

Virtual Threads of a Skin

Women Weavers and the Practice of Skinning *The Sims*

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses Sadie Plant's idea of weaving as a way for women to gain social power through technology in order to explore today's game cultures. Using weaving as both a mimetic and a functional analogy and metaphor, the paper attempts to show how the practice of computer game character 'skin making' or 'skinning' can be seen as a contemporary counterpart to weaving. The paper explores the convergence of woman and technology, here player and game, as a cyborgian entity and discusses its dimensions in a Harawayan spirit. The paper starts with an introduction to the similarities between skinning practices around *The Sims* and Plant's notion of weaving women and their relationship with technology, and continues with a discussion of the reasons why skinning has emerged, especially amongst Sims players.

Prologue: The Story of Arachne¹

Arachne was a young woman from Lydia, sometimes said to be a princess, who offended Athena, and suffered the consequences. Her story helped serve as a warning to all to take care not to offend the gods.

Arachne was gifted in the art of weaving. Not only were her finished products beautiful to look at, but the very act of her weaving was a sight to behold. Nymphs were said to abandon their frolicking to come observe Arachne practice her magic. So remarkable were her works that observers often commented that she must have been trained by the very patron goddess of weaving, Athena herself. Arachne scoffed at this. She was disgusted at being placed in an inferior place to the goddess and proclaimed that Athena herself could not do better than her.

Athena was quite perturbed at Arachne's bold claim, but she decided to give the young woman a chance to redeem herself. She came to Arachne disguised as an old woman and warned her to be careful not to offend the gods, lest she incur their wrath. But Arachne told the old woman to save her breath. She welcomed a contest with Athena, and, if she lost, would suffer whatever punishment the goddess deemed necessary.

The goddess accepted the challenge and revealed her true form. The nymphs who had come to watch Arachne's weaving shrunk back in fear, but Arachne stood her shaky ground. She had made a claim, and she was sticking to it. So the contest began, the mortal at her loom, the goddess at hers. Athena began to weave the scene of her contest with Poseidon for the city of Athens. A beautiful scene

¹ Adapted by Melissa Lee, available at <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/a/arachne.html>.

developed from the threads, showing Poseidon and the salt water spring, and Athena with an olive tree, gifts to the people who would name Athena as their patron, and their city after her. The bystanders marveled at the goddess' work.

Arachne, for her part, created a tapestry showcasing scenes of Zeus' various infidelities: Leda with the Swan, Europa with the bull, Danaë and the golden rain shower. So exquisite was the mortal's work that the bull seemed lifelike, swimming across the tapestry with a real girl on his shoulders. Even Athena herself was forced to admit that Arachne's work was flawless. (Whether or not Arachne was actually better than Athena is still a mystery.)

Angered at Arachne's challenge, as well as the presumptuousness of her choice of subjects, Athena tore the tapestry to pieces and destroyed the loom. Then she touched Arachne's forehead, making sure that she felt full guilt for her actions. Arachne was ashamed, but the guilt was far too deep for her poor, mortal mind. Depressed, she hanged herself.

Athena took pity on Arachne. She most likely did not expect that Arachne would commit suicide. She brought her back to life, but not as a human. By sprinkling her with the juices of aconite, Athena transformed the woman into a spider, her and her descendants to forever hang from threads and to be great weavers.

Introduction

The emergence of a participatory and co-creative game culture offers women new opportunities to take part in a creative process around digital games that goes beyond the manufacturing context.

Even if women remain largely excluded from the design tables of computer games², it is possible for them to act productively within the player community, from inside the culture. This is linked to the emergence of one of the most interesting creative practices to arise around character-focused rather than goal-driven computer gaming: character ‘skinning’ or ‘skin making’. The practice lacks an established terminology and set of rules, which may be partly because it is a new phenomenon; it may be partly because as a fan activity practised by a small number of players, most of whom are female, it is virtually never discussed in the ‘official’ fora of gaming. In addition, only a small number of academic studies have concentrated on skinning (e.g. Kennedy 2006; Poremba 2003; Schleiner 1998). ‘Skinners’ themselves talk about individual skins they have created or provide step-to-step tutorials for making them, but forum discussions on the practice itself are difficult to find.

Hereafter I will use the term ‘skinning’ to stand for the practice in which players use graphics editors or special software designed for this purpose, such as *DEdit* or *FaceLift Gold*, to alter the looks of game characters. This can vary from changing the colour of a single item of clothing to totally renewing the character from skin colour to brand new clothes and equipment. Usually, as in *The Sims* games, these new characteristics – clothes, hair, faces, skin colours, tattoos etcetera – are not character-specific but can be ‘clothed’ – i.e. put on any character in a game. Accordingly, a skin (see Figures 1&2) is a player-made outfit for a computer game character or avatar. These user-

² Approximately 45 % of all players of digital games in the UK are female (Twist 2003), and more women than men in the 25-34 age group play digital games in the USA (Mindlin 2006). But as little as 5-10 % of game designers are women (Haines 2004).

created ‘textures’ applied to a player’s characters can vary from resemblance to Britney Spears to Santa Claus, and are very often distributed around the player community via some online database such as *SimSkins* which concentrates on fashion skins for *The Sims* games. A majority of these are culturally specific to US produced popular culture and Western, middle class and white representations in general. To clarify, using the words of a professional skinner: ‘[t]he images of the skins are also sometime [sic!] called textures. Skins are textures, but not all textures are skins: skins are only used for characters, while texture is the name used for image files ‘folded’ around something, regardless what it is: rocks, grass, walls, furnitures [sic!], objects, etc’ (Denuid 2008). My paper could as well include object textures and environment textures as most of what is written applies to them. However, I will concentrate on character skins and use them as my examples.

Figure 1 & 2. Skins for *The Sims 2* game by bootsbrisket³ and minanna⁴.



³ From <http://www.modthesims2.com/showthread.php?t=34045>

⁴ From <http://www.modthesims2.com/showthread.php?t=217385>

Skinning practices have grown around particular games and are especially popular among female players. The idea of changing the existing characters within a game and inserting more women is an attempt to redress the lack of gender balance found in such games. Several researchers have noted that the number of female characters in most games is substantially smaller than that of men. Female characters are also represented in stereotypical roles and respond to masculine desires. (e.g. Beasley, 2002; Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Provenzo, 1991.) Thus it is significant that game characters resulting from the masculine game design processes and environments largely occupied by male designers can be reworked by (female) players. Earlier, female Quake players who have ‘skinned’ their own female heroines into a highly masculine game have been studied by Kennedy (2006) and Schleiner (1998).

The Sims games offer an interesting object for my observations for many reasons. First, *The Sims* has been exceptionally popular among female players - some 65 % of its players are women (Boyes, 2007). It is also the best-selling computer game series ever with 100 million shipped copies worldwide (Howson, 2008) according to the manufacturer. In addition, fan practices around *The Sims* games have proven especially vivid and versatile as numerous *The Sims* fan sites, machinima videos as well as texture databases online show. *The Sims* games have also produced passionate discussions among game scholars about whether they should be called games at all because they do not fulfil all the alleged formal requirements, such as a goal and quantifiable outcome (e.g. Juul, 2003). Finally, unlike the games like Quake *The Sims* games offer a wide range of female characters in the beginning and do not reproduce traditional game themes and masculine game content. Whereas Schleiner introduces Quake skimmers as ‘teenage to early 20’s boys’ (1998), *The Sims* skimmers are mainly females and adult players make up a big group among them. The reasons for

skinning *The Sims* characters may extend somewhere behind simple addition of female characters into the game.

Skinning as Weaving

The cloths and veils are hers to wear: it is through weaving she is known, and weaving behind which she hides

What is woman without weaving? A computer programmer perhaps? (Plant 1995, pp. 61 & 57)

In her article about the far-reaching relationship between woman and machine one of the most influential cyberfeminists⁵, Sadie Plant, describes how the computer emerged from a history of weaving. The Analytical Engine, invented by Charles Babbage and further developed by Ada Lovelace (around 1842), was the first model of a general-purpose computer and, according to Plant, inherited much from the Jacquard loom as part of its operational principles: ‘Analytical Engine [as the computer’s ancestor] *weaves Algebraic patterns*, just as the Jacquard loom weaves flowers and leaves’, (1995, 50). Weaving, for Plant, is the most typical form of activity for women and integral for their identity, ‘a quintessence of women’s work’, she suggests (Ibid., 46). Starting from the stories of a Greek goddess, Athena, and continuing to the invention of weaving machines, weaving has remained a technological task dominated by women. It is certainly the case that in Anglo-Saxon culture weaving was a woman’s job and role as even the word ‘wife’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon

⁵ [C]yberfeminism is [...] interested in exploring the role of women in the technological age, the relationship of women and technology, and how women can make use of technology to fight against the patriarchal society. (Chan ,2003)

for 'weaver'. Acknowledging this history, Plant argues that weaving is what brings women and cybernetics together. She links technology and woman together and suggests they are both 'used as man's tools, his media and his weapons' (Ibid., p. 58). Weavers, looms, software and programmers are all invented to assist and add capacity for man. What is significant here is that in the integration of woman into machine and machine into woman, according to Plant, is a possibility for both to become free from man's hegemony; they 'all are developed in the interests of man, but all are poised to betray him' (Ibid, p. 58). Basically, drawing on feminist theory of patriarchy but proposing a possibility more powerful than earlier feminists, she writes that the long-lasting connection between women and machines marks also programming as a feminine domain. On this field it is possible to change the existing male-domination over the use and original importance of the machine. Together with Irigaray, she approaches technology from a feminist understanding according to which the existing patriarchal powers structures should be made more equal through revealing and making overlooked female elements visible.

As described, Plant offers a mythical theorisation and a rather vague utopian picture of technology; she does not give practical examples from real life. Her style is characteristic of some cyberfeminist writing, both creative and academic, and breaking traditional boundaries between fact and fiction. But I want to believe we can use such a text for empirical considerations and everyday observations as well. In the next part of this paper I will discuss women's productive participation in computer games in the light of Plant's approach to weaving as a starting point for securing the association of women with technology in new ways.

Plant's idea of technologies and women who are 'are poised to betray him' (Ibid.) is similar to Haraway's notion of cyborgs as the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism as

well as state socialism (Haraway, 1991). Haraway's cyborgs are, too, extremely unfaithful to their origins. And this is where I wish to draw the practice of skin making into the discussion. According to my reading of Plant's argument, we can draw a connection from weaving to skinning. The mimetic analogy between weaving and skinning is clear. While looms were used in order to create textiles for clothing, so skins are clothes for virtual characters. Both weavers and skinners use technology to cover bodies and clothes to be worn. Skinners are weavers of the virtual cloth.

Like weaving for Plant, skinning can be seen as an emancipatory practice through which women create a special relationship with a machine and gain advantage within a patriarchal as well as male dominated framework. Skinning in games culture is the 'betrayal' of the values and ready-made content of the game. Cindy Poremba's (2003) research on counter-cultural actions and activism in games have suggested similar possibilities for players. According to her results, '[p]layer-authors used existing games as a platform to express their own views and ideas in the changing cultural landscape—these games became a participatory media channel for the creation of independent, player-produced meaning' (Ibid.). In my paper, women as game players and the tools that make skinning possible form an illegitimate offspring of computer game cultures that gnaws at the constructed worlds of computer games from inside. The women players question the 'natural order' of the game and produce content more appropriate for themselves. While Plant's reference to Freud, '[w]eaving is woman's compensation for the absence of the penis' (Plant 1995, 46) might look extravagant, it is actually very near to the concrete everyday state of affairs when considering computer games and how they are produced.

Importantly, weaving and skinning share the same ontological basis. When involved either in weaving or skinning, one takes a position as a part of a process, not as a controller or a governor.

Plant writes about women becoming integrated into the machine limb by limb and becoming attached to its processes and operations. Following the cyberfeminist notion of a cyborgian entity, neither human nor machine is superior in the combination that results. Similarly, when skinning, women players do not ‘become designers’ who proffer their final results - a game - to be played by others. Rather, they use the tools already offered by games and the possibilities embedded in them in order to contribute within a peer-to-peer participatory network consisting of thousands of nodes reworking the same pieces of virtual fabric. There will never be a final result or an ultimate contributor.⁶ Everyone’s work is valuable but also vulnerable as it may be changed by anyone else. Skinning is not only about creating skins and using them on one’s own computer but sharing them with other players, discussing them, gathering them in databases and circulating them, so that there is no start or end point; just as a cloth being woven by a woman is integrated into a loom.

Irigaray (2004) has explored this kind of ‘p2p’ relationship as a feminine way of existing in the world. For her, sexuate difference results partly from our way of entering into relation with oneself, with the world, and with other(s). The way women relate to things is horizontal – between subject and subject – whereas men tend to go for a vertical or hierarchical relationship, one between subject and object. (Ibid.) These differences can be seen in the way men take part in fan cultures around games and computer technologies in general, such as in LAN (Local Area Network) parties, compared to women’s participation in the culture. While women have formed communities based on the equality of participators and co-creation, LAN parties have celebrated the myth of an

⁶ This understanding of productive user participation is easily found from the new media and cultural studies literature around participatory cultures in general and computer game play and production in particular (see e.g. Wirman, 2007).

individual coder hero and introduced competitions in order to highlight virtuosos and make them into the object of envy to others. Often, while those attending competitions during LAN parties do so in groups, even in these male participants emphasise individualistic, competitive and hierarchical relationships between each other. Furthermore, the entire hacker culture which concentrates on mastery over a program code, has been demonstrated as highly masculine (see e.g. Levy, 2001).

The ‘matrix’ nature of weaving as well as skinning means that the most sensible way to consider the cyborg, the integration of human and machine in this matrix, is in terms of *the process* (weaving or skinning) not of the subject (a weaver or a skinner). While Haraway would argue that it is not the skin that encapsulates a cyborg (1991), I would say that when we observe skinning, it is precisely the skin that establishes the basis for a cyborg – because a cyborg is constructed around a (digital computer game character) skin and because of a skin but not in it. But a cyborg, unlike a human, is continuously recreated within that matrix. While Haraway would argue that a cyborg identity is postmodern and thus fragmented and fluid, I would propose that while the process of skin making is networked and continuous, it does not make sense to separate out just one node of the network that circles and reworks skins. There is no need for one to identify with another as they both share the same purpose and are parts of the same process.

Why DOES *The Sims* Afford Skinning?

There have been just two computer games which have had a ground-breaking role in engaging women and girls in computer games. The first was *Barbie Fashion Designer* (1996) published by Mattel Media in 1996. The second game was *The Sims* published by Electronic Arts in 2000. Interestingly, both offer the facility to create clothes and alter the looks of game characters: both enable virtual weaving. One could argue that their popularity among female players is obviously

because of women's interest in consumption, shopping, fashion, and dressing up. It has also been claimed that *The Sims* is popular among women because many of the designers are women. For example, the game's lead designer Will Wright has suggested that they 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). These reasons are partly convincing, but I argue, they are not enough to explain their success alone.

A seamless convergence between woman and machine and the Harawayan model of a cyborg assumes certain qualities from a machine. Generally, they suggest an equal relationship between human and technology with the latter able to exercise some agency. Plant writes that the '[a]utomated loom was the first to store its own information, functioning with its own software, an early migration of control from weaver to machinery' (1995). While Plant's notion can be interpreted and overlooked as a simple description of the distribution of work in a tool system, Norman's (1998) idea of technology's affordances leads to a broader understanding of how technology affects the ways people live their everyday lives.

According to Norman (1998), technologies have affordances, qualities which suggest specific ways to use them. Affordances make assumptions of a user and depend on that user's culture, knowledge, and experience. A classic example is that of a chair, which affords support and, therefore, sitting. Depending on person's physical abilities or their cultural expectations, however, it may be the case that the chair is too high or small, for example, to afford sitting to that particular person. So, what is it that *The Sims* as well as *Barbie fashion Designer* afforded that made them so popular among women? Is it a coincidence that another game concentrating on clothing and physical appearance,

Barbie Fashion Designer, was an early success in girl gaming? Why is it that *The Sims* is especially successful in inviting women to participate in the practice of skinning so apparently keenly?

To answer these questions we can use Norman to examine the ways games can afford practices and models of use for their players. Norman states that symbols are not affordances but symbolic communication (Hartson, 2003). In a computer game like *The Sims* very few of the affordances are physical. However, as Hartson (Ibid.) has shown, it is possible to treat interface objects on the screen, such as buttons, like physical objects. *The Sims* and *Barbie Fashion Designer* games afford a player to set her own goals, look closely at a game character, move characters in different directions and customise the character. They also offer an avatar, or a character through which the player interacts with the game world or which carries the player's agency in a game. This means that the 'game view' is either in the first or third person. All of these factors encourage attention to what a character looks like and acknowledge its importance, including possibilities for identification as well as empathy, within the game. They also suggest that a character is flexible and can be physically transformed, which makes it convenient to use time in redesigning the looks of it. While game characters are important in both games their development is central to the progress of the games as well. In *Barbie Fashion Designer* this development simply comes through the introduction of new outfits, but in *The Sims*, characters overtly develop their abilities, skills, and careers. Such changes in a character affords a player to think of it as an entity that can be further developed. With skinning, then, the development of a character simply carries on outside the game involving some extratextual and hypertextual references, knowledge and aptitudes. More importantly, both games afford activities entirely outside the game itself, and even facilitate creativity in the 'actual world' In *Barbie Fashion Designer*, it is possible to print out the designed clothes and use them on real Barbie dolls, whereas *The Sims* has afforded new skinning practices to emerge.

Skinning is probably most popular among female players of *The Sims* games as the user nicknames on skin-circulating forums indicate. The vast majority of the *Sims Resources* featured artists presenting themselves as women⁷, and game skin databases include many more female character clothes and body parts than male ones (see for example *Mod The Sims 2*⁸). By skinning the game is constructed and managed for a female audience. Thus the modified game does not just respond to existing consumers but helps constructing and reconstructing them as a ‘feminised’ category and offers new starting points for potential players.

While a game with a goal introduces values for each object and action within it, in a game without a goal these values are given by the player. In *Warcraft III: The Reign of Chaos* (2002), which is a strategy war game, for example, the goal is to kill the opponent and this is clearly stated in the instructions and is built into the rules. What matters in the game is the amount of units, resources and weapons and their qualities and how these are used strategically to win. *Warcraft III* does not encourage players to alter the characters in the game as it is already established that individual personalities or character differentiation have nothing to do with winning the game and will make no difference to a player’s success. In contrast, as vivid discussions around ‘gameness’ has often brought up, *The Sims* or *Barbie Fashion Designer* do not clearly state a goal nor the values of the game, nor the importance of game objects, including such things as character’s clothing. Instead, the player’s own goals and own values, or those goals and values they regard as culturally important, in

⁷ <http://www.thesimsresource.com/artists/featured/>

⁸ <http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php>

The Sims and *Barbie Fashion Designer*, can be written into the design of new clothes and skin colours, but without this having an overtly indicated purpose. The player may, for example, decide to build a neighbourhood of Hindu people (a goal set by the player) and she will therefore need to design character faces with bindis, as these do not already exist in the game. The player sets her own goals and finds ways to intervene in the game that achieves them.

If we assume that a player of *The Sims* effectively ‘integrates’ with the game, thus forming a cyborg in Haraway’s model, it is relevant to ponder what *The Sims* affords in order to facilitate this integration and make it possible. Skins made for the characters of *The Sims* games have been gathered in a large number of online databases, something that has not happened with other games. While Online networks were not widely available at the time *Barbie Fashion Designer* was published in the mid-1990s *The Sims* has appeared at a time when online communities have been afforded to develop and thus this also afforded the circulation of skins within a network of active player contributors. I suggest that the possibility of communicating with other players and contributing within an online community are features which *The Sims* games have afforded has helped make it even more popular than *Barbie Fashion Designer* among young women.

Moreover, as I noted earlier, in the integration of woman into a machine and vice versa, it is important that the two entities have a ‘horizontal’ relationship. Women prefer subject to subject relations over subject to object relations. In skinning, women become a part of a larger online network and the skins are collaboratively created within these networks. This is a different relationship from the one in which a player is solely engaged with a computer, using it for a purpose set by technology, a game.

Pure Emancipation?

Historically, weaving was first something that occupied woman who was not allowed to take part in more 'important' tasks and work that had to do with power (Plant, 1995). However, making clothes was inevitably pretty crucial to human existence, culture and creativity. Weaving was later appropriated from women during the Industrial Revolution in the C18th as weaving machines were invented and weaving was industrialised and mechanised. And now, some centuries after, what is it that many women do with their free time: they weave virtually. One of the largest web pages distributing user-generated skins today offers near hundred thousand skins.

In this historical development it is interesting to see how the cottage industry of weaving was threatened and then extinguished by the weaving machine, a machine which Plant (Ibid.) introduces as one of the most important milestones regarding women's convergence with the machine. At the time weaving was transformed by the emergence of industrial capitalism, whose work practices became hegemonic. Today within the games industry it is masculine hegemony, as well as the industrialisation of games that women are working against, with this new form of cottage industry in which skinning has become an illegitimate offspring of computer game cultures.

Or is it the opposite – that women, now as players, are once more harnessed to weave for hegemony, but it only appears as counter-cultural and craft making. The task is hidden in the form of play and fun. When exploring modding, another participatory creative practice related to computer games, Julian Kücklich's (2005) invents a notion of playbour. For him, playbour relates to the new forms of leisure that combine play and work. What makes modding special as a productive leisure practice is the way the products have commercial value.

[...] it seems necessary to differentiate forms of ‘productive leisure’ from unproductive leisure. While there have always been forms of productive leisure - crafts such as knitting and woodworking as well as hunting, gardening and fishing come to mind - the products of these activities may have never made a significant appearance in the marketplace in capitalist societies. Arguably, this has only changed with the advent of affordable digital technology that enabled their consumers to mass-produce high-quality digital artefacts at low cost and without loss of quality.

[...]

While the industry faults ‘piracy’ and file-sharing for their dwindling revenues, the digital games industry actually benefits from the fact that mods can be produced on personal computers and distributed at negligible cost over the Internet. (Ibid.)

Kücklich identifies modding as a practice similar to open source development and voluntary work but problematises the way in which game companies actually profit from players producing new content (Ibid). Erkki Huhtamo makes an important assertion when he writes that ‘[p]laying a computer game may involve the player differently than watching a movie or a television program, but seeing it automatically as more empowering, liberating - or addictive - could hardly be accepted without qualifications’ (1999). He reminds us of the ideology that is constituted by a player position. Players are, after all, acting within a framework offered by the games industry: a framework that does not come without obligations – or at least not without cues that lead the participation towards certain directions. Many of *The Sims* custom content collections online and game modification tools are, for example, overseen and provided by Maxis or Electronic Arts. Presumably this helps them to increase and uphold their ‘fanbase’.

Furthermore, if skinning is about emancipation and a desired convergence, why are half-naked women characters and ‘celebrity’ skins, such as Oprah and Buffy, what has been mainly produced?

In the case of a weaving machine, it was the factory owner, the capitalist, who decided what to weave. Like the cybernetic feedback loop of one weaver and one loom, the ruling class system was simple. Whereas there is no one directly ruling skin makers, we need to look at the versatile cybernetic network which a player is tied into in order to find the broader influences.⁹ It is actually the whole popular culture that affects how Sims are dressed up. Is, then, the decentralisation Plant (1995) talks about a fallacy? Players still produce, not only for, but also according to what is determined by larger movers within a globalised market, and the games industry is one of these.

But the fuel of feminist work is irony. ‘Irony is about humour and serious play’, writes Haraway (1991) and builds the whole construction of a cyborg on irony. ‘Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true’, she later argues (Ibid.). These contradictions are more than clear when skimmers try to create content within a patriarchal culture and under its power. I suggest that we should not concentrate too much on the values and ideology the skins themselves carry but, as I have argued earlier, look at the processes of skinning. The emancipatory value of skinning lies in the very possibility of this process and through it. It is secondary what is produced. Primary issue is to produce and participate within the networks.

⁹ Work on post-industrial culture and its relationship to postmodernism might be useful here and will be taken into account in the future studies. The fragmented and apparently unstructured character of post-industrial culture and its emphasis on consumer choice gives the illusion of personal freedom and agency, but this is only permissible in the context of continuous consumption.

According to Irigaray, women should not aim at reaching the highest position in a patriarchal world, but should seek to assert their own values (Irigaray, 2004). This is especially important to practices and ways of working. If, by skinning, women are able to spread horizontal ways of communicating and producing as well as gaming without pre-set goals and practices that take game content into evaluation outside the game, it may be more effective than producing game characters with burqas and curvy bodies. Furthermore, even the most sexist girl characters for *The Sims* may represent some kind of irony. I have not studied how women react to the sexy and stereotypical game characters they create, but it is possible that they are created in order to try absurd looks in a game, for example use clothes they would hate to wear themselves or narrow a waist as much as possible just for the fun of it. Additionally, we cannot say much about skins based on their look only, it should be studied how certain skins relate to the actual playing. If a 'bimbo' character in a game is also the most intelligent person in the neighbourhood or a character with the most expensive hand bag never gets a partner, the characters are played against the stereotypes familiar from popular media.

Conclusions

Feminist game studies has tended to concentrate on the issue of women's participation in the design teams producing digital games, but there are also other possibilities. I have examined computer game skinning as a contemporary practice through which women connect with technology in a way that enables them to 'use games wrong' and as means of emancipation inside a culture that is highly masculine. In this paper, I have suggested that, in the practice of skinning, weaving and programming coincide and become one. I have also explored why *The Sims* games have made virtual weaving more possible than any other game and why we should concentrate on the process of skinning rather than the end results of it.

I would also suggest that skinning as a way of ‘creating’ games better responds to women’s way of relating to things – it follows the horizontal orientation suggested by Irigaray. It may also be, as some feminist scholars suggest, that such a fundamentally masculine space as the games industry may force women to act according to the laws established by men. Irigaray says that in doing so, a woman may conform herself to norms or values that are not hers (2004). For this reason we cannot directly assume that *The Sims* became popular among women just because a large group of the designers were women. It may be the case that these women were still too few to change the well-established models of working and producing or question best practices in developing game content. In this difficult situation, skinning offers a required alternative.

A story from Greek mythology which started this paper overlaps with Haraway’s cyborg manifesto. In it, Arachne, a woman who confronted a goddess, is actually transformed into a cyborg – an amalgamation of human and animal – by the goddess. One reading of the story suggests that there is something bad or unwanted in being a spider, as Athena wanted to teach Arachne a lesson by transforming her: so the price a woman pays a goddess for being better than her is to become cyborgean.

But one of the most cited phrases in cyborg manifesto is the sentence in which Haraway admits she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess (Haraway, 1991). Relating this idea to the story, I would like to see this old Greek myth as a happy, not a sad story. As a spider/human cyborg Arachne is now able to weave whatever she wishes and by any rules she wishes. Even if Athene is still able to control the larger picture it may be that she does not see the tiny but fabulous and incredibly important patterns Arachne now weaves. Finally, if skimmers were to claim their economic or legal

rights over the production of *The Sims* and act like Arachne in the beginning of the story, they could easily lose the creative power of their nonhierarchical peer-to-peer networks.

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