Live Chat
with Plato and Will Wright

"Help please! Explain simulation."   *plato@TheAgora.org*

Will, I have just installed the SIMS—which was not easy given the state of the operating system I have here in Athens. I am trying to get my mind around your notion of *SIMULATION*. Is it a story? A game? A morality tale?

"Help please! Explain simulation."   *will@TheSims.net*

Plato, at least your processor speed is not a problem. Basically, what I mean by "simulation" is a model. It is an abstraction in which I encode the basic rules of a social system, such as a household or city: the behaviors individuals in the system are capable of performing, the laws they must obey in relating to one another, and other elements, including economic principles regulating exchange of goods, labor, and so forth.

Oh, I see, I think. In my *Republic*, I had Socrates and Glaucon try to construct a "City in Words" which was supposed to be ordered in direct analogy to the principles that order the just soul. If we could locate justice in the City, by analogy, we would be able to understand justice in the soul of the just person.

Exactly. The *Republic* you and Glaucon constructed in words was a model. Just like in the models users make in my SIMS, you modified elements of the model by adjusting this or that parameter of the "just city" in order to get a variety of other types of city, none of them matching the orderliness and quality of life in your ideal Republic.

The difference: in a computer model I can allow the interactions between individuals to evolve in time, so we can observe the system as we might puppets in a play.

"But the Sims are locked in the Cave…"   plato@TheAgora.org

But Will, I do have some questions for you about this game. You have made a virtual world where little people go through the motions of everyday life: getting dressed, eating, using the bathroom, going to work, having parties. They seem to be motivated solely by worldly, material interests, without any concern for higher truths. They are mired in what unenlightened people call "real life." Isn't this just a version of my Allegory of the Cave, where the Sims are shadows on the wall of the cave, and the people playing the game are the prisoners chained in the cave mistaken shadows for truth?

"But the Sims are locked in the Cave…"   will@TheSims.net

I can see why you might think this, Socrates, but you are mistaken. The Sims is not a shadowy reflection of the material world. It's actually a model of human relationships: it's abstraction from real life, closer to the ideal of Truth than to a real representation of human life. You might notice if you look at the game space that it is uncluttered, containing only the essential elements to play the game, and that all the accessories serve a function: the refrigerator holds food, the newspaper is there to find jobs, and so forth.

"But the Sims are locked in the Cave…"   *plato@TheAgora.org*

But from my point of view what's missing from your game is engagement with abstract, transcendent ideas of Justice, Beauty, Truth and the Good.

"But the Sims are locked in the Cave…"   *will@TheSims.net*

Well there certainly is an abstract model underlying the Sims. But it is a conception of the good as I know it and as generalized from empirical observation. I also draw upon the work of sociologists and scientists who study networked behavior. As for transcendent values, I don't see how we can encode them in a model. There are only behaviors and desires, material needs for happiness of individuals pursuing their own interests, constrained by the needs and interests of the community.

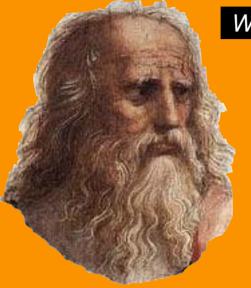*What is the moral responsibility of the artist?*   *plato@TheAgora.org*

Will, I think that your excuse is too easy. Artists—by which I mean to include computer-game makers—should be held to the highest moral standard. You'll recall that I exiled the poets from my ideal city because they told lies, misrepresented the gods, and gave bad moral examples in their characters.

It's important to reflect strong values in our creations, and I believe the Sims value structure is flawed. Your little characters do not pursue the Good. They pursue comfort, material goods, and reputation. Maybe you can't encode transcendent values in a model, but surely you can reward certain kinds of moral choices and punish others?
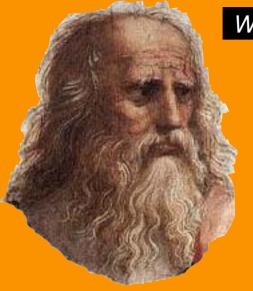
What is the moral responsibility of the artist?   *will@TheSims.net*

Plato, Sims *are* punished for poor choices. I created an environment where things work best when people behave well toward each other: this seems to me to be a model of a moral universe.

Writing, Memory, Community

plato@TheAgora.org

Let's move on. I have a more subtle point to make. Please hear me out.

As you may know, I hold that a philosopher arrives, eventually and with great effort, at a direct intuition of the Good through dialectic/dialogue: a public and real-time exchange of language with other people. The opposite of this kind of exchange is the written word: a record of a living conversation in a dead letter. I made an argument against writing in my *Phaedrus*. Writing induces forgetfulness, since people don't have to remember anymore once something is written down. Through alien, external marks on paper they can go through a process of recalling internal thoughts: the opposite of true memory.

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Now let me try to apply what I've just said about writing to your work, Will.

Writing disrupts traditional culture and social relationships. The memory of a traditional culture is oral. It is shared, public and communal, based in ritualized speech that everyone knows. Writing allows an individual to divorce himself from society. My teacher Socrates chose death rather than exile: divorce from his community. To him life without the shared public intimacy of a face-to-face culture was unthinkable.

Socrates' work itself would have been impossible to conduct in writing. True discourse, the kind of reasoned conversation that leads to understanding, is inscribed in the human soul, and it is delivered through speech.

Plato, before you go on to say how this might be relevant to the Sims, I have to stop you. If writing is so bad, don't you think it's ironic that the medium of your work is written words? Doesn't this contradict your point?

Wouldn't you have retreated from public engagement if your teacher had been killed by the state?

I regard my work as a second-best substitute for actual conversation. That's one reason why I cast my philosophy in a dialogue form.

But I think that the Sims suffers from being a game played by an individual at a computer. Like writing, the Sims replaces live, communal interaction with an isolated activity. It draws the individual away from the community, from engaging with others in seeking truth.
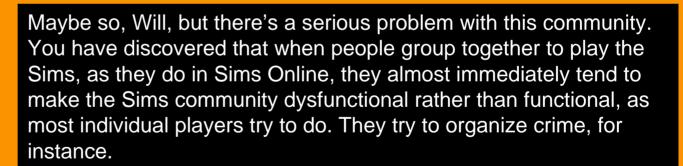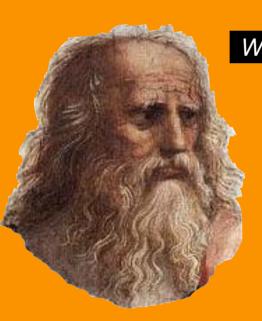
Plato, I've got an answer for you. Sims Online allows real people to participate with each other in a virtual community. The Sims characters are not dolls or puppets but the avatars—the masks—of the people playing. The only real difference between this online community and a face-to-face real community, such as the one you experienced in 5th century Athens, is that the online community is disembodied. Isn't the body—like the rest of the material world—something that you said is a mere reflection of an ideal? Isn't an online community therefore purer?

Maybe so, Will, but there's a serious problem with this community. You have discovered that when people group together to play the Sims, as they do in Sims Online, they almost immediately tend to make the Sims community dysfunctional rather than functional, as most individual players try to do. They try to organize crime, for instance.

Even worse, your online community is unrestrained by the traditional moral laws that I tried to justify with reason. These folks are free to make up any rules to live by that they can all agree on: a true rule of the rabble. This virtual community of yours reproduces the mob mentality of 5th century Athens: this is a group that would vote to kill Socrates all over again

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We seem to be disagreeing more than we agree, Plato. Why don't we stop this dialogue and let the students figure out the answers through their own discussions?