

'The Sims' removes gender barriers in video game

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This image released by Electronic Arts shows the new diverse characters that will be available on "The Sims 4" the latest edition of "The Sims" video game. (Electronic Arts via AP)

The creators of "The Sims" are opening up gender customization options for the first time in the long-running history of the popular life simulation video game.

"The Sims" publisher Electronic Arts and developer Maxis said a free update available Thursday for "The Sims 4" will remove gender boundaries and allow players to create virtual townsfolk—or Sims, as they're known—with any type of physique, walk style or voice they choose.

"The Sims 4" and earlier installments of the 16-year-old series previously restricted specific clothing, hair styles and other aesthetic options to either male or female characters.

EA and Maxis said over 700 pieces of content previously available to only male or female Sims will now be accessible regardless of gender in "The Sims 4" and its various expansion packs.

The studio said in a statement it wanted to "make sure players can create characters they can identify with or relate to through powerful tools that give them influence over a Sims' gender, age, ethnicity, body type and more."

While previous editions of "The Sims" have featured character customization restrictions based on gender, users have unofficially modified the PC game over the years to remove such barriers.

"The Sims 4" executive producer Rachel Franklin said in an email to The Associated Press that the developers have been working for over a year on the update. She noted that "female Sims can wear sharp men's suits like Ellen (DeGeneres), and male Sims can wear heels like Prince."

Franklin also noted players can now change their Sims' gender at any time and specify whether they can reproduce with other characters. She said Maxis worked with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender advocacy group GLAAD on the update, including following a suggestion to remove gender symbols associated with characters in the game's

gallery.

"Creating the possibility for greater gender diversity within the world of 'The Sims' is an exciting development," said Nick Adams, director of GLAAD's transgender media program. "It was a pleasure working with developers who were committed to updating the game so that all players can create a Sims world that more accurately reflects the world in which we live today."

The move brings "The Sims" in line with its depiction of gay, lesbian and bisexual characters.

The franchise has included same-sex relationship options since its 2000 debut, although gamers who desired virtual nuptials for their Sims of the same sex had to wait until the release of "The Sims 3" in 2009. "The Sims 4" was originally released in 2014.

The gaming medium rarely depicts or invites users to create transgender characters. The fantasy role-playing game "Dragon Age: Inquisition" from EA and developer BioWare notably featured a transgender male character named Krem in 2014.

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