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Gender Values in Simulation Games: Sex and The Sims

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Abstract

My paper is based on the idea that computer games as simulations can be seen as a new kind of aesthetical realism forming a certain perception of reality and thus certain ideological statements. These statements can be found in the structural shaping of the games, in other words the rules and gameplay of a game. The investigation thus concerns the framework that the rules and gameplay provide in games and its ideological effects or statements, and in this paper, I am specifically interested in uncovering value statements on gender and sexuality in The Sims 2 (EA Games/Maxis 2004). The Sims, being an immensely popular game and a 'pioneer' within the prevalent genre of simulation games, can be seen as representing general tendencies in computer games, and therefore the study of this game should offer overall insights into the ideological aspects of gaming.

Keywords

Computer games, ideology, interface aesthetics, gender, aesthetic theory, simulation

INTRODUCTION

This paper offers an analysis of value statements on gender and sexuality in the immensely popular simulation game, The Sims 2 (EA Games/Maxis 2004). I draw on my background in comparative literature, and therefore the approach to this subject builds on the theoretical insights gained within games research while being generally inspired by critical and literary theory. I take my cue from Miguel Sicart who has convincingly argued that "games are and can be designed as moral objects, with ethical values embedded in their design" (Sicart, 2006).

I begin by giving a brief theoretical introduction to the critical study of games and to issues such as realism and representation in games. Reflection on these issues is important in order to understand the relations between the player, the game itself and the context within which it has been produced and is being consumed. I then proceed with a closer look at the representation of gender and sexuality in The Sims 2, where I describe some of the central features of the game in regards to this issue. This leads to a discussion on which values or social discourses are being reproduced or challenged in the interaction between player and the game, and I conclude with some remarks on the interactive relationship between player and game.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The critical study of games

Computer game research¹ has been quite occupied with the criteria for analyzing, evaluating and defining games as an aesthetical genre, and the relevance of terminology and methods taken from other aesthetical research areas such as comparative literature and film studies has been discussed. Gonzalo Frasca and Espen Aarseth, among others, have pointed out the dangers of simply transferring a certain methodological approach such as narratology from these well-established

¹ In this paper, I will use the term "games" in the sense of computer games in general. Whether the newly developed field of game research should apply only to computer games or whether game research can be said to apply to all kinds of games, not only digital, is an ongoing subject of discussion that I will not enter into here.

disciplines to the new research in games. They argue that games as opposed to literature and film are not static representations made of fixed sequences of events but rather dynamic simulations (Aarseth, 2001). However, this is not the same as saying that games cannot be seen as aesthetical phenomena, which can be described through general aesthetic theory; this is actually a valuable and highly relevant approach to games – or as Jesper Juul puts it: “I think that having the tools for discussing games, and remembering how we interpret other cultural forms can prevent us from making naïve, literal interpretations of games” (Juul, 2005). Games do not function in quite the same way as books or film, but this does not mean that they are transparent or ideologically neutral playing machines.

Realism, representation and simulation

Games have their own distinct characteristics, limitations and possibilities, but share many issues with other art forms. One of the central issues in art in general concerns the relationship between work and reality, and the definition of realism in this context varies greatly depending on theoretical and ideological positions within aesthetical criticism, but it can be broadly defined as the act of representing a social reality by the use of signs referring to aspects of this reality. In the twentieth century, we have learnt to regard realism as a style or a discourse, which is no less natural or neutral than others. Realism in art is thus understood as much more than a direct, objective reproduction of reality; rather, it expresses different visions of reality and thereby also certain values or ideologies.

Again, it should be stressed that realism in games is certainly not directly comparable to realism in e.g. literature, but it is my opinion that we can speak of realism in games in the sense that various aspects of a game can be said to be founded in references to real life experience. This goes for various aspects of gaming, e.g. the virtual environment of the game, such as the everyday suburban setting of *The Sims 2*; the possibilities and forms of social interaction, such as conversing and flirting in *The Sims 2* but also physical interacting in an otherwise fantasy-based game like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment/Vivendi 2004); and of course, the frame narrative(s) or back story of a game can also be based in realistic scenarios. We can also speak of realism in game experience – in the games industry, designers and developers almost always strive for overall improved game experience to provide the “illusionistic realism” (Pold, 2005) that allows for the player’s immersion and engagement in the game.

Realism is closely related to mimesis, a concept derived from ancient Greek, referring to the aesthetical representation of reality through similarity and imitation. However, the French philosopher Paul Ricœur argues that mimesis is not the same as a static reference to reality, but rather an interpretative process in which the reader is engaged while reading, in other words it is a dynamic process (Ricœur, 1983). In this sense, mimesis is understood as a configuration in fictive terms of something already prefigured in the life experience of the reader, and becomes an active reconfiguration of the reality of the text interacting with the reality of the reader. Thus, the world of the text and the world of the reader are united through the preconception of the reader, since the text’s reference to a known, common world is a condition of its understandability. This preconception often carries an implicit cultural generalization or ideology.

Ricœur’s theory on mimesis and narrative is, of course, directed towards literature, but his points about the interpretative and active participation of the reader in the configuration of the meaning of a literary text fits well with the concept of simulation, which plays a vital role in the context of representation of reality in games. Simulation indicates a dynamic process rather than a fixed image, and in my opinion, simulation can still be considered a representation if representation is understood broadly as a mimetic practice communicating something about the world we live in through signs². Within the representative frame of the virtual world, the player participates in a creative process of sense-making. Games are, of course, extremely varied in setting and genre, but most (recent) games and certainly simulation games present realistic worlds for the player to enter and interact with, and it is the dynamic relationship between the player and the gameworld – and what representation(s) result from it – that I wish to analyze.

² The discussion about whether games should be understood as representations and/or simulation is well-known, and I will not enter further into it in this paper. My point here is simply that I understand the concept of representation as tied to mimesis (as an imitation of reality) more than to narrative, and therefore simulation and representation are not necessarily contrasts in my view.

REPRESENTATION OF SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN THE SIMS 2

“Love” in Simlish

The main purpose, or rather the main activities, in *The Sims 1* and *2* consist of creating and controlling virtual characters in a virtual world. The player and the game is freed from traditional game conditions such as winning or losing, and instead the game is more about achieving and maintaining a level of success – or just experimenting with different scenarios – rather than reaching a final victory. Within the frame and space of *The Sims*, the player can move freely, creating his/her own missions, experiments and narratives. It is a remarkable fact that this type of game with its special gameplay and lack of traditional game conditions is among the most popular (meaning the best-selling) of all computer games. But in spite of this apparent lack of restrictions, *The Sims* (as well as other open-ended simulation games) is still furnished with a number of indispensable rules and conditions, and studying these can help point out underlying ideological structures.

There is no doubt that for many players, one of the main attractions in *The Sims* (both the original game and the sequel) is the simulation of social interaction in the game and in particular the possibility of playing with romantic interaction between Sims. Acknowledging this popular aspect, the game industry has picked up this feature and has developed copycat games such as *Singles: Flirt up your life* (Rotobee 2004), which focuses solely on a simulation of romantic and sexual interaction. Romantic interaction in *The Sims 2* is certainly an important part of the game, and even though it is not a necessary condition for success (or progress), neglecting to explore this aspect of the game will cause the player to miss a large portion of the range of possible actions and interactions in the game. So, the player can ignore the romance part while playing, but this would mean not exploiting the possibilities provided by the game.

In *The Sims 2*, what motivates the development of a Sim's life is aspiration, where certain actions performed earn Sim points, which are monitored by the “Aspiration meter” on the control bar. Achieving and maintaining a high level of fulfilled aspirations is rewarded with bonuses such as a longer lifetime and various objects. The player can choose between five life aspirations, six with expansion packs – family, knowledge, fortune, pleasure, popularity, and romance – when creating a Sim. The inclusion of these aspirations as an integral part of the gameplay speaks of the game as reflecting a social reality where these are important values in life. And that romance is among these speaks of the importance attributed to this aspect of life. Since the game obviously refers to a contemporary (American) social reality, giving the player these options to choose from shows that these are the values that the game identifies as normal and credible – although there is a clear element of satire in the game's portrayal of modern life³.

The conditions of succeeding romantically in *The Sims* give some clues as to the values inherent in the game. I have played through various scenarios in *The Sims 2* in order to search for the constraints and possibilities afforded by the game as regards to gender and sexuality issues. First of all, there is no such thing as jumping directly into bed – Sims have to build up a certain degree of friendship before they can do this. In other words, Sims will have to like each other before they can love each other. Teenage Sims cannot be romantically involved with adult Sims, and although teenagers can go on dates and kiss and such, they cannot make “WooHoo” (the game's euphemism for sex) and so cannot get pregnant. A new feature in the *Nightlife* expansion pack allows the player to choose two “turn-ons” and one “turn-off” for each Sim, so that Sims can have positive or negative chemistry with each other, which facilitates or slows the process from friendship to romantic relationship. Among these turn-ons and -offs, the player can choose such things as different hair colours, make-up, bathing suits and stink, but you cannot choose to make a Sim prefer one sex over another.

A Sim can have as many romantic partners as he or she is made to engage with, but if a Sim couple is married or living together, infidelity does have a clear impact on their mutual relationship (conveyed through relationship points on the control bar). For example, as I experienced in one of my games, when pregnant Sim Marion Phillips witnessed her romantically aspiring husband flirting a little too heavily with one of their house guests, her attitude towards him dropped from +99 relationship points to an angry -99 score, and it took a lot of effort for Barry to build up the relationship again. This had an impact on how the game could be played, since time had to be spent

³ The satire and humor in *The Sims* is an important part of the joy of the game (at least in my view), but the game as a whole is not presented or mainly experienced as satire.

repairing the relationship, so the two Sims could make use of each other as ‘mood boosters’ again. They could, of course, also choose to break up/divorce, but this would mean ejecting one of the Sims from the lot. In fact, infidelity does not have to be directly witnessed by the affected Sim – in The Sims 2, Sims have memories and an act of infidelity can thus be witnessed by an outsider Sim and later come up in conversation with an affected Sim.

Gender and sexuality

As shown above, gender seems to be treated without differentiating between the two sexes in The Sims 2. Sims move around in the same way and have the same possibilities of interacting with each other and with objects, regardless of their sex. Sims can live in a same-sex relationship, and although in that case they cannot be married, they can be joined together in a union, which is a quite progressive feature (at least in an American context). Animated cutscenes have been introduced in The Sims 2 to sum up or capture moments that are considered important, which includes sharing a first kiss, exchanging marriage vows, and making “WooHoo”. The cutscenes integrate the Sims that are being played into the animation, so that the player-customized Sim(s) are the ones appearing in the scene. It makes no difference in the animation sequence if, for instance, a male or female Sim initiated “WooHoo” or proposed marriage.

If two women make “WooHoo”, one of them can even become pregnant – a feature that is not only progressive, but impossible in the natural world. Even male Sims can get pregnant, but only by alien abduction, which is probably more a comical than progressive element and not a standard scenario. However, the pregnancy feature in the game does bring about some gender-specific situations. When a Sim gets pregnant, she is put on a mandatory maternity leave during pregnancy, and while she still gets paid her full salary, she does not have the opportunity to be promoted (or change career track) during this period (which in The Sims 2 is three days). Of course, this is a very friendly representation of what having a child can do to a woman’s career in real life, but still, a more gender-neutral option would be to give the non-pregnant partner a mandatory parental leave as well after the child is born to scale things out.

The setting of the game and the central position of marriage and family values in the gameplay options does seem to favour a certain social behaviour within the otherwise progressive feel of the game (see also Flanagan, 2003 and Sicart, 2003). Mia Consalvo writes that although The Sims (here speaking of The Sims 1) has “certain ideologies constituted within its gameplay (how can it not? It’s a human creation), it is not necessarily hardwired to follow dominant ideologies. The gameplay itself structures but also leaves free spaces for user interactions as they occur in spontaneous ways” (Consalvo, 2003). This is true, but I choose to see the fact that the game itself “structures” as a pointer that it does express certain values, even though the player can act relatively freely within this frame.

In all cases, a successful life in The Sims does not necessarily presuppose heterosexuality, but it is still tied to a certain way of living both in gameplay and game representation. There are certain features in the gameplay that facilitates or impedes the player’s options in regards to sexuality and gender positioning, and in this sense, the representation is not quite neutral. For instance, one of the upgrades in The Sims 2 allows the player to interact with almost all the NPC’s (non-player characters) under the same conditions as other Sims in the game, which means that your own Sim can end up marrying e.g. the maid. When you order maid service in the game, the game discreetly urges the player to interact and flirt with the maid, since both the male and female maid are designed as pretty and scantily dressed, and from the interaction pie menu, the option to “Flirt...” will always be present. Interestingly, the sex of the maid will always be the opposite to that of the Sim who ordered the service, showing that the maids are clearly designed for a heterosexual relation.

With regards to gender representation, the game has a quite clear distinction when it comes to physical appearance. Male and female bodies are quite defined; females are voluptuous and males are broad-shouldered and tall, and the game does not allow the player to customize body shapes. The option to choose a “thin” and more androgynous body shape in The Sims 1 has also been removed in the sequel. Wardrobe in the game is gender-specific, and it is simply not possible to choose a dress for a male Sim. The closest I could get to cross-dressing in the game was a kilt, which is hardly a feminine garment. Make-up, however, is available for both sexes. Some of these features can of course be modified by aid of fan-made clothing and faces, and this possibility for the player to customize his/her game is even supported and encouraged by the game developers themselves. As Sicart remarks, “The Sims offers a large degree of freedom to the players – the rules

only determine the context in which actions have game meaning, and the game system reacts to them. But this freedom is encapsulated precisely by the rules” (Sicart, 2005). In a way, the player completes the game by adding his/her own goals, ideas, narratives and sometimes graphical content, but always within a certain framework that the game has put up.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The relationship between the representation or construction of gender as found in the game’s structural form (i.e. the game as a fixed structure) and the possibility of the player to act creatively while playing the game (i.e. the interactive aspect of the game) needs to be discussed further, whereas this paper has focused on a case study and analysis. The concept of the dynamic mimesis developed by Ricœur, which I mentioned earlier, can perhaps be of use in trying to examine the interactive relationship between player and game. I do believe that mimesis in a hermeneutic understanding can be applied to all art forms, regardless of their (many) mutual differences. Although I agree completely with Gonzalo Frasca and others that computer games cannot be treated as narratives or fiction in exactly the same way as literature or film, I think that Ricœur’s theory applies to games as well as other aesthetical phenomena. In this perspective, the meaning of the game as experienced by the player is a result of the game’s intermediary position between the player’s pre-understanding of the world and of what it is to play a game and his/her reception and ‘application’ of the game (Ricœur, 1983). In other words, the player brings with him/her a certain understanding of the world into the game, which is also set with its own set of rules and values, and finally, the playing of the game results in a kind of ‘re-figuration’, where the player’s values are confronted, challenged, manipulated or reproduced by the game.

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