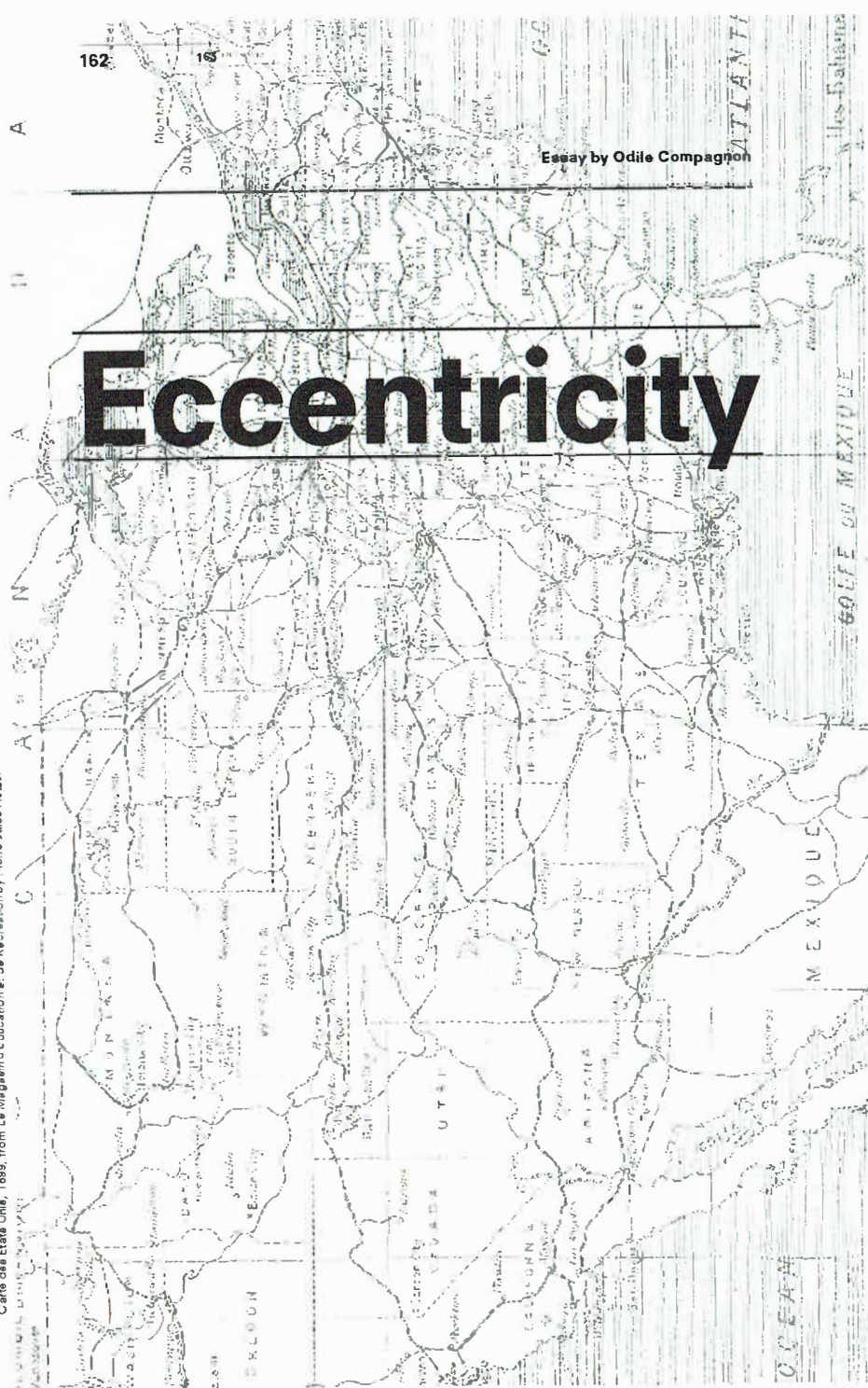


# Eccentricity



It was by accident, one thing leading to the next, that I discovered the *Will of an Eccentric*. This fascinating novel, written by Jules Verne, was published in installments between January and December 1899 in *Le Magasin d'Éducation et de Récréation* by Pierre Jules Hetzel and Jean Macé. It tells the story of a rich Chicago tycoon's decision to leave his immense fortune to the winner of a board game, a reinterpretation of the popular Game of the Goose, which he organized throughout the United States and designed to take place after his death.

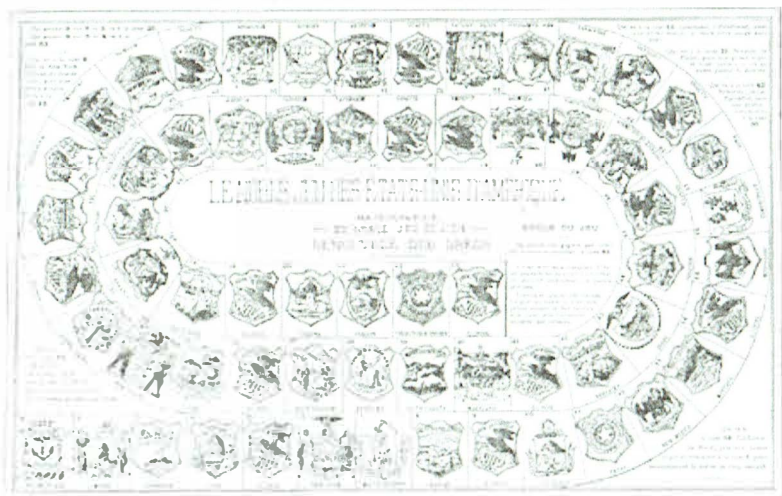
While every move by the seven possible winners, each chosen randomly by the tycoon among the whole Chicago population, is entirely subject to chance—it is literally determined by the roll of the dice—the manner in which each one travels through the country to get from one destination to the next is up to the player's creativity and personal resources. Each of the 63 spaces represents a different state—with Illinois repeated 14 times—and for each one, the deceased tycoon, William J. Hyperbone, has left precise instructions leading the players to the exact location where they should receive their next assignment. Following the popular Game of the Goose, some spaces mean trouble and some, repeated every 9 spaces, allow one to move faster across the board, which translates into less travel through the country towards the final destination. It is at space #63, assigned again to Illinois, where the first player to arrive will be the recipient of Hyperbone's colossal fortune.

Jules Verne takes his readers through the United States, mostly by train, but also on horseback, by foot, boat, bicycle or stagecoach. Using descriptions he found in the recently published Baedeker Guide of the United States, Verne gives us picturesque descriptions of the landscapes and cities the protagonists travel through: Cleveland, Cincinnati, Key West, Salt Lake City, Death Valley, Calais (Maine). The list itself seems rather random, reflecting the arbitrary character of the game and contrasts with the precise representation of the railroad and river network through which Verne explains the natural, political and economic geography of the nation. While the physical description of the country takes the most important part of the book, the author also reveals the cultural and social aspects of the American nation. His characters discuss abolition of slavery, women's rights, Mormon history, race, Native American culture, industrialization and speculation. The adventures turn out to be epic at times, and intrigues between players start to form, as they more or less accidentally meet during stopovers or as chance makes their pawns fall at the same space on the spiral of the board game.

While reading this little book, which strangely was never published in the United States, I was under the spell of Verne's fascination for this country and amazed at the accuracy of the caricatural descriptions of each state and its inhabitants. One description in particular translates the procession that follows Hyperbone's casket from La Salle Street to Oakwood Cemetery, an 8-hour walk through the streets of Chicago and all its parks and boulevards. It is highly unlikely that anyone would have done that on foot, and yet the description of the streets and parks is so compelling that I had to trace the itinerary on a map and plan to follow it on my bike.

But what captivated me most was the way in which Verne associates the arbitrary and the precisely planned, allowing his characters to use his or her personal skills, means and qualities to choose a mode of transportation over another.

## LE JEU DES ETATS UNIS



Noble Jeu des Etats Unis, 1899, from *Le Magasin d'Éducation et de Récréation* by Pierre Jules Hetzel

Throughout the story, along the spiral of the board game and across the fifty states, it is a clever combination of transportation system, time schedules and individual skills that makes the action develop around the unpredictable fate. And Verne pushes the irony even farther when he describes the speculation that builds up around the players, as bidders hypothesize on the potential of their favorite to win the game, end the race, and inherit the fortune.

There is in this Game of the Goose, at the scale of a continent, a truly amazing rendering of a very modern network system, and I could not help but think how similar the work of today's architects is to this eccentric game, and how the spaces we design, the programs we write for our clients, continually combine these three intertwined layers, the arbitrary of the circumstances, the strict data and codes, and the individual characters of our clients, partners and consultants.

As a young professional, graduating from architecture school in France in the 80s, my path seemed prescribed, in the same way my studies had been. Having interned in various firms during the summer breaks, I found a job with the one I felt most attracted to and worked there for a couple of years before getting together with my best friends to start our own practice with some jobs handed over by my former employer, Paul Chemetov, and others granted through competitions. These were pretty straightforward, and seemed complicated to us, only because we had everything to learn. But we learned, projects kept coming, we did them well and more came. We were still far from thinking, as Chemetov had said once in front of us, when a brilliant idea had seemed to come to him spontaneously, "*la facilité me hante*" (ease is with me), but things did seem somewhat simple. Designing consisted in reading the program, visiting the site, putting our heads together and coming up with an interesting design to win the competition. We rarely met the users,

and the programs (for schools, housing, institutions) were provided to us by the administrations. Our practice was pretty much the continuation of that of the generations before.

Things have changed dramatically since. Architects have to face a much more complicated set of constraints, and each completed job seems, instead of leading to the next, to head to a new departure, where new data must be read, new schedules understood, new networks tied, new skills learned, and new maps drawn. It is as if the dice had to be rolled again, bringing you, sometimes, to positions from which you can only extract yourself when someone comes and takes your place. Understanding those constraints is becoming more and more complicated. Giving priority to one variable over the other is quite impossible. One needs to be constantly juggling between deliberate answers to quantified effects and improvised responses to fluctuating causes.

Should one wish for an artificial intelligence to give binary reactions to these stimuli, whether data driven or arbitrary, as some of us dream of doing with computer programs which could assimilate all variables and regurgitate them in a wholesome design? Or should one chase, as Verne's characters do, a more unpredictable outcome, which, for fear of spoiling the ending, I cannot reveal here?

In 1899, the book's protagonist (and its author) put Chicago at the center of the game. It is in the Auditorium Building where it all starts, at Oakwood Cemetery that it ends. Players also find Illinois spaces spread out through the board game, which could have meant a lot of time in Chicago if those spaces were not the ones playing the role of the geese in the traditional Goose Game. These are the spaces where, if chance makes you land there, you get to double your draw and move on, closer to the goal. Having myself come and gone through Chicago three times in the course of my life, for various durations and at various times, I cannot help but feel an immense sympathy for Jules Verne's insight, making Chicago not only the center, but also the place where you can double your draw and move one.

I am grateful for this coincidence that has put the *Will of an Eccentric* onto my path. The enlightenment I found in those fond descriptions of the city that has become my home, written from another century, with the perspective of an ingenious time-and-space-traveler from another continent, made me see the importance of letting chance do some of the work. It is with a different perspective that I will pedal between the parks of Chicago, among the parks of the United States, and continue to draw, with each project, from the opportunities, statistical data, and sympathies that come forth.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Verne, Jules. *Le Testament d'un Excentrique*. Paris: Hetzel, 1899. Print.

# LE TESTIMON D'UN EXCENTRIQUE



# LE TESTAMENT D'UN EXCENTRIQUE

Qui amène 9 par 6 et 3, va à la case 26.  
Qui amène 9 par 5 et 4 va à la case 53.

Qui va à la case 6, Etat de New-York, (le Pont, du Jour de l'Oie), paie une prime simple et va à la case 12.

Qui va à la case 19, Louisiane, (l'Hôtelier), paie une prime double et reste deux coups sans jouer.

Qui va à la case 31, Nevada, (le Puits), paie une prime triple et reste jusqu'à ce qu'un autre joueur le délivre.

Qui va à la case 42, Nebraska, (le Labyrinthe), paie une prime simple et va à la case 30.

## LE NOBLE JEU DES ÉTATS-UNIS D'AMÉRIQUE

RENOUVELÉ  
— DU NOBLE JEU DE L'OIE —  
RENOUVELÉ DES GRECS

### RÈGLE DU JEU

La partie est gagnée par celui qui atteint le premier la case 63.

L'Etat d'Illinois remplace l'Oie, les joueurs ne peuvent s'y arrêter, ils doivent redoubler les points obtenus.

Lorsqu'un joueur est rencontré par un autre, il paie une prime simple et doit revenir à la case précédemment occupée par celui-ci.

Qui va à la case 52, Missouri, (la Prison), paie une prime triple et attend qu'un autre partenaire vienne prendre sa place.

Qui va à la case 58, Californie, (la Mort), paie une prime triple et retourne à la case 1 pour recommencer la partie au coup suivant.

