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ISSUE #219

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The Sims 4

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THIS TIME, WITH



Maxis is known for working within its formula, fleshing out and reorganising elements in new iterations rather than reinventing the wheel. **MEGHANN O'NEILL** visits the California studio expecting to learn how new features might pan out, but also leaves appreciating why this series has made its mark on her.



THE SIMS 4
DEVELOPER MAXIS
PUBLISHER EA
DUE 18A
www.thesims.com

So, this introduction has become, curiously, a music history lesson. Follow carefully and you will understand why it must be so. It is concerned with both ice cubes, and our ears' aversion to "the tritone," due its treatment historically, in Western tradition. In Medieval times, combining three adjacent tones was considered, "the devil in music," and studiously avoided in sacred, or religious, forms of composition for hundreds of years. Rules established in the Baroque and Classical periods meant that the tritone was then cast as dissonance, a grouping that must always promptly resolve.

In modern times, this interval is explored

more freely, but its aural foundation remains. In most contexts, it sounds uncomfortable and evokes a kind of present wariness in the listener. (Imagine the anguished rising notes to "Maria," in *West Side Story*, but without resolution; 'Ma-ri', but no 'a'.) In *The Sims 4*, ice cubes striking the inside of a glass sound as a tritone, so briefly foreshadowing the player's failure to mix a nice drink. Mix it well and a comfortable, consonant interval of ice cubes will alight your ear, instead. It is precisely this kind of gratuitous attention to detail that characterises this new entry for the series.

Yes, there have always been secrets to discover, often only subconsciously,

FEELING

In **The Sims 4**, the next generation gets angry, and sad, and inspired, and the whole gamut of emotions



in Sims games, from hidden skills to the Simlish language. Having been invited to EA Redwood Shores to see the game in production, it was hardly surprising to innately recognise phrases like the affectionate, "noo boo," or frustrated, "chi wagga choo choo," just around the office. This is a place where Goopy Rossi, Animation Director and, presumably, maker of fine Carbonara sauce, analyses social interaction at Friday night drinks, and where designers discuss concepts like "angry woohoo" entirely earnestly. Un jandevol!

If you're lost, that's because you've missed thirteen years of conditioning. From the relatively simple management

of little people in the original game, combining influences like feng shui and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the series has opened expansively, now being inspired by the shared imagination of designers and players. It spans concepts like want/fear, personal aspiration, self-driven achievement, emergent gameplay, community, love, relationships, nature, the supernatural, customisation, and architecture from houseboat to subterranean tomb. So, what's next? What's even left to explore?

Executive Producer, Rachel Franklin, says it's, "transforming your Sims into thinking, emotional beings," in a way that embraces, "the mind, body and

heart." As well as "being" emotionally aware themselves, this next generation of little people are much easier for players to relate to and empathise with. Gameplay decisions lead to cascading, poignant consequences, and there are new, finer points to animation. Sims may angrily stomp around, for example, and facial variation is strongly tied to emotional state. We noticed the difference between angry and sad Sims, down to their eyebrows.

One of the ways a Sim might be defined through her emotional progression is highlighted by Creative Director, Ray Mazza. He says, "The character evolves as you meet her desires. So, if you can



“OH. ABLOO. UH, SESAROO?” | In previous iterations, it was maddeningly easy to get stuck in doorways or on staircases for, literally, hours of game time. On pathfinding, Lead Producer Lyndsay Pearson says, “We’ve put a lot of effort into working on those nuanced behaviours. The detail is in the smaller pieces of animation, so Sims can take a little step to the side or move out of the way.” Ostensibly, as many as twenty Sims can now cross paths without colliding.

unlock the sociopath trait, she will get “fun” from torture.” As to the smaller steps, if she is depressed she will be less effective at work, unless she is a writer, of course. If your Sim is feeling flirty, she will be able to dim the lights by clapping her hands. Should she also be wearing expensive clothes by candlelight, she will be able to attempt riskier romantic interactions.

This demonstrative reactivity, previously only touched on by buffs/moodlets, is now explicitly laid out as discrete emotional states. According to Mazza, there will be fifteen, of varying intensity. Although things may change before release, examples given include, “angry,

depressed, inspired, embarrassed, elated and confident,” with “sad” being a subset of “depressed,” as a further example. Players will be able to push states onto a Sim through their actions, as will the game, randomly, but states are balanced for persistence rather than whimsy.

So, rather than each interaction, or even each object you walk past, creating a new emotional state, they should be seen as forces that magnify a current state. Producer, Grant Rodiek, asks us to envision emotions as, “like traits but temporary,” and that their purpose is largely to create, “nuanced, unique stories that are special to you.” He also explains that there will be a diminished gameplay

focus on needs fulfillment, with the current user interface actually showing no bars at all, only icons in varying states of green, yellow and red, and only requiring attention at failure level.

That self-driven stories, stemming from emotional states, underpin play is supported in many ways. We see Sims multitasking: sitting, eating and talking at the same time, used to streamline needs fulfillment. It is also demonstrated how supposedly simple animations, like standing from sitting, can now be completed in half the previously required time. As the result of study and experimentation, animators show how Sims in groups can move naturally to



accommodate people joining or leaving the interaction, with subtle head/body turning and sidestepping. It's something small, but quite evocative.

Also, as well as how two Sims are feeling at the time, whether they are "soulmates" (friends and lovers) or just having a "fling" (only lovers) will influence their available romantic interactions. We hear a surprising number of mentions of, "woohoo in a rocket," based on emotional state and tied to glissandi, for the educated ear. At the very least, there is a distinct astronaut career, with unlockable rewards as home decoration. Gardening is highlighted as a detailed activity, once

again, with fallen fruit even giving life to new plants and we do know the base game will ship with piano, violin and guitar skills.

The cow plant will be returning, with a new taste for feelings. We believe it will eat emotional states, possibly along with the person, and create an essence your Sim can then drink, strategically. In Create-a-Sim, you may also take advantage of "smart randomisation," as items of clothing you've already chosen attract matching pieces. Then, pick a default walk to further illustrate your overriding emotional intent for a character; possibly a jaunty strut. These are all familiar experiences, but are now

◆

"SUL SUL." | Remember when The Sims 3 got a boob slider, for those all-important, minor adjustments? In the Sims 4, you literally, well, grab and pull whichever body part you wish to manipulate with the cursor, from iris and pupil, to thighs, to anything. You can also now wear hats on your hairstyle and boots under your jeans, rather than through. Associate Producer, Jill Johnson, shows us how to easily create a quite convincing version of herself.



A SPOT OF SELF-REFLECTION

Producers **Lyndsay Pearson, Rachel Franklin** and **Ryan Vaughan** explain new underlying systems

Given Australian players, if purchasing at release, may have spent more than \$600 on The Sims 3's base game and expansion packs, what one thing will make The Sims 4 worth starting over?

We've gone right back to the Sims themselves, how we can differentiate between them, make them more relatable and give them a dimension of emotion. Having emotionally aware beings changes, fundamentally, how you play the game.

Which parts of the game do emotions interact with?

They interact with a number of systems. For example, when you construct your house, the objects you put in it will impact their emotions. The Sims you interact with have a chance to do so, as well. You could have a Sim who is a very talented painter, and when you hang their painting on the wall, it makes another Sim flirty, or sad, when they see it. If your Sim is picking on another Sim, this has the chance to make them angry.

There is also an opportunity to just wake up in a different emotional state, based on if the Sim had a good, or a bad, dream. Or, you can capture a memory and the associated emotion and reminisce. There are many ways to push your Sim in and out of a state. Emotions will open up new gameplay options for a character and there are things you can only do when you're in certain emotional states.

What rewards are found in managing the emotional system?

Within music, for example, you could be required to write three moving or mournful songs, which your Sim would have to do in a depressed state. This would unlock ways to help with skill development. Or, as a writer, if you really go to that melancholy place, and write a wonderful novel, that will, in turn, enhance your career.

For the players who aren't so focused on achievement, there are aspects which can be organically exposed by the way your Sim feels and the interactions available. There's still an opportunity to tell stories and experiment.

How are success and failure treated within emotional states?

If your Sim is in an extreme emotional state, like being mortified, there is a chance she could die from embarrassment. Though, even if you see an emotion as negative, there is potential to do cool things with it. This lets you explore success and failure in a different way. It's what you define it to be.

The Sims is about giving the player a canvas. Anger is often seen as a negative emotional state. If you're really angry, you're simply going to punch the bag harder, run on that treadmill faster and use your angry energy to help grow a skill. Someone might think that always being sad is bad, but someone else might be trying to tell a specific story with that emotion.

integrated into the affective dimension and, as many designers emphasised, "with a tactile focus."

Most intuitively, The Sims 4 allows you to drag and drop from a library of pre-furnished, moldable room blocks, which can have all the items, and wallpaper/flooring, you need for your colour-matched kitchen, or bathroom, already attached. Foundations can be added after walls, which can be of varying heights with stairs stretching accordingly. Friezes can be added with ease, then it's just a click of the auto-windows button for a quick finish. You can fully customise and shop if you like, the old-fashioned way, but this demonstration, frankly, makes building

in The Sims 3 look unnecessarily time consuming and ungainly.

The Sims 4 heralds the beginning of a deeper journey into a well-loved world, in which the affective dimension is made explicit and tied to many aspects of play. It will feel easier to navigate, while Sims are both more expressive, and move more sensibly, thanks to careful attention paid to animation. Although aspects like needs fulfillment and creation sliders have been put under the hood, you should still be able to engage as much as you want to. Still confused as to what any of this has to do with Medieval music and ice cubes?

Though the base game must initially

feel much sparser, the devil is in the detail. In Senior Audio Designer, Robi Kauker's words, "John Cage proposes the theory that all sound is music and all music is sound. As you throw the ice cubes, your ears aren't hunting for xylophone or something you'd find in a cartoon; this is a real pitched sound. These are miniature compositions, taking the concept of the Webern mini symphony movement down to the micro symphony." Simply, of all the disciplines, it was audio that best clarified how pivotal the series' careful secrets, for the subconscious, truly are. The potential for emotional manipulation, here, places us somewhere between fear and awe. **PC**