Players Unleashed!

Modding The Sims *and the Culture of Gaming*

media matters

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Tanja Sihvonen

Amsterdam University Press

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

I still remember the day I learned how to kill my Sims. I recall having heard my brother complain about the Sim kids being a nuisance, as they were wasting the resources of the family, 'eating too much', without producing anything tangible (like money) in return. Although they had been quite nice to have at first, in a loving-couple-eventually-becoming-a-real-family sort of way, I soon learned that they were a big hassle. Sim kids were not as easy to control as the adult Sims since their interaction possibilities were much more limited. Although they were hapless, they were also short-tempered and annoyingly cheerful. The only reasonable way to deal with them was to get rid of them.

So I set off to build pools, directed my Sim kids to take a dip and then I removed the ladder, watching the little children exhaust themselves to death in the water. I ordered an irresponsible single mother to cook for her children, without teaching her how to do it first, and soon enough the whole kitchen was on fire. The first fire left behind a half-destroyed house with three dead bodies. And once I got a penchant for it, why would I have limited my destructive activities to kids only? Some Sims washed their hands too many times, turned on a light and died of electrocution. Some starved to death, or were abducted by aliens. And for some I bought a cute little pet – with the result of them getting ill and even dying from the 'Guinea Pig Disease' that was raising havoc among *The Sims* players in the early 2001.

It is evident I did not only play *The Sims* by looking for different ways of killing the game creatures. However, it can be argued that experimenting with the game in this way opened my eyes for the hugely varied possibilities of play. I did not only torture my little homunculi to death, but I also learned to utilise all kinds of cheats, tricks and hacks so I could create interesting scenarios in the game to amuse myself (and not all of them were that morbid). With my colleagues, I also engaged in discussions that considered various possibilities of seeing naked Sims in the game. Later on, I would invite my Sim neighbours over for dinner stark naked, and, of course, make my Sims have wild sex on a bearskin in the middle of the living room around the time they should have been going to work.

Although it might all sound like a lot of fun, researching games has involved a lot of serious work and very little frivolous play. In hindsight, I can see that without the help and support of many people this arduous task would not have been completed. Here, I would especially like to thank Seija Ridell, Susanna Paasonen, Mia

Consalvo and Sal Humphreys for their invaluable feedback, and my dear friends Barbara Abatino and Bram Kooistra for putting up with me on an everyday basis. I also want to thank my editors Jeroen Sondervan and Inge van der Bijl at Amsterdam University Press for their patience and encouragement. I am still learning from the Sims, so I guess I need to extend my thanks to the developers as well as to the players and modders of the game. Keep on playing!

I UNLEASHING PLAYERS

Game and its modification

> Because of the open-ended creative freedom that players experience with the game, *The Sims* has universal appeal like no other game franchise. We thank players everywhere for their creativity, sense of humor and strong sense of community that has made *The Sims* the cultural phenomenon it is today. (Nancy Smith, President of *The Sims* Label, quoted in Electronic Arts press release, '*The Sims* celebrates 100 million sold worldwide')

The Sims is a curious computer game. Originally published in 2000 by Electronic Arts, it has since become a global crossover hit and a cultural phenomenon. It has been termed a strategic life-simulation, a lifestyle simulator, an IKEA game and a virtual doll's house where the player's task is to provide little AI-controlled humanoid characters, called the 'Sims', with a house, household items and furnishings, and follow the daily activities of these pixellated people. *The Sims* also looks and feels like an exceptional game: its actual gameplay consists of orchestrating the Sims' everyday lives by directing their paths, choices and relationships. It is especially untypical in the context of mainstream games and game genres. Nevertheless, due to the accessibility of its thematic and gameplay, *The Sims* has attracted millions of players worldwide, among them a number of people who, prior to its introduction, were not involved in playing digital games at all. It has been an unexpected success story – a conclusion that can also be deciphered from the press release excerpt above. Interestingly enough, even after a decade since its introduction, it is still not rivalled by any other game titles of the same design or composition. In other words, its success has not yet been duplicated (Croal 2008).

One of the main reasons why *The Sims* resists being categorised as a regular game is its design: it features subject matter, ways of interaction, characters and viewpoints that cannot be straightforwardly identified to replicate the militarised masculinity often regarded to epitomise the field of digital games. By militarised masculinity Kline et al. (2003, 247-248) refer to a self-amplifying cultural channel or 'groove' which interactive gaming has cut out for itself mainly by concentrating on game design practices that produce strongly gender-coded scenarios of war, conquest and combat. It is also the result of the industry's ongoing negotiations with

its assumedly young and male hardcore player base. *The Sims*, on the other hand, was one of the first major releases, backed up by a considerable publicity campaign that was *not* targeted primarily at male players. It was not explicitly directed towards the female or any specific age group, either. It can be assumed that the game developers hoped it would attract all kinds of players and thus broaden the gaming crowd – which it indeed did. Its creator Will Wright has admitted in an interview that its developers consciously aimed at a gender-wise balanced player base (Becker 2001). As a result, *The Sims* has earned the title of the most successful PC game in history, and for quite some time now the whole series of *The Sims* games has been holding the third position in the list of global best-selling game franchises of all time (see the 'List of best-selling video game franchises').

The Sims instantly became a hit after its publication, and it also got rather positive recognition in the gaming press, despite the fact that some of its characteristic features such as graphics were already slightly outdated when it was launched.[1] Its commercial success has later on been regarded as proof of the idea that in games, good interaction design and playability are ultimately much more important than fancy graphics (Herz 2001). The system of object orientation in *The Sims* clearly works well for the modelling of the domestic 'real life' it portrays, and its designers obviously succeeded in creating a balance between the various functions of the game. As game researcher Mia Consalvo (2003a, 10) summarises, its interactive mechanism is easy to learn but hard to master. The key aspects in the gameplay of *The Sims* are realised through its intuitive graphical user interface, the built-in 'construction set' (the creation of characters as well as the Build and Buy modes which have always had advanced drag-and-drop mechanics) as well as the point-and-click method of directing the characters' actions. Also, the spatial and 'architectural' qualities of *The Sims* have been praised on many occasions.

What was also different in *The Sims* at the time of its introduction was the sociability of its characters, as many of the activities the Sims were to perform were inherently social in nature. The Sims could engage in deep conversations in their own language, *Simlish*,[2] or dance the tango together if the right music was playing. Or, two Sims could share a passionate kiss and soon be headed for an intense romance. When a Sim would come across another Sim, the first thing they would do is greet each other, and only after some conversing the player would be able to choose from more interaction options depending on the Sims' personalities, interests, moods and relationship status. Socialising was considered important also for advancing in the ranks of occupations in the game. Several game objects were designed to support social interaction and group activities in ways that had not been seen in mainstream games before *The Sims*, and many of its players still regard maintaining Sim relationships as the most important aspect of the gameplay.

The Wikipedia page on *The Sims* ('The Sims') provides an interesting summary of its gameplay: 'The only real objective of the game is to organise the Sims' time to help them reach personal goals.' An alternative way of describing its gameplay

would be to emphasise the *player's* personal goals of playing *The Sims*. For example, Will Wright has stated that his favourite ways of playing the game involved 'testing the limits of the behavior engine and designing cool houses' ('Sims.com chat transcript'). *The Sims* is essentially a game that allows for multiple play styles and preferences, acting more like an underlying foundation or a platform for all kinds of constructive (or destructive) activities the player wishes to engage in. It is not a game in the traditional sense of the word, unless the player *chooses* to bring in elements that are generally regarded as the essential characteristics of (digital) gameplay, such as the adoption of specific rules and goals, a system of character level-up and particular conditions for winning and losing.

My hypothesis is that a large part of *The Sims*' appeal is based on the fact that it succeeds particularly well at functioning on the levels of both simulation and game. In addition, its 'toyish' quality, its malleability as a digital text allows the players to practically select the functions (rulesets) of their own game and create the stylistic and thematic elements they want to play with (e.g. Laukkanen 2005, 66-68). There is no one way of playing *The Sims*. Instead, I regard its play more like experimentation and 'tinkering' with the available materials – playing with the game's capabilities, testing its boundaries and developing gameplay goals incrementally. These are the exact activities that have elsewhere been regarded as essential prerequisites in learning how to use software, as well as in developing it (Hayes & King 2009). The representative aesthetic style, the expressiveness and social nature of the Sims as well as the flexibility of the mechanics of play have all made *The Sims* a hit among heterogeneous groups of people. My point of departure is the assumption that the adaptability and versatility of *The Sims* gameplay are important features among the key factors behind its success. Around the time of its launch, Ted Friedman (cited in Kline et al. 2003, 270), a well-respected writer of video games, proclaimed that its adaptability was likely to transform game developers' idea of what successful games should be like. Similarly, game researcher Andrew Stapleton was quoted (in Davies 2004) comparing *The Sims* with reality TV shows like *Big Brother*:

> *The Sims* has the same sense of voyeurism by putting the players in a position of omnipotence within the game world, allowing them to create environments and situations, observe the consequences, and then ultimately decide whether to respond to the events faced by the characters.

By suggesting that the player should adopt the position of a God, *The Sims* invites her to construct a game world and then take responsibility for her creation. Due to the initial elasticity and pliability of the game code it seems only natural that there is great divergence in the play practices of *The Sims*.

The specific characteristics of *The Sims* warrant a study that situates the game not only in the context of digital games and play but also explores it as a kind of (construction) toy and a base for various sorts of performances not traditionally includ-

ed in the analyses of gaming or play cultures at all. The success of a game cannot be explained by its intrinsic characteristics only. Hence I think it is important to ask, first, how *The Sims* functions as a setting for its players' play and performative practices and, second, in what ways the players use the game and modify it in order to make it work better for their purposes. My research setting is therefore dual: I am interested in what *The Sims* allows its players to do (in other words, what its game engine – the core software component that provides the technologies the game needs in order to run – and other game components allow them to do), and what the players in turn accomplish to do with it. I intend to study the players' uses and possible misuses of the game code. This work is therefore concentrated on providing a snapshot of a 'socioculture' of gaming, which is necessarily backed up by analysing the game code through its scripts and affordances as well. The concept of *script* in technology-related studies refers to the power of machines and media apparatuses to define other actors' (most importantly, people's) relations to themselves. A related concept is *affordance*, which similarly denotes possibilities and constraints for the users' actions. These terms do not only characterise individual actor's usage situation, they also take part in the social construction of technology-related knowledge and its material conditions (see Akrich 1992; Dant 1999; Kallinikos 2002; Norman 1998). Let it be noted, however, that I am not doing an anthropological or an ethnographical study where acknowledging the differences between the actual players would be essential for my analysis. Instead, the primary point of reference through which I intend to study the dialectic of game and play is the player activity known as *modification* or 'modding'.

Modding refers to various ways of extending and altering officially released computer games, their graphics, sounds and characters, with custom-produced content. Modding can also mean creating new game mechanics and new gameplay levels (maps) to the point where the original game transforms into a completely new title. The most famous example of this is the *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) mod *Counter-Strike* (2000), which has since been sold separately as a new game. The creation of new game titles through modding can thus combine the creative efforts of players into the industrial logic of game development. A 'modding scene' refers to the collaborative internet networks that players use to share the resources for modding (tools, programmes, tutorials, FAQs and general help) and their creations (mods) with other enthusiasts. Modders are usually interested in a number of games, and the modding skills which have been learned from working on a particular game are often transferable to the modding of other titles. Nevertheless, it can be said that each game has its own modding scene (Laukkanen 2005, 15). This is especially true about *The Sims* modding, which is a hugely popular internet activity and a relatively unparallelled form of collaborative action particularly among female players (e.g. Wirman 2008).

Modding *The Sims* consists of creating and altering game contents by using various kinds of software tools. Designing new outfits for game characters, or

'skinning', has been a popular modding practice at least since the launch of *The Sims Creator* in 2002 as part of *The Sims Deluxe Edition* bundle. In that programme, skin files were saved as bitmaps, which meant that they could be freely edited with any graphics software. Today, common utilities such as *Photoshop* are used to create new Sim clothing and accessories, and new game objects are similarly designed with low polygon modellers like *Milkshape 3D*. New neighbourhood terrain maps can also be created with the *SimCity* games. In addition to numerous player-created tools, there are also official editors, such as the fundamental *Body Shop* that lets players create their own Sims by using a predetermined set of physical attributes and personality traits, as well as *Homecrafter Plus*, which allows players to customise their habitats (floor and wall coverings). Alongside these, there is content management software that is needed for keeping the mods organised which are shared on the internet (see Hayes & King 2009).

Modding can be regarded as a social activity in more than one way. In modding, the player's agency 'extends beyond an instantiation of the designer's agency to the authorship of a new artifact. These artifacts, in turn, become vessels of the player's agency, and play a key role in the social validation of their role as authors' (Poremba 2003a, 1-2). Similarly, according to J.C. Herz (2001), *The Sims* 'succeeds tremendously because it allows players with different agendas to interact as consumers, producers, mavens and community leaders and to reap rewards for all of these activities'. As the adaptability and versatility of *The Sims* games have made them popular with very different kinds of people, there is great diversity in the mods and modding sites as well. *The Sims* has been a huge global success, and there are modders communicating anything imaginable online, ranging from national and regional identity formations to very specific hobbyist interests. Issues concerning ethnicity and sexual orientation considerably shape the modding arena, too. However, despite the initial flexibility of the game code, gender, age, race or nationality do not figure in the modding scene in any uncomplicated way. There seem to be tendencies to suppress other than mainstream, white, heterosexual and conformist ideas and expressions also in *The Sims* modding community, as I will later demonstrate.

Due to the complex social structure of *The Sims* modding scene, it is fruitful to approach the modding practices through analyses of various internet resources. These typically contain custom-made game characters, in-game objects and decoration items as well as modifications of the suburban domestic space through elements intended for housing, gardening, transportation and so on. In this study I will use both large-scale, collectively maintained web resources as well as individual players' websites that distribute and discuss *The Sims* mods. The modding resources used in this research have been accessed regularly, and the mods that they share generally date from between 2000 and 2009 (see *The Sims* site list in the References section). *The Sims* modding scene is interestingly characterised by the fact that it does not really show drastic signs of slowing down. Instead it continues to

evolve, partly because *The Sims* players have not had any alternative game platform for the kind of activities that they are interested in engaging in.[3] The fact that most of *The Sims* modders create small add-ons has similarly affected the organisation of the modding scene. Although there is a level of specialisation among *The Sims* modders, there are no total conversion (TC) mods – transformations of the game release into new titles – which would have sparked their distinct development environments. Another consequence of this is that most of *The Sims* mods have been distributed as small files, suitable for sharing on the modders' personal webpages (Laukkanen 2005, 71).

However small it may be in scale, even the most basic modding requires the player to understand the elements of graphical content, file types and structures, file packaging methods for uploading and downloading, as well as file export and import mechanisms (Hayes & King 2009). It is no wonder then that many collective internet forums have been formed to aid the individuals with the practicalities of modding. Currently the most prominent collective internet sites for *The Sims* modding are *The Sims Resource* (TSR) and *Mod The Sims* (MTS). TSR was opened in August 1999 – before the actual release of the game – and in 2010 it hosts 2.2 million members and some 680,000 mods. *Mod the Sims* has close to a million registered users. Both of these sites feature traits of a kind of semi-professionalism that has been considered particularly typical to *The Sims* modding scene. One indication of that is TSR requiring a paid subscription for full access to their mod archives and tools (see also Laukkanen 2005, 70). In addition to mods and modding sites, I will also analyse mod-related texts on the internet. The online texts associated with modding are multiform and diverse – they range from convoluted player board discussions to technical and tightly structured modding tutorials. While writing this book, I have also exceedingly used Wikipedia and various *The Sims* game wikis as reference material. This has been a necessity since the most accurate, wide-ranging and profound information considering games can be found online, especially on the kinds of collectively updated and monitored web resources such as wikis.

The extensive use of websites and other online resources in this work reflects the fact that game-related discussions, both leisurely and professional, are more and more taking place on the internet. A benefit of wikis is the fact that they harness the power of presenting diverse perspectives and an expanding knowledge base. This is the result of wiki being an easy-to-use collaborative space which uses simple and uniform navigational conventions and functions through organising and cross-linking knowledge (Leuf & Cunningham 2001, 16). The main downside of wikis is their volatile nature as they are constantly re-edited and therefore lack the stability and transparency of printed encyclopedias. And, what has naturally been key in analysing the functionality of mods in the first place is the mod-enhanced gameplay itself. I have mostly played the first *Sims* game, but this research is at least partly applicable to the modding of *The Sims 2*, too. The modding of *The Sims 3* (released

in June 2009), however, falls largely outside of the scope of this study due to time constraints. Also, since much of the academic research so far on *The Sims* understandably focuses on the original instalment of the series, it is expected that the theoretical part of my work relies more fundamentally on the analysis of the modding of the original game than *The Sims 2* or *The Sims 3*.

In general, it can be suggested that modding does not only concern the code or the functions of a particular game, but the 'cultural instrumentalities' (see Kuhn 1990) of modding must be analysed within the larger technological, economic and political contexts as well. The co-productive position that *The Sims* invites its players to adopt is further reinforced by the possibilities of fabricating and sharing new game artefacts as well as through the recontextualisations and remediations of its basic gameplay. The players' reworkings of the available game materials and their affordances have become an essential part of the overall culture of gaming, shaping and restructuring the developer/player relations in a fundamental way (Poremba 2003a, 1-2). Also, what we regard as 'game' is being reshaped by this disposition. As Steven Jones (2008, 2) argues, games today are 'meaningful less as narrative or symbolic "texts" to be interpreted than as complex forms for social activity'.

Modding is, by definition, a cultural activity. But in *The Sims* modding community it is that in a particular way: the modding of *The Sims* has entailed commercial potential already from the start.[4] In the context of *The Sims*, questions concerning game modding tend to bring up issues around the commodification of creative recreational activities and the future division of labour as well. Custom content creation such as the modification of existing in-game items is often strongly encouraged by game companies and developers, as it is considered to be an important factor in the games' marketing strategies and extended shelf-life as well as a driving force behind turnover expectations in the first place. At the same time, the relationship between the industry and the players' 'fan production' is far from easy, as, for instance, the industry aims at regulating and co-opting user-created content for its own profit-making purposes (see 'Introduction to computer game modding'; 'What is a mod? – About terminology'). This is one of the reasons why it is not reasonable to set the limits of the analysis of modding at the mods themselves, let alone in the 'game text', as the larger contexts of game production and consumption need to be discussed, too.

Product and process

The scope of this work is grounded on an analytic dualism between *The Sims* game title and the actual play of the game. Both of these aspects are visible in my use of the word 'game': I think of the COTS (commercial off-the-shelf) game title as 'game-as-product' and the game materialised in gameplay as 'game-as-process'. I see that this approach has specific advantages in relation to my research material and

questions, which are formulated on the basis of treating the game primarily as a backcloth or a 'pad' for the self-expressive and storytelling purposes of *The Sims* players. The duality of game-as-product and game-as-process reveals that a game does not only consist of a material aspect, the algorithm, but it also entails an embodied experience, the act of play.[5] A game exists at the same time as rules and the evocation of those rules. One way to contextualise this notion is to relate it to Aristotelian metaphysics, which determines two basic modes of being, those of potentiality and actuality. In this sense, all games are constructed of rules and rulesets, which contain the potentiality of the game, game *in potentia*, but only the actual play of a game brings it to full existence, game *in actio*. The game has to be experienced by its player, interacting with the rules and the provided virtual environment, in order for it to achieve its actuality. The potentiality of a game can thus be considered as a designed formal system that is able to direct and predict certain experiences the player is likely to undergo without resorting to simplistic determinism. The ruleset of a game is developed as a series of affordances and constraints, relative to the choices given to players, and it is the interaction with these that conditions the experience of play resulting in the game in actuality, the game-as-process (Sicart 2005, 15-16).

Within the cultural studies tradition, neither of the dimensions of the game's potentiality or actuality is approachable per se. In order to focus on the dynamic processes of signification that the player engages in play and the various methods of altering the game code (as well as the narrative potential attained by remediation or the redirection of the game engine), I will present in this work a typology of the modding practices associated with *The Sims*. My typology is, on the one hand, a comment on the previous research done on gameplay and modding. On the other hand, it introduces a level of detail to the analytic differentiation between the various grades of configurative play and modding, and therefore it differs somewhat from what has earlier been written about gaming and modding. On a more general cultural studies level, my modding typology contributes to the understanding of gameplay and the players' preferences as a major force behind the emergence of computer games as cultural entities.

What will be clear in the course of this work is that neither the game-as-product nor the game-as-process can be treated as neat and confined objects of study on their own. For instance, '*The Sims*' is a label used to denote a series of games that encompasses the original PC game and its seven sequels, the console and mobile versions of the original game, the controversial multiplayer online game *The Sims Online* (TSO), *The Sims 2* and *3* as well as their expansion packs, 'stuff packs' and ported versions, such as *MySims* (2007) for the Nintendo Wii and DS. In total, there are literally dozens of *The Sims*-es, 'commercial off-the-shelf' games and compilations. Between these games, the theme and basic game mechanics may be analogous even though there are differences in their aesthetics, objectives and play options. It is clear that *The Sims* games cannot simply be treated as one unity whose players are

all the same, as there might be considerable differences among the players and play styles of each instalment. Here, I am concentrating on the modding of *The Sims* PC games without being very interested in the specificities of individual *Sims* titles. For the purposes of this study, I have decided to treat these games as part of the same entity, bundled under one name, *The Sims*.[6]

The Sims was originally created by American game designer Will Wright and his team at the California-based game company Maxis, which in 1997 merged with the industry giant Electronic Arts (EA). EA is well known for its high-end sports game franchises covering all major sports (ice hockey, basketball, football, golf), released under series such as the NHL, NBA and FIFA as well as the popular Tiger Woods games. In addition to these, EA focuses on the development of action games (e.g. the *Battlefield* first-person shooters) and popular film tie-ins (*Batman*, *Harry Potter*). It seems evident that *The Sims* series does not easily fit in with the selection of heavy action-packed games and ultra-masculine sports titles. However, the ever-growing popularity of *The Sims* has made it an exceedingly profitable long-term franchise for the corporation. *The Sims* was first released for Microsoft Windows on 4 February 2000, and since then the original game has sold more than 16 million copies worldwide. By January 2007, the original *Sims* and all of its expansion packs had together sold more than 70 million units. The base game, contrary to the customary practice of game business, is available even now, and it is still a steady seller. In spring 2008 it was announced that all of the *Sims* games had sold over 100 million copies globally ('*The Sims* celebrates 100 million sold worldwide'). These sales figures are perhaps a bit of a surprise considering its development history. At the time of its introduction, *The Sims* was regarded as a peculiar and somewhat eccentric game; its subject matter, 'everyday life', raised suspicions among the gaming crowd, and the game was warily approached by established game reviewers and critics. 'Three years ago, no one believed that a videogame about people and social interaction, without shooting, driving or what passes for action, could be published successfully,' EA president John Riccitiello reportedly commented in 2003 ('The Sims Franchise Celebrates Three Years at the Top of Worldwide PC Charts'). Even though the game turned out to be a massive hit, it has been placed in the canon of successful games with some difficulty. To some extent, *The Sims* still remains an anomaly within the context of digital games.[7]

To date, games have become an important commercial phenomenon, and since the early 1970s, the game industry has been evolving and expanding at a rapid pace.[8] A growing number of institutions and establishments are interested in producing statistics that represent the massive upswing of the industry. According to some analysts, the game industry, which is characteristically both seasonal and cyclical, had grown by 50 per cent between 2004 and 2006, and a survey conducted in the USA suggests that almost half of the population have played games ('Video Game Market – Changing Competitive Equation'). The game industry still expects considerable expansion of the global market; it is supposed to grow from $29 billion

in 2005 to as much as $44 billion in 2011 (see 'The Online Game Market 2006'). There is a specific historical reason for the statistics exemplified here being considered very important in the field of games. For a long time, games have been suffering from a public image of being only a children's pastime, an unimportant, culturally insignificant triviality. The word 'game' has been so tarnished that the game industry itself has avoided it. Formally, it still keeps referring to itself as the 'interactive entertainment industry' (see 'ESA'). It has been suggested that in formal contexts, the game industry prefers to avoid the word 'game' in the purpose of distancing its products 'from the childish pursuits of game, play and toys, and downplaying the technology connection with its unwanted resonances of nerds in bedrooms' (Newman 2004, 5-7).

The game industry does many things to improve its image. For example, games have been subject to extraordinary approximation considering their position among other media products. The game industry has been claimed to rival the revenues of the Hollywood box office (Gee 2003; Humphreys 2003, 79), especially if both hardware and software sales are counted in (Newman 2004, 3-4). There are also more symbolic ways to compete with the film industry, in particular. For instance, the stunningly movie-premiere-like launch of Bungie Studios' *Halo 3*, the AAA title for Microsoft's Xbox 360, appeared in the headlines of all major news channels on 25 September 2007, because its first 24-hour sales were expected to top the most profit-making movie premiere of all time. *Halo 3* was estimated to gross more than $190 million during the first 24 hours following its launch in the USA. This can be compared to the top-grossing opening weekends for films: the all-time list in the US and Canada is currently headed by *The Dark Knight* (2008) with a gross figure of $158 million ('List of biggest opening weekends'). However titillating these numbers might be, it is evident that the relationship between the game industry and the player cultures – the game-as-product and the game-as-process – cannot be approached through statistical comparisons or other abstract notions. Mia Consalvo (2007a, 2-5) situates games and tackles the variety of gameplay practices within the industry setting by introducing the concept of *gaming capital*, which refers to the possibilities of players to (re)define games and their play practices at a rather fundamental level. What she emphasises is the importance of understanding the interplay between players and the game industry, among other actors, in the development and deployment of the actualisation of what a game is and what gameplay entails. Gaming capital therefore denotes the realisation of the complex and dynamic push-pull mechanisms that involve players and the industry, and that continuously affect the relations between diverse game commodities, structures and groups of different kinds of players.

Consalvo's work importantly relates to the dual dynamic which is central to my argument on the adaptability and flexibility of the game code in the hands of players. In the context of *The Sims*, a sort of material implication of these kinds of push-pull mechanisms associated with gaming capital can be discovered, for instance,

through noting that the game is originally built on top of a visual programming language called Edith. Edith effectively provides the game with a virtual machine complemented by its development environment (Forbus & Wright 2001, 1). The buyable *Sims* game only includes the virtual machine but not the development environment for it. However, what modders can be considered to do is a kind of substitutive work where alternate (non-proprietary-based) development environments are being created and maintained on top of the game. The creation of development tools for modding is a clear indication of an industrial production logic that is currently being contested and criticised on the part of the users. In the digital world, if players do not like the affordances or potentials built in a game, they are free to start changing them. The possibilities for this kind of 'end-user programming' through visual programming languages like Edith are envisioned also in the documentation that describes the ease with which the behaviour of objects in *The Sims*, in particular, can be altered (Forbus & Wright 2001, 2).

The idea of gaming capital is also useful in considering what kinds of texts are feasible through *The Sims* gameplay, as it brings a dynamic dimension to the definition of textuality and involves individualised play practices in its analysis through concepts customarily used in semiotically inclined research. Textuality, as well as textual analysis as the tool for studying the interaction between various actors present in gameplay, is a valid concept in the study of games also in the sense that it brings together the industry perspective (game development) and the gameplay practices of individual players. The processes associated with constructing meaning and the reproduction of ideologies through media contents are reflected in the analysis of the 'semiotic power', as John Fiske (1995) once termed it, of the recipient, or the person interpreting and using the text in question. In the context of games, this semiotic power yields unprecedented material results that also affect the industry practices in fundamentally important ways.

Broadly speaking, modding can be defined as the players' productive efforts in the context of computer games and game cultures. Modding in general can thus be interpreted as an important (potential) constituent of gaming capital. Some forms of modding circulate and reproduce elements that are very similar to the fan activities tapping into the production logic of the more traditional media. Especially vital points of comparison in this context are carefully targeted ('cult') television series and so-called genre films (fantasy and science fiction, in particular), as well as many forms of literary production and certain branches of popular music, which often seem to evoke fannish practices. Game cultures and, more specifically, modding scenes incorporate media fandom elements, too: the internet distribution of gameplay videos, tutorials and walkthrough guides, gameplay screenshots and favourite game character contests can be proportioned to the creation of fan fiction and artwork. The enthusiasm with which game players generally engage in online discussions about their favourite games can also be related to the importance of the internet for the practices of performing fandom. Two particularly interesting cases

of game players' productive remediation – the reproduction of the game's content in another medium – and the ones that are especially popular among *The Sims* players, are *gamics*, a kind of graphic novel that usually consists of text and screenshots made with the game ('game' + 'comics'), and *machinima*, a form of filmmaking that uses the game engine to create so-called virtual movies. Gamics are to machinima what graphic novel is to animated film (see Knorr 2008).

Remediation, reproduction and refashioning of the game through the expressive potential of totally different media can be regarded as an important constituent of the gaming capital of its players, especially within the context of *The Sims*. They are a form of fan practice that sometimes results in economically feasible productions, too. Many dedicated *The Sims* modders who are specialised in making machinima aim at having a career in the game industry. A good example of this is the work of *The Sims 2* machinimator Michelle Pettit-Mee of Britannica Dreams (see Pettit-Mee 2009). Nevertheless, there still remains a fundamental difference between fan production and modding: game developers generally support game modding, whereas traditional media corporations often aim at suppressing the productive activities their fans engage in. Especially all commercial (re)production of media content tends to be tightly controlled. The attitudes of the industry can be detected in the divergent ways players and fans are addressed in corporate communications and how their productive endeavours are tolerated. For instance, *The Sims* players have been using modding tools and utilities provided by EA from the beginning, and they are still generally encouraged to distribute and share their creations, although there is also the kind of content online that clearly would not be approved by EA. But as game researchers Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006, 226) suggest, the nature of gaming is such that spaces for alternative creative practices are likely to exist in any case, whether the game producers and developers wish or not.

Understanding gameplay

In order for us to analyse modding, gameplay has to be at the core of this study – although it does not figure as the focus in any straightforward way. Actual gameplay on the large scale has been rather difficult to pin down in games research. So far, the most prominent play-related statistics and analyses have mainly been offered by industry organisations, such as the *Entertainment Software Association* (ESA). For instance, the US figures collected by ESA currently tell us that the average age of a computer and video game player is 35 years. The proportion of females among all gameplayers is 40 per cent; males lead with 60 per cent (ESA 2010). The trend has been that almost half, 45.2 per cent, of all the games sold in the US have been labelled E (for everyone), with commercial genres such as strategy, action, sports, and family & children topping the charts (ESA 2007). As we can see, despite the impres-

sive numerology and the emphasis on 'facts' these statements seem oddly generalised. ESA does not disclose its methodology, so it is difficult to compare the data with other sources. In addition, the presentation of its results seems to be peppered by ideological notions such as the majority of gamers are in fact responsible adults and household heads, and games form almost an ideal pastime for the whole family (for more criticism, see Mäyrä 2008).

Where the statistics often fail is illustrating the qualitative differences in the gameplay preferences among various age and gender groups. But however purposeful and politicised the figures may be, they point towards an important trend in the evolution of game cultures: the diversification of play. By looking at the history of digital games, one can easily detect that gaming technologies and apparatuses such as home video game consoles, computers and various kinds of hand-held devices have culturally tended to figure much more prominently as part of the young boy's than the young girl's realm. Playing games has decidedly contributed to the social segregation of the sexes and the differentiation between their areas of expertise and self-expression, not to mention the current gender division present in the socio-economy of the post-industrial labour market.

However, what seems to have happened in the past decades is that as part of the diversification of gaming, girls and women have become more prominent members of the gaming crowd, although this progress has not always taken place very smoothly (Johnson, King & Hayes 2008). Yet, even though the gender gap with regard to playing digital games at the moment is not large overall, men and women report to playing different kinds of games – or perhaps, as some research suggests, they play games differently (see e.g. Kallio et al. 2007, 68-69). Traditionally, only a relatively small proportion of women have been playing the kinds of games that are interesting or 'sexy' from the point of view of the media. The games getting media exposure usually belong to the particular genres preferred by men, such as the first-person shooter (FPS), the action-adventure, the real-time strategy (RTS) or the sport simulation. Traditionally, games belonging to these genres have tended to get much more media attention than those favoured by women, who play, for instance, a lot of casual as well as card, board and trivia games. One of the results of the PR and marketing strategies being so powerfully concentrated on these so-called AAA-list games, the high-end game titles, is that the game industry appears to be producing primarily these kinds of games. This in turn starts to dominate the general impression on what a 'game' is and who the people who play games in fact are (Jenkins 2003, 244).

The number of those who can be labelled as 'gamers' or 'players' according to selected criteria varies greatly, and also the discourse on the popularity of gaming depends on, among other things, the definition of a game and the identification of players. According to what is now considered as the classic game model, a game is a 'rule-based formal system' and fundamentally an appellation for a structure of interaction incorporating rules, means and objectives, the systematisation of which

is often based on the computer processing power. It usually involves a winning condition, which is manifested in a prize or reward of some kind, either in-game or in real life (Juul 2005, 6). Game researcher Jesper Juul's (e.g. 2003, 6) often-cited definition is based on six variables:

> A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.

In addition, games are generally thought to provide their players with amusement, enjoyment, satisfaction, mastery, diversion, or other form of entertainment (Eber 2001). Whether *The Sims* fits these criteria will remain a matter of debate, but what can surely be suggested is that many of its play options support practices that are definitely not included in the prerequisites of 'game' defined above. As the quote from the EA press release in the beginning of this chapter suggests, *The Sims* is a toy-like, free-form game with relatively simple playability. It was aimed at everybody, and when it became a hit, it was a truly global crossover success.

The Sims provides interesting research material because it has not only challenged the common notion of what a game is, but also who game players are. Despite the current diversity in games, *The Sims* has often been dubbed disparagingly as a 'girl's game'. The statistics used to back up this claim give slightly contradictory evidence: in 2001, for example, the figures presented by its developer Maxis showed that some 40 per cent of its players were female, 60 per cent male (Pearce 2002). More recent statistics suggest that, quite clearly, most of its players are female.[9] Even though *The Sims* cannot be self-evidently categorised as belonging to the 'feminine niche' of digital games, its girl's game label pinpoints to the fact that gender still plays a key role in defining the products of the game industry, both culturally and commercially. *The Sims* has also academically been treated as an 'ideal' game for female players (Jenkins 2001; King & Krzywinska 2006, 209; Wirman 2008). The fact that *The Sims* is favoured by female players may also have been a factor in the practice of defining *The Sims* as a 'non-game' or an 'interactive toy' which can then be placed outside of the scope of 'real' digital games.

Furthermore, *The Sims* has brought girls and women into the arena of game modding, which is even more astonishing considering the overtly masculine histories of computer programming and software development. To reword my research question then: What happens when the affordances of the game code, the identities of the players and ideologies associated with modding practices are being constructed and negotiated in the context of a supposed girl's game, *The Sims*? The modding scene of *The Sims* is considered to be very different from those of other heavily modded titles, such as the famous first-person shooter *Half-Life* and the fighting game *Unreal Tournament* (Epic Games 1999). Due to the simplified mechan-

ics of modding, easy-to-use tools and a supportive community, *The Sims* modding has become a popular leisure pursuit of much larger demographic groups than only adolescent men, who are generally thought to dominate the modding arena (e.g. Poremba 2003b). A noticeable proportion of *The Sims* modders are female, and it is likely that this is reflected in the production and distribution of mods as well. Through analysing the play and modding practices of *The Sims* it is possible to contextualise mods in a wider sociocultural setting that functions towards maintaining the gendered frames associated with computers and other digital technologies. In my opinion, the most important of the ideologies dealt within and through the textualities of games revolve around gender and sexuality, even involving such complex areas of social interaction as genuine, real-life relationships. The particularities of modding are in this case not only treated as symbolic representation of the contemporary sociocultural setting and political economy, but also as artistic self-expression and the creation of an empirical testing ground for change (see also Flanagan 2009).

Indeed, I would like to contend that there is an urgent need for using hands-on experience with modding on particular games (or game types) as a resource for the creation of theory. As Laurie Taylor (2002) notes, game theory is something that has largely been developed outside of the empirical research on gaming. Joost Raessens (2006, 3) similarly points out the need for precision and differentiation, or 'stratification', which would take the particularities of gaming and related practices into account instead of resorting to generalisations. By analysing the essentials of *The Sims* gameplay and modding I therefore aim to show that the gendered inclination of games is not self-evident or naturally given, but that it is maintained through specific kinds of practices that take part in the politicisation of the already charged issue of games and gender. The potentials included in the game code are essential in my analysis of how people actually modify the game and alter the manifestation of its intrinsic affordances. That is also why the study of *The Sims* mods has to be based on a rather detailed look into the gameplay as well as its game mechanics and functions. After all, in order to analyse the *modification* of a system one first has to find out about the basic organisation and properties of that system.

The Sims is played through creating households and families consisting of individual characters, the Sims, and its gameplay can be started off by experimenting with pre-made characters (such as the Goths, the Newbies, the Pleasants, the Roomies or the single Michael Bachelor) and houses, or by creating new Sims to the player's liking. There are certain preconditions for the creation of game characters, such as gender (which has to be chosen from two options) and skin colour, and although there are preset templates such as Caucasian and African American, these can be extensively altered via sub-sliders that affect things like age, height, weight, hair style and eye colour, clothes and accessories. In the original game, Sims were generated by first creating a family (with a family name), then providing each

of its members with a first name and an optional biography, and choosing the age group (adult/child), gender (female/male) and skin complexion (light/medium/dark). The personality of a Sim was formed by allocating a set number of points along five attributes, and this would also generate a star sign for the Sim. The principles of character creation remain the same in the different versions of *The Sims*: Sims get their physical appearance from a selection of components such as heads and bodies and other body parts, bundled with clothing and accessories – these are called 'skins' – which remain the basic moddable elements in *The Sims*. Each family has a house on its own numbered and named lot, whose borders form the boundaries of an individual playing session. In short, only one family and one house can be played at a time.[10] In the game, a Sim family (of any number of people between 1 and 8) is created first and then a domestic setting with furniture and decoration is designed for them. The Sims' lives consist of performing mundane activities such as having dinner, reading books, going to the bathroom and mopping the floor, as well as carrying out more long-term plans and commitments such as going to work or school, developing various skills and maintaining relationships with other Sims. The daily life of a Sim is every now and then accentuated by special events: getting a promotion at work, getting married, moving in with another family or having a child. A Sim can be abducted by aliens or get so upset that she leaves her house permanently.

Although both *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* are open-ended games, *The Sims 2* introduced a structure of play that was more restricted temporally: in it, all Sims experience aging through six stages of life, and they can live up to 85 Sim days. They also have goals, needs and fears in life, the fulfilment of which affects gameplay significantly. *The Sims 2* introduced a number of features that were not in *The Sims*, but in many respects it also functioned as a reappropriation of the original game's central characteristics. *The Sims 2* offered more fine-tuned mechanics of gameplay, especially in terms of interaction with objects, along with the obvious improvement of more detailed graphics. The camera movements were freed from the rigid isometric projection system; this unleashed the game's potential to be used for the creation of machinima, in particular. Also the character creation tools in *The Sims 2* were praised for giving the player considerable control over the appearance of her Sims. An important ruleset addition in *The Sims 2* was the Aspiration Meter, which allocated four desires and three fears for each Sim, taking part in determining a Sim's mood and work performance. As the overall structure of the game moved away from bodily functions and towards life goals, hopes and dreams of the Sims, the player was clearly positioned to help them out with their aspirations. As the Sims were also designed to be much more independent and self-sufficient than earlier, the player was put 'more in the role of a benevolent guardian angel than an invisible day-care teacher' (Sjöberg 2004).

The aging system created for *The Sims 2* was a major improvement in the sense that the juxtaposition of adults and children as well as the behavioural patterns of

children were rather heavily criticised in the original *Sims*, where babies born to willing couples would become pre-teen children, but never grow up to become adults. In *The Sims*, no one would ever die of old age, either. The concept of a temporal lifespan, which was already developed among modders, was incorporated in the major play mechanisms of *The Sims 2*. These upgraded Sims also started featuring functions associated with 'DNA', being members of a family both in their mental characteristics and physical appearances. The DNA would also be passed on to a couple's child and keep influencing the family history. *The Sims 2* thus gave the characters a complete lifespan, from infancy to adulthood and eventual death – even though the insertion of an inevitable death in the gameplay mechanics resulted in the boom of anti-age cheating, the code for which was provided in the game manual.

The Sims is staged within the contours of a small suburb outside 'SimCity'. The look of the game has always been detailed and naturalistic, yet highly stylised and cartoon-like at the same time: for instance, the Sims' conversations were represented through speech balloons containing icons and pictographs. *The Sims* featured a combination of 2D and 3D dimetric projection and fixed resolutions whereas *The Sims 2* was realised entirely in 3D with a powerful graphics engine. For both games it is customary that some features are abstracted and stylised whereas others aim at creating as realistic and lifelike a feel to the gameplay as possible. As game critic Stephen Poole (cited in Consalvo 2003a, 6) has noted, games must not be 'too real' as then they might result in reduced enjoyment in gameplay. A certain level of abstraction is needed. As a result of its characteristics, it is rather difficult to pin *The Sims* down as belonging to a particular genre – its theme and style of play are relatively unique (or at least they have been, until the 'casual revolution' of Facebook games; see Juul 2010). In the categories of strategy and simulation, in which *The Sims* is often placed, most other games – like flight simulators and war strategy games – tend to look and feel very different in comparison, as both their aesthetics and game mechanics are structured according to divergent principles.

As I have previously argued, despite its success *The Sims* does not appear in any straightforward way in games journalism or the politically oriented public debate on the 'effects' of video games, which still primarily evaluate games – the first one positively and the latter negatively – based on their adrenaline-inducing and titillating qualities. Therefore I regard *The Sims* as a kind of prism through which the workings of the game industry, games media and the preferences of game players (i.e. the culture of gaming) can be investigated in a fruitful way. It looks as if the problematic dealing with gender issues in relation to games is deeply embedded in the game industry as well as games journalism, which is illustrated by the fact that game journalists do not quite seem to know how to write about this kind of a game. *The Sims* is also considered 'very peculiar' in some academic discourse (e.g. Wark 2007, para. 049). What I think is often lacking in the game journalistic accounts and in a significant part of academic discourse, too, is not only a profound under-

standing of the gendered ideologies of address and operations of games such as *The Sims*, but likewise of the dynamics of the game through its play and modification. What has to be acknowledged first is the fact that the game's functions and behaviours are manifested in the representation of the game world through the act of gameplay. The potentiality of *The Sims* is actualised in play, and the resulting game-as-process can be considered as the textual dimension of the game. Furthermore, the textual dimension of the game is complemented and complicated through the means of modding. This is why the theoretical foundations of 'text' and 'textuality' have to be rethought and somewhat reconfigured for the context of this work. The texts that result from the kind of 'tuned-up' gameplay I will study here clearly illustrate that the players of *The Sims* are not only innocent little girls playing with their cute virtual dolls and doll's houses.

Reconfiguring textuality

My analysis of modding begins by regarding it as a practice that taps into the structure of the game, which is, in essence, logically and materially different from other media like film. As game researcher and critic Raph Koster (2006b) puts it:

> Our interactions with the [game] system are demonstrably different and observable, leading any casual observer to understand the gap between the experiences of different users. [...] Watching someone playing a game is its own review: we understand how that person relates to the work.

The different ways of playing a game are thus made explicit; there are structural, empirically detectable variations between divergent ways of playing the same game. This notion is a direct result of the nature of games as cybertext, or the 'topological structures of the[ir] textual machinery' (Aarseth 1997, 4). Modding further complicates this topological structure through which the player chooses her paths by adding not only new elements, objects and characters, but also new, unexpected rulesets and behaviours. Although the theme of my study, the modding of The Sims, may sound relatively specific, the dynamic I will tackle in this work easily reaches out beyond the realm of one game and its modification practices. As this is a cultural study, the methodologies used for providing an idea of gameplay are textual analysis and representation analysis of mods, in particular, which are then contextualised within the sociocultural aspects of playing and appropriating the game code.

This approach is based on the notion that the game takes shape in the process of playing it, and the aspect of the player-game interaction, the gameplay, demands a lot of consideration in the study of games. 'The gaming situation', as game researcher Markku Eskelinen (2001, 1-2) terms it, is a combination of ends, means, rules, equipment and manipulative action, and gaming should be seen as configur-

ative rather than interpretive practice. According to a number of game studies scholars, it is precisely this configurative aspect of gameplay that distinguishes game from other cultural forms in terms of text-user relation. Cybertheorist Espen Aarseth (1997, 3), among others, has suggested that in art we are required to configure in order to interpret, whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure. 'The game interface bridges the gap between the diegetic world and that of the player,' states Mark J.P. Wolf (2001, 3-4), proposing a triple structure to the study of games. As he indicates, the game's existence as an object of study, a text, has to incorporate player action and algorithmic structures and mechanisms as well as the interface and the game's graphical and/or textual content. The interactive infrastructure of game code, the power allocated to the player and the resulting individualised gameplay experiences are an important part of interpreting games and situating them in the sociocultural context.

The complex and intertwined relation between a game and its play is illustrated writ large in the core issue of digital media studies, namely the importance of regarding the user (such as the player) as part of the process of a cultural product (in this case, a game) becoming representationally existent, a text. However, taking the idea of textuality as the starting point for a study on games has not been a generally accepted proposition among the most prominent group of game studies scholars, especially in the so-called ludological strand of game theory. In *First Person*, Aarseth (2004; see also Aarseth 2003) argues that games cannot be primarily regarded as texts or in terms of textuality; he asks, 'Where is the text in chess?' and states that even intertextuality is irrelevant in the study of games. Aarseth admits that games appear in extremely diverse sets of practices, yet the fundamental characteristic of all of them is that they are 'self-contained', which means that their value system is shaped internally by their predetermined core rules. Therefore, game characters, the semiotic system that games employ and the gameworld taking shape at the level of representation are the most coincidental and the least important elements in the research of games.

In the middle of the current disagreement regarding games and textuality, it is, in my opinion, necessary to bear in mind that studies of texts and textuality have a long history and a well grounded theoretical basis outside of the field of game studies. Although I see it as problematic to uncritically approach the player-game relation through the tools and concepts developed within the traditions of literary, film or even digital media studies, I still think they cannot be ignored completely. I will therefore relate the cultural articulations of play to activities such as viewing, reading or listening, seeing them coexist and interact with various forms of other media, hoping to implement caution in my study nonetheless (Cover 2004). My starting point is the notion that in the earlier studies of art, in particular, textuality has been connected to the institutionalised and generalised base of a cultural product, thus making it a 'discrete unity' whose outer boundaries could be identified and determined, so to say, for the purposes of analysis. The dimension of materiality

has been an unproblematised vessel for the text to traverse, but not an object of study in itself. Nevertheless, this situation has changed, at least to some extent, due to the adoption of the theories developed within the fields of technology studies as well as material culture studies (e.g. Oudshoorn & Pinch 2003).

Following Roland Barthes' (1996 [1979]) radical notions of the fluidity of text, which marked the shift from structuralism to poststructuralism, digital media theorist Sean Cubitt (2000, 90) proposes that the text, especially in the digital age,

> is not a fixed entity but the ephemeral production of users' interactions with the medium. From one point of view this represents a diminution and dematerialization of textuality: without the permanence of the model text, there is no object for textual analysis. Since the digital interface is by nature fleeting and changeable, textuality resides primarily in the flow of interactions, and only marginally in end products [...].

Understanding technology in terms of both social construction and textual practices can be very useful in the studies of digital media. It can especially help us tackle the problem of defining, or *rematerialising* the object of our study, which, due to digitalisation, can be seen to dematerialise (Cubitt 2000, 87). By this notion I refer to the process of disappearance of the (model) text or, in other words, the particular, predefined content of a mediacultural product. Nevertheless, in the context of my work, I see that there is also a rather concrete way of investigating the ephemeral flow of interactions Cubitt refers to. *The Sims* mods can be regarded as a material implication, a 'trace' or a 'stain' of the players' interactions with the game, binding together the affordances of the code and the players' preferences. In a sense, the hopes and dreams of players crystallise in a material form in the mods they create.

What is the 'textuality', the representational mechanism of The Sims, then, and on what grounds can it be considered to invite its players in the practices of simulation, possibly training them to accept specific world views? According to the seminal study by Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, the thematics of The Sims cannot be approached through concentrating on the interaction between player and game only, but the game has to be situated in the larger circuits of technology, culture and marketing. These circuits are superimposed on and interpenetrated in each other, resulting in a complex web of constituting forces that manifest themselves at various levels of actual gameplay. The cultural circuit, in the analysis provided by Kline et al. (2003, 269-271), links the player to the designers of the game through the game text, and the technological circuit is constructed by the player's connection through her machine to its developers. The marketing circuit, on the other hand, ties the game consumers to the game industry through the game commodity. One of the main implications of this multilevel 'circuitry' is that The Sims acts as a force of digital socialisation, and it does so in many exceedingly clever ways:

> In inviting gamers to involve themselves with the details of Sim careers, leisure, and domesticity, the game interpellates or addresses players who are already engaged in a multitude of social discourses identified as precisely the subjects of such career choices, lifestyles decisions, design, purchasing, and domestic decisions. (Kline et al. 2003, 273; 276)

The contents of the game thus tap into the meaning-making practices of its players, and in this respect it is vitally important to consider the ideological implications of the game and its proposed thematics. While the socio-techno-economic analysis in Kline et al.'s 'Sim Capital' chapter is absolutely convincing and persuasive in many ways, it nevertheless lacks a central aspect: the acknowledgement of the importance of regarding gameplay and modding as constitutive elements of games, especially in the analysis of games as sociocultural texts. Doing research that takes this aspect into account is the most important motivation of the work at hand.

Games, and especially digital games, are a relatively new area of cultural study, and game studies has developed mainly within the past decade. This is to say that the study of games in their own right, 'as particular kinds of textual systems that operate in their own distinctive ways', has been emerging only relatively recently (King & Krzywinska 2002, 2). It is fair to note, however, that there have been studies of digital games in the previous decades, but their focus has not generally been on the specific qualities of games or the subtleties of playing them, but rather on responding to broader social concerns about games and their potential 'effects'. These studies have often been produced from psychological or sociological perspectives, and their motivations have stemmed from old anxieties about protecting the children and other groups deemed underprivileged from the potentially destructive effects of mass culture. The psychology-based studies on games and gameplay are often disregarded in the more aesthetically or textually oriented research paradigms of art and humanities. Yet, film or literary theory and communication research have not been very involved in the study of games either (Aarseth 2001; Kerr 2003; King & Krzywinska 2002; Newman 2004, 5-7). Digital games have been fitted within the scope of culturally attuned media studies with considerable difficulty in the past decade or so (e.g. Aarseth 2001; Jenkins 2002; Juul 1998). One of the main reasons for this is the somewhat rigid interpretation of the scopes of textuality and narrative (and textual analysis in practice) which have not been easily adapted to the study of such transient texts as games. As many new media forms, also games are defined by non-linearity. However, the underlying notion of the traditional sender-message-receiver model as the norm in communication research continues to presume a certain linearity to all processes of media production and consumption. It is true that the research on the media process is elaborated to take into account the divergences in meaning-making, interpretation and reception, but nevertheless, the model may effectively rely on rather fixed notions of text, authorship and audience (Cover 2004, 174).

Some game researchers seek to establish a view according to which studies of games should be distanced from research on other media altogether. They argue that the narrative media ecology brought about by more mainstream forms of media is exclusive of games, because the engagement in games is realised through interactive play rather than more traditional practices of reading, listening and viewing, which are associated with the print media, cinema, television and radio. On the other hand, there are also arguments in favour of games incorporating at least some narrative elements, and that the process of play is not totally unlike the experience of reading a novel or watching a film – after all, all of these forms of engagement are constituted through semiosis (e.g. Kücklich 2003). Even the simplest game can be interpreted as a construction of semiosis that conveys narrative, and more elaborate games may have complex and multilayered narratives. From a cultural studies perspective, which I adhere to, it is difficult to separate text and play, as play in itself is always textual, even if its textual form may not be durable, recorded or easily analysable. It is precisely the interactivity in the form of gameplay that allows the players' participation in the process of the game as text (Cover 2004, 175-176).

The problematics of regarding gameplay as a constitutive element in bringing forth a game (text) are also reflected in the difficulties of defining what kinds of objects games are, materially and practically speaking. The range of a (single) game is much more difficult to master as a work than the more traditional media products such as newspaper articles or television programmes – or, to put it in other words, methodologies for the study of textuality are developed in the contexts of media that are or become existent through less effort than what is needed for a game to come through. In addition, gameplay experience can vary greatly from one player and playing session to another, and for the gameplay to even succeed, a player-researcher needs, first of all, a lot of time and serious commitment, as well as various motor skills of operating the interface devices, puzzle-solving, etc. Then, in order to grasp the entirety of a game, patience is called for so that the exploration of all the possible areas and courses of action, hidden features (for instance, the so-called Easter Eggs) and alternate narrative paths can be completed – and yet, the textuality of the game may still remain intangible (Wolf 2001, 7, 13-14). This diversity poses such a challenge that large-scale, in-depth studies on gameplay are very hard to conduct.

So far, games have primarily been studied through aspects of their structure and mechanics represented in the graphical output. Practices of gameplay have been articulated in terms of motivation, interaction and completion of tasks within the given time frame, structure and other genre-related conditions of play. I regard *The Sims* modding as a mode of activity (or various activities) and the player's position as a role that the game system invites the (potential) player to assume. In addition, the activity of gameplay will be analysed as performance, a specific manifestation of the feasibility of this role. Furthermore, as the player position and the act of play

are conceptualised in terms of role and performance, it is only natural that the game (world) manifests itself as a stage (see also Bowers 2007). The relationship between narrative and game, or storytelling and gameplay, has traditionally also been investigated through the notions of role, play and performance. The concepts mentioned here were originally introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman (1959), and although they were presented in a very different context, they have been used extensively also in game studies. The narrative aspects of games are most clearly developed in the theory concerning role-play (Hitchens & Drachen 2009). While there inevitably are narrative elements present in all play styles of games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), in role-play there are specific tendencies to use the game platform for the purposes of storytelling in much the same way *The Sims* modders use their game for remediation. Games like *The Sims*, *Second Life* or *WoW* end up being forms of participatory entertainment where their players engage in the creation of a common fantasy world.

The aim of this study is therefore not only to give an overview of playing and modding *The Sims*. I also want to analyse the player-created mod in terms of and in itself as a symptom of a larger cultural shift, endorsed by digital technologies, of a player (or reader, spectator, user) becoming the co-producer (author or co-author) of the cultural artefact in question. As game researcher David B. Nieborg (2005, 4) concludes, '[b]y producing additional or replaceable game content, the agency of gamers goes beyond the mere interaction with the text itself. Gamers are able to change almost any aspect of gameplay [...] taking their agency to another level.' This altering focus does not only concern the role of the player, but the conception of what constitutes game as a cultural product, a text, is also being renegotiated. That is why the question of textuality is especially relevant in the study of games like *The Sims*. The game functions as a germane platform for the investigation of the issues of textuality in a more general cultural studies context, too. This kind of approach is, in my view, demanded by digital media theorist Sal Humphreys (2003, 90-91) when she suggests that textual analysis of games and the sociocultural studies of the elements of gameplay lack the productive and economic relationships involved in this 'ergodic' textual play that posits players as co-creators of the emergent text. It is also essential to consider this custom content creation as a form of collective activity, taking place on the internet, largely based on the ideals of voluntary sharing of the offerings and freely distributing the code. The study of player cultures and communities has often been considered an important part in the positively connotated research of participatory culture, but in the context of this work the terminologies and ideologies related to this line of thinking are also put under critical scrutiny. In any case, the emerging paradigm involving the idealism of participatory activities as well as media convergence and networked experience incorporate elements that are vital to the study of *The Sims* modding scene, too (see Jenkins 2006a).

I think it is important not to disarticulate digital games from their various social

and cultural contexts – they are, after all, particular forms of entertainment media. Besides occupying a similar position in the world as some other technologies, they also have a functional significance as media; they are articulated in and into both public and private lives of people in complex and often contradictory ways. The media technologies have their own genealogies, or 'biographies', through which they are constructed, but they themselves also take part in defining some of the main routes along which ideas, experiences, pleasures and meanings are being socially and culturally constructed (Silverstone et al. 1992, 15-18). There seems to be a high level of enthusiasm associated with studying the cultures of gaming. Games drive innovation: the players are a demanding group that push for advances not only in technology, but also in interface, functionality design, connectivity protocols and the development of complex graphics and physics engines. The innovations in these areas spread beyond the gaming media in what Sal Humphreys (2003, 79) calls a 'trickle down' effect: 'If we view games as a remarkably successful set of applications in the realm of new media, then understanding how they work becomes a project important for a much broader field of study.' Furthermore, game studies not only promote 'new media theory', but through its advancement we may gain a possibility to re-conceive previous media relationships as well. The rise of interactivity is an indication of a culturally articulated desire to take part in the transformation of text, and games allow participation in the construction of narratives in multiple new ways. As such, they provide us with potential for the re-examination of older forms and methodologies associated with media theory, too (Cover 2004).

Computer game modding will be situated in two primary contexts in the course of this work. First, modding is regarded to figure extensively as part of the operations of the game industry, even though the 'official' histories of game development and design often omit its importance. In addition to tapping into the dynamics of both commercial and non-commercial game development, modding is considered a cultural activity here; it is the appropriation of the game system and the affordances of the code to the purposes of the gameplayers. Therefore, the second frame for studying modding in this work is analysing its practices in detail in the context of *The Sims* game series. In order to understand the specificity of *The Sims* modding, the principles of operation of game cultures, in general, as well as their historical foundations have to be excavated. This kind of contextualisation is especially important since there is a lack of relevant research in the area. That is why I will start chapter II by discussing modding both as the leisurely creation of extra content by players, as well as an institutionalised part of official game development. Game modding will in this context be analysed as an instance of 'participatory culture'. Modding games has traditionally been an elite activity, powered by the enthusiasm of largely (or exclusively) male hardcore gamers, whereas the so-called casual gamers, or 'grey players', are often thought to be females and adolescents. It is no surprise, then, that modding has most intimately been associated with the FPS types of games, at present the most violence-relying and 'masculine' of all game genres

(e.g. Nieborg 2006, 5). *The Sims* modding contradicts these notions simply because it is a hugely popular activity, carried out by its players in strength, and – most importantly – because many of its player-modders are female. *The Sims* modding possibly also involves people with more diverse backgrounds (considering age, for example) than FPS modding.

As will be further elaborated in chapter II, the practices associated with modding have the power to not only alter the gameplay experiences of individual players, but they also figure importantly in the workings of the game industry. Because of the implications of modding, I will show that it is not possible to draw conclusions considering digital games and game cultures on the basis of the affordances of the game code only. In modding, the dimensions of testing and experimenting with the game's malleability and adaptability as well as the desire of realising the game's 'full potential' are always present. Mods are fundamentally game elements and components of private gameplay, but due to their mediated nature as strings of code that are often freely shared on the internet, I also regard them as 'software patches' or a kind of 'hacking devices' that may fundamentally alter the play experience of a particular game for a considerable array of players. In this way, modding is also an important instance of what will in this study be termed as the 'participatory design' or the 'second stage of development' of games, the principles of which are typical to all software services in the contemporary culture industry.

In order to be able to systematically analyse the modding practices in the context of *The Sims*, I will present a typology for the various ways and methods of altering game code in chapter III. My typology considers, most of all, the different levels of playing *with* the game, and its purpose is to show how diverse the practices of modding can be. They range from utilising programming errors and glitches in the game to using cheat codes, and further into reworking the game's original aesthetics and operations into a very different set of characteristics. Finally, the game engine can be used for other purposes than pure gameplay through practices related to remediation: players habitually create online narratives and machinima by taking advantage of the storytelling affordances of *The Sims*. A very important part of this creative self-expression is the use of modded objects and characters as part of the narrative reconfiguration of the game.

Mods do not therefore only alter the private game experiences of individual players, but they also take part in the creation and maintenance of a specific kind of community on the internet, the particularities of which will also be investigated in chapter III. *The Sims* mods are usually shared online through players' private web pages, or on common internet resources which are often moderated by a group of semi-professional player-modders. Despite the fact that modding is, in principle, a component in the solitary activities of playing stand-alone computer games, it can also be regarded to constitute conditions and potentials for the game experience of other players. I suggest that the internet functions as a safe playground in this sense especially for girls and women who are interested in modding. The workings of *The*

Sims modding community will be investigated through an analysis of the gaming technologies, as well as their localised and material practices of organisation. The internet activities can be said to expand the private gameplay of *The Sims* by adding a public dimension to it, and this aspect allocates modding certain political power. The creation and distribution of mods take part in the renegotiation and restructuring of the ideological propositions inscribed in the original game, through means I will explain in detail in chapters IV and V.

In order to understand how the reworking and redirection of *The Sims* effectively work, I will first analyse the gameworld of *The Sims* along with its play mechanics and rulesets in chapter IV. My basic analysis of *The Sims* gameplay and the interpretive and configurative dimensions of its modding are based on investigating the temporal and spatial variables which structure the object-oriented game mechanics and rulesets for the player engagement with the game. These dimensions are all affected by various kinds of modding practices, each in their particular way. There are of course several examples of the initial ideological inclinations and propositions in the code of *The Sims* – which I will primarily analyse through regarding the game as a product of the capitalist system, conveying the consumerist ideology associated with domesticity and the American suburban mental landscape. But to what extent the realisation of these propositions depends on the developers' intentions, incorporated in the game code, in comparison to the reconfigurative power allocated to the player, is a question I will tackle in detail while explaining the basic operations of *The Sims* gameplay in chapter IV.

My assumption is that the most important ideological paradigms that are associated with *The Sims* consider regarding the game as a virtual doll's house through which the reaffirmation of the suburban and gendered spatial order can effectively be negotiated. This suburban mentality is familiar to us primarily from other media contexts, American post-war TV sitcoms, in particular, and *The Sims* can easily be situated in the context of these kinds of media products in its initial stage. Nevertheless, as the perspectives on player participation (and moreover, modding practices) in the emergence of the game text are taken into account, it becomes clear that the ideologies conveyed by the game-as-product are often rendered into surprising results in the hands of the player-modders. What happens in modding, then, is sometimes a kind of subversive reappropriation of the proposed ideologies inscribed in the game code. Here, it is important to be reminded once again of the starting point of my analysis, which is the notion of *The Sims* as an adaptable, flexible and elastic software system, the implications of which are visible already on the level of the players' interpretation and configuration of its intrinsic affordances. It cannot therefore be assumed that *The Sims* would act straightforwardly as a proponent of a certain ideological paradigm. That is why I will investigate its modding in chapter V especially through alterations of its object-oriented game mechanics and transformations of the game characters, as well as the uses and functions of the modded characters. This section will therefore deal with the most profound

mechanisms of appropriating *The Sims* gameplay practices through modding. In chapter V, I will also trace the potential associated with modding objects and characters in relation to bending the original inclinations of the game by, for instance, regarding the modded *Sims* gameplay as an identity-political performance of gender.

II CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL APPROPRIATION

Modding and participatory culture

In principle, modding can be defined in one simple and straightforward sentence: it is the activity of creating and adding of custom-created content, mods, short for modifications, by players to existing (commercial) computer games. These additions can be supplementary – in which case the mod is called a partial conversion – or mods can result in an entirely new game, which is then called a total conversion (TC). For instance, games like *Quake* and *Ultima* provide their players with flexible game engines that allow them to turn the original FPS into almost any type of game, from driving games to architectural walkthroughs (Ondrejka 2003, 8). Typical modded elements are characters, enemies, weapons, levels, textures, music and gameplay modes, and they can be added to both single- and multiplayer games. The mod-friendliness or 'moddability' of a game can be determined by, for example, its incorporation of gameplay variable definitions in text or other non-proprietary format files. Modding graphical elements depends on whether they are available in standard formats such as bitmaps (bmps). The modular anatomy of computer game modding is, in principle, based on the twofold architecture of game software: there is the game engine (or engines), and there are libraries containing all the data objects out of which the engine creates the game in real time as it is played. Normally, the engine remains out of the range of the player, but data in the libraries can be tinkered with. This aspect makes (certain parts of the) games moddable (Knorr 2007, 3-4).

In practice, however, game modding consists of a multitude of convoluted, sophisticated and overlapping activities that are not easily distinguishable or categorisable. Despite this complexity – and because of it – all kinds of practices associated with modding so far have in research been customarily grouped under one broad heading such as 'addition' (Aarseth 1997) or 'creative construction' of new game elements (Raessens 2005, 373). However, as the discussion of 'reconfigurative' (Raessens 2005) or 'transformative' (Sotamaa 2007) play suggests, there are numerous possibilities for the player to alter either the game-as-product or the game-as-process, both within the given ruleset and against it, as well as on the metalevel of gaming itself.

Following Linda A. Hughes (cited in Sjöblom 2008), it can be suggested that the metalevel of gaming is the result of the reappropriation of 'metarules', the players'

negotiations about the rules, which then constitutes a vital component of the actual modded gameplay.

Although the research on and around the issue of game modding is still in its infancy, within the past ten years the theme has attracted the attention of at least a dozen new media theorists and writers. Most notably, modding has been placed within the contexts of participatory culture (e.g., Jenkins 2003; 2006a; 2006b; Raessens 2005; Wirman 2009) and the political-economic implications of the dissolving of the boundaries between production and consumption (Kücklich 2005; Nieborg 2005; Nieborg & van der Graaf 2008; Postigo 2003; 2007; Sotamaa 2005; 2007; 2009). Before these wide-ranging sociopolitical concerns, however, the first phase of studying modding consisted of regarding it as a form of art that would ideally open up subversive political potential for individuals (Catanese 2003; Mitchell & Clarke 2003; Poremba 2003a; 2003b; Schleiner 1998; 2002). Modding has also been considered integral to the industry; game journalist James Au (2002), among others, has suggested that the business of computer game production has been dependent on mod creation. Focus on the industry has also sprung critical treatises of the power positions held by both parties, in which modding is regarded as post-industrial unwaged labour, 'playbour', and the developer companies are seen to reap the benefits of the work done by the largely recreational modding community (Kücklich 2005; Sotamaa 2005; see also Knorr 2007, 5-6).

The heavy concentration on the structural aspects of the undeniably important question of power in relation to the development and reconfiguration of games has perhaps decelerated the elaboration of other vital perspectives to modding, such as the study of mods as elements of gameplay itself – as dynamic factors of the game-as-process. It has to be remembered, after all, that modding is likely to be motivated by the players' desire to improve and upgrade their own gameplay experience to begin with. In this respect, modding cultures can be compared to fannish activities, which are 'dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational' (Jenkins 2002b, 167). It cannot be doubted, however, that there are also players who mod games for some external purposes instead of these intrinsic motivations, for example, by retexturing objects and characters for specifically themed machinima with which to enter competitions. It is in fact worthwhile noting that this kind of 'reinterpretation' and 'rededication' (Knorr 2007, 7), or in game researcher Olli Sotamaa's (2007, 393) terminology, 're-purposing' of the game engine has become a more and more essential part of modding. As an example of this, Raph Koster (2006) has analysed why *The Sims 2* relied so heavily on 'screenshot' storytelling and movie-making tools, while Sotamaa (2007) has discussed the development of machinima with(in) *The Movies* game. The transgression of the reinterpretative use of games from arduous, time-consuming and cooperative coding into something that can easily be done with the simple mechanics built in the game is a powerful demonstration of the influence modding has had on 'official', corporate game development, too.

Game critic J.C. Herz (2002; see also Herz 2001; 2005, 335) has suggested that a staggering 90 per cent of *The Sims* content is likely to be produced by its players. Incorporating player-created content to the game was analysed as the key reason for *The Sims*' success as early as 2001, when a journalist made a similar estimate of over 80 per cent of its content in use being custom-made (Becker 2001). These provocative statements, however exciting they may seem at first, eventually raise more questions and point out problems of analysis instead of providing key insights on the issue of *The Sims* modding. First of all, as Sotamaa (2007, 384) points out, all computer games are inherently configurative and participatory in that they 'emerge' as the result of the players' inputs, offering feedback, rewards and further challenges. In *The Sims*, this tendency is taken to extremes in the sense that the whole game has already from the start been designed to profoundly support configurative and transformative play. For example, *The Sims* players are supposed to create their characters and construct playgrounds from scratch, and the ready-made houses in the game act more as models or exemplary types for the players' own creation. Is there thus a simple way to tell the 'user-created' mods from 'player-created' game content in *The Sims*, and what are the criteria for separating them?

Second, there are numerous ways of organising and altering game data that are inherently built in games like The Sims, and do therefore not constitute a case of modding per definition. One of the most important methods for doing this is 'cheating', the possibilities for which are included in the game code, and which, in the case of The Sims, seem to be elaborate and very accessible by courtesy of the Maxis development team. Also taking advantage of glitches and bugs in the game code – in other words, exploiting its 'vulnerabilities' – can be included in this practical category. In the inclusion of these kinds of practices I follow Mia Consalvo's theory on cheating (Consalvo 2007a). None of these actions constitute an easily definable case of playing/modding as such, but since these practices are such important constituents of gameplay I will include them in my analysis. I also consider them essential in trying to understand what games are culturally, and what kinds of practices have to be taken into account in the semiotic study of the gamut of gameplay.

I therefore use the term 'modding' to incorporate various kinds of activities where the player tweaks, adds, alters or deletes existing game code to transform her own gameplay experience in one way or another. Before going on into the details or practices of modding, however, I will contextualise these activities in a more general discourse on user-driven digital content creation. *The Sims* modding practices can be regarded as a form of what is often called 'participatory culture' (following the tradition initiated by media theorist Henry Jenkins) or 'networked experience' (as J.C. Herz rather euphemistically calls it). As Herz (2001) concludes,

> *The Sims* is a remarkable example of how a company and its customers can help a product evolve to the point where customers not only do a large portion of the

innovation and marketing but also produce as much intellectual capital as they consume.

Even though this 'capitalistic' perspective on user-led content creation may seem like an exception among the most prominent ideologies associated with the internet activities and forms of networked collaboration that are thought to constitute the core practices of participatory culture, it is especially relevant in the context of game development and modding.

The notion of participatory culture is customarily used to refer to practices such as self-expression as well as creating and sharing one's outputs – basically anything that can be expressed and transferred as digital code – freely with other internet users. It also refers to the creation and maintenance of certain forms of socialisation through computer-mediated communication (CMC) like peer-to-peer connections (P2P) as well as taking part in various forms of collective labour, such as developing and updating wikis. Ideas grouped under rubrics like Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005), 'social engineering', the 'collaborative turn' and (h)activism are customarily included in this line of thinking, too (Suoranta & Vadén 2008; Jenkins et al. 2006). The idea of 'productive users' (*produsers*) has been described as a form of collective intelligence (Lévy 1999), manifesting itself in the collaboration that these users engage in. Digital technologies are seen to enable their users to take part in the production and modification of cultural artefacts, thus letting them participate in the core operations of the culture industry (Jenkins 2002b). This also stimulates the social dynamic of the networked experience. These 'social production practices' are further encouraged and directed by the technological tools that are placed by the industrial actors at the disposal of these 'emerging non-market actors', individual players and internet denizens (Benkler 2006, 138, passim).

Henry Jenkins (2006a, 3) defines participatory culture as oppositional to the more traditional notions of passive media spectatorship and regards both media producers and consumers rather as (unequal) parties in a new environment where media forms and contents are being created and circulated. Participatory culture can be conceptualised along the lines of individual (artistic) expression and engagement as well as strong communal support, and he concludes that although there is basically no necessity for the members of a group to contribute, they must believe that they are free to do so when ready, and that their contributions will be appreciated and appropriately valued when shared. The members also have a sense that their contributions matter, and this leads the group to be based on at least some degree of social connection and reciprocation. There is also likely to be informal mentorship whereby what has been learned and gathered by the most experienced is passed on to novices. This leads him to conclude that '[t]he community itself [...] provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation' (Jenkins et al. 2006, 7).

There has also been a more politically oriented and simultaneously individualist

tendency to the thinking of participatory culture, which emphasises the emergence of an informed, active, and (politically) involved consumer. The consumer, the citizen, is regarded to participate in the definition and organisation of political realities through cultural production not only by getting meaningfully involved, but also by her actual lived practices and embodied experiences. The definition of participation is thus seen to constitute an essential part of the political and ideological struggle for power – power that is understood in the Foucauldian sense as an essential characteristic of all social relations (Carpentier & De Cleen 2008, 3-4). By taking part in the mediated production of meaning (content-related participation) and/or in the management of content production organisations (structural participation) these citizens engage in '(semi-)collective mediated rituals' that facilitate the (re)construction of their identities and imagined communities (Carpentier & De Cleen 2008, 6). According to Nick Couldry (cited in Carpenter & De Cleen 2008), even though the thematics of participation have inextricably been linked to the workings of media, power and the questions of representation – both in the formal political sense and in the broader sense of symbolisation – in modern democratic politics, the everyday experienced politics of participation reside in the interconnections between the consumers and producers of media.

On the other hand, and despite the rhetoric that emphasises communality, a large part of the theory of participatory culture production in its idealism seems to posit an individual consumer in the position of a nomad or a postmodern chameleon who constantly has to rearrange her identity formation according to the exigencies of the current situation. Participatory culture is thus also a manifestation of the individualisation and atomisation of the human being, typical of the reflexive modernity Ulrich Beck among others has investigated (Beck et al. 1994). The 1970s idea of a *prosumer*, first expressed by futurist Alvin Toffler, entails a vision that products and services should be customisable and thus made more individually appealing. This individuality ideally manifests itself in the transformation of mass-market production of goods to a more flexible model: on-demand, just-in-time, and custom-made (Toffler 1970; 1980). Especially '[t]he age of the Internet has witnessed the spread of what one might call a do-it-yourself ideology' (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 86), also resulting in the imperative of a 'must-have' individualism. For instance, John Hartley's idea of audiences fashioning their identities from a global smorgasbord of media imagery, crystallised in his conception of 'DIY citizenship', has been criticised of treating agency as too subjective, decontextualised and dematerialised a practice that leans on a Western assumption of unproblematic access to the resources of participation (Murray 2004, 13).

The economic production models associated with this participatory culture thinking stress the joint efforts of producers and consumers in the creation of new commercial goods as well as in the improvement of the existing ones – both of which should in their revamped form idealistically be better suited to both parties' needs (e.g., Jenkins 2006a). On the other hand, this 'shared' production model has

been seen as an instance of frictionless capitalism, where enterprises 'outsource risks, both economical and ecological, to consumers who also work as co-designers of the new products' (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 36). In the Deleuzian imagination, this outsourcing is a symptom of reality collapsing into a continual state of becoming where people are reduced to the role of machinistic realisation nodes of non-subjective affects, drives and desires. Everyday objects, although seemingly solid, are thus connected to necessary but invisible webs of connections, influxions, and investments through the virtual aspect of reality (Deleuze & Guattari 1987).

The idea of participatory culture is of course not entirely new. The emergence of a new communication and collaboration system through building up a network of developers, users and other participants is something that took place in association with the diffusion of the printing press as early as the 16th century (Eisenstein 1979). But one could say that the practices and levels of involvement the term participatory culture describes – as well as the value constellations or the *axiologies* associated with it – are pronouncedly present in the digital age, in the information economy (Bauwens 2005; Benkler 2006). 'The *differentia specifica* of digital media – interactivity, multimodality and non-linearity, possibilities for recombination and perfect copying – are not neutral toward established forms of society' (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 41), and this is also what makes them particularly interesting in this context. The idea of the Information Society is irrevocably linked with new digital media in that it brings together powerful fantasies concerning active citizenship, freedom, democracy, new economy, and so on (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 146). Most of the theorists of participatory culture are practically concentrated on the internet and the online networked experience (e.g., Castells 2001).

It has been pointed out, however, that the internet should never be seen as a medium of transfer (the vehicle carrying the message), but rather as a cultural modality, bringing the form (the 'how') and the content (the 'what') together inseparably (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 48). Game modding, enabled by the internet connection, can be considered an important part of what are currently known as 'social software' or Web 2.0 technologies, based on user-led content and knowledge production. Modding could also be regarded as 'creative consumption' (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 114). Axel Bruns (2007) terms the content creation associated with these kinds of practices as *produsage* – 'the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement' – that is visible in such essential internet activities as collaboration structured around different kinds of FLOSS[11] and wiki projects, citizen journalism and blogging. He argues that usage in these collaborative environments is almost necessarily productive, as users and participants are so easily and effortlessly enabled to take their usage practices a step further, so to speak, and start adopting a more productive position. Users as participants are almost inevitably becoming also the produsers (Bruns 2006; Bruns 2007).

The essence of digital culture – the flexibility of code and the 'softness' of soft-

ware – has given new hope to the proponents of the democratisation of culture (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 49-51), but alongside many 'copyleftist' ideologies there is a strong trend to see user participation as 'new' potential in the traditional business operations of industrial production (Lessig 2006). The game industry is a prime example of this, although it has to be stated upfront that it is struggling to hold this position. Interestingly enough, Will Wright (cited in Herz 2001, 1) has compared the involvement of player communities in the game development to the expansion of urban areas in the USA. He discusses the dynamics of production in both and differentiates the relationship between 'basic' and 'non-basic' (means of) production thus:

> People come in to work at the factory, and the goods from that factory are sent out to other cities or across the region. But over time, smaller services start building up within the city, like little grocery stores or gas stations, that are servicing needs within the community. The internal infrastructure gets larger and larger, and over time it becomes the biggest part of the city – the city producing goods and services for itself.

Figure 1. The content creation pyramid of Will Wright (Koster 2006b).

Wright's allegory may look like an innocent description of an existing situation – 'the city producing goods and services for itself' – yet it must be taken into account that this situation is also shaped by economic power positions that are affected by the ideological struggles between the two parties. J.C. Herz (2002b) has called this development 'harnessing the hive', which entails supporting the users' innovation and creation of ideas for the commercial benefit of the producers. The motivation for the promotion and underpinning of such creativity remains therefore utilitarian. This is also associated with the current discussion based on the activities these user-

player-modders engage in. For example, game researcher Raph Koster (2006b) presents on his website a pyramid by Will Wright (figure 1), aiming to illustrate both the quantitative and qualitative levels of *The Sims* gameplay and its content management.

What is positive about this pyramid is that it is an attempt to analytically diverge between the various levels of dealing with *The Sims* content. Nevertheless, as Koster points out, there are also some problems with this scheme. First, it seems to presuppose a certain set of values associated with each 'level' of engagement. As such, the pyramid is reminiscent of, for example, the 'Path to Ascension' by game designer F. Randall Farmer (2006) in the context of *Habitat*, an early online role-playing game (Lucasfilm Games 1986). According to Farmer's categorisation participation, contribution and creation are automatically more valued than content 'consumption', and the levels of participation are to signal the grades of active engagement with the system – with the underlying notion that the deeper and more configurative the engagement goes, the better it is. But what are the criteria for this improvement, and for whom is it better, in the first place?

The idea of the levels of content creation can be interpreted as part of the corporate capitalist paradigm, in which player participation is not primarily valued by its innate motivations, features or aesthetics, but according to the added value it can bring to the company that produces the systems allowing participatory practices as well as tools for their realisation. In this mindset, the more profound the participatory creation is, the more beneficial it potentially is to the developer company. This is also the underlying reason for the creation of these kinds of schemes: it is part of the classificatory objective of the 'customer orientation' or 'public relations' of a commercial business. A list compiled by game industry professional David Edery (2006) neatly illustrates this ideology, too. It assumes that user-generated content (UGC) can, for instance, extend the life and drive of the sales of existing games, lead to entirely new games, drive virtual businesses, make games more dynamic and interesting, help reduce piracy, help game developers identify potential employees, and lead up to novel uses for game engines. The term user-generated content in itself is a contested concept that has been criticised of typifying a similar industrial viewpoint than the participation levels scheme I presented above (Long 2006). The 'social commitment dimension' that Farmer so idealistically describes in his scheme can be turned discursively around in one shift move and be interpreted as a description of a corporate profit-making plan.

Nevertheless, the notion of the direct profitability of participatory design becomes problematic if we accept the theorem that

> any interaction with media is a joint act of creation, that the work of the consumer is to reify the work of the original creator, melding it with their own interpretations and thus creating a new, third work that exists in the space between the consumer and the producer (Koster 2006b).

As has been noted, both games and their modifications can be confrontational and disruptive in various ways: game mods have been used for artistic self-expression and as vehicles for making political statements. Mods also commonly include satirical elements (cf. *Castle Smurfenstein* mod for *Castle Wolfenstein*), or they act as spoofs, such as Anne-Marie Schleiner's 'counter-military' mod *Velvet Strike*, which allows players to insert 'counter-military graffiti' and images of embracing terrorists and counter-terrorists into the game space of *Counter-Strike* (Schleiner 2002; Tribe 2007). Don Hopkins, one of the programmers of *The Sims*, created an experimental open-source 'Interactive Faux News Simulation Game' called *Sims Faux*, parody of the Fox TV News, with which the player can insert political figures such as George W. Bush and Dick Cheney in her own customised TV shows and webcasts (Hopkins 2006a; 2006b; 'SimFaux'). Some of the political mods can also be rather controversial, such as the *Unreal Tournament* 2003 mod *9-11 Survivor* that deals with the terrorist attack in New York City through simulating the desperate escape attempts of an individual working in the World Trade Center (Nieborg 2006, 9-10; '9-11 Survivor').

It might be true that the computer game industry is economically dependent on modding, but as a result of the subversive practices described above, this dependence is not self-evidently beneficial or profitable to the game developer. Even within the 'conformist' modding practices, there are activities that can be considered problematic from the point of view of the industry. Nevertheless, game developers are compelled to consider the strategies players use to navigate through the game code and to ulitise it in order to find out what draws them to the game in the first place, and how the game can entice its players to the longest possible gameplay, as this is associated with the expansion of business opportunities. Getting involved in a game drives players to the purchase of expansion packs, additions, sequels and, in the case of *The Sims*, stuff packs, too:

> In a commercial context, this tool-based, user-driven activity extends the life of the game, which both enhances the value of the product (at no incremental cost) and increases sales: the longer people play the game, the longer they talk about it, effectively marketing it to their friends and acquaintances (Herz 2002b, 11; see also Herz 2002c).

In order to understand the player's continuing fascination with the play of a particular game, there have been attempts to classify player behaviour in terms of involvement and dedication. For example, game designer Richard Bartle (2003) has considered the player 'lifecycle' by distinguishing the different roles players incorporate in various stages of play. His four main player types are killer, explorer, achiever and socialiser, and some of the more marginal roles include those of scientist, griefer and hacker. In general, the theory on the players of online games states that they start out testing the boundaries of the game and aim at learning more about

the workings of the in-game world, then they actually enjoy gameplay itself, and finally, they may stick around to spend some time with their friends and fellow players (Koster 2006a).

Social interaction, structured around a game, can be thus considered a deep level of engagement. In stand-alone games such as *The Sims* it is clearly powered by practices related to modding. Mods, complemented by the distribution of cheat codes, add-ons and player-created art, as well as peer support such as manuals and walkthrough guides, are the primary reason for players to go online, to visit the sites associated with the game. Modding computer games can be regarded as the meta-level of play in that it takes place mostly outside of the game and necessitates player cooperation on the internet; in this sense it is difficult to situate modding for instance within the player role categorisations of Bartle's often cited scheme. I propose that a more fruitful approach to gaming is considering it as a mode of activity instead of a clearly defined role that players assume, and then analysing the 'markers of this modality' according to which games are demarcated from other aspects of the external world (King 2005). Modding can be regarded as a specific mode of activity, both within and outside gaming, and an important constituent in the workings of internet-aided participatory formations that are constructed upon the idea of *communitas*, sharing.

Playing games and modding them are sometimes thought to constitute two rather divergent modes of activity, and it is plausible that gamers and modders are two groups of people that necessarily overlap but do not equate completely (Knorr 2007). It is intuitively understandable that game developers want people to play their games after buying them, but are they just as keen to allow them to co-author their design, as well? If we compare game development to other areas of cultural production such as film-making, we instantly gather that there is a difference in the level of engagement the industry allows its fans to take part in the actual creation of saleable products. There are several possible reasons for this, one of which could be the maturity of the industrial formulation: sectors of the mass-market entertainment complex such as film and television have been establishing and solidifying their broadcast models and business practices since decades, whereas some segments of the digital game industry might still be emerging and verging on the limits of profitability (see Benkler 2006, 21-22; Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 86). Simply put, the game industry needs its customers' inputs and ideas in developing the kinds of games people would want to buy and play.

The other explanation has got to do with the history of game programming and development. I argue that practices such as cracking, pirating and modding games are intricately tied to the operations of the game industry and the mechanisms of game creation. In fact, creating custom content for games has been influencing game development to such a degree that the modern architecture of games is practically the result of it. *The Sims*, which functions more like a platform for its players' productive and expressive efforts than a straightforward ludic game, can in this

sense be considered as an apotheosis of modding. However, positing it in the context of the history of games does not automatically warrant its status as such. Also, there seem to have been contradictory tendencies in the history of game design. In the game industry, developing games (production) and playing them (consumption) are the result of activities that are intricately linked – despite this, there are important policies and demarcating systems that have gradually been developed to keep them apart.

Game development in context

Digital games have been around for a relatively long time, but their history and cultural impact is very different from other media forms such as commercial television (which in fact dates from roughly the same period of time). However, framing the history of games in the context of enthusiasm found at individual hobbyists' and amateurs' clubs, one may begin to see similarities in their development. As is generally well known, hobbyists – mostly young men – were the first to experiment with radio waves as well as audiovisual signals, and as a result of this interest they were able to build their own machines for transmission and reception. Items such as radio kits and wireless transmitter-receivers have also been considered to have provided boys with an important opportunity to form a personal relationship with technology, thus predating the highly valued activities of coding and hacking from as early on as the first decades of the 20th century (Huhtamo 2005, 15-16). In the history of technology, the focus on amateur production has often meant concentrating on the masculine appropriations of machines and their uses.

Playing, modding and programming games share an important and multilayered cultural history, which is connected to what we now understand as the hacker ideology and the open source movement.[12] Playing games, modding and hacking share an important pleasure principle – they are voluntary, self-gratifying activities that are not primarily thought to serve any end outside of themselves (see e.g. Huizinga 1971). Whereas gaming can be regarded as the exploration of the possibilities and constraints of a game programme (via its representative layer), modding, hacking and programming go a step further: they touch upon the underlying code itself in order to alter the operational principles of the game's ruleset and mechanics. In literature, hacking has often been idealistically granted a more philosophical and cultural meaning than what its technical attributes would necessarily predispose. For example, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Wark 2008) defines hacking as a creative process through which new cultural beings are constantly being authored and carved out of existing reserves of information:

> In art, in science, in philosophy and culture, in any production of knowledge where data can be gathered, where information can be extracted from it, and

> where in that information new possibilities for the world are produced, there are hackers hacking the new out of the old.

Whatever the attitude to such high-flown notions of hacking might be, it has to be acknowledged at least that the creative processes associated with the production of executable software and delivering it together with its source code have had far-reaching political and economic implications. The distribution of FLOSS has meant that the operating principles of software have basically been opened up to anyone who might care to take a look. However, as Leadbeater and Miller (2004) note, the networks of amateurs who are able to work at professional standards with the help of new technology ('Pro-Ams'), still tend to be dominated by well educated, white and wealthy males. In principle, providing the public with the source code creates potential for empowerment. People may consider modifying computer code to suit their personal needs, repair bugs and glitches, create new modules and polish existing ones, finally resulting in the redistribution of the revamped code and, ideally, a new cyclical or iterative dynamic for cultural production (e.g. van den Boomen & Schäfer 2005, 6). In practice, no matter how advanced tools or methods are provided and distributed, the new cultural products are brought about by people who always have their own motives and purposes for the creation and redevelopment of the digital code.

The importance of acknowledging the role of the active, male user of technology can be traced back to the foundations of the computer game development, as the first games produced were created by individual males – fans and hobbyists – not companies or even established entrepreneurs (see Camper 2005). However, although games themselves may have been designed by 'isolated' men, game playing and distribution have, of course, always been more collective activities in nature. In addition to the first computer games being created in the collaborative webs of individual programmers, for a long time they were also copied, reproduced and redistributed within these networks, among peer groups consisting of fellow developers and players. Before the internet, there was ARPAnet and, for example, Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) in the 1970s that were used to share game-related content and swap out of the ordinary gameplay ideas among the fans of the most popular computer games (Knorr 2005).

Both modding and hacking are practices that demand an effective communication and diffusion network. In hindsight, it is easy to see that the most important achievement of the decentralised community of computer programming enthusiasts and hackers was the creation of the operating principle behind the internet, packet switching, in the 1960s (Abbate 2000). Software development, be it geared towards building up networks or something else, took place in three contexts in the US during the course of the 1960s and 1970s: academic, governmental (that is, military) and industrial laboratories. The main result was the first transcontinental computer network, ARPAnet, which was launched by the Advanced Research Pro-

jects Agency (DARPA) of the United States Department of Defense. As the predecessor of the internet, ARPAnet was quickly adopted by scientists and computer engineers for the purposes of sharing vital information – for 'business' as well as 'pleasure' (Wynants & Cornelis 2005, 16). The rise of the whole computer network, and especially the internet, would not have been possible without the dynamic of *communitas* and reciprocity – which we might call the 'brotherhood' – as well as individual users supporting each other in order to promote the 'common good'. The fact that this common good has been defined according to fundamentally masculine inclination is still visible in the computer cultures and the user practices associated with the internet today (e.g. Castells 2001; Nieborg 2005, 3). The gendered nature of the emerging software culture which also acted as the basis for the contemporary social media scene has perhaps not been fully acknowledged yet, even though some valuable attempts at its analysis have been made (see in particular Herbst 2008).

Nevertheless, the collaborative spirit that has continued to shape much of the background workings of the internet was not a self-evident result of computer programming practices. Before the 1970s, the computer industry was focused entirely on producing and selling hardware. Software, including the source code, was delivered with the hardware, and was not in itself seen as something that could be profitable and marketable as a commodity. As there was no commodified software, also the idea of 'free' software became first pronounced only with Richard Stallman's GNU project, a gratis version of the Unix operating system that was intended to be accessible to everybody.[13] The incentive for something like GNU to be developed was the partial commercialisation of Unix. In 1991, Linus Torvalds started the development of a general public licenced (GPL) version of Unix that later came to be named Linux. As we can see, there have been open and collaborative working methods in use already for a long time, alongside the commercial sector which has primarily been occupied with protecting patents and copyrights (Wynants & Cornelis 2005).

What are the specific characteristics of the game industry in this historical setting, and what is the role hacking has had in game development? The history of digital games has often been told through focusing on 'the first' or 'the most successful' games of certain genres, and the story has so far been almost exclusively concentrated on the history of commercially salient mainstream game titles. From an economic point of view, one of the first indisputable success stories among games is the coin-operated arcade game *Pong* (1972) that could also be played on home consoles and computers at a later stage. *Pong* was an adaptation of Ralph Baer's earlier tennis emulation for Magnavox Odyssey, which was a fully analogue game system that produced a black-and-white image and did not have sound (Malliet & de Meyer 2005, 26). *Pong* started out as a very simple game consisting of two paddles, a ball, and a score – and a now legendary instruction card that read, 'Avoid missing ball for high score'. *Pong* became an instant success, and soon *Pong* machines were to be found everywhere in the USA.

For many, simple and relatively abstract arcade and console games – such as *Pong* – requiring active visceral response and quick reflexes still represent the quintessential 'game', and fast-paced feedback-action is what is conceived of as 'playing'. The view of *Pong* almost being the game of all games is exceptionally outward in the histories written on video games, especially the more popular ones. For example, in Steven L. Kent's *The Ultimate History of Video Games*, there is a whole chapter titled 'And then there was *Pong*', conveniently illustrating the importance of the design principles of *Pong* for the general idea of what constitutes a game and, consequently, how the history of games should be told. However enlightening and valuable in itself, this '*Pong* history' of games is rather ill-fitting for the purposes of this study. As it has become the standard of writing game history, I think some of its characteristics need to be discussed here nevertheless. *The Sims* is essentially a PC game, deriving from genres like strategy and simulation that demand a lot of memory and storage capacity, and a graphical user interface operated by keyboard and mouse. Its play mechanics are also different from the so-called arcade/action games, even if there is also an element of juggling between given tasks within a tight time frame. Playing *Pong* does not necessarily require the player to think or draw up a plan beforehand, but it demands full concentration and quick reflexes at the time of playing. With *The Sims*, many players map out the possibilities and scenarios they want to test out *before* or while they start playing, and as a result, the game may partly be left to unfold on its own while playing. *Pong* and *The Sims* represent such diverging ideas of playability and the implementation of the available technological affordances that they might even be regarded as the two opposing ends of game design.

In any case, the idea of *Pong* as the quintessential game is reflective of a certain history of games which is also importantly connected to the ideologies of modding and hacking the code. It is often noted that the earliest digital games from the late 1950s were experimental and not available to the public, as they were created on the gigantic mainframe computers in laboratories and research centres in the USA. Nevertheless, there is an important exception: *Tennis for Two* was developed in the research institution of Brookhaven National Laboratory for the entertainment of the guests on the annual Visitors' Day. It was programmed by a team led by physicist William Higinbotham and it was the first recorded iteration of a game that was later to evolve into the classic *Pong* (Burnham 2003b, 28). However, what is common to nearly all early games, including *Tennis for Two*, is that they are most of all examples of individuals' efforts at creating something 'just for the fun of it'. This is represented by the fact that Higinbotham never thought of his invention as something commercially valuable; he did not even try to patent his game.

The game that is most often labelled as the first computer game in history is *Spacewar!*, completed in April 1962 at MIT. Its creation was the result of the efforts of a group of young students, Steven 'Slug' Russell, J. Martin Graetz, Wayne Wiitanen, and others that considered themselves as 'hackers'. At MIT, they had hands-

on training with the most advanced computing technology of the time, such as the first truly 'interactive' computer, TX-0, with its programmable cathode-ray tube (CRT) and inventive input devices, like the light pen, for which it was famous. At this time, there were also some early examples of interactive entertainment around, for example, *Bouncing Ball* and *Mouse in the Maze*, which were computer-CRT demonstration programmes, and the inevitable Tic-tac-toe, which was an actual, even if simplistic game (see also Graetz 2003, 42-45). Therefore, when a MIT-based company DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation) donated its first production-model computer, the PDP-1, to the laboratory in the autumn of 1961, the keen programmers in anticipation had already designed a demonstration programme to suit the taste of the MIT hackers. The preliminary game, *Spacewar!*, consisted of two spaceships, named Needle and Wedge, which could fly about the screen and fire missiles at each other in a carefully visualised starfield. Its features included The Heavy Star with gravity that slowly pulled the spaceships into itself and a 'hyper-space' attribute that allowed these ships to disappear and reappear elsewhere on the screen. *Spacewar!* may have got only limited distribution to other computers in the course of the 1960s, but its inspiring theme (visible in, for example, the first arcade game, *Computer Space* [1971]) and the fact that it was an open source project, built to be hacked, had a profound influence on other programmers (e.g. Markowitz 2001; Wolf 2001, 23). The space travel and space war themes recurring in game history are present even in the modding of *The Sims*.

Besides *Tennis for Two* and *Spacewar!*, there are less well known game-like experiments from the same period in the US, the UK as well as other countries. Most computers had game-like demonstration programmes for various uses in the 1950s and 1960s. Whether we call them games or not really depends on whether we see the contemporary criteria of games matching these early experiments (Newman 2004, 1). In any case, the two games mentioned can be singled out as representing what have later been defined as the essential 'game' qualities of this emerging brand of electronic entertainment. *Spacewar!*, in particular, was the precursor of the modern game culture in multiple ways. It was the first digital game that got any commercial exposure outside of its birthplace (commercial in the sense that it was used as a demonstration tool for the capacity of marketable computers). The game was an appealing choice, since its basic game mechanics were based on new innovation rather than adaptation of traditional games such as Chess or Tic-tac-toe. It also incorporated direct interactivity, a feature that is often considered the most important element in digital games. *Spacewar!* laid out the characteristics of the archetypal battle or shooting game, thus being an early example of what was to become the most prominent genre of digital games, the shoot-'em-up. Its use of real-time graphics and response mechanisms, later known as elements of gameplay, gave rise to the prominence of the visual dimension within the form, and its choice of theme reflected the space frenzy of the 1960s. The theme also alluded to the future tendencies of game designers to derive inspiration from very specific

areas of popular culture: science fiction, quasi-mediaeval fantasy and Tolkien-style imaginary worlds (Darley 2000, 24-25). The pervasiveness of the characteristics first incorporated in *Spacewar!* – such as the representational origins, design modifications and the repetitive nature of play – is considered so important that it has been used by many ludologists to distinguish a game from non-game (Myers 2003, 7).

What is especially relevant about *Spacewar!*, considering the history of game modding in the context of this work, is not only its chosen subject matter that reflected the interests of its creators, but also the fact that the game was a FLOSS project which could be regarded as representative of the emergence of the MIT hacker mentality in the 1960s: 'Certainly, this rather curious conception of a compulsive yet "playful" approach to programming *per se* is seen as predisposing the hacker towards the creation of games' (Darley 2000, 24). Hackers are still understood as a specifically male group of hobbyists who make computer programming an end in itself and whose approach to it could be described as good-humoured rather than utilitarian. Thus, according to digital media theorist Andrew Darley, they can be seen as the perfect group for devising and playing (the prototypes of) commercial digital games. The credit for the 'first computer game ever' has almost without exception been assigned to *Spacewar!*, and the role that the game has played in the preconstruction of the general conception of games is worthy of attention. The public image of *Spacewar!* also sheds light on some of the developments in the game industry. *Spacewar!*, credited as a 'Steve Russell game' contrary to its origins, promoted the idea of a lone game developer working painstakingly (yet 'playfully') on a piece of computer code. As game researcher James Newman suggests, game design and programming in the 1960s, 1970s and even in the 1980s were in the hands of solo developers, or 'one man bands', who worked on their programmable home computers, in makeshift surroundings of their bedrooms or converted garages. These individuals, who were almost exclusively men, could be responsible for the whole development of a game, including programming, character and background animation, level design and, often, the creation of music and sound effects as well (Newman 2004, 33-36). Early computing technology was relatively simple to master, but on the downside it was underpowered, at least by today's standards. Nevertheless, these technical constraints were also considered to be incentive, as designers had to concentrate on making the experience of interaction as well balanced, paced and compelling as possible. Games were not about sumptuous audiovisual spectacle, but simple playability (Newman 2004, 34-35). This conception of playability, with its associations to specific kinds of interaction mechanics, themes and graphics, is still greatly valued today. On the basis of this, it becomes understandable that many writers and researchers, including Mark J.P. Wolf (2003, 53), suggest that the period between the early 1970s and 1984 (the year of the North American video game crash) is to be called 'The Golden Age' of the video game.

According to a number of researchers, the digital games scene changed signif-

icantly in the course of the 1970s. The same titles were adapted both to home consoles and to cabinet and arcade machines that were located in bars, specific games arcades and parlours. Playing games was a head-to-head or a group activity – because of the limitations of integrated circuit technology – and that was naturally reflected in the aesthetics and structures of the games themselves. It was in 1978 with *Space Invaders* that the 'computer-controlled other' emerged, thus prompting the development of single-player games. Prior to that, players were usually competing against each other, and it is likely that the thrill of the gameplay emerged largely from the social, competitive context (Rehak 2003, 113-114). *Space Invaders* did not only introduce the non-human opponent, 'the other', but in doing so it also disarticulated the game's avatarial forms visible on the screen from the material bodies of the players. At the same time, the player's screen identity and style of play were restructured in new ways. The gameplay did not occur against another person, but the tireless and ever faster computer that remained ultimately unbeatable. This meant that, at some point, 'you', as the player, were going to 'die', if only to be resurrected and given another go. According to many, the purpose of an avatar, the on-screen persona, is fundamentally based on this simulated experience of death and revival. It looks like during the 1970s developments in game cultures, the players had to come up with the prolonged 'pleasure in defeat' tactic in order to enjoy gameplay in a new way (Rehak 2003, 114).

Steven Malliet and Gust de Meyer (2005, 31) conclude that the era before 1980 was dominated by three types of games: maze games (such as *Pac-Man*), climbing and obstacle games (*Donkey Kong*), and space wars (*Space Invaders*). The development of digital games throughout decades reflects the specific interests of the men who had, first of all, incentive for designing games and access to the computing technology to realise their aspirations. As game historian Leslie Haddon (1993) has summarised, designing games was not so much about creating fancy graphics or soundscapes, or telling interesting stories through the emerging medium, but testing the capability and, most of all, the *programmability* of the computer. Computer games were the hobbyist's playground for a long time, and it took a while for the commercial potential of games to be recognised by commercial venturers. The game enthusiasts and hackers of the 1970s and 1980s were almost exclusively male and game themes looked astonishingly masculine, but it is not self-evident whether the cause of the masculinity of the gaming community is the subject matter of most games or the social conditions in which these games were available for playing (Haddon 2002, 58, 65-67). As the examples presented here suggest, the origins of game development and modding have not been institutional, but it has been through the efforts of individuals that the first (commercially) successful game mods have come into being. Modding, much like developing the early games in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, was both a private endeavour and a collective effort within a specialised player base. In this sense it closely resembles the amateur development histories associated with many other technological innovations, too.

Modding games has been part of the cultural dynamic that has shaped and continues to influence the current ethos of producing software code. Modding can be considered as the predecessor to various innovative working methods building upon iteration and reverse engineering, and thus affecting our idea of knowledge-intensive work in general (see ChEeTaH 2005). In addition, it has had an influence on the importance we ascribe to the open source movement and the hacker (counter)culture in today's world. Game modding serves as a link between practices that are considered either as programming/working on code or playing games, and as such it also functions as a sound example of the workings of participatory culture in the overall context of digital content creation. Modding in this context can also refer to hardware hacking, although this practice is arguably less common, globally speaking, and often requires a higher level of expertise and specific equipment. The origins of hardware modification can be traced to the turn of the 1980s, when the avatarial representations of players were taken to a new dimension with the advent of the first 'real' digital game character, Pac-Man. Before the unimaginably successful game of *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), gameworlds featured mainly nameless spaceships and other vehicles or inexpressive human stick figures. Although Pac-Man itself was an eyeless yellow dot with a triangular 'mouth' (as its purpose was to eat other small dots, blue and white pills, and bonus fruits), it soon gained a superstar status within the game culture, setting the stage for such famous later characters as Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog and Lara Croft. The adversaries of Pac-Man were also famously granted names and 'identities' – there was the red Blinky, the pink Pinky, the turquoise Inkey and the orange Clyde – that still figure in games-related popular culture paraphernalia.

The Japanese amusement company Namco had decidedly developed *Pac-Man* as a relatively non-violent maze-crawler in order to appeal to both male and female players, and the tactic proved viable (see e.g. Burnham 2003a, 234; DeMaria & Wilson 2004, 62-63). However, in terms of success, the sequel to *Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man* from 1981, was even more prominent; according to statistics, *Ms. Pac-Man* is still the best-selling arcade game in US history. The upgraded counterpart to Pac-Man dubbed Ms. Pac-Man was also the first female game protagonist. Still, despite the success of *Ms. Pac-Man*, Pac-Man is *the* (male) game character and Ms. Pac-Man just the female variant of it, the same yellow dot-figure which could just as well have been a Pac-Man character with legs, 'Mrs' or 'Miss' Pac-Man, as was originally envisioned (Demaria & Wilson 2004, 78). Interestingly enough, however, *Ms. Pac-Man* was no mere sequel – it was the result of a clever modification of the contents of the original game, done by two MIT students, Kevin Curran and Doug Macrae, who later founded a game company, General Computer Corporation. They were so skilful in their modification work that Atari, a company that developed the home console version of *Pac-Man*, hired them on the basis of their hacking prowess. At this early stage, one of their projects was a *Pac-Man* hack that they called 'Crazy Otto'. The American branch of Namco chose to validate their hack with the official

licence. It was then stored on the circuit board and grafted to the original *Pac-Man* hardware (Keiser 2006, 146). It is therefore safe to say that modifying game contents has been a *recognised* part of the game industry practices and mainstream game cultures at least since the early 1980s and *Ms. Pac-Man*, which can therefore be considered not only an important 'godmother' of arcade and home console gaming but also of game modding.

Nevertheless, it has to be acknowledged that there were widespread practices of reproducing and copying the source code of successful games even before the 1980s. Much of the game cultures of the 1960s and early 1970s was based on player-developers sharing games and their source code between themselves. The popularity of the early home computers like Apple II and Commodore 64 also advanced the so-called cracker subculture, based on 'cracked' games being distributed among groups of ardent players. Cracking was based on hardcore computer hobbyists utilising their programming skills to remove the copy protection of commercial releases and to enable various kinds of gameplay cheats. In the 1980s it became customary for crackers to add a customised intro or a load screen to the cracked games to show off their programming skills and build a reputation in the game-sharing subculture. The practice of these 'cracktros' gradually evolved into a subculture of its own, known as the *demo scene*, where simple text screens were replaced by more and more advanced graphics and audio (see Laukkanen 2005, 9-10; 'Demo scene'). The cultures of copying and sharing games were an example of gaming capital that ultimately led to complex social structures, which incorporated multiple motivations and manifestations, and even artistic aspirations.

For a long time, only a portion of games were made commercially available, and it was evident that copyright and ownership issues were not unheard of in game companies. Very successful games like *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) brought imitators and also blatant copycats into the arena, and the copies, such as *UFO Invaders* or *Space Commanders*, have been labelled as cases of actual and genuine copyright infringement, or 'piracy'. Reproducing existing games and making them into new game titles assumed dramatic proportions in the 1980s, and the illegal circuit allegedly sucked most of the money there was to be made in the field. (Malliet & de Meyer 2005, 29) Software piracy was naturally not a problem on the development side only. Gamers also found lucrative possibilities in copying game software from carriers such as the cd-rom format first made popular by Sony's PlayStation in 1994 (Malliet & de Meyer 2005, 39). On the console gaming side, the cd-rom differed from earlier cartridges in a number of important ways: it was cheaper to produce, easier and quicker to manufacture and distribute, and its storage capacity was much bigger, so it could incorporate a large amount of high-quality data. For the gaming community, the cd-rom also contributed to games becoming more of a lifestyle product, as the carrier of the code allowed better audiovisual quality and expanded gameplay possibilities. On the downside, at least from the point of view of the industry, cd-roms were much easier to duplicate.

The histories of console gaming and hacking have so far been primarily concentrated on hardware modding, especially practices around the implementation of so-called mod chips. The production of mod chips started with Sony's PlayStation in the mid-1990s, allowing the use of imported and copied game media, as CD writers gradually became more common and affordable for the general public. Before the optical media there were cartridge-based game console systems which had converters and passthrough devices (and later on, flash memory cartridges) that were used to circumvent the restrictions initiated by the manufacturers, such as copy protection and regional lockout mechanisms (see 'Mod chip'). Besides hardware modification, there are examples of successful software modding on the console gaming front, as well. The most fatal case of a game console failing to hamper its users from illegally copying and distributing games is Sega's Dreamcast, which was introduced in Japan in 1998. Despite being graphically equivalent or even superior in comparison to the early games of its worst competitor, PlayStation 2, it ran into serious trouble when a German hacker group *Team Utopia* discovered a back door in the console's ROM BIOS.[14] The back door allowed hackers to copy game files as so-called images onto standard cd-roms and boot them without any hardware modification. What followed was a wave of piracy as gamers distributed games on the internet for free and burned the images on cd-roms that were then used to play games. As a result, Dreamcast game sales dropped dramatically, game developers started to lose interest in the console, and finally, Dreamcast was pulled from the market only three years after its launch (Huang 2003, 3-4).

In many ways, the game industry, like many other industries in the digital field, is still aiming at maintaining a balance between different axes of hardware and software production. Major hardware manufacturers like Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft sell subsidised game consoles to make profits out of selling software (games) for them (Kerr 2003). The dilemma here is that hardware modification may increase the demand for the machines (as in the case of Microsoft's Xbox that was turned into an operable PC by cracking the operating system) but decrease sales of software products. In general, game companies are aware of the 'grey' economy revolving around their consoles, but this is tolerated as long as it does not directly threaten their business operations (see Schäfer 2004, 70-71). However lucrative game console modding may look like in the future, at present most of game modding still happens on a networked PC platform. Hardware modding of the computer is less common, and 'tweaking' in this sense denotes practices such as case modding (redesigning the looks of computer mainframe), overclocking the computer components (making them run at higher clock frequencies than they were intended to maximise the level of the performance of the system), and adding extra cooling devices to reduce the heat generated by the overclocked components (Schäfer 2004).

Many of the games on the market today are designed already from inception to be suited for alteration and reworking, and the industry is well aware of the benefits

of gaming capital. Promoting and distributing mods is most effortlessly done via the internet for free, although many mods have also become an increasingly important factor in securing the continuing commercial success of game titles, as they add extra replay value and extend the shelf life of games as well as raise public interest in particular titles. Many game developer companies provide the players with extensive tools, manuals and documentation to leverage the potential success of mods, keeping the success stories of mods such as *Counter-Strike* (1999) in view. Because of the particularly visible role amateurs, hobbyists and (semi-)professionals have had in game development, it remains a relatively unique branch of industrial production. It is likely that there has always been a strong self-expressive strand to game creation and modification. After all, it is plausible that modifying an object or a service to suit the individual taste of its user is a widespread, perhaps even inherently human desire, illustrated by the range of tuning up cars and bikes to revamping home electronics and toys. Modding is also an upcoming term in current popular literature (see e.g. Freedman 2008; Pospisil 2006). As the innate motivations for modding have been met with the possibilities offered by the flexibility and malleability of the computer code, the results have been outstanding: modding has become an essential and irreversible part of contemporary digital culture production.

Histories of modding

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, *The Sims* content creation can be situated within a rather long and complex tradition of hacking and tuning up game data. In this section I will focus on three particular historical layers of which the traces are visible in the operations of *The Sims* modding scene. In this respect I am not only referring to the obvious development of FPS modding in the 1990s, but also to the malleability of text adventure games from the early 1970s onwards and the 'construction toolkits' that were customarily provided with many successful 1980s computer games. In fact, I am tempted to write the history of games from a participatory culture or 'commercial creativity' point of view in this chapter, since it seems so evident to me that games have always been treated as launchpads for their players' creative appropriation and self-expression. They have also customarily been played and treated against their developers' intentions. Games have been cracked, copied and pirated, their bugs and glitches have been exploited, and game contents have been played and tinkered with. Modding games has taught numerous people the basics of programming, copying and distributing code in the most imaginative ways.

The ideologies and practices currently related to modding games are the result of several histories, one of which is obvious and relatively well covered, whereas the others remain subsumed in more of a vague ideological layer manifesting itself in

various disparate practices over a rather long period of time. Game modding and similar themes have not systematically been brought under critical scrutiny as of yet. In order to grasp the essentials of the contemporary modding picture I have contextualised these ideologies in the histories of software development and computer programming above, also including practices that are (or have previously been) considered as hacking or cracking. My other motivation for the historical contextualisation is the notion that altering the readily available game content is often regarded as a relatively recent phenomenon and its historical roots are dismissed as unimportant, even inexistent. For instance, Olli Sotamaa (2005, 1) has argued that (RTS game) modifications have found their way into the marketing strategies of game companies and become part of the mainstream game culture only within the past decade.

The more obvious history of game modding is customarily motivated and told by focusing on first-person shooters such as *Half-Life* (Valve 1998) and *Unreal Tournament* (Epic Games 1998), or third-person shooters such as *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment 2001). Many shooters are global bestsellers and well-known game franchises, and therefore they also provide an appropriate case for the studies on the political and economic implications of modding (Knorr 2007; Kücklich 2005; Nieborg 2005). One of the most successful total conversion game mods globally is *Counter-Strike* (1999), which is built on the engine of *Half-Life*. The original version of *Counter-Strike* was developed by two young university students, Minh 'Gooseman' Le and Jess 'Cliffe' Cliffe, who were promptly hired by Valve after their graduation. Today, *Counter-Strike* is especially famous for its player culture that entails both professional gamers and groups of players and modders, some of which have even come to earn a living out of the game. In research, *Counter-Strike* is almost considered an epitome of modding, and it still is an immense commercial hit, too; it is the most widely played online first-person shooter in the world (see 'Counter-Strike'). It has also continued to attract modders: according to Valve's Steam distribution service nearly 120 million man-hours are spent monthly on various versions of *Counter-Strike* (Keiser 2006, 146).

FPSs such as *Counter-Strike* have also been the target of much – if not nearly all – of the academic interest in modding. Anthropologist Alexander Knorr (2007, 3 [footnote 4]) explains that this is understandable as even though the practice of modding is naturally not restricted to shooters, they retain the prime impact on economy, society and culture in terms of the transformation of technology. Military thematics and modding seem to go hand in hand in more than one way. According to David B. Nieborg (2005; 2006), every significant conflict involving a Western country has its own war game mod. The development of FPS games has, in fact, been so thoroughly informed by practices related to modding that they have become 'co-creative media', the partakers of which consider themselves members of a highly collaborative, self-regulating and powerful group that retains a semi-institutional position in relation to the official game industry (Nieborg 2005, 4). As has

been suggested, the relationship between the game industry and game players is relatively complex and not totally comparable to other sectors in the media and entertainment industries. For example, most game designers and developers start out as avid gamers, and maintaining a high level of gameplay may even be considered as a prerequisite for working in the field. There surely remains a certain level of antagonism between the game producers and consumers, for reasons I shall explain later in detail, but on the other hand, there is also a degree of indispensable and mutually beneficial collaboration. Modding is an example of practices which necessitates this kind of cooperation. As famous programmer John Carmack has said, 'it's been one of my highest strategic decisions to make all these things [for modding] possible. Putting these capabilities into the hands of the users, the game becomes a new canvas for people' (cited in Kushner 2002, 2).

As of yet, the general idea is that the pioneering phases of large-scale modding are associated with FPS games such as *Doom* (id Software 1993) and *Quake* (id Software 1996), and that they are widely considered to be the predecessors of the modern modding culture. To be more precise, this genre originated with *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992), which can also be regarded as one of the first major titles supporting varied and far-reaching modification practices: players did not only tweak the mechanics of the game – for example, by providing their characters with more ammunition or health points – but they also created original novel content for it. However, as Knorr (2007, 4) explains, modding *Wolfenstein 3D* was 'destructive', as players had to delete pieces of the original code in order to insert their own code as substitute. In addition, there was no way to restore the original content once it was removed from the game. id Software's programmer John Carmack took the experience of modding *Wolfenstein 3D* into consideration when he developed his next game, *Doom*, and the modular architecture for it. According to game critic David Kushner (2002, 2), Carmack was intrigued by the emerging mod phenomenon when he saw that someone had hacked the code of *Wolfenstein 3D* and replaced the Nazi bosses with dancing, purple Barneys (the so-called *Wolfenstein Barney Patch*). The game consisted of a game engine and data files containing all the needed graphics and sounds, grouped under the acronym WAD.[15] In an apparent endeavour to support modding practices, Carmack also made public the source code of the applications used for the creation of the contents of *Doom*. In that way players everywhere could generate their own content for the game, wrap it up into a WAD, and guide the game engine to load the data files needed for actualising the game-as-process either from their own or some other modders' WADs. By creating this twofold approach to game design, Carmack also provided for the birth of a new business opportunity: game companies could start selling game engines and sub-engines to other developers, even outside of the realm of the game industry, in addition to selling complete stand-alone games to end-users, the players (Knorr 2007, 4-5).

David Kushner (2002, 3) regards the modding tool *Doom Editor Utility* as a wa-

tershed in the development of mod making in the sense that it made it possible for non-programmers or non-hardcore players to take part in the creation of mods: 'Anyone with the interest could create a level of a complex game, the equivalent of writing a new chapter into a book, and then, via the Internet, publishing that creation.' Even more profound possibilities for modification were granted by a programme called *DeHackEd*, developed by student Greg Lewis, with which modders could access the game's actual code, the executable file. These kinds of modding tools gradually empowered the player to actively take on the role of the game maker (Kushner 2002, 3). Even more importantly, the game industry is both technically and socioculturally affected by these kinds of practices, as Knorr (2007, 4) aptly summarises:

> Astoundingly enough the sketched macro-anatomy of computer game software, to which the whole industry since more than a decade sticks, was not created out of pondering the technical issue of efficient program architecture, but as a direct consequence of the sociocultural practice of game modding.

It has been suggested that in the contemporary context the success of a particular computer game depends considerably on the mod-making toolkits that are available with the purchase of a game. According to a study in 2003, approximately one-third of modern computer games had incorporated toolkits (Jeppesen & Molin 2003), and it is likely that this number is rising. The toolkits direct and aid user innovation and design in important ways, ranging from providing the means to alter the levels or environments for play to changing the looks of both the playable and non-playable characters (NPCs). There are also games that provide their players with the source code or scripting language in order for them to alter their gameplay (Prügl & Schreier 2006, 240). The malleability of game text is visible in the importance of discursively differentiating game titles in their various incarnations: the term 'vanilla' or 'V' may be used to refer to an unmodified original game, and the naming of various mods of a specific game is very important in recognising them as individual mods with distinguishably innovative new content. It has to be pointed out, however, that the use of tools and toolkits is not entirely a new phenomenon; also, the concept of assigning users agency in the technological innovation process has been extensively studied for more than two decades (von Hippel 1988; 2005).

The history of the official, industry-released modding tools – which has not been thoroughly researched yet – could be started with games like Electronic Arts's *Adventure Construction Set* (ACS) published in 1985 in tandem with *Racing Destruction Set* and *Music Construction Set* for Commodore 64 and Apple II. ACS was to become one of EA's best-selling games that year. ACS was a programme written by graphic adventure game pioneer Stuart Smith, modelled after *Pinball Construction Set* (PCS) that was designed by Bill Budge and published by Electronic Arts as early as 1983 (see 'Adventure Construction Set'; 'Pinball Construction Set'). *Pinball Construction*

Set is considered revolutionary in that it practically created a new genre, the 'builder' or 'construction set' computer games with a purpose of letting players construct their own virtual pinball machines. This was done with a graphical editor with which the player could place various kinds of controls – flippers, bumpers and spinners – onto a table that could also be designed according to will. The drag-and-drop method of constructing a table was regarded as innovative in its intuitiveness at the time, as well as the principle that no programming knowledge was required in the making of a new game. The results were new top-down view maps with altered characters, since some of the attributes affecting playability, such as gravity, could also be modified. New games could then be saved on floppy disks and freely shared with other players. The games that were created with ACS had a resemblance to the *Ultima* series of games, especially with regard to their aesthetic style typical of the adventure genre. The ACS package also included a complete predesigned game, *Rivers of Light*, which was based on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and a roundup of sample adventures for inspiration. What soon became obvious, however, was that truly innovative game design was still hard to master, and it was a time-consuming process. ACS only automated the mechanical parts of creating a new game, thus leaving the story or logical succession of interlinked challenges for the player-modder to construct.

Various kinds of construction kits followed the initial success of ACS and PCS, paving the way to the current computer game modding (Elmaleh 2008). For instance, adventure-RPG mod-making tools were introduced in the early 1990s. One of the first RPG creation kits was *The Bard's Tale Construction Set* released in 1991, which promoted the (legal) practice of sharing the player-created games as it was not required to own the construction set in order to play games created with it (see 'Mod (computer gaming)'; 'Bard's Tale Construction Set'). *The Shoot 'Em Up Construction Kit* (SEUCK, which actually referred to the general modding tool provided for particular types of Commodore 64 games, and later on for Amiga and Atari ST games, too) from the late 1980s proved to be a rather versatile tool, as well. SEUCK could be used to edit still-screen games or classic arcade scrolling games alike (Hare 2008). According to its avid contemporary fans that maintain a dedicated 'SEUCK vault' internet site, it allowed its users to design their own characters, spacecrafts, equipment and weaponry as well as edit the landscape, sound effects, levels and play mechanics by using only the joystick as an input device. There were also no training or programming skills required, and the player could either start making new games from scratch or redesign one of the free games provided with the editing tools (see 'The Seuch Vault').

There is also another curious precursor to the established practice of the modern game industry in the field of ACS- and PCS-powered modding: Electronic Arts organised a contest for the ACS players in order to find the best custom-created adventure games. This happened shortly after ACS was released, and the announcements for the contest were included in the packaging. According to Wikipedia, approxi-

mately 50 games were submitted to the jury, and winners were chosen in three categories: 'fantasy', 'science fiction' and 'contemporary'. A number of these were later turned into exchange items by assembling them in a kind of database, where players could trade for copies and earn royalties for their own designs (see 'Adventure Construction Set'). This industry-led 'construction set' history of games, particularly the graphic adventure games, is reminiscent of an earlier tradition of text-adventure games, which was based more on informal development work done by enthusiastic gamers, hobbyists and (semi-)professional computer programmers.

Text adventure games have always been modifiable by nature. Creating new maps, in-game environments, and altering the appearance of characters and NPCs has been a rather logical step in the process of playing them, as their key objectives included mastering the game space and knowing the way to the target while acquiring the necessary means and equipment to get there. Adventure games were not that much modded by extending their game space, but by transforming it slightly so that the game became interesting again after several replays. The basic interactive mechanism and the ruleset were usually kept the same. Because of their exploratory nature and the element of incoherence (for example, the lack of intrinsic game rules), it is understandable that they were modded through altering the in-game environment, adding new game elements and maybe remodelling parts of the symbolic representational system rather than touching upon the narrative structure itself (see Myers 2003). One of the early and most important prototypes of the adventure ur-genre was *Colossal Cave Adventure* (also known as *Adventure* or ADVENT), which is often referred to as the first computer adventure game.[16] In her dissertation, Mary Ann Buckles (1985) also refers to it as 'storygame', and compares it to the riddle and the folktale in the context of literary formalism. It precedes the modern gameplay cultures in important ways. *Adventure* was, for example, the first game where the player could interact with objects: they could be picked up, used and dropped. Various items could also be carried by an NPC.

Colossal Cave Adventure consisted of two separate elements. First, the structure of the game was based on a part of the actual Mammoth Cave in the US, explored in the early 1970s. The Mammoth caver and *Adventure* developer Will Crowther then went on to create a vector map based on surveys of parts of the cave. Second, there was a literary element to the game, which incorporated a number of Tolkienesque fantasy units, such as dwarves and a magic bridge, but also more common elements such as objects that could be picked up (keys, a lamp), scenery items (stone steps, pits), animal creatures (a bird) and adversaries (a snake) (Jerz 2007, para. 33). This part of the game was originally developed in 1975-1976 and modified and expanded later by graduate student Don Woods; he added more comic fantasy elements, such as elves and a troll. After Will Crowther released his *Adventure* game on the ARPAnet and programmer Don Woods got in touch with it, the game was modified and expanded several times before becoming popular among other university students and programmers. The game was thus not a 'product' in the same sense that

many other games were, especially those belonging to the action game genre – it was an execution of code that could basically be altered and modified according to the will of its current user. This was a very important reason for its initial success. Written language as the representational vehicle of the adventure game was also key, as revising and altering text were considerably simpler than creating new graphic images, let alone animation.

Adventure, like all early games, was altered and revised multiple times over the years. In the context of the adventure genre, each revision decreased the game's realism and increased the role of fantasy elements, therefore providing also the need for significations of contextualisation during gameplay. However, many adventure games were not always able to motivate consistent contextualisation during play, because they did not necessarily have the fundamental design elements, such as the intrinsic game rules, to guide the significations of contextualisation. Without such guides and with the increasing complexity of the used symbols, the play had to be prolonged through repetition rather than expansion or transformation of context. Whereas action games were extended through an iteration of context, progression through a series of levels of play, the adventure genre was extended through the iteration of elements within the game context. In the latter case, gameplay and context could essentially stay the same, and only the core gaming elements could be changed (for example, performing the tasks or solving the puzzles to progress in the game) (Myers 2003, 10-13). However, these games did not necessarily have complex characters or dynamic narrative structures – playing adventure games had more to do with the elemental pleasure of identifying and mastering a set of rules than enjoying the graphical realism so eagerly striven for by most other game genres. On the other hand, these interactive fiction games could rely on an existing body of narrative as well as interactive techniques, which was probably the reason for the fact that the genre of adventure game has invited a lot of individual experimentation and innovation, acting as a solid basis for multilevel modification work (Jerz 2007, para. 13).

Colossal Cave Adventure is also important in the sense that it represents the text adventure genre which created the first market for home computer games. In the 1980s, these were among the best-selling computer games, and even after the heyday of their commercial success some members of the interactive fiction community continued to produce valuable writing, analysis and theory related to them (Jerz 2007, para. 4). In the end, adventure games did not attain long-lasting commercial success, although the popularity of *Colossal Cave Adventure* resulted in the creation of commercial adventure game titles, too, most importantly *Zork*, which was written in 1977-1979 by four MIT students that later on founded the prominent game company Infocom (see 'Adventure'). The adventure genre suffered from what David Myers has called 'semiotic dissonance'; it did not offer a consistent and coherent representation as the basis for a predictable form of contextual play (see Myers 2003, 23-24). As we can gather, their openness and moddability did not se-

cure a position as important COTS game products. Nevertheless, acknowledging the malleability of these early games and noting the importance of the inspirational value their programmers gained from playing (with) them are in any case vital aspects in the context of this work. In the history of gaming only a few games have been ready cultural industrial products in the sense we are most recently accustomed to regarding them. This is particularly true of simulation games, which have arguably introduced even more deeply inclusive methods of participatory design than shooters, construction games or text adventures.

Modding simulations

> In some sense the fans are kind of co-developing the game with us now. We did the original architecture and the original objects and characters, but now they're taking a very strong role in the future of the game and where it goes.

The Sims can be considered as the first mass-market game to fundamentally rely on player-created content. As Will Wright's quote above (cited in Becker 2001) suggests, it was quite deliberately developed as a platform for people's own creation. The numbers of downloads of the most popular items and remediations produced by its players easily reaches hundreds of thousands, even millions.[17] The successful business strategy of *The Sims* has further promoted the development of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) such as *Second Life* into expansive virtual worlds where users are encouraged to create content with built-in tools, real time, gaining advantage of the interactive and collaborative working methods supplied by the corporate developers of the game environment (Ondrejka 2003).

As I have previously suggested, most of the studies on computer game modifications have for obvious, culturally determined reasons concentrated on first-person shooters. The FPS allegedly remains the most heavily modded game genre to date. The mod culture for the FPS is, according to David B. Nieborg (2005, 3), overall well developed and largely institutionalised. Other established mod cultures include the RTS (real-time strategy) games and war simulations, which may include, for example, a map editor for the players to design their own battlegrounds. Somewhere outside of these established modding circles lies – both practically and theoretically speaking – the core of The Sims modding community. The Sims modding has not yet fully redeemed its position as something worthy of hardcore modders' and theorists' attention. In any case, these other modding cultures act as important contexts for the study of The Sims modding as well, since many of the practices of modding are, at least technically speaking, built on the same principles. There is, however, a tendency to regard The Sims modding as a 'casual' practice that does not demand great skill or dedication, unlike FPS modding that is allegedly powered by a highly competitive attitude and the pursuit of the widest possible peer

recognition. Modding The Sims has been treated as a form of self-expression or the creation of a kind of folk art, the products of which are primarily aimed for the benefit of the immediate player community around an individual modder-artist. This self-expressive potential offered by the game has been regarded as a particularly necessary outlet for many Sims players (Herz 2002a). It is true that The Sims allows for far more wide-ranging modification than most other games and that it incorporates important self-expressive possibilities, especially through its extensive support for creating gamics and machinima. Because of the versatility of The Sims modding mechanics and tools (both official and custom-created) as well as the diversity of its player base, however, The Sims modders engage in hugely varied activities. Some of these present challenges to the developer company and excite the popular press in almost the same way as the FPS game modding, in general, or the political turmoil around some particularly visible shooter mods. In addition, there are also semi-professional (game) programmers working in The Sims modding community, and it is evident that for many of these people modding is more than a mere trivial pastime or a hobby.

How did Will Wright and other Maxis game designers originally come up with the idea of supporting custom content creation as part of the development and marketing of their game titles? How does the idea of participatory design fit into the practices of game development overall? I think some basis for a discussion on these topics can be found in the history of simulation and 'God' games, particularly the ones that companies such as Maxis (led by Wright) were developing in the course of the 1990s. Also, in order to understand the current mechanisms of *The Sims* content creation, I think that a look into the development of these simulations will be useful. The 'Sim-simulations' have their own player base which has been developing over a rather long period of time. The players of these games are likely to enjoy the constructive aspect of computer games in a different way than the players of shooters, for example. They are often like crafters of miniature worlds who find pleasure in tuning up the game environment (and its particularities, such as game characters) for no obvious outside purpose (such as, for instance, exploding it afterwards). The fact that these games encourage the practice of tinkering makes them especially prone to modding and suitable for many individualist and self-expressive uses. The element of control has been regarded as particularly significant in describing the pleasures of this kind of stand-alone gameplay (Consalvo 2007b). The fluidity of the design of *The Sims* also connects the history of the Sim games to the earlier tradition of the so-called construction kit games, which I investigated in the previous chapter.

The most obvious history of *The Sims* can be tracked down to the urban planning game *SimCity* (Maxis 1989, also designed by Will Wright), which is one of the biggest successes in commercial simulation games of all time.[18] In *SimCity*, originally known as *Micropolis*, the player's task is basically to lay out a plan for a virtual city and work as its mayor, taking care of the needs of its denizens and the industrial

life. *SimCity* is, in fact, a city-planning game, or a system simulation, which models a city and its inner workings: the game provides the player with essential elements needed for the construction of urban settings. These include power plants, parks, police and fire stations as well as various transportation terminals such as airports and seaports. The software controls a zoning system that allows the area to be divided into residential, commercial and industrial zones, traffic with roads and rails and, finally, also the citizens. The inhabitants of the city were called 'Sims' from the beginning. Interestingly still, the selection of the name for *The Sims* was not a self-evident process, but many variations were considered (such as 'The Jeffersons'). In principle, the player could not be in direct contact with the city's residents, but the Sims vocalised their demands through opinion polls and messages. The crowd of the Sims also acted as a kind of buffer between the player and the environment in the sense that they could warn the player if they were very displeased with the unfolding of events (Lew 1989).

SimCity – today known as *SimCity Classic* – offered a 2D, 16-colour overhead view, which was transformed into a more detailed, isometric view in the sequel *SimCity 2000* (1993) (see 'SimCity History: SimCity Classic'). *SimCity* continues to attract a large number of players, and its gameplay also benefits from the considerable modding work done by them worldwide (e.g. Lauwaert 2009, 73-83). *SimCity*, like *The Sims*, is an example of a programme that actually functions more like a sandbox-toolbox design environment than an actual game. Whereas *SimCity* operated in the urban sphere through its infrastructure, politics and public life, *The Sims* transferred the scale of action to the private homes and lives of individual people. This kind of privatisation of the game space may appear self-evident in hindsight, but in the 1980s and 1990s the transformation was heavily doubted as the long development process of *The Sims* suggests. Changes in the public and private spaces are also connected to the development of Sim games, as I will later on explain.[19] *SimCity* was an unexpected success, especially as it differed so drastically from other games being developed in the course of the 1980s. After all, that was the era commonly known as the Golden Age of the Video Game, famous for its fast-paced action games that were aimed at providing the player with a competitive setting and the promise of instant gratification. *SimCity* was totally different: it was a slowly advancing simulation where the player was expected to build up and keep a meticulous balance between various zones of the city.[20] However, the simulation game proved to be an entertaining as well as educational hit, arguably 'forming the cornerstone of a genre in itself' ('Inside scoop – SimCity.com'). Although simulation per se had been an established system of modelling for a long time, *SimCity* was one of the first commercially successful attempts to combine the principles of simulation with the possibility of gaining a pleasurable experience through gameplay.

Wright's inspiration for *SimCity* was derived from urban planning theories by Professor Jay David Forester and mathematician John Conway's work with cellular automata (1970), which emulated evolutionary processes through simple black-

and-white pixel graphics (DeMaria & Wilson 2004, 262-263).[21] This aspect is connected to the important marketing strategy for the simulation games of the era, *SimCity* as well as others: labelling them as educational. These included, for example, a nuclear power plant simulation game *Scram* (Atari 1980) and *Energy Czar* (Atari 1980), in which the player was responsible for the entire energy policy of the US. It is likely that also some boardgame versions of large-scale 'social experiments', such as *The Game of Life* originally invented by Milton Bradley in 1861 and its successor by the same name published to celebrate its centennial (Milton Bradley Co/Hasbro 1960), acted as inspiration for the development of *SimCity*. It has been suggested that there have been many kinds of 'pre-' or 'protosimulative' devices that have not merited proper investigation in the contemporary histories of media (Jenkins 2007).[22] From early on, computers were also used in laboratories and universities at the intersection of information sciences and social sciences to model complex systems, such as economy, city planning, and the evolution of life. *Simsoc*, a computer model of the social system, was tested by people playing different roles in university classrooms (Kline et al. 2003, 89). Early computer games like *Hammurabi* (1970) allowed the player to reign an ancient kingdom thus acting as a precursor of the more modern *Civilization* computer game series (MicroProse 1991; 1995; 2001; 2005).

As *SimCity* was so successful at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, Will Wright could concentrate on his next Sim project without restraint. In *SimEarth* (1990), a grand-scale 'life on Earth' simulator, the player controlled the progression of an entire planet through modelling aspects that were inspired by ecology, geology, climatology and the evolution of life. However, this simulation was not a big hit (DeMaria & Wilson 2004, 263). With his next project, *SimAnt* (1993), Wright turned to the opposite direction of simulating the life cycle and the struggle for survival of an ant colony. In the game, ants build their habitat in the backyard of a man's house. Will Wright was pleased with the fact that the game engine could recreate the behavioral models and tactics of the ants so well. In a way, simulating the AI-powered ants' behaviour could be regarded as a predecessor of simulating real people in *The Sims*, even though it took Wright and his team another nine years to complete that game ('History of The Sims'). In the 1990s, Wright continued to develop simulations such as *SimCity 2000* (1993) and *SimCopter* (1996), and Maxis also published a number of Sim games in which Will Wright was not involved, for example *SimLife* (1992), *SimFarm* (1993), *SimTower* (1994), *SimTown* (1995) and *SimPark* (1996) (DeMaria & Wilson 2004, 264). *SimCity*, in particular, also had a number of add-ons, such as the *SimCity Urban Renewal Kit*, which allowed the players to customise their game space by letting them draw and model their own buildings to be used in the game; a practice that is still being carried out by the contemporary *SimCity* modders. One particularly important precursor of *The Sims* was perhaps the 'juvenile version of *SimCity*', *SimTown* (figure 2), which included an ability to create and manage Sims that lived in a house, went to work and wandered around the town.

The inhabitants of the town could be named and given personalities and even select clothing. Their sayings and tastes of food could also be determined. Unlike in the original *SimCity* games, players could also design individual houses and gardens for their little people ('History of The Sims').

Figure 2. A screenshot of SimTown ('SimTown').

It has to be noted at this point that the creation and eventual launching of *The Sims* was neither a straightforward process nor the result of linear development. *The Sims* was introduced in 2000, but Will Wright had been working on a 'real-life people' simulator game since the early 1990s. The original prototype of the game idea was completed as early as 1993 and named *Home Tactics: The Experimental Domestic Simulator* (Keighley 2002). It was first turned down unanimously at the developer company Maxis. Apparently, the shift from large-scale God games such as *SimCity* to the management of the daily lives of miniature people did not seem like a good idea to the company executives. Large-scale simulations at that time could do without any specific game rules in the sense that their gameplay was merely based on attuning to a set of parameters and determining individual goals at will. With some of the Sim games, for example *SimEarth*, it was possible to 'follow' the game as a story or demonstration, in this case of the gradual evolution of life on Earth – a feature that probably contributed to the controversy over whether simulations truly are games or, for instance, 'interactive toys' as suggested by Wright himself (Costikyan 2002, 12-13).

However, ambitious 2D simulators functioning on the macro scale started to lose popularity in the gaming market as new forms of aesthetic thinking and, alongside those, new playability concepts began to emerge. Simulations were gradually losing their position throughout the 1990s as game designers set their minds to increasing more immersive playability, character and skills development and a different level of interactivity. For example, Myst represented a graphically astounding adventure puzzle game whereas *Doom* and *Quake* took the player's immersion into the 3D game world to a whole new level, thus considerably advancing the FPS genre (Darley 2000). As simulations were facing tightening competition in the digital games market towards the end of the 1990s, game developers like Maxis had to come up with new ideas of improving the attractiveness of games by adding various playability and character creation options. Some Maxis titles, such as *SimCity*, were nevertheless steady sellers, and the development of these games continued along the lines of their original design (towards *SimCity 2000*, *SimCity 3000* and most recently, *SimCity 4D*). Increasing competition, changes in gaming trends and advances in computing technology created a situation where Maxis turned to its players and fans and started paying specific attention to their suggestions and requests. According to its own announcement, in *SimCity 2000* a large part of its added new features were a direct result of the communication between the company and the players ('Inside scoop – SimCity.com'). Although the actual modding and design of WADs started within *Doom* player circles, Maxis was one of the first game companies that took listening to the wishes of its customers as part of official company policy and considered it of utmost importance to develop a mutually trustful relationship with its player base (see Lauwaert 2009, 74-77).

This kind of early approach to allowing game 'customisation' had interestingly enough been tried out before, albeit with less success. As early as 1985, game company Activision had released a game called *Little Computer People* (also known as *House-on-a-disk*), which was seminal in the development of the artificial life simulations. First, the simulation was designed to act as an electronic 'fireplace' or 'fishbowl' – people only needed to turn it on and watch it, and it ran as long as was wanted without any interactivity. However, the finalised version was developed more into a game format, providing the simulated people with a response system and some interactive capabilities. Every game diskette was customised so that each Computer Person appeared as an 'individual' with their own personality and appearance. The author of the game, David Crane (cited in DeMaria & Wilson 2003, 228), explained that

> we were prepared to make an apartment building with dozens of Computer People, all interacting with one another and trading equipment and furnishings, etc. We had hopes to create disks full of new stuff and/or new houses that you could buy to customize your Computer Person's environment.

However, the game proved to be a commercial failure, and the add-ons and sequels never materialised. Interestingly, the concept of designing semi-autonomous, AI-controlled individuals in a moddable home-like environment clearly resembles the idea behind *The Sims*, and Will Wright confirmed in an interview ('Will Wright. A Chat about The Sims and Sim City') in 2000 that the development team of *The Sims* gained valuable insight from the designers of *Little Computer People*.

In 1997, the game industry giant Electronic Arts bought Maxis, and the new executive team re-evaluated Wright's *Home Tactics* project. They decided to take a risk with it and gave the designer proper resources – for instance, the work contribution of more than fifty programmers – to complete the game. Nevertheless, it is likely that the initial tremulousness towards this game concept was reflected in the anxiety of marketing the title. Although Maxis had got positive feedback on this game at several game trade shows, some reviewers doubted its appeal. After all, it had neither clear objectives nor a way of winning or losing, no rules, levels, drivable cars or guns like most other games. As the launch of *The Sims* neared, Maxis began to build up a fan base by hosting chats and webcam events at their website, http://www.thesims.com. The company also launched various customisation tools such as *Facelift*, *SimShow* and *The Sims Home Crafter* before the game itself was released. The first *Sims* mods were thus already in circulation before *The Sims* hit the shelves (Becker 2001; 'History of The Sims'; 'Will Wright. A Chat about The Sims and Sim City'; 'SimShow'). The custom creation tools that Maxis launched were especially targeted among *SimCity* players, who adopted them eagerly and started producing objects for the as yet unpublished game in unprecedented quantities. J.C. Herz (2002c) concluded that by the launch of *The Sims*,

> there were 50 Sims fan sites, 40 artists pumping content into the pipeline, and 50,000 people collecting that content. A quarter-million copies sold in the first week. A year later, there are dozens of people programming tools for Sims content creators, 150 independent content producers, half a million collectors, and millions of players reading 200 fan sites in 14 languages.

The Sims debuted as a simultaneous release in fourteen languages on 4 February 2000, and although there were ambiguous expectations among the public, it soon proved to be tremendously successful. Within a year, it had broken all sales records and made Will Wright one of the few celebrities in the game industry (Keighley 2002). What resulted from its success was a kind of iterative feedback loop: the developer company provided the players with tools, stood back and watched them play, and then adjusted their strategies in producing additional content in line with what they saw. Wright later on summed up in an interview that a lot of what *The Sims* expansion packs and *The Sims 2* became was based upon the company closely watching what people did with The Sims (Croal 2008). Maxis also supported the fans' remediating practices from the beginning by providing them with an official

web resource for uploading and downloading additional game content. The malleability of *The Sims* can therefore be interpreted as a sign of the developer company taking its players' wishes seriously: the photo camera and video recording possibilities as well as tweaking the looks of characters to the extent that it is possible in *The Sims* are also an indication of how important the players' configurative creation was initially assumed to be by the developers (Keighley 2002; Lauwaert 2009, 90-91). Some mods have had a profound effect on the 'official' game content creation, as Maxis reproduced some of the players' ideas through their own professional-quality output. At the same time that there was a 'completely bottom-up, distributed, self-organising process' (Herz 2002a) of player-led content creation going on, the developers were trying to catch up with the fans and modders and rival them, so to speak, at their own game.

Before the launch of *The Sims*, Wright contemplated merging *Sim City* and *The Sims* into one game in the long run, but after the success of *The Sims*, it was clear that *The Sims* series was going to be the company's primary product. After the initial success of *The Sims*, however, it looks as if EA has done exactly what Will Wright mentioned as the negative influence of having huge, transnational corporations publish most of the games:

> [...] most large companies seem a bit too risk adverse when it comes to developing new ideas outside of the mainstream. Everyone is getting very good at milking their cash-cow sequels but very few are putting substantial investments into developing new genres, or taking bold risks. That still comes mainly from the smaller developers. ('Will Wright. A Chat about The Sims and Sim City.')

This statement, although publicised in early 2000, aptly summarises the development of *The Sims* series as well. After the initial ingeniousness of *The Sims*, its radically novel playability options and the generous player participation policy granted by Maxis, all the expansion packs and even the sequels, *The Sims* 2 and 3, have merely been extensions to the initial idea and the core mechanics of the base game. *The Sims* 2 was launched on 17 September 2004, and with its own similar expansions, it rather faithfully replicates the original idea, as well. The capitalistic logic guiding the extension of a single game into a considerable game franchise is conveniently illustrated by the fact that EA has been providing so-called stuff packs for sale as accompaniments to *The Sims* 2 and 3 – a sign of a company policy that is not entirely in accord with the long tradition of supporting the wild practices of modding anymore.

In fact, it can be argued that the multitude of modding practices has never been effortlessly amalgamated with corporate policy. On the one hand, game developers have had to be in control of what happens on the modding scene, but at the same time game modders have always done what they pleased without giving much thought to what the official corporate policy has been. This has been the practice

simply because it has been possible, as tinkering with the game code has been allowed. The public image of *The Sims* – cherished by its developer company, reiterated in the corporate PR – as a game suitable for all ages, labelled with an inclusive Teen ESRB rating, has probably encouraged modders to experiment with it also in ways that have most probably not been appreciated by its corporate stakeholders at Electronic Arts. *The Sims* modding was close to making unfavourable headlines when the infamous American attorney and anti-game lobbyist Jack Thompson attacked it, claiming that it was possible to create and experience child pornography in *The Sims 2*. According to him, EA was well aware that players customarily removed the censorship blur that covered the 'naked bodies' of the Sims. He concluded that EA is 'cooperating, gleefully, with the mod community to turn Sims 2 into a porn offering'. According to a news piece on *GameSpot* (Surette 2005), EA vice president of corporate communications, Jeff Brown, responded to these allegations:

> This is nonsense. We've reviewed 100 percent of the content. There is no content inappropriate for a teen audience. Players never see a nude Sim. If someone with an extreme amount of expertise and time were to remove the pixels, they would see that the Sims have no genitals. They appear like Ken and Barbie.

This discussion is interesting for a number of reasons. First, EA's response assumes that all of the content circulating around *The Sims* is directly controlled by the distributor and developer corporation. Second, it resorts to the two main mechanisms EA created to prevent the players from accessing any glimpse of nudity in the game: the sexless default bodies of the Sims and the protective blur that appears when a Sim gets naked (for example, when taking a shower). However, it remains a fact that *the Sims* players customarily express a desire to see and operate scantily clad or nude Sims. Therefore, various kinds of methods for the corporeal unveiling of, in particular, the female game characters have been developed in the modding community. Some of these methods are included in the game code and are thus based on 'cheating' or taking advantage of glitches; others involve more sophisticated means of revealing the private parts of the Sims. What is therefore also interesting about the EA statement is that it severely downplays the modding work done on *The Sims* by not acknowledging the ease with which the censorship blur can be removed. Also, the prevalence of the most basic and most common mod there is – the specific 'nude patch' – is denied, and instead the company insists that players will never see any realistically naked Sims in their game. However, it is a well-known fact by everybody who has ever visited any *Sims*-related website that players create Sims of all ages, shapes and sizes with detailed depictions of exactly the body parts EA does not want them to see, including breasts, nipples, labia, penises and pubic hair. Creating nude game characters is the heartland of the realm of modding, symbolically speaking, even though neither Jack Thompson nor Jeff Brown is willing to see it. And modding – it has to be remembered – is a key characteristic in

the success of computer games like *The Sims*. Will Wright, on the other hand, has expressed a more realistic and moderate view on player-created content and its inclusion in the official game development process.[23] For example, in this excerpt he clearly states the importance of recognising the influence players have on the direction game development is supposed to take:

> Every game is a learning experience you build upon. At some point you could have built something that seems to be in the right area, then you give it to the players, they do something really remarkable with it, and it opens new vistas that you want to explore the next time around. It's almost this back and forth ping pong where we jump in this new space, explore it as thoroughly as we can, then we can use players, and the players transform it, and decorate it into something remarkable, which clearly shows us the next door to go through. (Croal 2008)

In fact, it may be that the vision laid out by Wright is the only sustainable way to address the problematics of the developer-player relations and the touchy subject of politically incorrect modding. The public image of games like *The Sims* may well be smooth and brazened out by the industry spokespeople, but the details of participatory design, or the so-called first and second stages of game development, are telling in terms of the offstage power struggles and the game culture realities the industry has to deal with.

Wright's newest game, Spore, has sparked considerable media attention and even 'anti-Spore' movements (see 'Anti-Spore'), as the game and its editor have quickly been adopted for the purposes of creating 'obscure', for instance, genital-shaped, virtual life forms by its players. The fact that these creations are designed to be effortlessly shared online has, once again, been politically condemned – although a more game-culture-savvy way of interpreting them might be regarding them as yet another indication of what Richard Bartle has half-seriously termed 'time to dick'.[24] It is noteworthy that modding remains outside of the scope of the developers' purposes and intentions in the sense that they have only limited means of monitoring what is going on in the field of modding, and even less power over what kinds of mods are being created and distributed – yet, modding remains an issue they absolutely cannot ignore.

Maxis and EA have solved this dilemma in relation to *The Sims* in such a way that they aim at creating as much high-quality extra content as they can, feeding it to the player communities in the form of 'official' downloads and stuff packs. The practice that Maxis adopted, already from the start, was to provide players with new stuff, household items and skins, on their official *The Sims* website every Thursday, which they called *The SimDay* (Simpson 2003). This practice is still carried out in attempt to not only satisfy the ever-increasing demands of the player-modders, but also, undoubtedly, to escort them towards the kinds of activities that are the most beneficial from the point of view of the game developer company and its future market

plans. In a way, EA is competing with the international crowd of probably tens of thousands of voluntary modders. *The Sims* thereby remains the most expanded and stuff pack-fortified game so far, and the playground which both the official developers and game modders engage in seems to be a rather highly contested terrain.

Another interesting indication of the importance of gaming capital, modding and amateur game development for the future of the industry-led game creation is the launch of The Sims Carnival, an online resource for creating and customising Sim games by EA: 'Here, you are the game developer!', states the opening line on its web page. The Sims Carnival is essentially a modding toolkit that is extended to promote creativity to the level of designing new games. In the FAQ section it is stated that '[t]he introduction of this new creative endeavor from The Sims is designed to convert millions of players into game designers – no programming skills required!' Its portal at http://www.simscarnival.com will host the creations of players with a promise that advertising revenue will be shared with the game creators whose works reach a certain threshold of popularity. The Sims Carnival seems to have been purposefully designed to continue the traditions of modding and game development, with the special orientation of including more people with various backgrounds in its potential base of player-modder-designer(-customers) (Sihvonen 2008; 'The Sims Carnival'). Fascinatingly enough, by naming the portal 'carnival', EA reportedly wants to evoke an association with Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival (Totilo 2008).

Bakhtin's theory is an elaboration on the idea that carnival is a social structure of collectives that temporarily organise in a way that disrupts prevalent socioeconomic and political power. In short, carnival is supposed to empower the lower classes to be creative in ways that subvert authority and ruling institutions. The notion of carnival is tightly linked with the notion of grotesque: at the brief carnival time, individuals with varied backgrounds can share the powerful but irrevocably passing feeling of being the equal members of a crowd and adopt distinct identities through masquerade and changing costume. These bodily changes are further emphasised through grotesque carnivalesque activities of excessive eating, drinking and having sex. Nevertheless, the subversive mechanisms associated with the unruly behaviour are somewhat balanced by the fact that carnival itself is always a very controlled happening; it is carefully spatially limited and temporally structured (Bakhtin 1984). Even though the transformative and empowering potential of services like The Sims Carnival may currently be hyped, it is enlightening to consider the passing (albeit recurrent) nature of the carnival, associated with all kinds of unruly activities – perhaps unintentionally alluded to by EA – as the essential prerequisites of commercial game development and its authority over player participation. Recent developments in promoting amateur game development and modding are allegedly characterised by industry practices such as providing players with straightforward creation tools, enabling content sharing, encouraging the community of players to talk about their experiences and commercialising the user-created content (see

Matthews 2007, 2; Lauwaert 2009). Although these practices are most advanced and most carefully profited among the semi-professional shooter modding community, there are similar signs of industry involvement among The Sims players.

For example, recently *The Sims* players and modders were encouraged to design an outfit for their Sim and enter it in a competition. The design contest was called *The Sims 2 H&M Fashion Runway*, and the prize for winning would be having that virtual Sim garment reproduced as a real piece of clothing for the H&M clothing brand (see 'The Sims 2 H&M Fashion Runway'). In addition, an online voting system was established for these creations to support the community aspect. As a result of this collaboration, Maxis/EA got positive recognition in the media, H&M got an interesting piece of clothing in their collection (at low cost), and *The Sims* players obtained a chance to experiment on crossing the boundaries between virtual and material production. This is but one example of an assumedly fruitful collaboration between very unlikely business partners – at least in the traditional mindset – and presumably just a foretaste of similar projects that are being planned as this is written. My take on the different historical layers related to player participation is therefore motivated by the notion that utilities such as *The Sims Carnival* in fact turn out to be just the contemporary and the most recent manifestation of a long tradition of including players and modders in game development. Even if these services and toolkits seem to promote empowerment and freedom of creation, as well as the establishment of a self-organising community, their ultimate purpose is more likely to include players as customers, not as producers in their development cycle. However, could there also be potentially groundbreaking creative possibilities and business opportunities involved in this kind of novel organisation of the industry?

Serious game development or intense play?

The dynamics of custom content creation and game modding have in the previous section been addressed in the context of the historical layers of simulations and game development as well as through the political and economic struggles that take place, so to speak, on the wrestling ground consisting of game code. My take on these struggles has been based on the notion that modding is an essential and inbuilt part of game development. Nevertheless, despite this inherent dynamic, the game industry fervently aims at staying in control of its business interests. The dilemma here is that since the success of games depends at least partly on the modification possibilities offered to the players, game development needs to include the players' and modders' perspectives in its design processes. However, at the same time it has to keep the potentially unruly modders on a leash to avoid political turmoil and economic loss.

In the context of theories concentrating on participatory culture and the empowering potential it assumes its user-fans to have, it is tempting to regard computer

game modding to fit the bill (e.g. Lauwaert 2009; Jenkins 2006b; Poremba 2003a; Postigo 2003). Modders are given a chance to have an effect on all levels of gameplay – ranging from altering the looks and mechanics of a single game to providing the game industry with a semi-professional workforce, the enthusiasm of which is neatly complemented by its altruistic tendencies to share the offerings of the intense modification practices. On the other hand, as will be elaborated in the course of this chapter, this 'co-development' of games does not necessarily run smoothly; there are issues that pose new kinds of complications and threats to the current game industry and its organisation. One could say that there is a kind of elaborate play going on between game developers and the players of their games. The game industry will most certainly say its core business is selling games as COTS products, but it cannot be contested that instead 'the social dynamics of a networked player population are the backbone of its business' (Herz 2002d, 95). The game industry is well aware of the fact that social networks and play cultures are needed to solidify games as profitable titles, and the way to aid the accumulation of gaming capital is to let players modify the games they purchase and share their creations. It is likely the industry agrees that 'the adaptations and appropriations by players of the core never stray very far from that core and can easily be re-incorporated within the core' (Lauwaert 2009, 91).

Gaming and modding are essentially voluntary activities in which players engage freely, providing that they accede to, for instance, the End User Licence Agreements (EULAs) stipulated by the game company. Through EULAs, game developers can encourage or (try to) ban the use and especially the trade of in-game items and modifications. On the other hand, it may be more sustainable for them to allow players to shape and rework the scripts and affordances of a game up to a point, as long as the overall supervision of the game development is kept under corporate control. It looks like part of this process is not to allow players to rhetorically assume the role of a developer or a producer, but firmly address them as 'players' or 'users' instead. In this way the hierarchy between developers, who are involved in 'serious' paid work, and players, who play and mod the game for the fun of it, is being strengthened. It has been emphasised that commercialism should be differentiated from the operations of game modding scenes also in research, as they are thought more likely to adhere to philosophies of freeware and other anti-capitalist principles (see Laukkanen 2005). It is customary in the often rather celebratory analyses of modding cultures to regard modders as player-authors than actual developers or co-creators. Modders as the player-authors of commercial games are thought to be motivated by the pleasure principle, or the pure enjoyment of replenishing a game to its fullest gameplay potential by modifying it to their own personal liking. This approach is complemented by the view that modding is in fact often regarded as an extension of gaming instead of being a vital part of game design and development (Nieborg 2005, 7). There are, in fact, several processes of demarcation going on in the field that take part in the ideological restructuring of the game industry and the identification

processes associated with the roles its participants are thought to incorporate.

This perspective alludes to the ideological paradigm that is expressed in the so-called hacker ethic promoted by Pekka Himanen and Manuel Castells (2002), according to which a new value system of work is evolving. They argue that every individual should be working at what they choose, in their own way, powered by innate zest like hackers, who are in this line of thinking considered as 'enthusiasts of any kind'. The personification of the hacker ethos is, of course, Linus Torvalds, the originator of Linux, who firmly believes in the intrinsic value of writing software, and remains passionate about his work over decades. In the hacker discourse, creativity, socially responsible activity and joyful pursuit of passion become the new denominators of work, and in the end, work dissolves into play (e.g. Levy 2001 [1984]; Dibbell 1998). The Protestant idea of externally motivated work transforms into what famous hacker Eric S. Raymond (2001) has termed 'intense play'. The idea of modding as intense play is one way of dealing with the problems caused by the disintegration of the ideological boundaries between work and play, as well as the ones that are supposed to keep the fields of production and consumption apart and complementary to each other. Modding does not only allow players to cross the line that differentiates the traditional order of work into producers and consumers – a relationship characterised by a rather solid logic of economic transactions – but modding is also a means of adding value to the products of the game industry. The practices of modding result in concrete products, mods, that can be treated individually, distributed, copied and eventually also traded, allowing for deeper and more diverse systems of making meaning, as well as profit. In the long run, these subtle but profound mechanisms of content creation have the potential to transform the field of digital media and the business models associated with all cultural production (Humphreys 2003; Kücklich 2005; Nieborg & van der Graaf 2008).

Ideally, the elaborate play between game developers and the players of their games results in a kind of win-win situation, where game companies provide their players with a considerably unrestricted access to the game code in return for the co-development services that players freely and eagerly provide the company. These may include such production-related practices as beta-testing and possibly also debugging and optimising the behaviour of the code, as well as play (or 'consumption') related ones such as writing tutorials and walkthrough guides, and providing peer support for fellow players (which could almost be considered as a kind of customer service). Players can also assist the developer company with fixes for bugs and ideas for sequels or revamps and take part in the marketing, especially by spreading word of mouth (Consalvo 2007a; Lauwaert 2009, 76).

As I suggested in the previous chapter, EA's game creation toolset *The Sims Carnival* is a prime contemporary example of the company's deliberate procedure of including players in game development. Whereas the idea of such a service is basically applauded, the implementation of the ideals of participatory cultural production, or participatory design, associated with the profit-making policies of the game

industry giant, can also be approached with a slant – as journalist Justin McElroy (2008) concludes in *Joystiq*: 'In the future, there will be no game developers. Well, to be more accurate, there will be no paid videogame developers, just a legion of unpaid game slaves, toiling away for a chance at e-stardom.' Some of the hot topics in the discussion on the future of game modding are indeed the commodification (of mods), the general division of labour (the future of playbour) and the salience of phases such as testing for game development as well as the distribution of financial resources for the creation and design of new game titles (Kücklich 2005). This problematic is clearly visible in, for instance, the introduction of industry-led modding (and machinima-focused) competitions that reward the best partakers with considerable prizes. It has also been established that serious modders are likely to be employed by game companies. It is interesting that these people are able to cross the boundaries rarely transgressed so easily in other media industries, even though this cross-border activity may come with a high price (Nieborg 2005, 3-4; Taylor 2006). Game companies let their players take part in the participatory design of games – but at what cost?

The politicised and morally overheated commotion surrounding the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (GTA:SA; Rockstar North 2004) minigame modification *Hot Coffee* a few years ago provides an interesting example of the potentially explosive dynamics of letting players alter the mechanics of the games-as-product. *Hot Coffee* ('coffee' here acts as a euphemism for sex) was a mod that allowed players to engage in sexual actions otherwise inaccessible in the GTA:SA gameplay.[25] However, *Hot Coffee* was more of an innocent test case in the sense that it did not really involve any actual modification; it was a tweak of existing code or a patch that made it possible for a single player to make use of some of the background materials in the game. According to its discoverer, the then 37-year-old Dutchman Patrick Wildenborg, all the required code was already in the game, only unavailable to the player. The uncovering of the code and revealing the sex scenes involved toggling only a single bit in the installed game's main.scm file (Wildenborg 2005). The still somewhat unresolved turmoil around 'Hot Coffeegate' had to do with accountability, and it involved questions such as: If 'inappropriate' content is produced through a game, who can be held responsible for it – the developer company that provided the code, engine and other elements needed for the realisation of the illegitimate content; or the individual modder, who through some arduous tinkering brought into play the potential that already existed within the game code? What made the situation difficult in the *Hot Coffee* case is that Rockstar Games first tried to cover up the fact that the sexual content was built-in and forgotten among the executable game code, never meant to be utilised – issuing a press release where it claimed that 'hackers' had infiltrated and changed the code (Knorr 2005).

The political pressure on the game developer seems to have been considerable, as a patch for the original GTA:SA has since been released, disabling the minigame, as well as an updated version of the complete game with the whole minigame re-

moved ('No more hot coffee'). The Hot Coffee incident resulted in considerable financial loss for the Rockstar Games parent company Take Two Interactive, partly due to the convoluted ESRB reclassification procedures in the USA from Mature (M) to Adults Only (AO, 18+), which also included the massive operations of withdrawal and recall of all the copies of GTA:SA currently on sale. The original games have since then been made available on the internet, either as pirated or official versions on services such as eBay, and so-called downgraders are also available for the more recent, patched versions of the game allowing players to access the Hot Coffee minigame again. Perhaps Rockstar Games expressed a traumatic trace of the incident in the next instalment of the GTA series, where a character called Maria asks the game's protagonist if he would like to 'come up for a... uh... coffee or something?' – to which the main character, Toni Cipriani, replies: 'I'll pass'. [26]

As is also exemplified by the *Hot Coffee* incident, tinkering with game code is not only altering the often very private experience of play; it is also tapping into the dynamics of the practices of signification that involve defining what kinds of entities games are, culturally, technologically and economically speaking, and what, in fact, constitutes the activity we call 'gameplay'. Modding, like gaming, takes part in the diverse practices of identity-building, especially those that are historically and socially associated with such activities as software development, programming and hacking. Although playing, modding and game development are basically all very different kinds of modes of activity – and equally, being called a 'player', a 'modder', or a 'game developer' situates the person very differently in the organisation of participatory culture – they all share essentially similar practices of working on the code. In fact, the blurring of the boundaries between the various stages of production can be considered an illustration of the same ideological stance towards computing and the use of the code, often supplemented by the demand for its free/libre distribution.

The material and philosophical dimensions of modding are based on software, which comprises a heterogeneous set of tools, written in code, that are aimed at facilitating the creation of a virtually endless array of cultural productions. It is thus 'inextricably intertwined with the processes through which technology informs culture' (Herbst 2008, 23). Digital media researcher Mirko Tobias Schäfer (2004, 67; 2009) argues that all software-based products are actually processes that, at the moment of their introduction, enter a 'second stage of development' among the web-browsing user groups. This ongoing post-publication development stage does not only entail users' or players' input, but also the original developers' efforts at further improving the performance of the product. In fact, the software developers can actually be regarded to assume a service delivery role rather than any kind of production or manufacture of goods. This is accentuated by the developers' objective of facilitating and maintaining community relations in and around the games they introduce to the market (Humphreys 2003, 89-90).

Even though it is worthwhile noting the continuing efforts of the original devel-

opers, it is still the dispersed and largely voluntary community of amateur producers and users that shapes the existence of software code (in all but name, perhaps). The tightening stipulation of EULAs and copyright control can also be interpreted as a sign of desperate corporate attempts to exert control over the fluid and ultimately uncontrollable code. This second stage of development has also been termed the 'social (after)life of texts', where media content enters an online dimension of reproduction, exchange and circulation whose functions are collectively defined on the platforms of distribution, storage and publication. Internet researcher Lisbeth Klastrup (2007) has noted that these online loci have their own conventions and terms of use that continue to shape and exert control over these products and services as well as the processes of interpretation and interaction they invite their users to engage in. A similar idea is expressed by J.C. Herz (2001), when she considers the lessons learned from the success of *The Sims*, and argues that online (game) businesses are rather like cities in that they exist in human context over time: 'The best ones are designed to grow more interconnected, not just bigger, as the population evolves. They're always messy. They're never finished. [...] When you open your window, there's a there there'. The human context related to game modding is therefore manifested on multiple levels, and the practices associated with modding are diverse and multilayered to the point where it becomes almost impossible to grasp their essence in a neatly systematic way. As soon as some kind of an idea is formed of the motley activities associated with modding, they change. This can be considered as the corollary of the nature of the code itself. The power of the computer lies in the simple fact that computation is possible with anything that can be expressed in and formulated as an algorithm – and algorithms are, inherently, malleable (Schäfer 2004, 64).

In the context of the modding of *The Sims* this malleability of the code can be illustrated by looking at dedicated websites that have specific themes, some of which drift far from the original propositions and inclinations of the base game. For instance, an American university student who happens to be interested in the daily life of ancient Romans in the first century has created an extensive web resource

Figure 3. An example of creating Roman military costumes with The Sims (Beall 2004).

that offers complete sets of various domestic buildings with their appropriate historical decorations for downloading. All of the mods are provided with detailed explanations and instructions (Beall 2004). On her website, there are also Sims sporting characteristic period costumes, representative of the social hierarchy typical of the era, as well as depictions of their habitats (figure 3).

The idea of games as endlessly patchable and customisable software services contests the current understanding of game titles as COTS products which are each associated with identifiable gameplay tactics and designated play cultures. If we take it seriously that game text should be considered as an 'emergent' process rather than a 'closed object', we have to consider the concrete as well as intangible social investments of players as integral to the very organisation of the game itself. These also take part in the '"value chain" of game development, which in turn implies the intersection of social and economic relations in this environment' (Humphreys 2003, 89-90). The resulting game text thus becomes the manifestation of a shift from the producer-consumer mode of thinking to a different kind of system of analysis. Although game developers mainly rule in the arena of the symbolic representative power, they also need to rely on player interaction and social activity for the success of their games. This is the key to the players' subversive power on hand – a power potential that is possible to realise through the practices of modding (Humphreys 2003, 90).

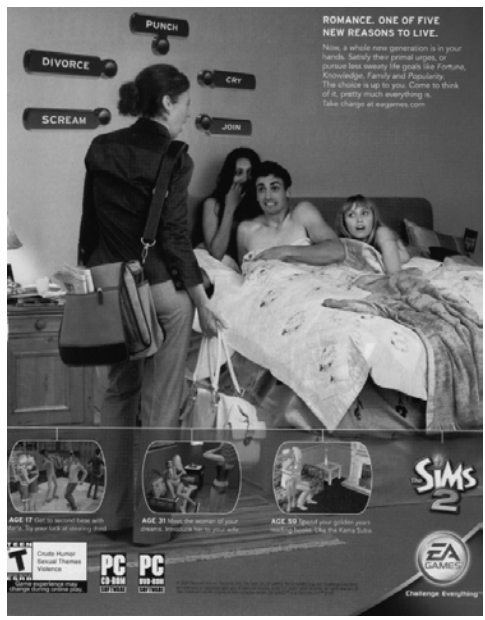

Figure 4. The Sims 2 advertisement.

The Sims has always been a game with a central theme revolving around relationships, identity performances, and various kinds of lifestyle issues, and it was precisely these thematics that were ironically toyed with in a (pre-launch) advertisement for *The Sims 2* (figure 4). Interestingly enough, the focus of the ad seemsto almost inadvertently switch from playing the human female 'Sim' (portrayed in the large picture with the pie menu) to the guidance of different age male Sims (small screenshots). The 'inclusive' articulation of gender in this kind of PR material suggests that the developer company EA may have had difficulties in addressing the multiplicity of the player positions and identities that are involved in playing and modding a game like *The Sims*.

As *The Sims* is so malleable, it is no wonder that there are numerous web pages promoting specific content and interests. There are a lot of sites featuring gay Sim skins and props, for example. On *The Sims* modding sites that discuss gay issues, it is easy to see that the possibilities for creating and experimenting with the multitude of sexual orientation of the Sims are highly valued and celebrated in the player community (see 'Gay Sims Club 2'; Koge 2004). In fact, the liberal policy of making the Sims bisexual (or asexual) in the first place has even been mentioned as one of the key reasons behind the initial success of the game (e.g. the comment by Mieke Weissmann on 'No gay marriage in The Sims 2?').

To illustrate the multiformity of the practices aided by digitalisation and the spread of computer networks, Henry Jenkins has categorised participatory activities in four groups: *affiliations*, which are manifested in memberships in online communities; *expressions*, which refer to the creation and production of new content; *collaborative problem-solving* that necessitates working together in teams to develop new knowledge; and finally, *circulations*, the shapings of the flow of media by for example blogging and podcasting (Jenkins et al. 2006, 3). Jenkins (1992) has initially been interested in subversive participatory culture activities, namely the workings of fandom, already in the 'pre-web' era. Modding can be regarded as taking the inherently productive and participatory stance of fans and users of technology to the next level, as it results not only in diegetic alterations in media products, but also because it produces concrete objects, autonomous pieces of code, that can be further modified, transferred, distributed and even individually traded anew. As John Banks and Sal Humphreys (2008, 406) argue, peer production networks and commercial interests manifest themselves in the 'hybrid configurations' of the proprietary and the non-proprietary, the commercial and non-commercial.

As the work of Henry Jenkins suggests, an important context for approaching active audiences, amateur productions and the creative endeavours of media users have been studies conducted in the area of fandom and fan cultures. The kinds of conflicts that characterise the scope of this work on game modding are also present, to an extent, in the critical cultural studies' approach to the paradoxes of fan production and the necessarily associated cultures of consumption. The basic dilemma here arises from the fact that in order to 'productively negotiate' their fandom (for

example by creating fan fiction by using the characters of a popular TV show), it is first imperative for the fans to acquire and consume all the possible and relevant cultural texts in order to absorb their semiotic potential for reworking and remediation as well as further employment of the 'fannish' meaning-making tactics. The research tradition of reading fan cultures as or through anti-commercial, challenging and 'resistive' positions is currently contested by the paradigm of contextualising these activities as part of culture industries' 'campaigns of fan cultivation' (Jenkins 2000; Meehan 2000; Murray 2004, 13). The resulting co-existence 'within fan cultures of both anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices' posits a dire challenge to the textually oriented, empowering studies of fandom (Hills 2002, 28).

Fandom has previously been regarded as an agency that involves particular kinds of activities around popular cultural issues as well as social identity formation and its dynamic re-enforcement. Cultural texts act as a material basis on which individuals can reflect on their identity and navigate through social situations by investing emotional energy in a particular set of issues, celebrities, sports teams, media productions and the like. The relationship between a fan and a cultural text is always affective in the sense that it binds together the private experience and the sociocultural meaning-making strategies that guide the affect in and through the experiencing subject (Ahmed 2004, 52-54). The processes of identification and idealisation are at play in the affective encounters of fans and the objects of their admiration; the concept of identification can, for example, be used to signify a fan's desire to be like the idol she admires, and idealisation describes the placing of the star on a pedestal as the fan's source of inspiration (Ahmed 2004, 126). Today, the internet functions as an irreplaceable platform for these community-building strategies, although many of the practices of performing fandom originally developed through the channels of mail-order catalogues and xerox zines (Jenkins 1992).

According to key fandom researchers such as Henry Jenkins, at the core of fandom are always fannish activities, which need a collective of usually like-minded individuals to be brought about and given some social significance. In his classic study, Jenkins makes a proposition to conceptualise these activities as textual poaching, following de Certeau's idea on strategy and tactics as constituting layers in the contextualisation of quotidian human activity, especially as an aid to the conceptualisation of spatial practices.27 The empirically observable activities (e.g. fan artwork) shared and reappropriated within collective fan cultures are understandably the most researched part of fandom, and this aspect of fan studies appears as rather promising for the study of gameplay and modding, in so far as these are considered the creation of cultural artefacts, too. However, research conducted on fandom has (been) politicised in such a way that it is not easily applicable to the study of games and game modding. As Simone Murray (2004 20) suggests, fan studies has been too narrowly centred on the legitimation of the 'creatively resistant fan pursuing subversive media pleasures, as well as its more

muted successor, the semiotically self-determining fan viewer'.

In many studies of fandom, fans have been considered as enthusiastic media users and even independent, amateur producers, and fan practices have ultimately been celebrated as displays of discursive power over the official production mechanisms of global media corporations (Jenkins 1992; 2006b). In these analyses, the multinational corporate order is often seen as a rather stable and essentially monolithic media system against which fans exercise their autonomously critical, self-directed and creative posture – even though textual poaching can only effectively count as *poaching* if 'there is a gamekeeping regime for it to flout' (Murray 2004, 12). The securely guarded boundaries of such a corporate regime have recently been moved and lowered, even erupted up to a point due to the internet and the digital content creation tools utilised in the network-powered fan communities, but even this change is not straightforward from the point of view of the politics of fandom:

> Emerging models of fan/producer relationships around premium media content might best be characterized as an uneasy dance in which conglomerates' desire for maximum circulation of content chafes uncomfortably against fans' resourcefulness in eluding the prescribed legal and economic frameworks for the circulation of that content. In a sense, it is an amplification of the fraught and highly contestatory relationship between media fans and producers which has characterized the industry for decades, and which has increasingly preoccupied the content industries since Internet technologies rapidly expanded consumer access to production and distribution infrastructure. (Murray 2004, 9)

The industry's interests in promoting fan activities for its own profit resembles the practices of game corporations that have supported amateur game development and modding for decades, in the diverse ways I have described in this work. There is, however, a significant difference in scope and the dedication with which traditional media corporations seek to secure and maintain their intellectual property (IP) and copyrights as well as their trademarks in comparison to game developers, who seem to utilise different strategies to safeguard their economic interests. In this sense, the ideology of participatory culture makes it possible to reframe the producer-consumer relationship towards the ideology of 'affective economy'. In this process the writings of Jenkins (2006a) have been crucial. This is partly due to the diverging textualities of the cultural products in question: the essence of a game is the result of the private reconfiguration of its code (and the possible public distribution of those reconfigurations), and in this it differs from the use value of books, films or TV programmes, the usage of which does not necessarily contribute to the text itself in any (ergodic) way. The narrative potential of the more traditional media products is idealistically intended – at least from the industry perspective – to be celebrated 'as is' (Murray 2004, 11). Within game cultures, on the other hand, the

online distribution of game screenshots, character development descriptions and walkthroughs ('plot guides') is tolerated, even encouraged by game companies. It is essential to note in the discussion of the diverging corporate control and PR tactics that whereas game companies aim at a mutually beneficial relationship with their player base in ways I have previously analysed, many transnational media conglomerates have become famous for their vigilant campaigns to protect their IP by engaging in cease-and-desist correspondence with fansite operators and even suing their most productive or famous fans for copyright infringement. There are differences in ways a 'fan identity' and a 'game modder identity' have culturally been articulated, and even though the practices of fandom share important common characteristics with the workings of 'extratextualised' gameplay, their impact on the industrial development of media-cultural products is far apart.

On the other hand, it may be true that the adoption of this perspective is aided by the criticism that is directed against Henry Jenkins, for example, as he is seen to be too concentrated on a narrow selection of mass-media cultural properties such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* at the expense of all kinds of niche-market and grassroots media activities that are taking place on the outskirts of global capitalist productions. 'While Jenkins admits that many corporations are pushing convergence as a strategy of control, he frames consumer resistance as a struggle to get media companies to be more responsive to consumer tastes and interests' (Bogost 2006). In some contexts, fans, gamers and modders in fact are taking the tools of creation under control, and in some cases they may reconfigure the available media contents in very similar ways, according to their own interests and intentions. However, *The Sims* player and modding communities online can also be regarded to elevate the field traditionally conceptualised as fandom onto another level. *The Sims* players perform their fandom and employ gaming capital by creating custom content for their game, and this practice is in various ways supported by the developer company of the original COTS game. This is the kind of support EA also wants to emphasise in much of its corporate PR. It is also likely that EA carefully monitors online player activities for its market research purposes. Whereas the avid fans of a TV show or a movie are sometimes violently shut out from the reproduction, reappropriation and reassessment of their favourite cultural product, the player groups of games like *The Sims* take part in the reconstruction of the game as a media-cultural artefact in a very concrete way.

It has been established that the relationship between audiovisual media production companies and the fans of their TV programmes is characterised by mutual suspicion or even an open conflict rather than symbiotic and collaborative cohesion that is discernible in modding-driven game development (see Jenkins 1992). For example, as I have mentioned before, it is evident that the expansion packs for *The Sims* have been developed largely according to the critique and wishes of the players. This was discernible already at an early stage, for instance in the interactive 'wish list' compiled by Dan Simpson (2003, 100-103) in his *The Sims Walkthrough*. In

hindsight, it is obvious that most of the players' listed wishes have been fulfilled (see also Herz 2001). What then becomes essential to ask is how the original game supports various play styles and preferences, and how these are further developed as the activities of performing fandom. In the latter part of this work, I will cast a look into what kinds of ideological propositions the game lays out at its players' disposal, and how the players (re)negotiate these in practice through the means of modding and via the maintenance of collaborative online networks.

III DYNAMICS OF MODDING

Categorising modding practices

What makes computer games specifically interesting pieces of digital code besides the actual gameplay is their inherent potentiality for malleability and alteration. At present, game software is structured and interconnected according to a specific logic: there is the game engine that controls everything that is to be experienced by the player by ordering the hardware to generate the appropriate images, sounds and movements, and mediating the content through designated interfaces such as the screen and speakers. The game engine thus renders the in-game world, its characters and objects, lets the story unfold according to the storyboard and the player's input, allows music and sound to be heard at the right moment - and it does all of this out of game data that is stored in files and libraries. This data, consisting of components such as 3D meshes, textures (surfaces) for objects and characters, scripts and rulesets, functions like raw material out of which the engine 'spins its yarn' for the player to experience in real time as the game is played. The fact that the contents of these data libraries can be altered makes games moddable (Knorr 2007, 3-4). Practically speaking, game modding takes place on the level of altering and tinkering with game data files as the access to the game engine is not normally granted to players.

Most of the theoretical notions on modding are structured around the level of adding game data. One of the most basic categorisations is the one provided by David B. Nieborg and Shenja van der Graaf (2008), as they make a differentiation in their study of total conversion (TC) mods between the fundamental elements of the games and mods as extensions of them, in other words, to 'proprietary engines' that are under corporate control. In their study, this is termed as the techno-economic dimension of modding and put under ideological scrutiny, as the TC modding is considered to entail free labour and unpaid development work done by players, granting benefits to the industry (see also Postigo 2003). Other, more general and perhaps more neutral terminology is used by digital media theorists such as Espen Aarseth (1997) and Joost Raessens (2005), who term modding as 'addition' or 'construction' of new game elements. However, these concepts are too vague and imprecise for the purposes of this study; it is impossible to differentiate the particularities of The Sims modding with the help of these non-specific categorisations.

In order to develop more precise concepts and tools for the analysis of mods and the convoluted modding practices, I present a modding typology chart (Chart 1) as the basis for discussion. This chart is a collection of terms and concepts gathered from various academic sources, and its purpose is to show how my own thinking is both a continuation and a reappropriation of the earlier research done on this topic. The chart renders visible the different and multiform ways and levels in the modding of especially the kinds of malleable, free-form computer games such as *The Sims*. Modding does not therefore constitute a simple category of 'constructing' or 'adding' new game elements to an existing game - it also includes fuzzy and incoherent practices such as taking advantage of bugs and glitches that have an effect on the game's functions and mechanics in ways I will later explain in detail. The actual tinkering with game code also contains potentially convoluted activities like cheating, the practicalities of which are notoriously difficult to treat in an analytically substantial way. The complexity of these practices is plausibly one of the main reasons for the lack of profound, empirically based and theoretically informed studies on game modding so far.

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Aarseth 1997</th><th>Raessens 2005 (Domains of participation)</th><th>Knorr 2007 (Sociocultural appropriation)</th><th>Nieborg & van der Graaf 2008</th><th>Sihvonen</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Game-provided</td><td>Interpretation</td><td>Interpretation</td><td rowspan="3">Taking into possession (interpretation)</td><td rowspan="3">Play</td><td rowspan="2">Interpretation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Exploration</td><td rowspan="2">Reconfiguration</td></tr>
<tr><td>Configuration</td><td>Configuration</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">User-extended</td><td rowspan="3">Addition</td><td rowspan="3">Construction</td><td>Reworking</td><td>Extension</td><td>Reworking</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reinterpretation</td><td rowspan="2">(Metaplay)*</td><td rowspan="2">Redirection</td></tr>
<tr><td>Rededication</td></tr>
</table>

* Nieborg & van der Graaf do not actually use the term 'metaplay' in their study, but they have speculated upon using that concept in private conversations with me.

Chart 1. Typology of modding.

First of all, there are two fundamental sets of criteria that have to be recognised in any kind of research on game modding. The first considers the above-mentioned technical principle of separating the utilisation and alteration of game data files from the use of the game engine for some purpose it was not originally intended for (a practice typically done in association with altering the contents of data files, in any case). I will elaborate on this division below. At this point a more important distinction for my purposes is categorising the modding practices on the basis of, first, whether they are feasible through operating the affordances of the game code (of the COTS game-as-product) or, second, whether they result in the participatory design practices carried out by the players in ways described in the previous chapter. In other words, this division can be approached in terms of regarding the modded gameplay essentially as either *game-provided* or *user-extended*. It has to be pointed out, however, that this cannot be considered a strict dichotomy, since there are also several modding practices that result in the compound and conflation of these two main categories – nevertheless, it is needed in order to render the diverging mechanics of mod creation understandable and theoretically approachable.

In the context of touching upon game data, I have named the first three modding categories as 1) *interpretation*, 2) *configuration* and 3) *reworking*. The user-extended dimension of reworking is the one that has in previous studies been considered as the purest form of modding, 'modding proper', in that it usually entails both altering the game's aesthetics and mechanics, usually by adding new gameplay elements. In this case, I have found Alexander Knorr's conception of reworking most useful, and therefore I also follow him in terminology. Knorr considers reworking, the strongest form of appropriation, to consist of the deconstruction and reassembly of game elements, but not only that; in his opinion, the discourse on the deconstruction and reassembly is likely to be reductive in that it focuses too much on the objects themselves. Instead, the category of reworking should also take into account the decisive dimension of the 'transformation of the *relationships* between the objects in question and the members of the appropriating group' (Knorr 2007, 11; my emphasis). The last category of modding, 4) *redirection*, is differentiated from the three other ones on the basis of it utilising the game engine for the creation of external textual artefacts, such as collections of screenshot-based online images and gamics as well as machinima realised through the capture of gameplay video and audio. This fourth dimension in the modding typology is termed *redirection* of the game engine, and it has a special connotation to practices that are usually approached through theoretical concepts such as *remediation*.

Indeed, I regard redirection to include remediational elements in that it utilises the game for a kind of media-cultural production – it can be said that the game itself functions as a transtextual and transgeneric vehicle, a toolset for the creation of new media content. Redirection of the game engine to novel uses that are motivated by external reasons (as opposed to the actual gameplay and its intrinsic purposes) is part of the general modding picture, and therefore it also figures in

my typology.[28] However, redirection and remediation of games open up such a vast new discursive tangent on cultural production and participatory design that I can only fleetingly touch upon the issue in the study at hand. Instead, the focus of my analysis of The Sims modding in this book will be on the interpretation, configuration, and reworking of game data. Both interpretation and configuration can be said to form the foundation of gameplay. As I will more systematically argue in the next chapter, gameplay can be regarded as an inherently configurative practice. Since I understand the term modding to comprise a wide range of activities, interpretation and configuration also appear as the basis for my study of game modding, although less obviously than, for instance, the dimension of reworking game data.

Interpretation is included in this typology on the grounds of it being a necessary part of taking games, as forms of sociocultural appropriation, into possession through semiotic signification. Games are a good example of artefacts that present themselves as open for semiosis since they are 'surrounded by interpretative flexibility', manifesting themselves in all kinds of convoluted, gameplay-related practices (Beck 2001, 67, cited in Knorr 2007, 7). Therefore, the interpretive dimension also figures importantly in the contexts of both playing and modding games. As is visible in Chart 1, Espen Aarseth (1997) investigates the basic gameplay through concepts like exploration, where the player has to make strategic choices among alternative paths and actions, and configuration, which refers to play practices as 'building' a virtual world by selecting from existing possibilities for construction. Explorative, configurative, and reconfigurative functions of gameplay are also present in Joost Raessens's (2005) category of *reconfiguration*, which entails the actualisation of the potential that is either empirically or virtually present in a game. As a minor deviation from their terminology I have decided to call my category *configuration*, because I do not regard it involving the design or construction of new elements that are interpolated to the existing code – it merely 'configures' the readily available code and its functions within the parameters and affordances of the developers' intentions.

However, the question of (developers') intentionality is a particularly tricky one in the context of digital games. Software code, as has been established in the previous chapter, is in a state of 'permanent beta' in the sense that especially products of high potential profitability, such as games, are pushed to the market long before they have been properly tested and the inevitable bugs in their code have been fixed (Neff & Stark 2004, 173-188). Besides the notion that individual and situated gameplay practices of players may alter tremendously, resulting in variations in the games' representative layer, it also has to be remembered that the game code is not 'ready', transparent, fixed or immutable either, not even in its primary (COTS) stage. This fact has an effect on the analytic interpretation of its functions, too. The game world processed by the game engine is often the result of compromises and optimisation, which necessarily renders it prone to malfunctions and glitches. Furthermore, programming errors are extremely common in computer games – also in *The*

Sims – perhaps even more so than in console games or other digital productions. It is not uncommon to experience a game crash while playing. The most prominent of programming errors seems to be the discrepancy between the display model of software (the diegetic, in-game world) and its world model (the representation of that in-game world as experienced by the behaviour of characters and objects inside the game) (figure 5). This discrepancy is generally noticed when these two 'models' intersect unintentionally, for instance, when objects or characters collide with (or 'bleed' into) each other or with their environment's walls and other surfaces that are supposed to be impenetrable (Bainbridge & Bainbridge 2007, 64-67). In *The Sims*, bleeding can occur when the object's Alpha masks (a specific greyscale image that defines the transparent areas of the rectangular bitmap creating the shape of an object) and its Z-buffers (the mask through which its 'third-dimensionality' is created) are not defined correctly. Bleeding has been a relatively common problem with the early Sim object reworkings and mods.[29]

Figure 5. An example of glitched textures in The Sims 3 (Terrakki_ 2009).

Digital games are typically products that are constantly being patched and updated as the result of their users' wishes as well as their criticism and complaints. As a consequence of the economic imperative of their publication, games are ripe with errors and glitches which players encounter with both irksome and optimistic attitudes, hoping to gain possible advantage from using them in one way or another. The use of glitches and bugs can primarily be considered to belong to the *interpretive* category of modding, whereas actual cheating (the use of cheat codes and the like) is more likely a form of *configuration*. Nevertheless, what the player does in practice

can effectively be dependent on the same functions of the game code, so even though these practices are theoretically divided in distinct categories, they may pragmatically speaking overlap (Bainbridge & Bainbridge 2007, 62-64). The importance of considering glitches as essential elements in the gameplay experience is supported by a number of recent studies (e.g. Hayes & King 2009; Kimppa & Bissett 2005; Nitsche 2008). According to them, glitches are software errors that can be defined as either programming bugs or design flaws. An example of a widely used glitch in *The Sims* is creating a 'floating' home by building a house on a set of columns and then deleting the columns (see also Hayes & King 2009). Cheats, on the other hand, despite the fact that they sometimes exploit glitches as well, are more like tools for mastering the game 'by circumventing the official rules for play' (Bainbridge & Bainbridge 2007, 62). Even though it is difficult to provide a general estimate of the extent and the importance of cheating to players, I would say that in the context of *The Sims*, at least, cheating constitutes a widely accepted and normalised part of player behaviour. Furthermore, it can be recognised as part of the configurative aspects of modding on the basis of it being developed and controlled by the game's designers. For a long time, many of the available cheat codes have been provided with the game manual, and needless to say, websites listing all kinds of cheating options abound on the internet.[30]

Contrary to the practices of using cheat codes, I consider adding external elements, such as mini-programmes or patches (which are pieces of software operating on the core level of the game, see Lauwaert 2009, 76) as something that alters the game code itself, it *hacks* into it. These practices are therefore not primarily considered as part of the configurative mechanics of gameplay, but they are included in the third category of modding, *reworking*. Avid game players are generally well aware of the prevalence of rule ambiguities, glitches and errors in game programming, and they naturally seek to exploit them in any way they can (Nitsche 2008, 25-29). Cheats and design limitations may work towards providing the players with a multitude of positive functions, and there are players for whom these 'inconsistencies' in the game code are actually socially rather significant (Bainbridge & Bainbridge 2007). The positive aspects of glitches and cheats are also emphasised by Mia Consalvo (2007a, 5-6), who considers them not only as tricks for gaining individual advantage in games but also as a method for identity- and community-building as well as strengthening subcultural ties.

The question of what cheating actually constitutes is worth raising, although the understandings of what it is should also be kept open to interpretation and debate. One of the implications of this is that many of the practices some players label as cheating, others regard merely as skilful gameplay. The impetus on practices that individuals engage in leads Consalvo (2007a, 127-128, passim) to examine cheating as an enjoyable praxis that is ludic, situated and iterative in its expression. The other question concerns the definition of the unethical nature of cheating: Could it instead be neutrally termed as gaining clever advantage, for example? The most important

mechanism for configurative gameplay and modding practices, also in the context of *The Sims*, is precisely this clever gameplay, or cheating, and that is why it also figures so importantly in my tentative analysis of modding. In a more general context of computer games, one of the prominent glitch categories includes rule functions, playable spaces, objects or even NPCs such as monsters and other enemies which were accidentally left behind in the code by the game's programmers (Bainbridge & Bainbridge 2007, 65-66)[31] – an instance of which was discussed in the context of the *Hot Coffee* mod scandal previously.

The material basis of the functionality of *The Sims* cheats, on the other hand, is in the developer testing device: in the game, there appears a small window with a prompt (the command prompt console) when the player presses the key combination *shift+ctrl+c*. Presumably, this was originally used by the designers to test various functions of the game, and there still remain interesting traces of this test phase in the variety of the Sim cheat codes. For instance, by typing 'boolProp testingcheats-enabled true' in the prompt console, the player of *The Sims 2* can alter almost any function of the game, from changing the Sims's moods to giving birth or killing creatures, simply by right-clicking an object to access full control of it. This cheating device is such a powerful tool for tweaking the game code that a modder has had to warn her fellow players that not *all* of the Sims' problems will be fixed by typing in cheat codes (figure 6).

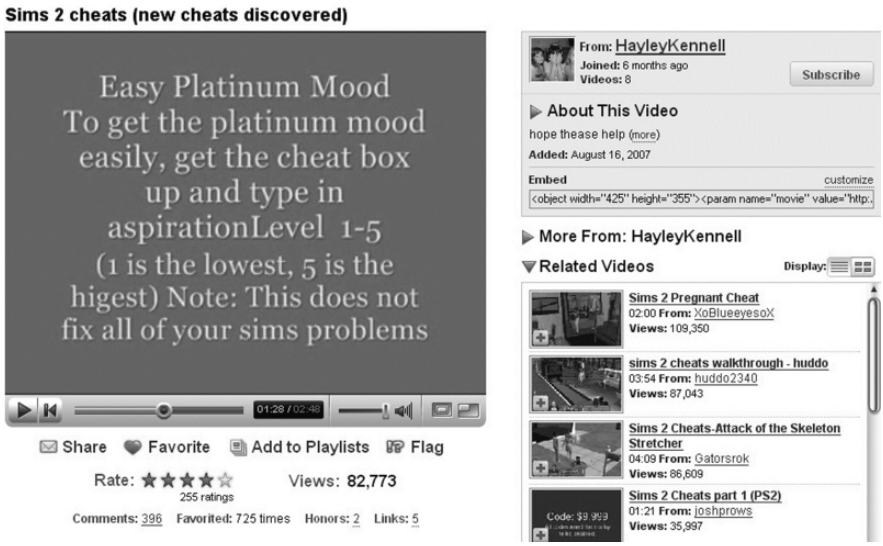

Figure 6. Screenshot of an instructional fan video on YouTube (HayleyKennell 2007).

It is therefore important to note that analysing the affordances of game code cannot only be based on the 'official' version of how the game is supposed to work as the basis for gameplay. In the interpretive layer, largely based on representation, the

player aims to make sense of the scripts and affordances of the game world, both in its form of a display model and a world model, and the behaviour of the game characters (which are, in game language, considered as 'objects' too). In addition to that, gameplay is also the result of configurative practice, carried out within the affordances (such as cheat codes) and representational limitations (bugs, glitches) of the game engine. This kind of play is applauded for its instructive qualities: through configurative play the player-modders learn about the basic case and syntax of software, the importance of accuracy, and the discrete elements that together comprise the complex system of a computer game (Hayes & King 2009). These aspects of gameplay engage the player in the actualisation of the potential already present in the game code, the potential associated with the perpetually work-in-progress nature of the game-as-product. Since the essence of games is not primarily dependent on their representational characteristics, it is rather configuration as a constitutive element of gameplay that is the key to understanding many of the modding practices associated with *The Sims*. The different concrete methods of interpreting the affordances of the code as well as creating mods to complement *The Sims* game are identified and discussed next.

From interpretation to configuration

> [T]he fundamental thing about a computer game is the structure of what you do as a participant, and the structure of something like SimCity or The Sims is about understanding a system, and trying to make it grow in the way you want it to grow.

This quote by new media theorist Noah Wardrip-Fruin (cited in Terdiman 2004) suggests that loose and open-ended simulation games like *The Sims* are designed to promote constructive thought as part of their gameplay. I concur and add that particularly games like *The Sims* are already from the start loaded with what I in this work will term 'ideological propositions'. The developers of *The Sims* have always been outspoken about the inclinations of their games, even to the point of being interpreted as encouraging consumeristic pleasures and white, secluded, suburban lifestyles. As has already been hinted, the game mechanics of *The Sims* are based on the social structure of American middle-class neighbourhoods and its actual gameplay is founded on commodity consumption through character interaction with objects. Indeed, critics like Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter conclude that *The Sims* presents a worldview that celebrates consumerism through a simultaneous structure of affirmation and negation, interwoven in its ironic, over-the-top portrayal of the Sim lifestyle. As a result of this tongue-in-cheek distancing, this strategy 'can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment – thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in it' (Kline et al. 2003, 277).

The authors of 'Sim Capital' thereby propose that *The Sims* cleverly invites its players to engage in what will later on in this work be theoreticised as an 'interpassive' relationship, one that is built on a false premise of actual participation. However, they have also been criticised for promoting a rather deterministic understanding of the game's representational and gameplay mechanics (Mactavish 2005), and my analysis supports this criticism. This is especially visible in their omission of the fact that *The Sims* provides for a plethora of forms of gameplay, many of which are based on utilising the game code in ways that simply disrupt the logic of play often described in a nonchalant or ironic way in the game's official paratexts, such as the manual. A good example of this is the most common configurative practice of cheating by uploading money – for instance, 50,000 Simoleons can be loaded by first pressing *shift+ctrl+c* and then typing 'motherlode' in the appearing console – which could be interpreted as an escape from *The Sims*'s most basic structure of monetary economy (acquiring an income in-game and then spending the money). What the money cheat in my analysis exemplifies is the fundamental fact discussed above that gameplay cannot be interpreted solely along the lines of the game's representational qualities, acting as the basis for interpretation. If we accept the theorem that *The Sims* is rather like a 'sandbox where rule sets [sic] are created, selected, or discarded as the player chooses' (Mactavish 2005), we will need to direct our attention also to the ways these rules are identified, played with, and manipulated.

Before plunging into further analysis of the modifications and transformations of the game's basic ruleset and mechanics, I will briefly discuss the concept of representation and sketch out the basic representational qualities of *The Sims*. Representation, one of the key terms in cultural studies, denotes the often complex processes that deal with interpretation and meaning-making by encompassing the dimensions of both *presentation* and *re*-presentation. In poststructuralist cultural studies, researchers usually start with the notion – conveyed by Lawrence Grossberg (1995), among others – that we do not have access to the pure and unmediated 'reality' per se, but rather our realities are always already produced in language and processed through various kinds of semiotic practices. This framework is based on the notion that the world is a textual world, already at its most basic level, and we as its inhabitants have to navigate in the midst of signs and symbols, as if in a semiotic circle of dynamic meaning-making from which there is no way out. This circular motion engages us in considering power positions and political dimensions, as well, since representations always work as part of cultural dynamics which are never void of ideologies and semiotic struggles (Fiske 2004).

Representation is therefore a tool functioning within and through language that binds together objects, linguistic denotation and signification. This signifying and denotative relation is the result of a complex process in which meaning is produced by filtering things through cultural codes. In practice, analysing representations involves identifying these cultural codes and dimensions of power through concepts

such as class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity (race), which in turn are anchored in sociocultural practices that are affected by norms, habits and conventions. Because of these, we are used to seeing and experiencing things in a particular way. Representational analysis warrants considering power and ideology as part of the cultural construction of their being, but representative practices also need to be associated with cultural frames and conventions that delimit and hinder the processes of signification (e.g. Hall 1997). An example of analysing *The Sims* in a representational framework, accessible through interpretation, is to briefly consider its portrayal of ethnicity. In the original game, there were three different skin shades for the player to choose from when creating game characters: light, medium and dark. These shades have been interpreted as ethnically diverse, that is, representing three distinct 'races''. But, as Mia Consalvo (2003a, 13) points out, '[a]lthough players can certainly make Sims dress and behave according to different cultural norms, the Sims themselves are not inherently cultured according to race' – nevertheless, it cannot be denied that racial norms play a part in the interpretation and configuration of game characters and their behaviours.

The connection between a Sim's skin shade and what we culturally associate with that particular skin colour is manifested in the ways the player creates the game character and operates it. Furthermore, in a closer inspection of the game's representational affordances it becomes evident that there is a certain inclination towards the light- or white-shaded Sim skins; for instance, there are fewer fashion choices (skins) available for the more dark-shaded Sims than there are for the white characters in the COTS game. It is not surprising that white Sim skins are also overrepresented in the modding scene. The kinds of biases present in the player communities promote the conclusion that the whiteness/lightness has still remained a somewhat uncontested representational norm, despite the relative impartiality originally built into the game, or the diversity of the Sim skins that EA likes to celebrate in its PR material and game covers (see Consalvo 2003a, 16-17).

When analysing games, it has to be kept in mind that significatory interpretation also involves other kinds of activities than the ones associated with more traditional media, where interpretation has been investigated by theories concerning media users' semiotic capabilities and their encoding-decoding processes (e.g. Hall 1997). In successful gameplay, signification often entails practices that invite the player to think about the resulting game-as-process not only in terms of representation but also as a dynamic, evolving system, a *simulation*. In an essay on *SimCity*, game researcher Ted Friedman (1998) proposes that it is quite natural for the player to seek to identify and exploit the rules of the game system in order to win and beat the game. This is the result of the fact – as cybertheorist Janet Murray (2000, 89) formulates it – that '[i]n an interactive medium the interpretative framework is embedded in the rules by which the system works and in the way in which participation is shaped'. The thrust to understand how various game systems work plausibly leads the players to experiment on them, as well, to 'play the system' in order to engage

in the so-called *metagame*, and by manipulating the functions of a system to obtain better results in gameplay (e.g. Turkle 1997).

The utilisation of the principles of metagaming can be treated as a form of configuration of the game's affordances, and they work already on the very basic level of *The Sims* gameplay. Manipulating the temporal aspects of the game-as-process can be taken as an example. Whereas most of the comments about space in *The Sims* have been positive, the game's flow of time has been one of its more critically approached features from the start. The gameplay of *The Sims* is structured upon the fact that grown-up family members have to go to work in order to bring in an income (in Simoleons, §, the Sim currency), whereas children go to school. In the actual gamespace, at home, the lives of the Sims revolve around fulfilling needs and wants that develop on their own, and as this Maslow-inspired 'hierarchy of needs' is in balance, the Sims can concentrate on working, studying, enjoying themselves and socialising with other Sims. The temporal sequences of the game are dictated by an in-game clock of which the speed can be altered, and the clock determines when Sims have to go to work or to school.[32]

However, an essential feature of The Sims gameplay is that many of the Sims' behaviours, both essential and trivial, such as going to the bathroom or making a cup of espresso, take up an unreasonable amount of time. A sluggish Sim can be late for work just because it takes her 20 minutes (in game time) to walk from the living room to the carpool. In order to successfully negotiate between various tasks that the Sims are about to perform, the player may have to alternate between pausing the game to place orders separately for each Sim, and then speeding it up again to skip through the most simple and time-consuming tasks – only to pause the game again to queue up the Sims' next set of actions. Juggling with game time in order to attain the desired action is a simple example of configuration, based on the player's understanding of the game's underlying principles of operation, many of which are manifested in gameplay through the intuitive use of these automatised gestures.

This kind of metalevel understanding of the game's principles of operation, metagaming, drives the issues of representation and the interpretive analysis associated with it into movement. Configuration, in this respect, brings along a dynamic component to the analysis of gameplay and the modding of games. It is generally assumed that game players are likely to be more aware of the structural elements that guide their experiences than the consumers of other media, even though, as Henry Jenkins et al. (2006, 15) point out, there is a difference between mastering the rules of the game and understanding how those rules might affect our general worldview and the perception of reality. Nevertheless, *The Sims* 'pushes the limits of the medium by revealing them, by laying bare the machinery. By building a window into Sims' souls, it prompts us to consider our own' (Herz 2000). As I have previously argued, this consideration is not the result of a straightforward mechanism that would function as a simulative system of (some kind of) a reality, but it could rather be considered as a configuration and reworking of the semiotic codes

and conventions, associated with representation, through which players are used to make sense of *their own* realities – and here lies its transformative potential also in a more general cultural context.

The dimensions of interpretation and configuration as the basis for gameplay are founded on certain audiovisual principles and structures for semiosis that characterise *The Sims* and render it a particular kind of real-life simulation. For instance, the space in *The Sims* is divided up by a system of tiles, which allows objects and Sims to be placed on squares and rotated by 90°, without the possibility of being diagonal (except for walls and fences). The player's perspective in the original game is therefore dimetric, and the screen could be accessed from four symmetric viewpoints; *The Sims 2*, on the other hand, is realised entirely in 3D (see figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7. '2.5D' isometric perspective in The Sims.

In fact, the graphics of *The Sims* were originally a combination of 2D and 3D: the characters, Sims, were rendered as high-poly-count 3D objects, but basically everything else was prerendered and displayed dimetrically.[33] As a result of this there could be depth confusion problems, as objects in this kind of '2.5D' world would not change size as the player's perspective changed, although the inconveniences associated with this could apparently be alleviated by appropriate game design.

The 'lack of depth' was an issue with some mods created for the original *Sims*. In modding *The Sims*, tinkering with the so-called sprites when creating objects was quite challenging, and sometimes modders would just distribute rather clumsy-

looking two-dimensional objects that were evidently of 'poorer' quality than those created by Maxis or the more ambitious modders. Striving for the reappropriation of the naturalistic conventions used to represent 'reality' – or to create an illusion of dealing with real life – in the context of *The Sims* easily clashes with the technical difficulties and inefficiencies modders face with software, and the resulting mod may in itself also be interpreted as a 'bug' or a 'glitch' in the game's system of representing real life.

Figure 8. 3D perspective in The Sims 2 (Kerri 2007).

J.C. Herz (2000) treats *The Sims* as a parody of consumerism by regarding it as a metaphor and casting a look at the functions of that metaphoric representation: 'The question is: Where does the metaphor break down? By taking the metaphor to its logical extreme, *The Sims* asks that question in an elegant and provocative way. And to that degree, it succeeds as art, or as modern architecture.' This assertion is presented here to illustrate the fact that audiovisual representation still plays a role in the overall construction of the game's propositions, as the material with which the player's interpretive scheme for its decoding works, in tandem with game mechanics. For instance, in most shooters, the ruleset of the game may often remain the same, but it certainly makes a difference to the feel of the game whether the villains are represented as 'Germans' (situated in WWII Europe), as 'Arabs' (in the contemporary Middle East) or as 'Vietnamese' (during the Vietnam War in the 1970s). In all of these cases, the same familiar set of game mechanics (founded on

the notion of identifying, finding and eliminating your enemy) is applied to a different representational setting (of that enemy). If the ruleset of the game stays the same, the message will fundamentally remain the same as well, even though the representational setting varies. To decipher a game's message, it needs to be approached through and paralleled with its gameplay mechanics, but this is not to say that the audiovisual dimension of games would be irrelevant. Nevertheless, a game needs first of all to be played to be interpreted and understood (Terdiman 2004). Mods literally tap into the dynamics created and maintained by the game engine in the sense that they are neither static data nor self-contained executable programmes, but they intersect with the engine by featuring behaviours that (re)configure the game environment, and thereby also the storyworld.[34] Mods in this respect function like software objects that contain specific rules for a certain action – '[t]hey function in prescribed ways, interact semi-autonomously, and exhibit behaviours within a dynamic framework,' as Herz (2002a) explains:

> The Sims don't know how to play soccer for instance. But if a soccer ball – a software object, containing all the rules for playing soccer – is dropped into their midst, they will form teams and start playing soccer. Player-created plug-ins and mods intersect with game engines in a similar fashion.

Therefore, in addition to designing new aesthetics for the game, players also create objects and characters with new behaviours, which have the potential to either superficially or significantly alter the ruleset of the game that functions as the basis for players' (narrative) gameplay practices. For instance, the *Twister* game mod *Sim Twister* is a practical example of this kind of object, comparable to the soccer ball mentioned above, being a little add-on that intersects with the game engine and alters the Sims' behaviours through predefined scripts (figure 9).

Although most mods are simple, individual objects that do not trigger any complicated sets of behaviours, like the example shown here, some mods are the opposite – they may even elicit freshly emergent narrative instances. Considering the different 'uses and gratifications' of mods thus has to include an analysis of the resulting novel gameplay mechanics as well. Modding cannot primarily be thought of as an aesthetic or operational alteration of the contents of the game data files, as it may include changes in the use of the game engine, either directly or indirectly, as well. In addition to the conceptual typology presented in Chart 1, I include here a more detailed categorisation of the particular modding practices associated with *The Sims* (Chart 2), which will function as the basic theoretical framework for my exploratory analysis of modding practices in the subsequent chapters. In Chart 2, two sets of characteristics are distinguished on the basis of whether they consider altering the *aesthetics* of the game or the *operational* principles of game objects and characters. The aesthetic dimension refers most of all to the representational level of gameplay. On the levels of interpretation and configuration, it results from the

player building houses by using the in-game tools and creating game characters by putting together the game-provided components of the Sims.

Figure 9. The Sim Twister game mod is an example of reworking the game code ('Sim Twister').

In the reworking – the modding proper – of The Sims, on the other hand, the aesthetic characteristics are associated with creating new-looking locations, objects and Sims, that is, altering both their looks on the surface as well as their shapes and forms. This shape, the usually 3D polygon model of a game object (the mesh), is the basic structure or the 'skeleton' needed to give an object some kind of a form as if underneath the surface. The visible surface layers of objects, on the other hand, are generally called textures or skins; in this distinction, texture refers to the surface of inanimate objects and skin to the outmost skin-and-clothes layer of game characters, the Sims, various NPCs and animals as well as the game's other non-human figures (vampires, zombies, werewolves, etc.). As is visible in my Chart 2, in aesthetic reworking the skins of the Sims can be transformed and appropriated for example by adding customised tattoos or piercings, and by changing their mesh the Sims can be made considerably smaller or taller than the COTS game would predispose.[35]

Objects can similarly be retextured by, for example, changing their colour; their shape and form can also be altered in the most imaginable ways. For a long time, EA did not launch any object-editing utilities for modding, so modders essentially had to reverse engineer their own editors; the most famous of these has been *The*

Sims Transmogrifier (Tmog) created by former *The Sims* developer Don Hopkins (see 'Lush Creations'). Object creation in the original game always started with creating duplicates of existing objects. An object with desired attributes, such as the size and behaviours, was sought out and copied with the *Transmogrifier*. Then the bitmap images that created the game object were replaced with new graphics, and the object's properties (the name, description, and cost) could be customised according to will. In the aesthetic sense, on the other hand, the game space is probably one of the most modded elements of *The Sims*: it literally acts as a canvas for the players' self-expressive creation.

	Modding categories	**Aesthetic characteristics**	**Operational characteristics**
Game-provided	*Interpretation*	Assembly and fabrication of game elements from a selection of existing parts and items	Taking advantage of glitches, bugs and weaknesses in the game mechanics
	Configuration		Cheating: utilising specific cheat codes provided by the developers
User-extended	*Reworking*	– Creating new spaces – Altering the looks of objects and characters (texture and skin) – Altering the underlying models of objects and characters (mesh in 2D or 3D)	– Creating new spaces (not only aesthetically speaking) – Altering the functions of objects – Altering the behaviours of characters – Metagaming (using additional programmes, patches and hacks)
	Redirection	– Taking and distributing screenshots (e.g. 'Photo Album' images) – Creating gamics ('game comics') – Creating machinima ('machine cinema')	

Chart 2. Aesthetic and operational characteristics of The Sims modding.

As is evident from my inclusion of both of these dimensions – aesthetic and operational – in the analysis of modding, I believe that in *The Sims* modding scene representation is particularly important, even to the point that I regard it as complementary to the game's simulative ('functional') aspects. For instance, the (re)presentation of the looks of the Sims has been considered so essential that specific programmes, such as *SimPose-ium*, have been created in order to bring out the best of the modded Sim skins when shared on the internet.[36] As suggested above, aesthetics refers to the looks of the Sims (their skin and their bodily build determined by the mesh), and the operational dimension describes the alterations in their be-

haviour. The same idea will be investigated in the context of objects by distinguishing the textures (surfaces) of objects from their functions. The aesthetic dimension is primarily associated with the representational qualities of the game, whereas the functions and behaviours of objects (and characters) are included in the analysis of the workings of simulation.

The *operational* characteristics of modding, on the other hand, consider altering the functions of the in-game space and objects as well as the behaviours of game characters – in more concrete terms, what is being changed is the interaction mechanisms and/or triggered in-game animations associated with each of these game element categories. Characters do not only look different, but they also behave in ways that would not have been possible in the game originally (consider the *Twister* example above). Objects are made to perform actions that typically affect the Sims' moods, possessions, or their relationship statuses, thus altering the gameplay mechanics in often radical ways. The operational reworking of game data can involve practically every aspect of the game; ranging from creating new spaces (buildings and landscapes with new functions) to altering the properties of objects (both the inanimate Sim objects in the game and the behaviour of the actual characters, the Sims). As the functions and behaviours of all these dimensions (spaces, objects and characters) are interconnected, I will treat the usage and modding of them in the context of *The Sims* gameplay practices rather than through their innate characteristics, or the particularities of their individual modding circles (such as 'skinning' the Sims). The operational modding of objects is especially relevant in the context of this study, as the game mechanics of *The Sims* work through objects (the principles of which will be discussed more in detail later on). At this point it is relevant to note that if the properties or 'advertisements' of the Sim objects are altered, the game's ruleset also changes. Understanding the transformations in the operational dimension of objects (as presented in Chart 2) is key to grasping the potential and the appropriative power incorporated in the modding practices.

The fourth subdimension to the operational reworking category in Chart 2 is metagaming, which effectively denotes the use and inclusion of additional programmes, for instance, made by users and players themselves, often distributed as patches or individual add-ons to the game code. There are also custom-created programmes and editors that remain external to the game code; these may for instance help the player to identify corrupted Sim files and keep her data libraries in proper order (see figure 10 for an example of the 'About' section of a comprehensive, commercial editor made by modder Rick Halle). In addition, there are versatile and advanced, 'crowdsourced' modding utilities that can be used to acquire profound transformation of the game; SimPE ('SimPE – The Sims 2 Package Editor') is probably the best-known example of such a tool. With SimPE, a modder can edit simple things like neighbourhoods and Sim characteristics, as well as create new objects in 3D – there are even plug-ins for previewing and organising the custom content outside of the game.

What I am also showing with Chart 2 is the importance of regarding the degree of modding, or the 'level of penetration' into the game code. The deeper the modder goes, the more difficult and time-consuming the hands-on practice of modding becomes. In the depths of modding, there is something I call 'pornographic hacking', which is the result of a profound symbolic penetration on the insides of the code; in this treatment, the game code gets twisted as if 'perverted'.

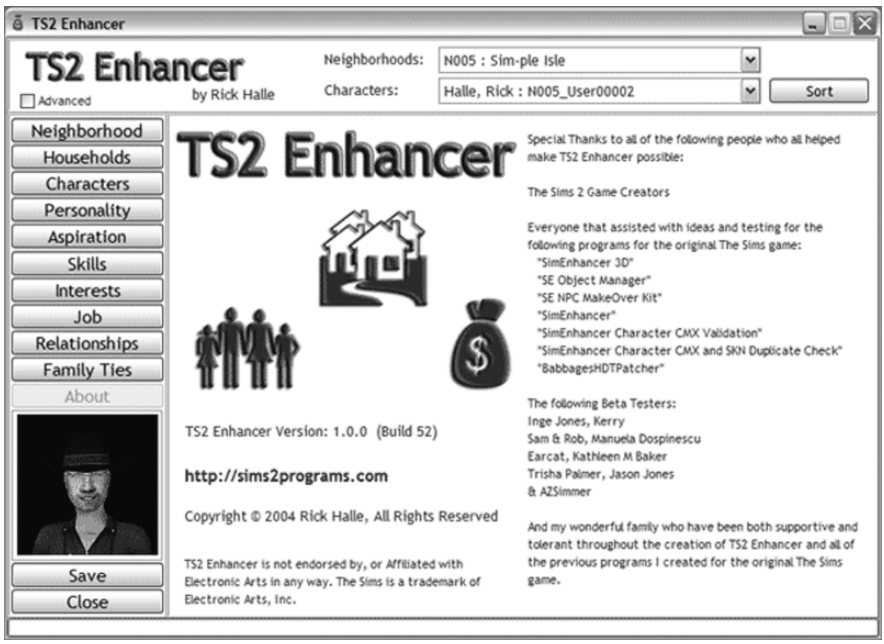

Figure 10. TS2 Enhancer (Halle 2007).

Pornographic hacking manifests itself both theoretically, in the notion of corrupting the game engine to perform extreme actions envisioned by the player,[37] and in practice, in the extensive and well-developed practices of creating actual pornography with *The Sims* game engine. Pornographic hacking is an example of a player practice that entails and connects all the possible levels of modding, transforming and redirecting the game itself into something that definitely was not anticipated by its developers at EA.[38]

The creation of pornography with *The Sims* is an example of redirection – both aesthetic and operational reinterpretation and rededication of the game engine – which is a modding-powered form of gameplay that so far not many game researchers (perhaps only Knorr 2007 and Sotamaa 2007) have included in their theoretisations on modding. In addition to regarding this level of content creation remediation, it could also be termed 'extra-mechanic play', following game researcher Jonas Heide Smith (2004), who has made the distinction between intra-

and extra-mechanic conflicts that characterise games (gameplay resulting in obeying the in-game rules as opposed to games being social spaces which have socially determined rules, including netiquette laws such as 'no swearing' or 'no base raping'). In my Chart 2, this is marked as usage of the game engine for the creation of online image albums (screenshots with annotations), gamics and machinima. Alexander Knorr (2007, 10) regards this aspect of modding as relatively important, and he considers it an emblem of 'the modder's stance' – the use of the game engine for other uses than gaming itself. As he puts it, 'modders do not play games, they play *with* games.' According to his categorisation, there are two main ways of doing this: the players may reinterpret the use of the game artefact, or they may rededicate the game, that is, give it over to new applications.[39]

At the core of modding is what I regard as the most significant category, that of reworking the game data. It is essential not only because of its aesthetic and operational dimensions, but also as a set of practices that could be termed and theoreticised as gameplay based on socially renegotiated metarules. In this kind of play, the rules and functionalities of the game are redefined and bent according to the wishes of the player(s), and this separates it from 'normal' gameplay – and directly contrasts with the commonly held notion of gameplay as 'achieving set goals by following given rules' (Bainbridge & Bainbridge 2007, 61). This aspect of gameplay and modding is tied to the distinctive social contexts and implications of games – even the likes of *The Sims* which do not 'inherently' necessitate (online) social interaction. Although the foundation of my work is built on the intersection between the affordances of COTS games (games-as-products) and games-as-processes resulting in gameplay, a very important aspect of this study is to also regard the power allocated in metarule-based gameplay, as it results in a transformation of the game, ranging from subtle and superficial to deep and profound. Through modding, the constituents and essential components of the game as well as the mechanics of its play are altered. Along the way, the representationalised gameplay practices also tend to get reconfigured from private experiences into something that is shared in public, on the internet. The transgressions between the private and public spheres of gameplay and modding, the interactivity acting as the basis for such practices, as well as the material and spatial contexts of such spheres will be discussed in the next chapter.

Sharing the idea of play

In its most popular form *The Sims* is a PC game: its play practices are structured around the domestic, single-player game engine and rulesets which are integrated and assimilated within the networking capabilities of the home computer. Although *The Sims* is effectively a stand-alone game, analysing its modding without connection to the internet is not feasible, since the players' activities tend to be so fundamen-

tally based on the practices of sharing gameplay tips, hints and experiences as well as distributing the actual mods. The modding sites studied for this work are online resources which are dedicated to the distribution of individual game objects, homes, character skins, modding programmes and even whole, playable lots with houses, decorations and gardens. Besides the general game discussions often revolving around materials such as tutorials, walkthroughs and cheating guidelines, there are thousands of websites where players reflect on their own gameplay experiences and produce it publicly by making it visible through the redirection of the game engine. These sites commonly offer narratives combining text and images either in the form of gamics and machinima, or personal, often humorous accounts of experimenting with the game. This 'extratextual' material could also be termed 'paratextual', following French semiotician Gérard Genette's terminology, which is further developed in the context of games by Mia Consalvo (2007a). It is in fact possible to analytically diverge *The Sims* modding in many ways – for instance, as a relationship between an individual player and a computer, manifesting itself in the interaction they engage in, or as a collective activity constituted by players' online gatherings and communications.

In the subsequent section, I will first investigate how the personal computer has been culturally constructed as a domestic technology, predisposed to the use of a single person at a time, and how this is reflected in the play (and modding) practices of games like *The Sims*. As part of this investigation, I will also refer to the concept of interactivity and its problems in the analytic framework that I am using. After that, I will look more closely into the practicalities of *The Sims* modding as both an individual and a collaborative project which can be contextualised within the more general online cultures. Here, I will also touch upon the issue of spatial structuring – making private space public through game mods – and social interaction that channels the division of public and private spaces on the internet. My point of departure lies in the notion that the space of the computer can be investigated through two different paradigms: as a technically created space, or a social construction of space, which is more personal as it presupposes a certain intimate relationship between the user and the computer (Flanagan 2002). Spatial questions, in general, are present in the discussion on games and game cultures in many ways. Space is often mentioned as the central aesthetic and functional dimension of games (e.g. Aarseth 2000; Nitsche 2008; Taylor 2003), and the locations of play have recently been treated as a topic well worth raising, too (e.g. Beavis & Charles 2005).

In general, *The Sims* modding seems to consist of projects that deal with private fantasies being carried out by single individuals. Even though modding *The Sims* is necessarily an interactive, networked activity, many of its players enjoy precisely the solitary, individualist play styles that the game propounds. Only in studies focusing on younger players and children, direct social interaction has a more pronounced role in its gameplay (e.g. Dyson 2008). In a research project involving multiple age groups, Jansz, Avis and Vosmeer (2007) concluded that the most important motives

for playing *The Sims 2* were pastime, fantasy and challenge, and social interaction was among the least important (for adult female players, it was *the* least important). These observations suggest investigating *The Sims* gameplay primarily as a private experiment, taking place on a personal computer and usually in a domestic setting, in the intimacy of a study or a bedroom – all aspects of the rather traditional way of considering computer gaming.

By looking at online play practices and the practical organisation of player communities, it becomes evident that the internet is a key factor in the construction of what PC games culturally are,[40] even though the internet does not add an easily definable dimension of social interaction to gameplay and modding. This observation can be made more understandable by contextualising games like *The Sims* within the thirty-year history of the personal computer and computer games. The technical and sociocultural development of the PC, its interface and the peripherals, such as the keyboard and the mouse, have guided the evolution of computer games to a different direction than that of console games, which are more inclined to, for instance, necessitate a (face-to-face) multiplayer gaming experience for the game to be enjoyable. It has only been very recently that game console systems have started to incorporate network abilities and more fine-tuned user interfaces – the first internet service, Seganet, was created for Sega's Dreamcast only as late as 2000.[41] For instance, console versions of *The Sims*, launched between 2003 and 2004, were some kind of hybrid between their PC tie-ins and contemporary console games that were based on a rather different logic of gameplay than their computer counterparts. It is no surprise, then, that the ported versions of *The Sims* games have been only modest commercial successes (see 'The Sims #Ports').

Gaming devices have, in general, been important in domesticating media technology, but while TV and console games have mainly been targeted at groups, computer games have throughout the years been designed for more individual experiences. Game consoles also support team play and 'lean-back' activities such as watching videos or listening to music (which are a relatively new extension to the home computer, the 'lean-forward' media). The computer, on the other hand, is designed for multiple 'useful' tasks, and its user interface supports working with meticulous and detailed assignments such as revising extensive amounts of text. The core functionality of the PC is its programmability, whereas the game console aims at being as tightly and securely protected as possible against its users' intrusions.[42] Many aspects in *The Sims* link it to the tradition of personalising and customising the private use experience of a computer. *The Sims* is a PC game par excellence, as its gameplay consists of detailed design projects and minute character creation that are all complemented by the extensive modification possibilities encouraged by the online community. Playing *The Sims* could be regarded as a private endeavour, where the player first makes an inventory of and then sets out to experiment with the available materials and resources. At a later stage, the game is about innovating and creating new things to the player's (and through modding, also to

other players') liking. The association of *The Sims* gameplay to daily chores is not totally absent from its play practices – a remark also made by many of its players. As McKenzie Wark (2007, para. 049) notes: '*The Sims* is a very peculiar kind of game, in which everyday life is the subject of play but where play is nothing but work.'

Despite contrary evidence, traces of the solitary gamer myth still surface every now and then, although researchers such as James Newman (2004, 145-169) have done important work to deconstruct that line of thinking. It is questionable whether playing games has ever truly been a solitary activity: it seems rather that most of the spaces for gaming, especially arcades, have been public places facilitating group play more than any individualist activities (e.g. Bogost 2007). The same can be said about video game play at home, which, for example in the 1980s, was something that friends or family members were likely to do together in the place of assembly of the living room. Video game play was also heavily supported by the practices of swapping copies of games and essential play-related information in the gatherings and club meetings of like-minded adolescents. If we go even further back in history, we see that there have always been important layers of social interaction woven into and emerging around the practices of gameplay. The first single-player games emerged as late as 1978, and before that, many social games – card and dice games as well as board games, such as chess – were played by groups of people both in the privacy of their home and in public places.

Since the end of the 19th century, fairs, amusement parks, department stores and beach holiday destinations have acted as stages for public gameplay, competitions and trials of strength. Around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, game machines and other coin-operated slot machines as well as the so-called penny arcades, in particular those adjacent to movie theatres became widespread. They soon gained an immense popularity but also a rather questionable reputation. After WWII these amusement arcades with their pinball and other coin-operated devices reached almost an iconic position as the symbol for the rise of youth culture (Huhtamo 2002, 28-37). The modern game arcade is a natural successor to the penny arcade, which has always been a pronouncedly masculine space. The spaces and material contexts of public gameplay have typically been 'arenas of action' that young people (mainly boys) have used to manifest and organise displays of social competence. By acknowledging that this location, in general, occupies a central role in the formation of identity and community especially in the lives of young people, we can also propose that gendered identities are constituted and maintained through instances of gameplay in particular kinds of social contexts and locations (Beavis & Charles 2005, 356-357). For instance, some leisurely spaces for gaming have been regarded as such morally daunting places throughout their centennial history that women and children may have been forbidden entry to them altogether. Game platforms are gendered technologies, and the locations of play even today are gendered spaces (Bryce & Rutter 2003, 12).

As is historically evident, the players of games in public spaces – as any public

agents – have largely been boys and men, and according to statistics it seems that also the ones playing privately at home have primarily been the male family members. In the era of digital games there are important indications of the fact that most of the home computers and other gaming devices have been bought and situated at their disposal (Suoninen 2002, 100-102). The gendered practices that characterise domestic spaces allow men greater access and control of media technologies, in general, as well as more time for leisure (Beavis & Charles 2005, 358). It has been particularly difficult to gain information about the play practices of girls and women, as games and gameplay in general have been connected in complex ways to the issues of social and spatial control (see Wirman 2008). One of the explanations provided for the success of The Sims (among females) has indeed been the 'feminisation' of its players through inviting them to adopt the position of a feminine nurturer, a domestic care-taker, acting in the privacy of a home (Flanagan 2003) – a home the features of which have nonetheless been quite effortlessly disseminated in public. Hayes and King (2009) have proposed that *The Sims* 'offers opportunities for participation in global modding communities, with distinctive forms of collective knowledge-building, apprenticeships, and opportunities for social recognition', and although I agree with the main argument of their thesis, I consider it important to note that computer networks do not always invite all their users to log in and occupy equal positions in the same way. However tempting it might be to analyse the semiotics of *The Sims* modding sites, forum discussions and remediated game contents on their own, as mere representatives of the autonomous and 'transcendent' virtual reality – which is culturally constructed as distinct from everyday life on the basis of, for instance, its particular kind of 'interactivity' – it cannot go unnoticed that digital items like game mods are also the result of material, situated and embodied practices.

In principle, modding can be theoreticised as an activity that results from and taps into the interaction between a player and a game. Interactivity itself is often considered a constitutional feature both in terms of the games' aesthetic form and their playability, and it is also thought to separate games and playing from the principles of storytelling and other narrative forms of engagement in culture (Aarseth 2001; Frasca 1999; Juul 1998; 2001). Interactive access does not only allow the player of a game to perceive the virtual game space but to manipulate it, to change its basic ingredients (e.g. Nitsche 2008, 31-33). It is an instance of the interactive (physical) participation having a perceivable effect on the virtual world, the kind that Aarseth (1997) terms 'ergodic'. In a sense, it is natural to expand the interaction taking place in gameplay towards sharing the game contents – the results of the representational practices of interaction – on the internet. However, interaction is not a totally innocent concept; it is a theoretically burdened term. For instance, according to digital media theorist Lev Manovich's (2001, 55-57) criticism, the objective of raising interactivity as digital media's central feature confuses two different aspects of it: the physical, empirically observable and the mental or psy-

chological interaction between the user and the media content. It has to be noted, however, that interactivity is sometimes used also in reception theory to refer to the cognitive interaction of a reader or spectator with a text, but this use is marginal compared to the most common context of its use as identifying a mode of engagement between humans and machines (see Morse 2003). The idealism associated with interaction is also heavily criticised by the new media philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1999), who considers striving for interactivity as a forced choice, something that actually results from socio-political guilt: 'Since participation is technologically possible, it must work.' By providing 'active citizens' with the technical possibilities for interaction, it also recreates the pressure to act, thus shadowing a need for what is termed interpassivity. In Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén's (2008) discussion, interpassivity connotes to the kinds of phenomena where an emotionally or cognitively charged task is outsourced to someone or something else.[43] Interpassivity is a transferential relation between the user and the object ('the other'), in which the other not only functions for the user but also employs emotion in the user's or viewer's place (Patterson 2004, 117). This kind of illusory interactivity is typical for the rhetoric of the Information Society; the active citizens and participants can do 'anything' – everything is allowed – as long as the political consensus is not disturbed.

In fact, interpassivity results from the illusions of interactivity and participation that actually produce passivity. Interpassivity sounds like an appropriate term in the context of *The Sims* gameplay for a number of reasons; one of which is that the player's interactive capability or control over the Sims is reminiscent of indirect persuasion rather than giving direct orders, like in many other games. Therefore it is likely to support activities that turn into 'passivities'; the player of *The Sims* may spend time in front of the computer, watching her Sims lead their virtual lives and advance in their careers, without ever reflecting on the feeling of being in control of the events unfolding on the screen. The drive towards interpassivity and the illusion of participation is arguably also familiar to everybody who has ever visited an online fan or player forum where enthusiastic members of a community seem to be exchanging ideas and swapping vital information. Similarly, there are many different levels of engagement in the modding scene: the most common mode of activity is downloading mods, no doubt, and the actual creation of novel, original game content still remains a somewhat exclusive activity. This fact is often obscured in the enthusiastic appropriation of the theories of interactivity and participation, especially in relation to the utopias associated with the internet. It has to be acknowledged that through their interactive capabilities the computer and online networks have accelerated the common desire of people to transgress the boundaries of 'fixed' identities and personality factors without dedicating themselves to long and arduous processes of physical or mental transformation. I regard the internet to function in this sense as a testing ground for experimentation and exceeding the limits. What naturally results from this is more likely a make-over, however,

or even just some temporal make-up, rather than profound change.

The Sims modding scene is an interesting example of this kind of testing ground that seems to be particularly appealing to female players. As players take ingredients from their daily lives and relationships and mix these with the scripts and affordances of the game, they may ultimately approach and negotiate change – but to what extent gameplay or modding can result in any (social) change, is a different question altogether. However, in networks-related discourse it is customary to grasp the issues around interactivity through their positive effects, and the result of this is that there is a certain idealism that unavoidably tags along. The promises and lucrative possibilities provided by both modding the game and sharing the resulting content invite an individual *Sims* player to get connected to the internet, either to download industry-produced or user-created content, or to upload her own work.

In practice, there are basically three categories of websites linked to the game. First, Maxis/EA have their official web resources for *The Sims* players, directly linked to the game interface (e.g. http://thesims.ea.com/, http://thesims2.ea.com/). The access to the content and player forums on the site is free, but registration is typically required. On the official pages, players will not only find information about the games, but also dozens of officially released modding tools, game patches and add-ons, discussion forums and other community tools, as well as an extensive fan site listing. The resources are carefully monitored and moderated, so only the content approved by EA passes onto the forums; uploading mods is not allowed without given authorisation. Second, there are collective web resources and wikis that are maintained and moderated by a (sometimes considerably large) group of players, who control file downloading and uploading as well. The most prominent and current examples of these sites include *Mod The Sims 2* and *The Sims Resource*; also prominent resources such as *Sapphire Sims* are worth mentioning. Registration is often mandatory to access all the archives on the site. Some of the people affiliated with these semi-official sites also acquire some sort of an income through the site as a number of them require either a (PayPal-type) 'donation' or a paid membership in order to access the data, usually for a certain period of time.

The third group of *The Sims* sites are web pages that are created and maintained by individual player-modders. The names of these sites are often word plays around the thematics of *The Sims* (to give some random examples, there are sites like *Around the Sims*, *Parsimonious*, *Pimp My Sims*, *SimGedöhns*, *The Well Dressed Sim*). Some of these sites may ask for a (marginal) payment as well, for example to cover the costs of hosting the site, which can be considerable. Many modders are very explicit about their position in the modding community by stating their specialities upfront (like skinning, creating hacks, or designing spaces), and some address their downloaders directly by asking for feedback, assistance or funding. The personal sites of *The Sims* modders are often concentrated on providing a particular mod type, such as character skins, or a theme, like anything related to horror. Through investigating such goal-oriented practices as modding, it is possible to locate the online socia-

bility and the 'expectations of exchange' in something concrete and finite, which results in the sharing of mods and the practices of modding, meaningfully tapping into the collective online dynamics of gameplay (see also Porter 1997).

As I concluded earlier, *The Sims* game infrastructure has always been supportive of content creation and uploading, and the game design has made the installation of mods relatively simple. Originally, all *The Sims* player had to do was to download and unpack the data file contents into the right game folder and they would be available the next time the game was loaded. In the case of *The Sims 2*, custom content has been delivered in .package files that similarly needed to be unpacked and data placed in the relative folder. The installer *Sims2Pack* (see 'Sim2Pack Clean Installer') is a content management tool used for downloading, but data files can also be downloaded in .zip files that the player has to extract manually (through *WinZip* or similar tools). The websites containing mods are usually organised and indexed in a way that makes it effective to download content: for instance, the building mods include lots, houses, wall, floor, and roof files whereas character mods consist of skins, meshes, and accessories.

The sites and resources delivering *The Sims* mods are an interesting indication of the two-fold nature of the internet as located and constructed in both semiotic and material technologies (Ito 1997, 89). These two technological sets of discourses, or in Foucauldian terminology, dispositifs – by which Foucault (1980 194-195) originally refers to a set of heterogeneous discourses and the very connection between the elements and apparatuses of culture – are inseparable. They affect, mould and challenge each other in an intersecting manner: surfing the internet is not only immersion into virtual reality, but using and taking advantage of material entities, such as workstations, file servers, network connections, programmes and applications, search engines and databases. Both the speculative-idealistic discourse on digital media and the concrete, located and embodied conditions which encourage or hinder the use of technology are visible in the ways *The Sims* players design and maintain their web pages and distribution platforms for modding. The internet as a diffusion network in general is not a 'radically disjunctive and purely imaginary space that lacks consequentiality, location, or materiality', as Mizuko Ito (1997, 88) concludes. For instance, since *The Sims* modding is so popular, many modding sites have been suffering from bandwidth problems due to excessive traffic, and some of them have even had to close down because of the lack of storage or transmission capacity. Given the context it is understandable that modders hosting their creations freely online have been asking for donations from the downloaders.

As there have been tremendous numbers of *The Sims* modding sites, it has been crucial to the organisation of the scene to create databases and portals to index the assortment; these have been maintained by collectives and individual players alike (e.g. 'The Sim Surfer'). Also other forms of help have customarily been on offer. For instance, there has been a standard practice of including technical help and

FAQs on modding sites, as well as *Read Me* text files with the downloadable mods, which suggests that players may constantly have had problems downloading and/or installing the available custom content. Another practical problem associated with modding has been organising the game data that individual players have downloaded from the internet. Enthusiastic player-modders may have thousands, even tens of thousands of mods on their hard drives (see e.g. the comment by shellwoman8 at 'Sapphire Sims 2: Keeping your custom content organized'). Since sorting out mods takes a lot of effort, there are also programmes such as *Sims 2 Categorizer* and *Sims2Pack Clean Installer* to aid with the task. Furthermore, mods are not only associated with file types and other technical dimensions, but the standards for their categorisation and usage are more and more based on the acknowledgement of their creators and the associated web resources (for both technical and 'subcultural' reasons). A way of paying respect within the modding community is, of course, the acknowledgement of the origin and the creator of a particular mod or a modded element (typically, a mesh for Sim skins).

Figure 11. A system of organising custom game content ('GangsterSims').

What results is a myriad of various kinds of complex systems of indexing the mods in the downloads folder, as is detectable for instance in an online discussion thread where a few avid *Sims 2* players compare their methods for organising data. The player Syera's proposition, for example, is based on the creation of subfolders, which results in a basic structure of four categories; 'BuildMode', 'BuyMode', 'BodyShop' and 'Hacks'. Under these subfolders, sub-subfolders are created on the basis of the sites where the particular mods have been downloaded, and if the

originating site has many creators, they are distinguished as well. Objects are further categorised as sets and as individual items. An example of a slightly different kind of system of organising mods is provided in the following image (figure 11).

When analysing the online expansions of the individualist and domestic gameplay, it needs to be emphasised that there are all kinds of mechanisms and assertions of power at play on the internet that demand to be taken into account as well. In addition to the material and social affordances of technology that I have been discussing so far, there is a multiplicity of situated and embodied contexts of use that are dependent on the user's individual disposition, gender, age, preferences, as well as the conditions and contingencies of the use situation. As an example, let us consider the FAQ section of a Sims modding site ('SIMale'), which used to provide nude male Sim skins freely for modders and now asks for a password for access.

> The site was shut down due to some neanderthal puritans due to it contained cartoon nudity. So now the downloads have been moved to different yahoo groups. There are no downloads available at the site, although now there are previews on a Swedish server integrated to the site showing what the nude downloads available in the yahoo groups look like. To get the password (which isn't the same as the old one by the way) you need to be subscribed to one of the SIMale adult or donor yahoo groups. Being a subscriber to The SIMale Update Mailing list isn't enough. When your subscription to the adult or donor group has been approved you have to go to the group page and read the latest mail in the message archive. In that mail you will find the password to the preview pages on the site. ('SIMale', the text is transcribed as it is.)

This excerpt functions as an example of the complexity of issues that dictate the online availability of simple mods, such as custom-made nude skins, which individual *The Sims* modders want to upload and download. What technically presents itself as a simple transmission of game data files, or 'interaction', and the sharing of players' own creation for their own private gameplay experience, somehow resolves into a power struggle between various interest groups, some of which may be outside of the game modding scene altogether.

Despite these kinds of instances, modding widespread PC games like *The Sims* has been regarded to deliver the promise of the 'bendability' of gender, age, ethnicity, social origin and nationality, which was a major issue among entrepreneurial IT enthusiasts and new media theorists alike in the late 1990s, around the time *The Sims* was launched. The subversive power of computer networks to transform what is considered to constitute societal disequilibrium has been stressed in these discourses, and even *The Sims* has been treated as a suitable weapon to be used in that kind of a revolution. *The Sims* has been granted subversive cultural and political power in for instance Gonzalo Frasca's (2001b) analysis, and it is also thought to

encourage women to develop a range of computer-related skills and abilities, to act as a foundation for future learning (Hayes & King 2009; Wirman 2008). Online play environments – both the actual MMOGs and game-centric web resources – are complex areas of multilevel interaction; they are social worlds with their own culture, social rules, language and geography, as virtual worlds researcher Nick Yee (2006), among others, has concluded. On the other hand, the current MMOGs are not necessarily thriving social experiences, either. There is a convincing trend in game research to consider these online play environments as realms that primarily support single play or loose quasi-social experiences rather than any kind of 'true' social interaction.[44] So, whereas some researchers trumpet the transformative power of these virtual communities and see them as loci for reinvigorated informal public life, I am convinced that the kind of interaction investigated here does not cover all areas of social intercourse or incorporate all people in the same way (e.g. Fernback 1998, 38; on the discourse on the public sphere, see Habermas 1989; Dahlberg 2001a; 2001b). It has also been suggested, however, that partly because of the gendered nature of public gaming spaces, the internet would function as a suitable retreat especially for girls and women, providing them with a degree of anonymity and a less competitive environment, not only for gameplay, but also for the supportive sharing of experiences and other positive social interaction (Bryce & Rutter 2003, 10-11).

Various internet spaces, also in the context of *The Sims*, can be regarded as repositories of collective cultural memory and important leisure places as well as arenas in which power relations are put to a test (Fernback 1998, 37). It has been argued that the internet may after all be promoting uniformity and homogeneity at the expense of diversity and heterogeneity. For example, most of the common discussion boards, newsgroups and chatrooms have predetermined and announced topics or themes of discussion, and they also imply social sanctions on individuals who voluntarily depart from them. It is evident that collectively edited websites need monitoring and looking after – in critical research, the idealism of wiki, for instance, necessarily needs to be balanced by practical examples of 'deviant' behaviour (which can be exemplified by the *The Sims* wiki main page hack on 30 September 2007, figure 12). While acknowledging that the internet indeed provides opportunities for new kinds of social formations and explorations of the dimensions of individual identities, it can be argued that anonymous and acronymous encounters do not oblige their participants to necessarily deal with diversity in any constructive way (Healy 1997, 62). The popularity of games and forums online thus offers unprecedented possibilities for interaction, but not without disruption.

The negotiations and dynamics that revolve around the struggle for symbolic power are visible in *The Sims* modding scene in multiple ways. For instance, as I suggested earlier, the modded character skins are of the absolute majority only available for white, slender females, and there are numerous websites where heterosexual romance is self-evidently the name of the game, despite the fact that

the Sims were created as inherently asexual or bisexual. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the Sim characters are often sexualised and racialised through modding. This contradicts, once again, the once-held-dear internet utopias of physical markers losing salience as the basis for identity evaluation and social control online. There has also been a kind of class society structure built in *The Sims* game code even from the beginning, which has been manifesting itself in the practices of modding and the distribution of mods, too (Nutt & Railton 2004).

Since *The Sims* originally started out as a domestic game, most of the tasks that

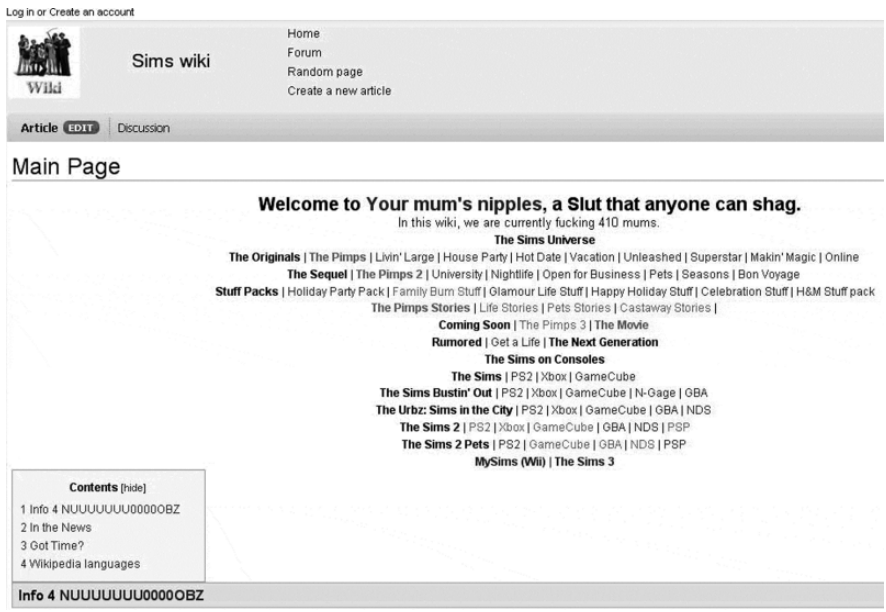

Figure 12. A hacked wiki page ('The Sims Wiki').

the player was presented with revolved around housekeeping and gardening. As this proved to be quite a 'workload', in comparison to working outside of home in the game world, some NPCs such as the maid and the gardener were introduced. When these characters got modded, their figures quickly reproduced the social and ethnic tensions peculiar to the US; there were maid mods that transformed the NPC into a dark-skinned, scantily clad, and overtly sexualised Latina woman. Even today, there are maid mods that either innocently or rather explicitly reproduce the sexual power play that resides in the class structure of society (figure 13).

After presenting these examples of doing identity politics it has to be pointed out once again that *The Sims* players do not constitute an easily definable or concise online community. In fact, as many internet scholars have pointed out, calling online conversations and random encounters a 'community' is very problematic in the first place and has probably been done too easily in the past (e.g. Porter 1997).

It seems rather that *The Sims*-related interactions taking place on the internet are diverse and eclectic, and that *The Sims* modding scene is divided on the basis of its members' individual preferences and practices of play. As the game allows players to experiment on the characters almost any way they want – from seeing pet dogs breed to having teenage and male pregnancies in the family – it is inevitable that this study can only fleetingly touch upon the wildly varied practices of modding. Instead, some exemplary aspects of it will be discussed for the sketching of a bigger picture in the latter part of this work.

Figure 13. A modded transvestite (adult male) French maid for men (liegenschonheit 2005).

Private and public spaces

Modding is an individualist activity in the sense that it is very much based on the personal preferences of players, but at the same time it is likely that only a fraction of The Sims mods are kept private and most of them are being distributed (freely) on the internet, through various kinds of web pages (see also Jeppesen & Molin 2003). As such a two-fold activity, both private and public (or collective), modding can again be compared to the established practices of popular culture fandom or computer programming and hacking, as I have previously suggested, in which personal effort is greatly valued but the dissemination of the end products takes place within an (enclosed) community of like-minded individuals, often resulting

in a kind of meritocratic social structure. Game modding, in general, happens in a less protected environment – although in one that is not entirely open either. In any case, the practices of modding bind together two spheres that are often conceptualised in dichotomous terms: the private and the public/communal.

Treating The Sims modding as an individualist and a collaborative project at the same time can be contextualised within the more general tendencies of the modern computer networks (Fernback 1998, 36). As digital media researcher Dave Healy (1997, 57) concludes, the internet is not about an escape into isolation, but rather an ongoing and outgoing exercise in connectedness. Interaction between player-modders and the distribution of user-created content, mods, is inherently visible: anyone who wants to take part in these activities can do it, perhaps only on condition that she registers on a particular forum or website. At the same time, however, modding is also a private activity, especially in terms of the themes that modders play around with. It is customary, for example, to share relationship-themed fantasies on the internet through The Sims storytelling resources. Overall, a considerable number of The Sims mods have to do with intimate encounters and sex, which are generally thought to constitute part of a person's private, offscreen life. These themes are so prevalent that many critics and writers have come to the conclusion that sex is an essential part of the pleasures of playing The Sims (Gillen 2007; Lynn 2004).

The Sims players often share their aesthetic and functional preferences regarding the houses they create by imbuing the generic game space with individual significations and annotations, and distributing the results for others to see and review. The screenshots of the original Sims game feature the dimetric viewing angle typical to the game, whereas The Sims 2 mods can be aesthetically constructed in a more flexible way. What is common to these representations, however, is the relationship themes they play around with: game screenshots and videos portray Sims interacting, falling in love, getting engaged and marrying one another. Soon there is a baby to follow – or, through the means of modding, several babies45 – and exactly like in real life, babies tend to figure extensively in the family photo album. Other private occasions that get massive online exposure are events like birthday parties, backyard BBQs, Halloween and Christmas celebrations and holiday trips, and in all of these, the representation of the Sim family and social relationships play a quintessential part. What is also noteworthy in this context is the nature of celebrations such as weddings as 'events' rather than as states of being, which emphasises their transient representational function in the game (Consalvo 2003a, 23).

One of the dimensions of sharing The Sims mods can be conceptualised in terms of making the private space public – although, as game theorist Mary Flanagan (2002 2009) points out, the spatial structuring and social interaction that characterise the division of public and private spaces on the internet necessarily calls up a wider discourse on the techno-cultural interpretations concerning, for instance, the nature of privatised public spaces and publicised private spaces. The public sharing of original creative content that may deal with private fantasies in the

context of The Sims modding is naturally not entirely without problems. Most of the problems seem to consider the nature of file-sharing itself and the principles of copyright/copyleft, as is illustrated in the Read Me file by The Sims modder fairywitch:

> Please do not clone and modify any of my things for your web-site without asking first. Send a short mail explaining what you would like to use and I will get back to you as soon as possible. If you just want to modify things for your OWN game and not for distribution, feel free to do that. My site is part of the File-Sharing project initiated by Neighborhood99, a forum for the Sims. This clearly states that files are allowed to be passed along through mail to your buddies and friends when they remain intact; meaning that you have not modified the content of the original zip. This is to save bandwidth. You can find out all about it at either Neighborhood99 or at http://www.nighttimesims.no/pobs/. Please follow the rules and maybe we can really save some sites bandwidth including mine :-) (fairywitch 2007; the text is transcribed as it is)

What is interestingly visible in this excerpt is the fact that the further modification of the content created by another player-modder is allowed as long as it is not redistributed but only intended for the player's *private* gameplay. It is notable that *The Sims* modders share the content they created in the first place, as it is evident that the players are primarily interested in advancing their own private gameplay and not the public maintenance of any kind of commun(al)ity. As the notes on the copyright and the bandwidth limitations in this *Read Me* file suggest, sharing content may prove to be a rather risky and problematic endeavour, too.

The binary dynamics of private and public are played out most of all in the reproduction of private life experiences of a player into the public arena of the modding scene. *The Sims* gameplay is often based on the combination of private experiences and the more commonly shared fantasies:

> One of the first things people generally do with the game is to put themselves into it, maybe their family, their wife, their neighbours, their house [...] As you are playing you are, from the Sims' point of view, balancing all these factors in their little life: work, family, kids and all that; and you can't help, as you play the game for a little while, but start developing a deeper awareness of your own life. (Davies 2004)

Media sociologists Diane Nutt and Diane Railton (2003) similarly conclude in their article that the players of *The Sims* actively negotiate the game's representation of real life in juxtaposition with their own real world experiences. In other words, the players use the affordances of the game to conceptualise and experiment on their immediate social structures, such as the family, and combine this experimentation with various kinds of imaginary elements and fantasies. It has been suggested that

young children, in particular, are eager to play *The Sims* in this way (Schiesel 2006).

An understanding of real life is necessarily transposed into the game world through *The Sims* gameplay practices. It is furthermore negotiated by the creation of tensions and conflicts that mimic the contemporary real-world situations and problematics – of relationships, in particular. When *The Sims* players engage in remediation by distributing their own Sim images, screenshots or video clips of their own gameplay sessions, they publicly reproduce their own domestic game space and bring their understanding of real life under the scrutiny and assessment of their fellow players. The 'sense of the real' – or the naturalistic conventions of the reproduction and representation of the real – is connected to the particularities of *The Sims* as a specific kind of suburban simulation, on the operations of which I will focus in a section later on. It can be proposed here that *The Sims* gameplay illustrates the two-fold logic of mediated experiences as described by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) in their theory on remediation. As users of media, we are drawn to experience our own reality immediately through media such as family photographs and regard the experience as 'authentic', even though we are simultaneously conscious of the role of the media in the reconstruction and mediation of that experience. The user of media can thus forget the presence of the medium at the same time as she is reminded of it. These two tendencies, transparency and hypermediacy, are present in different degrees in all media-related and media-induced experiences.

In addition to this theory and the formal definition of remediation, Bolter and Grusin (2000, 77) also discuss how it reworks implied use patterns and ideological assumptions by refashioning economic, social and political beliefs. The associated question in the context of this work, and *The Sims* in particular, is the interplay between authentic real-life experiences and the mediated nature of the gaming experience – as Nutt and Railton (2003) would put it, in the genre of real life. In *The Sims*, this intermingling is illustrated most of all in the 'naturalisation' of the game space and it can be formulated as a question: What kinds of ideological assumptions are we persuaded to employ in the processes of accepting the suburban Sim environment as 'realistic' and the Sims themselves as looking like and mimicking the behaviour of 'real people'?[46] The game space in *The Sims* is originally a presentation of wealthy American suburbia, a neighbourhood in the outskirts of *SimCity*, with its playable one-family houses. What the players do with the game space in modding, however, sometimes results in a transformation of this initial stage through configuration and reworking of the game data; nevertheless, some critics customarily regard the game as a straightforward ideological representation of the American lifestyle and especially the family values associated with it (Frasca 2001). It is undeniable that the game initially invites its player to accept the suburban mentality by promoting both the physical markers, especially those linked with ethnicity (whiteness), age, gender and the ideal body, as well as the sociocultural value structures associated with the consumerist, disintegrated, nuclear-family lifestyle.

On the surface, *The Sims* might seem to suggest a 'WASP' lifestyle to its player.

However, modding complicates the COTS affordances of the game, accessible through interpretation, by introducing elements that do not necessarily or automatically fit into the sunny and tranquil residential suburbia that the player is originally presented with. Players have tested the game's capabilities by making the American suburban iconic unit of one-family house into, for instance, a nightclub, game arcade, striptease club, temple, church, summer cottage, Santa Claus's grotto and a settlement on Mars. Especially the semi-professionally structured and paid websites provide the options that are distanced from the default Sim suburbia (e.g. 'SimSlice'). It seems as if the superficially interpreted game space, the white-bread suburban, two-storey house, remains a private place – both in the game and in the practices of play. In comparison, the sense of spatial reconstruction and the possibilities of its extrapolation function as an incentive for the players to start recreating imaginary public spaces and sharing them with their peers. The basic spatial setting in *The Sims* can be termed 'realistic' in the sense that the source system of its naturalistically grounded representative simulation is 'real life'. My argument on modding is based on the notion that in the context of *The Sims* many gameplay and modding practices consist of combining the already-known commonplaceness to the still unknown nature or alienness of objects, spaces and characters.

It is precisely because the game space of *The Sims* is both functionally and thematically based on familiarity that I regard its play and modding practices to concentrate so heavily on rendering the space (as well as objects, characters, scenarios, etc.) strange and foreign. The familiarity of the space and objects is illustrated by the fact that all the possibilities for interaction are presented to the player in the course of action, having been defined beforehand. The player can click on an object, and she will see a pie menu with options such as, in the case of the fridge, 'Have a snack', 'Have dinner', 'Serve dinner'. If there is no action performed by the player, the Sims will sit or stand still, looking as if they were pondering on what to do and where to go next. The same applies to the Sims' interaction with objects. There are thus no interactive mechanics left for the player to uncover in the sense that there would be a structure of hidden features or behaviours – the level-up mechanism in *The Sims* functions through addition, deepening and refinement rather than unlocking secret paths or powers. It is therefore only logical that the sharing of *The Sims* mods is largely based on rendering the original game space – the foundations of which are familiar to all of its players – into something partially or completely different, depending on the tastes and preferences of the individual modders. The practices of modding are aided by the fact that the affordances of the in-game world and its basic ruleset, the layer of the Sims' 'everyday life', are made easily recognisable and acceptable whilst at the same time being malleable and transformable. The players of *The Sims* are likely to enjoy the pleasures of immediately recognising the aesthetics and operating principles of the suburban game space, but also direct their attention to the constructed and contested nature of the game environment through

digging deeper into the game code by taking part in the shared practices of modding.

On the basis of looking at mods, the players of *The Sims* seem to occupy tremendously divergent play tactics. It can be speculated whether the players who think *The Sims* is too mundane and trivial to fascinate them for a long time are directing their expectations primarily towards the transparency of the naturalistic conventions employed in the original game code (see also Frasca 2003a). As an example of other kinds of tactics, there are several websites that are dedicated to the various ways of torturing and killing the Sims (these destructive practices may be related to other Sims, objects or places; see 'The Sim Murder Page'). Some players create monster families whose every member is antisocial, untidy and passive, and build a gloomy dungeon for their habitat. In this case the designated objective of gameplay may be, for instance, making the neighbours' lives more unpleasant and difficult. These players take the challenge posed by the pre-existing game code seriously and bend it to the purposes they have envisioned for their own gameplay, thus advancing the transformation of the COTS game into a cultural product of which the uses are impossible to predict or keep under corporate control.

In the subsequent chapters of this work I will present an exploratory analysis of the transformations of the (individual) game experience through mods and (the collective activity of) modding. The actual mods and modded elements I will focus on are divided into three categories: game characters, space and objects. Spatial mods include residential lots with houses, incorporated with building items such as wall, floor and roof tiles. The categorisation I use here is largely based on the structure of the original *Sims* modding sites, and it was naturally developed according to the different file types associated with each category in question: originally, wall files were for instance distributed as .wll and floors as .flr files, and skin files were transferred as bitmaps (.bmp) together with meshes (.cmx and .skn).

What *The Sims* players do online is share – they share the idea of their own experience of play. At the same time they comment on, either directly or indirectly, the importance of the internet distribution mechanisms and the shared custom content creation for their private gameplay. As one of the most important characteristics of *The Sims* is arguably to 'representationalise' these private gameplay practices and share this experimentation with other players, it becomes inevitable that *The Sims* gameplay starts being heavily dependent on the internet connection. Therefore the websites containing personal, remediated gamestories, texts, screenshots, gamics and machinima are such an essential part in constituting and delivering the experiences of playing the game (Terdiman 2003). The players often use imaginative tactics when they zigzag in-between the possibilities created within the modding communities and their own (or their Sims') objectives. Creating a balance between the temporally structured play-acts in the Sim world can be regarded as one goal of playing the game, and the representation of these, be it in a textual, image or video format, can be interpreted as the players' public display of their individual play preferences.

IV NEGOTIATING THE CODE

Playing with the Sims

As I have previously argued, interpretation and configuration, acting as the basis for the processes of meaning-making in gameplay and manifesting themselves in the physical activities of play, are closely tied to the representational qualities of *The Sims*. It may be true, however, that in the context of digital games, *The Sims* is an exception in this regard. James Newman (2002, 2), for instance, criticises the strong cultural studies tradition of theory building through concepts like (graphical) representation used to explain the pleasures of gameplay. He argues that for instance the appearance of game characters is not important to the primary player during gameplay, but the way the gameworld feels to the player is absolutely crucial – and in this process the game character acts merely as a vessel whose functionality is judged on the basis of the game's playability. The kinaesthetic experience of play is thus tied to the controls and mechanics of a game, and the character, the player's avatar, represents the possibility or a 'capacity' to undergo a game in a specific way (e.g. Jenkins 2005). The degree to which the player considers herself to 'be' her avatar, or the game character she plays, is not contingent upon representation, but a 'character' – be it a blinking white light or a MMORPG warrior tuned-up to the max level – is rather a set of characteristics, a tool with which to operate within the gameworld (Newman 2002, 7).

In principle, it is tempting to agree with Newman on the argument that the representation of game characters in the process of gameplay, for the experience of the player, is not a key issue in the study of games. However, it cannot be concluded that representation – associated with the interpretive dimension of gameplay and modding – does not matter in the context of games at all. In extra-game contexts, such as in the creation of gamics and machinima through the redirection of the game engine as well as game advertisements and dedicated fan websites, the representational aspect of game characters is often extremely important. It could be said that game characters, particularly the ones like Lara Croft and plumber Mario, outside the scope of game, are 'representationalised' in so far that they are assumed to incorporate an identity of their own. This strategy, which no doubt is largely based on the marketing efforts of game companies, makes it possible to bring forth game-related films, TV series, figures, paraphernalia and new additions to the expansive

franchises. Game characters can therefore be analysed as 'medial transpositions' as well, in relation to similar fictional characters found in other media products (see Richard & Zaremba 2005, 285-286).

Nevertheless, as this is not the main representational mechanism I am interested in – and since the configuration and reworking of the Sims in *The Sims* works differently from most other games, anyway – my analysis of the game is based on a different set of preconditions. Play and modding practices in the context of *The Sims* on the basic levels of interpretation and configuration can indeed be analysed as the product of the game's representational dimension, mainly touching upon the aesthetics of the game, which can thus be associated with the tactics that permit the player to construct individually meaningful gaming experiences within the strategic framework of the COTS game code. At the same time, the representational level considers the 'lives' of the playable characters, the actions, experiments and movements that take place in the in-game space, that result from the interaction between the player and the game character – the 'realisation of the framed events' (Walther 2004, 12).

It is important to note that the Sims do not function like most other game characters. Rather, their behaviour can more fruitfully be understood as performative, as the result of a certain kind of interaction. Henry Jenkins (2005, 9-10) compares the reciprocation between the designer and the player of a game to *dancing*: the developer creates functions within the game that are possible for the player to carry out or 'perform'. A similar idea is expressed by Janet Murray (2004, 5) when she argues that the game world of *The Sims* is the result of a collaborative improvisation, 'partly generated by the author's coding and partly triggered by the actions the interactor takes within the mechanical world'. The player knows that in order to make progress in the game she has to learn to conform to the rules of the game, but even so, playing as an activity is characterised by the feeling of freedom and self-direction. The player has to encounter an adept amount of challenges and opposition in order to enjoy play, but at the same time she has to have various kinds of resources to tackle them. Playing a game necessitates reacting to stimuli as well as dynamic, constant and alert interpretation. A theory of a similar type of action in the context of semiotics is developed by literary theorist and cultural studies scholar Mieke Bal (1999, 216, 225), who talks about meaning-making as a necessarily temporal, dynamic and contextually informed process.

In order to understand how differently *The Sims* actually works in the context of digital games in this sense, a look into research on the operations of other game characters may prove useful. Game characters' representational and functional qualities have so far been approached through investigating the semiotic potential of famous avatars; in particular, Lady Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* franchise. Game researcher Bob Rehak (2003, 481) analyses Lara Croft as essentially a vessel that is void of significations, and whose purpose is to be functional from the point of view of the game player. Nevertheless, as simultaneously a game character as well as a

kind of virtual star, Lara is both 'open' for various kinds of signification practices and 'loaded' with meaning through her uses in (extra-gamic) media contexts. It is exactly because the character of Lara is reusable like a 'rubber glove' – existing for the player to slip *in* and function *as* – it actually works better when it does not have too many identifying characteristics of its own (Sihvonen 2006). The possibilities for Lara's signification in every new situation and media environment are endless, and in this respect she resembles toys such as the Barbie doll, whose popularity has been similarly explained through the possibilities of resignification (Paasonen 1999). At first glance it might seem like Lara Croft is specifically coded for a particular kind of representation of femininity, targeted for the gaze of heterosexual men, but from the point of view of gaming the simultaneously fixed and fluid nature of the character actually makes it possible for Lara to be used also in very unexpected ways in the 'resignificatory play' (which Rehak considers the result of her *polysemous perversity*; see Rehak 2003, 481; also Sihvonen 2006). A similar idea is proposed by Helen Kennedy (2002, 7), who argues that digital characters such as Lara are always open for novel kinds of signification practices, thus offering multiple possibilities for experiencing narcissistic and voyeuristic pleasures.

Lara Croft is particularly important in the context of games and game studies because she is one of few truly famous virtual characters that are generally known also outside of the realm of digital games. She is such a powerful figure that she is habitually featured in *The Sims* mods, as well (figure 14). She has gained particular notoriety as the subject of feminist analyses, as many media critics have written about the problems they see in her representation (e.g. Schleiner 1998; Flanagan 1999; 2002; Kennedy 2002; Richard & Zaremba 2005; Sihvonen 2006). While developing theories on the representative and simulative pleasures of playing (as) Lara Croft it has to be kept in mind, however, that an astounding majority of game characters are coded as 'masculine', and that also the principles of operating such characters are defined along exceedingly masculine and heterosexist norms (Consalvo 2003a, 4).

For example, the basic constituent of many games is the principle of putting the player in a position where she has to 'penetrate' and learn to control the virtual space through her character (Weinbren 2002). Since the early days of character-specific digital games most of the famous characters, such as Nintendo's mascot, the plumber Mario from *Donkey Kong* (1981) and the *Super Mario* series (1981-present), have been representations of active heroism, and they have rather straightforwardly been coded as stereotypically masculine character types. In the classic narrative their task has been to rescue an iconically passive feminine trophy character from a monster – for example, Princess Peach from Bowser (King Koopa), or Princess Zelda from a giant ape (see also Consalvo 2003b, 172). These canonical examples insinuate how the representation of characters in games has been deeply rooted in stereotypical views of femininity and masculinity, and how this has been naturalised in terms of narratives and aesthetics of 'colonisation'. This colonisation, according

Figure 14. Various examples of Lara Croft mods and skins (MTS2).

to Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins (1995), is not only aesthetically apparent but also visible in the aim of completing the spatially organised narrative potential that the game has to offer. The masculinity of gaming spaces is connected to the in-game

aesthetics of spatial structures and places as well as the spatial relations reproduced within the game's ruleset. Also, the analyses of in-game spaces have often been concentrated on reading the relationship between the game character and the game space as an antagonistic project, based on a juxtaposition that in turn gives justification to the use of hostile measures, such as blatant violence, on the part of the player (e.g. Skirrow 1986).

As has been established, many game researchers approach (especially the early) videogames in terms of gaining spatial control and pitting 'man against the environment' (Aarseth 2000; Newman 2004, 116). The game space, which is subject to conflicting interests as an arena of play, is often 'loaded with anticipation' and readily constructed as oppositional in relation to the player's actions. In these games, the game space presents itself as if already constructed, leaving the player practically with little or no constructive control of the gameworld (Newman 2004, 116-117). Instead, she is expected to utilise what could be termed as 'strategies of resistance' in opposition to the hostile in-game world and its often monstrous inhabitants. Especially the militarised masculinity I am discussing elsewhere in this book renders the player in direct competition and conflict with the environment. The progress or levelling-up in these kinds of games is often done through proceeding from one location to another, and as the measure of gameplay is generally regarded in terms of progression or 'going forward', the experience of play easily presents itself as linear (or episodic). The path that the particular player experiences is cleared by pulling through battles and overcoming obstacles, and this path then becomes the individual game-as-process through which the player, by operating her character, is expected to gain control of the game space in its entirety (see Murray 2000, 130-133).

It is therefore natural that the game space usually presents itself to the player through a game character, and the functions of this strategic framework have to be dealt with by the tactical operations of the character (Aarseth 2000; Jenkins 2004; Taylor 2003). The properties of the game environment are bound to the possibilities of operating as the game character, and the player's gameplay practices and her positioning as a game character in the game world are inseparably tied together (Newman 2002, 9). Space in many games is constructed by a certain double logic: it may be representationally fantastic, but its functionalities are strictly based on the common laws of physics and mechanics (for example gravity and coordination). A sense of realism is needed for the player to intuitively operate the game character, and therefore even the most imaginative game spaces basically need to be topographically conservative (Weinbren 2002, 218-221).

Spatial organisation and the positioning of the player evidently have an effect on the aesthetics and functions of game characters, as well. Because of the fundamentally competitive nature of games, also game theory is largely based on themes such as (violent) opposition and juxtaposition of game characters, but in the context of *The Sims* this paradigm is not feasible. *The Sims* is based on creating a friendly,

inviting, and 'sunny' atmosphere – amusingly enough accentuated by the fact that there were no weather conditions that would deviate from the fair weather default in the original game before modders created these – which is based on the design of the Sims as game characters generally featuring pleasant, easily acceptable and benevolent looks. Even though the Sims do not generally have to deal with major catastrophes, they paradoxically appear as more powerful and self-sufficient game characters than the more standard action-adventure heroes and heroines – a fact that is quickly noted in the experience of guiding an often clueless warrior in the introduction to a hostile game world. As game researcher Rune Klevjer (2007) concludes in his thesis, vicarious game avatars can appear in digital games in all kinds of forms, ranging from a racing car to a gun, but what connects them is the fact that they incarnate the player's actions; they are the embodied manifestation of her engagement with the game world. This kind of 'prosthetic' mechanism is only partly applicable in the context of studying *The Sims*. More likely, the player of *The Sims* has to develop tactics of cooperating and 'living' with her Sims, addressing them in the second person (see also Harrigan & Wardrip-Fruin 2007).

To sum up, the kind of 'functional identification' that most games invite their players to assume through the operations of game characters is not the primary mechanism of playing *The Sims*, which is rather based on a kind of representationalisation of the Sims and their surroundings. This is one of the main aspects that has directed my attention towards regarding *The Sims* essentially as a 'non-game'. According to my analysis, there are two main directions of configuring the Sims through modding: some players aim at creating the 'perfect' suburban home, inhabited by an ideal family that consists of a beautiful mother, a successful father and children, in all likelihood complemented with family pets. The recreation of the middle-class suburban dream could be interpreted as a replication of the ideological frame the game-as-product proposes its player to assume through interpretation and configuration, at least on a superficial level.

At the same time, other players treat the game code in a much more liberal way in order to create characters that do not fit in the suburban ideology, or test out X-rated scenarios that would definitely get them banned from the official modding sites. However innovative the various play tactics may appear in the research context, in the mainstream discourse they are hardly mentioned at all. Instead, the popular press steadily focuses on the aspects of the COTS game product:

> It's easy to feel good about *The Sims*. Children adore it and parents approve: not simply because it is constructive and repays long-term planning, but because playing God has its responsibilities. Forget to take a Sim to the bathroom and there will be a mess to clean up. Neglect to feed baby and it will be taken into care. Program your Sim to be active, playful and outgoing and then lock her in a room with no windows and 24-hour television, and watch her become depressed. (Davies 2004)

This view, expressed by journalist Tristan Davies, emphasises the sentiments of social responsibility the player of *The Sims* is supposed to feel while assuming a near-deific vantage point in relation to her little play minions. Aspects related to socialisation are further developed in the article by citing a specialist who confirms that *The Sims* may well function as a testing ground for family and working life issues and therefore actually teach us something about how society works.

A somewhat more nuanced and critical approach in the same direction is to be found in 'Sim Capital', where *The Sims* is considered as the quintessential game in teaching us the consumerist logic of capitalist societies; the authors argue that just as military simulations provide training for soldiers, *The Sims* lays on civilian simulator training for consumers, or 'yuppies-to-be' (Kline et al. 2003, 276). On the basis of looking at the modding practices of *The Sims* it seems to me that the most reiterated ideological messages in the context of the game are not concerned with materialism and consumerism, however, but revolve around identity-political issues such as experimentation with body images and the representation of gender within specific spatial settings. In order to investigate how these processes of negotiation actually work I will now move on to analysing the game's affordances in this regard. First, I will explain how *The Sims* gameplay basically unfolds, and second, I will look into the ideological propositions inscribed in its game space that are available to the player to play with. Third, I will analyse how the suburban mentality of *The Sims* is negotiated through configurations of the domesticity and the roles the Sims are made to perform. This, in turn, will serve as the basis for my subsequent analysis on how modifying the functions of objects and the behaviours of characters can transform the whole play experience of *The Sims*.

The Sims is indeed often categorised as a simulation or a God game that addresses its player in the position of a household deity. The player's perspective, the 'God mode', grants her a chance to operate the lives and daily actions of simulated humans by adopting an upper-angle view on the events on the screen (see Wark 2007, para. 036-038). The fantasy of assuming the position of an omnipotent God in gameplay has been considered so powerful that some critics have compared it to the technique of using the omniscient third-person narrator in classical novels (e. g. Heliö 2005). Considering the God mode of play, Will Wright has been reported to having drawn inspiration for the game design from science fiction author Stanislaw Lem's short stories, especially *The Seventh Sally*, where an anthropomorphic engineer robot Trurl creates a miniature city with artificial citizens so that a deposed tyrant he encountered can oppress them. In the story, Trurl's comrade Klapaucius is shocked to learn about the creation, and the two continue to argue over whether they should tell the simulated people they only exist in the memory of a computer. 'My purpose was simply to fashion a simulator of statehood, a model cybernetically perfect, nothing more!' Trurl cries as Klapaucius confronts him (Lem 1974). In the end, the virtual people only created for the amusement of the dictator evolve to the point of breaking the walls of their glass box and in turn displace their

oppressor (see 'SimCity'; Kline et al. 2003, 269). One of the original cheat codes for the unpatched *Sims* game was 'klapaucius' for uploading 1000 Simoleons – probably a homage to Lem and a humorous reference to Wright's original inspiration.

The Sims also grants a level of autonomy and free will to its game characters, and often the player feels like opting for the position of a domestic caretaker or troubleshooter instead of an omnipotent God. Whereas some game critics point out that anything is possible in *The Sims*, I am more inclined to regard playing *The Sims* essentially as a rather frustrating experience (see also Macedonia 2000). My own very first try of *The Sims* resulted in two of my carefully crafted game characters slowly and painfully dying from starvation – it was the result of a vicious cycle that started with them not getting jobs and soon not having any money left to buy food. What I quickly realised after that experience was that I should have familiarised myself with the workings of the game system first and learnt to understand its operations in order to get a more positive outcome. In a more theoretical framing, this is also what the authors of 'Sim Capital' suggest when they point out that the vast economic, technological and cultural forces shaping the player render her 'subject' to *The Sims* game system: 'The player reappears [...] as the product of a system, an at least partially programmed and subordinated "subject", as much played upon as player' (Kline et al. 2003, 279).

In gameplay, the fantasy of perceiving the Sims as autonomous little people in their own world is reinforced in multiple ways. For instance, the fact that the characters have their own way of communicating and even their own language (Simlish) underscores the limits of the player's omnipotence. Also, the censorship blur that appears when Sims use the bathroom or engage in sexual intercourse can be interpreted as a means to grant the game characters at least some 'privacy', and as such it functions as an underpinning of the illusion of their autonomous existence beyond the player's control (Reid-Walsh 2006, 9). *The Sims* effectively cannot be considered as traditional game characters – let alone avatars – that would function as a direct manifestation of the player's gameplay practices and choices.[47]

The Sims are more like digital pets, comparable to Tamagotchi and other electronic entertainment devices: they can be controlled to a certain extent, but their functions are cleverly designed to give their player/owner the kind of feedback that provides her with the illusion of them being in possession of a degree of autonomy, and even having power over *her* actions (see Nutt & Railton 2003, 582).

From early on, the Sims were regarded as particularly expressive, animated personalities (Park 2000), especially compared to many other contemporary game characters. The criteria for the success of gameplay ('winning') in *The Sims* were designed to largely depend on the mood of the characters, and that is also why the Sims had to be expressive – they needed to gesticulate and make appropriate faces so that the player would have an idea of how they were 'feeling' and could react accordingly. In *The Sims*, there is also another, more direct way of addressing the player: the Sims can look up at their creator, wave their hands and yell their (often

desperate) message to her in Simlish, backed up by a speech bubble with pictorial information. This kind of direct contact between the player and game characters violates one of the basic laws of digital game design, where the game character, the player's avatar, functions as her alter ego, an itself transparent tool or vehicle for operating in the in-game world. The character can never look back at the player, because it is not an individual with an identity, or even a degree of AI-powered free will – it is an empty signifier for the player's performance, which can then be measured and rewarded accordingly (see Aarseth 2004, 47-49).

In order to systematically approach the question of what the game code allows versus what players manage to do with it, I will investigate the rulesets and play mechanics of *The Sims* next. The various levels of modding, introduced in the modding typology in the previous chapter, tap into the dynamic of gameplay in different ways, each promoting specific aspects of it by altering the affordances of the original game. First of all, playing *The Sims* is essentially about balancing the various components of the game: the balance is realised foremost through interpreting and directing the actions of the game characters. Each Sim has a personality, which translates as an inclination to do certain things more likely or readily than others. These inclinations are not gender- or race-dependent although some are affected by age. Originally, the personality traits were associated with five main personality types, expressed in sliding scales between which the player could divide a certain number of points when creating a new Sim. The personality attribute scales were neat-messy, outgoing-shy, active-lazy, playful-serious and nice-grouchy, and they could not be altered later on. The level of autonomy of the Sims could be adjusted according to the wishes of the player, and the polygonal characters would do all kinds of things when left to their own devices. Depending on the particular personality factors, tastes and moods of the Sims, they might like watching television, tidying up, playing games, striking up a conversation or drifting towards the fridge to pick up something to eat.

In addition to the permanent personality characteristics, Sims also have short-term motives, needs and wants that have to be fulfilled, as well as more long-term goals and fears shaping their lifespan in an important way. Every Sim has a set of status bars signalling a specific set of needs, which are constantly being drained from green (good) towards red (bad). The needs are visualised in eight bars – Hunger, Comfort, Hygiene, Bladder, Energy, Fun, Social and Room – the operations of which are meant to motivate certain behaviours associated with satisfying them. At most, two or three needs can be fulfilled at the same time. The 'Room bar' is bound to the Sim's experience of enjoying the space she is in, and it is the only motive associated with spatial rather than temporal activities. All the other needs have to be satisfied regularly within the temporal structure of the game, according to their individual weighing system; a Sim will try to satisfy her needs starting from the most serious need. The overall mood of the Sims is directly dependent on the fulfilment level of the need meters, and it is displayed by a colour-changing diamond

(a 'plumbbob') hovering above the active Sim's head. This diamond is such a powerful emblem of the game mechanics that it has since become the iconic symbol of the whole Sims game series.

From the point of view of play mechanics, the personality factors of the Sims are essential, as the characters are always guided towards the kinds of activities that support their inner motivations or needs which depend on their personalities. The Sims' interactions with objects, a particularly important aspect of the game mechanics, is realised through executions of the combination of personality characteristics and needs (or wants). Playful Sims like to hang out with other Sims or play pinball, pool, or on the computer, whereas serious Sims are more inclined towards solitary activities such as reading books and newspapers. Sim children like to play with doll's houses and toys. Neat Sims do not only clean up after themselves, but others too. They automatically wash their hands after eating or going to the bathroom; they take the trash out and recycle the newspaper as soon as they have finished reading it. Messy Sims are the opposite: besides neglecting personal hygiene, they also tend to make a mess – for instance, leave a puddle on the floor when they have finished taking a shower.

Even though the basic game mechanics are structured around algorithms that direct the string of events on the basis of the Sims' personality factors, motives, needs and the affordances of the objects at hand, the gameplay in practice cannot be approached through analysing the interactions between these components only. The fundamental ruleset of the game is structured around objects and the deliverances they afford, and in the world of *The Sims*, the affordances of objects are dependent on their monetary value. In other words, the value of objects is one parameter according to which they function in and as part of the game's ruleset. The economic dimension of *The Sims* could therefore be regarded as an essential part of its play mechanics as well: as most objects and services are defined on the scale of price, thus incorporating monetary value, they are included in the game's ruleset as featuring a numerical value against which the fulfilment of the Sims' needs can be measured. Through this value system objects play a part in the operations of the game engine. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Sims' desires and the satisfaction of these desires is not as straightforwardly accomplished through objects as it may first appear.[48]

The often rather complex interactions that the Sims undergo to fulfil their needs are also associated with the game design principle of including a temporal dimension in their execution. Therefore, it is not only money that is dealt with and exchanged in the context of the game – time is also of the essence in everything that the Sims (are made to) do. In the Sim world, 'time is money'. Therefore, while the Sims go to work to earn money so that they can buy 'stuff', the ultimate reason for buying stuff is usually in effect that the more expensive a thing is, the more it will save time on fulfilling the Sims' needs and wants. When Sims do not have to work as much, they are given a chance to spend their days on doing something else, for

example, having fun on the computer or watching TV. After climbing up the career ladder a Sim works fewer hours for more pay, and in the context of the game this means more time for the player to exert control and direct the Sims' activities to the course she wants. The basic structure of the game is meant to reproduce the division of labour and leisure, or work and play time, and the gap between them is manifested in the temporal composition of gameplay, but also – and most of all – in the interactive mechanism of dealing with objects.

What has been exemplified in my analysis of *The Sims* gameplay so far is how players develop ways to cope with the uneven flow of game time and how they manage to fine-tune the control mechanisms associated with object orientation. What *The Sims* players actually end up doing is *configuring* the game space and the functionality of its objects in order to evoke specific actions from their game characters whose behaviours they cannot directly dictate. In fact, modding in general terms, and especially practices such as cheating (the usage of cheat codes), are ways for the player to gain more control of the game – to tame and 'domesticate' her Sims, so to speak, and to render them more manageable for her individual gameplay preferences and goals. This is a practice which is derived from the design of *The Sims* as a game that cleverly and in many subdued ways resists the player's attempts at control in the first place.

As the mechanics of *The Sims* result from object-oriented interaction, the main system of controlling the behaviour of the Sims is a result of creating environments and objects that support the desired actions. In principle, *The Sims* is comparable to other digital games, where the space often presents itself as a coded playground or a stage that is infused with loaded detonation mechanisms ('hot spots') for actions and events, waiting to be set off (Jenkins 2004; Järvinen 2000, 103). Every deed, every embodied and sensory hook-up of the player to the diegetic space-time of the game signifies a change in the relationship between the game environment and the player, and therefore also the representational level of gameplay itself. This is also the operational principle behind game modding, especially in the context of shooters, as through level-editing and altering the behaviour of the enemy, interest in a particular game can be maintained or revivified. Modding therefore provides the player with a promise to relive the game experience in a (slightly) altered form. Furthermore, the changes in the game code take place on the axis of time, although their results are usually visible in spatial practices (e.g. Järvinen 2000, 92).

The core mechanics of *The Sims* gameplay can therefore be summarised as the creation of a spatial setting which is then furnished by individual objects and props, as the needs of the Sims are designed to be satisfied not only with the help of objects but also by providing them (and the player) with an aesthetically pleasing environment. Sim objects bridge the distance between the spatial structure of the game (suburban neighbourhood) and the individual play practices that are executed through guiding the game characters in interaction with the objects at hand. Objects therefore take part in the actualisation of the relationship between the suburban

game space and the Sim inhabitants of that world. The design of *The Sims* is object-oriented in the sense that each object performs functionally; every action in the game is directed towards objects (including other game characters). Game objects are therefore 'charged' with potential and 'politicised' with meaning. As the gameplay of *The Sims* is founded on the player's attempts at directing the Sims' paths, the manifestation of that gameplay (the Sims' movements and deeds) can be read as the tactical dimension, based on the player's interpretive and configurative readiness, and actualising within the frame of a strategic game space – a space invested with ideological propositions.

In order to further delve into the tactical dimension of gameplay, or the Sims' interaction with objects that I will analyse in greater detail below, I will first need to cast a look on the game's principal ideological frame of reference – the suburban space. As is generally well known, *The Sims* started unfolding as a game about architecture, and the Sims were initially added in the game to simulate the properties of the customisable houses ('Will Wright. A Chat about The Sims and Sim City'). Space in *The Sims* is a key characteristic in many ways. The structure of the game is based on the idea of creating a setting, a kind of mise-en-scène for the Sims to step in and appear within the selected temporal frame of interactive play with objects. The interaction, the game-as-process between the player and the games, takes place in the framework of the spatial elements that are open to the player's choice and the temporal structure that is basically determined by the game engine.

The metaphors according to which *The Sims* is being described in the popular press refer to it by using spatial terminology, too. In addition to being called a virtual doll's house, it is often compared to reality-based stageplay or theatre. Its gameplay is likened to drama and storytelling, for instance, in the sense that the player has to assume the role of a director guiding the rather reluctant actors, the Sims, in compliance with her dynamic 'manuscript'. The player-director can also be regarded as staging performances, or testing out various scenarios while playing – after first having designed the setting and props for such a performance. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2006, 10), drawing on the work of Janet Murray (2000, 235-237), suggests reading *The Sims* as a theatrical improvisation, and continuation of the tradition of *commedia del'arte*, where a group of actors play a set of stock characters by using ready scenarios, rituals of interaction and other formal patterns that enable them to develop scenes and stage their parts ad hoc. Playing *The Sims* can also be thought of as a kind of puppet show, or a balancing act associated with things like juggling. Building a house in the game resembles working as a building contractor or a master builder, whereas the input of an interior designer is needed after the preliminary construction work is completed (Pearce 2002).

All of these spatial practices can be included in the categories of interpretative and configurative play, the ideological dimensions of which I will discuss in this and the next chapter. As Beavis and Charles (2005, 358) suggest, '[u]tilising game space – domestic space – is central to the pleasure and purpose of *The Sims*'. The

basic spatial setting of a game invites its player to engage in certain activities; it addresses the player in a specific position and proposes a structure for her to operate in. According to Louis Althusser (1969, cited in Hebdige 1995), ideologies are often manifested as structures that are usually taken for granted and not necessarily processed on the conscious level at all. Although he refers to institutions such as the family and the church whose functions can mainly be interpreted through systems of representation, it is possible to broaden the ideology perspective on physical structures as well. Buildings, in their 'natural' surroundings, carry within themselves ideological assumptions of their origins and purpose; they may be implicit or quite literally structured into the architecture. The built as well as open spaces reproduce prevailing ideological notions that configure practices like moving around, settling down, going to work, being educated, and so on (Hebdige 1995, 12-13).

Built environment is thus not simply a passive setting for human actions, but it works *strategically*: for example, urban structures may facilitate certain activities (such as driving a car) more than others (walking long distances). To an extent the consideration of space through its strategic implications can be applied to the study of games as well. Strategy, as well as its counterpart, tactics, is derived from Michel de Certeau's (1988) extrapolations on the lived space, or the relationship between the environment and human behaviour. On the level of strategy, spaces are created and structured, whereas the tactical dimension refers to the usage and appropriation of such spaces; tactics thus denotes the player's activities in the strategic frame of the game space (de Certeau 1988). Understanding space through tactical deeds also brings a certain dynamic in its definition: only through the interaction between the strategic level of space and its users (such as game characters) navigating it can spatial meanings be evoked and brought about. These theoretical notions, which are used both in urban studies and in the research on media spaces, are a salient starting point for the study of game space, too, especially in the case of *The Sims*: in this context, the game environment is structured around explicit ideological assumptions that frame and attempt to guide the processes of gameplay in an important way.

Game space as canvas

The central strategic stage on which *The Sims* is set is a classic, almost stereotypical American suburb, which features standard detached-house architecture. The basic, unexpanded neighbourhood of the original *Sims* consists of ten residential lots, which are divided by streets (figure 15). Each family has their own house and garden, which the player is encouraged to fence in – regardless of the fact that in the playable space, the neighbours only exist as a kind of apparition: social networking is assisted by letting the neighbours visit the house that is being currently played only as NPCs

that are outside of the scope of the player's control. This structure makes it possible for the player (or, alternatively, directs and forces her) to fully concentrate on one house and one family at a time, to build and experience a kind of self-sufficient microcosm that produces an idealisation of the perfectly complacent domestic life. Each home (base) in *The Sims* is reminiscent of a bastion in the sense that it needs to be secured and guarded against outside intrusions (of burglars, social workers, vermin, bears, the police and fire department, among others).

Figure 15. The original neighbourhood of The Sims.

The Sims suburb is a re-imagination of the mythical scheme of American urban planning, the 'Levittown', 'cookie-cutter' or tract housing development served by roads and autoroutes (see Flanagan 2003).[49] The suburban dream life is based on motorised transportation for both practical and ideological reasons. Historically speaking, the expansion of the suburb started in full force during the 19th century, when the train and the motor vehicle made it possible to travel effectively from place to place. Also in *The Sims*, the suburban space is demarcated by wide streets and road surface markings, although there were originally no drivable cars in the game at all. Roads divide the game space conveniently into playable lots and serve as visual markers of the suburban spatial paradigm. They are symbolically key to the construction of suburban ideology also in the sense that they physically mark the

connection from the peripheral, private house to the vibrant gathering places and other central areas of SimCity.

Most of the game space in *The Sims* is occupied by private houses, but there are also spaces that can be regarded as open and public, or semi-public, such as shops, shopping malls, restaurants, beaches, holiday and spa resorts, and different kinds of production spaces, like movie and recording studios. It is easy to see the importance of these spatial extensions for example by looking at the advertisements of *The Sims* expansion packs (EPs). One of the first EPs, *Hot Date*, took the Sims 'downtown' and *Unleashed* made it possible to insert a café or a shop of the player's own creation in the game. *Makin' Magic* produced 'fantastical lots' and magic shops, and *Vacation* was advertised as giving the player a chance to design her own dream holiday destination. *The Sims 2* EP *University* provided the player with the possibility to experience student life on campus, and *Open for Business* invited her to try out a career in shopkeeping or other branches of business; these EPs also altered the playable space as well as added new, fancy NPCs and other character types.

For a Sim, leaving the house in the game signifies going 'somewhere else', which in practice means either disappearing from the game space for a certain number of hours (going to school or work), or actually changing location in-game. The method of transportation in the original Sims game was a car pool, a school bus, a taxi, or a shuttle of some kind – a Sim thus could not drive a car on her own. The symbolic

Figure 16. The Sims car pool.

meaning of automobiles in The Sims was visible in, for example, the fact that the ridesharing car looked different according to the career path the Sim had taken as well as the grade of her job (figure 16). The higher up an individual Sim would climb on the vocational ladder, the bigger and fancier the car pool that would drive her to work. Although this emblematic inclusion of automobiles was unavoidable, given the suburban mise-en-scène, the lack of 'real', drivable cars was a serious source of complaints for the early players of The Sims. Later on, some modding sites distributed operational cars that instantly became a hit among players, and also a kind of luxury item that was used to demarcate the elite modders from the more common players on sites such as Mod The Sims 2, where the number of downloadable automotives is currently close to a thousand ('Mod The Sims 2: Automotive'). The insertion of drivable cars is an example of a (re)configuration of the affordances already present in the game code and a reworking of the game mechanics in the direction desired by its players. For instance, the selection of cars offered by the Killersims website in 2004 was based on the carpool cars that were present in the game, with an added bonus as Killersims advertised itself as 'sponsoring' the driving licence for the drivable cars (figure 17). Other functions for these cars also were provided; for instance, the sporty 'VROOOM! Edition Dodge Viper' featured carwash vouchers with which *The Sims* player with a Superstar status (available through 'levelling-up' in the *Superstar* EP) would be rewarded by bikini girls washing

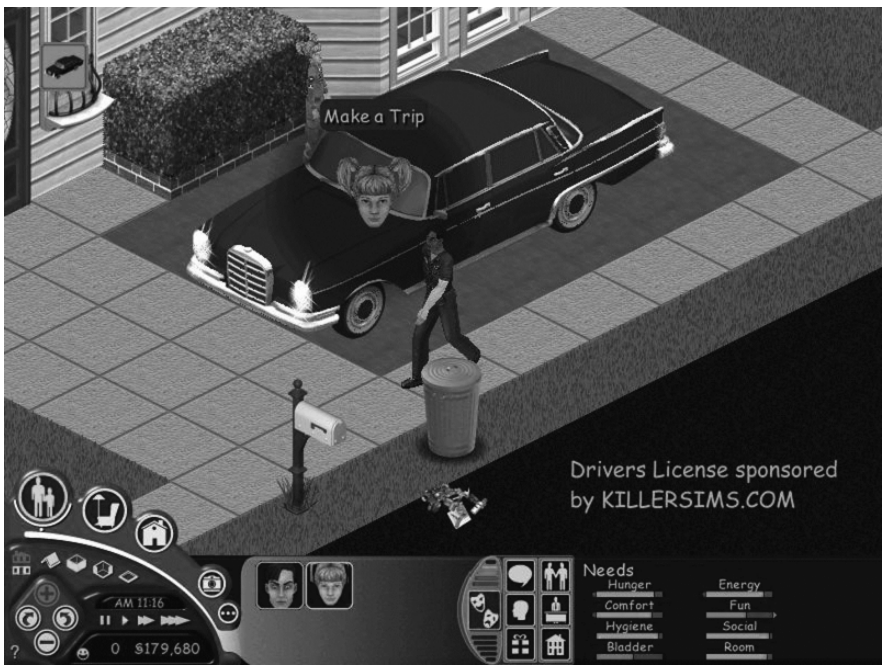

Figure 17. A drivable car in The Sims ('Killersims: Cars').

the car. Typically, these kinds of modded items were relatively expensive in the economy of the game – the price of these particular cars ranged from 2,000 to 30,000 Simoleons.

A player recollecting his first play experiences of *The Sims* mentioned in his published game diary that the wide roads of the game caused controversy in France; they were seen as 'too American' (Boal 2000). Despite these kinds of cracks it seems that the suburban space initially constructed for *The Sims* is universally recognisable and acceptable, at least in the Western part of the world. The same detached houses that we see in *The Sims* are familiar to us from countless other media presentations – perhaps most importantly from the 1950s and 1960s television sitcoms and some groundbreaking slasher horror films of the 1970s. As the mediatised representations of suburbia always feature characteristics such as private cars and garages as well as wide streets separating individual houses on their lots, it makes sense that *The Sims* re-enacts this spatial ideology in a game format, despite the fact that there were originally no drivable cars intended for gameplay. Because of the same spatial logic the mailboxes and trash cans are also situated along the road in *The Sims*, even though post is delivered and garbage is collected on foot.

The suburb has begun to occupy such an emblematic position in the audiovisual depictions of the American way of life that it has become the epitome of it. Suburbia is a term that refers most of all to the naturalised conception of a relationship between a certain kind of lifestyle and physical place. Living in a suburb is the norm in the United States: by the year 2000, half of the entire US population have become suburbanites. Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops (2002, 33) from the US Census Bureau note that '[f]rom 1940 to 2000, the proportion of the population living in central cities remained relatively stable, while the suburbs continued to grow substantially'. Suburb is, as Greg Dickinson (2006, 4) calls it, the decentred centre of life and mentality in America. It is not the norm only in terms of the uniform architecture or its built environment, but also through how it is 'imaged and imagined' across various kinds of media-cultural texts. These textual resources, such as films, do not only draw on spatial images, but they urge the spectators to see and understand suburbs in specific ways – the experienced space is created through multilevel intermingling of texts that we bring with us to the material sites we visit. Thus the social and cultural significance of suburbia can be studied through texts that mark it as a place in which people invest specific meanings (Beuka 2004, 21; Dickinson 2006). The media representations of suburbia often consist of a particular landscape, a specific spatial paradigm, through which the desires and disillusionments can be effectively articulated and negotiated. Suburbia is a space laden with emotional attachments.

At the same time, paradoxically enough, suburbia is also conceptualised as a place of general or non-specific nature; it features generic architecture and mass-production. It is thus characterised by its 'placelessness', a lack of clear spatial identity, which ambiguously allows it to be both a place and a non-place at the same

time (Beuka 2004, 20). I think that this spatial ambiguity might be one of the most important reasons for the success of *The Sims*, the gameplay of which is, as I have suggested, essentially occupied with architectural questions. *The Sims* draws on the idea of suburbia as not urban, nor rural – a suburb is defined as the area inside a metropolitan area but outside the central city (Hobbs & Stoops 2002, Glossary B-6) – and this 'in-betweenness' locates it as a site where many kinds of complexities and contradictions can be successfully negotiated. A suburban space is culturally constructed as a privatised, feminine and consumeristic place somewhere in the borders of the city centre (or 'downtown') and the country (e.g. Hartley 1997, 182-183). The concepts and adjectives used to describe suburbia are indeed often 'borderline' conceptual pairings, as well: suburbia is immediately recognisable although it may not be familiar at all; it is typical and distinctive, modern and conservative, esteemed and frowned upon, safe and secure in mentality but fragile and shattered at the same time (Silverstone 1997, 4).

Many of the features of suburbia can be interpreted as signifiers of the break from traditional communities and lifestyles, markers of a certain rootlessness and the homogenisation of modern life (Beuka 2004, 2). Suburbs are thus the perfect location for the treatment of anxiety, in particular, caused by the separation and alienation brought about by the massive urbanisation processes in the course of the 20th century. Is it because of these kinds of contradictions that the individualised suburban space can present itself as an image of domesticity, the family and the everyday life, which is turning out to be easily accessible and acceptable – even in the form of *The Sims* game space – worldwide? In the past decade, *The Sims* series has been available in 60 countries, and it has been localised and translated into at least 22 languages, including some rather marginal ones such as Finnish and Dutch. However, its central aesthetic and textual characteristics are the same everywhere, and players do not seem to criticise its main spatial structure. One could say, following Stuart Hall (2005), that suburbia as the spatial paradigm of *The Sims* is built upon naturalised conventions. *The Sims* suburbia is a 'reality construction' that is transcribed by relying on specific value sets and ideologies that hide themselves in the 'near-universalities' and obviousnesses of everyday life, and therefore easily escape our attention.

Suburban life in *The Sims* almost appears *not* to be constructed, even though it is the result of careful selection, inclusion and omission of components – 'the effect of an articulation between sign and referent'. The transparent codes the game uses as a basis for signification are not naturally 'given'; they have been profoundly naturalised through processes of habituation and domestication (Hall 2005, 121). In order to understand and interpret *The Sims* and its modding, it remains important to analyse the methods for setting up such a reconstruction of the suburban daily life. I argue that in order to tackle the question of why the principal suburban space in *The Sims* is so acceptable in the global context, we need to interpret and contextualise it alongside other mediatised representations of suburbia. Because of the

dominance of the US popular culture in the Western media sphere, the image of the American suburb also figures as a site of fantasies in the European context, although the identification of Europeans with this kind of space perhaps appears as 'more mediated' and less direct than in the US.

It is easily detectable by looking at the mediated presence of suburbia: images and imaginations of space in the media are more than representations of places. For their audiences, they are fine-tuned to offer ways of mapping their 'location' in time and space, their spatial relationships. This self-location, and by extension identity, is also a project of narration (Dickinson 2006). This narration is constantly being negotiated through the intermingling of spaces and images, which remain constitutive of each other and of the possibilities of the spatialised experience itself. Greg Dickinson (2006) investigates suburban films as spatial stories, arguing that they are stories about space that strive to create a 'dwelling' in the world that responds in meaningful ways to the concerns of everyday life. He sees these kinds of spatial stories as everyday 'architectural art' in the same sense Michel de Certeau regards them as parts of larger structures that permit people inhabiting them to make sense of life – to make it as aesthetically, polemically and ethically rich and compelling as possible. For de Certeau, spatial stories do not only include verbal enactments, but also various kinds of physical enunciations of space (such as walking, shopping and dwelling). De Certeau's understanding of the individual's actions has prompted many game researchers to theoreticise about players' interaction with and within the in-game space. The everyday spatial stories are also important in the work of Henri Lefebvre (1991), who argues that spatial imagination draws us into a deeper analysis of the 'everydayness' of everyday life. The bounds and potentialities of this imagining expose the banality of the choices we make in our daily life.

The 'banalities' of everyday life also reconstruct the main spatio-ideological context of *The Sims* gameplay. This emphasis is contrary to most other games, the spaces of which are often fantasy settings, such as abstracted dungeons, science-fiction-like research facilities or enclosed manor houses, or purely imaginary places set in quasi-mediaeval or futuristic locations. The game space of militaristic shooters and large-scale real-time strategy games often presents itself as a hostile environment, waiting to be conquered and controlled (as I argued in the previous chapter). A majority of games are set in 'public' places, in locations that are already constructed as specific in relation to the game's thematics, and usually they do not offer the player a chance to reconstruct the space to her own liking.[50] True, there are also games that are set in realistic, present-day urban areas, but the image of the city they draw is far from the idyllic peace of *The Sims* suburb.[51]

Exploration and testing of the potential of the game space can be considered as an important component of how the basic mechanics of modding in *The Sims* actually work. However, exploration in it is differently structured than in most other games, especially adventure games, which belong to the veritable exploratory

genre despite obvious similarities in their spatial organisation. It is notable that the basic principles of exploration and interaction in *The Sims* gameplay are derivative of the adventure game genre. *The Sims* suburbia acts as ideological restructuring of a real US suburb, and similarly, adventure games started out as reproductions of actual spaces. In fact, one of the suggested reasons for the success of adventure games was indeed their clever and inventive mimicry of the actual space, or in other words, the fact that the game established a playful association between the real and the virtual environment (Jerz 2007). In practical terms, what in the case of *Colossal Cave Adventure* (discussed in chapter II was carried out by typing in commands such as 'turn left' and 'go in' is now incorporated into the interface of *The Sims* by a point-and-click system. Once the player clicks on the screen with the right button of a mouse, she sees a command that says, 'go here'.

This innocent-looking instruction can actually be treated as a symbol of the principle of construction of *The Sims* space: it is based on the notion that the game world acts as an utterly familiar and secure stage, a canvas, for the player's unique temporal performance. Suburbia in *The Sims* presents itself like a default template on which the players are invited to draft the narrative of their own (domestic) situation and either their imaginary or real-life relationships. The diegetic suburban space unfolds in front of the eyes of the player as the game loads, so it essentially is 'already there', not waiting to be discovered and rummaged about but providing the player with a solid structure for her interpretation as well as boundaries for experimentation. In order for the player to understand the 'go here' command, she has to have an idea of what 'here' means and stands for: 'here' is something that is already seen and known, it is a well trodden path that the player has taken before, at least symbolically if not in practice. This is also an important part in the configuration of *The Sims* as simulation of 'real life'. I argue that it is precisely these naturalised conventions of representing the real life through mundane and familiar everyday spaces, characters and objects that function so well as the basis for individualised gameplay, especially in terms of configuring and reworking the game through modding. The naturalised mediatisation looks like it is based on a rather transparent mediation of reality, even though, in essence, it recreates the reality it portrays as a guarantee for its own truth (see Hall 1998, 175). It is evident that an animated computer game like *The Sims* cannot produce a similar 'reality effect' as photorealistic media (film, television), but it can aim at reproducing it within the limitations of its own generic conventions.

The reproduction of real life in game format is necessarily the result of ideologically charged choices and preferences that are shaped in the contexts of other media products portraying similar settings and sceneries. Representations of suburbia have changed considerably since the 1950s and 1960s when they first occupied the media spaces of television and, initially to lesser extent, film. In post-war USA the image of a suburb became the symbol of a new hope of economic prosperity and a sense of community, the emblem of which was the happy and af-

fluent nuclear family (Spigel 1992, 2). The emphasis on the family was an important theme in post-WWII popular culture, as it mirrored tensions caused by the veterans returning and pushing women out of the workforce, back into their domestic settings. In sitcoms such as *The Partridge Family*, *I Dream of Genie* and *Bewitched* suburbia presented itself as a place of harmonious family life where certain kinds of irritations would occur – but they were always absolutely minor, resolvable within the duration of the show. Suburbs, in general, were idealised images of a harmonious and contented family life, which was largely seen as the result of the re-establishment of the paternal authority of the father (Heller 1995, 40).

The interbinding histories of the suburb and media have encouraged a number of researchers to produce analyses of suburbia as a 'state of mind' or as a specific set of values instead of a particular place (Silverstone 1994; 1997; Spigel 1992; 2001). The importance of suburbia is analytically associated with the Anglo-American cultural sphere, which is dominated by the emphasis on white, middle-class lifestyle and family values as well as the separation between the private and public (spaces). According to media researcher Lynn Spigel (2001, 3-5), the latter differentiation is constructed as a basis for various kinds of societal interpretations that nevertheless share the same idea of space as articulated in terms of gender and gendered practices. Suburbia is a construction of private places, stand-alone households, of which the care-taking is the women's responsibility, and the public dimensions of which are established through the use of domestic popular media, especially television. The concept of suburbia thus also refers to the atomised 'core unit' of society, the nuclear family, the structure of which is held together by patriarchal power and associated control mechanisms (Silverstone 1997, 7; Hartley 1997, 185). At present, suburbia is, and has been for quite some time, a shorthand for repression, isolation and conservative values that are associated with Christianity and especially the hard work ethic typical of the Protestant faith. Ernest Hemingway, who grew up in a middle-class suburb of Chicago, called it a place of 'wide lawns and narrow minds' ('Ernest Hemingway biography: Childhood'). This can be seen in the way the concept of suburbia has come to envelop various kinds of idiosyncrasies, such as having a backyard barbecue on Independence Day and trick-or-treating on Halloween. Suburbia thus refers to the physical area of suburbs encapsulating the concept of tract-home nuclear family with conformist attitudes. Tract housing development, creating a community through building a large number of identical homes, has been described as dispiriting and demoralising especially by the American teenagers who were born in the 1960s and 1970s suburbs. It has also been the subject of popular culture, either as a symbol for traditional values (*All in the Family*), or as a location of satire on the American society (*American Beauty*, *The Simpsons*).

It is likely due to the double take on suburbia as a non-place and a place filled with specific meaning that the players find the suburb of *The Sims* such rewarding a place to elicit their fantasies about the good family life, defined along the lines of

'normality', and bring forth deviant and contradictory aspects to it. It is pleasurable to re-imagine and reappropriate these almost transparent codes in a game because it is so common to be familiar with the conventions of representing suburbia from other forms of media. It can therefore be argued that events such as Halloween, the backyard barbeque party, and even, to an extent, Christmas with the family customarily reproduced in the media through particularly American and suburban iconography quite naturally figure in the modded play practices of *The Sims*. In addition to providing the players with a specific location to decorate, such as the backyard, there are often also particular kinds of objects associated with the celebrations, the creation and sharing of which is a noteworthy part of the operations of *The Sims* modding scene.

A concentration on the particular kinds of 'suburban' media genres, such as the family sitcom, is visible also in the redirection of *The Sims* game engine through its uses in remediation. For example, A *Sims 2* machinima series *The Strangerhood* by semi-professional player collaborative Rooster Teeth tells the story of seven people inhabiting the same suburban street, having lost their memory and waking up to find themselves in unfamiliar surroundings. The residents of 'Strangerhood Lane' incorporate the kinds of roles in the construction of the storyworld that could be considered as rather conservative – each embodying a particular set of stereotypical characteristics – following the suburban mentality I have described in this chapter. This is especially visible in their portrayal and re-enforcement of the traditional gender roles and ethnic stereotypes. *The Strangerhood* season one effectively consisted of seventeen episodes, originally distributed at steady intervals on the Rooster Teeth website, and as such can be regarded as rather faithfully replicating the standard TV production paradigm. In addition to every episode focusing on particular characters and their relationships there was also a larger narrative structure that was completed in the 'season finale' called *The Final Countdown*, where the characters were finally allowed to go back to their own homes ('The Strangerhood: the latest episode of The Strangerhood').

The initial ideological frame of reference of *The Sims* clearly relies on the white, suburban mentality, based on a kind of colonisation, which manifests itself in the marking and protecting of one's own territory against exterior threats (Chambers 1997, 87-88). The privacy of the home in the game space is menaced by burglars, for example, and it constantly needs to be protected against these outside intrusions through antitheft alarm systems. If we compare *The Sims* in this sense to other game genres, in shooters and action games space often presents itself as a hostile, contested territory, whereas in simulations the 'already-conquered' space is rendered as the player's 'own' and thus worthy of protecting already from the start. It can be concluded that, on the basis of investigating the cultural representations of suburbia in the context of the spatial paradigm of games, *The Sims* clearly relates to other media much more than other games.

Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that the suburban landscape in television

and film is also a space where multiple sets of contradictions are actively negotiated. It has been argued that the increasingly complex and troubled identification of the suburb as a spatialised 'state of mind' is reflected in media through a multilayered set of discourses that deal with the Americans' disappointment with its dysfunctionality as well as the anxieties and fears that are related to the general tendencies of the massive processes of suburbanisation (Beuka 2004, 19-20). In this regard, there are also critical voices echoing in The Sims player scene: for instance, an American player (Thompson 2002) criticises the game space for too strong a connotation to the US suburbs, which for him present themselves as 'total nightmarescapes of alienation'. In its complexity, Greg Dickinson (2006) argues that suburbia is also the space of the appearances and disappearances of the ethos of postmodernity. Suburban films are built on notions of security and comfort, and as such they function as ethical rhetoric of right and wrong, home and away, safe and sinister. As the (white) family is in the centre of the representation, suburban films are inclined to reject 'impossible' spaces and sexualities, promoting uniformity and conformity (Beuka 2004, 229; Dickinson 2006). After analysing various The Sims modding sites, I am compelled to conclude that The Sims effectively takes part in the idealisation of particular kinds of domestic spaces and social structures, too.

Playing house, performing gender

The Sims was originally intended for the simulation of the operations of a household in miniature, or for 'playing house'. As I previously established, the stage for its play is an unmistakably suburban American domain, consisting of detached houses each situated on their own private lot. The setting of its play seems to be widely appreciated in public by mainstream print journalists, especially those that are not game culture insiders themselves (as opposed to specialised game journalists who do not seem to know how to tackle the extensive popularity of The Sims). In these discourses, The Sims is often seen as the 'good' alternative to gloomy and violent video games in its naturalistic portrayal of the safe suburban family life; it is praised to instruct young children, girls in particular, about good housekeeping and the maintenance of social relations in the family. As one of the parents interviewed for the New York Times article sums up,

> 'The entire concept seems very creative,' he said. 'It seems as if it [*The Sims*] teaches them a lot about the different motivations and desires people have in life and it shows some of the frustrations of running a household. In other games you see a lot of violence and we're not into that as a family. But it's interesting to see how they react to things with *The Sims* that normally a parent would have to deal with, like if one of their Sims doesn't want to go to school or is messy or

if there are conflicting desires in the family.'(Schiesel 2006)

The strategic boundaries of the game are clear: they invite the player to articulate her perceptions of home, family, relationships and the roles of each family member, as well as the functions of the home, household work and the affirmation of particular kinds of identities and lifestyles in the context of that suburban dwelling. As Schiesel (2006) notes further on, children playing *The Sims* seem to be particularly engaged in re-enacting their own suburban family structure. In fact, two children had been interviewed and the following summary of their playing habits was presented in the article:

> Francesca and Richard have been playing the game since last fall and within its electronic confines have built a fantasy world that looks surprisingly similar to their own. Comfortable suburban home. Parents named Mark and Francine. Children named Francesca and Richard. Antique French sofa in the entry hall. Lots of leopard-skin patterns scattered about the house.

This narrative of the children's play style can be read as the continuation of the project of perfecting the so-called American Dream. Solidifying the gender dichotomy in association with house-building, furnishing the home and maintaining certain kinds of relationships are reflected on the ideals and value systems typical of the suburban mentality. What therefore becomes a critical point of reflection is precisely this lifestyle manifesting itself in the playful performance of the heterosexual matrix of the relationships and the family.

The idealisation of a particular kind of domestic social structure and play with it can historically be proportioned to the tradition of playing with dolls and doll's houses. The doll's house has been interpreted as the device for accustoming and instructing little bourgeois girls for their future roles as housekeepers and family mothers. While this instructive function is still considered to be present in the modern doll's house, nowadays they are primarily thought to act as the fantastical manifestations of their owners' imaginative capabilities (e.g. Hastie 2001, 113-157). Historically speaking, doll's houses were especially popular in the Protestant countries of Europe, such as the Netherlands and Northern Germany, and from these areas the tradition spread also to the Anglo-Saxon part of the world. Some of the preserved doll's houses from the 16th and 17th centuries celebrate the talent of their makers; they were the manifestations of the skill and craftsmanship of carpenters and silversmiths, and in some European regions there were craftspeople who prided themselves in making the kinds of miniatures that were specifically intended for the doll's house (e.g. Flanagan 2009, 25-27).

The trope of the doll's house brings forth multiple interesting perspectives in the context of playing with The Sims households and their associated modding practices. First of all, the ideological frame of The Sims has been quite straightfor-

wardly interpreted as the re-enactment of the instructive ideology of the doll's house tradition: if the doll's house play was meant to turn little girls into good mothers and housekeepers, The Sims is seen to be destined for the strengthening of the suburban value system, the appreciation of family and the solidification of the consumerist lifestyles (Flanagan 2003; 2009; Lauwaert 2009, 86-88). Second, as has been suggested, the doll's house was a particular favourite among wealthy bourgeois families, and some of them were so skilfully crafted that they actually ended up in the parents' display cases rather than at their children's disposal. The doll's house was the perfect vessel for transferring the bourgeois ideology: it subtly demonstrated the wealth of the commissioning family while simultaneously acting as a reminder of the proper social order. The doll's house has also been interpreted as a separate space for play so that girls would not be tempted to go outside, but on the other hand its panopticon structure also acted as a kind of rebound: it created a possibility for girls to exercise power over and supervise the dolls they were playing with – while being supervised by the adults themselves (Reid-Walsh 2006, 6-7).

As a media-cultural product proposing a particular kind of conformist ideology construction *The Sims* is also a favourite among parents and educators (e.g. Beavis & Charles 2005; Frasca 2001b). It has been praised for not only its non-violent thematics, but also for its constructive and positive approach to issues like social interaction and inclusion. Some of its play practices are also indicative of the doll's house tradition in the sense that they aim at replicating or simulating the real life of the players in a miniature form while others bring in a clear aspirational dimension in this playful reproduction. The building of a Sim house and determining the appearances of the family members are connected to the player's understanding of her own life and everyday setting. At the same time, players often seem to work on the dreams and fantasies related to their own lives in various ways. In her analysis of Barbie dolls, Lynn Spigel points out that the affirmation of one's own identity is often done through the use of various kinds of miniatures. Dressing up dolls and refurbishing doll's houses are part of narrative processes aimed at aiding the storyteller-player to negotiate the possibilities and constraints of her own life in a distanced context of a play environment. The re-sized, miniaturised object thus functions as a nostalgic thing as well – a tool for its user's self-reflection and self-expression (Spigel 2001).

The Sims primarily offers private spaces, homes, for play, and at the same time, its gameplay usually takes place in a domestic setting, too. It is no wonder then that the player's own home and the predispositions of her everyday life may closely link to the design of her game characters and houses. Many *Sims* players create a replica of their own home in the game as well as miniature versions of themselves alongside their friends or family members (see Beavis & Charles 2005, 363-364; Nutt & Railton 2003, 580). Sim houses and characters can indeed be meticulously crafted to correspond to their real-life counterparts. For example, the administrator of *Simburbs*, 'Mrs. Dutchie', takes pride in a house mod on her website by presenting

it as a fastidious copy of her real, furnished home. The modder mentions that she is very pleased with her houses – both the real and the play one ('Simburbs'). The drive towards representing everyday life as 'realistically' as possible encourages the players to develop ways and means through which they can reproduce a naturalistic feel to the game space of their creation.

In addition to striving for realism, an important concept in the context of play is aspiration, the transgression of the mundane and trivial everyday life. This tendency is already visible in the names of many of *The Sims* modding sites, among which such examples as *4ever Simfantasy*; *Sim a Little, Dream a Lot*; *Sim Dream Homes*; *Vintage Sims*; *A SIMple Utopia*; *Sassy Sims* and *Sim Snobs* have been encountered (see 'The Ultimate Sims List'). On many of these web pages the playing of *The Sims* presents itself as an action that takes part in the 'virtual realisation' of the dreams and wishes of the player, especially dreams concerning self-realisation and the player's own life goals. These realisations are then (re)presented to other players, either in a straightforwardly transparent way or ironically. Besides the central theme of building up dream houses, there is also the important fantasy dimension of performing stardom that is realised through incorporating fan cultural elements to the 'body play' with the Sims. Skins based on pop music personas and film stars have been very popular among modders from the start (see 'Mod The Sims 2: Celebrities and Real People'). It is important to note that striving for experiential realism and the public sharing (and display) of private dreams are not necessarily contradictory, as the objectives of gameplay are often set out in a situated and individualist way. The players also test various play techniques and tactics through the creation of diverging families (e.g. 'California Simmin'').

The combination of realistic and fantastical elements is typical of children's play but also, for instance, of the collecting hobbies of adults. This is specifically visible in the context of miniatures, which often act as simulations of the 'real thing': model railroad kits and doll's houses are designed to be as if they were entrances to other worlds, the universes of which can be endlessly tinkered with, complemented and modified. Miniatures always act as political and instructive tools, too: scale models such as aeroplanes and motor vehicles as well as toy soldiers and other militarised simulation devices have been allocated a very different cultural status in the boys' (or men's) realm than little girls' dolls in their preferably pink plastic houses. The lower cultural status of the doll's house is visible even in some academic discourses that seek to promote the notion that The Sims is not only a doll's house (e.g. Hayes & King 2009). Children's toys are 'technologies of gender' in the sense that the politics of simulation inscribed in them are instructing their players on how to be properly socialised into being either a boy or a girl. The concept of the technology of gender derives from the work of Teresa de Lauretis (1987), who situates it in the sphere of instructional powers and techno-social apparatuses of society. To her, gender is the product and the process of a number of social technologies, institutionalised discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of

daily life. The dynamically representative and simulative dimension that these technologies in miniature inhabit could be treated as the key to understanding their significance also in a larger sociocultural context (see Bachelard 2003, 319-377).

The basic game mechanics of *The Sims*, based on the fulfilment of the Sims' motives, can be considered instrumental for the purposes of storytelling in miniature that combine realistic and fantastical elements. This notion is based on the fact that in order to keep a Sim responsive to instructions, the player must keep her happy and content. When a Sim's needs are met, the status bar fills up, but if any of these bars drops down significantly, the Sim will become unhappy and overwrought. When a status bar goes completely red, the Sim may suffer anything from a small mess (as a result of urinating on the floor, for example) to a total disaster (which may occur, for example, when a Sim does not get any nourishment, resulting in a death by starvation). If the status bars are constantly on the red, the Sim will quickly become depressed and sullen, ignoring any kind of interaction possibilities with other Sims and, even more importantly, with the player. If a Sim is neglected, she stops being productive and turns into a pathetic, insubordinate slob. The key to any kind of playstyle is keeping the Sims active, as a Sim 'can't become a resentful outcast shaped into a vengeful drifter by adverse situations' (Park 2000).

The gameplay practices of balancing between the daily routines which the Sims necessarily have to undergo to fulfil their needs and the more exciting, potentially 'subversive' acts that the player may want to engage them in is, again, reminiscent of the doll's house tradition. Ethnographer Frances Armstrong concludes that the most popular activity in doll's house play was to act out daily domestic routines, either as a kind of preview or a rehearsal of imagined future routines. Based on doll's house paratexts such as manuals and journal writings she suggests that setting the doll's house as a stage, with action frozen at a particular moment, was very common. In addition to the everyday housekeeping tasks, some particularly popular 'frozen' scenes included parties such as weddings and funerals, which are characteristic also in the play of *The Sims*. What is notable, however, is that in addition to these ideologically rather conformist patterns of play she also found traces of unconventional play with gender roles and domestic tasks. For example, in one doll's house she reports finding a female doll dressed in men's clothes, with an apron wrapped around it, lying in a four-poster bed (Armstrong 1996, 36-39).

It is therefore notable, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, that the game-as-product offers a *certain* frame, the idealised suburban home, which is only one component in the practices of interpretation and configuration of gameplay. The same can be said about doll's houses: the spatial frame alone does not determine the nature of play, and thus it remains necessary to investigate dolls, the setting of play, as well as the play itself. In this respect the doll's house can metaphorically be likened to the game engine of *The Sims*. The representation and reworking of the conception of home, which is particularly visible in the practices of sharing game spaces and household objects on the internet, is also associated with the public

negotiations of the conventions related to suburban identities and gendered lifestyles. The suburban mentality is negotiated in the gameplay of *The Sims* through configuring the domestic setting and its decoration to support the kind of role-play where the gendered identities of the Sims are being performed, re-enforced and emphasised in rather particular ways. For instance, as argued previously, the logic of *The Sims* game-as-product is initially built on the premise that the family is more likely to succeed if one of the parents (or one adult among many) does not get a job but spends the day at home, doing housework and socialising with the neighbours (Simpson 2003, 28).

This kind of ideological configuration of the affordances of the game leads me to investigate in what ways *The Sims* in fact supports these types of play practices. Looking at the representational level of the game, it seems to me that the ideological framework *The Sims* operates in is manifested in little details, for instance, in the gendered distinction of jobs it suggests as 'natural': despite certain 'sexlessness' of the Sims, the (by default) scantily clad maid and the social worker NPCs in *The Sims* are always female, whereas firemen and policemen tend to be male Sims. The configuration of the game space in *The Sims* is bound to the representational mechanisms of 'interpreting' and performing gender, which are negotiated in the game's context foremost by referencing the ideologies associated with the feminisation of the private sphere. Mary Flanagan (2003) has explored the development of suburbia and the feminisation of the domestic space in the 1950s as a project for reinscribing women's place in the home, fuelled by the ideology associated with the American Dream. Women were expected to dedicate themselves to creating and maintaining the perfect home, and as this was an arduous task, they were allowed to 'console' themselves by engaging in particularly consumerist pleasures of shopping for domestic appliances and decoration.

The ideology of the American Dream has specific connotations with suburbia, as according to a generally held conception, the spatial structure of suburbs and the suburban mentality are vital in understanding the Americans' aspirations for building the good life (Hayden 1995). Suburbia is dreamland, a site of imagination; it unravels itself as a landscape pregnant with particularly American desires (and anxieties). In the 1960s, suburbs grew in size and quantity all over the US, and with the fulfilled promise of economic prosperity they also became a potent symbol of the American Dream – a dream that was accessible through creating a new sense of the safe and shared communal space (Beuka 2004, 5, 6; Heller 1995, 44). Naturally, this dream was mainly reserved for the white middle-class nuclear family that had fled the city centre and left behind 'nonconformity', poverty and crime (the 'White Flight'; see e.g. Muzzio & Halper 2002, 545). Suburbanisation as a project was based on the idea of uniformity and the idealisation of the esprit de corps over individuality (Heller 2006, 44). A change of attitudes towards the suburb took place in the 1980s. Suburbia was no longer considered the site of fantasy, an idealised place for neighbourhood communality, but it became the landscape invested with

phobias (Beuka 2004, 8). This change was most of all reflected in contemporary popular film, which is understandable, as television networks could not as openly criticise the suburban family structure and what was assumed to be its most loyal viewer base, the housewives.

This nationally specific and ideologically charged location, imbued with these particular cultural mentalities, is explicitly developed as the context for negotiating the sociocultural geography of *The Sims*, too. The re-enactment of particular kinds of performances related to gender are probably most visible in the skinning of the Sims. What is notable about the modding of the game characters is that their functionalities are realised in an indirect way, unlike those of spaces or objects. The consumerist logic that the players are assumed to adopt in Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's 'Sim Capital', acting as part of the ideological restructuring of the American Dream, is therefore relatively easily emphasised through reworking objects. If the players so wish, they can change the functions of objects quite simply by providing them with a money-making mechanism, for instance, and these kinds of modded objects abound on the internet – whereas altering the behaviours of game characters has always been much more difficult. Tweaking the in-game animations in *The Sims* has been tedious from the beginning, as animations for the original game were made with programmes like *3D Studio Max* backed up by several EA proprietary plug-ins (Forbus & Wright 2001, 6). Nevertheless, making a Sim to perform gender in a specific way seems to be regarded as so essential in the reconstruction of the suburban private sphere and domesticity that the modders are willing to put their time and effort into such high-level role-play.

First of all, it has to be acknowledged that the fundamentally egalitarian nature of the Sims is subsumed and played out in the game in many fundamental ways, and therefore the introduction of gendered hierarchies and value structures requires specific effort from the player-modders. For instance, all Sims, regardless of their gender, can propose to other Sims, and when a Sim receives a positive answer, the proposed-to Sim takes on the family name of the proposer irrespective of their gender. Even when a Sim that is not romantically inclined moves in with another family, s/he takes on the name of the household. Although many seem to think that the most significant difference between homo- and heterosexual characters in the game is the fact that gay couples cannot get 'married' (but have the option to cohabit which is called 'joined union'), this difference is downplayed by practices such as the adoption of a common family name. The insistence on common family names can therefore be interpreted as more likely a practical question, deriving from the need to keep the game data organised, than the result of any conservative ideology. As Mia Consalvo (2003a, 13) suggests, the family names in *The Sims* resemble team names in sports, as Sims, like players, can move teams and be traded back and forth multiple times at will. Furthermore, each move in this sense seems positive, and the families who did 'lose' a member do not seem to be too moved by the loss.

However, as many players are willing to perform traditional gender roles, they

have created mechanisms that accentuate the diversification of the inherently similar male and female characters. For instance, it has been quite common to rework objects and decorative items to suit either boy or girl Sims, for the creation of complete sets of bedroom furnishings and toys in either pale blue or pink (figure 18). Recreational items traditionally coded as either feminine or masculine also abound on *The Sims* modding sites. Whereas girl Sims are provided with frilly ballerina costumes and props, it has been customary to offer boy Sims toy soldiers, cars and guns to play with.

Figure 18. Modded nursery items: blue for a boy Sim, pink for a girl (CTherese 2009).

It is important to note, however, that the gendered coding of objects and spaces in The Sims is mainly aesthetic, not operational, in the sense that all characters are equally allowed to interact with these modded objects. Therefore it is essential to consider the player's individual choice in what kinds of mods she chooses for her game characters. In this sense each Sim can be regarded as a possibility or a site of becoming (something), as Mary Flanagan (1999, 83) puts it, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze. Game characters are potentialities for representing and performing certain gendered practices that in practical or ideal terms reconstruct the everyday life of the player. Interestingly enough, the same idea, albeit in a very different context, is present in James Newman's (2002, 9) writing as he concludes that the actions of a player (manifested in the character) can be regarded as the goal of the game itself.

As has already been suggested, the combination of personality factors, motives, and in the case of *The Sims 2*, life goals, aspirations and fears, too, is likely to direct

the player towards a kind of *role-play* with her Sims, as the creation of characters is not only structured around the issues of representation but also their configurative functionality in the interpretive framework of the game. The character creation can therefore be read in an identity-political framework: whether the player creates young male Sims who tend to make a mess, or elderly Sim women who not only keep their own house clean, but also others', can be interpreted in terms of restructuring, or (re)configuring the game's affordances according to the real-life gender stereotypes in the re-enforcement of which the player wants to take part. On the other hand, it is a common practice among players to also experiment with the gender roles they make their characters perform, as the creation of gay male-only households or the employment of transvestite maids suggests.

Perhaps *The Sims* gameplay through the (re)configuration of the Sims could in effect be investigated in the context of actual role-playing games as well. The position that the player of *The Sims* assumes can be likened to that of a gamemaster of a continuous and largely improvisational RPG campaign, where the 'player characters', in fact, are the Sims. If a role-playing game is defined as an 'episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a gamemaster in determining how their fictional characters' spontaneous interactions are resolved' (Mackay 2001, 4-5), we can begin to see its similarities to the many play styles of *The Sims*. The fundamental difference here is perhaps that the 'participants' that *The Sims* player guides are not other people, but computer-controlled characters. The roles that the Sims are made to perform are dependent on their age, gender, personality attributes and other characteristics that either depend on the algorithms and scripts provided by the game engine or are something the player has chosen in the beginning of her game 'campaign'. The gameplay of *The Sims* therefore consists of individual play sessions, or campaigns, which are characterised by indirect interaction and result in an episodic narrative structure; this narrative structure is emergent in the sense that there is no underlying story for the player to uncover through gameplay.

On the contrary, if the player so wishes, she can follow her game as a narrative unfolding on its own by letting her Sims freely interact with one another and the objects in their environment. The exploratory posture of *The Sims* player is thus emphasised in the extensive and experimental nature of the gameplay itself. The form of signification in *The Sims*, informed by the adventure game tradition, also contributes to the position an avid player is likely to adopt – that of the creative member of a cooperative group of players, readily sharing the gameplay experience with her peers.[52] The inherently social aspect of the Sims is another feature that connects it to the RPG genre. In a sense, *The Sims* GM assumes two positions as part of her role-play: being a player of the game and a metalevel manager of it at the same time. In addition, gamemaster refers to a position in multiplayer games that is in charge of organising and arbitrating players' actions in the context of a particular ruleset: she is supposed 'to weave the other participants' player-character stories

together, control the non-player aspects of the game, and create environments in which the players can interact' ('Gamemaster'). It seems to me that what connects the position of *The Sims* player to that of an RPG gamemaster is the basic demand for *moderation*. All of the delineated role-play practices are also incentive for modding, as constructing the in-game world and characters to support the individual storytelling preferences of a player are likely to gain considerable boost from downloading custom-created and specifically targeted mods into the game. At the same time, the creation and variation of mods are likely to be encouraged by the individualist needs and divergent (narrative) purposes of the player.

As I argued above, suburban space and gender roles are naturalised through the use of specific codes and conventions which we, as viewers of American TV programmes and movies, are necessarily familiar with. It is evident, however, that the simulation of this kind of real life in a game format cannot be ideologically innocent, specifically as it involves such culturally charged tropes as home, family, work and the everyday life. The modding of *The Sims* space is also encouraged through the localisation of the game-as-product; through localisation, the potential for recreating the American Dream in miniature may be developed in unexpected directions. Let us consider Japan as an example, where the players' immediate living environment with its distinctive architecture and urban planning are likely to provide a rather different basis for reproducing the understanding of everyday life and 'home' in the game space than what its original developers in the US plausibly intended. Managing the lives of and playing with 'Japanese Sims' could also be considered as a form of role-play. Therefore it is no surprise that there are a lot of Japanese mods

Figure 19. An unexceptional and modest home for Japanese Sims (squeam 2008).

in circulation; the selection ranges from providing the player with the means to design traditional Japanese houses, furnish them appropriately, and inhabit them with Japanese-looking Sims wearing typical costumes and props (figure 19).

I suggest that one of the key reasons for the success of *The Sims* is that it manages to connect the conventional representational framework to new mechanics of playing and toying with its (ideological) affordances. This is illustrated by the fact that for many, a large part of the fun of playing *The Sims* is creating spaces and situations that are not self-evidently or at all associated with the suburban (mental) landscape. The player can for example place some manga and anime characters in her Sim houses and create a retro-futuristic set for them in which she can play out her fantasies (figure 20).

Figure 20. Manga and anime character Sim skins (Corry n.d.).

Also various kinds of fantasy settings as well as the familiar iconography of popular culture products, such as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and *Harry Potter*, figure in the play practices and mods created for *The Sims*. Popular websites, such as *Phantasims*, have offered an impressive array of fantasy objects for downloading, as described on a *Sims* modding site index:

> Highlights of the home include a giant vampire bat that mysteriously changes location, a very imposing dragon, a Sea Serpent and crocodile for your moat, a cauldron style cooking pot that is a working stove, numerous skulls, bones,

> gargoyles, and ghosts, a scary Grim Reaper statue, a large skeleton candle unlike anything I have seen, a gory floating helmet, and what spooky castle would be complete without a hound from hell? ('The Sim Surfer: Dead_P')

One of the most prominent ways to render *The Sims* 'alternative' or even subversive in the context of its suburban domesticity is to mod the game environment, objects and characters to express the so-called Gothic sensibility. In a way, the Gothic theme is an expansion of the game's affordances in the sense that there has always been an inclination towards it; for example, in the inclusion of certain kinds of 'dark' game elements, particularly those associated with death (graveyard with tombstones, urns, the Sims' mourning for their dead) and NPCs such as the Grim Reaper and the Tragic Clown. In fact, the pronounced presence of D/death (both as a game incident and a character) in *The Sims* has made it possible for modders to develop all kinds of mortality-related artefacts, surroundings and characters with specific behaviours (e.g. SoapyTarantula 2007).

Striving for contradictions and perhaps even deconstructing the provided suburban game space is therefore something that many *Sims* players seem to enjoy doing in particularly varied ways. If they so wish, the players can flee from the inscribed WASP mentality of *The Sims* and remodel the game according to their own personal standards and preferences. Even though the basic spatial structure (the inherent neighbourhood composition) cannot be changed, the aesthetics and the object-oriented practices of *The Sims* can be completely transformed through the various ways of modding the COTS game code (see Roudavski & Penz 2003, 3). By 'deconstructing' suburbia players also take part in the new ways of negotiating the mentality and the spatial mindset of the suburb in a more general context of the media industry and cultural production. The foremost means of making this happen is engaging the Sims in role-play which disrupts the naturalised conventions and role expectations associated with the mainstream media representations of the American suburbia.

V EXTENDING THE GAME

Pleasures and politics of simulation

The Sims has generally been labelled a virtual doll's house and a real-life domestic simulator where the player creates and controls the lives of little AI-powered people. These kinds of epithets can be investigated through the concept of simulation, which in this context is regarded as an operating principle that connects the in-game occurrences to the ways players make sense of the real (that is, the actual, social) world. In semiotic terms, simulating real life refers to the subject matter of the simulation, 'the signified', whereas reference to, for example, the doll's house gives an idea of the particularities of the signification process and the representational system in question ('the signifier'). In the context of *The Sims*, the association between the game (or, the game-as-process) and its referent in reality can fruitfully be investigated through the notion of simulation precisely as the explicitly stated source system of the game is the naturalised, albeit somewhat idealistic construction of the ideologically charged American suburbia that I investigated in the previous chapter.

The Sims can be categorised as an experiential (rather than algorithmic) simulation and a free-form game, deriving from the traditions of the adventure and RPG genres. Its RPG-qualities are most visible in its emphasis on the creation and development of characters and the important roles the characters are assumed to encompass as the player's representational devices. Another characteristic of *The Sims* that follows from its adventure-RPG-trait is its contextuality, visible in the constant transformation and expansion of the game's context (see Myers 2003, 35). The add-ons of *The Sims* have brought, for example, 'The Shopping Centre', 'The Old Town', and 'The Studio Town' in new gameplay spaces, as well as a constant flow of new gameplay elements. Although many game scholars rely on the idea of the incompatibility of game elements and the elements of simulation, in the case of *The Sims* I see these elements providing a multidimensional platform, a predisposition for toying and playing with the notion of reality and real life. As I am interested in ideology, I am also keen on finding out how these ideological propositions are inscribed in the game, and on the other hand, how they are reworked and redirected.

Gameplay can hardly ever be considered totally distanced or free from ideolog-

ical assumptions, as its basic mechanism is based on the player getting to know and habituating herself to the operations of the game algorithm (e.g. Wark 2007). The concept of simulation is useful precisely in the analysis of such processes. Simulation is, according to its basic definition, a dynamic model of a system; it consists of the operations of a system represented through another system. Unlike representation, simulation also refers to the spatio-temporal nature of the relationship between a system and the person experiencing it, such as a game and its player, and it also brings forth aspects associated with the situatedness, materiality and embodiment of the use practices that would traditionally (not) be considered through static textual analysis. For instance, the interface of a game can be regarded as a kind of feedback loop 'where the player must be seen as both implied by, and implicated in, the construction and composition of the experience' (Newman 2002, 5).

Despite being a convoluted concept that is often used without necessary contextualisation – as Prensky (2002) notes, it became a veritable buzzword in the American popular-scientific circles somewhere in the middle of the 20th century – simulation is widely used in the studies of digital culture and games as well. In the study of simulation games, ludologist Gonzalo Frasca's (2003, 223) point of departure is that 'to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system'. The idea is that in addition to reproducing the (usually audiovisual) characteristics of a source object, simulation includes a model of its behaviour. This model, be it a simple toy or a complex cybertext, reacts to its user's input according to a predetermined set of parameters, and it is hardly ever ideologically 'innocent', as the example of simulating a voting machine in *The Sims* suggests (figure 21). It is detectable in Frasca's (2003, 223-224) text that he sees the essential prerequisite of simulation to be its 'manipulability': for example, a person using a flight simulator can, by performing certain actions, alter the behaviour of the system in a way that is similar to the behaviour of an actual aeroplane. The difference between similar-looking filmic narration and simulation is that the latter cannot be interpreted solely by observation or through the output, but its analysis has to incorporate the consideration of the (inter)active relationship between the user and the system.

Simulation always creates and works through a fictitious situation, but at the same time, it has to have relevance in the actual, social world. Even though striving for realism may be the most important goal of the design of simulation games, from the player's perspective the challenge is, first of all, to master the complex mechanics of the game that have no direct relation to external reality ('Simulation'). Coming from a different angle, Christopher Csikszentmihályi (1999, 66) criticises professionals developing the fields of information and communication technologies for grounding their visions on the idea that 'man' and 'machine' are fundamentally similar. However, in the context of games this similarity can in fact be considered as an advantage, guiding us towards understanding the operating principles of the game itself. Simulative pleasure can be regarded as derivative of the experience of

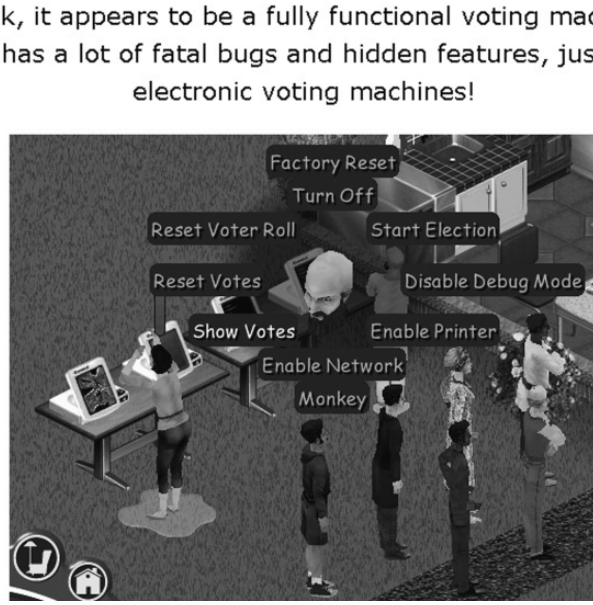

Figure 21. The Dumbold Voting Machine (Hopkins 2004a).

an immersive state of mind or 'flow' (e.g. Csikszentmihályi & Csikszentmihályi 1988), based on the player forgetting herself and the game character, and instead concentrating on the 'repossession' of the system that is reproduced through simulation, realised in gameplay. The pleasure of playing simulation games is thus created by learning to operate according to the demands of the system – habituating oneself to think like a machine (Newman 2002, 9). This 'machinic approach' to gameplay may sound threatening, especially if we were to regard *The Sims* gameplay as an experiential simulation of a kind of ideal capitalistic society, where human relationships are based and valued solely on the acquisition of better and thereby more expensive objects.

Indeed, it cannot be denied that *The Sims* is a product of a capitalist system, functioning on the basis of a monetary economy (structured around a made-up currency, the Simoleon) and a lifestyle that on the surface appears to be idealising consumerism above all else. For instance, the default soundtrack to the Buy and Build Modes in *The Sims* consists of the kind of light and uplifting music, 'muzak', that is mainly used in shopping centres and public lifts. Every purchase in the game is accentuated by a hilarious cash register sound, and an absolute majority of the semi-public spaces in the game are designed to be cafés, restaurants or shops of some kind – spaces destined for consumption. All consuming activities have an effect, usually positive, on the Sims' status bar (usually increasing the mood). Nevertheless, there are several aspects to the game that undermine the black-and-white interpretation of the game as the capitalist's wet dream.

In this section, I will look into how player-created game objects and characters take part in the reconstruction of this kind of an ideological frame, and in what ways their functions can be used to change the initial gameplay into something different altogether. As the reference point of the simulative game mechanics is arguably the reproduction and renegotiation of particular kinds of suburban identities, lifestyles and social practices, simulation in The Sims also tends to be regarded as a toolbox for conveying ideology – teaching the player the 'proper uses' of objects as well as providing sample scenarios of social situations. The most basic instructive mechanism in the game is the interaction in which the Sims engage with objects, but game objects in this sense have so far merited only a fraction of the scholarly attention that has been directed to the game space and the game character. Simulation, however, might work well as a theoretical tool in the analysis of game objects, too, because it describes the relationship between the two systems as explained above by providing a model of their behaviour. For instance, the kind of analysis that Consalvo (2003a, 28-29) engages in with regard to the happiness, relationships and possessions of the Sims is only possible by looking into their interactions with objects.

Game objects have several different characteristics. In principle, whether taking place in a fantasy world or in a more realistic setting, all computer games have to rely on representational mechanisms associated with coherent processes of signification in order to work as intended. This is the kind of organisational layer that, in the context of games, can effectively be dealt with by Artificial Intelligence (AI). For example, the basic operational mechanics of *The Sims* can be related to the traditional AI paradigm especially with regard to their interactive qualities: the interaction taking place in the initial setting, characterised by a particular set of conditions, results in an emergence of behaviour that evokes distributed (symbolic) AI programming (Cavazza 2000). Most importantly of all, objects trigger actions and take part in the spatial organisation of gameplay, thus guiding the Sims' behavioural patterns, which then remain only indirectly affected by the player's choices. This aspect of *The Sims* is reminiscent of the so-called *situated* AI techniques that guide the set of mechanisms defining the relationships between spatio-temporally placed actors and objects (Cavazza 2000, 229-230).

The Sims originally became famous for its innovative AI-controlled game mechanics – today, similar mechanics are used in many social networking games, for instance on Facebook. Originally, the clever utilisation of scripts and algorithms as the basis of object interaction resulted in a game that could be only partially under the player's control; as I have argued, the play mechanics of *The Sims*, or the player's chances of interaction, have always been much more indirect than in many other games. This is also characteristic of the simulative aspects of the game. The realistic illusion that the game furthers is accentuated through the incorporation of algorithms that produce the impression of the Sims' quasi-autonomous behaviour and their unpredictability. Will Wright stated in an interview that one of the most complicated algorithms created for *The Sims* guided the movement of the game

characters ('Will Wright. A Chat about The Sims and Sim City'). The temporally framed ruleset of *The Sims* functions so that each action a Sim performs is the manifestation of a computation process, the aim of which is to produce a score for every possible interaction. This score-computing involves an analysis of the existing objects at (the Sim's) disposal, as well as checking and weighting the advertisements for these objects (Cavazza 2000, 229). The Sims, left to operate on their own, are programmed to maximise their happiness by going through all of the behaviours of every object at their disposal:

> Once they choose a behaviour, the procedure for that behaviour (which is part of the object) is then run in the thread of the Sim itself, so that it has access to that Sim's parameters in addition to those of its defining environment (the object the behavior is from) (Forbus & Wright 2001, 1).

The Sims is realised through object-oriented programming (OOP) that has become the standard programming methodology since the mid-1990s especially due to the rising popularity of graphical user interfaces (GUIs) and the programming language C++. In the context of modern computer games it is important to note that OOP uses 'objects' as programming entities that have actions and interactions; in OOP, every object is a discrete unity and capable of receiving, processing and sending messages to other objects. In traditional programming, data and behaviour are usually treated separately, but in OOP objects can be considered as independent little machines that each entail their own role and responsibility.[53] How do these objects function in *The Sims*, then? First of all, Sim objects clearly have a system of organisation: all buyable items in the game are categorised; they range from the cheap and basic to the exclusive and high-end. The cheaper an object is, the less effective it is. That is why the pleasures of consumerism seem to be primarily available for upper-middle-class (or wealthy) Sims, as most of the interesting objects – those that support romantic interactions, for example – cost a lot of money (e.g. Consalvo 2003a, 27-). The affordances of an object are defined according to specific parameters that are included in its offstage description. Because of the scale of these parameters, or the values associated with each object – and considering that the effects of objects are determined in relation to the needs, life goals and personality features of the Sims – objects in the game actually perform more like machinic parts triggering events rather than mere targets of the Sims' (or the player's) action.

Therefore, each object has to include a thread (a set of behaviours) and local variables or, in other words, a set of local data. The local data consists of the parameters that describe an object and its pointers, or indexes, through which its interactions with other objects are defined. The set of behaviours, on the other hand, consists of procedures that implement the object's function and check the possibility of it. In addition, it consists of advertisements that define its properties in

relation to the Sims' needs, wants and moods. A set of motives (Social, Hunger, Room, etc.) drive the Sims' behaviour. Each motive (need) has its own 'advertisements', which define how interacting with particular kinds of objects fulfils the corresponding motive. During the process of estimating the advertisements, they are weighted on the basis of the Sim's priorities. The character-object interaction is also affected by a set of spatial and personality components, which add to the complexity of the levels of gameplay. The spatial aspect influences the Sim's tendency to consider and choose the closest objects first, possibly even regardless of the magnitude of the advertisements associated with them, whereas the personality component acts as an inclination towards certain kinds of activities instead of others. For example, a playful Sim experiences an augmentation in her entertainment motive by interacting with objects intended solely for play, such as the pinball or the doll's house (Cavazza 2000, 229).

In the context of modding it is essential to note that the distinct and individualised nature of game objects makes them susceptible to various kinds of modification practices, primarily because the attributes or 'operators' of objects are relatively easy to alter, and thus '[g]ames which are object-oriented, at every level of experience, [may] provide a substrate for personal construction projects which are all too rare in the current landscape of corporate capitalism' (Herz 2002a). Another reason for this is that the basic architecture of *The Sims* is structured so that all interactions between objects are based on the same principle. Objects in the game therefore behave essentially the same way, creating a series of events through the accumulation of individual actions and performances. In fact, every operatable game element in *The Sims*, including the Sims themselves, is an 'object' in this sense, and thus they all feature the same logic and principles of operation. Thereby their modification is also based on the same routine. The simulated in-game world of *The Sims* is realised through activating a set of objects – to be more precise, their behaviours – in a procedural fashion.

To sum up, the in-game objects incorporate a value set system according to which they function in the game. The gameplay of *The Sims* is based on the acquisition of money, so that objects can be bought, and it is precisely the attribution of numerical values of objects to the fulfilment of the Sims' needs and desires that has been considered as an invitation for players to assume what can be considered a rather capitalistic mindset. For example, J.C. Herz (2000) has argued that the object orientation in the game is a sign of its overall objectifying nature, as *The Sims* invites its players to also treat the Sims themselves instrumentally:

> [T]he Sims is disturbing in its crudeness. But it's also disturbing in its accuracy, to the extent that getting and spending is the modus operandi for a lot of folks and to the extent that we treat each other as objects, as a means to an end. To some degree, at least in the public, professional sphere, we are all pushing buttons and pulling levers. [...] The Sims live in a perfect consumer society where

> more stuff makes you happier, period. There's nothing else. So your goals in SimLife are purely material: Work your way up the job ladder so you can earn more money, so you can buy more furniture, a bigger house and more toys.

Nevertheless, as if wanting to challenge the political-economy-inspired and critical-ideological interpretations of *The Sims*, Will Wright has argued that the game is actually set up as a parody of mindless consumerism and, on a larger scale, capitalism in that all the objects, in addition to improving the lives of the Sims, function towards deteriorating them. All Sim objects have potential failure states, and every upgrade comes with an additional cost:

> All the objects are saying, 'Buy me! Buy me! I'll make you happy. I'll save you time.' But if you play the game in that way [...] you'll find at some point that something's always going wrong, and the Sims are running round having to deal with maintaining the objects. The game is tooled so that they promise to save you time but beyond some point they actually become a huge time sink. (Davies 2004)

When considering the competing interpretations of the game's propositions it becomes evident that treating objects in the framework of representational textual analysis is not enough for understanding how they *function* as elements of gameplay in *The Sims* – although it is important to note that objects also have important aesthetic qualities that can (and are prone to) be considered vital in the construction of the player's experience, especially through the modding practices players engage in, based on the interpretation and configuration of the game's affordances. The play dynamics of *The Sims* cannot simply be considered to function straightforwardly as the simulation of a perfect capitalistic world, although this is the impression that is readily obtainable from the paratexts around *The Sims* and its media presence. These views have been promoted in many commentaries on *The Sims* (see, in particular, Kline et al. 2003, 276-277), but they can be criticised on the basis of looking at the modding practices of the game. Furthermore – as was illustrated by the notion of regarding *The Sims* as a multilevel parody of consumerism rather than a manifestation of it – it has to be acknowledged that the game already at its game-as-product stage has more intricate and elaborate propositions to offer than what the critical ideological interpretations would suggest (see also Lobo 2005, 15). After all, the game text of *The Sims* is the result of gameplay practices which are structured around the scripts and affordances provided by the game engine and the default game contents, as well as the players' preferences in tweaking them – resulting in the modified gameplay as an individual, emergent, multilayered, situated, embodied and context-dependent practice. Considering this, it becomes obvious that there is an emerging discrepancy between the readings of *The Sims* so far and what I am proposing as the result of my analysis of *The Sims* modding in the study at hand.

By looking only at what *The Sims* game-as-product allows on the surface it may well seem that the game is structured on the basis of consumerism and materialism. Gonzalo Frasca (2001) argues that one of the most noticeable signs of this is that in *The Sims*, the social connections and relationships of a family are tied to the material wealth the members of a family are able to accumulate. It is mainly this interconnected logic of associating material goods with non-materialist values, among other things, that raises the opposition of critics such as Frasca or Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter; this critical view of *The Sims* is often repeated in other media, as well. My analysis of *The Sims*, on the other hand, is based on looking at how the players respond to and bend the affordances of the game code, especially when it comes to directing the game characters towards the kinds of behaviours the player-modders are interested in witnessing and experiencing. For example, as the maintenance of social relations in *The Sims* is a rewarding but rather time-consuming task, there have been modded devices that are able to help with that, such as the *Joy Booth* (which will be investigated below). Also, if the player wishes her Sim to fall in love with another Sim, or several other Sims, there are various simple configurative methods and shortcuts to making that happen – in the original *Sims*, this kind of 'instant love' could be acquired by for example consciously making a red potion with the chemistry set (originally known as 'the Concoctonator'). A simple way of modding such objects would be to set them to produce only the kinds of results that players want; for example, in the case of a player wanting to experiment on the love affairs of the Sims, the Concoctonator could be modded to produce only red potions.

It thus becomes evident that the practices of modding alter the gameplay experience in a fundamental way; as almost any action and behaviour in the Sim world is made possible through modding objects, characters and spaces, the rules of play are significantly transformed, and then the question has to be posed anew: What is the point of playing The Sims? As the game-as-product of The Sims is based on a kind of commentary of real-life situations and social relations, it is hard to avoid reading its modding-powered gameplay through 'ideological lenses' as well. On the other hand, in addition to the obviously political significations the game invites its player to negotiate with through its affordances, there are also pleasures that may first appear as trivial or particularly Sim-centric in the player's interaction with various in-game objects. For example, some players have created mods which appear and function as piles of trash or dirty laundry in the game – the same category of mods would include 'queer' states of objects such as rendering them broken in interesting ways (this activity could also be interpreted in the framework of 'reproducing real life'). The aesthetic dimension of objects is often considered important in this kind of pleasure-seeking; for instance, the fan identity of a player may be manifested by the decoration of a Sim house with posters, statues and other extratextual paraphernalia associated with popular culture products, stars and celebrities.

In addition to these kinds of rather innocent aesthetic and operational pleasures,

there are also more dubious and even sinister mechanics of play attainable through reworking game objects. Since *The Sims* is intended as a game suitable for teenagers, too, it naturally does not support the use of alcohol or narcotic substances, nor does it provide possibilities for controversial activities such as smoking. Here is where modders step in: they engage in the reworking of objects that provide the kinds of pleasures they find appealing, for example, by designing a dedicated smoking table, based on a Chess game table of the original game. Appropriately, smoking cigarettes in *The Sims* increases the Comfort, Fun, Social and Energy values in the Sims' status bars and adds to their Logic scores. As a bonus, smoking also reduces the feelings of Hunger (see the Smoking Table on 'Cheap Frills'). Creating new objects, with or without any interesting functions, can be an ideologically charged activity in a variety of ways. Examples of these kinds of objects in *The Sims* include handguns and other weapons, which naturally bring in a glimpse of the standard militarised masculinity so typical of many other digital games. Striving towards making *The Sims* behave more like a 'proper computer game' can be detected through this kind of modding, too. For instance, some modders have created military equipment in *The Sims* so that they can re-enact scenarios resembling those of more mainstream games, shooters in particular. For instance, a modder named wintermuteai1 created a gun mod for *The Sims 2* that features a weapon with a real laser sight. The player can then use the weapon to aim at a target, another Sim, who will die when hit by the simulated shot (figures 22 and 23).

Figures 22 & 23. A functional gun mod (Wintermuteai1 2009).

What is noteworthy in these practices, is that modding the game characters and the associated objects can be regarded as a drift towards rendering the safe and familiar domestic environment into an assemblage of hostile locations, inhabited by other kinds of creatures than the jovial Sims of the white suburban neighbourhood. A similarly alienating effect is created when politically explicit messages are introduced in the Sim world. For instance, a rather controversial Sim object, the *Saddam Shag Carpet* (figure 24) was made with the *RugOMatic*, featuring a description:

> Now you can walk all over Saddam Hussein's face, with this Indoor/Outdoor Pre-Shrunk Sanforized Saddam Shag Carpet. Less politically correct than a bear skin rug, but more sought after and much harder to find. Great for the floor next to the toilet, soaking up pet messes, and covering up holes in the ground hiding evil dictators. Styrofoam square not included. Weapons of mass destruction sold separately. (Hopkins 2004b)

Figure 24. Saddam Shag Carpet (Hopkins 2004b).

The malleability of the game thus functions as an incentive for the emergence of the multiplicity of gaming practices, each being negotiated in their own sociocultural setting and gaining meaning through individualist preferences.

The fundamental reason for the prevalence of *The Sims* modding practices is arguably the simple fact that modding is both attainable and highly efficient in the context of the game's inner organisation (its game mechanics). As the guide for programming objects in *The Sims* points out, the manufacture of reworked objects is not only easy but also highly rewarding. As an example, it provides instructions for building up a *Joy Booth*, a modded shower object, based on a similar idea in a classic Infocom game as well as the 'Orgasmatron' from Woody Allen's movie *Sleeper*. In effect, 'taking a dose' from the *Joy Booth* results in saving time in avoiding relationship maintenance (which is arduous in *The Sims*) as well as increasing the Social, Fun and Mood values of the Sims (and decreasing their Hygiene a little). In

the test phase, the *Joy Booth* proved out to be such a success with the Sim family and their neighbours that they ended up getting 'addicted' to it. The modded shower object resulted in a kind of 'SimHeroin' that the Sims could not get enough of: they opted for another dose even at the expenses of weakening social ties and losing sleep (Forbus & Wright 2001, 7-11).

Tweaking the behaviour of objects in *The Sims* is relatively simple in the technical sense, but mastering the uses of modded objects as part of the operations and functionality of the game world through the Sims' complex interactions may not be that effortless. If we consider one of the main criteria for modding to be making gameplay more interesting, modded objects often contradict this notion by disrupting the logic of play – they change the mechanics of the game in ways that are not always understood or anticipated by the player. Many hacks in *The Sims* function as cheats that eliminate challenges and obstacles in the game while others modify the behaviour of the Sims. At some point, the 'hacking viruses' got so troublesome for many players that the modders had to start developing their own 'anti-virus' software: 'Modders took a page from the anti-virus industry and created a central list of identified hacks, their names and checksums, then wrote programs that can scan a user's *Sims 2* directory and isolate suspect files' (Poulsen 2005).

Also, as I have suggested, modders have created all kinds of objects that function as shortcuts in the sense that they provide the Sims with infinite reserves of money or increase the parameters for their skills, needs or moods. Sitting on a particular modded armchair or looking at a wall clock may result in maximum points in one or even all of the Sims' need scores. As the gameplay of *The Sims* is structured around the level-up mechanism that instantiates the satisfaction of the Sims' needs as a careful balancing act as well as the slow and painful acquisition of skills, one may be left wondering what there is to do in the game if the gameplay mechanics are so completely transformed by modding. 'No pain, no gain' has been the fundamental logic of its gameplay so far, but because of modding this principle seems no longer viable. It has to be concluded then that modding the behaviours of the Sims and altering the operability of Sim objects in various ways contests the often cited idea of the instrumentality of *The Sims*. The flexibility of the interpretive potential included in games like *The Sims* contradicts firmly held notions of the game, some of which suit beautifully the premeditated anti-capitalist paradigm cherished by some cultural studies scholars. One of them is regarding the Sim universe as a totally instrumental world where 'the only form of success is the acquisition of more and better objects' (Herz cited in Kline et al. 2003, 276), and

> even having children is a means to an end, since it is through the interaction of your Sims' kids with the neighbours that adult Sims get to know each other, and it is only by entering into social networks that one gets the professional advancements that lead to career promotion – and more income. (Kline et al. 2003, 276)

However, utilising the cheat codes and tricks alongside modded objects, for example, results in the disruption of the 'formally engineered' gameplay logic, in which higher-quality, more expensive objects always work towards addressing the Sims' needs in a more efficient way. Even though modding does not change the basic fact that in *The Sims*, interaction is structured around the operations of objects, and that each object yields a measurable benefit – and a potential failure state – when an action is performed upon it (Herz 2000), modding can alter the game's (ideological) structure in other fundamental ways. Transferring the perspective from the Sims' (or the player's) interactions with objects to the uses and functions of the game characters in a wider sense is a valid way to approach this critical question. As I have in various ways illustrated so far, *The Sims* game code is an editable collection of scripts and affordances that perform certain operations, but at the same time its inclinations and inadequacies have continued to function as incentives for the players to make the game behave in ways that are not initiated by the original code. Avid players often seem to aim at distancing themselves from the ideological propositions that the game offers. It is no wonder then that in addition to the experimentation on the novel gameplay mechanics realised through this kind of 'distortion', the self-expressive and creative strands of modding seem to have become rather essential for the pleasures of gameplay at large. As I have previously argued, the problems and imperfections of the base game as well as the crude representational tools for the creation of the Sims may act as an important spur for modding, especially skinning the characters.

From recycling to remediation

In the context of digital games and other works of interactive fiction, *The Sims* has been presenting itself as a rather unique case throughout the years. Previously, I have analysed how its characters behave, how its interpretation- and configuration-based gameplay mechanics work, and how the objects at the game characters' disposal may be reworked to function in unexpected ways. Also, the narrative architecture of the game and the possibilities for its redirection – the use of the game engine for the purposes of remediation – seem to be grounded on a different foundation than in most other ludic games. As I have suggested earlier, the appropriation of suburban homes and frames for various kinds of gendered play practices is often done through narratives that transform the setting in which this gameplay takes place. My framing of the issue of narratology and games in this chapter is based on the notion that *The Sims* players habitually seem to incorporate specific kinds of storytelling purposes into their play practices, the use of their characters, and even the interpretative processes related to the workings of the game engine itself. This is visible in not only the player-created mods but also in the variety of remediations produced through *The Sims* gameplay.

The idea of remediation initially referred to a process whereby new media technologies build upon earlier technologies in a linear vision of technological progress. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999, 77), while focusing on formal design principles in their theory building on remediation, also discuss how remediation reworks implied use patterns and ideological assumptions by refashioning social, economic, and political beliefs. Remediation, in the context of *The Sims*, is the result of a redirection of the game engine to out-of-game uses. Due to the narrative structure of the game, and the game's ideological propositions that the players are invited to negotiate in their private gameplay, these uses tend to be individualist manifestations of the interpretations of the gameplay and storytelling affordances inscribed in the game code. In this sense, the generic conventions that *The Sims* reiterates are not only a pattern of imagery – they are formulated through the relation of this imagery to the specific narrative structure of the game (e.g. Williams 1999, 247). As I have shown in the course of this study, the genre of 'real life' gets articulated in myriad different ways depending on player preferences which also shape their narrative choices (Nutt & Railton 2003). In this chapter, I will provide a few examples of how this narrative restructuring works in practice.

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2006) suggests in her paper on interactive game design and play activity that the design of *The Sims* promotes a kind of theatrical improvisation, based on various traditions of pantomime and toy theatre, that is remediated through this contemporary interactive setting for play. She also argues, drawing from Janet Murray, that the behavioural logic of *The Sims* has a kind of 'moral physics' with a lifespan and consequences, and that the gameplay is in fact 'cyberdrama' driven by a new kind of synthetic actor – it is authored by Will Wright and collaborated by the player. Both Murray (2004, 5-10) and Reid-Walsh as well as Maaike Lauwaert (2009) treat *The Sims* as an example of a successful digital storytelling environment, where the player actions eagerly tap into the affordances of the game code (generated by the author's coding), resulting in a kind of co-operative improvisation. The player therefore experiences 'dramatic agency' through evoking activities and alterations in the scene and setting of play.

Let us consider a simple example of how Murray's dramatic agency in *The Sims* might work. For instance, the player may want to raise her Sim as a character who is very interested in a particular activity, say swimming. This can be done by constantly directing the path of the Sim towards water, building up skills associated with water sports, and acquiring objects and props that support this kind of hobby in the game world. According to the selected theme, the player can, for instance, build imaginative pool items, scan and download water-themed mods, and configure her Sim to look gorgeous in a swimsuit. What eventually happens, through play interactions, is that she would be bringing the Sim up as a fanatic swimmer, someone who enjoys water games so much that she tosses around in a bikini all day and is magically driven towards pools and spa areas, as if always being on the lookout for a possibility of a dip. The interactions, the character be-

haviour, the objects available, the scene – all of these can be used to evoke a very particular kind of narrative setting for play. As I suggested earlier, *The Sims* is a game the simulative qualities of which result in an episodic narrative structure, in other words, a succession of little story pieces that the player may choose to interpret as the components of a larger emerging narrative at will. These story pieces are quite naturally then adopted and reformulated as the components of extratextual remediations which the player-modders often seem to share on the internet (see also Murray 2000).

The narrative 'actualisations' – representations of gameplay – can help us tackle the interaction between the player and the game in the context of *The Sims*, but, perhaps more importantly, they are also connected to the larger dynamic of play acts making 'sense' and gaining social significance on the online player forums. Interaction in this respect is not only interesting vis-à-vis the gameplay itself, but in the context of modding, where it acts as the basis for a plethora of self-expressive potentials. The constructivist understanding of narratology permits me to look into the narrative dimension of the game text as well as the networks and interconnections where those game texts get transposed through various media environments (see Jenkins 2004). Much of the narrative theory associated with games so far has been based on analyses of graphic adventure games such as *Myst* (Cyan Worlds 1993) that actually reproduce the basic narratological structure involving a kind of 'fabula' and 'sujet': these games tend to aim at developing as grasping a plot as possible through presenting the player with puzzles and riddles, a kind of peephole to the underlying static narrative, the disclosure of which then remains an important part of the objective of the gameplay (e.g. Aarseth 1997; Montfort 2003b). Contrary to this kind of narrative organisation, *The Sims* produces emergent narratives that can usually be meaningfully interpreted only in connection with the situated nature of the player's activities and her personal preferences (Cavazza 2000, 228). *The Sims* does not contain a back story or fabula that would unfold for the player through gameplay. The emergent narrative structure, however, makes *The Sims* a particularly susceptible tool for the purposes of individual redirection and remediation.

In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins (2006a, 109-130) develops a theory of transmedia storytelling by citing examples that show how players alter the rules of games in order to play the kinds of roles and game characters they want. Players often wish to engage in interactions, he suggests, that are not inscribed in the game code but have to be made possible by designing game structures that elicit a certain kind of character behaviour. The interaction between the player and the game algorithm has also in the context of this work been tackled through the notion of role-play. The extraction of a certain kind of character behaviour could also be regarded as procedural expression, to paraphrase Ian Bogost (2007), a representation of the game-as-process as it emerges on the basis of rules and incentives built into the game. As players do not always seem to be entirely satisfied with the affordances of

The Sims, they alter the aesthetic and operational qualities of the game through mods to make them fit better with their individualist purposes of 'narrative play'. For example, while *The Sims* has been proposing certain body types for its players to play with, there have always been people who have preferred game characters that deviate from the norm. It is likely that these kinds of character templates have been used extensively for personal storytelling. There have been websites dedicated to the construction of, for example, fat or obese game characters, and although tinkering with the 3D meshes of the Sims has not been easy, it has always been possible.

Furthermore, important programmes such as *BodyWarp* for the creation of 'deviant' Sim skins have been created by individual players ('Spanki's Skin Shack'); *BodyWarp* is a free custom programme with which the player can load the 3D wire frame models of all Sim bodies and manipulate their body parts individually, while the normal skins simply drape over existing body types. On the web pages aimed at the creation of other body proportions than those included in the default 'skinny', 'fit', and 'fat' meshes of the original Sims ('fat' here representing more or less the average figure in reality), there is a tendency to praise the possibilities for such reappropriation practices (e.g. 'The 2001 Dimensions FAT SIMS Project'). It is likely that the customisation potential of the Sims leads the players to take the game to directions they find personally interesting or pleasurable, encouraging them to create narratives by experimenting with gender performance or identity political issues. The creation of fat game characters is but one indication of the diverse ways in which *The Sims* modders do their best to utilise the game code and make it bend to their liking (figures 25 and 26).

Figure 25. Examples of player-created fat Sims for The Sims 2 (Dr Pixel 2007).

As has been suggested, the remediation and reworking of private fantasies is typical of the practices of fandom in the sociocultural context of media production. Digital games, in addition to being 'new' in terms of their technical realisation, possess

Figure 26. Modded obese Sim meshes and skins for The Sims ('The 2001 Dimensions FAT SIMS Project').

characteristics of 'older' media – in other words, they recycle central representational and narrative conventions that we have become familiar with in other cultural products and vehicles of representation, such as cinema and television. According to David Bordwell's (1985) and other scholars' constructivist theory on audiovisual narration, the analytic emphasis shifts to regarding the actions and hermeneutic interpretations of an agent (spectator, listener, user and player) as vitally important constituents in determining the significance of the narrative in question:

> Cinema has confirmed that narrative is more than a set of texts or even a certain kind of text. It is first of all an innate capability, like language itself, which surfaces in many areas of human life and is dominant in some of these. Narrative competence holds our significations in place to give them an order and a thrust (Andrew 1984, 76).

For instance, already on a very basic level, *The Sims* has been used to replicate and 'rearrange' scenes and character settings from famous works of popular culture in much the same way fans have traditionally been performing their fandom through recycling texts and images – as the example of creating a 'fan poster' by staging Daniel Radcliffe as a Harry Potter Sim at Hogwart's school suggests (figure 27). Maaike Lauwaert (2009, 84) calls this practice *mediaclastic* in the sense that these fan productions almost entirely consist of quotes and references to other media products. Creating Sim replicas of famous actors, rock stars, and other celebrities has similarly always been very popular in *The Sims* modding community (see figure 28 for an example).

In addition to these kinds of screenshot-based still imageries, the static structure of combining text and image (gamics) has also been extensively used as a light and versatile tool for the expression and negotiation of fan identities in this storytelling

Figure 27. An example of a series of Harry Potter themed skins (Arisuka 2010).

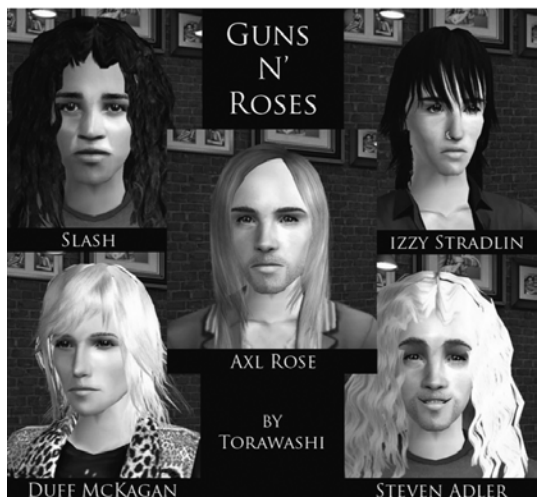

Figure 28. The members of Guns N' Roses as Sim characters (Torawashi 2007).

sense. Since creating gamics does not necessitate the use of specific animation or editing programmes or compilers (even though these are often used), and due to the relatively small file size, these fan creations have customarily been shared and distributed through the personal web pages of *The Sims* players. The creation of gamics has similarly been used as a platform or a 'tuned-up real life setting' for experimenting with personal, identity-political narratives. Here, I use the example of a player who has incorporated her favourite film star and herself in a kind of fantasy role-play that includes the development of a fictional relationship between the two Sims. This kind of storytelling usually necessitates configuring and reworking the game code on a large scale. This excerpt is from a compilation of screenshot-based short stories, each advancing the romance in a particular direction (figure 29).

What the player-created narrative exemplifies is the fact that *The Sims* gameplay

often involves training the game characters to perform in particular ways, even to the point of making them incorporate very specific roles in the player's scenario (or 'role-play campaign'). Gaining control of the Sims both aesthetically (such as skinning them to look like Keanu Reeves) and operationally (making them perform in the ways the player wishes, such as acting as the boyfriend of the player's alter ego Sim) seems to be key in the pleasures of playing and redirecting *The Sims*. The private pleasures of gaining control over the Sims and using them to the player's

FEBRUARY 15, 2003

SIMULATED V(ALENTINE'S)D(AY)

While the real me spent the evening with a pint of Cherry Garcia, doodling Joel Silver's name all over my PeeChee folder, *simulated* krix had a lovely Valentine's date....

Always the continental, Keanu ordered for me. "The lady will have the lobster, stuffed with a smaller, tastier lobster. And bring us a bottle of your best wine, hold the pretension."

You know that lovely hands-together gesture he does? Simulated Keanu does it too! SWOON!

Ah, the romance of it all....What a perfect night.
Of course, it didn't end there, but some things must remain a mystery.

Although the fact that I'm home, in the same clothes, blogging in the daylight might give you some clue..
wink

| from inside the mind of krix at 12:01 PM | comments (9)

Figure 29. An excerpt of a narrative describing a fantasy relationship between a player named krix and Keanu Reeves (krix 2003).

liking is a theme that has also been discussed as the possible central reason for the huge success of *The Sims* (Consalvo 2007b). Many fannish activities of recycling the faces of celebrities or creating narratives around common popular culture themes seem to be very popular and widespread in *The Sims* modding scene. The creation and distribution of machinima, on the other hand, can almost be treated as a form of semi-professional, niche media production in its current form, as it necessitates the use of elaborate software tools and editors, as well as the utilisation of proper dissemination channels, social networks, and peer recognition. Even though general remediation tools and utilities are equally available to all *Sims* players, in

theory, gaining notoriety within the modding scene in this sense requires particular effort and dedication. Arduous and transgressive reworkings of the game code are specifically important for the making of large-scale machinima, as the examples of the urban scifi-thriller *Chrono Dash: Dead Leaves* by The_Enigmartist (2005) and *The Snow Witch* by Michelle Pettit-Mee (2006) suggest. Transposing the peaceful

Figure 30. A screenshot of The Snow Witch machinima (Pettit-Mee 2008).[54]

suburban milieu of *The Sims* into a futuristic urban warzone, or turning the mainly Western-looking light-skinned Sims into believable characters in a Japanese ghost story requires true devotion from the makers (figure 30).

The creation of gamics and machinima can be analysed as instances of transmedia storytelling, even though the emergent narrative aspects of this activity are not similarly applauded by all. The discourse on the transmedial positions players adopt as part of their gameplay would most likely benefit from treating the player-game interactions in the framework of transmedia *authorship* instead of transmedia storytelling, Ian Bogost (2006) argues. One of the possible reasons for the omission of narrative vocabulary in this context is the long-held dispute over the 'essential' characteristics of games, as there have been competing approaches within game studies to define and determine the object of study. Early on, games were categorised foremost according to the area of expertise and the individual preferences of theorists and scholars who wrote about them (Newman 2004, 9-10). In the era of modern game studies, since the 1990s, the most important element of demarcation has been the evolving schism between the so-called ludologists and narratologists (see Frasca 1999; Frasca 2003; Juul 1999). Although the dispute seems to have

faded out by now, there are still remains of it in current game theory. In general, the terms used in game studies reflect the nature of games as both particular kinds of conveyors of audiovisual-interactive entertainment experiences and as products of specific industrial formulation (King & Krzywinska 2002, 26).

By bringing up the examples of gamics and machinima, I want to point out how difficult it is to grasp what kinds of activities players are effectively engaging in, and what ultimately *forms* the scope of play. T.L. Taylor (2002) suggests in her analysis of 'ownership' in online games that the players' activities can never be interpreted as simply 'playing the game' – the players also congregate and occupy the virtual space for their own purposes, which can be rather unexpected, as the example of political demonstrations in *World of Warcraft* suggests. It seems to me that unlike the MMOG player communities, which are transient and primarily dependent on the play acts themselves, the main constituents of *The Sims* modding communities on the internet are remediated storytelling practices executed through the mod-enhanced gameplay of *The Sims*. As *The Sims* is essentially a single-player experience, the importance of websites and resources is different from online games: *The Sims* play experiences need to be specifically 'representationalised' and remediated on the internet in order to be shared. That is why the *communitas* of *The Sims* modding scene is being maintained and moderated through dedicated sites and forums – as Steven G. Jones (1998, 5) suggests, 'the social construction of reality that exists on-line is [...] not constituted *by* the networks CMC users utilise, it is constituted *in* the networks'. Sharing not only ideas but also concrete game contents is especially important considering this reconstructive dimension of online collaboration and community-building of *The Sims* player-modders.

The players of *The Sims* are therefore productive members of game cultures and communities in more than one way: they create game characters that look interesting, design costumes and accessories for their Sims, build houses and customise their household items and other props according to will. In fact, these sophisticated modding activities resulting in transmedial activities and redirection of the game may effectively be the reason why the players keep playing the game in the first place. On the other hand, much like the players of online games, *The Sims* modders take part in the collective production of cohesive social meanings on the internet; what makes *The Sims* a definite success story is its ability to offer a well developed social dynamic online that would not exist without the efforts of regular and dedicated players and modders (see also Grimes 2006, 977-978). Nevertheless, while the production and negotiation of social meaning may sound empowering enough, there are also tendencies that complicate the subversive potential of this activity.

Kinky play: pornographic hacking and *The Sims*

> Sims' romantic activities can make objects queer through use – just as the Sims are made queer through their social interactions (Consalvo 2003a, 27).

As has been proposed, the maintenance of the suburban mentality through Sim role-play has been influentially associated with the reaffirmation of a certain kind of femininity and the domestic, secluded sphere of the white, middle-class family home. The re-enactment of gendered preferences in the context of gameplay is often done specifically through female game characters. There was an important movement, both in theory and practice, which unravelled the generic assumptions of the masculinities and femininities associated with games, chronicled by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins in their book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* in 1998. Even though that anthology was a landmark study, it has not been followed by many in the same vein (see Jenkins 2001). So far, gender issues have figured most prominently in the research conducted on the players' gendered gameplay practices and in studies concerning game aesthetics – for example, the representation of human subjects in the game world through avatars and other game characters (e.g. Jansz et al. 2007). There are specific historical reasons for the themes, aesthetic choices, gameplay options and on-screen personas to be represented in games in the often extreme ways they currently are. The emphasis on the looks of game characters, alongside the vitally important practices of avatar creation, for instance, are visible in female characters with particularly exaggerated proportions, and in this respect *The Sims* is no exception (see also Consalvo 2003a).

In the context of games, the writers and scholars interested in the media representations of the female body have been compelled to ask, once again, whether the overproportioned feminine body images of game characters could be considered an empowering vehicle for feminist thought, or whether they are merely an object of gaze, presumably targeted to please only boys and men (Kennedy 2002, 1-3). In *The Sims*, the investigation of the gendered game characters poses another challenge, too, as the default bodies that the game-as-product invites its player to accept are absolutely normal to the point of being 'normalised'. It is therefore through modding that the players have to create diversity and produce the kinds of body images that proliferate in other games as well as real life; paradoxically, the Sims' bodies, especially the nude ones, are reconstructed more 'realistically' through add-ons provided by the modders. It can be argued that because the default bodies of the Sims presumably function like sexless, ageless, and raceless templates, or 'empty signifiers', the practices of recreating and reappropriating corporeality through modding render *The Sims* a particularly interesting case – through modding, particular kinds of cultural preferences are transcribed and manifested in the Sims' bodies, and the results are then made visible in the public/private spaces of the internet.

As has been suggested, many modders carefully position themselves in the modding scene in this sense; for example, a modder named SimderZ is famous for her elaborate Sim fetish costumes that skilfully simulate the properties of shiny materials like PVC, rubber and leather (figure 31).

Figure 31. Fetish fantasy Sim skins (SimderZ 2008).

The possibilities for character creation in *The Sims* are nearly endless, and on the internet there are remarkable amounts of wildly modded objects and spaces freely at the players' disposal. Most of the interpretive and configurative mechanics of the game – its rulesets – are constantly transformed according to the player's preferences in what was previously termed 'narrative play': men can be dressed up in skirts and young teenagers can get pregnant, if the player so wishes. In fact, the 'teenage pregnancy' mod can be regarded as yet another attempt at making the game more lifelike. As has been suggested, pregnancy in *The Sims* has always been simulated rather realistically, in the context of computer games, at least – except for the fact that teenage girls could never get pregnant (see Glasser 2009).

One of the most radical notions that the game proposes is the principle of separating the Sims' gender and sex from their 'sexuality'. Sexuality in the game therefore becomes the result of activity; it is not an inherent, innate inclination in any way. Mia Consalvo (2003a, 18-19, 21) concludes that the sexuality in *The Sims* is 'queer' in the sense that it challenges the normalised understanding of the basis for heterosexual and homosexual identities in society. In these kinds of fundamental ways, the game presents itself as an accommodating testing ground for the player to step in and set various kinds of performances in action in ways she is interested in seeing or experiencing them. The utilisation and redirection of *The Sims* for the creation of private, 'individualist' pornography almost sound like the

future scenario of interactive services that Linda Williams envisions at the end of her classic treatise *Hard Core* (1999). Is it possible that female players of *The Sims* could be undergoing a transformation from occupying the position of a sexual object (in traditional pornographic representation) to sexual subjects that get to toy with the endless possibilities of experimentation and self-discovery through a computer game? While considering the role of a game in these processes, it may be useful to emphasise that technology itself is key to understanding many pornographic pleasures. Technological advances seem to follow the pornographic quest for an ever more faithful reproduction of 'reality'. Also,

> [w]e will never understand Internet pornography as long as we consider the networked personal computer as a mere tool through which we access the sexually explicit graphics, for in so doing, we miss the ways in which our sexual desires are being mediated through the pleasures of the technology itself, and the particular fantasies it has on offer. (Patterson 2004, 119)

Therefore 'cyberporn', the engagement with the technological site of the internet and the material interface of the computer, presents us with a range of novel issues that consider the pornographic image. The technologically aided quest for the increase in realism, as well as the context-dependent criteria for 'acceptable' or 'ideal' corporeality in any case make the pornographic image a particularly dense semantic site (Patterson 2004, 106).

One of the most common and notable ways players bend the original affordances of games has to do with the creation of nude game characters through specific nude patches, as well as other mods. It remains a fact that also the players of *The Sims* continue to express a desire to see and operate nude Sims, and therefore several mechanisms for their corporeal unveiling have been developed.[55] It has to be remembered that in principle, *The Sims* is very protective about letting its players see any nudity, as it is a game originating within the cultural climate of the US. The Sims' 'privacy' is protected foremost by two means: first, by the censorship blur that covers the central parts of the Sims' bodies and second, by the fact that the Sims incorporate a slender and almost sexless Barbie- or Ken-type body by default. *The Sims* is famous for its relationship-themed gameplay as well as its nude characters, most of which appear as rather realistic in comparison to the characters in most other digital games. There are, in fact, several mechanisms of seeing nudity in *The Sims*, and these are categorised here according to my modding typology (Chart 3). The methods for creating and using Sims 'without clothes on' range from interpreting the game's potentials to redirecting its affordances towards the wanted purposes. There has always been a well developed tradition of exploiting cheats and glitches so that the game provides its players with unexpected and sometimes very attractive opportunities, even if these are not always openly admitted or discussed; these are included in the configurative dimension of Chart 3. Despite these oppor-

tunities, the tradition of the player-created nude patch, resulting from a freely circulating add-on on the internet, has probably always been the most important method of creating nude game characters also in *The Sims* ('The Sims Nude Kit'). The distribution of nude patches is typical of the online digital game cultures overall, but as the attached chart illustrates, in this case its use is complemented by other methods as well.

Category	Action	Result
Interpretation	Combining the readily available body parts to create a scantily clad Sim; e.g. making a Sim wear a pyjama all day	Using clothed or only half-naked Sims; operating within the game's ruleset
Configuration	Using the 'move_objects_on' cheat code to remove e.g. a shower cabinet while a Sim is naked in it (The Sims)	Sims appearing in default (sexless) naked bodies without the censorship blur
Reworking	Installing an additional programme (nude patch) that removes the blur; installing custom-created naked skins and/or meshes to change Sims' appearance	Player sees customised Sims' bodies (wearing user-created meshes and/or skins)
Redirection	Using the modded (naked) Sims in gamics or machinima	Creation of pornography, for example

Chart 3: The use of nude characters in The Sims.

Digital media researcher Susanna Paasonen (forthcoming) suggests that the internet provides an effective distribution platform for pornographic content, texts, images and videos, by facilitating communication between the sharers of this content. Drawing on the work of Jonathan Lillie she concludes that domestic spaces remain central also in online porn consumption, which mediate sexual representations through the technological and sociocultural architectures that reconstruct the internet. Various forms of online pornography draw on a rather traditional set of practices, conventions and aesthetics, although there are also novel experiences of use and relationships between users and screening technologies as well as the dynamics of searching and browsing. Theoretically speaking, the massive archives available on the internet would seem to offer emancipatory scenarios by allowing their users to freely embody chosen subject positions, roles and desires; however, in practice, these technologies of desire, while being productive, are also fundamentally regulatory and restrictive (Patterson 2004, 106-107). In the context of analysing nude game characters it is essential to acknowledge that an overwhelming majority of them are female. Although there clearly are websites and services that offer nude male characters too, or both genders equally, the over-representation of the female body (parts) in my sample of analysis is striking – which is perhaps a bit surprising, considering the fact that the majority of *The Sims* players are female, as well.

On the other hand, the overrepresentation of light-skinned female game characters could perhaps also be interpreted as an indication of a general cultural trend – the widespread image of a desirable female figure is clearly transposed in the modded imagery of *The Sims*, too. Perhaps *The Sims* in this sense may be interpreted to function as the emblem for the 'shifting nature of the relationship between viewer and woman-as-spectacle' (Patterson 2004, 110). The 'traditional' way of analysing the players' resurfacing will to experiment on the digital characters at their disposal, particularly the female ones, would be interpreting it in the framework of film theorist Laura Mulvey's classic theory on visual pleasure, which Helen Kennedy (2002, 3-4), for instance, has elaborated on in the context of digital games. According to Mulvey's (1988) psychoanalytic interpretation, the sight of a 'castrated' female body in the media causes anxiety to the male spectator, so women's bodies must be rendered less threatening by compensating or 'phallicising' them in one way or another. For instance, this is indicated in the way the third person point-of-view and smoothly operatable and zoomable camera 'slice' the bodies of female game characters into pieces and render them more approachable or manageable for the presumed male viewer. The masculinisation of the mediated images of the female body is often accentuated by certain kinds of fetishes, and in this respect *The Sims* is no exception. The discussed fetishisation of female game characters has been in the context of Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* game series, but I regard it as somewhat applicable to the case of *The Sims* as well (e.g. Schleiner 1998).

Also, the practices of employing nude (female) Sims in gameplay could be read, for instance, in the contexts of amateur pornography. Amateur porn production/consumption does not only bring with it a shared (online) space for meaning-making, but also various opportunities for 'interaction' and 'self-representation' that are effectively attainable online:

> The viewing mechanisms available on a number of amateur porn Web sites foreground the idea that consumers of pornographic images are purchasing a fantasy of private access to a person; the specifically pornographic character of these images constitutes only a small part of the total 'interaction'. (Patterson 2004, 112)

What in amateur porn – being constructed around the notion of 'authenticity' – is therefore notable is the fact that it abolishes the spectacular in favour of other models of relationality. On the other hand, in the context of *The Sims*, there are simultaneously important processes of fetishisation at play, and some of these are rather spectacular. As stated, modding in general can be interpreted in the framework of fetishisation through add-ons. There are, for example, Sim women with big breasts and excessively curvaceous backsides, as well as other markers of overt sexuality, as is visible in the collection of famous real-life porn actress skins on the modding resource *The 8th Deadly Sim* (figure 32).

Figure 32. The modded female porn star Sims, seen here in a preview picture and thus with 'censorship blurs' ('The 8th Deadly Sim').

Although the fetishes associated with game characters mainly concern the female Sims, there are also services that provide men with what is initially missing from their Ken-like habituses. For example, *The 8th Deadly Sim* and other sites offer the kinds of mods that refurbish the male Sims with penises, and this can equally be considered as a fetishistic practice (figure 33).[56]

Figure 33. Examples of the use of sexualised Sim skins ('The Sims 2: Erotic Dreams [Archive]').

In fact, the penis is an interesting case of both aesthetic and operational modding in the sense that it can also be an add-on that has functions – it is therefore a deeply reworked object, or even a 'hack' in *The Sims*; in the most advanced pornographic *Sims* mods, there are, naturally, various states that the penis appears in, and as the male member is not an inherent part of the Sims' mesh, its functions have to be

carefully synchronised with the behaviours of the character. It can therefore be suggested that the Sim penis is an apt symbol for the pornographic hacking of *The Sims* players – it acts as an emblem of the players' will to penetrate into the game code in order to change the setting as well as both the aesthetics and the operational behaviours of the Sims. The pornographic *Sims* mods and hacks are eagerly distributed on the internet, and in this sense the practice of modding taps into the long tradition of sharing sexualised images and media texts. Linda Williams (2004, 2-3) argues that pornography is emphatically part of American (and Western) culture, and instead of us reaching the 'end of obscenity', we are more and more compelled to engage in 'speaking sex' in public arenas. Sexually explicit talk and representation has long ago ceased to be a private, 'bedroom-only' matter; instead, it insistently appears in the new simultaneously public and private realms of the internet.

As I hope to have shown here, a very important constituent in the pleasure of playing *The Sims* is the representationalisation and public sharing of its modded game characters along with its spaces and objects. Unlike in many other digital games, where the appearance of game characters is arguably not essential to the player during gameplay, or where the character functionality is the primary mechanism through which the playability of the game is judged, in *The Sims* the Sims' appearances and behaviours – their interactions with their living environment and its objects – tend to be the main source of enjoyment. The creation of Sim porn is a prime example of this. The Sims are therefore not tools or utilities with which to operate within the gameworld; they are rather like complex, semi-autonomous creatures that occupy a position that dynamically switches between being a subject (an agent) and an object (of the player's actions). It is no surprise, then, that *The Sims* seems to function as an ideal site for engaging in negotiations and rearticulations of subjectivity, agency and identity.

CONCLUSION

I began this study by quoting Nancy Smith, President of *The Sims* label at Electronic Arts, who acclaimed *The Sims* as a 'cultural phenomenon' thanks to 'the open-ended creative freedom that players experience with the game' ('The Sims celebrates 100 million sold worldwide'). My research has tackled precisely the players' various ways of exercising the creative powers allocated to them in the context of this computer game. The basic dynamic of my work has been concentrated on the player activity known as modification, or 'modding' *The Sims*. The frame of reference of computer game modding has been based on the dual setting of first looking at what the game (code) itself provides for, and second, what the players actually choose to do with the game and its intrinsic scripts and affordances. Hence I have considered it important to ask, what kinds of ideologies *The Sims* has invited its players to articulate and play with, and how the players have responded to these propositions. More specifically, my research has been directed towards investigating the interaction between the game as a product (a commodity that can be purchased) and its play, the game as process. What has rendered the specific object of my study as a particularly interesting case is the fact that *The Sims* has, already from the start, been designed to cater to the needs and desires of its players by providing them with a set of tools and a kind of sandbox to play around with. *The Sims* in this respect has always been more like a toolset and a launching pad for its players' creative aspirations than a fixed system of rules, means and objectives (which are considered typical of the organisation of digital games, in general). The players of *The Sims* do not only play the game, but they modify its contents and form to suit their individualist self-expressive purposes.

By concentrating on the modding of *The Sims* I have investigated specific aspects of digital games and culture that have so far been dismissed; that is why the title of the study refers to the reconfiguration of the culture of gaming through modding. What has been especially interesting in the modding of computer games from a cultural studies perspective is that the resulting data objects, mods, could be analysed as representations or as semiotic components of gameplay and the remediation of it. It has therefore been important to acknowledge that these modifications have not only been stable signs or representations, but also dynamic constituents of gameplay and the simulative mechanics of the game system. That is why I have analysed mods in terms of their aesthetics and operations, too. Mods, the

'end-products' of the players' processes of interacting with the game-as-product, have in this work been analysed as textual elements and add-ons that tap into the dynamic of making meaning of the gameworld, which in the case of *The Sims* has arguably been a simulation of 'real life'. Moreover, as has been established in the course of this work, the relevance of mods is never limited within the in-game world, but they act as vehicles for carrying explicit social and political messages, for instance, by taking part in the negotiations of technological agency, identity and gender. *The Sims* has provided valuable research material for the study at hand as it explicitly deals with ideologically charged themes of gender, sexuality, privacy, relationships and the urban space on the level of the 'unspoilt' game code. The gameplay practices have therefore been analysed here by referencing the contested dynamics of representation, societal simulation and body politics. Moreover, the notion of *The Sims* inviting its players to engage in a kind of identity play has been contextualised within the larger implications of game modding – for instance, with regards to the game functioning as a potential vessel for digital socialisation through the creation of game elements. During the course of this work, I have argued that through internet distribution, modding constitutes conditions and potentials for the gaming experience of other players, too, and this sharing mechanism allocates modders certain identity-political power.

Prior to this work, computer game modding has been investigated primarily in the context of its political and economic implications. Even though I always thought this perspective was very interesting, I also wanted to study the practicalities of modding and sharing mods. In the end, I had to develop my own system of organising the various kinds of modding practices I wanted to analyse. My modding typology essentially considered the different levels of altering and touching upon game code, and it was based on the notion that mods – in their various forms of cheats, patches, add-ons, skins, retextured objects and the like – were like the 'transtextual manifestations' of *The Sims* players' individual gameplay preferences. Furthermore, by employing such a typology, I wanted to focus on the *activities* of players and on the modes of them moving across a range of positions at different times. My categorising system could therefore be used to analyse various kinds of modding practices within the context of the configurative activities of all players. The adaptability, flexibility and elasticity of *The Sims* game were the primary justifications for the inclusion of the interpretive and configurative dimensions in my typology of the modding practices. The other modding dimensions, reworking and redirection, included altering the game contents and reconfiguring the game engine for remediation – the creation of text- and image-based web narratives and machinima, in particular.

A tentative analysis on the basis of these categorisations was carried out in the latter part of the study. Through discussing game characters, space and objects I showed how the interpretive and configurative dimensions of modding have been based on temporal and spatial variables which in turn have structured the object-

oriented game mechanics and rulesets of *The Sims*. Through analysing how most digital game characters and avatars, such as Lara Croft, functioned as the player's 'vessels' in gameplay, for instance, I was able to illustrate that the Sims were in fact used very differently. My argument was based on the observation that the Sims customarily seemed to be used in a kind of role-play, and that the game environment was often made to act as a space for the player's own role-playing campaign. I also devoted a considerable part of my analysis to the investigation of *The Sims* game space as a reproduction of a particular kind of spatial ideology, namely that of the stereotypical American suburb. Suburbia in my work has been regarded as operating strategically, as an intended inclination towards certain ideological propositions rather than an actual, fixed frame of operations guiding the player's actions. The game engine has essentially rendered *The Sims* players a certain kind of playground for (re)construction and (re)configuration, and for this reason it has also been vital to consider the questions of representation and simulation in this study. The result of the kind of spatial setting presented in *The Sims* has been the realisation of the player's spatial situatedness as foremost through certain kinds of tactical deeds. In this context I also elaborated on the notion of mods and modding taking part in the reappropriation of ideology through miniatures as 'technologies of gender', especially through the doll's house.

Nearly all of the dimensions of *The Sims* gameplay seem to have been affected by modding. In modding, the dimensions of testing and experimenting with the game's malleability and adaptability as well as the desire of realising the game's full potential have always been present. That is why I have concluded in this work that the ideologies conveyed by the game-as-product have often rendered surprising effects in the hands of player-modders, as the examples of nude, fat and other 'deviant' game characters engaging in overly conscious gender performances suggest. Nevertheless, although I have pointed out here that modding can fundamentally transform the affordances of the game, they still structure the initial gameplay experience in an important way. Modding necessarily taps into the dynamic that resides as a potentiality in the game code and negotiates the ideological propositions it has to offer in an often complex and convoluted fashion. That is why I also needed to concentrate on the transformative gameplay that was attainable through the various ways of reworking and redirecting *The Sims* in the end. Some mods in my analysis have been reconstructed through remediation and repurposing of the game engine in ways that have disrupted the intended thematic or narrative qualities of the original game. For instance, some modders have used *The Sims* to tell stories of violence or situate their characters in exotic locations (for instance, in outer space). I have regarded these kinds of mods as examples of socioculturally attuned gameplay practices that have not originally been supported by the base game.

Furthermore, I have concluded that the distribution and sharing of mods on the internet has also carried along ideological statements that have considered, for

example, the idealisation of the everyday life and the restructuring of the gendered domestic sphere which players have been negotiating through *The Sims* gameplay. The 'spacing' of the game in this sense has been analysed through discussing the material implications of modding as well as the locations and situations in which *The Sims* has effectively been played and modded. Mods in fact may have acted as 'patches' or even 'hacking devices' with which the limitations and deficiencies of the original domestic game space have been dealt with on the collaboratively maintained modding sites. By arguing that the use of computer networks has always functioned as a fundamentally important dimension of computer games and their modding, I have been able to conclude that the internet has been the primary force that has shaped the modding-powered gameplay of games like *The Sims* in many ways. Uploading and downloading mods through websites and engaging in online discussions have been an essential part of manifesting the 'modder's stance'. Moreover, as has already been suggested, the relevance of mods has not been limited within the in-game world, but they have acted as vehicles for carrying implicit and explicit socio-political messages, for instance, in the form of commenting on global media events and incidents. Game mods, in general, have always carried traces of ideology which have had to be included in their analysis: the most famous example of the political messages conveyed through mods has been the *Counter-Strike* graffiti patch *Counterspray*, which had been conceived as a protest against George W. Bush's 'War on Terror' (Schleiner 2002).

Game modders, in general, can be regarded as hobbyists, serious enthusiasts or even amateur developers, as they have engaged in what I have in this work conceptualised as the participatory design of games. The larger context for analysing these kinds of design practices has been the ideological notion of 'participatory culture', which has in this study been approached as a rather idealistic paradigm of considering media users' and fans' productive aspirations and activities within the established sphere of digital media and cultural production. I have peppered my analysis in this respect by regarding their activities as the performance of fannish identities and dispositions, too. By analysing the relationship between the player-modders of games and the game industry in a historical perspective, I have concluded that the history of game development could be regarded as the result of co-dependent and collaborative practices, in which both parties have needed the other for the realisation of their own goals. The history of game modding, according to my interpretation, has proven to be much more diverse than previously has been admitted to. Game modding has hardly been considered important in the histories of game development or the formation of game cultures, but my study has showed how fundamentally the practices of modding have been integrated in the workings of the game industry and the gaming scene. It can be concluded that, for example, the basic modular architecture of modern computer games is the result of the double logic of modification: modding is made possible by the fact that computer games consist of two components, the game engine and the game data that the

engine operates. As game developers allow the alteration and transformation of the game data by the players, the result is that computer games are rendered moddable. What further complicates – and makes interesting – the interaction between the game and its play is the convoluted and far-reaching practices associated with modding in-between.

The prevalence of mods throughout game history is also a reminder of the fact that computer games cannot be studied without taking into account the multiplicity and the complexity of player practices around them. What has made *The Sims* a particularly interesting case in this respect has been the fact that many of its players and modders have been female. While most of the studies on game modding so far have concentrated on specific genres of games, FPSs and strategy games in particular, the resulting conceptions of what has counted as modding and what implications it has had for the cultures of gaming have been rather male-focused and, in my view, limited. *The Sims* modding, as I have demonstrated in this work, does not only consist of making new maps, avatar skins and weapons; it also includes practices like creating fantasy settings, designing new game props and engaging the customised game characters in an ad-hoc role-playing scenario. It has to be concluded, then, that what the players accomplish with *The Sims* game engine and all its related data components is a multitude of things – most of the associated modding practices convey signs and significations that effectively disrupt the ideological inclinations of the original game code, which is not to say that they would be 'innocent' or free from ideological propositions themselves. In any case, this work has been based on the observation that the productive activities of game players, such as modding, can fruitfully be analysed to articulate these intersections between technology, design, participation, ideology and cultural practices. If *The Sims* modding has such relevance in the field of game development as this study suggests, the practices of player participation will eventually end up having a considerable effect on the larger contexts of digital culture production.

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NOTES

I UNLEASHING PLAYERS

1 The importance of graphics in the review of digital games is especially visible in game journalism and other game-related writings in the popular press. The prevalence of the idea of graphics being perhaps the most important dimension of digital games is illustrated in, for instance, Burnham's (2003; also Demaria & Wilson 2003) definition of a video game as 'an electronic game played by manipulating images on a video screen', as well as in the tendency of game history publications to concentrate on the visuals of past games.

2 Simlish is a fictional language, specifically created for *The Sims*, which is inspired by real languages like Ukrainian, Tagalog and Navajo. Simlish was designed to be 'understood' by a speaker of any language, and therefore it uses the human voice to express the Sims' emotions through the tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues. In *The Sims*, Simlish can be heard from television or stereo systems, or when the Sims converse. Simlish has also inspired many players to do translations and create encyclopaedic recollections of it.

3 Although there are resources that catalogue the available modding sites and utilities, it has been common for *The Sims* mod pages to sport links, recommendations, and even specific community-voted awards to their affiliate sites. In the early 2000s, *The Sims* modding was concentrated in the community service *Yahoo Groups*, which offered the fans a forum for discussions, file sharing, image galleries and link listings. Some of the custom content and modding tools have also been shared via general file hosting services such as *FilePlanet* and *SourceForge*. See Laukkanen 2005, 68, 72-73.

4 I feel the need to stress this fact, since a large part of the theory building on modding does not regard it as a commercial activity. For a profound discussion on the commercial production and consumption related to game modding, see Sotamaa 2009.

5 The differentiation between the game-as-product and game-as-process also resembles the poststructuralist analytic division of 'work' and 'text' made famous by French cultural critic Roland Barthes. According to Barthes, text is something that results in the act of reading and interpretation, and so is comparable to the dimension of game-as-process. It has to be pointed out, however, that Barthes does not necessarily contain what text-resulting-in-reading produces; in other words, text is not an inherent

potentiality in the work, as the Aristotelian idea of potentiality and actuality would suggest.

6 I regard *The Sims* series as being initiated by the launch of *The Sims* in February 2000. *The Sims* expansions and stuff packs are not individual games; they require the purchase of the base game, which can be either *The Sims*, *The Sims 2* or *The Sims 3*. As the theme of my research, *The Sims* modding considers all of the PC versions of *The Sims*, I will only differentiate between the individual titles when specifically needed.

7 An amusing detail in the history of the development of *The Sims* is the emphasis on the scholarly influences its creator employed while designing the game. These include Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, Abraham Maslow's *Motivation and Personality* as well as Paco Underhill's *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* (Davies 2004).

8 For the sake of simplicity, I talk about the 'game industry', although I realise that different platforms and numerous chains of production and consumption actually constitute a range of industries that overlap. These include the PC, consoles, handheld devices, arcade, mass market board, online and wireless games (see also Costikyan 2008).

9 In 2003, EA announced that about 60 per cent of *The Sims* players were female (Bramwell 2003). Also Lewis (2003) mentions that 52 per cent of the players of *The Sims* franchise are female. *The Sims* was also mentioned as the female players' second most favourite game after Solitaire in Kallio et al. (2007).

10 This principle, characterising *The Sims* and *The Sims 2*, was altered for *The Sims 3*, which therefore features a more unrestricted play space.

II CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL APPROPRIATION

11 FLOSS, introduced by Rishab Aiyer Ghosh in 2001, is an acronym that stands for Free Libre Open Source Software (Herbst 2008, 25).

12 Open source not only implies that the source code is available with the application or service, but the open source principles promote access to the design of these and more general participation in cultural production. Open source stimulates the use of the source code of any given application and its further development or integration into new design (Weber 2005; 'The Open Source definition').

13 The English word 'free' is problematic in the contexts of hacker cultures and software development, in general, because of its double meaning. That is why it is often complemented with the epithet 'libre', as in FLOSS which stands for Free Libre Open Source Software (Herbst 2008, 25).

14 A ROM-BIOS is an abbreviation of 'Read Only Memory Basic Input Output System'.

15 The acronym WAD, 'Where's All the Data', refers to custom content packages that contain levels, graphics and other game data.

16 Most of the people interviewed by Dennis Jerz who were involved with the development or testing of the game date it between late 1975 and early 1976. Contradictorily, many written sources, including the Wikipedia entry state that the game was designed as early as 1972 ('Colossal Cave Adventure').

17 The number of *The Sims* downloads so far amounts to tens of millions on 'official' forums such as thesims2.com alone: 'TheSims2.com [...] has more than 4.3 million unique visitors per month, who have downloaded more than 70 million user-generated creations. [O]n YouTube, [...] more than 100,000 videos and movies of *The Sims* have been shared, with about 200 million views.' ('The Sims celebrates 100 million sold worldwide'.)

18 *SimCity* was not the first game designed by Will Wright; previous to that he made a Commodore 64 game *Raid on Bungeling Bay* (Brøderbund 1984), which featured inhabited and built-up islands where the player's job was to fly an armed helicopter around on top and fire at enemy bases, factories, ships, tanks, anti-air guns and a large battleship (Keighley 2002).

19 The developers, Will Wright and his colleague Jeff Braun, started their own company Maxis in 1987 to promote this title. *SimCity* was Maxis's first game, and at this time the publisher was also Brøderbund (DeMaria & Wilson 2004, 262).

20 This evolving dilemma of game design was scrumptiously illustrated by Wright's business partners at Brøderbund allegedly asking him during the launch negotiations, 'Who wants to play a game that you can't win?' (DeMaria & Wilson 2004, 262).

21 *SimCity* has other precursors, too. Previous and more straightforward simulations, such as *Lunar Lander* (Atari 1979), combined as-realistic-as-possible simulation based on black-and-white vector graphics with the futuristic theme of space travel. Games like *Lunar Lander* or *Defender* (Williams 1981) were good examples of how strategic thinking slowly started to parallel the principle of 'moving fast and shooting' in game design and play (Malliet & de Meyer 2005, 30-31).

22 There is also a tradition of building physical, game-like simulations, which in some cases may have had a profound effect on game development. Often when the saga of the 'first computer game ever' is told, it includes a notion of most of the MIT hackers who created *Spacewar!* also being members of a hobbyists' circle called *Tech Model Railroad Club* (TMRC). The club was involved in building a meticulous electric model train layout, complete with miniature locomotives and nickel-plated rails (Montfort 2003a, 38-39).

23 Wright has been reported as being 'surprised' to see the amount of 'adult content' the modders of *The Sims* were creating. On the other hand, he has acted as a strong proponent of the malleability of games and the importance of player-created content in other contexts (Wright 2006).

24 In the context of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), 'time to dick' refers to the period of time that elapses before the players start creating and distributing obscenities such as penis pictures.

25 The backstory of GTA:SA involves the playable character Carl 'CJ' Johnson returning to his hometown in the ambience of crime, violence, drugs and sex. Like all the games in the GTA series, SA is a free-roaming sandbox universe peppered with minigames, one of which involves him having sex with women. Originally, the camera pans away from the act and lets most of the action unfold only in the imagination of the player. On 9

June 2005, however, *Hot Coffee* started circulating on the internet that let players control, to a degree, the sexual actions of CJ resulting in massive uploads of screenshots and forum postings on the internet. What followed was a political turmoil, especially in the USA (see the commentaries on '*Hot Coffee* minigame controversy'; Knorr 2005).

26 This scene takes place in *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories*. Another example of the influence of the incident is the Statue of Liberty in the game featuring Hillary Clinton's face and hand holding a cup of coffee (instead of the customary torch) as well as an achievement called 'Warm Coffee'. Senator Clinton was one of the most prominent politicians who demanded the banning of the game's sexual content ('Hot Coffee minigame controversy').

27 See Jenkins, 1992, drawing on de Certeau, 1988, according to whom strategy can be thought of as a structure in which users' operations can be channelled, and the tactics level consists of practices users develop to appropriate the strategic preconditions.

III DYNAMICS OF MODDING

28 In addition, redirecting the game in interesting ways usually necessitates the game being buffed up by other forms of modding, especially reworking of game contents.

29 Alpha masks were needed in the original *Sims* because its objects were not realised in 3D, although they still needed to function as if 'three-dimensional' in the game space. The various brightness levels in the Z-buffer mask bitmaps were used to create an illusion of depth (Laukkanen 2005, 81).

30 For instance, this kind of list is provided in the help section of the official *The Sims 2* site with a note, 'Get a little help from Maxis with these official cheat codes' ('The Sims 2 Help').

31 Similar examples resulting from the gradual development of *The Sims* include the fact that a Sim could be married to several other Sims simultaneously, and Sim children lack important behavioural characteristics that make them considerably more difficult to control than grown-up Sims.

32 In the original *Sims*, one day lasts about 20 minutes, but if the player cranks up the game speed and lets the Sims do autonomously whatever they pleased, a basic Sim day could be over in less than five minutes. The in-game clock could also accelerate on its own, for example, when every member of the family was sleeping.

33 The display of *The Sims* is thus not isometric. Dimetric projection is common in many computer games, and it is often confused with isometric projection, where the angles between the projection of the x, y, and z axes are all the same, or 120°. In dimetric projection, however, two of the three axes of space appear equally foreshortened and the scale of the third direction (vertical) is determined separately, making approximations common (see 'Dimetric projection').

34 To emphasise the variety of ways players interact with the game's ruleset, I sometimes use the term (re)configuration. 'Configuration' here denotes the mild tweaking of the ruleset in gameplay (consider the example of juggling with in-game time) while

'reconfiguration' refers to practices that may come close to the actual reworking of the game's affordances (such as the addition of new game elements through inserting cheat codes).

35 There is a cheat code '*StretchSkeleton #.##*' (# indicating values from 0.50 to 3+, when 1 is normal), which makes the Sims larger or smaller in size.

36 *SimPose-ium* (for *The Sims* 1) is an animation editor which allows the players to display Sims and pose them in any position for still images. It has mainly been used by people in the distribution of Sim images on websites as well as creating storyboards and gamics with *The Sims*. It also provided the modders with the means to edit the animations and add new character behaviours to the game ('Simpose').

37 The notion of 'extreme actions' in this context refers to the pornographic modding practices vis-à-vis the affordances of the COTS game and the assumed intentions of the developers (for a selection of interesting *The Sims* hacks, see 'Simbology').

38 Also Tero Laukkanen (2005, 86-87) notes that it is likely that the most common motivation for using hacked objects in *The Sims* is storytelling, which is based on the player gaining more control over the character and object behaviours, enabling interactions that would not normally be possible.

39 By reinterpretation Knorr (2007, 9-10) also refers to practices such as creating walkthrough guides and emulation, by rededication practices such as machinima.

40 In a way, the evolution of the single-player version of *The Sims* to the multiplayer online game *The Sims Online* (TSO) seemed like a natural step, but it failed. I see the failure of TSO as an indication of the fact that even among the developers, there is no clear (research-based) idea of how people in fact play *The Sims* and what it actually is that keeps them loyal to the franchise. My speculation is supported by Mia Consalvo's analysis (2007b), which notes the differences in the play styles and interaction capabilities between *The Sims* and TSO. Another indication is that the ideas employed in the initial development of *The Sims* have been rather faithfully replicated in the conception of *The Sims 2* and its expansion packs. *The Sims Online* was in operation between 17 December 2002 and 1 August 2008. In 2007, EA announced that the game would be 're-branded' as *EA-Land*, but apparently the problems associated with the concept in the first place halted the project. Also, the official TSO websites have gone offline by now. The most fundamental design flaw was allegedly the instability of the game's economy due to the ill-advised money-making mechanisms which let players gain illegitimate profits; this then led to social uproar and maintenance trouble ('The Sims Online').

41 The development of internet support for console and handheld game devices seems to have been painfully difficult. There were, for example, specific peripherals that were needed to connect *Game Boy Color* to the internet (Shark MX in 2000, Mobile Adapter GB in 2001). Microsoft's *Xbox* featured an unofficial PvP-support for LAN games over broadband internet connection in 2001. Compared to the home computer, only the 7th generation game consoles (Nintendo Wii, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) have managed to incorporate online play in an effective way.

42 This is interestingly visible in (the *Xbox*) hardware modding, where the modder is expected to unpack and reassemble the parts of a console. This automatically voids the warranty and may lead to other forfeit by the manufacturer as well (Schäfer 2008).

43 For instance, sitcoms on the television are recorded in front of live audiences to capture the authentic reactions of those people, in order to liberate the TV viewers from the 'burden' of engagement, from interpreting the drama on their own terms or sympathising with the characters (Pfaller cit. in Suoranta & Vadén 2008, 147).

44 In an important recent study of WoW play and social interaction, the authors concluded that the social factor in the gameplay had almost nothing to do with direct interactions and camaraderie in the context of quest groups or guilds. To the players, other online characters acted merely as an audience for their accomplishments, as a social presence comparable to a crowded café, or as a source of spectacle and entertainment favouring more indirect forms of social experience (Ducheneaut et al. 2006, 407-416).

45 The baby is an interesting modded item in *The Sims*. In the original Sims a baby mod could be bought (as opposed to appearing as a result of an intimate relationship obtaining a certain level), and in *The Sims 2* all kinds of Sims, also teenagers and men, can get pregnant and give birth to a child. There are also important cheat codes associated with childbirth, such as 'forcetwins', which results in a pregnant Sim having twins.

46 McKenzie Wark (2007, para. 032) points out that 'from the point of view of representation, the game is always inadequate to everyday life. A Sim in *The Sims* is a simple animated character, with few facial features or expressions. In *The Sims 2* they seem a little more lifelike, but the improvement of the representation in some particular ways only raises the standards by which it appears to fall short in others.'

IV NEGOTIATING THE CODE

47 This view is strongly proposed by Espen Aarseth, for example, who has sparked a debate on whether characters like Lara Croft actually change the experience of gameplay at all.

48 Treating object-based interaction in games through the incorporated cost-effect system of them can also be compared to the importance of violence in the game mechanics of some game genres. Violence, too, has an instrumental role in the in-game world, but through its representative and simulative association with real-world events and politics, it may become a problematic issue also in games (Kline et al. 2003).

49 The term 'Levittown' refers to large suburban developments in the US by William Levitt and his company *Levitt & Sons*. The original Levittown was the first mass-produced suburb of New York City that was built as a planned community between 1947 and 1951. It is widely regarded as the archetype for postwar suburbs throughout the country (see 'Levittown, New York').

50 There is also a genre of games that are 'location-based', the so-called 'urban games' or

'street games', which are typically multiplayer games played out on city streets and built-up urban environments. The most current example is *geocaching*, in which a participant hides a cache and other players search for it, typically using navigational equipment as aid.

51 For example, the GTA series draws heavily on the architecture and urban spatial paradigm of contemporary US cities. The newest instalment of the series, *Liberty City Stories*, has even spawned a website where game spaces and buildings are compared in detail to their real-life counterparts in New York City (Johnston 2008a; 2008b).

52 However, the Sims are not fully autonomous, like in other Sim games (*SimCity*). The player is responsible for various aspects of the Sims's personal life, health and financial management, and the Sims are unable to take certain actions without specific commands from the player. Financial maintenance, for example, is simulated by the need to send the Sims to find jobs, go to work, pay bills, and take advantage of personal development and social contacts to advance in their career. Left alone, without any player supervision, the Sims will eventually develop overdue bills, and their property will be repossessed.

V EXTENDING THE GAME

53 OOP was originally developed on the basis of programming language *Simula 67* that was used to make simulations in the 1960s. There is a link between OOP and the principles of simulation: on analogue computers, the kind of direct mapping of real-world phenomena or objects to their analogue counterparts (a process that also resembles the modern OOP approach in digital computing) is considered and called 'simulation'.

54 *The Snow Witch* (Britannica Dreams) is a machinima based on Japanese folklore and the spirit Yuki-onna (Snow Woman). It tells the story of two woodcutters, an old man and his young apprentice, who take refuge in a simple forest hut as a snowstorm hits them. *The Snow Witch* was filmed entirely in *The Sims 2* in October 2006, and it won the Best Story prize at the European Machinima Festival 2007 (see 'Snow Witch').

55 *Spotlight Site Archive* includes a reference to 'Paladin's Place' with *Sim Wardrobe*, a programme that lets the players select the clothing their Sims wear: 'After the release of Hot Date, Paladin shone in the Sims community, being the first to tackle the categorization problem successfully and give us back our nude patch{xe patch}. Without his programs many of us would still be tearing our hair out trying to get games to do what we want. Thank you from the bottom of this Simmer's heart!' ('Paladin's Place').

56 See the discussion thread focusing on the uses of *The Sims* for the creation of pornography ('*The Sims 2: Erotic Dreams* [Archive]').

INDEX

G

H

I

P

Q

R

S

T

U

W

Z

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Sihvonen examines the technical and material specificities of *The Sims* mods, as well as their cultural context. Viewed as a manifestation of participatory culture, modding makes PC games malleable: players reconfigure the game by creating new content, changing the behaviours of game characters and altering the uses of the game engine. Using a semiotic framework, Sihvonen suggests a signification process that includes interpretation, configuration, reworking and redirection with the game system and rules.

From its historical roots in shooters and text adventure games, the author bares the fascinating evolution and dynamics of modding, where gender stereotypes, the thrills of hacking and living the Sims' American Dream intersect with the aesthetic and operational dimensions of modding.

Dr. Tanja Sihvonen is researcher in computer games, play and digital culture.

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