

Rethinking Agency and Immersion: videogames as a means of consciousness-raising

Gonzalo Frasca
Georgia Institute of Technology
frasca@jacaranda.org

ABSTRACT

Until recently, most videogames 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, 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, videogame 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 videogames 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 theater and applying them on videogame design.

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

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Do you think videogames are state-of-the-art? Think again. The basic rules for videogame design were written more than 20 centuries ago. At least, this is literally what Brenda Laurel argued in her now classic Computers as Theater, where she applied Aristotle's Poetics to software and videogame design [Laurel, 1996]. 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 videogames 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 videogames that enhance the player's critical thinking and understanding of her society.

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 that keep sending space marines to kill them all.

According to E.M. Foster's classification for literary characters, most videogame characters would be flat:

"Flat characters are two-dimensional 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." [Foster, 1995]

Just like what happens in folk tales, videogame 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 analyze videogame characters with rules that are designed for literary ones. Actually, it is even possible that videogame 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 videogame 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. The player is not one particular Sim, but he is able to control many of them.

Welcome to the suburbs

The best-selling videogame 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 was able to create a complex game that put videogames on a less fantastic representational track, dealing with family life and human relationships. The player controls Sims, the inhabitants of a virtual American suburb, according to her own goals: there is no "winning" scenario in the game. Characters' personalities are described through five different traits (Neat, Outgoing, Active, Playful, Nice) and the player can choose from a fixed set of actions, such as cleaning, eating, sleeping, etc. The personality of the Sims is just showed through their mood. They totally lack of bias and any sorts of philosophical, political or religious beliefs.

One of the most interesting features of the game –which is coherent with the recent "mod" videogame culture, where designers provide tools for players to expand the original game – is the ability to create and exchange customized features. For example, players can create their own "skins to make their Sims look like their favorite superhero, or even like themselves. It is also possible to create custom wallpapers and to download new objects – however, they are not allowed to design new functional objects or behaviors.

The Sims is an excellent example of how videogames 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 that you have is in direct proportion to the amount of things that you own¹. The role of ideology in videogames is more complex than in traditional media because they not only represent actions, but they also model behavioral rules. If narrative is about description then simulation is about legislation. In his study about urban crisis, anthropologist Julian Bleeker shows how the racial factor is excluded from the Sim City 2000 urban simulation. While riots happen in Sim City 2000, they are always triggered by causes such as heat

¹ Of course, it is possible to argue that this is not the designer's fault but rather that the simulation is simply too realistic.

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 can not 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 [Turkle, 1995] imagines the possibility of using simulations for players to analyze 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”

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

Brecht, Boal and non-immersive acting

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

In theater, immersion does not only affect the spectators, but performers, too. Traditional acting schools encourage actors to get immersed into their characters: to get “into their skins” in order to feel and act like them. While I do not believe that “playing” in videogame terms is equal to “acting”, it is easy to see that the distance between the gamer and the videogame character is minimal. The player just moves the joystick and the character jumps: there is not subtle performance in this action; the player is not trying to convey any feeling through the jumping and definitively has no means to “perform” his own jump.

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 theater 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 “Theater of the Oppressed” (TO)- that literally tears down the stage’s “fourth wall”. Boal’s main goal is to foster critical thinking along with breaking the actor/spectator dichotomy by creating the “spect-actor”, 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 theater” –where actors work “undercover” in public spaces- and the “Forum Theater”.

Forums are created around a short play (5 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 theater as a tool, not as a goal *per se*. In other words, the ultimate objective of Forum Theater plays is not to produce beautiful or enjoyable performances, but rather to promote critical discussions among the participants. Unlike traditional theater that offers just one complete, closed sequence of actions, Forum Theater sessions show multiple perspectives on a particular problem. It does not show "what happened" but rather "what could happen": it is a theater that stresses the possibility of change, at both social and personal levels.

Non-immersive videogame playing

I propose expanding the concept of third-person characters, such as the ones in The Sims. In traditional videogames, the player "is" the character. In The Sims, the player can control the player 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 behavior. This would be solved if players had more control over character creation by deciding their behavioral rules instead of just picking their clothes.

My intention is to take a Boalian approach to videogame playing, based both on the construction and discussion of characters as a videogame equivalent of Forum Theater. This approach has similarities with some of the constructivist work based on "learning by doing", particularly Yasmin Kafai's work on science learning through videogame design [Kafai, 1995]. This is no accident, since Boal's work is based on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 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 videogames.

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 on what could emerge from the collaboration between TO and videogames.

The Sims of the Oppressed?

The idea for a videogame that I will describe is based on The Sims and takes the "mod" concept – videogame modification by amateur designers- to its extreme by allowing players to modify the simulation itself. This is similar of what Boal's Forum Theater 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 modeled in the simulation. I did notice, though, that the FIFA series of soccer videogames do not include my home country, Uruguay, as a team, 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 uniforms colors. However, to expand Sim City in order 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 programming. It would demand much more work than the one that is needed for creating 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 gameplay of this modified version, that 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 behavioral details that they think need improvement in order to attain a higher level of reality.

A sample scenario

In order to give a better explanation, following is a sample scenario of a particular session, based of 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” website 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 behavior includes new actions for the player to use, such as “induced vomiting” which will allow reducing faster 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 by a couple, three children and a cat. After the download, 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 realizes that when the mother reaches a certain degree of fatigue, she would start drinking. The more she drinks the less she will care about her family. She would remain 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 realizes that the behavior of this character is much more accurate to the idea that she has. 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 and 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 behavior 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 behavioral rules.

A couple of weeks later, she finds out that her behavior has become quite popular. Actually, some players have posted some modified versions. Some of them have even e-mailed 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, Agnes introduces this behavior on her alcoholic mother character, after performing some minor modifications. Now the mother takes more care of the plants and does not kick the cat anymore when she is drunk.

Building rules, crafting characters

Before even commenting this design, it is essential to repeat that programming simulated behaviors 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 Crossing² suggests, participants can become involved with programming simulated features and will exchange tips and help others who are less skilled programmers.

While it is possible that certain players, such as Agnes, could deal with the programming of new behaviors, it is likely that most players would become “lurkers”³. Would this fact necessarily go against the principles of TO, which stresses active participation? As Boal states it:

“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 opinion 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 Theater and it is not enough to simply shout “Stop!” to actively participate. However, I believe that both the multiplicity of behaviors 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 behaviors. 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 Theater. By meta-simulation I mean that it is a simulation that allows creating simulations. Of course, it does not let players change everything – otherwise it could not be considered as a unique product at all. Even if the “Sims of The Oppressed” would 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 behaviors would give players the opportunity to experiment with a wide range of different constructions. Since many different versions would exist

² “Moose Crossing” is an object-oriented multi-user dungeon where participants can modify the environment by creating new objects.

³ This term refers to the people who read online message boards but rarely or never post any message. By extension, it is applied to any person who is involved in some kind of online community without actively participating.

for one single behavior – as we have seen for “alcoholism” – the system would help players to realize that the concept of behavior –and particularly deviant behavior- is not a fixed entity but rather a social construction.

The ability of players to modify behaviors 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 behaviors, 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 would create behaviors means that some behaviors would be buggy or, at least, not very complex. These “bugs” would make players more aware of its 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” would carry several design issues. The most obvious one is that such an open-ended system would make easy for players to create certain characters and behaviors that may be problematic, such as “Benny’s Pedophile Clown version 1.2”. Other behaviors could even be illegal in some countries such as Germany, Canada or France, where the “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 ten 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.

Playing with tolerance

“The Sims of the Oppressed” is just an example on how current simulations could be enhanced to allow more room to 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 videogames 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, videogames have the potential to let players to 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 being as believable, human videogame characters, The Sims has opened an ideological Pandora’s box. If designers try to ignore this fact, videogames will remain simply a toy. However, if they realize that dealing with different models of reality requires a critical attitude, videogames could become a medium for exploring and discussing our personal and social realities.

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