

The Evolution of Emotion Work in *The Sims 1-4*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Sims is a massively popular digital game series, spawning four flagship titles and countless spin-offs for PC, console, and mobile since its 2000 debut. *The Sims* has always been a game about managing simulated lives, yet over the years it has also become a game about managing simulated emotions. While earlier installments asked players to make their Sims happy by meeting a selection of six essential needs, which have loose correspondence to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, later installments make the pursuit of Sim happiness more complex. In the latest installment, *The Sims 4* (2014) – which still receives updates and expansion packs to this day – players are required to perform in-game emotion work to keep their Sims happy, if not simply functional. Taking an intersectional feminist approach, this paper explores how the type of emotional management asked of players in *The Sims 4* risks reinstating a patriarchal feminization of emotion work, and by doing so reaffirming patriarchal happiness scripts.

The Sims, as a literal dollhouse simulator with what is often labelled “casual,” if not “feminine,” gameplay mechanics (Cote 2020, 101), has long been considered a “girls’ game” (Khalatbari et al. 2023, 81). It is notable, then, that as the association between *The Sims* and female, feminine, and/or casual players grew, so too did *The Sims*’ implementation of emotion work via in-game mechanics. Such affective labor is common to casual game design, due to the genre’s presumed female player-base, and casual games often feature “emotional appeals” to engage players (Anable 2018, 93; see also Chess 2011). *The Sims 4* perpetuates this gendered focus on emotion work in casual games, which is exacerbated by the series’ ties to analog doll play (Flanagan 2003; Palmer 2023), a historically feminized play culture intended to teach girls how to keep house and become good wives and mothers. While such intended teachings through doll play have long been subverted by the players themselves, in both *The Sims* and analog doll culture (Flanagan 2003), dolls and dollhouses are still positioned as feminine toys, designed to play out particular – if evolving – gendered scripts targeted at women and girls. This presentation is therefore interested in unpacking what emotional management responsibilities are being forwarded to the

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female/feminized player of *The Sims 4* today, and what layers of patriarchal complicity this simulated emotion work retracts as players strive towards Sim happiness and its promised, ideologically weighted rewards.

In *The Sims 4*, the emotion work of pursuing happiness occurs not simply by the meeting of needs, but by attaining social situations, objects, or life events that are assigned positive “moodlets” by the system. Moodlets, a gameplay mechanic originally introduced in *The Sims 3* (2009), but fleshed out in *The Sims 4*, either add to or subtract from a Sim’s happiness, based on whether a positive or negative life event triggered the moodlet. Positive moodlets are essentially a gameplay manifestation of what Ahmed calls “happiness scripts” (2010, 59), those rules we learn to live by to achieve forms of happiness or pleasure which maintain rather than disrupt the status quo. *The Sims 4*, in materializing emotion work via moodlets, also materializes the very scripting of social scripts: it shows how happiness scripts are not inherent from birth, but coded into us by external forces and scripted differently depending on the ideological powers shaping our societies. What is supposed to make a Sim feel happy, playful, angry, sad, confident, and so on, acts as a mirror to the happiness scripts we are taught to pursue in real-life. Many of these happiness scripts, however, maintain exploitative ideological relations related to capitalist consumer culture, an ideology grounding *The Sims* since its first instalment (Kline et al. 2003), yet the pursuit of happiness in *The Sims* is also entangled with heteronormative, colonial patriarchy.

In considering the patriarchal dimensions of simulated emotion work and happiness scripts in digital “girls’ games” like *The Sims 4*, I draw on the gendered history of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Patriarchy frequently dematerializes – or renders invisible – the emotion work performed by women (Bolton 2009), especially women of color (Wingfield 2021). *The Sims 4*, in a sense, rematerializes emotion work, by making emotional management a quantified in-game mechanic, via the moodlet system and its accompanying happiness-based reward system (in which Sims with more “satisfaction points” can earn in-game perks). Yet this rematerializing of emotion work is overtly utopian in that, in the game-world itself, each Sim – regardless of gender, race, or sexuality – is presented as requiring and performing equal levels of emotion work. Not only is emotion work equally required in-game across Sim identities, but any Sim can pursue any happiness script programmed into the game. If a Sim faces barriers to successful emotion work or happiness, these are player-selected barriers (based on a Sim’s customizable personality traits), rather than simulations of real-life systemic barriers (e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia). *The Sims 4*’s seemingly inclusive game world can in this way act as representational “window dressing” (Chang 2017, 228; see also Wark 2009), which does not account for the disparity faced by marginalized identities in the real-world, nor for the fact it is a female/feminized player being hailed to undertake the complicated affective labor that keeps the Sims’ utopia emotionally stable.

Of course, players do not have to take up the emotional management prescribed by *The Sims 4*. This presentation acknowledges the many player-generated challenges to feminized emotion work and patriarchal happiness scripts in *The Sims* series, as seen in subversive play and rejection of Sim-caretaking (Flanagan 2003), as well as in the series’ extensive mod culture (Sihvonen 2011; St Fleur and deWinter 2021). Ultimately, however, I am concerned with how *The Sims 4* itself, following the series’ gendered evolutions, offers a patriarchal re-feminization of emotion work and the happiness scripts that work inscribes. In *The Sims 4*, happiness is presented as equally available to all, yet the emotion work undertaken by the feminized player to make the

(simulated) other happy unveils how patriarchal – and fundamentally unequal – the promise of happiness still is today.

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