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# “Are babies worth it?”: Mediated Representations of Children in Digital Gaming

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## INTRODUCTION

Infants and children are both mechanically and idealogically challenging subjects when represented in gaming. How real-world children and infants play and engage with digital texts has been explored thoroughly (Hamlen 2011; Ferguson & Olson 2013; Bassiouni & Hackley 2014) but despite their varied and distinct forms, presentations of younger humans and humanoid figures are relatively understudied. Emma Reay (2021; 2024) has written extensively about how children are presented in gaming and discusses the roles children play more broadly in these interactive texts. Reay has identified many of the roles children take on in gaming—including as heroes, martyrs, killers—and notes that the figure of ‘the child’ as they put is a “‘lightning rod’ for political and cultural controversy” (Reay 2021). Beyond this, how infants are depicted is usually tied to gestation and breeding (Gallagher 2025) or part of a broader content analysis exploring frequency of representation (Williams et. al. 2009; Jones et. al. 2025). Building from Reay’s work I want to further illuminate some of the ways games present children—in particular infants—to players. More specifically I want to explore the cultural, political, and sociloigcal implications of what I term a ‘mediated child’—ie. a child that has not been explicitly created by a player but rather is the result of previous character creation input mediated through a system that determines a new output.

To explore what these representations of mediated children can look like I will analysing several key examples from gaming. Drawing from a broad range of texts including *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios 2008), *Rimworld* (Ludeon Studios 2018), *Hardtime III* (MDicky 2025), *Crusader Kings II* (Paradox Development Studio 2012) & *III* (2020), *The Sims 4* (Maxis 2014), *InZoi* (InZoi Studios 2025), *Medieval Dynasty* (Render Cube 2021), *Sunless Sea* (Failbetter Games 2015), *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* (Taleworlds Entertainment 2022), *BitLife – Life Simulator* (Candywriter LLC 2023) and more, I unpack the various impacts that including mediated children has. Building from scholarship surrounding character-creators (Iantorno & Consalvo 2023; King 2023; Harper 2020; Dietrich 2013) as well as domestic and dollhouse play (Brierley-Beare 2025) I outline how these representations negotiate class, race, gender and familial structure. I anayse the systems, structures, and resulting discourses that lead to the creation of an in-game ‘child’. While some will attempt to show gestitation and delivery, other texts will

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instead elect to have babies 'spawn' overnight or through some kind of machine. How a child looks visually may be based on previous choices from a character creator, or by social factors, or may be drawn from a pre-determined set of characters. The child may become playable character and act as an 'heir' for the player, or they may be used as labour or capital, or they may simply continue to exist only in their child-forms. These distinctions are numerous but impactful and by recognising how particular systems produce new 'children' including what factors lead to their creation, what elements are included when it comes to the new permutations, and their functions and expected role in the interactive experience, we can see what value is placed on children in these games. I urge for the continued exploration of these unique and varied forms of child representation as well as recognise both the normative and transgressive potentials hidden within these newfound understandings of a 'mediated child'.

## BIO

Dr Amy Brierley-Beare is a games researcher from the University of Adelaide. Her work looks at the trends and patterns in representations of romance in mainstream gaming. Brierley-Beare's research interests include productive play, emergent narrative, and audience studies.

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