

## Exploring Fantasy Life and Finding a \$4 Billion Franchise

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Electronic Arts

Sims characters interact in the kitchen of a family home.

In the winter of 1860 Milton Bradley, a lithographer in Springfield, Mass., released a new game he had developed called the Checkered Game of Life. Its players began on a checkerboard square called Infancy and tried to make their way through various trials to the destination of Happy Old Age.

Before radio, before phonographs, at a time when cards and dice were tainted in the popular imagination by their association with gambling, that first version of Life in some ways opened the modern age of in-home games. Almost 150 years later, it still isn't often that a new game breaks into the canon of family entertainment. The classics — the likes of Monopoly, Scrabble and Risk — are many decades old. In board games there hasn't been a new mass phenomenon since Trivial Pursuit's debut 26 years ago.

But over the last eight years the Sims — Life's modern, digital descendant — has found a place in millions of homes and hearts beside all those creations of cardboard and laminate. On Wednesday Electronic Arts, the Sims's publisher, plans to announce that the series has sold more than 100 million copies (including expansion packs) in 22 languages and 60 countries since its introduction in 2000.

All told, the franchise has generated about \$4 billion in sales or an average of \$500 million every year for the last eight years, placing the Sims in the rarefied financial company of other giants of popular culture like "American Idol," "Star Wars" and "Harry Potter."

But beyond the facts and figures, the Sims has become one of the most famous game franchises (behind perhaps only Mario) because it has heralded the evolution of video games into mainstream entertainment. Years before the Wii, before Nintendogs, before Guitar Hero and World of Warcraft and the other recent hits credited with rescuing games from the clutches of geekdom, the Sims was entrancing girls in a medium most often aimed at men. In a video game universe dominated by living room consoles, the Sims has remained a more intimate experience on office and bedroom PCs. In a world reshaped by the Internet, the Sims has remained almost entirely an offline, single-player experience.

So how did a game in which the action is as mundane as scrubbing a toilet, having a kid or flirting with a neighbor come to captivate so broadly?

If the Sims were a TV show, there would hardly be a question. Since the early 1970s, many of the most popular television shows have been set in locations no more exotic than a living room, from "All in the Family" through "The Cosby Show" and "Seinfeld," not to mention

telenovelas and daytime soap operas. As a noninteractive medium, television has often proved most powerful when it provides a clear reflection of the lives of its viewers. Because they are at once immediately recognizable but at a safe distance outside one's self, classic television characters like Archie Bunker can provide an insightful lens on the vagaries of modern life.

Most games are different. Rather than peer in from outside, their players in some way become the protagonists and must take responsibility for their actions. That act of inhabiting another character, rather than merely watching it, creates a moral and dramatic responsibility for both the designer and the consumer.

The easy way to handle that responsibility has usually been to place video games in environments that at least appear to have little to do with reality. In a game with no human characters, that's easy; think of Pac-Man, Tetris, Minesweeper. When human characters are introduced, that flight into the fantastic usually means a science-fiction universe, a war zone, a realm of orcs and elves or a land of cheerleaders and quarterbacks. Lately, new games have allowed people to channel their inner rock stars.

All those sorts of games are about allowing people to explore external expressions of their fantasy lives, precisely because the settings are so outlandish. After all, how many of us are really going to win the Super Bowl, pilot a spaceship or slay a dragon?

The Sims has stood out because it is perhaps the only game series that is fundamentally about exploring the inner expressions of a person's fantasy life. There is no way to avoid it. Just as a novelist's every character in some way reflects the writer, every Sim in some way reflects its creator. Even if that " 'Desperate Housewives' meets 'Kramer vs. Kramer' " household you made doesn't appear to reflect your real life, it does reflect some aspect of you.

In that way the Sims is a very different experience from the SimCity line that began in 1989. SimCity is a traditional strategy game in that it is presented at a level of abstraction where individual people are nothing more than antlike dots; there is little emotional, as opposed to merely proprietary, connection. The Sims, by contrast, is all about managing idiosyncratically individual lives of your own concoction.

If this all sounds a lot like playing with dolls, you're right. The core, most passionate audience for the Sims has become school-age girls. Across many years and many cultures, girls have long been the demographic group that most gravitates toward playing at "real life." (Boys, meanwhile, with their footballs and toy soldiers, as with their video games, have usually played at inhabiting some external, aspirational identity.)

As we age, we sometimes become more reluctant to explore publicly the what-if of our lives, to admit to wondering what else we could have become. Last weekend I sat an adult friend down at the Sims and suggested she start her own virtual household. "This feels like a psychological test," she said warily, looking up at me with suspicion.

Of course it is. And it will come as no surprise in the coming years to hear that some therapists are incorporating the Sims into their practices. Why ask, "Tell me about your family?" when you could ask, "Why don't you create your family?"

In that vein, one of the most telling elements of the Sims' popularity is that it has never really succeeded online. Electronic Arts once thought that people would flock to manage their digital families together in cyberspace neighborhoods, but that has not been the case. While little girls have no shame or self-consciousness about opening their virtual homes, it turns out that adults are more circumspect. For adults, playing the Sims can be like writing a diary. And that is the big difference between the Sims' cycles of death and birth and the simulated aging in a social board game like Life.

"What we've discovered is that the Sims is a very private experience for a lot of people," Rod Humble, head of the Sims studio, said in a telephone interview last week. "It's private because it's set in real life. Rather than on a console in the living room where everyone can see, you

generally play on a handheld or on a PC in the study, where no one can look over your shoulder. You get to tap into this wonderful childhood imaginary game, which is 'What if I could create my own little world and all the people in it and watch them go through their business and jump in and change things when I want?' That is a pretty personal fantasy."

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