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STS 145 – Henry Lowood
Case History

The Story of The Sims

In the following case history, I will examine the emergence and significance of The Sims. I will begin with a brief introduction of the game's origins and history. I will then proceed to assess the significance of the game on the history of gaming, highlighting both notable events in the evolution of The Sims itself, and particular characteristics of the game experience which demonstrate its uniqueness relative to other games that have come before it. I will conclude with some remarks regarding the lasting impact of The Sims, as well as some considerations in regards to of the game's limitations and weaknesses.

It's not a difficult argument to make that The Sims has had an enormous impact on the world of gaming. To begin with, The Sims is the best selling game of all time. More than 8 million copies have been sold worldwide. Moreover, the singularity of its structure and architecture is clear. That said, what's important is to get beneath the surface of such glowing generalizations, and to understand the reasons for its success.

The game, published by Electronic Arts and developed by Maxis, was originally released in 2000, for Windows. (In January 2003 a console version was released for the PlayStation 2, prior to which only the Windows version existed.) The lead developer of The Sims is the legendary Will Wright, whose SimCity franchise made an incredible splash in the gaming community as well.

The game (not entirely surprisingly given its name) falls into the simulation category. A player controls the lives of simulated people. The player can create a family, and enable the simulated people within it to build a home, pursue careers, make friends, find lovers, become rich. The player can also allow the lives of the simulated people to be unhappy ones, pitted against one another. In this way, the player is in the position of a quasi-god, controlling the fates of the simulated people through actions and inactions. It's an extremely open-ended experience, with an emphasis on building and exploring. Will Wright describes the experience as "more like a hobby – a train set or a doll house," and as "a mellow and creative playground experience" (Keighley). In this, *The Sims* is fairly novel. Although there had been games in the past which attempted to simulate normal lives and the relationships between them (for instance, *Little Computer People* on the Commodore 64), *The Sims* is arguably the first instance in which such a simulation has built up such a complex world to be appealing to the general gamer (Lopez).

It's interesting to note how difficult it was for Wright to get support for the creation of *The Sims*. It took years. As documented in Keighley, the original idea emerged in part in 1991. After Wright's home was destroyed in a fire, he observed the sequence by which the family "reacquired" items for the home. That's when the idea came to him to design a virtual "dollhouse", and have the player slowly acquire objects to fill it. He called the prototype "Home Tactics: the Experimental Domestic Simulator" (Keighley).

However, Wright was unable to get the rest of the management team at Maxis to buy into the concept. It wasn't until 1997, when Maxis was purchased by Electronic Arts, that the idea was resurrected. As Wright recalls: "EA basically came to me and said,

‘We’re going to roll the dice on you and give you all the resources you want for Home Tactics” (Keighley). The gamble paid off handsomely. Since its release in 2000, the game has surpassed all sales records in the industry.

The fact that Wright had so much difficulty getting The Sims produced is worth examining. It demonstrates, I think, the general reluctance in the game industry to stretch beyond the traditions (which have consistently proved themselves financial successes). The truth is, EA was taking a big chance with The Sims – it was clearly entering fairly uncharted territories. The game’s success despite these uncharted territories also begs the question: what did players see in the game that propelled it to unparalleled success?

I’d like to argue that the importance of The Sims in the history of computer games can be explained by highlighting four general categories: the focus on ordinary daily lives, the simultaneous attention-to-detail and simplicity of experience, the genuine encouragement of player creativity, and the provision of a framework for players to safely test their own boundaries.

I won’t argue that The Sims is entirely unique in these attributes; however, I believe the game successfully promotes these concepts in a manner that far surpasses games that came before it. Such success is apparently in the marketplace: we need only consider the extent to which The Sims appeals to consumers beyond the pale of traditional gamers. For instance, fifty percent of the registered players are female. Moreover, as evidence of its broad appeal, consider how EA classifies the players of The Sims. It contrasts four distinct categories. The first it calls “People-Suck players” – these players enjoy making their simulated people suffer. The second they refer to as “Reality TV Watchers” – these are the people who enjoy being voyeurs, an experience for which

The Sims affords many opportunities, albeit virtual. The third group is the “Trophy Seekers” – these are the players who play in order to accumulate as much wealth as possible. And the final group is referred to as the “Dollhouse players” – these players enjoy engineering, architecture, and enjoy the game accordingly. The point here is that this player base represents an incredibly wide cross-section of the population, particularly given that they’re playing the same game. There must exist something unique in the core of the game that attracts such a diversity of interests.

The first of the unique features, I’d argue, has to do with the game’s emphasis on ordinary life. The Sims is not a game bent on the slaying of dragons. It’s about living a daily routine. It brings to the forefront “the tactical and strategic forethought” that we use in our daily lives (Keighley). It also highlights the interdependence of an ordinary life’s activities – everything in the game seems to hinge on everything else. These are notions to which everyone of us can relate. It’s no doubt a risky strategy to rely too heavily on ordinary experience: a primary reason people attend movies like Star Wars, for instance, is that it enables them to escape into a world perceived to be more exciting than ordinary lives typically are. But the strategy also has advantages, chief among them being the ability to broaden the appeal of the experience, so that consumers who wouldn’t traditionally consider themselves game players, might entertain the idea of attempting to play. The truth is that The Sims may have erred too much on the side of ordinariness: many complain that the game becomes repetitive and tedious after the initial experience. It’s also difficult to come to a clear conclusion regarding how realistic a simulation like The Sims should treat such subjects as violence and sex. However, I believe that the game’s openness to exploring the world of the ordinary was quite exotic in relation to the

traditional trajectory of game development. And that sort of breaking with tradition is the very means by which novel types of game play will be discovered.

A second feature of *The Sims* which helps to distinguish it in the history of gaming is its simultaneous attention-to-detail and simplicity of experience. As many observers have pointed out, one of the most rewarding aspects of the game is the sheer number and variety of objects that populate the virtual world and with which characters interact (London). And the attention to detail in regards to these objects is remarkable. As one reviewer describes it: “the Maxis team is obsessive-compulsive when it comes to making sure that everything from flushing a toilet to chopping up vegetables sounds like the real thing” (Lopez).

Yet, despite this attention to detail, the graphics in the game are incredibly simple and clean, as is the interface. It’s easy for most neophytes to become comfortable with the interface within the first hour of game play. In addition, the game play itself is straightforward. It offers the player a functional architecture within which to experience; and while there do exist clear determinants of success or failure, much of the game experience is left up to the player. This flexibility has the potential to expand the game’s appeal to a wider audience, as each player can create a more customized experience for himself or herself. As Wright has commented, “You only have to give people the briefest, most tentative scaffolding to hang something on and they’ll build an elaborate narrative and fill in the gaps with their imagination” (Sieberg).

In other words, the architecture of the game enables players to evolve their own narrative, just as we tend to construct narratives in our own lives. Wright points out this tendency: “We were not writing a story but anybody playing this game could not help

imagine a story as the game progressed” (Sieberg). I’d argue that this openness of structure, particularly when coupled with the ordinariness of daily life, is a significant break from the tradition of computer games, and is one of the ways in which The Sims has had marked impact on the trajectory of the industry. It allows for adaptability, based on player taste and mood. As one reviewer comments, the relationships between players in The Sims are “mature enough to please all age ranges and interests, but immature enough to provide a constant set of Rickie Lake-esque escapades of your choosing” (Lopez).

Another unique characteristic of The Sims involves the emphasis on player creativity. In a way, this component is interwoven with the previous component: players must use their creativity to construct an experience from within the general architecture of the game. But it goes beyond that as well. User communities have emerged, where objects, skins, and Sims storylines are shared. That an enormous fan base is actively exchanging anecdotes and self-created add-ons is testimony to the power of the game. Moreover, the fact that Maxis seems to encourage such community is important. Again, Wright: “It was very important to me to see all the creativity online” (Keighley). It also suggests an opportunity for pushing the notion of community further, a which the newly released Sims Online attempts to take advantage of. No doubt there are other games with equally active communities of players; however, the “market” in Sims add-ons is striking, as is the flexibility afforded players in customizing their own experience. As Lopez explains, “The Sims really takes it a step further by letting fans tweak the environments that the characters live in” (Lopez).

The fourth unique trait I'd like to discuss concerns the ability of players to safely explore their boundaries, and it's here I believe *The Sims* might have its greatest overall impact. A game like *The Sims* has the potential to allow players to explore their own lives more closely. This occurs in part because the game is designed to simulate ordinary life, which I believe enables self-examination to a greater extent than, say, a game about extraterrestrials. (As Wright describes it, "Everyone is narcissistic at some level, so having a game about your life can be a powerful concept" (Sieberg).) It allows players to test their own boundaries as humans, without the risk such behavior brings with it in society. According to Ted Friedman, simulations serve "as a kind of map-in-time visually and viscerally demonstrating the repercussions of many different decisions" (Friedman). In this way, *The Sims* functions as a sort of modern trickster figure, enabling the players of the game to push the limits of socially-endorsed actions, in a seemingly non-threatening way. It's not that *The Sims* succeeds entirely in creating such an environment, but the emphasis within the architecture of the game seems to gesture toward such a conception, and accordingly diverges considerably from the primary conceits of most computer games.

I have attempted to outline a number of key ways in which *The Sims* represents an important milestone in the evolution of gaming. Of course, there remain a number of hurdles in optimally architecting the type of experience *The Sims* seeks to create, and it's important to acknowledge the shortcomings of *The Sims* in regards to such hurdles. I'd like to identify two in particular. The first is a set of success factors in the game that's clearly overly simplistic relative to real life situations. Sims are focused on a small subset of beneficial activities: advancing in their careers, making new friends, performing

rudimentary tasks like using the bathroom and showering. While these are certainly some of the building blocks of real life, in the game itself they don't seem to add up to any sort of higher-order experience. The activities never seem to transcend themselves. This sentiment is captured concisely in the following, the title of a game review of The Sims: "Play God, Fix Toilets" (Lopez).

The second shortcoming, which no doubt relates to the first, has to do with the absence of sustained emotion in the game. Sims seem only to do, not to feel. There exists an unambiguous emotional void. Granted, this tendency has been present in computer game design for some time – but in a game like The Sims, which attempts to simulate ordinary life, there would seem to be more of a premium placed on the simulation of feeling as well as action.

Such shortcomings notwithstanding, The Sims represents a significant and fascinating episode in the history of computer games. In many ways it represents a radical break from the traditional bread-and-butter of the computer game industry, which is all the more impressive given its own economic vitality. The presence of The Sims, as well as its offspring, will continue to be felt in innovative game offerings for some time.

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