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A Day in the Life of a Sim: Making Meaning of Video Game Avatars and Behaviors

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SIM: MAKING MEANING OF

VIDEO GAME AVATARS AND BEHAVIORS

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of

Antioch University Seattle

Seattle, Washington

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements of the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

By

Jessica Stark

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SIM: MAKING MEANING OF

VIDEO GAME AVATARS AND BEHAVIORS

This dissertation, by Jessica Stark, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
Antioch University Seattle at Seattle, WA in partial fulfillment
of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SIM: MAKING MEANING OF

VIDEO GAME AVATARS AND BEHAVIORS

Jessica Stark

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Seattle, WA

With video game usage—and criticism on its activity—on the rise, it may be helpful for the psychological community to understand what it actually means to play video games, and what the lived experience entails. This qualitative, phenomenological study specifically explores user behaviors and decisions in the simulated life video game, *The Sims*. Ten participants completed one- to two-hour long semi-structured interviews, and the data was transcribed, organized into 1,988 codes, which were clustered into 30 categories, and from which six themes ultimately emerged. These resulting themes are: *self-representation*; *past, present, and future*; *purpose for play; self-reflection*; *co-creation*; and *familiarity*. The essence of playing *The Sims* includes a degree of self-representation through gameplay choices, projecting one's own past, present or future into the game, and play that is motivated by distinct reasons or benefits. Gameplay in *The Sims* also involves a sense of familiarity, the interaction of inspirations coming from both the user and the game, and the users' reflections on the connection between themselves and the game. Relationships between the six resulting themes and the current literature on video game psychology are reviewed, and future research and clinical implications are discussed. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, http://aura.antioch.edu/ and Ohio Link ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/etd.

Keywords: video games, The Sims, phenomenology, gamers, video game players, video game users, simulated life, qualitative, Sim, video game psychology, user behavior, lived experience, gameplay, self-representation, avatar, self-reflection, identity

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all the non-male gamers out there for fighting

stereotypes, for playing what, when, and how you want to play, and for showing the world that

we are equals who deserve the same acknowledgement and respect as our male counterparts in

the gaming world. Keep fighting the good fight and doing what you love.

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Introduction

The basis of my dissertation project is the underlying assumption that people play video games, and in particular simulated life video games, because they enjoy them and benefit from playing them. Research supports that people feel positive affect after playing certain video games (Przybylski, Weinstein, Murayama, Lynch, & Ryan, 2012; Saleem, Anderson, & Gentile, 2012), portray parts of their personality and lives through avatars and games (Fong & Mar, 2015; Griebel, 2006; Reed & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009), and can express themselves virtually in ways that they are unable to do in everyday physical life (Cabiria, 2011; Taylor, 2002). The goal of this study has been to explore the relationship between players' physical and virtual lives, both in character and behavior, to try to get closer to identifying what meaning people make of their simulated life video game experiences. To do this, I took a qualitative phenomenological approach to allow participants to illuminate their experiences, and I, as the researcher, partook in synthesizing their meaning-making to capture the essence of this phenomenon.

While one notable study has explored players' personalities and values in relationship to their behaviors within the video game, *The Sims* (Griebel, 2006), to date there have been no studies that have allowed participants to speak for themselves about what they gain or identify as important about their experiences with this game. Examining the meaning that players make of their virtual experiences will increase the literature on the complex interaction between players' physical and virtual selves, and the unique subset of experiences related specifically to simulated life games, which could potentially produce insight into how this meaning-making can be used therapeutically with clients.

Literature Review

As an introduction to video games, the first section of this review provides a short history and overview to game genres, as well as the therapeutic and positive aspects of video games. The next section reviews motivations for why people choose to play video games, as well as games as cultural reflections of the environments in which video game players live and idealize. This review also explores players' relationships to their avatars and avatar identity as described by appearance, representation, and presence. Since this study is specifically about the game, *The Sims*, this game is explained, and game-specific research is highlighted. Lastly, descriptive and interpretive phenomenology are described, as well as general phenomenological methodology and analysis as a research method, as this is the research method used for this dissertation.

Introduction to Video Games

Although playing video games is often considered a frivolous pastime for a marginal group of asocial people, it is estimated that 63% of Americans currently engage in playing them (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2016). For over 50 years and since the creation of computers, video games have been developed and grown to be a multi-billion dollar industry. Types of video games have also expanded in variety, spanning multiple mediums with which to play them and crossing multiple genres. Often, the complexity of games and different ways to categorize games makes it difficult to create clear definitions of genres, but nonetheless, there are general genres in which most games are placed (Apperley, 2006; ESA, 2016).

Short history. The first video games were developed at the time of the first computers, which was in the 1940s and 1950s. Early uses for the computer were World War II simulations and for research purposes, but games were developed as well, including strategy games like *Nim*, *Checkers*, and *Chess*, and radar games such as *Tennis for Two* in which a virtual ball bounced

from side to side on a radar. One of the first commercialized computer games, *Spacewar!*, came out in the 1960s, and in the 1970s the Commodore 64 was an early computer that became popular for personal use, and made at-home video game play easier. Multi-user dungeon (MUD) games were an early-popularized type of game in which players had adventures through text-based virtual worlds. This was also a time when arcade machines, such as *Pong*, and early video game consoles, such as the Atari 2600, were developed.

In the 1980s, these machines continued to grow into color arcade games, such as *Pacman*, and consoles made by other companies, such as Nintendo and Game Boy. Additionally, some game-specific accessories were created, such as the Nintendo Zapper for *Duck Hunt,* which was a controller shaped like a gun used to shoot ducks on the screen instead of the normal controller. In the 1990s, many more consoles were developed including Sega Genesis, Playstation, and Nintendo 64, as well as some full-body games with accessories, such as the game *Dance Dance Revolution*, which used a placemat to step on as an interactive controller. Additionally, the first phone game was released, which was the game Snake on the Nokia phone. This was also the first time that massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) were developed, which fostered online communities connecting international players to interact within video games in a way that had not been possible before.

In the past 15 years, video games including those played on PCs, consoles, and phones, have continued to grow. Consoles now include multiple generations of Xbox and Playstation, Wii, Gamecube, Kinect, and more. Phone games have expanded to the point that there are online stores, such as the AppStore, from which users can buy these games. Other casual games, such as *Farmville* and *Words with Friends*, have expanded through social media websites, such as Facebook, and are often played with people who are connected with friends through the social

media sites. Additionally, MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*, have gotten so popular that there have been world championships for the best players, and some PC games, including *The Sims* franchise, have sold more than 175 million copies worldwide. Needless to say, video games have expanded tremendously in the past 50 years and are now a large part of today's society.

Overview of game genres. There are many different genres of video games that are sometimes difficult to define or differentiate. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2016) identified shooter games as the best-selling video game genre in 2015, followed by action games, sport games, role-playing, and adventure games with many other genres selling smaller quantities. They also separated out the best-selling computer games from video games, and the top selling genres for computer games were strategy followed by casual, role-playing, shooter and adventure games. However, the categorizations and distinctions between genres are often unclear.

Apperley (2006) argued that there are two ways to approach the study and categorization of video games: (a) the narratological approach, which relies on narrative paradigms, and (b) the ludological approach, which focuses on games' structures, rules, and mechanics. He argued that video games should not only be categorized based on visual aesthetics of the game, but more attention should be paid to interactive characteristics, as described below. He also noted that video games often belong to several genres as once, and that the categorizations are generally messy.

Nonetheless, Apperley (2006) identified four main genres. The first is simulation games, with one view that these games must follow the laws of physics to be categorized as this, such as driving games that replicate real driving, and another view that games only need to follow the laws of play to be a simulation game, such as driving games that exist within a cartoon world

that follows the laws of that world that may somewhat contradict physics. The second category is strategy games, and the author noted that many games that are not considered in this category can still include strategy depending on the players' levels of expertise in the game. The third category is action games, which is often broken down into first-person shooters or third-person games; however, the author argued that this difference comes from a narrative perspective similar to that in movies rather than a ludological one, since many games can change modes to switch point of view. He noted that a ludological approach might include subcategories based on whether the success of the actions within the game depend on the skills of the players hitting buttons, or the skills of the game character increasing levels. The last genre identified is role-playing (RPG) or adventure games (the author used these terms synonymously), which has traditionally been viewed as a game in which a character is played in a fantasy world. Apperley noted that the genres into which games fit can change depending on the approach taken for categorizing video games. For example, from an interactive approach, simulation games might be defined as requiring the player to constantly engage in watching the screen and manipulating the controller. From this approach, the often-categorized simulation game, *The Sims*, does not encourage this type of interaction and thus would actually be more of a strategy game because "the player has to manipulate the simulation as it progresses through time in order to get the result with the most utility" (Apperley, 2006, p. 14).

While the names and categorizations of genres and games can vary, Apperley's (2006) list of four noted genres gives an example of how games are often divided, with the Entertainment Software Association (2016) providing an example of many additional genres, or sub-categories of these genres, including flight, racing, and children's entertainment games, for example. While the literature review of this paper will encompass information about games

within multiple genres, the primary focus of this research project is on simulated life, role-playing, single-player games, and in particular the game series, *The Sims*.

Effects of Video Games

The idea that aggression is caused by playing violent video games has dominated this field since the 1980s; yet, some researchers argue that these statements are misleading and are a result of methodologically limited studies. Some research has supported the sentiment that violent video games increase aggressive behavior (Calvert et al., 2017; Shaw & Warf, 2009), and more specifically, they increase players' state hostility, and decrease their positive state affect (Saleem et al., 2012). Furthermore, Mehrabian and Wixen (1986) found that players' feelings of arousal and dominance increased game play preference, such that players are perhaps more likely to prefer violent video games because of these attributes. The American Psychological Association Task Force on Violent Media recently conducted a research review of studies from 2009–2013 and found that these studies demonstrated an association between violent video game use and increased aggression (Calvert et al., 2017).

On the other side of this argument, Griffiths (1999) pointed out that research on aggression and video games generally lacks variety of methodology, age of players, and longevity of the study. Most of the early research on this topic involved the methodology of having young children watch or play a violent video game, and then placed in a room with toys where researchers observed the children's play behaviors for 30 minutes, which demonstrated an increase in aggressive play. Griffiths argued that although there is a lot of research on this topic, the research is less impactful once the reader understands that generalizations are often made based on this limited methodology. A temporary increase in aggressive behavior in children in a laboratory after playing certain video games should not be extrapolated to the idea that everyone

who plays violent video games will have long-lasting, highly aggressive behaviors as a direct causality of those games. Shaw and Warf (2009) also questioned if violent video games actually increase aggression, or if aggressive people are drawn to playing more violent video games. Furthermore, the APA Task Force acknowledged that there are many facets to violent video games that are evolving over time and should be considered, including plot complexities and the resulting guilt or other emotions that players may feel from violent gameplay behaviors, and competitive features of games that may produce aggressive effects more than violent content (Calvert et al., 2017).

While aggression has been one of the leading areas around which video game research has centered, there has also been a growing body of research documenting the positive and therapeutic aspects of video games and virtual environments. In their recent research review, Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014) summarized positive effects of video games in the domains of cognitive (e.g., attentional and spatial skills from shooter games, problem-solving skills from strategy games, and creativity benefits from video games in general), motivational (e.g., resilience in the face of failure), emotional (e.g., mood management), and social benefits (e.g., prosocial behavior). Additionally, Jane McGonigal (2010, 2011), a game designer who has contributed towards the movement of harnessing the positive power of games, has argued that people should be playing *more* video games because of the positive aspects they bring. Similarly, Franco (2016) highlighted studies noting potential therapeutic benefits of video games, and concluded that therapists and clients can benefit from video games in the areas of rapport-building and increased insight. Even within the realm of violent video games, Jansz (2005) argued that these types of games can be helpful to players, especially adolescents. Violent video games often elicit feelings of anger or fear during play, which are emotions that are less

acceptable to be displayed in public, but are important to experience especially during identity formation, which occurs during adolescence. Additionally, games that elicit frustration, anger, and anxiety also usually produce benefits within the game for players who can work through those emotions and flexibly adapt to the given situation, which reinforces these adaptive skills outside of video game contexts as well (Granic et al., 2014).

Furthermore, some "prosocial" video games (e.g., *Chibi Robo* and *Super Mario Sunshine*) have been shown to elicit the opposite state of emotions compared to violent video games: increased positive state affect and reduced state hostility (Saleem et al., 2012). Specifically, positive emotional experiences have been felt after playing puzzle type games (Granic et al., 2014). Additionally, Greitemeyer, Osswald, and Brauer (2010) found that participants demonstrated more interpersonal empathy and less schadenfreude (i.e., pleasure at another's misfortune) after playing some prosocial video games (e.g., *Lemmings*) compared to when they played neutral games. Smyth (2007) also found that participants who played MMORPGs online at home for one month acquired more new online friendships than participants who played single-player games (games that are not played with other online players) for the same amount of time. Ultimately, not all video games are created equally. They are complex, multi-faceted, interactive experiences and may result in an array of emotional and physiological responses from players.

Therapeutic Usefulness

Several games that were not specifically designed for therapeutic benefit have actually been considered for this use. Fanning and Brighton (2007) conducted interviews with art and play therapists to identify if and how the therapists could imagine using *The Sims 2* as a way to create meaning and facilitate communication between therapists and clients. Therapists indicated

that they anticipated *The Sims 2* could help mediate emotional issues and connect with clients'

deeper issues, perceptions, and concerns. In a general sense, therapists who learn about and

connect clients with their in-game personas may be able to provide insight into the clients'

history, desires, and personalities (Dini, 2012). *Second Life* is simulated game that has

specifically been found to benefit some players. In a study where 20 overweight and obese

participants received either face-to-face or *Second Life* virtual reality weight loss support and

instruction, those who received the virtual support were more likely to have maintained their

weight loss three months after the three-month program ended (Sullivan et al., 2013). Possible

factors contributing to these results include a lack of access barriers, such as cost, time

constraints, and travel difficulties, as well as participants' opportunity to explore behaviors with

real-time feedback in the game, but without negative consequences in their physical lives. In

another study conducted within *Second Life*, participants with disabilities who actively played

the game for three months scored significantly better on measures of self-esteem and affective

states, including depression, loneliness, anxiety, positive emotions, and life satisfaction, than

their scores before playing the game (Gilbert, Murphy, Krueger, Ludwig, & Efron, 2013). The

authors noted that the game is a way for people with disabilities to feel involved in a community

without experiencing the emotional or physical barriers associated with accessing communities

in their physical lives. Additionally, Kowert and Oldmeadow (2015) found that online games can

provide a social outlet for players and provide a sense of security, closeness and belonging,

which may particularly benefit people who have an insecure attachment style.

　　While some video games have been found to inadvertently have positive effects, other

games have been specifically designed for healing and therapeutic purposes. For example, the

game, *SuperBetter*, was designed with the help of doctors, psychologists, and scientists as a tool

for building resiliency as a coping mechanism for people facing difficult challenges (SuperBetter Labs, Inc., 2012). This game has been tested empirically to determine the actually effectiveness and outcome of participants who play the game. Roepke and colleagues (2015) found that participants with significant depressive symptoms who played *SuperBetter* for 10 minutes a day for one month achieved greater reduction in their depressive symptoms than those who were on a wait list as the control group. These results were found whether the game was played in conjunction with cognitive behavioral therapy and positive psychotherapy strategies, or without other interventions. The shift from associating violent video games with aggressive behavior to the creation of video games for therapeutic benefit demonstrates a potentially strong willingness for society to view video games as a dynamic entity that can provide a wide range of emotional and holistic impacts.

Motivations for Play

Many studies have explored motivations for video game play, each with slightly different results and categories based on the specific games and genres being measured, and methods for developing categories of motivation. Below are some of the examples of studies that explore motivations for playing video games, including one specific to *The Sims*. Understanding players' motivations can potentially provide further understanding of why people make specific in-game choices.

Bartle's (1996) study was an early one that developed a taxonomy of players based on their motivations for playing MUD games: achievement within the game context, exploration of the game, socializing with others, and imposition upon others, such as using game tools to cause distress to (or occasionally to help) other players. He argued that players often approach games for one of these four reasons, and were categorized as either achievers, explorers, socializers, or

killers. However, Yee (2006) argued that archetypes for video game players are often too sweeping and miss the nuanced reasons why players engage with video games, which can include multiple motivations for the same game. Through a 40-item questionnaire distributed to over 3,000 MMORPG players, Yee identified ten categories of motivations for online video game play that were categorized into three overarching, non-exclusive components: (a) achievement, which included desire for advancement and power, competition, and optimizing character performance; (b) social, including an interest in social communication, relationship-building, and teamwork; and (c) immersion, which included the desire to leave issues of the physical world behind to embrace the virtual world through discovery, role-playing, and/or character customization.

Tychsen, Hitchens, and Brolund (2008) further explored motivations for video game play, and used Yee's (2006) 40-item questionnaire and added an additional 10 items that included questions around the components of leadership and character uniqueness among others. The results of this much smaller study including 164 participants, indicated 12 different categories of motivation, including some overlap with Yee's categories, such as socializing, discovery and immersion, escapism, competition, and mechanics. Other unique categories, such as tactics, character depth (i.e., developing back-stories of characters), and leadership among others were also developed. One distinct difference between these studies is that while Yee identified that 57% of the participants in his study had a single motivation that was strongest for them, Tychsen and colleagues found that only 8.5% of their participants had a single motivation. Instead, they found that on average, the participants in their study identified 4.65 different strong motivations for playing RPGs, and concluded that different motivation categories are often highly inter-related and can appeal to players simultaneously. This difference was likely the

result of having a larger number of motivations from which participants could choose, and it highlights how nuances of taxonomy delineation can greatly impact results while also noting the plentiful reasons why participants engage in gameplay.

In 2010, Jansz, Avis, and Vosmeer identified motivations specifically for playing the game, *The Sims 2*. The researchers identified six potential motivations for play based on previous research, and gathered data through an online questionnaire from 760 participants. Results indicated that *The Sims 2* players' highest motivation for play was enjoyment, and that they played the game for the fun of it, and their lowest was for social interaction with friends. Other motivations listed were control, and the idea that participants liked the control they had over their Sims; fantasy, that they could do things they were unable to do in their physical lives; challenge, to reach higher skill levels; and diversion, to focus on something other than their typical lives. While social interaction was not rated the lowest in the previously mentioned studies, the fact that *The Sims 2* is a single-player game contextualizes this difference.

Just as there are many ways to categorize games into genres based on the view from which a person approaches the task, there are many ways to identify video game players' motivations for play. These differences may be attributed to genre of game (e.g., RPG in Tychsen et al., 2008, and simulated game in Jansz et al., 2010), scope of the study (e.g., mode of play in Yee, 2006; genre of game in Tychsen et al., 2008, and specific game in Jansz et al., 2010), or other variables, such as definitions of each type of motivation. The key emphasis that Yee (2014) later made was that motivations are nuanced, complex, and can overlap and change for players over time, depending on a game, or even within the same game; "We don't play games just because they fit our gameplay motivations, we also play them for deeply human and cultural reasons" (Yee, 2014, p. 35).

Games as Cultural Reflections

Video games are separate from physical life in that they have their own rules, requirements, and restrictions. Some games allow players to role-play as dragons or cats, or to rule over an entire civilization, while others require that players steal and kill to advance levels. Huizinga (1949) described the concept of the "magic circle" as a "temporary world within the ordinary world" (p. 10), and one in which rules are different within the game than they are outside of the game. For example, in a boxing match, it is appropriate and beneficial to hit one's opponent repeatedly, yet if a person did that on the street, it would be grounds for an arrest. Within video games, players operate within a set of rules that is separate from those in their physical lives.

Yet, Consalvo (2009) argued that video games cannot completely be considered magic circles, but rather are adaptations rooted in life's rules and expectations. For example, even though players may be engaging in an MMO game together, they may be making jokes about the virtual world that are inspired by events that have occurred in the physical world. She argued that by reducing the experience of video games to taking place either within or outside of the magic circle, the integration between these two scopes, the context, and the meaning-making, is lost.

Even with the distinction that video games have different parameters than physical life, cultural norms and customs are inherently evident within video game play. For example, Taylor (2002) found that when two avatars in a social setting stand close together, face-to-face with grimacing expressions, players saw this as a clear signal of a conflict, similar to what people would experience in their physical lives. Contrastingly, when those same avatars stand close together, side by side holding hands, this conveys love and/or friendship and perhaps solidarity

(Taylor, 2002). These types of cultural norms are experienced within the game, even when they are not defined or scripted into a game by the designers.

The way that games are designed, and the specific rules or missions within games, can also reflect cultural standards or reflect what that society deems important. One way this reflection can be seen is that most games allow player agency to affect their surroundings; if players interact with their environment in a specific fashion, then it impacts the game in specific ways (MacCallum-Stewart, 2010). This contrasts film media, which does not have an interactive component to it, and may be a unique element to the popularity of video games. Considering that "escapism" is ranked as a common motivation for video game play as noted above (Jansz et al., 2010; Tychsen et al., 2008; Yee, 2006), Cabiria (2011) found that games may allow players to have control over their virtual environments when they may be wishing they had more control of their physical lives.

Another way cultural influences can be seen is through games that have an emphasis or goal for the players to collect and maintain possessions (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; MacCallum-Stewart, 2010). These goals are likely guided by a materialistic and consumer-driven Western society, and mimic the goals that many consider part of the American Dream. For example, in the game *The Sims*, players receive benefits in their gameplay when their avatars are surrounded by or purchase expensive objects (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Nutt & Railton, 2003). The main goal of this game is to live a simulated life however the player sees fit, yet the game designers still built incentives for players to work towards earning money to spend their money on materialistic objects in order to earn boosts or bonuses for their characters. Just as *The Sims* is designed such that it reflects back to players their own consumeristic culture, Bassiouni and

Hackley (2016) found that the mere act of purchasing video games contributes and reinforces this consumption culture as well.

   The Sims is a game that not only represents many of life's activities, but also some of the social conflicts in American culture. For example, Nutt and Railton (2003) highlighted that *The Sims* takes place in the suburbs, where the ideal American Dream lies, but the game does not provide options for characters (called Sims) to live in rural or urban areas. They argued that this reflects a common ideal of the best way to live without including options for the reality of millions of people living in America. This game also reflects common physical life stereotypes; within early version of the game, female Sims would get a boost in fun points when cuddling a baby, but male Sims would not. Furthermore, in a progressive sense, same-sex couples could have relationships and move in with each other, but in a conflicted traditional sense, only heterosexual couples could get married. Similarly, the notion that a family can be constructed many different ways (e.g., two parents with children, a couple with no children, one parent with children, multiple generations, multiple adults, etc.) was represented, but once the family was created, it was considered a single unit and the individuals could not be separated from each other. In these ways, Nutt and Railton argued that *The Sims* represents American society's thoughts and conflicts about gender roles, how to think of family, and aspects of what should be ideal.

   Taylor (2002) also found similar evidence of this cultural reflection in the game, *The Dreamscape*. This game demonstrated freedom from societal restrictions in some ways, such as being able to adopt the head of a cat or a dragon for a character, and restrictions in other ways, such as having only two dichotomously gendered, stereotypically featured bodies. Within the game, Taylor found that there existed a date auction, which may have represented a culturally

fun activity, but it was restricted to heterosexual dates only, which also reflected societal restrictions. In one instance, a homosexual player challenged this activity by indicating that he would go change to his female alternative avatar so he could bid on a male date. This same player also filed a complaint with the game developers about this exclusionary activity. While the player was able to take in-game action to meet his needs, he was also affected in physical life as demonstrated by his action and self-advocacy.

Similar to the way this player attempted to change a dynamic within the game that seemed exclusive by design, other players within *The Dreamscape* took action of creating their own activities that they desired from their physical life as well (Taylor, 2002). For example, players made up games such as scavenger hunts, held protests in certain spaces demonstrated by several avatars wearing the same clothing and repeating chants, or had dance flash mobs where a group of avatars would show up in a virtual setting and exhibit the same series of behaviors at the same time. Furthermore, when sexual activities were not built into the game, players would position their avatars in certain ways to give the impression of sexual action (Taylor, 2002). These players chose to directly mimic elements of their physical lives that they enjoyed within a game that did not explicitly design these elements, but allowed players to create them. These are just some examples of how society's desires and conflicts have been represented in video games, particularly in role-playing and simulated life games.

Avatar Identity

There have been several studies that link players' feelings of identity with their avatars to the level of enjoyment that they feel while playing video games (Przybylski et al., 2012; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010; Wolfendale, 2007). It appears that the more attached people feel to their avatars (Wolfendale, 2007) and the more they can identify with their avatars (Trepte & Reinecke,

2010), the more enjoyment they experience through playing video games. However, while this attachment may result in players feeling closer to their avatars, it also means that they feel more emotional impact, such as feeling hurt or offended, when something bad or unpleasant happens to their avatar (Wolfendale, 2007). Furthermore, Przybylski et al. (2012) found that when people play a game through which they experience their ideal personality characteristics, they feel more positive affect afterwards, and are more intrinsically motivated to continue playing. This can especially be true for players who have more discrepancy between their ideal personality and actual personality.

Trepte and Reinecke (2010) found that the more players thought their avatars were similar to them, the more identification they felt with their avatars. Furthermore, those with more life satisfaction were more likely to create avatars similar to themselves. Yet, there are many components of what it means to identify with something like an avatar. One of the Merriam-Webster's dictionary definitions of avatar is "an embodiment" (Avatar, n.d.). Hamilton (2009) argued that embodiment is when an avatar represents one's movements, interactions, and intentions, and that people would identify more strongly with avatars who embodied them. Taylor (2002) broke down avatar embodiment into three main aspects: personal identity representation, presence, and social integration and communication. The following section will further explore three components of avatar identification: appearance, representation, and presence.

Appearance. One way to identify with an avatar is through its appearance or looks in relationship to the player. Avatar appearances have been demonstrated as impactful enough that people can guess a part of a player's personality based on his or her avatar's appearance (Fong & Mar, 2015). One factor that can impact how a player creates his or her avatar is motivation for

play or avatar creation (Reed & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; William, Kennedy, & Moore, 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence that physical world and virtual world behaviors can influence each other based on avatar appearances, such as the assertiveness with which players interact depending on the characteristics of their avatars (Taylor, 2002; Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009).

Fong and Mar (2015) found that appearance was relevant in representing a person through evidence that participants were able to accurately guess the personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism of the creators of avatars based on the appearance of their avatars. When avatars are customizable, some players choose features that as closely duplicate their physical body features as possible, while others choose a looser representation of who they are (Fong & Mar, 2015; Reed & Fitzpatrick, 2008). Some researchers seem to disagree about whether or not the purpose of the avatar has an effect on how similarly an avatar resembles its creator.

Reed and Fitzpatrick (2008) discussed one participant in their study who created an avatar in the MMO simulated life game, *Second Life*, for the purpose of communicating with her grandchildren. She attempted to create an avatar that physically resembled her as closely as possible, which included choosing grey, textured hair, increasing the avatar's weight from the default setting, and trying to find clothing that covered the avatar's midriff. These same authors also discussed another participant who was an academic professor who created her avatar in *Second Life* for the purpose of exploring the technology of the game; she created an avatar that visually looked dissimilar from her, and instead had spiky, brightly colored hair, and brightly colored clothing. Yet, both avatar creators described their avatars as representing them, and the authors postulated that the motivation for avatar creation may have spurred the differences.

On the other hand, Vasalou and Joinson (2009) found that participants in their study generally created avatars that appeared to resemble their physical features and their interests and talents regardless of the purpose. In their study, participants were told to create an avatar that was intended to either represent them in a blog they would create for their close friends, a dating website, or as the detective character in a mystery-themed online game. The authors found minor differences between these groups' avatars, but they did not find significant differences in how much participants' avatars were physically similar to their creators.

It is important to note that these two studies (Reed & Fitzpatrick, 2008; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009) were quite different from each other, and strong conclusions about how important motivation is to the accurate portrayal of creators through their avatars cannot necessarily be made. These studies differed not only in how they were presented and the types of possible motivations of avatar creations, but also in population with one study focused only on adults over age 50 (Reed & Fitzpatrick, 2008) and the other study comprised only of college students (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009).

In relationship specifically to gameplay (as opposed to other motivations outside of the intention of using an avatar to play video games), Trepte and Reinecke (2010) found that when people were instructed to imagine playing a non-competitive game, they were more likely to describe creating an avatar that was more similar to them than when they were instructed to imagine using their avatar to play a competitive game. The reason for this was not explored, but it's possible that players using their avatars for non-competitive reasons felt more freedom and comfort to feel represented by their characters.

Another documented motivation for video game play is for the purposes of role-playing. Williams and colleagues (2011) described role-playing as a video game experience where

players choose an avatar that is distinctly different from them. In this study, the avatars of those who role-played were less similar to their players than those who did not engage in role-play. The authors identified that while people who play MMO games specifically for role-play are fairly uncommon, the main motivations for their participants to role-play was for: immersion, which included having a character or fantasy that was not possible in physical life; taking a break from stress in physical life; and for socialization. Interestingly, Yee (2006) also identified these motivations for reasons why people play online MMO games in general, regardless of whether they specifically engage in role-play or not.

It is important to note that some video games allow players to change the appearance of their avatars throughout the game, or encourage the creation of many different avatars. In these cases, avatars may sometimes physically resemble their players and at other times appear very different from their players, and the motivations for these changes can vary.

Taylor (2002) identified that there can be a sort of tug-of-war between a person's physical self and virtual self, and that the behaviors and appearances of each entity can influence each other back and forth, both in gameplay behaviors and in physical life behaviors. For example, in the game, *The Dreamscape*, one player first described only feeling comfortable choosing the head of a cat for her avatar appearance rather than a human. Over time, the player became more comfortable being represented by a human head, and also found that she contributed to more in-depth conversations with other players with the human head compared to the cat head. Similarly, Yee and colleagues (2009) found that people acted differently within virtual environments depending on the way their avatar looked. Participants who used taller avatars negotiated more assertively and aggressively within the virtual space than those who

used shorter avatars. This back and forth influence of virtual and physical behaviors based on avatar appearance is an example of the importance of this aspect of avatar identity.

Taylor (2002) also found that uniqueness of the physical features of an avatar were important to some players. Participants of her study described feeling offended and upset if other players "stole" features that the player identified were unique to her or him. Yet, while the importance physical features, and the impact of avatar similarity have been documented, Hamilton (2009) also argued that the appearance of an avatar is less important to players than whether the avatar represents an overall reflection of the player.

Representation. It has been demonstrated that avatar representation, or capturing essential qualities of a player, is one of the key ways that players feel they can identify with their avatars (Hamilton, 2009). Schultze and Leahy (2009) identified that many players describe trying to create an avatar that was "virtual me," and Taylor (2002) described players who try to obtain a "that's me" sense in their avatar. Li, Liau, and Khoo (2013) developed an instrument called Player-Avatar Identification Scale to measure the amount of identity a player has with an avatar during video game play on four factors: feelings during play, absorption during play, positive attitudes toward the avatar, and importance of the avatar to one's identity. They then gave the questionnaire to over 1,000 youths in Singapore who were instructed to think of playing games such as *The Sims* while completing the measure. The most highly endorsed item was that, "The characters I play reflect who I am." All of these examples demonstrate the feeling or sense of being associated with an avatar that a player feels represents her or him.

Furthermore, Vasalou and Joinson (2009) identified in their study the different aspects that participants chose to create in their avatars as a representation of themselves. The authors found that participants used one or more of three main features in the creation of their avatars in

the Yahoo! Avatars program: (a) the avatar mirrored the participant visually through fashion items or representations of hobbies; (b) the setting or props of the avatar represented upcoming, past or current important life happenings for the participant; and (c) some part of the avatar creation represented desired life changes or self-improvement of the participant, such as one participant creating an avatar that represented the care-free lifestyle she wanted to embrace more. These areas seem to capture what a player means when they describe an avatar representing them.

Similar to appearance, there is also evidence that what feels like a good fit or representation of a player can change over time. Taylor (2002) found that in *The Dreamscape*, players would gather in a room together to body swap, which sometimes included adopting the body of a different gender while maintaining one's original avatar head. Sometimes players would comment on how they liked the look of the new body, or felt that it fit well with the feel of their avatar. However, many of them also returned to "their" bodies after the event, which they felt more represented who they are.

Taylor (2002) also found that players who did not feel their avatars reflected who they were tended to participate in more reckless behaviors, and described the feeling of being absolved of responsibility of their virtual actions. Furthermore, she also encountered participants who described feeling anxiety in their physical bodies when they felt their avatars did not represent them well or didn't feel right to them. This relationship to the physical world highlights the impact and importance of some players' feelings around accurate representation of themselves through their avatars during video game play, especially multiplayer social and simulated life games.

Presence. Feeling presence—or feeling as though one is actually in the virtual world—is another way that players can identify with their avatars. Taylor (2002) described this as the self of the player rooted in virtual space through an avatar, and Lombard and Ditton (1997) described presence as the illusion of a non-mediated experience when in fact it is mediated. Taylor also related the idea of being pulled out of the feeling of presence when something happens within the virtual space that breaks this sense, such as computer game that glitches when perhaps part of an avatar's body gets distorted or disappears, or an avatar walks through a wall in a way that is out of context for the game. The sense of presence has been described both qualitatively (Schultze & Leahy, 2009), and has also been measured quantitatively by several domains (Ravaja et al., 2004; Riva et al., 2007) with regards to what players experience while they are in virtual environments and/or playing video games.

Schultze and Leahy (2009) described identity with an avatar as having two components of presence: (a) telepresence, or one's sense of being in the virtual environment through the avatar, and (b) social presence, or the sense of being represented by the avatar in an environment where it can be there together with others. They described a continuum of the integrated relationship that players can feel with their avatars on each of these two spectrums, and that players can move along those spectrums even during a single gameplay session. These authors conducted interviews, and asked participants to create photo-diaries of their gameplay in *Second Life*. Through analysis of this data, they identified a spectrum for the dimension of telepresence, and one for the dimension of social presence that each ranged from nearly overlapping between the self and avatar to complete separation between the two entities, with most players falling on the more integrated end of the spectrum most of the time.

The telepresence dimension specifically focused on the actual visual presence of the avatar within the game. On the integrated end of the spectrum was *invisible* where the players did not need to see their avatars at all because they felt so present within the game themselves. Next down the spectrum was *3D cursor* in which players did not need to see their avatar, but still felt that they were living through their avatar rather than fully being within the virtual world themselves. A little less integration between self and avatar was described as *object of reflection* with the example of a woman who wanted to lose 50–75 pounds, and played with an avatar that was much skinnier than her. Next down the spectrum was *object of affection* where players described a type of doll-like affection for their avatars, and next to that was *object of play* in which players tried things on their avatar for the explicit purpose of having fun and choosing outrageous items or behaviors. On the more separate end of the avatar-self spectrum was *tool* in which players might send their avatar to work in *Second Life* to gain materials, status, or currency while they perhaps even walked away from the game in their physical life. The next position on the spectrum was *repository of capital* where players recognized that their avatar was important only for the purpose of what material or status was attached to the avatar within the virtual space that would be lost if the avatar was not used. On the farthest end of the spectrum was *autonomous agent*, in which a participant described walking away from the computer and coming back to see her avatar sitting on a rock where she had left it with the notion that the avatar was a separate entity who had been waiting for the player to return.

Schultze and Leahy (2009) also described a continuum for their social presence dimension. On the more integrated end of that spectrum between self and avatar was *virtual me* where players felt the avatar was just a virtual body of themselves. Next down the spectrum with some overlap between self and avatar was *possible/ideal/true self*. The authors identified a

participant in this category who had a B.A. degree in business administration in physical life, but who was a nanny for a job. In *Second Life*, she embodied an avatar who ran her own business, which is what she aspired to do in her physical life. Next down the spectrum was *character* in which the players saw their avatars as separate from them with personalities of their own. And on the farthest end of the spectrum with no overlap between self and avatar was *scripted character* in which players used avatars to play out or represent pre-defined characters, such as characters in popular movies or comic books. These two spectrums were intended to encompass a fluid relationship that players may experience with their avatars, and the feeling of presence within their video game play (Schultze & Leahy, 2009). However, this research was exclusive to *Second Life* or may or may not be attributable to other simulated life games, such as *The Sims.*

The feeling of presence has also been measured quantifiably. Ravaja and colleagues (2004) conducted a study with presence, defined as "the perceptual illusion that a mediated environment is not mediated" (Lombard & Ditton, 1997), as one of the measurable components of video game play. Participants in this study completed an adapted Independent Television Company-Sense of Presence Inventory (ITC-SOPI) with items assessing spatial presence (e.g., the feeling of visiting the game world), engagement (e.g., feeling involved in the game environment), and ecological validity/naturalness (e.g., believability of the game content). Results indicated that some games, including games with first-person view and naturalness, provided more of a sense of presence than others, and that games played with a higher difficulty level elicited higher scores in the realm of spatial presence compared to easy games (Ravaja et al., 2004). They also found preliminary evidence that players' sense of presence during video game play may vary as a function of their personality.

Riva and colleagues (2007) also used the ITC-SOPI questionnaire to measure levels of presence, in addition to using the UCL Presence Questionnaire, both as post-experience measures for 61 participants in their study. The UCL Presence Questionnaire consists of three questions that ask about the participants' sense of being in the virtual environment, sense of the virtual environment as reality, and whether their experience was more like viewing images or visiting a place. One element of the results of this study was the discovery of a circular interaction between the emotions of video game players and their sense of presence; participants felt a greater sense of presence when engaged in emotionally-charged virtual spaces, and also their emotional states were more greatly impacted when they felt a stronger sense of presence (Riva et al., 2007).

The Sims

The Sims is a single-player simulated life game created by Electronic Arts. The original game was released in 2000, with *The Sims 2*'s release in 2004, *The Sims 3*'s release in 2009, and the most recent version of this franchise, *The Sims 4*'s release in 2014. It is one of the top 10 best-selling PC games with over 10 million copies sold, and is available to be played on video game consoles besides the computer, such as PlayStation 3, Wii, Xbox 360, Nintendo DS, and smartphones. Between all versions of the games, and all playing platforms, *The Sims* franchise has sold over 175 million copies of the game worldwide (Gaudiosi, 2013).

Within recent versions of the game, users choose physical characteristics for their Sim, as well as personality traits (such as absent-minded, grumpy, or neat), and skills (such as painting, martial arts, or collecting). Once gameplay begins, players obtain a home either by buying or building one, and begin with some Simoleons, the Sims' currency, to make purchases to furnish their home. Players then choose activities for their Sim to do, such as cook a meal, read a book,

use the bathroom, attend a job, or many other virtual activities in which people may partake in everyday life. Goals of the game can be self-directed by the player, such as building particular skills, collecting items, or receiving work promotions, or they can be driven by the Sim's lifetime wish, which is chosen by the player. Examples of lifetime wishes are to become a chess legend, which includes reaching the highest logic skill level and becoming a highly ranked chess player, or to become an astronaut, which includes reaching the highest position in the military career track. Another area that might direct game play is opportunities that may arise for Sims, which players may choose to accept or decline. Examples of opportunities are to read a specific book for a cash reward, or to fulfill a work request specific to the Sim's job for an increase in job performance, which puts a Sim closer to a promotion. Lastly, Sims have meters in certain basic life areas, such as hunger, bladder, and sociability, which must be fulfilled or the Sim may suffer consequences; for example, a Sim may not be able to perform certain activities if he or she is too tired, or if a Sim does not eat for 48 Sim hours, he or she will die.

The Sims are avatars that sometimes have control over their own behaviors, and are sometimes directed by the player of the game. They have basic needs, as well as aspirations for achievements in their lives. Following Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, their higher order desires cannot be achieved if their basic needs are not met. Maslow (1943) described five basic human needs that build upon each other: "physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization" (p. 394). He theorized that the higher-order needs, such as esteem and self-actualization, only emerge as possibilities to be fulfilled if and when the lower-order needs have been met. Within this framework, Sims cannot fulfill their aspirations if their basic physiological and safety needs are not met. This is represented by the fact that they cannot survive if they do not eat or sleep, and even their need for love is represented by needing social interaction, which includes close

friendships, to maintain a stable mood. Only if these needs are consistently attended to, can Sims pursue larger goals for themselves.

Additionally, players can choose the age of the Sim when they create one, and they can also choose how quickly that Sim's age will progress. After several Sim days, weeks, or months, the Sim will have a birthday and will progress to the next age group (e.g., from a child to an adolescent). Once the Sim reaches old age, he or she will eventually die, and the Grim Reaper turns the Sim into a ghost. If players have created or acquired control of other Sims through relationships or by birthing or adopting children, they may continue playing the game with these other Sims, or they may choose to create a new family of Sims at any time. Sometimes Sims will die from accidents before reaching old age, such as drowning in a pool or burning in a fire. Lastly, in some versions of the game, players can choose the level of autonomy of their Sims. A high level of freewill means that if the Sim is hungry, he or she will make and eat a meal without the player directing this activity; the other end of the spectrum represents a Sim who will whither and die if the player does not feed the hungry Sim. Within these basic guidelines, players make game and behavior choices as they please.

Research specific to The Sims. While there has been research specific to *The Sims* on the previously mentioned topics, there has also been research using this game on a variety of other topics. Some of these topics include the relationship between players' personalities and Sims' behaviors, gender differences in who plays this game in comparison to other games, how people play the game, and the use of *The Sims* for architectural or other learning tools. These studies illuminate the wide scope of research that has centered around this game.

A research study that is closely similar to this proposed dissertation is a mixed methods study from 2006 by Thaddeus Griebel, in which the purpose was to gather empirical research to

determine if users projected aspects of their lives into *The Sims 2*. This was the first empirical study involving *The Sims*, and the researcher gathered demographic and big five personality data, as well as information about the participants' values and behaviors of *The Sims* play. There were 30 participants from an undergraduate university in Illinois who completed personality, values, and background surveys. They were then instructed to play one Sims household without cheat codes (i.e., using a shortcut method to alter the game, such as automatically and immediately gaining large sums of money or skills) of *The Sims 2* for 30 Sim days (about 10 hours of play) within six weeks. The participants then completed a survey about their Sim behaviors, and were entered into a raffle for a copy of the game. Results indicated that gameplay was related to personality traits, such as participants who scored higher on neuroticism tended to have their Sim change careers, insult other Sims, and miss Sim bill payments than those who scored lower on this personality trait. Additionally, nearly all participants reported that at least some aspects of their past, present, or future were portrayed in their Sims' lives. The currently proposed dissertation will continue to explore this idea of connection between players and their Sims through a different approach of bottom-up information gathered and produced directly by the participants, rather than Griebel's top-down approach of exploring specific aspects such as the connection of personality type to Sim behavior.

One unique element of *The Sims* is that the players of the game are comprised of approximately 65% women (Boyes, 2007), compared to 41% of women who are game players in general (ESA, 2016). Jansz et al. (2010) wanted to further explore the demographics of players of *The Sims*, and their study was the first to gather the demographics and gaming characteristics of *The Sims 2* players; they also explored the gender differences in motives for playing the game. They found that 84% of their 760 participants were female, which is an even higher rate than

previous indications of the rates of women playing *The Sims*. That percentage rose to 91 when only participants aged 21 years and older were considered, although the authors acknowledged that their sample was non-random and self-selected. Additionally, the authors found that women were more likely to choose diversion as a motivation for playing this game compared to men, and that men were more likely to identify challenge, fantasy, and social motivations for playing *The Sims 2* than women.

Some authors also found gender differences in how the game has been played. Stokrocki (2013) conducted a qualitative study using participant observation of five adolescents playing *The Sims 2* during a 10-week summer day camp. She observed aesthetic preferences, spatial practices, learning strategies, and storytelling, and identified that the girls were more concerned about safety features, such as installing smoke detectors, whereas the boys were more concerned about "having fun, messing around" (Stokrocki, 2013, p. 35) as evidenced by starting fires, horseplaying, and putting a bowling alley in the Sims' front yard. Beavis and Charles (2005) who particularly followed four teenage students in their gameplay behaviors in *The Sims* also noted similar trends; the male participants were more emphatic about how the game was unrealistic and just for fun, and spent time setting a house on fire, whereas the girls tended to spend more time taking care of their belongings, and spent time getting rid of cockroaches that infested their house. Yet, Beavis and Charles also noted some of the teenagers' less explicit cross-gender motivations; they described one boy who later stated that he actually liked their Sims' house and didn't want to burn it down, and one girl who revealed her desire to fit in with the boys and would agree with their endorsements of unrealistic play, as well as demonstrate different behaviors from them during play.

Beavis and Charles (2005) attributed much of their discovery of how their participants'
gender identities were also enacted in the classroom to Flanagan's (2003) argument that perhaps
more women play *The Sims* because by setting the video game within a house, it feminizes the
player based on historical links to domestic spaces. Flanagan outlined the historical and idealized
emphases, particularly in post-World War II America, on consumerism, suburban life, class
divides, and romanticized values, as well as gender roles. She postulated that *The Sims* is not
only a reflection of stereotypical gender conflict, but also a politically-charged reflection of
capitalism. This idea is also reflected in the earlier section in this paper on Games as Cultural
Reflections.

Another area of research on *The Sims* has been on the game's use for learning. Ranalli
(2008) conducted a study in which nine English language learning participants played *The Sims*
in conjunction with variable conditions of additional instruction and/or quizzes. Although the
Sims speak a made-up gibberish language called Simlish instead of English in the game, many
game instructions and updates are in written form, and the extensive catalogue of products and
household items are written in English. Players can view both the word of a product and a picture
of it next to each other, and if they choose an action for their Sim, such as *Wave Goodbye,* they
can then watch their Sim enact that behavior to solidify the meaning of the phrase. The author
concluded that as long as supplementary materials about vocabulary, culture, and ways to play
the game that would practice new material was included, that many participants showed an
increase in vocabulary acquisition and found that using *The Sims* as one of the tools was
enjoyable and helpful (Ranalli, 2008). Additionally, Stansbury (2017) conducted a study with 22
undergraduate college students taking a social psychology course, including learning about the
self. Half of the participants completed a paper applying concepts of the self to a movie and

presented a multimedia presentation about norm violations, while the other half played *The Sims 3* for at least 18 hours over the 5-week course and blogged about their perceptions of the Sims' sense of self and well-being based on specific prompts. Stansbury found that while the video game group experienced less confidence in their overall learning of the designated concepts, they performed better than the control group based on pre- and post-test scores. These studies demonstrate how *The Sims* can be an innovative and engaging tool for students to learn new material.

Phenomenological Method

The intent of phenomenology is to go beyond what people may feel they already know and to discover new phenomena, experiences, and structures that were potentially unknown prior to analysis (Schmicking, 2010); it is to "emphasize descriptions of meaning structures of lived experiences" (Osborne, 1994, p. 187). One of the main benefits of phenomenological research is that the researcher can explore the inner world of human psychology through introspection with the intent of getting to the core of the internal experience; the researcher looks at the whole person and integrates thoughts with behaviors together (Osborne, 1994). This method may be considered contrary to quantitative research, which often approaches research with an already-developed hypothesis (Osborne, 1994), whereas phenomenological research is not intended to have a specific research question or test a hypothesis (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Osborne, 1990).

Osborne (1994) wrote, "The emphasis [of phenomenological research] is upon discovery, description and meaning rather than the traditional natural science criteria of prediction, control and measurement. Traditional notions of random sampling, reliability, validity, replicability, etc., are not necessarily appropriate in the qualitative context" (p. 168). Instead, the readers of the phenomenological research and the psychology community help determine if the research is

reliable and valid (Osborne, 1990). The research is considered reliable when other participants can produce different answers to interview questions that still reduce to the same phenomenon. Validity is obtained through the process of the researchers' bracketing—or recording their own experiences with the phenomenon—and transparency of the entire research process to allow the readers of the research to assess validity based on the researchers' interpretation from their stance. And the results of the research should resonate with non-participants who have experienced the phenomenon for it to be considered both reliable and valid.

There are several different ways to conceptualize phenomenological methodology and historical frames from which to view the concepts including Goethean pre-philosophical experimental phenomenology, grass-roots phenomenology, and post-transcendental phenomenology (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007), but this section will primarily focus on descriptive Husserlian phenomenology, and interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology, since these are the two main classifications often referred to in literature.

Descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology is often associated with the foundational writings of Edmund Husserl with the idea that there is a true essence underlying all lived experiences (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Osborne, 1994). This type of phenomenology has the underlying assumption that while the experience being studied comes from individual people, that there are real and shared phenomena, or essences, in the world that can be described through these individual accounts (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007). This idea was more fully developed from Husserl's inspiration by Brentano (1838–1917) when he added the notion of "intentionality," or the idea that conscious thinking is always related to some *thing* (Dowling, 2007). Intentionality is thought to be "the fundamental concept for understanding and classifying conscious acts and experiential mental practices" (Dowling, 2007,

p. 132). Osborne (1990) described intentionality as the same as the existential–phenomenological view that people are of the world rather than in the world. The goal of descriptive phenomenological researchers is to be able to describe the essences that exist in lived experiences through intuition (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007; Osborne, 1994).

One way this process is attempted is through careful observation and unprejudiced descriptions (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007), and through phenomenological reduction, which is one of the bases of Husserl's phenomenological philosophy on which this research method is based (Dowling, 2007; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Osborne, 1994). "Phenomenological reduction is the process of continually identifying one's presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon and attempting to set them aside (bracket them) in order to finally see the phenomenon as it is" (Osborne, 1994, p. 170). This includes the researcher taking individual knowledge of her or his own experiences, and looking at it in a fresh way from a different perspective and with critical and theoretical reflection (Dowling, 2007). The intention is to shift from looking at the world based on given assumptions, and instead bring to light those assumptions to see what exists outside of them by letting the data speak for itself in spite of the researcher's predispositions (Osborne, 1994).

Interpretive phenomenology. Interpretive phenomenology verges with the tradition of hermeneutics, and is based on the philosophies of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who was a student of Husserl (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007). Within this methodology, there is the belief that consciousness is not separate from the world of human existence (Dowling, 2007), and that the hermeneutic circle (i.e., that people and the world co-construct each other) is the basis of existence (Osborne, 1994). This type of phenomenology asserts that interpretation is unavoidable (Osborne, 1994), and that it is the primary way to explain phenomena. Interpretive

phenomenology views description is a special type of interpretation, whereas descriptive phenomenology views interpretation as a specific type of description (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007). From an interpretive lens, there is no such thing as uninterpreted phenomena because first they are interpreted by the participants based on the words chosen to describe experiences, and then by the researchers in the words chosen to write about them.

The way this research is conducted is through examining contextual features of the phenomenon in addition to participants' stories (Lopez & Willis, 2004). It is not just mirroring the descriptive account of the phenomenon, but changing it depending on the results and circumstances of the research (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007). With interpretive phenomenology, it is believed that bracketing and reduction cannot be done and should not be attempted (Osborne, 1994). Instead, analysis is the process of articulating and clarifying meanings that emerge from the data with the researcher as the center point to demonstrate their relevance (A. P. Giorgi & B. Giorgi, 2007); the researcher's preconceptions are explicit and explained as a part of the analysis (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Thus, explanations are a product of history, context, and the intersection of humans (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Phenomenological methodology and analysis. While philosophically there is a distinction between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology, much of modern research phenomenology combines these two philosophies; researchers often use bracketing as part of their research process, but also include the whole person and context of the situation in their explanation of the studied phenomenon (Osborne, 1994). For example, Empirical Phenomenology Analysis typically uses descriptive phenomenology as a basis for data collection (i.e., focusing on the dialogue and content of interviews for data) with influences from Merleau-Ponty and interpretive phenomenology in analysis (Gee, Loewenthal, & Cayne, 2013).

Furthermore, Hein and Austin (2001) found that the results of these two philosophical approaches heeded similar results. In their study, one researcher approached a transcript of a woman's description of her experience of a work-family role conflict from an empirical phenomenological stance, which is similar to descriptive phenomenology, and the other researcher analyzed the same transcript from a hermeneutic approach, which is similar to interpretive phenomenology. The resulting phenomenological descriptions were similar, and the researchers concluded that while the philosophies of the approaches are different, the actual methods of approaching the data may ultimately result in similar results (Hein & Austin, 2001). They identified that there is not one correct way to do phenomenological research, and Osborne (1990) echoed this sentiment that phenomenology is more of an orientation than a specific method.

While there is no specific right way to do phenomenological analysis, it is still helpful and important to know possible approaches to this process, especially for new researchers. Several authors identify their own step-by-step process to do general phenomenological analysis. For example, Dowling (2007) identified three essential steps for phenomenological research:

1. Break down the original descriptions into units;

2. Transform the units into meanings that are expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts; and

3. Combine the meanings to create a general description of the experience.

Osborne (1990) broke down this process into five steps:

1. Reduce the data into a simple paraphrase for each sentence;

2. Interpret the themes of each paraphrased sentence;

3. Cluster the themes;

4. Create a higher-order cluster of those clustered themes; and

5. Use the hierarchical structure of clustered themes to describe the phenomenon.

And Morrissette (1999) described a seven-step thematic extraction process:

1. Analysis of the interview as a whole;

2. Analysis of the interview as text;

3. First order thematic extraction;

4. Second order thematic cluster;

5. Individual participant protocol synthesis;

6. Overall synthesis of participant protocols; and

7. Between participant analysis.

In general, data analysis includes identifying all themes in the transcript of each participant to find thematic clusters, comparing and combining themes across participants, and then creating a synthesized description that captures the essence of the phenomenon (Osborne, 1994).

Phenomenology data analysis primarily focuses on the shared aspects of the phenomenon across participants (Osborne, 1990), so while themes don't need to be present in each participant's individual descriptions, they should be relevant to each person's experience of the phenomenon (Osborne, 1994). Furthermore, results should not be simply repeating what participants reported since the foundation of phenomenology is that phenomena can be intuited and interpreted; instead, it involves the researcher's ability to intuit the essence of the phenomenon from parts of the participants' descriptions that overlay all the data, or what Husserl referred to as "ideating abstraction" (Osborne, 1994). This process includes looking for latent meaning, or reading between the lines.

The number of participants and the amount of data in phenomenological research depends on how quickly the phenomenon is illuminated as judged by the researcher (Dowling, 2007; Osborne, 1994). Ultimately, the validity of the results depends on "the adequacy of its rendering of phenomena" (Osborne, 1994, p. 172). During or after data analysis, some researchers choose to do a goodness of fit checking, which is bringing the results to the participants to ask how the descriptions compare to the experiences. This step in the process is sometimes viewed as necessary for a strictly interpretive phenomenological method rather than a descriptive one (Dowling, 2007). Since this process may result in some participants' rejection of the researcher's interpretations that may actually be valid, goodness of fit testing is only a suggestion (Osborne, 1990).

Methods

For this dissertation project, I used a phenomenological qualitative method because I believe it best answers my research question to describe and make meaning of the phenomenon of playing a simulated life video game. Descriptive phenomenology is a research method that can be useful in uncovering essences lacking in previous research (Lopez & Willis, 2004), and that is the intent of this project. I first bracketed my own experiences by writing them down, then decided to include my own information as data, along with interviews from nine other participants. After reflecting on these 10 interviews, it appeared I had enough data to demonstrate themes to explain the phenomenon. I conducted interviews in person or online, transcribed the data, and found cluster themes to describe participants' experiences.

Participants

Six of the interviews were conducted in person, and three were done online over a video chat program, where the participant and I could see each other during the interview. Live interviews were important for this study for several reasons. Synchronous and visual conversations with the participants were important to be able to read visual cues and adjust interview questions according to all the data the participant presents, including nonverbal data. Text-only interviews, such as through email or online chats, would have omitted my ability to read sarcasm, assess for pauses or confusion, or read facial cues. The video chat system, Skype, was used for three of the interviews which allowed me to read these visual cues; however, they were less ideal than the in-person interviews because data glitches occurred including losing connections, having frames freeze in the middle of the conversation resulting in disrupted flow, missing what the participant was saying when we tried to talk at the same time, and missing body cues that may have existed outside of the computer frame, such as wringing hands. However,

conducting video chats also allowed me access to participants whom I otherwise would not have been able to use due to geographic limitations.

There were no restrictions to age, gender, race, or any other demographic categories, with the exception that the participants must speak and understand fluent English. All participants were adults over age 18; had participants been minors, parental consent would have been obtained before conducting interviews. Since the intent of this dissertation is to describe the phenomenon such that it captures the general experience of all participants, I did not use demographic data in analysis nor compare my participants' demographics to general statistics of Sims players. Again, this is because my study is not intended to be a representative sample of Sims players, and because sorting participants into groups based on this information would be part of a quasi-experimental design (Osborne, 1994), and my intention is to do purely a phenomenological study. However, I did ask participants to offer demographic data that they wanted to share purely for additional information about the participants, and not for data analysis.

I used snowball recruitment techniques to interview participants who considered themselves to be Sims players, which I loosely defined as people who feel they are familiar with any version of *The Sims* and could talk about their experiences playing it. I used word of mouth and Facebook as recruitment tools, and was willing to expand to other recruitment techniques if necessary, such as posting to online or company forums or using other social media platforms such as Twitter among others; however, these techniques were not necessary nor used.

Phenomenological research only needs enough participants to describe the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990), so I gauged this threshold while I conducted the interviews. Due to the type and size of this study, it will not be generalizable to the greater population, and is not intended to be

this (Osborne, 1990). Instead, this is intended to be an exploratory study that describes the phenomenon of how some people make meaning of their play of *The Sims*, which might give insight to what other players might experience while playing this game as well.

Materials

First, I obtained the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative: Human Research Curriculum Completion Report; this CITI training was completed on November 13, 2013, and updated/renewed in July 2015. The next material item was the consent form (see Appendix A), which is in compliance with the American Psychological Association (2010) Code of Conduct Standard 8: Research and Publication. This was provided to participants for their consideration before meeting with me, and once they agreed to participate, they signed this form in person at the start of the interview. For interviews conducted virtually over video chat, I received a scanned or photo copy of the signed consent form and recorded their verbal consent as well. Safeguards were in place for receiving assent from minors and consent from their parents; however, no minor participants were used in this study. The next material used was an audio recorder to record all interviews, and a backup recorder was used as well. My fourth material was a list of tentative questions for the interview (see Appendix B). Since the interviews were semi-structured, the interview question list was intended to be a guideline with a lot of flexibility. My fifth materials were a pen and paper with which to take notes during the interview. Lastly, I had access to the qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose.

Procedures

Before I began recruitment, my first step was to bracket, or to write down my own experiences and answers to the interview questions (see Appendix B). This process allowed me to recognize my own experience of the phenomenon, and to acknowledge the perspective from

which I entered the data and analysis of the phenomenon (Osborne, 1994). I also documented my experiences because I used myself as a participant, and my data was part of the analysis. While the idea of the researcher being part of the research is not often discussed, phenomenology is a type of research method where this is appropriate. Osborne (1990), whose phenomenological methods I am generally following, discussed how the researcher can be part of the data by writing down her or his own experience of the phenomenon and then analyzing it. The intention of phenomenological research is to describe a phenomenon, and since I am a person who has experienced this particular phenomenon, I believe that including myself as a participant added to the data analysis and ultimate description of the phenomenon.

The next step after I completed writing down my own experiences was recruitment of other participants. I started with word of mouth and Facebook recruitment, and these methods generated enough participants for this study. Specific wording of recruitment posts and follow-up emails are outlined in Appendix D. From there, I began scheduling interviews. This type of initial engagement acted as a sort of preliminary interview, which was a helpful way in identifying participants that would help illuminate the phenomenon (Osborne, 1990).

Two interviews were conducted in my home, two were conducted in participants' homes, one took place at a participants' workplace and the last in-person interview was done at Antioch University Seattle. All were done in a quiet, private space without interruptions.

The interview itself consisted of a greeting and welcome, consent to audio record before recording, and signing of the consent form. One of the first goals of the interview was to establish empathic rapport and respect since without this I would likely have not been able to gain access to the participants' internal experiences (Osborne, 1994). I informed the participants that my intent with the research was to get at the heart of their feelings and their lived

experiences as much as possible as opposed to collecting an embellished or narrative account that would fulfill what they think I might want to hear (Osborne, 1994).

Then I conducted the semi-structured interviews which lasted between one to two hours each (see Appendix B for a list of potential questions). The questions were mostly open-ended, and the interview went with the flow that the participant dictated as much as possible. I waited to ask subsequent questions or prompt for additional information until the participant had indicated they had fully answered a question (Osborne, 1990). Furthermore, the list of interview questions was used if the participant did not cover aspects of the phenomenon that I wanted to explore; my intent was to get "empathic generalizability," which was to identify elements of what one participant said that could be found in the experiences of other participants as well (Osborne, 1994).

I ended the interview with words of appreciation and by answering any additional questions participants had. As noted in the consent form (see Appendix A), I requested for participants to provide me with a photo or screen shots of themselves and/or their Sims; however, no participants chose to provide me with this data. Upon completion of interviews, I transcribed them into Word documents and uploaded the transcriptions with all identifying information redacted into Dedoose for data analysis.

After analysis was complete, and final results were compiled, I randomly chose half of the participants to contact for goodness-of-fit checking (Dowling, 2007). I contacted each of these five participants and set up a time to receive their feedback. I met with each one either in person or over video chat and described the final results to them, as well as quotes from their interview that were used as examples in my analysis to illustrate each theme. The main purpose

of this goodness-of-fit checking was to see if they resonated with my final description of the phenomenon of the lived experience of playing *The Sims*.

The Researcher

At the time of bracketing, I was a 30 year old, white female who had been playing *The Sims* on and off for 15 years. It is one of the video games that I have enjoyed the most and that I have continued to return to with excitement over the years. About two years prior, this game impacted my emotions in a way that surprised me: I felt actual grief over the impending and eventual death of a Sim that I had created who was similar to me and whom I felt represented me in many ways. This piqued my curiosity in researching this game, video games in general, and what it means to play this game as a general sense as felt by others as well.

Data Analysis

As noted earlier, some research supports that there is no one right way to conduct phenomenological data analysis (Hein & Austin, 2001; Osborne, 1990). Many methods begin with breaking the data down into smaller components through paraphrasing or description codes, clustering those codes into higher-order meanings of phenomenological concepts, and drawing themes from those clusters that describe the essence of the experience (i.e., Dowling, 2007; Morrissette, 1999; Osborne, 1990). I used this integration of steps from multiple sources for my data analysis.

To begin, once my redacted transcriptions were uploaded into Dedoose, I went through each interview line-by-line and reduced the participants' words to simple paraphrases (see Appendices E and F). This included actual literal descriptions that participants provided, and it also included intuited reading between the lines of what was being conveyed by the participant (Osborne, 1994), without adding information that was not present or implied by the data. These

paraphrases were then clustered into themes that represented what was being articulated in the description of the phenomenon (see Appendix G). These clusters were then sorted into higher-order themes that encompassed the essence of the phenomenon (see Appendix H). These basic tenets or themes of the phenomenon are described in the results section of this dissertation.

Results

Summary of Participants

There were a total of 10 participants including the author of this dissertation. Self-reported, optional demographics were collected for the purpose of additional information, but this data was not used for analysis. Eight of the participants identified as female, one as male, and one as gender queer. Ages ranged from 23 to 38. Two participants were born and raised outside the United States while the rest grew up in the United States. Socioeconomic status for participants while growing up ranged from low to high, and their current range is from low to upper middle currently. All 10 participants had at least a college degree and many had further higher education. Nine participants were white, and one identified as biracial. Some participants were married while others were single, some had kids while most did not, some were homeowners, and most were renters. Many of the participants identified as straight or heterosexual, and a few identified as bisexual or queer. All participants started playing *The Sims* at least five years ago, and most started playing 10 to 15 years ago.

Summary of Findings

During line-by-line analysis, a total of 1,988 codes were generated across the 10 interviews (see Appendices E and F). These codes were then clustered into 30 categories that incorporated all significant data relevant to this phenomenon (see Appendix G). Finally, six themes emerged that encompassed all 30 categories, with some categories falling into multiple themes, which demonstrates the different dimensions extracted from information from participants. These six themes are *self-representation*; *past, present, future*; *purpose for play*; *self-reflection*; *co-creation*; and *familiarity* (see Appendix H).

Self-Representation

One component of the lived experience of playing *The Sims* is that the individual person, or self, is represented through their gameplay. For some participants, this was demonstrated through creating Sims that were very similar to them in appearance or personality, or that represented aspects of their ideal self. For others, it meant that their Sims partook in similar behaviors as them, including a representation of their values, such as not stealing from others. There were also some participants who stated their Sims were not a main focus of their gameplay, nor did they feel represented by their Sim in particular. Yet, these participants still described having a part of them represented through *how* they chose to play the game, such as a person who identified as getting bored easily who regularly changed the focus of what she was playing in the game. Participants demonstrated that their current or idealized selves were represented through the actual Sim characters and their behaviors, including representing their values, personal preferences and interpersonal style, as well as through the way they chose to play the game.

Some participants described feeling really represented by their actual Sims and their Sims' appearance. P4 described how she wanted her Sim to be as similar to her as possible, even down to fashion accessories and personality traits. She also described how she made other Sims represent other people in her life as well, and that this connection to her Sims, through having them represent her and people she knows, was a major part of the appeal of playing the game.

I mean, I tried to be pretty . . . I can't think of a good word to describe what I'm trying to say, but . . . true to life, I guess. I mean, I'm not super thin, so I wouldn't make my Sims thin. [. . .] It was always just reflective of who I was [. . .] I always wore a watch, so my person would wear a watch. You know, just down to as many details as I could because I

really wanted to see myself doing these things, so if it didn't look anything like me, then

it wasn't as fun, I guess, because I didn't really care about that avatar if it wasn't me or

someone I know. Like, when I make families, it'd be like . . . if I made my family, I'd

really spend time making Dad look like Dad, Mom look like Mom, and my brother look

like him. And so if it didn't look like someone I knew, it's hard to really get engaged. So

I just tried to stay as true to myself as I could. Even personality, like, I'll put myself a

little bit more on the lazy side or messy side, or you know, because that's the truth and

that's how it's going to be.

Similarly, P3 created Sims who represented not only her, but other people in her life as well. She

described such a strong connection to one particular Sim family and stated, "I grew up in that

family." This connection was exemplified when she became emotional describing how her Sim

was able to have children in the game while she struggles with infertility in her physical life.

So, I had a Sim family and my name was Constance. Because [. . .] like, if I could change

my name, that was probably what it is. And I grew up with that family. It was weird

because I named my mom and dad the same as my mom and dad. But I grew up in that

family. That was the character that grew old and moved out, and found her own family,

and had kids. And, it's hard to think of, but it's something that's so easy that's not

actually easy . . . [tearful].

Beyond physical attributes and names, Sims were also used to represent participants'

identities. P6, who identifies as gender queer with a preference for female pronouns, started off

playing *The Sims* with a male avatar, which she felt represented who she felt like on the inside.

One of the big reasons [why I like to play *The Sims*] is that I got to be a guy. I'm gender

queer, so it's . . . I don't fit either gender. So I got to be a male, and not white at that. I

always picked a non-Caucasian male as my avatar, so [laughs]. [. . .] So, I got to be who I was inside my body. Who I felt like I was. And who I wanted to be. Rather than, like, being a fat, white, woman [laughs] . . . a fat, white, queer, woman, I got to be a buff, dark-skinned hunk of a guy, which is what I felt like inside. It's bizarre walking around in a body like this feeling a different way, and then you look in the mirror and it's like . . . dysmorphic. That's how it was for a really long time for me. For years . . . decades, until recently. So it meant expressing my actual . . . how I felt identity-wise, as far as meaning goes.

And then as years passed, P6 started to play *The Sims* with a female avatar. This shift represented changes within herself, and her understanding of her own identity.

And I remember thinking, "Wow, I really want to try being a girl and see what happens." So I did, and it was a girl that looked like me . . . brown hair, Caucasian, you know, not super skinny. It felt like I was coming into who I actually am, rather than . . . you know, who I actually am in the real world. I don't know what it actually means, but it just kind of popped out one day. So I played her.

P3 described how her sexual orientation was represented in *The Sims*, and how the game was a place where she could feel safe being open about her identity.

The one thing I liked a lot about *The Sims* too was that you didn't have to be heterosexual. It allowed for a dynamic . . . I mean, never more than one person. Once you commit to one person, you commit to a person, but it didn't have to be a man if you were a woman. I appreciated that. I'm bisexual, and growing up in my family that was not acceptable. And violently not acceptable. I've always been that way.

Several participants also described Sims as embodying mostly them, but also slightly idealized versions of themselves. P1 described how she prefers Sims who are mostly similar to her, but when they do differ from her, she chooses for them to have attributes that represent her ideal self, and that she feels disconnected from them if they are too dissimilar from her.

I want a Sim who is mostly me, otherwise I'll just be annoyed with her. Like, I don't want a mean Sim or someone who is really messy around the house or really flirty. I just don't identify with that, so I don't like it, and I don't want to watch someone be like that because I don't get it. But then other parts of her are just a little bit different than me. Like, she might be a little bit more positive or optimistic than me. Like, traits that I'd like to have that I don't feel I embody. But not traits that I don't want or that annoy me.

Beyond creating an ideal version of just herself, P10 described creating ideal Sims for others in her life as well.

I think when people make a Sim version or a digital version of themselves, it's always an idealized version of themselves. So, I'd like to think I'm kind of cool, so I made her cool. She had bright hair, and she kind of dressed like me, and she was super tall. She looked kind of like me, but then I also made her artistic, and a workaholic, and . . . I set up the apartment just like this, and she had her easel, so she was drawing all the time and she was painting. She was probably a better artist than me. And I think her life goal was to be a CEO of some business megacorp or whatever. So, yeah, I just made her super cool and friendly, and looked kind of like me. And obviously her name was mine. And then we had [partner's name], I had [partner's name], my husband, too. I built him to look like him . . . super smart, and I had him breeding robots or whatever that business path is.

Yeah, just like an idealized version of everything. And of course, the dog was perfect

because she is in her life too.

P10 went on to describe how she continued to play with this ideal "me" Sim through to future

generations, who also represented possible or ideal iterations of her children and grandchildren.

Through feeling represented by her Sim, her connection to that family was strong enough that it

lasted with family members after her "me" Sim died.

I did have a Sim family that was me. It was me, and it was [name of partner], who's my

now husband, and we had our dog and we had our cat, and I set up the apartment to look

kind of like our apartment. And obviously it was a house and not an apartment, so it kind

of grew and got much bigger. This whole wall [points at wall] became a whole living

room, and the kitchen became a much bigger kitchen. It grew because then we wound up

having a family, and we had kids, and that was really cool. And like I said, there was the

whole thing with my dog dying and that was really super sad. I didn't stop playing after

that, but I did continue playing . . . our Sims got old, our Sims died . . . I played as our

daughters . . . our Sims had daughters so I played as our daughters for a while . . . our

daughters had kids. And that family, it really did mean a lot to me. It was cool to see the

cycle of it. They would go to the graveyard and they would mourn us. That's pretty cool.

We had a garden outside with the face of a tombstone, and our cloned dog, which our

daughters raised. It just lasted a really long time, and the longer it lasted, the more into it

I was. And they were special, they were really cool.

One participant shared how she wanted her Sim to represent parts of herself that she

didn't want others to know about. This person, P9, described how her Sim embodied herself, but

that she wanted to hide this fact from anyone who might watch her play by making sure her Sims did not seem to resemble her in any way by outsiders.

> That's part of my thing too is that I won't do too much similarity to real life; I don't really do any similarity to real life. Only because . . . not like my husband watches me play, but I think before if he would have seen, he would have been like, "Oh, what's that about?" and he would have started internalizing that. [. . .] There's nothing close to my real name. And not in the way that anybody looks.

P8 also discussed how his Sim didn't look like him, yet it still represented his preferences and style, particularly in ways that he was unable to obtain in his physical life.

> I don't want to make it look like me, that's weird. And I don't know. It's like hearing your voice recorded . . . [laughs]. [. . .] I always made them look like I kind of wanted to look like, which was more alternative, more piercings, more tattoos, stuff like that actually. Because when I was younger, obviously I didn't have that option, but even when I was older I was like, "If I could grow a decent quality facial hair, I think I would look good and I would do it, but I can't do that in my real life, so . . ." I would give him a mustache or beard or whatever.

> Several participants described how it was important that their Sim represented their own values through the Sim's behaviors. P7 illuminated how she is not sure why she prefers not to play "evil" Sims, but something about them doesn't feel right to her.

> So, there are characteristics I never use, which are, like the evil one. Or bad. Or any of those, I just don't touch them I realized. [. . .] Yeah, but they're never mean. Like, I just don't like those ones. Like, I never do the thief path. I just feel guilty. Like, I just can't do

it. I don't know why, and I know it's a game, but I just, like, it doesn't feel right for some

reason even though, like . . . you can do that.

P6 also described how she does not enjoy playing "mean" Sims, but she had more insight

into why this is true for her; she always strived not to be mean in her physical life, even though,

and perhaps especially because, some perceived her that way.

> [Sims] can be dickholes, and they can be mean. I never wanted to mean [in *The Sims*].
>
> Ever. And that's how I am as a person. I never wanted to hurt people. I've been seen a
>
> long time as someone who can be really aggressive and cause harm. I was the big kid and
>
> when I would shove other kids when we were playing, I'd really hurt them. And I'd feel
>
> like, "Oh, I'm bad." I'd really internalize that shame. So that came out in the game as me.

Even though P9 plays Sims who sometimes cheat on each other, and she feels that this

behavior may be viewed outside the realm of socially acceptable behavior, she doesn't feel bad

playing her Sims this way because this behavior is not outside her value system. On the other

hand, working at a job that she doesn't care about does not represent her values and therefore her

Sims embody this.

> Even my values are staying in my gameplay where I don't steal, or I don't take things.
>
> Where I don't do just random, like I'm going-to-work-at-a-convenience-store type jobs. I
>
> know that's not a Sim job, but . . . It doesn't even bother me if I . . . like in Sims 2, I
>
> cheated and they were married, and it doesn't bother me. I feel like a shithead for saying
>
> that, but I have done stuff like that.

P3 described how conducting self-perceived immoral acts within games affected her

enough that she would revisit the game prior to the actions being made and choose different

paths that aligned more with her values.

I will go back to a save in a game where I've made a moral choice, and especially if I

didn't understand that I was making a moral choice, and I made an incorrect one in my

mind, I will go back and redo it. Like, it'll bother me enough.

Additionally, even if some participants didn't feel fully represented by particular Sims,

they described how the way they chose to play the game was representative of themselves. P7

described how the focus of her play changed quickly, which represented her general short

attention span.

I've been diagnosed with ADHD, and so I think just having constantly different types of

stimulation, or like, seeing different things, I get kind of tired of things easily . . . or bored

with things easily. Because if I'm doing it for entertainment, and I just have the freedom

in a game to switch it up, then I will. Which is why I go back and forth between building

and playing and building and playing . . . new character, new building . . . it's just kind of

fast-paced in that way . . . for a slow game it's fast-paced, I guess.

Furthermore, P8 described how he feels satisfied in life when masters a new skill, and he

plays *The Sims* in a way that he can feel this same satisfaction for completing skills or tasks in

the game.

I liked the completionist aspect of it. It's very satisfying seeing those bars fill up. Like

almost by virtue of the fact that it took a long time for your skills to level up, whenever

you got a skill point, you were like, "Ahhh." That whole satisfaction thing.

He also discussed how he tried to keep the game clean and simple with the main task of

increasing Sims' skills, which represented his personality of preferring things to be orderly.

I always wanted to have my same [Sim], and I was always . . . this is going to sound

maybe kind of sad, but I was always just a single guy. It was always just me. Because I

don't know if it's an OCD thing or whatever, but I always kind of wanted to be like, "Ok, I just want to focus on this, and I don't want it to be messy. I don't want to have to deal with all this kids-growing-up and intergenerational stuff, and like maybe I won't have this . . ." and I was like, nope. I want this little section to be perfect.

There are many ways that participants felt represented through playing *The Sims*, some through their Sims' appearance and behaviors, and others through their style of play. This representation could change over time as well, and could also extend to others in their lives. Despite the different ways participants felt represented through playing *The Sims*, this element was an important part of what was experienced when playing this game.

Past, Present, Future

Aspects of participants' past, present, and future selves were created and played in *The Sims*. Some participants recreated, or even altered, aspects of their own history. For example, one participant recreated an alternative past for herself through the game when she was unhappy with how her actual past impacted her in the present. Other ways the past was represented in the game was through a retrospective lens of participants' former present selves. Since all the participants had played this game for years, many of their experiences were from the past, and represented their present selves from that past perspective. Often, the focus of participants' gameplay shifted as they got older to continue representing their present selves, and some of them noticed how their gameplay choices changed as they grew and matured over time. Many were impacted by their present mood and by what was occurring in their physical lives at the time of playing. Additionally, sometimes participants projected their future desires for themselves, or others in their lives, into the game as well. For many participants, *The Sims* represented elements of their

past, present, and future, both at the time of playing the game throughout their lives, and through a retrospective point of view.

One participant played out a different possible past that her life could have had. Impacted negatively by her parents' divorce, P3 used *The Sims* to create an alternative past for herself in which a nuclear family prevails from a child's perspective. She also noticed how her gameplay choices reflected her current, present self, and shifted from identifying with the child Sims in her families to playing more with adult Sims as she became an adult herself.

> So after my parents got divorced, I found myself making a lot of traditional nuclear families where I was sort of the child in that situation, which is kind of weird to think about now because I play a lot more adults now, right? So it's more reflective, I guess, of who I am at the point that I play it.

Several participants described how their gameplay behaviors from the past represented their desires at the time they played, and how that has shifted over time. P7 articulated how her interests and focus in the game followed her interests in her physical life, from pursuing boys in her childhood to focusing on her career as an adult.

> I think I was a lot more . . . what's the word I'm looking for? Enticed, I guess, by like relationship and social stuff and romance when I was younger than I am now. It's interesting because now I'm actually more into the young professional or the skill-building or some sort of thing, which I think relates to my life and where I'm at right now. [. . .] And maybe I have a greater context or something now that I'm older. I kind of get what that world looks like, and what it looks like for adults, and what life is like in a way that I didn't know when I was a teenager. Like, it just wasn't within my scope or my frame of reference being someone at that age.

P10 also described how her Sims represented who she was and what she cared about at different stages in her life, noting that as she's gotten older, her gameplay and Sims have become less silly and playful, and more serious about life.

> I made other me families, but I just didn't take them as seriously. I don't know what it was about that one. That was the most current one-that was the most recent one I did of me, so it could just be a maturity thing, or now just going into this older phase of my life, I think that's more important to me. That's cooler for me to tap into. I think in the past I would just kind of make a me, and make a super idealized me, and then play for a little bit and be like, "Oh, this is boring" and then jump over to another family. Maybe in the past it's been more of the chaotic, crazy, funny ones that are just more fun, just because in my life that's what I was doing . . . I was doing what I wanted [laughs].

P9 also discussed not only a shift in her Sim over time, but she also revealed how her Sim might portray her secret desires for her present self if she lived in an alternate reality:

> I think as I've grown up myself as a person and individual and professional, my own apparels have gotten less skanky and I've seen that in my Sim in her apparels. I tried to dress her up in like short shorts and a middrift and this jacket thing that goes over it and I was kind of like, "I don't really like the way that looks." So, there's that. But if I were a skank, maybe if I weren't with [partner] and didn't have my kids, if that never existed, this may be more of what my life was like.

What was occurring in participants' lives at that present moment often became a part of the game, or influenced how they played. P5 described how she plays The Sims based on how she feels right then and there, which can be influenced by her mood or other factors:

There's a TV show that I watch that's terrible—I wouldn't suggest you watch it—called

Teen Mom. [. . .] So like, if I watch that and I'm like "Oh I want a baby now because I

just watched this," I'll go in immediately and make a girl . . . a young adult with a baby.

You know, why not? And there are times when I'm like, "I hate kids. I never want to

have kids. I'm too young to have kids." And I'll just make people without them and tend

to make them hate kids.

The Sims was also used as a place to project wishes or desires for oneself that could not

be acted upon in the present, due to physical life limitations or undesirable consequences. P1

described how she wants children of her own, and so she acted out this longing through making

her Sims have many babies.

I think she got married. She was partnered at least, and they had kids, they had 2 or 3

kids. I kept trying to get her pregnant, which I know is interesting because I would love

to have children. And so I know I play my Sims to have lots of babies, or try to. And then

she got to this age where she wasn't childbearing age anymore and she couldn't have any

more children. I tried to slow down time so that she could have more kids, and finally she

got to this point where she couldn't have any more kids.

The future was also acted out in *The Sims* by some participants. P3 acknowledged the

perceived deficits of her house growing up, and used the game to create a possible future home

that she could then work towards making a reality.

It's sort of this idea of what's possible when money isn't an issue. I've always hated

money, and money has always been a stressor for me, especially when I was younger.

[. . .] I went over to other peoples' houses and I equated houses and belongings to

stability I think. People who had more normal families had bigger houses for some

reason. I also just enjoyed the extravagance of, oh, I have a pool in my house, right? That was exciting, especially as a kid. It never really wears off. Like, oh, I can do this. Like, when I grow up, this is possible. And if I shape my future now and figure out what I want in this large house, then maybe I can make it happen.

P10 described creating a Sim that was "me," and then playing the children and grandchildren of that Sim as if they might have been her own future generations.

I liked [that Sim family] a lot. I would have kept playing because it was cool to see, too, the generations and things changing. [. . .] I kind of had this story in my head. It was kind of like role-playing multiple generations, and just what that means looking at the generations growing up. That was pretty cool. So I would have kept playing them. I probably would still be playing them with my great-great-great grandchildren or whatever it is [laughs].

P10 also described playing out a possible future not only for herself, but for her friend that they both found quite humorous. This participant not only played out a possible future in *The Sims*, but she also connected with her friend in the present moment through text.

I had one house with [my friend] where it was just her and cats. Just her and a house full of cats because we have a joke of how she'll be a crazy cat lady when she grows up. [. . .] So I texted my friend, [name], in real life and I said [. . .], "You have to get rid of one of your cats. [laughs] Which one do you want me to get rid of?" And of course, she just sent back sad face, sad face, sad face, sad face. I was like, "I'm just going to get rid of the one that you like the least."

One element of playing *The Sims* for most participants is noticing how they are acting out parts of their past, present, and future selves. This showed up as reliving or noticing a different

past, playing self-representing Sims with an alternative present from physical reality, and/or projecting their future aspirations and desires into the game.

Purpose for Play

When asked directly about benefits from playing *The Sims*, most participants were not able to articulate specific gains. However, all participants clearly illuminated specific purposes for playing *The Sims* and the resulting benefits through when and why they played. For many, this included using the game to connect with others, which brought the virtual game into the physical space while participants described how they bonded with friends and family members by having this game in common. Some participants also used the game to experience a sense of control during chaotic periods of their lives, or to try something new in a safe space that they would not be comfortable doing in their physical lives. Participants also described using the game to alter or distance themselves from their current moods, such as playing more often when they were feeling depressed or bored. Others saw the game as a medium and outlet for creativity, and benefitted from using the game in this way. In general, participants illuminated that they received benefit from playing *The Sims* through identifying different purposes for playing the game.

Even though *The Sims* is a single-player game, most participants described playing the game with other people by sharing the game directly, watching each other play, or feeling closer to others through playing. P6 described how her girlfriend, who did not play many video games, enjoyed playing *The Sims* and it was a way that the participant could share one of her hobbies with her partner.

And so we would just hang out and play this game. It was fun, you know, it was bonding. It was a bonding experience. My girlfriend didn't like video games, but she liked that

one, so I was like, "Awesome! Cool! She can play that one with me. Something we can share." So she can get me on my level.

P3 also described how *The Sims* facilitated bonding in her physical life, specifically with her new step-siblings whom she'd recently joined through their parents' marriage when she was younger.

It was nice to share sort of this common thing with my brother and sister because they were already brother and sister before I got there, and it was . . . [. . .] It was very exclusive. And so, combining our money was sort of a way into that exclusive club for me. And the things that we shared and things that we compared were nice. It was a commonality. I'd never had a brother or sister before, and I didn't really know how to function with a brother and a sister. It was a commonality that we shared. And two, it helped . . . like, if my sister got really upset with my brother about taking *[The Sims]* disc for too long, I was that companion then and we could commiserate together, which I find that I do a lot. But I was happy for that interaction. And then I sort of became the big sister out of the three of us. [. . .] But *The Sims* has really brought us together on that level, which I'm thankful for.

Humor was a big component of P10 playing *The Sims* with her friends. She described how she had several friends whom she connected with through the game by replicating themselves and people in their lives in a humorously, exaggerated way.

So, when I lived in [another state], I had three really good friends. [. . .] When I moved, we had created a Sim family together. [. . .] And we just made caricatures of each other. They were completely just blown-out-of-proportion caricatures of each other, and one of the most fun houses that I've played with. Super, super fun, and just silly.

Additionally, P10 described playing *The Sims* by herself, and then bonding over photos of her creations that she shared with her friends.

> Or I'll know going in that I should do so-and-so, like a friend of mine. Wouldn't that be fun. I've done characters, just the character creation part, so I can take pictures and send them to someone and be like, "LOL, I made you a Sim."

While P5 did not play *The Sims* in conjunction with other people in her physical life, she recreated the people she missed while traveling abroad in the game as a way to feel closer to them.

> I think the longest I'd been away from my family prior to this was like two weeks, so if I feel like I miss my sister, I'll make sisters and I'll put them in the game. Not me and my sister, but just sisters. Or if I miss my room, I'll make a room that looks like my room in [my hometown] does.

P9 also used *The Sims* as a way to feel connected to others, particularly to society at large when she was moving places frequently and felt isolated.

> With moving around so much and then moving with [my partner] to [a state] where I knew nobody but his family, it was a way for me to still get cultural interaction with pixels. I got socialized because living in an isolated area, you don't have too many opportunities to do that. So I think it's always been, like, I go back to it . . . so now, I'm living in a rural area again and I'm isolated in the valley. I mean, we have technology, but it's still no different. So it's just my way to live a life completely different than what I do now.

Positive emotions were typically a byproduct of making connections with others through *The Sims*. Yet, some participants described this emotional shift as a deliberate purpose for

playing—to distance themselves from depressed or sad emotions. P2 described how she turned to the game when she was feeling depressed and adjusting to a new location and a busy life.

> I probably started picking it up again in grad school because . . . well, I might have been a little bit depressed. We moved to [a West Coast state], and I had never been to [that state] and didn't have any friends, and [my partner] was working a lot, and I was working a lot, but it was just kind of the thing we did, I'd say.

P5 also described how she plays *The Sims* more often when she is feeling down, depressed, or perhaps feels less in-control of her physical life: "Whenever something is going really, really wrong in my life, I play way more Sims. Because you can just make it a happy, perfect little bubble. So that's definitely been a part." Additionally, when P5 felt grief over the death of her cat in her physical life, she used an avatar recreation of her deceased pet in *The Sims* to feel closer to it and process those emotions.

> I remember when I had *Sims 2* and it was *Sims 2* pet version. This is going to sound really dorky, but our first cat had been alive since I was born, and her name was [cat's name], so I made, like a [cat's name] in *The Sims* game as well. And the [cat] in real life was really sick and got put down, and I was very attached to the avatar version of my cat, which is very weird. And we had two more cats at the same time, but yeah. Definitely just like a, "Oh yeah, at least I still kind of have her in a way."

As a form of self-care, P9 described how she uses *The Sims* therapeutically to stay in the present moment when her anxious mind wanders into the past or the future.

> I think in the sense of like self-care. I don't want to say . . . I don't really have depression, but I have been diagnosed with anxiety disorder in the past, so I think playing *The Sims*

helps me focus on something else and not to worry about that. When I'm in *The Sims*, that's it. I'm just present in that moment.

P3 also described the game as a way to ground herself at times she felt she was spending too much time thinking about things. And she specifically enjoyed *The Sims* because it helped her distance herself from her thoughts in a way that also made her feel more in-control.

It also provided me a lot of escape. Like, I'm really good at escaping. And I find that I need it a lot. Because if I'm in my own head for too long, it's not great for me. Although it's getting better. It's getting progressively better. But if I'm having a hard time, even then, I need to be distracted. And it was an excellent distraction that allowed me to sort of form this world and be in charge of something that felt meaningful also.

Several participants expressed that playing *The Sims* was a way to exert control over a virtual world when they felt powerless in their physical lives. P6 described how she enjoys having total control over Sims in the game when she struggles with the existential idea that she has very little meaning or control in her own life, which can create mental discord for her.

It gave me an escape from living with existential angst. Feeling like there is no meaning is really stressful at times with this head of ours that wants to make stories and wants to make things, just like, intense and we have these ideas of what life's supposed to be like fed to us through Hollywood movies, and it's not that way. So you have this dissonance all over the place. And *The Sims* is a very controlled place to be. I can play god. And I don't believe in god, but I can play god. And I can pick and choose my life. Whereas I can't really pick and choose my life here. People think about . . . may think that you have choices, but most people don't. They may have the illusion of it, but I don't think there's an actual choice.

P3 described seeing the level of stability in *The Sims* as a welcome juxtaposition to the chaos she felt in her family life.

> I like the idea of constructing this world and for me, *Sims* was a life that I could control. It was something that gave me a lot of family stuff without all the crazy drama. I mean, there's Sim drama, but there's a level of control that can exist that wasn't in my life.

She also discussed how *The Sims* allowed her to feel safe when she otherwise felt unsafe as a child in her physical life.

> I don't know if it's a possibility for Sim parents to divorce, and they certainly never have an option for a Sim father to be the way my dad was. So it was safe. It was a place where I was safe. Even though it wasn't me, right?

Other participants also relayed this sense of safety as they used *The Sims* to act out certain behaviors that they wouldn't or couldn't express in life otherwise. P1 described how she learned more about herself through creating same-sex relationships for her Sims while in an opposite-sex marriage in her own life, and that this was a safe, private way to explore her own same-sex attractions.

> I can also play with things I can't play with in real life. Several of my female Sims are bisexual, and date men or women, depending on who's available and who seems attractive to her. I don't get to do that in real life because I'm in a monogamous marriage. But I'd like to play with the bisexual attractions in my real life, and that's just not an option. [. . .] I like being able to explore that in *The Sims* without any consequences, or even without anyone knowing about it at all. It's a private thing I've gotten to play around with.

For P10, *The Sims* was a safe space for her to embody being flirtatious, which she finds fun, but not something that she would do in her physical life.

Sometimes it's fun for me to play a different character completely or play a really flirtatious, sexy character who just has a billion boyfriends or whatever . . . I forgot what that achievement is to have someone who breaks so many hearts or whatever. That's so not me, but it's super fun too. It's fun to kind of tap into that and vicariously live through that person, like this is kind of interesting.

Additionally, several participants identified that their purpose for playing *The Sims* was as a creative outlet in their lives. P10 described how she greatly benefits from expressing her ideas through fantasy worlds in video games.

I would say that in general, video games and gaming in general, enriches my life. Specifically, games with people and character and story and giving me an outlet of just having creative expression of a story, and being able to imagine new worlds and interesting things. And I guess *The Sims* is not so much a new world-it's not super high fantasy, it's not so far from reality that it doesn't have as much of that part that I'm getting from [other] games, but yeah, just being able to be creative and expand my thinking of all of the possibilities and all of the crazy things that could possibly be impossible. Games definitely do [that].

P5 used *The Sims* to recreate a time period of the past that she had dreamed of living in as a child.

I remember I went through a pretty big phase when I played *The Sims 2* when I made period-style homes and things like that. I grew up reading Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, all of that kind of stuff, and I like, as a kid, really wanted to live in that

period. I just thought it was very elegant and very beautiful, and all the women were very

well-dressed and so were the men. So I think I spent probably two years literally making

houses like that, and making families to live in them and stuff.

And P7 enjoys that the game brings an element of art and aesthetic pleasure to her, and

that she can be creative in these ways as well.

Definitely the art and creativity part of it just because . . . I'm just very visual. [. . .] And

so I think for the creativity and art piece, that definitely relates because it's an

opportunity to build stuff that's visual. [. . .] So, I think that's part of why I play.

While some participants were consciously aware of the benefits they enjoyed from

playing *The Sims* at the time of playing or in hindsight, and others were not, this theme was

illuminated by nearly every participant. Many felt an elevated mood after playing this game,

which sometimes was the result of playing with others, feeling purposeful in their play in a safe

or creative space, or simply to escape from or alter their negative mood.

Self-Reflection

While some participants were aware of their reasons for playing *The Sims* prior to playing

it, another component of their experience playing this game occurred afterwards as they reflected

upon it. This self-reflection showed up in various forms including noticing how the self was

projected into the game, beyond just seeing "me" in the game to reflecting on one's physical life

and how specific elements were understood and appeared in the game. Another point of

reflection was on personal social issues as illuminated through gameplay, and how important

matters in participants' physical lives were projected into the game. Participants also noticed

their emotional responses to the game or gameplay choices, sometimes feeling both justified in

their response to emotional events as well as silly or shameful about their response to "just a game" or about their actions within the game.

Similar to self-representation, many participants noticed how parts of themselves appeared in the game. However, self-reflection takes this representation one step further, and illuminates a deeper understanding of how the self was projected into the game upon reflection of their choices. P2 reflected on how the reason why she did not often play with male Sims was related to her early negative experiences with men in her physical life.

I think part of the not having the males around [in *The Sims*] had to do with me not being comfortable with guys in general. I just . . . we had some unpleasant foster kids who were older, and were not the greatest people. And I think that left me kind of scared for a while of guys in general. So I think, especially with my high school Sims, those were . . . I think that was mostly why they weren't involved.

P5 also saw how early perceptions and interactions impacted her Sims play, including her view of her parents' relationship with each other, and her own relationship with her mother.

I'm pretty sure I know exactly why I [have single, uncoupled Sims]. I was quite young when my parents separated the first time, so I've never had a very positive outlook on relationships lasting. Except for my own. I'm very happy with my own, actually, I probably should mention that. But yeah, definitely that. And I'm sure a lot of me making women is because I don't talk to my own mother, and so I'm like, "Oh, I'll make a mother and a child. Why not?" I'm sure it's some kind of psychological like, I'm not sure what, but yeah. Definitely, probably a factor, so.

P9 reflected on the idea that her Sims emulated her own behaviors of cheating in relationships in her physical life.

I've had in *Sims 3* men move in, men move out, I've cheated, like actually said "Hey, let's be in a relationship" and then I cheat because it's fun. It's not like fun, but it's like fun to have my Sim sneak around probably because it mirrors real life a lot.

With anxiety and jealousy as two identified emotions felt by P2 at the time of playing, she postulated that her Sim was less responsible than she was in her physical life as a way to experience living a life she wished she could.

I think [my Sims slacked in their studies] probably because I wanted to a little bit. Plus I really sometimes . . . still do . . . wished I didn't have nearly so much anxiety about doing things perfectly and stuff like that. No, you know, I just have weird standards and if it doesn't fit them, then I have to go and do it again. And actually, yeah, I would do that a lot. And if I would decide that a paper wasn't good enough at the end, then I'd just delete it and start over. [laughs]. So that probably had a little bit to do with it. And then I'd be really . . . I think a little bit of it . . . my roommate was also during freshman and sophomore year was a bit of a partier as well, so I think I might have been a little bit jealous.

P7 also used *The Sims* to project aspirations for herself, and spent time reflecting on how her gameplay behaviors related to her personality.

Well it's so funny, once I look around the room and I'm like, "There's clutter everywhere!" Like, usually what I design has much less clutter [laughs], so I don't know how it relates-maybe it's an aspiration. Maybe it relates to my personality more than my

style in that I like change and changing it up, and there's so many options that I like just having the options and doing different things.

Having internalized the idea that she would want her children to have every opportunity she did not have in life, P4 reflected on how she projected these desires onto her Sims.

It was maybe like, if you had a child and it's like, "Well, I didn't take band in high school, but I need you to because I'm going to . . . you need to do this." That's kind of how it felt too, like it wasn't always just me, it was like a child that I had to rear, so whatever I could do to make that a better experience or a better person, I would do that. Only because I was forced to play band or do this and that when I was little that I'm like, "Ok, well this Sim is going to be well-rounded too!" [laughs].

P8 also reflected on how the way he played *The Sims* emulated the way he acted in his physical life, noticing how he regularly assumed he would fix disliked elements at a later time, but not follow through.

I always liked at first kind of like the decorationy part of it where you got to set up your house, and pick like, "Ok, this is going to be this room, this is going to be . . ." and arranging your stuff. I felt like I would always get excited about that, and I would start and then I would never, ever rearrange it. I would just do it once, and I was like, that's fun. And I was like, "Oh, I'll probably fix this up or make it better as I get more money." And that just never happened. It wasn't worth it to me because it didn't give me those sweet stats that I wanted. So yeah, usually once I got stuff going, I was like, "Okay, we're good." Which is also how I feel in real life when I move in. I move in and I'm like, "Yeah this is awesome. Oh, I'll unpack that box later." And then it just never happens.

And the things that annoy me in my house, I'm like, "Wow, this is really annoying." And then it'll take me a long time to actually do something about it.

Many participants also reflected upon their emotional responses to events that occurred while playing *The Sims*. Several described how sad they felt at times, especially after the death of a meaningful character in the game. P6 reflected on how sad she felt after her Sim fish died in the game, and also mixed emotions about having such a strong reaction to an event that occurred within the game.

And then, I had fish tanks, which I do have a fish tank in real life. [. . .] Those little guys, they're my friends. I always got sad when they died, oh my gosh, in the game. I've actually cried. Isn't that funny? I would cry. Like, goddammit. It's a game. My fish died. I'd have to restock it. I didn't want to restock it. That's too sad. Bob's dead, or whatever. It was sad.

P1 noticed that she felt not only sad after her Sim's death, but also that she felt dread in anticipation of the event, and how these emotions were expressed in her physical life.

Definitely my second to last Sim stands out the most to me because I played her the longest in recent history. She started as a young adult female, and was pretty similar to me in most ways. [. . .] But it was really sad when she died because I wasn't expecting her to die. In the previous versions of the game that I'd played, the Sims didn't grow old or die. So I was shocked when she did. I first thought it might happen when her friends started dying as she got into old age. I even stopped playing the game for a while and told my husband that I was worried every time I logged in that this was going to be the time that she died. It was sad when she did.

P10 also felt sad after a death in *The Sims*, and she reflected upon how she adjusted her game behaviors to try to prevent this death.

> I was probably surprised . . . well, I don't know if I was surprised. Maybe surprised when my dog character died, I was surprised how urgent it was when I realized what was going to happen. [. . .] So yeah, I'm not super surprised that *The Sims* can make me cry, but it's surprising how when it does happen, it's like, "Oh shit" when it hits you, "This is going to happen. I need to stop this problem."

Some participants described mixed emotions about some of their gameplay behaviors. P6 noticed how she found cheating within *The Sims* to be funny, but it also created highly undesirable consequences that negatively impacted her emotions and thoughts on the behavior.

> Breakups. Getting caught fucking someone else's guy. [laughs]. Which I've done so many times. It's super funny. Like, shunned by the community. That was so . . . ugh. They find out. [Interviewer: Yeah, they turn on you.] I know! How fucked up is that? I thought it was funny and I was super upset. It was a mix like, this is a game and it's funny, and like . . . "Ugh, oh my god, everyone's going to hate me." And freaking out about it. I think that was only like a couple of times. I know I said it was so many times, but it was like, twice . . . maybe once or twice. I felt too bad. [. . .] Just saying . . . it's fucked up.

When P4 played *The Sims*, she reflected on how she continued the same gameplay routine and focus as she did when she was much younger, and how this behavior might have been more reflective of an earlier developmental stage, yet how she still found it an enjoyable way to play the game.

And then, maybe up until a couple years ago, I think I had it on the iPad, and I played it

heavily . . . really heavily, but for a short period of time, and I think it was still . . . I was

single, so it was still [me] and Benedict Cumberbatch [laughs], so it was still like me plus

hot guy, or someone I had a crush on. And I like, couldn't believe I was doing it, and it

was almost like, a little bit shameful. But it was still really fun.

P3 described a deep, emotional connection to her most meaningful Sim family, and

everything that it meant for her to have a fantasy life to live amidst her own personal chaos.

Yeah. I guess I don't like talking about that [Sim] family. It feels very private. And, I

don't know. I wish it was real too [tearful]. I can't think of how many times that I wish

my Sim life was my real life, or even just that my Sim house was my real house, or that I

could eat every day and that wasn't an issue . . . so. I don't know. I guess I don't know

how to answer that without a lot of emotion. [tearful].

Participants' self-reflection sometimes also resulted in learning something new about

themselves or about life through playing *The Sims*. Through comparing her own avatars'

similarities to herself with those of others, P6 had a major revelation about how this reflected her

own dislike for herself, and how to cope with this new information.

So I talked to my girlfriend at the time about it, and I was like, "I noticed I'm playing

characters that look nothing like me. They're dark-skinned males." And she was always

picking a red-headed super white female, which is what she was in real life. [. . .] And

same with her Sims character-they matched her. And I would notice this with other

people . . . they matched them physically, almost all the time, but I was not matching my

avatar to me in any of my games. And that was, like, it was like this huge, like, "Holy

shit. I don't like who I am. I'm afraid to be who I am because I think people are going to

reject me." So that really started the process of accepting myself as I am and becoming

more okay if people reject me, it's like . . . that's their problem.

P6 also discussed how *The Sims* helped her see a part of society that she was otherwise

not privy to, and how she related the Sims' world to the physical world she was experiencing.

And then *The Sims* helped me kind of figure out society. I was like, "Ok, this is what

people do. These people who tell me 'Get a fucking job, you scumbag.' When I'm

sleeping on the streets. This is what they do. And I'm going to figure it out."

Similarly, P3 reflected upon how she turned to *The Sims* as an example of a socially

normative life that served as a type of mentor for her.

I don't know, I just never realized how much of me it was. Like I always knew it was sort

of cursory pretend me. And I knew I was definitely socially invested. But I never realized

that my expectations very much hinged on what happened [in *The Sims*], and especially

as a teenager, that I looked to it to sort of give me life advice as to what was normal, and

what I should do. Because I definitely didn't get that in real life. There was not that

person. I really based a lot of what, you know, job department, marriage, kids, on that.

Upon reflection, *The Sims* also left participants questioning some of their game

behaviors. P7 struggled with how much emphasis she put on the physical attributes of her Sims,

and felt uncomfortable by what this might reflect about her.

[The Sims I make are] usually attractive-I don't really know what that's about. It kind of

makes me feel creepy a little bit actually. Like, just to be honest. I mean, I don't know

what that says . . . I'm kind of afraid of what that says about my values. [. . .] When I

think about how I'm playing, that must mean something about how I treat or feel towards

people. And so there's kind of an inconsistency there. [. . .] But it doesn't really matter, is the thing. But for some reason it does to me. I don't really know why that is.

One of the behaviors that P10 engaged in was killing some of her Sims, which feels fine to her in the moment, but makes her feel guilty upon reflection of these behaviors.

I'll kill Sims for reasons, or I just want to make it more difficult for the family because the family is having too easy of a time. That sounds awful. But at the end of the day, it's a game, and I want to make it fun. I don't have to kill, I guess I could have them move out-that would make it a little easier. Why else would you kill them? I'm not sure. [I] totally [feel guilt around killing them]. Not like . . . at the time, no. When you're doing it, no. But now? Yeah. I'm like, I've totally killed Sims and that's awful. Why would I do that? I don't know. Because you can? Because it's an option? So, yes, I've done it. Yeah, there's a weird guilt around killing your Sims. That's totally weird.

Furthermore, participants spent time reflecting on how what they experienced in the game represented larger cultural or societal issues. P10 spent time reflecting on why most of her Sims were white, and made a conscious effort to change this within the game.

I actually did notice recently, or like, the last couple of years, that I kind of had a moment where I was like, "Actually, I don't have a whole lot of minority characters in my games." It just doesn't happen. And that could be because I'm just building characters off of myself, or off of people I know-and most of my friends-circle is pretty white. We're a pretty white group. So I consciously started changing that. So I have a lot more minority characters now in my games, and then of course, it's important to me . . . this actually feels silly that I have thought about this, but it is important to me-it's important to me that my characters aren't playing stereotypes. So it's not like, "Oh, I'm going to do a black

family now, and do all these terrible stereotypes . . .” That would be awful and I would feel really shitty doing that.

P10 also used *The Sims* as a platform for breaking stereotypes, and creating a reality that has yet to occur in her society in physical life.

I’ve had a bunch of lesbian couples [in the game]. I had a couple where I wanted one to be president—I made her life goal to be president. And the game was great because nothing held her back! So she did, she became president, it was great. And the other one was the stay-at-home mom and took care of the house. She was awesome too and they raised a bunch of kids . . . and she was a gay president.

Through reflection of how restrictions in the game mirrored society’s changing acceptance of same-sex relationships, P3 used *The Sims* to see how she might be viewed in the physical world outside of her family’s expectations of her.

So I believe in the earlier versions you couldn’t marry a woman, but you could have relationships with a woman. And very socially reflective of the time. But I had already had, by the time I started playing it, I had already had bisexual interactions [in my life]. And, it helped me to know that yes, my family is fucked up and very narrow-minded, but it doesn’t mean it has to be that way. I still . . . it was still clear that it . . . I don’t know. I struggled a lot with secrecy, and is it okay, and what happens if someone knows? There’s a lot of danger associated to that for me, at least there used to be. But it felt like another reason why it was sort of a safe place, that there was . . . you know, you walked down the street and nobody’s harassing you about it. Nobody’s going to send you to jail for it, right? You’re just with somebody of the same sex. I still struggle . . . I am still trying to understand that side of me, just because I’ve been pushing it down for so long.

P4 commented on the consumerist aspects of the game, and she reflected upon how this represents aspects of physical life.

I remember when you could build upstairs, and I always wanted to build the upstairs. And I always made sure there was an en suite for the master [laughs] . . . or a huge deck. That was my big thing . . . a huge, upstairs deck outside. And I'd have like a workout thing out there, and a telescope, and two chairs and a table . . . maybe like a lounger. Yeah, I don't . . . I would just give them these lavish things and then never use half of it. What a metaphor for life . . . you have all these things that you never use . . . most of them, but . . . [laughs].

Beyond seeing themselves and their lives in *The Sims,* participants reflected upon what this means to them, which sometimes led to strong emotional reactions including confusion at times. Whether the reflections about relationships between participants' physical lives and Sims' lives are true is less important than the fact that these reflections occurred. This element of reflecting on how *The Sims* relates to and impacts their physical lives is a part of the lived experience of playing this game.

Co-Creation

One part of the experience of playing *The Sims* for many participants was how their own ideas for what they wanted to happen within the game was combined with what the Sims did on their own. For many, the actual creation of Sims involved a combination of the participants' mood with options that the game generated. And while some participants found that giving Sims high autonomy made the game more enjoyable, others found the Sims' own choices frustrating.

Regardless of the specific choices they made, participants described a type of co-creation with the game that impacted how they played it.

Some participants described how they waited for inspiration to hit them through elements that were presented to them in *The Sims*. P7 described how she brings to the game the idea that she wants to create unique Sims each time, but that she uses the game's suggestions to decide the Sims' specific looks.

> So I won't make a character that looks like the last character or dresses like the last character. A lot of times I'll think of like, inspiration, or I'll look through the clothes first and kind of see what sort of style I'm interested in. Also the randomize button . . . you know, like the two dice or whatever . . . I'll just kind of click that, like, probably hundreds of times [laughs] and just wait for inspiration to strike basically. So I don't know really what the rhyme or reason is for that because I don't set out with a pre-determined character typically. The only, I guess, baseline information I have setting out is that I want it to be different because it's more fun that way for me.

P10 also described relying on the game's prompts for creating Sims, and that she would continue this co-creation with her Sims and the game as she both provided input and waited for inspiration from the game for creating the Sims' houses and the rest of their lives as well.

> Usually when I start a new family, I don't know what I'm doing. I usually will just go in, sometimes I'll just roll character creation-just roll the dice and see what people start showing up. And on multiple occasions, I have done that until I find someone where I'm like, "Oh that person looks interesting. What are they about? What do they like? What do they look like they like? What are they into?" And then kind of build a story around that. [. . .] And then from there usually I'll kind of let them do their thing a little bit.

Sometimes I'll even play and just kind of see what happens, and I'll introduce chaos sometimes because I enjoy that too. Or I'll make their lives easier sometimes by cheating and getting them some items. But yeah, part of it is just letting it be what happens.

This participant went on to describe how she plays the whole game this way: having an idea of how she wants to play the game, but letting her Sims' behaviors impact her plans and divert her to creating a new or altered path for the game.

I don't just sit back usually, but I do put their autonomy up high. I know some people who have Sims who can't pee unless you tell them to; mine can. They can do whatever they want. They do do whatever they want. When usually if I have an invitation to go on a date, or anything like that, I'm like, "Yeah, sure. Do it. Go and just see what happens." Usually if they meet someone and I see something happening where they're in an argument or getting little negative signs above their head, I'm like, "Oh, they clearly don't like that person" then I'll amplify it. Once I see it happen, I'm like, "That guy sucks. You hate him. Whatever. You're going to, like, steal his car. You don't like him." So I'll usually just amplify anything like that that comes up. [. . .] So I'll alter the story. I'll jump in. I don't just let it happen and watch, but I definitely . . . I don't have a plan for what's going to happen until it starts happening. Or I do have a plan, and I allow that plan to just completely change when something throws me off, or when something gets introduced to the story that makes it interesting.

P10 described how she really desires this co-creation and depends on the Sims' own actions as a large part of what makes the game desirable. She likened the Sims to "real people" even though she knows they are avatars, mostly because they play a role in the co-creation of their own lives.

It's way more interesting for me to let their personalities develop I guess. [. . .] If I was just filling out a character sheet and then that would be the end of it, then it would just be someone I completely made up. Whereas if it's something like *The Sims* and they're kind of making decisions on their own, they kind of are more like people. They're more like real people. And I am interested in real people. So, yeah. I don't think I would have fun if they weren't surprising me or doing things on their own. They would be a lot less interesting.

On the other hand, some participants described how they felt annoyed by some of their Sims' behaviors. P4 described how she created a scenario for her Sims that she expected they would continue pursuing on their own, and then felt frustrated when they did not act in a way she expected or desired.

I made [the Sims of me and my partner] pretty true to life but where they should just naturally date each other maybe. Like, we ended up both being hopeless romantics, but like, I was really pursuant about a relationship, and he was like really wanting a family, or maybe it was reversed . . . but I was hoping that they would just kind of naturally . . . they would get into that rhythm. And then just right off the bat, he was super whiny about needing social companionship, and I was like, "There is somebody in the house with you!" So then I think I just got annoyed and then I was like, "You both are going to bed, and I'm turning the game off!"

P5 described how she would let her Sim pursue a partner after it was suggested in the game, but that she was disappointed by some of the prospects.

Sometimes it's like, if they meet a Sim and they seem particularly happy, or if their interests are similar, I'll be like, "Yeah, go for it." But a lot of the female Sims that are

game-generated appear to be really grumpy for some reason. It's like, "Oh, I don't want to talk to these people." A lot of them like, storm past your house.

Similarly, P1 described waiting to see who might be presented in the game as a possible partner for her Sim rather than creating her own. She also illuminated that she would choose a partner that both seemed to fit her own preferences, as well as the preferences she imagined for her Sim.

[My Sim is] in the process of partnering. And so it's seeing who comes around town. I'm choosing not to make up a partner for her. I'm choosing for her to try to find and meet a partner. And so it's kind of like waiting to see who passes by. And it's just a . . . both me and her, I feel like . . . me evaluating, "Is this a person I want her partnered with? And is this a person I would want to be partnered with?"

Additionally, P8 summed up the duality of sometimes feeling projected into the game, and sometimes feeling very distanced from the game.

But when I was playing *The Sims*, there were definitely parts where I was like, "Yes, this is definitely how I want to live my life." And there were parts that were like, ehh . . . definitely playing it like a video game.

Even though *The Sims* is a game where players can have complete control over every aspect of the game, including how much autonomy Sims have for their own actions, most participants described co-creating their game by combining their influences with those from the game. They illuminated that a major aspect of playing the game is by both providing and receiving information about what will be the next actions, and that this back-and-forth could produce emotional reactions as well.

Familiarity

Participants expressed a level of comfort and familiarity with *The Sims* as part of their experience of coming back to play the game later, or even thinking or talking about the game. Since all participants had been playing the game at least intermittently for many years, most discussed what it was like to come back to the game each time. Many participants had particular routines or rituals of certain elements of the game that they would play the same way each time. Some of these included creating Sims that all shared similar characteristics, always filling their Sim houses early using cheat codes, or primarily focusing on skill-building each time. Additionally, this game clearly had a positive impact on participants for them to fondly look back upon their experiences playing it, including wanting to relive the original emotional impact of the game.

Some participants described how *The Sims* was a game that they kept coming back to and playing in intervals over time. P10 found herself coming back to *The Sims* regularly, and more than other video games, because of the comfort that she felt with it.

> *The Sims* has just been a part of my gaming experience for a really long time, so it has a special little place in my heart. And it does, it just keeps coming back. For whatever reason, I'll just keep picking up *The Sims*, and I'm not sure why really. That doesn't really . . . I have a lot of games to play-I have a Steam library with like 400+ games, and some of them I haven't even played before, but sometimes it's just a comfort thing. There's a comfort level in playing *The Sims*-it's relaxed. It's like a good go-to, zen, relaxing, fun experience.

She also described what it was like for her to keep coming back to *The Sims* regularly for so many years.

And I kind of fall off sometimes and won't play for a really long time, and then it's one
of those things where I'll wake up one morning and be on the computer, and I'll be like,
"Oh, I haven't played [*The*] *Sims* in a while. Let me boot that up." And usually I'll go
play with some of my families, like my older families. And then I'll be like, "Oh, I'll just
start a new one." And then I'll start a new one that I've made up, or a new town, and then
I'll be super into it for like three months, and then kind of fall off again. And I feel like
I've been playing forever; I think I've been playing since high school? Middle school? I
don't know when it came out, but I feel like it's been a long time, so, yeah, it just keeps
kind of going.

P1 described the feeling of being "sucked back into" the game every time she returned to
playing it, and also described it as being familiar to her.

I've also played it a lot, so I think part of it is just, I don't know, among the myriad of
options of things to do in the world, that's one that I know really well, I've done a lot of
the various activities. But every time I do open it up and play it, I get sucked right back
into it. Of wanting to go through another cycle of several sittings of gameplay.

Similar to P1, P7 also highlighted that familiarity is something that keeps her playing *The
Sims*.

I think familiarity since I've been playing it for so long. I think like the format and how
it's done is familiar. Sometimes I don't really like going through that new game period
where you're just trying to figure out how to even navigate it. I just kind of want to play
when I start . . . when I download it or whatever. Yeah, probably familiarity is the biggest
thing.

She also added that the consistency of the game contributed to the fact that it "just stuck" for her.

I mean, it's something I've been playing a long time, since the first one when you got all

the expansion packs, like, in the little square CD thing. So it's kind of just been a steady

game I've been interested in. So maybe some consistency or some constancy in some

ways. When I'm into a video game, I'm really into it, but it's hard to find the ones I'm

really into, and that's just kind of one that stuck.

Reminiscing about previous emotional reactions and experiences around the game was

also a part of some participants' views contributing to the theme of familiarity. P4 described how

The Sims was a big part of her life when she was younger, and that she has nostalgia for the way

it used to make her feel, which she is unable to recreate.

The Sims, it just kind of holds a special place in my heart just because I did play it so

much as a kid. I remember trying to save up to buy the expansion packs or begging Mom

and Dad to buy the expansion packs, and I just remember spending time in the software

aisle in Target or wherever just looking, and lusting after these expansion packs. It was

just a big . . . a big part of my life, I guess, for a long time. And so to me, if I play it now

or more recently, it's just more of a nostalgia thing, and it's . . . it's kind of like you can

never go back and experience something the way you did the first time or how it used to

be. And that's kind of how it is now, unfortunately for me. It's just not the same, or it

doesn't give me the same feelings that it did before.

P3 spoke about a particular expansion pack for the game that produced mixed feelings for

her, and expressed a desire to revisit that experience.

You know it was right after I played the Deluxe and Hot Date [laughs] . . . you know it

just makes me laugh, it's so smarmy and terrible, like cheesy, terrible pick-up lines, just

makes me feel gross about it. But good, like, secretly I want to go find it and play it

again. I don't even know if I could. I don't even know if I have a thing with a CD drive

anymore, but uh, I would.

Having a routine with which one plays *The Sims*, and having it be a similar experience

each time was also described by participants as something that was familiar about the game. P4

stated, "You know, I still kind of want to play it again, but I don't know. Just a trip down

memory lane, I guess. Same thing over time, I guess."

P8 described how he imagined himself playing *The Sims* in the present in a new way, and

explore new areas of the game, but the more he thought about it, the more he believed that he

would more likely play it with the same routine he had always used in the game.

[If I went back to play *The Sims* now,] I think I would probably start with my old

standby. I would start by making one person—myself—and play through just kind of to

get that familiar feeling. Then I might branch out more just because as I mentioned, part

of what I enjoy is seeing what I can do. [. . .] So I think it would change just in that . . .

actually, I don't know if that is true. I might actually just do my old standby thing.

[laughs]. I love rereading books, I love rewatching TV shows, so I would probably just

go do my standbys.

P6 summarized her general desire to revisit playing *The Sims*: "I want to play again now. Like,

go home and start a new Sim. Like, tonight. I'm super excited now. I still have *Sims 3* chillin at

my house. Nice. Thanks. [laughs]."

Perhaps unique to players who have been playing for an extended period of time, an

expression of familiarity and comfort with *The Sims* was expressed by participants as an element

of playing the game. Nostalgia and longing for previous emotional excitement about playing

were coupled with current desires to revisit the game. Several participants expressed a particular

routine, or a typical way that they played the game, and an overall feeling of being drawn back to the game after stepping away for a period of time, all contributing to their overall sense of familiarity.

Goodness-of-Fit Checking

Through a random number generator, five participants were chosen and contacted for goodness-of-fit checking. All five participated in 30-minute conversations about the results of this study; one was in person and the other four were over video chat. For each conversation, the research question was reviewed, and the participant was given a brief summary of how the results were generated. Then all six themes were described, and quotes from each participant were read back to them for some or all of the six themes.

Each participant agreed that all six themes resonated with them as an accurate part of their lived experience of playing *The Sims*. They all said that none of the themes were an overreach of their experience, or described something that they did not experience. Additionally, none of them could identify a part of their experience that was not encompassed by the six themes. Some stated that they would continue reflecting on whether they thought anything was missing, but none of them contacted me afterwards with new information. Three of the participants independently reiterated that using *The Sims* as an "escape" from what was going on in their lives was an important element of the purpose for play theme for them. Two of the participants had strong emotional reactions to having their own quotes read back to them. Overall, this goodness-of-fit checking demonstrates that at least half of the participants found the results of this study to be accurate for them, and this helps validate that the six themes may resonate with other players of *The Sims* as well.

Discussion

This study produced six themes—self-representation; past, present, future; purpose for play; self-reflection; co-creation; familiarity—each distinct but overlapping with the other themes. For example, some projection of an ideal self is seen in both self-representation, and past, present, future; yet, they are separate from each other based on what they mean, how they are presented, and what else they refer to as described by participants, and each of these two themes include elements separate from each other as well. Participants contributed to each of the themes, often in different ways, but the overarching points of each theme wove into the experience of playing *The Sims,* as demonstrated through goodness-of-fit testing. For example, while some participants may have created Sims that looked similar to them, others did not, but still believed that their values were portrayed through their Sims actions. Several of these themes also relate to current research in this area, including self-representation, or having parts of the self represented through gameplay, and purpose for play, or having a motivation for playing *The Sims*, often resulting in a beneficial experience.

That some video game players use avatars to represent aspects of their identities has been confirmed previously through research as noted in the Literature Review section above, and is also supported through the present study. In this study, it was revealed that some participants created Sims who looked very similar to themselves, while others created Sims who loosely resembled them in appearance, but still represented them in other ways. Fong and Mar (2015), and Reed and Fitzpatrick (2008), conducted research with similar findings—that appearance is but one way that players represent themselves through their avatars.

In this study, participants also felt represented by *The Sims* through self-representation. Similar to Hamilton's (2009) assertions, a user can feel that their identity can be represented

through their avatar's movements, interactions, and intentions. Some participants in this study demonstrated their values through their gameplay choices as well, by choosing actions aligned with their beliefs—or by experiencing dissonance when they did not align. By comparison, Taylor (2002) also found that players who did not feel their avatars reflected who they were tended to participate in more reckless behaviors, and described feeling absolved of responsibility for their virtual indiscretions. While this set of dissonant behaviors was not directly encompassed under self-representation, P10 described how her experiences were in line with Taylor's findings:

> I would not kill [the Sim] families that we talked about, like, those were my families . . . I wouldn't kill them. No way, there's no way. I'm definitely closer to them, but then there are some games that are throw aways and are fun and it's like, 'Ok, let's do some crazy stuff on this one.' And I don't really feel that much guilt for that.

Additionally, the results of this study are supported by some of the mid-range items on Schultze and Leahy's (2009) spectrum of telepresence that they developed through their study (see Literature Review section above for full details). For example, the idea of killing Sims, as described above by P10, relates to the object of play item on the telepresence dimension, or the idea that Sims are just computer images with which to play around. Object of reflection of this dimension was also demonstrated in this study through participants expressing not only who they are in the moment, but also a slightly idealized version of themselves into the game as well.

Griebel (2006) found in his study specifically on user behaviors in *The Sims* that nearly all participants reported that as least some aspects of their past, present, or future were portrayed in their Sims' lives. Griebel's finding was replicated in the present study, demonstrated through the theme, past, present, future. Whether participants in this study were recreating the past,

representing aspects of their current selves or mood, or projecting future desires into the game, they also connected parts of themselves over time into the game. Vasalou and Joinson (2009) reiterated this idea as well in their study of avatar identity in which users created avatars and the researchers reflected upon how these characters related to the participants who created them. Although Vasalou and Joinson examined user behaviors using a different game, they found that participants managed to use avatars and gamespace to represent elements of their past, present and/or future through the setting or props of their avatar. Their participants also projected desired life changes into their avatars, a behavior this study replicated as well.

Considerable research has been conducted on motivations for playing video games, which is addressed through the theme identified in this study as purpose for play. Originally this theme was going to be labeled benefit of play because most participants interviewed on their reasons for playing *The Sims* identified that the activity generated some benefit for them. However, further data sifting and goodness-of-fit checking with participants indicated that playing the game to distract or escape from certain moods, such as depression, loneliness or boredom, is not best described as a benefit, albeit a strong reason for playing, but rather an escape to buffer the difficulty of certain realities. Hence, the theme title is purpose for play instead of benefit of play. Jansz et al. (2010), who conducted motivational research specifically on *The Sims 2*, found that diversion was a fairly strong motivation, especially for women; results of this study are in alignment with these findings. Cabiria (2011) postulated that playing for diversion or escapism might be a way for players to exert control over a virtual space, to compensate for a perceived lack of control in their physical lives. P3 echoed this sentiment, explaining that she used *The Sims* when things felt too difficult in her physical life:

It wasn't necessarily an escape, but it kind of was. If things were too hard, I would build

a new house. It wasn't always visiting [one Sim's] family, but that's sort of where I

would go. [. . .] And it was something I think, too, like *The Sims*, something that I could

control while the rest of my life was shit.

Other motivations identified in Jansz et al.'s (2010) study are enjoyment, control, fantasy,

challenge, and social interaction. Although specific user purposes for playing *The Sims* were not

broken down in the present study, all of Jansz et al.'s motivations resonate with this author's

understanding, as participants' self-reported purposes for play in this study were often very

similar. Additionally, even though Yee's (2006) research on motivation focused on user

behaviors in MMO games, his findings on achievement, social connection and immersion

parallel the behaviors of participants in this study within *The Sims* environment.

For several participants, one of the compelling reasons for play reflected in this study was

to connect or bond with other people through shared or parallel play within *The Sims*

environment. In addition to Jansz et al.'s (2010) and Yee's (2006) determinations that social

interaction is often an important element of video games, Bassiouni and Hackley (2016)

completed an investigative qualitative study on children ages six to 12, and concluded with

similar results. They found that these children used video games as a way to deepen and extend

their bonds with other children in their existing social circles and families. Even though *The Sims*

is a single-player game, it is interesting to note that for several participants, connecting with

others was an important element to playing this game.

One of the main elements of the self-reflection theme was participants' own self-

discovery by recollecting and reflecting on how and why they play *The Sims*. This theme

includes users reflecting on their emotional responses to the game as well. Wolfendale (2007)

found that players have strong reactions to what happens to their avatars when they feel closely connected to them. When participants reflected on their emotional responses to what happened to their own avatars in *The Sims*, they were often surprised by the strength of their feelings and how closely they actually connected to the character. For example, P10 was surprised by her emotional reaction to her Sim's dog's impending death, P6 noticed her emotional reaction to her Sim's fish dying, and P1 was emotionally affected in her physical life by the old age and eventual death of her primary Sim. Additionally, some participants felt guilt or shame for some of their gameplay choices or their Sims' behaviors, such as killing their Sims on purpose or having Sims who cheated on romantic partners. Mahood and Hanus (2017) conducted a study that found a similar user phenomenon: players experienced feelings of guilt or shame after their video game characters committed morally dissonant actions.

Another component of the self-reflection theme was the participants' ongoing awareness of their personal beliefs regarding social issues, which were projected into the game. Flanagan (2003) asserted that *The Sims* is a politically-charged comment on consumerism because it emphasizes material consumption, suburban life, class divides, gender roles, and romanticized values. Participants in this study embodied those sentiments by reflecting and projecting political, social, and consumeristic orientations from their own lives into this game and vice versa. For example, P5 noticed and commented specifically on how consumerism is reflected in *The Sims*: "I would just give them these lavish things and then never use half of it. What a metaphor for life . . . you have all these things that you never use." Additionally, participants reflected on race, gender, and family roles, and projected them into the game. Several participants noticed that their Sims were regularly white, and made a conscious effort to create non-white Sims. Similarly, P10 specifically sought out to create a lesbian president Sim.

However, this same participant also noted that the president's lesbian partner was a stay-at-home wife, and that she often had one Sim partner not work to take care of the home. She described this decision as mostly pragmatic for reaching in-game goals, and it reflects a built-in element of the game: that it is beneficial for one person to not work and instead stay home to take care of things. This is not reflective of mostly two-income homes in current American society, but rather, a past ideal. These observations reflect Nutt and Railton's (2003) assertions that *The Sims* represents the American ideal, but within that it projects gender and family roles which can represent conflicting societal viewpoints.

Co-creation is another theme that emerged in this study, but it is not highly represented in current literature. Co-creation includes the idea that players bring a part of themselves to the game, including their intentions and desires on how to play the game and what should happen in it, and then they receive input from the game itself, all of which work together to create the way the game actually unfolds and is played. It is possible that this theme is more specifically relatable to simulation life games more than other types of digital games, or perhaps it is an under-researched area of video games. However, Schultze and Leahy (2009) did touch on this concept on their research of *Second Life*, another simulated life game. They created two spectrum dimensions, social presence and telepresence, both of which represent part of this idea of co-creation. Participants in the present study represented different elements of Schultze's continuum of social presence ranging from possible/ideal/true self down through character and scripted character. In the present study, participants' self-reports ranged from seeing their Sims as part of themselves and what they are bringing to the game, to seeing their Sims as characters with their ability to act on their own and present to the player with what should happen next in the game. While Schultze's study is not an ideal representation or connection to the literature of

the theme co-creation, it touches on the idea that the game is about both what the player brings to the game, and what they take from it.

The last theme, familiarity, is also not fully represented in the current literature. Familiarity includes the sense of nostalgia that players felt when they thought about playing *The Sims*, and the desire to recreate the positive emotions that they associate with playing the game. It also includes creating a familiar pattern of play, such as having specific routines or rituals in how they play. This also may be an under-researched area of video games. Additionally, this may be unique to the fact that the participants in this study had all been playing *The Sims* for at least five years, and several had been playing for 10–15 years, and that the bulk of their time invested in the game was in the past, rather than more recent.

The results of this study indicate that players of *The Sims* have a wide range of elements that contribute to their lived experience of playing this game. Some of these elements are also represented in the current literature, either specific to other research on *The Sims* or through video game research in general. However, other areas did not seem well-represented through video game research and may warrant additional research or investigation on these topics.

Limitations

While the goal of this study is to describe the lived experience of playing *The Sims,* it is acknowledged that the sample size was only 10 participants. While this size is acceptable for a phenomenological study, the results are not intended to be generalizable to the greater population, and may not be representative of all people who have played *The Sims*. Specifically, all participants had been playing this game for at least five years, and many for 10–15 years, yet some had not played the game for quite a while, though they considered themselves "Sims players" per the inclusion criteria. Many participants were more retrospective in their answers

about their experiences playing rather than describing more current lived experiences. While this element may have been representative of many players of *The Sims* and added to this study in many ways, such as having a broader reflective lens, it can also be considered a limitation in describing the actual lived experience of playing this game. Furthermore, all 10 participants were gathered through social media snowball recruitment, and all initially learned about the research from the researcher herself or someone who knew about it. They may not be representative demographically or geographically of all *Sims* players.

Future Research and Clinical Implications

As noted in the discussion above, additional research on video gaming on the topics of co-creation and familiarity may add to the literature on this topic in a meaningful way. Further research in these areas can contribute to the understanding of what goes into the process of playing video games, how in-game decisions are made, and what contributes to the desire to revisit games after playing them.

The results of the current study also have implications for therapeutic usefulness. First, as evidenced by all participants' willingness and desire to share their gaming experience, discussing clients' preferred video games with them can help build therapeutic rapport. With an oftentimes negative discourse around video games in psychology, some therapists may not approach the subject of video game play, or may either diminish or pathologize players' interests and behaviors. However, this study demonstrates that people can be extremely willing to share information about their gameplay tendencies, and that it can reveal intimate information about their lives. A therapists' questions about clients' interests in video games, especially for clients who identify as "gamers," can convey an openness to enter clients' often-pathologized world without judgment.

Second, *The Sims* specifically has been demonstrated to help players process and project parts of their past, present, and future into the game. When guided by a therapist, clients may be able to use this game to repair difficult events in their past, acknowledge their present experiences, learn about parts of themselves they are dissatisfied with through areas of idealization, or act out desires for their future in a helpful way. The actual playing of *The Sims* could occur in the therapy room in vivo, and the therapist and client may discuss what is happening as it happens, or the game could be played in between therapy sessions and subsequently discussed. As P3 created nuclear Sim families while processing her parents' divorce, clients can use this game to comprehend or mourn a part of their lives that they wish was different. It can also help with actual grief or sadness, as P5 created a Sim version of her cat after it died, and played with Sim sisters while missing her own sister overseas. Furthermore, the game can be used to act out desires without negative consequences, such as P1 and P3's creation of bisexual Sims, P6's exploration of her gender queer identity, and P9's expression of her flirtatious tendencies without wanting to ruin her marriage and family. These are just some examples of the ways in which players benefited from *The Sims* on their own, and the impact of these types of actions can be amplified with clinical assistance.

Third, it has been demonstrated that playing *The Sims* and other games can contribute to feeling connected with others, and conversations with clients about using games for this purpose may help alleviate loneliness or isolation. Many participants in this study shared how they used this game to bond with others in their lives. For those who are unfamiliar with the gaming world, it may appear to be an isolating experience where players do not communicate or interact with others. On the contrary, many participants in this study shared how they used *The Sims* to bond with others in their lives, even though this game is single-player. This feeling of connectedness

can be even greater for MMO game players, or for players who connect with each other online over their shared interest in video games, such as on the website *Twitch*, which livestreams game-playing of a multitude of games.

Finally, this game can be used to discuss cultural and societal influences on clients and how they perceive this information. Especially during the current political era that is rife with polarization and sensitivities, *The Sims* could be used to process perceived discrimination, and acknowledge implicit biases and privilege. As examples, P3 used this game to feel comfortable in her bisexuality after being shamed by her family and society, while P10 and P7, both white participants, consciously incorporated non-white Sims into their games. Further research on the effectiveness of these types of therapeutic interventions would also highly contribute to the literature of integrating video game play into a therapy room.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore a specific type of simulated life game called *The Sims*, to learn more about the lived experience of playing this game. With video game usage on the rise, one might expect that the acceptance of the video gaming community might grow. While some games are being designed specifically for positive benefits for users, there is still much stigma about gamers spending too much time involved with video games.

As the researcher of this phenomenological study, I first acknowledged my own experiences playing this game by writing them down and seeing the lens through which I approached this study. I then conducted one- to two-hour long semi-structured interviews with nine participants, and included my own experiences as part of the data as a tenth participant. Data analysis resulted in nearly 2,000 line-by-line codes, which were reduced to 30 clusters, and

six themes ultimately emerged from the data. These six themes were self-representation; past, present, future; self-reflection; purpose for play; co-creation; and familiarity.

The results of this study indicate that the lived experienced of playing *The Sims* entails the player feeling that their self and who they are is represented through the game in some capacity. This could be through projecting parts of themselves into Sims or creating "me" Sims, seeing their values represented through their gameplay choices, or having their personality represented in how they play the game and what activities they spend time on. Players of this game might see how they've recreated or altered parts of their past through their play, brought their present mood into gameplay, or projected an ideal or potential future for themselves into the game. Furthermore, a part of playing this game may include reflecting on gameplay choices, noticing emotional responses to the game, and/or acknowledging how cultural and social issues affect players personally and are played out through the game. Through playing *The Sims*, players may feel connected to others with whom they share their gaming experiences, or may use it as an escape from their current mood or emotions. They may feel a nostalgia for previous positive experiences they have had playing it, or play in a similar manner each time they start a new game. Results also indicate that players bring a part of themselves to the game, but also receive insight and inspiration from what is presented to them by the game itself, and together with the game, they dictate what will happen next. The results of this research indicate that these elements describe the essence what it is to play *The Sims*.

Furthermore, these results may have implications for therapeutic work that clinicians can use to help connect with, learn from, and form a deeper understanding with and for their clients, and help direct clients to use the game in a therapeutic manner. Further research can be done to

determine specific interventions using video games or *The Sims* specifically, and to further explore some of the resulting themes of this study.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Antioch University Seattle Informed Consent Form
2326 6th Ave, Seattle, WA 98121
Project: A Day in the Life of a Sim: Making Meaning of Video Game Avatars and Behaviors
Researcher: Jessica Stark, Psy.D. Student in Clinical Psychology

The Antioch University Psy.D. Program supports the practice of protection for human participants in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time, and that if you do withdraw from the study, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

The purpose of this project is for scholastic research and advancing the field of psychology. The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of *Sims* players, and the interaction between an individual's online character and in-game behaviors, and their real-life identity. Interviews will be approximately 1-2 hours long, may take place in person or on a video chat program, and will be audiotaped for the purposes of interview transcription and review. Audio recordings will be stored on a password-protected recording device for no more than one year, and transcriptions will be stored on an encrypted USB drive. Participants will be asked about various aspects of their personal lives in relationship to their experiences while playing the video game, *The Sims,* as well as their in-game characters and behaviors. These questions may at times feel personal or intrusive, and you may choose to withdraw your participation at any time during the research if you wish not to answer these questions. You are encouraged to call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)'s National Helpline if you are in distress at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). If you are under age 18 years, a parent or guardian must also provide written and verbal consent to your participation in this research before the interview may begin. To preserve anonymity, all written work will use pseudonyms unless written permission is obtained by the researcher. If you decide to provide digital images of yourself or your game characters and behaviors, additional consent and permission will be obtained, and can be withdrawn at any time. Participants may also be contacted two more times after the interview is complete to review information that was provided in the interview and/or is part of the research; this review may take place over the phone, in person, or via video chat. You may withdraw participation in these reviews at any time. While multiple safeguards will be in place to protect the confidentiality of all participants and data, some video chat systems are not secure, and since data will be stored digitally, there is the rare possibility that it may be compromised. All participants will be informed immediately in the unlikely event that a breach of confidentiality occurs. Data will be stored with the researcher for up to five years, after which it will be destroyed. Digital images may be stored longer if permission is granted by the participant.

Signature   Date

I have read the above statements and have been fully advised of the procedures to be used in this project. I have been given sufficient opportunity to ask any questions I had concerning the procedures and possible risks involved. I understand the potential risks involved, and I

assume them voluntarily. I likewise understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time without being subjected to reproach. I may also ask for a summary of the results of this study, which may take several months to receive. If I have questions I may contact the investigator, Jessica Stark, at jstark1@antioch.edu or Faculty Research Advisor, Jude Bergkamp, Psy.D. at jbergkamp@antioch.edu.

Antioch University Seattle Informed Consent Form-Digital Images
2326 6th Ave, Seattle, WA 98121
Project: A Day in the Life of a Sim: Making Meaning of Video Game Avatars and Behaviors
Researcher: Jessica Stark, Psy.D. Student in Clinical Psychology

The Antioch University Psy.D. Program supports the practice of protection for human participants in research and related activities. The following information is provided so that you can decide how you would like your digital images to be used. You should be aware that you are free to withdraw the use of digital images at any time, and that if you do withdraw their use, you will not be subjected to reprimand or any other form of reproach.

All digital images will be stored on an encrypted USB drive only accessible by the researcher. You may grant permission if you would like them to be used only by the researcher for descriptive purposes without visually being used, or if you would like them to be used in written work, conference presentations, and/or education and training for researchers/practitioners. You may withdraw your permission at any time; however, after images have been published or used in presentations, they cannot retroactively be removed, and can only be withdrawn from future uses. Pseudonyms will be used unless written permission is obtained by the researcher. However, if you agree for photos of yourself to be used, you may be recognized by audience members or readers of the material.

I acknowledge that I have provided digital images of me and/or aspects of my video game activity for the purposes of this project. I understand that I may withdraw the use of digital images at any time.

*I agree to the use of digital images of **my avatar or gameplay screenshots** for the following purposes (check all that apply).
_____ Only to enhance the researcher's written descriptions, but not for visual display.
_____ To include in written work (for example, dissertation and published articles).
_____ To include in conference presentations (for example, psychology conventions).
_____ To include in education and training for researchers/practitioners (for example, classroom lectures or consultations).

*I agree to the use of digital images of **myself** for the following purposes (check all that apply).
_____ Only to enhance the researcher's written descriptions, but not for visual display.
_____ To include in written work (for example, dissertation and published articles).
_____ To include in conference presentations (for example, psychology conventions).
_____ To include in education and training for researchers/practitioners (for example, classroom lectures or consultations).

_____

Signature   Date

_____Printed Name

Appendix B

List of Interview Question (Guidelines)

List of Interview Questions (Guidelines)

1. What does it mean to you to play *The Sims?*

2. Why do you like playing *The Sims*?

3. Tell me a little bit about your personality and who you are as a person.

4. When you have played the Sims, have you always played with one Sim, or have you created and played with more than one Sim? If one, describe that Sim. If more than one:

    a. Tell me about your favorite or the one that is most meaningful to you?

    b. Why is it your favorite or most meaningful?

    c. Tell me about your other Sims.

    d. How is your favorite one different from your other Sims?

    e. When during your gameplay did you create this one? (Your first Sim? Your 10th? About an hour into gameplay? 5 years into gameplay, etc.)

5. How did you choose the characteristics of your favorite/only Sim?

6. How does your identity relate to your favorite/only Sim's identity? How does your identity to relate to the identity of your other Sims who aren't your favorite?

7. What was going on in your life when you played your favorite Sim?

8. Tell me a little bit about the things that are important in your life.

9. Tell me a little bit about your Sim play or the way you play the game.

10. Are there certain behaviors or paths/patterns you prefer to direct your Sims to exhibit?

11. How do the behaviors or paths of your Sims, or your favorite Sim, relate to your own life or the way your life was when you played that Sim?

12. Are there periods in your life when you play The Sims more often than others? Tell me about that.

13. Does playing The Sims bring meaning or benefit to your life? If so, in what ways?

14. Is there anything in your gameplay that surprised you?

15. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your experiences playing *The Sims* or how your physical life and the lives of your Sims relate to each other?

16. What demographics would you like to share with me about yourself?

Appendix C

IRB Application

IRB Application

1. *Project Purpose(s): (Up to 500 words)*

        The basis of this research is the underlying assumption that people play video games, and in particular simulated life video games, because they enjoy them and benefit from playing them. Research supports that people feel positive affect after playing certain video games, feel they are able to portray parts of their personality and lives through avatars and games, and can express themselves virtually in ways that they are unable to do in their everyday physical lives. The goal of this study is to explore the relationship between players' physical and virtual lives, both in character and behavior, to try to get closer to identifying what meaning people make of their simulated life video game experiences. In order to do this, this researcher intends to take a qualitative phenomenological approach that will allow participants to illuminate their experiences, and for me as the researcher to partake in synthesizing their meaning-making to capture the essence of this phenomenon.

        While one notable study has explored players' personalities and values in relationship to their behaviors within the video game, *The Sims*, to date there have been no studies that have allowed participants to speak for themselves about what they gain or identify as important about their experiences with this game. Examining the meaning that players make of their virtual experiences will increase the literature on the complex interaction between players' physical and virtual selves, and the unique subset of experiences related specifically to simulated life games, which could potentially produce insight into how this meaning-making can be used therapeutically with clients.

2. *Describe the proposed participants- age, number, sex, race, or other special characteristics. Describe criteria for inclusion and exclusion of participants. Please provide brief justification for these criteria. (Up to 500 words)*

        For this phenomenological study, approximately 10-20 participants will be interviewed, and the exact number will be determined during data analysis based on how quickly the phenomenon can be described. The primary criteria for participants is that they self-identify as a "*Sims* player," or a person who has experience playing the video game, *The Sims,* and is willing to talk about their experience. Interviews will be conducted in person or online via video chat. There will be no restrictions to age, gender, race, or any other demographic categories, with the exception that the participants must speak and understand fluent English. If prospective participants are under age 18, they will only be accepted into the study if a parent or guardian provides both written consent and visual/verbal consent, and if the participant provides assent.

3. *Describe how the participants are to be selected and recruited. (Up to 500 words)*

        Snowball recruitment techniques will be used to recruit participants who consider themselves to be *Sims* players. Initial recruitment will be via word of mouth and Facebook, and this researcher will expand to other areas as necessary, such as posting to online gaming forums or game company forums, or by using other social media platforms such as Twitter.

4. Describe the proposed procedures, (e.g., interview surveys, questionnaires, experiments, etc.) in the project. Any proposed experimental activities that are included in evaluation, research, development, demonstration, instruction, study, treatments, debriefing, questionnaires, and similar projects must be described. USE SIMPLE LANGUAGE, AVOID JARGON, AND IDENTIFY ACRONYMS. Please do not insert a copy of your methodology section from your proposal. State briefly and concisely the procedures for the project. (500 words)

This researcher will first obtain informed consent, which may be written or verbal for adult participants; for minor participants, written and visual/verbal consent will be obtained from the minor's parent or guardian, and written or verbal assent will be obtained from the minor. This researcher will then conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews, which will be audio-recorded on a password-protected recording device. Once the interviews are completed, they will be transcribed into Word documents, which will be stored on an encrypted USB drive, and the audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription not more than one year after being recorded. The documents will then be redacted of all identifying information and uploaded to the computer program Dedoose for data analysis. Digital images of each participant, his/her avatar, and/or screenshots of his/her video game play will be requested, and participants will have the option to provide this data or not. If they do, this data will also be stored on the encrypted USB, they will sign an additional consent form to specify permissions for use of this data, and the participant will be reminded that they may rescind permission to use these images at any time. After first-order analysis is completed, this researcher will contact participants as part of the member checking process for a check of accuracy of their information. After all interviews and data analysis is completed, participants will be contacted once more for final member checking for resonance of the described phenomenon.

5. Participants in research may be exposed to the possibility of harm — physiological, psychological, and/or social—please provide the following information: (Up to 500 words)

a. Identify and describe potential risks of harm to participants (including physical, emotional, financial, or social harm).

The potential risks of harm to participants in this study are very limited, and participants will be informed of the nature of the research before electing to participate. Some of the interview questions ask the participants about how their video game play and characters relate to their own lives, so there is the potential that participants will reveal difficult information about themselves during the interview that they may find troubling. However, the likelihood that this type of information will arise is low, and if it does arise, the likelihood that it will be harmful to the participant is also low.

b. Identify and describe the anticipated benefits of this research (including direct benefits to participants and to society-at-large or others)

Individually, participants may identify and connect more meaning to their video game play, and thus may enjoy the way they play video games even more after participating in this research. Additionally, this research will contribute to the video game and psychology community by highlighting the extent to which and how playing video games might contribute meaningfully to individuals, rather than being viewed as a problematic pastime. Lastly, the

results of this research could be considered for therapeutic application if clinicians identify clients who may benefit from finding meaning in their own lives by playing simulated video games.

c. Explain why you believe the risks are so outweighed by the benefits described above as to warrant asking participants to accept these risks. Include a discussion of why the research method you propose is superior to alternative methods that may entail less risk.

I believe that a phenomenological qualitative approach to this research will best answer the research question, and will allow the most freedom for participants to choose what they would like to illuminate as part of this particular phenomenon. If participants identify something troubling that they would not like to talk about, I will not require them to do so, and they may choose a different way to answer the proposed question or ask to skip the question completely. This research method approach promotes flexibility and for the researcher to follow the lead of the participant, which will reduce the likelihood of potential risk.

d. Explain fully how the rights and welfare of participants at risk will be protected (e.g., screening out particularly vulnerable participants, follow-up contact with participants, list of referrals, etc.) and what provisions will be made for the case of an adverse incident occurring during the study.

All identifying information will be redacted during data analysis, and if necessary will be replaced with a generalized description of essence the participant is intending to describe. Participants will be informed that they may discontinue the interviews at any time, and withdraw from the study. Any participants under the age of 18 will be required to assent, and the consent of a parent or guardian will also be obtained in writing and verbally. If, in the rare instance that a participant expresses troubling information about herself or himself that has the potential to be harmful, therapeutic resources will be provided to the participant, including a referral to the Antioch Community Counseling and Psychology Clinic and Crisis Clinic. Additionally, the phone number for SAMHSA's National Helpline is included in the informed consent. Two follow-up contacts will be made with participants as part of the member-checking process, and this will also provide an opportunity to check in with any participants who may have experienced difficulties during the interview.

6. Explain how participants' privacy is addressed by your proposed research. Specify any steps taken to safeguard the anonymity of participants and/or confidentiality of their responses. Indicate what personal identifying information will be kept, and procedures for storage and ultimate disposal of personal information. Describe how you will de-identify the data or attach the signed confidentiality agreement on the attachments tab (scan, if necessary). (Up to 500 words)

All audio recordings will be password protected, and will be deleted after transcription, no later than a year after being recorded. All transcriptions will be saved on an encrypted USB drive. All data that will uploaded to the program Dedoose will be redacted of all identifying information. To preserve anonymity, all written work about this research will use pseudonyms

unless written permission is obtained from the participant. If participants provide digital images that identify themselves, an additional consent will be requested (see attached).

7. *Will electrical, mechanical (electroencephalogram, biofeedback, etc.) devices be applied to participants, or will audio-visual devices be used for recording participants?*
    No. Only audio devices will be used.

8. *Type of review requested. Please provide your reasons/justification for the level of review you are requesting:*
    I am requesting a full review because while the research involves no more than minimal risk, no physiological intervention, and no deception, there is the possibility that I will include some minors under age 18 in my interviews.

Appendix D

Social Media and Participant Contact Copies

Social Media and Participant Contact Copies

First Facebook Post

I'm doing research for my dissertation and I am looking for participants who are Sims players (people who feel they are familiar with any version of the PC/Mac game-not the phone app-, The Sims, and are willing to talk about their experiences with playing it). Send me a message if this describes you, and I'll give you more details about being a participant. Feel free to share this post! Thanks!

Second Facebook Post

Help! I'm looking for a few more dissertation participants. If this describes you, please contact me:

-Identify as a player of The Sims (computer version)
-Have played recently enough to talk in detail about your gameplay
-Are willing to spend 1-2 hours sharing your experiences with me in person or via video chat

Tell your friends! Thanks!

Sample Contact Email

Hi XXX,

My name is Jess Stark and I got your email address from XXX who mentioned that you might be interested in participating in my research study about The Sims.

First, thanks for your interest! Second, here's a few more details about the research:

I'm looking for participants who self-identify as Sims players (people who are familiar enough with the PC/Mac game to easily talk about their experiences playing it). The process will consist of an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 1-1.5 hours during which participants will be asked questions about their experiences playing The Sims. Interviews will then be transcribed, de-identified, and the data will be used for qualitative analysis for the purpose of my dissertation.

Attached are two consent forms, and participation is completely optional. If you're still interested in participating after reading these over, please let me know a general idea of your availability over the next few weeks or months. I'm doing both in person and online interviews, and I'm not sure where you live, but I'm located in the Seattle area. If you're not local, we'll likely be using either Skype or Google Hangouts, but please note that neither is guaranteed to be completely confidential/secure since it's online; however, I don't anticipate this to be a problem. If you decide you don't want to participate, or don't qualify for participation (ie, played The Sims too long ago to be able to talk about the details of your gameplay, or only play the app version), just let me know.

Thanks again and I look forward to hearing from you!
Best, Jess

Appendix E

Excerpt of Coded Transcript

Excerpt of Coded Transcript

"Oh man. I wish I could remember more of what I did back when I was in middle school or whatever." [Code: Difficulty remembering earlier play] "I think there was probably one where I actually, it might have been a random other Sim, but maybe I actually did the whole marriage and baby thing, and had an artistic career," [Code: Most meaningful Sim was played through marriage and baby and had specific (artistic) career] "or I actually put in the time to read the books and gain knowledge skills, or paint, or practice speeches in front of the bathroom mirror, or whatever it was where you could gain charisma." [Code: Put in time on skills to build most meaningful Sim] "One of them that I could just really put the time in to build that personality, I can't remember exactly what or when or whatever, but there were a couple of times when I actually put the time in, so that would probably be the most meaningful ones." [Code: Spent most time with most meaningful Sims] "Because you can, you can watch them change, and watch them get better at what they're doing, or they get a promotion, or their social skills are up, or they throw a successful party or whatever it is." [Code: Meaningful to watch the Sims change and improve with better skills] "It's kind of it like, 'Boy, I wish I could do that . . . just read this book and then all of a sudden I'm smarter.'" [Code: Some admiration of Sims' skill-building abilities and ease] "That's getting a little off topic, but probably some character that I would have played way back in the day." [Code: Not a specific meaningful Sim, but a type of Sim and gameplay that was meaningful] "Because I did, probably 95% try to make them based off of me." [Code: Sims created primarily based on self IRL] "Because I think you used to be able to pick personality points and stuff, so I probably tried to do it as close to life as I could." [Code: Based Sim personality on self IRL] "So you know, when I did do something, it was like, 'Hey that's great. My person did something well, and I'm sitting here in my room.' You know

[laughs]." [Code: Identifies Sims' achievements as personal achievements] "Yeah, but it must have been one from way back in the day that would have been probably the most meaningful." [Code: Earliest Sims were most meaningful] "Especially because I was a kid, so watching me do something like that . . . some cool thing, or different thing or whatever, and keep the house clean even . . . you know, something I struggle to do even now [laughs]. Yeah, it would have been something back in the day." [Code: When Sim does something, it's "watching me" do something]

Appendix F

Sample of Line-by-Line Codes

Sample of Line-by-Line Codes

1091	Earliest Sims were most meaningful
1092	When Sim does something it's "watching me" do something
1093	Tried to make Sims look "true to life" of self
1094	Made Sims' thinness match own IRL
1095	Dressed Sims in same clothing as worn IRL
1096	Made Sim "reflective of who I was" even if age of Sim didn't match own IRL
1097	Made physical appearance of Sim same as own IRL
1098	Created Sims with intention of seeing self do things as Sims
1099	Not fun if Sim didn't look like self IRL
1100	Didn't care about Sims not representing self or RL
1101	Would make Sims look like each member of family IRL
1102	Not engaged with Sims not appearing as someone known IRL
1103	The truer to RL, the more engaging and fun the game was
1104	Sim would have even negative parts of RL self included
1105	Made Sim nearly identical to self
1106	Would adjust Sim appearance to compensate for emotions IRL (thinner Sim when feeling unattractive)
1107	Would have Sims do undesirable RL goals (working out)
1108	Sim would be less identical to self when mood was a bit down/less than ideal/unmotivated
1109	Create identical Sim with some enhancements over RL
1110	Difficult to play with pre-set families
1111	More fun to play with Sims nearly identical to RL
1112	Harder to make personality like own when Sims too focused on basic needs
1113	Game mechanics improved over time
1114	Game became more realistic over time
1115	Surprised by calling game realistic
1116	Found activities that Sims could do as similar to own activities
1117	Sims did activities typically not done IRL
1118	Exploring scenarios in Sims unattainable IRL
1119	Wants lots of money in Sims because it's "the childhood ideal"
1120	Sims were social/active while preferring to be on couch in PJs IRL
1121	Sims with similar interests as self, but slightly different activities
1122	Sims can do unattainable things IRL (cook)
1123	Can control personality to match Sims' but not behavior options as much
1124	Sims more similar to self in personality than behavior
1125	Frustrated by some game mechanics
1126	Game mechanics forced Sims to be different from self

Appendix G

Example of Codes Clustered into a Category

Example of Codes Clustered into a Category

Code #	Pt. #	Code
Attachment or Connection to Sims		
42	2	Played most meaningful Sim more than others
44	2	Most meaningful Sim-more friends than other Sims.
47	2	Most meaningful Sim-different from other Sims
209	5	Avoiding Sims' death-emotional connection
207	5	Emotional connection to Sims
208	5	Desire for Sims not to die
214	5	OK to kills Sims w/o emotional connection to them
212	5	Dying Sims=depressed RL
246	5	Satisfaction with happy Sims
275	5	Attached to avatar
370	5	Feeling bad for Sims (if no friends)
371	5	Acknowledging emotion for a game
628	1	Emotional impact when most memorable Sim died
629	1	Surprised by impact of Sim's death on personal emotions
630	1	Feeling invested in favorite Sim
633	1	Name of Sim not remembered-not as important as Sims' actions
635	1	Sim family meaningful because of primary Sim
637	1	Less meaningful to play an acquired Sim than a created one
638	1	Stopped playing after main Sim died
666	1	Takes time to "develop" the Sim
731	1	Felt sad when Sim died
732	1	Surprised by Sim's death
734	1	Shocked when Sim died
735	1	Affected by Sims' friends dying
736	1	Gameplay impacted amount of play
737	1	Avoiding game to avoid emotions induced by game
626	1	Difficult to describe Sim despite being most memorable
999	7	Relates attachment to Sims to playing them over a lengthy time
1000	7	Used to feel more invested in actual Sims than now
1081	4	Most meaningful Sim was played through marriage and baby and had specific (artistic) career
1082	4	Put in time to build skills on most meaningful Sim
1083	4	Spent most time with most meaningful Sims
1084	4	Meaningful to watch the Sims change and improve with better skills
1086	4	Not a specific meaningful Sim, but a type of Sim and gameplay that was meaningful
1101	4	Not engaged with Sims not appearing as someone known IRL

1110	4	More fun to play with Sims nearly identical to RL
1133	4	Sims feel like raising children
1134	4	Wanting to better the Sims through their experiences like children
1135	4	Wanting Sims to be well-rounded
1245	4	Sometimes felt bad about actions taken against Sims (killing them)
1243	4	Mixed emotions about killing Sims-horrible yet enticed to do it
1228	4	Felt responsible for taking care of Sims
1272	4	Physical consequences to Sims for gameplay choices
1334	6	Felt peaceful doing certain behaviors in game (fishing)
1422	6	Goth family fit personal goth culture-connection with AI Sims
1430	6	Became emotional when Sim was shunned from community (for cheating)
1431	6	Had mixed feelings when Sim was shunned for cheating-both humor and sad/hurt
1446	6	Emotional person IRL; not surprised by emotional reactions to game
1472	3	Money constraints in Sims is stressful
1475	3	Unwilling/unable to play Sims through death
1510	3	Important for Sims to have good relationships
1518	3	Feeling emotional talking/thinking about meaninful Sim family
1525	3	Wanted names of children of meaninful Sim to be meaningful also
1549	3	Feels too disconnected to create Sim of opposite gender than self IRL
1554	3	Important for Sims to be smart and artistic (similar to RL)
1595	3	Scrutizine, second guess, and change avatar characteristics to get it "right"
1687	9	Plays same Sim over long term
1689	9	Chooses for Sim not to get old to avoid seeing her look old
1783	9	Important for Sim to stay happy
1826	10	Finds humor in watching friends as Sims do unrealistic things
1829	10	Strong emotion (sadness) when Sim pet similar to RL pet died
1842	10	More recent relevant Sim is most meaningful
1847	10	Identified meaningful family as "special" and "cool"
1849	10	Stopped playing favorite Sim family after game malfunctioning (not self-initiated)
1856	10	Miss play "my me family"
1858	10	Taking "me" Sims more seriously now; more relevant and important
1891	10	Will create new Sim family if "not into" originally created Sim family
1893	10	Creates story lines for Sims based on random character creation
1894	10	Creates Sim house based on story created about who Sim might be
1903	10	Feels connected to and loves avatars
1917	10	Sad to see "fun" Sim family die, but not as connected as "me" Sim family
1924	10	Sad about Sim games corrupting over time

1925	10	Wishing to go back and play old/fond Sim families
1932	10	Surprised by urgency felt trying to save dying pet Sim
1934	10	Found consolation in AI behaviors (ghosts/Sims grieving after death)
1935	10	Not surprised by power of the game, but still impacted when it affects emotions deeply IRL
1939	10	Chooses traits for Sim from RL self, then feels closer to them as a result
1952	10	Feels more justified to kill Sims for a reason than for fun
1955	10	Less inclined to be mean to Sim families that are more meaningful
1956	10	"Really care" about some Sims, like "me" Sim
1960	10	Closeness to Sim is less about likeness to Sim and more about mindset going into playing that Sim
1961	10	Closeness to Sim unknown at point of Sim creation
1964	10	Closeness to Sims builds through time spent playing them
1976	10	Sims was funny when Sim AI acted out RL secret desires/joke between friends
1986	10	Envisioning Sim's entire life story from character creation

Appendix H

Final Themes with Integrated Categories

Final Themes with Integrated Categories

- Self-Representation

  - Gameplay is Representative of Self

  - Self-defined Meaningful Goals

  - Variation in Ways to Play

  - Connection Between What's Happening in Physical Life and Style of Gameplay

  - "Me" Sim as Self

  - Sim Similar to Self

  - Sim as Ideal or Better than Physical Life

  - Game Personalization

  - Investment in Sims

- Past, Present, Future

  - Using Sims to Try on Something for the Future

  - Connection Between What's Happening in Physical Life and Style of Gameplay

  - Sim as Ideal or Better than Physical Life

  - Sim Different from Self

  - Changes in Gameplay Over Time

- Familiarity

  - Gameplay Routine

  - Nostalgia/Familiarity

  - Sims as Safe

  - Game Personalization

- Purpose for Play

- o Connection Between What's Happening in Physical Life and Frequency of Gameplay

- o Using Sims to Fill a Physical Life Purpose

- o Connection Between What's Happening in Physical Life and Style of Gameplay

- o Sims as Safe

- o Sims as Entertainment

- o Desiring Game Privacy

- Co-Creation

  - o "Me" Sim as Self

  - o Sim as Other

  - o AI/Self Duality

  - o Game Limitations

  - o Gameplay Based on Game

  - o Game Personalization

- Self-Reflection

  - o Sims as Cultural Reflection or Awareness of Personal Issues

  - o New Learning about Self through Reflections of Gameplay

  - o Embarrassment or Shame about Gameplay Choices

  - o Playing Evil/Negative Sims

  - o Negative Evaluation of Self in Physical Life

  - o Attachment or Connection to Sims

  - o Lack of Connection to Sims

  - o Sim as Ideal or Better than Physical Life