The Sims in Therapy:
An Examination of Feasibility and Potential of the Use of Game-Based Learning in Clinical Practice

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Abstract

Easily adaptable commercial computer game simulations may be of use to art and play therapists, providing a customizable venue for creating meaning and facilitating communication, and at the same time offering many of the established strengths of game based-learning (empowerment, motivation, insight, and engagement (Prensky, 2001)) to achieve healing and resolution. More specifically, Electronic Arts’ game *The Sims2*, with its tools that allow users to create a character’s appearance and personality attributes, and a game engine that runs character interactions based on these user-directed qualities, may be ideally suited for use in art and play therapy.

This pilot study examines the possibility of using *The Sims 2* and computer-based simulation games with similar tools in a therapeutic setting. While use of *The Sims 2* at this point is for the most part casual and often user-directed for addressing and possibly mediating emotional issues, its more formalized use and adaptation by professionals is most likely imminent. However, before *The Sims2* can be used by clinicians, it is necessary to assess some of the technological and conceptual issues that may impact its use as a treatment modality. This manuscript documents a pilot study involving interviews with and observation of art, play, and occupational therapists learning about and exploring *The Sims2* for possible clinical use in the treatment of certain psychological disorders.

While all of those who participated in the study were interested in the possible use of digital simulation games like *The Sims2* in their professional practice and recognized its probable implementation in the near future, many identified factors that would be necessary for its successful use. In particular, transference was the paramount concern of all of the therapists interviewed. The therapists maintain that while a computer-based game may have tools and functionalities that would support and facilitate a client in connecting with deeper issues, perceptions, and concerns, its application for therapeutic purposes would still require careful mediation with a professional.
Introduction

Art and play therapies in particular involve facilitating clients to create artwork or work with figures to draw out and give their emotions form and expression. Easily adaptable commercial computer simulations and games (Prensky, 2003) may provide an additional technique for occupational, art, or play therapies. As a learning tool, games provide a safe, nonjudgmental, stimulating, and self-directed venue for exploring and engaging in choices and consequences. Previous studies using computer games in learning settings indicate that while student test scores may not improve significantly, students actually learn to a deeper understanding, and are able to describe why an answer to a test question is correct or incorrect (Squire, 2002). In addition, several studies have shown that use of games in learning provides the player with empowerment, motivation, insight, and engagement (Prensky, 2001). This suggests that digital game-based learning may be of use to healthcare professionals in working with their clients, especially in treatment of behavioral or attitudinal issues. Electronic Arts’ The Sims2 is one of many games that might be perfectly suited to address this.

The Sims2 is often described as less of a game and more of a simulation or a toy, in that it is not designed around a concrete goal. The Sims2 game engine allows the user to create families and customize characters by assigning them specific, basic personality attributes such as “shy” or “tidy” to shape their agenda of needs. In effect, a user can participate in the creative process by customizing the game’s settings and characters.

For therapists using art or play therapy to support their clients in giving form to deeper feelings, The Sims2, with its ready-made, consistent interface, may be a possible modality. A therapist or psychologist could use a game like The Sims2 to encourage a client to explore how they respond to a situation recreated in an environment that is safely removed from the reality that is contributing to their issues.

Figure 1
A user-created family in The Sims2
The strengths of the use of *The Sims2*, which anyone can purchase, include its portability, consistent interface and communication tools, and the simple-to-use feature that allows the user to personalize the game for individual use. It is also worth recognizing that emerging and current K16 learners in the United States and western Europe have most likely developed considerable schema shaped by interacting with computer-based technology; as a result, computer games have gone beyond satiating the game playing public as a source of entertainment and evolved into a meaningful, socially expressive medium (Green, 2004).

However, before clinicians can use *The Sims2* in their professional practice, it is necessary to assess the technological and conceptual issues as they may relate to implementation.

**Literature Review**

The level of the user’s interactivity and consequent sense of empowerment and control over their learning experience will affect the extent to which surface or deep learning will occur (Jonassen, 1988). This seems particularly applicable to a computer-based simulation such as *The Sims2*. Within *The Sims2*, a user can recreate an environment and its elements to relive a specific event by exploring and examining the consequences of their choices, for instance. As a Sims2 player, the user has a god-like role, able to create characters and to an extent, shape the quality and direction of their lives. In fact, *The Sims2* has been described as a computerized version of doll therapy (Suler, 2003), a therapeutic modality in which clients re-enact interpersonal interactions, using dolls to represent those involved in a specific, often life-defining event.

*The Sims2* provides the user with a private laboratory in which to experiment with forbidden behaviors and decisions, a vehicle for high-tech self-gnosis within the context of a computer game (Thompson, 2003). Playing the game can be therapeutic, as it provides a setting in which an individual can vent emotions that may not otherwise be appropriate. Players have been known to torture their Sims2 characters by starving or drowning them (Suler, 2003), or to program a character modeled after a previous boyfriend or girlfriend to recreate a relationship and examine why the relationship failed (Jenkins, 2003). In fact, some psychologists’ patients discuss their Sims2 games during their therapy sessions (Thompson, 2003). For this type of gameplay, users seem to gravitate towards using the family album in *The Sims2* to document and provide testament to their re-created experiences within the game environment. Once created, a user can upload their family album, which includes snapshots of gameplay and narrative created by the user, to *The Sims2 Exchange*. *The Sims2 Exchange* is a web space set up by Electronic Arts, developers of Sims2, in which users can upload the family albums they create to document their gameplay or to create specific stories. These family albums document a range of topics portraying our human condition, including:

- A woman’s drug addiction and recovery
- An African-American girl’s adoption by a white family
• Failed relationships
• Abusive relationships

In fact, a recent search on The Sims2 Exchange site for stories about "abuse" produced 95 results with the word “abuse” in the story taglines.

Figure 2
A young girl’s story about her newborn and tumultuous family life, as created in Sims2 and uploaded to the Sims2 Community site.

Existing research has not probed into how to maximize the potential of The Sims2 as a therapeutic device, although the game-playing population seems to be setting the stage for just that. Research into the extent to which healthcare professionals recognize The Sims2’s potential for therapeutic purposes would lay the groundwork for the manner in which healthcare professionals choose to incorporate it into their professional practice.
The purpose of this pilot study is to examine about the perceptions, options, and attitudes practicing therapists hold about the use of Sims2 for therapeutic purposes.

Methods

To explore the practicality of using a computer-based commercial product like The Sims2 for therapeutic purposes and to open discussion on what may be its imminent adaptation, researchers designed a qualitative study. This study involved interviews with seven therapists from practice arenas ranging from art therapy, to grief therapy, behavioral psychology, family counseling, and occupational therapy. This study also involved observation of the therapists exploring and using Sims2. The therapists ranged in age from 30-60, and had little or no experience with Sims2. All were computer literate.

In one-on-one sessions with each therapist, researchers demonstrated Sims2 and asked them to discuss and respond to potential therapeutic uses. The therapists were then given up to 90 minutes to explore Sims2 on their own and provide further determinations on the game’s potential uses.

Findings

Initial Reactions
While those therapists involved in the pilot study recounted anecdotally how clients are using computer-based games or toys like The Sims2 to recreate and explore parallel lives, none were using it specifically within their professional practice. However, many recognized, albeit often warily and with reservation, The Sims2’s potential for use in their work.

Man vs the Machine
Despite the relevance of some of her gameplay to real life outcomes, one therapist explained that she didn’t “feel at all engaged in the game.” She also did not like the idea of having people go into a computer game to sort out their interpersonal issues, since working with a computer would keep them from confronting those very issues. She explained, “One of the things [about] therapy is that it forces you into interacting with another human being. This is interacting with a machine.” She added, “Before we had electricity, we had to interact with each other. This game takes away from person-to-person interaction, which is why people are in therapy in the first place.”

She added, “There is a need for human beings to share, to express themselves and not keep things inside. In this case, with a game, it feels like people can keep some kind of distance from their real life, of course. [There is] protection and projection into the game. My thoughts are that [the user is] not dealing with many issues.”

Despite this counter-intuitive disconnection, most practitioners agreed that The Sims2 or a related tool could prove to be an effective venue for communication and for eliciting dialogue. This would be especially applicable for particular types of people – those who
immerse themselves in their computer, for instance, and who then might be more willing to engage in therapy if it involves using a computer.

**Possible Applications**

Yet given its immediately apparent limitations, the therapists also quickly recognized possible applications of using simulation games like *The Sims2* in their practice. They indicated that a computer-based dollhouse like the one *The Sims2* might be more pertinent to the articulation and communication needs of an emerging generation that has grown up communicating with and learning with a computer.

Examples in which art and play therapists envisioned possibly using *The Sims2* in professional practice include asking the client to:

- Create a “safe place” or “create a safe home”
- Create the “ideal family”
- Create home before and after the death of a family member
- Project the future of their home life in ten years or one year.

A family therapist recognized similar possibilities of *The Sims2* for families negotiating a divorce or mediating grief. She suggested that one could ask clients to use the game to recreate a family situation before and after the change, and then examine and discuss the differences between the two settings, and the client’s feelings about the process.

One therapist added, “Of course, the therapist needs to give direction and to provide scaffolding and consistency [in how people work through the process].” The same therapist added that this kind of application would require “processing time to go back to the game to [compare] the created story with the same situation in the client’s own life, to move them towards seeing things as they actually are, not as they’d with they’d be.” The therapist recognized other opportunities for other uses with *Sims2*, including directing a client to create a family they aren’t happy with. The client would then work with the therapist to identify projection issues and then process through what the client is not happy with it their own family lives. The therapist explained that for this type of application, “The direction might be: if you could create a family of your dreams, what would this be?” *The Sims2* would then be a medium the client could use to express their feelings. However, the therapist strongly cautions against people using *Sims2* to try and sort out issues on their own. She explains that during art therapy sessions, as a client, “You don’t have control of the emotional world when you are dealing with the input of the image of abuse. You’ll just be painting playfully and then things start coming out and you don’t know what to do with the image that’s coming out. The real traumatization comes out when there is no one there to help [you] out.”

Other therapists responded similarly to the need for the ongoing presence of a professional during a client’s interaction with *Sims2*, recognizing its use as a means of facilitating difficult conversations.
Exploring Consequences

The Sims2 also provides a vehicle for exploring consequences. In the game, if the physical and emotional needs are not met for members within a household, characters can die, and the player can be left with but a shell of the household’s previous existence. An occupational therapist who explored The Sims2 felt that The Sims2 was an excellent venue in which autistic clients “could learn how important social relationships really are, learn about social interactions. “ Such clients could then “process through the mistakes they made with their social interactions.” The therapist liked that The Sims2 is set up to “make the user aware of personal needs, or that others have needs as well.” He felt that Sims2 would be a useful as “a cognitive therapy tool, as a way for building awareness about needs.” He also pointed out that people with autism “love computer games and understand them” because they are based on logical, clear-cut cause and effect relationships. “People with autism,” he added, “connect with a formal explanation.”

Facilitation of Transference

One key issue that emerged from talking with one art therapist was the impact of games on behavior. Many educators argue that games are effective learning tools, while commercial game developers maintain that violent games in particular do not encourage violent behaviors in the users. In fact, transference appears to be the paramount concern of all of the therapists interviewed. While the game may have tools and functionalities that would support and facilitate a client in connecting with deeper issues, perceptions, and concerns, therapists maintain that this new realization requires careful mediation from a professional. A therapist pointed out that it is the job of therapists to help people see what lies in what they have created and [how it relates to] their own emotional landscape. Some people are more fragile, and need help to move on. To use The Sims2 therapeutically, the art and play therapists in particular urge that implementation would have to be “very structured, about seeing things, analyzing them, taking responsibility, and moving on.” The art therapists explain that during the art therapy process, the client goes into the “fantasy” part of their brain to connect with feelings and issues deeply buried in the affective consciousness. As these feelings take form and as the client begins to articulate them through artistic expression, it is the job of the attending therapist to mediate the client through these feelings towards a place of resolution.

One therapist explained, for those using Sims2 to explore their emotional landscape on their own, “once [their feelings] start coming out there is a lot of impact on [the user]. They could get depressed, and not having someone to recognize what’s going on, I don’t know what they would do.” Another pointed out that using The Sims2 tools to depict facets of one’s emotional schema “might simplify a complex situation and make it worse too. We also don’t know what the real missing pieces are. It’s hard to help a kid make the connections they need to because of that, working without the information you need.” Mediation would help connect the missing dots.

Implementation Requirements

While all of those interviewed were interested in the possible use of digital simulation games like The Sims2 in their professional practice and recognized is probable
implementation in the near future, many identified factors that would be necessary for its successful use. These included:

- Practitioner and use fluency with the game – these would require upfront time
- Practitioner skills in eliciting the message from the story
- Working effectively within a set timeframe, like that of a therapy session
- The need for “upfront training for the cognitively impaired so that they could play, although [The Sims2 interface] does force cues from time to time.”
- A process for determining how to fit use of The Sims2 or a related application into their curricula into a specific meeting or session period and over a series of class meetings or sessions
- The Sims2 templates or pre-set characters and settings “pre-programmed for portable implementation”
- An infrastructure that supports fostering community between other practitioners using the game for identifying features and applications for professional practice.

Finally, the success of implementation comes back to transference. As with the other therapists, this therapist explained, “Transference is important here, how it’s done,” emphasizing that “someone has to be with the user/client during gameplay sessions to facilitate frustration and ensure that the intended learning takes place.”

**Points for Future Consideration**

At this point, the use of a game or computer simulation in a therapeutic setting is perhaps best described as emergent. Several institutions have used virtual reality to help people deal with phobias and traumas by having people relive, relearn, and reprocess with the facilitation of a healthcare professional. However, in these instances, the interactivity does not involve the client creating all or parts of the virtual world.

**Limitations of this Study**

This pilot study examines the possibility of using The Sims2 and computer-based simulation games with similar tools in a therapeutic setting. While its use at this point is for the most part casual and often user-directed, its more formalized use and adaptation by professionals is most likely imminent. To prepare for this, a more careful study is needed to examine how to use The Sims2 within the context of specific methods used in art and play therapies. Furthermore, those involved in this particular pilot study represent a range of therapeutic practices. A study that focuses on a specific professional practice would clarify which game features may be of use and how best to contextualize them in order to support healing. Finally, this pilot study assumes that people who pursue therapy are interested in using The Sims2 in their processes; an examination into the interest and feasibility from the client’s perspective may indicate that a computer-mediated tool is not as imminent as has been assumed in this study.
References


