

Dumb People, Smart Objects: The Sims and the Distributed Self

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Introduction

Electronic Arts' Sims franchise, encompassing three main entries, numerous expansions and spin-offs, and two distinct online versions, has transcended its video game status and become a cultural icon. These games, largely devoid of explicit objectives or teleology, feature simulated humans, or Sims, partaking in such quotidian endeavors as housekeeping, paying bills, decorating, watching television, using the restroom, and entertaining guests. Despite their mundane subject matter (or perhaps because of it), Sims games are astonishingly popular. The franchise has collectively sold more than 100 million copies, making it the best-selling PC series ever (Ortutay 2008). Sims games are published in 60 countries and translated into 22 languages (Ortutay 2008). Additionally, since its launch in August of 2011, *The Sims Social*, an online version of the game accessible through Facebook, has attracted over 34 million players and displaced Zynga's juggernaut *FarmVille* as the second most popular game on the ubiquitous social network (Pham 2011). Sims games have appeared on PCs, handheld devices, smartphones, and every major home console of the last decade. Additionally, references to Sims games have appeared in network television programs including *The Drew Carey Show* and *Malcolm in the Middle*, among others ("The Sims™ becomes" 2002). However, this information is perhaps unnecessary. The strongest evidence of the franchise's salience is that I need say little about the games and their impact; their significance is understood.

A crucial factor in the franchise's popularity is its appeal to non-traditional gamers. Remarkably, over half of Sims players are female ("The Sims™ becomes" 2002; Surette 2005). As journalist David Brooks discusses in "Oversimulated Suburbia," in addition to the conventional video game audience consisting of teenage males, Sims games attract mothers of four who see them as a space in which to establish the order lacking in their physical lives. They draw those who desire to form social bonds with other players in a non-competitive environment. They appeal to property- and commerce-driven power brokers who open nightclubs and coffee shops, players "obsessed with making Sims money and becoming masters of the Sims universe" (Brooks 2002).

Yet, for all of the wondrous variety born of these varied demographics and multiple ludics, one ubiquitous theme permeates the Sims' universe: **commodification**. The quintessence of the Sims franchise is the interplay between simulated humans and their constructed environments. This core concept befits a series that began as an architectural simulation entitled *Home Tactics: The Experimental Domestic Simulator*, in which the player's task was to build and decorate the perfect simulated home, and the function of the virtual denizens was to evaluate structures and provide feedback (Keighley 2005a). This focus on commodities is still very much ingrained in the Sims' digital DNA, as Brooks identifies in the franchise's first installment: "As with any good bourgeois society, Sims society is built around interior decorating. You have to furnish your home, and the game itself offers a dazzling array of dining-room table sets, recliners for every price point, party balloons, and sconces" (2002).

But of course, this dazzling array is insufficient. Sims games include sophisticated yet simple tools for players to modify and create objects for their virtual worlds, and gamers have thoroughly embraced this ability. Player-generated furniture, paintings, clothing, plant life, magical artifacts, beds, foosball tables, stairs, computers, shrimp carts, surf boards, doors, and skins that transform Sims' appearance into anything from popular celebrities to medieval warriors cram websites. *The Sims Resource* alone boasts over 600,000 downloadable accoutrements for Sims games. Many accessories may be downloaded freely, but not all are available without cost. Skilled craftspersons make tidy sums of real-world dollars selling virtual wares: hand-crafted lamps, toilets, coffins, and St. Bernards (Musgrove 2005).

Despite claiming marquee space in the games' titles, the simulated humans inhabiting these meticulously-curated environments are best understood **not as autonomous agents but as nodes in a network**: digital Barbies and Kens, undefined unless imbricated in a milieu of commodities. It is thus unsurprising that in several interviews franchise architect Will Wright describes his creation as a virtual dollhouse (Kelly 1994; Pearce 2002; Yi 2003; Keighley 2005b).

This core element of Sims games, networks of interaction among simulated humans and their constructed, commodified environments, is the subject of this paper. The behavior model coded into Sims games adopts a philosophical view of the self that is dependent upon its entanglement in a web of objects, in which distinctions between human and non-human dissolve. The distributed self that arises from this network is a contingent zone of conflict with ambiguous borders, wherein environmental influences vie for expression. In short, Sims games establish a world in which objects own people as much as the converse. This relationship provides grounding for this paper's somewhat hyperbolic title. **Sims are akin to dumb terminals: operators that pass input and display output, while processing occurs in a larger network.** Sims games depict humans as dumb responders in intelligent constructed worlds, a portrayal that seems increasingly appropriate in a progressively more networked, digitized, and commodified culture.

Built Environments and Behavior

In a 1994 interview in *Wired*, Will Wright makes the following statement about his next game, which would become the first Sims title:

I'm hoping to strike out in a slightly different direction. I'm interested in the process and strategies for design. The architect Christopher Alexander, in his book *Pattern Language* [sic] formalized a lot of spatial relationships into a grammar for design. I'd like to work toward a grammar for complex systems and present someone with tools for designing complex things. I have in mind a game I want to call "Doll House." It gives grown-ups some tools to design what is basically a doll house. But a doll house may not be very marketable. (qtd. in Kelly 1994)

Given the rampant financial success and cultural relevance of *The Sims*, Wright's concern about the marketability of such a program proved unfounded. Indeed, his virtual dollhouse has tapped into a very potent theme in the contemporary zeitgeist. His concise statement connects the core elements of Sims games—constructed environments, user tools, and complex systems—and implies their applicability beyond the boundaries of the game. Wright's appeal to Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, a work that he has elsewhere labeled a Western version of feng shui (qtd. in Demaria & Wilson 2004: 264) and "roughly between psychology and architecture" (qtd. in Cambron 2002), reveals the essential association between built environments and human response that is the crux of the Sims series. Through this perspective, humans and the constructed objects of their environments form a complex system of mutual interdependence.

The systems-based perspective of *The Sims* is in keeping with Wright's previous works. Wright has routinely cited the urban planning theories of Jay Forrester as the inspiration for his first major video game, *SimCity* (Pearce 2002; Keighley 2005b). Forrester formalized his theories of systems dynamics while at MIT by applying holistic cybernetic models drawn from engineering to subjects as various as population, ecology, and economics. *SimCity*'s urban planning simulation utilizes Forrester's theories to create a complex system in which city blocks and transportation systems function as autonomous agents according to rules based upon their physical relationships to other agents. Despite having no global system of organization, these discrete units collectively form an ordered pattern of development, inspiring science writer Steven Johnson to identify *SimCity* as "one of the first games to exploit the uncanny, bottom-up powers of emergence" in his book *Emergence* (2001: 87).

Wright continued to incorporate systems theory into his later games. *SimEarth*, his follow-up to *SimEarth*, is based upon James Lovelock's Gaia Theory (Cambron 2002; Keighly 2005b). Lovelock's hypothesis begins with the observation that living beings and their shared physical environment significantly affect one another, and from this he extrapolates the controversial idea that the physical environment and its constituent parts function together as a complex organism. Lovelock defines this symbiosis in his book *Gaia*: "We have since defined Gaia as a complex entity involving the earth's biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and

soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet” (2000: 10).

His explicit incorporation of theories from Alexander, Forrester, and Lovelock into video games reveals Wright’s profound interest in the interactions between living and non-living things as parts of complex systems. Sims games are thus properly understood not as simulations of virtual people, but as Wright’s dollhouse metaphor implies, simulations of complex environments. This is reflected in the player’s perspective in Sims games, which is fixed upon structures rather than Sims. The virtual humans leave for work, neighbors drop by, guests float in and out of the screen, but the player, and the experience, is locked upon structures, the nexus of these interactions.

At a code level, structures and objects are crucial to Sims’ actions and identity. Wright indicates that the behavioral model in *The Sims* is partially based upon his earlier video game *SimAnt* (Demaria & Wilson 2004: 265). Wright states that in this game—a simulation of an ant colony, called “one of the emergent world’s crowning achievements” by Johnson (2001: 22)—**ants operate in a more intelligent way than the game’s single human**. According to Wright, this is because the human functions according to the rules of traditional, top-down artificial intelligence programming, whereas the ants manifest a “distributed environmental intelligence” based upon virtual pheromone trails (qtd. in Phipps 2005). Wright states of his preparation for the first Sims game: “I began wondering, could we build a more robust simulation of human behavior if we adopted this ant model, where we distribute the intelligence not through the agents, but through the environment?” (qtd. in Phipps 2005). The result of this speculation became the core behavioral model for Sims games, in which **objects in Sims’ homes—televisions, stoves, toilets—broadcast messages to Sims about how they can interact**. Wright calls this a “proximity pheromone” model, because a particular Sim’s actions are largely determined by the intensity and distance of an object’s broadcasts (qtd. in Demaria & Wilson 2004: 265). Wright captures the relationship between Sims and their environments succinctly through the statement that gives this paper its title: “What we did was make the people really dumb and make the environment and objects really smart. [...] basically the fridge yells at the player, ‘I can satisfy hunger five!’ and the chair says, ‘But I’m all about comfort four!’ and the bath says, ‘Hygiene seven right here!’” (qtd. in Keighley 2005b). **It is possible to see coherence between Wright’s description of the action possibilities inherent in objects and James J. Gibson’s similar description of *affordances* in his book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.**

Wright’s comments reveal that Sims do not make rational decisions in a conventional sense; they filter the multitude of signals that fill their commodified environments. However, Sims do not all respond exactly the same way in seemingly identical circumstances. Individual Sims discriminate various environmental stimuli and perform different actions. According to Wright, this is because Sims have proclivities that predispose them to certain behaviors over others. **“We gave their personality a very heavy weight on their decisions,” states Wright, “to an almost pathological degree. A very neat Sim will spend way too much time picking up—even after other Sims—while a sloppy Sim will never do this”** (qtd. in Johnson 2001: 188).

Sims thus do not express free will in ways we might expect;¹ they are filters that operate under individuated rules. One Sim may sort object broadcasts so that he accepts messages that lead to cleanliness (dirty dishes crying out for scrubbing, a mop beckoning for use). Another Sim may deflect such broadcasts while accepting those from a comfortable couch or droning television.

To untangle the implications of the Sims' acts of filtering, we might turn to Mark C. Taylor's discussion of screening in *The Moment of Complexity*. Near the end of his text, Taylor states that he is not the author of the book, because the ideas, words, and concepts that appear in it are not solely his own, but an amalgamation of other sources (2001: 196). The self that writes the work is a contingent construction, a manufactured product of the book as much as its creator. This entity is described by Taylor as a "transient eddy in a river whose banks are difficult to discern" (2001: 196). We can see something of Roland Barthes's death of the author from his famed essay in *Image—Music—Text* in **this notion of an unstable self constructed through a web of associations**. "My identity—literary as well as otherwise—" states Taylor, "is parasitic upon the ghosts that haunt me" (2001: 196). Taylor's self is constituted of the conflicting influences that "jostle with each other in a struggle for recognition" (2001: 197). For Taylor, selves are essentially filters, or what he calls screens, upon which some influences are expressed while others are deflected. This duality is encapsulated in the term *screen* itself, which means both to conceal and to show (2001: 200). We can see in Taylor's concept of the self as "the result rather than the presupposition of screening information" a strong connection to the depiction of Sims as filters (2001: 205). A Sim thus becomes a kind of contested space: a zone of conflict wherein commodity messages vie for expression, just as Taylor's ghosts jostle for dominance. **Object broadcasts do not consciously contend with one another for manifestation in a Sim; this is not a Darwinian struggle for survival. Yet a process of selection does occur. Sims filter the selected from the deflected, and draw their own identities from this conflict. This scenario inverts an expected hierarchy, in that objects vie for ownership of Sims rather than the converse.**

This curious manipulation of ownership is at the heart of *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*, by sociologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, which is an extended investigation into **the role of objects in the making of identity**. The authors capture the mutually-constitutive relationship of object and user through their statement that a self is "to a large extent a reflection of things with which [it] interacts. Thus objects also make and use their makers and users" (1981: 1). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton mean this statement literally rather than metaphorically. For them, as indeed for Sims, the self is indivisible from a larger world of objects. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton base this assertion upon empirical evidence collected through interviews and also the theoretical groundwork of Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. Arendt sees the human-made "world" as separate from the natural "planet." Interestingly, Arendt makes an anti-Romantic, anti-Platonic, and anti-Judeo/Christian move by viewing the human-made world of

¹ Curiously, Sims have a "free will" option that can be turned on or off. Sims who have no free will make no actions without the guidance of the player. This paper explores what is implied by the status of Sims who have free will.

things as the objective grounding of self in opposition to the apathy of a disinterested natural world. “Against the subjectivity of men,” states Arendt in *The Human Condition*, “stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature” (1958: 137). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton see in this perspective a connection with Heidegger’s dense concept of dwelling in the world, and conclude:

These arguments imply that men and women make order in their selves (i.e., “retrieve their identity”) by first creating and then interacting with the material world. The nature of that transaction will determine, to a great extent, the kind of person that emerges. Thus the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are. The material objects we use are not just tools we can pick up and discard at our convenience; they constitute the framework of experience that gives order to our otherwise shapeless selves. (1981: 16)

The profound imbrication of the self in a network of constructed objects that Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton identify underlies Sims’ virtual identities. Sims and their objects exist in a mutually-dependent complex system, in which any part, when isolated from the whole, loses meaning.

Making Play

At this point, the reader may have noticed that some pronoun slight-of-hand has occurred during the previous section regarding living people rather than digital simulacra. This shift is made to introduce a vital component of the Sims’ complex system that must be taken into account: the player. Wright discusses player integration in the Sims’ virtual world:

It’s actually very interesting in *The Sims* how the pronouns change all the time. I’m sitting there playing the game and I’m talking about, “Oh, first I’m going to get a job, then I’m going to do this, then I’m going to do that.” And then you know when the character starts disobeying me, all of a sudden I shift and say “Oh, Why won’t he do that?” or “What’s he doing now?” And so at some point it’s *me* kind of inhabiting this little person, and I’m thinking, “It’s me, I’m going to get a job and I’m going to do x, y, and z.” But then when he starts rebelling, it’s *he*. And so then I kind of jump out of him, and now it’s me vs. *him*. (qtd. in Pearce 2002, italics in original)

The Sims’ virtual world organizes into units: filtered commodity broadcasts form the essence of a particular Sim; Sims aggregate into families; families consolidate into virtual neighborhoods. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s discussions of the reciprocity between tools and users, and Wright’s observation about the blurring of identity evident in pronoun switching, imply that the player is a vital component of this system in all of its parts and wholes. Players are entangled with the simulated world through the virtual objects, humans, and communities they both create and consume in a complicated reciprocal interdependence.

Brooks discusses how physical and digital personas mingle through their shared investment in virtual commodities. Brooks claims that a player’s first reaction in the Sims’ world of

infinite possibilities is to consume: to “nest and decorate” (2002: 368). Brooks labels this nesting drive a “virtual hedonism, [...] a delicious set of pleasures and sensations that apparently come from imagining what floorings would go with what wall surfaces, from selecting blouses and boleros, from mixing and matching and combining” (2002: 368). These simulated objects motivate actions and shape selves in the real world as in its virtual counterpart. Brooks proceeds through a brief catalog of the numerous online repositories of Sims goods—places patterned after real-world structures, such as the Mall of the Sims, the Sims Thrift Mart, and Historic Sims Houses—and then describes the real effect of these intangible simulacra on human players:

And see how the public bubbles with enthusiasm! In Sims sites devoted to fashion discussions, you find yourself among people in a shopping frenzy. Authentic Victorian wallpaper is now available! Here’s a new site with pet gyms for your little Sims gerbils to run around in! “Oh! And something very very very very very special!” one Sims nut enthuses on <partysims.com>. “A brand-new portable-TV collection!” (2002: 368)

Reading Brooks’s statements, it is difficult to discern if living players or virtual Sims are more susceptible to the simulated goods broadcasting their affordances.

Although there is something amusing about this unbridled enthusiasm for intangible goods, it is crucial to examine this commodity-focused impulse through a lens other than simple materialism, as Brooks suggests. “It’s not exactly a materialistic fever they’re stoking,” states Brooks, “because none of the stuff is actually material” (2002: 368). Moreover, in addition to the desire to accumulate, the nesting instinct demonstrates a drive to arrange, assemble, and personalize, a desire for “mixing and matching and combining” (Brooks 2002: 368). This focus on communal customization is an identifiable feature of human behavior, and has been explicitly incorporated into the Sims franchise. “We probably spent an extra year in development [of the first Sims game] making so many parts of the game customizable,” states Wright. “Had the game been a flop that would have been a wasted year. But if the game was a success then that year would be well worth it because of the community we could build around the game” (qtd. in Kosak 2005). Wright’s hope for an emergent community predicated on a distributed user base came to fruition. Wright states that, because the first Sims game was vastly customizable due to the modification tools released before the game shipped, at one time approximately 80 to 90 percent of game content was community-created (qtd. in Becker 2005). The subsequent main entries in the Sims franchise have likewise cultivated communities of player-creators through websites including *The Sims Exchange*, an official Sims site where players can trade user-created objects and share narrative Sim photo albums. Wright uses the biological metaphor of pollination to describe the blossoming of this emergent community from human and digital components (Kosak 2005).

Given the Sims franchise’s concerted investment in creating and sharing, it would be reductive to view these games as mere enablers of virtual materialism. The vast community of makers that has sprung up around them reveals players’ shared interest in production. In her interview with Wright, Celia Pearce hypothesizes that games like these form “a new genre of experience where consumption and production are synonymous” (2002). The player

of such games buys the ability to generate her own content, and thereby participate in a vast complex system of commodities, simulated human, and biological players. A player becomes an amalgam of consumer and producer—what Pearce calls a “conducer,” a term she attributes to NYU Media Research Lab professor Ken Perlin. This hybrid status is identifiable in many of the MMORPGs that enable players to create and share objects in the interest of network-building. A prime example is Linden Lab’s *Second Life*, which in its programmer-generated state is almost completely devoid of content. Users in shared space generate almost all of the virtual structures, items, and personas that exist in the simulated world. *Second Life* denizens pay a monthly charge for the experience of world-building itself. “Linden Lab,” states video game journalist Mark Wallace, “provides only a landscape (and sometimes not even that); the residents effectively constitute the largest content-creation team in existence, and one that pays for the privilege” (2005: 15). It is as if players are purchasing canvas and paint rather than art.

In addition to the appropriately-named *Second Life*, many other games reveal curious overlaps between consumption and production in real and virtual worlds. Sony’s *Station Exchange* website for its *Everquest II* MMORPG is an official auction marketplace “that provides players a secure method of buying and selling the right to use in game coin, items and characters” (2005). In other words, players can sell or buy in-game items with real-world currency. This fusion of a real and virtual economy is by no means particular to *Everquest II*. Players of the MMORPG *EVE Online* may use in-game currency, called ISK, to purchase ad space in the game’s official print magazine *E-ON* (Walsh 2005). CCP, the game’s developer, also plans to use ISK to pay freelance contributors to *E-ON*. In essence, real-world workers are being compensated with play money, and this play money, in turn, can be used productively in the real world.

In each of these scenarios, participation in a larger network is enabled through the fusion of consumption and production Pearce identifies. Taylor states of this kind of amalgam, “We no longer primarily exchange things but now swap images and information in networks that virtualize reality” (qtd. in Rickert and Blakesley 2004: 817). By making, exchanging, and using objects, players develop an evolving system that transcends the gap between the physical and virtual worlds. Players are not simple consumers, but vital parts of a broader system comprising human and object, living and non-living, physical and virtual elements. This fervor of conduction is readily apparent in Sims games. Virtual objects are created, shared, and consumed in a distributed network, and like any emergent system, this network has spread beyond its planned borders. Wright states that within two years of the *The Sims* launch, its community had produced some 30 to 40 of its own tools for the customization of game elements and interface (Kosak 2005). In addition to using the tools provided by the programmers to construct and modify objects, the community had, completely through bottom-up organization, crafted its own implements for this purpose. Like ants finding the shortest distance to a food source, the system had generated more efficient emergent solutions from below. We are now in a situation where it is common for a player to purchase a Sims game and after spending some time embellishing her Sims’ environment with in-game content and objects downloaded from online repositories, decide to construct her own virtual

items. She then uses developer-provided tools or those generated by the user community and creates several objects. She places these objects in her own virtual Sims world, and they have an immediate effect on her Sims by broadcasting their affordances. This player, stimulated by a need to join the larger community as a producer, uploads her Sims family, a house she has decorated, and a few photo albums to *The Sims Exchange*. Some of her virtual objects she places in a separate online repository. She may or may not charge for their use.

This scenario, a complex situation of overlaps among human and virtual elements, raises a multitude of questions. For whom are objects designed? Are they owned by their creators or by the virtual Sims they directly influence? What is the difference between how virtual objects affect Sims and how they affect the human elements of the system (both their creators and the wider networked audience who download and incorporate them into their own virtual worlds)? If, as Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton claim, human evolution is marked not by gains in intellect, morality, or wisdom, but by the kinds of objects we are able to construct, what are we to *make* of our new era (1981: ix)? Wallace states of a group of *Second Life* users that “they define themselves by what they build,” but how are we to frame the piles of ones and zeros, the handfuls of electrons, that constitute their creations (2005: 16)? And how are these creations building us? Although these questions are largely unanswerable, they can be addressed productively by redefining our understanding of the seemingly autonomous categories of human and object, and by reorienting how we view the interactions between them.

Humans and Things as Networks

The complex networks surrounding Sims games reveal a flattening of the distinctions between actor and object, actual and virtual, consumer and producer, maker and made. Virtual objects broadcast competing affordances. Sims become metaphorical topographies where commodity battles unfold. Players create and disseminate constructed objects and Sims, and yet, as Brooks and Pearce suggest, they are simultaneously shaped by these items through their involvement in a larger network of consumption and production. Taken in isolation, each component of this system is limited. Yet, from these elements, an order emerges that acts in ways different than any of its constituents, or, in Johnson’s terms, specialized components create unspecialized intelligence (2001: 93-94). In other words, although the parts—be they human or object, actual or virtual—are dumb, the whole is smart. This scenario problematizes where cognition takes place, how it is generated, and who the principal actor is. This dislocation simultaneously unsettles identity and the nature of self.

Unseating humans from their position as conscious actors and equating them with things is a somewhat counterintuitive proposition. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton state that “the most basic information about ourselves as human beings—the fact that we *are* human—has been traditionally conveyed to us by the use of artifacts” (1981: 92, italics in original). Rhetorician Kenneth Burke posits a “collective revelation” that occurred early in human history that “involves the pragmatic recognition of a distinction between persons and things”

(1966: 53). Burke claims that it is a shared human trait to differentiate between the consciously-chosen “actions” of humans and the mindless “motions” of objects (1966: 53). Nevertheless, he deftly sidesteps the metaphysical quandary of whether or not humans actually are mere objects in motion. He grants that “the distinction between *things moving* and *persons acting* is but an illusion,” but our belief that we are more than objects in motion functions as if true, regardless of its veracity (1966: 53, italics in original). This distinction is crucial, as it reveals that human separation from objects is a contingent orientation based upon perception rather than an a priori distinction.

Others are not as convinced as Burke that “the human race cannot possibly get along with itself on the basis of any other intuition” than the apparent distinction between people and things (1966: 53). In his book *Mind, Self, and Society*, pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead argues that objects and other humans external to the self function identically: “It is possible for inanimate objects, no less than for other human organisms, to form parts of the generalized and organized—the completely socialized—other for any given human individual, in so far as he responds to such objects socially or in a social fashion” (1967: 154). Mead here polarizes existence into two camps: the self and the other. Mead claims that components of the other, be they human or object, are equivalent in their differentiation from the self. As such, while the unique self remains intact, the distinctions between external humans and objects are dissolved.

Although Mead preserves the sanctity of the self as a hermetic entity, later authors working in a postmodern milieu view identity as a composite construct. Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* (1999) inverts the hierarchy of self such that it becomes a by-product of its constituent biological parts. Dawkins claims that rather than humans using genes to create more humans, genes organize into humans to make more genes. In essence, humans become vehicles for more effective gene reproduction. Matt Ridley’s *Genome* presses this viewpoint, explicitly depicting humans as complex systems akin to bee hives:

The relationship between body cells is indeed very much like that between bees in a hive. The ancestors of your cells were once individual entities and their evolutionary “decision” to co-operate, some 600 million years ago, is almost exactly equivalent to the same decision, taken perhaps 50 million years ago by the social insects, to co-operate on the level of the body; [...]. (2000: 232)

These depictions challenge the unity of the self, positioning it not as a singular entity but an aggregation derived from a colony bound by mutual interest.

If the distinctions between human and object are porous, and identity is a conglomeration rather than a singularity, then it is no great leap to interpret any specific self, as the Sims series implies, as constituted of objects. This view does not concede to simple materialism; it acknowledges the vital role of things in the making of self. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s interview subjects articulate this importance. Speaking of the objects in her home, a 62-year-old grandmother using “well-chosen words” states that they “represent my hard-earned final composite identity” (1981: 143). Another subject states of her treasured

possessions that “if I didn’t have them, I probably wouldn’t be the same person. They sort of mold my personality” (1981: 190). An additional interviewee contends that “everybody’s made up of different things. They’re part of me in the respect that they make up my personality” (1981: 190). All of these people, consciously or not, acknowledge their profound imbrication in a network of commodities, and how this entanglement shapes their identities.

The statements of these people about everyday objects cohere with Edwin Hutchins’s argument in *Cognition in the Wild* (1996) that humans and objects function reciprocally. Hutchins’s extended example of the relationship between sailors, their instruments, and their ship demonstrates how humans and objects are interdependent. From an external perspective, it is difficult to attribute cognitive primacy to either the human or non-human parts of the system, as neither can function in isolation. It is this codependence that leads Hutchins to contend that cognition is best understood as an entity distributed amongst human and non-human parts situated in an environment. It is a fallacy to locate thought and identity solely in the human brain, as these concepts emerge from the interactions of a larger world of things.

Andy Clark, in his book *Being There* (1997), similarly contends that the adaptive success of humans, indeed the very characteristic that defines them, is their ability to incorporate the environment into their acts of cognition. Clark speaks of the “extended mind,” which is an ephemeral entity emerging from the interaction of our own biology with the physical world (1997: 85). For Clark, the mind is “leaky” and mingles “shamelessly” with its environment (1997: 53). N. Katherine Hayles, drawing upon the work of Hutchins and Clark in “Flesh and Metal,” describes their views of the self as systemic, meaning that the acts that define humankind are “distributed throughout the environments in which humans move and work,” and are “actuated by a variety of actors, only some of which are human” (2002: 302-03). All of these contentions are formalizations of something encapsulated simply and profoundly by the youngest member of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton’s interview pool: “All my special things make me feel like I’m part of the world” (1981: 193). Humans cannot function, indeed cannot exist, in isolation. To invoke a concept of humanity is to invoke an entity inextricable from its entanglement in a larger material network.

This view of the self as an aspect of its physical environment has roots back as far as the 5th century BCE, as evident in the location-based mnemonic systems of Simonides and later Cicero. Both men recommend associating memories with objects in the physical world. They acknowledge, as Hutchins, Clark, and Hayles do, that the distinguishing characteristic of humankind is the partial offloading of cognition onto the environment. This viewpoint manifests explicitly in Wright’s discussions of Sims games. Wright describes the player and the virtual world functioning in a system of “parallel processing” (qtd. in Pearce 2002). Wright explains that “there are certain things we just cannot simulate on a computer, but on the other hand that people are very good at simulating in their heads. So we just take that part of the simulation and offload it from the computer into the player’s head” (qtd. in Pearce 2002). In another interview, Wright describes this situation as using the player’s “imagination as the co-processor” (qtd. in Phipps 2005). Such a symbiotic relationship is an overt example of Clark’s definition of humans as natural cyborgs, “not in the merely superficial sense of

combining flesh and wires but in the more profound sense of being human-technology symbionts: thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and nonbiological circuitry” (2003: 3). Sims games blur distinctions between human and machine, actual and virtual. The games evince Taylor’s contention that “it is no longer clear where to draw the line between mind and matter, self and other, human and machine. *Mind is distributed throughout the world*” (2001: 230, italics in original).

The notion of a distributed self crackles behind the authors’ works. This concept requires a rethinking of the hermetic thinking entity sanctified by Descartes. Perhaps the most significant implication of viewing the self as a distributed entity is that it dissolves autonomy. Classifications such as “human” and “object” become not discrete categories, but useful misnomers: terminological representations of ambiguously-defined nexus regions where influences mingle, or in Taylor’s words, “the intersection of relations knotted in nodes” (2001: 211). Figure 1 demonstrates how this view redefines the self as the emergent product of interactions rather than an autonomous unit.

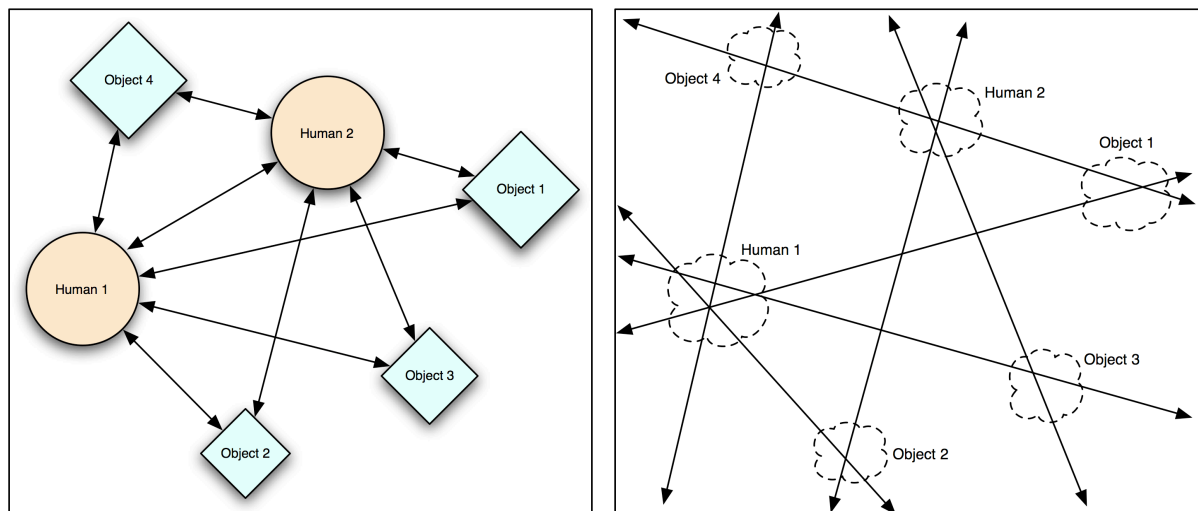


Fig. 1. The Cartesian model on the left shows autonomous selves interacting with other human and non-human entities. Boundaries are well defined and essence is stable. The diagram on the right depicts the distributed self in its environment. Boundaries are ambiguous and contingent. The nature of selves and objects is fluid, and the distinction between human and non-human is obviated by their shared status as nodes in a macro system of intersecting influences.

Under the model of a distributed self, humans and objects are equated. The distinction is useful for productive communication, but not based on essential differences. Taylor indeed questions if the term “self” has meaning any longer, as it signifies “a node in a complex network of relations,” a definition that applies to objects equally well (2001: 231).

The utility of this perspective in a world that is increasingly commodified, yet simultaneously more virtualized and networked, is apparent. It allows us to grapple with the vague distinctions of human and object in ways that models positing an autonomous self cannot. Hayles states of a distributed, emergent view of the self: “Seeing entities emerging from specific kinds of interaction allows them to come into view not as static objects precoded and prevalued, but rather as the visible results of the dynamic ongoingness of the flux—[...]” (2002: 298). The distributed self, a entity continually emerging from complex interactions within an environment, helps us productively interpret the strange overlaps between humans and things in actual and virtual worlds. It makes lucid Taylor’s statement: “As a node in networks that are infinitely complex, I am the incarnation of worldwide webs” (2001: 232). The omnipresence of cellular communications, instant messaging, mobile computing devices, and on-demand information and entertainment transforms Taylor’s sentiment from hyperbole into common sense observation.

Taylor’s metaphor of the web appropriately de-centers the hierarchy that may arise when viewing entities in this sort of fractal or micro/macrocosmic relationship. That is to say, it is possible to view Dawkins’s orientation as shifting the indivisible component, the “prime mover,” as it were, from the human to the gene, yet leaving an essential top-down structure of components and wholes intact. Similarly, one might fairly ask of Sims games: if Sims are composed of the competing affordances of objects, what composes the objects? The most appropriate response is that objects are themselves constituted of other objects and Sims in a circular/reciprocal rather than hierarchical relationship, as illustrated in Figure 2. Every node in the web is both part and whole, both constituted and constituting. Entities are only defined through their relationships to other entities in the system, or in Taylor’s terms, “Each emerges in and through the other, and therefore neither can be reduced to the other” (2001: 207). There is no prime mover, no indivisible atom, as the entity and the network reciprocally define one another. “From the genome to global markets,” states Taylor, “webs act through those who appear to act on them. [...] there is a co-determination as well as co-evolution between the individual and the web or matrix” (qtd. in Rickert and Blakesley 2004: 807). The de-centered web, rather than a new digital Great Chain of Being, legitimates the distributed self.

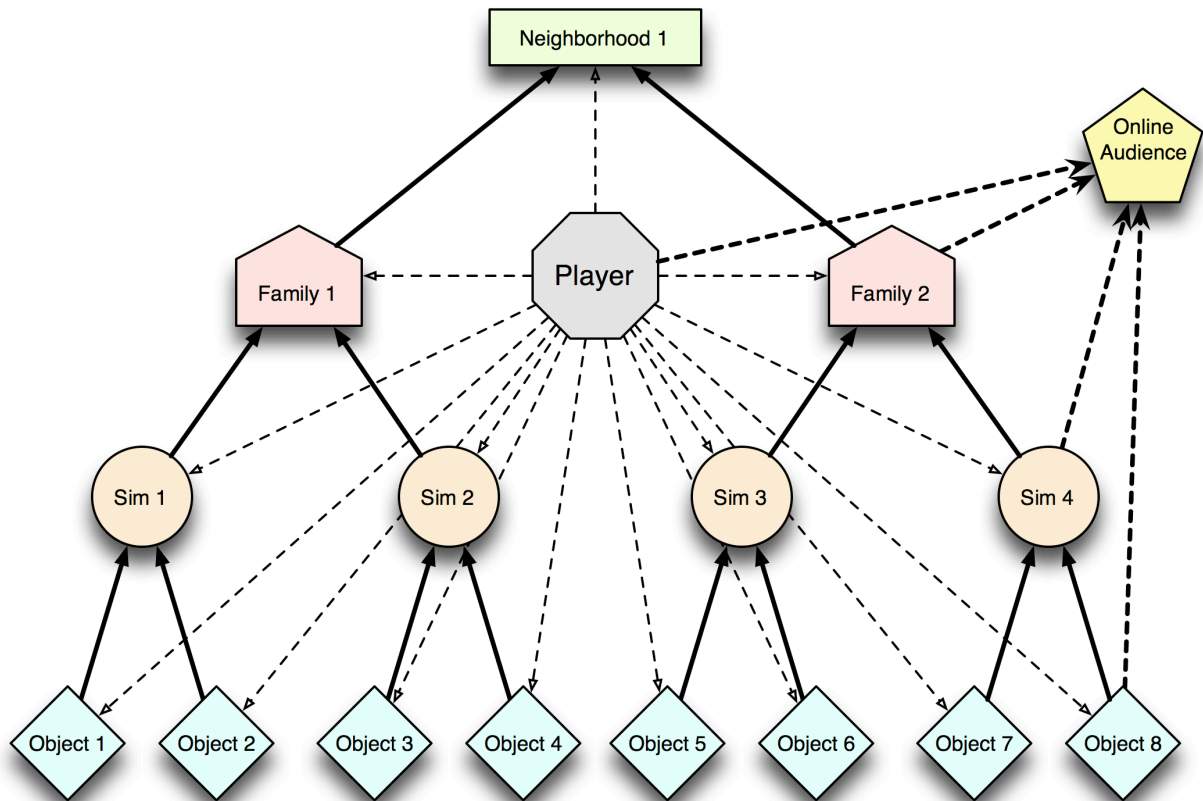
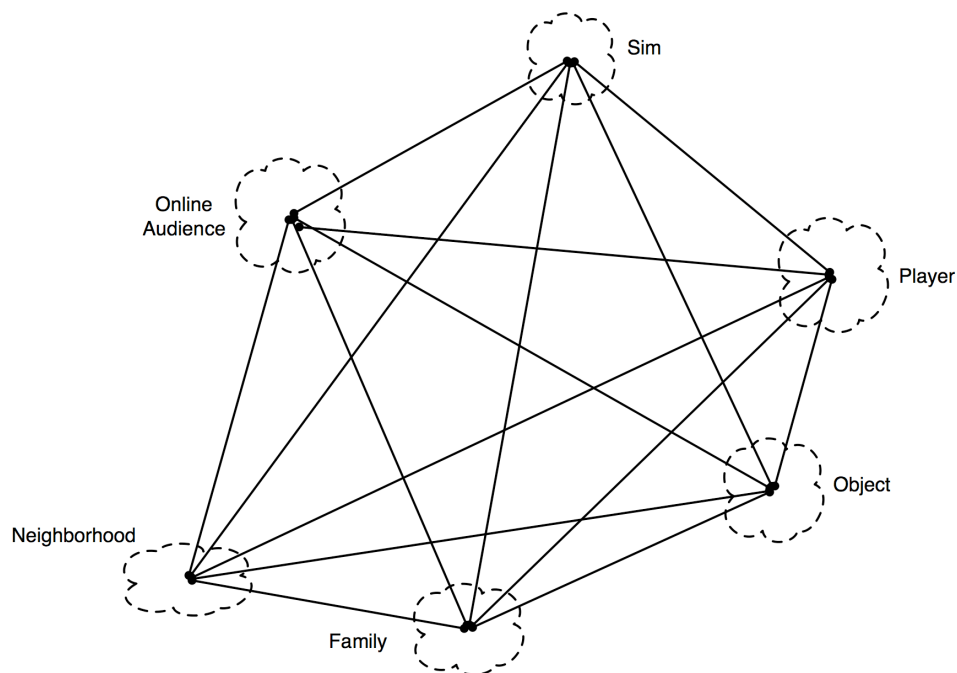


Fig. 2. Modeling an object/human relationship in a hierarchy, as above, does not obviate the need for a foundational element, but rather shifts it from humans to objects. In the nodal, web-like structure below, each entity—human and non-human—is comprehensible as both result and constituent of every other entity.



Emerging Selves

So in fact you have the players kind of cross-pollinating their creativity with each other, but it's transparently mediated by the computer. They don't even know whether the computer came up with this, or some other player in Oklahoma, or what. They just know that the game is doing something different today than it did yesterday. (Will Wright qtd. in Pearce 2002)

It is important to recapitulate and clarify what this paper posits. It identifies a particular model of a distributed self functioning in Sims games that dissolves distinctions between human and object, real and virtual. These distinctions become helpful but contingent constructs that identify ambiguously-defined nodes where interactions occur. This flattening of difference casts the self as a entity both constructed and constructing. This model does not devalue the importance of humanity, nor does it remove agency. As Taylor states, "The decentering of the subject does not result in the dissipation of agency but leads to nodular subjectivity in which self and other are inseparably bound together" (qtd. in Rickert and Blakesley 2004: 809). The distributed self model seeks to be a productive representation of the complex relationship between selves and objects that is increasingly relevant in a postmodern, digital milieu.

This paper's position is that no model can claim a greater measure of objective truth than any other; nevertheless various models are differently appropriate to particular historical and cultural contexts. As evident in manifestations including Sims games, viewing the self as a contingent entity distributed amongst a wide network of actual and virtual objects is an increasingly salient perspective. "Just like the clock maker metaphors of the Enlightenment, or the dialectical logic of the nineteenth century," states Johnson, "the emergent worldview belongs to this moment in time, shaping our thought habits and coloring our perception of the world" (2001: 66). Distribution and overlap engage the contemporary zeitgeist in ways that Cartesian autonomy does not. The true value of Sims games thus unsurprisingly are their fidelity of simulation, but not simply of digital humans. The complex system surrounding the Sims franchise, entangling networked players, virtual objects and humans, actual and artificial currency, is a microcosm, a fractal component, of the digitized, commodified, networked culture that spawned it.

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