

THE SOCIALIZING VOYAGE OF THE VIDEO GAME PLAYER

GROWING-UP WITH PLAYING *THE SIMS*®

Pascaline Lorentz, Ph.D.



Masaryk University
Brno 2015

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The Socializing Voyage of the Video Game Player

Abstract

Video gaming proffers manifold possibilities in role taking and requires players to entertain dialogues with various interlocutors in online and offline contexts. Online games have been extensively studied. Yet, we wonder what happen through the offline interaction between the player and their avatars. This work shows that, while playing with *The Sims*®, players undertake a *socializing voyage* through several stops: simulation, anticipation, experimentation, embezzlement and interdependence. Throughout their experiences video gamers extend their awareness and their plasticity to increase their social flexibility. At the end of their voyage, players achieve a better understanding of their social world.

The socializing voyage is the micro level of the video-ludological socialization developed elsewhere.

Key words: Video gaming, *The Sims*®, Socialization, Role-taking, Self.

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PREFACE

At the time of writing the analysis of this research about the teenager audience of *The Sims*®, I had lived and worked in Australia thanks to a research fellowship which entirely changed the course of my life. Ten months after my return to France to finish and defend my PhD, I again packed my bags and jumped onto the first flight for my new beloved land: Australia. There, the wish to translate my doctoral work written in French was vivid. Yet, prerogatives of finding a postdoctoral contract overtook the ambitious translation project. This translation has, however, seen the day more than two years later because of the postdoctoral contract I obtained. Patience is the mother of all virtues. When I have been told that my postdoctoral grant included a book project, I gathered all my strength to embrace my buried translation project and bring it to light.

The initial doctoral dissertation was far too long to be translated in the time allocated for this ebook. I, consequently, choose to concentrate this book on the socializing voyage the player of *The Sims*® undertakes because the self-discovery journey is the key finding of my PhD. This ebook is, therefore, only an extract of the fourth chapter of the overall work. In 2013, a book chapter *Video-ludological Socialization* was published, which briefly touched on both the socializing voyage and the video-ludological socialization. In this ebook, the voyage is detailed at each of its stopovers: simulation, anticipation, experimentation, embezzlement and interdependencies. A book will be published in French in late 2015, which describes the position of the player of *The Sims*®, their socializing voyage and the video-ludological socialization in details.

The methodology of the doctoral research was composed of three steps. Firstly, I observed the practice in itself as very little research had been made

on what is done with *The Sims*®. Secondly, after many unsuccessful attempts to obtain figures from Maxis, I decided to gather my own data on teenagers playing *The Sims*®. Thus, I built a 75 question survey that I personally administrated to 180 children aged from 12 to 16 attending French school in Strasbourg, France, in Moscow, Russia and in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. After having analyzed the data with descriptive statistics, I went back to these schools for the third step of the study. There, I organized 20 focused interviews with children. The composition of the participants regarding the focus interviews was representative of the characteristic of the population surveyed with the questionnaire. An entire chapter is dedicated to the presentation of data and their analysis in the dissertation (chapter 3).

This ebook can be useful to anyone who is interested in the interaction that is established between a player and their avatars, or interested in make-believe games and in *The Sims*®. Not to mention that video gaming complement endeavors previously made with literature and movies where the hero would take the audience on their journey. This reading is made accessible to a large audience. Anyone can join the journey. Please come in!

INTRODUCTION: THE SOCIALIZING VOYAGE AND ITS TRAVEL STOPS

On August 12, 2002, my bags were packed, my airline ticket and passport too, I am leaving Strasbourg to fly off to Canada. This exchange year as a student marks the beginning of a series of personal, academic and professional experiences abroad. The Internet has been more advanced in Canada in 2002, contrary to what was happening in France. There, I find myself lonely, really lonely, without friends, family, and references; even the French language is different. Social isolation caused by the beginnings of an experience abroad is violent, painful, confusing. I, then, seek for a solution that suits me best between taking initiative and staying alone. With the help of my computer which has since become my memories trunk as it follows me wherever I go. I begin playing *The Sims*® - the version 1 was released in 2000- and I create all my friends and all my family members in the video game. While playing with these fictitious people time passes, the phone has still not rang, I have not received any email but after a few hours of play, I do not feel social isolation anymore and I am ready to face this new world in which I seem to be lost. I give it a try and go; Montreal awaits me.

What has happened during these few hours of gaming? Why do I feel less loneliness and remoteness? What is the nature of this relationship between players and their characters in an offline game? How does this work?

A few years later, time has come to choose a thesis topic for my PhD. Electing to study video gaming in 2007 is still a risky bet and my encounters push me towards the abandonment of such a theme. I ultimately decide to dedicate my doctoral research to *The Sims*®. Because choosing means to renounce, but to renounce does not mean to give up. To renounce in this case means to give priority to something else. When individuals go on a journey to explore

a country they are asked to give priority to certain places, to certain facets of this country that they would like to know. This does not mean that they diminish the other interests of this country they do not give attention.

Throughout this research, I have tried to give priority to the voice and ideas of teenagers interviewed. Their confessions, their remarks and their comments have paved my way. Each of you may have wanted to give shape to this journey, to desire it, to dream it, to experience it, to live it too. Yet, I invite you today to share the fruits of my scientific experience by presenting the work of this travelogue.

The initial question of this research focused on the nature of the relationship of the player with its avatars in the video game *The Sims*® that simulates life. The distinction was made at that time with all online video games. In an online game, the computer is a medium between two players, who aim to interact to achieve a task. Here, the player of *The Sims*® only interacts with the game as it is an offline setting.

The main objective of this work is to provide one or multiple answer(s) to the question about the nature and the meaning of the interaction established between the players and their avatars during play. This relationship is very particular because it is the act of communicating with a computer system and the video game. The player can adopt different and varied statuses during play. In all cases, players entertain a relationship with their avatars, even in an offline game. Indeed, the game does not exist without the action of the players who interact with their Sims.

Using the questionnaire and its results, and the focus interviews, I wanted to identify what teenagers are doing with their avatars and how they play this life simulation. In this work, my interpretations following the analysis of the results will be presented. I approached the interpretation stage dynamically and modeled the results by attempting to articulate them.

The most prominent result emanating from these analyses is the journey teenagers undertake during their game. I want to show here that this voyage participates in the socialization of the individual-player and so I detail all its stopovers. Socialization is a complex and long process that has been analyzed by various researchers in several different disciplines. In this work, socialization is an ongoing process during which the individual becomes more of a social being embedded in a given society. Individuals are therefore continually socializing as they may enter new societies throughout their life (e. g. new professional environment, new couple relationship, new country, etc.)

My analyses and interpretations are displayed in stages while maintaining the dynamic aspect of its reasoning. This socializing voyage is an ongoing process during which players travel through areas: simulation, anticipation, experimentation, embezzlement and interdependencies. Exploring each of these moments of the voyage helps to better understand the meaning of this journey to players.

The first stop is the *simulation* where neophyte players create their character according to what they already know as they reproduce this reality in the game. The players then try to use the framing of the game to dream big and place their avatars in a dream materialized by the video game. They use the game to give life to their dreams. This step is called the *anticipation*. Once this dreaming part of the game is exhausted, players move to the *experimentation* stage. The teenagers want to experiment what the game offers and they turn the video game into an experimental device that is a life laboratory. The various actions teenagers have tested in their play with *The Sims*® are studied at this step. Here, players are sometimes stopped by rules of the game. As the confrontation with the game system strengthens, players tend to seek for solutions and therefore explore all the possibilities of

the game. The frame of the game is being well-known at this stage therefore players begin the *embezzlement* time of their voyage. Indeed, after having identified its pros and cons, the players wish to circumvent the rules of the game to give free rein to their imagination and give life to their desires. Yet, players' decisions do have consequences. The socializing voyage consequently ends with the awareness of the *interdependence* of game elements. When players take action in the game, this act has consequences. Players become aware of this connection at this last stop of their voyage. This marks the completion of their trip. Being aware of the consequences of their life choices equals crossing the finish line.

Please fasten your seatbelts, secure all baggage underneath your seat or in the overhead bins, make sure that your seats and table trays are in the upright position for take-off. Please turn off all personal electronic devices, including laptops and cell phones. Smoking is prohibited for the duration of the flight. Thank you for choosing The Socializing Voyage of the Video Game Player. Enjoy your flight.

SIMULATION

For the French psychoanalyst Serge Tisseron, video games represent a “digital clay” and the difference with the games of yesteryear is not so large:

“The offline player only engages himself in high-tech version of the traditional childhood games.”¹

Just as the children once played with their toys, players learn to behave in society with video games. This is a continuation of the play activity of the first years of their life. In this regard, the American sociologist George Herbert Mead had coined that children successively adopt two distinct social roles when they play. Firstly, they act out the role of close family members, who are *significant others* (e.g. the mother, the father, the baby) to them. Secondly, they move to the role of the less close ones called *generalized others* (e.g. the teacher, the police officer, the doctor). The idea of a typology in several successive steps is here adopted. These abstract constructions are used to describe two game situations. These tools help to understand activities and behaviors of players when playing with *The Sims*®. During this activity, children—or teenagers in this case—perform different actions through imitation. First, the players create an avatar in which they recognize themselves; they want to play with a continuum of their Self. The avatar in this case allows players to create an extension of their corporeality to be able to manipulate the avatar according to their wishes. Indeed, at the beginning of this playful life simulation experience, players perform realistic actions with their avatars. The teenagers make them adopt behaviors and attitudes close or similar to their own. The manifestations of these behaviors in the game led to the copied physical appearance, selected traits for the avatar

1 Translated «*le joueur offline ne fait que s'engager dans une version high-tech des traditionnels jeux d'enfance*». TISSERON Serge (dir), *L'enfant au risque du virtuel*, Paris, Dunod, 2006

that are close to those of the player. In this stage, there are players who have told me they like creating a Sim, a character of the same gender than theirs, with similar color of skin, also living in families, with the same number of friends and one lover. In terms of the Sim professional life, the players choose one to which they aspire. The social life of the character is rather classic and this whole life simulation takes place in a realistic setting. Teen-players seek to recreate a known realistic situation. In this stage players are looking to be realistic in their creations. They say that they love the game:

*"Because it is realistic, one creates his life and his own person"²;
 "because this game is real, this is everyday life. We invent a character, a family, a life"³; "I love this game because it is our life we create we imagine"⁴.*

We read that these players want to reproduce their reality and somewhat embellish it. However, teenagers rely on many levels of understanding their reality may differs from family. The teenager-players tend to reproduce what they know as Magali told us:

"Magali: well I started not too long ago, about one month ago so I have built a house, I created roommates

(...)

Isabelle: well for me it's a couple ... I created a Dad who works a good job, making a lot of money while his wife is staying at home

Magali: housewife

Isabelle: Yeah and when I create people all by myself, I make them work only in the afternoons, not in the evening because I like them to entertain a social life. She has to go out and all

² F, 11 years old, Moscow

³ F, 13 years old, Abu Dhabi

⁴ H, 12 years old, France

PL: So there is a character who deals with social life and everything else and a character that makes money?

Isabelle: yeah that's right (laughing)

PL: and then again, how it goes in your families in real life is your mom works Isabelle?

Isabelle: yeah

PL: and your mom works (Magali)?

Magali: Yeah

PL: So it's a bit different?

Magali: Yeah

Isabelle: Yeah but for myself, both my parents work so they uh

PL: hum hum and both your parents work too?

Magali: yeah, both my parents work but I did it in relation to my parents because my mother, as an example, has a day off because she she...she

PL: Works on a partial basis? A 80%?

Magali: Yeah, that's right she works Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday. She doesn't work on Friday so I did something like that with my Sims

Isabelle: Well my father works hard and that's also why I made father work more and mom, because she works at a hotel has many responsibilities, but

PL: She staggered hours?

Isabelle: Yeah and she doesn't necessarily work all the time, for example she can come and pick me up when I ask because as it is

the director and she has a little bit more time to herself than her employees

Magali: Oh

PL: She adapts her schedule?

Isabelle: Yeah, in function of us

Magali: My mother has her hours

Isabelle: Yeah (silence)⁵

We can read from this passage that Magali and Isabelle have different practices. Their video gaming experiences are differentiated although they are the same age. They expressed the desire to repeat what they know while justifying their practices differently.

To articulate Mead and Weber sociologies appears to be relevant here. Max Weber directs his attention to the socialization of individuals, describing two types of socialization: Communal relationship (*Vergemeinschaftung*) and "Sociation"⁶ (*Vergesellschaftung*). Communal relationships are the fact of imitating the behavior of others and this form of socialization takes place within the family. Sociation results from the coercive effect of the actions of others on the individual who is forced to accept a behavior. This form occurs rather in public institutions or in professional institutions. Both types of behavior show two levels of integration, the micro and the macro social in which the individual's socialization evolves. The fact of not having specifically talked about childhood has been criticized in Weber's work and this is the reason I complete here with Mead analysis.

5 Excerpt from the interview number 6

6 Sociation is the French word used as I unfortunately have not found the English corresponding notion. The German term is added. According to me the translation cannot be socialization.

On the other hand, George Herbert Mead was particularly interested in the play of children and its participation to the process of socialization. The first stage of socialization with role-playing in George Herbert Mead work⁷ is the imitation of a *significant Other* (e. g. the mother, the father). For Mead, children, adopting a role they know well, socialize and integrate the different behaviors from the society in which they grow up respecting what they have been familiarized with. Thus, the young children learn to behave in society as they seek to define themselves by interpreting the roles of others. The second stage of socialization with role-playing is the imitation of generalized others which occurs in a later stage of the voyage.

The players of *The Sims*® entertain an interactive relationship with their characters by interpreting different roles and they, therefore, socialize through role-playing. Thus, it is possible to reuse Mead expression of 'significant Others', taken here in the sense that the other virtual is closer to the identity of the player that may be a more differentiated avatar, which is addressed in a second time. For the latter, the term 'generalized Others' is then adopted.

The micro-sociological vision of Mead is adapted to this study but lacks a macro-social consideration of this social activity. I therefore hope that by combining the two theoretical frames I could explain the role-playing activity of teenagers in today's society.

One question remains: Why teenagers prefer playing a game that simulates life rather than reproducing the desired actions directly in their lives? Why should they play to live while adolescents can simply live their lives?

The broad range of possibilities provided by the game appeals to teenagers who envision many play situations. Yet, the first asset of *The Sims*® is the

7 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962 [1934], 448 pages, p.150-165

possibility to reproduce a very similar Sim. Everything was thought by the game designers for players to deeply customize their play. As a result, playing *The Sims*[®] is a signified and significant activity for the teen player.

The first game was released in 2000. Throughout time, the developers of *The Sims*[®] have extended the possibilities of customization⁸. The third version of the game features options to further customize avatars by defining their character traits⁹. According to the descriptive character traits, they are classified by the developers into two categories, the “positive” and “negative”. This reductive vision altogether enables to distribute them.

Here is a table summarizing these traits:

Absent-Minded	Flirty	Loves the Outdoors
Ambitious	Friendly	Lucky
Angler	Frugal	Mean Spirited
Artistic	Genius	Mooch
Athletic	Good	Natural Cook
Bookworm	Good Sense of Humor	Neat
Brave	Great Kisser	Neurotic
Cannot Stand Art	Green thumb	Never rude
Charismatic	Grumpy	No Sense of humor
Childish	Handy	Over Emotional
Clumsy	Hates the Outdoors	Party Animal
Commitment Issues	Heavy Sleeper	Perfectionist
Computer Whiz	Hopeless Romantic	Schmooser
Couch potato	Hot Headed	Slob
Coward	Hydrophobic	Snob
Crazy	Impressionable	Technophobe

8 The fourth game, which was not released at the time of the research, embeds emotions to Sims.

9 In previous releases, the character was defined by the astrological sign of the player.

Daredevil	Inappropriate	Unflirty
Dislikes Children	Insane	Unlucky
Easily Impressed	Kleptomaniac	Vegetarian
Evil	Light sleeper	Vehicle Enthusiast
Excitable	Loner	Virtuoso
Family-Oriented	Loser	Workaholic

Table 1: Traits¹⁰ available in version 3

From the traits highlighted in bold in the table, two separate groups are made: the first is the effective character traits such as “athlete”, “workaholic”, “charismatic” and “blue ribbon” and the second is that of non-effective character traits such as “kleptomaniac”, “sycophants”, “clumsy” and “malicious.” A group of players creates a character that resembles them to test social behavior, but also to virtually learn to react in society. So it is as if teenagers “imitated”, according to Gabriel de Tarde¹¹, of social behavior, but virtually.

Along with this list, children admitted during the interviews to also choose the traits of their characters based on Sim’s life goals. In fact, there are here two levels involved in the selection of these traits: a first level with shaping the personality of the avatar and a second level with the projections that form the player about the future of their characters in the game. On many occasions, respondents confessed choosing “workaholic” as a trait for their Sim whenever they aimed a successful career. Implicitly, teens make the connection between career success and the voluntary nature of the character.

This imitation takes many forms and I circumscribed two types of imitation that I called: *Try-imitation* and *imitation-innovation*. The try-

¹⁰ The traits in bold are the most cited by teenagers interviewed.

¹¹ De TARDE Gabriel, Les lois de l’imitation, Genève, Slatkine, 1979 [1895], page 73

imitation characterizes teenagers' actions when utilizing their avatars to test their own social behavior in specific social settings. They transform the game into a testing ground or a laboratory. The imitation-innovation refers to activities and behaviors teens already know, but have not yet experienced in their life. This step will be detailed in the following sections about the *anticipation* and the *experimentation* phases.

Many times, players have confused the identity of their avatar and theirs saying "I" to refer to actions of their character. This confusion is much less in the case of experiments, which reflects a distancing with the character. Note that players start playing with a character who is a continuum of their Self, then, as we will see, while gradually gaining gaming experience, they stand out more and view their avatars as a "friend" they control. This translational movement is necessary for the transition to the second stage which is playing with many Sims at the same time. At this stage, players need to be able to insert their Sim into a wide Sim world where different Sims interact with one another.

EMBED THIS SELF IN SOCIAL SITUATIONS

From the time the players have created an avatar as a continuum of their Self, they try to make their Sims live their life in society available in the game. The teenagers insert their avatar in a preexisting world where these Sims live a more or less intense social life. These avatars are integrated into social settings.

For Gabriel de Tarde, the researcher has to focus their interest on the relationships between Selves of people, because it is their interplay that produces and shapes social life. This movement is inherent in de Tarde monadology and imitation is its channel. The socialization is completed, according to de Tarde,

when the individual has internalized a signifying model which helps to make sense of reality. People are able to create meaning as they keep a creative imagination as a second pole. This pole far exceeds the socially proposed model, thus individuals can become the source and origin of a transformation of society. This means individuals both assimilate the model and create meaning by applying it to their reality. About some amenities of the game, they tell us:

"PL: But you think it's right that adolescents are working?"

Elodie and Bernice: no

Julie: They should live their teen life with at curfew... that sucks because I dunno teens like that when they are 15-16 years old... I dunno they can go out late at night and while working there it's too early I think it's like in an adult life"¹²

Julie explains that she does not want her teenage Sim to have adult responsibilities and she rather has an avatar which lives a teenager's life according to her definition of adolescence.

By decaling their teenage situation onto their Sims, players reproduce what they already know of life. They also translate with their words a strong desire for social conformity based on terms such as 'normal'. Bear in mind that the normal, as well as the pathological, are socially constructed words¹³; it remains that the use of these terms is powerful. Players justify their actions by claiming to want some "normalcy" for their Sim.

On the other side, players have the objective to have fun and to laugh, that's why they prefer unusual avatar. They justify their choice by saying:

¹² Extract from interview number 3

¹³ MAUSS Marcel, « Les techniques du corps », Journal de Psychologie, volume 32, n°3-4, 15 mars-15 avril 1936, 23 pages

"Because it's funnier"¹⁴, "It makes me laugh"¹⁵, "because life is better when it's comic"¹⁶, "I do use my imagination a lot, it disconnects me from real life"¹⁷, "the unusual characters are good because we do not see this on a daily basis and it's funnier to play with."¹⁸

These players want to have fun with their characters, to test further social experiences, to live adventures. The purpose of their video gaming is primarily entertainment. This category of player is not after reproducing a known-situation, but rather seeks to trigger hilarity in their life when playing. They use video games as a tool to provoke an emotion. They seek to create a funny situation in the game to laugh and be amused.

A category straddles the two, bringing together players who tell us they perceive themselves as unusual people and therefore want their avatar to look like them. They said, for example:

"I love being the best and original"¹⁹, "in life I've always preferred the funniest people"²⁰, "I don't like to be in sync with fashion, I don't like being a sheep"²¹.

This presents a junction between different behaviors. On one side, the context of the game aims to simulate life and players utilize it to create an avatar «as in real life.” On the other side, the underlying objective is to have fun and enjoy doing in the game what precisely is not possible in real life. This is the **humoristic objective**. Then, there is the perception of the players, that is to say they perceive themselves as a classic or an unusual individual. Based on this definition of their Self and the goal of the play, players will accordingly

14 H, 12 years, France and H 13 years old, France

15 H, 14 years old, Moscow

16 F, 13 years old, Moscow

17 F, 15 years old, Moscow

18 F, 13 years old Moscow

19 H, 13 years old, Abu Dhabi

20 H, 12 years old, France

21 F, 12 years old, Moscow

create their Sim. At the crossroad of these motivations are players who see themselves as an unusual individual and have a **realistic objective**. These players are at the entanglement of these meaning-provider worlds.

During this "mise-en-scène" of the Self, the socializing process underway is also called self-socialization. This process supports the development of the individual through introspection channeled by reflection. Self-socialization allows players to reflect and question themselves about their own behavior. As demonstrated by the work of Jeffrey Arnett²², the media participate in the self-socialization of individuals. The players independently socialize simply by playing the game and by using an avatar which resemblances them in many ways. It is worth mentioning here that this video game is an offline game, which means the teenager-player interacts with an avatar that is not related to another avatar monitored by another player. Thus, it is when players understand the interdependence of game elements that they achieve their self-socialization.

Another process occurs while playing this game: Altercasting. Altercasting takes place when the person is projected into a role. For example, if parents tell their daughter that being a "good girl" is to do well in school, to be well-behaved and polite, to keep her clothes clean, the girl is projected in this role of being a "good little girl" because she knows the components cited by her parents.

For some analysts of *The Sims*®, its players are more likely to "altercast" than to self-socialize. I would argue that the players put themselves into a certain role because they stage themselves in the game and therefore I would say that players at *The Sims*® are also entangled in an altercasting process. Yet, these players proved that they create their action through the experimentation stage developed later on.

22 ARNETT Jeffrey Jensen, "Adolescents' Uses of Media for Self-Socialization", *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 24, Issue 5, pp.519-533, 1995.

According to the findings of the overall research (i. e. survey plus focus interviews), teenagers encounter both processes: Altercasting and self-socialization. It is when interpreting specific roles that teenagers are forced to choose the components of these roles, the role they have chosen for their Sim. Experiencing altercasting situations leads teenagers to redefine the borders of their socialization and thus to self-socialize.

One of my hypothesis points that players create an avatar similar to themselves, or rather similar to the image players have of themselves. This section showed that, indeed, teenage-players adopt this practice. They utilize their avatar to perform various imitations that can be distinguished between try-imitation and innovation-imitation. In the case studied, try-imitations are more common.

We discussed a first aspect of the socializing video gaming and we pursue the exploration. Yet, in what extend this **video-ludological socialization** would be unlike the classic ludological socialization observed by George Herbert Mead and others? What do the video-ludological socialization bring to the global socialization of players?

The Sims® is a game that offers many social settings to be simulated in which the players are integrated, embedded and within which they must manage their avatar or their Self-continuum. One of the major benefits of a video game in comparison with a traditional game of make-believe is the potentiality to push the dream far. Teenagers may well see the future, anticipate their future social reality and more important to dream this future at length. This last point feeds the desire to grow up, to become autonomous from their parents. This will be later developed.

We focus now on how the anticipation of the players' future reality is conveyed by the game through innovation-imitations. We will look at of the various fashions in which the players can project themselves.

ANTICIPATION

This life simulation video game harbors manifold stakes and possibilities. Players' creations can so far be organized in two categories: The try-imitation and the imitation-innovation.

One of the advantages of the video game is to provide a possible world which is larger and broader than the real world of players. This game offers a fertile ground for experimenting social situations. Among them are anticipated social situations. One of the hypotheses of the study was that players are more likely to create an ideal Sim, socially valued. Players can generate dreamed or fantasized characters and make them live a dreamed or imagined life. Thus, players at this stage adopt a behavior in the game whose characteristics are related to what Robert Merton called "anticipatory socialization"²³. The American sociologist showed in his work that soldiers who copied behaviors and activities of officers had more chances to get promoted. Individuals anticipate behaviors to be theirs in a near (and wished) future.

Thanks to the possibilities offered by the game, teenagers are making their avatar do all actions they would like to do themselves and for this, they are required to adopt behaviors corresponding to the expected social situation. For example, a shy and withdrawn teen boy wishing for a more outgoing life could manage a Sim having a career in politics who will, therefore, be obliged to maintain numerous social relations and perform well in public speaking (charisma²⁴). To improve charismatic skills, the avatar might practice speech in front of his mirror. Hoping to be more outgoing, the player decals his desires on his avatar and thus experiences a situation he hopes to be true, but failed to achieve in his life. Another example is a career

23 MERTON Robert King, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Mac Millan, 1968, 713 pages

24 <http://www.carls-sims-3-guide.com/careers/political-career-track.php>

in the music industry. Players at *The Sims*® may desire to be a rock star via their Sim. To achieve this goal, teenagers make their avatar work very hard on skills required for this career²⁵ (music, logic). When the Sim is a rock star because the avatar achieved expertise in many skills, players are satisfied and they know what to do to get what they want. The players are, indeed, aware of these links between the game and the flesh world and they told us:

*"Penelope: Before I didn't make the link between the real and the virtual well for me The Sims® was just a game, and not long ago when I started playing the third one and I dunno, but I was a bit older I became aware of things and I dunno... I began to tell myself that I should go to others rather than letting them coming to me."*²⁶

The player told us right before this excerpt, that arriving to a new school in the middle of the year was not easy and that she sometimes struggled. Other players have said in interviews that going to talk to other characters in the game is much easier than in the flesh world, but they are aware that sometimes they should try to go to talk to others as simply as it is in the game. In a way, players would like to meet the ease of social interactions as it occurs in the game in the flesh world.

Even though Merton concept of "anticipatory socialization" relates to behavior of a given social class and identified as desired, it remains that there is here the first fruits of this type of social behaviors. The intention behind these behaviors is, indeed, a relative improvement of the individual situation to seek for an accession to a higher social class. Before Merton, Veblen said in *Theory of Leisure Class*²⁷ that individuals who wish to access a higher social class tend to imitate behaviors and tastes of individuals from the expected class. In the game, players make their avatars to adopt player dreamed behaviors and activities.

25 <http://www.carls-sims-3-guide.com/careers/music-career-track.php>

26 Extract of interview number 3

27 VEBLEN Thorstein, *La théorie de la classe de loisir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, 250 pages

In addition to this dreamed activity, the avatar is inscribed into the normative frame of the game. Indeed, the Sim sojourns in a preexisting world. This world system in which the avatar is embedded is responsive. Players must take into account the ins and outs of the situation played. Yet, it has been shown earlier that players can simulate all kinds of situations and that they enjoy a wide leeway in their creative acts. The advantage of the video gaming world compared to the possible imaginary world in the flesh life is to have to react to what happen to the character. The great strength of video games in general and *The Sims*® in particular is to provide the conditions for the **possibility of improbabilities**.

A reflective look upon player practices is required by the game because players need to define what success in the game is to know which strategy to employ. The frame of the game impacts on the success of Sims in their endeavors. As a result, players must think their future actions in advance to optimize their chances to accomplish their goal. Hence, I addressed this point in interviews by asking teens to define what a “good” Sim is. After or before this question, I have also asked teenagers to tell me what a “successful life” is in the flesh world. I tried to draw a parallel between the two worlds—game world and flesh world—because the literature on *The Sims*® presents articles arguing that this video game reinforces the consumerist and capitalistic ideology by highlighting the importance of material comfort in people’s happiness. My goal was to understand if the players themselves consider this perspective as well.

Instead of describing personal, moral and mental qualities of a Sim, players talked about family and professional life. These are situations, not criteria. Players mention the material wealth of their characters too. They also discussed elements related to social status synonymous with social success rather than personal qualities inducing personal satisfaction. This reflexive approach brings the teenager to question and explore the meaning of success

when playing with a Sim. This exploration of a virtual reality to search for a meaning of success fuels the socialization process.

For Cornelius Castoriadis, socialization is being completed by the internalization of a significant model. Thus, the socialization does not cease with the end of the game as teenager-players are still in search of a meaning; they cannot identify what it means to “succeed” or to “be happy” but they have taken the path of a definition which begins by contesting the game definition of success. Players project themselves onto the game through the avatar and through the situation in which the avatar is embedded. There are two ways of projection: through the character and through the situation the character lives.

SOCIAL PROJECTION THROUGH THE CHARACTER

When teenagers play to simulate life, they operate at two levels: the one of their avatar and the one of the society in which their avatar lives. This first section focuses on the character and actions that players undertake to make their Sim living a dreamed life. Players said that they want to recreate a better themselves; they want more freedom and desirable activities.

A question was asked about the morphology of the character because my goal was to draw a comparison between the Sim physical look and the appearance players declared for them. The conclusion is that a very large majority of players 92.8% create a slender Sim while 77.8% of the players declared to be of a thin morphology. When analyzing the data, the players perceiving themselves as fat were much more likely to create a slender Sim than the players perceiving themselves as thin. This physical characteristic of the avatar responds to societal demands highlighting the slim body²⁸, which is synonymous with beauty and good health.

²⁸ See the work of David Le Breton on this topic

Parallel to this, I was surprised during the analysis to notice that the players living in France were more likely to create tanned characters. I expected the high percentage of players creating tanned Sim to be related to teenagers living in Abu Dhabi, where local people are more likely to have a darker skin than in Moscow and Strasbourg. The explanation came during the interviews as teenagers in France are stressed since they want their Sim to be “beautiful” meaning to have radiant complexion. Tanning is apprehended today as a sign of wealth as to go on vacation, even more outside of the summer season.

These examples of the physical appearance of the avatar chosen by players show that the creation of a virtual character goes **beyond the mere reproduction of oneself**. Whether the stake is about overall beauty, slimming and tanning in particular, players wish simulate life with extensions of themselves that are “**a pimped myself.**”

Pursuing the expansion of their desires and their longings, players have freed their avatars of their constraints. They explain getting rid of the parents of their teen avatars, oftentimes using murder to achieve this situation. They aspire to greater freedom and thus reflect this desire in the game by releasing their virtual teenagers from the yoke of their virtual parents. Besides the need for this act of freedom, to which I would return later, it appears important to stress the idea which generates this act. Teenager players want their own desires to get real through their characters; as their desires come to life in the game. This way, players **anticipate adulthood demanding more autonomy** and greater freedom of action for their teenage characters. Again, they project a reality in the game and do everything they can to materialize it with the game.

The third aspect of the projection through the character is with the Sim activities which are chosen by the player. In the game, the activities which avatars are practicing influence their lives as they learn skills and play, and it promotes learning. A refreshed and entertained Sim is much easier to

manipulate to go to work compared to a stressed and tired Sim. Just like in the flesh world, these cultural and leisure activities are part of social mobility strategies. Thus, I have sought to draw the comparison between practices of the player and those of their avatars. They differ somewhat, contrary to my expectations. There is a mirror effect, as previously seen, but this is complemented by an anticipatory effect. Merton concept of anticipatory socialization, this time used in terms of practices and not only motivations, choices of players can be explained. Teenagers choose leisure activities for their character that will help their Sims to climb the social ladder in the game. This also concerns personal traits such as charisma for a happy social life. For instance, playing a musical instrument is much more common in the game than in players' leisure and this is a socially valued leisure²⁹.

Painting is another example corroborating this because painting is extensively chosen by players for their characters, even though a tiny proportion of players have an artistic leisure out of school.

In this regard, Pierre Bourdieu work on leisure activities³⁰ is reused to better understand strategies of players for the success of their avatar life. Additionally, one open question in the survey asked players to suggest an action they want to see doable in the game that is yet not possibly reproduced. Horse riding, a socially valued leisure, was mentioned repeatedly.

This section has shown that the players can project themselves through their character. A second form of projection—through social situation—is also possible.

29 DONNAT Oliver (dir.), *Les pratiques culturelles des Français à l'ère numérique. Enquête 2008*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, La Découverte, 2009, 282 pages, p. 199

30 BOURDIEU Pierre, *La Distinction*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1979

SOCIAL PROJECTION THROUGH A SOCIAL SITUATION

When analyzing data, it was found that players love having their Sims living in a family or with flat mates. Despite the fact that the Sim is an extension of player's Self at this stage, teenagers enjoy envisioning their teen avatars as adults living in families. This social setting is seen as an ideal life. Yet, players later admitted that living like adults was not "that fun" after all.

Players confessed likewise the fact that they love using in the game items that are not accessible (or even refused) to them in the flesh world. To buy and drive a car appears to be highly enjoyed by teenagers, more often by boys. Similarly, players said they liked to own a pet such as a dog or a horse³¹. For other reasons, the trampoline is a much appreciated item among teenager players. Thus, teen players utilize the game to have access to situations out of their reach.

Players are very likely to hire a cleaning agent in the game. Be aware that this service was cheap in the first and the second version of the game, but this is no longer the case. This is truly a luxury in the third version because it costs 125 Simoleons per day which represents more than half of the daily wage of the early career jobs. However, no significant statistical relationship between the two variables was identified. Most of players of the sample played *The Sims*® 2 at that time. The use of a cleaning agent remains socially valued and reflects a desire to free time to be devoted to leisure and entertainment.

Players explained in addition that a successful Sim has a happy and healthy family with children who have good grades in school and grow up well. Through this speech, it is seen that teenagers attach importance to the success of the children of the game:

31 This is possible only with the add-on "*The Sims*® Pets".

"Julie: I have a trick when my kids get home from school after getting off the school bus...well, then...it is an automatism since I play well then I pause the game and I make them do their homework, that's the way it is"³²

It's a simple enough strategy allowing the player to have Sim children who achieve excellent academic results. This tends to idealize family life (and the homework matter!). When her teenage character works after school, she explains how she manages to handle both situations:

"Julie: When they also have ah...congratulations, I have had a wish when it was to be on the uh for 4 days

Berenice: The honor roll!

Julie: Yeah the honor roll...Yeah it's not hard because you only have to make them doing their homework but ah

PL: But they are happy

Julie: Yeah they are happy

Berenice: Very very happy! And their parents too! "³³

This excerpt translates the awareness of the importance of children's performance at school for the entire household. It is worth mentioning here that this option was not available in the flesh world for our participants as French schools do not honor their student performance. Therefore, I wanted to know if players differentiate the two spaces —flesh world and game world. Being successful was again important to be defined by players. They said:

³² Extract of interview number 3

³³ Extract of interview number 3

PL: So what is a successful Sim? A good Sim, what is it?

Daphne: A good Sim is ...

Edward: A good Sim is the one who knows life and who lives life as we live it

PL: Hmhm what do you mean?

Edward: The most beautiful copy of us, the one who resembles us the most ... who are like us

Karim: There is no perfect Sim

Daphne: Yes, there are!

Karim: No there aren't any...There is something in The Sims® that if you like you make the replica of you, or of your family

(...)

PL: What is a perfect Sim for you Daphne?

Daphne: A good Sim is the one who has all the skills, who has a family, who is very nice to people, they have many friends, and who is the head of a medical company, for example, or a doctor a great doctor who is a very famous, well-known in the world of Sims

PL: And in real life? Who's a successful person?

Edward: It's ...

Karim: A person who is happy

Daphne: A person who is very sociable, this is very good

Edward: It is someone who lives their life as if each day was the last day of their life

PL: Hmhm

Edward: Someone who loves life, who is like hippies it's like the world people who wants to protect the world

Daphne: But life in The Sims® is totally different

Karim: Not to think that every day something bad will happen

PL: Be positive

Edouard: Must be positive

Karim: Also we take on several risks in The Sims®, but in real life we're always a little scared like that

PL: And you like taking risks in the life of The Sims®?

Karim: (Embarrassed) Yes³⁴

In both interview extracts, the definitions that players give to success and to what a good Sim should be are presented. What is particularly interesting in this passage is the lack of equipment, furniture or material supplies. Adolescents do not respond, contrary to what some researchers assumed, "earn as much money as they can" or "buy the fanciest car" or "build the hugest house". Their interests are concentrated to social and personal life of the character. Even when Daphne mentions being a doctor, this is for stressing the dedication of this doctor the good Sim can be.

Success in the flesh world is synonymous with a positive mindset and attitude which results in taking advantage of life, in being happy and being sociable for our three players in Abu Dhabi.

It must be said here that Karim expressed with force that life in the two worlds are very different for him and we understand later that this is because the game allows him to take risks. This remark reflects the experimental aspect of the game for the player. Karim is more likely to try actions out in the game

³⁴ Extract for interview number 2

than in the flesh world. To support this comment, an extract of an interview conducted in France which touched on the family climate is added below. In an Alsatian school, teens told us:

"PL: So, for you, what is a good Sim?"

Magali: For me it's a married couple they both get along very well, they never fight and they both have a good job they go out and they are not jealous of each other"³⁵

This excerpt emphasizes the harmony between family members and the social climate of the family created. Again, the material aspect does not intervene here.

The criticism is often made today toward the static state of our societies suffering from a certain lack of opportunities³⁶ for social mobility. It seems that the current society allows less social mobility than those of parents and even more of grand-parents of teenager players. *The Sims*[®] fills this vacuum and provides a field for projection where players can develop strategies to access a higher social class.

The players can project themselves onto the game through their avatar and through a situation lived by their avatar. These projections allow players to anticipate situations they aspire to and situations they envision as their future. At this stop of the socializing voyage, players' actions in the game are motivated by anticipation. Whether this occurs through the ideal avatar the player created or through specific life situations that the players dream about, teenagers largely enjoy this time to fully embrace the gaming experience. When teenagers have enough of this dreamy stage, they move toward the next destination where more adventures are expecting them.

³⁵ Extract for interview number 6

³⁶ To illustrate this point, please check SENNI Aziz, *L'ascenseur social est en panne...j'ai pris l'escalier !*, Paris, L'Archipel, 2005, 206 pages

EXPERIMENTATION

After identifying two stages —simulation and anticipation— in the journey of the socializing voyage of players, our attention is now directed toward what is done during imitation-innovation play. Indeed, players try out new and different actions from those they already know and they experiment life in the safe environment of the game.

One hypothesis was that the players continue their journey by creating an unusual avatar in order to experiment situations and to also get entertained. This experimentation section shows that the game provides a field for social experiences to players, so that *The Sims*® can be an **experimental device**.

First, I will show that the players gradually detach themselves from their avatar. Teenagers step out from this virtual relationship. This movement is accompanied by an awareness of the game and its rules by players. This will be discussed in a second time.

THE SUBJECTIFICATION MOVEMENT OF THE PLAYER

One of the salient parts of monitoring an avatar is to stage others, to manage their behaviors and the storyline of their life. In this section, the words within the lexical field of theater and drama perfectly match to describe the relationship between the player and their characters. This is mainly because this game extensively reminds a staged setting where avatars are actors and the player embodies all existing jobs in the world of theater. Here, I stress that the player previously took their distance with their Sim —this other Self— and therefore can be the director of this ongoing virtual life happening on the screen. This process goes with the exploration of the otherness of

their avatar. Players will include more of these others throughout the play experience.

Players, teenagers here, continue to learn life in society and thus they gradually socialize by playing different roles. First, they seek to define their identity from their standpoint. Second, players readjust this definition of themselves by taking into account opinions of others in their definition. This is understood with the help of Charles Horton Cooley concept of the looking-glass self. Inspired by the philosophy of John Dewey, alike Mead, Cooley sought to understand human communication and its importance for the human society. Cooley explained that individuals communicate on two levels. First, there is an internal dialogue that people entertain with themselves. Second, this communication opens to the level of society when individuals interact with one another. Mead³⁷ deepened this idea by saying that “mind” can emerge only with the social process of communication and it should be understood in relation to it. Cooley added that from the time when individuals are able to communicate, they can establish a social order. He hopes to understand the relationship between communication and the organization of the society. For Cooley, the Self is not given but built through relationships and interactions between the individuals and their society. Besides, Blumer³⁸ reused this idea by saying that the self of the individual is defined by the inner conversation. For Cooley, introspection or “sympathetic introspection,” is not entirely personal but also public because of its consequences as communication bridges the individual and society. Indeed, Cooley defined intelligence as the **ability to solve problems** and introspection is one way to seek for solutions. Hence, Cooley

37 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962 [1934], 440 pages. We cannot reuse the idea of gestural communication in this case since the avatar actions are extremely limited and cannot be studied in depth, but it may be possible in the future with technical developments.

38 BLUMER Herbert, *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*, University of California Press, 1986, 208 pages

said that the “looking-glass self” is socially developed. Like Mead’s theories, Cooley begins his theory with observing the relationship between a child and their mother as a way of learning interaction. He explained that a child can only socially construct themselves within a frame, the frame of a specific community. He circumscribed three progressive stages in the construction of the Self: “sense of appropriation”, “social self” and “self-reflection”. The sense of appropriation spontaneously brings individual to activities related to their biological functions. The social self results from interpreting different social roles and learning from these while self-reflection is the stage of a passive internalization of values and norms. Cooley told us:

“the looking-glass self, seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgement, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind. »³⁹

This play with Self and our perception of Self encourages the development of the individual identity. The game *The Sims*® provides a world of situations where the ability to solve social and relationship problems is tested.

Cooley explained that individuals are not determined biologically or environmentally. He insisted on that individuals inherit “lines of teachability” that help them to solve encountered problems. The ability to solve problems is not, according to Cooley, innate but acquired within the family and through family experiences, but also because of the reflection carried out by individuals themselves.

39 COOLEY Charles Horton, *Human nature and the Social Order*, Transaction Publishers, 1992, [1902], 456 pages, p.184

This skill, called “plasticity” by Cooley, is relative to openness of people and determine the establishment of rules and therefore social institutions which ensure the control of the individuals’ environment. Why is this concept of plasticity of any importance to Cooley? Simply because it puts communication at the heart of a social and a societal life. Indeed, mutual understanding is a *sine qua none* condition of the existence of a society. This skill is, in fact, developed during play and that is dramatically more important in video games of simulation of life than in the same games in the flesh world. The interaction with the system, that Cooley would have called the societal life, is much more present and plays a leading role in the activity of the players and in their play experience.

Cooley analyzed the correlation between the sense of self by the individual, and societal forms. For example, the increasing individualization of societies is related to the place of the subject within families and institutions. In the case of the players, they move from a stage where they see themselves as the kernel of the activity where only their avatar —this continuum of their Self—matters to the stage where they realize that they are part of a whole which depends on their actions. The tree logic philosophy of Christopher Alexander, by whom the creator of this video game —Will Wright—was inspired, participates in the transfer of a single and primary Self to an interlaced Self. This is **that translational movement that I call the voyage.**

What is also of interest is the nature of this interaction between the player and their avatar. Could it be called communication? I previously explained that teenagers integrate norms of the game thanks to the consequences of their in-game actions. Here, I stress more strongly on the dialogue between players and the game system through avatars.

It mattered to me to present the use of Cooley’s work as his work is often ignored by researchers because of Mead’s critics. Mead reproached to Cooley to concentrate on mental and psychic process to explain the identity

development. Cooley, however, had given social explanations for concepts such as “mind” and “imagination”. Besides, he said:

“It appears that the human mind is social, that society is mental, and that, in short, society and the mind are aspects of the same whole”⁴⁰

Communication through interaction is at the heart of the articulation between the individual and the societal level in Cooley’s theory.

Moreover, Cooley insisted upon the role of conflicts as trigger of introspection and identity negotiation because conflicts require to be solved. He called these conflicts “hostile sympathy”. This peculiarity in Cooley’s theory is retained here because it draws attention to the second part of the definition of socialization saying that it is an ongoing process constantly evolving.

So what is the advantage, or at least the difference, with the simulation of life in the flesh world?

The main advantage of simulation of life with a video game is the utilization of what Cooley called “plasticity”. Cooley’s concepts help to bridge the different levels of analysis of the video gaming. He brought the importance of the internal dialogue of individuals in their relation to society into the table and I reused his contributions when analyzing video gaming with *The Sims*®. Cooley’ sociology bridges the micro and the macro levels with the concept of communication as a foundation of a society. I analyzed the dialogue between the players and their characters, between the players and the game and between the players and their entourage.

The completion of the subjectification movement of the player is achieved with the detachment of the players from their Sims. Indeed, teenagers step

40 COOLEY Charles Horton, *Human nature and the Social Order*, Transaction Publishers, 1992, [1902], 456 pages, p.81

out from this fusion relationship driven by the game to then embody other avatars and live other experiences.

Time has arrived for us to take a step back to analyze the statuses players can embody in the play area. We will focus on how the player adopts the statutes and interpret roles that are contextualized according to the society in which the player evolves.

Statuses with which teenagers who play are focused the family life and household because it is not yet possible to follow the Sim to their workplace or to school. As a result, adolescents may be the father or the mother, the son or the daughter, a child/parent/grandparent, single/couple/family, heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual, monogamous/polygamous, flirty/flirted. A range of roles match to each of this status.

Unlike the identity voyage, the stake here is to understand social role according to expected behaviors. Other members of the same household have expectations toward a certain social role. For instance, someone has to take care of children. Additionally, society also has expectations. For instance, a city needs a mayor to function. In the previous section, I explained the players grant specific character traits to their Sims and they observe how others perceive this character they have created. Here, the players dialog with the game and its normative frame. The frame of the game is pretty open and teens can perform a variety of social situations. Thus, the statuses of the real life are available in the game and the interpretation of social roles can be varied and rich. As the players can customize their avatar by choosing traits, they embody different characters according to their desires. To each social role corresponds a play reality to which the game system responds.

When teenagers interpret some social role, they attribute typical behaviors which are related to the statuses they have been familiar with in their society. For example, teenagers said that when a baby arrives in the Sim household, it is the mother who takes parental leave in the majority of cases and stay at home to look after the child while the father works. The female players are more likely to contest this situation and they send the mother to work while the father remains at home with the baby. They said:

"PL: What happens with babies? Is there someone who stays at home to look after them?"

Felicia: Bah the mother!

PL: Why?

Felicia: Bah I dunno...it is because it's always the mother eh

Patricia: Well, for me it's the father

PL: And it was your mother who stayed at home when you were born?

Felicia: Yeah because she quitted her job when she had three children because it is a... Well my father works and my mother stays at home

PL: And she doesn't work in Moscow either?

Felicia nods a no

PL: And you Patricia?

Patricia: Well, for me, my father works at home but he travels a lot and my mother works for a website, well, she started to work

PL: She works at home?

Patricia: Yeah that's right

PL: And why do you keep the father at home in The Sims®?

Patricia (laughs): I try stuff

PL: Yeah I wanna know why

Patricia: I don't know, I like it

PL: Well, it is the advantage of The Sims® we can send who we feel like, it's not like in real life, because in real life it's not easy to say "well listen darling, you're going to look after the baby "

They laugh

Felicia: And then you do what you want

PL: Yeah yeah it is doable but it's not that easy

Patricia: Yeah but that's precisely what is cool in The Sims® Yeah we can try lots of things, you can do anything you cannot do in the real life, well then it depends but we can do a lot of things in The Sims® and I think it's interesting."⁴¹

The respondents mention that they enjoy the possibilities of the game in this excerpt. Nothing forces the player to send the father rather than the mother to work when a baby has arrived in the household. However, the results of the quantitative survey showed that the majority of the players send the father to work and keep the mother at home to look after the baby.

Players tested behaviors in the game to know what could happen to their characters and sometimes it is in the interest of the game that players are pushed to act in a certain way. For instance, in *The Sims® 3* the babysitter will not stay in the household when parents are at home and someone has to take care of the baby. The player is forced to decide whom.

⁴¹ Extract from the interview number 4

The advantage of the game **is being forced to play other characters**⁴² to see their avatar evolve. Indeed, the player will need their avatars to have more and more friends to climb the social ladder of the game. Sims also need friend for starting a family. To befriend more people, the player can opt to play with other Sims who interacts with their main Sim. By manipulating these other avatars and making them interact with the principal Sim, teenagers increase the intensity of the social life of their character. The player controls and is responsible for an entire household. When they begin the game with a male avatar, who later gets a family, the player is in charge of all members of the household. Thus, this forced time playing other Sims implicitly require of the player to interpret other roles that they may have not chosen otherwise (e. g. such as playing a woman for a boy and vice versa, or playing an adult when being a teen and vice versa). This configuration of the game brings the player to understand varied social roles and social situations.

During these specific moments of play, the **avatar becomes a friend** with which the player plays. It is no longer a continuum of the Self, but a separate entity. This is essential for the humorous activities that the player realizes thereafter. Besides, the respondents translated this distancing with their words by saying that the Sim upsets them as the avatar does not want to do what they want. This is crucial. Emotions felt by players are suddenly differentiated from those of the avatar. If this separation would not happen, the game would become too frustrating with no fun and the gamer would give up.

"PL: But why Sebastien doesn't let his Sim eat before sleeping if he is hungry?"

(Everyone laughs)

Nicolas: Sadist! Sadist!

42 This strategy has been made more difficult with the latest versions of the game, but is still possible.

*Sebastian: I'm so upset with the Sim I tell him to go there and he does not want to, why not?*⁴³

The Sim does not do what Sebastian asked him to and the player retaliates by abusing him. So the teen player conflicts with his character. In this regard, this conflicted state is beneficial to the social development of the teenager. As mentioned earlier, Cooley thought that conflict helps development and definition of the Self. Moreover, defining enemies often precedes identifying friends in conflictual situations. Here we perceive the oscillation in the relationship between the players and their avatars. Opposition and resistance have to be overcome one way or another. This is a challenge for the player who doesn't want to remain in a place where they suffer. Making decisions and taking actions to get out of this place of negative emotions help the teenager to grow up.

The video game allows the emergence of this opposition and these conflicts without the price of their repercussions that the flesh world has. The game is like a training camp.

Parallel to this movement of subjectification that occurs when the players detach themselves from their avatar is the confrontation with the game system. Sometimes players are punished by the game system for their action or the game system doesn't allow them to do something. At these times teenagers realize the limitations of the openness of the game. This is what we are going to describe now.

AWARENESS OF THE GAME

The Sims® has a frame of rules that the player gradually encounters while playing. When the player is an experienced gamer this step is shortened. The player who begins playing video games with—as it was the case for most of

43 Extract from the interview number 5

respondent— has to accumulate a certain amount of hours played to reach this stage.

With this in mind, I hypothesized that older children would tend to play at more advanced stages of the game. However, results didn't show any statistical relation between the different variables that would have allowed me to validate this hypothesis. During the interviews, it emerged that this is not so much the age, but rather the **amount of time played** that is relevant. The more experienced gamers, who provide advice and cheat codes to others⁴⁴, play with multiple characters and are more creative and innovative than neophytes even if they belong to the same age group. Thus, players of *The Sims*® have a differentiated experience of the game according to their mileage.

The game is so rich in possibilities that players come to develop their creativity. The characters players create are parts of a whole: the story. A game indeed requires the creation of a story included in a plausible system⁴⁵. By becoming storytellers, players add meaning to actions of their avatars; they design a plot and make choices about the scenario played by their characters. Thus, with age, but mostly with **the accumulated videogame experience**, teenagers move to the next stage of the socialization process by role-taking, they are now playing with *Generalized Others* as Mead would say.

During this experimental stage, players are looking to diversify their avatars. They don't pay attention to their avatars' professional life anymore —their dreams have vanished—because they use cheating codes or they choose an easy job for their Sims. That's when the teenagers orchestrate a shaky social life for their avatars in surprising decors.

44 Let's recall here the conversation between Isabelle and Magali about cheat codes she would willingly give her

45 NATKIN Stéphane, *Jeux vidéo et médias du XXIème siècle. Quels modèles pour les nouveaux loisirs numériques ?*, Vuibert, Paris, 2004, page 7

George Herbert Mead speaks of Generalized Other to qualify the characters created by the child who invents a role and play it. Sometimes the child is inspired by characters from fiction (i.e. from TV or movies) or function (i.e. the villain, the monster, the spy) and sometimes children invented the role from scratch. Nonetheless, Mead emphasized upon the importance of rules and regulations in this phase of the game. Children have, indeed, realized that **they are part of a society which has rules** to be followed. Teenagers of our research are here aware of the frame that the game imposes upon their play. Yet, teenagers go further in their search of their identity by confronting the societal rules and they develop themselves with:

At this point, we observe teenagers try to violate rules, create atypical avatars, and laugh about it:

"It's funny, they are different from others"⁴⁶, "to have fun since I cannot do this on myself"⁴⁷, "because we do not often see oddball people in real life, so it's fun to see what an original Sim can do"⁴⁸.

The player here plays with the game itself. Players have, indeed, understood the rules of the game and what they should do for their Sims to be successful. Yet, they are more interested in having fun, in laughing at the situations their avatars have to live. This attitude is very close to the cynicism of the Goffmanian actor. Nonetheless, I want to use Mead framework to explain these findings even if the activity of the players at this stage is closer to contest rules than creation of social situations, it remains that players at this stage have to solve problems encountered on their way to have fun. As Cooley stated, solving problems is the definition of intelligence. Thus, it could be said that this stage asks players to react rather than to create. Still,

⁴⁶ H, 13 years old, Abu Dhabi

⁴⁷ H, 14 years old, Abu Dhabi

⁴⁸ F, 14 years old, Moscow

this oscillation in negotiating with the game contributes to the overall **video-ludological socialization**.

The virtual allows players to carry out experiments they absolutely could not do in real life. Players interviewed are well aware of the limits of their actions in life and say:

"Try things that you cannot do in the real life"⁴⁹, "we can do whatever we want like murdering the parents as to free teenagers"⁵⁰, "do stupid things without being scolded."⁵¹

They say they use the game as a test laboratory. As explained by Pierre Bruno, "the fun element in the simulation game is to acquire knowledge"⁵² and that is precisely this particularity of *The Sims*® that players enjoy so deeply. But what comes to teenagers mind first is to have fun and to laugh while playing.

For example, Sebastian wanted his character to be simply dressed with his underwear all the time:

"Sebastian: Sometimes when I go into the menu because when you create a Sim, you choose their outfits, pajamas, everyday clothes and what I did is that in normal outfit I put my Sim in underwear (Nicolas laughs) so the Sim is always in boxer shorts

PL: Hmhm in boxer shorts and you like that?

(Nicolas laughs)

Sebastian: Yeah it's so funny

PL: It's funny, because you cannot do it in real life and I guess in Moscow

49 H, 12 years old, France

50 F, 14 years old, Abu Dhabi

51 F, 13 years old, France

52 BRUNO Pierre, *Le jeu de simulation dans Le jouet : valeurs et paradoxes d'un petit objet secret*, BROUGERE Gilles (dir.), Paris, autrement, collection Mutations, 1992, page 69

(Nicolas is laughing out loud)

Sebastian: Ah bah if you do they arrest you

PL: You got yourself arrested? Not in real life

Sebastian: No and I set the pajamas to be a suit with a tie

PL: A suit?

(Nicolas still laughing)

Sebastian: It's so funny"⁵³

What matters to Sebastien is to have fun about the situation, and to make his friend Nicolas laughs. Sebastian makes use of the game to live one of his extravagances: To stay in underwear during the day. The importance that teenager-players give to vampire also illustrates this trend to experiment. The craving for entertainment motives these actions and adolescents repeatedly evoke the fun they have playing with these atypical characters.

"Julie: And it's not bad, because with other jobs they go to work and you can't see what they do the rest of the day. But with this we do the investigations and we get money, not much but I like doing that. But when they are vampires choices are reduces...because I I have my Sim she is a vampire and I make her going out at night but they don't like that uh and I have the news celebrities and now I have one she is at the top of her career it's not bad uh but as she is vampire the game is limited (...)

Bérénice: I do crazy stuff sometimes...I create vampires and I make them biting everyone, I start a whole town of vampires, but hey it's really hard

Julie: Oh yeah

53 Extract the interview number 5

Berenice: It is really complicated because there are a lot of Sims!

PL: Yeah it's long

Julie: Well this having many Sims I don't like that because at the beginning of the add on they said that eh I think after when you have too many vampires well it's not fun any longer because I do know that my usual Sims they don't like when there are many vampires they feel a bit like

PL: They are a little scared

Julie: and then after that there are only vampires there would be no one during the day and that's why also because vampire Sims are great at night but during the day (pause) first the coffin levitates while they sleep

Berenice: Oh yes! that!

Julie: Otherwise the day is not really (pause) I like it less during the day

PL: So you finally prefer to mix

*Julie: Yeah*⁵⁴

These girls confess enjoying playing with vampires, but they prefer to combine the advantages of different characters rather than having only vampires. They apply their critical thinking to explain how the players can use all the possibilities of the game to optimize their fun such as playing with vampires at night and human Sims during the day.

In acting out several roles, teenager-players explore parts of themselves unfolded and they therefore build on a deeper self-knowledge. This acquisition of "social knowledge" —themselves as social beings and

⁵⁴ Extract of interview number 3

themselves in social interactions— showed how players assimilate implicitly and explicitly the cognitive outcomes of their gaming.

Thus, the voyage starts to take shape. One stops after another players form their identity more fully and more deeply.

This is the **continual dialogue** between teen-players and their avatars which socially shape the player. Social interaction, for the tenants of the symbolic interactionism is the vector of identity construction of individuals. It is through interaction that human beings define themselves and integrate their function as members of a society. This socializing process is pursued after the end of the game, yet this has however led to the integration of social identity elements, additional elements to those obtained in other situations. Thus, the relationship between the players and their avatars exceeds the playful aim to embrace a sociological function and a cognitive dimension. The socialization goes through an adaptation of the “I” to the “We”. The players and their “I” take part in a social life full of other “Is” and must adjust in order to create a “We”. Taking the interactionist perspective, it is in the relationship between the player and their avatars and other avatars of the game that players develop the boundaries of their “I”. At this point, it is about studying the forms of the “I” in the “We” or even the “Wes”, aligned with what Georg Simmel meant when mentioning “forms of socialization”:

“Here are the elements of each being and each social fact, inseparable in reality: on one hand, an interest, a goal, or a motive; on the other hand, a form, a mode of the reciprocal action between individuals by which, or upon which this content enters the social reality.”⁵⁵

55 Translation of « *Voici les éléments de tout être et de tout fait social, inséparable dans la réalité: d'une part, un intérêt, un but, ou un motif, d'autre part une forme, un mode de baction réciproque entre les individus, par lequel, ou sous la forme duquel ce contenu accède à la réalité sociale.* » in SIMMEL Georg, *Sociologie. Étude sur les formes de la socialisation*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p.44

To quote Simmel, social reality consists of individual interests and of reciprocal actions between individuals. Players are individuals of a particular society: the one created in the game. The worlds of video games are modeled and shaped by rules. The players play in these worlds and they are motivated by their personal interest. They are regulated by strict rules of the game and even if the player has a substantial degree of freedom, their actions are framed, down to a world and a defined space. Thus, adolescents may temporarily find the world of childhood and be carried to evolve in a framed environment without noticing borders with frustration. They experience life in a reassuring framework. Later on, experienced players begin to sense the coercive and exerting pressure of the frame of the game. Players feel oppressed by this framework and the status they chose locks them into an identity that no longer suits them as it seems narrow from now on. Thereafter, they claim for a greater autonomy as a subject in this game and virtual space. This increasing autonomy of the players reinforces the **subjectification movement** mentioned earlier. Here, Cooley's theories are helpful to understand the **bridge to be made between the time of the individualization of the subject and those of their socialization**. In addition, the freedom players enjoy in the choice of their Sim identities asks teenagers to assume their choice when playing. Whenever teenagers play with an avatar they have created, they must adapt to the avatar's characteristics.

Despite the freedom of the gameplay, the teen-player encounters limits and I asked them to cite impossible actions they would love to see possible in the game. In analyzing their responses, three groups are identified: More freedom in movement of the avatar; more control over the avatar; and a higher quality of the interaction between the gamer and their avatars.

The first response group centers on the demand **for more freedom of movement of the Sim**. Teenagers would like their avatar to travel anywhere,

to drive, to travel by plane, by helicopter, by bicycle or on horseback, to go to space and on the moon, to visit other cities, to skydive. They also request a theme park where their Sims could go.

The second category rather addresses **the extent of the control over their characters**. Teenagers want to manage their avatars when they are at work and in school. Above all, a few of them would like to murder other characters or make them commit suicide or taking drugs. These requests are focusing on the **player's power over their avatar** through their relationship with their Sims.

The last category gathers skills and activities. Teenagers would like to **share activities of their characters**. They expressed the wish **to learn from their Sims** when their avatars play a musical instrument, when they paint, and when they cook. In addition, they want to create clothes for their characters as an activity in the game. They ask to see their Sims fabricating their clothes. Similarly, some players expressed their desire to hear their avatars speak a language they understand. Demands of this third category are focused on the **quality of the interaction** maintained between the players and their characters.

Experienced players seek for ways to make their wishes come true. Some of these requests can be addressed by modding the game. Indeed, modding and cheating grant opportunities to bypass these constraints. In the words of Michel De Certeau⁵⁶, players of *The Sims*® tend to poach the game to make it their own, to customize the experience. Instead of being simple consumer of the game, players of *The Sims*® are also producers of the experience. These behaviors mobilize all our attention in the next section.

⁵⁶ De CERTEAU Michel, *L'invention du quotidien*, Paris, Union générale d'édition, 1980, 2 tomes, Tome 1 : Les arts de faire, 347 pages et tome 2 : Habiter, cuisiner, 415 pages

EMBEZZLEMENT

As the previous section displayed, the player experiences all kinds of action with their Sim and seeks to replicate a wide range of activities. With the accumulated video gaming experience, there are more actions done. What happens when the creativity of the players is restricted? Confronted by the technical limits and rules of *The Sims*®, the teen player is facing a problem. How to make possible the desired impossibility?

Since the huge success of the first game of the series published in 2000, players have developed items and tools to improve possibilities of simulation in the game. Players have technical tools at their disposal, and they can share their creations from an early time. Tanja Sihvonen in her doctoral dissertation⁵⁷ about *The Sims*® and John Banks in his book⁵⁸ dedicated to co-creation in video games shed light on the pioneer game where developers did take players' opinion and suggestion into account. The *modding* or modification of the game is an option available to the player. It allows to create objects and also to artfully circumvent rules. The most advanced expression of the change is cheating with its codes. While the debate between what is a cheat and what is not one will not take place here⁵⁹, these options are available and players can make a choice. This decision partakes in the subjectification movement of players during their socializing voyage.

The stop of the socializing voyage is called embezzlement as players utilize several ways to divert the frame and avoid obstacles. First, modding or

57 SIHVONEN Tanja, *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims® and the culture of gaming*, Turku, Finland, 2009, 346 pages, pp. 66-73

58 BANKS, John, *Co-creating Video Games*. B (2013)

59 CONSALVO Mia, "Cheating can be good for you", in DAVIDSON Drew, *Beyond Fun. Serious Games and Media*, ETC Press, 2008, 206 pages, pp. 72-80

making modifications of the game is one option available to player who aims to create the modd or to use it when available on the Internet. Indeed, fan communities of *The Sims*® made tones of mods which are freely accessible to player far before Maxis ceased this opportunity to make profit on players' passion for the game. Second, cheating and the use of cheat codes are studied to better understanding its meaning for teenagers interviewed.

MODDING AT THE PLAYER RESCUE

Like any world *The Sims*® universe is bounded by borders and not everything is possible. Yet, this does not stop players who find way to bend the rules of the game. For example, children are not allowed to cook in the game; their parents do the cooking for them. As presented in this video⁶⁰, there is a code to expand the child's body so children can truly cook. The rules thought, designed and provided by game designers are, in fact, diverted.

A strong desire for customization was expressed since the very first version of *The Sims*® in 2000. Hundreds of websites dedicated to the game provide mods. Player can, therefore, download wall papers, clothes, cars, furniture. National accessories such as sauna, flags, food are also adopted by players to make their gaming experience even more personal. Thousands of elements are available for house building too. Sims themselves can be 'modded' as their skin can be modified to be full of acne spots, covered by make-up or even displaying scars. There are two very strong doctoral studies that were undertaken by Tanja Sihvonen⁶¹ and Hanna Wirman⁶² on modding and skinning in *The Sims*®, therefore this work will not go further on this topic. Here, we are interested in the possibility players enjoy to modify their gaming experience. The extents to

60 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC2lmQPezUg>

61 SIHVONEN Tanja, *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims® and the culture of gaming*, Turku, Finland, 2009, 346 pages

62 WIRMAN Hanna, *Playing The Sims® 2. Constructing and negotiating woman video game player identities through the practice of skinning*, Bristol, Doctoral dissertation, University of West England, 2011, 313 pages

which players can explore the game are hardly envisioned from its jacket; it is necessary to ask players what they do in the game.

Sometimes the diversion goes a long way and it raises ethical problems. Indeed, torture can happen in the game initiated by the players who confess:

"PL: And it has never happened to you to be angry with a friend and you go home, you play The Sims® and you create a Sim like your friend and make their life miserable in the game?"

Isabelle: Yeah!

Magali: Not me

PL: And what did you do Isabelle?

Isabelle: I don't know, but I did so many things

PL: Did you do it to a girl or a boy, maybe it was a boy?

Isabelle: I don't know, it was a long time ago when I was already annoyed with a girlfriend I created the Sim at her image and I then caricatured her

PL: Like her being fatter

Isabelle: Yeah, she is a little bit fat, I created her to be really fat; if she has protruding ears, I created her with cauliflower ears

Magali: Elephant ears

Isabelle: I already unwind a lot on her look, after that it depends on my mood but I still have a character like that in my session when I'm upset or when I argue with my sister

PL: Hmhm ... so what do you do to The Sims®? Did you torture them? There is a student in Abu Dhabi who told me she had prevented her from showering

Isabelle: I prevent her from eating!

PL: And have they ever died of hunger?

Isabelle: (Laughs) yeah and they don't go to the bathroom ...

PL: ... And they pee on themselves

Isabelle: Exactly!

PL: And after they can clean themselves up?

Isabelle: No, they do not shower

PL: And why you prevented them from going to the bathroom?

Isabelle: Dunno!

PL: Because Magali is thinking "yeah but I've never done that myself"

Magali: Yeah (smiling)

Isabelle: But I did! But you'll see when you're really angry with someone

Magali: but for me if I get angry with someone I will not seek revenge on my Sims"⁶³

Isabelle accentuates her experience of torture by adding comments because she is trying to prevail over her girlfriend Magali, who less experienced is dumbfounded by her friend's comments. Later in the interview, Isabelle confides having tortured one of her teachers:

"PL: There is less pressure

Magali: That's it!

Isabelle: In mathematics we will have a job interview about the data

63 Extract from the interview number 6

we are aware of we perfectly know that it's not going to happen

Magali: No but it's true that it's just the teacher, for example, I don't know if you know who is Mr. X and we have him...well

Isabelle: Ooh la

Magali: We do an exercise we do it but we get it wrong he gives us a mark of zero over twenty in homeworks although we did it so when that happened, we obviously don't like the subject if he graded us with zeros even though we did the job. After this, I'm not so sure we are going to carry on with our exercises

Isabelle: Ah, in fact I did with Mr. X in The Sims® and I ensure he had tons of problems

PL: Ah okay and what you did to this character?

Isabelle: I have increase his ear size one bigger than the other and he is red

PL: Tell us what you did to Mr. X as a Sim

Isabelle: They should not tell that when you write your paper because otherwise they will kill me⁶⁴

PL: Oh no, anyway who cares about this person it could be anyone

Isabelle: Bah bah with Mr. X, I was out of control! I made him burn himself well I made him drown

PL: So you've recreated him several times?

Isabelle: Yeah⁶⁵

64 At the time of printing Isabelle and Magali are attending another school

65 Extract from the interview number 6

The game is used here as a stress relief. In this extract, the two players are well aware of the difference between the world of the game and the flesh world. Keep in mind the potential escalation of this type of revelation, yet Isabelle's comments were corroborated by others.

As teenagers felt the need to recreate their desires in the game, they have tried to have their teen avatars living without their parents. This is not allowed by the game. Teenagers explained their approach: kill the parents. Beyond strength of the psychoanalytic meaning of such a statement and such an act, the goal was simply to release their teen avatar from parents. Somehow, the world of *The Sims*[®] could work as a 'subuniverse' to use Berger and Luckmann⁶⁶ vocabulary which is ruled by certain norms and standards. Both authors connect the subuniverse to the secondary socialization—the professional world. I suggest, then, to apply this concept to the video-ludological socialization.

Teenagers admit that while playing they realize that adult life is difficult, that this is not enjoyable when Sims fight, that babies and children require much (sometimes too much) attention.

The degree of violence in players' reaction to what is happening in the game translates the intensity of the confrontation between teenagers and the game system. This is observed when a player declares to grill babies on the barbeque, this statement following a lamentation about consequences of the sexual life of his Sims. He told me that when his characters do "WooHoo"⁶⁷, babies join the household as a result, but they are far too time consuming. At the end of the interview, the player admitted that this idea came from his elder brother⁶⁸, who was using the game primarily for such experiments.

66 BERGER Peter, LUCKMANN Thomas, *La construction sociale de la réalité*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2^{ème} édition, 2005 [1966], 284 pages

67 Term used to describe sexual intercourse in the game

68 We have not conducted an interview with the older brother so this is only based on the statements of the respondent.

The second confrontation occurs when teen players want to give birth to their dream of independence from the parental yoke. On many occasions this limit of the game was mentioned by players. In fact, when a player creates a family with one or more teenagers, this household is not allowed to be complete without an adult within. Teenagers confessed that they add an adult (or parents) and they execute this unwanted avatar when playing. The teen-Sims are affected by their loss, but only temporarily. Thereafter, and this must be an oversight of game designers, the household of teens can live their life without any palliative surveillance. No guardianship had been programmed although harsh penalty is applied to careless parents⁶⁹.

To circumvent the rules of the game, the simplest method remains cheat codes. The information available on the Internet greatly helps players to get all kinds of cheat codes for *The Sims*®. We raised this topic during the interviews as well.

CHEATING AND ITS "MOMENTS"

The subject of cheating comes up early in the interviews and teen players love to exchange conniving glances when the topic is mentioned.

"PL: And what about the characters? What do you select as characters?"

Julie: Well, it depends on long-term wishes but if I want my girl to have several boyfriends, I will not take a family with lots of children but sometimes I actually rather create families with The Sims® 2 because there is a code which works well, and then there is another code for when I cannot handle the game

Berenice: Motherlode

69 It is to be reminded that social services take the child away from this particular household and that there is no possibility to get it back, ever.

Julie: No motherlode is when you can have lots of money but there's another one that when I don't manage well and then everyone is happy

PL: Ah to set the bar in the green right?

Julie: Yeah right

PL: It's cheating! (Laughs)

Julie: Yeah a little⁷⁰

This excerpt shows the distance Julie puts with her friend because she is the one who knows that there are other cheat codes best than the most famous one. Sometimes teen players have more difficulty confessing their activity and they slowly progress like Isabelle before revealing their knowledge:

"PL: And how you do with the money to build the house at that time?"

Isabelle: But I actually well I don't know if it is legal, but I have codes I don't really have...

PL: Magali, you also got the codes?

Magali: No I don't there is a certain amount of money at the beginning and they put well I think they put well I don't know anymore...

Isabelle: It's a standard model I believe

Magali: Yeah and then you click on it and we see what we want and then it takes away some money until we had no more left

PL: So you don't use the codes?

70 Extract of interview number 3

Magali: No

Isabelle: I, I prefer using them

PL: The fact that Isabelle uses codes (Isabelle whispers, "I can give it to you if you want" to Magali aside) what do you think?

Magali: But no well it's not well she can huh everyone does it so

PL: So that's what's funny, because I heard "yes I use the codes only to build the house because I don't have enough money and I like to build a big house with lots of furniture and after I don't use the codes no more »

Isabelle: No no

PL: Isabelle how you do it?

Isabelle: I use them all the time well it is especially good for the money at the beginning of the game for the house too, but then after it can be useful but hey I will not say as I type codes all the time no

PL: You use it for the money, there is also the one to make friends

Isabelle: Yeah social life

PL: For lovers ...

Isabelle: Uh no and friends no it's more for money

PL: For the money where do you find your codes?

Isabelle: Well us well it's from friends they gave them to us well in short my friends gave them to me

PL: And your girlfriends where did they find these codes? on the Internet?

Isabelle: Well I don't know

Magali: Yeah there are websites on which you type Sims codes with the name and you put why and well my brother did it with World of Warcraft I think and well you type the name of the game and then you easily find codes on the Internet”⁷¹

Isabelle is worried about the legal issue of what she does in the game, and then she explains her use of cheat codes. Then, Magali, her girlfriend, defends her friend by pointing that others do it too. The excerpt ends with Magali attempt to brag about her knowledge in cheat codes thanks her brother experience. The ease of access to cheat codes stands as an excuse for the practice. These players somehow imply that the use of codes is part of the game since “everybody does it” and that “you easily find codes on the Internet”.

Sometimes player hierarchies cheating actions and Sebastian gave his side of the story:

“PL: And why do you do this to steal things from others? It’s not very fair, right?”

Sebastian: But I I don’t steal, I use cheat codes instead

(PL laughs)

Sebastian: I use the code for money and for the baby actually there are the two parents who go to work and the baby can’t in fact stay on his own, so it asks me if I want to call a baby sitter, and if I don’t want to well the mother has to stay home, but I hire a babysitter and she comes and sometimes she steals things the babysitter”⁷²

When I rose the fact that cheating is not fair for the game, players unanimously declared that cheating “it’s not fair”. Then, they justified their actions by

⁷¹ Extract from the interview number 6

⁷² Extract from the interview number 5

its ephemerality. Cheating is “okay” to build the house because 20,000 Simoleons is not enough money to properly equip their avatar’s house. On several occasions, they explained that using the code for money helps to decently settle their Sim and then they added, with relief and satisfaction, that the game could begin.

“Bérénice: I prefer to create Sims and thereafter I’m in great careers but uh when I do families I like to create the house for instance for big families I put a basement, I do everything (insisting) perfect (smile)

PL: And then how do you do? you also take the cheat code for money because we are limited in the beginning?

Berenice: Yes, I also take the cheat code (laughing)

PL : Elodie you also used the cheat code?

...

PL: You use it all the time or? Or sometimes as you told me at the beginning of the building process and then after, if it becomes boring

Bérénice: I used it at the beginning because otherwise we have a problem after with money and then I’m limited and if we accomplish a great career, we can get a lot of money”⁷³

Berenice explains her desire to get her character a decent start to be able to concentrate on building a great career that will bring her a lot of money. Then, I investigated to know whether this tendency to use the cheat codes was an attitude of the most passionate players. It appeared that it is rather the experienced players, or the ones initiated by experienced players, who use the cheat codes more frequently and more consistently. This is not a typical behavior of fans of the game but a skill supporting players’

73 Extract of interview number 3

expertise of the game. How teenagers justify this behavior shows their thinking and reflections on the reasons why they divert the rules of the game. This confrontation stop brings a great deal to teenagers who learn to negotiate, more or less, with the game system. Although the fact of cheating is by definition a transgression and should rhyme with the end of the game⁷⁴, players explain that this act is temporary and done only for the money, so they can continue the game and they don't believe that they have fundamentally disturbed it.

By diverting this financial difficulty of the beginning of the game explaining that their interest is not consequently disturbed, teenagers indirectly prove that making their Sims living a life is at the kernel of their preoccupations. Hence, achieving a materialistically comfortable life with their Sims is sent to the background of their experience. This cheating behavior is crucial to grasp the essence of their play: the social life of their Sims. This follows up what has been said in the previous section.

Some players have even elaborated complex strategies to enrich their characters without cheating as Nicolas, who proposes the following solution:

"PL: All right, have you ever had Sims who fight?"

Sebastian: Yes!

Nicolas: Yes

Sylvain: Yes!

Nicolas: Well actually Sébastien if you want to have lots of money you simply get to kill a few Sims and after you take their money

PL: Ah!

74 CAILLOIS Roger, *Les Jeux et les hommes : le masque et le vertige*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio, 1967 [1958], 374 pages, chapitre 4, pp. 101-123

Sebastian: A legacy?

Nicolas: Yes!

Sebastian: Well no, you can't do that!

PL: Why?

Sebastian: Because actually I had a boy and a girl and the boy in fact died he was too old so this way the soul departs and the girl was sad for the next two days⁷⁵

Even though Nicolas' solution did not appeal to Sebastian, it is one of the strategies available to players. Yet, Sebastian does not want to see his character sad due to the death of his companion simply to get richer.

For example, players who declared during interviews that they cheat when playing systematically justify their act by claiming the ephemerality and temporality of it. It seemed unbearable to them to not comfortably settle their Sim in a decent house. The cheating behavior will be later discussed in this section. Players explain that money is a strong constraint and that cheating —by receiving unearned 50,000 Simoleons at once— is the most commonly mentioned cheat code. Yet, there are multiple other cheat codes on the Internet but players continually mentioned this one. While one of the objectives of the game is to earn money and to adapt the actions of the Sim as to make the more money possible, the starting amount set by the game designers does not allow a proper and decent installation according to our players. This is the first clash between the players and the limits of the game, between teenager desires and opportunities displayed. Players argue that the amount of money⁷⁶ available at the beginning of the game should be higher and they increase it themselves when they have the code. By doing

⁷⁵ Extract from the interview number 5

⁷⁶ Remember the initial budget of a family is 20 000 Simoleons before the purchase of the house and furniture whatever the number of people in the household.

so, teen players call the gameplay into question and they redefine the rules of the game. They focus on social relationships between the characters and they reject the goal of financial capital accumulation. Besides, Elodie draws our attention to differences between versions of the game:

*"Elodie: But I have replayed with The Sims® 2 not too long ago and I found that there is a lot of interactions in The Sims® 2 that are not in The Sims® 3 and my brother and I we drew a comparison and at the end there are more interactions in The Sims® 2 than in The Sims® 3, but The Sims® 3 is a more open world, which is also cool!"*⁷⁷

She emphasizes upon the greatest possibilities in terms of social interactions and social relationships in the second version, while recognizing the contributions of the third version. Surprisingly, teen players attach more importance to social relationships in the game than wealth. The scholarship on this video game studied for this research strongly advocated that *The Sims*® is a consumerist game which would drag its player—even more in the case of children—into consumerism. With this study and its findings it is eventually known that things are much more complex than they had appeared at first. Once again, I would like to insist on the importance to be given to players' voices when studying practices. There is a noticeable difference between what can be done in a game and what is done in reality.

To the question asked in the survey about what happens in the game—"What do you do when you get a bonus?"⁷⁸—the main responses were "I buy furniture", "I save it", "I improve the house", "I buy clothes". Very few players have responded that they spent money on social situations such as organizing parties, going on holidays, giving gifts. This may reflect a possible link between money and material comfort in teenagers' mindset as money would only be seen to make their Sim's life more comfortable, not nicer or richer. Bear in mind that the goal of the

⁷⁷ Extract from interview number 3

⁷⁸ Question number 39

game is for the avatar to be happy, not necessarily materially rich but happy. If the character is depressed and refuses to obey the player's commands, the game is stuck. This distinction between a comfortable life and an agreeable life appears, in fact, to be the focus point of the game. This stop of the socializing voyage is a cornerstone as players get autonomy in their experience. First, they develop their skills to do more and create further activities. Second, they bestow meaning upon their acts. The differentiation in the purpose of the game that we have just seen is crucial to understand how players at the embezzlement step irrevocably become the commander-in-chief in their game experience.

Cornelius Castoriadis highlighted that the completion of socialization requires an empowerment of individuals with psychoanalysis. The stop of experimentation stands, in my opinion, for what Castoriadis meant by this. Far from being the "passive dopes" to quote the critic term by Harold Garfinkel, players proved their ability to divert the frame of the game. In doing so, these players exercise their free will to adapt the game to their desires, their play goals. The teenagers question their play through their confrontation with the limits of the game. This reflective approach, to which teenagers are brought by the game, attests of their lucidity about their actions. Although differences in practices are identified among players —especially between boys and girls— teenagers evolve and mature throughout their play. From simple imitation, they go through different stages to reach the embezzlement. The findings presented in this section support the self-discovery voyage that players of *The Sims*® undertake. These poaching attitudes—to quote Michel De Certeau—are part of a whole, which is the overall gaming experience. I, indeed, explained before that the amount of experience prevail over the age of the player. When teen-players arrive at the stop of embezzlement they complete the subjectification movement which partakes to the awareness of the globality of their gaming experience. This empowerment is perfected with the consciousness of the interdependencies between the elements of the game and those of the flesh world.

INTERDEPENDENCIES

The socializing voyage allows players to identify themselves and to position themselves in relation to others, those Others. The paramount tree rationale of the gameplay actively impacts the phenomenon of interdependencies between the actions of the players, the game system and players' life in the synthetic world. The awareness of the game system by players is the foundation of the phenomenon of interdependencies. Video gaming activity of teenagers is shaped by the logic of the gameplay and by players' reactions to what is happening to them in the game.

In this section, we review elements which influence the nature of the experience lived by players. First, the regulations exerted on the players and their practice—the intra-regulation and the extra-regulation of play—are studied. Then, the completion of the civilizing process of players is discussed. These two steps allow the synthesis of the outcomes of the socializing voyage for adolescents.

AWARENESS OF PLAYER REGULATIONS AND PRACTICE

Two types of regulation monitor the player experience in *The Sims*®. The first is what I call “intra-regulation”, meaning the actual regulation in the game and its space. Next, what I called the “extra-regulation” that is the monitoring of video gaming in the overall society is presented in details. Again, a change of perspective is required to analyze the playing activity with many angles.

The Sims® world is heavily regulated. While the game is a sandbox where players enjoy great freedom, they paradoxically encounter many limitations in their experiences to which they have to respond. The rules of the game are clear and explicit first which reassure lay players of video games. Children

appreciate evolving in the framed environment where they know what is right and what is wrong. As indicated by child and virtual specialist⁷⁹, children need a strict and standardized environment early in their life to easily achieve identification of others' expectations. The transition to adolescence engenders a reconsideration of children status in the family. More attention is given to adolescents' opinions and teenagers are sometimes associated to the making of decisions in the family. This shift in parental authority, and therefore in the status of teenagers within the family, can generate stress and may cause anxiety for adolescents.

Within the game, the situation is clearer and the stake of decisions made by the teenager lessens. Two types of penalties can occur in the game that I called: **interactional** and **systemic** sanctions.

Social relationships are sanctioned throughout their duration in the game. For friendship, for flirt relationships, for intra-family relationships or even for professional relations, the game system provides frequent feedback to the player if the behavior performed by their avatar is considered inappropriate. For example, when a Sim talks to another and decides to kiss him/her although they have just met, the other Sim will probably reject the kisser, maybe even violently. Afterwards, the rejected Sim has to dedicate a lot of time to repair his/her mistake by talking at length with their interlocutor to regain their trust. If adultery is performed—and noticed—in a Sim couple, the most common reaction is a slap, some fights and a break up. These events affect the household atmosphere because the cuckolded refuses to sleep in the same bed or express a desire to slap the other Sim every time this one enters the room. Sims can also be mean or insulting. This fact is not trivial because an unpleasant and tense atmosphere, characterized by an "environment" gauge in the red, hovers in the house and its inhabitants are all affected. The overlap model event is again observed in this case.

79 TISSERON Serge (dir), *L'enfant au risque du virtuel*, Paris, Dunod, 2006

Then, the question is whether or not teen-players do the amalgamation between events in the game and their life in the flesh world. The focused interviews provided some answers to this question that the survey did not.

The majority of the sample had a few fights (48.3%) and a handful of players repeatedly (10%). However, there is more than a third not having tried this experience (36.1%). As said before the level of violence between avatars in the game is gradual, from insult to the fight (murder is not available). In addition, the players have the right of life and death over their character and they can kill them in different ways.

As the game's main objective of *The Sims*® is to keep the avatars alive and make them happy, the most serious sanction is the death of a Sim. It can be due to the game or to the player.

Players get rid of annoying or irritating Sims as mentioned earlier. In this case, the death of the Sim is not a **systemic sanction**, but an **interactional sanction**, which occurs during the dialogue established between the players and their avatar. This penalty partakes the subjectification movement of the player.

To understand why some players had had several Sims dead, I asked them an open question in the survey for them to reveal their reasons. The most frequent responses can be grouped under three categories. The first is that these killings make teen-players laugh so they test the limits of the game to see to which point they can actually go. They shared that "it's fun", "it's funny." This group gathers 37% of answers.

The second is the opposite emotional situation that takes place when players are annoyed, "it annoys me" or "I was sick of it" with their characters and the pressures that the game system applies to them. Murdering the Sim comes as a **deliverance of the player**. This group is composed of 23.5% of the responses.

The last situation is that players wanted to free their teen-characters from their parents and players get them killed. This represents 12.3% of the responses.

The first death happens most of times through a **systemic sanction** because the game system gets the avatar killed. Due to old age of the avatar or illness, the Sim dies and the player must play with a new one. When *The Sims*® are ill-treated, their death is also a systemic sanction. For example, if the Sim does not sleep enough or does not eat enough, they die. If the player forgets to put a fire alarm in the house and a fire starts burning the Sim, it is also a systemic sanction.

Another example of systemic sanction is the removal of an abused child from the home by social services. Even though, the player did not perform interactions expected with the baby, the game system is responsible for the penalty. Teenagers were particularly chocked by this response of the game system. They said:

PL: And do you have had the social worker to come home?

Felicia: Oh yes!

Patricia: Yes! She came to take the baby!

PL: How did it go? How did you live this?

Patricia: It was a horrible experience! I didn't understand why they had taken this child, who had done nothing

PL: It's precisely because you had done nothing to him! (Laughs)

Patricia: Yeah well I didn't pay enough attention to him because I had forgotten. I don't know what happened but the next day, the baby was in the room

PL: This time he was in the room!

Patricia: And I actually had forgotten it and I forgot it for a long long long time

PL: So the baby was crying and crying

Patricia: Yeah and I didn't hear it because I had no sound

Felicia laughs

PL: And you? How did it happen?

Felicia: For me, it was only once but just like that still it was a toddler not a baby and I did not take care of him and they came to take him away

PL: And did you do it again afterwards or not?

Felicia: The baby?

PL: No! Not taking good care of him?

Patricia: No, but I thought we could in fact get him back

Felicia: Well, like in reality when they can have it back

Patricia: This is why I felt really bad

PL: So Felicia has a good question here. How does it happen in reality when the social services come to take the children?

Patricia: Ah this is real!

Felicia: Yes, it is!

PL: Of course!

Patricia: Some people come for your child?

Felicia: Well, if you don't take care of him.¹⁸⁰

The systemic sanction caused a shock among the players which had been reinforced by the fact that it is not possible to get the baby back. Patricia's surprise about the existence of social services alike in the flesh world translated that the parallelism between the two worlds is not necessarily made. For these players, the game is one system with its specific rules. Players see their play as framed by the game and existing within the game.

From the time when players refuse the intra-regulation, they seek to adapt their play to the game system. They use cheat codes and mods to get around the difficulties they face, as we have seen in the previous section.

The use of cheat codes generates a **temporary stretching of the rules of the game**. In doing so, teens-players redefine, in fact, the game; they adapt the system to their desires.

Sometimes players develop bypass strategies, for example, Sylvain:

"Sylvain: Once I sent the parents to work and the baby was left alone, there are people who came and took the baby away and they left something like a straff.

PL: What is a straff?

Nicolas: A fine in Russian

Sylvain: To pay, they've left a huge fine! So I did not save the game and I restarted to play a new game

(PL laughs)

Sebastian: Well, yes because then this way you're back at the beginning"⁸¹

For boys interviewed here, it seems natural and obvious to try to avoid this sanction. If the game allows it, why not using the bypass. Similarly, I heard

81 Extract from the interview number 5

players telling me that to avoid paying the bills, they stop the game when the post officer arrives, and switch to “build” mode. Then, they raise four walls around the post officer and get back to “life” mode. The post officer dies with the bills. Simple and effective.

Players indeed readjust and modulate the intra-regulation of the game system by punctually diverting it without denying it. We have seen before that teenagers do not pay so much attention to the money they make in the game. For them, the main purpose of this game is the relationships between avatars. The fan community of *The Sims*® was particularly active in creating specific objects⁸² to promote the customization of the game. This *modding* of the game entails a very low impact on the very system of the game. Players are more looking to customize their play than to fundamentally transform it.

The players can be the dramaturge of the play they write when playing *The Sims*® and consequently some situations experienced in the game are violent when they feel like. Yet, these behaviors are not mandatory; the player/dramaturge is responsible for these behaviors to occur in their game. Notwithstanding some accidental deaths, players should be able to make their avatars living a relatively long life.

Generally, the activity of the video gaming is also subject to a specific regulation that the player also feels. I called this external monitoring of playing video games: the **extra-regulation**.

EXTRA-REGULATION

Video gaming has recently changed and accessed the status of a leisure . Part of this process was the regulation of video games. Today, many tools are

82 See SIHVONEN Tanja, *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims® and the culture of gaming*, Turku, Finland, 2009, 346 pages et WIRMAN Hanna, *Playing The Sims®2. Constructing and negotiating woman video game player identities through the practice of skinning*, Bristol, Doctoral dissertation, University of West England, 2011, 313 pages

available to assess the content of a video game. Moreover, people are widely informed—even wrongly, yet widely—about video gaming. Notwithstanding play has always been under governmental and institutional scrutiny. In the article by Pierre Robert⁸³, it is understood that the regulation of games in the 14th century occurred to reduce the problems related to excess of gaming (and drinking when playing). But still today resistances to allow adult video games translate the reluctance toward playing activity and more strongly toward adult play⁸⁴. Every country has its own system for monitoring video games. There are scales of rating and assessment of video games for parents but also for teachers using video games in class. These tools allow everyone to know quickly if the game is suitable for the intended audience or not. . Thus, players are given a “type” of game according to their age although we have seen in this research that the experience accumulated is more important to differentiate plays than age. By making the assessment of video games a public matter, the responsibility is shifted from the player to the state. This also allows the government to pursue policies encompassing playing video gaming. The requirement to present an identity card to buy a game recommended for over 18 years manifests the transfer of responsibility to the government. In this vein, I was asked a few years ago to write a short article⁸⁵ for the journal of parliamentary assistants about female video gaming. The French Senate was about to announce a law about the creation of video games in France. This does not mean that the activity is doomed to disappear, in no way, but video gaming—and by extension video gamers—is controlled by the government. Therefore, the question that arises with this development is what will be the long term objective of the government about video games, and above all,

83 ROBERT Pierre, « Les origines de la répression des jeux en droit anglo-saxon : le contrôle de l’Homo ludens dans l’Angleterre du XIVe au XVIe siècle », *Droit et société*, n°17-18, 1991, pp. 159-172

84 On this theme, see Peter Matthew for Galaxy Research, *Community Attitudes To R18 + Classification Of Computer Games*, Australian Government Attorney-General’s Department, November 2010

85 LORENTZ Pascaline, « La pratique féminine des jeux vidéo et ses enjeux », *Revue d’études politiques des assistants parlementaires*, numéro 6, juin 2011, pp. 28-29

which is the Ministry responsible for video gaming? This implies to define what a video game is: a leisure activity? Or a work of art? Which category of activity belongs to video games? Answers to these questions would change policies made which may impact the nature of video gaming as a result.

This public control is done and will be done by two means: control of the practice by its duration and by its content. Like other cultural products, the content of video games is subject to review by the public authorities; the PEGI⁸⁶ label in Europe and the ESRB in the United States are the best-known example for video games.

The presentation of these two ways — through duration and content—of monitoring video gaming will provide better understanding of the constraints that apply to the video game player today.

CONTROL VIDEO GAMING BY ITS DURATION

The many studies on video game addiction⁸⁷ often mention the number of hours not to exceed. The time consuming aspect of video gaming is pointed down. During the interviews, players constantly sought to minimize the amount of hours played when mentioned. They teased each other by shouting injections like “but you are an addict” to label the intensive player as being a deviant, including an example:

Edward: I try not to play too much for not to glue to games

Karim laughs loudly

PL: What's going on Karim?

86 The Pan-European Game Information (PEGI), PEGI Annual Report 2009, Brussel, 2009, 64 pages
 87 Et il faut noter que l'Institut Fédératif des Addictions Comportementales (IFAC) du CHU de Nantes diffuse une lettre d'informations à propos des addictions principalement celles résultantes d'une utilisation des nouvelles technologies, pour plus d'informations sur cet institut : <http://www.chu-nantes.fr/institut-federatif-des-addictions-comportementales-ifac--34394.kjsp?RF=1339767922230>

Karim: He plays a lot

Edward: I don't play a lot!

Karim: Oh yes!

Edward: I play during the weekends that's all

PL: But you play other games that The Sims®, right?

Edouard: Yes I play other games (embarrassed)⁸⁸

This excerpt illustrates the social control exercised among players. It is stronger between non-gamers and gamers. The discomfort that Edouard expressed in his reply and the fact that he seeks to avoid getting into the subject reflects a non-acceptance of the practice when being adopted intensely. The player internalized the social constraint to paraphrase Norbert Elias⁸⁹.

In 2011, the American researcher and game designer Jane McGonigal published *Realty is broken* and delivered several presentations in the world, particularly in France in winter 2011. The thesis of her book is to present the immense potential of video game players to solve the problems of today societies. She began her speech on Ted talk⁹⁰ by presenting the number of hours players spend playing by saying that these hours could be used in a more optimum manner. In her speech supporting video gaming, Jane McGonigal, actually, reinforces the prejudice that time spent playing video games is useless. She advocates for a better use of this time, maybe a more utilitarian use. The historical summary of the control of gambling throughout

88 Extract from the interview 2

89 ELIAS Norbert, *The Civilizing Process*, Wiley, 2000, 560 pages

90 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM>

the ages made by Pierre Robert⁹¹ and the work of Jean-Marie Lhote⁹² showed the consequences of gaming are the heart of the matter rather than the activity itself. Instead of working to produce wealth, individuals dedicate their time to playing games. This leakage in opportunities to make profit seems unacceptable in our societies. Idle times are only for youngsters. The contribution of video gaming to individuals' lives has no room as the prevention from working hours is highlighted instead. Therefore, when and why is this practice tolerated? Video games are tolerated when they serve the dominant ideology —utilitarian for today. One way to achieve this is through their content.

CONTROL VIDEO GAMING WITH GAME CONTENT

In order to control this community of video game players, politicians consider different means of action. Violence seen in video games has been the primary source of moral panic, sometimes supporting the hypothesis of an addictive element of games.

The control of the players can be performed in two ways. First, players are categorized into age class according to the content of games they play. In Europe, the PEGI system works in a distinct fashion than the Australian system for example⁹³. One of the players in our sample told us about this system:

91 ROBERT Pierre, « Les origines de la répression des jeux en droit anglo-saxon : le contrôle de l'Homme ludens dans l'Angleterre du XIVe au XVIe siècle », *Droit et société*, n°17-18, 1991, pp. 159-172

92 LHÔTE Jean-Marie, *Histoire des jeux de société*, Paris, Flammarion, 1994, 671 pages

93 In Australia, many games were banned by the Office of Film and Literature Classification as explained by Thomas Apperley, «Video Games in Australia», in chapter WOLF Mark (ed.), *The Video Game Explosion*, Greenwood Press, 2007, 500 pages, pp.223-229 but also about the regulation of video games, see the thesis: TEAR Anthony, *Dangerous Games? Censorship and Child Protection*, University of Queensland, in 2000, 89 pages

"Julie: Well I do know that sometimes I had my little cousin who looked like this while telling me" oh what are they doing there" when my Sims were making babies and all

(Other smile)

PL: But we see nothing!

Julie: Yeah but I also have a friend who is CM1 there and she starts to play The Sims® because I saw her, she begins to understand because in fact she didn't really understand the game. Once I was with her I showed her how to decorate her house she was so amazed, but I think the directions on the game box saying 10 years old or 10-12 years are well done because there is still a lot to understand in The Sims®"⁹⁴

She agrees with the classification of the game *The Sims*® by the PEGI system by explaining that the younger players, according to her, cannot grasp the subtleties of the game.

The PEGI system was created by the creative industries whose leaders came together to provide a tool to consumers. In Australia, the category system is organized by politicians and civil servants. Meanwhile, the fact that video games are evaluated and classified according to their characteristics enables manufacturers to initiate a more intensive production process⁹⁵. Since the process of legitimization of video gaming trigger the approval of this activity by the greatest number of people, the demand for video games increases. The remaining problem is that if more people play video games, the government must especially monitor this activity, become a "moral entrepreneur" to use the terminology of Howard Becker⁹⁶. And controlling the video gamer might be in the society's interest.

⁹⁴ Extract from interview number 3

⁹⁵ Hence the challenge made by Laurent Trémel in his work *Mythologie des jeuxvidéo* where he argues that the legitimacy of video games was made by creative industries.

⁹⁶ BECKER Howard S., *Outsiders*, Métailié, 1985 [1963], 247 pages

COMPLETION OF THE PROCESS OF CIVILIZATION PLAYER

The control of the video game player is presented as a public concern. Taken from an outsider's perspective, video gamers act as barbarian that need to evolve and social institutions tend to be eager to show players their way to civilization.

MONITORING THIS "WILD" PLAYER

Seen from the outside, players in action looks like an animal in a *furious pursuit*, unleashing their impulses —control and death. Players seek to avoid their death, and sometimes to generate the death of others in the game. Because players are the master of their world —this unknown territory for neophytes— they tend to be misunderstood by people looking at them playing video games. The work of Robbie Cooper⁹⁷, a British artist, who photographed and filmed players' faces when playing, translates the intensity of the video gaming experience. The images showing people playing give the impression that they are possessed by something beyond them. Here is seen the separation between two worlds: the profane and the believers. Each world fail to understand the other, and vice versa.

To understand video gaming, it is necessary to place the player into context. Indeed an analysis of a practice without considering its context and without integrating discourses that actors produce about it has little meaning. I have tried to show throughout this work that the overlap of game elements with life yields the understanding of this activity. Moreover, I join here Robert Ezra Park⁹⁸ when he explained that civilization cannot be understood out of fashions to integrate, to reject and event to exterminate

97 See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HfOUhwhdUVo> et <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojXpvGBPoUo>

98 See article: MAROTTA Vince, "Civilization, Culture and the Hybrid Self in the work of Robert Ezra Park", *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, November 2006, pp.413-433

Others. He insisted by saying that Western civilization was not solely imposed on others as the only civilization, but that future civilized people have accepted some forms of this civilization thus producing a hybrid civilization.

By listening to teenagers talking about their actions in the game, the question of killing their avatars comes to the foreground throughout the interviews. Although I chose to encourage this topic, players abundantly fueled it. Taken outside of context, it might sound very shocking to excuse such violence in the game. Yet, it seems to me that the meaning of this act for the player goes beyond accident or murder. This behavior has to be taken into the overall context of video gaming. In gaming worlds players are free of usual monitoring from many agents. They can misbehave. External regulators try to get players into order. Order is, indeed, one of the characteristics of the state of civilization for Freud⁹⁹, alongside with hygiene and control of the sexual impulse. So, is the video game player uncivilized? Who would have the responsibility to civilize gamers then? Their parents? The society?

The individual has to get socialized and civilized classically first within their family.

"Each individual has to travel on his own behalf through the process of civilization that the society has gone through in its whole; because the child is not born civilized"¹⁰⁰

Norbert Elias theories on socialization shed light on the requirement of children to internalize social constraints to be able to be part of the society. Yet, video gamers appear to behave as uncivilized individual when playing. They are the unbearable proof of the lack of completion in civilizing process of the society. That is why this behavior allowed for children, is suppressed

99 FREUD Sigmund, *Civilization and its discontents*, London, The Hogarth press, 1982 [1963], 90 pages

100 Translation of : « *Chaque individu doit parcourir pour son propre compte en abrégé le processus de civilisation que la société a parcouru dans son ensemble ; car l'enfant ne naît pas civilisé* » ELIAS Norbert, *La civilisation des mœurs*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 342 pages, p. 278

for adults. Adults should be civilized. However, it is not in the public interest to adopt a laissez-faire regarding video gaming. Players and non-players have, consequently, formed two opposing groups not willing to climb down. Then, this confrontation is, again, a simulacrum for survival.

Players with *The Sims*® complete their journey by being aware of the interdependencies between elements of the game. This awareness enables players to reflect upon interdependencies of life elements too. Yet, the practice of video gaming remains of the private sphere and the heterogeneity of video gaming is still largely overlooked.

INTERNALIZING THE STRESS AND IMPULSES

Reflecting upon the harsh criticisms video gaming still suffer from, I wondered how these behaviors would be a problem at a global level. The work of Norbert Elias brought missing explanations into the frame. The expression of players' emotions during the game shows the individual's inability to restrict and to contain their emotions. Video gaming is, therefore, an outlet for individuals. This idea reminds me of the sport fans in the stadiums, which are themselves mostly adults, and whose behaviors tend to surprise neophytes too. Practicing sports is another leisure activity widely present in teens' life when socializing.

"Playing or attending any sport has become a major means to build an identity in the modern society and to make sense of their life to many. In short, one can reasonably say that sport becomes an increasingly secular religion of our time which is increasingly secular."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Translated from : « *Jouer ou assister à un sport quelconque est devenu l'un des principaux moyens de se constituer une identité dans la société moderne et de donner un sens à sa vie pour beaucoup de gens. En bref, on peut raisonnablement affirmer que le sport devient de plus en plus la religion séculière de notre époque de plus en plus séculière.* » in DUNNING Eric, ELIAS Norbert, *Sport et civilisation. La violence maîtrisée*, Paris, Fayard, 1994, 392 pages, p. 306

This parallel is fully relevant in the sense that Dunning and Elias bring another analogy —with religious practice— that I also utilized¹⁰² to study video gaming.

The internalization of impulses is the sign of maturity of individuals and societies. Studies about violence in video games strongly contradict one another. The same happens in the scholarship on addiction to video games. The very anecdotic cases in which video gamers endangered the society have to be put into perspective with the huge proportion of players in the world.

From the moment video gamers are seen as a group whose individuals adopt suspicious behavior, their study becomes necessary. The task of sociology is to create categories¹⁰³ to classify individuals in a society. This categorization and classification of video game players presupposes homogeneity of their group which could be seen as a whole. Yet, not much is known about the entire population of video gamers. This is the future task at hands of sociologists.

¹⁰² I developed this in a separate article available at: <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/religions/article/view/12172>

¹⁰³ DURKHEIM Émile, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique*, Paris, PUF, collection Quadrige, 2007 [1895], 144 pages

CONCLUSION: THE VIDEO-LUDOLOGICAL SOCIALIZATION THROUGH IDENTITY-VOYAGE

Drawing on the work of George Herbert Mead on the play activity of children of his epoch, I postulated that video gaming also socializes. To question this assumption, a mixed method research on the behavior of teenagers playing *The Sims*® was undertaken. The analysis of the results and their interpretation led me to draw a dynamic model in several stages: simulation, anticipation, experimentation, embezzlement and interdependence.

I assumed that the actions performed in the game would depend on the player's age to assess maturity. This is not the case. The video game experience is, in fact, more important than the age of the player. This research showed that the player of *The Sims*® voyages through several lands from simulation stop to embezzlement stop where players become aware of the interdependence of their actions in the game.

To summarize what has been said, the first step of the player journey is the **simulation** because it characterizes the actions taken at the beginning of the game. The players choose a character they portray. By embodying their avatar, players put their Selves in social situations in the game. This step shows that the players create a Sim similar to the image they have of themselves.

Then, the players enjoy the wide possibilities of the game and dream their life which they anticipate virtually. Here, the player tend to create a socially and culturally valued character. During the stage of anticipation players dream their life and project their dreams onto the game. This projection is part of the embodiment process. At that some point, players have enough

of this fantasized glorious future and they start to take distance with their avatar to manipulate it even more extensively.

The **experimentation** is the third stage of the socializing voyage because this is the time where players detach themselves from their avatar to become again a subject. This is the subjectification movement. By being at bay of the action, players become aware of the frame of the game. Taking another perspective thanks to the subjectification movement brings another angle into players frame. Thus, players reflect on what they see and on how this differs from what they saw before. The game provides an experimentation field and the players take the opportunity to test their characters and their behaviors. The experimentation is the stage when players tend to create a very different Sim from them. The video game—here a laboratory of life—still has limits and a strict framework that the player encounters. Teenagers seek to confront the limits of the game while having fun and laughing about the misfortunes of their avatars. Wishing to continue their exploration, the teen-players further try to divert the game.

The fourth stop of the journey is the **embezzlement** of the game. Players alter the settings of the game by cheating, by modding the game, by nipping the purpose of the game in the bud when murdering their Sim. This step is where the most experienced players are, which does not mean the oldest of the sample. Here, the hours of play differentiate gamers, not their age. Thus differences in actions monitored in the game are observed depending on the maturity of the playing experience of teenagers, but also depending on their sex. These video gaming attitudes may seem problematic for the uninitiated. The need to include these attitudes into a whole, into a canvas describing how the game is displayed is felt. The bigger picture allows the observer to nest the gaming behavior into its context. The interconnections between the different elements of the game entering into account are thereafter revealed.

The *interdependencies* are, thus, the last stop of the socializing voyage of teenagers because they become aware of the limits and boundaries of their gaming activity. Players internalize the constraint and accept the regulations that apply to them and to their gaming activity. This awareness is a key in the journey as it completes and marks the end of the gaming activity.

The video-ludological socialization occurring throughout the voyage is something more than the classic socialization with play. By providing an experimentation field, in which players are embedded through their character, video games add social experiences to toys and role play. Why?

Through video gaming, players are offered a field for anticipatory socialization. They, additionally, have the opportunity to re-enchant their world through play. The possibility of contesting the game frame and to oppose to it enriches video gaming in regards to traditional play. The game system reacts to players' actions in the game. In return, players have to react to the game system responses. Gaming worlds provide an additional socializing agent. This triggered this video-ludological socialization, which is a long-term process because players encounter many game titles throughout their life. Moreover, the emergence of a category of expert players impacts the landscape of video games. Expert players, indeed, ask for games at their level¹⁰⁴. In short, the video-ludological socialization possess many faces and lasts throughout the life of the player. The socializing voyage that the player at *The Sims*[®] undertakes is only one drop in the ocean.

¹⁰⁴ Has also been recognized in the public world in Australia with the passage of the law on the R18 + label about video games for a mature audience

GLOSSARY

During the analysis and the interpretations, I used manifold ways to reflect such as mind mapping, drawing Prezis³⁰, developing a specific vocabulary. Alternating between French and English reinforced the difficulties faced. Therefore, I developed a terminological guide which is presented below.

Classic creation: Situation where players simply reproduce in the game what they already know from out of the game.

Conquest Effect: Players go on a quest to do whatever they are up to in the game. They even reinvent the rules if they want.

Decal effect: Motivation of the situation where players give priority to reproduce what they know when playing the game.

Decal: To reproduce what is known by transfer.

Demystification: Process that brings the players to criticize the game situation by taking away its realistic simulation features. "It's just a game," players state at the end of this process.

Detachment: Action of players to detach themselves from their avatars. Detachment is conveyed by the subjectification movement.

Embezzlement: Stop of the play where players seek to circumvent the game rules and to modify the game frame by creating changes and using cheat codes for example.

Experimental Device: Feature of the game when players realize all sorts of experiences.

Extra-regulation: External control of the players and their gaming (e. g. laws). Rules are set out of the game.

FPS: Abbreviation for First Person Shooter

Flesh world: This world is opposed to the synthetic world that is created by computer assistance and to the imaginary world created by the mind. This term was cited by Torill Elvira Mortensen.

Game with Self: Back and forth between the identities of the individual resulting from the blurring of boundaries between the flesh world and the game world because the game world is included in the overall world of the player.

God-like position: Position where players decide all about their avatars' life.

Hostile sympathy: Concept developed by Charles Horton Cooley, "*That is to say, we enter by sympathy or personal imagination into the state of mind of others, or think we do, and if the thoughts we find there are injurious to or uncongenial with the ideas we are already cherishing, we feel a movement of anger.*" in *Human Nature and Social Order*, p.266.

Humoricization: Making fun, and/or laughing about a seemingly serious situation such as torture or death.

Humoristic Objective: Play situation where the main goal of players is to have fun, to be entertained.

Identity Travel: Tracking players role-taking activities.

Imitation-innovation: Situation where the players borrow an unknown social behavior from someone to test it with their avatar in the virtual world.

Incidental Skill: Acquisition of a skill without being the result of a conscious action of learning.

Instrumentalizing relationship: Relationship where the players use their character to perform experiments and observe the consequences.

Interactional Sanction: Penalty that is realized during interaction.

Intra-regulation: System of rules that is in place in the game.

Laboratory Effect: Situation when the players utilize the game as an experimental device. The game is then a laboratory for social experiments.

Lines of teachability: Concept developed by Charles Horton Cooley, "*We must depend upon the environment to stimulate and define this capacity, to supply teaching along these lines. When we say that a child is a born musician we mean, not that he can play or compose by nature alone, but that if he has the right kind of teaching he can rapidly develop power in this direction. In this sense, and in no*

other, a man may be a born lawyer, or teacher, or poet, or, if you please, a born counterfeiter or burglar.” In Social Process, p. 199.

Ludant: Something that allows playing (e.g. video game)

Ludé: Something that is played (e. g. life)

MMO(G): Abbreviation for Massively Multiplayer Online (G)ames.

Movement of subjectification: Situation during which the players detach themselves from their avatars. Thus, they become an independent subject. This movement goes with the awareness of the rules of the game and its system.

Oral component of flirt process: First step of the flirt process which aims to convince the Sim desired. This phase is a test to check if the avatar responds positively to advances. This occurs during a conversation.

Overlap of worlds: Expression borrowed from Georg Simmel to describe the players’ situation between their worlds.

Physical component of flirt process: Second step of flirt process. This moment of interaction is more physical. The avatar can enter into physical contact with the Sim desired or make a gesture such as offering a gift. This step is a risk because the Sim can be harshly rejected.

Projective Effect: Situation when players project their desires and dreams onto their avatars.

Projective Relationship: Relationship where the players envision their character as a continuum of their Self.

Realistic claim: Situation when players ask game developers to provide missing elements of the game to make playing experience more realistic. Modders can also answer realistic claim of players.

Realistic Objective: Playful situation where the objective is to reproduce a situation known from the flesh world.

RL: Abbreviation for “Real Life”.

Slide: Transition time between two socializing steps. For instance, the socializing slide between primary and secondary socialization is when the

individual begins their secondary socialization without having completed its primary socialization. For example: the internship after graduation but before job contract.

Social Flexibility: Capacity to adapt to the interlocutor's mindset when interacting.

Social Projection: Play situation where players project themselves onto their character and they stage life situations in the game to which they aspire.

Social Self: Concept of Charles Horton Cooley.

Socializing Voyage: Travel undertaken by players at *The Sims*® when they play different characters. This voyage encompasses many steps such as simulation, anticipation, experimentation, embezzlement and interdependence.

Sympathetic Introspection: Concept developed by Charles Horton Cooley which is "an instrument of intersubjectivity to study the social world". In JACOBS Glenn, *Charles Horton Cooley – Imagining Social Reality*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006, p.97

Systemic Sanction: Penalty that is generated by the system of the game.

Try-Imitation: Act of reproducing social behavior known in the flesh world.

Unusual Creation: Situation where players create a different character from what they know.

Unusual Creation with Realistic Objective: Situation where players see themselves as unusual human beings and want to realistically replicate their originality in the game.

Video-Ludological Socialization: Socialization process that occurs during the video gaming activity.

VL: abbreviation for «Virtual Life».

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**THE SOCIALIZING VOYAGE
OF THE VIDEO GAME PLAYER
GROWING-UP WITH PLAYING THE SIMS®**

Pascaline Lorentz, Ph.D.

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