

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

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Since its January 2000 release by EA and Maxis, *The Sims* has proven that the simulation genre could overcome the classic formula popularized by lead designer Will Wright's *SimCity*.⁷ After becoming the best selling PC game of all time, it has also proven that the mainstream game market could enthusiastically embrace a game based on the simulation of emotions and people over guns and fighting. But above all, *The Sims* marks the first time that a computer game has so deeply presented a philosophy of life within the context of entertainment. The carefully orchestrated play mechanics of *The Sims* charge the player in designing narratives and lifestyles within a behavioral psychology simulation that furthers a number of implicit theses about human behavior and life. It is one of the most deeply thoughtful games ever created and serves to legitimize computer games as a meaningful art form.

Will Wright, co-founder of Maxis, established the modern simulation genre through his epic masterpiece, *SimCity*. It was one of the first games in a new brand of interactive designs that placed the consumer in charge of producing their own entertainment. He describes the simulation metaphor of *SimCity* as being a gardening game; one in which the player prepares the soil, plants seeds, and waits for new growth to surprise him. When the player is satisfied with maintaining his garden, he may choose to expand his garden and plant more seeds.¹ Indeed, the garden metaphor does embody the play cycle that characterizes *SimCity*. The player is charged with designing and constructing a city, maintaining it, and expanding it into a large, successful city. In Maxis alone, several simulation games followed closely in this metaphor including *SimTower*, *SimPark*, and the rest of the *SimCity* franchise. Clearly the popularity of these games had not waned by the time *The Sims* was released. The third iteration of the *SimCity* franchise was released just months before the release of *The Sims*. And although *SimCity 3000* was a raging

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

success, its simulation metaphor had not strayed far from the original game, released almost 10 years before. *The Sims* demonstrated that the simulation genre could charge the user with not only designing a house, but also with designing a narrative around simulated people. No longer was the genre tied down to the build, maintain, expand cycle, the introduction of psychological and social simulation expanded the simulation model in interesting ways, brought widespread acclaim, and introduced large numbers of consumers to computer games.

The original idea for *The Sims* came to Wright as he was rebuilding his home after the Oakland-Berkeley fire of 1991. He observed that the way he reacquired objects for his new home resembled dollhouse play. These observations sparked the idea for a dollhouse game called *Home Tactics: The Experimental Domestic Simulator*. In 1993, the concept for *Home Tactics* was pitched to a Maxis product selection committee but was instantly rejected. Because he didn't have a fully realized prototype, he relied on describing the game through typical actions performed in it, such as making dinner or taking out the trash.³ Clearly this description as a game concept wasn't a particularly compelling one. Despite Maxis' rejection of the concept, Wright continued to develop his ideas for a domestic simulator. In an interview with *Wired* magazine in 1994, he described the game that would become *The Sims* as "giving grown-ups some tools to design a dollhouse." When Electronic Arts acquired Maxis in 1997, EA executives approached the man who they saw as the genius behind *SimCity* and decided to take a risk and grant him the resources he needed to see his domestic simulator to completion.² It is clear that, despite starting out as a dollhouse game, *The Sims* eventually matured into a much more profound simulation of people and their lifestyles.

For his work in advancing the intellectual study of interactive design, Will Wright has been inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame.³ In order to understand the philosophy of *The*

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

Sims, we must understand its lead designer’s fundamental approach to game design and the relationship between player and designer. In an interview with University of California’s Celia Pearce, Wright discussed his approach to game design.

Games are defined by the relationship between the designer and the player. The designer defines a problem landscape, a rule set that defines the solution possibility space, and the solution topography that defines what can happen from one moment to the next. The player explores the problem landscape by moving around on top of the solution topography. Because simply defining a solution to a problem landscape by itself doesn’t make for a very high quality game experience, the designer must make the problem landscape evocative by creating a metaphor that wraps scenarios, events, actions, and reactions around it in order to allow the landscape to take on meaning. The player approaches the game looking for a simple metaphor that helps them understand the problem landscape, the actions they are allowed to perform per the rule set, and the consequences of those actions per the solution topography. Confronted with a relatively unknown landscape, the player tries to build a mental model of how they think the rule set defines the possibility space and how the actions they perform will affect their position on the solution topography. Providing the player with a simple metaphor allows them to bootstrap into exploring the solution space through experimentation—performing actions and observing the results. Exploration of the solution space adds details to the player’s mental model. As the player’s mental model begins to resemble how the rule set and possibility space are defined, their strategies improve. The challenge as the designer is to help build a mental model in the mind of the player. The designer must make the metaphor that defines the solution space consistent so that the user is able to extrapolate a vague model based on the suggestions of the metaphor. The designer must also design the

solution topography so that, within the metaphor, it seems reasonable to have a given event occur as a result of a particular action. If the topography seems unreasonable because, for example, performing the same action under the same conditions doesn't produce the same result, the player's mental model breaks down very quickly.¹

Wright is drawn to designing games that enable the creativity of the player. He is fascinated with games that put the player in a design role. In creating a game, he wants to give the player a tool to create things along with a world, a context for the creation, which reacts to those things, and in doing so, creates meaning and purpose for them. In these simulation games, the player is in a design role, so the solution space must be as large as possible. When the solution space is very large, it becomes possible for the player to discover solutions to the problem that have never been created before. If the player knows that their solution is unique, they will care more about it. As a designer, Wright doesn't want to stamp the same mental model into every player's mind. He believes that as a designer, he should only be a catalyst for the players' exploration and should have very little impact on the outcome of the game.¹

Home Tactics fits very easily in the classic Will Wright simulation design. He gives the user a tool to design houses, decorate them, and fill them with things. The context of the player's creation is the characters that live within the house that the player builds. According to the argument made in Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language*, the design of one's environment directly affects one's behavior.⁶ Serving as the context for the creation of the home, the characters react to the architectural design of their environment by modulating their behavior. The characters are happier when they're living in a more thoughtfully and functionally designed home.⁴

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

As *Home Tactics* became *The Sims*, it became clear that although it is interesting to modulate a character's behavior based on its environment, there are countless more interesting ways to simulate the characters than simply being backdrops to architectural design. *Home Tactics*, the home simulator, expanded to become *The Sims*, the people simulator. In *The Sims*, Wright gives the player an environment in which they can order around their semi-autonomous characters to interact with other characters and the domestic home using granular interactions such as "recycle the newspaper" and "kiss Betty Goth." Although it isn't immediately obvious how, the design of *The Sims* fits perfectly in the Will Wright simulation design model.

In addition to designing a home, Wright charges the player to design a narrative, a story for the characters in the game. The player doesn't create a storyboard and construct a plot line ahead of time, as one might expect from the suggestion of narrative design. Instead, the player designs a narrative like one would in one's own life—by doing. The narrative that the player designs simply consists of its characters simply going about their lives, reacting to situations that arise and acting out of internal desires and needs. The choices that the player makes for the characters represent the design decisions of the narrative. The challenge of designing narratives like this lies in how the player decides to spend the character's time. The player must design the lifestyle that its characters lead in order to manage their limited time in a way that satisfies the character's needs, ambitions, and personality.

The context for the player's creation includes the internal psychological model of the characters and the external expectations of the "SimSociety." As in real life, the decisions and choices that the player makes about what the character spends its life doing has to balance and consider the psychological model of the character and the expectations of the society that the character lives in. While the external

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

societal model is relatively hidden from the player, the player can make assumptions about the way that societal elements will react to characters acting in certain situations because of their familiarity with how modern society operates. For example, one aspect of the societal model in *The Sims* is that land use and electricity use are services that incur costs. These costs are represented as bills that come in the mail and society expects the characters to pay these bills if they use the services. If the characters fail to pay these bills, a societal element, the repossession man, enforces society's will by removing an item from the character's home that is equally valuable as the amount of money required by the ignored bill. Therefore, a narrative decision to be unemployed results in the character lacking money. It becomes impossible to remain in a state where the character is able to maintain its own needs and remain unemployed. When the money runs out, the characters have no way of satisfying their hunger need. Once the bills stop being paid, society will remove items of worth from the home including some of the most basic objects needed to satisfy characters' needs, such as the toilet and the shower. Once these objects are removed it becomes increasingly impossible to maintain the needs of the characters.

The internal psychological model of the characters is also relatively hidden, so the player must build up their own mental model of how the characters' internal psychological model will react to different situations and stimuli. Clearly, the player has the benefit of being familiar with what it is psychologically like to be human. Given the assumption that the internal model of the characters is based on mapping from common experience, the player can easily make a great number of assumptions about the way that the characters will react to situations. For example, experience suggests that sleeping in a bed will result in a more comfortable rest that will restore more energy than sleeping on the floor.

The internal character model agrees with this and thus, sleeping on the floor has similar uncomfortable results on the characters.

Clearly, the internal character model is a significant simplification of a small fraction of the vast complexities of human behavior. Therefore, the choice to include certain mechanisms that resemble human behavior that form the basis of the internal character model are indicative of a set of observations regarding human behavior. Because the internal character model is relatively hidden from the player, we won't pretend to fully understand the intricacies of the model. Instead, we present a basic aspect of the model and show the underlying assumptions. At the most superficial level, the behavior of a character is governed by the interaction of two sets of parameters that represent the character's innate, immutable personality and the character's current, highly mutable mood and needs.⁴ The combination of the tendency to act in certain ways and the current needs of the character demonstrates that *The Sims* takes a common sense viewpoint that people's behaviors are governed by a combination of innate genetic traits and localized circumstance. However, a discontinuity between reality and the simulation lies in the absence of the ability to learn lessons from prior actions. For example, fires sometimes occur when a character is cooking. They are very often very traumatic for the character—nearly every need parameter is maximized and their mood drops to its lowest levels. However, almost in all cases, when a new stove is purchased to replace the old one, the character is not afraid of attempting to cook again. And in some cases, the same character leads to more fires.

While there are countless ways to design narratives in *The Sims*, many players make the decision to either follow a material lifestyle or a social lifestyle. We use the repercussions of this one choice as one example of a thesis that is implicitly claimed by *The Sims*. Maxis conducted data mining on the daily habits of players and showed that

early in the game, the player focuses on building the house and filling it with things, but after a certain point, most players stop building up the house and instead focus on interacting socially within the game. For others, house building becomes a dominant activity. The characters in those games tend to have very tedious lifestyles. The player simply needs the character to go to work to earn more money so that the player can build a bigger house. When the character returns home, the player simply orders the character around the house to satisfy any pending needs. Often, as the career of the character advances, the game requires the character to have a minimum number of family friends to advance to better paying jobs. In the hopes of career advancement, players in the material route build up the requisite number of friends and use them to advance their character's career. Despite technically having friends, the characters operate in a work, eat, sleep cycle and lack the time to socially interact. Because of the lack of social interaction, the characters become sad. Although the character does benefit by having a nicer environment, the game acknowledges that for the character, this is false happiness in the fact that the objects break down and are costly to maintain. By designing this reaction into the simulation model, the game implicitly proposes the thesis that material wealth holds false happiness, but social relationships are necessary for characters to lead a fulfilling narrative.

However, as experienced players know, building and maintaining relationships can quickly become tedious for the player. The proper sequence of orders necessary to make a friend can be easily queued up. Experienced players often fast-forward through these portions because the social actions have lost their novelty. After the initial novelty is lost, the social actions merely become a necessary pattern in playing the game. In reality, the complex emotional investments in relationships are what make them intrinsically important and interesting. But, aside from

making the character happy, there isn't much intrinsically interesting for the player in terms of building relationships for the characters. While design goals of the narrative tend to focus around maximizing the happiness of the character, the narrative also serves to entertain the player. This leads to an interesting side effect of the people simulation model. That is, the assumption that what's good for the character is good for the player breaks down. Having lots of relationships is good for the character, it makes them happier and advances their career, but creating and maintaining lots of relationships can be tedious and unrewarding for the player.

If we revisit the material lifestyle, we see that although it causes depression in the character, building bigger houses and buying nicer objects satisfies the character's need for a pleasing environment. In spite of the false happiness thesis, there is an implicit reward system for the player to design material lifestyles. As the character acquires more money, the player may see that as being analogous to a score, where maximizing the score represents winning the game. Playing so that the character has money to buy nicer things may also reward the player by letting them satisfy their own consumerist desires by buying nicer things to look at during the game. Designing a narrative around the material lifestyle also allows the player to operate in the traditional simulation cycle of build, maintain, expand by buying nicer things, running out of room to put them, expanding the house, and filling that with more things.

Despite the implicit thesis that a number of social interactions contribute to the happiness of the character, building relationships can be entirely tedious for the player. Because players' design goals for the narrative tend to be to maximize happiness, relationship building is often a key part of the game. However, because there is very little in the way of enforcing design goals within *The Sims*, it's clear that one of the

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

design goals that emerge from long-term playing is that the narrative must also serve as entertainment for the player. This is a key example of where what benefits the player doesn't necessarily benefit the character. Indeed, sometimes building relationships merely to destroy them is a very powerfully entertaining activity for the player.⁵ And although the false happiness thesis still remains valid, *The Sims* also asserts a thesis about life that essentially concedes that some of the most entertaining parts of life aren't necessarily those that lead to the most happiness or to the greatest fulfillment.

In conclusion, the study of the philosophy that governs Will Wright's game design and the design of *The Sims* within that philosophy leads us to an exploration of the play mechanics of *The Sims* that assert various implicit theses about human behavior and life. Through studying the development of the game, we see that despite humble beginnings, *The Sims* developed into an extremely complex people simulator that allows players to explore the design of narratives that may reflect on their own lives or merely serve to entertain them.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SIMS

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