“I make characters that are like me!”: Representing the Family, Gender and the “Other” in the mainstream video game series The Sims.
The Sims as a site of investigation

- Player directed, no set goals
- Households commonly referred to as "families"
- Has always allowed for non-heterosexual and non-heteronormative play

Core theories

- Stuart Hall- “The Other”
- We categorise the world around us so we can understand culture and society- that which does not fit into these categories become "othered”

- Judith Butler - Perception of binary gender outdated, we perform gender in ways we perceive to be correct
- “Othering” comes from where non-normative performances challenge dominant understandings of gender as binary

- Henry Jenkins- “Participatory Culture” - Fandom is a space which invites participation
Theme | Definition
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Exploration of Identities | Players who create characters which explore identities, sometimes non-heteronormative identities.
Subtheme: The Player’s Self-Identity | Players who create characters which explore their own identity.
Subtheme: Fan vs Casual Player | Players who identify as fans as opposed to casual players.
Reality vs Fantasy | Players who wish for realism or who use all the tools at their disposal to construct their families.
Adaptation | Players who use game modification or cheats in order to change the gameplay when creating their families.
Telling Stories | Players who use the game as a tool for their own creative freedom and expression in the families and narratives that they create.
“I didn’t mean for her to be LGBT” | Players whose narratives changed due to autonomous behaviours of their game characters.

“Having extremely diverse characters is really what I strive for in my game”

EXPLORATION OF IDENTITIES
Binary Gender

- Players situated their characters within the gender binary; this was emphasized through the use of the categories of man/woman when describing characters and how they performed gender.

- I also found that making use of the gender options in creating trans sims had players reinforcing the emphasis on “acting more feminine/masculine” after completing their transition.

Darling Walsh

- A pre-made Sim from “The Sims 4 City Living”
- Gender locked to male clothes, yet is labelled female by the game (So I will use gender neutral language here)
- Split players on the forum: players either challenged gender through transitioning them to male, imagined them as a butch lesbian or gave them a ‘girly’ makeover.
- Darling also challenges heteronormativity, as they are a teenager living with roommates in a “family” unit. They also do not have a family tree.
Stereotyping

- Rejection of heteronormativity through game mechanics (Traits)
- Heteronormative relationship narrative challenged
- Perception of a normative relationship/family challenged through ‘cheating’
- While The Sims may reward players for following the heteronormative family structure, it is not the only way to play the game.
Self-Identity
- Many of the posters revealed that their own identities fall within the Queer umbrella.
- Players use the game as a tool of self-expression and exploration, emphasising that the ability to create marginalised identities and resist heteronormativity has been allowed by the game since The Sims 1.

Conclusions
“...The fact that Maxis have kept their opinions pro LGBT+ from the beginning (despite perceived risks) is really important to me, as there are so many companies who only change their opinions when it begins to affect their bottom line”

Even if I couldn't be who I wanted in reality, I could always be anything in the sims.

There's no discrimination about who you are or people whispering behind your back. Not feeling nervous if you'll be rejected for friendship or love.”