Is this a play*ground?
Walking among Sims and their encounters

Written Part

David Palme
0426714

University of Applied Arts Vienna
Study Programme Art & Science
Programme Number S 066 776

Supervised by
Univ.Prof. Virgil Widrich

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Sen.Lect. Dr. Bernd Kräftner

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In this document i enumerate snippets, instead of aligning content into the linearity of pages. Those snippets might refer to further, related snippets in this way:
(01.1)

Citations are referenced along the bottom lines (↓ 01.1).

I regularly refer to online material. Find these references in ‘clickable’ format on: playground.dpupp.com

‘Terms’
that i use extensively or in a particular manner will be explained along the way.

Let’s go >

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02
Abstract

This is a journey of *becoming Sim*. It all has started in early 2012 when the ‘Institute for Research of Everyday Life’, during an enquiry into fakes, images and simulations of everyday life, bounced into the computer game ‘The Sims’.

Soon after, we were wearing green cardboard diamonds letting ourselves be played as physical Sims. This practice has developed a life of its own: several members of the institute have accompanied the Sims into various contexts and environments (i estimate that about 80 people have played ‘the Sims AFK’ as of January 2014).

The following four meters of paper re-present this journey by compiling artifacts, stories, and encounters.

Many people will accompany us on this journey. You might recognize yourself.

I am looking forward to meeting you again, AFK.

Thank you Ruth, Lars and Jörg, for becoming physical Sims together. For being ready to see where we will be carried.

03

None of this work is affiliated, endorsed, or sponsored by Maxis or Electronic Arts Inc., the companies that produce the computer game series ‘The Sims’.

The work is an act of being in the world, engaging with and intervening in cultural practice and the world’s best selling PC computer game series as of December 2013 (↓ 05.2).

'Institute'
refers to the 'Institut für Alltagsforschung' (Institute for Research of Everyday Life) that i have been part of during the past years. In several experiments, expeditions and projects we explored the vast field of everyday life; challenging the 'banal' and 'self-evident' in various situations, contexts and spaces. Material from these past undertakings can be found at www.alltagsforschung.org (in German language). In September 2012 the Institute gave birth to the Sims AFK.

'We'
denominates the people who have been involved in the respective events mentioned in this paper. Since much of what is referred to here, has been collective work, i use the term 'we' extensively to speak from within and about the various contexts that i have been situated in.

04
Demo version of an airport terminal

In January 2012 four members of the Institute apply for participation in the trial operation of a newly built terminal building of the Vienna airport (↓ 04.1).

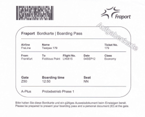
The undertaking is extending over 33 days. There are two mass trials (with up to 400 participants) and two night trials. Attendees receive an allowance of € 32.00 for their participation. To keep results 'realistic' one can only attend twice (on two trail days).

Unfortunately we cannot take part--the spots are fully booked. However, our interest in those kind of 'real world' simulations is sparked. A few months later our colleague Jörg participates in a similar 'Probebetrieb' at the airport Frankfurt. He should catch the 12:50 flight to 'Fictitious Point' at gate Z50 (04.2), consume a meal in one of the restaurants, and pay regular visits to the various toilets.

We are astonished by the effort that goes into this simulation. About the heuristic strategy to cope with the unpredictable complex system of everyday life. For us it appears as a huge technocratic play*ground, set up to smoothen flows of information, people and material.

Needless to say that while exploring further notions of 'simulation' we obviously encounter simulation computer games.

04.2



Fraport

Aufgabenkarte

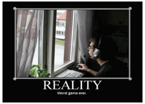
Fraport Bordkarte | Boarding Pass

Airline	Name			Ticket No.
FraLine	Testpax 179			179
From	**To**	**Flight No.**	**Date**	**Class**
Frankfurt	Fictitious Point	LH0815	04SEP12	Economy
Gate	**Boarding time**		**Seat**	
Z50	12:50		NN	

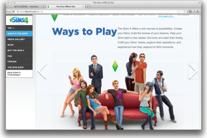
A-Plus Probebetrieb Phase 1

Bitte halten Sie diese Bordkarte und ein gültiges Ausweisdokument beim Einsteigen bereit.
Please be prepared to present your boarding pass and a personal document (ID) at the gate.

04.3



05.1



Ways to Play

The Sims 4 offers a rich canvas of possibilities. Create your Sims, build the homes of your dreams. Help your Sims start a new career, find love, and start their family. Fulfill your Sims' needs, explore their aspirations, and experience how they respond to life's moments.

05
'The Sims'

is a life simulation video game series. It is currently the best selling PC gaming franchise of all time (↓ 05.2). As you start to play you create virtual characters, model and outfit them to your taste, choose their lifetime wishes, and personality traits. These decisions will shape your 'Sims' and their behavior.

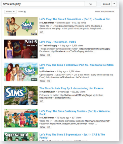
The actual gameplay revolves around the Sims' daily life in their household, education, work, leisure time, and social relationships. Via mouse clicks you control your Sim where to go, whom or what to talk to and interact with, what to do with objects.

I have not played the game extensively. From a few sessions playing, friends' stories, media and the web i have a rough knowledge of 'The Sims', its gameplay and imagery.

'The Sims' is a sandbox-game: you explore the world that the Sims live in according to your own tempo and decisions. After you have played a lot it might eventually become boring. Via commercially available add-on editions you take your Sims into new worlds and contexts e.g., 'Island Paradise', 'University Life', 'Generations', 'Pets'.

Part of this journey is to get to know the virtual Sims better. They will reappear throughout this document.

05.2



Let's Play: The Sims 3 Generations - (Part 1) - Create A Sim
by LifeSimmer

Let's Play - The Sims 2 - Part 6
by TheSimSupply

Let's Play The Sims 3 Collective: Part 15 - You Gotta Be Kitten Me!
by Khaleesims

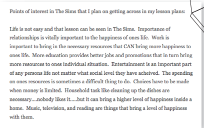
The Sims 3 - Lets Play Ep.1 - Introducing Jim Pickens
by CallMeKevin

Let's Play: The Sims Castaway Stories - (Part 6) - Welcome Back!
by LifeSimmer

Let's Play The Sims 3 Supernatural - Ep. 1 - CAS & The Family!

In the meantime we can watch video footage of 'The Sims' on youtube:
http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=sims+let's+play

05.3

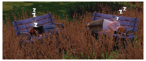


Points of interest in The Sims that I plan on getting across in my lesson plans:

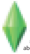
Life is not easy and that lesson can be seen in The Sims. Importance of relationships is vitally important to the happiness of ones life. Work is important to bring in the necessary resources that CAN bring more happiness to ones life. More education provides better jobs and promotions that in turn bring more resources to ones individual situation. Entertainment is an important part of any persons life not matter what social level they have acheived. The spending on ones resources is sometimes a difficult thing to do. Choices have to be made when money is limited. Household task like cleaning up the dishes are necessary....nobody likes it.....but it can bring a higher level of happiness inside a home. Music, television, and reading are things that bring a level of happiness with them.

High school social studies teacher Dave McDivitt on 'The Sims' in his lesson plan.

05.4



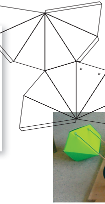
Robin Burkinshaw conducted an experiment in playing a homeless family in 'The Sims 3':
http://aliceandkev.wordpress.com/



06
A floating green diamond

above a Sim identifies this character as
selected, and ready to receive the playe
commands. According the Sim's mood, this
diamond will change its color along a gra
from light green (great) via yellow (aver
to red (horrible). In Sims jargon this di
is referred to as 'PlumbBob' (↓ 06.1), i
stick to 'diamond' in the following.

06.3



04.1
http://www.viennaairport.com/jart/prj3/va/main.jart?rel=de&reserve-mode=active&content-id=1351048408438&news_beitrag_id=1322179315723&archiv=yes
accessed on 02.01.2014

04.3
Good luck in finding the source of an internet meme:
https://www.google.at/search?q=reality+worst+game+ever&tbm=isch
accessed on 30.12.2012

05.1
http://www.thesims.com/en-us/the-sims-4#/what-is-the-sims
accessed on 24.12.2013

05.2
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_best-selling_video_game_franchises
accessed on 24.12.2013

05.3
http://davidmcdivitt.wordpress.com/2006/08/02/the-sims-application-in-sociology/
accessed on 24.12.2013

06.1
http://sims.wikia.com/wiki/PlumbBob
accessed on 24.12.2013

's

dient
age)
amond
will

06.2

How to Appear as Sim?

For each diamond you will need:
- green cardboard
- 1 wide stiff headband
- 40cm textile elastic band
- 2 wooden sticks 33cm long, Ø 5mm

And the following tools:
- cutter knife
- hot glue gun
- double sided adhesive tape
- duct tape
- cable ties

Draw the shape depicted left (06.3) on cardboard: The triangles have a sharp angle of 33° and about 20cm side length. You can download a PDF here: http://playground.dpupp.com/diamond.pdf

Cut out the shape and scratch along the folding lines with the blunt side of the cutter knife.

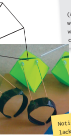
Fold the diamond and close it along the flaps with double sided adhesive tape.

Glue two wooden sticks into small holes on the back of the diamond.

Mount the other ends of the two sticks onto the headband with cable ties and duct tape.

With the hot glue gun attach the elastic band onto both ends of the headband, thus closing its gap. Do not make the band too wide, the diamonds should sit firmly on the head.

(After having build three iterations of these wearable Sim-diamonds, we are finally pleased with both, their stability and carrying comfort.)



Notice that these diamonds still lack an elastic band, that closes the headbands gap.

When i wear such a diamond i notice how it absorbs the weight of my actions. My joints loosen, my body and mind become flexible. I am eager to try things out.

07

The Sims AFK

The idea suddenly pops up: »Let's take the Sims AFK!«. The institute has a tradition of interweaving, what is casually referred to as 'virtual' and 'real'--a problematic separation indeed--and partnering with objects, icons, actors and their (inter-)actions along the way. Previously we have experimented with (and simultaneously have become subjects of experiments by) numerous cardboard mockups, an analog Dropbox, virtual fridges, etc.

So in April 2012 without much ado we invite friends and run a first trial of 'The Sims AFK'. Ready to see where we will be carried:

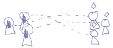
'AFK' (away from keyboard)
A phrase commonly used in online communication to signal a user's absence from his/her keyboard and thus computer. Significantly different from 'IRL' (in real life) by avoiding a distinction between 'virtual' and 'real'.

'Sim' & 'Player'
Within this document from this point on, 'Sim' refers to a physical person rather than a virtual character from the aforementioned computer game. Sims wear green cardboard diamonds to render them recognizable and are linked with their 'players' in a game-control-relationship. *Being Sim* and *being player* are modes that mutually constitute each other (among interfering objects, such as cardboard diamonds, telecommunication devices or multimedia equipment).

'to control'
is used in the following, like i speak about computer games: When i play a computer game as a player i control an on-screen avatar/character/thing.

'Stage' & 'Play*ground'
I construe stages and play*grounds as subjective experiences of actors within social situations. They can emerge as individual experiences when actors declare them for themselves or as shared experiences when several actors verbally or silently agree on their becoming.

07.1



07.2

Pairing

We play Sims AFK, first of all, by becoming pairs of Sims and players and linking ourselves in an allegedly simple game-control-relationship (11.2) (and we will soon see that this relationship is not as unproblematic as it appears at this point) (08):

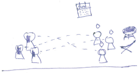
As a player, i will control my Sim by instructing him/her what to do next.

As Sim, i will be controlled by my player: i receive instructions and react (potentially according) to them.

Half of us wear green cardboard diamonds, the other half, the players, have by now established a telecommunication to their respective Sims via mobile phones or walkie talkies. Sims use earphones with their phones/walkie talkies to facilitate play with both hands free.

The very moment of establishing a cont(r)act between player and Sim will be investigated in more detail later on (15).

A rudimentary setup is formed, we can already play (»Spin in a circle while scratching your head!«). But before we do so, we situate, contextualize and further mediate the game.



07.3

Situating & Contextualizing

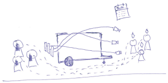
Our play*ground is on the camp site 'Wien West', in and alongside a caravan which traditionally serves the institute as a mobile home base and office. We declare one side of the van a stage for the Sims and the other side a control station for the players.

Uncertain of what this experiment will bring about, we frame it in a casual atmosphere and label this first edition of the game and its levels:

'The Sims AFK: The Institute for Research of Everyday Life Takes a Day Off'

Level 1 'Free Time, Free Play'
Level 2 'The Institute hosts a BBQ'

Hence the members of the institute Ruth, Jörg, Lars, and me sim ourselves.



07.4

Televising

The players at the control station observe the Sim's environment via four screens that show life-video-feeds of different angles, recorded by four cameras placed in the stage area. The Sims are aware of this setup and sometimes utilize these camera angles to visually emphasize certain (inter-)actions (10.1).

07.5

Did we mimic a computer game?
Let's compare

a digital edition of 'The Sims'
to
our situation:

'The Sims 3: University Life'
as spatio-temporal context
'The Institute for Research of Everyday Life Takes a Day Off'

a virtual university campus
as a ground for the Sims
our caravan and some adjacent space

07.1, 07.5
Still frames taken from 'The Sims AFK' video documentation
http://vimeo.com/48817627
accessed on 24.12.2013

07.6

Player's Manual

'The Institute for Research of
Everyday Life Takes a Day Off'
4. September 2012

Preparation

We play on the camp site 'Wien West' in and around the institute's caravan.

Each Sim has a green diamond floating above his/her head and wears earphones connected to his/her mobile phone to facilitate play with both hands free.

Number of players = Number of Sims = 4

The four screens in front of you show the Sims' environment from different angles.

Call a Sim and wait until all players have a stable phone connection to their Sim.

Find a list of the inventory (all playable objects) on the desk in front of you.

We will play two Levels:
- 'Free Time, Free Play'
- 'The Institute hosts a BBQ'

Play

Tell your Sim what to do.

Keep instructions short and clear, both verbally and action-wise. Otherwise your Sim might be overwhelmed.

Sims will communicate with players via gestures. Thus, they will let players know e.g.
- if they cannot understand instructions
- what they think of instructions
- of possible actions or
- that they refuse to act at all.

SIMS HAVE FEELINGS AND A CONSCIOUSNESS,
WILL LET YOU KNOW THEIR MOOD, AND SAY NO
TO INSTRUCTIONS THAT THEY ARE NOT WILLING
TO CARRY OUT.

e.g. BSc. Frida Sim-pson
as my virtual avatar
pairings of Sims and players

comfy seating in front of a screen
as a ground for the players
a bench at the control station
next to the caravan

screen, mouse, and keyboard
as input/output devices
channels for control and
communication in several
directions (bodies, cameras,
screens, walkie talkies)

08

One more thing,

before we start to play: the last few rows of the player's manual depicted left (07.6), already hint that our game still lacks something:

SIMS HAVE FEELINGS AND A CONSCIOUSNESS,
WILL LET YOU KNOW THEIR MOOD, AND SAY NO
TO INSTRUCTIONS THAT THEY ARE NOT WILLING
TO CARRY OUT.

As physical Sim i am a fragmented being: human, cyborg, player, my player, one, two, many, puppet, clown, listener, and actor entangled with further players, objects, instructions, spectators, and a consciousness.

To some extent i refer to Simself (instead of myself) as remote-controlled, but within this externally controlled entity something is eager to react to my environment, to take sides, to dare and say YES, to communicate feelings, and to say NO!

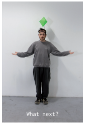
The physical Sim is a political Sim (15).

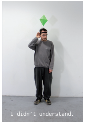
So we make explicit, another feedback cycle in the game: Sims communicate with their players through gestures.

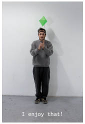
The list that is compiled below depicts the gestures that we have worked with, during this first encounter with the Sims AFK. It should by no means be considered complete, on the contrary: Future editions of the game in different environments and further contexts will bring about additional gestures that we have not yet enacted.

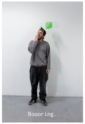
Soon, we ourselves will learn of a crucial new gesture (10.3).

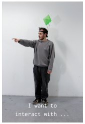
08.1

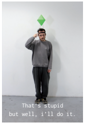

What next?

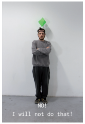

I didn't understand.

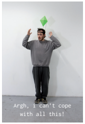

I enjoy that!

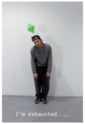

Booooring.

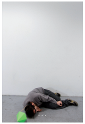

I want to
interact with …

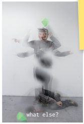

That's stupid
but well, i'll do it.


NO!
I will not do that!


Argh, i can't cope
with all this!


I'm exhausted …


…


what else?

08.2

What happens

after all this tedious preparation: four Sims hang out on their day off. They make music with rubbish, do gymnastics, daze in a hammock, watch western movies, play frisbee, hug each other, fix their cardboard diamonds, make bracelets from waste.

In level 2 they prepare a barbecue: cut vegetables and prepare skewers. At times three Sims are gathered around the construction site of a boxed barbecue, fiddling with screws, legs, and wheels. We manage to light the fire just when game ends.

While we finally eat together,

i notice the intense regeneration phase that succeeds the game. We juxtapose our subjective perceptions, stories, and images of the past two hours. Certain incidents stick to our minds and we try to make meaning of it by blending our points of reference (13).

This sticks with us: the complexity
of directing Sims to collaboratively
prepare a dinner. What follows is a
little detour elaborating on the Sim'
impact on work and delegations of wo

This last image accidentally
takes shape while i retouch.
My computer and me are alone
in the room, but in my head
some people say:

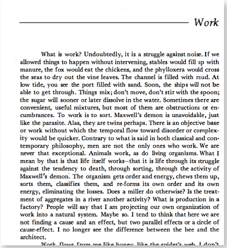
»This appears more like
a hysterical Sim than a
political Sim!«

09

Work is shit

no seriously! In the very sense of these words: work is energy spent on moving, separating, and sorting out, on preventing the rotting and mixing, to hold against chaos, complexity, and death. Life is work, work is life! I invite you to read with me, along the lines of Michel Serres' 'The Parasite':

09.1

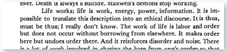


Work

What is work? Undoubtedly, it is a struggle against noise. If we allowed things to happen without intervening, stables would fill up with manure, the fox would eat the chickens, and the phylloxera would cross the seas to dry out the vine leaves. The channel is filled with mud. At low tide, you see the port filled with sand. Soon, the ships will not be able to get through. Things mix; don't move, don't stir with the spoon; the sugar will sooner or later dissolve in the water. Sometimes there are convenient, useful mixtures, but most of them are obstructions or encumbrances. To work is to sort. Maxwell's demon is unavoidable, just like the parasite. Alas, they are twins perhaps. There is an objective base or work without which the temporal flow toward disorder or complexity would be quicker. Contrary to what is said in both classical and contemporary philosophy, men are not the only ones who work. We are never that exceptional. Animals work, as do living organisms. What I mean by that is that life itself works—that it is life through its struggle against the tendency to death, through sorting, through the activity of Maxwell's demon. The organism gets order and energy, chews them up, sorts them, classifies them, and re-forms its own order and its own energy, eliminating the losses. Does a miller do otherwise? Is the treatment of aggregates in a river another activity? What is production in a factory? People will say that I am projecting our own organization of work into a natural system. Maybe so. I tend to think that here we are not finding a cause and an effect, but two parallel effects or a circle of cause-effect. I no longer see the difference between the bee and the architect.

Work flows from me like honey, like the spider's web. I don't

[...]



liver. Death is always a suicide. Maxwell's demons stop working.

Life works; life is work, energy, power, information. It is impossible to translate this description into an ethical discourse. It is thus, must be thus; I really don't know. The work of life is labor and order but does not occur without borrowing from elsewhere. It makes order here but undoes order there. And it reinforces disorder and noise. There is a lot of work involved in chasing the hare from one's garden so that

s
rk.

09.2

Making work explicit

In some sense, a game of Sims is nothing more than a constant flow of giving and receiving assignments of work. In order to instruct work to a Sim, we first have to make this work explicit. This is easier said than done.

In our very first game we had four Sims prepare a barbecue. You have experienced similar situations: when a handful of people join forces for a shared goal, an intricate dance of collaboration emerges. Practices embed in a choreography of verbal or silent turn-taking, synchronizations and delegations. Objects come into play. Interruptions turn up and result in detours.

It does not matter here, if we speak of so called banal work (prepare a dinner) or highly specialized processes (set up an experiment). Routine disguises the endless successions and delegations of tasks at microscopic magnitude.

The Sim is a demon that makes autonomous synchronization and collaboration among actors disappear. Brought into such an environment it causes a crisis. The crisis of having to instruct work verbally (thereby phrasing it into words), to open black boxes, to make steps explicit.

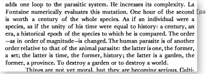
Tell two Sims to cook a meal--they will be overwhelmed. Tell one Sim find an onion in the bowl, and cut it with the knife that lies on the table, and tell the other Sim to fetch the pan and turn on the cooking plate--they will probably do it (08.2).

09.1, 09.4
Michel Serres 1982. 'The Parasite'.
USA: John Hopkins University Press

09.3

Pyramids of delegations

09.4



adds one loop to the parasitic system. He increases its complexity. La Fontaine numerically evaluates this mutation. One hour of the second [parasite] is worth a century of the whole species. As if an individual were a species, as if the unity of his time were equal to history: a century, an era, a historical epoch of the species to which he is compared. The order —as in order of magnitude—is changed. The human parasite is of another order relative to that of the animal parasite: the latter is one, the former, a set; the latter is time, the former, history; the latter is a garden, the former, a province. To destroy a garden or to destroy a world.

Things are not yet moral, but they are becoming serious. Culti-

I will slightly rearrange this:

O .... The delegated work
ne that hides
hour of behind well phrased,
the second [parasite] diplomatically formulated
is worth a century of the whole species ..... sentences and messages.

We constantly move within pyramids of delegations. In a few days i must submit five copies of this document to the University of Applied Arts. Soon i will take it to the printshop and ask them to print six copies.

The Sim enters the scene: »Hey Sim, could you please take this document to the print shop for me, i am already buried in so much work!« He is overwhelmed.

So i accompany him, the walkie talkie in my hands. We walk the street towards the print shop. »Stop at the red traffic light!« ... »Ok, proceed now and take care of cars«

We arrive at the shop. From the back room i hear the rumbling noise of machines. »Find the flash drive in your pocket and hand it to the guy behind the counter.« ... »Smile back and ask him to print six copies.«

You see, i could very well delegate the work package 'print out six copies of this document' to a Sim. Albeit, this delegation becomes real-time delegation. The well phrased package explodes into myriads of tiny instructions.

The Sim is an anti-efficient tactic. It disperses black boxed delegation and substitutes it with a relationship under care and trust (15).

09.4

Hello David,

could you please deal with that 'SHORTCUTS PROHIBITED!' sign and send me the final layout for approval, before you send it out to the printer.

Thanks!
Sent from my iPhone.

Fictitious email based on countless similar messages that i have received during my work in graphic design.

'The Sims AFK' refers to the game. A messy practice in a messy world. As of today don't know what is. The journey goes on.

The Sims AFK have to some extent developed a life of their own. Several members of the Institute have accompanied the Sims into various contexts.

In the following sections i have compiled some episodes and observations from these games.

10

Youth center, Berlin

I have just come home from a christmas celebration in a youth club in Friedrichshain. When Jörg told me of the Sims game that they would host as part of the christmas party, i fetched a bus to Berlin.

So for the past two days, i have joined--as assistant-observer-participator--the cosmos of the youth club:

- children that regularly come to play, take part in workshops, or hang around in the afternoons when school is over and their parents are still on the job;
- the staff team;
- Meike and Jörg, who have organized the three days of workshop/rehearsal/play. Meike had been part of the staff team for several years until only a few months before;
- the parents who attended the show on friday night.

10.3

On Thursday

before we start to play, we sit in a circle and re-member the rules of the game. Apparently the rules are clear to everyone, we do not need to recall them (07.2):

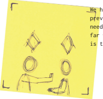
»You tell me what to do.«
»I do what you tell me.«

But we do need to remember the Sims' gestures (08), their way of communicating to their players. Turn by turn the children act and speak them out:

»No, i don't want to do that so i'm not going to do that!«
»Haha, i like that instruction!«
»That's stupid but well, i'll do it.«
»I want to interact with ...!«
»Argh! I can't cope with all that!«
»I don't understand.«
»I am exhausted!«

And at that point i learn a new gesture:
»Stop doing that to me!«

I draw the sketch that is depicted on the left: the affected Sim spreads out both arms to the front, both hands open, opposing an interaction, establishing a distance.



We had not explicitly defined this gesture previously ... why, i wonder ... did we not need it? It seems crucial and important! So far we have played mostly among adults Sims, is this one reason? Can't be!

10.4

On the evening after the show

the head of the youth club mentions: she would want to have the Sims for longer than just one brief show. They could have several rounds and constellations, and turn it into a workshop: the kids would play among themselves on a 'Freaky-Friday' and the parents join in on the following 'Family-Saturday' (14.9).

Today at the show, the parents have been observing their kids play among each other. Only once a mother briefly instructed her own Sim-kid. It seems natural: parents tell their children what to do. The Sim-kid crossed her arms. »NO!«

10.2

Physical Sim on a digital projector image

10.1

Jörg has brought along

lots of audio and video equipment and together with Andreas, who hosts the center's multimedia lab, they wire a sophisticated setup that connects the stage-room to the control-room. Four cameras film a living room and transmit live images to screens in the room next door. From here we give our instructions to the Sims via walkie talkies and observe them acting on-screen (07.4).

During the first sessions i learn that the Sims game on friday evening would be--besides hopefully a fun time--the main show for the guests of this year's Christmas celebration. Thus, behind the four players' chairs, already placed at the control-table, we set up additional seating rows for additional spectators: the game becomes a play, play becomes a play.

10.5

Also in this game

we keep digital representation intact: we play via elaborate multimedia setups. Performance and feedback loops flow within cyborg monsters of players, Sims, cameras, microphones, screens, loudspeakers, and walkie talkies (13). I am surprised by how clever the children interact with the cameras, when they come close to the lens to show a grimace or pose a gesture.

We detach fractions

of the virtual Sims from the digital by giving them bodies of weight. Interaction of and between Sims, like tickling, pillow fights, hugging, and marriage proposals are well known from the computer game and have repeatedly been instructed in the games we have played until now.

All of a sudden two tickling Sims require spoken words, actuated body parts, and agreement or dissent becomes physical.

10.6

Also virtual Sims occasionally reject tickling:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soMz8Cr6lj4

11

Spielefest, Vienna

Here we establish the cont(r)act in a new way: four Sims tag their phone numbers to their shirts and go into an event, the Spielefest (a board game fair). Anybody can call and control us.

At the reception they approve us as costumed (even if our costume is only a green cardboard diamond). We are granted free entry.

Many children call us, some repeatedly. In the entrance area of the event they let us sing, dance, roll on the floor, and propose marriage. Employees of a company send hugs from one to the other via the Sims. A boy plays his Sim-friend for a few minutes.

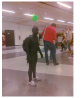
After several--a Sim will later speak of them as destructive--instructions, a boy wants one of us to shoot at random guests with a toy gun. When she denies his father says: »This Sim seems to have too much independent existence, try another one.«

A group of six boys and girls--one of whom i have swapped shoes with--have played us extensively by now. They instruct me to pick up a boxed toy from the floor. It is a gift from them to us Sims: a Transformer action figure. Have we become action figures ourselves?

When i come home that evening, the green diamond does not float above my head anymore. I receive a text message from one of the boys who was playing Sims with us a few hours before: »Jump in the air and scream!«

Playing never stops.

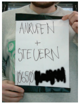
11.2



A guy in a black suit comes by and i can take this picture. However, lacking a connection to a player, he only looks like a Sim (7.2).

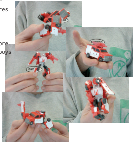
»Let me introduce myself, I am a Sim. I am your Sim. Bring me into play. I will do what you tell me. But don't exploit me. Take care of me.«

A suitable introduction when an anonymous player rings a Sim?



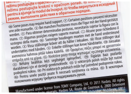
'Call + Control'

11.1



The Sims receive a gift.

11.3



režimu postupujte v opačnim poradí. režimu postupujte krokmi v opačnom poradí. pentru a ajunge la modul de început. Чтобы вернуться в исходный режим, выполните действия в обратном порядке.

Some poses may require hand support. Certaines positions peuvent nécessiter une aide manuelle. Bei manchen Positionen muss die Figur mit der Hand gestützt werden. Para obtener determinadas posturas, necesitarás sujetar la figura con la mano. Algumas posições exigem suporte manual. Alcune pose richiedono il sostegno della mano. Sommige houdingen moeten met de hand ondersteund worden. Vissa ställningar kräver att du håller i leksaken. Visse stillinger skal understøttes med hånden. Enkelte stillinger kan kreve håndstøtte. Joissakin asennoissa hahmoa pitää tukea kädellä. Ορισμένες πόζες μπορεί να χρειαστούν στήριξη από το χέρι. Niektóre pozy mogą wymagać ręcznego ustawienia. Néhány beállítás kézi segítséget igényelhet. Figürün bazı pozlarda durabilmesi için el desteği gerekmektedir. U některých poloh může být nutné podepření rukou. Pri niektorých polohách môže byť potrebné podopretie rukou. Pentru unele poziții poate fi necesară susținerea cu mâna. В некоторых положениях игрушку требуется поддерживать рукой.

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Hasbro SA, Route de Courroux 6, 2800 Delemont
Middlesex, UB11

The manual that comes with the Transformer figure states: »Some poses may require hand support.« Indeed: some poses may require Sim support.

11.5

Sometimes we play without

the use of video gear in (semi-)public space: the Stadtpark in Graz (12), the entrance area of the Spielefest in Vienna, or the Donauinsel.

The experience is very different: there is no defined, safe stage anymore, no more screen to hide behind. We move among passers-by, event-visitors, employees, security guards, etc (13).

Still a fragile, invisible stage emerges, in the form of an aesthetic space that spans us Sims, our cardboard diamonds, the controlling players, the walkie talkie communication, and the ones around who (decide to ?) temporarily become spectators, even participants in interaction.

This is the home of the physical Sim. Who stepped out of the flatscreen and finds herself/himself in a weird in-between-state:

- Clownish and/because free to break social norms.
- Vulnerable and/because exposed in a social environment. Not knowing what the next instructed action will be.
- Supported by a piece of cardboard that mimics an icon well known to many.

This invisible stage is what constitutes the game of the Sims, that turns us into Sims and players. It is a fluid stage, always negotiable. Like a shaky ground, carried only by a few matches that are constantly being exchanged. And in certain moments this base brakes down, the game withdraws. And suddenly we stand exposed as ourselves with a cardboard diamond above our head or holding a walkie talkie in our hands. But not Sims anymore, not as players anymore.

Switching sides

I have not yet mentioned this important step: in the majority of the games we switch sides at some point. Sims become players, players become Sims (not necessarily in the same pairs). This is crucial, it balances experiences and perceptions.

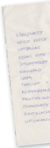
At the Spielefest this is not the case: We wear the diamonds, we do not yet know who will become player by calling us. However a boy approaches us and becomes Sim for some time.

11.4

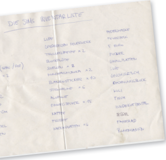
After the game at the Spielefest

a former Sim is disappointed that the actions that appear in the computer game severely restrain the physical Sim's sphere of action (10.5). When we have played with people who do not know the computer game well, i have not noticed much restriction. But also i often wonder: can we become Sims without the cardboard diamonds? What do we become instead?

12.3



HÄNGEMATTE
WEISSE KREIDE
LUFTBALLONS
EDDING STIFTE
SERVIERTABLETT
MASSBAND
GRAFFS
TEELICHT
ABSPERRBAND
FAULTIER KOST
STRANDMATTE
PLASTIKSACKE
LUFTSCHLANG



DIE SIMS INVENTARLISTE

LUPE
SPRÜHREGEN FEUERWERK
TRILLERPFEIFE x 2
BLOCKFLÖTE
SCHELLEN x 2
MUNDHARMONIKA x 2
BLANKOSTICKER x 10
STROHHALME x 6
ALUFOLIE
EINWEGBECHER x 15
KAFFEE
FRISBEE
KARTONPLATTEN x 6

FEDERMASKE
FEUERZEUG
5 EURO
ZUCKER
SCHALLPLATTEN
LUPE
GESCHIRRTUCH
RECHNUNGSBLOCK
KULI
TISCH
HUNDEKOTBEUTEL
SESSEL
FAHRRAD
BLUMENSAMEN

The inventory list of
'Die Sims im Stadtpark'

12

Stadtpark, Graz

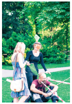
In July 2013 the Forum Stadtpark, a cultural center in a public park in the center of Graz, invites us to hold a workshop (↓ 12.1). Two days before we come, a controversy about rules and restrictions concerning the Stadtpark erupts. Riding the bike has been prohibited and a popular bar in the park is not allowed to host late night dj sets anymore. The team that invited us wishes that the upcoming workshop revolves around this new controversy.

In Graz an 'Ordnungswache'--a public city (not)police--»points out irregularities in social coexistence and moderately intervenes in conflicting situations.« (↓ 12.2) (12.5)

On the train to Graz i feel insecure: who am i to refer to a situated controversy, 250km from my home? On the other hand, the Sims (as a practice) could become local when the people who become Sims and players are familiar with the environment and the issues (14).

We declare a major lawn as play*ground for the Sims and control from the balcony of the culture center. The Sims become companions in testing and transgressing the limits of what is considered socially accepted behavior in the park.

Soon the border of the game becomes fuzzy as Sims serve coffee and borrow a sloth-costume to parkgoers. Several of them ask for and become both Sims and players. A clear-cut distinction of *in the game* vs. *out of the game* cannot be sustained anymore (11.5).



All photos from Graz
(c) Jakob Isselstein

12.4

What remains after the Sims leave the scene? When the dust settles?

I don't know, but at the end of the game several parkgoer-Sims ask us for the diamonds. We give them away.

12.5

Daydreaming of *being Sim* in the Stadtpark

I am Sim. Momentarily idle, earphone focussed. The next instruction could come any second. I can literally feel the invisible strings that stretch out to my player. I am one, and i am two.

My player stands on the balcony. 5 meters above me, she rests her arms on a handrail and through the walkie talkie, she tells me to fetch the bike, and have a ride through the park.

I find the bike and start off, slowly cruising along the curved gravel paths. The bike almost moves by itself, i wonder if my feet actually push the pedals or just rest on and rotate along with them. I smell the sweet recreation and bubbling activity that is around. Simultaneously.

Suddenly, i am held up by a guard of the Ordnungswache. I did not recognize him earlier though now i can tell it from his uniform. It appears to me delicate, clean and straight. The shield of his hat casts shadow onto his face.

I must not ride the bike, it is prohibited in the public park, he tells me. While i point to my player behind us--she is observing our encounter from the distance--i tell the man in the uniform:

»I am Sim, i don't act alone. I only did what she told me: fetch the bike and go for a ride. I am not responsible for my actions.«

He squints his eyes to make out the figure far off, on the balcony. She still holds the walkie talkie close to her mouth.

»OFf3r h1m A ride 0n7he lU8ga8e R#ck!«

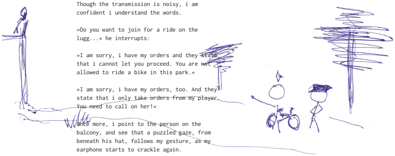
Though the transmission is noisy, i am confident i understand the words.

»Do you want to join for a ride on the lugg...« he interrupts:

»I am sorry, i have my orders and they state that i cannot let you proceed. You are not allowed to ride a bike in this park.«

»I am sorry, i have my orders, too. And they state that i only take orders from my player. You need to call on her!«

Once more, i point to the person on the balcony, and see that a puzzled gaze, from beneath his hat, follows my gesture, as my earphone starts to crackle again.



13

Who is in charge?

Further delegations: I have already contemplated on how my body and mind become flexible, my joints loosen when i wear the diamond (06.3).

As Sim i act out of a collective of humans and nonhumans. A socio-technical conglomerate (↓ 13.1) consisting of

a diamond:
I merge with the object, i become diamond-human and human-diamond. Virtual Sims frequently behave in weird ways, are well recognized and--i dare say--accepted as fellow citizens. Should physical Sims be perceived differently? I become icon-human and human-icon. As this hybrid, i relax by sharing the severity of my actions with my diamond.

a noisy communication/feedback system:
Who knows if the words that i interpret are the instruction that my player just spoke? Who knows if the meaning that my player produces from observing my action, corresponds to my own understanding of what i have just done? Who knows if the gesture that my player interprets is the feeling that i have just enacted? Communication and producing meaning are noisy and mediated. We compose our own stories of what we hear through the earphone and see in the distance.

a player:
As a player i am equally entangled in the system that i just speak of. I have both the opportunity and the burden of directing a Sim: a companion that is eager to act ... but to act what? What would my Sim want me to instruct? A spontaneous idea: start it, see it, adjust it, and repeat. I observe the action, it resonates and i tune it with a further instruction. I am simultaneously spectator and actor-through-Sim, a spect-actor (i borrow this term from Augusto Boal and the Theatre of the Oppressed). I see myself throught my Sim's actions. I care for my Sim, i care for myself.

And i have mentioned beforehand (08): within this network, that i really cannot properly get hold of, Sims insist on a degree of autonomy: they will react, they will say no, they will take care of themselves.

We act out of an environment and we act in an environment. When the borders of the game become fuzzy i will eventually bump into thirds that have not been formally introduced into our play. These encounters are situated in ambiguous grey areas, occasionally legal grey areas.

Each and every time that we meet in these foggy moments, we have to re-construct social meaning and order, find footings (↓ 13.2). These encounters and the negotiations they bring about, can fuse into the game, stay aside or even bring down the game as a whole.

Do Sims delegate the liability for their actions? Do players players delegate the liability for their instructions? I do not know, all-encompassing statements cannot be made. I am ready to see where i will be carried!

12.2
(translated by me)
http://www.graz.at/cms/beitrag/10199690/4932409/
accessed on 31.12.2013

12.1
18.07.2013, Forum Stadtpark
'architektur in serie - unter ferner liefen'
http://forum.mur.at/index.php?idcatside=856#18.07.
accessed on 31.12.2013

13.1
Bruno Latour. 1999.
'Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies'
USA: Harvard University Press

13.2
Harrison C. White. 2008.
'Identity & Control - How Social Formations Emerge' 2nd edition
USA: Princeton University Press

14

A posse of Sims

I feel that precisely from the messy mediated system that the game builds upon, an intense sense of community among the involved people (players and Sims) can emerge. In, and with, this gameplay-monster we wrestle for every single meaningful incident. Random clashes of intentions and significant moments resonate strong among the whole group.

The other becomes spectator, fellow player, actor, ally. This encourages the formation of a clique, a posse. The Sims AFK are not bound to a particular place, they can travel and come into play wherever someone declares a play*ground. What is possible for a mobile posse that brings along its own invisible stage?

I have referred to it elsewhere in the Graz (12) episode, a seducing, albeit precarious position: In the blink of an eye the Sim-posse is here and along with it the turmoil. Excitement and fever rises. Sims rush across the space, players keep instructing on and on. A noisy environment. Boundaries are transgressed, norms are breached. And in the next moment we are gone. The game is over. The dust settles.

What remains?

The Sims AFK. Before we have left the Stadtpark we not only gave away the cardboard diamonds. We gave away the game. I have already indicated the spatial mobility of the Sims, at the same time they are not bound to particular people, nor bound to us. They can travel into contexts and environments. The Sims come into play among whoever/whatever brings them into play.

The game is wild, vigorous, fragile, and intimate at the same time. The relationships that we form in the Sims AFK can certainly be disturbed, influenced, (mis)used (15). Who has initiated the posse? With what objective in mind? What 'truth' do we as Sims and players revolve around? Who or what will profit from the game ... aside from the fun time that we may have?

Not yet a posse ...

wagenplatz treibstoff brennt

Activists of the 'Wagengruppe Treibstoff' (↓ 14.7) remix the cover of the console game 'Grand Theft Auto V' on their posters. Seen in the streets of Vienna in November 2013.

PS3
grand theft auto

On the day that 'Grand Theft Auto V' is released i receive this photo from a friend.

How will the Sims AFK be perceived from external passers-by? I feel that, apart from the actual actions that happen, the diamond icon speaks strongly in many ways (the following list incomplete, of course):

in a situationist sense (↓ 14.8)
To some extent i consider the virtual Sims as accepted fellow citizens. Why should we not behave wild and weird out there in the tangible public. Just like our virtual companions do on our screens?

in a commercial sense
»Why the hell would i wear a trademarked, multi-million-dollar icon on my head and let myself be remote-controlled?!?«

in a familiar sense
»I know these guys with the diamond, i can relate to them ... even if i don't exactly know what to make from all this?!?«

in a childish sense
»Look at these kiddies play their games ...«

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Creative Commons licenses enforce attribution. (↓ 15.1) I do not. Feel free to skip it.

Welcome to the play*ground.

14.1

Park Fiction

In the middle of the 90's in Hamburg a project emerged from the neighborhood assembly 'Hafenverein': 'Park Fiction'. It set out for a collective 'production of desires' about a neighborhood park. Unfortunately i have not been there/then ... i have only read about it:

»Instead of doing activism proper, Park Fiction made the struggle as well as the planning process work as a platform of exchange & production. Lectures, talks, discussions, exhibitions and film-screenings employed the local knowledge, people started to make-each-other-more-clever.« (↓ 14.2)

»Collective production of desires is to redefine what the city is, to lay out a different mesh over the city, to appropriate the city, to imagine what could be different and then play the game by different rules.« (↓ 14.3)

»The desires will leave the homes and be in the streets.« (↓ 14.4)

They set up a planning-container, a clay modeling and portable planning studio, a telephone hotline with an answering machine for people who get inspired late at night, and an archive of desires.

On a site that was once bound to be sold to a real estate investor, a public park based on the collected desires has since been realized. Park Fiction as a network persists. The park is there/now. The archive of desires is there/now. I wonder: before it turned into an archive had it been a crib of desires?

In a programatic text from 1998 the group explicitly states their critical attitude towards short-termed artistic interventions, 'participation art' (↓ 14.5). I will loosely translate this statement in the following:

»[...] The controversy about the architectural development of the riverside area has been around since the 80's. The Hafenverein has been protesting for many years. The demand--a park, planned by those who will use it, need it, want it--has been formulated a long time ago.

We mention this once more, because we refuse it when artists take the stage as stimulators of communication, as initiators, only to have their concept (ful)filled by others. This ugly shift in paradigms is an avant-garde trick: artists retreat from figuration and simultaneously obtain a position higher up in the cultural hierarchy. The purpose of such participation art seems to be the reproduction of general inactivity and passivity as empty action.«

14.6

wünschen
bauen
geniessen
START
ZIEL
PLANUNGSCONTAINER
UNAUTHORIZED URBAN PLANNERS LIKE US,

14.9

I am not going to render a verdict

We remain in an area of tension. What is at stake? The Sims AFK as a situated practice that may very well revolve around political issues. As a play*ground embedded in a 'construction site' ... where the construction site is a lasting process among actors in their environment, who decide from within, when a game of Sims AFK is suitable and healthy (10.4).

We do not need be there/then anymore. The game is here, in this document and with everyone who has played so far.

(08.2, 11.1, 12.4)

The Sims have lit a bonfire, have received a gift, have given away their diamonds, have given away themselves.

14.7
Wagengruppe Treibstoff
http://treibstoff.wagenplatz.at/
accessed on 05.01.2014

14.3
Wikipedia - Park Fiction (translated by me)
http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Park_Fiction
accessed on 02.01.2014

14.5
(loosely translated by me)
http://park-fiction.net/park-fiction-aufruhr-auf-ebene-p/
accessed on 06.01.2014

14.2, 14.4, 14.6
http://park-fiction.net/park-fiction-introduction-in-english/
accessed on 02.01.2014

14.8
Internationale Situationniste #1 - Definitions
http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html
accessed on 05.01.2014

15.1
http://creativecommons.org/choose/
accessed on 07.01.2014

Moments of encounter

I meet you as a stranger. Let’s become Sim and player fall in together, an informal cont(r)act under care and trust. We are nascent. I listen to you, and respect your choices. We may take care of a self. Sim and player are in coexistence. So, who are you now?

I feel curious and eager for surprise. I do not know where we are headed. Do you? ... We offer an array of action, we will see where we are carried. Will we see where we are carried?

Let’s enter the play*ground, the common ground. We are not alone, can you hear the noise?

...

What do you want me to do?

...

What do you want?

Let me introduce myself, i am a Sim. I am your Sim. Bring me into play. I will do what you tell me. But don’t exploit me. Take care of me.