Chapter 14

Is There a Virtual Socialization by Acting Virtual Identities?
Case Study: The Sims®

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will present sociological analysis of the offline video game The Sims®, from the first version to the third one. The focus is on the social impacts of virtual relationships on gamers at stake in the gameplay. With the game The Sims®, we would like to analyze the process of socialization involved in the relationship between the gamer and his Sim. The gamer, here a teenager, has to figure out how to behave when he is an adult with responsibilities. The primary socialization is his family, and the secondary one is the avatar in the game; we will demonstrate that gamer will learn all the classical steps of socialization that lead to become a social being and are included in the gameplay. The study of these two times of the socialization process is relevant because they take part of the construction of the Self. Nowadays, teenagers also become a social being and an adult through gaming at video games.

This chapter relies on a sociological doctoral research led in France, in Russia, and in United Arab Emirates. Results of the survey tell us how most gamers of the poll use characters to experiment social life and build identities by confronting their virtual behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

The difference between gaming and learning could be very narrow and for a few years, serious games have been developed and studied by researchers because they have noticed that a video game can teach the gamer something (Greenfield, 1994; Gee, 2003) and vice versa. Simulators and simulation games used to be classified among what we now call serious games. Incidentally, when Will Wright proposed his video game, The virtual dollhouse, which is a simulation of life, nobody supported his idea (Ichbiah, 1998). The point of the game is to manage the life of a Sim, an avatar,
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and to deal with his wishes and aspirations. The difficulty is the independence of the Sim. This virtual character is able to do actions on his own. Managers thought that a video game simulating life would not be able to entertain gamers, which is what it was supposed to be aimed at.

However simulating life has always been the goal of video games creators and a few years after the first try, the American engineer, Will Wright, achieved to convince a new manager to develop his game. Now, \textit{The Sims®} has become famous world wide.

Howbeit, few sociologists focused on this video game as a work field. Hence, the wish of working on it for a doctoral research in Sociology appeared. This chapter will present a sociological point of view on virtual worlds about communication between the gamer and his avatars. Past research focused on interactions between gamer–computer – gamer it consists in a real relationship with its codes and norms up to what is going on when there is no other gamer at the end of the network. In his book, Dubey (2001) argued that the utopia of virtual society would rely on the technical substitute of social link and would be built by virtual knots. Where lonely people, connected to each other by a virtual network, live the main idea would be the need of rethinking social life (Bouvier, 2005). Besides, Schmoll (2000) explained that virtual worlds existed through the reality of the commune imaginary universe created and shared by gamers. This argument can be pursued in more details with the example of online communities. As a matter of fact, these communities are real thanks to the relationships their members have created and maintained. Thus, we could consider that there is no interest for studying social relationships in a game with a gamer–computer system interaction. Leaving the topic of online communities on one side, we shall give a different approach to another aspect of virtual communication. If it is said that communication has to be between two different people, can we also say that there is communication between one real person and a virtual one? Gamers spend a huge amount of time playing their favourite game. Is it conceivable that there is nothing happening during this gaming time? All the social process involved in this relationship takes a part in the construction of gamers’ identity (Süss, 2006). We may foresee the opportunity of studying various social aspects of virtual life. This text relies on a sociological doctoral research led with 180 teenagers living in Strasbourg in France (“S”), in Moscow in Russia (“M”) and in Abu Dhabi in United Arab Emirates (“AD”). The sample is small because the point is to study the correlation between different variables in a homogenous population (Javeau, 1990). There is 55% of girls and 45% of boys in this sample. They have filled a survey composed of 67 questions and some of the results appear in the text below.

The point is about focusing on what the social impacts of these virtual relationships and all the effects of communication between the gamer and his avatars are. We will give the same meaning to virtual characters, avatars and Sims with no distinction. Can we claim that these relationships are pointless, they have no social impacts, and are useless – and have no effects on gamers – just because they take place between a real gamer and its virtual identity? This is precisely why we shall analyze the gameplay of the video game \textit{The Sims®}, then explain the process of socialization which takes place in this gameplay and we will finally develop the way gamers use avatars to fulfil social experiences.

\textbf{THE SIMS® PRESENT A REAL VIRTUAL LIFE}

In this first part, the purpose will be to expose and underline all the social aspects and possibilities of communication in the game \textit{The Sims®}. The player has to deal with many status bars related to Sim’s needs such as Hunger, Energy, Social, Comfort, Social, Hygiene, Bladder and Room
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