Chapter 7.5
Exploring Personal Myths from The Sims

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ABSTRACT

Many game scholars claim that the emergent authorship opportunities provided within The Sims may lead to positive game play outcomes. This study hypothesizes that narratives told by game players may be similar to narratives told in real life and explores 66 Sims narratives via McAdams criteria of a good myth (1997). Results suggest that most people who play The Sims do not naturally adhere to the criteria of a good myth when developing their narrative, however, over half the narratives met some of the criteria. Our results suggest that The Sims has the potential to serve as a narrative studio for personal myth development but that some kind of intervention or scaffolding may need to be provided. The concept of psychosocial moratorium (McAdams, 1997) is suggested as one possible strategy professionals in multiple disciplines may use to promote The Sims as a narrative studio for myth development. Suggestions for future research are also provided.

INTRODUCTION

The Sims 2 is an electronic game that requires players to direct a Sims[1] citizen over a lifetime. The players set Sims' life goals (i.e., popularity, fortune, family, romance, or knowledge), create personalities, build homes, organize social lives, and take responsibility for nurturing a Sims from birth to death. The Sims gives players an opportunity to participate in emergent authorship via

a story kit, or set of game features, that allows them to craft their own stories through game play (Pearce, 2005). This is in direct opposition to many games integrating spatial narrative in which players reconstruct an existing story via game play (e.g., Indiana Jones series by LucasArts, or Blade Runner by Westwood studios) (Pearce, 2005). Games integrating emergent authorship such as The Sims often provide a deeper level of immersion because players create their own characters rather than taking on the role of a predetermined one.

Many game scholars claim that the emergent authorship provided within The Sims may lead to positive game play outcomes. For example, some claim it offers rhetorical (Frasca, 2003), narrative (Jenkins, n.d.), creative (Wright, 2006), and reflective possibilities (Jansz, 2005). Some claim that playing The Sims allows players to explore and make sense of life. For example, Consalvo (2003) argues that The Sims offers a wide range of possibilities in exploring sexual orientations while others believe it may be used to help health professionals understand their potential patients (Atkinson & Gold, 2002) or as a therapeutic tool by those who are dealing with addictions or abuse (Terdiman, 2003). Nutt and Railton (2003) believe that playing The Sims helps individuals to examine society because of the way it requires players to develop "understandings of real-life family practices" and "rely on assumptions about shared knowledge and understanding of relationship patterns" (p. 579). There is, however, no research to support these claims. This study aims to investigate them by examining similarities between the narratives told by The Sims players and Dan P. McAdams criteria for a good myth or life story (1997).

Experiencing the Sims

Imagine having a chance to create and control a digital doll in a digital town. You design the doll's appearance (e.g., hairstyle, makeup, and clothing) and traits (e.g., gender, age, aspirations, and a zodiac sign that reflects its personality). In addition, you must satisfy your doll's basic needs such hunger, social interaction, and comfort, manage its desires and fears, build its personal skills such as cooking, and coordinate all aspects of its life which may include finding a job, dating, starting a business, attending a university, having pets, or going out at night. You are responsible for your digital doll from birth to death and the way you satisfy its basic needs, develop its skills, and make decisions determines the type of life it will lead in the digital town. You can receive support from or provide support to other game players via The Sims Online Exchange Community, and you can also connect with other game players by sharing your Sims story online via the Story Exchange. Players can take in-game snapshots and tag captions which users can upload to the Story Exchange using one of The Sims features called Family Album. Many people have done more than simply imagine this; more than 200,000 Sims have been created, and The Sims is the best-selling PC game in history with more than 70 million copies sold (Burman, 2007).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The Sims has been touted as a promisingly unique game genre that may yield a variety of positive outcomes via the narratives produced by game players. This study hypothesizes that narratives told by game players may be similar to narratives told in real life. McAdams (1997) claims that individuals develop personal myths as a way to continuously explore and make sense of their lives. The proposed positive outcomes of Sims play are also related to exploration and meaning making. Thus, the criteria for a good myth or life story (McAdams, 1997) may be an effective tool to analyze virtual narratives told within The Sims. The purpose of this study is to examine 66 Sims narratives via McAdams criteria of a good

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