

Buy, build, live: The Sims' American Dream, neoliberal utopia and its impact on city design

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this presentation we would like to present an analysis and case study of city design in games The Sims 3 (Maxis, 2009) and The Sims 4 (Maxis, 2014). The Sims series tries to simulate pleasurable life and create a safe space (Bódi, 2024) for players at the same time. The Maxis games are creating a utopian vision of our everyday cities reflecting Kłosiński's reinterpretation (2018) of Huizinga's magic circle (1955). While researching the relationship between game spaces and utopias, we are using the common understanding of the term 'utopia', however it should be noted that a fictional vision of an idealized world should be called 'eutopia' (Maj, 2014).

However, this simplified simulation of life lacks many of the hardships and systematic problems people face in reality. Instead, it creates an idealized, shallow portrayal of life in a neoliberal system, where everything can be obtained solely by hard work and discrimination or poverty doesn't exist. By eliminating all inequitable factors in its world, The Sims is trying to create a safe space that players can escape to from difficulties in their lives (Bódi, 2024). However, by doing that, the game sells an idealistic utopian idea that from the start everyone is equal to each other and so by hard work they can achieve the same outcome (Sicart, 2003). By that, the game world feels more like a simulation of the American Dream than of life itself (Scuderi, 2023). By showing this capitalist utopia, The Sims resemble something akin to

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Baudrillard's (1994) simulacrum as many game worlds do (Kłosiński, 2018). This impacts city planning in the series significantly.

The suburbia in American society and media carries the image of safety and family values, when in history we can see that this image was heavily curated, fake and built upon exclusions and xenophobia (Massey, Denton, 1993). Only certain groups could live there, and it was dictated by the law how this area should look (Rothstein, 2017). Moreover, the concept of suburbia was never a natural emerging phenomenon, but an artificial system promoted by developers (Duany et al., 2000), influenced by the gas and car industries, excluding individuals that are unable to drive (Bozovic, 2025). The Sims series replicates the same image of suburbia as safe cozy space, but does not acknowledge its history and many problems, they are sort of *lost in translation* from reality to game. We believe that this erasure of said issues only cements this false image of American suburbia (Curlew, 2005) and further plays in neoliberal utopias.

However the visible elements that signify the exclusion are still present in this games, for example in The Sims 4 there are no vehicles, your sim will just teleport to location, but the cities are still designed in a car-dependent manner, just as there is no racism or homophobia in the games but there is suburbia that was built upon exclusion (Fishman, 1987). The default place for starting your game in The Sims is a typical suburbia where the player builds their own home from the start, such as Willow Creek in The Sims 4 and Sunset Valley in The Sims 3. Strict rules for building American suburb houses (Duany et al., 2000) are replicated by a limited number of items a player can choose from in the series. The neoliberal utopia is further being replicated in city design by exclusion of slums or other poor districts from the games (Curlew, 2005). Furthermore, in The Sims 3 the better social standing you have, the more probable that your sims will live far away from the starting area, usually on top of hills or in penthouses on rooftops, which is exemplified by the city Bridgeport from the Late Night DLC (Udontcareaboutphilip, 2025).

The Sims' privileged perspective is exemplified by how it views other more "exotic" locations. It suffers from orientalist and colonialist tendencies, represented by vacation worlds, for example Selvadorada, in which your sims can't live but they can go to explore. Those worlds are inspired by real world places dominated by tourism (Murthy, 2019). The player is not meant to experience the culture of the places, but to play into the escapist narration of breaking the Sims' everyday work routine. Even if a certain tourist destination gets its own world, it is often portrayed by a single activity special to this location. For example, in the Mt. Komorebi location, inspired by rural Japan, the player is encouraged to explore a mountain or go skiing, which is viewed as a vacation activity. The Sims' transactional and capitalistic idea of those places is further exemplified by the possibility of selling historical artefacts from those destinations.

In conclusion The Sims offers its players an altered version of our reality, by which it presents a capitalistic and neoliberal agenda reflected in the game's city design. The game tries to create a pleasurable simulation of life, which in fact is making a utopian version of our reality by erasing all the discriminating and exclusive factors. However, The Sims displays auto-centric planning despite not even having cars in the first two games. Similarly, the game creates a safe environment without inequalities and exploitation, basing its world on an American suburbia - inherently inequitable,

classist, and xenophobic urban planning approach. In our presentation we hope to provide an interesting perspective on utopias, neoliberal game spaces and idealized simulation of reality.

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