Liberal Sims?: Simulated Difference and the Commodity of Social Diversity

A. Brady Curlew
The Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture
York University and Ryerson University
Toronto, Canada
curlewab@yorku.ca

ABSTRACT
This paper outlines how representations of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity intersect with strategies of late capitalism in *The Sims*, arguably the most popular video game of all time. Within an industry known for its social stereotyping, *The Sims* has been praised as socially progressive for its liberal views towards same-sex relationships, racial equality, and non-sexualized presentation of women. However, I will argue, using the theory of Stuart Hall, Naomi Klein, Henry Jenkins and others, that below its progressive façade *The Sims* amounts to an exploitation of diversity initiated by targeting untraditional markets to better tap into the consuming potential of millions of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people – what Hall sees as the commercial appropriation of difference. I want to suggest that the spike in social liberalism may not be the result of a socio-cultural change in ideology, but instead reflects a change in how traditionally marginalized people are marketed to in late capitalism. *The Sims*, in this formation, becomes a hybrid entity, fueling both progressive liberal discourse and the relentless pursuit of profit at the expense to those it (mis)represents.

Keywords
The Sims, representation, commodification of diversity

Within the discourse that exists around the critical analysis of the digital gaming industry as historically chauvinistic, xenophobic, and hetero-normative, room must be made to critically analyze the games that bypass such traditional prejudices but present contentious elements nonetheless. One such game, Electronic Arts' *The Sims*, has been praised for being socially progressive given its liberal views towards same-sex relationships, absence of racial stereotyping, and non-sexualized presentation of women. Although these progressive articulations are undeniably a step in the right direction in terms of the positive representation of minorities in digital gaming, I want to argue that the reasoning behind such liberal progressiveness does not necessarily reflect a sudden change in cultural liberalism, but instead reflects a change in how traditionally marginalized people are marketed to in late capitalism. I'm concerned with how representations of women, same-sex desiring people, ethnic minorities and people of colour in *The Sims* intersect with how the game is marketed to these audiences. This focus demands borrowing analytical tactics from a wide range of disciplines: sociology, cultural theory, race studies, gender studies and queer theory, digital game theory, and the political economy of the gaming industry. However, given the limited scope of this paper, what I present here shouldn't be treated as anything more than a topical introduction to these issues. I'm not trying to generalize or unfairly equate any of the struggles faced by the groups mentioned, but

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instead introduce them into the discourse surrounding study of gaming where I feel more of this kind of discussion is necessary.

First off, however, I must declare that this paper presupposes that the study of representations and the ideologies ascribed onto them is both valid and important to understanding how we frame social being and interaction. Of course, representations in digital games, like representations on television or in movies, are not authentic depictions of reality, but they are not without their importance. Like television and movies, they supply "images and frameworks that help to inform social life," to quote Justin Lewis [1], but I would also add political and economic life to the fold, acknowledging to the full extent the power-relations exercised during the act representing (or not representing) marginalized peoples in the mass media. Indeed, it's impossible to ignore the exercise of power-relations when taking a look back at the historical development of the video game. From the disturbing goals of *Custer's Revenge* to the emphatically bouncing breasts of the female fighters in *Dead or Alive*, from the lampooning of queer characters in *Leisure Suit Larry* to the necessarily-criminalized people of colour of the *Grand Theft Auto* games, contentious representations of marginalized people have always worked to appeal to expected audiences, while "othering" entire sections of our multifaceted society in the process.

However, in recent years, several digital games have emerged that fulfill the representation and identification interests of traditionally "othered" audiences – *The Sims* being the most prominent example. In terms of gender, it breaks some ground by eliminating what Kline et al. call the "dominant code of masculine gender positioning effected by digital gaming" [2]. Female characters are not victimized, or sexualized during gameplay of the preprogrammed game (they can, however, be objectified by players who can import their own creations into the game), but importantly, there is gender equality among characters in the game – what a male Sim can do, a female can do also. But we can read this unique example of gender equality as a marketing exercise to help open up the video game industry to non-traditional gamers, like women. According to MIT's Henry Jenkins, gaming companies have been targeting non-traditional gamers since the mid-to-late nineties, when increased competition began to limit the profits any one company could earn from the core market of young white males:

> [The] game market had entered into an age of heightened competition at a time when, in fact, ninety percent of American boys were already playing computer games. To survive, these game companies understood that they would need to expand their market and thus, then as now, there were… [new] targets… [3]

Indeed, stories and advertisements for *The Sims* appeared in publications that had never discussed video games before such as *Mademoiselle*, *Working Woman*, and *Cosmopolitan* [4]. The game's content is also coded towards "the feminine" – one *must* play much of *The Sims* with what is regarded as a traditionally "feminine" locale, the home, as a backdrop [5]. Some might also see the game play of *The Sims* as traditionally feminine - after all, one of the most fitting metaphors used to describe the game is a "virtual dollhouse" [6]. Furthermore, large portions of the game involve stereotypically female concerns, such as managing the upkeep of domestic setting, caring for infants and children, establishing and maintaining romantic relationships, performing interior design, and most prominently, shopping and buying. Would shopping and buying be integral aspects of the game play in *The Sims* if EA wasn't broadening its consumer base to include more female gamers? As Catherine Driscoll notes, women and especially young girls are often only considered in terms of "their value in a system of exchange and in relation to (or as) consumption" [7]. While *The Sims* is commendable for attempting to solve the problems of female objectification and under-representation in the gaming world by offering unsexualized and equally-abled female characters, it is lamentable for stereotyping female subjectivity. The female character is no longer trapped in the tower awaiting rescue by a male hero, nor is she simply made a hyper-sexual heroine to draw in the male gaze - but she is still trapped within the bonds of necessary domesticity and conspicuous-consumption ascribed onto the category of feminine.

In terms of sexuality, *The Sims* is groundbreaking for its inclusion of same-sex relationships. Playable characters can form romantic relationships with any other adult character in the game, regardless of their biological sex. Importantly, however, the homosexual acts performed in *The Sims* do not define the identities of the characters - sexuality is an action, not an identity, at least not in the game elements offered by Electronic Arts. By not creating gay identities to choose from, EA avoids being accused of generalizing or essentializing perceived and stereotyped traits of people who identify as gay or lesbian, something that might upset this and other potential consumer groups [8]. They avoid the sticky problems confronted by toy companies like Mattel, the makers of Barbie, when creating cultural products meant to represent difference. Cultural critic Ann duCille explains how Mattel, facing criticism for not making their black Barbie dolls distinct from their classic white Barbies began producing dolls that reinforced and emphasized racially stereotyped physical features [9]. The producers of *The Sims* seem to have side-stepped this issue. By putting the tools of identity creation into the hands of players, EA can still appeal to same-sex desiring consumers, while not having to determine themselves what "gay" or "lesbian" looks like. Interestingly, the inclusion of queerness in *The Sims* is a 180 degree turn around from a position Maxis, the game's development company, took in 1996. A gay programmer hacked in an "easter egg" that allowed for the representation of gay affection into a Maxis game called *Sim Copter*. For this unauthorized queer addition to the game, the programmer was fired and unshipped versions of the product were quickly changed back to "normal" [10]. Why, only four years later, are representations of same-sex desire okay? Has society progressed that much in such a short period?

Why this sudden social liberalism? It could be, as Naomi Klein states, a kind of exploitation of diversity initiated by targeting untraditional markets to better tap into the consuming potential of millions of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people – what Stuart Hall sees as the commercial appropriation of difference [11]. Klein argues that in the early nineties, corporate producers and marketers of pop culture embraced Generation X's demand for more liberal

diversity and positive representation of marginalized peoples, but did so not out of conversion of political belief, but because of the financial rewards involved [12]. In *The Mouse That Roared*, Henry Giroux reminds us that the corporate powers that produce pop culture – companies like Disney, and, I would argue, Electronic Arts, the publishers of *The Sims* – are never blind to the economics and politics involved in their marketing practices. These types of corporations very often "do not give a high priority to social values, except to manipulate and exploit them" [13], leaving us to question just how liberal this corporate liberalism is. It is true that after this diversity revolution mainstream cultural producers like The Gap and Diesel Jeans began running more advertisements featuring ethically and sexually diverse people, and more gay and lesbian characters popped up on primetime television. However, as Klein states, despite this new splash of colour, everyone modeling a Gap wardrobe was still slim, young and conventionally beautiful, and the gay neighbours on TV never ever got laid [14]. Similarly, for all the diversity on display in *The Sims*, it's rather difficult to make your characters obese. Only one body skin available with the original game or its expansion packs is mildly overweight, and it is a man's body – the female bodies are all necessarily slender. While hacking in obese skins is possible, it often involves altering the character's body-frame in such a way that skews the games animations. Disabled or disfigured bodies are also not an option. Do these limits to diversity implicate the producers of *The Sims* in the cooptation of difference Klein mentions? Is difference only depicted where it is profitable? Does the fact that *The Sims* is directly marketed to non-traditional audiences factor into its content? Of course, just the possibility of queer relationships in a high-profile mainstream video game is a progressive step forward for our traditionally heterosexist culture – but one arguably taken only to welcome traditionally "othered" consumers into the culture of late capitalism. *The Sims* allows players to engage in a queer romantic relationships, just as the family-friendly simulacrum of Disneyworld may now celebrate "Gay days," but we should not let these positive developments cloud over the fact that we are still a long way off from seeing openly gay heroes or romantic homosexual relationships portrayed in mainstream narrative video games or animated Disney films

In terms of race and ethnicity*, The Sims* provides the opportunity to play as a positive, non-stereotypical character of colour if the player so desires. It allows players to choose the skin colour of the characters they construct. This type of feature is common in role playing games and sports games where players are frequently given the ability to design the physical appearance of their onscreen characters/avatars. Yet, beyond the shade of skin tone, there is no difference between any two Sims created; ethnic and cultural differences are not programmed aspects of the game. While this ensures that every Sim is given equal footing socially and there is no discrimination on the basis of skin colour (a positive thing, however unrealistic), there are no differentiations among people of different racial make up – meaning everyone conforms to the same cultural lifestyle – that of the middle class, Caucasian suburbanite. In this regard, *The Sims* assimilates ethnic difference into white American society.

The bipolar nature of *The Sims* regarding race and ethnicity is a result of what Stuart Hall refers to as the ambivalence of difference. Difference and our conceptions of it are always both positive and negative.

> [Difference] is both necessary for the production of meaning,

> the formation of language and culture, for social identities and a subjective sense of the self… at the same time, it is threatening, a site of danger, of negative feelings, of splitting, hostility and aggression towards the "Other." [15]

The makers of *The Sims* can avoid including the issue of ethnicity in their game since much of the game is player controlled – if a player is upset by the lack of cultural specificity available, they can create and import features of that specificity into the game.

Being more melting pot than multicultural paradise, the preprogrammed world of *The Sims* denies ethnic players the particularities of their culture in the game. Religious holidays and practices are mostly absent in the game – characters can purchase certain religious artifacts, a Christmas tree or a Menorrah for example, but these only serve functional purposes and denote nothing about your Sims individuality nor allow you to undertake the practices of the faiths they represent. Having a Christmas tree doesn't make it possible for your conceived Christian Sim to pray – buying a stone Buddha statue for the garden does not allow your conceived Buddhist Sim to meditate. However, most religious artifacts are left out of the game. But once again, absent objects can be player-designed and imported into *The Sims*, but we must question the validity of this solution; while it is possible to import a Musalla prayer rug into the game, players do not have the power to program their conceived Muslim characters to use it. This elimination or impossibility of cultural difference has made the history of the characters playable in *The Sims* very much the history of the white American suburbanite, mirrored not only in the dollhouses of virtual reality, but, once again, in the real dollhouses of real suburban America.

When Mattel's previously mentioned line of ethnic Barbies was introduced, it drew substantial criticism for simply "colouring in" their classic line of blonde, white dolls and ignoring, trivializing or exoticizing specific cultural elements of difference – elements of otherness – that worked to define the ethnicities being represented. Each character of colour in *The Sims*, like each Barbie doll of colour, despite their different "dye jobs," shares the same mould – that of the "archetypal white American beauty" [16]. In doing this, the producers of both Barbie dolls and *The Sims* "normalize" – make normal, comfortable, familiar – the different kinds of people represented. It is the same tactic used by the entertainment industry to increase the market appeal of celebrities of colour and marginalized ethnicities to a mass white audience. For example, Sidney Poitier achieved star billing in movies because he was seen as non-threatening, non-different; *The Cosby Show* was widely accepted because white audiences were shown that black families could be just like them, the epitome of "normal". The opposite occurs when difference is injected into the equation – folk-rock singer Cat Stevens was famously made abnormal when he became a Muslim and changed his name to Yusuf Islam, adopting qualities seen as threatening to much of his white, Western fan base. As Richard Dyer writes, "The establishment of normalcy through social- and stereo-types is one aspect of the habit of ruling groups… to attempt to fashion the whole of society according to their own world view, value system, sensibility, and ideology" [17]. Important cultural differences, customs, and lifestyles

are denied in favour of a skewed equality that equates everybody to a middle class Caucasian standard.

This strategy of representation is what cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls "integrationist" [18]. Playing into the ambivalence of difference, the integrationist model offers representation to historically unrepresented or misrepresented peoples, but with a catch that deprives them of cultural difference. According to Hall, "othered" peoples "could gain entry to the mainstream – but only at the cost of adapting to the white image of them and assimilating white norms of style, looks and behaviour" [19]. Just the presence of colour in a cultural artifact like a Barbie doll or video game character is often enough to satisfy those would-be libertarians out to quash inequality, and enough to capitalize off of marginalized consumers who have traditionally been underrepresented. However, there is no actual depth behind these surfaces. Writes Ann duCille:

> For me, [ethnic Barbie dolls] are at once a symbol and a symptom of what multiculturalism has become at the hands of contemporary commodity culture; an easy and immensely profitable way off the hook of Eurocentrism that gives us the fact of cultural diversity without the particulars of racial difference. [20]

Such is the state of multiculturalism in the era of late capitalism. The "differentness" available in *The Sims*, like that available to Barbie, does not represent "the triumph of difference but rather that of similarity, a mediated text that no matter what its dye job ultimately must be readable as white" [21]. What is most disquieting is knowing that, as author Julian Bleeker notes, this decontextualized and appropriated difference often gets "counted as realistic" – allowing realities of racial inequality to get misrepresented [22].

Behind the supposedly liberal representations of difference in *The Sims*, behind this simulacral surface, we can notice a depth still very much mediated by market appeals and hegemonic social norms. Preprogrammed difference in *The Sims* seems only to be included if it is saleable and fashionable. Where something like the capacity for same-sex desire is acceptable – possibly a reflection of the chic attached to gayness in current popular culture exemplified by the success of television shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* – obese, disfigured, or disabled bodies are not deemed acceptable for inclusion in the game, nor are the particularities of ethnic or alternative cultures. Of course, the modification features of *The Sims* allow for (limited) versions of excluded elements of difference to be imported into the game by players, permitting critical play that may elevate social introspection and liberalism above marketing appropriation of difference, at least for some individual players. In the end, however, we are left with a hybrid entity within which three categories play off each other: the first including preprogrammed social liberalism that is indeed a step in the right direction (gender, racial and sexual equality), the second including limited player-imported capacities (in terms of constructing character identities

with materials fans import into the games), and the third including the workings of late capitalism, where everyone is welcome into the fold of consumption, as long as they ascribe to familiar and comfortable social norms. The way we negotiate these categories can determine the future representative qualities of the medium, and may perhaps shape our future perceptions of simulated difference.

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