

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: BUILDING THE VIRTUAL WORLD:
SOFTWARE, BETA TESTING, AND THE
BIRTH AND DEATH OF *THE SIMS ONLINE*

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Originally released in 2002, *The Sims Online (TSO)* was one of the most hyped online games ever brought to market. Many critics believed its connection to *The Sims* would ensure its success. However, this potential was never reached, and in August of 2008, EA/Maxis shut down *TSO*, terminating users' accounts and removing all traces of it from the Internet. Despite its failure, *TSO* remains an interesting text for analysis, especially as a case study of the growing importance of virtual worlds on the Internet, and as a cautionary tale for future virtual world development.

Combining a cultural studies approach with the emerging media studies' subfields of "ludology" and "software studies" this dissertation examines the formative period of *TSO*'s development—how was the game developed, created, and used in its earliest stages (especially its beta test, in which users play the game before the official release in order to uncover problems with the software).

Whereas previous examples of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) genre were fantasy-based, *TSO* fashioned a world very much modeled on the familiar; players would navigate their Sim avatar through a landscape filled with simulacrums of the material artifacts, cultural rituals, and social practices that are common in American culture. *TSO* was not a game about battle and conquest—it was a game about the meaning of production and consumption in our lives and leisure. The dissertation focuses on the overlapping and even blurring meaning of consumption and production in users' experience of *TSO*, as well as in the architecture of the game. The analysis of the crucial beta test phase provides a particularly focused examination of the collision of these terms.

BUILDING THE VIRTUAL WORLD: SOFTWARE, BETA TESTING, AND THE
BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE SIMS ONLINE

By

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my children Jakob Case and Nora Strummer and to my amazingly supportive wife, Jill.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Images	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction: The Big Wipe: Beta Testing <i>The Sims Online</i>	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review: <i>The Sims Online</i> , New Media, Ludology, and Software Studies.....	15
Chapter 3: Will Wright's Sim Franchise: The Promise and Potential of <i>The Sims Online</i>	43
Chapter 4: Towards a Theory of Virtual Consumption: Applying Daniel Miller's Process of Recontextualization to <i>The Sims Online</i>	80
Chapter 5: <i>The Sims Online</i> Versus <i>The Sims</i> : Reading the Beta Test	115
Chapter 6: <i>The Sims Online</i> Versus <i>Second Life</i> : Remediating Life	160
Chapter 7: <i>The Sims Online</i> Versus Radio KSIM: A Case Study of Consumer Production Practices	200
Chapter 8: Conclusion: The Final Big Wipe: <i>EA-Land</i> and Beyond	231
Bibliography	254

List of Images

Image 1:	A coffee shop in <i>TSO</i> .	1
Image 2:	Screenshot from a PC emulator version of the original <i>SimCity</i> .	46
Image 3:	Promotional image from emulator version of original <i>SimCity</i> .	47
Image 4:	Screenshot from <i>SimCity 3000</i> .	49
Image 5:	The front-cover image of <i>The Sims</i> .	54
Image 6:	Example of houses in <i>The Sims</i> .	56
Image 7:	Screenshot from <i>Microsoft Flight Simulator X</i> .	58
Image 8:	<i>The Sims</i> as hypermediated.	59
Image 9:	An example of the thought bubble in <i>The Sims</i> .	61
Image 10:	Fire in <i>The Sims</i> .	63
Image 11:	Player created <i>Men in Black</i> skins from <i>The Sims</i> .	64
Image 12:	Avatars in <i>EverQuest</i> .	71
Image 13:	The map screen in <i>TSO</i>	84
Image 14:	A Sim character gaining creativity skill in <i>The Sims</i> .	85
Image 15:	Sim avatars practicing body skills in <i>TSO</i> .	86
Image 16:	Houses in <i>TSO</i> became factories for developing skills.	87
Image 17:	The pizza job object in <i>TSO</i> .	88
Image 18:	The original back-cover for the special edition of <i>TSO</i> .	91
Image 19:	Cartoon from <i>The New Yorker</i> , 7/5/93, vol. 69 (20).	107
Image 20:	Simmies in <i>TSO</i> .	112
Image 21:	Sim avatars “playing” chess in <i>TSO</i> .	126
Image 22:	House under construction in <i>TSO</i> .	131

Image 23:	This screenshot shows typical “factory” house in <i>TSO</i> .	145
Image 24:	This screenshot is a promotional image of a wedding in <i>TSO</i> .	151
Image 25:	Screenshot of text-based <i>Zork</i> .	156
Image 26:	Screenshot from the welcome screen of LambdaMOO.	158
Image 27:	Sim avatars “grinding” gnomes in <i>TSO</i> .	164
Image 28:	Another house in <i>TSO</i> dedicated to “grinding” gnomes.	165
Image 29:	<i>Second Life</i> authoring program; designing a shoe.	168
Image 30:	Players in <i>TSO</i> could choose which city they wanted to live in.	173
Image 31:	The Sim avatar creation program in <i>TSO</i> .	176
Image 32:	A bear Sim avatar in <i>TSO</i> .	178
Image 33:	Creating an avatar in <i>Second Life</i> allows for greater detail.	182
Image 34:	Custom created avatars in <i>Second Life</i> .	183
Image 35:	The love bed in <i>TSO</i> .	191
Image 36:	Another sex house in <i>TSO</i> .	192
Image 37:	This image is a promotional screenshot of a talk show in <i>TSO</i> .	203
Image 38:	Screenshot of the list of popular houses in <i>TSO</i> .	211
Image 39:	Synchronized dancing at Bauhaus Radio Warehouse in <i>TSO</i> .	214
Image 40:	The cult of Efar chanting “gabba gabba” and “!” in <i>TSO</i> .	217
Image 41:	The McDonalds kiosk in <i>TSO</i> .	221
Image 42:	The map screen <i>TSO</i> with neighborhoods shown.	222
Image 43:	Town hall style meeting in <i>EA-Land</i> .	235
Image 44:	Another screenshot from <i>EA-Land</i> .	237
Image 45:	A screenshot from the <i>Spore Creature Creator</i> .	242

Chapter 1: Introduction: The Big Wipe: Beta Testing *The Sims Online*

After a prolonged period of laboring with my roommates to build the perfect coffee shop, the announcement was made—the world would be completely destroyed later that night. We were told to prepare for the big wipe. I spent those last few hours as anyone else in my position might have, reflecting on the world I helped to create. I visited some other houses in the neighborhood and the mood was somber, yet hopeful. People usually hard at work simply stopped and took time to dance, express their affection with loved ones, or to hang out and chat with their friends. Then suddenly the world ended. I was left at my computer screen, staring at a message alerting me all of the servers for *The Sims Online (TSO)* were down and that I should



Image 1: A coffee shop in TSO. www.tothegame.com.

try reconnecting to the game at a later time. The date was December 16, 2002 and the beta testing phase was over. The next day the virtual world was to enjoy a fresh canvas; Electronic Arts (EA/Maxis) was officially releasing *TSO* to the general public.¹

Upon its release, *TSO* was hailed by a majority of computer game critics as the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) that would bring online gaming to a mainstream audience. Most of this hype was related to the fact that *TSO* promised to build on the amazing success of the single-player computer game, *The Sims*. On April 16th, 2008 EA/Maxis announced that combined sales of *The Sims*, *The Sims 2*, and their various expansion packs reached one hundred million units, officially making it the best selling computer gaming franchise ever.² In June of 2009, EA/Maxis released *The Sims 3*, which promises to add a new level of customization to the franchise.³ *The Sims* franchise has become one of the most (if not the most) recognizable brands ever in the computer gaming industry. Up until the release of *TSO*, the MMORPG genre had been dominated by what are considered “hardcore gamers.” These games offered users the chance to explore worlds of fantasy in the style of the popular role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*.

¹ The lead designer of The Sim Franchise, Will Wright, created a company named Maxis. Before releasing *The Sims*, the biggest company in the computer gaming industry, Electronic Arts (EA) purchased Maxis, but kept Maxis as a subsidiary and Wright remained in charge of his team. Maxis still functions as a production company but is owned by EA. Throughout this dissertation I refer to this relationship as EA/Maxis.

² Dean Takahashi, “The Sims game hits 100 million units sold” 4/16/08, VentureBeat, <http://venturebeat.com/2008/04/16/the-sims-game-hits-100-million-units-sold/> (Accessed 1/21/09).

³ *The Sims 3* was released on June 2, 2009 and in its first week sold a PC game record 1.4 million units (and was also the top selling application for the iPhone). See “*The Sims 3* first week sales results in 1.4 million units,” *N4G*, www.n4g.com/pc/News-343590.aspx (Accessed 6/18/09).

EverQuest, *Ultima Online*, *Asheron's Call*, and others attracted hundreds of thousands of users desiring to live out their fantasies of slaying dragons and acquiring hidden treasures. *TSO* promised to expand the market for MMORPGs, allowing users to create and explore a virtual world fashioned by the rituals, style, and culture of our everyday lives. Instead of swords and magical spells, players in *TSO* concerned themselves with home furnishings.

As one of the first examples that attempted to move MMORPGs beyond its “hack and slash” beginnings, *TSO* offers clues about the popularization of virtual worlds. Even without *TSO*, online gaming has continued to grow. The most popular example is *World of Warcraft (WOW)*, a fantasy-based MMORPG. On December 23rd, 2008, Blizzard Entertainment reported *WOW* had reached 11.5 million subscribers worldwide and its expansion pack released earlier in 2008 sold four million units in the first month, which was a new record for PC gaming sales.⁴ Likewise, *Habbo Hotel*, which is available to download for free and is marketed strictly to a pre-teen market, registered its 100 millionth avatar and is visited by nearly ten million individuals every month.⁵ *Second Life* has garnered mainstream attention. Certainly online gaming and virtual worlds are in their infancy, but they are truly emerging as important and economically viable examples of new media.

As an illustration of their growing popularity, the virtual world of *Second Life* has been represented in several primetime television shows including *CSI:NY*, *The Office*,

⁴ “New World of Warcraft Milestones” Blizzard Entertainment, 12/23/08, <http://www.blizzard.com/us/> (Accessed 1/21/09).

⁵ Wagner James Au, “*WOW* No Longer World’s Biggest MMO?” GigaOM, 6/26/08, <http://gigaom.com/2008/06/26/warcraft-no-longer-worlds-biggest-mmo/> (Accessed 1/21/09).

and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Most notably, HBO purchased and aired a machinima entitled “Molotov Alva and his Search for the Creator: A Second Life Odyssey.”⁶ This video was “filmed” with virtual actors and created within *Second Life* by user Douglas Gayeton. Showtime’s *The L-Word* has a presence in *Second Life*, holding various showings, discussions, and publicity events. I will return to a detailed discussion of *Second Life* in relationship to *TSO* later in this dissertation—understanding the relationship between these two software programs might offer hints for the future of *Second Life* along with the conditions for its success.

The industry’s expectations for *TSO* were never met. Pundits and industry insiders believed *TSO* could realistically reach one million subscribers in its first year—*TSO* never even approached one hundred thousand users. In March of 2007, the game’s publisher, EA/Maxis announced that the virtual world of *TSO* would undergo major changes. The name *The Sims Online* was dropped and the computer game was re-released as *EA-Land*. A few months after, on August 1, 2008 EA/Maxis shut down *TSO*, closing users’ accounts and removing all traces of it from the Internet.⁷ That was the date of the final big wipe. While what transpired in the period in between these two big wipes is important, it is also essential to reflect back on the beta stage to uncover how the software program released on December 17, 2002 came to be. Primarily, this dissertation examines the formative period of *TSO*’s development—how was the game developed, created, and used in its earliest stages. The beta test

⁶ For an interview with Douglas Gayeton concerning this project see <http://www.hbo.com/docs/programs/molotovalva/interview.html> (Accessed 1/23/09).

⁷ Mike Sellers, “EA to Close EA-Land: Goodbye to *TSO*, Terra Nova, April 2008, http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2008/04/ea-to-close-ea.html (Accessed 1/20/09).

constituted an important period of development and is analyzed throughout this dissertation.⁸

The use of a beta testing stage is becoming standard practice in the development of software and is almost always utilized when a company is releasing a new MMORPG. After the concept for the game is designed, a production team begins working to make the game a reality. Once enough of the structure of the game is completed, it enters the first of two testing stages. Alpha testing features a product that usually does not contain all of the content planned for the official release. Alpha testers are usually the developers who have created the game and this initial stage ensures that the basic architecture of the game is sound. As development advances and a cohesive playable gaming environment is formed, the game usually enters the second stage, beta testing. Beta testing provides real world exposure for the game, allowing potential players to download, and participate in the game before its official launch. Beta testers are expected to fill out surveys, participate in forums, and report bugs and various other game play issues. In essence they help to produce the final product through their consumption and exploration of the work in progress.

The level of devotion is important in terms of the perceived exclusivity of most beta tests. Sites like Betawatchers.com and Betadogs.com, which offer news and

⁸ It is important to note that I printed out the documents from the beta stage in November 2002. As I approached *TSO* from an academic perspective I archived many of the documents available building up to its release. These documents are in paper-form, and include the forums from the beta test, official plans released by EA/Maxis to beta testers detailing possible future developments for *TSO*, and articles posted on the official *TSO* website. These documents (along with several of the reviews) are no longer accessible on the World Wide Web. I have included dates of access in sources. This condition is important in terms of the call for virtual world preservation discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation.

suggestions to users for gaining admission into a new game's beta stage have thrived since the popularization of *EverQuest*. In most cases the number of potential beta testers exceeds the actual need. This creates a level of competition among consumers who want to be chosen to help the company create a better product—to the point where beta testers are developing resumes in order to present themselves as the ideal candidate. Why? What does the consumer gain in this relationship?

The beta test is a space where the relationship between the producers and consumers of *TSO* can best be explored. How did consumers communicate their thoughts, critiques, and hopes for the software to its developers even before the game was officially released? In what ways did the producers employ (or ignore) its consumers in order to construct the best product imaginable? Highlighted by the beta test are the complicated and at times blurred boundaries between production and consumption in new media texts.⁹

This dissertation attempts to document the creation and eventual demise of *The Sims Online*. Despite its failure, and in some ways due to it, *TSO* constitutes a remarkable topic for academic analysis. *TSO* was an important entry into the commercial

⁹ The beta test also becomes an example of the ways in which producers are employing consumers through the utilization of new media technologies. While this process is not unique to computer gaming—as beta tests exist for professional software—the focus on play adds an interesting dimension to the relationship. This conflation of leisure and labor is addressed by Steven Poole in his essay, “Working for the Man: Against the Employment Paradigm in Videogames.” Poole does not discuss the beta stage, but rather how working is becoming a dominant paradigm in computer and video games. See, Steven Poole, “Working for the Man,” Keynote Presentation for Future and Reality of Gaming Conference, October 2008, Vienna, <http://stevenpoole.net/trigger-happy/working-for-the-man/> (Accessed 6/18/09).

MMORPG market because it attempted to provide a virtual world not constrained by the questing and “hack and slash” structure of the fantasy-based examples that had previously defined the genre. Instead, *TSO* fashioned a world very much modeled on the familiar; players would navigate their Sim avatar through a landscape filled with simulacrum of the material artifacts, cultural rituals, and social practices that are common in our daily lives. *TSO* was not a game about battle and conquest—it was a game about the meaning of production and consumption in our lives and leisure. The focus on the layering and conflation of consumption and production in *TSO* as a text emerges as a central discussion throughout this dissertation; the beta test emerges as a key site for such an exploration.

This relationship between production and consumption provides the framework for this dissertation—the software itself enabled users to actively produce and consume a digital landscape that mirrored and attempted to model the practices of production and consumption for its participants. Therefore the relationship between production and consumption is both expressed through game play and through the increasingly complicated meanings of these terms within the context of user-generated content and new media. The game essentially presents a consumer culture where goals are ultimately connected to the accumulation of digital capital in order to acquire virtual objects. *TSO* was populated not with wizards and knights, but rather with individuals expressing their desire to consume. In addition, *TSO* presented the user with a commercial product that required them to produce the environment they will inhabit. An exploration of the complicated relationship between production and consumption of and within *TSO* resides at the center of this project.

I turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu in order to examine what benefits consumers gain in volunteering their time as beta testers in order to help producers create a game. In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu attempts to expand the understanding of capital beyond the purely economic context promoted in traditional economic theory.¹⁰ He writes, “by reducing the universe of exchanges to mercantile exchange, which is objectively and subjectively oriented toward the maximization of profit, [that is to say] (economically) *self-interested*, it has implicitly defined the other forms of exchange as non-economic, and therefore *disinterested*.” Viewed only through the lens of economic capital, *TSO* is solely a commodity by which consumers pay money to obtain the software and then pay a monthly subscription fee for continued access into the virtual world. Likewise, beta testers are exploited—mostly blind to their willingness to provide free labor. Bourdieu complicates this reading by presenting two other forms of capital (cultural and social) as processes by which power is represented and exchanged.

Cultural capital is a form of currency connected to a specific level of knowledge and familiarity with the ideas, texts, and practices of the legitimated class. Bourdieu discusses three types of cultural capital—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized. Cultural capital in the embodied state is related to the way cultural knowledge is transmitted through the domestic sphere. Those more familiar with the culture surrounding the ruling elite have a better chance of incorporating themselves into that class. This more hidden exchange of capital helps to ensure the reproduction of the class structure. In the objectified state, cultural objects such as paintings are

¹⁰ Paul Bourdieu, “The forms of capital.” In J. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, Greenwood, 1986.

exchanged not only in terms of their economic value, but the symbolic meanings attached to them. Finally, the institutionalized state poses that the institution bestows recognition of individual's cultural capital in the form of credentials or qualification. Bourdieu argues that in all its forms presents the individual with the potential to translate cultural capital into economic capital.

The application of these ideas to the beta testers of *TSO* reveals the way cultural capital flows and produces opportunities that translate into cultural prestige and possible economic gain. As discussed, developers of MMORPGs are rewarded with a free work force. However, in order to create these non-professional users into an effective and valuable asset, the developers must offer knowledge and insight into the inner workings of the system. This can be seen in the ways that developers offered participants access to the actual design plans used to create the game. For example in *TSO*'s beta stage several design plans that usually remain as internal documents were released to the beta testers so that they could better understand the long-term vision for the software. EA/Maxis offered knowledge with the hopes that consumers would ultimately create the content for the game. In reviewing the forums, many of the participants appeared to be completely invested in the development and application of their ideas about how the game should be ultimately presented. In exchange for their labor, they were gaining a semblance of control over the game's development.

There were also more abstract benefits for the beta tester. For example, because the beta tests were usually invite-only, becoming a beta tester for a hyped MMORPG provided the participant with a certain level of social status within the gaming

community—they get to play the game before anyone else can. However, the benefits in terms of long-term character development remain limited. Players are given characters during beta, but when the game is officially released their history is erased from the server even if the testers continue with a purchased account. Even during the beta experience, issues arise that occasionally create the need for a wipe of the server, and any work on the character by a tester is lost. In most cases the work the beta tester puts into their character does not give them a head start in terms of advancing within the game. To a degree, beta testers do gain a specific knowledge, or cultural capital, about game play that they then can apply when they start their characters anew after the official release. In the case of *TSO*, after the big wipe, beta testers were ready to take over the direction of the virtual world enabled by the game's official release.

When *TSO* first began its beta stage, the process for selecting participants was similar to the MMORPGs that had preceded it. As discussed previously, there are consumers who develop resumes in their attempt to become beta testers. However, the type of player represented by this pool of participants did not reflect the desired market for EA/Maxis. Soon after *TSO* entered the beta stage, the developers decided to open it up for anyone who had the desire to participate. It was at this time I began participating in the beta stage and documenting the materials and discussions that were passing between the game's producers and consumers. These documents are interesting in the ways that they highlight the fluid nature of consumption and production in the context of understanding how software is developed. In this dissertation, I examine documents from *TSO*'s beta stage in order to better understand

the relationship between programmers and users.

The eventual demise of *TSO* serves to define the boundaries for this study. Even so, I do not explore every incarnation of *TSO* during its nearly seven-year run, choosing instead to focus on a period of slightly more than two years, when the game was fresh and the innovation was most active. While some developments are obviously not captured by this research, I discuss the beginning and end of the game's development period.¹¹ Almost all of my investigation is dedicated to the formative period of the game's introduction to the market. It was during this time that media coverage concerning the game's impending release was at a peak, as there was a great amount of hype surrounding *TSO*.

In the next chapter I present a literature review for computer games. I explore the meaning of *TSO* as a game within a cultural studies framework. Additionally, I introduce the field of new media studies and its emerging subfields, ludology, the academic study of videogames, and software studies. How is the virtual world of *TSO* constructed through the way that it is coded? What elements highlight the unique qualities of its digital context?

Chapter one is an overview of the history of Will Wright's Sim Franchise, specifically examining the concept of simulation and its value to the gaming industry for understanding issues surrounding play. I explore the ways simulation games

¹¹ Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace, in their book *The Second Life Herald*, provide an excellent overview of their experiences in *TSO* during its second and third year of existence. As they didn't play the game when it was initially released, this period of its history is only briefly covered in the work. See Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid That Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse*, The MIT Press, 2007.

allow players to access and understand the codes and laws that pattern the world around us. By tracing the evolution from *SimCity* to *The Sims* and finally *TSO*, I examine why there was so much hype surrounding the game's November 2001 release. I then analyze how EA/Maxis marketed the game. Specifically, I am interested in how the market for the product was defined and what promises were attached to the product. I also discuss the media hype surrounding the game's release by examining its coverage by the mainstream media. Finally, I explore how *TSO* was represented to the public.

The primary focus of chapter two is the relationship between consumption and production in *TSO*. I place this discussion within the context of theories of the consumer society. I argue that *TSO*, like *The Sims* before it, is primarily a game about the role of consumption in our daily lives. More importantly, *TSO* becomes a site for the negotiation between production and consumption through an emerging process where responsibilities are shared in the creation of digital texts. By analyzing the role of the beta test and the condition of game play, where players are responsible for building the entire infrastructure for the game, I examine how the barriers between production and consumption are becoming harder to define.

In chapter three I analyze the comments made by players during *TSO*'s beta test. Here I disentangle the way the software was constructed, especially as it relates to consumer expectations due to the game's association with one of the most popular computer games of all time, *The Sims*.

I continue to discuss the weaknesses of *TSO* in chapter four by comparing the game

with the successful online world, *Second Life*. While many of the overall goals of the two games are similar (creating a socially engaging online environment that is ultimately constructed through participant creativity), the architecture of these two software programs are extremely different. I argue that unique approaches to intellectual property and subscription pricing, among others, helped *Second Life* succeed where *TSO* failed.

Chapter five is a case study of a successful consumer project in *TSO*. When the game was released one of the more interesting trends was that players began to create in-game radio stations that utilized third-party Internet programs to “broadcast” player controlled radio style programming into *TSO*. The example I examine is KSIM: Radio Bauhaus. I interacted as a participant observer, as I was a KSIM DJ for two years. Along with a discussion of how the radio station was created, I examine its relationship to Oldenburg’s concept of the third place, and propose a new term that recognizes the virtual context of worlds like *TSO*, the “simulated third space”.

In my conclusion I focus on the final big wipe and explore the transition of *TSO* into *EA-Land* and its ultimate demise. I also connect the limitations of *TSO* to Wright’s most recent project, *Spore*. Here I return to the questions related to the value and problems of examining and archiving virtual worlds. *TSO* is no longer accessible, which makes the archival aspects of this project even more important. The documents from the beta test discussed in this dissertation not only help me to address the central position of production and consumption in *TSO*, but also are valuable because their existence addresses one of the more problematic limiting factors in

investigating digital texts. If I had not made a conscious effort to archive these documents during *TSO*'s beta stage, they, like all of the documents controlled and maintained by EA/Maxis, would be currently unavailable for examination. This dissertation provides a window into a world that no longer exists.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: *The Sims Online*, New Media, Ludology, and Software Studies

Following the heightened amount of publicity *The Sims Online (TSO)* received building up to its release, the game quickly disappeared from the spotlight of the mainstream media. It was neither considered a runaway success, nor was it initially considered a monumental failure. Like most other Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) the virtual world constituted by the software continued to grow and develop with little notice outside of those playing the game. As is symptomatic with our spectacle-obsessed consumer society, attention is drawn to MMORPGs only when they are associated with controversial issues, such as violence, addiction, and sexuality.¹² While these aspects are certainly entertaining and interesting, they do not reflect the experiences of most participants. In my own experience, interactions within *TSO* were generally mundane. The structure of game play reinforced this idea of normalcy—activities in the game mainly consisted of fulfilling the Sim avatar's¹³ need to eat, sleep, have fun, and socialize. The game was so mundane that one of the goals was to direct your Sim avatar to use the bathroom at least once every couple of hours. My goal is not to downplay the exceptional and absurd—I discuss my involvement with a fictional cult and a radio station that operated inside the virtual world in a later chapter—but rather to argue we must also

¹² I will discuss several essays concerning the dangers of *EverQuest* in relationship to addiction and violence later in this chapter.

¹³ Throughout the dissertation I refer to the representational actor within the software of *TSO* as the “Sim avatar.” When I discuss *The Sims*, I use the term “Sim character.”

examine the more common ways that users gained meaning from their interactions within *TSO*.

The utilization of a cultural studies framework can be helpful in analyzing the more ordinary uses of technology. In his essay, “Thinking The Internet: Cultural Studies Versus the Millennium,” Jonathan Sterne argues that scholars have focused too much on the Internet as a “millennial cultural force,” instead of investigating the ways most people were interacting with the Internet in their everyday lives, or examining the ways the Internet was connected to older media.¹⁴ Most discussions during this millennium context characterized the Internet as part of a utopian or dystopian movement. These writers asked if the technology would revolutionize our lives for the better or become another tool of alienation. During this period of scholarship, technophiles characterized the Internet as progressive and the solution to all of the day’s problems. At the same time, technophobes worried about the end of civilization as we know it. While both of these positions added a sense of importance and even urgency when it came to understanding the implications of this growing technology, they also fell into a technologically deterministic argument: agency was taken away from the users and assigned to the Internet. Additionally, in their desire to present the Internet as something new and transformative, scholars failed to place the technology within the multiple economic, political, and cultural contexts in which it was developed and used. Sterne argues that a cultural studies orientation should be employed as a way to uncover the meanings of the Internet outside of these limited millennial narratives.

¹⁴ Jonathan Sterne, “Thinking The Internet: Cultural Studies Versus the Millennium” in Steve Jones, (ed.) *Doing Internet Research*, Sage, 1998.

Cultural studies focuses on the dialectic between culture and power. Where the humanities often emphasize the interpretation of texts, cultural studies is more interested in uncovering the contexts for texts and events. Sterne writes that “Cultural studies seeks a richer understanding of the political character of cultural and social life, and this means examining the relationships among people, places, practices, and things.” Objects and events contain issues of power because they are shaped by cultural beliefs and ideologies. In order to effectively understand these issues of power, cultural studies research must reveal the ways in which these relationships between “previously unrelated elements” are articulated. All cultural phenomena in industrial societies are articulated in a way that is not arbitrary; objects and events contain meanings and connections that require further examination. Within our uses of technology is the potential to reinscribe systems of domination present in our society, and the ability to reach higher ideals, creating new worlds of possibilities—intervention is essential in encouraging uses to conform to the latter.

The structure of this project is partially influenced by the cultural studies “circuit of culture” formula, which was proposed by Paul de Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus in their book, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*.¹⁵ They argue that in order to adequately study a “cultural text or artefact” it must be analyzed in relation to five “major cultural processes,” which are identified as representation, identification, consumption, production, and regulation. Discussions of these cultural processes emerge throughout the dissertation. In their study, the authors proclaim that they chose to study the Sony Walkman because of its

¹⁵ Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, Sage, 1997.

status as a “typical cultural artefact and medium of modern culture.” They write that through its study “one can learn a great deal about the ways in which culture works in late-modern societies such as our own.” While *TSO* is not as ubiquitous as the Sony Walkman, its connections to *The Sims* and to the increasingly popular genre of MMORPGs, place it as an important example of the changing conditions of our emerging digital culture. By applying the circuit of culture to *TSO*, elements unique to the growing importance of new media can be analyzed in detail.

As an object and example of new media, what qualities did *TSO* embody that are considered unique to our current digital condition? While I am careful not to fall into a technological deterministic argument, it is equally important to understand that technology and the medium by which something is delivered remains important to its overall meaning. As such, I integrate a cultural studies perspective within the frameworks of media studies and its subfields of software studies and ludology. Cultural studies scholarship cautions against ascribing too much power to technology. The technological deterministic argument championed by Marshall McLuhan and others tends to overemphasize the role technology has in social change. Nonetheless, it is equally important to explore the unique qualities of new media. Computer games have the ability to engage users in different ways than a television or radio could, and vice versa; the medium is most certainly a meaningful message. How is the classification of *TSO* as a computer game and as a software program relevant to the conditions of its use?

TSO is most easily understood as a computer game. When I began this project in

2002, the amount of prior research on the topic of video, computer, and digital games was very limited. As the commercial popularity of these games has flourished, so too has academic interest in the subject.¹⁶ The study of video, computer, and digital games is hotly contested and often highly divergent. Because of this, there is little consensus among researchers about what the study of these video and computer games should be called. Proposals for naming this field of study have included “video game studies,”¹⁷ “game studies,”¹⁸ “computer game studies,”¹⁹ “digital games studies,”²⁰ and most recently “ludology”²¹. While the goal of this project is not to define the field of study,²² I feel it is important to explain the emerging field of

¹⁶ There are several edited collections that focus on the study of digital games. Several of these include introductions with the explicit goal of defining the field through reproducing a review of the literature. Three of specific note are Mark J. P. Wolf, (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game*, University of Texas Press, 2001; Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, The MIT Press, 2005; and Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce (eds.), *Understanding Digital Games*, Sage Publications, 2006. As the earliest, Wolf’s review covers the very limited work being done on the topic prior to the year 2000. The latter two reviews are much more involved in attempting to outline and define the emerging field of study and focus on ideas of narrative, ludology, and, to a lesser degree, simulation.

¹⁷ Mark J. P. Wolf, (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game*, University of Texas Press, 2001 and Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader*, Routledge, 2003).

¹⁸ This is the title Espen Aarseth chose for the first academic, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to this emerging field. He also uses the term “computer game,” and as the entire journal is titled *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*. The journal was first published in July of 2001. <http://www.gamestudies.org>.

¹⁹ Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, The MIT Press, 2005.

²⁰ Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce (eds.), *Understanding Digital Games*, Sage Publications, 2006.

²¹ Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology” in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (eds.), *Video/Game/Theory*, Routledge, 2003.

²² Mainstream media have championed the most common term, “video games.” This decision is based upon the fact that the video game console market that has enjoyed the greatest economic success. Academically, however, the term is limited because of the technology it denotes. Mark Wolf, who promotes the term in his edited volume, *The Medium of the Video Game*, writes “video refers to the use of analog intensity/brightness signal displayed on a cathode-ray tube (CRT), the kind of picture tube used in a television set or computer monitor, to produce raster-based imagery.” While almost all of the industry examples were dependent upon video technology when Wolf published his book, the technological landscape has changed quite dramatically. For example, as of this writing in 2008, it is almost impossible to purchase a television that uses CRT; video is quickly being

ludology and my use of the term: “computer gaming.”

To present this topic as a new discipline, there has been an academic move toward the term “game,” at the expense of other aspects related to the technological context.

This school of thought is best highlighted through the work of Espen Aarseth, an individual central to the argument for the need of a discipline dedicated to the analysis of video, computer, and digital games. He is responsible for founding the journal *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, and considers the essential quality of the medium to be its relationship to the act of play, reacting against those who wish to define the medium by the discussion of narrative. In doing this, however, he also pushes the boundaries of what can be considered part of the discussion. The return to the term “computer game” shows that Aarseth understands the importance of boundaries in the academic research on the topic, but this tension between computer games and the larger context of games continues to exist within the journal. In the mission statement, for example, he writes that “Our

replaced with digital media. The importance of the term “video” that remains is primarily historical; it brings to mind the primacy of the video arcades at the birth of the medium and the gradual development of the home gaming market, which continues to flourish.

In his discussion Wolf makes the distinction between the video game market and the computer game market, but only to a degree. He argues that both exist as different “modes of exhibition” for essentially the same purpose. His argument is that some video games were developed for mainframe computers, some for the video arcade, some for home consoles, and some for the personal computer, but overall the experiences created are more similar than different. This reflects an interest in the historical aspect of this discussion. The overview he presents of the concurrent and interrelated evolution of technology for the computer and home console system is limited in that it discusses very little in terms of the way that each system of technology created a different experience for the user. There is value in this discussion as it points out the ways in which video games and computer games have been intrinsically linked. Wolf is also making the case, which continues to be argued today, that there are more similarities than differences when it comes to video and computer games. However the question still needs to be asked: what is lost when these two terms are conflated into one?

primary focus is aesthetic, cultural and communicative aspects of computer games, but any...article focused on games and gaming is welcomed.”²³

In this study, I use the term “computer gaming.” The experience of *TSO* was dependent upon the computer, and in this project I focus on the computer as opposed to other modes of exhibition, despite important connections between computer, arcade, and console games. Such rationale is justified by examining the unique qualities connected to The Sim Franchise as a computer experience as opposed to The Sim Franchise as a home console experience. The computer-based products created by Wright for the computer are defined by their lack of narrative structure—game play in *SimCity* and *The Sims* centers around issues of resource-management, instead of having the player follow a predetermined path toward a logical conclusion. Likewise, in *TSO*, the player creates any semblance of narrative through “lived” experience acting in the computer-mediated space. The computer as a mode of exhibition encourages the tinkering that is commonly associated with this technology. On the other hand, when The Sim Franchise has attempted to transition to the home console market, the games have been re-imagined as goal-oriented and story driven. For example, in 2003, *The Sims: Get A Life* was released for Playstation 2, Xbox, and Nintendo GameCube. While the player had the option of experiencing *The Sims* as it was intended for the computer, they could also follow the game as a linear narrative, where the Sims characters had to advance from living at “mom’s” house to building their own family and home.

²³ <http://gamestudies.org>

My use of the word “gaming” over “game” reflects a desire to emphasize games not only as texts but also as a series of interactions among users, hardware (the computer), and software. Where the term “game”²⁴ refers to the rules and structures that define the conditions of play, “gaming” refers to play as a process.²⁵ This is an important distinction, especially as related to *TSO*’s connection to The Sim Franchise. As to be discussed in the following chapter, *SimCity* was *TSO*’s primary creator Will Wright’s first “sim” game. Wright experienced difficulty convincing game producers to release *SimCity*—he was told it was not enough of a game, and that it lacked the central idea of conflict necessary to classify it as such. Wright focused on the creative drive associated with loosely structured play instead of the rigid emphasis on conflict, defined goals, and resolution that are at the core of what is traditionally considered a game. This aspect became even more apparent after the release of *The Sims* for the personal computer. *SimCity* offered the user the option of playing the

²⁴ The term game is actually complicated, especially when there is an attempt to draw boundaries between what can be considered a game, and what cannot. For example, while Wolf begins by defining the elementary nature of a game as including conflict, rules, utilization of player skills, and a valued outcome, he just as soon begins to accept examples that do not fit this already broad definition. In his attempt to define the medium of video and computer games as singular, he expands the definition to include any software identified as a game by the digital gaming industry. Wolf’s example of *Mario Teaches Typing* illustrates the difference between the larger definition of a game and the industry’s standards. *Mario Teaches Typing* helps to import a specific skill to the user, and there is no conflict within the experience. However, as the cartridge is still packaged and marketed as a video game, Wolf finds it necessary to categorize it as a video game. As the definition of game becomes more inclusive, the subtle nuances become blurred, or even erased.

²⁵ The definition of game continues to be debated among scholars interested in the subject. As the medium advances and develops new experiences, our understanding of the term continues to evolve. More recently, there has been a move toward the action of gaming at the expense of framing a game as an object. In his introductory essay to *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth argues, “Games are both object and process.” Similarly, Ralph Koster, in his work, *A Theory of Fun and Game Design* argues that games are essentially “patterns” and that fun is associated with the user’s ability to successfully navigate and understand the pattern. See Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no.1 (July 2001) and Ralph Koster, *A Theory of Fun and Game Design*, Paraglyph, 2004.

software as either an open-ended narrative with no logical conclusion, or with modes of play where specific goals were defined. *The Sims* was more like a sandbox, or as Wright has suggested, a dollhouse. There was no possible way for the player to declare himself or herself as the victor, or to complete an entire “game.”

Similarly, as an MMOPRG, *TSO* maintained a very open-ended structure—users were not required to compete with one another in any direct way, instead they were encouraged to explore and define their own terms and ideas for game play. The structure and economy of MMORPGs dictate that a player can never completely lose or win. The software is designed to be a never-ending experience—inclusion of finality would negate all incentives for users to pay the monthly subscription fee.

While not a game in the traditional definition of the term, there were inherent objectives presented by *TSO*’s software. Players were required to meet the various needs of their Sim avatar, which replicated the pattern of life formulated in *The Sims*. If players did not direct their Sim avatars to use the bathroom, accidents would happen. However, unlike *The Sims*, these accidents were merely visual jokes and had no impact on the Sim avatar. The Sim avatar in *TSO* (like the avatar in other MMORPGs) was not the character the player manipulated, but rather acted as a surrogate for the user. A player in *TSO* was embodied through their Sim avatar. Ideally, the user was not experiencing the software as a game; they truly inhabited the virtual world. The rules and structure associated with a game were de-emphasized in order to highlight the importance of dramatic play.

Ludology offers an important disciplinary framework for this study because of its emphasis on play.²⁶ The foundational text for ludology is Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, which attempts to understand the importance of play in our daily lives.²⁷ Huizinga counters the way play has been marginalized as the trivial practices of children by placing the concept at the center of our interactions with ritual spaces. Huizinga presents a very broad range of possibilities for ritual spaces, including weddings, courtrooms, and playgrounds—any space that structures the behavior of those who have entered. Making the point that these ritual spaces are a type of “magic circle”, he writes,

Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc, are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.²⁸

²⁶ Several theorists have suggested the term ludology as a possible disciplinary framework for understanding the larger historical context of gaming. In Mark J.P. Wolf's second edited volume on the topic, *Video/Game/Theory*, Gonzalo Frasca offers an essay entitled, “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology.” In this essay, part of the issue for Frasca, as it was for Aarseth, is that at the time of its publication in 2003, theoretical discourse on the topic was dominated by a narrative paradigm. Scholars primarily working within several traditional disciplines, such as literature, film, and television studies argued that video, computer, and digital games presented the consumer with a new form of narrative, and that the already established theories and practices of their fields were ideal to analyze the medium. Aarseth, in particular, argued against this trend and for the creation of a new discipline devoted to the examination of “computer games.” Frasca, who references Aarseth throughout his essay, also advocates for this measure. Instead of denying the importance of narrative to the analysis of games, Frasca claims that an overall turn toward Ludology will work to de-emphasize its centrality. He writes that “Ludology does not disdain [the narrative] dimension of video games, but claims that they are not held together by a narrative structure.” Frasca defines Ludology quite simply as “a discipline that studies games in general, and video games in particular.” See Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology” in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (eds.), *Video/Game/Theory*, Routledge, 2003.

²⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Beacon Press, 1971.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Huizinga's concept of the "magic circle was applied to video and computer games by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman in their essay "Game Design and Meaningful Play", who argue that the term is perfect because there is something "genuinely magical that happens when a game begins." Salen and Zimmerman build upon Huizinga's work to formulate how game designers can work to create software that provides the consumer with an experience of "meaningful play."²⁹ Like Huizinga, they emphasize play as the central aspect of experience. They argue that it is not the game, but rather how the players interact with the game that creates meaningful play. One of the examples they use to illustrate their point is chess; they write:

the board, the pieces, and even the rules of Chess can't alone constitute meaningful play. Meaningful play emerges from the interactions between players and the system of the game, as well as from the context in which the game is played. Understanding this interaction help us to see what is going on when a game is played.

The way we play ultimately determines the outcome; the rules of the game simply structure the possibilities. Therefore, in order to effectively understand a game, one must explore the relationship between the play and the gaming environment within which it takes place.

This relationship is at the center of Edward Castronova's work in his book *Synthetic Worlds*.³⁰ Castronova argues that the popularity of MMORPGs will continue to

²⁹ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, "Game Design and Meaningful Play" in Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (eds.), *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, The MIT Press, 2005. Also see Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, The MIT Press, 2003.

³⁰ Castronova favors the term "synthetic" over "virtual" because he feels virtual suggests they are not real or meaningful. Castronova argues the term is preferable because there is a material quality to the synthetic. See Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

increase and explores why an increasing amount of people are finding valuable experiences in virtual worlds. Castronova frames his argument by presenting two extreme readings of these spaces—virtual worlds have generally been interpreted as games or as advanced tools for communication, similar to e-mail. Castronova argues both positions are extremely limited in understanding the overall meaning of these spaces. Instead, he argues that they are a complex “mixing of play and nonplay.” The environments not only act as arenas for play, but also as spaces for interaction between real people. As a result, he views MMORPGs as similar to the “Game of Life” that is our everyday experience. He writes, “And thus we can say equally of our daily lives and of synthetic worlds, that ‘all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.’” For Castronova, “real life is something of a game.” Virtual worlds are offering users a different type of play, one they view as beneficial and important. They might be playing the role of a mild mannered office worker during their daily life, but at night they become the hottest nightclub owner in the virtual world of *TSO*.

At times, the tension and conflict in our daily lives can be dramatic, but in general our daily lives are mundane and highly patterned. We face very few “life or death” situations, and our decisions have implications but rarely result in radical change. Life is like a game, but not always an exciting one. There are rules, but these rules can often be challenged or ignored. We define and alter the goals we set for our lives. To quote a popular adage, “It’s not if you win or lose, its how you *play* the game.” This understanding of life is similar to the type of environment created by *TSO*; it is not as much a game as it is an environment that encourages a specific type of play.

In Castronova's discussion of the "Game of Life," he references *Homo Ludens*. Play exists in every facet of life, including children playing dress-up, grown adults kicking a ball on a field, and lawyers performing in a courtroom. For Huizinga, "Play is significant; it is always present in culture...we access reality by playing with it." The shift from the importance of the object (game) to the primacy of the process (play) is very valuable in terms of understanding an example like *TSO* where social ritual overshadows narrative and resolution. Castronova continues by examining the relationship between MMORPGs and Huizinga's term "the magic circle". While Castronova finds value in this idea, he also stresses how porous the magic circle really is. The interactions and relationships that emerge in these virtual worlds are not separate from the worlds that enable their existence—they are very much interconnected. Specifically, Castronova examines the ways in which the economies created by these virtual environments are easily translated into the economic context of our material monetary system. This point is an important contribution to the field of ludology.

Ludologists argue that the theories already established in other disciplines are ultimately inadequate, and that in order to properly understand video, computer, and digital games, scholars must analyze the 'gaming situation' itself. The term 'gaming situation' references the work of Markku Eskelinen, specifically his essay entitled "The Gaming Situation."³¹ Through this discussion, Eskelinen attempts to reconcile the traditional understanding of the term game with the actual experiences inherent in the video game market. Working from a formal definition of games as presented by

³¹ Markku Eskelinen "The Gaming Situation." *Game Studies* 1, no. 1, July 2001

David Parlett, he writes, “Games are systems of ends and means.” Eskelinen further notes:

In computer games there are events and existents, the relations and properties of which the player has to manipulate or configure in order to progress in the game or just to be able to continue it. Events, existents, and the relations between them can be described at least in spatial, temporal, causal, and functional terms.

The means of a computer game are the structural rules that determine the gaming environment. The player interacts with the environment by manipulating the space in a specific way. This manipulation allows for the game to progress in one way or another. Eskelinen, however is careful not to emphasize the necessity of a conclusion or as Parlett defines it, the “ends.” While he argues for a unified definition of video, computer, and digital games, he also allows the examination of the specific qualities for each example. He argues that “the importance of these dimensions varies from game to game and sometimes also within the phases and levels of an individual game.” The emphasis on play remains, but without neglecting how it relates to the environment of the game. This interaction between play and environment creates the gaming situation.

The use of the term ‘gaming situation’ incorporates a discussion of the rules without negating the overall importance of play and action. By switching from the word game to gaming, the object is transformed into process. *TSO* might not be a game in the traditional sense, but it is certainly an arena for gaming and play. It may be useful to shift the focus from “game studies” to “gaming studies” to include not only the structure and rules of the game, but also the player interaction in its emphasis.

Ludology is useful because it provides a larger historical context for the analysis of computer, video, and digital games. Games and play have historically been under-theorized.³² Ludology scholarship is often too focused on the unique aspects of video, computer, and digital games—not open to the theoretical histories of other fields—perhaps because of a perceived risk that these disciplines will colonize the topic as their own. As such, Ludology would benefit greatly from a cultural studies intervention—the unique qualities of the “gaming situation” can be approached but within larger historical and cultural contexts. Ludology has also reached a point where there is little consensus concerning topic boundaries. For example, Eskelinin suggests that any text considered a game, (computer, video, board, card, etc.) should be included within the framework of modern ludology. Frasca reinforces this idea by arguing that the “board gaming community” had previously used the same term.³³ Aarseth also suggests that video, computer, and digital games are unique enough to merit their own discipline, by arguing:³⁴

Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again... To make things more confusing, the current pseudo-field of ‘new media’ (primarily a strategy to claim computer-based communication for visual media studies), wants to subsume computer games as one of its objects.³⁵

³² Historically, games have been marginalized as trivial; as a result, academic interest has been limited. However, with the growing importance of video, computer, and digital games in our culture, scholarship is ever increasing. For example, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan edited a volume entitled *Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media*, The MIT Press, 2007. This volume includes in-depth analyses of various table-top games, including *Dungeons & Dragons*.

³³ Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation vs. Narrative: Introduction to Ludology” in Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (eds.), *Video/Game/Theory*, Routledge, 2003.

³⁴ Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce (eds.), *Understanding Digital Games*, Sage Publications, 2006.

³⁵ Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies*, 1, no. 1 (July, 2001).

Aarseth's protection of "game studies" becomes counterproductive and ignores important historical contexts that could be useful in understanding the evolving medium. One of Aarseth's most important contributions to the discussion was his observation in his book *Cybertexts* that "electronic texts," which include video, computer and digital games as well as hypertext narratives and even print texts, could be best approached as "cybernetic systems."³⁶ The computer becomes a key actor in understanding how the program works to create the gaming environment. This is a point closely aligned with the central position of new media studies. Aarseth's fear of outside disciplinary colonization seems detrimental to the research on the topic, as it begins to stifle exactly the kind of interdisciplinary work that is essential to a thorough analysis.

While ludology remains an important framework for analyzing *TSO*, it is important to remember that there are unique qualities associated with *TSO*'s relationship with the networked computer. There is benefit in examining the role of play, competition, and the "gaming situation" in *TSO* but it would be shortsighted not also to focus on the ways that it also exists as a software system. One of the benefits of a cultural studies approach is that it encourages researchers to examine the connections and interrelationships between divergent fields of study. How are new media studies, and its subfield software studies also valuable in analyzing *TSO*?

³⁶ Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Johns Hopkins, 1997.

Any discussion of new media needs to begin with Lev Manovich and his book *The Language of New Media*.³⁷ In reference to the computer's role in our emerging digital culture, Manovich writes, "the computerization of culture not only leads to the emergence of new cultural forms such as computer games and virtual worlds; it redefines existing ones such as photography and cinema." Manovich argues that, as a culture, we are increasingly dependent upon computer technology in all facets of our lives, writing "we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication." This point is echoed by David Trend, who emphasizes the importance of the computer as the central artifact of our new digital culture.³⁸ Trend argues that "the ubiquity of digital data storage, computation, and telecommunication have made us profoundly dependent on computer networks (whether we realize it or not), enveloping society in what might be termed a 'digital culture.'" By placing the computer at the center of the discussion, the computational similarities of new media objects are highlighted and connections between seemingly divergent applications begin to emerge.

New media studies attempts to define the multiple contexts that are important in understanding our current condition. As Manovich argues, too much of the work being applied to new media objects is speculative, concerned with the implications of

³⁷ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, 2002. Also for an overview of the developing field, see Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (eds.) *The New Media Reader*, The MIT Press, 2003.

³⁸ David Trend (ed.) *Reading Digital Culture*, Blackwell Publishing, 2001. Trend uses the term digital culture instead of the term new media, but the goal is the same in that his collected volume explores the various contexts from which new technologies have emerged. He argues that the point of the collection is to stress, "technologies emerge from specific contexts and serve particular interests. Yet the interrogation of these contexts and interests remain a blind spot in most discussions of cyberspace and digital media." This is similar to the project Manovich proposes in his work on new media.

these technologies on our future, or how the technologies will continue to evolve.

There is a need to shift the focus not only to the present, but also to the past.

Manovich argues that the conventions, elements, and forms of new media are not unique, nor are they insular. Instead, he points to scholarship from art history, literary theory, media studies, and social theory as valuable to the understanding of new media objects. Most importantly, Manovich stresses that humanities scholars must also turn their attention to computer science. This is an important point; the language of computer science is valuable in understanding the centrality of computation to new media objects.

In the discussion of the difference between old and new media, there are a couple of arguments worth mentioning within the context of this project. First and foremost, new media are programmable because they can be represented by numerical data. Every new media object is determined by its digital code and thus can be understood mathematically and is “subject to algorithmic manipulation.” New media objects rarely exist in a completely fixed state, even if that is the intention of the programmer. As programmable concepts, new media objects can be continually altered and transformed. Part of the power of *The Sims* is that it gave consumers access to the same editing tools available to the game’s creators; the players were given easy access to the code and, therefore, could recreate aspects of the gaming environment as they desired. In *TSO*, the shared landscape initially existed as a blank canvas that users had the power to define. Programmability is both an essential aspect of gaming studies, and a key to understanding new media objects.

Manovich presents several other key distinctions between old and new media including modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding, each of which has its value for understanding the computational aspects of *TSO*. Using the term modularity, Manovich describes the way new media objects can be “incorporated into larger-scale objects, but continue to maintain their separate identities.” The entire landscape of *TSO* could be described as modular, where the geographical area is separated into a fixed number of modular lots. Each lot is developed by players in a specific way, but still determined by the larger system of *TSO*. Automation refers to the way in which the computational device partially automates many of the processes “involved in media creation, manipulation, and access.” In *TSO*, the creativity of the user was limited in several ways, including the inability to upload unique user-generated content into the gaming environment, and the pre-determined outcomes of objects automated by the program. While creativity is emphasized within *TSO*, it can only exist within the pre-defined structure offered to the user. In terms of variability, which Manovich argues reflects the possibility for new media to exist in different and “potentially infinite versions,” the application of *TSO* is very direct. When *TSO* was released, players had to choose a server where they would “live.” Each server evolved independently of the others. Also, within each server, the landscape was constantly changing, providing users with infinite possibilities through which they could construct the virtual world. Finally, transcoding refers to the way in which new media objects as computer data share dimensions “that belong to the computer’s own cosmogony rather than to human culture.” New media can therefore be understood as

belonging to two distinct but interrelated layers, the computer and culture. Manovich writes,

We can say that [the computer and culture] are being composited together. The result of this composite is a new computer culture—a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modeled the world and the computer’s own means of representing it.

Transcoding thus best explains the type of interaction between operators and the computer in the creation of a unique cultural experience within *TSO*.

Manovich also discusses the topic of computer games in *The Language of New Media*. Previously, Manovich made the distinction between narrative and database in new media objects. In this sense, however, Manovich argues that while narrative is an important idea in many forms of old media, including cinema, many examples of new media lack the thematic elements that could translate into a sequence; that is, they are without beginning or end. Manovich uses the term database to describe new media objects as “collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.” However, Manovich views no connection between the database paradigm and the computer games themselves. Instead, he turns back to narrative as a useful strategy, focusing specifically on the examples of *Myst* and *Doom* to make his point. He does not reduce the discussion to narrative, and instead sees an inherent power to the medium, arguing that computer games “exemplify new media’s potential and give rise to genuinely original and historically unprecedented aesthetic forms.” Manovich discusses the practice of game developers releasing game editors to consumers, thus enabling them to actively participate in the creation or individualization of their gaming experience.

Manovich views the database as its own cultural form because it directs the actions of its user. Databases are usually conceived of as a detailed interface that provides users access to a data set. While Manovich defines the term as “a structured collection of data,” he argues that a great amount of new media objects employ a database structure without appearing to be actual databases. New media objects are databases in that they are “collections of items on which the user can perform various operations,” including the way that the user views, navigates, and searches the data in any form. Similarly, new media objects are open systems, meaning that they are never a complete narrative, while databases also always have the potential for growth. Manovich views the database as a possible “symbolic form for the computer age, a new way to structure our experiences of ourselves and our world.” The database becomes a kind of cognitive map for understanding the proliferation of information in our current society. Manovich writes that “the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we would want to develop a poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of the database.” In many ways, the narrative approach to *TSO* is too limited: there are narrative elements but they no more drive the action in the gaming environment than they do in our daily lives. Thus, the database becomes a more useful metaphor.

If we consider the database to be a new cultural form, then we should examine how the new media object structures data on the level of code. A central question to this examination refers to how the structure of the database helps to program the user’s experience. Manovich argues that we need to examine new media objects on the level of their code. He writes:

To understand the logic of new media, we need to turn to computer science. It is there that we may expect to find the new terms, categories, and operations that characterize media that became programmable. From media studies, we move to something that can be called “software studies”—from media theory to software theory.

While Manovich is vague about what this area of study might eventually look like, he is interested in the “material” aspects and the “logical principles of computer hardware and software.” Consequently, we need to explore how the interactions with the interfaces of computer software enable the authoring and distribution of new media objects.

As he advocates for software studies, Manovich implies that the relationship of new media objects to media studies is important, but ultimately limited. The unique quality of new media, primarily its programmability, is at odds with older media. Therefore, it is not necessarily the computer we need to focus on as a medium, but rather understanding how the computer runs software. Manovich argues that viewing new media as merely a new form of media is limited because we also must approach new media as “a particular type of computer data.” The display of the data on a screen might remind us of old media, but that is only a surface reading. At its core, new media is “stored in files and databases, retrieved and sorted, run through algorithms and written to the output device.” Very rarely do we interact with the actual computational technology, since the experience is always mediated through software. New media is media, but it is also the code constructed through software that determines how it looks, how it works, and ultimately how we can use it.

In his essay “Virtuality and VRML: Software Studies after Manovich,” Matthew Kirschenbaum discusses the material nature of software by employing the term “digital object.”³⁹ Kirschenbaum views the importance in the shift from new media studies to software studies as connected to the potential for a deeper “historical materialist” reading in the latter. In media scholarship, the product as text is emphasized: we read films on their surface level. Software, however, exists at the level of computation and reflects the multiple material contexts of its development. Concerning the intangible, yet material, condition of software, Kirschenbaum writes:

Software is the product of white papers, engineering specs, marketing reports, conversations and collaborations, intuitive insights and professional expertise, venture capital (in other words, money), late nights (in other words, labor), Mountain Dew, and espresso. These are the material circumstances that leave material traces—in corporate archives, in email folders, on whiteboards and legal pads, in countless iterations of alpha versions and beta versions and patches and upgrades, in focus groups and user communities, in expense accounts, in licensing agreements...

One of the goals of software studies, according to Kirschenbaum, is a dedication to archival research that uncovers the various conditions (historical, economic, social, etc.) present in the developmental stages of software creation. In his conclusion, he argues that software studies needs to do the work of “fashioning documentary methods for recognizing and recovering digital histories, and the cultivation of the critical discipline to parse those histories against the material matrix of the present.” As a result, it is through software studies that we can uncover the hidden discourses of software development and better understand our past, present, and future

³⁹ Matthew Kirschenbaum, “Virtuality and VRML: Software Studies After Manovich” originally posted August 29, 2003 to Electronic Book Review, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/morememory>, Viewed March 23, 2008.

interactions with digital objects. In part, this project is dedicated to this process of archival recovery as discussed by Kirschenbaum, and includes material traces from the stage of development, including documentation from the beta stage of play and official game design plans.

Furthermore, Matthew Fuller is quickly emerging as the primary scholar within the field of Software Studies. In addition to his book, *Behind the Blip: Software as Culture (Some Routes into "Software Criticism," More Ways Out)*, he has also edited the first academic volume designed to describe the ways in which software has become a central force in our emerging digital culture.⁴⁰ Relying heavily upon the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, Fuller argues that electronic media participates in "conceptuality," which can be understood as a "proposal for understanding software as a form of digital subjectivity." Software influences the ways in which we experience virtual worlds, as noted when Fuller states, "each piece of software constructs ways of seeing, knowing, and doing in the world that at once contain a model of that part of the world it ostensibly pertains to and that also shapes it every time it is used." Software is powerful both in the way that it shapes our understanding of the world and in the way that it creates and limits possibilities for interaction within it. *TSO*, for example can be understood as a model for communication and identity construction, which in turn highlights and informs the connections to our everyday lived experiences. Not only are our relationships within

⁴⁰ Matthew Fuller, *Behind the Blip: Software as Culture (Some Routes into "Software Criticism," More Ways Out)*, Autonomedia, 2003 and Matthew Fuller (ed.), *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, The MIT Press, 2008.

TSO shaped by the software, but, potentially, so are the relationships that exist outside of the virtual world.

At the heart of Fuller's discussion of software is a concern with the relationship between the "users and developers" in the creation of "social software." In defining "social software," Fuller argues that it is:

Software that is directly born, changed and developed as the result of an ongoing sociability between users and programmers in which demands are made on the practices of coding that exceed their easy fit into standardised social relations.

The increased amount of socialization between the user and the programmer has arisen due to a conflation of the two terms: the developer is not the sole producer of software. The user operates the software by inputting data, which is also a form of programming. In addition, as I explore in relation to *TSO*, the user is increasingly an active participant in the creation of software at the stage of development. While Fuller understands the power that is bestowed upon the user through this relationship, he is also careful to illustrate that this relationship is not a balanced one—the process of development might be more open, but ultimately the developers are the ones who have control over the software. He writes, "Whoever is closest to the machine owns the space of possibilities which the relations have been established to explore." In order to rectify this problem, Fuller argues that software needs to be more open, and that researchers must analyze software on the level of code. One of the basic ways through which to accomplish this is to investigate how software is developed. However, Fuller argues that it is more important to track the less "expert" systems of development. He writes:

The problem is not in recognising other forms of “expertise” and finding ways of accessing them... There is a far more important need to recognise and find ways of coming into alliance with forms of intelligence that are excluded from the depleted culture of experts.

Fuller argues that one strategy for uncovering these hidden aspects in software construction is through a “poetics of connection.” The user often extends the use and usability of software beyond the developer’s “product specification.” What most scholarship on the subject overlooks, however, are the ways that technology has been “overrun and conceptually, if not infrastructurally, reinvented by hordes of what are seen as rather insignificant no-experts: teenagers, illegal works, gossip-mongers, and so on.” The specific example Fuller uses is mobile technology, in which the consumers have developed their own uses and meanings for the ubiquitous device. However, the connection to *TSO* and other examples of gaming software is obvious: users have made connections between the software and their real lives outside of the vision created by the developer. Through their “capacity to generate a poetics of this connection” users are reinventing software and technology.

Fuller speaks to the ultimate power of software by proposing the term “speculative software” and turning to a discussion of Ellen Ullman’s *Close to the Machine*.⁴¹ He quotes, “We think we are creating the system, but the system is also creating us. We build the system, we live in its midst, and we are changed.” He argues that we can understand speculative software as the way software opens “up a space for the reinvention of software by its own means.” Fuller writes:

⁴¹ Ellen Ullman, *Close to the Machine: Technophilia and Its Discontents*, City Lights Publishers, 1997.

It is the assertion of speculative software that the enormous spread of economies, systems of representations, of distribution, hiding, showing, and influence as they mesh with other systems of circulation, of life, ecology, resources—themselves always both escaping and compelling electronic and digital manifestation—can be intercepted, mapped, and reconfigured precisely by means of these blips.

Here, Fuller presents the political aspect of software studies. The control of software is up for grabs and we can investigate the ways in which software is being negotiated in a political context. There is a hegemonic relationship between the producer and consumer. For example, in beta testing, the producer cedes certain aspects of production to the consumer but ultimately remains in control of the software's development. Likewise, through inclusion of internal systems of control, such as licensing agreements or propriety ownership, the producer attempts to maintain control over the use and speculative development of the software. Fuller argues that this power is being challenged and it is in these spaces that we can uncover the true potential of software. As it relates to *TSO*, this point becomes especially interesting. The promise of The Sim Franchise is an enhanced degree of control over the programming of the gaming environment. *TSO* allows for this, but to a much lesser degree than *The Sims*, or even its more successful counterpart *Second Life*. The producers of *TSO* limited the ability of users to generate their own digital objects and, in turn, relegated *TSO* to a visually interesting chat space. Conversely, in *Second Life*, users are not only encouraged to program the space in new and original ways; they are even granted intellectual property rights. What is created in *TSO* becomes the property of EA/Maxis, while what is created in *Second Life* remains the property of the player.

This project applies the theories and principles of ludology, new media studies, and software studies to a single digital object, *TSO*. Most of the research in this area has been limited in scope. For instance, Fuller only provides single-chapter explorations of various examples of software. Likewise, Manovich only attempts to define the field in *The Language of New Media*, rather than to thoroughly examine a singular digital text. However, my study is not merely an exchange among these fields of study. While these perspectives are essential, and certainly useful to analyze the unique qualities of *TSO*, their emphasis on the “gaming situation” and the computational aspects of digital culture limit the understanding of larger economic, social, cultural, and global contexts. By integrating these discussions into a larger cultural studies framework, we can begin to understand the complex layers of meaning related to *TSO* as a cultural text while examining the unique qualities associated with it as a computer game and software system. We need to ask how producers have attempted to code the experience and, in turn, how have consumers attempted to use the code to satisfy their own means.

Chapter 3: Will Wright's Sim Franchise: The Promise and Potential of *The Sims Online*

In order to begin to understand the reasons for the elevated expectations surrounding the release of *The Sims Online* (TSO) in 2002, it is important to trace its connection to Will Wright's Sim Franchise and to the emerging Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) genre. In terms of The Sim Franchise,⁴² I focus on the two most successful examples, *SimCity* and *The Sims*, connecting their popularity to the promise and potential of TSO.⁴³ These games (along with previously successful MMORPGs like *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*) form a major historical context for examining TSO's development. It is important to understand the genealogical antecedents of the new media objects because, while there are unique aspects to TSO, there are also important discourses that informed its development, implementation, and reception. In addition, by reviewing news sources and gaming industry publications published both before and directly after its official December 2002 release, I focus on the expectations for TSO. How did players' experiences with these previous computer games contribute to consumer and media expectations for the

⁴² I use the term "The Sim Franchise" to include all of the software titles, upgrades, and expansions released that were guided by Wright and his production house Maxis, and that contain the word "sim" in their title. For this dissertation I am only including the games released before *The Sims Online* enters the market. I also mainly focus on *SimCity* and *The Sims* as they were the major releases in terms of economic success and their impact on the gaming industry. The complete list of games in The Sim Franchise includes *SimCity*, *SimCity 2000*, *SimCity 3000*, *SimEarth*, *SimLife*, *SimCopter*, *SimAnt*, and *The Sims*.

⁴³ I am specifically referring to the initial releases of *SimCity* and *The Sims*. After both games entered the market and became economic successes, there were several generational upgrades to *SimCity* (*SimCity 2000*, *SimCity 3000*) and numerous expansions for *The Sims* (*House Party*, *Living Large*, *Hot Date*, *Vacation*, *Unleashed*, *Makin Magic*, *Superstar*). These examples received media attention but not to the degree that engulfed *The Sims Online*.

game? I conclude by reinforcing the importance of examining *TSO* within an economic framework by specifically arguing that its commercial structure ultimately limited the game's potential for success.

Will Wright did not create any of these software titles by himself, but the fact remains that he was the driving creative force behind their design. It is impossible to overestimate his importance to the evolution of the computer gaming industry. Countless media sources have detailed his life story. The most thorough media investigation into his life story was conducted by John Seabrook as part of the profiles section in *The New Yorker* magazine. The title of the piece, "Game Master" speaks specifically to the level of respect Wright has garnered in terms of his ability to produce examples of software that challenge and test the boundary limits of what computer games are and can be.⁴⁴ Wright became the first game designer to be honored with the prestigious Vanguard Award in 2007, which "recognizes outstanding achievements in new media and technology."⁴⁵ The software titles Wright designs rarely fit into the patterns established through other computer gaming genres, such as "first person shooters" and "adventure games". Wright is very cognizant concerning this aspect and is often hesitant to call his creations games.

⁴⁴ John Seabrook, "Game Master" *The New Yorker*, 11/6/06

http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/11/06/061106fa_fact (Accessed 1/23/09).

⁴⁵ This award has been viewed as a landmark achievement for Wright and the video/computer game industry. The recognition provides validation of the industry as a viable form of popular entertainment, evidenced by the list of previous recipients, including George Lucas, James Cameron, and Pixar Animation Studios. In their announcement of Wright as the recipient, members of the Producers Guild Awards committee, Mark Gordon and Hawk Koch, stated, "Will Wright is the icon of the gaming industry and one of the great producers of entertainment content. His creations have transcended into feature films and continue to entertain a global audience. We are proud to have him be the first Vanguard recipient from the gaming universe." See "Will Wright Receives Top Honors" by Micah Seff, <http://ps2.ign.com/articles/751/751048p1.html> (viewed September 29th, 2007).

Instead, he argues that his software titles are more indebted to the imagination and unstructured quality of play. In several interviews, Wright emphasizes the ways he perceives his software titles as tools or toys. Arguing his designs are unlike other examples in the medium, he tells one interviewer, “Most games are made on a movie model with cinematics and the requirement of a cinematic climatic blockbuster ending...My games are more like a hobby—a train set or a doll house. Basically they’re a mellow and creative playground experience.”⁴⁶

Wright’s first foray into computer games was in 1984, when he developed *Raid on Bungling Bay* for the Commodore 64 personal computer. Broderbund, one of the earliest computer gaming companies, produced the game. Game play was fairly straightforward. The user controlled a helicopter which flew over various island landscapes while attempting to destroy the structures below. The game enjoyed limited success on the computer platform. Nintendo acquired the license for the game in 1985 and ultimately sold approximately one million cartridges, mostly in the Japanese market.

While *Raid on Bungling Bay* did not revolutionize the medium of computer and video games in any direct way, it remains important because, in creating this game, Wright discovered the inspiration for his next project, *SimCity*. This revelation has been well documented, as Wright said:

[*Raid on Bungling Bay*] included an island generator, and I noticed after a while that I was having more fun building islands than blowing them up. About the same time, I also came across the work of Jay Forrester, one

⁴⁶ Geoff Keighley, “SIMply Divine” GameSpot.com, 2009, <http://www.gamespot.com/features/maxis/index.html> (Accessed 1/23/09).

of the first people to ever model a city on a computer for social-sciences purposes. Using his theories, I adapted and expanded the Bungling Bay island generator, and *SimCity* evolved from there.⁴⁷

Even though this marked the beginning of The Sim Franchise, Wright still had to challenge the barriers of an industry that resisted his idea to create a software title that didn't fit into the traditional definition of a "game."



Image 2: A screenshot from a PC emulator version of the original *SimCity*.

There were two unique aspects that define *SimCity*.⁴⁸ First, there is no predetermined conclusion to the game. Players can never reach a defined ending point, and thus can theoretically play a single game for an indefinite amount of time. The second unique aspect, which is connected to the first, is that the game cannot be conclusively won or

⁴⁷ Ted Friedman, "Semiotics of SimCity" *First Monday* 4(4), 1999, http://outreach.lib.uic.edu/www/issues/issue4_4/friedman/index.html (Accessed 1/23/09).

⁴⁸ I am not really discussing *SimCity* as the first "god game," but as the first commercially successful simulation game that employed this alternative strategy for game play. There were previous examples in which the user would play the actual role of a "god" controlling followers in situations of war, devotion, and suffering. Similarly *SimCity* can be connected to examples of "corporate capitalism" simulations in which the goal was economic expansion. For a more in depth discussion see J. C. Herz, *Joystick Nation*, Little Brown, 1997.

lost. Because the game has no logical endpoint, there is no pre-scripted method of evaluation; success or failure is based upon the user's own goals and strategies.

While many previous games inevitably ended in the defeat of the player, such games as *Pac-Man* and *Space Invaders* gave the player a definite method of evaluation for their success—a score. In *SimCity*, the rankings can be devised by the players but are not written into the directives. For example, in *SimCity* you can compare population size as a measure for success, but only if the users playing the game have that specific goal in mind. Moreover, there is no interface built into the game that allows you to compare your current city to your previous attempts or to the cities of other players. There is no list for documenting or system for recording the “highest” score.

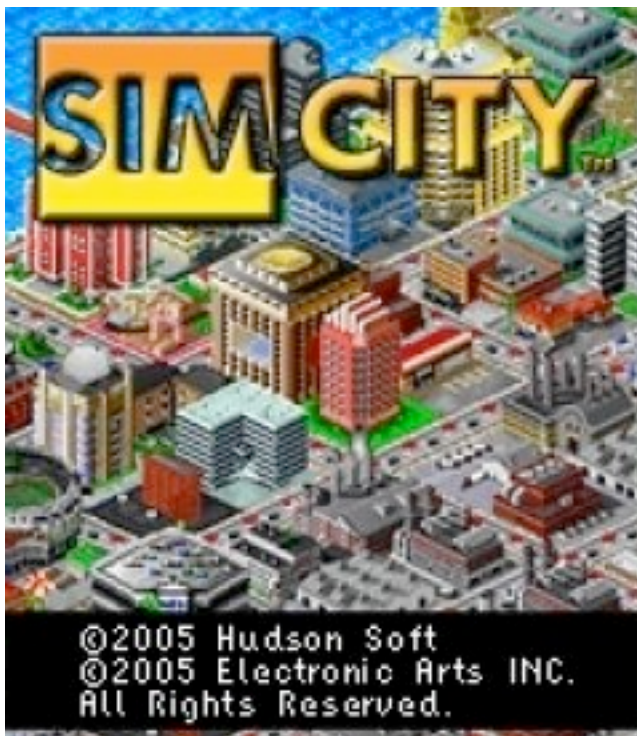


Image 3: Promotional image from emulator version of original *SimCity*.

Another key difference between *SimCity* and the previous examples of successful computer games can be found in a discussion of content. Whereas most computer games were being constructed with an element of combat or destruction as their central tension, *SimCity* is interested in building and managing a complex urban environment. As noted by several writers, this aspect of the game provided an educational element to the game that was also unlike any other previous commercially viable releases. In the essay “SIMply Devine: The Story of Maxis” Geoff Keighley points out that the program was employed in about 10,000 classrooms.⁴⁹ Likewise, an article for *Time* about one of the game’s updated versions, *SimCity 3000*, relays the famous example of then New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani observing his son Andrew playing the game. Mayor Giuliani tried to interfere by “making suggestions on taxation, zoning and so forth” until his son turned around and proclaimed, “Dad, this is my city.”⁵⁰ The article also quotes New York City Planner, Hayes Lord, who proclaims, “They should introduce this game to all classrooms.”⁵¹ Sherry Turkle makes a similar point in her book *Life on the Screen*, in which she argues that, in an age when many people are worried about the inability of America’s youth to maintain focus, she has observed many children interacting with a game that centers upon complex and educational ideas, such as zoning and taxes, for long periods of time.⁵² Eventually, these anecdotes of the game’s educational value helped provide a degree of legitimacy to the computer

⁴⁹ Geoff Keighley, “SIMply Divine,” GameSpot.com, 2009, <http://www.gamespot.com/features/maxis/index.html> (Accessed 1/23/09).

⁵⁰ T Chris Taylor, “Playing God” *Time*, 3/1/99, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,990331,00.html?iid=digg_share (Accessed 1/23/09).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

gaming industry. However, there was an initial level of concern that the game would be too didactic for a commercial market. The executives at Broderbund showed serious concern that the game was too “educational” and pressured Wright to include aspects in its design that ensured that “it would be perceived as a game.”⁵³ Wright inserted disaster scenarios into the software, which included floods, fires and earthquakes among others. Whether or not these elements helped to create a “gaming” experience is debatable, but what is of interest is Broderbund’s insistence that the product, which was initially created by Wright, was not what they considered a computer game, and would not fare well in the established market.



Image 4: Screenshot from *SimCity 3000*. www.tothegame.com.

⁵³ Ted Friedman, “Semiotics of SimCity” *First Monday* 4(4), 1999, http://outreach.lib.uic.edu/www/issues/issue4_4/friedman/index.html (Accessed 1/23/09).

Due to the open-ended structure of *SimCity*, game play is quite different than that in the popular adventure games which preceded it. *SimCity* places the user in the position of mayor, giving him or her complete charge over constructing and maintaining a complete urban environment, which includes structuring the landscape through zoning decisions, and balancing issues of pollution and economics by choosing power sources. The player becomes the ultimate micro-manager, making sure that the level of taxation is sufficient while dealing with issues of crime, sprawl, and transportation. Once again it is important to reinforce the idea that there is no ultimate goal to the simulation; the city will continue to develop based on the input decisions made by the user—for example, if the user is trying to increase population, it must be noted that there is no inherent limit to population size. Likewise, if the user is actively trying to create a dysfunctional city, there is nothing in the simulation to restrict this style of game play. In this way, the personal goals of the player define the sense of accomplishment in *SimCity*. Compared to a computer game that employs levels to signify natural stopping points in the gaming experience (*Doom*, for example), *SimCity* appears to be a never-ending narrative. As Friedman notes:

Game playing is a continuous flow - it can be very hard to stop because you're always in the middle of dozens of different projects: nurturing a new residential zone in one corner of the map, building an airport in another, saving up money to buy a new power plant, monitoring the crime rate in a particularly troubled neighborhood, and so on.⁵⁴

This element of immersion can be partially attributed to the success of *SimCity*, as players often reported an addictive quality to the game. One fan, describing his love

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

of the game in the online game database *Moby Games*⁵⁵ likened it to a drug; stating it was as “addictive as crack... Im serious, I sat like a loser in PJ's for two weeks parked in front of the PC.”⁵⁶

With more skepticism than support, Wright was able to create a game centered on the desire to build rather than the desire to destroy. While *SimCity* was not a runaway success, it did gather a dedicated following. Since its initial release in 1989, the title has generated two hundred and thirty million dollars of profit.⁵⁷ The impact of the game was even greater, and is harder to quantify: as Seabrook writes, “A sizable number of players who first became interested in urban design as a result of the game have gone on to become architects and designers, making *SimCity* arguably the single most influential work of urban-design theory ever created.”⁵⁸ And Wright was just getting started.

Where *SimCity* is interested in urban design, the inspiration for Wright's next major venture was architecture.⁵⁹ Wright often cites the work of Christopher Alexander as a source for *The Sims*, who explores the functional aspects of architectural structures.

Wright's original idea was to create a game that measured the efficiency of design:

⁵⁵ *Moby Games*, <http://www.mobygames.com> is “the working name of an extremely ambitious project: To meticulously catalog all relevant information about electronic games (computer, console, and arcade) on a game-by-game basis, and then offer up that information through flexible queries and “data mining.” In layman's terms, it's a huge game database.” <http://www.mobygames.com/info/faq1#a1>

⁵⁶ This quote is from the poster “OlSkool_Gamer” on the Moby Games site, <http://www.mobygames.com/game/dos/simcity/reviews/reviewerld.41311/> (accessed November 12, 2007).

⁵⁷ John Seabrook, “Game Master” *The New Yorker*, 11/6/06 http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/11/06/061106fa_fact (Accessed 1/23/09).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Sims Like Us” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12/18/04, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/Technology/Sims-like-us/2004/12/17/1102787274524.html> (Accessed 1/23/09).

players would build houses and the program would provide feedback about the practicality of the design. However, as with *SimCity*, Wright's attempts to convince the executives that a market existed for a game about building houses proved difficult. In the original design, Sim characters were only included as a way of presenting feedback to the user—originally there was no intent to present the player with the ability to manipulate them. If you built a house and the Sim characters living in it were happy, you had created a successful home; if they were unhappy, this highlighted the flaws in the design. Wright and others on his team quickly realized that the game really had potential if the people inhabiting the software were more fully developed. Patrick Barrett, one of the original software engineers for *The Sims* confessed, "Explaining to executives that it's all about architecture was very difficult, so we started pushing it as a people simulator. We put a lot of work into the people and added a lot more objects. The executives understood the "people game" idea a little better but they still didn't think we could do it."⁶⁰ As was the case with *SimCity*, where Wright stumbled upon the joy of building the islands while working on his previous helicopter game, the development of his new game took an unexpected path.

Despite the popularity of *SimCity*, developers were not convinced that Wright knew what he was doing in regards to his newest venture. The game took seven years to develop,⁶¹ during which time it came extremely close to being cancelled. The game's associate producer describes the doubts shared even by the game's designers during

⁶⁰ Rhianna Pratchett, "Happy Families" *The Guardian*, 10/10/2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2002/oct/10/games.onlinesupplement1> (Accessed 11/22/02).

⁶¹ It has proven difficult to find an estimate regarding how long the average game takes to develop, but most of the information points to anywhere between two and four years.

the long development process, “Maxis, before they were purchased by EA wanted to kill *The Sims*. EA wanted to kill *The Sims* on a number of occasions and even we wondered who’s going to play this game? Who’s going to tell these little people to go to the bathroom?”⁶² The computer game that became the best selling title ever almost did not even make it to market.

In February of 2000 *The Sims* was finally released and, eventually, earned the title of the best-selling computer game in history. The game has been referred to as a virtual dollhouse; players generate and design characters with specific personality traits, then navigate them through a mythical American suburb modeled upon American television and movie culture. Like *SimCity*, the players of *The Sims* define their own goals for game play. Where *SimCity* presents narratives of development, sprawl, and technological advancement, *The Sims* offers a story of capitalist consumption.

Players begin the game by controlling either one of two families already inhabiting the neighborhood or one of their own creation. If they choose to bring a new family into the neighborhood, that family, regardless of the number of individuals within it, was granted twenty thousand “simoleons,” the currency of *The Sims*. Players then use this money to build and furnish their house. In choosing which objects to purchase, the game player needs to take into account the specific needs of their Sim character.⁶³ Where there is no specific overall goal to the game, players are required to satisfy the “motives” of each Sim character. These “motives” include bladder, fun, hunger, hygiene, social, comfort, energy, and room. So, while users might want to

⁶² Kornel Lambert, “The Sims,” *Computer and Video Games*, 2002, <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/article.php?id=85069> (Accessed 11/22/02).

⁶³ Throughout the dissertation I refer to the representational actor within the software of *The Sims* as a “Sim character.” When I discuss *TSO*, I refer to this actor as the “Sim avatar.”

spend their money on an expensive television or computer, the Sim character can die of starvation if they don't have a refrigerator and will soil themselves if they don't have a toilet. The game thus begins as a lesson in necessity and desire.

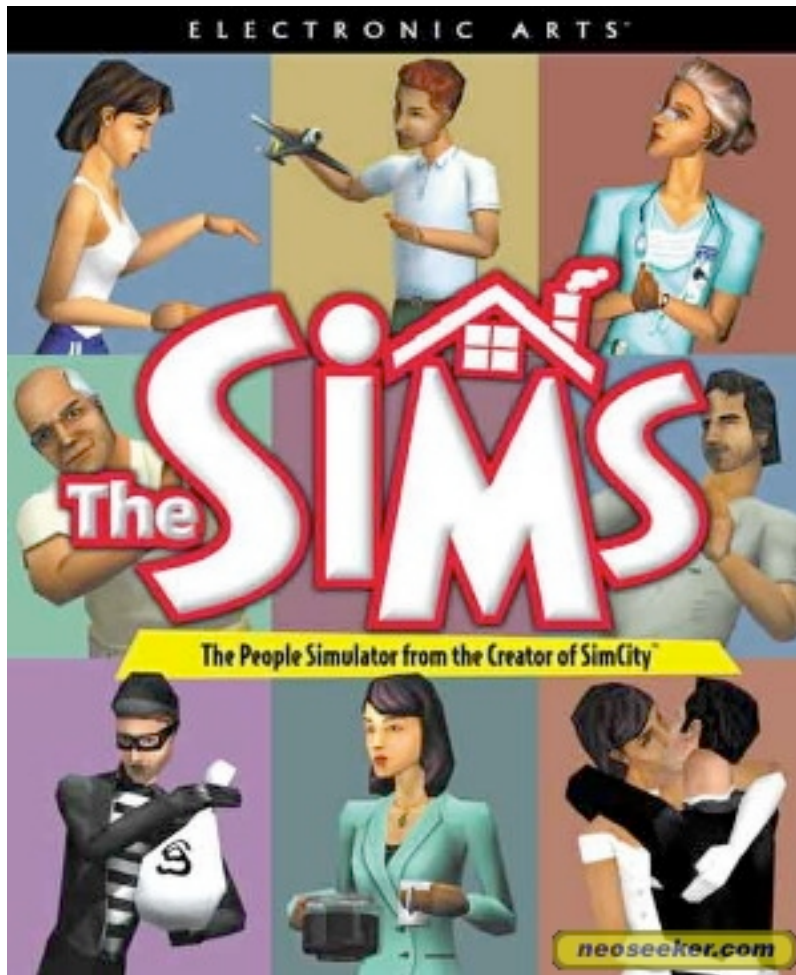


Image 5: The front cover of *The Sims*.

Even though the importance of food is stressed over entertainment, the Sim character is not happy if their “motives” were neglected. The relationship between the Sim characters and the user is interesting; the user’s role as puppet master does not go unnoticed by the Sim characters. In the beginning of the game, the default settings give the Sim characters limited free will. The user needs to tell each Sim character to

make a meal, eat, go to the bathroom, flush the toilet, take a bath or shower, go to bed, and so on. If, for instance, the player cannot afford to buy an object for entertaining the Sim characters (television, radio, chess set, and computer, among others), then the unhappy Sim character would refuse to perform the instructions of the player. That Sim character instead shakes their fist with rage at the player, yelling the calculated gibberish of Simlish while a thought bubble appears over his or her head with a picture representing their need inside of it. For example, the bubble over a Sim character with an extremely low fun level might feature illustrations of a television, basketball, or musical notes. Therefore, in order to meet all of the needs of the Sim character, the user must instruct her or him to get a job, so he or she can make the money needed to buy objects needed to raise their happiness levels. The game quickly became a capitalist consumer fantasy; where the Sim characters get jobs to purchase items that make them happier, then spend their time working harder to get better jobs in order to buy better items to make them happier.

While this materialist narrative mirrored the “American dream” along with a popular media representation of the suburbs, the game’s creators have argued that this view of the game is too simplistic. In an interview with the now defunct TechTV, Wright explained that in *The Sims*:

You know, I want a better TV. I want a better kitchen.
And when I get them, they will make my life better.
But as you start playing the game for much longer with
that same family, you realize that every object has a
built-in failure. It can break, or it can start a flood, or it
can catch on fire. So as you start buying more and
more of these things and filling your house up, it’s like
all these potential time bombs. So if you play the game
in a very materialistic direction, you start realizing that

all these things that you bought are sucking up the time that they were supposed to save you. And as you build a bigger and bigger house, you realize the routing time is becoming bigger and bigger. So really, the long-term thing that a lot of people are hitting in this that the materialism is sort of a false promise.⁶⁴

Therefore, while the game appeared, at first, to be espousing the dominant economic narrative of our culture, as game play evolved, counter narratives also began to emerge. The game began to offer a social commentary on the value of consumerism in our society, even while it also continued to offer little options for oppositional strategies and narratives. *The Sims* was a game about how consumption defines us. In an ironic way, the game quickly began to mirror its own narrative, adopting a strategy of periodically releasing expansion packs that imported new content in the form of objects, pets, and even a shopping mall into the original game. Each expansion pack has also enjoyed economic success, thus compounding the financial gain made through the investment in Wright's unconventional ideas.



Image 6: Example of a house in *The Sims*. The image of the right shows the structure without walls, which allows users the ability to access their Sim characters, www.simslice.com.

⁶⁴ “Q&A With Will Wright,” TechTV, 3/11/00, <http://g4tv.com/techtv/vault/features/22117/QA-With-Will-Wright.html> (Accessed 1/23/09).

On the surface, *The Sims* mediates the American suburb.⁶⁵ Suburban America however was not the subject of remediation. Rather, *The Sims* references popular culture's portrayal of the American suburbs. Despite its name, *The Sims* is not a true simulation. When players interact with the software, they are not simulating the experience of the American suburb, but are rather reconstructing its meaning. There is an important distinction between games that attempt to provide the user with a simulated experience and the "subgenre of micromanagement simulation games."⁶⁶ In true simulation games, the software attempts to replicate a process through the remediation of the process itself. For example, the game *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* presents its users with detailed cockpits of jumbo airliners in which mastery of the technology is required to take off, fly, and safely land. In the language of Bolter and Grusin, the drive behind simulation games like *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* is determined by the "logic of immediacy." Bolter and Grusin argue that the logic of immediacy "dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented." As software, the goal of *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* is to completely erase the medium of the computer and the computer game. Users are meant to feel that they are actually flying the plane to the extent that other networked players are placed into the roles of air traffic controllers in order to enhance the simulation.

⁶⁵ See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, 2000.

⁶⁶ This is a point emphasized by Alexander Galloway in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006



Image 7: Screenshot from *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*. www.tothegame.com.

There is no attempt to erase the medium in *The Sims*. Rather, its software operates according to the “logic of hypermediacy.” As a micromanagement simulation, *The Sims* emphasizes the “multiple acts of representation and makes them visible.”⁶⁷ Instead of replicating daily life, *The Sims* makes the mediated context part of the game’s appeal. Will Wright’s games are more like “models” than “simulations.” In *SimCity*, for example, the goal is not to have the player experience what it would be like to create and maintain a city, but rather to have them participate in the imagined day-to-day operations that Wright has determined are the essential aspects of city management. This idea is most notable with regard to how time operates in *The Sims*.

⁶⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, 2000.

Franchise. In *SimCity*, there is a standard deviation of time: players are given the power to control time, either by slowing the game down or speeding it up. If a player wants to micromanage each detail, he or she has the option to do so. Likewise, if players would rather watch the fate of the city they planned, they can play the game on fast-forward and observe the rise and probable fall of their urban environment.



Image 8: *The Sims* as hypermediated. www.tothegame.com.

True simulation games, such as *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*, attempt to give the user a “real experience” and offer real time simulations.⁶⁸ *SimCity* allows the user to play

⁶⁸ The *Microsoft Flight Simulator* series does allow players to speed up time, but there is a large segment of players that are extremely interested in the realistic “simulation” of flight. In the latest incarnation, *Flight Simulator X*, there is an online feature through which some players take on the roles of air traffic controllers who communicate with other players flying the planes.

the role of observer, silently watching events unfold rather than taking control over them. Thus *SimCity* challenges the idea of what it means to play a computer game.⁶⁹

I return to this discussion in a later chapter when I argue that there is an inherent tension in *TSO* because unlike *SimCity* and *The Sims*, the passing of time becomes fixed.

In *The Sims*, commonly referred to as the prototypical god game,⁷⁰ the player is presented an omniscient view and directorial authority over their Sim character's domestic lives. In this sense, the user is always reminded of the software and the constructed nature of the game. Not only is the player given control over the Sim characters, that Sim character is represented as being aware of the player's control over them. The Sim characters will "look" upwards and "scream" at the player if they feel they are being neglected. If Sim characters are starved, they demand food. Sim-characters 'speak' through thought bubbles, which is an obvious remediation of the comic book as it relates to their cartoonish appearance. Their language consists of a series of hieroglyphic symbols that communicate singular ideas: a hamburger appears when they are hungry, a toilet when they need to relieve themselves.

Visually, the interface also stresses its mediation. Unlike *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*, in which the interface is meant to replicate an actual cockpit, players of *The Sims*

⁶⁹ This type of simulation has become a more significant part of video game play. For example, with the popular Madden NFL series, users often play in franchise mode, which follows a user-controlled team from season to season over a longer period of time (10 to 20 seasons). Usually, people will not play every game, but will rather choose to "simulate" games or even entire seasons, sitting idly while the computer runs a simulation to decide who wins, how many touchdowns a player scores and whose career is ended by injury. When a user chooses this option, can this be considered game play? Or is it something else?

⁷⁰ J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired our Minds*, Little Brown, 1997.

are always reminded of the constructed nature of their Sim characters. For example, the Sim character under the control of the operator (only one Sim character can be controlled at a time, while the other Sim characters are operated by the game's code) is marked with a green diamond floating above his or her head. Information relaying the Sim character's vital statistics are ever-present on the screen informing the player about all aspects of his or her life, including how much money he or she has, who his or her friends and family are, and how full his or her bladder is.



Image 9: An example of the thought bubble in *The Sims*. www.tothegame.com.

For Bolter and Grusin, the question is not which logic (immediacy or hypermediacy) creates a better experience, but rather how each is utilized for similar ends. Both immediacy and hypermediacy attempt to “get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real.” Once again the word “real” is not meant as a metaphysical marker, but rather as having the ability to evoke a genuine emotional connection and response

from those interacting with the remediations. One has a strategy of obfuscating mediation and the other of emphasizing it. Both are, and will always be, remediations. In *Microsoft Flight Simulator X*, no matter how precise the simulation becomes, there will always remain a space between playing the game and actually flying a plane. Ultimately, the software needs to be judged by the sense of satisfaction it provides for its user, in which the detail of representation is only one aspect. With *The Sims*, it doesn't matter how cartoonish or fictional the world becomes, what is important is that the game creates a meaningful experience for the player. One way of thinking about this is through the attachment of a child to his or her baby doll; an apt metaphor for *The Sims* as the game is often referred to as a "digital dollhouse."⁷¹ In this way *The Sims* acts as simulation of play as a process. A child can form a real emotional connection with a doll regardless of whether its appearance resembles a real baby or an anthropomorphic carrot.

One of the major elements that connects *SimCity*, *The Sims*, and *TSO* together is their shared visual framework. In *SimCity*, the structures are highly stylized while maintaining a very simple modular shape. This style can be connected to the structure of the in-game environment and its graphical capabilities. First, the map functions in the form of a grid, necessitating that the buildings easily connect to one another within the urban landscape. Likewise, the graphical limitations create a need to have iconic structures that are easily recognized. Finally, to give the game a sense of playfulness, bright and vivid colors are utilized. The overall effect created

⁷¹ *The Sims: Deluxe Edition*, <http://mossimossi.blogspot.com/2007/12/sims-deluxe-edition.html> (accessed 9/12/08).

could be compared to what a city might look like if it were built from Legos (as illustrated in the previously included screenshots from the game).



Image 10: Fire in *The Sims*; Sim characters cry, panic, and call the fire department.
www.tothegame.com.

The cartoonish graphical interface adopted throughout all of The Sim Franchise titles helps to create not just the style, but also the sense of humor inherent in *The Sims*. The modular “Lego” aesthetic developed in *SimCity* is clearly replicated in *The Sims*, only in a more detailed manner, with access to a much closer perspective. In part, what is exciting about *The Sims* is the level of customization allotted to the user.⁷²

⁷² One of the frameworks that is helpful in understanding the importance of customization in new media objects, such as *TSO* is Lev Manovich’s discussion of new media. Manovich lists

This aspect reflects Wright's desire to create a game about architecture; the houses can be simple or intricate, and players can spend a significant amount of time building and designing their homes, as evidenced in the above screenshot. The second screenshot illustrates the way in which the aesthetic helps present an element of playfulness,⁷³ adding a visual reference to the popular movie *Men In Black*. This reinterpretation of popular culture became a common practice in *The Sims*.



Image 11: Player created *Men in Black* skins from *The Sims*.

Like its predecessor *SimCity*, there is no definite end to *The Sims*. Using a “people simulator,” users play to see what happens to the families and social structure they create. The goal of the game is simply to play and to experiment. In several interviews, Wright has commented that the open structure of the game has sparked

four principles of new media, which include numerical representation (a new media object can be described mathematically), modularity (a new media object has the same modular structure throughout, which allows individual elements to be reassembled while maintaining their separate identities), automation (most of the work associated with programming is performed automatically by the software), and variability (a new media object is not fixed and can exist in different and potentially infinite versions). See Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, 2002.

⁷³ This screenshot was obtained from “The Sims Resource” at <http://www.thesimsresource.com>. The picture was added by “MIB” on June 26, 2007 and is titled, “The Men in Black are investigating the basketball playing Robot!!!!”

creativity within the user; for example in a interview, he states that many users decide to take a counter-narrative approach and create the most dysfunctional family possible. He comments, “I think that letting the player choose their own goals and pursue them gives the game so much re-playability and also allows the player to be so much more creative with what they do in the game.”⁷⁴

Even though there is no online gaming component to *The Sims*, a major aspect of its popularity was connected to a rabid fan community that utilized the Internet to share their enjoyment of playing and recreating the game. *The Sims* was marketed as a computer game, but the various authoring tools inherent and associated with the software were just as important to its success. To a degree, *The Sims* offers novice computer users the ability to use its aesthetic palette to create original user-generated content. For example, in the bottom corner of the screen is an icon that features the image of a camera; this button “snaps a picture” of the screen while the user was playing the game, saving it to a “photo album.” The original intent was for players to share their photo albums on the official website for the game. However, players quickly discovered an alternative use for the screenshots: the creation of complex narratives. Instead of using the screen capture technology to document actual game play, some players became involved in playing the game in order to create the situations needed to stage the desired image for their story. This practice became quite popular, and in 2002, two years after *The Sims* was released, there were more than 100,000 such narratives archived on the official *The Sims* website. Not included

⁷⁴ Amy Silverman, “The Way We Live Now: 10-31-99: Questions for Will Wright; How to Win at Life,” New York Times, 10/31/99, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D02E0DA1538F932A05753C1A96F958260&fta=y> (Accessed, 1/29/09).

in this number were countless other examples that were considered unsuitable for the official site.⁷⁵

Another technology central to the emergence of an online community associated with *The Sims* was a programming tool that allowed users to create their own content that could then be imported into the software. In this way, *The Sims* taught users simple programming skills. Discussing this technology in the essay “Learning From *The Sims*,” J.C. Herz writes,

For all its mainstream appeal, *The Sims* hinges on a sophisticated set of authoring tools that allow people with zero programming skills to do radical plastic surgery on standard-issue Sims and to create custom objects, from lawn ornaments to limousines. Eight months before the game shipped, these tools were released online. By the time *The Sims* hit the shelves, there were 20 independent tool developers, 50 fan sites, 40 artists hacking up custom content and 50,000 collectors of these user-created objects. When new players arrived, the virtual economy was already feeding itself.⁷⁶

As I discuss later, this was one of the most important aspects of *The Sims*: players were granted the ability and encouraged to use the software in whatever ways they could imagine.

Despite the fact that the authoring tools were relatively easy to use, a relatively small amount of people playing *The Sims* were actively involved in creating unique content for the game. Instead of creating their own content, most players chose to download the creations crafted by a minority of dedicated fans. Wright has discussed the

⁷⁵ For examples of this practice, visit the original website at www.thesims.ea.com.

⁷⁶ J.C. Herz, “Learning From *The Sims*” *The Industry Standard*, 3/26/01, <http://www.thestandard.com/article/0,1902,22848,00.html?page=0%2C2> (Accessed 1/29/09).

importance of this phenomenon and the development of an online community dedicated to *The Sims*. He writes:

In an online community, there's this kind of social economy between the community members. Some people have status because they make cool skins⁷⁷ or that's a good website that's visited a lot... The big thing is that we have five percent of the hardcore players actively entertaining the other ninety-five percent. In fact it's more like two percent to ninety-eight.

This relationship between production and consumption is a central theme that I follow in the next chapters. An important discussion I tackle explores the ways in which new media technologies, such as *The Sims* and *TSO* further blur the distinctions between these frameworks for analysis.

For those players who were actively engaged in these various creative practices, their activities helped transform *The Sims* into a social game. Based on this partially organic transition, the idea for re-fashioning *The Sims* into a completely online experience that would highlight social interaction made sense. If a dedicated minority created such interesting content from these simple authoring tools, Wright wondered what would happen if they were given the power to create an entire world. In the same interview quoted above, he continues, "That's the exact kind of thing we're trying to get in *Sims Online*, we're trying to get the two or three percent of the hardcore a strong incentive to entertain the other ninety-seven percent of the people

⁷⁷ Skins is the term given to the avatar bodies created for the game. In *The Sims*, players could choose among a limited amount of body types. The authoring tools enabled users to create an infinite amount of possible skins. Some players created celebrity skins, while others became fashion designers, fashioned nude Sim characters, and introduced overweight bodies into the game.

who play the game, as opposed to just killing them very, very efficiently.”⁷⁸ The dedication of players creating unique content for *The Sims* became one of the rationales for making *TSO*.

The success of *The Sims*, coupled with the growth of a strong online community surrounding the game, convinced many gaming critics that *TSO* would become another runaway success for Wright. In 2001, the year before *TSO* was released, MMORPGs were viewed as the future of the gaming industry. In his review of *TSO* for GamesDomain.com, Richard Greenhill begins by placing the game within the framework of the larger computer and video gaming industry. He writes, “There was a time when you couldn’t take more than a few steps at E3⁷⁹ before tripping on a new real-time strategy game. Now, aside from a few excellent showings scattered about, real-time strategy games are out and MMORPGs are the in thing.”⁸⁰ Greenhill, along with other journalists, argues that *TSO* had the greatest potential to open the MMORPG market. At the time Greenhill was writing, the financial impact of MMORPGs was limited. In 2001, the computer and video gaming industry within the United States alone had earned 9.4 billion dollars, with MMORPGs only accounting for \$259 million.⁸¹ The hope, considering the release of *TSO*, was that the market would swell to \$1.7 billion in 2002.⁸²

⁷⁸ J.C. Herz, “Learning From *The Sims*,” *The Industry Standard*, 3/26/01, <http://www.thestandard.com/article/0,1902,22848,00.html?page=0%2C2> (Accessed 1/29/09).

⁷⁹ E3 is the annual computer and video gaming industry show. <http://www.e3expo.com/>

⁸⁰ Richard Greenhill, “E3-*The Sims Online*,” 2002, http://www.gamesdomain.com/e3_2002/169.html (Accessed 11/22/02).

⁸¹ Michael Y. Park, “Gamers Live a Double Life” *Fox News*, 8/9/02, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,59959,00.html> (Accessed 1/29/09).

⁸² *Ibid.*

Without question, the biggest reason for the hype surrounding *TSO* was its connection to The Sim Franchise. In articles discussing the potential of *TSO*, *The Sims* phenomenon was cited as the number one reason for which the reviewer felt that *TSO* would enjoy similar success. For example, Greenhill argues that, out of all of the MMORPGs previewed at E3, *TSO* had the “most promise for success...certainly if the single-player game’s popularity is anything to go by”.⁸³ Additionally, Libe Goad, writing for the popular women gamers’ website GameGal.com, explicitly connects the two titles, stating:

It’s hard to imagine the world without *The Sims*. The vociferous, and often incontinent, little critters have made tracks into the hearts [of] numerous gamers, spawning a love affair that will soon have its flames fanned by the release of *The Sims Online*.⁸⁴

Goad concludes arguing that *TSO* is an essential purchase for those women who love playing *The Sims*, writing:

I can safely say that women who love *The Sims* will have no problems making room in their heart for *Sims Online*. With the myriad of future online games requiring monthly fees, this new way of simming should be a priority on your must-have subscription list.⁸⁵

The general feeling concerning *TSO* was that it would be a success because the Sim franchise had already established a huge fan base.

Its connection to The Sim Franchise was not the only reason why reviewers were predicting future success for *TSO*; there was also speculation that the popularity of

⁸³ Richard Greenhill, “E3-*The Sims Online*,” 2002, http://www.gamesdomain.com/e3_2002/169.html (Accessed 11/22/02).

⁸⁴ Libe Goad, “The Sims Online (PC Online),” GameGal.com, 2002, <http://www.gamegal.com/e32002/simsonline.html> (Accessed 11/22/02).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

games utilizing social networking technologies would continue to grow. Of specific note in 2002 was the financial success and media attention surrounding the MMORPG *EverQuest*. At the time, the game ranked as the most financially successful MMORPG in the United States. In 2002, *EverQuest* maintained nearly half a million subscribers, each of which were paying more than \$13 a month, in addition to their initial investment of \$50 needed to purchase the software.⁸⁶ *EverQuest* also entered the national spotlight due to its perceived addictive nature, which was a common mainstream concern in regards to the dangers associated with the computer and video gaming industry. Park describes the negative attention surrounding the game, writing that:

EverQuest's players became famously—or notoriously—immersed in the game: It was dubbed “Evercrack” last November when a Wisconsin mother claimed it was responsible for her son’s suicide. Shawn Woolley, a 21-year-old with a history of mental illness, played the game 12 hours a day and was playing only minutes before he shot himself.⁸⁷

Shawn’s mother decided to sue Sony Online Entertainment, arguing that as the company responsible for the addictive nature of the game, they were also liable in her son’s death. One of the mother’s proposals was for Sony Online Entertainment to label *EverQuest* with a warning about its addictive nature. With *EverQuest* at the center of this controversy, several industry analysts felt that even the negative publicity was good for the future of the game itself and the MMORPG genre in general. The term addictive is certainly negative, but the label could also encourage gamers unfamiliar with the genre to find out why it was labeled as such. It was this

⁸⁶ Michael Y. Park, “Gamers Live a Double Life,” *Fox News*, 8/9/02, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,59959,00.html> (Accessed 1/29/09).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

context that helped move MMORPGs into the mainstream consciousness and was most likely a factor in the decision to develop *TSO*.



Image 12: Avatars in *EverQuest*. www.tothegame.com.

Controversy had already played a key role in helping computer and video games become one of the most successful global entertainment industries; years of debates surrounding violence in the medium had kept them in the spotlight. The most famous occurred when political pundits attempted to connect the shootings at Columbine High School to the perpetrators' affinity for playing violent computer games like

Doom.⁸⁸ While violence in computer and video games remained controversial, the most explicit games (*Doom* and *Quake* for example) continued to rank among the medium's most successful sellers. In this context, the success of the games in The Sim Franchise, which were more mundane than violent, is especially important.

The success of The Sim Franchise has been attributed in part to its ability to appeal to consumers not usually considered to be the target market for the industry: women.

The Sims was "one of the rare computer games played more by women than men."⁸⁹

Wright understood that appealing to this undervalued market was a key to success for *The Sims*. When asked in an interview for TechTV if he anticipated that *The Sims* would be as popular as it had become, Wright responded by discussing the role of gender. He said:

There are a lot of hard-core gamers bringing it home and getting into the strategy portion of it. And then they're saying this is the first game my wife or girlfriend ever showed an interest in, and now I can't get her off the computer. So I think that already its hitting a more gender-balanced group than most games.⁹⁰

Part of the appeal to women as a market for *The Sims* (and *TSO*) is related to its consumer narrative, a point I will investigate further in the next chapter. Unlike most of the real-time strategy and first person games that dominated the computer and video gaming industry in the past, *The Sims* was not a violent game. Instead, the

⁸⁸ One of the Columbine shooters, Eric Harris, described his love for *Doom* in his diary, which was published after the tragic event. The media coverage focused on several reasons surrounding why the high school students were driven to violence, one of which was their love of *Doom* and Marilyn Manson. See Eliza Gauger, "Columbine Diaries Reference *Doom*," *Kotaku*, 7/6/06, <http://kotaku.com/gaming/eric-harris/columbine-diaries-reference-doom-and-duke-185640.php>

⁸⁹ Sora Song and Lev Grossman, "Sim Nation," *Time Magazine*, 11/25/02, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1003738,00.html> (Accessed 1/29/09).

⁹⁰ "Q&A With Will Wright," TechTV, 3/11/00, <http://g4tv.com/techtv/vault/features/22117/QA-With-Will-Wright.html> (Accessed 1/23/09).

game played more like a soap opera: players would entertain their neighbors, fall in and out of love, manage their finances, cook, clean, procreate, raise children, and advance through their chosen career path. While there was also a popular culture influenced humor to the game (such as possible alien abductions, mad scientists, and the occasional burglar), game play focused on the mundane tasks of daily life, such as eating, showering, and going to the bathroom. As I will discuss later in this chapter, *The Sims* also became a tool for the expression of individuality and creativity, which could also be manifested in practices that have been traditionally associated with a gendered reading (scrapbooking for example). By creating a game that proved to be appealing to women, *The Sims* paved its way to success by initially doubling its potential market.

Most reviewers of *TSO* felt that *TSO* had the ability to expand the MMORPG demographic well beyond the *Dungeons & Dragons* fantasy stereotype and erase the stigma attached to participating in an online social world. In their review, Gamespot.com declares *TSO* one of the top-ten games featured at E3 in 2002. The review states:

Considering how the original game, *The Sims*, opened up computer games to a whole new audience of people who didn't really play PC [personal computer] games before, *The Sims Online* seems poised to go even further—to bring even more people into the world of PC games....a game like *The Sims Online* could finally give a reason for those friends of yours to try out those PC games you're always talking about.⁹¹

⁹¹ The Gamespot review named *The Sims Online* as “editor’s choice” for the top games of E3, 2002. The full review can be found at http://www.gamespot.com/gamespot/features/all/e3_2002_bestof/p1_02.html (Accessed 1/29/09).

TSO was viewed as the perfect vehicle to introduce an entire new consumer market to the world of online gaming.

Within the reviews lauding *TSO* for its potential to become a runaway success and to expand the market for MMORPGs, there were also several warnings and concerns related to the possible failure of the game. While the warnings were less prominent, they did appear in several of the reviews and were ultimately more prophetic than the predominant optimism surrounding the title's launch. There were two major concerns voiced by these reviewers. First, because *TSO* was actively marketed toward people unfamiliar with MMORPGs, there was the potential of alienating fans of the genre. In his extensive review for the popular gaming website Gamers.com, Jeff Green couples the excitement building around the game with reserved speculation. He calls the game a huge risk, writing, "It doesn't fit the profile. There are no monsters to kill, no levels or armor class to attain, no Dwarves to kick. You can't kill other players. Its neither fantasy nor sci-fi based."⁹² The review for *Gamespot* echoes this concern; warning, "If you're already a big fan of 'serious' computer games, you might not care for [*TSO*]."⁹³ By attempting to appeal to a larger market, there was a growing fear that the players already familiar with the MMORPG genre would ultimately be disappointed.

The second concern, which was largely connected to the first, was that even if *TSO* succeeded in appealing to a mainstream audience, there was no guarantee that this

⁹² Jeff Green, "The Sims Online: Indulging our inner Weirdo," Gamers.com, 2002, <http://gamers.com/game/1016135/previews?page=4> (Accessed 11/22/02).

⁹³ Gamespot review of *The Sims Online* can be found at http://www.gamespot.com/gamespot/features/all/e3_2002_bestof/p1_02.html (Accessed 1/29/09).

audience would be willing to pay a monthly subscription fee in order to continue their participation. Brian McClimans, the business writer for *The Oakland Tribune*, was the most vocal in this regard. In his article, “Pay to play: Game companies charging for online fun,” he discusses the apparent shift in the computer and video gaming industry from console systems in 2001 to interactive online environment games in 2002. After reviewing the economics of MMORPGs, McClimans warns that, despite the possible upside for *TSO*, there is serious doubt about whether the mainstream public would be willing to pay a monthly fee. In the article, McClimans interviews financial analyst Michael Pachter who argues, “The size of the market that will actually pay to play is significantly smaller than anybody is estimating...The number of people willing to pay \$10 a month...maybe it’s a couple million people worldwide...I think its more likely a million.”⁹⁴ Pachter also points out that the cost is compounded because MMORPGs generally require a broadband Internet connection due to the amount of bandwidth needed to send all of the information between the computer and the server. Winda Benedetti reiterates this issue in her article, “A world of possibilities emerges as games go online.”⁹⁵ She states that, in 2002, only seven percent of American households had broadband, effectively illustrating the lack of infrastructure needed to allow MMORPGs to flourish. She writes, “As it stands right now, for the price of a broadband subscription, players can

⁹⁴ McClimans goes on to suggest that MMORPGs consider making advertising deals with Internet Service Providers in order to cover the costs related to the monthly fee. See Brian McClimans, “Pay to play: Game Companies charging for online fun,” *Oakland Tribune*, 7/14/02, Retrieved from NewsModo, <http://www.newsmodo.com/2002/07/14/pay-play-game-comp-aniescharging-online-fun/display.jsp?id=210423> (Accessed 1/29/09).

⁹⁵ Winda Benedetti, “A world of possibilities emerges as games go online,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer Report*, 10/8/02, http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/lifestyle/90132_onlinegames08.shtml (Accessed 1/29/09).

buy a new game every month.” *TSO*’s strategy for dealing with this issue was to create software that could handle the dial-up consumer base while recommending that players ultimately upgraded to broadband. This, however, created many problems for both broadband and dial-up players as the program struggled to compensate for slow speeds, often leading to serious issues of software lag.⁹⁶ It had been established that the mainstream market was willing to spend \$50 every time a new expansion pack was released for *The Sims*. However, there was no guarantee that those same consumers would be willing to spend \$50 to purchase *TSO*, \$10 per month for the subscription fee, and an additional \$50 per month to cover the broadband charges.

Early indications from potential consumers echoed a similar concern. The review for *TSO* on the Gamers.com website featured a user feedback section entitled, “User Hype.”⁹⁷ While most of the responses were filled with optimistic hope for the game, there were several negative responses specifically related to the issue surrounding the cost for the game. Soon after EA/Maxis announced the \$10 per month subscription fee, “bring_it_on2” wrote, “*The Sims Online* is cool and all, but I want to be able to play something that won’t cost anything. If none of u know, the sims cost \$10 a month and I want free, and fun. I don’t like paying to play the sims” (sic). Another poster named “Meow” warns, “The monthly subscription fee will be the ultimate

⁹⁶ The game play of *TSO* was supposed to flow seamlessly. However, due to bandwidth issues, especially for dial-up customers, the game would often stall until the processor could catch up. This process is defined as lag.

⁹⁷ Readers of the website had the ability to post their own reviews of the game or comment on the official review and other comments. In this instance, readers could give the game a rating between 1 (lowest) and 10 (highest). In my research, I analyzed data taken between May and November 2002 (until the game was officially released). The average rating was a 7.4. Out of the 50 user reviews, 34 assigned the game a score between 8 and 10, 6 reviews assigned the game a score between 5-7, and the remaining 10 reviews assigned the game a score between 1-4. <http://www.gamers.com>

turn-off for many...isn't it enough you bought the game?" Ultimately, "Meow" advises others to join the beta test before making a commitment to purchase *TSO*. As I will discuss the beta test in-depth in the next several chapters, I will only mention here that among these reviews, there was a growing criticism of the game based on the experiences in beta. These criticisms primarily arose from consumers who had prior MMORPG experience. For example, "Staplerblast" argues that there is "no real economy, no real point" and predicts that "this game will bomb with both traditional Sims fans and [MMORPG] gamers." "Keller32" agrees, stating, "There really isn't a true game," and cautions others that the game presented by Maxis is nowhere near the game they were promising in interviews and reviews. There were several other comments throughout these reviews that suggested players turn to *EverQuest* as an alternative. Although many fans of *The Sims* were swept up by the hype surrounding *TSO*, it became apparent that the major concerns voiced by several of the reviewers were being repeated by the game's potential audience months before the official release.

When asked to reflect upon his experience, Wright argued that the monthly subscription fee was a major hindrance to *TSO*'s success. In a 2007 interview,⁹⁸ Wright discusses the failure of *TSO*, and, in large part, attributes it to the fact that a large core of dedicated *The Sims* fans might not have had the economic means needed to participate in *TSO*. Specifically, he argues that the game alienated a "majority of

⁹⁸ Steve Morgenstern, "The Wright Stuff." *Popular Science*, February 2007. This essay is part of the Wright's 2007 publicity tour for the Personal Computer game *Spore*. *Spore* was once titled "Sim Everything" and is a game that traces the development of a single species (uniquely created by the user) from a single cell organism to an advanced space traveling civilization. The game was eventually released September 7th, 2008.

our players of The Sims” by requiring monthly payments from a group of underage teenagers, many of whom “don’t even have credit cards.” While the subscription model was flawed, the larger question that needs to be addressed is one of market demographics regarding whether the game’s primary audience was teenage girls. Perhaps this demographic was not especially interested in online gaming; however, there is significant evidence to suggest that teenagers were a promising, and largely untapped, market for the MMORPG genre. During *TSO*’s run, several MMORPGs marketed specifically to children and teenagers increased in popularity, including *Whyville*, *Habbo Hotel*, and *Club Penguin*. In each of these examples, consumers had the option to play for free, although *Club Penguin* offers a “member” status, which requires a periodic subscription fee.⁹⁹ All of the games cited above are similar to *TSO* in that they are primarily social worlds which offer users the opportunity to create online identities and habitats. Although these games succeeded with the subscription model while *TSO* failed, it must be noted that, because *Whyville*, *Habbo Hotel*, and *Club Penguin* were only marketed to children, parents were offered the added comfort of knowing that the subscription spaces were safe from online predators and inappropriate content. There was no explicit statement of exactly to whom *TSO* was intended. This lack of focus was reinforced through the marketing campaign which featured the slogan, “Be Somebody. Else.” This call for unlimited possibilities in the creation and exploration of identity appealed to everyone, indeterminate of age, gender, sexuality, or social class. By trying to appeal to everyone, the company succeeded in appealing to too few people for the game to succeed.

Furthermore, it is important to note that *Whyville*, *Habbo Hotel*, and *Club Penguin*, like *TSO*, are commercial products; the ultimate goal is financial success. While *Club Penguin*, in part, replicates the subscription model utilized by *TSO*, *Whyville* and *Habbo Hotel* have systems through which “real” money can be exchanged for in-game currency, be and then used to acquire additional content and digital objects. This structure is similar to the popular online world *Second Life*, which I discuss in-depth in a later chapter. While *TSO* is a game about consumption, the players only actually pay to play the game. Once the software is purchased and the monthly subscription fee is paid, there is no financial transaction between the consumer and the owners of *TSO*. In other examples, the online worlds become spaces for consumption in which players are encouraged to consume much in the same way and for the same reasons that we do in our material world. When money is available, money is spent, usually for the expression of identity and individuality. Questions central to this exploration include: Is the continued process of cultural consumption an essential element to a thriving online world? What does it mean to consume digital objects in a digital environment? In the next chapter, I discuss the relationship between consumption and production in *TSO* in greater detail.

Chapter 4: Towards a Theory of Virtual Consumption: Applying Daniel Miller's Process of Recontextualization to *The Sims Online*

Upon first entering the virtual world of *The Sims Online (TSO)*, I began to envision the type of life I would create for my Sim avatar, Dean Kay. What goals would I attempt to reach in the game? Would Dean attempt to attain a level of wealth only imagined in my material life? Would he forsake the allure of virtual goods—living as a nomad without possessions, espousing the benefits of a completely immaterial existence? Or would he strike a balance between these two extremes? Faced with such a range of choices, I began to reflect upon the meaning of virtual consumption. Choosing the first option would necessitate a greater amount of effort—it required hard work and an increased amount of participation. To what end would this serve? What would be the ultimate payoff? Dean might be able to afford the most expensive virtual objects and display his status as one of the world's elite, but would owning the most expensive television really create a more enjoyable gaming experience than owning the least expensive one, especially considering the fact that both televisions shared the same basic value in relationship to fulfilling his digital needs. However, if I chose the third option, why should I participate in the game at all? If the only goal was to take a stand against the capitalist context adopted by the virtual world, how meaningful could my protest be if access to the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) required participation in the capitalist framework

encapsulated by our actual surroundings? And was the second choice really a balance between these two extremes? Would it make any more sense to work only hard enough to buy a comfortable existence when the entire world is constructed of digital code? What is the value of consumption in a virtual world? How does such an investigation into this question complicate the understanding of consumption in the context of our daily lives?

In this chapter, I analyze the role and meaning of consumption in *TSO*. I begin by examining the relationship between consumption and game play. While *TSO* shared a visual aesthetic with *The Sims*, the differences between the two software products can be highlighted through a discussion of how each incorporated the practice and utility of consumption into its experience. Secondly, I apply various theories and discussions concerning the role of cultural consumption to *TSO*. How do we understand the practice of virtual consumption—what does it mean when the objects that are being consumed exist only as code? How does this meta-level of virtual consumption inform our analysis of consumption in our daily lives? I relate this discussion specifically to Daniel Miller’s theory of consumption in which he examines its political potential. In *TSO*, consumers were promised the tools to fashion the game into an interesting and engaging environment. Play and labor were increasingly conflated. What benefits did these participants receive for their labor? How exactly did users simultaneously consume and produce *TSO* as a product and as a reflection of their desires?

In order to understand the meaning of consumption in *TSO*, it is important to outline game play and how it attempted to differentiate itself from its direct predecessor *The Sims*. *The Sims* presents its narrative of consumption within the context of a mythical suburban neighborhood where one-bedroom homes harmoniously coexist with the elegant mansions neighboring them. The economically diverse landscape coupled with the initial scarcity of the in-game form of money, simoleons, implicitly informs the player of the ultimate goal of the game—economic advancement. Players begin by placing their Sim characters in an inexpensive house and furnishing it with the objects most essential for survival. These essentials include a refrigerator filled with food to combat their hunger, a television to keep them entertained, a bed in which to sleep, a bathtub in which to bathe, and a toilet to relieve their bladders. Thus, the cycle begins. Players acquire entry-level jobs for their Sim characters in order to earn more money for them. This money is spent in the purchase of new virtual objects that will help the Sims advance in their careers. When the Sim character receives a promotion, the cycle begins anew. The message is clear—in order to succeed, one must consume. Although not explicitly stated in the game’s manual, the narrative presented in the game replicates the myth of the American Dream: upward social mobility is inherently desirable and reflected by the status evoked by our possessions, even if those possessions happen to be constructed of code. The mansion with the enormous price tag on the hill, which is present in each neighborhood, reminds the player that one of the goals of the game is being able to afford to live in that house. Ultimately, *The Sims* is a capitalist narrative focused on the power that intelligent consumption has in advancing our social and economic

position in society. Consumption within the game evolves from a very practical exercise to a means of communicating taste and success.

Although *TSO* shared a visual aesthetic with *The Sims* (through its direct adoption of the animation generator), it did not adopt the suburban landscape also present in the game. When a player accessed *TSO* for the first time, he or she was presented with a choice of servers to inhabit.¹⁰⁰ Each of these servers was represented as a map that included a range of environmental climates such as islands, deserts, and plains.

Additionally, unlike *The Sims*, which offered pre-fabricated options players could purchase for their Sim characters, *TSO* initially presented the earliest adopters with a blank canvas. With the absence of the game's suburban context, users were encouraged to be creative with their character designs and think outside of the single-family home often privileged by American culture. Various promotional materials on the official website discussed numerous possibilities that players might consider in their creations, including restaurants, dance clubs, and gyms.

¹⁰⁰ *TSO* was not designed to host all of the participants within a single persistent virtual world. Instead, a group of servers were employed, and players could choose which server (or city) they wanted to play within. When *TSO* was first released each server was equipped to host approximately 30,000 players. Will Wright, in his post "Roommates from Heaven or Hell," reported this figure in May 2002. http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimsonline/features/social_may02.jsp (Accessed 11/22/2002).



Image 13: The map screen in *TSO*. www.tothegame.com.

Game play in *TSO* was also less structured than in *The Sims*. Even though players were required to maintain their Sim avatars' needs (bladder, entertainment, social, hygiene, hunger, and sleep) and develop their skills (logic, creativity, science, mechanical, body, and cooking), career paths were completely removed from the software. In *TSO*, job-objects replaced the careers that drove the economy of *The Sims*. Though job-objects were present in *The Sims*, they were primarily used for obtaining skills; their payouts were negligible when compared to the salary awarded for working. For example, in order to advance through a career as an artist in *The Sims*, the Sim character needed to develop his or her creativity skill.¹⁰¹ Creativity skills were advanced when Sim characters interacted with skill-objects, which included guitars, pianos, and easels. In the case of the easel, when a Sim character painted, he or she would increase his or her creativity skill. When the painting was

¹⁰¹ Throughout this dissertation I refer to the representation of the player in *The Sims* as the sim- character, and the representation of the player in *TSO* as the Sim avatar.

finished, he or she could sell it for a specific amount of simoleons based upon the level of artistic mastery he or she had achieved (his or her total number of creativity skill points).¹⁰² Not all of the skill-objects were connected to a financial reward—players could also gain creative skill points by practicing guitar or piano—but those that did (the ones I refer to as job-objects) became major sources of economic gain in *TSO*.

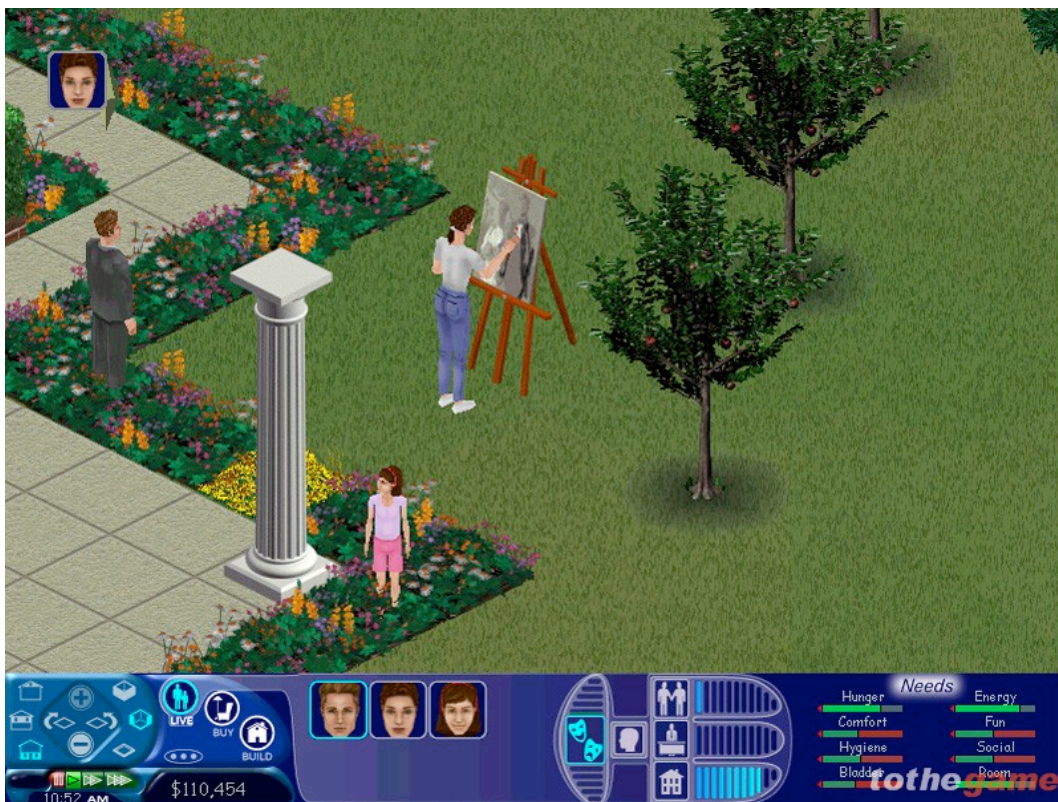


Image 14: A Sim character gaining a creativity skill in *The Sims*. www.tothegame.com.

¹⁰² When the finished products, such as paintings, were sold, they were sold to the software itself—the exchange was more symbolic than actual. When the player clicked on the painting after it was completed, he/she was presented with the option to “sell painting.” After selecting this option, the painting would disappear and, in exchange, the player would be rewarded with simoleons.



Image 15: Sim avatars practicing body skills by using weight training machines in *TSO*. www.tothegame.com.

The interactions with job-objects were similar in both *The Sims* and *TSO*; the key difference being that, in *TSO*, there was an economic benefit for participating in cooperative play. While the payout for a completed painting remained low if only one Sim avatar was working at an easel, the payout increased for each additional Sim avatar who was also painting on the lot. This change reflected *TSO*'s multiplayer structure—the success of a MMORPG is dependent upon the creation of an environment that encourages socializing and cooperative play.



Image 16: Houses in *TSO* became factories for developing skills. This is a screenshot of Sim avatars participating in cooperative play. www.ign.com.

This condition was reinforced by the addition of two specific job-objects that could only be operated if multiple players worked together. The Pizza job-object required four Sim avatars to operate, and was the most economically viable object available in the game. Two Sim avatars were needed to operate the other new job-object, Map, which also created income at a quicker rate than single-player objects such as the easel.



Image 17: The pizza job object in *TSO*. www.ign.com.

The utilization of these job-objects was not the only means of financial growth available in *TSO*. Simoleons could also be earned for running a popular property. In *TSO*, there was a system developed in which the lots with the most visitors received simoleons bonuses. Those lots were rewarded for understanding how to create viable spaces that fostered cooperative play. Additionally, there was hope among the producers (as illustrated through promotional materials on the website) that the consumers would use their creativity to develop ways to earn simoleons outside of the invisible economy operated by Maxis. In order for the economy to thrive, simoleons

needed to flow between players, instead of relying upon the software to provide payouts for completed tasks. For the game to succeed, a functioning economy needed to be realized. In the following chapter, I specifically address *TSO*'s inability to fulfill this realization. Despite this failure, however, it is clear that, at the time of its initial release, the software had been developed to promote interaction between players.

There is one last example that highlights this attempt to fashion an environment in which cooperative play was in an effort to challenge American culture's emphasis on individualism and sole-ownership: the software was structured to privilege group cohabitation. If a player desired to create a house without the help of "roommates," there were strict limitations concerning the size of the house a player could build. The difficulty of quickly mastering the in-game economy also facilitated communal game play and encouraged the creation of living spaces reflective of the group houses that commonly surround college campuses. As such, there was a shift away from the family unit (highlighted in *The Sims*) and the identity of the individual gamer towards more contingent social structures (friendships, business partners, and casual acquaintances).

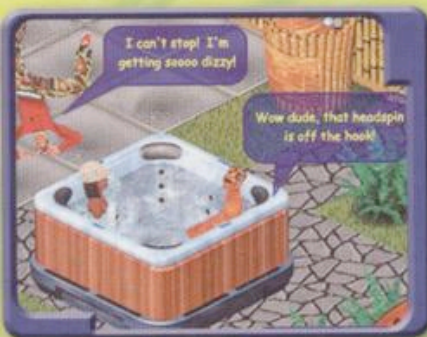
Where *The Sims* asked players to confront the perceived connection between consumption and financial rewards, *TSO* shifted the focus to the way in which that cultural consumption communicated one's identity to other players. In place of *The Sims*' career path, *TSO* highlighted interpersonal interaction as the driving force behind the creation of a viable economy. In *The Sims*, players operate Sim characters

as if they were playing with dolls and navigating them through their dream careers. Conversely, in *TSO* players brought life to their Sim avatars, performing their identity for an audience of other players. As such, the Sim avatar was a direct reflection of the desired identity of the actual player. Instead of controlling Sim characters, *TSO* offered players a means of communicating their own desired and completely constructed identity.

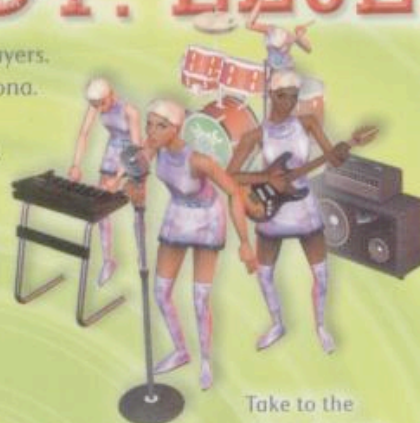
The relationship between consumption and identity is reflected through *TSO*'s initial marketing strategy. "BE SOMEBODY. ELSE" represented the key slogan for the game. Featured in magazine advertisements and highlighted in big red letters on the back of the software's packaging, these words promised the potential user the chance to adopt a brand new identity and become someone of importance. In *TSO*, players could gain the notoriety and wealth that seemed so elusive in their everyday lives, thus escaping the limitations of the workaday world. They could "BE SOMEBODY." The inclusion of the period between the words "SOMEBODY" and "ELSE" emphasized the constructed nature of identity in *TSO*—they could be a "SOMEBODY" by fashioning an idealized version of their own identity, or they could be "SOMEODDY ELSE" by adopting any identity they chose. Players could transgress traditional boundaries such as race, class, and gender - even choosing alien and bear avatars if they desired. The producers attempted to appeal to an audience that was open to experimenting with the nature of identity, promising users a blank slate on which they could redefine their identity while potentially achieving virtual fame and success. Identity became simply another object to consume.

BE SOMEBODY. ELSE.™

The Sims Online™ is a massive world built by thousands of players. Create a Sim and play as yourself or your alternate Sim persona. Explore neighborhoods, make friends, host events, or run a business. How you play is limited only by your imagination.

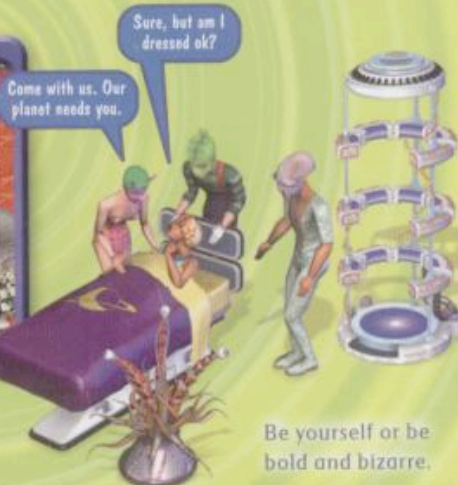
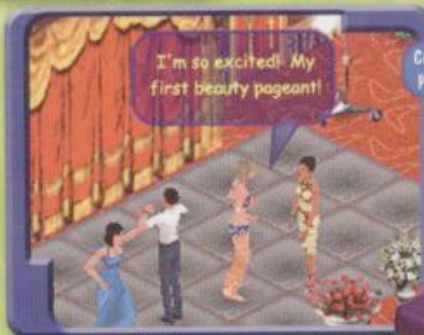


Throw parties, make friends, and improve your social standing.



Take to the stage, become a star, or just be entertained.

Interact with other Sims through chat, instant messages, and hundreds of animations.



Be yourself or be bold and bizarre.



Design themed businesses, homes, and neighborhoods.

Monthly subscription is \$9.99

FIRST MONTH FREE

Credit card required to register and play

Payment methods include credit card and Game Time Card**

IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON THE SIMS ONLINE INCLUDING TERMS OF SERVICE AND GAME AVAILABILITY CAN BE FOUND AT www.thesimsonline.com

EA RESERVES THE RIGHT TO TERMINATE THE SIMS ONLINE SERVICE AFTER 90 DAYS NOTICE

TEEN

Comic Mischief
Mature Sexual Themes
Mild Violence

Moby Games

The Sims Online is a live game you play via the Internet, allowing you to play with thousands of other users. AN INTERNET CONNECTION IS REQUIRED TO PLAY. Internet service providers usually charge a monthly fee to provide this access. † ELECTRONIC ARTS CHARGES A MONTHLY SUBSCRIPTION FEE FOR THIS ONLINE PRODUCT, separate from your Internet access charges. The first month of this fee is included in the purchase price of this package. You must provide a valid credit card to register and play. ** After your first month you can use your credit card number to buy more time, or you may purchase The Sims Online Game Time Card at your local retailer or through www.store.ea.com. Online gameplay and use of a Game Time Card is subject to The Sims Online User Agreement and Terms of Service. For the current monthly rates and other details, see www.thesimsonline.com. YOU MUST BE 13+ TO REGISTER FOR THIS GAME. The Sims Online Service is available in English only. EA RESERVES THE RIGHT TO TERMINATE THE SIMS ONLINE SERVICE AFTER 90 DAYS NOTICE.



mobygames.com

Image 18: The original back-cover for the special edition of TSO.

In their book, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood argue that the benefits of consuming goods are not only in the use of the goods themselves, but in the “double role in providing subsistence and in drawing lines of social relationships.”¹⁰³ Consumption is a mode of communication that helps us make sense of our relationship to the world surrounding us. The authors argue that all goods carry meaning and, rather than focusing on their actual use, we need to understand consumption as a language. By overlooking the real value and usefulness of consumer goods, we can begin to understand how “commodities are good for thinking” and how they become a “nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty.” The choices we make in consuming goods reflect the messages we intend to transmit to other consumers. The digital environment of *TSO*, along with the specific emphasis upon consumption within the game, provides an ideal text through which to understand the primacy of the symbolic meaning against the economic worth of commodities. In *TSO*, everything is symbolic. We can completely separate use value from its power to communicate meaning.

As a symbolic space of consumption, *TSO* offered an ideal environment in which to explore the tension between use value and the symbolic condition of the virtual object—the focus was shifted from the object being consumed to the process of consumption itself. In this sense, consumption is a means of seeking pleasure for the consumer, and not strictly the act of obtaining a service or product. Modern consumption becomes a strange form of motivation. In “Consuming Good and the

¹⁰³ See Mary Douglas and Baron C Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Toward an Anthropology of Consumption*, Taylor & Francis, Inc 1996.

Good of Consuming,” Colin Campbell argues “such acts of consumption are critically interwoven into the motivational structures of individuals, providing the energy they need to carry through difficult tasks as well as the gratification necessary if they are to subsequently believe that their efforts were worthwhile.”¹⁰⁴ Therefore, not only consumption, but also “anticipatory consuming,” which primarily exists in our imaginations, becomes a possible motivating force in our daily actions. We live and work in order to satisfy our endless need to consume.

Does the consumption within *TSO* reflect capitalism’s ability to create illusory needs among consumers? What exactly are players consuming beyond the bits of code that ultimately remain under the proprietary ownership of EA/Maxis (as detailed in the Terms of Service)? From a Marxist perspective, it is natural to view *TSO* as working to further manipulate the masses. The Frankfurt School analysis highlighted by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s work, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” argues that producers of culture have completely subjugated the consumer and that the strength of “industrial society is lodged in men’s minds.”¹⁰⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer believe the entertainment industry works to distract consumers from their economic reality, and manipulates them into accepting the status quo. In analyzing various forms of production, Adorno and Horkheimer examined the ways in which the logic of modern capitalism creates a system in which producers present the consumer with an illusory version of culture that can no longer

¹⁰⁴ See Colin Campbell’s essay, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming,” in Lawrence B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, Cornell University Press, 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm> (Accessed July 2008).

be distinguished from the real world. An application of Adorno and Horkheimer to *TSO* would argue that the virtual world only worked to distract users from the inequalities and manipulations present in their actual lives.

The Frankfurt School perspective, however, is ultimately limited, especially in relationship to the post-industrial context that frames our consumer society. Adorno and Horkheimer place their focus on the producers of culture (the culture industry) and do not allow for resistance or the creation of oppositional meanings on the part of the consumer. In part, the Frankfurt School undervalues the importance of consumption, viewing it in a secondary position to production and to the manipulations of industrial capital. Adopting a strong Marxist position, Adorno and Horkheimer see consumption primarily as a denigrated practice of capitalism.

TSO is a product of a culture in which the divisions between production and consumption blur. The primacy of industrial labor in America has declined over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. Conversely, consumption has generally increased during that same period of time. Thus, the Marxist perspective on consumption has also lost value. Scholarship has shifted the focus from production (the Frankfurt School) to the unique qualities of modern consumption in a post-industrial age. In his book, *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske makes a distinction between the Financial and Cultural Economy. Whereas the Frankfurt School argued that culture was imposed upon the masses by the forces of the market, Fiske argues, “Popular culture is made by the people.”¹⁰⁶ For Fiske, the Cultural Economy is completely separate from the Financial Economy—cultural meanings of

¹⁰⁶ See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Routledge, 1989.

consumed objects are not created by the producers of culture, but rather by their consumers. This is a point further explored by Colin Campbell in his essay “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming.”¹⁰⁷ Campbell argues that within a Marxist framework, the focus on production was valuable because subjects of industrial capitalism often struggled in their attempts to satisfy their needs of survival. The modern consumer is generally not too concerned with basic survival, and instead is motivated by his or her endless wants and desires. Consumption becomes a primary process by which wants and desires are met. Like Fiske, Campbell shifts the focus from the commodity to the process of consumption—the act becomes more important than the object. He makes the case that the basic motivation underlying consumerism is the desire to experience, in reality, that pleasurable feeling the consumer previously only enjoyed imaginatively. For Campbell, the process of consumption begins even before the object or service is purchased—the function of the product does not matter as much as the idea of the pleasure that the consumer will feel from obtaining it. Connecting this idea to *TSO*’s virtual context illuminates the value of consuming objects that have no basis in material reality. It doesn’t matter that the objects are solely constructed through code, what matters is that the process of virtual consumption addresses the actual desires of the subject.

It is impossible to understand the changing nature of modern consumption without also addressing its relationship to modern production. As the meanings of consumption and production have evolved, the discourses surrounding these concepts

¹⁰⁷ Colin Campbell, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming,” in Lawrence B. Glickman (ed.), *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, Cornell University Press, 1999.

are also in need of updating. Of specific interest to the subject of *TSO* is the effect of computer technologies on perceptions of labor and leisure. In his examination of the emergence of the network society, Manuel Castells argues that the development of information and communication technologies has profoundly impacted the material, social, and cultural condition of our advanced society.¹⁰⁸ The technologies of the network society, specifically the computer, have become essential tools for both labor and leisure. In an increasing number of cases, work can be performed in any location from the home to the coffee shop. With the development of cell-phones and blue-tooth electronics, citizens of the network society are finding themselves tethered to their jobs outside of the traditional five-day, nine-to-five workweek. In the same sense, however, these same technologies can also be used during the hours of compensated labor for purposes of consumption and leisure, allowing employees to shop online, communicate with acquaintances, and even enter virtual worlds like the one made possible through *TSO*. Likewise, play within these virtual worlds includes participants laboring through professions, jobs, and, quests in order to advance their avatar's status.¹⁰⁹ The boundaries between production/consumption and labor/leisure continue to become ever less clear.

The theory of consumption best equipped to address the specific contexts fashioned by virtual worlds (as highlighted by my investigation of *TSO*) is represented by the work of Daniel Miller. Echoing the criticisms of the Marxist perspective on

¹⁰⁸ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Blackwell, 1996.

¹⁰⁹ See Steven Poole, "Working for the Man: Against the Employment Paradigm in Videogames," Keynote Presentation for Future and Reality of Gaming Conference, October 2008, Vienna, <http://stevenpoole.net/trigger-happy/working-for-the-man/> (Accessed 6/18/09).

consumption, Miller argues that the computer has directly affected the concept of work in post-industrial society. He writes:

The labour theory of value, which as employed by Marx, postulated work as the sole source of value, is even less convincing today than it was when it was first formulated. The idea that surplus value is merely the appropriation of human labour takes no account of the vast impact of the microchip, of machines which often make the physical nature of human labour itself entirely redundant.¹¹⁰

It is important to remember that *TSO* still remains, in part, a product of industrial labor. While the software is digitally coded, a physical product was still manufactured and distributed as a commercial product. *TSO* was mass-produced, and reflects the process of industrialization. Even within this context, Miller argues that there has been a shift in the primacy of labor in modern society. We are defined more through consumption than industrial practices. Within this framework, the products of industrial labor become valuable because consumption creates culture, which, in the pre-Gramsci Marxist tradition, was thought to only be possible in the realm of production. Miller writes:

The very active, fluid and diverse strategies by means of which people transform resources...purchased through the market...into expressive environments, daily routines and often cosmological ideals: that is, ideas about order, morality and family, and their relationship with the wider society.¹¹¹

In forming his argument, Miller turns to Hegel's theory of objectification and the idea of "sublation." In Hegel's view, society first externally creates the culture that surrounds it, and then, through the process of sublation, society internalizes it, which in turn creates social identity. Miller applies the process of sublation to cultural

¹¹⁰ See Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

consumption. He argues that the subject externalizes his or her interpretation or understanding of the world, and, from that externalization, creates the world (culture). While industrial society provides us with objects to consume, consumers ultimately define the meaning of these objects by inscribing them with their own values and social ideals. It is through consumption that we create our collective identity.

Miller formulates his theory of consumption by discussing case studies of material objects, such as candy, make-up, and alcohol. How does the virtual context of the world created through *TSO* highlight and expand his theory? As a material product, *TSO* is extremely limited. The box contains an installation guide, a brief introduction to game play, and a coded CD-ROM. For Miller, the process of consumption only begins with the point of purchase; however, the physical materials presented by *TSO* are peripheral to its value. It is the immaterial code that is ultimately being consumed. Once users load the software onto their computers, they gain access to the virtual world and an entire new level of production and consumption emerges. This is a world completely detached from the “physical nature” of the material world—it becomes a complete abstraction of the industrial society central to Marxist analysis. Thus, *TSO* provides us with an idealized form to discuss Miller’s argument that the act of consumption is valuable in the way it creates culture. As mentioned in Miller’s theory of consumption, the point of purchase (or, in the case of *TSO*, the point of installation) marks the beginning of a “long and complex process, by which the consumer works upon the object purchased and recontextualizes it, until it is often no longer recognizable as having any relation to the world of the abstract and becomes

its very negation, something which could be neither bought or given.”¹¹² Miller argues that “recontextualization” is a strategy that reflects the political potential of consumption—individuals inscribe their own values into the commodities, often negating and challenging the intent of the culture industry. In addition to the ability to access the virtual world, consumers of *TSO* were also acquiring tools that enabled them to fashion that world and their adopted identity into a meaningful experience. By using these tools, consumers produced the virtual world—the processes of production and consumption merged. Miller formulates this point by writing, “[W]ork may be defined as that which translates the object from an alienable to an inalienable condition; that is, from being a symbol of estrangement and price value to being an artifact invested with particular inseparable connotations.”¹¹³

In support of his argument, Miller discusses ways in which “segments of the population are able to appropriate industrial objects and utilize them in the creation of their own image.”¹¹⁴ The work of consumption potentially allows for the development of identities and meanings not inherent to the commercial product. For Miller, the work of consumption does not equate to physical labor, but rather the intimate association that develops between the object and the individual or social group. To illustrate this point, he explains the process of work within the context of a pub. Miller writes:

The work done on a pint of beer includes the whole culture of pub behaviour, such as buying rounds, as well as the development of an often long term association between the consumer and a particular beer, which excludes all other types of

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

drink or brands identified with other social groups by gender, class, parochial affinity and so on. Such cultural practices cannot be reduced to mere social distinction, but should be seen as constituting a highly specific and often extremely important material presence generating possibilities of sociality and cognitive order, as well as engendering ideas of morality, ideal worlds and other abstractions and principles.

In this example, patrons “work” by inscribing their own understanding of the world and their values onto the environment (or world) enabled by the bar as a social space. For example, patrons might work to define certain beverages as authentic and others as representative of elitism and cultural pretentiousness (made possible by the practice of consumption). Miller continues, “The ability to recontextualize goods is therefore not reducible to mere possessions, but relates to more general objective conditions which provide access to the resource and the degree of control over the cultural environment.” Relating this sentiment to the virtual context presented by *TSO*’s software, the fact that digital commodities are complete constructions and have no material reality is of little importance. The true value of these virtual objects is that the work they enable helps players create the virtual world.

It is important, however, to note that the application of recontextualization to material culture is limited—Miller’s ideas are much more effective in the realm of the theoretical than when they are applied. For example, in the example of the bar previously discussed, how much power do consumers really gain over the shared environment? They are still subject to the laws of society, which in part dictates proper behavior within this setting. How valuable is the ability to assign class meaning to bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon? Miller continually reminds the reader he is addressing the potential of consumption to create a meaningful experience for the

consumer, but that this potential is not regularly realized. Beyond the value of anticipatory consumption (Campbell) how can we understand consumption as a political strategy and a process by which consumers gain power? This is not to devalue Miller's theoretical position but rather to argue the virtual world might prove a better realm for its application.

For Miller, consumption is work. In *TSO* work and consumption were experienced through the process of play. How does *TSO*'s context as a space of play affect our understanding of labor and leisure? If *TSO* exists as a form of Huizinga's magic circle,¹¹⁵ how do the rules and rituals that emerge within this space recreate these social forms? Johan Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens*, defines play as activities occurring outside the framework of spaces where normal behavior is enacted. In these spaces, the rules of everyday life do not apply—there are a new set of rules and procedures structuring the action. Individuals are often assigned specific roles that determine their position and status. Huizinga offers the example of weddings and courtrooms as spaces of play. The term “magic circle” has been adopted to describe the way that these spaces are separated from the normative structures of everyday society. The traditional analysis of play, which places it solely within the realm of childhood and the trivial, is too limited. Play is valuable because, through it, we navigate ritual spaces. Play also allows us to explore, negotiate, and recontextualize complicated, and at times controversial, issues in a less serious context.

¹¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Beacon, 1971.

How do the informatics of play within the virtual world allow for consumers to gain a greater degree of control over the rules that structure their digital environment?¹¹⁶ In the material world, there is a great amount of risk—not to mention bureaucracy—restricting our ability to change the rules of society. If the economic system is not working, it is more realistic to work within the system than it is to completely destroy it. Changing the rules that structure a society is a difficult path. However, within the virtual world, because the rules are structured directly by the software, these rules are easier to re-code. Additionally, because the worlds are governed by play and experimentation, the impact of these changes aren't experienced with as much resistance. The entire world can be played with, and in turn new possibilities for structuring economics, politics, and social status have the potential to emerge. The virtual environment provides a framework where Miller's ideas can be more fully explored.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the career paths directing game play in *The Sims* were removed from *TSO*. While there remained mechanisms for the accumulation of virtual capital (simoleons) the ultimate promise was that consumers would create new forms of labor within the virtual world that would, in turn, enable their continued (in-game) consumption. By playing *TSO*, players were experimenting with the relationship between production and consumption. The constructed nature of the virtual world allowed users to reflect upon the way in which their own society was constructed. Additionally, by placing the processes of production and consumption within the framework of play that defines the virtual world of *TSO* as a social space,

¹¹⁶ See Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture (Electronic Mediations)*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

the connection between economic capital and the power to consume is weakened. It would be an error to argue that the connection is completely severed, as there remained costs related to purchasing the required technology, the software, and the monthly subscription fee. However, once the user entered the virtual world, access to actual economic capital was no longer needed in order to consume virtual objects. The benefits of consumption, as detailed by Miller, could be obtained without having to expend increasing amounts of money.

The separation of capital from consumption in *TSO* allowed users more freedom in exploring the possible meanings of the objects they purchased. As such, *TSO* represented an ideal environment for the application of Miller's promoted strategy of "recontextualization." Without further economic investment, risk was also reduced; therefore, players were more likely to "play" with these objects in ways that would not be attempted if they existed in the material world. Thus, it was not only economic risk that was reduced within *TSO*. Because the technology allowed users to remain anonymous and play was expressed as a central characteristic of the "magic circle," users were able to adopt identities and subject positions they would not consider adopting in their everyday lives. *TSO* offered a safe space for players to try on new and transgressive skins. Through consumption, the boundaries of identity could be recontextualized.

While there was a great deal of potential in such a space for adopting progressive political perspectives and experimenting with issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, it is important to understand that this potential is not without its limits. For

Miller, recontextualization is a strategy, but it does not completely negate the existence of a dominant narrative. Miller describes recontextualization as the ability of social groups and individuals to “appropriate such industrial objects and utilize them in the creation of their own image.” Recontextualization allows for a single object to be inscribed with an infinite range of readings. Miller argues that recontextualization is a political strategy; he writes:

The notion of recontextualization permits a more positive reading of the possibilities for the receptor of the commodity. The change from user to consumer is not necessarily a fall from freedom...but may lie closer to possibilities which are addressed in other trends within the sociology of art, where interpretation is understood as recreation.¹¹⁷

While Miller argues that there is a potential for consumers to challenge the capitalist framework of the commodity, he does not assume that recontextualization always results in progressive or resistant meanings. The ability to adopt identities across boundaries of race, class, sexuality, and gender may be transgressive, but such enactment often reflects problematic stereotypes. Miller is careful not to promote “blanket condemnation or blanket populism” with regards to consumption, but rather illustrates the need for cultural critics to examine certain recontextualization practices in order to “investigate the key issue of what conditions appear to generate progressive strategies in consumption.”¹¹⁸

In *TSO*, the exploration of identity resulted in both transgressive and dominant forms of play. For example, the risk associated with cross dressing in everyday life was negated in *TSO*, and players interested in exploring the meaning of gender found a

¹¹⁷ Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

safe environment to do so. The virtual world offered a space for players to explore the performative aspects of gender. At the same time, however, there were players adopting more stereotypical aspects of race, gender, and sexuality, as a means of stating their dominant position in their material worlds. This is a point made by Lisa Nakamura in her book *Cybertypes*, where she explores the meaning of identity tourism and racial passing within virtual environments.¹¹⁹ The argument that needs to be made is that Miller's application is ultimately limited, but there are conditions within the virtual world that allow for identity to be more freely experienced.

An example Miller discusses which demonstrates how commodities can reflect both positive and negative views of consumption is found in his discussion of make-up. In his analysis, Miller argues that British culture has commonly framed its application as a means of hiding one's true identity. He writes:

It is commonly argued that the real self is represented by the natural face which provides direct access to the person as he or she truly is, while to cover the face in cosmetics is to mask it in terms of a set of unrealizable ideals generally manufactured by the capitalist market or patriarchal society in which the authentic person has become submerged.¹²⁰

Miller concedes that there are valid gender and market criticisms related to the power of patriarchal society. Despite these criticisms, however, Miller argues that a positive reading of make-up can still exist for consumers. Specifically, Miller questions the assumption that "the effect of cosmetics is always to hide the 'real' person." Miller contrasts this perspective on make-up with the use of face paint by New Guinea highlanders. In this culture, make-up is utilized to fashion a "direct representation of

¹¹⁹ This is a point made by Lisa Nakamura in her book *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Routledge, 2002

¹²⁰ Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.

their real selves.” These individuals view their actual faces as arbitrary and non-reflective of their identities. Miller continues, “It is only when the face is something worked upon, through elaborate cosmetic preparations which provide an expression of the self constructed by the self, that they appear in their true guise to the observer.” As opposed to the traditional Western claim of an essentialist given self, the New Guinea highlander is reflective of a “culturally constructed self.” While play is not directly addressed in this reading, the ritualistic nature of make-up in both cultures provides a natural connection. How can we place the creation of the Sim avatar within a similar framework? The common analysis is to argue for the virtual self as being an abstraction of an individual’s true identity. This perspective can be traced back to the earliest discussion of the Internet—one of the most famous examples being a cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker* of a dog using a computer featuring the caption, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” However, can we also view play and the construction of the Sim avatar as meaningful expressions of the “culturally constructed self”? Like consumption, which has too often been denigrated as the simple result of capitalist manipulation, how can we reposition play as central to the formation of identity and cultural meaning?



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

Image 19: Famous cartoon from *The New Yorker*, 7/5/93, vol. 69 (20).

While players certainly reproduced the dominant narrative of capitalism through their interactions with *TSO*, there were also others who actively recontextualized virtual objects in an attempt to construct an oppositional message. *TSO* promotes a space where consumption develops directly into a social practice in which the values of the (actual and virtual) world are enacted, developed, and challenged. Throughout the remainder of this dissertation, I examine the discourses of game play in order to uncover the process, value, and limits of recontextualization, especially as it relates to

the relationship between consumption and production in the virtual world. For example, in my analysis of *TSO*'s beta test, I highlight the rhetoric that confronts the nature of labor and play. Several beta-testers placed their analyses of the game within the framework of Marxist discourse, arguing that too much labor was required to satisfy their desires to consume and construct the virtual world. In these discussions, players directly reflected upon the meaning of play, labor, and consumption. The relationship between play and labor was further complicated as players began to experiment with creating new ways of generating simoleons. Examples included virtual interior designers, clinical psychologists, and sex workers operating within the digital environment. The latter example was also connected to a larger style of play that reflected a small segment of players creating a syndicate of organized crime as a form of labor. I also explore the way users begin to play against the capitalist framework promoted by the game's software. In chapter five, I specifically examine the oppositional style of play that emerged surrounding the in-game radio station KSIM. In this instance, players often attempted to change the meaning of consumer products, such as McDonalds merchandise, that became available for virtual consumption. Players would recontextualize these licensed virtual objects through various role-playing events by surrounding them with signs of protest and espousing anti-capitalist messages to un-suspecting patrons.

KSIM is an example of how *TSO* presented users with a world in which the conflation of production and consumption had been more fully realized. Players involved in the creation and maintenance of KSIM were not simply consuming *TSO* as a product; they were using it to create and distribute culture. Miller views the

overlapping of production and consumption practices as being the most important trend towards society's ability to "overcome the alienatory consequences of mass consumer culture."¹²¹ Miller discusses fashion to make this point. The aspects of culture, such as fashion, that critics assumed would "overwhelm us" have actually been subverted—he writes:

In practice there is the building up through bricolage of specific and particular social groups which define themselves as much through the rejection of all those cultural forms they are not as from the assertion of their particular style.¹²²

It is in this discussion that Miller comes closest to an analysis of the types of practices emerging in virtual worlds like *TSO*. He argues that, in reality, we are not adopting a set of values sold to us by corporations, but rather we are engaging in ever more specialized forms of cultural consumption and production. He mentions the emergence and proliferation of clubs and nationwide organizations devoted to the consumption and production of activities inside and outside of the mainstream of the culture industry. The examples he provides are as diverse as "medieval music, swimming, ballroom dancing, steel bands, and fan clubs."¹²³ Miller argues that these examples express an increasing potential as abstractions of the capitalist system; he argues:

The building of social networks and leisure activities around these highly particular pursuits is one of the strangest and most exotic features of contemporary industrial society, and one which is for ever increasing. There is no more eloquent confrontation with the abstraction of money, the state of modernity than a life devoted to racing pigeons, or medieval fantasies played out on a microcomputer. All such activities, whose adherents may be widely dispersed, depend upon the

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

paraphernalia of mass consumption such as telephones, trains, and easy and relatively access to relevant goods from the commercial market.¹²⁴ [sic.]

Miller suggests that this trend reflects our desire to be “self-productive.” He continues, “In this sense, the older dichotomy between production and consumption is challenged. The workplace is not, and, indeed, never has been the only site for self-production through work.”¹²⁵ *TSO* becomes an idealized space for this form of labor, especially considering self-production is a condition for participation.

The consumption practices of *TSO* further abstracted the conditions of industrial capitalism by placing the in-game economy (represented by simoleons) into a direct relationship with actual money. For some, playing *TSO* became a recognized (and taxable) form of labor in the American capitalist system. The distinctions between labor and leisure were challenged. How did these economies interact?¹²⁶ In examining the pattern of game play in the early period of *TSO*, it became apparent that players were frustrated with the difficulty of the internal economy and their inability to earn enough simoleons to build the elaborate and lavish homes they enjoyed constructing in *The Sims*. As was common in other prior MMORPGs, such as *EverQuest*, a market quickly developed in which American currency could be exchanged for units of simoleons. Because the game has been cancelled, the traces of this market have also disappeared. When the game was active, however, websites

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ I am going to give a short review of this discussion as the trend existed in *TSO* on a very small scale. Edward Castronova’s *Synthetic Worlds* does a great job of discussing the economic relationship between in-game economies and economic markets in *Worlds of Warcraft*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, and *EverQuest* among others. See Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

including www.paythegame.com offered simoleons, pets, rare items, and properties in their sales.¹²⁷ Even though the game never reached the success that was predicted for it, there was a sizable market for simoleons following the game's official release.

With the fantasy-based MMORPGs, items, especially rare ones, were commonly exchanged for American currency. This was much less common in *TSO*. There were rare items in *TSO*, but unlike the examples in other MMORPG games, they had little or no effect on overall game play. In *EverQuest*, for example, a rare sword might represent historical value or have the ability to do more damage than a common one. In *TSO*, the rare items were primarily status-based or acted as markers for longevity. The expansive fan-run website, *The Sims Online Stratics*, provides a complete list of the "Longevity Rewards, Incentives and Rares."¹²⁸ For example, participants in the beta stage were rewarded with founder status, which came in the form of a special "founder" icon attached to any Sim created by a founder. Founders were also given a "simmy." The Stratics page explains that "[s]immies were one-time rewards given to Sims created on or before December 17, 2002." As such, these "simmies" had sentimental value and were exhibited as markers of status. Aside from their decorative value (they were statues that displayed the *TSO* logo below a blue, red, or

¹²⁷ In the period prior to the game's cancelation in 2008, the market for the game was quite limited. There were no accounts for sale. Two properties were listed that were considered rare and desirable because they were islands. These properties were listed at \$149.99 and \$199.99. Rare Pets ranged from \$6.99 to \$44.99. The real indication of the lack of interest was reflected in the cost of simoleons, where 200 million simoleons could be purchased for \$65.99. I viewed the site several times during the latter part of 2007, and the early quarter of 2008 without discovering any movement.

¹²⁸ This was posted by Fryegoddess (Allison Wonderland) and edited by Katheryn. http://sims.stratics.com/content/game_play/buymodecatalogs/rares/ (Accessed January 28, 2008)

silver globe) they were meaningless to the advancement of game play. Their value was only connected to their impact on the construction of a Sim avatar's identity.



Image 20: Simmies in *TSO*. www.simslice.com.

There were virtual objects that had considerable impact on game play. The accumulation of these objects enabled Sim avatars to potentially obtain a higher level of social status within the virtual world. Virtual objects were valuable in the way that they enabled actors to successfully navigate these digital environments. If a player exchanged actual money for increased access to in-game capital, represented by simoleons, he or she could increase his or her ability to create an attractive environment that was useful and attractive to other Sim avatars. Objects of value within the virtual world became objects of value in the actual world because the users inhabited both worlds. While *TSO* constituted a type of “magic circle” with rules and structures outside those of normal behavior, the walls of this circle were porous—actors, and in the current discussion, capital, flows between the two. Play in ritual spaces has repercussions outside of the construction of these spaces. The connection

between the material and virtual world was not severed; each had an impact upon the other. It is for this reason that Miller's promotion of recontextualization holds so much promise within the context of virtual world play—can players apply what they learn and experience in the virtual world to their everyday lives?

The question that remains is, despite its promise, why did *TSO* fail as a viable virtual world. While I explore the answer to this question in greater detail throughout the remaining three chapters of this dissertation, it is important to note here the ways in which the practice of consumption and the possibility for recontextualization were ultimately limited by the game's software. Of specific interest is the lack of user-generated virtual objects in *TSO*. There were no unique objects within the virtual environment—everyone had access to the same virtual commodities as long as they raised enough simoleons. Each virtual object was programmed by the software's code and designed by the game's producers. This fact is especially important in relationship to *TSO*'s direct predecessor, *The Sims*. One of the major complaints from players migrating from *The Sims* to *TSO* was their unfulfilled desire to expand upon the creativity in designing virtual clothes, Sim characters, and objects. As discussed in a previous chapter, *The Sims* allowed users to create original content that could be imported into their game and shared with other players via the Internet. When confronted with *TSO*, these players wanted the same control over their Sim avatars as they had over their Sim characters in *The Sims*. The inability to grasp this control ultimately limited the potential for recontextualization in *TSO*. Though the software was expansive in terms of the number of virtual objects available, there was still a limit in terms of the types of objects players could purchase and produce.

Players were thus limited in their abilities to create a virtual environment within *TSO* that could function as a meaningful and thriving world.

Chapter 5: *The Sims Online* Versus *The Sims*: Reading the Beta Test

The Sims Online (TSO) remains significant despite its lack of commercial success. It is important because of its relationship to *The Sims*, the best selling personal computer gaming franchise, and its status as the first major social Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). By examining its failure, we can begin to understand the types of experiences users are seeking when they engage in this entertainment medium. The purpose of this chapter is not to describe the end of TSO, but rather its birth. Specifically, I focus on a series of documents released by EA/Maxis prior to the game's release (publicity materials, design plans), along with posts to the official forums during its beta test, because not only do these documents help to identify the central issues that eventually led to the cancellation of TSO, but also they provide a unique window into the process of networked virtual world building.¹²⁹ I explore the following questions: Firstly how are the ideas and desires of

¹²⁹ I am employing the term networked virtual world to describe this current phenomenon. While I use Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) as a term that describes the marketing genre for TSO, MMORPGs are only one example of the various types of networked virtual worlds emerging through the proliferation of new media technologies. The naming of these worlds has proved highly problematic. Various identifiers have been previously employed including virtual, synthetic, and digital. Digital seems too broad to be helpful in analyzing the trend, as it merely describes it as computerized. The term synthetic, championed by Edward Castronova in his book *Synthetic Worlds*, fails for me because it suggests that the "real world" is not also synthetically constructed through hegemonic discourses and negotiations. Virtual is perhaps the most problematic because of its association with virtual reality. However, it ultimately proves to be the most useful. Tom Boellstorff argues that there is a need to rehabilitate the term virtual from its association with virtual reality, which places it in opposition with reality. Instead, as argued above, there is a need to understand the virtual itself as a reality. He employs the term "actual" to describe the historical context of our material existence, arguing, "Virtual connotes approaching the actual without arriving there. This gap between the virtual and actual is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either." The term virtual

consumers and producers understood and negotiated in designing a society from the bottom up? Secondly how do the decisions to create such worlds reflect the hopes and promises we hold in redesigning our own culture, political system, economy, and identity? And finally, what types of experiences are consumers seeking in their exploration of these worlds? These questions lie at the center of this project. This chapter draws from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's work on "remediation" and the emerging field titled "software studies" as defined by Lev Manovich and Matthew Fuller.¹³⁰ I argue that *TSO* remediates text-based Multi User Domains (MUDs) and explore the limitations established by its economic-based subscription model.

In their book *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Bolter and Grusin argue that while the concept of remediation has roots in semiotics and representation, media (new and old) also has a material presence. They write that "media have the same claim to reality as more tangible cultural artifacts; photographs, films, and computer applications are as real as airplanes and buildings."¹³¹ The digital nature of these objects does not deny their connections to tangible social, political, and economic

is essential because it calls attention to the inherently mediated quality of online worlds. See Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton University Press, 2008. The qualifier networked is added to indicate the fact that some of these virtual worlds create real experiences for their users without utilizing network technologies. For example, *The Sims* created virtual world that was alive and real for its users without placing it within the MMORPGs genre. *The Sims* would be an example of a non-networked virtual world.

¹³⁰ See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2002; Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, The MIT Press, 2001; and Matthew Fuller's *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software*, Autonomedia, 2003, along with his edited collection *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, MIT Press, 2008.

¹³¹ See Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2002.

histories. Likewise, these new media technologies do not emerge out of a vacuum, but are instead deeply embedded in these various contexts. Bolter and Grusin argue, “Introducing a new media technology does not mean simply inventing a new hardware and software but rather fashioning (or refashioning) such a network.”¹³² *TSO* is not simply a software product: its status as software is as important as its relationship with the hardware of the computer, the process of its development by designers and coders, and the various ways end-users use and give meaning to it. Because “users are as much a part of the technology as the software itself,” the interactions between software, hardware, and user supersede any claims of technological determinism.¹³³ *TSO* does not create culture, completely anew, but rather emerges from and refashions the cultural contexts already surrounding us.¹³⁴

The materials that emerged from the period of *TSO*’s development are instrumental in uncovering the negotiations among the hardware, software, developers, and users. In

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ There have been several major critiques of Bolter and Grusin’s work on remediation. For example, Jan Baetens argues that Bolter and Grusin place too much emphasis on the centrality of remediation and the drive for more “direct contact with reality” in tracing the major reforms that have occurred in society since the Renaissance. Baetens argues that remediation places too much emphasis on the ability of new technology to address the limits of the technologies that came before it. Technologies are often created to address “false needs.” Baetens also finds fault with the perceived inability of Bolter and Grusin to properly place technology within its social, historical, and economic contexts. While their application might be limited, Bolter and Grusin do argue for the need to reject the technological determinism of McLuhan and to place new media studies within a cultural studies framework. They argue, “In an effort to avoid both technological determinism and determined technology, we propose to treat social forces and technical forms as two aspects of the same phenomenon: to explore digital technologies themselves as hybrids of technical, material, social, and economic facets.” As discussed, this dissertation also attempts to place the examination of new media studies within a cultural studies framework. See Jan Baetens, “Riposte: Jan Baetens asks Remediation or Premeditation?” <http://www.altx.com/EBR/riposte/rip9/rip9bae.htm> (Accessed 2/10/09); Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2002.

part, these documents represent the “digital materialism” of the software’s birthing process, and bring to mind Lev Manovich’s call for “software studies” in *The Language of New Media*. These archives constitute material traces of the discussions and negotiations surrounding the development of the software and the social networked virtual world. Manovich laments the lost opportunity of chronicling this stage during cinema’s period of infancy. *TSO* provides the perfect example of a digital object; when EA/Maxis closed off access to the game, it ceased to exist. In the preservation and analysis of these documents, the digital history of *TSO* is protected. As Matthew Kirschenbaum explains in his essay, “Virtuality and VRML: Software Studies After Manovich,” software studies, “is, or can be, the work of fashioning documentary methods for recognizing and recovering digital histories against the material matrix of the present.” A central question to consider is how we can assess the importance of the software and understand the various ways it was constructed, developed, adapted, and used, specifically after it vanishes from popular consumption. Software studies is the attempt to uncover the material nature of code.¹³⁵

The connection between *TSO* and *The Sims* is evident through their titles: *TSO* is offering fans of *The Sims* the opportunity to experience their love of the game in an online environment. In one of the first official documents released on the EA/Maxis website promoting *TSO*’s release, Wright highlights this connection while also beginning to describe the games’ divergent paths. He writes:

¹³⁵ The most notable contributions to software studies include Matthew Fuller’s *Behind the Blip: Essays on the Culture of Software*, Autonomedia, 2003, along with his edited collection *Software Studies: A Lexicon*, MIT Press, 2008.

Forget half of what you know about *The Sims*. Forget the part about interacting with simple, predictable, simulated people. In *TSO* everyone you interact with is real and the consequences of these interactions are far more complex and unpredictable as a result. At the same time, we've tried very hard to carry on much of the existing Sims interface and concepts into the new online game as we can. We want you to feel comfortable with the game from the beginning so that you're immediately moving through and living in the world.¹³⁶

The Sims' success made the attempt to repurpose it into a MMORPG a logical decision; there was a growing community of players who created and shared original content for, about, and inspired by the game. Even though *The Sims* was not networked, online communities dedicated to its consumption multiplied across the Internet. The developers counted on this creativity to continue. Wright ends the promotional essay by saying that, "I'm really looking forward to playing this game in its final form. I'm especially curious to see what happens when the creative fans, which have made *The Sims* such a tremendous success, get their hands on it. There's no telling what will happen!"¹³⁷ For Will Wright, EA/Maxis, and industry prognosticators, the marriage of *The Sims* and the MMORPG genre appeared to be a perfect match. Everyone predicted another huge success for the franchise; however, the game never reached one hundred thousand subscribers and only six years after being launched, *TSO* was cancelled.

Is *TSO* a remediation of *The Sims*? Though the answer seems obvious, Bolter and Grusin do make a distinction between remediation and "borrowing." In the tradition of Marshall McLuhan, remediation is concerned with the medium, while "borrowing"

¹³⁶ Wright, "Will Wright on why *TSO* is Socially Engaging," April 2002, http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimsonline/features/social_april02.jsp (accessed November 21, 2002)

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

remains at the center of content. According to Bolter and Grusin, borrowing does not operate according to the same logic of remediation because “the content has been borrowed, but the medium has not been appropriated or quoted.” The authors continue to explain that, “with reuse comes a necessary definition, but there may be no conscious interplay between media.”¹³⁸ This interplay can only occur if the user/viewer has experienced both, as this is the only way that the relationship emerges. In the case of *TSO*, EA/Maxis estimated that at least 70 percent of players also owned a copy of *The Sims*.¹³⁹ In addition, as previously mentioned, the familiarity between the two software products was used as a major marketing tool. Bolter and Grusin call the connection between a remediation and its ability to create real experiences for the user a “remediation as reform.” Remediations are involved in the process of transforming reality, creating real experiences and real meanings for their users. Remediations are political texts. Alexander Galloway explores the political aspect of the micromanagement simulation game in his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Specifically related to the idea that these games can uncover and change our understanding of our current historical situation, Galloway argues that the power of the micromanagement simulation game is the illumination of

¹³⁸ In this discussion, they discuss the 1990s trend to make movie versions of classic Jane Austin novels. This is an example of borrowing because many of the audience members might not have read the books and, therefore, there is no understanding of the way by which the medium of the book is being remediated into film. While the point is understandable, it overlooks the percentage of people that have experienced both. For them (as well as the ranks of professional critics reviewing the film), the language of each medium is highlighted, dissected, and discussed. In addition, the repurposing of content becomes part of the narrative through advertising and, most likely, “remediated” books distributed to booksellers featuring Gwyneth Paltrow (*Emma*) on the cover.

¹³⁹ In 2003, a member of *TSO*’s development team wrote an essay for Gamasutra about the development team’s attempts to alter the game in order to increase its subscriptions. See Jessica Lewis, “*The Sims Online* Evolution: A Case Study,” September 17, 2003, Gamasutra, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2806/the_sims_online_evolution_a_case.php (Accessed 2/09).

society's "informatic control" over us.¹⁴⁰ Galloway views the success or promise of these games as important in the way they not only expose the levels of "informatic control" but in the way that "they flaunt it."¹⁴¹

As he studies the micromanagement simulation computer game as an allegory for the informatic control, Galloway begins to turn away from the representational (semiotic) reading of a text to focus more on the level of code and the way in which algorithms are politically meaningful. Galloway advances the framework of Manovich's principles of new media (numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, and transcoding) to include a discussion of *Civilization* as a "control

¹⁴⁰ To illustrate the difference between the level of control given to the player of computer games as opposed to the people watching television and movies, Galloway turns to the way in which the criminal justice system has traditionally been represented. He writes, "The police are not removed from the crime film genre, far from it, but their micromovements of bureaucratic command and control are gone." On television and in the movies we become quite familiar with the actions (and flaws) of individual policemen, but the "boring minutiae of discipline and confinement that constitutes the various apparatuses of control in contemporary societies" are rarely exposed. Galloway argues the best way to allegorize political power is to expose "informatic control" at its core. Cinema has succeeded in showing the effects of that control, but failed in helping the audience understand that the institutions and policies are the responsible systems. See Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture (Electronic Mediations)*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

¹⁴¹ In his writing, Galloway focuses on Sid Meier's *Civilization*, a contemporary of *The Sims* which has the history of "civilization" as its focus instead of the practices of everyday life. He writes, "In the work of Meier, the gamer is not simply playing this or that historical simulation. The gamer is instead learning, internalizing, and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart, global algorithm. To play the game means to play the code of the game." To be successful in the game, the player needs to understand the intricate and controlled structures of the system—which can be read as a direct commentary on our own modern informatic culture. We are structured by "political realities of the informatic age." Micromanagement simulation games become allegories of control and help the operator understand the aspects of information and order that rule and structure his or her life. Here, what becomes important is that the ideological workings of games like *Civilization* need to be unpacked. Galloway refers to Friedman's essay about *SimCity*, entitled "*Civilization* and its Discontents," as a successful attempt at providing a critique of the ways the algorithm is programmed to create a specific and simplified version of a history more dedicated to building a system of balanced game play than actual historical accuracy. (98) *Civilization* is not a game about history, but rather reflects the political sensibilities of the culture from which it emerges.

allegory,” which helps uncover the way “the game plays the codes of informatic control.” He stresses the need to read computer and video games at the level of code, and not just on the surface level of the screen. The question Galloway asks is whether the game “embodies the logic of informatic control itself.”¹⁴²

As he explores ideological meaning at the level of code, Galloway turns to *The Sims* to show how the process can be valuable beyond the example of *Civilization*.

Civilization encourages the operator to confront the way history has been created through the manipulation of information. In contrast, *The Sims* brings the simulation to the level of the banal. Instead of a macro examination of humanity, *The Sims* presents a reality where the processes of everyday life are dissected and repeated on an infinite loop. The activity of playing the game also becomes an act of understanding the patterns of consumption and repetition that make up peoples’ lives. Through this process, Galloway argues, *The Sims* effectively provides its own critique of its narrative. Galloway writes that “the boredom, the sterility, the uselessness, and

¹⁴² For example, he turns to the question of racial identity and how the discussion changes when the analysis is switched from the image to the code. In the first case, the arguments mirror similar examples in film, television, and fiction. Emergent questions would include how race, nationhood, and imperialism are represented on the screen. However, the reading becomes more complicated when the researcher examines the text on the level of code. Galloway writes, “The construction of identity in *Civilization* gains momentum from offline racial typing, to be sure, but then moves further to a specifically informatic mode of cybernetic typing: capture, transcoding, statistical analysis, quantitative profiling (behavioral or biological), keying attributes to specific numeric variables, and so on.” Here, Galloway turns to the work of Lisa Nakamura to expose how the code does not reflect any real understanding of the meaning of skin tone, but rather allows the user to choose an the index of hues programmed into the software—a point that I will return to in my reading of *TSO*. This is not to argue a lack of connection to the larger social history of race, it is only to emphasize the importance of the way this material is organized and coded at a numerical and modular level. The focus is not only on the representation of racial identity, but also on the question of how racial identity and history on the larger meta level, become transcoded into “mathematical models.” Galloway argues, “So history in *Civilization* is precisely the opposite of history, not because the game fetishizes the imperial perspective, but because the diachronic details of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple.”

the futility of contemporary life appear precisely through those things that represent them best: a middle-class suburban house, an Ikea catalog of personal possessions, crappy food and even less appetizing music, the same dozen mindless tasks over and over—how can one craft a better critique of contemporary life?” When we play *The Sims*, we are also experiencing, and perhaps critically examining, the cultural logic of our own consumer society. By understanding how the code determines the structure of life in *The Sims*, we can also begin to understand “informatic control” in the actual world.

While Galloway’s discussion of *The Sims* is illuminating, his examination lacks the deep level of analysis needed to explore the complex ways through which the code structures the gaming experience, and in turn, our relationships with the virtual and material worlds surrounding us. In the following pages, I analyze *TSO* at the level of its code and explore how it relates to the experience one has in interfacing with it, that is, the level of representation. For the most part, Galloway does not approach the multiplayer aspects of gaming, specifically in terms of the relationship between the software and its social aspects. As *TSO* is essentially a social space, this becomes a core issue in my analysis.

Clearly, *The Sims* and *TSO* are both computer games; however it is important to note that as representatives of different genres (micromanagement simulation and MMORPG respectively) they independently operate under completely different structuring principles. They are remediating different media. Bolter and Grusin make it clear from their reading of computer games that genre difference affects the

genealogical lineage of remediation. These authors spend a considerable amount of time discussing *Myst* and *Doom* in relationship to their shifting between first and third person perspective as remediations of film. The ways in which the content and micromanagement simulation context of *The Sims* informs the experience of *TSO* is especially obvious in the language of criticism employed by the latter's beta testers: when they are critical of *TSO*, it is largely in reaction to the game's inability to replicate the enjoyment the users get from playing *The Sims*.

The remediation of *The Sims* into *TSO* is most noticeable in the graphic interface of both programs (as illustrated by the images in the previous chapters). Even though *TSO* did offer some new content, most of the objects, interactions, and avatar skins were taken directly from *The Sims*. The games look extremely similar, but they differ in terms of the experience of interaction users have when playing them. Many of the users wanted an online version of their favorite game; what they actually received was something quite different.

The Sims and *TSO* were developed to be dissimilar. The element of time is extremely different in the two programs, which later became a cause for concern. Prior to the beta test, Wright published another essay on the official website entitled "The Rhythm of the Game."¹⁴³ Wright writes in this essay, "When we first started playing early versions of *TSO* around the office about a year ago everyone noticed the same thing right off the bat: 'There's no speed control.'" Wright discusses the attempts to alleviate this problem by adjusting the rate of speed in the game's software. For

¹⁴³ Will Wright, "The Rhythm of the Game," September 2002, http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimsonline/features/fun_sep02.jsp (Accessed 11/21/02)

example, in *TSO*, as compared to *The Sims*, motives decline much slower, the amount of time a Sim avatar needs to sleep is shortened, and there is an attempt to keep the player active as much as possible.

The users, however, did not necessarily view this change in a positive manner. This is especially apparent in some of the earlier stages of the beta test, though it remains a constant theme throughout the run of the game. During the closed beta, the moderator for the beta test forums initiated a discussion entitled, “Raves and Rants—We want both.” Comments concerning the issues of time quickly emerged. On 10/16/02, HeatherBelle@Alphaville writes:

Ok. Listen. Here is the big problem, as I see it. Earning a skill takes about 15, 20 minutes. I don't want to sit and watch my sim practice her speech for 15 minutes. That is too long. My whole problem with the game is that everything takes TOO LONG....I love the game and interacting with people. But watching my sim play the piano for an hour is not fun.

This sentiment is echoed in several other posts. For example, Beast Gryphon@Alphaville argues that watching his Sim avatar gain skills is “boring,” and then states, “I find myself looking for the speed increase button 30% of the time.” In contrast, time in *The Sims* is variable: players are encouraged to moderate the speed of the game, and the fact that time is not fixed leads to a more experimental and playful experience. Players are not only controlling their Sim characters, they are also altering the algorithms and creating their own ideas about the meanings of time and space in a digital world.



Image 21: Sim avatars "playing" chess in order to learn a logic skill in *TSO*.
www.virtualworldsreview.com.

To transform *The Sims* into an online experience, many of the non-diegetic aspects of the game had to be removed.¹⁴⁴ Non-diegetic aspects are the elements of game play

¹⁴⁴ In his attempt to provide a framework for reading computer games at the level of code, Galloway attempts to structure the various ways through which games are experienced and processed. Key to this is defining the space of the computer game—where does the computer game exist and how does that space enable a process of interaction between the user, the hardware, and the software. Central to his analysis are the concepts of “diegetic” and “nondiegetic” space. Diegetic space is the game’s total world of narrative action. In the case of *TSO*, this is the geographical landscape offered to users for construction and exploration. When one’s Sim inhabits the world of *TSO*, they exist within the diegetic space of the game. Game play, as Galloway notes, exists in spaces outside of this space and is directed not only by the user but also by the hardware and software. These instances exist within nondiegetic space. These are elements of play that are external to the world of “narrative action.” By switching the focus from representation to the enacting of code, Galloway examines the ways that the machine and player interact within these spaces. He is interested in the ways that the player and the machine together create the space of the game. It is in the intersection of these four terms—machine, operator, diegetic, and nondiegetic—that Galloway explores the way in which the video game acts as a process that can be explored and examined outside of considering it solely as a narrative text: it includes operator acts in diegetic space, machine

dominated by inaction. The inactive elements of game play in *The Sims* helped to complete the total experience of the game and directed the ways in which users performed the game outside the parameters of the diegetic game space. For example, when a user chooses to speed up game time and yield the control of the action to the code being run by the computational device, he or she momentarily becomes a passive spectator. Time in *The Sims* is both important and flexible. In attempting to create a unified diegetic space, time in *The Sims* functions to provide the illusion of forward motion. The Sim character does not age beyond the marker of how many days they have lived. At the same time, if one attempted to play the game as it is structured, without manipulating time, the experience would be extremely long and tedious. If a player waited for their Sim character (who lived alone) to return from their day of work without speeding up time, they would essentially be doing nothing but staring at an empty house for almost an hour at a time. This function also becomes essential in developing a Sim character's skills. How many players choose to watch their Sim character read a book for an hour to build their cooking skill when

acts in diegetic space, operator acts in nondiegetic space, and machine acts in nondiegetic space. These four intersections provide the basis for uncovering the way in which the code structures the gaming experience.

1. Operator acts in diegetic space – this includes game play and directing the avatar as represented on the screen.
2. Machine acts in diegetic space – the code dictates game play, as preprogrammed objects force responses and inputs from the operator.
3. Operator acts in nondiegetic space – various actions from the user that enable the game, but exist away from the game as represented on the screen. This includes conversations stemming from the game that occur in spaces outside actual game play, including everyday life, forums, and chat rooms
4. Machine acts in nondiegetic space – the machine itself affects play through automatic updates, crashes, and wipes.

Through the analysis of these connections we can formulate a more complete picture of the way users and software interacts to create the whole experience of *TSO*. I return to these concepts throughout my analysis. See Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture (Electronic Mediations)*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

they could just push the fast forward button and finish in minutes? While waiting for a Sim character to finish whatever the user has initially directed it to do, many of the mundane tasks usually required of the user will be accomplished automatically by the code. This is especially true if the user has operated a Sim character for a long enough period of time, as the ritual becomes programmed into the avatar: after telling a Sim character to go to the bathroom enough times, it eventually catches on that when the bladder is full, then he or she must use the toilet. In this way, it is likely that the Sim character will continue to go to work and earn money, which can accumulate quickly over this period of user inaction. Then the user can return to normalized game time and using the accrued income, repair any problems that might have occurred, such as broken objects and empty refrigerators.

However in *TSO*, time was fixed. Without the ability to speed past the “boring” parts, users were reminded of their limited power within the closed system. Despite the fact that it shared its content with *The Sims*, *TSO* was unlike any other product in Wright’s Sim Franchise. Algorithms direct the trajectory of progress and evolution in *The Sims* and *SimCity*. These algorithms are constantly interacting with the content and choices chosen by the user. Cities in *SimCity* evolve: increased population led to increased pollution and the user is required to face such consequences as the city continues to grow. Similarly, in *The Sims*, players have to remain mindful of the never-ending influence of the software. Players can create the Sim characters, but algorithms ultimately control their behavior. Successful game play occurs when the players are able to “surf” their Sims through the various directives programmed into the environment. In *The Sims* there is an illusion that Sim characters enjoy free will.

Sim-characters operate even when players are not directing their actions—the software replaces the player and claims control over moving the Sim character through the gaming environment. While players suffer consequences for ignoring their Sim characters, Sim characters continue to “exist” without user involvement. It is in this way that *SimCity* and *The Sims* earn their “Sim” designation. The development of the gaming environment and of characters is at least partially simulated. Conversely, the complete control given to the user over a single Sim avatar in *TSO* came at the expense of simulation. Player inactivity resulted in Sim avatar inactivity. The game would not progress without constant user input. The attempt to create a more immersive experience resulted in a highly structured and rigid virtual world.

The developers of *TSO* sacrificed an element of randomness central in defining the humorous tone of *The Sims*. For example, coded into *The Sims* are cutaway scenes, which include scenes of bodies simulating sex under bedroom sheets, aliens abducting midnight stargazers, and burglars prowling and breaking into unsuspecting Sims’ houses. The complete control over the diegetic space offered to the user in *The Sims* allows not only for the player to direct game play, but also for the code to intercede and present the user with a sense of unpredictability and humor.

As control over content was given to the player in *TSO*, most of the instances of non-diegetic play that were central to the success of *The Sims* proved impossible to incorporate into the MMOPRG experience. The mechanics of shared game play space required that time remain consistent: if the game were to stop for one player it would have to stop for every player. In its attempt to create a consistent social

environment, *TSO* shifted the burden of creating an entertaining and humorous space from the software to the players. As to be explored in the remainder of this dissertation, this strategy did not always create the desired result, which became a major reason for the game's limited success.

Aside from the replication of the visual similarities within the two games, the element that remained the most consistent between the two was the architectural creation tool. The mechanics, operations, and options were extremely similar, so much so that it would have been very difficult for a novice to distinguish between the two. However, major differences emerged from the limits placed upon the user within each system. It is important to note that in both systems the architectural creation tool did not act as a space of game play, but rather as a nondiegetic space of construction. In both instances the user was designing the gaming space rather than actually playing the game. It has been documented that in creating *The Sims*, Wright had initially set out to introduce a program to the user enabling them to become domestic architects.¹⁴⁵ The Sim characters in *The Sims* were introduced as a way of evaluating the utility of design. If the user built a home that utilized space well, his or her Sim characters would express their happiness. Wright quickly realized that it was just as much fun playing with *The Sims* as it was building the homes, and the dollhouse aspect was expanded. The algorithms worked as a system of evaluating the choices made by the

¹⁴⁵ In addition to several articles in the mainstream press, Wright himself wrote about the architectural context in official publicity documents for *The Sims Online*. In an August 2002 post entitled "Downtown Construction," Wright writes, "Few realize that the whole idea actually started out as a simulation of architectural design. But even as the 'social' side of the game became dominant, the design side remained and in my mind is still the foundation of the Sims offline experiences."

http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimsonline/features/fun_aug02.jsp (Accessed 11/21/02)

player in designing his or her home. If the players designed a house that made sense to the programmed needs and movements of their Sim characters, then the Sim characters advanced in their social relationships and employment status. In *TSO*, algorithms were no longer utilized for this function, rather feedback was supposed to come from the collective judgment of the mass of players interacting with the game. Instead of having to master the system of algorithms, players in *TSO* needed to appeal to the desires and aesthetics of the masses.



Image 22: House under construction in *TSO*. It should be noted, that this is not the architectural creation screen. www.ign.com.

Fellow players, not the code, became the judge of one's success in *TSO*. In both *The Sims* and *TSO*, the software limited what the user could create. The architectural creation tool provides the user with a predetermined set of building blocks that could

be combined in an infinite number of ways, yet all the choices still existed within the boundaries of the structure provided. Walls, for example, were uniform in height and lacked modification. In addition, users were only able to create items within the palette dictated by the visual style of *The Sims* animation engine. Finally, there were in-game economic constraints in both programs. Though the gaming environments were mostly detached from actual capital, virtual capital (in the form of simoleons) was needed to participate in the digital economy. While cheat codes in *The Sims* allowed users to gain unlimited access to virtual capital, *TSO* required the construction of a “fair” economy. This financial aspect created a central source of tension for many fans of *The Sims* as they played *TSO*.

The beta test forum that gained the most attention in terms of visitor volume was named “Economy: The Big Picture.” Created shortly after the game’s transition from closed to open beta, the forum was established in response to a perceived dissatisfaction with the game’s economy. The first post on the forum is from MaxisWill, Will Wright himself. This post was dated November 16, 2002, a month before the game was to be released. The first paragraph reads:

We’ve been reading your feedback on the boards and are completely aware that for many players the economy in *TSO* is seen as our most unbalanced system. We agree. One of the tricky parts of this is that the economy is made up of many interdependent subsystems and the subsystems are all in different stages of development at this point. Sometimes we’ll add a new feature or tune something in the economy but without 5 other changes that impact it (which are on the way), it will feel like we’ve unbalanced the game for no reason.

He continues by promising to reveal the “larger picture,” that is, the economy as he intended it to be. He asks players to help the developers “design what this will

eventually become.” Finally, he provides a link to a design plan that discusses how he hopes the economy will develop.

During the first week after Wright released the design plan for the economy to the beta testers, there were 328 responses posted on this forum. While some posts were simple congratulations, the majority were thoughtful mixtures of criticism and praise for the game in which people discussed how to balance work and fair return within the game. Almost all of the comments were informed by the experience of playing *The Sims*. These comments directly discussed the ways *TSO* either added elements that were lacking in the previous form, or how it failed to live up to the former’s standards. In *The Sims*, while goals were tied to career advancement, players did not follow their Sim characters to their jobs. A sim-hour before the Sim character was scheduled to be at their job, a car arrived at the front door to escort him or her off to work. After a full workday, the Sim character would return home with a daily paycheck. However, in *TSO*, players were never detached from their Sim avatar, as the player experienced the virtual world through the skin of the Sim avatar. In order to create a persistent world experience, work needed to become part of the game. Therefore, while the management of leisure time was the central concern of *The Sims*, players of *TSO* became preoccupied with labor. This was accentuated by the structure of the MMORPG: there was a sense that the economy must be fair and to allow equal access to success. This was different from what players of *The Sims* were used to. Simoleons were much harder to earn in *TSO* than in *The Sims* and the ability to cheat was completely removed. The result of this change was a tension between “casual” players longing for increased access to virtual capital, and “hardcore”

players who argued a balanced and challenging economy was essential to the long-term health of an online world.

The two different styles of play clashed over their expectation of how they perceive an online economy should be modeled. The day after the initial MaxisWill post, a beta tester argued that it is too easy to make money in the game, writing, “I know tons of people complain they don’t start with enough, but really, they’re spoiled whiners about it in my opinion. Everybody wants everything the first day, and that’s not how it should work.” (Lisa Gaffney@Alphaville, “Re: Economy: The Big Picture”

11/16/02) This was reiterated in another post in which the author argued developers needed to make the game more challenging by introducing larger goals for the user to accomplish. Misty@Blazing Falls remarked, “Make Goals. Make some of the goals pretty hard to reach, then it’ll be a game.” (“Re: Economy: The Big Picture”

11/16/02) There was an idea that the world of *TSO* needs to mirror the conditions of our actual economy. The goal of the game for many dedicated (hardcore) online gamers was to spend a significant amount of time playing and observing the development of his or her Sim avatar and assets over an extended period of time. They played the game to declare their superiority within the virtual world. On the other side, however, were players new to the MMORPG genre and identified themselves as “casual gamers.” These casual gamers were often loyal fans of The Sim Franchise and represented the market that developers were attempting to target with the development of *TSO*; these were the players that were going to expand the market for the MMORPG genre. Many of these users claimed befuddlement and irritation at having to work hard in order to create their ideal homes. One poster

stated, “I probably don’t understand all the fine points of these plans. But I want to say that I signed on last week and would rather not work harder at being a Sim than I do at being a real life person.” (Doctor Ros@Alphaville, “Less Mindless Work” 11/19/02) Some posts expressed outright outrage, such as Kais A Deeya@ Calvin’s Creek who argued, “And I would rather not play at all than to struggle to find a profession that actually competes with people who don’t have real lives and can spend more time in game than in real life...I already have a job that pays! I don’t need to pay a monthly fee to come home to another one.” (“Re: Economy: The Big Picture” 11/16/02) The problem for the developers of *TSO* was one of audience: fans of MMORPGs argued that persistent worlds needed long term goals, while fans of *The Sims* wanted instant gratification. It was this tension that highlighted the inability of *TSO* to reach its perceived potential. Many users expected that they would be able to continue to play *The Sims* with the added benefit of having other players visit and praise their creative constructions. Instead, they discovered an environment that was more time intensive and difficult to master.

One approach for analyzing the problems surrounding the economy within *TSO* is to compare it to the economies of successful MMORPGs that preceded its release. In his book *Synthetic Worlds*, Edward Castronova argues that a competitive economy is essential in creating a successful online world. He writes, “One could make a world of equal economic outcomes, but then what fun would there be in finding a bargain? ...In the end, MMORPGs (like all video games) seek to create a stream of pleasant moments, and inequalities are apparently an inherent element of that.” The inequality that results between players in MMORPGs is generally accepted so long as everyone

begins with the same resources and opportunities. This point needs to be examined further in the context of *TSO* where, despite the equality at “birth,” a very vocal minority of the players claimed there was no equal ground. Casual players, who wanted similar access to the virtual economy earned by the power gamers, felt overwhelmed by their inability to compete in the virtual marketplace. While this is a divide that is accepted in most MMORPGs, the influence of *The Sims* created a unique context for *TSO*. Players were not expecting an experience defined by competition (similar to *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*); they were expecting to express their creativity in a familiar digital environment. Thus, some players began to post comments on the forum asking the developers what would happen if they shifted the focus from creating a fair economy to emphasizing the social possibilities of the game.

While I am employing a casual versus hardcore player dichotomy, I am careful not to oversimplify the complaints against *TSO* as a simple misunderstanding of the MMORPG genre. I use the binary classification to specifically highlight the experiences of a major market demographic of the game, namely fans of *The Sims* who might not have been comfortable interacting in online spaces. It is a mistake to view this group of consumers as too limited to provide helpful and constructive criticism. As they interacted with the beta version, they were able to quickly assess the aspects of the game that worked for them, and the aspects that did not. Would it be possible to construct a successful MMORPG that left the pretense of a balanced economy behind? The structure of *TSO* dictated that the more one participated in the online environment, the better chance one had to succeed. Mini-games, which are

discussed in-depth later in this chapter, dominated the early economy of *TSO*. The mini-games began to overshadow the loose structure of game play originally intended for *TSO*. What if, instead of a mini-game economy, *TSO* utilized a production-based economy in which the users “built” and “sold” the objects used to furnish the landscape of the game? Many users proposed this exact solution in their posts. For example, on 11/17/02 Great Uncle Frank stated that the game should provide only “the bare minimum items available through the MOMI¹⁴⁶ catalogue, and allow players to make the better items.” Almost immediately, another beta tester, Yukon Sam@Interhogan added that player interaction is negatively affected by the mini-game economy, stating, “You are not going to see much trade in used objects no matter how you pitch it. Give the players the means of production.” The rants and language used point to a general dissatisfaction in the way that the player was cast solely as a consumer, even within a world where working was a central theme. Players were dissatisfied because they were limited in the construction of those objects, not because the objects were digital.

The calls for reimagining the entire economy of *TSO* were not completely ignored, yet changes were never fully implemented to address these shortcomings. Two days after his initial post, MaxisWill (Wright) wrote another post to the board entitled “Thanks.” He begins the post by confessing his own lack of confidence in the economy and the probability that it won’t be fixed by the time of the game’s launch. He writes, “Most of what I’ve outlined as our ‘near term’ Economy we hope to have

¹⁴⁶ MOMI was the acronym for the Municipal Observation and Management Incorporated, *TSO*’s governing body. MOMI was basically the (virtual) public face of EA/Maxis.

working around the time of launch. I wish I could be more specific about this, but we just don't know how well things are going to progress over the next few weeks." He then addressed some of the recurring questions and concerns (including the ones presented by Great Uncle Frank and Yukon Sam) by responding:

I see many suggestions for a production-based economy. We have considered this. This is a neat idea but has some real issues with friction and bootstrapping (do you really want to visit 5 different locations looking for a particular end-table each time?). From a practical standpoint there's no way we can get something like this working in time for launch but we do consider it a great possibility for the longer-term economic design. (Thanks, 11/18/02)

Overall, the post emphasized the extent to which *TSO* was an unfinished product when it was released to the public weeks later. This fear that the game would not be ready in time for the scheduled released date was expressed by beta testers throughout this stage of testing. For example, on 11/18/2002, maxmidget@Alphaville launched his "No-Gold Campaign"; writing:

TSO is already a great game, but as Will's paper proves, it still needs a lot of balancing, debugging, and additional features. Despite the *TSO* team's great efforts, and the addition of more people to both the beta and the team, the December deadline is just too close. The beta test needs to be extended at least into January. Also a game with balancing issues such as these should not hit the shelves. The *TSO* team is great and working hard and quickly, but a lot of this is trial and error.

Four days later, Templewood@Blazing Falls shared a similar sentiment, although he chose not to frame the criticism within a cloud of praise. He warned:

Sorry..but the only December 17th I can see *TSO* being ready for prime time (after initial "Gee *WOW*" factor) is December 17th 2003, or 2004...not 2002. *TSO* has the potential to be a gaming ocean, but right now it's a shallow wading pool....Something needs to change, otherwise this is going to be the biggest flop in MMORPG gaming history. (11/22/02)

While these are two of the more critical posts, a large segment of beta players feared that Wright did not fully understand the experience they wanted from the game. Specifically, Wright's question, "Do you really want to visit 5 different locations looking for a particular end-table each time?" gave many of the beta testers the feeling that the problems with *TSO* were not being addressed. Once again, Templewood@Blazing Falls was very succinct in criticizing the plan laid out for *TSO*, answering Wright's question with a resounding "Yes!" He argued:

Why WOULDN'T I want to go to 5 different lots looking for a certain end table? I do it in real life, going from shop to shop...and usually tend to find other things I was interested in, or that caught my eye...Not only that but it gives people a REASON to go to different lots, to try to find that one item that has just the right feel for our lots. (Re: Thanks, 11/18/02)

To a large degree, beta testers felt that the producers had incorrectly prioritized the gaming experience: too much emphasis had been placed on creating a complicated and "fair" economy at the expense of offering an environment for creativity and limitless consumption.

While many of the beta testers expressed their dissatisfaction with the game's economy in regards to their inability to earn enough simoleons to thrive within the virtual world, others connected the way in which its shortcomings limited social interaction. Success for *TSO* hinged on creating an effective social space; it was essential for *TSO* to build an environment that truly promoted user interaction. Unlike *The Sims*, which was a game tailored to the individual, *TSO* could only succeed if a vibrant community developed. Where *The Sims* was developed as a game, *TSO* was developed as a gaming environment. This distinction affected the

meaning of play in each of these software systems. In *The Sims*, the user plays the game; in *TSO* the user becomes an active participant in a virtual world. Johan Huizinga's writing on play is useful for understanding how the movements of individuals enact the game.¹⁴⁷ Situated in a discussion of sacred rituals, Huizinga describes the action of play in this context as reflective of "something acted" or "an act action." Within this context, play as action creates drama, which includes instances of performance or contest. Play becomes a dramatic act as action occurs within the imaginary world as created by the software.¹⁴⁸ Huizinga names this connection between ritual play and drama "the dromenon." The dromenon is a helpful concept in understanding dramatic action in *TSO*. Operators are in complete control of their Sim avatars, choosing their movements, actions, and, most importantly, words. Understanding the landscape of *TSO* as a dramatic space is essential, because of the level of interaction between different operators through the use of the software and technology.

As previously discussed, game play in *TSO* was actually very limited. There were elements that attempted to replicate game play in *The Sims*, such as the requirement to fulfill the various needs of Sim characters and Sim avatars (hunger, cleanliness, entertainment, etc.) However, these elements were changed to reflect the focus on player interaction in *TSO*. Game play elements that could be completed by a single user were de-emphasized. For example, Sim avatars didn't need to go to the bathroom as frequently. Also, the software included elements that promoted

¹⁴⁷ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1950.

¹⁴⁸ Alex Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

socializing. A Sim avatar would make more money and improve their skills more quickly if he or she was on a lot that had reached its occupancy limit.

Several elements new to *TSO* reflected the push toward the encouragement of social interaction. For example, one of the quickest ways to earn simoleons in *TSO* was through participation with two multi-player mini-games referred to as “Pizza” and “Map.” Each object required cooperative play where players would have to work together in order to complete a simple task. In “Pizza” four players had to add the proper ingredients in order to correctly cook the pizza that was ordered for delivery. “Map” required two players. One player had access to the completed map and had to direct the player with the incomplete map through the maze. The use of these mini-games reflects the desire of the producers to create a more social space. In many ways, this attempt to create social interaction had the opposite effect. For example, the mini-games led to cooperation, but the level of social interaction that actually took place was quite low. Because most players were trying to accumulate virtual wealth as quickly as possible, socializing while playing “Map” or “Pizza” was discouraged; the perception was that being friendly interfered with time that could be spent earning simoleons. The role of each individual was to perform a specific task that would lead to a reward for the group; everything else was viewed as working against that specific goal. Drama in *TSO* primarily occurred when players were not engaged in active game play. This is not to say that they were not playing the game, but that the dramatic role-playing elements were not facilitated by actual game play. In this way, *TSO* was much more closely tied to the technology of a chat room than to computer and video games not part of the MMORPG genre. Game play often got in the way of

dramatic interaction. This condition also became a major complaint during the beta test. For example, on 11/20/02 Mary Rose@Jolly Pines expressed her frustration with the game by writing:

The few weeks I have been playing *TSO* I have only had time to make one “real” sim friend. All the rest of the time we can’t talk because we are concentrating on what we need to win pizza or code. I have been feeling that the game is not social enough, and that I might as well play offline.

This post echoed a common critique against the mini-game economy as interfering with the promise of creating *TSO* into a social space. Comments stressed how most of the time spent in the game was dedicated to earning simoleons and attempts of socializing were being met with resistance. Happygoodies@Interhogan argues that, instead of getting a chance to socialize, communication is limited to saying “‘ls lc’ over and over”¹⁴⁹ (11/17/02). This point was reiterated by Joceln deWinter@Alphaville who argued that while owning a pizza machine was one of the only ways to create a successful property, she couldn’t “stand having a big moneymaker” on her lot because “the constant spam of ingredients and letters ruin the true interactions going on in the house” (11/17/02). While the idea behind pizza and map were to create elements that required social interaction, the result was quite the opposite.

The mini-game economy not only worked against social interaction in *TSO*, but also limited creativity. As an architectural software program, *The Sims* allowed users to create some rather elaborate and beautiful homes. Players had similar expectations in

¹⁴⁹ “‘ls lc” refers to the mini-game of “Pizza” where four players work together to build a specific sized pizza. “‘ls” means “large sauce” and “lc” means “large cheese”. Players would have to communicate with each other in order to construct a completed pizza, which included sauce, cheese, dough, and a topping.

TSO; there was a desire to express their creativity in an interactive and immersive environment. The goal for most of these players was to build their dream house. While this was possible, it was a much more difficult endeavor than they had experienced playing *The Sims*. As such, there were many posts arguing the mini-game economy should be abandoned for an environment where players could consume and build outside the limitations of a structured economy. For example, Lleana@Alphaville argued, “The more I play this game (at least 5 hours a day and over a month now), the more I find it a chore. My vision of *TSO* is to be able to afford to build a dream house for my sim as well as meet great people who play the game.” She could not understand the game’s value or why she needed to pay “\$50 plus monthly fees,” warning that she was on the verge of quitting *TSO* and returning to *The Sims*. Her concluding remark points to the notion that the game needed to be completely overhauled in order to survive. She continued, “I’d hate for Maxis to have invested all this money and resources to create a game that doesn’t live up to the consumer’s expectations.” (11/21/02) Almost exactly the same argument presented by Lleana@Alphaville is made by Gidge McClain@Blazing Falls, who wrote:

I really thought this would be so much more dynamic, and would have so many more design options and objects than all *The Sims* offline games combined. Silly me! I’m bored, quite frankly. My whole game experience is money, money, money...and glorified chat room encounters. Who cares?! I thought we’d be able to build amazing dream properties (like we did in *Sims* offline), and then we’d have the thrill of interacting with real people on our properties, seeing their reactions to our creativity, seeing how well our designs “traffic” with others, etc. So far, I know already that I won’t be paying for this game if it doesn’t really change. I’m just bummed! All of the adults I know feel the same way also, we have been driven by our love of creative design [which has been stripped from us], and this is a far cry from what we wanted. (11/21/02)

The focus on succeeding in the game in order to create a “dream house” created a pattern in which accruing simoleons became the most common style of play. As such, houses that enabled players to earn money fast became the most successful properties, and any house that did not perform this specific function was largely ignored. The one-stop-shop property, where players could work, fulfill their needs, and immediately get back to work dominated the landscape of the game: all of the properties looked similar and featured the same objects that would make visitors the most money. In her post on 11/18/02, Crystal Breeze@Interhogan argued that creativity was not rewarded in the game, writing, “I was just starting to think about NOT buying the game, even though I love *The Sims* and have spent months looking forward to *TSO*. I was frustrated because no one showed up at my “Offbeat” lot for my poetry contest (\$1000 first prize), because they were all too busy making pizza.” Players expressed a growing concern that creativity, which had been at the center of their experience with *The Sims*, was being replaced with an environment that only rewarded standardization and economic success.



Image 23: This screenshot displays a good example of how houses were constructed in *TSO* for maximum earning. The rooms flow from satisfying one Sim avatar need to another. www.virtualworldsreview.com.

Probably the most criticized aspect of *TSO* was the game's roommate system. One of the questions that initially confronted developers was how to translate *The Sims* into a truly social environment. While socializing was a central theme of *The Sims*, its suburban context pointed to an important issue that must be addressed when transforming it into an online game: suburbia consists of a collection of private spaces and social interaction often only occurs in areas such as common streets and sidewalks, community buildings, and localized institutions of commerce. The overwhelming commitment displayed by users to building their dream houses could possibly lead to isolation. This is highlighted by a previous critique, which

mentioned that space outside the “home” simply did not exist for players in *TSO*. The solution to this problem, as presented by the developers, was to code the game in a way that privileged, not the American dream of sovereign home ownership, but rather a more communal view of cohabitation.

Because cohabitation was privileged by the game’s software, the economy was very difficult to master as a single player. Cooperative play was a central goal for the developers and an essential condition for successful game play. One specific example of how the game’s roommate system worked was its connection to the potential size of a lot. The initial size of a lot in *TSO* was very small in relation to the lots available in *The Sims*. The size of a lot determined the amount of space one was provided in order to build his or her home. In *TSO*, players could pay a certain amount of simoleons to increase their lot size, thus enabling them to build a bigger house. However, the cost was related to the number of users occupying the property: it is very expensive for a single user to increase the size of a lot, but the cost decreased for each additional roommate living on the lot. In this way, players were encouraged to live with other players, and to delay their desire for individual home ownership. Wright described the potential benefits of the roommate system prior to the beta version in a May 2002 promotional essay entitled “Roommates from Heaven or Hell?” Wright warned that players would no longer be able to use the cheat codes commonly employed in *The Sims*, and that it would be much more difficult to obtain a bulk sum of money in a short amount of time. In terms of strategy, he argued that players should seriously consider using the roommate system. He writes that “[roommates] can give you a tremendous economic head start on players that chose to

“go it alone.”¹⁵⁰ The benefits included gaining the ability to keep a lot open to visitors for a longer period of time, which could result in larger bonuses, and the option of pooling resources in order to purchase more expensive and beneficial objects. He also mentioned that it would be easier to increase the size of a lot if the player chose to live with other players. Wright presented the roommate system as a potentially interesting social experiment. Clearly, the goals of *TSO* differed from the goals of *The Sims*; part of the fun and challenge of *TSO* emerged from its condition of cooperative play. Wright’s hope was to balance cooperation and competition within the game. Living with roommates encouraged players to work for unified goals (making their shared lot successful), while at the same time planning for his or her ultimate desire to create their own lot.

While the benefits of living with roommates were clear, not everyone was enthusiastic about this element of the game. First and foremost, the roommate structure threatened the idea of architectural design autonomy, which was at the core of *The Sims*. In *TSO*, every player who lived on a lot had the ability to make changes to the look of the built structure. This meant that anyone who lived on a lot had the ability to undo the work of the people with whom they lived. So, while the roommate structure was advertised as beneficial, many players voiced a great amount of discomfort at the thought of having to trust virtual strangers. Players wanted complete control over the look of their lots; the design of the game ran counter to that desire. One of the first major rants against *TSO* during the closed beta was related to

¹⁵⁰ Wright, “Roommates from Heaven or Hell?”
http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimonline/features/social_may02/jsp, May 2002,
(accessed 11/21/02)

the way in which the roommate system created an undesirable experience. On 10/15/02, Blythe@Alphaville argued:

I have been looking forward to *TSO* coming out for the longest time!...I can't say that I am extremely thrilled with this game. I know that I haven't played very long, but I hate that we hardly get any money at all! I couldn't even build a house. Everywhere I read that I will "benefit" from having a roommate, but that is not true! You have to have a roommate...This frustrates me so much because I never wanted a roommate...I just wanted to build my own house and have my own life! I am spending all of my time in other people's houses trying to build up my skill because I have no money! I have played practically all day and can say that I haven't used any of the interactive features with another sim (greeting, talking). Everything that I enjoyed about *The Sims* is taken out of this game.

Numerous other posts from the closed beta test expressed similar frustration at the way the game's code punished players attempting to operate outside of the roommate system. For example, Kersti Acura@Alphaville wrote that she would not buy the game because "not everyone wants a roommate." She continued, "I had a plan to build my dream house ALONE NOW that is not possible because I need 5 roommates to even get all of the land. What were you game developers thinking?" (10/6/02). Additionally, throughout the open beta, there were calls from players to abolish the penalty against those wishing to build their own house. On November 17, 2002, in response to Wright's follow-up post, Brynne@Interhogan complained because Wright failed to comment on the criticisms against the roommate system. She responded, "I still feel that those who wish to own a place without roommates shouldn't be penalized so drastically." Medea@Alphaville echoed this sentiment on November 18, 2002, when she wrote:

I may as well forget about playing this game once it goes on sale, because I won't be able to play it any other way than being

forced to interact in a sustained, serious way with total strangers and worse, my game play will be DEPENDENT upon their reliability and agreeability. Would you want to pay to operate a virtual business with most of the random people you encounter in a chat room?

The following day she wrote an angrier note, stating that the developers had stripped players of the ability to truly make the game their own, which is how the game was being marketed. She argued, that the roommate system forced players to play the game in a very specific and limited way. She restated her position:

It smacks of condescension. Most people don't want to be told how to play what still amounts to entertainment. A lot of the game proposals also seem designed to 'trick' players into playing a certain way (namely, forced socialization, and forced clicking of certain animations). We will have much more fun, I'm sure if trusted to provide our own entertainment parameters.

Medea@Alphaville was equally upset with the way the code had structured her gaming experience and pushed for a more open system, one in which the players could decide how they wanted to play the game. Some players began to understand the attempt of the roommate system as imposing a collective gaming style and, as such, argued *TSO* promoted a "communist" ideology. In an 11/19/02 post by Comrade Ivan Petrovich@Dan's Grove, the author called another poster a communist because she argued that the developers were correct in their attempts to "make people work together." The claims of communism were then picked up by several other beta testers in their attempts to have the developers remove the roommate system. The historical condition of *TSO* emerging from and for a capitalist consumer market was related to its limited success in attempting to promote a more socialist style of ownership.

In addition to concerns about losing autonomy over the design of their lots, there was also a growing (and sometimes warranted) distrust over how other players used the power that being a roommate afforded them. The core issue was that the structure of the roommate system was inherently unbalanced. Owning a lot gave the player more power over the property than those considered roommates. While everyone had the power to build and destroy the structures on the lot, only the owner could grant and revoke roommate status. This created an unfair power dynamic that could be exploited for personal gain. Several of the beta testers reported abuses within this system. For example, in a post dated October 20, 2002, Jaisin@Alphaville claimed that the owner of a property kicked her out without notice after she had spent her simoleons helping to build the house. That same day, Kat@Alphaville reported a similar abuse. She wrote, “I don’t mean to be bitter but when a house owner takes you on as a roommate, takes your \$6,000 toward a pizza maker then kicks you out while you’re offline...it’s just not right!” As I discuss in a later chapter, the abuse enabled by the roommate structure was disastrous for roommates and placed owners in a position of serious risk. Players exploited the system and formed a “mafia” where individuals would infiltrate homes, and then threaten to erase the entire structure if they refused to pay a “tribute.” While the roommate system worked for some players, the general consensus was that it added an unnecessary and contentious component to the game play experience.

Even though many of the beta testers claimed that socializing was limited by the economy and the structure of the game’s code, players continued to socialize. A common pattern for social interaction in *TSO* was that, after players either reached or

abandoned their hopes for building a property, they turned to role-playing as a source for their creative outlet. In understanding *TSO* as a social rather than a gaming space, Johan Huizinga's work on the centrality of play in relationship to ritual emerges as an important theoretical perspective.¹⁵¹ Perhaps the clearest example was that weddings became a common ceremony performed in the game. These events were usually performed with a degree of humor as players enacted the various rites. Often, at least one Sim avatar would object to the marriage and a dramatic fight would ensue. The weddings were playful and the result had absolutely no effect on game play. The software did not recognize marriages, and thus they had no meaning outside of the performative value assigned to them by the active participants. The role-playing aspect of the environment, which while not directly attached to game play as defined by the coded rules, typically produced the most enjoyable experiences.



Image 24: This screenshot is a promotional image of a wedding in *TSO*. www.tothegame.com.

¹⁵¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1950.

Several beta testers argued that while the game was faulty, its real potential could emerge when players no longer worried about making money. Stephen Thomas@Alphaville stated, “The fun I have had in the game comes from interacting with other sims and role-playing.” Similarly Kais A Deeya@Calvin’s Creek complained that she wanted to use the game for role-playing but that goal interfered with her ability to succeed in the game. She wrote:

And lets consider the role-play aspect—I would like to open a club but what is really going to draw people there? To have fun dancing? You can watch a fish tank in your own house and get fun up much faster than looking for a club, leaving your property, entering theirs. The only thing that would make it a business is for the owner is to charge entrance fees. Sorry, I will buy the fish tank instead. (Re: Economy: The Big Picture, 11/19/02)

In the *TSO* experience, game play was ultimately limiting the creation of a playful environment. Would the space have been more social, creative, and interactive if the gaming elements were de-emphasized?

If *TSO* had created a more open and less competitive space, would it have been a success? While there is no way to completely answer this question, it is important to understand why this option seemed problematic for the developers and a segment of the beta testers. There was a general fear that if the gaming elements were de-emphasized, then *TSO* would become nothing more than a chat room. Jay Harris@Blazing Falls echoed this sentiment, arguing that the game should be harder: if players “have everything” they want, then “what’s the point of the game? To meet people? You can go to chat rooms to do that” (10/19/02). Misty@Blazing Falls made a similar argument, “If its too easy to make money, then *TSO* just becomes a

big pretty chat room.” With more social opportunities, would *TSO* simply have become a remediation of a chat room?

Central questions emerge: What is the relationship between *TSO* and other new media technologies, such as the chat room? How did *The Sims*’ framework shape *TSO*’s development and reception? While its relationship to the other games in The Sim Franchise is essential, *TSO* attempted to do something completely different from its predecessors. Likewise, although *TSO* was marketed as a MMORPG, the developers’ goal was to create an experience unlike any MMORPG that came before it. Thus, the relationship between *TSO* and the fantasy-based MMORPG is ultimately limited.

What is important, however, is the confusion the marriage of *The Sims* and the MMORPG genre caused for *TSO*’s designers, developers, beta testers, and consumers. If *TSO* was priced and marketed as a MMORPG, then there would be certain expectations from the consumer. The social experience at the center of *TSO* was going to be continually compared by the consumer to the type of gaming experience offered by previous MMORPGs like *EverQuest*. Anything less would be considered insufficient. While beta testers and reviewers focused on chat rooms, I argue that Multi User Domains (MUDs) and MUD Object Oriented (MOOs) provide a more relevant comparison for *TSO*.¹⁵² By understanding *TSO* as a remediation of

¹⁵² MUDs are the larger category that includes MOOs. The major difference is reflected by the nature of the programming languages in each. MUDs were the earlier forms and user development was fairly limited in terms of programming the world. The title MOO refers to the “object oriented” nature of the MUD (MOO = MUD Object Oriented), where users are able to program almost every virtual object they encounter. For more information see Write Design Online—MUDs and MOOs at <http://www.writedesignonline.com/resources/writing/mudandmoos/index.html> (Accessed, 6/18/09).

MUDs and MOOs, developers might have been able to construct and market a much more interesting and successful product.

The connection between MMORPGs and MUDs has been under-theorized.

Discussing *EverQuest* in his book on education and video games, James Paul Gee links the worlds of MMORPGs and MUDs. He writes:

When online play first began, players moved through dungeon role-playing as different types of characters, but the universe through which they moved was composed entirely of text. Each player read text that told him or her what was there to be seen or done or what the effects were of various actions the players had taken. There were no pictures, only words. Now players move through fully realized graphically beautiful, three-dimensional worlds.¹⁵³

While Gee does not expand on this connection, the link between MMORPGs and MUDs is essential for understanding the development of *TSO*. Like the early MMORPGs, the first MUDs were created as environments dedicated to the exploration of fantastical worlds filled with heroes and monsters. MUDs began as remediations of the famous fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*.¹⁵⁴

When the networked applications for the computer were being created in the late 1970s, many of the programmers were self-professed fans of *Dungeons & Dragons*.¹⁵⁵ In his essay, “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory,” Aarseth discusses how

¹⁵³ James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

¹⁵⁴ *Dungeons & Dragons* was developed and gained subcultural popularity during the early 1970s. For more about the connection between MUDs and *Dungeons & Dragons*, see Sherry Turkle’s *Life on the Screen*. Turkle argues that even though there are no computers structuring the experience, the world created by *Dungeons & Dragons* is “permeated with the spirit of a computer program.” The rule books are expansive and completely dictate every situation that might emerge through game play. See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Simon & Schuster, 1997.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

computer networks and the use of modems allowed for the creation of “different types of textual communication.”¹⁵⁶ He writes, “At the end of the 1970s with the spread of the highly popular *Adventure*¹⁵⁷ over the networks, it was to be expected that someone should combine instant textual communication and adventure gaming.”¹⁵⁸ The resulting program, named *Zork*, was the first MUD and was developed by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle in 1979 at Essex University.¹⁵⁹ In *Zork*, players scored points by defeating other players in combat or by discovering hidden treasures.¹⁶⁰ The computer networks allowed for the creation of a *Dungeons & Dragons* style gaming environment that could be played by anyone with a computer and a modem.

¹⁵⁶ Espen J. Aarseth, “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory,” in George Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

¹⁵⁷ *Adventure* was the first interactive fiction; the history of which is detailed in Nick Montfort, *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*, The MIT Press, 2003.

¹⁵⁸ Espen J. Aarseth, “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory” in George Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

¹⁵⁹ See Ann Kovalchick and Kara Dawson (eds.), *Education and Technology: An Encyclopedia*, ABL-CLIO, 2003; L. Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*, University of California Press, 2002; and Richard Bartle, *Designing Virtual Worlds*, New Riders Games, 2003.

¹⁶⁰ Espen J. Aarseth, “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory” in George Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

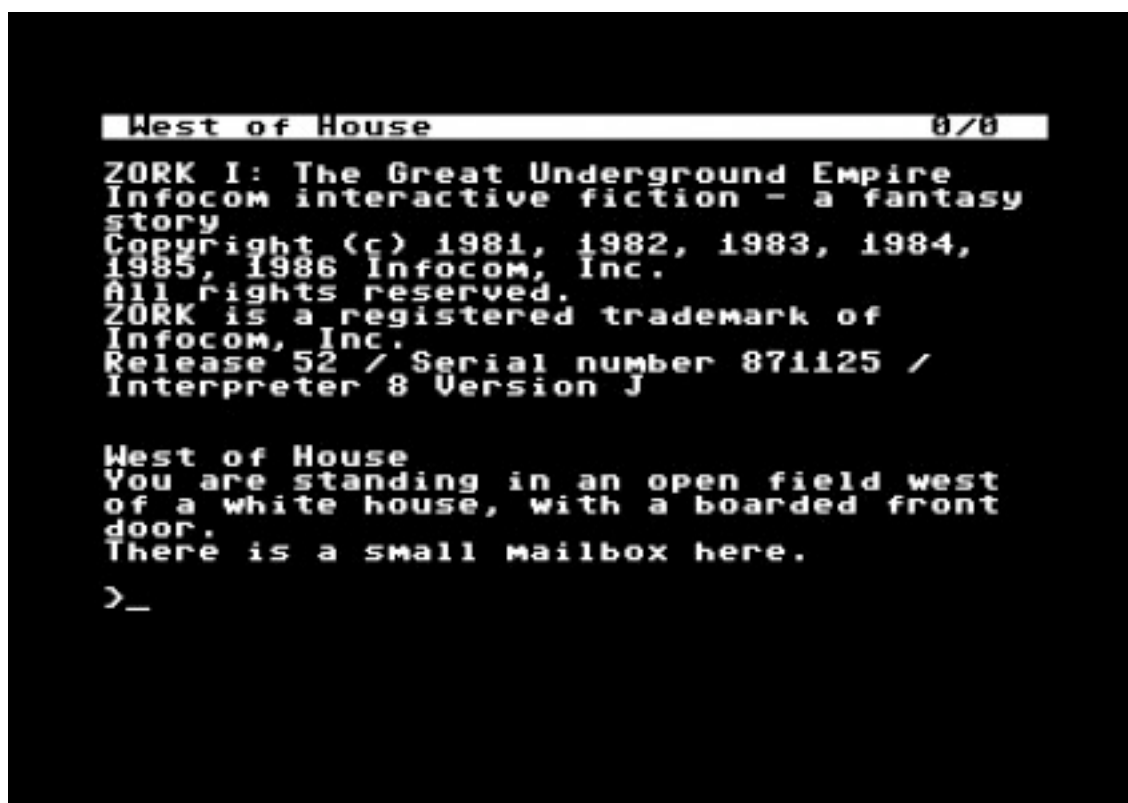


Image 25: Screenshot of text-based Zork.

Where the style and theme of *EverQuest* can be directly linked to *Zork*, *TSO* is more closely connected with several MUDs developed after *Zork*, which attempted to distance the form from its gaming and fantasy origins. The most important example was *TinyMUD*, which was developed by James Aspen as a student at Carnegie-Melon University. *TinyMUD* was different from *Zork* because it emphasized the social potential of the technology by completely removing its gaming aspects.¹⁶¹ The most significant feature added by Aspen was the ability for users to help create the landscape in which they were participating. With basic coding skills, users could “expand the MUD’s textual descriptions, adding their own landscapes to the

¹⁶¹ L. Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*, University of California Press, 2002.

topography of the MUD.”¹⁶² *TinyMUD* succeeded because it connected with the increasing population of users gaining access to computer networks in the 1980s who might not have had any interest in fantasy “hack and slash” gaming. As Kendall notes,

For those who discovered mudding in its early days (mainly college students), much of the appeal came from the excitement of being able to create virtual worlds through text as well as from the novelty of communicating in “real time” with large numbers of geographically remote people.¹⁶³

A growing community of computer network users wanted to express their creativity and explore their identities without having to pretend they were living in a world populated with elves, wizards, and dragons. The popularity of *TinyMUD*, as well as other subsequent social MUDs, led to a movement to change the term Multi-User Dungeon to Multi-User Domain in order to further distance the technology from its *Dungeons & Dragons* roots.

What impeded *TSO* from expanding the participation base for MMORPGs in the same manner that *TinyMUD* accomplished for MUDs was, in part, an issue of economics. MUDs (and later MOOs) were primarily developed at universities, and were not conceptualized as commercial products. This is not to say they existed outside of an economic structure. Bandwidth concerns, as well as privileges to access and knowledge, are imbedded in economics. The transition from MUDs developed by individuals interested in creating and using new technologies for entertainment and experimentation to MMORPGs, where corporations are operating under the

¹⁶² Espen J. Aarseth, “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory” in George Landow (ed.), *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.

¹⁶³ L. Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*, University of California Press, 2002.

desire for profit, is central. While *Zork* was not “pay for play,” the early commercial MMORPGs, like *Ultima Online*, and *EverQuest*, were able to connect to an already popular fantasy computer gaming market. These games promised users an experience similar to what they were already used to, with the added component of online play. The connection of *TSO* to The Sim Franchise was the reason that many felt it too would be a success. However, the experience offered to users did not meet the expectations created by The Sim Franchise, and many players could not justify the economic investment needed for participation. This was especially true for those players who saw *TSO*’s major contribution to The Sim Franchise as nothing more than a graphically enhanced chat room.

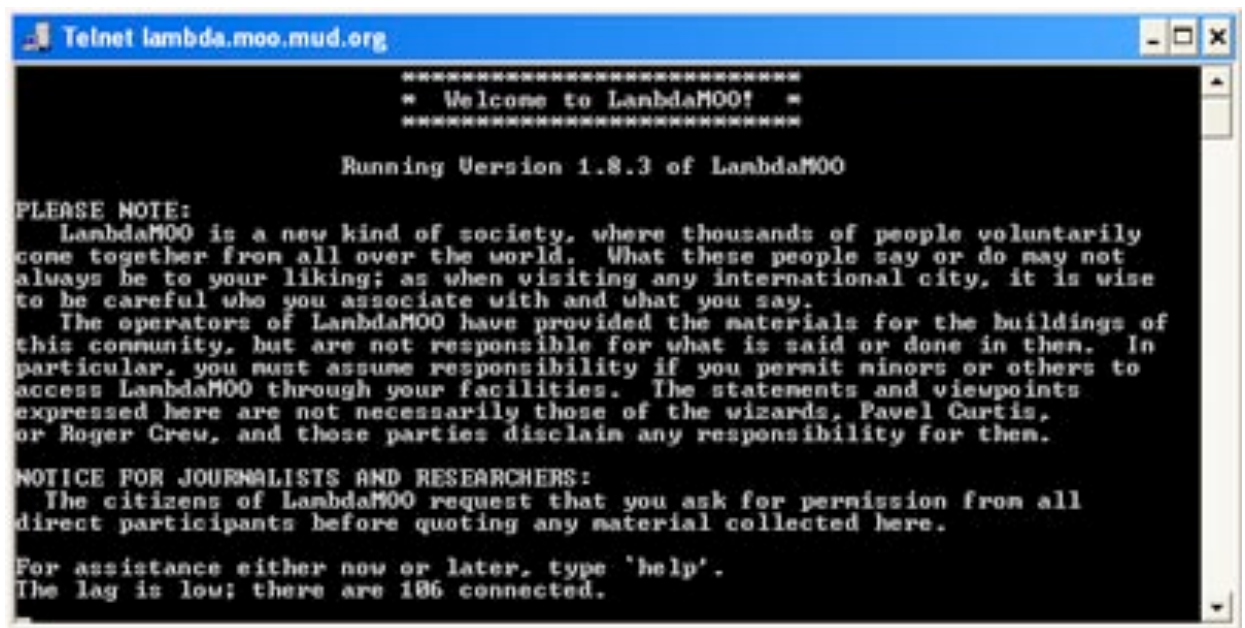


Image 26: Screenshot from the welcome screen of LambdaMOO.

It would be a mistake to argue that *TSO* failed because it did not provide users with a fun game or the tools to create an interesting world. There were many users who saw great value in *TSO*. However, as participation declined, the game was eventually cancelled. It was apparent that *TSO* could not succeed under the economic model

from which it was created. What would an alternative pricing model for a social online world look like? The answer, in part, can be found in *Second Life*, a digital online environment released one year after *TSO*. Although *Second Life* is free to download and to play, developers created benefits for players who decided to make the economic investment by purchasing a subscription plan. This structure helped to create a much more open and creative experience.

Chapter 6: *The Sims Online Versus Second Life: Remediating Life*

The beta test for *The Sims Online (TSO)* revealed that potential consumers had major reservations concerning the software's ability to create a successful virtual environment. While the beta documents were instrumental in uncovering some of the specific reasons for the failure, they were also important in that they provided a unique window into the process of virtual world building. Several questions emerge: How do the negotiated debates and decisions surrounding this process reflect our desires for our online and offline experiences and environments? What can the act of designing and redesigning a world tell us about our hopes and promises for the development of our identities, culture, society, economic systems, and forms of governance? Moreover, what types of experiences are consumers seeking and gaining in their exploration of these virtual worlds? How do we evaluate the success of virtual world building? What qualities make a virtual world successful? This chapter focuses not in understanding *TSO* as limited in relationship to its status as an MMORPG, but rather in its inability to create an immersive and thriving virtual world. Why did *TSO* fail to create an effective online space for social interaction?¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ There is certainly a case to be made that the gaming elements in *TSO* were undeveloped, especially in relationship to the larger MMORPG market. However, I argue that the problem was not the inability to create a successful MMORPG, but rather that the decision to model a version of *The Sims* based on the structures traditionally presented by MMORPGs was a key mistake. The question should not have been, "How could the producers make *TSO* into a successful MMORPG?" but rather, "How could the producers create an online environment that successfully capitalized on the creativity and energy of *The Sims*' fans?" For a longer discussion concerning how to evaluate a successful MMORPG see Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

It is important to explore the qualities that create a successful social online environment in order to fully understand the reasons for *TSO*'s failure. To do this, I present a comparative analysis between *TSO* and *Second Life*. The latter is considered a success not only by its users, but also by academic and mainstream critics.¹⁶⁵ While I will be focusing on the differences between *TSO* and *Second Life* in this chapter in order to explore their divergent paths, there are also important similarities. For example, both software titles offered users the tools to completely construct the virtual environment. When these worlds were initially presented to the user, they were presented as blank slates. Participants largely controlled the development of the virtual landscape. Additionally, participants in *Second Life* and *TSO* expressed their identity through creating avatars, which become the representational surrogates for navigating the virtual world. Finally, *TSO* and *Second Life* were the first two major attempts to create visually directed virtual worlds beyond those of the narrow fantasy narrative represented by *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*.

Second Life was not an attempt to improve upon the technology or the experience of *TSO*. While *Second Life* was not launched until June 23, 2002, a little more than six months after *TSO*, both programs were developed concurrently. Philip Rosedale was

¹⁶⁵ According to the statistics available on the official *Second Life* website, as of 2008 there were over 15 million registered accounts. This, however, does not mean there are 15 million participants, because many of these accounts are seemingly inactive. The best estimate is that there are roughly 40,000 "residents" inhabiting *Second Life* at any given point in time. For current statistics, visit http://secondlife.com/whatis/economy_stats.php. Linden Labs enjoys significant profits from *Second Life* and there are numerous accounts of participants earning what would be considered full-time salaries through their involvement with the game. Also see Paul Sloan, "The Virtual Rockefeller: Anshe Chung is raking in real money in an unreal online world" *Business 2.0* http://money.cnn.com/magazines/business2/business2_archive/2005/12/01/8364581/index.htm (retrieved on 2/23/2008). There is also an increasing amount of academic interest in *Second Life*, including Tom Boellstorff's *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Princeton University Press, 2008.

the creative force behind the development of *Second Life*. In 1999, he formed the company Linden Lab. While the interest in creating immersive three-dimensional computer mediated experiences was always central, the initial goal of the company was to build a new hardware system that could present an adequate virtual reality simulator. Over time, the company began shifting its focus from hardware to software. The result was *Linden World*, a fully rendered online three-dimensional environment where users could participate in simple games and socialize. In 2001, after a meeting with investors, Rosedale noticed that the people playing with *Linden World* were more excited about using the technology for collaboration and creative expression than for competing in the objective driven games. In turn, Rosedale decided to abandon the focus on gaming, and instead attempted to create a software system that would encourage users to generate content and form online communities. From this decision, *Second Life* was born.¹⁶⁶

The importance of Rosedale's decision to de-emphasize the gaming elements of *Linden World* in the development of *Second Life* cannot be understated, especially when contrasted with *TSO*. In *Second Life*, the decision to base the economic system on user creativity instead of the traditional MMORPG structure enabled users to develop unique experiences.¹⁶⁷ Unlike *TSO*, in *Second Life*, users were not required

¹⁶⁶ For more information visit the official *Second Life* website (<http://secondlife.com>). See also, Wagner James Au, *The Making of Second Life*, New York, Collins, 2006, and the YouTube video "The Origin of *Second Life* and its Relation to Real Life." Originally published on November 22, 2006 at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0t1XR-LrgyM>

¹⁶⁷ In the conclusion of the previous chapter, I argued that out of the beta test for *TSO* emerged a desire to allow users to "play" in the virtual world without the limitations dictated by its status as a game. Once a player utilized a specific strategy to succeed in *TSO*, other players would quickly begin to emulate and replicate a similar strategy. So, instead of rewarding creativity, the rewards were distributed based upon copying someone else's

to participate in a game to obtain the economic capital needed to build their desired object. The financial constraints normally associated with digital MMORPG construction were stripped away, enabling any player to build practically anything they could imagine. This was the desire stated by numerous beta testers in *TSO* who wanted to express their creativity without being constrained by structure of the game. The distinction between *TSO* as a gaming environment and *Second Life* as a social world is most clearly present in that *TSO* participants were officially referred to as “players” or “users” while *Second Life* participants became “residents.” Such terms denote the difference between playing a game and living in a virtual world.

By examining the economic structures employed by *TSO* as a gaming environment and *Second Life* as a virtual world, one can begin to uncover major differences between the two software titles. In *TSO*, economic success was connected to performing well in the context of the game. While money could be transferred among players, most of the currency was controlled by an invisible system that had the ability to distribute a seemingly infinite amount of capital into the online environment. A player in *TSO* needed to obtain a large amount of in-game capital in order to build a fully realized property. Every aspect of building a property had a cost associated with it. This included buying the lot, building the structure, and furnishing the property. One of the major ways that players gained capital in *TSO* was by interacting with job objects. In these instances, money was not transferred from player to player, but rather originated from the invisible monetary system and was

playing style. This limited the role of creativity when interacting with the software system. The parameters of the game—its code—affected the choices players made in constructing the virtual world.

transferred to the account of the successful players. For example, a player could decide to build a gnome by interacting with the workbench job object. After a predetermined amount of time, a completed gnome appeared on top of the workbench. Upon clicking the gnome, players learned that they now had the option of selling the gnome for a predetermined amount of simoleons. It is important to note, especially when contrasted to *Second Life*, that this was the only option presented to the player. Players could not negotiate its price, or attempt to sell it to another player. Additionally, the gnome was completely uniform in appearance: the code dictated what it would look like. The player had no input over what color the gnome's hat should be nor could he or she decide to create trolls instead of gnomes.



Image 27: Sim avatars "grinding" gnomes in TSO. www.virtualworldsreview.com.



Image 28: Another house in *TSO* dedicated to “grinding” gnomes.
www.virtualworldsreview.com.

From this economic structure, a key strategy for economic success emerged: “grinding.” “Grinding” refers to players repeating a simple task over and over again in an attempt to accumulate the desired reward.¹⁶⁸ Game play was reduced to an operation cycle, in which players cycle through a series of clicks. In this case, every five minutes the player would click on the gnome to sell it, and then click on the workbench to begin the process anew. The complaint during *TSO*’s beta stage was that grinding was a successful strategy for earning simoleons; it also had several negative effects on the game. First and foremost, grinding effectively halted social

¹⁶⁸ The reward does not have to be monetary. For example, in *EverQuest* status is attached to the level a character has reached. In order to level (to reach the next achievement status), players need to gain a specific amount of Experience Points (XP).

interaction. Even in the cases of “Pizza” and “Map”, where inter-player communication was essential to success, social interactions were discouraged as they slowed the speed of the grind. In addition, the repetitive process of pointing and clicking did not translate into a fun or challenging experience. While this complaint has been leveled against MMORPGs in general, at least games such as *EverQuest* present players with the opportunity to strategize in order to survive the encounter: there is a level of risk associated with attacking a wild creature. In *TSO*, the outcome was always the same. While there was a level of strategy associated with mastering the multiplayer job objects, once the strategy was developed it became second nature. Finally, the grinding process emphasized the lack of creativity associated with game play. While the ultimate goal of building a house emphasized the creative drive, the player must first spend hours of his or her time pointing and clicking through the pattern defined by the grinding process. Ultimately, game play in *TSO* was reduced to menial labor: in order to create, the player had to first engage in the mindless repetition built into the structure of the game.

Economic success in *Second Life* operates under a much different system. While it is similar to *TSO* in that its digital nature allows for an infinite amount of capital to be infused into the economy, *Second Life* is structured to encourage the development and growth of a resident-to-resident economy. By making the means of production accessible, residents are encouraged to build and create anything they can imagine. *Second Life* capitalizes upon the digital context of the MMORPG, arguing that all resources within the structure can be reduced to code, and therefore are limitless, and in essence, without economic value. If all resources can be reduced to a series of

code, then why should it be more expensive to build a virtual object out of gold than out of copper? Scarcity does not need to exist in a virtual world. In *Second Life*, this does not mean that there is a total lack of economy, but rather that the economic structure has been altered to reflect the unique characteristics of a virtual environment. Since everyone has equal access to resources, a player's ability to utilize the tools provided by the software to craft a desirable product and/or experience defines his or her capital and worth. Participants are not rewarded for the length of time they can repeat a simple task, but rather for how creative they are in manipulating the code. In this way, *Second Life* most closely resembles the structure of the "free market." This economy works partly because Linden Labs decided to relinquish their rights of intellectual property: residents are given ownership rights to everything they create in *Second Life*. Ownership offers a deeper connection between the producer and his or her creation. The economy functions and thrives because of this: despite the fact that everything is virtual; residents are given economic and creative control over the fruits of their labor.

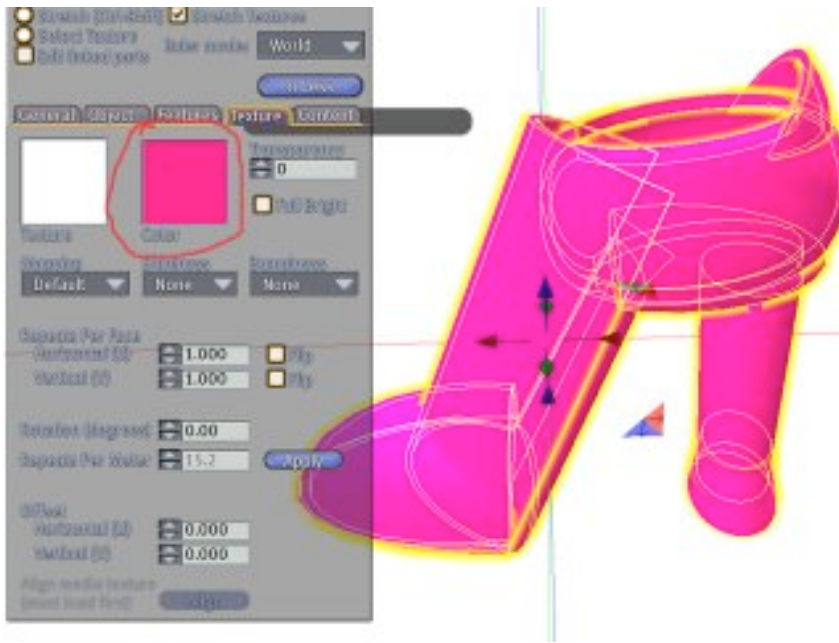


Image 29: *Second Life* utilizes complex "authoring" programs in order to create virtual commodities. In this example, the user is designing a pair of shoes. www.mermaididiaries.com.

The economies in each example are dictated by the different experiences they offered to their users. Because *TSO* attempted to create a world dictated by the structure and conditions of a game, participants needed to feel that there was a level playing field.

In a game, everyone should be given the same opportunities to win. *Second Life*, on the other hand, is not presenting a game, but rather a "*Second Life*," which reminds us that the world we inhabit in our material lives is not necessarily fair.¹⁶⁹ *TSO* is a remediation of a game, and *Second Life* is attempting to remediate our lived

¹⁶⁹ One way of thinking about this difference is by relating it to John Huizinga's concept of the "game of life" in his book *Homo Ludens*. Huizinga emphasizes the importance of play as a cultural practice, viewing it as providing the participant with both the ability to step out of "real" life "into a temporary sphere of activity" which allows us a degree of freedom not afforded in our ordinary contexts. At the same time, he also views play as a defining element of ritual in our everyday lives. In this way, examining play helps us to understand the ways in which our everyday lives are also types of games. We are all playing the "game of life." If the actual world can be conceptualized as a type of game, then this, in part, legitimizes the worlds created with the aid of these new media technologies. The drive to play constructs all of the worlds we inhabit. The experience in *TSO* is one of playing a game with detailed rules; whereas participation in *Second Life* is less structured by the software and allows for individuals to pursue their own paths.

experience. While both environments were structured through code, interaction within *Second Life* was less directed by the rules governing game play than *TSO*. *TSO* was more restricted in terms of its boundaries for exploration. *Second Life* lacks instructions for participation: residents are truly given the power to create everything as they go along. Residents are not required to provide “life’s essentials” for their avatars. *Second Life* emphasizes the virtual context as separate from the material needs of the body. Instead of reminding users of their material existence, *Second Life* enables the resident to be completely immersed in a world where sleep, food, and hygiene are completely nonessential. Despite the rhetoric attached to *TSO* as an environment that would be developed and directed by its consumers, the software was coded as a game in which there were specific patterns of action required for the user to succeed. Players were not given a “second life,” but rather received the opportunity to play a networked and more controlled version of *The Sims*. Instead of creating a world where users could easily create and share their visions among themselves—a major appeal for the online community that grew around *The Sims*—*TSO* presented users with a difficult gaming space in which mastery over an elongated period of time was needed in order to produce one’s vision. Game play became the central experience, and building and creativity became long-term goals. The expectation was for the player to become his or her Sim avatar, though at the same time, the player was constantly reminded of the rigid nature of the virtual environment. Patterns of care were a central aspect of the game: players had to continually direct their Sim avatars to eat, sleep, go to the bathroom, and bathe. The

player was the Sim avatar and the Sim avatar's puppet master at the same time. This shifting perspective disrupted the immersive experience.

Without having to operate under the conditions of fairness, *Second Life* enables users to convert material capital into virtual capital. If a user desires to have more money in *Second Life*, all they need to do is buy it through the official Linden Exchange (LINDEX). While the practice of buying virtual power through material capital is not unique to *Second Life*, it is one of the first examples in which the practice is completely integrated into the game's economic structure by its developers. In *TSO* and other MMORPGs, this practice occurred, but always through a third party broker such as Ebay, where players could buy and sell in-game currency and objects for material wealth. The software's producers, however, always discouraged this, specifically because they argued they maintained copyright over the entirety of the virtual world. Therefore, the producers would often threaten cancellation of player accounts if they were caught participating in this practice. The unofficial trade of virtual economy for material wealth in the traditional MMORPG was frowned upon because it threatened the "fairness" of the game along with the perceived conditions concerning intellectual property.

By transferring the power over the economy and intellectual property rights from the developers to the residents, *Second Life* was able to create a virtual world where personalized content became the central identifying aspect in the construction of one's online identity and status. As detailed in the previous chapter, this was one of the central expectations for *TSO*; as such, the producers made a serious

miscalculation by not placing personalized content at the center of the game. *The Sims* had succeeded largely because the programming tools released by the producers enabled players to create their own content for the game. It was the creativity of the players of *The Sims* Wright cited as the basis for his decision to begin the project that ultimately resulted in *TSO*. However, these tools were stripped from *TSO*. In order to understand the reasons behind this decision, it is important to examine the technological infrastructures of both *TSO* and *Second Life*.

The infrastructure developed in order to support the networked use of *TSO* was very different from the one created for *Second Life*. Specifically, *Second Life* utilized a system of servers in a way unlike the MMORPGs that preceded it. The model commonly used by MMORPGs (including *TSO*) was to stack servers vertically; however, *Second Life* employs a horizontal or “grid” structure. Traditionally, servers have been organized vertically in order to allow more users to participate in a given online environment. The issue this structure addressed was that server lag often accompanied overcrowding; each server could only accommodate a defined amount of users. As the amount of participants occupying a virtual world increased, servers could not properly process the heightened activity, which resulted in lag for the user. A single server could not accommodate the type of traffic a successful MMORPG generates. The most commercially viable games, such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, and *World of Warcraft*, utilize multiple independent servers. Instead of creating one digital environment for all users to occupy, the virtual environment was multiplied,

and the user population dispersed among them.¹⁷⁰ This creates a layering of worlds, each developing and evolving interdependently of one another. In most examples, the geographical space was duplicated exactly. For instance, it does not matter which server one joins in *Star Wars Galaxies*, the landscape will initially be indistinguishable, at least until the players begin to construct new structures. *TSO* differed by creating a unique geographical map for each server. However, as there was no relationship between these servers and the landscape, this practice had no impact on the gaming environment. A player's Sim avatar was bonded to its server of origin and could not travel between the different "city" servers. While players had the ability to create a Sim avatar on three different servers at any one time, the layering of worlds helped stress the artifice of the experience. As a space created for social interaction, it was immediately limited by the impossibility of interacting with the entire population of participants.

¹⁷⁰ When *TSO* was first released each server was equipped to host approximately 30,000 players. Will Wright, in his post "Roommates from Heaven or Hell," reported this figure in May 2002. http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimonline/features/social_may02.jsp (Accessed 11/22/2002). Theoretically, *Second Life* can host an infinite amount of residents; however, there have been lag issues using this structure as well.



Image 30: Players in *TSO* could choose which city they wanted to live in. www.ign.com. The horizontal model employed by *Second Life* was able to create a unified experience for the user. Instead of using servers to create a series of interdependent worlds, the servers were organized to connect a single, persistent digital environment.¹⁷¹ Akin to the visions described in famous speculative fictions—including William Gibson’s “cyberspace” in *Neuromancer* and Neal Stephenson’s “metaverse” in *Snow Crash*—*Second Life* provided the user with a singular virtual world where potentially every connected individual could participate and live.¹⁷² The result was a fully immersive experience and a world that seemed infinitely expansive.

¹⁷¹ The virtual world is spread across various servers referred to as the Grid. Each server represents a different region, which can then be identified by a unique name and content rating. In this way, individual properties can be districted to specific grids in order to identify them as mature in theme. See “Inside Second Life’s Data Centers” (<http://www.informationweek.com/news/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=197800170>), *Information Week* (3/5/2007). Accessed 11/11/2008, and “Introducing the Second Life Grid-Official Linden Blog (<http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/09/04/introducing-the-second-life-grid/>)” Linden Lab 9/7/2007. (Accessed 11/11/2008).

¹⁷² These are two of the best examples of cyberpunk fiction which gained popularity in the 1980s among science fiction readers. See William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, Ace, 1984; and Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, Spectra, 1993.

Ultimately, this choice of structure created an environment that felt open, and allowed the user to truly explore the virtual landscape.

Although the space in each program was structured differently, *Second Life* and *TSO* were similar in the way in which they created virtual environments where narrative cohesion was largely absent. In both cases, the lack of a structure allowed users to assume greater control over the direction of the environment: the software provided users with the ability to apply their own desires and ideas into the established framework. Instead of navigating a landscape built by developers, users were presented with a type of social experiment in which they were required to build an entire world anew. However, it is important to note that while both games stressed creativity, there was a stark contrast in the level of control afforded to the users in each example. Again, this can be partially attributed to the restrictions placed upon *TSO* because of its connections to *The Sims*. In order to appeal to its demographic, *TSO* had to resemble *The Sims*. This limited the potential for creativity among its users. While there was no narrative structure dictating social interaction and game advancement, the visual context acted as a unifying form. Users were not creating a brand new world in *TSO*; instead they were re-creating the worlds they had previously constructed in *The Sims*. In contrast, *Second Life* was the first major venture from Linden Labs, and new users had no predetermined notion of how the world should develop. The difference between the two programs is emphasized by a relaxed attitude toward design and style in *Second Life*. Building in *TSO* was modular and resembled playing with Legos. Players could pick and choose from a series of pre-designed building blocks. Since the producers designed everything, the

style remained constant. In *Second Life*, the user was given the tools of the programmer. He or she could then mold the world. To continue the toy analogy, *Second Life* had the pliable qualities of Play-Doh; while the learning curve was steeper, there was a potential for the user to add his or her own sense of style to the design and development of the environment. This resulted in more potential for the mixing of visual styles, with limits on creativity being much less stringent.

One way to demonstrate the differences between *TSO* and *Second Life* is to examine how participants constructed avatars in each. We can point to the importance of the software's code as a significant structuring agent in terms of the options available to the user. In *TSO*, the Lego analogy is extremely apparent. Though there were many possible combinations, the user had relatively few choices to make in terms of his or her Sim avatar's appearance. Initially, the user chose the character's gender, skin hue (light, medium, dark), and body frame size (thin, average, slightly overweight). Only the choice of gender presented the user with a different set of possible avatars. There were only a limited number of heads and bodies assigned for each gender. Skin hue darkened the skin coloration of the chosen head and body, and the frame size added or subtracted bulk.¹⁷³

¹⁷³ In the post, "The Art of Creating *The Sims Online*," Bob King (the game's lead designer) and Sebastian Hyde (computer graphic artist) discuss the inspirations for the Sim avatar construction of the 2300 skins (bodies) and 1100 heads included in the game. http://www.ea.com/eagames/official/thesimsonline/features/cool_sep02.jsp. Accessed 11/22/2002. It is important to note the problematic notion of race informed by the informatic code of the game—race is reduced to skin color and many of the avatars are created from a particular Western Caucasian bias.



Image 31: The Sim avatar creation program in *TSO*. www.ign.com.

The hypermediated style of *TSO* was emphasized by the limits of avatar construction.

As Bolter and Grusin argue in *Remediation*, hypermediation and immediacy are not always in conflict.¹⁷⁴ A hypermediated environment can still provide the user with a sense of immediacy. This is a point I will return to shortly when I turn to avatar construction in *Second Life*. However, in the case of *TSO*, the few possibilities built into the software continually pointed to the limited palette afforded to the user in creating his or her Sim avatar. In navigating the landscape of *TSO*, it was a common occurrence to cross paths with another avatar that either shared the same head or body as your own. Occasionally, you stood face to face with an unknown twin. While this was not unheard of in virtual worlds, of all the mainstream entries into the MMORPG genre, *TSO* presents the user with the fewest options.

¹⁷⁴ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, The MIT Press, 2000.

One specific example that points to the tension between hypermediacy and immediacy within *TSO* involves the inclusion of a bear head and body as an option for avatar construction. It was not the hypermediated aspect of talking bears that challenged the immediacy of the experience, but rather the limitations of the software in consistently representing the avatars as bears. Basically, there were several objects and activities within *TSO* that allowed avatars to briefly change their appearance. For example, when a user decided to have their avatar swim, the Sim avatar would quickly spin around and his or her body would re-form wearing a bathing suit. In the case of bears, his or her bear body would transform into a human body wearing a bathing suit. The software only viewed each avatar choice as a skin, it was not coded to recognize any difference between those players who chose to participate as human and those who chose to participate as bears. A similar issue arose with the costume trunks that allowed users to play “dress up.” Costume trunks provided users with the opportunity to wear a variety of outfits, such as fireman, policeman, and diva star, which were often utilized for role-playing. The outfits were uniform, and only varied with regard to skin color. Bear avatars would always appear with human bodies, which would disrupt their bear appearance. While it was quite humorous to see the body of a fireman with the head of a bear, players voiced their disappointment about this limitation.¹⁷⁵ Again, the bear issue points to the restrictions in regards to controlling the environment players experienced, in spite of promises to be able to construct and develop from the bottom up.

¹⁷⁵ On the server on which I played, Interhogan, there were various “bear” protests. A player who role-played the mayor of Interhogan recorded and released a public service announcement in support of the bear population. Various in-game radio stations, including KSIM, which is discussed in detail in the following chapter, distributed the audio. To my knowledge, the developers never acknowledged these complaints.



Image 32: A bear Sim avatar in *TSO*. www.ign.com.

The lack of variability in creating Sim avatars for *TSO* was specifically problematic because this practice was such a central aspect to the emergence of a fan community surrounding *The Sims*. In the beta test, for example, many players expressed their disappointment in not being able to completely control the look of their avatar, along with their inability to create custom objects and design elements.

SimfreaksDeb@Alphaville writes,

Many of us have been very involved in the success of the offline version of *The Sims*. We design skins, objects, walls, floors, etc. I really miss these custom objects so I'd like to suggest that a way to make these available in the game must be worked out. Perhaps someone that designs skins could sell their original designs. A person that makes objects could have a furniture shop with their original objects...I think this is the kind of diversity that made the offline version such a success.

This desire was echoed throughout the beta test. Tischel@Calvin's Creek wrote that "as a creator of objects, skins, wallpaper, floors, etc. I want to be counted as one who would love to offer or display custom items. I wish I could use my own skins for my

own sim.” Unlike *The Sims*, *TSO* did not allow for unique user-generated content; everything had to be constructed like Lego pieces, put together from the building blocks provided by the software’s producers. *TSO* promised to be an environment completely dependent upon its users for its content and landscape. It is ironic that users were never given the ability to create their own Sim avatar skins and objects.

The reason for the lack of custom skins and objects in *TSO* was twofold. First, there was an issue with content delivery. In *The Sims*, users could control which avatars they wanted to import into their game. However, in *TSO*, Sim avatar skins were part of the code that was downloaded to the user’s computer during the installation of the software or through update patches provided by the developers. If a player created a new skin, then only players who also have downloaded that skin to their computer could view it. The distribution of user-generated skins would have required a major infrastructure overhaul. This created a technological restriction for *TSO*. During the beta test, Wren@Alphaville realized the limitation of the hardware in allowing players to create their custom content:

The problem I see with this is that our new textures would have to be transferred to every player in the game in order to work. You know that patch you loaded yesterday? Your textures would have to be patched like that to every player in the game in order for them to see your clothes. Then there would have to be space made in the database, unique identifiers assigned to your textures, etc., etc...

Because each server was independent and every newly created skin would have to first pass through the developers to reach the other users, this created a logistical nightmare for the developers.

The second reason for the limitations of *TSO*, in terms of Sim avatar construction, relates to the issue of intellectual property. When given the power to create their own digital skins with the technology of *The Sims*, users not only created Sim character versions of themselves and their acquaintances, but also of celebrities and trademarked characters. For example, when I played *The Sims*, I imported a set of superhero Sim characters into my game. The player who created the Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman digital skins had no legal right to replicate and distribute their images, and the owners of the trademarked property (D.C. Comics) were never compensated. The developers could largely overlook this practice in *The Sims* because the software and code was housed completely on the users' computer. If D.C. Comics wanted to sue over the illegal use of their trademarked property, they would have limited legal recourse against the developers of *The Sims*. D.C. Comics would have to uncover the person responsible for creating the illegal skins and then track down those players who had imported the characters into their games. Even though the developers of *The Sims* had created the technology used to perform the copyright violation, suing them would be akin to suing Apple and IBM for selling computers that aided users in copying other types of intellectual property in the form of movies, television shows, and music. The structure of *TSO*, however, placed more responsibility over content in the hands of the developers. Since all of the content was either housed on a centralized server controlled by EA/Maxis or transferred from these servers to the users' computer, the company had a greater responsibility in regard to issues of copyright protection. If they allowed the inclusion of user-generated digital skins, they would also be running the risk of copyright infringement

lawsuits. This fact led to the need to limit the ability of users to create their own content. Thus, a creative element central to the success of *The Sims* had to be completely erased in *TSO*, which greatly restricted the latter's ability to succeed. Like *TSO*, *Second Life* is extremely hypermediated. While it is remediating everyday lived experiences and communication, it is not attempting to remediate reality. It presents a virtual environment not bound by the laws and physics of the actual world. Thus, there is a greater range of possibilities afforded to the user in transforming the world. There is a pastiche sensibility that permeates the environment: it is almost as if anything goes both visually and thematically. Users are positioned as coders and given the freedom to shape almost every detail of their avatar. In addition to the stock choices included in the creation program, users are encouraged to refashion the code and create their own content. Everything that exists in the *Second Life* landscape has been coded and recoded by the virtual world's participants.¹⁷⁶ *Second Life* was a much fuller realized remediation of MUDs and MOOs than was *TSO*. Linden Lab created the space and the tools, but all of the content is envisioned and implemented by the users, thus creating an experience starkly different than that of *TSO*.

¹⁷⁶ See "New World Notes: GOD GAME"
(http://nwn.blogs.com/nwn/2006/05/god_game.html) Accessed 1/23/08.

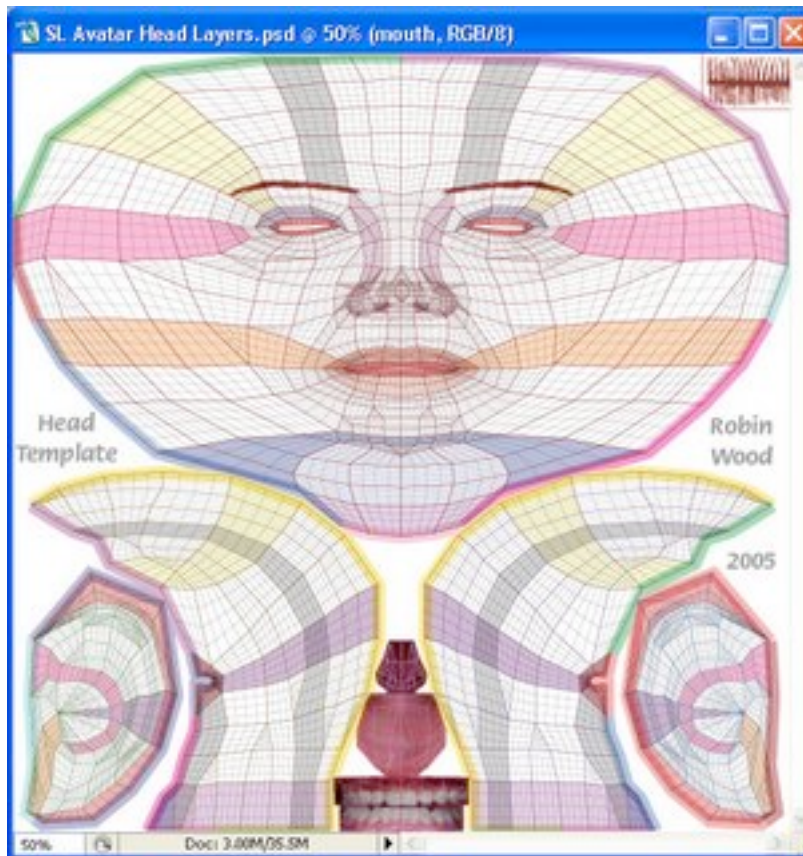


Image 33: Creating an avatar in *Second Life* is more complex but also allows for a greater amount of detail. This screenshot is just for creating the head of an avatar.
www.mermaididiaries.com.

As the users are actively coding the world in which they continue to inhabit, they are given access to the centralized servers. The residents are literally writing the code as they develop the environment. For example, once a new digital skin or object is coded, it immediately becomes part of the software and is made available to all users. Linden Lab thus takes on more of the role of facilitator than that of developer. Here, the issue of copyright infringement needs to be addressed, as it is a clear risk. In the case of *Second Life*, each time a virtual object is coded, the IP address connected to the account associated with the resulting object is recorded into the code. This way, Linden Labs can assign responsibility to the individual user. If a trademark holder finds issue with content in *Second Life*, Linden Labs, as detailed in the End User

Licensing Agreement, is able to direct them to the person who created the questionable material.¹⁷⁷ The software becomes a safeguard for the company. In contrast to *TSO*, *Second Life* is a much more open world: users are presented with more freedom and control, but also with the consequences of those allowances.



Image 34: Custom created avatars in *Second Life*. www.mermaididiaries.com.

¹⁷⁷ There has been at least one case of copyright infringement in *Second Life* that has entered the courts; however, this was one resident suing another claiming that his intellectual property had been stolen. As more and more corporations are beginning to inhabit *Second Life* (Nike, Toyota, Apple) this is becoming a greater concern. In the essay “IP and Business: *Second Life* – Brand Promotion and Unauthorized Trademark Use in Virtual Worlds,” Ailin Graef details how Linden Labs responds to allegations of copyright infringement in accordance to the policy directed by the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act. As detailed in the policy, infringement policing is the responsibility of the copyright holder. Linden Labs, then, aids in these investigations when claims of infringement are filed. To read Linden Labs policy concerning the Digital Millennium Copyright Act see <http://secondlife.com/corporate/dmca.php>. (Accessed 8/12/08). For more on copyright issues in *Second Life* see “IP and Business: *Second Life* – Brand Promotion and Unauthorized Trademark Use in Virtual Worlds,” Ailin Graef, World Intellectual Property Organization Magazine, June 2007, http://www.wipo.int/wipo_magazine/en/2007/06/article_0004.html Accessed 8/12/08, and “*Second Life*—A Whole New World of Trademark Infringement?” Sarah Adamczyk, Chilling Effects, 10/27/06, <http://www.chillingeffects.org/weather.cgi?WeatherID=561> Accessed 8/12/08.

The legal issues surrounding user-generated content and the repurposing of copyrighted materials have become central to the discussion of new media technologies. For instance, in his book *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins chronicles a community of *Star Trek* fans during the 1980s and their creation of music, videos, art, fan fiction, and zines dedicated to the show. Examples of these practices are not unique to new media. However, the proliferation and decreasing expense of these technologies has increasingly enabled users of varying technical ability and social class to enter the realm of remediation production.¹⁷⁸ Where there were once economic and status barriers in place to limit the production of media texts, we are now living in a world immersed in software applications including YouTube, Garage Band, and Windows Movie Maker. The computer not only allows the creation of such texts, but, as detailed by Manovich in *The Language of New Media*, the computer also provides the means for distribution. Questions surrounding the appropriation of such content will only continue to grow. A central question thus becomes: Where does responsibility lie and what rights do consumers have over the appropriation of copyrighted material?

This discussion is especially interesting in the context of the computer game, which itself is becoming a source for user-generated content. With *TSO*, in accordance to the terms of services contract, any content created within the game legally remains the property of EA/Maxis. Though users were encouraged to be creative and to

¹⁷⁸ The practice can be traced back to numerous examples, including early sampling in music production, the development of zines by burgeoning fan communities, and the creation of videotapes and fan fiction. In his book *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins chronicles the way *Star Trek* fans have participated in such projects, which predate the popularization of the Internet. See Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Routledge, 1992.

create new and exciting projects, ultimately the producers had the right to dictate the boundaries of such use. Therefore, if someone were to create a sitcom using *The Sims* or *TSO*'s software engines, EA/Maxis would have legal recourse to protect their economic rights. This strategy is typical of computer games and MMORPGs. The most famous example is *Red versus Blue*, which is one of most popular Machinima¹⁷⁹ and which used the software engine from the game *Halo*. As the creators of *Red versus Blue* continued to economically benefit from their product through the sale of DVDs, an agreement was reached with Microsoft that allowed them to enter an official licensing contract.¹⁸⁰ However, Microsoft would have been legally entitled to sue the creators of *Red versus Blue* for copyright violation. With *Second Life*, Linden Labs made the decision to take a different approach. Users would retain control over all of the content they created within the digital environment. One of the most well known examples to emerge out of this structure concerned an avatar named Kermitt Quick who utilized the programming tools provided through *Second Life* to create the game *Tringo*. This game became very successful within *Second Life*. Because he retained copyright over *Tringo*, Kermitt Quick was able to then sell the license for the game to an established gaming company. The amount of money he received for the

¹⁷⁹ The term Machinima comes from a combination of the words Machine, Animation, and Cinema. Players utilize game engines for means other than playing the game—the software becomes the set and toolbox for the creation of digital narratives. For examples see www.machinima.com.

¹⁸⁰ Bungie, the production company that created *Halo* for Microsoft contacted Rooster Teeth (*Red versus Blue*'s production company) and made a deal that allowed Rooster Teeth (without license fees) to legally use the material. See David Konow, "The Cult of Red vs. Blue," TwitchGuru. Tom's Guide Publishing, 9/24/2005, http://us.tomsgames.com/us/2005/09/24/the_cult_of_red_vs/ and Clive Thompson, "The Xbox Auteurs," *The New York Times*, 8/7/2005.

license was undisclosed, but the example points to the unique approach of *Second Life* to the issue of intellectual property.¹⁸¹

Linden Lab's decision to grant property ownership to the residents of *Second Life* occurred roughly a year after the program was released. The company felt that property ownership was the key to a healthy economy and growth. In his book *The Entrepreneur's Guide to Second Life: Making Money in the Metaverse*, Daniel Terdiman argues this point. He writes:

If you own what you create, you will be motivated to create more. And creation breeds complex and burgeoning economies. So Linden Labs---aided in part by advice from world-renowned copyright attorney Lawrence Lessig---decided that the best way to foster a real economy in *Second Life* was to buck the [MMORPG] trend and give residents the same property rights that people have in real life.¹⁸²

This strategy proved to be very effective. In the first month after the shift, residents were logged into *Second Life* almost ten percent more than the previous month. The second month resulted in a twenty-two percent spike in revenue for *Second Life*, which was followed the next month by a fifteen percent spurt. *Second Life* began to establish a new economic model for the virtual world market

Not only did *Second Life* challenge the economic structure within the virtual world, Linden Labs also changed the way that the owners of virtual world capitalized from the consumer. Unlike *TSO*, which was patterned after EverQuest and Ultima

¹⁸¹ For more about Kermitt Quick and Tringo, see Daniel Terdiman, *The Entrepreneur's Guide to Second Life: Making Money in the Metaverse*, Wiley, 2008.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

Online's subscription models,¹⁸³ *Second Life* provided potential users with limited free access. There was no cost associated with creating a *Second Life* account, and residents could continue to use the free account to indefinitely explore the virtual environment. However, Linden Labs did not completely abandon the subscription model. By allowing free access, potential residents were given the ability to explore the benefits of the virtual world and understand its value. Then, residents were given the option of continuing to use *Second Life* for free or to invest in a "Premium membership." "Premium memberships" cost \$9.95 USD and offered subscribers access to technical support, the ability to own land in *Second Life*, and a monthly stipend of 300 Linden Dollars. In changing the structure from one where access required a fee to one where users could choose their level of commitment, *Second Life* was able to organically grow over time.

A similar economic model might have allowed *TSO* to flourish. Much of the hype surrounding *TSO* was its potential appeal to consumers who were perceived as not active in the consumption of virtual worlds. However, this population was also unaccustomed to the economic commitment required to play in subscription-based MMORPGs. The issue was not that these players were hesitant to spend money on computer games, since they had proven their willingness to purchase multiple expansion packs for *The Sims*, but rather that they could not justify paying a monthly fee, especially when the program initially offered for consumption did not meet

¹⁸³ This was detailed in the previous chapter. Successful MMORPGs that preceded *TSO* required consumers to initially purchase the software and then to pay a monthly subscription fee for as long as they desired to play. The monthly fee supported the costs of maintaining the servers, funded future content development, and provided a steady stream of income. Attempting to replicate the economic success of *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*, *TSO* followed a similar economic model.

expectations. When these players did not find the experience they were hoping for, it was easy for them to simply return to *The Sims*. This problem was compounded by the fact that *TSO* was rushed to market in order to capitalize on the holiday buying season. It is clear from the beta documents that the game released in November was not the finished product; there were numerous plans yet to be implemented, and admitted issues with the game's economy.¹⁸⁴ While it is not uncommon for developers of MMORPGs to continue to add new content or adjust elements of game play after the game's initial release, the disproportionate amount of players with no previous exposure to online gaming in *TSO* created a less than desirable situation. In part, due to the hype surrounding the game's release, a polished product was expected.

Another major issue with the economic subscription model utilized by *TSO* was that, in order to keep track of accounts, players were required to register a credit card.¹⁸⁵ Ultimately, this hindered the attempt to market the game to teenagers, who often did not have ready access to a credit card. While *Second Life* also required residents to register a credit card, this condition worked with their overall marketing strategy.

Unlike *TSO*, which was directed at an open and inclusive market, *Second Life*

¹⁸⁴ There were many plans that included additional content and changes to the overall system—including the introduction of hospitals and jobs. Some of these plans were implemented during the game's run while others were never introduced. During the beta test, several participants noted that they did not feel as if the game was completed enough to release. For example, Great Uncle Frank@Blazing Falls argues, "Does it even look hopeful that this will be a flawless launch at this time? Not even close. I've done enough beta testing to know they either need the luck of the Devil or have a good working copy ready to go, cause this beta version is hurting right now..."

¹⁸⁵ The subscription cost did not need to be paid by credit card, as consumers could buy subscription cards online and in stores which provided a code for access. However, users still needed a credit card in order to register.

restricted access to adults only; anyone under 18 was officially unable to participate. Ultimately, Linden Labs utilized credit card registration as a screening practice. Even if a user decided to enter *Second Life* without paying a monthly subscription charge, they still had to verify their statistical data by providing Linden Labs with credit card information. For a major corporation, restricting access is often viewed as an economic liability. However, for *Second Life*, this decision helped to define the game for potential consumers.

Even though *Second Life* has not been devoid of controversy when it comes to issues of sex and sexuality,¹⁸⁶ the risks are greater with avatar anonymity in intergenerational virtual environments such as *TSO*. In virtual worlds, participants rarely know the true identity behind the avatar with whom they are interacting. Without the age safeguards provided in *Second Life*, potentially troubling situations could easily arise in *TSO*. Several beta testers engaged in a heated discussion concerning the desire of some players to institute an age restriction for the game. The discussion initially emerged from a player expressing concern over meeting several players who professed they were under thirteen years of age. On 10/20/02, Fluffy@Alphaville wrote, “I have met an 11 yr old girl (Playing her cousin’s character), a 12 yr old girl, another 11 yr old person whose friend’s uncle worked for EA/Maxis. This is no place for kids—they could get virtually molested!” On the other hand, Jack The Ripper@Blazing Falls expresses his desire for age restriction,

¹⁸⁶ The issues that have been most reported concern the creation and distribution of child pornography and age play, where residents creating avatars that appear child-like engage in online sexual encounters with “adult” residents. Linden Labs has officially banned the practice of sexual age-play, but this is a difficult practice to effectively police. For more information see “Pedophiles Target Virtual World,” Sky News, UK News, <http://news.sky.com/skynews/article/0,,30100-1290719,00.html>. Accessed 9/26/08.

not in order to protect the children, but rather to protect his role-playing interests. He writes:

I as an adult player feel that I need to limit some of the things I have my character do simply because there may be kids around. As you are all so gung-ho on letting everyone play the game the way they choose, what makes me any different? What about the adult man that wants his sim to have an online relationship? Even though it's total role-play and not the least bit real, he could get labeled a child molester or get in trouble with a young girl's parents should his sim do romantic things with an underage female sim. I agree, parents SHOULD take the responsibility to monitor what their child is doing online. But we all know that many parents honestly don't give a crap about their kid or his or her online habits. That is, they don't care until they believe they have been victimized in some way. All I'm asking for is an age restricted place where adults can play without fear of subjecting a child to something their parents/society don't want them to witness...

TSO was attempting to market itself as a product for everyone and included parental controls for censoring language. However, *TSO* was unable to create an environment in which there was limited control over the situations to which underage players could potentially be exposed. Those parents who were concerned with their children's online habits might have been hesitant to give them permission to play. Conversely, by defining itself as intended for adults only, *Second Life* was able to address the concerns of participants interested in exploring adult themes.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ There was actually a growing concern in *Second Life* that underage participants were providing false information in order to gain access to the virtual world. In August 2005, responding to a perceived interest from underage users, Linden Labs released "*Teen Second Life*." *Teen Second Life* was identical to *Second Life* but existed on a separate grid that was restricted to children from the ages of 13-17. Upon turning 18, residents could then graduate and transfer their avatar to the main grid in *Second Life*. For more see Daniel Terdiman, *The Entrepreneur's Guide to Second Life: Making Money in the Metaverse*, Wiley, 2008.



Image 35: The love bed in *TSO*. www.ign.com.



Image 36: Another sex house in *TSO*. www.ign.com.

The concern over age play and inappropriate underage online behavior was at the center of the controversy that gathered the most mainstream media attention for *TSO* after its release. Peter Ludlow, a professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, played a character named Urizenus on the Alphaville server. In 2003, Ludlow wrote for the *Alphaville Herald*, an online blog fashioned as a newspaper covering all of the events, news, and happenings surrounding *TSO*. In his stories for the *Alphaville Herald*, Ludlow was often critical of EA/Maxis and attempted to chronicle some of their missteps. Ludlow was also interested in the emerging seedy underbelly of Alphaville, which consisted of “scammers, thieves, money launderers,

prostitutes...and other dubious types.”¹⁸⁸ In one essay, Ludlow reported on the exploits of a female avatar named Evangeline who Ludlow identified as “Alphaville’s most infamous scammer.” Evangeline professed to be an adolescent male in real life, and described, in detail, his operation of hosting a brothel in *TSO* where “Evangeline,” along with other minors, would trade online sexual favors for simoleons. In his essay in the *Alphaville Herald*, Ludlow discussed the exploitative nature of the underage brothel and questioned the legality of the practice. As this story began to gather national attention in the media, casting a negative and disturbing shadow over the already struggling *TSO*, EA/Maxis turned its attention to Ludlow. EA/Maxis claimed they terminated Ludlow’s account because he had violated the end user licensing agreement (EULA)¹⁸⁹ by providing a link in his Sim avatar user profile to the commercially operated *Alphaville Herald* website, Ludlow said that after receiving an initial warning, he removed the link, but days later he received a letter that officially terminated his account. The letter read, “While we regret it, we feel it

¹⁸⁸ Ludlow’s initial stories about underage cyber prostitution gained limited coverage by the mainstream media. After EA/Maxis terminated Ludlow’s account, the story gained momentum and was discussed in several major media outlets including, *The New York Times*. For more information see Farhad Manjoo, “Raking muck in “The Sims Online”: What happens when a virtual newspaper covering virtual events runs afoul of a real corporation?” 12/12/2003, Salon.com, http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2003/12/12/sims_online_newspaper.html. Accessed 8/12/08 and Amy Harmon, “A Real-Life Debate on Free Expression in a Cyberspace City,” *New York Times*, 1/15/2004, A1. This entire event is covered in a book Peter Ludlow wrote with Mark Wallace. See Peter Ludlow, Mark Wallace, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse*, The MIT Press, 2007.

¹⁸⁹ All MMORPGs contain End User Licensing Agreements (EULA). These agreements detail all of the rules of the game in extremely complicated legal language. Basically, these agreements are used to protect the corporation from any liability should a lawsuit arise and to retain the power over the virtual world in terms of participant behavior and copyright protection. In order to play the game, the user has no other choice but to agree to the EULA. For more, see Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

is necessary for the good of the game and its community.” Though it is impossible to say if Ludlow was punished because he violated the EULA or if it was retribution for the negative press incurred by *TSO*, the timing suggests that the latter was at least a motivating force behind the termination. Ludlow’s termination, which many, including Ludlow, felt was censorship, gained even more mainstream coverage than his original story about underage cyber prostitution in *TSO*.¹⁹⁰ Not only does this incident illustrate the previously discussed issue of anonymous intergenerational interaction and the inability of *TSO* to shield minors from inappropriate content, but it also points to a larger pattern of mismanagement by EA/Maxis.

It should not be surprising that, after being banished from *TSO*, Ludlow built a new home in *Second Life*, where he created a new virtual newspaper, *The Second Life Herald*. Unlike *TSO*, which took an adversarial approach to the *Alphaville Herald*, *Second Life* openly encouraged journalism. Linden Lab even went as far as hiring professional journalists, such as Salon.com contributor Wagner James Au, in order to cover the news in *Second Life*. Even as an employee of Linden Labs, Au wrote several essays critical of the company, yet continued to receive nothing but support.¹⁹¹ The Ludlow case highlights the differences in approach by *TSO* and

¹⁹⁰ The most interesting discussion concerning this issue can be found in Erick Goldman’s “Online Gaming and Free Speech: Showdown at the Virtual Corral” InformIT, 8/12/2005, <http://www.informit.com/articles/printerfriendly.aspx?p=405720>. Accessed 8/12/08. Goldman outlines the arguments for and against considering EA/Maxis’ decision to terminate Ludlow’s account as unjustified censorship. Ultimately, Goldman sides with the corporation arguing that *TSO* should not be granted the rights of state actor and instead should be viewed as an Internet Service Provider. In this dissertation I am not as interested in the legality of the act, but rather in analyzing how *TSO* dealt with the issue and how this pointed to a larger pattern of anti-community policies.

¹⁹¹ Farhad Manjoo, “Raking muck in “The Sims Online”: What happens when a virtual newspaper covering virtual events runs afoul of a real corporation?” 12/12/2003, Salon.com,

Second Life to governance, regulation, and developer responsibility in ensuring the creation of a strong and stable online community within virtual worlds. A central question to consider is: What role should developers play in the evolution of their virtual environments?

The important question is not whether EA/Maxis had the legal right to terminate Ludlow's subscription, but rather what the decision illustrated about the developers' relationship to their consumers. Ludlow's initial concern in reporting the underage cyber prostitution he uncovered in *TSO* was not to embarrass and ruin *TSO*, but rather to address a problematic use of the game. As a player and fan of *TSO*, Ludlow was disturbed by the growing amount of questionable behavior he observed emerging in his new adopted city of Alphaville. He was not the only one. In Farhad Manjoo's Salon.com essay about Ludlow, the author discusses a group of Alphaville players that got together and formed the "Sim Shadow Government" in order to combat avatars like Evangeline. The group's leader, Snow White, tells Manjoo, "In my opinion I do not think the game was designed for people to become 'scammers' and to harm other sims...It is more of a glorified chatroom, to be friendly with others, not to betray them."¹⁹² Although the group was largely ineffective, its formation points to the desire among players for some form of official governance that could police behavior considered detrimental to the health of the virtual community. The problem, however, was figuring out who should decide what behavior is acceptable or unacceptable. In terms of the larger structure of *TSO*, Wright had decided very early

http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2003/12/12/sims_online_newspaper.html. Accessed 8/12/08.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

in the game's development that the developers would be as hands-off as possible in allowing the players to figure it out by themselves. Wright viewed *TSO* as a social experiment, and was interested in seeing how players would develop the game. What happens, however, when one group of players wants to create a fun and socially engaging virtual world and another group enjoys being anti-social in order to scam and bully anyone in their path? Without EA/Maxis involvement, there was little recourse for those in the prior group to combat the practices of the latter. Would *TSO* have benefited if EA/Maxis had decided to intervene and better define the rules of online behavior in their virtual world? Could this have helped to foster a stronger community and, ultimately, a more immersive and valued environment?

These questions are not without precedent. One of the most famous of the text-based predecessors of *TSO* and *Second Life* was *LambdaMOO*. Julian Dibbell's *Village Voice* article, "A Rape in Cyberspace," documented a series of despicable public acts in *LambdaMOO*.¹⁹³ A participant, who ultimately turned out to be a group of undergraduate males in the dormitories of NYU, used a "voodoo" program that enabled them to take control of another player's avatar. By using this program, two female avatars were "forced" to enact sexually and violently disturbing situations. These events led to the creation of several "town forums" where players discussed the nature of unregulated space and if the interests of the community outweighed the beliefs in freedom and free speech. The conclusion was difficult, as agents endowed with the power of termination circumvented the democratic discussion and acted

¹⁹³ Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace," http://www.juliandibbell.com/texts/bungle_print.html, Accessed 9/08.

without consensus, but this also led to the creation of a democratic system in which players could decide how to deal with issues such as cyber-prostitution. Dibbell explores the fall of a perceived cyber-utopia and examines the need for defined limits for behavior and governance in virtual worlds. While Wright might have created an interesting social experiment, *TSO* failed to offer a virtual environment that could sustain a thriving community of players.

Wright's laissez-faire policy for *TSO* and EA/Maxis' treatment of Ludlow helped to define an adversarial relationship between the game's producers and consumers.

EA/Maxis' goal of creating a complex and immersive virtual environment was ultimately secondary to the desire to develop a financially lucrative product. In his essay concerning Ludlow, Manjoo reinforces this argument. He writes:

The situation underscores what is becoming increasingly apparent in the virtual world: There's a fundamental divergence between the interests of a community (typically high-minded goals like freedom of speech and assembly) and the interests of the corporations that run those communities (typically not very high-minded but otherwise understandable goals like making money and avoiding public association with words like "prostitution."¹⁹⁴

Ultimately, these virtual worlds are commercial spaces that attempt to benefit from the creation of online communities. However, the desires of users within these communities are not always in sync with the desires of the corporations. The way EA/Maxis handled this tension is at the center of *TSO's* failure. Had there been a greater attempt to support the community of players hoping to build a meaningful and complex virtual environment, then, possibly, consumers would have seen greater value in the product.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

The idea of allowing players to completely direct the evolution of the game was an interesting, but ultimately flawed, strategy. As soon as some players decided they wanted to play the game to cause grief for other players, the virtual environment dissolved into lawless anarchy. The only recourse was retaliation, which only worked to send the virtual world into further chaos. While *Second Life* also placed the control over the virtual environment in the hands of its residents, Phillip Rosedale positioned Linden Labs as more of a centralized governing agency than an independent and detached corporation. Rosedale realized that the ultimate success of *Second Life* was deeply tied to the investment and success of its residents. Returning to their economic models for earning profits, the entire strategy of EA/Maxis was to collect monthly subscription fees. In this way, *TSO* became almost like an exclusive country club in which membership fees were the only requirement for joining. While still dependent on subscriptions, *Second Life* was structured in a way that encouraged residents to build a functioning virtual economy. As such, when the residents prospered financially, so did Linden Labs. To continue the governance metaphor, *Second Life* built its success around citizenship: when residents realized the value of the virtual environment, they would not only pay a monthly subscription fee, but they would also pay to buy virtual real estate and virtual commodities; they would financially participate in their “second life.” Linden Labs often mediates disputes and enacts policies that police the virtual world. In part, this is acceptable to residents because Linden Labs has given them a real stake in *Second Life*: players own, and have the ability to capitalize on, whatever they create, so the value of protecting the virtual environment outweighs most notions of the desire for a completely open and

unregulated society. Linden Labs invests in the residents, and, in turn, the residents invest in *Second Life*. Where EA/Maxis built a virtual gaming environment, Philip Rosedale and Linden Labs fashioned a thriving and immersive virtual world.

Chapter 7: *The Sims Online* Versus Radio KSIM: A Case Study of Consumer Production Practices

After the popularization of *The Sims* in 2001, I started to examine The Sim Franchise from an academic perspective. When, in the first half of 2002 Electronic Arts (EA/Maxis) announced the November release date for *The Sims Online (TSO)*; I decided to make it the topic of study for my dissertation. When I initially explored *TSO*, during the game's beta test, I was interested in uncovering the ways in which players would meet Wright's challenge to create innovating content, game play, and narratives using the software he had helped to develop. It was never my intention to become actively involved in creating content. Somehow, a month and a half after starting the project, I found myself sitting in front of my computer, playing *TSO*, and speaking into a USB microphone, "This is DJ Dean Kay, and you are listening to KSIM, Interhogan's first and best radio station." The failure of *TSO* as a commercial success has been the primary focus of this dissertation. Nonetheless, there were participants who became dedicated supporters of the virtual world fashioned by the software. While the software was severely limiting to the creation of an immersive virtual world, there were many instances in which the promise of allowing consumers to develop a fascinating experience was met. The goal of the present chapter is to chronicle the evolution of one such project (along with my involvement in it):¹⁹⁵ the

¹⁹⁵ A central methodology for this chapter is my own role as participant observer along with a series of informal discussions with KSIM's founder Dahlea. These discussions were performed in various ways, including face-to-face meetings, chats utilizing *TSO*'s messaging system, instant messenger, and emails. For a larger discussion of the use of ethnography in computer mediated environments, see Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*, Sage

TSO Internet radio station KSIM and the unique game play that emerged surrounding its popularity.

KSIM created a focal point for a group of players to experience *TSO* beyond the limits constructed by the game's software. Thus, a discussion of KSIM is important in several ways. First, KSIM was a successful example of consumer-produced content created for *TSO*. An examination of KSIM is helpful in understanding the relationship between consumption and production in a virtual world. Second, I examine how the players used the technologies of the game, along with other new media technologies to create interesting narratives (dominant and counter) which helped fill a void due to the lack of central storylines for *TSO*. KSIM represented a group of players who were dedicated to creating a unique and interesting gaming experience using the tools available to them. Also, KSIM helped to create communal bonds between players engaged in the production and consumption of the radio station. An examination of KSIM offers an interesting window into the creative and, at times, oppositional game play that was possible within *TSO*. Specifically, I highlight KSIM's involvement in practices of culture jamming and virtual protest. This discussion shows the tension between *TSO* as a commercial space and as an environment promoting the development of interpersonal bonds. Finally, in the conclusion of this chapter, I examine the utility of spaces like KSIM in creating a thriving and immersive virtual environment, applying and re-contextualizing Ray

Publications, 2000; and Annette Markham, *Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space*, AltaMira Press, 1998. As a participant observer, I was very careful to disclose my intent to study *TSO* for an academic project when interacting with players I had hoped to incorporate into my analysis. I still managed to become friends with a number of other players within these limitations.

Oldenburg's concept of the "third place" to a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) context. Through an examination of KSIM, the potential associated with *TSO* emerges, as do some of the reasons for its eventual failure.

The true value of *TSO* was its ability to provide a means of expression to its users. By encouraging the practice of media sampling, the developers of *TSO* hoped to benefit from the players who were actively involved in creating new and original content for the game. The history of KSIM can be traced to the vision and ideas of one such consumer who adopted the name Dahlea. Dean Kay¹⁹⁶ first met Dahlea when she was a contestant on *TSO*'s version of *The Dating Game*.¹⁹⁷ Until I heard about the game show, my experience with *TSO* was pretty uninteresting. At the time, I had only observed players attempting to meet the goals of success alluded to in the official manual. Generally, the game was being played in expected ways; players gained skills to gain money to build better houses, and buy more expensive virtual objects. *TSO*'s version of *The Dating Game* was my first indication that *TSO* could actually evolve into an interesting virtual environment. *The Dating Game* was set up as a stage in the back of a creative Sim avatar's house. There was a stage decorated with four chairs for the contestants. Several rows of chairs were placed facing the stage that allowed for the audience to observe. Participating Sim avatars then

¹⁹⁶ As a participant observer in a virtual world there is a certain amount of slippage between Donald Snyder the academic and Dean Kay the Sim avatar. As such, I use the name "Dean Kay" to indicate that the event or conversation happened while playing *TSO*.

¹⁹⁷ "The Dating Game" was a popular television show for the ABC network originally released on December 20, 1965 and lasting almost 9 years on its initial run. The game featured a single bachelor or bachelorette separated from three suitors (of the opposite gender) by a single partition. The show has been redeveloped for television several times since. For more information see "The Dating Game: Summary," tv.com, <http://www.tv.com/dating-game/show/5410/summary.html> (Accessed 1/20/09).

replicated the classic sexual innuendo-filled question-and-answer banter that characterized the original television show, with the added feature of a very chatty audience. The bachelor or bachelorette chose their suitor, and the winners were sent on their way with a simoleons prize to spend on their “date.” Dahlea was bachelorette number three. Although she lost, I found her responses to be the most witty and interesting. I started talking with her, and soon discovered that she had created an Internet radio station marketed toward the city/server Interhogan. I downloaded the necessary software and quickly became a loyal KSIM listener.



Image 37: This image is a promotional screenshot and shows a talk show in *TSO*.
www.virtualworldsreview.com.

When she first started playing *TSO*, Dahlea was in her early thirties and lived in Houston, Texas. Throughout her life she had an interest in computer technology, considering, for a while a career in programming. She was a self-professed gamer, and had previous MMORPG experience with *EverQuest*. In fact, Dahlea was more than a gamer, she was a “power gamer.”¹⁹⁸ She was almost always logged into *TSO*;

¹⁹⁸ See T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, The MIT Press, 2006 for a discussion of “power gaming” in *EverQuest*.

I estimate that her character was in the game at least ninety percent of the time I played. She claimed that she slept in fifteen-minute increments several times during a twenty-four hour period in order to maximize her time in *TSO*. As such, she gained economic success in *TSO* rather quickly, which enabled her to pursue other avenues of creative explorations, such as the creation of KSIM.

Dahlea had always been interested in creating side-projects for the computer games she played. This mainly consisted of photo-shopping images from screen captures as well as making mix-tapes as soundtracks. She had actually attempted to create a radio station while playing *EverQuest*, but was limited by the technology available. Even in the beginning of KSIM, this remained an issue. For example, initially, in order to DJ, a player needed simultaneous access to two networked computers. However, Dahlea was able to find a small number of friends with the ability and interest to DJ. KSIM was officially launched to coincide with *TSO*'s official release date. A month later, Dahlea discovered how to allow players with only one computer to DJ, which is when Dean Kay met her and became a KSIM DJ personality.

The radio station became a sizable commitment for Dahlea. She spent many hours researching the technologies available, attempting to understand how they worked and their specific advantages.¹⁹⁹ As station manager, she was very active in making

¹⁹⁹ Internet radio technology began to emerge in the mid 1990s. By the time Dahlea was creating KSIM, there were already several established online sites dedicated to hosting Internet radio broadcasts, including Netradio, Shoutcast, and Live365. During KSIM's first month, Dahlea used the software and services of Live365. Using Live365, KSIM DJs could play digital music that was either ripped to their computer or from the hardware's compact disc player. The "broadcast" would be relayed to the Live365 server, which was available to anyone who downloaded the free Live365 player, and was connected to the KSIM channel. Live365's major drawback, however, was that it required too much of a computer's

sure KSIM ran properly and that each DJ, including me, had the proper training to use the technology and fix any problems that might arise. Additionally, she researched the legality of Internet radio in terms of sharing music files in the context of the anti-file sharing cases that were frequently occurring in the early 2000s; making sure that all of the DJs followed the rules dictated by Live365.²⁰⁰ KSIM also became an added financial expense for Dahlea. While the station was free to listen to, the use of

processing power (as did playing *TSO*). It was impossible to both broadcast a radio show and play *TSO* at the same time on a single computer. In investigating other alternatives, Dahlea discovered that Shoutcast utilized the standard windows application Winamp, which was less taxing on the processor. However, because Shoutcast used host computers as servers, there was an increased chance of the broadcast crashing. The solution was to broadcast to a reliable third party server, which allowed for five listeners, and then relay one of those listener lines to the Live365 broadcasting server. This enabled the listeners to easily access to the broadcast without forcing the DJ to utilize the processing-heavy Live365 program. The complicated nature of the solution reflects the increased knowledge needed to effectively participate in such a project. While *TSO* was constructed with a low learning curve in order to appeal to a population not familiar with MMORPGs, there were still barriers to advanced participation. For a complete history see P. Sinclair, J. Anderson, and P. Cruikshank, "Webcast-A Concise History and Analysis Specific to Radio Broadcasting," http://www.dcs.napier.ac.uk/~mm/socbytes/feb2001/Feb2001_14.htm (Accessed 1/14/09).

²⁰⁰ At the time, Internet radio had not gathered much mainstream attention and, therefore, the legal issues were very vague. Dahlea consulted a lawyer she knew to check the Digital Rights Copyright Act in order to determine the legal implications of running an Internet radio station. At that point, Live365 had stated that it paid a percentage to the record companies, but there were no concrete guidelines for detailing what was and was not legal. The lawyer felt that the audience was so small and that the chance of anyone monitoring the station for copyright violation was extremely minimal. He also suggested that if an issue developed, Dahlea would most likely receive a "cease and desist" warning that would allow her to end her involvement with the radio station before a lawsuit began. This issue ultimately never arose, but it does point to another problem surrounding the formation of Internet radio stations. This can be related to Henry Jenkins' discussion of convergence and the relationship between copyright holders and the fans that use the copyrighted material to create new forms of culture. For more, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, NYU Press, 2006. Eventually, there were several policies enacted by the United States government that regulated the practice in which KSIM was involved, including the Copyright Arbitration Panel (CARP), which increased the royalty structure and forced many smaller Internet radio stations to shut down. KSIM would have been adversely affected by this policy if it had survived. However, there are still Internet radio stations associated with virtual worlds, so I am not sure how closely the behavior is monitored. For more information about the legality of Internet radio, see Hiawatha Gray, "Royalty hike could mute Internet radio: Smaller stations say rise will be too much," *The Boston Globe*, 3/14/2007.

Live365 for broadcasting and the third party servers cost \$25 a month. With the assistance of a friend, Dahlea took on the responsibility of paying this monthly fee.

Like most radio station operators, Dahlea and the other KSIM DJs wanted an audience. Dahlea also had plans to recruit more DJs in order to extend the programming schedule. Most of the advertising and recruitment efforts were accomplished by asking property owners if they could announce KSIM's existence to the various Sim avatars present at that time. Most owners were accommodating, and this strategy proved to be quite successful. By the time Dean Kay started to DJ, about a month after the first broadcast, there were ten DJs and close to one hundred and fifty known listeners. Dahlea did all of this, not because she loved music, but rather because of her desire to enhance the gaming experience. Counter to Wright's claim that the tools of *TSO* allowed for a broad range of player-created content, Dahlea argued that the game "didn't provide itself to do a lot." She viewed KSIM as an essential component to the development of an engaging play space.

The introduction of the voice into the virtual environment was also an important factor in the popularity of the radio station and in its development as a focal point for communal game play. At the core of *TSO*'s experience was the developers' hope that participants would use the space to communicate with one another. However, the communication was text-based. In *The Sims*, when the avatars expressed their feelings or appeared to be in conversation, speech bubbles appeared above their heads. *TSO* replicated this aesthetic style, creating speech bubbles that allowed players to communicate with other Sim avatars. The words that the player typed into

their keyboard appeared in their avatar's speech bubble. Around this time, players in fantasy-based MMORPGs like *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* were utilizing voice technologies, such as Team Speak. Players were using these technologies to help direct strategy among a larger group of players: if there were too many people typing at the same time, chaos would often ensue.²⁰¹ The value of voice that KSIM integrated into *TSO* was twofold. First, the addition of voice helped to create a quality of virtual embodiment for the DJ's Sim avatar by grafting a sensory ability on top of it. Secondly, DJs utilized their voices to introduce various narratives into the virtual environment, which were used to facilitate game play.

Almost all of the DJs reported that they would receive messages from listeners expressing how “sexy” and “beautiful” their voices were. There was an element of virtual embodiment created by the incorporation of the voice into the virtual environment.²⁰² KSIM was not only a remediation of analog radio; it was also a remediation of our embodiment. With access to our voices, other participants felt as if they had proof of our identity (gender), and that proof made us more desirable. In discussing this phenomenon with Dahlea, she related it to a larger condition—the voice humanizes the pixels. She argued:

Humanization was a big thing as well. It was very hard to humanize pixels, but with the requesting of songs and the instant

²⁰¹ The most famous example of this can be viewed in the YouTube sensation entitled “Leeroy Jenkins.” Players are utilizing voice technology to communicate during a “raid.” See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkCNJRfSZBU> (Accessed 1/2/09). For more on the Leeroy Jenkins phenomenon see Joel Warner, “The Legend of Leeroy Jenkins” *Denver News*, 3/7/07, <http://www.westword.com/2007-03-08/news/the-legend-of-leeroy-jenkins> (Accessed 1/2/09).

²⁰² I experienced the condition of virtual embodiment in a very personal way. While I am positive that I don't have a “sexy” voice, every time I participated as a DJ, I would receive at least one instant message telling me how sexy my voice was.

delivery, it helped to form a connection. It helped create a civil environment. This one guy was giving me a hard time about my music, saying it sucks. The second I talked about him on the air—I think I called him an asshole—he suddenly felt bad and apologized. It might have been the idea that others heard me. Or maybe because hearing my voice helped him realize that I was a real person.

The radio station also helped DJs establish their identity through the music they chose to play, as well as their personal interactions through radio banter. Voice enabled another avenue for the DJs to share their personality with other players in the game.

In her reflections of KSIM, Dahlea also argued that voice became an essential tool for helping to form a “community of interest” surrounding the radio station. Ultimately, the radio station acted as a unifying force in a virtual environment that was inherently fragmented. Bandwidth restrictions limited the number of Sim avatars that could be in any one property at a single time. After a house hosted sixteen Sim avatars, no other players could enter until someone left. This limited the development of larger communal playing groups, such as guilds, which are a popular aspect of most MMORPGs. KSIM helped overcome this barrier created by *TSO*’s software: no matter what property a Sim avatar was in, they could be connected to KSIM’s imagined community by tuning in.²⁰³

²⁰³ This can be related to the historical rhetoric surrounding radio and the formation of community. In his essay, “Radio Lessons for the Internet,” Martin Spinelli discusses German psychologist of media and communications Rudolf Arnheim, who argues, “wireless without prejudice serves everything that implies dissemination and community of feeling and works against separateness and isolation.” Arnheim felt that radio was valuable for the formation of community because it defined relationships based on use and interest, rather than proximity and economic status. The term “imagined community” refers to the work of Benedict Anderson who, through an examination of newspapers, explains the way that nationhood and citizenship are bonded through imaginary relationships with a larger public that never truly shares the same space of interaction. Spinelli discusses the ways in which radio has been

In most cases, the types of game play encouraged by KSIM were generally at odds with the goals defined by *TSO*'s software. For many of the players congregated around KSIM, the social connections they were making in *TSO* seemed to outweigh their experience playing the game. KSIM offered not only a common soundtrack, but it became the focal point for exploring new possibilities for how to "play" *TSO*. The official Interhogan property for KSIM was named "Bauhaus Radio Warehouse." The property's construction, which was built primarily by Dahlea, reflected the radio station's desire to distance *TSO* from its narrative of consumption. Dahlea took the name Bauhaus from the architectural movement²⁰⁴ that had served as a major inspiration for the style of the house. The house was extremely imaginative and purposefully counterintuitive to the overall goals of the game. In most cases, houses were constructed to be as efficient as possible, in effect creating an assembly line where Sim avatars could easily go from station to station in order to meet their motive requirements. There was easy access from the kitchen to the bathroom, to the bedroom, and to a social space. Such houses seemed to be modeled after Henry Ford's assembly line; they all included job objects by which Sim avatars could make simoleons or advance a skill, which were also needed to make more simoleons. Bauhaus Radio Warehouse turned away from the concept of flow. Instead, the radio station's building attempted to be visually interesting; navigating throughout the

argued to give a sense of a common bond for its shared listeners. For more see See Martin Spinelli, "Radio Lessons for the Internet," *Postmodern Culture*, 6 (2) January 1996; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso; Revised Edition, 2006.

²⁰⁴ Bauhaus was an architectural movement centered in Germany in 1919. There was an effort to understand the industrial revolution and its influence on society; as such, the Bauhaus movement attempted to couple architectural design with an industrial aesthetic. See Ulf Meyer and Hans Engels, *Bauhaus: 1919-1933*, Prestel Publishing, 2006.

house had a maze-like quality. The house utilized several *Star Trek* style transporters, which had to be used in order to reach essential objects, such as toilets and refrigerators. Dahlea also decided not to dedicate a section of the house to increasing skills or to earning simoleons. Instead, Dahlea recontextualized many of the objects initially designed for these purposes into works of art.²⁰⁵ For example, Dahlea used a carpenter workstation, which I discussed in relation to grinding gnomes in the previous chapter, to create a single gnome, but instead of selling it, she left the gnome on the table top and built a wrought iron fence around it, forbidding its sale.

Despite its counter consumer narrative (or maybe because of it), Bauhaus Radio Warehouse remained a profitable property. Popular houses were rewarded simoleon bonuses based on the number of visitors and Bauhaus Radio Warehouse was almost always in the upper echelon of the top fifty properties. During its first year, *TSO* introduced categories of houses into the game. Each category was intended to be specific to the intended purpose of the house. This enabled greater diversity in terms of the types of houses that appeared most popular in the game. These categories included Money, Skill, Residential, Shopping, Games, Welcome, Love, and Offbeat. Bauhaus Radio Warehouse almost always occupied the most popular spot in the Offbeat category, and continued to appear in the top fifty houses overall.

²⁰⁵ See my discussion of Daniel Miller and his theory of consumption in Chapter 2 of this dissertation or read Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.



Image 38: Screenshot of the list of popular houses in *TSO*. www.ign.com.

While KSIM was instrumental in maintaining Bauhaus Radio Warehouse's success, it is important to explore how the property managed to sustain its popularity. Bauhaus Radio Warehouse was not essential to KSIM in that players did not have to be on the property in order to listen to the radio station. Additionally, as noted, Bauhaus Radio Warehouse did not offer the resources needed to play the game successfully in terms of avatar development and financial gain. Rather, Bauhaus Radio Warehouse was a space for sim-slackers. The continued success of Bauhaus Radio Warehouse was connected to its participants' ability to create a unique gaming experience, which was often in opposition to the competitive consumer narrative highlighted by EA/Maxis.

On my first visit to Bauhaus Radio Warehouse, I entered the property to find it full of Sim avatars dressed in matching religious robes.²⁰⁶ They were all dancing. In *TSO*, dancing was primarily performed for one of two functions: if Sim avatars danced in a cage, they could develop their body skill, and if Sim avatars just danced, they would increase their fun and/or social needs, depending upon whether they were dancing solo or with a partner. Players could make their Sim avatars dance by clicking on them, selecting dance, and selecting a specific dance move, such as “watusi,” “moonwalk,” or “twist.” The Sim avatar would perform the animations. In this instance, however, there was a performative aspect to the dancing. Participating Sim avatars arranged themselves in three rows and faced the same direction. One of the players acted as the “choreographer,” and typed which sequence of dance moves to choose. If all of the players were able to begin the sequence at the same time, all of the Sim avatars would appear to be performing a synchronized dance routine. Once all of the Sim avatars were in sync, additional dance moves could then be selected and added to the queue that directed the Sim avatar’s action, thus continuing the routine. The entire environment was enhanced by the participation of the KSIM DJ, who had his or her Sim avatar “broadcasting” from Bauhaus Radio Warehouse. The DJ chose the dance music, which the choreographer attempted to match, fashioning the radio station into something more than only an auditory experience.

²⁰⁶ There was a group of virtual objects that players could purchase known as costume trunks. These costume trunks enabled Sim avatars to temporarily dress in an outfit different from the one the player chose when he or she created his or her avatar. The costume trunks had various themes including work (fireman, policeman, etc) and formal wear (wedding outfits, religious robes, etc.).

Synchronized dancing continued that night for almost four hours. Once again, it became apparent that *TSO*'s structure as a gaming environment often interfered with the imagination and flow of player enjoyment and creativity. A single Sim avatar could only participate in synchronized dancing as long as his or her declining motives would allow.²⁰⁷ Dancing exerted energy, which created an increased need for the Sim avatar to sleep. Likewise, the software's algorithms dictated that as time passed, the Sim avatars became hungry, and their bladders full. As discussed in the previous chapter, the gaming elements of *TSO* were ultimately limiting in creating unique gaming experiences. The practice of synchronized dancing continued at Bauhaus Radio Warehouse for over a month. Because of the growing popularity of KSIM, news of these performances spread throughout Interhogan, encouraging new Sim avatars to visit in order to observe and participate in the activity. Through these various experiments like synchronized dancing, KSIM attempted to fill the void created by the lack of a narrative structure in *TSO*.

²⁰⁷ During game play, players would periodically have to direct their Sim avatars to eat, go to the bathroom, sleep, clean up, socialize, and have fun. By doing this, Sim avatars would continue to be happy and active. If a player did not, for instance, meet the bladder need of his or her Sim avatar, there was risk of a virtual accident.



Image 39: Synchronized dancing at Bauhaus Radio Warehouse in *TSO*. Dean Kay is on the far left of the picture (blonde hair and glasses) and Dahlea is in the middle of the screen (blue Mohawk hairstyle).

Without a defined narrative for game play in *TSO*, it was up to the players to decide how the virtual environment should be experienced. KSIM became the focal point for the development of game play for the players involved in its production and consumption. In one interview, Dahlea told me about another KSIM DJ who had escalated the importance of pink flamingos in the game. The actual use of the pink flamingo within the context of the game was trivial: if a property had a pink flamingo, any Sim avatar could choose to kick it in order to increase their fun level. The DJ referred to by Dahlea argued that this practice was cruel and inhumane to the pink flamingo population and began a movement to ban the kicking of pink flamingos. This initiative continued for at least a month, prompting a KSIM listener who role-played a Sim avatar named “The Mayor” to record and release a public

service announcement proclaiming that the pink flamingos were actually constipated and that the act of kicking them was the only way to provide relief. The story surrounding the plight of the pink flamingos culminated in the kidnapping of a pink flamingo princess by one of KSIM's DJs, a search through the city of Interhogan by a group of players attempting to recover her, and the event's subsequent trial. KSIM DJs reported the entire sequences of events. This was one of many examples of the types of gaming experiences created because of KSIM.

My favorite example of a narrative constructed and facilitated by KSIM and Bauhaus Radio Warehouse emerged in the formation of a pseudo-cult. The creation of the cult occurred one night when a group of dedicated KSIM listeners at Bauhaus Radio Warehouse were attempting to figure out something interesting to do within the gaming environment. After two months of playing, many players expressed that they found the overall game boring, and only continued to play because of the radio station. Therefore, significant time was devoted to coming up with the next KSIM event or happening. In this instance, one Sim avatar was jokingly talking about how amazingly great and important he was. His name was Rafe, and, in response, another player wrote, "Praise EFAR," which was Rafe's name spelled backwards. Players began to develop a series of rituals and a language pattern associated with "the cult of EFAR." While the cult began as a joke, its novelty expanded in size and activity.

The cult became an in-depth storyline for those players surrounding KSIM and several happenings revolving around its practices became central to game play. In part, the cult became a strategy for some of the more dominant KSIM players to

disrupt the aspects of *TSO* they felt were problematic. KSIM players utilized the cult of EFAR as a form of culture jamming. In his book *Culture Jam*, Kalle Lasn argues that Guy Debord and the Situationists Internationale offer exciting tactics for confronting the “spectacle” created by our consumer society. Lasn advances the term “détournement” as describing a possible political strategy “as a way for people to take back the spectacle that has kidnapped our lives.” Literally a “turning around,” détournement involved re-routing spectacular images, environments, ambiances, and events in order to reverse or subvert their meaning, thus reclaiming them.²⁰⁸ In part, this practice describes the strategy for the cult of EFAR. The KSIM core consisted of a group of approximately 30 players who continually listened to KSIM and visited Bauhaus Radio Warehouse over an extended period of time. One of them would suggest a property where the rituals of the cult of EFAR should be performed. As many of the KSIM DJs were displeased that the landscape of *TSO* was becoming ever more “sexual” in nature—the most popular properties had names like “Cum All Over” and “Spanking BDSM Dungeon”—these were the types of properties most often chosen. A group of ten to fifteen members of the cult of EFAR communally descended on the property without introduction or explanation. Everyone began to perform a sequence of ritual chants. For example, the phrase “gabba gabba,” which was a reference to the Ramone’s song “Beat on the Brat,” a mainstay on radio KSIM, would be repeated over and over by every member of the cult. Reception to the intrusion was mixed. In some cases, the Sim avatars native to the property were amused and would quickly become converts, replicating the actions others were

²⁰⁸ See Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*, William Morrow & Company, 1999.

performing. In other cases, they got angry, yelled various insults at the cult, and then banned them from the property.²⁰⁹ Eventually, one of the KSIM DJs built a cult of EFAR temple in close proximity to the Bauhaus Radio Warehouse. The player designated the temple as a relationship house, which was the accepted designation for properties dedicated to the practice of cyber-sex, and unsuspecting players searching for Sim love would arrive only to experience EFAR rituals instead.



Image 40: The cult of Efar chanting "gabba gabba" and "!" at an adult themed property in TSO.

The popularity and, for a while, the centrality of the cult of EFAR helped strengthen the bonds between the group of players surrounding KSIM and Bauhaus Radio Warehouse. The cult helped to create and reinforce a type of “insider” knowledge to which only members accepted into the group were privileged. The cult of EFAR

²⁰⁹ Banning was the power given to people who lived on a property to revoke the rights of a Sim avatar from visiting their house. As there were no common spaces in the game, every property could be policed in this way. This, however, was limited because players could only control the spaces they considered home.

became almost mythical, with players approaching us (as I was part of the cult) attempting to understand the tenets of the pseudo-cult and gain membership. Several forums and message boards dedicated to *TSO*, both official and unofficial, contained discussions about the cult of EFAR and the meaning behind it. Members decided not to publicize and recruit for the cult, choosing instead to focus on the absurdity of the rituals. During these property invasions, no explanations were given, and if anyone asked, the players would feign ignorance. The entire practice became an insider joke for KSIM players, and while events surrounding the cult did not occur every night, its language became part of the everyday gaming experience.²¹⁰

In addition to the cult of EFAR attempting to disrupt *TSO*'s emerging sexualized environment, core members of KSIM were also interested in countering some of the game's consumer narratives. This is not to argue that KSIM existed outside of the consumer narrative of the game: Dahlea was only able to make KSIM into a success and build Bauhaus Radio Warehouse so quickly because of her ability to master the game and accumulate a certain level of economic capital. However, once she completed these tasks, Dahlea generally found the economic focus of so many players to be a key limitation for *TSO*. The economic aspect of the game especially became an issue for Dahlea in her position as station manager for KSIM. Several property

²¹⁰ One such example centered on the difficulty of creating an exclamation point when typing one's words. For reasons I have never uncovered, punctuation was primarily limited to periods and question marks. If a user pressed the "Shift" and "1" keys on their computer, nothing would appear on the screen. Somehow, a player discovered a complex series of keys that would produce the exclamation point. While I cannot remember the exact sequence, the ability to make the ! appear on the screen was usually met with amazement. The cult of EFAR incorporated the ! into their rituals and vernacular—guarding the secret from players not associated with KSIM and the cult. Even after the activities of the cult dwindled, players would frequently use ! and the refrain "gabba gabba" to remind everyone of the communal inside joke.

owners began to understand the marketing potential of the radio station: they offered Dahlea simoleons in exchange for advertising spots that would be periodically announced by the various KSIM DJs. At a station meeting, Dahlea opened the proposal up for discussion and most of the DJs were vocal in their position against the practice, arguing instead that KSIM should be used to facilitate game play and as an avenue of amusement for those involved, not as a source of revenue. While most agreed in terms of the value of announcing various events happening in Interhogan, the consensus was that air-time should not be sold to run other player's commercials. KSIM positioned itself as an arena for game play outside of the norm constructed by *TSO's* software, and this directed the politics of the radio station.

The most extreme example of the focus on consumption in *TSO* was the introduction of McDonald's merchandise into the virtual landscape. In 2002, EA/Maxis completed the first seven-figure deal with advertisers, namely McDonalds and Intel, to incorporate product-placement into the video game medium.²¹¹ Because of this deal, players could purchase McDonalds kiosks that would offer simulated McDonalds products to the guests visiting their properties. While McDonalds quickly became popular throughout the game, as the kiosks were programmed to fulfill hunger needs more quickly than other foods, a percentage of players, including many associated with KSIM and Bauhaus Radio Warehouse, found ways of criticizing its integration into the virtual environment. As a symbol of

²¹¹ See Reena Jana, "Is that a Video Game—or an Ad?" *Business Week*, 1/25/06. The larger relationship between computer gaming and advertising has been termed "advergaming," which is "the use of online games integrated with a marketing message." For more on advergaming, see H. Thomases, "Advergaming," 2001, http://www.webadvantage.net/tip_archive.cfm?tip_id=167&a=1 (accessed 10/6/07).

commodification, McDonalds became the central image for those players attempting to create their own narratives in regards to understanding the pre-existing dominant and subversive narratives of our consumer society.²¹² Replicating the repurposing of the workbench discussed earlier in this chapter, Dahlea purchased a McDonalds kiosk to display in Bauhaus Radio Warehouse. She contained the object within a gate and placed signs in front of it arguing against the politics of *TSO* in including McDonalds in the gaming environment, and the politics of McDonalds pertaining to the nutritional value of their products. There were also larger acts of protest. On several occasions, KSIM DJs helped gather players in an effort to destroy McDonalds. Like the cult of EFAR, these events became extremely ritualistic in nature. All of the participants would dress like the popular McDonalds' character The Hamburglar using the costume trunk and choosing the black and white striped prison outfit while placing the black fedora on their heads. Everyone would gather around the McDonalds and chant "grubble grubble" repeatedly. Then, everyone would try to burn the McDonalds down. It was very difficult to create a fire in *TSO*. The only way to do so was to populate the screen with virtual bales of hay and then to launch fireworks at them. Every once in awhile, the bales of hay would catch on fire and burn away. While the fire had no real affect on any virtual objects, the goal was to capture a screen shot of a fire that appeared to be consuming McDonalds. The KSIM

²¹² In a post on the blog Shift.com, Tony Walsh began a call for the picketing of McDonalds in *TSO* immediately after learning of the deal between the two entities. He views the incorporation of McDonalds into *TSO* as the "ideal high-profile backdrop in the war against "advergaming". Some of the strategies for "culture jamming" in *TSO* include picketing McDonald's kiosks, consuming virtual McDonald's food and then having the Sim avatar perform the "vomiting" animation, and opening a McDonald's kiosk and then verbally abuse the patrons and the food you are selling. See Tony Walsh, "Big Mac Attacked" Shift.com, 11/12/2002, <http://www.alternet.org/story.html?StoryID=14530> (accessed 11/19/2002).

players, including Dean Kay, attempted to set fire on a property that housed a McDonalds numerous times, but never experienced success. It is my speculation that *TSO* and McDonalds had anticipated such attempts and programmed the software to restrict this from happening. To allude to an earlier chapter, the software was used to ensure the consumer context. Even though the attempts to burn the McDonalds failed, the attempts demonstrated how these symbols of dominant consumer culture were recontextualized in order to create subversive anti-consumer meanings.



Image 41: The McDonalds kiosk in *TSO*.

The introduction of McDonalds into the gaming environment became a symbol of the attempt to fashion *TSO* into a purely commercial space, which many of the core KSIM participants viewed as extremely troubling. However, this was not enough to cause these players to end their involvement with the game. Ultimately, it was EA/Maxis' refusal to intervene in what these players considered a process of virtual gentrification within the gaming environment that led them to abandon it. The issue began with the introduction of neighborhoods into *TSO* a couple of months after its official release. Content was continually being added to the game, which reinforced

the idea discussed in the previous chapter in reference to the fact that the game was released unfinished. Neighborhoods helped define the geographical landscape of the virtual environment. Properties in proximity to each other could choose a name for their neighborhood and designate their homes as being within its geographical boundary. When many properties in a specific area joined a neighborhood, the name of the neighborhood appeared on a map that allowed players to navigate the virtual landscape.



Image 42: The map screen in *TSO* with the neighborhoods shown. It is interesting to note that one of the neighborhoods is named after a *TSO* radio station, "Fueled Radio Rocks."

The properties surrounding Bauhaus Radio Warehouse were predominantly populated by KSIM participants and most agreed upon choosing the name "Bohemian Valley" for the neighborhood. So, when a player looked at the map in order to enter the game, the name Bohemian Valley appeared above the geographical area we

inhabited. Conflict emerged between KSIM and EA/Maxis over a distant neighborhood dedicated to players who wanted to speak Spanish in the game. This neighborhood bordered one of the most popular and largest neighborhoods in the game. Around this time, *TSO* was already considered as a commercial flop because it never attracted the number of players most analysts considered necessary for the venture to succeed. In an attempt to increase the game's exposure, EA/Maxis made a deal with America Online (AOL) that allowed AOL members' free temporary accounts to the game. Players connected to the larger neighborhood exploited these free accounts in order to purchase all of the empty lots within the Spanish -speaking neighborhood without ever building houses on them, effectively changing the demographics enough that the smaller neighborhood was completely erased from the map.

As several DJs, including Dahlea, were bilingual and spent a considerable amount of time in the Spanish-speaking neighborhood, KSIM helped organize a protest against the larger neighborhood, asking listeners to boycott those properties. Additionally, KSIM DJs instructed listeners to change their profile information to reflect their unhappiness with the process of virtual gentrification.²¹³ In turn, members of the offending neighborhood responded to the protests by complaining to EA/Maxis that they were being unfairly attacked and that the inclusion of the boycott information on player biographies should not be allowed. EA/Maxis began erasing biographies that

²¹³ Every Sim avatar had a biography page that players could alter to reflect their avatar's identity. This tool was utilized early on as a way of announcing the existence of the radio station. This is also the page, as discussed in the previous chapter, that EA/Maxis used as its justification in terminating Peter Ludlow's account. Ludlow had included a link to the Alphaville Tribune, which EA/Maxis argued was a commercial site and in violation of the End User Licensing Agreement.

included the boycott information. They sent letters to these players alerting them that they were in violation of the End User Licensing Agreement because they had included “personal attacks” in their biographies and ran the risk of having their accounts deleted. The numerous attempts by those affiliated with KSIM to explain the protests and concerns to EA/Maxis about the future of *TSO* fell on deaf ears. The protests continued over the radio station, but most participants felt powerless in their ability to have an impact upon the direction of the virtual world.

Mirroring the Peter Ludlow incident, it became apparent that EA/Maxis was more concerned with expanding the game in terms of subscription numbers than allowing those already participating to develop and define the political aspects of the virtual landscape. While the radio station was outside the reach of EA/Maxis, which continued to allow the boycott, the actions and inactions of EA/Maxis were a source of disillusionment for many of the core KSIM players, especially Dahlea. Because of this situation, she decided that she had enough of *TSO*, and began the process of attempting to migrate the radio station, and the people engaged with it, to another MMORPG. In a conversation, Dahlea told me:

The only reason I kept playing *TSO* at that time was so I could keep all those friends that I would have to leave behind. And being the conniving little bitch that I am [sarcasm] I started trying to convince a couple of people to make the switch with me. So the original date to stop playing was originally planned for [a small face-to-face meeting for KSIM participants in Las Vegas in July of 2003] because I wanted to stick with my friends until I met them. But then the whole boycott happened and the customer service was so negative. It wasn't the planned time, but it pressured us into realizing there was an alternative

The alternative was *Star Wars Galaxies*, a virtual world based on the popular movie franchise released in June 2003. Radio WOKI replaced KSIM and the mass migration from Interhogan began.

The KSIM exodus from *TSO* to *SWG* was directly related to EA/Maxis' inability to construct an immersive environment that allowed for players to explore the complicated meanings and issues connected to life in a virtual world. EA/Maxis treated participants as consumers, not as "citizens," which limited the software's potential. One framework that is helpful for understanding this distinction is Ray Oldenburg's writing on the "third place."²¹⁴ While Oldenburg is primarily interested in how third places help facilitate the development of communities, it is not my intention to argue that the players involved with KSIM constituted a community. Rather, I am interested in how Oldenburg's concept is useful in describing the potential (and limits) of the "imagined community" that surrounded the radio station.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ See Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, De Capo Press, 1999.

²¹⁵ The term community and its potential to exist in computer-mediated communication environments has been hotly debated. For overviews of this discussion see Harold Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, MIT Press, 2000, and Jenny Preece, *Online Communities: Designing Usability and Supporting Sociability*, Wiley, 2000. While I generally argue that community can exist in online spaces, I do not feel that KSIM created a community. While very personal and immediate relationships emerged from these interactions, these were the exceptions rather than the norm. The radio station helped form an "imagined community," in which the common aural experience helped create a bond between players. The migration from *TSO* to *SWG* helped strengthen these bonds, but most of these relationships diminished because the gaming elements within the latter example were much more developed and personalized. Players became too occupied with reaching individual goals within *SWG*, and thus the communal aspects were sacrificed.

In his work, Oldenburg privileges the space of the “hangout” and laments its disappearance during the period of the American migration from the city to the suburb, which reflected a culture he viewed as increasingly commercialized. The hangout, or third place, is a space outside of the home (first place) and work (second place) that allows for people to meet, participate in discourse, develop the bonds of friendship, and potentially form a community. Oldenburg argues that the move to the suburb resulted in a fragmented culture in society. He writes, “A man works in one place, sleeps in another, shops somewhere else, finds pleasure or companionship where he can, and cares about none of these places.” Without the centralized geographical space of the city, people became more nomadic, losing their emotional attachments to any one place. The pubs and coffee shops that densely populated the corners of a city vanished, though they had been valuable in the facilitation of public and social discourse. He defines the third space as a “generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work.” Third places are valuable because they present a neutral site. They act as levelers where people of different backgrounds can interact; they offer sites where conversation is the central activity, and they breed familiarity, which enables the possible formation of community.

The application of Oldenburg’s concept of the third place to *TSO* is problematic in several ways. Oldenburg was suspicious of emerging technologies during the post-war suburban migration. For him, the turn away from human interaction and toward the media passivity was one of the essential contributors to the emerging nomadic

condition. He writes, “Television takes the place of active participation and weakens the local grass-roots structure; political influence increasingly shifts to remote sources of power and manipulation.” For Oldenburg, political discourse disappears as interactions shift from the third place to the television set. While the computer-mediated spaces fashioned by the software of *TSO* offered participants a new arena for casual conversation and discourse, Oldenburg would ultimately view their technological context as reflecting the distancing of the individual from his or her geographically immediate peers. The geographical location is especially important to Oldenburg and is another major limitation in understanding the virtual environment as a third place. The local is an important element in the political value of the third place. In his chapter, “The Greater Good,” Oldenburg recounts a colleague’s criticism that the third place is advocating a world where citizens neglect their social and political responsibility, and instead spend all of their time lounging at local hangouts. Oldenburg counters this criticism by arguing that third places are, in themselves, “essential to the political processes of a democracy.” He contends taverns and pubs have long been part of the leveling of society where ordinary citizens could debate current issues as well as interact with local elected officials.²¹⁶ Part of the central value of the third place is its existence within a specific local geographical area: it becomes a place where members of the neighborhood can congregate for local political discourse, recruitment, and debate. This is one of the

²¹⁶ It should be noted that Oldenburg’s criticism could be overemphasizing the value of the historical third place and that he is idealizing their actual conditions. For example, urban neighborhoods have historically included exclusionary practices based on race, gender, and social class. There is also a degree to which these types of places could and did emerge in suburban contexts, such as libraries, community centers, and pools. See Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, De Capo Press, 1999.

major criticisms against the claim that community can exist in a computer-mediated communication environment: *TSO* further distances participants from their local historical situations.

Despite these conditions, there is still value in Oldenburg's work in terms of understanding social interaction in virtual environments. In his essay, "Computer-mediated Communication as Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg's Great Good Places on the World Wide Web," Charles Soukup argues that even with these limitations, Oldenburg's theories are still relevant to virtual spaces. Specifically, Soukup points to the meaningful relationships that are being formed online, as well as the real connections that exist between online and offline interactions: the technological context does not exist in a vacuum, it still remains a part of our real experience. Instead of referring to the virtual environment as a third place, Soukup promotes the term "virtual third place," which he argues requires the conditions of accessibility, presence, and localization. Only the condition of presence was even closely met in *TSO*. The commercial "country club" subscription fee that dictated the financial investment required for participation in *TSO* ran counter to Soukup's condition of accessibility. Likewise, in replicating the political foundation formulated by Oldenburg, Soukup argued that, in order to qualify as a virtual third place, the environment required a connection to an actual localized community or geographical space.²¹⁷ There was no geographical connection between *TSO* and the actual world.

²¹⁷ See Charles Soukup, "Computer-mediated Communication as Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg's Great Good Places on the World Wide Web," in which he discusses the conditions of the "virtual third place." For an example of the type of environment he is discussing, see David Silver, "Localizing the Global Village: Lessons from the Blacksburg

While two conditions preclude *TSO* from qualifying as a virtual third place, the interactions and relationships that emerged among the core players surrounding the KSIM radio station resembled the goals outlined by Oldenburg and Soukup. As previously discussed, the politics and goals of KSIM were positioned in opposition to the larger economic context of *TSO*. Additionally, Dahlea personally made the financial investment required to run KSIM to ensure that other players could participate for free. This does not discount the larger costs associated with broadband access and subscription fees, but the attempt to provide the KSIM radio station as a free service is also important. The question of localization is more complicated. Important questions thus emerge: Can the local exist within the virtual environment and its related technological matrices? In what ways can we understand the central importance and immersive nature of a virtual property such as Bauhaus Radio Warehouse? How do various forums, online bulletin boards, and official and unofficial websites act as spaces where the local politics of the virtual world can be protested and negotiated? Was there potential for KSIM to position itself as a “simulated third space” in its attempt to confront the perceived practice of virtual gentrification? Where Oldenburg and Soukup argue that there is an essential condition of materiality in understanding the political importance of the third space, the term “simulated” attempts to reconcile the lack of a connection between the

Electronic Village,” in Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick, eds. *The Global Village: Dead or Alive*, Bowling Green, OH, Popular Press, 1999. Silver discusses the use of the corporate and Virginia Tech sponsored Blacksburg Electronic Village by the local (non-university) Blacksburg population. While he points out some of the limits of the technology (such as limited access), he also argues that, for members, it became an important space for local political discourse.

virtual environment and a “community” already established in the actual world.²¹⁸ It is clear that in these various peripheral technologies, such as the forums and the radio station, participants are dedicated to the process of creating a more ideal virtual world and, as a result, actively debate proposals and relay criticisms. Although it is problematic that these virtual environments are distanced from the actual world, it is also important to explore the ways in which these spaces become meaningful for their participants.²¹⁹

I am not arguing that KSIM became a simulated third space, but rather that the politics of EA/Maxis, coupled with the limitations of *TSO*’s software design, ultimately restricted KSIM from doing so.²²⁰ There was a desire among the KSIM core players to use the tools provided by EA/Maxis in order to create something more politically developed and meaningful than a virtual shopping mall or popularity contest. There was a genuine drive to fashion *TSO* into a more engaging environment focused on creative identity exploration. Had KSIM core players been allowed to own their experience, to have the tools of virtual citizenship, as was the case with *Second Life*, the story of KSIM and *TSO* might have ended very differently.

²¹⁸ The use of the word “simulated” is not an allusion to The Sim Franchise, but rather to the work of Jean Baudrillard on simulation and simulacra. The lack of localization points to a condition of the postmodern—the simulated third space as essentially an imagined community in an imagined world. For its participants, however, the interactions, discussions, and debates that occur in these spaces are real and meaningful. See Jean Baudrillard, Sheila Faria Glaser (translator), *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

²¹⁹ There is also an argument that could be made concerning the effect of such discussions in helping participants realize and understand similar practices in their everyday lives. How do their interactions with economic, zoning, and structural questions in the virtual world influence their perception of these issues in their local contexts?

²²⁰ I would argue that there are examples in *Second Life* that could be read as successful “simulated third spaces,” though this is a possible direction for future research.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: The Final Big Wipe: *EA-Land* and Beyond

In Summer 2003, a plan was hatched among the core members of the Radio KSIM staff and listeners. We had been socializing with each other almost every day over the past year and yet none of us had ever met face-to-face. The first and only staff meeting for Radio KSIM was going to be held in Las Vegas, a city almost as virtual as the one we inhabited in *The Sims Online (TSO)*. Close to twenty-five people showed—we socialized, talked about the radio station and *TSO*, and collectively decided to move our entire operation to the recently released Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) *Star Wars Galaxies (SWG)*. Radio KSIM would be rebranded as Radio WOKI, and I would change my name from DJ Dean Kay to the more alien sounding DJ Ked Naya. For most of us, *TSO* had run its course. In a way, meeting the other members in person solidified the connection between us as players—it didn't matter if we spent time together in *TSO* or *SWG*, the interpersonal connections were stronger than the software connecting us. As a researcher, I consistently visited *TSO* for approximately six months after the Vegas trip, but, overall, the game had lost its entertainment value. I spent most of my time in *TSO* examining the changes being made and searching for signs of interesting and creative game play. Without the players I had befriended in connection with Radio KSIM, the experience felt empty. Eventually, I decided I had enough research for a serious investigation, and I cancelled my *TSO* subscription.

Instead of participating in the game, I followed the developments surrounding *TSO* through various official and fan-controlled websites, such as Peter Ludlow's *Alphaville Herald*. Over the next several years while I continued to work on the project, I lost most of my interest in returning to the game. The producers continued to update and change the game, but not in any radical way. For example, in 2004 the producers added the ability for Sim avatars to own pets. However, the big issues such as the uneven economy or the inability to upload user-generated content were never fully addressed. Subscription numbers, which never reached expectations, continued to decline and the industry began to declare the game a failure. Still, it continued as my project began to lose direction.

My interest in the game was not reignited until February of 2008, when EA/Maxis announced *TSO* would be completely redesigned. To emphasize its rebirth, the game would be re-named *EA-Land*.²²¹ For the first time in nearly four years, I decided to return to the game. In *EA-Land*, Interhogan no longer existed; in its place was a single server that housed the entire population of users. When I logged in, the first thing I noticed was the game's sparse population. The map screen included red dots showing the locations of current users, and I found that there were less than fifty people in *EA-Land* that night. As expected, most of these users were located in lots with restricted access, and among the people to whom I did manage to talk, there was little interest in reflecting upon the changes that had besieged their virtual world. I spent approximately two hours that night looking at what the world had become

²²¹ See Duncan Riley, "EA Turns *The Sims Online* Into Free *EA-Land*, *Second Life* Competitor," TechCrunch, 2/25/08, <http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/02/25/ea-turns-the-sims-online-into-second-life-competitor/> (Accessed 1/21/09).

before logging out. I didn't realize it at the time, but those would be the last two hours I spent in the digital environment once known as *TSO*. Two months later—on April 29, 2008—EA/Maxis announced that, despite its recent re-imagining and re-development, they would bring *EA-Land* to an end on August 1, 2008. On that date, with minimal participation and mainstream interest, one of the most hyped MMORPGs in the history of the gaming industry officially came to an end. The final big wipe occurred and the world ended. *TSO*'s failure was, in fact, so monumental that it made the “Yahoo Video Games” list of “Big Budget Disasters.”²²² After mentioning *TSO*'s estimated 25 million dollar budget, the article presented the following overview:

Although megapublisher Electronic Arts usually has a knack for delivering smashes, ever time it's dipped its toe into the waters of massively multiplayer games since *Ultima Online* it's ended up badly burned. Its last effort, an online version of *The Sims*, should have been a smash hit, but, well, let's just say it underperformed just a tad. Turns out the best way to make history's most successful videogame franchise into a massively multiplayer game is not in fact to remove most of the features players enjoy and then heap on a monthly fee. *The Sims Online* underperformed from day one, and although EA re-invented the game as “EA-Land” in February, it's currently marking time until the Grim Reaper comes to turn off the servers on August 1 [2008]

While this dissertation has focused primarily on *TSO*'s formative period, that is, the beta stage and first year of its commercial release, here I examine its end: the transition from *TSO* to *EA-Land* and the game's subsequent cancellation. This conclusion will also address some of the possible lessons that may have been learned from *TSO*, especially as they relate to those developing new virtual worlds and networked computer games. In this conclusion, I specifically relate *TSO*'s failure to

²²² Mike Simth, “Big Budget Disasters,” *Yahoo Games*, 6/12/2008, <http://videogames.yahoo.com/feature/big-budget-disasters/1218872> (Accessed 1/23/09).

the 2008 release of Wright's "sim-everything" game *Spore*. What did Wright learn, or perhaps overlook, from his experience with *TSO* in his attempt to create a new software program partially dependent upon the creativity of its players? I reflect upon the process of conducting research for such a project, focusing on the limitations and issues that emerged over the course of my investigation. Lastly, I conclude by discussing the temporal condition of digital texts, supporting the need for archiving and preserving virtual worlds.

The transition from *TSO* to *EA-Land* in late February 2008 was interesting for several reasons. First and foremost, the reconceptualization of the software was directly related to the alternative model utilized by the more popular example of *Second Life*. Players now have the option to experience software for free, or opt for a paid membership subscription and reap additional benefits. EA/Maxis' description of *EA-Land* was eerily similar to the structure of *Second Life*. The announcement read:

We heard from the community that the economy was broken in *TSO*. That was true, too many users were billionaires, and the goal of the game was mostly about extracting money from Maxis. I can now say with satisfaction that we have fixed the economy on *EA-Land*. This took many features, from establishing a real estate market, where users can easily buy or sell lots to one another, and a dynamic object pricing market where the prices of objects purchased from [M]axis is based on supply and demand, enabling stores and entrepreneurs to earn a living. We also enabled users to buy simoleons directly from Maxis. While there is no need for users to do so in the game (we give subscribers simoleons every week), it can help new users build their dream house faster with a simple paypal transaction secured by us.²²³

²²³ See Duncan Riley, "EA Turns *The Sims Online* Into Free *EA-Land*, *Second Life* Competitor," TechCrunch, 2/25/08, <http://www.techcrunch.com/2008/02/25/ea-turns-the-sims-online-into-second-life-competitor/> (Accessed 1/21/09).

In addition, players were now able to import user-generated skins and objects into the virtual environment, although, unlike *Second Life*, EA/Maxis had to first approve “all of the content [so] this user content is safe to be viewed by everyone.” *EA-Land* was EA/Maxis’ attempt to replicate the success of *Second Life* using the aesthetics of *The Sims*.



Image 43: Town hall style meeting in *EA-Land*. The lot sized increased but it was graphically the same game as *TSO*.

The most surprising aspect of the transition from *TSO* to *EA-Land* was EA/Maxis’ decision to remove any connection to The Sim Franchise by renaming the game. There are a couple of possible reasons for this move. One reason is that the producers might have realized the problematic expectations with which the consumers entered the experience as a result of their familiarity with *The Sims*. Aside from the aesthetic connection, there were actually more differences than similarities between *The Sims* and *TSO*. Another possibility is that the producers of the game may have wanted to

reinforce the idea that this re-imagined version of *TSO* was nothing similar to the product initially introduced to the market a little more than five years before. The choice of *EA-Land* as a name, however, was strange because EA/Maxis had found itself at the center of controversy and criticism throughout its history, especially in its attempts with respect to the online gaming market. For example, EA/Maxis was the central target of Peter Ludlow's attacks in his writings that pertained to his participation with the *Alphaville Herald*.²²⁴ The element that made the most sense was the inclusion of the word "Land" in the title. Where *TSO* attempted to replicate the success of *The Sims* by re-appropriating its name, the game's title was not at all useful in terms of describing the experience players should expect in their interactions with the game. By adding the word "Land" to the title, there was now an emphasis on the virtual geographical space promised through interaction with the software. The word "Online" in *The Sims Online* denoted the game's digital context, while the word "Land" in *EA-Land* provided the virtual environment with an anchor to the material world. It was no longer a game, but a destination.

²²⁴ Peter Ludlow's problems with EA/Maxis were discussed in the previous chapter and can be further explored in Peter Ludlow, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse*, The MIT Press, 2007. The book provides a good overview of *TSO* and *Second Life*, and explores Ludlow's various exploits in these virtual environments.



Image 44: Another screenshot from *EA-Land*. The three yellow panels on the floor highlighted the logo for *EA-Land*.

One of the most cynical explanations states that the renaming of the game was done in an attempt to lessen the blow of having a game in The Sims Franchise fail. In response to a post about the closing of *EA-Land/TSO* on the “SimWorld news blog,” “EA Boycotter” displays such cynicism, writing, “It seems their only concern was to get the game renamed to *EA-Land* so that it could be distanced from the Sims name. This way the future of The Sims PC games would not be affected.”²²⁵ In fact the title of the post “EA Boycotter” responded to was “*EA-Land* Closing & Player Campaigns!” not “*The Sims Online* Closing & Player Campaigns!” Perhaps there was an element of truth to this perspective. The decision was problematic because,

²²⁵ This is from the comment section of Madji, “*EA-Land* Closing & Player Campaigns!” *SimWorld News*, 5/9/08. <http://simworldnews.wordpress.com/2008/05/09/ea-land-closing-player-campaigns/> (Accessed 1/20/09).

despite *TSO*'s monumental failure, The Sim Franchise remained a viable brand; the choice to completely abandon it seemed counter-intuitive.

The re-imagining of the game marked by the switch from *TSO* to *EA-Land* was met with cautious optimism from its participants, even spurring some consumers that had previously abandoned *TSO* to give the game another try. *EA-Land*'s official blog became the focal point for discussions about this transition. While the beta test for *TSO* had ended quite some time ago, the *EA-Land* blog became somewhat of a second beta test. This context did not elude active participants, and in several comments players offered their services as testers. For example on March 24, 2007, shortly after the *EA-Land* Project was first announced, "Gilly" wrote, "I would be happily volunteer to be a guinea pig or tester if you need any...in fact I feel completely safe in saying that most is true for all the posters here on your blog...Just in case it need to be said. Beta testers for life." The blog became a record of the conversations between developers and consumers in their joint attempt to fix *TSO*'s many flaws. Even more than the original beta, there was a grand attempt to bring the consumer into the development process; posts would often directly solicit ideas from participating players. There was also a direct acknowledgement that the lack of user-generated content was a serious detriment to the success of *TSO*. Many of the early posts focused on the plans and issues surrounding this task.²²⁶ These discussions focused on not only technical issues, but also on concerns surrounding decency

²²⁶ The blog began in March of 2007. This coincided with the opening of Test Center 3, which was the testing ground for what would become *EA-Land*. The transition to *EA-Land* was announced in December 2007. Test Center had existed as a server city since the beginning of *TSO*; however this project was developed as a complete overhaul of the software. The blog existed at <http://ea-land.ea.com> but was erased from the World Wide Web shortly after the game officially ended on August 1, 2008.

standards (overtly sexualized Sims avatars), and intellectual property rights (individual and corporate creators). Most of the detailed plans offered to consumers by developers were met with excitement; during this early period of development, serious posts would spark anywhere between fifty and one hundred responses. By April 2008, developers reported that there were 1,603 unique users who had posted to the blog. Collectively, these users had posted almost 12,000 comments to under 1500 blog entries. Clearly, there was still significant interest in *TSO/EA-Land* until its end.

When EA/Maxis announced on April 29, 2008 that it would officially end *TSO/EA-Land* on August 1, 2008, many players expressed their sadness and anger. Most of their comments focused on EA/Maxis and its failure to support the game and follow through on its promises. However, there was also a sense that the developers involved with the game's reconstruction had done everything they could and were not at fault. In the Sim World News post previously mentioned, "majdi" writes:

Don't blame the developers, they have worked their butts off for all of us to have a better game play and new features almost weekly. Personally, I believe the developers didn't even know about the plans of closing *EA-Land* since they would've not promised us the amnesty. I can't believe the developers will go into all this headache and exhaustion for nothing...It is also worth reminding that the last few weeks before the huge announcement was made, there was a lack of communication from the developers, with a possible reason of negotiating this decision with top management, or simply, they have been told to leave their offices and stop working on the game.²²⁷

The response by "EA Boycotter" expresses a similar sentiment, stating,

²²⁷ *Ibid.* The amnesty referred to in the post refers to EA/Maxis' attempt to bring past *TSO* subscribers back to the game with the introduction of *EA-Land*. Players would receive gifts and skill locks based on their account's age, not their Sims' age. Those players who had left *TSO* would be treated as if they had continued their subscriptions the entire time. For more information see "The Amnesty Program," *SimWorld News*, 2/22/08, <http://simworldnews.wordpress.com/2008/02/22/the-amnesty/> (Accessed 1/23/09).

The developers worked long hours on a game that was not updated and upgraded for years. They started turning it around. Many issues still need to be fixed but the hopes of many were slowly coming to be. For Electronic Arts (EA) to just take all that away killing off many relationships and communities is wrong. Stand up to these Corporate Bullies and help in the fight to save a very important game to many.²²⁸

These players attempted to save *EA-Land/TSO* by creating several websites and petitions protesting its cancellation. After “madji” posted the news about the game’s cancellation in her post “*EA-Land Closing & Player Campaigns*,” she included a link to the website www.playercampaigns.com. She included the following summary of the project in bold text:

The community, with the huge amount of rage and sadness expressed to the world, have decided to start up a huge campaign called PlayerCampaigns to attempt to save the game. Different ideas are being introduced and made easy, simple but effective tasks are found in the forums for everyone to do that would benefit the game. Please don’t think this is a stupid idea, many other communities have succeeded to save their favorite game. The help and support of anyone is greatly appreciated, and every single person can contribute and have a huge effect on the destiny of this game, even if you never played it. For example, the internet radios were about to go into a point where most of them would’ve closed due to some new laws and pricings, however, the community made a campaign and got the support of more people where they were sending emails to officials and more, which ended up in saving the internet radios and all those decisions were not implemented. Please join us at the PlayerCampaigns site and contribute as much as possible in any idea or task. This game has meant more than just a game for mostly everyone, it has been an escape from real life and a second home to many. Many people with disabilities were now able to talk, walk, meet and make new friends. Many have gone through deaths, marriages, sicknesses, new babies born and more together. The memories and friends made over 6 years should

²²⁸ Madji, “*EA-Land Closing & Player Campaigns!*” *SimWorld News*, 5/9/08. <http://simworldnews.wordpress.com/2008/05/09/ea-land-closing-player-campaigns/> (Accessed 1/20/09).

never be underestimated and we don't want that to end...imagine this happening to your favorite game!!²²⁹

While the economics associated with the costs of servers and developer support could not justify the game's continuation, it is interesting to note that there was a community of consumers dedicated to its survival.

As previously mentioned, the addition that provided the biggest payoff for *EA-Land* participants was the introduction of user-generated content into the game's virtual environment. Although the content first had to be approved by EA/Maxis, there was a sense that the original promise of *TSO* was finally being realized. During the short period of time that players were allowed to upload custom content to *EA-Land* (and its testing predecessor Test Center 3), more than 30,000 objects were incorporated into the game. In his book, *The Second Life Herald*, Peter Ludlow recounts a conversation with Will Wright during which Wright professes that the lack of user-generated content is one of the primary reasons *TSO* failed to live up to its original promise.²³⁰ While the final chapter on *TSO* has already been written,²³¹ Wright has continued to be an innovator in the field of computer gaming. What lessons did he learn from *TSO*?

Spore was Wright's first major project after leaving *TSO*. After a prolonged development stage, *Spore* was officially released on September 7th 2008. Described as his attempt to create a "sim everything," Wright's *Spore* attempts to replicate the pattern of evolutionary history by following the development of a single-cell

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ Peter Ludlow, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the Metaverse*, The MIT Press, 2007.

organism to a hunter/gatherer, the establishment of a civilization, and the exploration of the galaxy. Wright wanted the unlimited creativity of the game's players to drive its success. In June 2008, EA/Maxis released the *Spore Creature Creator*, which could best be described as a tool that presented its users with the power to create and animate a limitless number of strange looking creatures.



Image 45: A screenshot from the *Spore Creature Creator*.

Wright knew that if they were given the power to create, users would populate *Spore*'s universe with rich, complicated, and aesthetically interesting content. EA/Maxis described *Spore* as the first “massively single player game.” Similar to *TSO*, one of the major concerns of giving players the power to create *Spore*'s content was that a percentage of those players would want to add content considered offensive to a mainstream market. In addition, for *TSO* to work as a MMORPG,

players had to sacrifice their control over the simulation algorithms that allowed them to direct the pace of game play. With *Spore*, Wright created a centralized database that EA/Maxis could monitor and censor. If a player uploaded their creature to this server, that creature could be distributed through the network to other players and be used to populate millions of worlds. Consumers create the content for thousands of individuals with whom they will never have contact. Because there is no in-game interaction between players, the game is not massively multiplayer, but, as mentioned above, massively single player. Each player experiences *Spore* in his or her own desired way.

Similar to the structure of *EA-Land*, EA/Maxis retained the right to decline user-generated content from being distributed through the network of players. Not surprisingly, this became the focus of controversy even before the game's September release. In an interview with the Associated Press, Wright addressed the growing concern over the emergence of "Spore porn" or "sporn," arguing that he was actually impressed with some of these efforts. He remarked, "When you give players creative control, you have to expect they're going to do the unexpected....Some of it's really good for what they were shooting for. It's amazingly explicit, especially when those creations are animated. We just have to make sure those people aren't messing up the experience for others."²³² EA/Maxis, however, did not share his enthusiasm. Not even a month after releasing the *Spore Creature Creator*, the company began the process of removing material they considered inappropriate from their YouTube

²³² Andrew Webster, "Will Wright talks Spore porn, console versions," *Ars Technica: The Art of Technology*, 8/28/08 <http://artstechnica.com/journals/thumbs.ars/2008/08/28/will-wright-talks-spore-porn-console-versions/> (Accessed 1/20/09).

channel, which was dedicated to users who wanted to upload their *Spore* creations. The company also began sending e-mails to users responsible for creating the objectionable content which stated, “Your Electronic Arts account has been flagged for violating the Electronic Arts Inc Terms of Service. We believe that the violation or behavior is serious enough to bring it to your attention as it may impact your future access to the service.” This was the message sent to Kristen Salvatore, a writer for the magazine *PC Gamer*, after she submitted a creature named “Boobalicioius” (included below).²³³

²³³ For more about the incident with Kristen Salvatore, see Make Fahey, “CNN Tackles Hot Spore Porn Issue,” *Kotaku.com*, 7/31/08, <http://kotaku.com/5031493/cnn-tackles-hot-spore-porn-issue/> (Accessed 1/20/09); Chris Hicks, “EA bans the *Spore* porn,” *Computer and Video Games*, 6/19/08, <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/article.php?id=191272> (Accessed 1/20/09).



Image 46: Kristen Salvatore's Boobalicious.

While Salvatore was only issued a warning, there were several reports of players receiving thirty-day suspensions for uploading “sporn” to the central server.²³⁴ It is clear that EA/Maxis remained concerned about the nature of the content being developed with the use of its software. However, in comparison to *TSO*, which restricted all user-generated content from being uploaded to the servers, this situation remains an important advancement in integrating the creativity of consumers into the content development process.

²³⁴ One such case was reported on the GameSpot *Spore* message board. “Atrobasinnu” writes, “So apparently you can’t make things look naked? I made a starship that looked like a pair of jugs and I was banned from EA for 30 days.” <http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/genmessage.php?board=926714&topic=45857806> (Accessed 1/23/09).

In my own experience, the game play of *Spore* has definitely been more engaging than that of *TSO*. However, even with the inclusion of user-generated content, *Spore* still remains a single-player experience and does not match the level of interaction and creativity within and surrounding *TSO*. Projects like the radio station KSIM, and Peter Ludlow's *Alphaville Tribune*, allowed participants to explore the possibilities of new media technologies as well as the boundaries of the virtual world. Despite the emergence of sporn, *Spore* remains a very controlled and defined space. While it is interesting to view the types of creatures other players create, the interaction among players is limited to only this viewing.

Even with the various limitations built into *TSO* through the development of its software, a very imaginative and exciting space was created. While I would not say that its game play equaled that of other, more successful, MMORPGs, I valued many of the relationships I formed while interacting with the other KSIM participants. These relationships lasted for several years, even after most of us stopped playing *TSO*. On the final night of *TSO/EA-Land*'s existence, I had intended to make one last visit to the virtual world to say my goodbyes. I had witnessed the birth of this virtual world, and I thought it was only fitting to also witness its death. The night of August 1, 2008, I went to my computer and logged in, only to receive a message telling me that there was an error and that I would not be able to connect to the game. After exploring several forums, I discovered that there had been numerous reports dating to the middle of June from other players receiving the same message. The game was not being updated and the bugs were no longer being fixed. One user reported a very

complicated plan for circumventing the error message, which I tried but failed to execute. I was unable to bear witness; the world ended without me.

I decided to spend that night archiving any and all sites related to the final demise of *TSO*. I visited each of the official EA/Maxis websites and downloaded all of the material I could find for fear that it would completely disappear from existence the following day (which it eventually did). I looked for blogs and reports from various events happening within *EA-Land*, and for forum discussions concerning the game's end. I was hoping to address a central problem in researching digital material: the ease of which it, like the virtual world of *TSO*, can vanish into thin air.

Reflecting upon the entire process of this project, I find that *TSO*'s disappearance speaks directly to the specific challenges of examining a virtual world. In the case of *TSO*, there were already inherent complications for research, namely the fluid nature of the MMORPG medium. Unlike novels and movies, computer games allow for infinite possibilities concerning the way in which they are construed. The user, through a combination of decision-making, reflexes, and strategy, helps direct the manner in which the game unfolds. While books and films remain static, each time a computer game is interfaced, a unique experience is created. This condition is compounded by the specific qualities of a networked computer game, such as *TSO*. In most cases, when a computer game is released to the public, it is released as a finished product; *Pac Man* can still be played in exactly the same form today as it was played in 1980.²³⁵ This, however, is not the case with *TSO* and other MMORPGs.

²³⁵ While there have been numerous sequels and updates to *PacMan*, the original game is still played on computer emulators, cell phones, iPods, and joystick systems that attach to

Always in a state of flux, the software that is initially distributed is continually altered through a series of “updates” published by the software’s producers. While some of these updates are minor and dedicated to fixing “bugs” in the game’s programming, others introduce new content or attempt to balance fundamental problems in the game’s world such as economic inflation. Additionally, the virtual environment of *TSO* was constantly altered and developed as players actively built its landscape through the process of game play. It would be impossible to experience *TSO* in the same form as it was initially released. In fact, as a result of the immaterial quality of networked MMORPGs and the demise of *TSO*, it would be impossible to interact with the game in any of its forms at the present time. The text is no longer accessible, which introduces a historical limitation for this academic inquiry.

The question of how to research and archive virtual worlds is currently being approached by a project entitled “Preserving Virtual Worlds.”²³⁶ This project investigates ways of preserving “early games and literature,” along with “later interactive multi-player game environments.” On its website, the project describes the problem it is attempting to address, “This project addresses a neglected topic in digital media preservation: methods, infrastructure, standards, and technology for preserving the complex software, content, and interactivity in computer games and electronic literature, as well as the transactions and interactions that constitute the

televisions. In these cases, the game has not been altered and still includes the original kill screen where, on the 256th level, the program essentially crashes.

²³⁶ The project, Preserving Creative America: Preserving Virtual Worlds, explores “methods for preserving digital games and interactive fiction.” The project involves participants from Stanford University and the University of Maryland. For more information see: http://www.ndiipp.uiuc.edu/pca/?Home%3A_Preserving_Virtual_Worlds (accessed 11/17/2008).

user's experience of them.”²³⁷ This project argues that virtual worlds equal the level of impact on our society and culture of other realms in the entertainment industry, such as television, music, and cinema. The goal of virtual world preservation is important because, without a record, “future generations will have no way to understand how these experiences became such an important part of our culture.”²³⁸ While the Preserving Virtual Worlds project is still in its infancy, one effort has already emerged that provides a great benefit for my current work. On the final night of *TSO/EA-Land*, Alex Degtiar, a member of the Preserving Virtual Worlds project team, chronicled the EA/Maxis sponsored “See You Soon Party” by employing video capturing technology. That night, Degtiar was able to document the last five and a half hours of *TSO/EA-Land*, the last five minutes of which were added to “Archiving Virtual Worlds,” a repository for videos documenting the activities and events that occur within digital environments.²³⁹ The video entitled *EA-Land: The Final Countdown* (2008) can be accessed at

http://www.archive.org/details/EALand_FinalCountdown. Its description reads:

These are the last few minutes of *EA-Land* at the See You Soon Party in EA Town Hall, hosted by EA's Parizad. Tears are shed, final goodbyes are made, and lasting memories are created before the plug is pulled and the world is brought to an end. The party was held in the Community Pub (Test Center 3) and EA Town Hall (*EA-Land*), beginning Thursday, July 31st, 11 p.m. and with a scheduled ending of 4 a.m. PDT. The game world was officially shut down as of 4:35am PST, August 1st, 2008.

²³⁷ http://dev.prairienet.org/?page_id=10 (accessed 5/26/09).

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ “Archiving Virtual Worlds” is part of a collaborative effort between Preserving Virtual Worlds and the “How They Got Game Project” of the Stanford Humanities Lab. For more information see http://www.archive.org/details/virtual_worlds (accessed 5/26/09).

There aren't any big surprises in the video. Among the thirty Sims on the lot (the maximum allowed) most are gathered around the pool, following the instructions of a Sim attempting to take a final picture of everyone at the party. Other players have decided to spend their last minutes chatting in a hot tub. The avatars are varied in appearance—there are several bears, a couple of angels (with halos floating above their heads), and a man in a Santa Clause hat. There is a steady stream of word bubbles appearing on the screen throughout the video. They are a mix of loving goodbyes and sadness pertaining to the loss of *TSO* in their lives. It is important to note that whenever the players refer to the game, *EA-Land* is never mentioned. However, the references to *TSO* are many, and include: “bye!!! *TSO* I LOVE YOU”, “I LOVE *TSO*!!!”, “Love you *TSO*...thank you for everything” and “I’ll miss *TSO* :(.” The only references to *EA-Land* are in the official messages sent to the game’s users.

One of the most interesting aspects of the video is its audio track. As discussed in the previous chapter, the incorporation of player run radio stations into the gaming experience became a popular practice. Approximately one minute into the video, DJ Spike (whose Sim is at the party) begins to talk. He says, “Hey guys this is the last time you are going to hear me speak, well the last time before *TSO* goes down. I just want to thank you. It’s been an amazing experience.” His words prompt immediate responses from the other Sims at the party. When DJ Spike said “thank you,” another Sim avatar wrote, “no, thank you.” There are several other comments directly reacting to DJ Spike’s words, especially when he becomes emotional and starts to cry. You can hear him holding back his tears as he continues, “I promised I wouldn’t

make myself cry, but I can't stress how much you guys have meant to me over the past however many years it's been." At this point he starts to cry. Several of the sims-avatars respond with a chorus of "awwws" and warnings that they too are about to cry. Even with the highly stylized and cartoonish look of the environment, there is a real sense of emotion emerging through the screen. Amid his tears, DJ Spike introduces the final song, "Time to Say Goodbye" by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman, by telling his audience, "Some people don't get attached to things, but when you make friends like people have in this game, it's actually really hard. So I am going to play you the last song...good luck in life everybody and best wishes. I love you all and it's been great knowing you. Take care guys." After proposing a toast to MaxisParizad, the EA/Maxis representative/employee hosting the party, DJ Spike's voice goes silent as the song brings everyone closer to the end of the world.

MaxisParizad is the liveliest participant at the party. He maintains a sense of humor that often characterized the *TSO* experience for me. Sitting in the hot tub, one of his last comments is "before I die, I'm going to pee in this spa." With a couple of minutes left, he uses his power as an *EA-Land* employee to broadcast a message to everyone in the virtual world. The subject line reads: "Last Call!" and the text simply states, "Game Over. You Win!" At about the four-minute mark of the video, another message appears on the game screen. This one is not from MaxisParizad, but rather an impersonal entity named "ARIES_OPERATIONS." It is an official "Broadcast to *EA-Land*" with the subject: "The City will be going offline in 1 minute." Responses of sadness abound.

The end of the world is captured by the alert of a “Network Error” that reads: “Lost Sever Connection. Possible causes: Your client may have erroneously disconnected or the sever may have crashed (Error Code: 23).” Right before the crash, two messages appear on the screen. One simply said “tso” and the other “bye all.”

Degtiar provided a commentary reflecting upon the video and his involvement with *TSO/EA-Land*:

Being there for the very end really was a unique experience. Many players knew each other and had been part of *The Sims Online/EA-Land* for years, while others were newer to the experience. Regardless, this final event welcomed all, and everyone shared their happiness to spend their last moments together with EA’s Parizad, their friends, and their acquaintances, their tears and sadness over having *EA-Land* torn from them, their frustrations with EA and its decision, and their hopes for keeping contact and meeting again. The last moments were especially moving, as emotions ran high and people that had made *TSO/EA-Land* and this community a part of their lives for so long had to make their final goodbyes. It was a once in a lifetime event that would be hard to forget.²⁴⁰

The video captured by Degtiar is a remarkable record of a world that no longer exists. To paraphrase Marx: all that is digital melts into air. Despite attempts to archive digital culture,²⁴¹ *TSO* highlights how entire “worlds” can seemingly disappear. My study serves to remind the future that archival effort needs to place upon the documentation of digital cultures. Almost all of the documents acting as my primary sources have been completely erased from the Internet; all of the content from the

²⁴⁰ Henry Lowood, “‘Lost Server Connection’: The Last Minutes of a Virtual World,” August 4, 2008, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/htgg/cgi-bin/drupal/?q=node/239> (accessed 5/26/09).

²⁴¹ There has been an increasing call to document the digital objects that can too easily disappear from such a temporal medium. For further discussion about this effort, see Gail M. Hodge’s “Best Practices for Digital Archiving: An Information Life Cycle Approach” in *D-Lib Magazine*. Vol. 6 (1) January 2000. <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/january00/01hodge.html> (accessed 11/17/2008).

official websites, blogs, and forums dedicated to *TSO* and *EA-Land* have vanished from everything but memory. In November 2002, when I began playing the beta version of *TSO*, I spent a substantial amount of time and resources printing all of the content from these online sites with the thought that, one-day, it might prove valuable to my research. Without this effort, this research project would have been impossible, and without the efforts of the Preserving Virtual Worlds Project, future research will also be extremely limited. This dissertation acts, in part, as an attempt to excavate the lost virtual world of *TSO*. It is a document of the ephemeral quality of digital culture.

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