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THE SIMS 4

Maxis simulates more
of what makes us human

Publisher	EA
Developer	Maxis
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2014

Everybody knows that *The Sims* expands. It's one of the most continually iterated series in history, each main title receiving more add-on packs than the last.

What is less obvious about *The Sims* is that, at key intervals, the series contracts. Next year, Maxis will release *The Sims 4* – and all that accrued expansion content will reset back to zero to allow the studio to make fundamental changes to the way its life simulation operates.

Producer **Lindsay Pearson** has been working on the series since the original game. “We hit a point during *The Sims 3* where we wondered where the Sims were going to go next – what was the next evolution of what a ‘Sim’ means?” she says. “For *The Sims 4*, that was going back to the Sims themselves. [The decision to create a full sequel] is triggered by an idea, and then we have conversations about whether it is the technology that has to change or the content. This time it was both.”

Pearson began work on the sequel almost three years ago. Individual groups of developers move from the previous game to the new one as they become needed, starting with the engineers responsible for the base-level simulation and moving up through concept artists and content designers.

For *The Sims 4*, work has been done to rebuild the game's pathfinding and animation

engines from scratch. Previous *Sims* games have given the impression of being tile-based, with characters moving in stiff, fixed patterns between context-specific actions. In *The Sims 4*, characters dynamically adjust their positioning relative to what they're doing and the social environment they find themselves in. Maxis has studied footage of crowd behaviour – filmed in EA's Redwood City headquarters – in order to accurately represent the way, for example, a group of people chatting will respond to a new person approaching their circle. In *The Sims 4*, a character's awareness is visible: their head and upper body move to acknowledge the new person, and they smoothly step back to create space in a way that is far more fluid than in the series' past. The new animation framework has reaped other benefits, too – Sims can now pass each other on the stairs and walk through doorways as a group without causing a logjam.

These may sound like small changes at first, but they're significant in practice: the experience of a *Sims* player is predicated on details like this – on the believability of the world that the player creates in tandem with the game. Furthermore, more fluid animation has a knock-on effect on game mechanics. In *The Sims 4*, a character can multitask, ●



The Sims 4 producers
Lindsay Pearson
and Ryan Vaughan





THE SIMS 4



Events in a Sim's life can trigger memories that allow them to return to that emotional state later. It's a way of giving the player some degree of control while keeping the focus on the Sims themselves

Maxis's designers have a grounding in fashion design: it's an important part of the game for many fans, who contribute their own fashions to the third game's social network using a set of surprisingly in-depth tools



performing several actions at once as long as they don't contradict each other on a physical level. This could mean running on a treadmill while watching TV, filling up Entertainment and Exercises meters at the same time. It could mean eating dinner around a table while telling a joke, or washing the dishes while having a conversation. At its core, *The Sims* is a management game with a heavy veneer of wish-fulfillment fantasy: in allowing for more flexible use of time that also happens to be more true to life, *The Sims 4*'s new animation system promises to serve both masters.

That said, Maxis is also overhauling the Sims' internal lives in an attempt to create a greater sense of autonomy and personality. "People have always extended their emotions onto their Sims," producer **Ryan Vaughan** says. "Now, Sims have their own emotions and they're going to be pushing back against the player. They're living beings, they have feelings, and the gameplay evolves from that."

At any given time, a Sim will occupy a particular emotional state, from the relatively neutral Fine to the self-explanatory Elated, Depressed, Angry and Romantic. There are 14 in total, and rather than existing on a spectrum (Angry to Content, for example) they each exist as a separate state, experienced with varying degrees of intensity. A Sim's emotional state affects everything from their posture to their walk, facial expression and voice.

Moods also grant positive and negative status effects, and unlock unique interactions with objects in the environment. Interestingly, emotions themselves aren't 'good' or 'bad' at a mechanical level: they all have their uses, and players interested in micromanagement will be encouraged to experiment.

An inspired Sim might be more likely to paint a masterpiece, for instance, but a depressed Sim will gain access to a unique set of sombre artistic, writing and musical styles that have a greater emotional impact on the Sims around them. Likewise, an angry Sim may be more likely to get into a fight but also exercises more effectively, gaining the ability to 'Rage Run' on a treadmill or take out their anger on a punch bag.

Players can game the emotion system by directing their Sims to consume specific

drinks, watch certain types of entertainment and occupy particular environments. Furnishings and architecture act as amplifiers – a dark, candlelit room, for instance, is more likely to result in a successful dinner date.

Overhauled building design tools look set to reduce the frustration of configuring an ideal Sims home. While superficially similar to the grid-based toolset of previous games, a smart set of new features makes tweaking homes on the fly much easier than it has been before. The game now recognises closed-off spaces as rooms, which can be picked up and moved elsewhere, with doors and windows automatically reconfiguring to make sense of the new layout. If you've ever had to painstakingly move every item in a kitchen simply to extend a wall by a single tile, you'll appreciate the new system.

The game recognises intent far more intelligently than before, too. A gap between two balustrades on a terrace will be

"Sims have emotions and they're going to be pushing back against the player"

understood as a potential new location for an extension or a staircase, and the relevant pieces will resize accordingly. This ties into a broad shift in architectural style away from New England towards Louisiana and the gallery houses of the American South.

Maxis is staying quiet about the big picture at present; there's no word on which careers and life stages will make the transition, nor how many towns will be available at launch or what form the game's online features will take. The latter point will be especially key given the problems that plagued Maxis's previous outing, *SimCity*, at launch. Nonetheless, a renewed focus on the finer details of human experience – and the tools that allow Sims players to reenact them – bodes well for the future.

"Building an expansion pack is very much about what we want to add," Vaughan says. "Going back to a base game is about how we want to evolve the experience into something new that's not been done before." ■

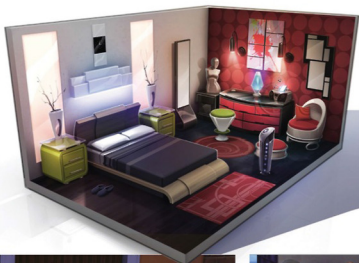


Face facts

Character creation is incredibly important in *The Sims*, and the system has seen a complete overhaul for *The Sims 4*. Features that came to the series in expansions – such as customising the proportions of body parts – are now regarded as core, and the tools used to manipulate them have been substantially rethought. Adjusting a Sim's face and body shape now simply means grabbing it with the mouse and tugging it into the desired shape, a kind of sculpting process. Furthermore, it's possible to select a walking style in addition to a look and voice.



Custom-designed room sets can now be pulled fully furnished from the house creator, and will resize intelligently when pushed or pulled at the fringe.



ABOVE Allowing Sims to socialise in a variety of poses and while performing a range of actions creates a much more realistic sense of communal living. Charismatic Sims will hold the attention of those around them



ABOVE Certain actions – such as a cruel comment or a moving piece of music – can be used to trigger emotional states in other Sims. This is one way for players to micromanage the system

LEFT For the first time in the series, it's possible to adjust ceiling height. Windows and other ornamentation will dynamically scale to fit, and doing so can create spaces with lighting profiles that weren't possible in previous games

