

SIMple & Personal: Domestic Space & The Sims

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ABSTRACT: What happens when video games, a typical “male” space primarily created by men, are combined with domestic space? Domestic space has been historically linked to the feminine, and therefore, playing a game set in a house must be a kind of “feminisation” of the player. That the game *The Sims* is popular among women and girls also supports this thesis. In this essay, I postulate that this feminization manifests through the design of the game space, game tasks, and game goals, and that further, this feminisation is reflected socially through the dominance of consumer culture..

KEYWORDS: Computer Game, Gender, Technology, Domestic, Virtual, Play

For over 50 years, Americans, and most of Western Europe, has considered “progress” through images of automobiles, the space program, the cold war, suburbia, strip malls, and the information age. The idea of progress has been inextricably intertwined with the American mythos of man’s conquest and subsequent consumption of his surroundings through technological and visual means. Electronic space is often overlooked, however, as a site of epistemological importance; if it is examined, the virtual is considered in the terms of narrative or community rather than as an epistemological system defined by behaviors and space. We need to examine examples of virtual space such as exhibited in *The Sims* to tease out the implications of these inherent architectures and to examine the impact of cultural attitudes upon space.

Over 20 years ago, NASA researchers used a head mounted display to “fly” over virtual landscapes (Zajtcuk & Satava 1997). This experimentation marked the beginning of the use of virtual reality (VR) for scientific visualization. More importantly for this particular project, it solidified the link between computer graphics and virtual technologies to produce and refine space as a visual and conceptual frontier. This essay explores those spaces which mimic or represent domestic space. Computer games are most often played in the home (frequently at a gaming-specific console) and some games depict domestic space and enlist players in constructing domestic space in the game. Since Activision’s 1985 game *Little Computer People*, domestic space has been an alternative theme to other forms of action and simulation. Thus the house serves as both a situation for gameplay and a theme within games.

The Sims is at the forefront of gaming as a cultural phenomenon on an international scale: the initial release of *The Sims* was worldwide and the game was translated

in 14 different languages, and it is the most popular game featuring domestic space. Games such as *The Sims* are subtle yet powerful methods of enculturation by which social values, interaction styles, and everyday activities are practiced. The game does not follow stereotypical, often violent, gaming models.¹ Instead, it offers the ability to create a virtual house, wherein players control characters as though it were an interactive, intelligent dollhouse. Known also as a “paper doll” game among consumers, the space of the game is a site of negotiation between the real and the virtual domestic experience; it ironically, yet wholeheartedly, embraces suburban-style consumption and domesticity. Because both computer gaming and playing house are mechanisms of fantasy, it is valuable to examine domestic space and *The Sims* carefully; both types of play also involve a good deal of gender role definition, projection, and reversal or subversion, and thus looking at gender roles and space within *The Sims* in relation to historical models.

This paper explores the space of *The Sims* and study a range of historical associations brought forward by the game. Why is the house a fascinating site for gameplay? Are games which feature domestic space a reflection of gender conflict, and do they represent the reclaiming of domestic space by male designers and participants? Does subverting conventional norms in gameplay alter gaming stereotypes? The premise of this investigation is to examine the construction of virtual space in *The Sims* to study the gender implications of such a space, examining the creation and representation of domestic themes through a Western feminist lens, focusing on consumer practices and space in *The Sims*.

Domestication and suburbia. Houses, from mobile yurts to city condominiums, are a fundamental component of human life. Structural and conceptual ideas about home also serve as key components of defining a particular culture. Houses function in our imaginary and in our play; the house is the icon for “home,” whether one lives in a condo, duplex, or houseboat. The fantasy-projection of playing house, and the propensity for making miniature houses and household goods, is at least thousands of years old: play houses have been discovered dating from Ancient Egypt. It seems human nature to recreate our domestic surroundings in our play, and *The Sims* is created as a natural, and unquestioned, extension of this history.

In the West, especially in the United States post World War II, the house has been the glorious icon of the American dream, representing class fluidity and the (few) egalitarian promises of capitalism. While Marxist critic Henri Lefabre critiques the consumption of space as a capitalist endeavor in his significant critical writing on space, he, like many other theorists and writers, falls into romanticizing the house. “The House is as much cosmic as it is human. From cellar to attic, from foundations to roof, it has a density at once dreamy and rational, earthly

¹ In March, 2002, Electronic Arts announced that *The Sims* had become the best-selling PC game of all time, selling over 6.3 million copies worldwide (BW, 2002). The game also appeals to women: over 50% of new players and approximately 40% of all players are women (BW, 2002).

and celestial" (Lefabre, 121). In using the house and its immediate surroundings as a normative palette with which to create their own image of home and household relationships, designers of *The Sims* draw on ideas about domestic utopias such as proffered by advertising and corporate marketing research.

After purchasing the game, most new *Sims* players spend hours (and usually days) in non-stop manipulation of the simulated house. The goal of the game is to keep your *Sim* characters happy, fed, clean, and nurtured. *Sims* players work to make their initial pre-fabricated virtual home their own. Players are given a default, modest 1 bedroom home when beginning the game, complete with yards, mailbox, flowers, some shrubbery, and an outdoor patio. The standard house in *The Sims* is allocated to players equally across player and character class, race, and ethnic lines; it represents a particularly "Levittown" standard in domestic American architecture, yet simultaneously is supposed to embody a player's individuality by presenting the opportunity to add on to and enlarge the house, purchase appropriate furniture, and take up a pastime such as reading or watching television. The imagery of the home never leaves the screen, and players themselves are confined within or near the inner/outer bounds of the walls. While point of view can change through player commands, the house remains the focus of interaction and play; the structure of the house is the only space in which sims really operate. While characters appear to have a life outside the home (most characters go to work, for example), players never visit work with their characters. In addition, there are no heirlooms, mementos, baby pictures, or markers of history, particularly family history, among any of the artifacts in the home, thus requiring users to create their own personal objects for importation into the game environment.



Players have a set amount of startup funding in order to purchase appliances, furniture, and essentials such as lamps (otherwise the house is dark at night), a device to cook with, books, etc. Players are encouraged to purchase some furniture for their new characters; expensive furniture tends to "comfort" the simulated characters more-- they derive greater happiness from sitting in an expensive, cushy chair, for example, than a plain wooden one. Once the player learns that caring for their sims' happiness requires a bigger budget, they have characters look for an income that can then be used for further acquisition and shopping. Without an income and without new toys and spaces to assist their development, the sims become unhappy and things quite literally turn to chaos. Characters will stop using the bathroom for fundamental

needs, their happiness will decrease, and filth will accumulate in the house without food, entertainment, and new household goods regularly coming in. Earning "Simoleans" is paramount to success, and there are many ways in the game to garner more money through "cheat keys" as well as labor.

Most early interaction in *The Sims* occurs in the kitchen. The kitchen allows the most opportunity for interaction as well as the introduction of new gadgetry (many items available to new players are kitchen appliances). Doors default to frame the kitchen as the permeable boundary between inside and outside space. This is in keeping with the trend of kitchens in American life; the kitchen in history was reduced to a service area in the 18th and 19th centuries, but in contemporary culture, new appliances and the gourmet food movement have elevated the real US kitchen to a site which represents luxury and prestige. If one has time to cook, one has enough money and motivation transcend fast food and instant microwave meals. In her book *Geography of Home*, Akiko Busch notes that kitchens in modern American homes have expanded beyond the size of other rooms in the house—mostly this is to accommodate appliances (Busch, 45). There is room for experimentation with ideas of household norms and placement of material goods within the game, however. For example, when a player placed large chair and television in the kitchen, the characters were just as happy as if this setup were placed in the bedroom. This flexibility allowed the player to change the stereotypical layout of the home. Even with this elasticity, the bed gets in the way inside the kitchen, and efficiency of character task and movement seems to win over creativity. By far, the most substantial way one affects the happiness of a *Sim* character is through products, not "feng shui" placement.

Suburban Sims. While there are varying notions across cultures about spatial practices and particular urbanization models, suburbanization is certainly an international phenomenon. Silverstone attributes the first suburb to London, where crowded conditions in the 19th century city drove the middle class outside the city (1997, 3). Populations of London suburbs doubled in the second half of the 19th century and other world cities soon followed suit as transportation such as the train and the automobile allowed their growth. *The Sims* recreates particular aspects of suburban design, ideals which are focused on control over the environment. As Lars Lerup notes, the suburban dream extends even to the vehicles we drive and the way we go to work; to him, the Chevrolet Suburban is a now-classic icon which extends the safety and shelter of the suburbs throughout the commute to the dangerous city; the larger the sport-utility vehicle (SUV), the larger our control over our environment. Such grandiose control is explored in *The Sims* through desiring practice: players work to expand their homes and possessions, and a good deal of a player's success is measured not only by the size of their house but also by their ability to accumulate goods and climb the corporate ladder. In the geography of *The Sims*, each player's house is constructed as a world onto its own; houses are set in a generic, suburban tract just outside SimCity, where characters presumably work. All *Sim* characters, even nearly penniless families, live in these pleasant suburbs with wide, blacktopped roads.

Nearby streets, houses, and even interior fixtures are rendered in three dimensions and offer players an abundance of detail. In fact, Will Wright has noted that French audiences complained about the width of the roads, for they felt "too American" (Boal, 2000, par 13). As participants and voyeurs, players can zoom in or out and rotate the scene to get any view they prefer of the Sim 'burbs.'

If a typical American player's physical home is a romanticized 'castle', then the player's *Sim* house and the surrounding *Sim* suburbs easily become a utopia. *Sim* domestic space cannot be separated from domestic ideals culled from the popular imaginary, and the last century's classic domestic setting has been in/is tied to the icon of the suburb. Suburbs offer not only particular kinds of architectural space and controlled access, but are more importantly a way of life—and with that way of life, the suburb is in fact a set of values, beliefs, and expectations. The suburban home was created in part as a response to women's working outside the home and the perceived collapse of traditional family roles; from the industrial revolution to World War II, the West has witnessed various liberations and subsequent domestications which work to domesticate women by the insistent demands of the household. Spigel notes that in postwar America, the "new suburban family ideal was a consensus ideology, promising practical benefits like security and stability" to those who had lived through massive death and rationing brought by war (1992, 2). After World War II, suburbia helped reinstate the traditional gender roles women held in the 19th century home. The "Rosie the Riveter" image was replaced by June Cleaver.



Norman Rockwell, *Rosie the Riveter*, 1943



June Cleaver from the television show "Leave It To Beaver," played by Barbara Billingsley 1958

In 2002, when *The Sims* peaked in popularity, something interesting happened in US culture involving the physical home and the virtual. Since the 1980s there has been a growing American trend to move to controllable spaces; the house has shifted from being a place of comfort to a site for defense. *The Sims* game as created amidst 1990s dot-com successes, a period of great optimism when a robust economy and low crime rate combined with the utopian language of new technologies, providing an almost mythic lifestyle. Americans, safe and secure and living among the lowest crime rates in decades were

"livin' large"² and actively participating in both the consumption of household goods and virtual technologies. After the crash of the economic boom, spending in the US on durable goods dropped significantly, though it was still higher than pre-dot com indices—in fact, since September 11, spending on durable consumer goods such as appliances and furniture has increased over 10 points,³ especially on kitchen appliances, alarm systems, and home technologies. This, combined with the increase with *The Sims*' popularity, demonstrates that Americans are retreating into their homes both physically and virtually.

The Sims does have tongue-in-cheek aspects such as "whimsical shopping Muzak" when purchasing objects for the home. Most players read the all-out endorsement of consumption in *The Sims* as irony – that ultimately, the game encourages players to question whether their characters would be happier with bigger, better items and houses. While goods and services are valued in gameplay, human interaction and compassion are also valued. The richer the characters become, the more they must work, and the less time they have — thus, the more effective their items must be at delivering pleasure. Just as the first generation of US suburbanites (postwar Americans) were conscious of the performative and artificial nature of media depicting "consumer dreams" and suburban family life in the 1950s, *Sims* players certainly know their roles. The game wouldn't be as successful as it is without the aspect of interaction and creation it offers to players who must shop, consume, and design for more. That growth and progression unquestioningly must rely on consumption, however, is problematic given real world social spending and the very problematic pleasure of consumption as an end in itself, which the game reinforces.

If consumption as a game goal and play goal is a cause for more investigation, so too is the link between consumption and the domestic, between consumption and space. What happens when video games, typically "male" spaces, are integrated into both real (home) and virtual (game) domestic space? Are games which feature domestic space a reflection of gender conflict, and do they represent the reclaiming of domestic space by a masculinist software industry? While there are varying notions across cultures about spatial practices, and in particular, urbanization models, *The Sims* operates across these cultural practices, offering an unadulterated American model of suburban living and capitalist desire. Suburbia is central to contemporary culture in physical and geographical as well as cultural ways, yet it, like the home, is a space with gender implications.

Feminine spaces. The house in contemporary society is often associated with the female in the popular imaginary of television, film, and other media. Playing house in miniature was a popular American pastime in the late Nineteenth century and was featured in home magazines

² *Livin' Large* is the name of one of *The Sims* game expansion packages

³ US Congress Report, 2002

of the 1890s to early 20th century. Children used old ledgers or albums to create a paste-up graphic room per leger page set. These early visual miniature representations of upper middle class houses provide a specific idea of house as imagined by a particular class at a particular time and geography. Rodris Roth notes in "Scrapbook Houses" that such scrapbook houses "were an ideal medium to introduce girls to their future roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers" and that the "house in a scrapbook, just as much as an actual one, had to be run and maintained properly" (308). The house was implicitly known to be a gendered space. That female children were being trained to imitate their parent's tastes and shop for desirable goods from mail order catalogs and samples suggests the intertwining of play, gender, and consumption over a century ago. The space of the domicile is thought to be a traditional space, limiting to women and nurturing to men, clearly centered inside patriarchal structures. Home then becomes the place of property lines, architectures, work, play, and above all, consumption; by practicing housekeeping, players maintain traditions of cultural, material, and symbolic importance which work to reinstate historical norms. The fundamental role of suburbanized domestic space in *The Sims* seems to be to present players with economic, political, and ideological models which rely upon a historically feminine association to function. Thus, the definition of space in *The Sims* becomes a representation of feminization and traditional conceptions of women's roles. If domestic space has been historically linked to the feminine, players engaging in a game set in doll house are in turn "feminized" in such roles. That the game *The Sims* is popular among women and girls also supports this thesis. In playing *The Sims* or other contemporary doll house games such as *Barbie and Her Magical Dream House*, we encounter a fascination with household objects, with consumption, and with normative class values. Do these interactive dollhouses represent the material fantasies of capitalism? Or, more intricately, a type of gender performance of traditionally female gender roles by players?

This feminisation of the player manifests through the design of the game space, game tasks, and game goals, and is reflected socially through the dominance of consumer culture. While players are reinstated into traditionally gendered feminine roles when first playing, they are also allowed to create miniature systems within these confines. Does this mean that subversion is possible within such a system? While unquestioningly tied to consumption, this feminisation could in fact be liberating on other levels. I would like to suggest that it is this enclosed feminization of the player that encourages player subversion of the game in the form of alternate-goaled games. The subversion of the game in the form of skinning (replacing the graphics of household object with other images, which could be objects of different value or objects which make no sense in the game), fan culture (where narratives of life within *Sims* households are constantly written, reimagined, and rewritten), offer the space that the household space depicted in the game does not. In many ways, this is the only area for post-consumerist practices. Some players subvert the game by purposely making life miserable for the little consumers; players can download negative or subversive homes such

as "Mr. Sadistic," a household where *Sim* characters are tortured and frequently die.

The Sims is a game in which subtle yet powerful methods of enculturation occur via gameplay and by which social values, interaction styles, and everyday activities are practiced. The virtual household construction accomplished via shopping has a particularly loaded set of social meaning. Computer games reveal anxieties and uncertainties about domestic ideology and gender roles - uncertainties which manifest through the playing of the games. Importantly, Will Wright and the team who have created *The Sims* are adamant that the game is "neutral"; players can create characters of any race and income status, and they all achieve the American suburban dream. But neutral is a problematic term in light of the emphasis on consumption upon which the game relies. Domestic spaces in *The Sims* are more than a reflection of stereotypical gender conflict. Both male and female players are encouraged to be household consumers, feminized and capitalized by the system which creates them. The reclaiming of domestic space by technology designers and player participants has, in a very complex way, turned this corner of computer gaming into a very politically charged site for play and, potentially, a future site for social change.

Author's Note: *Sims Online* poses a different set of issues for both domestic space and goals of consumption, which will be explored in another paper and at the conference.

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