

Analyzing the Representation of Southeast Asian Cultural Heritage in the Life-Simulation Game *The Sims 4*

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage is comprised of both intangible elements such as customs, beliefs, and traditions, and tangible elements like monuments and archaeological sites. Preserving cultural heritage is crucial for passing knowledge and values to future generations, yet it faces risks of being forgotten or damaged. Modern technologies, notably video games, have emerged as essential aids in cultural preservation. Video games offer rich historical backgrounds and intriguing depictions of historical events and personalities. Despite the fact that there are various publications on the depiction of cultural heritage in video games, there has been limited study on Asian cultural heritage representation, particularly that of Southeast Asia. Understanding the significance of having diverse representations in helping promote knowledge about other cultures and identity-building, this thesis examines how Southeast Asian cultural heritage is portrayed in the life-simulation game *The Sims 4*, with a focus on the recently released Southeast Asian-inspired expansion pack, *The Sims 4 For Rent*. In order to address this research question, this paper built a theoretical framework that was inspired by previous academic work, the game characteristics of *The Sims 4* and Southeast Asian culture. The data for this study was gathered through analytical play, and then analyzed using a qualitative textual approach. The research findings are organized into six categories: people, environment and folklore, religion, architecture and design, cuisine and food traditions and society and daily life. The results of this study show that *The Sims 4* developers have mainly used Thailand and Vietnam as inspiration when creating the world of Tomarang. Malaysia and Vietnam were also briefly mentioned but they did not play a huge role in the creation of the world. Having used four main Southeast Asian countries for the creation of Tomarang, the game developers depict the region as one nation with similar culture, which is completely untrue. Similar results were found by Šisler's (2008) analysis on the representation of the Middle East in video games. Overall, *The Sims 4* developers have accurately represented Southeast Asian cultural heritage apart from the traditional hair

accessories and objects like the lotus lanterns in the ocean and the lotus monument in the main square of Tomarang. This study is attributed to the research conducted on cultural heritage in video games as it offers a theoretical framework on examining cultural heritage elements in particularly life simulation video games like *The Sims 4*. Additionally, the study complements the academic work, done on Asian, specifically Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation in media and video games by stating that *The Sims 4* creators have used the Otherness framework for its representation of Southeast Asian region as it has portrayed both positive and negative stereotypes about it.

KEYWORDS: *Cultural Heritage, Video Games, The Sims 4, Southeast Asia, Thematic Analysis*

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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage comes in different forms - intangible, such as the shared customs, beliefs, values, traditions, language, music, art, literature, and food of a particular group and tangible, such as the physical remains of a society, such as monuments, architecture, and archaeological sites (Camuñas-García et al., 2023, p. 5). As cultural heritage is often seen as a way to pass on knowledge and values from one generation to another, there is a high risk that cultural heritage could be forgotten or vandalised. Thus, technologies have now become essential tools for its preservation. For example, over the past decades, the usage of video games has grown in popularity not only for entertainment purposes but also as a tool for the preservation of cultural heritage (Harkai, 2022, p. 845).

Video games can benefit culture preservation as they provide a sense of immersion in a historical context (StepofWeb, 2024). Additionally, video games can bring historical events and characters to life in a way that is more engaging than reading a book or watching a movie (StepofWeb, 2024). An example of such a game is *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020). Players of this game can simultaneously have fun and learn about the history of Eivor Varinsdottir and the Viking invasion of Britain, Norse colonisation of North America, Viking Expansion in Ireland and Siege of Paris (885–886) (Wikipedia, 2024a). Moreover, as video games nowadays also have an educational purpose, they are often implemented in museum exhibitions (Malegiannaki et al., 2020, p. 8). One example of using video games for teaching cultural heritage in museums is *Virtual Egyptian Temple*, which depicts a fictional Egyptian temple (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 7). Throughout the game, players gather information about the temple and later have to answer questions about it (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 7).

In terms of cultural heritage representation in video games, there is a need for more Asian representation, particularly Southeast Asian. According to Lin (2024), East Asian representation in media (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan) is much more prevalent in comparison to Southeast Asian representation (Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) (Britannica, 2024a; Britannica, 2024b). An example showcasing this difference could be one of the most popular games nowadays - *League of Legends* (TwitchMetrics, 2024). The game features characters inspired by Chinese

and Korean mythology, such as Sun Wukong (Monkey King) and Ahri (The Nine-Tailed Fox), and Nioh, which takes place in a feudal Japan-inspired world (Andriani, 2023; League of Legends Wiki, 2024). However, *League of Legends* (2009) does not illustrate any characters of Southeast Asian descent. All in all, because of the fact that the representation of East Asian culture in video games is prevalent, academic studies on Asian culture representation focus also solely on Eastern Asian culture. It is therefore relevant to study, the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in video games, which is the focus of this thesis.

The particular case study that this paper will look into is that of another popular video game - *The Sims 4* (2014), as in December 2023, *The Sims 4* developers introduced a Southeast Asian-inspired expansion pack called *The Sims 4 For Rent* (*The Sims Wiki*, 2023b). Because there has also not been any Southeast Asian cultural representation in the life-simulation game, *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack is quite anticipated by the fans of *The Sims 4* (*Sims Community*, 2023). As a result of Southeast Asian cultural representation in games being scarce, this becomes therefore a relevant case study to explore. What is more, as *The Sims 4* is a life-simulation game with its main purpose being to create an accurate representation of real-life events and cultures, analysing the accuracy of Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation in *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack is a proper topic for a thesis to research into. Thus, the research question of this paper is:

RQ: How is Southeast Asian cultural heritage portrayed in the life-simulation game - *The Sims 4*?

1.1. Academic Relevance

Previous studies on the representation of cultural heritage in video games explored tangible and intangible cultural heritage (Balela & Mundy, 2011). However, most research on cultural heritage representation in video games has been done on serious games with a rise in the research conducted on commercial games. According to García-Fernandez & Medeiros (2019), the reason for the lack of research done on cultural heritage in commercial games is that commercial games may not always meet the specialised objectives of cultural heritage communication, particularly when it comes to scientifically and realistically transmitting

historical material (2019, p. 2266). However, despite their argument, there is indeed research done on commercial games. One example is Šisler's (2008) work on Muslim and Arab cultural heritage representation in video games. The author found out that adventure and role-playing commercial games present the Middle East in a fantasy manner, using the "Orientalist" approach, while action commercial games depict Arabs and Muslims as an enemy (2008, p. 214). Although there has been numerous research done on cultural heritage presentation on different genres of commercial games, there is a lack of research done on cultural heritage representation in the life-simulation genre of commercial games. One of the few instances of academic work done on the topic is Ferreira's (2012) analysis of *Second Life* (2003) on the representation of Portuguese cultural heritage. Overall, due to the lack of research done on cultural heritage in life-simulation games, this paper would like to contribute to previous studies by focusing on life-simulation commercial game, *The Sims 4*. Considering that life-simulation games simulate and try to replicate real life, it is relevant for video games to create an accurate portrayal of cultural heritage. Having high accuracy could, as a result, create awareness and motivate people to adopt sustainable practices concerning heritage.

In terms of Asian representation, there is a substantial number of scholar work done on Asian and Asian American representation in media. According to Kim (2013), Asian representation is quite stereotyped by either being portrayed as the offensive yellow peril or model minority (2003, p. 22). Moreover, Asian women are often objectified and stereotyped into demeaning categories, such as "Lotus Flower" and "Dragon Lady" (Uchida, 1998, p. 167; Lee, 2018, p. 3). In video games, Asians are often depicted as martial artists and villains (Dickerman et al., 2008). However, there is less academic attention to the fact that Asia comprises of not only East Asians but also Southeast Asians. Moreover, although there is a sufficient number of academic works done on Asian representation, especially East Asian, there is little to no previous studies on the portrayal of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in media or video games. Thus, this paper will try to fill the research gap by analysing Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation in the life-simulation commercial game – *The Sims 4*.

1.2. Social Relevance

In order to create a full overview of the social relevance of this paper's research, it is important to mention two main points. The first major point is the relevance of the game *The Sims 4* in a global context, while the second one is the relevance of cultural representation in media and games.

Firstly, regarding the relevance of the video game, *The Sims 4* is the fourth game of *The Sims* series, published by Electronic Arts in 2014 and changed into a free-to-play model in 2022 (The Sims Wiki, 2014a). Although the release date of the game was ten years ago, the game developers have kept the game up to date by releasing additional downloadable content (DLCs) such as game and expansion packs. *The Sims 4* allows its players to create and dress characters called "Sims", build, and furnish houses for them, and simulate their everyday lives (Wikipedia, 2023c). Additionally, as no singular objective or predefined goal exists to pursue, players are urged to immerse themselves in an interactive environment where choices reign supreme. The main point revolves around the lives of the "Sims," with players assuming the role of caretakers, guiding their actions, and tending to their different kind of "Needs" (Wikipedia, 2023c). Currently, *The Sims 4* is ranked second in Steam's most popular life-simulation games, with 34.448 players in January 2024 (SteamBD, 2024). Even ten years after its release, *The Sims 4* is still popular because it relates to everyday activities and interactions, making the game easy to play and understand (Bardwell, 2020).

Secondly, cultural representation is extremely important to be present in nowadays media and video games for several reasons. The first reason is that including diverse characters and cultural context promotes inclusivity and identity-building. It allows players from diverse backgrounds to feel that their stories and perspectives are acknowledged and valued (MoldStud, 2024). However, this is not the case for Southeast Asian people as due to lack of Southeast Asian cultural representation in media, they have become a marginalized group that is forced to identify with the media's wrong definition of Asian rather than their own unique identity (Goel, 2020). The second reason is that having proper cultural representation can break the stereotypes around Southeast Asian people. Additionally, the life-simulation nature of *The Sims 4* gives players the opportunity to explore new worlds and gain a deeper understanding of the region's rich culture and traditions (MoldStud, 2024). All

in all, this paper's results could inspire not only game developers but also movie producers to pay greater attention on diversity and inclusivity in their works, especially Southeast Asian cultural representation. Thus, knowing about the game's popularity and the importance of the accurate Southeast Asian representation, this paper will delve deeper into researching the Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation in the new expansion pack – *The Sims 4 For Rent*.

1.3. Chapter Outline

Chapter one introduces the topic and research question of the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in the life-simulation video game *The Sims 4*. Additionally, this chapter goes further by providing the academic and societal relevance of the topic, such as the lack of Southeast Asian representation in media and games and background information on *The Sims 4*.

Chapter two introduces the definitions of cultural heritage. Moreover, chapter two presents an overview of previous studies on cultural heritage in video games and emphasises the growing importance of accurate cultural representation in video games. Additionally, chapter two describes the previous research done on Asian, particularly Southeast Asian representation in media and video games and highlights that there is little to no representation of Southeast Asian culture in both media and games.

Chapter three discusses that this paper utilises a qualitative approach, case study as research design, and analytical play for data collection. Furthermore, this paper uses thematic analysis inspired by the theoretical framework of Balela and Mundy (2011) for data analysis.

Chapter four introduces the results from the data analysis and discusses their further meaning and relevance for the topic. Lastly, chapter five concludes the findings, discusses the limitations of this research and proposes other directions for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

As the research question of this paper is about the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in life-simulation games, this paper's theoretical framework will be divided into three sections. The first section of the theoretical framework is an overview of the definitions of cultural heritage. The second section depicts the usage of cultural heritage in video games, particularly serious and commercial. Lastly, the third section looks more in-depth at the Southeast Asian representation in media and video games.

2.1. Defining Cultural Heritage

In recent decades, significant importance has been put on preserving cultural heritage as cultural heritage encompasses the history and identity of a group of people (GGI Insights, 2024). Additionally, cultural heritage gives all historical places recognisable characteristics and is the repository of human experience (Balela & Mundy, 2011, p. 3).

In academia, the meaning of cultural heritage is often expressed differently. Each definition introduces new nuances to the word, which might contradict previous definitions (Balela & Mundy, 2011, p. 3). And it is also common to find articles that do not adopt an existing definition of cultural heritage by a well-known source. For example, according to scholars Feilden and Jokilehto (1998), cultural heritage encompasses the whole eco-environment that depicts the activities and success of humans in the past that cannot be replaced (1998, p. 11). In my opinion, this definition is not accurate as it requires that in order for something to be considered cultural heritage, it has to be "successful."

For several decades, the definition of cultural heritage only encompassed physical objects, the so-called tangible cultural heritage. In 2009, for example, UNESCO defined it as those "artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance" (UNESCO UIS, 2009, p. 25). Tangible cultural heritage comprises physical objects and artefacts belonging to a culture, such as buildings, historic places, monuments, and artefacts (Sullivan, 2016, p. 30). An example of the usage of the tangible-oriented definition of cultural heritage is from the World Heritage Convention in

1972. The convention divided cultural heritage into two categories - monuments and groups of buildings, and sites (Smith, 2006, p. 96). Monuments were categorised by “architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and combinations of features”, and groups of buildings were described as “groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape” (Smith, 2006, p. 96). Comparing both definitions, it is important to mention that both definitions for monuments and groups of buildings included the fact that they are of immense value in terms of historical, artistic, or scientific context. However, these definitions miss an essential point that was made in the definition of sites. Sites were defined as “works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view” (Smith, 2006, p. 96). The problem with these definitions is that even though all of the mentioned objects and buildings are made and constructed by humans, only the sites category mentioned that they are “works of man.” Thus, this definition of cultural heritage suggests that monuments and buildings are not created by men.

It was not until 2003 that UNESCO finally recognised the existence of intangible cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage consists of “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). The introduction of intangible cultural heritage is revolutionary as it finally recognises traditional knowledge, customs, rituals, and oral traditions as part of the richness of global cultural heritage. Additionally, indigenous knowledge systems related to sustainable resource management and biodiversity conservation are often shared orally from one generation to another, so they should be recognised and preserved because they contribute to solving global issues such as environmental sustainability and poverty alleviation (UNESCO, 2015, p. 11). Understanding the importance of the recognition of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, this paper will focus on analysing both types of cultural heritage.

2.2. Cultural Heritage in Video Games

As it is becoming common for video games to present a country or a region's cultural heritage as a form of cultural preservation, there is an increasing academic interest in studying this phenomenon. According to Majewski (2015), based on representing cultural heritage, video games can be divided into four categories: emphasising cultural content or entertainment value and appealing to mass or small markets (Majewski, 2015, p. 3).

Games that focus on cultural content and are appealing to the mass market are called culture-centric video games, while games that focus on cultural content but are appealing to the small market are called serious video games (Majewski, 2015, pp. 5-6). Games that put emphasis on entertainment value and are appealing to the mass market are called commercial video games (Majewski, 2015, p. 3). In contrast, games that put emphasis on entertainment value but appeal to the small market are called game-mods video games (Majewski, 2015, p. 7).

Additionally, with no regard for a game being serious or commercial, video games can also be divided into five genres: traditional, simulation, strategy, action, and fantasy (Choi et al., 2020, pp. 2-3). Thus, considering the two categories, *The Sims 4* is a commercial game, because it is a game appealing to the mass market and has entertainment value, and the game is a simulation game because it simulates real-life activities and situations (Majewski, 2015, p. 3; Choi et al., 2020, p. 2).

Although there has been an increasing representation of cultural heritage in commercial video games, there was little to no research done on cultural heritage in commercial video games just a decade ago (Ashcroft, 2020). The most prominent research on cultural heritage in video games at the time was on serious games. According to Majewski (2015), serious games are indie games with a cultural focus, such as *Digital Songlines* (2015, p. 5). What is more, Mortara et al. (2014) argued that serious games can be used with several purposes in mind, such as cultural awareness, historical reconstruction, and heritage awareness (2014, p. 319). In their research, the authors found that cultural awareness and historical reconstruction were the main topics of serious simulation games. Serious games focused on cultural awareness emphasise portraying a society's intangible cultural legacy,

whereas serious games focusing on historical reconstruction concentrate on the accurate reconstruction of a specific historical period, event, or event that occurred in the past (Mortara et al., 2014, p. 323).

Cultural awareness serious games provide a comprehensive experience by bringing to life folkloristic and religious events (Mortara et al., 2014, p. 319). An instance of a serious game with a focus on cultural awareness is *Papakwaqa*. According to Huang and Huang (2013), *Papakwaqa* is a serious game about Taiwan's Atayal minority, with an emphasis on intangible cultural assets such as tribal beliefs, rituals, and rites (2013, p. 99).

Serious games that are centred on historical reconstruction are recognised to be utilised as a source of information (Mortara et al., 2014, p. 324). Because there are sometimes no evident remains from historical events, having the player actively participate in the game would help them grasp the origin and progression of the event (Mortara et al., 2014, p. 319). A historical battle, for example, may benefit from digital recreation if only aged written materials exist about it.

Scholars Dagnino et al. (2017), for example, examined the game *Canto a Tenore*, which is a serious game designed to help students acquire the fundamentals of this uncommon singing style that originated and is still used in Sardinia (Italy). Since this game concentrates on an intangible heritage, namely a traditional Italian form of singing, it might be categorised as a serious game with cultural awareness. Through analysing the game development and game design, the research paper argues that *Canto a Tenore* is a well-developed game as it reaches its educational and entertainment goals.

Another example of analysing serious games is *Europe in a Museum*. The game includes a variety of images that are relevant to both native and European cultures. Because the game's primary goal is to identify artworks, it might be classified as having artistic/archaeological heritage awareness (Mortara et al., 2014, p. 320). Similar to Mortara et al. (2014), Kara (2022) analysed the game's cultural history through game design, gameplay, and instructional material. What is more, using a mixed-methods approach, the author discovered that the *Europe in a museum* serious game had a significant, beneficial

influence on learning about cultural heritage. In addition, the findings indicated that the game had a significant long-term impact on students' cultural heritage learning.

However, scholars are also now researching cultural heritage in commercial games. According to García-Fernandez and Medeiros (2019), commercial games may successfully transmit cultural heritage values in addition to serious games (2019, p. 2262). However, commercial games may not always meet the specialised objectives of cultural heritage communication, particularly when it comes to scientifically and realistically transmitting historical material (García-Fernandez & Medeiros, 2019, p. 2266). In contrast, nevertheless, scholars such as Anderson et al. (2010) stated that although commercial games with a cultural heritage theme were primarily created for entertainment purposes, these types of commercial games are good at accurately and realistically recreating historical events such as battles (2010, p. 9). Moreover, commercial games with a cultural heritage theme are often created in the documentary genre (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 9). Some examples of such games are *History Line: 1914-1918* (1992) and *Great Battles of Rome* (2007).

A scholar who has researched cultural heritage in commercial games is Ferreira (2012), with their analysis of *Second Life* and its representation of Portuguese cultural heritage. Ferreira (2012) found that the locations in the game were accurate representational places. However, these locations are only considered meeting points for the community playing there and do not hold any cultural value to the players (Ferreira, 2012, p. 77).

In terms of Muslim representation in video games, another scholar, Šisler (2008), analysed the image that European and American video games construct of Arabs and Muslims. The author found out that adventure and role-playing games present the Middle East in a fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting “Orientalist” imagery (Šisler, 2008, p. 214). In contrast, action games present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematising Arabs and Muslims as enemies (Šisler, 2008, p. 214). Additionally, in his paper, Šisler (2008) mentioned that the Middle East is often presented as one ethnicity when, in fact, there are several (2008, p. 207).

Similar findings by Balela and Mundy (2011), who analysed the commercial games *Assassin's Creed I* (2007) and *Unearthed: Trail of Ibn Battuta* (2013) and their representation of the Middle East. Contrary to other scholars analysing games through game design and gameplay, Balela and Mundy (2011) were the first to create their own framework by looking at the tangible and intangible dimensions of arts and artefacts, environment, people, and history. What is more, they found that strong selection and beautification were used when portraying the region, which could lead to misunderstanding. Given that the depiction of Asians is also often done through an Orientalist approach, it would be interesting to find out what approach *The Sims 4* chose. Thus, the lack of studies on simulation games and this relevance of accuracy representation in this genre, this paper would like to contribute to the field of study by analysing whether *The Sims 4's* representation of Southeast Asia cultural heritage is accurate or stereotyped.

2.3. Southeast Asian Representation in Media and Video Games

As there has been little done on Asian cultural heritage representation, this paper is looking into a much more extensively researched topic - the representation of Asian people, particularly in Western media. Looking through the papers written on this topic, there are two main frameworks that make themselves clear. The first framework uses Orientalism to explain the Asian representation in media, and the other uses Otherness.

According to Matsumoto (2020), the Orientalist framework presents a stereotyped view of Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa that embodies colonialist attitudes toward Western superiority (2020, p. 115). In the present day, Orientalism is still present in media, embodying a huge amount of racism and sexism, which results in monolithic, highly reductive archetypes (Matsumoto, 2020, p. 115).

One way that Orientalism is used nowadays is in the representation of Asian women in media, particularly Western. Under this framework, Asian women become repositories of Western fantasies as a result of the geographical region itself (Matsumoto, 2020, p. 115). The Orient represents not merely a site of historical occurrences but, rather, a site for collective imagination that leads to both exploration and exploitation (Matsumoto, 2020, p. 115). As the Orient often incorporates an object of knowledge and desire, it suggests the

notion of sexuality and sexual utility (Matsumoto, 2020, p. 115). Thus, women from regions like Asia, the Middle East and North Africa are degraded to objects of sexual desire and a fulfilment of Western people's exotic fantasies. Additionally, Yegenoglu (1998) argues that Oriental women are described as "mysterious and exotic" and "feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous" (Yegenoglu, 1998, p. 11).

As a result, the portrayal of Asian women is divided into two main stereotypes: the "Lotus Blossom" and the "Dragon Lady" (Uchida, 1998, p. 167; Lee, 2018, p. 3). The "Lotus Flower" archetype is "based on Western male sexual fantasy, a product of colonial and military powers interwoven with sexual domination" (Shrake, 2006, p. 188). This stereotype presents Asian women as delicate and submissive who exist to serve men, especially as love interests for white men (Kung, 2018, p. 424). Another qualification of "Lotus Flower" women is that they are self-sacrificing and suicidal (Shimizu 2007, p. 59). As a result of this stereotype, Asian women are often objectified as exotic women by men. One movie that includes the "Lotus Blossom" image of Asian women is the 1922 film *Toll of the Sea*, where a Chinese woman rescues and falls in love with an American who abandons her and marries a white woman (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571). Pathologically devoted to him, she gives up her mixed-race child to the American couple and then drowns herself (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571).

Other often-used names used to depict the "Lotus Blossom" archetype are "geisha" and "China Doll," which suggest an over-sexualisation of particularly women of East Asian descent. However, this does not mean that other Asian women, such as Southeast Asian ones, are not portrayed using the image of the "Lotus Flower." Although it has a similar meaning to the "Lotus Flower" archetype, Southeast Asian women, particularly Filipino, Thai and Vietnamese women, are often portrayed using more derogative and rude stereotypes such as LBFM, meaning "Little Brown F* Machines," "3rd World Woman" and "Pity Chicken" (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571; Poltecha, 2017, p. 45).

The LBFM stereotype emerged as a result of the USA wars in Southeast Asia. It depicts a Southeast Asian prostitute whose femininity is characterised by a machine-like sexual drive and performance of eroticised poverty (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571). This hypersexualised Southeast Asian image is exemplified in movies about the Vietnam War, such as *Full Metal Jacket*, in which Papillon Soo portrays a Vietnamese prostitute who

entices two American soldiers. (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571).

As the name suggests, the “3rd World Woman” is usually presented by an uneducated woman from a poor country. This stereotype is used in the 2004 *Bridget Jones' Diary: The Edge of Reason* film, where a Thai woman, Phrao, befriends the main white lead Jones (Poltecha, 2017, pp. 37-38). The “Pity Chicken” archetype is portrayed as an innocent woman who is placed under male control and enforcement and forced to face her suffering life and to get through it on her own (Poltecha, 2017, p. 45). Such women are often forced to commit illegal actions and work 24 hours in fear of domestic abuse from their partner. The “Pity Chicken” stereotype is present again in the 2004 *Bridget Jones' Diary: The Edge of Reason* film.

In Hollywood films, Asian female characters are also portrayed as “Dragon Ladies,” who are characterised as aggressive and dangerous but also desirable and sensual (Lee, 2018, p. 3; Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571). They pose a challenge to Western power but are quickly brought to submission to ensure White dominance (Lee, 2018, p. 3). Additionally, “Dragon Ladies” are often described as “inhuman robots that are unfeeling, savage, sexual, and completely self-serving” (Lee, 2018, p. 3). Some examples of Western films that include the “Dragon Lady” archetype are the 1924 film *The Thief of Bagdad* and the 2004 film *Mean Girls*. In *The Thief of Bagdad*, a scantily clad Mongol slave is dispatched to spy on and try to win the hand of the princess of Bagdad for the evil Mongol prince (Hwang & Parreñas, 2021, p. 571). In *Mean Girls*, Trang Pak and Sun Jin Dinh are two Asian Americans who are promiscuous and mean high schoolers engaging in a sexual relationship with their older white gym teacher, Coach Carr (Ramiro, 2022, p. 97).

The second framework used to portray Asians in today’s media is the Otherness framework. As the name suggests, this framework divides a certain group of people from the dominant group in society. Some of the early cases of Otherness towards Asians involve using the derogatives “yellow peril” and “yellow face.”

According to Kim (2013), “yellow peril” is the longest-staying stereotype towards Asians (2013, p. 22). Asian immigrants' different bodies and cultures were perceived as a great threat—the yellow peril—to American identity as the country of the White race and Western civilisation (Kawai, 2006, p. 112). White Americans perceived people of Asian descent as inassimilable foreigners who “would eventually overtake the nation and wreak

social and economic havoc” (Fong, 2002, p. 189). Although this stereotype originates from the time of Ghengis Khan, there was a growing use of this stereotype and negative sentiment towards Asians during the late 19th century when large numbers of Chinese came to the USA for the construction of the transcontinental railroad (Kim, 2013, p. 22). During that period, American newspapers described Chinese people as “immoral, heathen, barbarian, disease-ridden, brutal, corrupt, and uncivilised” (Kim, 2013, p. 22). With the start of World War II, the “yellow peril” image was also utilised when mentioning Japanese people. The negative sentiment towards Japanese people was most powerful during the 1980s when Japan experienced one of its strongest economic developments (Kim, 2013, p. 22).

The “yellow face” stereotype is again targeted towards Asians and Asian Americans as being a threat towards American society and culture. According to Ono and Pham (2009), during the early 20th century, American movies did not hire Asian actors to play Asian roles so they were performed by White people who were “wearing heavy white make-up as a base and exaggerated black make-up around the eyes, sometimes actually taping the eyes back to change their shape, using an accent imagined to ‘sound Asian,’ speaking words from a script that either sound vaguely like someone speaking an Asian language or that are distorted English or simply gibberish” (2009, p. 46).

Model minority is a relatively recent term as compared to “yellow peril” and “yellowface”. In the mid-1960s, amid civil rights movements and calls for educational equality and social justice, the mainstream media began to portray Asian Americans as model minorities (Kim, 2013, p. 25). According to Lowe (2008), model minority refers to “the perception that Asian Americans excel in areas of academic, economic, and career success where other ethnic minorities in the United States do not” (2008, p. 478). However, the model minority is strongly connected with political aims. The model minority conveys the concept that the United States' political arrangements promote success and the accomplishment of the American Dream (Kim, 2013, p. 25; Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 46). Model minority discourse was developed during the civil rights movement to encourage people of colour to accept responsibility rather than assign blame and advocate for social change by painting a distorted picture of all Asian Americans as hardworking, quiet, and persevering without complaint (Kim, 2013, p. 26).

Overall, individuals of Asian origin are portrayed as the “model minority” when they

perform better than other racial minority groups and as the "yellow peril" when they outperform White Americans (Kawai, 2005, p. 115). Additionally, Kim (2013) found out that even though Asian people are no longer stereotyped with *yellow faces*, American media still used the *yellow peril* stereotype when talking about China and the model minority stereotype (2013, p. 43). Moreover, according to Nagaraj and Wen (2020), Asian people are often portrayed as not speaking English, as clumsy, and as disliked by Americans (2020, pp. 5-7).

In terms of professions, there is a change in representing Asians from being portrayed as martial artists, ninjas, laundry owners, grocers, geishas and Chinese restaurant workers to businessmen, medical professionals, and high-achieving students (Kim, 2013, p. 27). Nagaraj and Wen (2020) agree and add to Kim's finding by stating that Asian characters in Hollywood movies are portrayed as geeks, math whizzes, techies, or non-masculine (2020, p. 2).

When researching video games, similar stereotypes about Asian people were found. According to Dickerman et al. (2008), Asian video game characters are represented as martial artists, such as in *Shadow Warrior* (1997) (2008, p. 25). They also add that Asians are often depicted as villains in video games. For example, they are portrayed as mini bosses that have to be defeated for the main White protagonist to advance in the game, like in *Double Dragon* (1988) and *Final Fight* (1991).

Although scholars argue that Asians are over-represented in media and video games, the reality is they are under-represented because they do not properly define "Asian" or realise that Asians are comprised of diverse ethnicities. Thus, Southeast Asia is often excluded from "Asia". East Asian Americans are often considered the model minority or Honorary White and are treated the same as European Americans (Lin, 2024, pp. 1-2). However, Southeast Asian Americans are considered the problem minority and are receiving the same treatment as African Americans (Bui, 2021, p. 14). This stereotype is evident because when Southeast Asian refugees come for the first time to America, they live in impoverished areas in the USA and participate in gang culture (Ngo & Lee, 2007, p. 416).

Portraying Southeast Asians in media, particularly Western, in a negative light is an often-used stereotype. According to Huang (2015), American movies often describe Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, as "corrupted, dirty and dense" (Huang, 2015, p. 45).

Ngampornchai (2007) further adds to the American perception of Thailand as a country with high poverty and prostitution (2007, p. 86). In 1992, the definition of Bangkok as a “place where there are a lot of prostitutes” was included in the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture (Harrison, 2000, p. 138). Additionally, Thai people are portrayed as poor but smart and friendly (Huang, 2015, p. 52). They often work in negatively connotated occupations such as drug dealers and thieves (Huang, 2015, p. 52).

Similar findings were shared by Gutierrez (2019), who analysed the portrayal of the Philippines in Western media, particularly American ones (2019, p. 40). They found that when American media talked about the Philippines as a country, topics like poverty and disaster relief were often mentioned. As a result, Western media channels create an indirect dependent relationship between the Philippines and the USA, with the USA being the dominant one.

The portrayal of Vietnam by Western media is also presented in a bad light. Although there has been a change over the decades, there is still a strong sentiment against Vietnamese people that is still present from the Vietnam War (1954-1975). This negative attitude towards Vietnamese people is often re-created in Western movies about the Vietnam War. For example, the ARVN (Army of the Republic of (South) Vietnam) is shown in a negative and problematic way; as plunderers of corpses and assassins (Kleinen, 2003, 438). However, it is not an accurate representation as ARVN were people with low salaries and uncertainty in food supplies, ill-armoured and ill-trained, who, instead of surrendering, showed instances of heroism and determination in battle (Kleinen, 2003, pp. 438-39). Overall, in Western war movies, Vietnamese soldiers and civilians are portrayed as cunning, cruel, even sadistic, ambivalent, and irresponsible (Kleinen, 2003, p. 449).

Interestingly, however, out of the three Southeast Asian countries - Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand, only Thailand has been mentioned in a positive light in Western movies. Overall, from a Western viewpoint, Thailand is often associated with spicy food and exquisite temples (Ngampornchai, 2007, p. 33). It is a famous adventurous travel location, but it is chaotic and hot. Thai people are shown wearing both Western and traditional Thai costumes, believing in Buddhism and speaking accented English (Huang, 2015, p. 52). American movies also emphasise the third gender male (Huang, 2015, p. 53). Seeing that there is a different attitude towards Southeast Asians in comparison to East Asians in society,

this paper will examine whether *The Sims 4* has created an accurate or stereotypical representation of Southeast Asian people and culture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To answer the posed research question, this paper has used qualitative research to understand, describe and explain social phenomena from an inside point of view (Flick, 2018, p. 2). Thus, qualitative research was the perfect approach for this paper to understand how a life simulation game like *The Sims 4* has portrayed Southeast Asian cultural heritage. Additionally, qualitative research was better suited for the research topic because this paper looked more deeply into video games, which are part of people's daily lives. According to Flick (2018), qualitative researchers are interested in observing themselves in the worlds they want to study and not transferring the world into their scientific environments as quantitative researchers do (2018, p. 7).

Moreover, this paper has used the case study approach of qualitative research because it could be used to explain, describe, or explore events or phenomena in the everyday contexts in which they occur (Yin, 2014, p. 2). This approach was applied to answer the research question since this paper had examined video games, a popular daily life activity (Shi et al., 2019, p. 292). Additionally, the epistemological approach of this case study was interpretative, because this paper focused on understanding individual and shared social meanings and on theory building (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 4).

The case study this paper applied was a single intrinsic one, meaning that the paper has only focused on one unique phenomenon (Crowe et al., 2011, pp. 1-2). Regarding this paper, its intrinsic case study was the life-simulation game - *The Sims 4*, particularly the For Rent expansion pack. This expansion pack was chosen as a case study because it was one of the most anticipated expansion packs for 2023 as, for the first time, Southeast Asian culture and people were introduced into the game (Sims Community, 2023).

The Sims 4 For Rent is the fifteenth expansion pack for *The Sims 4*, published on December 7th, 2023 (*The Sims Wiki*, 2023). *The Sims 4 For Rent* provided residential rental dwellings that may be divided into several areas and rented out as multi-family households (*The Sims Wiki*, 2023). Sims may become property owners, rent out their flats to other Sims, and deal with tenant issues (*The Sims Wiki*, 2023). There were also numerous new social

activities and games for children in a new world called Tomarang, which were inspired by Southeast Asian countries - Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam (*The Sims Wiki*, 2023).

3.2. Data Collection

In terms of data collection, this research applied analytical play, which entails observing while playing video games. However, this type of data collection differed significantly from just playing a video game since it required the ability to communicate and critically assess one's experiences with the subject of research (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 165). Furthermore, analytical play connects games to broader frameworks of historical and social importance (Mäyrä, 2008, p. 165). Because this research critically examined the player's experience of playing *The Sims 4 For Rent* and understood the social issue of accurately depicting Southeast Asian cultural heritage, analytical play was the appropriate method for data collecting.

The data collection of this paper consisted of 9 hours and 30 minutes of gameplay. These hours were divided into three screen-recorded gameplay videos. The first and third videos were recorded by the researcher of this paper, while the second one was downloaded from the popular *The Sims* creator's *Deligracy YouTube's channel*. The first one is around 50 minutes, and it focuses on the CAS (Create-A-Sim) Menu, particularly the new clothing items and jewellery. The second video also took around 40 minutes to be recorded and it was about new furniture and exterior pieces in the Build and Buy Menu. The last gameplay videos were recorded for around 8 hours, and it followed the daily lives of the fictional family of Ashly Morris, her husband and their two daughters, living in Tomarang. Furthermore, to avoid forgetting any significant interactions or images during gaming, the gameplay was not only screen-recorded, but also further extra notes were written down when necessary. After the recording and downloading of these gameplay videos, they were uploaded on *Atlas.ti*, where the analysis was finally conducted.

3.3. Data Analysis

This paper utilised thematic analysis to analyse the collected data from the gameplay. Thematic analysis has the advantage of being applicable to a wide range of theoretical and epistemological perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Another feature of this form of analysis is that it generated ideas and themes from the data (Boeije, 2010, p. 157). Because this study would be employing an inspired-by Balela and Mundy's (2011) theoretical framework and looking for patterns in the selected cultural items, thematic analysis was an appropriate method of analysis.

Furthermore, as this paper used thematic analysis for its data analysis, this paper has been following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis (2006, pp. 16-23). Following phase one of Braun and Clarke's phases of thematic analysis, after uploading the gameplay videos in *Atlas.ti*, the researcher watched all three of the videos several times and took further notes in order not to miss an important item or activity that can be potentially an important feature of Southeast Asian cultural heritage. Next is phase two, where during the procedure of watching these videos, every potential cultural object and process was sorted into initial topics on *Atlas.ti*. After the sorting of all the topics, only the most common and holding cultural significance for the Southeast Asian region topics were taken into account and they were further finalised as the final topics of this research. Phase three began by searching for categories among the final topics, while phase four was about reviewing the created categories. With phase five and six, this paper designed and defined fifteen topics and seven categories, which later became the sub-categories of this research (*Table 1*). The main two categories of this paper are Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage (*Table 1*). The creation of all these categories and respectively sub-categories and topics was through following a deductive approach as the analysis of the data was heavily influenced by the theoretical framework of Balela and Mundy (2011).

3.4. Operationalization

In order to analyse the three gameplay videos, this paper has created a theoretical framework including 14 in total topics, ranging from *Exterior Design of Houses* to *Traditional Childhood Games* (Table 1). The theoretical framework of this paper was heavily inspired by Balela and Mundy's (2011) theoretical framework regarding tangible and intangible cultural heritage in video games. However, the theoretical framework by Balela and Mundi was insufficient to analyse all the necessary elements that would ensure the accuracy of the portrayal of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in life-simulation games. Hence, the topics of the theoretical framework for this paper was tailored to fit the game mechanics of *The Sims 4* and culture and traditions of Southeast Asia.

Firstly, topics like *Exterior Design of Houses*, *Cultural Landmarks and Monuments*, *Interior Design of Houses*, *Attire and Accessories* and *Hairstyles and Hair Accessories* were selected as *The Sims 4* is a game that greatly focuses on character creation (CAS Menu) and building and furniture (Build and Buy Menu) (Wikipedia, 2023).

Additionally, as *The Sims 4* is a life-simulation game, daily life activities, such as what kind of food they eat and how they prepare it, or what they do in their daily lives for relaxation, such as talking with family and friends (family dynamics), and cooking are important for analysis. Hence, topics like *Traditional Dishes and Recipes*, *Cooking and Food Preparation Activities*, *Street Food Culture*, *Family Structures and Dynamics*, *Social Etiquette and Manners* and *Traditional Childhood Games* were included into this paper's theoretical framework.

Moreover, countries in Southeast Asia are known to have a great diversity of religions, such as Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, which are all practiced within Southeast Asia (Britannica, 2024). Thus, the *Religious Items and Practices* topic was selected.

Lastly, Southeast Asian countries also have a diverse variety of ethnic groups and nature, which results in Southeast Asia having rich folklore (Britannica, 2024). Hence, topics such as *Indigenous Fauna and Wildlife* and *Symbolic Flora and Plant Life* were added to the theoretical framework.

These 14 topics were further categorised into six categories - *People, Environment and Folklore, Religion, Architecture and Design, Cuisine and Food Traditions and Society and Daily Life (Table 1)*. For instance, the *People* category included the topics *Attire and Accessories, Hairstyles and Hair Accessories and Family Structure and Dynamics*.

Table 1. Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage Framework

Categories	Sub-categories	Topics	Definition
Tangible Cultural Heritage	<i>Architecture and Design</i>	Exterior Design of Houses	This topic refers to the portrayal of the exterior design of traditional Southeast Asian residential buildings within the game
		Cultural Landmarks and Monuments	This topic depicts the representation of iconic cultural landmarks and monuments that correlate to Southeast Asian heritage within the game
		Interior Design of Houses	This topic shows the depiction of interior decorations and furnishings that are characteristic to Southeast Asian cultural heritage within the game
	<i>Traditional Clothing and Fashion</i>	Attire and Accessories	This topic talks about the representation of authentic traditional clothing and attire from Southeast Asian cultures within the game
		Hairstyles and Hair Accessories	This topic refers to the portrayal of traditional hairstyles and hair accessories commonly worn with Southeast Asian traditional clothing within the game
	<i>Environment</i>	Indigenous Fauna and Wildlife	This topic discusses the representation of indigenous fauna of Southeast Asia within the game
		Symbolic Flora and Plant Life	This topic shows the depiction of symbolic flora of Southeast Asian cultures within the game

<i>Intangible Cultural Heritage</i>	<i>Cuisine and Food Traditions</i>	Traditional Dishes and Recipes	This topic discusses the representation of traditional Southeast Asian recipes within the game
		Cooking and Food Preparation Items	This topic talks about the portrayal of cooking techniques and food preparation methods that are significant for the Southeast Asian cuisine within the game
		Street Food Culture	This topic depicts the representation of Southeast Asian Street food culture within the game
	<i>Social Customs and Norms</i>	Family Structures and Dynamics	This topic refers to the depiction of family structures, dynamics that are characteristic to Southeast Asian cultures within the game
		Traditional Childhood Games	This topic shows the representation of traditional games that are commonly enjoyed by children in Southeast Asian cultures within the game
		Social Etiquette and Manners	This topic talks about the portrayal of etiquette and social norms in Southeast Asian society
	<i>Religious Practices and Beliefs</i>	Religious Items and Practices	This topic shows the representation of items and practices that hold significance within Southeast Asian religions

3.5. Credibility and Ethics

When mentioning the credibility of this paper's research, both reliability and validity should be mentioned. Reliability in qualitative research refers to the replicability of the research, meaning whether or not some future researchers could repeat the research project and come up with the same results, interpretations and claims (Silverman, 2011, 361). In order to ensure the reliability of this research, both the research strategy of the paper and the data analysis methods have been described in a detailed manner (Silverman, 2011, 361). This extensive description is done through the use of an extensive theoretical framework. This theoretical framework was created using previous academic research, such as the theoretical framework by Balela and Mundy (2011), and academic and non-academic articles based on topics such as a biography of the Southeast Asian region and *The Sims 4's* game dynamics. Lastly, not only did the theoretical framework allow transparency of the research, but it also allowed systematicity as all of the collected data was analysed in the same way.

Validity refers to the "extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers" (Hammersley, 1990, 57). In an analogous manner to reliability, the validity of this paper's research was ensured by the use of a theoretical framework. Moreover, the creation of the theoretical framework could be presented as following Fielding and Fielding's (1985) Data Triangulation. As previously mentioned, one of the reasons for this statement was that this paper's theoretical framework has been built on both theory and an existing model framework (Silverman, 2011, 370). The other reason that the researcher has chosen data - a video recording of *The Sims 4* gameplay, which has given them an account of the structure and meaning from within that perspective (Silverman, 2011, 370). Additionally, to ensure validity, this paper's research has strictly followed the methodological guidelines mentioned in Chapter 3. Some examples were following the criteria for collecting data, such as the time period and the game's place of gameplay - the world of Tomarang. Lastly, this paper's research decisions and strategies have been closely consulted with the researcher's thesis supervisor, who is an established researcher in the field of Game Studies.

Along with the credibility of this research, the ethics concerning the process of this

study should also be mentioned. Although this study is conducting qualitative research, the method of research did not include any interactions with participants or researchers such as interviews. Hence, this study does not bring up any ethical concerns like anonymity of the participants and objectivity of the researcher.

4. Results

As previously stated, this article focuses on the portrayal of cultural heritage in video games, namely Southeast Asian cultural heritage in the life-simulation video game *The Sims 4*, notably the most recent expansion pack, *The Sims 4 For Rent*. Thus, the research question of this paper is: How is Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation portrayed in the life-simulation game - *The Sims 4*?

To answer this research question, two main factors were taken into consideration – tangible cultural heritage, such as architecture, and intangible cultural heritage, such as cuisine. The findings of this research are based on a thematic analysis conducted on three gameplay videos, as described in the preceding chapter. This chapter divides the results based on six categories – *people* (4.1), *environment and folklore* (4.2), *religion* (4.3.), *architecture and design* (4.4), *cuisine and food traditions* (4.5) and *society and daily life* (4.6) (see coding tree in Appendix A).

4.1. People

One of the aspects that one can see representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in the extension package of *The Sims 4* is in the characters of the game. After the analysis of the recorded gameplay, the representation of people could be identified into three sub-categories – *Traditional Attire and Accessories*, *Hairstyles and Hair Accessories* and *Family Structure and Dynamics*.

Traditional Attire and Accessories

All of the clothing that was specifically designed for the expansion pack are definitely inspired by the region of Southeast Asia as they include elements of the traditional clothing of Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Singapore, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

The first clothing item worth mentioning is the sompot chong kben, which is a traditional garment native to Cambodia (*Figure 4.3*). The sompot chong kben is a long fabric worn around the waist that resembles a long skirt (Wikipedia, 2024h). Additionally, the name

itself translates from Khmer to “to wrap or to wear the kben” (Wikipedia, 2024h). This traditional attire is also widely adopted by the neighbouring countries - Thailand and Laos. In Thailand, the clothing is addressed as panung or phanung, while in Laos, it is called lao sinh (Wikipedia, 2024g; Wikipedia, 2024d).

The history of sompot chong kben dates back to ancient Cambodia, where deities were often portrayed wearing such styles (Wikipedia, 2024h). It said that a long time ago, the Khmer people wore sompot chong kben, following the Indian tradition and Hinduism (Wikiwand, 2024). Moreover, nowadays, the sompot chong kben is an often-worn attire for only special occasions in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos (Wikiwand, 2024).

Additionally, sompot chong kben is a versatile garment that can be worn by anyone, regardless of gender (Wikipedia, 2024h). This is accurately represented in *The Sims 4* as the sompot chong kben is included in both the female and masculine categories of clothing in the video game. The female adult and female child skirts are the most accurately designed ones (Figures 4.1 and 4.2), as the male adult skirt/shorts do not accurately portray the baggy detail of the sompot chong kben (Figure 4.4). Despite that, however, the male adult skirt/shorts could be inspired by sompot chong kben as some of its swatches include patterns on the bottom of the leg that are identical to the patterns of the sompot chong kben. Additionally, there is a female adult full-body outfit that is evidently heavily influenced by the intricate tying/tucking design of the sompot chong kben (Figure 4.5).

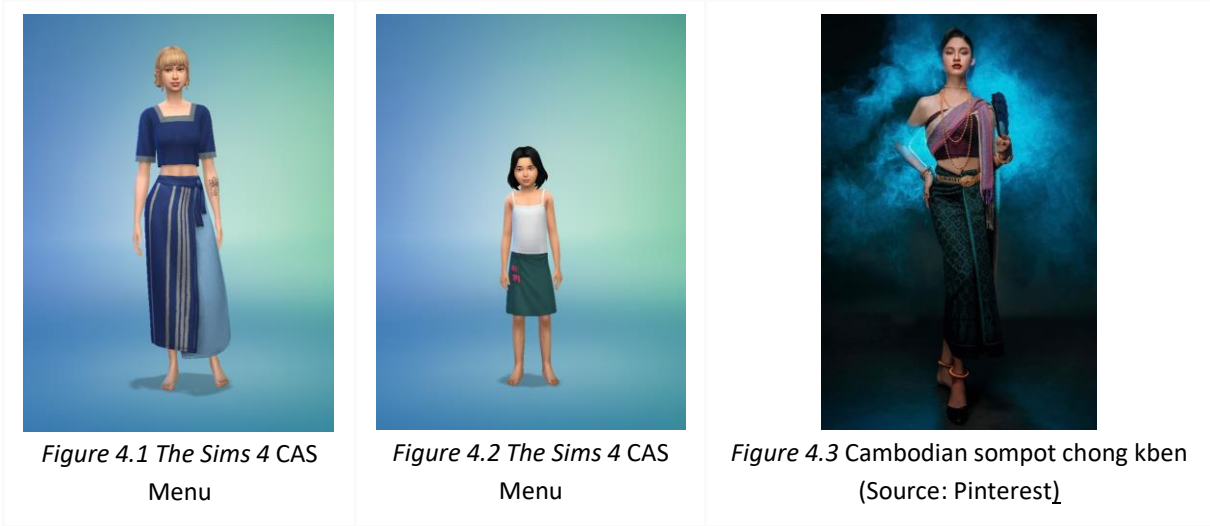




Figure 4.4 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.5 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.6 Thai couple wearing sompot chong kben (Source: Pinterest)

However, as evident from the photos above, the full traditional female attire of both Cambodia and Thailand includes a shawl-like garment that goes over the right side of the chest. In Laos, this type of garment is called pha biang. As this clothing item is an important part of the traditional outfit of the three countries, it would have been nice to include it as an accessory or top in the game. The closest item that was added to the game is a female adult top, which replicates the diagonal, over-the-shoulder detail of the pha biang (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7. The Sims 4 CAS Menu

The second clothing item worth mentioning is suea pat, which is a traditional female shirt from Northern Thailand and Laos. Suea pat is a long-sleeved shirt with no buttons, and it is worn by wrapping the right side of the front panel of the shirt over the left side of the front panel, and the two panels are tied together via strings (Wikipedia, 2024e). Its name comes from Tai, which means “wrapping shirt” (Wikipedia, 2024e). Similarly to sompot chong kben, nowadays, suea pat is only worn on special occasions such as weddings.

Unfortunately, the suea pat is not included as a clothing item in *The Sims 4*'s new expansion pack, but there are several clothing items that could be inspired by it. The shirt in *Figure 4.8* is similar to the suea pat as both shirts include a pattern on the collar. However, the shirt in *Figure 4.8* does not include the tie detail which is a specific feature of the suea pat. On the other hand, the shirt in *Figure 4.9* includes the tie detail but does not have a high collar with a pattern, which is also a specific characteristic of the suea pat.



Figure 4.8 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.9 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.10 Suea pat
(Source: Google Images)

The third clothing item is a Nehru-style jacket with five buttons, which is part of the traditional Thai male outfit. The name of this traditional outfit is called Raj Pattern. It was worn chiefly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by government officials and the upper class in Bangkok, and nowadays is used in select circumstances as a national costume. Apart from the white Nehru-style jacket, it also includes a sompot chong kben, knee-length socks and dress shoes (Wikipedia, 2023b). Including the Nehru-style jacket and sompot chong kben in *The Sims 4* makes it easy for players to recreate the full Raj Pattern (*Figures 4.11* and *4.12*).



Figure 4.11 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.12 Raj Pattern (Source : Pinterest)

The fourth clothing item that is of significant importance for the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage is the tabengman. The tabengman is a Thai warrior style of clothing top. It consists of a piece of cloth that covers the chest and is tied behind the neck (Wikipedia, 2024j). The tabengman is an important part of the history and traditions of Thailand as it was an easy way for women to move, fight, flee and disguise into men during the late period of Ayutthaya when the kingdom was heavily invaded and attacked by the neighbouring kingdom (Wikipedia, 2024k). Although there is no tabengman added to the new expansion pack, one of the female adult tops might be influenced by tabengman due to its cropped size and crisscross detail at the hem of the top (*Figure 4.13*).



Figure 4.13 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.14 Tabengman (Source: Google Images)

The fifth clothing item worth mentioning is lao sinh, a traditional skirt for Laos. As mentioned above this skirt was adopted from the Cambodian sompot chong kben, but the design of the lao sinh is more intricate than that of the sompot chong kben. Lao sinh consists of three parts - hua sinh, phuen sinh and tin sinh. Hua sinh is the waistband portion, which is typically tucked in and hidden (Wikipedia, 2024d). The phuen sinh is the body of the skirt, and it usually consists of one or two colours, while the tin sinh is the hem of the skirt, which is typically woven with different details (Wikipedia, 2024d). Considering these features of the lao sinh, *The Sims 4* developers have accurately represented this skirt in the game as most of the swatches of the added skirt both have one colour in the base and have details in the bottom (*Figure 4.15*).



Figure 4.15 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.16 Lao sinh (Source: Google Images)

The sixth clothing item is áo dài, the modernised national attire of Vietnam (Figure 4.18). The áo dài consists of a long-split tunic over silk trousers. Its name comes from Vietnamese and means “long shirt” (Wikipedia, 2024i). Moreover, the áo dài can be worn by both men and women (Duc & Bao, 2012, p. 99). Given the features of áo dài, *The Sims 4* have created an accurate representation of the outfit, but they have only added an áo dài for female adult characters (Figure 4.17). Thus, adding a male áo dài outfit would have contributed to a more accurate representation of Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Moreover, there are two additional dresses and two tops that are clearly inspired by áo dài. The dresses in Figures 4.19 and 4.20 are only partly similar to áo dài because it is a long tunic over a skirt, not trousers. The two tops in Figures 4.22 and 4.23 might be influenced by the high collar of áo dài. However, the top in Figure 4.22 also has the diagonal placement of the buttons around the collar, which is unique to áo dài.



Figure 4.17 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.18 Traditional áo dài (Source : Pinterest)



Figure 4.19 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.20 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.21 Modernised áo dài (Source: Pinterest)



Figure 4.22 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.23 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.24 Modernised áo dài with lace detail (Source: Pinterest)

Lastly, although it is not a particular outfit item, this paper will discuss the use of batik as a textile pattern. Batik is an Indonesian technique of dyeing clothes with the use of wax, which originated from the island of Java in Indonesia (Sudardi, 2021, p. 9). Batik is made either by drawing dots and lines of wax with a spouted tool called a canting or by printing the wax with a copper stamp called a cap (Sudardi, 2021, pp. 11-12). The applied wax resists dyes, allowing the artisan to colour selectively by soaking the cloth in one colour, removing the wax with boiling water, and repeating if multiple colours are desired (Sudardi, 2021, pp. 11-12).

The word batik is thought to be derived from the word 'ambatik', which translated means "a cloth with little dots" (Steelyana, 2012, p. 2). Additionally, according to Steelyana (2012), batik was originally reserved as an art form for Javanese royalty, as certain patterns

were reserved to be worn only by royalty (2012, p. 2). In 2009, batik was recognised by UNESCO as one of the cultural heritages of Indonesia (Steelyana, 2012, p. 2).

Throughout the newly added items of the new expansion pack, batik is widely represented, particularly in the clothing items. As there are distinct types of batik, *The Sims 4* have used three types of batik, which originated from the island of Java. The first type of batik is called buketan, which includes floral motifs (*Figures 4.27*). According to Moertini & Sitohang (2015), buketan motifs are used to express beauty and femininity (2015, p. 144). Knowing the buketan's characteristics, it becomes evident that *The Sims 4* developers have done research on the buketan as this motif is only used on adult female clothing items (*Figures 4.25* and *4.26*). Moreover, although buketan is indigenous to the island of Java, it is heavily inspired by Europe (Budi et al., 2021, p. 1).

The second and third types of batik are native Indonesian. One of them is called kawung batik (*Figure 4.29*), which includes motifs with circles (Wahida et al., 2020, p. 77). The kawung motif correlates to being hopeful, neat, and mature (Moertini & Sitohang, 2015, p. 144). This batik is used on a female child's top (*Figure 4.28*). The other one is called truntum batik (*Figure 4.31*), which illustrates a picture of flowers with a black primary colour (Saddhono et al., 2014, p. 55). As this motif represents the entwining love of husband and wife, the truntum motif is often worn on wedding ceremonies (Saddhono et al., 2014, p. 55). Following the meaning of this batik motif, the Sims 4 created a pair of unisex trousers (*Figure 4.30*).



Figure 4.25 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.26 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu

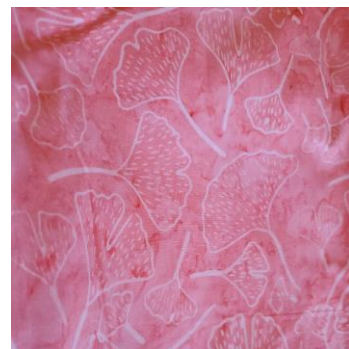


Figure 4.27 Buketan Batik with Ginkgo
(Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.28 The Sims 4 CAS Menu

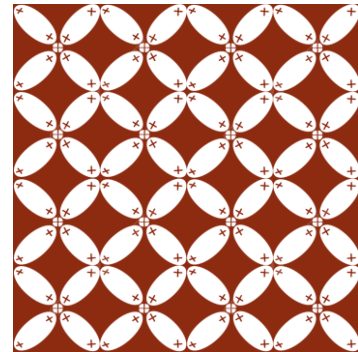


Figure 4.29 Kawung Batik (Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.30 The Sims 4 CAS Menu

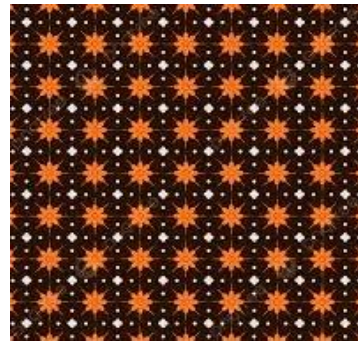


Figure 4.31 Truntum Batik (Source: Pinterest)

Overall, although *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack introduces numerous new clothing pieces, the game accurately represents the full traditional outfits of only two Southeast Asian countries - Thailand and Vietnam. Players can recreate the Raj Pattern, the traditional Thai male attire, and the female áo dài, the traditional Vietnamese clothes.

As far as accessories are concerned, there are few new jewellerys added. Despite being small in number, some of them hold great cultural significance for the Southeast Asian region. For example, *Figures 4.32* and *4.34* are likely to be inspired by ancient Indonesian gold jewellery that was found on Flores Island (*Figures 4.33* and *4.35*). Both pieces of earrings are thought to have dated back to the 19th century. Another example is *Figure 4.36*, which shows a necklace. This necklace might be influenced by ancient Indonesian silver jewellery that was found in North Sumatra in 1984 (*Figure 4.37*). As a result, all of the newly added jewellery is mostly likely focused on Indonesia and its cultural heritage.



Figure 4.32 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.33 Indonesian gold flat earrings of leaf
(Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.34 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.35 Indonesian gold earrings from Flores
Island (Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.36 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.37 Indonesia tribal silver necklace (Source:
Google Images)

Hairstyles and Hair Accessories

When analysing the gameplay videos in search of traditional hairstyles and hair accessories, there are none added to the game. This is disappointing as Southeast Asian countries have many unique hair accessories and hats. Some examples include the *nón lá*,

the Vietnamese conical hat, which is often part of their traditional attire, and makuta, the Thai and Cambodian crown (Figures 4.38 and 4.39).



Figure 4.38 Vietnamese conical hat (Source: Pinterest)



Figure 4.39 Thai makuta (Source: Pinterest)

Family Structure and Dynamics

In terms of family dynamics and structure, there are two types of family structures introduced with the pre-made Sims. The first family structure is a sibling household. The Cahyaputri family consists of two sisters whose parents have passed away in a tragic accident. As a result, the older sister has to take care of her younger sibling as she is still a teenager. According to Dommaraju & Tan (2014), this type of family would fall into the category of *Other family* because all members of the household are related to the head of, even though they are not alive anymore, and the household is not classified as a stem or nuclear family (2014, p. 565). With the exception of the rural areas of Vietnam, these types of families are quite popular all around the urban and rural areas of Southeast Asia. Other families are most prevalent in the urban areas of Cambodia (21.9%) and Thailand (20.6%) (Dommaraju & Tan, 2014, p. 566).

The second family structure that was introduced is the stem household. The stem household can be composed of nuclear families (parents with children) with the addition of parents/parent-in-law or son/daughter-in-law or grandchildren of the head (Dommaraju & Tan, 2014, p. 565). *The Sims 4* developers have added two stem families. The first one is the Bun Ma household, which includes a grandmother, her son with his wife and their daughter. The second family is the Linh-Sadya household, which consists of a couple of grandfathers, their daughter with her husband and their daughter.

This type of multigenerational household is the second most common family structure in Southeast Asia, behind nuclear households (Dommaraju & Tan, 2014, p. 567). A plausible reason for the increase of stem families might be the presence of grandchildren in the home left behind by migrant parents (Dommaraju & Tan, 2014, p. 567). Except for Vietnam, all Southeast Asian countries have a greater proportion of stem households in rural parts than in urban areas. This is appropriately reflected in the game, as both stem households are located in the Koh Sahpa neighbourhood, which is intended to depict Southeast Asia's rural surroundings.

4.2. Environment and Folklore

Another aspect of Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation that is evident in the game is the environment, particularly the flora and the fauna of the region. Thus, there are two main sub-categories - *Symbolic Flora and Plant Life* and *Indigenous Fauna and Wildlife*. These elements often hold a unique meaning to specific Southeast Asian countries, their people, and their folklore. Unlike the people category, this category could be found in not only the characters' clothes, but also in the design of the furniture and throughout the world of Tomarang.

Symbolic Flora and Plant Life

The new expansion pack accurately portrays Southeast Asian flora. The game mainly focuses on the national flowers of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Additionally, it mentions other endemic plants, such as ginkgo and magnolia. However, this paper will only focus on the portrayal of the three national flowers.

In 2005, rumdul was declared Cambodia's national flower (IntoCambodia, 2012). The rumdul is a small yellowish-white flower (*Figure 4.42*). It is used by locals for food, medicine and cosmetics (IntoCambodia, 2012). *The Sims 4* developers used the rumdul flower in designing the clothing items for *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack. They portrayed the flower in two full-outfit adult female clothing (*Figures 4.40* and *4.41*). As mentioned above, the outfit in *Figure 4.40* is a sompot-chong-kben-inspired one, which is native to Cambodia. Thus, it is evident that the game developers have done a lot of research in order to create an

accurate representation of Cambodia by combining the national flower of Cambodia with an inspired garment that is traditional for Cambodia.



Figure 4.40 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.41 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.42 Rumdul (Source: Pinterest)

In 1960, hibiscus was announced as the national flower of Malaysia (Embassy of Malaysia, 2022). The hibiscus (Figure 4.45) is cultivated as an ornamental plant in the tropics and subtropics (Wikipedia, 2024n). The colour of the flower is not only one; it could be red, white, pink, orange, peach, yellow, blue, and purple (Wikipedia, 2024n). In terms of daily life use, the hibiscus can be used for tea, medicine, and polishing shoes (Leong, 2018). In *The Sims 4*, the flower is illustrated in two clothing pieces - one adult female full-body outfit and one infant full-body outfit (Figures 4.43 and 4.44).



Figure 4.43 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.44 *The Sims 4* CAS Menu



Figure 4.45 Hibiscus (Source: Pinterest)

The national flower of Vietnam is the lotus (Figure 4.51). The lotus grows in the bottom of slow-moving rivers and delta areas (Wikipedia, 2024m). Depending on the colour of the lotus, the flower holds different meanings. For example, the pink lotus, which is the

most common in Vietnam, is a symbol of Buddha and Buddhism (Vinpearl, 2024). Moreover, it is also associated with the beauty of simplicity and a strong will to live (Vinpearl, 2024). It is prominently featured in Vietnamese art, festivals, and cuisine. In Vietnamese cuisine, the lotus flower is used in various dishes, such as lotus tea and lotus soup, adding a unique flavour and cultural touch to the food (Vinpearl, 2024).

This prominence of the flower is adequately represented in the game as well. Unlike the rumdul and hibiscus, this type of flower was used not only in clothing items but also around the world of Tomarang and in the creation of the furniture for the expansion pack. Firstly, as a detail in clothing pieces, the lotus is used in four clothing items - one adult male top and three adult female full-body outfits. In *Figures 4.46* and *4.47*, the lotus flower is discreetly hidden, while in *Figures 4.49* and *4.50*, it is the accent of the clothing. Additionally, similar to the rumdul and the dress, *The Sims 4* creators have done an excellent job reflecting Vietnam by depicting the lotus blossom on the Vietnamese traditional attire - áo dài.



Figure 4.46 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.47 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.48 Lotus Graphic (Source : Pinterest)



Figure 4.49 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.50 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.51 Lotus (Source: Pinterest)

Secondly, the lotus flower is used as an accent in many of the newly added furniture, too. Some examples are the lotus candle and the lotus curtains (*Figures 4.52 and 4.53*).



Figure 4.52 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.53 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

Lastly, the lotus was used as a decoration piece around the world of Tomarang, too. However, this representation falls short in accurately depicting the Southeast Asian region. The first reason is that the lotus lanterns in *Figure 4.54* seem to be more in line with a Chinese tradition, the Hungry Ghost Festival, rather than a Southeast Asian one (*Figure 4.55*). The second reason is the lotus monument in *Figure 56*, which bears a striking resemblance to the Lotus Temple in New Delhi, India, a structure that is not found in Southeast Asia (*Figure 4.57*). Additionally, both the lotus monument in the game and the Lotus Temple light up in the evening, making them almost identical to one another (*Figures 4.58 and 4.59*).



Figure 4.54 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.55 Lotus Lanterns in China (Source: Pinterest)



Figure 4.56 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.57 Lotus Temple in India (Source: Pinterest)



Figure 4.58 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

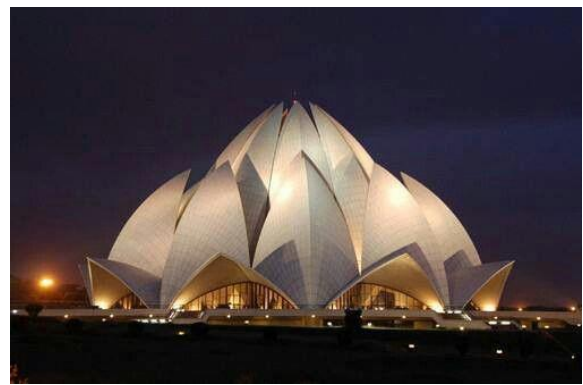


Figure 4.59 Lotus Temple at night (Source: Pinterest)

Indigenous Fauna and Wildlife

The new expansion pack, in addition to its focus on flora, also delves into the fauna of Southeast Asia. Among the various animal portrayals, the tiger and elephant stand out as the most prominent. As these two species are the most common fauna portrayals in the *For Rent* expansion pack, this paper will exclusively concentrate on their analysis.

The tiger in the game is most likely the Malayan tiger, which is the national animal of Malaysia. In addition, the Malayan tiger (*Figure 4.65*) is also a priority conservation target for WWF Malaysia, as in 2022, the number of tigers has declined to 150 (WWF International, 2024). The reasons for their rapid decline in population is the loss of their habitat due to rapid development, agricultural expansion, and widespread hunting (WWF International, 2024). *The Sims 4* creators have accurately represented the current situation of Malayan tigers by adding a temple-like tiger sanctuary (*Figure 4.60*). By allowing its players to explore, adopt a tiger and donate in-game money to the tiger sanctuary in the game, *The Sims 4*

developers bring further attention to the issue of the extinction of the species (Figures 4.61, 4.62 and 4.63).



Figure 4.60 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.61 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.62 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

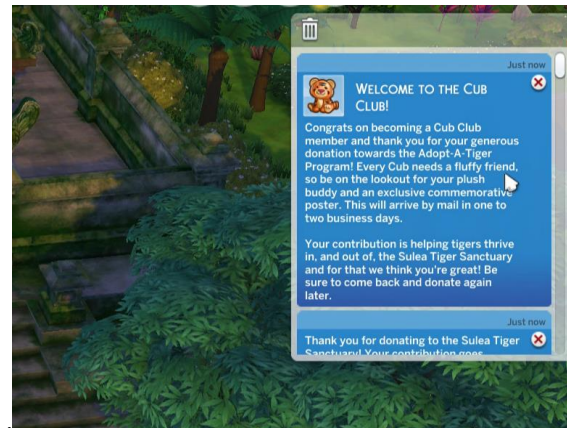


Figure 4.63 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

Apart from its portrayal as an endangered animal, the image of the tiger is prevalent all over the game, as one can find portrayals of it in clothing items and furniture. For instance, there are two clothing items that illustrate an image of a tiger - one is a child's top, and the other is an infant's full-body outfit (Figures 4.64 and 4.66). In terms of furniture, for example, there are tiger plushies, which can be received by adopting a tiger from the sanctuary (Figure 4.67).



Figure 4.64 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.65 Malayan Tiger (Source: Wikipedia)

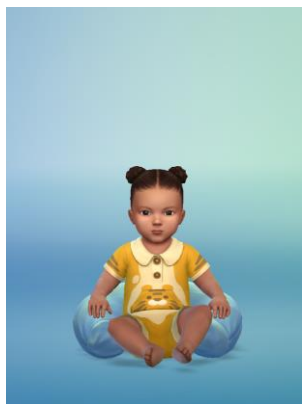


Figure 4.66 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.67 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

Overall, the Malayan tiger plays a key role in the creation of the whole world of Tomarang as it is the main character behind the lore of the world (Figure 4.71). The lore of Tomarang follows the story of Khun Mae, who later became the Great Mother of Tomarang (Figure 4.68). She saved the fishing village of Tomarang from the beasts attacking the village by turning it into a tiger (Figures 4.72-4.78). In the end, her soul was split into two - a human and a tiger form (Figure 4.79-4.80). Throughout the game, in order to understand the story of Tomarang, the player has to explore the Tiger Sanctuary (Figure 4.60), the statue of Khan Mae (Figure 4.68) and the cave (Figure 4.69), talk with the locals using the interaction “Tomarang Truth” (Figure 4.81) and collect all 10 of the colours of the tassels (Figure 4.70).

This representation of tigers in the game is closely related to the myths that Malay people have about tigers. In Malay mythology, tigers are a symbol of mysticism, and it is believed that certain people can transform into tigers (Craig, 2024). Additionally, an individual can turn into a tiger through black magic, fasting or inheritance (Roux, 2014). As

Khun Mae becomes a were-tiger through witchcraft, the Malay beliefs about tigers correspond to the image of Khun Mae in the game.



Figure 4.68 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.69 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

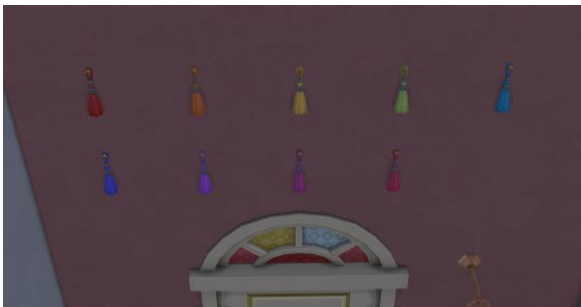


Figure 4.70 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.71 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

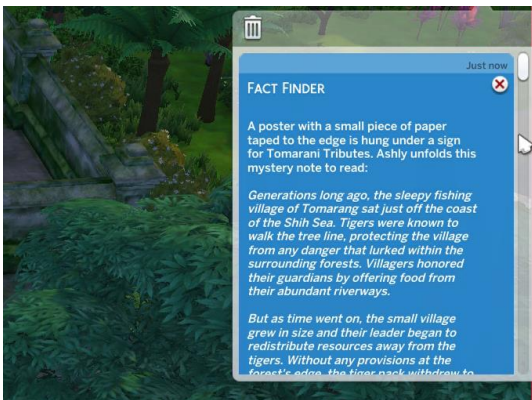


Figure 4.72 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

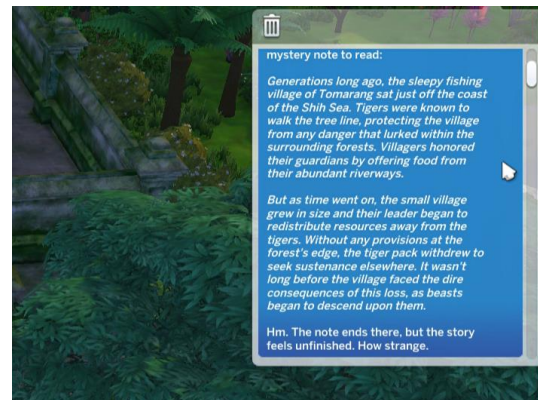


Figure 4.73 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.74 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.75 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.76 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

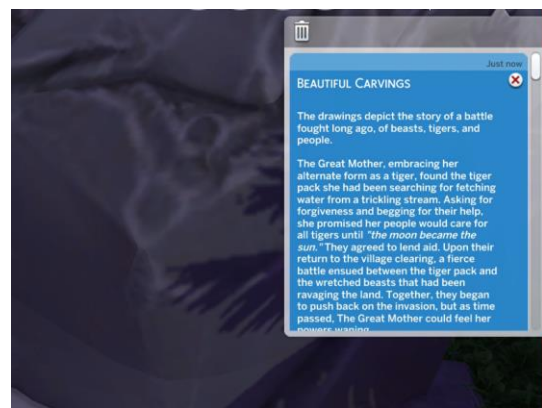


Figure 4.77 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

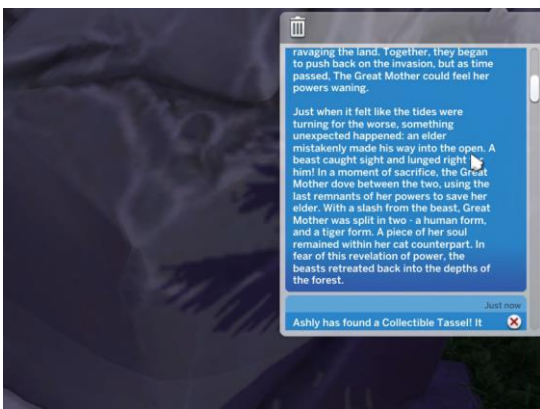


Figure 4.78 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

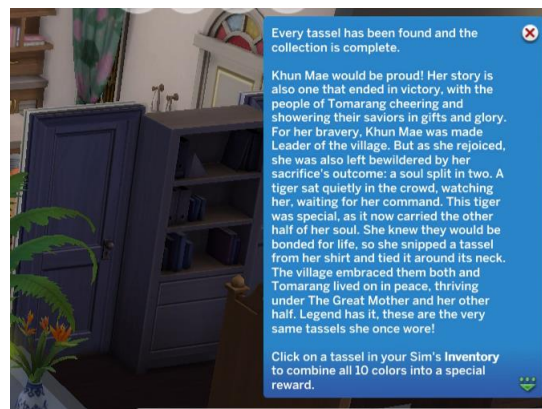


Figure 4.79 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.80 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.81 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

The elephant portrayed in *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack is most likely the Indian elephant (Figure 4.84). Despite its name, the Indian elephant is an indigenous animal to the Southeast Asian region, particularly Thailand, Malaysia, Laos, and Cambodia (Wikipedia, 2024o). Additionally, the Indian elephant is the national animal of both Thailand and Laos (Wikipedia, 2024o). Similarly to the Malayan tiger, the Indian elephant is an endangered species (WWF, 2024).

In the game, there are several images of the elephant. In the CAS menu, there are two outfits with an elephant image —one is a children’s top, and the other is a toddler’s full-body outfit (Figures 4.82 and 4.83).



Figure 4.82 The Sims 4 CAS Menu



Figure 4.83 The Sims 4 CAS Menu

In addition, *The Sims 4* developers have added images of elephants in the posters and wall wood carving (Figures 4.85 and 4.86). In Figure 4.85, one can see that behind the elephant, there is a silhouette of a Hinduist temple. The elephant plays a significant role in Hinduism as it relates to Ganesha, the Elephant God. He is an elephant-headed god who

represents "perfect wisdom" (NatureWatch, 2024). In general, the elephant represents loyalty, power, wisdom and fertility (NatureWatch, 2024). Making the reference between elephants and Hinduist temples suggests that *The Sims 4* creators know about the role of elephants in Hinduism.

Figure 4.86 depicts an elephant-shaped wall wood carving. Wood carving is a traditional art practised in Southeast Asia, mainly in Malaysia, Laos, and Thailand (Sabai Designs Gallery, 2017). One reason *The Sims 4* makers included an elephant as a wood sculpture might be that such sculptures sometimes have religious overtones (Museum of Asian Art, 2024; McIntosh, 2017; Abhakorn, 2018). Another explanation might be that the game developers aim to produce a realistic portrayal of Thailand and Laos by demonstrating their expertise in both nations' wood carving traditions and national animals.



Figure 4.84 Indian Elephant (Source: Wikipedia)



Figure 4.85 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.86 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.87 Thai Wood Carving of Elephants (Source: Google Images)

4.3. Religion

Some elements of Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation could be expressed in the form of religion, particularly religious buildings, and items. Thus, the category *Religion* consists of two sub-categories – *Cultural and Religious Landmarks* and *Religious Items and Practices*.

Cultural and Religious Landmarks

The Sims 4 For Rent does not include many cultural and religious landmarks. Overall, there are only two landmarks worth mentioning and analysing.

The first monument is called the Tinsu Temple (*Figure 4.90*). Although the building is only a rabbit hole (the player cannot see the interior of the building), the player can send their Sim to explore the temple. When visiting the temple or a religious building, it is mentioned that on entry, the Sim had to remove their shoes (*Figure 4.89*). Removing one's shoes when entering a Buddhist, Islamic or Hindu religious building is an essential part of the three religions (Wikipedia, 2024I). Thus, adding this sentence in *Figure 4.89* suggests that the game developers have done research on the religions in the region. This is a principal factor for the accurate representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage as the Southeast Asian region has a diversity of religions, with the biggest two being Buddhism and Islam (LibGuides Cornell University, 2023). However, as the religious building is called a "temple", the name suggests that the monument is most likely either a Buddhist or Hindu temple, as the Islamic religious building is called using a specific term, mosque (Britannica, 2019). Knowing that Islam is the second most common religion, being the leading religion in Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, it would have been nice to include an Islamic religious item or a mosque (Houben, 2003, p. 150).

Furthermore, based on the architectural design of the Tinsu Temple, the temple is most likely a Buddhist temple in Myanmar. The Tinsu Temple has a unique feature that is inspired by Burmese Buddhist temples, called pyatthat. The pyatthat is a multistaged roof, with an odd number of tiers (from three to seven) (Wikipedia, 2023b). Moreover, the pyatthat design is characterised by a series of progressively smaller tiers, each of which is topped with a spire or finial, and the edges of each tier are gold-gilded decorative designs

(Interlock, 2023) (Figure 4.91). As the Tinsu Temple in Figure 90 has a three-tiered pyatthat, called yahma, this paper would suggest that the temple is referencing a Burmese Buddhist temple (Wikipedia, 2023b).

The second landmark worth mentioning when analysing the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage is the Tiger Sanctuary, which was mentioned in the previous sub-chapter. Although the game developers have explicitly named this building a “sanctuary,” its architecture closely resembles that of a Hindu temple. Hindu temples are classified into two styles - Nagara architecture and Dravidian architecture (Goyal, 2023). Although both styles are typical architectural styles for Hindu temples in India, the Nagara style is unique to the northern part of India, while the Dravidian style is native to the southern part of India (Goyal, 2023). Additionally, a lot of Hindu temples in Southeast Asia are influenced by the Dravidian architecture style (Wikipedia, 2024p). Some of the typical characteristics of the Dravidian Hindu temples include a gopuram and a multi-story vimana (Bharne & Krusche, 2014, pp. 147-153).

A gopuram is a monumental entrance tower, usually ornate, at the entrance of a Hindu temple (Bharne & Krusche, 2014, p. 153). In addition, it is common for gopuram to be decorated with sculptures and carvings associated with Hindu deities and mythology (Wikipedia, 2024p). The Tiger Sanctuary in Figure 92 has a mossy stone gopuram with a sculpture of a scary-looking tiger.

A vimana is the structure over the inner sanctum in the Hindu temples of South India and Odisha in East India (Wikipedia, 2023d). The tiger sanctuary in Figure 4.90 also has a two-story vimana called dvi-tala (Wikipedia, 2021). Considering that the Tiger Sanctuary in the game has these two characteristics of the Hindu Dravidian temple, this paper states that the sanctuary could be inspired by the Dravidian architecture type of Hindu temples.



Figure 4.88 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.89 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.90 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.91 Kyauk Taw Kyi Temple in Myanmar
(Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.92 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.93 Ulun Danu Beratan Temple in Bali,
Indonesia (Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.94 Sri Maha Mariamman Temple in
Bangkok, Thailand (Source: Wikipedia)

Religious Items and Practices

In terms of religious items in the game's new expansion pack, there is only one - the spirit house. Spirit houses are shrines that are found in Southeast Asian countries, such as Cambodia and Thailand (Figure 4.96). These shrines are usually in the form of a small, roofed structure mounted on a pillar, and they can range in size from small platforms to houses

large enough for people to enter (Wikipedia, 2024c). In Thailand, spirit houses are divided into two types - san phra phum and san chao thi. The main difference between the two types of spirit houses is that san phra phum shrines are installed for a heavenly being, while san chao thi shrines are installed for spirits that have an inexorable association with the place, such as ghosts (Pearce, 2011, p. 352). When installing the sa phra phum, the spirit has to be summoned by an installation ritual so it can become the new spirit of the place (Pearce, 2011, p. 352). In Cambodia, a similar practice is followed. Although there is only one type of spirit house in the country, the spirit houses in Cambodia are more similar to the Thai san phra phum as they utilise the shrines to worship spirits, who originate from ancient religious beliefs (Baeq, 2012, p. 35). In order to appease the spirits, people have to make offerings in the form of fruits (Wikipedia, 2024c). In the game, players can, in fact, put fruit and light incense at the spirit house, making this depiction of spirit houses accurate (*Figure 97*).

What is more, the two types of spirit houses in Thailand have distinctive designs. The most common configuration is for san phra phum to sit on a platform at eye level or higher and be supported by a single pole (Pearce, 2011, p. 352). In contrast, san chao thi is placed closer to the ground, resting on a dais supported by four or six pillars to indicate the entities' association with the location (Pearce, 2011, p. 352). Based on these descriptions, the spirit house in the game is most likely a Thai san phra phum, as the shrine is built upon only one pole (*Figure 95*). Additionally, the spirit house in the game is a large one as large shrine have an additional platform in front of the shrine which provides an appropriate location to offer various items to the spirits (Pearce, 2011, p. 355).

One similar feature between the spirit houses in Thailand and Cambodia is that both countries believe that spirit houses are built in order to avoid lousy omen from wandering homeless spirits or the neglected genius loci of the home or workplace (Baeq, 2012, p. 35; Pearce, 2011, p. 352). According to Kitiarsa (2005), spirits must have a place to remain that is suitable for worship; otherwise, they may bring about disasters for humans, such as poor fortune and a deterioration in one's life, family members, or company profit (2005, 14). One way to ensure that the spirits do not cause misfortunes is by building the spirit house in a domesticated area, where the spirit can become a guardian of the place (Pearce, 2011, p. 352). Thus, it is common for each house to have a spirit house. This requirement for spirit

houses is accurately represented in the game, as almost every residential lot in the expansion pack has a spirit house in the front area of the house.



Figure 4.95 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.96 Spirit Houses in Thailand (Source: Wikipedia)



Figure 4.97 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

4.4. Architecture and Design

As one of the most important game features of *The Sims 4* is building and interior design, Southeast Asian cultural heritage is clearly represented in the *Build and Buy* Menu of the game. As Southeast Asian cultural heritage elements could be found in both the exterior and interior of the pre-made residential lots of the Tomarang world, the category of *Architecture and Design* is divided into two sub-categories – *Exterior Design of Houses* and *Interior Design of Houses*.

Exterior Design of Houses

Traditional Southeast Asian houses, also known as vernacular houses, have several notable features such as the multi-levelled floor, outward-slanting walls and gable, gable finials, saddle-backed roofs and tripartite of the house (Scheffold et al., 2004, p. 23). The traditional houses created in *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack have a limited number of the above-mentioned features, making the representation of Southeast Asian architecture not fully accurate - multi-levelled floor (stilt foundation), saddle-backed roof and gable finials.

Only one of the pre-made residential lots in the game has a stilt foundation, as there is only one mainly traditional Southeast Asian house (*Figure 4.98*). The other two houses are built using a mix of traditional and modern styles (*Figures 4.99* and *4.100*).

Having a stilt foundation is when a house is supported by piles that do not touch the ground. Stilt foundations are common in Southeast Asian traditional dwellings because they provide structural stability during earthquakes in the region (Ju, 2017, p. 7). Additionally, nations such as Indonesia use supporting piles as a security precaution against animal attacks. For example, the longhouses along the Rejang River were built on piles as tall as 20 to 40 feet, with fence constructions made of heavily branched trees adding an added layer of defense (Ju, 2017, pp. 8-9).

Similar to the house with a stilt foundation, in the game, there is only one house with a typical Southeast Asian saddle-backed roofing. The saddle-backed roof is a roof in which the roof ends soar upwards and is positioned higher than the centre of the roof ridge (Ju, 2017, p. 10). Having a steeping roof like the saddle-backed one together with attap as a roofing material is the most common feature of Southeast Asian vernacular houses as it is ideal for the tropical rainfalls and long wet season in the region. The steeping roof allows the rainfall to run down quickly, while the attap is a material that does not absorb water (Ju, 2017, p. 10). However, the house with the saddle-backed roof does not have an attap roofing. Thus, the Sims 4 developers could have added an attap roofing in order to make a more precise representation of Southeast Asian traditional houses.

In addition, there are different styles of saddle-backed roofs in the region. The style that the game creators used to make the house in *Figure 4.100* is called the Minangkabau style. This Indonesian style is a more grand and elaborate variation of the saddle-backed roof

as it consists of several saddle-backed roofs with exaggerated roof ends stacked one upon the other (Ju, 2017, p. 12). Moreover, the Minangkabau-style roofs have extended ridge lines, which often result in outward-sloping gable ends (Ju, 2017, p. 12). The Minangkabau-style roofs in *Figure 4.101* and the roof of the house in the game in *Figure 4.100* do not look exactly the same because *The Sims 4* mechanics limit the player to build such a form as a roof.



Figure 4.98 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.99 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.100 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.101 Rumah Gadang in Indonesia (Source: Google Images)

The last Southeast Asian traditional house feature that the houses in the game is the gable finials. The gable finial is an architectural design that is typically carved and employed decoratively to emphasise the apex of a gable (Firzal, 2016, p. 13). In the different Southeast Asian countries, the gable finial could be built or craved into different forms. For example, the gable horn is a common feature of Thai traditional houses (*Figure 4.102*). In Indonesia, the gable finials are usually in the form of crossed swords or buffalo horns (Schefold et al., 2004, pp. 35-36). Additionally, according to Schefold et al. (2004), the Batak groups in

Sumatra believe that the gable finials hold a protective magical effect (2004, p. 36). In the game, the house in *Figure 98* has a gable horn, while the house in *Figure 4.99* has a gable finial that is unique to Kalae houses (*Figure 4.103*) in the northern part of Thailand (Wikipedia, 2024b). Thus, this paper could suggest that the house in *Figure 4.98* is inspired by Thai traditional architecture, while the house in *Figure 4.99* is influenced by both Thai and Indonesian traditional architecture.



Figure 4.102 Traditional House in Chiang Mai, Thailand
(Source: Pinterest)



Figure 4.103 Kalae House in Northern Thailand
(Source: Google Images)

Interior Design of Houses

In terms of the interior design of Southeast Asian houses, there are several points that need to be mentioned. First of all, looking at all of the newly added furniture, one could see that the game developers have followed the stereotype of the Southeast Asian region being a holiday destination. As Bali is one of the most popular honeymoon destinations, some of the added furniture is created in a similar design to what one can see on a holiday bedroom suite in Bali, Indonesia (Wiyanti et al., 2021, p. 202) (*Figure 4.105*). One example could be the canopy bed (*Figure 4.104*).

Second, the newly added furniture may be classified based on two features. The first aspect is the furniture's style, which might be modern or traditional. The other distinguishing feature is the furniture's condition, which ranges from brand new to worn-out/stained. When analysing the furniture, it becomes clear that the modern style furniture is solely brand new in quality, but the traditional style furniture is both brand new and worn-out/stained in quality. Although one might believe that traditional items are often vintage

and, thus, they could have a more worn-out look, in the game, the traditional items are more brand-new looking in quality than worn-out.

Lastly, the game developers have added items that could create the appearance of stains or mould on the walls and floor of buildings (Figure 4.106). This feature could be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that *The Sims 4* developers are following a negative stereotype about Southeast Asia, as mentioned by Huang (2015). The stereotype is that the region is dirty and not kept up (Huang, 2015, p. 25). This presentation leads to the negative presentation of the whole region to all players of the game. The other interpretation is that because of the humidity and constant rain in the region, it is very possible for some buildings to have stains or even mould. To solve this problem, the game developers have added air conditioners, which are often used as dehumidifiers (Casteel Air, 2022). By doing so, the game makers provide a realistic and objective representation of the region's surroundings and daily life.



Figure 4.104 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.105 Hotel Room in Bali, Indonesia (Source: Google Images)

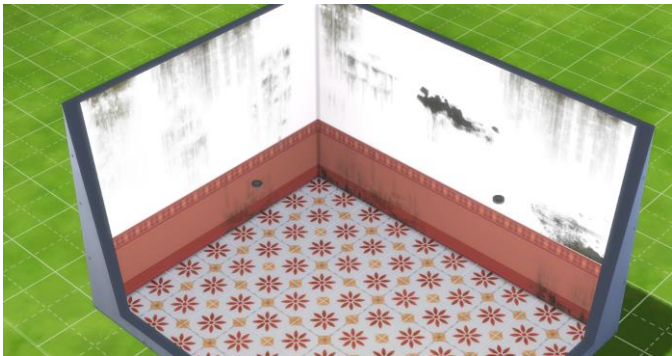


Figure 4.106 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

4.5. Cuisine and Food Traditions

Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation is also evident in the Sims's everyday actions such as the cooking process and the recipes that Sims prepare in the game. Additionally, *The Sims 4* paid special attention to the Southeast Asian culture of selling food in stalls on the streets. Thus, there are three sub-categories – *Cooking and Food Preparation Items*, *Traditional Dishes and Recipes* and *Street Food Culture*.

Cooking and Food Preparation Items

Moving on to Southeast Asian cuisine, the Sims 4 developers have added a lot of new food-related features to the game. Firstly, in terms of the process of preparing and cooking the food, the game creators have added a pressure cooker and kettle. Although the kettle is not an entirely new equipment to the game, the pressure cooker is added as a new way for the characters to cook food.

The pressure cooker is a sealed vessel in which the food is cooked with the use of high-pressure steam and water or water-based liquid (Wikipedia, 2024q). The high pressure of pressure-cooking limits boiling and creates higher temperatures not possible at lower pressures, which allows food to be cooked much faster than at normal pressure (Wikipedia, 2024q). In Southeast Asian cuisine, the pressure cooker is used to cook faster legumes like in Burmese Samosa Soup and meat, such as in Beef Rendang (Low, 2024; Vinay, 2018).

The process of cooking with a pressure cooker in the game is accurately represented as the Sim has to first prepare the food like chop the vegetables, put it in the pressure cooker and let it cook for some time. When the light changes from purple to orange, the Sim has to let out the steam and the food is ready to be served (*Figures 4.107, 4.108 and 4.109*). Additionally, the Sim receives a good moodlet about cooking with the pressure cooker, and the cooked food becomes an excellent quality (*Figure 4.110*). However, if the Sim forgets to let out the steam on time, they receive a negative moodlet about the food and the food declines in quality to poor, making it unpleasant to eat for the Sims (*Figure 4.111*).

When adding the kettle (*Figure 4.112*), *The Sims 4* developers did not add any specific teas, such as green tea for the Southeast Asian region, as they already existed in the game before the release of the For Rent expansion pack. However, it would have been nice to add

new types of tea, like lotus tea, as it is considered to be the most prestigious Vietnamese tea (Taste Atlas, 2024).



Figure 4.107 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.108 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.109 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.110 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.111 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.112 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

Traditional Dishes and Recipes

In terms of new recipes and dishes added to the game, there are nine new dishes and three new drinks. The five dishes that could only be cooked by pressure cooking are Burmese Samosa Soup, coconut rice, Nasi Lemak, steamed rice and Khao Niao Mamuang. The other four dishes could only be bought from the street stalls during the Night Market event. They are Banh Xeo, Ca Phe Trung, Malaysian Satay, Tofu Pad Thai and Pancit Bihon. Based on cuisine, the game has dishes from six Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, the Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. As the number of newly added dishes and drinks is too large, this paper will focus on only three recipes - two dishes and one drink.

The first recipe is Khao Niao Mamuang, also known as Mango Sticky Rice (*Figure 4.114*). The dish originates from Thailand and is the most famous Thai dessert (RachaelCooksThai, 2023). As the name suggests, it consists of sticky rice that is mixed with sweet and salty coconut milk sauce and sweet and ripe mango. Before serving, crispy mung beans are added on top of the sticky rice. Crispy mung beans are the traditional topping for sticky mango rice, which add a crunchy texture to the soft dessert (RachaelCooksThai, 2023).

The khao niao mamung in *The Sims 4* is perfectly recreated by the developers. Firstly, it provides the players with a description of the dish, including its ingredients and category (*Figure 4.116*). Secondly, the visual design of the khao niao mamung is identical to the actual design of the dessert (*Figure 4.115*).



Figure 4.113 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.114 Khao Niao Mamuang (Source: Google Images)



Figure 4.115 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.116 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

The second recipe is called Pancit Bihon, a Filipino noodles dish (Figure 4.118). It is made with rice noodles cooked with soy sauce, vegetables, and chicken. This dish originated from Chinese migrants who worked in the Philippines during Spanish colonial times (Phelps, 2024). The Chinese sold pancit bihon as street vendors to women who worked in cigar factories because they had little time to cook at home (Phelps, 2024). Thus, the name of the dish is coined from the Chinese word pien-cit, meaning ready-made food (Phelps, 2024).

Similarly to its history, pancit bihon is only sold by street vendors at the Night Market in the game (Figure 4.117). Additionally, the game developers have once again provided a thorough description and history of the dish, making it easier for its players to learn about Southeast Asian cuisine, particularly Filipino cuisine (Figure 4.120). In terms of design, there is a visible resemblance between the game version of pancit bihon and the real version of the dish (Figure 4.119). However, due to the limit of graphics for the smooth gameplay in the game, the dish is illustrated in quite low quality. Lastly, unfortunately, the Philippines was only once mentioned as a Southeast Asian country throughout the whole expansion pack. The Philippines has a remarkably diverse and unique cultural heritage. Hence, the game developers should have added more items or interactions inspired by the country.



Figure 4.117 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.118 Pancit Bihon (Source : Google Images)



Figure 4.119 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.120 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

The last recipe is sugarcane juice, a liquid extracted from pressed sugarcane (Figure 4.122). Although sugarcane is not native to Southeast Asia, it is still a popular drink in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar (Wikipedia, 2024f). Street vendors often sell sugarcane juice in Vietnam and Myanmar (Wikipedia, 2024f). Moreover, it is often that other fruits are added to the sugarcane juice to make it sweeter. However, in the game, the drink could either be ordered from a bar or through a specific drink tray (Figure 4.121). Additionally, similar to the khao niao mamung and pancit bihon, the game developers have done an excellent job at presenting the drink to its players (Figure 4.123). Lastly, when drinking the sugarcane juice, the Sim can receive a positive moodlet (Figure 4.124).



Figure 4.121 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.122 [Sugarcane Juice](#)

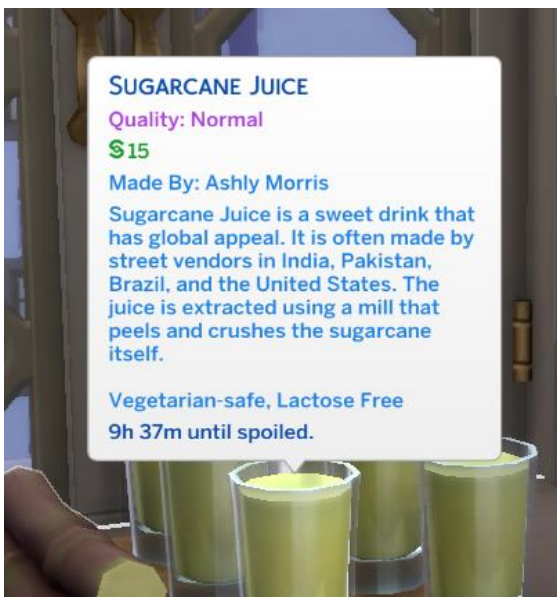


Figure 4.123 The Sims 4 Tomarang World



Figure 4.124 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

Street Food Culture

Furthermore, street food culture in Southeast Asia is a significant aspect of both the region's cuisine and society. Moreover, street food vending provides jobs and income to the region's residents (Henderson, 2019, p. 45). Street cuisine is frequently advertised as a tourist attraction (Torres Chavarria & Phakdee-auksorn, 2017, p.67). These food carts are often held by families; therefore, the recipes are passed down from generation to generation (ASEAN, 2015). Street food sellers frequently operate in towns and rural areas, favouring locations with substantial foot activity (Henderson, 2019, p. 45). In Southeast Asia, they are situated in areas that are known as public spaces suitable for commerce.

Visually, street food vendors are pedlars transporting their items to semi-permanent kiosks with a tiny dining space (Henderson, 2019, p. 46). Semi-permanent booths might be outside tents with a table for food preparation. Street sellers typically utilise plastic tables and chairs in the eating area since they are lightweight and easy to move (*Figure 4.128*).

In *The Sims 4*, the street food vendors are accurately represented as semi-permanent stalls that only appear during the Night Market in the Morensong neighbourhood (*Figure 4.126*). Additionally, the game developers have ensured a dining area by adding the typical plastic chairs (*Figure 4.127*). There are two street food vendors at this event, one with vegan alternatives (*Figure 4.130*) and the other with non-vegan options (*Figure 4.129*). The food is also relatively low, which is consistent with the actual cheap pricing of street food (*Figures 4.129* and *4.130*). Finally, *The Sims 4* creators have successfully captured the ambience around these street food vendors by incorporating a variety of colourful materials and lighting (*Figure 4.125*).



Figure 4.125 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.126 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.127 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.128 Street Food Vendors in Thailand (Source: Google Images)

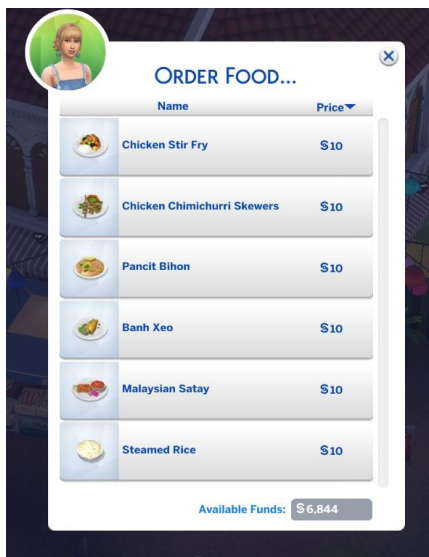


Figure 4.129 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

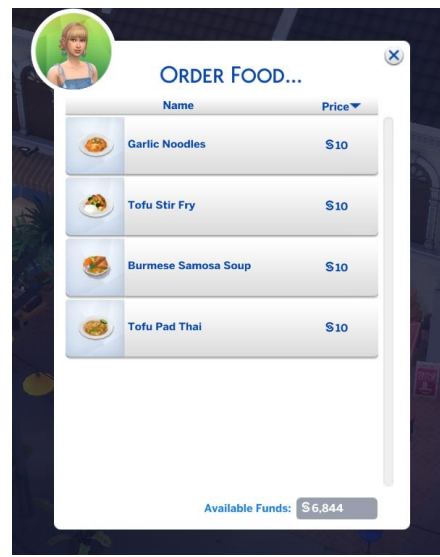


Figure 4.130 The Sims 4 Tomarang World

4.6. Society and Daily Life

Apart from cooking, Southeast Asian cultural heritage is represented in other daily activities that Sims can do around the world of Tomarang. Such activities are the way of communication between Sims and their manners and their way of entertainment as children. Hence, the sub-categories for the category *Society and Daily Life* are *Social Etiquette and Manners* and *Traditional Childhood Games*.

Social Etiquette and Manners

The Sims 4 For Rent expansion pack represented only several points about Southeast Asians' daily lives. The first two are part of the social etiquette of the people from the region. Firstly, the game developers have added a sign that makes all of the Sims living in the residential lot remove their shoes on entry (Figure 4.131). The player can decide between wearing slippers, being barefoot, or staying with their shoes on (Figures 4.132 and 4.133). This item is not a new feature, as it was first added with the release of the Japan-inspired expansion pack called *The Sims 4 Snowy Escape*.

While in East Asia, it is more common to wear slippers inside, in Southeast Asia, people usually walk barefoot. However, in more modern Malaysian families, it is becoming more frequent for the residents and guests to wear slippers inside (Wikipedia, 2024I). Some reasons for not wearing shoes inside are hygiene, bad luck, and heating/cooling systems

(Blakemore, 2024). For example, East Asian countries use floor heating systems, while Southeast Asian countries often make their flooring from stone or marble. This is because using stone or marble as flooring keeps the residents cool during the hot weather (Merchant, 2023). Stone flooring was also considered as an essential feature of Southeast Asia culture, so the game developers have added some new stone flooring. No matter the time the “no shoes” sign was added to the game, its addition makes it clear that *The Sims 4* developers have done research on the house etiquette of Asian countries.



Figure 4.131 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.132 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.133 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World

Secondly, the game creators have added a new option for when Sims meet each other for the first time. It is called Tomarani Introduction (*Figure 4.134*). The animation of this greeting is identical to the Thai greeting, called Wai (*Figure 4.136*). The Wai greeting includes a slight bow, with arms pressed together as done while praying (Toast to Thailand, 2022). As seen in *Figure 4.135*, the Wai greeting perfectly aligns with the animation in the game. There are only two differences between the Tomarani Introduction and the Thai Wai greeting. The first difference is that in *The Sims 4*, the Sims greet each other not at the same

time but with a slight delay. The reason for that is not intentional; it is just the game mechanics. The second difference is that when the Sims meet each other, they do not say anything. When doing the Thai Wai greeting, however, people greet each other with saying Sawasdee kha/khap, which means Hello in Thai. A reason for this difference could be because *The Sims* has its own language, called Simlish (*The Sims Wiki*, 2014). Although translated to Simlish, making the Sims say something when doing the Tomarani introduction would have been a good addition.



Figure 4.134 *The Sims 4 Tomarang World*



Figure 4.135 *The Sims 4 Tomarang World*



Figure 4.136 Thai Wai Greeting (Source: Google Images)

Traditional Childhood Games

The second two points are related to childhood games that are popular in Southeast Asia. The first game that was added to the For Rent expansion pack is playing with marbles (*Figure 4.138*). Although marbles is played by almost all Southeast Asian countries' children, the game is quite popular in Indonesia and Thailand (Traditional Games of Southeast Asia, 2007). The game is known as kelereng in Indonesia and luk hin in Thailand (Traditional Games of Southeast Asia, 2007). To play marbles, one needs two or more players, marbles and to draw a circle on the ground (Traditional Games of Southeast Asia, 2007). The aim of the game is for all of the marbles in the circle to be shot out of the circle. The winner of the

game is the person who collects all of the marbles from outside the circle (Traditional Games of Southeast Asia, 2007).

The marbles game in *The Sims 4* is not an easy game to play since the Sim must either acquire marbles by digging around Tomarang or purchase them from a vendor during the Night Market. The marbles game can only be played by children, which is understandable given how popular it is among children aged 11 to 12 (Traditional Games of Southeast Asia, 2007). Overall, the marble game is appropriately reproduced in the game since the game's rules, required materials, and age group are all well depicted (Figure 4.137).



Figure 4.137 *The Sims 4* Tomarang World



Figure 4.138 Marbles Game in Vietnam (Source: Google Images)

The second game that is common among Southeast Asian children is hopscotch. Hopscotch is a traditional children's game in which one or more players jump across a grid of squares placed on the ground (Tan, 2017). A puck or game piece is progressively pushed across the squares, and players must hop their way across the hopscotch framework while adhering to specific rules and staying on the framework's lines (Tan, 2017). Furthermore, no minimum number of individuals is required to play this game. Hopscotch, while not a traditional Southeast Asian game like marbles, is popular in Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore and Malaysia.

The hopscotch game is also correctly represented in *The Sims 4*. The rules of the game are congruent with the actual game rules, as seen in Figure 4.139 when the Sims have the proper structure of squares and a pluck. Furthermore, there is no limit to how many

individuals may play the game. Lastly, in *The Sims 4*, hopscotch can be played by not only children, but also teens, young adults and adults.



Figure 4.139 *The Sims 4 Tomarang World*

5. Conclusion

This study gives further insight into how cultural heritage is portrayed in video games by examining the case of the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in *The Sims 4*, a commercial life-simulation game. This research is inspired by the theoretical framework on cultural heritage representation in video games by Balela and Mundy (2011) and it is further expanded to fit the unique features of life-simulation games like *The Sims 4* and the cultural and social characteristics of the people from the Southeast Asian region. To determine whether *The Sims 4* developers accurately depict Southeast Asian cultural heritage, this study develops a theoretical framework, performs qualitative research through analytical play, and uses thematic analysis to analyze the finalized data. After the analysis, six categories came evident as answers to this study's research question: *How is Southeast Asian cultural heritage represented in the life-simulation game – The Sims 4?*

This study reveals that the portrayal of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in life-simulation games like *The Sims 4* can be divided into six categories – people, environment and folklore, religion, architecture and design, cuisine and food traditions and society and daily life. The six categories examined various aspects of the Southeast Asian cultural heritage represented in *The Sims 4*. Through this analysis, it became evident that in order to create the world of Tomarang, *The Sims 4* developers used mainly Thailand and Indonesia as inspiration. Some examples for Thailand are the Thai Raj Pattern, the Thai national animal - the elephant and the Thai spirit house, while some examples for Indonesia include the Indonesian batik pattern and Indonesian traditional houses. Malaysia and Vietnam were also occasionally mentioned but they did not play a huge role in the creation of the world of the *For Rent* expansion pack. However, due to the fact that the game creators have used four main Southeast Asian countries for the creation of Tomarang, the game suggests that the region is all one nation with similar culture, which is completely untrue. This finding is similar to Šisler's (2008) research on the portrayal of the Middle East in video games as they also found that the Middle East is represented as one ethnicity. Thus, it would have been more coherent to base the world of Tomarang on only one Southeast Asian country like they did with *The Sims 4 Snowy Escape*'s Japanese-inspired world Mount Komorebi. By doing this, the game developers would avoid confusion among its players and complaints from the

Southeast Asian players of the game. Overall, *The Sims 4* developers have well-researched about the region, and they have accurately represented Southeast Asian cultural heritage with the exception of the traditional hair accessories and objects like the lotus lanterns in the ocean and the lotus monument in the main square of Tomarang. Following the findings of this paper, this chapter will discuss the theoretical implications (5.1), the practical implications (5.2) and the limitations and suggestions for further research (5.3).

5.1. Theoretical Implications

This study has investigated Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation in the life-simulation game – *The Sims 4*. Considering the lack of previous academic literature on this subject, the findings of this study have two theoretical implications.

Firstly, the results of this paper complement the research done on cultural heritage in video games. The most prominent research that was done on this topic is by the scholars Balela and Mundy (2011). Despite these two scholars' study, there is little research done on cultural heritage representation in video games, particularly life-simulation games. Following the theoretical framework created by Balela and Mundy (2011), this paper offers a theoretical framework that is specifically designed for analysing the portrayal of cultural heritage in life-simulation games. Although the framework of this study is tailored to fit the unique gaming specifics of *The Sims 4* like the freedom players have when creating their characters or building residential/commercial lots, it is created to be discussing universal cultural heritage elements such as environment and people. Additionally, if needed, the theoretical framework can be easily edited in order to fit the features of other life-simulation games.

Secondly, the results of this study contribute to the research made on Asian representation and cultural heritage in Western media and video games. Moreover, this paper particularly contribute to the understanding of Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation in media and video games as there is huge research gap about it. From this paper findings, it becomes evident that Western video games such as *The Sims 4* are trying to create an accurate picture of other non-Western regions of the world for their players.

However, sometimes the game creators either deliberately or not portray the positive and/or negative stereotypes about the said region. In the case of this research, *The Sims 4* developers have not used the Orientalist framework, but they may have utilised the Otherness framework. In the *For Rent* expansion pack, the game creators have applied the positive stereotypes about Southeast Asian countries such as being a popular travel/honeymoon destination and being a region, which pays great attention to religion and where there are lots of temples. In addition, *The Sims 4* developers have also portrayed some negative stereotypes like presenting the region as dirty and unkept. Thus, the results of this study denote that Western media and video games are still following stereotypes about different countries even if it is by mistake.

5.2. Practical Implications

As the video game market expands, game manufacturers bear a great deal of responsibility for appropriately representing different countries and ethnicities. In terms of practical applications, the study's findings demonstrate the need for appropriate cultural heritage representation for two reasons. The first argument is that the findings presented in this study can help to raise awareness on societal issues such as diversity and inclusivity. By highlighting the significance of cultural representation in digital settings, game developers may foster diversity and inclusiveness in the gaming industry. Furthermore, having a well-created, for example, Southeast Asian cultural heritage might make Southeast Asian game players feel represented, hence, boosting their cultural identification and pride.

The second reason is that the study's findings might assist game developers in grasping the issue of accurate cultural heritage portrayal and taking steps to enhance it. For instance, after reviewing the findings of this study, *The Sims 4* developers can incorporate certain missing cultural features, such as traditional Southeast Asian hairstyles and hair accessories. What is more, the outcomes of this study might help *The Sims 4* creators learn more about a region or country's cultural heritage in the future, avoiding stereotypes and ensuring cultural sensitivity.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This section reflects the limitations of this research and suggestions for further research. This research has several limitations that are worth mentioning. The first limitation is that the data analysed within his study for this paper is only collected from one video game – *The Sims 4*, particularly *The Sims 4 For Rent* expansion pack. Thus, this study's findings are only right for the case of this life-simulation game. In order to gain a more global viewpoint on the accuracy of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in video games, more research should be done on Southeast Asian cultural heritage in other video games. The second limitation is the nature of the study. This study focuses on content analysis of three gameplay videos. Thus, future studies analysing how players perceive the representation of Southeast Asian cultural heritage in the game can contribute to better understand this topic. Conducting interviews or sending out surveys would help not only researchers but also the public understand the importance of proper Southeast Asian cultural heritage representation.

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Appendix A: Theoretical Framework Tree

