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Consumerist Environmentalism in *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*

Abstract: In 2021, the United States was the second largest emitter of greenhouse gases globally (after China, whose population was then over four times larger). The scale and urgency of the problem has been broadcasted for years, but the necessity and methods of dealing with it on a national and individual level seem to be quite obscure. Recycling is not the norm, oil and meat consumption is high, and excess spending is common. Consumption is still seen and presented as the means of satisfying most of one's needs as well as a necessary condition for achieving a high social status. Dealing with climate change, as much as materially possible, involves dealing with the specificity of American geopolitics and culture: among other factors, its post-Protestant views on money and poverty, imperial position, and extreme individualism.

The expansion pack *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*, produced by California-based Electronic Arts, fits into the consumerist approach to climate change popular in the United States. *Eco Lifestyle* introduces air pollution, recycling, living off-grid, and local politics, as well as the styles and activities related to pro-environmental attitudes. However, these activities are stripped of their material sense, as the actions depicted in the game are not what limits emissions and carbon footprint in the real world. This seems to be more a strategy than an error; and yet, it is hard not to regret a missed opportunity of creating a playable and ecologically sound *Sims* expansion for the lovers of the gameworld—and the world.

Keywords: digital games, video games, environmentalism, environment, consumerism, simulation, carbon footprint, capitalism

1. Introduction

The expansion pack *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*, produced by California-based Electronic Arts (EA) and released in 2020, represents a peculiar interpretation of environmentalism and misrepresents environmental action. There are more reasons for this than simply adapting the pro-environmental mindset and behaviours so

they can exist in the gameworld. In fact, *Eco Lifestyle* represents a characteristically American stance towards caring for the environment: a consumerist, individualistic, severely limited approach. This article explores chosen historical and psychological reasons why US citizens, as well as other people living under the influence of American culture and politics, are especially prone to reject or distort environmentalism. It also analyzes the *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack, focusing on how the game embodies American consumerist environmentalism and on how it could represent the actual environmentalism better.

2. United States v. environment

Among threats to the Earth's environment, three are the most substantial (Greenfield and Weston). First, climate change, caused mostly by emissions of greenhouse gases, such as CO_2 and methane, mainly due to unsustainable heating, transportation, production, and farming. Second, pollution, both by chemicals and by discarded objects. Third, the exploitation of natural resources, such as land, seas, fuels, and water, which is related to higher emissions of greenhouse gases, loss of biodiversity, and, again, pollution. The United States significantly contributes to all three of these interconnected threats. In 2021, it was the country with the second highest greenhouse gas emission rates in the world, preceded only by China (Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser, "Greenhouse Gas Emissions"), whose population in the same year was over four times as large as the population of the United States (World Bank). This was mainly due to the excessive use of oil, gas, and coal for the production of electricity, heating, and transportation, as well as extensive manufacturing and consumption of goods, agriculture, changes in land use, and mining (Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser, "Greenhouse Gas Emissions"). The United States is also the country with the highest production of waste in the world; in 2018, it produced 265.2 million metric tonnes of waste, dominating over much more populated states, such as China or India. It is also the second-biggest producer of municipal waste per capita in the world (Alves).

There are many reasons why the United States contributes to the destruction of the environment to such a high extent, and they arise from its economy and politics as well as from its culture and history. Capitalist values, as in valuing an individual's prosperity and financial freedom above the well-being of the surrounding world, both human and non-human, have been ingrained in the US culture since the colonial period. The early settlements of Pilgrims and Puritans in North America were the place where they could, after years of persecution and exile, cultivate their variants of Protestantism. Their belief in predestination inclined them to see financial success as a sign of God's grace (Monbiot). And to the next generations, it was something perhaps even more dear: a dream sanctified with their ancestors' sacrifice, worth crossing the ocean for; something they ought to achieve no mat-

ter the damage dealt to others. Years later, writers such as Thomas Paine, Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, and Benjamin Franklin, who named and started to shape American identity, described Americans as men of action and commerce; they saw financial well-being not only as a worthy but also as a truly American goal. These claims were made at the dawn of the Revolutionary War, and were meant to address the major issue the thirteen colonies had with being colonies: they could have benefited so much more from selling the fruit of their (and slave) labour than from sending it to Britain without much profit. Paine even went as far as to describe profit as a human right, while subsequently declining basic rights to Native Americans: "[Britain's] politics", he wrote, "instead of civilizing, has tended to brutalize mankind, and under the vain, unmeaning title of 'Defender of the Faith', she has made war like an Indian against the religion of humanity".

The following development of the sovereign United States was based on territorial and economic expansion. The advancing frontier and the corresponding concept of Manifest Destiny established the foundation for modern American imperialism: vast perspective, ambition, and the focus on one's greatness with little regard for the cost of one's actions, especially the cost borne by others—and to say that the cost borne by Native Americans, other nations, animals and environments targeted was severe is an understatement. The rapid development of industry in the 19th century, coupled with large-scale immigration to the United States, as well as the developmental leaps the American economy took while the rest of the world was immersed in conflicts—resulting in the lavish 1920s and prosperous years 1945–1970 (Greenspan and Wooldridge)—reinforced the myths of American culture: the American dream, the self-made man, the land of possibility, the unyielding American optimism. Such economical progress was related to the exploitation of natural resources as well as the use of fossil fuels. The practices of obtaining and managing fossil fuels have both shaped current American capitalism (Altvater) and caused enormous greenhouse gas emissions: historically, the United States has produced the most emissions in the world and currently it still accounts for almost 30% of all CO_2 emissions ever produced (Ritchie), even though the growing economies of the world are chasing the United States in these statistics (Liao and Cao).

The current economy of the United States, along with the environmental threats that it poses, is strictly related to the political situation of the country. Like other countries with imperial claims, the United States has engaged in a series of wars over resources (Altvater) and spheres of influence; it has also, like other political powers, such as the European Union or China, dominated other countries economically, for example, through flooding them with cheap goods or making them dependent on its aid. As Andrew J. Bacevich claimed, the aggression Americans had to employ to free themselves from British rule made them show "little reluctance to employ force" against other countries as well as against individuals (123). What is interesting in American imperial politics is that the country's ability to engage in wars is supported by its predatory capitalism. In the American system,

social policies are either scarce or non-existent, which means that the accessibility of healthcare, higher education, and much-needed benefits, such as maternal leave, which for many means simply the possibility of raising children, relies on one's financial status. Signs of financial success, such as material goods, are, in turn, associated not only with luxury, prestige, or pleasure, but also survival, safety, and stability, and become even more desired indicators of status as they are treated as requirements to prove one's resourcefulness, competence, attractiveness, popularity, and so on.[1] Both harsh necessity and desire make US inhabitants fight for a higher income. In a society with little equality of chances, it often means supporting the empire's war-related potency directly: joining the army is still a way of getting an education, achieving financial stability, and gaining respect. Other ways of striving for a higher income include directly reinforcing the system that causes such need in the first place. Many attempt to become entrepreneurs, and those range from multi-level marketing (MLM) victims, through medium-size business owners, to brand-making celebrities and the uncanny mixtures of superheroes and supervillains, the likes of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk. Those who cannot or do not want to be soldiers or entrepreneurs often become the under-appreciated workforce, supporting the system after all.

Environmentalism understood as a "political and ethical movement that seeks to improve and protect the quality of the natural environment through changes to environmentally harmful human activities" (Elliott), especially at a time when there is a dire necessity for it, poses several threats both to the American variant of capitalism, and to the acceptance of imperial politics in the United States and other countries. It challenges the rationale of the system, such as the myth of everlasting growth or the infatuation with consumption, as well as the importance, compared to other dangers, of fears necessary for the system to last: the fear of war, of social chaos, of the loss of position among those who have already accomplished something within the system, or those who feel they can do so in the future. If one was to accept the environmentalist point of view, especially a person who has already participated in the capitalist system in any capacity, they would have to face several emotional difficulties: cognitive dissonance ("How can I be a good person if I did that?"), internal conflict ("How can I address environmental issues fully if I want to keep things that have so far been giving me comfort, safety, or pleasure?"), fear ("My loved ones, my community, and I are in danger"), or even, as Kris Kevorkian and Clive Hamilton argue, grief related to the degradation of the natural environment ("How do I deal with the fact that the future I have imagined for my-

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[1] Even though brand marketing is present all over the world, brands have a special significance in the United States, and that includes peoples' names. For example, on the frieze of Columbia University's Butler Library, there are several words. They do not form a maxim or a motto, though; they are just a list of names: Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero, and Vergil, which carries meaning, of course, and sheds light on Columbia's foundations, but also reads almost like Chianti, Balenziaga, Dior, Coco Chanel, Aspen, Paris, Italy, and breadsticks.

self and the world is forever lost?"). The complexity of the climate crisis makes it that much harder to comprehend and that much easier to deny (Weber and Stern). No wonder so many people, especially those immersed in systems like the American one, choose to deny climate change and reject environmentalism, or, subconsciously, to not notice it at all.

It is not surprising, considering the role of industry in the US political system and the expectations of high engagement in chasing profits put on US citizens, that when it comes to climate change, "Americans report higher levels of disbelief in climate change and lower levels of concern about the problem than … citizens of many other countries", even other "wealthy industrial capitalist democracies" (McCright et al. 184). They are also less convinced that climate change has a human cause (Weber and Stern 317). However, the American public is far from united on these matters (McCright et al.). It is the US citizens from the political right that declare impact scepticism—"the belief that climate change impacts are not serious or dangerous or are even exaggerated"—while the views on climate change of leftist or centrist US citizens do not differ significantly from the views of people with similar political preferences in other countries (McCright et al. 184).

Climate change denial in the United States has risen significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, when environmental problems, such as the depletion of the ozone layer or biodiversity loss, were first covered on a wider scale, and when the United States, compared to other countries, was already an economical superpower. As Aaron M. McCright et al. explain, American conservatives were then challenged, more strongly than ever before, with the risks and fears related to the system they approved of. Since then, the US Republican Party has increased its denial efforts and created an organized climate denial movement meant "to challenge the reality, human cause, and seriousness of climate change", a movement "strong, enduring, and influential" like no other (McCright et al. 184, 186). Since then, the perception of the severity of climate change effect has shifted on both sides, but it has decreased especially significantly among Republicans (Weber and Stern 322). Currently, political views are strong predictors of environment-related attitudes, and the factors used to describe one's political inclinations turn out to be associated with climate change denial in the United States. Such factors are, for example, "identifying as a conservative Protestant, regularly viewing Fox News or other conservative media, [and] espousing free market ideology" (McCright et al. 186). These are much stronger predictors of climate change views than other important factors, such as "education [or] scientific literacy" (McCright et al. 186), which is why the (significant) environmental movement in the United States has only limited success, and perhaps also why high consumption of oil (Worldometer) and meat (Kuck and Schnitkey), excess spending (Tighe), and insufficient efforts to properly manage waste (Stein) are not addressed enough. The characteristically American denialist movement also impacts other countries, especially the UK, as there is no language barrier (Weber and Stern 322).

The psychology behind climate change denial in the United States goes beyond historical, political, and emotional motivations, and even beyond the psychological processes that make like-minded, or like-situated, citizens follow the Republican Party's lead and lean towards "anti-reflexivity, system-justification, and climate change skepticism" (McCright et al. 186). One of the core traits of American culture is its individualism. Individualistic societies are ones where "the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family" (Hofstede qtd. in Kim 4). Some researchers directly tie individualism with consumerism (Bylok). Individualism is the opposite of collectivism; collectivist societies are tightly-knit and often perceive good social relations as more valuable than personal freedom. According to Uichol Kim, communities that had to cooperate more closely in order to ensure their survival developed more collectivist cultures. An opposite process shaped US culture: it is, after all, a country comprised of the descendants of individuals who took a risk to sail to it, of those who left their communities and went west, and of those who defied their surroundings and changed social class—and were praised for it. In fact, according to many authors (e.g., Triandis, McCusker, and Hui), American culture is the most individualistic in the world.

Individualism in the United States influences both the way Americans perceive the climate crisis and the way they aim to deal with it. In a given situation, members of collectivist cultures focus on the social circumstances and environmental factors influencing the individual involved, while people living in individualistic cultures tend to attribute responsibility to the individual—their decisions, capabilities, and personality traits. They are prone to make an error that Lee Ross called the fundamental attribution error: the mistake of overestimating the agency of an individual and underestimating other factors. Therefore, in relation to the environmental crisis, Americans are more willing to see both causes and solutions within the realm of individual actions. The focus on the individual might discourage people from committing to activities that make the most sense when seen from a communal, or even global, level, and make them more prone to climate change denial, which, in turn, will be related to attributing the "problem" to the environmentally minded individuals and seeing them as ridiculous, illogical fanatics.[2] Those who commit to more environmentally friendly ways of living, however, will overestimate the importance of the actions individuals can undertake, such as making informed choices in terms of consumption, diet, transportation, and so on, which, as much as they are imperative, are only accessory to the changes that industry and the legal system have to undergo. Some individual changes, limited in their scope, can easily be adopted within the (unchanged) system, and even used to its benefit.

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[2] This trope usually includes hippie-like clothes, shallow interest in Eastern religions, and a certain lack of logic in the fanatics' actions, especially those related to their pro-environmental beliefs, or, if it is present, to their vegetarianism or veganism (TVTropes). Phoebe Buffay from *Friends* might serve as an example of such trope.

Environmentalism has already become a trend complete with heavily marketed products that might, especially if bought on a whim, do more harm than good. One of the products that appeal to individuals with the environment in mind is the game discussed in this article—*The Sims 4*, and its expansion pack *Eco Lifestyle*.

3. *The Sims 4: Eco* (?) *Lifestyle*

Eco Lifestyle was released on 5 June 2020, as the ninth expansion pack to *The Sims 4*, first published by EA in 2014. *The Sims* series goes back to the first *The Sims* game released in 2000, and it is consistent in its main mechanics: the players control a citizen who works, engages in relationships, and expands their home, the primary setting of the game. Even though *The Sims* game series is based on simulation and free play, the procedural rhetorics (Bogost) are clearly and strongly capitalist. In *The Sims* (2000), the most challenging achievement the game pointed the players towards was to succeed in one's career, accumulate wealth, and move into the best house in the game, the house on a hill. The game has been called a simulation of North American suburban life, where "commodity consumption is the *raison d'être*" (Kline, Dyer-Whiteford, and de Peuter 275–76), and an "ideological tool of late capitalism" (Sicart 5). Since then, *The Sims* games have been supplemented with multiple mechanics allowing the players to enjoy more activities and choose their own path more freely, but most mechanics are still pretty consistent with the aspirations of conservative neoliberalism (Staśko). The focus on earning and consuming, besides being clearly visible in the procedural rhetorics of the game, is also present in EA's sales model: the expansion packs are sold, but the basic game, which does not contain much more than an enticement to play, is free.

The *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack adds a new town, Evergreen Harbor, to the game. Many worlds in *The Sims* series resemble particular cities or regions of the world, mostly of America, or point towards places known from American pop culture. To list just a few: Willow Creek is New Orleans, Del Sol Valley—Los Angeles, Sulani—Hawaii, StrangerVille—New Mexico with clear references to the Roswell incident. Evergreen Harbor is a post-industrial town, complete with a desolate seaport and abandoned salt mines; it alludes to the North American industrial past along with its environmental cost, and it is weirdly beautiful (perhaps particularly to an industrial-town-risen, nostalgia-stricken Pole). Evergreen Harbor also serves an important role in the game: it is a world where the new mechanics of eco footprint are first introduced.

The name "eco footprint" references the term introduced by Mathis Wackernagel and William E. Rees in *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*, which relates to the irreversible damage excessive human activity can cause to the environment, but the actual game mechanics of eco footprint more closely resemble carbon footprint (Huisman) as well as air pollution. The

eco footprint of a particular neighbourhood (Evergreen Harbor consists of three neighbourhoods) can either be neutral, green, or industrial. Achieving a particular eco footprint changes the look of the neighbourhood and affects the sims: in neighbourhoods with a green eco footprint, sims are happier and healthier; in those with an industrial footprint, the opposite. However, an industrial footprint makes succeeding in a career connected to the industry easier. The eco footprint is affected by the items on the lot, both the lot of the active sims family, and other lots in the neighbourhood. Trees, outside plants, recycled materials, and gadgets, such as Eco-Matic Smog Vacuum (Huisman 48), promote a green footprint, while appliances using electricity or oil, fireplaces, as well as other chosen materials (such as brick or metal) promote an industrial footprint. Appliances have a rating that determines how much electricity and water they use; sims with the handiness skill have a possibility of upgrading the appliances so they affect the environment less severely. One can also choose to live off-grid and produce energy and water in environmentally friendly (rain collectors, solar panels, wind turbines) or unfriendly (water generator, producing and using fuel) ways.

Besides the new world and eco footprint-related mechanics, the expansion pack adds new furniture, appliances, clothes, and activities to completely enable the eco *lifestyle* promised to the players. Sims can now recycle trash (for which they gain good reputation), make household objects and furniture out of recycled materials, wear second-hand-looking clothing, have a career in city planning, go dumpster diving for food or other things; they can even nap or have sex in the dumpster. There is also a political side to the game: local politics are represented by the mechanics of neighbourhood action plans. Sims can vote for them using their influence points (ten points equals one vote), or use their influence points (five points each time) to persuade others to vote for a chosen plan. Influence reflects privilege, outlet, and position—one can gather points through getting promoted at work, getting a degree, engaging in relationships with other sims, being active on social media, increasing one's fame level, donating money, hosting events, and, if some specific neighbourhood action plans have been implemented, through engaging in activities valued in the community, for example, gardening, fishing, repairing broken appliances, expressing oneself creatively, having a career in tech and so on.

Neighbourhood action plans can, besides establishing new values for the town, require all sims to conform to policies that might include saving energy or water. There are also implementable policies that do not affect the eco footprint but affect the community in other ways, for example, they make the neighbourhood greener (Green Initiatives plan), prompt the renovation of the town, which changes its looks and brings the townies more prosperity, directly increasing wages but also taxes (Modern Development plan), liberalize the community's attitude towards relationships (Free Love plan), promote certain values, such as caring for one's body, recycling, or conservative values (Rock Your Body [and Mind] plan, Upcycling Initiative plan, Back to the Old Days plan), allow violence between non-active sims

(Roughhousing Encouraged plan), promote stealing (Sharing Is Caring plan), or even force sims to wear paper bags on their heads (We Wear Bags). According to that last proposal, bags are piling up; wearing them is supposed to be a way of protecting them from being wasted. Perhaps the neighbourhood action plans are supposed to mimic not only the possibility of influencing one's community or country through politics but also the confusion and frustration one can feel while navigating policies as well as facing not only election programmes that contradict one's own values but also ones that are clearly misguided. Some neighbourhood action plans reference values declared by particular sides of the political spectrum, liberal or conservative. The political entanglement of the environmental viewpoint visible in many countries and prevalent in the United States can therefore play out in the game—and the gameworld can be made and perceived to be just as divided as the real world.

The two clashing spheres within the game—industry and the environment—are represented by two sims inhabiting Evergreen Harbor, Knox Greenburg and Bess Sterling. Knox is an "eco master" who shows up on the active sim's doorstep in order to educate them about voting for the sake of the environmental gain of the neighbourhood. He seems to be inspired by Robin Greenfield, although his looks and behaviours might also be the result of an active stereotype. In the description of Knox's family it is said that "sometimes he takes 'fighting' [against pollution] a little too literally", even though he does no harm to the other sims, and has no traits suggesting such actions (*The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*). It is hard to pinpoint what exactly prompts this description other than the game presenting deep environmentalism as something too extreme and making fun of Knox's controversial behaviours, such as dumpster diving, thus situating him within the eco-fanatic trope.

Bess Sterling, on the other hand, is an entrepreneur, and a corrupted one—it is said that she uses her position as Civil Designer to implement politics that favour her business. She educates the player on the possibility of voting in order to boost one's ability to earn money and asks the player to invest in her business, which seems shady, but which brings profit to those who invest. She also runs a scam asking sims to pay her money (one simoleon only) in order to be happy. After paying, sims become happy for a short time. This short-term happiness references the pleasurable but also environmentally and socially harmful practice of purchasing attractive but unnecessary items and services on a whim, which is usually embedded in and heavily propagated by capitalist systems, especially advanced ones like the United States. In addition, Bess's scam has an almost magical power—yes, the money is lost, but the feeling is real—and the harm done by Bess's scamming is not addressed. The game, even though it directly calls Bess a scammer, at the same time describes Bess and her boyfriend, Jules Rico, in a visibly more positive way than Knox—as "cheerful and charismatic [people who] hustle around Evergreen Harbor like an entrepreneurial whirlwind" (*The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*). As with all other aspects of the game, also here the player is the one to interpret the situation, which

is far from clear, and decide what to do; the game does not reprimand players for their decisions, and the gameplay does not change drastically whatever they decide.

The idea of introducing environmental concerns to a life simulation like *The Sims 4* is fascinating, and even though it is implemented only to a limited extent, it is still interesting and entertaining. That said, there are several problems with the way *Eco Lifestyle* represents the environmental factors working in the gameworld. Even though the problems of heating and powering households are addressed, and local politics are also represented in an adequate way, other issues, like the carbon footprint of different modes of transportation, are not included in the game at all. It might have been difficult to do, as in *The Sims 4*, unlike in other games in *The Sims* series, vehicles, such as cars, are not shown, just mentioned. It is the same with air travel, which supposedly happens when sims are travelling to other, possibly distant worlds. Even though there are no cars or planes shown in the game, sims can build spaceships in their backyards, and using them produces no eco footprint and is ecologically neutral.

More importantly, other problems are left out of the eco footprint equation because they would challenge the core rhetorics of *The Sims*: pleasure gained from earning money in order to consume, mostly houses and household items, and from the everlasting change of styles. Some materials, such as brick, promote the industrial eco footprint. However, changing the materials houses are made of produces no pollution at all, and often promotes the green eco footprint, which, with the exception of toxic materials, such as asbestos, and of emission-producing vehicles and appliances, is the exact opposite of what actually contributes to the carbon footprint in real life: producing, buying, and consuming new objects, rather than using ones that have already been purchased, even if in the first place they were not the most environmentally friendly materials. In other words, using the plastic object one already has is much more sustainable than buying a new one made from sustainably produced or recycled materials. The environmental costs of producing clothes and make-up, and especially the cost of fast fashion, are also completely missing from the game. Even though the *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack introduces some new, second-hand-looking clothes to the game, there is no environmental benefit from wearing them other than simulating a hipster. One can even pair them with make-up looks by Mac available in the game, and it does not affect the gameplay at all. The selective and hypocritical application of the eco footprint mechanics is the main source of disappointment with *Eco Lifestyle*: it is more *style* than *eco*. It is about a lifestyle, rather than about a change, even if a simulated one. And the game does not even hint at minimizing one's consumption instead of simply changing one's consumer habits, even though it is one of the most powerful environmentally friendly actions a consumer can take.

The changes introduced by *Eco Lifestyle* apply to the other contents within the game to a limited extent. The eco footprint and neighbourhood action plans can apply to other worlds than Evergreen Harbor (if they are not disabled manually).

Objects from the main game and other expansion packs, however, do not affect the eco footprint, which is especially significant in relation to the *Cottage Living* expansion pack, which introduces farm animals (cows, chickens, and llamas) to *The Sims 4*. Meanwhile, in the real world farming is a sector that significantly contributes to the climate crisis through the unsustainable use of land and other resources, as well as greenhouse gas emissions, mostly due to breeding farm animals, especially methane-producing cows, for meat (Steinfeld et al.; Naqvi and Sejian). At the same time, meat consumption in the United States is very high (Kuck and Schnitkey), and meat advertisement is extremely popular and contextually related to health, including fast food ads on sporting events (Kuhn and Anderson). There is also a strong link between the anti-environmental and conservative mindset and attitudes towards meat consumption, including disregarding the cost on the side of animals consumed and the environment (Dhont and Hodson), which is exactly what happens on the level of the procedural rhetorics of *The Sims 4*. The suffering of each individual animal—the loss of life, bodily integrity, freedom, and relationships—I will not discuss here, but the costs go far beyond the already very high emissions and pollution (Singer; Foer). In *The Sims 4*, however, breeding animals, farming, and dietary choices do not impact the environment, unlike in real life, where the choices of vegans, vegetarians, semi-vegetarians, and even people avoiding beef help to lower greenhouse gas emissions significantly (Ritchie, Rosado, and Roser, "Environmental Impacts of Food Production").

Even though the environmental cost of one's diet is missing from the game, vegetarianism is represented in *The Sims 4*. It is introduced to the game as a character trait that makes sims nauseous and sad if they accidentally consume meat, because it is, as the in-game description says, "against the rules" (*The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle*). This representation speaks nothing of the empathy and solidarity that guide such rules, but it is not significantly more superficial than the ways other principles and beliefs are represented in the game. There are some hints of interspecies closeness related to farm animals, too. For example, sims (non-vegetarians too) can feel sad if a farm animal known to them dies or is eaten. The killing of animals for meat, however, is presented in a hypocritical way. Animals are not killed by the active sims directly; they are sent away to be killed and sims receive meat by mail. Except for this inconspicuous horror, the countryside is perfectly *palatable*: idyllic, frugal, trendy, marketable, cottage-core.

4. Conclusions

Why did EA, a giant digital games publisher, one of the leaders of the American gaming industry, and a company with highly capitalist values, which can be seen both in their games and in the workplaces they organize (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter; Nisen; Cooper), even bother with the topic of environmentalism, and not just

as a marketing gimmick? As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter argue, a lot of content in digital games reflects the predatory capitalist reality of the companies they are created in (380), which is strictly related to their representation of various aspects of environmentalism. Paweł Frelik notes that "the energy rhetoric in commercial video games … becomes the question of complicity in this wreckage" (92). Even serious games addressing climate issues seem to be influenced by the games dominating the market and tend to lack imagination when it comes to designing new energy-related power structures (Wagner and Gałuszka). Even though *The Sims 4: Eco Lifestyle* is concerned with environmentalism, it does not go against the grain. Quite the opposite: it perfectly fits the positions of American capitalism, which does not reject the topic of environmentalism; it capitalizes on it. Environmentalism is too visible now to be fought directly; misinformation, commoditization, and pointing environmentally minded people towards less radical (and less effective) solutions is a much more promising strategy. The YouTuber lilsimsie, after admitting that she enjoyed the *Eco Lifestyle* expansion pack, said that she did so as she was "one of those environment people". I, too, purchased the game with the hopes of simulating the change I wish for outside of the digital world. I was, however, disappointed with the quality and purpose of the simulation.

Addressing environmental issues correctly would require implementing major changes in *The Sims 4*, and not just within the mechanics of the game. The pleasure of playing is connected to the pleasure of overcoming in-game resistance (Csikszentmihalyi; Chen; Janik). In the *Sims* series, that resistance has always been created by career and financial difficulties. Succeeding in the game, in turn, allowed the players to consume freely—coveted consumerist pleasures, however, used to become boring shortly after the resistance was gone. Removing the resistance from the game altogether would make it unenjoyable. However, the career struggle and consumption desire are not the only possible mechanics of creating resistance within the game. A demanding environmental challenge, instead of an incomplete set of *Eco Lifestyle* mechanics that do not affect the gameplay significantly, could have been the source of in-game resistance and pleasure, if not more: a new paradigm for the game to be organized around. It would certainly be fascinating to be challenged in an environmentally correct simulation in a world as detailed and as playable as the *Sims 4* gameworld.

EA claims "to strive for environmental action" (Huisman 34), even though the purpose of the game was to be "more of a storytelling tool than an educational tool" (Webster). It is true that thanks to *Eco Lifestyle* environmentally minded people have gained an outlet in *The Sims 4*. The game is becoming more and more inclusive and allows the players to both see themselves represented, and to engage in recreating the stories of others. In the case of *Eco Lifestyle*, these are stories of eco-freaks, dumpster divers, kombucha brewers, social activists, minimalists. Even though the game tends to ridicule and distort these characters rather than promote

environmentalism, it is largely up to the players how many stereotypes they include in their own play. Perhaps engaging with such stories, as well as comprehending some visual and behavioural parts of environmentalism, can trigger the mere exposure effect and decrease discrimination towards the people represented, whether this representation is positive or not (Izard, Kagan, and Zajonc). Simulating a life one could have had—wished to have—outside the game might even empower environmentally minded people to openly question the status quo. Or it could go another way: players' need for environmental action could already be satisfied within the game, while they are actually contributing to the crisis (even if in a minor way). After all, the very act of playing a digital game increases one's carbon footprint (Möring).

However, the main problem of *Eco Lifestyle* is not its misrepresentation of environmentalists, but of the environment itself along with the actions that affect it. Neighbourhood action plans change only what individuals within the neighbourhood will do; and whether they decide to save water or wear paper bags on their heads, the system remains the same. The environment in the game, although slightly affected by the player's actions, and often not the ones that matter in real life, actually remains the same, too. It is indestructible: it worsens only to a certain point and can always be saved by buying a few solar panels. In this way, *Eco Lifestyle* faithfully follows the American approach to the environmental crisis. It questions the severity and human cause of climate change. It focuses on individual consumers' actions rather than on industries and politics. It also presents these actions in a distorted way in order to fit them into the capitalist system so it can remain largely unchanged and even benefit from what was initially a threat.

The environmentalist aspect of *Eco Lifestyle* can be equated with what Arne Naess called the "shallow ecology movement": a surface-level interest in seeking solutions to environmental problems that do not involve challenging the core factors that contribute to such problems: anthropocentrism, disregard towards non-human life, consumerism, the myth of everlasting growth (Drengson). Shallow ecology does not necessarily stand against what Naess describes as "deep ecology"—the change both within the results and the causes of environmental problems—it just does not go as deep. However, seeing "shallow" principles enacted while "deep" concerns are thoroughly omitted might lead the players to the conclusion that consumerist environmentalism is enough. The game is not strictly educational, but some players clearly perceive it as such (Grązka), which increases its potential of contributing to misinformation. And it is hard to believe that EA does not design its games with full consciousness of the fact that by addressing some problems and concealing others they are clearing the name of numerous flawed industries, such as (fast) fashion or (factory) meat—and under the pretence of playfully addressing ecological innovation, they are normalizing and excusing overconsumption.

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