

The Sims and the Need for Fantasy
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The Sims, which has become one of the most popular games on the planet, will soon see its sixth expansion pack, and has already been converted into both a console game and a massively multiplayer online experience. What was significant about the original game that it generated such a large and committed fan base? We will look first at reasons for the game's popularity, and try to elucidate why it appeals to such a broad range of individuals, then move into the history of the game's conception and the path of its development, from the original Sims to the Sims Online.

Since its release in February of 2000, over 8 million copies of The Sims have been sold, making it "the biggest-selling computer game of all time."¹ In a chart compiled by the NPD Group of the 2002 top ten best-selling PC games in North America, five of the ten slots are occupied by The Sims or one of its various expansion packs. The original game comes in at number five, almost three years after its initial release.² Much of The Sims' success is due to its wide appeal; it attracts women and men, committed and casual gamers, adults and children.³ This popularity can be contributed to a variety of factors. Serious gamers may appreciate the uniqueness of the game's concept⁴, while casual gamers may appreciate the lack of violence⁵. These qualities alone, however, would not be sufficient to generate the obsessive devotion that can be observed on any number of Sims fan sites, nor would they probably sustain the sales of the expansion packs, which, as we noted above, are topping sales lists every year. Beyond the superficial trappings that distinguish The Sims as a non-violent, domestic simulation, there is something else at play, something that appeals deeply to the human mind. It is here that the real significance of The Sims lies.

Will Wright, creator of The Sims, is acutely interested in models, and that interest comes across clearly in his creations, the most famous of which are SimCity and The Sims⁶. At its core, The Sims is just a model. While SimCity is modeling the dynamics of a growing town, The Sims attempts to model human behaviour and psychology. What about this model draws in so many people? There are many theories; as mentioned above, one idea is that people enjoy acting out scenarios in a safer, happier, controlled world. Other ideas indicate that we enjoy treating the game and the people in it as pets, things they we must take care of, lest they perish. Or we simply enjoy the sense of control—simulation games are often labeled "God games" in deference to this theory.⁷ Probably each of these ideas is true for some segment of the population; people play games for different reasons. Is there anything universal in our attraction to models? Perhaps some answers lie in Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus' book *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games*. In chapter 2, "Why Video Games Are Fun," they present a situation where two men miss a flight, but one man misses it by only two minutes, whereas the other man misses it by half an hour. As they point out, most of us would agree that the first man

¹ Becker, David. "'Sims Online' off to Slow Start." In *ZDNet India* (January 2003), at <http://www.zdnetindia.com/news/features/stories/75110.html>.

² Clavert, Justin. "Best-selling PC games for 2002." In *GameSpot* (January 2003), at <http://gamespot.com/gamespot/stories/news/0,10870,2909794,00.html>.

³ Takahashi, Dean. *Opening the Xbox: Inside Microsoft's Plan to Unleash an Entertainment Revolution*. Roseville, California: Prima Publishing, 2002, pg. 35.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Segan, Sascha. "A World of Their Own: Online Game Lets You Play God." In *ABCNews.com* (March 2000), at <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/tech/DailyNews/sims000322.html>.

⁶ Keighley, Geoff. "The Endless Hours of The Sims Online." In *GameSpot* (2002), at <http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/simsonline/index.html>.

⁷ Poole, Steven. *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000.

would be more upset. Why is this? They postulate that, when something negative occurs, we construct an alternate reality in which the negative thing did not happen. The closer that alternate reality is to the real world, the more regret we have about the experience. In *Mind at Play*, they use this theory to explain why arcade games become addictive—it is easy for the player to put in another quarter and try to create the reality in which they win the game⁸. This theory can also be useful, however, in explaining the mass appeal of *The Sims*, and its significance as a game. In some sense, *The Sims* is not a competitive game—there is no way to “win” or complete the game. Therefore, it is not the reality of the game that the player is trying to remake, but their own reality. *The Sims* allows users to project their own hopes and dreams, expectations and disappointments, onto the artificial people, and thus, in a sense, act out an ideal life. Granted, this is probably not a conscious thought in many cases, but it could be part of what drives players to keep playing the game. In some ways, it is better than reality, because there is no regret. *The Sims* can always be made to do exactly what the user wants.

The Sims is not the only game providing an alternate reality—games such as *Ultima Online* and *Lineage* do this as well, in different ways. What may be unsettling about *The Sims*, but what also makes it important in the gaming world, is its nearness to actual reality.

How did such a game come to be developed? Everything began, of course, with Will Wright. As mentioned in our class on Artificial Life and in various interviews with Will Wright, his foray into the world of computer games began with a Commodore 64 game: *Raid on Bungling Bay*. In this game, a helicopter flies from island to island and performs tasks. Wright designed the island territory over which the helicopter flies.



Figure 1: Screen Shot of “Raid on Bungling Bay”

It was while designing this simple landscape that Wright realized he could create a game based on making landscapes. *SimCity* came out of this experience. While at Maxis, the game company that developed *SimCity*, Wright had the idea for another simulation game, which he initially called “Home

⁸ Loftus, Geoffrey R. and Loftus, Elizabeth F. *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.

Tactics.” The game was partially inspired by the 1991 Berkeley-Oakland fire, in which Wright and 3,800 other lost their homes. Wright was fascinated by the process that both he and his neighbors followed while rebuilding their homes.



Figure2: Mock up for Home Tactic Box

The game never appealed to the executives at Maxis. This changed when Electronic Arts (EA) bought Maxis in 1997. They put resources behind Wright and gave him the go ahead to develop his game.⁹ From class, we know that even EA tried to pull the plug on the project a few times before seeing it though. Only because Will Wright threatened to leave the company and take the game elsewhere did they support the effort to completion.

Initially, Wright saw the game as a house builder, a model for making homes. It was only as the development of the game progressed that he and his team, Luc Barthelet, Claire Curtin, and Roxy Wolosenko, began to focus on the social interactions of the human characters. In this instance, Wright was inspired by the psychological theories of Abraham Maslow¹⁰. While the focus changed, the interface also went through a number of iterations, including the rejected toolbars and Sim shown on the next page.

⁹ Keighley, Geoff. “The Endless Hours of The Sims Online.” In *GameSpot* (2002), at <http://gamespot.com/gamespot/features/pc/simsonline/index.html>.

¹⁰ Takahashi, Dean. *Opening the Xbox: Inside Microsoft's Plan to Unleash an Entertainment Revolution*. Roseville, California: Prima Publishing, 2002, pg. 35.

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Figure 3: Older Versions of Toolbars and Sims

On February 4, 2000, the Sims was finally released in the United States, on the PC platform. It had been developed by Maxis, and published by Electronic Arts. It was an almost immediate success. At the time of its release, no other game like it had been published. One might argue that other simulation/strategy games, like the SimCity series, the Petz series, and the Creatures series, were similar ideas, but The Sims stood apart for a number of reasons. The Sims is inherently about relationships between humans, unlike any of the other series. Noted Luc Barthelet, the General Manager of Maxis, "I learned through the development of this game that when you create an environment with representations of human beings, and make those humans behave in a familiar

fashion, that the user cannot help but create a story in his head to explain their behavior. I am convinced that people are more interesting than domestic animals.”¹¹

Indeed, there are many consumers who are fascinated by *The Sims*. While playing the game, a user controls almost every aspect of the Sims’ life. A game begins by making a character on the screen shown below:



Figure 4: The Person Builder

Once the player has created a family, they can move that family onto any vacant lot in the neighborhood. We should also note that the family can be whatever the player wishes—same sex couples, single parents—Will Wright wanted the user to be able to create whatever kind of family they envision. After moving the family to an empty lot, the user designs and builds a house for the Sims living there. A variety of floor and wall coverings are available, along with different doors, windows, and plant life for the yard. With the house built, the Sim family starts to buy items for the home, including toilets, sinks, refrigerators, beds, as well as more exciting items like a pool table, or a dollhouse for the kids. Then, the adult Sims must find a job and the child Sims must go to school. The Sims start at the bottom of their job ladders and must acquire skills and friends in order to advance their career. Acquiring skills also allows them to do things more effectively around the house, like cooking and repairing broken appliances.

¹¹ Micari, Anthony. “The Sims.” In *Strategy Gaming Online* (2002), at http://www.strategy-gaming.com/interviews/the_sims.shtml.



Figure 5: Without cooking skills, Sims can start fires

The original The Sims was complex, but the expansion packs have added even more complications. At present, with The Sims Unleashed, Sims are able to visit a downtown area, a vacation island, and commercial zones in their neighborhood. They can now buy pets, raise their own crops, and pursue new careers like “Slacker,” “Hacker,” and “Rock Star.” Social Interactions have increased dramatically since the original version, and relationships have grown more complex; instead of having only one status bar to track one Sim’s relationship to another, there are two: a “lifetime” bar and a “daily” bar. The lifetime bar, per its name, keeps track of the lifetime relationship between Sims. It builds more slowly and depletes less quickly than the daily bar, which can easily alter based on the events of the day. These changes reflect not only Will Wright’s feelings about the game, but also the input of millions of users, who are able to post their comments, families, and custom-made buildings on The Sims website. Says Wright, “We’re getting a sense of when people like to play the house building game vs. the relationship game, and what types of families they like to create, what objects they like the most.” He goes on to say, “Eventually, in the not too distant future, we’re working towards having this be dynamic on a daily basis so the game in some sense can be self-tuning to each individual player based on what they’ve done in the game.”¹² Wright explains that he would like to have the Sims website set up to collect data on a daily basis from each player and change conditions in the game based on what the user did the day before, or possibly, what another user did the day before:

I’m thinking that some of that will be just standardized hill climbing behavior where we’re trying to optimize variables for a particular player type. But another component could be that players do some very specific scenario or sequence of action that the computer recognizes, and says, ‘Hey, that’s kind of an interesting little sub-plot. Let’s try that out on some other people.’ At that point, the computer is just sharing interesting things from one player and trying them out on other players. So in fact you have the players kind of cross-pollinating their

¹² Pearce, Celia. “Sims, BattleBots, Cellular Automata God and Go: A Conversation with Will Wright.” In *Game Studies* (July 2002), at <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/pearce/>.

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creativity with each other, but it's transparently mediated by the computer. They don't even know whether the computer came up with this, or some other player in Oklahoma, or what. They just know that the game is doing something different today than it did yesterday.¹³

Perhaps this vision is closer to the future of The Sims than is the Sims Online, which has not been as popular as EA had anticipated. Outcasts for the Sims Online had been extremely positive; Will Wright and EA believed that the combination of the popular game with the massively multiplayer platform would produce the largest online community yet. Instead, by the end of January 2003, only 82,000 members had subscribed; EA had expected 200,000 would join by March. Why has the online version of the Sims disappointed? EA blames price, and plans to reduce the cost of its software by \$10.¹⁴ But perhaps price is not the only issue. If The Sims gains much of its great appeal by offering an idealized world, a world where every action has the outcome the player desires, perhaps the Sims Online gets too close to reality. In the online version of the game, there are no fake characters; every character is represented by another human being. And that may be precisely *not* what many of the players of The Sims are looking for.

In *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*, Gerard Jones speaks of “the cost of investing fantasies with too much reality”¹⁵ He is speaking of the need for parents to help their children make the division between fantasy and reality. In the same vein, we need to be able to make that division between fantasy and reality when we are playing a simulation like The Sims. While the original Sims and its many expansions do create a realistic world, the lines of play are always clear. The player knows that they are in control of every interaction, and that they have made it all up. It is not real. When the game branches into something like the Sims Online, that line becomes distinctly harder to draw. More than price, it is that the Sims Online falls too close to reality that causes devoted Sims fans to stay away. The Sims, on the other hand, offers an experience that is close enough, but not too close.



Figure 6: The Sims enjoy an idealized pool party

¹³ Pearce, Celia. “Sims, BattleBots, Cellular Automata God and Go: A Conversation with Will Wright.” In *Game Studies* (July 2002), at <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/pearce/>.

¹⁴ Becker, David. “‘Sims Online’ off to Slow Start.” In *ZDNet India* (January 2003), at <http://www.zdnetindia.com/news/features/stories/75110.html>.

¹⁵ Jones, Gerard. *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*. New York: Basic Books, 2002, pg. 120.

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