**Ordinary people**

By Jason Hill

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The world's biggest-selling computer game features no violence, no plot, no score, it cannot be completed and was almost never made.

Since its release in February 2000, The Sims has sold more than 33 million copies, including seven expansion packs. Sims titles continue to dominate the Australian PC game charts, often occupying as many as eight positions in the top 10: an astonishing feat in a fickle and fast-moving industry.

Like a virtual doll's house, The Sims lets players direct the lives of computer people as they complete everyday activities such as eating, working, furnishing the house and making friends. It is popular with people of all ages, allowing players to pursue fantasies and experiment with life choices.

But acclaimed games designer Will Wright had a difficult time convincing Electronic Arts, the world's biggest games publisher, to support his idea for a life simulator.

"I was describing a game that involved going to the bathroom and taking out the trash at a time when most games were about saving the world or slaying the terrible dragon," he says.

The Sims is now a cultural phenomenon, attracting more newcomers, particularly females, to interactive games than any other title. More than 60 per cent of players are women, and more than 20 per cent are aged over 35. The sequel, to be released on September 20, looks likely to captivate even more fans.

Wright believes the life simulator's astonishing success has a lot to do with targeting women.

"I think the fact that The Sims appealed to the female market automatically doubled the sales," he says.

"The main reason we were able to do that successfully was that about 40 per cent of our development team for The Sims, and my two other designers, were women."

Most developers focus on "hard-core" gamers, who spend a lot of their free time and income on their favourite hobby. But Wright says The Sims was designed for "very casual game players" and attracting so many newcomers to gaming was "very satisfying".

"The newcomers didn't really see any other games out there that they wanted to play," he says. "So they would buy The Sims, play it, and then just keep playing it for months or years. This is one of the reasons why the expansion packs were so popular."

Another reason for The Sims' longevity are the strong online communities, which offer players customised furniture, characters, clothing and houses. Wright believes the "fan support we received around the game, like fan sites and custom content, is unprecedented".

Matthew Van Zyderveld, 24, says he played The Sims and all the expansion packs "to death".

"When I first started playing, I'd spend up to a few hours per night managing my little household, learning new skills, going to work, getting multiple lovers and managing to have dozens of affairs without my missus finding out. The Sims allowed me to live another virtual life where I could do things that I wouldn't do in my normal life," he says.

Marianna Hill, a 29-year-old mother, says she enjoys furnishing Sim houses. "My husband and I started a game playing each other once, and that was fun," she says. "It was like I was fulfilling a deep need to buy expensive junk."

Landon James, 12, plays the game for about five hours a week and likes "how it lets you control the whole life of someone".

Administrative assistant Danielle Wardley, 23, sometimes plays for up to eight hours at a time.

"It enables you to try things that you may not necessarily feel comfortable trying in real life: punch that guy in the head, flirt with that stranger, have lots of kids," she says. "It's also satisfying to just live normally."
Psychologist Kathryn Wright believes The Sims appeals to many base instincts, including narcissism, voyeurism and consumerism.

"The Sims acts as more of a mirror for the player than most games," she says. How a player tackles the game reveals a lot about their personality.

John Suler, a psychology professor and specialist on people's behaviour in cyberspace, from Rider University in New Jersey, told Psychology Today magazine: "You can really see a lot of (the players') psyche spilling out into their games.

"I spoke to one teenager who created a version of herself and her boyfriend. Then she created another version of herself, an evil version, to try to steal her boyfriend. She wanted to see what it's like to be evil."

When starting work on The Sims 2, Wright says his goals were not to lose the charm of the original game, but "to increase the space of possibilities in the simulator and to bring the Sims more fully to life".

"It's been over four years since the first Sims was released; our games tend to have a long shelf life. That's a long time in computer years and I think it's clearly reflected in The Sims 2. The difference between the two is much larger than (in) most sequels."

Every facet of the game has been reworked. Players now spend their time trying to cater to their character, or Sim's personal dreams, rather than their basic needs such as eating and going to the toilet. Character aspirations include fame, fortune, knowledge, family and romance.

The other drastic change is that Sims now age, reproduce and die. They pass on genes and personal traits, allowing players to build an entire family dynasty. Sims also now exhibit more complex behaviour, with memories and deeper relationships.

Another goal was to use new three-dimensional graphics to build a closer affinity between players and their Sims.

"We wanted the player to feel like they're in the same room with their Sims," says Wright, adding that even he gets surprised by his Sims' behaviour. "That's how we know the simulator is getting to the right level of emergence."

But Wright confesses he enjoys the Building mode the most. "The new engine allows for a much more impressive walk-through of your design and the level of detail on the objects is amazing."

Wright is not surprised that playing interior decorator has appealed to so many fans. "We all have a very personal response to the environment that surrounds us. Because of this, we enjoy exploring hypothetical environments in our imaginations."

This story was found at: http://smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/25/1093246604238.html