

I spend, therefore I am

An analysis on the importance of consuming in The Sims 4

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Floris Koster

3946444

f.koster@uu.nl

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Supervisors

Prof. Dr. J.F.F. (Joost) Raessens

Dr. R. (René) Glas



Universiteit Utrecht

Abstract

Kline et al. (2003) explained more than fourteen years ago how the first version of The Sims simulates a digital world in which consuming is priority number one. Although The Sims is supposed to be a digital sandbox where every story seems possible, I argue that this notion is perhaps not entirely true because elements in the game could evoke players to play in specific ways. In this thesis I investigated how the newest version of The Sims structures the idea of consuming. In addition to Kline et al. (2003), I proposed to analyse The Sims 4 by a game specific approach, focussing on two concepts: *procedural rhetoric* and *indexical storytelling*. In relation to the concept of procedural rhetoric, as explained by Ian Bogost (2010), I analysed how underlying procedures convey an argument to the game its players. The most intriguing finding is that money in the game is even so important, that it is preliminary to all other human needs, such as safety, food and water. However, Teresa de la Hera (2014) argues that guiding players' behaviour through rules is not as simple as Bogost tries to convince us. Therefore I studied The Sims 4 also in relation to the concept of indexical storytelling, as explained by Fernandez-Vara (2011). I found that many game elements trigger players to play in a specific way, structuring the overall narrative of the game, in which consuming is very important. Although The Sims 4 seems to be a sandbox, game elements forcefully pushes the player towards a particular type of narrative that focuses on earning money to buy the best consumer goods.

Keywords: *The Sims 4, political economy, cultural studies, procedural rhetoric, indexical storytelling, consuming, textual analysis.*

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1. Introduction

Recently, I asked my thirteen-year-old sister what she thought of The Sims 4 when she played the latest copy of The Sims series. She explained that the game shows which opportunities you have in life and how things can work out for you. I agreed with her, because The Sims simulates daily life from a Western perspective that looks so much like our world and can be played on various creative ways. Although this short description is very optimistic, many bloggers are less happy with the newest version of The Sims (Avendano, 2016; Branco, 2014; Keem, 2016; Tamburro, 2014). The Sims 4 was released in November 2014 by Electronic Arts and is still one of the most popular games, according to Bol.com today.¹ According to Electronic Arts, The Sims 4 offers players a new experience when playing The Sims, in which the narrative is richer because characters are smarter and for the first time feel and express their emotions (Electronic Arts, 2014). However, The Sims 4 received an overwhelmingly negative reception by numerous players over the world. According to bloggers, players are extremely disappointed with the lack of functionalities and content of the game. In comparison to The Sims 3, elements as life stages, jobs and building possibilities are missing. In relation to the reactions of the bloggers, the narrative seems even reduced in relation to The Sims its predecessors, in which players just have to buy consumer goods.

Although The Sims is supposed to be a digital sandbox where everything is possible, I argue that this notion is perhaps not entirely true and that elements in the game can evoke players to play in specific ways. In line with the ideas of Stephan Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2003), I argue that the game invites a specific type of play in which consuming is very important. Kline et al. (2003) wrote their book *Digital Play* to argue that videogames, such as The Sims, are not merely a technical endeavour but also a social phenomenon. They tried to grasp how the underlying meaning of The Sims is shaped and questioned whether the game is a place of freedom and creativity, or just a commodified tool to influence players. To fully understand the underlying meaning of The Sims, they argued that videogames should be analysed from a political economy and cultural studies approach. They found that The Sims illustrates and intensifies late-capitalism, by simulating a digital world wherein consuming is priority number one. They later refer to these types of videogames as *games of empire* (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009), in which games can help to sustain empires, such as late-capitalism.

¹ The Sims is currently the second best sold videogame on Bol.com, one of the biggest online shopping websites in The Netherlands (Bol.com, 2017).

While the claim of Kline et al. (2003) to study videogames from two perspectives was very strong, the execution of this approach is missing two crucial points in my opinion. First, they studied the first edition of *The Sims* mainly by the political economy approach. Second, the cultural studies approach Kline et al. (2003) did propose, left out game specifics that are crucial to understand games. That is not very surprising, because the classical cultural studies is mainly focused on representations and semiotics. Stuart Hall, one of the founding fathers of the cultural studies, focuses for instance on the representation of cultural phenomenon in daily life through media, but not on games in particular (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013).

I argue that games are much more than a bundle of cultural representations and have the potential to influence players through its codes and procedures. Children for instance, can be one of them who can be influenced by the world they are exposed to, because they are not well trained to critically reflect on it. Therefore it is very important that we understand what message *The Sims* is trying to tell, which seems to be according to Kline et al. (2003) that *The Sims* simulates a digital world where consuming is very important. And to fully understand how *The Sims* tells this story, research is needed in which *The Sims* is studied from a game specific approach. Therefore my main question in this thesis will be: How do game specific elements structure the idea of consuming in *The Sims 4*?

To understand how videogames are able to tell stories and convey meaning, I first will zoom out to contextualize *The Sims 4* within a cultural and political perspective in chapter two, in which I will explain the research on *The Sims 1* by Kline et al. (2003). Second, in chapter three I will explain the importance of approaching *The Sims 4* from a game specific approach, by focussing on the concepts of *procedural rhetoric*, by Ian Bogost (2008) and *indexical storytelling*, by Fernandez-Vara (2011). Ian Bogost explains that procedures dictate how actions in a videogame can be carried out (Bogost, 2010, p. 3). In all these predefined procedures lays an underlying choice, made by an author with a specific goal in mind. So in that sense a videogame can convey an argument about how things (should) work through its procedures, rules and codes. Teresa de la Hera (2014) criticises the concept of procedural rhetoric and argues that although the concept by Bogost helps us to understand the way arguments can be embedded in the rules of a videogame, players can interpret the game differently, because they can play the game totally different than intended by its author. Therefore I will also use the concept of indexical storytelling. Fernandez-Vara (2011) explains with her concept that players construct a narrative in videogames by themselves, by playing the game on their own

way. She adds that although the designer creates the elements of the story and integrates them in the world, the player has to interpret them and piece them together.

To answer my main question, I will conduct a textual analysis on The Sims 4 in chapter 5, based on the concepts of procedural rhetoric and indexical storytelling, while focusing on the importance of consuming. And because I argued that we need a game specific approach, I will use a game specific textual analysis as proposed by René Glas (2014). He argues from a methodological point of view, that if we want to gain knowledge about and truly understand games, we should play them. By playing a The Sims 4 these invisible codes and procedures become more tangible and will help me to answer my first sub question: to what extent is consuming a necessity in The Sims 4? Further, by using the concept of indexical storytelling, I will analyse how players can move through the digital world and answer my second sub question: to what extent do game elements in The Sims 4 promote a specific narrative in relation to consuming? The main goal in this analysis is to show how and why The Sims 4 triggers players to consume. In relation to the concept of procedural rhetoric, I will analyse the underlying meaning of the procedures of the game, and answer my third sub question: to what extent do game elements in The Sims 4, in relation to consuming, convey an argument about how life is supposed to be?

Last, in chapter six, I will reflect on The Sims 4 its 'sandbox' kind of setting. Based on my analysis I will explain that this 'sandbox metaphor' is perhaps not entirely true, because elements in The Sims forcefully pushes the player towards a particular type of play that focuses on earning money to buy the best objects.

2. The Sims as cultural phenomenon

In this second chapter, I zoom out to contextualise *The Sims 4* within a cultural and political setting, using the ideas of Kline, Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2003). By doing so, I try to answer what kind of story *The Sims* tells when indeed the gameplay is structured in a way. Kline et al. (2003) argued that *The Sims 1* simulates a late-capitalistic world, wherein the act of consumption is the main objective. Throughout their book, they question whether videogames are places of freedom and creativity, or just commodified tools to influence players. They explain that videogames are not merely a technical endeavour but also a social phenomenon that has the capability to influence its player's thoughts. To understand how games are subject to this, they argued that videogames have to be analysed through both a political economy as a cultural studies approach. Although I criticize the approach Kline et al. (2003) used to study *The Sims*, I first need to explain what they initially did. Therefore I will first explain both their political economy (2.1) and cultural studies approach (2.2). Last, I will explain why and how the approach that Kline et al. (2003) used, is missing out some crucial points in my opinion for analysing games (2.3).

2.1 Political economy approach

From the political economy point of view, the authors build upon the ideas of Karl Marx and Marshall McLuhan wherein the general idea is that media technologies can exploit its users (Kline et al. 2003, pp. 30-38). Kline et al. refer to McLuhan and explain that each technological device communicates on the level of everyday experience "creating a cultural ripple effect as people use the potential of technologies to act differently – but also to feel differently" (p. 33). While McLuhan his view on technologies is characterised as technologic deterministic, the power of the media becomes even more intriguing when Kline et al. relate him to the thoughts of Karl Marx (2003, pp. 37-41). They refer to Marx's description of culture and explain briefly his 'base/superstructure' metaphor. The idea is that culture is divided in a 'base' and a 'superstructure', where the base is a place where the actual materialistic economic action takes place. This base is influenced by the superstructure, and includes according to Kline et al. (2003) also games: "this base/superstructure metaphor consigned newspapers, television, films, broadcasting and, we would add, videogames to marginal role quite contrary to their growing importance in advanced capitalism" (p. 38). All these elements in the superstructure can in a way influence how the base takes shape. In short, according to the idea of the

'base/superstructure' metaphor, media are able to influence society and in extent the way consumers will spend their money. Although we can identify parts of The Sims by approaching it from a political economy point of view, the authors argue that it "does not complete the job of unpacking the videogame" (p. 41). Therefore they suggest that we also need the Cultural Studies.

2.2 Cultural Studies approach

From the cultural studies point of view, Kline et al. (2003) argue that we need to pay attention to mainstream media and culture such as fashion, television programmes, music, and videogames because "they are rich sources of social meaning that provide us with resources and reference points for giving significance to the world around us and for expressing and constructing identities, our sense of who we are" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 42). Within cultural studies, researchers analyse how media texts such as movies, paintings and videogames, "give our experience of the world meaning through representations (or images) and patterns of narrative" (p. 43). And in many of these studies scholars focus on so-called power relations. They try to understand the relation between the producer of a cultural artefact and the consumer to analyse how these media are interpreted. In order to do so, we can break a media text, such as The Sims, down to understand how meaning is conveyed through textual and visual codes. These codes unveil important information about how games represent contemporary culture, ideologies and are potentially read by players. Of course, there are multiple ways of reading objects; we can accept, discuss or reject its meaning. Stuart Hall, one of the most important writers within cultural studies, calls these positions respectively: a dominant-hegemonic reading, negotiated reading and oppositional reading (Hall, 1993, pp. 134–136).

Although many scholars researched the relation between power and representation, Stuart Hall stands out. Kline et al. refer to Stuart Hall and explain that these textual representations are never innocent: "instead, they are very closely connected to systems of power in society" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 43). The importance of power within the representation in videogames sets really foot when actually hit the start button:

Once we press 'start' on our Tomb Raider, The Sims or Crash Bandicoot video game we know that gaming is not simply a cybernetic relationship with a machine but also a mediated cultural text, offering to us subject-positions and game scenarios that carry

social meanings about, say, gender relations, colonialism, and consumerism (Kline et al., 2003, p. 43).

So when playing a videogame, and specifically *The Sims*, players step into a metaphorically 'dream machine' that portrays a second reality. This reality contributes, according to the authors, to the "construction of an everyday 'common sense', a repertoire of assumptions and premises about how things are in the world" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 43). And because these digital realities are often made by large companies, we have to be aware of the fact that the underlying message in videogames is able to influence players. Children, as my sister of thirteen years old, can be one of them who can be influenced by the world they are exposed to, because they are not well trained to critically reflect on it. Therefore it is very important that we understand what message *The Sims* is trying to tell, which seems to be according to Kline et al. (2003) that *The Sims* illustrates and intensifies late-capitalism, by simulating a digital world where consuming is priority number one.

2.3 Videogames as cultural phenomenon

Although the research conducted by Kline et al. (2003) helps us to answer what kind of story *The Sims* implicitly tells, the execution of their approach is missing two crucial points in my opinion. First, they studied the first edition of *The Sims* mainly by the political economy approach, leaving out many parts of the cultural studies approach. Second, the cultural studies approach Kline et al. (2003) did propose, left out game specifics that are crucial to understand the specificity of *The Sims* as a videogame, such as how meaning is constructed through codes and procedures. In my opinion, the idea that games can learn us how the world is supposed to be, is very intriguing and should be researched. Although Kline et al. (2003) studied parts of *The Sims* from a cultural perspective, they did not do so from a game specific approach. But they are not the only one.

Within cultural studies, there seems to be less attention to game specifics that make them different from traditional media. For example, Russel Belk (2013) gave in his article an update to the concept of an 'extended self' after the rise of the personal computer, the internet and smartphones. He focused on how people used digital worlds such as *The Sims* to extend and change their identity. Although he found that many players 'escaped' to this digital world to do things they normally could not do, such as buying luxury products or to pretend to be someone else (Belk, 2013, pp. 480–481), he

did not focus on any game specificities. Other research within this approach is doing exactly the same, and focus more on how cultural phenomena in real life do occur in The Sims, such as our ideas of family values (Sicart, 2003), gender inequality (Albrechtslund, 2007), gay marriages (Curlew, 2005) and so on. And even Stuart Hall himself, does not focus on these game specificities that help to understand games. In one of his most famous books *Representation: Culture representation and signifying practice* (Hall et al., 2013) he solely focusses on representations and semiotics, instead on any game at all.

Together these studies show that within the cultural studies approach, from both Kline et al. (2003) as others, The Sims is often treated as a traditional media, such as a movie. But to fully understand how a videogame can tell stories, I argue that we need a game specific approach. Therefore I will explain the importance of approaching The Sims from a game specific approach in chapter three.

3. Encountering The Sims from a game specific approach

In this third chapter I will explain why and how The Sims should be understood and researched from a game specific approach. Although both traditional media as videogames are able to tell stories, the cultural studies focuses in my opinion too much on representations and less on game specificities that make them different from for example movies. Although the cultural studies do not focus on game specificities, game studies is not that different in understanding the relation between the producer of a cultural artefact and its consumer, or in this case player. Joost Raessens (2016) explains how Game Studies became a distinct field of study during the early years of the 21st century and includes many aspects of the traditional cultural studies where it originates from. According to Raessens, game studies is an approach to understand videogames as “cultural artifacts in and of themselves, in their design and development, their effects on people, and their meaning and context” (p. 1). In this chapter I will build a foundation for my analysis in which I explain how videogames are able to tell stories and could be analysed. From the perspective of the author, I will focus on how games can tell stories through its codes, rules and procedures, by explaining the concept of procedural rhetoric coined by Ian Bogost (2008) (3.1). From the perspective of the consumer, I will focus on the role that players have in the narrative that is constructed in videogames (3.2).

3.1 Game elements structuring the gameplay

In this section, I will focus on perspective of the author of a game and explain how a game and its underlying meaning is encoded through both its procedures as rules, by following the argument of Ian Bogost about procedural rhetoric (2008). Ian Bogost (Bogost, 2008) coins the concept of procedural rhetoric in his article ‘The rhetoric of video games’. This article was later used as draft for his book called *Persuasive Games* (Bogost, 2010). Bogost explains with this concept that procedures dictate how actions can and cannot be carried out in videogames (Bogost, 2010, p. 3). These procedures are rule-based, often tied to authority, crafted from the top down and can be found everywhere, both in the real as digital world (p. 3). In all these pre-defined procedures lays an underlying choice, made by an author with a specific goal in mind. So in that sense, the procedure itself can convey an argument about how things (should) work. Therefore Bogost relates procedurality with textual, visual and digital rhetoric, in sense

that digital procedures can be persuasively coded (pp. 15-21). He finally calls this procedural rhetoric:

Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming (Bogost, 2010, p. 29).

Because videogames are interactive, they require user action to complete their procedural representations, and therefore are partly pre-coded: “interactivity guarantees neither meaningful expressions nor meaningful persuasion, but it sets the stage for both” (p. 44). As such, they provide particularly promising opportunities for the procedural translation of rhetorical messages. In that sense, users only have to complete so called ‘enthymemes’, as how Bogost calls them. Here he refers to the Aristotelian concept enthymeme in which “the listener is expected to fill in the missing proposition and complete the claim” (p. 43). Scholars have argued that words are not the only form of expression that can be understood to form enthymematic arguments. Pictures can also function as enthymemes because they require the audience to help construct their meaning (Finnegan, 2001; Smith, 2007). Players of videogames are obliged to obey the rules, by means of the structure of a videogame. By having to obey these rules, games can use new ways to make claims about how things work (Bogost, 2010, p. 43). In other words, the basic set of rules and procedures in games, are able to convey meaning or an argument about things.

Although the concept of procedural rhetoric sounds suitable to analyse how game elements in *The Sims 4* structure the gameplay, I have to acknowledge that the initial goal of this concept is meant for analysing serious games. Serious games have according to Bogost a “though-out-educational purpose and are not intended to be played primarily for amusement” (Bogost, 2010, p. 55). Bogost explains his concept of procedural rhetoric with the videogame *Animal Crossing* as example (Bogost, 2008, pp. 117–121). *Animal Crossing* seems to be a game for children, but in fact let players experience how a debt makes bankers wealthy. Each player starts with a certain amount of debt that you eventually have to pay off. To do this, you have to buy more living space to sell items. But that not only creates more debt, it also drives the impulse to acquire more goods. More goods demand even more space, creating a vicious cycle (p. 117). This example shows how innocent games can be seen as a serious game, in which underlying

procedures convey an argument about how things could, or should, work. I argue that The Sims can be understood in the same way as Animal Crossing, as such that underlying procedures convey an argument about how things work in life. In this thesis I will therefore use the concept of procedural rhetoric to reveal political choices that the authors made and how they shape certain arguments.

However, guiding players' behaviour through rules is not as simple as Bogost tries to convince us. According to game scholar Teresa de la Hera (de la Hera Conde-Pumpido, 2014), one of Bogost's flaws is to presume the existence of ideal players who play the game in a way the game designer is expecting them to play it (p. 90). Here she follows the argument of Simon Ferrari who argues that there is not only one correct way to complete an enthymeme. De la Hera argues that Bogost is disregarding player creativity and forgetting that player choices can lead to a manipulation of the dominant rhetoric intended by the game designer, resulting in a "misunderstanding of the proposition omitted in the syllogisms" (p. 91). Although the concept by Bogost helps us to understand the way arguments can be embedded in the rules of a videogame, I argue that meanings are produced through complex negotiations that make up the social process and practices through which we interpret the things around us. So the player as part of this process is crucial to understand, because players can be very creative in achieving goals, or playing the game in various ways. To understand the perspective of the player, I argue that in addition to procedural rhetoric, we also need to focus on how a narrative is constructed in The Sims.

3.2 Narrative in videogames

In this section I want to build a foundation to analyse how The Sims 4 is able to tell a story through game elements, and how players have an important role in the interpretation of it. Because The Sims has no specific goal and can be played in many ways because of its 'sandbox' kind of setting, it seems that there is no fixed narrative. Or is it? This is exactly what game theorist Jesper Juul (2001) tried to find out for videogames in general. He questioned whether games do tell stories and if so, how they do it (Juul, 2001). He explains that narrative in videogames is different than in traditional media, such as movies. He argued that players can tell stories about a game session, that many computer games contain narrative elements, and in many cases players may play to see a cut-scene or realise a narrative sequence. Although games and narratives share some structural traits, they do not necessarily all tell stories.

Henry Jenkins gave a reaction on Juul his ideas and added a crucial element in which games are different than traditional media, according to him: *spatiality* (Jenkins, 2004). Jenkins argues that spatiality evokes different kinds of narrative possibilities and coins the concept environmental storytelling. According to Jenkins, environmental storytelling creates the preconditions for an immersive narrative experience in at least one of four ways: “spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives” (Jenkins, 2004, p. 5). The narrative of The Sims is not pre-structured or pre-programmed, and therefore represents the fourth model of how narrative possibilities might get mapped onto game space. According to Jenkins, The Sims is a sandbox wherein any imaginary narrative can be played (Jenkins, 2004, p. 11).

Although The Sims is supposed to be a ‘sandbox’, Kline et al. (2003) argued that the game simulates and intensifies a late-capitalistic world in which consuming is very important. So in that sense it seems that there should be elements in The Sims that structure the gameplay in such a way that players will start consuming. By arguing that The Sims is a sandbox, Jenkins seems to ignore the fact that game elements invite for specific narratives. Game scholar Clara Fernández-Vara (2011) supports this notion.

According to her, narratives in games are involuntary and the tools provided do not really create a narrative experience that relates to gameplay: “it is more an afterthought” (Fernandez-Vara, 2011, p. 5). Instead of focusing on how the game world may generate a narrative, she focuses on how narrative contributes to gameplay, and to help the player restore behaviour in the game and coins the concept of *indexical storytelling*. Indexical storytelling is a strategy to construct the narrative of a videogame, based on leaving traces and affecting the space, either on the part of the designer and the player (p. 5). A videogame such as The Sims is in comparison to a movie not scripted and can be played very differently, since the game offers a physical space where players can move through. With indexical storytelling she refers to the idea that a story is not “told” in a traditional sense, but rather put together through different pieces: “The designer creates the elements of the story and integrates them in the world; the player has to interpret them and piece them together” (Fernandez-Vara, 2011, p. 6). In figure 1, this is briefly visualized. When moving from point A to B, players have the possibility to choose their own path, creating a different narrative. This path is not necessarily a physical movement, but can be used as a metaphor for many elements in a game, such as achieving a goal.

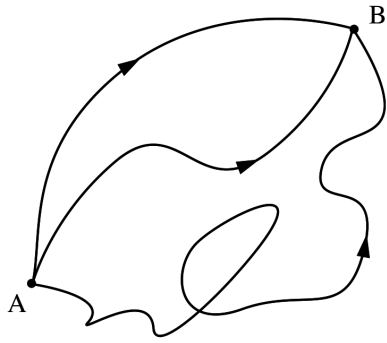


Figure 1: moving from a to b.

The concept of indexical storytelling shows the influence that players have on the narrative in videogames in two ways. First, because having the option to choose how to move through a game causes the player to potentially be exposed to both different game elements as the same elements in a different order. And second, the concept can be seen as a addition to the concept of procedural rhetoric, because in relation to de la Hera (2014) her critique on the concept, these different paths show that there are multiple ways to complete an enthymeme, or even avoid.

Furthermore, players in *The Sims* move through a 'digital maze' from the perspective of a character, an element that Fernandez-Vara did not include in her concept of indexical storytelling, but is a crucial game element in my opinion in *The Sims*. Characters in *The Sims* play a huge role in relation to *The Sims* its narrative, not because players enter this digital world that has a rich background in sense of events that happened in the past. Characters in *The Sims* are made from scratch and are in that sense pure fantasies from the player that can be compared with playing a dollhouse. Therefore, players have to construct their characters life story themselves. And from that perspective, players are explicitly making their characters' story, by moving around, buying things, interacting with other characters and so on.

4. A game specific method for understanding The Sims 4

Based on the foundation I have made in the theoretical framework (chapter 2 and 3), I will explain in this fourth chapter how I will analyse The Sims 4 in order to answer my main question: “How do game specific elements structure the idea of consuming in The Sims 4? To answer this question, I will reflect on the method that I will use in my analysis on four points. First I will explain how and why I will use a textual analysis, while reflecting on its strong and weak ties (4.1). Second, what answers I try to find using this method (4.2). Third, how my game specific approach helps me to structure my analysis (4.3). Fourth and last, why I chose to analyse the latest version of The Sims series (4.4).

4.1 Textual analysis

To answer my main question I will conduct a textual analysis on The Sims 4, which is often seen as a classical method within cultural studies to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world, which involves the perspective of the researcher to interpret data (McKee, 2003). This includes taking into account the purpose of the text, the time period in which the text was written and the audience for the text, in this case The Sims 4. Furthermore, a textual analysis helps us to break The Sims down to understand how meaning is conveyed through its procedures, codes and rules as I explained earlier. These codes unveil important information about how the game represents contemporary culture, ideologies and can be read by players.

Although a textual analysis is one of the most used methods within cultural studies, there are numerous possible variations. And as I argued earlier, we need a game specific approach to understand games. Therefore I will focus in my analysis on the concepts of procedural rhetoric and indexical storytelling. Together these two concepts show how meaning is constructed in videogames from respectively the perspective of the author and player. Although The Sims is supposed to be a ‘sandbox’ where any narrative is possible, both concepts show that game elements are able to structure the gameplay. And to understand how these elements structure the gameplay and narrative, I will use a game specific textual analysis as explained by René Glas (2014).

From a methodological point of view, Glas (2014) argues that if we want to gain knowledge about and truly understand games, we should play them. Glas builds upon the ideas of game scholar Espen Aarseth and explains six approaches coined by Aarseth to play games as method. Glas mainly criticises the idea that it is not about the amount

of time you need to invest in play, but on what to focus on while doing so (p. 28). I strongly agree with Glas and will therefore play The Sims 4, while focussing on one major element in line with the argument Kline et al. (2003) made: the importance of consuming in the game. Furthermore, focusing on both procedural rhetoric and indexical storytelling while playing the game, will help me to both answer my main question, as structure my analysis, as I will later explain (4.3).

Despite the fact that a textual analysis helps to gather detailed information about how game elements potentially influence the narrative in The Sims 4, this method has three weak aspects that I need to reflect on. First, a textual analysis involves the perspective of the researcher to interpret data that has been gathered. This means that I will solely be the one that will reflect on the political choices that have been made by the author of the game. Although this process is not entirely objective, it is not necessarily a negative point in this research, because I will focus on technical aspects of the game that potentially can influence the gameplay. Second, in this research I will not analyse how other players will play The Sims 4. Although I explained that meaning is produced through complex negotiations between the author of a game and its consumer, I try to find out how this process is being influenced by game elements. Therefore I will focus on the game itself. Third, because I will use a game specific approach, I will not focus on representations and semiotics in The Sims 4. I explicitly explained in chapters 2 and 3 that a game specific research is an addition to the work of Kline et al. (2003). Therefore I will not focus on cultural studies aspects in this research.

4.2 Research questions

Taking into consideration all of the above, this study tries to answer the following main research question: How do game specific elements structure the idea of consuming in The Sims 4? To answer this question, I have to answer the following sub-questions:

- 1) To what extent is consuming a necessity in The Sims 4?
- 2) To what extent do game elements in The Sims 4 promote a specific narrative in relation to consuming?
- 3) To what extent do game elements in The Sims 4, in relation to consuming, convey an argument about how life is supposed to be?

4.3 Structure of analysis

To answer my main question, I need to analyse how a narrative is constructed in *The Sims* from both the perspective of the author and player. And to find out how this narrative is constructed from the perspective of the author, I first need to figure out how players are able to make their own narrative.

To answer my first sub question I will initially start playing the game, while focussing on the necessity of consuming. In this first section of my analysis I try to find out when and how the game motivates players to spend their money to buy things. To challenge the game in relation to consuming, I will play *The Sims 4* without any money. So in this first section I try to find out if *The Sims 4* is possible to play without any money, or if money and consuming is crucial in its narrative. In my analysis I will reflect on how this will turn out for my character (5.1). Basically I try to figure out if and how the game motivates or triggers players to consume.

To answer my second sub question, I will focus on the concept of indexical storytelling. Fernandez-Vara (2014) explained that the narrative in videogames is not fixed in contrast to movies. Players are able to make their own story by playing the game on their own way. Nevertheless, some elements in the game are pre-made and are waiting to be interacted with by players. It seems in line with her argument that in games, such as *The Sims*, there is a framework in which several narratives are possible, but not all. One way of finding out how game elements influence the gameplay of *The Sims 4*, is by focussing on the possibilities players have in the game. Therefore I will reflect on the affordances of *The Sims 4*. The concept of affordance was first coined by (Gibson, 1977) and refers to all possibilities of actions on an object or environment. Although the concept of affordance was never intended to define or analyse videogames, game scholar Aki Järvinen (2008) argues that game elements have affordances for performing abilities and skills. In my analysis I try to analyse if consuming is a necessary element in the narrative of *The Sims 4*, or can be avoided (5.2). So basically, I question how influential this framework is upon the behaviour of its players and structures the narrative.

To answer my third question, I will use the concept of procedural rhetoric by Ian Bogost (2010). Bogost explained that in the game its code and procedures a certain argument could be embedded about how things should work in life, according to the author. Kline et al. (2003) showed that *The Sims 1* portrays a digital reality in which consuming is one of the most important things in life. And because *The Sims 1* simulates our western daily life, it seems that game tells players how the Western world is supposed to be. In my analysis I will use the concept to unveil political choices that the

developers made in the game its codes, procedures, limitations and affordances, and how they convey an argument about how the world is supposed to be, in relation to consuming (5.3). So by using the concept of procedural rhetoric, I try to figure out the underlying meaning of the game about consuming. Because I will play The Sims 4 without having any money at all, my assumption is that game mechanics in The Sims will push me to gain money and consume.

4.4 Justification of corpus

In this thesis I will analyse the latest version of The Sims series, called The Sims 4, because of two main reasons.

First, although many studies have been conducted on The Sims, most of them are focused on earlier versions of The Sims series, originating between 2001 and 2014 (Bianchi, 2014; Frasca, 2001; Griebel, 2006; Kline et al., 2003; McGuire, 2004). Therefore it seems that the newest version of the game has been studied less extensively. And although the latest version of The Sims was released in late 2014, the game is still a recent phenomenon since it is still one of the best-sold games in The Netherlands.²

Second, in relation to its five-year-old predecessor, The Sims 4 is doing everything different according to Electronic Arts. According to game journalist Robert Wiesehan (Wiesehan, 2014), the newest version of The Sims is explicitly focused on identity. Electronic Arts explains that The Sims 4 offers players, in comparison to previous editions, a new experience when playing The Sims. The narrative is richer because characters are smarter and for the first time feel and express their emotions (Electronic Arts, 2014). It seems as the next step into the utopian life simulation game, and therefore I will focus on The Sims 4.

Furthermore, Electronic Arts is known to develop expansion packs in the months after they release 'main game'. These expansion packs give players more opportunities than the original Sims 4 game. In this thesis I will not include any of the expansion packs for my analysis. As part of my corpus I will use printscreens that I have made during my gameplay. I will include these printscreens in my analysis to visualize what is happening in the game.

² The Sims is currently the second best sold videogame on Bol.com, one of the biggest online shopping websites in The Netherlands (Bol.com, 2017).

5. Analysis and interpretation of The Sims 4

In this fifth chapter I will analyse how game elements in relation to consuming in The Sims 4 influences the gameplay for players and in extent the overall narrative. Throughout this analysis I will refer to screenshots I took while I played a session of The Sims 4. I will divide my analysis in three parts, in which I will focus on the game at three levels. First I will focus on the basic elements in the game that include any sort of money or consuming and describe how important this is in relation to the gameplay (5.1). Second, I will focus on these elements that include money more critically and try to expose the influence of it on the overall gameplay in relation to indexical storytelling (5.2). Third and last, I will approach these elements from a procedural rhetoric perspective and try to analyse what kind of argument the game conveys (5.3).

5.1 The need for money

In this first section I will analyse when and why players need money to complete tasks in the game. The Sims 4 contains roughly three stages in which players play the game, of which the first two stages are preparatory for the third in which the gameplay really starts.

5.1.1 Stages in The Sims 4

The first stage is the 'Create-A-Sim' tool, in which you need to create your own household. Your household can contain multiple characters that you can modify by selecting your outfit, skin, body gestures, personality traits and many more (see figure 2). I have chosen to make one character. In this first stage there is no need for any money, because any kind of clothing is free to wear, including a variety of accessories. In the second stage players have to buy a property to live in (see figure 3).



Figure 2: creating my character



Figure 3: Buying a property

This is the first moment when players are exposed to the need of money. Every household begins their story with 20.000 simoleons, a digital currency used in the game, which is presumably the same as 20.000 euros. This money is necessary to buy a property and start the game. You can choose to buy an empty lot or a pre-made house, filled with furniture. From this moment, players enter the third stage in which the game starts and the importance of money really sets foot.

5.1.2 Money in daily life

The third stage is where the actual gameplay takes place and where the idea of consuming is a prominent factor. There are numerous moments in the game where the need for money is crucial. I have chosen to explain the three most important elements in the game that are heavily influenced by money or consuming: *staying alive*, *developing skills* and *socializing*.

Staying alive: Needs

Although it is not explicitly stated, the most important goal in the game is presumably to stay alive. If all of your characters die, you have to restart the game and make a new household. It means basically that you failed. In The Sims 4, there are six *needs* that will drain and put stressful moods on your character when nearly depleted: bladder, hunger, energy, fun, social and hygiene.



Figure 4: The needs of a character



Figure 5: Can't eat without money

Although it takes a long time, only one type of need being depleted will kill a character: starvation. All other needs simply make it so that your character will not do many optional tasks, like painting or collecting something, until that need is met. But without money, it is almost impossible to stay alive at all, because you cannot make something to eat (see figure 5). And having money is not only a precondition to stay alive, but for every other element in the game. Players need money for the most crucial needs of their characters: shelter, food, water and electricity. When your character has no money, the

problems will add up after a couple of days: both your electricity as water will be cut off. This will result in your character to be unable to eat or shower and resulting him to die (see figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6: Paying bills is impossible



Figure 7: The electricity was cut off

Developing skills: Aspirations

In the first stage of The Sims 4 you need, next to personality traits, give your character a *lifetime wish*, such as reaching the top of a specific career. Your character wants to achieve this, and will receive a reward upon completion of that aspiration. Each aspiration has milestones to complete, at which point you will get another set of goals. During that process, they will gain satisfaction to spend at a special reward store. When an aspiration is fulfilled, you should switch to another to chase another reward and the satisfaction that comes from completing the goals of later milestones. In order to achieve a lifetime wish, your character needs to develop some skills, such as playing a guitar. And almost all of these skills are learned through interacting with consumer goods, such as a guitar, a mirror, an oven or a computer. The lifetime wish of my character is being a master in computer game sciences, also called a 'Whizzkid' (see figure 8). To achieve this lifetime wish, my character needs to buy a computer and practice programming.



Figure 8: My lifetime wish



Figure 9: Expensive is better

Although it is impossible to buy a computer without any money, it is interesting to see that the more expensive a consumer good is, the more advantages it has in relation to learning skills. Cheaper computers have in that sense fewer advantages and break down more easily. Expensive computers will learn skills more quickly.

Socializing

The third element in which money plays a role is in the process of interaction with other characters. Although making friends is entirely optional, one of your characters needs is to be social. Nevertheless it is remarkable to see that the options you have in conversations are depending on the skills your character possesses. And as I explained earlier, these skills are almost impossible to learn without having to spend money on consumer goods. An example of this is seen in figure 10, in which my character is having a conversation and is able to talk about games. Because he learned to program, he is able to have different conversations. In that sense, money is indirectly one of the basic elements in the game that can bring some extra depth to the gameplay and enriches the narrative.



Figure 10: A conversation in The Sims 4

5.1.3 Playing without money

In the previous two sections I have described where money is an important factor. The question that remains is if The Sims 4 can be played without money. The most obvious answer is: no. Because the narrative only starts after you bought a house, it is impossible to even start the game without spending any money. Even when you ignore this first moment, it becomes almost impossible to stay alive. So to answer my first sub question, it seems that consuming in The Sims 4 is a necessity for almost every aspect in the game.

5.2 Motivating players to have and spend money

The first section of my analysis was more a description of how money and consumption elements manifest in daily life. In this section I will go deeper into these elements and explain how The Sims 4 structures the behaviour of players. Although you can play the game without money, The Sims 4 tries to adjust their behaviour during the game in order to get more money. In general there seem to be two ways on how the game promotes players to spend money, by implicitly limiting the affordances in the game and explicitly directing players to do things.

5.2.1 Implicitly

The first thing you will notice when you do not have any money is the lack of functionalities, or possibilities in the game. As I explained earlier, money is crucial to maintain basic needs such as shelter, food, water and electricity. But also buying consumer goods, that help your characters fulfil their lifetime wish, becomes impossible. Players therefore will be less able to do things in the game when they have no money. For example, when you do not have any money, basic functions in the game will stop working (see figures 11 and 12). During this moment the electricity was cut off, resulting in a near death, because your character is impossible to make food.



Figure 11: Unable to play a game



Figure 12: Unable to eat without money

In relation to the concept of indexical storytelling, the narrative of The Sims 4 becomes more restricted and less diverse. As I explained earlier, both game elements as the ideas of the player together make the narrative in videogames. When a player has no money, the influence of a variety of game elements becomes visible. Although several narratives are possible in The Sims 4, having no money will limit them dramatically. It seems that in any kind of narrative, consuming is a necessary element. From a more positive perspective, more money will enrich the game its narrative. Buying expensive consumer goods can help your character to learn skills more easily. And these skills will help to get

higher positions at work, allowing you to get a higher loan, and result finally in getting more money.

5.2.1 Explicitly

Although the narrative in *The Sims 4* is limited when you do not have any money, this sort of play will probably not occur in most cases. Most players of *The Sims 4* will not even be poor, because the game triggers players on various ways to get money. When playing *The Sims* for the first time, you will get tips by the developers, in which they tell you how basic functions work. And one of the first tips you will get is that you need a job to pay the bills (see figure 13).



Figure 13: You need a job



Figure 14: A Character wants to buy things

Having a job in that sense seems to be obligatory, rather than optional. This does not even sound strange; it seems very logic that you need a job. Most of us where grown up with the idea that you have to work in order to buy things. So getting a job is probably one of the first things players will do in the game. Next to instructions by the game itself, also your character triggers you to buy things. In the left corner of your screen, you always see the current mood and desires of your character (see figure 14). In the example above, you can see that my character wants to buy a radio, call a friend and play a videogame. Although these suggestions are completely optional, they have influence on both the narrative as the current mood of the character. When I agree to buy a radio, I give in to the elements in the game that structure the narrative, and at the same time enhance the mood of my character. Therefore it seems plausible that players are easily manipulated to do things as suggested.

In relation to indexical storytelling, it seems that there are many elements in the game that nudges players to do things, such as completing pre-made sequences that involve consuming. Although they are somewhat optional, players will get rewarded for completing them, or even punished when they do not. So to answer my second sub

question, it seems that game elements in The Sims 4 indeed promote a specific narrative in which consuming is a prominent factor.

5.3 The Sims' procedural rhetoric

In this third section of my analysis, I try to figure out to what extent game elements in The Sims 4, in relation to consuming, convey an argument about how life is supposed to be. In the previous two sections I explained where and how players are triggered to get money, or to spend it. In this section I try to understand the principle behind it, by using the concept of procedural rhetoric. Bogost explained that in the procedures and rules of a game an argument could be found. Based on my findings in the previous sections, there seem to be four main arguments that the game makes. I will explain them separately.

5.3.1 Money is preliminary to all other basic needs in life

One of the most intriguing arguments that can be found in The Sims 4, is that money is so important that it seems to be preliminary for everything else in the game. Without money you cannot even start the game at all, because you need to buy a property to live on. You can obviously accept this first fact and spend the rest of the time without consuming, but it is really hard to do so. Money is a preliminary condition for almost all things in the digital life of The Sims 4, in comparison to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1970), as seen in figure 15.

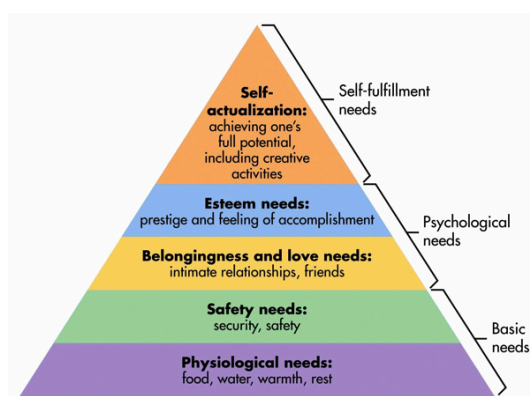


Figure 15: Maslow's pyramid of needs

Maslow stated that people are motivated to achieve certain needs and that some needs take precedence over others. Our most basic needs are for physical survival, and these will be the first things that motivate our behaviour. Once that level is fulfilled the next

level up is what motivates us, and so on. In *The Sims 4* it seems that money is not only necessary for self-fulfilment needs, but also preliminary to the physiological needs as explained by Maslow (1970). It is not strange to see that money is necessary to buy things of which you gain prestige, but it is remarkable that your character is unable to get humans' most basic needs without it. It is for example unable to sleep on the floor and live like a homeless. The developers of *The Sims 4* made a political choice by making money so important in the game. In comparison to the 'real' world, money is also very important, but not necessary to stay alive. In the Western world, people have a right to exist, meaning that without money you can at least get the most basic human needs. In *The Sims 4*, you will automatically die without having any money. So it seems that the game its procedures dictate that consuming in life is one of the most important things.

5.3.2 Money can buy happiness

A second interesting argument that can be found in *The Sims 4*, is the idea that money can buy happiness. In the procedures of the game, it seems that there are two outcomes in which happiness is a result from consuming.

First, as I explained earlier, you always see the current mood of your character, in which he can give you suggestions what to do. When you buy consumer goods that are currently wanted by your character, you will get temporary bonus points towards your current mood. This will result in a much happier character because he emotionally reacts to your recent purchases. So the procedures in the game show that spending money will make humans happy.

Second, there seems to be a difference in the products you buy for your characters. The more expensive the product, the better it is for the overall environment, for learning skills and your characters happiness. When using the products that are more expensive, your character will be happier and learn new skills more easily. And these skills will help to get higher positions at work, allowing you to get a higher loan, and result finally in getting more money. Again, the procedures in the game show that consumer goods can help you become better at things, in sense of both becoming happy as developing yourself.

5.3.3 You cannot become poor in The Sims 4

The third interesting outcome of playing *The Sims*, in relation to procedural rhetoric, is the fact that your character cannot become poor. In my attempt to play *The Sims 4* without any money, it seemed to be almost impossible to let my character become bankrupt. And even more striking is the fact that there is apparently no insurance for

people without money. Although it probably is not a problem that normal players will encounter, the game developers did not include any sort of help to get characters out of debt. The only thing you can do to get out of poverty is to sell items, or to get a job. But when following the 'main storyline' that The Sims 4 triggers you to, you probably do not end up bankrupt. In that sense, The Sims 4 its procedures seem to dictate players that getting money and staying alive is a responsibility of your own.

Every character strives to achieve their lifetime wish, in which almost all cases you have to become more successful at work, skills, social life and so on. For all these lifetime wishes, you have to have a job in line with your wish. If you want to be the best computer technician, you have to start a job as a technician. From that moment on, you have to buy items that help you to get better at things for your job. Eventually you will become better at both your work as your progress in achieving your lifetime wish.

5.3.4 Progress is indexed in wealth

The last argument that The Sims 4 seems to convey, is the idea that the progress you have made in the game is indexed in wealth. While playing The Sims 4, you do not see your personal progress visualized in a colourful bar. The only things you do see are the individual needs per character. And because there is no real goal in the game, your progress is hard to define. Nevertheless, there are two ways to tell how successful your characters in life.

First, the amount of money you have could possibly tell how much progress your characters made during their lifespan. By achieving higher ranks at work, you will get a higher salary. And since every household will start with the exact same starting amount, the higher your balance, the more successful you probably are. It does not even sounds strange, because many aspects in the game pushes players towards becoming the best at things, such as work and several skills.

Second, the more expensive your luxury inventory of your house seem to be, the more progress your characters seem to have made. Although it sounds obvious that some products are only available when you have enough money, the result of a higher rank at a specific skill or job is noteworthy. Some items in the digital store are only possible to buy when reaching the highest level at a specific skill or job. And these expensive products do really matter in the game. Your characters will learn new skills quicker on an expensive product in comparison to a cheaper version.

Overall, from a procedural perspective, The Sims 4 seems to motivate players to consume. As I have shown in the second section of this analysis (5.2), players are able to

avoid parts of the game where consuming is a necessity, despite of the fact that it is hard to do so. In this third section of the analysis, I have shown that the procedures and rules of the game are pushing players towards a particular type of play that focuses on earning money to buy the best objects. And in addition, these procedures seem to embed four arguments about the importance of money in life. So to answer my third sub question it seems that The Sims 4 conveys four different arguments: 1) money is preliminary to all other needs in life, 2) money can buy happiness, 3) poverty is your own choice in life and 4) having a successful life means having more money.

6. Conclusion

The main question in this research is concerned with the idea of The Sims 4 being a 'sandbox' in which any imaginary gameplay or narrative is possible. Although The Sims is supposed to be a digital sandbox where every story seems possible, I argued that this notion is perhaps not entirely true because elements in the game could evoke players to play in specific ways. So regarding this question, I first analysed how Kline et al. (2003) researched more than fourteen years ago the first version of The Sims in which they questioned exactly the same. They argued that The Sims 1 simulates a digital world in which consuming is priority number one. Although the research by Kline et al. (2003) gave me a start to address this main question in the newest version of The Sims, there were two major problems in their approach. To understand how games can convey such an argument, they argued that videogames should be analysed from a political economy and cultural studies approach. While their claim was very strong, the execution of their approach was missing two crucial points in my opinion. First, they mainly focused on the political economy approach. Second, the cultural studies approach they proposed did not treat videogames separately from traditional media, such as movies. Therefore I argued that The Sims 4 should be researched from a game specific approach.

I proposed to analyse The Sims 4 by a game specific textual analysis, in which I played the game, while focussing on two concepts: *indexical storytelling* and *procedural rhetoric*. In relation to the concept of procedural rhetoric, as explained by Ian Bogost (2010), I analysed how the narrative in The Sims 4 is constructed from the perspective of the author. The most intriguing finding in this thesis is the importance of money in its narrative. It seems that money in the game is even so important, that it is preliminary to all other human needs, such as safety, food and water. But the game also argues that poverty is an unwilling condition and that money can buy happiness and shows your success in life. Because Teresa de la Hera (2014) argued that Bogost focused too much on the game itself, I decided to analyse The Sims 4 also from the perspective of the player, by the concept of indexical storytelling, as explained by Fernandez-Vara (2011). By using the concept of indexical storytelling I analysed how the narrative in The Sims 4 is constructed through the perspective of players. It seemed that although players can be very creative in their gameplay, many game elements trigger players to play in a specific way and will likely end up consuming. It seems that players are both implicitly as explicitly exposed to more opportunities and a richer gameplay when they adhere the game its logic and start consuming.

By analysing The Sims 4 from both the perspective of the author as player, I am able to answer my main question, regarding the idea of consuming in the game: How do game specific elements structure the idea of consuming in The Sims 4? Although The Sims 4 seems to be a sandbox, the game its procedures forcefully pushes the player towards a particular type of play that focuses on earning money to buy the best consumer goods. Therefore I argue that the sandbox metaphor is somewhat problematic to use, because not every type of play is possible in The Sims 4; the procedures and codes of the game pushes players to a particular kind of play in which consuming is an important factor. Overall there seems to be two main ways of how consuming is promoted in the game. First, without money your character will die out of hunger. Second, it seems that your character is being rewarded for spending money on consumer goods.

Although I have identified how game elements in The Sims 4 are able to structure the narrative towards the idea consuming, my approach is not entirely representative for the actual gameplay of players. Players can be very creative in their gameplay, as I have shown myself. In this research I did not focus on the concept of subversive play, in which players play a game totally different than intended. Mary Flanagan researches for instance how players play The Sims totally different, and gives the example of players playing sadistically (Flanagan, 2009, p. 59). Further research should therefore investigate how players handle the underlying meaning of The Sims 4.

Nevertheless, I want to argue that games such as The Sims should be approached more critically, because a certain amount of its players are children. When my sister of thirteen years old plays The Sims 4, the game seems to be very innocent, because there is no violence, hate or abuse. Although the game looks like a digital dollhouse, I argue that The Sims 4 can also be seen as a sort of learning device. When playing the game, children are exposed to these underlying arguments about how this digital world is supposed to be. Although we as scholars, parents or grown-ups can acknowledge the fact that the game is a 'near perfect' simulation and reject its underlying argument, children could perhaps more easily accept these arguments that are embedded in the rules of the game. Therefore I argue that games, such as The Sims 4, should include a better warning than it has today. Future research therefore can be addressing the age rating labels on videogames. These age rating do not take into account the underlying meaning of games, but rather practical skills required to play a game (PEGI, 2017).

I want to end with acknowledging that representing human life in a video game is not an easy task. And although its underlying codes and rules are pushing on the act of consuming, players ultimately have the power to play in a very different way.

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