Building and rebuilding the Anthropocene in *Cities: Skylines*

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INTRODUCTION

I examine the city-building game *Cities: Skylines* (Colossal Order 2015) as part of an ongoing ecocritical project, arguing that the city-building genre is uniquely positioned to demonstrate the forms of power working to create perilous futures through our present climate crisis. *Cities: Skylines* initially appears to privilege an omniscient version of the combined power of construction, urban planning, policy-making and economic management. Players are granted agency over vast landscapes, able to build the countless different physical elements that make up a city, as well as shape the social, cultural and economic aspects of their virtual community using policies and bylaws. However, underlying *Cities: Skylines*' fantasy of superhuman city-building agency is a deep current of *ecological power*, which reveals the destabilising effects of the intertwined human logics of growth and capitalism upon environments and ecosystems.

Experiences of *Cities: Skylines* typically begin with the presentation of a 'blank canvas' of rolling grassland, pristine beaches, thick forests and other untouched natural features. External highway and railway connections terminate just inside the edges of an otherwise empty square of nature awaiting the player's intervention. Drawing upon Eugene Thacker, I suggest that game invites us to address something impossible to encounter in our everyday lives: an experience of the "*world-without-us*", a pre-Anthropocenic vision of our planet, unmarred by human activity (2011, 13). The *world-without-us* is an enigmatic and "nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific" because of its dissonance from our own lived experience of Earth (Thacker 2011, 13). This unsettling planetary apparition arrives with a clear invitation from *Cities: Skylines* and its game mechanics: to resettle, personalise and render familiar through civic construction.

In extending this invitation, *Cities: Skylines* seeks a "*world-for-us*"; the version of the planet that we humans are part of, interpret, relate to and invest with meaning (Thacker 2011, 12). In designing a *world-for-us* players are asked to construct not only a city, but also to imagine futures. Through their open-ended simulations, city-building games emphasise an already inherent relationship between videogames and futurity. Games provide players with a "model for the conscientious shaping of the future" through "the forward-looking evaluation of innumerable choices that we make in the here and now" (Milburn 2018, 222), a ludic logic made particularly explicit in the process of designing cities and witnessing their development over time. Games thus enlist a kind of 'procedural futurism' (op de Beke 2021), where players can enact experiences of an alternative reality and how this "might operate as a system that we could live in" (Fordyce 2021, 295). The speculative orientation of the medium has helped videogames

illustrate ecologically sustainable visions of our life on Earth (Abraham 2018; Abraham and Jayemanne 2017), and to convey through narrative and interaction the complex causes of the climate crisis (Kelly and Nardi 2014).

Through textual analysis of *Cities: Skylines* I demonstrate, however, that the game's accounts of a *world-for-us* invariably recreate contemporary currents of ecological power. Reflecting our lived world, the game's virtual cities are limited to destructive and destabilising engagements with the planet. A replication of the familiar, and unerring, logics of growth – of population, economies and material objects – permeates the game. While assembling together the components of a city within a simulated natural environment encourages in players a form of 'ecological thought' – an awareness of the innumerable, intimate connections and interrelations that ripple across ecosystems (Morton 2010, 1) – players are restricted from the possibility of any radical action in light of this knowledge. Instead, *Cities: Skylines* reaffirms habituated, destructive responses to the prospect of a *world-without-us*. A pattern is extended wherein "games naïvely reproduce a whole range of instrumental relations that we must reimagine" if we are to somehow redress the planetary damage of the Anthropocene (Chang 2019, 23). *Cities: Skylines* narrows down the futures its players might imagine in service, perhaps unwittingly, of a 'capitalist realism' that has "colonized the minds and imaginations of Western citizens, making capitalism" and its environmentally destructive ways "seem both natural and inevitable" (Abraham 2018, 76).

By affording players an omniscient power to build and govern cities, *Cities: Skylines* also reproduces and illustrates an underlying Anthropocentric system of ecological power. However, players are restricted in exercising or negotiating this ecological power, as the game's ludic imperatives demand unsustainable and destabilising engagements with natural environments. I consider how, in its replication of circuits of real-world ecological power and constraint of speculative futures, *Cities: Skylines* demonstrates both the opportunities for and limits to the meaningful critique of contemporary power within games.

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