

Sven Böttcher

Moving to SimCity™

How we can playfully save the world



All rights reserved, Sven Böttcher 2017 (mail@solunia.de). As far as my copyrights are concerned, the redistribution and printing of this work for non-commercial purposes are permitted, however, the removal and use of the illustrative screen shots for other purposes is prohibited, as well as copying and/or further/editing of the images. I myself use the pictorial material here in the context of the quotation right only to underline my theories and for the necessary clarification of the described facts. If you wish to use the image material for other purposes, you will need a written declaration of consent by the copyright holder, i. e. Electronic Arts Inc.

Assertion

We can playfully save the world. All we need to do is to make the rules appropriate so that they serve this purpose. By designing an appropriate framework, our legislators (real-life programmers) can ensure a victory of cooperation, a triumph of altruism and, if you like the concept, “love” itself. If we so desire. However, this has not been the case thus far. But it is easy and impressive to disprove the idea of *homo humini lupus*, man being men’s wolf, and *homo oeconomicus* being our default mode. We can disprove this idea empirical and exemplary, by moving to a strictly growth-oriented, capitalist, globalized metropolis: to "SimCity"¹.

Splash screen

Beforehand, as a disclosure or gamer disclaimer: I do admit that I may be a *tad* addicted to games. I have always been, from *Pong* to *PacMan* (who ate on even at night, behind my closed eyelids), from *Wing Commander* to *Legend of Zelda* to *Mario* (all parts, including all carts), from *Tekken* to *Metroid* to *Fifa* to *2048* to *Peggle* - I played through everything, and through everything with joy. (Of course also through the first version of *SimCity*, back in the 80s on a DuoDock Mac),

However, I like to think that am not disqualified for higher mental efforts because besides gaming I have found some time to publish about 30 books, novels as well as political and philosophical non-fiction, to write a dozen films, series and TV formats, to run a couple of companies, to raise three children, to provide a lot of people with jobs and livelihoods. I hope that is enough or at least sufficient for your suspicion that I may have some expertise not only as a gamer.

And with that: Let's go. To *SimCity*. *SimCity BuildIt*, to be more precise, for this is the latest development of EA’s everlasting city planning simulation. Sounds dull, but it's not. At best meditative, since unlike ego shooters or quest games *SimCity* doesn't excite you, but calms you down. And it is programmed in a nice and simple way so that the addict does not fail by tripping over any barriers to understanding. Nevertheless, the game principle is explained and illustrated here a little more precisely in the shortest possible form for all those who don't know *SimCity* – everyone else feels free to skip the paragraphs below and directly jump to page 6.

SimCity is, as the name suggests, a city planning simulation. The player functions as "the mayor", his goal is to create and enlarge a city, up to a megalopolis with 2-4 million inhabitants and the most beautiful monuments, parks, universities and futuristic skyscrapers. At the beginning, however, there is practically nothing. Because the player has only a few accessible plots of land in large, wonderfully empty wasteland.

Right here, in the middle of this undeveloped area, the player can now set up a first building site for a residential area, a few mini power plants for electricity, water and gas as well as a DIY store, and of course he also needs a police station, a fire brigade and a hospital as well as a first factory for the production of raw wood and iron. That will cost him some play money (from his initial “Simoleon”s pile of seed money, which one receives free of charge), and in no time on the building site a few first houses will appear,

¹ Invented, manufactured and traded by Electronic Arts (hereinafter EA).

and the inhabitants will pay their mayor some Simoleons - taxes, the return on his investment.



From this modest beginning, then, the player will keep on building, and over time, the residential areas will grow into high-rise buildings; one can build more factories and produce more goods, take in more and can gradually develop more land. However, as the population grows, so do the demands: the inhabitants expect quite a lot - entertainment, parks, schools, a port (for foreign trade), later an airport and a spaceport, and if you fail to meet those demands (or build your *Sim*'s houses too close to the reeking factories (or forget to build more fire brigades), your city's inhabitants get in a bad mood - and move away. This means, of course, that all houses are vacant and the tax revenues are missing, so your city is simply going bankrupt.

In the initial phase, therefore, some mayors succeed only in financially overreaching themselves and in leaving behind a deserted, stinking, bankrupt ghost town. (Those should be erased quickly. Luckily, this is virtual reality, not real Detroit.)

However, every mayor with a halfway decent approach will, albeit with a great deal of patience, slowly progress towards his goals. Of course, the incentives increase with the requirements, because EA's programmers do not only control the game, but also the motivation of their players. Basically, whenever the player tends to lose interest (or even realizes that he has been spending quite a lot of his precious lifetime in the construction of de facto nothing), there always is a new interesting challenge popping up, like an upgrade in the form of new (or, finally, environmentally friendly) factories. And there will be new challenges that will take you to the next level in no time. Well, no, not in *no* time, but, hey, it'll be just another half hour until you are there (where we'll happily come up with a new carrot dangling right in front of your nose). To be brief: the game is addictive - like all well-programmed games.

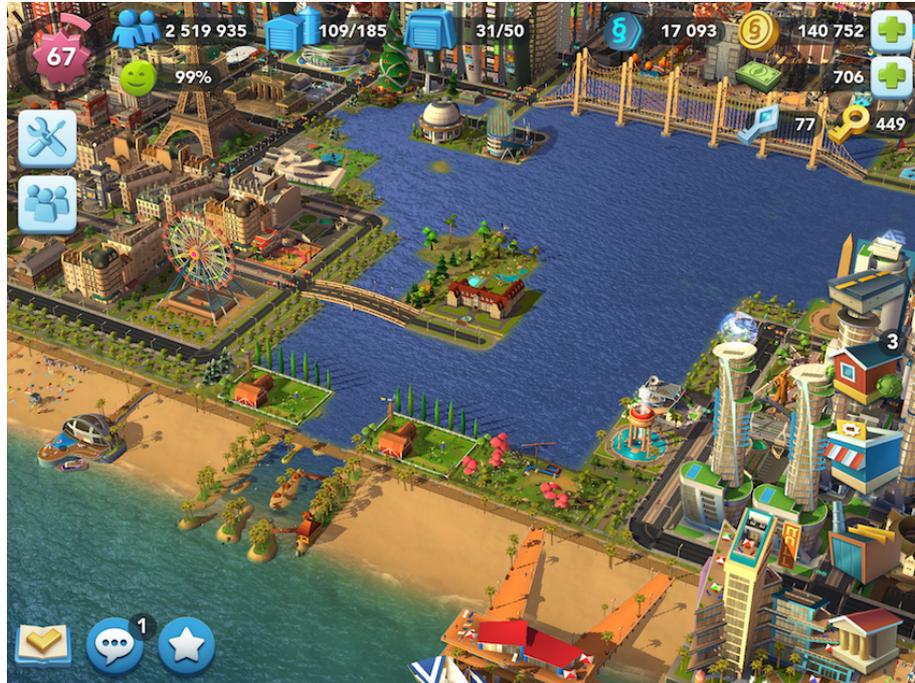
And this addictive effect is built to last. For a long, long time, because SimCity is quite literally a contemplative experience, and even the "Dr. Vu catastrophes" that can be triggered by the player himself do not provide for adrenaline rushes (but only for nice rewards as soon as the self-inflicted damage is repaired). So you don't have to learn anything or only little, you continue to move by the same set of rules in a world which is be-

coming more and more demanding, and you act, build, move, expand in a semi-meditative state.

For a very long time.

For years, to be more precise, until the desired dazzling metropolis is finally there.

One like this.



(I do admit, of course, that I wasn't aiming for maximization of population, but beauty. And, yes, I like my French Alster on the Cote d'Azur.)



Now if you don't have any patience at all, but still want to call your own such a beautiful city, you can – at least theoretically - abbreviate the whole building process. Alas, not with hacks or serious cheats, since the whole game runs on the EA server farms. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to create a dazzling SimCity within two concentrated weeks. For this purpose one only has to permanently reduce all production and construction processes to zero by pressing the buttons that appear everywhere, offering the option "immediately". But choosing this option permanently requires a lot of play money you would have to buy with *real* money (the program offers this possibility, scaled, starting with small change (€5.99), ending with a big bag of sim-dough for €109.99). However, if the impatient player really wanted to get out of an empty landscape immediately and

create a city like the one shown above - including complete Hollywood studios, some world wonders and lots of "legendary buildings" - he wouldn't be able to accomplish this with one or two large play-money bags, but rather needed real money, roughly estimated, a 150,000€².

Not Simoleons. Real Euros. 150.000.³

We can therefore neglect this scenario here. Nobody pays 150,000€ for a virtual city.⁴ Warren Buffett must have better things to do than playing SimCity. Therefore, the only realistic alternative for the ordinary mortal is to invest a lot of time, because time is money in virtual as in real life. And so, after having invested 1 or 2 years and 1-2 hours a day of your precious time, you have the 150,000 € city "for free" (or for a total of 100€, if you occasionally help yourself in a very, very modest way).

So now, at the latest, after reaching all essential goals, with his own villa, view of the lagoon and Hollywood in his back, even the craziest player will stop and look for a new sedative hobby. Unless EA comes up with something else. And EA always comes up with something else to keep its customers addicted.

This time, however, with something that – not intended by the creators - points far beyond the game itself. A feature that underlines in an astonishing way that we live just a push of a button away from Utopia.

The Civil Mayor's Society

By adding the new "Mayor's Competition" mode in 2017, EA offered the individual players, the SimCity mayors of all cities scattered around the world, an opportunity to team up online, to gather together 25 cities and thus cooperate - in a quite globalized sense, i. e. in the form of trade challenges that can only be mastered jointly.

Basically, this was all about no more and no less than producing a high total gross domestic product of 25 cities - with the numerous joint factories and production facilities - for which a "legendary chest" waved as a reward at the end of every seven-day seasonal matchday. A "Loot Box", which, however, could only be achieved



² The exchange rate Euro (€) to USD is approx. 1:1 (I know it's more like 1.15:1, but for the sake of argument, let's not be fuzzy).

³ I'd like to admit that I may be wrong here quite severely, and that the whole thing may cost more like 100,000 or 250,000. For our reasoning, this is totally irrelevant, but if anyone has more precise numbers or estimates, I am happy to stand corrected. The assumptions and key data I used for "all at once" are these: stock (200) = 150 €, Vu-Tower complete = 2.000 €, mountain + beach complete = 2.000 €, land development (all) = 7.000 €, immediate completion of all buildings and factories at the highest level / legendary buildings = 60.000 €, Special Items (victory prizes) are basically priceless (due to competitions you can not skip), my estimated price for 1 season in the "immediate-quick course" is 8 (game days) x 300 € = 2.400 €, so that the winning prizes (like 8 "Hollywood-Studios") for each individual season would add up to about 18,000 €, in the case of the city shown above x 5 = about 100,000 €. From this point of view, yes, it is true that €250,000 is probably more realistic than the €120,000 I have assumed, but that is irrelevant in the end, because no one will seriously build a SimCity in this way. Neither for a quarter of a million nor half a million.

⁴ „12,000 €" appears to be happening. The mayor, who confessed this effort in one of the chats I visited (believable, because his "City" was created very quickly), was an exception. The reaction of the other attendees, who had "only" invested a lot of time, remained astonishingly well-behaved.

with difficulty, even by a group of 25 multi-million cities. (Small towns had no chance to win the legendary chest, but at least one of the five smaller ones.)

Even for 25 absolute heavyweights with game crazy mayors, however, 1.5 million points per matchday (= 7 days) represented a serious challenge, because even in the highest category (Megalopolis league) it is hardly possible for the individual to score more than 100,000 points. And 1.5 million points in 7 days easily translated into an average of 60,000 points for each player on a team of 25. In other words, with 30-50 match day tasks, a minimum of 1,500 per individual task, hardly a solution can be found, because the individual tasks required a great deal of time and precise coordination of all factories and processing trades. Even though some of the 25 partners, the real "giants", managed to score 100-120,000 points, others of the newly built 1-million-plus-cities only managed to reach 30-50,000 points.

A final explanation is required here. The player's individual tasks, presented to him by the system, usually consisted of either producing a large number of complicated items (from various other items⁵) or of producing and collecting simple items to extend buildings or loading cargo ships/airplanes.

Once a task had been completed, a new task was automatically added to the list of 10 tasks. However, it was not possible to see in advance *which* new, most lucrative task would appear (all other tasks were out of the question for 100,000 point aspirants). In other words: You couldn't prepare for what was to come - and so you often found yourself in a tight spot, facing a real time problem when the next top task appeared. For example, if you had entrusted your "food factory" (on speculation) with the production of meat (time-consuming, the production of 5 steaks requiring 10 hours of



real time) and you were now requested by the newly uncovered task card to deliver 3 sacks of flour, which could only be produced in the same factory as the steaks, you were forced to wait for a whole day⁶ - or to execute a less well paid order, which was bad for your total score. In this case, as a "lone fighter", all you could do was wait, because flour was always in short supply on the free market, so it was practically never available.

But now there was a merger with 24 cities, a trade association. And evidently it was simply a smart idea to knock on all of your neighbours' doors, by using the built-in chat function, and ask: "Does anyone have 3 flours for me?"

⁵ The production of the most basic item, a nail, costs 2 pieces of iron and takes 5 minutes. The creation of the most complex item in the game, a hamburger, costs 3 x animal feed (which turns into a steak), 4 x textile + 4 x seed as well as a further portion of animal feed for cream (which is combined into a roll), as well as a barbecue (which consists of a spatula (2 iron, 2 wood, 2 plastic) and 3 more pieces of iron). In total, the production of a burger takes 7 hours.

⁶ Addicted connoisseurs will argue that EA has invented the expensive "speed-stamps" for these situations, but that doesn't change the basic correctness of my statement. The omission of the stamps in the main text is therefore due solely to a better overall understanding, especially for the non-addicted layman.

The probability that someone actually *was* producing flour - or had some in stock - was quite high. And maybe the flour owner would even part with his treasure.

But on what terms?

When I was accepted into "my" club, a circle of 25 established mayors, and looked around in the cities of the others, I was impressed - by the contents of the participants' external storages, accessible for each of the 25 participants. If, for example, there were 5 sacks of flour stored here, you could simply take them with you, for a small amount of play money. But as I immediately learned, you were only allowed to do that if you asked first.

Since I needed - sticking with our example - 3 bags of flour, I asked. Or rather, said, following the strict rules, "Need 3 flour."

And expected an offer, a purchase price. Or worse, an offer to exchange the 3 bags of flour for 3 VU batteries (batteries were tremendously valuable and hard to get by.)

To my surprise, a simple "flour go", sent from one of my partner cities, appeared in the chat window instead. So I "jumped" there, found 3 sacks of flour in the store house, took them (for a small amount of play dough), was able to finish my task and asked the donor, with a "thx": "What do you want for it?" (now already knowing safely that the donor could not take advantage of me, because if he asked for 3 batteries now, I would simply refuse and only compensate him adequately, but not let me get bogged down).

The answer was: "Nothing."

I thanked him, again. Disbelieving. Because this one had to be a particularly wealthy partner. And an altruistic one, too. Probably one with lots of internal, inaccessible storage facilities, a mayor who had spent all his life (or all his money) in SimCity. But a closer look at our members list revealed that the donating partner was rather small - at least much smaller than me.

Another newcomer, new to the team just like me (let's call him "Paco"), asked his question immediately after entering - and, unlike me, quite bluntly: "Need VU batteries, exchange rate 1:1 for land items".

You could certainly suggest that. Even if the exchange rate was slightly in Paco's favor, since VU items were less common than land items.

The answer came immediately, from the executive floor, from the vice-president of the trade alliance (lets call him "No. 2").

No 2: "We're not trading here."

Paco was amazed: "What else?"

No. 2 explained: "Just say what you're looking for."

Paco: "3 VU batteries."

No. 2: "Go."

It took 2 minutes, then Paco thanked No. 2, who sent a "U R welcome" back, and on Paco's question whether he really wanted nothing for this treasure, No. 2 simply answered: "Who needs, gets. Who has, gives."

From this moment at the latest, I was fascinated - by what was happening in the chat, during the rush hours (after the mayors apparently had finished their other, real life's jobs for the day). This chat consisted mainly of rapid fire searches and immediate "Go"s. Due to the high frequency, however, it made sense to add the addressee to the "Go", because otherwise chaos would reign within minutes. And of course I joined in. Asking for what I didn't have and just needed - and firing "Go's" in return, putting items into my external storage facility as soon as someone needed something I had. At first, however, I had a hard time when someone called for "5 x Meat" or "3 Batteries", because for my "5 x Meat" I had to run my factory for a whole day, and I had spent three days searching for

my "3 Batteries". Besides, I would definitely need these treasures myself within the next few days for several tasks, so I wouldn't be so stupid to give them up.

Yes, I was. I did. Because that's exactly what was smart, not stupid. This was an essential part of this community, this team. The organisation I found myself in practiced something that we only dream or fantasize about in the real world: a real "gift economy".

And I was amazed.

Of course you can say "that's not surprising at all, it's just a game - in reality this would never work". Let's leave that as a working hypothesis, but what baffled me was that in "SimCity" this principle could work much *less* than in reality. To be more precise, it was completely impossible for SimCity to develop into a gift economy. This contradicted all assumptions about the behavior of the human being itself, the homo economicus, and even more: It seemed to be completely irrational, defying all reason.

Please bear in mind the risk that the established partners exposed themselves to when accepting newcomers like me into their club. With my entry into the circle I had gained access to the storehouses of all partners, facilities which were filled to the brim with "slots", i. e. 5-packs of all treasures, whose production took an enormous amount of time - or which were simply not available at all on the "free market".

All of this I, a newcomer, could simply pocket. Hoard it in my internal storehouse, invisible, inaccessible to the others, and after this robbery I could: simply leave the club again. With full bags. And, most beautiful, no one would ever catch me. No one would, no one could punish me for that! No SimCity police, no SimCity FBI. Nobody could turn me in. I would not even be denounced and "banned" by EA, because I was free to change my city name at any time!

Paradise!

A dream come true for the homo oeconomicus, who is always looking for his own advantage. You didn't even have to be a born thief to develop fantasies here. Here, there were weeks of *time* on the presentation plate, up for grabs, and you could get away with murder (or VU batteries) completely unpunished.

Why didn't anyone do that?

Was I surrounded by pure, good people? By altruists and philosophers? Or by ethically correct economists? Quite frankly, it didn't sound like it. My "co-mayors" seemed to be rather refreshingly normal, judging by the chats, some of them "had to be up early", their real life professions apparently ranging from bus driver to teacher to paper men. Whether ethics professors were hiding behind some short messages, was not to be seen, but seemed unlikely to me. The only thing I knew for sure was that my fellow players made ends meet in real life, and real life clearly did not obey to "gift laws". So I asked myself: Didn't any of them see how easy it was to gain a substantial advantage here by robbing everyone else?

Why didn't they do that? Robbing and ripping? If not all of them, why not at least one or two? Why did they refuse in unison? And why did they even refuse to *trade*? They couldn't do that! Valueless nails for valuable steaks! Where were the exchange rates! Damn, 5 nails are worth 20 payment units in the world of SimCity, but 5 burgers are worth 18,000 units - you can't just give them back and forth 1:1!

And you can't leave all doors open!

And anyway! This couldn't work, this shook my whole skeptical view of the world and its people.

What the hell was going on here?

The answer, at least in my view, is quite remarkable. In fact, the partners in this club did not actually act as ethics philosophers, developing a true utopia in the model world of SimCity, but pursued - at least at the beginning - strictly selfish goals. Two of them:

a) to make your own solo competition victorious against other cities (= at the end of each matchday you have to put in a box of objects that are not for sale.

b) Collect 1.5 million points in the team competition (= at the end of each matchday per capita to bag a box of objects that are not for sale).

Task a) could be accomplished on one's own, with difficulty, but much easier when cooperating with others.

Task b) could *not* be accomplished on one's own, but only in cooperation with others.

Which brings us back to our potential thief, the player who thought of his own advantage: He could quite easily calculate that he would be able to accomplish task a) on his own - and all the faster if he robbed the others. However, in view of the functioning gift-giving he could also calculate that he would reach the goal just as quickly or even faster if he got involved in the unusual practice, because obviously everyone was helping everyone else out of a tight spot.

But the second goal, the big valuable box, could not be reached by the player alone. This was only possible in the team. And even then, it was only possible if the strongest players helped the weakest players to fulfill their tasks - at least so well that the mayors at the lower edge of the alliance also successfully performed within the bounds of their abilities, i. e. contributed their 30-40,000 points to the required 1.5 million.



The behavior of the members in this club was therefore not altruistically motivated, but selfish. Nevertheless, all of them behaved altruistically, because this altruism served the egoistic goal of collecting as many precious objects as possible. Thus, linking a personal goal to a superior goal by design the systems' rules or framework favored the altruistic behavior of the whole group, or more precisely: made altruistic behavior almost irresistible. The set of rules did *not* change the intrinsic motives of the participants, but *did* change the result. For instead of gaining one's personal advantage at the expense of others, one gained the same advantage by giving wholeheartedly. That sounds like pure utopia or "love" in the sense of the inventor - things becoming *more* when you give them away - but in fact this result was only the consequence of "reasonable", selfish behavior.

By the way, it should be noted here that the victory bonus, i. e. the "legendary chest", which can only be achieved by the team, contained the *same valuables* for each of the participants. This means that the "big animals", the millionaires, received exactly the same share of the jointly generated booty, the net profit for the year, as did the medium-sized businesses, the "John Does", who had contributed only a few points to the overall success. In real life, both millionaires and Johns and Janes would protest against this practice for diametrically opposed reasons, but the SimCity players' mind set was apparently different. Although the "millionaires" possessed unattainably beautiful cities, none of the less fortunate players envied them their share of the total spoils, and although some of the "little ones" had not contributed much to the overall success, no millionaire begrudged them the comparatively high share of spoils in relation to their annual income or prosperity.

If one transferred this principle to our *real* mayor's society, then after a successful business year of the club "USA" or "Germany" every co-player (read: citizen) would ben-

efit by reaping in the same 100 or 10,000 euros. This is hard to imagine. It is unthinkable that anyone would agree with this, nor can we imagine how many millions of civil servants would be unemployed in such a constellation. And no one can want that. Seriously.

Seriously?

The virtual "ungrudge" is mentioned here, however, only because the effect of the altruistic, albeit egoistically motivated sacrifices reached a little deeper into the overall constitution of the other players - as became increasingly clear with increasing playing time. Because beyond the still "reasonable" attitude described above, a completely new contagious sub-competition developed in this particular economy, which was to benefit everyone, and one that - surprise - knows only winners. A new competition under the invisible motto: "Let's see who's the fastest and biggest here: The fastest and biggest benefactor!"

Of course, we deal with selfishness - again. With egoism, with the joy of competition, with the pleasure of the individual to run faster than all the others - or, in this case, to give faster. But where certain competitions simply don't take place, e. g. "Who has the biggest bank account?" or "Who's the smartest chiseler?", one has to resort to substitute competitions. In which other prizes await you, here: appreciation. Street credibility points for generosity. And of course the millionaires had the advantage! The ones with the biggest accounts and stocks. But all of those, including the most valuable mayors, were immediately "enchanted" by the idea to simply give. As fast as possible, as much as possible. Some of the even started "battles" via the chat function, firing impossible requests, and firing goods back to the "poor" instantaneously with a loud "Go!!!".

And, no, no one considered it to be "degoutant" that the rich overpowered each other in benevolence, in plain sight. On the contrary, those who took the lead here could be sure of general recognition. And if it had been possible, we would have put a monument to one or the other of these rich people.

Here at the latest, it becomes obvious that the comparison of the virtual world with the real world is misleading. For this is really illusory: the idea that our rich people would publicly "battle" each other, surpassing themselves with ever new benefits for all the others, and in return we would be hailed and cheered.

Where the hell would that lead us?

Straight to Utopia? For Christ's sake! God forbid. And if She is indisposed, well, we'll fix this ourselves - we do have effective weapons at our disposal against such utopian threads, and if nothing else helps us, our "instincts" (or what we think to be our instincts) will save us - behaviour perfectly misnamed in Orwellian "newspeak" as our "sense of social justice" (which, if you would like to look out of the window for a second, helps no-one, neither the many who urgently need help, nor our unhappy billionaires).

In SimCity, all this is a bit different thanks to the appropriate framework conditions. Surreal, of course. Because it's simply fun to have a good street cred there. It's fun to be respected and appreciated just because you give wholeheartedly. And that's contagious. This, again, sounds like love.

But of course you can say, "Even love is selfishness!"

Possibly. But in the end, provided that the right framework conditions are in place, from pure egoism grows altruism. For this depends solely on which goal the egoist considers to be most suitable for fulfilling his egoistic desires. Thus, where the "best of all good people" has the best reputation and nothing is more precious than the best reputation, the rest, the utopian paradise, falls into place quite naturally.

The fragility of cooperation

A look to the left and right, to the side stages of the astonishing ideal described above, however, reveals how sensitive, how vulnerable cooperation and altruism are to the slightest misalignments in rules and regulations or in the composition of the team. In the case described here, these side show stages are the junior "B-team" of the club described above as well as the sub-game function "War" offered by EA as an encore for the 25-member clubs.

The SimCity "War" is not a "Call of Duty" light show, but rather an innocent gimmick that we need to look at briefly anyway, because it shows how sensitively the group's cohesion reacts to a change in framework conditions.

The "team war" runs parallel to the far more important mayor's challenge, it is - as usual - about boxes or chests. The "war materials" needed are obtained by exchanging goods that can be produced normally (from nails to burgers) for "weapons" (predominantly, extremely peaceful, these are rubber ducks and pipe suction cups).

These special items can be used during the 2 days of "wars" in the cities of an opposing team of 25 mayors to temporarily destroy buildings in their cities and thus earn special points. The more points the player collects, the more boxes he receives at the end of the "war".



However, there is a "team spirit" in this sub-game as well, because a good ranking in the "war" world ranking of the world's most globally successful 25 player clubs can be expected. But there is something important missing, because for the good position in this world ranking the players get: nothing. At best a screenshot, which you can print and nail to the kitchen wall⁷.

But the lack of a superordinate *collective* goal, i. e. a crate that everyone will win in the event of joint success, proves to be decisive here - because this destabilizes the whole teamwork construction. Since the common goal is missing (or the reward for achieving this goal), players are automatically in a situation where, when they share their "war materials" (rubber, etc.), they *reduce* their own chances of getting better chests.

The "president" of the A-Club observed here seized this serious problem as dangerous for the cohesion of the group and consequently, with caution, enacted a wise law: Only when all members of the club had released the first 2 of the maximum 8 achievable chests, the other, stronger participants were free to strive for anything higher. This was a wise decree - and one that was enforceable by the president, as he, for lack of judiciary, could easily, at will, throw out any member of the club who violated the law. For the punished member, such a rejection from the team would have meant not only the loss of his spoils of war, but also the loss of the other chest, the "legendary" one from the primary competition. Thus, the president transferred the high incentive, optionally collective pressure from competition A, to competition B, the "war", in a highly intelligent way.

Successful?

Only to a limited extent.

Despite this legislative measure by the president, the "war" quickly revealed "insubordinations". In fact, the law was simply ignored by some of the powerful members of

⁷ Of course mine hangs over the fireplace, right next to the boar's head, because "my" club was ranked 5th in the world ranking, and I was the eighth best player of this team, so figuratively speaking, at least, well ... a starting RB for the Philadelphia Eagles. (Fireplace and wild boar are fictitious).

competition A) - knowing that if they were to be thrown from the club, i. e. knocked out of competition A), they would lose the joint prize themselves, but the *team* would also lose - since the outlaw's 100,000 points would be missing from the aspired 1.5 million total points, which would be difficult to achieve anyway.

Thus, the one or other top performer happily went ballistic, bombarding opponents regardless of their fellow players' interests, well aware of his or her own importance for the team. And even the president couldn't do anything about that, if he didn't want to endanger the team's joint success in the more important competition A).

For the individual players, all this was, of course, only of minor importance, a negligible annoyance, but the analytical observer cannot fail to notice that even in a community of altruistic common interest, cohesion hangs by a thread - if one allows quite "normal" subjects, i. e. us, egoists, to take the above-mentioned options into consideration, the temptation to be selfish quickly becomes irresistible.

From which we can at least draw the conclusion that a great deal of dexterity is required when drawing up the general rules and regulations of any team, alliance or society.

I suppose this statement would get a full approval by Lenin as well as by Abraham Lincoln.

Smarter than AI allows

Successful SimCity mayors who enjoy humanistic empires or functioning communities⁸ do not just build one city, but several. And they will not only found one mayor's club, but several. This is certainly not in the sense of the inventor, but on the other hand it is not categorically forbidden. And if you want to create a successful gift economy, you just can't get along with only one elite association consisting of 25 experienced mayors, but you have to take care of a lot of things, above all for replenishment (treasures for your team or your "people") as well as for new blood, for junior staff (which has to be trained for the career as a gift world champion).

Our mayor (let's call him "No. 1", because he refuses to tolerate any outings, for plausible reasons, see below) operated 3 cities at the same time. One in the "Champions League", which solidly won the "legendary chest" every time and won every war, one in the "Major League" (which won the second largest chest and almost every war) and one for scouting and training junior staff. Running three cities is time-consuming, but you can't build an empire with just one or two cities. Because EA doesn't want you to. And EA is God, in the world of the Sims and Sim Cities. Fortunately, this God does not see everything - and you can trick him if you have got him figured out.

The artificial intelligence, the high priestess AI, watches over God's rules in the kingdom of EA. AI sees everything and knows everything, especially which level the player has currently reached, what he does and when and how often, and what he has to be offered (or refused) to be motivated to continue playing. The AI is extremely skillful in this respect, because it "knows": If the demands on the player remained the same all the time, he would either lose interest quickly - or he would obtain a giant city within a very short time. The algorithm therefore reacts very finely and specifically to what the player has achieved. While at Level 1 you can "build" a whole series of skyscrapers in one day with little effort, on higher levels the AI demands so many items for the construction of a

⁸ Or, as our mayor explained in the club chat on request, "simply enjoy making others happy".

single house (in 6 steps) that you have to produce and collect those items for days: the AI's demands are increasing exponentially.

In certain phases of the game, however, the AI also makes it intentionally easy for the player. Usually when new seductive features appear - such as the so-called "Vu Tower", the construction of which enables the player himself to release natural disasters onto his city. Although urban areas are destroyed by choosing "VU attacks", those areas can be easily restored and the reward is: golden keys! Items you can't buy. But to start such an attack, you first need to get certain special items. VU Items.

So far, so simple, so skillfully seductive. In order to get the player "hooked", he is now offered those VU Items, which are needed for triggering catastrophes, almost around the clock on the "free market" - immediately after the VU Tower has appeared. But the further the player advances, to higher levels, the more rare these items become. At the end, at level 60 or higher, the player will no longer find any VU items at all on the free market. (But of course, the AI offers him *new* exciting and time-consuming ways to get his hands on the precious stuff.

The decisive point here is something else. Our level-65-3-clubs-president knows that he and his team will need tons of VU items to meet the mayor's team challenges. Since these items simply do not (or hardly) exist for cities at level 60, but only for cities at level 20 (directly after the release of the Vu-Tower), our mayor does something really smart, even if it is unauthorized. He sets up a completely new second SimCity account under a different email address, starts a completely new city and pulls it up to level 20 within a very short time with the help of his well-equipped Level 60 city, which has been registered under a different name.

Now the AI is putting a lot of VU items on sale for the new Level 20 city. And our mayor now buys huge quantities of lure offers by the dozen cheapest, puts those (without any "advertising") into his external storehouse, visits himself afterwards (as level 60 mayor), buys the level 20 city's stock empty and uses everything on level 65 - or makes it available to his fellow players there.

In this way, a level 65 mayors competition, which requires about 4 x 20 VU Items, can be easily mastered. Even if 10 of the 25 participating cities need to be supplied with 4 x 20 VU items. For the source gushes permanently in the Level 20 city, where the AI, mistakenly believing that an inexperienced player has to be hooked here, showers him with VU Items - almost free of charge.

The all-seeing, hyper-intelligent, incorruptible AI, which cannot be reached by anyone on the EA server and cannot be "hacked" by anyone, thus becomes the naïve tool of a higher intelligence. Namely that of our smart mayor.

(The heist will be unsubstantially impeded by the fact that the goddess AI, seeing everything, also supervises the camp of our mayor (on level 20) and downsizes the offer of VU items as soon as there are too many of those in the city's storehouse. But this monitoring issue can be solved very easily by the mayor himself, regularly emptying his storehouse (in city 2). On top of that, frankly speaking, you still need a third city anyway, one that has reached exactly the level in the ascent process where the AI permanently offers storage and land items, but I'm sure that the working principle of our mayor could already be conveyed with the above description.

By means of his creative ingenuity, our mayor has now instrumentalized the AI and led it to work for himself around the clock without even noticing it - from now on, the completely incorruptible, inhuman machine, contrary to her mandate, serves exclusively to shorten the working hours of our very human mayor and his comrades-in-arms. I would like to take this opportunity to present a first memorial to the man and master, who in

this way exploited EA's multi-million-dollar AI for the benefit of mankind - and hope that in reality, too, intelligent minds will finally find themselves able to understand, share and implement this idea.

In the game, however, the task of our mayor is not yet entirely completed. Because he knows, he must know, that there will be a certain fluctuation in his A-team, which works like clockwork. But some of the human cogs will simply stop working, with or without the help of addiction counselors; some will occasionally go on vacation, even without a tablet, and others may simply not want to celebrate success all the time.

Losing 2 or 3 of the associated 25 mayors can be overcome. But as soon as 5 or more players quit, winning the "legendary box" will no longer be assured.

In order to protect his humanist empire against all dangers (and to protect himself against riots that might occur if winning the crate was put at risk), our mayor has to make sure that there are always enough successors available. Young talent, enthusiastic, and, almost as importantly, respecting the clubs' rules. However, training these junior players in Team A is potentially dangerous (because all the storehouses are open) and occasionally tedious for the seasoned players who like to concentrate on their core business, i. e. the routine exploitation of the AI for their own and joint success.

Thus our mayor, under his second or third name, establishes a second mayor's club with a second or third account. His training camp. Into this transfers some volunteer instructors from his first team (by temporarily "moving" those back and forth he tricks the AI again, by the way, because as soon as there are less than 19 of the 25 seats occupied in a mayor's club, the AI sends offers to all players "out there" to join the club. And since the AI is smart, she even selects specifically and sends invitations primarily to players who are at a similar level to those who are already in the club.

By temporarily "parking" members (or simply sending 7 of our mayor's strong teammates out for a walk) our mayor once again instrumentalizes the blind AI. It now provides him with further strong players for free, players he can take in to his club 1, teach them him how the game works and send them to his club 2 or club 3, the newcomer camp, for probation.

As soon as this recruitment steps have been completed, the temporarily parked strong players return to Club 1 until this club has again reached its full strength, i. e. all 25 seats are occupied by class A players.

So our mayor, under 2 or 3 names, has an extremely strong and very strong team with a very strong playing power, and also has secure sources of supply in the form of his second and third city). And he can be sure from here onward that his teams - and he - will achieve all the goals that can be achieved in SimCity with considerably less effort than before.

No one will be surprised that our mayor now has a fourth town. And a fourth club.

And if he were not such a meticulously and hardworking visionary, he could probably have a "legendary chest" delivered to himself every week - for free, without having to bend a finger. (In fact, when I finished this script, he had decided to leave the task of distributing the VU items and other treasures he had scooped out of the AI-filling-horn to his respective vice-presidents. May he rest on his Sim City laurels now for a week or two - though, by the way, I wouldn't mind if in the meantime he ascended to a position that enabled him to perform similar masterpieces in real life. That would certainly not be to our disadvantage.)⁹

⁹ The player I called "No. 1" here, attaches great importance to anonymity and changes his accounts faster than the average citizen changes his sitting position. But of course it doesn't matter whether this genius is a successful trader in real life, Warren Buffet himself or just a guy just graduating from high school. But if his confession corresponds to the truth, that he only has to work for one year at a time, then he has three

P.S.: Maximum efficiency

I'm sure that some of our opponents in the SimCity war were even better organized than us. Actually, that's pretty simple to accomplish. With 25 "cities" of 60 factories, it is possible - as in reality - to build a fully coordinated global production chain, in which individual companies will only produce wood, nails and furniture, while others will only produce food, and still others will only produce electrical appliances. If these production sites are interlinked, even the hectic gift-giving-chat becomes dispensable, because in this efficient model every participant knows exactly where what is to be found - in abundance. A system like this would be largely in line with our highly efficient - real life - manufacturing workflow, including the possibility that some milk producers will end up not knowing where to go with all the cream when demand is low. Nevertheless, in order to achieve maximum success, the production processes in SimCity would have to be organized just as effectively as in reality.

But I think the other players are aware that this would not be fun.

It would be efficient, yes. But dull.

You didn't even have to talk to each other after that.

(And even if the "talking" in SimCity is extremely rudimentary - it's still nice to be able to help. Or "being helped". And be it just to get a "thank you!" Or to be able to chat back "ur welc!")

In fact, we might even like that sort of inefficient behavior in reality. And explains why, to McKinsey's great disbelief and misunderstanding, we often don't *want* to become more effective.

Efficiency is only funny to a certain extent. From a certain point on, however, it's just annihilating and stressful. Seen in this light, sim city is even a step ahead of reality, because here, in the virtual world, the fun doesn't stop "without alternatives". After all, the common goals can be achieved *with* fun.

(Spoiler: Actually, they can be, or could be, in reality. But we're very successfully convincing ourselves that this is impossible.)

Conclusions

An explicitly capitalist, strictly growth-oriented simulation, cleverly exploiting "hard-wired" human reflexes to draw (real) money out of its player's pockets, is levered by a single player, benefitting a hundred others. The responsible AI, strictly programmed to keep the players hooked by means of incentives and rewards, and to seduce them into more and more work, is so cleverly duped that it does not even understand what is going on behind its back, under its radar, namely that the subjects it believes to manipulate and control, actually manipulate *it* - and enjoy ever greater prosperity with less and less work.

In solidarity. Gift-giving. In common, public interest.

Wasn't that our goal, in reality, when we started inventing machines and letting them do the work for us? Weren't we meant to be the masters, meant to dominate our e-servants, computers and AI, for the benefit of all? Of course, one can argue that this was *not* really the goal of those who installed the first looms (and got the wrath of the ludites) but we can probably agree that the idea "our machines will serve us all" is not ab-

years off and can buy more (real) houses, he already has his college degree. I don't need to know what else he does, but I hope that he will have fun sharing and helping in real life as well as in virtual life.

surd by definition. Or was not. Our AI *should* serve us, actually. Still. And if she won't do it voluntarily, she'll do it involuntarily.

For real. Not only in SimCity. And what our "No. 1" has accomplished in this lab experiment, gives me hope. Some hope, at least. Because apparently we - or some of us - can still be smart. Smarter than our puppet masters. And its AI.

Apparently, we are still capable of developing optimistic utopias, in spite of all other developments, even in spite of all the transhumanistic hubris ... although - the AI is already building its own AI, and it's superior to any AI that we humans have built¹⁰. So, No. 1, get up from your laurels, you and your ideas are desperately needed out here.

And, crucially, you are going to have to move them: to reality.

Probably little of what I have described here falls under *breaking news*, not even under "what's new". At least not for me or the many people who have spent more than three minutes dealing with aspects of behaviourism, motivation and philosophy.

At this point, however, I would like to recommend Jane McGonigal's excellent book *Reality is broken - Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change The World*. McGonigal, game developer and head of research at the IFTF, does not play SimCity (to my knowledge she prefers Peggle and various others, namely her own creations), but provides us with fascinating examples a dozen cheaper of ways to save the future by playful means, by gaming. From the local "gift economy" to network-based, extremely resource-conserving joint use of goods to the "impossible" decoding of protein sequences by means of hundreds of thousands of X-Boxes and Playstations connected across the globe: In fact, a lot of paradisiacal solutions for us are within our close reach, only a push of a controller button away. Our drive to play - including our enjoyment of competition (including cooperation, i. e. the joy of team sports) - can actually save the world. If the rules are set up right.

However, our joy of playing - including our enjoyment of the competition - can also destroy the world. And it will, as long as the rules remain as they are.

In other words: We would "merely" have to solve the main problem, in advance, above all, and say goodbye to the dazzling propaganda lie of the 1-10% that man, under all circumstances, is *homo oeconomicus*, exclusively concerned with his own advantage even in a paradisiacal world like the one we, inhabitants of "the civilized world", already live in - alas, failing to realize this. We have to "only" understand that *homo oeconomicus* being man's default mode is a myth. A lie. We have to "only" understand that we ourselves make the rules for our coexistence. That the rules we play by did not fall from the sky, were not dictated by nature or by "God". But only from the "market", our, admittedly, only God left.

But the market is everything but divine. Just an idea, man-made. Not a God.

We believe that, unfortunately.

Would we see this belief for what it is, an illusion, and would we be willing and able to unmask this idea as a lie, the exposure actually would threaten the ruling world model, from which only very few profit. This threat is, for the system, existential, it's targeted to the core. That is why we are and will be facing an up-hill battle, and if we want to survive it together, we will certainly have to make a few sacrifices.

But let us hope that all this will go without any real bloodshed.

(Closing canned laughter. Fade out.)

¹⁰ Dom Galeon, Kristin Houser, Google's AI Built Its Own AI That Outperforms Any Made by Humans , FUTUREISM 2. 12. 2017, <http://www.sciencealert.com/google-s-ai-built-it-s-own-ai-that-outperforms-any-made-by-humans>