

FAMILY VALUES: IDEOLOGY, COMPUTER GAMES & *THE SIMS*

Miguel Sicart

IT University of Copenhagen
Department of Digital Aesthetics and Culture
Glentevej 67
2400
Copenhagen
Denmark
miguelsicart@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article discusses some ideological issues related with the simulation of social systems in *The Sims*, proposing an interpretation of *The Sims* as an ideological game.

This paper will focus on describing *The Sims* as a social simulator of a post-capitalist society: what *The Sims* proposes as an ideological game is a simulation of a specific set of values linked with a capitalist culture. Therefore, it can be considered not as a social simulator, but as a simulator of an ideology of modern capitalist societies.

The last goal of this article is, then, to propose an analysis of the relation between rules, gameplay and ideology in certain computer game simulations.

Keywords

Computer games, Ideology, Philosophy, Sociology

INTRODUCTION

Since its release in the year 2000, Will Wright's *The Sims* has been a topic in a large number of discussions in the field of game research. The reasons for this interest can be summarized broadly in the fact that *The Sims* intended to be a social simulator. More than a game, maybe even beyond a "software toy", as Wright has sometimes defined his other products (such as *Sim City*), *The Sims* wanted to be a playful representation of life. A medium to express ourselves, to dream and build consequently the life conditions we desire.

This game proposal attracted the attention of all kinds of cultural researchers for its possibilities and ambitions. *The Sims* it is a game, but a serious one, so to say. Therefore, new possibilities are open for topics of research inside computer game studies. It is not a risky to say that this game is probably the most famous ludical product in the academic world.

Even though the games mechanics have been described thoroughly in the recent tradition of "sim papers", and despite the fact that is the world's best selling game according to Electronic Arts (EA), I will describe it briefly. In *The*

Sims there are several layers of gaming. The first one consists in the design of the avatar. As players we have a certain number of skins we can combine to create our avatar(s) in the game. Besides, we can download from the Internet a large amount of skins that make the number of combinations almost infinite. The next step is to insert that avatar in the neighbourhood, buy some land and building a house, or directly buying a house.

Only then the second phase of the game starts. This virtual landscape called "neighbourhood" is the place where we will take the traditional game decisions: where to go, what to do, with whom we want to interact. We will meet our sim-neighbours and we will play with the environment and the items placed in that space.

Finally, the third level of gaming is defined by the possibility of buying needs and constructing items. By clicking on some buttons of the display, we pause the time of the conventional game and we gain access to the purchase/construct section of the game. In it we can decide about the construction of our house, about its furnishing, and even about our avatars hobbies.

These basic premises already show one of the interesting characteristics of *The Sims*: it is based in purchasing virtual items with virtual money. If we add this fact to the game concept, that is, the simulation of social interaction, or even the simulation of life, the questions that originated this paper arise: what kind of society is *The Sims* depicting? How is it described? What is, finally, the ideology that lies beneath *The Sims*?

The goal of this paper is to describe *The Sims*' ideology as it is shown in the gameplay and in the game structure. The basic questions are: is *The Sims* an ideological game?, and if so, how is that ideology reflected in the game design? The framework of this investigation is the works on ideology and late capitalism written by Louis Althusser and Fredric Jameson. In order to describe more precisely this interpretation of the game's ideology, Charles Taylor's concepts on the "ethics of daily life" will be added to this framework.

Are games ideological? Are ideological games possible, from a structural point of view? How does the game structure reflect this ideological concepts? All these questions will be posed in this paper; some will be answered, some will maybe remain as a challenge for game industry and game researchers. In any case, it's time to play with *The Sims*.

IDEOLOGY, STRUCTURES, REPRESENTATION: ALTHUSSER, JAMESON, TAYLOR

This section of the paper is entirely dedicated to the proposal of the theoretical framework in which the analysis of *The Sims* will take place. In order to describe the ideology of this game, the concepts of ideology and late capitalism defined by Althusser and Jameson have been adopted.

To understand *The Sims* as an ideologically interesting game, it is needed to define "ideology". The French philosopher Althusser described thoroughly this concepts in several of his major works. His concept of ideology deals in a proportional way with the macrostructures as the State, as well as with the individual. Besides, it provides an interesting link between ideology and representation.

On the other hand, *The Sims* is a contemporary game that simulates a specific social stage; namely, that of the western cultures in the late XXth century. In order to understand some of the specific features of this social stage, Fredric Jameson research on the concept of "late capitalism" will be used.

Dealing with ideology means walking in the subtle side of words. That is why it is needed to set the boundaries of those words, so the steps taken are as safe as language can make them.

Althusser: Ideology, Structures and Repression

When referring to Althusser, two apparently colliding characteristics show up: first, his condition of Marxist theorist. Second, his affiliation with structuralism. These facts have made Althusser a frequent target for postmarxist theory as well as for poststructuralism. Despite this criticism, Althusser's major works are still one of the most comprehensive approaches to the relations between individual, State, and the meanings of representation of those relations. These topics are the ones that make Althusser's theories an interesting framework for our description of *The Sims* as an ideological game^[1].

What is ideology for Althusser? Before answering that question, it is necessary a brief description of what the source of ideology is for Althusser. For this philosopher, that source is the State as conceived in Marxist theory. That is, the State Apparatus considered as the repressive power of the ruler classes operated by means of political power. This repression is exemplified in the traditional Marxist proposal by the police and other forces of order controlled by the state.

Acknowledging this fact, Althusser goes one step ahead and divides the repressive operations of the State in two different "apparatuses": the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), which embodies the traditional direct repressive forces of the State, and the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), the more subtle means of repression that are determined by the State but are addressed to individuals privately. While RSAs are evident shows of the power of the State, ISAs try to configure the individuals attitude towards that State. An althusserian example of ISA is school: an institution controlled by the State, that helps preserving the ideology of the state by building the individuals subjectivity according to the proposals of the State itself.

Modern States assure the spread of its ideology mainly through the subtle manipulation of the ISAs, as these contribute to the people within a state behave observing rules dictated by that State. Through ISAs, the State generate ideas and systems of values that are internalised by the individual as truth.

But ideologies change through time. That is a reasonable argument that Althusser took into consideration, proposing a differentiation between ideologies as specific set of values generated by certain States in certain moments of time, and Ideology. Ideology is an empty structure that is filled up by the ideologies promoted by the State. Ideology as a structure is the mediation of the individual as subject with the Power of the State; or, in more Marxist terms, with the relations of production. Ideology, then, is a representation itself of the relation between the individual as subject and the larger social structures.

What is the function of ideology? According to Althusser, the material relations of the capitalist production are alienating to the individual. This individual, in order to be able to cope with this alienation, creates stories that justify precisely that alienation. For example, someone can say: "being all day in the cubicle for this miserable salary is mean, but it's much better than working in a slaughter house". This representation is ideological, as it is derived of the values transmitted through the ISAs. This way, there is a double alienation: one

related to the capitalist production, and another one linked to the representation of those relations that, as individuals, we assume.

These double alienation through the ISAs ensure the stability of the State and the fear to the using of the RSAs, as all individuals tend to share a common ideology transmitted by means of education, leisure, and cultural industries.

What makes the althusserian definition of ideology interesting is the fact that ideology is a subconscious structure. Just like language in Lacanian theory, Ideology represents the subject relation with the institutions of power from a prerational state. As subjects immersed in a certain State, we are all influenced by the set of values and the common knowledge that the State promotes through the ISAs for its very survival. All our acts are patterned by this assimilation of the ideology, either accepting it or neglecting it. Subconsciously, ideology rules our representation of the world and the relations we establish with this representation.

Why is Althusser's description of ideology relevant to the study of computer games, namely *The Sims*? Because of the structural condition of ideology. If we accept that ideology is a structure that is a part of our subconscious and that is modelled by the power institutions, then we can accept that part of those modelling instruments are cultural artefacts. Therefore, some computer games can be considered as an ISA as long as they represent the representation of the real conditions of existence in our cultures.

Summarizing in less Marxist words: ideology is that subconscious structure that is filled up with values and contents by a certain power apparatus in a certain moment of time; that process of filling up the individuals I directed by institutions related with those powers, like school or the cultural industries.

From an individual point of view, ideology is that set of values with which we represent the world as we perceive it, assuming the rules that are promoted through the ideological medias, or neglecting them. Ideology is the rules that determine our relation to the representation of the world.

The Sims pretends to simulate social life, if not life itself, in modern societies. As a representation of the world in which we live and as a cultural artefact, it at least deserves being considered as an ideological media. Having grasped the althusserian description of ideology, it is time to consider the time in which our ideology takes place: the late capitalism era.

Fredric Jameson: Late Capitalism

Dealing with the concept of postmodernism has been a focus topic of western philosophy in the last three decades. Trying to grasp the blurry boundaries of this notion has filled thousands of papers, books and conference proceedings. Perhaps we are not living anymore in a postmodernist era, if we ever did, but at least we can argue that we lived in a postmodern focused time.

The works of Fredric Jameson are one of the most important attempts to define postmodernism as an era in human history^[2]. In order to fulfil this ambitious task, Jameson placed his philosophical framework in the postmarxism.

But it is not this paper's goal to define postmodernism, nor to join the legions of modernist, postmodernist, or transmodernist writings. What is more interesting of Jameson's works is not his definition of postmodernism, but his analysis of the social and cultural environment in which postmodernism takes place.

For this author, postmodernism is the cultural movement(s) that take place correlatively to the development of a new vision of capitalism, the so called

late capitalism. For late capitalism, Jameson understand the moment in the history of economics in which global markets and transnational companies determine a transglobal scope on capitalism. What is more, this capitalist scope has changed the focus of the Power recipients: there are fewer strong States; now Power is embedded in the globalised markets. Therefore, economy is the institution that determines ideology now.

The most interesting idea from Jameson analysis of late capitalism is the fact that any effort to contest the dominant ideology is frequently assumed, reabsorbed by capital itself. Revolutions often end with the insertion of their ideals in the mainstream ideology of capitalism. As a flexible, disembodied structure, late capitalism is able to host in its ideology both its affirmations (definitions) and its denials, being both accepted in order to keep the flow of economy in an optimal state. In order to maintain the material means of production up and running, late capitalism, as an abstract institution that permeates all the social and cultural layers of western societies, is able to integrate in their discourse the dissident discourses. This way, it ensures its permanence through time, the stability of its position of power.

Returning to Althusserian concepts, it is capital which determines the ISAs to remain in its power status quo. Late capitalist economy would be, then, the source for ISAs, while the States, subordinated to the dynamics of late capitalism, would ensure the stability of the RSAs in case of necessity.

History provides a clear example of this definition. In May 1968 the students from the Sorbonne university and other educational French institutions took the streets claiming for a revolution to come. Once the RSAs, embodied in the police and in the state of siege declared by the government revealed to be insufficient, the late capitalist ISAs started their work. They ensured that whatever the students were claiming for, it could be possible in the state without the disintegration of the economical logic. In the gates of a revolution, the flexibility of the late capitalist structures showed its powers, embedding the destructive discourse of the students into the very same discourse of capitalism. May 1968 was the a lost revolution, because the capital was able to assume its own enemies into their structure.

Why is this flexibility interesting for this research? It shows that ideology is a subtle mechanism that accepts superficial revolutions as long as they don't threaten the stability of the roles of economic power. Therefore, the simulation of this societies has to be able to accept those superficial revolutions as long as the late capitalism dynamics is not affected. *The Sims*, then, must be analysed as a reproduction of the ISA of late capitalism: a flexible ideological surface that is patterned by a structure that contributes to the survival of the society it simulates. To keep the structures the users (the individuals) must be offered the illusion of free will.

With these brief introductions to Jameson and Althusser the core framework of this research on *The Sims* ideology has been set. Still, a last step is needed before entering in the analysis of the game. In order to understand more precisely which is the ideological discourse that determines this interpretation, a glance on Charles S. Taylor's concept of the "ethics of daily life" is needed. Once done that, it will be the moment of getting immersed in the simulated family values of *The Sims*.

Charles S. Taylor: The Ethics of Daily Life

The two philosophers that have been set so far as a framework for this research have a strong Marxist background. The third author that is going to be used for this analysis of *The Sims* cannot be further away from that methodological approach.

Charles Taylor, professor of Moral Philosophy, devoted a great amount of his intelligence to map the concept of self; that is, to answer the question: "what do we mean when we say I?". In his master piece *Sources of the Self* [Taylor 1989], this author outlined the evolution of the moral concept of self from the Greek philosopher to the advent of postmodernism, to the so called "epiphanies of Modernism".

Even though this work is a source reference for those interested in the questions that the self asks to philosophy, this research will only take one of the most interesting concepts written in that book: the "ethics of daily life".

This concept was suggested by Taylor as a proper way of describing the ethical and cultural values that are privileged in Modernity. Mankind, as Taylor explains, has always proposed a set of moral values in order to enhance the "good life". Since the Illustration and Nietzches burial of religion as the Power embedded on earth, the "ethics of daily life" have slowly managed to prevail as the dominant moral discourse in the western cultures.

It is not an easy task to explain clearly, without devoting long theological/scientific discourses, what the "ethics of daily life" mean. Basically, it is a description of the moral values that are dominant in our culture. In the personal level, there is a respect for the individual and for the family: the individual is appreciated as "successful" if work and family are successful. There is a community feeling that is also important, but it comes from the individual: the joining through friendship, work or leisure of several individuals is conceived as a communion of selves: a community. "Good life" is that in which everyone can participate from, and which helps the individuals regain consciousness of their importance as such. Finally, there is a respect for the higher institutions that assure the stability of that "good life". Parliamentarism, democracy, gender equality and the end of all segregations are the final goal of the "good life".

If we want to describe basically the western societies contemporary values, Charles Taylor's notion of the "ethics of daily life" is an excellent approach. Therefore, it will be a very useful resource for this research's approach to the beauty of simulated life; to *The Sims*.

FAMILY VALUES: THE SIMS

Finally, it is time to centre our attention on the game itself. The focus of this research has been roughly set, as well as the framework of the investigation. In this section of the paper three case examples taken from the game will be presented and analysed through the ideological methods previously exposed. Then, an intepretation of the ideology in *The Sims* will be suggested, as a first step for a further discussion on ideological games, and how ideology is determining some computer game simulations.

Case 1: Equality and Gender

When I first started playing *The Sims* with a research interest, I proposed myself to explore the boundaries of the social simulation the game suggested. As a westerner, living immersed in the lights and shadows of late capitalism, a

topic like gender equality in salary wages was an interesting test. Therefore I started my game with Marcia.

I created a female skin called Marcia, a very balanced character, and bought for her a nice house. I slowly increased her abilities and social network in order to get better jobs to buy that really cool minimalist alike furniture. After quite a lot of time and simoleons (*The Sims* currency) spent in Marcia, she became a successful politician, earning a lot of money and enjoying crowded parties in her two floors designer home. She had succeeded in simulated life, and everything went just as smooth as dreams.

But this test did not satisfy me, so I tried another female character, Selma. When I created her, I decided she was going to be a single mother, and bought for her a piece of land in order to build her home. Unhopefully for my experiments, *The Sims* gives a fixed amount of money to every Sim family that is created. Equality of opportunities that is undoublessly interesting, but that somehow interferes with the logic of the simulation.

In any case, Selma's life (my game) was hard: it was difficult to get friends, increase my skill levels, furnish my home, and take care of the baby (called Bratt). There was literally no time to do all the things I was supposed to do to have a successful life ... but I finally mastered the game. It took me much more time than with Marcia, but finally my Sim was living in a colonial-style two floors house while working as godmother of the local mafia (no clean business, but the time schedule was just perfect!).

Taking these two examples into consideration, a first thought came into my mind: In *The Sims* there is no discrimination according to sex in terms of salaries. As long as you follow the pre-established ways of being happy in the game, and you have the patience and the gaming skills to succeed, all sims are treated in the same way. Same salaries, same job opportunities, same concept of success.

Even though western societies are struggling to reach these goals, there are not a reality yet. Women are usually paid less than men in equal working roles. But *The Sims*, apparently, does not take that into account. It goes one step ahead than the society it simulates. Therefore, we can argue that the game portrays a vision of the late capitalism in which the ultimate goals of the ethics of daily life (equality of opportunities, success) are possible to be fulfilled no matter the gender of the (simulated) individual.

Not to say that there is a fictitious equality of opportunities from the start, given the same amount of money that the player has to start the game. This is also a feature of the idealistic view of *The Sims* on its simulation of contemporary societies.

The Sims, then, seems to be a game that simulates the perfect utopia of the late capitalist societies according to the relation of the individual with the means of production. But the ethics of daily life are also related with personal relationships: how does the game simulate these relationships? That was my next step in exploring the boundaries of *The Sims* as a social simulator.

Case 2: Homosexuality

According to Charles Taylor, one of the pillars of the ethics of daily life is the coupling of the individuals. Through relationships individuals reaffirm their selves as well as they contribute to the community through the very same process of coupling. Traditionally, couples were heterosexual, while

homosexual couples had no official recognition or relevance: they did not “exist”.

Towards the end of the millennium and in the first years of the XXIst century, an certain openness from some states, like Denmark or Holland, towards homosexual couples has finally given them their right to get married, and in some cases adopt children. Still, most of the western countries do not recognise legal rights to homosexual couples, in an outrageous state outdating according to the evolution of societies.

The Sims, once again, seems to be one step ahead of the societies it simulates. I played for a long time with a gay couple, Martin and Wood. There was nothing in the game that did not allow this relationship, or that made it strange. The other sims acted normally with them, they got promoted in their jobs rather easily, and even though I could not marry them, I managed to include in the little family a small boy. They were happy and successful.

Therefore, I can argue that *The Sims* is a very progressive simulation of societies, as it is normal to play with gay couples, that have all the rights that may lack in some real societies (and I am quite sure that one of the future expansions, if not already in the marked, will allow homosexual weddings). There are very few social constraints in this game: the society it simulates is advanced, much more than the real one.

This first reading of *The Sims* provide a vision of a game that actually simulates the ethics of daily life: it is important for the successful constitution of the individual its happiness work wise, as well in their affective lives. Speaking with game language, in order to succeed in playing the game, there are no restraints in the avatars we select, as they are all equal to the game system. One of the goals, to obtain happiness, can be acquired by those means the player believes useful or relevant, no matter what the simulation's degree of realism is. Nevertheless, the sun is not always shining in Simland (or simcity). This idyllic vision can be discussed going further in the exploration of the boundaries of the game. I called this exploration the Kurt Cobain Refutation

Case 3: The Kurt Cobain Refutation

Once I had tested the possibility of happiness in *The Sims* with female and gay characters, I focused my gaming in exploring another boundary: the happiness of the misfits. The Austrian poet Georg Trakl said: “I am only happy when I am sad”. Is that possible in *The Sims*? As it would be quite snobby to play the role of an expressionist poet in a Will Wright game, I tried to impersonate Kurt Cobain, the deceased leader of the rock band Nirvana.

I downloaded Cobain's skin from the net: the looks matter. Then I made an extremely unbalanced personality for him, bought a house, used a cheat (my personal equivalent of a record deal with Geffen) to build him a mansion packed up with a lot of “things”, and, as I couldn't make him a compulsive drug addict, I made him an alcoholic. I included later a Courtney Love skin, in order to fight with him and make his life a little bit more miserable.

My Kurt was very talented in creative skills, but spent all day playing guitar, drinking, and watching TV in bed. His social relationships were few and shallow, his marriage was a fake, and all his money was spent in stuff that ended up in any corner of the huge mansion: just like in the good old days of *Nevermind*, Nirvana's bestselling album.

Shortly after my beginning as SimCobain, I discovered myself struggling with the Sim. He refused to play guitar or watch TV: he wanted to have friends, a

job, to be nice with his wife, he wanted the life that Kurt Cobain parodied in his songs! Then the game took control, and I was a mere observant of how Kurt remade his life. But the question remained: if the real Kurt Cobain enjoyed some moments of his life, those were in the best moments of his art; then, why is my sim not enjoying it?

The I realised a possible deep reading of *The Sims*. Apparently, the society it depicts is advanced in equality terms. Too advanced: all sims must be equal, allowing only some minor combinations of their lifestyles. No misfits are allowed in *The Sims*, only the stereotyped winners of late capitalist societies.

What is the ideology of *The Sims*, then? This research proposes a Marxist reading: this game simulates a capitalist society in which the economic means are the values that determine the conditions of happiness and social integration. The more you earn, the more friends you can have in your home, the more successful your life is; that is, the more you are inserted in the material relations of capital, the more you will be accepted in society. If any individual defies those material relations, it is excluded of society until it returns to "the good path". The game assures that the sims behave according to the rules of the game, or, in other words, the simulated capitalist society assures that the values considered more important prevail and are accepted by the individuals.

By encouraging players to work and earn money to have more friends and master the game's happiness, what *The Sims* does is a process of presenting the player with the representation of their relations with the means of production. That is, according to Althusser, Ideology. What is more, it practises a double alienation of the individual in the althusserian sense. Given the alienating relations with the means of production, that avoid misfits to have a place in the system (the game), *The Sims* encourages its players to forget about that alienation by giving them the illusion of free will: equality of rights, as long as their lives are productive to the system.

Therefore, the very same gameplay of *The Sims* can be considered as an ISA. It makes all the players and sims equal in order to maintain the simulation of capitalist means of production. In case there is a misfit, the system takes over, acting like an RSA and controlling the sim until its simulated life is back in the good track. As Fredric Jameson had proposed, late capitalism is able to assume its contradictions (the real inequalities) in its representation of itself, with the goal of prevailing as the dominant system in western societies.

The final argument of this research on *The Sims* wants to restate words that have been repeatedly along this paper. *The Sims* is not a simulator of life, it is not a social simulator. More deeply, this game can be understood as a simulation of the ISAs that ensure the domain of capitalism, becoming itself an important part of the ideological apparatus. And while ethically and politically this is a dangerous fact, for game development is an open door to a next step in the art of computer games: the era of ideological games.

IDEOLOGICAL GAMES?

This paper had the intention of giving a particular reading of the ideology that *The Sims* arguably promotes. Despite the possible failure of this research, one topic appears to be interesting: are computer games ideological? Or, more precisely, if computer games are ideological, or want to be ideological, how is that possible.

Following with the framework suggested for the research on *The Sims*, I will try to answer that question starting from this hypothesis: as shown in Will Wright's game, videogames can be ideological. In that case, the ideology they hold is a part of the ISAs. Computer games are a part of the Entertainment Industry, an important part of the capitalist production in contemporary western societies. Given this origins, games will be a medium for the spreading of this corporation ideology, a substantial part of it attending to its massive success. As there is no independent, decentralised game industry, as there is in cinema, computer games tend to be consequent with the ideological discourse that supports the corporations that develops them. Therefore, games can arguably be considered a part of ISAs.

If so, then ideology in games is structural. According to Althusser, Ideology is a structure that is filled up with discourse that are, at the same time, structural. We can only find ideology, then, in the structure of games, not in what they "tell". According to this assumption, ideology in computer games is structural. What is the structural core of a computer game: the rules and the gameplay. Therefore, ideology lies beneath the plot on a game, it lies in the relationship it establishes with its user, in what is allowed to do and why. This paper concluded that *The Sims* can be understood as a simulation of the ideology of late capitalist societies not because it is a social simulator of these societies, but because what we are allowed to do in the game as players is ideologically guided. If we try to play a misfit in *The Sims*, the game takes control after a while, because as players we are not supposed to do so! There is a illusion of free will, that is limited by the rules and the gameplay of the game. What if we try to play a homeless in *The Sims*? We cannot: it goes against the rules. Ideology in games is contained in the rules, and in its expression towards the player: gameplay.

Ideological games, therefore, propose a relationship with the player that is somehow similar to that between the ISAs and the subject, as defined by Althusser. What they make is a representation of the world that contributes to the alienation of the subject. Society is not so bad if in *The Sims* a woman earns as much as a man and can live with her female partner in a wonderful house surrounded by all their friends, and their children's friends. But that is just a representation: the selection of those parts of reality privileged by the late capitalism entertainment media.

Are ideological games possible? Absolutely. What is more, they are a reality. But their ideological representations are not in the surface of their plots. A game like *Counter Strike*, in which a team of terrorist and a team of law enforcers must battle, is not an ideological game. In its gameplay, in its rules, there is no ideological representation. It does not matter that one of the teams is called "terrorist", as it is just a definition, a name. In the game there are no rules that imply a certain ideology: it is just a simple game of killing or getting killed, a game of survival with rules oriented to deal with the very same fact of survival. Therefore, ideological games must represent in their rules a certain ideological discourse. So far, the games in which that representation is more clear is simulations: *Sim City*, *The Sims*, *Civilization*, even *Age of Empires* (arguably a simulator, though) can be considered ideological games.

Much will be discussed about computer games as ideological means in the future, if its share of success in the entertainment industries continue increasing. What this paper intends is to give a possible understanding of ideology in games, of how to approach to it from an academic perspective. Games are powerful means of representation. What they represent, and the way

they do it, must be analysed in order to contribute to their development not only as entertainment machines, but as a legitimate artistic expression^[3].

Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to suggest a reading of *The Sims*' ideology within a post Marxist framework. As it has been argued, Will Wright's game can be considered an ideological simulator of the late capitalism societies. Using a computer game structure, *The Sims* is a revolutionary attempt to represent society in a playing digital environment. Its success, both as a game and as a business, is undeniable.

This research intended to cast some shadows on that success. *The Sims* can be understood as a subtle system for spreading the ideology of corporative late capitalism. Even though this is just a possible interpretation of the game, the questions that have emerged during this research suggest, at least, a more cautious approach to *The Sims*. Maybe not everything is perfect in this sophisticated doll house. Or, what is even more dangerous, maybe actually the game has a deeper meaning than the merely ludical one.

Besides suggesting this caution, this paper also intended to introduce a definition of ideological games. Going beyond the analysis of themes and topics, as researchers we must focus in the ludical structure of games (rules and gameplay) to reveal their complex representations of ideological messages. Games can be ideological as long as they are structurally ideological, as long as the player, as subject, is presented to a set of rules ideologically determined that represent a concrete ideological discourse.

Games as form of entertainment and art are reaching maturity. As researchers, our goal is to be ready to understand that maturity as part of a complex discourse, like literature or cinema. Acknowledging that games can actually be ideological expressions broadens our field of research, but also gives us an exciting new horizon, and the duty of developing discourses that can see deep into the core structures of digital entertainment.

REFERENCES

- Frasca, Gonzalo [2001], *Videogames of the Oppressed*, available online at <http://www.jacaranda.org/frasca/thesis/>.
- Frasca, Gonzalo [2000], *Ephemeral Games. Is it barbaric to design games after Auschwitz?*, in *Cybertext Book 2000*, edited by Markku Eskelinen and Raine Koskimaa, Research Center for Contemporary Culture, University of Jyväskylä
- Althusser, Louis [2001] *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review P, 2001
- Jameson, Fredric [1991], *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham : Duke University Press
- Taylor, Charles S. [1989], *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Boal, Mark (29 March 2000), "Three Days in the Most Surreal Game on Earth: Me and My Sims", Village Voice, available online at <http://villagevoice.com/issues/0013/boal.php>
- Flanagan, Mary [2003], "SIMple and Personal: Domestic Space and The Sims", MelbourneDAC 2003 procedures, available online at <http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Flanagan.pdf>

^[1] The basic bibliography of Althusser on ideology is *Lenin and Philosophy* (1968) [2001], where de discussion on ISAs and RSAs is presented.

^[2] Vid. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)

^[3] More on “serious” games and ideology in computer games can be found in Frasca [2000], [2001]