A BLACKGIRL SIMS AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: NAVIGATING IDENTITY THROUGH CRITICAL GAMEPLAY ANALYSIS, PERSONAL REFLECTIONS, AND BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT

By

Olivia Shepard

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In Media, Culture, and Technology

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

2024

This thesis has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of MASTER OF ARTS in Media, Culture, and Technology.

Department of Media Studies, University of Virginia

Thesis Advisor:	*Dr. Ashleigh Greene-Wade*
Committee Member:	*Dr. Lori Morimoto*
Committee Member:	*Dr. Kevin Driscoll*
Director of Graduate Studies:	*Dr. Elizabeth Ellcessor*
Department Chair:	*Dr. Andrea Press*

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

This year, I often doubted I would graduate in May, but several key individuals provided unwavering support. I am immensely grateful to my advisor Dr. Wade for her invaluable mentorship. Her wisdom and kindness have been instrumental in my journey.

My boyfriend, Gabriel, has been my emotional rock throughout my thesis work. His belief in my dreams has been crucial to my perseverance. I owe thanks to my best friend, Laura, who endured countless text and voice messages about my thesis, serving as an essential sounding board for my research; I thank her most for always reminding me of my worth. My roommate, Helena, has been a source of encouragement and companionship since we met at UVA in August 2019. She's been with me since the beginning, and I am excited we are to graduate together after nearly five years of shared experiences.

I thank my parents, Christine and Anthony Shepard, who always pushed me to excel and never give up, even in the face of adversity. My siblings—Victoria, Amelia, Julia, and Benjamin—each played a role in boosting my moral, helping me to gain confidence and reminding me to laugh and have fun. She won't know it, but I thank my puppy, Rosie, who provided me with the endless love through many challenging days. I am thankful for the academic guidance of Drs. Sean Duncan, Lori Morimoto, Kevin Driscoll, and Andre Cavalcante at UVA, who trained me to be the media studies scholar I can call myself today.

In my thesis, I advocated for *The Sims* as a tool for self-reflection and exploration of blackgirl identity. Despite the many errors and areas for improvement I know are contained within this thesis, my aim has been to establish a map for other Blackgirls feeling lost in themselves to find their way home. If this thesis helps even just one black girl to find herself, then every effort will have been worthwhile. Every. Single. Second.

Abstract

This thesis proposes methods in which to explore Blackgirl identity within the digital gaming sphere, particularly through *The Sims 4*. Positioned at the crossroads of Black Feminist Thought and digital culture studies, it documents a personal journey of navigating and negotiating racial and gender identity in a virtual setting. By critically analyzing two Sims narratives, the thesis reveals how digital spaces serve as vital sites for identity exploration and expression.

Employing a combination of Blackgirl autoethnography and the innovative mixtape-as-method approach, the study engages with diverse media artifacts, including game screenshots, personal narratives, and curated digital collections. Analyzed through a framework informed by scholars known as "Thee Black Fem Baddies," this research offers a nuanced view of Black female identity dynamics within digital and gaming cultures.

Central themes include identity construction through gameplay, the role of digital games in critical reflection, and the impact of gaming on personal identity development. *The Sims 4* is presented as a crucial platform for creatively expressing the self in transformative ways that challenge traditional narratives and forge new paths for personal and collective identity formation.

This work enriches the discourse on race, gender, and digital media by highlighting how virtual platforms can shape and support the continuous negotiation of identity, especially for marginalized groups. By extending the boundaries of Black Feminist Thought into the digital realm, it provides insights into how digital games like *The Sims* serve as powerful tools for identity exploration and expression for Black girls and women.

Introduction

Figure 1. Shepard Family photograph, November 2023. From left to right: Anthony "Shep" Shepard (51), Christine Grieco-Shepard (51), Julia Shepard (13), Olivia Shepard (22), Benjamin Shepard (14), Amelia Shepard (19), and Victoria Shepard (24). Photograph by Abby Sacks.

The date is March 29th, 2020: I was eighteen years old, a first year at the University of Virginia, and eighteen days prior, the World Health Organization deemed the COVID-19 international outbreak as a Pandemic. I had been sent home for Spring Break and would not return to school until August 2021.

As anyone who was present for the COVID-19 Pandemic remembers, those early days were filled with fear, uncertainty, and the urge to find something to pass time while we were closed indoors. While many turned to *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, my lack of money and a Nintendo switch prompted me to instead explore another game, *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts 2014). *The Sims*, usually $40 USD was on sale on Origin for only $4.99. When I hit purchase, little did I know that this game would become not just become a full-time hobby for me, but one

of my greatest passions, my inspiration to become a Media Studies scholar, a platform to explore and become myself.

My journey with *The Sims 4* coincided with the aftermath of George Floyd's tragic murder, sparking global conversations about racism and injustice. These dialogues, alongside widespread Black Lives Matter protests, prompted my personal reckoning with my biracial identity—my mixed heritage of Nigerian, Italian, Polish, Muscogee-Creek, and Irish roots. Raised in predominantly white environments and schools, I realized my understanding of Blackness was underexplored compared to my whiteness, prompting me to confront questions about my racial identity and positionality within a deeply white supremacist and patriarchal society. As I grappled with the complexities of my race, gender, and understanding of myself, *The Sims* emerged as an unexpected tool, providing a platform for my identity exploration, construction, negotiation, and expression.

Project Overview

In this thesis, I conduct a critical analysis of how I explore, construct, negotiate, and express my Blackgirl identity through *The Sims 4*. I argue that *The Sims* not only encourages players to critically reflect on and explore their identities, but also serves as a powerful tool for identity exploration when coupled with a carefully considered theoretical and personal toolkit. This thesis demonstrates my argument through a critical analysis of two significant stories I crafted within *The Sims.*

My analysis of *The Sims* and my storylines integrates an examination of the game's technological features and mechanics with a robust academic framework and detailed personal reflections. I employ a multimodal methodological approach rooted in Black feminist theory to analyze these narratives using screenshots, personal narratives, and curated media artifacts such

as Pinterest boards and diaristic notes. My work is underpinned by the principles of Thee Black Fem Baddies, a conceptual collective of Black feminist thinkers and writers.

In Chapter One, I analyze my *Sims* playthrough known as "The Box-Salter-Cloud Universe," which I began in the Spring of 2020. This period was characterized by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge in racially motivated violence against Black Americans, and the ensuing Black Lives Matter movement, coinciding with my transition from adolescence to early adulthood. Chapter Two focuses on my second narrative, "Heart Lake Crossing," developed during my Winter Break in January 2024. By then, the World Health Organization had declared the end of the pandemic nearly a year earlier, society was adapting to post-pandemic normalcy, and initiatives in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion had made significant strides globally in improving the treatment of Black lives. Personally, at twenty-two years old, I had graduated with a BA in Studio Art and Media Studies from UVA the previous May and was nearing the completion of my master's degree. This chapter of my life marked another transition—from college into my career and adult life. In my conclusion, I summarize my thesis and suggest how game developers and Blackgirls can learn from this research moving forward.

Through this exploration, I aim to showcase *The Sims* as a critical, creative, and reflective tool for Black girls and women, enabling us to engage in critical reflection and identity construction within a technological and societal framework that often marginalizes us. By sharing my experiences and insights, I seek to contribute to an ongoing conversation about representation, empowerment, and self-definition for Black girls and women in and out of digital spaces.

Literature Review

The literature on identity, Black Womanhood, digital expressions of identity and Black Womanhood, and *The Sims* provides valuable insights into exploring, constructing, and negotiating Blackgirl identity. In introducing this literature, my goal is to facilitate a dialogue between these fields, contributing my perspective to ongoing conversations while demonstrating how this interdisciplinary body of work informs my theoretical framework for research.

Identity

First, I define "identity" through Stuart Hall's Identity Theory as he posits in "The Question of Cultural Identity" from *Modernity and Its Futures* (Hall et. al 1992). According to Hall, identity is our conception of ourselves that bridges the gap between how we define ourselves internally and the version of ourselves we project to the world; it is finding a balance between the constant shifting of how we define and portray ourselves in our personal and public worlds. As Hall writes, the ideas of self and identity were previously thought of as unified and stable, until modernity refracted our sense of selves into fragmented, contradictory, and unresolved identities (Hall 1992). As Hall quotes, "The very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable and problematic," (Hall 1992). I would like to acknowledge here that Hall does not say "problematic" in terms of there being something inherently, morally, or ethically wrong with the fragmenting of identity in modernity; rather, he posits that as we approach a more complex perception of identity, it can cause unease and ontological insecurity in people who relied on the uniformity of their identities.

As he also notes, "identity is historically, not biologically defined… Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves… The

fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy." (Hall 1992). As we approach an increasingly complicated understanding of culture, cultural identity, and cultural representations, we are both confronted and bewildered by the possibilities of identities and at how quickly and fleeting these identities can be.

I use Hall's theory of identity as the foundation of my research because unlike many other theories of identity, Hall situates identity in conversation with Black culture and cultural representations. As my research pertains specifically to Black Girl and Woman identities and experiences, using identity theory from Stuart Hall, a scholar who understands and incorporates a Black-specific milieu into his framework, makes it pertinent to use for my research.

Blackness, Femininity, and Black Girl and Womanhood

I now pivot to setting definitions for my intersectional identity through which I frame my identity analysis: Blackness, femininity, and Black Girl/Womanhood. I set these definitions through critical race theory, critical gender theory, and Black feminist thought.

I first contextualize the term "Black" as a socially-constructed identifier, and can generally be used to identify a person who identifies as a Black American, whose lineage traces back to the African diaspora, and whose family was victim to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade; while "Black" is a signifier group a racial group, "Blackness" can be defined as the unique and connected experiences of being of the African diaspora; it is a set of traditions and a collective experience of surviving the historical struggles Black people have faced in the diaspora, particularly in regards to Slavery, Colonialism, Imperialism, and Racism; it is an aesthetic of distinctive cultural repertoires and understandings, and a set of counternarratives Black people have struggled, and still struggle, to voice (Hall 1993). Hall also describes Blackness as marked

by, “its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary,” (Hall 1993). This is a basic characterization of Blackness that I introduce to give a brief and suggested understanding of Blackness as it is used throughout this thesis and by the scholars I incorporate into this thesis’ framework. However, as I will discuss in the next paragraph, this is one of many negotiated understandings of Blackness and should not be regarded as the only or even best definition of Blackness; it is simply the one I am choosing to use due to my resonance with it from my research and lived experiences as a Black Woman.

In Stuart Hall’s essay “What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?” (1993), Hall argues that Black culture is constantly being negotiated; he criticizes the tendency for what is perceived as “Black” to be described as biologically or naturally occurring, and urges for the explicit integration of historical, political, and social contexts in regarding what performances are and are not considered “Black”. Hall argues for a more participatory, negotiable approach to understanding what Black popular culture and Blackness are in general. Stuart Hall's definition of Black culture pertains to my thesis because as referenced in the identity section, identity is constantly being negotiated. As Black identity is innately tied to Black culture, which her Hall’s theory is constantly being shifted and negotiated, it provides a framework through which I can explore and negotiate my own Black Girl identity via my *Sims* play, breaking free of any pre-defined or expected performances or ways of being a Black Woman, unlike that of which American history may project onto Black people and Black women, specifically.

I pivot now to speak specifically about Black Women. I contextualize the identifiers “female” and “Woman”, as well as the experience of being female/Woman (femininity), through

Black Feminist Thought and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is not biologically determined or naturally occurring, rather a routine performance of various behaviors, preferences, and daily practices that have been assigned as belonging to a gender to enforce specific gender expectations and uphold patriarchal values and ideologies (Butler 1990). Through thinking of gender as a performance, it allows readers to critically examine gender as a social construct to be deconstructed, particularly that of the gender binary and the oppressive systems of sexism and the patriarchy. Butler's framework complements Stuart Hall's conversations of identity and Blackness; in tandem, they allow me to assess gender as a social construct and remain critical of the tension between "girlhood and womanhood" as a constructed gender experience and a culminated, accepted set of stylized performances our society has come to know as being, "girl/woman". This framework provides me set of acutely critical intellectual tools to perform a nuanced and negotiated Blackgirl *Sims* identity exploration and analysis.

Butler's theory of gender performativity is highly valuable, yet it lacks a foundation of Black studies and critical race theory and therefore cannot sufficiently be used to analyze the experiences of Black Women as unique and distinct from those of women of other ethnic or racial identities. It is at this tension that I pivot to Black Feminist Thought and my proposal for the theoretical framework of "Thee Black Fem Baddies."

Black Feminist Thought is an amalgamation of various Black Women thinkers and writers who have critically evaluated the position of Black Women within and amongst different institutions and systems of power in society; this includes, but is not limited to, American capitalism, politics, the education system, racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. I like to think of these Black Feminist scholars as kin to a Hot Girl Squad (a group of sexy, confident women

living their best lives) doing, “Real Hot Girl Shit”. These women refuse the diminishing, discriminatory, and oppressive narratives that have been assigned to Black Women throughout history. Through their intellectual contributions and inspiring bravery, they resist the institutions of white supremacy and the patriarchy in a way that is both foundational and game-changing to our perceptions of society as we know it. I believe a collection of thinkers this powerful, and mark-making deserve an equally powerful and mark-making name; it is for these reasons that henceforth, I call upon my Black Girl agency to title these women, “Thee Black Fem Baddies.”

Thee Black Fem Baddies are an imagined intergenerational collective of key contributors to Black Feminist Thought. Though the works of the women in my iteration of Thee Black Fem Baddies are spread across decades of time and space, they have had a profound impact on one another; their ideas echo between each other's works and theories, and collectively, their legacies uphold an on-going conversation of Black feminist theory that began as early as Antebellum-era America and carries on today.

Thee Black Fem Baddies is an abbreviation for “Thee Black Feminist Baddies”, and each of these words have important meaning toward my framework. I break each down below:

The term "Thee" is inspired by Megan Thee Stallion (see fig. 1), a rapper, entrepreneur, and philanthropist who sparked TikTok dance culture with her 2020 hit, "Savage." Megan has cultivated a philosophy known as "Real Hot Girl Shit," embodying confidence, a carefree attitude, and self-awareness of one's allure. Her lyrics are bold, sexy, and fearless; they are not only entertaining but also politically potent, advocating for Black women’s justice, friendship, power, and pleasure (Stallion 2020).

Megan embraces the moniker "Stallion" and is often associated with the imagery of a cobra, symbols traditionally linked to masculinity and power. Yet, through her authenticity and

her embrace of traditionally feminine and alt (alternative) interests like anime, cosplay, and her love of her French Bulldog, she redefines these symbols, crafting a distinctly Blackgirl identity for herself. In many ways, Megan has been a Blackgirl mentor for me, and naming Thee Black Fem Baddies after her is true to myself and my experiences as a Blackgirl. Additionally, in naming Thee Black Fem Baddies, I draw on Russworm and Blackmon's practice of blending Black women's lyrics with theory to articulate Black Girl narratives (Russworm and Blackmon 2020).

Figure 2. Megan Thee Stallion dressed as a Sailor Moon anime character during her performance at the Summer Sonic Festival in Japan. Photograph published by Ashleigh Gray for DailyMail.com, August 22, 2022. Image copyright holders acknowledged.

I chose to abbreviate "Feminist" to "Fem" for ease of reading and to differentiate it from "Femme" as used in gender and queer studies. "Baddie" is a term of endearment among Black Girls and women (including Megan Thee Stallion), signifying success, strength, and confidence;

being called a baddie is one of the highest compliments a Black woman can receive. I regard the "OGs"(Original Gangsters) of the Baddies as Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Angela Davis, Audre Lord, The Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins. For my thesis in particular the most prominent thinkers are Angela Davis, Thee Combahee River Collective, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and most of all, Patricia Hill Collins. There are many other Black Feminist Thinkers that are of Thee Black Fem Baddies, however the list I provide above is simply who I have incorporated into my iteration of the framework; it is my hope that Black Feminist Thinkers would adopt Thee Black Fem Baddies and reshape the framework to fit toward their own Blackgirl research, as the collective is supposed to be dynamic and ever-changing based on the evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Thought.

In my research, several core themes have birthed from Thee Baddies; In 1972, Angela Davis argues that the Black female body is the antithesis of and resistance against dominant white male structures (Davis 1972); In the late 1970s, The Combahee River Collective views that Black Feminist Thought is birthed from the lived experiences of Black Women, especially their consciousness of their own sexual and racial oppression (The Combahee River Collective 1977); in the 1980s, bell hooks urges for an institutional critique against mainstream (white) feminism, campaigning for a feminism that fights against the interconnected systems of racism, classism, and imperialism, and not just for the rights of white women and men in middle-to-high socioeconomic classes (hooks 1988); in 1990, Patricia Hill Collins advocates for a departure from Enlightenment-era positivist social science research methods, and instead encourages Black feminist thinkers to prioritize the lived experiences and epistemological understandings of Black Women in Black Women's research, and particularly so over detached, objective methods

(Collins 1990); In the 1991, Kimberlé Crenshaw coins, “intersectionality theory,” that intersecting systemic forces of race, gender, and class oppress Black Women and Women of Color disproportionately than both Black Men and White Women (Crenshaw 1991).These women and their intergenerational dialogue continue to build upon and contribute to the dialogue of Thee Black Fem Baddies today. In embracing a style that is true to both my Blackgirl hermeneutic traditions and sociolinguistic patterns, I stand by my decision to use the term “Thee Black Fem Baddies.” This choice reflects my allegiance to the empowerment and validation that Thee Black Fem Baddies offer me, empowering me to ground my research and writing in my personal narrative as a Black Woman (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991). This nomenclature does not merely encapsulate my interpretation of Black Feminist Thought, but also lays the foundation for how I theoretically frame my negotiation and construction of my Blackgirl identity via my *Sims* play. While I have envisioned these scholars as part of an imaginary collective, sitting in a I together, coffee in hands, minds at work, changing the future, I am cognizant of their individual and unique contributions to Black Feminist Theory. As such, I will attribute individual ideas to their respective creators, avoiding the conflation of their distinct theories into a single, monolithic perspective. My creation of the term “Thee Black Fem Baddies’’ serves as a tribute to the collective, feminist genius of these women, whose constructive collaboration has fostered several decades of potent Black Feminine Theory and Thought. Their legacy is one of challenging norms, asserting Black Women’s agency, and progressively eroding the structural barriers that perpetuate our marginalization and subjugation, and they deserve a name that suggests they have done such.

Thee Black Fem Baddies offer a valuable foundation for developing my own understanding of how Black Girls and women can shape and negotiate their identity in *The Sims*.

This exploration is informed by over fifty years of Black Feminist Theory and Thought. My research is an exciting contribution and complication of existing prominent Black Feminist Theory, as video games and video gaming cultures are very recent in contemporary history and therefore have not yet been thoroughly researched amongst even the most contemporary Black Feminist Theorists. I aim to situate Black women's Sims practices amongst broader conversations of digital identity and exploring identity in games; through doing this, I aim to place my work in conversation with Thee Black Fem Baddies, ultimately expanding the potential for untraveled theoretical pathways and future Black Feminist research.

Digital Games and Identity

In this section I situate my research amongst literature of digital identities and identities in games. Digital games and identity theory are plentiful; I do not aim to cover all digital games and identity theory that exist, rather create a comprehensive understanding of the affordances of digital games technology for players to explore, construct, and negotiate their identities. The scholars and arguments below are the readings I encountered that shaped my understanding of digital games and identity; this being said, I want to acknowledge that other theorists I have not encountered in my own research surely exist and could equally apply to my research and similar research in this field.

Henry Jenkins (2006) claims that players embed their digital game play with various technological, economic, aesthetic, social, and cultural meanings; these aspects of the medium must be examined to sufficiently understand how digital games are reshaping our personal and cultural identity construction. Anne-Mette Bech Albrechtslund (2007) argues that when a player interacts with a gaming system, they encode their play with the sets of rules and values prioritized by their identity and culture, and that as they play, "the player's values are confronted,

challenged, manipulated or reproduced by the game," (Albrechtslund 2007). This can suggest that while play can merely reinforce the sociocultural values of their own identity and culture, it can also challenge or even change them entirely. Lori Norton-Meier (2005) expands on Albrechtslund when she argues that videogames have, "the potential to push an individual to learn and think cognitively, socially, and morally… players actively create new virtual worlds, participate in complex decision making, and think reflectively about choices that were made, including the design of the game." (Norton-Meier 2005). James Paul Gee (2003) argues that video games encourage identity reflection and work in clear and powerful ways; in particular, players place significance within a multimodal environment, using embodied experiences to address challenges and contemplate the complexities of both imagined worlds' designs and the construction of real and imagined social relationships and identities in our world today (Gee 2003).

Jenkins provides a foundational view of digital games' effects on identity and video game play as he emphasizes a broad and multi-dimensional impact of digital games on players. His theory sets the stage for Albrechtslund, Norton-Meier, and Gee who expand upon Jenkins's approach which, while broad and wide-encompassing, is also somewhat limited in terms of its theoretical depth due to lacking to describe *how* or *why* the play may critically change the players' identity construction and negotiation. The other authors, in conversation with Jenkins, further explore how various kinds of gameplay interact with the personal and cultural identity of the player. Extending from Jenkins, Albrechtslund shows the relationship between identity, culture and gaming, and how both affect each other as the player plays. Her theory suggests that games are not just passive experiences but active engagements that reflect and reconfigure players' values. Norton-Meier adds another dimension by exploring the potential of video games

for cognitive, social, and moral development. Her theory positions video games as environments that not only reflect and challenge identities and values, as Albrechtslund suggests, but also actively contributes to the player's development. Norton-Meier's perspective introduces the concept of learning and growth through gameplay, highlighting the educational value of identity exploration through gaming. Finally, Gee builds on and synthesizes all these ideas by focusing on the specific mechanisms through which games promote identity reflection and learning. Gee's theory highlights how video games offer a variety of ways for players to engage and experience game worlds, such as through visuals, sound, interaction, and player-constructed narratives. These elements allow players to deeply immerse themselves and actively participate in these game worlds, making decisions as if they were physically present within the game. This deep involvement with the game helps players gain a better understanding of their identities and their positionality within the world around themselves.

The Sims and Identity

In exploring the multifaceted narrative and community dynamics of *The Sims* as a platform for identity exploration, the scholarship of Henry Jenkins, Anne-Mette Bech Albrechtslund, Elizabeth Hayes, and Abdah St. Fleur with Jennifer deWinter highlights how the game serves both as a creative space and a social environment. Jenkins emphasizes *The Sims* as a sandbox game that promotes emergent narratives, where players can reflect their personal identities and experiences, positioning the game as an effective tool for narrative construction and identity exploration. Albrechtslund expands on this by discussing the freedom within the game to create and control characters, underlining the game's potential for players to re-figure their identities within its structured yet open-ended environment.

Elizabeth Hayes (2011) introduces an educational perspective, noting the significance of *The Sims*' online community. She discusses how fan sites in tandem with the global network of Sims players enhance the game experience through social interaction and community recognition. This aspect not only enriches the game's narrative potential but also extends its educational reach, particularly in the context of IT learning and community engagement. Hayes' analysis includes the impact of these interactions on fostering technical skills and a deeper engagement with STEM fields, particularly among girls, through an interest-driven learning model.

Fleur and Jennifer deWinter's (2021) concept of "playbour" adds a critical dimension by addressing the labor that Black content creators contribute to the game. They highlight how these creators, through mods and custom content, fill gaps left by the game's developers in representing diverse identities. This unpaid effort is crucial for adding necessary diversity and authentic representation, which not only enriches the game's content but also underscores broader issues of diversity and representation in the gaming industry.

Together, these perspectives paint a comprehensive picture of *The Sims* as a dynamic platform for identity exploration and community interaction, emphasizing its role in fostering narrative creativity, social engagement, and educational development. This thesis will further examine the interplay between these elements and their impact on the representation of Black girlhood and womanhood within the gaming community.

Synthesizing the Literature

Stuart Hall's theory on identity sets a foundational tone by discussing identity as an evolving construct deeply influenced by cultural dynamics. This perspective is crucial for understanding the fluidity and multifaceted nature of Blackgirl identity within digital platforms like *The Sims*,

where these identities can be explored and expressed in varied ways (Hall 1992). Hall's concept ties directly into Henry Jenkins' observation of emergent narratives within *The Sims*, where players can craft personal stories that project their internal identities in a virtual public arena (Jenkins 2006).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity complements this by showcasing how players engage with and disrupt traditional gender norms within the game, challenging societal expectations through their avatars (Butler 1990). This ability to experiment within *The Sims* serves as a critical platform for Black women and girls, echoing Butler's argument on gender as a socially constructed performance.

Thee Black Fem Baddies then bring an essential intersectional analysis to this exploration. They highlight how *The Sims* offers a uniquely secure space for Black females to express their identities away from the oppressive dynamics often encountered in more public digital and non-digital spaces. This perspective is crucial for contextualizing the specific challenges and opportunities Black women encounter in virtual environments, emphasizing the game as a realm where they can assert and explore their identities without external pressures.

Anne-Mette Bech Albrechtslund explores the influence of players' cultural and personal backgrounds on their interactions within *The Sims*, suggesting that gameplay mechanics can both mirror and challenge players' identities and values (Albrechtslund 2007). This interaction highlights the dynamic nature of identity negotiation within digital spaces, offering a nuanced extension to Stuart Hall's ideas about identity as a culturally influenced construct. Albrechtslund's discussion sets the stage for a deeper examination of how these personal and cultural backgrounds are not only reflected but actively shaped through community engagement, a theme further developed by Elizabeth Hayes.

Elizabeth Hayes shifts the focus towards the communal and educational potentials of *The Sims*, emphasizing how its online communities serve as platforms for social interaction and identity affirmation, particularly for young girls (Hayes 2011). Hayes' insights into how these communities support and validate players' identity explorations provide a broader social context to the individual narratives crafted within the game, effectively illustrating a practical application of Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, where community interactions become spaces for performing and reshaping gender identities.

James Paul Gee and Lori Norton-Meier then delve into the cognitive and developmental opportunities presented by *The Sims*. Gee articulates how the game serves as a powerful medium for players to experiment with identities, offering scenarios that facilitate deep cognitive and emotional engagement (Gee 2003). This perspective resonates with Albrechtslund's findings, suggesting that these engagements are not merely reflective but transformative. Lori Norton-Meier expands on this by discussing the potential of these gaming environments to foster complex decision-making and ethical reasoning (Norton-Meier 2005), enhancing the players' ability to navigate and negotiate personal and cultural identities in ways that echo Hayes' discussion on the educational impact of community dynamics.

Finally, Abdah St. Fleur and Jennifer deWinter address the concept of "playbour," highlighting the often-uncompensated labor that Black content creators contribute to *The Sims*. Their efforts to enrich the game's diversity and representation challenge the existing narrative structures and broaden the scope of identity representation within it (St. Fleur & deWinter 2021). This dialogue underscores the themes introduced by Thee Black Fem Baddies about the protective space *The Sims* offers for Black females, adding a layer of critical examination on how these spaces are constructed and maintained through the creative labor of marginalized

communities.

Together, these scholars create a comprehensive narrative that not only links their individual contributions but also underscores the complex interplay of personal, cultural, and communal dynamics in shaping digital identities. This synthesis sets the stage for a deeper exploration of how Black girls and women utilize digital gaming as a transformative space for identity articulation, pushing the boundaries of Black Feminist Thought into the digital realm and providing a fertile ground for future research.

Methodology

Boylorn Blackgirl Autoethnography

My methodology is founded on Boylorn's "On Being at Home With Myself: Blackgirl Autoethnography as Research Praxis" ((Boylorn 2016). Boylorn developed Blackgirl autoethnography as, "a way to talk about embodied, critical, and culturally situated research… [it] considers how structural forces influence the lived experiences of Black women and gives Black women agency to tell their own stories and to do so within a context of situated knowledge." Blackgirl autoethnography speaks from the intersection of gender/sex, race, and class to also offer critiques about the social and cultural consequences of being a Black (space) Girl and allows for the messiness and unexpectedness of owning what it means to be a Blackgirl (one word)" (Boylorn 2016). As Boylorn talks about Black (space) Girl and Blackgirl (one word), she draws upon Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, making known that being Black, being Girl, and being Blackgirl, are three different identifiers each with their own unique milieu of experiences. She also recognizes and validates the tumultuous and chaotic experience it can be of reflecting upon and becoming your Blackgirl identity and writing one's Blackgirl autoethnography; this is incredibly validating to me as my journey of becoming my Blackgirl identity was something I struggled with deeply for several years, and this thesis has in many ways been an opportunity for me in a healthy and academically-informed manner process that journey and reflect on it as my experience of becoming my Blackgirl self.

Her article about Blackgirl autoethnography was the original inspiration behind my research because of Boylorn's posing of her personal experiences through Black feminist thought to produce both critical and personal qualitative research on the racial and gendered identities of

Black women. As in my research, I am both the subject and object of my study, which is that that is deeply personal and at the core of who I am. As Boylorn writes, “My body is my home. My home is my work. My body/home is a research site. My body/home/research can be theorized, politicized, and actualized through praxis,” (Boylorn 2016).

Boylorn’s writing is both a practice of showing and telling her experiences, using multi-experiential expression to relay her experiences through a theoretical lens. Her Blackgirl autoethnography, fit with dialogue, personal anecdotes, quotes, Black feminist theory, blends Boylorn’s own experiences of navigating her Black (space) Girl and Blackgirl (one word) identities, and inserts her personal life into a body of theoretical literature for it to be usable within a broader frame of Black feminist thought.

This kind of methodological work is incredibly ground-breaking and one of its kind. As my research and personal narrative highly privileges similar ground-breaking activities, Boylorn’s Blackgirl autoethnography will guide my own Black (space) Girl and Blackgirl (one word) identity via my Sims play.

Though my Sims play is fictional, it is deeply rooted and informed by my personal experiences and academic theoretical background. In this way, I can analyze my Sims play and the media artifacts that cumulatively construct the narratives of my Sims play, and through a reflexive analysis of how my Sims play relates to my personal life, I can then analyze both in conjunction through Black feminist theoretical framework with aims to provide novel insights into my own navigation of my Black, Girl, and Blackgirl identities via my Sims play.

Boylorn also writes the following on Blackgirl autoethnography:

> "Blackgirl autoethnography has always been a way for me to be at home with myself and resist stereotypic notions of Blackgirlhood even if/when the outside world has attempted to silence Blackgirls… autoethnography, as a method, pushes and blurs those boundaries by allowing us to be simultaneously vulnerable and visible. Blackgirl lives are situated on the margins and borders and are recentered when we see ourselves worthy of recognition in addition to critique… it has significant potential for helping to voice marginalized and maligned lives… [Blackgirl] autoethnography offers a way for [Blackgirl] public/private testimony and acknowledgment, but not without risk," (Boylorn 2016).

This section is helpful for me as it provides me a framework for which I can begin to explore my Black, Girl, and Blackgirl identities, as well as the complications and complexities that go with them. In this thesis, I share deeply personal anecdotes that I struggled to talk about, let alone write about, prior to my writing. As Thee Black Fem Baddies encourage me, I employ Boylorn's Blackgirl autoethnography to be brave and blur the boundaries between the theoretical and personal to be vulnerable in an academic text and share my story amongst Black feminist thought in doing so. While Boylorn uses dialogue and text as medium to share my story via *The Sims*, I use a mixed-media approach to express my Blackgirl autoethnography in the following two chapters. I explain the nuances of my mixed-media approach below.

Mixtape-as-Method Approach

My engagement with *The Sims* and the exploration of identity within this platform can be best understood through a diverse array of media artifacts. These artifacts, sourced from various platforms, creators, technologies, and types of media, provide a multifaceted view of how virtual environments influence personal identity navigation. I pull from TreaAndrea Russworm and

Samantha Blackmon's, "Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought" (2020). From the first time I read this article, I admired its creative and innovative approach to qualitative research; as described by Russworm and Blackmon, their article itself is a "Black feminist mixtape" that blends multimedia artifacts of music lyrics, interviews from various Black feminist games studies authors, and critical analysis embedded in Black feminist thought to conduct a critically engaged analysis of Black women's involvement in the history of the video game industry (Russworm and Blackmon 2020).

To the authors, the article as mixtape is alternatively a "discursive cultural remediation". As described by Russworm and Blackmon, there are three reasons they employ mixtape-as-method; one, mixtapes in the 1990s were seen as a material of resistance, as the medium made it easy for music artists to self-publish their music and distribute it directly to the public under low-cost means. Through mixtapes, artists were able to circumvent the capitalist and economically exploitative interests of record labels and used mixtapes as a symbol of their own agency and artistic autonomy (Russworm and Blackmon 2020); two, the metaphor of mixtape evokes the idea of listening, and Russworm and Blackmon employ mixtape-as-method to encourage readers to listen to the experiences of Black women. As per Thee Black Fem Baddies (hooks 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990; Boylorn 2016), Black women need to be able to tell their stories through their own epistemological understandings and situated knowledges of Blackgirl and Womanhood. The metaphor of the mixtape highlights the need to not only read but listen to and absorb the experiences of Black women. The third reason is to highlight and be attentive of Black women's creative, joyful, and playful practices, which the mixtape boldly represents.

Russworm and Blackmon present these three reasons for mixtape-as-method to highlight what values are encouraged by the mixtape medium and Black feminist thought: agency,

autonomy, the importance of privileging Black women's experience, the importance of listening to Black women's experiences, and remembering to include Black women's joy and pleasure in Black feminist discourse, and not solely focus on Black women's suffering. As the mixtape was a tool by artists to write their own narratives, Russworm and Blackmon use the idea of mixtape both as a methodological tool and metaphor for their Blackgirl autoethnographic research. As mixtapes allowed musical artists the agency and creative autonomy to explore their music and put the power of their means of production and distribution in their own hands, Russworm and Blackmon use their article to produce the story of Black women's place in video game history and distribute it via interviews, Black women's lyrics, and Black feminist thought – all of which are low-cost or free to distribute. As the mixtape is egalitarian and anti-capitalist, the mixtape-as-method approach is as well.

For my research on *The Sims* as platform and tool for identity navigation and reflection, the mixtape-as-method approach is perfect for my selection of the media artifacts I will use for my analysis. I never formally wrote down or recorded my two Sims storylines, so I rely on a smorgasbord of media artifacts and memories to tell the story of my Sims. These media artifacts are those constructed by myself, other Black women, and people, that collectively inform my Blackgirl Sims play and my use of *The Sims* as a platform and tool for my Blackgirl identity navigation. The media artifacts I use in my mixtape include, but are not limited to, screenshots, memes, Pinterest boards, Television show characters, sets, and stories, photographs of myself and my family, and the recounting of my memories as pertinent to my research.

As Russworm and Blackmon have been informed by Black women's music, I have been informed by Black women in *The Sims* community and our play habits. For example, my favorite Sims player, AshleyPlays, creates Pinterest boards and Spotify playlists for her characters to

capture their essences. Informed by her play, I also make curated Pinterest boards to create a clear vision of my play. Additionally, many of the mods and CC (Custom Content) I use are informed by the gameplay of other Black women Sims players and are mods and hair CC that other Black women use such as Sims creator Shaebuttyr's Black hair CC and Xmiramira's Melanin Pack, which are skin CC. These are two examples of Black women-generated Sims media artifacts that inform my Blackgirl *Sims* play and identity navigation via my Sims play.

The innovative and creative nature of Russworm and Blackmon's mixtape-as-method approach can be used expand on Blackgirl autoethnography as developed by Boylorn. These two approaches combined provide me a unique method to produce my multimedia, personal and theoretical, Blackgirl autoethnography of my Blackgirl identity via my *Sims* play.

Through these two methodologies, I blend the fictional with the lived, the digital with the analog, and the theoretical with the personal, enabling me to craft a multidisciplinary study on *The Sims* as a tool and platform for navigating Blackgirl identity. This approach allows for a comprehensive exploration that captures the complexities of identity construction within digital and real-world contexts.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

In my thesis, I employ a combination of Blackgirl autoethnography and mixtape-as-method to explore my Sims narratives. These methods reveal the negotiation and navigation of my Blackgirl identity during two pivotal transitional periods in my life. I find Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory to be an invaluable framework for analyzing the media artifacts created through my Sims. This approach is rooted in feminist and Womanist values and often intersects with Black Feminist Thought, offering a compelling path for my analysis.

Charmaz critiques traditional positivist research ideologies which argue that qualitative methods are biased and unreliable, insist on a rigid separation between data collection and analysis, and view qualitative research merely as a precursor to quantitative methods. Furthermore, there's a prevailing misconception that qualitative research cannot generate theory (Charmaz 2006). Similar to Thee Black Fem Baddies' approach (Collins 2000; Boylorn 2016), Charmaz rejects these outdated positivist values. Her methodology not only deconstructs these notions but also provides a robust set of tools for conducting qualitative research that is deeply theoretical and intimately personal.

In my research, I integrate Blackgirl autoethnography and the mixtape-as-method approach to dissect narratives created in *The Sims*, which mirror the evolution and assertion of my Blackgirl identity during pivotal transitions in my life. Employing Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory, which is steeped in feminist and Womanist principles and intersects frequently with Black Feminist Thought, offers a compelling framework for analyzing the media artifacts from my Sims gameplay. This approach not only aligns with but also enriches the foundational ideas proposed by Thee Black Fem Baddies.

Charmaz critiques traditional positivist ideologies in research, which often dismiss qualitative methods as biased and preliminary to quantitative research. Her Constructivist Grounded Theory challenges these notions by arguing against the separation of data collection and analysis and the misconception that qualitative research cannot generate substantive theory. Her work, resonating with the transformative agendas of scholars like Collins (2000) and Boylorn (2016), provides essential tools for conducting research that is both deeply theoretical and intensely personal.

Utilizing Charmaz's perspective on textual analysis, I view texts as constructed within specific socio-economic, historical, and cultural contexts. These texts, as Charmaz suggests, are influenced by prevailing discourses and aim to record, explore, explain, justify, or predict actions. In my thesis, these "texts" refer to the multimedia materials featured in two key chapters, which document and analyze the narratives of my Sims from Spring 2020 and January 2024. These chapters not only showcase the narratives but also engage with the extensive discourse on Black feminist theory, game studies, and *The Sims* franchise. Through Blackgirl autoethnography, I then interpret these multimedia materials, providing personal accounts that connect my lived experiences to the broader theoretical landscape.

Charmaz's approach involves a two-step textual analysis: first, a line-by-line analysis that overviews all data and begins to pull potential analytical themes that are grounded in the data; then, a second round of coding is conducted, in which data pulled from the initial broad coding is selected based on themes that are pertinent to potential arguments and theory that can be produced from them. This process involves taking the broader data and specifying it for a narrower and emphasized analysis of the data. As Charmaz writes, "During initial coding, the goal is to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data. Later, you use focused coding to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data. Theoretical integration begins with focused coding and proceeds through all your subsequent analytic steps," (Charmaz 2006).

Per grounded theory, I take my media texts and produce a broad, extensive "line-by-line" analysis of them. While Charmaz means this literally for written texts, my texts are mainly visual. In doing so, I employ the visual art analysis training I learned as a Studio Art major

during my undergraduate years, which entails me taking every aspect of an image I can think of and discussing it critically regarding a broader context in which it exists.

As Charmaz writes, “Grounded theorists evaluate the fit between their initial research interests and their emerging data. We do not force preconceived ideas and theories directly upon our data. Rather, we follow leads that we define in the data, or design another way of collecting data to pursue our initial interests,” (Charmaz 2006). Charmaz puts emphasis on the word define to show that we find themes that are grounded in the data, then find theory through those themes. For me, I will be taking the media materials I synthesize in my mixtape-as-method collection of media and defining the themes of Thee Black Fem Baddies.

In many ways, this research has been the most intuitive research I have done in my whole life, mainly because it is the first time I have written about myself and my own media this extensively; the contexts of my media texts are my own experiences. Through this mixed-method approach, I aim to conduct the Black Girl autoethnography of my Sims gameplay.

Spring 2020: The Box-Salter-Cloud Universe

Introduction

This chapter delves into my 2020 Sims narrative featuring two sisters, Pandora and Bubblegum Box, and the family dynamics that evolve from their story. I critically assess my Sims gameplay, focusing on character creation in the CAS (Create-A-Sim) and the in-game decisions that shaped my Sims' development. This analysis is framed through the lenses of Thee Black Fem Baddies and Blackgirl Autoethnography, connecting the gameplay mechanics, creative choices, and narrative directions to my personal exploration of black girl identity during that period.

The objective of this chapter is to illustrate that my gameplay decisions were exploratory and often lacked a predetermined plan, reflecting a phase of personal growth and self-discovery. By employing Thee Black Fem Baddies and Blackgirl Autoethnography frameworks, I argue that the exploratory nature of my gameplay mirrors my own journey towards understanding my identity, with the superficial representation of blackness and black femininity in the game mirroring my own initial shallow grasp of and ultimate disconnection from my black girl identity at the time.

I intend to demonstrate that *The Sims* can serve as a powerful tool for exploring, constructing, and negotiating black girl identity. My approach utilizes the game as a platform for conducting critical analysis through both theoretical frameworks and personal reflection. While I present this method as effective for my own identity exploration, it is not prescribed as the sole or definitive approach. Instead, I encourage other black women to engage with *The Sims*, discovering individually how it can serve as a transformative tool for reflecting on and exploring their own black girl identity, just as it has helped me to critically assess the connection between my gameplay and my evolving understanding of my identity during that crucial period. This

analysis sets the stage for discussing the subsequent four-year journey toward reconnecting with, embodying, and becoming my black girl identity.

My Blackgirl Past

Figure 3. Old family photo featuring, from left to right, Amelia Shepard, Victoria Shepard, and Olivia Shepard. Photo taken in 2009 and sourced from Christine Shepard's Facebook Archive.

Embracing my Blackgirl identity has been a challenging journey.

Over the years, I have grappled with my racial and cultural identity, a struggle intensified by systemic racism and sexism that impose rigid, damaging stereotypes on Black girls and women (Collins 2000). These stereotypes often leave those who do not fit neatly into predefined categories feeling lost and incomplete. Internally, I felt misaligned from my Blackgirl identity, experiencing significant emotional turmoil as I yearned to feel authentic and whole.

As a light-skinned Black person, I could externally avoid some conflicts associated with my racial identity. However, internally, it was a different battle. Boylorn (2016) reminds us that

one cannot escape oneself. As I matured, I became painfully aware of societal expectations defining what a Black girl should be. The more people I encountered, the more apparent it became that I did not meet these external standards.

The label of being "the whitest Black girl" clung to me persistently, creating a deep void that has taken years to begin to heal—a process I am still undergoing. The desire to align fully with my Blackgirl identity was overwhelming. Daily, I struggled with anxiety that felt all-consuming, as if I were trapped in an identity limbo that did not match my internal understanding of what it meant to be a Black girl. This internal conflict often felt debilitating, making it difficult to breathe or see myself positively. There were moments when looking in the mirror filled me with disgust, as I was inescapably confronted with the unfillable gap between who I was and who I wanted to be.

Adding to my trauma during this period were several external and personal stressors: the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, the Trump presidency—a particularly turbulent time for me as a Black woman, given the palpable lack of safety and protection for people in my community—and a significant breakup with an emotionally abusive partner I had been dealing with since the beginning of the school year.

It took two years to start addressing my anxiety and depression medically and therapeutically. However, when I began treatment, I was fortunate to receive support from various Black women. Both my Nurse Practitioner, who provides my medical treatment for depression and anxiety, and my therapist have been instrumental in guiding me through my journey.

My therapist, whom I refer to as J to respect her privacy, has played a significant role in my healing process and in reconnecting with my Blackgirl identity. We share a bond over being

alumni of the University of Virginia, which adds a layer of mutual understanding to our sessions. Her empathy, patience, and kindness have been crucial in my recovery. Our sessions often touch on our respective experiences of navigating dual identities I, with my mixed racial and cultural background, and she, balancing her life as a Beninese immigrant in America. These shared experiences have enriched our sessions, contributing profoundly to my path toward healing.

I also sought deeper connections within the Black community at UVA. After discussions with a Dean at the Office of African American Affairs, I became more proactive in engaging with Black students and participating in community activities. Although my involvement with the Virginia Black Review was brief and I did not contribute writings due to graduate school commitments, the connections I made with other Black creatives were invaluable. These relationships have significantly supported my journey toward affirming my Blackgirl identity.

The most impactful aspect has been my academic exploration of Blackgirl identity since starting graduate school in 2022. Engaging with a broad spectrum of literature on critical race theory, Black studies, gender studies, and Black feminist thought has been exhilarating. Each new idea or piece of literature ignites a spark within me, elevating my understanding and joy in learning to new heights. This intellectual engagement is why I was inspired to create The Black Fem Baddies; their confidence emboldened me to embrace and evolve my own Blackgirl identity.

However, in 2020, my journey was just beginning. Today, I retrospectively analyzed my Sims gameplay to understand my Black girl identity during that time. It is important to clarify that the analysis was not conducted then; it is being done now, from the perspective of the present. This reflective analysis leverages the theoretical frameworks and therapeutic work I have developed since then, allowing me to use my Sims gameplay as a platform and tool to

critically examine my Black girl identity from that period. It is my intention that this chapter serves as a template for how *The Sims* can be utilized as a tool to explore, construct, and negotiate Black girl identity.

Create-a-Sim

Initially, I chose cartoony, thematic names for the sisters, reflecting my view of *The Sims* as a similarly unrealistic game. This naming strategy underscores my emotional and mental dissociation from the game world, illustrating a lack of immersion, which, as Gee discusses, signifies a deeper disconnect from my gameplay experience.

Pandora Box is named after the myth of Pandora's Box, reflecting my affinity for media's villainous female characters like Evil Queen Regina from ABC's Once Upon a Time, Bellatrix Lestrange from Harry Potter, amongst others. These are women who are outcasted to the margins of their societies yet leverage their marginality as power. Unlike conventional heroines, these characters utilize their outsider status as a source of strength and allure, a trait I deeply identify with. In the myth, Pandora, who unleashes sin upon the world by defying orders a man gave her, mirrors my own tendency to defy expectations and forge my own path. Therefore, naming her "Pandora Box" and aligning her with the villainous aspects of my personality felt like the right fit. Pandora represents the "night" side of my identity—mysterious, introspective, and embodying feminine yin. Through her, I explore the more covert facets of my character that remain internal.

Conversely, Bubblegum reflects the "day" side of my personality—bright, nurturing, and playful. Her name and design in the Create-A-Sim (CAS) system encapsulate this persona with vibrant colors and playful accessories, symbolizing my outward, sociable nature. Bubblegum embodies the youthful and carefree parts of me, such as my love for girly, Lolita attire, babies,

pets, cartoons, and the optimistic outlook I tend to express on life. These contrasting characters illustrate the dualities within me, highlighting the complex binaries of my identity. In the CAS, I meticulously crafted their appearances to visually represent these inner and outer aspects. Pandora's sleek, dark attire contrasts sharply with Bubblegum's whimsical, colorful outfits, highlighting their distinct personas.

In addition to physical appearance, the CAS system allowed me to enhance their personalities through choices in aspirations and traits, which influence their behaviors and interactions in the game. Pandora's traits include evil, ambitious, and mean, aligning with her role in the Villain career and her aspiration to become a "Public Enemy." These characteristics drive her gameplay narratives, filled with mischief and autonomy, reflecting my engagement with darker, more complex storylines. Bubblegum's traits—good, goofball, and cheerful—complement her career as a comedienne and her aspiration to be a "Joke Star." This setup fosters a gameplay focused on humor, community, and positive interactions, mirroring the lighter, more visible aspects of my personality.

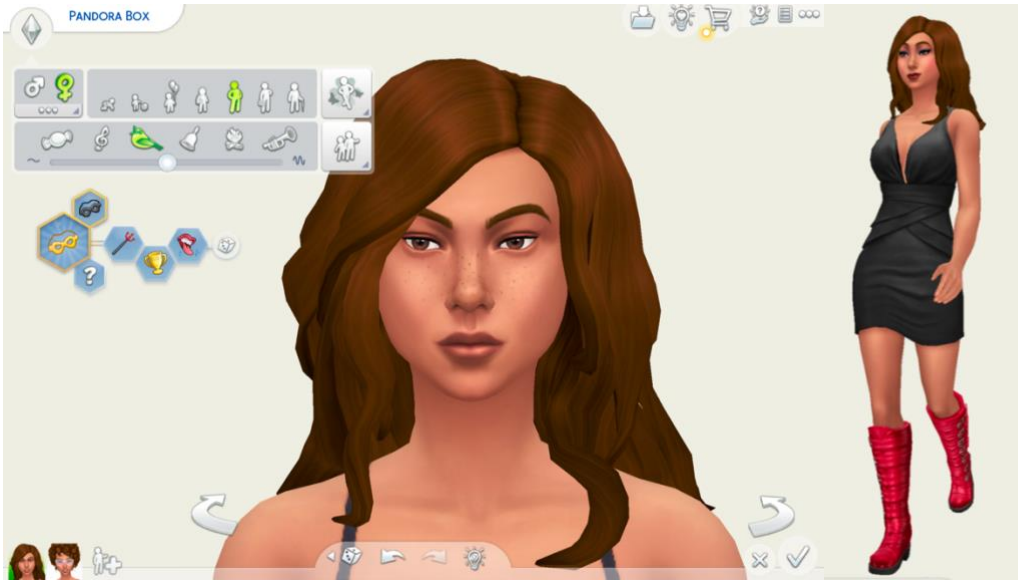

Figure 4. Pandora Box, a Sim character originally created in March 2020, reloaded in my present-day Create-A-Sim interface. Screenshotted on 28 April 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts Inc.

Figure 5. Bubblegum Box, a Sim character originally created in March 2020, reloaded in my present-day Create-A-Sim interface. Screenshotted on 28 April 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts Inc.

The CAS system's deep customization features, from physical traits to personal aspirations, significantly impact how I express and explore my Black girl identity through *The Sims*. It provides a rich platform for projecting and examining aspects of my identity, enabling me to navigate and express these complexities in a controlled, creative environment. Through Pandora and Bubblegum, I engage with themes of Black femininity, identity construction, and the nuances of personal and societal expectations, which allowed me to begin exploring my identity as a Blackgirl, albeit if my mental, emotional, and academic toolset was limited at the time.

According to Black feminist scholar Audrey Smedley, race can be identified by observable human features such as skin color, hair texture, body size, shape, and eye formation (Pixelade 2018). Patricia Hill Collins expands on this, theorizing that in America, race is often

viewed through a binary lens of black and white, with Asians, Latinos, and Indigenous peoples occupying intermediate categories (Collins 1990). Under white supremacist ideology, the conventional beauty epitomized by blue-eyed, blonde, thin white women stands in direct contrast to the stereotypical image of Black women, characterized by dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair.

In my gameplay, the characters Pandora and Bubblegum are Black-biracial, mirroring my own identity. Although their mother does not appear directly in the Box-Salter-Cloud narrative, I explored her background in a prequel set in a 1950s environment that I designed, depicting her as Black with dark skin and tightly coiled hair. This decision was an intentional effort to anchor their identities in a clearly recognizable Blackness, albeit presented ambiguously within the main storyline. This ambiguity reflects the confusion and struggles I experienced with my own racial and feminine identity, grappling with being light-skinned and racially ambiguous—traits that allowed me to blend more easily into white society than darker-skinned Black women, a dynamic critically analyzed by Collins (1990).

This portrayal led to a critical moment when a friend remarked that my Sims seemed "white-washed," a comment that deeply impacted me as it was never my intention to diminish their Blackness. This feedback spurred deeper reflection on how I represent Black femininity and prompted me to confront the complexities of my identity that I had previously avoided.

Growing up, I often avoided directly addressing my racial identity, but creating the Box-Salter-Cloud universe during a period of significant personal and societal upheaval—including the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement—compelled me to face these issues directly. My education and the ongoing global discussions about race helped me develop a critical understanding of my historical position within contexts marked by colonization, the

Atlantic Slave Trade, and persistent racism in America.

Reflecting on my gameplay through Alice Walker's concept of the Black woman as both the "model" and the "artist" of her identity (Walker 1983). I view my initial Sims creations as a metaphorical modeling process. These characters were the early, naive representations of my Black girl identity, created while I was still enveloped in a color-blind cocoon of my own making. This gameplay not only mirrored the stages of my identity crisis but also facilitated a deeper engagement with my Blackness, femininity, and the complex dynamics of family and sisterhood.

In-Game Play

I began playing *The Sims 4* with Pandora and Bubblegum Box in Willow Creek, the basic starter world available in the base game. At that time, I lacked any expansion packs or additional Downloaded/Purchased Content (DLC), making Willow Creek—with its simple, traditionally-American suburban setting—my primary play space.

The sisters started in a modest house that I built using my limited Simoleons—the in-game currency (§). I equipped it with the most affordable furnishings available in Build-Buy Mode, the game's construction interface. In the early days, I directed Pandora to engage in "mean" interactions with other Sims from the pie menu, embodying her mischievous nature, while Bubblegum ventured out to meet neighbors and explore the community of Willow Creek.

The narrative took a significant turn when Bubblegum met Harry Salter, a local Sim. They married within three Sim days and soon welcomed their daughter, Pepper. This new addition transformed the Box-Salter family dynamic; my gameplay shifted from a casual exploration of game mechanics to a focused engagement with family life. The arrival of Pepper

reignited my enjoyment of "playing house," immersing me in the challenges and joys of parenting within the game.

At one point, a glitch unexpectedly aged Pandora to an elder, nearly ending her story prematurely. I employed in-game cheats to restore her youth and creatively spun this incident to transform her character arc from a villain to a nurturing figure. This change not only marked her redemption but also enriched the narrative with themes of personal growth and introspection.

During the pandemic, I dedicated eight to twelve hours a day to playing *The Sims*. With one Sim Day translating to twenty-four real minutes, and a Sim year lasting about twenty-eight days or approximately 11.2 hours of gameplay, the extensive hours I invested enabled rapid progression through my Sims' lives. As Pepper matured, I meticulously developed her personality and interests, highlighting her love for chess and science to reflect her intellectual curiosity. I also carefully selected her clothing and other aesthetic elements to highlight her evolving identity.

Amidst these developments, Pandora sought companionship, moving away from her earlier mischievous lifestyle. Despite some initial humorous rejections, she eventually found love with Elijah Cloud. Their wedding became a notable event in my gameplay, resonating deeply on a personal level and adding profound narrative depth.

The family narrative further expanded with the arrival of cousins Rain and Rock, born to Bubblegum and Harry, and Pandora and Elijah, respectively. Notably, I timed the pregnancies of Pandora and Bubblegum so that their children would be "Twousins" (twin cousins). This added new dynamics and challenges to the family structure as it included children of all ages, allowing me to deepen my engagement with family-oriented gameplay. As the narrative progressed and the children grew, I sensed a natural plateau in the storyline. Eager for new adventures, I

relocated the Box-Salter family to Sulani, a tropical paradise from *The Sims 4: Island Living*, providing fresh narratives and settings for their ongoing story.

Figure 6. Box-Salter-Cloud Family in a Snapchat snap from April 2020. Top row, from left to right: Harry Salter, Elijah Cloud, Pandora Box Cloud, Bubblegum Box Salter. Bottom row: Teen-aged Pepper Salter (left) and child-aged Shaker Salter (right). Screenshotted April 2024. © 2020 Electronic Arts Inc.

Initially, the Box-Salter-Cloud Universe served as an exploratory platform where I grappled with my nascent understanding of my Blackgirl identity. Starting with characters like Pandora and Bubblegum, who were created through superficial binaries, mirrored the initial stages of my identity exploration. Retrospective analysis shows that the organic development of the Box sisters' narrative paralleled my evolution from uncertainty to a deeper understanding of my identity as a Black woman. This unstructured gameplay fostered a personal connection with these characters, reflecting the beginnings of my self-awareness and engagement with my Blackgirl identity.

During a challenging period in college and the early days of the pandemic, managing the

mundane aspects of life within the game helped me cope with real-world uncertainties. Focusing on daily activities such as work, family interactions, and leisure provided a comforting routine, reflecting the significant yet ordinary experiences of Black women. This gameplay not only afforded me a sense of control but also emphasized the potential of *The Sims* to explore and affirm Blackgirl life. As scholars like Russworm and Blackmon suggest, it is vital to celebrate Black women's joy and play, highlighting the importance of these ordinary moments (Russworm and Blackmon 2020).

The narrative of sisterhood between Pandora, Bubblegum, Pepper, and Shaker offers a profound lens to explore themes of family and connection, essential to Black female identity (Collins 1990). As these characters supported each other through various life challenges, I saw parallels in my own relationship with my sister, Victoria. Although we had drifted apart due to differing life paths, the pandemic offered an unexpected opportunity to reconnect and strengthen our bond. The gameplay became a cathartic space for simulating scenarios of reconciliation, emphasizing the power of Black sisterhood and solidarity.

Interestingly, the contrasts between the sisters—Pandora and Bubblegum, as well as Pepper and Shaker—miraculously reflect the differences between Victoria and me. Pandora, akin to a classic villain, sharply contrasts with Bubblegum's inherent goodness. Similarly, Pepper's academic inclinations oppose Shaker's focus on aesthetics and vanity. These dynamics resonate with my life, where I embody the nerdy and artistic traits while Victoria adopts more athletic and 'cool' attributes.

These character dynamics emerged organically, highlighting an unconscious creative process that mirrors my evolving self-awareness and familial relationships. It is intriguing to observe how my perceptions of identity and sisterly differences subtly influenced the

development of these characters. This gameplay deepens my understanding of how personal dynamics shape creative expression and highlights *The Sims* as a powerful tool for articulating the complexities of sisterhood within Black female experiences. The game, acting as a digital canvas, allowed these familial dynamics to be projected and examined, revealing the nuanced ways we navigate and understand our relationships. This underscores the profound capability of digital storytelling to reflect real-life relationships and to provide a platform for exploring and reinforcing our deep-seated bonds.

In *The Sims*, characters like Bubblegum and Pandora are not merely game entities; they are profound explorations of Black femininity, portrayed as a form of empowerment in a world where Black women are often marginalized and stereotyped. Unlike mainstream media, where Black women frequently appear in supporting roles or are depicted through narrow, stereotypical lenses, *The Sims* enabled me to center their stories and complexities. Bubblegum, embodying kindness and empathy, and Pandora, evolving from villainy to nurturing, represent diverse performances of Black femininity that challenge conventional narratives.

This portrayal resonated deeply with my personal journey towards understanding and embracing my femininity as a source of strength, particularly as it intersects with my identity as a Black woman. The creation and development of these characters mirrored my early exploration of what it means to be a Black girl. Initially, my understanding might have been shallow, influenced by limited representations in media and society. Yet, these characters embodied my desire to expand that definition and explore the richness of Black femininity on my terms.

Through *The Sims*, I crafted stories that placed Black women at the forefront, actively shaping their worlds and defining their paths. This was a crucial counter-narrative to the often-passive roles assigned to Black women, showing that empowerment can manifest through

various expressions of femininity—not only through assertiveness but also through care, resilience, and community engagement.

Mods, CC, Cheats, and Community Engagement

When I first started playing *The Sims 4*, I was unfamiliar with Mods, Cheats, or Custom Content (CC). However, as I became more invested in the community, I started exploring resources like YouTube channels dedicated to Sims news, reviews of Expansion Packs, and tutorials on Mods and CC. Mods and Cheats introduced a new level of flexibility and control over my gameplay. For instance, by pressing command + control + C on a Mac keyboard, it opens the cheat menu. One of the first cheats I mastered was "Motherlode," which, when entered the cheat bar and confirmed with enter, automatically deposits §50,000 Simoleons into my Sims' bank account. This cheat granted me financial freedom in the game to purchase any objects or houses I desired. I also learned other cheats, such as careers.promote, which advances your Sims in their career without the prerequisites, and weather.start_weather_event, which allows you to select the weather, provided you own *The Sims 4* Seasons DLC.

The pivotal moment in deepening my connection to the game came when I learned how to download and install Mods and CC into my game's mod folder. This opened new possibilities and significantly enhanced my gameplay experience, allowing for more detailed control over my gameplay and the lives of my Sims down to the minutest details. It also expanded my ability to express Blackgirl identity and representation within the game.

One critical mod I downloaded was the MC Command Center (MCCC) (Deaderpool, n.d.). This powerful mod grants almost complete control over every aspect of the game. With MCCC, I could alter my Sim’s gender, species, career level, pregnancy status, or even instantly

change their features or attire. I could also choose to make their needs never decay, effectively allowing them to live without traditional game constraints. This mod, along with cheats, offers players not just control over their Sims but meta control over the game itself, including the ability to modify the UI or even the game's core mechanics. The introduction of MCCC was revolutionary for exploring and creating Blackgirl Sims and their stories, fostering a deeper connection with *The Sims* community and strengthening my engagement with the game as a tool to explore, negotiate, and construct my Blackgirl identity.

Downloading CC through platforms like Pinterest and *The Sims* Resource, the oldest and most well-known CC library, further expanded my capabilities to represent Blackgirl identity in *The Sims*. The game, shaped by the inherent biases of its white developers, has historically reflected these biases. Before the significant updates initiated by the international Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, which led to an overhaul of the skin tone system and more accurate representations of Black, brown, and other Sims of color, the representation in Sims was limited.

Before these updates, Black and brown players had already been creating and sharing mods and CC to provide the representation that the game developers had not, crafting content that more accurately reflected their experiences and identities (Fleur and deWinter 2021). Influential creators like Xmiramira and ShaeButtyr provided resources like a broader range of skin tones, detailed Black hairstyles, and beauty products like nails and makeup designed by and for Black women Sims players.

While my expression of my Blackgirl identity was still evolving, diving into *The Sims* community and interacting with other Black women online through my gameplay, as well as linking my play to academic pursuits—like my final paper in Intro to Media Studies analyzing *The Sims 4* through the lens of its white bias—were pivotal steps in my journey toward

embracing my Blackgirl self.

When I first started playing *The Sims 4*, I was unfamiliar with Mods, Cheats, or Custom Content (CC). However, as my engagement with the community deepened, I began exploring resources such as YouTube channels dedicated to Sims news, reviews of expansion packs, and guides on mods and CC. This led to significant flexibility and control over my gameplay. For instance, by pressing command + control + C on a Mac keyboard, I could open the cheat menu. One of the first cheats I mastered was "Motherlode," which instantly added §50,000 Simoleons to my Sims' bank account when entered the cheat bar, granting me the financial freedom to purchase any objects or houses I desired. I also learned other cheats, such as careers.promote for advancing career levels and weather.start_weather_event to control weather conditions, enhancing my gameplay experience significantly.

The discovery of Mods and CC was a turning point that significantly expanded my capabilities within the game. I remember the excitement of watching a YouTube video that explained how to download and integrate Mods and CC into the game through the mod folder. This knowledge was transformative, dramatically enhancing my control over gameplay details and enabling deeper expression of Blackgirl identity within the game. This newfound control was not just about gameplay; it was a gateway to deeper community engagement and an expanded sandbox for creating and exploring Blackgirl Sims and their narratives. As I delved into the modding community, my connection to *The Sims* and its potential as a platform for exploring, negotiating, and constructing Blackgirl identity was strengthened.

Further expanding my toolkit, I started downloading CC from Pinterest and *The Sims* Resource—the oldest, largest, and most renowned CC library. This allowed me to address the gaps left by the game's initial lack of diversity, which was evident until the international Black

Lives Matter movement prompted a significant overhaul of *The Sims*' skin tone system in 2020. Prior to this, Black and brown players had taken it upon themselves to create and share mods and CC that provided the representation we needed, crafted by and for our own communities. Through creators like Xmiramira and ShaeButtyr, I amassed a rich collection of Black female-oriented CC, from a wider array of skin tones to specific hair textures and culturally resonant attire.

My engagement with *The Sims 4* deepened further as I started watching Black Women's Sims content and listening to discussions about Black representation in games, like Pixelade's "BLACK CREATORS MATTER! 🥯🐸" episode from his YouTube Podcast, *The Sims 4: Sul Sul Podcast* (Pixelade 2018). This episode, recorded in December 2018—well before the events of 2020 that would reshape much of our digital and social landscapes—highlighted the importance of Black creators in the gaming community. Such discussions underscored the significance of expanding these conversations to a broader audience.

During this period, I not only embraced the game as a form of entertainment but also began integrating it into my academic pursuits. One of my first significant academic endeavors was a textual analysis of *The Sims 4* for an Intro to Media Studies course, framing the game through its inherent white biases. This academic engagement was one of the catalysts that propelled me forward in my journey to fully embrace and define my Blackgirl identity through both digital play and scholarly analysis.

Spring 2020: Conclusion

As this chapter ends, it is evident that *The Sims* has been more than just a game for me; it has served as an invaluable tool for exploring, constructing, and reflecting on black girl identity.

Through the virtual lives of Pandora and Bubblegum Box, I have embarked on a journey that mirrors my own real-world experiences of self-discovery and identity negotiation. The exploratory and sometimes haphazard nature of my gameplay in 2020 allowed me to engage with aspects of my identity in ways that were unstructured yet deeply reflective, highlighting both my disconnection from and the nascent reconnection to my black girl self.

This process of virtual and narrative experimentation within *The Sims* provided a safe space to explore the multiplicities of black femininity—ranging from the stark contrasts between characters like Pandora and Bubblegum to the evolving dynamics of my sisterhood and familial bonds. These elements were not just story mechanisms but also personal explorations that reflected the tensions and harmonies within my own life and relationships, particularly with my sister, Victoria.

Through employing frameworks such as Thee Black Fem Baddies and Blackgirl Autoethnography, I have analyzed how these digital interactions serve as metaphors for and reflections of my own growth and understanding. This method, while specific to my experience, underscores the broader potential of *The Sims* as a platform for other Black women to explore their identities in a complex, interactive environment.

By narrating this chapter of my journey, I aim to encourage other Black women to see *The Sims* not merely as entertainment but as a potent medium for identity exploration and expression. Whether it is through constructing narratives, designing characters, or manipulating environments, the game offers a unique opportunity to challenge stereotypes, celebrate diversity, and assert the richness of Black girlhood in all its forms.

In the next chapter, I will leap forward four years to January 2024, as I stand on the threshold of graduating from graduate school and stepping into adult life. Once again, I will

engage with *The Sims*, using it as a reflective tool to illustrate the evolution and embodiment of my black girl identity since 2020. This analysis will demonstrate how *The Sims* not only captures a singular instance of black girl identity expression but also maps the growth and unfolding of this identity over time, highlighting the game's potential to document and inspire personal development and understanding.

January 2024: Heart Lake Crossing

Introduction

In Winter Break 2024, I embarked on a new creative journey with the creation of Heart Lake Crossing, a concept developed specifically for a Let's Play (LP) series on YouTube. This narrative centers around the story of three sisters—Vanity, Violet, and Viola Heart—who face the tragic and untimely loss of their parents. Vanity, the eldest, makes a life-altering decision to leave her bustling city life behind and return to her rural hometown of Heart Lake Crossing to raise her two younger sisters. This heartwarming tale unfolds as the sisters, leaning on the strength of their bond and the close-knit community of their small town, navigate the complexities of life, hardship, and love, illustrating the enduring power of sisterhood and community in the face of adversity. In this chapter, I aim to show how my Sims gameplay reflects the evolution of my becoming my Blackgirl identity over four years, showing how my gameplay and sense of Blackgirlhood has critically, theoretically, and internally evolved, and how my Sims gameplay reflects and aided in my negotiation and evolution of my sense of my Blackgirl self.

Town Cast

Below, I introduce each of the characters from Heart Lake Crossing, providing a brief description of their roles and characteristics. Building on the analysis of the Create-A-Sim (CAS) system conducted in the previous chapter, this section will delve deeper into how I now utilize CAS with its enhanced features to develop a diverse and multicultural cast, each with distinct personalities and roles within the small-town narrative. In the subsequent analysis, I aim to explore themes that emerged from crafting this Let's Play (LP) series concept. By conducting a

critical textual analysis of my Sims, both as constructed media artifacts and as virtual characters within a narrative of my own crafting, I will illustrate how these developments represent and foster the expression of my Blackgirl identity through digital storytelling and character development in interactive media environments. This approach allows for a richer understanding of how Blackgirl identity can be negotiated and expressed, reflecting my own evolution in gameplay and identity exploration within *The Sims* community.

Figure 7: In-game photoshoot of three Heart Sisters, Vanity Heart (26), Violet (15), and Viola (8). Screenshotted April 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts Inc.

Figure 8. Supporting cast of "Heart Lake Crossing." Top row, left to right: Brooklyn Walters (26), Mateo De la Cruz (26), Jewels Covington (28), Jax Covington (9), Tommy Covington (21), Cedric Glass (34), Emmett Glass (30), Isis Porter (61). Middle row, left to right: Tyra DuBois (29), Theo DuBois (29), Joselyn DuBois (75), Kennedy Jacobs (15), Reece Jacobs (15), Cecilia “CeCe” Jacobs (8), Georgina Jacobs (66), Benedict Jacobs (70). Bottom row, left to right: Andy Kahn (50), Sam Kahn (15), Avani Kahn (14), Aamir Kahn (55), Hana Fujita (42), Tadashi Fujita (23), Tadano Fujita (16), Keith Stacy (67). Multiple in-game Create-A-Sim screenshots compiled April 30, 2024.

Though I would best describe Heart Lake Crossing as an ensemble cast, the three Heart Sisters are, in my own head, the main characters. Vanity Heart, 27, stands as the pillar of the Heart family. Her creation is informed by fictional Black female lawyers, particularly Olivia Pope from ABC’s *Scandal* (2012), Annalise Keating from ABC’s *How to Get Away with Murder* (2015), and Rachel Zane from USA’s *Suits* (2011). These characters are played by Kerry Washington, Viola Davis, Aja Naomi King, and Megan Markle, respectively. Vanity is a highly intelligent and ambitious young woman; she has always viewed her small-town upbringing with a critical eye, aspiring for greatness far beyond the humble confines of Heart Lake Crossing. Her journey from valedictorian at Copperdale High through her academic success at Britchester University, culminating in a fast-tracked law career in San Myshuno, contributed to her ultimate

estrangement from her family and hometown. However, the untimely deaths of her parents forces Vanity to confront her past and move back home to Heart Lake to raise her sisters. She now has the challenge of reconciling her ambitions with the responsibilities of family care. Her return to Heart Lake and her subsequent election as Town Mayor reflects her complex journey towards understanding that life's true fulfillment lies not in professional achievement but in love, family, and community.

Figure 9. Compilation of fictional black female lawyers who inspired the creation of the character Vanity. From left to right: Olivia Pope from Scandal (ABC, 2012), played by Kerry Washington; Annalise Keating from How to Get Away with Murder (ABC, 2014), played by Viola Davis; Rachel Zane from Suits (USA, 2011), played by Meghan Markle. Images sourced from Google and compiled together. Screenshotted April 24th, 2024. Image copyright holders acknowledged.

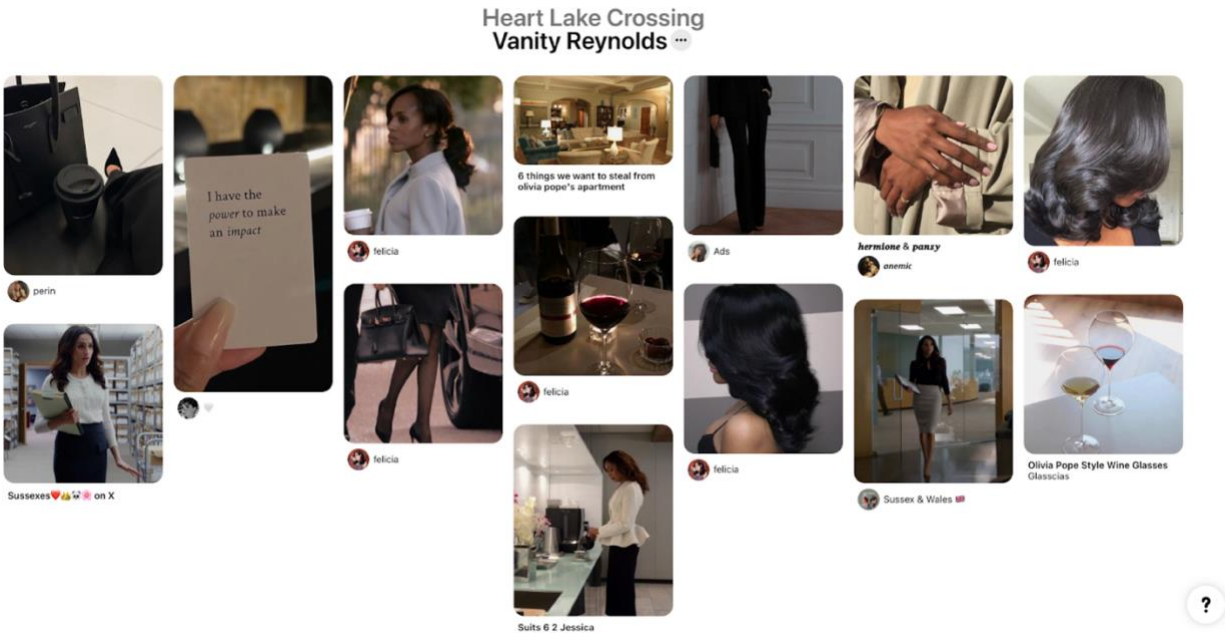

Figure 10. Aesthetic/vision board for the character Vanity Reynolds, created on Pinterest. Board established January 2024, screenshot taken April 2024. Image copyright holders acknowledged.

Violet Heart, the middle child at 15, personifies the quiet observer, with a passion for reading and writing shadowed by her struggle with social anxiety. She is inspired by Ginny Miller from Netflix's *Ginny and Georgia* (2021) and Maddy Whittier from *Everything, Everything* (Stella Meghie 2017); they are played by Antonia Gentry and Amandla Stenberg, respectively. Violet is inspired by black women writers Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker; she dreams of expressing her inner world through poetry and prose, yet she finds herself caught between her artistic desires and societal expectations of earning a practical career like her sister. Violet's journey is one of internal conflict—between duty and desire, loyalty, and love—underscored by her anger and complicated feelings towards her older sister Vanity and her secret love for her best friend, Kennedy's, brother, Reece. Viola Heart, the youngest at 10, is the embodiment of youthful exuberance and curiosity. Aspiring to reach the pinnacle of the Llama Scouts, Viola's adventurous spirit knows no bounds, whether she's pulling pranks, exploring the

outdoors, or engaging in various athletic pursuits. Her vivacious personality serves as a constant source of light and laughter within the Heart household, often challenging Vanity's patience but enriching their family life with her boundless energy and love for adventure.

Figure 11. Ginny Miller from Ginny and Georgia (Netflix, 2021), played by Antonia Gentry, and Maddy Whittier from Everything, Everything (Stella Meghie, 2017), played by Amandla Stenberg. Images sourced from Google. Copyrights of the image holders are acknowledged.

Now, let's meet the townsfolk, starting with Brooklyn Walters. Initially, I conceived Brooklyn as the town sheriff; I decided to redesign her role within Heart Lake Crossing because I made both a personal and political decision to erase the American police system from my game. In her redesign, Brooklyn is now the town's most colorful and quirky resident, a freelance crafter, and co-owner of the local movie theater with her fiancé, Mateo. Her personality exudes cheerfulness, creativity, and geekiness, challenging the traditional representations of Black women as tough and serious, and instead embracing a multifaceted expression of Black femininity. Mateo De La Cruz, Brooklyn's fiancé and previously her Deputy, now acts as the town goofball with the comedian aspiration. My changing his character from a more

stereotypically Latino machismo man to a silly, clumsy, and warm-hearted figure challenges traditional notions of and redefines toxic masculine expectations targeted at men of color in life and media.

Jewel Covington stands out as the confident and openly lesbian owner of the local saloon. Known for her dedication to family and her pivotal role in the community, Jewel balances her love for rock music and competitive spirit with the responsibilities of raising her nephew, Jax Covington. Nine-year-old Jax, inspired by the mischievous Fred and George Weasley from the *Harry Potter* series, brings light and joy to the town of Heart Lake Crossing. Raised by Jewel amid his parents' instability, Jax's presence highlights resilience and happiness in the face of familial challenges. Tommy Covington, Jewel's younger brother, embodies the struggles of adulthood and unfulfilled potential. Once a promising high school quarterback destined for the big leagues, Tommy's life took a different turn as he stepped up to help raise Jax. Now a struggling musician, Tommy navigates the complexities of fatherhood and his own aspirations, illustrating the nuanced journey of growing up and assuming responsibility.

In Heart Lake Crossing, the Glass family is one of the town's founding families, and the Glass brothers add a touch of old Western drama to the narrative. Cedric Glass, the elder sibling, is a stoic and dedicated rancher, deeply connected to his family's heritage. His developing relationship with Vanity Heart brings out new emotional layers in Cedric. Meanwhile, the gloomy and enigmatic Emmett Glass returns to Heart Lake after years of exile, filled with rage and a thirst for vindication. His return sparks a fierce confrontation with his estranged brother Cedric as they battle over the deed to the family ranch. This rivalry, steeped in love and legacy, positions Emmett at the heart of both family and community tensions, making him a central figure in the story's unfolding drama.

The DuBois family, another founding family, is notorious in Heart Lake for their unique brand of mischief. Tyra DuBois, the town gossip, leads the local newspaper, “The Heart Lake Herald”. Meant for informational news on the town and events, Tyra uses her editorial role to create a juicy tabloid of the townies’ lives. She thrives on eavesdropping and cheekily publishing the town's light-hearted gossip, drawing inspiration from figures like Ava Coleman from "Abbott Elementary" and Tyra Banks from "America's Next Top Model," stirring trouble to achieve her aims. With the new *For Rent* expansion pack (2023), I even was able to give her the “nosy” trait, embedding her love of gossip into the very fabric of the game. Her twin, Theo DuBois, a non-binary aspiring celebrity makeup artist, offers a grounding contrast with his more reasoned approach. Friendly and fiercely protective, Theo embodies a flair for glamor instilled by their fabulous grandmother, Joselyn DuBois. A former stage actress and current dance instructor, Joselyn infuses Heart Lake with old Hollywood charm mixed with modern aspirations. As the grandmother of two black queer grandchildren and an avid ally of both BIPOC and Queer communities, she subverts common media stereotypes surrounding conservative older white women.

Reece, Kennedy, and CeCe Jacobs each carve their unique paths in the small town of Heart Lake. Reece, the athletic heartthrob, balances his charisma and popularity with the sudden questioning of his sexuality. His sister Kennedy, vibrant and outgoing, remains blissfully unaware of the inner tensions affecting Reece, nor her best friend's affections for her brother. This adds a layer of drama to their family dynamics. Meanwhile, CeCe distinguishes herself by diving into fashion and social scenes, setting her apart from her outdoorsy friend Viola Heart. Their contrasting interests highlight the strength found in diverse friendships. All three siblings share a deep connection to their grandparents, Benedict, the town's seasoned angler, and Joselyn,

who nurtures the community's town garden.

The two single town elders are Isis Porter and Keith Stacy. Isis is a commercial psychic inspired from the many women I met who practiced voodoo in New Orleans. She is an independent woman who enjoys money and being with her cat. Living next door to Isis is Keith Stacy, a retired gym teacher and now the owner of the local gym. He is desperately in love with and swoons over Isis, challenging traditional expressions of masculinity. Their "not so" secret relationship is a frequent topic in Tyra DuBois' gossip column. Though they have smaller roles in the town, they add to the quirkiness and overall subversion of hegemonic presentations of race and performance of gender in mainstream media.

The Japanese American Fujita family is led by Hana Fujita, the widowed matriarch who manages the local grocery store alongside her sons. Hana exemplifies strength and dedication as she balances her personal loss with her role in the community, demonstrating unwavering commitment to both her family and her neighbors. Tadashi Fujita, Hana's elder son, harbors dreams of culinary greatness while juggling responsibilities at the grocery store. His quiet demeanor belies a deep passion for cooking, and his journey reflects both personal and professional growth as he strives to fulfill his aspirations within the constraints of his familial duties. Tadano Fujita, Hana's rebellious teenager, deals with typical teenage challenges and a burgeoning romance. His interactions with Violette Heart add layers of conflict and growth to the family narrative, depicting the complexities of youthful rebellion and the search for identity amidst the backdrop of familial expectations and personal desires.

In Heart Lake Crossing, the Kahn family presents a dynamic spectrum of characters, each influencing the town in distinct ways. Aamir Kahn, who is best described as the antagonist, uses his wealth and power to assert control, often clashing with the community's values of empathy

and kindness through his hypermasculine and capitalist tendencies. His ex-wife, Dr. Andy Kahn, the town's respected physician, counters his harsh influence with her intelligence and feminine compassionate leadership, enhancing the community's health and well-being. Their daughter, Avani Kahn, wants to be like her father and navigates the trials of being pretty, popular, and petty, playing a pivotal role in the youth drama of the town with her romantic entanglements and rivalries. Meanwhile, Sam Kahn, their son, exemplifies the emotional complexity of adolescent boys; his melancholy nature and experience of unrequited love challenge traditional norms about masculinity and emotional expression, adding depth to the younger generation's narrative in Heart Lake Crossing.

Mods, CC, and Community Engagement

Four years into playing *The Sims*, I have become adept at using mods to explore and express Blackgirl identity within the game. My analysis focuses on my black Sims, particularly Pandora and Bubblegum Box, who were created using both the emotional and academic tools available to me at the time, along with the limited in-game resources. Since I began modding in Spring 2020, I have not played an unmodded Sim, enhancing my gameplay with Mods, CC, expansion packs, and increased emotional intelligence and academic knowledge. This has allowed me to take full advantage of the Create-A-Sim (CAS) capabilities to express my Blackgirl identity through the development of Heart Lake Crossing.

In Heart Lake Crossing, Blackness is central, more so than in my previous Box-Salter-Cloud Universe. The mods crafted by Black women in *The Sims* community, such as the detailed edges on Vanity and the hair textures on both Vanity and Violette, have been crucial in shaping these characters. The intentional design of the parents before the Heart sisters emphasized their

Black-biracial identity, drawing from Black women characters I admire across various media. I meticulously designed my Sims, using skin blends for smoother skin and both in-game and CC hair for authentic Black hairstyles. Sliders were employed to customize physical features to achieve specific body proportions that resonate with my vision of Blackgirl identity, moving away from the more Eurocentric features typical in CAS.

The integration of base game characters into my narrative was inspired by other creators, such as AshleyPlayss and her "Mimi in Windenburg" YouTube series. This approach allowed me to enrich the blackness of my Sims' lore with that of the base game. For example, I used CAS cheats to make Agatha Crumplebottom, a pre-made Sim from *The Sims 4*: Cottage Living, the great aunt of the girls, deepening the narrative's connection to the expansive universe of *The Sims*.

Now, as a graduate in Media Studies and immersed in Black feminist thought, I critically engage with media representations more than ever. In creating my Sims, I consistently ensure that their features, such as nose shape and hair design, authentically represent Black-biracial identity. Despite the limitations in available curly hair textures, which often only cater to looser curls, I strive for authenticity.

The community offers two types of Custom Content (CC) for *The Sims*: Alpha and Maxis Match. Alpha CC is highly realistic but demands more from computer graphics, while Maxis Match aligns with the game's original, cartoony aesthetic. I prefer Maxis Match, especially for hair, as Alpha CC can sometimes give curly textures an uncanny appearance. Although many Black Sims online may feature straight or lightly curled hair—reflecting styles like wigs or relaxed hair—I strive to represent a broader spectrum of Black hairstyles. This includes box braids, 360 waves, cornrows, natural curls, and both high and low fades. My goal is to celebrate

the diversity and cultural significance of Black hair, countering narratives that discriminate against natural Black hairstyles and affirming their intrinsic value to Black identity.

Figure 12.1: Top row: Benedict Jacobs with 3c-4a curls and beard. Middle row: Reece Jacobs with short box braids. Bottom row: CeCe Jacobs with large, long rope braids. Each Sim is shown from back, three-quarter, and portrait views, featuring a mix of in-game styles, Maxis-match custom content (CC), and Alpha hair textures. Screenshotted April 30th, 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts.

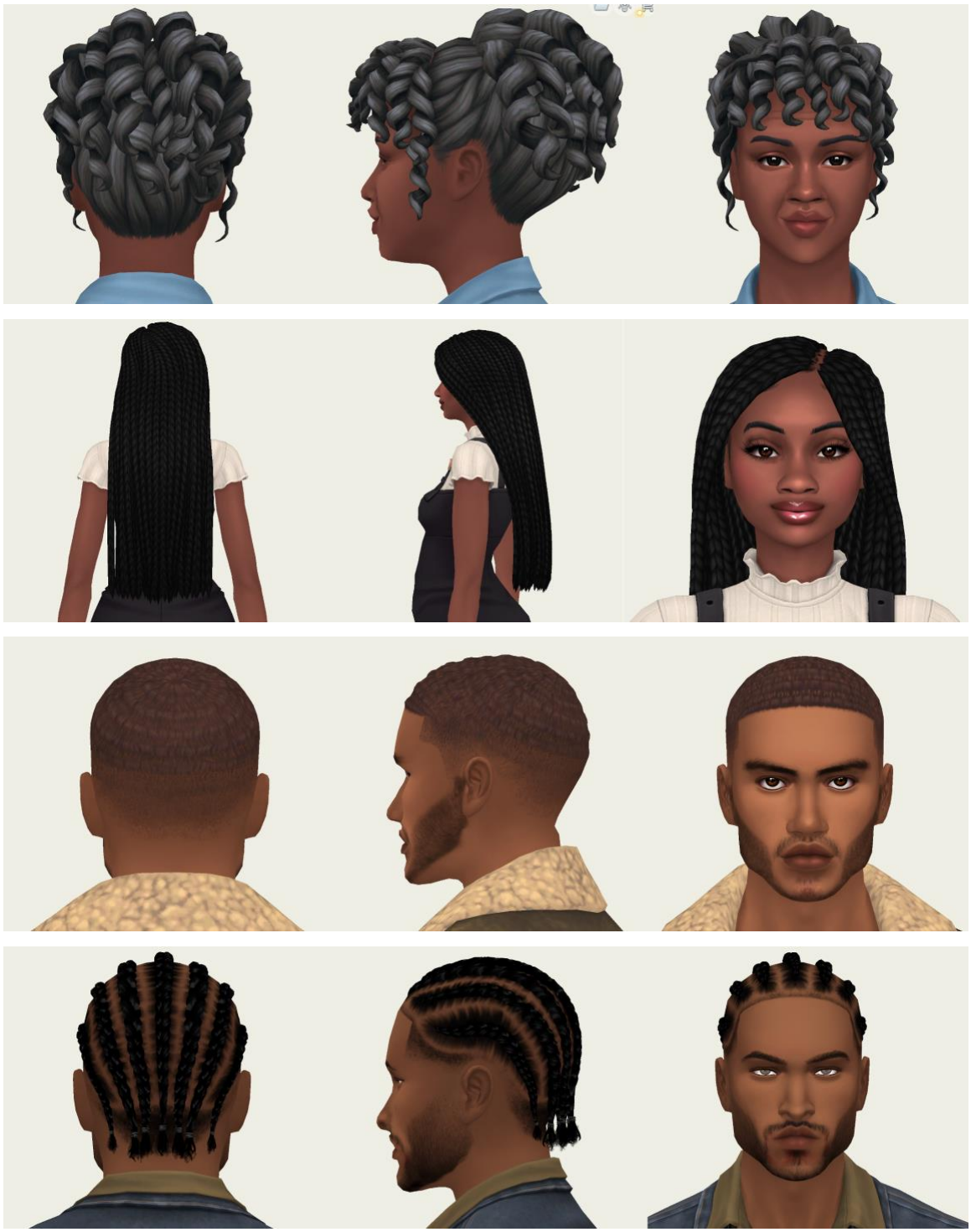

Figure 12.2: Top row: Georgina Jacobs, relaxed hair styled with curlers. Second row: Kennedy Jacobs with long box braids. Third row: Cedric Glass with 360 waves. Bottom row: Emmett Glass sporting cornrows. Each Sim is shown from back, three-quarter, and portrait views, featuring a mix of in-game styles, Maxis-match CC, and Alpha hair textures. Screenshotted April 30th, 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts.

Figure 12.3: Top row: Brooklyn Walters with natural 4A-4B curls. Second row: Mateo de la Cruz sporting a mid-fade. Third row: Isis Porter featuring short, twist braids styled into a front ponytail. Bottom row: Tyra DuBois in a

red wig with edges laid. Each Sim is shown from back, three-quarter, and portrait views, featuring a mix of in-game styles, Maxis-match CC, and Alpha hair textures. Screenshotted April 30th, 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts.

Figure 12.4: Top row: Theo DuBois with a low fade. Second row: Viola Heart, 3B hair styled into four Dutch braids

and two ponytails. Third row: Violet Heart with 3A hair, worn natural. Bottom row: Vanity Heart with 3A hair, worn natural and edges laid. Each Sim is shown from back, three-quarter, and portrait views, featuring a mix of in-game styles, Maxis-match CC, and Alpha hair textures. Screenshotted April 30th, 2024. © 2024 Electronic Arts.

A standout feature of Heart Lake Crossing is its celebration of Black women's romantic desirability. In my town, every Black woman experiences a range of romantic engagements—from having multiple admirers, to being in stable, loving relationships, or enjoying the freedom of being happily single with casual connections. This inclusive and diverse romantic landscape challenges and subverts traditional narratives that often marginalize Black women's attractiveness, drawing inspiration from scholars like hooks (1988) Collins (1990). In Heart Lake Crossing, Black women harness their sexuality as a form of empowerment and resistance, not relegated to secondary roles but celebrated as the most sought-after individuals, positioning the town as a haven where Blackness equates to beauty. This portrayal establishes Heart Lake Crossing as a utopia where Black women flourish and reflects my own journey toward embracing the beauty within my Black Girl identity. Through gameplay, I have used mods to privilege Black women's physical features as the beauty standard, particularly with the popular mod WonderfulWhims, which revamps the attraction, sexuality, and reproductive systems in the game. This mod allows for detailed customization of attractiveness traits based on physical features, such as curly/black hair, tan or dark brown skin, and curvier bodies, effectively setting these as the preferred beauty standards in my game.

My involvement with "*The Sims*" over the past four years has been crucial in shaping my Blackgirl identity. Through strategic use of mods, custom content (CC), and the Create-A-Sim (CAS) feature, I've carefully designed Heart Lake Crossing to explore and reflect the complexities of Black femininity. The mods and CC, particularly those from the Black Women's

Sims community, have enabled me to depict more authentic and varied experiences, effectively utilizing a virtual world to explore and develop my reality.

Build-Buy Mode

Reflecting on the profound impact television has had on my identity, I constantly find myself drawn to narratives set in quaint, suburban towns. Growing up as a military kid, I experienced life in various small towns across the United States, such as Montclair, Virginia, and Steilacoom, Washington. The lush greenery, tight-knit community feel, and significant bodies of water in the heart of these towns have reinforced my belief that home is always in a small town, near a small body of water, and a coast. Drawing inspiration from these experiences and the small-town charm depicted in my favorite media— "Gravity Falls," "Once Upon a Time," "Stardew Valley," and "Gilmore Girls"—I created Heart Lake Crossing. While these series deepened my appreciation for such settings, they also highlighted a significant lack of diversity, typically featuring predominantly white casts with, at best, a token Black character. This spurred my determination to disrupt these narratives and establish Heart Lake Crossing as a space that celebrates diversity, particularly honoring Black, and brown communities within the idyllic charm of small-town life.

Heart Lake Crossing is much more than just a game setting; it embodies my ambition to challenge and expand narratives around small-town life to include the experiences of Black and brown people. This approach to mundanity as political gameplay serves not only as a method for creating comfort but also as a vehicle for political action and agency for Black women in media and real life. Over the past four years, as my life has stabilized and improved, the role of mundanity in my gameplay has evolved from a coping mechanism spurred by traumatic life

events to a space for exploration and enjoyment. Through Heart Lake Crossing, I use mundanity and slice-of-life narratives for entertainment and to explore and enact political action, using the game as a platform to envision new Black imaginaries and possibilities.

In creating these virtual spaces, I developed my Blackgirl utopia through the sandbox mechanics and building features of *The Sims 4*. I emphasize that this is *my* Blackgirl utopia to clarify that it is not a one-size-fits-all solution for all black girls. Heart Lake Crossing is my specific utopic response to the Blackgirl dystopia I have observed in my life and the media narratives I have consumed. Other black girls will likely envision different Blackgirl dystopias and can use *The Sims* to create their own utopias or dystopias, thereby exploring, constructing, and negotiating their Blackgirl identities in a similar manner. My goal is to demonstrate one way *The Sims* can be used for Blackgirl identity exploration. Building a Blackgirl utopia through Heart Lake Crossing is how I achieved this. I encourage black girls reading this to engage in the same kind of reflective work and to use the various capabilities of *The Sims* to undertake this introspective work through gameplay.

Figure 13. Gravity Falls Town Square from Gravity Falls (Disney Channel, 2012). Rights held by the copyright

holder. Accessed from Gravity Falls Wiki on April 18, 2024.

Figure 14. Storybrooke, ME. Filmed on-location in Steveston, a historic fishing village in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada. Image sourced from Google. Rights held by the copyright holder. Accessed on April 18, 2024.

Figure 15. Pelican Town from Stardew Valley (2016). Developed by ConcernedApe. Rights held by the copyright holder. Accessed on Stardew Valley Wiki on April 18, 2024.

Figure 16. Stars Hollow, depicted on a backlot called "Midwest Street" at Warner Bros. Studios in Burbank, CA, inspired by the real-life town of Royalton, VT. Image sourced from Google. Rights held by the copyright holder. Accessed on April 18, 2024.

Figure 17. Dolphin Beach, Montclair, VA. A major beach in the small town where I grew up. Rights held by the copyright holder. Accessed on April 30, 2024, from http://properties.houselens.com/60473/4173+Waterway+Dr%2C+Montclair+VA+22025.

Figure 18. Photo overlooking the Christine Anderson Ferry and the Puget Sound, Steilacoom, WA. Image sourced from Google. Rights held by the copyright holder. Accessed on April 18, 2024.

Figure 19. Heart Lake Crossing in Birds Eye view as seen from Build Buy Mode. In-game screenshot taken on February 4, 2024.

Figure 20. Close-up of Heart Lake Crossing heart-shaped pond. In-game screenshot taken on February 4, 2024.

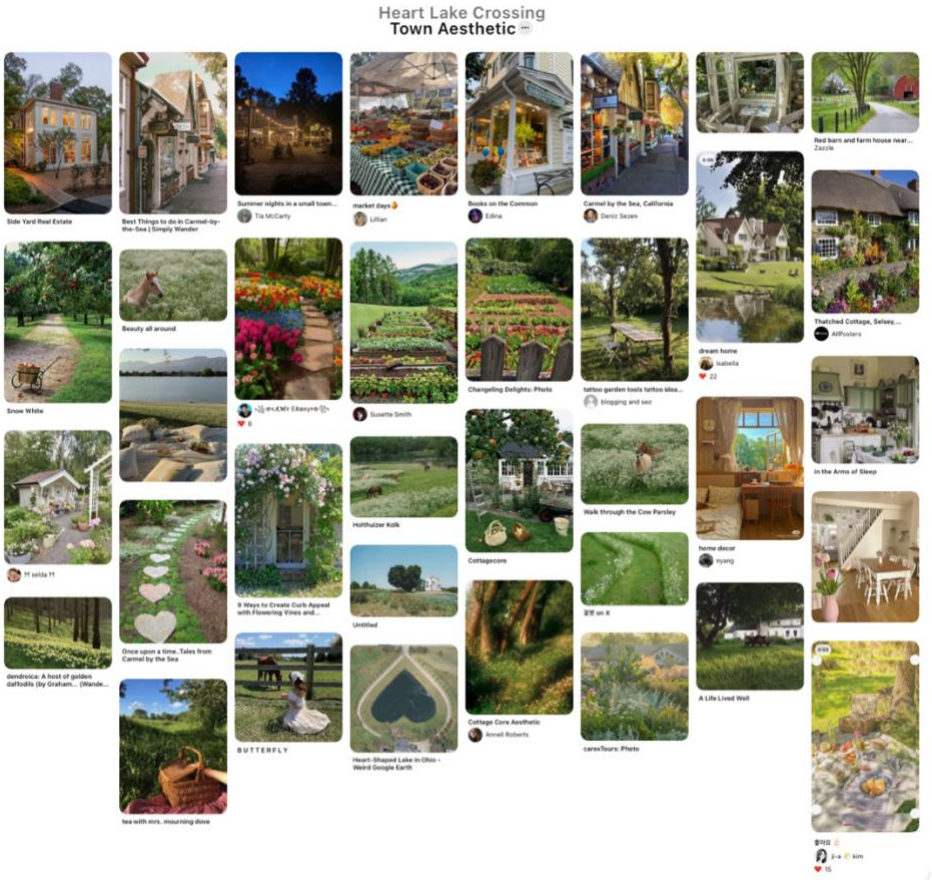

Figure 21. Pinterest board created to curate the aesthetic of Heart Lake Crossing. Showcases iconography of small local living and lush greenery. Rights reserved by copyholders. Created in January 2024.

The Designed Story

Unlike The Box-Salter-Cloud Universe, I never actually played Heart Lake Crossing in the game. However, I still designed a thorough story for these characters and the town of Heart Lake Crossing that I can analyze as I did my actual gameplay for the Box-Salter-Cloud family. From Spring 2020 to now, my approach to storytelling has evolved to become much more metacognitive and informed. Unlike my earlier gameplay, where I explored narratives organically yet uncritically, this time around I consciously reflected on how I constructed the narrative. This shift allowed me to consider not just the characters but also the world itself as integral to the story's overall impact. Each character and storytelling choice was grounded in a deeper, critically informed basis, highlighting a significant evolution from my gameplay four years ago.

This transition in my storytelling approach indicates that I have moved beyond merely exploring narratives for exploration's sake. Equipped with an academic and emotional toolkit, I now engage with my gameplay on a more critical level, targeting specific intersecting issues and systems of oppression. This informed play not only allows me to navigate these complex themes more adeptly but also maintains an awareness of how I process and think about these issues, enhancing my ability to engage critically with these narratives and their relation to my Blackgirl identity.

In Heart Lake Crossing, sisterhood takes on profound significance, underpinned by mutual support and collective healing in the face of tragedy. The narrative of Vanity, Violet, and Viola Heart is a testament to the power of sisterhood as a foundational support system. After their parents' loss, the sisters' bond exemplifies solidarity, care, and the resilience that emerges

from unity. This portrayal of sisterhood as a source of strength demonstrates its role in fostering communal and individual growth amidst adversity, marking a departure from the simpler depiction of sisterhood in the Box-Salter-Cloud universe toward a more nuanced and critically informed representation.

The complexity of sisterhood in Heart Lake Crossing is explored through dynamic and evolving relationships, presenting sisterhood in a light that acknowledges its challenges. For instance, Violet harbors resentment towards Vanity for leaving the family, introducing tension that mirrors real-life familial complexities. Similarly, Jewel and Tommy navigate a strained relationship due to Tommy's irresponsibility, while Avani's bullying of Sam, driven by a desire to please her father, further illustrates the complex dynamics within families. These examples highlight that sisterhood and familial bonds are multifaceted, acknowledging that even in the closest families, there are hurdles to overcome.

Heart Lake Crossing emphasizes themes of community and family unity, mirroring my own upbringing in various parts of the country as a military child where I rarely had extended blood family nearby. In the game, despite the complexities and conflicts within individual family units, the overarching narrative highlights a community where support and solidarity prevail. This dynamic is deeply influenced by my life experiences, where my sisters and the communities we lived in formed the core of my familial relationships. Similarly, in Heart Lake Crossing, Vanity, Violet, and Viola Heart find strength in their bond and the community around them. When Vanity finds herself overwhelmed by the responsibilities of raising her sisters, the community acts as an extended family, offering support and assistance. This portrayal of chosen family—a concept vital to my development and identity as a black girl—highlights the power of non-blood relationships and the profound source of strength and identity formation they provide.

Over time, families within Heart Lake work through their issues, emerging stronger and more united, reflecting the support system I experienced with my own sisters and neighbors. While this portrayal may lean towards the utopic, it was essential for me to envision Heart Lake Crossing as a utopia—a beacon of hope and a sanctuary for Black women, where the ideals of community, support, and resilience are not just aspired to but actively realized. This narrative choice reflects a deliberate intention to craft a space where Black women can find solace, inspiration, and a vision of communal harmony and familial bonds that withstand and thrive through life's challenges.

In Heart Lake Crossing, femininity transcends individual characterization and becomes integral to the community's ethos, embodying values of care, empathy, and collective well-being. This narrative shift allows for a broad critique and exploration of femininity, threading through the lives of its characters in varied and meaningful ways. Keith Stacey, for instance, redefines the archetype of the hypermasculine gym teacher, instead presenting as a sensitive, love-struck man who is open about his feelings, thus illustrating a masculine embodiment of traditionally feminine traits. Similarly, Sam, a sweet-natured boy, acts as a protagonist who personifies the nurturing and empathetic qualities celebrated by feminist scholarship. These characters, among others, signify a nuanced portrayal of gender, where femininity is respected and valorized across the spectrum of Heart Lake Crossing's inhabitants. Conversely, characters who reject these communal and nurturing values are cast as antagonistic forces within the narrative. Figures like the hyper-masculine, capitalist Aamir Kahn or the manipulative Avani Kahn exemplify the disruption and discord that arise when empathy and care are absent. Their roles underscore a critical perspective on the societal implications of rejecting interconnectedness and compassion.

The narrative complexity of Heart Lake Crossing is further enriched by the diverse

expressions of femininity among its female characters. From a lawyer sister who takes on the responsibility of raising her siblings to a teenage girl who finds solace in chess and poetry, and a young scout embracing adventure and exploration, the game showcases femininity's multifaceted nature. Notably, the town's doctor is a woman, emphasizing the professional and personal strengths of female characters in traditionally male-dominated fields. The DuBois family, known for their flair and mischief, adds another dimension of femininity, contributing to the town's dynamism and sense of community.

Heart Lake Crossing not only highlights femininity but also broadens its scope. Male characters express and embody feminine values, either by challenging hypermasculine norms or through their roles as antagonists, highlighting their detachment from the game's central values of empathy and care. This inclusive and expansive representation of femininity, engaging both male and female characters in its narrative, positions Heart Lake Crossing as a space where gender expression is fluid, valued, and integral to the community's identity and cohesion.

January 2024: Conclusion

Heart Lake Crossing exemplifies a creative and reflective endeavor that deeply intertwines with my personal narrative and my evolution as a Blackgirl navigating intersecting identities in the safe and creative space of *The Sims 4*. By developing a detailed and black-centered narrative around the Heart sisters and the broader community of Heart Lake Crossing, this Let's Play series not only serves as a platform for narrative design but also as set of digital and creative tools for Blackgirl identity exploration and expression. For me, my evolution of storytelling in Heart Lake Crossing from uncritical gameplay to my own personal lore-rich black feminine virtual utopia mirrors my growth in understanding and articulating black girl identity through

various avenues: mental, emotional, academic, digital, and via gameplay. I crafted each character and plot line to challenge conventional narratives that underserve the people they represent and hurt marginalized communities, as well as to celebrate the beauty in variety of identities and communities. This series, particularly the story of Vanity, Violet, and Viola Heart, mirrors my own experiences with limited familial networks and the significant role of my sisters and chosen families in my experience in my personal journey and becoming my black girl self.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the themes of Blackgirl identity and the many ways in which *The Sims* serves as a set of tools, a platform, and a medium for exploration and expression. The narrative of Heart Lake Crossing, juxtaposed with the Box-Salter-Cloud universe, provided a canvas to examine the nuances of my Blackgirl identity through digital storytelling. This exploration was equally an academic endeavor and personal journey that reflected my relationship with my Blackgirl self since 2020 to my present writing of this in 2024.

The Sims, its affordances, and the contributions of the Blackgirl Sims community via Mods and CC allowed me to fully facilitate the creation of narratives that could reflect my perceptions of the diversity of the Black experience. In my two gameplays I engaged with themes of sisterhood, family dynamics, femininity, community, and, importantly, the representation of Blackness in digital spaces. These themes were explored through the various affordances of the games, my actions and prompted interactions of characters within these digital worlds, and an academic critical lens that questioned and challenged traditional representations of and narratives around race, gender, and identity.

By constructing narratives that either align with or starkly contrast their own individual experiences, players can navigate various facets of their identity in a controlled yet open-ended environment. The transformative power of *The Sims* lies in its sandbox nature for storytelling, where the boundaries of reality are only limited by the imagination. Through the game, I crafted narratives that not only entertained but also provoked thought and facilitated a deeper understanding of my identity. This thesis demonstrates that digital storytelling, when engaged with purpose and critical reflection, can deeply explore, and express the multifaceted nature of Black girlhood.

This thesis aims to serve as a blueprint for other Black women to critically examine their identities and engage in reflective practices through gameplay. While my focus has been primarily on the exploration of Black girlhood, it is crucial to recognize the vast spectrum of experiences that intersect with Blackness, including queerness, disability, immigrant status, and more. Each of these identities adds to the complexity of the individual experience and deserves thoughtful exploration and representation.

The methodologies and approaches I have outlined, rooted in Black feminist thought and personal narrative, are designed to inspire, and guide similar introspective journeys. By exploring the nuances of identity within the virtual space of *The Sims*, I have discovered a unique platform for self-exploration and expression. It is my hope that this thesis not only illuminates the possibilities for Black women to rediscover and affirm their identities through digital storytelling but also encourages the extension of this work to encompass other marginalized identities.

Proper scholarship and academic thought are crucial in adapting the insights gained from this exploration to other intersectional identities. By applying the principles and reflective practices detailed here, others can navigate their paths toward understanding and articulating their complex identities. This thesis is an invitation to all who share intersecting marginalized identities to harness the power of gameplay as a tool for critical examination, creative expression, and personal growth.

In developing games that cater to a diverse audience, gaming developers have the unique opportunity to deepen their understanding of how marginalized users interact with their creations. By focusing on the profound ways these users engage with games for identity exploration, developers can create more inclusive and affirming spaces. This requires a

deliberate effort to listen to and incorporate feedback from marginalized communities, ensuring that games offer a variety of representations that reflect the multifaceted experiences of their players. This includes providing customization options that respect and celebrate diversity in race, gender, sexuality, disability, and more. Additionally, developers can engage with scholars and creators from marginalized backgrounds to inform their work, ensuring that representation is not only present but nuanced, respectful, and authentic to our experiences.

My journey of exploring and becoming my Black girl identity through *The Sims* is ongoing. Each day brings new insights and growth, and my engagement with the game continues to evolve in tandem with my personal development. Over the past four years, I have seen significant growth, and I anticipate that future gameplay will further reflect my evolving understanding and expression of my Black girlhood. This research illustrates the potential for iterative, reflective analysis of one's identity evolution through gaming. It offers a model for continuous engagement with self-discovery and the becoming of self, inviting players to revisit and reassess their journey as they grow and change. The beauty of this process is its perpetual nature, allowing for endless exploration and redefinition of identity within the virtual and real worlds.

Works Cited

Albrechtslund, Anne-Mette. 2007. “Gender Values in Simulation Games: Sex and *The Sims*.” *Proceedings of CEPE 2007*.

Boylorn, Robin M. 2016. “On Being at Home With Myself: Blackgirl Autoethnography as Research Praxis.” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 9 (1): 44–58.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge. https://www.routledge.com/Gender-Trouble-Feminism-and-the-Subversion-of-Identity/Butler/p/book/9780415389556.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900055.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

Davis, Angela. 1972. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” *The Massachusetts Review* 13 (1/2): 81–100.

Deaderpool. n.d. “The MC Command Center.” Accessed April 30, 2024. https://deaderpool-mccc.com/.

Electronic Arts. 2014. “*The Sims 4*.” Electronic Arts.

Fleur, Abdah St, and Jennifer deWinter. 2021. “How Content Creators Represent the Black Community in *The Sims 4* •.” *American Journal of Play* 13: 297–319.

Gee, James Paul. 2003. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hall, Stuart. 1993. “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice* 20 (1/2 (51-52)): 104–14.

Hayes, Elisabeth. 2011. “*The Sims* as a Catalyst for Girls’ IT Learning.” *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 3 (1). https://genderandset.open.ac.uk/index.php/genderandset/article/view/132.

hooks, bell. 1988. *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*. 4. pr. Boston: South End Pr.

Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture*. NYU Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qffwr.

Norton-Meier, Lori. 2005. “Joining the Video-Game Literacy Club: A Reluctant Mother Tries to Join the ‘Flow.’” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 48 (5): 428–32.

Pixelade, dir. 2018. *BLACK CREATORS MATTER! // The Sims 4: Sul Sul Podcast*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTXbt4xf78E.

Russworm, TreaAndrea M., and Samantha Blackmon. 2020. “Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought.” *Feminist Media Histories* 6 (1): 93–118. https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2020.6.1.93.

Smedley, Audrey. 1999. *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

Stallion, Megan Thee. 2020. “Opinion | Megan Thee Stallion: Why I Speak Up for Black Women.” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2020, sec. Opinion. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/opinion/megan-thee-stallion-black-women.html.

The Combahee River Collective. 1977. “The Combahee River Collective Statement.”

Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

https://sheabuttyr.tumblr.com/post/652578621346709504/afro-collectionhere-is-a-revamp-of-my-afro-hairs.

Smedley, Audrey. 1999. *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

The Combahee River Collective. 1977. “The Combahee River Collective Statement.”

Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.