

The game of narratives: narratological chaining in *The Sims* game¹

Marcos Braga e Regina Helena Silva

Abstract

With the theme of “Games and Narratives”, the paper follows the path, or, rather, the possible “narratological chaining” that, in a certain way, allows players of *The Sims* game the possibility of expressing themselves and approaching the quotidian through different narrative forms. This can be done by playing the game, accessing the official website’s narrative possibilities, and publishing virtual “diaries” of the game, which are written by the players themselves, based on its avatars’ virtual quotidian. We attempt to perceive, throughout the study, how the players are able to express and make themselves present in the world by means of various digital narrative possibilities.

Keywords:

Communication and technology. Narratives. Digital games. Entertainment. *The Sims*.

1 Keys for reading the world

Throughout history, the development of media and communication technologies and information (TCIs), have influenced, in a certain way, the way that man perceives and constructs the world around him. The creation of new devices,² forms and technologies that launch vastly different intertwinings between images and narratives over all periods of human history, gives individuals unprecedented possibilities for new kinds of social and symbolic exchanges. Media products and their technological apparatuses do not only construct enunciations and representations, but also give rise to a series of tensions that enter into constant conflict with the knowledges of society, provoking new positions, updates, demands and interpretive frameworks, which come to be seen as “keys for reading” the world.

Man, in turn, is a signifying, questioning subject with an admirable capacity to express himself in the face of life’s varying challenges. He constructs, comprehends and communicates, but it is language that permits him to manifest himself in the world, and it is through the

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peculiar structures of narratives that he learns, interrogates and is able to deal with the world. Language confers consciousness upon human beings, and through its illuminating characteristics reveals the intimate self and exteriorizes the hidden world, deepening and broadening personal and social existence. But once again, it is by means of narratives that we have the possibility of formatting some complex dimensions of language – whether they be verbal, physical, emotional, ludic, ethical, technical, individual or collective. Put into action, in the clashes of the everyday world, it is nourished and replenishes itself through interactions that arise from communicative processes.

In the wake of this constant narrative negotiation, in every period of history, the evolution of communication and information technologies, at significant levels not only have assisted people in dealing with everyday symbologies, but have also signaled changes in the way that individuals themselves understand the world. According to Gláucio Aranha (2006), historically, technological efforts geared toward the processes of mediated communication revolutionized the social systems and of the transmission of knowledges, violently breaking with existing notions of spatiality and temporality.

By the discovery of photographic techniques and the invention of the phonograph, man had been able to communicate over long distances, via manipulating of images and memories. The radio was the media that made communication between distant points most viable, adding the power of its oral tradition (including voice, sound, music), making it possible for listeners to hear sound events as they were being produced, thus providing a sense of being there in the here-and-now. Television broadcasting, which added visual components to radio's sound capacity, also achieving global dissemination and accessibility, can moreover be considered a rich arena for discourses, a *locus* where different actors and aspects of social life echoed and gained importance. In the early twentieth century, we are still discovering that computers and games are not destined only for entertainment but for communication and an entirely new set of responsibilities that challenges us.

Janet H. Murray (2003), reflecting over the future of narratives in cyberspace, perceived that games can also be fertile ground for symbolic representations, exchanges and productions. According to this author, the game is a kind of narrative that shares many similarities with daily life; or, as Johan Huizinga (1971) put it: playful

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2 "The device is a component of the contract of communication, without which there is no possible interpretation of messages, in the same way that a theater piece makes little sense without its scenic component. In a general way, it includes one or more types of materials and constitutes itself as a form of support, with the assistance of a certain technology" (CHARAUDEAU, 2006, p. 105). [Our translation.]

activity goes back to the dawn of human culture, with the game being a central idea in many civilizations. Thus, according to this philosopher, games provide us with an opportunity to simulate or re-enact our relationship to the world, overcoming difficulties, surviving inevitable battles, rearrange our spaces, rethink our time and prevail in the most adverse situations. “Games offer safe training in areas that possess a real, practical value; they constitute rehearsals for real life” (MURRAY, 2003, p.142).³

Taking into consideration the fascinating narrative experience by which subjects traverse the world and the media, in search of understanding and of “keys for reading” their world, in this paper we will discuss a peculiar narrative chaining, analyzing the construction of avatars in *The Sims*, an electronic game that simulates activities from its players’ everyday life. In the game’s official site, there is also the possibility of constructing new narratives in the form of “virtual diaries” based on (or not) on the plot developed in the game. In this trajectory – of playing for the diaries – the players end up finding other players, experiencing new mediatic paths, publishing new products, reading diverse texts and acquiring new experiences and repertoires. More than a medium of pure entertainment, games, which today have taken on electronic forms, permit subjects to experience, safely and with a peculiar temporality, forms of

narrating and assimilating symbolic complexity that extend beyond the everyday environment in which they live.

2 To play, to narrate, to communicate

In a general way, we have the idea that to narrate is merely to tell a story or describe an event. But what we fail to perceive, in the tangle of stories, myths, anecdotes, tales punctuation, subjects, verbs and phrases that make up the weft of text is that by narrating we are also communicating. Narrative activity, in its various concepts and dimensions, figures as an arena for knowledges in which practices are marked by the heterogeneity of experience and by the dynamics among elements that make up their *corpus*. To narrate is nothing but a way of communicating, and, thus, we cannot arbitrarily make divisions between the place of “who narrates” the text of “who listens” to it. Both participate actively in a production that is woven into an elastic fabric by the actions and experience of individuals. “It is a relationship forged as a pact, in which the narrative, after being established by this encounter, emerges and manifests itself, strongly linked to the text in which it was powerfully contained with respect to the interlocutor that puts it into action and makes it happen” (COUTINHO, 2007). That means, the narrative does not exist without its main verbs: to modify, update, organize, interpret, negate, and qualify the experience.

3 Our translation.

To study narratives thus constitutes an analytic perspective that seeks to comprehend not only the complexity of social ties, as they are reenacted and performed in the contemporary world, but also the differences that this peculiar way of organizing the world presents, implies, and unfolds experience, knowledges and everyday life to the subjects (LEAL, 2006, p. 21).⁴

It is through narratives that subjects attempt to comprehend and impose their presence in the world as active agents of communication dynamics. The narratives produced and negotiated “in the media as well as in the streets”, even when armed with their various framings, editions, formats, and platforms, present themselves as tools that can assist subjects in perceiving, knowing, and negotiating their space in the world. From the earliest forms of imagetic production up to the more contemporary forms such as cinema, TV, video, computers and computer games, image technologies provide narrative elements that, taken together with socio-historical and cultural factors, contribute to the reaffirmation, tensioning, and construction of subjectivity of individual perception of the world in which we live. In this incessant search for knowledge, of oneself and of the world, subjects seek out newspapers, magazines, websites, online computer games and “virtual diaries”, in search of traces or “keys for reading” that may offer a few lines giving a fleeting understanding, for the time being, of our complex quotidian.

During modernity, it was the place of cinema, as a communications media and “visual machine”, to play an important role in this sense. For Walter Benjamin (1996), techniques for reproducing images, as well as the varying narratives, lens and approaches utilized by cinema, arose as forms of exercising subjects’ perceptions of the world, as well as for examining the productions of meaning present in man’s everyday modern environment. Through contact with cinema, spectators were submitted to changes in locale via filmic narratives, which offer a dynamic way of working with their senses and the capacity to deal with time and space. The grand power of attraction exerted by the moving images of films appears as a factor for transforming the visual and symbolic imaginary of the spectator, thus making possible new attitudes by audiences, who come to be creators and actors, transformed by technological and aesthetic progress of this invention. Benjamin sees the development of cinema as a kind of school of the gaze and of *feeling the world*, which comes to assist the perception of time and of spaces, which, in modernity appear in discontinuous ways. Today, our games are mediatized into digital formats. Together with other digital forms such as chats, forums, twitters, blogs, mobiles and others, they offer a way of learning how to deal with and adapt to the discontinuous logic of contemporary life. Furthermore, they can offer participants in this communicative process a form of socialization in

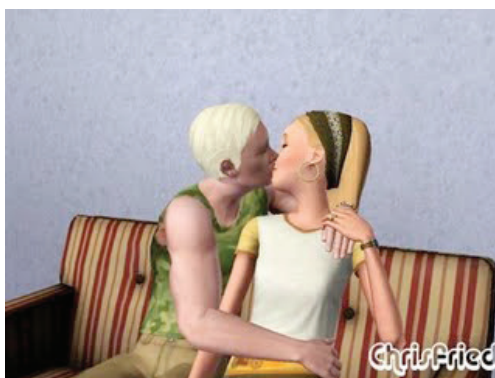
virtual domains; the creation and appropriation of new symbologies; the exchange of references that bring the possibility of modifying or reaffirming diverse perspectives; and, via their narrative devices, innumerable representations and fantasies capable of altering the way that individuals develop systems of values, beliefs and perceptions of the world. Also included in this aspect are the possible birth of a new comprehension of space/time and even new skills in utilizing communicational devices (subjects, for example, can demand for receiving information more and more quickly, to be consumed or discarded, also sharing, updating or publishing their opinions).

Within this analytical logic, the object that we have chosen to analyze as a case study is the narrative chaining that can be formed by players of *The Sims* game. Created by Will Wright and launched in the first decade of the 21st century, *The Sims* came after a series of games called *Sim City*, by the same author. The game functions as an entertaining “simulation of everyday life”, which, through certain rules,

parameters and references, makes a virtual world available that can be precipitously experienced by its players. The dynamic constructed by the game occurs via the simulation of a “cyberquotidian” in which ordinary activities of daily life are reenacted, such as working, paying bills, dating, sleeping and shopping. Technically, there is no way of winning the game; the goal is to evolve, overcome obstacles, achieve goals and dreams. The player can create avatars, scenes, social relations, in addition to having the power to halt, save, and accelerate the pace of action. The central idea of the game is that of a virtual theater, in which we can entertain ourselves by reenacting and rehearsing aspects of our lives. Even with the limitations imposed by the devices of a simulator, it is a rich product, in narrative terms, one that also permits players to become members of its site and official community, in addition to offering them opportunities to write and publish stories in online diaries. A peculiar narrative chaining that, when examined closely, offers ways of approaching and understanding various subjects, experiences and worlds.

Figure 1 - Images of *The Sims* game





In *The Sims* and its *virtual diaries*, written by the players themselves in the game's official site, everyday life makes itself felt in the narrative woven via sounds, images and the actions of avatars on the screen. The subjects themselves experiment, create possibilities and rehearse multiple forms of seeing and feeling the world. In this entertaining narratological exercise, the subjects, by making their presence felt in some way in cyberspace, can practice their roles in the world, and become motivated to seek new experiences. As we will see further on, in the virtual diaries and in other online environments, players of *The Sims* game can interact, interpret, participate, create and transform narratives, scenarios, masks and relations. In the ludic exercise of discovering one's "self" and one's world, these spaces bring the possibility of negotiating points of view, stimulating future discussions and, in a certain way, reflecting over and reinforcing behavioral models and visions of the world. They can also assist, via the game's narratives and diaries, in constructing, assimilating and comprehending the contemporary environment's diverse forms of significations. When a player enters

The Sims game, he is playing with creating and controlling virtual models of life and of narratives.

3 Narratological chainings in *The Sims*

Upon entering the digital environments, players may be encouraged to perform the same exercise that, in a certain way, man performs with the concrete world, with himself and with others around him. The character can explore all of the environment's possibilities and it is via his actions and interventions in cyberspace that the virtual world takes on life. It is an organizing activity, in constructing a common world through action and intervention, creating new positionings and frames of meaning. The games and other narrative digital tools, such as *The Sims'* diaries, can lead individuals, based on their desires and cultural perspectives, to create various temporal and spatial worlds, as well as creating and incorporating a character, a narrative or another personality. They evoke readings, interpretation, interference, imagination and an attitude of immersion; that is, a conventional suspension of the *present*, which allows the freedom of simulation or representation to be established.

According to Edmond Couchot (1993), everything occurs as though through numerical simulation it were possible for a new dimension of the real to appear, not as a copy nor as a representation or duplication, but as an analog, transformed and transmuted by binary calculations. A numerical analog of the world, of things, of natural or artificial realities, a numerical analog of the very thinking and acting subjects of perception, of their bodies, gestures, writing and thoughts. It is a condition that permits, up to a certain point, a forecasting and “manipulation,” in the sense of co-authorship and malleability, of the world. In simulation games, in the face of other selves and cyberspace, the narrative establishes itself as an integrated whole that involves multiple forms of behavior, including speech (written), gestures, visuals, inter-individual spaces, multiple social and cultural contexts. In virtual games, as in ordinary life, it is impossible to conceive of communication and narratives as monophonic units; they must be thought of as a global complex that is fluid and multifaceted.

In this article, we are going a little beyond narratives produced by the game and within it. We are also including this aspect—narratological chaining—the “diaries” written by players and published on *The Sims* game’s official site. Players/users registered on the site can write new stories, publishing texts about the avatars’ lives, and/or explore a multiplicity of perspectives that sometimes stray beyond *The Sims*’ narrative limits. For example: in the game

the players cannot break objects, possess superpowers or murder another character. Since the diaries’ narratives obey the structure of written language, virtual barriers assume other dimensions. Now, players who were previously limited by the software and by the rules of the game, express themselves in the text by a multiplicity of variables limited only by the paths of their own imaginations. In this process, players take control of the story itself, no longer being mere interpreters of a simulated world but becoming directors of their own imagined world. These “diaries”, as they are called in the site, appear as a new narrative and communicational field arising from *The Sims*’ players’ desires to explore and speculate, alone or in groups, other textual possibilities. Unlike the “virtual personal diaries” – what we have come to call “blogs” – in *The Sims* game, the diaries were created, in the first place, for sharing, in written format, the virtual experiences of playing the online game. But, like *blogs* – which ended up moving away from the initial idea of being an online equivalent to old-fashioned personal diaries – *The Sims*’ virtual diaries took on a potentially new use. The particularities of this new narrative resource are not limited to merely producing commentary based on the virtual quotidian of an avatar, they also extend to the possibility of testing and exploring new textual possibilities and plots, publishing and updating them, based on the meeting – or lack thereof – with possible readers.

Figure 2 – A Sims diary: The story of “Bernardo & Bianca,” written by the author “Mynna”



These texts are directly linked to the dynamics of the game, and their narratives are marked by the innumerable experiences, contexts, knowledges and places of speaking utilized by the authors in writing. When they are posted on the official site, these diaries gain a certain visibility, in addition to being read and commented on by other players. On the site's forum, authors and readers can also converse about the narratives, with the possibility of generating, based on these encounters, new updates and twists in the plot. Through playing, writing and interacting, the subjects end up experiencing, in a ludic way,

different forms of commentary and discussion, which permit them to explain and relate some of their perspectives on the world. This narratological chaining is a peculiar path that involves the creation of an avatar in a simulation game, the writing of a diary about the character's virtual quotidian, the interaction with some readers about the narratives, and the inhabitation of other places in search of new narratives.

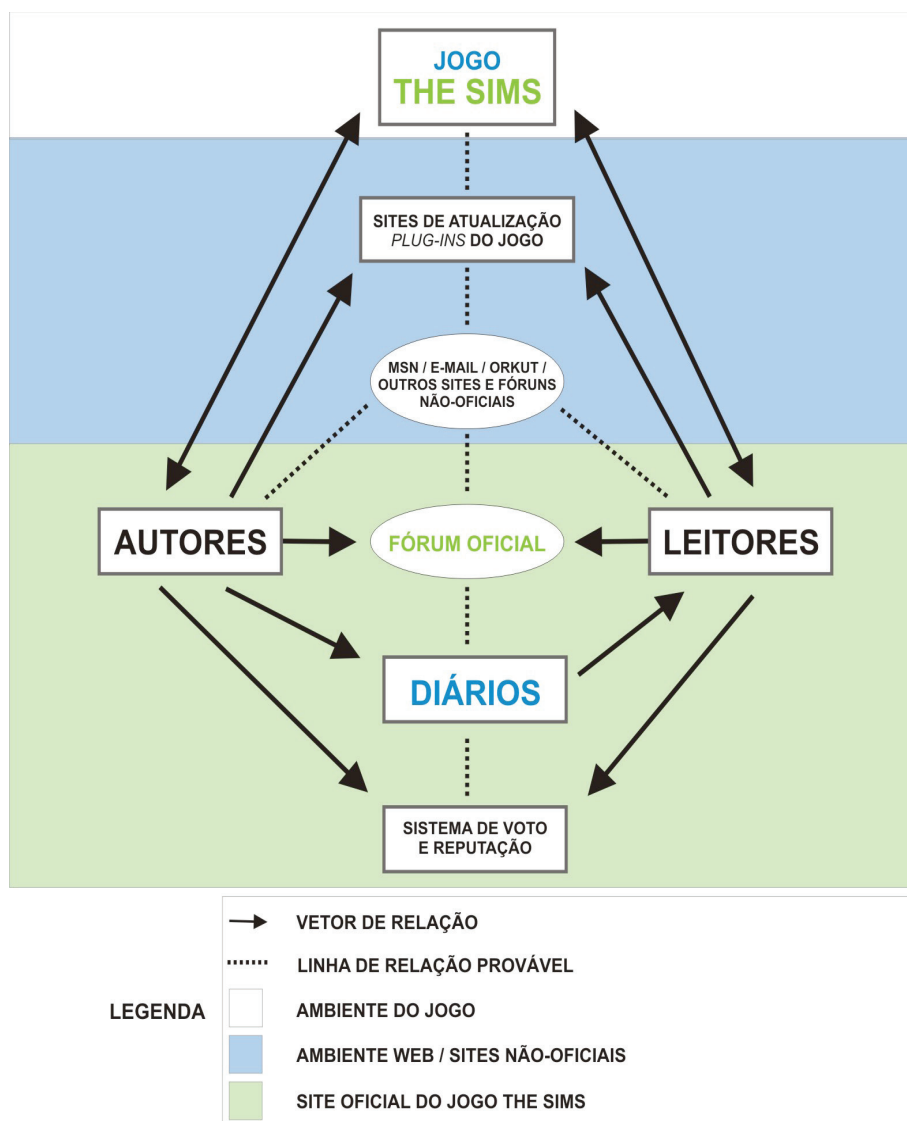
As we have seen, *The Sims* game presents itself not as a game that is separated from the course of everyday life, a mere leisure pastime for bored

players. The game goes beyond its original offline format, shifting to online and mobile modes, with official and unofficial sites that end up constructing and stimulating a rich narratological chaining and a possible network of relationships between more enthusiastic players. We will see that the game presents itself as an interesting narrative fabric, one that is woven on a daily basis by the players who are registered on the

game's official site, reading, writing and sharing their diaries, participating in forums, creating ties, gaining visibility in the groups, updating and producing information about the game.

In order to facilitate an understanding of this network of interactions, we have created a flow chart showing a few of the possible relationships between the game/site and authors/readers in the production of narratives.

Figure 3 – Flow chart of *The Sims*' narratological environments



As Figure 2 illustrates, the players can move between three distinct environments: the game platform, the official site and other environments considered “unofficial.” In this narratological chaining that *The Sims* and its diaries offers its players, we can envision the following sequence: there is a proposed narrative, formatted and programmed with the intent of simulating the subjects’ everyday environment. The invitation to participate in this cyberquotidian is made in an entertaining way, in the format of a game. The subjects, with their knowledges, paces, frames of meaning, dreams and worries, take part in the game, adding their skills and concerns to the mix. Within the cyberquotidian of the game, he players can negotiate, at any time, the plot that they choose to enact. To this end, they can accelerate or halt the pace of the narrative, save it or start afresh with a new story, add new characters, invest time in relationships and experience a variety of situations. These virtual situations may bear some similarity to the player’s everyday life, but the activities of the avatar can also be diametrically opposed to it. In seeking more tools for understanding and refining the narrative that is negotiated in cyberspace, subjects can seek out other environments that offer some clarification of that virtual experience.

In this search, they end up finding the game’s official site and being invited to become members of the group of players who stimulate the dynamics of the site. Without perceiving it, they thus extend the game’s narrative, by seeking

tutorials, tips, new updates and other players to interact with and discuss their experiences. While navigating the site, players discover the possibility of creating virtual diaries, or more specifically, constructing narratives related to their avatar’s virtual quotidian. In attempting to write a virtual diary, players perceive that it is necessary to return repeatedly to the game, in order to refresh their memories about specific details of the story or to photograph the characters’ actions. What players end up discovering is that the narratives that they create in the site’s virtual diaries do not necessarily have to follow the style of a conventional diary; that is, they do not have to describe, step-by-step, the avatar’s daily activities. The freedom of written text permits them to create diverse kinds of narratives, whatever their imagination permits. Once again, in addition to further extending the narrative action, which once limited the procedural rules of the game, the subjects can again act on safe ground in attempting, via an entertaining activity, to discover something about their own presence and place in the quotidian. In publishing virtual diaries, the author, depending on his involvement with the site and its forums, has the possibility of interacting with other players, which can end up influencing other stories he publishes later on. On the site’s forum, authors and readers can encounter one another in pre-defined spaces to discuss the diaries. In these spaces, posts ranging from the smallest suggestion, complaint or comment about the plot

or the author's writing ability, serve to facilitate interactive ties that can lead subjects to other discussion environments (*Orkut*, *MSN*, e-mail, *Twitter*, useful sites, etc.).

In *The Sims*, we have a narrative in which external agents can alter the story's development. The narrative agent defines the pace and space of the narrative, editing the properties and attributes of each character, making decisions, creating new plot elements and sending characters in new directions. Internally, both in the game and the virtual diaries, the player/author/reader can make himself present in the narrative when he suddenly projects himself into the fictional world by creating an avatar or writing his own personal diary. But in order to narrate about this world, he needs to be involved in the quotidian that surrounds him, making himself narratively present with respect to the "other", understanding and making others understand, updating and constructing explanations and perspectives that will be useful in future investments and experiences.

Thus, as Janet Murray (2003) observes, more than a narrative structured around formulas such as "cops and robbers" or "young man saves the princess," in *The Sims* it is possible to think of two narrative flows. The first conforms to the conflicts between the player/author and the plot itself. By playing a game that simulates the everyday, he produces a series of narrative actions, which are sometimes limited by the

game's software. In search of more challenges and elements to enrich the narrative, the player can buy and install expanded versions of the game, packages of updates and other files that in some way make the text more convincing to him. On once again reaching the end of the software's possibilities of action, the issues raised by the plot remain. And, upon perceiving the of continuing and/or extrapolating the narrative in another environment, the player who had previously presented himself as merely one more citizen of a virtual city, now takes on new aspects that only the ability to write can express. Inevitably, the plot is updated and extended to the virtual diaries of *The Sims*. Published in an environment constructed by people minimally interested in the game, a new narrative can be the focus of attention in the forums and other discussion environments. Once again, the plot that began timidly as an entertaining proposal for simulation goes on to become an authorial publication on the official site of the game's producer. The second narrative flow is designed by the subjects themselves, who play the game or write their virtual diaries. This flow occurs along the path that the subjects traverse as they play *The Sims* game and access the game's official site; in the ways permitted by their acceptance of the idea of the game and of the production of virtual diaries; in the decision to write and in the publication of the texts on the producer's site; in the disposition to take part in a visible arena for discussion in the site's forum; in the attempt to

seek new information and form ties; in the search for other places of speaking and of action in different environments. In this incessant journey, the subjects end up discovering things about themselves: what they think, what they would do in certain situations, what they fear, what they desire, which side they would be on in certain discussions; and other “keys for reading” that attempt to position them within their quotidian.

In this path, *The Sims* possesses clear characteristics that can at times *maximize* (or *minimize*) its ludic aspects and narrative construction. The narrative power of non-linearity and the presence of obstacles to be overcome is an important premise in order for a ludic activity to be fascinating and contribute to the understanding and adaptation of the individual in the face of the demands of a society marked by the excess of visual stimuli and information. However, although the permitted interaction may be high and even though the player can create characters and stories within the game, these creations will always be constrained by the rules imposed by the software, which constitutes a certain limitation. But we believe that the limits of the technical devices of the game do not completely undermine the social and symbolic fruition, production and interlocution that occurs with and from the game.

The analytic trajectory of this paper has shown that, far from being a response to individuals' latent yearning to know the world and, as a result,

themselves, the possible narrative chaining found in *The Sims* game provides an avenue for an important opportunity for playersexpression. By means of the language resource formatted in specific narrative combinations, it is possible to externalize some of the concerns that are present in individuals' immeasurable inner worlds. And with each new opportunity for relating, commenting and expounding about the world, the subjects end up seeking other new ways of narrating, in a continuous search for other “links” for narratological chaining. In *The Sims* narrative chain, some find an opportunity to share with the “other” stories about various contemporary perspectives, and in the game's simulative environment, to vigorously and safely rehearse, practice or merely play a series of actions that may have real practical value for their lives. However, it is through seeing the production, action and positionings of the “other,” published in the game's site, that they are able to discuss, critique, praise and reflect over the places from which they speak, their perspectives. In a critical mode, which is not necessarily deprecating, as signifying subjects, they are able to interact, discard, learn, and take with them what they see fit. In *The Sims* and its different narratological environments, what remains is nothing more than a ludic but intriguing possibility for playing, experiencing, producing, interacting and creating significant ties with the “other” and with the world.

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O jogo das narrativas: encadeamentos narratológicos do game *The Sims*

Resumo:

Com a temática “*Games e Narrativas*”, o trabalho percorre um caminho, ou melhor, um possível “encadeamento narratológico” que, de certa forma, pôde conceder aos jogadores do game *The Sims*, a possibilidade de se expressarem e abordarem o cotidiano através de diferentes formas narrativas. Nesse trajeto, o game, as possibilidades narrativas do site oficial de *The Sims*, e as publicações dos “diários” virtuais do game, que são escritos pelos próprios jogadores a partir do cibercotidiano de seus *avatars*. Tentamos perceber, ao logo da pesquisa, como os jogadores conseguem se expressar, experimentar novas formas de tensionar e se fazer presente no mundo, por meio de uma das diversas possibilidades digitais de narrativa.

Palavras-chave:

Comunicação e tecnologia. Narrativas. Jogos digitais. Entretenimento. *The Sims*.

El juego de las narrativas: encadenamientos narratológicos del juego *The Sims*

Resumen:

Con la temática “*Games y Narrativas*”, este trabajo recorre un camino, o mejor, un posible “encadenamiento narratológico” que, de cierta forma, puede conceder a los jugadores del game *The Sims*, la posibilidad de se expresar y abordar el cotidiano por medio de diferentes formas narrativas. En ese trayecto, el game, las posibilidades narrativas del sitio oficial de *The Sims*, y las publicaciones de los “diarios” virtuales del game, que son escritos por los mismos jugadores a partir del cibercotidiano de sus *avatars*. Inentamos percibir, a lo largo de la investigación, cómo los jugadores logran expresarse, experimentar nuevas formas de tensionar y de hacerse presentes en el mundo, por medio de una de las diversas posibilidades digitales de narrativa.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación y tecnología. Narrativas. Juegos digitales. Entretenimiento. *The Sims*.

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