

'EAT IT' CITY SIMULATOR

Proposal for the Graduation Project at the Media Design Master Programme

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keywords

game, simulation, urban planning, centralized systems of (food) distribution

key question

How a simulation game could be used to structure and analyse current problems in urban planning, and more general problems of power distribution through the paradigm of the food industry

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My work is concerned with social organization and problems of centralized distribution systems. With an analytic approach to the question of who can produce and consume in today's corporate economy, and the deconstruction of an industry's chain of sequence, I will try to offer an overview of the current condition of power structures.

I will present the research through a city simulation game, with the player assuming the role of a citizen empowered with some of the roles of an urban planner. The player will have the opportunity to regulate the spatial distribution of the food industry in the city and beyond.

/////background and motivation

The Food Industry Paradigm

The food industry and its structure are a metaphor for the hierarchical systems of power and control usually found in political and public media structures. Its effect on society is the same one as any other consumer industry - deteriorating values and degenerating needs to meet a surplus in production. Driven by interests of multinational corporations, it is an alternative power structure to the political and governmental systems, often collaborating with more powerful ones to the disadvantage of the rest.

The concern about the food we eat comes from a fear of consequences that the use of chemicals, and unnatural processes in food production might have on us. The base for this fear is the veil between us and the origin of our daily bread. It is very hard today to have an idea about what our food has really been through on the way to the supermarket. The dictatorship of corporate interests threatens to seal off the variety of seeds, their DNA being held under patents.

/////>what is urban planning

The illusion of looking from above

Urban planning is a projection of spatial distribution of activities and designated densities within the physical structure. Historically, this has been done by experts zoning down the cities in their two-dimensional representation. The number of people involved and the complexity of zones has increased significantly but the planning is still done from the position of the All Seeing Eye.

The aspect of urban planning I am particularly interested in is that of (possibility for) participation. Up until now, the all encompassing idea of the inclusion of citizens in the planning processes and decision making, has been limited to certain predetermined participatory forms and fields designed by the ones who were once called "experts". This change is not a qualitative one but more a quantitative shift where we now have more minds included in the system, therefore less responsibility per mind, but not necessarily more space for different ideas.

Supermarkets are today the main source of groceries for the average consumer in developed countries. Packed with varieties of the same type of product, they tend to offer everything from food to household stuffs under one large roof. Some have an organic chain of products next to several non-organic brands, to satisfy more careful shoppers. What is “the way of the food” we eat today, how can it reach the buyer and for what price?

The food and the marketing industry have convinced consumers to feel only as recipients of whatever they have put out for them to consume. We cannot fully control our nutrition. We cannot participate further than choosing what is already offered.

Because participation is such an important aspect of urban planning today, I would like to tackle the responsibility of a citizen/planner and the amount of power or control that he/she can exercise on an imaginary society.

///>///understanding through translation

Today’s learning process and education methods are based on transposition of facts and concepts into contexts that expose and enhance their qualities, through displacement. In the tradition of the Situationist International, I want to construct an environment in which the programmability of urban development becomes obvious.

Situationism is closely related to urbanism and the strategies for inhabiting and using the city space. Urban planning tends to regulate this space in the most cost-effective manner. Simulation of possibilities for development is its’ inherent tool. Much software has been developed for the simulation of conditions and interactions between the relevant factors, but little of it has had as much success amongst both professionals and amateurs as ‘Sim City’. Simulation games like ‘Sim City’ are a very fruitful ground for representing a flattened and simplified picture of what the city is or could be about. It can be seen as a symbol of the illusion of urban planning, where one tries to arrange spatial hierarchies, looking from above to direct and condition complex urban processes.

I am developing a “detournement” of the ‘Micropolis’ game, the open source version of ‘Sim City’. The scenarios I will create should unveil this link between the bureaucracy behind the food industry and the structures of power reflected in political and corporate forces.

/////possible collaborations

I would like to connect these game scenarios to the real-life situations that I find problematic. Using external data sources I want to influence programmed processes and algorithms. For this reason, I will try to establish connections with organisations who have access to real-time information on food production.

technical

Technical skills I will need to realize the project include learning of (the basics and hopefully more) C++ programming language. It is very likely that I will also need to broaden my knowledge of Python.

The game will be either server based or released as a (cross platform) distribution in which case I would have to take care of a lot of hardware exceptions.

The final presentation will most probably take form of a public play in which case I have to decide on the multiplayer possibilities.

timeline

mid January:

- learning basics of c++;
- getting familiar with the Micropolis code - debug markers, understanding the process flow, small interventions in existing variables and functions;
- research on the simulation alternatives - history of simulation games and discussions in the communities;

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end January:

- learning basics of c++;
- getting familiar with the 'Micropolis' code - how the graphics are rendered and how the game is terminated;
- research on the simulation alternatives - interviews with
 developers
- establish contacts with potential collaborators on the sources of external data;

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middle February:

- getting familiar with the 'Micropolis' code - how to import external data;
- research in the thesis that urban planning and computer design can be compared on a formal level and that programming and administration come from the same origins and similar mind sets

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/////beginning of March:

- presentation of current development at Make art: chmod +x art, Groningen

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middle March:

- getting familiar with the 'Micropolis' code - writing new functions for the game (automation of emergence of tiles, based on the game of life);
- game design - scenario development;
- game design - development of external data representation;

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/////end March:

- presentation of current development at the Pixelache festival

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beginning April:

- getting familiar with the 'Micropolis' code - writing new functions for the game (new zones and new disasters);
- game design - scenario development;
- game design - hardware implementation, possibilities of physical interaction and representation of the game events/processes in the public space;

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middle April:

- getting familiar with the 'Micropolis' code - writing new functions for the game (new zones and new disasters);
- game design - hardware implementation prototype

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/////Mock Show, April 24th
/////Essay Submission, May 7th

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middle May:

- interaction design and hardware implementation testing;

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middle June:

- final design decisions, production

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/////Graduation Exam, June 14th

related projects

Barbie Liberation Organization, 1989

A hardware hacking project - replacement of voices and a swap of stereotypes, exposing the stereotypes with the change of the “speaker”

<http://sniggle.net/barbie.php>

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DUO Collective, Bristol Food For Free, 2004 - 2013

maps of food available for free in Bristol; a detailed survey of edible plants that live within the public realms of Bristol.

http://duo.irational.org/food_for_free/

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YESMEN, 3rd World Food,

an ironic proposal for redistribution of excrement in the Third World countries to address starvation problems

<http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/plattsburgh>

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GORDAN SAVICIC, PlaySureVeillance, 2008

a Nintendo DS game and a social network hack

<http://www.yugo.at/processing/index.php?what=playsureveillance>
