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ISSUE 138

IMITATION OF LIFE

The Sims Studio finally cuts the strings on its creation. In a games™ exclusive, we find out how The Sims 4 breathes new life into the billion dollar dollhouse

Sunday 20 October, 1991. A large urban conflagration blazes across the hillsides of Oakland, California, consuming over 3,500 homes within its deadly Diablo winds in a period of 72 hours. Among those affected is *SimCity* designer Will Wright, who returns in the days following the disaster to discover the remains of his home in incinerated ruins. This is, surprisingly, a good thing.

From the ashes, Wright began to piece his life back together – literally one domestic item at a time. A refrigerator, cooker, sofa and a variety of other furniture soon rejuvenated his feng shui. But for Wright, this design for life quickly became an obsession, one that constructed the rudimentary foundations for what would become his newest simulator, titled *Home Tactics: The Experimental Domestic Simulator*. Nearly nine years later it would be known, quite simply, as *The Sims*.

The franchise has grown somewhat significantly since 2000. Three mainline entries and an exhausting litany of expansion packs and spin-offs have catapulted Wright's dollhouse from a concept that apparently spurred twelve-year-old boys to sprint out of focus groups, to one of the biggest brands in entertainment. It has transitioned from original developer Maxis to the purpose-built offshoot The Sims Studio located at EA's Redwood City offices south of San Francisco – which is conveniently where games™ finds itself today.







● Much like a trip to Ikea, you can outfit your abode with a ready-made design, saving hours painstakingly matching your wallpaper with your bedsheets.

We're lingering under an oversized PlumbBob (the iconic hexagonal bipyramid that hovers above each Sim) in reception, which is currently radiating a hospitable green hue. We suspect that this is its default tone, but it could easily be a reflection of the studio's affable attitude during our visit. We step inside a formal boardroom to find a rally of producers lined against the wall standing in mutual hushed enthusiasm, while a laptop roars to life and introduces us to *The Sims 4*.

"I swear, I dream about *The Sims* in my sleep," admits lead producer Lyndsay Pearson, as we're familiarised with the various members of the team at the start of the presentation – most of which are veterans of the franchise from its nascent years. "I started working on *The Sims* on *Unleashed* – that expansion pack way back for the original *The Sims*," she continues. "I've been on three base games, lots and lots of expansion packs. I love being part of it. But before I worked here, I actually played *The Sims*. And like many people my first experience was my Sim making breakfast and starting a fire. That was a good way to start."

For us, it all begins with life. All the nuance, complexity and delight of being human," beams executive producer Rachel Franklin, explaining the studio's approach to the sequel. "We put these all together to create intelligent, emotionally rich and more believable



Sims. We've brought together the mind, body and heart. Our virtual little people are thinking, emotional beings now." It all sounds ominously like *Sims* might turn self-aware in the sequel, but the truth is that this approach addresses a more mature and intelligent simulation. In *The Sims 4*, tangible emotional states replace the simplistic mood system inherent to each Sim, which The Sims Studio hopes will establish an empathetic connection between player and avatar.

"For *The Sims 4* we're actually really going back to the *Sims* themselves and giving them an entirely new dimension," continues Franklin. "Adding this emotional aspect is opening up all kinds of new gameplay for us. To do this we actually have a totally new set of technology and tools that are underpinning all of our systems under our gameplay, powering our creative tools, powering our animations and all of the gameplay itself."

Indeed, and within each of the handful of emotional states – including happy, sad, inspired and depressed, among others – are a range of nuances that will unlock contextual actions. An angry Sim might take out its frustration on a stuffed animal by tearing it to shreds; a sad Sim might opt for wallowing in self-pity during a 'sad shower'. But these extreme mindsets will also offer boons: the angry Sim could see marked improvement at the gym during a cathartic workout; a sad Sim might create a work of art inspired



Attention has been paid creating more expressive Sims. Socialising Sims will wildly gesticulate and feature a wider suite of facial movements.



by their misery. The range of concomitant interactions spawns intriguing possibilities that'll encourage players to manipulate Sims into bipolar swings of temperament to experience everything the game has to offer.

"Luckily, we have a lot of people that happen to be real people and have real life experiences," laughs Pearson. "We have a huge well to draw from, so one person will say 'When I'm angry, this is what I do' or 'When I'm sad, this is what I do.' We want each of those progressions and each of those emotions to feel really rich and deep and different. You'll see different content unlock, different socials unlock and different outcomes unlock within a bunch of different factors in the game – the way you get through skills, careers, the way you get through your day. So there's a lot of emergence in there that people will get to explore for a long time."

Naturally, moodlets contribute to reflect situations and events as they have done in the past, while clothing and the surroundings will also feed into the emotion of a Sim. Furniture can be purchased through an Ikea-like catalogue, offering a range of items that directly influence how a Sim feels within the environment – for example, an inspirational painting could boost the creativity of a Sim.

Of course, there's a risk that tethering emotional charges to everyday items could create a vapid household of conveniently appeased Sims, or worse, commonplace objects awarding arbitrary buffs.

"We spent a lot of time tuning that," Pearson explains. "It has a lot to do with the weight we give any particular thing. Though it might be we decide that we give a flirty painting and that may give you an impact if you're in a flirty mood – like if it's in your bedroom

and it's your little love nest and it'll enhance that. It's not that if you have a flirty painting in your bathroom and walk in the door then all of a sudden you'll be flirty. It's not that crazy. So it has a lot to do with how we weigh the importance of those things. There are going to be certain things that will have a big impact that'll change your emotion right away, but others are going to have to be accumulative and add up to changing your emotion overall."



The Sims has always catered for humanity's deviant side. Talk to anyone who played the original and they'll recall spending hours placing their Sims in tortuous situations (pro tip: direct all the Sims towards the pool and then remove the ladders). Yes, it's within the darkest subset of imagination that *The Sims* has always seemed to thrive and the prospect

of actions causing a profound psychological impact in *The Sims 4* will no doubt drive players to new heights of sociopathy.

Pearson and Franklin are sitting together during lunch, laughing as they spitball a combination of environmental objects that could kick a Sim over the edge. A sad painting on a wall, a sad song on the radio and a sad television programme

– unsurprisingly, this makes for a rather miserable Sim. "We've always had that deviant aspect," says Pearson. "What we've tried to do is, even in those really dark places – that in the real world are really hard for people to deal with – we've tried to put a funny spin on it." She goes on to give an example: a Sim who suffers a bladder leakage will continue to carry indignity for some time before dying of embarrassment. "We'll also have that you might be so hysterically happy that you giggle yourself to death," she adds.

"We're going back to the Sims themselves and giving them an entirely new dimension"

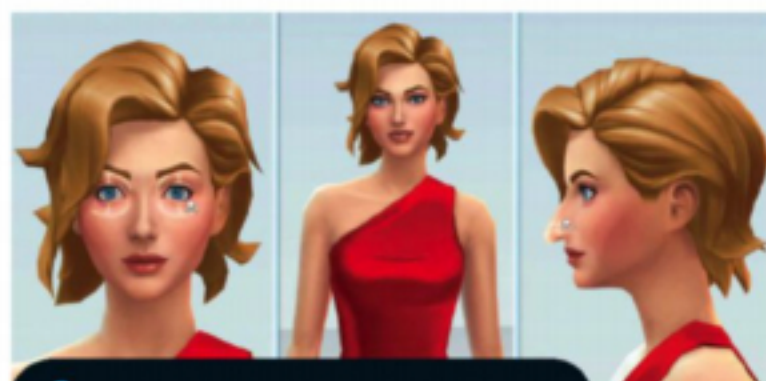
THE SIMS EXCHANGE

Expanding the community features in *The Sims 4*

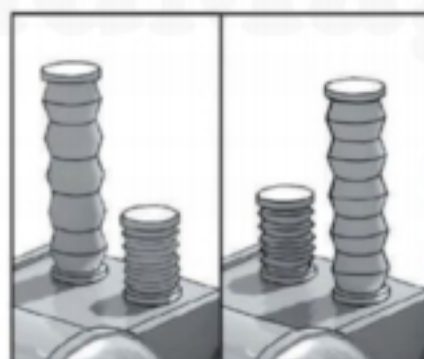
An overlooked area of *The Sims* has been The Sims Exchange – an online community nurtured by The Sims Studio that enables users to both submit and download custom mods for each title. *The Sims 4* wants to make creation accessible, and producer Lyndsay Pearson predicts that the new tools will galvanise the community: "We think by letting these tools be more fun, more useable and more powerful for people who might not have tried it before that will also hopefully galvanise them to want to share creations and say 'Hey I'm good at this too, look what I made.' And then make that experience easier for people who want to opt into that." The Sims Exchange is set to be an embedded aspect of the *Sims* experience.

"We love when we're launching a game to see everything that the community makes and generates – it's always the best part of launching any *Sims* game," says producer Ryan Vaughan. "We design it in a way that we think people are going to play with it and then they go back and create these creations that make us say 'How did they do that? I never thought of doing this in the game.'"





Create-A-Sim is a more tactile process, enabling you to drag your avatar into the perfect Sim.



Bellows



"We balance it with a quirky take on it to make it not go to that dark place that people go to in reality and come at it from a 'Simsy' point of view."

But it's not simply a case of offering a diverse spectrum of psychological states, but being able to convey the nuances of each mood effectively. We stop by animation director, Goopy Rossi, who demonstrates some of the advanced facial animations and mannerisms that'll communicate emotion to the player. The ways in which a Sim walks, wakes up in the morning and approaches other Sims have all been acutely detailed to reflect the current mood of the Sim. Rossi also highlights group behaviour as another key area that the studio sought to advance, creating more believable social situations.

"In Sims 2 and 3 we added group behaviour much later in expansion packs," says Rossi. "It was really more about [basic] interaction and the group stuff came later, and it was always hard to layer that over, so we want to make sure that the core system supported group behaviour. When multiple Sims are interacting with each other, it happens in a natural way."

Rossi plays a video that borders on voyeuristic – surveillance footage of an internal social event and how staff interacted in groups. People shuffle to accommodate others joining the discussion, large personalities emerge through wild gesticulation and subtle movements shape the flow of conversation. "We've effectively taken that intelligence and translated it into the algorithms that control the grouping of the Sims," adds creative director Ray Mazza. "We're also giving players control over groups of Sims. You can now tell Sims when they're in groups to do things together. 'Go over there together,' or click on a basketball hoop and select 'shoot hoops together.' It makes it really easy to do things



together, rather than orchestrate each Sim individually." This impeccable replication of naturalistic human behaviour extends to being able to navigate through narrow gaps and doorways without causing a blockage. But by far the most fundamental improvement is the Sims' newfound ability to multitask and Mazza jumps into an example of how the system will streamline gameplay. "Your Sim can go to the gym and you can have your Sim hop on the treadmill and then watch the home and garden channel on the TV – so she's gaining a little gardening skill and getting fit on the treadmill. Then a guy

walks up next to her and starts bench-pressing, and she decides she wants to flirt with this Sim. She can do that without having to get off the treadmill, walk around that Sim and kick him out of the object. They can just do this as they're exercising. They can form a relationship, fulfilling their social needs and gaining some skills. It looks natural, it feels good and it's more strategic."

It'll also have other social benefits. "Sims can now double-fist drinks," laughs Mazza, "That'll certainly help with group interactions."

Imagine the title screen of Super Mario 64. The eponymous hero launches towards the screen, his facial features shift enthusiastically in motion.

Using the cursor, you pinch and pull his chubby features to contort the iconic mascot's jolly face. It's tactile, responsive, but, above all else, it's fun.

To make a sweeping generalisation: character creation, for the most part, is none of those things.

"This really sets us apart from any other Sims games we've made so far," says associate producer Jill Johnston, self-

"The most fundamental improvement is the Sims' newfound ability to multitask"



Sims 4 AMA

◉ We asked one fervent Sims player to grill The Sims Studio on the issues that matter most

I want to be able to create a Sim using facial recognition. Is that possible now?

Lyndsay Pearson (Producer): We've had people ask that for a long time. That would be pretty cool, but our Sims have a specific art style, because we don't want people to feel bad about torturing their Sims. We want them to be a stylised toy.

Will the food look more appetising in the sequel?

Ryan Vaughan (Producer): I think we're all really excited about the art style of *The Sims 4*, and how that

your imagination. *The Sims 4* gives an emotional connotation to the Simlish, so they'll actually sound sad or happy.

Can the Sims' fashion style be more contemporary?

Pearson: Our lead in the area of picking out clothing assets is very fashionable for a reason. We think a lot about that.

I want to do some home improvements. Can I take a loan out from the bank and build a house with it?

Pearson: That's an interesting idea. We've tossed it around for different Sim things in

the past, we haven't bit it off yet but it's something that would potentially be cool down the line.

Can I follow my Sims to work and interact with colleagues?

Pearson: That's hard.

Vaughan: Our core system has events now where you'll be able to go out and play through certain parts of your career. There will be social aspects to that too, where you're out interacting with other Sims and moving up the career ladder as you control that Sim.

Could there be an app that enables me to customise and interact with my Sims 4 game on mobile?

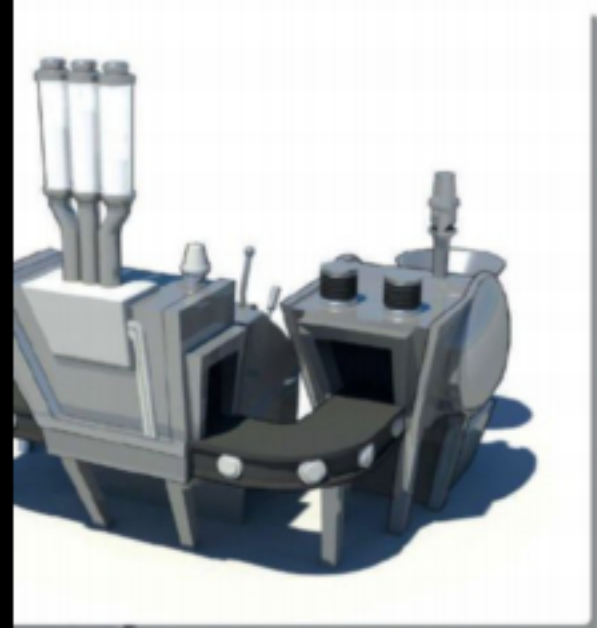
Vaughan: That's a great idea and part of what we're looking at now too as we finish off this really solid foundation of the game. We're making sure that it's built in such a way that we can add stuff like that when we hear really great ideas.

"We don't want people to feel bad about torturing their Sims. We want them to be a stylised toy"

ties into the Sims' emotional states as well. Food is going to have an emotional impact on your Sims. So not only is it going to look very in-tune with this style that we hope is pervasive throughout the community, but food is going to give your Sim an emotional state too.

Why don't they speak English?

Pearson: Every so often that one pops up again. My favourite way it comes up is on the forum and people are like 'Are they talking Russian?' They think it's some other language. But Simlish serves a very good purpose for us. It's an opportunity for players to impose their emotions on the Sims and imagine what they're talking about. One of my favourite examples was back in *Sims 2* there was a penguin that shows up and went and talked to the snowman about hot soup. That's just mean! But Simlish is a tool for us and we like leaving it up to



Back View



◉ There will be plenty of new items designed for *The Sims 4*. This cupcake making machine takes up a lot of room and won't do a lot for the waistline, but the buffs are well worth it.



confessed Create-A-Sim enthusiast, who explains *The Sims 4*'s leap forward in Sim creation. "Our main goal is to advance ease-of-use, tactility and power of the tool. It's kind of like reaching in, grabbing, pulling and moving the Sim yourself. It's like moulding clay – but not so messy." The *Super Mario 64* analogy is rather apt; players can use the mouse to tweak facial structure, body proportions, and overall shape to create more diverse Sims. There are several levels of detail at work, zooming in to stretch eyelid width, tug at pupil size and even noodle the nostrils if you so desire and even dictate the style in which they walk around their environment.

Johnston jolts through a quick demonstration of the new system, creating herself in Sim form within a matter of minutes – pulling the default avatar in various directions, painting on muscle definition and stretching various appendages. She points out a couple of other improvements: randomisation has even been overhauled, creating smarter match-ups of clothing to create a more consistent dress sense for the fashion conscious; elsewhere hats, boots and other items are now more versatile to allow for compatibility for a range of hair and clothing styles.

But if in the past there have always been two types of players – those that pour over every microscopic detail and others who let the simulation run – then these steps to streamline the creation tools could easily converge the two distinct playstyles. "There are so many different ways to play it," says producer Ryan Vaughan. "There are players that just love to build and create and the tools in this game are so much fun to play with – that's what I've always wanted out of the game. Grabbing on and moving the Sim's face that way, adjusting the ears. It's the same with Build Mode – you'll be able to plonk down a room and then pick it up and move it over."

We're given a demonstration by game designer Aaron Houts, who delves into the new systems in place: "We looked at Build in past games – and you can do powerful stuff with it – but for some people it was kind of daunting to jump in," he states. "You had to plan out what you wanted to make if you wanted something good. So we thought 'How can we make this flexible, keep the power to be able to make cool stuff, but make it easier to just jump in and start playing with it and start discovering along the way?' We designed a system called 'Blocks' and they are... well, building blocks for the house."

It's rare for a concept to actually be simpler than a developer's proclamations, but creating a luxurious abode takes far less time and patience than in previous iterations. You place a ready-formed structure (with walls and floor already attached) based on a catalogue of shapes, and manipulate its parameters, stretching walls and surfaces, tweaking objects – such as the pitch, curvature and overhang of roofs – all the time the infrastructure adapts to the alterations on-the-fly. It promotes freeform creativity, spurring more diversity in community creations.

"The tools in this game are something that I'm both proud and really excited about," says Vaughan when he joins *games™* shortly after the

demonstration. "I'm a builder myself – that's my playstyle – and the power behind them is really strong. Building and creating your Sims is something that I have a lot of fun with now. A lot of players in the past have really invested themselves in these very intricate buildings, which you can still do in *Sims 4*, but now you are able to grab these blocks, grab these rooms, and put stuff together quickly. If you don't like it then pull it apart and put it back together in another way. It's not 'Oh, I've got to destroy this whole lot and start over.' It's really about being tactile, like you're playing with blocks almost. You can do it and intuitiveness behind it makes it that much more fun so that you can be able to get creative and push the game towards how you want to see it."

games™ is listening to Joshua Radin. When *The Sims 4* arrives in 2014, players will be listening to Joshua Radin. Unlike us, however, they probably won't realise it.

The singer-songwriter – whose music can often be heard buoying a particularly melodramatic moment of adolescent angst in any number of US teen dramas – has not only lent his soothing tones to the game, but has performed an original track completely in Simlish. In fact, he's one of 300 artists who have recorded songs in the fictitious, nonsensical dialogue of the series' inhabitants over the years.

It's indicative of the phenomenon that *The Sims* has become, spawning a multitude of offshoots in the 13 years since the first entry was released. Massively-multiplayer, mobile and even medieval iterations have all played a part

in defining *The Sims* between each numerical entry. Pearson acknowledges the audience diversity, suggesting *The Sims 4* will create a solid gameplay foundation that will enable the studio to incorporate features from other titles in the series' history.

"There are so many different people that play and so many different things to learn," she says.

"Our focus for building *Sims 4* is

'How do we make the right base for any of those possibilities in the future? How do we create that foundation so that, in the future, as it makes sense to appeal to those different types of audiences, we could look at that and figure out how to go there?'

It's clear that The Sims Studio is keeping the focus firmly on the benefits of single-player. Conversation swings towards the more emotive Sims, their complex relationships (see p69), the expanded Aspirations system – featuring intermediate goals along the way and wide-reaching progression branches – and the minimalist UI. It's no surprise that, after the debacle surrounding *SimCity*'s always-online policy, broaching the subject of multiplayer and interconnected neighbourhoods is cannily evaded (NeoGaf can breathe a sigh of relief: *The Sims 4* will be playable offline).

And it's no surprise to find that the studio sparks with enthusiasm for the title's much-vaunted new features. Every facet of *The Sims 4* has been layered with a huge amount of depth, while care has been paid to make it more accessible than ever. For a team that has been deeply entrenched in the franchise for years, the fire fuelling its passion for driving Sims forwards looks to be in no risk of extinguishing any time soon.



"It's kind of like reaching in, grabbing and pulling the Sim yourself. It's like moulding clay"



Build Mode takes its cue from Create-A-Sim, enabling players to intuitively construct a property by dragging and dropping rooms, removing any needless fiddling.

The carnivorous Cow Plant makes a welcome return in *The Sims 4*. It's an easy way of dispatching any unwanted house guests.





Queueing up tasks isn't such a chore anymore. Sims will now continue conversations and socialising while undertaking other activities.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The Sims 4 offers more complex relationships with your fellow neighbours, as producer Ryan Vaughan explains

"Relationships are a big part of the game. It's important in *The Sims 4* how your Sims interact with the other Sims around them, and the emotional states that they go through and how that affects the relationship." So instead of one relationship bar that can grow incrementally through friendship and into a romantic bond, *The Sims 4* has two concurrent bars – romance and friendship. This offers the possibility of soul mates – couples that max out both metres – while the balance could be swayed so that, in theory, you have a friend-with-woo-hoo-benefits deal with someone you know.

