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No Selling the Genie Lamp:
a game literacy practice in *The Sims*

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ABSTRACT Drawing on the New Literacy Studies, the authors argue that game literacy takes multiple forms and is embedded in different practices associated with particular games and gaming communities. They examine one specific game literacy practice that involves players of *The Sims* creating challenges for other players, and they identify how playing and creating these challenges engages players as designers, modders, coach/mentors, teachers, and orchestrators of particular forms of discourse. The forms of writing that the players engage in, both in online game forums and in their stories about their Sims, is a new print literacy practice, as well as an integral part of a specific game literacy practice. The authors' analysis suggests that the ability to engage in 'soft modding' may be a crucial, though undervalued, aspect of game literacy in this context, and also illustrates how game literacies can be integrally tied to and, in turn, transform print literacies.

A Socially Situated View of Game Literacy

The word 'literacy' in its traditional use means 'writing' and 'reading' language. It is common, of course, to use the word in an extended sense, for things like 'visual literacy', 'computer literacy', 'music literacy', and even 'emotional literacy'. In these extended senses, the terms treat images, computers, music, and emotions as if they were systems, like language, for producing ('writing') and consuming ('reading') meanings.

Thanks to the popularity of research on video games over the last few years, terms like 'game literacy', 'game design literacy', and 'gaming literacy' have emerged. For example, Eric Zimmerman (2008) has defined the term 'gaming literacy' quite expansively, using the concepts of design, play and systems to argue that gaming literacy represents a new paradigm for literacy more broadly.

'Game literacy' more narrowly construed would mean at least being able to use the design features of video games to play games. Games mix producing ('writing') and consuming ('reading') in a more integral way than does print literacy. Playing a game is at one and the same time a form of consuming ('reading' or understanding the design features and content of the game) and producing ('writing' or enacting the game by playing it). Some people view written texts in this way and see reading as a form of 'rewriting' the text by giving it specific meanings germane to the individual reader. However, if written texts worked like video games, people's acts of reading would change the print and even the content of the text, just as game play changes the images and even the events in a game. When someone chooses to steal something in the role-playing game *Oblivion*, for example, that event exists in the story and virtual world because the gamer put it there. The story and world in *Oblivion* is not fixed. The closest written texts could (and have) come to this would be a case where an author wrote bits and pieces of a text and left the reader to choose from among them and order them. For example, Julio Cortázar's (1966) novel *Hopscotch*, written in an episodic, snapshot manner, has 155 chapters, the last 99 being designated as 'expendable'. The book can be read either in direct sequence from chapter 1 to 56, which, Cortázar writes, the reader

can do 'with a clean conscience', or by hopscotching through the entire set of 155 chapters. There are several other ways to read the novel, such as reading only the odd or even pages, or choosing chapters in completely random order. Another well-known example is Harlan Ellison's (1975) novelette, 'The Deathbird', featuring an interpolated autobiographical essay within a fantastical scenario of struggle between a reborn Adam and the mad God who pretends to have made him. Notably, there is an entire genre of 'interactive fiction' that is often described more as a game than as a text (see, for example, http://jerz.setonhill.edu/if/). In fact, one particular form of interactive fiction originated as a form of text-based computer adventure game (see the information and stories at http://brasslantern.org/beginners/introif.html and http://www.ifarchive.org/; also see Montfort, 2003).

Starting in the 1980s a movement now known as the 'New Literacy Studies' (the NLS) changed how we look at print literacy (for overviews, see: Gee, 2000, 2007; Street, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2005; Prinsloo & Mignonne, 1996; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Pahl & Rowsel, 2005, 2006). The NLS argued that print literacy is not one thing, but, rather, that there are many different literacy practices (different 'literacies') in which written language is used in different ways for different purposes. Furthermore, the NLS argued that literacy – and the same argument can be made for any technology – has no general effects, good or bad. Rather, people pick up different skills, values, and attitudes in different literacy practices. Thus, we need to study literacy in terms of specific practices situated in specific social and cultural contexts.

The NLS saw literacy as something people did, not inside their heads, but inside society. It argued that literacy was not primarily a mental phenomenon, but, rather, a sociocultural one. Literacy was a social and cultural achievement – it was about ways of participating in social and cultural groups – not just a mental achievement. Thus, literacy needed to be understood and studied in its full range of contexts, not just cognitive, but social, cultural, historical, and institutional as well. The NLS saw readers and writers as engaged in social or cultural *practices*. Written language is used differently in different practices by different social and cultural groups. And, in these practices, written language never sits all by itself, cut off from oral language and action. Rather, within different practices, it is integrated with different ways of using oral language; different ways of acting and interacting; different ways of knowing, valuing, and believing; and, often, different ways of using various sorts of tools and technologies.

For example, people read and write religious texts differently from legal ones and differently again from biology texts or texts in popular culture like video game strategy guides or fan fiction. And, too, people can read the same text in different ways for different purposes; for example, they can read the Bible as theology, literature, history, or as a self-help guide. They can read a comic book as entertainment, as insider details for expert fans, as cultural critique, or as heroic mythology. People don't just read and write these texts. They do things with these texts, things that often involve more than just reading and writing. They do them with other people – people like religious fundamentalists, lawyers, biologists, manga otaku, gamers, or whatever – people who often make judgments about who are 'insiders' and who are not, of particular social groups.

What determines how one reads or writes in a given case? Not just what is in one's head, but rather, the conventions, norms, values, and practices of different social and cultural groups: lawyers, gamers, historians, religious groups, and schools, for instance, or larger cultural groups like (certain types of) Native Americans, African-Americans, or 'middle-class' people. For example, Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1981) argued that some Native American and Canadian groups viewed essays (a prototypical literacy form in school) quite differently than do many Anglo-Americans and Canadians. Athabaskians, the group Scollon & Scollon studied in the United States and Canada, have a cultural norm in which they prefer to communicate only in known circumstances with people who are already known to them. Essays require the writer to communicate to a 'fictional' audience, or the assumed general 'rational reader', not someone already known, and, thus, violate a cultural communicational norm for Athabaskians. To write an essay, for Athabaskians, is to engage in a form of cross-cultural conflict. Essays are not 'neutral', they are socially, historically, and culturally value-laden; indeed, how, when, and why they arose in history is a well-studied phenomenon.

People learn a given way of reading or writing by participating in (or, at least, coming to understand) the distinctive social and cultural practices of different social and cultural groups. When these groups teach or 'apprentice' people to read and write in certain ways, they never stop

there. They teach them to act, interact, talk, know, believe, and value in certain ways as well, ways that 'go with' how they write and read (Gee, 2007).

Lastly, the concept of design is integral to this socially-situated view of literacy. As described by the New London Group (1996), all texts are designed using the range of historically available choices among different modes of meaning. This article, for example, follows the design conventions of a traditional scholarly article, with a linear narrative form, headings, a concluding reference list, and so forth. Contrast this to the form of a blog or personal webpage, or even an article in a popular magazine. Authors (of any kind of text, be it an essay, a game, or a web page) can, of course, draw on these modes in hybrid and novel ways, leading to new meanings and new design forms. Interactive fiction, as we mentioned above, is an example of how a traditionally text-based design was transformed with the help of digital technology. Design thus links the technical and social aspects of literacy, and design knowledge – including the ability to be meta-reflective and critical of existing designs – is a crucial aspect of literacy.

As we move to talk about wider literacies, like 'game literacy', it is important to keep in mind the NLS approach to print literacy and to generalize to other types of literacy. Game literacy is itself multiple, embedded in different practices and fully socioculturally situated. Game literacy does not have one effect, but gives rise to different skills, values, and attitudes in different contexts.

The Sims Challenges and Game Literacy

Game studies has often attempted to offer a general, all-purpose definition of what makes something a game, when, in our view, there is none (see Wittgenstein's [2001] famous remarks about 'game' as a 'family resemblance' concept). Equally, we think that any attempt to define 'game literacy' in general, all-purpose terms is doomed to failure. Game literacy is, we argue, a family of different practices engaged in by different social groups with a variety of cross-cutting similarities and differences, just like in the members of a real family (as Wittgenstein would have predicted).

Here we want to look at one specific game literacy practice, one of the many different 'game literacies'. The one we will discuss is interesting for a variety of different reasons. One reason is that this practice very heavily melds digital and traditional print literacy. In fact, this practice is both a game literacy practice and a print literacy practice. This is interesting because new literacies, like new digital literacies, do not replace old ones, but rather change their place in the overall ecology of meaning-making practices in a society. Another reason that the game literacy we will look at is interesting is that it is associated with girls and women. Many of the gaming practices that have received a good deal of attention, both from academics and from the media, have been associated with boys and men. We want here to start studying the family of game literacies (or the many different practices that constitute game literacy) by looking at one member of the family, one that has not received the attention it deserves. If lots of other people look at lots of other game literacy family members we can as a field gain deep insight into what this phenomenon of 'game literacy' really amounts to. In an NLS perspective, there is no other way.

The games that often gain a lot of attention in both game studies and in the media are ones associated with multiplayer and competitive forms of play, in games like *Halo* (Bungie, 2001), *Counter Strike* (Valve, 2003), *America's Army* (US Army, 2002), and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) (see, for example, the entire special issue of *Games & Culture* devoted to *World of Warcraft* [Krzywinska & Lowood, 2006]). There are other games that have received a good deal of attention, for example, certain forms of single-player play in *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar North, 1997) (e.g. Frasca, 2003; Murphy, 2004; Murray, 2005; DeVane & Squire, 2008) or forms of multiplayer play in *Civilization IV* (Firaxis, 2005) (Squire, 2004; Durge & Squire, 2009). And there are, of course, others (e.g. Madden football leagues in the USA or competition in racing games). However, these games are all associated with males, though, of course, some females play each of them.

The Sims (Maxis, 2004), and games like it that are associated with females, have received research attention, of course, but have also raised certain perplexities and controversies (Consalvo, 2003; Flanagan, 2003; Nutt & Railton, 2003; Beavis & Charles, 2005; Hayes & King, 2009). Some people claim *The Sims* is not a game, since it has no clear win state. They treat it as 'sandbox' or

'doll house'. Further, players of *The Sims* are not always treated as serious gamers in the way that *Halo* or *World of Warcraft* players are. For example, people say that *The Sims* is like playing with dolls (Schiesel, 2006), though no one seems to say that playing *Rise of Nations* (Big Huge Games, 2003), say, is like playing with toy soldiers. Even women who spend countless hours on *The Sims* do not consider themselves to be 'gamers' (Hayes et al, 2008). Finally, we know a lot more about how games like *Halo*, *World of Warcraft*, *Civilization*, *Rise of Nations*, and *Full Spectrum Warrior* (Pandemic Studios, 2004) use good learning principles to create good problem-solving than we do for a game like *The Sims*. We can note, for instance, that *The Sims* and games like it play little role in James Paul Gee's books ([2003] 2007, 2004, 2005, 2007) on games and learning.

We want to look at one practice in *The Sims* that constitutes a game literacy. This practice recruits print literacy in a major way and melds it with game literacy in an integral fashion. In fact, this game literacy raises questions – good ones – about what and where the 'game' is. The game literacy we want to discuss involves players of *The Sims* creating challenges for other players on game forums devoted to *The Sims*. This is a very popular form of game play in *The Sims* community; players have created fan sites and discussion groups devoted entirely to *Sims* challenges (e.g. http://www.legacychallenge.com; TS2challenges group at Yahoo! Groups). The challenge we will focus on here is called the 'Nickel and Dimed Challenge', that was posted in the community forum on Electronic Art's *The Sims2* website (http://thesims2.ea.com). It was created by a player who calls herself 'Yamx' (note: all quotes are from The Nickel and Dimed Challenge Forum [BBS] thread. No message or page numbers are available. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from posts by Yamx).

> *Sims 2: Nickel and Dimed Challenge*
> This challenge was inspired by, and is named for, the book Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich (which has nothing whatsoever to do with Sims, but is nevertheless highly recommended). The idea is to mimic, as closely as possible, the life of an unskilled single mother trying to make ends meet for herself and her kids.
>
> *The Goal:*
> Raising your kids successfully until they're old enough to take care of themselves. If you can get all children to adult age without anyone dying or being taken away by the social worker, you've made it. If you want a kid to go to college, they can, but ONLY if they manage to raise at least $2500 in scholarships, since you won't be able to help them. Also, they have to live with you until their late teens (after all, 13 year olds don't go to college). Once the age indicator reads 'becomes an adult in 5 days' (or less), you can have them move to college, but not before that.

The Sims is a family and community simulator. As we said above, some people reject it as a 'game' because it does not state a clear goal or win condition for the player. Players can work out the lives of their Sims in many different ways. Players themselves confuse the issue as to what exactly *The Sims* is since they very often use cheats to give themselves a lot of money or other advantages and thus short circuit some of the 'move up in the world' mechanic from the bottom trajectory of the game (e.g. start with a low-status job and a small amount of money, and gradually work your way up to increasingly better jobs with higher salaries).

At first it looks like Yamx is returning players to the bottom-up trajectory built into the game. But she is doing something much more complex. First, she is treating the game as a tool kit for building simulations, not as a simulation in its own right. She is moving the center of the game away from the software (*The Sims* game) to her own work of organizing other people's play in particular ways.

Second, she realizes that *The Sims* in and of itself is not a very good (or 'realistic') tool kit for building the sort of simulation she has suggested, living life as a poor single parent (Yamx allows for players being single fathers, rather than mothers, and some do play the challenge that way). Because *The Sims* is not by itself, without some restrictions, a great tool kit for building this sort of simulation, Yamx states a great many rules to render it a better tool. She has players download a house and lot she has created that greatly restrict the funds available to them. Further, she states many conditions that restrict what parts of the game can and cannot be used. Here are just a few:

> We're simulating the life of an unskilled worker, so obviously, there are severe restrictions on skill building. (This is not to mean that real life unskilled workers can't be creative or charismatic,

> but within the game, that would invariably lead to promotions, so it's banned.) These restrictions apply only to the Mom, not the kids.

> No cheats (except move_objects to remove bugged items) – in particular no kaching, motherload, maxmotives, or anything that aids survival. (If you want to use a hack to make the phone ring only five times instead of twenty, that's fine with me.) Custom content is okay if it's things like recolors or hairstyles. No special objects that will make your sims life easier, like a bottomless fridge or items priced $0.

> Life in poor neighborhoods is often unsafe – you cannot have a burglar or smoke alarm, and no sprinkler.

> If you're given the genie lamp, you have to keep it, unused, in some corner of your lot. No selling it, and no wishes.

> No quitting without saving after bad events.

One way to understand this game literacy is to look at Yamx's many roles in it. However, in the case of each role, she operates in a way that encourages the players to participate with her in that role. For example, one of her roles is to work out what it means to simulate real-world issues in *The Sims* and how this can best be done. The way she does this causes the community of people taking part in her challenge to think about this issue as well. Some players write back to Yamx telling her that her restrictions are not realistic in terms of how poor people actually live in the real world, for example, as in the post below:

> Hi, I am about to start this challenge. I just have one thing to say before I do. Being a poor person, I am very well qualified to say that no smoke detector is completely unreasonable. They are required by law in all low-income housing and given away freely by fire depts. to poor residents for the asking, at least in the USA.

Yamx's response in these cases shows that she is focused not on a set of rules that are fully realistic in terms of the real world, since this cannot really, in fact, be done in *The Sims*. Rather, she is focused on modifying how people play the game so that their game play captures both the degree of challenge in a poor's person's life and 'the feel' of being a poor single parent:

> Oh, I realize that in real life, there are fire alarms in poor neighborhoods. Just as in real life, poor people can be terribly creative, and charismatic, and great cooks, and ...
>   The point is that within the game, many real-world difficulties simply don't happen. There is no rent – everyone owns their house, no medical bills, no vandalism (except maybe someone kicking over your trash can), you can get away with having only one outfit, which never needs to be washed or mended, your children automatically get a full set of new clothes when they outgrow the old ...
>   In a nutshell, the life of a poor sim is still MUCH easier than the life of a poor person (as you know). So therefore some of the rules are there simply to make sim life harder, and thereby bring it a little closer to real life.
>   Also, the fire alarms in the game work unreasonably well. Where on earth do you find one in real life that has the fire brigade on your doorstep in ten seconds?

There are a good many queries and responses like this on the thread. Yamx makes it clear that she knows 'the challenge can only mimic the real thing to a small extent' and that she was trying to generate a feeling of 'barely scraping by' and 'having very few options and just having to put up with a lot of stuff that was so apparent in the book'. People write back to Yamx to say things like, 'Sounds like you've put a lot of thought and time into this'. Many of the players begin to think about the whole nature of simulation, and *The Sims* in particular not just as itself a simulation, but as a tool kit for making new simulations. In fact, Yamx's challenge invites them to think in a dual way: simultaneously about the nature of being poor in America and the nature of simulations and other depictions and representations of that reality.

Another role that Yamx assumes is as a 'modder' and a 'translator', but a modder and a translator of a specific type. Yamx is using *The Sims* as a tool kit to create a simulation that creates the 'feel' of being a poor single parent, not to engage in a realistic depiction like a documentary or

realistic novel. Furthermore, her simulation is a game in the sense of having a very clear win state. What Yamx has done is 'modded' ('modified') *The Sims* to create a new game. She has also translated a non-fiction book into a game. Both her modding and translation make her a game designer, using *The Sims* as her engine.

However, Yamx's modding and translation are both, in certain respects, unique. She is not modding in the 'traditional' way (i.e. the way we have heretofore paid the most attention to in game studies) by creating new game mechanics or new game content by (re)programming. Such modding is highly valued in the gaming world, since it recruits digital skills to modify or even make a whole new game out of an old one by using the software by which the game was made. Yamx is not modding in this way; rather, she is modding by creating new game mechanics and content out of *The Sims* through creating new 'rules of play' (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), that is, by creating new forms of game play. Furthermore, there have been many games made from movies, many of them quite poor. Yamx is making one of the few games from a book – a non-fiction book to boot – and her transformation is, in many respects, a better game than many commercial games made from movies. Indeed, she has demonstrated a particularly innovative type of design knowledge, the ability to hybridize, or draw from multiple genres to create a new form of meaning-making (New London Group, 1996); in this case, a game that combines elements of *The Sims* as a simulation of a book, and *Sims* storytelling.

Like the celebrated game *Counter Strike*, what Yamx has made is a mod. But it is a very different sort of mod and a different sort of modding than *Counter Strike*. We have tended to focus on the *Counter Strike* model where people reprogram a game and not the sort of modding that Yamx represents. We think that people who can mod in the *Counter Strike* sense are 'digitally savvy', and, indeed, educators would like to spread such skills. However, Yamx is 'digitally savvy' in a different way, not just because she has exemplified 'high tech' skills, but because she has orchestrated a new combination of game, game play, and social interaction. Yamx's approach is a very social form of modding. She doesn't just modify a game and let others play it. She orchestrates their play.

In addition to being a modder and translator, Yamx is also a sort of dungeon master, or game organizer, who controls all aspects of the game. Players who take her challenge consult with her as to the interpretation and limits of the rules, as well as the possible modifications they can make. So she has not just made up rules of play, she also continuously monitors how people are playing as they consult with her as 'the expert'. However, she does this in ways that give rise to negotiation with the players. They participate in her role as a dungeon master. For example, consider Yamx's two responses below. The first is a response to a player who put her children into a private school and the second is a response to a player who fears she has broken some of the rules:

> Sorry, no private school. In real life, wohooing with the headmaster alone wouldn't get you in – he'd have to explain to the school board why your kids are not paid for, and what's he going to say – 'Oh, I wohooed with their mom?' LOL.
> Even if there are isolated cases where something like this might happen, the simple fact is that the overwhelming majority of kids from poor families simply have no shot of getting into private school. (Hey, I thought I was being generous by allowing college! ;D)

> Aw, well, as long as you had fun with it, don't worry about the score/having accidentally broken some rules. It's not like it's a competition, so you're not cheating it's all about having fun with a new way to play the game. :)
> And as you said, you can always play again, without using aspiration rewards, and with the 'quitting when elder' thing – that way, you can claim the first time was just a test run. ;) Five kids all by herself during the depression? Wow. That's impressive. Maybe I'll try that next time …

It is apparent from the second quote that in addition to her role as a sort of dungeon master, Yamx is also a kind of coach or mentor, encouraging and rewarding the players with praise and helping them to see their play in a certain way, e.g. 'it is all about having fun with a new way to play the game'.

In her roles as dungeon master, coach, and mentor, Yamx treats the players as partners who do not just follow her rules, but use their own creativity to extend them and thereby engage in their own game deign and modding. For example, consider the post below where a player hits on a

way to make Yamx's 'realistic challenge' fantasy oriented. Yamx and the player then work out how a fantasy version of her challenge can remain 'realistic':

> [A player asks:] Is it okay for the Grand Vampire, or the Leader of the Pack, to 'accidentally' infect one of my teens or my parent?

> [Yamx responds:] Well, this challenge was kind of intended to simulate Real Life, but if you want to include a fantasy angle, I have no immediate problem with that – this is the Sims, after all. *g*
>
> So let's see ... if the Grand Vampire infects one of your teens, the teen stops aging, right? Meaning he/she can then never grow up and move out, making the challenge endless – unless you do it when they're already less than five days away from growing up and have $2500 in scholarships, so you can send them off to college ...
>
> As for the parent – you can if you want to, but remember: you'll need to have enough money to buy a coffin, you will need a nanny much more than normal (because you can't take care of young 'uns during the day), you're making it even harder to hold down a job ... It could certainly be interesting, though. :)
>
> The Leader of the Pack – hmmm, I haven't played werewolves much, but do they have any advantages besides the strange morphing after dark and infecting others? If not, I see no problem.

In addition to modder, translator, dungeon master, and coach/mentor, Yamx has yet another important role. She is also a kind of teacher. First, she engages in some overt instruction. For example, when one player claims that 'it will be impossible for a sim to stay at just one cooking point?,' Yamx responds:

> If you check the 'Unskilled' section again, you'll see that cooking and cleaning are actually excepted from the 'one point only' rule – you can skill those two skills as far as you like, as long as you do it only through 'practice' (or, in the case of cooking, the TV). The 'one point max' rule only applies to logic, charisma, creativity, body, and mechanical.

Second, her challenge changes how people play the game. They leave their own style and comfort level to take on a new way of playing and learning. Consider the four posts below:

> This looks awesome! I'm going to try it out. I was getting bored with my game anyways.

> It was a really interesting challenge to me because I'm so used to speeding up to high money jobs by skilling. So this really put a new element into the game ... Most Sims players are able to do the normal stuff in their sleep.

> This was a very fun challenge. I really liked how hard it was to start with. I've never played with sims quite that broke before.

> Awesome challenge!! Haven't played without the money cheat in awhile ...

Third, along with her challenge, Yamx, like a good teacher, gives the players an 'assignment' that makes them reflect on what they have done in accomplishing her challenge:

> It'd be really great if you'd make a story to let us all see how it goes for your sims (lots of pictures are good), or at least post here and tell us about it. Here's mine: http://tinyurl.com/26fr58

The Sims allows players to make an 'album' which works something like a storyboard for a movie. The player can annotate pictures, creating an illustrated story. Yamx not only gives this assignment, but she offers her own story as an example. Throughout the thread, Yamx reads and encouragingly comments on people's stories (and they avidly seek her feedback). For players who do not know how to create stories and upload them, she links them to a tutorial and offers them guidance, encouragement, and support. She is a teacher in the sense, not of telling people what to do, but in the sense of encouraging and resourcing their own creativity and productivity. Of course, this is very much a role we want for twenty-first-century teachers in our schools.

A New Form of Discourse

Yamx is orchestrating particular types of social interaction in her roles as modder, dungeon master, coach/mentor, and teacher. One important thing that her work in all these roles accomplishes is to set loose a fascinating play of identities. This play of identities becomes integral to the game Yamx has made. The players, as they write their stories and in their reports to Yamx on the thread, engage in a type of talk that integrally mixes (a) narrative (storytelling); (b) details of their game play as determined by Yamx's challenge; (c) how aspects of *The Sims* as a game intersect with that game play, and (d) their real life histories. In this hybrid discourse we see a play among various identities: virtual character identity (the identity of the virtual characters in their *Sims* play sessions, characters with whom the players very much identify); real-world identity; gamer identity (as a *Sims* gamer); and a social identity on the thread.

Consider, for example, the following from a Nickel and Dimed story created by a fan:

> Poor Deb. She gets a job and the Nanny doesn't show up in time, so she has to quit and wait till the next day to look again. The funds are really getting low at this point, and we can't sell unused items or dig for treasure. I'm starting to freak out at this point, and so is Debsa.
> (http://www.freewebs.com/sims2fan08/nickelanddimedchallenge.htm)

Having to wait till the next day to get a new job is one of Yamx's rules, as is not being allowed to sell unused items or dig for treasure. The 'we' in 'we can't sell unused items or dig for treasure' betokens the player's identity as a gamer playing Yamx's challenge. The clear identification of the player with her virtual character 'Debsa' – e.g. 'poor Deb' or 'I'm starting to freak out at this point, and so is Debsa' – melds her gamer identity (she is 'freaking out' as a gamer since she may blow the challenge) and her virtual character identity (her character is 'freaking out' because her virtual life might end badly).

Or consider this from the thread:

> After one day of working with a nanny and a toddler, she quit her job until the wee one was in school. Most of her money was going to child care, and she was exhausted. When the older one became a teenager it was much easier, and once there were two teens it almost felt like cheating, it was so much better. Luckily, SimTeens don't have gangster friends or drug problems.
>
> I ended up getting a bunch of 'pity promotions' – she ended up at third level because of chance cards. At that point I decided to make her quit due to 'depression.' (And she comes by that depression honestly. She's a family Sim with no real time to date and fall in love, and her aspiration of marrying off six kids just ain't happening in this lifetime. She spent most of her time in the red, and cried and worried a lot.) Then, of course, she had to start over.

Note here how the player talks simultaneously about what she did as a gamer (e.g. 'I decided to make her quit'), what the game, *The Sims*, does as a piece of software (e.g. chance cards and aspirations are part of the game mechanics of *The Sims*), the context of Yamx's challenge (e.g. 'it almost felt like cheating'), and the story of what happened to her virtual characters (e.g. 'After one day of working with a nanny and a toddler, she quit her job until the wee one was in school'). All these forms of discourse are integrated seamlessly.

Here is another example from the thread:

> Well I am finished with it.
>
> Lily had to quit her job again and she was so depressed. I felt bad for her. Then the son got fired for making the wrong choice on one of those card things. Then he got depressed. I was not happy with him. His grades fell to A-. I had to have him walk to town and party for a while to bring him out of his depression. Then he did his home work and went to bed really late. So the school bus came and he didn't want to go to school but I sent Lily in to talk to him. He ran and got on the bus just in time. And when he came home his grades went to A.
>
> He was running out of days before adulthood and Lily gave him a talking to about how much college would help and how much she wanted him to go. He went to school and came home with an A+ and got a scholarship. But not enough and only one day left. He was so worried. He loved his mom and didn't want to disappoint her. So that night he ran away and went to college. He plans to work at the coffee house to earn his way and still try to make the deans list so he can stay another year. I wish him luck.

Here, again, we see a complete melding of talk about the story in the virtual world and the decisions and actions the gamer took as a gamer playing both *The Sims* and Yamx's challenge. We see again – 'I wish him luck' – the melding of a person's real-world identity and virtual character identity. The gamer talks about the virtual character as if he were real and a person in her real life and even attributes motives and desires to him: 'He loved his mother and didn't want to disappoint her'.

Finally, consider the two posts below where players clearly bridge the game (in both the sense of *The Sims* and Yamx's challenge) with their real lives:

> This is pretty true to life! And I love it. When my son is older, I'll show him this as a story, he's only 11 months right now ... So yeah! But I love that there are people out there who truly understand and have empathy for single parents, moms or dads.

> So, even though this is ... wow ... so much like history repeating itself (I had a child and a toddler when I became a single mom; then I had a baby and had to go back to work in 7 weeks – and had to pay $125 a week for a sitter back when I was making only 10 bucks an hour). It was ... interesting. We made it though. My daughter's going for her master's, my son is a musician writing his own stuff and my youngest son just got high marks and is about to enter college. So, the single mom gig is tough – but it's doable.
>   This might be a nice way to tell my kids a bit about their history in a Sim-ish kind of way. :)
> Very very well done challenge Yamx. Kudos!

Note here how the trafficking between the virtual world and the real world goes in both directions; neither side is privileged. Yamx's challenge reflects real life and, in turn, the stories and play sessions her challenge has generated can be used to inform people in real life. The players' own play sessions and virtual stories are being treated as legitimate representations of reality, right along with novels, movies, and real-life storytelling, with their own 'truth' to tell.

The melding and frisson among both different types of discourse and different identities is very much part of the deep engagement that Yamx has created. People through their game play are giving birth to virtual characters and virtual stories that then through the players' stories and discourse are allowed to infect their real worlds. The forms of writing that the players engage in, both in the thread and in their stories about their Sims, is a new print literacy practice. At the same time this is an integral part of a specific game literacy practice. The game literacy practice here is not just playing *The Sims*, but playing Yamx's challenge, or Yamx's game, and that game involves engaging with Yamx as designer, modder, coach/mentor, teacher, and orchestrator of a particular form of 'talk' (i.e. writing on the thread). In this dance of identities and discourse, Yamx demonstrates another sort of design knowledge, a knowledge of how to 'design' social relationships that become a central aspect of game play.

A New Form of Modding

Let us return to Yamx as a modder, though one that is modding rules of play, not reprogramming game software. We have done a good deal, and rightly so, to celebrate good game designers and good modders as tech-savvy creators. Yamx is modding in a different way. She is being creative and tech-savvy at a different level. We may miss her accomplishment because the more male paradigm of game design and modding can lead us to see what Yamx is doing as 'soft'. And it is 'soft' in the sense of using not just good technical skills but also a variety of so-called 'soft skills'. 'Soft skills' is a term for a person's so-called 'emotional IQ' (Goleman 1995); that is, a person's ability to understand themselves and others and to communicate those understandings. We might even call what Yamx has done 'soft modding' if the word 'soft' did not also have some negative connotations. In fact, what she is doing might well be called 'socio-emotional technical modding of rule of play'.

There has been a lot of talk and effort given to so-called 'Serious Games', that is, games for non-entertainment purposes. One problem with such games has been truly marrying good game mechanics, game play, and content (e.g. algebra or health). Too often in such games the game mechanics have little really to do with the content. Another problem is that such games have not always been 'fun' or truly engaging. Yamx has much to teach us here. She has truly married her

game mechanics, game play, and content. Being a single parent becomes simultaneously content and game mechanic at the level of gaining 'a feel' for what it means to be poor in America. She has translated a serious book not just into compelling and engaging game play, but engaging writing and game social interaction that is integrally linked to that game play. She has shown that if we want to make 'non-entertainment games', we ought to think of the socio-emotional technical modding she has done where a game (hers, her challenge, not just *The Sims*) turns out to be serious and wildly entertaining at the same time.

What Yamx has done, the game literacy and concomitant print literacy she has helped to create, has obvious potential for deep learning, even of the sort we associate with school. She has taken a serious and important book about our society and economy, where both are seen through the lens of being poor in America, and translated it into a form of play where players have to reflect on the themes of the book and the nature of representations of reality (in one case a book, in the other a simulation/game). Players have to recruit digital skills, writing skills, communication, and negotiating skills on the thread. All this could be taken further in an educational sense, but we surely have here the promise of a deep and engaging way to teach social studies and social science. At the same time, Yamx clearly points to some of the skills that will be required of twenty-first-century tech-savvy – and emotionally savvy – teachers.

However, in the end, our goal has been to show that game literacy, just like print literacy, is not one grand thing. It is a myriad of different and evolving practices, some of which are integrally involved with and, in turn, are transforming print literacy. These different practices make up a loosely related family with cross-cutting similarities and differences. And it is a family that will grow in many unpredictable ways in the future.

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