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Exchanging Online Stories: A Space for Both Learning and Leisure

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Abstract

The advent and popularity of The Sims and The Sims 2™has led to the telling, reading, reviewing and exchanging of stories in cyberspace on The Sims 2 website (http://thesims2.ea.com/), namely a section called the Story Exchange. Those involved in reading and evaluating these online stories include a 15-year-old female named Sarah, who was interviewed about her experiences in playing The Sims, The Sims 2, and using the Sims 2 website, including the Story Exchange section. The paper reviews some literature about the possible interrelationships between gaming and curriculum, and it introduces notions about *plaisir* and *jouissance* evident in the practice of those saturated with consumer-media culture (Kenway & Bullen, 2001). From Sarah's viewpoint, it seems to be apparent that the children, adolescents, and adults who engage with these online narratives on the Sims 2 website have determined quality indicators of the stories without guidance or instruction from external structures or authorities. I suggest that the Story Exchange section of the Sims 2 website is an example of a legitimate learning space that is an avenue of leisure, knowledge, and skill development, out of alignment with traditional structures and institutions of formal schooling. In the conclusion, attention focuses on what this might mean for primary and secondary education, and how formal schooling and informal learning activities (such as the exchanging of online stories) could be aligned.

Introduction

In this paper, I explore the notion of informal learning (Sefton-Green, 2004) that is occurring specifically with an online story exchange found on The Sims 2 website (http://thesims2.ea.com/). This particular type of informal learning is closely linked with leisure, as The Sims 2 is a simulation game that is a worldwide best seller.

After briefly introducing The Sims, I then relate the literature that explains the research and findings that indicate how gaming (including The Sims et al.,) and curriculum can link together. The types of pleasure evident in the praxis of those who write and share online stories are defined, following by an explanation of the methodology and methods used in this study, and the theoretical lens employed to analyze the study. I draw on my interview with Sarah in order to explore how The Sims 2 Story Exchange operates, and offer suggestions as to why the creation of cyberspace narratives is so popular. The paper concludes with implications for traditional schooling.

It should be noted that I am not discussing the Sims Online game. This is different to the Sims 2 website, and is different to The Sims 2, which is a software program. Also, when I use the term 'exchanging', I am referring to the online interaction of users who upload and share their stories on the Story Exchange section of the Sims 2 website, where they upload, and read others stories, i.e. exchanging.

The Sims 2 Story Exchange

> **The Sims 2** is a strategic life simulation computer game developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts. It is the sequel to the best-selling computer game in history, The Sims. It was released on September 17, 2004 and sold a record one million copies in its first ten days. The Sims 2 has been released for Windows, Mac OS X, and several game consoles. Four expansion packs and three stuff packs have been released to date. In The Sims 2, players control computer characters known as Sims as they interact with their virtual environment, engaging in activities and forming relationships in a manner similar to real life. It builds on its predecessor by allowing Sims to age through six stages of life and incorporating an all-new 3D game engine. Its genre is a 'life simulation' game or a 'god' game (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sims_2, date accessed 27/10/2006).

The Sims et al., is a 'god' game in that it simulates the controlling of lives (life simulation genre), and as Nutt and Railton (2003) stated, players "can play God and create utopian communities, or rewrite aspects of their own lives to negotiate different imagined outcomes" (p. 589 - 590). What is interesting is that players of The Sims and The Sims 2 cannot specifically control the outcomes of their created simulated people. As people play the game, they generate narratives of agents within society and their relationships (Nutt & Railton, 2003). The Sims 2 Story Exchange section of the Sims 2 website displays stories that have been created by the Sims 2 players, who have created their own avatars in the Sims, and hence, original stories. The stories are constructed and based on what the avatars do in the software program itself, and storylines are written to accompany static images of the stories. These stories are created according to how their Sims live their lives, and though these outcomes are unknown, they are produced by the game player's 'everyday' decisions s/he makes for the Sim and his/her family. It should be noted that when one plays The Sims 2, one does not have to construct stories with static or moving images and descriptions (much like a children's storybook). One can simply just play the game!

Though the provision of an online help website is not a new phenomenon, the peculiarity of The Sims 2 Story Exchange section of the website is such that when Sims 2 players have designed an avatar's personality, appearance, and what they want them to aim for in life (using the Sims 2 software), they are then able to upload their creation(s) onto the Sims 2 website. This enables others to download other people's character creations, including for instance, the clothes that an avatar wears.

The ingenious idea behind all of this is that the stories themselves are shared online and can be installed in chapter form, whereby a 'serial' is created, and readers of the Story Exchange website eagerly wait new instalments (chapters) of highly rated stories. The people who create these fictitious stories based on the Sims 2 program are of all ages and backgrounds. Sarah, in particular has created stories, but at the time of the research, had not permanently uploaded and shared her stories on the story exchange. She had mainly focused on reading and evaluating others' stories.

Other features of The Sims 2 website include an online shop where one can buy further addendums for their software. There is a technical support area, and free downloads, along with a detailed help menu. Cheat codes are also available online (the significance of which shall be alluded to later in this text).

Previous articles and research have been published relating to how gaming and schooling can be linked through curriculum focus. A brief review of this literature follows, as this article moves towards exploring how The Sims 2 story exchange feature might be utilized in schooling.

Gaming and Curriculum

Recent research has sought to identify and describe new literacies that have arisen or may arise with the nexus of youth culture and its engagement with online media. Authors such as the ones mentioned below have explored the genre of computer games as a new literacy and discussed the many facets that may make up a new technological literacy.

Ilana Snyder (1998) argued that writing and technology have always and will always be interdependent and inseparable. Additionally, Snyder claimed that text was no longer something "located exclusively on a page" (p. xx), but that new writing spaces had moved from page to screen. Snyder (2002) also argued that playing games involves negotiating fairly complex combinations of print and iconic representations within the game narratives themselves. In her qualitative study of six Australian teenagers, Catherine Beavis (2004) filmed and interviewed students about their multiplayer and online game playing. Beavis found that,

> Online computer games immerse young people in highly complex and engaging worlds, worlds in which literacy and communicative practices are significantly reconfigured and extended by the contexts in which they occur (p. 204).

In earlier publications, Beavis (1998, 2002) argued that multimedia and digital technologies were changing traditional understandings of literacy, and claimed the need for educators such as English teachers in secondary schools to integrate popular texts such as electronic games and the like into the curriculum as a way of addressing the reality of students' textual worlds. Suggestions made by Beavis include asking students to consider how playing a game is and is not like reading a book (Beavis, 1998, p. 250) and from there discussing values, ideologies, gender roles, and issues of identity, etc. Beavis did not argue for the complete displacement of traditional texts in preference for contemporary texts, but in actuality, aimed for the enrichment and diversification of "students' range of narratives and textual experience, to *create continuities between school and out-of-school* reading, pleasure, analysis and critique" (Beavis, 1998, p. 252, emphasis mine). To summarise, Beavis argued for the reconceptualisation of education and literacy for the purpose of embracing positive elements of contemporary culture, and utilizing them in contemporary curriculum which would in fact offer a great deal more to youth than the traditional curriculum as it stands (Beavis, 1998, 2002).

James Paul Gee (2003) identified 36 learning principles he believed were present in good video games, which demonstrate how children are learning when they play video games. He implied that these learning principles should be implemented into classroom learning and teaching as children now bring along different experiences and different learning preferences to what children in schools had prior to the advent of computers and video games. The amount of learning present in the nascent stage of beginning a video game through to the mastery of it is huge, but yet, gamers are learning while not realizing it, and their thought processes are advancing to higher levels, though they may not be aware of that.

In 1999, Beavis and Gough completed a study of two Victorian secondary schools exploring the incorporation of computer games into the literacy curriculum and explained what that might look like (Beavis, 2002). Teachers commented on some boys who prior to the study were not considered academic, attentive, or school-oriented whose interest, involvement and collaboration increased due to the changes made to the literacy foci. The other point of interest was that those who were strong in traditional practices of literacy suddenly found themselves in 'alien waters' – many of these students were girls.

The traditional focuses of learning and teaching within schools need to be transformed to incorporate what appeals to the children of today as interesting, intriguing, and suitable for the way they learn. To support this statement, I introduce the studies of Toni Downes (2002a; 2002b) who explored children's use of computers in the home especially in the broader context of families. Downes (2002a) reported

that children's discourses reflected their interest in digital media, in comparison to print. One aspect of this was the increased productivity, for example, the affordance of word processors to make tasks easier and quicker. This study took the approach of 'listening' to children to describe what they did with computers in their homes, with emphasis placed on children as capable informants about issues that affect their lives (Downes, 2002a). Through interviews, it was found that children enjoyed the fact that computers enabled them to be entertained, and parents claimed that computers were beneficial, as they seemed to enhance motivation towards children's schoolwork. In a three-year study of over 500 children, Downes (2002b) discussed the use of computers as a tool, a toy, and as a playable tool. She claimed that home computer use has blurred the 'processes of play, practice and performance', and therefore is in stark contrast to the pedagogy currently supporting computer use within schools. Conventional pedagogy separates knowledge into curriculum subjects, positions the teacher as the director of learning, emphasizes the step-by-step mastery of content, and the structure of the school day reflects clear distinctions between work and play (Lynch, 2001; 2002). Downes (2002a; 2002b) suggested teaching pedagogy needs to change to combine digital and traditional modes of learning which take into account the influence that computer use has had on wider society, and therefore on children's preferred mode of learning and preferred engagement with computers. These preferences are brought to schooling environments (R. Johnson & Lynch, 2004). These studies conducted by Downes have implications for schooling and how formal education might cater to children who prefer, are used to, and are motivated to learn through digital and electronic media and to take advantage of and extend emerging literacies and orientations to knowledge and to learning.

If these aspects are evident in teenager game playing in western, English-speaking countries, then these sites where learning and leisure are occurring can be validated as legitimate praxis, and argued to be positive new learning spaces.

In 2004, Julian Sefton-Green argued for a 'culture-shift' to accommodate insights from research in the area of informal, out-of-school learning. He highlighted that there was not a shared understanding of what informal learning might look like and where this might take place. But, because children and youth were actually 'making, authoring and communicating' in their engagement with digital media, formal education needs to find ways of synthesizing learning across formal and informal domains.

Attention now focuses on the pleasure evident in playing games.

Plaisir and Jouissance

Leisure can be positioned as a combination of *plaisir* and *jouissance* – the definitions of which now follow. Roland Barthes (1975), a French theorist, was the first to use these words to describe two types of leisure or pleasure. *Plaisir* is a French word directly translated to the English word 'pleasure', or can mean the synonym 'enjoyment' (Grace & Tobin, 1998). *Jouissance* is a French word that accompanies *plaisir* but describes a different type of pleasure, of which English has no word for, so the word *jouissance* is untranslated in English. Kristeva, the French feminist influenced by Barthes (1975), amongst others, used psychoanalysis to discuss *jouissance* in the transgression of pleasures of the abject (Kristeva, 1982). The type of practice, play, and leisure evident in the autonomous activities that have formed these structures arguably constitute *jouissance* – pleasure that transgresses boundaries.

The terms *plaisir* and *jouissance* are part of the practice found in the field of teenagers' computer use, and arguably comprises an important part of youth culture, which Kenway and Bullen (2001) described in their book, 'Consuming Children: Education-Entertainment-Advertising'. The authors focused on adolescents and argued,

> Aspects of today's consumer-media culture, evokes *jouissance* in children. Children and youth are encouraged to delight in the impertinent and the forbidden, to transgress adult codes to live only in the present (p. 70 - 71).

And,

> The *jouissance* which children derive from consumer culture is designed to ensure that they unreflexively consume rather than interpret such texts (p. 75).

In another publication, Bullen and Kenway (2002) gave examples of the practice of *jouissance*:

> The boy who explores, experiments and improves with technology is not constrained by the fear of breaking the machine or the rules. His is a pleasure that disregards boundaries (p. 64).

They also related how some avant-garde cyber-feminist and girl-oriented websites suggest, "there are girls who do experience the transgressive pleasure of *jouissance* in and through technology" (Bullen & Kenway, 2002, p. 64).

As part of the accepted practices within youth culture, I believe youth explore the boundaries (part of the praxis of many a field), and sometimes experience *jouissance* as a result of transgressing those boundaries. Students do explore taboo topics (Grace & Tobin, 1998), and this is not a new thing. The literature has been included to address how traditional notions of curriculum (i.e. keep everything under control, do not let students transgress what is acceptable, they should not be questioning authoritative structures, etc.), need to change in order to include what students are doing, how they are learning, and provide safe spaces for students to construct identities – false or not – in part of the development of themselves as a person.

Plaisir and *jouissance* link together in that through enjoying what computers and cyberspace offer, participants are able to transgress the boundaries that have been placed on them by their parents and by the authoritative figures in their school. Through the exploration of what is not real (but could be possibly real if they were to venture into that field), the game players of life simulation games create *plaisir,* which is sometimes *jouissance*, because they are exploring fantasies, the imaginary, the unknown, the intangible, the untamed, and the uncensored in their form of chosen play.

As Beavis (1998; 2002; 2004) and Bullen and Kenway (2002; Kenway & Bullen, 2001) have expounded, providing the opportunity for students to explore what is considered taboo, may not only be beneficial, but also might provide *plaisir* or *jouissance* for those students who might enjoy an adventure that is unknown and unprescribed. Because it is not necessary to 'fit in' with authority figures and authoritative structures, it is essential to be able to describe how it may be beneficial for students to engage in this type of practice.

Methodology

I have focused on understanding the lived experience of a 15-year-old female's use of, experience with, and engagement with The Sims 2 website. I did not focus on how Sarah played The Sims 2, though in the interview, reference was made to the game in order to describe the connections with the website. I sought to explore one aspect of a phenomenon and have drawn upon one hour-long open-ended interview with Sarah in order to explain the phenomena and praxis found within the context of engaging with The Sims 2 Story Exchange. The study and this article does not claim to be generalizable, but instead offers insights as to what is going on in the field, especially from Sarah's viewpoint.

I knew Sarah through a personal, family connection, and knew she was passionate about the Sims, and had spent a lot of time playing it over some years. Many a time, she had referred to the Sims (2) website and the stories that were available to read, which had been created by other Sims 2 players. As she had much of the available software, I wondered why she also spent a lot of time exploring this website because one does not need to have the Sims software to read these online stories. Out of interest, I had a look at the website and the Story Exchange section, and from there, devised some questions I thought I could ask Sarah, in order to develop my understanding of what was present there, and what caused her level of interest in the story exchange to be so high.

I contacted Sarah and informed her about my interest in the whole area, and asked whether she would be interested in being interviewed about the topic. Sarah had time to view the questions that I was intending to ask and gave her informed consent to be involved.

In the analysis, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *field*. Bourdieu (1992) defined a *field* as a "configuration of relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon the occupants, agents or institutions" (p. 72 – 73). A *field* is Bourdieu's metaphor for representing sites of cultural practice (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002). Within each field (social space), there is that which is excluded, and that which is included. These contexts (fields) shape and produce praxis. The acceptable praxis in a field arises from the hierarchical ruling principles that predispose agents to value something over other things. However, "It appears as if everyone is free to play, everything is negotiable. If it were not, the 'rules' of the games themselves would not be accepted. Everyone plays, but differential structures ensure that not everyone is equal" (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 25). Bourdieu likened knowledge of a field and its practices to knowing the 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) or 'how the game is played'.

The rest of this article focuses on a sub-field within the field of game playing, that of The Sims Story Exchange and what are the unwritten conventions, which must be adhered to when exchanging stories. These are discussed which highlight the autonomy of the players who play The Sims 2, who through using the software, have created stories, that they upload for others to read on the Sims 2 Story Exchange.

Sarah's Perspective

Sarah is a 15-year-old female who has played The Sims for seven years. About three years ago, she started playing The Sims 2. Sarah regularly accesses The Sims 2 website and its Story Exchange.

The Sims 2 Story Exchange is a (web)site for learning and leisure. This is a sub-field within the field of simulation games, where this site supports the reading of others' stories, the creation and writing of new stories, and encourages the rating and evaluation of stories. All of these activities are aligned with the computer game.

I asked Sarah what she thought about and would say to people who might criticize the reading of online texts. She replied,

> [Reading online stories is] just like reading a normal book. I mean, they're not all people my age that are writing the stories. There are some older people as well, people with kids, stuff like that, so they don't use simple language. Some of the stuff is more elevated, and it's not y'know just a picture and then couple of words like a picture book or something. It's kind of more the story and then the pictures just help go with the text, give you something to be like oh ok, so, that's what they look like, y'know. Yeah (Sarah, interview excerpt).

Sarah had made it known to me that she did not read many print books, but suggested she did a lot of online reading on the Story Exchange. I asked Sarah, "How 'bout talking about the interest of reading online in comparison to reading books, and reading when you sit down and you're not in front of a screen? Can you tell me about that?" She replied,

> Well, um, reading online, sometimes it's better because you can't always get to the library to go and get a book that you want and you can't always find one that you like, but with a story it's pretty easy cause you just go on and then if you read a couple of pages and you don't like it, you can just go and find another one really easily. You don't have to y'know go to the library and get another book, and hope that you like this next one. But it's also kinda frustrating because like I said, they upload it in chapters so they might have only uploaded to chapter 5 and you have to wait y'know a month or two before they upload the next one, and if they've been away on holiday or y'know just taking a really long time, it's real frustrating cause I want to know what's going on, I want to know what happens next [giggles] (Sarah, interview excerpt).

Sarah's perspective demonstrates a pragmatic approach to the selection of library books, compared to the ease of being able to choose between various online texts. Because she can easily choose which online texts to read, and has an enormous amount of texts to choose from which not require library issue, she believes she is advantaged by reading mostly online texts.

Though electronic books have become more popular, they have not surpassed the popularity of traditional hard cover or soft cover books. This may have to do with the comfort level one sustains in being able to lie down on a couch or a bed comfortably and read a book, compared to having to sit with a laptop and associated cords wrapped around oneself (conveniently displaced by wireless internet). However, with this reading of contemporary texts, associated with created stories, what implications does this have in the future? These children who are used to sitting all day in front of their laptop while reading for leisure, from stories which are created by a game for leisure, may do away with the notion of hard cover and soft cover books being traditional. In the future, they may say it may be something they used to do in their childhood.

When I asked Sarah about the types of stories that were available to read on the Story Exchange, she claimed a huge variety of text types and genres. She enthused,

> They have pretty much everything you can think of [laughs]. There's a whole lot of things with expansion packs in the games that people have adapted on. Like the people who created the Sims created stories as well at the very beginning that haven't been played through right to the very end, so people have made their own adaptions [sic] on that and carried it on which ever way they want or they've just created y'know completely their own things. And they're also challenges that people have posted because they wanted more of a challenge than the actual game and then they've turned that into kind of like a story as well, which is like the legacy challenge, which is y'know, have to have a ten generation families thing, kind of thing. That was just created by somebody who was playing the Sims (Sarah, interview excerpt).

This quote also demonstrates how players have reworked The Sims 2 in order to provide challenges, express their creativity, and negotiate other life trajectories. By this I mean that when a challenge is set, this usually relates to a message that may have been posted on the Sims 2 website discussion board, which sets criteria for how a story could be created which has not been done yet (posted on the website). This may involve the exploration of types of life pathways or trajectories that have not been 'done', or documented yet. For instance, Sarah referred to a challenge that an older player had set for herself. This player's challenge was to create the ugliest Sims she could, and through the avatars

giving birth, progressively get the children of the avatars to become uglier and uglier. Another challenge Sarah referred to consisted of an alphabet focus whereby upon creating 26 generations (which takes a long time to play, even though the game is not in real time), each new generation member's name would start with the next letter of the alphabet. Sarah referred to these challenges as fun activities to "see if you can do it".

In particular, the association of reading, writing and reviewing online stories is arguably a leisure activity, yet seems akin with general objectives of English curricula. When students can design and be involved in new learning spaces that suit their needs and make connections with the type of learning that suits them, and connect with other similar learners, it raises questions about how this positive aspect of combining leisure and learning can be perhaps used to enhance secondary English classroom programs. However, this idea or type of practice must be cautioned (Bullen & Kenway, 2002; Kenway & Bullen, 2001) so as not to destroy the pleasure found in this leisure. However, it could be used to enhance English programmes by introducing elements of pleasure from engagement with technologies, that are so much part of the every day practice of digital insiders (Goodson, Knobel, Lankshear & Mangan, 2002). As engaging with these stories is a form of leisure for the game players, one has to raise the question as to whether putting things into school that are pleasurable out-of-school will in fact destroy the pleasure?

Sarah referred to constructs in The Sims Story Exchange community of what she considered to be really good in terms of originality, and editing of static images:

> . . . there's so many good ones out there at the moment and you need a really original idea for it to be rated highly, and you have to have all the pictures perfect and probably need some good photo editing skills (Sarah, interview excerpt).

Sarah also shared the rating system that the Story Exchange employs:

> . . . when you upload a story, it's, when it first comes up, it's three stars. And then underneath the star rating of it when you go to read it, there's a little thing where you can rate it yourself. Y'know, the person's whose story it is can't see what it's rated, who rated their story what, but they can see what it's rated and then, um so you click on it, however many stars you think it should be, and then if they get a certain amount it'll go up. And so if y'know, so many people decide that it's a really great story and they rate it five stars, then it's rating will go from three stars to five stars, or if they decide that it's really bad, they'll move it down to two, sort of thing (Sarah, interview excerpt).

Those who participate in the Story Exchange are producing texts that are visually supported in the form of static imagery. Through reading and understanding others' narratives that have been shared online, they are engaging with screen literacy and contemporary literature that is flavoured with popular culture. The learning involved in the game involves the working and re-working of static imagery and narrative text in order to create stories that are uploaded on to the website. The conventions of the field (rules of the game) have been created by those who are in the field and those who explore the game. The indicators of quality that have been established were by the insiders, not by outsiders or external structures. The players who have determined the criteria are children, adolescents, and adults – not authorities, nor external structures. In contrast to Kenway and Bullen (2001) who argue that many adolescents consume texts unreflexively, this suggests that those who review others' stories are making some value judgments.

I asked Sarah how she thought the website had influenced people to play the game. She replied:

> I think its made people want to write stories and want to try these challenges like the legacy challenge, and so it just brings a whole new way of playing the game, cause at first, all you did was just y'know, make the family, live their life, and

> now its like well, maybe I could make a story out of what I'm doing rather than just playing it through, giving it more elements or more goals to try and achieve, that sort of thing (Sarah, interview excerpt).

Sarah seems to be suggesting that one reason for the perpetual creation of stories and activities in the game and consequently the website, is because of the conventions and the genres that have been set up as game challenges on the website.

Sarah explained how photo editing, photo taking (within the Sims 2 program), being competent with the program, and putting it all together is all intertwined with being able to successfully negotiate The Sims 2 Story Exchange.

> People create stories using the Sims 2 and they, sometimes they'll edit the photos y'know to try to fit with the storylines, so they use other programmes as well, not just the Sims 2. And then they upload it and it's like a chapter in a book and then people can rate it out of well y'know 5 stars and they'll read it and they might y'know, sign their guest book y'know, and say, I really like your story, or I think you could improve it by doing this, and yeah (Sarah, interview excerpt).

Another facet of viewing the stories on the Story Exchange is the enthusiasm that it sparks as a result of the creativity exhibited. Sarah stated,

> . . . it's really interesting to see some of the ideas that people have come up with and you're like I never would've thought of y'know doing that in a million years, but then you see that one, and it kind of sparks new ideas, like ooh, I could change this to make it like that, and I could fit my own version of this, y'know (Sarah, interview excerpt).

For Sarah, reading others' original online stories piqued her interest. It is possible that because they were written recently, and involved the use of a medium she appreciated (The Sims 2), that this made it more interesting and engaging for her.

There is leisure involved in the lifelike exploration of identities, of characters that can be constructed on a whim, life goals that can be readily chosen, and life histories that can be readily compared. This leisure may transgress boundaries that people are unable to transgress in real life, whether desired or not. As they are not dictated to by authority figures, they are able to explore and choose their own paths, with the avatars they create and simulate. They do not have to appease the authority figures or structures in their real lives, as they are able to construct alternatives and preferences that are only available in the Sim life (or virtual life). This is especially the case for adolescents who arguably have more limitations on their life choices than adults who have more freedom of choices they wish to make. The employment of cheat codes, which I would suggest tends to be utilized by gamers at some stage of their play, is also an example of *jouissance*, or bliss – perhaps because it is an example of being able to 'beat the system'. As an adolescent, opportunities to 'beat the system' or transgress boundaries are limited, though, admittedly, many choose to push boundaries that are detrimental for them. Examples of what adolescents may have little choice or decision on are hair colour, lifestyle, tertiary education, night life activities, location of living, house design, sexual orientation, life goals, clothes they wear, and pets. This of course depends on their family environment and many other influences. But within The Sims 2, they are able to make different choices and explore alternatives.

The stories on the story exchange combine static images (though movies can also be used), text, and original storylines created by people of all ages, cultures, etc. Is this not a way that directly engages with digital insiders whose learning preferences are such that they are multifaceted, i.e. they engage with images, texts, and sound simultaneously? This is not to put down the use of traditional print books/literature, or negate it, nor suggest that it is irrelevant (Beavis, 1998). However, it may be

appropriate to introduce activities relevant to new kinds of learners, who are engaging in new learning spaces.

For example, players gain knowledge when playing The Sims 2 and reading stories on the story exchange. For example, in a story Sarah read online, she found out what Ivy League universities were, as they were explained in a narrative. It is possible that players of The Sims 2 learn about health, happiness, and balance because in order for their Sim to function well, the Sim needs to have enough sleep, nutrition, attention to hygiene and the like, as well as time allocated to the pursuit of their lifelong aspirations. Having a focus on needs, wants, fears, and aspirations is conducive to learning how real-life people also live day-to-day. The Sims 2 also has a category for 'fun', and if any of the needs are not met, or desires not fulfilled, the Sim ceases to function (which is exemplified in various ways, such as being depressed, and being sick). However, in regard to the structures and conventions that the game designers have inserted into the program, that then becomes the knowledge that is permeated throughout the game that the players must discover and accept in order to play the game successfully. As Nutt and Railton (2003) claimed, "The game creators, and the format of the game itself, rely on assumptions about shared knowledge and understanding of relationship patterns" (p. 579).

Conclusion: A Legitimate Learning Space

The rules of the game when using the Sims 2 Story Exchange reflect an adherence to conventions that have been constructed and developed by those within the field. The voluntary employment of quality indicators highlights how aside from authorities, quality assurance in terms of peer evaluation has contributed to the popularity and success of The Sims et al. As the players and readers are given a voice, it indicates that they feel part of the community of players. The Sims 2 players have constructed these 'rules', not by authorities, and not by software designers.

How can this be applied to traditional schooling and pedagogy? It implies that children are able to help generate quality controls in a peer group, which are ones they are happy to adhere to because it means that they are then part of 'the' community. It also means that the (web)site, though it is predominantly for leisure (as Sarah indicated) is a legitimate site for learning. In playing The Sims 2 and engaging with The Sims 2 website, learning occurs through reading, through responding to others, and through the creation of narratives that reflect what is being personally played within the game.

Some ideas were mentioned in the previous section about how The Sims 2 Story Exchange could be utilized in the school curriculum. However, while one might leap on the bandwagon and design a unit that utilized The Sims 2 in one's language program, it remains apparent that sites of leisure can and should be created in schools so that *plaisir* and *jouissance* can be experienced within schools, and so real-life narratives can be explored in a safe space (as Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen suggested). As Sarah said, "People like to play cause of the god complex. You get to control how things turn out". Sites of leisure and 'controlling how things turn out' should have a place within schools. The autonomy and choice that is exhibited when Sims 2 players read the Story Exchange demonstrates that they are committed to good literature, that they have considered what they think 'good' literature is, and that the leisure involved in reading this good literature is inherent in people of all ages, whether they read online texts or print books.

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Addendum: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How long have you been playing the Sims?
What interested you to start playing?
Tell me about the Sims 2 website.
When was the website launched?
What is the difference between The Sims and The Sims 2? Has this made an impact on the online popularity of the game? Has the features of The Sims 2 meant that story exchange is possible?
Tell me about the story exchange part of the Sims 2 website.
What do you think you have learnt in regard to your general knowledge, not computer/technical skills, since you've started using the Sims 2 website?
Tell me about the nature of the stories that you read. What are you interested in reading about?
Have you created your own stories? Have you uploaded your own stories?

How much time do you spend reading stories online?
Is this your main form of recreation? Do you prefer to play The Sims 2 over reading others' stories?
Do you download others' 'Sims'? Do you use them in your stories?
How do you write the stories after you have been 'playing' the Sims? Does it chronologically record the steps you make, or do you have to write separate stories from what you have been playing? Do you simply have to add text to the static images in order to help others understand the direction of the story? Or, do you create your own story using static images you've created?
How do you create/decide which images to put into your stories? Does this replicate a comic strip?