The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of Arts and Architecture

THE SIMS 2: REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

A Thesis in

Art Education

by

Hui-Chun Hsiao

© 2007 Hui-Chun Hsiao

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2007
The thesis of Hui-Chun Hsiao was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Karen Keifer-Boyd  
Professor of Art Education & Women's Studies  
Thesis Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Patricia Amburgy  
Associate Professor of Art Education

Wanda B. Knight  
Assistant Professor of Art Education

William Kelly  
Associate Professor of Theatre

Christine Marmé Thompson  
Professor of Art Education  
In Charge of Graduate Program in Art Education

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

For more than 20 years, digital games have caught the attention of scholars across a variety of disciplines who are examining them for their potential as a learning tool. Recent studies have looked at how digital games support learning in different contexts (e.g., game semiotics and knowledge domains for learning, skill development through problem solving, and game communities as networks for learning). However, in terms of digital games and the opportunities they offer for learning through reflection, most research focuses on the reflection that occurs as a game player consciously and purposefully applies ideas in each phase of problem solving. Relatively few studies focus on the deep reflection that occurs during players’ emotional engagements, narrative experiences, and identity construction within game play, and whether such reflection leads meaningful learning.

Using the digital game The Sims 2 (TS2) as an example, this study was designed to advance understanding of how digital game play provides an interactive narrative interface through which players may play, explore, and express themselves, via ludic narrative. Ultimately, the goal of the study was to discover whether the experience of narrative play and sharing in TS2 encourages reflective learning and the construction of identity.

Adopting a qualitative case study method, this study addressed three main research questions: (a) How does The Sims 2 (TS2) provide an interactive narrative interface for its players? And how has the nature of The Sims 2 interactive narrative interface impacted players’ experiences?; (b) In what ways does the nature of narrative
play in *TS2* facilitate players’ identity construction?; and (c) In what ways does the nature of narrative play in *TS2* promote reflective learning? These primary questions provoked further inquiry and analysis about the nature of the digital game *The Sims 2*, its players’ narrative play experiences, and the impact of identity formation, reflection, and learning.

Based on the analysis of the research data collected from various resources, this study revealed that the digital game *TS2* provides an interactive narrative interface (INI) that enables players to construct their own play experiences through gameplay, narrative, sharing, discussion, and reflection. These narrative play experiences, at the same time, inspire players to construct and uncover dimensions of their identities. Further learning by recapturing and sharing narrative play experiences through self-reflection, storytelling, and reflective dialogue with others provide players with new understandings and meanings through which they may examine the meaning behind their narrative play.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ......................................................................................... iix

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION...................................................................................... 1
  
  My Personal Game Experiences ................................................................. 2
  The Definitions of Game and Digital Game ........................................ ...... 5
  Statement of Problem ................................................................................... 6
  Purpose of the Study ..................................................................................... 9
  Description of The Sims 2 .......................................................................... 9
  Research Questions ...................................................................................... 16
  Limitations of the Study ............................................................................. 16
  Significance of the Study .......................................................................... 18
  Overview of Chapters ............................................................................... 19

Chapter 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ............................................................ 20
  
  Digital Games and Learning ..................................................................... 20
  Motivation to Learn .................................................................................. 21
  Game Semiotics and Knowledge Domains for Learning ......................... 23
  Skill Development through Problem Solving ............................................ 23
  Experience and Transformation ................................................................. 25
  Game Communities as Networks for Learning ....................................... 26
  Potential for Creative Play and Critical Thinking ..................................... 26
  Digital Games and Narrative .................................................................. 28
  Defining Narrative .................................................................................... 29
  Interactive Narrative in the Digital Age ................................................... 31
  Are Digital Games Narrative? ................................................................. 35
  The Debate about Digital Games and Narrative ..................................... 35
  Identity Construction in Digital Games .................................................... 42
  Reflection and Learning .......................................................................... 45
  Reflective Learning through Dialogue ................................................... 48
  Reflective Learning through Storytelling ............................................... 48
  Synthesis of Literature of this Study ....................................................... 49

Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY .................................................................................. 53
  
  Case Study with Qualitative Data .............................................................. 53
  Data Collection via Internet ........................................................................ 54
  Selection of Research Participants ............................................................ 57
  Researcher’s Role in the Study ................................................................. 61
  Research Data Gathering and Management .......................................... 61
  Data Collection from Documents ............................................................ 61
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection from Archival Records</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection from Interview Data</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness and Credibility</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis Techniques</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framework for Analyzing Data</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game-structure</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game-world</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gameplay</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of Final Report</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Play with the Interactive Narrative Interface (INI) in The Sims 2</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game-Structure: Navigate with a Spatial Narrative Structure in TS2</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomous Characters</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free-style Cinematic Camera</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording and Authoring Tool</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game-World: Play within an Emergent Narrative World in TS2</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Representative System in TS2</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifiable System</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gameplay: Play Experiences with Interactive Narrative Interface in TS2s</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GeekU</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Get Along, I Want You to Be Happy Forever</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shy Girl’s Retreat for Social Practice</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Need to Get a Social Life</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom6</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Am Your God to Take Care of You</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A “Control Freak’s” Dictatorial Kingdom</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Play Is Boring and I Am a Boring Person, Too</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BugM</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go Wild and Live Beloved in a Perfect Life</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than Just a Boring Worker’s Creative Outlet</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am Fulfilling My Happiness through the Sims</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Across-cases Analysis</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You Sims are so real!</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Escape from Stress, Conflicts, Depression and Real Life</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To Cheat or Not to Cheat?</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sims’ Stories or My Stories?</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Community and Reflective Dialogues</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Key Findings</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the Research Questions</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1-1: Creating a Virtual Character (Sims) in TS2 ..............................................11
Figure 1-2: Three Read-to-Play Neighborhoods and their Underlying Terrains...........12
Figure 1-3: The TS2’s University Expansion Pack......................................................13
Figure 1-4: Building and Decorating a House in TS2 ..................................................13
Figure 1-5: Story Mode in TS2 ....................................................................................14
Figure 1-6: The Online Community on TS2 Official Site............................................15
Figure 2-1: Space Invaders, Pac-Man, and Tetris (from left to right).........................37
Figure 2-2: Myst ...........................................................................................................38
Figure 3-1: Archival Database on the TS2 Site............................................................56
Figure 3-2: Research Participant Selection Process.....................................................60
Figure 3-3: Data Triangulation ....................................................................................64
Figure 3-4: Theoretical Frameworks for Data Analysis ..............................................69
Figure 4-1: Sims’ Relationship Editor of SimPE (WordPress Entries).........................84
Figure 4-2: GeekU’s Sims Personality Traits ..............................................................87
Figure 4-3: Social Bunny .............................................................................................92
Figure 4-4: The Grim Reaper in TS2 ...........................................................................109
Figure 4-5: BugM’s Super Hero Family and Super Friends ........................................111
Figure 4-6: Wonder Woman cleaned the toilet while the male superheroes sat around playing poker ............................................................................................112
Figure 5-1: The Interactive Narrative Interface in TS2..............................................130
Figure 5-2: Identity Construction in TS2 ....................................................................135
Figure 5-3: Reflective Learning through Review, Sharing, and Discussion of Narrative Play Experiences in TS2 .................................................................140
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd, for her advice and commentary on this study during its entire evolution. Without her help, this study would never have been completed. I would also like to thank all of my committee members, Dr. Patricia Amburgy, Dr. Wanda B. Knight, and Prof. William Kelly, for their help, encouragement, understanding, and patience during the length of this project. In addition, I owe my special thanks to my editor and social bunny, Sherilee Carpenter, for her great support and professional editing of this manuscript. I am also indebted to all of the participants in this research study.

Moreover, I would like to express my profound love to my husband, Wei-Chung Chang, who encouraged and supported me throughout this study, and listened to my “dissertation talk” even while he was sleeping. Lastly, I am grateful to my parents and families, whose love and support have gotten me through many stressful times during my study at Penn State.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Ever since *Spacewar*\(^1\) was first invented in an MIT lab in 1962, digital games, which are generally known as video games and computer games, have been part of popular culture for over 30 years and have had a significant social, economic, political, and technological impact on society (Newman, 2004). According to Entertainment Software Association’s 2006 annual report about the computer and video game industry, to date 69% of heads-of-households in the U.S. play digital games. Moreover, in 2005, the average game player was 33 years old; in fact, 25% of Americans over the age of 50 played digital games in that year. As these data show, the number of female gamers has significantly increased over the past few years—38% of all game players are women and 42% of online game players are female. Therefore, playing digital games now cuts across age and gender lines and has become a vital part of contemporary culture and society. As a result, today digital games have caught the attention of scholars from fields as diverse as the social sciences, computer science, media design, literature, and education—studies in all of these areas are contributing to understanding this emergent medium and its phenomena.

Envisioning digital games as one of the most influential and rapidly growing mainstream mediums in the world, Norwegian professor of literature Espen Aarseth

---

\(^1\) *Spacewar* (1962) can be viewed as the first invented digital game.
established a scientific journal called *Game Studies* in 2001 to mark the beginning of
game studies as a discipline. Since then, the study of digital games has expanded beyond
the basic dispute about the digital game and its negative effects, and has turned to
analyzing the content of the games and the media of gaming itself.

Moreover, digital games signify something more than the simple act of play itself
and game playing is a worldwide phenomenon that reflects and shapes our culture.
Therefore, some researchers have suggested that digital gameplay cannot be properly
understood as simply a human-machine interaction, but is situated in social and cultural
contexts that are perhaps more important than the game itself (Aguilera & Méndiz, 2003).
Therefore, in studying digital games, we not only learn more about this emerging media,
its phenomena and impacts on our everyday life, but also the significant implications of
digital gameplay in our culture and society. Digital games, by their own means, present
“an ideal context for examining a wide range of social and cultural dynamics” (Williams,

**My Personal Game Experiences**

Growing up in the golden age of arcade games in the 1980s, I still remember how
much pleasure and joy gameplay brought to me. From *Pac-Man* (1980), to *Super Mario
Bros.* (1985), to *Street Fighter* (1987), to *Prince of Persia* (1989), the purchase and play
of digital games filled me with happy memories in my lonely childhood. As a transfer
student, playing games and meeting new friends in the pleasure grounds helped me
become involved in my new school life, and to organize social activities with my friends.
During my teenage years, playing digital games became an escape from struggling with adolescent depression in real life. The opportunity to violently crash cars or to frenziedly fight with monsters in the games—doing something that I was not born to do in the real world gave release to my anxious emotions and pressures.

Digital games for me, in my youth, were playful activities that gave me enjoyment and emotional relief. However, a serious car accident changed my perception of digital gameplay. I recall that on the morning of the accident, I was on the way to school and passing a channel on the highway. For an unknown reason, I suddenly lost control of my ruby coupe—the wheel was too shakey to hold, the brake didn’t work, and the worst thing was that my car was ramming a safety island. “Oh my lord”, I screamed, and then my instinct told me that my car would crash in seconds. Guess what arose in my mind? An UNDO command or the hot-key Ctrl +Z—yes, the command that allows you to recall the steps/orders that you manipulate in computer programs. It sounds funny, but it did happen although it didn’t work at that time. In reality, my car turned a somersault and crashed on the highway, upside down. The consequence seemed predictable; I pushed the four-way flash before I got rid of the seat belt that tied me in tensely. Some drivers stopped and tried to offer me help. Everybody thought I was lucky and were also curious about the secret of my calm.

“I play Formula One racing game with a force feedback device”, I said.

“This seems not my first time to face the similar situation. ... you know when your speed is over 200 miles, you will... and then...” I kept saying next to my upside down coupe and I won’t ever forget the facial expression of the tow truck driver as he said in response to my answer: “I can give you a lift to hospital”.
After surviving the car accident, I started to think about the subtle relationship between my survival and the car racing game I played. The purpose of the racing game was not to teach me how to save myself in an accident, but I did learn it by playing the game. Or, more precisely, I should say that the experience of playing a car racing game prepared me for tackling similar contexts, and with more calm and less fearfulness for dealing with later occurrences. From that moment on, the significance of learning through digital gameplay and the significant implications beyond gameplay itself gradually motivated my later research interests in digital games and learning.

However, the crucial idea behind this study was initially triggered by an incidental conversation between my husband and me. “Why did you create characters whose personalities are opposite to yours,” my husband asked when I showed him my virtual dollhouse on the computer. He hadn’t had the opportunity to try the game. “Well, I didn’t notice that until you pointed it out. It could be a coincidence,” I responded without concern. That night, I kept thinking about that conversation. I asked myself, “Is it just a coincidence? Or did I unconsciously create the characters that I want to be in a real world,” “Why do I usually guide my character to explore failure and run the hazard? Is it because I don’t allow myself to do this in the real world?” These questions perplexed me and led to two interesting issues for further exploration—whether digital gameplay supports learning to deal with real-life events and whether such play has the potential to raise self-awareness in a search for self-identity.
The Definitions of Game and Digital Game

In general, a game, by its nature, usually denotes a well-defined setting that is governed by a set of “rules” that have to be followed by the players in order to achieve the final goals (to win). Game researcher Gonzalo Frasca (2001) described a game as a voluntary action that takes place within certain well-defined frames of space and time in which the players make decisions about managing resources along clearly defined and binding rules in pursuit of winning the game. Digital games, however, originate from traditional games, are computerized according to emergent technology, add automation and complexity, and make playabilities and play experiences much richer than before (Juul, 2005).

According to these definitions, games entail specific rules that give meaning to players’ actions and that their outcomes are variable and quantifiable. However, to satisfy the gaming population’s increasingly diverse set of appetites, the game industry, aided by the innovative computer technology, has offered an incredible assortment of new games in today’s market. With negotiable rules and no particular outcome, some games, such as Black & White®, Majestic® and The Sims®, challenge traditional definitions of games. Thus, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s (2004) broader elucidation that “formed by rules and experienced through play, a game is a space of possible actions that players activate, manipulate, explore and transform” seems more suitable to providing a conceptual framework for today’s games (p. 378).
Statement of Problem

During more than 20 years of discussion, academic interest in digital games has slowly shifted from early ‘do-games-induce-violent-behavior’ studies, to more relevant discussion of the potential of this new medium for other purposes, such as learning rather than entertainment. With digital games becoming a growing, developing, and progressing medium, many researchers have taken an interest in the effects of these games on players, and how some of the motivating aspects of games might be utilized to help facilitate learning, such as learning about problem solving, numbering and time management, social collaboration, structures, history or cause and consequences (Alman, 1992; Garris, Ahlers, & Driskell, 2002; Millians, 1999; Prensky, 2001; Salies, 2002). However, the unsatisfying experience of directly adopting game formats into educational contexts has driven researchers to study successful (commercial) digital games, in particular examining the play activities of digital games and the principles underlying their design in order to establish rich learning contexts (e.g., Endestad & Torgersen, 2003; Gee, 2003; McCormick, 2001; Prensky, 2003; Roussou, 2004; Sandford & Williamson, 2005; Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, & Gee, 2005; Squire, 2003; Wallace, 2005).

In terms of learning, digital games in the early part of the 21st century are not seen as merely involving low-level skills, such as hand-eye coordination and fast reflexes (Greenfield, 1984), but as powerful emerging tools for higher-order learning, such as information analysis and synthesis, decision making, and problem solving. A growing body of studies has reported that digital games are powerful contexts for learning because

---

2 I use Gonzalo Frasca’s (2001) term.
they offer opportunities for players to immerse themselves in another world in which players take on different identities, and learn through the experiences associated with these identities as well as the surrounding content of the games (Asgari & Kaufman, 2005; Gee, 2003). This immersion, and the engagement engendered through gameplay, is often cited as a compelling reason for introducing game formats into the learning environment (Ulicsak, 2005).

While digital game play has the potential to provide meaningful learning experiences, most game studies concern learning within game activities. Relatively few studies concern the emotional engagements, narrative experiences and reflections that occur from and following gameplay. Some approach game research from a belief that games are a reflexive system rather than a reflective environment, containing too many actions and requiring immediate responses and reactions, and as a result allowing little time for reflection. However, today’s games, such as role playing, adventure, simulation, strategy, and puzzle games, often proceed at a slower pace that offers more built-in reflective 'space' and 'time' for reflection (Prensky, 2003; Squire, 2004a). More and more studies take the stance that game-based learning is experiential learning, and therefore learning from the experience of gameplay must include reflection (Gee, 2003, 2005; Prensky, 2005; Squire, 2004a; Squire & Jenkins, 2003; Vaupel, 2002; Wallace, 2005). These studies that emphasize the importance of reflection in learning most often focus attention on the reflection that occurs as a game player consciously and purposefully applies ideas while strategizing and implementing each phase of problem solving. These studies ignore the significant reflection that occurs during players’ emotional
engagements, narrative experiences, and identity construction within gameplay as these lead to deep and meaningful learning.

Moreover, researchers who take a cultural approach to investigating how games are interpreted for their meaning and significance to the player, contribute to an understanding of how players conceptualize self, their relationships with others, and to their constructed sense of the world. Sherry Turkle (2005a) argued that computers and digital games offer themselves “as models of mind and as evocative objects, objects to think with, for thinking about a range of philosophical and psychological questions, including questions about knowing, selfhood, and what we mean when we say something is alive” (p. 267). Analogously, Jenkins (2006) argued that digital gameplay is a technologically, economically, aesthetically, socially, and culturally important medium that must be examined by anyone who wishes to gain an understanding of the ways in which digital games are currently transforming our construction of personal and cultural identities. Thus, digital gameplay, in a sense, can be viewed as lived experiences that invite a renaissance perspective of the world in which we live and of the construction of personal and cultural identities (Rushkoff, 2005). The construction of identity and reflection through gameplay and narrative may promote a type of learning that is more significant than that which may occur through play. This perspective has not yet been seriously examined in detail.
Purpose of the Study

Using the digital game The Sims 2 as an example, this study was designed to advance understanding of how digital gameplay provides an interactive narrative interface in which players may play, explore, and express themselves through narrative play interactively. Ultimately, the goal of the study was to discover whether the experience of narrative play in the game encourages reflective learning and the construction of identity.

Description of The Sims 2

Developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts in August 2004, the digital game The Sims is a life-like social simulation game that imitates aspects of the real world for players to build, maintain the characters, families, and neighborhoods over an entire simulated lifetime. The realistic three-dimensional images, interesting storylines and a creative simulated playing environment have led to the purchase of one million copies of The Sims 2 worldwide within the first ten days.\(^3\) To date, more than 55 million copies of TS2, including expanded packs\(^4\), were sold by May 2006 (Water, 2006), making it one of the best selling games in game history. Additionally, from Thai to German, TS2 has been translated into 17 languages, and the franchise has seen life on platforms ranging from PC, MAC, console, portable handheld, to mobile phones (Winegarner, 2005).

\(^3\) Data from IGN.com
\(^4\) By May 2006, The Sims 2’s expansion packs include Universality, Nightlife, and Open for Business. Its new expansion, Pets was released in October 2006.
Within the digital game genre, *The Sims 2 (TS2)* is recognized as a life-like simulation game. The foundation of this game is the concept of a dollhouse, where little people live out their day-to-day lives inside a virtual world in one’s computer. Players can direct them in this virtual environment however they like, with objectives of their own choosing—to build and decorate houses, to create characters, to design hairstyles and outfits for the Sims, or to play the role of god in guiding the Sims’ living situation and helping them to achieve their aspirations. Being a god in *TS2* is like the scenario in the movie *Bruce Almighty* (Shadyac, 2003), where a man who complains about god too often is given complete power in an attempt to teach him how difficult it is to run the world. Bruce has the ability to change everything except human free will. He ends up realizing his arrogance, desires, fears, and self/personality through being a god.

Unlike most games that only provide us with two possible endings—winning and losing—*The Sims 2* type of game (also called a *Paidia* game in game studies) with its fuzzier logic and scope beyond winners and losers can provide an environment that allows games to grow in scope and artistry (Frasca, 2003). In short, *TS2* ships without specific rules so that everybody can play the game differently—you can try to make your Sims popular, wealthy, and successful, or treat them like lab-rats. The appeal of playing *The Sims 2* is that the game is what you make it, since *TS2* is the game that provides players with a platform and then leaves them to define their own goals. On the other hand, the problems (conflicts) generated based on the goals players pick usually have more than one method of resolution which, on the other hand, can encourage players’ imagination and creativity.
In a nod to three different game modes—play mode, architecture mode, and story mode—it has also been described as a virtual dollhouse, an IKEA game or a narrative Lego (Jenkins, 2004; Pearce, 2004). In the play mode, players can create a virtual character (called a Sim) and assign each a personality, an astrological constellation, interests, and an aspiration (Figure 1-1). A Sims in TS2 is a semi-autonomous character whose behavior, wants, and fears, based on players’ previous choices and the inner game artificial intelligence (AI) system—“the basic needs (of Sims) are coming from Maslow,\textsuperscript{5} the personality side is roughly Myers-Briggs,\textsuperscript{6} the childhood-to-adult transitions are more Freudian,”\textsuperscript{7} Will Wright, the creator of TS2, explained in an interview (Kosak, 2004, ¶18).

---

\textsuperscript{5} In Abraham Maslow’s theory of the hierarchy of needs, beyond the details of air, water, food, and sex, there are five broader layers of need: the physiological needs, the needs for safety and security, the needs for love and belonging, the needs for esteem, and the need to actualize the self.”

\textsuperscript{6} Katharine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers developed the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to assist a person in identifying 16 significant personal preferences.
After Sims are created, players can create or choose a neighborhood to move their Sims in three ready-to-play neighborhoods\(^8\) that consist of an underlying terrain, a network of roads, and residential lots with vacant and occupied houses (Figure 1-2). Except for the neighborhoods that accompany the core game, each expansion pack (EP)\(^9\) also extends new areas for Sims later to explore. For example, teen Sims can go to college to gain a profession and to pursue a degree (University); Sims can go out with friends to have a drink, hang around, or date someone downtown (Nightlife); or hire employees to establish a business (beauty salon, real estate, or toy store) in shopping district lots (Open for Business) (Figure 1-3).

---

\(^7\) I am referring to Freud’s theories about how the memory and childhood experiences significantly influence our adulthood and personality.

\(^8\) Three ready-to–play neighborhoods: Pleasantview, Strangetown, and Veronaville

\(^9\) The Sims’s expansion packs includes Livin’ Large, House Party, Hot Day, Vacation, Unleashed, Superstar and Makin’ Magic.
In the architecture mode, the player can purchase an unoccupied residential lot or build his/her Sim a new house. When constructing a house in *TS2*, the player is provided with the wall tool, the room tool, and selections of doors, windows, flooring, stairs, roofs, fireplaces, and swimming pools. A house in *TS2* can be up to six floors, with a tall roof or skylight, with/without a foundation. The player then selects furniture and decorates the house by buying household objects through a catalog. The house can be renovated later in the game (Figure 1-4).
The Sims grow and age, from being toddlers to elders. They have very different approaches to life at different stages; different kinds of successes and failures. In story mode, the player can take snapshots or record video sequences for every important moment of Sims’ everyday life (Figure 1-5). The most compelling feature of the camera in story mode is that, combined with the pause button; players can hold the gameplay anytime to rearrange the sets, to take a better shot angle, or even to modify scripts as though they were shooting a movie. In addition, the story mode allows players to add their own written thoughts and dialogue so that there is a context to the images throughout game play. The players then can share the stories and movies online with other community members (audience).

In combining artificial intelligence (AI) techniques and advanced simulation systems, the digital game *The Sims 2* (*TS2*), provides a life-like narrative structured environment for player exploration, making it one of the most powerful and dynamic interactive narrative environments ever created. Moreover, the *TS2* player online community, arguably the largest community in game history, provides artistic creations,
fictional narratives, ongoing in-depth discussions of play experiences, and descriptions of real-life experiences that have intermingled to become a firm network that supports social interactions and learning (Figure 1-6). Thus, *The Sims 2*, by dint of its distinctive nature along with its dynamic affinity community, appears to be an ideal case study for this research.

Figure 1-6: The Online Community on TS2 Official Site
Research Questions

In order to contextually understand the nature of *The Sims 2*, its players’ experience and learning potential, I examined the following research questions by using qualitative case study techniques:

What are players’ experiences with narrative play in the digital game *The Sims 2*, and how does the nature of those experiences facilitate players’ reflection and identity construction?

Specific questions were as follows:

1. How does *The Sims 2* (TS2) provide an interactive narrative interface for its players? And how has the nature of *The Sims 2* interactive narrative interface impacted players’ experiences?
2. In what ways does the nature of narrative play in TS2 facilitate players’ identity construction?
3. In what ways does the nature of narrative play in TS2 promote reflective learning?

Limitations of the Study

“There are no perfect research designed studies, there are always trades-offs” (Patton, 1990, p. 162). This case study has certain limitations that need to be taken into account when considering the study and its contributions. First, the selection of the single case study design naturally limits the generalization of the study’s results.
Another fundamental limitation involves the selection of research participants. Usually, more than 10,000 posts may be found on the TS2 discussion forum every day; players who were not English-literate or who couldn’t respond promptly to the recruitment announcement posted on the discussion forum and the players who were not able to access the Internet to participate in the online community, were excluded from the sample of research participants for this case study.

Additionally, by using a purposeful sampling strategy to screen the final research participants in this study, we found that three research participants were female. This may have been due to the fact that the majority of TS2 players are female. Therefore, the three research participants may not be considered representatives of the entire population. Each participant’s situation indicated only their individual perspective.

Moreover, another limitation stems from the fact that in taking a sociocultural perspective in this game study, my position as a foreigner interpreting the U.S. participants’ data may not entirely reveal all of the implications and underlying messages in their data. However, while this study was conducted from a cultural outsider’s point of view, on the other hand, it provides diverse and distinctive perspectives on U.S. culture that may contribute another voice for U.S. researchers and their future research on digital game play and learning. For me, this research was an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of U.S. culture and in particular the research participants’ situations, and to compare my own understanding of Western culture with findings possible through immersion within it.

Finally, by employing an email interview strategy in this study, all subtle visual, non-verbal, and physical clues that may help to contextualize the interviewee in a face-to-
face scenario are lost (Birnbaum, 2004; Wood et al., 2004). On the other hand, this absence of visual cues also represents a significant challenge to me (as a researcher), when attempting to provide a view of the situation as a whole. To minimize the impact of this absence of visual cues, I conducted follow-up interviews via email with each research participant to clarify their stand on issues raised in their interview responses and discussion online.

**Significance of the Study**

In this study, I attempted to take further steps, from a socio-cultural perspective, toward an investigation into the interrelationships between digital gameplay, reflective learning, and identity construction. To this end, I claimed an interactive narrative interface in *The Sims 2*, as a mediation to support players’ narrative play experiences and their retelling of it, and at the same time to facilitate players’ identities construction as well as to promote reflective learning.

The findings from this study provide a different perspective for future research on digital game study in relation to gameplay and learning. In addition, this study will provides another perspective for art educators that will allow them to reconsider digital games not only as prevalent phenomena but also learning and teaching strategies that may encourage art creation, and critical reflection and learning about self intertwined in social systems. This study also contributes to an understanding of the context of learning and digital game play for digital game designers and educators as they work together to
create future games, digital interactive stories, and other forms of virtual learning communities.

**Overview of Chapters**

In this chapter, I discussed the need to explore the learning potentials triggered by interactive narrative and reflection. Combining the distinctions of interactive narrative and life-like simulation, digital game, *The Sims 2* serves as an ideal example of the significance of what gameplay can encourage in terms of identities construction and reflection. To gain a thorough understanding of digital games in relation to learning, narrative, identity, and reflection, relevant literatures are examined and discussed in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 contains a description of the methodology, procedures, and research perspectives adopted to answer the research questions in this study. A qualitative case study method, Internet data collection strategy, purposeful criterion sampling method, and the theoretical frameworks of data analysis are also discussed in this chapter. Chapter 4 presents the findings from this study. I analyze how the interactive narrative interface in *TS2* impact players’ experiences and how these narrative play experiences, at the same time, facilitate players’ identity construction, reflection, and learning. In chapter 5, I used my findings to examine the theories described in the literature to answer my research questions. Followed by the study summary, implications from the findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Before examining whether the digital game *The Sims 2* is capable of facilitating players’ experiences in narrative, identity construction, reflection, and learning, it is necessary to have a contextual understanding of the following issues: How can a digital game provide us in terms of learning? Are digital games narrative? What are players’ identities formed in games? What is reflection and how can we learn from reflection? In this chapter, I begin with a brief overview of the current academic literature on digital games and learning. I then investigate narrative in the digital age and the relationship between digital games and narrative. Next, I explore players’ identities as these may be generated, transformed, and constructed through digital gameplay. Finally, reflective learning theories are discussed and considered as they may apply to the integration of learning, narrative, and identity construction within a digital game realm.

Digital Games and Learning

After a careful review of the relevant literature, I found that current studies in terms of digital games and learning can be roughly divided into the following major

---

10 It should be noted that digital games in this review signify commercial, mainstream or entertaining off-the-shelf (COTS) games rather than professional/vocational training simulators.
issues: games as evoking enjoyment and motivation to learn; games as semiotic and knowledge domains for learning; games as challenges to learning problem-solving skill development; games as providers of experience and transformation between different domains; game communities as social networks for learning; and games in creative play and critical thinking. In the following subsections, I explore these studies on learning included in digital gameplay.

**Motivation to Learn**

As Bisson and Luckner stated, “enjoyment and fun as part of the learning process are important when learning new tools since the learner is relaxed and motivated and therefore more willing to learn” (1996, p. 108). Certainly, that motivation is an important part of any successful learning context. Motivation is related to learning because learning is an active process that requires conscious and deliberate efforts (Bruner, 1960). For over 20 years, researchers have been trying to figure out just what it is that makes digital games so motivating. Earlier game researchers, such as Thomas Malone (1980), argued that the key features that have contributed to the motivation to play games are “challenge,” “fantasy,” and “curiosity.” Analogously, Richard Bowman (1982) used the video game *Pac-Man®* to see that through digital gamesmanship there is “conscious, deliberate mental and physical activity” (p. 3). Through observations of and interviews with *Pac-Man®* players in various age groups, Bowman claimed that digital games such as *Pac-Man®*, in which “skills and challenges are progressively balanced, goals are clear, feedback is immediate and unambiguous”, contributed to the formation of a flow
experience to engage players. This is the noted “Pac-Man Theory of Motivation” (1982, p. 17).

Similarly, in *Digital Game-Based Learning*, Marc Prensky (2003) explained the relationship among fun, enjoyment, motivation, and learning in games: “fun in the learning process is to create relaxation and motivation. Relaxation enables the learner to take things in more easily, and motivation enables them to put forth effort without resentment” (p. 111). He extended Malone’s notions about motivation by developing a set of key criteria for why games engage and motivate people to play and then learn through the gameplay:

- Games are a form of fun. That gives us enjoyment and pleasure.
- Games are a form of play. That gives us intense and passionate enjoyment.
- Games have rules. That gives us structure.
- Games have a goal. That gives us motivation.
- Games have interactive. That gives us doing.
- Games have outcomes and feedback. That gives us learning.
- Games are adaptive. That gives us flow.
- Games have win state. That gives us ego gratification.
- Games have conflict/competition/challenge/opposition. That gives us adrenaline.
- Games have problem solving. That sparks our creativity.
- Games have interaction. That gives us social groups.
- Games have representation and story. That gives us emotion. (p. 106)
A game, therefore, can generate fun and motivate people to learn through rule-based, goal-directed, interactive and challenging play in dynamic and participatory simulation environments.

**Game Semiotics and Knowledge Domains for Learning**

Long-term observation of his children and others playing games led James Paul Gee (2003), a well-known linguistics and literature researcher, to argue that a game is a “semiotic domain” that gives information an embodied and contextualized presence. According to Gee, to successfully play a game depends on the player’s abilities to recognize the game’s multimodal features and contexts. Such abilities require comprehension of both a game’s “internal design grammar” (visual signs, symbols, rules, theme, and its content are presented) and “external design grammar” (the ongoing activities, practices and identities determined by players) (p. 43). For example, in the game *Civilization IV®,* players have to develop familiarity with game concepts, visual presentations, and deeper understandings of relationships among history, geography, economics, and politics in order to win the game.

**Skill Development through Problem Solving**

The gaining of problem-solving skills is the most identified benefit that players can receive/learn from digital game playing. “Games typically consist of over-lapping well-defined problems enveloped in ill-defined problems that render their solutions
meaningful” (Steinkuehler, 2005, p. 2). Unlike well-defined problems that have a clear initial state and goal state, ill-defined problems are hard to define and solve. Players have to figure out solutions either by asking one another for advice or through failure. Prensky (2003) called this kind of learning “discovery learning”, which is the solving of problems by searching through data or structures for pieces or clues.

Additionally, game researcher Kurt Squirt asserted that the process of problem solving in games can drive recursive cycles that involve the following steps: “developing causal interpretations of events, brainstorming possible solutions, implementing solutions, examining results, and repeating” (2004, p. 363). Gonzalo Frasca (2001a) believed that the process of looking for answers not only empowers the players by allowing them to take a critical distance from the subject, but it also gives them life experiences that they might not get somewhere else. Most importantly, these simulated experiences in deducing game rules from actual play, learning how to solve problems, and then creating strategies for overcoming obstacles in games might help players to become more experienced and street-wise when exploring social and personal problems in their real life (Frasca, 2001a; Gee, 2003).

As shown above, playing a game is an activity that involves improving skills in order to overcome these challenges. Play is therefore fundamentally a learning experience.
Experience and Transformation

Establishing a highly realistic and immersive environment is something that games do particularly well. Games realistically simulate a subset of domains in which players can practice. The causes and effects of decisions can obviously be demonstrated and different approaches can be tried out in the same scenario again and again to build up a more accurate picture of the context (Gee, 2003; Prensky, 2003). Gee (2003) pointed out that digital games are well suited to new forms of learning. Players can interact with the game-world by probing, choosing different ways to learn, seeing things in a context, and applying learning when faced with new and different challenges. Players actively construct ideas and relationships in their own minds based on experiments that they perform rather than being told what to do, causing the learning to be more effective and efficient.

Some scholars also believe that the knowledge, skill, and experience that players generalize are applicable from one game to another and can be transferable to different contexts and domains (e.g., Gee, 2003; Hornyak & Page, 2004; Prensky, 2003; Sandford & Williamson, 2005). On the other hand, it might be possible to transfer/apply these experiences to real-life practice if the player is encouraged to think about his or her learning (Papert, 1998).

Game Communities as Networks for Learning

Although the stereotype of the gamer is a lone teenager playing in front of a TV/computer, in fact, digital games, as Bowman (1982) claimed, also serve as agents of
socialization. Games bring players together, competitively and cooperatively, into the virtual world of the game and its social communities. Networked with others, players are provided opportunities to participate socially, share information/experience, define problems affecting them, and help each other with questions, resulting in a distributed learning context.

Game communities—in Gee’s term, “affinity groups”—can distribute knowledge, skills, tools, and resources to form complex systems of interrelated parts. In addition, Gee argued that the experience of belonging to an affinity group is one in which learners gain resources through their affiliations that equip them to solve problems within, and perhaps outside of the specific domain. Game communities bring together “ways of knowing, ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of caring: the situated understandings, effective social practices, powerful identities, and shared values that make someone an expert” (Shaffer et al., 2005, p. 33).

Potential for Creative Play and Critical Thinking

The development of digital games today has broken down the established convention that games should have goals, fixed rules, or unchangeable endings (to win or lose). Hundreds of games such as *The Sims 2* and *The Movie®* either ship without firm rules, or have rules that players ignore outright by inventing totally new strategies of play. Some modifiable game systems enable creative players to morph from passive
players to active designers, to build their own contents and virtual systems\textsuperscript{11} by altering the source codes and conventions of games. Aarseth (2003) called this kind of gameplay “innovative play” (2003, p. 2).

Games not only allow players to creatively subvert the “fixed” rules of games, but the representation of game simulation is another powerful tool for triggering critical thinking. We all agree that simulations in games are never accurate representations of reality but, rather, reflect designers’ values and understandings of reality. Thus, a simulation system becomes a means of consciousness-raising through which players think critically about the simulated situations. (Frasca, 2001a, 2001b; Squire, 2003, 2004a; Turkle, 2005a, 2005b)

Frasca (2001b) used the techniques of the “videogames of the oppressed” adopted from Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed”\textsuperscript{12}, to examine how current simulations (games) could serve as mechanisms to allow for more discussion and critical thinking. Frasca argues that through digital gameplay, players can question what they have seen and then play an active role by thinking about how they play relative to their personal and social reality, rather than just being passive spectators. Similarly, Squire (2004a) utilized the game \textit{Civilization III}\textsuperscript{®} in world history classrooms to encourage students to point out the ways its systems reflect and occasionally misrepresent, compared to their personal experience in reality. Through observations and interviews, Squire suggested that through group discussion, simulation bias and inaccuracies can be capitalized upon to foster

\textsuperscript{11} Known as Mod—The customization of existing commercial games (resource code) through the use of freely available development tools (a process known as modding).

\textsuperscript{12} Augusto Boal took Brecht’s ideas of alienation effects (A-effects) to create a new form of theater that literally blurred the “fourth wall” by allowing the audience to become actively involved in the play, to disrupt the presentation and to make the audience question what they were taking for granted about what was happening on the stage.
critical reflection. Such critical thinking, Gee (2003) argued, is absent in many schooling practices.

In reviewing literature on digital games and learning, we can see how successful digital gameplay can contribute to learning experiences without embedding curricular content in it. Immersed in games, players are motivated and willing to understand the game domains. By progressively applying strategies to each stage of problem solving, players gain the knowledge and competences associated with the game content and identities they adopt in the game. Moreover, modifiable game systems provide players with flexible space for learning how to artistically create their own game contents, as well to creatively modify the game systems to fit their own need. In addition, the representation of games can be used as a trigger for players’ critical thinking about the relation between game-worlds and their personal and social reality. Finally, online game communities serve as an affinity hub for information exchange, experience sharing, social communication, and collective learning. By being an active participant in these communities, players gradually learn from each other to become experts in the game domains. Most importantly, such learning practices through gameplay might be accumulated and transferred from one domain to another.

**Digital Games and Narrative**

To explicitly examine the issue of digital games and narrative, in this section I begin with a basic summary of narrative definitions, forms, and functions. I then draw on longstanding conflicts between digital media and narrative to contextually examine
whether digital games are capable of transporting interactive stories. Finally, the noted debate between Ludologists and Narratologists is utilized to provide an explicit picture of the relationship between digital games and narrative.

**Defining Narrative**

Narrative is a term that has several changing meanings. Bal (1997) stated that a narrative text is “a text in which an agent relates (‘tells’) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof” (p. 5). According to Chatman (1978), each narrative consists of two parts: story and discourse. Story consists of “the chain of events (content) and the existents (characters, item of setting)” while discourse is the way in which “a certain content is communicated” (p. 19). In other words, the “story is what is depicted in a narrative and the discourse is how this story is being depicted” (p. 20). Therefore, “story is the core of a narrative, its content; narrative is the sum of content and form” (p. 20). Whether the story is transposed across one medium to another, it is a means to transport this virtual object to the reader. In doing so, it does not lose its essential properties, that is, the actual content (story) of the narrative.

In recent years, the meaning of narrative has been widened to encompass all fundamental means by which we organize, explain, and understand our own experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Eaton, 2005; Madej, 2003). They argue that people relate narrative experiences based upon the context in which they occur, the people they encounter, and the culture in which they are immersed. Moreover, Stockhausen (1992) believed that storytelling can help people to “capture, code, and validate the (generative)
knowledge born of experience, observation and intuition” (quoted in Alterio, 1999, p. 15). In addition to advocating the importance of narrative in contributing to social and cognitive development, some researchers view the process of storytelling as a way of knowing, with “the capacity to uncover, discover, freeze, create or re-imagine meaning and to enable the articulation of expression and subsequent learning” (McDrury & Alterio, 2003, p. 35). More importantly, narrative accommodates diverse realities and enables people to share experiences from their own cultural frame of reference (Bishop & Glynn, 1999) in which we “bring a sense of our own identity back to focus” (Pagano, 1991, p. 199). Furthermore, Bruner (1986) stressed the importance of stories in understanding self and bringing cognition, emotion, and action together to give experience “cultural relevance” (p. 69). Therefore, narrative, as its very nature serves as one of our main ways of understanding ourselves as well as the world surrounding us. In other words, we impose meaning on chaotic experiences through storytelling and, in the process, find our own inner voice and know our own world more fully.

To sum up, narrative is the most important type of expression in everyday life for individuals and the collective. We construct meaning for chaotic experiences through story-making and storytelling, and in the process find our inner-self and learn about the world around us. It does not matter what medium serves as the discourse for a narrative as long as this medium is capable of transporting a discourse at all.
Interactive Narrative in the Digital Age

Since the 1980s, many books, papers, and researchers have announced the dawn of a new age in which advanced technologies can offer new ways of telling and writing stories. No other technology has the power of computer (digital) technology to offer narrative that is truly interactive. Researchers such as George Landow (1992) believe that digital technology will deeply transform, or “reconfigure” conceptions of narrative, originating with the works of Aristotle (350 BCE), which contain a fixed sequence—a definite beginning and ending. Hypertext, the universally known pioneer of the modern era, challenges narrative and all linear literary forms and rules to present a new narrative genre.

Ted Nelson first coined the term “Hypertext” in 1965, to describe a new form of electronic text, a radically new information technology, and perhaps a new mode of publication. He described this new form of narrative as “non-sequential writing—text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read on an interactive screen” and as “a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways” (Nelson, 1990, pp. 1-2). In Hypertext 2.0, Landow (1997) extended the concept of hypertext to include text coupled with visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data. Thus, hypertext denotes an information medium that links verbal and nonverbal information. New media theorist Katherine Hayles (2001) also stressed that

---

13 Hypertext and hypermedia own similar concepts but the latter includes media other than text. Since many hypertext documents have some graphical content that makes the distinction between hypertext and hypermedia so blurry, some authors call them both hypertext.
hypertext cannot be thought of as simply an electronic form of traditional print, but takes shape as “a network of possibilities rather than a preset sequence of events” (p. 21).

Viewing interactivity as the most important property of digital media in support of narrative meaning, Michael Joyce (1988) distinguished hypertext into “constructive hypertext” and “exploratory hypertext” to denote two levels of interactivity. Exploratory hypertext is designed with the expectation that readers will explore the document without intensely changing it, while constructive hypertext is designed so that readers will actively revise and extend the hypertext. Besides emphasizing its interactivity, researchers such as Robert Coover (1993) argue that “freedom” can possibly be released from the author's control in traditional novels through (constructive) hypertext. From this perspective, the reader may become an active participant or even a co-author, rather than a passive reader of traditional print. Landow (1992) used the term “reconfiguring narrative” to describe the narrative of digital media. He believed that this reconfiguration begins with the role of reader, that is, in hypertext the reader is a “reader-author, able to construct individual sentences and entire discourse from author vocabulary and syntax” (p. 124).

In the hypertext, readers navigate through a complex structure of lexias without any instructions or clues about where to go or where they lead. Murray (1997) wrote that such “lack of linearity” in this story “isn't a bug—it's a feature” to a postmodernist reader (p. 58). Most hypertext advocates also believe that the lack of linearity in this story won't destroy narrative; rather, readers can construct their own text from the fragments (Landow, 1997).
Whether hypertext fiction is described as an interactive story, or reading it is seen as a new type of interactive process, hypertext never achieved widespread success in becoming a mainstream form of interactive narrative. Independent scholar Marie-Laure Ryan (2005) believed that the main problem with telling stories in hypertext format is that the reader needs to invest too much cognitive effort in extracting meaning. She argued that the elements of stories must be thematically unified and logically coherent, “because they are held together in a sequence by relations of cause and effect, and because temporal order is meaningful” (¶ 3). Furthermore, evidence from empirical studies of reading suggest that rather than revolutionizing literary reading, many aspects of hypertext are found to “disrupt reading,” and that hypertext “discourages the absorbed and reflective mode that characterizes literary reading” (Miall & Dobson, 2001, p. 1).

Additionally, some critics point out the existence of contradictory constraints and the misleading notion of collective authorship in hypertext media. Researchers such as Polaine (2005) argued that narrative works are “usually concerned with immersing the reader in the story and the narrative suffers when interaction is simply grafted onto it” (p. 152). He believed that asking readers to switch between an immersive state of immediacy and an interactive awareness of process may disrupt the narrative experience. Besides, even though hypertext narrative provides readers with a textual path to follow (some hypertexts even allow users to annotate during the process of reading/exploring), there is a difference between playing a creative role within a “pre-authored” environment and having authorship of the environment itself. In other words, readers cannot be identified in hypertext as an author or co-author of the digital narrative, although the reader can experience many exciting aspects of artistic creation.
The first generation of hypertext theorists not only believed that narrative would thrive in an interactive environment, but they also claimed that interactivity would thoroughly rewrite the rules of narrativity. From linear to non-linear, from passive to interactive, from fixed to dynamic, and from dominated to collaborative, in actuality, the distinguishable characters of hypertext established a new form of interactive narrative. However, many could see the potential but did not understand the media itself, leading to the fading of hypertext. On the other hand, following Chatman’s (1978) definition of narrative in terms of story and discourse, and examining interactive narrative using the distinct concepts of interactive story and interactive discourse, we find that most hypertext literature actually tends to focus on the use of interactive discourse, which allows readers to switch stories at different points. This is at odds with the concept of the interactive story, in which readers are given the opportunity to create narrative.

Interactive narrative, however, is still as described by Chris Crawford: “to date, not a single interactive storyworld (storytelling system) that commands wide respect has been created” (2003, p. 259). New media researcher Lev Manovich spoke of interactive narrative as a “holy grail for new media” (quote in Ryan, 2005, ¶ 8). Even so, Crawford (2005) still believes that interactive storytelling are not going to go away and could become a dominant form of mainstream entertainment in the future, since “the belief in the universal power of interactivity is what leads people to try to marry interaction and storytelling” (p. 50). However, this contradiction between storytelling and interactivity and the unsettled disputes about the issue of authorship continue and work to later influence the academic arguments about digital games and narrative.
Are Digital Games Narrative?

Unlike other more sophisticated disciplines, digital game studies in the 1990s, during their infancy, were only seen as an academic subject in sociological studies of effects (most of them negative). Due to growing interest in understanding the “media” of digital games, game researcher Gonzalo Frasca (2003) defined the term *Ludology* as “the study of games,” rejecting efforts to understand games through other existing media (book, theatre, film, etc.), and attempting instead to examine the game-specific dynamics of games, such as the relationship among rules, strategy, and game outcomes.

However, another controversial issue has been raised by a group of people who view digital games as a potentially emerging variation of the narrative form. The question, “Are games narrative or not?” evoked a passionate debate between Ludologists and Narratologists that lasted for years and dominated early studies of digital games.

The Debate about Digital Games and Narrative

In early digital games, stories often take the form of cut-scenes, background stories, or motivated dialogue. They are not seen as an interactive storytelling method but are usually pre-rendered cinematic sequences for introducing the game. They are irrelevant to gameplay; without them, gameplay still remains meaningful and valid.

Narratology\(^\text{14}\) began when researchers from various fields started to look at digital games as a new media for relating stories and supporting narrative, most notably Janet Murray's enthusiastic speculations about narrative games as the future of the medium.

\(^{14}\) The study of the form and functioning of narrative, or narrative competence
She believed that the potential for future development and improvement of games lies primarily in their narrative possibilities. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, she proposed that the arrival of “perhaps the next Shakespeare of this world will be a great live-action role-playing GM\textsuperscript{15} who is also an expert computer scientist” (1997, p. 152). This unsophisticated thinking immediately caused another group, who claimed to be Ludologists, to strike back. Ludologists argue that narrative, stories or story elements may be a part of games; however, stories are not games intrinsically. They cited action games such as *Space Invaders®* (1978), *Pac-Man®* (1980), and *Tetris®* (1985) as examples to argue that games only imply minimal stories (Figure 2-1). Some radical Ludologists, such as Markku Eskelinen (2001), assert that compared to other game components, narrative is only a small part of gameplay and thus merits no attention. To hardcore gamers, pre-rendered cinematic sequences are sometimes a letdown for the player who is expecting an interactive experience, because they are forced to endure and relinquish the control of the game (Chandler, 2005, July 7). Moreover, game researcher Jesper Juul maintained that narrative is not a vital part of digital games; rather, “the narrative tends be isolated from or even work against the computer-game-ness of the game” and “plots are a burden on games, making them less fun and lowering their replayability value” (Juul, 1999, p. 53).

\textsuperscript{15} Computer game master
As aforementioned, the unsolved problem long-existing in the hypertext age, the rigid conflict between “interactivity” and “storytelling,” supports a cogent argument for Ludologists and their approach. They argue that any combination of the two, as in “interactive fiction” or “interactive storytelling,” faces enormous problems (Meier, 1997; Juul, 1999). Adams (1999) also pointed out that interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative, since “narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power” (1999, ¶ 26). The adventure game Myst® (1993) is frequently mentioned as an example of this problematic combination (Figure 2-2). In Myst, there is an explicit narrative frame in which the narrator (game designer) establishes the world of the narrative, setting up the structure within which the player's actions take place. Since the player has “little control over the action, the game is boring and can not even be seen as a game” (Juul, 1999, p. 53).
Taking a close look at the debate, we find that arguments on both sides are problematic and temporal. For instance, whether narrative indeed makes a game less interesting is arguable. Compared to game development today, we can easily see that the lack of playability in *Myst* does not necessarily come from its use of narrative, but rather is the result of its immature game engine. In addition, different players have different expectations of the gaming experience. Hardcore gamers look for action in games, but more casual players may have different preferences inclining toward games that look and feel more like familiar media, such as drama or cinema. We can also see that people on both sides of the debate almost invariably find something worthwhile in the arguments of those with opposing views. One position commonly uses classical abstract games, such as chess, *Tetris* or *Space Invaders* in their analyses; the other position simply treats digital games as a narrative exercise. Both views are too narrow in scope. They fail to acknowledge that gaming is a maturing media that might offer some NEW specific functions to support players' imagination, creativity and satisfaction within a new spatial environment for narrative experiences.

Figure 2-2: *Myst*
The Armistice of the Debate

The debate gradually settled due to exhaustion on both sides. Even today, there are fragments of arguments and discussions to be heard; however, most admit that the battle is insignificant and somewhat trivial. Researchers have also ceased their fire. As Janet Murray suggested in her keynote talk at DiGRA 2005\textsuperscript{16}, there is no opposite between Ludology and Narratology—some people who are “interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: they are interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other” (p. 2). She also believed that game studies, “like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving” (p. 3).

The Ludologists' and Narrativists' critiques of digital games versus narrative offer an effective starting point for a deeper exploration of the relationship between games and narratives, and also open up interesting conceptual spaces through which we can see the intrinsic qualities of both forms of media. Games are based on a ludic structure (ludus\textsuperscript{17}), but some games have a narrative structure (paidia) as well. Some traits in today’s games can be considered as spaces ripe with narrative possibility. Adventure and role-playing games, believed to be the most story-based game genres, present a particular type of game “with strong narrative aspirations, as the games are being 'narrativised' in various ways” (Heliö, 2004, p. 65).

\textsuperscript{16} The conference of the Digital Games Research Association
\textsuperscript{17} Gonzalo Frasca, a scholar of digital games, explores the structural differences between stories and games and describes paidia as a narrative structure, while ludus is a game structure.
However, to continue the discussion of digital games contain the potential for interactive narrative on solid ground, there are two more issues to cover—the conflict between interactivity and narrative, as well as the authorship of the interactive story creations. In the digital game realm, the tension in the contradiction between storytelling and interactivity may be possibly solved, at least in part, through today’s emerging technology, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and real-time rendering engines. Glassner (2004) believed that any solution to interactive storytelling requires programmable resources that are completely adaptable. The ideal programmable environment would “enable the technology to dynamically produce sounds, scenery, dialogue, and music that reflect the player’s choices, allowing the player to be part of the environment’s design” (p. 121). Yet, artificial intelligence (AI) usually plays the most essential role in such a programmable system. Several AI techniques are now used routinely in games to reconcile narrative with interactivity. More and more researchers embrace the idea that the future of gaming, in particular the development of new genres of interactive storytelling and new interaction modalities, will largely depend on AI techniques, since “the real-time rendering system can constantly updated to preserve story consistency and AI can generate narrative actions that conditions are constantly updated” (Cavazza, 2004, p. 47).

The other unsettled dispute is the authorship of the interactive story creations. As mentioned previously, we cannot refer to hypertext readers as co-authors or co-designers, even though they can decide their own methods of story reading. In a non-narrative structure game, game designers dictate the rules and types of events that can occur, and the players can rarely (usually not) change these rules. Obviously, players are not co-
authors who may create the stories themselves. In the case of embedded narrative games, designers sculpt spaces as they construct the game, and create story-like animations to instruct players to move forward along the game path, allowing them to influence and interact with the embedded narrative (Jenkins, 2004; Pearce, 2001; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Thus game designers here are more like narrative space sculptors/architects, while players are more like participants than storytellers.

However, the role of players in emergent narrative games goes far beyond the degree of co-authorship offered to the player in ordinary games. In this compelling framework, players are allowed to experience, to generate, and to tell their own stories in various ways. Thus, we can claim that players in emergent narrative games are story creators, storytellers, or even directors in some sense. Along with AI techniques, emergent narrative proposes an innovative paradigm for interactive storytelling in future games.

To sum up, the opinion that interactivity and narrative are fundamentally incompatible in games is an outmoded stand point. Contemporary game designs that employ real-time rendering engines and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology have made it possible to interactively develop narrative through gameplay. Moreover, some emerging games, such as Black & White®, The Movie®, and The Sims 2, even allow players to tell their own stories interactively through narrative play in the games. We already have witnessed the success of many games, such as Half Life 2®, Fable®, and Final Fantasy XII® serial, which seamlessly blend narrative and interactivity to set

18 Black & White published by EA Games in 2001; Half Life 2 published by Valve Corporation; Fable published by Microsoft Game Studios in 2004; and Final fantasy XII published by Square Enix in 2006.
new standards for future narrative structure games. There is no doubt that we will see more intimate links in future game development among AI, simulation, and interactive story telling.

Identity Construction in Digital Games

“Who am I” has been an interesting and crucial question to answer while exploring or discussing the ontology of identity (Asgari & Kaufman, 2005; Mul, 2005; Ricoeur, 1991; Turkle, 1996). According to philosopher Paul Ricoeur, there are two main uses of the concept of identity: “identity as sameness” (Latin: idem; English: same) and “identity as selfhood” (Latin: ipse; English: self) (1991, p. 189). However, selfhood is not sameness. Identity as sameness means uniqueness which is defined as the only “mode of being” and is opposite to the existence of all things (p. 191), while identity as selfhood is mediated and actively constructed by a dialectic of explanation and understanding in a social world through our experiences, expressions, social roles, and (life) stories (Mul, 2005; Ricoeur, 1992). Thus, for Ricoeur, in order to answer the “question who”, one has to refer to the concept of “identity as selfhood” (p. 191).

In terms of identity in relation to digital games, recent discussions have placed increased focus on how the digital games, in particular Multi-User Domains (MUDS)\textsuperscript{19} or

\textsuperscript{19} Computer programs, originated from Dungeons and Dragons, that are usually text driven and running over the Internet server or bulletin board system, allows multiple users to participate in virtual-reality role-playing games.
Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs)\textsuperscript{20}, can brilliantly offer players opportunities to adopt different identities becoming someone they fantasize or want to be like in the virtual domain (e.g., Heliö, 2004; Lin & Sun, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Turkle, 1996, 1997). While most studies still concentrate on the psychological impact of addictive Internet use and players’ behaviors with the virtual identity online, some researchers have looked in depth at this phenomenon and the possible implications of this virtual identity for critical reflection and learning.

Sociology and psychology researcher Sherry Turkle contributed a conceptual understanding of identity within virtual realms of cyberspace. She argued that “we are moving from modernist calculation toward postmodernist simulation where the self is a multiple, distributed system” (1996, ¶ 1). For Turkle, computer machine, online virtual domains (e.g., MUDs), and digital games are “new mirrors,” “evocative objects,” mediators, or interfaces to think with, for thinking about our knowing, ourselves, others, and the world (Turkle, 1984, 1996, 2005a). She also argued that in the digital age, answers to the questions of “What is this machine?” and “What can I do with it?” give way to “Who am I?” (2005b, p. 131).

Another researcher, James Paul Gee (2003), focused on a detailed look at and delineation of three distinguished identities that a player confronts within gameplay. They are actual identity, virtual character identity, and projective identity. Except for a player’s pre-owned (actual) identity, upon entering a gaming environment, the player creates/adopts a character or assumes an identity “to indulge him/herself in make-believe

\textsuperscript{20} MMORPGs are networks of players who interact with each other to achieve goals, go on missions, and reach high scores in a fantasy world, while MUDs combine elements of role-playing games, fighting, and killing in social chat channels with limited graphics.
realities and identities” (p. 54). The identity enacted by a player to reflexively perform in a game world is called a virtual character identity by Gee. By actively engaging with virtual characters, players develop projective identities in which their actual identity and virtual character identity merge. Gee stressed that once players become immersed in manipulating their virtual character with their own values and desires, the boundary among identities becomes unclear and eventually unrecognizable.

Gee (2003) believed that in virtual game environments, players can adopt, reflect on, and learn through these types of identities. He also argued that as players explore multiple identities, they have an opportunity to learn more about multiple perspectives, the competence and knowledge associated with that identity, as well as their own current and potential capacities and limitations.

More recently, French philosopher Jos de Mul (2005) complemented Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity as a medium through which we construct our multiple self in the domain of digital games. He argued that in digital games ludic play is similar to narrative, serving as an appropriate metaphor for human identity as well as a means by which people reflectively construct their personal and cultural identities since ludic play and narrative both “give expression to important aspects of human life that structure our lived experiences and by doing that enable the reflective identification with this structure” (p. 260).

Seeing digital gameplay as “a remote imitation of the infinite play of the world,” Mul discerned three stages of ludic identity formation in gameplay. They are: \( \text{Play}_1 \) refers to “the ludic prefiguration of our daily life,” which consists of our living experience as playful in the natural and human world. \( \text{Play}_2 \) refers to, under strictly specific rules, the
player's expression and possible actions with “the implicitly experienced ludic nexus” in games. It can also be defined as free acts that take place within a specially designed time and place in a game. In Play3, the player identifies and understands her/himself from the perspective of this space of possible actions. The space and actions are then reflectively applied to the players themselves and as a result transforms his or her identity (Mul, 2005, p. 261).

In short, players’ ludic actions in the game-world are influenced by their past experiences and understanding of the actual world. Upon entering a game space, players are empowered to freely express themselves in any possible ludic ways without carrying scruples, which may not occur in the real world. Through reflection on ludic play in the game, players identify and understand themselves, thereby transforming their personal and cultural identities.

**Reflection and Learning**

In order to examine whether the reflection that occurs during the process of gameplay can encourage reflection and promote a type of learning, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the theories of reflective learning.

Different from the early research on learning, “dominated by behaviorism and cognitive psychology, limited itself to measurable, observable behavioral outcomes” (Brockbank, McGill, & Beech, 2002, p. 6), most modern theories promote the concept of reflection as essential for deep and significant learning. According to Dewey (1933), reflection is the process by which one makes meaning from experiences that involve
more than simply attending to events, but also the interactions with other individuals, the environments, and the world. He noted that reflective thinking originates from a state of doubt, uncertainty or difficulty, and further turns into an act of “searching, hunting, inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose the perplexity” (p. 12). In *The Sims 2*, doubts may be raised about the sharing of narrative play, since both play a role in the reflective act of experiencing and posting narrative and in dialogue with others about the visual story posted online.

Similar to Dewey’s idea of reflection as a response to a situation of uncertainty or a problem, Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) delineated reflection, in the context of learning, as “a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations” (p. 19). Thus we can see that reflection is a self-directed process of meaning making that occurs when an individual is aware of a problem, analyzes a problem, associates new information with existing knowledge or experiences, finds relationships among information, and solves a problem with new understanding and changed conceptual perspectives.

Moreover Donald Schön (1983) proposed two types of relevant reflection: “reflection-in-action” is a simultaneous reflection through which the individual is consciously monitoring the problem-solving process and modifying next actions instantaneously, while “reflection-on-action” is the reflection that occurs after an event and leads to changes in the future course of actions.

More recently, in terms of the relation between reflection and learning, Jennifer Moon (1999) argued that reflection is not viewed as just a solitary pursuit but as a
collaborative activity that can enhance the process of learning. Based on constructivist philosophy, she identified a five-stage map of reflective learning: noticing, making sense, making meaning, working with meaning, and transformative learning. Moon (2004) believed that reflective learning occurs when the learner is upgrading stages of learning from lower stages, like making sense, to higher stages, such as making meaning, working with meaning, and transformating learning. Subsequently, Brockbank, McGill, and Beech (2002) also stressed the importance of presenting and actively engaging with others in a social context to improve and transform his/her learning through reflection. They defined reflective learning at three different levels: improvement, transformation, and learning about learning.

At the improvement level, learners generate an understanding of and solutions for improving performance in the process of their work through reflective learning, that is, “doing things right”. Further, at the transformation level, learners move one step further and reconsider their work in strategic terms, from inquiring about and challenging existing patterns, to transforming, through creativity and innovative attempts to do the right things, their understanding from new perspectives. Finally, at the future level, in learning about learning, learners are encouraged to stand back and reflect on their own improvements and transformations during the learning process. In doing so, learners receive opportunities to think about their own performance in their work and seek to identify “how we did that”, that is, how knowledge may be applied to future situations (p. 10).
Reflective Learning through Dialogue

As Moon (1999) and Brockbank et al. (2002) argued, reflection is not a solitary pursuit but is a collaborative activity in a social context. Therefore, conversation with others can be seen as a significant way to encourage reflective learning. Reflective dialogue or reflection-with-others is distinguished from internal dialogue, where reflection is limited to the insights of the individual. Through reflective dialogue with others, individualistic assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions may be challenged and may also lead to a reconsideration of how things are being done, and how things can be improved (Brockbank & McGill, 1998; McDrury & Alterio, 2003). Reflective dialogue, at the same time, can facilitate learning from a passive level to a deeper level of reflective learning—what Brockbank et al. called “learn about learning itself” (p. 10).

Reflective Learning through Storytelling

On many occasions, dialogue is employed as a means of facilitating reflective learning. Storytelling also is addressed in a large body of studies, as an apparatus for inducing reflective learning. Researchers, such as McDrury and Alterio (2003), link the art of storytelling with reflective learning processes to propose storytelling as a theory of learning within a socio-cultural framework. They describe the process of storytelling as “a way to knowing” and outline five stages21 of learning through storytelling—story finding, story telling, story expanding, story processing, and story reconstructing—that move learners from the surface to a deeper approach to learning.

---

21 This is *reflective Learning through Storytelling Model*. 
Moreover, in recognizing that “stories are [a] product of reflection,”\textsuperscript{22} McDonnell, Lloyd, and Valkenburg (2004) stressed that the act of storytelling requires more than just passively reviewing an experience. It also requires reflective articulation of an experience—reflection on that experience, reconstructing it from a particular perspective and conveying that to an audience in a way that engages them. When we tell our own practice stories and listen to those of others, all of us work “together to process them deeply and critically, we connect in ways which enrich self, relationship and practice,” and also in this manner, “we construct new knowledge and advance our understanding of the relationships we construct and are constructed by” (McDrury & Alterio, 2003, p. 175).

**Synthesis of Literature of this Study**

Containing too many actions and only a little time for reflection, earlier games were reflexive rather than reflective. Further development enabled digital games to evoke meaningful learning opportunities through interactive options for reflection on ludic narrative and ludic identity formation. Most of the research literature on game play emphasized the learning that occurs through game actions but relatively few concern the potential for emotional experiences and reflection that occur within game play. However, more and more game researchers, such as Kattenbelt and Raessens (2003), have argued that to determine the complexity of the experience represented in the game and by game players, information about experience and reflection is needed. Similarly, Prensky (2005)

\textsuperscript{22} The argument originated with Schön in 1988.
suggested that in considering the social context in which games, fun, and learning take place, players’ experiences and reflections are very important and should be addressed more in future studies.

The narrative experiences and aesthetic expressions, such as interactive narrative and artifact creation, also have gone largely unnoticed in the appreciation of what games can offer in terms of learning, since games are rarely appreciated as a medium through which to facilitate players’ expressions or to enable intense artistic expressions. However, in some emerging games, players are allowed to navigate, explore, play, and even tell stories in spatial narrative environments, making it possible for narrative to take place interactively in game play. In such games, players become storytellers and thereby determine the game story’s outcome, to artistically create their own stories, and then to reflect upon narrative play experiences afterward. Interactive storytelling in narrative-structured games, in a sense, “can be investigated or produced as an art form, with the goal being either to learn their possibilities for artistic expression, or to produce an aesthetic experience in itself” (Gander, 2005, p. 51).

The Ludologists' and Narrativists' critiques of digital games versus narrative offer an effective starting point for a deeper exploration of the relationship between games and narratives, and also open up interesting conceptual spaces through which we can see the different qualities of narrative gameplay and other media. Through the debate we can see games, basically, are still “a play-centric context,” rather than “a storytelling context” (Pearce, 2004, p. 144). Not every game contains stories. Some abstract graphic games do not even tell stories by themselves. Thus, the digital game itself cannot overwhelmingly be seen as a narrative and cannot be studied as a narrative structure by directly applying
literary theory to it. However, as games continue to mature, we see that games are based on a ludic structure (ludus), but some have a narrative structure (paidia) as well.

While Turkle convincingly argues that the computer machine and online virtual spaces are a medium to evoke our thinking of our life, world, and self, we can see Mul’s (2005) ludic identity put more emphasis on the form of play in the games and argues that players’ identifies are reflectively transformed through the process of ludic play. Gee’s (2003) tripartite identity theory clearly illustrates the relation of three intersecting types of identities that appear in the gameplay that players can reflect on and learn from. All the notions together contribute a multi-dimension perspective to see through the generation, transformation, and construction of players’ identities within digital gameplay. More profoundly, we can say this framework is ideal for exploring players’ identities construction through narrative play in interactive-mediated digital games.

Finally, as the aforementioned overview illustrates, reflective learning theories can be adopted as a framework for examining players’ experiences in reflection, identity construction, and learning within narrative structured digital games. Reflection occurs as a game player consciously and purposefully applies ideas at each stage of problem solving, as well as when a player reviews and thinks about his/her actions, multiple identities, and narrative play experiences in the game. Moreover, sharing play experience by telling stories artistically and having a reflective dialogue with others about their play experience can also effectively facilitate players’ reflective learning, since stories and dialogue “provide cognitively complex and culturally potent systems for conveying the way we think about, feel about, and make connections in experience” (Amulya, 2003, p. 3).
In this study, I investigated the relationship among players’ narrative play experiences, identity construction, and the reflection that occurred via playing the digital game *TS2* to see if such experience and reflection could lead players to generate new understanding and learning.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline the research procedures and methodology followed in this study. After introducing the qualitative case study methodology and the rationale for using it in studying the digital game TS2 as well as its players’ experiences, I discuss the advantages of using the Internet in carrying out data collection relating to game research. Next, I describe the methods used to select participants and for data collection. Finally, I briefly explain the theoretical framework used for data analysis in this study.

Case Study with Qualitative Data

The purpose of this study was to examine whether players’ experiences with narrative play in the digital game The Sims 2 facilitate players’ identity construction, reflection, and learning. To better answer the research questions of this study, I employed qualitative case study method in this investigation.

Case study research methods have been widely used by researchers, social scientists in particular, for many years across a variety of disciplines (Creswell, 1998; Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1984). The case study has been defined as a research strategy that “focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 534) and as a research method that enables “an empirical inquiry
that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 1984, p. 23).

Unlike quantitative research, which generally describes trends applicable to populations or provides an explanation of the relationships among variables, qualitative research attempts to explore, describe, and understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2001). Creswell (1998) also noted that in qualitative research, by asking participants broad, general questions, researchers can collect the detailed views of participants. In analyzing these data, the researcher may interpret the meaning of the information, drawing on personal reflections to learn more about a certain phenomenon.

Therefore, I used case study methods to understand a particular situation—play of the digital game *The Sims 2*, its narrative interface, as well as its impacts on players’ experiences in relation to reflection, identity, and learning. In choosing to use a qualitative research approach for this case study, I collected qualitative data, analyzed the information gathered, and interpreted the meaning of the information from the specific data collected, rather than drawing conclusions about the data based on general propositions or theories.

**Data Collection via Internet**

Researchers Richard Wood, Mark Griffiths, and Virginia Eatough (2004) suggested that the Internet is a good medium to use in carrying out data collection in game research, since: (a) digital gamers usually have their own technological competence
and are proficient in using Internet technology, such as taking part in a synchronous interview using either a chat room and/or conferencing software, which will make the process of data collection more efficient; (b) it has a potentially global pool of participants—therefore, researchers are able “to study extreme and uncommon behaviors as well as make cross-cultural comparisons”; (c) the researchers do not have to be limited around a geographic location, as long as researcher and participants have access to the Internet, and “this makes international collaborations much more practical”; (d) it provides access to “socially unskilled” individuals who may not have taken part in the research if it was offline; and (e) it has a “disinhibiting effect on users and reduces social desirability,” which may lead to increased levels of truthfulness and “therefore higher validity in the case of self-report” (p. 511).

In this study, the Internet data collection strategy included game players’ online logs, which provided useful data by being a complete record of their events and play (e.g., uploaded creations, activities, and discussion). These logs are digitally archived and can be re-accessed time after time. For example, on the TS2 site, each player has a personal Web space, called a MySim page, through which players share their basic information, creations, play diaries, and messages on his/her guest book. With time stamps, all information and messages posted are contextually archived and accessible to all TS2 members. This rich textual material database offers users the opportunity to read this information, or to search by keywords, player’s ID or country, story themes, or discussion topics (Figure 3-1). The results of the search may be shown in the order of the users’ preference, or may be saved and printed. Researchers can analyze sequences of events, observing how events early in a sequence influence those occurring later through
this complete database. As a result, time-based research can be carried out through access to this digital archive, even after the events themselves are finished (Wood et al., 2004).

Another Internet data collection strategy employed in this research was the email interview. Bampton and Cowton (2002) coined the term “e-interview” to denote the means of communication between interviewer and interviewee (p. 1). An e-interview could take a number of forms, such as a focus group run in a chat room in real-time, or a sequence of e-mails between one researcher and one research subject. Aside from cost and time efficiencies, the e-interview, and the email interview in particular, provides participants with the opportunity to think and reflect at some length on the questions, leading to more considered responses and possibly even richer data. Moreover, when dealing with sensitive issues, the e-interview strategy affords a degree of anonymity to avoid some embarrassment and awkwardness. These advantages tend to be more prominent when conducting a digital game study. Since game players may recognize each other via their virtual identities, email interviews can avoid disclosure of their real

Figure 3-1: Archival Database on the TS2 Site
identities to researchers. A detailed procedure for conducting an email interview is discussed in more detail later in the data collection section.

**Selection of Research Participants**

Rather than seeing the informants as “subjects” to be studied, qualitative researchers treat them as “participants” and view inquiry as a close, “interactive process between the researcher and the participants” (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, finding participants who were willing to take part in this research became a crucial issue at the initial stages of data collection.

*The Sims 2* official site is arguably the largest and most organized game community in game history. Most game sites only provide basic functions, such as technical support, downloadable materials, and discussion forums for the players. The *TS2* official site distinctively endows its players with personal space for their creations (character, lots, and stories), play diary, and guestbook. By doing so, about one million players (i.e., *TS2* members) participate in this online community, inhabiting it to form an affinity group and to share their play experiences, stories, and thoughts within the *TS2* site. Thus, by its very nature, the *TS2* site is the most feasible place to approach *TS2* players about participating in this study.

Following the receipt of approval to conduct this research project from the Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) at The Pennsylvania State University, I posted the research recruitment announcement (Appendix A) on the *TS2* official site in order to recruit potential research participants. On average, more than
10,000 items are posted on the *TS2* discussion forum (BBS) every day. Such a heavy number of transactions means that a new post can stay on the first page of the forum no longer than 4 minutes on average. Therefore, to ensure the broadest possible distribution of the recruiting announcement, I posted this recruitment three times on one Saturday in June 2006—at 10:00 a.m., 2:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. Meanwhile, to assure potential participants that this research was not a scam, and that my intentions were worthy, I provided my personal information as a researcher on my *MySim* page so that possible participants could go there to read details about who I am and my motives for doing this research. The information on my *MySim* page is accessible to all *TS2* members. On the other hand, posting my contact information on my *MySim* page gave *TS2* players unobstructed contact with me. They could email or leave messages on my guestbook if they had questions or concerns about this recruitment.

After posting a research participant recruitment invitation on the *TS2* forum, I received responses from 37 members, expressing their interest in participating in this study.

“I’d glad to participant in your interview....”

“R U serious? are you really doing a study on the influence that *TS2* has on people and how it may affect lives around them. Dude, if so I am so in!! Sims is so my life. You gotta let m4e know.”

“i will in. it is about time for academic to hear from us!”

“If you need someone from PA, I would be willing to be interviewed ...”

(personal communication, July 24, 2006)
In selecting research participants from those research volunteers who responded to the recruitment announcement and showed interest in participating, a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) was adopted to screen the final three research participants. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select information-rich cases from which a researcher may learn much about the issues that are important in an in-depth study (Patton, 1990). Seeing the play activities within TS2 as a narrative play that involves narrative navigation, exploration, and interaction within the game as well as the retelling/sharing of player experiences and stories with other members online, in this study I intended to invite research participants who had experienced the spectrum of play experiences in TS2. Therefore, I included research participants who were qualified according to the following criteria:

1. Frequent and longevity of posts: (a) update his/her personal blog on TS2 official site at least once each month, and (b) participate in an online discussion at least twice each month for at least 6 months;
2. Share stories or movies online—have posted at least two stories or movies online; and
3. Must be over 18 years old.

After carefully reviewing all 37 players’ MySim pages on the TS2 site, 8 potential research participants were qualified according to the inclusion criteria. After sending out the consent form (Appendix B) to each of 8 potential research participants, I used the criterion sampling approach (Patton, 1990) again to sift out the three final research
participants who first responded by returning the consent form and answering interview questions properly. See Figure 3-2 for a visual of the purposeful sampling strategy.

The final three were: Mom6, a stay-at-home mom with six home-schooled kids; GeekU, a computer geek who bought the TS2 game and all its expansions on the day they arrived at the store; and BugM, a single mom who loved writing stories in TS2 to keep her brain functioning. It was not my initial intention to focus on specific gender or age groups. However, as Maxis’s official records showed that 70% of TS2 usership are female (Water, 2006), the three final research participants in this study were female, ranging in age from 20s to 40s. To protect the research participants’ identities, their names are replaced here with fictitious names generated by their distinguishing characteristics.
Researcher’s Role in the Study

In this study, I played multiple roles at different research stages: (a) as a player, to contribute knowledge of digital games to the TS2 analysis; (b) as a participant observer, to post recruitment notices in order to identify research volunteers on the TS2 official site; (c) as a research and TS2 community member, to collect and record research participants’ artifacts and discussion online; and (d) as a researcher, to conduct interviews, gather relevant data, and analyze and interpret the data collected.

Research Data Gathering and Management

Yin (2003) recommended six types of information in a case study: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Stake (1995) also encouraged researchers to use multiple data sources in order to generate more credible and trustworthy data. In this study, I gathered data from several sources, such as documents, archival records, and interviews. As mentioned previously, rather than using other traditional methods, such as person-to-person, telephone, and postal surveys, in this study, all data were collected via the Internet.

Data Collection from Documents

Documents collected and analyzed for this study included TS2 game reviews, the design team’s work diaries, game developers’ interviews, and game players’ interviews. To ensure validity, the documents were carefully reviewed to avoid the inclusion of
incorrect data in the database. These document data were used in the analysis to glean basic understandings of the nature of the digital game *The Sims 2* and its online community. These documents also helped to corroborate evidence gathered from other sources in this case study.

**Data Collection from Archival Records**

Archival records collected and analyzed included *TS2* online survey data, online discussion forum records, live chat transcripts, participants’ game diaries, and participants’ artifacts (stories, movies, houses, characters, and objects design). All archival data were collected from the *TS2* official site by the researcher to ensure the consistent origin and accuracy of the records. These records provided important data concerning each player’s experiences with *TS2*.

The most time-consuming task relating to data collection from archival records was the screening out of irrelevant information from players’ enormous posted content in the *TS2* discussion forum. For example, two of the research participants in this study had more than 200 posts on the discussion forum, while the third had over 400 posts. All posts were read contextually, including the original post and all follow-up responses, to remove insignificant or theoretically unrelated occurrences.
Data Collection from Interview Data

To gain a detailed understanding of each individual player’s experience with TS2, a semi-structured interview was proposed as the primary data collection strategy in this research. The interview, which consisted of approximately 16 open-ended questions, was conducted according to the interviewee’s schedule and availability (see Appendix C). There were no predetermined categories of answers—these open-ended questionnaires were designed to encourage participants to express themselves freely in order to obtain rich detail about the topics as well as the perspectives of participants.

Research participants were offered a selection of interview methods to choose from: email, chat room, or instant message system (e.g., Microsoft Messenger®, Yahoo Messenger®, or Skype®). In this study, all three research participants preferred to be interviewed by email. Thus, the 16 open-ended written questionnaires were divided into two emails and sent to each research participant after receiving a signed consent form from each of them. Spontaneous follow-ups were also sent via email to clarify participants’ previous interview responses as these concerned the focus of this study.

Since case study research generates a large amount of data from multiple sources, in this strategy, I systematically organized the data and kept a research journal to prevent myself from losing sight of the original research purpose and questions.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Since qualitative and quantitative research differs in worldview, each requires different paradigms to evaluate their worth. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended
using the term “trustworthiness,” along with “credibility” as operational terms, to refer to verification in qualitative studies. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, I used the following strategies in this study.

- Data Triangulation—data source triangulation was used to ensure accuracy and credibility in construct validity (Stake, 1995). Data collected from participants’ artifacts (movies/stories), participants’ game diaries and online discussions, and participants’ interview data generated a solid data triangulation for examine players’ narrative play experience in this study (Figure 3-3).

![Figure 3-3: Data Triangulation](image)

- Prolonged engagement with and observation of informants—I have played and been a member of the TS2 official site since the game was released in 2004, and have become an active participant, observing and recording data since this research idea project began in 2005. On the other hand, the research participants’ records, such as logs, stories, online discussions, and diaries, are
completely archived in the database on the TS2 official site from the day a player registers to become a community member. All of these archived data, however, may serve as a forceful supplement to prolonged engagement and observation of research participants on the TS2 site.

Data Analysis Techniques

For a case study, Creswell (1998) explained that data analysis consists of “making a detailed description of the case and its setting” (p. 153). Bogdan and Biklen defined qualitative data analysis as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (1982, p. 145). Since qualitative data analysis is inductive rather than deductive (Creswell, 1998), in this study I analyzed the data and then developed concepts and categories, rather than beginning with theory to predict a pattern of results, and then examine the data to test a theory.

Many researchers suggest that coding is the first step to opening up meaning from data in qualitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994) also pointed out that the process of coding can be seen as analysis itself: “to review a set of field notes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis” (p. 56). While analyzing the data gathered from multiple sources, I began to develop my inductive codes by directly examining the data, rather than having a priori codes in mind. This open coding strategy was used to classify and assign meaning to pieces of the data and then to develop categories of concepts and
themes emerging from the data (Yin, 2003). By repeatedly reviewing the initial codes, I eliminated less useful ones and then combined smaller categories into larger ones, or subdivided a category if needed, and related ideas into larger themes and later identified relationships between them. In the next section, I discuss the theoretical frameworks for data analysis in this study.

Framework for Analyzing Data

For data analysis purposes, all data were carefully examined, categorized, and tabulated. Aarseth’s (2003) three-dimensional framework for analyzing digital games was used as the conceptual foundation in this analysis. The three dimensions are game-structure, which covers the rules and technologies of the game; game-world, which contains game fictional content, representational system, level design providing the arena for play; and gameplay, which refers to the players’ actions, strategies, motives, and experiences.

Game-structure

I analyzed document data to reveal the rules and technologies embedded in TS2. A spatial narrative approach (Jenkins, 2004; Pearce, 2004) concerns games as navigable spaces—its game-structure—and provides narrative experiences for players as the game is being played. Spatial narrative as game-structure was investigated to understand how the TS2 narrative element can be spatially embedded in the game design.
**Game-world**

I used an *emergent narrative* approach (Jenkins, 2004; Pearce, 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) to analyze the game-world’s fictional content, features, and representation system design in *TS2* to determine how these elements form an emergent narrative world in which players can create and tell their own stories interactively. An emergent narrative approach involves analysis of documents, archival records, and interview data in order to understand the form, mode, type, and particular storytelling processes and meanings as interpreted by the research participants.

**Gameplay**

Research participants’ online discussions, game diaries, and interview data were analyzed in order to understand the full range of play experiences through activity practices in *TS2* following Stake’s (1995) suggestions for data analysis procedures. Stake described these procedures as categorical aggregation or direct interpretation, correspondences and patterns, and naturalistic generalizations. I analyzed the interview data through examination and coding of the direct interpretations by the individual participants. Then I sought to find patterns. After establishing patterns grounded in the data, I developed context-bound naturalistic generalizations. These naturalistic generalizations then related back to information gleaned from the literature review and other relevant documents. I then used them to translate the patterns and thick descriptions that concerned my research questions in relation to prior studies and theories on interactive narrative, identity construction, and reflective learning. As patterns began to
emerge in sets of data, I conducted follow-up focused interviews to confirm or correct the interim analysis in order to ground the evidence in thick description and to identify relationships that remained focused on the research questions.

With regard to the focus on the activities in *TS2* that render the experience meaningful and cause deeper reflection during the gameplay, I concentrated on three main activities. They were: (a) the experiences of narrative play and interactive story creation and sharing—interpreted through the perspective of *reflection through storytelling* (Bruner, 2002; McDrury & Alterio, 2003; Schön, 1988), which maintains that stories are products of reflection, and storytelling is an effective way to evoke reflection; (b) the construction of identity through narrative play—examined through the lens combining James Paul Gee’s (2003) tripartite identity theory and French philosopher Jos de Mul’s (2005) theory of *Ludic identity* for understanding the way in which interactive narrative interfaces in games enable players to participate in the reconstruction and deconstruction of pre-given identities and the construction of new identities; (c) the participation in online dialogue—explained by the approach of *reflection with others (dialogue)* (Brockbank et al., 2002; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983) and *reflection-on-action* (Schön, 1983), which stresses that dialogue is a significant way to encourage reflection leading to a reconsideration of how things are being done, and how things can be improved (Figure 3-4).
Finally, reflective learning theories (McDrury & Alterio, 2003; Moon, 2004; Schön, 1991) were used as a lens through which to examine how the experiences of narrative play in the digital game, *The Sims 2*, facilitated learning and construction of identity through narrative play and interactions on the onsite game and its online communities.

**Presentation of Final Report**

The final report, as noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is the “lesson learned” from the case study. The presentation of the final report in this study followed Yin’s (2003) linear-analytic structure, starting with my research questions and a review of the
related literature. I began this discussion of the data analysis procedure followed in this study by describing how the interactive narrative interface provided in TS2 impacts players’ experiences. I then explain how these narrative experiences facilitate players’ identity construction, reflection, and learning. I conclude with a summary of my findings as well as a discussion of suggestions for future study.
Chapter 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

To adequately answer my research questions—what are players’ experiences with narrative play in the digital game *The Sims 2*, and how does the nature of those experiences facilitate players’ identity construction and reflection—I first analyzed the digital game *TS2* to discover how it provided an interactive narrative interface for the players to use in playing, exploring, and telling their own stories. Next, I carefully examined the research data gathered from three research participants to reveal the ways in which experiences with narrative play in *TS2* may facilitate players’ identity construction and reflection.

**Narrative Play with the Interactive Narrative Interface (INI) in *The Sims 2***

To better understand the nature of *TS2*, Espen Aarseth’s (2003) three-dimensional taxonomy for analyzing digital games, which consists of game-structure, game-world and gameplay, was used as the conceptual foundation in this analysis. Due to the nature of this framework—game rules construct the game-world in which gameplay occurs—the data analysis also followed this order: game-structure, game-world, and gameplay.
Game-Structure: Navigate with a Spatial Narrative Structure in TS2

Despite the aforementioned passionate debate between Narrativists and Ludologists, some researchers have assumed middle-ground positions to suggest that some games can be considered as spaces ripe with narrative possibility, so that the story elements interweave in the game-structure spatially. Jenkins (2004) used the term narrative architecture to describe the design of a virtual fictional world with a diversified geography composed of various locations that offer their own opportunities for experiences, adventures, discoveries, and meaningful action. Concurrent and subsequent writings by Pearce (2004) have explored the notion of spatial narrative, in contrast to time-based media, to distinguish occasions in which the narrative is embedded in “space” with a deconstructed form.

From this perspective, we can connect the TS2 game-structure design with the concept of spatial narrative. TS2 has several narrative strategies, which as argued by Jenkins (2004), are essential preconditions for a spatial narrative environment. For example, in TS2, players start the game by choosing one of three ready-to-play neighborhoods. Each neighborhood has its own history, background stories, setting and inhabitants; players must familiarize themselves with the context of this neighborhood to manipulate the game properly. Such background stories are what Jenkins calls an evoked narrative, in which elements from a known linear narrative are included in the spatial design of the game.

23 For details see Chapter 2.
24 The three neighborhoods in TS2 are Pleasantview, Strangetown, and Veronaville.
Furthermore, as TS2 players move through this narrative space, their actions structure their experiences and such experiences can later be interpreted by the player as a kind of travel narrative. Jenkins called this an enacted narrative, which indicates the narrative organized around the player’s movement through space. In addition, once TS2 players interact with this narrative space, some pre-authored narrative and its consequences appear to respond to the players’ actions. For example, leaving a Sims in a swimming pool without a ladder will cause the Sims to drown. These narrative events and their consequences are pre-embedded for players to discover as they progress through game space—Jenkins (2004) called this the embedded narrative.

Even though spatial stories are often dismissed as fragment pieces that are compelling on their own terms but do not contribute significantly to the storyline development (Jenkins, 2004), often these episodes may be stored within players’ narrative experiences and provide resources for generating emergent narratives later in the game. Nevertheless, since TS2 is a compelling narrative function game, TS2 players are provided with a recording tool that they may use to collect and save episodes into a photo album for future re-assembly or reediting. The stories catalogued as “Ponderings and Observations” shared on the TS2 site are the prime examples of how players interpret the system dynamics of TS2 and progress through their narratives toward story-telling. Without specifically themed scenarios, the stories in the “Ponderings and Observations” catalogue usually display the pictures that players took during their narrative explorations; some do not even contain written descriptions.

In addition to possessing the significant characteristics needed to align itself with a narrative structure game, TS2 has a more advanced system design to demonstrate the
dynamic facets of this narrative game. In the following sections, I employ TS2’s autonomous characters, free-style camera, and recording/authoring tool as examples to provide a detailed view of how these designs contribute to enriching players’ narrative experiences in this spatial narrative environment.

**Autonomous Characters**

With the exception of the non-player characters\(^{25}\), in TS2, players can create virtual characters (called a Sim) and assign each a personality, an astrological constellation, interests, and as aspiration. Yet, the Sim in this game is a semi-autonomous character whose behaviors, reactions, emotions, and even memory are controlled by a distributed artificial intelligence system (DAI) and the player’s previous choices. For example, in the game, Sims might follow, ignore, or reject your commands, depending on how well you have satisfied their needs physically and psychologically, and how they feel at the moment. Sims also have their own memories, which are generated by important events that occur in their lives. If you give them a *screwed-up* childhood, they might develop very negative memories and phobias. Such negative associations in connection with those memories will carry through into their adulthood and influence the ways they behave. In addition, in TS2, Sims actually grow old, get sick, and even die of old age. Sometimes you may see an elder Sims moping around and looking back on a long string of memories, sobbing. They are so real for you that you feel connected to them. For a split second, the Sims seem just like someone you’ve known awhile. Such a

---

\(^{25}\) Non player characters, NPCs for short, indicate the characters that are purely controlled by the game system rather than by game players.
lifelike simulation environment helps players to immerse themselves in the scenario and/or characters, or perhaps to evoke a memory from their personal emotional experiences.

**Free-style Cinematic Camera**

By employing the latest engine system, *TS2* allows players to swivel the camera, which can be programmed to represent a potentially infinite number of perspectives in the game. Players can take a third-person view to monitor the characters and gameplay as a whole or to zoom all the way in and get a people’s-eye view of what it would be like to be there with the Sims, seeing exactly what they see and going where they go. These on-the-scene views, according to Murray Smith (1997), allow viewers (players) to “imagine seeing as the character does” (p. 412). At the same time, this promotes imagining the character “from the inside” (p. 413), thereby fostering empathy with the character. Such personal and emotional involvement with a Sim in *TS2* is essential for the player’s narrative experience to resonate.

**Recording and Authoring Tool**

A surprising narrative experience in game testing led the *TS2* design teams to develop the idea of a photo album feature to make the game more sophisticated and accomplished. “[W]e noticed that people couldn’t play without attaching a story to what they were seeing. This seems to be a natural way in which humans understand,
remember, and communicate experiences,” Will Wright said in the interview (Kosak, 2004, ¶ 32).

The photo album feature later became a more powerful recording and authoring tool that allows players to take snapshots or capture video clips of every meaningful moment of their play. The set of pictures taken in TS2 can later be assembled into a linear story by using the authoring tool provided in TS2. Moreover, Maxis, the TS2 game production firm, also furnishes players with a dedicated space on the TS2 official site for players to exchange their creative stories. As of May 3, 2007, there are more than 100,500 stories on the site. In a sense, the capability to exchange stories on the TS2 site not only encourages players to transform their narrative play experiences into written-picture stories but also provides an opportunity for players’ creativity to be offloaded and shared with the public.

**Game-World: Play within an Emergent Narrative World in TS2**

Not only does TS2 feature an embedded narrative—a set of pre-authored sequence narratives lodged in the game space—but TS2 game-world also is equipped with an emergent narrative feature that provides players with an unprecedented opportunity to tell their own stories interactively. The term emergent here means something not predetermined, while an emergent narrative indicates that the narrative is generated from events that occur from moment to moment in an interactive system (Pearce, 2004; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Similarly, Jenkins (2004) used the term emergent narrative to define pregnant game spaces that enabled players to create their own stories.
In TS2, players create and interact with Sims’ everyday lives. Due to TS2’s make-up, players will encounter a combination of challenges and problems. Basically, the main challenge for the player in TS2 is to help the Sims to achieve their aspirations. Yet, since the Sims are either autonomous (NPC) or semi-autonomous, all actions taken by the players have particular consequences and at the same time may generate new conflicts and challenges. For example, relationships in TS2 are a very important issue. The Sims in the same household often have conflicting desires and fears. The player then has to balance their relationships, needs, fears, and moods at the same time, all under the same roof. As Sims do not appreciate the player’s tastes or interior design preferences, they may complain about the player’s poor arrangements by exhibiting a dissatisfied expression every time they pass certain places and ask for improvements to the environment, to make it the way they prefer. On the other hand, the Sims may show their appreciation by using aspects of their new environment often. Sometimes during this particular interaction and emotional responsiveness, players may feel like they’re living with an electronic roommate.

Throughout the conflicts, solutions, consequences, interactions, and new problems generated through play of TS2, an unpredictable narrative experiences occurred and emergent narrative gradually develops. Pearce (2004) used the term experiential narrative to characterize the type of emergent narrative that develops from the inherent conflict in the game, as experienced by the players themselves. Moreover, TS2 allows players, through a god-like view, to watch and/or interpret the game through control of a free-style camera, which may be used to produce a sequence of emergent narratives—what Pearce (2004) called a performative narrative. Such a narrative indicates actions as
perceived by spectators who are observing and/or interpreting the game underway. In the end, TS2 players are provided with a power authoring tool that they may use to take snapshots or capture video clips of every meaningful moment in their play and piece together the fragmented stories generated within the gameplay to tell their own stories. Also, the story mode allows players to add their own written thoughts and dialogue so that there is a context for the images throughout gameplay. This is the story system identified by Pearce (2004) as one of most essential operators in an emergent narrative system. In this system, the player may create their own narrative content either independently or in conjunction with a meta game story.

In light of these analysis, we can see that embedded narrative are more related to game-structure design by game designers who construct games in a way that provides narrative experiences for players, while emergent narrative is closer to the conceptions of interactive narrative where players can really create and tell their own stories interactively. Therefore, in this emergent narrative game-world, the players rather than just exploring a narrative space, in effect, create its own story.

Through actors, sets, props, storyboard, cinematic camera\textsuperscript{26}, and even audiences, TS2 contains all of the classic elements needed to tell compelling stories. In a sense, TS2 creates more narrative possibilities uniquely suited to the digital medium than has any other game that has appeared before. On the other hand, The Sims 2 unfolds conceptions of emergent narrative through the process of game playing in which players are provided with the abilities to create/select actors, arrange and decorate scenes, play and generalize

\textsuperscript{26} The videogame camera is not an optical camera; it can be programmed to represent a potentially infinite number of perspectives beyond the classic, representational linear perspective.
(fragment) stories, edit and construct the stories, and then tell stories to audiences. Therefore in *The Sims 2*, players can define their own goals and write their own stories.

In *TS2*, game designers paint their worlds in very broad frameworks and count on the player to create and fill in the rest. Players then shift their roles from a gamer who plays interactively, to a designer who creates content artistically, to a story participant who experiences the narrative play emotionally, to a director who constructs the narrative experience linearly. *TS2* has taken a radically different approach to narrative than most of the games that have preceded it. It is really about the player telling the story, not the computer or game designers. This is also what Pearce refers to as *emergent authorship* (2001).

Finally, a complete description of *TS2*’s fascinating game-world requires detail about the brilliant functions designed for the *TS2* online community. Announced six months before the game was released, *The Sims 2* official site27 is arguably the largest community in game history. Each registered player (member) has a personal page, called “*MySim* page,” listing the player’s basic information, such as location, interests, a brief bio, and community rank. For members of the community, a *MySim* page becomes a social portal through which to invite other members to browse the player’s blog, and uploaded creations on the *TS2* site. This portal serves as the best place for all players to share their narrative play experience, to discuss the problems they encounter in the game-world or in the real world, and to exchange their Sims stories. In a sense, the *TS2* site

---

27 To avoid ambiguity, the term “*The Sims 2* official site” and “*The Sims 2* online community” afterward are referred to as “*TS2* site” and “*TS2* online community” throughout this dissertation.
serves to facilitate players’ artistic creations, by enabling the sharing of them visual for public consumption, feedback, and encouragement to continue the story.

*The Sims 2* game and its online community together form an “interactive narrative interface” that provides dynamic, complex, and interactive ways for players to navigate using a spatial narrative structure, to play in an emergent narrative world, and to inter-socialize with other players in an affinity community. Thus, the play experience in this interactive narrative interface (INI) is *narrative play*, which embraces players’ experiences with narrative navigating, game playing, story creating, retelling, and sharing, as well as play experiences discussed with other players.

However, in considering a player’s narrative play experience within a socio-cultural context, a crucial issue needs to be clarified before going further to analyze how the interactive narrative interface of *TS2* impacts players’ experiences. As a game that simulates everyday life, exactly what aspects of life, culture, and society does the *TS2* imitate in its simulation system? And how does it depict them? In the next section, I place special emphasis on distinctions in the *TS2* game-world by highlighting its representation system and modifiable system to explore how these specific design features and flexible interactive narrative environments contribute to *TS2* players’ simulated social life.

**The Representative System in TS2**

Like the game’s engine system, representation can also be seen as a system in a game-world. The representation system refers to how the game represents the world, and includes the visible elements, the presentation context, the narrative, and characters.
Players’ avatars then interact with both systems to produce the play experiences. At first glance, *The Sims 2* seems to be a very culturally specific stereotype of suburban U.S. However, according to Will Wright (2003), the creator of the game, *The Sims 2* takes place within a culture and society that has never really existed anywhere. Instead, it is a simulation of a “American television sit-com-like world” (Chaplin & Ruby, 2005, p. 138). This sit-com-like world, in fact, has evolved further than any society in the real world. For instance, it is an idealistic equal-opportunity society, in which each Sim family initially is given the same amount of Sim money to establish their family. Moreover, there is no employment discrimination according to gender, race, or ethnicity. Sims receive salaries depending on different job tracks rather than their gender, age, or race. Of course each job requires different skills, so that players must guide their Sim in employment situations.

Additionally, the *TS2* also presents a progressive gender equality society. Some researchers have criticized *TS2* for containing a suburbanized domestic space and traditional conceptions of women’s roles. However, in *TS2*, the Sims can share housework equally, regardless of gender. The Sims clean house, make beds, cook, and raise children, depending on their personality and mood. Sims are either autonomous or semi-autonomous. They cook when they are hungry. A Sim may also cook for all family members if they are around or a Sim may just cook and eat by her/himself. A player can hire a male or female maid to help with domestic chores, but the decision to hire a maid adds to the household expenses. Without a sexualized presentation of the female, *TS2*, as a progressive society, also takes liberal views of the presence of gay marriage and families. Thus, gay couples have the same right to form a family, wed, and adopt and
raise children in *TS2*. Generally speaking, there are very few social constraints in this game: the simulated society is advanced and evolving, more so than real societies today.

However, there is no denying that *TS2* apparently still contains a consumerist ideology and stereotypes of success and respectability. The increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable in *TS2*. For example, players need to satisfy Sims’ basic needs by purchasing goods from catalogs. In the initial game setting, it is obvious that the purchase of more expensive furniture leads to a more comfortable score. Sims also seem to appreciate bigger spaces and more luxury goods, such as a jacuzzi and a private swimming pool. In owning these items, the Sims find it easier to build relationships with others, which also make them more popular. Even good communication can help the relationship score; however, it is difficult for the host to greet every guest at the same time. Consequently, the material goods are acquired to please guests to help them avoid their boredom and encourage them to visit again, leading to a close relationship.

Fortunately, the *TS2* game space has been largely extended by the newly released expansion packs. *TS2* today is not merely a house keeping game, but a micro-world in which players have fun exploring outside the house rather than just staying at home, dealing with routine domestic work. Further, such a pre-set representation system which mixes utopian ideology, capitalist desires, and success premised on material wealth may be modified, subverted, and altered following a player’s inclinations. Therefore, the type of people who play *TS2* and the ways they play also contribute to this representation system.
**Modifiable System**

Encouraged by game-developing companies, over the past few years the phenomenon of playing a mod\(^{28}\) game has become the mainstream in the realm of digital gameplay (Kushner, 2003). By implementing the free download source codes and level editors provided via the company’s site, mod makers can alter the appearance of the game interface, game levels design, game rules, and even non-player’s character (NPC) behaviors. For example, they can make a truculent monster (NPC) dance in a comical posture, or have two enemies cooperate to rescue a hostage rather than fighting each other. Such user-created mods (modifications) then are shared on the game’s fan site. Some mod makers even take orders for a custom-made mod from other gamers with special requests. For ambitious mod makers/gamers, making mods is a meaningful development experience, and the original game-developing companies are always interested to see how a game’s life may be extended through the new and exciting levels and content created by mods.

By downloading/accessing various aspects of the game mods, *TS2* players may modify their games into completely new ones for exploration. Simple Package Editor (SimPE)\(^{29}\), for example, is one of most famous mod tools specially designed for general players to use in modifying *The Sims 2*. Players may download this free third-party software to adjust the game engine setting, to create custom content and sound, or to change a character’s attributes, memories, and relationships in the game (Figure 4-1).

---

\(^{28}\) Mod is short for modifications

\(^{29}\) *The Sims 2* Package Editor (SimPE) is an open source project that is free and available under a commercial license.
Other popular TS2 mods like Rodney’s Death Creator, which allows players to kill any Sims in any fashion (death by disease, drowning, electrocution or fire), and the Career Editor, which allows players to create a new career for their Sims, such as a NFL Player Career (enabling Sims to play football for a living), a Slacker Career (Sims are paid to be a professional celebrity party guest), or a Mafia Career (teens can be street gangsters).

Figure 4-1: Sims’ Relationship Editor of SimPE (WordPress Entries)
Similar to modding tools, the *TS2* also ship with semi-official cheat codes created by its game designers, which allow players to improve their play performance effortlessly. For example, players can use a cheat code to get Aspiration points\(^{30}\) and to fulfill Sims’ wants or fears. Moreover, they can use them to strengthen a friendship/relationship with other Sims; to make Sims ill or make them immune to any illness; to make your Sims thin or fat; or to instantly restock the fridge and clean the dirty kitchen and bathroom. By taking advantage of mods and cheats, players of *TS2* gain more freedom to create their own content and their fantasy world for their distinctive narrative play experiences.

After providing background on how *TS2* gives its players an interactive narrative interface for game-structure and game-world dimensions, in the next section, I describe three research participants’ play experiences and analyze how these experiences with this interactive narrative interface may facilitate their identity construction and reflective learning. To maximize the research participants’ presence in the research, I have included some quotations in the participant’s own words.

\(^{30}\) Aspiration is a Sim’s life goal. If a desire expressed by a Sim is satisfied, his Aspiration score rises; on the other hand, if something he fears occurs to him, his Aspiration score drops. Once a Sim’s Aspiration score drops below a certain level, his/her life becomes far more challenging to play; a low Aspiration score may mean death for elders (Greg, 2004).
Gameplay: Play Experiences with Interactive Narrative Interface in TS2s

GeekU

“I’m a Sim-oholic,” GeekU, a young computer geek, proudly announced on her MySim page. She described her interests as sewing, making bead jewelry, chatting online, and of course, playing The Sims 2. She has bought every expansion pack of TS2 on the day it arrived at the store, and still has each pack to this day.

Being so engaged in TS2 play, GeekU even analyzed herself in terms of Sims personality traits31: “Sloppy/Neat: 1; Shy/Outgoing: 2; Lazy/Active: 4; Serious/Playful: 10; Grouchy/Nice: 8; and Aspiration: Pleasure” (personal communication, September 30, 2006). Use of these TS2 buzzwords conveys that she is shy, a little bit lazy and sloppy, pretty much playful, and a very nice girl (Figure 4-2). Most importantly, she claimed to be a social Sim, which suggests her personal aspiration to become a popular person in real life with meaningful interactions with others.

31 In TS2, a Sim’s personality depends on how his/her 35 Personality points are distributed among the five trait sets: Sloppy/Neat, Shy/Outgoing, Lazy/Active, Serious/Playful, and Grouchy/Nice.
GeekU enjoys playing *TS2* in various ways: to download floorplans of her favorite houses from the Internet and recreate them in the game; to participate in the Legacy challenge\(^{32}\) which, under some particular rules, requires players to raise 10 generations of related Sims in the same house; and to write *TS2* stories using pictures she took in the game and then to share the stories with other Sims players on the *TS2* site. The inspiration for her stories sometimes stemmed from the events in her gameplay; sometimes stemmed from a collection of odd pictures from odd events in her Sims neighborhood that had nothing to do with what was happening in the game; and sometimes she sought a new idea for her stories by taking votes from community members. Recently, GeekU is using *TS2* to create a memory book for her dad as a tribute.

\(^{32}\) *TS2* ships without a specific play goal, some Simmers (*TS2* players) post a goal under some restrictions and invite other *TS2* players to compete for goal achievement and then post pictures online to prove success. This is a new way to play *TS2*. Players are typically not allowed to cheat in the challenges.
for Christmas. She thought it would be a good idea to inspire others to share their happy memories with a loved one using *TS2*.

**All Get Along, I Want You to Be Happy Forever**

“I kind of connect with my Sims, even though they’re just digital images on a screen” (personal communication, May 26, 2006). GeekU described her attachment to her Sims in the interview. She cannot bear to lose her Sims or see them age and die: “I have not let a single one of my Sims age to an Elder. I just can't bear to see my precious Sim[s], who I have worked so hard to get to where they are, become paunchy and gray” (personal communication, October 25, 2006). If she becomes bored with a Sim, “I move them out of the house and delete them from the Sims bin, telling myself they moved to SimCity” (personal communication, October 1, 2006). That way their families won't have the memory of them dying, and neither will I!” she mentioned in the interview (personal communication, October 1, 2006).

Although she loves all of the Sims she includes in her games, she once killed off a Sim by locking her in a gateless fenced-in garden and left her to starve, “because she was so mean and picking on my Sims” (personal communication, October 25, 2006). She said, “Guess I get to talking about my Sims like they’re my own family and non-Simmers don’t quite understand it!” (personal communication, November 21, 2006).

Geek’s main goal in *TS2*, not surprisingly, is to keep all her Sims happy, to help them reach their special milestones in their lives, like getting promotions, getting married

---

33 Sims bin refers to a Sims library in which players may store un-acted Sims.
34 SimCity series games are created by Maxis, the same production house for *TS2* in 1989. SimCity is also the first god game in game history.
and most importantly, to have good social relationships with each other. As she emphasized in the interview, her greatest motivation in TS2 is “social interactions”, while “popularity” is the aspiration she chooses most often for her Sims; GeekU enjoys using TS2 to create a harmonious world in which all of her Sims get along.

With the exception of GeekU’s description of her concordant social relations play, I also found some instances of conflict and struggle in her stories. For example, in her story “The Smith Family,” a wife leaves her husband and eventually learns the price of turning her back on her family; and in another story “The Mistakes,” a single Mom, disowned by her own father, suffers a great deal to raise her baby alone. (See Appendix E: GeekU’s story sample.) GeekU then explained that, “Conflict exists in my game almost exclusively for the sake of stories. In gameplay, I prefer to have my Sims get along. Sims that seem to despise each other in a story, actually get along quite well.” She restated her desire for harmonious social relationships among her Sims (personal communication, November 21, 2006). Geek’s over emphasis on the amicable relationships among her Sims almost contrarily reveals her anxiety about being able to foster harmonious relationships among her Sims, and perhaps her anxiety to do so with people in her real life.

**Shy Girl’s Retreat for Social Practice**

Aspiring to become popular in real life, as well as being careful to maintain amicable social relationship among her Sims, GeekU seems to be an expert in comforting Sims and helping them to get along. “[I]f you poke someone, they’ll likely poke back, or
if you congratulate someone, they’ll like you better,” she said, sharing her experience in dealing with social interactions in TS2 online (personal communication, October 1, 2006). In offering suggestions to other TS2 members online about how to improve Sims’ social relationships without using cheats, she said:

... get your Sim a computer and have them chat with people online. There is almost always someone online, mostly townies, but also your own Sims (if they also have a computer). Personally, at least one computer is a mandatory item whenever I'm setting up a Sim household, for the very reason that they can use it to meet people. (personal communication, December 27, 2005)

However, in reality, this brilliant strategy—to meet people by chatting online, actually helps GeekU in her own social situation. As a single mom, GeekU actually doesn’t have much opportunity to get out and do a lot of socializing: “*turning red* I have a hard time relating to other people. I was terribly shy when I was a child, and didn’t get much chance to build really good social skills,” she said in the interview (personal communication, November 3, 2006). In recommending that Sims chat with Townies, the “virtual Sims,” who live far away and never show up in the game, GeekU’s description here somewhat suggests her preference for a distanced relationship rather than in-person contact, which also remained consistent in her description of her real-life situation.

Customized to be a friendly world, TS2 to GeekU is not only an ordinary and enjoyable game, but a peaceful retreat in which she has a chance to practice social skills, make a relationship work well, or even meet “people”: “I don’t have much contact with other people, my Sims are my social life, and I talk to them all the time. Sad, huh?”
In an effort to practice social interaction in *TS2*, GeekU even has “a neighborhood full of teens and their parents who are working toward their [own] life goals, so I'll have loads of chances to check out the new social interactions” (personal communication, February 23, 2006). In a sense, *TS2* to GeekU is also a relationship laboratory in which she can observe and try out different combinations of social interactions to figure out possible solutions for her social difficulty.

GeekU’s confession shows us why her Sims are so important to her; the Sims are her family as well as part of her social life. The combination makes it difficult to think about losing them. Realizing that, GeekU has learned to carefully backup the game every time she plays, since: “... it's sad. I long ago decided that, after my family, my Sims would be the worst thing to lose” (personal communication, July 21, 2006).

Although GeekU tried so hard to gain a successful social life by playing *TS2*, one of her posts on the *TS2* site reveals that her strategies do not usually work very well in improving her Sims’s social relationships. In the discussion forum, she reported that she has seen Social Bunnies show up in lots of places in her game: “in the toy box, on clothing, on children's homework books, and some other places, too” (personal communication, October 11, 2006). In *TS2*, a Social Bunny only arrives when a Sim’s social needs are unfulfilled (social bar hits rock bottom, -100). A Social Bunny comes to get a Sim out of their doldrums; it eventually departs when the social bar restores to zero (Figure 4-3). Seeing a Social Bunny is not a good sign in the game—it indicates that the Sim is suffering a great deal of loneliness and isolation. If this happens to a child Sim, the social workers come and take the child Sim away. It is perceived as neglect. However, “I like it (Social Bunny), personally” (personal communication, October 11, 2006)—she
wrote this at the end of her post to express her appreciation of how a Social Bunny can help with Sims’ social needs—to keep the lonely Sims company as they work through depression. From her preference for the Social Bunny, I feel that the Social Bunny represents a way out of social isolation that she perhaps wishes existed in her non-Sims life. A Bunny is positive and needed by her depressed Sims and herself, too.

Another issue caught my attention in the interview with GeekU. She reported that she had created her Sim-self—the self she created in the game a couple of times. “[M]y Sim self was a lot more stylish and beautiful!” she added, stressing the difference between her real self and her Sim-self (personal communication, October 25, 2006). However, it is even more interesting to learn that she never plays with her Sim-self in the game, instead: “I just leave her to be someone that my other Sims can make friends with,” she answered (personal communication, October 25, 2006). I didn’t ask her why she would rather guide her other Sims in getting along and was so passive toward her

Figure 4-3: Social Bunny
Sim-self in the game. Her gameplay behaviors somewhat led me to associate her shyness and lack of confidence in relating to others and I speculated that in doing so, she might be trying to avoid the embarrassment stemming from rejection from others in the game.

Thus, she works hard not to change the behaviors of her Sim-self, but to influence her other Sims to like the “better looking” Sim-self. Perhaps she feels that she’ll never change and wishes others would like her as she is. Or maybe, as she described herself, surrounded by “take-charge people” in her family, she just wanted her Sim-self free to be “itself”. That might explain why GeekU would rather choose to be a thoughtful god quietly looking after her Sim-self rather than to tell the Sim-self what she should do in the game. This seems to reflect her desire to have her real family support her in making her own life decisions, rather than directing her decisions.

I Need to Get a Social Life

“Sad, huh?” is GeekU’s phrase as she expresses her sentiments while reflecting on or comparing her real life to her perfect Sims life. In analyzing her data, I found that GeekU is a sentient player who frequently reflects on the meaning of her gameplay while sharing and discussing game experiences with others online. Take her “single Sim family” as an example—GeekU self-reflected on “tons of single-Sim family” in her games and made a connection with her status in real life—unmarried. She then explained that: “Guess it's my way of making up for not being able to find a good man to settle down with in [real life]” (personal communication, November 21, 2006). Clearly, her sentiment on this matter reveals social expectations that she has been indoctrinated to
believe—life is not complete without a man in it, for example—is at odds with her lived experiences as a single mom.

GeekU then also mentioned the reason why almost all of her households in the game are single-parent, single-child households like hers—“I guess, as a single parent myself, I just can't comprehend raising a child with both parents around.” She even has a lot of her Sims get pregnant with themselves (self-pregnant), since “I guess I relate to them better that way!” (personal communication, December 1, 2006). Here I speculate that her description conveys her belief in single independent women’s suffering, her eagerness to obliterate her past, and her unhappiness with her lack of a satisfying relationship with a man in her life.

In the interview, GeekU also related her preference for a harmonious game-world in TS2 to her own situation in real life: “I have plenty of conflict in my real life, so I work to avoid it in the game” (personal communication, November 3, 2006). Therefore, following on this sentiment and desire, she guides her Sims: “I try to surround myself with people who are kind, fun, and supportive, and I find that the Sims that I create and use are kind, fun and supportive, too” (personal communication, November 3, 2006). From her description, we can see how GeekU’s real-life experiences influence her gameplay in TS2, while at the same time her play in TS2 reveals what she desires and what has evaded her thus far in real life.

Finally, in terms of what she has learned in playing TS2, GeekU answered with a short but powerful statement: “I’ve learned that I need to get a social life (!)” (personal communication, November 3, 2006). I wondered, but did not ask, whether this meant
spending time developing friendships with real people. It was more likely that it indicated her intention “to find a good man” with whom to share her life.

I noticed that GeekU’s game, except for the social relationship practices which she reported that she hoped to have in real life, GeekU also brought some of her real-life “issues” into the game. Through the numbers of single-parent families, self-pregnant Sims, and even her passive Sim-self, GeekU’s gameplay manifests her awareness of her own attitudes toward her gameplay; however, the issues that she may care most about, but does not know how to handle them in real life, remain untouched and unchanged in her gameplay. Having her Sims pregnant by themselves rather than meeting other Sims somewhat reveals GeekU’s avoidance of new relationships, which is consistent with her social skills needs in real life. On the other hand, GeekU’s wish to be popular in real life and her escapist behaviors in her gameplay also reveal her conflict and discordant identities.

Mom6

Mom6 is a 34-year-old stay-at-home mom with six children. She expressed her interests as jewelry making, book binding, homeschooling, poetry, old English stories, and playing The Sims 2. To her, TS2 is never just for the young: “With 6 kids I haven't been young in a long time and I am addicted. Completely, totally and happily addicted to the Sims,” she admitted on the TS2 site (personal communication, November 6, 2005). As an addicted player, Mom6 described that she always knows when she is playing
entirely too much when she dreams of people speaking Simlish with a little thought bubble\textsuperscript{35} over everyone’s head.

Interestingly, Mom6 is not the only one who plays TS2 in the family—her husband and her six home-schooled kids play the game as well. In her game diary, Mom6 described the way her husband plays: “my hubby, pretty much only builds houses … It’s the first time he’s shown any real interest in anything in a long time” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). She then mentioned how her kids got started playing with her on the original TS and all of its expansion packs. They seem to all have their own ways to enjoy the game.

My oldest is now 12 and she loves to play. [O]f course she has to get me away from it first. My 11 year old just likes to build houses and create people. … She is in it for the artistic stuff. … The older ones use it pretty much like electronic dolls. My son is a scientist at heart; he does experiments with them. What will happen if I do this kind of thing. … The other three are t[o]o young to play anything that isn’t for preschoolers but they like to sit beside me and watch me play. They help me decide on a lot of what the characters do when they are watching.\textsuperscript{36} (personal communication, October, 7, 2006)

Despite that \textit{The Sims} 2 is rated T (for teen), containing content that may be only suitable for ages 13 and older, Mom6 still allows her 6 children, the oldest of whom is 12, 

\textsuperscript{35} In TS2, except when they are speaking their own language, Simlish, Sims also communicate with gestures and facial expressions, and through thought bubbles overhead.
\textsuperscript{36} Participant quotes are provided here exactly as they were written—with caps, grammar, etc. not corrected unless otherwise indicated in brackets or … for parts deleted.
to play the game. She explained that *TS2* does “a good job of simulating normal aspects of life, and social interaction”—the sorts of things she wants her kids to experiment with about human nature and all the things that can possibly happen within it (personal communication, October 7, 2006).

Having been honored as a *Professor of Llamalogy*[^37], Mom6 used to be an active member on the *TS2* site. However, after undergoing numerous clashes with other community members, Mom6 now rarely participates anymore. Instead, she shifted to developing her own onsite community with all her family members, sharing with them her play and stories.

*I Am Your God to Take Care of You*

In terms of *TS2* gameplay, Mom6 seemed to enjoy the power of playing god in controlling her Sims: “Every time you tell your Sim to do something and he [or she] looks at you with that do I have to look on his [or her] face, you can feel the power of playing [g]od” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). As teacher, mom, and housewife, Mom6 obviously is very good at time management in her real life, which also made her become an efficient game player.

The way I’m playing the game is to play every family for 7 days then send any teenagers to college together then play every lot on college for 2 semesters come back play all the families in the regular neighborhood

[^37]: In the *TS2* community, people use Llamatology to indicate their knowledge and understanding of the *TS2* game. A *Professor of Llamalogy* is therefore an expert *TS2* gamer.
until it gets to 9 am on Thursday then go back to the college get everyone graduated then go back to the neighborhood and play them until Monday at 9 am then move the College kids back into the neighborhood and [c]ontinue playing each family like that around and around. (personal communication, October 31, 2005)

After spending most of her day taking care of six home-schooled kids, Mom6 did not wish to fight with the game to get it to do what she wanted it to do, so she used to cheat a lot. However, different from other TS2 players, who usually cheat for money to have more economic freedom and allow their Sims to explore themselves rather than spend their Sim time working for a living, Mom6 doesn't do money cheats. She thought it defeats the purpose of how she plays the game. Instead, Mom6’s main goal in TS2 is “just to get them to live life as long as possible, have as many kids as possible, and become a perm[anen]t platinum personality.” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). To achieve this goal, using the cheat “maxmotives,” Mom6 does not allow her Sims to have any fundamental needs, so that “no one ever has to sleep and eating is strictly a social function” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). According to the game rules, the Sims have certain pre-setting needs—an emotional need to feel safe, well, cared for; a need for a cozy and clean living space; a need for amusement and relaxation; a physical need for food and sleep and to use a toilet; a physical need to feel clean (hygiene); and a psychological need to interact with other Sims (social) (Greg, 2004). If Sims ignore their "hygiene" need, they will stink, but if Sims do not eat, they starve to death. In TS2, you can turn off Sims’ needs manually by cheating to make your play easier. However, by doing that, you lose a significant part of the fun.
From the ways Mom6 plays *TS2*, I feel that she is more interested in achieving predetermined goals and, in a sense, “winning” by achieving those goals rather than playing the game. On the other hand, using cheats to increase her Sims’ motivation score but turning off her Sims’ needs, and making eating a strictly social function in her game, suggest that Mom6 is a pragmatist who does not want to waste time on the things that are unnecessary and will not benefit her victory.

**A “Control Freak’s” Dictatorial Kingdom**

For Mom6, what seemed to be the most motivating aspect of *TS2* was a sense of mastery: “I am in control of what happens to someone’s life. … I can make that life the best or I can make it horrible, I can make the[m] rich or just scraping by. … It is the only game I really enjoy” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). Such mastery of *TS2* becomes not only “a big help on stress relief” but also an alternative outlet for her lust for control (personal communication, October 7, 2006). “Rich” or “scraping by” indicates a different pleasure or punishment exacted of her Sims if they do not work toward her values and intentions in the game. Her strong need to control others and to have them share values is expressed consistently.

When asked to name the greatest benefit of playing *TS2*, Mom6 reported using the game as a substitute for her real-life need for control:

As humans we have very little ability to truly control our own lives. I tend to be a control freak. By control[ing] my Sims I don't have to control my children or my husband or my friends. I can be happy with their decisions
and let them live their lives while using the Sims to fulfill my need to control things. (personal communication, October 7, 2006)

She then gave an example of how she allowed her daughter to handle a personal problem without her “help,” while she was busy helping her Sims in the game:

(Her daughter) was having a situation where a friend of hers mother had decided they couldn't be friends anymore because we aren't Christians. I just wanted to handle it myself but instead I let her keep the phone and went and played the [S]ims. They have found a way to stay friends without the others’ mother realizing it. They can’t see each other face to face anymore but [she] worked it out for herself without me. Because I listened and went to play the Sims. (personal communication, October 7, 2006)

As an efficient goal achiever, Mom6 developed her own effective and rigid discipline for handling gameplay. That might be why she rarely allowed her Sims to have romantic aspirations. A romantic Sims usually wants romantic situations, which Mom6 somewhat considers impractical and nonessential in achieving her goals for gameplay. Also, in being a sovereign god, Mom6 did not seem able to stand challenges and defiance. She once complained about “the worst problem” she had in the game: “the tendency to start affairs on their own regardless of who was around and how easily some of them become jealous over a simple friendly hug” (personal communication, October 8, 2006). To close the game without saving it, she then turned off the “free will” option, which makes a Sims autonomous, to avoid a similar situation from happening again—“so no
one does anything I don't want them to do” she reported in the interview (personal communication, October 8, 2006).

It is also not difficult to see why Mom6 is so pleased with her TS2 gameplay. By turning off Sims’ free will, she becomes a sovereign in the dictatorial kingdom she constructed to fulfill her need for control. In that dictatorial paradise, her authority and command is neither questioned nor challenged. Ironically, the intention of playing TS2 clearly conflicts with what she hoped her children would learn from the game: “you can't always control who you love, and that some times bad things just happen and there is nothing that anyone could have done to stop it” (personal communication, October 7, 2006).

In Mom6’s game diary, I also noticed another situation that she called “a problem” in her game diary, revealing her irritation with having her thoughtful help not appreciated by her Sims. In one of her Sim families, the dad Sim really hoped that their only son would go to private school, so Mom6 had the mother Sim flirt with the Head Master of the school: “to try and get things moving in a better direction.” The gameplay ended up with the son not getting into the private school and all family members now mad at the mother Sim. Mom 6 just cannot understand why they are so angry: “she (mom Sim) just tries to help the situation a little with an innocent flirt and the whole thing blows up in my face” Mom6 said in her diary (personal communication, October 8, 2006). We can somewhat speculate that Mom6’s play is influenced by the roles associated with being a mother, teacher, and housewife. She attempts to succeed in each of these roles by eliminating those things that might jeopardize the outcomes. Moreover, following her own wishful thinking to accomplish what she thinks is best may usually work in her real
life, but she has found herself challenged and questioned by her Sims in the game. Such challenges in a sense provide another perspective on Mom6’s reflection on her actions and decisions; however, she seems not to be aware of the reasons for these challenges; rather, she prefers to blame the Sims’ resistance and ignorance.

Curiously, I asked Mom6 if any family member had noticed changes in her after she had used *TS2* as an emotional buffer against control of her children. She gave a funny but knowing answer: “They don't say anything after I play but I have had my oldest tell me to go play the [S]ims before my head explodes. <grins>” (personal communication, November 11, 2006).

**My Play Is Boring and I Am a Boring Person, Too**

Even in a game like *TS2* that provides players with many possibilities to create their own game content, Mom6 didn’t take advantage of these features. She reported that she rarely creates her own Sims in *TS2*: “I seem to have more fun playing the characters that Maxis\(^\text{38}\) created than I do my own. Who knows why” (personal communication, November 11, 2006). From her description about sticking with pre-existing Sims in *TS2*, we confirm again that she seems not to be as interested in playing *TS2* as in having control over all Sims in her game.

“I’ll just stick to writing stories. I seem to be pretty good at that,” Mom6 reports in her game diary. There, she frequently shows her ambition to create particular stories, such as the Royal Kingdom story and Prosperity Challenge story; however, she never

\(^{38}\) Maxis is the production house of *The Sims 2*. 
seems to finish any of them: “Unfortunat[e]ly I’m not real good at writing stories in this format which is funny con[s]idering writing stories is what I do best (personal communication, June 9, 2006). She then describes her difficulty in finishing the stories: “visual images are not really my thing. I even dream in words[,] so for me writing is better detailed through painting a picture with words than adding words to put a story to a picture” (personal communication, October 11, 2006). Her comparison of a visual images story and text story reveals her obstinate view of what a story should be and the contradiction between her wish to do more and what she believes she can do best.

However, when Mom6 read about other players’ discussions on the TS2 site regarding all sorts of problems they’d encountered in the game, she then suddenly “realized just how boring my Sims are as that everyone in Pleasantview^39 had become happy and successful” (personal communication, October 21, 2005). “My Sims are pretty boring people, but why should that su[r]prise me. I’m pretty boring myself.” She then posted a self-reflective message in her game diary (personal communication, October 21, 2005). She later remarked with the same sentiment in answering my question about her efficient gameplay: “To be honest, my type of play is rather boring to most. But, then I am a pretty boring person at times. I like my families to be happy. And happy is boring” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). Her “boring” play may be due to over-reliance on cheats to grab control from the Sims and the game in order to make her Sims happy and successful while playing the characters created via Maxis. On the other hand, from her description, we can see how she projects her desire to have a successful and happy family in real life.

^39 One of three pre-existed neighborhood in TS2.
Seeing that this introspective moment held emotion, out of curiosity, I asked Mom6 in the follow-up interview whether playing *TS2* changed the way she saw herself or others in her life. “Not really,” she reported and then explained that being the oldest daughter of a mother with a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling and a father who was a minister, she pretty much had the chance to see the best and the worst in people. Besides, “I was the person I was going to be long before I found the Sims,” she restated in the interview (personal communication, October 7, 2006).

Finally, in answer to my question about whether she learns anything by playing *TS2*, Mom6 replied with confidence: “That my view of human nature is essentially correct. ... I pretty much know that if [a] Sim does A it will lead to B. It’s true in daily life and it’s true to the game” (personal communication, October 8, 2006). However, I’m not certain that the game Mom6 mentioned as being consistent with her view of human nature is the original *TS2* game or the one she modified by removing “free will” to make her Sims non-functional.

After carefully taking a close look at her gameplay, I found that even Mom6 is seemingly fighting for control of the game and her Sims, but at the same time, she also expressed her resistance to social values in the real world through flights through the game system that stemmed from her real life. Her decision to home school her six children in real life reveal some of this resistance to the conventional social system. That might also explain why Mom6 relied on cheats to control her Sims—she did not wish to fight with the game during her break from fighting with the real world. The game-world created in *TS2* by Mom6 is based on her own values—everything should happen according to her prediction. Therefore, upon receiving challenges and questions from
other players or the Sims in her gameplay, she tended to close the game without saving or quitting the community, turning off all communication and negotiation. Again, the fact that her attitude towards the online community and the fact that she home-schools her six children could suggest Mom6 is likely not tolerant of others’ view, similar to the clashes she noted regarding interacting with TS2 community members.

Furthermore, Mom6 tends to absolve herself from the unaccomplished tasks in her gameplay. She blames a lack of time for downloading enough customized content to finish any challenge; blames her leaving the TS2 online community to community members’ impolite behaviors and responses; believes that the types of story writing provided in TS2 do not reflect her preferences, which also causes her stories to be dull; and frequently uses the phrase, “who knows why,” to reveal that she rarely thinks about why.

**BugM**

BugM is a single mom in her 40s. She became involved with TS immediately after one of her friends showed her the game. To this point, she has played TS in serial games for over five years. When not playing Sims, BugM is interested in music, movies, NFL football, and annoying her daughter, who thinks her mom is too involved with her life. She then attributed her behaviors to the fact that, with the exception of her two cats, Fatty and Skinny, her college-aged daughter is all she has as family.

BugM plays TS2 in general to build houses, do legacy challenges, and write Sims stories. With its non-specific-goal design, TS2 for BugM is just perfect for her creativity:
“The good part of the game is it is what you make it” (personal communication, June 13, 2006). In contrast to Mom6’s preference for playing Maxis-made characters, BugM hates jumping into the middle of any existing family, and tends to start a game with new neighborhoods and the Sims she created. Besides enjoying game play, she has discovered that she enjoys writing stories to enhance play of TS2. In order to accomplish her sophisticated stories, BugM relies on mods and cheats to increase her ability to control her Sims and uses a camera in the game. With regard to her story writing, which goes beyond simply recording events through her gameplay, she likes using TS2 to tell a story she really wants to share. Therefore, when reading BugM’s story, it will not seem like you are reading a Sims-based story. Rather, it will look like a general storybook with both pictures and literary compositions. Use of an ingenious prologue, leads to a flashback story that invites readers’ immersion and engagement immediately.

The online community is important to BugM, who uses it to share stories and to receive feedback from others: “I’m pretty interested in writing, I really like it and I want peo[p]le to be able to judge it, and honestly there is no other way for me to get my stories and ideas out to the general public” (personal communication, June 8, 2006). In addition to surfing to read the stories on the TS2 site, BugM also bookmarks other Simmer’s MySim pages if she likes their creations or stories so that she can check back to see what they have updated and to read their next installment. In this story-exchange network, BugM not only posts and shares stories but has a group of some eager readers waiting for her new stories. To BugM, “the online community is very important in all aspects of [the] story creating process” (personal communication, June 13, 2006).
Like a doll house, her favorite Christmas present of all time, TS2 to BugM is a virtual micro-world with infinite possibilities for change. Adorned with the custom contents downloaded from fan sites and her own creation, aided by mods and cheats, BugM’s game-world is inhabited by fantasy characters and romantic creatures. She has a romance Sim who is on the Slacker track, always coming home from work and wanting to change into his undies, which makes her feel novel and amused. Her famous Super hero family consists of well-known heroes—Batman, Superman, The Flash, Captain America, and Wonder Woman—who work together to solve criminal cases and protect the world. (See Appendix E: BugM’s story sample.)

In addition to all of the funky stuff in her stories, another significant theme in BugM’s discussion is her yearning for features of “Makin Magic,” which is a TS original expansion not yet available to use with TS2 all of the time. In “Makin Magic,” the player can hatch and pet a dragon, forge charms, and make a pet become a Sim via a spell. From gathering ingredients for potions to enchanting flamingoes for guests, BugM loves playing with magic, which allows her imagination to wildly spread. Unlike some other community members who complain about the unreality of “Makin Magic,” BugM believed that she kept the original TS in her computer just to play this old expansion, “because it (Makin Magic) isn't like real life” (personal communication, November 18, 2006).

Through BugM’s description of her gameplay and stories, I also noticed that she seemed to be partial to the theme “dad and beloved kids.” This subject repeatedly appears
in her stories as well as in her online discussions with others. BugM informed me in the
interview that the experiences she remembers most are those relating to the first family
she made.

   It was two Sims I had married and they had three daughters. They were
   ‘family’ Sims so the parents were very interested in the children. It was
   my first experience playing TS2 so seeing the kids run out to greet Dad at
   the end of the day was cute and I loved how the dad’s wants were always
   to play with or talk to the kids. I lost the family when I had to reinstall the
   game and I still miss them. (personal communication, June 8, 2006)

   In addition, in her response to a thread on the TS2 site, BugM admitted a little
   crush on a good-looking Dad Sim who always wanted to play with the kids and always
   took care of the baby. A similar scenario appears in her story, “The Pitt Family,” in
   which a 17-year-old girl deals with her dad’s death. (See Appendix F: BugM’s story
   sample.) The girl suffers shock after living years full of love and laughter with her dad.
   This dad theme somehow seems to reveal her expectations for a good dad in her family.
   Since she is a single mom, she is likely to have projected her yearning for a dad’s love,
   and/or her worry that her daughter may face a lonely life due to the absence of a father in
   her family. The same solicitousness for her daughter is found in another post on the TS2
   discussion board by BugM regarding one of her dreams:

   …. I am blaming the Sims for a dream I had last week that the grim reaper
   came to get me but I pleaded that I needed one more day because I didn’t
   want to die with dirty dishes in my sink and I had to say good bye to my
   daughter because I am all she has. While I was pleading I woke up—felt
kinda weird so I made sure I did my dishes and called my daughter
LOL—just in case. (personal communication, November 6, 2005)

After reading this, I saw that, as a single mom, she was expressing her sentiments about her daughter and her responsibility. The Grim Reaper in TS2 is a personification of death. The Reaper is a cloaked skeleton holding a scythe, and appears when a Sim is going to die. The Reaper then takes away the Sim and leaves a tombstone in the place where the Sim died (Figure 4-4). The negotiation with the Grim Reaper in BugM’s dream reveals, as a mother, her resistance to defeat, and also represents her concern for her daughter as well as her responsibility toward her.

Figure 4-4: The Grim Reaper in TS2

40 LOL is a Internet slang which refers to an appreciation of humor and literally meaning “Laughing Out Loud”.
More than Just a Boring Worker’s Creative Outlet

Playing *The Sims 2* has enabled her to make her real life more interesting. BugM’s gameplay, compared to that of the other two research participants, obviously reveals that playing *TS2* is not merely a creative outlet for her but also a critical agent in expressing cultural resistance in her real life. Take her story “the super hero family” as an example: she reported it as a funny story, but I noted, accidentally or intentionally, that her narrative method manifests cultural resistance. First, unlike the familiar images of the *Super Friends* in which Superman usually holds the central position via his disproportionate body size, which exemplifies his predominant power, instead, BugM has Wonder Woman holding the important post, indicating the leading role in her super hero’s family (Figure 4-5). Moreover, Batman, a masculine super hero, is described in her story as a delicate individual who is frustrated by his love for his homosexual beloved, which leaves him sobbing. More than that, his bright and dazzling vehicles have been replaced with a bland family van. Using the strategy of alteration in her stories, BugM apparently challenges the conventional definition of the super hero and the traditional male domination of the family.
Moreover, BugM makes readers aware of the conflict inherent in expected traditional female roles of domestic duties in the family. Wonder Woman mutters as she cleaned the toilet while the male superheroes sit around playing poker. Even with these characteristics—“beautiful as Aphrodite, wise as Athena, swifter than Mercury, and stronger than Hercules”\textsuperscript{41}—Wonder Woman in BugM’s story, like most mothers in a family, are expected to perform domestic chores—cleaning, feeding, and maintaining the family (Figure 4-6). In another example, stereotypical male behaviors are emphasized in a way to show males as incompetent. The male superhero was depicted as irresistibly attracted to lingerie models—blondes in tight dresses, sexy girls—while Wonder Woman handled an investigation. However, as aforementioned, the TS2 world presents a progressive gender-equal society in which all Sims are equal and TS2 is a modifiable representation system. Therefore, the subversion of prevailing roles by exaggeration and juxtapositions in BugM’s story evidently reveal the use of the game to resist cultural gender codes and expectations.

\textsuperscript{41} This is description shown on the flash cover of the comic book “Wonder Woman”. 

Figure 4-5: BugM’s Super Hero Family and Super Friends
Except for the culture resistance in her stories, BugM also showed how she projected her desires onto her gameplay, Sims, and stories. For example, when responding to what inspired her to write the story “Eve & Tom” in which Eve is finally reunited with her baby’s father, who was forced to leave her and didn’t even know the baby existed, she said: “I had Eve have a baby and raise her on her own because that is what I did. I did not have a happy ending as Eve did” (personal communication, November 18, 2006). Another example is in her story “The Pitt Family.” BugM used the first-person perspective to describe the 17-year-old girl’s sentiments upon encountering her dad’s death. The teen girl Sim recalled her dad: “My teen years when most kids turn away from their parents, I still knew my Daddy would always be there to comfort me and give me the encouragement I needed to get through the pitfalls of adolescence.” Reflecting on her real life, and with a teenager daughter complaining that her mom is too involved in her life, she projects her desire and expectations on the girl Sims to reveal her hopes that her daughter will become mature enough to understand how much her mom loves and cares about her.
I am Fulfiling My Happiness through the Sims

Asked why she plays TS2, BugM first replied that she enjoyed trying all of the new experiences in TS2, and then in answer to my inquiry about the way she plays TS2, she responded that: “I play the Sims in general to kinda create a life the way I wish I had it” (personal communication, November 18, 2006). “I am not very happy with my life right now. So I suppose I am fulfilling my happiness through the Sims” (personal communication, June 13, 2006). She then remarked: “Everything might be going wrong in my life but I tend to make my Sim’s lives perfect” (personal communication, November 18, 2006). From BugM’s reflection on the ways she played TS2, we confirm that she projected her desire to have a perfect world onto her gameplay. With regard to favoring magic and fantasy in her game, she explained that: “maybe certain things can’t happen in real life, are not possible in any way, but sometimes we all like to take a break from things, stretch ourselves and for a little while believe that it could be” (personal communication, November 18, 2006). From her description we see what TS2 gameplay means to her.

Asked whom she would recommend TS2 to, BugM replied after reflection: “to people looking for a way to escape everyday life for a little while, which is funny because you are playing your Sims['] everyday life—but you can make their lives perfect” (personal communication, November 18, 2006). BugM’s reflection here reveals that TS2 to her is a world in which she is capable of making everything perfect. Moreover, her avoidance of jumping into the middle of the existing family in the game is somewhat consistent with her desire to get rid of a pre-existing frame of life and her hope to make a
brand new start toward a perfect life. This perfect world could be magical, interesting, beloved, or fantastic—all qualities that she desires in the real world.

**Across-cases Analysis**

In previous sections I presented three research participants’ individual narrative play experiences, organized by a brief introduction to each participant, their methods of play (god-ship), critical issues found in their data, and what they think about their gameplay. In this section, I discuss the patterns and common themes that emerged from the analysis of the three research participants’ data. I also discuss deviations from these patterns and possible factors behind the deviations to provide context-bound findings.

**You Sims Are So Real!**

A subtle connection between a player and his/her Sims may be identified through data analysis on all research participants in this study. Both BugM and GeekU reported that they rarely let their Sims enter elderly stages; it is even harder to let them die of old age. BugM reported: “It doesn’t bother me so much to have them die in accidents but dieing of old age bothers me” (personal communication, June 8, 2006). Similarly, GeekU also reported that “not one of my Sims has reached Elderhood, even they have all 7 or 8 generations deep live together” (personal communication, March 11, 2006).

Similarly, her emotional attachment to her Sims was evident in Mom6’s gameplay, when she described her sadness when one of her Sims died: “I must admit I have cried
when one of my Sims died ... I didn't kill her off and I wasn’t ready for her to die,” and “I didn't save the game and did everything in my power to save her but no matter what I did she was dead. I got so upset over it I deleted the whole city” (personal communication, September 27, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, in TS2, players control/interact with semi-autonomous Sims and autonomous Sims (non-player characters) who have their own innate behaviors and free will. Such lifelike Sims and their emotional responsiveness together prompt participants to project themselves onto Sims’ emotional and conceptual perspectives, thereby invoking their sense of engagement and fostering empathy with the Sims. One of Mom6’s family may provide a good example of these sentiments. She stated that she once killed a mother Sim to enable her serious plans and she ended up accidentally saved the gameplay. “I was so upset and the man [Sim] was so upset,” and “I think the two of them were really in love. I mean it was seriously scary. I sat here and cried cause every time I told him to go eat or anything ... he would run back to the tombstone and start crying all over again” (personal communication, November 19, 2005).

**An Escape from Stress, Conflicts, Depression and Real Life**

Even with the different satisfactions experienced through their gameplay, looking across all three research participants’ narrative player experiences in TS2, I found a common lure to their devotion to the game: a need to escape from real life. BugM tends to play TS2 to get away from her depression and real life: “When life is get[t]ing me down I can play the Sims and their perfect little world and escape for a while” (personal
communication, January 12, 2006). BugM even credits *TS2*: “My best experiences are when I let the game [*TS2*] take me away from real life” (personal communication, January 12, 2006). Similarly, Mom6 admitted that in being a mom, teacher, and home business worker, she really needed “some kind of an outlet for the daily stresses of life. The Sims are mine” (personal communication, December 1, 2005). And surrounded with family members who are all take-charge people, GeekU believed that: “So having a peaceful world in my Sims game is my way of escaping the conflicts in my real life” (personal communication, July 14, 2006).

Interestingly, not only does *TS2* offer a temporary escape from real life, but all three research participants have, over time, gradually constructed a private aspirational world that more closely resembles what they wish they had in real life. For GeekU, she wishes a peaceful world in which all Sims get along and are supportive. BugM yearns for a perfect world in which she has the magic power to make her daughter and herself a beloved family. Mom6 is working toward realizing a world in which she has all of the authority for assisting her Sims and enabling them to lead a precisely successful life as she defined success.

By freely performing as a god-avatar and developing their aspirational world for their temporal inhabitation, the research participants project their values, desires, and fears onto the god (virtual identity) or their Sims. In doing so, their multiple identities are gradually revealed and constructed. For example, Mom6 has been a control freak and a busybody in her dominator’s centralist realm; BugM loves to be a magician and receive love in her perfect space; and GeekU portrays herself as a “better looking” Sim passively waiting for friendly contact from her other Sims. These identities, reflexively constructed
and generated through the research participants, project their values and desires onto their virtual identities, their gameplay, fantasy world, and Sims. These identities are what Gee (2003) refers to as the “projective identity”, and the word projective, according to Gee, means: “to project one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” and “seeing the virtual character as one’s own project in the making” (pp. 54–55). Therefore, we can say that participants are the gods they play, while the ways the participants play and the game-world they create in TS2 reveal their values, desires, and even fears about their real life.

On the other hand, a close look reveals these three research participants’ real selves through their gameplay and game-worlds. Under the cover of her pleasant gameplay, GeekU actually revealed that she is still an escapist who reconstructs her unsolved “issues” in real life but leaves them untouched in the game. Even she knows that she needs to have a real social life, but she does not seem able to identify ways to change the things she actually cares about, nor does she practice social interactions in her gameplay so that she could handle better in real life. As a “control freak” with little tolerance of others’ opinion, Mom6 expresses her resistance to conventional social values in the real world by home schooling her six kids, allowing her kids to play T-rated games in real life, and turning off Sims’ needs and free will in her gameplay.

**To Cheat or Not to Cheat?**

As aforementioned, it is common for TS2 players to use mods or cheats to enhance their play pleasure and performance in the game. Mods are a means of
expanding the game levels by changing the system rules or increasing game functions while cheats are used mainly to eliminate obstructions encountered by a player. Not surprisingly, in this study, all participants reported how they used cheats to make their gameplay smooth and goal-achieving easier. Mom6 cheats to ensure that all her Sims do not wish to sleep and eat; she sometimes turns off the Sims’s free will by cheats if they are doing something she didn’t want them to do. Without questions and resistance from her Sims, Mom6’s play becomes efficient and effortless but also holds no surprises and excitement, resulting in unexciting play. Despite recognizing how predictable her Sims are, after reading others players’ posts about problems, she began to think about her own play as boring. Nevertheless, Mom6 still cannot extricate herself from her desire for control. Mom6 uses cheats often, which might explain why she has never been able to finish any of the Legacy Challenges in which cheats are strictly prohibited.

Similarly, not long after GeekU learned about cheats, she began to constantly use them to make her Sims never do anything for themselves. However, when she started her first Legacy Challenge, she realized that the game is a lot more fun without cheating. Now she uses cheats only when creating stories and getting just the right pictures for those stories. BugM did not know about cheats when she began to play the original Sims game and now wishes she did not know about the ones for The Sims 2. She imputes her cheat-addiction to a lack of self restraint, but reported that except when making stories, she tries to be cheat-free in her game.

The different ways in which each research participant deals with the conflicts and obstructions in the game also reveal their projective identities, the identities through which each player mentally maps their needs and wants. They cheat so that their desires
come true and to avoid their fears. For example, fearing that her Sims will become elderly and die, GeekU used the cheat “Elixir of Life” so that her Sims would always be young and healthy. Interestingly, this cheat also reveals what she wants and desires most—to keep Sims alive and to fulfill her desire to maintain long-term relationships.

**Sims’ Stories or My Stories?**

While claiming *TS2* provides an interactive narrative interface for players’ narrative experience enchantment, I found there is an interesting issue raised through the participants’ description of the procedure of their story making. Except for Mom6’s camera tour stories, which literally records the circumstance in her game, the other two participants’ stories reveals different levels of meaning than just a commentary of their gameplay. GeekU reported that “Some of my stories stem from events in the game ... Others are stories that I made up and had nothing to do with what was happening in the game” (personal communication, July 14, 2006). Similarly, BugM also claimed that “My story writing has nothing to do with game play. The stories that I write are just random ideas that I come up with.” Although some of BugM’s stories were initially inspired by pictures she randomly captured from her gameplay, she also derives story plot ideas and then takes “pictures to reflect those ideas.” Further, she describes that “the plot changes as I take the pictures and come up with new ideas” (personal communication, January 12, 2006).

From GeekU and BugM’s statements, we learned that the photo album feature in *TS2* goes far beyond what *TS2* designers intended—to record, assemble, and share
actions and events that occur in the game. Moreover, BugM completes her stories by uploading and deleting sections of stories over and over again. Both BugM and GeekU use cheats to control their Sims and scenes, setting the camera to take the “right” picture to accomplish their compelling stories. Therefore, we can be fairly certain that these two participants are not actually telling their Sims’ life stories but are using TS2 as a picture generator or storytelling agent to produce the visual elements their stories need in order to embody the ideas they wish to express and share with others.

Furthermore, BugM claimed to have added some real-life characters and experiences to most of her stories. In a sense, her stories are more likely to be personal, leading to positive actions toward self-expression rather than just serving as a commentary on her gameplay or a made-up story. In addition, by using TS2 as a tool for self-expression, GeekU and BugM, two single mothers, both have a story theme related to how a single mom suffers mentally and physically to keep their child. Coincidentally, they both create the same happy ending—to be reaccepted and reconnect with their families. These two stories reveal their conflicts about being single mothers who would like to be understood and forgiven by their families for deciding to keep their children, thus making their suffering and waiting worthwhile.

**Online Community and Reflective Dialogues**

In this study, all three participants have been registered members of the TS2 online community for at least two years. However, the participants expressed slightly divergent views on the TS2 site. BugM reported that she had learned a lot about TS2
through reading and online discussions. She also expressed her love for the *TS2* site and the ability to share stories and exchange play experiences with others: “I enjoy the community. ... I like getting feedback on my stories. I enjoy being able to help others with a problem they are having” (personal communication, June 8, 2006). Similarly to BugM, with more than 400 posts on the discussion forum, GeekU also enjoys joining discussions with other players online. As a computer geek, most of GeekU’s posts are about helping community members to solve their computer or Sims’ problems. With regard to sharing stories with the community, GeekU said: “I like to know what people think of my stories. I like to hear from others what I did well, but also I like to know what people think I could do better” (personal communication, November 3, 2006). According to GeekU’s and BugM’s report, we see how the *TS2* online community benefits its players by providing a sophisticated platform for information, knowledge, experiences, creations, and story sharing and exchange. This is why they have spontaneously stuck with this community, as well as the fact that they are comfortable about sharing experiences in their narrative play and/or personal life in the real world.

In contrast to GeekU and BugM, Mom6 was once enthusiastic about the online community, and enjoyed sharing her play experiences with others. However, she quit due to disagreements with other members. She expressed her frustration in the interview: “in the end, the unending ability for humans to need to destroy each other and spread their misery where ever they might be entered into *The Sims 2* site and especially the BBS... [made it so] I rarely participate anymore” (personal communication, October 7, 2006). Mom6 thought I was lucky to catch her on the day when she was bored and not in the
mood to play TS2. So she logged into the site “to see if anything had improved” (personal communication, October 7, 2006).

After carefully reading Mom6’s posts on the TS2 site, I finally gained insight into her reasons for leaving the TS2 site. Some of her peremptory notions and lack of toleration consequently caused questions and challenges among the community. To avoid annoying noise, Mom6 also disabled her guest book function which allows other community members to leave messages and feedback or to offer meaningful critiques about her posts, stories, and herself. Instead, Mom6 used game diary, a unidirectional communication platform used by BugM and GeekU as an announcement board for their new coming stories, as an alternative way to share her experience and thoughts about gameplay.

Even Mom6’s game diary contained rich information about her self-reflection on her gameplay as well as on her personal life experience. However, to quiet and turn the volume off on the TS2 site, Mom6 creates a noiseless online community in which she can have her say without worrying about unwelcome feedback and challenges. This noiseless community leaves Mom6’s own view of the world isolated and untouched. Thus, compared to the other two participants, Mom6 obviously receives few opportunities for meaningful dialogues with others. And dialogue is a significant way to evoke and encourage reflection, which also possibly leads to meaningful learning.

Moreover, after reviewing the research participants’ discussion online to screen the valuable data for this research, I found some very interesting discussions which demonstrate that through critical dialogues with others, players are encouraged to think about their play in ways that actually promote reflection and evoke new understanding. In
response to GeekU’s post regarding her envy of her Sims—“Gorgeous men who are easy to find and get, loads of money, beautiful houses that never take more than an hour to clean up . . . sometimes I want to be my Sims, because THEY have everything!” (personal communication, December 17, 2006)—one thread respondent replied that life is not always as perfect as it is for the Sims and it is good not to worry about whether you will have everything. Another thread respondent then noted that if (GeekU and other post respondents) compared themselves to Sims or used the game to escape from reality, then perhaps they were in a state of depression. He then explained that he said that to be facetious but he thought perhaps Sims players should discover the reasons for their depression and relate this intimate exploration and revelation in the game. This thread, in a sense, encouraged players to positively understand themselves through reflection on their gameplay and their view of the Sims’ world as it differed from their own.

Another thread also helps to explain how TS2 can evoke deeper reflection on the representation of this modifiable simulation system in detail. In the original TS2, the game system only came with two body shapes for players to choose from—skinny or fit. However, soon after the game was released, players were able to download mods to create their Sims with any shape of body. We now can see fat Sims, muscle-Sims, or paunchy Sims in the stories shared online. To be responsible for their own play in such a modifiable game system, TS2 has led the players to critically think about the reasons why all of the Sims they create for the games are so skinny. The issue raised here profoundly has shifted in the online forum from why the Sims in TS2 are always skinny, to why I made all my Sims so skinny. For example, GeekU, on the issue of “fit sims vs fat sims,” explained why all her Sims are thin: “If I want to see a fat person, I can go look in a
mirror” (personal communication, September 23, 2006). Another player expressed how she stuffed her Sims to meet her need to always satisfy her hunger without worrying about weight gain, etc., while another player criticized the media for creating a perfect image that everyone is supposed to live up to. This topic then evoked enthusiastic and reflective conversations among community members.

From these examples above, we can see how dialogue with other community members leads the research participants to reflect on how things are being done, how things can be improved, why things are done a certain way, and why the issue of identities affects self-definition. The process of sharing and discussing narrative play experiences helps participants to develop self-awareness and create new understanding of their gameplay, their desire and fears, and dimensions of themselves. This is similar to what many researchers described as a critical reflection—the ability to develop self awareness of knowledge, and then to share this understanding with others as a means of creating new understandings.

**Summary of Key Findings**

The digital game *The Sims 2*, by its very nature, allows the composition of life-like content, god/role playing game interactivity, modifiable representation system, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology to present a unique game environment that supports the players’ narrative play experiences. From the description of the research participants’ gameplay, we can see how *TS2* offers them different levels of narrative play satisfaction. On the other hand, each of the participants brought a very different personal
history and self-inclinations to the game—all of which distinguish their play experiences. BugM, a single mom who works in a routine job, finds a magic world in TS2 in which her creativity is unleashed and her imagination has a chance to exist. By writing stories in TS2, she has a chance to freely express herself and even critically challenge predominant stereotypes in the cultural context in which she is situated. As a home-schooling mom, Mom6 basically concentrates on game playing in TS2 to put her desire for control into practice. By eliminating obstructions from Sims and the TS2 game system, Mom6 creates her non-challenged kingdom in which she makes all her Sims “happy” and gives them “platinum personalities”. Lacking opportunity to connect with others herself, GeekU instead takes care of her precious Sims and ensures that they get along and are supportive of each other. Thus, we can see that all participants’ approaches toward The Sims 2 game are distinct, and their individual narrative play experience represents a situated structure that reflects each participant’s identity, positions, and lived experience in the real world.

In being a god and controlling their Sims, three research participants sought to try out different behaviors and personalities in order to explore and challenge their perception of their lived experiences, the world, and even themselves. By imposing their values and desires onto their gameplay, they constructed aspirational worlds for their escape and satisfaction. The game-worlds they created, at the same time, reveal not only their values, desires, and fears, but also disclose what they think are the most important and most threatening aspects of life, as well as elements of their inner selves and their identities.

Moreover, by looking at these three research participants’ story creations in TS2, we understand that the photo album feature in TS2 should not be considered only as
merely a tool for the player’s photography for their Sims-storytelling, but as a sophisticated device that facilitates self-expression and artistic creation. Therefore, the stories they created in TS2 are not merely chronological sequences of events but artifacts in which they may immerse their artistic expressions, aesthetic creations, and cultural narratives, thereby engendering meaningful experiences in narrative play as well as placing their life experiences in cultural context.

Through reflection via sharing discussion on their narrative gameplay in TS2, the research participants were provided opportunities to recapture their play experiences, to think about the ways they played—the game-world they created, and the things they wanted their Sims to do—and later to evaluate their play experiences in relation to their real life and themselves. In this study, we have seen how the research participants make meaning of their gameplay and generate new understanding of themselves through self-reflection or reflective dialogue with other community members. This reflection enables the participants to make meaning and generate new understanding of their experiences. According to many theorists, this all points to the process of learning from experience. By helping her Sims, Mom6 realized that she tended to be a control freak. By understanding that people have little ability to truly control their life, Mom6 found that she should learn to be happy with others’ decisions as well as to respect others’ lives. GeekU, the super shy girl, realized that she needed to develop real social relationships with people in the real world, even though she was attached to and satisfied with the harmonious social world created in the game. Despite the fact that everything could go wrong in BugM’s life, she knew that she at least could still move into a perfectly magical
space that would allow her to unleash her creativity and imagination, and fight depression.

Finally, the research participants’ conflicts, identity construction, reflection and new self understanding as facilitated through the *TS2* narrative gameplay could be reinforced or challenged by more critical questions and conversations that may also lead to further opportunities to reformat their cultural identity in the real world. For example, a discussion about the unresolved issues in her gameplay might encourage GeekU to think more deeply of her gameplay in relation to her real life and herself. A question regarding her gameplay and the things she wishes her children to learn from playing *TS2* might provide Mom6 an opportunity for reflective reconsideration of her ambivalence, values, and, herself.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I first discuss and answer each of the research questions. Next, following the discussion of the implications of this study, I offer suggestions about points not fully explored in this study and questions that remain for further research.

Discussion of the Research Questions

After carefully reviewing the related literature, conducting a qualitative case study to collect relevant data from various sources, systemically analyzing the data, and examining the final results in light of the elaborate theoretical framework, here I summarize the findings to answer each of my research questions in order to draw insightful conclusions about this study.

This investigation was guided by three research questions:

1. How does *The Sims 2* (*TS2*) provide an interactive narrative interface for its players? And how has the nature of *The Sims 2* interactive narrative interface impacted players’ experiences?
2. In what ways does the nature of narrative play in *TS2* facilitate players’ identity construction?
3. In what ways does the nature of narrative play in *TS2* promote reflective learning?

**Response to Research Question One**

*How does The Sims 2 (TS2) provide an interactive narrative interface for its players? And how has the nature of The Sims 2 interactive narrative interface impacted players’ experiences?*

The digital game *The Sims 2*, by its very nature, is a hybrid of a god game and role-playing game that features emerging AI technology, life-like simulation, and a conceptual platform called an Interactive Narrative Interface (INI) for players’ distinct explorations. Specifically, the interactive narrative interface in *TS2* consists of a spatial narrative structure in which narrative elements are naturally embedded for players to navigate and explore. It is an emerging narrative game-world in which players may generate their own narrative journeys through the process of narrative play, and *TS2*’s compelling online community in which players share their narrative play experiences in various forms of narrative—discussion text, artistic creations, and linear story-book. Thus, in *The Sims 2*, playing the core game is only part of this narrative gameplay. To experience creation and to exchange creations with other players, and to develop and share dialogue about their play experiences with others, can complete this narrative play experience as a whole (Figure 5-1).
Figure 5-1: The Interactive Narrative Interface in TS2.
The interactive narrative interface that supports players’ narrative play experiences, the lack of a clearly defined game goal, and the presence of a god/role-playing game genre, the combination of a modifiable game system, autonomous characters, and a recording and authoring tool (photo album) in *The Sims 2* enable players’ distinct narrative activities, ludic play experiences, and shared contact.

In adopting the persona of a god as their virtual identity in the game, the *TS2* players are allowed more freedom in defining this god-concept through their free play. By using various mods and cheats to reinforce their inclination toward being a god in the game, the players tailor their personal conception of that virtual identity (god) in any way that they wish to do so. Thus, the god then becomes the players’ agents in carrying out applications of the values and desires sought by them in guiding Sims as they explore possible actions and construct the game-world.

Furthermore, as the players put more time into playing the game, identifying and guiding the Sims’ interactions with each other, the Sims then are further personalized beyond their original definitions—no longer just virtual characters in the game but now friends, family, and even an extension of themselves. This could explain why BugM, who never made a Sim-self, said: “I feel that all the female characters that I make are myself” (personal communication, June 8, 2006). Besides, the Sims’ well-simulated behaviors and their emotional responsiveness prompt participants to are further personalized beyond their original definitions, thereby invoking their sense of engagement and fostering empathy with the Sims. Such personal and emotional involvement is essential to real resonance and later reflection in the players’ narrative play experience.
Moreover, utilizing the powerful authoring tool in TS2, the players have opportunities to visualize their narrative play experiences and to piece together story fragments generated in their gameplay in textual detail by adding written thoughts or circumstances for later sharing online. Unlike other interactive storytelling software/programs which automatically record the plots generated by a storyteller/player’s choices and actions in the programs, the recording function in TS2 is determined by the players as they manually control the photo-taking tool to record a particular narrative gameplay moment. In this study, most of the research participants’ stories were created intentionally to express themselves, rather than just passively recorded from events in their gameplay. Therefore, the story creations in TS2 are liberated from only capturing the actions and events that occur in gameplay, and are instead endowed with sophisticated possibilities for the players to tell their own stories for creative idea sharing and self-expression.

From this perspective, TS2 provides an open-participatory system. The interactive narrative interface for its players is not a fixed-rule gameplay but enables players to construct their own play experiences through gameplay, narrative, sharing, discussing, and reflecting.

**Response to Research Question Two**

*In what ways does the nature of narrative play in TS2 facilitate players’ identity construction?*
By taking the role of god in the game, the TS2 players have more freedom to define their ways of play. In using mods to modify the game rules and settings, and in utilizing cheats to eliminate the obstacles and conflicts in their gameplay, the players transform themselves into mighty gods who have more power to make their performance work as they please, while avoiding what they fear and are unwilling to see in the game-world (Figure 5-2).

By indulging in such free play in the game, the research participants in this study have their Sims try out various combinations of behaviors and personalities. In doing so, the participants receive opportunities to explore their multiple identities and to generate new identities that they may freely express in ludic ways without scruples. These identities resemble what Mul (2005) has termed the “ludic identity”—the identity constructed through players’ actions and influenced by their pre-configured life experiences. By trying out the Romance Aspiration on her Sims, Mom6 found that: “I have discovered something about myself though.” She realized her double standard toward males and females—she could have romantic female Sims but saw romantic male Sims as “horrible womanizing”. She then decided: “I’m going to work on that to see if I can’t change my own perspective” (personal communication, October 24, 2005).

Moreover, from an obstinate and domineering dad, to a gentle and powerless mom; from an obedient and overprotected daughter to her friends who live the life they want; in her gameplay, BugM enjoys giving her Sims “conflicting personalities” to try new experiences and at the same time explore possible selves. “... It’s kind of having many personalities that you express using TS2,” she noticed about her ways of play in TS2 online community (personal communication, May 12, 2005). Thus, the free play in TS2
that encourages players to try out various combinations of behaviors and personalities can also inspire the players to disclose dimensions of the self. On the other hand, a forum for the exploration of the issue of identity is generated through the conflicts generated through participants’ free play as they try out behavioral possibilities, their observations of the Sims’ emotional reactions and responsiveness, and their perceptions of moral dilemmas generated in the process of gameplay.

Moreover, through this free play in the game, the research participants reflexively impose their values and desires onto the god (virtual identities) or their Sims to avoid what they fear and encourage what they dream about. In guiding their god and constructing aspirational worlds to inhabit/escape, their projective identities are gradually constructed. Feeling herself to be powerless to change her unhappy life, BugM sought a perfect world filled with magic things, a beloved life and happy endings. Having a terrible fear of loss, GeekU tried to people her game with Sims who happily got along and were supportive. With no tolerance for complaint and resistance, Mom6 wished to get everything and every Sims under control and organized. Reciprocally, the participants’ aspirational worlds in TS2 also revealed their wants, anxieties, fears about their inner real life, and identities in return. For example, in maintaining a harmonious world for her Sims that focuses on perfect social relationships but leaves her own social conflicts and difficulties untouched, reveals GeekU to be an escapist.
Figure 5-2: Identity Construction in TS2
Through this narrative system and with control capabilities to be a god, we see how participants create a microcosm based on their lived experiences of the world, and at the same time project onto it all sorts of fantasy scenarios through free expression and play in *TS2*. Thus, except for the participants’ real-world identities, their projective identities are gradually constructed and developed through imposition of their values, desires, wishes, and fears onto their virtual identity (god) or their Sims in the game.

In light of this finding, we learned that *TS2* cannot be seen as merely a game but as a mediator that allows each player to continue their cognitive development and construct their identities. *TS2*’s game-world, therefore, is not only a virtual world that enables research participants to temporarily escape from their real life, but it is an actively aspirational world in which the participants may realize their vision for a different, new life, instill and enforce values they believe should be present in the world, and generate multiple identities through gameplay. The identities constructed by players project their values and desires onto their characters and gameplay. According to Gee (2003), this allows the players to strongly identify with the character and game-world and thus have an immersive experience within the game, and at the same time to use the character and/or game-world as a mirror upon which to reflect on his or her own values and choices afterward.

Therefore, *TS2* recruits identities in a powerful way that not only inspires the players to uncover dimensions of the self, but also triggers deep reflection that may further provide an opportunity to allow them to change their perceptions of themselves and to reform their social cultural identity in the real world.
Response to Research Question Three

In what ways does the nature of narrative play in TS2 promote reflective learning?

At the surface level, through an iterative process of trying out solutions, revising assumptions, and getting feedback to regenerate new solutions, the participants in this study received opportunities to make meaning of their experiences, to learn through reflection on the meaning of those experiences, and then to create strategies for overcoming obstacles in order to approach their goal of playing TS2. Yet, more than that, TS2 also promotes deeper reflection that takes place through gameplay, as players review their narrative play experiences and their identity construction during TS2 gameplay, and connect it to their real life.

With its realistic designs for character behaviors and compelling narrative scenarios, TS2 invites players to become emotionally engaged in the game as they immerse themselves in this simulation system and the Sims. Such engagement and immersion could lead the players to see themselves as Sims, leading them to reflect not only on the Sims’ behaviors and responsiveness, but also on themselves and their own lives.

Moreover, by playing a god in the game, the players are permitted to experiment with different viewpoints in particular scenarios both as god and Sims—taking a Sim view to explore the consequences of acting within the game, or taking a god viewpoint to direct observe, and interpret all actions and consequences. By shifting between observers and participants in the game-world, the players achieve a critical distance from their
gameplay and actions/consequences that allow them to view them more objectively, which is a reflective learning process.

Furthermore, as game play is completed in TS2, the players’ narrative experiences become linear stories in retrospect. While sharing these play experiences with others, the players engage in a process of storytelling that requires them not only to passively rethink their experiences, but also to locate the significance of the experiences, reconstructing them from a particular perspective and then to articulate those experiences to other community members. This storytelling process, according to McDrury and Alterio (2003), encompasses “ways of knowing” that may help the participants to reflect, to explain, to express, to analyze or to understand their experiences, themselves, others, and the world (p. 35).

Moreover, by reflecting on and evaluating their identities as generated and revealed in their free narrative gameplay, the research participants make statements about who they are, what they want and fear, and what they consider to be important. Such reflection and the in-depth understanding that develops during gameplay could lead to changes in the players’ future thoughts, feelings, and actions, and even transform their social and culture identities. On the other hand, the multiple identities constructed through the research participants’ free gameplay might provide them with more opportunities to see themselves and the world from different perspectives, which is significant learning that could lead to life changes (Figure 5-3).

From the description of GeekU’s “fit sims vs fat sims,” we learned how TS2 players take active roles in their play relative to their personal and social reality, rather than passively accept the simulation bias and inaccuracies represented in the game.
Therefore, the process of sharing and discussing their narrative play experiences helps participants to develop self-awareness and create new understanding of their gameplay, their desire and fears in relation to their real life, and dimensions of themselves.

Through this study, we see how all three research participants make meaning through their gameplay, and generate new understanding of themselves, whether using TS2 to satisfy their desire for control, find fulfillment and happiness, or practice social interaction. Reflection is what enables them to make meaning and generate new understanding of their experiences. Such reflection, according to many theorists, involves the process of learning from experience. Therefore, the research participants not only engage in ready-made gameplay but also actively construct these experiences by participating, interpreting, and reflecting on the experiences in their gameplay. Such reflective practice is essential to deep and significant learning.

In conclusion, the digital game TS2 provides an interactive narrative interface (INI) through which players may navigate, explore, express themselves, and intensify their experience narratively and artistically. The narrative play experiences with INI in TS2, at the same time, serve to initiate and powerfully facilitate players’ identity construction, evoking reflection about their gameplay, multi-identities, the world and themselves. Narrative play furthers learning by recapturing experiences and reflections of narrative play, giving the play new meaning. The narrative play experiences provide new understandings that can lead to discovery and reform their social and cultural identities in real life as well as lead to meaningful learning.
Figure 5-3: Reflective learning through review, sharing, and discussion of narrative play experiences in TS2
Implications of this Study

As Sherry Turtle (2005b) suggested, as educators we need to “to accept specific applications of computer technology as inevitable” (p. 4), but not see its current direction as absolutely determined. To construct the richest lives possible with technology, we must keep our sense of its enormous potential and the possible new paths in support of learning in more effective and appropriate ways. Digital games, a joyful and engaging application available via computer technology, powerfully convey enormous learning potential—some related directly to the context of the game, leading to fun, motivational and engaging experiences, and others to the development of skills such as problem solving, sequencing, deductive reasoning and memorization, while others provide opportunities for reflection and transformation. Even through some digital games were not previously considered educational, and indeed not originally intended to be, they are ingeniously integrated with educational significance, leading players to learn through the experiences in playing, exploring, sharing, interpreting, and discussing.

Nowadays, while digital games are often described as engaging and motivational, there is still little compelling research on the connection among the social contexts of games, fun, and learning. Most studies focus on the characteristics of the game activity itself, design issues, or new technology employed, rather than the player's self-expression, culture narrative, and reflection in specific types of games as these affect the experience and process of learning. And the social contexts of gameplay—the reflective activities, discussions, and collaborations that emerge in gameplay—are even more than
the game itself in determining the emergent activities and the types of learning that occur (Aarseth, 2003).

In this study, I took a socio-cultural perspective, using the digital game *The Sims 2* as an example of how a digital game, by its significant nature, can provide its player with distinct narrative play experiences that at the same time may facilitate the player’s identity construction and further encourage individual reflection and learning. As art education moves toward social and cultural awareness, art is viewed as a meaningful cultural system that encourages students to learn through interpreting and understanding “cultural practices as ideology, social power, and constructed forms of knowledge” (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007, p. 19). The features supporting interactive narrative and modifiable representational systems in *TS2*, as examined in this study, can provide art educators with a reason to consider digital games not only as prevalent visual culture that necessitates critique within the field of art education, but also as learning and teaching strategies that may encourage cultural expression and enable critical reflective learning about socially constructed identities and value.

Specifically, the cultural narrative of the experience engendered through gameplay, no matter its form as shared text, visual stories, video sequences, or discussion, opens a new narrative opportunity that may differ from the currently dominant narratives, and may be considered an artifact of visual culture, serving as evocative objects that lead to reflection, further learning, and even social change.

Moreover, the modifiable representational system in digital games can be seen as an open visual culture system initially constructed by game designers whose values and ideology are influenced by the culture they inhabit, but are open to question, challenge,
and change. This virtual visual culture system allows players to access, alter, and subvert the game-structure and rules, and directly change meanings, such as the subversion of prevailing privilege, race, class, or gender relationship, which in a sense enact cultural resistance in a variety of contexts.

An important implication of this study has to do with computer accessibility. At first glance, my study and its applications are based on assumptions about technology accessibility. If certain media—in this case, digital games—are not made accessible to particular types of people, then the findings from this study will not be directly applicable to them. Beyond that, however, the design and essential nature of narrative play and learning strategies as extracted from *TS2* could be applied to or used to transform other media platforms or even classroom activities—e.g., role-playing practice, narrative playing, group discussion, reflective dialogue, and so on.

One further implication should be accounted for—the fact that the vast majority of *TS2* players are female. At first glance, the population of female players may be the result of Will Wright’s concept of *TS2* as a virtual dollhouse in which players create and nurture their virtual creatures. Such game design and its ideology may not be attractive to male players but certainly corresponds with the traditional female role in the family. However, as a game that allows modification and contains undefined game goals, *TS2* brings players’ play experiences far beyond initial assumptions and expectations. Therefore, male players’ play experiences and approaches in *TS2* should be examined and incorporated into future research, whether to provide another viewpoint or to support with further evidence of the occurrence of learning in *TS2* gameplay.
Finally, online game communities serve as participatory hubs, allowing all members opportunities to diversify cultural expression, share experiences and social communication, and engage in collective learning. The experiences shared and subjects discussed in a game community at the same time function as a social mirror in responding to social and culture experiences that could suggest deep levels of reflection on players’ social position, inner-self, and the visual, cultural world in which they are situated.

Therefore, the complement of digital game media and visual culture pedagogy appears to be a perfectly adaptive strategy for encouraging students to develop interpretational skills to use not only in interpreting visual text/information conveyed, but also in critically investigating the meanings and quality of visual text/information with consideration of the target audience(s) for the information. Jenkins (2006) called this the new media literacy—cultural competencies, interpretational ability, and social skills needed to fully participate in contemporary culture in the digital age. On the other hand, the possibilities that cultural narrative digital games provide to players, like other evolving multimedia technologies such as simulations and hypermedia, are giving rise to a new story mode that is an integral part of visual culture, while narrative is a way to make sense of experiences and understand the self and the visual cultural contexts in which we are culturally situated (Keifer-Boyd & Maitland-Gholson, 2007).
Suggestions for Further Study

Among those who view digital games as emerging cultural objects as well as an important part of our society, further research is needed on how digital games shape and influence our culture and society and how learning take places through play experience in ludic interactions, critically challenging, actively modifying and reflectively transforming the cultural meaning of games.

Moreover, all of the limitations relating to this study provide outstanding questions that merit further exploration. For example, there should be further research targeting various age groups, gender, game genres, and social backgrounds to ascertain whether the questions examined in this study would lead to different findings and have different implications. In addition, by taking advantage of digitally archived data through an online game site, researchers can reach a potentially global pool of participants via the Internet, and thus make cross-cultural comparisons.

Furthermore, in this study, all three research participants were long-time players who played the game upon its release. Even with different play approaches and varied outcomes to evoke learning, the play patterns were somewhat similar—to escape from reality. Thus, to determine how engagement in gameplay affects players’ ability to reflect and learn, an in-depth study that includes diverse players with different levels of engagement is needed. In this case, play, as it led to reflection and learning, is distinct due to the engagement in gameplay—a very important issue when considering future applications of digital games in learning contexts. Meanwhile, the game-worlds players create to escape from reality, in fact, contain significant implications as revealed in terms
of the multidirectional influences of socio-cultural contexts and individual identities, which also need to be unpacked and explored in future studies.

In addition, except for the game-worlds that players created and represented as a way to explore identity, representation, and cultural narratives, the structural decoration of the customized houses in TS2, in a sense, can also be seen as a means of engaging in a type of architecture of the self (Wharton, 2000). This includes the social construction of meaning and of contemporary objects, which may mirror the critical reflection that needs to be analyzed in detail in future studies.

Finally, the modifiable representational system is a very unique interface that encourages players’ interpretations and expressions in term of cultural compliance, negotiation, or resistance. When considering the meaningful reflections and identity construction that occur within this game environment, the modifiable representation system itself contains rich and abundant information about the players’ lived experiences, values, identities, and desires, which are valuable for an analysis of identity construction and self-reflection via gameplay experiences.
References


Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.


Appendix A

Research Recruitment Script

Dear Sims players,

Do you like to create stories while playing TS2? Do you want to share your experiences in playing TS2? Do you feel that playing TS2 influences you in many ways? My name is Hui-Chun Hsiao, a doctoral student in the art education program at The Pennsylvania State University. I am seeking research participants for my research project, “Playing experiences within the digital game The Sims 2”.

Please sign my guestbook or contact with me via email at hsiao.TS2@gmail.com, if you are interested in this topic and would consider participating in this project by contributing information on your experiences and perspectives on playing TS2. You may also contact me at this email address if you have any questions or would like more information. Please note that you must be at least 18 years of age to take part in this research project.

Thank you very much.
Appendix B

Implied Informed Consent Form

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Playing the digital game *The Sims 2*

Principal Investigator:  Hui-Chun Hsiao, Graduate Student
207 Art Cottage
University Park, PA 16802
(814) 861-2619, Email: huh2@psu.edu

Advisor:  Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D.,
Professor
The Pennsylvania State University
210 Arts Cottage, University Park, PA 16802-2905
(814) 863.7312, Email: kk-b@psu.edu

1. **Purpose of the Study:**

   The purpose of this study is to investigate the kinds of play in the digital game *The Sims 2*.

2. **Procedures to be followed:**

   You will be asked to approximately 12 questions divided into two interviews/sections. I will send you the questions via email to you. You may be asked to clarify responses to the 12 interview questions. Please choose the interview method you prefer, either through email or instant message system (e.g., Microsoft Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, or Skype). With your permission, the stories and discussion posted on your Sim page may be collected for the purpose of this research.
3. **Duration/Time:**
   It will take approximately 30-50 minutes to complete the 12 interview questions. A maximum of 20 minutes may be needed for follow-up and clarification.

4. **Statement of Confidentiality:**
   Your participation in this research is confidential. If this research is published/presented, unless you provide expressed permission, the information will not be linked to your name or other personally ID information. Your confidentiality will be safe to the degree permitted by the technology used. Specifically, no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the Internet by any third parties.

5. **Right to Ask Questions:**
   Please contact Hui-Chun Hsiao at (814) 861-2619 or hsiao.TS2@gamil.com with questions or concerns about this study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact Penn State’s Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.

6. **Voluntary Participation:**
   Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

7. **Please place a checkmark by any of the following that you provide your consent:**
   - [ ] I agree to be interviewed via e-mail for the purpose of this research. The email will be deleted in 5 years after the study is completed.
   - [ ] I agree to be interviewed via message system for the purpose of this research. Please select one platform following: ___ MSN
___ Yahoo Messenger  
___ Skype

☐ I would like my name to appear in publications as author of the insights and stories that I provide. Please list me as: ______

☐ Please do NOT use my name in storage of data and in publications of this research.

______________________________________________    ______________
Participant                                                                                 Date

______________________________________________    ______________

Please send me this form with your electronic signature/date via email or print this form out and return this form with your signature/date to

Hui-Chun Hsiao
425 Waupelani Drive # 526
State College, PA 168001

Thank you very much.
Appendix C
Interview Questionnaire

Questionnaire Part One

1. Which parts of TS2 you think are the best simulated of real life?

2. How do you play The Sims 2? And why do you play the ways you do?

3. What are your best experiences and the most unexpected experiences in playing TS2?

4. Have you ever created a character like yourself or like people who you are familiar with and play with them in the TS2? If so, how did the characters differ from the real life self or people you know?

5. Which of the characters created for TS2 do you hate the most? Why? And what did you do with him/her?

6. In what ways, if any, do the characters in your play, either those generated by the TS2 system or by you, remind you of someone you are familiar with?

7. What does the TS2 online community (BBS on TS2 official site) mean to you?

8. Are there particular people you would strongly recommend The Sims 2 to? Why?

What has been most beneficial to you as you play The Sims 2?
**Questionnaire Part Two**

1. Which of the characters created for *TS2* are you most attached to? Why? Did you record your play with him/her and write stories about it?

2. What is your story writing procedure? Does your stories simply a record of your game play? If not, what is your storyline based on? Your play, the images you captured from the game play or your own idea?

3. What does writing stories or/and sharing stories in *TS2* mean to you?

4. Is it important to you that other players’ respond to your stories? Why?

5. There appears to be some instances of harmony and conflict in your stories. Is this done for effect, or a deliberate aspect of your play experience in *TS2*?

6. What is the best *TS2* story you created in *TS2*? Do you share it with others? What are memorial/favorite responses you have received for your stories?

7. Has your experience in playing *TS2* challenged/changed the way you see yourself or others in your life?

8. Do you think you learn anything by playing *TS2*? If yes, what have you learned?
Appendix D

GeekU’s Story samples

Dad

I’m a firm believer in saying all the good stuff you have to say about someone before it’s too late. In that light, I present my tribute to my father...and the reason that I felt driven to share this story.

I was adopted when I was three years old. I was too young to remember, but my dad often gave me my baths and tucked me in at night.

As I grew up, Dad always answered my questions about my adoption. He gave me all the information he had, and even kept up communication with my birth mother. When I grew up, he put together a meeting with me and my birth mother - one of the greatest gifts he ever gave me.

My dad was an extraordinary outdoorsman. I remember going on family camping trips, fishing trips, and hikes through the forest. Dad always had something to teach us about the wildlife, plants, geology, or history of where we were. The lessons were interesting because they had to do with what we could see and touch right at that moment.

We also did a lot of skiing when I was a child. Dad would rouse us before dawn to get us ready to go. He always had a pot of oatmeal on the stove for us. Then, after a hot, hearty breakfast, we'd all pile into the big blue truck for a day on the slopes.

Many of my most memorable gifts came from my dad. A box of assorted beads and thread started a love of making bead jewelry. A cedar chest became my treasure box of memories. A sewing machine enabled me to pursue my hobby of making clothes - first for my dolls, then for myself and my son.
Some of the gifts weren't things I could touch. When I was growing up, I expressed interest in learning all kinds of things, from playing the violin to getting my amateur radio license. For every new interest that came up, my dad offered to provide me with the equipment I needed.

My dad has been the most fascinating teacher. I remember long family car rides when he would talk at length about anything from religious history to Soviet politics. He was so knowledgeable that he could make any topic interesting.

As I got older, he and I would sit together in the living room and he would tell me about how the world works and how I could best prepare myself to become a part of it. He knew what I was good at and what I enjoyed doing, and he encouraged me to find a way to make a living doing it.

Dad also taught me hands-on stuff. I learned how to fix a leaky faucet, swap out a light switch, and change a flat tire (which has saved me numerous calls for tow trucks).

My dad continued to support and encourage me when I became an adult. When a friend and I wanted to take over a small coffee shop, Dad could see that it was clearly a losing venture. Nonetheless, he paid some of our living expenses while we ran ourselves into the ground and got nothing for it.

Even at one of the lowest points in my life - when I was a single parent, living with my mother and my small son and struggling through community college - he covered my expenses so I could care for my son instead of having to work.

Early last November, I got a call from my mom saying that Dad had been having seizures and was in the hospital. My son and I went to see him right away.

We found my dad awake and resting comfortably. My brother was already there. Dad said that the doctor had found a small tumor in his brain, but he was going to have it removed and he would be fine and on his way home in a matter of a few days.
Dad did have the operation, and he did go home, just as the doctor said. As far as anyone knew, he was doing fine.

A week later, I got another call from my mom. She asked me to come over - it was about Dad. Her tone, and the fact that she wouldn’t tell me over the phone, made me realize the news was not good.

Mom asked me to join her on the sofa. She looked worried.

"Dad’s neurologist removed the tumor on his brain. The surgery went well, and Dad is at home." I nodded. This part, I already knew. "The tests came back on the tumor." She sighed. "It's malignant. It has grown roots deep into his brain and can’t be removed. The doctor says Dad has about a year left to live." I just sat looking at her, shocked. My father, the outdoorsman, the hard-working family wage earner, the one who had been so supportive of me all my life, was dying. Mom and I held each other and cried for a long time.

Dad’s doing okay now. He has trouble coming up with the right word sometimes when he’s speaking or writing an email. He gets tired easily. But he’s still himself - supportive and encouraging.

We had a wonderful Thanksgiving, all of us together, last November. We all knew we had a lot to be thankful for - HAVE a lot to be thankful for - and my dad made a lot of that possible.

I have been thinking about my dad a lot more now, thinking of all the good times we had and everything he taught me, and treasuring special moments. I recently heard a song for the first time in a long time, and I thought it fit him perfectly:

You've been so kind and generous
I don't know how you keep on giving
For your kindness I'm in debt to you
For your selflessness my admiration
For everything you've done you know I'm bound
I'm bound to thank you for it.

You've been so kind and generous
I don't know how you keep on giving
For your kindness I'm in debt to you
And I never could have come this far without you
For everything you've done you know I'm bound
I'm bound to thank you for it.

Oh I want to thank you for so many gifts you gave
The love, the tenderness, I want to thank you
I want to thank you for your generosity, the love
And the honesty that you gave me
I want to show you show my gratitude
My love, and my respect for you, I want to thank you.

- from "Kind and Generous"
by Natalie Merchant

I love you, Dad!
Here's my challenge to myself: Take on one of the most strictly forbidden subjects in *The Sims 2* and create a story about it - a story that will not get me permanently banned from TheSims2.com.

If you like it - or even if you don't - I'd like to hear what you think. If you don't like it, please tell me so honestly in my guest book. Please don't downrate this story. I've worked long and hard on it, getting the pictures and text just right and doing my best to keep it clean.

I give you...The Mistakes!

Katherine Brown was the youngest daughter of Fred and Esther Brown. The Brown household was a very religious one. All the books and music had a religious theme. They didn't own a television. All through the house there was a prim, proper, almost Victorian air.

Fred Brown was a strict disciplinarian. As head pastor of the neighborhood church, he felt it was his responsibility to set the best possible example for his congregation. His daughters were told how to dress, how to do their hair and makeup, how to comport themselves in public, and where and when they were allowed to go out.

Esther, his wife, was a meek, quiet woman who deferred to her husband on almost everything. She stayed home most of the time, cleaning, cooking, and teaching her daughters the domestic skills she felt they needed. Once a week, she lead the ladies' study group at the church, and that was the extent of her life outside the house.

Margaret, Katherine's oldest sister, was a sophomore in college. Although she was going to a private religious college, Margaret had more "street smarts" than the other three girls put together. Margaret was wise, compassionate, and intelligent, and she liked nothing better than to help someone else out of a tough spot.

Ruth and Rebecca were the seventeen-year-old twins. They were active and mischievous, given to inside jokes and pranks. They were known to do such crazy things as putting sugar in the salt shaker and hiding things, like shoes and toothbrushes, in places no one would think to look. They also played soccer and volleyball for their school.
Of all the Brown girls, sixteen-year-old Katherine had caused her parents the most grief. Katherine was a curious girl. She was not content to simply accept what she was told by her parents. She questioned everything. Sometimes she asked her parents directly, but she learned early on that doing so got her into trouble.

One afternoon, Katherine was on one of her rare trips to the public library getting books for a school project. She came around the end of a shelf and nearly ran into a young man about her own age. He had black hair and the most beautiful, exotic eyes she had ever seen. She was so surprised, she nearly dropped her books.

"Oh, my goodness, I am so sorry!" she gushed, feeling very embarrassed.

"No, it's my fault," the boy said. "Are you okay?"

Katherine looked into the boy's eyes. She was mesmerized. She had never seen such beautiful eyes before. It took her a few moments to regain her composure, and then she laughed nervously. "Yes, I'm okay, thank you."

"My name's Bryce, Bryce Carson. What's yours?"

"Katherine Brown," she said. She shook his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Bryce."

"Likewise, Katherine," he said. "Do you come here often?"

Bryce's look made Katherine feel a little shy. "Sometimes," she said, and shrugged. Bryce smiled warmly. "Good. I hope we meet again." He shook her hand again. "I'm glad to have met you, Katherine."

As she watched him walk away, Katherine thought about her brief encounter with Bryce. The more she thought about it, the more she felt both shy and excited. She had never had a boy be so interested in her before, and she wasn't sure what to make of it.

The next day, she asked her parents' permission to go back to the library. They agreed, and Katherine walked down the street on shaky legs. She was half hoping and half afraid to see Bryce again. When she got to the library, she walked all around it, but did not find him. She was surprised at how disappointed she felt. Katherine chose a quiet corner and started reading.

As she was reading, she noticed someone was standing in front of her, not moving. She looked up, annoyed, but was pleasantly surprised to see Bryce. She smiled. "Hello, Bryce."

He smiled back. "Is that seat taken?" he asked.
"No, please," she said, and moved her things over so he could join her.

Created: 09.03.2006 Updated: 09.03.2006

“What are you working on?” Bryce asked.

“A biology project about llamas,” she answered.

“How’s it going?”

“It’s going well. I’m almost finished.”

Created: 09.03.2006 Updated: 09.03.2006

Katherine and Bryce talked for a long time. Suddenly, she looked up at the clock. “Oh my goodness, I have to get home.” She hurriedly gathered up her things.

“Wait,” Bryce said, “I’d like to see you again. May I?”

“Meet me back here on Monday after school,” Katherine called over her shoulder.

Created: 09.03.2006 Updated: 09.03.2006

Katherine and Bryce met several times that week. Monday and Tuesday they met inside the library. Wednesday, Bryce was waiting for Katherine by the library’s front door.

“Would you like to go somewhere else today, like the coffee shop?” he asked when she arrived.

Katherine had never been to a coffee shop before. In fact, she had heard rumors about the people who hung out there. But if they were anything like Bryce, they couldn’t be as bad as she had heard. So she and Bryce spent the afternoon talking over hot drinks.

Created: 09.03.2006 Updated: 09.03.2006

Back home, Katherine’s family had noticed that she was gone more than usual. Her father asked where she was going and what she was doing. She told him that she was going to the library to work on a biology project. Her father seemed satisfied.

Margaret, though, sensed that there was something more. Margaret had seen the dreamy look on Katherine’s face and knew there was a boy involved in these trips to the library.

Created: 09.03.2006 Updated: 09.03.2006

One evening after supper, Katherine was working on her homework when Margaret came in and sat next to her. Margaret was quiet for a few moments, and then said, “So you’re getting a lot done on that biology project.”

Katherine nodded, wondering what Margaret could be getting at.

Margaret continued. “Do you have a partner, or are you working on it alone?”

Created: 09.03.2006 Updated: 09.03.2006

Katherine looked at Margaret. She realized that Margaret knew her afternoons at the library were not spent alone. She shrugged and said, “There’s a boy Bryce who’s been helping me a little bit.”

Margaret sat back and looked at Katherine. After a moment, she said, “So do you and Bryce get along well?”

Katherine laughed, embarrassed. “Yeah, we do. He’s really sweet, and he’s very nice to me. And he’s handsome, too. He has the most amazing eyes....” Katherine’s voice trailed off and she got that dreamy look again.
Margaret smiled. "He sounds wonderful." She paused until she had Katherine's attention again.

"Just don't let him push you into anything you're not comfortable with, okay?"

Katherine looked surprised. She couldn't imagine Bryce doing anything like that. But she knew that Margaret meant well, so she nodded and said, "Okay. Thanks, Margaret."

Margaret hugged her sister and left the room.

As the end of the school year and final exams approached, Katherine and Bryce saw less and less of each other. But she still thought about him all the time.

Finally, school was out. Katherine was so excited to finally get more of a chance to see Bryce. Plus, she was finally old enough that her parents trusted her to walk places in the neighborhood by herself.

Every day she walked to the library or the coffee shop to meet Bryce. They talked about all kinds of things; music, movies, books, school, and just about everything else. Katherine found Bryce to be fascinating. He knew about so many things that she didn't, and she listened intently to everything he had to say.

In early July, Bryce invited Katherine over to meet his family. She wasn't sure if it was a good idea to go to his house without asking her parents first, but she wanted to know what his parents were like, so she agreed.

"Mom? Dad?" Bryce called as they walked in the door.

"Hi, Bryce," a woman's voice answered.

"Come on, let's go meet my mom," Bryce said to Katherine. He led her to the rec room, where a woman and a girl sat on the floor reading a book.

"Hey, Mom. Hey, Kelly. I'd like you to meet Katherine."

He turned to Katherine. "This is my mom Jane and my sister Kelly."

Katherine extended her hand to his mom. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Carson." They shook hands. "Hi, Kelly. Good to meet you." Kelly suddenly turned shy.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Katherine," his mom said. "Please, call me Jane."

"Where's Dad?" Bryce asked.

"Out back," Jane answered.

"Come on, Katherine," Bryce said, and he led her through the door to the patio.
They found Bryce's dad getting ready to grill some hamburgers for lunch. "Dad, this is Katherine," Bryce said.
Bryce's dad shook Katherine's hand. "Good to meet you. I'm Kendall."
"Pleased to meet you, sir," Katherine said warmly.
"Hey," Bryce said, "want to come see my room?"
Katherine shrugged. "Sure."

Bryce and Katherine went back inside and to his room. She looked around at the posters on the walls, the decorations on his desk, and his CD collection on the floor. Everything was new to her.

She and Bryce sat on the floor and listened to some music. The music, too, was new to her, and she was captivated. All she ever heard at home was hymns and classical music. Here she was listening to something sweet and melancholy, and it was almost hypnotizing her.

All too soon, it was time for her to go home. Bryce walked her to the front door. "Thank you for coming over. I had a great time." He had a look in his eye that made her feel all warm and tingly inside.
She blushed and smiled. "So did I. Maybe we can do it again sometime."
"How about tomorrow?" Bryce asked hopefully.
"Sure, I'd like that."

She looked into Bryce's eyes and got a funny feeling in her stomach and began to feel a little dizzy. They held hands for a moment, then Bryce moved in close to her. He put his arms around in her in a hug.

Katherine's head was spinning, and she was so fluttery inside she could hardly breathe. Bryce's face was right in hers now, and before she knew what was happening, he kissed her. It was just a peck on the lips, but it was so thrilling that Katherine thought she was going to faint. Bryce held her until he was sure she was steady on her feet, then he bid her goodbye.
When Katherine got home, she was still shaky. To make matters worse, her father was waiting for her at the front door. He looked extremely displeased. Her mother looked worried. She could hear Ruth and Rebecca inside, snickering.

The next morning, Katherine got up early. She was going over to Bryce's house again, and she didn't want anyone asking her any questions.

As she approached Bryce's house, though, she saw a taxi driving away. Through the back window, she could see Jane and Kendall. She knocked on the front door, and Bryce answered.

"Hi, Bryce, where are your parents going?"

"Oh, they're going to some all-day seminar. Kelly's got a plan at a friend's house. So we can hang out here and have the house to ourselves."

Bryce made breakfast, and they played a couple of rounds of pool. Then they played hackey sack for a while.

After lunch, Bryce said, "Want to watch a movie?"

"Sure," Katherine said.

So Bryce chose a comedy - not too violent for Katherine, and not too soppy for himself.

As they watched the movie, Bryce kept looking at Katherine in a way that made her feel that funny tingly feeling inside again. He put his hand on her knee, then slowly started moving it up her leg. It tickled, but it also stirred up the same fluttery feelings in her stomach. She could feel her heart beating faster. She had no idea what these new feelings were, but she liked them.

Bryce pulled her toward him and held her close. He touched her face, then turned her head so he could kiss her. He continued touching her all over. Finally, when they were both flushed and breathing hard, he whispered, "Let's go finish this in my room."

What happened in Bryce's room that day, Katherine could not even begin to describe. It was the most amazing experience of her young life, and she wanted it to last forever. She couldn't imagine going back to her boring, sheltered life after this.
But return she must, and she avoided eye contact with everyone that night. She spent the evening in her room, writing in her diary. Margaret came in at one point, but Katherine ignored even her favorite sister.

In fact, Katherine spent almost the entirety of the next few weeks holed up in her room. She came out only to eat. She wanted to see Bryce again, but at the same time, she wasn't sure she could face him.

Three weeks went by since her last visit before Katherine decided she needed to get up her courage and see Bryce again. She willed herself to continue up the walk and to ring the doorbell.

Jane answered. As soon as she saw Katherine, she broke out into a huge smile.

"I am so glad to see you!" she exclaimed. "Bryce has been moping around for the last three weeks, thinking something awful had happened." She ushered Katherine inside.

"Bryce!" Jane called. "Someone's here to see you!"

Bryce trudged out of his room. He was in his pajamas, and he had not shaved in some time. He looked tired. But his face brightened when he saw Katherine.

She smiled, embarrassed. "Hi, Bryce."

Bryce grinned. "Katherine! I thought something awful had happened. You didn't call or come by or anything."

Katherine looked at the floor, feeling guilty. "I know. I'm sorry."

Jane turned to Bryce. "Maybe you want to get cleaned up a bit for your guest?"

This time it was Bryce with the embarrassed smile. "Oh, yeah, um...excuse me, okay?"

Katherine smiled. "Sure."

"Come on, Katherine," said Jane. "Let's have some tea while Bryce gets presentable."

In the kitchen, Jane asked, "What kind of tea do you like, Katherine? We have peppermint, licorice, lemon, green..."

Suddenly, tea was one of the last things Katherine wanted. "I think I'd just like some water, thank you."

"Okay, are you sure?" Jane turned to Katherine, who looked pale. "Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry, I just don't feel well." A wave of nausea washed over Katherine, and she just made it into the bathroom before she got sick.
Jane came in behind her. "I am so sorry, are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

Katherine stood up. "I'll be okay, thanks. I've been sick every morning for the last three days, but I'm usually okay after breakfast."

Jane hugged her and said, "Well, let's get you some breakfast, then." Katherine thought she saw a gravely serious look on Jane's face, but she was too sick to really notice.

Bryce came in as his mom was finishing making some pancakes. He wondered why the others were so quiet.

Jane served the kids some pancakes, then sat and ate quietly. Finally, she looked at Bryce and asked, "When did you say was the last time Katherine came over?"

"About three weeks ago." He paused, looking uncomfortable. "It was the day of your seminar."

Jane nodded, then said, "Something major happened that day, too, guessing from how the two of you have been acting since then." It was a statement, not a question, and it made the kids squirm uneasily.

Jane was quiet again for a long time. Bryce and Katherine glanced at each other, wondering what was going through his mother's head. Finally, she turned to Katherine and said, "I think you might be pregnant."

Katherine just looked at Jane. At first Katherine didn't react - she had no idea how to respond. She just sat there looking at Jane and grasping for the next thing to say. She was shocked, terrified, humiliated, and awed all at the same time. She looked at Bryce, and she guessed from his expression that he was thinking the same thing.

Jane broke the silence. She turned to Katherine and said, "My guess is, your parents would take this very, very badly. Am I right?"

Katherine nodded, still too stunned to speak.

Jane sighed. "Well, they need to be told. Do you want me to go with you?"

The shock began to wear off, and tears formed in Katherine's eyes. Never had something this drastic ever happened to her, and never had someone showed so much support and care for her before. She nodded and tried to say "thank you", but the words did not come.

Bryce finally found his voice. "I think I should go, too. After all, the whole day here alone was my idea." Jane nodded.

So the three of them walked to Katherine's parents' house. Katherine introduced the others to her parents and to Margaret. To her relief, Ruth and Rebecca were not home. She wished her parents weren't either, but then she would just have to tell them some other time.
Mr. Brown, Margaret, Jane, Katherine and Bryce settled in the living room. Mrs. Brown offered around juice and tea, then joined the others.

“So, what’s this all about?” Mr. Brown asked, with an accusing edge to his voice.

Jane looked at Katherine, who was trembling. Soon, all eyes were on Katherine, who could not speak for a minute. Finally, she drew a deep breath, looked her father squarely in the eye, and said, “Daddy, I’m pregnant.”

There wasn’t a sound in the room. Mr. Brown didn’t say anything for a long time. But his face turned bright red, and he began to shake. Finally, he stood up and shouted, “Katherine Brown, you are no longer welcome in this house. Go get your belongings, all of them. I want no trace of you left behind!”

Katherine was thunderstruck. She knew her father would be angry, but she had no idea that he would want to erase her from his life completely. Tearfully, she went to her room, with Jane and Bryce behind her. They packed her clothes, books, photos, and personal items into whatever bags they could find. Then they went to the bathroom and got her toothbrush and hair brush. The whole time, Bryce kept saying, “I’m so sorry, this is all my fault. I never should have asked you to do that. I’m sorry.”

Outside, Jane heaved a sigh. “Well, you don’t have to worry about having a place to stay. You can come stay with us. We’ll make room for you, and you and the baby and Bryce can all stay together.”

Katherine began to cry again. It was all so much to take in - the baby, being disowned by her father, and Jane’s unwavering acceptance and support.

Jane, Kendall, and Bryce brought in a crib and a changing table for the baby and set them up in Bryce’s room. Kelly was glad to have Katherine around; to her, it was like having a big sister. Katherine started school in September at the same school Bryce went to.

Katherine may have been pregnant, but Kendall and Jane did not let her have it easy. They had taken her in as a daughter, and as such, she was expected to be a full-fledged member of the family.

But Katherine wouldn’t have had it any other way. She loved working side-by-side with Jane in the kitchen, helping look after Kelly, and studying with Bryce. Every day she felt more and more a part of the family, and she had never felt more loved and welcomed.

Finally, in April it was time for Bryce and Katherine’s baby to be born. Kendall arranged for a cab to take them to the hospital, where Katherine gave birth to a beautiful, healthy baby boy. They named him Zane.
Bryce and Katherine were wonderful parents. They paid lots of attention to little Zane and took very good care of him. Zane grew quickly into a strong, happy baby.

One afternoon, when Bryce, Katherine and Zane were resting, a visitor rang the doorbell. Kendall answered the door and ushered the visitor in. Then he came to see Katherine.

"Hey, you might want to come out and see who's here. And bring Zane," he said.

Katherine looked at Kendall, confused. But she did as he suggested. She brought Zane to the rec room, and Bryce followed, intrigued. To their amazement, there on the sofa, was Katherine's sister Margaret.

Katherine just stood there, stunned. Margaret smiled at her sister. "I came to see how you're doing." She motioned toward Zane. "He's beautiful. He looks so happy. You both must be great parents."

Jane and Kendall looked on as Margaret held her little nephew. It was a healing step, for everyone. They knew, and Katherine knew, that there may never be a way to mend relations with the rest of Katherine's family. But in this moment, the rift didn't seem so great, and maybe it was possible to heal the old wounds.

Originally, The Mistakes was going to be a one-part story. But so many people asked me, "So what happens next?" that I decided to tell this part of it, too.

They say that sequels are rarely as good as the original, and I admit I probably could have done better with this one. But I've learned a lot by creating it, and I hope you enjoy it, anyway. :-)

And now, on to The Mistakes, Part 2!

One year later, Katherine's father still had not had a change of heart. He had moved the rest of the family to a new house on the other side of town and steadfastly refused to allow his wife and the twins to communicate with Katherine.

Katherine, or Kate, as she had begun to call herself, could not have been more welcome in the Carson household. Jane minded little Zane while Bryce and Kate were in school. Jane and Kendall loved their new role as grandparents, and Kelly was an attentive and fun auntie. Kate missed her own family, but life for her was good.
Many more years passed. Kate and Bryce were grown now and on their own. Zane had grown from a healthy, happy baby to an active, friendly boy and now he had a sister, Lucy. Bryce had gotten a good job with the Sim City government, so Kate was able to stay home with the children.

While Zane and Lucy were at school, Kate would spend long hours reading, gardening, or playing the piano. This gave her lots of time to think about the years since she and Bryce met. She had many happy memories, but she was deeply saddened when she thought about how her parents and sisters had missed some of the biggest moments of her life:

Her high school graduation...

...her and Bryce's wedding...

...and the birth of their daughter Lucy.

But the Browns were growing up, too. Margaret had finished medical school and was working in an assisted living home.

And Ruth and Rebecca had married and had children of their own.
But the passing years had not been so kind to Fred and Esther Brown. Fred became bitter, constantly worrying how he had failed as a parent. He became even stricter than before, and this started a cycle of frustration as his children grew up and moved away - far, far away. In the end, all he could do was to keep his wife a prisoner in her own home. Even his congregation was moving away as he became more fire-and-brimstone in his sermons.

Through all of this, Esther never recovered from the loss of her youngest daughter. Secretly, Esther admired Kate's curiosity and courage to question. It was a trait Esther herself had, but never allowed herself to show it.

Esther's spirit and health began to crumble after Kate left. Each milestone in her daughters' lives made her own life more and more joyless because each milestone moved her children farther and farther away. Esther became old and frail.

Finally, Margaret used her position as a medical professional to convince her father to move Esther into the assisted living home where she worked. Margaret felt that it was not only medically necessary, but also spiritually important, since the family was more likely to visit at the care home than at the house under Fred's harsh eye.

It was not long after Esther's move to the care home that Kate received an email from Margaret saying that their mother's health was failing. Kate's eyes welled with tears when she thought of her strong, gentle mother lying in a bed, withered and dying.

The day after she received the email, Kate and Bryce got the children ready and went to see Esther. When they arrived, Kate decided it would be wise to have Margaret escort them. So the found her and asked her to take them to Esther's room.

Esther was awake and sitting up reading when Margaret knocked on the door. "Hi, Mom," Margaret said gently. "How are you feeling?"

Esther shrugged and said nothing.

"I have a visitor for you. Is now a good time?"

There was a tone of enthusiasm that piqued Esther's interest. She put her book down. Margaret opened the door wider, and Kate, Bryce, Zane, and Lucy walked in.

For a long moment, nobody moved or spoke. Kate had no idea how her mother would react - it had been so long and it had ended so badly before. Bryce suspected that he and Kate were probably not on good terms with Esther. Margaret simply stood back and let events unfold.
Esther just stared for a long time, almost unwilling to believe it was her youngest daughter. Finally, she sat up, slowly set her thin feet on the floor, and, quivering, stood up. Her whole body shook with the effort.

She looked at Kate and held out her arms. For the first time in ten years, mother and daughter held each other.

Kate helped her mother onto the sofa, and she introduced her to Zane and Lucy. Esther's eyes shone with joy as she met her grandchildren for the first time. Kate had brought a photo album, and she and Esther looked at it together while Bryce took the children to play. One photo at a time, Esther got caught up on the years of her daughter's life that she had missed. She could not have been happier.

Finally, Kate could see that Esther was getting tired, so she gave her mother one more hug and helped her back to bed. Kate gathered her things and stood at the door to watch her mother sleep. Margaret appeared behind her.

There was a moment of silence while the sisters looked at their mother together, then Margaret said quietly, "I haven't seen her so peaceful in years. I'm glad this worked out for everyone."

Kate hugged Margaret and said, "Thank you so much for trying so hard not to let the family fall apart completely." The held each other for a moment, then Kate went to find Bryce and the kids.

Over the next couple of weeks, Esther's spirit got better and better. Kate came over whenever she could, and usually brought the children. Esther even got up enough strength to take short walks out into the garden to be in the sun. Her happiest times now, she said, were when she was sitting on the bench in the garden, talking with Kate and watching the children play.
On one of these afternoons, after Kate had taken Esther to her room and helped her to bed, Esther looked at Kate and said, "For ten years, I felt like my baby girl had been stolen from me. I am so glad you're back in my life. I feel completely at peace now."

"I'm glad to have you back in my life, too, Mom," Kate said. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Katherine. Goodbye," said Esther, and she dropped off to sleep.

Later that evening, Kate got a phone call from Margaret. She sounded like she had been crying.

"Margaret, what's wrong? Is it Mom?"

"Yeah, Mom died about an hour ago."

Kate was quiet for a long time. Finally, she said, "Is there going to be a service?"

Margaret said, "Probably. I just called Dad, Ruth and Rebecca, and they're on their way here. I'll let you know what I find out."

"Thank you, Margaret. I don't care what Dad thinks, I want to be there."

"Okay. I'll call you when I have the details." Margaret and Kate hung up.

Bryce had been standing in the doorway listening. He gathered from what he heard that Esther had died. He gave Kate a hug. "I am so sorry," he said soothingly.

Kate heaved a big sigh. "I'm just glad I got to spend what time with her I could before....." Her voice trailed off.

"So what about the service? Are you going?"

Kate nodded. "Margaret said she'd let me know when and where it's going to be. And I think I'll take Zane, if you would stay with Lucy."

Margaret called again a couple of days later. "The service will be at the church tomorrow. Can you make it?"

"Yes," Kate said. "Thank you."

Inside, Kate was both nervous and excited. She was so eager to see her sisters again and meet their families. But at the same time, she was afraid her father would cause a scene about her being there. Kate didn't want trouble, but she felt that, regardless of her father's feelings, she was entitled to be at her mother's memorial service. Kate had knots in her stomach for the rest of the evening from worrying.
The next afternoon, Kate and Zane dressed up for the memorial service and went to the church. Kate looked around at the place that held so many memories for her. It had been so long since she was last here, and she felt rather out of place. Zane was looking around, too, wondering what he was going to think of the family he had never met.

In the sanctuary, Kate stood by the back door nervously. She could see her sisters and their families sitting in the pews. At the front was her mother's urn, flanked by arrangements of tulips, Esther's favorite flower. And at the very front was her father, looking old and tired.

That old, tired look immediately turned to rage when Fred noticed Kate and her son standing at the back of the room. He stomed down the aisle, got right in her face, and demanded, "What makes you think you're welcome here? You are not a member of this family! Get out right now!"

Kate looked calmly at her father and quietly said, "She was my mother, just as she was Margaret, Ruth and Rebecca's mother. I have just as much right to be here as they do. I will not let you push me around any more." She looked at him evenly. "Excuse me, please. My son and I would like to join the service." She took Zane by the hand and led him to an empty pew. She could feel Fred's eyes burning into the back of her neck, but she ignored it.

She noticed Ruth and Rebecca turning to look at her and Zane and looking like they would like to come and talk. Kate guessed that they were still very much under Fred's sway and were afraid of angering him.

The service was beautiful. Margaret, Ruth and Rebecca each spoke, then Fred took a turn. Through his anger and tears, he spoke lovingly of Esther and what a model wife and mother she was. As soon as the organ began to play again, Kate and Zane left.

Kate didn't say a whole lot for the next couple of days. She spent a lot of time thinking about the service, about her father's reaction to her coming, and about how her sisters seemed to want to reconnect with her. She wondered if there was a way to make that happen.

"Dad's in the hospital," Margaret said. "He's had a heart attack. It's bad. The doctor says he probably won't pull through."

Kate was silent. Her first instinct was to run to her father's side. Even with as angry and bitter as he had been, even with as hurt as she felt, he was still her father and she still cared about him. But she knew there was a chance that her being there would stress him so badly that it would kill him.

Margaret finally broke the silence. "If you want to see him, it might be a good idea." She paused. "He's not been conscious since they brought him in. I can go with you if
Kate finally found her voice. "Yes, please. Can you meet me there right now?"

"Sure. I'll be at the front door."

Kate met Margaret at the front entrance to the hospital, and Margaret led her to Fred's room. No one else was there.

Kate looked at her once proud, stern father lying, weak and vulnerable, in his bed. She had no idea what to do or say. Finally, she simply took his hand and said, "Daddy, it's Katherine. I love you."

Kate stood looking at her father and holding his hand for what seemed like an eternity. There was no response from him for a long time. Finally, Kate saw his eyes open. He turned his head slightly to look at her. Then she felt a gentle squeeze on her hand and saw a tear in his eye.

In that moment, Kate felt more at peace than she had in many years. She knew her father had forgiven her and that he loved her. They gazed at each other for a long moment, then his eyes closed and he was gone.

Kate and Margaret stood looking at their father's lifeless form and grieving for some time. Finally, Margaret sighed and said, "I'd better call the others. Let's go to the lobby."

Kate was surprised that Margaret thought so little about having all four sisters in one room. "Do you want me to go so they can be with him and you all can make arrangements?"

"No, you can stay," Margaret said as she pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

"Hey, Ruth, it's Margaret...yeah, he died about fifteen minutes ago...she's here...yes, she really is...good, see you soon." Margaret hung up her phone.

Kate looked at Margaret, confused. Margaret was smiling. "Ruth has been aching to see you again all this time. So has Rebecca. They'll be here shortly."

Kate was mystified. Ever since she left home and moved in with Bryce's family, she had presumed the whole family except Margaret had shut her out. She knew now that she had been wrong about her mother, but she had no idea that her sisters not only didn't hate her, but missed her and desperately wanted to reconnect.
Kate was all aflutter when Ruth and Rebecca arrived. She hugged first one, then the other, in the shared joy of reuniting and the shared grief of the death of their father.

The sisters hugged and cried for a while, then Margaret said, "I think we all have some catching up to do. Shall we go across the street and get something to drink and talk?"

Margaret, Rebecca, Ruth, and Kate found a cafe and sat around talking for a long, long time. Story by story, the sisters became family again. Ruth and Rebecca couldn't have been happier to have their little sister back, and Margaret was pleased that her efforts to keep them together had not been for nothing. Most of all, Kate was overjoyed to be reaccepted into her family. She felt like a piece had been missing from her and now was returned, and she knew that nothing was going to take that away from her again.
Appendix E

BugM’s Story samples

The Super Hero Family

Created: 02.20.2006 Updated: 02.20.2006

Follow Wonder Woman and the boys as they vie for power, find love and lust all while they solve a case that revolves around a phone and a little townie girl that we all love to hate.

Created: 02.20.2006 Updated: 02.20.2006

It was a quiet day in Sim City. The boys, Batman, Captain America, The Flash and Superman, were hanging around head quarters playing poker.

Created: 02.20.2006 Updated: 02.20.2006

Wonder Woman was busy cleaning. As she scrubbed the toilet, she muttered, "They would live as pigs if it weren’t for me; starve too if I didn’t feed them." Ever since they had gotten that poker table, she could barely pry them away to answer the calls of distress they received. They played poker constantly, not stopping until they were starved or ready to pass out. Wonder Woman considered getting rid of the table it was a distraction but, it was a distraction Batman needed.

Created: 02.20.2006 Updated: 02.20.2006

Ever since Robin had run off with Spiderman, Batman had been inconsolable. "I thought we had something special, I thought I meant something to him." Batman wailed this daily for weeks. But since they had gotten the poker table the crying had lessened and he only burst into tears if someone mentioned Robin, or robin eggs, or Baskin Robbins or Robin Hood or...........

Created: 02.20.2006 Updated: 02.20.2006

The piercing ring of the Hot Phone interrupted Wonder Woman's thoughts. Wonder Woman raced to answer it, as she passed the boys still enthralled in their game, she gave them a disgusted look and a sarcastic “Don’t get up. I'll get it.”
On the phone was a very distressed young woman. She frantically explained that she and her roommates were lingerie models and that one of her roommates, Staci...was dead. Wonder Woman asked "Was there an intruder?"

"No" cried the woman, "it was a phone call!!"

Perplexed, Wonder Woman asked "A phone call, how could a phone call kill her?"

Sobbing the woman answered "I...I...don't know...my roommate, Staci, received a phone call...then she started to scream 'make her stop; just please make her stop'. then she burst into flames and she was ...d...d...dead!"

Wonder Woman calmed the caller down and said they would be right over. Sighing, she thought if anything could get them away from that game it will be lingerie models in distress.

She was right, before she could even explain what was wrong, the mere mention of lingerie models had Superman on his feet in a milli-second shouting "Lets go!"

Batman exclaimed "To the Batmobile!" and raced out the door singing "Da na na na na na na na na na na BATMAN!"

The Flash, rolling his eyes, wondered out loud "Does he have to sing that every time?"

Then quickly shouted "Shot gun" and raced after Batman.

Captain America quipped, "At least he isn't crying. Lets Go!"

They all headed for the Batmobile.

As they reached the driveway they all stopped in their tracks. Batman wasn't getting into the Batmobile, he was getting into a mini van.

Surprised Superman exclaimed "What the....Where is the Batmobile. ... this is a mini van!"

Batman, tearing up, explained, "I traded the Batmobile in for the mini van because it held too many memories of Robin and the long drives we took together." Choking back tears he added "the car dealer said it would comfortably seat six."

Batman was sobbing uncontrollably now.

Exasperated Wonder Woman shouted "For the love of ....just get in the van....NOW!"

The Flash, Captain America and Batman quickly climbed in. They were secretly afraid of Wonder Woman and her wonder moods.
Superman stood there with arms crossed and said defiantly "I'm not riding in a mini van...my reputation...for Pete's sake we'll look ridiculous, seriously Super Heros in a mini van!"

Wonder Woman hating that she thought the ego maniac was cute even while annoying her retorted, "Then fly. You know you CAN fly." Sounding like a child, Superman answered, "I don't want to, its not special anymore."

Through clenched teeth, Wonder Woman asked, "What do you mean its not special anymore?"
"Well," began Superman, "These days everyone can fly. The local police department has a whole squad that can fly. They call themselves Catptain Hero's...geez..they dont even have capes! And those Ecological Guru's flying around with their little leaves flapping in the wind, its indecent.. why do they have to fly...what are they going to save.. a tree?"

Not wanting to listen to any more of his tantrum and realizing she wasn't getting anywhere with ordering him to get in the van, Wonder Woman decided to use a different approach to get Superman to do what she want. So she simply mentioned that there were lingerie models waiting and with the speed of light Superman was in the van and they were on their way. Superman was drawn to beautiful women like a fly to honey. He couldn't resist them, not that he ever tried.

Arriving at the lingerie models apartment, the Super Heros found that the grim reaper had already come and gone leaving an urn in Staci's place. Unfortunately, that meant there wouldn't be much evidence.

Wonder Woman instructed the boys to question the models to gather evidence and above all else to remain professional.

Wonder Woman went to work questioning one of the models. She approached the model and asked her her name.
The model answered, "Candi with an i."
Wonder Woman thought to herself, 'what else would it be'. She began the questioning, "So, Candi with an i, what can you tell me about the phone call your roommate, Staci, received before bursting into flames?"
Candi answered in her giggly, high pitched voice, "My names not Candi with an i, its just Candi spelled with an i."

Wonderwoman took a deep breath and continued, "The phone call, what can you tell me about the phone call? Do you know who it was or what the call was about?"

Candi thought then answered, "It all started a few days ago when we went to the park and Staci met a little girl. I don't know her name but she had brown hair and wore a yellow shirt. She went up to Staci and said she needed a friend. Staci felt sorry for her and gave the little girl her number and told her to call whenever she needed to talk. Once the phone calls began, they never stopped. Staci was on the phone constantly and when she wasn't she walked around the apartment wringing her hands muttering to herself. The phone calls where driving her crazy!"

"Today was the worse day of all because the calls kept coming all night. So Staci hadn't slept and was really on edge and when she answered the phone for the tenth time today suddenly she threw her arms up in the air, like this," Candi demonstrated, "and screamed like a banshee 'make her stop ....somebody make her stop' and then poof she went up in flames and was gone." Candi began to cry.

"Instantaneous Combustion" Wonder Woman said with a shudder. "The sheer frustration and annoyance this child inflicts must have caused the blood to boil until the victim exploded in a ball of fire. This little demon child needed to be stopped before she could strike again.

Weepily Candi pouted, "If only there was something we could have done to save Staci, but we're just incredibly beautiful lingerie models."

Wonder Woman shaking her head replied, "Did you ever consider unplugging the phone, turning the ringer off or changing your number?" Candi with an i ran out of the room crying. Wonder Woman knew it was her sworn duty to serve and protect but stupid people annoyed her. Getting all the information she could from Candi, Wonder Woman turned her attention to her partners in crime fighting to see if they had gotten any information from the other models.

Looking around the room she couldn't believe her eyes. The Flash, Captain America, and Superman were all cuddling on the couch with lingerie models in their laps. Batman was no where to be seen.

Wonder Woman choked with rage shouted, "What are you doing! Where is Batman?" Shaking and her heart pounding, she didnt know if she was angry at them for their unprofesionalism or because Superman was sitting their smirking with that Bleach blond bimbo on his lap.
Preface:
My name is Cynthia Pitt and this is the story of my life. I'm 17 years old and just began my final year of high school. The first 17 years of life were full of love and laughter. My Mom died shortly after giving birth to me. I know you're saying aww, and yes, there were times I miss the idea of a Mom but I didn't know my Mom. I'm a Daddy's girl. My Dad has been there for every triumph to cheer me on and for every defeat to pick me up and dust me off. I'm a plain, ordinary girl but to my Dad, I'm a beautiful princess. This is my story and it begins at a time that felt like the end.

It was a bright and sunny day, birds chirped happily in trees the sweet fragrance of flowers surrounded me, but, to me the day was ugly, black and unreal. The only thing that was real was the cold hard marble of my father's tombstone and the stabbing pain in my heart.

Just two days earlier, as I was getting on the school bus, I turned and waved goodbye to my father standing on our porch. I was carefree, but I didn't know then what I know now. I climbed aboard the school bus like it was any other day.

After the last class of the day, my friends and I were hanging around the computer lab, as we often did. We were geeks and proud of it, at least that is what we told ourselves. It was a normal day, like hundreds of other days. Still, as I sat listening to my friend, Traci, talking about our chemistry homework, I couldn't understand why I had an uneasy feeling growing in the pit of my stomach.

I looked up to see our principal, Mr. Hastings walk into the room. Normaly he bounded into a room with a bounce in his step and smile on his face. The students loved him for his jovial manner and honest concern for their welfare. Today, when he came into the room he walked as if carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders and his smile was replaced by a somber look rarely seen upon his face. The uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach was growing.
Mr. Hastings walked straight over to me and in a voice oddly filled with sympathy said, "Cynthia there is someone in my office that needs to speak with you." The uneasy feeling in my stomach was spreading, "Is it my Dad?" I asked. "No, Cynthia, please come with me." was all he said.

I followed Mr. Hastings to his office, every step full of dread. I didn't know why I was feeling this way, it was a normal day like any other day. I had been to Mr. Hastings's office lots of times to chat, why now did the thought of entering his office have me wanting to run scared.

When we entered Mr. Hastings's office a blond haired man sat in one of the wooden chairs in front of his desk. I didn't recognize anything about this man, but for some reason I knew I didn't want to hear anything he had to say to me.

The man stood and faced me. He was a handsome man about the age of my Dad and he wore an expensive suit. My heart was racing and my palms were sweaty. Who was this man and why was he here to see me?

He stood there staring at me with a look of both surprise and concern. It felt like forever before he spoke. Then finally he said, "Forgive me for staring Cynthia, I was taken aback by your striking resemblance to your mother." He didn't know what he was talking about, I had seen pictures of my mother and she was a beautiful woman and I was just me. Nervously, I asked, "Who are you?" He smiled and said, "I'm sorry, of course you don't recognize me. You were an infant the last time I saw you. I am your Uncle Edward, your mother's brother."

He came towards me and embraced me. My Dad had told me I had an Uncle Edward but he lived far away and I never saw him. I was confused and started asking questions, "I don't understand, why did you come to see me here at the school? Have you seen my Dad? Does he know you are here?" My Uncle squeezed me a little bit tighter when I asked about my Dad and then letting go of me, in a gentle voice he told me to sit down he had something he needed to tell me. The blood in my veins turned to ice and I shivered.

Slowly, Uncle Edward began, "Cynthia, there is no easy way to tell you this. This morning I received a phone call from Captain Jones of the Pine Place Police Department where your Dad works. He said that your Dad was shot while responding to a call of an armed burglary at the local bank. Your Dad had me listed as who to contact in case of an emergency. I came as quickly as I could, I wanted to be here for you when you
heard the news."

Frantic I demanded, "You have to take me to the hospital, I have to be with my Dad."
The look in my Uncle's eyes told me what he was going to say before I heard the
words, "Cynthia, you don't understand. I'm sorry Honey, your Dad didn't make it, he
died, there wasn't anything anyone could do."

I sprang from the chair, shaking with rage I screamed, "Your a liar, my Dad would
never leave me."

Calmly My Uncle said, "I'm sorry, honey, but its true."
Pounding my fists in the air, I began pleading, "I need to see my Daddy. It's not true,
its a mistake. I need to see my Daddy, please stop. Why are you trying to hurt me?
Mr. Hastings please tell him my Daddy's okay." I looked into Mr. Hasting sad face and
knew it was true. The room began to spin and I felt the floor begin to slip away from
beneath my feet.

Before I could collapse to the floor, my Uncle Edward was there wrapping his arm
around me giving me support. He told me over and over again that he would be there
for me that he would take care of me, that everything would be ok. Racked with grief
greater than I had ever known possible, I thought how could this be happening, it was
just a normal day like any other day.

Two days passed. Two days of hugs, I didn't feel and condolences I didn't hear. Two
days wrapped in an unpenetrable fog where only my aching heart could be felt and the
silent screams of agony in my head could be heard. Two days past and here I stood in
front of my Daddy's tombstone and he was gone. I would never see him again except
in my memories. Memories that came flooding back to me like uncontrollable waves
racing towards a shore.

Me running to my Daddy's open arms.

Being scooped into the air and knowing I was the apple of my Daddy's eyes.

Flying on my swing. My relentless, "higher Daddy, I want to go higher." Laughing,
pushing me higher until I felt like I could touch the sky.
Quiet times, my Daddy reading to me. My favorite story was THE UGLY DUCKLING, I felt like an ugly duckling and it gave me hope that one day I would be a beautiful swan. When I told my Daddy this, he smiled and cupping my face in his hand said, "But Pumpkin, you're already a beautiful swan." He wasn't just saying that, he believed it, to him I was beautiful.

My teen years when most kids turn away from their parents, I still knew my Daddy would always be there to comfort me and give me the encouragement I needed to get through the pitfalls of adolescence.

Daddy tickling me until my worries were gone.

The last memory of my Daddy, two days ago, he was waving to me from the porch as I got onto the school bus. His last words to me, 'Have a good day pumpkin. I'll see you for dinner.'

Two days had passed since I waved goodbye and here I stand, long after the other mourners have gone, my Uncle Edward standing near like a silent pillar of protection. My body weak but my feet feel made of stone unable to turn and leave. Once I leave, my new life will begin and I'll have to face the truth, my Daddy is gone.

My Uncle Edward came slowly towards me and wrapped his protective arm around me. Knowing I was unable to leave on my own, he gently turned me away from my father's grave and led me out of the cemetery.
Time had stopped once again, just as it seemed to the first time I looked into Tom's eyes. The Beatles began singing 'Hey Jude' over my stores sound system and I was taken back to that summer when we first met. The summer of 1969.

Despite the Woman's Movement my friends were still looking at college as a way to meet the right, wealthy, husband and joining their parents in the ranks of the Country Club set. I wanted something more than what my parents had planned for me. Ava lived the life she wanted; not worrying about living up to anyone's expectations but her own. Ava talked often about her boyfriend, Aran, and their friends Rolf and Jewel. She not so subtly mentioned Aran's friend Tom, hinting we would make a great couple. My curiosity had led me to agree to go with Ava to meet her friends on an afternoon when I knew my parents would be out.
"Ava, how much further is it?" I asked as I tripped over a tree root.
"Just a little further, I promise." She answered. We had driven down a dirt road off of
the main road. Then parked in the woods and proceeded on foot. Finally, we came
upon a clearing and a little stone path over run by grass and wildflowers led to the
bright blue door of a little shack. It was a dilapidated little structure with a sagging roof
and peeling paint. Ava had spoken of the place with such fondness, I was a little
surprized by the condition.

We entered through the blue door. The shack was furnished with well worn
mismatched furniture, I was sure came from the dump. Amongst the worn posters and
road signs covering the walls were beautiful abstract painting. "Ava, baby where have
you been?" The guy lounging on the couch asked. Ava held up the bag full of snacks
we had picked up after work. It was immediately met with cheers.

Ava introduced me to her friends. Lounging on the couch was Aran, her boyfriend.
Dancing wildly to Jimi Hendrix playing on a transistor radio was Jewel, a pretty redhead
with a pixi cut and sitting unable to take his eyes off of Jewel was Rolf, Jewel's
boyfriend. I was welcomed with smiles and warm hellos. Ava noticing me eyeing the
paintings, smiled and whispered, "Tom painted them."

Ava asked where Tom was and everyone pointed out back.

We went out through the back door into the backyard. It was wild and beautiful. The
late afternoon sun shown down on the the ground covered in vibrant wilflowers making
them sparkle. The air was filled with their sweet perfume. Butterflies flitted about and
song birds chirped happily in the branches of the shrubs and tress that surrounded the
area, protecting it from the outside world. My home was surrouned by manicured
lawns, perfectly clipped hedges and carefully planned flower beds, the envy of the
neighborhood. It couldn't compare to this place that seemed out of a faily tale.

Standing at an easle painting was a boy that looked just as wild and beautiful as his
surroundings.

"Tom, I have someone I want you to meet." Ava said. The boy painting stopped and
turned towards us. Time stopped as our eyes met. There was an instant connection.
We stood staring at each other, it could have been two minutes or two hours. Ava
broke the silence with a giggle and a "I'm gonna leave you two alone now." We both
laughed and Tom said, "Its nice to finally meet you Eve. Ava talks about you all the
time."

After the first few awkward moments, we talked as if we had known each other our
entire lives. We talked about books, politics and music. We both loved the Beatles and
agreed the recent marriage of John Lennon to Yoko Ono would be the end of them. We
talked about poetry, everything from the classics of Robert Frost and Eager Allen Poe
to the the gritty realism of contemporary poets Allen Ginsberg and Etheridge Knight.
Tom was a talented artist and when he talked about art his eyes lit up and he spoke
with the same excitement as a child talking about Christmas morning. Tom wasn't like
any other boy I had known. I hadn't dated much, just awkwardly set up dates with
sons of my parent's friends. They talked about how fast their cars went and how much
money they would make when they joined what ever company their father owned. The
rest of the date would be spent fighting off the advances of the “respectable boy” my parents had set me up with. My parents would not approve of Tom.

We talked about our families. There was love and warmth in his voice when Tom spoke of his. He was the youngest of three boys. His oldest brother had been killed in the early stages of the War in Vietnam. It had devastated his parents and Tom had become an active anti-war protester. I envied Tom’s closeness with his family. I often felt like one of my parent’s possessions brought out on occasion to impress their friends. They pushed me to be the best at everything, second would not be good enough. I worked hard to win their approval. I graduated top of my class, anything else would have been unacceptable. I would be attending a prestigious private college in New England in the fall where I would be expected to excel, graduate with honors and then marry a proper husband. Anything else would be unacceptable. Being at the shack would be unacceptable. I suddenly realized it was dark and that we had been talking for hours.

I quickly rose to my feet and said, “I should be going.” I had to get home before my parents, I didn’t want to have to explain where I had been. They would forbid me to ever come here again and I wanted to come back. I couldn’t imagine not seeing Tom again. Was not telling them where I was a lie? I was torn between doing what my parents demanded of me and what I wanted. All my life I had done what was considered proper in their eyes. I told myself as long as they didn’t ask I was safe. Tom seemed puzzled by my needing to leave so early but said, “That’s cool.” Then leaned over and kissed me on the cheek adding, “I hope to see you again.” I said goodbye to everyone and Tom walked me back through the woods to my car.

This is the end of part one. Read part two as Eve fights for her independence and grows closer to Tom.

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO CREATED THE CUSTOM CONTENT USED IN THIS STORY.

A few days later, Ava brought me back to “the shack,” as it was lovingly called by everyone. Tom and Aran were out back playing hacky sack. They were skilled players. The sack never touched the ground. Tom invited us to play. I hesitated, “I’ll just watch, I’ve never played before.” I said “We’ll show you,” Tom coaxed, “It’s okay, Eve, you don’t have to be perfect. Just let yourself have fun.”
I was far from perfect. The sack went flying in all directions when I did manage to kick it. I did have fun and I loved not being perfect. Aran teased me mercilessly and I loved that too. Rolf and Jewel showed up a bit later and joined us. We played until we were too hot and hungry. Aran suggest going for a swim and as he started for the pond added, "Last one in buys pizza." Everyone took off running for the small dock by the pond taking of their clothes with wild abandon as they ran. I had never been skinny dipping and the thought put a knot in my stomach....it was broad daylight. I slowly followed the trail of discarded clothing.

When I got to the dock. I wished I had let go of my inhibitions and ran along with them because then I would be in the water and not standing on the dock with everyone looking up at me. Ava yelled, "Come on, Eve. Jump in." Aran laughingly teased, "I'll only peak a little." Ava promptly jumped on Aran's back pushing him under the water. Jewel and Rolf were locked in a passionate kiss. Tom smiled at me, winked and turned away from the dock.

I took that moment to forget about the Eve I was expected to be and was the Eve I wanted to be. Free. I stepped out of my clothes.

I walked out on to the diving board and did a cannonball into the pond. I will always refer to this moment as the Liberation of Eve. I wasn't perfect, good girl Eve and the world didn't end. We swam, played, splashed and laughed. I had swam wearing expensive bathingsuits in expensive pools but swimming naked in a pond amongst the water lilies, cat tails and my new friends I had the time of my life. I happily bought the pizza.

Later that afternoon, when we were alone, Tom pulled me into his arms and said, "I'm falling for you Eve." Then he gave me my first real kiss. It was warm, sweet and left me feeling dizzy, everything a first kiss should be. He was everything my parents disished. His hair was long and he had tattoos. Tom didn't care about material possessions. He was happy with life's basics, a roof over his head, enough food to eat and having friends to love, laugh and share life with. I was falling for him too. When I was with Tom, I was perfect just being me.

I spent enough time at home and at my parent's social functions to avoid questions concerning my activities. I sometimes felt like I was leading a double life. Then in late June my father left for an extended business trip. My mother was too busy with her tennis lessons at the Country Club, shopping and playing Bridge with her friends to care what I was doing. As long as I was home each night my days would be free. Each day I couldn't wait to get to the shack. It was two rooms with no electricity, an outhouse and an old handpump well for water. It was paradise. It was lazy afternoons listening to Tom read me his poetry, swimming, watching Tom paint, dancing and listening to music and just being, with out having an agenda.
Aran came home from work one afternoon, threw himself on the ground and announced he was, "tired of working for the man."
Ava teased, "Working for the man? You work for a guy selling t-shirts that say 'Keep on Truckn'."
Aran laughed and sheepishly added, "We sell tie dyed ones too." Sitting up he said, "I think we should all save our money so we can go to the music festival in upstate New York in August. Man, it is going to be three days of peace, love and music. It will be one hell of a way to end the summer." The end of summer was not something Tom and I talked about. I dreaded the end of summer when I would be leaving for college. The other's had talked about heading to the West Coast and I knew Tom planned on joining them. He dreamed of selling his paintings by the ocean. Tom reached out and squeezed my hand. It was decided we would all go to Woodstock. It gave me almost two months to think of a lie to tell my parents.

Two weeks after my father left for his business trip, my mother told me she would be joining him for the weekend. That afternoon as we danced in the backyard of the shack, I told Tom, my mother would be gone for the weekend and that I would be free to stay the entire weekend at the shack. Tom said nothing but reached out and pulled me into his arms, holding me close as we danced.

Friday evening when I arrived at the shack only Tom was there. We sat on the couch for a long time listening to music and talking. After a while, Tom drew me on to his lap. Looking in my eyes he said, "You know I really love you."
"I love you too." I whispered back. Tom kissed me gently and rose from the couch. He took my hand and led me into the bedroom

Tom lit the candles and then joined me on the bed. Taking me into his arms, he softly said. "Nothing has to happen Eve. I would be happy just to have you in my arms all night." Tom knew there had never been another and he wasn't willing to rush me.

I pulled him to me for a kiss. Tom was as caring and gentle a lover as he was a man. When we made love it wasn't awkward or uncomfortable. It was beautiful and natural and when I fell asleep later with Tom's arms wrapped protectively around me, I felt a happiness I didn't know existed.

Time passed quickly, as it often does when you are happy. As August began every happy, blissful moment I had was tinged with the dread that was building in me because the end of summer was nearing with every passing hour. I would be heading to college at the end of the month and Tom would be heading to California. There was no point in making promises. Everyone was excited about our upcoming trip to Woodstock. It was all we talked about. My father was gone on another business trip, so I only had to worry about lying to mother. I wished I could just tell her the truth about my friends and where I was going but she would have forbid me to go. The story I gave her was that I was taking a bus to visit my high school friend, Miranda, in Philadelphia for a few days.
On August 15, we left for Woodstock. It would be three days that none of us would forget. Over 400,000 people gathered together to hear some of the best music of our generation, The Greatful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, The Who. It was a kaleidoscope of people, music, rain, mud, peace and love. We came home happy and exhausted. My friends dropped me off down the street from my house so my mother wouldn't see. I kissed Tom goodbye and told him I would be over to the shack later that evening, He was leaving in four days and I didn't want to miss any time we had left together.

This is the end of part two. Find out in part three what happens to Eve when she goes home and if Tom goes to California.

Thank you to everyone that created the custom content used in this story.

As I headed home, I hoped my mother wasn't there so I wouldn't have to lie about the great time I had at Miranda's. I thought if she wasn't there to question me then, later in passing she would just ask if I had a good time and I could answer without going into detail. I could simply say I had a great time and that would be the truth. The less lying the better.

However, I wasn't going to be that lucky. Waiting in the livingroom for me was not only my Mother but my Father was home from his business trip. Neither of them looked very happy and when I opened my mouth to speak my Father held up his hand to stop me. He angrily told me, "Before you stand there and lie to your Mother and me, let me tell you we know you were not visiting Miranda in Philadelphia. Miranda was home visiting her parents. We saw her at the Country Club and she told us she had not heard from you in months." My stomach was queezy.

I had never seen my Father so angry. "We have rules, Eve. Expectations for you to live up to. Miranda told us the last time she had spoken to you, you told her about some hippies you were consorting with......" I was sure I had never used the words 'hippies' or 'consorting' but I wasn't going to correct him. He went on and on about how I was letting them down, how I was making them look bad. How disappointed in me they were. I tried to defend myself to tell him what wonderful people Ava, Tom and the others were but he would hear none of it. He just got more angry.

He was seething now. "I forbid you to ever see them again, do you understand Eve? Your quitting your job and you are not to leave this house until you leave for college in two weeks."
"You can't do that."
"I cried.
My Father went off on another tyraid telling me exactly how it was going to be but I didn't hear the words he was saying. My head was pounding.
I broke out in a cold sweat, my knees felt weak. The room began to spin and everything went black.

When I opened my eyes, I was laying on the sofa with my mother looking sternly down at me. She informed me that my father was calling Dr. Drake, the family doctor and making an appointment so they could find out exactly what kind of drugs I was on. I would have laughed if my head wasn't hurting so. "I'm not on drugs, Mother." I told her.

"Eve, how can we believe anything you say? You have been lying to us all summer." She scowled. Fine, I thought. Dr. Drake would tell them I was over tired and that would be the end of it. I had an incredible time and if this ugly scene with my parents was the price I had to pay, so be it.

Dr. Drake had been my doctor all my life, he was kind and I liked him very much. Dr. Drake left the room after he examined me to get the test results from the blood he had drawn. I got dressed and waited in the examining room. He came back in and sat down, "Eve," he said, "your blood shows no traces of drugs." I told him I was just over tired. "Yes, Eve, he said slowly, "and your also pregnant. Would you like to tell your parents of it easier for you if I did." I sat there stunned. I didn't want to tell them. Dr. Drake and I went to his office where my parents were waiting. I didn't listen to what he told them, I was lost in my own thoughts. My Mother let out a small gasp. My Father stood, arms crossed, grimly listening to the Doctor. He thanked Dr. Drake and then escorted me and my Mother out of the office. We drove home in silence.

When we reached home, through clenched teeth, my Father told me to go to my room while they discussed what was to be done. I wanted to argue that it was my life and I should be involved in the discussion but I felt too weak and needed time to gather my own thoughts. I was still in shock. I went to my room and laid on my bed to think but drifted off to sleep. My Mother woke me. "Eve, your Father and I have come to a decision."

Feeling better, I was prepared to argue. "Don't you think I should be the one making the decisions? Its my life!"

"You are 17 years old. You are our responsibility, Eve. We know what is best for you. Your Father is so angry and disappointed in you he can't even look at you. Is that how you want it to be?" she said.

Sighing, I asked, "What decision did you make?"

"Your Father is making arrangements for you to stay at a descrete facility in Maine for girls in your condition." my Mother answered. "A Home for Unwed Mothers?!" I couldn't believe it.

My Mother continued, "You will stay there until you give birth. They will arrange the adoption. While you are away we will tell everyone that you delayed your entrance to college and that you are traveling in Europe. We wont have your indescretion cause a scandale in the community."

"I wont go! Tom loves me and he will want us to be together and raise the baby." I cried.

"Don't be ridiculous, Eve. You were just a summer fling. He knew you would be leaving in the Fall. He was just using you, you mean nothing to him. You are being naive. You
are a minor and you will do as we say. Do not press your Father, Eve. He is a powerful man, he would have Tom thrown in jail. Do not throw your life away or Tom’s.......if you really love him.”

My Mother was shrewd and knew all the right things to say, all the right threats to make. I agreed to go to the ‘facility.’ I needed time to think and by agreeing to go it bought me time. I planned to sneak out in the morning to see Tom. I wasn’t sure I would tell him I was pregnant, but I needed to say goodbye. What my Mother said was true, my Father was a powerful man and would seek to destroy Tom. I had to protect him. Feeling vulnerable I wondered if my mother was right about Tom. I pushed the thought out of my head. Tom loved me..he had to. I couldn't think anymore and crawled into bed and cried myself to sleep.

In the morning, my plan to see Tom was foiled by my parents. They were already up and ready to go. My Mother had packed a few of my belongings and my bags were already in the car. My parents weren't taking any chances. We drove for hours in silence. When we arrived at the ‘facility,’ it looked like any other house on the street. A brick walkway led to a door flanked by two hanging pots of flowers welcoming me to my prison.

Ms. Hubbard, the facility director, greeted us. She was a plain, overly cheerful woman. She told us that up to six girls stayed there at at time, but a present it would just be myself and two other girls. She gave us a tour of the home, as she called it, the dining room, recreation room and the labor and delivery rooms. Everything was decorated in bright cheerful colors. I guessed to keep the prisoners happy. She introduced us to the small staff. There was a nurse on duty at all times and a Doctor on call. At the end of the tour, she went over some of the rules. We were allowed to go to town only when chaperoned by a staff member. Phone calls could only be made to our parents. I would be allowed to receive mail but could only send mail to those my parents approved of. Turning to me she added, "We want your stay with us to be as pleasant as possible, Eve. We care about all our girls." Was she kidding? She showed us to my room.

Under other circumstances, I would have found the pink floral room cozy and charming. But, now I only saw it as my cell in this prison. Ms. Hubbard took my Father back to her office to complete the paper work, leaving me alone with my Mother.

"Eve, I know this is difficult for you, but you will see this is the right decision.” My Mother said, showing sympathy for the first time. "I didn't get to say goodbye to Tom. He has the right to know." I cried. Wrapping her arm around me she said, "If this boy loves you as you think he does. He will come to the house looking for you. If he does, I will tell him where you are. It will be up to him to contact you. If he does, you will know he loves you and if he
I wasn’t sure I believed my Mother, but it was my only hope. When I didn’t show up at the shack, surely Tom would go to my parent’s house looking for me, if only to say goodbye before they left for California. My Mother said goodbye and left my room. My Father left with out saying goodbye. He had barely spoken to me since leaving Dr. Drakes office.

I called my Mother everyday for the next five days. She told me Tom never went to the house. He was surely on his way to California with the others by now. I lay awake at night wondering if our love had been real. I was sure it was, I knew I loved Tom and remembering his eyes and smile when he would looked upon me, I knew he had to love me too. My Mother could very well have been lying to me to make me go along with their plans for me. I needed to talk to Tom, but even if it hadn’t been against the rules, I had no way of contacting him. I had never felt so alone.

One of my fellow inmates at the home was Susan. She was 19 and had been a sophomore at college. Her family was much like mine, locking her away here to avoid scandle. Unlike me she was happy to be here, happy to be having her baby put up for adoption. She gave birth two weeks after I arrived. She never held her baby. She didn’t want to. Two days later she was gone. Ms. Hubbard told me she had a “lovely couple” that wanted to adopt my baby and that I could meet them if I wanted. I had been so wrapped up in my pain and grief in being torn away from Tom and my friends that I hadn’t thought about the little baby growing inside me.

It wasn’t long before my body game me a constant reminder I was pregnant. Morning sickness racked my body not only in the morning but all day long. The nausea lasted about a month and stopped as quickly as it started. My belly was beginning to grow. Everyday it seemed my body was changing. Out of loneliness, I began talking to the little being growing inside me and it wasn’t long before I knew that I would not be able to give this baby made from my and Tom’s love to strangers to raise.

I turned 18 when I was six months pregnant. I went to Ms. Hubbard’s office. I told her I had decided to keep my baby. Ms. Hubbard really was a kind woman. She didn’t try to change my mind, but cautioned me to the difficult road ahead for me. I knew it would be difficult, but I knew it was the only, the right, choice for me.

Taking a deep breath, I called my parents to tell them of my decision. My Father was furious but, very calmly told me if that was my decision then they were done with me. They would disown me and I would be completely on my own. I stood by my decision and they stood by theirs. A few days later, they sent the remainder of my belongings, no note attached. I was discarded that easily. Like a prized vase kept on a shelf for all to admire until it is chipped and lost its value and is tossed into the trash.
My stay at the home paid through my delivery, Ms. Hubbard encouraged me to stay until I gave birth. Looking in the mirror, at my ever expanding belly, I barely recognized myself. I was due any day. When I allowed myself to think of Tom my heart would ache and the tears would come.

This is the end of Part Two. Read part three and find out how Eve manages motherhood and if she ever sees her Tom again.

Eve & Tom (Part Four)

In the early morning darkness, on the 21st of March, the first day of Spring, I gave birth to my and Tom’s little girl. I named her Lily. Looking into her little pink face, I knew I had made the right decision. Her eyes the deep shade of blue like her Daddy’s, she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. She would be raised with kindness, understanding and most of all love. Though my parents had cut me off, I wasn’t penniless. I had a sizeable savings account. Money I had previously saved from the allowances my parents had given me, Christmas, birthday and graduation money from relatives and money I had saved from my job at the florist shop. I bought a small used car and a couple of days after Lily was born I packed it with my belongings and Lily and I moved to a suburb of Boston.

I rented a one room apartment over the garage of Mr. and Mrs. Welche, a very nice elderly couple. It was small, but it was cheap, clean and furnished with a sofa with a pull out bed and a small kitchen table with two chairs. It had a small kitchen area and a tiny bath. I hung a few pictures, bought a crib and a couple of plants and it was home. It was all mine and Lily’s. The Welches really were a dear couple. They were very fond of Lily and when I found a job working as a secretary in a Real Estate Office, Mrs. Welche was happy to look after Lily for me. I hated to be away from her and would rush home every evening to see her.
Time went by quickly, Lily was a toddler learning to walk and every day she looked more and more like Tom. She had his eye's and raven black hair. Sometimes, I would look at her little face that looked so much like her Daddy's and my heart would break. I never dated. I couldn't knowing my heart belonged to Tom. Time had not changed that. The summer after I gave birth to Lily, I had called the florist shop where Ava and I had worked, hoping she had returned there. They told me they hadn't heard from her since the last summer and they didn't know how to reach her. I had no way of finding Tom.

While working at the Real Estate office, I had taken courses and gained my Relator's License. I was making a decent living selling commerical properties and could afford a nicer apartment, but we stayed above the Welche's garage. It was comforting to have Mrs. Welche to look after Lily and Lily was as fond of the Welches as they were of her. It also allowed me to add to my savings. It had become my dream to own a bookstore. After several years of saving and looking for the right property, I was able to make a down payment on an old house in the perfect community surrounded by several colleges. It needed alot of cosmetic work but the structure was sound and the price was right. I was able to put a bookstore on the first floor and make a home for Lily and me on the second floor. The Welches were sad to see us go, but I promised they would always be a part of our lives and we visited them often.

I started out with a small selection of books and as my business grew over the years, the store expanded and I added a small cafe and out side seating. The cafe consisted of coffee and what ever I had the notion to bake, cookies, muffins, coffee cake. With the comfy sofas and chairs placed throughout the store and my great coffee and muffins, the Lily Pad Cafe and Bookstore was a success. The best part was I would always be there for Lily when she came home from school.

Lily grew into a beautiful little girl. She was bright and kind with a tender heart. There was many an injured creature that recooperated in a shoebox under her care. Her resemblance to Tom was remarkable and sometimes caused a pang in my heart even after all these years.

One morning, sitting on the floor of the bookstore reading to Lily before school, she surprised me with a question I always knew would come, "How come I don't have a Daddy?"

Closing the book, I slowly answered, "You have a Daddy, he just doesn't live with us."

The questions came flooding in once the dam was broken. Why doesn't he live with us, what's his name, where does he live? I told her his name was Tom Rollins and that we were very young when I had her and that he didn't know she was born. That I didn't know where to find him. I had never been more grateful to hear the horn of the school bus. I kissed Lily goodbye and promised we would talk more about it when she got home from school. It would give me the day to decided what to tell her.
After Lily left for school, Kim, a local college student that worked part-time for me, said, "I know it is none of my business, but I couldn't help overhearing." I smiled to myself, Kim could never help overhearing.

"What is it Kim?" I asked

"Well, I heard you tell Lily that her father was Tom Rollins and that you didn't know where he was. Were you just telling her that or do you really not know where he is?" she asked.

"What I told Lily is the truth, I don't know where Tom is." I answered, wondering what her point was.

Kim excitedly continued, "Eve, there is a Tom Rollins showing his art in a gallery in the city. My roommate is an art major and she was just talking about it this morning."

Could it be possible, after all these years, Tom and I were living in the same city? Kim opened the morning paper and there in the Arts section was a small article calling Tom "an up and coming artist" and his paintings "emotional and moving." The showing opened that night.

All the feelings I kept safely locked away in my heart surfaced. I could think of nothing but Tom all day. I was so eager to see him. I was grateful when Lily came home from school and was too busy with a little toad she was sure was lost to ask any more questions. I didn't know how I would answer them now. Kim agreed to babysit while I went to the gallery to see Tom. Riding in the cab my heart was bursting with a new found hope. I still loved Tom as much as I had nine years ago.

By the number of people at the gallery, the opening was obviously a success. Tom's paintings were impressive, his talent had grown over the years. I stood by the door scanning the crowd looking for his face.

As I slowly scanned the room, I saw Tom, standing in the corner with a blond in a tight dress caressing his face. I couldn't breathe. I stood staring at him, my heart breaking. What had I been thinking? It had been nine years. Just because I had been unable to let go of our love, it didn't mean Tom hadn't moved on. Sensing someone staring at him, Tom began to turn towards me.

I quickly turned and ran out of the gallery, tears streaming down my cheeks. I hailed a passing cab and got in. I couldn't talk to him now when my emotions were so raw.

As the cab pulled away, I heard my name being yelled. Looking out the window I saw Tom running after the cab calling my name. The driver looked at me in the rear view mirror and said, "Miss, would you like me to stop?" I shook my head no. All these years pining away for him wasted. I would always be grateful to Tom, for he gave me Lily. I knew I would have to tell him about Lily some day, but I needed time for my heart to heal.
I was miserable. It was hard to get over the hope I had always held that Tom and I would some how be together. Kim, for once, had the good sense not to ask questions and Lily, being eight, had atleast for the moment, forgotten about her questions concerning Tom. A week after the gallery opening, Kim had taken Lily to the park and I was closing the cafe, cleaning the counters. I heard the door to the store open and without looking up, I said, "I'm sorry, I'm closing now." The person didn't speak but walked over to the counter.

As I slowly looked up, I found myself face to face with Tom. Time stopped as we stood staring into each other's eyes.

Tom finally spoke. "I can't believe it is really you, Eve. I had begun to think I had only imagined you at the gallery."

I moved around the counter. "All these years, Eve, I have been looking for you. I have so many questions. I don't understand, you must have come to the gallery to see me, why did you leave without speaking to me?"

I couldn't speak. I couldn't help myself, my eyes filled with tears spilling down my cheeks. Tom said softly, "You saw the woman at the gallery and you were hurt." My chin began to tremble and I shook my head yes. Tom smiled and said all the words I had longed to hear, "Eve, you have always been the only one for me. There has not been anyone since you. I have always held the hope in my heart that some how I would find you and we would be together. That woman you saw was just an over eager art collector. I had never seen her before that night." He reached up and brushed away my tears.

He pulled me into the arms I had waited years to feel around me.
When he kissed me, it was as it was the first time, sweet and warm and left me feeling dizzy. Tom had found me by going to the cab company. He spent days tracking down the driver that had picked me up at the gallery and paid him a hefty sum to find out where he had dropped me off.

We had a lot to talk about. My mother had lied to me as I had suspected. Tom told me when I didn’t show up at the shack, he did go to my house. My parents told him that I didn’t want anymore to do with him and that I had left early for college. Tom went to the school I was to attend that fall and when he found out I had withdrawn my admission, he had gone back to my parents house. He went everyday banging on the door until they had him arrested for trespassing and the court ordered him to stay away. He never went to California with the others. He stayed in the area hoping to find me. He moved to Boston two years after I had. “It was as if you vanished into thin air. I didn’t know what happened to you, Eve, and it just tore me up.” he said. It was my turn to tell him about Lily.

I told him everything, the fight with my parents, the horrible, lonely days at the Home for Unwed Mothers in Maine and all about our beautiful daughter, Lily. Tom was pained by the suffering I had gone through at the hands of my parents and speechless at the fact that he had an eight year old daughter. He sat silently stunned. Finally he asked, “Do you think she will like me?” I laughed and said, “She is going to love you.”

I was right, there were no awkward moments between them. They were so much alike. Lily immediately took to Tom and he to her. Lily was happy, she had a Daddy.

Two months later, Tom and I were married, our darling Lily by our side and surrounded by our closest friends. I know it has been said before, but.............we lived happily ever after.

*THE END*

THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO CREATED THE CUSTOM CONTENT USED IN THIS STORY
VITA

Hui-Chun Hsiao

Education

Ph. D. in Art Education, the Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 2007.


B. F. A. in Fine Arts, National Taipei University of Arts, Taipei, Taiwan, 1993.

Professional Experience

Instructor, Department of Information & Mass Media, Yuan-Ze University, TaoYuan, Taiwan, 1998-2002

Adjunct Instructor, Taipei National University of the Arts, Taipei, Taiwan, 1997-2002

Senior Designer, National Chang Kai-Shek Cultural Center, Taipei, Taiwan, 1997

Multimedia Designer, ICON Multimedia, New York City, 1996-97

Publications


