THE PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY PLAY:

ON ACTOR-NETWORKS AND IDENTITY PERFORMANCE IN FACEBOOK GAMES

SUEN DE ANDRADE E SILVA / 3560333

RESEARCH MASTER THESIS
MEDIA & PERFORMANCE STUDIES
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
UTRECHT UNIVERSITY
SUPERVISOR: DR. MIRKO TOBIAS SCHÄFER
SECOND READER: DR. RENÉ GLAS

January 28, 2013

Abstract

This thesis combines the perspectives of actor-network theory and game studies as a theoretical framework for analysing the role of technology in the constructions and performances of players' identities. As digital technologies are increasingly pervading people's everyday life, material artefacts are playing more and more roles in the way society is shaped and perceived. This ludification and mediatisation of culture has opened up new possibilities for the understanding of identity, particularly in relation to use, appropriation and re-signification of technology. The author suggests that contemporary selves are not only fragmented and dispersed, but also playful and technological, and that the social practices that shape identity construction rely more and more on technological affordances. Social network games are used to illustrate both how technology makes itself visible in the social world, and how material artefacts affect humans' sense of self. The author concludes by arguing that, in social network games, identity comes into being through an articulation of body, imagination, and technology.

Keywords: actor-network theory, identity, games, social network games, ludification of culture

Contents

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The construction and performance of identity has long been haunting the dreams and nightmares of researchers in almost all disciplines. Self and being have been conceptualised and scrutinised from widely differing perspectives, and with the most varied objectives. From Descartes' *cogito* (Descartes and Miller, 1984) to Braidotti's *nomadism* (Braidotti, 1994), identity has always been both a source and a target of questions, theories, and intensive academic work.

In the humanities and social sciences, two theories have provided what are probably the most adopted frames through which the performance of self can be understood: sociologist Erwin Goffman's "impression management" (Goffman, 1959) and feminist philosopher Judith Butler's "performative identity" (Butler, 1990). The former explains how individuals consciously adapt their self-presentation to fit specific social contexts, and how one's own sense of identity is reshaped by social interactions and everyday life. Performative identity, on the other hand, claims that identities are discursively constructed, and that people act according to how they have learned to act, conforming to the dominant discourse and reproducing power relations, (often) without conscious realisation. In both cases, identities of individuals are never fixed and static, but are rather being continually reshaped according to the multiple contexts in which they are embedded.

The emergence and widespread availability of video games and personal computers has added a new layer in the process of identity expression, extending it into new domains. Usually seen as spaces for experimentation and exploration, virtual worlds have become a fertile ground in which 'real' selves can be projected, re-worked, and even completely replaced. The playful character of identities created within virtual spaces – whether it is on Facebook or on Azeroth[1] – has highlighted the fluid nature of self-construction and performance, and has opened new fields of investigation into identity research.

Contemporary (digital) culture has also taken the presentation of self beyond social and discursive boundaries, challenging the paradigms already consolidated. By being rooted in face-to-face interactions and non-mediated everyday life, Butler's and Goffman's theories lack consideration of the material dimension of self-presentation practices. Since the great majority of studies on identity performance through video game play are based on those theories, they have also neglected the technological context in which players are embedded. It is in this gap that the focus of this thesis lies.

This work critically explores the role that digital technologies play in the shaping and enactment of individuals' identities. I turn my attentions to the relation between the now popular social network games and their players to argue that the proliferation of mobile technologies and casual video games has not only emphasised the ludic element in culture (Huizinga, 1955), but also the material character of identity. I employ Bruno

[1] Azeroth is the name of the fantasy world in which the Warcraft (Entertainment, 2004) game is set.

Latour's notion of actor-networks (Latour, 2005b) to show that the performance of self is moving beyond social and discursive relations towards a growing reliance on non-human agents, and that such performances have been deeply affected by devices, interfaces, and algorithms. I claim that mobile technologies in general, and casual video games in particular, provide clear examples of this shift, and that those media have become contemporary realms of self-presentation.

Although feminist studies have long emphasised that gender – like any other dimension of identity – is socially constructed and perpetuated (Beauvoir, 1953; Butler, 1990), the meaning of the word 'social' seems to never be challenged or questioned in the field of gender studies. Some feminist scholars, such as Donna Harraway (1991) and Karen Barad (2003), have already theorised about the inclusion of non-human entities in what constitutes human bodies. However, a similar broadening of perspectives is still lacking when it comes to the constitution of the social. The conceptual framework offered by actor-network theory will be useful in disrupting the meaning of 'social' by introducing the agency of non-humans. In this sense, the social constructions and performances of the self become the outcome of articulations and negotiations forged among multiple and hybrid entities. In contemporary digital culture, this active participation of non-humans in the construction of the self is brought forward, and is made more and more apparent.

This thesis is divided into five main sections. In the following chapter, **The Performance of Self in Videogames**, I review the main theories applied in studies of identity performance, summarising their ideas and concepts and explaining how they have been used in game studies. This section explains what occurred when personal computers and video games fostered the creation and presentation of identities in virtual spaces, and how mediated communication allowed individuals literally to play with their senses of self. The works of Erwin Goffman (1959; 1967) and Judith Butler (1990; 1993) are central for this analysis, together with several studies of identity performance and video game play that have emerged in the past few decades.

The third chapter discusses how mobile technologies and networked communication have moved the "ludification of culture" (Raessens, 2006) a step forward, and why the performance of identity can no longer be explained only in relation to socio-discursive practices. A complementary approach is then proposed through the concepts of actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Ihde, 1990; Law, 1992; Latour, 1999, 2005b). By acknowledging that technologies deeply affect human actions and experiences, ANT allows contemporary performances of self to be conceived as a combination of human and non-human actions. Hence, the chapter is entitled **Actor-Network Theory: Things are Actors Too**, for it introduces technology as a new actor in the enactment of identity. In order to follow this actor, a theoretical model will be developed through a combination of ANT with game theory, more specifically with Alexander Galloway's (2006) moments of game action and Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman's (2004) levels of play engagement.

After defining the theoretical background in which this thesis is based, I will introduce a case study to support and illustrate my hypothesis. By describing social network games, and by discussing how they have permeated people's everyday life, I argue that contemporary video games have become spaces in which identity and technology converge and continually shape each other. The model proposed in Chapter 3 will then be considered in the light of social network games, to show how actor-networks are formed from the associations between those games and their players. In **Social Network Games as Actor-Networks**, I concentrate on the material aspects of the games and

their relation to play.

A close investigation of identity performance through social network games is conducted in the subsequent chapter: **The Performance of Self in SNGs**. In this piece, Anthony Giddens' "modern self-identity" (Giddens, 1991) provides the background and vocabulary to my analysis, for his theory explains not only how contemporary selves are fragmented and dispersed in new ways, but also why communication systems are fundamental in the forging of modern identities. Additionally, I rethink Goffman's and Butler's theories from the perspective of actor-network theory, pointing out how identity performance emerges from the association between human and non-human actors.

To complement my analysis, and to reinforce my arguments, the last chapter shows how players take over social network games, appropriating technology for their own purposes, and why this appropriation can also be seen as a presentation of self. Entitled **Breaking Rules and Performing Identity**, the final chapter brings to light a different relationship between humans and non-humans, and a new association in the actor-network dynamics.

My conclusion summarises this thesis, explaining why social network games can be understood as the reassembling of the social, in Latour's terms. In the conclusion, I also reinforce that new technologies are increasingly shaping our senses of self. I claim that the algorithms of contemporary communication media pervade and manipulate not only social activity but also our very identity. Furthermore, I suggest that hacking, modding and cheating are concepts that reflect more than the ludification of culture; they also signal the re-assembling of the self.

It is important to mention that it is not my intention to discuss in this thesis whether or not social network games are truly social, in the sense of promoting meaningful interactions among players and collaborative play. This subject has already been considered carefully and convincingly in Jacobs and Sihvonen (2011), Meurs (2011), and Wohn et al. (2011). My work is based on the premise that social network games are indeed social, particularly according to the meaning proposed by actor-network theory: "not as a fixed human-based entity, but rather as a fluid connection between human and non-human actors" (Latour, 2005b, p. 75). For a critique of the lack of sociality in social network games, see Bartle (2011) and Bogost (2010).

Another point to notice is that this work does not address the subversion of normative identities through gameplay either. I am not interested in debating whether video game play challenges or reinforces stereotypical ideas of gender, race, class, and so on. My concern here is to demonstrate how social network games challenge the constraining of identity construction to social and discursive domains, from which materiality and technology are excluded. Studies of video game play from the perspective of queer theory can be found, for instance, in Cassell (2000); Consalvo (2003); Leonard (2003) and Kafai et al. (2008).

This thesis is about social relations and identity performance in a world where both humans and non-humans are equally agents. The act of performing the self is based on the premise that without non-humans the action would never happen. For this reason, my main object of study is the material aspect of social network games – devices, interfaces, and algorithms –, and the relation players establish with that materiality. With that as a goal, I critically analyse the way social network games function: which actions are encouraged – and which ones are restricted – during play. In addition, I pay attention to the visual and textual elements that guide players' experiences, investigating how interface

and algorithms work together to shape human actions. Besides studying the games in themselves, I also look into the ways players communicate with one another through game-related websites and fan-pages. Player-generated content can offer valuable insights not only into how players' identities are framed by the game technology, but also into how this same technology can be appropriated and used in ways not previously intended.

1.1 Methodology

Based on the premise that game research is simultaneously a reflexive and a situated act (Lammes, 2007), this study employs methodological approaches that account for both the experiences of the researcher-as-player as well as the local cultural practices in which play is embedded. In order to develop a comprehensive and rich study of SNGs as actor-networks, two main methods are applied: auto-ethnography (Ellis et al., 2010) and participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989). In addition to those two methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 players of social network games to enhance my observations.

Whereas auto-ethnography puts play at the central focus of investigation and provides a deeper view of the relations between player and game, participant observation makes it possible to situate individual experiences in a broader cultural context, ensuring diversity and richness to the analysis and at the same time avoiding generalised claims. Furthermore, the combination of these methods offers a fruitful way of preventing overly narrow and inadequate interpretations of the analysed content.

Social network games in the simulation category are taken as the main objects of study. The limitation to simulation SNGs was required for the sake of clarity and focus. Since there are thousands of social network games currently available, I decided to focus on those that provide more opportunities for players' self-expression through the customisation of game space and avatars. Other games – such as those in the arcade, puzzle, and sports categories – might not provide the same complex and creative spaces for performances of self[2].

Along with focusing on the simulation genre, I also turn to the games that most approximate the everyday life of players. In that it revolves around the development and maintenance of an "ordinary life", the Facebook game *The Sims Social* (Playfish, 2011) makes possible a merging of identities performed within and outside the game world[3]. This merging emphasises the role of technologies in the performance of self, and confirm my hypothesis. Furthermore, since the core game dynamics are very similar among all simulation social network games, references to other applications might occasionally be made to enrich my work.

The analysis of *The Sims Social* is divided into two parts. First, the classification of game elements and processes according to the framework proposed in Chapter 3 reveals, for instance, which diegetic functional acts take place during play and how they are related

[2]Following definitions in Wolf (2001), simulation social network games are those that invite players to build in and take care of different environments such as farms, cities, houses and restaurants. In the case study adopted here, players simulate their own life.

[3]Ordinary life means the actions carried out in the day-to-day life of any person, such as sleeping, eating, socialising and having fun. Yet, the very description of the game invites players to "play with life with your real friends for free". (source: https://www.facebook.com/TheSimsSocial/info)

to the players' sense of self. The player-machine associations are described and examined, creating a map of possible paths that might be taken in the performance of self. In this classification, I address questions such as 'how many options exist for customising one's avatar?', 'which interactions can be established between an avatar and a given object, and what are the outcomes of each interaction?', 'how do game and player communicate with one another, and how do players communicate with other players within the game space?'.

The second step includes the investigation of user-generated content gathered through the official game forum and the Facebook groups 'The Sims Social Family' and 'The Sims Social Everything'. Those groups were chosen due to the high number of members, posting language (English), and the variety of interactions. By looking into messages, pictures, and comments, I explore more nuanced interactions between the game and its players. This is also the stage in which cheating, hacking and modding are further considered. Moreover, this investigation allows a rethinking of Butler's and Goffman's theories in the new technological context.

Table 1.1: Interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country	Play session/day
adrtor	Female	47	UK	between 1 and 2 hours
amario	Female	18	Brazil	between 3 and 5 hours
cathir	Female	42	USA	between 1 and 2 hours
clamcc	Female	41	USA	over 8 hours
esttan	Female	27	Indonesia	between 1 and 2 hours
farthe	Female	19	USA	between 1 and 2 hours
gisbus	Female	20	Brazil	between 1 and 2 hours
jeslea	Female	27	USA	under 1 hour
karfag	Female	12	Brazil	between 1 and 2 hours
katreg	Female	45	Brazil	between 3 and 5 hours
lumdon	Female	20	Brazil	between 6 and 8 hours
marjos	Female	28	Brazil	between 1 and 2 hours
niaofs	Male	26	Netherlands	between 3 and 5 hours
wilbar	Male	33	Australia	between 3 and 5 hours

Data collection and analysis were conducted during a period spanning over three months. During that time, I played *The Sims Social* and other SNGs paying particular attention to the ways identity performance is shaped by game systems. Such interpretations were drawn from my own engagement with the game as well as from the continual attention to how my co-players created and customised their avatars and game spaces. A total of 30 co-players were visited weekly, and each visit lasted around five minutes. Besides playing the game, I also joined several communities of players in Facebook, in which I could observe how players exchanged game-related messages, and how game experience was shared and taken beyond individual game spaces. As a member in those communities of players, I actively participated in the community life, asking for and providing help whenever possible, commenting on other members' posts, and sharing my own achievements. Although my involvement in the communities were mostly covert, at the final stage of data collection – during the interviewing process – my interest and purposes were made clear to some group members.

Fourteen interviews were conducted between 26th August and 10th September 2012. Interviewees were approached initially through a message left on three Facebook groups inviting players to fill in a short survey concerning their playing habits. Through this form, players could also inform their contact details in case they were willing to participate in the interviews. From the 125 respondents to the survey, 12 female and 2 males were further contacted by either e-mail or chat, through which a semi-structured questionnaire was applied. During the interviews, players were asked about their avatars and houses, as well as about their relationships with other players and their impressions of the game[4] . The questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. Further details about interviewees can be found in Table 1.1[5].

In conducting this research, I hope to offer a critical and comprehensive analysis of identity in our contemporary media scenario. This analysis starts with the definition of the theoretical framework on which this thesis is grounded.

[4]It is important to acknowledge that since I relied solely on online methodologies, my sample was limited only to those profiles where indications of players' identity – such as pictures, real names, location and gender – were provided and thus it is a is a demonstrative, rather than a representative sample.

[5]Players' names and pseudonyms were changed to ensure the anonymity of the participants in this study.

CHAPTER 2

The Performance of Self in Videogames

The question of how identities are constructed and performed through digital play has been widely addressed in the past few decades. The ways players present themselves – or experience new senses of self – in the safe and disembodied worlds of videogames have revealed how fluid and creative identity can be when coupled with play. Whether it is in complex and deep online environments such as *World of Warcraft*, or in more simple and straightforward virtual spaces like *Habbo Hotel*, players have always found ways to transform their avatars into an extension of their selves, increasing player involvement and enhancing playing experience.

Game researcher Gordon Calleja argues, for instance, that the relations between players and their avatars directly affect the game experience (Calleja, 2007a,b). Along similar lines, Sheila Murphy points out that "the in-game structures that enable the identification of the gamer with the onscreen character all serve to deepen the connection between the game world and the real world" (Murphy, 2004, p. 235). Players' identity is therefore an important factor during play, and the closer the relationship between real and virtual selves the better the game experience is presumed to be.

However, what do the words *'identity'* and *'self'* mean exactly? Although there are numerous approaches available to explain those terms, two main definitions are usually taken: the internal and the social dimensions of human beings. This distinction is most clearly seen in Freudian descriptions of *id* and *ego*, in which the *id* stands for the basic and inner parts of one's personality and the *ego* is "the part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world" (Freud, 1974). An alternative approach to this dualistic view is proposed by Lacan, who argues that there are no essential internal selves but only social constructions of identity (Lacan and Wilden, 1968). This perspective has been widely reworked and most of contemporary researches dealing with identity and self-presentation are based on the anti-essentialist premise that identities come into being through individuals' relationships with others. Danah boyd provides a comprehensible summary of this understanding:

> [H]istory, experience and interaction provide the model by which individuals can give meaning to the physical, psychological, philosophical, and moral aspects of their identity. One's identity is not simply based on the characteristics that are written on the body or the circumstances in which one is born, but on how the individual reacts to and internalized these experiences. (boyd, 2002)

In studies of videogame play, the two main frameworks adopted are based on Erwin Goffman's notion of "impression management" (Goffman, 1959), and Judith Butler's definition of "performative identity" (Butler, 1990). On the one hand, studies based on Goffman's theory have shown that playful identities are actively constructed and

reshaped according to the social environment in which players are immersed (Taylor, 2003; Brownfield, 2009; Martey and Consalvo, 2011). Individuals actively adjust their self-perceptions in relation to how co-players react to them within and outside the game world. On the other hand, and from the perspective of Butler's followers, the game space is used for either challenging or conforming the normative identities that are discursively established (Threlkeld, 2008; Kafai et al., 2010; Hampton, 2010). Some works have also combined those two approaches to explain how social interactions question and challenge categories such as gamer (Shaw, 2012; Thornham, 2011), otherness (Leurs, 2012), and sexuality (Brown and Tappan, 2008). In all cases, identity has been related to either the social or the cultural dimensions of play, and technological aspects have been largely neglected.

This chapter summarises Goffman's and Butler's theories, reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses and discussing how they have been applied in studies of videogame play and players' experience. This discussion lays the ground for a deeper and broader understanding of the relations between identity, play, and technology. In order to explain how technology has been affecting players' performance of identity, it is necessary firstly to know how the very meaning of identity has been conceived of in game studies. I start by discussing Goffman's definition of self as the product of social interactions.

2.1 Goffman and the Social Self

For sociologist Erwin Goffman, identities are strategically shaped and re-shaped according to the numerous social encounters individuals face throughout their lives. By closely observing, analysing and documenting how individuals interact with and present themselves to others, he proposed that the self be understood as a social product. The social construction of self, according to Goffman, has two dimensions: the enactment of a coherent and meaningful image that one has of oneself to a given audience, and the conscious intention of producing a self-image that can be socially trusted and supported.

Every aspect of identity is performed by a conscious and active individual, who interacts with his/her surroundings and manages how the world perceives them. Theatrical metaphors form the basis of Goffman's work, and those metaphors are employed to describe the different settings, attitudes, and mechanisms that support identity performances. For example, Goffman argues that performances of self take place on two regions: the backstage – where the setting, appearance or manner of the performance is constructed and where "the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman, 1959, p. 112), and the front stage – where a performance is actually presented to an audience. Putting it simply, in the back region actors can try out and rehearse the performances that they might or might not enact in front of others (in the front stage). In Chapter 5 of this thesis, I will discuss how new technologies in general, and videogames in particular, have blurred the boundaries between front and back regions.

When acting in a front stage, individuals communicate with their audiences through three different forms: by explicitly giving information (such as through words and intentional behaviour), by the subtle and even unconscious messages given off, and by the meanings inferred from the audience. The negotiation of these three elements, together with a reflexive understanding of the performance enacted, shapes one's conscience of

oneself – or one's identity. In other words, identities are produced through the continual interplay between self-presentation and others' evaluations. The self is, in this sense, the product rather than the cause of any identity performance:

> A correctly staged and performed scene leads an audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman, 1959, p. 252)

Although Goffman does mention the role of objects in the performance of self when explaining front stages, the materiality of identity performance is a largely neglected issue in his work. He uses the term 'setting' to claim that items such as clothes, furniture, and décor are "vehicles for conveying signs" (Goffman, 1959, p. 24), which reinforce the identity the individual wishes to convey. However, no further attention is paid to how and why the elements that compose any setting affect the performance.

Goffman's theory helps us to understand the social and reflexive nature of identity, and offers a valuable vocabulary to describe the dynamics that compose the performances of the self in out contemporary digital culture. His concepts of front- and back-stage, as well as his idea of impression management are appropriated and reconsidered in the context of mediated interactions. By thinking videogame play as a form of impression management, we can identify how technology affects – and sometimes determines – human interactions and, consequently, impression management.

Whereas Goffman provides the tools for analysing the performance of self from a sociological perspective, Judith Butler's theory of "performative identity" draws attention to power relations and discursive practices that pervade human interactions. As will be explained in the following section, identities not only are performed by conscious subjects that interact with one another, but also – and more importantly – are reproduced through repeated practices established in and by discourse.

2.2 Butler and the Discursive Self

Judith Butler is probably the most well known name when it comes to a critical thinking of identity in relation to power. Although her work is primarily concerned with sex, sexuality, and gender, her ideas have inspired productions on several other issues, such as spatial practices (Gregson and Rose, 2000), belonging (Bell, 1999), and working relations (Hodgson, 2005). Butler has intensely questioned how accepted conventions of identity are produced and reproduced through discursive processes. According to her, discourse gives shape to normative notions of identity, and the continual enactment of such norms reiterates and perpetuates discourse[1]. In other words, individuals act out their identities

[1]Although Butler refers specifically to gender identity, in this thesis her idea of performativity is extended to include any other aspect of identity.

in the way they have learned to do so, reproducing power relations (and reinforcing discourse) often without awareness (Van House, 2009).

Whereas Goffman is concerned with an active and prior subject that consciously performs his/her own sense of self, Butler does not acknowledge the existence of such a conscious agent. Instead, she claims that identities are always already constructed within and through discourse. As Butler puts it, "[gender] proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

Performativity is a key term in Butler's thoughts, and it highlights the repetitive and citational aspect of identity performance. Nevertheless, the meaning of the term performativity clearly differs from the theatrical notion of performance. Whereas performance implies the *expression* of an inner identity, performativity is related to the *construction* of selves that are embodied through the repetition of established norms. This distinction is clearly drawn in Butler's criticism of Goffman, when she argues that

> [Identity] cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,'... this self is not only irretrievably 'outside,' constituted in social discourse, but that the ascription of interiority is itself a publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication (Butler, 1988).

Moreover, the theatrical aspects of performative practices are, for Butler, the very means by which historicity is dissimulated. By enacting normative selves again and again, individuals no longer discern the discursive nature of their identities, which become disguised as natural trait. As an example, Butler cites the statement "It is a girl!" uttered by a nurse or doctor who, by doing so, initiates at the very moment of birth – or even before the child is born – "the process by which a certain girling is compelled" (Butler, 1993, p. 232).

It is important to note that subjectivity is still present in performative practices, although it is not prior to – but precisely arising from – enactments. Subjectivity, in this sense, does not mean freedom of choice but rather the fitting into some already existing frame of experience. In explaining how subjectivity is put forward in Butler's work, Sara Salih (2002) employs the metaphor of a closet, from which individuals choose their identity – or different identities – within a limited range of options and according to the expectations and demands of their social groups.

The idea of performative identity, therefore, brings to light how power relations frame and affect identity construction. Through Butler's concepts, we can better understand why the interactions considered by Goffman should always be situated not only within a specific social context but also in relation to the discursive practices in which society is embedded. Discursive practices that shape identities in the material world are often reproduced in virtual spaces, framing virtual identities as well. While new technologies increase the reach and strength of normative identities, they simultaneously open up new spaces for resistance, questioning, and re-signification. In Butler's theory, however, material aspects are again neglected, which leaves room for taking "performative identity" a step further. For the time being, I shall concentrate on how Butler and Goffman have been employed in studies of videogame play.

2.3 The Ludic Self

The theories discussed in the previous two sections have shown that the construction and performance of identity takes place within social frameworks, and always in relation to discursive practices. By interacting with the world around us, and by reflecting on the ways our peers perceive us, we give meaning to our identities, and situate ourselves in a larger social picture. Those theories were based mostly on face-to-face interactions, and the opportunities for experimentation and exploration are very much limited in those cases. Except when acting on what Goffman has named 'backstage', individuals are expected to perform identities that have little or no playful character.

The emergence and popularity of videogames and digital technologies has offered new possibilities for the performance of self, and added a new symbolic layer to the concept of identity. In the past few decades, it has become possible to differentiate between 'real' and 'virtual' selves, and to allow the presentation of selves that are playful in character. This is especially the case when it comes to studies of videogames and play[2].

In this context, studies of identity performance have flourished, taking Goffman's and Butler's ideas into virtual worlds and providing a broader comprehension of how subjectivity, agency, and power relations frame the construction and performance of identity also in playful environments. At first, utopian perspectives on the libertarian power of virtuality envisioned a complete freedom of experimentation and an empowering experience for all players. As the Internet became more accessible and videogames became widely spread, empirical academic work revealed that much of the issues experienced in 'real' life were repeated in the 'virtual' realm.

In contemporary literature, performances of identity through videogames are still seen as a synonym of freedom of experimentation, regardless of the discursive practices surrounding game production and play. As an example, and without explicitly citing either Butler or Goffman, Rachael Hutchinson has analysed the performance of self in binary combat games, taking *Soul Calibur* as a case study. She argues that, by being able to choose the game, the game mode, and their characters, players are free both to experiment with their identities and to project a consciously constructed identity. As she puts it: "Performance of the self comes not only through player-character identification but also through the ability to choose between characters at will, offering limitless opportunity for experimentation with multiple selves" (Hutchinson, 2007, p. 296).

A similar study was conducted by Elizabeth Mcmenomy, who also aimed at understanding what a gamer identity means. By conducting ethnographic research with 30 female players, she shows how being a woman gamer impacts identity in both online and offline arenas. Her main concern lies in how female players of MMORPGs[3] construct and think about their avatars. She draws on Butler's concept of gender performance to identify the possibilities of reinforcement and subversion of gender roles through those games (Mcmenomy, 2011).

Todd L. Harper also discusses performativity in videogame play, particularly in fighting games, from a feminist perspective. He is interested in analysing how different ways of playing intersect with the performance of identity, and whether gameplay itself

[2]The words real and virtual mean, respectively, 'in the physical world' and 'in the Internet and videogame spaces'. When it comes to identity, real stands for the living person, whereas virtual stands for a player's avatar. Those adjectives are used with quotation marks for I believe that such distinction cannot be easily drawn.

[3]Massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

can be a form of performativity: the means by which individuals construct a specific gamer identity. He considers the material conditions of play and performance to argue that "what defines a game is dependent as much on the social practices of play as it is on what the designers code into the game in the first place" (Harper, 2010, p. 196). Although Harper is primarily grounded on Butler's work, he also evokes Goffman to explain how the display of certain game-related elements – such as badges and homemade arcade cabinets – functions as props for the performance of self.

Derek Burrill, in his turn, investigates how various aspects of play are combined to create a stage on which masculinity is performed. He focused not only on players' avatars but also on the physical setting where gameplay takes place to argue that games provide a safe space where masculinity can be performed without real-world consequences and harms (Burrill, 2008).

In a similar study, Valerie Walkerdine examines the performance of femininity by young girls playing videogames socially. Her analysis reveals that videogame play is clearly an enjoyable activity for female subjects but, at the same time, it is also problematic, due to the masculine codes embedded both in the game subject and in the very act of playing. In her view, videogame play becomes a moment in which socially accepted notions of feminine performance are challenged, since female players negotiate between competing to win – a trait conventionally attributed to male players – while being sensitive, caring and co-operative (Walkerdine, 2006).

An attempt to explain the performance of identity specifically in social network games has been made by Cathie LeBlanc. Drawing on Goffman's theory, she claims that social network games "provide the user with an opportunity to customise a personalised space that 'gives off' an impression of the identity of the player" (LeBlanc, 2011, p. 67). However, her analyses are kept on a very superficial level, and there are no further discussions of how those identities are performed through gameplay.

In summary, these and other studies have demonstrated a strong link between play and identity, but just a few of them have looked into how technology itself – devices, interfaces, and algorithms – affect the performance of self. To the best of my knowledge, only Mcmenomy and Harper have paid attention to technology, and even in those cases, technology is not the main concern in their works. Therefore, a closer study of the technological context in which identity is performed is still needed.

2.4 Conclusions

Although Butler explicitly disagrees with some of Goffman's ideas, their theories have several points of convergence. The most important can be found in the rejection of the essentialist view about identity and subjectivity. For both authors, identity is always constructed in relation to culture, and nature is nothing more than the material basis which social practices act upon. It is also important to note that discourse is a social practice as well, which brings Butler and Goffman's ideas even closer.

From this perspective, Butler and Goffman can be seen not as mutually exclusive, but rather as complementary. Whereas the feminist philosopher situates identity within language and society, and defines it as an effect of power relations rather than biological traits, the sociologist ensure some agency and critical thought to individuals, without returning to biological and psychological essentialism. In addition, at the same time

that Butler reviews the heterosexim in Goffman's thought, he offers a promising way of extending Butler's discussions of agency and subjectivity.

In rethinking the enactment of spaces and place-related identities, Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose have clearly summarised the complementary relation between Goffman's performance and Butler's performativity. As they put it,

> [P]erformance – what individual subjects do, say, 'act out' – is subsumed within, and must always be connected to, performativity, to the citational practices which reproduce and subvert discourse, and which at the same time enable and discipline subjects and their performances. Performativity then, involves the saturation of performances and performers with power, with particular subject positions. (Gregson and Rose, 2000, p.441)

Both approaches, when applied to studies of videogame play, have proved to be helpful for explaining the relations players establish among different dimensions of their identities. However, when it comes to digital technologies and 'virtual' spaces, the social and the discursive selves need to be taken a step further. As will be explained in the next chapter, a better and broader understanding of the social world requires the acknowledgement of the roles not only of human, but also of non-human actors. Whereas Butler and Goffman show that identity is always a social construct, actor-network theory (Latour, 2005b; Ihde, 1990) emphasises that the social is produced by relations between human and non-human actors.

CHAPTER 3

Actor-Network Theory: Things Are Actors Too

In the previous chapter, we saw that identity can be better understood when related to social practices – whether social is defined as dominant discourse or as human interactions. However, contemporary media landscape has been challenging the very meaning of the term social. Digital technologies are now ubiquitous, pervading almost every aspect of human lives and affecting even human selves. In addition, portable computers and smartphones are increasingly accessible, allowing people to be continuously connected, and expanding and enhancing our "networked society" (Castells, 2011).

This digital revolution has also leaded to what Joost Raessens has named "the ludification of culture" (Raessens, 2006). Videogames are now played almost everywhere and at almost all times, and game principles are continuously being applied to serious matters, such as politics (Gekker, 2012), science (Utrecht University, 2012), and education (Prensky, 2001). The terms play, playability, and gamification are no longer restricted to games research, and are now part of an everyday vocabulary.

In such a changing context, the term *social* needs to be reviewed and broadened, as to allow non-humans to be part of what composes the social fabric as well. This goal can be achieved with the help of actor-network theory (ANT), for it offers the standpoint from which the material practices that constitute the social can be explored. The purpose of employing ANT as a framework is to reveal how heterogeneous associations are formed, and which effects such connections produce. From an ANT perspective, the social world emerges from the connections among human and non-human actors as well as from the performances they enact. This understanding is essential for explaining which roles technology plays in the performance of self, and why things are actors too[1].

In what follows, I will introduce actor-network theory, drawing on the works mainly of Don Ihde (1990), Bruno Latour (1999; 2005b), and John Law (1992; 2009). Although Ihde has not been explicitly related to ANT, his thoughts are very much in line with the ANT approach, and his concepts can help to further explain how humans and non-humans relate to – and affect – each other.

After introducing ANT, I will take a slight detour into theories of videogame technology. Such a move will show the active role of videogame systems, and will provide the coordinates with which to track technology. In the last section, I will bring together ANT and game studies, explaining why videogame play is also an actor-network, and how game experience is affected by technology. In so doing, I will have a complete framework for analysing how technology affects players' performance of identity in social network games.

[1] Although the word 'thing' has been conceptualized by Latour (2005a) as "the issue that brings people together", i.e. a cause and a matter-of-concern, in this work the word 'things' has less philosophical connotations, and it rather denotes everyday objects, technological artefacts, and non-human entities.

3.1 Actor-Network Theory

Actor-network theory is a material-semiotic approach that provides new tools for exploring the agency of non-human entities in the social world. By emphasising that society comes into being through complex associations of heterogeneous actors (not necessarily human), ANT ascribes a more active role to material artefacts, and creates new possibilities for understanding social relations.

One of the main theoretical contributions of the ANT approach to social analysis can be found in the blur of boundaries between both nature and culture, and humans and non-humans. ANT claims that human and non-human entities are equally agents in the social world, since "any thing that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor" (Latour, 2005b, p. 71). From this perspective, technologies are seen not as neutral tools regulated by human intentions, but rather as fundamental sources and triggers of action. Moreover, as Latour (1999, 2005b) argues, the actions performed by non-humans are taken beyond causality, determination, and intention; material artefacts can also suggest, allow, constrain, invite, shape, and prescribe different forms of interaction.

Despite its name, ANT is not considered to be a proper theory, for theories are presumed to explain the reasons why an event occurs. The purpose of ANT is not *to explain why*, but *to describe how* relations are established, *how* they function, and which effects they have. The focus point of ANT lies, therefore, on the actor-networks and in their configurations (Law, 2009; Latour, 2005b).

However, one may ask, what precisely are actors-networks? A satisfying answer to this question might be given when we split the expression into 'actors' and 'networks'. In an ANT sense, an actor – named also as *actant* – is any agent that can associate, change associations, and disassociate with other agents (Latour, 2005b). When associated, *actants* establish what Law has named a "semiotic relationality", i.e. they define and reshape each other (Law, 2009, p. 146). This means that, each time an association is formed, actants acquire new attributes, new purposes, and new functions (Latour, 1999, p. 182).

Latour provides the example of a gun to explain how non-human entities become actants. He explains that, when placed in a box, a gun might be just a simple object, but when in the hands of a citizen, the same gun might affect the goals of its holder, creating possibilities, inducing to actions, and enabling a whole series of new associations and new outcomes. He says, "[a] good citizen becomes a criminal, a bad guy becomes a worse guy; a silent gun becomes a fired gun, a new gun becomes a used gun, a sporting gun becomes a weapon" (Latour, 1999, p. 180).

The association 'citizen-gun' exemplified by Latour shows not only how non-humans acquire agency, but also how actor-networks are formed. Network means, in this context, the capacity of actors to trigger actions in other actors, and the meanings that flow through such connections: It is neither a thing nor a shape, but a process. Actor-networks are therefore complex, fluid and temporary associations between different agents, in which each agent is transformed as interactions are performed. In Latour's own words:

> You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you. (Latour, 1999, p. 179)

By thinking society as the outcome of multiple and ever-changing actor-networks, we displace the human-centred perspective, and open up an entire new world of possibilities. Since ANT aims at mapping the actions that flow among different agents, I argue that it would be more productive to think of an actor-network*ing* theory. The use of the term in its continuous form emphasises the idea of movement, of change, and of instability. Actors are in constant networking with one another, and these processes of association and disassociation, of interaction, and of *agencement* are what matters[2].

Among the core concepts proposed by ANT, two are of particular importance. The classification of actors as either mediators or intermediaries is useful to explain the different forms of exercising agency. According to Latour (2005b), intermediaries are those actors who carry meaning without changing it, whereas mediators always modify (or transform, or translate, or distort) the meanings they carry. Nonetheless, such a distinction is neither fixed nor straightforward, since:

> A properly functioning computer could be taken as a good case of a complicated intermediary while a banal conversation may become a terribly complex chain of mediators where passions, opinions, and attitudes bifurcate at every turn. But if it breaks down, a computer may turn into a horrendously complex mediator while a highly sophisticated panel during an academic conference may become a perfectly predictable and uneventful intermediary in rubber stamping a decision made elsewhere.

In Chapter 5 these two concepts will help us to further understand how elements of social network games act on the cultural and social construction of play.

Although ANT does not provide rigid rules for analysing the networking of different actors, it does provide some useful recommendations. Latour's seminal work *Reassembling the Social* points out some methods for conducting ANT-based investigations: follow the connections, go slow, look closely, and keep everything flat (Latour, 2005b). To follow the connections means to look at the inscriptions generated by actors to see how new connections are forged, and how others are broken. In order to follow the connections closely, it is necessary to go slowly, creating a careful account of how actors recruit one another and, particularly, paying attention to the less visible actors – those who act behind the scenes. It is also necessary to look closely at the details, and to observe carefully how actions are performed. Finally, ANT recommends that distinctions and dichotomies be eliminated, so as to transform both powerful and powerless actors into equal points whose connections can be fairly traced. Besides those four recommendations, ANT also advocates that silent actors must always be accounted for, and that a principle of symmetry must be adopted: investigators must always take a middle point from which human and non-human actors can be equally observed (Latour, 2005b).

Such advice will prove to be useful when following the actor-networks that emerge in videogame play. However, a more detailed explanation of how humans and non-humans relate to each other is still needed. Even though ANT has shed a new light on the role of non-humans, and on the way heterogeneous relations can be mapped out, it does not

[2]As Law (2009, p. 146) explains, the terms actor-network is very similar to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea of *agencement*, which was later translated into English as 'assemblage'. For Deleuze and Guattari, "agencement implies specific connections with the other concepts. It is, in fact, the arrangement of these connections that gives the concepts their sense" (Phillips, 2006).

provide a clear vocabulary for naming those relations. Such vocabulary can be found in the thoughts of post-phenomenologist Don Ihde (Ihde, 1990).

Ihde's concepts have not been directly linked to ANT, and Bruno Latour has even criticised some aspects of looking at the human-technology relation from a phenomenological standpoint[3]. Nevertheless, the relationship formed between humans and artefacts becomes clearer when approached from Ihde's perspective. He shows, for instance, that artefacts might be embodied by, might function as mediators to, or might establish alterity relations with human beings.

The embodiment of technologies is, according to Ihde, a common practice in human life. When embodied, technologies transform the very notion of individuals' selves. Moreover, through embodiment, artefacts become not only perceptual extensions of human senses but also an intrinsic part of the way the world is experienced. Ihde (1990) illustrates such relation by citing eyeglasses and telescopes, which advance and transform body capacities while simultaneously giving new shapes to one's perception of the world. Another example is the driving of a car that, when embodied, enables the driver to experience the road and the world around him in a completely different way.

Mediated relations, on the other hand, transform technologies into translators of the world. Such experiences differ from embodiment in the sense that they require special modes of reading and interpretation, as well as particular interactions between the human and the non-human entities. Ihde explains that whereas embodiment makes humans experience the world *through* an artefact, mediations enable new perceptions *by* the technology. In other words, "what one sees is the instrument in itself and, from that, one can 'know' the world" (Ihde, 1990, p. 85). Thermometers and infrared cameras are examples of artefacts that, once interpreted, translate certain aspects of the environment.

The third set of relations explains how technologies interact *with* humans. In this case, objects become somewhat autonomous, and there is no clear mediation between the two entities. Sports cars, computers and videogames illustrate how objects become a quasi-other, to whom meaningful interactions are established (Ihde, 1990). The citizen-gun association previously explained also falls into the alterity relations category. This form of engagement is especially important for the purpose of this work. By seeing videogames as the autonomous actants to which players establish alterity relations, we can make clearer accounts of how identity performance arises from a complex and symmetric relation between humans and non-humans.

Although Ihde's theory has been criticised for implying that objects come into being only through human agency, his ideas are still helpful for our purpose. By reading Ihde with a different mindset, and by seeing not that humans determine the nature of objects, but rather that objects prescribe certain rules for both agents in any association, we can argue that the effects of interactions as well as interactions themselves are very much regulated by what non-humans can do as well as by how they function. Even though embodiment, mediation, and alterity – as described by Ihde – focus on the human part of actor-networks, from an ANT perspective, this emphasis is weakened and the focus can be placed on the connections in themselves. This is the perspective I adopt in the analysis of videogame play.

In summary, ANT invites us to "follow the actors" (Latour, 2005b) in search of their traces, the changes they produce, and the associations they establish. This work will therefore take videogames as the actors in the performance of self, and will follow the

[3]See for example Latour (1999); Smith (2003)

associations between players and technologies to see how their assembling works and which outcomes it generates. We have started this tracking with ANT. Now we turn attentions to studies of videogames, exploring how non-human actions have been conceived of in relation to play and game experience.

3.2 The Technology in Video Games

For a better understanding of how videogames and players work together for performing a meaningful identity, it is necessary to know the kinds of actions that are encouraged and enabled by the game as technology. This understanding will be constructed based on a two-dimensional schema proposed by media theorist Alexander Galloway (2006), in which both the location and the source of actions frame the play of videogames.

With regard to the spatial dimension, Galloway explains that videogame acts can take place either within or outside the game narrative. The actions that are part of the fictional world are named diegetic, whereas those that happen outside the game world but which directly affect gameplay are named non-diegetic acts. Examples of diegetic acts can be found in the shooting of enemies in FPS games like *Call of Duty*, and in the building and maintenance of a household in the simulation series The Sims. Non-diegetic acts, in turn, are seen not only in the push of the 'pause' button in any game, but also in the configuration of game menus, avatars and armoury, for instance. Although such distinction is often blurry – and has even been questioned[4] –, by locating the position of action in relation to the fictional space of the game it is possible to determine how game narrative, player interaction, and machine framing work together.

The second axis in Galloway's model entails the actions performed either by the operators (players), or by the machine itself. To illustrate operator and machine acts, Galloway cites the search and collection of power-ups, in which the search is defined as an operator act and the very attribution of special powers to the character is a machine act. However, the split between machine and operator acts is neither simple nor straightforward. As Galloway explains, "both the machine and the operator work together in a cybernetic relationship to effect the various actions of the videogame in its entirety" (Galloway, 2006, p. 5). Later in this session, we will see how the machine/operator split can be revisited in order to come closer to an ANT point of view. For the time being, this split is useful for pointing out that machine actions can be independent of human intervention.

This two-dimensional model is thus the basis for explaining what Galloway has named the "four moments of gamic action" (Figure 3.1): processes, algorithms, play, and structure. By locating the interplay between the player and the technology in those four quadrants, we can better see how videogame play becomes an actor-network. Moreover, the fact that neither pole of the schema is mutually exclusive emphasises the hybrid and complex nature of gaming experience.

In Galloway's terms, diegetic actions performed by machines reveal the agency and autonomy that reside in the materiality of processes. Those are the actions performed when the machine is on, but the operator is not interacting with it. Examples can be found not only on cut-scenes and in actions of non-player characters, but also in the

[4]See, for example, Jørgensen (2011).

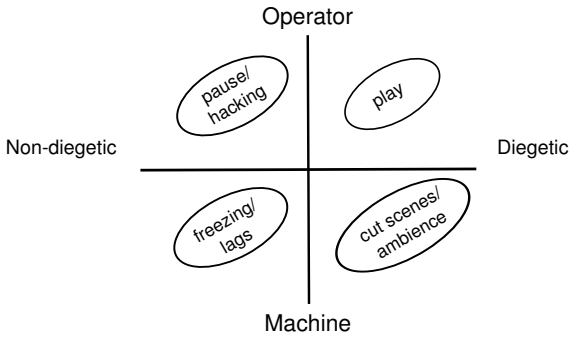

Figure 3.1: Galloway's model.

ambience acts perpetually performed in the game, which cannot be affected by players' activity. Diegetic machine acts are particularly interesting in the analysis of videogames as actor-networks, for they show how the agency of technology can be detached from human intentions.

Non-diegetic operator acts, on the other hand, are related to the activities performed by players outside the game world, but with direct effect on its configuration. Such acts allow an "experience from above" (Galloway, 2006), through which players configure, transform, and even hack the game. Galloway points out that those non-diegetic operator acts form the basis of play experience in simulation and real-time strategy games, for such games translate configuration into the very site of play. Therefore, they provide our main frame of reference for discussing the simulation game *The Sims Social*.

Diegetic operator acts, in their turn, can be seen as the very act of play, in the same sense proposed by Johan Huizinga (Huizinga, 1955) and Roger Caillois (Caillois, 2001). Those are probably what people usually think of when it comes to videogames: moving, jumping, fighting, running, and so on. Through diegetic actions, operators move around and express themselves within the game realm, creating the core experience of play. This type of interaction is important for it reveals the symbiotic and seamless relations that emerge from videogame and player during play.

Finally, there are also the non-diegetic machine acts, when technology imposes itself on the game structure. Both 'game over', freezing, and lags illustrate how the machine affects the game through non-diegetic acts. Although those actions might seem out of context when it comes to performances of identity, they must be taken into account in the analysis of play experience. Since non-diegetic machine acts can either enhance or impoverish the relation between player and games, they can strongly affect the performance of self.

Galloway's model thus provides the basis from which our analysis of SNGs can develop. Whereas ANT gives us the frames for looking into the human-technology associations, Galloway presents us with the initial map for exploring our field. This schema, however, still puts machine and human at different poles, going against ANT principles. In order to bring Galloway's thoughts and ANT closer, I will rethink the operator/machine poles not as a source of action but as forms of engagement, in which either the human or the non-human entity take the lead in the interaction.

To that aim, I rely on Salen and Zimmermman's (2004) modes of interactivity, for they name the multiple levels of engagement that take place between players and games. Although Salen and Zimmermman describe four modes of interactivity – namely cognitive, functional, explicit, and cultural – for the purpose of this work only the functional and

the explicit interactions are considered, since they are the ones in which machine and player are more intrinsically and explicitly related.

Functional interactivity emerges from the combination between the game affordances and the user actions upon those affordances. Those are functional engagements with the technology in itself, and they describe how players experience the design, the interface, and the system of a game. Examples of functional interactivity can be found in the way game environment is constructed, and in the forms of customisation of an avatar. In such interactions, the machine plays the main role, setting and defining how actions are performed.

Explicit engagements, on the other hand, emphasise the choices made by players, and their relations to the programmed events. Players explicitly engage with a system when deciding in which direction to move Pac-man, when performing a specific move in a fighting game, and when decorating a Sim house, for instance. At this level of interaction, players' decisions are more important and more explicit than the system itself.

By rethinking the sources of action in Galloway's model as modes of engagement, we can avoid the machine/player polarisation, and can bring them together in a more cohesive manner. The idea of the original schema is preserved, since players and games act differently according to the dimension of the engagement. Furthermore, the intertwining between human and non-human entities becomes more visible not only in the actions themselves but also in the effects those actions generate. Our analytic model for videogame play is thus proposed as Figure 3.2.

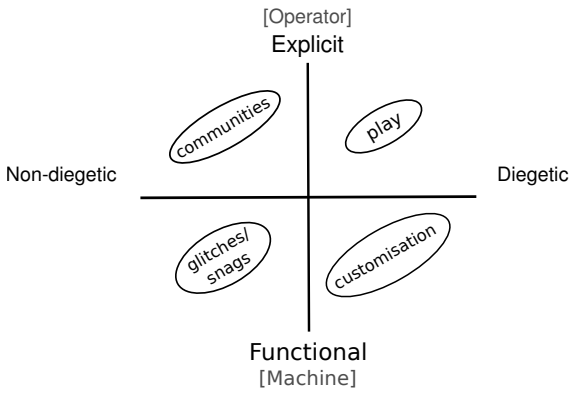

Figure 3.2: ANT model for analysing videogame play.

The space of action – whether within or outside the game world – is still an essential factor in this schema. Diegetic and non-diegetic interactions have different effects on both how the game is experienced and how identity is performed. For example, while diegetic interactions might have stronger effects in the player/game dynamics, the non-diegetic ones might have clearer outcomes in the player/community relations. As we will see in chapter 4, this is particularly true in the case of social network games.

In the following section, I will briefly situate the play experience within the proposed model, illustrating how the player/machine relation functions from an ANT standpoint. This illustration will borrow from several empirical works that have been made in the field of play experience and engagement.

3.3 Things Are Actors Too

We now have a complete map to analyse the play of videogames in general and of social network games in particular. ANT and Ihde have pointed out that non-humans are also part of what composes the social, and that videogames are quasi-other objects with which players establish alterity relations. In addition, Galloway and Salen & Zimmermman have provided the coordinates for following those actors and for tracing their connections. With these tools in hands, I can now situate videogame play within the analytic model proposed, as to further comprehend how technology becomes an actor in the game experience.

I start by the explicit engagements that take place within the game world, and which Galloway has called 'play' in its most direct sense. In explicit diegetic acts, technology acts as a mediator between players' desires and game opportunities, giving players as much choices and power as possible. Think, for example, about the number of movements a player of *Mortal Kombat* (Warner Bros, 1992) can perform when playing a given character. The game offers the different actions and their respective outcomes; it is up to the player to choose whether they want just beat the opponent or if they prefer to blow others away with enhanced moves. Another example comes from Kurt Squire's analysis of *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games, 1997), in which he explains how freedom and exploration form the basis of play:

> For players, part of what makes *San Andreas* interesting is the material that it provides for creating interesting interactions –whether in driving into the countryside in a 'pimped-out' 1970s-style sedan or stealing a hot dog truck and driving it through a recreation of a 1990s Compton neighborhood. (Squire, 2006, p. 21)

In diegetic functional acts, on the other hand, the machine controls players' actions directly and explicitly. An example of such machine-lead engagement can be found in the change of player perspective. The way players see the game world depends mostly on how the game is implemented, and the great majority of videogames offer just one point-of-view. However, this feature plays essential role in players' immersion, as Kristine Jørgensen explains by comparing two games, a first-person shooter and an action role-playing:

> Due to the first-person perspective of *Crysis*, the players describe that they merge with the figure in the sense of sharing and taking over its perceptual properties. Also, having a visible controllable figure on screen does not seem to create a sense of identification with it: in *Diablo 2*, the point-and-click interface emphasizes distance between player and figure, and the indirect control mechanisms provide a lack of tangibility and immediacy in the game world. (Jørgensen, 2009, p. 7)

This example shows how technology directly affects the way players see themselves in relation to the game. Whereas a first-person standpoint seems to create a sense of being in the game, a third-person view tends to foster a sense of otherness and control from outside. However, it is seldom possible to change a game perspective and, when it is possible, players have very few options to choose from.

The third type, non-diegetic functional relations, entails the actions in which technology affects gameplay from outside, and players have little control over it.

The examples provided by Galloway – freezing, lags, and other game failures – are relevant in this new model. In those cases, players' must try to find their own ways of bypassing machine's control. Those are probably the type of engagement in which machine is most clearly perceived, and game experience is mostly impoverished (Bainbridge and Bainbridge, 2007; Holmes, 2010; Lewis et al., 2010).

Differently from non-diegetic functional relations, the non-diegetic explicit ones can certainly provide ways of enriching game experience. As I discuss in Silva (2012), by joining game communities, players enhance their involvement with both co-players and the game itself through the sharing of game knowledge and the provision of mutual help. Similar findings are discussed by Sihvonen (2011) in her analyses of how modding practices become an essential part of *The Sims* gameplay. Those are non-diegetic explicit relations, the ones in which machine becomes the background to, and the subject matter of, players' actions.

From those examples, we can understand how players and games become actor-networks. Our analytic model is then complete and initially tested with general cases. We can now move on to our main question, the performance of identity in social network games. Because they increasingly play a part in peoples' everyday life, and because they blend together identity, play, and technology, SNGs prove to be an intriguing object of analysis in light of our ANT approach.

3.4 Conclusions

When applied to the analysis of videogames, the concepts and methods proposed by actor-network theory reveal more nuanced aspects of the player-machine symbiosis. By acknowledging that videogames are not merely tools, but rather active participants in the play experience, we can add new layers of meaning to social interaction and identity performance within virtual and playful environments. While ANT invites us to follow the actors, it also reminds us that agency is not restricted to humans.

In this chapter, ANT was used as the framework through which videogame play is explored. By looking at the intersections between the space of gamic actions and the levels of player engagement, we have seen the multiple layers of interaction and the different forms of agency performed by humans and non-humans in those actor-networks. The theoretical schema developed in this chapter is now our tool for analysing how things become actors in social network games.

CHAPTER 4

Social Network Games as Actor-Networks

Social network games (SNGs) – the games played on social networking sites – have transformed ordinary internet users into enthusiastic game players, giving form to a new gaming phenomenon. By combining simplicity, availability and affordability, these games have provided a fertile ground for entertainment and pastime. Moreover, they have facilitated the introduction of ludic activities into people's routine, popularising game play and changing the conventional stereotype attributed to gamers (Rao, 2008; Juul, 2010).

However, SNGs offer players more than just leisure and play. The fact that these games are embedded in a highly social environment makes them a playful stage in which player's identity can be performed, and played with. They also provide clear examples of the "ludification of culture" (Raessens, 2006), in which playful practices are increasingly integrated into everyday life, identity construction and modes of communication. Three key aspects work in tandem to transform SNGs in contemporary spaces for identity performance: their widespread accessibility, their ease of use, and their embedding in a meaningful social context.

SNGs are available for free on social network websites, and can be accessed through mobile phones and hand-held computers, which transform everyone with access to Internet into a potential player. In addition, no prior game knowledge is required from those who want to play SNGs, and these games are attractive also to players that do not have much time and effort to invest in such activities. Furthermore, the contexts in which these games are embedded translate play into a meaningful way of constructing and presenting not only an individual, but also a collective identity.

The performance of identity that takes place in social networking websites in general and SNGs in particular can be understood in both Goffman's and Butler's terms. In Goffman's terms, individuals actively and carefully manage the impressions they convey to their peers by selecting which information they share, with whom they share, and how they share. Numerous studies have already demonstrated how individuals use those online spaces to construct and express different aspects of their identities, actively and consciously adapting their 'selves' to specific social contexts (Hewitt and Forte, 2006; Liu, 2007; boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Rebs, 2011; Stenros et al., 2011).

In Butler's terms, subjectivity is enacted in the very disclosure of personal information. By performing identities that either conform or question social expectations, users of social networking websites cite dominant discourse and enact themselves individually and collectively. The use of social networking websites as a place for transgression and subversion of normative identities exemplifies this perspective (Cover, 2012; Van Doorn, 2010). When players of SNGs start using games for subversion and challenging of normative behaviours, they are enacting a Butlerian self through play as well. Borrowing Sundén's words, we can say therefore that individuals "write themselves into being"

(Sundén, 2002) in a playful space.

It can be said, therefore, that SNGs are social in relation to both peer-to-peer interaction, and discursive practices. However, the technological context in which those games are immersed makes them precisely the hybrid and complex social space as defined by ANT. Although one might claim that SNGs are *just games*, I argue that both the multiple engagements and the unique play experience they provide makes it impossible to punctualise those games in such way (Law, 1992)[1]. Furthermore, I insist that SNGs come into being only through a seamless blending of players and machine, which come together to create and transform interactions, effects, and possibilities. By resisting punctualisation and by being material-semiotic in essence, SNGs become clear examples of actor-networks. In the following sections, I briefly explain the three main elements in these actor-networks: the games, the players, and the inscriptions – or traces – their interactions generate. In Appendix B, a more complete list of game actors is presented.

4.1 The Games

Zynga's *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) is probably the first name that comes to people's minds when thinking of social network games. Although this association is not wrong, social network games go far beyond the simulation category which Zynga's *-ville* series fall into[2]. For being incorporated into social networking websites, particularly Facebook, these games have become the easiest and simplest contemporary forms of videogame play, offering ludic activities that range from arcade to gambling, and including puzzle, sports, and role-play.

Besides their dependence on social networking websites[3], SNGs are also distinctive for both their game design and their economics. Game design is intended to appeal to "the widest possible audience" (Paavilainen, 2010) – regardless of gender, age, and prior game knowledge – whereas the business model is based on a free-to-play system that stimulates micro-payments and viralisation. These characteristics have taken the category of "casual games" (Juul, 2010) a step further, and have shifted the understanding of games from products to online services (Sotamaa and Karppi, 2010; Jacobs and Sihvonen, 2011).

A close reading of SNGs in the simulation category shows how simplicity and easy-fun form the core dynamics of the most popular games currently played. Firstly, gameplay is based on simple and repetitive tasks performed through mouse-click. In *FarmVille*, for example, plotting, planting, collecting and fertilising are all executed in the same way: clicking. Secondly, every task accomplished renders collectable items and virtual currency, which will be used in future quests and missions. Lastly, gameplay can be interrupted at any time, and players can accomplish several goals even in a short game session. To complete this picture, we can add the juicy interface[4] and the positive themes, which

[1]Punctualisation is, according to ANT, the over simplification of a network into a single actor, as to give it the appearance of unity and, at the same time, to avoid coping with endless network ramifications.

[2]Zynga is the biggest SNGs producer and the most important developer of Facebook application, counting over 290 million monthly active users in April 2012. The company is located in California, USA. It develops browser-based games also for mobile platforms besides social network websites.

[3]Although it has been argued that SNGs can potentially be independent of social networking websites (Järvinen, 2011), examples of games whose technological platform is not a social networking website are still to be found.

[4]A juicy interface gives clear, cheerful, and continuous feedback for every action taken by the player

reinforce the appealing and casual dimensions of SNGs.

Gameplay is nearly the same in all simulation SNGs, those in which players are invited to build and develop different virtual environments, such as farms, cities, and medieval worlds. In some cases, like in *FarmVille*, in *CastelVille*, and in *The Sims Social*, players start by customising their avatars, and proceed by executing very simple tasks through which the basic gameplay is explained. Then, they are assigned the first missions. As missions are accomplished, new quests and new activities are unlocked. The more players advance in the game, the more they rely on interactions with other players.

Another distinctive feature is the asynchronous multi-player experiences fostered by SNGs. Although game advancements are tied to cooperation and peer-to-peer interactions, those engagements do not necessarily take place during the same play session – and hardly do so[5]. In other words, players interact with one another indirectly through the channels offered by social networking websites, providing mutual aid without being actually present in a shared game space. This asynchronous play creates a distinct form of sociability, and affords a great degree of flexibility for both players and game design (Rao, 2008; Meurs, 2011).

When it comes to economics, SNGs can be seen as a groundbreaking step in the game industry. The free-to-play model that underlies those games emerges from a unique combination of game design with monetisation strategies, in which the design fosters micro-transactions and, at the same time, design itself is carefully crafted and reshaped according to its effects on business metrics such as viralisation and retention (Deterding, 2010). As a result, players have a game where achievements and levelling up largely depend upon either investment of real money or continual and responsive help of numerous co-players.

One of the marketing-related design strategies most employed in SNGs is the constraining of player's activities by time. Usually implemented in the form of either 'energy' restrictions or limited rewards, these actions give shape to what Tyni, Sotamaa and Toivonen have named "rhythm design", and are key forms of supporting engagement, retention and sociability while stimulating real-money expenditure (Tyni et al., 2011). Game designer and researcher Sebastian Deterding further explains:

> [T]he usage pattern of small gameplay sessions interspersed throughout the workday is catered to by specific time-based game mechanics that at the same time cater to the core business model - offering players to circumvent waiting/grinding time through micropayments (Deterding, 2010, p. 10)

This merging of gameplay and consumption practices has raised strong criticism from both game developers and game researchers alike. Due to limited social mechanics and to the restriction of cooperative play to exchanging of game resources, SNGs have been accused of commodifying friendship bounds and of exploiting social principles (Björk, 2010; Liszkiewicz, 2010; Meurs, 2011). Besides that, SNGs are also dismissed for not being social (Deterding, 2010) and even for not being games at all (Bogost, 2010). Nonetheless, several studies have already demonstrated not only the multiple ways through which

(Schell, 2008; Juul, 2010).

[5]Some synchronous SNGs were launched by the time this thesis was written, and quickly gained popularity. However, even after this change, asynchronous multi-play remains a distinctive aspect of social networking games in general.

sociability permeates play experience, but also the ability SNGs have to engage a vast audience that does not fall into the conventional stereotype attributed to gamers[6].

Such an ability is also translated into numbers. The popularity of SNGs has increased steadily in the last 3 years, and the number of players of Facebook games reached 230 million in July 2012 – roughly 25% of monthly Facebook users worldwide (Facebook, 2012). The three most popular Facebook games, for instance, attracted respectively 6.9, 6.7 and 6.4 million daily active users in that period. Despite all the criticism against the games, players themselves have shown that they have multiple and positive experiences when engaging with SNGs. In the following section, I discuss who these players are, and what experiences they have when playing SNGs.

4.2 The Players

Although it is difficult to give precise figures about who the players of SNGs are, due to the fact that such data is still strategic information for game companies, it can be said that the majority of SNG players differ considerably from their stereotypical console and videogame counterparts. The initial conception that SNG players were housewives in their forties (Information Solutions Group, 2010; Morrison, 2010) has been changing, and it is now understood that the audience of SNGs is becoming more and more diverse (Deterding, 2010; Digital Buzz, 2012).

As Jesper Juul explains, SNGs appeal to casual and hardcore gamers alike, since they afford both styles of play. Casual gamers make low time and effort investments in play, and are more likely to take those games as simple and pleasant pastimes. Hardcore players, on the other hand, might play SNGs during several hours per day, and might attempt to beat any challenge those games have to offer. In any case, the flexibility of game design becomes a precondition for accommodating multiple modes of play without compromising players' experience and enjoyment (Juul, 2010).

However, one may wonder, what kinds of enjoyment those players seek in those games. Jane McGonigal suggests, for instance, that people enjoy playing SNGs because they feel productive just by keeping their minds occupied (McGonigal, 2011, p. 30). In addition, those games are said to offer "distracting gap-fillers and relaxing micro-breaks throughout the workday" (Paavilainen, 2010). Deterding complements McGonigal and Paavilainen's claims by explaining that, through these games, players can have a "pleasant boredom", i. e., a "quasi-meditative cognitive relief through repetitive activity with low suspense, low cognitive load and low emotional intensity" (Deterding, 2010, p. 22).

Besides offering a pleasant boredom, SNGs serves also as playful social tools. Wohn et all have empirically analysed how games played on Facebook are transformed into means of creating, maintaining and even enhancing social relationships among players. According to their study, several players start playing SNGs on friends' recommendation, and they keep playing also for social reasons (Wohn et al., 2011). Despite the burgeoning debates around the social in SNGs, this and other studies have shown that players have found alternative ways not only of circumventing the lack of social tools available in the games itself, but also of creating their own forms of social play.

The links between modes of play and expected outcomes were empirically studied by

[6]See, for example, Meurs (2011); Meyer (2011); Patatas (2011); Tyni et al. (2011); Wohn et al. (2011).

Wohn and Lee (2012), who pointed out three other reasons for playing SNGs besides pastime: common ground, reciprocity, and coping. Their study revealed that common ground and shared sense of identity are constructed through the customisation of both avatars and game spaces. Reciprocity, on the other hand, is achieved through publication of game advancements, exchange of in-game items, and again customisation of game environment. The last outcome in their list, coping, is achieved through the sharing of game-related messages and publication of statuses on Facebook walls. This might be one of the main factors that drive retention, as Sung et. al suggest, "players quickly learn that they feel better when playing; and so a kind of reinforcement loop develops, in turn, lead to be habitual behavior" (Sung et al., 2010, p. 3652).

The unique relationships players establish with games affect even the very manner in which those games are developed. Players' actions, opinions and suggestions have been continually monitored and incorporated in the design process, which results in games that remain in "a perpetual beta phase" (Jacobs and Sihvonen, 2011). Melinda Jacobs and Tanja Sihvonen (2011) suggest that such network-based participatory design have completely transformed the standard game design process, giving players more powerful roles in their relationships with game developers.

To sum up, the population of SNG players has proven to be not only numerous and diverse, but also highly engaged and powerful. Those players have changed both the stereotype attributed to videogame players, as well as the very manner in which videogames are developed. By translating simple and repetitive game mechanics into creative and compelling forms of entertainment and social interaction, social network games and their players have given new contours to the meaning of the word *'social'*, emphasising the hybrid and complex nature of social practices. It can be said therefore that the association between human and non-human entities became clearer when it comes to social network games. The next step will be to know which traces this association leaves behind, and what the theoretical model proposed in this thesis has to say about them.

4.3 The Inscriptions

From the previous discussions, it has become clearer how games and players together become actor-networks. It is now necessary to know which traces such associations leave behind, so we can follow the actors during their connections – as suggested and continuously reinforced by ANT[7]. Inscriptions also render accountable the processes of translation, another core term in actor-network theory. Through the inscriptions, we can recognise and understand the layers of engagement forged between different entities. To follow the actors, we need therefore to learn how to read their inscriptions and how to recognise translations (Latour, 1992).

The first place where such inscriptions can be found is certainly in the games themselves. By actually playing SNGs, and by interacting with multiple co-players, it is possible to see how machine and operator – as Galloway puts it – act together. The way the game is designed, the options given to players, and the possibilities opened to peer-to-peer interaction offer the initial elements that can be situated in the theoretical

[7]Latour (2005b, p.8) emphasises that the social makes itself visible "by the traces it leaves (under trials) when a new association is being produced between elements which themselves are in no way 'social'".

model proposed in Chapter 3. Those are the elements that belong to the diegetic side of our model, for they are intrinsically related to play and customisation within the game world.

Non-diegetic engagements, in their turn, can be identified through the texts and images left in the community of players formed on both Facebook and official game page and forum. Player-generated content reveals more nuanced details about the player-machine relations, since they bring those relations outside the private spaces of the game world, and put them in a broader cultural context. Pictures related to game environment and players' avatars as well as the comments made on those pictures can reveal, for instance, how players perceive their own and others' actions upon the possibilities created by the game system. Similarly, messages related to glitches and errors in the game, together with threads about game quests and in-game objects, provide clues about how the machine makes itself visible and predominant in the relation.

Figure 4.1: Customising a Sim: A functional diegetic act.

That being said, we can now locate the play of the Facebook game *The Sims Social* in our theoretical schema, in order to see the material-semiotic actions that emerge from this game. *The Sims Social* was chosen for the reason that this game is a life simulation in which players can customise their avatars (Sim) and Sim's homes using the numerous in-game items available. In addition, because it is a real-life – rather than a farm, city or medieval world – simulation, *The Sims Social* brings closer fantasy and reality, or play and everyday routine. Instead of immersing in environments created mainly out of imagination alone, players can base their modes of play in their real lives, either to reproduce or to transform it completely in the game realm. The very slogan of *The Sims Social* – "play with life" – indicates the intentional closeness with players' real-world experiences. Like other games in the simulation genre, and similarly to the previous versions in the *The Sims* series, *The Sims Social* is intended to transport players' real-life experiences into the game world, opening up space for experimentation, challenge, and discovery (Griebel, 2006; Nutt and Railton, 2003).

The game begins with the customisation of player's avatars, named Sim. Every Sim has a gender, a name and surname, and a personality – this last one must be chosen out of nine options available. After defining the 'inner' traits of their Sims, players can set their look by changing hair colours and styles as well as outfits. Once the Sim is created,

changes can still be made and are even encouraged[8]. However, the great majority of changes will be charged with some form of virtual currency. The range of items available changes continually so as to give more options to players and, simultaneously, to create a demand for new products.

Figure 4.1 shows the customisation screen of avatars. Through this screen, players translate the game system into a meaningful representation or idealisation of themselves. This screen also works as a kind of fitting-room, where players can try out different configurations for their avatars, before creating a final (but still changeable) character. Although the primary use of those controls is functional, i.e. intended to set the basis for play, in Chapter 5 I will show how this customisation screen becomes a key element in peer-to-peer communication outside the game world.

In light of the theoretical model proposed in Chapter 3, it can be said that the customisation of a Sim is a diegetic functional act, since in those interactions players are completely constrained by the game system. Although they can choose among several options of hairdos and outfits, for instance, they cannot create their own items, nor change the items already available. This is a diegetic act because it takes place within the game narrative, as if players were chosen their everyday outfits. This is also a functional act, for the game system predominates over players' freedom of choice.

Figure 4.2: Decorating Sim's homes: An explicit diegetic act.

This lack of freedom in avatar customisation is probably one of the most distinctive differences between *The Sims Social* and the computer and console versions of *The Sims*. Whereas players of previous titles could actively modify game content and forms to suit their individual purposes, as demonstrated by Sihvonen (2011), such degree of customisation is not allowed in the Facebook version of the game. Technological constraints together with commercial purposes may be the main reasons for such limitation.

Once the Sim is customised, players can start furnishing and decorating the Sim's homes. The latest version of the game included three home locations: a beach house, a modern flat, and a suburban house. Both the flat and the suburban house are immediately available to all gamers, whereas the beach house can be purchased for a fair amount of virtual cash. Gameplay consists basically of building, furnishing, and decorating the Sim's

[8]Players can purchase different traits or hair styles, for example, at any time during play.

homes and improving the Sim's skills. In addition, players can develop relationships with co-players – or neighbours. The number of neighbours as well as the kind of relationship maintained with each neighbours greatly affects how the game is played. The more neighbours and the more long-lasting bonds players have, the easier it is to succeed in completing the quests assigned by the game.

The 'shopping' screen (Figure 4.2) brings forward the full range of options for customisation of the game environment. The simple, informative and intuitive interface is a core characteristic in social network games in general. Segmented in similar ways as in real-life department stores, this screen translates consumption practices to gameplay. The simple and yet compelling design also purports to stimulate players' creativity and, simultaneously, to drive play towards real-money expenditure.

Both the construction and change of the Sim's homes as well as the maintenance of relations with other Sims can be located at the 'play' quadrant of our schema, or that space of explicit diegetic acts, for those connections allow players to act more freely. Although players are to some extent limited by the possibilities offered by the system, the choices are far more diverse and dynamic than those allowed during avatar customisation. The players' creativity and self-expression are strongly encouraged, whereas the machine itself becomes the ground for creativity to take place. Moreover, free development and change of game environment constitutes the very experience of the game.

Figure 4.3: Technological failures as functional non-diegetic acts. [Image changed for preserving players' anonymity.]

While the active play of *The Sims Social* provides information about the diegetic engagements between player and system, both the participation in the community of players on Facebook and the analysis of content available on the official game page and forum allow us to see the traces left by non-diegetic engagements. In those spaces, we can see not only how players circumvent the technological limitations imposed by the game,

but also how they react when facing the sovereignty of the system. In both cases, human and non-human actors can be followed through the images and texts exchanged on those sites, and through the relations established around that content.

Figure 4.4: Creating communities: An explicit non-diegetic act.

The use of Facebook resources to create and maintain groups of players is a common way of creating affiliation and enhancing collaboration within and around the game. For example, Figure 4.3 shows how individual disappointments with technological failure are brought to the community, and become a source of support. Facebook groups allow also new forms of performing identities, as in the case of Brazilian players who make nationality an important aspect of play and group formation (Figure 4.4). Moreover, it is possible to claim that players translate, in Latour's sense, some communicative and performative functions of gameplay to these groups, since the game itself is limited in some of those aspects.

Texts, images and players' spaces are thus the traces left by the actor-networks assembled from SNGs and their players. Those are the immutable mobiles, "textual and visual representations that remain stable through space and time" (Ritzer, 2005, p. 2), defined by ANT. Those inscriptions provide the answers to the questions that ANT approaches seek to address, namely how relations are established, how they function, and which effects they produce. They compose, therefore, the working material from which our analyses, theories and hypotheses can be developed. Furthermore, such inscriptions allow us to carry out a research that is simultaneously reflexive and situated, in which reflexivity comes from both the very act of play and the direct engagement with other players, and situatedness is provided by the participation in a broader community of players.

4.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, our theoretical model was illustrated and supported through a close analysis of social network games in the simulation genre, particularly *The Sims Social*. By explaining how non-human (games) and human (players) actors work together to transform SNGs into actor-networks, and by defining which inscriptions can be followed in the study of such assemblages, I have concluded our theoretical and methodological toolbox, and have laid the ground for the investigation of identity performance.

We have seen that both the game itself and the communities of players on Facebook are the sources of inscriptions through which our actors can be followed. We have seen also

that through the inscriptions left by the interactions between game and players we can 'read' the translations of play. The game space in *The Sims Social* becomes a simplified version of *The Sims*, which is in its turn a digital version of a doll's house – even if this house is, as Sihvonen (2011) shows, subverted and appropriated in numerous and creative ways.

In the following chapter I will focus specifically on identity performances in *The Sims Social*, discussing how the four types of interaction between players and games affect the way the self is constructed and presented. In doing so, not only will I show how contemporary performances of identity are material-semiotic in character, but I will also bring technology to the forefront in definitions of the term *social*.

CHAPTER 5

The Presentation of Self in SNGs

I have so far looked into the play of social network games through an articulation of actor-network theory and games studies, situating the actions performed by players and machines in the analytic model sketched out in Chapter 3. This model has helped us to see not only how humans and non-humans come together to form actor-networks, but also which traces are left from those associations. Now I will follow those inscriptions more closely, analysing what they reveal about identity performance and contemporary presentations of self[1].

This analysis is grounded in Anthony Giddens' (1991) writings on the fragmentation and dispersal of the modern self. For Giddens, present-day world – or late modernity as he calls it – which is characterised by the emergence of identities that shape (and are shaped by) the institutions of modernity. In this sense, the self becomes what he calls a "reflexive project": a continual negotiation and articulation between intimate aspects of personal life and social connections of a very wide scope. Such a reflexive project results in identities that are fragmented and dispersed, and which are given meaning through the coherent narratives individuals construct about themselves.

Seen from this perspective, social network games become clear examples of institutions of modernity. In these games, personal identities and social interaction are mixed together to create playful narratives that are maintained and enriched on a daily basis. Moreover, those games create the preconditions for fragmentation and dispersal, namely the separation of time and space and the disembedding of social relations. On the one hand, asynchronous gameplay and casual game mechanics make it possible to engage with the game at almost any time and from virtually everywhere. The social tools offered by social networking websites, on the other hand, open endless possibilities for connection and interaction with other players regardless of geographical location or physical constraints. The reflexive projects fostered by those games are therefore both hybrid in nature and playful in character, which adds a new dimension to the modern identities proposed by Giddens. Besides being fragmented and dispersed, contemporary selves are also playful and technological.

Whereas previous accounts of identity performance through playful media have focused on how players appropriate technology to express themselves, my approach takes a different direction, showing how selves become the very product of technological affordances. In other words, I claim that it is not the either conscious or unconscious self that is made known through the game, but rather it is the game that dictates and drives what selves can be. Technology explicitly imposes itself on the human interactions, experiences, and perceptions. It is not to say however that media and new technologies

[1]Since the purpose of ANT approaches is to be primarily descriptive, a combination of ANT and game studies in this case is necessary in order to provide an analysis of this phenomenon that is descriptive and analytic at the same time.

condition cultural and social changes, but rather that culture and society are co-produced by hybrid and complex actors.

In her inspiring work *Players Unleashed!*, Tanja Sihvonen (2011) has clearly demonstrated how players' modification of previous versions of *The Sims* added new meanings not only to the game itself, but also to the very act of play. She has asked how game code and players' identity are constructed and negotiated through modding practices. She has concluded that *The Sims* has "unleashed" its players by allowing them "not only [to] play the game, but [to] modify its contents and form to suit their individualist self-expressive purposes".

Taking Sihvonen's work as my starting point, I ask here a different – but related – question. I am interested in seeing how the players of the Facebook game *The Sims Social* are leashed back to the game as technology, particularly in the articulations of game elements and identity performance. My ultimate goal is to disclose the subtle and creative interplay between players' selves and the game system.

In the following sections, I show how *The Sims Social* becomes a space for the performance of identities that are technologically driven. I also take the examples provided by *The Sims Social* to reframe Butler's and Goffman's thoughts in the new scenario of mediated communication. Although *The Sims Social* is the main object of study in this investigation, other simulation social network games might also be cited to reinforce and enrich my claims. That being said, I start by looking at the relations between game avatars and players' identities.

5.1 The Avatar

The customisation of an avatar marks the first contact between players and *The Sims Social*, and represents the point at which the gender, the traits and the style of the Sim are chosen. In this moment, players are constrained by the machine in every possible way – from the limitation of gender to male and female to the lack of options in body shapes, and including very few differentiations in skin colour. This means, for instance, that androgynous characters are non-existent, as are the fat, the black, and the skinny. When it comes to race, the game is even more restrictive, offering very little racial diversity to the game world.

Differently from the computer and console versions of *The Sims*, it is not possible for players of *The Sims Social* to design their own Sim features – such as hair, skin, and outfits. Whereas the modification – or modding – of previous instalments in the game series extended players' agency and added another cultural dimension to the play of *The Sims* (Sihvonen, 2011), the free-to-play title has completely cut that out, leaving to players only the possibility of combining the items already available. The sovereignty of machine, however, seems not to impoverish game experience. Figure 5.1 shows one example of the numerous posts asking for peers' opinions on clothes and style choices published daily in the community of players on Facebook. The outfit contest that has been organised by game producers provides also various demonstrations of how creativity and system limitations are negotiated during play.

With regard to identity performance, the avatar becomes then a mix between game affordances and players' physical traits and personal desires, or between body, imagination, and technology. That is the case, for example, of a player who intended to

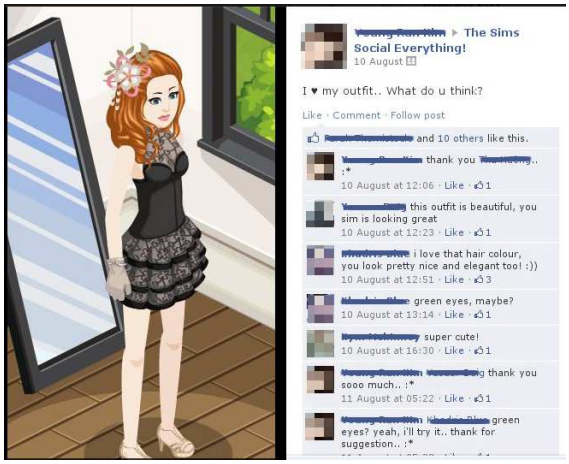

Figure 5.1: The self in the avatar. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

create an avatar as an image of herself, but due to game restrictions she could only have an image of herself in her teenage years (clamcc, e-mail conversation held between August 26 and 29, 2012). Another example comes from a twelve-year-old player who created a Sim that combines some of her real features – such as hair and eye colours – with an idealised version of herself in terms of clothes and behaviour (karfag, e-mail conversation held between September 1 and 6, 2012). By inviting players to "play with life" and, at the same time, offering a very limited range of real-life options in avatar customisation, *The Sims Social* imposes itself on players' presentations of self, leading to avatars that are both 'me' and 'other'.

Sex, gender and sexuality provide other interesting links between game and players. In *The Sims Social*, it is possible for players to maintain both homo- and heterosexual relationships. Although the game does not constrain the character of the relationships, Sims' gender is still delineated according to stereotypical definitions of femininity and masculinity. This is seen, for example, in the specific male and female clothes, hairstyles, and accessories available. Whereas female Sims usually have several options of dresses as well as other very feminine outfits and ornaments, their male counterparts can only wear typical masculine clothes. In addition, since previous titles in *The Sims* series were played mainly by females, developers of *The Sims Social* have clearly prioritised female-oriented content, particularly in the weekly themes and temporary quests. The following excerpt from a discussion on the official game forum illustrates how the link between gender and sex in *The Sims Social* is questioned by players[2]:

> I was very disappointed to realize that my reward for the second phase of the closet (female: dress, male: tux top) was restricted to my Sim's SEX! How messed up is that? Please don't put gender roles on my Sim! If my Sim wants to wear a tux instead of a dress (or if a male Sim wants to wear a dress instead of a tux), we should be allowed to! That restriction is preposterous! Make it to where we can wear BOTH! (Player 1 - August 28, 2012)

The above example shows how the discursively constructed identities – as explained

[2]All players' posts are reproduced here exactly as they exist in the game forum so as to maintain the richness of language and deepness of expression. Players' identities however have been changed for privacy reasons.

by Judith Butler (1990; 1993) – are reproduced and reinforced though the game system. By defining how male and female avatars should look like, and by leaving no room for questioning and transgression, the game forcefully inserts players into the same discursive practices that take place in the physical world. The materiality of the game thus becomes the product and the producer of gendered identities in Butler's sense. Some attempts to subvert game restrictions are seen in the gender-swapping performed by both male and female players. Since the game does not bound Sims' sex to players' sex – and it is possible even to change a Sim's sex at any time during the game –, some users create Sims with the opposite sex as their own.

Further empirical analyses of community of player in Facebook suggest also that, despite the fact that technology explicitly imposes itself over players' sense of self, the links between payer and their avatars are still strong. It is common to see, for example, players referring to their avatars as "me", particularly when looking for peers' opinions as well as for in-game romantic partners, as expressed both in the excerpt reproduced on Figure 5.2 and in the thread showed in Figure 5.3:

Figure 5.2: Excerpt of thread in game community. [Image changed for preserving player's anonymity]

Besides fostering performative identities – or the identities enacted (often unconsciously) according to dominant discourse –, *The Sims Social* in particular and social network games in general also affect the conscious management of impression, as proposed by Goffman (1959). In Goffman's sense, selves are produced and reshaped to fit the multiple social contexts in which individuals are embedded. When peer-to-peer encounters are framed by media, as in the case of social network games, it is possible to argue that technology becomes they key factor in how impressions are managed. Players' class, gender or social conditions are much less visible and play much lesser roles in such mediated performance of self than choices in avatars' skin colour, hairdo, and outfits, for instance.

Instead of conveying identities through individual behaviour, physical features and material possessions, players must rely on game elements and styles of play to manage how they want to be perceived. In an empirical study about players' choices referring to the purchase of virtual items on social network games, Rebeca Rebs (2011) has revealed how some in-game goods become an intrinsic part of players' personality, and are used as symbolic markers both for building affiliations and for reinforcing distinctions. This confirms my hypothesis that technological and social norms equally affect the performance of self through game play, creating expressions of self that are hybrid in nature.

Finally, there are the expressions of identity though avatars' names. When customising their Sim, players are asked to create also a name[3]. It is interesting to see how most of

[3]Sims' names contain only Latin letters, numbers and spaces. Special characters are not accepted.

Figure 5.3: A female player refers to her Sim as 'me'. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

the players analysed in this study employ their own names in their avatars. Sometimes the player's first name is combined name with another aspect of either a personal or a collective identity, so as to shape the avatar's full name. An eighteen-year-old Haitian player refers, for example, to her ethnic identity not only through the avatars' physical features – such as skin, hair and eye colours – but also through the avatar's surname 'Mocha'. She adds: "I didn't want to create something that was too far from me because I am black and am proud to be Haitian so I wanted to represent that" (farthe, chat conversation held on September 3, 2012).

The presentation of identity through display names has also been discussed in relation to the use of both social networking websites (Mainsah, 2011) and instant messaging software (Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2011) by ethnic minority youth. In both cases, screen names revealed the ways users expressed their identities by blending together ethnicity, cultural affiliations, imagination, and technology. Whether it is within the game world – as in *The Sims Social* – or in other instances of peer interactions such as those explored by Mainsah and Leurs & Ponzanesi, digital media become key actors in identity performances, bringing together technological and social norms in fluid and complex dynamics.

Using an ANT vocabulary, the game elements that compose players' characters can be defined as both intermediaries and mediators. When included in the game space without being actively put into play, i.e. when 'resting' in the customisation screen alone, those elements act as intermediaries of cultural meanings. They bring to the game some of the cultural elements existing in the real world of game producers. Once those elements are assembled together and effectively put into play, they are converted into mediators, since the meanings they carry are transformed according to the players' own cultural embedding and expressive purposes. In other words, they act as mediators between producers' and players' cultural symbols and meanings.

The avatar is thus one of the several means by which self and machine meet and shape one another. While game restrictions emphasise the technological aspects of players' avatars, the player' imagination and desire add new meanings to media affordances and uses. The fact that avatar customisation is a functional act stresses the role of machine in the actor-network. Now I will turn to the associations in which players themselves come

to the forefront of human/non-human interactions: the explicit diegetic acts that define the creation of game environments.

5.2 The Environment

Once a Sim is created, players can start furnishing and decorating their Sim's houses. Currently, the game offers three different environments that have their own thematic furniture and objects: a suburban house, a beach house, and a luxurious flat. Even though furniture and decorations are usually related to specific houses, players are free to choose how and when to change their spaces. The total of in-game items as well as the type of interactions they foster changes on a weekly basis, for continual change in game content is one of the main design strategies employed in social network game at large. Nonetheless, it is possible to say that players have at their disposal over 1500 different items, distributed among decorative and functional objects, furniture, and construction materials[4].

Figure 5.4: The 'House of the Week' contest stimulates players' imagination and ability to create meaningful environments.

Despite both the limited range of products at players' disposal and the impossibility of customising players' own items, highly creative and complex environments have been created, as demonstrated by the 'House of the Week Contest' organised by game producers and exemplified in Figure 5.4. Moreover, players' agency – which can be noticed in the way objects are combined, organised, and used – is at the core experience of playing *The Sims Social*. In this sense, the game is then simultaneously restrictive and empowering, framing play and yet stimulating agency, innovation and engagement. The customisation of game environments, therefore, provides a fertile ground for identity performance.

An interesting point about how the game creates opportunities for both enactment and exploration of the self is seen in the narratives created around the game spaces. At the same time that *The Sims Social* intends to be a real-life simulation, the themes introduced in the game weekly add new layers of playfulness and imagination to players' experiences. The 'Christmas Week', for instance, created a rich relation between the

[4]Most of the functional objects allow multiple interactions, and some interactions can be performed by two Sims at a time – varying according to the type of relationship existing between the Sims. In addition, some items are unlocked for purchase as players level up.

game, players' identity, and real-world events – as seen for example in Figure 5.5. In the same way, the Japanese Week not only encouraged a playful form of "identity tourism" (Nakamura, 2002) but also evoked the memories of the tsunami that hit Asia and Japan in 2011, as suggested in the following message, left on the official game forum.

> I notice for Japanese week there is a 'tsunami t-shirt' in the shop with a large picture of a wave. Don't you think that's a bit insensitive? A lot of people died in Asia and Japan when the tsunami's struck - it's not something I feel inappropriate to a game. I find it a little offensive to be honest. (Player 2 - August 30, 2012)

By creating houses that reflect not only their tastes but also their feelings and values, individuals translate play into a presentation of self. Similarly to the creation of avatars, the composition and change of environments shows how game system is merged to human intention as to give meaning not only to play but also to identities. Conversely to the case of avatars, in the customisation of environments, players' agency overshadows machine restrictions, leaving more room for appropriation, experimentation, and re-signification. Furthermore, the aspects of identity that are performed through the game environment are usually more subtle and difficult to recognise when compared with that of the avatar, for fewer direct links between game and player are provided when it comes to players' properties[5].

Figure 5.5: Christmas time also in the game world. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

According to Anthony Giddens (1991), selves are given meaning though the coherent narratives individuals create thought their lives. Such coherence is found also in the playful narratives developed within the game world, such as in the attempts to create spaces that represent real-life traits or preferences. This is the case, for example, of a 41-year-old American interviewee who decorated her house with several computers, and included a barbecue grill in her garden because she loves both computers and grilling out in real life (clamcc, e-mail conversation held between August 26 and 29, 2012). Another example comes from a 45-year-old Brazilian player who revealed that the fact that she does not change the furniture and decorations in her game properties very often reflects

[5]It is easier to recognise, for instance, when players' physical traits are reproduced on their avatars.

her real-life issues related to change and renewal (katreg, e-mail conversation held between September 1 and 6, 2012).

An important distinction between performance of identity through avatar and through game space is found in the functionality of objects. Since the Sims' clothes, features, and accessories have only aesthetic purposes within the game, they are more likely to be chosen solely because of players' preferences. Furniture and decorative items, on the other hand, are essential to both players' level up and achievements of some quests. For this reason, the functionality of objects might have stronger effects on players than their symbolic value in some cases. Besides that, promotional objects — such as those sponsored by Dove and Toyota – collaborate to blur the boundaries between reality and play, and between real-life and ludic identities.

The customisation of environments in *The Sims Social* as well as in other social network games thus provides another context for the performance of self according to both Butler's and Goffman's perspectives. In this new scenario, both impression management and citation of discourse takes place through use and display or in-game objects. Again, machine becomes producer and product of social dynamics, and gameplay becomes a form of self-presentation, self-perception, and self-exploration. By building their online homes consciously and carefully, players not only convey a specific image of themselves but also reflect on their own identity. In this process, "online and offline identities are formed in an interreferential process through which people make sense of both material and virtual existence" (Crowe and Bradford, 2006).

Collective identities are easy to recognise when enacted through gameplay. Aspects of location and nationality, for example, might be expressed through specific game icons such as flags, monuments, and other cultural symbols. The American flag highlighted in Figure 5.6 is a clear illustration. The fact that such markers are not usually seen on players' houses brings into light an important relation between the game system and the performance of players' identity. For example, since only the American and the British flags were available in *The Sims Social*, players from different nationalities or living in places other than the USA and the United Kingdom might be less willing to place such objects in their spaces. Other games, such as FarmVille, offer flags of several countries besides the USA and the UK, which might encourage more diverse performances of national identity[6] .

Figure 5.6: The American flag as a symbol of cultural identity. [American flag highlighted by the author.]

[6]In fact, from the 30 players visited, only 5 displayed the American flag and 2 displayed the Union Jack in one of their properties.

Another interesting relation established between social network games and their players are found in the appropriation of game spaces for artistic expression through what has been named "tile art". Instead of building homes and farms – as it was expected by game designers – players use the game space and the game elements to create carefully crafted images, expressing their artistic skills (Figure 5.7). These tile arts became very popular among players of *FarmVille*, but they have been increasingly appearing in *The Sims Social* as well. Such use of the game space is probably the clearest example of how multiple and imaginative the outcomes and inscriptions generated by actor-networks might be.

In the same way that the customisation of players' avatars works as both mediation and intermediation, the creation and change of game environment both carry and change cultural meanings. Whether it is in the appropriation of game elements for creating tile arts, or in the playful reproduction of suburban American homes, objects that initially function as intermediaries become powerful mediators in the hands of creative players.

Figure 5.7: Game elements are appropriated in the performance of players' artistic skills on *FarmVille* (l) and on *The Sims Social* (r).

From this analysis, it can be argued therefore that the game system becomes the raw material from which selves are created and enacted. Avatars and environments shape and are shaped by the way players perceive themselves, and want to be perceived by their peers. Machine and self become one and the same. However, there is also a third element in the performance of self through the play of social network games: the *social* in its most ordinary understanding. By organising and controlling not only how selves are reproduced within the game world but also how players interact with one another, those games touch also the third dimension of Giddens' construction of modern selves, namely the organisation and control of social relations, regardless of time and space constraints. In the next section, I discuss how technology makes itself visible and active in the *social* of social network games.

5.3 The Social

One of the main distinctions between social network games and other videogames lies in the way social interaction and collaborative play are fostered and organised by game rules. Whereas in traditional videogames collaboration and peer-to-peer interaction emerge from play, in social network games it happens the other way around and play comes out as the very product of players' interactions. By taking full advantage of both the communication

tools as well as the social graph afforded by social networking websites, these games create deep and close ties between playfulness and sociability.

The social in social network games, however, has been a source of several controversies, and some scholars have suggested that such games do nothing else than commodify (Liszkiewicz, 2010), exploit, and even spoil (Deterding, 2010) social relations. Despite the criticism, the collaborative play created within and around those games suggests that new understandings of sociability are required when it comes to social network games. Moreover, when approached from an ANT perspective, the meaning of social is broadened, allowing a more nuanced view of such game experiences.

From the perspective of actor-network theory, social network games are indeed social for they create complex and fluid associations between human and non-human entities, and because each association leads to a multiple and varied outcomes. In this sense, the social is reassembled and reconfigured every time the games and their players come together, bringing to light the role of non-human entities. These roles are reflected also in the way players' identities are performed.

Identity performance in social network games transcends the game world, becoming deeply embedded in players' everyday lives. Since these games have entered the broader context of social networking websites, and these websites, in their turn, have pervaded people's routine, the boundaries between imaginary play and real life are blurred and reconfigured. Such blurring can be clearly seen in games like *The Sims Social*, in which real-world friends become in-game friends and, at the same time, in-game activities end up affecting real-world friendship[7]. As Deterding (2010) puts it, in social network games, social presence becomes social identity.

How then, one might wonder, is the social framed by game technology? What kinds of interactions are fostered and how are they fostered? Those questions can be answered through a look at the ways social network games bring players together. The first form of promoting sociability is seen in the game rules that make it essential for game advancement that players have a large number of co-players, who help each other on a regular basis. Although it is possible to play social network games in a single-player mode, the lack of co-players results in a significant expenditure of (real) money[8].

By binding players advancements' to mutual help, daily visits, and sharing of content, these games transform sociability into a premise for a fully play experience. At the same time, the game converts social bonds into game resources, erasing the awareness of others' co-presence in the game space and reducing peer-to-peer engagements to lateral interactions (Deterding, 2010). It can be said, therefore, that within the game world, friends become objects – part of algorithms –, and the social relies deeply on player-machine engagements.

The second type of sociability, on the other hand, takes place in a more open and inclusive fashion. Although the machine still determines how communication takes place – whether it is through Facebook pages, chat, wall posts, or by other mediated forms of community building – the type and nature of interactions vary greatly, and the presence of other humans becomes much more noticeable in the association. In these communities, players find new ways of playing together, creating the spaces in which

[7]This is the case, for example, with people who started playing the game just to help their real world friends, strengthening real-world bonds (Wohn et al., 2011).

[8]For a detailed description of the free-to-play business model underlying social network games, see Tyni et al. (2011).

identity performances are freely encouraged. Furthermore, they transform hidden in-game interactions into fully open peer-to-peer (mediated) communication. In Figure 5.8, we can see an interaction performed between two co-players, which was registered by one of the players and then shared on the players community as a way of literally including other players in the performance. Similar posts are often seen in the community, and seem to be highly appreciated by community members. This is one of the most common ways of transforming private play sessions into group play.

Figure 5.8: Hidden player-machine interaction converted into mediated peer communication. [Image modified for preserving player's privacy.]

The enactment of self can be perceived in the different types of interaction taking place in these player communities. Members who continually share their achievements, comment on other members' posts, or provide in-game help are usually perceived as very friendly and caring people. These are often experienced players who have great game knowledge and who invest significant time and effort in the games. Active members are also the ones whose identification with avatars and environments seems to be more clearly expressed. Figure 5.9 illustrates how an active member of the group *The Sims Social Family* created a narrative in which she and her in-game partner could perform their identities as players and, at the same time, could give new meanings to an otherwise single play.

Figure 5.9: Playing together – and performing identities – beyond the game space. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

Players' identity is also enacted through language use. As Goffman (1959) has noted, the way we use language reveals different aspects of our identity. Language is also the means by which discourse perpetuates itself, in Butler's terms (Butler, 1990). On the one side, language establishes individuals' identity even before individuals' are born, as in the doctors' utterance "It is a girl!" (Butler, 1993, p. 7). On the other side, by choosing words and modes of speaking, individuals also convey different versions of themselves, as

in the use of slang by youths (Goffman, 1959). When using the social tools afforded by social network websites, players of social network games have more freedom to disclose different aspects of their real identity, which might not be possible to show within the game world. In Figure 5.10, we can see not only how a player proudly reveals his national identity but also how he compares in-game commitment and care to real-world relations.

Figure 5.10: Pride and friendship expressed through language. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

From an ANT perspective, such social performances of self can be considered an outcome of the associations players establish with the machine itself and with other players. In this sense, technology not only mediates communication but also becomes the main subject matter and often the signs that are communicated, such as in the sharing of images and game items. Moreover, those performances are probably the ones in which the machine makes itself most clearly visible. The social is thus created by the machine (the social networking website), revolves around the machine (the social network games), and takes place through the machine (photo and text editing, game play, etc.). By situating those associations in the proposed theoretical model, we can see both explicit and functional non-diegetic engagements.

Explicit engagements can be found in the activities of the community itself. In these spaces, players can determine how, what and to whom they share content, and perform identity. Even though the machine mediates and gives substance to players' interactions, the players themselves are more powerful in defining the inscriptions of such associations. Functional engagements, on the other hand, can be seen in the machine failures, such as snags, glitches, and lags. Those are actions in which players become passive, having only the right to complain. The high number of posts related to game snags and glitches shows how impoverishing functional engagements might be for game experience (Figure 5.11).

Functional engagements that affect identity performance are also seen in the use of Facebook's social graph. Social network games use players' social graph to foster player acquisition, retention, and monetization, transforming gameplay into a form of implicit identity performance. In the same way that some automated web systems are designed specifically to take advantage of users' habits, leading to what Schäfer (2010) has named implicit participation, social network games implicitly construct the identity of a Facebook user as 'gamer', and strive for converting every social tie into a game player. As a result, the 'user as gamer' identity becomes not only widely apparent, but also easily exploited.

The contrasts between implicit and explicit participatory practices, in Schäfer's (2010) sense, can be noticed in multiple aspects of social network game play. Whereas the use of social graph configures a specific dimension of implicit participation, the continual sharing and exchange of game achievements can be defined as explicit participation. These

Figure 5.11: Players' attempt to overcome the machine in functional non-diegetic engagements. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

conscious and overt actions are more than mere forms of gathering game resources, they also become an intrinsic aspect of gamers' identities within the social space of Facebook. The communities created around these games as well as the wiki and fan pages may be seen as the ultimate forms of explicit participation in (social network) gaming culture, for they are the spaces in which gameplay is consciously and actively put in the broader context of players' everyday practices.

The narratives players create through game communities exemplify the modern presentations of self as proposed by Giddens (1991). By using peer-to-peer mediated interaction as a way of creating coherent stories about themselves and their forms of play, individuals make explicit multiple aspects of their identities, and are able to make sense of both their own and others' selves. Such identity performances support my claim that contemporary selves are not only fragmented and dispersed but also playful and technological.

5.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have discussed how players' identities are enacted through the play of social network games, particularly *The Sims Social*. By analysing the creation of avatars, the shaping of environments, and the engagement in social interactions, I have shown how the game system becomes both the basis and the matter from which selves come into being. In such identity performances, human and non-human entities are equally active, regardless of their different levels of agency.

Whereas in explicit engagements – like the creation of environments and the participation in communities of players – humans appropriate machines in more visible and powerful ways, in functional engagements – such as the customisation of avatars and an the facing of game failures – the game makes itself more visible and prevailing. In both cases, identity emerges from the dialogue between game affordances and players' desires, or from the articulation between body, imagination, and technology. Those identities are thus examples of Giddens' idea that "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (Giddens, 1991, p. 75)

This construction of self, I have argued, has increasingly relied on technology and material artefacts. In contemporary digital cultures, what we make of ourselves is closely

linked to how technology shapes our actions. This intertwined aspect between gamer identity and game system was demonstrated by a close reading of the inscriptions left by these actor-networks, and by a reconsideration of the idea of *identity performance* as proposed by Butler (1990) and Goffman (1959) in our new technological context.

In the next chapter, I take a different perspective, looking into the ways players circumvent machine restrictions and give new meanings to both social play and identity performance.

CHAPTER 6

Breaking rules and performing identity

In the previous chapters, I have focused on how the technology in social network games – interfaces, algorithms, and systems – affects the performance of players' identity. I have drawn on actor-network theory and game studies to examine how human and non-human entities become equally actors in self-performances. My analyses have shown that contemporary selves are not only the product of discursive and cultural practices but also the effect of technological affordances.

In this piece, my perspective takes the other way around, and I look at how players themselves overcome machine restrictions to create new game experiences and, consequently, new performances of self. I further explore user-generated content to see both how the game is appropriated in ways not intended by game designers, and what such appropriations reveal about players' selves. By doing so, I aim at disclosing another association between humans and non-humans, and another outcome of SNGs as actor-networks.

Differently from other (more conventional) forms of videogame play, the technical aspects of social network games greatly prevent significant hackings and modifications of game system. Because they are developed with web-based technologies, and because they are server-centred, social network games can only be appropriated through the exploration of loopholes and flaws in game rules. The most common ways of cheating technology, in those cases, are the use of game-simplifier softwares, such as gift collects and snag bars, the creation of multiple Facebook accounts, and the participation in large groups of players throughout the Internet. Whereas the use of gift collectors and the creation of fake accounts have no clear relations to identity performance, the participation in player communities suggests interesting links between gameplay and presentation of self, hence being the central focus in this chapter[1].

Nevertheless, before delving into how community building is translated into transgressive play and identity performance, we explain why players are continually looking for ways of cheating technology. By taking the game *The Sims Social* as a case study, we start by outlining how its design and mechanics create a conflicting relation between the challenges offered by the game and the dependence placed upon co-players.

6.1 Tasks, tasks, and more tasks

Players of social network games need to invest much time and effort if they want to receive all the rewards and prizes the game has to offer. The assumption that these games are easy to play is called into question when we consider the number of missions and tasks

[1] Although a more sophisticated form of hacking in *Farmville* is discussed by Glas (2011a) when she explains the Sheep Designer tool, this software is no longer working.

assigned to players. Although gameplay evolves from specific time-based mechanics, there are dozens of parallel activities not tied to time, and some of them even help to overcome this restriction[2]. As Tyni et al. (2011) have already explained, the rhythmic design of social network games is essential for maintaining engagement and continuity. However, the continual demand for player activity ends up turning such games from casual into hardcore play experiences.

The Facebook game *The Sims Social* illustrates this shift. Launched on Facebook in August 2011, this game is a free-to-play adaptation of the popular videogame series *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000). Similarly to the previous Sims games, *The Sims Social* is a life simulation in which players create a personalised avatar (Sim) and his or her home, and perform all the activities required to maintain their Sim happy and healthy, such as eating, sleeping, and socialising. Differently from the original game, players of *The Sims Social* create just one Sim, and socialise only with those of their Facebook friends[3]. This limitation is used to stimulate asynchronous interaction among players, reflecting one of the main social dynamics employed in social network games at large.

The core mechanics of *The Sims Social* are very similar to those in other social network games in the simulation genre, especially the *-ville* series detailed by Tyni et al. (2011). After creating their avatar, players start by furnishing a simple two-room house. As with other games in the same category, the initial steps function as the guide through which the players learn how the game works. Once the basic gameplay is introduced, players are assigned the first missions. As tasks are accomplished, new quests and new activities are unlocked. The more players advance in the game, the more they rely on interactions with other players.

Players' achievements are measured through six different indicators: energy, in-game currency, social points, experience points, lifetime points, and house levels. Each of them increases or decreases according to specific actions. For instance, to furnish their houses, Sims spend either in-game cash or social points, and by doing so they increase both the house level and the experience points. In similar fashion, visiting another Sim results in social points, energy, and experience points. Most activities render also collectable items that are required in missions and tasks. In summary, *The Sims Social* offers endless actions to be executed in the same play session, and it is possible to continue playing this game for several hours at a time.

Other important elements in *The Sims Social* are the limited missions and seasonal goods. This content plays a fundamental role in maintaining players active and engaged, since it "keep[s] the game endlessly changing and evolving" (Tyni et al., 2011). Although neither completing quests nor purchasing goods is mandatory, the rewards and benefits they offer are highly appealing. Furthermore, such special items function as a form of classification, distinguishing dedicated (and more advanced) players from casual ones (Rebs, 2011).

The accomplishment of missions in time, however, poses a double challenge for the great majority of players. First, it demands daily game sessions – often more than one session per day. Second, the quests require high numbers of different items that are collected mainly through the help of friends. It means that, besides making a significant time commitment, players also depend on the continual and responsive support from their co-players. Whenever friends do not play regularly, or whenever players have just

[2]Visiting neighbours, for example, might render instant energy

[3]In other platforms, players can create various Sims, who interact with one another.

a few co-players, it becomes almost impossible to succeed without paying real money. This situation is worsened by the fact that players can send limited daily request to the same friend. All these aspects often create an imbalanced relation between the challenges offered by the game and the ability (non-paying) players have to accomplish them.

To bypass these rules, and to reduce the frustration of not completing all (or at least most) missions, players have organised a distinct type of cooperative play. By creating and joining groups of players on Facebook, they are able to give and receive nearly unlimited help, and are able also to complete the quests in a much faster and easier manner. This alternative form of social play is further explained in the next section.

6.2 Asking for help

The social aspects of social network games are usually explored in terms of game design and mechanics. The asynchronous nature and lack of in-game communication tools are said to offer "no real possibilities for detailed cooperation between players" (Tyni et al., 2011). However, a closer look at the forms of interaction that takes place around the game reveals a different story.

Players have been using the affordances of social networking websites for creating a more dynamic, synchronous and cooperative play of social network games. By joining groups of players, they are able to circumvent the restrictions imposed by game design, and to add a new layer of engagement with both the game in itself and with other players as well. In the case of *The Sims Social*, these groups are very popular. A search for the string "The Sims Social" on Facebook, for example, results in more than 200 groups of players, some of them comprised of over one thousand members[4].

In these groups, players interact with one another exchanging items required in missions, asking for specific help, and sharing (and commenting on) their achievements. They also publish images of their homes and avatars, asking for other players' opinion and advice. In some groups, members are highly active and the types of interactions vary significantly. Nonetheless, asking for assistance in the missions seems to be the main type of interaction taking place in these spaces.

Usually, interactions start by one member leaving a message on the group wall looking for other online players. By doing that, the asynchronous experience and silent presence created by game design – as suggested by Consalvo (2011) – are converted into a synchronous and interactive play. In addition, the boundaries between interaction within and around the game world are blurred, for in-game actions are brought into the group page and, at the same time, group members participate actively in the game experience of their peers. It is common to see, for example, messages inviting others to visit the game space of their peers and to change it by 'reviving crops', 'fixing/cleaning objects', and 'building rooms' (Figure 6.1).

The constraints of game design and the lack of social mechanics are thus overcome, and a meaningful cooperative play is established. Why is this cooperative rather than collaborative play? According to Stenros et al. (2009), collaborative play entails a shared goal, i.e. players "[work] together to reach a strategic long term goal". In social network games, however, there are only individual goals, and social interactions have direct effects

[4]The most popular group of *The Sims Social* players is comprised of over twelve thousand members.

Figure 6.1: Looking for simultaneous play. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

only for one player at a time. Therefore, the definition of cooperative play seems to better explain the type of sociability developed in those groups: "players band together to reach short term tactical goals even if their ultimate goals may be in conflict".

Besides game advancements, another important outcome of these practices is the enhancement of social ties. By actively participating in such groups, players develop longer and stronger relations with co-players. Whereas the exchanging of gifts embedded in game mechanics has been understood as a weak (and exploitative) norm of reciprocity (Meurs, 2011), the interactions emerged from such groups seems to provide the basis for the development of a sense of belonging and a common identity (Blanchard and Horan, 1998; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Wohn et al., 2011). Figure 6.2 exemplifies the strengthening of bonds among community members.

Figure 6.2: A player's request that was immediately attended by his/her awesome friends. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

These practices are creative forms of circumventing the rules imposed through the game design. Instead of either patiently waiting for the asynchronous interactions of other players, or spending real money in virtual goods and game advancements, players organise themselves to ensure alternative play experiences. In addition, by complementing the in-game communication tools with those available on Facebook, they exchange game related messages more efficiently. Cooperation seems to be, therefore, a very promising playful practice. However, one may ask, can it be considered cheating? And, more

importantly, what does community building tell us about identity performance? An exploratory consideration of those questions is presented in the following section.

6.3 Breaking rules, performing identity

From the examples discussed in the previous section, it becomes clear that players of social network games have being playing a slightly different game from that expected by designers. As Tyni et al. (2011) note, by limiting players' moves through time, energy and items restrictions, game design strategically ties gameplay to the purchasing of virtual goods and creates the revenue system in which social network games are based. When players fail to conform the rules – which means to either wait or pay –, the producers' profits might be seriously compromised.

Whether or not these practices are indeed transgressive depends on how cheating is defined. In its social sense, cheating is understood both as an unfair advantage that one player has over the others, and as a break on socially negotiated rules of play (Consalvo, 2007; Glas, 2011b; Kücklich, 2008). From those perspectives, the cooperative play created around social network games seems not to be cheating for it neither gives advantage to a particular player, nor does it set up play outside social rules.

The first case is supported by the fact all players have equal opportunities to join the community, to help, and to be helped. Moreover, even when a member is playing in a competitive mood – as for example, by attempting to achieve the highest house value among peers –, the mood of the group as a whole is not competitive, and the advantages offered remain the same for all its members[5].

Socially defined rules deserve a more nuanced view. As Consalvo (2007); Glas (2011b) and Kücklich (2008) pointed out, by not obeying socially accepted rules, cheaters affect their own game experience and the social dimension of play, introducing deception and chaos to the game world. Although individuals do change their relations both with the game world and with other players when joining a cooperative group, these changes are positive for all players involved. Therefore, feelings of trust and confidence ensure the stability of the play field.

From this analysis, it can be argued that the social engagement created in these groups might not correspond to the social dimension of cheating. Nonetheless, René Glas (2011b) employs a term from De Paoli & Kerr (2009) to remind us "[c]heating in digital games is sociotechnical in nature". Therefore, its technical aspects need also to be considered, and it is exactly this dimension that further complicates our question. Whereas players of social network games might not see group cooperation as cheating, but rather as a creative and engaging social play, this might not be the case for game developers. Since players are breaking the rules embedded in the game code, their act can be comprehended as devious, particularly since such sociability might have negative effects on the economic model behind the game.

Developers of social network games generate profit mainly though the micro-payments and the viral marketing generated through game play (Tyni et al., 2011). When players organise themselves to circumvent hurdles of game design, they significantly diminish the effects of those two economic strategies. On the one hand, micro-payments are replaced

[5]The competition against the game itself is not considered in this case.

by players' mutual help. By acting as a source of fast and continual resources, group members hardly need to invest their real money in game advancements. Although players still face some design constraints, such as the limited daily requests, those barriers are lowered as the number of members and the group activity increase. On the other hand, the effects of viral marketing are significantly reduced, since interactions are enclosed in a group consisting of players already. It means that almost no new player is brought to the game world through group members, which can lead to a stagnation of game population. Without population grow there is no new potential paying player, and the micro-payments are again affected.

Whether game designers have already predicted this type of player behaviour is a question that remains open. The lack of reference to this practice on the official game page and forum signals that, if producers are already paying attention to the distinct ways games have been played, they seem to not be interested in encouraging such engagements. Moreover, since this practice challenges not only the way games have been developed, but also the control designers carefully take over gameplay (Jacobs and Sihvonen, 2011), restrictive measures might be soon implemented. The questions will then turn to how long it will take for players to find their own ways of circumventing new hurdles, and which new forms of sociability will emerge from the play of social network games.

Figure 6.3: A communal identity is embodied by players. [Image modified for preserving players' privacy.]

Regardless of being transgressive or not, this new form of social play reveals nuanced aspects of identity performance. By actively participating in such communities, individuals not only enhance their gamer identity but also give new meanings to their own and their peers' selves, thereby creating new communal identities (Figure 6.3). While new relationships with other players are created, new grounds for identity performance are established at the same time. Moreover, players appropriate machine elements to open new spaces for questioning, challenging, and re-signifying gameplay.

We can conclude, therefore, that the (maybe) transgressive play that emerges from such communities illustrates how technology becomes a new actor in contemporary performances of self. The exploitation of loopholes and the breaking of game rules are part of what it means to be a good, committed, and knowledgeable player. This commitment is not restricted to the game itself but also, and more importantly, to other players, which ensure feelings of trust and belonging in an environment created by and around technology.

6.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have discussed how players of social network games have developed alternative forms of play, bypassing game restrictions and enhancing the social dimension of those games. Whereas Stenros et al. (2009) have demonstrated that there are "many faces of sociability in games", previous studies concerned with the *social* in social network games have focused only on game mechanics and communication tools.

I have suggested here a different perspective, emphasising that there is another face of sociability beyond that allowed by game design. I have argued that the cooperative play that has emerged from groups of players created on social networking websites is related not only to the technical aspects of games, but also to players' own engagement and experiences.

While studies of sociability in social network games have focused on their technical affordances, players themselves have shown how creative and subtle they can be when playing with the game rules. The face of sociability analysed here, however, seems to have also a negative aspect, for it breaks the rules of play, and poses new challenges to the model that sustains game developers.

Despite being to some extent transgressive, these forms of cooperative play can be understood as singular forms of identity construction and performance. The cultural practices emerging within those player communities give shape to specific social identities that are intrinsically related to how technologies are used, interpreted, and appropriated. In this sense, the fragmented and dispersed selves proposed by Giddens (1991) share a collective identity, which is also playful and technological.

CHAPTER 7

Final thoughts: Reassembling the Social with SNGs

In this thesis, I looked into the role of digital technologies in contemporary performances of identity. My purpose was to show that technology has increasingly been framing and affecting our senses of self, and that current understandings of identity need to go beyond social and discursive practices as to include material artefacts. Moreover, I claimed that modern selves are not only fragmented and dispersed, as proposed by Anthony Giddens (1991), but also playful and technological.

Actor-network theory was adopted as the main lenses through which to see how non-humans affect the construction of the social and the performance of selves. The use of ANT for the analysis of identity performance has proved to be productive for it offered the vocabulary through which the agency of non-humans could be acknowledged and explained. Although studies on identity construction and performance have hardly taken non-human actors into account in the way ANT puts forward, the analysis of identity through an ANT perspective was successfully achieved in this work. This discussion moreover is in line with Butler's claim that both her own ideas and those of ANT are not opposite, but rather "two ways of undoing the same problem" (Meijer and Prins, 1998, p.285) – i.e. of accounting for non-human entities in the construction and theorisation of bodies, identities and societies.

My discussion started with an analysis of the conventional paradigms adopted in studies of identity performance, summarising the ideas proposed by sociologist Erwin Goffman (1959; 1967) and feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990; 1993), and exploring how their concepts have been employed in studies of video game play. Such analysis pointed out how identity started to be seen as the product of social practices – whether social is defined as peer-to-peer interaction or as discursive construction – and how new technologies have created new spaces for experimenting with the self. This discussion indicated that the role of material artefacts in such performances is still largely neglected, even when social constructions of self take place in highly technological settings. It is for that reason that the meaning of the concept social needs to be expanded.

Then, I moved on to an analysis of how technologies can be included as part of the social fabric. To that aim, I relied on the writings of actor-network theory (Ihde, 1990; Latour, 1999, 2005b; Law, 1992), for this approach brings to light the material-semiotic dimension of the social world. By arguing that society comes into being through fluid and complex relations between human and non-human entities, actor-network theory provides new frames through which the social construction of identity can be reconsidered. Since my work deals specifically with identity in relation to video game play, actor-network theory was combined with game studies to create the theoretical model in which further analyses were based. Through this theoretical model, I could locate the interactions between humans and non-humans – or between players and games – according to both

the spaces of engagement as well as the levels of agency each entity exerts over the other.

In chapter 4, a case study was introduced and further considerations of our theoretical model were developed. The Facebook game *The Sims Social* was employed as an example of how humans and non-humans come together to form actor-networks, and indicating which inscriptions are produced by those associations. *The Sims Social* was chosen for three main reasons. First, as a social network game, it exemplifies the embedding of playful practices into the everyday life of ordinary people, what has been named the "ludification of culture" (Raessens, 2006). Second, as a simulation game, *The Sims Social* intends to merge real life and play in a seamless fashion, opening new spaces for creation, exploration, and discovery. Third, for being embedded in a highly social context, it creates fruitful and complex actor-networks, making clear the role of technology in the forging of the social. By considering *The Sims Social* in the light of our theoretical model, we could identify how to follow both human and non-human actors in contemporary performances of identity.

With my theoretical map in hands, I arrived at Chapter 5, where the performance of identity in social network games was discussed. In this chapter, I have shown how players' selves become a combination of body, imagination, and technology, and how identity becomes the product of both social practices and technological affordances. I followed the inscriptions left by associations between game and players to identify not only when and how technology makes itself visible in the construction of the social, but also the extent to which this visibility affects identity performances. Butler's and Goffman's concepts were also reconsidered in the context of social network game play, taking the materiality of the game – interfaces, systems, and algorithms – as the central focus of attention. This change in perspective revealed that interfaces and algorithms play a fundamental role in the way players convey a carefully crafted image of themselves. It also showed how technology becomes simultaneously product and producer of normative identities. By defining what avatars should look like and, at the same time, by fostering creativity and experimentation, social network games simultaneously restrict and empower players, framing play and yet stimulating agency. In our contemporary digital culture, I claimed, impression management and citation of discursive norms are intrinsically related to the use, appropriation, and re-signification of technology.

The final chapter brought a different association between game and players, and a new form of performing selves. In this piece, I explored how the breaking of game rules can also be seen as identity performance. The construction of player communities and the establishment of new modes of play change not only the perceptions of the game in itself, but also the meanings of gamers' identity. Moreover, as social network games are appropriated in new ways, multiple spaces for (transgressive) performances of self are open. Players' communities are therefore extensions of the game world, where play and social identity are further blended together.

In summary, this thesis offered a deeper and closer reading of the concept of identity, particularly related to technology and play. By focusing on the material aspects of social network games, I demonstrated the active roles technology plays in contemporary constructions and perceptions of identity. The merging of play and self-performance proved to be fruitful in considering the hybrid and fluid nature of identity, particularly in our contemporary digital cultures. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of the active roles played by non-human entities in the configuration of contemporary societies allowed a broader and more complex understanding of identity performances.

This work may be seen therefore as an attempt to reassemble the social, in an ANT sense. The goal was to show such reassembling by considering the role of game systems in the social dynamics. I have argued that the game becomes an important actor, since it triggers connections between players and the game itself, between players and other players and between different game instances. It is possible to extend these connections even further so as to include the computer or mobile phone as the sites where the play takes place, or the culture of gaming as a whole. The social in social network games is the fluid outcome of the interplay of hybrid actors, each of them with specific purposes, but all of them with one ultimate goal: to play. And this play is social not because two or more (human) players get together and interact with one another, but rather because several different entities are assembled and re-assembled together, and continually shape one another.

Every time a player logs in and plays, there is a new association, and even when the player is not there, the game keeps going on its own, and the assemblage is still there but in a different form. Think, for example, of the crops that keep growing, or of the energy count that keeps running, or even of the neighbours that act in the game space in their own time. Think also of the ongoing messages that flourish on players' accounts on Facebook, or of the interactions their peers perform without the necessary co-presence. All these actions generate inscriptions, translate intentions, and foster sociability. All of them, moreover, depend on nonhumans in the same degree as they depend on humans: Without one, the other cannot act. And what has it to do with identity? This multiple and fluid assembling and re-assembling becomes the ground and the fuel for identity construction and performances. It is through play that individuals "write themselves into being", borrowing Sundén's (2002) words.

This discussion was grounded in a threefold empirical method: autoethnography, participant observation in players' communities, and semi-structured interviews with co-players. The combination of those methods was necessary not only for a close reading of play and performance but also for a reflexive and situated analysis of those social practices. Whereas active play provided a deeper understanding of the game as technology and the possibilities opened to players, empirical investigations of other players through participant observation and interviews broadened the understanding of play as culturally and socially situated, and extended my analysis beyond my own experiences as player and as researcher.

It is important to acknowledge that there are some constraints in the methods employed. The most significant one is found in the number of co-players studied. Although the experiences shared by the fourteen interviewees as well as the observation of the spaces created by my 30 co-players were valuable and enriching for my analysis, this sample cannot be considered representative, but rather demonstrative. In addition, broadening the number of players visited as well as the number of communities investigated would also benefit this research. Furthermore, I am aware that my cultural and social backgrounds largely affect my perceptions of the game and of other players, and therefore, my claims cannot be generalised. However, despite those drawbacks, I strongly believe that insights and experiences gained by this research are still highly valuable for the understanding of our contemporary digital culture.

Future works might delve deeper into the connections between appropriation of technologies and performance of identity to show other forms of transgressive performances taking place in social network games. Other works might also look further

into how issues of power and privilege are reshaped by the play of social network games, and inquire into how power and identity are negotiated within and around those games. A third possibility for future discussion of the technological dimension of the social could also focus on the political implications and cultural transformations brought about by the interactions between players and games. Social network games are still a recent phenomenon, which makes them an interesting and fruitful object of analysis from the perspective of both actor-network theory and game studies.

Bibliography

Bainbridge, W. and Bainbridge, W. (2007). Creative uses of software errors: Glitches and cheats. *Social science computer review*, 25(1):61–77.

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs*, 28(3):801–831.

Bartle, R. (2011). Current social games are not fun. http://www.gamasutra.com.

Beauvoir, S. (1953). *The second sex*. Knopf, New York.

Bell, V. (1999). *Performativity and belonging*. Sage, London.

Björk, S. (2010). Principles and patterns of social games: Where's the difference compared to other games? Invited talk at Games Convention Online (GCO) - Leipzig, Germany.

Blanchard, A. and Horan, T. (1998). Virtual communities and social capital. *Social Science Computer Review*, 16(3):293–307.

Bogost, I. (2010). Cow Clicker: The Making of Obsession. http://bogo.st/fb.

boyd, d. (2002). Faceted id/entity: Managing representation in a digital world. Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA.

boyd, d. (2008). Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. In Buckingham, D., editor, *The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning*, pages 119–142. MIT Press, Cambridge.

boyd, d. m. and Ellison, N. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1):210–230.

Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Colombia University Press, New York.

Brown, L. and Tappan, M. (2008). Fighting like a girl fighting like a guy: Gender identity, ideology, and girls at early adolescence. *New directions for child and adolescent development*, 2008(120):47–59.

Brownfield, K. (2009). *Games and Gamers: Adult Female Gamers and Identity Display*. PhD thesis, Southern Illinois University.

Burrill, D. (2008). *Die tryin': videogames, masculinity, culture*. Peter Lang, New York.

Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4):519–531.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, New York.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge, New York.

Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games*. Free Press of Glencoe, New York.

Calleja, G. (2007a). Digital game involvement a conceptual model. *Games and culture*, 2(3):236–260.

Calleja, G. (2007b). Revising immersion: A conceptual model for the analysis of digital game involvement. *Situated Play*, pages 24–28.

Callon, M. (1986). Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. In Law, J., editor, *Power, action and belief: a new sociology of knowledge?*, pages 196–223. Routledge, London.

Cassell, J. (2000). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Castells, M. (2011). *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, volume 1. Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, Mass.

Consalvo, M. (2003). *It's a Queer World After All: Studying The Sims and Sexuality*. GLAAD Center for the Study of Media and Society, S.I.

Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Consalvo, M. (2011). Using your friends: Identifying the top interaction mechanics in current social games & media. Presentation at GDC 2011.

Cover, R. (2012). Performing and undoing identity online: Social networking, identity theories and the incompatibility of online profiles and friendship regimes. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*.

Crowe, N. and Bradford, S. (2006). 'Hanging out in Runescape': Identity, Work and Leisure in the Virtual Playground. *Children's Geographies*, 4(3):331–346.

De Paoli, S. and Kerr, A. (2009). The Cheating Assemblage in MMORPGs: Towards a Sociotechnical Description of Cheating. *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, pages 1–12.

Descartes, R. and Miller, V. (1984). *Principles of philosophy*. Wilder Publications., Radford.

Deterding, S. (2010). Social Game Studies: A Workshop Report. Technical report, Hans Bredow Institute for Media Research, Hamburg. With contributions by S. Björk, S. Deterding, S. Dreyer, A. Järvinen, B. Kirman, J. Kücklich, J. Paavilainen, J. Schmidt & V. Rao. Available at: socialgamestudies.org/report.

Digital Buzz (2012). Infographic: Social Gaming Demographics 2012. Retrieved from http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/infographic-social-gaming-demographics-statistics-2012.

Electronic Arts (2000). The Sims. [Computer/Console Game].

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., and Bochner, A. P. (2010). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1).

Entertainment, B. (2004). World of Warcraft. Blizzard Entertainment. [Computer Game].

Facebook (2012). 230 Million People Played Games On Facebook.com In The Last 30 Days. http://techcrunch.com/2012/08/03/230-million-people-played-games-on-facebook-com-in-the-last-30-days.

Freud, S. (1974). The Ego and the Id. In Sigmund, F., Strachey, J., Freud, A., Rothgeb, C. L., and Richards, A., editors, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, pages 182–194. Hogarth Press, London.

Galloway, A. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Gekker, A. (2012). Gamocracy: Political Communication in the Age of Play. Master's thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

Glas, J. (2011a). Hijacking FARMVILLE. Master's thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Glas, R. (2011b). Breaking Reality: Exploring Pervasive Cheating in Foursquare. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play*, pages 1–8. DiGRA.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Penguin, London.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y.

Gregson, N. and Rose, G. (2000). Taking butler elsewhere: performativities, spatialities and subjectivities. *Environment and Planning D*, 18(4):433–452.

Griebel, T. (2006). Self-portrayal in a simulated life: Projecting personality and values in the sims 2. *Game Studies*, 6(1). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/griebel. Accessed in August, 24 2012.

Hampton, D. (2010). *Beyond resistance: Gender, performance, and fannish practice in digital culture*. PhD thesis, USA.

Harper, T. L. (2010). *The Art of War: Fighting Games, Performativity, and Social Game Play*. PhD thesis, Ohio University, USA.

Harraway, D. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. *Simians, cyborgs and women: the reinvention of nature*, pages 149–181.

Hewitt, A. and Forte, A. (2006). Crossing boundaries: Identity management and student/faculty relationships on the facebook. *Poster presented at CSCW, Banff, Alberta*, pages 1–2.

Hodgson, D. (2005). 'putting on a professional performance': performativity, subversion and project management. *Organization*, 12(1):51–68.

Holmes, E. (2010). Strange reality: On glitches and uncanny play. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 4(2):255–276.

Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Beacon Press, Boston.

Hutchinson, R. (2007). Performing the self subverting the binary in combat games. *Games and Culture*, 2(4):283–299.

Ihde, D. (1990). *Technology and the lifeworld: From garden to earth*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Information Solutions Group (2010). 2010 Social Gaming Research. Technical report. http://www.infosolutionsgroup.com/2010_PopCap_Social_Gaming_Research_Results.pdf.

Jacobs, M. and Sihvonen, T. (2011). In Perpetual Beta? On the Participatory Design of Facebook Games. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play*, pages 1–8. DiGRA.

Jorgensen, D. L. (1989). *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*. SAGE, London.

Jørgensen, K. (2009). "I'm overburdened!" An Empirical Study of the Player, the Avatar, and the Gameworld. *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, pages 1–8.

Jørgensen, K. (2011). Time for New Terminology?: Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Sounds in Computer Games Revisited. In Grimshaw, M., editor, *Game sound technology and player interaction: concepts and development*, pages 78–97. Information Science Reference, Hershey PA.

Juul, J. (2010). *A casual revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*. The MIT Press, USA.

Järvinen, A. (2011). State of Social in Social Games. Presentation at Casual Connect Conference 2011, Retrieved from casualconnect.org/lectures/community-social.

Kafai, Y., Cook, M., and Fields, D. (2010). "blacks deserve bodies too!": Design and discussion about diversity and race in a tween virtual world. *Games and Culture*, 5(1):43–63.

Kafai, Y., Heeter, C., Denner, J., and Sun, J. (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on Gender and Gaming*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Kücklich, J. (2008). Forbidden pleasures: Cheating in computer games. In Swalwell, M. and Wilson, J., editors, *The pleasures of computer gaming*, pages 52–71. McFarland & Co., Jefferson, N.C.

Lacan, J. and Wilden, A. (1968). *The language of the self: The function of language in psychoanalysis.* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Lammes, S. (2007). Approaching game-studies: towards a reflexive methodology of games as situated cultures. In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference*, pages 25–30. DiGRA.

Latour, B. (1992). Where are the missing masses? The sociology of a few mundane artifacts. *Shaping technology/building society: Studies in sociotechnical change*, pages 225–258.

Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope: Essays on the reality of science studies*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Latour, B. (2005a). From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik – or How to Make Things Public. In *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, pages 1–3. MIT Press, Cambridge.

Latour, B. (2005b). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Law, J. (1992). Notes on the theory of the actor-network: ordering, strategy, and heterogeneity. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, 5(4):379–393.

Law, J. (2009). Actor network theory and material semiotics. *The new Blackwell companion to social theory*, pages 141–158.

LeBlanc, C. (2011). Social Media Games and the Performance of Self. In Evans, M., editor, *Videogame Studies: Concepts, Cultures and Communications*, pages 67–74. Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford, UK.

Lee, Y. and Wohn, D. (2012). Are there cultural differences in how we play? examining cultural effects on playing social network games. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28:1307–1314.

Leonard, D. (2003). "Live in your world, play in ours": Race, video games, and consuming the other. *SIMILE: Studies In Media & Information Literacy Education*, 3(4):1–9.

Leurs, K. (2012). *Digital passages: Moroccan-Dutch youths performing diaspora, gender and youth cultural identities across digital space*. PhD thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Leurs, K. and Ponzanesi, S. (2011). communicative spaces of their own: migrant girls performing selves using instant messaging software. *Feminist Review*, 99(1):55–78.

Lewis, C., Whitehead, J., and Wardrip-Fruin, N. (2010). What went wrong: a taxonomy of video game bugs. In *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, pages 108–115. ACM.

Liszkiewicz, A. J. (2010). Cultivated Play: Farmville. MediaCommons. Retrieved from http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/content/cultivated-play-farmville.

Liu, H. (2007). Social network profiles as taste performances. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1):252–275.

Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New media & society*, 10(3):393–411.

Mainsah, H. (2011). 'I could well have said I was Norwegian but nobody would believe me': Ethnic minority youths' self-representation on social network sites. *European journal of cultural studies*, 14(2):179–193.

Martey, R. and Consalvo, M. (2011). Performing the looking-glass self: Avatar appearance and group identity in second life. *Popular Communication*, 9(3):165–180.

McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. Penguin Press, New York.

Mcmenomy, E. R. (2011). *Game On Girl: Identity And Representation In Digital RPGs*. PhD thesis, Washington State University, USA.

Meijer, I. and Prins, B. (1998). How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler. *Signs*, 23(2):275–286.

Meurs, R. v. (2011). Playing Along Your Friends: Asynchronity and the Social in Social Network Games. Master's thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.

Meyer, R. (2011). Players Who Suit Social Games: Identifying, Analyzing, Expanding, and Progressing. http://www.gamasutra.com.

Morrison, C. (2010). Newer Facebook Games Are Attracting an Older Female Audience. Retrieved from http://www.insidesocialgames.com/2010/07/23/newer-facebook-games-are-attracting-an-older-female-audience/.

Murphy, S. (2004). 'Live in Your World, Play in Ours': The Spaces of Video Game Identity. *Journal of visual culture*, 3(2):223–238.

Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet*. Psychology Press, New York.

Nutt, D. and Railton, D. (2003). The Sims: Real life as genre. *Information Communication & Society*, 6(4):577–592.

Paavilainen, J. (2010). Users and Their Experiences in Social Games. Invited talk at Games Convention Online (GCO) 2010.

Patatas, B. (2011). Social Games Are Coming of Age. *Gamasutra*.

Phillips, J. (2006). Agencement/assemblage. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3):108–109.

Playfish (2011). The Sims Social. EA Games. [Online Game].

Prensky, M. (2001). *The digital game-based learning revolution*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Raessens, J. (2006). Playful identities, or the ludification of culture. *Games and Culture*, 1(1):52–57.

Rao, V. (2008). Facebook Applications and playful mood: the construction of Facebook as a third place. In *Proceedings of the 12th international conference on Entertainment and media in the ubiquitous era*, pages 8–12.

Rebs, R. R. (2011). Bens Virtuais em Social Games [Virtual Goods in Social Games]. In *Proceedings of the XX COMPÓS. Associação Nacional dos Programas de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação*, pages 1–17, Brazil. COMPÓS.

Ritzer, G., editor (2005). *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, volume 1, pages 1–3. SAGE, London.

Rockstar Games (1997). Grand Theft Auto. [Video Game, Console Game].

Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Salih, S. (2002). *Judith Butler*. Routledge, London, New York.

Schell, J. (2008). *The Art of Game Design: A book of lenses*. Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann, Amsterdam, Boston.

Schäfer, M. T. (2010). *Bastard culture!: User participation and the extension of cultural industries*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Shaw, A. (2012). Do you identify as a gamer? gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *new media & society*, 14(1):28–44.

Sihvonen, T. (2011). *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Silva, S. A. (2012). Social Play or Social Cheating? Another Face of Sociability in Social Network Games. In *Proceedings of the 16th International Academic MindTrek Conference*, pages 153–160. ACM.

Smith, A. (2003). Do you believe in ethics? Latour and Ihde in the trenches of the science wars (or: Watch out, Latour, Ihde's got a gun). In Ihde, D. and Selinger, E., editors, *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*, pages 182–194. Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Sotamaa, O. and Karppi, T. (2010). Games as Services - Final Report. Technical report, Department of Interactive Media TRIM Research Reports, Tampere. Available at: http://tampub.uta.fi/handle/10024/65772. Accessed in August, 08 2012.

Squire, K. (2006). From content to context: Videogames as designed experience. *Educational researcher*, 35(8):19–29.

Stenros, J., Paavilainen, J., and Kinnunen, J. (2011). Giving Good 'Face': Playful Performances of Self in Facebook. In *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, pages 153–160. ACM.

Stenros, J., Paavilainen, J., and Mäyrä, F. (2009). The many faces of sociability and social play in games. In *Proceedings of the 13th International MindTrek Conference: Everyday Life in the Ubiquitous Era*, pages 82–89. ACM.

Sundén, J. (2002). *Material virtualities: Approaching online textual embodiment*. P. Lang, New York.

Sung, J., Bjornrud, T., Lee, Y., and Wohn, D. (2010). Social network games: exploring audience traits. In *Proceedings of the 28th of the international conference extended abstracts on Human factors in computing systems*, pages 3649–3654. ACM.

Taylor, T. (2003). Multiple pleasures women and online gaming. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 9(1):21–46.

Thornham, H. (2011). *Ethnographies of the videogame: gender, narrative and praxis*. Ashgate Pub Co, England.

Threlkeld, A. (2008). Virtual disruptions: Traditional and new media's challenges to heteronormativity in education. *Beyond Current Horizons Technology, Children, Schools and, Families*, page 6.

Tyni, H., Sotamaa, O., and Toivonen, S. (2011). Howdy pardner!: On free-to-play, sociability and rhythm design in FrontierVille. In *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, pages 22–29. ACM.

Utrecht University (2012). The Citizen Scientist on the Move: Digital Play, Politics and Epistemology.

Van Doorn, N. (2010). The ties that bind: the networked performance of gender, sexuality and friendship on myspace. *New Media & Society*, 12(4):583–602.

Van House, N. A. (2009). Collocated photo sharing, story-telling, and the performance of self. *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*, 67(12):1073–1086.

Walkerdine, V. (2006). Playing the game. *Feminist Media Studies*, 6(4):519–537.

Warner Bros (1992). Mortal Kombat. [Arcade Game, Video Game, Console Game].

Wohn, D., Lampe, C., Wash, R., Ellison, N., and Vitak, J. (2011). The S in Social Network Games: Initiating, Maintaining, and Enhancing Relationships. In *Proceedings of the 2011 44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, pages 1–10. IEEE Computer Society.

Wolf, M. (2001). *The medium of the video game*. University of Texas Press, Austin.

Zynga (2009). FarmVille. Facebook. [Computer Game].

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire

The Sims Social: Players, Sims and Houses

About you
1 - Where are you from?
2 - How old are you?
3 - Do you work and/or study? Where do your work? What do you study?
4 - How did you begin playing TSS (out of curiosity, friend recommendation, etc.) ?
5 - Where do you usually play (at home, at work, etc.) ?
6 - Why do you play TSS? What is your main goal in the game?
7 - Do you play other Facebook games besides TSS?
8 - Do you play or have ever played other versions of The Sims?
9 - How often do you visit your neighbours?
10 - Why do you visit your neighbours?
11 - Do you usually interact with your neighbours outside the game, for example by chat or wall posts?
12 - With whom do you usually play TSS (family, real-world friends, players you don't really know, etc.) ?

About your Sim
13 - How did you choose the name of your avatar (Sim)?
14 - Do you think your Sim looks like you? Why?
15 - Do you see your avatar as a representation of yourself, or is he/she completely different from you? Why?
16 - Do you see your friends' Sims as representation of your friends themselves? Why?
17 - How do you choose your Sim's clothes and accessories?
18 - Would you put on the same clothes/accessories your Sim is wearing today? Why?
19 - Could you please send me a picture of you avatar wearing your favourite outfit?
20 - Are your hair and skin colours similar to those of your Sim? Why?

About your houses
21 - How often do you change the decoration/furniture of your houses? Why?
22 - How do you choose the furniture/decoration (by price, colour, style, etc.)?
23 - Is your real-world house similar to those you have in TSS, in terms of furniture and decoration? Why?
24 - What is your favourite property: your home, the beach house or Penthouse? Why?
25 - Have you decorated this house in a way that reflects some aspect of your personality? If so, which aspect?
26 - From all rooms you have decorated, what is your favourite? Why do you like it the most? Would you mind in send me a picture of this part?
27 - How do you compare the decoration of your houses with that of your neighbours? Do you think you have done a better job?

28 - If you could design your own objects, what would you design? Why?
29 - What is your favourite object in the game? Why do you like it?
30 - Does your Sim own your favourite object? In which property/room is it located?

About the game
31 - What are the things you like the most in The Sims Social?
32 - Is there anything you really don't like in the game? What?
33 - If you could change anything in the game, what would you change?
34 - How often do you experience technical problems (such as snags and reloads)? How do you feel about that?

APPENDIX B

Table of Game Actors

This appendix includes a list of the main game objects available in *The Sims Social*. These objects are what I have called game actors. The actors listed here were grouped according to their category, and defined as either implicit or explicit. Explicit actors are those that have direct effects on gameplay, such as authorizing actions, changing games status or fostering peer-to-peer interactions. Implicit actors, on the other hand, are mostly still objects whose interaction is limited to change of position within the game environment. These objects do not affect gameplay directly, but they still convey cultural or social meanings.

By the time this thesis was finished, there were over 1500 objects available for creating 3 different game scenarios, as explained in Chapter 4[1]. To avoid unnecessary repetitions, the objects in this list were grouped also according to their type. For example, instead of listing the 25 different chairs currently available, I only named one 'chair', since all chairs have basically the same functions, and act on gameplay in the same ways. It is important to notice also that the number of actors as well as the type of interactions they authorise changes continually. As explained also in Chapter 4, the continual change in game mechanics and design is one of the core features of social network games at large.

Table B.1: List of game actors.

Actor	Type	Info
Avatar's gender	Explicit	Stereotyped representations of gender are reproduced in the game, although without restricting gameplay to heteronormativity.
Avatar's skin colour	Implicit	The limited range of skin colour indicates that racial diversity is not very much welcome in the game world. However, skin colour directly affects neither gameplay nor peer-to-peer interactions.
Clothes & Accessories	Explicit /Implicit	These items are explicit markers of gender, culture, and identity in both gameworld and real life.
Pets	Explicit	Released in November 2012 after intensive demand from players, pets are currently a symbol of the power players have over the game in terms of design and production processes.

Continued on next page

[1]The wiki site of *The Sims Social* lists over 2400 items, which includes seasonal and temporary products that are no longer available in the game.

Table B.1 – continued from previous page

Actor	Type	Info
Food	Implicit	Festive and seasonal food can be seen as more than the simulation of real-life into the game: they become the play with cultural symbols.
Building objects		
Basins	Explicit	Building materials bring to the game world fantasy as well as cultural markers as, for example, the Japanese style items released during the Japanese Week and the classic items that resemble a common American house.
Doors	Implicit	
Fences	Implicit	
Fireplaces	Implicit	
Gates	Implicit	
Sinks	Explicit	
Showers	Explicit	
Toilets	Explicit	
Tiles	Implicit	
Wallpapers	Implicit	
Windows	Implicit	
Decorative objects		
Candles	Implicit	In the same way as building materials, decorative objects also bring to the game world both fantasy and cultural markers. Special cases are seen in the commemorative items, such as Halloween, Christmas and the Hanukkah, which are clear symbols of American culture.
Candelabras	Implicit	
Christmas decoration	Implicit	
Clocks	Implicit	
Flowers & Plants	Explicit /Implicit	
Fountains & Pounds	Implicit	
Halloween decoration	Implicit	
Mirrors	Explicit	
Paintings & Portraits	Implicit	
Rugs, Mats & Walk-Ons	Implicit	
Stuffed toys	Implicit	
Vases	Implicit	
Others	Implicit	Books, wall decorations, balloons, etc.
Furniture		
Bathtubs & Spas	Explicit	Again, everyday objects that reflect the American way of life are offered to players in tandem with more *exotic* items, such as coffin-like beds for Halloween decoration and marble thrones for the Greek week.
Beds	Explicit	
Bedside Tables	Implicit	
Benches	Explicit	
Bookshelves	Explicit	
Bookcases	Explicit	
Cabinets	Explicit	
Chairs	Explicit	
Chest of Drawers	Explicit	
Counters	Implicit	
Desks	Implicit	
Dividers	Implicit	
Dressers	Explicit	
Footstools	Implicit	
Lounges	Explicit	
Recliners	Explicit	
Shelves	Implicit	
Sofas	Explicit	
Tables	Implicit	

Continued on next page

Table B.1 – continued from previous page

Actor	Type	Info
Wardrobes	Explicit	
Skills objects		
Complete Kitchens	Explicit	Includes not only classic items such as the loft and the French kitchen but also playful elements such as the 'Orbital Kitchen'.
Computers & Typewriters	Explicit	These items are comprised of both modern Apple-like flat-screen computers as well as old-fashioned Olivetti models of typewriters.
Coffee Machines	Explicit	
Cookers & Ovens	Explicit	
Easels	Explicit	
Grills	Explicit	
Mats & Gym Apparatuses	Explicit	
Microwaves & Waffle Makers	Explicit	
Musical Instruments	Explicit	Guitars, pianos, keyboards, harps, etc.
Helicopter	Explicit	
Ice cream, Milkshake & Smooth Makers	Explicit	
Statues & Chisel Sets	Explicit	
Vehicles	Explicit	Cars, scooters, helicopter, yacht
Writing Desks	Explicit	
Drafting Boards	Explicit	
Others	Explicit	Some very specific items are released every week, as part of the weekly theme. Some examples are the Andre & Andre Dummy, the Blossom Combivan, the Simoir Model Mannequin, etc.
Other interactive objects		
Aquariums	Explicit	
Arcade Machines	Explicit	
Christmas Trees	Explicit	
Cocktail Bar	Explicit	
Dishwasher	Explicit	
Dressing Room	Explicit	
Fashion Desks	Explicit	
Flagged Up Poles	Explicit	There were two poles available, one with the USA flag and the other with the Union Jack. Both are no longer available in the game.
Fridges	Explicit	
Garden Plot	Explicit	
Greenhouses & Gardens	Explicit	
Mailboxes	Explicit	
Robots	Explicit	
Patisserie	Explicit	
Pet Accessories	Explicit	

Continued on next page

Table B.1 – continued from previous page

Actor	Type	Info
Pools	Explicit	
Sauna	Explicit	
Sound Systems & Radios	Explicit	
Stage	Explicit	
Sushi Bar	Explicit	
Telephones	Explicit	
Trashcans	Explicit	
TV Sets	Explicit	
Gazebos & Cabanas	Explicit	
Others	Explicit	Video cameras, telescopes, chess sets, stands, etc.
Sponsored items		
Diesel Collection	Explicit	During September 2012, several furniture items were advertised with a Diesel brand.
Dove Collection	Explicit	Several furniture items and bathroom apparatuses sponsored by Dove are still available for purchase.
Dunkin' Donuts Collection	Explicit	American doughnut company and coffeehouse chain advertised several kitchen apparatuses and some vehicles within *The Sims Social* during August and September 2012.
Magnum Collection	Explicit	Some furniture items like lounges and toys were sponsored by ice cream brand Magnum.
Toyota	Explicit	Toyota sponsored different Sim's cars during several months in 2012.
Heartbrand Ice Cream Stand	Explicit	The Univeler heartbrand logo was included in some toys and in an ice-cream stand.