In-World Realism

Andri Gerber in Conversation with Konstantinos Dimopoulos, May 22, 2019 (E-mail)

Andri Gerber: You recently finished writing an atlas on virtual cities. Could you tell me a bit more about this project? How did you come across this subject, and what was the project's ambition?

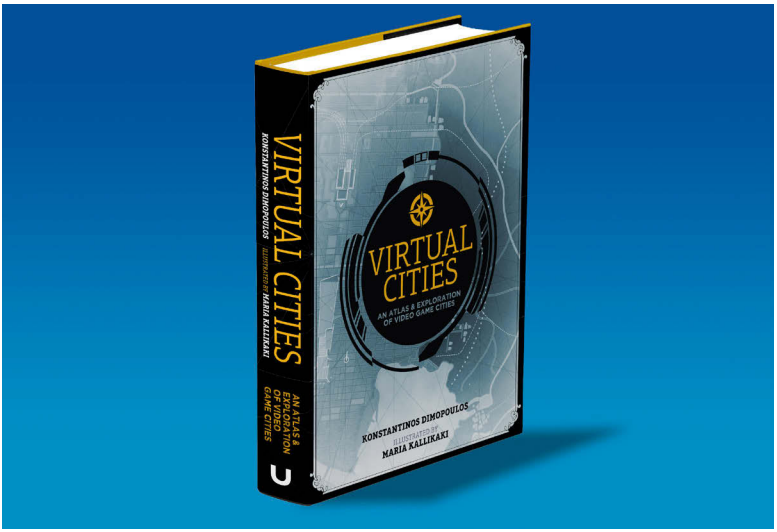
Konstantinos Dimopoulos: The *Virtual Cities* atlas is a book I had been thinking about for quite some time. I had been long fascinated by the format of the atlas, ever since I took cartography during my university studies. I was in love with the idea of the video game city since playing Dynamix's *Rise of the Dragon* (1990), when I realized that it could simultaneously feel real and utterly whimsical. Moreover, since I work as what I tend to call a "game urbanist," I knew I would thoroughly enjoy such a book. I realized that writing it would be an excellent research opportunity, as well as a deeply creative endeavor.

Back in 2017, I started vaguely imagining what *Virtual Cities* could look like, and which of gaming's urban centers it should include. I even started discussing the project with visual artist and friend Maria Kallikaki, but it wasn't until I was approached by the publishing house *Unbound* that work began in earnest. The unexpected popularity of the proposed book was what finally pushed me to expand, and—crucially—finish it.

As for the ambition behind it, I will be really happy if the first atlas of gaming's virtual cities lives up to its promise. I want *Virtual Cities* to stand the test of time, inspire creators and people who play video games, and act as a showcase of the medium's creativity.

Gerber: What are the qualities you are looking for in these cities? Are there virtual cities you had to leave out because they did not fit into your narrative?

Fig. 17: Konstantino Dimopoulos, Maria Kallikaki, Virtual Cities Atlas, 2019



Dimopoulos: Even though I am convinced that criticism is necessary in the evolution of any form, I do tend to favor its more positive expressions. I thus tend to celebrate the brilliant rather than criticize the mediocre—so in order to pick the cities for my book, I simply had to chose from those I deeply admire. I also tried to pick places from which useful design lessons could be taught, and through which fascinating urban stories could be told, while simultaneously trying to cover as much ground as possible. I wanted the atlas to be as representative of the medium's amazing variety as possible. To feature cities across genres, and of wildly different types, to cover thirty-five years of digital gaming on a multitude of different formats.

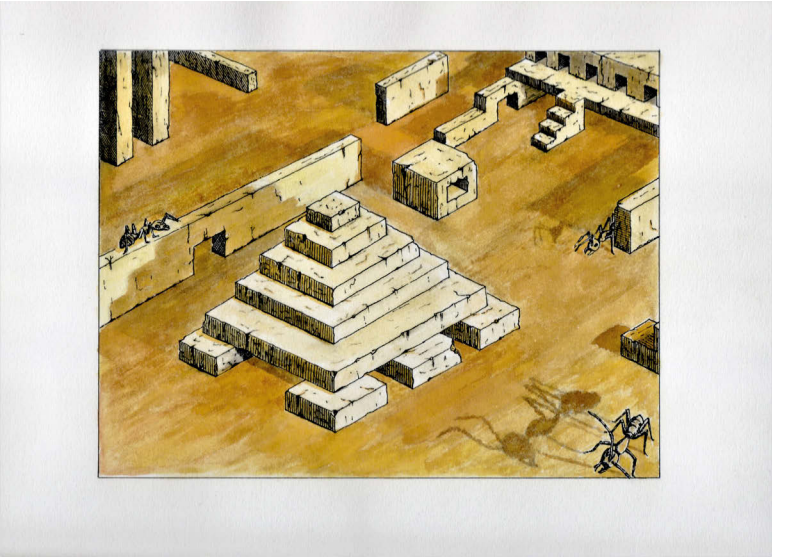
From the isometric ruins of *Antescher* (1983) and the text-only civic dystopia of *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (1985), to *Novigrad's* fantasy "open world" (2016) and the sci-fi metropolis of the *Citadel*: I tried to cover this ground while leaving room for less well-known cities. Part of the fun of reading through an atlas, after all, is imagining places you never knew existed, and planning excursions that may never happen.

Obviously, several cities I would have loved to revisit or explore for the first time had to be left out. However, I was happy to discover that there is

a much broader range of game cities we should consider important than one might suspect.

Gerber: You also work in the field of video game level design. How do you proceed when you are asked to design a virtual city? Where do you get your information? Do you read books on the history of architecture, for example?

Fig. 18: Maria Kallikaki, 8-bit city of Antescher from the classic ZX Spectrum game Ant Attack, 2019



Dimopoulos: Just like real-life urbanism, game urbanism is an incredibly diverse field. Designing cities is only part of what I do, but admittedly, it's the most intriguing part. In addition to planning for an imaginary city, gaming's interactivity introduces numerous new factors that have to be accounted for, such as a game's genre, narrative needs, and actual level design priorities. A city for a stealth game, to give you an example, will very obviously have to provide numerous hiding places and alternate routes. One thus has to come up with a design that is believable, occasionally phantasmagoric, while allowing for particular gameplay situations and running on specific hardware.

Obviously, creating a city for a 3D-open-world action game is vastly different from designing for a 2D point-and-click adventure, even if both benefit from the very same urban and geographic pool of knowledge. This same pool can also shape a city-building game or provide players in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game with the tools to create their communities in a physical form.

Reading and researching the history of cities, planning, and architecture, as well as striving to refine my understanding of what makes actual and imaginary urban centers work, never really ends. Even though both my Ph.D. and M.Sc. are in urban planning and geography, and I have been researching actual cities since the late 1990s, I find myself constantly reading through books, articles, and even newsbits. Nevertheless, each project requires new and more focused research.

Fig. 19: Maria Kallikaki, The Port of the Dead: Famous Rubacava (Grim Fandango), 2019

Gerber: In an article on *Gamasutra*, you note that one of the main qualities of virtual cities is to create "realism." In an interview you say: "[R]ealism, you see, leads to believability, which in turn leads to immersion. A feeling

of presence. Of being there in space".[1] How does one create this "realism" in virtual environments?

Dimopoulos: When I say realism, I do mean in-world realism. That is, a sense of cohesiveness within any given setting, even if such a setting is a magical castle-town, floating alone in deep space. Such a place would also have rules, and should therefore make sense, in order to help the people playing it suspend their disbelief. So, if we create a world where gravity exists, physics should behave accordingly; if our city is crafted by a society, certain societal rules should apply.

What I am advocating is essentially similar to Tolkien's idea of a second, coherent reality, where the imaginary should be almost as detailed and layered as actual reality. I have to admit, achieving such a feat can be very difficult in gaming, where creators often lack the crucial tools of framing and pacing. On the other hand, unlike literature, video games do allow for interaction and agency, which always helps foster immersion and empathy.

As to how one creates realism in virtual urban environments, the answer necessarily varies as wildly as these environments can. Generally speaking, though, for a city to have any chance of feeling real, at the very least it would have to supply the basic functions of urbanism. Assuming we are talking about human inhabitants, this means it would have to provide access to food and water, offer some sort of shelter, and allow for at least a rudimentary sort of economy. Without such absolute basics, a place would only make sense as a former city or a vast, brutal jail.

Gerber: What other qualities are you looking for when designing a virtual city?

Dimopoulos: Imagination, character, and believability are always crucial to me, but I must admit I am often impressed at how well games like *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) can abstract and recreate historical cities. It managed to fit a more than decent representation of Victorian London, the first metropolis, into a relatively small map, and capture a pop-influenced but thoroughly enjoyable sense of this era's atmosphere.

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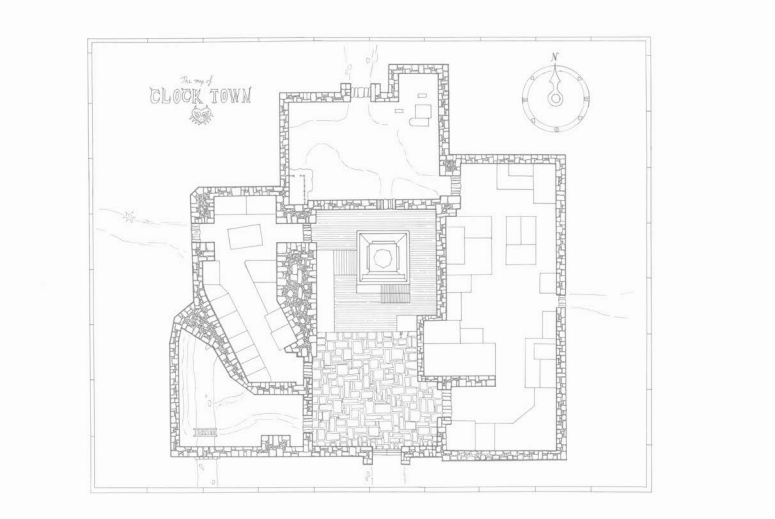
1 | Konstantinos Dimopoulos, "Urban Design and the Creation of Videogame Cities," *Gamsutra* (March 3 2017), https://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/KonstantinosDimopoulos/20170831/304756/Urban_Design_and_the_Creation_of_Videogame_Cities.php (accessed July 2, 2019).

There are, of course, far too many ways in which game cities can be wonderful. They can show little and imply much; they can be packed with detail and interactivity; they can hide countless details; they can evolve; they can do environmental storytelling on a historical level; they can support engrossing stories and set the stage for larger than life characters; they can be impressively dynamic and feature constantly changing systems, or even look outlandishly beautiful and unexpected. To be truly successful, above all, a city constructed for a game must ensure it properly supports and facilitates any and all gameplay.

Fig. 20: Konstantinos Dimopoulos, Sketch on a version of Zelda's Clock Town that would feel slightly more realistic than the one presented in Majora's Mask, 2019



Gerber: We share a passion for H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). I remember how frightened I was when reading his stories for the first time; at the same time, I remember how disappointed I was with the various movie-adaptations of his *Cthulhu Mythos* universe, as it is very difficult to convey the specific qualities of Lovecraft's writing. One of my fondest memories was playing the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game (RPG) with my friends in the 1980s.

You are now working on a video game based on Lovecraft, which will be released in the summer of 2019, entitled *The Sinking City*. Do you think the game will be successful in conveying Lovecraft's specific sense of terror of?

Fig. 21: Konstantinos Dimopoulos, Maps and sketches for an untitled City RPG project, and forthcoming freeware entitled Nékromegà, 2019

Dimopoulos: To clarify things: I am not currently working on *The Sinking City*, although I am closely following its development. I did work on the game's city for a few months during its pre-production, and I do believe that the team had, and still has, a crystal clear understanding of what makes cosmic horror work. I also believe that they will be implementing unique civic solutions to their world-building, and will provide us with a city that will finally do Lovecraftian horror justice.

As a side note, I have to admit that I still occasionally play the *Call of Cthulhu* pen and paper RPG myself, and am slowly working on creating a nice city for it, as a sort of passion project.

Gerber: One aspect of virtual games you criticize is the absence of the dimension of time, in the sense that we don't see buildings being constructed. The only game I know that does this is *Mafia* (2002). At the same time—as has also been noted during other interviews in this book—this appears to be a problem of architecture and urban design, too, in which one does not adequately consider the temporality of projects, and what could occur after the project is completed.

Dimopoulos: It is true that most people tend to think in an ahistorical manner; this is often the case with both world-builders of imaginary settings and professionals of the material world. We commonly (and incorrectly) perceive the past as something static, and the present as perpetual; this leads us to forget all about history, its traces and processes, and tends to spawn worlds that can feel lifeless or like a theme park.

Thankfully though, as I recently rediscovered while writing *Virtual Cities*, many of the best designers have managed to imbue their urban centers with a sense of history. The *Mafia* games are indeed fine examples, but thankfully, they are not the only ones. Kamurocho can be seen evolving throughout the *Yakuza* series (2005-2017). Shanghai in *Kane and Lynch 2* (2010) is on the verge of a total transformation. The history of *City 17* (2004) is evident in its many co-existing architectural styles.

I would absolutely love to see a great landmark (a cathedral in particular) being constructed during a game's narrative, and I do advocate for giving history and its mechanisms a more prominent role. But I believe we are slowly getting there.

Gerber: Friends sometimes make fun of me, claiming that as a historian, it seems I would rather live in Renaissance Florence or eighteenth century Paris than in our time. The virtual worlds we visit in games obviously have this potential: serving as a comfort from the struggles of our everyday. Yet at the same time, they also have the potential to critically asses our "reality."

Dimopoulos: I completely agree with you. Games and their intricate worlds enable our daydreaming, while consistently remaining political. Even when they do not aim to be! This is especially true when it comes to their cities. I am constantly amazed to see the strong class-based approach even mainstream, AAA titles go for. On the other hand, Paris during the eighteenth century must have been breathtakingly beautiful.

Gerber: If we assume that our everyday is as "virtual" as the environment of virtual cities—because we are dependent on our senses, on our culture, our experiences, and so forth—isn't this a fantastic paradox? Aren't virtual cities sometimes more real than the actual ones?

Dimopoulos: I'd argue that, yes, for a certain period of time virtual cities can feel more real than actual ones. Beyond this, they can even make us think differently about real cities, too, and they absolutely feel palpable to their creators. I find that, when working on a city, I actually think of it in the same terms I would think of one that exists. I think of the citizens, the

classes, the trends, what people might feel, and how local society would react to changes, et cetera. But, objectively, virtual cities are not real, nor were they designed to be. At best, they are artful, beautiful, immersive, and evocative illusions that can only partially simulate the way actual urban formations work.

Gerber: To what extent does your background as a rural and surveying engineer, as an urban and regional planner, and as a geography student influence the way you perceive and design games?

Dimopoulos: I spent too many years researching, studying, and appreciating cities, and thinking in a spatial, engineering-influenced manner. As a result, most of my thinking has been deeply influenced by my studies. On the plus side, both urbanism and geography have always been very broad disciplines, which thankfully meant I also dabbled in philosophy, history, design, statistics, math, literature, the visual arts, architecture, and even a bit of coding. This prepared me for the many hats someone working in gaming has to wear, and eventually led me to the field of game urbanism.

Gerber: And has the opposite also occurred? To what extent does your work in game design influence your practice, in urban planning and geographical research? Do you think there is a specific knowledge from designing virtual cities that could be transferred back to "reality," be it research or design?

Dimopoulos: A truly interesting question, but one I do not really feel fit to answer. For the past few years, I've been working exclusively on game cities, and I have returned neither to planning the real world nor to academia. My feeling, though, is that games can essentially influence reality in the ways all art forms can—by inspiring, critiquing, and so on—but also by providing simulation, modeling, visualizing, and useful procedural generation tools.

Gerber: As an extension of this, could you imagine to go back to practicing urban planning? How would an ideal "real" city be planned?

Dimopoulos: Not really, no. I honestly can't see myself attempting to tackle corruption, red tape, and maddening officials anymore. But I will always have very strong ideas regarding the ideal planned city. You see, I am confident that an ideal city cannot exist outside an ideal society, and what would an ideal society actually consist of is a deeply political discussion. Nevertheless, even if we agreed on the definition of perfection in urbanism, I could not accept the idea that one can solve societal, political, or economic problems with a clever plan and a few innovative design choices.

Even simple, almost obvious matters such as restricting the use of the automobile are hotly debated, and no plan has ever managed to even slightly ameliorate poverty.

Gerber: In the article cited above, you say that one of the main pieces of advice you give to urban planning students is: "[P]lease do not think like architects. That's the wrong scale when approaching settlements. Think like urban planners. Even better, think like geographers and planners".[2] I absolutely love this quote, as it refers to a long-standing historical controversy about the true nature of urban design and within whose competency this scale lies. Architects traditionally consider the urban scale as their exclusive playground, yet always in relation to architectural objects. Could you expand on that?

Dimopoulos: Oh, absolutely. I am convinced that the difference between architecture and planning is a matter of scale and function. A city is, quite simply, not a large building. It is an entirely different beast with vastly different functions. It must support vehicular flows, encompass pre-existing patterns and systems, is essentially (when truly abstracted) a construct of economy and geography; it is infinitely more complex than any building. This, of course, does not in any way mean that architects cannot be excellent urban planners, nor does it mean that planning can ignore architecture. Far from it. What we actually have to understand is that those are two different disciplines that simply happen to share a few similar traits, and definitely intersect when it comes down to the scale of urban design.

Gerber: What would be your advice to architects and urban designers wishing to work in the field of video games? How can one best approach it?

Dimopoulos: I suggest they definitely give gaming some thought, provided of course they are already interested in its worlds and systems. As researchers, academics, and creators, people who have been trained to understand and utilize space are—in my experience—very good at both game and level design. Of course, some research into games themselves would also be very useful, as would broad exposure to art, history, philosophy, and science.

Gerber: An obligatory last question: What are your all-time favorite games and what you are currently playing?

Dimopoulos: I'll answer the easy part of the question first: I am currently re-playing the original *Diablo* (1996), and really enjoying my time in *Alien:*

2 | Ibid.

Isolation (2014). As for my all-time favorite games, these would have to include *Monkey Island 2* (1991), *Sensible Soccer* (1992), *A Mind Forever Voyaging* (1985), *Space Quest IV* (1991), *Fallout* (1997), *TIE Fighter* (1994), *Manic Miner* (1983), *The Hobbit* (1982), *The Sea Will Claim Everything* (2012), *Witcher 3* (2015), and many, many more. But coming up with a stable, definitive list of them all seems utterly impossible!

Gerber: Most of the games you make reference to are relatively old. Is this because of nostalgia, as you used to play them as a child, or because their representation of the world was much more simple and left more space for imagination?

Dimopoulos: I believe this has less to do with nostalgia and more with the enthusiasm I had for all things digital as a teenager. Admittedly, the older I grow and the longer I work on games, the more I tend to appreciate them in a technical and artistic way, and less as a wide-eyed kid. To be honest, I do miss that feeling.