



Chris Howlett

'In the not-too-distant future'

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, contemporary culture appears increasingly seduced and absorbed by apocalyptic reveries. Scientists are racing to cryo-preserve genetic material from animals and plant matter in underground bunkers, while filmmakers use the spectacle of computer-generated imagery to speculate on the outcomes from dramatic climate change that we are not yet ready to confront in reality. Media outlets and politicians encourage fear as the predominant emotion in contemporary life, capitalising on our unease regarding health, national security and prosperity. As a culture, we have become deeply affected by what we crave and fear, whether by mediated images of violence and disaster or transgressions of social and sexual difference.

Chris Howlett's recent work reflects on these cultural anxieties and the symbolic language of a secular apocalypse. It is an 'end of the world' concept borrowing from the Judeo-Christian belief that disaster precedes salvation which is now secularised through advances in science and technology and an awareness of humanity's ability to self-destruct. For Howlett, expressions of fear and emergency are located in various forms of media and entertainment, particularly computer games that simulate the popular belief that crisis is looming. Through



reorientating the codes and conventions of these games, Howlett produces machinima projects — animated films made within real-time virtual 3-D environments — to underscore the agency these technologies have in redefining our subjectivities.

As a process of image-making, machinima derives from the participatory culture of computer games, with users recording, re-editing and sharing videos of their expert game play. For artists like Howlett, the re-mediation of games also functions as a strategy for using the social nature of game play performance to critique itself, and, by extension, its preconceived notions of narrative in specific game genres and the capacity of these narratives to reflect on contemporary social values. As Howlett explains, his machinima projects illustrate how 'virtual environments shift cultural and political understandings of our physical and physiological selves'.¹

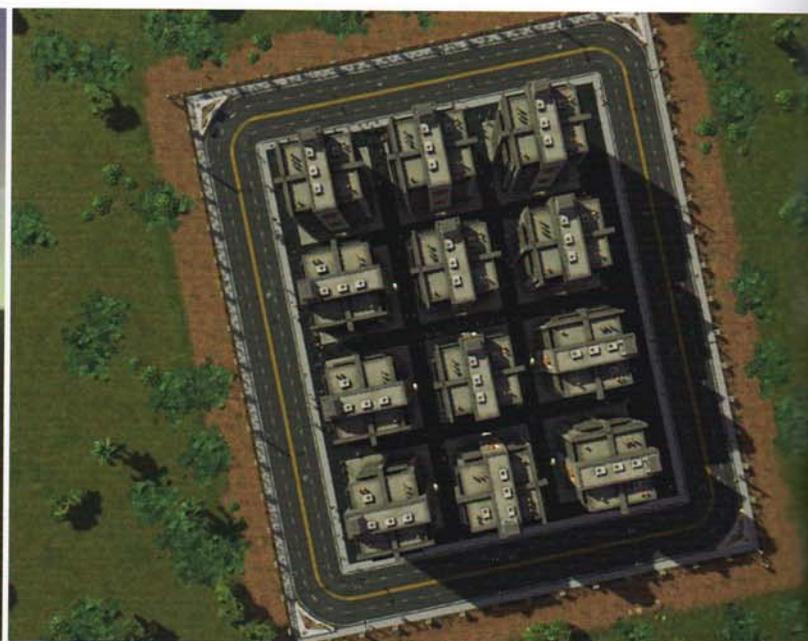
In the episodic project *Metropolis: Part I-III* 2009, Howlett utilises the popular simulation and strategy game *SimCity Societies* 2007 which offers users an opportunity to 'build, play with and destroy amazing cities'.² The game also functions as an interface for experimenting with shared values and narrative trees — structures that require users to follow or make decisions based on

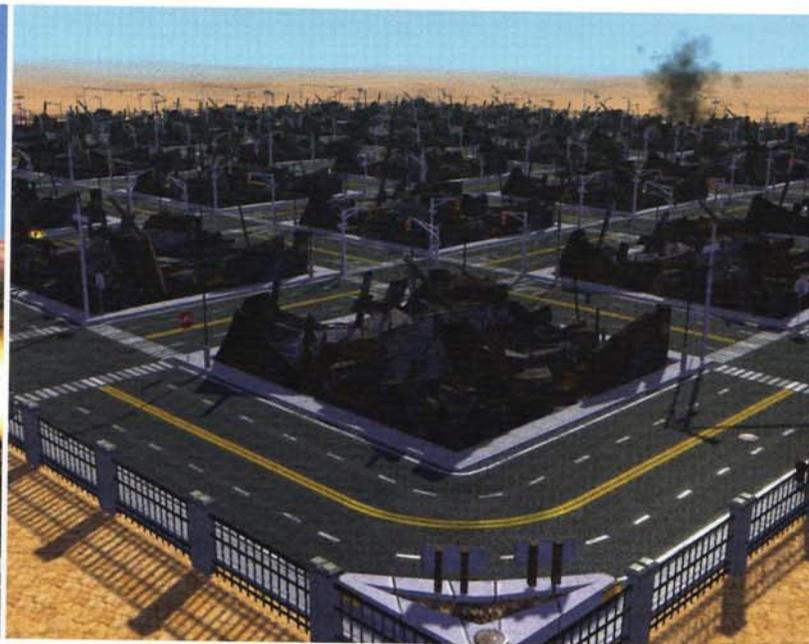
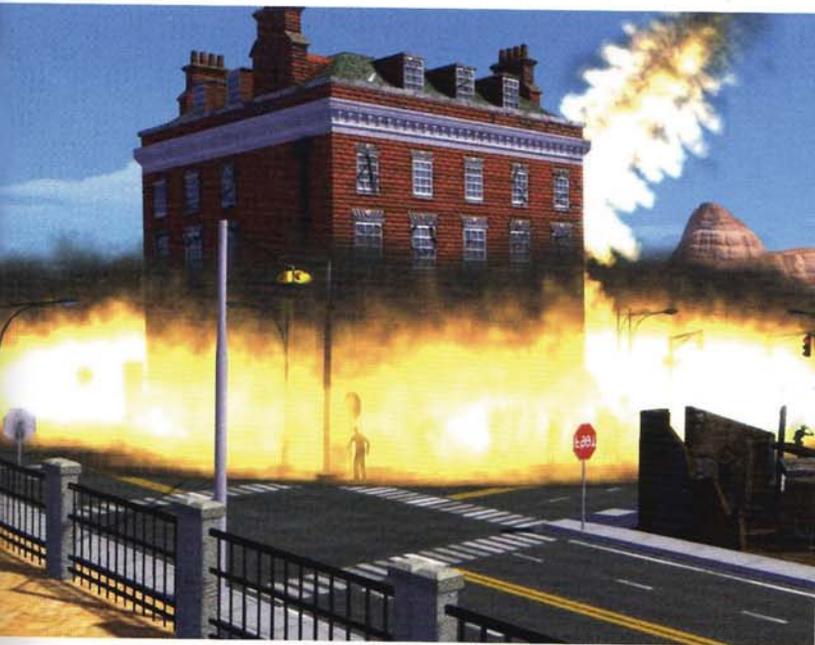
set systems. Users modify the appearance and behaviour of their avatars based on pre-determined values of productivity, prosperity, creativity, spirituality, authority and knowledge, and play out meta-narratives based on various social structures, from fascist-led dictatorships to contemplative, non-denominational cooperatives.

Howlett exploits the game's latitude for designing ominous, ideological propositions for how a future society might look, feel and end. Reshaping and recutting footage recorded both in the game and outside in nature with sound effects and music modified from the game's software, he reworks the archetypes of authoritarian, capitalist and romantic societies. These three different societies function as spaces for contemplating the concept of intentional communities — planned communities based on shared responsibilities and resources. *Metropolis: Part I-III* exaggerates the American-inspired residential model of the gated community — a community system resulting from residents' increased distrust and fear — as a self-contained and self-sustaining society in which its subjects live, work and play in a structured but dysfunctional manner.

In *Metropolis: Part I-III*, Howlett uses these intentional communities to explore homogenous psychological zones rather than visionary architectural solutions. The crosshatching

Metropolis: Part I-III
(stills) 2009





of streets and boulevards produces a cyclical grid of intersections forcing cars to aimlessly drive around the gated perimeters, while the cities are filled with isolated avatars. Following the unspoken rules of the game, individual subjectivity is given over to collective action and mood, and balloons float atop the avatars' heads advertising the symbolism via sad, sallow faces. These figures simply meander through their daily lives unaware of impending doom, cowering silently as meteorites crash into homes and earthquakes reduce the metropolis to uniform patches of rubble.

For Howlett, each episode of *Metropolis: Part I-III* simultaneously functions as an allegory of everyday life in game space, and everyday reality conceived of as an imperfect version of the game. *Metropolis: Part I-III* attempts to reshape the fears of real, lived experience as a process of game play. Not surprisingly, the work takes place in a world without a sky, where both viewers and avatars are unable to see the source of imminent danger. Like the last bastion of civilisation, achieving little but an increased state of entropy, the artist allows this world to break down of its own accord, failing to overcome the game's obstacles to happiness.

José Da Silva

Endnotes

- 1 Chris Howlett, email to the author, 22 June 2010.
- 2 Product description for *SimCity Societies* <<http://simcitysocieties.ea.com/index.php>>, viewed 10 June 2010. *SimCity Societies 2007* forms part of the *SimCity* city building franchise. Where the original *SimCity* 1989 game ascribed users with the opportunity to imitate governments, *SimCity Societies* describes itself as a social-engineering, rather than a city-building, simulator.

Metropolis: Part I-III
(stills) 2009