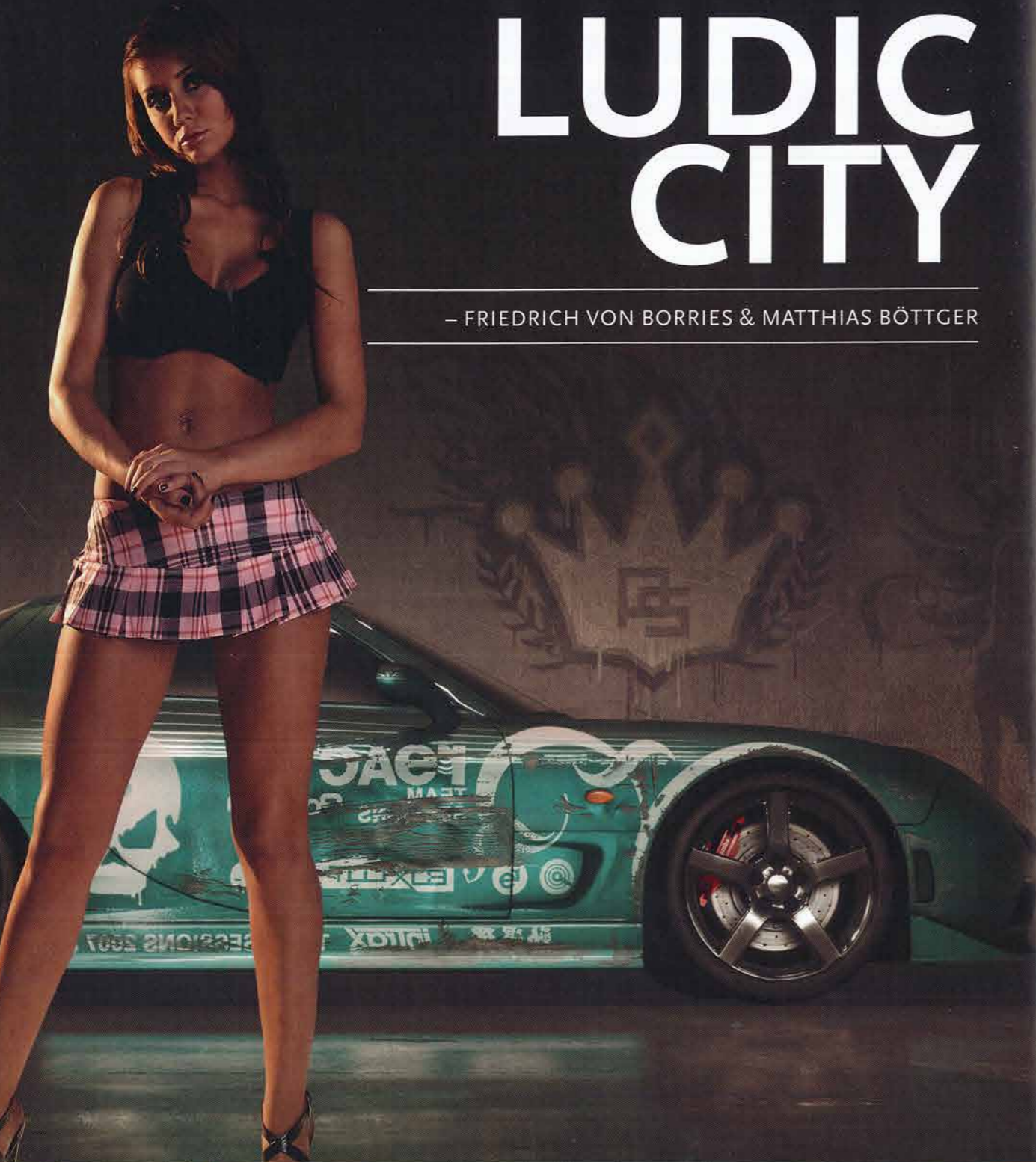


SEDUCTION AND FALSE PROMISES IN

LUDIC CITY

– FRIEDRICH VON BORRIES & MATTHIAS BÖTTGER



In the eyes of a gamer the city is a playground: games such as *Skate* (top image), *Need for Speed* (left page) turn it into zones of fun – “Skater-Paradise”, “Race Track”, “Parkour-Route”,...

BOTH IMAGES © EA / ELECTRONIC ARTS

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COMPUTER GAMES, SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE

People prospect for gold on “gold farms” – virtual gold, but panned with real sweat. In China, small software companies offering a special type of service are called gold firms. For 24 hours the staff plays multi-user dungeons (MUDs) such as *World of Warcraft* and other games where gamers have to laboriously build up the particular capabilities, strengths and characteristics of their avatars. Gold and guest workers from China speed things up. Either the accelerated avatars are directly commissioned or are developed for stock and then auctioned on eBay. Gamers from the rich “first” world can thus avoid the laborious work of constructing avatars. This is how the geographical and economic relationships of the globalised world are reflected in computer games as well, or to be more precise, in the virtual world that opens up between people as a result of a computer game.

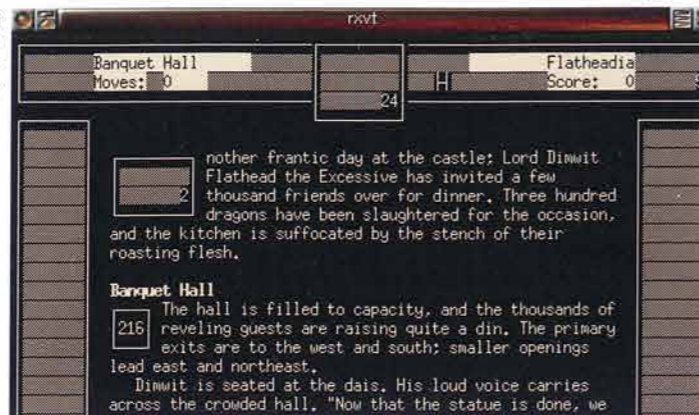
There is a wholly different relationship between space and people in *Colossal Cave Adventure*, one of the earliest computer games, developed by William Crowther¹ in 1975/76. When his marriage was breaking up, programmer and speleologist Crowther wrote a computer game to entertain his children, although he was nowhere near at hand. The topographical antecedent and source of his game was the Mammoth Cave, a legendary cave system in



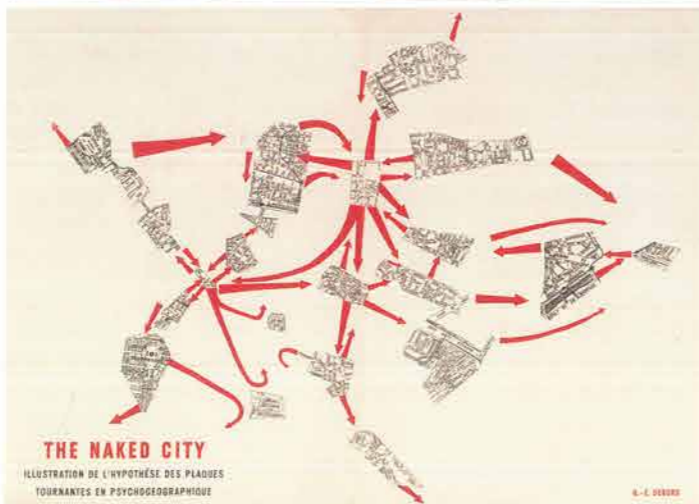
When gaming becomes a job: earning real dollars in so-called “Goldfarms” with virtual weapons and tools for Multi-user-dungeons games such as *World of Warcraft*.

WWW.CHINESEGOLDFARMERS.COM

The text-adventure game Colossal Cave blends with physical space.
ZORK © ACTIVISION 1980



Parkour is an art to help you overcome any obstacle to go from point A to point B only with the human body's possibilities.
©SHANE ROUNCE, http://www.flickr.com/photo_zoom.gne?id=471769693&size=o
CREATIVE COMMONS



The Parkour runner's ability to instant map making calls to mind of Guy Debord and the ideas of the Situationists such as collecting the lost and found pieces of the city by unplanned walks.
That process was called "Dérive".
"THE NAKED CITY", ILLUSTRATION DE L'HYPOTHÈSE DES PLAQUES TOURNANTES EN PSYCHOGÉOGRAPHIE, PUBLISHED IN ASGER JORN, POUR LA FORME (INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE: PARIS 1958). REPRINTED IN DOCUMENTS RELATIFS À LA FONDATION DE L'INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE 1948-1957 (PARIS 1985), BY DEBORD AND ASGER JORN / THE NAKED CITY. 1957

Kentucky.² In order to solve puzzles and overcome opponents, the player had to find his way through the cave. *Colossal Cave* is a text adventure, the spaces passed through being described in words. Navigating through space was effected by using commands "go west", "go south" etc. The spatial sense that developed thereby was so precise that practised players could orientate in the real cave on the basis of their in-game experiences.

As these two historically unconnected examples show, computer games are a highly spatial matter. And where there is space, architects are not far away. How space arises and how it achieves its effect is the basic issue of architecture. Good architecture involves not only the material shape of the built environment but also its effect on and interaction with users. It would thus seem a matter of course for architects to become interested in virtual spaces as well. Yet in reality most architects focus on what we know as physically built space. This is a limitation which one hopes will vanish in the near future, because the aesthetic and social qualities inherent in virtual spaces are a spatial challenge and opportunity. After all, it is architects who design the environment we live in. More and more commonly that includes not only the physical world but also virtual worlds. There too spaces develop that have real effects on our coexistence and actions.

Virtual spaces are projection surfaces for spatial ideas that are not realisable in the physical world. The different forms these may take are beautifully demonstrated in Second Life. The spectrum ranges from adapted, customised dreams of the middle classes with shopping centres and detached family homes to flight and projection fantasies of "another life", expressed architecturally in Yona Friedman's famous realisation of an architectural utopia, *Ville Spatiale*.³

More interesting for architects than the transfer of architectural codes onto virtual worlds such as Second Life is the overlaying of the physical world with the virtual. That's because virtual space can be structurally informative for the physical world. This is particularly evident, visible and tangibly experienced in computer games, which in the course of their now thirty-year history have emerged from the screen and conquered real everyday space as "ubiquitous games". The setting is the city.

WHY THESE SPACES ARE A PROMISE ...

Botfighter, developed by Swedish company It's Alive several years ago, is a good example of such an overlay. The game is simple. Every player is a fighting robot. Fighting is by texting. Weapons, armour and other equipment can be bought on the Internet. You are in the game once you turn your mobile on, so the game breaches the barriers of space and time. The battle begins once another player enters the same radio cell. The whole battle game is a text adventure communicated via text messaging that takes place in the real physical world. In Stockholm, where the game was first tried out, players cycled through the city to get from cell to cell more quickly and find new opponents and adventures. Like all ubiquitous games, *Botfighter* promises a new, exciting playful city. In having such visions, ubiquitous games strikingly resemble the ideas of the Situationists. The artistic protest movement of the Situationists, who were active from the 1950s to the 1970s, demanded and designed a new city with lots happening. They developed methods, strategies and practices for conquering and implementing this city. Unplanned wandering about (the *dérive*) was seen as one new way to perceive and explore urban space. *Détournement* was another. Mobile and ubiquitous



Ville Spatial - a utopia in Second Life based on the vision of Yona Friedman, initiated by Stephan Lorenz.
[HTTP://SLURL.COM/SECONDLIFE/CULTUREREGION/143/214/61](http://slurl.com/secondlife/cultureregion/143/214/61)



Ubiquitous games such as *Botfighter* cross reality: Gaming with the mobile phone and SMS.
© IT'S ALIVE INC. 2002

games are nowadays adopting these concepts again, turning our everyday spatial experience inside out and getting us out and about in the city, thereby promising us a new urbanism in a new city. The environment we live in can thus be influenced not only by physical change (e.g. construction) but by immaterial changes as well (e.g. playing games).

... THAT REMAINS UNFULFILLED...

But this new generation of commercial games cannot fulfil the Situationist dream because they separate the idea of an adventurous city from its critical social context and transform it into a base for the consumption-oriented, fun-loving society. To misquote Adorno, "there is no true play in the false", because instead of a free, play-minded city, ubiquitous games generate a surveillance city. To play ubiquitously I leave my coordinates behind and reveal my pattern of movement and behavioural structures. One could almost believe games were a disguise for a new, now-voluntary form of control. It is not for nothing that "control" is a widely used term in the community. Almost all mobile online games can be interpreted as a voluntary introduction of surveillance, i.e. self-induced surveillance. Suspension of disbelief becomes the suspension of misbehaviour and resistance. In its future combat system, the US military employs standard games interfaces to control weapon systems so as to facilitate rapid learning and intuitive use.⁴ No one can wage virtual war as well as someone who has done it since he had his first games console.

Thus in the media society playing could lead to people accepting voluntary dependency and spending time in more and more pre-set, controlled spaces. Or do games open up new possibilities for spatial interaction after all? For subversion, diversity and future?

... BUT NONETHELESS HAS SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL

Wherever there is surveillance, there is always a way out as well – a trick. Creative misuse is the watchword that indicates a way out of the control dilemma in games. A good example of this is *Barcode Battler*, a Japanese game from the 1990s. The business idea behind the game was that players collected cards to read into the games console with a barcode reader. But many players wouldn't dream of spending money on these cards if there were much more exciting codes about everywhere. They went to the supermarket and used the games console to read in the bar codes of chewing gum packages etc. In this, the game and its technology became a tool of environmental exploration through creative misuse.

Play can also be an instrument of criticism and emancipation, as Jane McGonigal's game *Ministry of Reshelving* shows. It is a very simple, purely analogue game that is coordinated and documented on the Internet. You take Orwell's novel *1984* from the literature section of a public library and put it in the politics or economics section.

Here, games become what they should be today – instruments for opening up new spaces for the imagination, not between man and machine but between man and man, motivating them towards a different, freer life. And despite the high surveillance and potential for standardisation, fast multiple digital communication reveals opportunities for lighting tactical interventions by a highly networked gaming community endowed with little official power but high technical and cultural knowledge.

1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Crowther, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Crowther
 2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kentucky>
 3 <http://slurl.com/secondlife/cultureregion/132/118/75/>
 4 Cf. James Korriss, "ENDER'S GAME", IN: VON BORRIES, WALZ AND BÖTTGER, SPACE TIME PLAY, BASEL/BERLIN/BOSTON 2007.



"Creative misuse" – a game that was not used as intended: the *Barcode Battler*.
 © EPOCH CO. LTD. 1991



Jane McGonigal's analog game *Ministry of Reshelving*.
 © JANE MCGONIGAL, 2005



Architecture is an obstacle. The topography of a city is structured in different levels of skills – from "beginner" to "expert".
 © APPLY PICTURES

...similar to the game *Skate*.
 © ELECTRONIC ARTS

