

From Designing Houses to Studying Architecture: Did Those Who Study Design Share Any Similarities in Playing the Sims Game?

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Abstract: Wright's famous game The Sims, and its sequels; The Sims2 (2004), The Sims3 (2009), and The Sims4 (2014) are computer based digital games that provide digital settings to simulate virtual dollhouses (Martey and Stromer-Galley, 2007). They are one of the most played games of all time, which is why it has been the focus of academic studies since its first release. Within the scope of this research, a comprehensive survey was conducted. The first phase of the survey was conducted with 54 participants and the participants who graduated from different departments were asked whether there is a relationship between The Sims game experiences, interest in playing SIMS and choosing a profession. The following phase was conducted with the focus of architects, interior architects and industrial design graduates and students, who are called design faculty members. In this study, the effects of playing The Sims on the profession and their professional achievements were questioned.

Keywords: The SIMS, Playing Computer Games, Game-based Learning, Effect of Playing The Sims, Design Education

1. Introduction

Computer games are a significant component of most children's spare time, and they are also becoming an increasingly vital part of everyone's life. Adults frequently marvel as youngsters devote hours to playing different types of games. In the past, computer and video games were criticized as a distraction from more "useful" activities, often leading educators to overlook their potential. When teachers have discussed games, they have mostly concentrated on the social consequences of playing games, disregarding major educational possibilities (Squire, 2003). However, the perception of computer games has begun to shift as the educational potential of this medium becomes increasingly recognized. A growing body of research and scholarly articles explores how games enhance learning outcomes, cognitive skills, and engagement (Dale et al., 2020; Rebetz and Betrancourt, 2007; De Freitas and Liarokapis, 2011).

Combining the words "education" with "entertainment," the term "edutainment" first appeared in the 1970s to describe media that was intended to be both educational and entertaining. Walt Disney, whose early educational films and television shows sought to make learning fun for youngsters, has been linked with creating the idea. The phrase gained popularity in the 1980s, and companies began to create educational software and video games that combined gameplay, puzzles, and storytelling with learning objectives. With the introduction of CD-ROMs and personal computers in the 1990s, edutainment gained popularity as a means of distributing instructional materials both at home and in schools. The 2000s experienced a shift in internet and digital media that resulted in the growth of several online learning platforms and applications, expanding the possibilities and audience for edutainment (Aksakal, 2015; Mukherjee, 2019).

The importance of computer-based learning is further underscored by the rapid technological advancements that have transformed education. From the 1970s onwards, researchers like Papert (1973), Perlman (1976), Malone (1980), and White (1981) began investigating how computer-based technology could enhance education. Their work laid the foundation for what we now recognize as educational technology, where digital tools and platforms are integral to the learning process. With the advent of sophisticated computer games that incorporate educational content, students can now engage with material in a way that is interactive and tailored to their individual learning pace. This not only increases motivation and engagement but also helps in developing critical thinking and cognitive skills.

From the 1990s onward, academics, teachers, and learning resource designers began to explore how digital games and interactive media could be used to promote learning. Research studies were conducted to examine the cognitive and social benefits of these tools, and many educational institutions began incorporating computer-based learning modules and educational software into their curricula. By the 2000s, with increasing access to technology, there was a growing interest in harnessing the motivational aspects of games to support learning in formal and informal settings. This exploration has continued to evolve, leading to the development of game-based learning environments, simulations, and interactive digital content that are now widely used in classrooms and online learning platforms.

Educational researchers and teachers have begun to recognize the value of games like *The Sims* in fostering critical thinking, creativity, and strategic planning. By engaging with these virtual environments, players can develop skills that are transferable to real-life situations.

It's critical to emphasize how some video games, even those that aren't specifically made for educational purposes, may still provide an extensive amount of learning opportunities in order to connect the conversation about computer-based learning with the particular example of *The Sims*. The shift from a broad discussion of educational technology to the particular instance of *The Sims* entails realizing that many games have intrinsic educational value because of their design features, which promote problem-solving, investigation, and judgment.

While educational technology has historically concentrated on products specifically designed for learning, it is becoming increasingly clear that engaging students with games like *The Sims* may be done in a novel and efficient way. These games mimic actual events and give players a risk-free setting in which to try out various tactics and results. Even while these games' main objective is amusement, their open-ended design encourages creativity and critical thinking, making them useful educational resources. Among the games that best illustrate how a game meant for amusement may be adapted to promote educational objectives is *The Sims*. *The Sims* offers players the chance to hone skills in areas like resource management, design, and interpersonal relationships—all of which have real-world applications—through its simulation of daily living.

The Sims, a life simulation video game series, is an excellent example of how computer games can be harnessed for educational purposes, though it was not originally designed with education in mind. The game allows players to create and manage virtual people, known as "Sims," and guide them through various aspects of life, including building and designing homes, managing finances, developing careers, and navigating social relationships. The game emphasizes creativity, open-ended gameplay, and personal expression, allowing players to shape the lives of their Sims in various ways, from mundane day-to-day routines to more fantastical and extraordinary scenarios.

The game's appeal lies in its sandbox nature, where there are no strict goals or endings. Instead, players have the freedom to create and experiment within the virtual world, making choices that affect the lives of their Sims. This flexibility, combined with the ability to mod the game and add custom content, has made *The Sims* a popular and enduring franchise since its debut in 2000.

The Sims game has managed to attract attention since the first day it was released. Like any game that sells in huge numbers, it has been the focus of research. Despite its popularity, no academic studies have been published on the future career choices of Sims players when they were younger. There are limited studies on the game itself (Martey and Stromer-Galley, 2007, Sihvonen, 2009), gender differences in players' motivations and patterns (Jansz, Avis, Vosmeer, 2010), the simulation games genre (Lenhart et al., 2008; Nutt and Railton, 2003), and ideological and cultural features (Consalvo, 2003; Frasca, 2003).

In this study, which started from a personal inquiry, the past propensities of design faculty students in *The Sims* game and professional acquisitions retrieved from *The Sims* were questioned. As part of this research, a comprehensive survey was undertaken. The initial phase of the survey involved 54 participants, who had graduated from various academic disciplines, and they were asked to explore whether there was a connection between their experiences with *The Sims*, their interest in playing the game, and their choice of profession. The subsequent phase of the survey specifically targeted graduates and students from architecture, interior architecture, and industrial design programs—collectively referred to as design faculty members. This phase focused on examining the impact of playing *The Sims* on their professional development and achievements. Individual experiences are included. Research questions are defined as: How does the practice of playing *The Sims* differ between those who are from design school and those who are not? How does engagement with *The Sims* game influence individuals' career aspirations and academic choices in design-related fields? What kind of practices do those from the design faculty demonstrate during the house design phase in *The Sims* game?

2. The Sims Game

William Wright is an American video game designer who founded Maxis and part of Electronic Arts (URL-1). Electronic Arts' *The Sims* is a series of life simulation video games. During the Oakland-Berkeley Firestorm, his house was one of the first to burn down. Wright became interested in the worth of belongings and the possibility of satisfaction when reviewing his losses and material demands after his home burnt down. Having always been

interested in architecture, he proceeded to create a concept for a game in which players would simulate everyday routines in a rural neighborhood, including the design of a home from the roots up: The Sims was born.



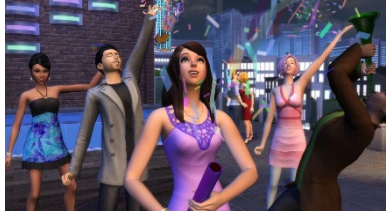

“I started to wonder about all the things we have and how we purchased them for a reason. Why do we need x or y or z? Why do we think something will make me happier? It almost came down to Maslow’s pyramid of needs,” Wright says (URL-2).

The Sims and its sequels' gameplay The Sims 2 (2004), The Sims 3 (2009), and The Sims 4 (2014) include maintaining a digital setting simulating a virtual dolls' dollhouse (Martey and Stromer-Galley, 2007). According to Jeff Braun who founded Maxis with Wright, when Wright presented his proposal to the Maxis board of directors, “the board looked at The Sims and exclaimed, 'What is this?' Is he proposing an interactive doll house? 'This guy is insane.'" Girls didn't play video games, and doll homes were for girls (URL-3). All this time, The Sims has been called many things: a sandbox, a toy, a dollhouse, a story engine, and a virtual world, as well as a game (Gee and Hayes, 2010). The Sims game has been continued to grow rapidly.

As of August 2024, *The Sims 4* has released 13 expansion packs, 12 game packs, 19 stuff packs, and 15 kits. With the latest updates, more detailed basements, pools, modular staircases have been added to the game, such as never before. The Sims games sold more than 200 million copies in gaming platforms as of 2019 (URL-4).

Along with playing, The Sims needs a great deal of design (Hayes, 2008). The player can establish a life for virtual persons known as "Sims," by pre-built homes or create their own, interiors, and outfits, as well as controlling them in overall. They direct their characters to satisfy their emotions and demands. The goal of the game is to keep your Sim characters happy, fed, clean, and nurtured (Flanagan, 2003). Wright created a method for "measuring" the happiness of the characters in his doll home based on their status, popularity, and skill, but also the environmental quality provided by the player— Characters are happier when they are in a pleasant home. After purchasing the game, most new Sims players spend hours (and usually days) in non-stop manipulation of the simulated house (Flanagan, 2003).

Table 1: Stages of playing The Sims (URL-5)

Stages	Definition
	<p>Create Unique Sims</p> <p>A variety of Sims are yours to personalize, each with distinct appearances, dynamic personalities, and inspiring aspirations. Create yourself, your favorite celebrities, your fantasy, or your friends!</p>
	<p>Build the Perfect Home</p> <p>Effortlessly build and design ideal homes for your Sims using Build Mode. Construct the home of your – and their – dreams by planning its layout, choosing furnishings, and altering the landscape and terrain.</p>
	<p>Explore Vibrant Worlds</p> <p>Travel between locations, discover amazing and distinctive neighborhoods, and encounter captivating venues. Your Sims can visit new communities, hang out with friends, or throw unforgettable parties.</p>
	<p>Add New Experiences</p> <p>Use the Gallery to find inspiration from a community of players just like you, where you can add content to your game or share your own creations. Download, like, and comment on your favorite Sims, homes, and fully-designed rooms. Join the community, join the fun!</p>

The SIMS describe the game on their website (URL-5) as follows: Unleash your imagination and create a world of Sims that's wholly unique. Explore and customize every detail from Sims to homes—and much more. According to the game manufacturer itself, the game has 4 stages; Create Unique Sims, Build the perfect home, Explore Vibrant Worlds and Add new experiences (Table 1).

The first stage, "Create Unique Sims," emphasizes the customization of Sims, where players can personalize their virtual characters with distinct appearances, dynamic personalities, and individual aspirations. This stage allows for a high degree of creativity, enabling players to design Sims that represent themselves, celebrities, or fictional characters.

In the second stage, "Build the Perfect Home," players can design and construct homes for their Sims. Using the game's Build Mode, players can effortlessly plan and create dream homes, choosing layouts, furnishings, and even altering the surrounding landscape and terrain. This stage focuses on architectural creativity and home design. "Build. Buy. Live." is the tagline of the game, and building is, accordingly, its first priority. Once the property deal is finalized, the player has the option to either construct a new home for their Sims or modify the existing one to better match their preferences and the needs of their Sims. Although building a new house is more expensive, it offers greater creative flexibility. The game's "build" mode provides an extensive and remarkably intuitive architectural toolkit, allowing players to easily manipulate and place everything from landscaping elements to window treatments using a simple, icon-based interface. If a room requires a door, the player can simply drag and drop it into place. The main challenge the player faces at this stage, aside from budget constraints, is the overwhelming number of design choices available. As the player browses through these options, it becomes clear why Celia Pearce (2002) referred to The Sims as "the IKEA game." Furniture is presented in a catalogue-style menu, each item accompanied by a perfectly crafted description highlighting its advantages (Paulk, 2006).

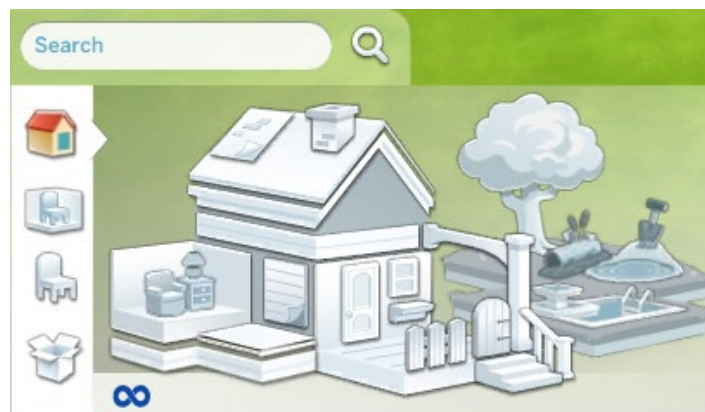


Figure 1: Build mode in The Sims 4 (URL-6)

The third stage, "Explore Vibrant Worlds," involves Sims traveling between various locations and exploring different neighborhoods. This stage allows players to immerse their Sims in diverse environments, meet new people, and engage in activities such as attending parties or visiting new communities.

Finally, the "Add New Experiences" stage encourages players to engage with the broader Sims community through the Gallery. Here, players can find inspiration, download, share, and comment on user-created content, such as Sims, homes, and rooms.

This stage fosters a sense of community, allowing players to enhance their game with content created by others and share their creations with the world. Together, these stages represent the core experiences of The Sims, combining personal expression, creativity, exploration, and community interaction.

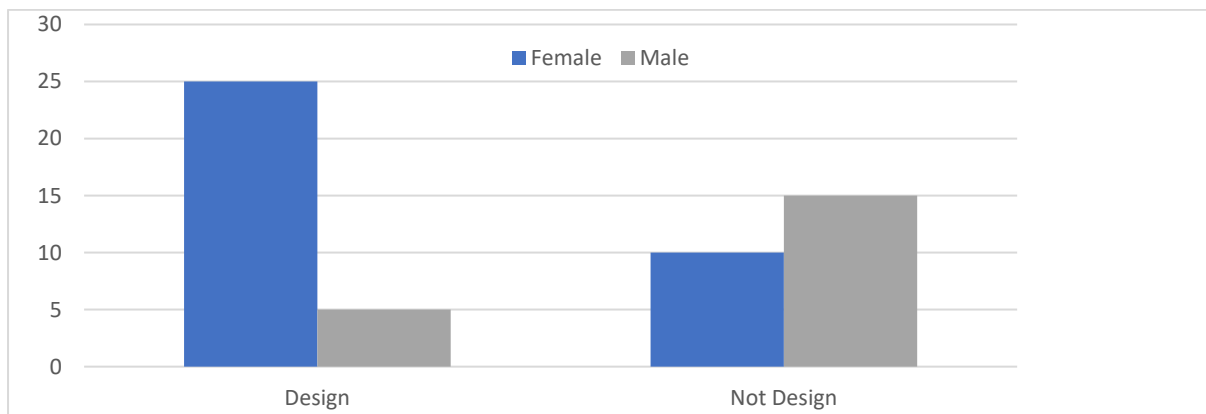
3. Researching 'The Sims'

Survey studies are mostly used to understand the differences of players in various contexts (Jansz, Avis and Vosmeer, 2010; Steen, et al., 2006; Cotton, et al., 2001). In a study compares the gender differences in players' motivations and patterns of play in Sims by Jansz, Avis and Vosmeer (2010), and online study with 760 participants was conducted. Participants were attracted by placing an advertisement on the official Dutch The Sims 2 website (www.desims2.nl). The hyperlink forwarded them to an online questionnaire that consisted of two parts. The first part inquired about the demographic background of the participants, such as age, gender,

education, profession, and so on, and continued by asking about the participants' favorite games, access to computers and/or gaming devices, and the time spent playing games. Part 2 included 27 graded phrases or items aimed at detecting the various motivations for playing The Sims 2.

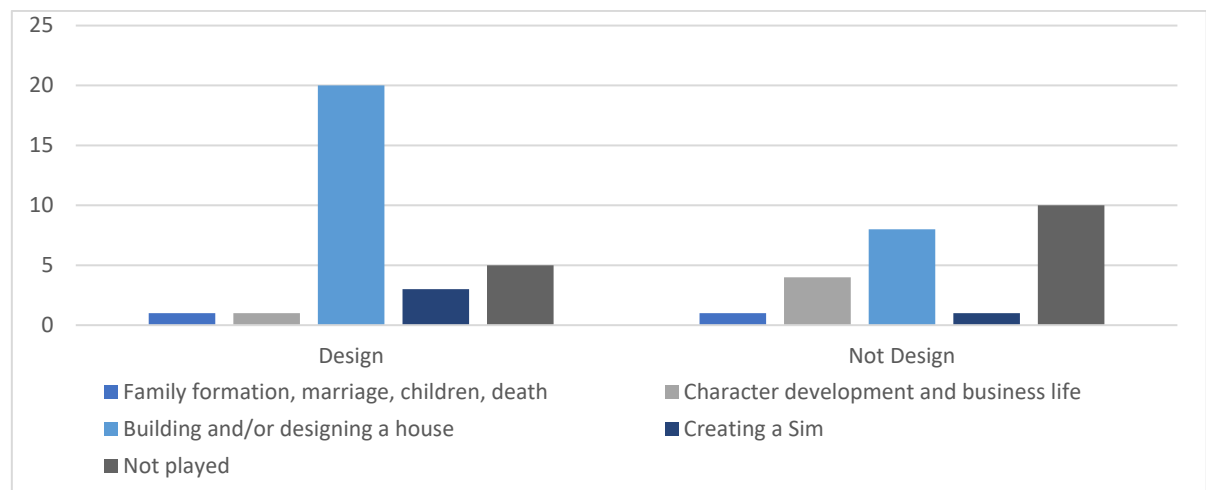
For this study, a survey with two phases was conducted, first with 54 participants and then with 40 participants, who were recruited through a hyperlink shared for a day on Instagram. In the first survey, 10 questions were asked to the participants. Of the participants, 19 were male and 35 were female. Among them, 25 female and 5 male participants were from a design profession, while 14 female and 10 male participants were not from a design profession (Table 2). In total, there were 30 participants from architecture, interior architecture, landscape architecture, and industrial design, which will be collectively referred to as "design professions" in this research. The remaining 24 participants were not from a design profession and came from fields such as engineering, medicine, law, communication, etc.

Table 2: Gender by Profession



During the game, players are first creating a character and a family if they want. Then they need to find a house, modify it or design from scratch. After that, they establish a family (marriage, kids, death), while developing their character, fulfilling their needs and advancing their careers. Participants are asked by doing which, they spent most of their time (Table 3). 71.8% of the participants spent most of their time by designing a new house and/or modifying an existing one. If the faculties are analyzed separately, these rates are 80% for those who come from design faculties and 57.1% for those who come from other faculties among those who play Sims.

Table 3: The part that participants spend the most time



The last question of the survey is an open-ended question and asks; Were you interested in designing and/or modifying houses in The Sims game? Can you explain this process? The advantage of open-ended questions can be seen in this question. From the answers given, it is seen that the participants are very interested in designing a house while playing the game. Those who have both studied at the design faculty and are interested in home design, state that they are influenced by this game in their choice of profession.

“Yes. Before I chose the department I was reading, I realized that I was interested in this subject with games like Sims.” (Male, 1996, Interior architect)

“Yes, it was interesting to me, even I would play Sims only for the house part. I can't say that I enjoyed playing with the next people.” (Male, 1993, Industrial Designer)

“Yes, I spent the most time and the most enjoyable part was designing the house. My purpose in playing the game was mostly to design houses.” (Female, 1990, Architect)

“Yes. I was designing the house and playing the game in five minutes and closing it.” (Female, 1992, Architect)

“I chose the interior architecture and environmental design department because I love and enjoy playing Sims a lot. In cases where the items in the base game and additional packages were not enough, I would download CC and decorate for hours. I witnessed the development process of the game and I played it from Sims1 to Sims4. I'm still playing. Since I did not know how to model in the first years of my undergraduate education, I did a similar modeling on Sims4 and obtained 3D visuals from the game. In short, I still play this game, which has greatly affected my professional life, and I learned many basic information (decoration, design, structure, English, etc.) thanks to this game.” (Female, 2000, Interior Designer)

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the open-ended responses. First, the responses were read carefully to understand the overall content. Important phrases and ideas related to designing houses were then identified and coded. These codes were grouped into main themes, such as "Career Influence" and "Design Skills." The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflected the participants' experiences. Finally, the findings were interpreted to reveal how The Sims influenced participants' career choices and design interests, clarifying the game's impact on their professional paths.

The analysis of responses to the open-ended question about participants' interest in designing or modifying houses in The Sims game reveals a significant connection between gameplay and professional aspirations in the field of design. The responses indicate that The Sims game has not only been a source of enjoyment but also a pivotal influence in shaping the career paths of those who later pursued studies in design-related disciplines.

Participants who have studied in design faculties, such as interior architecture, industrial design, and architecture, consistently noted that their engagement with The Sims played a critical role in developing their interest in these fields. The game served as an early platform for exploring their creativity and honing their design skills, which later translated into their academic and professional choices. For many, the act of designing virtual homes was not merely a part of the game but the primary reason for their continued engagement with it.

14 of the 24 participants who did not study at the design faculty stated that they played Sims. 8 of these participants said "designing a house" for the part they spent the most time with. Here are some of the answers that are worth mentioning.

“I would play with the enthusiasm of creating an order similar to the one seen at home.” -Male, 1994, Engineer

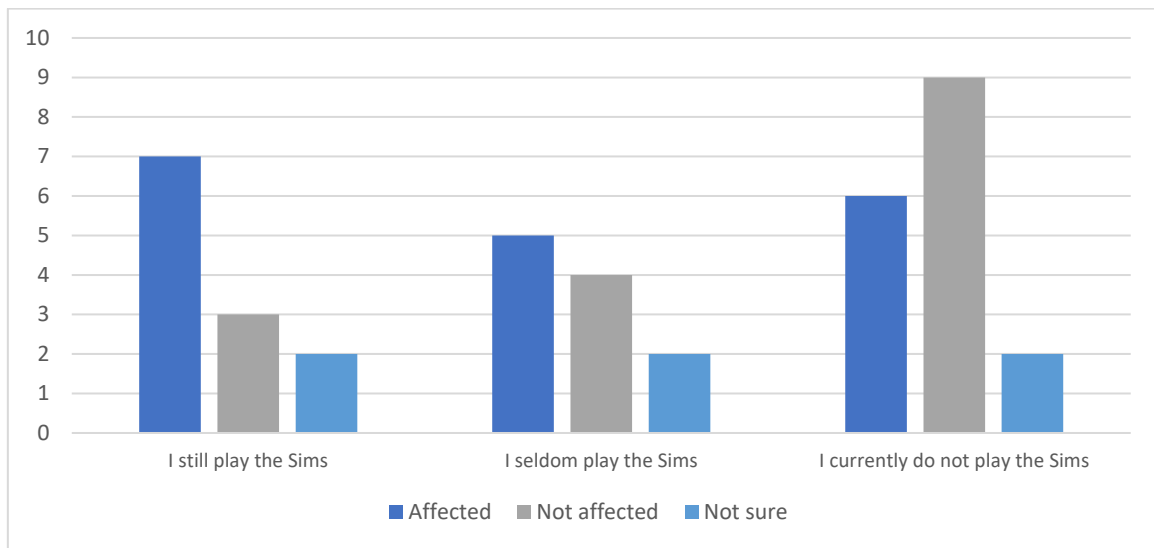
“Yes. Because my dream was to become an architect or interior designer. But I didn't want to read it because I don't have drawing skills. I suppressed my dream of designing a house a little bit with this game. I was more into decoration.” -Female, 1990, International relations specialist “

Designing the house according to myself and decorating it as if I was really going to live in that house was the process that interested me the most.” -Male, 1996, Medical Promotion Representative

It can be seen from here that these participants tend to design like their own houses and/or environments. However, those studying at the design faculty mostly refer to their professions.

Participants from design faculty were asked whether they still play The Sims or not. 30% of the participants still play The Sims, 27,5% seldom play The Sims, and 42,5% currently do not play The Sims. 18 out of 40 (45%) participants state that playing The Sims affected their choice of profession. When looked at the participants who still play The Sims, the rate increases to 59%. In contrast, participants currently do not play The Sims state playing The Sims didn't affect their choice of profession (Table 4).

Table 4: Playing preferences vs choice of profession



In conclusion, the survey's results and the open-ended questions highlight the strong correlation between The Sims participation and goals for design-related careers. The data shows that The Sims was not simply a source of enjoyment but also a formative platform for the development of design abilities and interests for many players, especially those with academic backgrounds connected to design. The impact of the game on career choices is especially noticeable among those who keep playing, since a significant portion of them credit their professional journeys to their gaming experiences. On the other hand, the perceived influence on their professional decisions decreases for those who stop using The Sims. This contradiction draws attention to how the game's impact changes depending on how much time is spent playing it, and it implies that creative, interactive platforms such as The Sims may have a significant impact on how people develop their careers in design fields.

4. Conclusion

The strong connection between gaming and career development, as evidenced by the responses from the surveys, underscores the educational potential of simulation games like The Sims. These games can inspire and nurture an interest in design from a young age, providing a practical and enjoyable introduction to concepts that are foundational in professional design education. The fact that some participants continued to use The Sims as a tool for modeling and visualizing designs during their studies further emphasizes its value as a learning resource, highlighting its profound and lasting impact on individuals interested in design. This influence extends to their educational and career trajectories, suggesting that video games can serve as both an inspiration and a practical tool in the development of professional skills, particularly in creative fields like design and architecture.

Wright's assertion that the design and organization of a player's [Sim] house can provide significant insights into their personality and character traits aligns with the survey findings. Many players create in-game representations that closely mirror their real lives, replicating their own identities, homes, and even their neighbors within the virtual environment (Breznican, 2004). This behavior further demonstrates the deep engagement and personal connection that players develop with the game, reinforcing its potential as a tool for exploring and refining design skills.

However, it is important to note the limitations of this study, which was conducted in Turkey with a limited timeframe and participant pool. The cultural and geographical focus may affect the generalizability of the findings. To validate these results, similar studies should be conducted in different countries and cultural contexts. Understanding how players from diverse backgrounds engage with The Sims could provide a broader perspective on its educational impact.

Video games vary widely in their social and complexity dimensions, as noted by Granic, Lobel, and Engels (2014). For example, games like puzzles and Tetris are simple and non-social, while Guitar Hero and Need for Speed are simple but social. On the more complex end, games like The Sims and SimCity are non-social, while Among Us and Minecraft are both complex and social. Interestingly, the upcoming release of The Sims 5, which EA revealed to be in development in 2020, is expected to introduce multiplayer online features. This addition would elevate

The Sims from a complex, non-social game to a complex, social one, potentially enhancing its educational value by enabling collaborative, online interactions among players.

With these anticipated developments, The Sims 5 is likely to attract renewed interest from researchers, particularly in terms of its educational applications. The game's evolution to include social and collaborative features may further solidify its role as a tool for developing professional skills in design and other creative fields. As the game evolves, it will also be important to consider how generational differences and the changing technological landscape influence player engagement and the game's educational potential.

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