipes. (In one strange but theoretically possible universe the Watch House was redecorated in pastel colours by a freak whirlwind, which also repaired the door latch and did a few other odd jobs around the place.) In a million universes, the Watch failed.
>   In a million universes, this was a very short book.[6]

In part this merely allows the whetting of the appetite of its readership for what follows through anachronistic reference that someone steeped in narratological theory would recognise as 'prolepsis' – the reader at this point will have no idea what 'hole', which 'pipes', or what might be exposed to the threat of 'failure'. Such proleptic foreshadowing is undoubtedly able to contribute to audience recognition of the well-told tale. This might be a comedy swords and sorcery novel, this declares, but this is a well-written comedy swords and sorcery novel, at least in terms of the care that has been taken over matters of structure. But it also points up a basic conceit of the fiction-making process, that the plot of the text is somehow uncertain until read, that we do not read to find out what is *written* next, but to find out what *happens* next. As Pratchett points out, there are a million possibilities unexplored, a million very short versions of this 'story'. But there is only one text held in our hands.

We put our trust in our authors to make the right choices among so many alternatives so that they will provide us with the most readerly pleasure.

All tales may be, as Nathaniel Hawthorne realised, 'twice told', but they do not often alter their events or emplotment when re-encountered in the same volume.[7] In a sense, it is even essential that they do not do so. Text, or at least the traditional realist literary text, has more or less been confined in its offering of a singular fixed version moving along fixed rails towards the buffers of closure. Literary academics might get excited by textual variations between editions, and the searching out of the smallest changes for their potential to invite new readings, but there is still a desire to end with an 'authorised' version. The possibility of the celebration of plural retellings is perhaps more evident in the case of film, where it manifests itself in the vogue now fuelled by the packing of extra material onto DVD releases of the 'Director's Cut' of various films.[8] But such deviations are more likely to be corrective in form – correcting errors of transcription, printer's errors, or the errors introduced by studio executives who had been paying more attention to audiences at test screenings than to the director of the film. All, however, end in a retreat into authoritative endorsement of a singular ending. And in that ending, in which justice is meted out (or not), virtue rewarded (or not), and the protagonists are orientated towards a 'happily ever after' (or not), we acquire a considerable proportion of the overarching meaning of the text, at least in respect of conventional popular fiction.

SimCity, however, offers something approaching the illusion of an apparently infinite possibility of potential readings. It has its constraints, and many of these are obvious – both in space (there are only so many diamond-shaped little boxes offered by the landscape grid on screen) and in type (you can only fill those boxes with certain structures, features or zones), but it pretends to a species of unlimited possibility. What Pratchett had borrowed from theoretical physics is the basic premise of the 'many worlds'

hypothesis that seems to suggest that each 'decision' made in the world lived in (the 'datum universe') leads not to a closing down of what had, up until that point, been an almost infinite number of possible futures, but to the creation of an alternative or parallel universe in addition to that datum universe in which that alternative choice is 'really' enacted. We might experience our universe in terms of linear progression driven inexorably forward along a single fixed line, but all possibilities nevertheless 'happened' elsewhere. One reason that it is difficult to prove this hypothesis, of course, is that we have no access to such variant universes. As a writer of fiction, Pratchett tells us, he is not so limited – he has been able to select the most satisfying of the alternatives for the purposes of his texts. He can even tell us about the more absurd alternatives that he has 'discarded' before settling for a plot that is not only 'theoretically possible' but satisfyingly plausible. We are to be treated to all the readerly satisfaction of delayed disclosure (the finding of 'the pipes'), drama (someone is going to fall down 'a hole'), and tension preceding resolution (will Vimes 'fail' or not?)

    SimCity goes further than this in presenting its own version of something akin to a playing out of the 'many worlds hypothesis'. There is no limit on the amount of the 'many worlds' that we might explore. There is no real hierarchy that establishes a single 'datum universe', except in fairly blunt terms. The manual for *SimCity 3000*, for example, recognises that the choices made by the reader might send us along the 'wrong' (or least satisfying) narrative line, particularly when disasters are confronted: 'Disasters happen all the time in the real world and SimCities are no exception. Before you unleash anything in your city, save the game.' In some ways this is analogous to hitting the 'quick-save' button before rounding a particularly suspicious corner in *Half-Life*, or backing up *Tomb Raider* before you send Lara Croft plummeting to her 'death' again and again as you try and judge a particularly irritating jump distance. Having spent many hours carefully constructing a city it is possible that the disaster you unleash might have similarly

terminal consequences for your Sims. But this is not a very satisfying analogy. In *Tomb Raider* you could sweep a particular level clean of any obstacles and opponents and then wander around looking at the game-world. But the play is over, and you are wandering around an empty stage. Once you have completed the particular plot fragment and Lara finally clings to that distant ledge by her fingertips, or Freeman stands in a corridor now stacked with alien corpses, the utility of the saved game is more or less redundant.

The phrasing of the manual instructions has a wider applicability within *SimCity*, however. 'Before you unleash *anything* in your city, save the game', we are told. In *Half-Life* or *Tomb Raider* we save the game so that we can correct our failings of reading when we fall into the error of in-game 'death' that will preclude the possibility of continuing our linear progression through the game. In *SimCity* you can save the game in order to explore alternatives that are not so much 'correct' or 'incorrect', but are presented as value-free. Want to switch the majority of your transport system from road to rail? Save the game first. Want to rezone all that housing for low income families as dense industrial land? Save the game first. Want to see what happens when an alien mother-ship drops off a fleet of flying saucers? Save the game first. This certainly seems to imply that there is no 'correct' course that we may identify. Making Sims use public transport might increase or decrease the growth rate of your city, increasing industrial density may increase pollution while providing much needed revenue, but the authorial choice of which might be most satisfying is handed over to the reader. Even if the city is razed to the ground by alien invaders, the player has not necessarily 'lost'. There is a potentially satisfying plot available in rebuilding your city from the rubble, of starting again and laying out memorial parks in memory of those who went before, just as there might be readerly satisfaction in watching your emergency services shrug off the effects of such devastation as they restore normality without any real pause.

What is of interest here is the way that the playing of *SimCity* provides so many possible narrative outcomes that do not fall into the binary opposition of 'correct' or 'incorrect' choice. The saved game of *SimCity* is not rendered immediately redundant, but can join all the other 'many worlds' that might have been, and we can do what the theoretical physicist cannot do, and explore that world at our leisure, making more choices and deviations that we may or may not want to explore further. We will still exercise ourselves in narrative terms as we approach successive choices, asking the basic question of 'What if?' that will then be worked out within the mechanics of the game, and we provide the 'meaning' of the plot fragment ourselves from our available conventional stories. Will this be the gallant story of recovery against all odds? Will my city thrive where the other cities of this Sim nation fall into recession? Will this be the tragedy of decline? Again and again we can ask the question 'What if?' as part of our engagement with text – we do not have to wait for moments of historical 'crisis' to present themselves. Everything here seems to point towards plural possibility, to a lack of fixity of outcome. The extent to which all this apparent freedom and supposed liberation might be illusory, however, will be the focus of the final section of this chapter.

SimCity limits

In some ways the basic framework of *SimCity*'s offer of limitless possibility would seem to invite positively 'utopian' readings. The term 'utopia', which has its origin in a coinage of Thomas More's for the title of his sixteenth-century political and philosophical tract, famously amalgamates the Greek words for both 'no-place' and 'good-place', which would appear to have a specific application to this form or game-fiction, just as 'half-life' or de Man's 'space between' proved useful in approaching earlier texts.[9] We certainly have been exposed to its inversion, the dystopian 'bad place' of the imagination, in both *Tomb Raider* and *Half-Life*. In terms of *SimCity* we are already aware that this is a textual construct, made of interrelated

data fragments given graphical expression on screen, that is a 'no place', and the implication of the rhetoric of the manuals for *SimCity* is that most players are more interested in constructing the imagined 'good place' rather than any deliberately flawed or dysfunctional social construct. As such *SimCity* might be usefully thought of as a utopian text, at least in potential. Even when we encounter a contemporary urban problem such as traffic congestion, pollution, or high crime rates in *SimCity* we are unlikely to seek to preserve them simply for the 'realism' or verisimilitude they add to our fictional text. The drive is always essentially utopian, there is a demand for a movement away from the 'flawed' to the 'perfect' that we may or not heed that is always orientated towards finding something that gestures towards an absolute 'perfection'. The plot fragment then presents itself in the following terms: There is flaw. I identify flaw. I 'act'. There is no longer flaw. I move on until I identify the next flaw.[10]

Before embarking on an extended and hyperbolic discussion of the genre of the management game-fiction as revolutionary in offering us a point of access to a realisable utopian potential, however, the point should be made that it is the common usage of 'utopia' as popularly understood as a space in which a 'perfect' society can be imagined, rather than a full exploration of a complex philosophical idea realisable somehow 'within' game-fiction, that we are most concerned with here. The utopian ideal, that is likely to be something that no two players of *SimCity* would agree on in detail ('bigger?' or 'more efficient?', 'more profitable?' or 'happy?', etc.) powers the apparently absent plot of *SimCity* when it is played by what was described in Chapter 2 in relation to *Tomb Raider* as the 'conformist' reader. Specifically, this chapter assesses the extent to which the approach of any such 'perfection' in reading *SimCity* forces acceptance of a particular and singular world-view that is just as ideologically conservative as that which underlies the basic plot of *Half-Life*, and forces conformity where the promise had seemed to be of liberation from constraint. Perhaps we should

always feel wary of any representative of authority (even the author of text, be they the writer of fiction or the designer of game-fictions) who promises and sanctions freedom, just as we should always be wary of those politicians whose offer to 'liberate' us only emphasises the control they already exercise over us, but the extent of its utopian potential might benefit from some consideration here.

SimCity is the longest established of the game-fiction series studied in detail in this volume, and it is perhaps appropriate that we can look to the reception of what has been described by some as the first realist novel in English, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, for a degree of insight into how it functions as a readable text that has limits of convention that may be concealed, but nevertheless firmly structure the experience of reading. The sections of *Robinson Crusoe* that most casual readers remember is its central narrative of isolation, when Crusoe is shipwrecked on an island and has to pit himself against the elements and solitude with only his faith (and ship's stores, and books, and weapons) for comfort until he can add Friday to his list of 'goods'. Before he is joined by Friday and makes him his 'servant' Crusoe builds himself his own little kingdom from the available resources, making inventories of his possessions, keeping a diary, building and arranging his physical environment, and showing an attention to managerial detail that might be all-too recognisable to the readership of management game-fictions. Everything is focused on the transformation of 'wilderness' into 'civilisation', as he builds his fortress, organises his production of food and orders his calendar by cutting markers of the passing days into the trunks of the trees that surround his settlement.

This text initially presented itself as a 'true story' apparently grounded in not only the 'someone' of Crusoe but in an actual 'some-place', and whatever the sophistication claimed for contemporary readers, it is worth noting that many still regard the text as a 'fictionalisation' of the story of the shipwrecked Alexander Selkirk. Most critics, however, have identified a different and more

complex relationship with the real in *Robinson Crusoe* than that location in simple autobiographical or biographical reference. This has never been a text read solely as 'about' one individual, whether that individual is defined as Defoe, Crusoe, or Selkirk, but as a text that says much about the cultural moment of its production – whether in terms of faith, individualism, or capitalism. When Karl Marx read *Robinson Crusoe*, for example, he was not taken in by the original conceit of the text, that it was a 'true' account of the shipwrecked Crusoe and showed the ways in which an individual survived the privations of shipwreck. Instead, and like all informed readers of his time, he recognised its fictionality. But even Marx, not primarily noted for the subtlety of his literary criticism, did not simply throw the text over his shoulder and turn back to a reading of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* because of his understanding that what he was confronted with was a fiction. Instead, he, and significant numbers of economists who followed in his footsteps, saw in Defoe's account a narrative that said something about the world we live in (or at least the world of emergent mercantile capitalism that Defoe lived in), and offered a reading of the text that stressed the extent to which it was not just a poor bedraggled sailor who was washed up on 'Crusoe's' island, but that entire economic system that has been described by Ian Watt as in Defoe's 'blood'.[11]

It is tempting to think of Crusoe's island as a tabula rasa or 'clean slate' on which Crusoe might create any utopian vision, just as the player or reader of *SimCity* is apparently able to create any kind of fictional version of society in the wilderness space provided at the moment of foundation of a city. This would, however, be a little naïve. Thinkers had long used such notions of an imagined space in a wilderness state in which there is as yet no social organisation for the entertainment of ideas about how we understand the social world we live in. Perhaps more significantly, many of the accounts of America's foundation and settlement also follow this basic model of understanding. But the insertion of human

enquiry always makes this a certain kind of text, where we have already taken the answers we will find in the wilderness with us when we set out. We might not have the underlying systems of consumer capitalism 'in our blood' uncritically when we encounter *SimCity* as Crusoe has when he arrives on 'his' island, but we are aware that this 'sim nation' is modelled on the world in which we live, and has embedded within it the same assumptions and formulae through which social scientists have attempted to explain that world to us. We are already within a heavily and densely textualised space, even if it is apparently empty when first encountered. It already exists as text, and the invitation is to 'read' as much as to 'write'. In the welcoming opening gambit of the *SimCity 2000* manual we are offered an illusion of the 'unlimited cities' we might construct, but we are then presented with a further one hundred and thirty eight printed pages of text largely concerned with telling us what the rules that condition and limit that possibility are.

The bottom line that can never be forgotten in *SimCity* is budget control and fiscal probity. Indulge in too many utopian impulses and, unless you access the cheats and keep replenishing your 'simoleons', you will go bankrupt, your city will fall into decline, and you will 'fail'. Get deep enough into debt through bond issues and you can do nothing but watch your failure play itself out. Rather than the single 'no' of Lara Croft, we will be subject to a long line of petitioners complaining about where we have gone wrong. In particular, truly radical departures from the American model of consumer capitalism are simply not allowed for – the car remains king, you must go through a period of heavy industrial production which inevitably pollutes before you can concentrate on service industries or high-tech, low environmental impact industries, the skyscraper still offers the most desirable vision of appropriate land use, and there is a basic core progressivism that, despite the environmentalist concerns built into the game, drives the game ever onwards towards 'bigger', 'better', 'newer'. Even the regularity of the in-game grid and the top-down isometric vision

of the world locate this kind of game-fiction in a particular context of how we read the visual image.[12] The cultural specificity of its 'American-ness' might not worry too many players in a world where our popular culture and mass entertainment constantly exposes us to American frameworks of understanding, but for a European reader there might still be a little regret that one cannot, for example, put in cycle lanes on *SimCity*'s roads, or put differential tax rates in place that sting the rich far harder than the poor.

It is not possible, even, to replay the mistakes of the command economies of the old Soviet Bloc in *SimCity*. A player cannot order one of his or her cities to produce only left footed shoes and another factory to produce (hopefully) matching right footed shoes, because he or she does not have direct control of the individual Sims, but only of general policy decisions. The player cannot restrict the movements of his or her Sims as the repressive regimes of the Soviet era did – if these citizens are faced with the digital equivalent of being forced to queue for too long, or to endure shortages of consumer goods, they will simply leave in disgust. The player cannot ration anything, or even use propaganda to persuade his or her Sims that the grass is actually greener, here, than it is in neighbouring states. Capitalism has not only won, it is the only possible model that might inform our playing of the game.

The basic method of control in *SimCity* allows us to set policy relating to a wide range of issues, but not to control the actions of the individual Sims who are presented to us as if they possessed autonomy. We can cajole and entreat our Sims to accept our design using a combination of carrot and stick, but we cannot directly order them. 'They' are given something approximating self-interest, just as the individual soldiers of *Close Combat* were given something approximating the illusion of self-preservation. But the artificial intelligence of the game does not allow us to appeal to the better instincts of the inhabitants of our potential utopia – the Sims are programmed to behave as if they are as concerned with a realisation of their 'self-evident' rights to 'Life, Liberty, and the

pursuit of Happiness' guaranteed in a way that reflects current American understandings of what these terms mean.[13] The social contract we work within is the social contract of contemporary American capitalism. The extent of the coincidence of only a 'Sim America' as offering access to this utopian potential is even reflected in the language of the manual of *SimCity 3000*:

> [Y]ou're so much more than just their Mayor. You control their destinies. Sure, they can do some things on their own, but it's up to you to give them a nice place to live, to work, to raise their families, to pursue happiness, and all those other things they should be allowed to do. Just remember – if you don't give them what they're looking for, there's always some other Mayor out there who will and Sims can be quick to leave for greener pastures.

Inevitably, a 'successful' *SimCity* city will be an American city, and only America offers access to utopia, only Sim America offers 'perfection'. The basic offer of freedom of action or reading is tempered by our need to cater for these supposedly 'universal' desires, and if we do not conform to those desires, then we will suffer the consequences.

As a potentially didactic text that might claim to be teaching us something about the world 'as it really is', then, *SimCity* might well prove unpalatable to some. Despite the concession it makes to some rather New Age ideas about environmental issues (talking in terms of 'auras' as well as about material wealth, stressing that trees have more than commodity value) it is also grindingly progressive in its assumption of the valorisation of the 'bigger', the 'better', and the 'newer'. *SimCity 2000* is a little more blatant in making this clear, and declares in its manual that it 'is primarily a "building" game where you create and try to increase the size of your cities'. 'Bigger' really does equate with 'better' – size is important in this game. As time passes we get access to more and more technological possibilities. As the city grows in size we get treated to more 'rewards' in the form of civic buildings that might be useful or just

reflect our stature as 'successful' mayors. When any aspect of the game falls into decline, we are faced with complaints and advice whether we solicit them or not. Even the cheat codes for *SimCity* communicate the extent to which the player is being asked to accept the values and judgements of a particular ideological system. In order to access a cheat that will enable purchases to be made with no cost (in Simoleons, at least), the player must access the command line and type in the phrase 'i am weak'.

That god games present us with the simultaneous promise of a liberty to do anything and the constraints of an imperative to conform (forcing us to accept what we must do to succeed) is obvious. In what amounts to an affectionate but satirical side-swipe at the genre Iain Banks had gestured towards the kinds of sim states that one can construct in the naming of a series of games in *Complicity*, one of very few novels in which a central protagonist is a player of computer games:

> *Despot* is a world-builder game from the HeadCrash Brothers, the same team that brought us *Brits*, *Raj* and *Reich*. It's their latest, biggest and best, it's Byzantinely complicated, baroquely beautiful, spectacularly immoral and utterly, utterly addictive.[14]

SimCity works as a game, and as a narrative, because we already know the story we are supposed to tell, already accept that the narrative reference made is not to the historical (as it was in *Close Combat*), but to the myth of American utopian futures. Banks uses '*Brits*', '*Raj*' and '*Reich*' to stand for something that is built into every aspect of the text of *SimCity* – a pre-existing narrative structure that we are then expected to conform to. At least *SimCity* does not attempt to use British imperialism and colonialism or Nazi militarism as its model, but however the expectations of the game are communicated, whether in its title or not, they establish limits above all else.

SimCity is not just a sim in the sense of truncated simulation, but a sim in the sense of simplification, for all its statistical

complexity it is an abbreviation and reduction of the complex world about us. Some simplifications are barely noticeable – the absence of weather effects, for example – while others carry a series of implications that might be of more concern. Sims are a homogenous group. They do not have individuality and behave as a mass, even if we can zoom in and see individual animated Sims moving about the game-world. There is no racism, sexism or religious intolerance in *SimCity* because the differences between groups are either ignored or taken into account in a statistical model in such a way that everything is averaged out, everything is subject to generalisation. In other god games such as *Black & White*, however, something potentially more worrying is present.

The player can choose between 'good' and 'evil' in *Black & White*, just as you can choose to reverse the cover art and have a black or white CD case on your shelf, but you cannot evade the framework of meaning and judgement that accompany culturally specific understandings of what good and evil might mean. The punishment and reward system for training the avatar creature that moves about the game-world as your representative provides a case in point – the creature 'learns' by a system of reward (stroking) and punishment (beating) carried out by movement of a cursor that visually represents your godly hand. Anyone who has had responsibility for childcare will recognise the basic model, but the devil is in the detail. It is no longer socially acceptable to beat the recalcitrant child. It is indeed often, seen as an 'evil' act – an act of abuse of the child. And yet it is not an act interpreted by the game as having any moral value or as being subject to moral judgement. The player of *Black & White* might worry about the possibility of injury produced in excessive creature correction, but not about that act as an act of abuse. Behave in a fashion that is interpreted by the game's designers as evil and your actions will be written on the body of your landscape, and particularly on the temple complex raised in your honour by your worshippers. What can resemble the magic castle of Disneyland darkens and twists into spikes. But

beating the creature is not so interpreted. One can imagine some grey areas not containable within the black and white moral system of *Black & White*, however. To sketch out a possible utilitarian problem, there might be moments of need for the whole of a settlement where the sacrifice of a few unfortunate individuals would serve the greater good. Whatever one thinks of the Benthamite notion of 'the greatest good for the greatest number of people' as a template for social behaviour and organisation, to label all sacrifice as necessarily 'evil' would seem to be extreme. *Black &White*, as its title implies, deals only in universal categories and does not allow grey areas. The vengeful God of the Old Testament, for example, would often be interpreted as evil by a system of in-game surveillance of the player that is implicitly applying the 'rules' of a Western European and North American system of values informed by Christianity's New Testament.

Such observation of an already culturally determined form of reading, however, should not lead us to reject such game-fictions because they have deceived us in the false promise of a truly open-ended experience. In that promise is one of the most interesting elements of the game-fiction's formal novelty and innovation – the multiple and plural is always prioritised over the singular as each plot fragment is encountered. There is something here that conveys the same kind of enthusiasm (and the inevitability of a collapse into its unattainability) as can be located in Buzz Lightyear's battle-cry of 'To infinity, and beyond'. We should not get too excited that the apparent absolute promise of the open-ended falls into a form of closure and ending, that this does not even approach the illusion of the infinite, let alone achieve the impossible and exceed it. In *SimCity*'s return to forms of closure, in our recognition in advance of future outcome, lies our ability to read this text, in its restrictive structure we are able to follow this as text. The game-fiction is open-ended within limits, open-ended for the moment, open-ended always with reference to an outcome (the building of our sim utopia in *SimCity*, the destruction of all other gods

in *Black & White*) that provide an implied ending that gives sense to our readings within that moment.

Notes

1 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). Kermode's discussion of how endings operate in relation to literary narrative remains lucid and informative. His discussion of utopianism has also informed some of the more general thinking in this chapter, and the section 'Literary Fiction and Reality' is particularly relevant to my discussion here (pp. 127–52).

2 The one radical departure that Maxis have made from their successful formula emerged in the game *The Sims* (2000), which shifted the distance at which the player engages with the social construct. In *The Sims* it is the individual and the family that is subject to management, and the homes of individual sims that are the focus of the player's building activity. Much of what I have to say about *SimCity* remains applicable to *The Sims*, however. Visually *The Sims* remains more *Simpsons* than simulation, for example, and the apparent freedom to direct the 'lives' of individual Sims in any direction is comparably limited by a particular model of how social relationships work and career progression is achieved. The extent to which *SimCity* offers some of the pleasures of television soap opera, which I have not had enough space to explore in this chapter, are far more obvious in the voyeuristic observation of the everyday 'activities' of a small neighbourhood group in *The Sims*.

3 The clearest example of this would be *Black & White* (2001), a literal 'god game' in that the player is invited to adopt the role of a god who is worshipped, casts miracles, and uses a proxy 'creature' to guide his or her worshippers within a firmly structured and progressive story. *Black & White* was praised for both its story, its lack of strictures in how the player might approach the solution of specific tasks and problems, but was heavily criticised in its first incarnation for the 'micromanagement' its settlements required. *Black & White* will be given more detailed consideration towards the close of this chapter.

4 Unlike many games *Settlers* allows the player to watch the building

process, with assigned individuals carrying raw materials, laying bricks, and hammering planks together. Such construction work is far more detailed in its representation than in *SimCity* and provides an important part of the aesthetic quality of a game that nevertheless amounts to little more than a construction of a production line churning out soldiers, priests with offensive capability, and heavy weapons.

5 For a thumbnail definition of 'tech-tree' see the glossary of game-specific terms. It is worth adding, however, that the presence of such 'tech-trees' is another way in which game-fictions ensure that they conform to progressive expectations, much in the same way as the incremental access to the products of technological improvement does in *SimCity*.

6 Terry Pratchett, *Men at Arms* (London: Gollancz, 1993), pp. 21–2. Like Pratchett I would not pretend to competence with regard to the complexities of this thinking, and seek only to explore the ways in which popular culture has found something of interest in its broad framework and its relationship with forms of enquiry about narrative, rather than physical laws.

7 The classic example of plural endings, at least in literary fiction, is John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1969). Much has been made of the implications of Fowles' instability of singular interpretation. See Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 45–50.

8 The most obvious example would be the film *Blade Runner* (1982), where the restoration of cuts originally made at the studio's insistence, including a restoration of Ridley Scott's original ending and the removal of Deckard's narration (provided by Harrison Ford on original release), render the text far more slippery and ambiguous in its meanings. The inclusion of extra material on DVD release, including the frequent addition of 'the making of' mini-documentaries that reveal the artifice of the text might also relate to the discussion of audience appreciation of the 'well-turned phrase' that was discussed in Chapter 2.

9 For a more detailed discussion of both 'utopia' and 'utopianism' in relation to written forms of popular texts, see McCracken, *Pulp*, pp. 154–82.

10 I realise that I might have been able to call on the substantial support of a wealth of psychoanalytic theory if I substituted the term 'flaw'

with 'lack'. I wish to retain my focus here, however, on the way in which the reading of such a game-fiction is a self-reflexive process demanding recognition that we are constructing a textual artefact (a 'made thing', a 'text'), rather than answering a basic human desire.

11 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957). Although the basic structure of this work owes something to Watt's volume, the relevant specific chapter in this context is '*Robinson Crusoe*, Individualism, and the Novel', pp. 62–92.

12 See Richard L. Gregory's 'Perspective' in Julia Thomas (ed.), *Reading Images* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 11–16 for a clear summary of the manner in which ways of seeing are not 'natural', but are culturally determined.

13 The phrase, of course, is from the text that in a sense 'wrote' modern America into existence (as a political state rather than a continental landmass), the Declaration of Independence of 4 July 1776.

14 Iain Banks, *Complicity* (London: Abacus, 1993), p. 51.