

# The Sims: Digital Puppets and the Afterlife of a Dollhouse

## Die Sims: Digitale Puppen und das Nachleben eines Puppenhauses

**Mariya Savina**

### *ABSTRACT (English)*

**T**he Sims is a popular computer game developed as a digital version of a dollhouse inhabited by digital puppets (or Sims) which are similar to human beings. Being a mix of a common doll, such as Barbie, with a real human or, more precisely, with its representation in popular psychology and in modern theories of personality, a Sim not only illustrates the contemporary transformation of dolls into humanlike digital 'creatures' but also their role in building and transforming the player's subjectivity as well as his/her image of the world. This paper discusses Sims as puppets and the image of a human they embody. The focus on the (inter)subjectivity of the Sims and on the resulting connection between their artificial world and the social world of the players can be seen as an invitation to engage in a kindly self-ironization of contemporary life contexts in digital puppetry.

**Keywords:** The Sims, Sim, doll, dollhouse, subjectivity

### *ABSTRACT (Deutsch)*

**D**ie Sims ist ein populäres Computerspiel, das als digitale Version eines Puppenhauses entwickelt wurde. In diesem Haus leben digitale, menschenähnliche Puppen (die Sims), die wie eine Mischung aus einer Puppe, beispielsweise Barbie, mit einem echten Menschen wirken oder, genauer gesagt, wie die Verbindung der Puppe mit einem Menschenbild, das aus Alltags-Psychologie und modernen Persönlichkeitstheorien abgeleitet wurde. Diesem Menschenbild entsprechend repräsentiert ein Sim nicht nur die zeitgenössische Transformation von Puppen (von konkreter Materialität in digitale Virtualität), sondern übernimmt auch deren Rolle im Prozess der Beeinflussung von Subjektivität und Weltbild des Spielers/der Spielerin. Der vorliegende Beitrag betrachtet Sims sowohl als Puppen als auch als verkörperten Ausdruck eines bestimmten Menschenbildes. Die Fokussierung auf die (Inter)Subjektivität der Sims und auf den dabei entstehenden Zusammenhang zwischen deren künstlicher Welt und der sozialen Welt der Spieler kann als Aufforderung gesehen werden, sich im digitalen Puppenspiel auf eine freundliche Selbst-Ironisierung zeitgenössischer Lebenszusammenhänge einzulassen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Die Sims, Sim, Puppe, Puppenhaus, Subjektivität

## Introductory Remarks

**T**he *Sims* is a life-simulation computer game created by Will Wright. The goal of this game is to build a house where digital creatures called “Sims” can live and satisfy their needs and desires with help of a player. Will Wright started to develop *The Sims* franchise when he had to find a new home and make it comfortable for his life after his own house had burned down. In the beginning, it was very difficult to find financial support for this project, as the game was often seen as too ‘girly’ and potentially not interesting for the male majority of computer players (Seabrook 2006). Nevertheless, such support was eventually found, and the first version of a game was released in 2000. *The Sims* became extremely popular among boys and girls alike. It had different expansion packs and continued to develop in sequels, *The Sims 2* (2004), *The Sims 3* (2009), and *The Sims 4* (2014). With each sequel, the world of the Sims expanded itself psychologically, socially, and geographically, making the characters more and more humanlike by developing their ‘personalities’, their system of social interaction and by adopting new elements of our everyday life to the virtual reality of a Sim.

## Subjectivity of a Sim

Sims are digital puppets similar to common dolls, especially to Barbie. However, there is an important difference between both: Sims are ‘alive’ and their life is temporal. Not only their daily routines, but also their lifecycles resemble those of human beings: Sims are born, grow up, retire, and die. Because of the temporality of their life, the task of a player is to make the life of a Sim good and take care of it. From this perspective, a Sim combines in itself a Barbie-doll and a house pet similar to a human. Their ‘vitality’ expresses itself not only in the temporal character of their life, e.g. in growing up and dying, but also in the biological cycles and processes within the life of a Sim, such as sleeping and being awake. Moreover, each Sim not only has different states of mind and biological needs, but also something similar to a ‘personality’, with different attitudes, needs, and emotions as well as humanlike desires, goals, memories, and even a personal sense of life.

In the original game, only the basic needs of a Sim were taken into consideration. Its life consisted of making money and caring about hunger, energy, social

interactions, etc. (see figure 1). Starting from *The Sims 2*,<sup>1</sup> Sims have a hierarchy of desires. The basic needs are still there, but their fulfilment is not enough for a Sim to be satisfied with its life. To be happy, Sims must, first of all, fulfil their wishes, which appear spontaneously as a constellation of personal and situational, or contextual, factors. Ideally, a Sim also should tend to achieve its lifelong goal, or its meaning of life. This goal is either connected with the Sim’s personal characteristics, i.e. with its ‘character’ created by the player, or is randomly assigned. Being formulated very specifically, e.g. as ‘Marry Off 6 Children’ (*The Sims 2*) or ‘Reach Level 9 in the Science career track’ (*The Sims 3*), Sims’ lifelong goal is considered to be determined by the hidden value system the specific personality of the Sim may hypothetically possess. Sims, therefore, not only have a ‘personality’ and a personal meaning of life beyond the satisfaction of basic needs. Their behaviour can also be considered as being influenced by an implicit value system.

As an ‘alive’ doll, a Sim embodies the image of a man based on modern psychological knowledge and its representation in popular culture. For instance, the general psychological concept of motivation plays a central role in explaining and determining Sims’ mood, emotions, and behaviour. In *The Sims*, motivation is understood as meaning-giving drives presented as specific goals that depend on Sims’ implicit values, but not on their biology. Achieving personal goals makes a Sim happier and its life more fulfilled. A similar image of a fulfilled human being can also be found in post-war psychological theories of personality (first of all, in that of existential and humanistic psychology) and in psychological researches and practices of our time. Just after 1945, Viktor Frankl criticizes reductionist psychological approaches and emphasizes the key existential role of the



Figure 1: Inside the house (*The Sims*)

<sup>1</sup> As of now, *The Sims* franchise has four parts. It is the franchise in general which I mean when I mention *The Sims* in my analysis. I specify the number of the exact part only when it is necessary.

problem of the meaning of life (Frankl 1972). Slightly earlier, Abraham Maslow develops a so-called pyramid of needs, with physiological needs at the bottom and self-actualization needs at the top of it. In accordance with his early ideas, this pyramid is functioning hierarchically, so that the higher needs, or the needs of growth, can be satisfied only after having taken care of the deficiency needs of the first four levels (Maslow 1943). Later, criticizing his early ideas of a hierarchy, Maslow proposes two principles of motivation, namely those of deficit and of growth, functioning independently of each other (Maslow 1968). These theoretical developments have shifted the interest of academic psychology from negative deficits and lacks to positive goals, values, strengths, and virtues, making their scientific research possible (e.g. Seligman 2002). At the same time, this new, positive image of a man has become part of popular psychology, thereby influencing the general psychological culture through the popularisation of self-development ideas and practices.

All these are reflected in the figure of a Sim. Embodied as the Sim, however, this positive image of a man turns into a caricature. Firstly, the ‘character’ of a Sim described through a set of personal traits defined by the game can only be seen as a caricature, or as a cartoon sketch of a real human character. For instance, in *The Sims 3*, the ‘character’ of a Sim is thought to be a combination of five traits which usually describe a Sim through its qualities and behavioural tendencies, such as ‘coach potato’, ‘bookworm’, ‘neurotic’, etc. (see figure 2).

As a result, the Sim’s ‘character’ combines very particularly formulated, superficial, and, hence, caricature elements. Applied to the Sim, the idea of happiness and self-actualization becomes its caricature as well: happiness, the central principle of the life of a Sim, turns to be a quantitative, or even a financial, characteristic of the life of a Sim. Each Sim in the game has its Happiness Points, or a special happiness currency, the amount of which increases by fulfilling a Sim’s wishes. It allows the player to buy the specific happiness rewards, helping to make the life of a Sim easier. This ‘currency’

also lets the player change the personality of a Sim, so that even the ‘psychological changes’ depend on the success of Sim’s self-actualization, as calculated in the Happiness Points. As a result, the motivation of a Sim, which is, generally speaking, the motivation to become happier, can be described as a relationship between being happy and achieving goals. These two principles function as pre-conditions of each other: the happier the Sim is, the easier it follows the player’s commands, and the easier it achieves goals that, in turn, make it happier and reinforces one’s happiness budget.

Summing up, *The Sims* provides the player with an easy-understandable logic of being a person (a Sim) as being (un)happy and (un)successful in the economy of fulfilling personal wishes and desires. What makes this image different from the real psychology of a human is the absolute lack of inner conflicts and crises: Sims have no inner conflicts concerning their desires or decision-making while negative events merely leave a negative emotional trace, eventually expiring by itself. The conflicts and crises do not belong to the Sims’ world and can only be projected there by the player.

***Sims – interactive yet other-directed in their environment***

The Sim not only caricatures the image of a man built by a positive psychological paradigm reflected in popular culture,<sup>2</sup> but also ‘lives’ in an environment similar to ours. Sims have houses and families, jobs, and friends to go out with, they communicate with each other, and they build different relationships. Similar to the environment of Barbie, the world of the Sim is constructed, first of all, materially – as a private house with furniture (see figure 1) – and socially as ‘intersubjective’ space, namely as relationships between the residents of a suburb. In other words, Sim’s subjectivity also reveals itself as its connectedness with the (material) environment and with others.

The environment of a Sim can be defined as a social materiality: on the one hand, there is nature (space, sky, earth, trees, etc.) functioning as a background of a family life, and, on the other, there are material objects and subjects of interaction. Strictly speaking, there are two main aspects of the Sim’s environment: 1) neutral background of a game, and 2) life inside and outside of the family in

2 Compared to Barbie, however, this image is more progressive, especially in terms of gender and equality. For instance, the gender of a Sim is not predetermined. Moreover, in *The Sims* women have the same interactive options and career chances as men do. See also Sicart (2003).



Figure 2: A Sim demonstrating the “Absent-Minded” trait (*The Sims 3*)

form of interaction with objects. Therefore, Sims are subjects of interactive activity or, precisely, subjects of middle-class life unrolled theatrically.

The Sims' environment is designed as a stage where life with its events and processes takes place (cf. Lorentz 2015, 38; Murray 2000, 235ff.; Reid-Walsh 2006, 10). This environment embraces all Sims as well as the objects of their interactive activity. The difference from real people, however, is that Sims are connected to the world only through direct interaction with objects and objectified others but not through meanings. In other words, Sims build relationships with things and individual others without working creatively on the relationship structure as such or without being connected to their world through any kind of creative production. Moreover, the connectedness of a Sim to the outside is limited by the walls of its private house. As a result, Sims' connection to the world is reduced to relationship with separate objects and 'individuals' inside and outside the family. At the same time, it manifests itself in the form of material wealth. For instance, Sims have the possibility to go to work, but their 'going-to-work' activity does not have any impact on the outside. Instead of influencing the life of the community, the job only improves the family financial well-being and brings just a few work acquaintances. As a result, it becomes a material presupposition of the quite-fulfilled life which, however, creates no social meanings outside of the house walls.

The idea to make a Sim connected with the world through the material state of its family mirrors some crucial aspects of our capitalistic social reality and its subjectivity (cp. Sicart 2003; Sihvonen 2011, 162ff.). Sims do not have any public life, their relationship with the world is particularly private. Speaking once again about career-building, job and career bring nothing new to the life of a Sim except money for new objects of consumption that are required to live well and happily. Since the activity of a Sim is reduced to building its house, career, and family, its (happy) life turns to be a biological, reproductive sustenance. The latter excludes the free-will action of a Sim even as a simulation and lets the maximum of its free will constitute itself only as rejection of commands issued by the player when the needs of the Sim are unsatisfied.

The importance of the satisfaction of needs and wishes corresponds with the basic domesticity of the environment of a Sim (cf. Flanagan 2003). The latter limits the world of a Sim and can be metaphorically conceptualized as a comfortable cage where the Sims 'live' the repetition of the same, which is its social-biological



Figure 3: Sims' family (*The Sims 4*)

maintenance of life. While a Sim builds its house and career, the house represents the (interactive) self of the Sim: when the whole landscape with earth, roads, trees, and inhabited houses, in its totality, organizes a stage, the inwardness of the house builds its foreground and is the place of the main action. It normally has walls, doors, windows, furniture, and objects the Sim can interact with. At the same time, other Sims, especially family members living together, can also become objects of interaction and react in accordance with their psychology and mood. Similar to environmental objects, other Sims are the source of fulfilling needs, goals, and wishes of the Sim that is played and 'lives' out the drama<sup>3</sup> of its life.

Speaking about the form of being, there is no intersubjectivity between the played Sim and the interacted object, but, at the same time, the world of the Sim lets the intersubjectivity be played by letting the player play simultaneously different Sims inside the family (see figure 1). The player cannot control reactions of

<sup>3</sup> It needs not, however, always be drama. There are plenty of internet communities of players who create different types of stories about their Sims' families.

different Sims in communication with each other; instead, he/she has the power to influence its positive or negative outcome by controlling the moods and needs of all family members. To live in a house as a family and have relationships with other house members is the main form of being of a Sim (see figure 3). Even when the Sim lives alone, its being has the form of a family, even when it is the family of oneself. Such a family can always be expanded at least into the community of two acquaintances living together.

Relationships and connectedness with separate others tend to be almost as important for the subjectivity of a Sim as the house itself. For instance, starting from *Sims 2*, all Sims have a family tree that transforms by changing the family status of a Sim (e.g. by getting married or having babies), so that the life of one seems to be always related to the life of others. That makes the life of a Sim closer to ours and lets the players experiment with family forms and types. However, the sphere of interactive existence of a Sim is empty both socially and politically: being able to build relationships with separate others, Sim does not have access to the sphere of social relationships as such. It can only reproduce the forms allowed by the game, whereas the dynamic, unpredictable social world with its possible new forms and structures is open to the real life of the player. Moreover, Sims do not have common history of a community. Their history takes place in the same landscape of a suburban life, where it reduces itself to private histories of separate families mirrored in family trees and houses. In other words, Sims live in houses instead of living in history, which, of course, is a possible form of being for a man as well. At the same time, their unhistorical life – in the unchangeable or slightly changeable environment of the suburbs – reflects some historical forms of living already existing in our world, which reproductively sustain its sameness in the artificial reality of a Sim.

### ***The limit and expansion of the Sim's world: the player***

Living on the stage of the world, minimized to a house, Sims can reach neither the perspective of the viewer nor that of the director of a show. The position of a viewer, as well as the access to the structure of social relationships behind the singular connections between artificial 'individuals', belongs to the world of a player – on which the world of a Sim has (transformative) impact.

Playing in the theatre of life, the Sim combines in itself not only Barbie and a house pet, but also a marionette puppet that follows commands of a player who

is parallel to the viewer and the director of a show. The player mixes these two positions in one godlike perspective of being beyond the scene and, at the same time, somehow giving commands to the Sim 'from the inside', as if the player was a good or a bad inner will of a Sim. Speaking from the perspective of the game metaphoric, the player is a god-similar other for the Sim that turns its view in the specific direction the player wants it to be turned. More precisely, this position can be specified as an inner daemon, good or bad guiding spirit, which seems to be located inside the head of a Sim (see figure 4).

Just as a gnostic God cognizes the divine Self through creatures, the player of *The Sims* not only learns something about people and life, but he/she also learns to understand and interpret him/herself by playing the game. This learning has two aspects. The first one is related to the social system of interactions the player can find, practice, and adopt from the game to his/her real life (Lorentz 2015, 28). This aspect considers the convergence and similarity between a Sim and a man, making it easier for the player to transcend him/herself in the Sim, as well as his/her life's situation in these of the latter. This aspect of a game also has a psychotherapeutic potential that has already been emphasized in different researches. For instance, the player can project his/her feelings, thoughts, and emotions onto the world of a Sim and play them out or learn better his/her desires, wishes, and inclinations (cp. Griebel 2006; Skigen 2008, 173f.). The game and its characters can also function as a source and a medium of successful interaction between the client and the psychotherapist (Fanning and Brighton 2007).

The similarity between a Sim and a man lets the player consider the Sim as his/her different 'I' which can motivate the player to research it and know it better. An example of such research is the YouTube flash mob '24 Hour Living As My Sim Challenge' where players of *The Sims* 'recreate' themselves in the game, turn on the free-will regime, note all actions of the Sim during one day in the virtual reality, and then try to exactly repeat that day with all the actions of the Sim in their own life.<sup>4</sup> Although this flash mob is motivated by Sims' similarity



Figure 4: Active Sim's head following the command of a player (*The Sims 3*)

4 See, for instance, <https://youtu.be/1V4hGBZ87zU>

with us, it actually shows huge differences between players in real life and the characters portraying them in *The Sims*. First of all, the temporality of biological needs of a Sim differs from ours so that plenty of players have suffered from hunger, e.g. having eaten just one yogurt or two slices of chocolate cake during the day. The other important finding is that Sims need a player to make their actions reasonable. Otherwise, they tend to organize the time irrationally – for instance, staying in front of the bathroom mirror for 40 minutes drinking a glass of water from the sink until their mood gets worse or until they ‘realize’ a new desire.<sup>5</sup> This leads us to another important aspect of learning by playing *the Sims*, which is the understanding of contrasts and differences between the life of a Sim and that of a player. Transcending his/herself in the life of a Sim, the player not only learns from the Sim but also potentially differs between the two lives, the real and the artificial one, exactly by drawing parallels between both of them: when making friends is possible in *The Sims*, why would it not be in real life (Lorentz 2015, 28)? Of course, the world of a Sim is more predictable and generally more comfortable as long as it is a world of simplified domesticity. It is also in some way an absurd world, in which the consumerist society becomes a caricature of itself. The representation of a happiness idyll in the form of domestic life may also make the player think whether the world of a Sim represents the whole life as it is, which is almost the same as ours, or whether there is something missing in this world, something that can only be found outside of the digital dollhouse. In this case, one distinguishes the Sim and him/herself already on the level of playing by considering something more in and above going to work/school or in keeping the house and relationships. This ‘more’ is possible only outside the world of Sims as the individual experience of meanings through which the one is connected to the world.

In other words, playing with the life of a Sim provides the player with an amount of (utopian) meanings that, at the same time, has a critical impact on the estimation of one’s life. The life of a Sim provides the player with values of a happy and peaceful housekeeping, unfolding itself in the form of small, private interactions with the world (cp. Sicart 2003). The player can adopt these values to real life and take a critical perspective of his/her own position in the world. This critical impact has two possible options. The first option is a negative comparison

of a played utopia with one’s own life, which leads to positive attempts to make it better in accordance with the values played in the game. The second option implies a critical position in the world of a Sim as well as understanding its limits. For instance, the game lets the player create the family or the house he/she wants and imitate the relationships of family members, imagining the possible motives of their life choices. However, sooner or later, the game stops. The player leaves his/her Sim with its needs and problems and comes back to his/her own life, in which he/she may try to be guided by the images of a happy family, most likely without any success, because the game completely ignores the dynamic of psychological development of an individual as well as that of a family system. As soon as real life becomes much more complex than the played one, the critical understanding of the difference between reality and illusion may arise. In this case, the life of a Sim can help the player develop an ironic stance on some aspects of his/her everyday house routine, seeing its banality from the perspective of the imagined utopian depth, so that banal things such as dishwashing or taking a bath turn into practices of satisfied fulfilment.

After playing with a Sim, the player may ask him/herself whether the happiness understood as career progress and a good household is the highest goal one should follow. Sims show us our own life in its repetitive banality in which everything is presented as everything that is, which starkly differs from the complexity of real life, with its ‘what can and what cannot be’. Strictly speaking, nothing new can happen in the world of a Sim. The question is whether the same tendency is relevant for the life practices of a contemporary person.

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In comparison to the usual children’s play with puppets, the play with Sims demands from the player to treat a Sim as a human-similar creature, which means to take a responsibility for its physiological, psychological and economic well-being by sustaining Sims’ lives. Not just the doll stays in the center of the game, it is the life as such or, more precisely, the life of a family and the life of each Sim inside the family. “*Play with life*” – the original slogan of *The Sims* – directly mirrors the central goal of the game. In contrast to a classical doll play of a child, the player of *The Sims* plays directly with life of a human similar virtual creature. Having a humanlike ‘state of mind’ and being able to influence the way of playing with them through needs, wishes and desires, Sims are more autonomous compared to

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<sup>5</sup> E.g. in [https://youtu.be/AbKVeP\\_BZVg](https://youtu.be/AbKVeP_BZVg)

common dolls. At the same time, as ‘living’ creatures they are more dependent from the player, who is responsible for them as a precondition of their existence. In other words, Sims are at the same time objects of a play and subjects of their life in the world.

However, the world of Sims is much simpler as that of real human beings. As dolls, they simulate the psychology of a human individual, integrating it with practices of private life so that the world of Sims becomes a reduction of that of ours, a digital form of private well-being. Therefore, if we try to define the image of a man embodied by the Sim with help of Max Scheler’s version of the Kantian question – “Was ist der Mensch, und was ist seine Stellung im Sein?” (Scheler 1991, 5), the answer would be quite ironic: man is a subject striving for happiness with a private house as his/her place in being. As a caricature of a man and his/her psychological life, Sims incarnate important aspects of our life, namely its everydayness and calculability. In difference to a real human, however, being alive does not exactly mean being mortal for a Sim. It rather means taking its own temporal part in the eternal, repetitive flow of life, a flow of indifferent mechanical time with happiness and suffering as its calculable, temporal characteristics. In the world where life is strongly identified with the mechanical repetition of the same, the happiness as the main goal of one’s being turns out to be the only possible, redemptive way to overcome the temporality dictated by a clock-hand motion. As a result, defining the life as endless attempts to increase, multiply, and sustain happiness through the generations coming and replacing one another, Sims should be seen as a kindly self-ironization of a contemporary man concerning the capitalistic circumstances of his/her being, which seem to replace one’s mortality with the immortality of increase.

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