Gender Equality: Progressive Change in The Sims Game Series

Bakalářská práce

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Z á s a d y   p r o   v y p r a c o v á n í :

Práce analyzuje reprezentaci genderových rolí a jejich vývoj v herní sérii The Sims. Cílem je ověřit, že herní série je ohledně této problematiky ve svých pohledech progresivní, a že je zde progresivní liberalizace názorů v průběhu epizod.

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Dovey, Jon and Helen W. Kennedy. 2006. Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Fromme, Johannes and Alexander Unger eds. 2012. Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Games Studies. Dordrecht: Springer.

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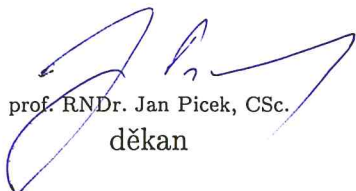
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Anotace

Cílem práce je analyzovat reprezentaci genderových rolí a jejich vývoj v herní sérii The Sims. Mou hypotézou je, že herní série je ohledně této problematiky ve svých pohledech progresivní a že je zde progresivní liberalizace názorů v průběhu epizod.

Klíčová slova

Gender, genderové role, feminismus, identita, homosexualita, heteronormativita, počítačové hry, vliv videoher.

Annotation

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the representation of gender roles and their evolution in The Sims game series. My hypothesis is that the game series has a progressive attitude towards such an issue and that a progressive liberalization of views and opinions is present throughout the episodes.

Key words

Gender, gender roles, feminism, identity, homosexuality, heteronormativity, computer games, the influence of video games.

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1.   Introduction

Technology is a dominant phenomenon of contemporary society. We live in a digital era, where the majority of our lives is linked to cyberspace. We use cell phones, television, computers and social media on a daily basis. Such an omnipresent use of technology affects us as people on many levels, it shapes our personalities and world views.

Gamers, while playing, are immersed in a complex virtual environment, exposed to whole new dimensions, with the opportunity to experiment with adopting various opinions, attitudes and ways of thinking. While this is often discussed in the media only in terms of the potential negative influence this might have on gamers – especially children – it is important to realize that these rich and diverse environments can potentially also offer a unique platform for personal growth and self-discovery.

I consider myself a gamer and I seek relaxation in video games just as much as I do in reading literature. I believe it is important to find a safe space even in the cyber world, not only in reality. While I was growing up, I played computer games – especially *The Sims*, adopting its positive views in the process. Those attitudes which have been shared with me via *The Sims*, where all people are made equal and where one is not criticized for their life choices, helped me to become a more open-minded person. I am convinced that people should be able to experience homosexual behaviour without considering it as a taboo or something unnatural. The same applies to cross-dressing or gender-bending. Women ought to be treated equally as men, with non-existing wage gaps in the career fields. They also should not be perceived as sex objects, since women were not created for men's pleasure, neither in real life nor in video games.

The Sims, in many ways arguably differs from regular computer games. Most PC games tend to present a patriarchal world, often to please whom the industry conceives as "typical gamers". They portray a mainstream way of life, trying to cater for the tastes of an imagined "majority". *The Sims*, however, as I am going to show below, is not doing this: it dissociates itself from a heavily gendered gaming culture. *The Sims* is one of the first major game series not targeted primarily at a male player base. The game series are not trying to please only a heterosexual male gaming audience, and, as such, *The Sims* brings new elements that are worth investigating from the perspective of gender studies and computer game studies, since it goes against prevalent stereotypes when in its handling of gender.

The game series went through a lot of changes over the past 19 years. This thesis is focusing on the main games of the series (*The Sims*, *The Sims 2*, *The Sims 3* and *The Sims 4*) and their relation to gender and gender equality. Therefore, it addresses central concepts of video games, identity and gender. This trifold theoretical framework forms the background for a better understanding of the game series' uniqueness.

2.   Video Games and Culture

As I have already mentioned in the introduction, technology has become an essential part of our lives. Since we are living in a digital age, we are constantly surrounded by electronics and modern technology. With each major change in society, either scientifically, socially or technologically based, culture changes as a whole (Pauls 2019). Thus, since electronic devices are already incorporated into people's lives with remarkable intensity, they can be logically expected to also influence culture. Communication, entertainment, as well as other features of our lives have moved progressively out of the sphere of personal physical contact and into cyberspace. People spend a lot of time online, chatting, watching films and videos, listening to music, or playing games.

As a result, video games have become a popular pastime activity in the past couple of decades. People play games at home, but also outside their private space, using their mobile phones or other devices in public (Jahn-Sudmann and Stockmann 2008, 13). In fact, this activity has become more popular than watching television, probably since playing video games is an interactive and more creative way of spending time than the passive reception of pre-created content (Chalk 2000). People playing such games are not mere "viewers" as it is with movies, "readers" when it comes to books, but they have become "users"[1] (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 6). When playing, gamers can change the direction of where the story is going, they "take the wheel" of what is happening in virtual reality. Players also engage with this media in a more complex manner, since it involves learning the control system, getting to know

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[1] One becomes a user when she gets actually involved and has the ability to change the text.

the gameplay[2], planning various strategies or solving puzzles (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 8). According to Sihvonen, this is related to an ongoing cultural desire for interactivity, for taking part in the transformation of the text, which can be achieved via playing computer games (Sihvonen 2011, 32).

In order for the player to get an overwhelming or complete game experience, one must be supplied with the possibility of getting lost in the story/game (immersion), have control over the game as it progresses (agency) and be given the opportunity to be someone else, obtain a different identity (transformation); these are the three basics elements of video game aesthetics according to Janet Murray (Janet Murray in Fencott, Clive, et al., 2012, 47). In other words, if a game is well designed, players lose track of the time when they are playing, have more or less (not complete) control over the events happening in front of them, and revel in being someone/something else entirely, often involving scenarios which would not be possible in real life.

All of these three elements can be found in *The Sims*. Through creating different Sims, players unleash complex people with unique characteristics in a virtual environment which provides them with various kinds of identities. Players, being Sims' creators, guide them through their lives and control the choices they make. Thus, if gamers are satisfied with their virtual persons and choices available, they are able to get lost in playing.

There is an ongoing debate whether video games are or can be seen as a work of art. According to Michael D. Gallagher, ESA's (Entertainment Software Association) president and CEO, video games are an essential part of our culture, whose creators "continue to push the entertainment envelope" (ESA 2015). According to Feige,

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[2] Gameplay as in a complex interaction between player (subject) and game (object) during the process of playing.

however, the question whether video games are works of art or not is a misconceived one. He explains that both video games and art are difficult to categorize, which means that there is no definite or simple answer to this problem. Feige points out that certain games can be seen as works of art and some not – but the same can be said, for example, about music or literature (Feige 2012, 101-102).

A *Washington Post* article from 2012 shows us that even children engage in this debate with heated opinions. One of the opinions shown is that video games "are a form of art since they involve human creativity and imagination (The Washington Post Company 2012). Others compare the computer screen to a canvas onto which one paints a game. On the other hand, it is often mentioned that games are not capable of expressing feelings, or that sitting at home while looking at the screen cannot be art. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: since we are living in a technologically progressive era, art is developing too – and it is being transferred to different environments, media and dimensions.

The whole issue, as Feige also recognizes, is rooted in the very issue of what is considered art, and if this question itself is possible to answer. A search for the definition in the online edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, provides one with the picture of Mona Lisa and the definition of "visual art" is presented as a result. This, however, can easily lead to a wrong assumption, since this implies that art can only be experienced visually, which would exclude several major types of art and, certainly, also video games.

At the same time, the encyclopaedia's definition further includes "experience consciously created through an expression of skill or imagination", suggesting that they acknowledge that not only visual experience can count as art (Britannica 2019).

They also mention, for example, the performing arts, which include music, dance and theatre, and they also refer to the literary arts.

Continuing on the idea of Feige, it is important to realize that the debate on what constitutes art reaches back to Ancient Greece and might not be ever satisfactorily answered. As Stanley Fish shows us with his concept of interpretive communities, what one considers or accepts as art is not at all independent from their social, educational, political and historical context, to mention just a few factors. We all live in a certain community, in a cultural environment, which has shaped our understanding and interpretation of texts and works of art (Fish 2004, 217–220). Each and every one of us is a part of a certain cultural heritage which influences their world view, and what they recognize and accepts as art, as well as how they experience art. With some overstatement, one could say, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

Thus, there is no real need to definitively decide the status of video games in terms of their relation to art. It is enough to realize that since both beauty and art are to some extent subjective, and at the same time community sanctioned, video games certainly *can be* and at times *are* seen as works of art by some – making them a cultural artefact, a potentially essential and vital part of today's culture.

Video games from this perspective can be then seen as a synthesis of multiple art forms: a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. There is usually a certain scenery, a visual spectacle to be seen. Atmospheric music accompanies those visuals, and very often narrative aspects are incorporated, adding some potentially, though not necessarily, literary text to the mixture. Just as theatre is a fusion of dancing, acting and/or singing, video games are a combination of visual, audio and literary elements (while it is important to emphasize that this is a mere potentiality, and such characteristics may not apply to

every single game). In addition, each of these essential artistic elements might include parts or aspects that some people would not consider art for reasons of the influence of their interpretive communities. One might feel not inclined to accept, for example, cubist paintings, grunge metal songs or surrealist texts as works of art. The same applies to video games – every game is a unique product; some are perceived as more artistic than others by some communities of gamers and game studies scholars.

3.   Video Games and Their Influence

Besides their potential as art, video games are often seen and experienced as a form of entertainment. People tend to seek enjoyment, thrilling experiences and new adventures when playing video games. Just as any other form of leisure activity – reading, watching movies, playing a musical instrument, or even hiking – gaming can be said to offers an escape from the (often hectic) regime of everyday life and its ironclad routine, and thus it allows players to unwind. Video games grant an environment "detached from everyday life and the powers of social control" (Lauteren 2002, 224).

This, however, is not without raising the issue of the potential influence these forms of "escape" might have on their personality. Here, I present only a few forms of influence, figuratively speaking only the peak of the iceberg of what is clearly a heated social debate, and not an exhaustive survey of opinions.

a) Positive Effects

Playing video games encourages children to be creative. According to a 2011 research by Michigan State University scholars, gaming has been linked to greater creativity in children regardless of their gender or race (Jackson 2011). The survey based on 500 children of the average age of 12,34 years has been conducted using The

Torrance Test of Creativity, which showed a positive outcome for those children who actively played video games. It has also been found that the game genre made little to no difference in the survey results, suggesting that any kind of gameplay experience positively stimulates children's creativity. In addition, the study notes the positive relationship between children playing video games and their visual-spatial skills, which often result in good mathematics, engineering and science performance.

Gamers acquire multiple skills thanks to playing video games. Games, regardless of the way they are frequently presented in the popular media, do not always mean shooting people – multiple educational games have been developed since the 2000s for children to gain positive experiences (Călin and Cernat 2016). As Gentile points out in his 2011 paper, edu-games are motivating, efficient and very good at teaching their content (Gentile 2011). Such interactive games are created specifically for gaining skills and knowledge; on the other hand, players can acquire new skills even through common games which were not originally designed to be study materials. As Călin and Cernat's study suggests, managing the in-game inventory when playing certain games, for example, helps with management skills in real life. They also point out that even the often criticized shooter games have a demonstrable positive influence, in that players' hand-eye coordination improves. In addition, such games help with decision-making, since they are usually fast-paced and require immediate responses (Călin and Cernat 2016). Moreover, their three-dimensional game environment helps to improve players' navigation, way-finding and place-learning skills (Gentile 2011).

b) Negative Effects

On the other hand, extensive exposure to video games can possibly lead to various negative issues, such as solitude or intra and interpersonal conflicts (Călin and

Cernat 2016). It has been found that playing video games for several hours a day may isolate gamers from the outside world, and can affect their academic and social life negatively (Messerly 2004). In addition, if the time spent playing games is not well balanced with time spent on regular life activities, it might develop into pathological gaming, which generates aggressive behaviour (Călin and Cernat 2016). Playing video games for long periods of time also supports a sedentary lifestyle. Once again, if the time spent playing games is not well-balanced, there is a risk of obesity (Gentile 2011). Such physically passive activities must be time-controlled in order not to get out of hand and damage one's health.

Besides, since players tend to identify with their game characters and they compare their real self with the virtual one, if the player does not appear to be as good as the fictional character, their self-esteem can be damaged (Miller and Summers 2007, 736). Video games also play a significant role in influencing people and their views on gender roles. Miller and Summers suggest that video game characters are possible role models for middle school-aged children (735-736). Teenagers are especially vulnerable to this influence since young people in this period of life are more easily shaped: they are experimenting with various lifestyles and searching for their identity (Novotná, Hříchová and Miňhová 2012, 56). When teenagers with lower self-esteem happen to play games with characters perfect in their appearance, they might also feel self-conscious about their own appearance.

Heated discussions have also emerged in the past about the level of violence young gamers have been exposed to via video games. Last year, for example, US president Donald Trump held multiple White House meetings in order to investigate gun violence. In March 2018, the issue of violent video games and their connection to school shootings was addressed. According to Douglas Gentile, psychology professor

at Iowa State University, aggression is often viewed as an issue with a simple cause which can be eliminated. However, when it comes to aggression, it is often mistaken for violence, which is a behaviour resulting in bodily damage or death – whereas aggression is intended to "only" harm someone else, either verbally or physically. "So if you give someone the cold shoulder, that is aggressive," Gentile says in an interview for National Public Radio (Gentile 2018). He further argues that such issues of aggression are naturally very complex, and need to be understood as such – it is a synthesis of multiple variables such as mental health, poverty, or even playing video games; it is not possible to attribute aggression to a single cause.

In fact, video games have not been satisfactorily proven to be a cause of increased violence in society. A study conducted by Christopher J. Ferguson from Stetson University's Department of Psychology has shown no indication of the truthfulness of such a claim. On the contrary, when investigating videogame violence consumption from 1996 to 2011 (comparing data on the consumption of video games plus their rating according to the Entertainment Software Rating Board), results demonstrate that while violent game consumption increases, youth violence decreases over time. Thus, this part of Ferguson's study shows that exposure to violent games was in inverse relation to violence among youth in 1996 to 2011. He argues that claims about media violence influencing societal violence are insufficient because other countries such as The Netherlands or Japan also have high violent media consumption, though there are relatively low incarceration rates (Ferguson 2014).

c) Conclusion

Douglas Gentile in his work "The Multiple Dimensions of Video Game Effects" suggests that there are two extreme opinions when it comes to video games, which view them either as completely good or completely bad. Such a binary opinion,

however, is not really appropriate to describe the complex phenomena which games are. Gentile instead mentions five different approaches in total which can be useful when talking about the dimensions through which video games affect players. Those categories – the amount of play, the game content and context, the structure of the game and its mechanics – help to better understand video game effects and they go beyond the binary opposition of simply helpful/good or harmful/bad games. Gentile rejects this dichotomous way of thinking and points out that, for example, when playing *Grand Theft Auto*, a 12-year-old boy can be exposed to and might express aggressive thoughts and feelings, but also his social and teamwork skills might improve given the fact that he is playing the game online (Gentile 2011).

In other words, rather than trying to reach sentential verdicts about computer games in general, it is more meaningful and productive to analyse the specific forms of influence specific games can have on their players. In this vein, the present thesis discusses the gender and sexuality related aspects of *The Sims* series.

4.   Identity and Difference

Humans are in a constant search of their own identity in order to find their true self and place in society. Such identities are often built in contrast to other peoples' selves: our self is defined based on other people's perception of us. There are multiple aspects to one's identity: the social level includes factors such as gender, age, profession. Appearance, nationality or religion are other defining aspects of one's identity. In the view of humanism, everyone has their own unique persona, their "real" self (Giles and Middleton 2008, 32-33). As Jeffrey Weeks says in his 1990 work, "Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and

what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality" (Weeks 1990, 88).

Social circumstances occurring at different times and places play a great role in determining one's identity. One would, for example, develop a different sense of self when being gay in current Russia, where homosexuals are constantly oppressed, or here in the Czech Republic, where the social environment is more welcoming towards gay people. The same applies to effeminate aspects of identity. For instance, wearing high heels used to be a sign of masculinity in 17th century France (Kremer 2013). Louis XIV would wear such shoes in order to look taller and to distinguish himself from people of lower rank. Nowadays, such acts where a man wears high heels would in general seem very bizarre, or at least odd. Racial issues are also handled differently now than in the past. It was also once a common practice in the United States to differentiate the intelligence of white and black people based on their genetics, which resulted in serious injustices (47).

Identities are often reduced to representative symbols and signs and as such will influence one's life in certain societies. As Giles and Middleton point out, black Africans used to be marked as "inferior" in 18th and 19th century America and Europe (Giles and Middleton 2008, 37). There are various labels which can be used either by the society or the individuals themselves, though they often lead to denying or excluding other symbols. As the example provided by Giles and Middleton shows, if one is seen as an Arab, they are most seen in a way that does not allow them to be European at the same time (35). With such identity come other presumptive labels such as Muslim or a linkage to Islamic culture. An Arab cannot be Christian, because society views such terms as mutually exclusive.

Such a binarity of labels/symbols presented above can be misleading for individuals when establishing their own selves. This, understandably, applies to gender identity as well. As multiple feminist theories argue, gender binarism is not a viable approach when it comes to gender identity. In the system of gender binarism, men tend to identify with a "typical" masculine behaviour according to society's image of one. The same goes for women, who align themselves with the "right" type of femininity based on their experiences throughout childhood and adolescence (42). As a result, people are encouraged or even forced to repress certain elements of their gender identity. However, gender, as a part of one's identity should not be considered an invariant aspect of their self, since humans evolve not only physically, but also mentally and spiritually.

5.   Portrayal of Gender in Video Games

Genders are not portrayed as equal in video games, although they form a central part of the perspective in most games. When compared to their counterparts, females are less present in video games, are not as important or powerful, and they also wear clothing which sexualize them (Ivory 2006, 104-105). The reasons for the fact that male characters in video games also appear more frequently than female ones (Millers and Summer 2007, 735) are multiple. First of all, the vast majority of video game developers are men, which leads to a masculine point of view in video games (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 36). Also, since the term "gamer" is widely, even if not necessarily completely correctly, considered by the industry to refer to somebody white, young, male and heterosexual, designers and game developers try to accommodate to the expectations of this group of people in order to reach a wider audience (Shaw 2010, 80-81) and maximize profits, presupposing at the same time that gamers belonging to

this social group prefer playing characters similar to themselves (Millers and Summer 2007, 735).

As far as female characters' portrayal is concerned, there are thus, certainly, serious issues. When it comes to their clothing, it is usually much shorter, and, in general, they are less clothed than men (Millers and Summer 2007, 735). This is in complete contrast to the portrayal of men: games do not focus on men's sexuality, but mostly on their abilities and power (735). This is also true for the representation of female non-playable characters, since they are both less present in general, and more sexualized if they do appear (735).

The situation is slowly changing, as some game creators feel the need to represent various identities in their games that better reflect today's players. A fairly new, and already very popular battle royale game known as *Apex Legends* might serve as an example. Being a hero shooter game, it has multiple characters that players can choose from. To this date, there are nine heroes, plus a new addition which has been just announced to appear in the next season. Some of those representational characters include Bangalore: a strong black woman with military background; Gibraltar: a non-heterosexual of Polynesian origin; Octane: a disabled stuntman with presumably Spanish roots; or Bloodhound: an explicitly non-binary hero. The newest legend, Wattson, is another strong female character: a skilled engineer mastering quantum laser mechanics (Electronic Arts 2019).

6. Gender Theories and *The Sims*

The Sims game world can be argued to serve as a refuge for people of various dissimilarities from the white male heterosexual norm, including gender non-

conforming people. The term "compulsory heterosexuality[3]" does not seem to apply for the Sims' society as it has done in our world (Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 885). It used to be a common practice to stigmatize and oppress people for not behaving according to this gender norm and it has taken a lot of work to move towards a freer society, at least in liberal Euro-American societies, starting with the Stonewall riots in 1969 (885).

One of the reasons of the games' open-mindedness may be the lack of religion in the game series[4]. According to Rivkin and Ryan, it was Christianity that sought the abnormal in homosexual lifestyle, addressing the non-reproductive nature of their sexual practices (886). Christian pastoral law – as well as canonical and civil law – was heavily oriented towards matrimonial relations, imposing several restrictions on them (Foucault in Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 892-893). It was mostly religion that created numerous rules prescribing how to behave and act as a certain gender, resulting in heteronormativity being the widely accepted norm (893). Without such restrictions and social regression, as it is to be shown below, inhabitants of *The Sims* world do not look down on gender benders[5] and people deviating from heteronormativity.

Michel Foucault as well as Gayle Rubin both pointed out that gender is variable, since there exist different ways of practicing sex and being one gender or another throughout history and distinct societies (Rivkin and Ryan 2004, 886). As Rubin states in her *Sexual Transformations*, due to industrialization and urbanization in Western Europe and the United States, gender roles changed, new identities were created, but

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[3] Compulsory heterosexuality is a socially constructed term, introduced by Adrienne Rich, which normalizes opposite-sex relationships while denying and marginalizing same-sex sexuality (Hidalgo and Royce 2017).

[4] Religion is present in *The Sims Medieval*, which, however, is not part of the main game series.

[5] Gender bending refers to a behaviour where one acts against the social accepted gender norms; they are "bending" the gender (Shaw and Ardener 2005, 10).

also various social inequalities were produced. She states that "homosexual behavior is always present among humans. But in different societies and epochs it may be rewarded or punished, required or forbidden, a temporary experience or a lifelong vocation" (Rubin 2004, 889-890). She provides the example of New Guinea societies, where all males are socially obliged to cultivate homosexual relationships, since such sexual behaviour is seen as highly masculine. She also talks about sexually motivated migration, San Francisco being the most famous "gay neighbourhood" in the United States (890). However, such areas gained a bad reputation and stigmatized homosexuals were common victims of police violence (891).

Gayle Rubin, in another of her texts, in her 1975 essay "The Traffic In Women," comments on the literature focusing on women by Marx, Engels, Freud and Levi-Strauss and tries to find the origin of women's oppression. When examining the work of Levi-Strauss, Rubin focuses on kinship system, where gift exchange used to be a unifying social concept between clans and families. According to Levi-Strauss, marriage is a basic form of gift exchange, making women the most precious gifts. Due to incest taboos, a man from one group is obliged to gift "his" women (sister, daughter) to the other clan, and vice versa. Such acts mean establishing deeper connections between those clans than other forms of gift exchange would, since marriage is permanent; thus resulting in kinship structures.

> It is certainly not difficult to find ethnographic and historical examples of trafficking in women. Women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold. Far from being confined to the 'primitive' world, these practices seem only to become more pronounced and commercialized in more "civilized" societies. (Rubin 2004, 779).

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Rubin further analyses the issue of what she calls the "sex/gender system" and states that in kinship structure, gender is nothing but a product of social relations. Moreover, such a society depends on obligatory heterosexuality, on marriages, which make males "men" and females "women". Rubin then links the hardship of gay people and women, since she proves that such denying of homosexual relationships has the same origin as women's oppression (Rubin 2004, 782).

Heteronormativity, however, as it is to be shown below, is a non-existent concept in *The Sims* world. As stated at the beginning, this cyber environment can be considered as a safe space offering acceptance for individuals of different identities. Women are in no way perceived as objects; they are a valuable part of Sims' society. There exist no women trafficking, women are treated the same as any other Sim – with respect. They are not looked down upon if they do not wish to take the role of a mother, since it is not women's only life objective. The social stigma affecting transgender or gender-nonconforming people, homosexuals and bisexuals is absent. There is no vocabulary in the game aimed at separating queer[6] people from those of different sexual and gender identities. Masculinity in women is not punished, nor is femininity in men. *The Sims* environment is very close to Gayle Rubin's dream where "one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" (787).

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[6] Queer is an umbrella term describing a community of people who do not fit into the normative perception of sex and gender and who fall outside of the heterosexual and cisgender category (Hidalgo and Barber 2017).

7. About the Game

a) General Information

The Sims is a video game series developed by Maxis Studios and published by Electronic Arts. The game is a simulation-based computer game, where gamers control virtual people called Sims. These characters are meant to represent common people from real life. Players thus act like a god, who controls them and directs their whole life.

In terms of its genre, *The Sims* is essentially a doll-house game. Other terms often used when describing this game type are sandbox game or open-world game. In other words, such games are intended for playing freely (Fromme and Unger 2012, 73), as the game environment does not usually come with pre-set goals and is instead designed for gamers to set their own individual ones (Jenkins 2004). There is no fixed aim in *The Sims* nor any explicit purpose for players. The game is entirely open-ended, with certain aspects such as lifetime aspiration or common life aspiration to guide players through the game. If they do not feel the need to follow such a path, however, they are free to follow their own scenario. In the end, it is up to gamers how they play the game, whether they have pre-set goals or not.

The game has an accessible gameplay. Upon starting the game, players can choose from a variety of neighbourhoods, in which they wish to create their Sim family. They can either start creating the family or build their housing first. There is also the option of playing with pre-made families, which there are plenty of in every neighbourhood. After the family and the house is made, players can start directing their Sims' lives.

A well-known symbol of the game is the Plumbob, a green gemstone floating above Sims' heads. It symbolizes which Sim is being played at the moment. Although the Plumbob is always green in colour when it appears in advertisements, its colour actually varies in the game. Depending on the Sim's mood, the Plumbob can change to yellow, orange and red colour (exact colours depend on the game series). Logically, red colour is the worst-case scenario, in which Sims can eventually die.

There are three main modes on the game screen while in a household. The first one is Live mode, in which players control their Sims and actively participate in their lives. The second one is Buy mode, where players can furnish their newly purchased home and decorate it with any necessities needed. The last major one is Build mode, which provides players with a platform to create their own home and design it according to their taste.

b) Autonomy

Sims simulate human beings; thus, these AI[7] do not necessarily have to obey players' actions. If a teenage Sim is too stressed or depressed to go to school, they will not do so. Although the player may feel frustrated; nonetheless, Sims act on their own needs and desires like any other live person:

> Far more than a dollhouse, *The Sims* evokes comparisons to a Greek myth
> in which you can play the deity, manipulating the lives of unaware humans.
> The trouble with this model—and what makes the game so intriguing—is
> that just like mortals in Greek mythology, your Sims often frustrate your
> plans with their own autonomy. (Macedonia 2000, 110)

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[7] AI stands for artificial intelligence.

This autonomy of the game characters is further enhanced by two additional elements. Sihvonen claims that since Sims have their own language and pixelated rectangles work as a form of censorship in certain situations, this grants Sims a certain level of privacy, and also limits the player's power (Sihvonen 2011, 130).

At the same time, Sims' autonomy can be adjusted to a certain extent. When playing *The Sims 2*, players have the option to turn on/off the Sims' autonomy. If the autonomy is off, Sims will not do any action which has not been initiated by the player. What that means, however, is that if this mode is on, players should not abandon their Sims' household for longer periods of time, since the virtual people will merely "breathe" and stand at the same spot for hours. Though in such cases, what happens is that the character comes into direct contact with the player. Sims break the fourth wall, look up in the "sky" and gaze into the player's "eyes" while yelling and gesticulating wildly (131).

8.   The Evolution of Gender in *The Sims* Game Series

The Sims was not intended to please mainly a male player base. Will Wright, the game creator, has said that the game developers were not aiming specifically at one gender, but tried to reach out to every possible player (10). In addition, game design does not follow the common form of digital games. *The Sims*' game features, such as characters, ways of interaction and subject matter, do not go hand in hand with the militarised masculinity of typical computer games, relying on strongly gender-coded scenarios of war and combat (9).

a) The Sims 1

The first stage when playing The Sims is creating a Sim. *The Sims 1* offers, compared to others, a limited choice when customizing a Sim (see Figure 1). When making a new household, there are only a few options available: name, gender, character, 3 skin tones, head looks and overall outfit. Players are met with only two gender choices; thus, gender binarism is present. Bodily proportions cannot be customized as such, though Sims can have a plump figure through overall outfits, where only a handful of pre-made outfits offer such a physique. Sims' skin tones are light, medium and dark. Apart from appearance, players can choose their Sims' personality, assigning them with a zodiac sign in the process. Choices when customizing Sims' personality traits are neat, outgoing, active, playful and nice. At the beginning, players are supplied with a set number of points which they use on each of the trait boxes. Lastly, Sims' biography can also be added.

Figure 1 Option screen when creating a male Sim.

Sims' clothing and hairstyles comply with gender stereotypes[8]. According to a Norwegian study conducted by University of Oslo, how young adults see themselves depends on the socio-cultural context in which opinions on their own body image are shaped (Traen, Markovic and Kvalem 2015, 124). It is often a slender and exercised body that is considered ideal in our society – that applies to both men and women. The study also points out that it is mostly a muscular figure that teenage boys strive to achieve, whereas teenage girls desire a thin body (124). If such socially demanded body proportions are not attained, young adults are then not satisfied with themselves (124).

The representation of men and women in *Sims 1* seems to mostly support these stereotypes: Women's clothing consists mainly of dresses and crop tops; in general, some type of tight clothing often revealing a portion of women's stomach. Male clothing mostly consists of shirts and suits, with a couple of skin-revealing outfits too. Male Sims' figures are often well-built, having multiple muscular options when creating them. On the other hand, female Sims' overall outfits offer a stereotypical, slim, hourglass figure (see Figure 2) – though as stated above, each of the two genders are supplied with a small number of "fuller" versions. Men are often short-haired and women long-haired.

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[8] I was working with The Sims – The Complete Collection.

Figure 2 Women's outfit.

The second stage of the gameplay is usually actual playing with created Sims. Some prefer building their own house, other players move them in a pre-made set of houses in the neighbourhood. After moving in, some arrangements are to be made first, since pre-built houses often do not come fully furnished. Then players are free to navigate their Sims' lives. Arguably the most important thing to do first, if players do not wish to use cheats – is to get a job for their Sims.

It is this aspect, the question of jobs, where arguably even *The Sims 1* is progressive. It is worth noting is that since 2000[9] there has never been a gender wage gap in this virtual world and also both female and male Sims have the same job opportunities. In Figure 2 there is my male Sim John, who has started working as a Beta Tester (recently promoted to a Support Tech) in the hacker career track. ICT is

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[9] The release date of the first game from the series.

often considered a male-dominated sphere in the real world; however, my female Sim Jane is just as qualified as any other Sim to get such a job here, regardless of her gender identity. Moreover, Jane is required to acquire the same skills as her male counterpart in order to get a promotion – in this case it is 2 mechanical points, which she has already achieved – (see Figure 3 and 4).

Figure 3 John working as a hacker (bottom right corner).

Similarly to the intolerance towards unequal pay for women, there has never been any intolerance towards non-traditional sexual preferences. All Sims are open minded and can form romantic relationships with Sims of both genders. Since there are two genders present, it can be concluded that all Sims are naturally bisexual, which Freud acknowledged already in the early twentieth century in his work "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex" (Freud 1920). My female Sim Jane can romantically interact with other female Sims in the same manner as any other male Sim can (see Figure 5) – though they cannot have a baby together. Understandably, both applies to male Sims too – they are able to form a romantic relationship but cannot have children. Furthermore, no character in the game, under any circumstances, will criticize or disapprove of such relationships based on homophobic opinions as it can happen in real life. As mentioned in chapter 6, heteronormativity is not a lifestyle adopted by Sims; therefore, there exist no hate crimes that would stem from seeing

same-sex relationships. However, to my surprise, if two Sims (of whatever combination of genders) were to show romantic feelings towards each other while being on a community lot, they might get scolded by an elderly woman due to her parochial opinions – though not because of their sexual orientation, but due to PDA[10] (see Figure 6).

Figure 5 Jane's "Kiss" option when interacting with another female Sim.

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[10] PDA stands for Public Display of Affection.

Figure 6 Jane getting scolded by an elderly woman.

A household consisting of two adults – either opposite or same-sex couples – has a chance of a call regarding their adoption of a child. This random phone call from the adoption agency is the only way for same-sex couples in the game for having a baby together, even though the call does not have to be accepted. Opposite-sex couples can also conceive a baby through interaction with a special bed.

Same-sex couples cannot marry in *The Sims 1*. The issue with the first game is that it does not recognize formal relationships or family ties at all, meaning there is no such term as a husband, a mother, a brother or a cousin explicitly used. Opposite-sex couples can marry, move in together, but no marital status is officially recognized in the relationship column. Thus, even though same-sex couples do not have the option of marrying each other, upon moving in together, they become one household and are treated as a family in the same way as opposite-sex married couples. Also, two

opposite-sex lovers cannot marry each other if they are already living together – since they are already considered a family.

b) The Sims 2

In the second game players are met with a wider variety of customizations for their Sims[11]. Upon creating a new household, for example, there are 4 skin tones available, the option of slim/fuller body and more age options than in *The Sims 1* (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 First customization screen available when making a new Sim.

In addition, there are multiple outfits and hairstyles to choose from. Male Sims now possess a bigger number of longer hairstyles, outfits that might not seem masculine and do not entirely comply with the usual gender stereotypes (see Figure 8). Moreover, make-up can be worn by male Sims, broadening the possibilities of gender nonconforming customization of Sims (see Figure 9). Jewellery is also added, along

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[11] I was working with *The Sims 2 – Ultimate Collection*.

with multiple piercings – available for both gender (though female Sims have more earrings, necklaces etc).

Figure 8 Men's clothing and hairstyle.

Figure 9 Male Sim wearing make-up.

There are still some outfits available for female Sims which reveal a great portion of their body (see Figure 10). Nevertheless, certain outfits that have a tomboy look or can be considered more masculine looking compared to the first game are available too (see Figure 11).

Figure 10 Women's outfit.

Figure 11 Women's outfit.

Job opportunities are still as equal as in the previous game. Female Sims can pursue any career regardless of their gender. Once again, my Sim Jane has an equal chance of becoming a general when pursuing the military career track as any male Sim. Or she can choose to be a game designer or a mad scientist – there are no limitations. What matters are the skills required for the specific careers or connections (for example in politics, having friends is necessary). Equal pay and equal chances apply to teenage Sims too, since they can get a part-time job. Understandably, the pay is lower, since the job is only for a few hours a day, but both teenage boys and girls are awarded the same.

Regarding same-sex relationships, not many things have changed. Sims of the same gender can still be dating with no repercussions – this applies for teenagers, adults and elderly Sims[12]. If two men or women marry each other, such a relationship is later called a joined union – signalizing that same-sex partnership is not equal to that of opposite-sex.

Moreover, two partners of the same sex are allowed to initiate the call to the adoption service now (of course opposite-sex couples have this option too, but it is not the only way for them to have a child). Thus, gay couples do not have to wait for a miraculous call, all it takes is to pick up the phone and make the call. The process is not over yet though. A social worker must first evaluate the financial status of the family – there must be at least 3,000 Simoleons[13] in the family funds, to make sure the child will be properly taken care of. This requirement applies to everyone regardless

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[12] Each of these life stages need to be listed, since *The Sims 1* recognizes only babies, children and adults (no teenagers or elderly Sims).

[13] Simoleons are the in-game currency.

of the parents' gender. Finally, the soon-to-be parents will then choose the age of the child (baby, toddler, child).

Male Sims in the game can even become pregnant, but only under very rare and exceptional circumstances and give birth to alien babies. *The Sims 2* introduces three new neighbourhoods – Pleasantview, Strangetown and Veronaville. In a pre-made family in Strangetown lives the Curious family, consisting of three brothers deeply interested in science. One of them, Pascal, is abducted by an alien who inhabits Strangetown and gets impregnated (see Figure 12). Just as his father, who had undergone the same life event and later gave birth to twins, Pascal conceives a baby while being a male Sim. Even though it is not a common occurrence in the game and it serves more as a supporting feature to the neighbourhood's mystery history (hence the name), it does make it possible for some male Sims to be pregnant.

Figure 12 Pascal Curious with his new-born baby.

c) The Sims 3

The Sims 3 game brings a completely new feature when making a Sim. Body modifiers now appear in the menu (see Figure 13). Each Sim's physical appearance can be customized to a bigger extent. Body weight, muscle size or muscle definition can be adjusted on a scale according to the player's preferences; thus, male Sims can have a plump figure, little or no muscle, whereas female Sims can have a more athletic and well-built figure. Men no longer have to oblige the prevailing social perception of their body – to be burly and sinewy. The same applies to women, since they can now look differently than simply delicate and slim. Female characters can also have their breast size changed, meaning the big-breasted image of women from *The Sims 1* has also become obsolete. There are also multiple skin colours available, with each one also having its own scale, where it can be further adjusted. Body hair is available only for male Sims, whereas make-up and tattoos are still the same for both genders.

Figure 13 Main customization screen in TS3.

When we look at the clothing and hairstyles, there is consistently a higher number of options when it comes to customizing female characters. This issue has persisted since the first game and has not been resolved. Women also possess a bigger number of accessories, such as gloves, wrist bands or earrings.

The Sims 3 invents a new personality system with a new set of traits for players to assign to their Sims. Instead of using a certain amount of points in the personality boxes, there are new, detailed traits to choose from: bookworm, handy, athletic, neat, slob, dislikes children, computer whiz and many more. This allows players to create boys that are for example neat technophobes, who will always be tidy and inept with computers. In the same way, girls can be designed to be vehicle enthusiasts or to dislike children, since not every woman feels the need to fulfil such a role. All traits are of course the same for both male and female Sims.

Same-sex couples are no longer in a joined union after the ceremony. There is a small, but very meaningful change: upon marrying each other, both Sims regardless of their gender are in a marriage – signalizing that both same and opposite-sex couples are now equal.

d) The Sims 4

Following the release of an official game patch released for this episode of the game, there has been an ultimate balance in choices while creating a Sim. A new gender customization was presented to players, which eliminates players' possible struggles with the gendered clothing, hairstyles or accessories.

Now players are free to choose whether their originally male character prefers to wear clothes which were previously strictly assigned to females. Such an option puts an end to the limited options when creating either male or female Sims (see Figure

14 and 15). Now, every hairstyle or piece of clothing, male or female, is available for all Sims. This customization applies not only to adults or elderly Sims, but also children and toddlers. As in real life, young Sims are and should be encouraged to be bold and create their own character and personality regardless of society's expectations of what they should be or should look like.

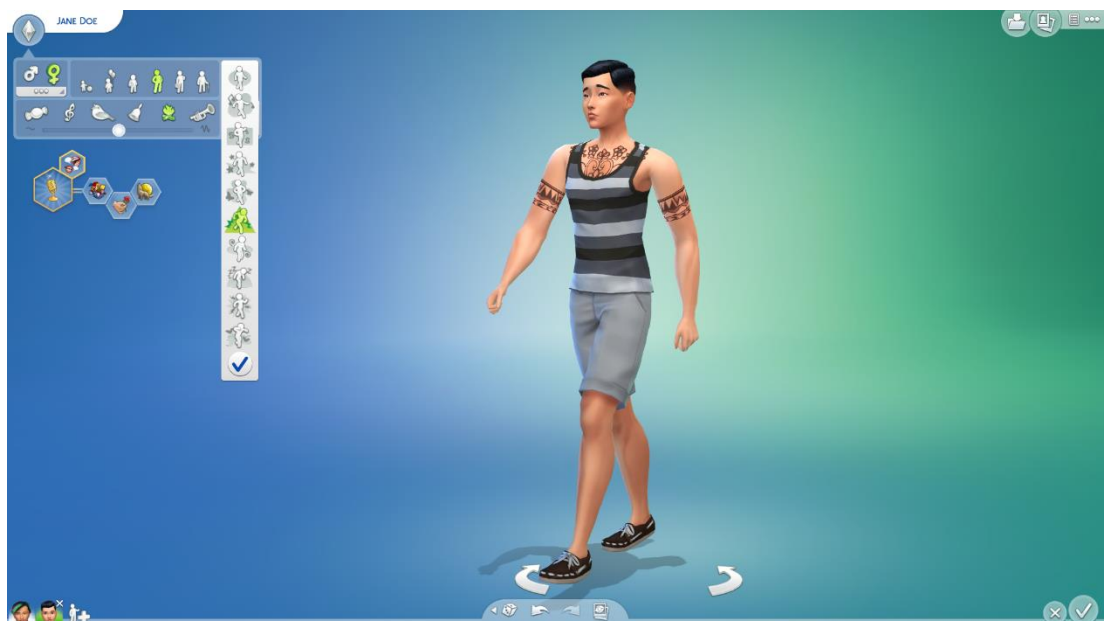*Figure 14 Male Sim wearing clothes designed for women.*

Figure 15 Female Sim wearing men's clothes.

In addition, players can adjust the vocal range of their Sims, since there are more customization options. This means that not only do female Sims have a deeper feminine voice option than *The Sims 3* allows, but they also have, for example, a men's baritone. The same applies to male Sims, their voice choices are creating a wide spectrum, allowing them to have a high-pitched or feminine voice.

The way a Sim walks can also be changed, with at least two stereotypical gendered choices; a so-called feminine walk and a tough walk. Thus, Sims have another element of their body language through which they can project their masculine or feminine image, depending on the players' choices.

Alongside with the voice and clothing, female Sims are now able to use the urinal when using the restroom (such an option, however, is available only in the menu when making a new Sim).

Another major point when talking about the changes in *The Sims 4* is a new feature regarding pregnancy. In the newest game of the series, it is possible for male Sims to be able to give birth to a child (not an alien one). Likewise, female Sims, if the options is enabled, can now impregnate other Sims – regardless of the other Sim's gender. Such options can be understood as a step forward in the inclusion of transgender people, since transgender men can conceive children and transgender women can have their own biological children too.

Every June the world celebrates a so-called Pride Month in remembrance of the Stonewall Riots. This year Electronic Arts collaborated with the It Gets Better Project, a non-profit organization empowering the queer community, to create a new set of Pride clothing, various Pride flags and gender-neutral bathroom doors for *The Sims*, allowing their players to celebrate the 2019 Pride Month. In Figure 16 there is an

official image from the Pride Month article by EA, where multiple Sims, including a toddler and a child, are wearing the new Pride clothes.

Figure 16 Pride Month clothing and accessories.

Every previously stated point takes the gender issue in the game series to another level. Such features open the world of non-binary and queer inclusivity, which is a step in the right direction. And Electronic Arts are fully aware of their own progress – as of March 20, 2019, EA addressed the topic of diversity and inclusion on their official website:

> We believe in the potential of every human being. We celebrate diversity of thought, cultural differences, lifestyle, age, background, experience, religion, economic and social status, gender identity and marital status. Building a culture of inclusion allows us to create experiences for our people, culture, and community.

They thus believe in their player community to be a reflection of a diverse world, for whom they create their games.

9.   Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to prove the gradual change in addressing the gender equality and related issues in the main game series of *The Sims*. As noted at the beginning, there has been an ever-present trend in video games when it comes to the portrayal of women. Female characters have often been sexualized and they have not even appeared as frequently in games as male characters. Both genders are often subjected to the stereotypical social expectations of men and women. Such game environments based on a patriarchal society and its attitudes form an unhealthy space for gamers, since spending time in cyberspace influences and shapes players' opinions.

The Sims, as this thesis illustrates, goes against this prevalent system of discrepancy between men and women and creates a sort of a utopian world where everyone is equal. All Sims are free to love whoever they want, regardless of their gender. Women can pursue any career and become anyone they aspire to. Since the first game has been released, there have been no wage gaps, which unfortunately still exist in the real world. Moreover, since *The Sims 2*, men can give birth, gay couples can enter a formal relationship and officially adopt children together. Women in *The Sims 3* are able to possess traditionally masculine personality traits or have a muscular figure, whereas men are not obliged to have a well-built body in order to be attractive as the society often tells them. In *The Sims 4* players are allowed to further explore their Sims' gender with various options which permit female Sims to impregnate other Sims or wear previously strictly men's clothing.

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