Playing *The Sims 2*

Constructing and negotiating woman computer game player identities through the practice of skinning

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Abstract

Despite some remarkable shifts in gender demographics of game players during the last decade, computer games remain male-gendered media. Engagement in such a culture, this work suggests, is characterised by confusion and incoherence for women players who are simultaneously taking part in male dominated leisure which marginalises them and a society which assumes gender equality as an acquired right. Small-scale ethnography tied together with an analysis of concurrent cultural discourses and the game system’s characteristics allows a deep analysis of the construction of identities that conflict with the naturalised idea of a player.

*The Sims 2* (2004) computer game sets out a unique case for a study of women’s player identities because it is both exceptionally popular among women and individuated by a theme and a structure that are understood as ‘feminine’. Furthermore, a group of women players whose engagement with the game is characterised by creation and sharing of new and altered game content, the skinning of it, appears interesting since the women skinners resist traditional gender roles by taking active, productive positions towards the game.

This work’s original contribution to knowledge is in offering a nuanced view of female game playing which resists easy assimilation to some of the dominant concepts recently in play within the field of study, such as political resistance in the form of game content appropriation and female empowerment through video game play. While skinners seem to have a possibility to change a game that results from a male-dominated game development culture, their skinning is fundamentally facilitated and invited by the game they play. Such practice therefore appears different from the ‘high’ forms of subversive user-participation that are typically cherished in the studies of media use. Consecutively, the approach in this thesis questions the straightforwardly embracing undertone of the current *Web 2.0* ‘buzz’ that claims democratisation of media production. *The Sims 2* skinning offers an example of a productive practice that does not go beyond what we understand as gameplay, but demands revisiting the very notion of gameplay itself.

Keywords: *Computer Game, Gender, The Sims 2, Co-Creativity, Participatory Culture*
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Chapter 1

Introduction

I have a little green post-it note which has hand-writing of a young player on it saying ‘maxmotives’ and a tiny butterfly shaped papercut on the bottom of the paper. I got it years ago as a gift from a daughter of a good friend. Actually, I assumed it to be a kind of expression of gratitude in a form of showing off one’s cultural capital, game cultural that is. I got it because I had, a moment before, showed the girl how to find player-created clothes and items for The Sims 2 (2004) game she was playing. In turn, she offered me some of her secret knowledge of the game by passing a note that included a code, or a cheat, with which all the ‘motives’ of the sim characters (such as Hunger, Comfort and Hygiene) stay on maximum level allowing me to concentrate on things outside the characters’ basic needs.
Retrospectively speaking, it is easy to acknowledge that both pieces of information shared were readily available online. However, the moment of passing those insights to each other was significant to me at least. It was a moment based on shared interest between generations. It was also a moment of female solidarity in which two people were able to express their knowledge on a common topic and based on that gain respect from each other. We sat in front of her computer and she showed me her game and the various expansion packs she had for it. It was not that I was the older and wiser or that she was the kid who knows more about game tech. We were just two players who talked about games.

It is these tiny everyday moments of playerhood that prompted me to undertake a piece of small-scale ethnography consisting of interviews that forms the basis of my research and enabled me to explore the everyday practice of women game players like my friend and myself. Such seemingly mundane moments of game cultural involvement are important to the individuals involved and work in creating a shared culture and identity.

This thesis aims to discuss one area of predominantly female leisure which appears to be left outside the dominant discourses of gameplay and which has gained only little attention from researchers: the making of those player-created Sims clothes and items, skins, that I introduced my young friend to. This study therefore locates a very specific gendered version of gaming pleasure: skinning *The Sims 2*.

1.1 Background

When beginning this research as a continuation to the master’s thesis project I completed with Rika Nakamura in 2005, I sought after an understanding of women players’ experiences in game cultures. Earlier research on women
1.1. Background

players had aimed to introduce the kinds of game characteristics that do and do not appeal to women (e.g. Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Ray 2004, Hartmann and Klimmt 2006) and some research had explored the ways in which women players actually take part in the cultures of gaming (e.g. Schott and Horrell 2000, Bryce and Rutter 2002, Kennedy 2006, Taylor 2003). Since there already was a strong indication of women constituting almost a half of all computer game players (e.g. Harris 2005, ESA 2010), I decided to look at those women who are active players instead of concentrating on why other women are not interested in playing. I considered it important to study, “given that games have been and continue to be a popular cultural site for play, especially for men and boys, who and what supports their play and under what conditions, and when, how, with whom and under what conditions do girls and women play games?” (Jenson and de Castell 2008, n.p.).

More specifically then, I was interested in exploring the cultural construction of ‘a woman player’ and how such a player identity is experienced in a culture that lacks clear points of identification for being a woman participant. Namely, I wanted to write about game cultural involvement so that it would highlight the problems women face when they use products that result from male-dominated game development cultures (e.g. Dovey and Kennedy 2007, Section 3.1.4 of this thesis) and situate on a leisure culture that is still understood as masculine (See Section 3.1): about being a girl or a woman player when the term player itself is not neutral, but instead naturalised as masculine.

While a tremendous change has taken place in the games business and in the player demographics during the last decade, the dominant cultural representation of gamers as male remains fixed in and within popular media such as computer game histories, television shows, magazines and films. Some male players also attempt to stabilise it by fixing meanings about player identity.
Hostility towards women players in multiplayer online games and the re-casting of existing women players as unattractive on online discussion fora is not unusual, for example.\(^1\)

Given the masculine associations linked to gameplay and their development, I took it as a good starting point to look at the ways in which women players create content for the games they play. This approach offers a possibility to explore what is it in the games that women players would like to change in order to like them more. In order to do this I found it important to show how game products are neither stabile nor fixed. Instead, I wanted to base my research on an understanding of games as open and flexible for new interpretations and configurations.

I ended up studying *game modifications* (or *mods*) and *game modifying* (or *modding*). In computer game communities the verb *to mod*, to modify, that originates from *Open Source* software development and have been used among computer enthusiasts, refers to an act of modifying software to perform a function that was not originally included by the (game) designer. As the idea of ‘software’ is vague and can be understood very broadly, also changes made in image, audio and video files are often included in modding. Correspondingly, a mod may be any piece of user-generated content that changes a function, graphics/texture, sound, game logic/mechanics, game space or other aspect of the game. These include new levels or quests, items, characters or enemies, story lines, and similar and are added either by replacing existing game elements or adding entirely new ones.

Approaching such game modifications from the point of view of gender was nothing new itself. A handful of studies (Kennedy 2006, Poremba 2003a and Schleiner 2001) had already suggested that game modification offers women a possibility for empowerment and proposed modifying as a po-

\(^1\)A website called ‘Fat, ugly or slutty’ at [http://fatuglyorslutty.com/](http://fatuglyorslutty.com/) offers a good introduction to this kind of discrimination.
1.1. Background

tentially liberating, subversive activity. Historically, these studies are situated in a moment when women were little by little gaining interest in games and the pioneering and technologically savvy group of women players was struck by the ‘masculine’ themes and representations in the games.

However, since such works are very specific to their time, the early 2000s, my work almost a decade later concentrates on a very different practice. Instead of looking at modifications made for games that could be seen as archetypes of masculine game cultures, I was drawn to study women who modify the graphics of *The Sims* life simulation computer games – often known as Sims skinners. These skinners who are interested in changing the textures and colours of game characters and items, the ‘skins’ of them, stood up as a primary example of a large number of women being productive in the culture of computer gaming. This is not only because the game itself is enormously popular among girls and women, but also because the exceptional volume of player-created content. There was nothing nearly alike. When beginning this project, in 2007, people were already playing the first sequel of *The Sims* (2000). Hence my study concentrates on it, *The Sims 2*.

As I ended up looking at skinning of *The Sims 2* and the identities constructed alongside such work, concentration on this particular game approaches the question of creative women players from a novel perspective. I will discuss a previously unrecognised kind of productive play: play that is not exclusively or even explicitly subversive. I will explore a practice of skinning that does not constitute an explicitly resistant, ‘high’ form of user-participation that is typically cherished in studies of media use and which as such is far too easy to neglect. Understanding the gendered nature of the game, its inner features in terms of form and ideology, as well as of the practice of skinning and the cultural discourses around it, helps to unpack the identities that are constituted by such gameplay and productivity. I will look at the ways in which this
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particular game as a product of popular culture serves as a basis for identity construction.

This sets out a significant break not only from earlier research conducted on female skinners, but also in regard to studies on game modifications in general. Earlier, the emphasis of the work on game modifications has been on games and their modifications as well as on the dynamics between players and the games industry. Critical questions have been asked about authorship and player contribution in games (e.g. Sotamaa 2009, Sihvonen 2009) and about modding’s legal and economic implications (e.g. Postigo 2003, Kücklich 2005, Banks and Humphreys 2008, Nieborg and van der Graaf 2008). Similarly to accounts of female skinners’ work, game modifying in general has often been approached from the point of view of (political) resistance and subversion.

This set of conceptual frameworks available to the field of Game Studies, however, fails to capture the kind of experiences that are supported by the particular game and its play. As the practice of skinning The Sims appears resistant in regard to dominant ideas of femininity and consumption instead, its understanding, I suggest, requires a much broader and a more nuanced account on women’s play and leisure. While the study draws attention to women players’ active participation in game cultures, it challenges generalised claims for female empowerment through video game play. Essentially, this is a move towards players’ side of the story. Instead of concentrating on how players change the game artifact or what kind of impact these changes have on the game’s authorship or legal ownership, my study explores what it means for the players themselves to be engaged in creating skins.

As I will further discuss in the later chapters of this work, the practice of skinning The Sims 2 appears as a peculiar form of gameplay engagement from a variety of perspectives, not least because skinning is supported and invited by the game itself. I will discuss the importance of Web 2.0 and participatory
media in regard to skinning. While these popular and scholarly discourses are also embedded with notions of empowered and democratised users (cf. von Hippel 2005, Chesbrough 2003, Tapscott and Williams 2008, Mason 2008), my research sheds light on the ways in which The Sims 2 skinning reproduces some of the existing power dynamics and continues the long history of women’s leisure on one hand and offers possibilities for cultural (instead of political) resistance and appropriation on the other.

The title of the thesis refers to two earlier works on feminine media use, both forerunners in feminist Cultural Studies. Janice A. Radway’s Reading the Romance from 1984 approached romance literature as an overlooked genre and thoroughly explored the experiences of its female readers. Ien Ang’s Watching Dallas from 1985 grasps another such genre but not in literature but in television: soap opera, which is a classic case of ‘bad entertainment’ in Cultural Studies. The title of my thesis, Playing The Sims 2, attempts to suggest The Sims 2 as a contemporary counterpart to romance and soap. Similarities are linked to exceptional popularity among female audiences coupled together with cultural devaluing of the genre. These will be discussed especially in Section 3.3.2. The way structures of meaning have developed in game cultures shows a remarkable similarity to these earlier ‘old’ media, with the cultural marginalisation and stigmatisation of women’s popular cultural pleasures and identifications.

1.2 Linkages

Such a starting point for research takes an interdisciplinary approach, but one primarily inflected by the Cultural Studies’ emphasis on lived practice and identities. Cultural Studies and Gender Studies, as they aim to show how identities and meanings are culturally constructed, shape the theoretical basis
of my project most forcefully. Such theories allow for competing, negotiated and fragmented models of self in general and gender in particular. My understanding of identity and identity construction draws on approaches informed by Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall and Judith Butler, among others, as I will elaborate in the following sections.

Understanding the cultural environments in which everyday practices of play take place and player identities are being constructed is essential for my project. As it is the cultural context of skinning that also interests me, not just the narrowly defined practice itself, my study encompasses games, gameplay and player productivity in general and the meanings associated with *The Sims 2* game and the practice of Sims skinning in particular. Bringing together various theories from different fields and the creation of an assemblage that best serves to unpack the identity construction of Sims skinners is one of the contributions made by this study. From another point of view, my aim is to show how some approaches used previously, such as fandom and hackerism, are not fully applicable when the specificities of *The Sims 2* and the gendering of the practice of skinning are taken into account.

In terms of research on gender, studies that look at both cultural discourses around gender in general and gender and technology (e.g. computer games) in particular, are explored in this work. Such approaches draw on feminist research traditions in Game Studies and Media Studies that share the point of view of Cultural Studies. Earlier work on Gender and Women’s Studies, especially on women’s leisure and girls’ subcultures, is valuable in linking the practice under study to a broader historical continuum.

My research is best situated in what is known as third wave feminism. Such versions of feminism have generally embraced the view that women/girls can no longer be appropriately cast as universal victims but should be reconstituted as potentially powerful in terms of their multiple positioning within
different discourses. In regard to game cultures, women are no longer on the margins in terms of who the players are, and usually have access to game technologies. Therefore they can be approached fairly as players and as somewhat equal participants of those cultures especially when we talk about games that are targeted to women and whose players are primarily women. Following such viewpoint I recognise differences between women and indeed differential subject positions amongst this group and within the identities of individual women.

Yet, this does not mean that discrimination against women could not be considered a problem. I see my research as a response to the postfeminist culture which emphasises that gender battles have been settled and political struggles are no longer meaningful. Women players are simultaneously inhabiting a male dominated leisure culture which marginalises them and a society which assumes that feminism is no longer necessary. For example, a woman player who works within a traditionally masculine field and shares domestic work equally with her male partner may still face sex-based discrimination when she plays her favourite online game or when she aims to buy such a game in a game shop. This produces confusion and incoherence in terms of their player identities. My attempt is then to contextualise these issues within the framework of the specific game and community in question. As a result, one of the objectives of my research took the form of making women players and their participation in game cultures visible.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary framework encompasses studies on games and game modifications that do not tackle questions of gender. Related subcultural practices such as hackerism and fandom that are often used in discussing these forms of player participation are introduced. Alongside Gender and Women’s Studies and Game Studies, Fan Studies and some theories of Social Sciences have been applied. In general, these fields are approached
where they are informed by or situated within Cultural Studies. As such, my research will be part of a cultural approach to Game Studies that concentrates on the use of games instead of the structure of a game. As Garry Crawford and Jason Rutter write,

> it allows digital games to be seen as more than just objects existing as non-social artifacts waiting for use or analysis. It moves away from any basic assumption that digital games have a meaning or form which can be discovered through applying the right analytical cipher to the appropriate game code in a manner removed from social, economic and political contexts. (Crawford and Rutter 2006, 162)

My work, therefore, moves away from looking merely at the textual meanings of a game, since it combines this approach with a more ethnographic and player focused intent. The conducted ethnography helps in unpacking the complex relationships between cultural discourses, individuals' experiences and game objects’ features.

Cultural Studies has also influenced the setting of research questions and research methodology most powerfully.

### 1.3 Aims and Objectives of Study

In the light of these concerns my primary research question was

**What kind of player identities are constructed and performed among women players through their participation in skinning?**

Further, I wanted to explore

- **How does the practice of skinning enable women players to intervene in game cultures?**
- **What are the primary discourses of play and subcultural leisure practices that skinning draws upon?**
- **How do female players transform the games they play, and to what extent is this transformation deliberate or conscious?**
- **Is it informed by a feminist agenda?**
- **What is the importance of gender in the practice?**
1.3. Aims and Objectives of Study

These research questions helped establish for me that *The Sims 2* would be the main focus for my research because of its extensive popularity amongst female players (Boyes 2007, Waters 2006). Concepts central to this approach will be initially introduced in the following.

1.3.1 Identity

My study concentrates on the discursive category of *The Sims 2* skinner and the experiences of those who are discursively constructed, and constructing themselves, as belonging to this category. I understand discourse as an organised social and cultural convention of discussing, representing and understanding a certain issue, computer game play for instance. A discourse is constructed within a culture, affects the very same culture within which it is continuously reconstructed and covers a set of rules according to which the issue should be approached from a particular perspective.

Hall suggests, citing Foucault (1970, xiv), that identity should be approached from this ‘discursive practice’ rather than through a theory of a ‘knowing subject’ (Hall 2007, 16). The relationship between identity and discourse is two-way. Discourses shape the construction of individual people’s identities as they offer collective notions based on which identity work can take place. Identities are then understood as “points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (Hall 2007, 19). Alongside, the performed construction of identities, through practice and repetition, shapes discourses themselves. “Identity is never solely a matter for the individual but constitutes a dynamic relationship between self and others” (Davis 2004, 182).

In the stories told during the interviews conducted for this research, participants are constituting the category of *The Sims 2* skinner identity and telling their stories based on familiar story-lines, concepts and images available.
in relation to this discursive category. This work can be called *positioning* oneself within a category: participants position themselves in a category of being a Sims skinner. Based on this understanding, we can postulate a distinction between *cultural identities* as those that are created around cultural discourses and the process of constructing *individual identities* that is about actively positioning oneself in and in-between these cultural identities and about accepting and further developing them.

Discourse theory enables us to understand how cultural meanings then operate through institutions and technologies as well as through the construction of individual identities. Cultural identities are constructed by and through institutions such as game media and games industry as well as in people’s everyday practices. In order to understand individuals’ experiences and identities, they thus need to be tied together with those cultural discourses that are parallel to them. Furthermore, these contexts need to be accepted as varying sets of influences that for any living subject are dependent on factors such as the person’s individual life history, social surroundings and historical moment.

Identity then becomes understood as a meeting point of various different discourses. Importantly, such theory allows for competing and negotiated models of the self: identities are “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions” (Hall 2007, 17).

To sum up so far, my research, when it aims to say something about players’ identities, assumes that they are fluid, constructed, historically contingent and parts of a continuous ‘process’, created within, through and in representations, discourses and everyday practices.

In order to map out how the construction of identities is spread around in our culture, I have used several methods. Primarily, I have conducted a set of player interviews with skinners. Second, I have studied game reviews
1.3. Aims and Objectives of Study

and forum discussions that shape the discourses around skinning in order to study the relationship between skinners and discourses surrounding skinning. However, because the set of available discourses and approaches to the Sims skinner identity in particular is highly limited, namely there is no distinctive cultural discourse on ‘skinners’, it has been necessary to approach discourses that appear close to it. Finally, I will approach Sims skinners from a variety of theoretical perspectives, or research traditions, that each highlight different aspects of the practice and work as possible starting points for individual skinner’s identity work. In so doing I also acknowledge the influence that research in general has upon the cultures it examines and take these studies as texts that have indirect effect on the cultures they discuss. Game definitions that have been produced within academy and later introduced to the industry could serve as an example here. It is thus one of the goals of my research to draw a map or a genealogy of identity categories that become tied together in the practice of skinning. I concentrate on defining and examining this set of cultural identities available as a basis of skinners’ identity work.

The work presents identities as being partly constructed and mediated by games and information technologies in general, as well as being affected by the identity representations and discursive identity categories which are formed around them in popular discourse, for instance. In my study, I suggest ways to challenge and problematise the conventional categories of (game) fandom, hackerism and tactical use of games as primary discourses that characterise Sims skinning. Instead, I will introduce a fourth category, playerhood, based on the empirical material gathered for my study.

Each one of the discourses describes the object of study differently. As Sari Husa writes based on her reading of Hall (1992) “while a discourse enables discussing a topic from one perspective, it restricts the other possible ways of looking at and portraying it” (Husa 1995, n.p., Transl. HW). Reading the
interviews and theoretical accounts side by side, I will explore what are the specificities of each theoretical stand in understanding skinners’ identities. I will then be able to suggest new approaches that challenge some of the troubles faced when looking at Sims skinners based on dominant ideas of a player, a game modifier, a fan, a hacker, an artist, and other related categories.

Methodologically, in regard to selecting theoretical reference points for a study of such multifaceted identities, this lays out an significant challenge. The study needs to draw on a broad set of theories that do not necessarily share a disciplinary background or an epistemological basis. These views may be based on very different emphases; some on the importance of technology, expertise and mastery, some on the social structuring of a society and solitude, for example. However, here it helps to be true to the theoretical starting point I have chosen, to accept that identities are fragmented and draw from several potentially separate discourses. Also, the emphasis will always be on the interview participants’ word.

In terms of understanding gender, I have found Butler’s (1999/1990) account on gender identity useful. It suggests that gender, too, is discursively constructed. Extending Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1978) on the discursive construction of identities, Butler writes about the performativity of gender and suggests that gender should be seen as “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999/1990, 43-4). This approach has been broadly used in cultural research and is suitable, also for my study, as it emphasises the cultural construction of gender identities as an ongoing process as well as an individual’s active role in this process.

Gender is a cultural construction, operating through discourses and through everyday practice, and this constructedness becomes evident in the ways in which both ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ operate on a continuum that is tac-
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Itly acknowledged in common-sense. This means that femininity is an attribute that can be associated with things and activities as well as people. For example, in ‘Western’ cultures skirts and giggling are often considered feminine, whereas guns and working as an electrician can be seen masculine.

However, the construction of femininity and masculinity is not separate from people’s ordinary identities: these identities are thoroughly imbricated through discourse, ‘lived’, thought, reproduced and naturalised. Leisure in particular tends to be ‘gendered’ that is, discursively linked to one sex or the other and often policed on that basis. Certain team sports, such as football and rugby, are linked to men and pilates and aerobics to women, for instance. Furthermore, it is men who are assumed to be interested in cars and women who are suggested to like shopping. Discourses around home and childcare contribute to the policing of women’s leisure and tie women to the home sphere. From a larger societal perspective, current differences in men’s and women’s pay also impact upon who is able to enjoy leisure activities and have money to spend on them. Furthermore, computer gaming, then, is ‘gendered’: it is discursively constructed and understood as feminine or masculine, but primarily as masculine. Subjectivity that is constructed in relation to gendered computer game play is therefore, at least to some degree, drawing on these gendered meanings of this discourse.

So, while being a woman is represented as an natural condition it is actually discursively produced and performed (Butler 1999/1990), both an experienced and perceived reality or possibility, a form of performed gender identity, and used in referring to people who are biologically female, whose ‘sex’ is female. Furthermore, ‘feminine’ qualities are ascribed to biological quite often go hand in hand in discourses. For example, if some activity, such as sewing, is culturally considered feminine, it is often also assumed that it is women who engage themselves in such an activity. Yet, what individuals do
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does not directly affect the general discourses of masculinity or femininity, at least not until they become constantly repeated by people.

Therefore, although my study concentrates on women players, or players who self-identify as women, it does not assume that such identifications are biologically determined or essential, but takes as its starting point the recognition that gender is lived and reproduced culturally, not predetermined. This work is not then a study of all women players or in comparison to men players. Women play in various ways and in various contexts as T.L. Taylor’s (2003) research on EverQuest (1999) and World of Warcraft (2005) players and Helen Kennedy’s (2006) work on Quake (1996) players, among others, suggest. My focus on Sims skinners does, however, recognise the ways in which the players themselves see this particular game as peculiarly available to, consonant with and articulated by feminine interests and a feminine subjectivity. This has largely to do with its theme being about home, nurturing, social relationships, and so forth. But it is also the open form, marketing that targets women, possibility for utilitarian gameplay and other aspects of it that make it appear welcoming for women.

As suggested, by looking at girl and women players of The Sims 2, many groups of active women players are necessarily left outside. As a result, my research among Sims skinners cannot cover women who play games from genres that are dominantly considered more masculine, either. Neither does it offer an all-encompassing description on how women actively pursue to change those games that do not correspond to interests that are conventionally labeled feminine.

Instead, my study is a study of a group of players engaging in a very specific practice that is dominated by women and is defined by a game that is understood as feminine and played by mainly female players (as discussed in Chapter 3). And already within this very specific form of player participation
there are significant differences in players’ preferences, taste, acknowledgement of the original game, degree of creative pursuit, and interest towards technical aspects of the game, for instance. As suggested, Sims skinners’ identities, or subjectivities, are not exclusively about gender. Instead, they are influenced by a number of identity discourses that may be gendered (i.e. considered feminine or masculine), yet not about gender per se.

Furthermore, while it is important for such a study to explore the fluidity and multiplicity of the interview participants’ identities, some of the identity categories are in contradiction with some aspects of the category of ‘woman’ or what is considered feminine. These identities not only appear in contradiction to each other but may often be contradictory with themselves. This is where I see the most interesting and productive discussions and challenging of the categories taking place. And that is what I have mainly concentrated on while interpreting interview transcripts parallel to research on different cultures. Such analysis reflects the ways in which two or more categories are in contradiction with each other.

In individuals, these contradictions cause anxiety and guilt when an illusion of an unitary self cannot be maintained (e.g. Davies 1992). And these contradictions should be understood as what they are: contradictions between discourses that shape identities. That a scholar can recognise competing identity categories does not mean that the participants are aware of them (cf. Kendall 2002). They may understand their identities as fixed and singular and therefore have difficulty in occupying different identity locations. What we can gain through analysing the construction of identities then, is what Bronwyn Davies suggests: “[t]hrough locating the source of a contradiction in the available discourses, it is possible to examine the contradictory elements of one’s subjectivity without guilt or anxiety” (Davies 1992, 57).

As such, my study of player identities differs significantly from the tra-
dition of studying the relationship between the player and the game character as a process of identification (e.g. Hefner, Klimmt and Vorderer 2007), and is instead focussed on the ways in which identities emerge from a wider game culture as well as from the practice of skinning in particular. This goes beyond the concepts of ‘narrative’ and ‘ludic’ identities (de Mul 2005), which are also about the internal workings of a game text or an object. Furthermore, whereas game skins have also been studied from the point of view of in-game female representations and thus as possibilities for identification (e.g. Kennedy 2006, Poremba 2003a, Schleiner 1998), I will focus on the competencies, skills and pleasures that skinning offers women players instead of the in-game identities of these women.

Finally, I want to address the impact of online communication for identity construction. Liberatory and utopian views of the Internet’s ability to render meaningless those aspects of identities that build on people’s physical qualities were characteristic to the early studies of the Internet (cf. Turkle 1995). However, more recent research suggests that identity stereotypes of off-line cultures extend and travel to those online.

Lori Kendall (1998) and Lisa Nakamura (1999, 2002), among others, argue that online interactions do not generally encourage greater fluidity or diversity in identities. Instead, “[w]hile telecommunications [...] can challenge some gender and racial stereotypes, they reproduce and reflect them as well” (Nakamura 2002, 325). Actually, suggesting that the Internet would be able to remove such meanings altogether does not take identities as socially and culturally constructed but reduces “sexism to (almost automatic) reactions to physical cues, and implies that such reactions cannot be changed except through the removal of those physical cues” (Kendall 2002, 221). Thus, my approach does not assume that identities constructed in relation to online participation build on different discourses that those constructed exclusively
outside online spaces.

How the Internet does change the construction of identities, then, results from the requirements for technological competence that online environments set out for their users. In online settings, it is largely those aspects of the self that were earlier suggested to be meaningless in online communication that shape the ways in which people develop technological competencies. A person’s physical abilities, gender, race and class, among others, affect on how she is able to and interested in as well as encouraged to gain skills that support her technological and online engagement. One may try ‘gender swapping’ in a game, but is nevertheless constructing her identity and technological expertise in terms of what is her access to the latest games, for instance.

The term technicity, which draws on the theories of cyberculture, has been introduced to describe these ways in which identity is connected to technological competence and taste (e.g. Dovey and Kennedy 2007, Thomas 2007/2000). Instead of identity, some prefer to approach how people’s technicities are constructed in relation to technology and to study which technicities are valued and which are marginalised in game cultures, for instance. While I will not be using the specific term, technicity, in this work, I will address the relationship between identity and technology in various occasions. For example in Sections 4.2.1 and 4.3.2 I explore the interconnectedness of identity and technological knowledge in general. In Section 5.3.1, I approach the issue of (technological) taste in particular. In many cases it indeed would have been possible to refer to these formations as technicities. In Section 4.2, I will return to technicity as a concept used by Kennedy (2006) in her work on Quake skinners.
1.3.2 Computer Game

The conceptual framework for my study offers a model for defining a *game* from multiple perspectives. To start with, a game is an object made for entertainment and sold as a commercial product. Simultaneously, a game is a systemic structure consisting of rules and goals, or ‘mechanics.’ A game is also something that is represented in media and invokes meaning and opinions. Succeeding in a game requires certain skills and competencies and is for fun and pleasure as well as a source of emotions. A game requires technology, which shapes its use and meanings. It needs players and makes people players. It can be looked at as material or as an abstraction. Computer game technologies in particular are games that usually take care of the rules of the game.

In regard to skinning, a game product facilitates certain kind of gameplay. It is an object of endorsement and criticism and open for different interpretations, playings and players’ contributions. A game is always under development and something that players are actively creating. It is a technology which is played in space and time where cultural and social conventions and hierarchies are in operation, and which itself carries meaning.

If we accept this broad understanding of what a game is, any game is different from culture to culture, from person to person and from time to time. A game is easy for one player and hard for another, for instance. Or interesting due to its graphical quality at one time and old fashioned in another. Each combination of technologies and arguments over the use of it contributes to the specific ‘gameness’ of it. The particular game under study is both culturally constructed and reconstructed as well as individually experienced. It is also a product that is marketed to a specific group of players or potential ones.

What my study attempts to do, then, is to discuss in which ways *The Sims 2* is played and understood as a game in our culture and how it shapes its
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use in regard to player productivity and the construction of a skinner identity. I look closely into the experiences of a small group of its keen players, through which we can gain a glimpse of how the game finally becomes meaningful as an object open to alteration.

1.3.3 Gameplay

Despite the complex nature of ‘game’ itself, including its cultural, social and structural meanings, playing games can be approached from the point of view of player’s engagement. Here I make a distinction between game, play and gameplay so that a game is something that can be discussed separately from its users, play is something that requires a subject and gameplay is the process of play where the two cannot be separated.

I further approach gameplay as inherently productive and active. Such definition of gameplay is based on looking at the game product as a technological artifact that is indeed pre-designed but only created when it is being played. In understanding this contribution of a player, the concept of configuration appears useful.

Espen Aarseth’s *Cybertext* (1997), which paved the way for one of the foundational principles of Game Studies, introduces games as texts with unique characteristics, as *cybertexts* or as *ergodic* texts. Compared to linear and thus many older and earlier forms of media, such as television or film, computer games allow users not only to interpret, but also to *explore, configure*, and add content to them (Aarseth 1997). Games cannot be approached like linear media because they do not come into being until a player puts life into them, plays them, creates particular stories out of multiple possibilities, remixes her own set of actions and outcomes, and thus creates the media text while playing. As Markku Eskelinen puts it: “in art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able
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to configure” (Eskelinen 2001, n.p.). This *configurative practice* means that
games may develop in emergent ways and have unpredictable outcomes (e.g.

Aarseth (1997)’s distinction between interpretative user function, where
the user is only able to make decisions regarding the meaning of the text, and
configurative user function, where the user can choose and create new strings
of signs that exist in the text\(^2\), sheds light on the particularity of games. The
game player (co)produces the game throughout the play process itself, unlike
the reader of a book or the viewer of a film, for whom a text in its entirety
exists in the world as a product open for various interpretations by different
users.

Further, the configurative user function required from the player can be
illustrated with a simple but fundamental example. If the player does not make
the effort of moving a character in *The Sims 2*, for example, no meaningful
progress takes place (or the game ends altogether due to a death of a character).
Actions taken by the player can also have impact upon the functions available
later in the game world and how game play can proceed.\(^3\)

Sal Humphreys articulates this characteristic of games proposing that
*gameplay “is an engagement which serves to create the text each time it is
engaged”* (Humphreys 2005, 38).\(^4\) This feature has also had an impact on the

\(^2\)Aarseth writes that “a text, then, is any object with the primary function
to relay verbal information” where the information is understood as “a string
of signs, which may (but does not have to) make sense to a given observer”
(Aarseth 1997, 62).

\(^3\)In multiplayer games, for example, the player affects other players’ ex-
periences of the game. Taylor (2006)’s and Humphreys (2005)’s studies of
MMORPGs extensively describe players’ ongoing impact on each other’s ac-
tions in such games. These activities change and create the game world for
other players. As Humphreys writes, “the trajectory of game play is thus con-
tingent upon the particular dynamics and action generated by shifting combi-
nations of players” (Humphreys 2005, 40).

\(^4\)Here it is important to note how the actual material game, not only the
interpretations of it, are created and altered in the process of using a game.
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study of games: “the computer game only exists as an ‘object for contemplation’ and analysis as and when it is played” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 104). Productivity can, therefore, be understood as a precondition for the game to exist as a cultural text. From this perspective it can be further suggested that every gamer is a co-author of the game, not only an interpreter of its meanings. Simply put, a user’s involvement in the game text is significantly different from the contexts of earlier media. And this idea of what a game is seems to be agreed upon in game studies (e.g. Poremba 2003a).

In other words, individual playings of games cannot be fully pre-determined before the activity of play takes place, which results that each game as played can also be interpreted in various different ways once it has been created in gameplay. In The Sims 2, for example, one player may concentrate on developing multiple generations of characters while another player’s focus is on creating a beautiful garden. Depending on the game, the same boxed game may lead to many entirely different played games as created by different players or when replayed by the same player. In games, interpretation thus appears as a level of user participation that comes both before and after configuration.

1.3.4 Games and Players: Co-Creativity

In order to differentiate between the described kind of productivity and engagement in gameplay that is typical for all players from the extratextual player involvement that goes beyond the ‘actual’ gameplay and leads to the creation of new texts, such as game modifications, skins or machinima videos, I wish to bring along the concept of co-creativity. Robert Jones points out that “as an interactive medium, the video game requires the participation of the gamer” and goes on noting that this interactivity should not be conflated

\footnote{Machinima videos are animations created from, usually 3D, gameplay footage recorded during the game. These can be made to work as gameplay guides or as independent productions.}
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with fan participation, such as the writing of fan fiction, and thus attempts to establish borders between fan and nonfan activities (Jones 2006, 643). What Jones calls fan participation is what I will hereafter refer to as co-creativity. An important difference to the configurative relationship here is that co-creative practices can usually be separated from the actual playing of the game, when playing is understood as what the original designers of the game offer for the player to be played. Texts and knowledge that result from co-creativity can be used in designing games or, for example, embedded in existing games.

Co-creativity, a term introduced to Game Studies by John Banks (2002) in his book chapter entitled “Players as co-creators” in 2002 and further elaborated by Sue Morris (2003) and Jon Dovey and Kennedy (2006), is a way to understanding the creation of a game is shared between paid game developers and players of a game. As a member of the community development team for the Trainz (2001) train simulator game, Banks studied the ways in which players of the game had a possibility to offer input when new sequels of the game were under development. What he then suggests as player co-creativity gathered together forms of player involvement such as critical commenting on online fora, development of new graphics for the game, and all-round discussions about the development and contents of the game with the actual paid development team. The views and knowledge of railway hobbyists on the railways and trains that were simulated in the game were invaluable help to its creators.

Morris discusses co-creativity in relation of FPS (First-Person Shooter) genre and Quake players. The particular genre in question is important since the majority of mods is created for FPS games and includes global success stories, such as Counter-Strike (2000) mod, that have been turned into commercial products themselves. Moving towards a fan base that does not emerge in such a particular way from a non-gaming community as is the case with
railroad players, Morris looks at the ways in which Quake players influence professional game development. Morris (2003) suggests first-person shooter games as products of collaborative creative processes between game developers and individual players, because game modifications feed new ideas and content into professional game production. In addition, she describes how players’ attendance in beta testing helps developers in their work and suggests modding as a source for innovation and experimentation for the official game development. The industry is constrained by marketing, censorship and financial considerations whereas modders are free to test and try out various new aspects for gameplay. This results in a particular co-creative relationship between player and developers. Like Banks, Morris lists critical feedback on game related fora as one of the central ways to make an impact.

Dovey and Kennedy (2006) broaden this concept of co-creativity to cover also other forms of player productivity, such as fan art, mod arts, and tactical arts, and show its usability in regard to explorations of games as co-creative media that are not necessarily linked to the commercial production of the game.

Building on this work, I understand co-creativity as a practice through which a player can impact the creation and use of games materially and immaterially. Synonymous and overlapping use can be seen between the notions of co-creativity and the creation of custom-content, user-generated content, game modifications, hacks, fan texts, and, in some cases, game art. Alongside co-creativity such creativity is sometimes talked about as player productivity or co-productivity.

In my reading of Game Studies and research on player engagement, the terms co-creativity, (co-)productivity and user-generated content are used interchangeably. However, as an industry term, user-generated content empha-

\footnote{In beta testing, versions of software are released to a limited audience in order to eliminate the remaining bugs and flaws of the product.}
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sises the role of the original designer and separates between player and developer creativity. User-generated content has a feel of an ‘addition’ to a game that is already ‘ready’ or that can be tweaked or complimented by players. Industry-oriented texts usually refer to user-generated content without mentioning the practice of creating the content itself but concentrating on the outcome of such practice instead. Meanwhile, productivity assumes a product instead of a process and suggests authority over it. Player-productivity, in parallel to commercial authority, is easily associated with legal and ownership issues and brings along notions of an entity (a product) such as ‘ready’, ‘whole’, ‘hacked’, ‘appropriated’, ‘taken into possession’ and so forth. With its etymological stance, productivity refers to one ‘product’ and does not support considerations of fluidity between products such as texts that become parts of other texts.

Therefore, I prefer the use the term co-creativity over co-productivity and other related terms. Talking about player participation as co-creativity allows the notions of shared power over the product, mutual benefit, transferability, and such that are not tied together with certain materiality. However, whenever possible, I will refer to the reworking of game character looks and item graphics simply by skinning in order to separate it from other modding practices. Using this specific term also makes it possible to leave behind any theoretical weight that is in dissonance with the specificities of the practice of skinning, such as any hacker associations of modding or beyond-use productivity of fandom (See Chapter 4).

While my study is focussed specifically on co-creativity in games, on The Sims 2 skinning, such research into users’ participation in the production processes of popular media should appear relevant to the study of participatory cultures and Web 2.0/DIY media in general. My research contributes to the study of participatory cultures as it aims to show how active participation
in a form of making user-generated content or being co-creative forms new, active audiences and thus new starting points for player identities. What my research only touches upon are the questions of authority, legal ownership, copyright infringement, and industry-player collaboration where these are seen as qualities of game products or as industry practices.

1.3.5 The Sims 2

The last decade has seen a rapid increase in women’s computer and console game play. New game technologies such as Nintendo’s consoles DS and Wii have been forerunners in explicitly targeting women and attracting female players (e.g. ISFE and Game Vision Europe 2010). Simultaneously has arisen an outburst of ‘casual games’, those simple online games that take little time and effort to play and allows temporarily fragmented play. These games are often referred to as a feminine domain (e.g. Chess 2009, cf. Casual Games Association 2007).

But even before casual games and Nintendo’s new consoles, there have been games that have attracted exceptionally wide female audiences. One of these is Sims. As a global success story and without real competitors The Sims, which was established as an offshoot of SimCity (1989), appears as a rare PC game franchise with player demographics constituting a majority of female players. The game is already being played in 60 countries and translated into 22 languages (Electronic Arts 2008).

The first Sims game came out in 2000 and was created by game designer Will Wright who had already been designing SimCity games since 1989. While SimCity was a strategy game about taking care of a city, almost like a digitalised train set with a tradition of boys’ and men’s culture, The Sims took the player into the homes of sim characters and let her lead their lives. In terms of what the game simulates, this marked a move down and into private
domestic space and also out from the city to the suburbs, towards the more feminine domains.

Two years after its launch the game replaced Myst (1993) as the best-selling PC game in history (Walker 2002) and by 2009 The Sims franchise had sold more than 100 million copies worldwide (Electronic Arts 2008). After numerous expansion packs, the game’s first full sequel The Sims 2 came out in 2004. Due its timing, my study concentrates on The Sims 2, although the latest sequel, The Sims 3, was published in 2009. The Sims 2, an extremely successful continuation for the already best-selling and consistently highly-ranked game by game reviews had already sold ten million in spring 2008 (Electronic Arts 2008).

Adding to the continuum of life simulations and artificial life games, The Sims games have been approached alongside games such as Tierra (1998), SimEarth: The Living Planet (1990), SimLife: The Genetic Playground (1992), SimCity, and Creatures (1996) series that concentrate on controlling the progress of ‘artificial’ living organisms (e.g. Kember 2007/2000). Meanwhile, the centering of domestic space in the game links it to games such as Little Computer People (1985) that represent a similar environment (e.g. Flanagan 2003).

But what makes the Sims games unique is the way they have been successful in introducing women and newcomers into gaming. It is indeed estimated that even 65% to 70% of the players of the franchise are women (Boyes 2007, Waters 2006). A look into general computer game player demographics may give a hint of its influence. While in 1998 it was suggested that the amount of female players was 15-25% of all players (Cassell and Jenkins 1998, 11), five years after The Sims was launched approximately 45% of all gamers in the UK were female (Harris 2005) and more women than men in the 25-34 age group played electronic games in the USA in 2007 (Mindlin 2006, cf. ESA
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While such a development is not simply down to the introduction of *The Sims*, the game’s 60,000,000 female players have clearly made a difference overall.\(^7\)

*The Sims 2* game, considered feminine by its theme and form, as I will further discuss in Chapter 3, and played by mainly female players, sets out an unique basis for a research on gender and games. Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell (2008) suggest that the meanings and pleasures associated with women’s gameplay should not indeed be approached from the point of view of those games that are primarily male domain since these are then defined by the hegemonic (male) set of meanings and pleasures.

If the very terms of our calculations, our axiomatic concepts and foundational practices, embody and express and re-cite hegemonic rules, we will continue to define for women and girls, activities, dispositions, aspirations and accomplishments in the terms of what these are and mean for boys and men. The problem is one of terms and turf. If we define the matter from the outset in terms that describe only what happens on male turf, we are unlikely to illuminate much about the situation as it is possible for women. As Butler elsewhere explained, the state accords rights to those that it then goes on to represent. This is ‘always already’ a hegemonic performance, however worthy or ‘progressive’ our intentions. (Jenson and de Castell 2008, 770)

Janine Fron et al. (2007) use *The Sims* as an example of those games that are left outside the ‘hegemony of play’ (See Section 3.1.1) due to their unconventional characteristics and player base. Thus, while it is important to acknowledge that *The Sims* is an exceptional game in many ways, it is also a good breeding ground for alternative pleasures that are not constantly evaluated and compared to the dominant ones. Concentration on a game whose

\(^7\)A study by Casual Games Association suggests that women outnumber men in casual game play (Casual Games Association 2007).

\(^8\)The introduced statistics provided by the games industry and associated parties should be approached with caution and work as reference only. The reasons for making such data available are not neutral, since they are closely linked to games business and making profit. Moreover, the means of gathering data or different bases of categorising it are rarely made transparent.
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players are predominantly women further offers an exceptional framework to
approach women not in comparison to men and thus as the ‘other’, but as the
primary participants in the practice.

Furthermore, the millions of women playing *The Sims 2* all play the
game in their own ways. In this thesis, I propose that one of these ways is
through skinning it and concentrate on exploring this specific way of engaging
with the game. However, a short introduction to the gameplay of *The Sims
2*, or what is usually understood as its gameplay, is in order. Here I refer to
playing with sim characters. After all, skinners usually have a solid experience
of the systemic structure of the game as a basis of their co-creativity.

*The Sims 2* game starts with selecting one of the ‘sim’ neighborhoods:
Pleasantview, Strangetown, Veronaville or a custom-made area, to start with.
In the latter choice, the neighbourhood does not include any houses or fami-
lies, whereas the named neighbourhoods have inhabitants in them as well as
unoccupied residential sites available for starting with a new family. After
choosing a neighbourhood or creating one’s own, the player creates ‘families’
to be placed to live in the neighborhood or picks one of the already occupied
houses. The families are created by adding family members one at the time.

Every individual sim is created by defining a set of characteristics (See
Figure 1.1). This allows a way to make a character unique and personal,
however not original. After choosing very detailed physical characteristics of
a sim including one of the only two fitness types, a fit or a slightly fuller body,
the player defines the character’s personality from a set of binaries such as
Sloppy/Neat or Shy/Outgoing, that then defines the astrological sign of the
character. The clothes of a character are chosen from a pre-existing range.
The player further determines the life stage (baby, toddler, child, teen, young,
adult or elder) and Aspiration (from the list of Family, Fortune, Knowledge,
Popularity and Romance) for a character or a group of characters that she
wants to see living together. The names of the characters are invented by the player, but each family does have to share a family name.

Each family needs at least one adult ‘sim’ if there are Toddlers, Children or Teenagers in the family. Teenagers or Elders cannot alone have young children living with them. If the player has added a male and a female sim to a family, she is also able to add a child that inherits characteristics from both parents. The game automatically generates his or her physical appearance and personality characteristics. Relationships between family members need to be defined for each young person (Toddler, Child or Teenager) and adults can be either partners or roommates with each other.

The game privileges a nuclear family, middle class or ‘white collar’ careers (and carerism as a way of life), property ownership and inheritance and material aspirations for consumer products. It represents a suburban American family life and emphasises the importance of money in achieving a happy life. This ideology of the game will be discussed in detail in Section 3.2.

After this first phase of *The Sims 2* the player continues to choose and buy a site according to her budget of in-game currency called ‘simoleons’.
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The budget at this point is not dependent on the number of family members chosen but simply 20,000 simoleons is allocated for each family. The player may choose to occupy more houses and create several families, but is allowed to control only one family at the time.

Once the family has been moved to a site or a house, the player can actually start directing her characters around the neighborhood. The sim characters are under the player’s control at home, but cannot be reached while at work. The player’s perspective in the game is God-like and omniscient, and the player is able to control and view several characters simultaneously. The player takes care of the characters to meet the aspirations set in the pre-gameplay phase.

In addition to the possibility to view and manipulate characters and the house, the player is offered detailed information about these through the game interface that consists of menus. The player can view and direct one character at a time. For each character, the menu referred to as ‘Simology’ shows the age stage, wants and fears, interests, needs, relationships, job information, personality, and aspiration data (See Figure 1.2). Such a model of character’s qualities is not unique to Sims, but a typical character sheet that has long been used in RPGs (role playing games), for example. Under these categories information such as job description and salary as well as bad and good memories and friends are shown. These scales and meters contribute to the complexity of the game as its gameplay is largely about optimising the well-being of an individual character and a family.

The sims themselves, as the game characters are called, can semi-autonomously use game objects and move within the limits of a lot. Characters are thus created to feel as if they had lives of their own independent from the player. At some stages the game can be played by merely observing of the sims who have autonomy in their actions and who manage their own lives. On their own,
however, the sims can do much less compared to what the player can make them do. *The Sims* is effectively like a combination of a simulation game and an old-fashioned dollhouse with its mix of player intervention and character autonomy and its emphasis on life in miniature (See Chapter 3).

For the most effective gameplay, the player needs to ‘order’ her characters to use objects effectively so that the characters’ needs are fulfilled. There are eight such basic needs in total: ‘Hunger’, ‘Comfort’, ‘Bladder’, ‘Energy’, ‘Fun’, ‘Social’, ‘Hygiene’ and ‘Environment’, and, accordingly, there are several objects sims can (be made to) use in order to fulfill these basic needs. Energy, for example, can be gained not only by sleeping in a bed or napping on a sofa but also by drinking espresso. It is necessary for the player to take care of the basic needs because if one of them is not filled enough, a sim cannot be made to do anything else, such as to read a book when she is too tired. The game is essentially about nurturing the characters.

![Figure 1.2: Character information, ‘Simology’, in *The Sims 2*.](image)

Depending on the aspiration, sims will be happy when they, for example, work and make lots of money (Fortune aspiration) or having a big and happy family (Family aspiration). Each activity has a character-development purpose in the game: ‘using the bookshelf’ (reading a book) progresses the intellect bar, practising in front of a mirror adds to charisma value, swimming brings fitness and repairing a sink gives mechanical points. Not until the maximum level of a ‘skill’ is reached can a sim do any of these tasks without a progress bar.
appearing on top of her head. Effectiveness and progress are built into the
technological system – or mechanics – of the game.

Every sim has a skills set of seven including Cooking, Mechanical, Charisma,
Body, Logic, Creativity, and Cleaning. The higher the skill value is (maximum
10), the longer it takes to achieve. However, the higher it is, the more and
faster a sim will achieve in that specific field, for instance in cooking delicious
meals. Skill levels also partly define what kind of jobs are available for a sim.
For example in order to become a Tenured Professor a sim needs the following
skills: Cooking 1, Charisma 6, Logic 8, and Creativity 7 whereas for a Dolphin
Trainer the skills needed are Cooking 2, Repair 2, Charisma 4, Body 2, Logic
1 and Creativity 1.

Accordingly, the skills can be progressed in various ways. A sim can
practice cooking, for instance, by actually cooking food, by studying cooking
from the bookshelf, by watching the Yummy channel on TV, or by using
Schokolade 890 Chocolate Manufacturing Facility. Cooking skill points are
then required if one is to pursue the Culinary career.

Once the player has launched a new family into a neighborhood, she
needs to build a house with furniture and technology in order to fulfill the
characters’ needs: a toilet seat is required in order to stabilise the characters’
Bladder levels, a fridge for preventing the Hunger getting too high and a sofa
or a bed for offering the characters Comfort and Energy. The player may lead
the everyday doings of each of the characters living on the same site. At any
point in the game, the family can move house, given a sufficient budget. Any
individual character can also move together with a character from another
‘lot’ if they agree on it. Detailed information on items, such as furniture
and electronic appliances, available for purchase and materials available for
building and renovating the house is offered in one of the menus of the game
interface.
During the gameplay, the characters go about filling their days with domestic chores and personal skills development as the in-game time passes. They speak ‘Simlish’ and meet neighbours in their gardens, homes or in the downtown area, which is an area separated from the family neighbourhood. The characters continue fulfilling needs and develop careers. The available career tracks are Culinary, Athletics, Business, Criminal, Law Enforcement, Medical, Politics, Science, and Slacker. Each career track defines the working hours of a job and how much money a sim can bring home after single working day, and thus represents some careers more attractive than others.

The game continues as long as the player manages to keep one’s character(s) alive, since they can die of old age or in accidents. The in-game time can be paused or speeded up. While the game is paused, the player may engage in building and decorating the house, which requires money. The core of the game is indeed to make money working. This money can then be spent on furniture and electronics of ‘better quality’. These are more expensive, but better fulfil the characters’ needs. This is of high importance in regard to the sims’ social lives; happier sims can better entertain their friends, for example. When the in-game time passes characters grow up, reproduce or adopt children and get older, finally dying and leaving their houses to future generations.

Finally, a whole another discussion would be spurred based on the eight expansion packs and ten so-called ‘stuff packs’ that have been brought to the market since the game’s original release. These expansion and stuff packs are made to prolong the lifetime of the product – to keep the brand alive – and are sold as separate products. The expansion packs add both new

\footnote{Some special editions of the game, such as \textit{The Sims 2: Holiday Edition} (2005a), include not only the original game but one or more expansions packs as well. Expansion and stuff packs have also been compiled without the original game. \textit{The Sims 2: University Life Collection} (2009), for instance, includes \textit{The Sims 2: University} (2005d) expansion pack and two stuff packs: \textit{The Sims 2: IKEA Home Stuff} (2008c) and \textit{The Sims 2: Teen Style Stuff} (2007e).}
features and content, such as clothes, items and furniture, whereas stuff packs
do not implement significant changes to gameplay but add ‘stuff’ – clothes,
items and furniture – only. An average of two expansion packs and three stuff
packs have been introduced every year from 2005 till 2009. The themes of the
expansion packs include lifestyle frameworks such as university, pets, living
in an apartment, and travelling.\(^{10}\) The features these expansions add vary
from new neighbourhoods and NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) to careers and
playable characters. Meanwhile, the ten stuff pack themes cover both branded
goods (IKEA and H\&M) and items and clothes concerning certain occasions
such as celebration, family, holiday and teenager style.\(^{11}\) Such expansions will
be discussed shortly in Chapter 3 and later in Section 5.1.2 in regard to the
influence of skinning to the revenue gained from the sales of the game.

1.3.6 The Sims 2 Skinning

The Sims 2 has proven exceptional also in regard to the volume of player-
created content, skins. Out of the numerous creative practices surrounding
The Sims 2 play, my study concentrates specifically on the practice of skinning
the game. Although some of the players I researched are not using the term
‘skinning’, I have chosen it because it is common among the English speaking
Sims communities and game scholars.

\(^{10}\) A full list of expansion packs includes: The Sims 2: University (2005d),
The Sims 2: Nightlife (2005c), The Sims 2: Open for Business (2006d), The
(2007a), The Sims 2: FreeTime (2008b) and The Sims 2: Apartment Life
(2008a).

\(^{11}\) A full list of stuff packs includes: The Sims 2: Holiday Party Pack (2005b),
The Sims 2: Family Fun Stuff (2006a), The Sims 2: Glamour Life Stuff
(2006b), The Sims 2: Happy Holiday Stuff (2006c), The Sims 2: Celebration!
(2007e), The Sims 2: Kitchen & Bath Interior Design Stuff
(2008d), The Sims 2: IKEA Home Stuff (2008c) and The Sims 2: Mansion &
Garden Stuff (2008e)
1.3. Aims and Objectives of Study

More specifically, the focus is primarily on players who are members of a Finnish *The Sims 2* skinning community, *Radola*, which gathers around a website\(^{12}\). Dozens of similar online fora are available for sharing, discussing and further developing the end results of skinning, the skins, among player communities. For reasons that are discussed in Chapter 2, *Radola* forum was chosen among these.

Skinning will be further discussed from various perspectives in the following chapters, but at this point, I would like to limit the discussion to a very practical view. I wish to draw a picture which, after years of research into this culture, I have in my mind of a typical player participating in skinning *The Sims 2*. This is not to generalise, but to offer an example that hopefully serves as a starting point for understanding the practice under study.

It starts with a young female in her early or mid teen years, who is a fluent computer user since she has got good access to the technology. Her knowledge of computer games, however, is limited. The girl has played console games and *Nintendo DS*, but only used a PC for play at school. Comes a day when an older relative of hers suggests she gives *The Sims* a try. She agrees and enjoys the game. She learns that her own computer is not powerful enough for playing new games and understands that many things, such as processing power and graphics card, may actually affect her possibilities to play. She later manages to get a better computer and buys *The Sims*.

After her relative’s introduction, the girl plays alone because the characters and environments in the game are very personal and she has developed an intimate relationship with them. She purchases multiple expansions for the game, but the new items and characters are not enough to maintain her interest. She has also downloaded custom-made content online and found out that all sorts of player creations are readily available. After months of play,

\(^{12}\)http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/
out of curiosity and because she already finds the simple gameplay too boring, the girl tries to create something herself. What she decides to create is a very modest piece of clothing, a dress that resembles one she has in her own closet, because it has got that lovely combination of blue and yellow that none of the game’s readymade dresses have. This is where the skinning starts.

The girl finds out that the game’s publisher offers some tools, including *SimShow* (See Figure 1.3) and *The Sims 2 Body Shop*, that help in changing the looks of the characters, their skins. But in addition to these, she reads about various independent programs, such as *SimPE*, available online. She gets to know that while some software allows the viewing, changing and importing of skins, some of them are for changing the texture only and some of them for modelling the skins on game characters. Since she happens to have *Adobe Photoshop*\(^\text{13}\) installed on her computer, the girl chooses to use it for actually creating the dress of her choice for a game character. For testing the outfit on a character she downloads *SimShow* provided by *Electronic Arts* (EA), the publisher of the game, for free on their website. In addition to learning these programs, knowing how the folder structure of a computer works is crucial for her at this point.

The girl learns that for each look there is a ‘mesh’ for the 3D structure of the skin and a ‘texture’ that is wrapped around the mesh when a 3D character is rendered by the game (See Figure 1.4). She also needs to know that *The Sims* software handles body textures separately from heads and that different sexes and age groups, body types, skin colours and models of clothing all act as bases for creating individual skins. This is how they are arranged in the folders of the game. There is one image file for each body type-age-gender-skin colour-clothing combination.

\(^{13}\)Since genuine *Photoshop* software is very expensive, not many players benefit from such an advanced tool but create skins with programs such as *MS Paint* instead.
1.3. Aims and Objectives of Study

She reads from a forum that instead of starting from a scratch, it is easier to start skinning on top of an existing character. The girl uses SimShow to find a dress that best suits her purposes – that is, a readymade dress that
most accurately follows the shape and structure of a dress she wishes to create. *SimShow* allows browsing of all clothes already available in the game. At this point it is the mesh that she is interested in first and foremost, since recolouring the texture is easier than creating a new mesh. She needs to choose where to start in regard to all aspects of a character and picks up a slim adult female character with dark skin who has got a long dress on her. The dress seems to be of the same shape as the one she wishes to create and only the texture of the skin requires changes. Because the structure of the dress (the mesh) matches a dress that already is available in the game, she does not yet have to learn about how to find a player-created mesh online. Neither does she look into polygon tools such as *MilkShape* that are meant for creating new meshes altogether.

After installing all the tools she needs and making them work with the game and its expansions, the girl creates her skin with various tools. Tutorials online lead her step by step to reach her goal and because most of the programs are non-commercial and their compatibility has not been tested, various problems could arise. But she is lucky and everything goes well up to the point that the skin is imported into the game. Thus, the most time-consuming part of her skinning process is to recolour the skin.

The girl examines the colours and proportions of her ‘real’ dress and imitates them with *Photoshop* using a readymade skin of a long dress as a starting point. Using multiple tools in *Photoshop*, she adds colour and details little by little. As a novice skinner, her skin is far away from the dress in her closet, but nevertheless something new for the game. Later, she finds it fascinating to open the game and see a character wearing the dress she just made: the same dress she wore on a Sunday brunch. She finds the skin she created pretty and considers sending it online for her peers to download and use in their own games. This means that she also needs to learn how to create
1.4 Structure of the Work

Figure 1.5: Player-created dress from *Radola* forum. Source: [http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/viewtopic.php?t=11115&mforum=radola](http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/viewtopic.php?t=11115&mforum=radola)

compressed ZIP or RAR packages. More importantly, she needs to be ready to welcome feedback and even criticism from other players. Once sent to the forum, it is surrounded and compared with by dozens of other dresses and items such as the dress in Figure 1.5.

1.4 Structure of the Work

The structure of this work is as follows.

Subsequent to this opening chapter, Chapter 2 *Methodologies, Approaches and Framings* will introduce and discuss the ethnographic material in the context of feminist ethnographic research traditions and Cultural Studies work on play and women’s leisure. For my study, I conducted email interviews and
the chapter will focus on describing the methodological perspective behind a small-scale ethnography. I will look at how the characteristics of email interviewing in particular influenced the course of my ethnography as well as introduce the means to describe the cultural context of skinning, such as game magazines and forum surveys and their importance to my research.

Next, in Chapter 3 Games, Gender and The Sims I focus on exploring the gendering of games and game cultures in general and the gendering of The Sims games in particular. I propose that many of the characteristics that discursively construct it ‘feminine’ are also central in the discourse that labels it a non-game. A detailed analysis of the game’s ideological and cultural meanings introduces the game’s cultural framework. This framework is a basis for the construction of The Sims 2 player identities.

This is followed by Chapter 4 The Practice of Skinning: Resistance beyond Play? Here I explore three dominant ways in which previous research has approached skinning: hackerism, fandom and tactical art. While each one of these approaches assumes a resistant participant and emphasises the outcome of the process of modifying instead of the process itself, they are useful in understanding how players’ contribution is linked to the industry and commercial development of computer games and how the authority over a game product is distributed. However, I will suggest that they are not especially useful in exploring player identities as they restrict us from seeing other pleasures and motivations, which has partly to do with gender and the special nature of the game in question.\(^{14}\) I will conclude that what makes the applications of hackerism, fandom and tactical art especially challenging is the way in which The Sims 2 game invites its players to create skins and be productive.

\(^{14}\)Earlier, Cornel Sandvoss has suggested that we “need to focus, not on the objective socio-demographic position of fans, but rather, on the role of fandom in constructing fans’ identity, in order to understand its social and cultural implications” (Sandvoss 2005, 161).
Finally, in Chapter 5 *Skinning as a Way of Playing The Sims 2*, I propose that such co-creative player engagement in participatory cultures is actually just one way of playing the game. I further explore how such practice resonates with what has been written about women’s leisure activities as productive and utilitarian. As a result, I demonstrate how skinning moves away from the political forms of resistance, as discussed in Chapter 4, and is better approached as cultural resistance by skinners who resist the dominant meanings of femininity and playerhood simultaneously. For player identities, it means that they are always constructed through exclusion and in negation to dominant forms of computer game play, *The Sims 2* play and game modifying.
Chapter 2

Methodologies, Approaches and Framings

In this chapter I will describe the interview methodology as used in my study and examine its efficacy in my research. I will suggest an empathetic, non-hierarchical form of feminist cultural ethnography that respects the position and voices of research participants. I also acknowledge that it is my own discursive position as a researcher which enables me to recognise and then systematically raise a set of factors that influence the players’ experiences. I will start with discussing the interview methodology in general and email interviews in particular alongside the feminist Cultural Studies approach. Introducing both detailed practical cases and larger epistemological and ethical questions I will suggest the advantages of email-based interviewing. Finally, I will discuss the way in which the small-scale qualitative interview in Cultural Studies research ties together different sources of information: culturally constructed meanings and written accounts of subjective experiences.
Chapter 2 Methodologies, Approaches and Framings

2.1 Interviews in Cultural Studies Research

As a Cultural Studies’ perspective suggests, this ethnography concentrates on players, their play and their identities. The study approaches cultural discourses as experienced, told and reflected upon by the players themselves, not to forget my final interpretation of what has been told to me. From this basis, interviewing, in general, was a fitting choice for this study as I wanted to gather information about people and identities. A good starting point in the study of identities was to ask the people themselves. The importance of ‘person research’ lies in a possibility to approach concrete ways in which a culture operates. Furthermore, such research can grasp the ways in which individuals and social groups “relate to public knowledge and develop distinctive forms of cultural production” (Johnson et al. 2004, 208). It is the lived experience of play that interested me. Instead of looking only at the discourses surrounding the practice of skinning, I wanted to know how the skinner’s identity is experienced and explained from different standpoints, by different people who all possess different views of their practice.

Hence, my concentration was always on the participants’ personal experience. Instead of looking at the practice itself through its meanings for the game culture, games industry, games’ content or in regard to the width of players’ possibility to contribute to games, I was primarily interested in what skinning means for players themselves and how their understanding of The Sims 2 is influenced by their practice. Thus, the knowledge that has been gained through the interviews is about the use of one particular computer game and about what its use means for individuals who participated this study. Meanwhile, a substantial knowledge on the media text itself, The Sims 2, has been required in reading these experiences.

This is close to what Richard Johnson et al. (2004) suggests as a way to overcome the striking feature of the majority of media research: that media
texts and audience reception are studied in separation. In my study of skinning, I have interviewed players about their particular approach to *The Sims 2* game, skinning, and combined this knowledge with a description and analysis of the game itself and the culture around it. I have also approached non-game cultural meanings associated to the game. Thus, in Hallian sense (e.g. Hall 1973), the meanings *encoded* in the media text have been approached in parallel to those that are being read of it and to those attached to it in a broader cultural context. It has also been my attempt not to limit the understanding of the text, as I have for example avoided locating the game in question into any specific genre (partly because it would have been impossible given the restricted notions of established computer game genres).

Johnson et al. (2004) suggest that such an approach, while exceptional, has been successfully executed in Ien Ang’s (1985/2005) and Radway’s (1984) work, for example. This kind of research “must deal with the reader’s [here player’s] life and circumstances (in its social, spatial and temporal aspects for example), but must also engage textually not only with the text that the reader reads but also the reading that the reader makes of it” (Johnson et al. 2004, 266). As the authors suggest, bringing together the text- and person based-research and approaching cultural processes as a whole is the focus and a distinctive characteristic of Cultural Studies. And this has also been the aim of my study. I am interested in understanding ‘cultural structures and formations’ (Johnson 1997) through a case study of Sims skinning.

In-depth interviewing was chosen because it is used to “generate data which give an authentic insight into people’s experiences” (Silverman 2006, 118). A loose structure or free flow form of interviews was accepted as a preferable option since the area of study was not very familiar to me (cf. Oinas 2004) and there was very little, if any, research available on the identities and experiences of those involved in game modifying. Open or semi-structured
Chapter 2 Methodologies, Approaches and Framings

interviews are considered useful when it is difficult to invent questions as a field is poorly known. A rigid structuring of questions was not possible since so little was written about skinning prior to my study. An exploratory study into a new area aimed to “formulate propositions rather than set out to verify them – or, at least, convincingly demonstrate them” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 492).

Furthermore, also because of the lack of research conducted on modding and skinning, I decided to start interviewing very early on in order to learn more about the practice in general. This resulted in the first couple of interviews being very much concerned with terminology, the technology used, and other practical aspects of skinning. While not the primary focus of my study, such technological and material connections of skinning are discussed throughout the thesis because they shape the space in which players operate and construct their identities. Such technologies carry various meanings. For example, game technologies are considered masculine in our culture as I will discuss in Chapter 3.

In preparation for interviews, the themes for starting and leading the interviews resulted from a literature review on game modifying, from my own experience with The Sims games and from a brief review of online community forums that focus on the practice under study. These themes are listed in Appendix 1. While many pre-designed themes were discussed with all participants, the flow of the interviews followed what emerged during the interviews and from my further questions on these topics.

Therefore, the ethnography was conducted in a form of semi-structured email interviews and followed a feminist and Cultural Studies tradition of interviewing. It is based on transparency, reciprocity and equality, aiming to balance the power between the participant and the researcher, and acknowledges thereby that meaning is constructed during the interviews themselves
2.2 Email Interviewing

(e.g. Johnson 1997, Oakley 1981, Gray 2003, Walkerdine 1997), as I will further discuss in Section 2.3.1. This kind of feminist interviewing explicitly seeks to reduce differentials of power between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’. However impossible an entirely equal relationship may be in practice, one should aim for it and be able to recognise how the imbalance of power affects the exchange between the researcher and the participant.

Following a constructivist epistemology\(^1\) and understanding the situatedness of knowledge\(^2\), I accepted that anything I can learn about identities and experiences of other people will be constructed and interpreted in numerous ways before it can be written in a thesis. Therefore, the forthcoming sections of this chapter set out some of the means of constructing such knowledge as well as my personal position in this process.

2.2 Email Interviewing

There were three main reasons for conducting the interviews by email. The first was to allow dialogue in the participant’s own space. It has been suggested that it is best to interview participants in environments they know as people are usually at most ease at familiar settings (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007/1983). Elina Oinas (2004) further suggests interviewing a participant in a familiar space as an aspect of conducting feminist research. Participants feel most comfortable at their own space, usually home, and therefore feel freer to

\(^1\)Such epistemological perspective in philosophy assumes that scientific knowledge is constructed instead of being discovered as such from the world. In regard to any form of ethnography, the knowledge gained then also becomes constructed in collaboration between the researcher and the participant.

\(^2\)Situatedness of knowledge is based on the so-called standpoint theory that was created as a critique of masculinised version of scientific ‘objectivity’. It proposes a view that aims to deconstruct what is often suggested as ‘real world’. Standpoint theory, through the works of Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith and Donna Haraway in particular, suggests that all knowledge is situated in a way that every individual holds her own perspective that shapes her views of reality (e.g. Harding 2004).
disclose aspects of their personal lives. Also Natilene Bowker and Keith Tuffin suggest that “[s]ituating discourse within a familiar physical location may enhance participants’ disclosure, and, hence, the richness of the data gathered” (Bowker and Tuffin 2004, 230). Not only were the participants able to contribute to the research within their homes, but they could do it using the technology familiar to them and from different locations if they wanted. It was also possible, and in practice most likely, for the participants to contribute to the study with the same technology and in the same physical space they are accustomed to use during their gameplay. This creates an experiential link between the practice under study and the interview.

When compared to face-to-face interviewing in participants’ space, email interviewing also allowed the participants to inhabit their own living environments without the intrusion of a researcher. Email interviewing thus removes the challenges that result from differences, such as age or personality, between the participant and the researcher. “E-mail interviews reduce, if not eliminate, some of the problems associated with telephone or face-to-face interviews, such as the interviewer/interviewee effects that might result from visual or nonverbal cues or status difference between the two (e.g., race, gender, age, voice tones, dress, shyness, gestures, disabilities)” (Meho 2006, 1289). One face-to-face group interview conducted in addition to email interviews offers a reference point here. Some participants seemed very shy in person but were comfortable communicating online. This suggests that one major barrier was overcome with email-based interviews. I also noticed that some personality aspects complicated the face-to-face exchange, but these aspects did not occur to me in email correspondence before meeting the same participants face-to-face. Matheson and Zanna (in Mann and Stewart 2000) suggest that informal online communication helps to increase disclosure, because participants are not inhibited by researcher’s presence and are thus more relaxed and aware of their
‘private selves’. Anonymity afforded by email interviewing “may explain why some people are more willing to participate in e-mail interview studies” (Meho 2006, 1289). According to Lokman I. Meho (2006), more sensitive and personal information becomes available through email than face-to-face interviewing.

The second reason for email interviewing was that online ethnography in general helps in overcoming physical distance. As this study was done in the UK, but the majority of participants lived in Finland, long-distance interviewing was a notable advantage. Both time and money was saved in conducting email interviews. While these aspects were crucial for me, they affected the participants as well. There were no travelling costs or travel time associated with participating. Here the question of accessibility was not considered as it was assumed that players in the focus group would already be using email for study, work and other purposes. That the participants were familiar with the use of email, and generally with computers given their skinning practice, was later proven true on the course of this study.

Third, asynchronous interviewing offered a possibility for flexibility in regard to timing. Both I as a researcher and the participants were able to write in a suitable moment independent of the other person’s schedule. Bowker and Tuffin suggest that email interviewing is potentially empowering for the participants because it allows them to control when, where and how to respond (Bowker and Tuffin 2004). For those with families, such asynchronicity potentially suits well to the general use of time, as time in-between serving the family (e.g. Radway 1984) can be used for the interviews.

I attempted to reply to the participants as quickly as possible both to keep the interviews going and to let the participants be in control of pace. However, such idea is not straightforward. First, my quick responses might have made the participants feel they, too, are assumed to reply without a delay. Second, as the possibility for a thoughtful follow-up is one of the further
advantages of email interviewing (Hamilton and Bowers 2006), I could not hurry with replying too much. Instead, I acknowledged this special advantage of email interviewing and tried to send well-thought out yet intuitive questions back to the participants.

In the following I will discuss the specificities of email interviewing and online research in terms of online recruitment and research ethics.

2.2.1 Recruitment and Radola

To recruit research participants for this study, I went directly to the online fora for sharing The Sims game modifications and alongside tried to find skinners from among women gamer communities and general modder communities. These include Mod The Sims forum\(^3\), Mod DB forum\(^4\), Game Hackers forum\(^5\), Gamer Girls Unite forum\(^6\), Boolprop forum\(^7\), and Radola forum\(^8\). The decision not to approach general The Sims fora was made primarily because only a fraction of The Sims players create content of their own and those involved in this practice share and discuss their creations in such places. If for no other reason, players need to find instructions for skin making from online fora. Both those publishing their skins and those making them for their own enjoyment were accessed through the fora.

In an online space, such as a forum for game-related discussion, boundaries between private and public are blurred. Even if the information and content of discussion is public and available to virtually anyone, participants may consider these spaces private. One practical example of taking this into consideration was asking for permission from an administrator of the forum

\(^3\)http://www.modthesims.info
\(^4\)http://www.moddb.com
\(^5\)http://www.game-hackers.com
\(^6\)http://www.gamergirlsunite.com
\(^7\)http://www.forums.boolprop.com/
\(^8\)http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/
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when intending to post a question about recruiting research participants, a
tquestion that has little to do with the usual subject matter of the discussions.
I asked for permission from the administrators of the mentioned fora in early
2008. *Boolprop* was approached a year later. All administrators contacted
were happy to cooperate. I then invited people to participate in my study
with a message sent to the discussion forum. The following message was sent
in Finnish to *Radola* forum.

Hi! I am studying computer game play and fan practices attached to
it, such as skinning (not just clothes and Sim appearances, but also
furniture, houses etc.) for my doctoral thesis. If you have made skins or
similar for The Sims or other computer games and maybe sent them to
forums such as *Simpsakat* and *Radola*, I would love to interview you for
my study. If you are interested in participating or want to know more
about my study, please contact me with a personal message. I will tell
you more about myself and my study and send you my email address.
How good you are in skinning, how much time you spend making them
or how much you have sent them online does not matter – it would be
great to have all kinds of hobbyists involved! Thank you all in advance
and have a nice spring!! :

Those fora that operate in English were approached with the following
message.

Hi everyone!

I am doing my doctoral thesis (Ph.D.) on the practice of skin making
and other productive (fan) practices around computer games (skins,
modding, machinima videos etc). If you are making skins or game
modifications, I would be very happy to interview you for my study.
Because I am not able to travel everywhere, unfortunately, I am mainly
interested in people who live in England (UK), Copenhagen (Denmark)
or Finland (and southern Sweden).\(^9\)

If you think you would like to participate or would like to hear more,
please send me an email. I will then send you more information about
me and my study.

Thank you very much in advance!

hanna

\(^9\)At this point I had not yet decided to conduct all interviews by email.
At this phase of recruitment I realised that whereas I only got a handful of replies altogether, general modding websites *Mod DB* and *Game Hackers* did not offer me any contacts to women game modifiers or those interested in *The Sims*. From *Gamer Girls Unite* and *Mod The Sims* I got no answers at all possibly because the messages soon disappeared behind newly posted messages on these popular fora.

When listing challenges associated to email interviews, Meho (2006) notes that such invites have a high rate of nondelivery. Given the quantity of messages sent to these fora daily, one single message easily disappears within the dozens, often hundreds, of new messages. As a result, not all potential participants read the invitation. I also speculated that in regard to a practice that one of my participants called a ‘nonsense hobby’, finding people brave enough to contact me based on their little knowledge on skins and little experience of it, was surprisingly hard.

However, *Radola* appeared as a relatively helpful source as I got several contacts. For this reason I then decided to concentrate on *Radola* altogether. In addition, the use of my native language also supported focusing exclusively on the *Radola* forum that operates in Finnish. As in-depth interviewing is largely based on recognising nuances and tones in the participants’ talk and because I expected slang and practice specific vocabulary from the young participants, a forum that operated with my native language was chosen. The interviews were thus conducted in Finnish, and later translated into English. This locates my research in a Finnish, European and ‘Western’ context.

What the Finnish cultural context may have introduced to the study in terms of gender has to do with gender equality. It is important to acknowledge Finland’s high degree of gender equality. For example, according to *The Global Gender Gap Report 2009* (Hausmann, Tyson and Zahidi 2009), Finland ranks number two in gender equality whereas the United Kingdom holds position
fifteen. A comparative study between different countries would be needed in order to further discuss this topic. The reader, however, needs to bear in mind that this study concentrates on Finnish players and thus presents a specific cultural context. The gender issues highlighted in the work, if they appear as such in a relatively gender-equal country, assumedly appear more striking in countries like the UK. Importantly, the game played is not a product of Finnish culture, but American.

The selected Radola forum itself was founded in 2006 by a student who created it as a part of her unofficial Radosims website that offers information on The Sims games. In short, Radola is a discussion forum of a larger The Sims website. In Radola, players are able to distribute their own modifications, download other people’s work and comment on them. In addition to custom content, the forum includes discussion areas on more general topics of The Sims games, which are, nevertheless, limited to this one specific game family.

The forum attracts both players who create skins and those who wish to use skins made by other players. Radola, with almost 5,000 registered users has gender demographics similar to the overall gender demographics of The Sims players (See Section 1.3.5). According to the creator of the forum, Rado, girls and women constitute approximately 60% of all users. A survey sent to the forum resulted 89% of respondents choosing ‘Woman’ as their gender out of two possibilities (‘Woman’ and ‘Man’). 349 players took part in the survey.¹¹

The members of Radola produce around 150 messages a day.¹² Rado and her fellow administrators remove unused member accounts regularly. Rado suggests that 80% of the members are active on the forum. During the recruitment process I found out that few of these 5,000 registered users are active on a daily, or even weekly, basis, however, as the message I send as was read only

¹⁰http://www.radosims.com
¹¹See the survey at http://tinyurl.com/radolaplayingwith.
¹²This is an estimate given by the administrator of the forum.
by couple of dozen members during the first week.

2.2.2 Participants

The interested members of Radola contacted me voluntarily after I had posted an introduction of my study and an invitation to take part in the interviews to the forum. After the first contacts with the participants via Radola, all later communication took place by email. Also the actual interviews were conducted by email. In order to complement the group of Radola players to be interviewed, I also sent out private invitations to players who were active on the forum. When successful, such a method allowed the inclusion of players who were not especially enthusiastic to discuss their skinning thus diversifying the group of participants. Furthermore, one participant from Radola was recruited through a forum administrator who asked her friends to participate.

In the end, eleven participants of this study were recruited from Radola. One of the participants is the administrator and creator of the website and forum. In addition to the members of Radola, two research participants who are members of international English-speaking communities were recruited through friendships. One of the two is Danish and the other Canadian. These two players use Boolprop as their primary The Sims 2 community website. Altogether, the email interviews encompass thirteen players.

The majority of players interviewed were teenagers. The youngest participant was ten and the oldest 45 years old. Other participants were between 12 and 35. In regard to gender, I was primarily interested in interviewing women players. However, I did not ask only women to contact me but kept the invitation sent to the forum general. Nevertheless, only one male, a 15-year old boy, was among the people offering to be interviewed and participate in the study. The participants’ gender was identified based on what they stated as their gender in the consent form. Alongside the majority of Radola members
being girls and women, the idea that all except one interviewee were female suggests that *The Sims* skinning is a gendered activity and that most *The Sims* skinners are women.\(^{13}\)

Out of the thirteen participants who all actively contribute to *Radola* or *Boolprop* in the form of discussions, two are not skinners. However, they were included in my ethnography as they were willing to participate and had their experiences to share about the distribution, discussion and use of skins. These players also contributed to what is written about the game itself in the forum and about skins’ importance in gameplay. Differences between those who create skins and those who use skins created by other players only are suggested in Section 5.1.3, for instance.

### 2.2.3 Obtaining Consent

An informed consent was required from all participants in order to create a trusting relationship between myself and the participants and to make sure we agreed on the basis on which the interviews took place. The consent form, accompanied by a participant information sheet (See Appendix 2), was sent to each player via email after they had first expressed their interest in participating. Consent was obtained from those participating in the study and from a parent of every participant younger than 15.

In cultural research, such consents are rarely obtained in order to verify the identities of research participants. This is because the Cultural Studies perspective does not aim to recover a ‘truth’, but to pinpoint the ways in which identities are culturally constructed. It was not essential for my study to be sure about the ‘real’ identities of the people I interviewed, such as names and personal details, since my project was focussed on the complex production

\(^{13}\)However, it was suggested by one participant, and this was also my own intuition, that that when it comes to creating actual modifications as well as tools for modifying the game the percentage of male participation rises.
and negotiation of their player identities and pleasures. Moreover, the email interviews respected the construction of such player identities online as it did not necessitate them to discuss these face-to-face, off-line.

2.2.4 Participants’ Anonymity

Research ethical measures specific to email interviewing such as those listed by Rebekah J. Hamilton and Barbara J. Bowers (2006) including the removal of identifiers from email when copying it to word processor, deleting of original email messages, and avoiding saving the addresses of participants in address books were taken into account. Only consent forms and similar documents may include real names, addresses or telephone numbers.

Before interviews, an interviewee placeholder name – e.g. ‘Simmer1’ – was created and used throughout the study. Thus, there was no need for real names afterwards. Participants were also informed that anonymised transcripts of the interviews may be made available to other researchers for research purposes only.

All personal information was removed and names replaced with nicknames in published manuscripts and papers in order to ensure confidentiality. I decided to use these same nicknames in the written thesis. While some scholars suggest that both first and last names should be used in order to create a feeling of equality with other sources of information such as researchers (Martin 1987), I decided to use ‘Simmer’ for two reasons. First, such naming emphasises their expert role and the practice in questions. Second, most of the players interviewed prefer the use of nicknames both in Radola and while being interviewed. Thus, ‘Simmer’ forms an alternative nickname however removing the further cultural meanings included in many real forum nicknames, such as ‘Candy’ or ‘Lady Kakadu’. Any published part of this ethnography will refer to participants with these imaginary nicknames. One exception to
2.3 The Course of Correspondence

the rule is the administrator of the Finnish Radola forum. She has agreed on different terms and given me a permission to publish her name if needed. A separate agreement was made since altering her name would not have secured her anonymity as there only exists one significant The Sims online forum for the Finnish player community and because after the interviews with her was started in early 2008, two Finnish youth magazines have already carried articles about her. Thus, while I am not disclosing her real name, it will be clear from the forthcoming which one of the Simmers is her.

2.3 The Course of Correspondence

In the previous section I introduced why the interviews discussed in this thesis were conducted by email. Email interviewing has been advantageous in allowing the players to participate in their own space, when was suitable for them and without revealing their off-line identities, for example. This is important for the suggested aim of creating an equal research setting as it empowered participants in organising the practical arrangements of the study.

I will next discuss what other issues were taken into consideration during the interviews in order to conduct them in a way that follows participants’ interests and preferences. In the end of this section I will move on exploring how email interviewing allowed simultaneous interviews that further offered a possibility to reflect between them. I will end by introducing additional means of exploring cultural discourses that are close to skinners’ identities.

The interviews started with an open question about participants’ backgrounds as players and game modifiers. With a little bit of variation I posed the following request: “Could you please tell me about your general playing habits and how you came to play The Sims as well as to create skins.” Based on what the participants then wrote me back, I asked approximately three
to five further questions per response. From the second reply onwards, the written structure of the interviews took a very specific kind of rhizomic form as several topics were discussed parallel to each other and individual subtopics continuously led towards new questions and answers. While email interviewing removes the need for transcription, the suggested kind of material gained through emails requires organising and connecting the threads that concern one topic. After conducting the email interviews I created files that each included one person’s interview as a whole.

While some researchers ask their email interviewees to keep earlier conversation untouched in an email in order to keep record and to ask the participants reflect their earlier responses during the interview (e.g. James and Busher 2006), I decided to erase the earlier responses where possible in order to allow the participants to develop ideas without keeping them in consistence with what they had already told me before. However, to make probing or follow-up questions more understandable, every new question was sent alongside the specific extract from the participant’s message that lead to posing the specific question. In some cases, where it seemed necessary, also the original question I had sent in the previous email was included. Significantly differing from a one-question-per-email type of interview, my interview messages could be characterised as ‘in-depth questionnaires’ because multiple clarifying questions were made on different subtopics.

The interview questions were embedded in the body of the email instead of enclosing them as an attachment. This was an intuitive choice for me, but Meho (2006)’s review on the practice of email interviewing proposes that because it makes the answering more straightforward, higher response rates are achieved in this way. The informed consent form was, however, sent as an attached file. Therefore, I sent along instructions for opening it and told I would be happy to help with any further technical issues in order to avoid
opt-outs resulting from technical incompetence.

2.3.1 Balancing Power

From an ethical point of view, semi-structured in-depth interviews help in creating a more equitable research setting where the aim is to create a non-hierarchical relationship between the participant and the researcher. It has been suggested that non-hierarchical relationships are also the best option when one wants to know about people through interviewing (e.g. Oakley 1981). From my personal perspective, in regard to the subject of study, I was interested in hearing whatever the participants had to tell me about their gameplay and skinning in particular. Taking into account the limitations on earlier research on the phenomena under study, free-flow in-depth interviewing allowed me to adapt a welcoming position to start with as an interviewer. Hereafter I attempt to present the research settings in a way that foregrounds the power dynamics of the interviews.

As already exemplified by the adopted precepts that aim for research settings that stress the empowerment of the participant, I attempted to follow a feminist approach to research interview as suggested by Ann Oakley (1981). Such an approach aims towards an equal relationship between the participant and the researcher and is based on transparency, reciprocity and participation (Landman 2006). Oakley argues against the ‘masculine’ mechanical and psychoanalytic interview models and the subordinate role of the interviewee suggesting that more collaborative approach would prove valuable. Today, such an approach is the dominant approach to interviewing in Gender and Women’s Studies as well as in Cultural Studies.

Oakley suggests that the researcher opens up her own identity during the process of interviewing sharing knowledge with the participant (Oakley 1981). In my research, this approach was brought into action by making my
own thoughts transparent. In practice, this was done simply by stating my knowledge or my initial interpretation of what they had told me. This is an example of what Suvi Ronkainen (1989) suggests as a characteristic of an equal interview situation where the researcher does not hide behind a role, but exposes herself to a human relationship.

I hope that being open about the inspiration for my interpretations gave the participants a possibility to reformulate their stories as well as to clarify or correct me. This is certainly what some of them seemed to do. Fortunately in practice, the participants felt comfortable to disagree with me and clarify their own points of view when mine was not exactly similar to them. For instance, when I assumed that the players would characterise their practice as hacking or as fandom and asked about it, the players stated very clearly they did not see that was the case. Especially the assumed resistant and subversive role of the participants involvement in skinning was strongly disagreed throughout the interviews. This, in my opinion, gives more weight to their told experiences since these were expressed opposing my implicit, sometimes explicit, assumptions.

In addition, whenever suitable I presented my previous knowledge on a matter under discussion. Such information was, for example, based on my own gameplay since I am a keen player of *The Sims* and many other games myself. I recognise that as a female player, this study is in some ways about myself, too. I share many of the opinions and observations my interviewees have expressed to me, and I feel the same tensions they have described and which I will disentangle in the following. I felt that sharing my own ideas and experiences was important, since most of my interviewees had never discussed their skinning activities with others before and sometimes struggled to explain what they thought or believed. Younger participants, especially, found it difficult to answer some of the questions that included explaining why they do
2.3. The Course of Correspondence

what they do or what they like or dislike in something. This may be because they were not used to articulating their feelings and experiences to another person or because of their writing skills were insufficient.

In addition to the difficulty in explaining one’s experiences and insufficient writing skills, participants’ responses were affected by the limitedness of cultural narratives and meanings around active woman players. While discussing a phenomenon that is very little addressed in the surrounding culture, the participants’ ‘collection of available narratives’ (Hänninen 1996 in Oinas 2004) was very limited. For example, issues related to the gendering of computer game magazines was very difficult to grasp for some. A ten-year-old player used the word ‘confusing’ while reasoning why she did not read game magazines.\(^{14}\) When I asked if it could have something to do with the kinds of games featured in these magazines and gave an example of a ‘war game’, she replied: “Yes! Now this is what I meant, that is so true. Usually the heading says: a new amazing war game! That is pretty annoying.” This gendering of games has already been addressed in the previous chapter and will be further elaborated in Section 3.1.

Meanwhile, among the oldest participants were players who expressed very articulate opinions about game culture and its masculinity. Their opinions were, however, so close to the popular discourse of marginalised female players that it was hard to find out which part of the narrative told was a story the participants assumed I wanted to hear and how that really overlapped with their everyday lives. This phenomenon has been presented by Hänninen (in Oinas 2004), who writes that while a participant tells a story it is shaped both by what the participant assumes the researcher wants to hear and the available related narratives in her culture. The Cultural Studies perspective

\(^{14}\)A survey in Radola also suggests that the members of the community are generally not interested in reading such game magazines. Find the survey at [http://tinyurl.com/radolagamemagazines](http://tinyurl.com/radolagamemagazines).
somewhat contradicts this idea, however, as everything is evidence of cultural identity and practices, including fantasy narratives or the kind of rehearsal and recirculation of specific discourses discussed here. The effect of ‘pleasing’ and available narratives is not a defect in a study as long as the influence of such factors is acknowledged and especially when the concentration of a study is on a level of discourse. “There is no need to question the ‘authenticity’ of interviews when it is based on an assumption that all telling is contextual in regard to time, space and audience” (Oinas 2004, 221, Transl. HW).

The disclosure of the researcher’s own identity appears productive also when one is concerned about the rightness of one’s interpretations of the participants’ stories. Valerie Walkerdine brings up the question of transparency when she discusses differences between different researchers’ interpretations of the same interview material.

We have to face some of the difficult issues of interpretation, while recognising that interpretive methods do not give a greater proximity to the Truth. It is for this reason that I want to question existing approaches to validity and reliability that use notions of inter-coder reliability, triangulation and so on. I want to suggest that we should not strive to reduce difference and agree meaning but rather actually make use of the differences between interpretations to tell a more complex story. (Walkerdine 1997, 70)

Walkerdine sees that while researchers with different backgrounds interpret any interview material from their own perspectives thus resulting in these differences in interpretations, something can be done in order to pay attention to the construction of such differences. She suggests that in the interview process, for example, it is helpful to bring forth the researcher’s own subjectivity so that the participant becomes aware of the ways in which her understanding of the world affects her interpretation. “If we adopt research techniques which place our subjectivities more centre-stage in the research process perhaps far more may be gained than it is feared will be lost” (Walkerdine 1997, 70).
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Among other things, Oakley (1981) writes that the acquired reciprocity encourages the participant to reveal aspects of her material reality and lead to intimacy between the participant and the researcher. Juliet Corbin and Janice M. Morse write that this exchange relationship can be maintained by acknowledging the researcher’s input in terms of offering “a sense of presence or of being with the participant in the story” (Corbin and Morse 2003, 342). The latter I understand as an attitude not to judge or question anything the participant suggests and by being a good listener. Here it may appear that understanding and questioning what one has said are contradictory. I believe, however, that the two can coexist. It simply requires sensitivity and attention towards the participants’ stories to balance the two in a discussion. Being true to one’s intuitions and staying sympathetic is what has helped me to balance the two.

Corbin and Morse (2003) go further proposing that reciprocity extends beyond being a participant since they usually ‘want something in return’ for their participation. Again, being a trustworthy listener for whatever the participant wants to reveal seems like the most important quality of a researcher here. This aspect of being a participant is especially important when the research topic covers traumatic experiences or illegitimate activities. In case of skinning where no sensitive information was discussed, it can be assumed that the participants were first and foremost attracted to the idea that their hobby was worth studying for someone and that they were approached as experts of this topic. I assume what the participants of my study gained from the interview was an insight into something they usually never talk or even think about: a new perspective into their own life through an outsider’s acknowledgment of the importance of their preferred practice. I suggest this is why some of the participants mentioned how interesting the interview had been for them, and why one participant wrote me in her final email: “NoNoNoNoNooo!
I don’t want this interview to end....”

In order to achieve such a reward from the interview, the participant needs to be able to discuss themes that she finds meaningful and important. Free-form interviewing sets out a good basis for such goal. However, one of the few disadvantages of email interviewing was that the lack of gestural and facial cues impeded recognising participants’ real interests among the discussed topics and I was forced to rely on their written expression skill instead. In email interviewing, it is very difficult for a researcher to know when a participant is enthusiastic about a topic and to identify themes that the participant does not like to talk about. In this regard only the length and style of answers can be used as clues.

Momentarily during the interviews, I was worried if I had appeared ignorant to specific answers if I had not always noted participant’s answer with a simple “Ok.” or “I see, thanks.” Occasionally it was also very hard to know which topics could lead to more comprehensive discussions and what kind of answers meant there was nothing more to pursue in regard to that topic. Meanwhile, it needs to be pointed out that while facial and bodily cues are out of use, the richness of communication is not simply one dimensional (text only) because email messages were embedded with smileys and online acronyms. The participants also referred to specific skins and forum threads with links and pictures as they were easily available on their computers, which enriched the material available for me.

Aiming for equality between the participant and the researcher often means balancing the power relationship between them. This can be supported by providing the interviewee with comfortable settings to take part in the study. Conducting the study by email in the participants’ own space, following their pace and allowing them to contribute at any suitable moment were also means to forward this aim. The expert role was offered to the partici-
pants by allowing them to start the interview with anything that interested them in regard to the research topic and with a free form structure of the interview in general. The interviews conducted are situated somewhere between semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Themes for the interviews were designed but the order of them not to be fixed, interviewees were encouraged to discuss their own themes. As Oinas writes, feminist interviewing “is based on an idea according to which the interviewee is understood as someone who takes part in deciding what is relevant in the research topic, what is to be discussed” (Oinas 2004, 214, Transl. HW).

In research writing, this model invites the use of the word ‘participant’ instead of ‘interviewee’ or ‘respondent’. In qualitative studies this wording has become a usual way of addressing the interviewee. Hence, I will use the term participant in this study. Interestingly, the researcher remains a ‘researcher’ despite her multiple roles of a listener, discussant, discloser of one’s personal life, meaning maker, storyteller, and so forth. While it is not possible to discuss such methodological and research ethical detail in this thesis, I will go with the norm and call the interviewee, myself, a researcher whenever necessary.

Hamilton and Bowers mention the lack of controlling devices as another way in which email interviewing advances equity. “It would seem reasonable that removing the controlling devices of interviews, that is, the tape recorder, video recorder, or phone schedule, from the professional would shift at least some of the power toward the participant” (Hamilton and Bowers 2006). Obviously, no such devices were present in the email interviews.

At best, such a study that aims for equal research settings “develops a participatory model of research that challenges power relationships between researcher and researched” (Oakley in Landman 2006, 431). Given the adapted constructivist perspective, I assume that the knowledge gained is partially dependent on the particular shape of the interviews as a collaborative process.
between me as a researcher and the participants. Such work is nevertheless just a manifestation of the identity work the participants engage with in their everyday lives despite the interview setting. However, certain attention has been paid to the ways in which what the participants assume the interviewer wants to hear might have affected what was finally told.

### 2.3.2 Analysis while Interviewing

I have described how email interviewing and online recruitment both come with challenges and advantages. Some of them are very practical and mainly consider the use of time and possibilities to contact participants. However, these, too, impact on the interview atmosphere and the researcher’s and participant’s feelings about the settings. Furthermore, the difficulty of reaching potential participants, for instance, directly affects the conclusions of my study as a specific group of people was recruited. As I have proposed, email interviewing have significant advantages in regard to feminist ethnography that aims towards equal relationship between the researcher and the participant and seeks to empower the participant. The participants’ possibility to attend in their own space and set the pace of the interviews by themselves are features of email interviewing that have contributed in this way. For me as a researcher, the email interviewing left space to properly reflect upon the correspondence, although the lack of control over the course of correspondence might sometimes appear frustrating even.

If the freedom to reply according to my daily schedule and the possibility to really think about my replies beforehand contributed to the ‘quality’ of the interviews, these aspects of email interviewing probably had an effect on the participants’ replies as well. Meho’s review of email interviewing as a research methodology indeed suggests, based on several studies where both email and face-to-face interviewing had been conducted, that the quality of
material gained through email interviews is as high as in the responses resulting from face-to-face interviews. Mehó’s review further proposes that “participants interviewed via e-mail remained more focused on the interview questions and provided more reflectively dense accounts than their face-to-face counterparts” (Mehó 2006, 1291). This was true in my study. The participants were invited to use as much time as they wanted in answering. The replies were then well-thought out and articulated. The participants very specifically replied to the questions asked and rarely talked off-topic.

The advantages of simultaneously interviewing multiple participants are more significant than the disadvantage of the extra work it requires. Suggesting it as an advantage of email studies, Hamilton and Bowers write that “[i]f more than one interview is taking place in the same time frame, comparisons across interviews can occur, allowing for cross-fertilization of ideas (Murray and Sixsmith, 1998), quickly enriching the depth of analysis and question generation” (Hamilton and Bowers 2006, 831-2). A small number of participants is important here, too, because only then can a researcher keep all the cases in mind simultaneously and concentrate on the shared nuances and topics between them.

While writing about qualitative interviews in Social Sciences, Mira Crouch and Heather McKenzie note that a ‘small sample’ is important for making connections between participants’ experiences. Since “such research positively calls for a collection of respondents’ ‘states’, the size of which can be kept in the researcher’s mind as a totality under investigation at all stages of the research” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 493).

In cultural research in general, sample sizes are less important and a

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15Crouch and McKenzie boldly suggest that the use of small samples “is the way in which analytic, inductive, exploratory studies are best done” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 496), and acknowledge the problem of using the word ‘sample’ altogether, because such research rarely attempts to generalize results and thus assume a group of cases as a ‘sample’ of something bigger.
body of significant work has been conducted with a small group of participants including works by Ann Gray (1992), Ang (2005/1985), Walkerdine (1997) and Joke Hermes (1995), for example. Small-scale qualitative research projects are good in pointing out complicated cultural processes, such as the construction of marginalised player identities in my case. This refers exactly to the ways in which knowledge gained from individual interviewees can be brought together and elaborated with multiple participants simultaneously. It also allows the combining of cultural discursive identities, around female players of skinner for instance, and those expressed and constructed in the participants’ writing, i.e. how they speak the discourses of gameplay or of femininity. Such a take on different texts and experiences available as typical for cultural research is often known as ‘thick description’ as suggested by Clifford Geertz (1973). The main idea of thick description is to rely not only on the individuals’ experiences, but on the context within which they take place as well.

Seth Giddings writes about the study of complexity through a limited set of cases and suggests that the “deep description of everyday life allows for the acknowledgement of the messy, the conceptually unresolved, the inverted and metamorphic operations of play” (Giddings 2006, 235). He refers specifically to his own method, *microethnography*, which “attends to the textures of, and linkages between, videogames, play, and players and their cultural and material contexts in moments or events rather than through either the abstractions of the notional ‘subjects’ of film theory, or the surveys and focus groups of media audience research” (Giddings 2006, 6). Such microethnography overlaps with my account where I am interested in unpacking the complex relationships between cultural discourses, individuals’ experiences and game objects’ features.

Furthermore, I would like to propose that the advantages of small sample interviewing that have to do with the cross-comparisons and cross-fertilisation
of ideas are even better achieved with simultaneous email interviewing. In simultaneous interviewing, sharing information between participants is possible. In this research, I could for example tell a participant that I had understood from another player about the importance of feedback one can get from the online forum. Such a comment encouraged the participant to further describe her own experience, either agreeing or disagreeing with the player who I had referred to. It might not be entirely wrong to say that the very process of interviewing creates a sense of community between the participants who felt freer to state their opinions when they received indirect support from other players through my interaction with them. In a way, the adopted form of email interviewing was a type of group interview in certain respects.\footnote{This approach, depending on the viewpoint, could be either embraced or criticised for its concentration on a group rather than an individual. Since several messages were handled simultaneously, the voice of an individual player was not always as clear as the common tone of the group.}

Email interviewing also allowed consultation of online fora during the interviews. Online fora, such as 
Radola, can be understood as secondary sources in this study. Small sample sizes allow a research strategy informed by knowledge and understanding of the social context (here, cultural context) that derives from outside the interview material (Crouch and McKenzie 2006). Furthermore, it continues “carries out ‘recontextualisation’ ” – the cases can be compared, answers can be reflected on based on earlier answers, and reflection in regard to other knowledge can be practiced. Cross-interpreting and reflecting between the individual cases is not possible with a large number of participants. Crouch and McKenzie suggest that “complex reactions and feelings are best given meaning and are optimally articulated – to the respondents’ satisfaction (i.e. their sense of ‘closure’) – through a dialogue which encourages reflection on, rather than mere reporting of, experience” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 487). One powerful source for reflection was the information
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gained from other participants and secondary sources. Such research “aims ultimately to establish, conceptually/theoretically, points of contact (adhesion or friction, as the case may be) between individual experience/action and the social context [here, cultural context]” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 491).

Because of the simultaneous cross-referencing and interpreting, Crouch and McKenzie recall the use of the word ‘methodology’ instead of method since ‘data’ collection and analysis cannot be seen as separate processes but happen parallel to each other17. “In the course of such research, then, in addition to the interview material and its extant disciplinary/conceptual background, a new entity is enticed to come to light as a third force in the proceedings – the emergent theoretical frame [the discourses] (Layder 1998, 170) which eventually envelops the ‘findings’ of the research” (Crouch and McKenzie 2006, 491). Over the course of the interviews I gained relevant knowledge from several sources such as scholarly texts and skinning specific online fora.

2.3.3 The Cultural Context of Skinning

As already discussed in this chapter, online fora specifically serving The Sims players and skinners were consulted and explored throughout the study in order to form interview themes, to deepen my understanding on specific aspects of skinning and when analysing the interview material. Even if not systematically, I followed the discussions on Radola forum throughout the research. Primarily, the knowledge gained helped me to understand how the community and the website operate and are being managed. Most of this knowledge has not been, however, included in this thesis due to its specific focus on individual players’

17Since I see no reason or way to separate data collection, analysis and interpretation from each other, I not only prefer to talk about methodology but also about the collecting of material (not ‘data’) for further analysis. Material in this sense can already be partly analysed ‘data’ or connecting thoughts, ideas or theories that are gathered together and interconnected during the interviews.
identities instead of how the community of *Radola* operates.

While I have explored the ways in which the individual players write and comment on the forum, this has served the need to learn about the skins they have created and which they have referred to. I did not feel comfortable about the idea of writing about these individuals from a point of view of a ‘stalker’, who picks individuals from a forum and examines how they discuss and go about on the forum. In this study, the participant-researcher relationship based on transparency and was set out to be as equal as possible.

In addition to studying the online fora, I familiarised myself with the discourse around *The Sims* games as presented in hobbyist game magazines (See Section 3.2) as well as explored how *The Sims* modifying is addressed on online fora concentrating on game modification in general (See Section 5.3.1). These texts contribute to a discourse of a naturalised male player and make certain assumptions on what kind of knowledge and skill (game cultural capital) a player must possess. As a player myself, I usually find the game magazines, for example, alien to my own gameplay practice.

Further, to understand technological and skill requirements of skinning I also studied the making of them myself and researched different tools and instructions available. These aspects of skinning will be addressed whenever necessary but are not described in detail. And in order to learn about the game itself (as well as for my own pleasure), I have played *The Sims 2* since it was first published in 2004.

However, while searching through player-created sources, I have learned how invisible most of the dynamics of the game are for a player who does not show specific interest in them. It would have taken me hundreds of hours of gameplay to master all components of the game system that are described in great detail in these resources. As *The Sims 2* is an extremely complex simulation where different parameters of individual characters (needs, aspirations,
memories, family relationships, wants, fears, skills, job, possessions etc.) and items all work together creating often unpredictable consequences, some supporting information on the game has been gathered from various Sims resources online. Player-created wiki pages\textsuperscript{18}, FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) and walkthroughs\textsuperscript{19} have been invaluable when describing such a system.

Furthermore, one group interview was conducted in order to further discuss some ideas and conclusions drawn from the individual interviews (See Appendix 4). Participants for the group interview were recruited from the same Finnish *The Sims* community forum as the participants of individual interviews. About ten people were interested in attending, but as Helsinki appeared as the only place where more than two people were available, Helsinki was chosen to be the only place for interview thus resulting in a number of four interviewees. All participants were females. The interview was conducted in the center of the Finnish capital, Helsinki, in a quiet park after a short negotiation of whether to go in a café that was agreed as a meeting place before. The noisiness of the café and warm summer day led to a decision to stay outside. The conversation was recorded and later transcribed. The interview was conducted in two half an hour sessions.

The discussion that took place in the real-time group setting did not differ significantly from the responses gained from individual email interviews. As such, many of the conclusions made based on the individual interviews were supported in the group setting.

Rado, the *Radola* creator who was also interviewed individually, took part in the group interview. Because she was almost ten years older than the other participants and because of her authority over the participants who were all familiar with her online presence, the dynamics of the group interview were not what I had hoped for. In fact, her opinions were so clear and well-

\textsuperscript{18}e.g. http://strategywiki.org/wiki/The\_Sims\_2/Needs\#Comfort
\textsuperscript{19}e.g. http://www.gamefaqs.com/computer/doswin/file/914811/35586
thought that the other players often merely echoed what she said. As such, this 
suggested that she indeed had gained a group of loyal followers and admirers 
through the forum. Such community dynamics would be a good starting point 
for a whole another research project.

Finally, some very specific questions that I felt needed to be answered 
by a larger group of players were sent to Radola through the discussion forum. 
For instance, in order to learn about whether The Sims 2 players play alone 
or in a group, I created the following survey and acquired the percentages of 
answers included in the following.

Do you play primarily alone or with someone?

I play primarily alone at home: 93% [152] of answers
I play primarily alone, but elsewhere than at home: 0% [1]
I play primarily with my friends or family members at home: 5% [9]
I play primarily with friends or relatives at their place: 0% [1].

Answers in total: 163

I also found it important to learn how the players feel about the Northern 
American references in the game and posted a question through the ‘survey’ 
function of posting new threads available on the forum.

It is sometimes confusing to see pancake eating sims and yellow school 
buses in the game. These are of course American things and it is natural 
because that’s where the game comes from. Is there anyone who would 
have been confused or even annoyed by the fact that the game is so far 
from the Finnish culture?

The survey has resulted in almost 150 answers already and it seems that 
such method allowed me to grasp very specific topics effectively in order to 
create a general understanding of the state of affairs and to back up some 

\[\text{http://tinyurl.com/radolaplayhabits}\].
claims made by the participants during the interviews. The ‘Americanness’ of the game will be discussed in Section 4.3.1.
Chapter 3

Games, Gender and *The Sims*

Simmer4: Sims is just a game, but I think it is still one of the best ones.

In the previous chapter I discussed the methodological framework of this research. I wrote that the argument in this thesis is largely based on a small-scale ethnography, on interview material gathered through email correspondence, and is discussed alongside other texts including group interview analysis, virtual ethnography on skinning forums, game magazine article analyses and online forum surveys. The study concentrates on thirteen players from 10 to 45 years old. All except two players create *The Sims 2* skins and share them online on a specific web forum targeted for *The Sims* skinners. Most of the participants are from a Finnish-speaking forum, Radola. As the underlying epistemological basis of this study draws on feminist Cultural Studies, the work aims to read participants’ stories in comparison to the attached cultural discourses which, again, invites concentration on small-scale ethnography and sensitivity to researcher’s own interpretations and contribution. Therefore, different ways to empower participants to decide about the course of the correspondence and about the topics covered were introduced in my ethnography.

I will now move on discussing what these players and the surrounding
culture have to say about the particular game in question: *The Sims 2*. I wanted to find out how the game itself sets out a basis for the Sims skinners’ identity work. In order to situate the discussion on gender and *The Sims 2* in a broader research tradition on gender and games and within some dominant discourses around feminine player identity, I will first introduce how gender stereotypes are kept alive and constructed in game cultures. Feminist Game Studies has long worked on describing the ways in which games can be approached from the perspective of gender and how their production, marketing and consumption is highly marked by gender, namely the masculine. Introduction to such processes will serve to help in conceptualising the later part of this chapter where I discuss the gendering of *The Sims* games in particular. The main argument in this chapter is that the game is, unlike the majority of games, gendered feminine instead of masculine.

Finally, this chapter aims to show how the game is excluded from the canon of games both in everyday settings and in scholarly work. Furthermore, in the case of *The Sims 2*, many of the characteristics that discursively construct it feminine are also central in the discourse that labels it a non-game and to those that devalue skinning of the game. Yet, for the players who participated in this study, the game has offered a comfortable and welcoming way to enter the game culture and a way of play that they consider unique. Understanding how the game itself works as a simulation of certain ideology and how it encourages individual play is also crucial for later discussion on skinning since it shows how these aspects of the game make it especially inviting to modify.
3.1 Gendering Games, Gameplay and Players

The following example is quoted by a writer and player Whitney Butts in her account of her personal experience as a female player of a popular game, *World of Warcraft*, on an IRC (internet relay chat) channel where the game was being talked about. As an ultimate drawback for a person’s playerhood, her player identity is denied by her peers based on her gender and her gameplay skills are being questioned.

Someone says something about Johnny Depp’s character in Pirates of the Caribbean, Captain Jack Sparrow, and I respond with “hehe Jack Sparrow is hot.” The conversation in party [a group of players achieving a common quest] chat follows:

[Warrior]: omg wtf dude are you gay or something?
[Rogue]: yeah dude, that’s sick
[Teleios]: I’m a girl. I can think guys are hot.
[Nice Guy with Good Grammar]: Woah, you’re a girl. That surprises me, you are actually a good priest. No one has died.
[Teleios]: Well yeah, girls can play games and be good you know.
[Shaman]: wow there’s a girl playing horde. Most girls are so insecure they have to play alliance to make themselves pretty.
[Teleios]: Well obviously that’s not a problem for me. I like my priest as she is.
[Rogue]: can I see ur pic plz?
[Teleios]: no.
[Warrior]: come on why not?
[Teleios]: I don’t show my pic to random people.
[Rogue]: ur not a girl.
[Teleios]: That’s right, girls don’t exist on the internet, or play games.
[Warrior]: at least not hot ones, they are all fat and stupid
[Teleios]: That’s not very nice.
[Shaman]: If you are a girl, you’re probably not hot either.
[Rogue]: can we go, teleios isn’t a girl they won’t show pic
[Nice Guy with Good Grammar]: Yeah, I don’t believe it either. Probably someone just fishing for free stuff. (Butts 2005)
The quotation above indicates the strong prejudices about the kinds of games women and girl players engage with as well as the themes of games and the game content they appreciate. Such attitudes emerge as female players construct their player identities while interacting with other players and peers in everyday contexts. As Stephen Kline et al. argue, “the moment of game-play is constructed by and embedded in much larger circuits – technological, cultural, and marketing – that in turn interact with one another within the system of information capital” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003, 270). These attitudes also ‘live’ in the minds of game designers, developers and those who are marketing computer games to end-users: in the game press, such as GameSpot and Edge, off- and online.

Simultaneously, those female players who follow the consensus in their consumer choices re-live these assumptions and strengthen them. And players who are willing to stand against this ideology of computer game play are considered marginal exceptions and either embraced as such (e.g. female Quake players in Kennedy 2006) or ignored altogether (cf. Bryce and Rutter 2002). But such assumptions and spoken attitudes are linked to a web of meaning making and statistical facts that are often lumped together as ‘games and gender’ problematics in general. What then forms the ‘vicious cycle’ of gendering certain games and gameplay activities is rarely broken down into its different levels and components.

Paul du Gay et al.’s model of the ‘circuit of culture’, which is based on a decades-long work by British cultural theorists (Champ 2008), helps to unpack this ‘vicious cycle’: the interconnections of the different aspects of gendering players, gameplay and games (du Gay et al. 1997). The authors suggest that the cultural meaning making of a cultural artifact encompasses five processes that work together in shaping the object. Representation, Identity, Production, Consumption and Regulation, as shown in the Figure 3.1, together define
3.1. Gendering Games, Gameplay and Players

what is known as a cultural artifact.

Figure 3.1: Circuit of culture (du Gay et al. 1997).

They all relate to each other and help to structure each other at different points in the cycle. While discussing women players, we then need to acknowledge that a game 1) is represented in various forms such as in game marketing and media, 2) offers meanings that offer a basis for constructing player identities, 3) is produced under specific design, development and manufacturing contexts and by people with specific kinds of cultural capital and education, 4) becomes experienced and used in a particular process of consumption\(^1\), and, finally, 5) is regulated as a certain kind of leisure object whose typical use takes place in a specific time and space.

Based on these elements of the circuit of culture we can understand that the gendering of games, players and gameplay works at different levels and sites that are nevertheless connected to each other. The circuit of culture involved in the gendering of computer games, players and gameplay includes factors such as male-dominated development cultures, representations of gamers as male, marketing games for men and based on masculine desires, game play-

\(^1\)This includes ‘decoding’ (Hall 1973).
ers constituting a majority of men and players’ gendered player identities. These aspects all work together and inform each other. Thus what happens in practice is that when gameplay is represented as masculine in popular media, women do not see it as an appropriate hobby and play less. And since game development hires people who themselves are keen players, this leads to a situation where women are less likely to become game designers. As a result, the lack of women in game development affects public understanding of games and their marketing as well as impacts upon the contents of games. Finally, the circle is closed when the game development industry produces games that are masculine due to their male-dominated design teams.

While such a caricature works only in drawing a raw picture of how gender works in relation to games, I will now look at these aspects of gendering games, gameplay and players in more detail loosely following the five elements of the circuit of culture: Representation, Identity, Production, Consumption and Regulation. Thus, the benefit of du Gay’s model for this argument is that it shows how the gendering of computer games emerges from a multitude of interconnected sources. Some limitations to the use of this model will discussed in the last section of this chapter.

3.1.1 Representation: Games Are Marketed for Men

Male-dominated game development and marketing for men, “[a]long gender lines, and with the male dominance in high-tech activities, has (at least until very recently) relentlessly constructed the game-playing subject as male” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003, 257). Cultural representations of ‘players’ and ‘gamers’ assume a male actor in the first instance. One participant of this study notes the importance of game magazines in this regard and suggests the discursive exclusion of women players.
Simmer1: Women players are left (I guess unconsciously, not that they [game magazine editors] would do it knowingly and relentlessly) to the margins [of potential readers]

It is indeed the case that in the articles of the biggest Finnish game magazine, Pelit (English: ‘Games’), male players are addressed in a comradely heteronormative fashion. A male journalist writes about ‘us guys’ and talks about the attractive figures of female game characters. By so doing the magazine in question not only gains an economic disadvantage among potential female audiences but also alienates female readers and contributes to constructing playerhood as masculine. The continuing dominance of men in the games world secures the male consumer because the female consumer is constructed in marginalised, highly specific terms – a situation already common in other forms of leisure such as sport and popular music. The Finnish game magazine in question is not an exception in this regard, but gendering of play and addressing players as males is a common practice worldwide (e.g. Chess 2009).

The game press has got an important role in bringing together like-minded players, in manufacturing a sense of community among these players (Newman 2008, 29). These magazines have powerfully encouraged players to appreciate their preferred media despite a broader cultural consensus considering games as waste of time (Newman 2008). Fighting against such strong negative stereotypes has usually lead to emphasising a set of ‘valuable’ skills demanded and advanced by gameplay, such as strategic skills and understanding of mathematical complexity. Games are made to look more ‘mature’ form of leisure by fetishising technical qualities such as high definition graphics. Also the gloating over sexual content often seen in game magazines could be read as a defensive act against the infantilised and desexualised geek image (e.g. Jenkins 1997). Players whose masculinity and sexuality is downplayed by the identity of a geek can perhaps emphasise such aspects of themselves
through consuming imagery with excessive sexual thematics.

This tendency to emphasise certain (masculine) aspects of games over other (feminine) content thus defines a very clear and limited target audience that leaves out players who find the suggested aspects of games irrelevant. Through appreciating specific qualities of games and gameplay, game magazines therefore exclude players with different interests from the constructed community.

Game magazines, books about video games, web forums and player communities also build up the canon of games. In such texts, women are represented through the introduction of ‘pink games’ (e.g. Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Kafai et al. 2008 passim) and thus as a marginal segment within a larger player culture. Fron et al. suggest that the dominant canon of games is “aided and abetted by a publication and advertising infrastructure, characterized by game review magazines, television programming and advertising that valorizes certain types of games, while it marginalizes those that do not fit the ‘hard-core gamer’ demographic. These attitudes prevail, in spite of the fact that inclusiveness has produced some of the best-selling games in history, such as Pac-Man, Myst, and The Sims” (Fron et al. 2007, 309).

Shira Chess (2009) has approached this creation of player communities from the point of view of game advertisements and gender. She suggests that such advertising builds on strong stereotypes and creates false differentiation between players. “By naturally equating video game play to masculinity, the advertisements [...] create a different status for masculine and feminine players. Masculinity, thus, maintains a ruling status in the gaming industry while femininity is necessarily marginalized” (Chess 2009, 76).

Some scholarship has engaged in understanding how current marketing strategies alienate potential women players. For example, Gareth R. Schott’s and Siobhan Thomas’s (2008) study concentrated on the launch of Nintendo
GameBoy Advance SP in 2003 and consisted of focus-group sessions with students aged 17-19 as well as females in their thirties in and around London. The marketing campaign for Nintendo GameBoy Advance SP included a central male-orientation: the tagline for the new handheld console stood ‘For men’. When the focus-groups were asked to discuss the console, women expressed their enjoyment over the product. But once they learned the game console was deemed to be for ‘men only’ they felt excluded and frustrated.

The female gaming community may inhabit a presence both on-line and in educational contexts, but findings showed that media advertising appears to occupy a much greater influence, so much so that it had an ability to dampen the intrigue of potential consumers. Despite the advances being made in this area of gaming culture, the public face of gaming continues to be male-dominated which act to exclude female gamers thus reinforcing the notion that they exhibit little interest in games and game culture. The reality of this study demonstrated that the hand-held device, Game Boy Advance SP, was perceived by a female sample as a gender-neutral design that offered good tactile and aesthetic qualities as well as an intuitive interface. It was the gender-specific advertisement strategy employed by Nintendo that served to undermine their potential endorsement of the product (even retrospectively). (Schott and Thomas 2008, 51)

Meanwhile, Aphra Kerr (2003) fairly acknowledges that gender inclusive advertising is not straightforward. In her study, Kerr explored how the intentional ‘gender-neutrality’ in the advertisements of Sony PlayStation 2 affected on the consumer demographics. Kerr found out that despite the ‘good’ intentions, the advertisements were marketed at already established gamers, not to those with only little or no prior experience from games. With women largely occupying the non-expert player groups, the campaign therefore did not result in the intended change in the gender demographics.

Furthermore, game press and marketing do not exist in separation from the culture in large and its meanings. In her doctoral dissertation on women players and productivity as represented in game advertising and in the games themselves, Chess suggests that “gender, advertising, and ideologies of play are
all part of an inseparable and symbiotic relationship, where advertising very often reinforces and reaffirms gender roles and stereotypes already a part of dominant ideologies. Advertisements help to reinforce normative gender roles already present in the video game industry and culture” (Chess 2009, 50). Chess examined the frequency of women in game advertisements, their roles in them as well as how women were positioned and presented as audiences. She suggests that the game advertisement studied represented female characters in sexualised and submissive roles. Her study also indicates that the advertisements contribute to female marginalisation since the texts explicitly address male players.

3.1.2 Player Identity: Games and Gameplay Are Masculine

As we can see from the representations offered by game advertising and marketing, playerhood is a masculinised discourse. But such discourse spreads much wider in the cultures of gaming and non-gaming (e.g. Bryce and Rutter 2002). Consequently, it results in that playing computer games does not appear as an appealing hobby for women, because they do not find comfortable starting points for constructing their identities within that discourse.

A recent example of the gendering of gameplay as masculine is a launched service that allows lonely men to play with ‘hot’ player girls. The service clearly suggests that the assumed player, at least in regard to certain genres, is a male.

What if you could pay a bit of cash to play Modern Warfare with an attractive girl? Or maybe relax with a casual game of checkers while you video chat with said female? A new social service launching tomorrow, March 23, called GameCrush (www.GameCrush.com) is hoping there are gamers out there willing to pay for the opportunity to play with girls.

On GameCrush, guys are Players and girls are PlayDates. Players pay to play and PlayDates get paid to play. Guys can browse PlayDate
profiles (there are currently around 1,200), view photos, and even chat with girls for free.

[...]

After a session you can rate your PlayDate on her hotness, gaming skill, and flirtiness.

Such representations of a player not only alienate women but also construct a cultural understanding of what a player is. The female player is represented in a serving role, as someone whose play is entirely in the service of the male player’s pleasure – a role similar to a geisha or a courtesan. Comparison with the earlier example of a player who was claimed to be ugly because she was simultaneously a good player and a female as discussed in the beginning of this chapter is interesting here. In the case of PlayDate players, the play of these assumed attractive female players becomes accepted when it is not for their own, but for the male player’s pleasure. These female players are not ‘real’ players, but their expertise becomes naturalised as part of their servicing roles.

Jessica Enevold’s and Charlotte Hagström’s ongoing research project on player mothers suggests about a tendency that women avoid labeling themselves players as well as disguise their play (e.g. Enevold 2009), possibly because of the mismatch of the discourses around motherhood and playerhood. Another study by Q Interactive and Engage Expo offers statistics on women playing social games, i.e. games on social networking services, and suggests that while 54% of players are female, only 42% of them consider themselves ‘gamers’ (Reisinger 2010). Both studies further discuss how women hide their play from their families and friends since they do not comfortably inhabit an identity of a player. They consider their other identities, as women and mothers for instance, more important. Meanwhile, Jenson’s and de Castell’s (2008) extensive interviews hint that it can also be the case that the notion of a ‘game’ is so fixed to certain types of games that the games they play do not fit into
their understanding of what a game is. Such situation also calls for sensitivity from the researchers: right kind of methods offer more accurate information.

It has often been the case, for example, when we interviewed girls about their gameplaying that most of them name a few titles, sometimes not accurately, and then indicate that they “play” but they do not always get to choose the game. Interestingly, in one focus group interview, after going round the table and naming games, one girl asked if computer games “counted” and the researcher responded “Yes” to which everyone replied by talking at once and naming off their favorite, free, online games. So, in one way, we had initially asked the wrong question, or they had perceived it as a question simply about console gameplay. (Jenson and de Castell 2008, n.p.)

Also my personal experience has shown numerous times that women who in the first instance deny playing any games later refer to their play with Solitaire (1990) and other games that come pre-installed with Microsoft Windows operating system. When asked specifically, these women admit they indeed play games, often on an everyday basis.

Later in this study (See Section 5.2) I will discuss how the players interviewed for this work negotiate their female player identities avoiding relying on the discourses of mindless time consumption. Also among them there are players who despite their frequent gameplay habits and do not see themselves as players proper.2

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2Some cultural difference exists between the terms ‘player’ and ‘gamer’, especially among established players. Gamer often refers to a more ‘hard-core’ commitment to playing, whereas the use of the term player is more casual and general. However, this differentiation is not important here for two reasons. First, having two words for a player exists primarily among English speaking communities (cf. Enevold 2009 that is conducted in Swedish and my study that was conducted in Finnish). Second, non-established players are often unaware of the nuanced meanings of these words and their talk cannot therefore be approached with an assumption of such meanings.
3.1. Gendering Games, Gameplay and Players

3.1.3 Playing Identity: Games and Gameplay Are Masculine

In earlier studies, numerous characteristics of games have been suggested either as appealing or as off-putting for girls and women players. Not much difference has been drawn between adult and child players in these studies and the female gender is often grouped together and discussed as a whole as if it was a source for a singular cohesive identity. However, from these studies we can see that in addition to cultural discourses around games as masculine, the actual game objects themselves bear qualities that could be labeled ‘masculine’ and therefore contribute to the overall labeling of gameplay and game cultures as masculine.

One of the best studied areas in the field of games and gender is game character representations. This accounts to the points of identification offered through game characters and the like. Studies by Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter (2002), Tracy L. Dietz (1998) and Patricia M. Greenfield (1994) suggest that female characters in games, as in the adverts, are often under-represented, sexualised and in submissive roles. Such “research has demonstrated that female game characters are routinely represented in a narrowly stereotypical manner; for example, as princesses or wise old women in fantasy games, as objects waiting on male rescue, or as fethised subjects of the male gaze in first person shooters” (Bryce and Rutter 2002, 246). It is understandable that the games drawing on fairy tales and traditional fantasy narratives bring along their archetypal characters. However, it seems that the modern games that could expand their character repertoire lack female protagonists and powerful female characters that are made to appeal to women players instead of men, too.

Already in 1991, Eugene Provenzo’s study suggested that most main characters and most of the video game characters in general were males (Provenzo
Such a starting point affects upon women’s interest in games and their possibilities for constructing player identities as well as in-game identities. It has been proposed that stronger female characters should be introduced in computer games (e.g. Edge 2003).

When computer games are considered to be a masculine medium, female characters can be seen as a possible entry point for girls into them (e.g. Grimes 2003). Some studies suggest that girls are disturbed by representations of stereotypical females that follow masculine fantasies (e.g. Haines 2004). The lack of ‘normal’ female characters is especially striking in violent games, where women are rarely represented in powerful, meaningful roles, i.e. having violent agency, unless they are also represented as sexually titillating. However, especially role-playing games today include detailed character customization and therefore allow players to create their own playable characters at least.

Violence as a broader thematical characteristic of games is understood as masculine, too. Schott and Kirsty R. Horrell’s (2000) ethnographic study suggests that where female players recognise some types of games as masculine and some types as feminine, violence belongs to the first category. Jeffrey Goldstein (1994), Peter Nikken (2000) and Christine Ward Gailey (1993), among others, suggest that women and girls do not like such content in games. According to Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (1998), violence is a major factor in turning girls off from games. But while Laura Ermi et al. (2004) encourage, conversely, us to look for differences in the ways in which violence can be present in games, some scholars remind us of those women who do like violent game activities (e.g. Taylor 2003). In general, violence has been understood as a broad concept and rarely explained in terms of who, in a game, executes violent activity, how is violence represented in terms of game graphics, what are the differences between physical and mental violence, how much of concentration in the game is drawn into the consequences and results
of violence, and so forth. Based on a monolithic idea of violence, it is hardly beneficial for group games or game content between violent and non-violent.

Suggesting the lack of violence as a feminine preference is therefore a very complicated issue. Whereas Jenson and de Castell (2008) have profoundly argued against such essentialising notions of ‘female-friendly game characteristics’ and suggest deeper analysis on what we mean by concepts such as ‘violence’ in games, these elements have the power to discursively construct certain games and gametypes masculine despite the fact that many women do like them. Attempts to find out ‘what women want’ in games inevitably leads to suggesting too straightforward and generalising conclusions. However, it is a different thing to discuss how the discourse around violence in our culture contributes to understanding certain games as masculine and how this might lead to a lesser amount of women playing them. ‘Violent’ games can be put into a broader cultural context in which ‘masculine’ genres are normalised and include some female participants, but the pleasure in violent fantasies is acceptable for men but taboo for women. Constructing an identity as a female player of such games involves negotiating the norms of femininity.

3.1.4 Production: Games Are Made by Men

A friend of mine once told me about her male co-designer who refused to create female characters that he did not personally find attractive. Common-sensically, men who are usually keen players themselves design games that they themselves find fascinating. Such experience also demonstrates how the sexualised female character is an industry default and does not require justification. Several studies indeed suggest that the genres, mechanics and content of games, despite years of criticism and encouragement from feminist game scholars and wider knowledge about female players, are still designed primarily with young males in mind (Heeter and Winn 2008, Consalvo 2008, Fullerton et al. 2008,
Today, only 17% of the workforce in the games industry in the UK is female, as demonstrated by Lizzie Haines’ (2004) report of women in the games industry from September 2004\(^3\) (cf. Dovey and Kennedy 2007). Only 2% of programmers and 5% of game designers are women. Most women in the industry are actually in less-paid administrative roles. Thus, it remains a fact that games are designed by a huge majority of men in the industry, although measures are taken to recruit more women.

A concern on this matter has been expressed in the articles of a recent anthology on women and games, *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (2008), which explores the ways in which the male domination of the games industry affects on the design of games as well as how such state of affairs could be abolished. Although it is the game publisher and the investors who decide on the kinds of games that are published, it has been suggested that a more diverse workforce in games industry could actually result in games that women enjoy more (Consalvo 2008).

The games industry, while offering careers that are based on knowledge on information technology, is affected by the challenges that IT related fields have in terms of gender. Only a marginal number of women seek their ways towards the required education on IT (e.g. Margolis and Fisher 2002). While women might have played a bigger role in IT professions at the beginning before such work was professionalized (Plant 1998), IT has been re-imagined as a skilled male-based career rather than a functional female-based servicing activity.

Science and engineering are nowadays male-dominated lines of education and the lack of women in these has a direct impact on the amount of women

\(^3\)Very similar results are provided by International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in their report from 2005 (IGDA 2005). Unfortunately more recent numbers are not made available to date.
3.1. Gendering Games, Gameplay and Players

going into the games industry. Judy Wajcman writes that “women still face considerable barriers when they attempt to pursue a professional or managerial career in technoscience”, since “entering technical domains [...] requires women to sacrifice major aspects of their gender identity” (Wajcman 2004, 110, 112). According to her, such professions start to appear more attractive to women when they can access them without “co-option into a world of patriarchal values and behavior” (Wajcman 2004, 112).

Marc J. Natale (2002) suggests that the low number of women in the computer industry is, in fact, partly a result of the gendering of computer gaming cultures as masculine, since women often lack this easy way of getting introduced to technology. Games development is also based on enthusiast players. Tracy Fullerton et al. (2008) suggest that one reason for the lack of women in game design originates from the ways in which game development hires new talents. “Currently, the primary path of entry to the games industry is to take a junior position as a game tester, a job that requires being a ‘hard-core gamer’, thus ruling out most women” (Fullerton et al. 2008, 169). This is because the kinds of games that allow the assumed kind of ‘hard-core gaming’ are mostly played by men.4 Furthermore, the games industry alienates women due the sexism they face and because of difficult working hours which make it impossible to meet the expectations of conventional motherhood as a game designer (Consalvo 2008). The male-dominated industry therefore delivers games that lack the perspectives women could offer and add into the games if they were taking part in the design of them.

4Recent casual gaming trend and the associated introduction of female gamer masses to online gaming must have an impact on the development of game design cultures as well. Currently, however, data on such changes is not available.
3.1.5 Consumption: Game Players Are Men

The underlying assumptions which continue to shape the way the industry imagines and produces games also inform the way in which players are represented as well as the lived culture of play. Game cultures have traditionally consisted of various practices that are considered masculine. Many of them are a direct result from the contents of games such as concentration on highs cores, competition, war, men’s sports and mastery. Not until very recently, through the introduction of online casual games and relatively novel gaming platforms, such as Nintendo Wii, have these thematics been forcefully challenged by new concepts.

However, the actual player demographics do not entirely support the idea of gameplay being a masculine pastime. While in the UK approximately 45% of all gamers are female (Harris 2005), more women than men in the 25-34 age group play electronic games in the USA (Mindlin 2006). According to Entertainment Software Association (ESA 2010), the division between men and women is 40% versus 60%. In the practice of play it is the technology that makes a difference, though. While computer game play, involving some technical skills in installing and running games, is mainly occupied by men, relatively recent consoles such as Nintendo DS as well as online games are popular among women. It is thus that the dominant concept of gamer often refers to those playing on a computer or expensive consoles while other play activities are more ‘casual’ and do not create ‘players’ or ‘gamers’. A hierarchy of games is constructed around what men do and how they play.

Introduction to the games also plays an important role in getting women into games. Since women do not have the same mechanics of being introduced to games due to their circles of friends as men do, they do not benefit from the knowledge of more experienced players. Sharing knowledge among peers is an important factor in learning about a game. Therefore, as Taylor (2008, 63)
3.1. Gendering Games, Gameplay and Players

suggests, “what often looks like a ‘women gamers’ problem is very regularly a ‘newbie’ issue”. The kind of knowledge, such as genre conventions, that new players do not posses, are often those that complicate women’s access to games. A player interviewed for this study tells about the happy experience of being introduction to the game through a friend.

Simmer3: My path with the sims started by watching as well, one of my friends happened to play so that I saw it and we ended up playing one whole summer all through the nights, listening to (I can’t remember the name) ‘Maijaahii, maijaahaa, maijaahuu, maijahahaa....’ [Dragostea din tei by O-Zone], downloading and my friend was repeating ‘Retro! Retro!’. I have a very warm memory of that summer :)

When women are not introduced to games through their friends, they are less likely to start playing. But the recent social games in Facebook, for instance, have proven this right because they have quickly become very popular among women. Wall posts related to games are visible by friends and offer an easy introduction to games. They also help in creating a sense of community where such playing is acceptable and ‘normal’. Such games have recently been suggested to be even more popular among women than men (Nations 2010).

3.1.6 Regulation: Games Are for Men

If we think about how the use of games is regulated, this thesis as a whole sets out a context in which women players attempt to claim gameplay leisure time for themselves in a culture that links games to men and masculinity. This cultural regulation of to whom gameplay is accepted and appropriate results in some women finding it difficult to become players and spend their time playing (See Section 5.2).

Thinking about children, then, games are forcefully regulated by parents, who have an enormous impact upon the use of them. A fifteen-year-old player and a participant of this study describes the influence of parents and
media in an educated way. However, her view channels a broader cultural discourse around an ‘appropriate childhood’ to mere parental care and assumes parents as powerful educators in ideology. Furthermore, the comment also assumes that it is the mothers (not fathers or the wider society) who bear the responsibility for socialising children into gender roles. Such view exemplifies the aforementioned discourse of women’s working, instead of leisured, role at home which again limits their own access to gameplay.

**Simmer12:** If mothers wouldn’t teach their kids to be girls by buying them Barbie dolls (which is because media and because their mothers have bought dolls for them. And because media has shown that one should buy dolls for girls.), but bought them trucks, the result would surely be different. But it is hard to say :D

While not exclusively, parents arguably have an influence on what is being played by children. Such influence is probably better grasped through the ways in which parents practically limit and afford time and technology for gameplay activities. In addition to parents’ support and encouragement, access to computer technology is an important factor in regulating gameplay. Some studies suggest that in family settings computers are more often bought for boys than for girls (Suoninen 2003, 57). Gameplay is regulated by parents who not only encourage certain kind of leisure activities but also provide equipment for them.

### 3.2 Gendering and ‘Othering’ The Sims 2

The previous section offered an overview of the ways in which games are gendered in our culture. I suggested that male-dominated game development,

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5Questions of gender and technology and technology as masculinised domain have been discussed among various research traditions. For an introduction of approaching these from the perspective of game culture has been proposed, for example, by Dovey and Kennedy (2007, cf. Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Kafai et al. 2008).

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3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

marketing towards masculine audiences and discourses around games as masculine in general lead to new prejudices that label the entire field of leisure as masculine and limit women’s interest in entering these cultures. This was necessary in order for me to establish the basis of woman players’ identity construction.

In this section I will move on analysing the object of my study, women players’ identities that are constructed through co-creativity of *The Sims 2* game, where it is informed and shaped by this particular game. Keeping in mind the ways in which games, gameplay and players are gendered as suggested in the previous section, I will look at *The Sims 2* and its peculiar popularity among women. The following will discuss what are the cultural circumstances within which women identify themselves as *The Sims 2* players and what might be its consequences for identifying as a computer game player in general. I am going to discuss how the mechanisms and processes of gendering, as suggested earlier, take place in regard to *The Sims* games and what are the implications of this gendering to the identities of the players of the game. Such discussion also explores what it is in the game that invites skinning.

Resulting from the ‘circuit of game culture’, the meaningful game-related cultures that are involved in this process of gendering are game journalism, game development, game marketing, game players in general, *The Sims* players, players’ peers, and players’ families. Thus, alongside the interview material collected with eleven Finnish, one Danish and one Canadian *The Sims 2* player, I examine four international and two Finnish reviews of *The Sims 2* game as discussed in Section 2.3.3. The two Finnish reviews are from two leading game magazines in Finland, *Pelaaja* and *Pelit*. The four international reviews are from four leading online gaming sites *EuroGamer*[^6], *GameSpot*[^7],

[^6]: http://www.eurogamer.net
[^7]: http://www.gamespot.com
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*GameZone* and *GamesRadar*. *GamesRadar*’s review is in two parts by two authors (Edge 2006, Stapleton 2006), but will be discussed as one single review. I will also include examples of gaming and other online fora that powerfully address these issues as well as looking at the ways in which game development and marketing have framed *The Sims*.

Arguably, *The Sims* games form a somewhat isolated island of both game content and game players within a larger culture of PC gaming. It initiated the creation of new kinds of player demographies and presented a mass-marketed alternative to the masculine canon of such games. Yet it remains a game that is not part of the privileged culture but, even if mainstream and popular, always also the ‘othered’ one (See Section 3.2.1). But what are the reasons for this? And where has this uniqueness lead in terms of the game’s status within game culture? What does it mean for an individual game to stand out in such a specific way?

While this thesis concentrates on players of *The Sims 2* and the structure of this first sequel of *The Sims* game, much of what will be discussed next concerns *The Sims* games more broadly. The three instalments of the game series share very similar features and the theme of everyday life as well as, at least to some extent, a structural openness. Meanwhile, the players interviewed for this study often do not distinguish between the two Sims games in their accounts.¹⁰

In the following, I am not suggesting that every single quality of *The Sims* has something to do with the ways in which the participants of this

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⁸http://www.gamezone.com
⁹http://www.gamesradar.com
¹⁰Given that there are no articles in Finnish grammar, the players (as well as game reviewers) often leave the definite article out and talk about ‘Sims’ although it is not the official name of the translated game. Many players also write ‘sims’ with a lowercase first letter in which cases I have made the correction in translation to make the name of the game visible within the quotes.
study understand their player identities in relation to gender. However, it appears fruitful to discuss for example the unique structural and mechanical aspects of *The Sims* in regard to questions of ‘marginal’ and ‘other’, because these positions have largely been occupied by femininity while focal aspects of games, game players and game cultures have been characterised by masculinity. When it comes to *The Sims*, its exceptional status simultaneously as the best-selling computer game and as a game with novel perspective towards gaming seem to be linked to questions of gender. I intend to show that an analysis of the supposed target group, designer demographics, player demographics, marketing strategies, game reviews, and game content leads to the analysis of a ‘gendering’ taking place in game cultures.

### 3.2.1 A Unique and Exceptional Game

I have briefly introduced *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* as well as their success in the first chapter of this work. To summarise, *The Sims* games have have long been among the few computer games that have been popular among women as well as the most popular computer game series in general. *The Sims* game series is played in dozens of countries and has been available for ten years already, and more women than men play the game. It is both the game content directly and the game content indirectly, through the expectations of the surrounding culture, that has affected on *The Sims* games’ popularity. Nonetheless, it appears culturally more acceptable for girls and women to play *The Sims* games than many canonical computer games.

Writing in 2008, but reflecting the hopes of feminist Game Studies at the end of 1990s, Cornelia Brunner proposes that “The Sims 2, which provides almost all the features and narratives we were asking for ten years ago, validates
our call from a decade ago for gender-neutral games” (Brunner 2008, 33).\footnote{11While many scholars tend to speak about the gender-neutrality of games, when it comes to The Sims, all the aspects of non-canonical content seem to be transformed into feminine instead of neutral. It is often the case indeed that ‘neutral’ is created from the masculine by adding some ‘feminine’ qualities instead of starting from a scratch.}

*The Sims* games include all the features that feminist game scholars were hoping for ten years ago. For example, as discussed in Section 3.1.3, various studies claim that girls show preference to games without aggressive themes and to the lack of violence in general. *The Sims 2* includes some possibility for conducting verbal and even physical violence, but violence in general is not central to its gameplay and it is possible to maintain play that does not include violence.\footnote{12Given the game’s representation simulation of Northern American suburban lifestyle it might actually be surprising that there are no guns in the game.}

Furthermore, whereas objectifying and hyper-sexualised game characters have previously been a stated problem of many games, *The Sims 2* does differentiate genders in terms of clothing but could still be considered non-sexist in terms of character representations. However, the game has a strong set of ideological assumptions built into various aspects of the simulation. These include the range of careers available and the relative values ascribed to them. For example, Daniel Baker (2004) found that the ‘Science’ career managed to balance the highest salary compared to free time because the so-called ‘Mad Scientist’ works only four hours a day. This in itself reflects certain assumptions about the nature of scientific work as a matter of inspired genius rather than applied effort. Whereas some of the salary rates may have real life counterparts, *The Sims 2* is to some degree more advanced in regard to gender equality. Miguel Sicart’s study that relies on his own play experience suggests that in “The Sims there is no discrimination according to sex in terms of salaries. As long as you follow the pre-established ways of being happy in the game, and you have the
patience and the gaming skills to succeed, all sims are treated in the same way. Same salaries, same job opportunities, same concept of success” (Sicart 2003). However, the different career paths form a hierarchy in which certain work is valued higher than other. Such system of preferred careers emphasises masculine work and virtues, such as being a ‘Captain Hero’, a ‘Criminal Mastermind’, a ‘Celebrity Chef’ or a ‘Business Tycoon’, and is based on American cultural status of specific professions. The top jobs are mostly those considered masculine and that pay best in the ‘Western’ economical context. Nevertheless they appear desirable since they not only offer better pay but also lead to other benefits such as more days off and shorter working hours. The gender pay gaps of the real world are largely transferred into the game.

In terms of gameplay, the game offers an equal opportunity to play with female and male characters and equal representations of female and male characters in regard to the game’s main themes such as repairing electrical objects or succeeding in and being paid of work. Anne-Mette Albrechtslund suggests that “gender seems to be treated without differentiating between the two sexes in The Sims 2” giving an interesting example: “[i]f two women make ‘WooHoo’, one of them can even become pregnant a feature that is not only progressive, but impossible in the natural world” (Albrechtslund 2007). The Sims characters seem to embody biology different from humans, which adds a fantasy feature into the game.

Arguably, The Sims games offer very little possibilities for conducting (physical) violence and the array of female characters is equal to that of males. However, neither the reviews nor the interviewees emphasise these aspects. Non-violent gameplay is mentioned in one review and by two interviewees. One of the players interviewed for this study associates shooting with fast paced action without clearly suggesting it would be the violence she does not like. A fourteen-year-old player describes the game based on what it does not
include – features she might find familiar from other games.

Simmer5: Sims games are calm enough for my taste, I don’t like shooting at all. For example there are no war sequences or battle sequences, the smallest [sic] dreads [in The Sims] are merely the Grim Reaper, the UFOs, the vampires etc.

An older player is able to address the lack of violence and sexist game characters in terms of gender.

Simmer3: What appeals to me, as a female, in [Sims] games is their ‘gentleness’, there is no horrid shooting and pieces of intestines and half-naked women with big boobs in them.

The interview participants are aware of the game’s success among female players and of their male friends’ opinions about it.

Simmer5: I guess girls play Sims more [than boys], and many of my male friends have been complaining that all the girls are always playing Sims.

Simmer6: I guess the majority of Sims players are girls.

A similar comment is offered by a player who, like many of the participants, proposes that the game is suitable for everybody, but cannot recall any male players. The player suggests that boys prefer ‘bloody and logical’ games instead.

Simmer10: Boys always play something bloody, as well as logical. I read an article where they told how boys are steeped in war games and how they play. I don’t remember anything else from the article right now. I guess The Sims is more like a girls’ game. At least I don’t know any boys who would play it, except my cousin who doesn’t own The Sims but sometimes plays it with me at my place.

Another player discusses the game as an exception in the broader game culture.
3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

**Simmer13:** While I like to think that all games are for everybody, and that there isn’t a certain type of game for females and a certain type of game for males, I think, in reality most other video games are marketed for young males (or children). As far as games for older teenage girls, and women, *The Sims* is the only game that I can think that’s marketed towards that demographic. For lack of a better word, it’s ‘cute’. It’s not the type of game men stereotypically would play. There are some that play *The Sims*, but they’re definitely a minority.

An obvious way to approach the background for such design decisions is to look at the production of the game. The reason for the inclusion of these ‘feminine’ characteristics may have to do with the designer demographics of the game as an exceptional number of female designers were included in the game’s development via an assumption that women are more able to design games for women. The contribution of female designers in *The Sims* is significant compared to other games: 40% of women in *The Sims* production (Hill 2004) and 17% in games development in general (Haines 2004). ‘Father of *The Sims* games’, Will Wright, has suggested that designers were able to appeal to such a huge female audience by having large number of women involved in the development of the game (Hill 2004). There nevertheless only exists a ‘father’ for the game, no ‘mother’.

Whether as a result of the inclusion of female designers or not, *The Sims* games took a big step outside the existing model of computer games and did something very new. This led to huge success. Without exception, game reviews note its exceptional popularity. Many of them also suggest that this success was unforeseen and discuss the exceptionally broad audience of the game and describe how new player groups are introduced to gaming through *The Sims* games. One of the two major game magazines in Finland, *Pelaaja*, offers a rather neutral observation about the success of *The Sims 2*.

**Pelaaja:** Following little human characters and interacting with them appealed to an exceptionally broad audience. (Kauppinen 2004)
Meanwhile, *Pelaaja*’s biggest competitor, *Pelit*, writes dismissively that *The Sims 2* is a ‘cliched must-buy for those interested in dollhouse play, voyeurism and social relationships’ (Sillanpää 2004) suggesting that there is nothing novel in the sequel of the game. The extract also proposes the game as a ‘must-buy’ consumer product the buying of which does not signal any critical understanding of the products available or particular personal affection for the game. Reviews from *GameZone* and *GameSpot*, two gaming websites with hundreds of reviewers, accompany on this.

**GameSpot:** [The Sims 2] is recommendable to just about anyone. (Park 2004)

**GameZone:** And the reason I made the distinction between ‘people’ and the usual stereotypes attached to computer gamers, is because The Sims is one of those rare, once in a dozen generations, type of games that transcends the culture lines between the masses and the gamers. The Sims, probably more so than any game since Pac-Man, has brought the non-gamer to the world gamers in massive, wonderful droves. (Jkdmedia 2004)

One reviewer uses the rhetoric of a typical computer gamer who does not appreciate *The Sims* very much, but nevertheless might be seduced by it. In the beginning of the review he writes about how he hesitates playing the game at all.

**EuroGamer:** Surely someone who plays games for a living should at least have played one of the best sellers of all time? Burying your head in the sand and saying “this just isn’t my thing” is all well and good when you’re a consumer; but as a professional that earns money from having opinions? You can’t really get away with that attitude – not on a game of this cultural significance at least. (Reed 2004)

Later he ends the review with the same tone, yet offering the possibility he might enjoy the game because of its numerous expansions that keep the game interesting by offering new content.
3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims* 2

**EuroGamer:** We wouldn’t hesitate to recommend it to those that have so far resisted its charms, and for the real fans it’ll be a dream come true, but whether we’ll stick with it is another matter. Ask us when the inevitable expansion hits... (Reed 2004)

Interestingly enough, these new player groups are not referred to as female or proposed as such. It might be that when these new players are not explicitly gendered, it is easier to speak about them in a dismissive manner. Nevertheless, the reader usually knows (as does the writer) that the game is already understood as feminine in many regards given, for instance, the doll-house comparison (See Section 3.2.3). Such writings exemplify how, despite the success and novelty of *The Sims* games, they have not been openly acknowledged within the community of gamers. In 2008, an article on *EuroGamer* website concentrated on the history of the game and started with questioning the tendency not to recognise the importance of *The Sims* in game cultures summarising both the gendering and devaluing of the game – with an ironic rather than critical tone, however.

Whenever talk turns to the games that have truly broken out of the games ghetto and impacted the world outside, many within our introspective hobbyist sphere seem curiously reluctant to give The Sims its due. The attention instead shifts towards the likes of Halo, and their impressive but carefully presented statistical first-weekend sales victories. Inevitably, this bias is because games like Halo are about dudes in cool armour totally shooting aliens to death, while The Sims is about relationships and choosing furniture and is for stupid gurlz and therefore not a proper game. (Whitehead 2008, n.p.)

These reviews remind of the modernist dichotomy between (masculine) art and (feminine) mass culture when describing these new audiences and build towards reading the game as mass culture. Consequently, it offers a player identity of ‘anyone’, not an enthusiast gamer. In the dominant dichotomy “mass culture appears as monolithic, engulfing, totalitarian, and on the side of regression and the feminine [...] and modernism [and modernist art] appears as progressive, dynamic, and indicative of male superiority in culture” (Huysсен
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1986, 58). Whereas *GameSpot*’s ‘just about anyone’ refers to new players as ‘any’ people dismissing the individual players’ pleasures, interests, knowledge and skill, *GameZone* uses a stronger term ‘masses’ as opposite to ‘gamers’ which, again, emphasises the little attention paid on an individual and her knowledge and skills, for instance. These new players are proposed as a mass or any people, not as keen and enthusiast gamers not to mention skillful players who might even have an impact on the industry or the games they play as individuals. As Andreas Huyssen summarises, the division between inferior mass culture and superior modernist art remains a powerful tool in everyday discourse. Such positioning is not only cumbersome in regard to the topic of this thesis, but also affects on the players of the game that is so labeled.

An answer from one player hints about the mass culture/art dichotomy while suggesting the captivating quality of the game.

**Simmer12:** Sims is so much more than other games. It is more ‘heady’.

Huyssen suggests that “[t]he lure of mass culture, after all, has traditionally been described as the threat of losing oneself in dreams and delusions and of merely consuming rather than producing” (Huyssen 1986, 55). *GameZone*’s review culminates to this seduction aspect in its last sentences.

**GameZone:** For the small minority that haven’t allowed themselves the pleasure of playing this game’s predecessor, I dare you to give this one a chance and you’ll no doubt see what the craze is all about. Just be sure to temper any plans you might have had for that free time. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. (Jkdmedia 2004)

In regard to the topic of this thesis, it is interesting how *The Sims* appears as a game that can be simultaneously for consuming and producing, heady and yet encourages creativity and innovation that presupposes a set of skills and competencies and wide knowledge over the game.
Whereas *The Sims* may appear especially female-friendly in its character selection and in terms of the form of action it offers, it is the relaxing, free and open form of play that appears much more often in the players’ talk. More than the actual thematical content, the players suggest uniqueness in regard to game form and structuring of gameplay. The players prefer creativity in action and this is tightly linked to the open form that allows them to contribute more than in a traditional computer game. Instead of concentrating on one single narrative or goal, the game offers various ways of enjoying it.

Game reviews celebrate the variety of options available with one accord.

**Pelit:** There is plenty to do and mess about, and every time you think you have seen all the old tricks, the little virtual people surprise you with an unexpected turn. [...] It would be insane to try to explore all aspects of such a broad game exhaustively in one review. (Sillanpää 2004)

**Pelaaja:** There is actually too much to do [...]. (Kauppinen 2004)

**GameSpot:** [...] there’s no denying that The Sims 2’s additions will give dedicated fans of the series plenty of stuff to do. (Park 2004)

**EuroGamer:** [...] there’s just an oceanic amount of things to do. (Reed 2004)

**GameZone:** Options, upon options. Possibilities, upon possibilities, this game never seems to get old. (Jkdmedia 2004)

**GamesRadar:** The range of options for providing for these needs, the actions the Sims can perform, the interactions that are possible, the careers that can be undertaken and the furnishings that can be purchased, make up a bewildering array of possibilities. (Edge 2006)

Meanwhile, *Pelit* magazine suggests the game will put off some of the potential players due to the lack of goals. The game often appears as a ‘rogue’ in the discussions of gameness due to its lack of clear goals and conclusion (See Section 3.3.1 on how this exclusion has been done in scholarly work.).
**Pelit:** The Sims is definitely a disappointment if one tries to play it like a traditional game and aiming for a goal. (Sillanpää 2004)

The myriad of options and attributes available in the game result in an open-ended form. Open-ended form assumes an absence of closure and freedom of play. It thus appears that it is the lack of some very typical elements of computer game play that is embraced in players’ talk.

**Simmer5:** [...] it is not really possible to complete the game.

**Simmer4:** I like Sims exactly because of the freedom, because you can do what you like to do, and you are not supposed to pass a level, the game kind of never ends.

**Simmer1:** When there is no restricted/restrictive narrative or closure encoded into the game, the gameplay is incredibly liberating, spontaneous and creative... This is what I personally respect (or what I am fan of, as ‘respecting’ sounds so official *laughs*) in Sims.

Shannon Copur, an associate producer at *Maxis*, has suggested that this kind of gameplay appeals to female players. “[T]he open-endedness of the [Sims] titles is a great attraction for women, as it allows individuals to play the games the way they want to without barriers” (Copur interviewed in Ray 2004, 162). Also Kerr (2003) proposes that the pleasures women players gain from seemingly masculine games\textsuperscript{13} originate from flexibility and freedom in regard to the possibilities of exploration. The open media form is also sometimes understood as feminine in the discussions of earlier forms of women’s popular media. I will therefore return to openendedness as a feminine genre convention in Section 3.3.2.

3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

Players and game reviews seem to agree on the exceptionality of *The Sims* (2). However, the participants of my study suggest that this special nature of *The Sims 2* as a feminine and borderline game is also the very quality that brings them to play. While the game press sometimes attempts to label it as a game for non-gamers and ‘masses’, the players who participated in this study propose this exceptionality in a merely positive light.\(^{14}\) For each of them, *The Sims 2* transformed the whole field of computer game playing into something more interesting by offering entirely different possibilities for participation. They highly appreciate the kind of gameplay *The Sims* offers contrast to other titles they know. However, the uniqueness of the game and its status in the game culture unquestionably sets a basis for a player identity that is different from the players of other games and special in some way (See Section 5.3.3).

**Simmer2**: The reason for my own interest towards Sims is that it differs so drastically from other games.

One player further links the free-formed play to creativity and self-expression.

**Simmer7**: Sims is indeed especially interesting because it allows you to create and express yourself as much as you want and as much as the machine can stand.

More specifically then, the freedom to express one’s own interests, dreams and fantasies is one side of the allowed free formed play.

\(^{14}\)Here this it is also important to notice that both the player participants and game reviews suggest *relative improvement*, not absolute goodness of *The Sims* games. *The Sims* games are not embraced as the best games ever, but simply much better or at least significantly different in relation to what has existed before. In fact, these players have little experience on other games an thus only little to compare with.
Simmer1: It is an integral part of the game that the narratives in 
Sims games are ‘customisable’. In Sims one does not only customise 
the software and game files but the game events and narratives and the 
narratives in the player-person’s head.

A similar comment from another player suggests that the game is enjoy-
able because of various ways to proceed.

Simmer10: The Sims is just a great game. There are so many options, 
and you can do whatever you want in the sims lives!

The player continues writing that what makes the game of ‘good’ quality 
for her are the various little details of the game that offer versatility.

Simmer10: Quality characteristics are really (I can’t find a word)...pretty 
and just of good quality. When I play The Sims I love it, for example, 
when I can go and pick which supper I want to give to my sim. If I want 
salmon, not chicken, I pick the salmon. Or then I can choose what kind 
of clothes my sims wear in the morning. All that is very good quality. 
Actually, it is heavenly.

While closely related to the open form, game levels and time limits are 
among the structural elements that shape gameplay and allow free-formed play 
are mentioned by the players.

Simmer4: I like to play Sims more than other games because there are 
no levels that you are supposed to pass. Those [levels] are usually boring 
and once you have completed the game, you have really completed it. 
This is not the case with The Sims and the gameplay is ‘more relaxing’, 
and not so long-winded.

While this player shows seemingly sophisticated taste of gameplay activ-
ities, some players return the issue of openness to their individual personality 
rather than identifying this as a gendered preference.

Simmer3: I have never been an especially keen player. I am not very 
competitive and all time limits in games have always irritated me and 
made me impatient.
3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

Furthermore, the lack of goals in the game has worked in a way that it easily adjusts to the level of individual players’ gameplay skills and knowledge. For example, one player brings up a difference in difficulty between typical boys’ games and *The Sims 2*.

**Simmer5**: Yeah, I find the tasks of driving and shooting games usually too hard.

It then appears that while the tasks and goals set to the player are clear and same to everyone in ‘driving and shooting games’, *The Sims 2* and its openness allows a playing style that never feels too hard as everyone can set their own goals at any given point. It is also that the game, through a concentration on character looks, social relationships and domestic life, emphasises ‘feminine’ skills and therefore might feel ‘easier’ for girls. In other words, it is not about absolute differences in difficulty but about relative difficulty in regard to competencies one possesses.

I would also like to suggest that the game feels easy to access both because the game is created with a theme and settings familiar to the interviewed players (See Section 3.2.3) and because of the open form that allows free setting of goals. The familiarity further contributes to the suggested ‘easiness’ of the game. While various games rely on their experienced players’ understanding of genre conventions, novice players such as many of the participants of this study, are not practiced to see the possible options in a situation faced. For them, it may be off-putting not knowing what to do in some games. But when the theme of the game is familiar from outside the game culture, the player is, without earlier knowledge from gameplay, able to guess what to do (or what to want to do) and to feel free and empowered to act in a way that feels suitable for herself.
3.2.2 Real Life as Freedom and Ideology

The freedom that female players describe they face in *The Sims* games seems to be partly a freedom to do what they are interested in doing at a given moment. Facing a set of options to choose from does not come across as a point of free choice if none of the available options is in accordance with those that one is interested in doing. Therefore, millions of options for action in a war themed game are meaningless if no single one of them appeals to the player. It might then be that the players who suggest that when playing *The Sims* they are ‘free’ to choose whatever they want to do, they think so because those options that are available are something they are interested in.

The arguments that support *The Sims* games’ superiority suggest that the players do not like games where one is ‘supposed to’ or ‘need to’ do something specific. These players do not let the game ‘tell them what to do’. Instead, the players wish to ‘decide’ both the motivations for action and ways of executing the action themselves.

*Simmer5*: Sims differs in that the player has a possibility for free gameplay unlike in war games, for example, where you need to kill specific enemies and so on, but Sims [gameplay] is so free form.

Furthermore, as a framework for action of all kind, the game sets out not only the options to choose from but also the motives for any possible form of action. These motives are supported and created through the theme and ideology of the game.\(^{15}\) A familiar domestic setting with a strong consumerist ideology that reflects players’ everyday life sets out a strong basis for what the player may find meaningful to do.

\(^{15}\)This argument goes somewhat in line with the ‘programmed freedom’ suggested by Vilém Flusser when he writes that “[i]t looks here as if photographers could choose freely... But the choice is limited to the categories of the camera, and the freedom of the photographer remains a programmed freedom... In the act of photography the camera does the will of the photographer, but the photographer has to will what the camera can do” (Flusser 2000, 35).
3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

Such process benefits from a familiar, strong ideology that sets out the motives for action and suggests the kind of things that one feels relevant to want to do. This is the Northern American suburban family life which players know from other texts of popular culture. Successful play of *The Sims* requires the acceptance of a stereotypical, popularised American suburban lifestyle. This framework makes the player want what seems rational to want in such settings. The player thus adopts the strong ideological and ludic motives for wanting certain things and feels like she was free to choose. Based on Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology, this can be seen as a process of ‘interpellation’ in which players are turned into subjects of the game’s ideology (Althusser 1971).

The freedom in the game thus arises from control, from signing to ideology. In other words, if the player is motivated to want something through the game narrative and ludic structure, a (false?) feeling of freedom is experienced. When the setting is laid out well enough, it does not even occur to the player to want something that does not fit together with the ideology. The feeling of freedom is paradoxically produced by control, by controlling the gameplay motives of players by this very ideology. As George Orwell famously writes: “Slavery is freedom” (Orwell 2009/1949, n.p.).

In the next section I will move on discussing how the idea of a dollhouse brings freedom and familiar domesticity together and how such combination is considered feminine.

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16 While it is not possible to further elaborate Althusser’s theory of ideology here, Morris has discussed the way in which interpellation takes place in relation to game texts in her essay ‘First-person shooters – a game apparatus’ (Morris 2002).

17 The full quotation goes: “You know the Party slogan: ‘Freedom is Slavery’. Has it ever occurred to you that it is reversible? Slavery is freedom” (Orwell 2009/1949, n.p.).
3.2.3 Domesticity and a Dollhouse Game

[...] The Sims is a stupid game anyway, [the reason] why anyone would want to play it in the first place is beyond me. I mean... you get to simulate the real world. How desparate [sic] do you have to get? (AnimeOtaku 2004)

Unlike other simulation games *The Sims* is focussed almost exclusively on the domestic sphere: this domestic focus is what lends it the ‘feminised’ characteristics recognised by manufacturers and gamers alike. A player who obviously plays other games than *The Sims* argues on a forum that playing *The Sims* is insane because the game does not add anything to the everyday life experiences we all have anyway. Mundanity as a characteristic of domestic space, also, bears negative connotations. The focus of the comment is in the routine and mundane activities players take part in. Within the genre of simulation games that originally included titles such as *SimCity* and *Civilization* (1991), *The Sims* represents a domesticated and feminised version of a simulation game. The following discusses these banalities and proposes a ‘critical playing’ (cf. a critical reading) of the game.

In *The Sims 2* the player is restricted to view one family and site at the time and changing family requires returning to the general neighborhood view. This emphasises the game’s concentration on families, instead of larger groups of people or communities. The familiarism of the game is strong and the significant changes in the gameplay are all related to reproduction and creation of consecutive sim generations.

For family is in the focus, *The Sims 2* can also be seen as a game that is concerned with a feminine domain. Family concerns, such as childcare, are still widely presented as feminine arenas in advertising and popular media. While certain legal gains have been made by women, childcare and domestic chores are still perceived as women’s responsibility. In the postfeminist context, women have successfully entered professional work domain, but are assumed
to take care of home and children alongside it. Such balancing of paid work and work at home result in women having very little time for leisure of their own, which will be discussed in Section 5.2.

Furthermore, the dichotomy between work and family, public and private, is not even handed. Such discourse does not often recognise work that takes place at home.\(^{18}\) “This delineation mirrors the opposition and disparate valuing of the male and female: the work domain [public] is characterized by the masculine; the family domain [private] is characterized by the feminine” (Runte and Mills 2002 in Runte and Mills 2003, 4).

Interestingly, The Sims games can then be considered too ‘feminine’ for boys to play. One of the participants discusses this in relation to how such feminine characteristics of the game make it ‘unsuitable’ for men and boys to play.

**Researcher:** Why do you think they [male school mates] haven’t played [The Sims games] themselves?

**Simmer5:** I assume they just haven’t bothered to try, exactly because it is considered a ‘girls’ game’ it would make them look somehow ‘sissy’ in their friends’ eyes.

Another player suggests that it is because of the family focus.

**Simmer6:** ‘Family games’ like Sims do not attract them.

While in The Sims games family life is presented in the context of domesticity, it “breaks the dominant code of masculine gender positioning effected by digital gaming – not simply in that it allows players to identify with female characters but, more significantly, because it does so in a conventionally

\(^{18}\)Sharing skins that represent aspects of private space online then appears as a potential mixer of these spaces. Laura Stempel Mumford (1994) writes that soap opera also blurs this line when the private matters are brought public. While The Sims 2 play as a solitary activity keeps the matters of one’s virtual households in secrecy, the sharing of ‘private’ skins allows the exchange between the private and public.
Chapter 3 Games, Gender and *The Sims*

‘feminine’ domestic setting” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003, 275).

Mary Flanagan writes that in the game

> both male and female players are encouraged to be household consumers, feminized and capitalized by the system which creates them. The reclaiming of domestic space by technology designers and player participants has, in a very complex way, turned this corner of computer gaming into a very politically charged site for play and, potentially, a future site for social change. (Flanagan 2003, n.p.)

The anxieties associated with men playing *The Sims* can be read from the comments of two male players below who claim the game enjoyable, but simultaneously admit that it does not currently offer them much respect, or game cultural capital, among their peers. What I mean by *(game)* cultural capital here is the kind of players’ personal experience, skill and knowledge that brings them recognition and status within their community. This widely used concept borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu (1984) helps in explaining what is it that players gain from doing what they do when no material rewards are functional. And more importantly, how some game cultural activities, while gendered, offer such capital for one gender only. So the players write:

> I find a lot of people just dismiss the Sims without giving it more than 20 minutes, assuming it’s for girls and only girls like it and it has lots of flowers in it, not to mention ponies.
> I say these people are obviously ‘over-compensating for something’ (I hate that phrase, but I can’t think of a better way to say it). It’s great. I can happily play THE MANLIEST GAME EVER (Gears of War) and then put on the Sims and try and make the ugliest baby ever by getting the old guy to sleep with the alien.
> Don’t be ashamed, give it a go! (Gillen 2008)

> playing The Sims is like riding a moped. A hell of a lot of fun but you don’t admit to your mates (Feeze 2005).

The first player assumes a certain amount of shame in playing the game suggesting that a more masculine playing style could exist in achieving goals
3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

such as creating ugly babies. Contradicting himself the player expresses his frustration towards general assumptions of the game as feminine and yet blows life to the very same assumption proposing a masculine way to play the game. The second player, meanwhile, suggests that playing the game is something one needs to do in secrecy due to its femininity. Using masculine expressions and metaphors (‘riding a moped’, ‘hell of a lot of fun’, ‘mates’) he further emphasises his own masculinity.

The anxiety expressed by the players can also be found on the ‘Yahoo! Answers’ service board, where a concerned parent writes:

If you think about it, The Sims 2 is basically a doll house game and it just seems strange for boys to play with a doll house. My son is 12 and my mother in law bought him The Sims 2 for his birthday. I looked at the game and it seems wrong for boys to play it. I’m worried that it will cause my son to become homosexual. I asked my mother in law for the recpit [sic] of the game so I can return it and I’m really considering returning it because I don’t know if my son should be playing games that are meant for girls. (Yahoo! 2007)

Even if the question had been posted by a so-called ‘troll’\(^{20}\), it reflects the same discourse that surrounds *The Sims* games and its content that is primarily understood in terms of gender and as feminine. The statement also includes one of the strongest rhetorical tools for gendering the game: discussing it as a dollhouse.

One way to consider *The Sims* games as simulations is indeed to look at them as dollhouses. Traditional dollhouses and *The Sims* games seem to share a free and open-ended form of play that mimics the conventions of the home. The dollhouse metaphor often used for marketing and discussing the game

\(^{19}\)The cultural anxieties expressed here are not uncommon although rarely so crudely expressed. While interesting, it is outside the scope of this work to discuss the kind of anxiety around gay sexuality as expressed through the mother’s concern of her son ‘turning gay’ through *The Sims* play.

\(^{20}\)A troll is “a provocative posting intended to produce a large volume of frivolous responses” used in email discussion lists, online forums, and *Usenet* newsgroups (Indiana University 2009).
may have affected on the gendering of it. Players’ notions about games are influenced by such game journalism and marketing that shape general opinions on games and gametypes. Marketing cannot be overlooked when arguing for reasons of *The Sims* games’ success among females.

*The Sims* games’ lead designer’s Will Wright’s comments on the game have had a remarkable influence on how the game came to be talked about as a dollhouse. Wright has referred to *The Sims* games as dollhouses and computerised dollhouses in dozens of interviews (e.g. Hattori 2000). While he has tended to be careful when giving interviews discussing who *The Sims* games were designed for, the target audience seems rather clear given that the game’s working title was actually ‘Dollhouse’. Leaking this information to the journalists powerfully proposes to introduce the game as a virtual dollhouse in later articles of the game.

Referring to the game as dollhouse, *Electronic Arts*, the game’s publisher, made history while they “worked the news value of the allegedly high number of female players of *The Sims* to place stories in journals [magazines] such as *Mademoiselle*, *Working Woman*, and *Cosmopolitan*” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003, 271-2). This is important because these magazines have a role in policing the kinds of things women who read these magazines find as suitable leisure activities. They represent certain things as attractive and by the mere exclusion of other topics deny their importance for women’s lives. Video games certainly do not belong to the typical topics discussed in such magazines. Since 2003, the acceptability of gameplay as a women’s leisure activity has somewhat changed²¹, however, and such adverts are more common in such magazines today.

The dollhouse metaphor is commonly used in game magazines, too. The tag line for the game’s review in *Pelit*, for instance, was “A carefully made

²¹The ‘women’s games’ are restricted to certain beauty and home skill themes, however. These will be discussed later in Section 5.2.1.
3.2. Gendering and ‘Othering’ *The Sims 2*

dollhouse simulator that has plenty to play with” (Sillanpää 2004). Meanwhile, *Pelaaja* magazine’s review includes a short interview with a female player who suggests a comparison with dollhouses. Also *GamesRadar* and *EuroGamer* mention dollhouse in their reviews. *GamesRadar*’s review dismisses the idea of a dollhouse as if saying that were *The Sims 2* a mere dollhouse, it was not interesting enough.

**GamesRadar:** It’s kinda like a dollhouse, except way cooler. (Stapleton 2006)

Meanwhile, *EuroGamer*’s review suggests that the sequel is not as much dollhouse like as the first *The Sims* game.

**EuroGamer:** Previous Sims just came across as little more than a glorified Doll’s House, populated by easy to manipulate drones. The Sims 2 seemed much more like an advanced Alter Ego [...]. (Reed 2004)

Thus, on one hand *The Sims* was reviewed in mainstream women’s magazines but on the other it led to it being treated dismissively in the specialist press. One of the players I interviewed mentions this troubling meaning of a dollhouse and criticises the way in which media represents the game as such.

**Simmer1:** I have always been somewhat irritated by the well-known allegory and characterisation of Sims as a ‘virtual dollhouse’. It is not wrong to say so, but I think the expression is too easy and naive and looks at Sims from an over-simplifying and one-sided angle. I mean the game is so much more than a traditional dollhouse and dollhouse play [...].

Instead of referring to domesticity, the players use dollhouse in order to describe the open form of the game.

**Simmer13:** Sims is almost like a giant dollhouse. I could be creative, and create people, which was so much more exciting to me than any of the other games I’ve found.
Another player interviewed recognises the game as an enhanced dollhouse with qualities more masculine.

Simmer15: The Sims combines Legos and dollhouses, in addition to a real life simulator it is a building and costume play.

Also some of the answers directed to the parent who was concerned about a son ‘turning homosexual’ by playing The Sims, contribute to devaluing the concept of the dollhouse. For them it is necessary to suggest that the game is ‘more sophisticated’ than dollhouses.

NO WAY!! I THINK UR REALLY TOO OVERPROTECTIVE. i’m sorry but this game is really NOT a dollhouse. its much more sophisticated [sic] than that. (Yahoo! 2007)

The person later suggests a rather masculine aspect of the game as something that offers an alternative to doll play: successful career and becoming a millionaire as the final stage in successful play. Interesting is also the way in which the player suggests that getting involved in a feminine practice is ‘gay’. Taking a heteronormative position as a given he argues that engagement in gendered leisure activity is a threat to one’s sexuality.

[T]rust me, there are ‘certain’ things that make the game not gay at all. such as woohoo ing. its not a dollhouse. its a life simulation game where u go through stages in life like marriage, having a baby, dating, buying stuff, and becoming successful millionaires [sic] with great jobs. (Yahoo! 2007)

The Sims may well be much more than a ‘simple’ dollhouse, but then again, what is a dollhouse anyway? In the discourses around The Sims, there seems to be a tendency, also in my interview material, to take a step away from dollhouses because dollhouse metaphor is not enough and because it brings along an idea of a girls’ toy. Nevertheless, as long as The Sims is referred to as a dollhouse, these connotations come along.
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And yet, it was probably a strategic decision decision for Maxis and Electronic Arts not to in order to avoid feminising the game by its name already by branding it with a name ‘Dollhouse’. However, given the strong negative connotations that gaming still bore in the beginning of this millennium as discussed by Seth Giddings (2006), the subtly introduced dollhouse metaphor may have nevertheless been strategically more successful in marking the game as harmless and suitable for young children, especially for girls since femininity is typically linked to vulnerability (e.g. Gordon, Iverson and Allan 2010).

Furthermore, from a practical point of view, the familiarity of a dollhouse might have an impact on its success in welcoming new player demographics. Drawing on a group of earlier studies on children’s play in general and computer game play in particular Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (1998) suggest that it is the familiar settings, such as the home, and characters, such as mother and teacher, that girls tend to prefer in games (cf. Walkerdine 1999). For example, Yasmin Kafai’s study conducted among children who designed games by themselves presents real life settings in contrast with fantasy. According to the research, six of eight girls placed their games in a real life location, such as a classroom or ski slope (Kafai 1998) marking a notable difference to boys who created seven out of eight games with fantasy settings.

While these studies do not go on arguing the reasons behind this preference, I would like to raise a point that instead of a mere interest towards imitating everyday life by play, there seems to be a practical reason for women’s preference for games in domestic settings. A setting familiar from the player’s everyday life is simply a good starting point for someone with no prior play experience or, more importantly, not many peers to help in getting into the gaming as discussed in Section 3.1.5. When games are linked to technologies that are not familiar to many girls, it is the familiar theme of The Sims games that may make gaming more relaxed and easier to start for those without prior
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experience on games.\textsuperscript{22} “[W]hen computer games involve familiar settings with
goals related to real world tasks, girls do become interested in them”, write
Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (1998, 57). As discussed earlier in 3.1.5, female
players often suffer from the lack of ways to be introduced to gaming. Familiar settings\textsuperscript{23} can then work as an easy starting point for gaming because of
the easiness of learning how to use objects and perform actions. For example
members of the *Radola* community find the American settings familiar enough
not to even recognise them as such as I will discuss later in Section 4.3.1.

North American domesticity is familiar to audiences of the wide-spread
US films and television series and thus helps them to understand how the
game works.\textsuperscript{24} It may appear familiar also to those whose real domesticity
differs from the North American one. While the game builds on players’ earlier
knowledge on American culture, it can thus also be that the domestic settings
familiar via the American cultural hegemony, if not imperialism, play key part
in its worldwide success.

3.2.4 Possibilities for Learning from the Ideology of the
Game

I am now going to look at how the game’s powerful ideology as a dollhouse and
as a simulation of American consumer culture can be seen to act as a learning

\textsuperscript{22}This does not mean that the game would not offer a fair degree of challenge
to its experienced players. The game is, in fact, very much what a famous game
design adage suggests as a good game: “It is easy to learn and hard to master”.

\textsuperscript{23}However, it would be too simplifying to understand the domestic space of
*The Sims* as non-fantastic, since the game includes numerous non-realistic as-
pects such as superstitions and references to spiritual and mythological beliefs
such as ghosts and vampires.

\textsuperscript{24}Martin Lister et al. discuss this American cultural dominance in regard
to ‘global culture’ and suggest that in videogames the American content is
often mixed together with Japanese (Lister et al. 2003, 268-9). The aspects
of *The Sims 2* discussed here do not, however, suggest such reading of the
combination of these two cultural backgrounds.
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vehicle. Leaning towards formal education practices, Barbara Maria Stafford (1994) proposes that simulations have later been used as education tools and mark a return to the early eighteenth century ‘oral-visual culture’, in which such means were widely used for educative purposes. Further, computer games are believed to be effective teachers both in formal and informal uses (e.g. Gee 2003, Squire 2006, Squire 2007). While there is no space here discuss how and if The Sims games actually teach their players, we can see the parallels to earlier forms of girl’s educative play and the potential to such learning in the game.

The notion of The Sims games as dollhouses arguably brings along the aspect of socialisation into appropriate (gender) roles: teaching its players to act ‘right’ both in a consumer culture and at home. As such, the game’s ideology includes a powerful framing of female agency in the game and offers a basis for educative play. As with dolls, playing with the game can be used as a way of educating girls into a nurturing role, into certain kind of female adulthood, because the sim characters require constant care and attention. The dollhouse metaphor may have even invited those parents who agree with strong gender roles at home and wish their girls to learn to be good housewives to buy the game.

The history of using dolls and dollhouses as an informal way to teach girls in becoming mothers and wives is long. Deborah Jaffé writes that “[f]or centuries it has been assumed that playing with dolls was primarily the occupation of girls” and continues to discuss theories according to which dolls’ house play is seen as a proper introduction for girls to the motherhood (Jaffé 2006, 141). Roland Barthes recognises girls’ dolls as those which “‘condition’ her to her future role as mother” and writes about the general function of toys that “literally prefigure the world of adult functions [that] cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think
about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen
and Vespas” (Barthes 1973, 53). In her book, *Made to Play House*, Miriam
Formanek-Brunell (1993) explores the social ‘feminisation’ of young women
through dollhouse play. Like dolls, *The Sims* educates towards motherhood
involving nurturing and caring.

*The Sims* players are also possibly trained to navigate in a society as
consumers. The emphasis on materialism through consumerism is striking and
exemplified by the way even the spiritual aspects of the game are associated
with objects. For example, death in the game is represented as a grave stone
on one’s yard. Furthermore, the game characters’ identities are constructed
through buying stuff: the purchasing of particular items allows the develop-
ment of specific skills. Flanagan directs our attention towards imitation, which
is in the centre of dollhouse play.

Rodris Roth notes in “Scrapbook Houses” that such scrapbook houses
“were an ideal medium to introduce girls to their future roles as wives,
mothers, and homemakers” and that the “house in a scrapbook, just
as much as an actual one, had to be run and maintained properly”
(308). [...] That female children were being trained to imitate their
parent’s tastes and shop for desirable goods from mail order catalogs
and samples suggests the intertwining of play, gender, and consumption
over a century ago. (Flanagan 2003, n.p.)

While the ‘Western’ consumerist domesticity of *The Sims 2* offers a
player a position as a consumer, dollhouse is an apt way to describe what
A. Brady Curlew suggests is a new kind of trap for female players.

[w]hile the Sims is commendable for attempting to solve the problems
of female objectification and under-representation in the gaming world
by offering unsexualized and equally-abled [sic] female characters, it is
lamentable for stereotyping female subjectivity. The female character
is no longer trapped in the tower awaiting rescue by a male hero, nor
is she simply made a hyper-sexual heroine to draw in the male gaze
– but she is still trapped within the bonds of necessary domesticity
and conspicuous-consumption ascribed onto the category of feminine.
(Curlew 2005, n.p.)
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Janet Murray explains that *The Sims* “has its own moral physics: education leads to job success; a bigger house means more friends; too many possessions lead to exhausting labour; neglect of a pet can lead to the death of a child” (Murray 2004, 5). Thus, the game builds around a set of values and characteristics of modern neo-liberal society. *The Sims 2* is extensively about consumption because its core mechanic has to do with earning money in order to buy better furniture and technology and decorate and build a house as more expensive furniture offers more efficient filling of the need-bars. For example, ‘Satinistics Loveseat’ sofa worth 150 simoleons offers just 5 Comfort and 2 Energy ‘points’ (See Figure 3.2) whereas the most expensive one, Lap of Luxury Sofa (1,700 simoleons) helps a sim to gain Energy worth 2 points, gives Comfort worth 10 and adds 2 to the Environment.

![Satinistics Loveseat](image)

Figure 3.2: ‘Satinistics Loveseat’ available for purchase.

It is part of the ideology of the game that more expensive items are of better quality or at least represented as more valuable in regard to a successful sim life. With an expensive sofa a sim is able to fill energy and comfort needs more quickly and is then able to concentrate on other tasks. If a sim is poor, almost all playtime will be used in filling the basic needs. Furthermore, these items do not wear out, i.e. there is no need to buy new ones because the old ones are not suitable for the intended use: they keep their ability to fulfill the sims’ needs. The only reason one would like to buy a new piece of furniture
would be to get one with better need-filling qualities and looks to start with. In order to make one’s sims as ‘happy’ as possible, keeping old furniture and preferring their simple style over the available new furniture is a poor strategy. However, as objects can be sold back, they are affected by depreciation. For example, the Satinistics Loveseat sofa has an initial depreciation rate of 22 simoleons and will depreciate worth 15 simoleons per day after that, but cannot be of less value than 20 simoleons.

Alongside offering a way to look at *The Sims* as a education tool for a ‘Western’ consumerist and individualistic way of life (or even a neo-liberal society) and nurturing, dollhouse as a concept suggests *The Sims* as a toy rather than as a game. Imitation in the game is what children do in their play – they try out their own versions of the adults’ rules in play. While the origins of dollhouses are as wealthy adults’ toys in the seventeenth century (Jaffé 2006), dollhouses are nowadays considered as children’s toys. Also digital games that have concentrated on nurturing have a long history as children’s games. This discourse causes a kind of infantilisation of *The Sims* games. Rather than games, *The Sims* products are clearly acknowledged as toys (e.g. Sicart 2005, Aarseth 2007b). “Will Wright tends to be very reluctant when it comes to defining his works as video games: he often refers to them as ‘software toys’, as software products oriented to play activity, rather than to more formal games activities” (Sicart 2005, n.p.). Again, market-wise this may be a successful strategy for *Electronic Arts* but it has an effect on the player communities: while *The Sims* players may be playing, they are not quite players.\(^\text{25}\) As consumer products, the game is often discussed as a ‘sandbox’, which is also bears meanings such as easiness and immaturity.

\(^{25}\)Today, adults are also collecting toys such as various ‘vinyl’, ‘geek’ and ‘cult’ toys available in shops like *Forbidden Planet*, but the activity of playing with toys is still reserved to children. Gameplay is, indeed, more broadly accepted as a form of mature pass time than playing with toys.
The game also simulates contemporary discourses of personal growth and self-improvement through the concentration on different character skills and improvement of those. Such aspect is very common in contemporary games. While the family life sets out the theme of the game, an individual character is the primary unit of the game. After all, the player is made to manage the life of one character at a time, not the entire family, for example. The game can be thus understood as a learning simulation of the individualistic life in the ‘Western’ world.

The toy and learning meanings of the game – used as synonyms or not – tend to lead towards an ‘othering’ of The Sims games. When associated with the game’s theme and domestic focus as discussed in earlier sections, the game becomes marked as something of lesser value or a different category than products that offer conquering distant worlds. The toyness (=childishness) and home-play seem to create a peculiar character for the game that results in that some (male) players feel it is not an appropriate game for them to play as the earlier comments from the ugly baby creator and other players discussed in Section 3.2.3 suggest.

Yet, it seems necessary to look at the positive aspects of managing a simulation of domesticity as well. As Wright has noted, “[p]laying is the process of discovering how the model works” (in Turkle 1995, 72). Learning how the system works and playing through everyday life in a game situation offers a safe environment to take control over it. Simulations could be approached in regard to how they “actually help players to challenge the model’s built-in assumptions” (Turkle 1995, 71). Playing through various everyday situations in The Sims 2, the game may give a feeling of being in control and a possibility to challenge the ways in which world/simulation works. For a female, equal social relationships and work conditions offer a way to be in charge of the difficult situations that they come across in real life. Formanek-Brunell (1993)
proposes that also the traditional doll play was challenged by women as they went on acting out non-typical scenarios such as funerals with their dolls.

### 3.3 The Sims Games in Game Studies

Previous section helped me to establish an understanding of how *The Sims* games offer a very specific point of reference for constructing player identities. I have discussed how domesticity, mundane content, openness and consumerism come together in these games. Such content leads to characterising the game as a dollhouse and toy in public discourses and further mark the game as childish and marginal (See Sections 3.2.4 and 3.2.3). I further suggested that *The Sims* is being left outside the dominant discourses of play due to both its form and contents. Players’ identities, then, are constructed as different from the mainstream idea of a player and feminised.

Fron et al. identified the concept of the ‘hegemony of play’ at the DiGRA 2007 conference. They suggest that “[t]oday’s hegemonic game industry has infused both individuals’ and societies’ experiences of games with values and norms that reinforce that industry’s technological, commercial and cultural investments in a particular definition of games and play, creating a cyclical system of supply and demand in which alternate products of play are marginalized and devalued” (Fron et al. 2007, 1). They argue that existing power structures in games development have created an implicitly male dominated status quo which ignores the needs and desires of players in minority, such as women. This hegemony of play marginalises those who, they suggest, are not hard-core gamers “in spite of the fact that inclusiveness has produced some of the best-selling games in history, such as Pac-Man, Myst, and The Sims” (Fron et al. 2007, 1), thus actually working against commercial interests. The taken for granted masculinity of games is an everyday implication
of the hegemony of play: it appears as the ‘natural’ order of things.

In order to complete the argument, I will now discuss how Game Studies has approached *The Sims* games and how this field of study covers approaches that do not consider Sims as a proper game. If popular discourse around *The Sims* places it in the marginals of the game culture, so does a body of scholarly work on games. The dollhouse metaphor, for instance, is widely used by researchers (e.g. Flanagan 2003, Pearce 2004). While other readings of the game exist, such as Gonzalo Frasca (2001a)’s suggestion about *The Sims* as a ‘life administration’ game, the dollhouse metaphor, where the emphasis is on a sort of child’s play instead of agonistic gaming, is the prevailing one within the scholarly work. Therefore, I will now explore how game definitions in Game Studies construct *The Sims* games as non-games and, possibly, *The Sims* players as non-players. This section suggests that existing game definitions are unable to recognise the special characteristics of *The Sims* as a game because of their structure- and object-centered focus.

### 3.3.1 Defining *The Sims* as a Non-Game

Considered from a structuralist ‘ludological’ perspective, *The Sims* appears as a ‘non-game’. With such perspective I refer to a view associated with the emergence of contemporary computer game studies in the early 21st century. Defending the uniqueness of games as object of study against the more established paradigms, such as Film Studies, the so-called ludologists emphasised the *playability* of games (e.g. Aarseth 2001, Eskelinen 2001, Juul 2003). Such work ‘dismembered’ games into qualities and, by comparing several games, proposed a set of qualities common to each one of them. These were, then,

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*Interestingly, *The Sims* has been an intriguing game for Game Studies from the very beginning given that the first issue of the *Game Studies* journal included its review by Frasca (2001a). No other games were reviewed for this first issue of a journal that came to declare the field of Game Studies established.*
understood as fundamental features of games, and the focus of ludology was asserted: (computer) games are those that fulfil a certain set of characteristics, such as rules and a goal.\textsuperscript{27} To establish common ground among a group of researchers interested in digital games, definitions of games were indeed a logical starting point. It was also characteristic for the field that it brought together various disciplines that shared a concentration on the text. The field of research also welcomed game designers, or designer-scholars, who were in need of reductive definitions in order to design game systems (e.g. Salen and Zimmerman 2003).

One of the most influential sources of the early game definitions is Roger Caillois’ differentiation between ‘ludus’ and ‘paidia’ kind of play as presented in his book \textit{Man, Play and Games} (Caillois 2001/1961). Where Caillois’ categories of games are “devoted to examining the means by which games become part of daily life” (Caillois 2001/1961, 41), the categorisation serves his purpose of suggesting play as an essential part of culture (cf. Dovey and Kennedy 2006). But the categories also seemed to offer a neat, yet simplifying, explanation of what is often assumed and proposed to be the difference between \textit{The Sims} like simulations and more goal-oriented games.

In Caillois’ formulation, ludus refers to goal-oriented, structured play whereas paidia is more spontaneous and free. In the discussions of an open form and a game’s ability to set out objectives for gameplay, reaching a goal equals closure. Closure manifests itself in a form of significant stagnation in gameplay and usually leads to closing it down in a way that there is nothing more to strive. Games without goals and closure can then be seen as toy-like

\textsuperscript{27}This work was started with Aarseth’s book \textit{Cybertext} (1997), were he defined cybertexts as non-linear texts that focus “on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim” (Aarseth 1997, 1).
As suggested in the previous sections of this chapter, Sims allows a kind of free form of play and does not set clear goals for its player. There is no such closure in the game that would make the player feel like she had reached the end of the game. Following the introduced definition, the early game scholarship has contributed to the notions of Sims games as non-games, or ‘borderline cases’ (Juul 2003), and resulted in reductive views of them. The Sims games are seen as different from traditional computer games that include predetermined goals.

Where ludus emphasises the talents and qualities of the player in general and makes a point of her efforts, paidia is about leaving oneself behind and letting the other lead. Basically, paidia is presented as more intuitive and therefore ‘easier’ whereas ludus requires talent and training. Such an approach to The Sims 2 does not recognise, or at least does not offer tools to articulate, the player’s real intellectual contribution, the setting of goals and rules for example. Approaching the game as a paidia type of play may even lead to the denial of any intellect and skill in such play.

Such definitions do not aim to recognise differences between players’ actions originating from different motivations and interpretations. Whereas in

\[28\] Some of the mobile versions of The Sims, such as The Sims Bustin’ Out for N-Gage, have clear goals and tasks in them. Also the recent The Sims 3 has got more goal-oriented focus in it, but no clear closure.

\[29\] Despite an understanding of the player’s essential role in the creation of a game, such studies concentrate on game objects and ‘ideal’ or ‘implied’ players instead of real cultural beings. Such definitions suggest the player as a ‘necessary evil’ needed just in order for a game to actualise. The player, then, is interesting only as it becomes defined by the game text, not vice versa. This structuralist approach lacks sensitivity to the different playings of the games and result in the marginalisation and devaluation of the ways that differ from the anticipated. From a feminist perspective, it is troubling that the ideal/implied computer game player is constructed based on the masculine history of computer games. It takes for granted that ‘masculine’ modes of play are a norm and is therefore ideological in its effect.
The Sims both rules and preferred goals are negotiated by players during gameplay, dominant game definitions often fail to recognise these player-originated rules and goals.

3.3.2 Games and Openendedness as a Feminine Media Form

In the 1980s some feminist work indeed attempted to describe play as an antithesis of competition (See Sutton-Smith 2001, 103-104). Play was understood as an expression of feminine pleasure and identity. But in Game Studies, such a reading of games emphasises not only the masculine virtue of mastery but also a distinction between high and low culture. By highlighting the ‘demanding’ technical qualities a game, games that base on other kind of knowledge and skill such as taste (See Section 5.3.1) are not recognised. These structure-oriented definitions can be considered as a response to the pressures under which people involved in both game culture and game research operate. “For many commentators, if videogames are worth considering at all, they can be easily and readily dismissed as little more than inconsequential trivialities” (Newman 2008, 1).

Emphasis on ‘worthwhile’ and ‘mature’ gameplay that concentrates on rigid rules and goal orientation may then help in legitimising these fields. Maybe the emphasis on logical complexity, mathematical functioning, possibilities of mastery over the system in dominant game definitions is a way to prove the value of games and to defend the ‘good’ aspects of them in order to further support their acceptance as adults’ entertainment. However, such emphasis on culturally masculine technological competencies contributes to the devaluing of other kind of skills and pleasures. Concentration on the structure as it is in the commercial product has clear impact on how the player herself can be seen.
3.3. *The Sims* Games in Game Studies

Tania Modleski (1982) writes about this polarity between high and low in regard to earlier ‘feminine’ media forms and suggests that such works are not receiving the same kind of attention as those considered ‘masculine’. Mass produced texts for women are not appreciated in their own terms because they become approached from the point of view of masculine forms and genres (cf. Chapter 4 on the devaluing of skinning as different to modding).

As discussed earlier in this chapter (See Section 3.2.1), the players interviewed for this study actually suggest that they prefer gameplay without rigid rules or a goal that leads to closure. I see the highlighting of rigid goals and complicated rules as a kind of fetishised masculine form of playing computer games that prevails among games research and is appreciated in the games industry over alternative forms. Whether *The Sims* 2 is a game or not might be a matter of definition and context. But for the identities of its players its marginalisation as a non-game has clear consequences: they are not typical players if players at all, but rather as *The Sims* 2 players in particular. It can be seen problematic from the perspective of the millions of women playing the game that it is not considered a game, while it clearly is a product of game cultures and belongs to this sphere of mediated leisure.

Interestingly, this most discussed and contested feature of the game, open-endedness, is a pattern that we can recognise also among other kinds of media texts. I would therefore like to compare *The Sims* games to two earlier products or genres of popular culture that have gained huge popularity among female audiences. If we look at the studies by Radway on romance novels and Ien Ang on *Dallas* soap opera, romance and soap opera share two qualities: they are immensely popular among female audiences and based on a form that builds on continuity and openness. As romance novels come in series and their use is characterised by repetitive reading (Radway 1984), soap opera is a very similar kind of ‘endless’ genre (Ang 2005/1985).
Modleski (1982) indeed argues that such an open-ended, closure-less form of media is a uniquely feminine form. She believes that “the narrative form of soaps, which ‘makes anticipation of an end an end itself’, invests pleasure in the central experience of women’s lives: waiting” (Feuer 1984, n.p.). However, while this kind of waiting may have lead to the wide popularity of an open form, it does not seem to fit within the contemporary ‘Western’ culture where women combine paid work with domestic labour and are perhaps too busy to ‘wait’.

Further, also on in the discussions around soap and romance, the lack of closure combined with domesticity and social relationships seem to contribute to their devaluing as genres of low cultural status. These forms of largely women’s leisure have not quite received the appreciation they deserve, at least based on their popularity. Neither do they maintain high status among a broader cultural context.

What is also often included in popular discourses around soap and romance is their potentially negatively addictive, dangerously seductive characteristics. Such ‘headiness’ of The Sims, as termed by one player, and its linking to mass cultural forms was discussed in Section 3.2.1. Similarly to romance novels and soap opera, The Sims is assumed to support a kind of addiction to develop. As the gendering of gameplay and the devaluing of those forms that appear feminine is a broader issue that this study concentrates on, I will continue discussing the devaluing of The Sims games and skinning as well as their gendering throughout the work. The interrelationship between gendering, form and status is extremely complicated, but will be addressed as much as possible.

For a critical reflection on this topic, see Mumford (1994).

Here I would actually like to propose The Sims as a genre of its own due to its specific form and focus. This ‘soap-game’ or ‘romance-game’ genre would then better suit to this trio instead of mentioning the game by name alongside genres of literature and television. However, I will not charge this discussion with unnecessary neologisms as it does not appear essential. A future research could, however, be conducted discussing The Sims as a genre.
as possible.

Yet, it needs to be acknowledged that there might be a practical reason for women liking open-ended games or other media. Open-endedness is a structure that has implications in regard to when and how a game is played and how it becomes synchronised alongside the player’s non-gaming life. I would like to draw attention to open-endedness as something that defines when and where play takes place rather than what the player can do while playing. This kind of structure works in regard to the temporality in the use of a media text.

Facilitating fragmented use and spreading of the use over a long period of time, the structure makes it easy for users without possibilities for prolonged period of concentration to engage themselves with the text. Women are often suggested to have this kind of fragmented leisure (e.g. Henderson 1996, Söderman 2009). Open-endedness here is indeed a characteristic of the text, but not in regard to the plot or narrative but in regard to the ways in which it structures its use.

In the forthcoming chapters of this thesis I will go on discussing the importance of an open form for the skinners’ practice and return to it especially in Chapter 5 where I look at skinning as an ongoing process of sharing and co-operation in comparison to mastery. It seems that while The Sims 2 game is characterised by an open form, also skinning maintains this feeling of endless addition and lack of closure. In such a discussion, acknowledging player’s own goals and rules is especially important.

### 3.3.3 The Goal of The Sims 2

But why is there no clear goal in The Sims 2 game – or is there? I suggest that looking at the theme of the game helps here. If The Sims games are approached as simulations of ‘Western’ consumerist and individualistic societies, what else
can be expected from a game than a never ending path towards better salary, better possessions, bigger family, greater number of friends? If we were to ask what is the goal of *The Sims 2*, we need to discuss what is the meaning of life in the world we live in. However, it is rather easy to recognise one ultimate goal for the player: to stay alive and to reproduce, or, not to die. Such a goal is a direct result of the adopted thematical basis of the game.

While according to several game definitions there is no pre-determined or designer-set goal in *The Sims* games, I would like to point out that, in fact, *The Sims 2*, like all simulations and a range of online multiplayer RPGs, contain one prewritten goal that affects everything the player is able do in the game. However, it is a goal that does not lead to closure and ending of the game, but is, on contrary, a goal to keep the system going, to be able to play. It is also tightly connected to the rule system, because the the rule-system itself exists to maintain this one goal of the game. To put it in a different way: in *The Sims 2* there is no goal to reach but there is a negative goal, a goal that the player is supposed not to reach. This is to die and, consequently, to stop playing. No matter how happy the sims in the game are and what they can achieve in life, every moment the game is running, the player is a winner. While the game makes its best to fight against, a good player can keep the game going. *The Sims 2* does not end with a fanfare of victory. Instead, it rewards its player with greater sub-goals and the very possibility to keep playing.

Something in the way in which these structural and thematical aspects of the game are tied together and support each other appears especially intriguing in case of *The Sims* games. Ultimately, not only the theme and settings of the game but also the mechanics represent progress and aims that change as we are about to reach them, process that has only goals that are already forgotten once reached. This is also where the traditional notion of the circuit of culture does not suffice in exhausting the ‘consumption’ category. As dis-
3.3. The Sims Games in Game Studies

cussed earlier, gendering such a game is a complicated process that includes marketing and media texts on the game, players constructing gendered identities, discourses around gendered themes and activities in players’ everyday culture, and so forth. But it also includes the structural and textual aspects of the game itself. The model of the circuit of culture (du Gay et al. 1997) needs supplementary conceptualisations if one is to understand these ways of experiencing a cultural object, a game in this particular case. The traditional category of ‘consumption’ would not capture all the nuances apparent in the ways in which players make meaning out of computer games. As discussed in 1.3.3, this is because the ergodic nature of the cultural object in question, a computer game, blurs the borders between production and consumption, i.e. there is no product to be interpreted or to be consumed until the player’s contribution takes place – consuming a game is inherently about producing it. Rather than explaining, straightforwardly, the ways in which players make meaning out of computer games in ‘consumption’ – attribute importance and value on certain aspects of the object and gain pleasure based on these, for instance – it would perhaps make more sense to recognise a number of nested processes of interpreting and acting accordingly that constantly feed back to each other.

We can read Sara Mosberg Iversen (2009)’s distinction between two parallel “structures that invite interpretation and configuration at two different levels; the ludic and the thematic” (Mosberg Iversen 2009, 79-80), as providing further detail of the intricacies of these circuits. I find this especially useful where it recognises the different kinds of invitations for meaning making during gameplay and as originating from the game object. Mosberg Iversen (2009)’s ludic level encompasses the systemic structure of the game, such as legal and illegal actions and measurements of success, while the thematic level of the game “refers to the game as a text that is interpreted within the frame
of everyday cultural significance” (Mosberg Iversen 2009, 81). The Sims 2 appears as an interesting case where the ludic (open form and lack of closure) and thematic (domestic and dollhouse-like) levels are seamlessly intertwined and support each other. Further, they are both gendered in their own ways, but together allow new kind of gendering to take place in The Sims 2 play. As I will soon move on discussing skinning the game, towards player co-creativity, I will focus on how these ludic and thematic aspects of the game invite such participation.

3.3.4 Player-Set Goals

Approaching games from the point of view of the player, Cultural Studies scholars later accompanied such notions that concentrated on rules, closure and competition and suggested different perspectives for thinking about games through the player’s engagement and as a system that includes the player. Dovey and Kennedy (2006), for example, write that game object centered definitions share disadvantages with structuralist theories from 1970s and 1980s where they aim to make suggestions on meaning based on formal textual features. According to them, “[t]his approach was increasingly challenged, however, as it failed to explain the experiences of viewers, or their diversity of interpretation.” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 28)

As discussed above, these formal definitions lack sensitivity to the different ways the games can be played. David Buckingham suggests that while “such definitions and typologies are valuable, considering computer games in these terms by no means wholly explains the nature of gameplay. The experi-

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32 A parallel distinction relating to game objects is the separation between simulation and representation (e.g. Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Frasca 2001b). However, the aspects of simulation and representation consider the ontological nature of game objects and their capabilities to reflect real world, while the thematic and ludic levels of games as presented by Mosberg Iversen (2009) cover the ways in which game objects invite certain kind of meaning making.
ence of play also depends upon how we interpret and use these various elements of the game, and how they relate to our own existing enthusiasms and preoccupations” (Buckingham 2006, 9). Giddings and Kennedy, meanwhile, refer to these studies on game as an abstract form or structure proposing that such cyber textual analyses “posit only abstract or notional playing subjects, contexts and / or events” and do not therefore suffice in the study of actual players and their pleasures (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, 17).

Moving the attention to the player allows us to approach game goals and rules, among many other things, as they are being set and negotiated by players themselves. In actual play situations, players can then be seen to affect and contribute to the structural aspects of a game. In ‘sandbox’ or ‘simulation’ games such as *The Sims 2*, it is required from a player to create her own goals, rather than simply respond to goals coded into the game system by its makers. In *The Sims 2*, the player can for instance decide to aim for a big house and large family, or to be a single person with a good career, or even aim to create a family with a graveyard for a backyard and ghosts coming in every night. These goals then vary from player to player, though the game supports some goals better than others. The importance of players’ individual contribution is highlighted in games that facilitate and support various alternative playing styles – that allow free and open form of play. Consequently, a game can be seen as a continuous process throughout which new meanings can be generated.

The essential point, then, is that games are grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and are therefore always in the process of becoming. This also means that they are not reducible to their rules. This is because any given singular moment in any given game may generate new practices or new meanings, which may in turn transform the way the game is played, either formally or practically (through a change in rules or conventions). (Malaby 2007, 103)

My interviews further suggest that these personal goals sometimes originate from within the player community. The discussion fora of *The Sims
fansites offer community-created goals often called ‘challenges’. A challenge can be, for example, to help player-named character, Millicent Boone\textsuperscript{33}, to become a writer in the game. This requires the player to download a readymade family from the discussion forum and reach all sub-goals listed in the challenge description.

As I will now move on discussing *The Sims 2* play from the point of view of skinning, it appears that the player-set goals are of most importance. The in-game rules are, while supportive, irrelevant to a large extent. Therefore, the idea of *The Sims 2* gameplay will be re-formulated in the later chapters of this thesis, in Chapter 5 in particular. Essentially, the practice of skinning is presented as one possible way to play the game. I will look at *The Sims 2* gameplay as a process that is situated in a larger context than what can be created by a single player with a single game product (See especially Section 5.1.1). In such gameplay, the rules are versatile and spread around player communities and different practices, and are only partly rooted to the commercial game product.

\textsuperscript{33}Notice a reference to a popular romance novel publisher *Mills & Boon*. 
Chapter 4

The Practice of Skinning:
Resistance beyond Play?

So far I have proposed that several structural, thematical and broader cultural aspects of *The Sims 2* game contribute to its gendering as feminine. Also the cultural discourses around the game, drawing on notions of a dollhouse and a toy for instance, emphasise the game’s uniqueness, although often in a de-valuing tone. Interestingly, the best-selling game of all times also marginalises its players in various ways. What is behind such notions is the open form of the game that can be approached as a sandbox or simulation, for example. The multitude of possibilities for in-game engagement available can be seen as one of the reasons behind the enormous success of *The Sims* games. The open form of these games serves as a platform for various kinds of play and no single right way of playing them exists.

In terms of skinners’ identities, I have suggested that they are built outside the ‘hegemony of play’ and experienced as different from the dominant image of players. Discourses around Sims seem to have a significant impact on the players’ identities, too. Now, moving on to the practice of skinning itself, I aim to explore the related discourses that have been used in approaching
skinning in everyday life, in popular discourses and in the field of academic research. Going through a set of such discourses I am able to pinpoint how skinning and skinners’ identities draw on these and overlap with them.

While *The Sims 2* is a game with unique characteristics, also its modifying seems to differ from the modding\(^1\) of other games. Primarily, skinning appears undemanding and of lesser value because of a larger cultural discourse that proposes creativity as resistance. In the following I will discuss my own ethnography parallel to three dominant views on game modifying that emphasise this player’s subversive role. These are hackerism, tactical uses of games and fandom. I will go on proposing that in order to appreciate and fully understand the identities of such players, we need to move beyond the existing frameworks on modding and skinning, or at least extend them, because of their emphasis on political and often gendered (i.e. masculine) meanings of resistance.

### 4.1 Resistance in Modding

When consumption in the 1980s was redefined as ‘cultural production’ or ‘symbolic production’, the creativity of everyday life came to occupy a central position in this production process. The emphasis on cultural creativity as resistance must be seen as a reaction against earlier discourse on the seduction of mindless consumers, that is it was locked up in the iron cage held together by market forces. Creativity became, in some ways, the weapon of the weak – a positive strategy of resistance. (Löfgren 2008, 126)

It is indeed that any multi-billion mass media industry that distributes products of popular culture invites scholarly accounts that emphasise the power of the ‘weak’ consumers and the possibilities for subversive productivity within such a powerful system. Cultural Studies was part of that moment in the 1980s when consumption was redefined and offers a strong tradition of scholarly work

\(^1\)For an introduction to modding, see Section 1.1
4.1. Resistance in Modding

on consumer culture that emphasises resistance and creativity. Sometimes overlapping with Cultural Studies the field of Media Studies has offered a similar account on passive media use as something negative in comparison to more active use of (interactive) media (e.g. Lister et al. 2003).

One of the biggest influences behind this thinking, among Jean Baudrillard (1996/1985) and John Fiske (1992), was Michel de Certeau (influenced by the work of Foucault and Bourdieu). In his widely influential work, *The practice of everyday life* (1988/1980), de Certeau discussed the ‘art of the weak’ through tactics of the consumers against the strategies of the system and set basis for research that celebrated, in a Marxist paradigm, the struggle of the small within the larger structures of power. De Certeau’s heritage is still strongly influential in current studies on player co-creativity as in studies approaching resistance in general.

While resistance has been a popular and widely used term in Cultural Studies and around, it is also an extremely complicated term to grasp. Historically speaking, when a group of theories was built on displacing the idea of passive consumers, resistance also became to signal something potentially progressive. But there is a risk of “turning almost every piece of pop culture and youth style into resistance [...]” where writers “find resistance in popular culture at every turn” (Barker 2003, 400) especially because of the way it has been romanticised and understood as progressive.

It was also a hypothesis for conducting this research in the first place to assume that women players create skins for games in order to fight back the patriarchy of the games industry and game cultures, namely the repetitive sexist and male-targeted female imagery of games including protagonists (as in playable characters) as well as NPCs (Non-Player Characters). The existing academic discourse around women players as resistant was so powerful, that it resulted in a starting point which later turned out to be unfitting as it did not
take into account the specificities of *The Sims 2* and its means to facilitate skinning. But as my short personal research history had already concentrated on the aspects of games that sometimes alienate women players, and where the aforementioned often victimised and vulnerable female characters are in an important role, it was easy to assume the making of skins as a subversive practice that gathers together women players who are willing to change the ways things work. I wanted to see women players fighting back.

After all, such examples had already been documented in the works by Kennedy, Cindy Poremba and Anne-Marie Schleiner. And more importantly, work on women’s skinning practices was limited to such accounts. However, where these works highlight the resistant and empowering possibilities of the practice, they also refer to special cases that differ significantly from the typical use of the games they discuss. Skinning practices introduced in these works acknowledge exclusively the tiny sections of game culture as distinct from everyday use of the products of the games industry. Importantly, they also discuss games that are very much in line with the dominant masculine contents and themes of games, where women could indeed see themselves resisting these stereotypes (See Section 4.3).

My work, meanwhile, extends and differs from this approach to women skinner where it concentrates on a practice that is very popular in one hand and focused on an un-conventionally gendered (i.e. feminine) game on the other. User nicknames on skin-circulating fora indicate that just like playing *The Sims 2*, the practice of skinning is most popular among female players. As one of the prime sites for *The Sims* skinners, *The Sims Resource*\(^2\) brings together hundreds of thousands players and a vast majority of its ‘featured artists’ present themselves as women\(^3\). The game skin databases also include

\(^2\)http://www.thesimsresource.com/
\(^3\)http://www.thesimsresource.com/artists/featured/
4.1. Resistance in Modding

significantly more female character clothes and body parts than male ones\textsuperscript{4}. In regard to \textit{Radola} in particular, some idea of the gender distribution was got through a survey sent to the forum by an administrator. Within one month 346 players chose between options ‘male’ and ‘female’ resulting in 89% ‘female’ answers. There even exists a forum thread in \textit{Radola} that aims to list all male members of the community “to prevent them from becoming lonely”. Also every player interviewed for this study apart from one were women despite the fact that no interest towards women in particular was mentioned in the invitations.

As I briefly introduced in Section 1.1, the historical timing of the work is significant here, too. Sims skinners are not the pioneering group of female players who, fighting space for women’s participation, aim to reveal the masculine contents of the games, but in fact a large group of very ‘mainstream’ players. But if we look at the numbers of \textit{The Sims 2} skins, such player participation, while more numerous, has not gained the attention it, in my opinion, deserves. My goal is to help filling this gap that exists in the studies on gender and gaming. It should not only be the explicitly resistant cases of player co-creativity that gain scholarly attention. I will discuss the value of such form of skinning that does not explicitly aim to challenge the ideology of game or game development cultures.

In addition to feminist studies on game modifying, also in the a broader context of Game Studies skinning is generally understood as the player’s way to subvert the game artifact and therefore as a way of being resistant. For instance, Flanagan talks about “[t]he subversion of the game in the form of skinning” (Flanagan 2003, n.p., See also Flanagan 2009). By being creative and taking the role of a producer instead of a consumer, it is believed, the player is allowed to change the game product that has traditionally been ex-

\textsuperscript{4}See for example \textit{Mod The Sims} http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php
clusively authored by its paid designers. Research of hackerism, fandom and tactical use of games, the three dominant theoretical perspectives to game modifying, all suggest such rebellious positioning of the player. While these categories share a quality of resistance, it is manifested in different ways in each relationship. The discourse of hackerism leans towards illegitimate use and mastery over technology, fandom emphasises critical use of a commercial product, and approaches of tactical art concentrate on the political resistance expressed through game modifications themselves. Such studies on off-game player-creativity often group all forms of game modifying together either as hackerism or as fandom or as tactical art and lead to categorising modders as ‘special’ case among everyday players. These categories are not separate forms of player engagement, but their separation has more to do with different theoretical approaches into a same practice instead.

Therefore, in what follows, I will concentrate on exploring what are the aspects of Sims skinning that become highlighted when it is explored from the points of view of hackerism, fandom and tactical use of games. I will suggest that we need to explore both the motivations of such resistance and the gendering of the identity positions these categories allow. What seems to challenge such accounts is the way in which the idea of resistance seems to be vitiated in Sims skinning because the game itself supports and invites such participation in various ways. Not all games are reworked to the extent The Sims 2 is. Therefore, alongside discussing resistance in such practice, I will

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5A similar account on the studies of media fanzine communities has been proposed by Camille Bacon-Smith in her book Enterprising women: television fandom and the creation of popular myth, where she suggests that some studies “have inadvertently projected a distorted picture of the group [fanzine communities] as a whole.” (Bacon-Smith 1992, 282)
suggest ways in which skinning is allowed, invited, suggested or afforded\(^6\) by the game. I wish to illustrate that it is not a coincidence that skinning as a practice is particularly popular among *The Sims 2* players, and unpack some of the ways in which the game invites its player to do certain things and denies the execution of others, or represents some aspects of in-game everyday life as interesting and shows others as unimportant, renders it compelling to modify, but only in certain ways. I am interested in whether resistance itself can be invited (if there is a thing called ‘facilitated resistance’) and where is the line between the two.

### 4.2 Skinners as Hackers

Where the farmer suffered the enclosure of pastoral commons, the hacker must resist the enclosure of the information commons. (Wark 2004, item 197)

Olli Sotamaa writes that the history of modding traces back to “the first generation of hackers” (Sotamaa 2005, 108). Given the histories of both computer gaming and mod making in software development, the discourse around modding often builds on a stronger discourse of hackerism. Accordingly, modding is discussed as hackerism’s counterpart within gaming communities: mods are understood in parallel to *hacks* and modders are referred to as *hackers* (e.g. Sotamaa 2005, Flowers 2008, Jones 2006, Lowood 2006). It is argued that it is the skills of game designers that are acquired by hobbyist modders. Modders constitute a group of players whose technological knowledge and skills enable them to take the power of a designer and change what is to be played. This

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\(^6\)The term ‘afford’ is used in its everyday meaning here. While the Gibsonian (Gibson 1977) and Normanian (Norman 1998/1988) concept of affordance can be used in a similar manner, concentration on cultural meaning and symbolic invitations of this work marks a difference to such theories. What my idea of an affordance shares with these accounts, however, is a concentration on the kind of suggestions that a technology makes about its use.
technological superiority raises them above typical users as they are able to tweak the code, to master it, and to create (subversive) alterations to it.

That some systems are closed from taking into possession, from free development and from gaining perfect mastery over them (Turkle 2005), renders such activity resistant. As the use of hackers’ knowledge and skill in such cases (or their technicity, see Dovey and Kennedy 2006) is restricted or forbidden by different kinds of mechanisms that have been created in order to maintain the centralised ownership of information, such as copyright laws and IP (intellectual property) rights, what is understood as hacking often appears unruly and rebellious. Behind such activity lies ideas of ‘information that wants to be free’ and of every individual’s right to use and create information as she wishes (e.g. Wark 2004, passim). It is in the heart of hacker cultures to understand that everyone has the right to make use of information. Therefore, hacking takes the form of resistance against systems that aim to claim some information, in a way or another, for themselves.

McKenzie Wark’s book *A hacker manifesto* (2004), quoted above, frames hackerism as a new class battle between the hacker class and ruling ‘vectoralist’ class that “control[s] the vectors along which information is abstracted, just as capitalists control the material means with which goods are produced, and pastoralists the land with which food is produced” (Wark 2004, item 029). In such discourse, hacking is understood in terms of “reclaiming authorship (or coauthorship) of a technology by supporting transparency and unanticipated use. It is a critical as well as playful activity circling around a Do-It-Yourself approach to the means for our interaction with the world, circumventing unwanted limitations.” (Busch and Palmás 2006, 30)

In this process, technology is seen as both the means to an end and the end of such work itself as the access to information is gained by “using technology in a way that it’s not supposed to be used” (hacker Ralph interviewed
in Jordan and Taylor 1998, 764) and the very mastery over the technology is one of the motivations behind the activity. Hackers wish to master technology and use it for their own purposes, which means that they want to overcome the possible restrictions that deny such mastery and thus need to find illicit ways to pass them. What the notion of hackerism essentially casts over modding as a discourse is the rebellious and illegitimate undertone of such activity on one hand and the emphasis on control and mastery over a system on the other hand. Furthermore, this mastery is about mastering a system in terms of knowing how it works and being able to change the underlying code on which it is based.

In such a discourse of hackerism, and modding as hackerism, the very resistance becomes romanticised. As Jim Thomas (2005, 606) suggests, “the romantic view of being part of a social revolution” is something that lies in the core of the discourse of hackerism. It is therefore almost impossible to consider a form of hackerism that would not embrace this aspect of glorious and strongly political resistance. An overwhelmingly mysticising aura and rhetoric that produces book titles such as *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (Levy 1984) arguably needs unpacking if we are to cast such a heritage over new kinds of practices, modding and skinning.

If we then approach skinning as hackerism, three main aspects need to be taken into account. First, the illicitness of hackerism and many modding practices in general is challenged because Sims skinners are not involved in an illegal or unwanted user engagement since skinning is actually supported and encouraged by the game and its developers, as I will discuss throughout this chapter.

Second, concentration on skinners as modders as game hackers is challenging because the hacker identity is highly gendered both in a cultural discourse around hackerism, in cyberpunk literature for instance, and in terms
of its values that include mastery, concentration on the system/logics of the
game and thrill of an illicit activity. The identity of a ‘buccaneering’ hacker
which bases on the daring ‘raids’ on a supposedly monolithic establishment,
causing its gendering as masculine, is especially challenging for women who
wish to identify as such: “Scratch the surface and the hacker is revealed as
an idealized white male subject.” (Dovey and Kennedy 2007, 136) Tim Jor-
dan and Paul Taylor (1998) suggest that “[h]ackers construct a more intensely
masculine version of the already existing male bias in the computer sciences.”
(Jordan and Taylor 1998, 767, See also Thomas 2002) It is this technologi-
cal competence combined with the gendering of hacker activities as masculine
that often also over-complexifies the readings of skinning as modding. While
Schleiner (1998) seems comfortable with the concept of a hack when discussing
skins from a feminist perspective (See Section 4.3), I will suggest that it is
exactly the gender stereotypes associated with hackerism that challenge any
straightforward conjoining of The Sims 2 skinning and such cultures. Fur-
thermore, such hacker communities are often suggested to be hostile to women
(e.g. Turkle 2005, Levy 1984).

Third, because of this emphasis on the code and logics of the game, skin-
nning appears unimportant as a form of modding as seen from the perspective of
hackerism. While the tradition of hackerism emphasises the logic and mechan-
ics of a system (over the graphics and the looks of things), game modifications
are also considered as those alterations that change the program code and
functions of a game. When skins are approached as mods by scholars and in
game cultures, they thus seem insignificant and trivial in their contribution to
those aspects of mods that modders traditionally respect. Considering ‘just’
the surface of the game, the graphics, the making of skins does not emphasise
hacking skills or technological knowledge.\textsuperscript{7} From this point of view, skins can be also characterised ‘disposable’ since they do not change the logic of the game, but ‘only’ add to the looks of it.\textsuperscript{8} The kinds of competencies required from skinners are not the same as those dominant in the discourse of modding as I will discuss in Section 5.3.1 of the next chapter.

The aforementioned ‘superficiality’ contributes to the separation of the cultures of skinners and modders of other games.\textsuperscript{9} The dominant modding spaces mark \textit{The Sims 2} as a game that does not belong to the modders’ sphere and correspondingly exclude skinners as outsiders. Skinners then are not included in the dominant discourse around modding. This marginalisation is further emphasised by the fact that modding has traditionally concentrated on FPS and RTS (Real-Time Strategy) genre and other games that by their masculine content engage different groups of players than \textit{The Sims 2}. This is to say that since the playerbases of FPS/RTS games and \textit{The Sims} games differ drastically, their modding communities are far apart from each other.

An example of this exclusion can be drawn from \textit{ModDB} forum which claims to be “the premiere online community that unites developers, players and their ideas, empowering them to shape the games we play” (\textit{ModDB} profile

\textsuperscript{7}It is interesting here that the first time graphics were integrated in games, this was suggested by a female. Steven Levy writes about Ken and Roberta Williams who are some of the pioneers of game development: “It began to sound good to Ken. Ken Williams could usually smell some money to be made, and he thought there might be enough bread in this for a trip to Tahiti or some new furniture. ‘This sounds great,’ he told her, ‘but to really sell you need more. An angle. Something different.’ As it happened, Roberta had been thinking lately how great it would be if an adventure game were accompanied by pictures on the computer screen. You could see where you were instead of just reading it. She had no idea if this was possible on an Apple or any kind of computer. How would you even get a picture /into/ a computer? Ken guessed they could try.” (Levy 1984, 297)

\textsuperscript{8}This is not entirely true either, as I will later explore in Section 4.3.2.

\textsuperscript{9}Which may in fact be beneficial for women in some respects as I will suggest in Section 5.3.1.
on Steam Community forums\textsuperscript{10}). Among tens of other games, the forum has got a section that concentrates on \textit{The Sims} series. Typically in \textit{ModDB}, popular games have tens if not hundreds of mods sent to the forum and the discussion concentrates on the mods themselves. However, no mods (or skins) have been sent to the section of \textit{The Sims} games. And out of couple of dozen messages on this specific section most of the messages have nothing to do with mods and some even mock the game. \textit{The Sims} series thread on the forum has comments such as “You are gay or a girl if you play this game...”\textsuperscript{11}, “i used to like this game..... for about a minute! i got sick of my sims and made them swim and then sold all the ladders so they couldn’t \textit{sic} get out!:D:carefree:” and “me too! got boring very fast. HIGHLY overrated”. I will return to this marginalisation of skinning in Section 5.3.1 of the next chapter where I discuss it as one of the ways in which skinning is rendered invisible.

However, while the reality of being a skinner might be characterised by exclusion from dominant modder communities, I wish to explore if and how the motivations of skinners overlap with those of hackers’. This section will concentrate on discussing the kind of pleasures skinners find in their practice. While it appears that the hacker discourse emphasises intentional and conscious resistance, I will show that skinners do not seem to share the hackers’ ideological basis for their contribution. This does not mean, however, that they have nothing in common.

\textbf{4.2.1 Skinners’ Motivations: Easy and Convenient Challenges}

The players I researched are primarily making new clothes for their sims and have various motivations for such skinning. Every single one of them also has

\textsuperscript{10}See \url{http://steamcommunity.com/groups/moddb}

\textsuperscript{11}This extract is from September 2009. The specific post has now been removed from the forum.
two or more reasons for creating their own content. But what usually motivates
them to try skinning in the first place is a curiosity about the possibilities
available.

**Simmer3:** The main reason for me to start creating my own pieces for
the game was my curiosity and my knowhow, which made it possible to
try. I mean that I was interested to see if I was able to create them as
well as to know how to make them.

**Simmer1:** I got more and more interested in creating my own content
when I was surfing the web pages of all skillful 3D modelers and admired
their new things. I just felt the urge to try something [...] 

**Simmer4** is very explicit in this stating: ‘I started to make download-
able just because I just wanted to give it a try’. Also Simmer9 has got similar
view on why she creates skins.

**Simmer9:** I think that I also wanted to prove myself that I can make
those. First I made very simple clothes, because I thought that would
be the best place to start from. I made those out of photos first, but
then decided to learn how to draw the textures by hand. I usually start
creating a new piece out of mere interest to try. Once I decided to draw
new hair textures, because I wanted to know how well I can succeed.

It is very clear from the interviews that the players are involved in skin-
nning because it offers them challenges that the gameplay itself could not offer.
One player suggests the requests other people make of specific skins as a chal-
lenge.

**Simmer3:** [...] wishes are like challenges for me, it is nice to try if I
can do it [...] 

Correspondingly, personal skills development is an essential part of the
challenge.

**Simmer3:** It is fun to do something where you can see your develop-
ment, and what you are good at!
Players often refer to the improvement of their skills by talking about ‘terrible’, ‘poor’ and ‘horrible’ skins they used to do in the beginning. By such statements they acknowledge their skills development and their technological knowhow.

This idea of challenging oneself is suggested to be a common motivator for hackers as well. For example Jordan (2008) writes that alongside fun and ideological basis, intellectual challenge is what interests hackers in software coding. Meanwhile, Taylor (1999, 65) writes that among hackers there is only “a small group whose interest is motivated out of mischief and malvolence” while most of the hackers are “hacking out of sheer curiosity”. Touching the gender issue discussed earlier in this chapter, Taylor writes that “[t]here’s a macho prowess to hacking, it’s a challenge”. Hector Postigo’s study on the ‘Duke It Out in Quake’ mod for Quake III Arena (1999) resulted similar suggestions: the modders of the game could not for example see their wrongdoing in regard to copyrights but instead emphasised their own enthusiasm over the original game (Postigo 2008).

While being challenged by a technical task seems common to skinners and hackers, skinners are not interested in the code per se but rather wish there were easy-to-use tools available. The challenge posed by skinning, while it eventually results changes in the game’s code, may then be based on different, and perhaps more feminine, competencies such as taste (See Section 5.3.1). There seems to be a clear difference between a relaxing and fun challenge and a more compelling skinning and modding that requires further technical expertise. One player describes how she avoided getting involved in skinning in the beginning because she did not actually know much about the required technical competencies.

Simmer4: I thought making of downloadables is like hard code editing, so I left it to others.
4.2. Skinners as Hackers

Later she makes a point that she would not be doing skinning if it required coding. The players interviewed have a string of prejudices against what they consider coding and wish to stay out of it.

**Simmer4**: I have tried coding, but I would not do downloadables if it would require it [coding].

The interest towards skinning does not build on mastering the technology. Instead, what encourages them to try is often a feel of easiness. There thus appears an interesting merging of challenge and easiness that the players find appealing.

One player finds skinning relaxing and differentiates it from ‘boring mind work’.

**Simmer1**: The work is fun and relaxing, also an excellent alternative to boring mind work.

**Simmer5**: [...] I started to feel like trying to make clothes myself, because it seemed rather easy.

Easiness is often connected to available tools as the first quote above already indicated with the note about the player’s earlier knowhow. The following player describes how she got interested in skinning because the tools for doing it were provided and they were easy to use.

**Simmer2**: I got interested in creating skins already with The Sims 1 [when] I bought the Deluxe package or something and there was this program with which one could easily make clothes to Sims.

The same player later suggests that she would not even be interested in making skins if there were no tools available. It appears that skinning for her is not worth the trouble of developing or searching player-made tools.
Simmer2: I do not like creating new content for games that do not offer [game] developer-made tools that make it easier to create custom content, I think it would require too much effort.

This comment could also be read as a way of constructing a conformist ‘good girl’ identity – that the player only creates skins if she is encouraged, and supposed, to. Furthermore, when asked about altering the mechanics of the objects instead of concentrating on their graphics, players suggest in unison that they would rather leave such work to hackers more knowledgeable than themselves. Quite often the players are downplaying their own skills and emphasising how demanding object hacking could be.

Simmer3: I haven’t got into it at all. For some reason I am not interested, and in addition I know it is technically so difficult :) It would require me to really put my mind to it and I can’t do it, because modding is anyway a nonsense hobby. Usually people who hack objects have a lot of experience in coding and other mystical stuff. It is not fun to do something you are not compelled to do. I don’t even feel that wouldn’t that be nice to do a hack like that or so. And if I ever feel like that, there’s usually such hack already available :) I don’t like inventing the wheel again.

One player notes that much more could be done with the game, but is not interested in such a complicated practice.

Simmer7: But older and more computer savvy people can do miracles with The Sims 2. Personally I haven’t got a clue how to edit meshes. I don’t like editing 3D models in general.

I was also interested whether the players would see themselves developing their own tools for skinning as such development characterises hacker communities. Again, players recognise hackers as more skilled than themselves. Based on my own interpretation of the Finnish terminology, I read the meaning of a ‘nerd’ here as referring to the hacker discourse as something demanding.
4.2. Skinners as Hackers

Simmer1: I haven’t participated in developing altering-modding-customising tools. I don’t think I would be able to do that; I am happy to leave such work to real nerds better than me. :D

As the players generally downplay their skinning in relation to coding, there are big differences in regard to how comfortable players feel with skinning skills. One player’s description of his unsuccessful attempts to create something is very typical.

Simmer7: I also tried to make jeans based on a photograph but it did not go too well. I’ve also tried making hair but nothing came out of it.

It appears as if the player is so certain about the lack of skills that he does not even bother to try or gain the skills required. Mastering the skills would have demanded too much effort on his part. Interestingly enough, this player is the only male interviewed for the study. Another player, after listing all the types of skins she has tried making, mentions specific kind of skins that she is not interested in creating.

Simmer3: I have made basically all other kinds of skins but hacks and furniture meshes. I have tried making hair, walls and floorings, camouflage clothes, meshes, makeups, skin colours and re-colourings, but I don’t particularly like it. I have made couple of quite satisfying walls, but I don’t think I am good enough in making other things.

The knowledge of specific tools and their features may have direct influence on what kind of skins are created. One player ended up creating a collection of feathery clothes, because a tool for creating feather patterns was available on the software she used.

Researcher: Could you please tell me how you ended up creating the feather collection?
Simmer10: There is a feather in the brushes of PhotoFilter, or a leaf (I don’t remember), and that’s how I got the idea.
The player’s confusion over whether the tool is a feather or a leaf further suggests that what the pattern was actually did not matter. The interviews suggest that a reason for creating a dress or a hairstyle is often arbitrary: that such model is easily available in the skinners’ own wardrobe or that skinner has recognised a pretty image when surfing. Skinners seem to be more interested in skinning itself and the challenges it offers rather than in the outcome of the work. I will discuss this in more detail in Section 5.1.1.

Creating skins with random textures and themes also exemplifies how the skins are often created without a direct connection to specific game situations or in-game needs for specific looks or items. Very rarely is it that the skinners themselves create new clothes because they ‘need’ such clothes in the game. This may nevertheless be the reason for other players to wish certain clothes as I will discuss in the following section.

4.2.2 Skinners’ Motivations: Sharing with Their Peers

Simmer6 has only sent a few skins to the Radola forum and notes as a reason that ‘Of course I am also a little worried about the critique of other players’. The player would be interested in sharing her work on the forum but is, as most of the players, careful with what kinds of skins they want to share with other people. Another player tells she is aware of other people’s opinions already when making skins.

**Simmer2**: I often find myself wondering ‘what would other people think about this? is this even good.’ and then it often leads to not finishing and publishing the piece of clothing.

The importance and support from the community is of enormous importance as the forum online works as a place to share as well as comment on other people’s work. Ultimately the reason for uploading work online is to make other players use them in their games and to show one’s skills. It appears
that alongside offering a personal challenge, the players create skins exclusively in order to fulfil other players’ needs in their games. Not very unlike hackers who aim for an ‘elegant hack’ to present for the community, skinners are interested in the opinions of other players. Jordan and Taylor (1998) suggest that peer recognition is one reason for people to engage in hacking. Similarly, Donald L. Pipkin (2003) suggests that hackers’ work can indeed be motivated socially among many other things.

This aspect of ‘showing off’ one’s skills is even more explicit in the form of skinning that is based on the requests other players make in Radola. On the community website, players who are not able to or interested in creating skins themselves, start forum threads by sending an image or a description of a skin, usually a piece of clothing, that they wish another player to create for them. An unoccupied skinner then takes the task and posts the readymade skin to the thread. The outcome is then evaluated both by the player who asked for such skin and the entire community who may tell whether they are going to download the skin or not or about the particular technical or more taste-related aspects of the skin.

Such a dynamic ties skinners and non-skinners together in a circle of knowledge and taste. The possibility for making requests is also an important reason for non-skinners to be active on the forum. While the forum has thousands of players registered, only a small amount of them actually creates skins. For some players, it is these requests of non-skinners that they concentrate on in their skinning practice.

Simmer15: Another key reason [for skinning] was fulfilling other players’ wishes, I haven’t been especially talented in this, but some paint-
As the administrator and creator of the forum, Simmer3 is in a particular position where she wants her site to serve as many players as possible. Therefore she writes that most of her skins she actually does as ‘a filling of the website’, not for herself.

**Simmer3:** Most of my first works I did to respond to a wish, and for doing so I got a pleasure myself.

For one player, there are several possible motivations for skinning, helping others among them. While other people’s wishes are a major motivation for her skinning, the player however mentions that it might also be the case that a wish is something she is not able, because of the level of her skills, to create.

**Simmer15:** Quite often I think about what the game lacks, and try to create those (e.g. proper wooden floor)[..] some of the ideas appear when surfing the net, if I find a nice texture or a picture I want to use it, in addition other people’s wishes work as inspiration on those rare occasions when they are simple enough for my skills.

Therefore, fulfilling other people’s wishes is not a straightforward procedure, but leads to negotiations on quality and skills. The idea of self-censorship is apparent from another comment, where a player suggests that some creations are not good enough to be sent to the forum.

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12 A ‘paintbucket’ here refers to a specific kind of skin that is understood not to require high technical skill. Paintbucket in the name refers to a function in *Adobe Photoshop* where any continuous area of an image can easily be filled with one colour. A skinner who ‘paintbuckets’ a piece of clothing simply picks one of the existing ones and re-colours it. Therefore, no shadows or shapes can be seen in the surface and such technique is most sufficient for creating planar surfaces such as walls.
4.2. Skinners as Hackers

Simmer9: I make downloadable mostly because of myself, but in practice I do send them [online] to be downloaded. Sometimes I tried to implement someone’s wish on a piece of clothing, but nothing came out of it. I simply do not like creating clothes I don’t like myself. Nowadays I am restricted from fulfilling wishes also because I don’t want to make clothes from photographs. They never end up being good enough for sending them to be downloaded.

Further, as the community critique may be harsh, it is a reason for some not to fulfill other players’ wishes.

Simmer4: It is rare that I do [skins based on] wishes, because a piece of clothing has usually been a kind that is very difficult to make into a neat whole.

Other players do indeed recognise differences in the skins created. Keeping in mind the small number of interviews, the interviews seem to suggest that younger players are more hesitant to send their own creations to Radola and fulfill other people’s wishes, while the most active content providers are on their twenties or older. Simmer1 suggests that she recognises meaningful differences in the quality of work based on the players’ age.

Simmer1: I would like to claim that generally speaking older and more experienced creators have a higher standard in regard to what kind of downloadable stuff is worth uploading [to the forum]. And I also feel that exactly the adults and older players who are most critical and less serious about their own work tend to call their custom content ‘things’ ;D

Furthermore, this oldest interviewee also notes that it indeed varies from person to person what kind of skins are taken well-customised and what is worth publishing.

While the skinners are forced to create skins of good quality and with accurate details, they also have power in regard to what they send to Radola.

Her final comment refers to the use of a term that downplays the importance of skins. According to her, she uses prefers to call skins ‘things’ in order to maintain a playful attitude towards the process of making them as well as emphasising modesty in their making.
Chapter 4 The Practice of Skinning:Resistance beyond Play?

and what kind of projects they adopt. Some of the interviewees suggest that
the kinds of skins they create need to please their own aesthetic sense. For
example, one player does not want to follow the latest trends in making skins
if they do not please her own sense of good style.

Simmer9: This is a tough question. It is not necessary that the clothes
are something I would use myself. This is a little bit hard question.
Usually people ask for clothes that I don’t like at all. I think it is
because those who ask are often many years younger than me and are
excited about every single trend no matter how awful it was.

Meanwhile, Simmer3 provides a whole list of things she does not create.

Simmer3: I don’t fulfill a wish which has’t been properly defined
(‘Standard granny clothes’, ‘Baggy pants for a teenager’), without a
proper pic (you have to see the clothing clearly and the pic has to be
large enough), I won’t do clothes with horizontal stripes (I hate hori-
zontal stripe!), or other patterns which I can’t stand, I don’t do clothes
either which I don’t like (like pink stretch jeans), not chauvinistic, racist,
sexist* etc clothes (not for teenagers or younger).

Therefore, the skinning requests and creating skins for other players
forms whole another dimension of skinning, an inherently social one. Radola
forum, as a platform for such exchange, brings together skin consumers and
producers. Players requesting certain kind of clothes, items or decorations may
need them for their ‘photo stories’ (stories about the sims’ lives illustrated with
gameplay screen captures) or for a specific family in the game, for instance.
The skinners enjoy the process of skinning itself. In this exchange those send-
ing out requests have the power to complain about poor execution while the
skinner themselves decide which works to provide and which not to provide.
In order to get the needed item or piece of clothing, it is important to know
how to ask and how to formulate the requirements. The forum administrators
further support this exchange by providing tips for making skin requests.

While age and interests of players of different ages is mentioned by couple
of participants above, it does not appear as a significant factor in regard to how
players describe their skinning or their motivations. Age does not seem to be of much importance on the forum either. Instead, Radola brings together players of all ages, who discuss and share their interest despite their backgrounds or individual factors.

4.2.3 Similar Motivations, Different Focus

When comparing the motivations of skinners with hackers, it can be proposed that some of them, namely those that have to do with peer recognition and technological challenge, are similar. But ideological resistance in terms of controlling information and technology is rarely experienced or discussed by the skin-makers themselves. The players interviewed do not consider themselves resistant just because they take the role of a co-creator and are able to change what is to be played, though they recognise themselves different from other players while involved in off-game creativity. More importantly, resistance does not characterise the skinners’ work either because skinning is actually supported by the game and cannot be considered as a way to bend the game’s rules or as a copyright infringement. As will be discussed later in this thesis, their involvement is closer to symbiotic and even exploitative co-creativity than the kind of ideological resistance that characterises hackerism. In the next chapter I will return to the notion of ‘hacking with permission’ and ‘positive hacking’ in order to argue the participants’ notions on hacking. For them, hacking is an illicit activity that, when done with permission, is not hacking any more. The appearance of Web 2.0 ideology of ‘democratised’ (von Hippel 2005) or ‘open’ (Chesbrough 2003) innovation literally brings together values that hackers have proclaimed for decades. Thus it seems problematic to discuss

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14 While finishing up this project, an article on modders’ motivations was published (Sotamaa 2010). I believe a comparison between the outcomes of this thesis and Sotamaa’s study form an interesting starting point for a future study.
hackerism of such systems in the old terms and with theories that fitted well together with traditional centralised media.

The characteristic of hackerism that is most dominant in the discourse around it, the illicit mastery over technology through the interest in computer code is less important in skinning. When it comes to mastering the technology, the skinners do think challenging oneself plays a part in what they are doing. However, they are not interested in the code itself or in mastering the game but rather adding to it and making it better in the spirit of the original. I suggest such form of game alteration is better looked as fandom and will look at it in Section 4.4. We can also approach this change in the original text as tactical art, which, similarly to accounts on fandom, leads to exploring the actual content that is being produced.

4.3 Skinning as Tactical Use of the Game

Previous section concentrated on introducing connections between skinning and hackerism. Through an overview of modding as hackerism I discussed its emphasis on mastery over technology and its gendering as masculine. I also explored ways in which modding and skinning appear similar in terms of technological challenge and peer recognition. For skinners’ identities, however, ideas of illicit activity and resistance appear alien. Therefore, I will now look

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15 This might approach the idea of being mastered by the game rather than mastering it. Giddings and Kennedy (2008) suggest that mastery is just one of the pleasures of computer game play and that there can be pleasure in being mastered by the game technology as well. Similarly philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer suggested that “a general characteristic of the nature of play that is reflected in playing: all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players. Even in the case of games in which one tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself, there is a risk that they will not ‘work,’ ‘succeed,’ or ‘succeed again,’ which is the attraction of the game. Whoever ‘tries’ is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game [...] is not the player but instead the game itself” (Gadamer 1975/2004, 106).
at another discourse that is related to game alterations: the *tactical* use of them.

Tactical uses of games are not entirely separate from the other two approaches, hackerism and fandom, that this chapter covers. As Geert Lovink suggests, in the current media sphere “[b]eing both hacker and activist is no longer a contradiction” (Lovink 2003, 17). Modern political media art requires such technical skill that any involvement in it can be seen as hackerism. How it frames the practice, however, is particular as it offers another kind of take on resistance emphasising the instrumental use of skins in order to bring out political messages.

Exploring skins as works of tactical art, Erkki Huhtamo writes that “[a] game patch artist may be motivated by ideological concerns, an urge to re-assert the role of the player as a (co)creator, or to subvert the prevailing gender relations, particularly the depiction of women as game characters.” (Huhtamo 1999, n.p.) This view of tactical art assumes an artist-activist who is aiming towards political change through technological competence. According to Lovink, tactical media encompasses a “temporary alliance of hackers, artists, critics, journalists and activists” (Lovink 2003, 271). Brett Stalbaum encourages us to make a direct line between hackerism and art: “It’s nice to think of artists as hackers who endeavor to get inside cultural systems and make them do things they were never intended to do: artists as culture hackers” (Rhizome 1998, 26 in Schleiner 2001, 224). The point of view of tactical use of games has indeed been one of the approaches towards skinning in earlier research.

Another concept closely related, and often synonymous, to tactical art is ‘appropriation art’ used within Game Studies by Martin Pichlmair (2006). Discussing ten examples of game appropriation art and highlighting the political importance of such art he states that “[a] number of pieces of Game Art can be regarded as contemporary Appropriation Art. These appropriations
of games are critical comments on politics, playing, and society.” (Pichlmair 2006, 1) For him, appropriation art extends from play to ‘meta-play’, since the player is rather ‘playing with the game’ than ‘playing the game.’\footnote{This division was earlier used by Newman (2005) in his article from 2005 as well as used as his later book title \textit{Playing with videogames} from 2008.}

Furthermore, in her essay from as early as 1998 originally, Schleiner calls game ‘patches’, this is skins, as “art strategies that provide an opportunity for feminists and gender hackers alike to influence the formation of new game gender configurations” (Schleiner 1998, n.p.). Schleiner also gives an exhaustive overview into what she calls ‘feminist game hacker art’ that, because of an excellent variety of examples, deserves to be quoted as such.

Some of the more amusing patches created by game hacker artists, (and they often create more than one), include the first person shooter Doom patch that morphs the attackers into monster-sized chickens and kangaroos, the Doom patch entitled ‘Barney and his Minions’, and the Marathon patch that replaces the game characters with different colored Gumby dolls. These patches undermine the extremely macho codes of interaction in these games by replacing the standard adult male characters with androgynous animals and goofy children’s fantasy characters. Although the category of ‘feminist game hacker art’ is premature since there are very few women participating in this realm of cultural production, there are female protagonists in patches that predate Tomb Raider, Resident Evil, and Vigilance. The Marathon Infinity patch ‘Tina Shapes’ and ‘Tina Sounds’ replaces the protagonist, ‘Infinity Bob’ with a female ‘Tina.’ A Japanese Doom patch entitled ‘Otakon Doom’ [...] replaces the protagonist with a Japanese anime girlfighter named ‘Priss.’ Another Doom patch replaces all the characters in Doom with the cast from the movie ‘Aliens’, including substituting Sigourney Weaver for the male protagonist. (Schleiner 1998, Game plug-ins and patches as proto-feminist hacker art, para. 2)

Discussing skins as a form of ‘hacker art’ Schleiner, who is a game artist and game art curator herself, suggests that skins can be subversive as they offer a way to diversify gender stereotypes in games. This is to say two things: 1) that players/artists have the possibility to change the content of games and 2) that this possibility offers them further power to twist the stereotypical female
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(and other) representations in games. The power players are supposed to have in this case is over the production of the games’ content (they are co-producers) and the ideology of the games (they can change what kind of ideology is portrayed through a game). And this power is gained by technological expertise that hackers possess.

In their book from 2006 Dovey and Kennedy present a classification of game-related co-creativity suggesting ‘tactical media’ and ‘mod art’ as two of its forms alongside fan art and co-creativity that strives towards independent game development. Also Dovey and Kennedy suggest skinning as tactical art. Their definition for tactical media practice in games suggests that such activity “seeks to use game forms and tools to make critical, subversive and oppositional works that both critique mainstream game practices and have comments to make about the wider social and political world” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 127). Theories of tactical media probably first grasped the subtle artist-activist agenda of political consumer practices. For Lovink, tactical media are “a set of dirty little practices, digital micro-politics if you like” (Lovink 2003, 254).

Dovey and Kennedy’s approach to tactical game art draws on Kennedy’s feminist study on female game modifiers. Kennedy’s ethnographic study on female players of a popular first-person shooter game, *Quake*, concentrates on players who, alongside forming women’s clans in the game, produce skins that add strong and, as she calls it, illegitimate and monstrous female characters. This practice needs to be understood as taking place in the context of a game which, to start with, is a highly masculine game with plenty of male characters and themes and activities that are traditionally coded hyper-masculine. In such context, women players use the power of their technicity to create female skins that challenge some of the ideological aspects of the game and thus work as tactical art. Kennedy argues that “[t]he female *Quake* playing community makes no specific claims to a feminist agenda or a feminist politics, yet it is
clear from the practices of the community that their activities are at least implicitly informed by issues which have been central to feminist critiques of technology and of popular culture.” (Kennedy 2006, 197) Similar findings have resulted from studies among science fiction fan producers who create seemingly feminist fan texts. Female science fiction fans are not necessarily attached to the themes of space exploration, but wish to extend their involvement with the characters via fan texts that concern the social relationships between them, Rhiannon Bury (2005, 72) suggests.

Thus, Kennedy’s work on *Quake* has a background significantly different from mine as the game that is being skinned in her studies is highly masculine in regard to the characters and narratives it represents. Games such as *Quake* and *Counter-Strike* with their male avatars set a compelling basis for women to create subversive player texts in the form of strong female characters and thus form an inviting object for studies on gender and co-creativity. For the *Quake* players Kennedy has studied, “[s]uch fantasy constructions of identity offer an exploration of alternative subjectivities in which being feminine does not necessarily equal being a victim or needing rescuing.” (Kennedy 2006, 193) The historical moment when the work was written was also a particular one in Game Studies and in game cultures. Kennedy’s research was one of the first ones to tackle active female players instead of suggesting ways in which games could be made better for women to play. Such work was timely in order to show the variety of women players and their pleasures. Meanwhile, as I will later discuss in Section 5.3.3, many of Sims skinners do not have experience of such masculine games that they could be resisting but instead limit their play to *The Sims 2* only.

Furthermore, the first-person perspective of *Quake* also forms a different basis for skinning than that which *The Sims* games afford. In regard to the mechanics of the game in *Quake*, the character that is being modified acts as
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the sole avatar of the player in what is often a multiplayer game. For female Quake players “[t]he skins often become the means through which a player will express aspects of her identity to other members of the community” (Kennedy 2006, 193) Meanwhile, The Sims skins are used in single player environment and on multiple playable characters. The attachment of a player to a first person single character in a multiplayer game is very different than that of multiple characters in The Sims. A pleasure very specific to The Sims in this regard seems to be when the game dresses an NPC with player-made content. One of the interviewees writes,

Simmer10: But immediately when I see a sim wearing clothes I have made in the city [which is one site where events take place in The Sims game], I pause the game and [call] right away: YIKES! Mom, one of my sims has my clothes on!

While Kennedy (2006) emphasises the technical competencies female Quake players gain through skinning and how these competencies allow them power in a masculine world, the situation may have changed over time. Kennedy’s interviews were conducted between 2001 and 2003, and one of her participants described her technicity as follows.

[...] I’d done some online chatting, used the computer for emails and played some free web games and stuff but I hadn’t thought of myself as any good with computers... A friend is teaching me how to use Photoshop on his computer and when I’m okay I’m going to try to do a really good skin and stick it up on the web. (Supergirls) (Kennedy 2006, 192)

Somewhat in contradiction, the players I researched can be considered very much computer literate. Since the beginning of the century, young people’s computer use has increased significantly in countries like the United Kingdom and Finland. The majority of teenagers are using both stable and mobile computers and communication devices daily (e.g. Carlsson 2010). In recent
years, social software and the use of computer technologies at school have further hastened the speed in which young people are introduced to new technologies and how easy is their adoption of these technologies. However, for many players of this study skinning does provide further competencies. This aspect of skinning will be discussed in Section 5.3.2. Furthermore, they are unconfident with their skills and downplay them as suggested in Section 4.2.1. For skinners engaging in a new kind of practice that involves new kind of technicity admittedly is about learning skills that are considered masculine and about entering a masculine field of game modifying in this respect.

If we return to Dovey’s and Kennedy’s game art categories, mod art, as different from tactical art, is understood as a practice of more traditional fine art that takes advantage in the new forms of expression offered by computer game media. Acknowledging the overlapping of the two categories, Dovey and Kennedy use *Velvet Strike* as an example of tactical art. *Velvet Strike* is a famous in-game intervention where the artist, Schleiner, uses anti-war graffiti placed in game spaces as a critique towards the war on terrorism and the attached politics.\(^{17}\) However, what Dovey and Kennedy suggest as characteristics of mod art originally presented as characteristics of game art in general by Grethe Mitchell and Andy Clarke (2007) – remixing, referencing, reworking and reaction – match very well with the workings of *Velvet Strike* as well. Whereas establishing rigid borders between the two is not interesting, what brings the two together is a critical agenda of an artist and the use of games as tools for possibly activist and usually political bias. This indicates the connection between activism and hackerism, sometimes referred to as ‘hacktivism’. Therefore, the terms mod art, tactical art and hacktivism are interchangeably used in explorations into game modifications that share a subversive approach.

Somewhat similarly to Schleiner’s and Kennedy’s proposition, Poremba’s\(^{17}\) For further information, see http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/about.html

\(^{17}\)
work (2003a) presents anti-war game skins, patches and in-game events as subversive art works. Poremba identifies Schleiner’s later artwork from 2002, the aforementioned *Velvet Strike*, that consisted of “a collection of spray paints to use as graffiti on the walls, ceiling, and floor of the popular network shooter terrorism game ‘Counter-Strike’ ” and was featured in the *Wired* magazine in June 2002 with a title ‘Make Love, Not War games’ (King 2002). Alongside the set of graffiti images decorating the games that are being critiqued, Schleiner posted a manifesto on her website describing her subjective feelings about the time after ‘9/11’. In the manifesto, she emphasises her own personal account of game mods that were made soon after the event and that added new characters, such as Osama Bin Laden, into popular war-themed games. In this case, game modifications were made to draw our attention to the sometimes disgusting realism of games that simulate war even when actual and seemingly unjustified battle that our nations may be involved in is taking place. Such anti-war modifications criticise not only the violent content of the games themselves, but also actual war, global politics and military achievements. Games are used both as a target and a means of criticism.

### 4.3.1 National Identities and Creativity: *The Sims 2* and the Finnish

Female game skins and anti-war images in popular computer games are both excellent examples of tactical media and how the technological openness of game systems can be empowering when it is turned to favor players’ art projects that are resistant and subversive. As tactical game art in general, such cases are nevertheless rare and also highly invisible to an everyday player. While the approached form of Sims skinning does not seem to fall into this category, it is possible to find tactical aspects in the skins the players I researched create. A good starting point would be found in what I call skins of national identity.
that resist American cultural hegemony.

While such creativity does not encompass all players, skins with Finnish imagery and meanings do exist. The interviews suggest that at least some Finnish players have taken seriously the advantage of being able to alter the game to correspond to national imagery and values. Results from the interviews propose that not only is locally designed furniture included in the game but replicas of traditional farm house chairs with time-worn features and ‘juntti’\textsuperscript{18} bachelors have also become parts of the virtual environment not to mention several saunas and Finnish-style outhouses.

Such player-created content is also well valued by other players on the websites where distribution of custom content takes place. The customisation through modification of a high-brand product is not unique in relation to computer games in general but examples from The Sims 2 definitely suggest more local and positioned emphasis on the content produced. The Sims games invite concentration on aspects of everyday life that maintain more national meanings than most contemporary games.

In order to look at The Sims 2 as a possible artifact of American cultural hegemony or ‘Americanisation’, it is important to recognise the ideology it offers for its player. This ideology has partly been discussed in Section 3.2. The Sims games are situated in a Northern American suburb and a house, with a family, is the focus of the game. The Sims game series represent values and content strictly linked to ‘Western’, if not North American, white, middle-class, culture and suburban lifestyle. Thus, in the case of The Sims 2, the settings, themes and ideology of the game do not represent a global transnational culture, but a very specific Northern American one instead. The home

\textsuperscript{18}This Finnish word is probably best left without translation. The term refers to a stereotype of an uneducated and unsophisticated, often but not necessarily rural, person whose taste and behaviour are not up to a perceived par.
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in *The Sims* represent a very particular domesticity, something that Flanagan describes as a ‘glorious icon of the American dream’ in post WWII United States (Flanagan 2003). *The Sims* does not represent a Finnish home and has very little to do with, for example, a Japanese home. Yet the particular North American domestic settings serve an important purpose. And yet, *The Sims* is a global cultural phenomenon in 60 Countries and 22 languages and has a player base of more than 100 million (Electronic Arts 2008).

Interestingly, the represented domestic settings are familiar to players from several films and television series. A discussion thread *Radola* includes players’ comments on such extensive familiarity with Northern American Culture that is has already become invisible. Without firsthand experience from the real life players do not question why the newspaper in *The Sims 2* is delivered on the front yard or why breakfast options include pancakes even when these customs differ drastically from the customs of their own culture. The Sims players on the forum suggest that they have been exposed to Northern American culture via cartoons and television programs for so many years that they had not even thought about it. Interestingly, however, the represented domestic settings are familiar to players from several films and television series. It can be that the domestic settings familiar via the American cultural hegemony play key part in the success. Players write on the forum:

I haven’t even thought about the whole thing about American content, so it definitely does not bother me. And even the mail boxes are prettier than Finnish ones.

The American culture in The Sims does not matter I don’t even notice it!

I haven’t really paid any attention to it, but now that you say I can see it.

I would like to suggest that it is partly due to the exhaustive cultural specificity in the game that has made it so successful in general and an object
of modification in particular, because such settings propose concentration on aspects of our everyday life that are usually very local.

But some players seem to have noticed. One player even suggests her interest in skinning has to do with Finnish content.

**Simmer1**: I got more and more interested in creating my own content when I was surfing the web pages of all skillful 3D modelers and admired their new things. I just felt the urge to try something, like make that Finnish bath whisk\(^{19}\) and something that wasn’t available anywhere else.

Three distinctive categories of player created skins that point towards national aspects can be found: local Finnish brands, cultural icons and traditions and localised anti-consumerist content. Among the brands used in skins are *Marimekko* (home textiles) and *Kalevala* (jewelry), which are simultaneously global trademarks and local brands (See Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2).

\[\text{Figure 4.1: Player-created } \textit{Marimekko} \text{ bedsheets. Source: } \text{http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/viewtopic.php?t=10209&mforum=radola}\]

In Finland, such brands and items are known by everybody and possessed by many. Scandinavian countries and Finland are commonly known from their design. This is mentioned in the game, too, since the description of

\[^{19}\] A ‘bath whisk’ is a bunch of fragrant boughs of silver birch bound together. They are commonly used in sauna, by beating oneself or one’s sauna partner, in order to stimulate the skin and remove tension from the muscles.
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the Satinistic Loveseat suggests that “Everyone loves the look and comfort of Scandinavian furniture design” (See Section 3.2.4, Figure 3.2). Offering famous Scandinavian design items and furniture skins for global distribution makes sense as also foreign players are able to recognise these objects. Arguably, the idea of Finnish national identity is largely built on innovation in industrial design. As Roland Robertson suggests,

[W]hat is called local is in large degree constructed on a trans- or super-local basis. In other words, much of the promotion of locality is in fact done from above or outside. Much of what is often declared to be local is in fact the local expressed in terms of generalized recipes of locality. (Robertson 1997, 26)

While certain aspects of the Finnish culture are reproduced in the form of skins, the emphasis on brands suggests about the importance of strong consumerist values of the game. The game thus invites modification, localisation and customisation only in some regards and not in others. What is included from a national culture is not only globally recognisable, but also made mean-

Figure 4.2: Player-created Kalevala jewelry. Source: http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/viewtopic.php?t=14012&mforum=radola
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meaningful within the structure of the game and its emphasis on accumulating wealth and purchasing everyday items. Most of the players I researched do not create skins that would break the consumerist, suburban settings and ideology of the game, but clothes with different patterns and items with everyday looks instead. In this regard their participation is in line with the dollhouse-type of play with conventional characters and everyday settings, while none of the skins they talk about include supernatural or out of ordinary aspects.

Although the original game content does not represent any specific brands, addition of such content is a logical continuation of the consumerist orientation of the game. Also the designers of the game have later understood this potential and introduced IKEA Home Stuff and H&M Fashion Stuff packages for The Sims 2. However, much of what was included especially in the IKEA furniture expansion had already been produced by skinners.

Marimekko, with its colourful patterns that easily change the looks of a sim home, are among the most ‘skinned’ Finnish products. Many of the players interviewed do use skins that feature Marimekko textiles in their game, and two of them have actually created some. One such player notes that the making of ‘Finnish houses’ requires a special consideration also in regard to the furnishing. Therefore it is important that a variety of such skins is available. The meanings associated with skins that represent real life objects also seem to bear the values and social status associated to them. So, such local features are not pure decoration in the game.

For example, one player categorises Marimekko products according to their use in her everyday culture. During the interview, she aims to prove her own understanding on how marketing of such products works and how some more ‘stupid’ people can be easily cheated to believe in marketed conceptions on the false status of certain items and clothes.

Simmer15: I would say the Marimekko Unikko (poppy) pattern com-
pares well with Burberry’s tartan. I think there’s something corny in their success, like ‘I am a better person as I can afford these.’° But as far as I know, the common view is very different.°°° Marimekko is a strong brand in Finland, and respected by all age groups.

Personally I like many prints by Marimekko, but I cannot appreciate items with Unikko fabric or shirts with horizontal stripes. First, they are not pretty and second, people have been overusing them for a long time already.

So, the elegant sims who rarely occur in my game may well have Peikon-lehti (splitleaf philodendron) bedsheets as a part of their sophisticated decoration. Unikko pattern and especially its overuse is reserved to those ‘we are not junttis and we are better than our neighbours’ junttis.°°°°

The player thus shows her cultural capital and brand-awareness in recognising differences in Marimekko patterns. She suggests that the popular patterns bear less value than those more ‘sophisticated’ recent designs that only an ‘elite’ finds interesting and can afford. In Marimekko’s marketing, Unikko has indeed been presented as ‘everybody’s Marimekko’ whereas other patterns have not been used in items such as coasters and socks but remained as textiles only. This kind of cultural sensitivity to consumer products, namely brands and fashion, is something that Sims skinners express and will be discussed in Section 5.3.1.

In skinning, local taste, cultural heritage and traditional lifestyle thus become reinvented within the frame of American suburban consumerism. Such skins are more about fitting Finnish-ness into American system than about arguing against its core values. Such skins reinforce homogenisation of national culture, and heterogenisation of global culture.

According to Robertson (2003) we could call such customisation ‘glocalisation’. Glocalisation is about how global is adopted in local settings so that homogenisation and heterogenisation cannot be seen as opposite but rather interrelated and simultaneous processes. Discussing the customisation of jeans in different countries Robertson, referring to George Ritzer’s idea of the Mc-

°°°°See the meaning of the term ‘juntti’ in footnote 18 in this Chapter.
Donaldisation of the world (Ritzer 1993), notes that such globalisation is actually working as a basis for localisation (Robertson 2003). Paraphrasing Richard Wilk (1995), J. MacGregor Wise (2008) also suggests that in global capitalism, the differences between national cultures are standardised.

...[w]hat global capitalism does today is that it actually promotes difference [...], and it thrives on difference. But it promotes only a certain type of difference, and ignores other differences. It promotes the types of differences that can be easily packaged and sold, the types of differences that are not threatening to global capitalism. By promoting a limited range of difference, it limits the range of actions available to people. (Wise 2008, 43-4)

The contents of skins are then in accordance with the ideology of the game that represents cultural difference through commercial items and stereotyping. A Brady Curlew (2005, 1) writes that “below its progressive façade The Sims amounts to an exploitation of diversity initiated by targeting untraditional markets to better tap into the consuming potential of millions of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people what Hall sees as the commercial appropriation of difference”. In the creation and distribution of such skins Wise’s description of global capitalism seems to hold well: “Be as different as you want, but only in certain well-defined ways that won’t rock the boat” (Wise 2008, 45).

There is, however, some indication of anti-consumerist content being created by players. These skins include graffiti, dirty faces, crumpled rugs and broken and dirty furniture (Figure 4.3, Figure 4.4 and Figure 4.5). Such skins are not essentially representing Finnish culture, but aim to produce an alternative to the ‘flawless’ game items and characters.

One of the participants, for example, is very proud of an acne face she has created. She mentions that it is interesting to fight back the ‘perfect’ game characters with such skins.
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Figure 4.3: Player-created face with skin problems for the sim characters. Source: http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/viewtopic.php?t=14008&mforum=radola

Figure 4.4: Player-created dirty face for the sim characters. Source: http://www.createphpbb.com/radola/viewtopic.php?t=7906&mforum=radola

Simmer15: Somehow I get satisfied when I manage to ‘ruin’ the marble surface of the game with some impurities of real life. With imperfect features, a sim gets more personality. I think I become more attached to sims who have wrinkles, acne etc. and then it is easier to develop a story around them in my mind.

Another player mentions a classic Finnish wooden chair as her favourite of the skins she has made herself. The downloadable set of one chair model comes in multiple colours including four broken and worn looks. The player

says she uses such skin in her sim homes inhabited by ‘junkies’ and ‘peräkammaripoika’ from Finnish rural districts. ‘Peräkammaripoika’ in Finnish refers to a socially restricted middle aged, sometimes alcoholic bachelor who may or may not still live with his parents (although the etymology of the term refers to living in a ‘back room’) but nevertheless cannot take proper care of his personal hygiene and housekeeping. The player interested in such characters explains:

**Simmer1**: So why in heaven’s name would I play conservative American middle class dream, when there’s a possibility to play totally against the grain and so something you like yourself... ;D

Furthermore, the interviews suggest a category of national game content that is based, not on brands and commercial products, but on national symbols such as sauna and famous Finnish artists. In addition to sauna objects and posters of performing artists, skins include in-game paintings representing famous art from the period of Finnish National Romanticism. One of the participants has created various Finnish artifacts to the game, but is most proud of her bath whisk.

**Simmer1**: For me and my rural sims this bath whisk is a must – and I think that this still is the greatest single object I have ever, counting from the very beginning, created to the Sims myself!
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A sauna room was later introduced to the game officially. In the group interview one of the players notes that it was a result of insistence by the Finnish players.

**GroupSimmer1:** That was something people wanted very much and EA Finland send some feedback there, to the throne room in San Francisco, that we want a sauna. That it seems to be the one wish over everything else and it was then quite well executed that sauna...

But not all players participating the group interview were happy about the way it was implemented.

**GroupSimmer2:** But then in the end you can’t do anything with it
**GroupSimmer1:** No, you can’t
**GroupSimmer2:** At least I can’t, I was first so happy that now we have a sauna
**GroupSimmer1:** Why isn’t there ever a Desire ‘to go to have sauna’? It would be nice, it wouldn’t have been so hard to implement. Now they just sit there wrapped in towels looking stupid.
**GroupSimmer2:** And then they have towels on...
**Researcher:** Can you even throw water [on the stones]?
**GroupSimmer2:** I don’t think so, they just sit there...
**Researcher:** Do you get anything from it?
**GroupSimmer1:** I think the Comfort raises or something ... there could have been a feature in there that if you go to sauna the Hygiene stays filled up longer or something like that, [now] it is like a frivolity
**GroupSimmer2:** Yes, and then, it is like a separate shack. So if you want to make it fit together with a bathroom, that would be a huge task. Especially because I don’t personally use any of the building features but always pick up a readymade house instead and hope it is readily pretty

The players are not happy with the fact that while *Maxis* has included in the game a sauna that does not function but rather acts as a decoration. Finnish players are nevertheless lucky in having an aspect of their culture
included, although the Sims version of the sauna is clearly drawn from the world of luxury hotels rather than Finnish tradition.21

To conclude, it appears that the domestic settings of the game welcomes a productive approach that emphasises the player’s own everyday items and symbolism. The Finnish skins represent a form of lived Finnishness that allow the player to re-live and pre-live everyday situations and to ‘decorate’ and stage such moments. This characteristic of games as a form of popular culture remains unique to them. It may also be that players outside Finland download content that represents Finnish everyday life and thus get introduced to the culture. Such Finnish content can be read as resistant because some of it attacks the original American ideology and resist the plasticity and the flawlessness characteristic to the original content.

However, only a small proportion of the skins the players I researched create includes national, Finnish, meanings. These works can be approached as tactical art, but they are better understood as attempts to include in the game something from the player’s personal life rather than proposing political resistance or agenda of some kind. However, while such skins may appear politically resistant (willingness to play against the consumerist grain), the players do not mention an attempt to influence other players or make a difference within a community. More than political resistance, these works are examples of cultural resistance.

Finally, instead of resisting the American ideology of the game, many of the participants of my study seem to be encouraged to create Finnish content simply because they are not interested in creating skins that already exist or that are too common in the skin sharing fora. Thus, the creation of Finnish content serves a simple purpose of producing something new and innovative in

21 The sauna room came together with The Sims 2: Bon Voyage expansion pack in 2007, which included aspects of primarily Asian cultures and items related to leisure activities and hotels.
which case such creativity does not imply resistance over the original American content.

4.3.2 ‘Surface’ Modding and the Ideology of the Game

Interestingly, one widely known Finnish brand, Nokia, is not present in player-made skins. Perhaps a reason for this is that the looks of such physically small technology would not make much of a difference to the phones that already exist in the game. This means that the game does not invite the inclusion of such relatively small everyday items, because the player’s view to the game does not represent small items as interesting to look at.\footnote{Further, there are neither mobile phones in the original game, nor mechanics that would make a difference between the use of static and movable items.} What is included in the game needs to be graphically meaningful in regard to the technological specificity of the game. One way to see how the game is localised by its players is to look at the dualism form/content. It is ‘only’ the surface of the game system that becomes localised and customised. Therefore the inclusion of certain items and design is limited to their visual aspects. It could be argued that whereas the global and American structure of the game remains the same, it is only the cultural content that is localised.\footnote{For the distinction between structural and cultural components of global products, see Joseph Straubhaar (2006).}

However, the relationship between the cultural ‘surface’ of the game, the graphics, on which skinning concentrates, and the structure of the game is not that straightforward. Skins do not simply operate on the surface of the game without changing the intrinsic mechanics of the game. In fact, anti-capitalist skins rise an interesting challenge to the concept of game mechanics altogether. They do have the power to change the ideology of the game when it comes to the central mechanic of the game: spending money. It is up to the player creating a skin to decide which one of the original items of the game to alter.
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For instance, if one remodels and re-colours the cheapest in-game chair into a broken and old-looking one, not much change takes place in regard to the ideology of the game. But if one remodels the most expensive chair, the one that also provides more comfort and satisfaction with environment to the sims living in the house, something interesting happens. It suddenly becomes desirable for the player to have such cheap and shabby furniture. In fact, the game mechanics then propose such a home as the most expensive one in in-game currency although the cultural meanings of individual objects suggest otherwise. The player is then probably striving for broken and ugly furniture in order to keep her sims happy. A lifestyle that requires the cheap-looking furniture then appears as the best one available.

The player can also do the opposite by skinning. If she decides to replace a cheap piece of furniture, i.e. something that offers neither comfort nor happiness for the sims, with a piece of design furniture, i.e. recolour the cheap piece of furniture with ‘high design’ looks, the ideology of consumerism as represented in the game is shifted. The player can then acquire a highly fashionable design home with almost no money at all.

Here one could say that the in-game ideological mechanisms should be approached independent from those of this world. However, since players attach values and importance on objects based on the discourses of real world, it is evident that the worlds are not entirely separate. The meanings of players’ everyday culture are in play while skinning as I will later discuss in regard to taste in Section 5.3.1.

Nevertheless, there are ways to alter the game in regard to its inner functioning as well. For example, Teen woohoo ‘hack’24 makes it possible for teenage sims to ‘try for baby’, as it is expressed in the game, and to become pregnant. Meanwhile, Autonomous Put Away Leftovers helps in home

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24Note the use of the term ‘hack’ here based on how they are called on modder forums.
maintenance as it automatically puts away any food left overs that otherwise would need to be cleaned up by family members or a maid.

A more exhaustive idea for modification of the game was suggested by Faranak Fotouhi-Ghazvini (2008) at the Women in Games Conference 2008. Fotouhi-Ghazvini presented a model of what The Sims would look like if it were ‘halal’. According to it, the capitalist values represented through need bars of The Sims could be substituted by those delineated in virtue ethics. While The Sims games are banned in Iran, the game culture of which Fotouhi-Ghazvini is interested in, a halal game would better answer to the requirements of the government. Fotouhi-Ghazvini for example suggests new sim status indicators that tell about the attitude of a sim towards the sufferings of other people or in regard to making good deeds. Compared to extensive goal-related changes like this, making of skins may seem insignificant.

Due to this work’s concentration on skinning, such modifications are left outside of it. It could be suggested, however, that when the player has the technological access and abilities to actually change how the game works as a system, much deeper alterations in the values could have been made.

### 4.4 Skinning as Fandom

We can now see that neither hackerism nor tactical use of games fully grasps the practice of skinning. A goal to aim for political resistance through skinning seems to suit better with games that concentrate around themes that are understood masculine and that include primarily male characters. In such games, the player’s possibility to make an impact with a female character, for instance, is much more substantial than in The Sims 2. I proposed that some co-created Sims content that aims to alter the original American representations with their own national symbols seem closest to tactical and appropriation art.
However, I concluded, even those skins are facilitated by the game’s ideology that is largely about consumerism. They do, for instance, merely replace American furniture with furniture that represents major Finnish brands. Therefore, the kind of resistant position offered by tactical use of games is, too, unfamiliar to Sims skinners. In seek of a better alternative, this section approaches the last of the three discourse associated with skinning that will be discussed in this chapter: fandom. In Game Studies, the term fan is often used to refer to skinners and modders in a similar way as the term hacker. This is done without further definitions or developments – in a casual manner and by borrowing the term from the fan cultures without theorising it.25 Further, somewhat confusingly, some texts refer to modders simultaneously as hackers and as fans.

I will now look at how the theories on fandom could explain skinning as well as discuss whether the resistance suggested by such approaches would, better than that of hackerism, help to understand the work of the skinners. Like hackerism and tactical art, also fandom implies a resistant position. Approaches to resistance in the studies on fandom take two steps. First, fans are understood as special members of audiences, those who are productive and create texts of their own. This has been seen as a resistant position among other users/members of audience who ‘simply’ consume (Jenkins 1992a, Consalvo 2003b, Consalvo 2003a). It is a precondition for every study of fandom that fans are somehow different from other, usual media users and audience members. Otherwise the entire concept of fandom would become obsolete. Drawing on his research into 19th-century music lovers, Daniel Cavicchi (2007), for in-

25In Wirman (2009), I categorised different productive game fandom practices based on how they reflect the original content. The basis for this categorisation was a notion very common within Fan Studies that fandom draws on a special interest towards a text and manifests itself through textual productivity. While the topic is not central to this study, it might interest those looking at how game fandom differs from traditional media fandoms.
4.4. Skinning as Fandom

stance, writes about fans as those who refuse to accept the anonymity and limited involvement of audiences and who want to extend their roles as members of audience toward more active participation and engagement. Very often this activity is presented as a contribution to textual productivity. Second, a way to think about fans’ resistance more specifically is to think about the appropriation of texts that fans are engaged in. Fans alter, recontextualise, rewrite and reconstruct the products of cultural industries creating fan texts that can seem subversive.

The two aspects of resistance, while closely connected, also form two methodologically different perspectives: those that concentrate on fan texts and those that concentrate on the fans, their identities, experiences and pleasures, themselves. This section looks at fandom and fan productivity from the point of view of resistance following these two lines of thought.

4.4.1 Fan Productivity

Emphasis on resistance and textual productivity among a group of audience members or users is, indeed, what is unique to Fan Studies in comparison to audience research in general (e.g. Hills 2002, Sandvoss 2005). The tendency to concentrate on fan productivity is familiar especially from first- and second-wave Fan Studies where fan texts offered a tangible and perhaps easy basis

26Rather confusingly, tactical media not only brings art, activism and hack- erism together, but connects to fandom through its theoretical background. The notion of skinners as resistant fans draws on the same sources as studies that approach skinning as tactical art. While tactical art builds on de Certeau’s ‘tactics’, fans are seen as ‘textual poachers’ based on de Certeau’s idea of poaching the everyday life. This poaching encompasses the acts of individuals in order to subvert the parties in power. His ‘tactic’, thus, is indeed this very act of poaching. That de Certeau’s work has been widely used in Social Sciences and Cultural Studies both to understand fan practices and to look at art practices hints the interesting overlapping of these two domains. Whereas tactical art leans toward mundane and away from institutionalised and author centered art, at the same time fan practices reach artistic practice and show substantial expressive and critical value.
for explorations into resistance and power relations in general (e.g. Sandvoss 2005). These days, fandom is often discussed based on texts that are considered as an outcome of fannish activities (Hellekson and Busse 2006).

Fans rework, cocreate, and recirculate texts that are possibly derivative and appropriative, or as Abigail Derecho (2006) suggests, archontic\textsuperscript{27}, in regard to the original content, as the texts seem to be ever expanding and never completely closed (for example, when fan fiction is written based on existing characters from a television series). For Fan Studies, Matt Hills argues, it is fans’ creativity as producers that “has formed the basis for theorisations of fandom which celebrate this ‘activity’, whether it be video editing, costuming/impersonation..., folk songwriting and performing or fanzine production” (Hills 2002, 39). While the mental production of meanings, interpretations, and identities has long been one of the interests of Fan Studies, the new and altered material forms of culture created by fans are arguably one of the biggest themes on which scholarly work, both on fandom in general and on games fandom in particular, has concentrated.

Such critics find fan texts to be important markers of the creativity, rather than passivity, of fans. Fiske (1992), for example, argues that all audiences produce their own meanings and pleasures around the products of the culture industries, but fans divert this semiotic productivity into some form of textual productivity. In the same spirit, Henry Jenkins (1992b) suggests five further levels of fan activity, one of which covers the particular forms of cultural production and artwork such as fan writing. Also, in her brief history of media fandom, Francesca Coppa describes the development of “bigger, louder, less defined, and more exciting” fandom in the early years of the 21st century, such as Harry Potter fandom on various online fora, and states that “media

\textsuperscript{27}Derecho (2006) introduces the term \textit{archontic literature} in order to discuss fan productivity without the hierarchical liaison as well as questions of ownership associated with appropriative and derivative works.
fans are making more kinds of art than ever before” (Coppa 2006, 57). It is thus the critical textual productivity of fans that this section concentrates on.

Before discussing skins as fan texts, I need to emphasise that such an approach is not without problems. This is because gameplay itself is productive already as a nonfan activity as discussed earlier in Section 1.3.3. Where Fan Studies want to make a difference between typical media users and fans emphasising the productivity of the latter, computer game players are, in addition to being consumers (Hills 2002), always already actively participating in the construction of a game as they experience it – thus producers of one sort without being fans. For this reason, computer games offer a good, but an extremely confusing opportunity for explorations on fandom and co-creativity.

It then is just a matter of preference where the line between configuration (See Section 1.3.3) and co-creativity (See Section 1.3.4) is drawn. If we for example suggest that players become co-creators when their participation affects other players’ play, this can be done both through configuration – in multi-player games – and through co-creativity – by offering skins for them to play with. Therefore I will make a clear working distinction here. What I discuss in relation to player productivity and co-creativity in the latter parts of this chapter considers only those forms of productivity that can be seen extra-textual, i.e. the creation of those texts that are beyond the actual gameplay as productivity, the skins, and not what is usually considered as gameplay (configuration).

It is also very important to note that in comparison to the fan texts of many earlier media, the creations of game fans become actual parts of their object of fandom. And when the skins are shared online, not only the creator herself, but potentially thousands (and globally millions) of other players may alter their game with a fan text. Meanwhile, by offering specific kind of tools, EA and Maxis can to some degree control the kind of content that becomes
created and shared within the community. Player-made tools as well as official ones, however, have both made it possible to create so-called adult content and items that some players find offensive. While Radola operates independently from the developers and distributors of the game, it is then the administrators of the forum that take care of censorship if they see a reason for it. The rules of the forum define, for instance, that racists and chauvinists are not welcome.

4.4.2 Appropriation in Taste

When approaching skinning from the point of view of fandom, the focus is on skins as fan texts and the relationship between original and fan-produced content. Such resistance in fan texts is best conceptualised as appropriation. It is indeed that in the studies on fandom, fan texts are generally discussed as subversive and appropriative. In regard to games then, Postigo, among others, suggests mods as derivative works and as appropriation of the original (Postigo 2008).

In this respect it is important to explore what the players think of the game content they are so eager to change and add on. What is mentioned in almost all interviews is that players strongly dislike the original style of The Sims 2 homes and the characters’ clothing. In addition to the excitement of skinning and enjoying the challenges it offers and for reasons that draw on the community and social aspect of skinning, the game content itself seems to encourage players to skin. Such content, the players suggest, is both limited in terms of quantity and tasteless in terms of quality. For example, as if assuming one would definitely prefer downloading player-made skins to one’s game, one player suggests it “is possible to manage with the original content if one has no possibility to download” skins. The player introduces many ways in which the original content could be improved. Hair and face skins are something without which she finds it hard to play.
Simmer5: The range of available clothes is quite limited, there could be more alternatives in colours, some casual outfits for women could be labeled as evening gowns, the selection of items is quite ok, some textures are just weird and odd and don’t please my eye, but it is possible to manage with the original content if one has no possibility to download [skins], but hairstyles, makeups eyebrows made by maxis are horrible, and that’s what I usually download first.

In general the players are also very critical about the taste as expressed in the game’s original content.

Simmer15: Objects, hairstyles and other are partly quite okay, but some of them are pretty awful, ugly. Even if you counted all the expansions, the selection of objects, clothes, makeup and hair are small and resemble too much each other. In addition, they are not very detailed, which results in a ['']plastic[''] whole.

Many participants accompany this player in the critique towards the tasteless style of items and character features.

Simmer1: The readymade stuff in the game – whether it was objects, wall or floor textures or sims’ clothes – are besides rather awful and in all their tasteless American lower middle class suburban home style such that you cannot possibly use them alone in the game! [...] no sane player would use readymade stuff exclusively. ;D

Simmer2: Some original stuff is nevertheless just totally horrible, sofas with floral patterns and such disgusting things.

Simmer3: Yuck, readymade clothes are just horrible ;D They are ugly and really unfashionable and colourless and yuck ;D

Another player suggests that the designers lack expertise in regard to fashion and style.

Simmer3: They would indeed need a fashion coordinator, nowadays they seem to get their ideas from magazines targeted towards ‘Fashion for grannies who suffer from urinary incontinence’ that has been made in the eighties...
The players further assume that such critical viewpoint is shared among players.

**Simmer7:** I mean, everybody knows that EA creates horrible clothes and genetics [as in facial features and skin colours.]

Many players go into great detail describing the flaws of the game, but which aspects of the game are disliked varies from player to player. For one player it is the ‘genetics’ of the game that are not satisfactory.

**Simmer6:** Well, I use downloadables primarily because I don’t like the genetics/clothes/items that come with the game. I am especially pissed with the genetics and I have therefore obtained substitutes to eyes and skins.

The player then continues describing how this criticism is a result of an acquired taste and suggests that “not until I heard about the downloadables and really started downloading all kinds of stuff did I start, little by little, realise how shoddy the original items and clothes were”.

It appears that while Newman suggests that “[b]y holding the visual style and artistic skill of the official texts and their producers in such high regard, [pieces of fanart] have become the virtual benchmark for contributions whose creators aspire to ‘industry standards’ of production” (Newman 2008, 73), Sims skinners propose that they create even better quality than that featured in the original game. Primarily, the players suggest their superiority in regard to understanding good taste and style as well as fashion.

The original content seems to be simultaneously rejected and secretly enjoyed. For example one player accepts a small concession to the exclusive use of custom made content.

**Simmer6:** I do use readymade outfits sometimes, because they are nonetheless pretty.
4.4. Skinning as Fandom

Sometimes the players explicitly recognise their appreciation of the style of the original. The game seems to remain respected and its style copied, but its content is considered tasteless, as one player writes,

_Simmer2_: The original clothes and objects are lovely, I try to make my own clothes in a sims style, so that they are not just photographs [as they are created out of photographs]. Some original stuff is nevertheless just totally horrible, sofas with floral patterns and such disgusting things.

Another player who has suggested the content is tasteless also admits respect towards the original.

_Simmer1_: In a way I do respect the accomplishments of [The Sims 2] game designers and their ways of creating content and the spirit also in my own content.

It may thus appear that the players are in disharmony with their preferences since they keep playing and embracing the game content which they so much dislike. However, this very merging of frustration and admiration is familiar from earlier media fandoms. Jenkins has suggested that simultaneous appreciation and questioning is one of the characteristics of fandom.

> [t]he fans’ response typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media. Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within the original works. Because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests. (Jenkins 1992b, 23, See also Sandvoss 2005, 17-8)

The players extend the game in a way that respects the original and aims to add to it instead of changing it into something entirely different. Working on the photorealism of the game is one of the areas where the balance between the players’ preferences and the original seems to differ from player to player, however, as I will discuss in the following.
4.4.3 Appropriation of the Represented Model of Realism

Alongside criticising the game’s content in terms of variety and taste, players are opinionated about the realism and photorealism of it. Some of the players think that customised content can reach better photorealism than that of the original game. Other players, meanwhile, suggest that it is important to preserve the kind of cartoonish style of the game’s graphics. For example, one of the players explains that a poster of a real life public figure created based on a photograph would not be suitable in the game. However, a poster created based on that figure’s sim character look-alike would be fine (See Figure 4.6). Another player, meanwhile, suggests that the real Sims puritans are those who aim to maintain the original cartoonish looks of the game. In her comment, the player seems to be proposing herself as a true fan of the game.

Simmer1: [...] I am one of those Sims puritans who would under no circumstances like their game to look too realist or photorealistic.

Figure 4.6: ‘In the Beginning’ painting is one of the decorative items available for purchase and exemplifies the cartoonish ‘simmified’ style of the game.

In the opposition are those players who seek realism in details who can for example find the ‘genetics’, the physical features of skin characters, insufficient.
A player writes how more realistic eyebrows and makeup, for example, can be found in skins.

Simmer5: Eye brows are, to my taste, too wide, and in makeup it is the lipsticks that is somehow too plain and eye lashes should stick out better, there are too few hairstyles and they are not very realistic, since I personally prefer realistic style.

Similarly, another player likes it when the game better resembles real life, when it is more realistic. While this comment is rather vague, it may reflect that there is more potential to draw parallels to one’s own life and the sims’ lives – and to test out fantasies for example – when the game is more realistic.

Simmer6: Downloadables, clothes, makeup and hairstyles bring the game closer to real world. Sims look more real.

In more contradiction with the original content are the skins that reveal intimate body parts that are originally censored. In order to use these features of the game, the player needs to use a hack that removes the blurring that appears over exposed private parts. Plenty of skins are created in order to represent such body parts as realistic as possible. One player suggests such content as a way to add realism to the game. But because there is nothing ‘under’ the censored (blurred) body parts, one needs to download skins in order to actually make these areas look realistic.

Simmer15: And when I aim for realism I have of course downloaded so-called adult downloadables, skins with nipples and private parts for men, since the plastic Barbie bodies look quite scary with the censorship hack.

But realism in texture and graphics seems to come with meanings of real life, which some players find uncomfortable. Many players seem to prefer to keep the game cartoonish, because realistic content implies realism in the storyworld. This is to say that with photorealistic content comes the realism
of real life, the values, ideologies, cultural meanings etc., as well. Some players suggest that the game should not share the values and activities of everyday life. One player suggests that too much realism might indeed appear somehow uncomfortable.

**Simmer2**: Preserving original style makes the sims nice, if everything was entirely realistic and like in photographs I would honestly speaking feel awkward about it. I don’t want it to be too realistic.

Another player is concerned about erotic custom content that might ruin the ‘holy’ space of the game. This reflects the players’ need to separate the game space as a space where they are free from some of the pressures and meanings of their daily lives.

**Simmer2**: There’s sex everywhere in the society nowadays and it would be nice to keep The Sims as a game of relaxation or alike.

Another player gives an example about creating expensive clothes for an audience consisting of young girls. Again, it is proposed that certain negative or troubling issues of real life should be left out of a game that is meant to be fun.

**Simmer3**: At the same time I like a bit more casual style, I aim to concentrate on clothes that me or other players could find in their own wardrobes, not just Dolce+Gabbana etc.

Furthermore, the players want to reject the perfection of the original content and add features with more ‘realism’ and edge. Such creativity can be understood as resistance against the flawless representations in the game.

**Simmer15**: I started making downloadables by making my versions of the ceilings and floors of my apartment at the time. They did not look like the real ones, but somehow I still like those poor things. I wanted to have a bit of grubby reality in my sims game, since downloadables all seemed like luxury products. I mean getting cosy things into my game was one of the main reasons why I started trying to make skins.
Thus, the game with a seemingly realistic setting seems to offer a safe place for fantastic adventures. After all, some such features are already included in the game through ghosts and other supernatural aspects. While the framework of everyday life allows players to easily learn the game mechanics as well as ‘soften’ the masculinity of computer gaming, players are not interested in bringing their mundane themes and problems as such into the game. This is very similar to romance novels and soap where everyday space offers a stepping stone for the most miraculous events. One player is especially articulate in proposing her experiences about the realism of the game and how this connects to her everyday life. First, she acknowledges that she prefers to keep the game ‘cartoonlike’.

**Simmer8**: For me the sims has a somewhat cartoonlike quality. It’s not directly copying reality it’s more of a comedy or even parody. There are supernatural creatures, weird ways to die, sims swirl when they change their clothes, etc.

She later elaborates this in regard to photorealism.

**Simmer8**: In terms of simmifying it means that I like objects that are created to be a seamless part of the game’s universe. = simlish writing on things, no real photos or photoskinning (at least it should be edited and handpainted on top), instead sim images are used as the base for, for instance, paintings and photos.

Thus, the sim universe should, according to her, be kept as it is, and custom content should go through a process of ‘simmifying’ in order to be made suitable for the game world. Meanwhile, she suggests a potential contradiction here: if the whole game is about realism, how come it is that she does not accept realism in it.

**Simmer8**: Like not mixing incompatible materials (sounds nearly religious). But I’ve not thought much about why it means something to me to not have too many direct everyday references – despite the whole game being that. Maybe it’s a free space?!
This contradiction is evident in a friend’s status update on Facebook when she writes: “[name] wonders why, when baby sleeps and laundry, cleaning etc. is done, she finds it most relaxing to manage virtual Sims households...?” It seems that some of the players use The Sims for escapism from their stressful everyday lives of being mothers and taking care of the home. These spaces offer both control over the things that are not under their control in real life as well as alternative fantastic and supernatural solutions to issues.

**Simmer8**: Both the playing and the managing of files, keeping order, etc. I think that this for me somehow becomes a bounded space that I can control and order. It’s a contrast to my life with young kids, work life that I feel somewhat trapped in, etc. So in that respect it’s blatant escapism.

One player suggests that it is the customised content that allows the dealing of everyday issues in a ‘game form’.

**Simmer15**: It is somehow nicer to play a game that looks like its mine, as such it works as a ‘therapeutical device’, as you can transform things that annoy in the real life into game form.

Many of the players also suggest that they are interested in skins because through them they can play with furniture and home decorations as well as expensive clothes they could never afford in real life.

**Simmer8**: My childhood was poor and I didn’t have a lot of money as a student either. But here I could get so many different styles of clothing and furniture. Things I’d never get for myself because it was too wierd [sic], impractical, ugly, expensive, or didn’t suit my taste. But with the sims I could experiment.

Playing out dream scenarios is also in the heart of these thoughts.

**Simmer1**: When I create content and build houses in the Sims, it is all about living through the dreams, dream houses and ideal reality virtually and playfully.
Simmer7: I don’t actually consider interior design as my IRL hobby, I do it just in the sims. If I had all the money in the world I could indeed like to decorate in the real life as well but my economic situation is what it is.

Simmer3: I like pretty clothes, shoes etc. and it’s nice to surf on the sites of mail order companies, looking at them, because I don’t have the money to buy much of them and no chance of using them, it’s nice to make them for somewhere. Visual pleasure :D

One player talks about her interest in building houses instead of playing with the characters and suggests that the game allows the implementation of ideas that would not be realisable in real life.

Simmer4: Building [houses and homes] also has got that positive side that you can really make houses yourself, and because it is the sims, you can make buildings that could not be possible in the real life.

The interviews suggest that the game offers a safe place to live through confusing everyday situations and to realise dreams. Players also seem to wish to keep it as a space that is somehow different from the real in order for it to remain separate enough. References to everyday life such as clothes from the players’ own closets and designer items of Finnish origin add to the realist feel of the game, but keeping them ‘simmified’ helps in maintaining the separation to the off-game reality. Therefore, the realism refers to many things at the same time. Yet, the game is not a direct simulation of real life.

The players generally wish to include aspects of everyday life that make the game more realistic in terms of the selection of items available. Meanwhile, these individual items should not appear too similar to those of this world in order to create a possibility for escapism. Some aspects of the real they wish to leave out entirely as this, too, restricts the kinds of fantasies that can be played out in the game.
4.4.4 Fandom in Participatory Cultures

I have suggested that the players’ explorations into the appropriation of the original *The Sims 2* content maintain a critical approach to their chosen game similar to those of other fandoms. Fans in general are considered particular in their resistance since their resistance is based on admiration and loyalty. A majority of skins do not contradict the values and ideology of the original sim universe, but add changes in regard to taste and graphical quality of the already existing representations. These skins do not try to stand out from the original, but instead smoothly blend into it. As such, the skinners’ engagement appears closer to that of fans rather than that of hackers or using skins tactically. It seems that in skinning appropriation acts out through the experiences of expertise and taste. I will look at these closer in Section 5.3.1.

Furthermore, marking a move from what is usually suggested about other media fandoms, the skinners’ participation is made possible and encouraged by the game itself. While the original items, clothes and textures are strongly evaluated by the players, their perceived poor quality creates a basis of creativity that strives to create a better game in regard to taste and realism, in addition to personalising or localising it. This results in a striking volume of player-created skins that complicates the straightforward reading of skinning as fandom.

We might ask if and how fan productivity is distinct from everyday media use – including gameplay – that is inherently productive in current participatory media cultures. Given that in current media cultures everybody is invited to be productive, it is crucial to consider to which extent it is possible to approach player co-creativity as fandom. Is considering the creation of new skins or other game modifications as fandom, for instance, to misread them or charge them with importance and effect greater than what actually exists?

My explorations into skinning as an act of fandom suggest that if resis-
tance in fandom is understood as a critical, productive user position over the object of fandom, drawing a clear line between fandom and co-creativity in participatory cultures is not only extremely difficult but probably also unnecessary. Jenkins envisages that “[a]s fandom becomes part of normal way that the creative industries operate, then fandom may cease to function as a meaningful category of cultural analysis” (Jenkins 2007, 364). Similarly Postigo writes that,

Today, due to the rise of digital technologies as important tools to mediate and produce content for the cultural industries, the participatory culture once found exclusively in fandom may be in the midst of a fundamental transition from being, as Fiske noted, ‘associated with the cultural tastes of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race’ (Jenkins, 1992b), to becoming mainstreamed and associated with empowerment through creative participation and technological know-how; on the cutting edge of meaning-making. In this sense the ‘cultural economy of fandom’ is born anew; no longer situated in small communities to create local cultural capital. (Postigo 2008, 70-71)

While skinners’ creativity may appear similar to earlier fan practices, the following chapter will concentrate on how the players “play ‘by doing’ The Sims”, as one player suggests. In such a view creativity is not an extension of adoration towards the game, a fan activity, but the whole engagement itself.
Chapter 5

Skinning as a Way of Playing

*The Sims 2*

In the previous chapter I discussed skinning *The Sims 2* through hackerism, fandom and tactical use, since these have been the three dominant approaches to game modifying. When discussing resistance in such practice, a closer look into hackerism and fandom reveals that whereas hackers are resistant towards economic, legal or societal arrangements, fans’ resistance is often targeted towards the content of the original fan text and simultaneously critical and admiring. What leads to productivity in hackerism is an urge to try and to share information, whereas fandom builds on loyalty towards a product and a need to make it even better. Tactical art, at the same time, is more about making statements through productivity and appropriative texts. Poremba establishes this division by suggesting that fandom is a form of parasitic intervention, while hacktivism is tactical in nature (Poremba 2003a).

I suggested that while some aspects of skinning can be meaningfully described as political resistance or subversion, aspects emphasised in these earlier studies on modding, such accounts do not suffice in exploring the gendered characteristics of skinning. I also proposed that the ways in which the
game itself supports and invites skinning challenge any straightforward readings of skins as subversive works or as fandom. When skinning is looked at from such perspectives, it often appears insignificant and unimportant exactly because of its lack of explicit resistance. Understanding skinners from these perspective thus means labeling them as something skinners do not consider being themselves. Most importantly, various aspects that characterise their practice and identities better than political resistance and appropriation are left unconsidered. The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on them.

Where this chapter aims to go, then, is towards an understanding of skinning as a way of playing the game, rather than as a practice that aims to appropriate it. I will start by discussing skinning from the point of view of participatory cultures that emphasise every user’s active creative involvement. I will introduce ‘simming’, the making and sharing of skins as a way of playing The Sims 2, and continue to ponder its resonance with ‘women’s leisure’ as something that is utilitarian and productive. I discuss the idea of invisibility, as in the ‘culture of the bedroom’ (McRobbie and Garber 1976, McRobbie and Garber 2005), as another characteristic of skinning as a feminine practice. Following this line of thought, I explore the ways in which both the marginalisation and the special nature of skinning The Sims 2 contribute to how the practice is rarely recognised in game cultures.

The last part of this chapter aims to articulate how such forms of leisure are negotiated by women and how they affect their player identities. Instead of trying to define skinning as a subversive practice where the skins themselves bear political meaning, we can approach the participants’ resistance as founded on the process of skinning as a way of playing The Sims 2. This marks a move from looking at the relationship between the game and the player towards the implications of being a player in a larger social and cultural context. As Kennedy (2006) suggests, we should be more interested in players’ technicity
and the power that co-creativity itself offers despite the criticism expressed through the skins themselves.

5.1 Player Co-Creativity in Participatory Cultures: Simming

Studies that emphasise – and romanticise – subversion and resistance tend to marginalise practices that do not seem to have sophisticated and exceptional, possibly political and without a doubt resistant, agenda behind them. Jean Baudrillard made a point that this emphasis on the resistant devalues and renders negative those practices that are about ‘mere’ consuming and practiced by masses.¹

The subject-resistance is today unilaterally valorized and viewed as positive – just as in the political sphere only the practices of freedom, emancipation, expression, and the constitution of a political subject are seen as valuable and subversive. But this is to ignore the equal, and without a doubt superior, impact of all the object practices, of the renunciation of the subject position and of meaning – precisely the practices of the masses – that we bury under the derisory terms of alienation and passivity. (Baudrillard 1996/1985, 85)

According to Newman, such a tendency is emblematic for Game Studies as well since “the ‘everydayness’ of videogames and, in particular, the consumption of games through the routine practices of play, is not well represented in the game studies research canon” (Newman 2008, 11, see also Crawford and Rutter 2006).

While earlier approaches to skinning often cherish subversion and resistance over mainstream consumption and brand loyalty, Sims skinning seems to be situated closer to the latter. This is because the game invites its players to

¹This line of thought is forcefully shaped by the Frankfurt School valuation of Marxist ideology (cf. Durham and Kellner 2006).
be productive and to create new content for the game. This section explores how focusing on Sims skinning addresses the everyday, and the more routine practices of play, and thus contributes to filling the gap suggested by Newman. What this has to do with resistance, then, is nicely suggested in an extract from the group interview.

Researcher: How about that other word, hacker. Is it something that you would use in everyday conversation, is it at all...is it like entirely...
GroupSimmer3: Is it possible to hack The Sims?
GroupSimmer1: Well, at least one can hack into Radosims...
GroupSimmer3: But I don’t think one could do it to the game...
GroupSimmer1: mm...
Researcher: Well, some could think that making downloadables is kind of about hacking the game. Because you are kind of, you’re changing the original...but you don’t think???
GroupSimmer2: But then the opportunity has been given, I mean then it has nothing to do with hackerism, because it has almost been the whole point to let people make the game as they wish.
GroupSimmer1: It is like hacking with permission, it is positive kind of [hacking], it is about developing that game.

Approaching this idea of ‘hacking with permission’, I will first map out the ways in which The Sims 2 game invites players to be productive as players. I will then discuss if skinning, which appears close to the forms of productivity in participatory cultures, can be meaningfully conceptualised as exploitation of players’ creativity and labour. Finally, I discuss how the participants’ identities are simultaneously built around skinning as a way of playing the game and in contrast to what they think is the actual or assumed way of playing it.

5.1.1 The Sims 2’s Invitations for Co-Creativity

The Sims 2 has been exceptional in regard of the amount of fan created texts, because it invites alterations to character features and items. An emblematic answer from a player implies that in comparison to other games, The Sims 2 game is something that she finds herself particularly tempted to modify.
5.1. Player Co-Creativity in Participatory Cultures: Simming

Simmer2: The Sims is the only game I would like to rework, other games I play would just get worse, not better, if I changed something in them :DD

Throughout the previous chapter I have already suggested various ways in which the game invites its players to be productive and to create skins. First, skinning has been made accessible and entertaining with modifying tools that are readily available (See Section 4.2.1, Poremba 2003b). Second, the original content of the game is often considered tasteless, or less-sophisticated, and encourages to enhance it (See Section 4.4.2). Third, as the everyday setting of the game originally introduced in Chapter 3 were further discussed in Sections 4.3.1 and 4.4.3, I proposed that the familiarity and everyday settings of the game encourage to find matching elements from one’s everyday environment and to add them into the game. Fourth, in Section 4.3.1 I discussed how the game sets out a ‘Western’ consumer ideology and suggests that the quality of one’s life can be enhanced through new and more expensive items and clothes.

But these are not the only aspects of the game that contribute to it as a skinning platform. In Section 3.2.3 I explored how the dollhouse discourse circumscribes the game and emphasises the importance of characters and their customisation. Characters are presented as flexible through the introduction of different parameters, such as motivations and needs, and the looks of the characters can be changed. The possibility for identification and role play further encourages customisation of the characters according to one’s personal preferences and fantasies.

What is also important in regard to concentration on characters are the visual qualities of the game (Wirman 2008b). The graphics of The Sims are very detailed and the looks of everyday items and objects such as telephones, yellow school buses and meals on plates take a realist representational form. The game is in 3D and the player is able to zoom in individual objects and sims as well as zoom out to provide a broader look. She can also view everything
from several angles. Zooming creates an emphasis on the detailing of clothes and pieces of furniture. Such emphasis on the graphical details of the clothes and items draws the player’s concentration on them and thus invites skinning.

In addition to these thematical and practical invitations to create skins, the open form of the game creates a kind of democratic setting for the player to take actively part in the creation of the game in the form of setting up new rules and goals for gameplay. The player is made to believe she has power to co-create the game, not to simply follow goals set for her. Louisa Ellen Stein (2006) suggests that it is the special expansiveness of *The Sims* games as texts that allow fan texts to be created. The game is, she writes, “well suited to the exploration of fannish themes and to the affirmation of a sense of fully developed characters, and yet at the same time replete with the types of challenges and restrictions within which fannish play flourishes” (Stein 2006, 28).

The player-originated goals also encourage creation of skins indirectly: the player may, for example, decide to build a neighborhood of Hindu people and she will therefore need to design character faces with bindis, household shrines and specific kinds of furniture, as these do not already exist in the game. In general, the player is made to feel that she has the power to be creative and productive.

This kind of inherently productive participation that is invited by the commercial product can be approached as a participatory culture. When participatory cultures are understood as cultures that have “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (Jenkins et al. 2006, 7), their characteristics seemingly overlap with the productive qualities typical to skinning. In such cultures, production takes a networked model
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in which “publication occurs continuously, and production is shared between developers and players, often through the mediations of the customer service teams” (Humphreys 2009, n.p.).

Contemporary Web 2.0 and participatory media cultures have further changed what we consider to be appropriation and when it makes sense to approach something from the point of view of subversion and copyright infringement. The suggested kind of ‘invited resistance’ is indicative of important changes in the labour distribution between the original game developers and players. More importantly, in participatory cultures, the player can engage in co-creative practice without being resistant. In the current received wisdom the era of Web 2.0 and participatory cultures are seen as collaborative arrangements that enable everyone to contribute to the sphere of global media. All users are seen as potential producers. The popular science ethos of today’s media cultures, for instance, is imbued with notions of “the new mass collaboration [which] is changing how companies and societies harness knowledge and capability to innovate and create value” (‘wikinomics’ in Tapscott and Williams 2008, 20) whose “users must be treated as co-developers” (O’Reilly 2005, n.p.) and which leads to “a society where the remix is changing the way production and consumption are structured” (‘punk capitalism’ in Mason 2008, 8).

What has been discussed about The Sims resonates with such viewpoints. While access to technology and other social and cultural factors evidently place people unevenly, this point holds where it suggests that the players of a game like The Sims 2 are all offered the same possibility to contribute to its contents. For this purpose, easy to use tools for creating custom content and fora for distributing such content are made available by Electronic Arts. A published computer game is nowadays “as much a set of design tools as a finished product.” (Lowood 2006, 29).
Taylor suggests, referring to Lucy Bradshaw in *Game Developer* magazine, that “games like *The Sims* have integrated this aspect [of player productivity] into their design explicitly and player-produced content often is noted by the developers themselves as one of the key factors in the games’ success” (Taylor 2006, 145). Similarly, Tanja Sihvonen writes that “the whole game has already from the start been designed to profoundly support configurative and transformative play.” (Sihvonen 2009, 52, See also Poremba 2010)

Allowing the player to take a role of a designer, to some degree, then twists the roles of a producer and a consumer since “the trend in consumer-production represents a fundamental inversion of the capitalist/industrial media production/broadcast model that has dominated ‘Western’ culture for at least a century” (Pearce 2006, 18). According to Banks, “The Sims game provides an excellent case study of the computer game industry enlisting and leveraging the online community fans into a commercially successful network. It also instances a trend in online producer-consumer interaction. In the process, the very boundaries and meanings of producer and consumer are undergoing significant and radical transformation.” (Banks 2002, 198)

Some scholars suggest that these practices indicate, in the Web 2.0 spirit, democratisation of the game culture (e.g. Sotamaa 2009). Kennedy, for instance, emphasises the democratisation in terms of technology and technological competence when she addresses women skinners’ work.

I would argue that these women who take pleasure in and contribute to popular games culture [as skinners] contribute significantly to the democratization of technology and technological competence in a way that elitist/artist interventions can rarely hope to achieve. (Kennedy 2006, 199)

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2Drawing on Sony Worldwide Studios’ president Phil Harrison’s keynote at the *Game Developers Conference* in 2007, Newman (2008) proposes this type of games as the ‘third generation of video games’ as *Game 3.0*. 

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Skinning *The Sims 2* has indeed allowed thousands of game players to extend their game with content that they themselves find meaningful and are, therefore, able to change the game to better respond to their preferences. The democratisation claim is backed up with the sharing of these skins that allows players to see and use each others’ creations.

But while knowledge over tools has at least to some degree become shared and development more transparent, what challenges the idea of democratisation of game creativity is the fact that such work is encouraged and facilitated by the games industry. Parallel to approaches that consider skinning as resistance exists an opposite, or complementary, paradigm that approaches it from the point of view of free labour and exploitation as I will discuss in the following.

5.1.2 Skinning as Exploitation

The combination of play and work in gameplay has been widely discussed by researchers who are interested in the economic implications of such participation and in the consumer/producer dynamics and authorship (e.g. Banks and Humphreys 2008, Postigo 2003, Kücklich 2005, Humphreys 2009, Sotamaa 2009, Sihvonen 2009, Poremba 2003b, Nieborg and van der Graaf 2008).\(^3\) Among these accounts is a view that suggests the kind of co-creative participation that cannot be separated from gameplay as a form of games industry’s exploitation of free gamer labour (e.g. Kücklich 2005). This is because the games industry gains enormous economic advantage from the co-creative involvement of players. The developers of *The Sims*, for example, openly acknowledge the importance of players’ contribution to their business. When asked “How much of a side benefit is that [player co-creation] in terms of keep-

\(^3\)Such merging of play and work has also been discussed in relation to hacker cultures, since also those rely on the idea of passionate and playful work (e.g. Levy 1984).
ing the development costs down?” the lead-developer Will Wright answered to Wired magazine “That’s not a side benefit, that’s a primary benefit.” (Terdiman 2005, n.p.)

Postigo writes that “many games in a host of genres such as real time strategy (RTS), role playing games, or first person shooters (FPS) are now designed to incorporate the skilled user into a post-production process” (Postigo 2008, 60) and, alongside Kücklich, suggests that the benefits of modding for the games industry outnumber those that the modders themselves gain (Kücklich 2005, Postigo 2003). What players create has an impact on the expansiveness and lifespan of the commercial products. It is widely argued, for example, that “mods can play a role in extending the sales of the original game or developing a devoted fan base” (Postigo 2003, 596) and that they help in maintaining the success of a game (Kennedy 2006, 184, See also Poremba 2003b). One player interviewed supports this notion by telling how her interest in the game has lasted only because of the availability and creation of skins. She doubts that her interest towards the game would have lasted without them.

Simmer15: [O]ne gets quickly bored without downloadables.

Furthermore, some of the players are very aware of game’s encouragement for skinning. They suggest that the limitations of the original content may be a well-calculated strategy on behalf of the designers.

Simmer1: As I said earlier, EA/Maxis know to stick with their own style, which comes with queer humour and camp attitude in regard to the naming of objects and item descriptions – this is how they leave space for players and hobbyists to create their own and different content. :)

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4In Section 4.3.1 I discussed how the Finnish players create local content with national meanings. From the point of view of player exploitation, this kind of skinning could be approached as a ‘localisation’ process that is being outsourced to players themselves.
Banks and Humphreys came to the same conclusion suggesting that players are indeed aware of the value they create. They further propose that “[i]t would be a mistake, we argue, to view these emerging participatory culture relations as shaped and configured through an opposition between the commercial and the non-commercial, markets and non-markets, the corporate developer and the fan community.” (Banks and Humphreys 2008, 408) Following Tiziana Terranova, both Postigo (2003) and Julian Kücklich (2005) write that players’ labour is “[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited” (Terranova 2000, 74). The benefits of the games industry and players are hard to compare with each other as they vary from economical profit to peer recognition and various forms of pleasure. Comparing monetary profit to other rewards than money; to intrinsic rewards of participation and creativity as well as social status for example, only contribute to the confusing mixing of financial and social economies (Banks and Humphreys 2008).

Yet, it is not straightforward that skinning is always beneficial for EA and Maxis. It is clear that the use of The Sims games is prolonged by expansions packs. This, again, forms a significant source of profit for the developers. But as a comment from one player suggests, there is no such a significant need to buy expansion packs or stuff packs when player-created skins and objects are available. The skins can therefore be seen as a competitor for expansion and stuff packs.

Simmer9: I don’t like at all the clothes that come with the basic game. Those have mostly odd colours, shapes and some of the are even poorly textured (such as one of the men’s night clothes, I don’t remember on which career path). I have only three expansion packs installed (Nightlife, Seasons and Apartment Life), so I cannot say much about the new clothes that come with expansion/stuff packs. But I have noticed that in the later expansion/stuff packs there are much usable and better textured clothes.
Chapter 5 Skinning as a Way of Playing *The Sims 2*

Downloading skins and buying expansion/stuff packs are two separate, although often parallel, ways of adding new content into the game. If players are able to expand their games for free, the need for commercial expansions decreases. The expansion packs, however, complicate the making of skins as skins created based on items (or their ‘meshes’) that come with specific packs cannot be used in games that are played without these expansions. This is to say that for the use of each skin, a certain combination of expansion and/or stuff packs might be needed in addition to the original game. As a result, players are encouraged to buy expansion and stuff packs in order to fully benefit from the skins available. Thus, the impact of freely distributed skins to the sales of expansion and stuff packs is complicated. As Sotamaa writes, “game culture originates in many sites, often at the same time defined both by resistance, exploitation and mutually beneficial relations” (Sotamaa 2009, 101).

5.1.3 Playing by Doing

The players themselves seem to be equally confused with how to refer to their practice. Skinning is suggested simultaneously as a form of play and as separate from ‘actual playing’, as one player puts it. I will now look at the players’ talk around their gameplay and especially in regard to how they see skinning in relation to it.

To begin with, the players I researched make a distinction between play with characters and the game’s build mode during which the in-game time is paused and building of houses and interiors takes place. For one player the play with characters differs from building (and skinning) since it does not require so much effort.

**Simmer15**: All in all I play quite a lot. Playing with the characters is about creating stories for me, although I don’t write them down
5.1. Player Co-Creativity in Participatory Cultures: Simming

anywhere. I take that as actual play, where the different functions of the game, with their limitations and possibilities, are realised. One can play with the characters even when you are a little bit tired, meanwhile building/character creation/making of wallpapers etc is a craft that demands more concentration.

Another player writes about ‘playing’ when she refers to the engagement with characters thus implicitly proposing building as something else than mere play. 5

Simmer5: I prefer building [houses and homes], making the sims, but playing is nice too.

Simmer7: Later I downloaded furniture and new wallpapers and floors, because I prefer building and decorating the houses over playing.

The players not only propose this play with characters as actual play, but also express their preference in building. Interestingly, another player makes a reference to work/play rhetoric suggesting that the work-like play with sims is boring whereas skinning offers an alternative to this.

Simmer4: I don’t really play The Sims that much anymore, but build and decorate houses instead. It is much more fun, since the lives of my sims lacked imagination. (My play meant that the sims went to work and fulfilled their needs, as well as tried to fill the skill bars. So it wasn’t a particularly interesting life.)

Such emphasis on building rather than following the lives of the characters demonstrates how many of the players suggest their play as different from the ‘dominant’ way of playing. These players are interested in creative interior design and designing houses instead of nurturing characters, for instance.

Only one player who separates building from ‘actual gameplay’ is primarily interested in the latter. Interestingly this player is one of the two interviewees from outside the Radola community and is not involved in skinning herself.

5This is the phase of play when the in-game time is not paused but runs and the characters go about in their lives as discussed in Section 1.3.5
Simmer13: I rarely play for building as I prefer to play characters lives out, rather than design, build, create sims, etc. I’m more interested in the actual gameplay.

The distinction results in that the player identities of those who prefer building over something they consider ‘actual play’ are under constant negotiation. For instance, one player discusses how she as a player differs from other players of the game.

Simmer4: [...] I admit that some would think that I have bought my sims for different reasons than others. (I mean that I have bought it for building and not for playing, but it is not exactly like that either.)

Skinning itself then takes building one step further and supports it. The players suggest that being interested in skinning diverts their The Sims 2 play experiences from the norm or from the dominant playing style of the game. One player writes that she does not “play in the most obvious way” (Simmer1). Another player’s comment demonstrates how skinners suggest their concentration on skinning limits other possible ways of playing the game.

Simmer2: I do indeed create new content constantly, but I’ve never managed to create big sims families and such. So I think my playing is rather limited to [the making of] custom content. I open the sims usually [only] when I need to take presentation pictures of some clothes [for the forum] for example.

The player thus suggests that she does not usually even run the game to play but only to support her skinning and distribution of skins online as it requires in-game pictures of them.

Most importantly, for the players I researched skinning is not an extension of ‘actual The Sims 2 play’ but many of them spend more time making new content than playing in the assumed way. In fact, for many of them play is limited to skinning.
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Simmer9: Actually, I don’t play more than couple of times a month nowadays. In The Sims I like the most that you can make the game look like you. Actually I prefer making downloadables over playing.

Another player emphasises the creative possibilities over the kind of escapism the narrative gameplay would offer.

Simmer15: I admit, there’s always a bit of escapism in there, but the creative possibilities [offered by The Sims 2] have always been the most important thing.

Therefore, skinning is not a practice that would feed into the players’ own gameplay and enrich it, but in itself a way of playing the game. Some of the players exclusively refer to skinning as ‘playing’.

Simmer2: As a Sims player I think I am quite passive [...] I certainly produce new content actively, but I have never maintained any big Sims families or similar. So I think my playing is quite custom content emphasised [...] 

Simmer1: So my ‘play’ is particularly about building and doing [...] And here we get into a question where does the line between play and non-play go, which in my opinion is in the Sims sometimes more like a line drawn on the water ...

Simmer1 later uses a notion of playing ‘by doing’ The Sims.

What emphasises the importance of doing skins, and also distinguishes skinners from what has been suggested about hackers, fans and tactical artists in this work, is that skinners are not especially interested in the outcomes of skinning. The players express very little interest in the ways in which the skins they make are played with or the purposes to which individual skins are created. Instead, the importance of skinning lies in the process itself. One player emphasises the relaxing nature of skinning, for example.

Simmer3: Making clothes is a way to relax for me, to reward myself, even comfort myself, the cheer myself up....:D I sometimes joke about it
as a substitute for chocolate. I won’t let it overtake social relationships, I don’t truant from school in order to make clothes or neglect to meet my friends. It is nice to do something, that you know you are good at! If the day sucks, it’s sooooooo nice to sit in front of a computer and knock together a nice dress. Hmm, I sound like an alcoholic...:D

Another player expresses this excitement in the process of creating skins using an idea of ‘tinkering’. The player explains her interest in skinning in terms of bringing playing and tinkering together.

**Simmer3**: I have always been a little bit of tinkerer, more than a player, and modding kind of combines my urge to tinker and playing.

Instead of discussing the technology based on which her tinkering takes place, however, the player emphasises the creative pursuits made possible through this technology. As suggested, it is often this possibility for creativity what the skinners find interesting in the game.

Looking at such co-creativity as a central form of skinners’ engagement with their preferred game offers us a possibility to rethink what actually is the game being played. The entire conceptual framework of looking at exploitation and resistance that is based on separating producers, consumers and products from each other, a separation that remains also in the discourse of participatory cultures, is challenged with players’ involvement in ‘hacking with permission’ which is about ‘playing by doing’. While different from ‘actual play’, players find it very hard to pinpoint how such gameplay and skinning are related to each other.

One of the participants uses a neologism that I find very useful, ‘sims-seily’. It succeeds in encompassing the various tasks and practices related to *The Sims 2* gameplay. ‘Simsseily’ could translate into ‘simming’, a term used on some of the English speaking *The Sims* community websites.

**Simmer1**: I sim approximately couple of hours per week. In simming I also include both making of custom content and the actual gameplay, which I actually do quite little.
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When we approach skinning as a way of playing *The Sims 2*, as ‘simming’, *The Sims 2* is more than the in-game mechanics designed by game developers. Co-creativity assumes a broad definition of ‘a game’ where the game cannot be seen as the mere commercial product anymore, but as a larger cultural system where professional and hobbyist creativity come together in a playful manner. Simming appears as a playing style that emphasises the co-creative involvement of the player, and includes in-game activities that support such work. This form of play builds on the invitations for skinning that are very specific to the game in question and which invite creativity.

Simming also includes participation in discussion and other activities of the community online and maintaining and hunting down downloadable content. For some players, interest in fashion or home decoration are integrated in the practice of simming. Simming takes place within a system consisting of players who wish for specific kind of skins and players who fulfill these wishes, as discussed in Section 4.2.2. For example, the end product of skinning is interesting in regard to its importance to the community.

**Simmer15**: Tinkering itself is fun. Not even very hard, [and] even if you wouldn’t like the result, it’s always fun if you can create something nice to your own or other people’s games.

As Poremba suggests, this role of a player “in *The Sims* is characterised by a willingness to tie in to a larger network of fellow authors in the support of a meta-game that consists of making, displaying and exchanging objects” (Poremba 2003b, 39). Such gameplay thus moves away from the pleasures of hackerism that build on mastery over technology as discussed by Sherry Turkle (2005) for example. In a way, this suggests gender preferences between women and men engaged in computing. Skinners’ work supports the distinction between women’s and men’s take on technology as suggested by Jordan and Paul Taylor, who write that “[f]emales who compute would rather spend their time
building a good system, than breaking into someone else’s system. (mercury, hacker, interview).” (Jordan and Taylor 1998, 767-8)

To conclude, The Sims 2 as played by skinners, or ‘simmers’, is not a life simulator, a nurturing game or a dollhouse, but a genuine Web 2.0 product: an open system with a theme, tools and form that support co-creative play. Rather than suggesting skinning as a meta-activity or resistance, I would like to propose The Sims 2 ‘simming’ as a form of The Sims 2 play that formulates the game itself as a process consisting of co-creative practices and community engagement around it. This approach not only assumes different roles of the player and the developer, but also suggests that players’ additions to the game can be casual and mundane instead of being resistant in relation to the games industry, and yet remain important and meaningful for the game culture in large and for the identities of the individual players. The free form of play kept alive with notions of dollhouse and toyness, for example, contributes to the game as a skinning platform.

5.2 Women’s Leisure

I have now established that Sims skinning is best approached as a way of playing the game, and suggested that we should consider the game as a product of participatory cultures. Skinning could then be seen as a form of exploiting players’ contribution. Yet, creativity in participatory cultures cannot be exhausted through a division between of work and pleasure only, since these two forms of engaging with a text become fundamentally intertwined and feed back into each other.

This section will apply an idea of women’s leisure as utilitarian into the practice of skinning and thus aims to further recognise how leisure can be ‘useful’. I suggest that this approach as especially relevant given that all
except one of the interviewed players are women. I will also examine how such a notion of leisure may help in overcoming some of the frustrations women may have when game cultures appear to marginalise them and popular discourse suggests a player identity that they do not recognise in themselves.

Both written (new) media histories and Women’s Studies recognise a peculiar difference between women’s and men’s leisure, gendered ways and acceptance of claiming leisure time, and gendering in its location and connections to particular technologies. This has to do with the gendered chores at home as well as in public that have existed in pre-modern and modern ‘Western’ cultures and shaped women’s engagement in work and leisure. That being said, it is not within the limits of this thesis to write a broader history on gender roles in ‘Western’ cultures, and I will discuss it only when it occurs tightly linked with women’s leisure and play.

Mary Celeste Kearney suggests that “[o]ne of those more fascinating aspects of domestic arts is their blurring of the traditional boundaries of labor and leisure, alienated work and creative expression.” (Kearney 2006, 25) Women’s leisure has always emphasised education, utility and productivity in such engagement (e.g. Shaw 1994). Soap operas helped women to learn about social relationships, romance novels told about history, TV cooks taught them to cook, exercising resulted a healthy and beautiful body and yoga a peaceful and strong mind. Voluntary work and charity organisations have always appeared as a field occupied by middle-aged women. Knitting, sewing, gardening, baking, handicrafts and so on all lead to creating products that benefit the everyday life. Similarly personal care including beauty, fashion and exercising aim to serve partners as well as women themselves. An OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report from 2009 concludes that when home and personal care are excluded from leisure, women enjoy less such

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6I have discussed this earlier in a presentation at the Women in Games Conference in 2008 (Wirman 2008a).
time in their daily lives than men (OECD 2009).\textsuperscript{7}

It indeed appears that some skinners have similar approach to their preferred hobby, or are constrained by the same social norms, as women have had throughout history. Simming itself offers a form of productive play that, instead of ‘actual play’ which can be considered ‘waste of time’, emphasises textual productivity and creation of new. It has been suggested that women turn their leisure activities into productive contribution because they do not feel entitled to leisure time.

Ann Grey writes, based on her own ethnographic research, that “[w]hat is striking overall […] is the felt need for the women to utilize spare time, that is, not to waste time.” (Gray 1992, 74) Susan M. Shaw (1994) describes that due to the ‘ethic of care’, women prioritise other people’s needs higher than their own. “Various studies have shown that not only do women often have little access to time on their own, or personal leisure, but that they also may not feel that they have a right to leisure for themselves.” (Shaw 1994, 11) Such lack of a sense of entitlement to leisure is unique to women (Henderson and Bialeschki 1991).\textsuperscript{8} When women do not feel entitled to free time, their leisure combines work and fun. If leisure is productive, it is easier to justify its importance for oneself. Just like the readers of romance in Radway’s (1991) study feel guilt because of their own pleasure and not doing work for the family and household, Sims skinners I have interviewed expressed guilt over just sitting and wasting their youth for nothing. Players may struggle with the same kind of guilt that

\textsuperscript{7}“To examine gender differences in a broader definition of leisure, daily amounts of personal care are again normalised to the lowest country (602 minutes for Mexican women). [...] Despite this adjustment for leisure-like personal care, in the majority of countries examined men still spend more time in broad leisure activities than women.” (OECD 2009, 32)

\textsuperscript{8}A further analysis of the ways in which such lack of entitlement to leisure is based on class would compliment the approach of this work. Arguably, class is important factor when discussing the meaning of work and leisure in people’s lives.
5.2. Women’s Leisure

Modleski recognises in the users of earlier feminine genres.

Perhaps we have internalized the ubiquitous male spy, who watches as we read romances or view soap operas, as he watched Virginia Woolf from behind the curtain (or so she suspected) when she delivered her subversive lectures at ‘Oxbridge,’ or as he intently observes the romantic heroine just when she thinks she is alone and free at last to be herself. (Modleski 1982, 4)

The productive emphasis on women’s play has been approached in relation to games marketing by Chess, who explored the game advertisements targeted specifically to female audiences. She suggests that such adverts concentrate on pragmatic, useful engagement with game technologies such as playing games to be fit or to learn to cook as well as those including simulated productivity (Chess 2009). It is indeed that some recent game titles that have been both marketed for women and popular among women, such as *Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!* (2006) and *Wii Fit* (2008), concentrate on personal training and utility.

A parallel approach is that of a group of researchers calling themselves ‘Ludica’, who suggest that a form of ‘additive play’ is characteristic to women’s preferred playing styles. Fullerton, Morie and Pearce (2007) suggest that the kind of creative gardening-like gameplay that *The Sims* games, among others, promote, appeals to female players. “This form of additive or constructivist gameplay represents an emerging and growing direction in video games, and one that seems to resonate with female players, both children and adults.” (Fullerton, Morie and Pearce 2007, n.p.) The argument is based on the kinds of games that have been popular among female players during the last couple of years and the authors suggest the creation of *The Sims 2* skins as one form of this ‘additive play’.

In what follows I want to point out the gendered aspect of such playful ‘work’ and tie it together with a history of women’s leisure and the research of
it in order to track down possible reasons for why women turn they play into co-creativity.

5.2.1 Useful Play Practices

Players experience skinning useful, and thus utilitarian, because they feel they are making the game better for other players to play. As discussed in Section 4.4.2, the participants in my study emphasise the importance of improving the game by broadening the range of available clothes and items and by providing content of better taste. They see themselves as important contributors to the quality of the game’s content. When players underline how ‘horrible’ or ‘ugly’ the original furniture and clothes of the game are, they value their own work in making the game better.

I would like to suggest that what feeds such need to be productive are the negative associations linked to computer game play. For gameplay still appears as a lonely and a waste-of-time hobby in some popular discourses around gaming, especially among middle-classes, co-creative playing can work as a way out from such notions. There indeed exists a strong stereotyping cultural discourse that presents a figure of a nerd or a geek as a computer enthusiast obsessed with a very specific activity such as playing a computer game. The geek figure is often negative and something the players seem to want to avoid. A question of excessive play as a sign of being a nerd in a ‘wrong way’ was notable during the interviews.

Being a nerd is further mixed up with addiction and other negative meanings as one player suggests. One player brings up the lack of responsibility by her father and accuses him of being too permitting. What made her situation change was her move to her brother’s house. The fourteen-year-old player uses the discourses of excessive use and addictions in arguing her ‘awakening to the truth’.
5.2. Women’s Leisure

Simmer12: I often become hooked on the game. I play several hours in a row, eat simultaneously and go to toilet. Luckily I’m not that bad anymore because I moved away from my unconcerned father. 

[...]

My brother’s partner made me understand that I played far too much.

However the players are often incapable of describing why they think playing is ‘bad’ for them. This particular player draws parallels with other objects of addiction and describes the way in which the computer, almost magically, persuades her to play and forget her surroundings.

Simmer12: Playing is like a drug for me, like gambling is for others. If I start to play, I can’t get myself off the computer. Hours pass really fast, and before I notice four hours have gone. Luckily I live with people who really care about me now, and they drag me off the computer. I cannot say why too much play is a bad thing.

For another player whose play time is not supervised by adults as she is one herself, it seems to be the bad conscience that finally stops her play.

Simmer3: Sometimes when I have been sitting on my computer for a long time I get a terribly guilty, like ‘is this how I am going to splurge my youth’ and so on and so on.

When asked about what she means by ‘computer addiction’, one player refers to ‘feeling terrible’ on the computer without being able to describe it better.

Simmer4: Long times spent on a computer definitely does no good for you, doing it feels terrible.

Although players rarely know the reasons for why they think playing for several hours in a row is a ‘bad’ thing, almost all of them suggest that being the case. The older players express more feelings of bad conscience over the ‘nonsense hobby’ than the younger ones.
In some cases, however, playing needs to be stopped for very practical reasons. A player describes that she cannot play more than couple of hours in a row.

**Simmer6**: The longest I play at a time is about one or two hours, and then, at the latest, I have a break.

When asked for clarification, she told that she gets a headache if she stares at the monitor for any longer. The player suggests that it was her body that restricted her play. Her comment expresses concern over healthy play: instead of using painkillers, she sees it important to have a break. But what interested me in her comment particularly was the reason she, in the very beginning of the interview, wanted to state the time she spends with the game. When discussing one’s favorite game, why start the discussion with playing times? I read it that she wanted to make it clear, from the very beginning, that her play is not excessive or an addiction. Instead, she presented herself as somebody who takes care of her health and knows how to be in control of play.

This aspect of moderate playing also appears in a comment that refers to *The Sims* players as different from the players of other games since they are able to play within reasonable limits. ’Extreme simming’ does not seem to be part of the culture.

**Simmer4**: I know people who own lots of different consoles and games that they then play millions of hours in a row, having school/work as the only break out. I think most of the sims players know how to play within reasonable limits, so I think the playing styles are somewhat different. :D

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9Aside from the negative connotations towards ‘excessive’ gameplay, her comment also reflects the work-like nature of gameplay – play is something to have breaks off. This is connected to how the interactive game medium is different from television, for example, which does not require full concentration. The notion of having a break in gameplay implies undivided attention and intensity or use.
5.2. Women’s Leisure

The latter should also be considered in contrast to pressures towards girls’ looks and personal hygiene as well as productivity at home. One player makes various notes about her looks as if to fight against the possibly negative geek image one could get from her involvement in skinning and play.

**Simmer3**: I have been to couple of game meetings, but I did not think I fitted very well – when there are 20 pairs of eyes staring at you as if an ufo or similar came in, it really gets your mood down. I just do not think I am a ‘typical’ player, because most of the other players are quiet, shy people, who do not pick their eyebrows and use ugly clothes. I am sorry, I sound like a superficial bitch again :D

She later continues:

**Simmer3**: So, here is some bitchy stuff again: in game circles I am proud of what I look like. Because almost everyone assumes I am short, chubby, have skin problems, shy, quiet nerd dressed in a sack, it is great to show them that a player can be beautiful too.

Sitting in front of a computer therefore appears as something that interviewees in general do not like to identify with and sometimes seek to compensate by emphasising their femininity. While a threat of being labeled as a geek stigmatises excessive gameplay, such identity seems to be especially negative for them as females. In a group interview, one player made a comment saying: “It is bad enough to be a boy geek, but you definitely don’t want to be a girl geek. Girls and geekiness just don’t go together.”

Furthermore, the figure of a geek is often linked together with the idea of solitary play and isolation, the community aspects of skinning are foregrounded in the interviews. Fundamentally, *The Sims 2* is not a multiplayer game, although skinning encompasses various forms of social interaction. For example, when a question was sent to *Radola* forum about the play habits of the members, 152 out of 163 answerers suggested playing the game alone instead of with a friend or a family member. These players, while also participating the *Radola* community, engage in solitary play for hours and hours every week.
The players enjoy helping other players towards their preferred play by offering them the clothes and outfits they wish to have. It is very typical for the players to create skins for other players by fulfilling requests sent to the Radola forum. This is especially important since, as suggested in Section 5.1.3 on simming, the skinners do not often play with the game characters themselves, but focus on skinning and sharing the skins for free instead. One player, for instance, writes how important it is for her to create skins for other players.

**Simmer2:** Usually when I make clothes I make them for the forum above all, not for my own use.

For the skinners it is important that they can actually help others. The players are happy to find out that their creations are always welcomed and much appreciated.

**Simmer15:** Another key reason [for skinning] was fulfilling other players’ wishes, I haven’t been especially talented in this, but some paintbucket walls have found their takers at least...

Fulfilling the needs of other players is therefore taken as a challenge in terms of how well the skinner can achieve the wanted result.

**Simmer3:** [...] wishes are like challenges for me, it is nice to try if I can do it, second I think I like pleasing people, I feel good myself when I know I have made someone happy :)

This aspect of the skinners’ work appears to bear similarity to gift-giving practices among media fans. Karen Hellekson (2009) characterises fan communities with a concept borrowed from Marcel Mauss (1990) when she writes that fan communities work as *gift economies* where exchange of gifts – giving, receiving and reciprocating – is required. Accordingly, the skins are shared and discussed on the online forum. The skinners benefit from this exchange
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as they gain cultural capital within the community and because they enjoy helping others. In terms of co-creative play, “community and socialising are essential parts of the game” (Simmer1).

Hellekson further proposes that this kind of economy that bases on non-monetary exchange is gendered as feminine and built on the dominant understanding of economic sphere as masculine and social as feminine (cf. public/home sphere in Section 3.2.3). Through non-profit gift-giving, the women participants sign out from the dominant male-gendered field of commerce. Therefore, “[t]his sort of exchange turns one role of woman and gift on its head: the woman is still the gift, but now she can give herself. This permits women agency that they lack under traditional patriarchal models” (Hellekson 2009, 116). The gifts themselves are symbolic and signal “aspects of the self, such as time or talent”. However, because skins have actual functional value and importance in terms of players’ experiences with a commercial product, they are not merely symbolic. Skins work as true parts of the game and are essentially influencing what the game is for its players. From an economical perspective, too, the skins are valuable for the game’s developers as I discussed earlier in Section 5.1.2.

The aim of this section has been to say that in parallel to justifying an entitlement to leisure through co-creativity, players are lead to it since the dominant notion of playerhood does not suit their player identities. Helping others and making play useful as a feminine approach to gaming is central to their practice. Hence, such claiming of productivity in their participation not only has to do with the ethic of care as suggested by Shaw but also with the aspects of computer game play and geekiness that do not support players’ feminine identities. Skinning is a form of play that attempts to move away from typical playerhood and its negative and masculine associations through making play useful. At the same time, the geek figure serves in normalising
their own engagement since more excessive approaches are seen to exist.\textsuperscript{10} Attempts to see play as more useful than what it already is as a form of entertainment are not uncommon to Game Studies either. As already suggested in Section 3.3.2, this kind of rhetoric has emerged alongside the popular discourse that suggests gameplay as an unhealthy and worthless activity. Newman (2008), for example, proposes that looking at the ‘productive’ and therefore beneficial sides of gameplay offers a way to overcome media panics around them. The moral panics tend to passivise and feminise their audiences suggesting such orientation as harmful (Boddy 1994). Similarly, some studies (e.g. Shaffer et al. 2005, Taylor 2006) suggest multiplayer games significantly different, because of the all-encompassing social interaction and collaboration that characterises such play. Behind these accounts seems to be an assumption of solitary play and alienation as a negative quality of play. The skinners them, instead of challenging these negative associations of ‘feminine’, may attempt to avoid them by aiming to the opposite. There appears a need to see games as useful and beneficial. Pleasure and enjoyment, escapism and fun do not suffice as reasons to play. Meanwhile, computer literacy, tactical skills, mathematics, language, cooperation and productivity\textsuperscript{11} turn gameplay into an activity that is in line with the prevailing rhetoric of ‘healthiness’.

\textsuperscript{10}Research of fandom and ‘obsessed fans’ suggest a similar assumption of always more extreme fan engagement. Joli Jenson (1992) explores this popular discourse that tends to pathologise fandom. (See also Nikunen 2001) She approaches fandom as a category that is always othered resulting in that fans propose an existence of other, more ‘obsessed’ fans. As a consequence, fandom becomes a difficult category of identity. The interviewed players cannot see themselves as fans and suggest fandom in terms of something ‘more’ than what they are themselves. For example, pre-ordering expansion packs and painting the walls of one’s room with symbols from the game counts as fandom for them. Accordingly, owning all expansions and buying them once they hit the shops is not fandom. Female fandom, when seen as hysterical and uncritical, also adds to this negative feel of fandom (e.g. Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs 1992).

\textsuperscript{11}Such beneficial aspects of gameplay are extensively introduced in James Paul Gee’s research on games and learning, for example (e.g. Gee 2003).
5.3 Invisible in the Bedroom

So far I have suggested that the skinning of *The Sims 2* is probably best seen as a way of playing the game and as such can be approached from the point of view of the history of women’s leisure that emphasises productivity and utility. I explored how resistance in skinning is then not about breaking the rules of the game itself or about engaging in an illicit activity, but more about challenging the dominant notions of femininity. In the following I am going to discuss how and with what consequences the unique nature of the practice leads to rendering it invisible in the game cultures. Essentially, such invisibility creates a cultural atmosphere in which skinners may feel that their engagement is not important enough to be talked about. Such invisibility can result from a lack of power for the women to discuss their practice, from a lack of access to establish their practice within game cultures or from a lack of knowledge on other similar practices, game cultures or ways to promote, for instance, all of which will be discussed in the following.

Angela McRobbie’s and Jenny Garber’s essay entitled “Girls and Subcultures” is significant where it highlights the particularities of girls’ leisure activities and discusses the ways in which namely girls take part in subcultures. In a passing sentence McRobbie and Garber coined a term that became influential in the studies of girls and subcultures: “the ‘culture of the bedroom’ – experimenting with make-up, listening to records, reading the mags, sizing up boyfriends, chatting, jiving” (McRobbie and Garber 1976, 213). McRobbie and Garber argued that girls in general seem invisible in subcultures and studies of them proposing a less oppositional, less creative and, most importantly, home-centered character of girl’s subcultural involvement. Girls seemed to be ‘invisible’ in contrast to the highly visible – indeed ‘spectacular’ (as they were called by early subcultural theorists) subcultural styles and practices of boys, such as skinheads (cf. Hall and Jefferson 1993). “It might be suggested
that girls’ culture of the time operated within the vicinity of the home, or the friends’ home. There was room for a great deal of the new teenage consumer culture within the confines of the girls’ bedrooms.” (McRobbie and Garber 2005, 107).

As the interpretation of McRobbie’s and Garber’s work has been informed and often connected to later work by Simon Frith (1978) and ‘bedroom culture’ has thus been extended from the original formulation of the concept, it seems necessary to look at the later reformulations of the argument. Sonia M. Livingstone’s rephrasing is one of the best known.

McRobbie and Garber (1976) noted how girls’ subcultures are too often rendered invisible by academic and popular discourses, especially those that focus on problematising boys’ appropriation of public spaces. Looking back to the 1950s onwards, they stressed the importance of the culture of the bedroom for girls, which they related to the greater attachment of girls to their family and to either a best friend or a small group of close friends, a circle which can be accommodated adequately in the bedroom. Spending time in one’s bedroom is not purely a matter of choice or convenience, but also reflects girls’ more restricted access to public and often male-dominated spaces and the domestic duties expected of them which tie them to the home (Frith 1978). (Livingstone 2002, 157)

The development of the cultures of the bedroom has often been argued through practical constraints and preferences that were (and are) typical for girls’ lives. These reasons include, among others, that girls were assumed to help with household chores and to stay nearby home. Home was generally assumed as a feminine space and better suitable for girls’ leisure. Girls’ stays outside the house were further restricted by parents because of safety issues and leisure centers and sports spaces were occupied by males. Even the kinds of clothes girls were expected to wear did not allow taking part in many of the outdoor activities. Alongside, the rise of consumerist popular culture came up with products that allowed indoor-use.

12Today, the culture of ‘cosplay’ (costume play), among others, has contributed to a more visible girls’ subculture as well.
5.3. Invisible in the Bedroom

Based on the idea of invisibility as a typical aspect of girls’ subcultures, I now want to suggest that the lack of explicit resistance and the emphasis on utility and co-creativity, in a very gendered way, moves the practice of skinning away from the mainstream of modding. While McRobbie and Garber also suggest that one of the differences between girls’ and boys’ subcultures lies in the extent in which they are critical or oppositional, I will look back to the gendered forms of resistance (resisting passive consuming, resisting typical playerhood and resisting typical gender roles in regard to technology and gameplay) I have already suggested in the first half of this chapter. Bedrooms, they write, “offer girls different possibilities for ‘resistance’, if indeed that is the right word to use” (McRobbie and Garber 2005, 112).

5.3.1 Graphics and Taste: Not ‘Real’ Modding

One aspect of skinning that contributes to the invisibility of the practice of skinning is its separation from the dominant game cultural co-creativity, from the modding scene in large. I have introduced this problem of devaluing skinning as an ‘easier’ form of modding in Section 4.2. I explored how The Sims skinners operate in different spaces than the modders of FPS and RTS games, who constitute the dominant discourse of modders. I also suggested that because the modding communities operate similarly to hacking and according to masculine values such as mastery over technology and romanticised resistance, it might not always welcome women players or support the construction of women players’ identities.

As of the devaluing of the skinners’ work, the skinners themselves may also appear dismissive towards their own contribution. The skinners have various names for the skins they create. They are often called downloadables or custom content, but also ‘things’ and ‘stuff’. Such terms help in creating a closed community where a specific terminology is used and no outsider could
guess what ‘stuff’ is. These names are used to create a sense of intimacy within
the community. However, ‘things’ and ‘stuff’ are somewhat devaluing terms,
too. One of the players suggests that the term ‘thing’ (Finnish: ‘juttunen’) does indeed express a humble attitude towards one’s creations.

Simmer1: Maybe it is the reason why people use the term, that we don’t think our works are incredibly pretty, special and revolutionary. Especially if it is about new textures (only), since implementing textures and colours to existing meshes is pretty easy. ‘Modesty beautifies’13, that’s what we have been taught to believe – and ‘self-praise stinks’, we think! ;D

A gender aspect is evident here, too, as the downplaying of ‘easy’ skinning in comparison to more ‘demanding’ modding can be postulated through the distinction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms. This distinction essentially separates the ‘intellectual participation’ (high culture) of an elite from the ‘easy and non-demanding’ (low/mass culture) participation of the masses and marks these as masculine and feminine (e.g. Hebdige 1988, Petro 1986).14 ‘High’ and ‘low’ cultural forms are thus both gendered and unequally valued. Fan cultures commonly share this both class and gender related stigma as Joli Jenson sums up:

Apparently, if the object of desire is popular with the lower or middle class, relatively inexpensive and widely available, it is fandom (or a harmless hobby); if it is popular with the wealthy and well educated, expensive and rare, it is preference, interest or expertise. (Jenson 1992, 19)

Importantly, what is understood as non-demanding and what appears intellectual is only a matter of definition. The demanding nature of making

13A Finnish proverb, similar to ‘Modesty is the beauty of women’, but without the gender emphasis.
14These two seem to come together in the hacker identity which is built simultaneously on the idea of being a loser and being elite. Turkle (2005, 207) writes that it “is a culture that both jokes about its members as ‘losers’, and that also sees itself as an elite”.

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mods in comparison to the easiness of skinning appears as such only from a perspective that emphasises typical ‘masculine’ virtues. Namely, while games development and game cultures as well as games research tend to value game challenges that have to do with overcoming mathematical and logical puzzles in various forms, more ‘feminine’ aspects of games are rarely discussed in terms of skill and knowledge. For example, in a recent online discourse among game designers, *FarmVille* (2009) and similar games were suggested challenge-less altogether since the games emphasise challenges that have to do with aesthetics and taste. Many of the overlooked aspects of skinning such as fashion, taste and brands are typically feminine cultural capital.

Exploring the meaning of fashion for the players of *World of Warcraft*, Susana Tosca and Lisbeth Klastrup discuss it as a feminine feature of the game and suggest that its importance for players has been neglected (Tosca and Klastrup 2009). This contributes to the visibility of knowledge over taste, as it appears in regard to Sims skinning, for example. Taste, especially when linked to fashion and home decoration which are culturally understood as feminine, are considered of lesser value than mathematical skills and other masculine competencies. Woolf once noted that “[s]peaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial.’ And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room.” (Woolf 1929, 74)

As already suggested in Section 4.4.2 when I discussed the poor original style of the game content as a motivation for skinning, taste is something that interests skinners and something they are skilled in. Players’ comments often suggest cultivated taste. One player goes into great detail when discussing the features of the game that have to do with taste.
Simmer9: I don’t like at all the clothes that come with the basic game. Those mostly have odd colours, shapes and some of the are even poorly textured (such as one of the men’s night clothes, I don’t remember on which career path). I have only three expansion packs installed (Nightlife, Seasons and Apartment Life), so I cannot say much about the new clothes that come with expansion packs. But I have noticed that in the later expansion packs there are much usable and better textured clothes.

I don’t really use the original hair of the game at all. I do like some meshes but the textures do not please my taste at all. I like hair that has got a more realistic texture.

There are both usable furniture and those that I don’t use at all. I would for example use original kitchen counters if they had better colours. I use some original bathroom items and some tables.

Such consideration is often apparent in the players’ everyday life as well.

Simmer5: Outside The Sims I am not really interested in mass fashion, I prefer to pick my own clothes, and I don’t consider some clothes ugly or bad because they are not fashionable. I don’t choose fashion clothes in The Sims either, but something that I find pleasing myself instead.

As an inspiration for skinning, players can thus use their own wardrobes.

Simmer6: So I do pick influences from my own style to The Sims as well.

Where the players can best show off their skill is in clothes, for example, while skinning simple wall and floor material does not offer enough challenge.

Simmer3: I feel creating walls and floors is too much like working on a assembly line, it’s not as much fun as creating clothes.

And when one masters such a skill, it can be played with by making tasteless clothes deliberately.

Simmer8: I love creating really kitschy and overdose blonde type sims with large hairdos and no taste whatsoever. Where everything is pink, and gold and fluffy. So I love to indulge in ‘bad taste’, too.
The aspect of fashion, when applied in games, has been popular among female players already before *The Sims* games. Another game concentrating on clothing and physical appearance, *Barbie Fashion Designer* (1996), was an early success story among women players (e.g. Subrahmanyan and Greenfield 1998, Wirman 2008b).

Furthermore, skinners seem to be happy in their own circles and are, indeed, ignorant about other modding communities. Because the skinning scene around *The Sims 2* is so large, it requires separate forums, such as Mod The Sims 2. Even the founder of Radola was not familiar with fora such as ModDB when asked. In addition to different focus and expansiveness of the practice, one reason for this might be in women’s tendency to do better in areas of skill and knowledge considered masculine when no men are present. Studies show that women perform better among other women when the focus of activity is considered masculine. “Smith, Morgan, and White (2005) have demonstrated that there is a stereotype that women do worse at computers. A field of study called stereotype threat paradigm (Steele 1997, Steele and Aronson 1995) proposes that people belonging to minority groups suffer from performance impairments when a negative task-relevant stereotype concerning their ingroup becomes salient” (Koch, Müller and Sieverding 2008, 1796). Sex segregation in class room, for example, improves girls’ success and confidence in technical tasks (Crombie and Armstrong 1999). Further, while some studies present that women enjoy play situations that are social and play mostly with men (Schott and Thomas 2008), my study suggests that *The Sims 2* players, while socially active in online fora, primarily play alone.

5.3.2 Lacking Paths to the Industry

Stephen Flowers (2008) writes that there are two ways in which users’ contribution can be turned to benefit commercial products: 1) through consensus
and outspoken collaboration and 2) by exploiting illegitimate work. As I have suggested above, neither of these seems to apply to skinning. There is no real communication between skinners and EA/Maxis as there is in those modding communities described by Morris (2003) and Banks (2002), for instance. While modders and industry sometimes fight over intellectual property rights and negotiate about who gains profit from the mods, such concerns do not seem to bother skinners. When co-creativity is understood as a practice that feeds back to the industry through a somewhat transparent process, this idea does not stem with skinning.

Importantly, the value skinners produce to companies such as EA and Maxis does not lead to players thinking they could profit from skinning themselves. Neither does EA or Maxis show significant protest in regard to the kinds of skins the players create. This is because skinning merges together the consumption of the product and the creation of new innovation, content and value. In skinning the very contribution of the user is the consumption the product. Skinners are neither illegitimate users nor outspoken collaborators in the creation of the game, but their contribution is rather taken for granted and therefore not negotiated between commercial development and the players.

While skinners operate in a separate space and easily downplay their expertise in regard to broader modding communities, they also fail to recognise, or possibly lack, the kinds of opportunities that involvement in computer game modifying is usually thought to offer players. Mod development has been suggested as the most common way to enter into professional game development. Morris writes that “[a]ccess to open-source development tools and online distribution channels for completed works ha[s] allowed young, talented developers to enter the industry judged solely of the quality of their work, despite a lack of formal training [...].” (Morris 2003, n.p.) Meanwhile, according to Sotamaa “[t]oday, a significant amount of professional game designers have their back-
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ground in mod scene” (Sotamaa 2003, 23, See also Postigo 2007). The games industry signals the same thinking. For example, *GameDeveloper* magazine quotes an art lead and level designer Ali Bordbar who says: “I definitely think the best way to start a career is game development is by starting out as a modder” (Wallis 2007). The modders who gain access to the games industry bring both name and visibility to their modding practice and can work as role models for other players.

Unlike modders are believed to, the skinners researched do not see games industry as an interesting option as a future career. A claim that suggests that “[t]he secret desire of every mod creator is to get recognition from the companies who are making the games” (Tom Mustaine in Kücklich 2005, n.p.), is hardly true to the skinners who associate the games industry with other computer related careers and think they do not have what it takes. Such fields are considered masculine and generally struggle with recruiting women (See Section 3.1.4).

The players emphasise tools that are easy to use and are not interested in learning to program as discussed earlier in Section 4.2.1. Essentially, this is because they do not consider skinning as a serious practice that would, for example, be important for them afterwards. One player, for instance, refers to skinning as a ‘nonsense hobby’ when she talks about programming.

**Simmer3**: For some reason I am not interested, and in addition I know it is technically so difficult :) It would require me to really put my mind to it and I can’t do it, because modding is anyway a nonsense hobby. Usually people who hack objects have a lot of experience in coding and other mystical stuff.

Very often the players’ lack of interest towards the industry has to do with their preconceptions of what it would mean to be a game designer or a ‘coder’. One of the players would consider working in the industry if it would not require static computer labour.
Simmer5: It has occurred to me couple of times that I could work with computers, but I tend to be more a person who does not want to sit in place all the time, so I guess I will leave that option. Game design would be quite interesting, but I have such a short fuse and I doubt my endurance would be enough, but it would be fun to be a play tester.

From another player I asked if she was interested in being involved in developing the next big game. She answered suggesting that such work would appear boring and repetitive.

Simmer4: If it means making sims on a computer by creating a big image by clicking pixel-sized areas one by one, then I wouldn’t. :D

For a mature player, working in the industry, meanwhile, was something only young people do.

Simmer1: These skills are indeed useful outside the game. And that is where they originate as well [...] I cannot see myself working for the games industry, I think it really is for younger people...

Yet another player considers his skills more beneficial for a graphic designer or an architect.

Simmer7: I believe sims [skinning] could help if one wanted to work as a graphic designer or as an architect, but I am not personally heading towards those fields so I don’t think what I have learned will prove beneficial any day soon. It would be nice to work with games indeed but I have made up my mind :D

Such notions express well that the players in general have very little knowledge about what it could possibly mean for them to work in the games industry. Some players think they have an idea of the industry, but offer essentialising images of the ‘mystical coders’ without mentioning any other possible vacancies in the field. The games industry appears as an ivory tower where only the few very talented people can get into.
Simmer15: There’s only space for few talents in the games industry and my skills and knowledge are very limited. So I guess I’m happy to leave that field to others. [...] I’ve understood that coding requires intelligence, persistence and broad acquaintance. In addition, unlike in image processing, you can really mess up your game (and in the worst case the games of the other people as well). Through image processing it is possible to create something pretty with little skill and little persistence. The code of the game, instead, is total Hebrew to me. I respect coders deeply and think they are not only intelligent, but also persistent and have started to play with code years ago already. I don’t know how accurate my ideas are, but the rarity of coders in comparison to other content creators tells something. [...] I am a basic user, and I have no deeper knowledge about virtually any specific area. In addition I don’t think I have any inborn talents to the field, so I guess this kind of hobbyist work is enough for me.

As an exception, one player admits she has “dreamed about being a game designer”. She is the only one mentioning the connection between fashion design and skinning.

Simmer2: I believe that in my future job I need these 3D skills, graphics editing skills etc. etc. which I have mainly learned through Sims. I have dreamed about being a game designer. My career plans are quite mixed as I would like to be a model/fashion designer but I am also interested in being a game designer/programmer :D

The general lack of interest towards career in the games industry is striking in the light of earlier research on modders and emphasises, again, the difference of skinners to the dominant group of modders. And because skinners limit their participation within player communities, their culture does not benefit from the kind of publicity that modders who become designers usually offer to their peers.

The skills and tools the skinners know are not entirely compatible, either. One of the field’s biggest development software distributors, Autodesk, also invites hobbyist modders to start their careers with professional tools (See Figure 5.1).

But the skinners do not benefit from such general modding tools as they use game-specific tools and general graphics tools instead. Besides general
graphics and 3D editing software, such as Photoshop and MilkShape, the majority of the tools the skinners use are created to facilitate specifically Sims skinning and are therefore useless for anything else. This results in the skills and knowledge gained by such involvement not being easily transferable. Apart from general image processing abilities gained through the use of Photoshop and the like, players find it difficult to apply their expertise elsewhere.

Despite the players’ lack of interest and skills in terms of accessing the industry, technological skills and competencies are something they do gain from skinning. The players gain both very fundamental and very specific competencies through their practice. In this respect there are significant differences between the participants, however. For some of them skinning is a stepping point for computer literacy. Here the very fact that the skinners’ play takes place on a computer instead of a console makes a difference since players need to understand how to install software and what are the requirements of it. One player writes that she learned about the functions of hardware because of skinning.

**Simmer12:** I am sure I can use the knowledge gained through The Sims for my advantage, and I have already. Before The Sims I had no
idea what is a C drive or a graphics card. I thought it would have been
in the display, but it is in the actual computer instead. The same thing
[happened] when I used to think that the display is the computer itself.

For some players, then, more general aspects of computer functions may
cause problems. In such cases, the technical knowledge gained while skinning
is not necessarily connected to a broader technological interest or a hobby.

**Simmer4**: I don’t make those [re-coloured skins] anymore, because I
(cough, cough) forgot how to save them correctly\textsuperscript{15}. D:

Another quote is an answer to a question why the player is not interested
in sharing her skins on an online forum anymore.

**Simmer6**: I don’t really know, it feels sometimes easier to keep them
in my own game, since then I don’t have to make zip[file]s and such.

Despite the players’ pre-skinning technological skills, it is clear that skin-
nig requires technological competencies that not every player posses. Players
suggest that the skills they learn from skinning are useful in other areas of their
lives. For example, one player lists language skills, typing speed and graphics
editing skills among the competencies that her participation in skinning has
advanced.

**Simmer3**: [...] it has been very worthwhile already, for example my
graphics editing skills have increased significantly as well as my English
language skills, typing speed [...] 

Another player writes that it is the skinning specific programs such as
graphics editors that have improved, but also acknowledges learning general
computer skills when involved in skinning as well.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{The player probably refers to the exact file format in which the skins need
to be saved in order to be recognised as skins by the game.}
Simmer5: Yes it has got some influence [to my skills] I have learned how to use [graphics] editors better and when I learned to download for The Sims I also learned first time about downloading on the computer.

It thus appears that for many players skinning is a step forward in regard of their use of personal computers. Additionally, these suggestions can be read as ways to claim the importance of women’s leisure that aims to utility value (See Section 5.2). It may be that recognising such benefits of their practice helps them to argue the use of time in a hobby that would otherwise seem worthless and in disharmony with their feminine identities.

5.3.3 Outsiders to Dominant Game Cultures

Throughout this work I have discussed how the participants of this study struggle to find their place in game cultures. The popular image of a computer game player as a young male geek does not encourage women to identify as such (See Sections 3.1.2 and 5.2.1). The gaming press, for example, has the power to create communities but fails to encompass feminine aspects of gameplay due to an emphasis on strategic skills of the player and mathematical complexity and hi-tech aspects of the games (See Section 3.1.1).

The players then seem to avoid being labeled as typical players. Instead, they ‘only play The Sims’, as one player suggests. The player’s comment is emblematic in where she denies the identity of a player and claims a particular Sims player identity instead.

Simmer1: No, I am definitely not any kind of expert on this [playing/games]! Neither am I an active [hard core] player. I just play Sims...

As almost all interviewees play Sims games exclusively, embrace the game’s uniqueness and have very little experience of other games (See Section 3.2.1), some of them might have never gotten in touch with computer
games without it. And given the long history of the game, most of the participants, based on their age, have even never had the need to try any other games since *The Sims* has always been available.

The skinners’ status as players is also informed by the fact that the game is unlike the others – not a typical computer game. As *The Sims 2* players, the participants are already defined outsiders by the ‘hegemony of play’ (See Section 3.3). The way in which *The Sims* games are advertised, reviewed and discussed differently to other computer games within the games media encourages women players to reject the dominant player identity. Conversely, it seems to be possible that the very same uniqueness which causes the exclusion of *The Sims* games from the canon of computer games may also be what makes it appealing for my interviewees and women in general. It may well be that exactly because *The Sims* games are not considered games with a big ‘G’ or carry the traditional associations of games as violent, competitive and masculine, they have gained their devoted girl and women followers.

But even as *The Sims 2* players, these players find themselves different from the norm. This is because their play is about creating content and as such not a ‘typical’ playing style (See Section 5.1.3). Furthermore, the players are also challenging the dominant images of a hacker and a fan (See Chapter 4 and Section 5.3.1). Due to the masculine and resistant associations of these discourses and the particular invited nature of skinning, the skinners’ practice is poorly grasped as what we are used to knowing as modding.

Given these circumstances, it seems reasonable for the women skinners of *The Sims 2* to deny anything that has to do with traditional and dominant concepts of computer game play and modding as a part of it. Simultaneously, from the perspective of larger game cultures, the skinners are not recognised as members of such groups. These denials evidently lead to skinners’ exclusion from broader player communities and cultures, and to their invisibility in them.
In the early classic studies, invisibility was explained, at least partially, by being hidden in the physical spaces of ‘bricks and mortar’ bedrooms. With the contemporary practice of skinning another kind of invisibility is rendered by the girls’ position beyond and outside of player and modder communities. That forums such as Radola are open in technical terms, does not mean that they exist to the wide public, or even to player cultures in large, or make their participants’ engagement widely known. As discussed in the previous section, skinners operate primarily outside the dominant modder communities, too.

This further results in that it is extremely hard to acknowledge skinning as a practice that would encourage other women to tinker with technology, to acknowledge its existence alongside other modding practices or to help the industry to find their ways to hire expert skinners (See Section 5.3.2) – or simply to recognise terms in which the work of the skinners should be appreciated.

Such route to rendering girls’ productive subcultures invisible has been suggested by Kearney. She notes, based on her own findings, that “[v]ery few individuals who aren’t a girl zinemaker, filmmaker, musician, or web designer – or the friend, parent, sibling, or teacher of one – are aware that girl-made media texts even exist” (Kearney 2006, 292). It indeed appears that since skinners do not think they gain cultural capital from being players and modders, they do not talk about their play in public. The players do not publicly bring forward their player identities or are talked about as players or skinners outside their forum (cf. Taylor 2008, 54 on ‘closeted gamer identity’). Their friends and families do not know much about their practice and the skinners think they are not interested.

Simmer5: I don’t really talk about the sims with my friends, I talk about it enough on the forum, and not many of them plays which means that they probably aren’t interested. They don’t think I am an expert, but often I am the one guiding them with downloading etc they are stuck with. I haven’t told them I make downloadables, either.
Another player appears somewhat sad about the fact that her friends are not interested.

**Simmer4**: My ‘long experience’ does not unfortunately emerge in our discussions much, because many of my friends are as interested in the sims as flies are interested in the stock market of Micronesia. I guess people around me know something about ‘the fantastic things’ I create, but they do not really express their interest.

This results, as Kearney continues, that the “stereotypes persist in our society of female youth as culturally unproductive” (Kearney 2006, 292). And if we look back to the ‘circuit of culture’ as discussed in Section 3.1, the existing stereotypes of games and gameplay as masculine do indeed lead to players not identifying as players, which returns back to the industry not acknowledging women as players. As non-typical players by their own words, the participants may indeed strengthen the whole gendering of (typical) gameplay as masculine. As a consequence, their non-typical playing style is left outside the dominant discourse around players. In terms of identity construction, this can be understood as a complex and subtle process of differentiation and exclusion. Yet, we have to try to grasp these contradictions and subtleties or we merely end up failing to recognise skinners, just as the modding theorists fail to.

### 5.3.4 Women’s Leisure and Resistance

Understanding this form of productive leisure also has implications for what can be seen as resistance. While resistance as we know it from fandom and hackerism does not match with skinning, other kinds of resistant practices can exist. The enormous potential for critical and resistant practices in games has not produced a movement of ‘feminist hacker art’ Schleiner (2001) envisaged more than ten years ago, but have a practice of women’s skinning that serves the same cause in terms of offering a space for women’s pleasures in computer gaming.
Studies of women’s leisure suggest that leisure offers women a possibility to escape social constraints, bolster their self-esteem and to overcome role expectations of a patriarchal society (e.g. Du 2008, Henderson and Bialeschki 1991). By becoming players, although such identity is under constant negotiation, skinners enter a masculine field, culture of gaming. Participating in an atypical sphere is in itself an act of resistance and empowerment. For example, “[r]esearch on women’s involvement in sport has suggested that this type of leisure participation in a traditionally ‘masculine’ activity offers women and girls the opportunity to ‘go against the grain’ of cultural sex-role prescriptions, with apparently beneficial psychological outcomes” (Shaw 1994, 15). That the players adjust the form of modding and its outcomes to what is considered feminine in our culture, concentration on taste instead of code, enhancement instead of mastery and sharing instead of competing, is just a way to negotiate their femininity within a masculine field as well as playfully reconsider and challenge the expectations of everyday life in a ‘game form’, as one of the participants writes.

Crucially, the skinners’ participation in productive leisure resists a famous dichotomy masculine/production versus feminine/consumption (cf. Hollows 2000, Bordo 2003/1947). Kearney (2006) draws on work by McRobbie and Garber (1976) and suggests that the connection between consumerism and female youth culture has long been maintained by commercial culture industries encouraging “girls’ frequent and carefree forms of consumption” (Kearney 2006, 23). In subcultural representations “girls and women have always been located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the [typically male] ‘ritual of resistance’” (McRobbie and Garber 2005, 109). Furthermore, “[...] production is valued positively as a masculine activity and consumption is seen

as negative and is identified with women and/or as ‘feminine’” (Hollows 2000, 113).

Kearney wants to lead attention towards the productivity of female youth instead of ignoring these practices when concentrating solely on passivity and consumption. Whereas the game in question may be about consumption, its playing requires active participation in gameplay (See Section 1.3.3) and its modifying, one of the ways of playing the game, certainly is creative. As I have discussed in the beginning of this chapter, women further turn this already productive play into something that is productive outside their own play experience: help other players by fulfilling direct requests and make the game better for larger audiences by creating skins of their own choice, for instance.

Sims skinners thus seem to be resistant in a way McRobbie and Garber (2005) as well as later Kearney (2006) have discussed: the women are resisting the traditional restrictive female consumer identity. “Arguments for resistance through leisure, are based upon a conceptualization of leisure as a site of personal choice, and self-determination, which can also provide opportunities for individuals to exercise personal power” (Green 1998, 172). Doing and being creative itself becomes an act of resistance and empowerment. Then, what is feminine in the game, is perhaps not the theme and the form of play only (as discussed in earlier chapters of this work), but the possibility for productive participation that skinning offers to its player. What then appears as feminine in regard to Sims skinning and simming does not have to do with the kinds of ‘appropriations’ that result but with the play style itself.

My study therefore suggests that skinning lies somewhere in-between being a consumer and being resistant as a woman. The factors that we have looked at above, of visibility, creativity, and opposition form the core of a ‘bedroom culture’ as I have applied it. While skinning complicates the dom-
inent distinction between consuming and producing media users, it also calls into question the valuing of production over consumption. So far I have proposed that people involved in such co-creative play are better acknowledged as players, instead of approaching them through the notions of exploitation or resistance or the discourses of hackerism, fandom or tactical exclusively.\footnote{What, then, are hackerism and fandom in such cultures is a different question altogether and is hopefully explored elsewhere.}

While such notions often emphasise the productive position of a media user, another way is to acknowledge ‘consumption’ as a valuable stance alongside. Whether this consumption, then, is creative and productive, is not important. As Hills writes, the evaluative use of the terms consumption and production is indeed one often used in Fan Studies and as such highly problematic.\footnote{This productivity, again, needs to be understood as different from play as productivity, from \textit{configuration}, as discussed in Section 1.3.3.}

As I suggested in the previous chapter, reading modding as hackerism and fandom does emphasise this distinction between ‘good’ production and ‘bad’ consumption (See Sections 4.2 and 4.4). What I wish to suggest here is that the ‘consumption’ of \textit{The Sims 2} game should be essentially assumed as different for its different players (See Section 3.3.3), some forms of which are based on co-creativity. In a larger context this means that what being a player (this is, a \textit{game consumer}) means can neither be transferred from game to game nor assumed as one in regard to one single commercial game product.
motivations for such involvement are often intrinsic and concern a particular
game and cannot thus be understood by the surrounding game culture. It is
hard to see the difference between subcultural involvement and participation
assumed from the player by the developers.

This is also linked to the types of resistance that become appreciated,
talked about and romanticised in our culture. I have suggested that when
making sense of the participation of the skinners it is easy to get into the
age-old discussion of valuing certain forms of culture over others and to the
gendering of these (See Section 5.3.4). But because of the sedimented cultural
notions and representations on playerhood in general and *The Sims 2* play in
particular, the players who fit neither into the assumed category of *The Sims 2*
player nor to the group of subversive players, struggle with constructing their
player identities.

I see that, for scholars, it is important to acknowledge these users and
consumers of *The Sims 2*, as *players* of the game, if we aim to acknowledge
the game’s multitude that includes its invitations to be co-creative and the
support mechanisms for skinning as essential aspects of the game (See Sec-
tions 1.3.2 and 3.3.1). If we are truly to take games as cybertexts that not
only require the player’s contribution but may invite productivity outside the
actual gameplay context, the distinction between consumption and production
should be revised. As Celia Pearce writes, “the boundaries between [...] media
consumption and media production are increasingly blurring” (Pearce 2006,
18).

Now, in conclusion, we begin to see the complexity of the gendering
processes at work in play. The earlier paradigms of resistance, appropriation
and subversion do not help us to understand *The Sims 2* players’ practices,
pleasures and motivations. Neither can their identities be exhausted by those
proposed by the categories of playerhood and modding. We have seen that the
skinner has a very particular way of playing The Sims 2 game and this may have little to do with other ways of playing the game.

This very exclusion and differentiation can be seen as a process of negotiating the players’ identities as significantly differ from the earlier notions of what it means to be a player. This is a form of resistance in itself. The players constantly negotiate between resisting the dominant discourse of playerhood and the dominant discourse of female consumption/passivity. Such resistance takes subtle forms that are not publicly advocated and are therefore easily left unnoticed.

Describing these non-identities or negative identities becomes almost as important as describing the identities they suggest they perform. For Nadav Gabay writes, “[n]o identity can be an identity without excluding something, i.e. what is different from itself” (Gabay 2006, 349-350). Meanwhile, William E. Connolly suggests that “[i]dentity requires differences in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty” (Connolly 2002, 64). The skinners construct and negotiate their identities as different from 1) players, 2) The Sims 2 players, and 3) modders.

In the field of queer theory Butler (e.g. Butler 1999/1990) and many others have studied sexual and gender identities from the point of view of understanding ‘otherness’ and suggest this position central to feminine identities. Hall argues, using Jacques Derrida’s concept, that identity is “constructed in or through différance and is constantly destabilized by what it leaves out” (Hall 2007, 18). The importance of offering an ‘other’ as a point of imaginary reference for the interviewees themselves is evident (i.e. when they suggest “gamers do this but I do that”). It appears especially that when game and information technological expertise are foregrounded, the lack of available identity positions for female agency forces women players to seek for points of negation and difference. It seems easier for the participants to discuss their playerhood,
fandom, participation and so forth in terms of what is excluded by their particular identities. Exclusion, rather than inclusion, is more useful when the discussed subject is neither cohere nor stable. And this is where difference kindly leads us towards the discursive understanding of an identity that builds on fluidity and progress instead of fixity and permanence.
Chapter 6

Conclusions

Researcher: Could you compare the making of downloadables with any other leisure activity – what other hobby does it resemble the most?
Simmer10: Maybe riding a hobby-horse, I guess...

In this thesis I have discussed a specific kind of player participation and creativity related to The Sims 2 computer game: the skinning of it. The work was based on a small-scale virtual ethnography, a set of email interviews with players whose engagement with the game is characterised by the creation and sharing of new and altered game content. This ethnographic material was discussed together with the kinds of cultural meanings that surround computer game play and Sims play in particular. Such analysis also covered the game’s structural and thematical features as well as its design and marketing, as these invite certain kind of player participation and set out a frame for being a player.

As a result, I have offered a reading of a player culture that is hard to grasp with earlier concepts used in relation to game modifying. I have proposed that skinning is a practice that holds some similarities with other game modifying practices, fan cultures, hackerism and can be read as appropriation of game content. This thesis illustrates how the game indeed offers a possibility to challenge the game’s consumerist American values through skinning. Because the skins are easily shared online and become actual parts of
the gameplay, there exists a real possibility to change the other players’ experiences. However, it came as a surprise to me how few of the skins created by the participants and discussed by them actually aim to change the strong ideology of the game.

What emerged from the interviews was a view of ‘simming’ as an inherently productive way of approaching *The Sims 2*. Essentially, the thesis illustrates that the ways in which skinning is invited and facilitated by the game and how the skinners discuss their engagement demands a perspective that allows looking at skinning as a rather conformist use of the game. I proposed that the kinds of individualistic representations of consumer culture offered by the game seem to guide what kinds of skins are created. This prompted me to revise my understanding of what gameplay and games themselves are. I proposed that understanding skinning as a form of participatory culture allows a more constructive approach to the ways in which such engagement is invited by the game. This practice is not a meta-activity or an addition to gameplay, but a form of play itself.

The players, while made to believe they have power in terms of taste and quality of the contents, appear to be taking part in a highly commercialised version of participatory culture. Importantly, *The Sims* appears as one of the first games, if not the first, to enter the sphere of participatory culture with masses of players. My work proposes that skinners are in a significantly different position compared to other similar cultures in terms of their knowledge over the history of *Open Source* production and the legacy of hacker cultures. My thesis shows how the interviewed players do not problematise their help to the games industry. Instead, they get pleasure from being useful.

The players do not appear very critical towards the media industry in general, either. For example, none of the skins presented the kind of feminist agenda that earlier studies have approached. My study suggests, instead,
that the players are involved in skinning for other reasons than the results of skinning. Their inspiration for skinning came from seemingly irrelevant sources or from other players. Taking other players’ requests as challenges was typical among them. What the players’ participation emphasised then was the process of creating. Skins, as it is discussed in this work, extend the original game product and work as parts of it, not against it. Characteristics of participatory cultures are based on shared achievement and collaboration as well as accumulation of knowledge and skill instead of concentrating on the appropriation of one single media product.

This lead me to explore the complicated question of consumption itself. I explored how Cultural Studies and the discourses and research of hackerism, fandom, tactical art and Web 2.0 all emphasise and romanticise the producer over the consumer. The valuing of production over consumption appears as a current academic, if not generally ‘Western’, cultural consensus that is highly gendered and linked to the discourses of resistance. While simultaneously inherently productive and a forerunner in participatory cultural practice, skinning is simply a way to consume The Sims 2. Based on my study I consider it important to explicitly embrace such player-consumer identity alongside the politically resistant one and to acknowledge that resistance and productivity are not mutually inclusive in current participatory cultures. The lack of articulated resistance in the players’ texts can then be read as a positive signal of skinning offering women a comfortable way to be players without a need to actively fight back the very culture they are partaking.

Being a Sims player is very important for the players who consider it significantly different from other games. This thesis argues that The Sims 2 game offers to its players a welcomed new kind of basis of play. In a culture where the primary actor is considered male, The Sims allows women and girls a convenient framework to access gameplay. However, this does not mean
Chapter 6 Conclusions

we should stop exploring the ways in which this same participation is being marginalised in game cultures.

Therefore, I have conceptualised Sims skinning from the point of view of feminist Cultural Studies that efficiently helped in grasping the gendering of the practice. I suggested that the notion of the culture of the bedroom, and especially how such cultures have been characterised as invisible, overlaps with the skinners’ creativity as a non-celebratory form of modding. Furthermore, I suggested how the women engaged in skinning resist the negative associations of computer games through a productive play practice. I showed how skinning matches the long history of women’s productive leisure that aims to helping others and to be functional or instrumental. Skinning is a new form of play specific to women’s culture and builds on female-gendered competencies such as taste, fashion, helping other people and being useful and is facilitated by the open form of the game product. The pleasurable challenges offered by technology are meaningful for the players, but not as central as those linked to taste and fashion.

Accordingly, this perspective resulted in looking at resistance from the point of view of cultural capital. Skinning appears, not politically but perhaps culturally resistant. The players I have researched do not aim to use the game as a medium of social critique, for instance. Their resistance is, rather, about not conforming to the dominant ways of playing, consuming and making game modifications. Through participation in the practice of Sims skinning the women players are also resisting dominant gender roles of women as consumers, as non-players and as technologically inept.

Skinners therefore occupy different positions of resistance. They can be seen resistant as players, as women, as women players, as users and members of audience, and as citizens, for instance. As players in general, although the identity of a player is denied or at least challenged by many of them, the
interviewed skinners are situated within a leisure culture that is considered masculine. From this position they are able to challenge the very masculinity of the sphere. Yet, by also adapting the ‘non-player’ discourse, the skinners operate simultaneously from within the game culture and as outsiders to it.

Furthermore, as players of *The Sims*, the skinners benefit from a discourse considered feminine and of a practice that is female-dominated. Such starting point allows them to be productive and in contact with technology without being constantly compared with men. Skinners also use their productivity in order to transcend their assumed player positions as ‘American’ and change some aspects of the game to represent their own Finnish culture. In addition, their practice that bases on players’ productivity and utility is a position that provides them a possibility to argue about the dominant ‘waste-of-time’ quality of playing games.

A parallel development has taken place in terms of another form of women’s leisure: handicrafts. Through blogging and other models of online communication, knitting and sewing communities are today facilitated on the Web (Minahan and Cox 2011). Similarly to what I have suggested about Simming, “[t]he existence of Stitch’nBitch groups as women’s groups may give further cause for optimism against a backdrop of what feminist theorists present as a gender divide in participation in technology” (Minahan and Cox 2011, 9). Women’s leisure has thus taken a major and leading role in participatory cultures. Alongside, it has turned formerly solitary practices into social, subversive forms of commenting gender through the possibilities offered by participatory culture.

By discussing player identities that surround the practice, I have showed how the dominant emphasis on resistance leaves out certain practices and games. I hope I have cast light on a practice that does not aim to change the world or even the game culture, but is nevertheless important in many ways
for the players involved in it.

Ultimately, this work was set out to answer the primary research question: **What kind of player identities are constructed and performed among women players through their participation in skinning?** As anticipated, there is no single unitary identity of a skinner but instead various contradicting and overlapping discourses that the individual players’ identities are based on. I have discussed identity as fluid and actively constructed and proposed that the women skinners’ identities are negotiated through exclusion and negation. This is primarily because the existing discourses around playerhood and game modifiers are male-gendered and emphasise resistance. As summarised above, being a skinner, then, is about negotiating between the dominant discourses of game play, Sims play and game modifying, among others. Further, skinner identities appear strongly female-gendered due to the game in question and the productive non-mastering characteristics of the practice. The open-ended play and utilitarian aim of the gameplay further mark it feminine in our culture. Skinning thus seems to merge feminine leisure to participatory culture underlining its potential for the creation of texts that are of utility value for other users.

To extract the suggested outcome for individual fields of research, my explorations into skinning as fandom suggest that if resistance in fandom is conceptualised as a critical, productive user position over an object of fandom, drawing a clear line between fandom and co-creativity in contemporary participatory cultures is not only extremely difficult but probably also unnecessary. This thesis proposes an ethnographic account of the mixed and parallel orientations of producing and consuming in participatory cultures. It suggests that a practice that may have been best categorised as fandom or hackerism earlier, has recently turned into mainstream and everyday engagement.

In regard Game Studies, this research proposes a new formulation of
play and game that builds on co-creativity and community interaction. My research also shows that some extremely popular practices are devalued in game cultures, and thus exemplifies how the ‘hegemony of play’ operates. In terms of Game Studies’ methodologies, I hope that my research works as an example of how ethnographic methods allow nuanced accounting of gameplay.

For new media research, my contribution is primarily in providing knowledge of the ways in which media products invite certain kinds of use by their theme and structure. I have also discussed how a particular media text and its technological form can function in the construction of user identities.

What this study shows about the relationship between games and gender is that games and meanings associated with them are not gender-neutral. I have showed that even a game that is played almost equally by men and women, boys and girls, and that has been suggested as gender-neutral, bears strong gendering in terms of its theme, structure, play and associated cultural discourses. This, again, might lead to anxiety in the players. There definitely is plenty of space for further studies on games and gender and for feminist game studies. For feminist research on women’s cultural practices, I have illustrated how computer game play can be situated within a longer continuum of feminine leisure and media use. My study illustrates that communication technologies and the Internet serve in building women’s communities around former solitary activities.

In terms of my primary field of research, Cultural Studies that is tightly linked to the other fields mentioned above, my thesis has offered an example of valuable engagement in popular culture that cannot be acknowledged by its political resistance, but by conformist use instead. The multi-disciplinary take on fandom, leisure, hackerism and gameplay have been important in this regard. Where Cultural Studies is concerned with power relationships between consumers and producers, also those practices that do not explicitly
aim to challenge power structures should be approached. It further necessi-
tates removing the equals sign from in-between resistance and productivity
altogether since participatory cultures allow highly active participation that
can be submissive at the same time. For Cultural Studies often tends to cel-
ebrate use that transcends that assumed from the audience, enjoyment and
pleasure gained through uncritical use of products of popular culture are often
left outside of its focus. However, I suggest that one form of empowerment for
audiences, users and players is to be able to refuse to resist, and to get car-
rried away instead. I suggest that such involvement is especially important for
groups that operate within a culture as a minority aiming to gain recognition
as equal members (e.g. for women in game cultures), since they are already
marginalised once by their participation.

In general, finally, an ethnographic study of players of the best selling
game of all times is timely without a doubt.

6.1 On Methodology

I suggest that this study has illustrated the importance of doing ethnographic
research on skinning. While the various theoretical approaches of earlier stud-
ies may be relevant for studying the corporate ownership, authority, legal issues
and larger societal importance of participatory labour, exchange with players
has shown that neither fandom, hackerism and artistic practice nor resistance,
subversion or appropriation are enough to explain the specificities of this prac-
tice.

Small-scale email interviewing proved to be a productive form of ethnog-
raphy for this thesis. It allowed the players to participate in their own space
and at times suitable for them. It also offered a computerised form of interac-
tion that is similar to their involvement in skinning. Most importantly, deep
analysis of such material alongside the associated cultural discourses and the technology in question would not have been possible on a bigger scale. My personal insights of game cultures helped me to identify these nuances, to ask relevant questions and to read the players’ meanings as I possessed first-hand experience on game play myself. I was also able to genuinely respect the work of the skinners since I myself, as a Sims player who does not create skins, have been dependent on their works available online.

The advantages that lead to choosing the particular methodology have been discussed in Chapter 2. But like any approach, also this one came with a group of challenges. In this study, it has been my aim to present a fair rapport of *The Sims 2* skinners in a Finnish context. However, in terms of how the participants were reached, the introduced methodology emphasised those players who have been keen to participate in an academic research. Because players were recruited with an open call on an online forum, it may be that only those players to whom the practice is especially important or who see themselves as particularly talented and experienced in skinning have partaken in this study. Different kinds of results could have resulted from a study where participants would have been recruited from general Sims player fora and later identified as skinners.

I also acknowledge that the general focus on Sims may have occasionally prompted players’ emphasis of the special nature of the game. As I knowingly chose a forum that concentrates on *The Sims* skinning as a place to recruit research participants and let the participants know I was studying *The Sims 2* skinning in particular, this might have affected on their own emphasis on *The Sims’* uniqueness. As Walkerdine writes, “participants in an event understand, remember and narrate that event differently, bringing into play some of the same kinds of issues as those of different interpretations and emotions on the part of the researchers” (Walkerdine 1997, 75). I would suggest, however,
that since skinners operate in a different sphere than those other modders and because both their experience with other games and their knowledge over those is limited, the uniqueness of the game is highlighted by their very involvement already. Also, the qualities of the game that make it special for the players are the same that have lead to its devaluation and exclusion at times within game cultures and games research.

Furthermore, email interviewing resulted in another set of more practical challenges. Because the participants of the study were allowed to take their time in replying and to write as lengthy replies as they wanted, I was forced to accept significant differences in the lengths of individual messages.

As a side effect of open email interviews where no facial cues can be given to encourage the participant to tell more, some of the replies I received were extremely short. In these cases the participants simply replied to me with the ‘results’ of their thinking processes, not with the processes themselves. In face-to-face situations, participants typically speak aloud the course of their thinking.

Also the fragmented nature of email correspondence, due asynchronicity, challenged both me and the participants in keeping track of the conversation. I felt that emotional and affective relationships to what one has written are hard to maintain between individual email messages that were sent days or weeks apart from each other. And because I conducted several interviews simultaneously, it was challenging to respond with the tone and style I had accepted suitable for each individual participant as well as to remember what had already been discussed with each individual participant.

Something needs to be said about the challenges of obtaining consent as well. To my surprise, about a third of those who showed a primary interest towards my study by sending me a private message or an email, never got me
6.1. On Methodology

back after I have sent them the informed consent form.¹

It further seemed that even the simple act of revealing their real names was enough for some people to make them withdraw from the study despite of their initial interest to attend. Indeed it is the initially assumed anonymity that some people find comfortable which becomes lost in the process of obtaining consent. I can only speculate that these players, while interested in being interviewed, were not willing to reveal their off-line identities. Since children today are often warned about suspicious people on web forums, young people may not always be happy to send personal information to an unknown person abroad. It was about one quarter of all people who ever contacted me who I finally interviewed.

Therefore, when contacting the last couple of interviews, I altered the consent form so that no names or contact information were asked other than a signature. This was exactly because I had faced great difficulties in encouraging participants to return the consent forms. In one case I also agreed on sending the form as an attachment of an email, because the player did not have a printer available and was able to scan the document for me. Two other players agreed on the terms via email since they felt sending the form was too much of a trouble or when the player had already sent the form via mail but it never arrived me.

In my study I experienced the shared power of maintaining the correspondence in the form of prolonged response times. Although the participants often apologised when their answers took a long time, I experienced a true feeling of not being in control of the course of the interview. Also in Bowker and

¹One reason for this is listed by (Meho 2006), who notes that, among other reasons, many email messages are blocked by spam filters. This is even more likely because of the attached documents. Based on the interviews that did take place I learned that several discussions were interrupted or entirely stopped because the participants simply did not receive my messages that had been moved to their junk mail folders.
Tuffin’s study “the longitudinal approach taken for online interviews occurred at considerable frustration to the researcher because there was no certainty surrounding when participants would respond” (Bowker and Tuffin 2004, 236). Unexpected, long pauses in communication are especially frustrating because there is no information on the reason of the prolonged reply. While some participants simply forgot to write back, some later told they had been unable to answer due to a sickness, for example. Unfortunately, work on email interviewing does not yet suggest how to re-establish the connection to participants and such themes are rarely addressed in literature on email interviewing.

Where some researchers set up answering times and deadlines for interviews, no rigid time lines were agreed upon in my study. The interviews continued as long as correspondence seemed comfortable and reasonable to continue. The length of the interviews between participants altered very much. This somewhat stretched my original plan and the interviews took place between March 2008 and May 2010, thus taking twice as long as I had anticipated. Each interview consisted of correspondence that lasted from five to seventeen weeks. During this time, six to eighteen questions-reply pairs of correspondence were sent. However, while the time lapse between individual email messages also varies, the duration of the entire interview does not tell much about the number of messages written since the time between email messages varied a lot. In addition, while some participants preferred writing short answers right away, those who took more time usually provided more thorough answers. With most participants there was a point of correspondence when I needed to remind them about the interview. As I did not want to appear officious, time was lost while waiting for a suitable time to hurry them up. In couple of cases it took several weeks to get a reply due to personal affairs, illnesses and exam periods, for example. One of the interviewees answered my messages after a period of seven months during which I thought I had accidentally insulted her.
6.2. Future Directions

Luckily, as I later found out, this probably was not the case.

Lastly, there were no agreed measures to be taken into account at my university in terms of securing the personal information of the participants. In general, many of the challenges linked to studies conducted online are not well documented yet. “In addressing these issues, researchers and Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) will need expertise, which many currently lack” (Meho 2006, 1289). It is also worth mentioning here that while research ethics guidelines are created to inform entire university faculties, instead of individual departments with specific epistemological bases, such systems can inhibit and limit effective research by setting up barriers or inviting anxieties on the part of respondents where none are necessary. Based on the experience gained from this study, I would for example prefer an online consent system in the future and would not ask the participants to reveal any identifying information or names.

6.2 Future Directions

For recognising the potential use value and applicability of the perspectives introduced here, the historical and cultural specificity of this work needs to be understood.

My research was conducted at a moment when women had only recently entered, *en masse*, computer game cultures. The game researched further proposes a safe place for their explorations into this new culture and is not just any game available at the late 00’s. In terms of player productivity, *The Sims* appears as one of the very first ‘Game 3.0’ products.

The co-creativity associated with it lies somewhere in-between modding as an extra-textual activity and co-creativity as a designed gameplay feature. More recent games such as *FarmVille* and other social networking games have,
for instance, commodified the kind of gift giving practices typical to skinning. Thus, the mainstream games industry seems to adopt and commodify former subcultural practices in its products similarly to what music and fashion industry, for instance, have been doing for decades. In comparison to these recent games that build on productive playing style, Sims skinning appears much less controlled and monitored. In other words, *The Sims 2* can be seen to leave more room for skins that oppose the game’s ideology, despite the fact that the players of this study rarely take advantage of such possibilities.

What I believe will keep appearing in future game cultures is that there will be playing styles that some people try to marginalise (e.g. by labeling them as ways of ‘playing with’ games). There are also always going to be dominant ways of playing and identities that need to be negotiated in relation to these. In general, it is very clear from this work that players construct their player identities, to some degree, in relation to the cultural meanings of the game they are playing.

A set of questions that seem worth further research can be postulated based on the outcomes of this work.

- What other forms of ‘permitted hackerism’, as characterised by a participant, exist in game cultures?

- Are the players of games such as *The Sims 2* aware of the strong ideology of the game or do they understand their possibilities to change it through game modifying?

- What are the ways in which the specific game development infrastructure of Sims games benefits from players’ work and how do they communicate with the players?

- How significant are the suggested kind of differences between Sims skinners and other modders in terms of how tight the relationship between
the players and the developers is?

- What kind of meanings does the general non-player public associate with Sims play? To which extent are these meanings related to the gendering of the game?

- What other similar female-gendered player communities are there in game cultures? Are they perhaps even more invisible as they might be associated with poorly known games?

- What kind of player identities are constructed in male-dominated game modifying communities and how do they related to those of skinners?

- How does co-creativity in Sims differ from co-creativity in Little Big Planet?

More generally, future work on women skinners and Sims skinners would benefit from a cross-cultural comparative analysis. Since some of the most strikingly subversive works created by the skinners in this research are based on national symbolism and brands, a comparison between Northern American and European players, for example, would help in producing further knowledge on how these practices work in relation to national cultures and meanings.

This work also indicates some differences between older and younger players in terms of the importance and meaning of skinning for their everyday lives. A comparison between different age groups could prove helpful in mapping out these possible differences. I also believe that a study that would compare those players who play various games with those who play primarily Sims would address some of the questions that this study leaves unanswered. Namely, it would be beneficial to explore how game-culturally informed the players’ experiences about the ‘special nature’ and ‘uniqueness’ of the game are.
This study suggests that other modding communities may appear alienating and downplaying towards Sims skinning. It would be interesting to discuss the results of this study parallel to work that approaches these other modding communities and their knowledge and ideas about Sims as a game and its skinners as game modifiers.

Also research on other female-gendered games that seem controversial among players, such as the so-called *social games* on *Facebook*, should be discussed alongside the outcomes of this research. As an example, on the day I finished writing this work, a piece of news was published online about how the market value of *Zynga*, the biggest publisher of *Facebook* games, passed that of *EA* (North 2010). Comments on the piece of news show strong anxiety towards this new type of games. *Facebook* games are suggested, not surprisingly, as non-games and as ‘easily digestible’. These kinds of processes of valuing and devaluing, embracing and downplaying, individual games and game genres in the cultures of gaming have gained unfortunately little scholarly attention. Outside game cultures, comparing the outcomes of this study with feminine practices on other male-gendered leisure fields could possibly show how the characteristics of feminine leisure transfer from culture to culture and from medium to medium.

It was not possible to include the actual making of game skins within the limits of this project. However, I suggest that a setting where the researcher would create Sims skins herself and study how these works are being received and discussed in the game communities could offer a supporting resource for understanding how the players’ works are negotiated and how the intended uses and meanings of the skins become understood within these communities.

The downsides of the adopted form of interviewing include the lack of face-to-face cues and nuances. I see that a study which allows the actual meeting of these skinners when they are engaged in their practice would compliment
the results of this study as they could take into account the material aspects of skinning as well as the family dynamics in the use of technology.

While I have suggested skinning, or simming, as a way of playing the game, such approach could be applied to other gameplay practices as well. Game Cultural Studies on the varying uses of games would offer insights to the multiple ways individual games can be experienced and played and how the emerging communities overlap and work together. I see that any cultural study on games significantly benefits from taking into account the practices that take place parallel to ‘actual’ gameplay.

Furthermore, in this thesis I have approached the relationship between human actors and information technology in two ways. First, I have discussed how the systemic structure and ideological content of *The Sims 2* game supports certain uses and encourage its players to create skins as well as how a certain set of available tools affects the modifying of the game. Second, I have looked at the ways in which game technology works in popular and theoretical discourses as an object and definer of hackers, fans, players and artists. Hence, this research leaves plenty of space for studies that recognise nonhuman agency and explores the ways in which the game and the player work together in a cyborgean symbiosis or as a network. Correspondingly, theoretical approaches of cyberculture studies and Actor Network Theory would compliment the more culturally-oriented perspective taken. I have started mapping out such gendered cyborgean skinner in a research paper (See Wirman 2008b) where I suggest that skinning as a feminine practice is an excellent example of Sadie Plant’s (1995) idea of the interrelationship between weaving and technology.²

One line of thought that I have only briefly touched upon in this the-

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²In this paper, I touched upon the idea of Arachne, a great mortal weaver of Greek mythology, as a cyborgean entity. Earlier, Tanya Krzywinska (2007) has applied the same story from Ovid’s epic poem *Metamorphose* in her research of long game narrative.
sis is that of *art*. Art is something that seems to bring the three suggested resistant discourses together. Forms of hacker art, tactical art, fan art and appropriation art have already been introduced in this work. In such uses, the word ‘art’ is often added to describe both expressive and politically charged amateur practices. All of these arts share qualities that tie them to the industry of digital games through the use of original commercial products. This art is produced from the consumer products and, even when criticising such products, could not exist without it. If any art ever is, such art is never totally independent from popular culture and its meanings. As discussed, the copyright laws further complicate the making of hacker/tactical/fan/appropriation art and emphasise its dependence on the original. I see a lot of potential here to go on discussing the questions of authority and the forms of artistic and hobbyist practice in terms of their cultural meanings. I think it would be interesting to discuss these forms of art parallel to more institutionalised forms of making art and to professional game artistry.

Finally, another conceptual framework I would have very much wanted to include in this thesis, and somewhat related to the concept of arts, is the idea of *craft*. Given the skinning’s similarity to other forms of utilitarian female creativity such as knitting and cooking, discussing it as a form of craft would have been very interesting. In my future work, I hope to continue exploring if skinning shares qualities with crafting. Especially that how craft is separated from ‘high’ arts seems to fit with the outcomes of my work. Peter Dormer (1997) suggests that what is characteristic to crafting is the separation of meaning from making, which also stems well with the process-oriented work of skinners.
Chapter 7

Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Interview Themes

Interviews were structured around the following themes.

**Background information**

Gender?

Age?

How many games do you use to create skins/mods? Which games are they?

What kind of skins/mods do you create?

Do you distribute them to some online community? Where?

How much time do you take playing games per week?

How do you see this time? As leisure? As creative? As personal space?

How much time per week do you use playing the game to which you make skins/mods?

Where do you do this? Does the location affect what you can do/how you do it?
Do you see yourself as part of a gaming community?

**Starting point**

Do you have a favourite game? What do you like about it?

How did you start skinning/modding?

Why do you do it?

When do you create skins/mods? What else could you do with this time?

**Skinning**

How does skinning/modding affect gameplay?

How important is it that you can change games

Why is it important: community/own play/art

What do you think you gain by doing mods/skins

Relationship with other productive practices

Does skinning/modding resemble some ‘nonline’ activity you are involved in?

How?

Is there another hobby that is like skinning/modding? In what ways?

**Relationship with the original game**

Fan or not?

Do you think the game you are altering is better with your changes/additions?

Why this game and not some other?

Why skin not mod / mod not skin?

In case of skins: what is your relationship with the skins and game characters?

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**7.2 Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form**

I Participant Information Sheet

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Thank you for your interest in my study which you are being invited to take part in! Before you finally decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and the list of interview themes enclosed, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please feel free to address any questions or ask for any clarifications from me. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. I will need to know whether you want to participate within two weeks from the date above.

**Area of research / Working title of the study:** Computer game playing and gender

**Purpose of the study:** I am interested in the ways players participate in the production of new and altered game content and the impact this has on who we think we are and how we play. By ‘game cultural content’ here I mean game modifications, skins, machinima videos and similar. I am interested in player’s opportunities to change the games they play and the ways they want to change them. Finally, my study intends to answer how any new identities players produce or experience contributes to creating new content within game cultures.

**Time, duration and place of the study:** This research project began in spring 2007 and will last three years (until spring 2010). All the interviews will be conducted during this period of three years, but some of the results may be published later on. You are asked to take part in interviews that take place during spring 2009, from mid January onwards. If an additional interview is needed, I will ask about your availability and interest again, and ask you to sign a new consent form.

I would like to interview you via email. Thus, the length of the interviews depends on how much time you take to answer me and how long you wish
to continue discussing. I would like to exchange less than ten emails. The direction of the interview will be lead by your replies. I would estimate the correspondence takes around three weeks.

**Participants in the study:** You have been chosen because you are actively contributing new content related to computer games. You are also taking part in community activities, such as discussing your and other’s work (game modifications, skins, machinima or similar) and using these during your play.

It is completely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect anything outside of this research project.

**Taking part in the study:** The first thing to do if you decide to take part in my study is to sign a consent form. I will then get in contact with you to arrange a suitable time to meet.

If you are under 18, please note that your parent/guardian will also need to sign the consent form. In addition, you will need to choose a responsible adult of your choice to be present at the interview.

The interview will be conducted as an informal conversation rather than a formal interview. Please feel free to use smileys, emoticons and abbreviations in your mails. The information is usually more useful if our discussion is spontaneous and relaxed.

I should only have to conduct one interview with you, but there is a possibility I may need to do a follow-up interview a year or two afterwards. If this is the case I will contact you within plenty of time and issue you with a new consent form.

Due to the subject matter of the project, it is not anticipated that any material
collected will be of a sensitive nature. However, if any such sensitive material does arise, steps will be taken to ensure your anonymity will be secured and that you will not be compromised in any way. All of the information collected will be kept strictly confidential and every step will be taken to ensure any quotes used will not be identified as coming from you, unless you explicitly give permission for me to do so. I would also recommend you to speak up if we encounter any difficulties or uncomfortable issues.

**Language of the study**: The interviews will be conducted in Finnish [or in English]. If Finnish is not your first language, a translation of this information sheet and consent form will be provided in English. The results of the study will be published both in English and in Finnish and the actual thesis will be in English.

**Possible concerns**: If you have any concerns about anything regarding this project you can contact me on the details below, or alternatively you can contact my supervisor, Estella Tincknell.

**Confidentiality**: All information which is collected from you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information which leaves my office will have your personal details removed. Your details will not be passed on to any other persons for any reason, and the project will be subject to the guidelines of the Data Protection Act.

**Results of the study**: The results of the research project will be published in my Ph.D. thesis and also presented at conferences. No names will be mentioned or associated in relation to specific aspects of the research, to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Copies of the thesis, or the relevant sections, will be available to the participants by request. If you wish, you have the possibility to go through the work that refers to data collected from your interview before it is published in my Ph.D. thesis.
The research project described in this participant information sheet is funded by the University of the West of England. For further information, please contact me or my supervisor: [contact information]

You can keep this copy of the participant information sheet attached to which you can find a list of themes I would like to discuss during the interview. If you decide to take part in the study you will also get a copy of a consent form.

With kind regards, Hanna Wirman

II Possible themes of the interview

Area of research / Working title of the study: Computer game playing and gender

General information on your play habits and especially the games you are customising

Background information on the customisation you are involved in

Personal skinning/modding history

Importance of skinning/modding for your own play

Participation in player communities

Fandom

Importance of a game character

Importance of the chosen game

III Consent Form

Please read the information on the ‘Participant Information Sheet’ you have received. If you agree with the terms as described in that document and are happy to take part in this study, please sign below and mail this form to the address below.
7.2. Appendix 2: Informed Consent Form

Hanna Wirman [postal address]

Area of research: Computer game playing and gender

Please complete these details:

Full name of participant / Interviewee [this line was not included in the later forms:] ———

Age ——— If under 18, see below

Gender Female ——— Male ———

I agree with the terms as described in the ‘Participant Information Sheet’, and am willing to take part in the Computer game playing and gender research project.

Signed ———————— Date ——————

If under 18, please include a countersignature by parent or guardian:

Full name of parent / guardian ——

Relationship to participant ———

I give permission for ——— to be interviewed for the Computer game playing and gender research project as described in the ‘Participant Information Sheet’.

I give permission to take photographs after the interview. Yes —— No ———

Signed ———————— Date ——————
Chapter 8

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