CHAPTER

21

What Went Wrong with *The Sims Online*: Cultural Learning and Barriers to Identification in a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

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When The Sims Online was launched in mid-December 2002, expectations were skyhigh. "The Sims games are always the best," a beta tester wrote in October (pizan36, 2002). "I think this is the best sim game ever made," another chimed in, screaming; "Dude I MEAN WHATS BETTER THAN PLAYING A GAME WERE YOU LIVE AND STUFF ONLINE" (snake72, 2002). Journalists also struggled to find the right superlatives. *Time* called it a "daring collective social experiment that could tell us some interesting things about who we are as a country" and proclaimed, "We're about to witness the birth of Simulation Nation" (Grossman, 2002). *Newsweek* issued a special report on "The next frontiers" with *The Sims Online* on the cover, writing, "America's hottest PC game is moving to the Net, where thousands of players will interact and live virtual lives. Is this the future of home entertainment?" (Croal, 2002). Subscriber numbers, however, never reached into the hundreds of thousands seen in other successful multiplayer online games (Woodcock, 2005). In the following, we examine the technical, psychological, and social dynamics of *The Sims Online* to understand why the game has not lived up to its expectations.

Creating Culture through Social Interaction and Communication

One of us (Greenfield) observed the spontaneous rise of a series of collaborative cultural developments in the aftermath of the Northridge earthquake that hit Southern California on January 17, 1994 (Greenfield, 1997). It looked like human beings were adapting to new physical and social conditions produced by the violent earthquake by co-creating new cultural practices and meanings. She wondered whether *The Sims Online*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game in which each screen agent (that is, a graphically represented character) is controlled by a real person, would also manifest rapid cultural evolution as thousands of players prepared to begin "living" in the simulated Sims world, a world of houses, clothing, jobs, and

entertainment. As *Newsweek* noted, "*The Sims Online* stands out because social interaction is the game's *raison d'etre*, not an afterthought" (Croal, 2002, p. 52). With the collaboration of Brendesha Tynes and the research team at Children's Digital Media Center, UCLA, she initiated data collection on *The Sims Online* from the first month that the game was open to the general public. The intention was to have a laboratory in which processes of cultural evolution could be observed. By starting participants at the game's beginning, Greenfield hoped to observe not just adaptation to an existing culture, but the actual creation of a culture from scratch.

Because the essence of culture is a shared world of meanings, activities, norms, and a constructed physical environment, human beings create culture by a process of co-construction, that is, through processes of social interaction and communication (Greenfield, 1997). Hence, the initial research plan was to look for evidence of culture formation by studying the conversational discourse that would take place in the game. Greenfield and Tynes planned to make the qualitative study of conversation among players a key method of study. Indeed, at the outset of the Sims study, they were in the process of utilizing this methodology to analyze the culture of teen chat rooms (Greenfield & Subrahmanyam, 2003; Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004). When *The Sims Online* first became open to the public, they heard from a video-computer technician who was helping us set up the study that *The Sims Online* was simply a 3-dimensional chat room. Although he put forth this characterization as a complaint, his description made the game sound perfect for their purposes. However, as the reader will see, the chat analogy did not turn out to be an accurate one. When Steen and Davies joined the project in early 2004 and we began to examine the assembled materials, the team quickly determined that the original analytic strategy had to be very much altered.

Background: *The Sims* and *The Sims Online*

In their press release at the launch, Electronic Arts, the publisher of *The Sims Online*, noted that "The Sims is the top-selling PC game of all time," selling more than 20 million units (Electronic Arts, 2003); according to insiders, they initially projected 400,000 subscribers to the online version the first year (Woodcock, 2005). Over the Christmas season, subscriptions immediately rocketed to 80,000; this was the point at which our study began.

The number of subscriptions is, of course, economically important to the game manufacturer. However, it is also critical to the game play itself. As a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMPORG), *The Sims Online* permits thousands of subscribers to play at once and interact with each other. This feature distinguishes it from other types of online gaming (see Chan & Vorderer, chap. 6, this volume, for a typology of online gaming).

Avatars and Player Control

As in *The Sims Online* (*TSO*), the offline Sims game offers an electronically generated, 3-dimensional world in which human figures, called sims, eat, sleep, build houses, work, and have roommates. While this may sound exotic, it is merely a virtual parallel to playing with "action figures" or "dolls." As in many facets of real life, in both versions of *The Sims*, the precise sequence of events is determined by the player or players, not by the program.

In the highly popular offline version of *The Sims*, the player controls all the virtual characters. Using the words of the electronic gaming community, the player "plays God" in *The Sims* world. The control, however, is not direct. In contrast to most action games, there is no one-to-one correspondence between controller movement and screen character movement (Kirk, 2004). Instead, the player instructs the sim to perform a particular act by selecting from a contextual menu of options, as if commanding a robot.

The Sims Online also utilizes this robotic form of character control. However, in the online version, the perspective is not the omniscient perspective of God. Instead, each screen character is an *avatar*; that is, it is controlled by and "channels" its own unique human being. Interaction is not between robots controlled by a single omnipotent, godlike player. Instead, character interaction takes place between human beings channeled by individual onscreen avatars. How would the interaction of these avatars create cultural activities, norms, and meanings? That was the question with which the research began.

Environment and Building: A Different Type of Player Control

The basic environment of the offline Sims is an invariant scene, a suburban subdivision on which the game invites the player to build one or several houses, and to move ready-made sim families into them. In *TSO*, the player chooses from nearly a dozen housing developments, virtual towns located in attractive artificial geographies and inhabited by thousands of avatars. Alphaville is the first and largest of these, situated on a coastal plain and archipelago and home to some 7000 sims. A player can maintain up to 3 simultaneous avatars, each in a different city.

The core of the offline Sims was the construction and decoration of house and grounds, and this code was inherited by *TSO*. While the avatar inhabits the virtual world, controlled indirectly by robotic instructions, the player has direct control over the act of building the house and landscaping the property. Construction materials are purchased from virtual shopping windows and placed on the building site at the click of a mouse. The task of construction itself is thus direct rather than robotic, relying on the familiar click and drag system. There is a one-to-one relation between hand movement and screen action (Kirk, 2004). In sum, game control is robotic (i.e., indirect) for the "living" avatars and direct for inanimate building materials.

This simple contrast is emblematic of the game psychology as a whole. Indeed, our analytic journey took us beyond culture and into more psychological issues. Initial issues included identity, identification, and social exploration. Later analysis led us to focus on the psychological processes elicited by the game that appeared to stand in the way of cultural evolution and cultural creativity. After we realized how many cultural norms were already programmed into the game, we turned our attention from cultural evolution to cultural learning.

As will become clear below, our first finding was that *The Sims Online* was failing to fulfill the initial high expectations of popularity. We ultimately traced this failure to the differing requirements of player–character identification and strategic control in the offline and online versions. Player control was our analytic key to understanding what went wrong with *The Sims Online*. We will make the argument that, whereas robotic control seems psychologically ideal in a stand-alone virtual society, direct control would work much better, both psychologically and socially, in a multiplayer online virtual society.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were a 23-year-old woman, a 2nd-year graduate student (KM), and a 28-year-old man (SH), a freelance producer and part-time actor. They knew each other before they started playing and occasionally arranged to meet each other in Alphaville. Both participants had grown up playing electronic games and were experienced players of MMORPGs. In terms of past Sims experience, SH noted that he had played Sim City and the offline, stand-alone

Sims, "but not avidly." KM described herself as a recovered addict of the offline version of *The Sims*. Both were curious to try the online version. We take our participants to be representative of the majority of *TSO* subscribers in age, SES, and general game experience. As we had intentionally built into our design, they also represented a range of experience with the offline version of *The Sims*.

Procedure and Data

The participants were asked by Greenfield and Tynes to record their play over a year's period with a camcorder-PC set-up provided for them; they were also asked to keep a handwritten journal of their play detailing their goals, gaming activities, strategies, and general reactions to aspects of game, other players, or gaming session overall. They received instructions, shown in the Appendix. Children's Digital Media Center, UCLA, under whose aegis this research was conducted, bought their subscription. Participants received $100 per month for playing and $1 per page for their journal entries. Tynes collected their journals every 3 months.

From KM we received 17 tapes of play capture over the period of a year from December 30, 2002 through December 29, 2003. KM's total recorded game play comprised 15 hours and 53 minutes. From SH we received 15 tapes of play capture over the period of a year from December 19, 2002 through December 24, 2003. SH's tapes comprised 8 hours 9 minutes of play time. A third player, LC, played once and then had to stop because of her college commitments (she was a freshman). We are not using her session in the present analysis. One of us (Davies) supplemented the first two players' data by playing herself and keeping notes from January through March 2004.

In addition to these primary sources of data on game play, we have benefited from the extensive coverage of *The Sims Online* and its design provided by the online gaming publications GameSpot.com, GamePro.com, and Game-Revolution.com, as well as from the player reports and conversations on threads devoted to *TSO* beta testing at Gamers.com.

ANALYSIS

Our data collection methods were planned with qualitative data analysis in mind. We checked the journals against the game capture videos at several points in time for each primary participant and found that the journals were an accurate reflection of what had transpired in the game. In addition, the journals provided the players' interpretations of their game play and a record of their changing motivations.

We began our analysis by going through the journals and Davies' notes to see what issues were coming up for the participants. In line with the original motivation of the study, we were on the lookout for evidence of cultural evolution. However, the journals provided more material relevant to the psychosocial issues of social motivation, social interaction, identity, and identification.

We also used the journal notes to understand some trends within the game as a massive multiplayer phenomenon. As it became clear that our participants' gaming experience (and that of thousands of other players) had been very different from what we had anticipated, we focused in on the surprising dynamics of avatar interaction. Finally, we were interested in the process by which a new player learns how to play the game, understood primarily as a process of cultural learning.

We analyzed the discourse of the journals and the transcriptions of game play from the video recordings, supplemented by the online discussions of other *TSO* players, in order to gain evidence relevant to all of these issues.

INITIAL FINDINGS AND NEW QUESTIONS

Our Participants and Their Multiplayer World: The Primacy of Social Interaction

In the months after Christmas 2002, subscriptions to *The Sims Online* peaked just above 100,000, not an unimpressive number, yet far short of predictions (Woodcock, 2005) and not sufficient to justify the financial investment. Electronic Arts noted in their fiscal 2003 report to shareholders "a pre-tax charge of $67 million as a result of impaired assets and restructuring costs in the online division" (Electronic Arts, 2003, p. 12). By April of 2004, the company estimated 57,500 subscribers (Glassman, 2004); at the end of the year, in spite of an international marketing campaign, the number had likely dropped to around 35,500 (Woodcock, 2005). Within the gaming community, there is a widespread expectation that the game will be terminated within another year.

This generally negative response to the game was reflected in our participants' declining interest in playing. Recorded sessions gradually became shorter and less frequent. From December 2002 through July 2003, all of KM's taped sessions comprised at least 1 hour of game play. From September through December, recorded tapes were all under 42 minutes. For SH, from December through May, 4 of his first 6 recorded video tapes were 1 hour or longer. After that, all his recordings comprised less than 1 hour of tape. While the instructions implied that we wanted the players to record their play at least once a month, both players skipped months. SH experienced some difficulties recording, which may explain part of his missed 3 months. KM skipped 1 month. Even paying them to play was not enough to get them to play without fail. The apparent fall-off in interest suggested new questions: What had gone wrong? Was something very different from the offline version of the game? Why was the online version apparently less engaging than the stand-alone version of the game?

In an interview just before the release, Will Wright, lead designer and creator of all the Sims games, told Gamespot.com, "I wanted to make parts of the game boring so you'd be encouraged to talk with others" (Keighley, 2002). An initial look at our journals indicated that Wright had succeeded in making much of the game boring. However, for some reason the game's interactive features did not have the intended effect of spurring a rich conversation. We therefore utilized our participant journals, video captures of their game play, and researcher notes to document the nature, quantity, and motivations for social interaction and communication.

Cultural Evolution versus Cultural Learning

In this material, we did not find evidence of the original topic of interest, cultural evolution. It turned out that too much "culture" had already been programmed into the game by the designers. In an interview during the alpha stage of the design process, Will Wright spoke of "an economy of motives" (Green, 2002) intended to shape player behavior. A similar economy of motives in the offline version of *The Sims* reminds the player when her sims need rest, company, food, and so on, mimicking the nurturing needs of virtual "human pets." Applied to a channeled avatar in a massively multiplayer game, however, these imposed "motives," along with other incentive systems within the game, constrained the individual player's agency. They tended to crowd out the possibility of the formation of new cultural norms and values (but see Steen, Davies, Tynes, and Greenfield, 2005). Thus, in *TSO*, the rules of the game to a significant extent stood in for and functioned as a shared culture.

Further reducing the in-game possibility space of our participants was the fact that thousands of alpha and beta testers had already been playing the game for months, building up a large

number of properties and creating a modified cultural environment into which newcomers, or "newbies," had to fit. An early review spelled out the emerging culture of the game:

> Since a player can earn money simply by enticing other players to congregate on their property, and because all the other players truly want to do is earn money, the object of the game is reduced to building—not a "house" in which your Sim will live, but a labor camp in which other Sims will come to earn money. Providing beds, showers, food and a pool table persuades your guests to stay longer and spend more of the money they are earning, owing their souls to the company store, so to speak, and never truly needing a place of their own. The result is a "city" in which nearly every house is a sweatshop. (White, 2003)

In case this cultural code was not immediately apparent to a new player, Electronic Arts provided personal guidance. As evidence of the way the "culture" was programmed into the game, consider this phone message from the game manufacturer that was spontaneously left for Greenfield when the research project initially enrolled in *The Sims Online*:

> "Hi, This is a message from *The Sims Online*, with some tips for playing the game.... Here are some helpful tips. Be sure to choose a skill to specialize in early, and find a job object that maximizes payout based on that skill."

For our players, then, the game was less an opportunity for creating new culture than a fully determined, preexisting culture to which they had to adapt. We therefore shifted our analytic focus from culture creation to cultural learning.

Identity, Identification, Avatar Control, and Perspective

Our player data suggested that the psychological processes of player–avatar identification interacted with the technicalities of game control, described earlier, to raise some interesting issues. Identity, identification, and game control therefore became key topics in our analysis. We adopt the general perspective that in *The Sims Online*, as the name suggests, the player is invited to treat her own avatar, the other avatars she encounters, and the entire computer-generated world within the game as a simulation of social reality. In contrast to a novel or a film, where the course of action is determined by the author or filmmaker, in *The Sims Online*, each player controls one of the characters within the simulation. In describing the emotional and imaginative engagement of the player in the fortunes of her and others' avatars, it is therefore not appropriate to apply the respondent-as-witness model, which explains such involvement in fictive scenarios in terms of empathy (Zillmann, 1994).

Instead, we utilize a concept of identification-as-simulation along the lines proposed by Oatley (1992, 1994) and applied to fictive narratives, although explicitly modeled on computer games. In identifying with a character, the player treats the avatar, in certain limited ways, as if it were herself. In the present context, we focus on the player's willingness to treat the avatar's movements on the screen as if they were her own bodily movements in space. We also examine the player's willingness to adopt the avatar's epistemic, emotional, and intentional states by integrating the avatar's goals, obstacles, and resources into her own planning system (Oatley, 1994; Steen & Owens, 2001; Steen 2005).

In the following, we first examine the issue of identity by assessing the characteristics and our participants' interpretations of the avatars they created to play the game. Second, we look at the degree to which they identified with these avatars during game play. The theory and

evidence that we will develop posits that greater identification occurs with direct rather than robotic control, and with a first-person rather than an omniscient or "godlike" perspective.

Interaction and Communication

The tapes and journals indicated that interaction and communication, the *sine qua non* for cultural co-construction, were much more rare and limited than anticipated. The reasons for this appear to be linked to the ironic nonessentiality of social communication and social learning built into the incentive structure of *The Sims Online*. We will try to make the case that the player control mechanism also contributed to this problem: Robotic control created a time and operational lag that was unfavorable to social interaction. In addition, we analyze the game's incentive structure and other rules aimed at generating sociality, and show that they had the unintended effect of discouraging a generative culture based on interpersonal relationships and player communication.

RESULTS: IDENTITY, SOCIAL INTERACTION, AND CULTURAL LEARNING

The First Newbie's Perspective

The Sims Online begins with the creation of an avatar. From a large array of alternatives, a player custom-builds his or her sim by selecting a gendered body with a particular skin tone, a head, and a set of clothes. Our first participant, KM, began play on December 30, 2002 by creating an *alter ego*:

> I created this character based on myself. It took me a while to go through all of the hair and outfits to pick one that I thought resembled me. (KM, p. 16)

This initial choice indicates that the player expects the avatar to function as an effective channel for her own identity. As the reader will discover, this common initial expectation was eventually violated for both our players.

KM entered the game with an extensive offline Sims game background, and had realistic expectations about the incentive structure and rules for getting ahead in the game. On her first day of play, she wrote:

> Today the goal for my character was to explore the game and figure out what was going on. Since I had played the sims before I knew that the two most important things to advance are money and skill points. I knew I had to get more skill points so I could earn some more money. (KM, pp. 16–17)

KM correctly assumed that the rules of the offline game had been ported to and inherited by the online version, effectively forming its cultural norms.

In spite of this knowledge, KM was surprised and explicit in reacting to the lack of social interaction and conversation within a supposedly "interactive" online game:

> I said "hi" to the other person playing chess, but little conversation happened. I noticed that no one in this house was talking everyone was just earning skill points. (KM, p. 17)

Six months later, KM realized that even conversation could appropriately be treated as a commodity in *The Sims Online*. On July 10, 2003, she wrote:

> Last I went to [illegible] P Clymat to talk to other people in order to increase my social meter. (KM, p. 75)

This is how the incentive system is designed to work: Players are encouraged to socialize. Yet the encouragement operates by converting the players' real-life desire to communicate with others into an avatar's mechanical "motive" to exchange speech bubbles, potentially devoid of any meaning or engagement, for points—the points acquired are the same with or without meaningful conversation. It is well known that extrinsic motives, such as rewards, reduce intrinsic motivation (Greene & Lepper, 1974); and this process could well have reduced motivation to converse. The reduction of a genuine human desire to converse and the increase of the motive to mechanically create speech bubbles makes the avatar less like a human being and less like oneself, therefore exposing the game to a disidentification of avatar and player.

KM early on encountered a related dehumanization of game avatars. Observing the paucity of conversation at a skilling scene, she wrote:

> It made me wonder if anyone was actually working the characters or if someone just plopped their Sim at a computer to get more skills and then left. (KM, p. 19)

Her suspicion that many of the avatars had been left unattended was strengthened when she realized it was a logical outcome of the structure of the game. Skill points and money were made by time-consuming and boring robotic sequences that required no attention:

> After about 10 minutes of playing chess, and seeing how long it took for the skill meter to go up I could see why no one was talking—probably no one was there! (KM, p. 19)

Here, then, was a weakness in the design of the online "chat room" of *TSO*: Many avatars are only intermittently attended, operating on autopilot while skilling and working. This creates the need, on the part of attending players, to weaken the link of identification between other players and their avatars, as the presence of one frequently does not entail the presence of the other.

Robotic control, plus omniscient player perspective, also makes conversation and social interaction unnatural, by opening up dissociations between player and avatar perceptual and epistemic states. The player has an omniscient visual perspective—an overview of the whole Sims world. However, the Sims avatars appear as though they have first-person perspectives (cf. O'Keefe & Zehnder, 2004); for example, the avatars can face in different directions. This situation leads to some social anomalies. We analyzed a recorded conversation at Lucky Luc's Slots, where the AJ, the proprietor's roommate, gives KM instructions on how to play a particular gambling game. During most of this extended exchange, the two avatars have their backs to each other. While a player can in fact see everything, he or she is also likely to utilize standard social meanings and interpret an avatar that talks to her with her back to her as disrespectful. Yet players do not actually control his or her avatar's orientation, nor does avatar perspective influence player perspective. By failing to face the person you are speaking with, you violate social convention and imply a lack of interest in the other—although it was clear from the content of the conversation that this would have been an incorrect inference.

Several times during the conversation, AJ made reference to gaming results that neither her nor her interlocutor's avatar could observe. This behavior breaks a cardinal rule of

mental-state attribution that "seeing is knowing" and opens up a gap between the embedded, in-game perspective of the avatar and the panoptic perspective of the player.

A similar dissociation can be witnessed between intentional state and mechanical behavior, even resulting in a player leaving her avatar "body"! In one session of recorded game play, we observed KM giving instructions to her avatar to play the guitar, and then adopt a passive stance while the avatar played. Further into the same scene, KM says to the other players, "I am going to go too, cant stand listening to my own music." Here KM announces her intention to leave the room, and in fact zooms out of the building to end up in a bird's eye view of Alphaville, used to decide where to go next. Meanwhile, until it is commanded otherwise, her avatar stays behind and continues to play the guitar. Clearly, this kind of dissociation between intended action and mechanical behavior, not to mention the ability to leave one's on-screen body behind, seemed likely to result in a disidentification of player with avatar.

Indeed, these dissociations appeared to have the unintended effect of weakening the identification of the player with her own avatar. On June 19, 2003, after nearly 6 months of play, KM wrote:

> I started a new character today because I was bored of the old one and I wanted to try something different. I made a character that is nothing like myself—I made my character very weird looking, and it is a male. (KM, p. 63)

The creation of a new character may simply indicate a desire to try something new—as explained in Turkle's (1995) pathbreaking work, KM was using the game to experiment with different identities. At the same time, the fact that this character was "weird," of the opposite sex, and "nothing like myself" implies that KM's expectation of a high degree of avatar identification was no longer present; we might call the effect electronic alienation. This process of disidentification, which we will revisit in our second participant, may be caused in part by the common practice of going *afk* ("away from keyboard"), resulting after 15 minutes of no activity in *ato* ("avatar timed out"). At that point, the avatar is electronically removed from the scene.

In KM's diaries, we begin to understand why so little conversation takes place in *The Sims Online*: Typical game play is characterized by long absences from the keyboard, as the robotic work of skilling and making money is itself experienced as boring. Our analyses of her game play captured on video indicate that this boredom forms part of a series of dissociations between players and avatars. These dissociations act cumulatively not only to weaken the bond of identification between self and avatar, but also to reduce the perception of other avatars as representing real people, capable of meaningful interaction.

The Second Newbie's Progress

The diary of our second participant, SH, reveals a series of psychological stages of identity, motivation, and cultural learning. He began to play on December 19, 2002, within days of the release of the game. While he recorded his first game, he did not start his diary until a month later. In the first recording, we observe the creation of an avatar with an insect head. He is given the name Fred Mandible and wanders around in Alphaville, steadfastly ignored by other players in spite of his efforts to attract attention. SH clearly was not aware of the widespread practice of leaving your avatar at work while afk ("away from keyboard").

> On January 19, 2003, SH writes that Fred Mandible was an experimental character I developed in order to understand the game. This character has been retired today. I didn't really develop the character fully because I knew he wasn't going to last. (SH, p. 5)

It is unclear what he means by "developing the character fully"—is this a statement about his own emotional involvement, that is, a lack of identification with his insect-headed character? Or is it, more prosaically, about gaining skill points? At this point in the game, SH may be uncertain and open-ended about what it means to develop a character, but judging from his next remark, his conceptions are extremely rich. He continues the previous entry by introducing his new character Sammar:

> I chose to develop this character because he is the closest thing to my alter ego. I needed an outlet for that ego in order to help myself in real day to day life. I'm hoping that I'll be able to learn from my other self and take those characteristics that I feel I lack and forge them into my real life. (SH, p. 9)

This statement suggests that SH expects the game to provide the opportunity for a personal and social learning experience, one in which his virtual life will allow him to explore and to cultivate modes of being and responding to the world that he can subsequently incorporate into his own life in a selective manner. It is this goal that motivates his progression from a sim very dissimilar from himself, a character with an insect head, to a character that he will identify with, one that very explicitly represents himself. He also provides an update on the first experiences of his new avatar:

> So far "Sammar" has done fairly well in getting to know his way around. He has visited a few different places. He's gotten a roommate, "KM," who also is a beginner. And he's made a few extra bucks making pizza. Not too bad for a first day. His frustrations are easing too with all knew [sic] knowledge and info he gains. His main goal at present is to make enough money to build a party pad by the beach. (SH, pp. 9, 11)

The first sentence indicates an awareness of cultural learning—he must learn his way around this constructed, virtual world. Acquiring a roommate—none other than our other participant KM—provides welcome company. SH makes it clear that, at this point, social interaction is a key motive for him and lies at the heart of what he expects from the game. He envisions his short-term goal as building a house in an aesthetically attractive location in order to provide a venue for himself to host parties and thus engage socially with other players.

SH is highly cognizant of and positive about the quality of his social encounters, even though the video recordings show a very modest level of interaction with others:

> A lot of the people I've visited at their properties have been exceptionally nice. I imagine it has to do with their visitor bonus. The people I met in the pizza place are not nearly as friendly. It's amazing what greed will do. (SH, p. 13)

There is a mild irony in the conjunction of his warm appreciation of the owner's friendliness and his dismay at the unfriendly and impatient behavior of the pizza makers, given that he realizes both are caused by the same greed. Yet he is clearly learning the system of incentives that constitute the built-in rules of *TSO* culture.

On January 22, SH expresses satisfaction at his avatar's development:

> This character has made huge strides in his skill levels. Interaction between "Sammar" and the other characters has increased dramatically. His logic skill is up 2 notches and his cooking skill is up a notch and change. His interaction and friendship with people is increasing mostly due to his helpfulness in cleaning and other household duties. (SH, p. 17)

SH approaches the game with an anticipation that he will encounter a friendly and collaborative environment. He expects to be liked and appreciated by contributing to a common good. Although he speaks of his avatar in the third person, his level of identification is high:

> Sammar is feeling accepted in this community. He is still figuring out the finer details but it's coming along well. He aspires to make his skills at their peak and make as much money as possible. (SH, p. 19)

The attribution is striking: "Sammar is feeling accepted in this community." By reporting an emotional engagement in his avatar's social position, SH indicates a subjective, in-game experience of moving toward membership within a larger community. The implication is that Alphaville is a community, that this community either accepts or rejects newcomers, and that such acceptance or rejection influences the success of a sim. At the same time, he is acquiring the tacit culture that has been programmed into the game, realizing that success depends straightforwardly on gaining skills and making money.

The next day, it is this pragmatic level of cultural acquisition that predominates:

> He's figured his way around, and his skill levels are constantly increasing as is his money levels are increasing [sic]. He's building a friendship base that's making him money and skill. (SH, p. 23)

He has now started to think of friendships in passive, instrumental terms: They are "making him money and skill," and are not necessarily pursued for their own sake. This subtle transition is critical to understanding why we observed very little interaction in our participants' Sims Online videos. *TSO* has been set up to function as an economy in which earning money is the only means to succeed at the game, and casual chitchat is a waste of time.

An underlying reason that the conversational opportunities so carefully engineered into The Sims Online remain underutilized is that the game lacks a sufficient strategic complexity to make information a scarce commodity. *TSO* characters have little information to share, because their world is structured in such a manner that information is not a critical element of gaming success or, perhaps more importantly, gaming fun. As in real-life communities, the need for vital information transfer, provoking collaborative energy, may be a critical ingredient for the rise of generative culture, and may be a reason such culture is absent in *TSO*.

Although SH's diary demonstrates he is learning this foreign culture by immersion, its dynamics continually disappoint his formulated motivational goals of exploratory social identity development and interaction. Indeed, while his diary has been upbeat and positive, he does not return to the game for more than 3 weeks.

When he returns to the game on March 18, 2003, SH reports:

> "Sammar" has built his skill levels, mostly mechanical & logical, and is making a decent amount of money making gnomes. He has a home now and is in the process of building it up to be a place where other sims can come to relax and make money. (SH, p. 25)

He now shows little emotional involvement with his avatar, whose activities in this session are directed not toward forming relationships, but on building skills and making money. However, he sees these activities as a temporary means to a more attractive goal of building a house. The purpose of this house is still to provide a place for others, but he no longer imagines they will come to party. Instead, they will come to his house to hang out and to make money. His cultural learning has deepened; he recognizes that social interaction for its own sake is a

dispreferred mode of exchange in the cultural environment of *The Sims Online*. Nevertheless, his own motivations remain strongly altruistic:

> My characters main goal at present is to be a viable and successful character who can help other Sims in their money and skill earning endeavors. (SH, pp. 25, 27)

SH wants to contribute to the success of other sims, but first his sim must become a "viable and successful character." We now see the first acknowledgments that the game is not intrinsically motivating; rather, it is a means to an end projected further into the game. At this point, playing has become more like work:

> The game part of the Sims is somewhat boring because character development is almost in real time unlike other Sims games where I can fast forward through time. (SH, p. 29)

He is beginning to critique the game: It is not fun, and reaching the part of the game that would be fun takes too long. His previous assumptions about the community structure and social nature of the game have fragmented into an acceptance that moving forward in *The Sims Online* means chasing skill points and money rather than developing relationships in social interactions. Starting from ignorance, false assumptions, and misguided aspirations, SH is slowly making the culture programmed into *The Sims Online* his own.

Continuing his March 18 entry, SH reflects on the lack of player interaction. He feels dead-ended by limitations in the design of the game and begins making recommendations for improvements:

> I think an offshoot room where people can seperate from the game and chat or have some other activity like a Sims poker room would make the game far more interesting. (SH, p. 29)

At this point, rather than playing *The Sims Online*, SH is inclined to "separate from the game" and just play some other game with people online. *TSO* itself is "somewhat boring" for not encouraging social interaction:

> The game would be more condusive to chatting if email were accessible while playing to swap pics and personal info. A real possibility of meeting these people off line would get the place buzzing. (SH, p. 39)

The subtext here is that avatar encounters in the game do not really feel like real encounters. They are not emotionally satisfying or engaging and thus do not draw people in. His suggestions of introducing e-mail, swapping pictures, and meeting people offline indicates that he experiences the on-screen characters as poor representatives of the players' social selves and social agency: Identification has become unattractive and the channeling role of the avatars is failing.

After recording a little more than 4 hours of play over a period of about 2 months, SH lost interest in his "alter ego." His hopes of using *TSO* to explore and practice new character traits and behaviors in a social context were effectively quashed. He stopped playing for a few weeks, until on April 9, 2003 he began a new sim:

> I started Freakstick today to retry The Sims.com. Freakstick is an odd looking character. He has a skinless body. He sorta looks like the anatomy figure from highschool biology class. And his head is a mask that's part tribal part the big blue character in Monsters, Inc. played by John Goodman. I chose to develop this character to express my off the

> wall personality, as opposed to my other character "Sammar" who is whom I'd like to be in real life, an alter ego, if you will. (SH, pp. 33–37)

The player's goal has now been reformulated: To "express my off the wall personality" (p. 37) rather than to "learn from my other self and take those characteristics that I feel I lack and forge them into my real life" (p. 9). The goal retains an element of sociality, but now as a playful exhibitionism. Like KM, SH is using the game to experiment with different identities (cf. Turkle, 1995). Nonetheless, like KM's second avatar, Freakstick is explicitly a distanced identity, a sharp contrast to the *alter ego*.

While *Newsweek* thought sociability was the point of the game (Croal, 2002, p. 52), the cultural code programmed into the game contains a very different reward structure. It is clear from the way in which SH's entry continues that the goal of sociability has receded from view:

> Now that I've learned the main tricks and tips in succeeding in The Sims, I have a new way of going about things. I plan on amassing large amounts of mechanical and logical skill. Those skills have the greatest amount of financial profitability with the least amount of constant attention. (SH, pp. 37–39)

SH has learned that profit, not sociability, is the highest goal in *The Sims Online*. In spite of having understood the culture, however, he persists on May 7, 2003 in his own desire to just socialize:

> In a perfect world a seperate area just for chatting would be great. A setup with regional room choice would be optimal. (SH, p. 43)

Far from experiencing a desire to live in a virtual world, SH is looking for people he can meet in real life to motivate him to play on. SH still wants to exit the game to chat, get away from the skilling and working—in spite of the fact that the game has excellent built-in chat features. Two and a half months go by with no further game play.

On July 27, 2003 he goes on for a brief session to build skills. There were few people online, so the effort did not pay off as much as he had hoped. "Maybe there will be more people the next time I log on," he comments (SH, p. 45). He is now speaking of people as a simple means to speed up the gaining of skill points; he is no longer interested in socializing or meeting friends. The incentives of the game appear to have ground sociality out of him.

On August 4, 2003, SH feels the need to explain why he bothers to keep playing with Freakstick:

> I'm continuing this character because I have invested time to build his skills up and his money a little bit. (SH, p. 47)

His relation to his avatar has become increasingly detached—he is no longer interested in trying out new traits or even showing off. The avatar is spoken of as disposable and identification is marginal. His goal is subtly reconceptualized, even as he represents it to himself as unchanged:

> My ultimate goal, still, is to gain enough skill and money to build the ultimate house where I won't have to work at making money. Rather I earn money by collecting the revenues given to me by the Sims for visitors coming to my house. Also I will get residuals for every dollar that my guests make. (SH, pp. 47, 49)

SH is now fully converted to the cultural code of the game: It is not about human relationships at all, or about good intentions moving you forward within a community of shared norms and

meanings, as in his earlier desire to help others. The cultural imperative of *The Sims Online* is to live off the labor of others, to become a "sim lord" (SH, p. 41), reducing the primary significance of human relationship to economic dominance through virtual sweatshops.

Having finally made the tacit culture programmed into the game explicit, however, SH proves unable to maintain interest in its values. Over the next couple of months, complaining that the "time it takes to build skill is a little overwhelming, not mention boring" (26 August 2003, p. 51), his game play trails off and he abandons the game.

CONCLUSIONS

What went wrong with *The Sims Online*? "We expected *The Sims Online* to be our flagship online subscription," the company confessed (Electronic Arts, 2003, p. 28). Gamers and the press alike anticipated success. "Finally it's here!" aquafan1 wrote on the beta tester board September 12, 2002. "An online game where you don't just kill things. The Sims series has to be the best set of games known to man. I mean what can be better than playing God? And now you can play with people all over the world! What more can you ask for?" (aquafan1, 2002).

The experience of our players provides some answers. Drawing on KM's diaries and recorded game play, we have documented the gradual discovery and internalization of five player–avatar dissociations. First, the dissociation of controller (mouse) movement from sim behavior was familiar to her from the offline version of the game. Second, in the online version, because money-making and skill-acquiring activities are so boring, this basic dissociation develops into a cultural practice of going afk, or "away from keyboard." Third, we witnessed KM's dissociation of her avatar's mechanical "need" to interact with other avatars from her own desire to socialize. Fourth, KM experienced the dissociation of her own intentions and her avatar's behavior, as the avatar persisted in playing the guitar after she had tired of it. This incident also involved a dissociation of player from avatar "body." Lastly, in her conversation with AJ at Lucky Luc's Slots, KM experienced the dissociation between the player's panoptic perspective and the avatar's embodied social presence. The cumulative effect of these dissociations, we propose, is to weaken the identification of the player with his or her avatar.

Using SH's diary, we chronicle how the player's own goals gradually are supplanted by the tacit cultural imperatives of the game. His initial expectations are of an open and free virtual community, in which he can experiment with new modes of being and behaving, where he expects to be accepted and appreciated for his altruistic behaviors, where avatars effectively and faithfully channel real people, and social interaction is a goal in itself. Starting by being ignored by other players, he is soon faced with the mind-numbingly boring necessity of skilling. Session by session, the realization mounts that social interaction in *TSO* is instrumental and devoid of intrinsic value. The last remnants of sociality pounded out of him, he finally adopts the game's cultural value of becoming a sim lord, sustaining himself off the labor of others.

Both our players progress from an *alter ego* avatar early in the game to a preference for a "weird" or alienated avatar toward the end. This disidentified avatar, we suggest, may function as the solution to the cognitive and emotional dissonance generated by the combined force of the five dissociations and the persistent, steamrolling pressure of the game's cultural imperatives. Gradually acquired, these slowly expel any desire for genuine social interaction from the player's own in-game aspirations. For our participants, what remained was not sufficient to motivate continued play.

The problems we discovered can be traced back to an imperfect transition from *The Sims* to *The Sims Online*. Robotic control, enjoyable when the player controls all the characters, as in the stand-alone Sims, generated a series of dissociations that hindered effective player–avatar identification in the massively multiplayer situation. The godlike power of *The Sims*

could not be ported to *TSO* with its many interacting players. This analysis suggests that many problems could have been solved and the affordances for natural conversation and social interaction better provided if player control in *The Sims Online* had been direct rather than robotic. What we do not know is whether this key adaptation to the multiplayer environment would have been sufficient to overcome the chilling effect on social interaction—the *raison d'etre* of the game—of the materialistic cultural code, a code that was well accepted by players of stand-alone *Sims*.

Our study complements Axelsson and Regan's interesting chapter (chap. 20, this volume). Using survey methodology to study players of one particular online game, *Asheron's Call*, they confirm the strong social motivations of MMORPG players. Their findings emphasize the importance of appropriate technologies to support the players' desires, such as multiple channels of communication and the ability to collaborate in short-term fellowships as well as enduring allegiances.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games are still young. The ongoing interplay of game designers and gamers create unique experiments at the intersection of individual psychology, social dynamics, hardware infrastructure, and computer code. A careful analytic study of these games may help locate some of the most fruitful and interesting neighborhoods in the emerging landscape of persistent online worlds.

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APPENDIX. INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO PARTICIPANTS

Sims Online Study

Introduction and Journal/Recording Instructions

We want to thank you in advance for your participation in the Sims Online study.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the Sims, this is your opportunity to participate in an online multiplayer game that allows you to create/recreate yourself in a cybersociety.

You will be paid to play! All we ask of you is that you keep a journal and record your play for one week of every month. We'd like for you to begin to play as soon as your game is installed in your computer. The amount of time you play is up to you.

Journals

Your participation in the Sims Study will require that you journal your activities after your play. Please turn in your journals at the end of each month along with the tape of your play (see below). We will make a copy of your entries and give it back to you until it is full. Once you've completed each journal we will give you a new one.

The first page of your journal should be a brief biography including your age, occupation, family background and prior experience with video games. Please note whether you have played any of the Sims games before and whether it was "stand-alone" or on-line. Please note whether you have played any other multi-player on-line game.

When journaling please be sure to do the following:

1. Start each new entry on a new page
2. Write only on the front of each journal page
3. Skip every other line
4. Write clearly and use a pen
5. Don't tear pages out or put loose pages into the journal.

Each entry should include the following:

1. The date, start time, and finish time
2. The name of your character
3. Why you chose to develop or continue to play this character
4. Perspective of your character (e.g., goals and feelings)—Please be as detailed as possible
5. Any thoughts or feelings you may have about what your character is doing.
6. Which places you go to online and why
7. Any feelings you might have about other characters or the game in general
8. If you use the website, describe what you did there.
9. Have you contacted anyone you met in the game outside the game? If so, why and how?

**Please journal whenever you play, even if you are not recording.*

Recording your play

We ask that you record your play for one entire week each month. *Before you start playing, please do a short test to make sure you are recording!* Whether you play for two hours or ten hours that week, we ask that you record your play from start to finish. Each mini DV records 90 minutes. Be sure to put a new DV tape in when the one you are using runs out before you play more. Label each DV with your name, the date, and the time of play for that DV. Indicate on the label how many DVs there are for that session (e.g., 1/2, 2/2). Put your recorded DVs in a safe place until they are picked up.

We are going to loan you a mini-DV camera and some mini-DVs. Once you have recorded a week of play, we will pick up the DVs from you. Please call Brendesha Tynes at xxx-xxx-xxxx or email her at btynesb@ucla.edu when you have completed the recording and she can come to pick up the data.

In some cases we are loaning you a computer that belongs to the Children's Digital Media Center. You are responsible for all the equipment that we have loaned you.

Scheduling your play

You are free to play whenever you want. However, the recording will be limited to one week per month. Note above that you will journal even when you are not recording.

Payments

You will be paid $300 for every three months of play (to be paid at the end of the 3rd month) as well as $1 per page of the journal. We have paid for the software and your subscription for three months. Initially, you will be asked to leave a credit card. They will charge your credit card $9.95 per month and this amount will be added to your $300 stipend every third month.

Troubleshooting

In case you have problems when you're trying to play, there is a 24-hour help-line. The number is 1 866-543-5435. There is also a website: EA.com.

If you are having technical difficulties with the equipment, please call Dom Alvear, xxx-xxx-xxxx. This is his cell phone.

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