UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Education - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Social Sciences

2009

Exchanging Online Narratives for Leisure: A Legitimate Learning Space

N. F. Johnson
University of Wollongong, nicolaj@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

This article was originally published as Johnson, NF, Exchanging online narratives for leisure: A legitimate learning space, International Journal of Emerging Technologies & Society, 7(1), 2009, 15-27.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society
Vol. 7, No. 1, 2009, pp: 15 - 27

Exchanging Online Narratives for Leisure: A Legitimate Learning Space

Nicola F. Johnson is a lecturer in Curriculum and Teacher Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia.

Abstract

The Story Exchange section of the Sims 2 website offers Sims 2 players a forum to read and review other players' original stories which they have written while playing The Sims 2. This article draws on interview data from Sarah, a 15-year-old female involved in reading and evaluating these online stories. Analysis of Sarah's experiences in playing The Sims 2 and using the Story Exchange website suggest that players who engage with these particular online narratives determine quality indicators of the stories, without guidance or instruction from external structures or authorities. Following this point, this Story Exchange is presented not only as an avenue of leisure, pleasure and informal learning, but one that is out of alignment with structures and institutions of formal schooling. This article argues that sites such as these should be read as legitimate learning spaces.

Keywords: Sims 2 – informal learning – leisure

©International Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society 2009
ISSN 1835-8780
http://www.swin.edu.au/ijets

iJETS Vol. 7, No. 1, 2009, pp: 15 - 27

Exchanging Online Narratives for Leisure: A Legitimate Learning Space

Introduction

The Sims 2 is a simulation game that has sold over 13 million units worldwide (Electronic Arts 2007), second only in worldwide sales to the original Sims[1]. The aim of this article is to demonstrate how some game players are involved in experiences that involve simultaneous learning and leisure, and claims that the creation of cyberspace narratives should be considered a legitimate site of learning. This article begins with a literature review that explains the possible interrelationships between gaming and curriculum. From this introduction, the methodology of the study is explained. A brief overview of The Sims 2[2] game is given, which explains its genre but focuses mostly on the connections between the game and the Story Exchange. Data from the researcher's interview with Sarah is drawn on to explore how The Sims 2 Story Exchange operates. Notions about *plaisir* and *jouissance* are introduced, which are evident in the practice of those saturated with consumer-media culture (Kenway & Bullen 2001). The article discusses possible implications for traditional, formal schooling, and concludes with stating that The Sims 2 website and its associated Story Exchange is an example of informal learning (Sefton-Green 2004) closely linked with leisure.

It should be noted that this article is 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, published by Electronic Arts Games (PC) and Aspyr (Mac). Also, when the term 'exchanging' is used, it is in reference to the online interaction of users who share their stories on the Story Exchange section of the Sims 2 website, where they upload, and read others stories, that is, exchanging.

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 learning designs evident in The Sims 2 Story Exchange 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" (1998: 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)

[1] The Sims 2 shipped in September 2004 with sales already topping 13M units worldwide. It was the best selling PC game of 2004

[2] Wikipedia 2007. The Sims 2, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Sims_2 (date accessed 7/10/2008)

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 (Beavis 2004: 204).

In earlier publications, Beavis (1998; 2002) argued that multimedia and digital technologies were changing traditional understandings of literacy, and suggested a 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: 250) and from there discussing values, ideologies, gender roles, and issues of identity, and so on. 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: 252, emphasis added). 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).

The traditional focuses of learning and teaching within schools need to be transformed to incorporate what appeals to young people of today as interesting, intriguing, and suitable for the way they learn. To support this statement, the studies of Toni Downes (2002a; 2002b) are introduced. She 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, how word processors can 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 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" (2002b: 31), 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 (Johnson & Lynch 2004). The 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 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 practice, 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. Yet, because children and youth were actually making, authoring and communicating in their engagement with digital media, formal education needed to find ways of synthesizing learning across formal and informal domains.

Methodology

This study focused on understanding the lived experience of a 15-year-old female's use of, experience with, and engagement with The Sims 2 website. It 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. The study sought to explore one aspect of a phenomenon and it draws upon one hour-long open-ended interview with Sarah in order to explain the phenomena and practice found within the context of engaging with The Sims 2 Story Exchange. The interview was conducted face-to-face, audio recorded and transcribed, after which Sarah read and edited it, approving it before I used it in the research. The study and this article do not claim to be generalisable, but instead offer insight as to what is going on in this field, using Sarah's viewpoint.

The author knew Sarah (a pseudonym) through a personal connection, and knew she was passionate about the Sims, and had spent a lot of time playing it over some years. Many a time, Sarah had referred to the Sims 2 website and the stories that were available to read, which had been created by other Sims 2 players (including children, young people, and adults). As she had much of the available software (including expansion packs such as 'Pets', 'Night Life', and so on), I wondered why she also spent a lot of time exploring this website where the Sims software is not required in order to be able 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 Sims 2 Story Exchange, and asked whether she would be interested in being interviewed about the topic. After I obtained parental consent as to the process and focus of the study, Sarah also gave her informed consent to be involved, and had time beforehand to view the questions I intended to ask in the interview.

The rest of this article focuses on the unwritten conventions of The Sims Story Exchange that must be adhered to when exchanging stories. These are discussed and 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.

The Sims 2 Story Exchange

The Sims 2 is a 'god' game in that it simulates the controlling of lives. Of life simulation genres such as this, Nutt and Railton stated, players "can play god and create utopian communities, or rewrite aspects of their own lives to negotiate different imagined outcomes" (2003: 589 - 590). What is interesting is that players of 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 can be written to accompany static images (screenshots) 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. Using the 'create story' feature within the software, players who are story writers add text to their captured screenshots to generate the story. They also have the option to construct a story first and then create the images to 'go along' with the story. These stories can then be uploaded to the website. 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, and ignore the possibility of creating narratives based on one's play.

Though the provision of an online help website is not a new phenomenon, the peculiarity of the Story Exchange section of the Sims 2 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 created avatars 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 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 await 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.

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 explained later in this text.

Sarah and the Sims 2

Sarah is a 15-year-old female who at the time of the study had played The Sims for seven years. About three years earlier, Sarah started playing The Sims 2. Sarah regularly accesses The Sims 2 website and its Story Exchange.

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 there are 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 demonstrates how players have reworked The Sims 2 in order to provide challenges, express their creativity, and negotiate other life trajectories. For instance, 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 yet been 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 example, 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 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. 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 *et al*. 2002), that is, those who have been saturated with digital media since birth.

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 do not require library issue, she believes she is advantaged by reading mostly online texts.

Though electronic books have become more popular, it seems 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. However, these children who are used to sitting all day in front of their laptop while reading for leisure, and who are engaged with stories created from a game, may do away with the notion of hard cover and soft cover books being traditional (Johnson 2009). In the future, they may say it was something they used to do in their childhood[3].

Sarah referred to features 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 (in contrast to classic literature such as Dickens, Austen, Shakespeare, and so on) 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, or rules of the game (Bourdieu 1990) 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, young people, and adults – not authorities, nor external structures. In contrast to Kenway and Bullen (2001), who claimed that many young people consume texts unreflexively, this suggests that those who review others' stories are making some value judgments. This of course may be influenced by discourses found inside and outside of school that discuss what constitutes 'good' literature – a subjective understanding in of itself.

[3] See Johnson (2009) for a discussion surrounding the challenges to traditional play in this digital age

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 five 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. What is striking in her discussion of her involvement in The Sims 2 is the co-existence of learning and fun; leisure can be understood as a combination of *plaisir* and *jouissance*. *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. Roland Barthes (1975), a French literary theorist, was the first to use these words to describe two types of leisure or pleasure. Kristeva, the French feminist influenced by Barthes (1975), used psychoanalysis to discuss *jouissance* as the transgression of pleasures of the abject (Kristeva 1982). The type of practice, play, and leisure evident in these autonomous activities arguably constitute jouissance – pleasure that transgresses boundaries in their everyday lives. 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 young people, 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 arguably 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 a young person, opportunities to 'beat the system' or transgress boundaries are limited. Examples of what young people may have little choice or decision over are hair colour, lifestyle, tertiary education, night life activities, location of living, house design, sexual orientation, life goals, clothes they wear, and pets. Their level of agency depends on their family environment including parental rules, school expectations and many other influences. But within The Sims 2, they are able to make different choices and explore alternatives in constructing their identity.

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, and so on. Is this not a way that directly engages with digital insiders whose learning preferences are such that they are multifaceted, that is, 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). Elsewhere, Beavis (1998; 2002; 2004) discussed how traditional curriculum may be changed to enrich the learning experiences for students through incorporating the study of narratives in computer games. However, it may be appropriate to introduce activities relevant to new kinds of learners, who are engaging in new learning spaces.

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 that she was reading. 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, with regard to the structures and conventions that the game designers have inserted into the program, these structures then become the knowledge that is permeated throughout the game. The players must discover and accept these structures in order to play the game successfully (Nutt & Railton, 2003).

Plaisir, Jouissance and a Legitimate Learning Space

The terms *plaisir* and *jouissance* are part of the practice found in teenagers' computer use. They comprise an important part of youth culture, as Kenway and Bullen 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 (2001: 70 - 71).

In another publication, Bullen and Kenway 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" (2002: 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: 64).

As part of the accepted practices within youth culture, youth explore boundaries, 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. *Plaisir* and *jouissance* link together in that through enjoying what computers and cyberspace offer (plaisir), participants are able to transgress the boundaries that have been placed on them by their parents and by the authoritative figures in their school (jouissance). Through the exploration of what is not real (but could possibly be real if they were to venture into that arena), 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.

The rules of the game (Bourdieu 1990) 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 franchise. 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 authorities, or software designers – a move for these players to not only be story writers, but genre creators and determiners of what constitutes 'good' literature in this genre.

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. Players are in fact designing and engaging in their own learning (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith 2006; Peppler & Kafai 2007; Willett 2007).

Some ideas were mentioned in the literature review 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 (2001; 2002) suggested.

Conclusion

Many authors have written about the significance of how students are designing and engaging in their own learning, and that this should be recognized (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith 2006; Peppler & Kafai 2007; Willett 2007). It is important to collate and understand young people's perspectives, which stems from a belief that what young people have to say is important and should be valued (Downes 2002a). 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. It is arguable that this site is a valid, real and accessible space for learning, even though many people may only view the practice as pointless fun.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was accepted for presentation at the Australian Teacher Education Association annual conference, 3-6 July, 2007. The author thanks Professor Catherine Beavis and Dr Valerie Harwood for comments on an earlier draft of this paper and thanks the reviewers for their detailed feedback.

References

Barthes, R 1975, *The pleasure of the text* (R. Miller, Trans.) Hill and Wang, New York.

Beavis, C 1998, 'Computer games, culture and curriculum', in I Snyder (ed), *Page to screen: taking literacy into the electronic era*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 234-255.

Beavis, C 2002, 'Reading, writing and role-playing computer games', in I Snyder (ed), *Silicon literacies: communication, innovation and education in the electronic age,* Routledge, London and New York, pp. 47-61.

Beavis, C 2004, '"Good game": text and community in multiplayer computer games', in I Snyder & C Beavis (eds), *Doing literacy online: teaching, learning and playing in an electronic world,* Hampton Press, New Jersey, pp. 187-205.

Bourdieu, P 1990, *The logic of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.), Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

Bullen, E & Kenway, J 2002, 'Who's afraid of a mouse? - grrrls, information technology and educational pleasures', in N Yelland & A Rubin (eds), *Ghosts in the machine: Women's voices in research with technology*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, pp. 55-69.

Downes, T 2002a, 'Children's and families' use of computers in Australian homes', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 182-196.

Downes, T 2002b, 'Blending play, practice and performance: children's use of the computer at home', *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 21-34.

Electronic Arts (2007). Sims Fans Embark on Exotic Travels as EA Announces The Sims 2 Bon Voyage (Press release), viewed 10 December 2008, http://planetthesims.gamespy.com/View.php?view=Pressreleases.Detail&game=8&id=77

Goodson, IF Knobel, M Lankshear, C & Mangan, JM 2002, *Cyber spaces/social spaces: cultural clash in computerized classrooms,* Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Grace, DJ & Tobin, J 1998, 'Butt jokes and mean-teacher parodies - video production in the elementary classroom', in D Buckingham (ed), *Teaching popular culture: beyond radical pedagogy*, UCL Press, London, pp. 42-62.

Johnson, R & Lynch, J 2004, 'Change happens: acceptance of "impermanence" and "flow" in teachers' professional reflections on technology and change'. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne, viewed 21 April 2007, http://www.aare.edu.au/04pap/lyn04292.pdf

Johnson, NF 2009, *The multiplicities of internet addiction: The misrecognition of leisure and learning*, Ashgate, Surrey, UK.

Kenway, J & Bullen, E 2001, *Consuming children: education-entertainment-advertising*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK.

Kimber, K & Wyatt-Smith, C 2006, 'Using and creating knowledge with new technologies: a case for students-as-designers', *Learning, Media and Technology,* vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 19-34.

Kristeva, J 1982, *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection* (LS Roudiez, Trans.), Columbia University Press, New York.

Lynch, J 2001, 'Introducing Internet-based technologies: challenges for teachers and schools', Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, La Trobe University, Bundoora, Australia.

Lynch, J 2002, 'What can we learn from McLuhan? Electronic communication technologies and the future of schooling'. Paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education, Brisbane, viewed 21 April 2007, http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/lyn02031.htm

Nutt, D & Railton, D 2003, 'The Sims: real life as genre', *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 577-592.

Peppler, KA & Kafai, YB 2007, 'From SuperGoo to Scratch: exploring creative digital media production in informal learning', *Learning, Media and Technology,* vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 149-166.

Sefton-Green, J 2004, 'Literature review in informal learning with technology outside school', viewed 20 April 2007, http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/lit_reviews.htm

Snyder, I (ed) 1998, *Page to screen: taking literacy into the electronic era,* Routledge, London and New York.

Snyder, I (Ed) 2002, *Silicon literacies: communication, innovation and education in the electronic age,* Routledge, London and New York.

Willett, R 2007, 'Technology, pedagogy and digital production: a case study of children learning new media skills', *Learning, Media and Technology,* vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 167-181.

Websites

See http://thesims2.ea.com/ (date accessed 7/10/2008) to see the Sims 2 website.

See http://thesims2.ea.com/exchange/index.php?pid=Exchange (date accessed 7/10/2008) to see the Sims 2 Story Exchange.