

SimCity Progressives

By Jason Kuznicki
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In 2011, the U.S. Department of Agriculture scrapped the Food Pyramid that it had promoted for nearly two decades. Split into six sections, the Food Pyramid rested on a hefty load of complex carbohydrates: 6–11 servings of bread, cereal, rice, and pasta.

Oof.

Whatever else one may say of it, the Food Pyramid was clear, specific, and so simple that even a child could understand it. But there was just one problem: Americans were getting fatter. Increasingly, nutritionists blamed the carbs.

So out went the Food Pyramid, and in came MyPlate, a guide whose visual recommendations are so vague that anyone not deeply connected to the ongoing nutritional debate might have a hard time saying why it even exists or what it is trying to accomplish. Still, at least it doesn't recommend the massive daily doses of pasta.

Americans, being the good, obedient souls that they are, promptly started losing weight.

GOVERNMENT-CENTRIC THINKING

At least that's the story told here in Washington, where all the right-thinking folks hold that every good outcome has a federal explanation. Here, it was the quite possibly improved federal nutrition guidelines, along with first lady Michelle Obama's advocacy against childhood obesity.

If the citizens are happy, then surely a bureaucrat is behind it, and it's only a question of figuring out which one to thank. If they are sad, well, in this town, that's just another word for opportunity.

A more sensible take on obesity, of course, would be to note that no trend continues forever, not even American fatness. Reversion to the mean, while it hasn't quite happened yet, ought never to surprise. Every trend continues until it can't anymore. None go on forever.

MyPlate serves as a good example of the sort of thinking I like to call “SimCity” progressivism. On this view, the government’s purpose is not necessarily to provide any particular goods or services, and not even (or only) the ones found in the Constitution.

No, the government’s purpose is to carefully curate the lives of the citizens—adjusting here, pruning there, maybe not necessarily forbidding, but managing, down to the last exquisite detail. Rather like one might do in a government simulator, only in real life.

NO ROOM FOR NON-MODEL CITIZENS

The nanny state is nothing new, of course, but new data and new procedural tools are giving rise to new ways of thinking about government and its role in all of our lives. Gone are the big-isms of the 20th century, but in their place is the overwhelming propensity to micromanage with data.

The goal of government would appear to be, in the words of criminal defense attorney Scott Greenfield, “a world of tasteless, sanitary perfection.” Government exists to give us a life that is not merely evil-free or pain-free, but also risk-free and surprise-free as well. A managed, predictable life, rather like the life to be had inside a well-played game of “SimCity.”

To a generation just a bit older than me, this punctiliousness may look neurotic and maybe even a little threatening. But people my age and younger might not even find it terribly surprising.

We are a generation raised on video games. And in this new vast wasteland, not all of it terrible mind you, the genre of government simulators looms large. Whatever our ideology, we all grew up playing governmentality games:

“SimCity,” or “Civilization,” or one of the many others like them. We learned from, and we were often persuaded by, these games.

This is not to say that “SimCity” is the real or the only reason for the mess we’re in. Certainly not. It’s an artifact, albeit one of many, all of them speaking with nearly the same voice. Our governmentality games offer a vision of what many seemingly take for a better government than our own.

Their biggest underlying claim is that human society is algorithmic: It can be modeled effectively with a set of mathematically defined procedures. True, computer games can hardly do otherwise, but to say that they simulate life is also in a sense to claim that life itself is algorithmic: Computers run models of citizens, and these models behave like... well, like model citizens.

Now, mainstream economics has made great strides in understanding how societies work by assuming that humans really are algorithmic, and by trying to model their behavior accordingly. Sometimes the economists are right. But they are also very often wrong, and when they are, economists inevitably learn something interesting.

PROCEDURAL PERSUASION

By contrast, governmentality games' algorithms implicitly make much, much stronger claims about how the real world works, and about the very best ways to run it. They stake these claims in large part by walking their players through procedures.

Media studies professor Ian Bogost argues that procedural rhetoric is a key element of a well-realized video game. What's that mean? Bogost writes:

“[P]rocedural rhetoric is the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively. Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes... [I]ts arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, though the practice of programming.”

Here's the problem, one that seems to worry critics like Bogost, and that frankly worries me a bit as well: We're all more or less aware of the tricks of verbal rhetoric. We also usually know when an image or a narrative is trying to sell us something. We're all members of a capitalist, advertising-heavy society, and while I adore capitalism, I find that knowing how not to be persuaded is surely a survival skill in any capitalist economy (it may even be a virtue: Consumers get better at detecting baloney over time).

We argue in words almost by nature. We do it in pictures, too: We love parodies of advertising posters, and no sketch comedy show post-“Saturday Night Live” would be complete without a few deadpanned mock-earnest commercials for horrid new products.

But we're a lot worse at picking apart procedural rhetorics, the very kinds found in video games. Here, the rhetoric is a thing we perform: We're the stars of the production, the pilot in the cockpit, the all-seeing monarch who sends his troops into battle. We're the city planners.

Video games' persuasive power has nothing whatsoever to do with whether the games are realistic. Right or wrong, players can still have fun, and be persuaded by, a simulation. How many of us can say for certain whether flight simulator games really simulate flight?

The claim is at least questionable, and sometimes, the answer is clearly “no.” But it's fair to surmise that plenty of people have been persuaded by flight simulators that they can fly.

The same is true of the experience of managing a population. The experience, that is, of governing. Do our highly popular government simulators match reality? If not, how do they differ? And when they differ, what are they claiming about how the world should work?

GOVERNING WITHOUT THE GOVERNED

We know plenty of people have been drawn into urban planning by playing “SimCity.” Indeed, it’s almost a cliché of recent articles about “SimCity” to read one or more urban planners declaring, happily or sheepishly, that they came to the profession after managing “SimCity” simulations.

To urban planners, “SimCity” is a bit of a guilty pleasure. As land use expert Ruben Duarte puts it:

“In SimCity, as the Mayor (aka: Planning God), you have absolute dictatorial control over your city where your decisions are the correct ones. It’s a world where buildings rise and fall at your arbitrary whim. Neighbors don’t want a new commercial center downtown? Screw those NIMBYs and just demolish their buildings and put a park in their place to increase your commercial center’s land value. What planner wouldn’t want to take a bulldozer to their most ardent development hecklers? You need a city council approval to build a new airport? [Screw] that noise. I’m just going to plop one right here next to my high-speed rail station. Done.”

The code itself, and the gameplay, both go considerably further than just making urban planning look like a whole lot of fun. Governmentality games like “SimCity” and “Civilization” also reflect norms about what government ought to be doing. They tell us how cities ought to look and how scientific and cultural advances ought to unfold. They tell us what problems the government is and is not equipped to tackle, and how nations ought to view one another and behave toward one another. They tell us how citizens should behave.

Playing a governmentality game requires acting out these norms. Inevitably it means being rewarded for making sure the government really is the leading force in society. It often means making sure the citizens are kept in line, but more often, they stay there of their own accord. The legislator’s main job is to figure out what the algorithm wants, and optimize.

Playing the game also means being punished for doing the things the designers implicitly take to be incorrect in the real world: You say, as a player of the “Civilization” series, that you don’t want to spend state resources on scientific research? Bad idea! Think maybe “SimCity’s” zoning laws (and ours) are a big mistake? The game doesn’t even let you opt out of them. Want to legalize drugs—to save money, shrink the prisons, cut the violent crime rate, and make your Sims a little happier? Forget it. (You can, however, run an anti-drug campaign, which the Sims dutifully obey, quite unlike in our own world.) Legalized gambling raises the crime rate in

“SimCity,” but in the real world, the relationship is ambiguous at best. And so on.

A FANTASY OF GOVERNMENT CONTROL

“SimCity” is a fantasy of control. Of government control. The procedural rhetoric of the game delivers the player a kind of control that our real controllers only salivate over.

Here, the rulers face few limits from the liberal democratic process or the rule of law, such as we find in any tolerable real- world government. The legislature may or may not have any power to overrule your decisions. The courts can't do much if anything to limit you. Nor can property rights, neighborhood associations, ballot initiatives, or any of the other usual checks on central power.

The goal is to manage the population, understood as an aggregate, modeled as an algorithm, and surveilled continuously. Anything that might get in the way of that goal would take away the fun, the fun of central control.

Note that in some games, the threat of taking away your fun is paradoxically a part of a player actually having fun. Governmentality games rarely carry out this threat simply because you govern badly. This is an eventuality that comes about very often in the real world, and that should probably come about more often still.

Several other aspects of the governmentality genre likewise enhance the feeling of control and tone down its possibly creepy implications: Knowledge problems are few. The collection of data is easy, cost-free, error-free, privacy-free, and near-total. The Sims, note, here, that they're not people, they're only Sims, are pliant and uncomplaining. There is of course an entire spinoff franchise devoted to running the Sims' lives individually, from day to day. It's even more popular than

"SimCity," and the Sims appear completely fine about it. The pseudo-people in these games are maybe the very best realization to be found anywhere of what social theorist Michel Foucault called "docile bodies." These are individuals temperamentally fit to be governed, and who comply, with their bodies and their lives, to the decrees of power. They are read by the state, according to the codes of the state, and they are passive in the face of the state. In the hopes of central planners everywhere, these docile bodies are to be monitored, explored, and transformed to suit the needs of the government. That is, the needs of the player.

WHEN THE PLANNERS GET PLANNED

It might be fair to ask: Is this really progress? The more and more data that can be gathered about us, and that is indeed being gathered by our governments, the more the fantasy of

"SimCity" may start looking like the real thing. The numbers are out there, waiting to be crunched, and they will be.

And yet the people are not an optimization problem. Their desires aren't so easily converted into algorithms. Neat, tidy, all-encompassing government rarely ends well, and for exactly that reason. A world of sterile, sanitary perfection offers little chance for authenticity, serendipity, or fun. Gathering the data may tempt us to think otherwise, but there is very good reason to believe that it alone will not be enough. To make valid inferences, we would need not only this data, but a theory of human motivations that goes well beyond anything we have conceived so far.

Some urban planners—quite rightly—also insist that life isn’t so simple, and that anyone taking their cues on governing from “SimCity” should probably be kept away from the profession.

“I don’t think I ever played SimCity without the cheat code implemented,” wrote John Reinhardt, referring to the cheat code that gave his city a million-dollar budget boost.

“Stadiums galore!” he continued. It’s a desire he appears to have in common with city governments nationwide. If only they had his means of paying for it.

Even with the best of intentions, too much central planning can ruin all the fun of a well-lived life. Ironically, “SimCity’s” latest release was plagued with user complaints—precisely because it took away so much of the players’ own creative freedom. Gameplay initially required connecting to the Internet, and the game’s centralized servers turned out to be unreliable. The connection requirement also meant breaking one of the truly great features of the classic game, namely its extensive support for user-generated content. “Holy crap what a mess that was,” said one reviewer.

It left fans in an odd reversal of roles: Now they were the ones subject to the inefficiencies and officiousness of central planning. And predictably, they hated it.

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