Play in between:
Women Player Identities and the Practice of Skin Making

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Abstract

Players within contemporary computer game cultures are increasingly able to alter and intervene in the games they play using a range of techniques, such as 'skinning' (i.e. altering the looks of characters with new textures) and 'modding' (i.e. making game modifications such as creating new levels or weapons), to create games that seem to better respond to their playing preferences. For women especially, these practices also offer ways to rework games that are predominantly designed by men for a male game-playing constituency.

This paper explores the practice of computer game skin making or skinning among a group of Finnish *The Sims 2* female players. It concentrates on the construction of player identities emerging within such a practice. Players present their identities in relation to the usual representations of a 'computer game player' or a 'gamer' and articulate cultural values and meanings originating from their gender as well as characteristics of the game they play, their technological expertise and their playing styles. Drawing on material collected by in-depth interviews conducted myself, the paper suggests several ways in which the women involved discuss and construct their identities through excluding certain typical notions of a player. It discusses the interview material in relation to the history of women's leisure as productive and instrumental.

Keywords

Computer games, co-productivity, gender, identity, game modifications, fandom, participation

Introduction

The Sims games have proven extraordinary in their abilities to mobilise players to produce their own game content. This is partly due to its doll house characteristics, its open-endedness, lack of prewritten goals, concentration on game characters or simply because of the fact that the manufacturers offered game modification tools for the players at a very early moment in the games' lifecycle. However, an enormous productive fanbase and a great number of web sites for distributing player made content show that a great number of *The Sims* players regularly alter and develop its objects, characters, environment textures, and building characteristics. A group of these 'game modifications' are often called often skins, the making of which is the focus of this paper.

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 to alter the looks of game characters. This can vary from changing the colour of a single item of clothing to entirely 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 – to many different characters in a game. Accordingly, a skin is a player-made outfit for a computer game character or avatar.

However, the practice of skinning *The Sims* is almost invisible for anyone not actually playing *The Sims* games and isn't usually discussed together with *The Sims* play. In the following discussion I aim to show the importance of the practice for women players and some of the multiple sides of identity construction related to it. It seems to fold together a number of challenging issues regarding gender and computer game play, space between play and work, hegemony of certain game types, notions of fandom and the blurring of the line between industry and users/players, production and consumption, which has already been discussed in the context of participatory media in general.

Identity and negation negotiation

This paper, when it aims to say something about identity and identities, also assumes that these categories are fluid, constructed, historically contingent and part of a continuous 'process', created within, through and in representations, discourses and everyday practices. To summarise, identity in this paper builds on the theories of postmodern subjectivity and British cultural studies greatly influenced by Stuart Hall and feminist models of constructed identity (e.g. Butler, Haraway). Furthermore, the paper 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.

The analytical perspective framing the interview material is informed by identity construction as a process of differentiation and exclusion. For Gabay, "[n]o identity can be an identity without excluding something, i.e. what is different from itself" (2006, pp 349-50). 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" (2002, p 64). In the field of Queer Theory Judith Butler (e.g. 1990) and many others have studied sexual and gender identities from the point of view of understanding 'otherness'. Hall argues, using Derrida's concept, that identity is "constructed in or through *différance* and is constantly destabilized by what it leaves out" (2007, p 18).

This understanding of identity as a constructive process that both depends and produces

‘difference’ in the construction of the self has been used in order to interrogate the interview material but was not prerequisite for its analysis. Instead, the importance of offering an ‘other’ as a point of imaginary reference for the interviewees themselves became evident from the very first reading of the transcripts (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, as I will demonstrate.

In the following, I will first briefly describe the interviews conducted and then explore several starting points for something I wish to call ‘negation negotiation’ as they suggest discursive identity groups or stereotypes my interviewees somehow contrasted their own activities and playing with. These points of exclusion and differentiation I have grouped under the themes of

1) Outside the “hegemony of play”: The Sims players
2) Beyond the assumed player: Women players
3) Between industry and fandom: Co-productive players

In-depth email interviews

The interview material was collected in spring 2008. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via email with three female players who actively create custom content for *The Sims 2* game. The method used was selected because the focus of the study is not well-known and the exploratory interviews were planned to provide information on the very practical issue of doing game modifications as well. This paper does not address the various methodological characteristics of small ‘sample’ interviewing in detail, but given that the aim of the study was to explore the dynamic patterns and themes related to cultural identity construction, interviews with small number was advantageous (see e.g. Crouch & McKenzie 2006). I am therefore primarily interested in adult women players who actively produce new content for games that is distributed and discussed on online fora designed for this purpose. The study is ongoing and part of my Ph.D. dissertation research. More interviews will be conducted in 2008-2009. I identified these women by their actual world sex; they are of Finnish nationality and aged 15, 21, and 45 respectively. Interviews included six to seven sets of questions formulated based on their earlier email answers.

Themes for the interviews were set but the order was not fixed and interviewees were encouraged to discuss their own concerns. The participants were recruited from a Finnish web site which allows players to distribute their own modifications, download other people’s work and comment on both. Participants contacted me voluntarily after I had posted an introduction and invitation to take part in my research project.

Skinner’s identity through difference

Interview results are grouped under three themes; Outside the “hegemony of play”: The Sims players, Beyond the assumed player: Women players, Between industry and fandom: Co-productive players) will be discussed next. Naturally, the names of the interviewees have been altered.

Outside the “hegemony of play”: The Sims players

Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce identified the concept of the hegemony of play in games theory at the DIGRA 2007 conference. They suggested 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, Fullerton, Morie & Pearce 2007, p 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 so-called "minority" players 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", thus actually working against commercial interests. (Ibid.) The common sense and taken for granted nature of games as 'masculine' forms of cultural practice are everyday implications of the hegemony of play: they appear as the 'natural' order of things.

The Sims games are not only the best-selling game series of all times (Howson 2008) but also open to a range of playing styles. However, they are often categorised as non-games and have not gained the status of real computer games. And if we deploy Fron et al's model, it seems this is because they are non-competitive in the usual sense – one cannot really win or lose. Within Game Studies, *The Sims* games have been located on the borders of gameness (e.g. Juul 2003) because of their lack of clear goals and feminised doll house character. The participants in my study were aware of *The Sims*' special nature as a feminine and borderline game and described it as a unique quality. For each of them, *The Sims* games transformed the whole field of computer game playing by offering entirely different possibilities for participation.

> I am interested in the Sims because it differs totally from other game products. [Katja, 15]

> I have never been an especially keen player. I am not very competitive and games' different time limits have always irritated me and made me impatient. Before the Sims I [...] [Heidi, 21]

This recognition results in the players not counting themselves as 'proper' computer game players but rather as ***The Sims*** players in particular. Their status as players was also informed by the fact that in this respect the game is unlike the others – not a typical computer game. When discussing same-sex relationships in *The Sims* games, Curlew (2005) have pointed out that *The Sims* games are renewing the game culture by taken into account some traditionally "othered" groups of consumers. The game's apparent suitability for different player groups was also mentioned by the interviewees. In the following quotation it is also significant how the player suggests the game more suitable for homosexual than heterosexual men.

> As neither a restricting/restrictive narrative nor an end closure has been coded in the game, playing it is really liberating, free and creative [...] This is what I personally respect [...] in the Sims. And I think this is the reason why many other people (women, gay people, older players and sometimes even also [...] hetero males) like the game too. :D [Saara, 45]

It may be that the stereotypical image of a computer game player as well as media representations of gamers as young 'nerdy' and socially inept males do not encourage women to identify such. It is also the case that *The Sims* games are advertised, reviewed and discussed differently to other computer games within the games media. Thus, *The Sims* players tend to exclude themselves from being 'gamers' rather than counter proposing *The Sims* games as 'normal' computer games as Saara says:

> No, I am definitely not any kind of expert on this [playing/games]! Neither am I an active [hard core] player. I just play The Sims… [Saara, 45]

Beyond the assumed player: Women players

> Game and player magazines do not have the smallest gender-sensitivity in what they do. Alternatively there is a lot of gender segregation [...] Women who play are left (I assume unconsciously instead of willingly or knowingly) to the margins. [Saara, 45]

Naturally, *The Sims* skinners interviewed create their player identities directly and consciously in relation to their gender. There are at least two levels in which this can be seen operating. First, they see themselves as **women** players and not just any players. Game culture is accepted as predominantly masculine and they therefore themselves as not fitting into the traditional notion of a player. In our culture it still seems that women are not expected or encouraged to like playing computer games as much as men and it is assumed that women – in general – are not interested in computer games. Everyday experience and studies suggest that women do not primarily identify themselves as gamers as suitable points of identification are missing. In popular media and gaming discourse mothers, for example, are almost without exception represented as supportive figures or sceptical worriers, not as players themselves (Enevold & Hagström 2008). The denial of one's 'gamerness' was visible in my interviews as well. The issue also ties into a wider difficulty for women to claim leisure time.

Second, the three women interviewed all suggested they were unlike other women players – exceptions to the rule. As each suggested at least one thing that made playing computer games seem somewhat 'nerdy', such as antisocial, as an activity, they then constructed themselves as different – *both* from this stereotype and from other non-gaming women.

The conventional construction of a female player within games culture that of 'one of the guys', either a tomboyish or sexually unattractive figure. Whitney Butts' example from her World of Warcraft in-game chat is effective in demonstrating this discursive model (Butts 2005). Other players did not seem to be able to admit she is female because she is a skilled player. Later, they propose she needs to be ugly at least:

> [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.
>
> (Butts, 2005, n.p.)

In order to demonstrate how they differ from the apparently stereotypical female player, then, one of my interviewees consistently emphasised her participation in feminine beauty cultures even though I had not asked them about this at all:

> I just don't think I am a "typical" player, because most of the other players are quiet, shy people, who don't pluck their eyebrows and use ugly clothes. I am sorry, I sound like a superficial bitch again :D [Heidi, 21]

Femininity appears as masquerade and appearance and the player gratuitously invokes such femininity only to disavow it.

Between industry and fandom: Co-productive players

Distinctively, *The Sims* games are also recognised as different from other games by my interviewees because they facilitate the customisation of content, unlike the majority of games. Participants see that the making of such content helps diversify their playing experiences in rewarding ways. They are therefore players for whom the creation of new

content for games is even more important as playing them.

> 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 in my playing the emphasis is on making custom content [...] [Katja, 15]

This is a central part of their player identities. Furthermore, not only are these players distinctive from usual players because they play a very 'special' game but they also think their ways of playing *The Sims* vary from the assumed model as Saara insists,

> [...] I do not play with the most obvious way like "get a spouse, make kids, get a job, advance in a career, gain money and make your house bigger and bigger". [Saara, 45]

It also appears that for my interviewees the difference between playing and making custom content is not important. They actually spend more time making new content than actually doing what is usually called 'playing'. This constitutes a genuinely productive relationship to gaming. My interviewees are primarily *The Sims 2* content producers, not simply *The Sims 2* players.

> 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 ... [Saara, 45]

> [...] the time I spend for playing is divided into actual gameplay, play for maintaining the site (such as making instructions) and skinning, lion's share of which is spent by skinning. [Heidi, 21]

Where The Sims skinning combines work and play it is also interesting to look at the studies on women's leisure. The combination of work and play or play that can be seen as work may be one of the reasons *The Sims* and skinning has became so popular among women. While men's 'right' to claim leisure time and a leisure culture away from work has been long established, women's leisure has always been more problematic – including education, utility and gain. It needs to be productive. 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 and are not activities beyond everyday needs. These products are usually for someone else than themselves. The interviewees in my study emphasise the importance of learning to use computer and graphics editors as well as helping other players towards their dream play by offering them the clothes and outfits they have wished for. Just like the readers of romance in Janice Radway's (1991) study feel guilt because of their own pleasure and not doing work for the family and household, *The Sims* skinners I have interviewed expressed guilty over just sitting and wasting their youth for nothing.

One of the participants uses a neologism 'simsseily' when she talks about several different tasks and practices related to *The Sims 2* gameplay with a common name. 'Simsseily' could translate into 'simming' which seems to be used on some of *The Sims* websites. In the following I have translated the verb 'simmeillä', which she also uses, into 'to sim'.

> 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. [Saara, 45]

The interviewees also create skins to gain a playing reputation and to fulfil other players' desires. And the production of skins is a crucial part of their game culture, not a marginal or negligible element. Distributing and discussing one's creations online is an important aspect of making skins. They do not wish to create skins too similar to existing ones, for example, and are concerned about what other players think about their skins. The players are very critical towards their own 'custom content', 'stuff' or 'thingies', as they call them, and express shame about their early creations which they now dislike. Such devaluing expressions used by my interviewees and on *The Sims* skinning web sites in general may be linked to the cultural devaluation of women's play.

On the other hand, the participants also express certain respect towards the original content of the game and want to preserve its original graphical style. They say it is important to keep their work non-realistic because of the original cartoon style and also argue that some themes, such as pornograpy, do not belong in *The Sims*.

Nevertheless, even if they spend a lot of time customising the game, buy all or most of the expansion packs, and look forward to *The Sims 3* and talk about it like experts, my interviewees do not want to be labelled as fans. They disavow a fan identity by setting out the figure of the fan as 'other', excessive and pathological (about fandom as pathology and of the 'other', see e.g. Jenson 1992)

> I m not one of those stereotypical bristling fanatics who look forward to new expansions like the rising moon and pelt into the stores immediately after launch to buy their own copies or pre-order the dvds weeks before the publishing from an online store. [...] I am also a fan who really produces and participates – and whose fandom is more like productive sort for better or for worse... :) [Saara, 45]

> No, I am not really a fan, it is a nice game but I would manage on a desert island for many many years without it. […] A fan is a person who looks a lot for the expansions, pre-orders them and hypes about them after buying. I do buy all the expansions but I buy them on my own pace whenever I have the time. [...] I think I am a fan a little bit but a serious business fan would be like what I just described, be always in touch. [Katja, 15]

The participants therefore position themselves as productive players who are simultaneously not 'mindless' fans nor primary creators, but rather players **customising** the original while also evaluating their creations and their investment in the game by describing what they do in an undermining way – as thingies or stuff.

Finally my interviewees suggest that making skins makes them feel better about their technological skills, and they recognise a possibility to work in the industry later on. But still there remains another gap – the one between skinners and 'modders'/hackers. The participants do not count themselves as hackers and they think there are more technically experienced people doing what they think hacking would be:

> 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. [Heidi, 21]

> Only couple of times I have tried to change objects' functionalities [...] It is enough for me what other people do. There are extremely good object hackers out there and one can get anything she wants from them. I haven't felt a need to bother to do them myself. It is easier and handier to download readymade [hacked objects]. [Saara, 45]

While skinning requires a certain amount of technicity and knowledge to use texture modification tools, a skinner does not need to know how to program. Highly skilled hacker is considered to be someone who knows how to break the original code and conquer it, but *The Sims* skinner more likely concentrates on visual aesthetics and creating skins that suit well together with the original game. Studies on computer game modding usually discuss game modifications from a very technical perspective. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) as well as Newman (2008) propose modding as highly technical work and thus leave out some contributions as those of skinners that seem to primarily operate on the 'surface' or representational level of computer games.

Conclusions: Not just ordinary play, not just ordinary players

In my interviews skinning appears as a practice inseparable from the actual *Sims* gameplay. Players talk about 'simming' which covers all aspects of engagement in the game: playing, being involved in the community and skinning itself. My interviewees play a little and skin a lot; actual gameplay is, ultimately, secondary. This suggests that the existence of skinning has made it possible to create game play that goes beyond the borders of playing the game in the traditional sense. The lack of preset rules and goals has made it easier to create challenges and rules outside the gameplay in a fictional world, within the practice of 'simming'.

If the conventional game development, dominated by men and by masculine cultural assumptions, does not lead to the production of games that appeal to women, maybe female players will have to continue to create their own rules and goals based on games like *The Sims* which operate as more open systems. However, while it appears that there are no rules in *The Sims*, there may be a need to rethink some of the rules of game theory as well as of the games themselves. I have suggested that acknowledging the long history of denied women's leisure and the productive and instrumental nature of such leisure, it is possible to better understand *The Sims* skinners and their atypical ways of play.

As both Huizinga's (1950) and Caillois' (2001) widely cited definitions of play suggest games as something that stand out from ordinary life as it is not serious and nor productive, my research into women's skinning practices suggests that at least some women prefer to play in a way that may be closer to earlier women's leisure activities than as an expression of freedom from productivity and ordinary life. By defining games such as *The Sims* unproductive, we also exclude an important feature of women's leisure which has existed for ages, its very productiveness.

There already exists a group of Nintendo games that have joined the old continuum of productive leisure for women. Plenty of DS games targeted to women, including *My Happy Manner Book* (teaches good manners), *Dream Skincare* (teaches beauty tricks), *Brain Age* (improves memory and logic), and *Female Power Emergency Up!* (teaches about relationships), combine utility and fun and many games for *WiiFit* are about taking care of one's body and thus helping to reach more sexually desirable body. It is devastating to see that also women's digital leisure seems to include this productivity and benefit as their selling characteristics. Albeit it is also important for games researchers to be aware of this continuum as it is possible that certain definitions for gameness do not go along with culturally feminine forms of pleasure.

Being productive was a central aspect of the player identities expressed by my interviewees and this partly shaped by other players' opinions on created skins. I therefore suggest that skinning cannot be understood as a solitary activity akin to the masculine model of playing,

but is something that draws players into larger communities online, even if the actual gameplay happens off-line and in single-player form. Therefore, ski nning should be seen as a practice which in itself forms a basis for a player identity: a co-creative player. Within this context of productive play, assumed goals and rules of the games appear irrelevant. Skinning is more than an extension to game playing, it is an important activity itself and a basis for the skill development and agency. These co-productive women players cannot find many points of identification within the general game cultural discourses and their identities are constructed through difference and exclusion.

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