

From Tradition to Simulation: Representation of Asian Culture in The Sims 4: For Rent

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ABSTRACT

Received : 7 June 2025
Accepted : 4 July 2025
Published : 17 August 2025

Keywords:

Asia Representations, Culture, Video Game, The Sims 4: For Rent, Visual Methodology.

This Journal aims to examine how Asian culture is represented in the video game The Sims 4: For Rent. As one of the most influential forms of interactive media, video games have the potential to convey cultural narratives through visuals, characters, and gameplay mechanics. This research adopts a qualitative approach using visual analysis based on Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Gillian Rose's visual methodology, particularly the site of the image (itself) and Discourse Analysis II. Data were collected through visual observation of elements reflecting Asian culture in the game, including architecture, clothing, objects, and social activities. The findings reveal that Asian culture, especially Southeast Asian culture, is represented through visual symbols such as traditional boarding house architecture, batik clothing, local cuisine, and communal values like mutual cooperation. These representations are framed positively, portraying warmth and the richness of local traditions. This study concludes that The Sims 4: For Rent functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a cultural learning medium that shapes global perceptions of Asian identity.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought a major transformation in the world of entertainment, including in the video game industry. Video games are no longer just entertainment media, but have become a medium that is full of meaning and is able to represent various aspects of social and cultural life. One interesting example is The Sims 4 game, especially in the "For Rent" expansion pack which raises the theme of life in Southeast Asia.

The Sims, as a life simulation game developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts (EA), has become one of the most popular games in the world. This game allows players to manage the lives of virtual characters called "sims" in various aspects of life ranging from work, social relationships, to housing. The presence of the "For Rent" expansion pack is an important milestone in EA's efforts to bring cultural diversity to the digital world. This expansion pack

features a new world called Tomarang which is inspired by the culture and social life of the people of Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, Thailand, and surrounding countries.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the representation of Asian culture in The Sims 4: For Rent with a methodological visual approach from Gillian Rose. The main focus of the research is to examine how visual elements in games represent Southeast Asian values, symbols, and cultural identities accurately, aesthetically, and communicatively.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theory of Representation

Representation according to Stuart Hall (1997) is the process of constructing meaning through language, symbols, and media. Representations not only reflect

reality, but also shape the way we perceive the world. Cultural representation in video games is the process of instilling cultural values through the visual and narrative elements present in the game. In other words, the representation of culture in games creates a symbolic space in which cultural identities are constructed and negotiated.

2.2 Visual Methodology - Gillian Rose

Gillian Rose's visual methodology emphasizes the importance of visual reading not only as an aesthetic object but also as a text full of meaning. Rose divides visual analysis into four sites:

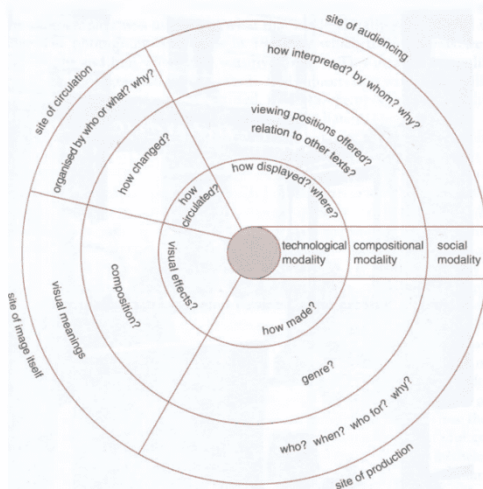


Figure 2.1 "The sites" and the modalities for interpreting a visual object

2.2.1 Site of Production

Visual representations are created in a variety of ways through the production's contribution to the visual presentation effect. The context of this critical visual methodology refers to the place and process by which visual material is created, not only regarding the physical location but also other factors that affect a visual representation.

2.2.2 Site of The Image

An image or visual meaning is formed by the visual itself, some of the components that exist in this visual context can be caused by the use of technology to display images. In this context, The Site of the Image focuses on visual material as an object of analysis, starting from composition, content and using semiology to delve deeper into visual elements and their meaning.

2.2.3 Site of Circulation

Refers to how visual material is distributed in various contexts, how a visual object is used and

interpreted by various audiences and the context that influences the visual meaning. Using The Site of Circulation provides an idea of how a visual object interacts with the media and how the visual meaning develops.

2.2.4 Site of Audiencing

John Fiske in Gillian Rose's book *Visual Methodology* says that an image or visual circulates where the image will be seen by their audience. *The Site of Audience* is one of the most important in giving meaning to an image or visual, because the audience is not always a passive recipient of an image's meaning but also relates to the context that affects their understanding of the visual.

In this writing, uses the site of the image as the main framework of analysis. Site of the image looks at how the visual composition of colors, shapes, symbols, and textures in an image or visual can shape a particular cultural meaning. In the interpretation and association of visual objects, the researcher acts on his own with the ability to analyze and decompose the meaning one by one of the visual compositions that make up a visual representation.

2.2.5 Discourse Analysis I and II

In Gillian Rose's book *on Visual Methodology*, it is explained that *discourse analysis* has a fairly specific meaning, discourse analysis refers to statements that compose a way of thinking about something, and how we act based on that thought. Based on the understanding in the book, art is not specific to a specific type or visual image, but the knowledge of institutions, subjects and practices that come together to define an image into an art. Discourse is affirmed through a variety of visual, verbal and textual images, whether or not it is prioritized through practice through certain languages.

Discourse analysis I can be used to explore how a visual image constructs a certain view in the social world, this type of analysis pays attention to detail on a visual image with various other types of evidence. The focus is on the discourse that exists around the production of visual images that involves the analysis of how language and discourse are used to shape a visual process occurs, covering the social, political and linguistic contexts that influence the formation or production of a visual image. About how a representation affects the production of visual content, for example.

Discourse analysis II focuses on the material in a visual image, by involving the analysis of how meaning is constructed through visual elements, symbols and narratives. It also includes culture that is reflected in its visual representation. This method is

effective for examining how the powerful discourse that produces the visual object and the position of the subject relates to an associated "institution". Institutions in *discourse analysis II* refer to things that have an important role in shaping social values and beliefs by influencing the way we see and understand the world. Not only reflects reality but also through the discourse and visual representations that are displayed.

By selection sites of image (itself) As the method chosen by the researcher in this study, discourse analysis II is the right choice to obtain and accumulate the results of the discussion of the object to be researched.

2.3 Asian Culture in Games

Southeast Asia is a region with a very rich cultural diversity, ranging from communal values, spirituality, traditional architecture, to culinary and folk games. The representation of Asian culture in games is usually realized through character design, clothing, social interactions, the use of body language, to architectural and landscape design.

According to Singh, 2006 in Liu 2023, it is also mentioned that examples of colors that are used as a representation of a culture, With this, in online games with the same mode there are several differences in design and color between each other, especially because of the development and design of games that are influenced by the culture and market needs of certain regions and countries. The colors used are simple colors that correspond to the reality of visual needs. In games that carry Asian culture, colors and symbolism tend to be more shown. One of them is the many traditional works that are displayed using the right colors to express certain emotions (Yu, 2021). According to Li in Liu 2023,

In The Sims 4: For Rent, these elements are shown in various aspects such as stilt house-style boarding houses, night markets, tuk-tuks as typical Southeast Asian vehicles, to interactions such as greeting with hands on chest or playing marbles. All of this is a medium of cultural representation that can be recognized by players from the Asian region.

2.4 The Sims

The Sims is a single-player life simulation game developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts. EA is a company from the United States that was established in 1982, is famous for publishing various iconic *games* across platforms and has several famous game studios under it. On the official Electronic Arts

website, they explain their focus on creating games and experiences that grow a global online community, while deepening engagement through interactive storytelling. One of the games that EA has successfully publicized is The Sims.

The Sims 4 became the latest series released by EA on May 6, 2013, along with more game content in it, namely, 15 expansion packs, 12 game packs, 19 stuff packs and 25 "Kits" as well as adding many updates from the previous game series which were redeveloped with visuals to make it look more realistic. At first, this series received a lot of complaints from fans and players of The Sims game because there were several interactions and game systems in the previous game that were not included in the new series of The Sims 4 games.



Figure 2. 2 The Sims Series

However, in the end, EA still added some old interaction features with updates for free through their official website, although it was a manual of pros and cons because some of the interaction features were incorporated into The Sims paid content. One of the expansion packs that has received a lot of attention from fans and sims players is "for rent" which was released on December 7, 2023.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a visual analysis method based on Gillian Rose's theory. Data is collected through direct observation of The Sims 4: For Rent gameplay and visual documentation such as screenshots of elements that reflect Asian culture. The focus of the analysis is the visual elements (site of the image), such as colors, architectural forms, clothing, characters, and in-game activities. The data analysis technique uses Discourse Analysis II to understand how the visuals produce and represent cultural meaning through symbols, interactions, and design.

3.1 Object of Study

The objects in this study are the visual elements contained in the For Rent expansion pack in The Sims 4, such as clothing, architecture, in-game objects, characters, and interactions between characters. The subject of the research is the game




itself, as well as the cultural context raised in its creation.

3.2 Data Collection

Data is collected through visual documentation (screenshots) of game elements, as well as observations of gameplay with a focus on the world of "Tomarang". In addition, a search of secondary literature such as EA's official documentation, player discussion forums, and academic articles on cultural representation in the media was also carried out to enrich the analysis.

3.3 Corpus

The research corpus consists of visual objects that exist in the game The Sims: For Rent. The main focus of the research is to analyze the representations of Asian culture constructed in games.

Element in Games		Description
Name	Visual	
Landscape and Visuals Background		In this expansion packs for rent, it comes with a new world map with the name "Tomarang" where the structure and architecture in it are close to Southeast Asian culture.
Clothes and Accessories on sims		The clothes and accessories in this pack take many references to typical clothing from countries in Asia.
Character		There are also characters that are added along with other game elements to complete these expansion packs. The characters featured in these packs represent the appearance of Asians, with tan skin and Southeast Asian-like character shapes.



Objects in Build Mode		Build Mode in The Sims is a game mode where players allow players to design and build residences and environments for their sims characters. Where in <i>this build mode</i> there are objects that can be purchased to use in the game.
Interaction		The <i>game</i> includes how the characters interact with each other, from greeting each other to playing together.

Table 3. 1 Research corpus

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Data in the form of visual documentation of images in the game The Sims 4 Expansion packs: for rent using the site of image (itself);

- The collected visual documentation was then analyzed using the theoretical framework of visual methodology by searching for the meaning of cultural representation through the site of image (itself), where the researcher visually analyzed images based on shapes and colors that were considered to be able to create a form of representation of a culture.
- The researcher will analyze the data using discourse analysis II, to find out how a meaning is constructed through visual images that include how the visual can be a representation of a culture or society.

RESULT

4.1 The Sims 4, For Rent Expansion Packs

The Sims 4 is one of The Sims series that has many expansion packs that can be played, one of which is "For Rent". This expansion pack is the 15th pack in The Sims 4 published on December 7, 2023 on all platforms. By presenting new objects or objects that can be played in building mode or "build mode" and hair, clothes, and other objects in character building mode or "create a sim" with a total of 205 objects in build mode and 142 objects in create a sim.

On the official EA page (ea.com) provides an explanation of what players will get in playing the For Rent expansion packs, from furniture, clothes to interactions or game activities that can be played. This pack also introduces a new world map or new world

map called "Tomarang". Here are some of the main features offered by EA in the For Rent expansion packs.

4.2 Asia Representation in Game

According to Hall (1997), "representation is not just a reflection of the real world, but is a way to build meaning and identity through a system of signs and symbols that are culturally understood". This is clearly seen in the selection of visual objects in Tomarang which are consciously designed to depict Southeast Asian culture.

Using Gillian Rose's (2001) Site of the Image approach, researchers analyzed that the cultural meaning in this game does not only come from verbal narratives or text, but emerges strongly from visual compositions such as building shapes, house ornaments, colors, and landscape layout.

4.2.1 Game Architecture and Environment



Figure 4. 1 Tomarang Landscape

Shown in the new map called "Tomarang" which features landscapes inspired by cities in Southeast Asia. There are stilt houses commonly found in rural Indonesia and Thailand, night markets with lanterns and food stalls, and building architecture rich in ethnic motifs and bright colors. This design provides a strong visual representation of Asian culture and provides a sense of closeness for players from the region. The environment dense with social interaction also reflects the communal lifestyle prevalent in the Southeast Asian region, where relationships between neighbors and relatives are an important aspect of daily life.

The dense layout, narrow alleys, and elements such as store signage in typical Asian letters and small gardens in the backyard depict a visual representation that is close to the urban life of the Southeast Asian people. These symbols reinforce the authentic feel in the design of Tomarang's environment, as well as demonstrate the game manufacturer's awareness of visual values that are familiar and relevant to the local culture.

4.2.2 Clothing and Character in Game

The character outfits in this expansion pack take inspiration from traditional Asian clothing, such as kurti from India, batik from Indonesia, cheongsam from China, and Asian accessories such as peacock feather earrings. These clothes are not only used by adult characters, but also by children and the elderly in the game, which shows the diversity of generations as

Figure 4. 2 Object in The Sims For Rent

well as the flexibility of using traditional fashion in everyday life. Some clothes even combine modern and traditional elements, which shows the process of cultural acculturation that took place in contemporary Asian society.



Figure 4. 3 Cahyaputri Family

One of the families introduced in this pack is pair of sisters named Vanesha Cahyaputri (left) and Zhafira Cahyaputri (right). In the game also explain how they came to live together. Characters such as the Cahyaputri family are depicted with tan skin color and local names such as Cahya and Wulan. This character is a symbol of the visual and narrative representation of Southeast Asian society. Both Characters also wear clothes with patterned fabric that give a traditional impression in the form of stripes patterns in blue, purple, yellow, green and red which depict a warm and traditional impression in characters. The naming of characters and their physical appearance becomes a form of representation that is not only cosmetic, but also reflects local values such as respect for ancestors, the important role of the family, and multigenerational in one house.

4.2.3 Objects in Game

Representations of Cultural Objects and Symbols
Objects such as tuk-tuks (typical Thai vehicles), spirit houses (places of worship outside the house), cooking utensils such as large frying pans, water kettles, and garbage are an important part of cultural representation in the game. These elements are not only decorations, but can be used by the characters in the gameplay, such as cooking traditional meals, making offerings at the altar, or simply relaxing on the terrace of the stilts.



Red, gold, and green dominate the visual palette, representing symbols of good luck, wealth, and harmony in Asian culture. This color is not only seen in clothes, but also in elements of the house, furniture, and wall ornaments. In the context of cultural symbolism, this use of color not only creates a distinctive atmosphere, but also reinforces the player's emotional attachment to the cultural identity represented.

4.2.4 Interactions in Game



Figure 4. 4 Sims Greeting others with “Tomarang Introduction”

The interactions between sims in the game include social activities such as greeting by bowing, playing marbles, and participating in night market events. It illustrates the value of collectivism, respect, and the importance of community in the lives of Southeast Asian people. Even the sims kids can interact through traditional games such as jumping rope or congklak, which revives the nostalgic values and childhood culture of the local people.



Figure 4. 5 Sims Interactions

Features such as family events, shared meals, and community activities in the in-game public park also reflect the culture of eating together and mutual cooperation that is very attached to Asian society. Activities such as cooking together, giving souvenirs, and attending celebratory events also emerged as activities that could be done in the game, reflecting typical Asian social life.



Figure 4. 6 Bun Ma Family

The characterization of Sims itself, which is formed with a personality that reflects Asian values such as respect for parents, the role of women as guardians of home harmony, and emotional closeness between family members. Characters like *Bua Bun Ma* are portrayed as wise grandmothers who are the center of the family, always present when her grandchildren need direction. The character of a father like *Kasem* takes on the role of a patient and responsible head of the household. Even children like *Nin* and *Sud* are not portrayed as free individuals who are out of control, but as part of a family unit that supports and cares for each other. The interactions between these characters are structured to depict the hierarchical but warm social structure of Asia, where positions in the family are accompanied by moral and emotional responsibilities.

DISCUSSION

Discourse analysis II focuses on the material in a visual image, by involving the analysis of how meaning is constructed through

visual elements, symbols and narratives. It also includes culture that is reflected in its visual representation. This method is effective for examining how the powerful discourse that produces the visual object and the position of the subject relates to an associated "institution". Institutions in discourse analysis II refer to things that have an important role in shaping social values and beliefs by influencing the way we see and understand the world. Not only reflects reality but also through the discourse and visual representations that are displayed. The representation of Asian culture in *The Sims 4: For Rent* can be analyzed through Discourse Analysis II introduced by Norman Fairclough. This approach views discourse not only as a language or text, but also as a social and ideological practice produced by institutions and consumed by society.

The findings of this study reveal that *The Sims 4: For Rent* offers a nuanced representation of Southeast Asian culture through carefully curated visual elements, character narratives, and interactive features. Using Gillian Rose's *Site of the Image* approach, the analysis demonstrates that architecture, clothing, social interactions, and symbolic colors are not merely aesthetic additions, but active carriers of meaning that communicate collectivist values, respect for tradition, and community spirit. This aligns with Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation, which asserts that media does not simply mirror reality but actively shapes cultural meaning through symbolic systems.

The results directly answer the research question by showing that the *For Rent* expansion reflects Southeast Asian culture authentically while also reshaping global players' perceptions of Asian identity. The use of familiar cultural markers such as night markets, traditional games, and multigenerational households supports Hall's notion that representation constructs identity through shared cultural codes. Moreover, by embedding these elements into gameplay, EA transforms cultural heritage into an interactive learning medium, aligning with Fairclough's perspective on discourse as both social practice and ideological production.

How EA Want to Create The Representation

The representation of Asian culture in *The Sims 4: For Rent* is not born by chance or based on the free imagination alone, but rather through a structured discursive production process, involving institutional and cultural parties. EA and Maxis, as a global gaming institution based in the West, explicitly developed this expansion based on in-depth cultural research and direct consultation with experts and creators from Southeast Asia, such as Jason Chu.

EA's choice to release *For Rent* with a Southeast Asian-themed world is a form of The Sims development strategy that not only follows global gaming trends, but also attempts to incorporate cultural diversity into the gameplay. This is in accordance with the explanation in *The Sims'* development theory (EA, 2023) which states that every expansion is an *attempt to bring a culturally and socially relevant gaming experience to a global audience*.

Through interviews and public acknowledgments, the development team stated that they did not want to create a fictional world that simply mimics the exoticism of Asian culture as a visual setting, but instead committed to crafting a play experience that feels "familiar and authentic" to players from the region. This commitment can be seen in how they elevate elements such as multigenerational boarding houses, spiritual customs such as offering offerings in *spirit houses*, and norms of manners in social interactions—all designed to reflect the real social dynamics that live in Southeast Asian society.

Social Practice

The Sims 4: For Rent is inseparable from the broader social and ideological context as it plays an active role in shaping and reproducing the structure of meaning about Asian culture in the global space. As an interactive medium, *For Rent* is not a neutral or value-free space; rather, it becomes a representation tool that conveys a number of key social ideologies inherent in Asian society, and makes it an integral part of the gaming experience.

One of the main ideologies put forward is familialism, which is the belief that the family is not only the smallest social unit, but also the main foundation in shaping individual values, norms, and behaviors. This is evident through the character designs and relationship dynamics between Sims, such as the important role of a grandmother in a

multigenerational household, or how children show respect for parents and elders.

By presenting all these values in a comprehensive, warm, and positive way, *The Sims 4: For Rent* not only serves as a reflection of Asian culture, but also as a subtle critique of the dominance of Western discourse in digital media, which tends to prioritize individualism, personal autonomy, and small, fragmented core family narratives. This game opens up a more diverse representation space by elevating Asian cultural identity to the global stage, while showing that collective values, local spirituality, and family ties are able to create a virtual world that is more meaningful, harmonious, and culturally rich. Thus, *For Rent* serves as a social practice that not only conveys reality, but also shapes the way we understand and appreciate cultural diversity in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

These findings have practical relevance for game developers, cultural institutions, and educators. Game designers can apply similar culturally grounded approaches to create authentic, respectful, and engaging representations in other titles. Cultural organizations could leverage games like *The Sims 4: For Rent* as tools for promoting heritage awareness, particularly among younger, digitally engaged audiences. For educators, this research highlights how video games can serve as interactive case studies for teaching cultural diversity, media representation, and cross-cultural communication.

The representation of Asian culture in the expansion of "The Sims 4: For Rent" can be analyzed in depth through Gillian Rose's Visual Methodology approach, especially with an emphasis on the "site of the image itself". This focus highlights how the visual elements featured in the game are not just decorative images, but form rich and complex cultural meanings. The visualization in this game is not only a surface aesthetic, but an active, structured, and symbolic, cultural narrative.

Cultural representations are also displayed through visual interactions between characters. The gesture of greeting with both hands in front of the chest (Tomarang greeting), children playing marbles or engklek in the yard, and the ritual of giving offerings in the spirit house are visual actions that contain deep cultural meaning. These gestures are visualized gently and familiarly, not exaggerated but

very reflective of the social reality of Asian society. Not only describing habits, these interactions represent values such as respect, social harmony, spirituality, and collectivism.

The overall visual representation in "For Rent" works as a system of signs that shapes the narrative of Asian culture as a whole. Visual elements whether landscapes, objects, clothing, or interactions result in authentic and vibrant cultural constructions. This representation allows players, especially from the Southeast Asian region, to find their reflection in the digital world that has been dominated by Western cultural representations. Thus, through the site of the image itself approach, it can be concluded that *The Sims 4: For Rent* does not only showcase Asian culture as an exotic setting, but as a visual experience that touches, deepens, and appreciates the diversity of local cultures.

Future studies could expand this research by exploring player reception across different cultural backgrounds to assess how audiences interpret these representations. A comparative analysis between Southeast Asian cultural portrayals in *The Sims* and other simulation or role-playing games could also provide insights into varying approaches to authenticity and adaptation. Additionally, incorporating ethnographic methods such as in-game observation combined with player interviews would deepen understanding of how cultural representation influences gameplay experiences and identity formation.

Author contribution

Mila Aminah Ramadhani was responsible for all stages of this research, including: Conceptualisation and Research Design, Data Collection, Methodology, Writing of the Entire Paper, Data Analysis, Editing, and Layouting. The author also applied relevant theoretical frameworks, analysis representation in a game and synthesized the findings into a critical academic discussion. Aulia Rahmawati, S.Sos., M.Si., Ph.D served as the academic supervisor, providing guidance and feedback throughout the research and writing process, particularly in relation to theoretical refinement, structure, and academic rigor. All authors have read and approved the final version of this paper.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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