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Rethinking agency and immersion: video games as a means of consciousness-raising

Gonzalo Frasca

Georgia Institute of Technology, USA
frasca@jacaranda.org

Abstract

Until recently, most video-game characters did not reflect our everyday life for the simple reason that most of them were trolls, aliens, and monsters. However, this has changed since the introduction of *The Sims* (Wright 2000), the people simulator. Nevertheless, characters in this game are still flat since *The Sims* simulates life in a Disneyland-like way, avoiding ideological conflicts.

Encouraged by authors like Brenda Laurel and Janet Murray, video-game designers have been taking for granted that a high level of agency and immersion are desirable effects. However, I will show that alternative, non-Aristotelian techniques could be used to develop character-driven video games that enhance critical thinking about ideological issues and social conflicts while keeping the experience enjoyable. I will do this by borrowing some concepts from Bertolt Brecht's and Augusto Boal's ideas on non-Aristotelian theatre and applying them to video-game design.

In this paper, I propose that a modified version of *The Sims* would allow players to create behavioural rules for their characters that reflect their personal opinions. Like in Boal's Forum Theatre, this game would foster critical discussion about social and personal problems.

Keywords: behavioural rules, *The Sims*, theatre of the oppressed, video games

1. Introduction

Do you think video games are state-of-the-art? Think again. The basic rules for video-game design were written more than 20 centuries ago. At least, this is literally what Brenda Laurel argued in her now classic *Computers as Theatre*, where she applied Aristotle's *Poetics* to software and video-game design (Laurel 1993). In the same tradition, Janet Murray describes 'immersion' (understood as suspension of disbelief) and 'agency' (the ability of the computer user to participate in simulations) as two of the desired effects that interactive narrative designers should incorporate in their products (Murray 1997).

As Murray pointed out, there is a clear similitude between adventure games such as *Mario Bros*, or *Tomb Raider* and folk tales. Both are plot-centric products with a clear goal ('rescue the princess', 'find the treasure'), where the main character has to overcome problems in order to complete a quest. My goal in this paper is to suggest alternative techniques for creating character-centric video games that allow players to explore their own reality. In order to do this, I will drop the traditional Aristotelian design conventions and use Augusto Boal's drama theory, creating video games that enhance players' critical thinking and understanding of their society.

2. The logic behind games

Nobody really cares if Lara Croft has a kidney disease or if Mario is a bit paranoid. The monsters in *Doom* are simply mean: nobody is interested in knowing why they behave in that

particular way. It may be genetic, or maybe they are just fed up with intergalactic imperialists who keep sending space marines to kill them all.

According to E.M. Forster's classification for literary characters, most video-game characters would be flat:

Flat characters are 2D in that they are relatively uncomplicated and do not change throughout the course of a work. By contrast, round characters are complex and undergo development, sometimes sufficiently to surprise the reader. (Forster 1995)

Just like what happens in folk tales, video-game characters are flat for functional reasons: what is important is to get the plot moving forward. The question that needs to be answered is 'what happens next?' and not 'why the character behaved in such a way?'

I wonder if it is fair to analyse video-game characters with rules that are designed for literary ones. Actually, it is even possible that video-game characters are not characters at all, as game designer Rob Fullop suggests:

When you play a game 10,000 times, the graphics become invisible. It's all impulses. It's not the part of your brain that processes plot, character, story. If you watch a movie, you become the hero — Gilgamesh, Indiana Jones, James Bond, whomever. The kid says, I want to be that. In a game, Mario isn't a hero. I don't want to be him; he's me. Mario is a cursor. (Fullop 1993)

I think that Fullop's observation is right. While video-game characters do have certain particular traits, it is hard to argue that they have a personality. The more freedom the player is given, the less personality the character will have. It just becomes a 'cursor' for the player's actions. However, certain games, such as *The Sims*, have characters (known as Sims) that are not controlled from a first-person perspective. Players do not assume the role of one particular Sim. They are able to control many Sims.

3. Welcome to the suburbs

The best-selling video game of the year 2000 was a suburban American life simulator. Drawing on his previous works, notably *Sim City*, the urban simulator, game designer Will Wright created a complex game that put video games on a less fantastic representational track, dealing with family life and human relationships. Players control Sims, the inhabitants of a virtual American suburb, according to their own goals: there is no 'winning' scenario in the game. Characters' personalities are described through five different traits (Neat, Outgoing, Active, Playful, Nice), and players can choose from a fixed set of actions, such as cleaning, eating, sleeping, etc. The personality of the Sims is shown through their mood. They totally lack bias and any sort of philosophical, political, or religious beliefs.

One of the most interesting features of the game, which is coherent with the recent 'mod' video-game culture, where designers provide tools for players to expand the original game, is the ability to create and exchange customised features. For example, players can create their own 'skins' to make their Sims look like their favourite superhero, or even like themselves. It is also possible to create custom wallpapers and download new objects. However, players are not allowed to design new functional objects or behaviours.

The Sims is an excellent example of how video games can convey ideology. Even if this title represents a clear breakthrough for the industry, the consumerist principles behind the simulation are nothing short of disturbing. Literally, the number of friends you have is in direct proportion to the amount of things that you own. Of course, it is possible to argue that this is not the designer's fault, but rather that the simulation is simply too realistic. The role of ideology in video games is more complex than in traditional media because video games not only represent actions, but they also model

behavioural rules. If narrative is about description, then simulation is about legislation. In his study of urban crisis, anthropologist Julian Bleeker (1995) shows how the racial factor is excluded from the *Sim City 2000* urban simulation (Wright 1995). While riots happen in *Sim City 2000*, they are always triggered by causes such as heat or high unemployment. However, there is no direct reference to race problems as one of the possible co-factors that may influence riots. The virtual city has no room for a 'Rodney King' incident. As simulations strive to be more realistic, they need to include more rules, and this cannot be done without the designers conveying their particular view of how the system, in this case society and human relationships, works. Actually, the most radical claim made by *The Sims* is not its consumerist creed but the fact that it is arguing that human life can be described as a set of rules.

In her study on how people deal with simulations, Sherry Turkle imagines the possibility of using simulations for players to analyse and question their ideological assumptions:

But one can imagine a third response. This would take the cultural pervasiveness of simulation as a challenge to develop a more sophisticated social criticism. This new criticism would not lump all simulations together, but would discriminate among them. It would take as its goal the development of simulations that actually help players challenge

the model's built-in assumptions. This new criticism would try to use simulation as a means of consciousness raising. (Turkle 1995)

This alternative that Turkle envisions for simulation exactly matches the work that Augusto Boal has been doing in theatre during the last decades.

'The Sims of the oppressed' is just an example of how current simulations could be enhanced to allow more room for discussion and critical thinking by changing the way games deal with character use and design

4. Brecht, Boal, and non-immersive acting

It is common to think that 'immersion', or 'willing suspension of disbelief', describes the audience's experience in a narrative or dramatic setting. In other words, the readers or viewers accept suspension of their disbelief (or actively create belief).

In theatre, immersion affects both spectators and performers. Traditional acting schools encourage actors to get immersed in their characters: to get 'into their skins' in order to feel and act like them. While I do not believe that 'playing' in video-game terms is equal to 'acting', it is easy to see that the distance between the gamer and the video-game character is minimal. The player just moves the joystick and the character jumps: there is no subtle performance in this action; players are not trying to convey any feeling through the jumping, and they definitively have no means to 'perform' their own jumps.

However, some drama theorists do not promote immersion as a desired goal. German playwright Bertolt Brecht developed a theory of drama that was clearly against Aristotle's ideas;

he argued that Aristotelian theatre keeps the audience immersed without giving them a chance to take a step back and critically think about what is happening on the stage. Brecht created several techniques, known as A-effects, in order to 'alienate' the play, reminding the spectators that they were experiencing a representation and forcing them to think about what they were watching.

Brecht's 'epic' techniques were not just targeted to the audience. He also encouraged performers to follow them. Brecht wanted the actors to be completely aware of their actions. Instead of being 'inside the skin' of the character, he wanted them to be a critical distance that would let them understand their role.

Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal took Brecht's ideas even further by creating a set of techniques, known as the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (TO), that literally tears down the stage's 'fourth wall'. Boal's main goal is to foster critical thinking and break the actor/spectator dichotomy by creating the 'spectator', a new category that integrates both by giving them active participation in the play. The repertoire of techniques of TO is extremely large and includes, among others, the 'invisible theatre'—where actors work 'undercover' in public spaces—and the 'Forum Theatre'.

Forums are created around a short play (five to 10 minutes long), usually scripted on-site based on the suggestions of the participants. The scene always enacts an oppressive situation, where the protagonist has to deal with powerful characters that do not let her achieve her goals. For example, the play could be about a housewife whose husband forbids her to go out with her friends. The scene is enacted without showing a solution to the problem. After one representation, anybody in the public can interrupt the play and take over the place of the protagonist and suggest, through her acting, the solution that she envisions would break the oppression. Since the problems are complex, the solutions are generally incomplete. This is why

the process is repeated several times, always offering a new perspective on the subject.

In Boal's own words: "It is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution" (Boal 1992). It is important to stress that Boal uses theatre as a tool, not as a goal per se. In other words, the ultimate objective of Forum Theatre plays is not to produce beautiful or enjoyable performances, but rather to promote critical discussions among the participants. Unlike traditional theatre that offers just one complete, closed sequence of actions, Forum Theatre sessions show multiple perspectives on a particular problem. They do not show 'what happened', but rather 'what could happen'. It is a theatre that stresses the possibility of change, at both social and personal levels.

5. Non-immersive video-game playing

I propose expanding the concept of third-person characters, such as the ones in *The Sims*. In traditional video games, the player 'is' the character. In *The Sims*, the player can control the character in a less direct way. However, *The Sims*' characters are generally flat, since most of their differences are based either on their moods, or on visual traits that do not affect their behaviour. This would be solved if players had more control over character creation by deciding their behavioural rules instead of just picking their clothes.

My intention is to take a Boalian approach to video-game playing, based on the construction and discussion of characters as a video-game equivalent of Forum Theatre. This approach has similarities with some of the constructivist work based on 'learning by doing', particularly Yasmin Kafai's work on science learning through video-game design (Kafai 1995). This is no accident, since Boal's work is based on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Freire 2000), which shares some basic ideas with constructivism. Both constructivism and Freire's pedagogy were created around Piaget's

idea that learning is not transmitted but constructed. However, while constructivism has focused on education in general and science in particular, Freire and Boal offer a more robust set of techniques for dealing with personal and social issues, which are the kind of problems that I want to address through video games.

It is important to state that my goal is not to do a literal translation of Boal techniques, but rather to use them as a source of inspiration. I will use, then, Boal's theory as a guide rather than as a blueprint. Since TO has such a rich set of different techniques, my approach would just represent a small glimpse of what could emerge from the collaboration between TO and video games.

6. *The Sims* of the oppressed?

The idea for a video game that I will describe is based on *The Sims* and takes the 'mod' concept (video-game modification by amateur designers) to its extreme by allowing players to modify the simulation itself. This is similar to what Boal's Forum Theatre does. It simulates an event and allows participants to play within those defined rules but also to create, try, and discuss alternative models.

I have been playing *Sim City* for several years now and I never thought about how racial issues are modelled in the simulation. I did notice, though, that the FIFA series of soccer video games does not include my home country, Uruguay, even though it won the World Cup twice. Thankfully, this was easy to fix. Some Uruguayan player used one of the features of the game that allows you to create teams. He simply included the list of current Uruguayan soccer players, along with their uniform's colour. However, to expand *Sim City* to deal with the issues that Bleeker pointed out would be a much more complex task. Firstly, its design does not allow modifying the inner rules of the simulation. And even if the program had such a feature, it would require a good deal of pro-

gramming. It would demand much more work than is needed to create a new 'skin'.

In order to allow the discussion of social issues, simulations like *The Sims* should allow players to modify the internal rules of the simulated model. The basic game-play of this modified version, which I will call *The Sims of the oppressed*, would be similar to *The Sims*. The main difference would be that, in addition to downloadable objects and skins, it would also be possible to get user-designed characters with different personalities and particular sets of actions. These characters would be created with a special programming tool. Players would be able to rate the different characters and even create their own versions, based on behavioural details that they think need improvement in order to attain a higher level of reality.

7. A sample scenario

The following is a sample scenario of a particular session, based on the rules that I am proposing:

Agnes has been playing with *The Sims of the oppressed* for a while now. She knows the basic dynamics of the simulation and enjoys it. Nevertheless, she feels that it would be great if family relationships were more realistic. So, she goes to the 'Character Exchange' Web site and browses through different characters. She finds one that looks interesting. It is called 'Dave's Alcoholic Mother version 0.9', and it is described by its author as:

This mother spends a lot of time working, and she is very tired when she gets back home. Still, every night she has to fix dinner and do some cleaning. She can get very annoyed by children and pets and may become violent. In order to escape from her terrible life, the mother drinks a lot of bourbon. Her behaviour includes new actions for the player to use, such as 'induced vomiting' for faster reduction of the character's drunkenness.

Agnes considers giving it a try and downloads it into one of the houses with which she has been playing.

Agnes' virtual household is composed of a couple, three children, and a cat. After the downloads, the original mother character is replaced by 'Dave's Alcoholic Mother version 0.9'. Agnes finds the character quite interesting. After playing with it for a while, she realises that when the mother reaches a certain degree of fatigue, she starts drinking. The more she drinks, the less she will care about her family. She remains calm unless her husband insists on cuddling or giving her a back rub.

While Agnes thinks that the character is pretty well depicted, there are details that she does not agree with. For example, the character always gets her drinks from the little bar in the living room. Agnes knows that, in general, alcoholics hide their bottles around the house and try not to drink in public. So, she goes back to the 'Character Exchange' and looks for another alcoholic mother. She finds one that seems promising: 'Dorothy's Alcoholic Methodist Mother version 3.2'. After trying it, she realises that the behaviour of this character is much closer to her concept of an alcoholic mother. She is really intrigued by why the designer insisted on the fact that the mother would be a Methodist, since it does not seem to be related to the character's alcoholism. She checks back on the character designer's Web page, where she finds a short narrative that explains that the character is actually based on a real person who happened to be a Methodist. Even if Agnes finds the story interesting, she thinks that the alcoholic part of the behaviour should be separated from the character's religious beliefs. So she uses an editor to modify the character's code and removes the religious references. She also adds some small details, like the fact that the mother loves a certain brand of whisky. Then, she posts it online as 'Agnes' Alcoholic Mother

1.0 - Based on Dorothy's Alcoholic Methodist Mother version 3.2', along with a short description of the main behavioural rules. A couple of weeks later, she finds out that her behaviour has become quite popular. Actually, some players have posted some modified versions. Some of them have even emailed her with some remarks and criticisms. She downloads some of these new versions and finds a couple that she likes a lot. Some weeks later, Agnes gets a little tired of playing with the alcoholic mother and wants to give her some more personality. So, she decides that it would be great if the mother became an ecologist. Agnes downloads a character described as 'Peter's Radical Greenpeace activist version 9.1'. After some editing and modifications, Agnes introduces this behaviour to her alcoholic-mother character. Now the mother takes more care of the plants and does not kick the cat anymore when she is drunk.

8. Building rules, crafting characters

Before even commenting on this design, it is essential to repeat that programming simulated behaviours, such as the ones described above, is not an easy task. Even if the design tool involved templates or some kind of visual object-oriented programming, it is likely that the average player would consider the task overwhelming. Still, as Amy Bruckman's work on *Moose Crossing* (an object-oriented, multi-user dungeon where participants can modify the environment by creating new objects) suggests, participants can become involved with programming simulated features and will exchange tips and help with others who are less skilled programmers (Bruckman 1998).

While it is possible that certain players, such as Agnes, could deal with the programming of new behaviours, it is likely that most players would become 'lurkers' (people who read online message boards but rarely or never post any

message); by extension, this term is applied to any person who is involved in some kind of online community without actively participating. Would this fact necessarily go against the principles of TO, which stress active participation? As Boal states:

In a Forum Theatre session, no one can remain a 'spectator' in the negative sense of the word. It's impossible. In Forum Theatre, all the spect-actors know that they can stop the show whenever they want. They know that they can shout "Stop!" and voice their opinions in a democratic, theatrical, concrete way, on stage. Even if they stay on the sidelines, even if they watch from a distance, even if they choose to say nothing, that choice is already a form of participation. (Boal 1992)

Still, *The Sims of the oppressed* is not an exact replica of Forum Theatre, and it is not enough to simply shout "Stop!" to actively participate. However, I believe that both the multiplicity of behaviours and the fact that amateur designers would create most of its content would foster a critical attitude even in those players who do not create behaviours. Even if the players do not create their own characters, they will not take the simulation rules for granted because they know that different players have alternative opinions about how these rules should work.

The most radical idea behind *The Sims of the oppressed* is the fact that it is a meta-simulation, which also is one of the characteristics of Forum Theatre. By meta-simulation I mean that it is a simulation that allows participants to create simulations. Of course, it does not let players change everything. If it did, it could not be considered a unique product at all. Even if the *Sims of the oppressed* could be really open-ended, it would still have a model and its own rules that would reflect a biased vision of the world.

In my alternative version of *The Sims*, the software publisher does not create characters but instead the players construct them using open-

source building blocks. Even if the program would still be biased, the kaleidoscopic availability of different behaviours would give players the opportunity to experiment with a wide range of different constructions. Since many different versions would exist for one single behaviour, as we have seen for 'alcoholism', the system would help players realise that the concept of behaviour, and particularly deviant behaviour, is not a fixed entity, but rather a social construction.

The ability of players to modify behaviours posted by others is in fact the ability to exercise criticism through programming, because the simulation rules are changed to match the programmer's personal view of reality. And, even if most of the players may not code their own behaviours, they would be able to combine existing ones in order to create more complex characters and then share them among others.

The fact that amateur designers can create behaviours means that some behaviours would be buggy or, at least, not very complex. These 'bugs' would make players more aware of behaviour construction and could behave as equivalents to Brecht's alienation effects, which were intended to break immersion in order to make the spectators view the representation from a more distant, critical distance.

Nevertheless, a simulation like *The Sims of the oppressed* implies several design issues. The most obvious one is that such an open-ended system would make it easy for players to create certain characters and behaviours that may be problematic, such as 'Benny's Paedophile Clown version 1.2'. Other behaviours could even be illegal in some countries such as Germany, Canada, or France, where 'Adolph's Holocaust-denier neo-Nazi version 6.66' would be prohibited by law. Personally, I think that since the goal of this technique is to encourage critical thinking, I would not censor any opinion. Still, this would be a major problem for the company that produces the software package. No matter how much you stress the fact that the content is

created by the users, I do not think that there is any company on Earth that wants to be known as the 'one that provided a platform for creating a simulator where you force young children to work in factories for 10 cents a day'. The only way that I can think of overcoming this problem would be to release the whole package as a collaborative, open-source project.

9. Playing with tolerance

The Sims of the oppressed is just an example of how current simulations could be enhanced to allow more room for discussion and critical thinking by changing the way games deal with character use and design. As I previously said, this is just one example among many that could be possible just by drawing on TO ideas.

Critical thinking is not simply a feature of *The Sims of the oppressed*. It is a requirement. If video games are to become a space for experimentation, their rules should be open enough to allow players to try different possible approaches. Unlike traditional representational forms, such as narrative, which deliver products as a closed package, video games have the potential to let players participate in an active way. However, this does not mean in any way that players would become authors. They would simply have more freedom to participate, but the system that would serve as their playground would still be authored and would, therefore, carry its own assumptions.

I think that, by introducing human beings as believable, human video-game characters, *The Sims* has opened an ideological Pandora's box. If designers try to ignore this fact, video games will remain simply toys. However, if they realise that dealing with different models of reality requires a critical attitude, video games could become a medium for exploring and discussing our personal and social realities.

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