

The Virtual Dollhouse

By Patricia Covey

The Beginning

When *The Sims* was released in February 2000, how could anyone have guessed that it would become the best-selling computer game in history? Most computer games are based on fantasy. This means they are set in unreal worlds with superhuman characters, monsters, or other impossible events. *The Sims*, on the other hand, simulates daily life. The characters are regular people, called “Sims.” Sims live in a world that may be even more ordinary than ours.

The Sims is different from other games because it is based in reality. It is different in another way, as well. In most computer games, you try to reach a certain goal, usually to defeat some enemy. In *The Sims*, the goal is basically to get through the day. You make sure your characters pay their bills, exercise, call long-lost friends, or even bathe. If you ignore your Sims, they get into trouble by fighting, losing their jobs, or becoming sick. Their fate is in your hands. If you ignore your toy dollhouse for a few weeks, all that happens is it gets dusty.

When the game’s designer, Will Wright, came up with *The Sims*, he already had an excellent record for designing popular computer games. In 1989, he designed *SimCity*, a computer game in which players plan and build cities. Until *The Sims* came out, the *SimCity* series had been the best-selling computer games. In spite of this, Wright had a hard time selling his idea for *The Sims* to the people who decide which new products to make. “Who would want to play a game that reflects the work of ordinary life?” they wondered. It turned out that a lot of people did.

Popularity

The Sims attracted serious, long-time game players. It also attracted people who hadn’t played

a lot of computer games: new players, casual players, older players, and female players. Usually, young men account for the most computer game sales. But girls and women buy half of the copies of *The Sims* that are sold.

There are as many reasons to like *The Sims* as there are types of people who play it. Some players enjoy designing their Sims’ houses. Of these players, some have fun making houses that look exactly like their own. Other players want to make their Sims happy by giving them vacations. In one version of *The Sims*, players can even allow their Sims to raise pets. Most players like buying things for their Sims. One way to keep Sims happy is to buy them things like pool tables and fancy outdoor grills. But this is not all they need. A Sims needs a strong social group, as well. Without friendship and contact with others, a Sim will get very lonely and sad.

The Sims Today

The thing that people seem to like the most about *The Sims* is not how the game is *like* the player’s real life but how it is *different*. In the real world, there are few things we can control. For example, at school or at work there are many rules made by other people we have to follow. If we don’t follow the rules, there are consequences. But in *The Sims* the player doesn’t feel the effect of not following the rules; the Sim does.

Whatever the reason for liking it, the game continues to be wildly popular. *The Sims* has been translated into 17 languages and has won many awards. Years after its release, Will Wright’s “dollhouse” remains at the top of the computer game sales charts.