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I'd like to have a house like that

Female players of *The Sims*

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Abstract

This qualitative interview study explores the practices of adult female gamers who play the videogame *The Sims*, focusing on the motivations they have for playing and how playing a video game might influence their digital competence. We address the wider context of leisure and the household, investigating to what extent playing videogames has become domesticated in the daily life of the family. It is found that female gamers play *The Sims* because they enjoy the particular way it allows them to take control, fantasize, and be challenged. For some, it is clear that playing this video game has increased their digital skills. We notice that there is an interesting similarity between the pleasures of playing this videogame and more traditional ways of female media engagement such as reading women's magazines or romance novels and watch-

ing soap operas. Our gamers similarly enjoy *The Sims* as leisurely moments for themselves, clearly and intentionally separated from domestic and family duties. We conclude that playing a videogame can be seen as a highly modern and liberating practice, as both playing in general and using ICT have traditionally not been a part of the female leisure domain.

Keywords #gender, #video games, #leisure, #uses and gratifications, #female gamers

Introduction

In living rooms all over the world, the leisure practice of playing videogames has become a mainstream activity, and by now the people who play video games – on consoles, PC's, mobile phones or other platforms – are no longer limited to the formerly dominant group of male teenage gamers. Studies investigating gender differences in video gaming usually indicated that women played less games, had less interest in gaming and less game-related knowledge, and spend less time and energy on the medium than their male peers did (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Jones 2003; Lucas and Sherry 2004), but in recent years this situation has changed, and gaming has indisputably gained popularity among female audiences. And while boys are still reported to play twice as much as girls do (Greenberg et al 2010; Roberts et al. 2010), and that for females players, identifying as a gamer is not self-evident (Shaw, 2011), the number of women engaged in video gaming has become substantial. Most research on gendered gameplay, however, has been limited to teenagers and young women, and their ways of dealing – or not dealing – with the medium of videogames. Apart from some notable exceptions such as the qualitative study by Royse et al (2007) and Mosberg Iverson (2013), the audience of adult female gamers is still a largely neglected group in research (Enevold and Hagstrom 2009).With the current study we hope to add useful insights to the fields of leisure studies and game studies, by reporting on the practices of adult female gamers who play the first videogame title that managed to attract a group of female gamers of all ages: *The Sims*. This game was first published in 2000 by Maxis/ElectronicArts, and has been followed up by *The Sims* online, *The Sims2* and *The Sims3*, and numerous extensions. Media

theorist Henry Jenkins (2001) was among the first scholars to present *The Sims* as a turning point in the domain of gender and video games. *The Sims* belongs to the simulation genre, allowing its players to create and manage a digital world that mimics the real world. In this particular series, gameplay consists of managing a digital space that has been compared to a virtual dollhouse (Flanagan 2003, Brunner, Bennett and Honey 1998).

Playing a video game requires a substantial investment of time, effort and often money. From a psychological perspective one may wonder why people are willing to invest so much in order to entertain themselves (Tan and Jansz 2008). The uses and gratifications approach to understanding media use offers a theoretical explanation for this kind of personal investment by conceptualizing media use as goal directed behavior (Rubin 2002). It emphasizes the active role of the media user, arguing that media selection and use is largely determined by the user's motivations (Ruggiero 2000). In a survey study that investigated the motivations for playing *The Sims*2 (Jansz, Avis and Vosmeer 2010) it was found that 'enjoyment' was the most powerful need for female players meaning that they were predominantly motivated to play *The Sims*2 as a way of having fun. Their playing was also, but to a lesser extent, motivated by needs to control (the virtual reality of the game), to fantasize and to be challenged. Female gamers were far less driven by social motivations than the male participants in this study, which was also a finding of Lucas and Sherry (2004). Mosberg Iverson (2013) noted that creating 'a space of ones own' would be an important reason for women to play a game like *The Sims* as well. Our present interview study allows us to investigate whether the motivations that were identified previously also emerge in conversations with adult female gamers, and how these motivations are elucidated by the players themselves.

For many adult women, especially those with children, interaction with their families has traditionally been the main way of spending their leisure time (Henderson et al1989). The gaming industry has recently been trying to incorporate the domain of family leisure by claiming how video gaming can have a positive influence on family life, emphasizing the ways that families may play games together (Chambers 2012). When it comes to the division of gaming technology within families, though, it has been

documented how male members of a household have a tendency to claim first access to game consoles and computers in the house and often take the role of expert in this area, undermining the desires, skills and knowledge of female family members (Van Zoonen 2002). As Enevold and Hagstrom have put it, "a mother who plays computer games challenges cultural norms, claiming time for an unproductive activity only for her, and acts in contradiction to what the concept of 'mother' implies" (Enevold and Hagstrom 2009, 7). Research into more traditional female pleasures such reading women's magazines (Hermes 1995), or romance novels (Radway 1984) and watching soap operas (Gray 1992) showed that - given that the home is a place of domestic and 'care' work for women (Martinson and Schwartz 2002) - their leisure time has to be explicitly marked from the claims of family members. In these studies it was found that magazines, books and television shows provide women with markers to sign off from domestic and family duties; giving them a possibility to enjoy their own time, without others. In the current study, we will explore whether and how the leisure practices of female gamers relate to the issues mentioned above.

The Study

We conducted an explorative qualitative live interview study among 23 women between the ages of 17 and 59, who played (any version of) *The Sims*. Our interview group consisted of Dutch female gamers with a variety of backgrounds: some combined fulltime jobs with motherhood or study while others were unemployed; some lived alone, others lived with children, with a spouse or with their parents. Employment and level of education were also quite diverse, ranging from university teacher to waitress and from shop-assistant to psychologist.

Motivation

> I use my fantasy. I'd like to have a house like that...(Tonny, 36)

This quote was taken from an interview with a single unemployed mother of two small children, who lived in a relatively small apart-

ment. She admitted that one of the pleasures she derived from playing *The Sims* was that it enabled her to dream about a bigger house and a better life. The element 'fantasy' has been noted in previous studies (Lucas and Sherry 2004) about gamers' motivations, and may be a general motivation for people who engage in any kind of gaming that is more elaborate than casual games. Videogames often present imaginative worlds inhabited by fantasy characters such as wizards, monsters and talking animals, or gamers can indulge in fantasies like flying a spacecraft, driving a race car and generally do things they could never do in real life. The options for fantasy in *The Sims* appear to be a lot more mundane, though. *The Sims* imitates real life, with avatars resembling normal people who engage in normal life situations. The fantasy that the game offers appears to be more applicable to real life: to experiment with fantasy relations or, as Tonny's quote indicated, to experiment with a more luxurious lifestyle, and to be able to obtain things one cannot have in real life. Diversion is a related motivation, where the game offers an easy escape either from a busy working day, a busy household or from a daily life that has problems of its own. The next quote is from the interview with a participant who suffered from rheumatism and chronic infections. She pointed out that for her video gaming was a way to relax and gain new energy during her daily chores:

> When I'm busy and I need some rest, then I game for fifteen minutes, and I relax a bit and then I can go on again. (Renee, 50)

The next quote clearly refers to the motivation 'control'

> What I like, is that you're some kind of God, and that's really thrilling of course, you're in control over your little people. (Bianca, 30)

This was a motivation that was often mentioned by our respondents.

> To make everything just the way you want it. Recreating your own life, in a way. (Anneke, 27)

The Sims is not a game that offers challenge in the sense of competition but as it turns out, the absence of elements of competition was actually experienced as a very positive feature. Earning money within the game is one of the few competitive factors within *The Sims*-gameplay, but we found that a majority of our gamers eliminated this factor by using a 'cheat', a secret code to gain more money.

> I learned a great trick that enables you to spend more money. They all live in very shabby houses when you start out, and they have to work really hard. I love it that I discovered that trick. You can give them 50.000 euros and you can build beautiful houses for them. (Lenny, 58)

Their lack of need for competition does not indicate, however, that our participants do not appreciate the overall challenge the game offers. As Mosberg Iverson (2005) has pointed out, the concept of challenge within *The Sims*-gameplay does not so much consist of beating the game or pushing oneself to get to a higher level, but in the act of designing a house, or making sure that the needs of the characters are met adequately. These forms of challenge have been mentioned many times by our participants, and are indeed seen as one of the enjoyable factors of the game:

> In *Sims2* you have to fulfill life wishes, as to get the best job or to raise ten children and then I decide to do that and it's really hard and then I really enjoy that they put this challenge in the game. (Michelle, 19)

Among our respondents we noted a striking lack of interest in the social possibilities of video gaming, as for instance can be seen among young male gamers that gather physically at so-called LAN parties to play their favorite games (Jansz and Martens 2005). Some of the gaming mothers sometimes do play together with their children, but most of them made clear that this was not an ideal situation, and that they preferred to play alone. For this group of gamers, playing apparently is a solitary experience that they enjoy doing in their own home, in their own time, for their own individual pleasure. While for the gamers that Mosberg Iverson (2013) interviewed online, online communication was an important part of their game-

play, this was clearly not the case with the current sample. This difference can be attributed to the fact that Mosberg Iverson contacted her respondents through an online fan community.

Technology

When it came to the use of technology, the stereotypical division along gender lines was still applicable to some of the women in our study. They considered their father, husband, boyfriend or son as the authority on all things technical within the household. Other gamers within this study though, made clear that the game had not only drawn them towards computer technology, but had actually led to computer literacy, much in the same way as early studies on games and gender indicated. The next respondent told about how she had never really liked computers, but when she had seen someone play *The Sims*, she had become fascinated. As she lived alone, there were no male family members in her household that she could leave the purchase and installation of a personal computer to. Actually, she confessed, she had always been 'kind of against' computers herself.

> But once I had it, I really started to like it, and I also started sending emails and using the internet. I even got myself ADSL. I learned quickly, and really, it wasn't that hard at all. (Lenny, 58)

Another respondent also admitted that playing *The Sims* has helped her become more confident about computer technology:

> You get used to computers, I think it's more like that. When you first encounter a computer you're really scared to push the wrong button. But at a certain point you get used to it and you get more, you know, a feeling of what a computer can do. I must say I learned a lot that way. (Ellen, 26)

These quotes show that playing a computer game can still help adult women to overcome the 'fear of computers', as it had been documented by Sherry Turkle (1986). For these respondents, playing video games had lead to computer literacy in a way that has not often been documented before.

Commitment

The Sims games feature several expansion packs to increase the gaming-possibilities, but only one of the gamers we interviewed had never bought such an expansion. All the other participants owned one or more of them, and two-third of the women indicated explicitly that they owned every single one of them. Many of them described the excitement they experienced on the days the new pack was to be released:

> I had reserved it through an online store. I had even taken the day off for it. (Phyllis, 48)

Also gamer Tonny, the unemployed mother of two, made clear how important obtaining the new game was to her:

> When *University* was released I really didn't have any money but I just had to have it. Period. 'I already have it', people on the forum were saying. Before I realized what I had done I'd purchased it. O shit, I really couldn't afford it. Well, then we'll just have to cut down on the meat this week. (Tonny, 36)

Comments like these show that this group of women is indeed deeply committed to their game, and can be seen as a very active and engaged group of gamers, for whom gaming is a part of their life for which sometimes even other parts of (family)life are set aside. But between the lines, their sense of responsibility for family and household always remained present, and they all seem to have been able to integrate video gameplay in their daily lives as mothers and wives. How much gameplay and household could be intertwined, is apparent in the next quote:

> Because my laptop is not brand-new and it takes quite a long time to start up. Then I just turn it on and I go hang the laundry or something like that in the meantime. (Julia, 35)

Sometimes the gameplay influences their thoughts about the real world:

> I can't really explain, but when I am in my house and I have to do the laundry, and the vacuum cleaning, I think of my sims sometimes, they have to do all kinds of things at the same time as well. (Marleen, 31)

On the other side, playing *The Sims* can also be used as a way to take a step back from a busy household:

> You can just go in all directions, and escape reality. (Petra, 42)

> I think it's relaxation, especially for grown-ups. If you want to turn your mind off, you just play *The Sims* for a while (Marleen, 31)

Using a videogame to escape from reality, to relax, and to step back from daily responsibilities may be a new type of media practice for adult women, but it resembles more classis ways of female media use. One of our respondents pointed out this similarity:

> It's like reading a book, you're in a fantasy world for a while. (Ellen, 26)

Janice Radway noted about the meaning of reading romance novels: 'Not only is it a relaxing release from the tension produced by daily problems and responsibilities, but it creates a time or space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires, and pleasure.' (Radway 1984, 61). This description seems to connect perfectly to the remarks that the respondents in the current study made about their experiences with playing a videogame. An adult female who plays *The Sims* clearly indicates that her current activities are separated from her household duties: not only is videogameplay something of which most women state that they prefer to do it alone, but specifically the act of *playing*, is what a gamer uses to indicate that she is not *working*, or *looking after* someone or something. For the readers of romance novels, an important feature of the book was that they could easily pick it up, and put it away again and this too seemed to be applicale to the gaming practices of the women in the current study.

There are, however, some remarkable differences between reading romance novels and playing a videogame as well. Radway's respondents indicated that they felt somewhat ashamed about their 'hedonistic' behavior, and they reported to feel guilty bout spending money on this kind of entertainment. None of the women who play *The Sims*, though, spoke about their games in such terms. They did not seem to be ashamed of gaming, or feel that they disadvantaged others within their household. Their attitude seemed to be quite different from that, and could probably best be described as *triumphant*. This observation may be viewed from the perspective of the connection between technology and the masculine domain. By playing a game on a computer, women incorporate computer technology into the feminine realm, or at least they challenge and shift traditional notions of what the masculine and feminine domains within the household consist of. And for some of our respondents, this indeed is a thing to be proud of.

Conclusions

In this study we have examined the gaming experience of a group of adult female gamers playing *The Sims*, a specific media audience that has thus far remained practically invisible within media studies. We focused on their motivation to play videogames, the possibility of them acquiring digital competence through gaming, and the ways they incorporate the practice of gaming within their family life. Our participants turned out to be enthusiastic and engaged gamers, who clearly enjoyed this specific title and our first general result thus contradicts the traditional notion about female gamers that they do not want to spend their time and money on gaming and are not very much involved with it. Considering our first topic about practices and motivations, we have demonstrated that this group of female gamers do not play the game to engage in any form of competition or social interaction. They rather play for individual relaxation, enjoying the specific challenge of the game and engaging in a fantasy-world that is close to their everyday life. Considering digital competence, we may conclude that the sheer intensity of their game play already testifies of digital competence, as was seen for instance in the enthusiasm with which our respondents expand their *Sims* game when possible. In terms of the division made by Royse et al (2007), between power gamers and moderate

gamers, we have to conclude that although in terms of dedication many of our respondents can be seen as power gamers, the negotiating of gender and game technology that was often seen, would classify them as moderate gamers. In some cases though, it was clear that playing the game did indeed have a positive influence on their digital competence.

Furthermore, we conclude that a relatively new perspective has been revealed in this study, concerning the similarity between the pleasures of *The Sims* playing and more traditional female pleasures of reading women's magazines (Hermes 1995), romance novels (Radway 1984) and watching soap operas (Gray 1992). Our gamers similarly enjoy *The Sims* as moments for themselves, for individual pleasure and relaxation separated from domestic and family duties. In that respect it is significant that mothers rather not play *The Sims* with their children. The respondents within this study have confirmed that there is a different kind of gaming mother, namely the one that plays games solely for their own enjoyment. Playing a videogame can therefore be seen as a highly modern and liberating practice and the women gamers in our study may be not just challenging cultural norms, as Enevold and Hagstrom (2009) implied, but actually changing them, showing how videogames indeed have an ongoing impact on the relations between media and gender in the digital age.

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