Queer Identity, Gender Performance and Gaming
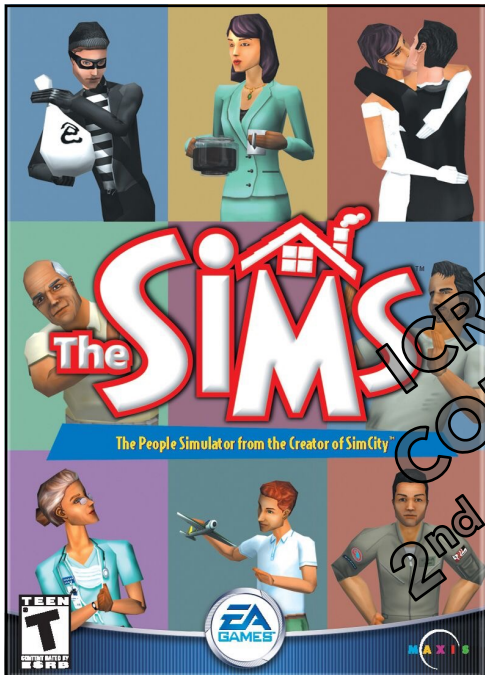
SARAH LEES

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

"I make characters that are like me!": Representing the Family, Gender and the "Other" in the mainstream video game series *The Sims*

ICRI THAGS CONFERENCE 2nd - 4th June 2021

The Sims as a site of investigation

- Life Simulation game
- 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 becomes "othered"

- Judith Butler – Perception of binary genders is outdated, we perform gender in ways we perceive to be 'correct'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

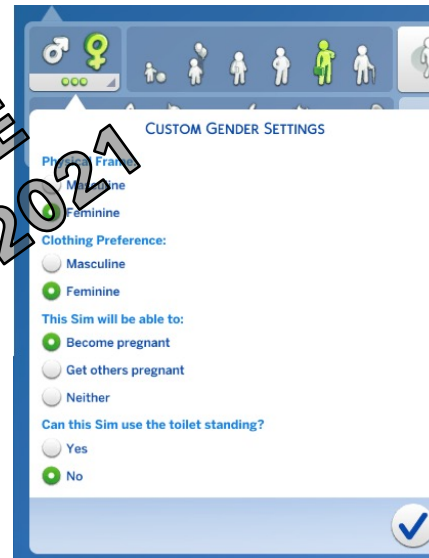| Theme	Definition
Exploration of Identities	Players who create families which explore various non-heteronormative identities.
Subtheme: The Player's Self-Identity	Players who create characters who reflect themselves or their own identity.
Subtheme: Fan vs Casual Player	What makes these players identify as "fans".
Reality vs Fantasy	Players who wish for high realism and players who use all the tools at their disposal to construct their families.
Adaptation	Players who use the 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 an emphasis on "acting more feminine/masculine" and completing their transition

Darling Walsh

- 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 explored 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

ICRI - HASS CONFERENCE 2nd - 4th June 2021

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"

ICRI - HASS CONFERENCE 2nd - 4th June 2021