Values in Play

Interactional Life with the Sims

by

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

To be publicly defended on March 11, 2011 at 13.15 pm

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ABSTRACT

Title: Values in Play – Interactional Life with the Sims

Langue: English

This study arises from pedagogical discussion about learning potential with computer games – more precisely, that one game genre called open-ended (sandbox) games can make players explore the game content in such a way that they learn about a specific content or phenomenon while playing. These arguments are strong in the constructionist tradition but are seldom backed up by empirical results. This study scrutinizes the social activity of game play with OESG. Video recordings of 19 play sessions in home environments generated the empirical data. The study comprises 39 players in groups of two or three, aged 10 to 14, as they were playing The Sims or The Sims 2 for one hour. The theoretical tools in the analysis were assembled within a sociocultural perspective on learning and communication, and also by using Vygotsky's ideas on fantasy and creativity and Goffman's ideas on social interaction. Drawing from analyses of the video-recorded play activities, this study gives an account of how meaning and values are negotiated during actual game play. Whereas previous research indicates that this particular game genre might hold progressive potential, insofar as it challenges the players' prevailing values and norms, this empirical study brings forth a counterargument by showing how the "freedom" in the computer game assists instead in reproducing prevailing values and norms. This is because the players proved to be using their sociocultural experiences – what they already know – as a resource in their interactions. This suggests that the educational potential of games might not be in exploring, but rather in the fact that rule-based activities make participants orientate themselves to specific topics. Hence, open-ended exploration within immersive game worlds might not be an appropriate way to challenge young people's preconceptions and stereotypes. These findings suggest that if a concept of challenged stereotypes is desired in video games, the design must present more of a contest to prevailing norms, accentuating alternative subject positions.