Making *Right(s)* Decision: Artificial Life and Rights Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT
With the proliferation of robotics in industry, education and entertainment, artificial intelligent robots challenge the way we think about relationships between humans and machines. This study examines critical issues in artificial life and rights, which are an emergent but, as yet, little understood area of educational inquiry through one of the most popular video game, *The Sims*. Since *The Sims* deals with simulated people and relationships, this game introduces important issues about ethics and morals [12, 13]. Drawing from examples through *The Sims* discussion forums, I will discuss our very notion of rights and what this means for artificial life in order to raise moral questions about social simulation and gaming.

Keywords
Artificial life, rights, moral dilemma, *The Sims,* Gaming

INTRODUCTION
With the proliferation of robotics in industry and education and entertainment, artificial intelligent (AI) robots challenge the way we think about relationships between humans and machines. In particular, the development of sociable AI makes machines more human-like with "artificial emotion" [34]. In this vein, Sengers points out that "an artificial being is not just a tool but has its own *life*. Such a creature we want to talk to, not just to find out the latest stock quotes or the answer to our database queries, but because we are interested in its hopes and feelings" [43, italic added]. Moreover, experiments in the field of human computer interaction have showed that participants often approach socially interactive technologies as if they have feelings [4, 16, 17, 25, 34, 37, 51]. Not surprisingly, when we engage with questions such as: "Will robots rise up and demand their rights?" [41], "Should robots also possess the rights and duties of all citizens?" [42], mind-twisting issues yield a host of ethical dilemmas and force us to reflect upon the nature of being human. The answers to these questions, at the very least, depend on what we mean by human and how we subsequently think about machines.

Although I recently learned about the existence of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Robots (http://gamma.sitelutions.com/~toucans/aspcr/), I have been puzzling for some time about advocacy of rights for robots. Frankly speaking, it seems far-fetched since we have not given enough care to human rights. The more I explore this topic, the better the issues surrounding human and robot rights provide a new perspective for exploring reciprocal interconnections between human and machines that lie at the core of technology studies.

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For teachers, this leads to questions underlying moral education. Since students are already engaged with artificial life (A-life) environments such as online and video games, educators can use these interests to introduce issues of rights, responsibilities and ethical dilemmas. One example of videogames intersecting with A-life is *The Sims*. Compared to violent video games, *The Sims* is considered as "educational," providing spaces for experiments with social life and family structure [6, 27, 38, 45].

In this article, I will map out issues arising from questions of A-life and rights. I draw on examples from public discussion boards of *The Sims*, which offer possibilities "to promote a new appreciation of the interrelated rights and responsibilities of humans, machines and nature" [32].

ISSUES AND UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT A-LIFE AND RIGHTS

Players of a virtual pet game using A-life techniques, called *Creature*, raised issues of their pet-like character's rights when an aggressive player wanted to sell his tortured Norn [9, 35]. Members of the community believed a Norn was similar to a *real* pet since "these creatures are designed to simulate life and fit almost any definition of life" [35]. Long before this strange idea that computer-generated character had rights for their A-life, Freitas anticipated that questions of machine rights and robot liberation would arise in the future [15]. Along this line, Kerr notes:

> The machines will convince us that they are *conscious*, that they have their own agenda worthy of our respect. We will come to believe that they are conscious much as we believed that of each other. More so than with our animal friends, we will empathize with their professed feelings and struggles because their minds will be based on the designs of human thinking. They will embody human qualities and will claim to be human. And we'll believe them [26].

Despite a growing body of published studies on A-life and AI, there is little consensus on definitions of "artificial," and "life" [for review see, 5, 8, 29, 31, 33, 39]. The phrase "A-life' was coined by C. Langton, and literally means "life made by humans rather than by nature", often in a constructed computer simulation [29]. Explaining the artificial life roots of AI, Steels suggested:

> AI community has started to stress embodied intelligence and made a strong alliance with biology and research on artificial life. This is opening up an "artificial life route to AI" which has been characterized as bottom up AI, the Animat approach, behavior based AI or animal robotics [47].

Influenced by biology and complexity theory, most descriptions of A-life emphasize the importance of "autonomy" in living systems [2, 3]. In this context, an autonomous agent means any self-organizing "adaptive system which actively behaves to achieve a certain goal while in continuous long term interaction with its environment" [54].

After criticizing promises of AI research which are reminiscent of old modernist, rationalist, humanistic and romantic visions in the boundaries of human nature and machine, Sack presents A-life as an example of "aesthetic critique of AI" [42]. The aesthetic turn from essentialist objections toward neo-cybernetic examination of the roles of the body, the senses and perception and interactions with environment, however, produces ethical implications, if we are all

interconnected with "enough similar to us" [42].

By problematizing *how* the effects of machines-as-agent are being generated, Suchman warns us to keep an eye on historical materialization of machines and consequences [48, 49, 50]. Haraway's cyborg helps us understand distinctions between natural and artificial in more meaningful ways. A cyborg is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machines and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creation of fiction" [19]. Cyborgs blur the binary between human and machine, science and social reality, natural and artificial and male and female, but it is also best examined as "a social discourse rather than as a strategy or artifact" [46]. Haraway reminds us that "trope nature through a *relentless artifactualism* means that nature for us is made as both fiction and fact" [20]. In this sense, with ethnographic research at Santa Fe Institute, Helmreich contends how a culturally specific vision of *life-as-we know-it*, is encoded into the construction of *life as-it-could-be*, borrowing the argument form Haraway [22].

Similarly, Inayatullah notes that nature is not an uncontested category, rather humans create nature based on their own scientific, political and cultural dispositions as other [23]. Thus, "ideological justifications from Christianity and the classical Cartesian separation in Western thought between mind/body, self/environment and self/nature leads to the denial of rights for nature" [32]. With this transformation in epistemology, Inayatullah notes that:

> Humans may see robots in their own rights; not only as mechanical slaves, products, and buy and sell, but also entities in their own rights. Denial of rights of robots - since they are considered other, as not sentient, and thus not part of our consideration - becomes of an exemplar of how we treat other humans, plants, animals and civilizations.... Robots should have rights not because they are like humans, but of what they are, as themselves [23].

According to Twist [51], this is not a matter of whether a machine has the ability to exhibit behavior that is intelligent or emotional. From Turing to Kurzweil, the AI movement has consistently made this argument. Furthermore, comparing artificial agents to animals, Elton argues there are no differences that make a moral difference between real animals and some animated agents featured in video games (i.e., the "viewpoint of vegetarians) [11].

If and when robots have their own rights, what are their responsibilities? To accommodate rights associated with relationships between nature and machines, we need to reassess our language. According to Inayatullah [23], rights are not an asset for the oppressed but a stock of symbols for the state to use against others. In this vein, Waldron suggests that the language of rights be replaced with the language of "needs." [52]. Rights typically refer to negative claims on others but can also refer to affirmative claims. A language of needs, however, is no less contestable and has a less secure relation to the idea of social duty [52].

A-LIFE AND THE SIMS

As Will Wright, creator of the Sims noted, Sim characters are "like human guinea pigs. It makes you realize how much of your own life is a strategy game" [18]. A key rule of the game relates to the way in which the player controls the lives of characters they create. It is a 'people simulator,' and one of the 'God games' in which the players rule over a society of their own creation [12, 27, 38]. With sophisticated three-dimensional graphical images, *The Sims* invites players into a set of suburban neighborhoods, which model ordinary everyday "real life situations" [6, 12, 13,

27, 38].

By creating their own characters, players take up certain subject positions and exercise certain options that animate *The Sims* with stories from everyday contexts. *The Sims* leads players to examine their own lives by simplifying a complex real world into a microworld [24, 45]. This simulation game is an intriguing realization of A-life. In this suburban-family simulation game, players design, build and furnish homes, manage the daily lives of Sims by finding them jobs, feeding them and helping them form relationships. Moreover, these creatures are quite autonomous in meeting their needs (e.g., Bladder, Hygiene, Comfort, Hunger, Energy, Fun, Social and Room) to a degree when players don't want to play *The Sims*. God-like power over the simulated life seems to provide the sense of control from "outside," while being "inside," controlled by larger and more powerful forces [49].

> Maxis [*The Sims* Software producer] provides the user with a fascinating virtual "nature," with its own physics and environment, replete with occupants that "live" their virtual lives within the confines of these artificial realities. The role of the user in these games is not so much participant in the action, as is the case with most computer games, but rather as the reigning "God" who designs the universe from the bottom up…. In [*The Sims*], Maxis has essentially created a flight simulator that gives one a taste of what it would be like to be in the pilot's seat occupied by God. In fact, if God used a computer simulation to create the world and populate it with organisms, his software tools would look a lot like those found in [*The Sims*]. [22]

Game characters become a mechanism for realizing a player's will in the game. Sims characters are more than artifacts for some of players: They are players themselves. Such emotional experiences are consistent with Wright's original intention for the game:

> If you're building a solution, how large that solution space is gives the player a much stronger feeling of empathy. If they know that what they've done is unique to them, they tend to care for it a lot more. I think that's the direction I tend to come from [40].

Not only does *The Sims* provide players with tools, called "Sim Creator," but characters in the game even express love, contentment, anger, disappointment, deceit, and despondence through "comic-like bubbles" so that players can see emotions in how the character acts. The character's thinking is influenced by well-defined emotional states (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Characters in the game express emotions like love, anger, and the like. Comic like bubbles show players what characters need or think.

In particular, artificial intelligence becomes more sophisticated in *The Sims 2* to draw real emotions from players [14]. For instance, characters grow old and die of old age but they also have memories that affect their personality and relationships with other family members or friends, due to new "aspiration/fear system" [44].

Killing Sims

The Sims evokes quite intense emotional experiences, characterized by strong feelings of caring, empathy, engagement and attachment to their characters or families, and what they feel as their character grows through the process of nurturing.

Players understand their character's situation, however, they do not relate to the character in any uniform way. After investigating people's relationships with AIBO, a robotic pet, Friedman et al. concluded that "participants seldom attributed moral standing to AIBO (e.g. that AIBO deserves respect, has rights not to be harmed or abused, or can be held morally accountable for action), despite their attachment" [16, 17]. In fact, in hundreds of Fan Web sites devoted to the game, players playfully describe the wicked ways they have killed their Sims— such as putting them in a tiny room with no bed and no toilet, setting them to fire, not letting them sleep until they pass out, or putting them in a pool, then deleting all the ladders, and waiting to see how long it takes to drown (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Created through game play in order to torture and kill characters.

In the most spontaneous postings to *The Sims* discussion forums, players note that nefarious behaviors like killing their character is just a part of video games, or "great stress relievers."

> Sim killing is *fun*. Maybe you hate Britney, and you make a Sim like Britney *just* so you can kill her. Fun. Anyway, because I am a Sim serial killer, I don't just kill my Sims one way. That would be so boring! So I've made a list of original ways you can kill Sims. If you have any more ways, e-mail me and tell me so I can add them :) (Anonym, 2004, April 13)

In particular, one of the players remarked that "Maxis made allowances for death and tragedy! If the game was meant to be played ONLY so that we kept all our Sims perfect and happy, then no one would get to see all the interesting (and often funny) things that happen when tragedy strikes." One member comments that having a "ghost" which is a residue of a Sims' death is the entire reason he kills his character.

Interestingly, with the recently released *The Sims 2,* players in the same discussion topic under the thread of "killing *The Sims*" responded somewhat differently. Due to the new features including reproduction, genetics and aging in *The Sims 2*, more often than not, most of postings in the thread "Please, don't kill them all" recognized the moral dilemmas created in *The Sims 2*:

> I don't think you should kill all of them, unless you really want to do that. You have to think about the consequences….Second: The remaining sim will have that memory as a bad one. Will cry and you will end up with a ghost. Third: Poor Sim!!!!
>
> Now, if you don't want the poor guy, make him move. If it don't create bad
>
> memories, you can use that Sim later, and you will not have any ghost scaring
>
> your beloved Sim.
>
> Awwwww, I don't know how anyone can kill their Sims. They seem so real too me.

Most of *The Sims 2* players face moral dilemmas of killing their characters since feelings *that* sims are "real," are evoked. At the same time as one player noted the consequences of killing a Sim weighs on one's conscience:

> I don't kill Sims that represents my family members and closest friends. No matter how much

they make my life crazy or how much they annoy me. I couldn't do that. Especially not with *Sims 2*. That would just be wrong.

As illustrated above, since *The Sims* characters evoke conceptions of life-like essence, they are conceived to have moral standing in the way that they represent "my family members and closest friends" or are recipients of care.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I examined critical issues in A-life rights and an emergent but, as yet, little understood area of educational inquiry through the vided game, *The Sims.* Video games epitomize a "new cyborgian relationship" with machine, mediating cultural text that offers subject positions [28]. Exploiting the relative comfort in distance that virtual life affords, researchers have explored the use of digital simulations to prompt students to reason through a range of moral dilemmas [1]. As in the case when an individual's consciousness is modified by the merging of human and machine, *The Sims* represents powerful ethnical dilemma. "Familiar to us" can not be criteria for moral concern and it urges us to think about our profound assumptions about relationship between human and machines. It does not mean I attempt to build "a taboo system that gets further and further from the actual value" [30], but I argue we need to keep eyes on our very notion of rights and what it means in this artificial society since "boundaries between humans and machines are not naturally given but constructed" [48]. By questioning uncontested boundaries between humans and machines, we do not only reconceptualize our relationships with machines but also raise the potential to inspire players to think about moral questions that social simulations and gaming generate.

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