(GAME)PLAYING ON WORDS
Lexical creativity in multimedia interactive entertainment

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Abstract – Creativity in English, and particularly "lexical creativity" (Munat 2016), has attracted scholarly attention in Linguistics for decades. In this digital age, creative uses of English are examined across a variety of new media, discourses, and genres (Munat 2007), but, with few exceptions, as Ensslin and Balteiro complain (2019a, pp. 2-3), little linguistic research has focused on videogames "as means and objects of communication; how they give rise to new vocabularies, meanings, textual genres, and discourse practices", that is on videogames as "medium-specific objects and tools of language studies". Against this background, this paper presents a preliminary descriptive corpus-assisted study aimed to explore lexical creativity in videogames as texts (Ensslin 2015, pp. 407-408) and, especially, in in-game texts (Bernal-Merino 2015, pp. 110-114), in order to contribute to the development of "videogame linguistics" (Ensslin, Balteiro 2019a, p. 3). Accordingly, this research analyses the latest episode of one of the most culturally and commercially successful game franchises at global level, namely *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts 2014), and investigates whether and how game writers creatively exploit and manipulate the English language system at the level of phonology, morphology, or syntax (Munat 2016, p. 92) for the purposes of players' fun.

Keywords: lexical creativity; videogames; videogame linguistics; *The Sims*.

1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the study of videogames has become an area of considerable academic growth. This is due to the fact that the game industry forms one of the major and most profitable creative sectors at world level, because gaming as a leisure activity has become pervasive in today's society, engaging people across countries, generations, and social groups.

However, as Ensslin and Balteiro claim (2019a, p. 1), despite the status of videogames as a global cultural phenomenon and despite the recent considerable interdisciplinary scholarly interest in this medium, "it is perhaps surprising that little comprehensive work exists to date that examines" videogames "as diverse, medium-specific objects and tools of language studies and discourse analysis", meaning that, with few exceptions (see, for example, Conway 2013; Ensslin 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015; Ensslin, Balteiro 2019b; Gee 2007, 2013, 2015; Hawreliak 2018; Iaia 2016; Newon 2011; Paul 2012; Stamenković *et al.* 2017), so far little and unsystematic research has investigated "how videogames function as means and objects of communication; how they give rise to new vocabularies, meanings, textual genres, and discourse practices; and how they serve as rich vehicles of ideological signification and social engagement" (Ensslin, Balteiro 2019a, p. 2).

Indeed, as Ensslin explains (2015), while studies on the narrative and ludological features of videogames appeared in the early 1990s, it was only in the 2010s that scholars began to show an interest in the nature of verbal and nonverbal communication in and about games, that is in the language and discourse of games and gaming (Ensslin 2012), thus laying the foundations of what Ensslin and Balteiro (2019a, p. 3) have recently named

"videogame linguistics" to refer to "a subarea of media linguistics" where "linguists and media and communication scientists and scholars from around the world" investigate videogames "in and about multiple languages".

In order to contribute to the development of this new subdomain, this study adopts its perspective to explore "lexical creativity" (Munat 2007, 2016) in multimedia interactive entertainment, most commonly referred to as videogames. In particular, this paper presents a preliminary descriptive corpus-assisted study on the ludic function of lexical creativity in the life-simulation game *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts 2014), the fourth and latest instalment of one of the most popular franchises in gaming history, namely *The Sims* (Electronic Arts 2000–).

There are three major reasons for selecting this game as the case study of this paper. First, as already mentioned, this game franchise has achieved enormous commercial and cultural success at global level,[1] distributed in dozens of countries worldwide and translated into just as many languages.[2] Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the language-related dimensions of this franchise and the few studies published so far focus on localisation and translation issues (Bernal-Merino 2015, pp. 63-65; Davidson 2011; Dodaro 2014; Eerio 2014; Fernández-Costales 2011; Pettini 2021). Secondly, life simulation, and this franchise in particular, are of considerable cultural relevance in the present day. Indeed, during the pandemic *The Sims 4* has recorded the highest increase in terms of revenues and players' engagement since its launch, because it represented a form of escapism, therapy, and stress relief according to many psychologists, as Pettini recapitulates (2021, pp. 399-400). Lastly, *The Sims* has been selected exactly because it is a real-life simulation game: players have fun by creating and interacting with a series of characters, known as Sims, in order to simulate everyday life experiences (Bittanti, Flanagan 2003). According to Nutt and Railton (2003), this franchise has established real life as a game genre, in the sense that players understand and enjoy the game through their notion of real life, and on this basis, they can use the game as a sort of life laboratory to play out 'like real life' narratives in either realistic or very creative ways.

In this regard, as the analysis will show, language in *The Sims* plays a role in making real-life simulation fun. Moreover, if players understand and enjoy the game through their notion of real life, the 'real-lifeness' of language, so the language of real life in terms of players' mental lexicon, can help players to understand and enjoy creative manipulations of existing forms and meanings produced by game writers to make life simulation fun.

Based on these premises, Section 2 outlines this paper's theoretical framework by introducing the concept of lexical creativity in the area of videogame linguistics. Section 3 illustrates the most important features of personality customisation in *The Sims 4*, with special attention to its aspiration system. Section 4 describes this study's methodological aspects, which background the pilot quantitative and qualitative corpus-assisted analysis of lexical creativity presented in Section 5. Lastly, based on the discussion of preliminary findings, some conclusions are drawn in Section 6, while suggesting potential avenues for future research.

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[1] Since its launch in 2000, this franchise has sold around 200 million copies globally, generated more than 5 billion US dollars in revenue, and a total population of over 1.6 billion Sims has been created (see Roberts 2020). As regards *The Sims 4* in particular, it has recorded more than US$1 billion in revenue and has recently passed 20 million players around the world (Roberts 2020).
[2] *The Sims 4*, for example, is available in 18 different languages.

2. Lexical creativity and videogame linguistics

The relationship between language, discourse and creativity has attracted scholarly attention in Linguistics for decades (Munat 2007). As Carter (2015, p. x) states, creativity is no longer to be regarded as the output of exceptional individuals, but rather as an everyday phenomenon manifested in a wide range of activities and practices in spoken, written and multimodal forms. According to Carter (2015, p. xi, original emphasis), "*all* kinds of language can function to perform creative acts" and creativity is not only language but also "what people *do* with language", which, due to the cultural, societal, and technological forces at play in the age of digital media practices, require us to constantly re-shape the ways in which we see and examine creativity.

Moreover, indeed, although it is an established area of linguistic research, there is no clear agreement among scholars about the precise definition and scope of creativity itself. The starting point is usually some manipulation of language, but, depending on the researcher's approach and area of interest, discussions of creativity can significantly vary. This seems to depend on the deep link between creative language and the sociocultural conditions of its production, the specific people who use it, the reasons and goals which motivate it, and the technologies used to produce it. In other words, what counts as creativity can vary from one context to another.

Of particular relevance here is the link between creativity and language play or 'ludic' language because, as Crystal seminally argued (1998), although the main purpose of language is that of communicating information, language play is truly central to human lives, it is a primary means of self-expression and amusement, and only through a proper recognition of its importance we can understand what is involved in linguistic creativity as an inherent possibility of human communication, as a form of ludic play and a source of human pleasure. According to Crystal (1998, p. 1), we play with language by deviating from rules and structures, by manipulating language "as a source of enjoyment either for ourselves or for the benefit of others". In other words, "we take some linguistic feature – such as a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters – and make it do things it does not normally do. (…) And if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun" (Crystal 1998, p. 1). In his seminal study, Crystal (1998) also made a distinction between amateur and professional users and uses of playful language, and he identified as professional examples of language play the work of headline and advertising copywriters, comedians, and writers of humorous texts. However, in this digital age, the group of professionals need to be reconsidered and among those whose work involves language play, one cannot but include game writers, that is the authors of videogame texts.

In the history of digital media, the game industry has been one of the driving factors of the digital revolution and videogames are not only one of the most popular forms of digital media but also one of the major creative sectors in the world. Like other professional practices in the wider creative industry, indeed, nowadays game writing is a prime example of creative writing and it can be easily associated to what Munat calls "the domain of lexical creativity" (2016, p. 92), in the sense that game writers can exploit "the language system creatively, at the level of phonology, morphology, or syntax" and thus they can "invent, modify, mix, and remix single morphemes, entire words, or whole expressions, by applying or by violating productive and creative word-forming processes" for the purposes of players' entertainment.

'Ludicity' is one of the major reasons behind creative uses of a language (Munat 2016, p. 101). A lexical creation is, by default, ludic because ludicity is a property of all

new word formations and the degree of ludicity is directly dependent on the communicative goal and context of the text in which lexical creations appear (Bagasheva, Stamenov 2013, p. 80). Accordingly, multimedia interactive entertainment, due to the very ludic nature of videogames and play, represents a very fertile ground for scientific research. After all, videogames are entertainment first and foremost, they are cultural and artistic forms "made to entertain" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al.* 2016, p. 159).

The focus of this study is thus on the ludic function of lexical creativity in the language of videogames, here meant as the ability of game writers to extend the English language system in a motivated, but more or less predictable way, including both regular, or rule-governed, and irregular, or non-rule-governed word-formation processes. Productivity and creativity are therefore interpreted here as hyponyms of "lexical innovation" (Bauer 2001, p. 64), or "lexical inventiveness" (Bagasheva, Stamenov 2013, p. 71), where novel units of meaning are created by manipulating the form and meaning of existing items.

The perspective adopted in this paper is "videogame linguistics" (Ensslin, Balteiro 2019a, p. 3), whose research object is the language and discourse of games and gaming, as seminally explored by Ensslin (2012). Therefore, it is easy to understand that videogame linguistics deals with a complex and multifaceted phenomenon which "involves various layers of communicative interaction and multiple types of social actors" (Ensslin, Balteiro 2019a, p. 2). These embrace, for example, the ways in which games and game professionals communicate meanings to players, and the ways in which players and other stakeholders communicate and negotiate game-related meanings by engaging in debates about games and gaming in many contexts.

In more detail, according to Ensslin (2012, p. 6), videogame-related language and discourse comprise the language about games and gaming used by all actors involved, including, among others: gamers across different media and communication platforms, for instance, via social networking sites, online discussion fora and in-game chats; the game industry's professionals, such as developers and publishers; critics, journalists, politicians, educators, parents, activists and other media stakeholders who, with different purposes and in different settings, generate and participate in discussions about games and gaming. The language and discourse of games also include the language belonging to the game itself, either used outside the game, encoded into paratextual material like instruction manuals, blurbs, advertising, etc., and, more relevantly for this research, the language used within games as part of their textual world, i.e., in-game texts, and encoded into a variety of text types, such as user interfaces, scripted dialogues, tutorials, instructions, system messages, etc. Moreover, given the variety of products falling into the category of videogames, in terms of genre, subgenre, theme, age rating, platform, etc., special attention should be paid to the languages of videogames in the plural, since each individual videogame may speak its own language or one specific language in particular. In other words, it is the experience players are offered in a game world what deeply influences the language used in-game.

Going back to game-related language and discourse, the classification offered by Ensslin (2012, p. 6) is, as the author explains, "by no means exhaustive", but represents a clear indication of the wide range of verbal and nonverbal aspects which can be examined from the perspective of videogame linguistics. In this study, the focus is on the language of in-game texts, an aspect that has remained largely unexplored. The reasons for the small quantity of works examining language within videogames lie in the difficulty in accessing authentic game texts. As pointed out by Pettini (2022, p. 11), most mainstream game developers and publishers are unwilling or unable to provide scholars with access to game texts, which are necessary in Language Studies. "This means that researchers must resort

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to other very time-consuming, and somehow limited activities to study videogames" (Pettini 2022, p. 11) because of the difficulties introduced in language analysis by the interactive nature of these products, as discussed in Section 4.

As Ensslin observes (2015, p. 407), although games are procedural and interactive media which have to be played rather than simply read, watched, or listened to, "they are nevertheless textual in nature". In particular, games are multimedia and multitextual creations belonging to a complex entertainment product that places emphasis on the type of interactivity that forces players to influence the virtual world they are playing in (Bernal-Merino 2015, p. 108). The nature of videogames as texts is thus extremely multifaceted. Although the examination of their textual features is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to highlight that a first major distinction must be made between diegetic and non-diegetic elements in relation to the game world, or between in-game texts, so texts displayed on-screen, and paratext (promotional material, box cover, manual, etc.). Secondly, within these two broad categories, text types vary depending on their function and, consequently, present different characteristics (Pettini 2022, pp. 47-51).

The text type this study focuses on is the User Interface (UI hereafter), which represents in-game content-focused text with informative function. In particular, this study examines the UI text which relates to customisation, that is text which is displayed on-screen in the UI, and which allows players to customise their avatar, according to the game mechanic[3] described in the following section.

3. *The Sims 4* aspiration system

The Sims series (Electronic Arts 2000–) is an extremely popular game franchise which, over the last twenty years, has become a cultural phenomenon by simply replacing monsters with plain humans (Chan 2003; Frasca 2001; Sihvonen 2011). *The Sims 4* (2014) is the fourth and latest major title in the series and presents the same 'fun factor' as its predecessors: players create and interact with a series of characters in order to simulate everyday life experiences (Bittanti, Flanagan 2003). As already mentioned, and as the game's executive producer Rachel Franklin (2014) and the game's player guide (Electronic Arts 2014) clearly explain and highlight for marketing purposes, the added value of this fourth episode is the psychological dimension of life simulation which, in-game, translates into new options within the 'Create a Sim' mechanic.

When players enter *The Sims 4*, they co-design their Sims by choosing a number of attributes, such as name, gender, age, physical appearance and clothes, voice, walkstyle, etc., and, as regards personality, one aspiration, which is the goal of their simulated life. Given the emphasis placed on the game's psychological simulation, the analysis in Section 5 explores lexical creativity in the language of personality, that is the language of the game's personality system, the language of personality customisation and, particularly, the language used to name aspirations.

In this regard, as discussed in the following section, although it is beyond the scope of the analysis, it is worth briefly mentioning here a special language-related feature of *The Sims* series: in-game dialogues feature a fictional language called Simlish. As Boland

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[3] While the concept of game mechanic is widely discussed in Game Studies, for the sake of this paper, it is meant as the rule system of a game, the system through which players interact with a game, that is "the mechanism through which players make meaningful choices and arrive at a meaningful play experience" (Salen, Zimmerman 2004, p. 317).

explains (2010, p. 17), the game's designer Will Wright decided to create a unique 'nonsense' language "made up of gibberish words that could not be translated, so that its meaning would be left open to the imagination of the player". A real language, simulated by a computer, Boland adds (2010, p. 17), would have been too repetitive and hiring translators for world languages would have been too costly.

Going back to personality customisation, aspirations are lifelong goals for the Sims and there are ten broad categories or aspiration tracks for Sims aged teen or older, namely Athletic, Creativity, Deviance, Family, Food, Fortune, Knowledge, Love, Nature, and Popularity, as well as four separate categories or aspiration tracks for child Sims, namely Creativity, Motor, Social and Mental. The aspiration system for child Sims is very simple and each track is associated with one single aspiration, for example 'Artistic Prodigy' for Creativity and 'Whiz Kid' for Mental. On the contrary, for Sims aged teen or older, each aspiration track branches into further categories. For example, by selecting Creativity as his/her aspiration, the player may be a 'Painter Extraordinaire', a 'Musical Genius' or a 'Bestselling Author'. By selecting Food, the player may aspire to be a 'Master Chef' or a 'Master Mixologist'.

In order to realise the aspiration selected, each Sim, that is the player, must achieve aspiration-related goals, which are called milestones, by engaging in aspiration-related activities, spending hours in practicing specific activities, and developing aspiration-related skills, which are increasingly complex, varied, and time-consuming. So, for example, if the player selects the Athletic aspiration and aims to become a 'Bodybuilder', he/she must work out, go jogging or exercise for an increasing number of hours, achieve an increasing level of fitness skill, own an increasing number of workout equipment tools, etc., and the progress he/she makes corresponds to aspiration milestones, like 'Basic Trainer' (milestone 1), 'Exercise Demon' (milestone 2), 'Fit to a T' (milestone 3) in the case of 'Bodybuilder' (milestone 4), which means that the aspiration is named after the final milestone.

4. Methodology

As discussed in Section 2, the interactive nature of videogames introduces several challenges to the analysis of their content. This is particularly true when investigating the language of videogames because game texts must be non-linear in order to give players authorial agency in the storytelling process. Textual fragmentation clearly manifests itself in the database spreadsheets which organise text in typical table style format with several columns and hundreds or thousands of rows or strings, each associated to an identifier or string ID which enables the game engine to display texts according to players' choices and actions. Textual non-linearity represents a challenge also for researchers, especially when examining game dialogues as text type. Indeed, as Pettini (2022, p. 65) illustrates, in order to create corpora of game texts in language and translation studies, researchers must reorder dialogue strings and make conversations linear and meaningful by playing the game or using online walkthroughs played by independent gamers and uploaded on platforms like YouTube.

In this study, however, non-linearity represents a relative challenge for the following reasons. First, the analysis of lexical creativity in Section 5 examines a text-type other than dialogues, namely the UI text type, which has been selected because it contains the text related to personality customisation, the latter representing the distinctive feature of *The Sims 4* in comparison with previous instalments. Second, this research could benefit

from access to authentic texts since the game's publisher provided the researcher with the game's original database and, more importantly, its official glossary, that is the in-house multilingual terminology database containing all the vocabulary belonging to *The Sims 4*. These glossaries represent invaluable reference material for the purposes of terminological consistency, and they testify to the publisher's commitment to cross-linguistic quality.

The Sims 4 glossary contains all the vocabulary of the language of real-life simulation, all the names which are relevant to the game experience. It consists of more than 5,000 entries concerning a wide variety of game contents, from the names of game mechanics like achievements, moods, and skills, to the names of home building items, like doors and roofs, game objects like books, plants, food, and drink, and more importantly, the names of customisable elements for the player's avatar, including both physical and psychological features. In the latter category, there are the 104 aspiration names examined in this paper. These glossary entries have been first associated to the relevant aspiration track and later classified depending on the subcategory and level they represent in each track, as described in Section 3, in order to contextualise their analysis in the light of the game mechanic. As to the more properly linguistic examination, based on their features and drawing on monolingual English dictionaries, aspiration names have been studied as lexical units and grouped in terms of linguistic categories (nouns, adjectives, phrases, etc.), degree of novelty (either recorded or not in a dictionary), level and type of lexical creativity with respect to an existing form (phonology, morphology and/or syntax), by taking into account the semantic value(s) of aspiration names and their formal and structural characteristics. As regards the linguistic categories and the definitions adopted in the analysis, different online lexicographic resources have been consulted, including the Oxford Dictionary of English (ODE online), the Oxford English Dictionary (OED online), and the Merriam Webster Dictionary (MWD online). However, all the labels and meanings used and quoted in this paper correspond to the ones recorded in relevant entries of the ODE online. One final methodological aspect of this research concerns the limitations of the scope of the analysis. Indeed, it must be specified that, in general, although some tendencies can be observed, the most significant characteristic of the ludic function of lexical creativity in naming aspirations in *The Sims 4* is that it exploits a wide variety of linguistic devices and game writers have played with different levels or features of language even for one single aspiration name, which has made classification extremely complex. For this reason, in this pilot study only the most quantitatively relevant phenomena have been identified and scrutinised, as discussed in the next section.

5. Lexical creativity in *The Sims 4* aspiration system

As already mentioned, this paper examines the ludic function of lexical creativity exploited by game writers in naming aspirations in *The Sims 4* personality customisation system. It investigates whether and how they manipulate or extend the English language system creatively, at the level of phonology, morphology, or syntax by applying or by violating productive and creative word-formation processes to play with words and make the game entertaining, thus turning language into an essential component of its fun factor.

In game texts, *The Sims 4* aspiration system is worded in a playful lexicon including a total of 104 aspiration names which, from the linguistic point of view, are encoded into a variety of single and multi-word expressions with a clear attributive and descriptive function. Indeed, by focusing on their characteristics, aspiration names represent various lexical units with different types and degrees of linguistic complexity,

which can be grouped into the following categories: nouns (3), adjectives (5), phrases (19), and compounds (77), as illustrated in Figure 1.
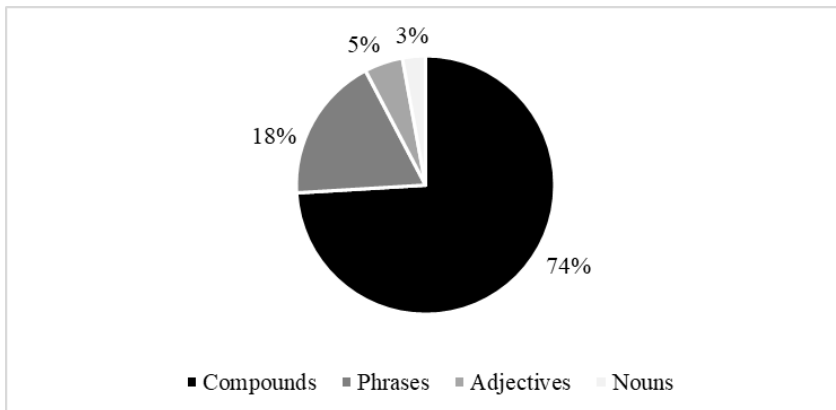

Figure 1
Linguistic categories of aspiration names.

As regards compounds, as Figure 2 shows, the most frequently used combinations include an adjective plus a noun (36) and a noun plus a noun (31), with few instances of other patterns (10), including an adverb plus an adjective, a noun plus an adjective, an adverb plus a verb, etc.
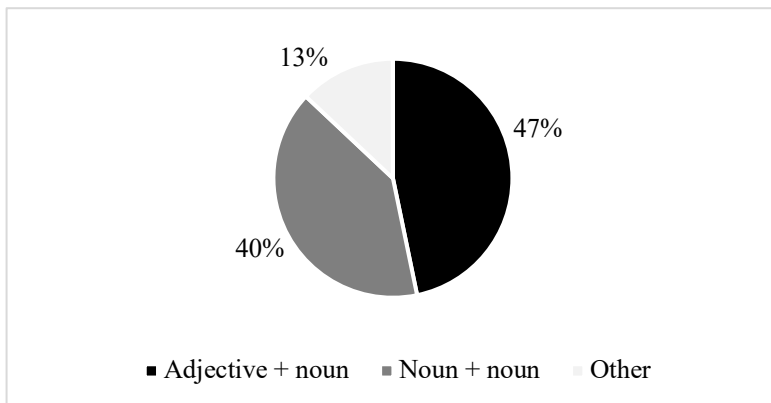

Figure 2
Types of compounds.

As regards the relationship between the English language system and the way it is used in the game, it is worth highlighting that most aspiration names (67%) represent novel combinations. This means that only 34 lexical units out of a total of 104 (33%) already belong to the English vocabulary and are recorded as lemmas in the above-mentioned monolingual English dictionaries. Examples include 'Gatherer' and 'Pantologist' as nouns, 'Precocious' and 'Energetic' as adjectives, 'Fish out of Water' and 'Up to Date' as phrases, 'Bodybuilder', 'Whiz Kid', 'Caregiver', and 'Rocket Scientist' as compounds.

Overall, the ludic function of lexical creativity in naming aspirations in *The Sims 4* manifests itself at the semantic level and translates into a general 'semantic gradability', a working concept and definition which is used here in the broad sense of encoding aspiration names into expressions whose meanings involve reference to some notion of degree.

In particular, the language of personality customisation creates semantically gradable concepts by either exploiting the degree involved in the meaning of existing material or encoding gradable concepts with novel combinations. In this sense, aspiration names perfectly serve the progressive nature of *The Sims 4* game mechanic, which is based on aspiration milestones marking an increasing scale of ability, as described in Section 3. For instance, in the Creativity aspiration called 'Musical Genius', defined in-game as "This Sim wants to be an expert musician and songwriter!", by practicing music-related activities and developing music-related skills, the player will be first 'Tone-Deaf' (milestone 1), so "(of a person) unable to perceive differences of musical pitch accurately", second, 'In Tune' (milestone 2) meaning playing or singing "with correct pitch or intonation", third, 'Harmonious' that is "tuneful; not discordant" (milestone 3) and finally a 'Musical Genius', so a person with exceptional skills in music, which means, as already mentioned, that the aspiration achieved is named after the final milestone.

On closer inspection, another general semantic feature which immediately emerges is that the large majority of aspiration names (70%), across linguistic categories (nouns, adjectives, phrases and compounds) and be they existing or non-existing in the English lexicon, tend to express a high level or degree of the quality or ability they describe. In particular, the playful nature of this system depends on the use of existing expressions or on the creation of novel combinations which make the meaning of aspiration names more colourful and forceful thanks to hyperbolic tinges. For example, in the Child Mental aspiration called 'Whiz Kid', the player will be first 'Precocious', meaning "(of a child) having developed certain abilities or inclinations at an earlier age than is usual or expected", second a 'Junior Scientist', so a young "person who is studying or has expert knowledge of one or more sciences" and finally a 'Whiz Kid', and so "a young person who is outstandingly skilful or successful at something".

Hyperbolic tinges are very common in multi-word expressions, where semantic gradability translates into semantic upgradability based on the combination between two or more elements, one of which relates to the aspiration while other components intensify the degree involved in the meaning of the whole expression. Examples include 'Exercise Demon', where 'demon' is used figuratively to mean "a forceful or skilful performer of a specified activity", in this case exercise, 'Angling Ace' which is also used figuratively to denote "a person who excels at a particular sport or other activity", in this case fishing, 'Artistic Prodigy' where 'prodigy' means "a young person with exceptional [in this case artistic] qualities or abilities", and many other, one might say, hyperbolic expressions like 'Bestselling Author', 'Competent Wordsmith', 'Painter Extraordinaire', 'Big Happy Family', 'Trusted Mentor', 'Master Chef' and 'Master Mixologist', 'Beverage Boss', 'Welcoming Host', and 'Technically Adept'. Other examples of playful and hyperbolic aspiration names include existing compounds like 'Criminal Mind' and 'Public Enemy' and novel compounds and phrases like 'Mostly Harmless' and 'Chief of Mischief', used to name Deviance aspiration milestones, where ludicity also depends on the unusual association between these 'deviant' concepts and aspirations themselves, or between the components of compounds in terms of structural features, as will be discussed later. Similarly, in phrases, elements combine with each other to emphasise the level of skilfulness at that particular aspiration stage, such as 'Readily a Parent' as the first milestone of the 'Big Happy Family' aspiration track and 'Brushing with Greatness' as the third milestone of the 'Painter Extraordinaire' track. As regards the latter milestone name, ludicity also depends on the polysemy of the noun 'brush', which can also mean "a brief encounter or skirmish" and on the deviation from a collocational pattern, since, in this sense, 'brush' usually collocates 'with' something unpleasant (ODE online). Moreover,

although they are not recorded in the dictionaries consulted or in other non-collaborative lexicographic resources, 'brush with greatness' and 'brushes with greatness' are commonly used phrases in English to refer to encounters with extraordinary things or people, presenting more than one million occurrences on the Web, as a simple Google search will prove.

Beside the general tendencies described above, other linguistic devices can be found in compounds and phrases to serve the ludic function of lexical creativity, meaning that semantic gradability or upgradability is achieved also thanks to the use of potential "attention-seeking devices" (Munat 2016, p. 100), which may draw players' attention to the way in which language is used, in terms of phonological features and orthographical features, sometimes used in combination. As regards phonological features, 19% of aspiration names are semantically motivated and (up)graded thanks to phonological devices like alliteration and rhyme. Examples include: 'Novelest Novelist' (Creativity - Bestselling Author), 'Learning Earning' (Fortune - Fabulously Wealthy), 'Prudent Student' (Knowledge - Nerd Brain), 'Nature Nurturer' (Nature - Freelance Botanist), 'Chief of Mischief' (Deviance), 'Angling Ace' (Nature), 'Professional Prankster' (Deviance - Chief of Mischief), etc. As regards orthographical features, 20% of aspiration names present orthographical manipulations of existing expressions, based on different processes which suggest playful uses of English in relation to an established form which can be recognised by the player as stored in their mental lexicon.

For example, orthographical devices include variations of existing compounds, like 'Funny Businessman' or 'Funny Businesswoman', depending on the player's gender, from "funny business", meaning "deceptive, disobedient, or lecherous behaviour", where the former is the name of a milestone in the Popularity aspiration called 'Joke Star', which in turn might be interpreted as an orthographical variation of the compound "jokester", defined as "a person fond of making or telling jokes". Similar structural changes seem to motivate 'Love Handler', the third milestone of the Love aspiration track 'Soulmate', which represents a playful variation of the informal expression "love handles".

Orthographical manipulations can also result from substitution, where one component of the existing expression is replaced with another which is semantically relevant to the aspiration, as in 'Estate of the Art', the name of a milestone in the Fortune aspiration track 'Mansion Baron' from "state of the art", and also the Knowledge aspiration 'Renaissance Sim' from "Renaissance man or woman", meaning "a person with many talents or areas of knowledge". An interesting example in this group, which also shows how phonological and orthographical features can combine, is the aspiration name 'Ill at Easel', which manipulates the existing phrase "ill at ease", meaning "uncomfortable, uneasy or embarrassed", to name the first milestone of the Creativity aspiration called 'Painter extraordinaire'. Here ludicity is not only based on the novel use of a word relevant to painting, namely the easel, that is "the wooden frame supporting a picture while the painter is working on it", but also on the repetition and similarity of sounds between the existing form 'ill at ease' /ˌɪl ət ˈiːz/ and the aspiration name 'Ill at Easel' /ˌɪl ət ˈiːz(ə)l/.

Orthographical manipulations can also develop from fragmentation, in the sense of either breaking the orthographical form of existing expressions or exploiting the potential ambiguity of an expression, due to the possibility of interpreting its compositional meaning in a different way. A playful lexical creation of this type is 'Sir Gala Had', which relates to the existing proper noun 'Sir Galahad', referring to "the noblest knight of the Round Table in Arthurian legend" and which, by extension, is now used to mean "a person characterised by nobility, integrity, or courtesy". Here ludicity is based on the

fragmentation of the proper name, which, first, creates a playful but unnatural construction, simulating a sort of SOV order, Sir + Gala + Had, and, secondly, it revolves around the pertinent word "gala" meant as "a social event or party", since this is a milestone in the Popularity aspiration track called 'Party Animal'. Another interesting example in this group is the existing phrase 'Up to Date', which in the game is the name of a milestone in the Love aspiration track called 'Serial Romantic'. Here the ludic effect depends on the possibility to interpret it with a different compositional meaning, based on the combination between the phrase "up to", which means "good for, capable of, fit for" and also "(informal) occupied or busy with" and the relevant noun "date", meant as "a romantic appointment or engagement".

6. Conclusions

Despite its limitations on the scope of the analysis, this pilot study suggests that multimedia interactive entertainment offers researchers plenty of opportunities to investigate the role language plays in the commercial and cultural success of this phenomenon at global level and to examine how language contributes to the fun factor of videogames.

This is particularly true as regards lexical creativity and its ludic function in naming a game world, because, if 'ludicity' is one of the major reasons behind creative uses of a language (Munat 2016, p. 101), and if the degree of ludicity directly depends on the communicative goal and context of the text containing lexical creations (Bagasheva, Stamenov 2013, p. 80), the very ludic nature of videogames and play makes these digital media a fertile ground for research from the perspective of language studies in general, and of videogame linguistics in particular.

As regards personality customisation and the aspiration system in *The Sims 4*, preliminary findings have provided an overview of the motivations and devices used by game writers to exploit the English language system creatively in order to make real-life simulation fun linguistically. In particular, the analysis has shown that all aspiration names are semantically motivated in terms of gradability because they must be descriptive of a stage in the progressive development of aspiration-related skills. This is in line not only with the content-focused and descriptive function of the text type containing aspiration names, namely the User Interface, but also with the game mechanic, the system through which the players advance to achieve the goal of their simulated life.

Findings have also shown that most aspiration names, 70% of them, acquire hyperbolic tinges to express a high degree of the quality or ability they describe, and this seems to depend on the emphasis game designers and writers aim to place on the opposition between real life and simulated real life. Aspirations in life simulation are overplayed: the player can aspire to be a musical genius, not a simple musician, not only a painter, but a painter extraordinaire, not only an author, but a bestselling author. In sum, the semantic level in terms of gradability and more often upgradability, thanks to the use of multi-word expressions such as compounds and phrases, is the main locus of ludicity in naming *The Sims 4* aspiration system. Moreover, other minor tendencies have been observed, based on the use of attention-seeking devices of phonological and orthographical nature to further enhance the meaning and the ludic effect of aspiration names.

However, further research should be carried out to better understand the ludic function of lexical creativity in real-life simulation games, by extending the analysis to

other customisation-related groups of terms, such as personality traits, walkstyles and all the terminology concerning physical appearance and clothes. Furthermore, other research methodologies might be added to the descriptive approach, for example, reception studies might be performed with a sample of players and questionnaires might be submitted to game writers. To conclude, potential directions for further research in videogames as means of communication and, particularly, as texts, are numerous and may all contribute to stimulate academic debate on the topic from the perspective of videogame linguistics.

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