

Another Castle

THE GAMING MAGAZINE OF IMPERIAL COLLEGE LONDON



The Rise and Fall of Introversion Software

ISSUE 0



Back in 2008, Tom Roberts, Azfarul Islam and Michael Cook launched *Another Castle*, a multi-format gaming magazine. In their first issue, they secured an interview with Peter Molyneux, an industry behemoth at the time. Gaming has changed a lot since then (Peter Molyneux all but disappeared into the ether) and the way we write about games has changed too. Kieron Gillen (comic book writer and former music and games journalist) published the manifesto for *New Games Journalism* in 2004, which set out a new way of thinking and discussing games, where a reviewer's personal experience was core to their analysis and reflection. In the past half-decade numerous publications (from *Kill Screen* to *Feminist Frequency*) and existing publications have adopted these ideas. Now it's the turn of Imperial students to continue this great exploration of gaming culture.

This issue is my attempt to resurrect interest in games journalism at Imperial and it's a project that is far from finished (hence issue zero). It begins with an interview with Mark Morris, an Imperial graduate who helped found Introversion Software, telling the story of a games company that has seen unprecedented success despite almost going bankrupt after the release of one of their games. Harry Mitchell writes fondly about *Half-Life 2* more than twelve years after its release, while Dani Hernandez Perez gives us a brief history of storytelling in videogames. Film editor, *Tilda Swinton* fanatic, and *Guardian Student Media Awards* nominee, Fred Fyles, interprets *The Sims* in an essay that goes beyond what even Kieron Gillen envisaged for games journalism.

Over the last year I've almost singlehandedly kept the games section of *FELIX* alive but I need your support if I am to continue. If you're interested in helping to shape the future of *Another Castle* please get in touch. ✉

Cale Tilford

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The fall and rise of Introversion



An interview with Mark Morris

Words by Cale Tilford



An Imperial Success Story

You started at Imperial in the late nineties, studying Computing. A lot has obviously changed since then. How was your time here and how – having revisited the department – have things changed?

There was a big change that occurred in the department about five or six years ago, and since then it doesn't seem to have changed much. When I first went to Imperial for my walk around day (I didn't have an interview) it was just a sort of 'come and have a look at the university', that would have been the Spring of 1997. At the time I wanted to do a Computer Science degree, but I had this fascination with, or I thought I had a fascination with, AI. In those days there were all these old Sun SPARCstations with these huge monitors and really crappy optical mice. I don't know if you even remember mice with balls in them but that was the norm back then. In order for these mice to work you had to have a little mousemat with a grid on it. Hardly any of the mice worked, because the grid had faded off. And there were these old dot matrix line printers you could use; it was all pre-laser and no Wi-Fi, no mobile phones. None of that kind of stuff.

I was in Weeks hall, and I remember one of the reasons why I applied to Weeks hall was because it was one of the few – it was the only hall actually – that gave you a network connection. On a Computer Science degree I knew I was going to be able to want to work from home. I'm not sure broadband was around to be honest; I think we were all on dial-up modems. We were really at the back of the birth of the internet. It was kind of an exciting time for Computing and the internet but the department hadn't really caught up with that. So very quickly after leaving I felt quite out of touch, despite being a very recent Computer Science graduate. We'd done very little HTML, very little JavaScript. We'd done no PHP.

They're a bit odd, but that's Imperial's way. They give you these problems, they give you the high level skills, but none of that instantiation of web development was covered at all. Which was quite different to classical imperative programming which I was spending most of my time doing. But I look back fondly on my days at Imperial, I'm still friends with three of the other guys I went to Imperial with.

Back then, was there any sort of game development community?

None. There was nothing at all. Chris had written a few games in his spare time. I think he'd written three or four before coming to Imperial, and he came to Imperial with a game called Shadows. I'd never even

considered game development but I'd been a gamer up until going to university. There was no community at all as far as we were aware. Chris had been telling me in a pub of this game idea he had for a hacking sim, which ultimately ended up being *Uplink*. And he said: 'you watch these films like *Sneakers* and *Hackers* and *Lawnmower Man*, but no one's ever really made a game that simulates that'. I still don't really have the vision to keep up with Chris. Until I see it, I can't really deal with it. Even then I didn't know what he was talking about, I had no idea how he was going to make this thing fun to play, or interesting.

He wrote *Uplink* when Tom and I were out drinking – we were going out most nights and he was staying in most nights coding. We'd get back at three in the morning and he'd be up programming. Sure, he'd come out occasionally but that was definitely his passion. There was a competition in our final year run by the business school for £10,000 for the best business plan. And Tom, my Electrical Engineering buddy, had taken all the corporate programmes. He was a lot more clued up on the operation of companies.

I said to Tom and Chris: 'Chris you've got a game idea and Tom you've got the business knowledge, should we just write this business plan'. We never intended to run a business. We were going to do our best to win and if we won we'd get ten grand, we'd split it three ways and pay off a bit of student loan, and that would be the end of it. We wrote the business plan, but it became very clear to us quite quickly that Imperial weren't really interested in supporting that. They were much more interested in new ideas and new technology that they could exploit.

They wanted innovative technology that had broad appeal, rather than a videogame. Everytime we went to the meetings they were like: 'rather than selling a game you could sell the technology to make games'. We stopped bothering going forward with the competition but we had this business plan that said we were going to make a few posts on a forum and we were going to set up a website to take some credit card orders. It took off relatively quickly, within a few months we were able to order 3000 units of *Uplink*, which we shipped around the world. That's kind of how it began.

There was nobody else at Imperial making games, and when we started launching the business properly and going to trade shows it appeared to us at the time that there was nobody else making games at the scale we were. There were no other small, micro-studios. Everybody that was making games, was like EA or Frontier – the big studios. Subsequently it turned out there were a few other developers around and making money then, but we just didn't know about them. There certainly wasn't the community that there is today.

Perhaps there were more on the West Coast; there's always been a nice burgeoning community there. The internet was very new so it was difficult to track down these groups of developers. We felt that we were trailblazing to a certain extent.

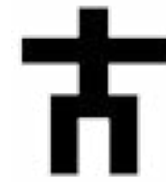
So why do you think *Uplink* did well? Was it the community you created online?

With video-games it's 99% the game and 1% everything else around it. That 1% is important as really good games can get missed but fundamentally the game has to be wonderful to be successful. And I think what we did with *Uplink* was combine our technical knowledge – or Chris' technical knowledge – with a very emotive, tense and well crafted mystery story. You were as close to believing you were a hacker, choosing to support or down this big organisation, than any other hacking game that has been made. I think *Uplink* stands up today. There's a few tweaks that could be made but fundamentally hacking is exactly the same as it was 15 years ago. Now there's script kiddies but that's about the only difference. The actual principles of hacking are pretty similar. There's new stuff like jacking into Wi-Fi that *Uplink* doesn't simulate.

There's a lot of technical people in the world that like playing games, intelligent people like everyone at Imperial, MIT and Oxford and Cambridge, that are a little underserved by the mainstream media. Everything – and it's changing a bit now – tends to be dumbed down to try and broaden the appeal. The problem when you're smart and you see dumbing down, is that the suspension of disbelief is broken. Suddenly you go 'this is bollocks!' if you ever watch a hacker movie and see someone like this [Mark clatters on the keyboard] you go 'that's bollocks!' They're not really there, they're not really doing that. The only time I've seen it filmed well is *Mr. Robot*. You're looking at the commands they're typing and it looks to me as if they're doing is pretty close to what they'd need to be doing.

A lot of people played *Uplink* and the community definitely helped drive it – that's the 1% I'm talking about. The forum and things we set up, that was quite new then. We did a little treasure hunt where you actually had to hack our website; we brought *Uplink* into the real world. The fact that *Uplink* had this branching pathway fueled the discussions on the forum. People were having radically different experiences which added to this sense of mystery. *X-Files* was probably a big touchstone for *Uplink* – a mystery where you don't really know what's going on. I think those were the factors that caused *Uplink*'s success. There was nothing else like it. It was a young internet where everyone was tech savvy. The audience came together well.

From Uplink to Darwinia



Uplink.

How did you get the game out there then? Did you send it to games publications or was it just through word-of-mouth on the internet?

We were reviewed in *PC Gamer*. We sent copies of it to every magazine out there – not just the gaming magazines but also lifestyle magazines. I remember I'd gone skiing with Tom and we got back and the *Linux Format* review was the first review to hit. I thought the *Linux* guys were going to love *Uplink* and the *Linux Format* reviewer gave it 61%. I remember picking it up in the newsagent at the airport and I was crushed. We thought that this was the end of this adventure for us. We didn't think we would be able to pursue a 61% game. About two weeks later, the *PC Gamer* review came out. Now obviously *PC Gamer* is bigger than *Linux Format*. The reviewer, Kieron Gillen, only gave us have a page but it turned things around for us. After that every score was 80% plus.

Then we asked ourselves, what's the next step? At this point we were selling it boxed online and the obvious next step was getting it into the shops. In those days, and still now, my thinking is to go back to first principles. If I'm going to put a game into the shop, what are they going to do to add value. They were just putting games on shelves in front of a consumer. We went to a distributor rather than a publisher and did a deal with them. They charged about a quid a box, which sounded reasonable to me. The indie game stores took it. Zavvi refused it. Game refused it. HMV were the only major store that carried *Uplink*. WHSmith's wouldn't carry it, they said it was immoral. We made a bit of money from this but not a lot. We'd done our UK retail deal so then we looked to North America. Rather than working with a distributor over there we knew we had to work with a publisher, because we couldn't do the marketing ourselves. We went to a couple of trade shows and eventually hooked up with a company called Strategy First, a Canadian company. They were going to advance us \$50,000 dollars for distribution across the United States with a ten percent royalty. We were only three guys so we were quite happy with this. Strategy First renamed it *Uplink Hacker Elite* – which Chris hates – and redid the packaging. So, they distributed it and we waited for our \$50k cheque to come back and then they declared Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in Canada, which means they didn't have to pay any of their debts. So we didn't see a penny of the sales over there. I don't think it did very well either.

So at this point you weren't digitally distributing the game on your website?

No. We actually padded the build size out with an encrypted MP3 of Chris playing his guitar to something

that would take three hours to download over a 56k modem. We determined that three hours was too long for pirates to share the game. There was no real online distribution at this point but that was our novel counter-piracy strategy. It didn't work. Nothing works.

After Uplink, the next game you released was Darwinia. Could you tell me more about how that came about?

Chris had finished writing *Uplink* the day Tom and I got involved in the business. We were desperately looking at how we could make more money from it: a *Linux* version, a *Mac* version, and all those distribution deals I talked about. We even looked at *Pocket PCs* and *PDA*s. But Chris had been on *Uplink* for two years and he was finished with it so he went on to write *Darwinia*. There was quite a lot of tension in the company at that point because we wanted him working on *Uplink*. *Darwinia* took him a long time to get finished. *Uplink* had been developed at university in his spare time so we expected the next game, a full-time project, to be delivered in about a year. Ultimately, for various reasons *Darwinia* took three years to make so we were well and truly out of money after that period. We were broke, flat broke. Tom and Chris were selling all their *CD*s and signing on to benefits to try and keep things going. Then we launched *Darwinia*. And *Darwinia* was a tough old sell. Now we had a lot more experience and our route to market was more open. The game reviewed very strongly; it got 90% in *PC Gamer*. They loved it. It went into the *IGF Awards* [Independent Games Festival] and won three prizes that year because it was like no other indie game. Independent games in those days were much smaller. *Darwinia* was what Chris likes to call triple-I. This was pre *World of Goo*.

People in the games industry were really excited and wanted to see what would become of the indie game scene. They were willing to look past *Darwinia*'s QA problems and its control problems to see the game for what it really was. But commercially it was a flop, we struggled to make any money back.

Now, at that time Valve were just about to launch their digital distribution platform called Steam and they reached out to us (or we reached out to them) and we had a big debate internally about whether we should put *Darwinia* on Steam. We were looking at the sales for our site, which were pretty small, and decided that even if they did cannibalise our sales we were making so little money it didn't matter. The status quo was that we were fucked. So, we did the deal with Steam. Which was of course the best deal we've done in the history of *Introversion*. Everything we've made, we've made through Valve. *Darwinia* didn't immediately pick up but obviously Valve brought the audience and the sales did eventually increase enough for us to get *Defcon* done.

Defcon was a really big moment for us. It was massively popular, more popular than anything else we'd ever seen. In those days you had to hire a physical box, and our servers just died under the load. It took us five or six hours to get them back up. I don't know how much money we lost in that time. Still, it was by far the biggest commercial success we'd had up to that point. But the perception was that *Darwinia* was the bigger success. This is where things started to go wrong for us. Microsoft, or an agent, reached out to us and said that *Darwinia* had won all these awards and Microsoft were launching the *Xbox 360* and would be doing digital downloads. Microsoft were very interested in *Darwinia* and new IP. They wanted really cool indie titles.

Even though *Darwinia* hadn't been particularly popular we then got involved into what turned out to be a six or seven year mammoth project. They wanted every game on *XBLA* to be multiplayer – that was part of their strategy. *Darwinia* had originally been a multiplayer game but ended up being singleplayer. We thought it would be as simple as just reactivating the multiplayer mode of the game. We tried to do that and it just didn't work. It was shit.

That ended up with Chris working on our fourth game, *Multiwinia*. The company got sidetracked down this multiplayer route that we had agreed to deliver for Microsoft. And we had done so much work for this multiplayer game. Even though it didn't review well and no one bought it, *Multiwinia* was still a brilliantly fun game. We launched it on *PC* and nobody played it. Everybody who had enjoyed *Darwinia* looked at *Multiwinia*, which was a completely different gameplay experience, and said 'I don't want to play this'. And the rest of the world who had played *Darwinia* and hated it didn't want to play the sequel. We ended up targeting a niche of a niche.

At conferences people still come up to us and tell us that *Uplink* is the best game they've ever played, that *Darwinia* is the best game they've ever played, or that *Defcon* is the best game they've ever played. And there have been more than ten people in the last ten years that have said *Multiwinia* was the best game they'd ever played. So we must have done something right with it.

It was a big flop on *PC* but we were still working on the console version of it. This was going to be a bigger, shinier version of the game. Eventually we burned the company into the ground – there was no money left. We were going to launch *Darwinia* and *Multiwinia* together on *XBLA* as *Darwinia+* about six years after we had intended to do that. And it flopped too. The day after we launched we knew things hadn't gone well. I phoned everyone up and sacked them. I shut down the office. We had quite a lot of debt that we'd taken on, so I had to restructure all of that. I didn't think that

was going to be easy. I wasn't really a businessperson at that time, I was just a person. And when you owe someone money as a person you go to court and they come round to your house and take your stuff. What I didn't realise was that companies aren't quite like that. With everyone I owed money to, we made a payment plan over about a two year period. If anyone one of them had rejected the payment plan they would all lose all of it. Obviously, they all accepted it. After a little while we suddenly realised that there was a reasonable amount of money still dripping into *Introversion* from the back catalogue on *Steam*. And to be fair, a little bit coming in from Microsoft. All of these little trickles were merging into a stream of money. That was enough to keep me and Chris employed. That's when Chris came up with *Prison Architect*. At that point *Humble Bundle* had just launched. They'd already done a *Frozenbyte* bundle and we went out and asked if there was any interest in an *Introversion* one. We would bundle our games and give them other stuff like tech demos and they liked this idea. Kieron Gillen was the first time the company was saved and *Humble Bundle*, in my view, was the second time. We made about three quarters of a million from the 'Humble *Introversion Bundle*' and that just gave us enough cash to get to the alpha version of *Prison Architect*. That takes us up to 2012. Within three days of *Prison Architect* launching we'd made \$100,000 dollars. Now we've made about \$22 million. *Humble* gave us just that little bit of resource to get us to *Prison Architect*, which was our first mega-hit.

I remember buying that bundle at the time, and that was the first time I had ever heard of the company. Do you think that the bundle's success helped with getting your name out there and played a part in Prison Architect's success?

One of the things that I learnt relatively early on was that everyone else's view of *Introversion* was not the same as mine. I kind of assumed everyone knew all of our games and knew we were the company behind *Uplink*. I'd lived it. There was this natural assumption that someone who had bought *Uplink* would buy *Darwinia*. The reality is that it's nothing like that at all. You stand on each game separately. I'm quite big on trying to push the *Introversion* brand. I want people to say that they're buying the next *Introversion* game because they know it's going to be good even if it doesn't review very well, like *Tarantino*. People go and watch his movies because there hasn't really been a bad one. There's been great ones and mediocre ones but they have never been awful. So I think the *Humble Bundle* brought a new audience to us and *Prison Architect* built a new audience on top of that.

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Kieron Gillen was the first time the company was saved and Humble Bundle, in my view, was the second time

Beyond Prison Architect



Prison Architect.

Where did the name Introversion come from?

We'd just learnt at university about Myers-Briggs' personality test. It's basically a model to codify different personality types into one of 16 categories. Both Chris and I were intrigued that this was possible. Both of us, when we learnt about the personality test, had resonated quite a lot with the categories we ended up in.

When Chris wrote the opening sequence for *Uplink* it flashed through all of the Myers-Briggs indicators, ending on introversion. We named the company when we wrote the business plan, and when we asked Chris what to call it he suggested Introversion Software. We thought it sounded pretty cool. Nowadays, we'd probably have to call ourselves something like "Bing Bang" or some fucking nonsense word, or put a monkey in it. Game Gibbon?

With the financial success of Prison Architect, what's next for Introversion? Are you looking to expand?

No, we're not going to expand. We like our size. Well, we'll expand slowly at our own rate. We take interns from Imperial and we've had about three now. I'm trying to make that process, which in the past has been a bit ad hoc, more formal.

This was the first year that we had advertised for an intern and we selected one recently who's going to come and work for us. If our interns are very strong, and they want to work for us, there will probably be a place. That's how we will expand, rather than aggressively thinking we need to hire loads of coders.

Each game project has its own unique requirements. Because of the indie revolution, the ecosystem now is much richer than it once was. The guy who did all the art for *Prison Architect*, a very talented man called Ryan Sumo, had been the artist on *Spacechem*. Chris knew roughly what sort of talent he wanted for *Prison Architect*. Now Ryan lives in the Philippines but after a few emails and contracts, suddenly we had a world class artist working with us. Now that the game has come to an end, Ryan's doing his next thing. That's important because the next game from Introversion doesn't require a 2D top-down art style.

Short-term for Introversion we have *Prison Architect* coming out on Xbox One, Xbox 360, and PS4. We're not doing that work yourself. I like to describe the team porting a game as like a car tuning company; they take a really well crafted core game experience on PC and turn it into an outstanding console experience. They rework every interface, the control mechanisms, fix annoying bugs, and add in support to make the

progression a little more gentle for the console audience. They don't dumb the game down; that's wrong. They make the ramp into the game less steep than it is for the PC audience.

We've got some other platforms in development but we want to move away from *Prison Architect* this year. Internally, we're working on some new ideas that we're going to be showing at Rezzed. With these new prototypes we want to do a market test and see which prototype players resonate with the most. We can then use that information to feed into what we're doing for the rest of the year.

Prison Architect is a simulator. What do you think makes a good simulator? How do you balance the complexity with a game actually simple and fun to play?

Balance is the key word. There are a lot of factors that you have to get right. The player has to be able to understand action and consequence. That was something we always worked really hard on with *Prison Architect*.

We could simulate everything but the player has to know why that prisoner just died. If it's too covert then there's no fun in that situation. There might be a degree of fun in trying to figure it out but you have to get the balance right.

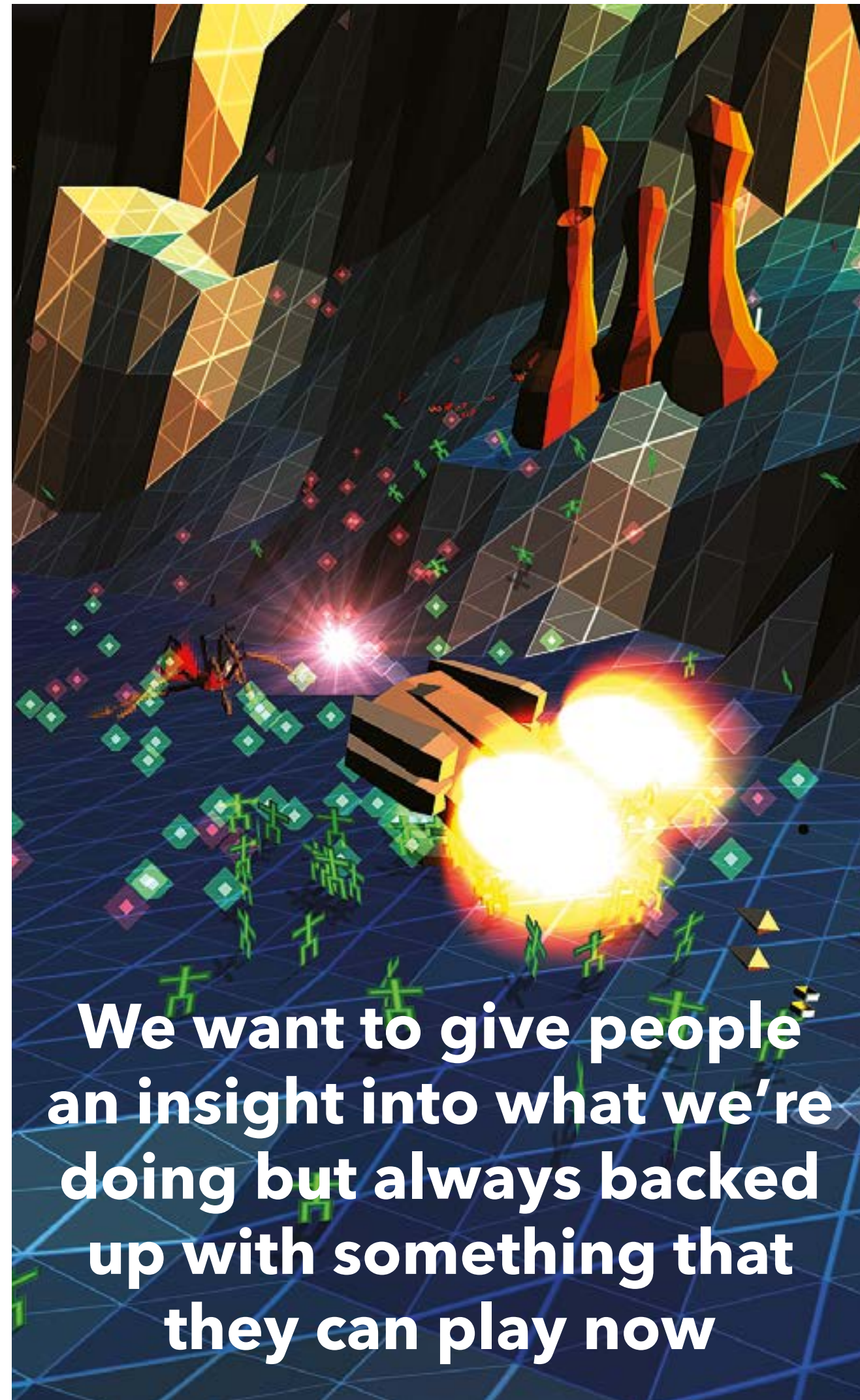
A really good example of this is the contraband screen. When you find contraband it backtracks through the contraband flow into your prison. There's a deadly fight and you have a dead prisoner on your hands. Now you need to know that one of the prisoners used a screwdriver to kill the guy and you need to understand where that screwdriver came from. Then you need to know what you can do to prevent that from happening in the future.

If you make that process too easy, then people are not interested in playing because there's no challenge to it. If you make it too hard, you'll lose players quickly because they won't understand why all this shit's going on. So a lot of the work we did was about trying to manage that.

What worked well was the alpha process, being able to drop in new systems on a monthly basis and to see whether that system worked or not. Rather than dropping the entire complexity bomb out there at once, which would have been a QA nightmare, we were able iteratively add new systems like contraband distribution via the laundry system.

We'd then look to see if we had broken the game. If not we could then move forward and layer something else in. There were some features we'd add in that would ruin the game, and then we would backtrack.

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Darwinia.

We want to give people an insight into what we're doing but always backed up with something that they can play now

You released Prison Architect in "early access" on Steam. The process you have described is what many in software development would call agile. Do you think you'd develop a game in that way again?

I think that it applies to some games more than others. That development methodology particularly worked for *Prison Architect* but it also had a massive impact on our ability to market the game. Chris and I made monthly update videos, and we've built an audience now that expect a monthly update from us. And we'll attempt to continue with that.

As we move onto different projects we'll see a drop off but we don't know yet how big that will be. We hope that Chris and I will be able to transition *Prison Architect* fans into core Introversion fans - fans that want to understand about game development and enjoy the banter between Chris and I in the videos. We want to give people an insight into what we're doing but always backed up with something that they can play now. It's an exciting time. ✌

Eight Games Under Eight Minutes

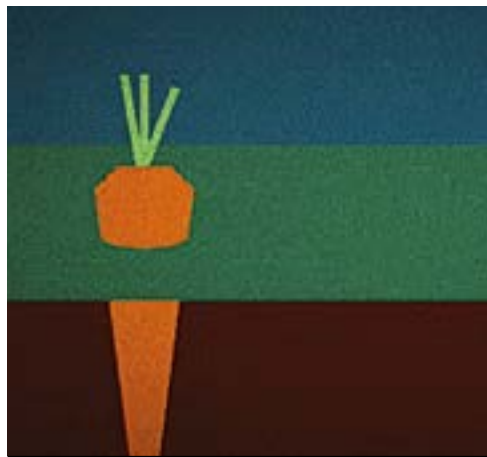
One



Cuckoo Curling.
Grenadine

Curling is a sport few millennials will ever have dabbled in but most will have played Connect Four. *Cuckoo Curling* combines these two games into a wacky turn-based strategic sport. Players take turns to slide their coloured discs across the screen into a grid, match four of your own colour in a row or diagonally and you win. However, unlike Connect Four, the added element of curling allows you to push your opponent's discs out of the play area. Twisting the formula even further are the two animals that will snatch up your disc whenever it falls outside the grid. This is all rendered in stylised orange and grey cel-shaded graphics. From the charming animations to its catchy music, *Cuckoo Curling* is easily worthy of a few minutes of your time.

Two



Carrots and Cream.
Aergia

The faint crunching of food has never been more terrifying. *Carrots and Cream* simulates gardening and food preparation, and emulates horror movies all in under five minutes. The screen softly vibrates with a filter of television static, as the player ends the short lives of a number of innocent carrots. After this culinary massacre, the tables are turned and as a worm you must escape the deathly slice of a garden shovel, only to be grated to death. Truly horrific stuff.

Three



Solitude.
Alexandre Ignatov

For many, our bedrooms are places of isolation, separated from the rest of the world. Increasingly, it is a space we never need to leave, with internet services providing anything at any time directly to our door. *Solitude* takes place in a single room. Notes, emails and a diary entry give you a clue to the meaning of this place and its importance. The player, an unknown and faceless character, has become a 'hermit'. By giving us only a single room to explore, Ignatov shows us how this single space has come to define a person. Try to leave and only darkness greets you.

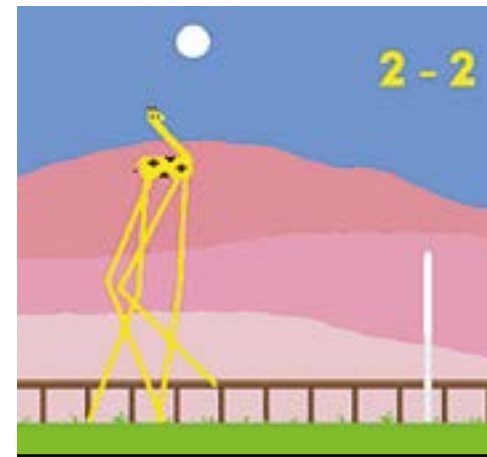
Four



90 Second Portraits.
Tangram Games

Great art often results when artists limit their tools and techniques but few limit the amount of time they have to produce their work. In *90 Second Portraits* you play as a speed-painter, painting the portraits of five customers – each in a minute and a half. You're given two different paint brush sizes and a bucket which can be used, with varying force, to throw paint onto the canvas. Together, these constraints force you to be creative. And your final work, displayed after serving all your customers, will look like the rushed output of a toddler on Microsoft Paint. In those 90 seconds, you have little time to reflect and really think about what you're creating. The result isn't art, it's a poorly rushed product.

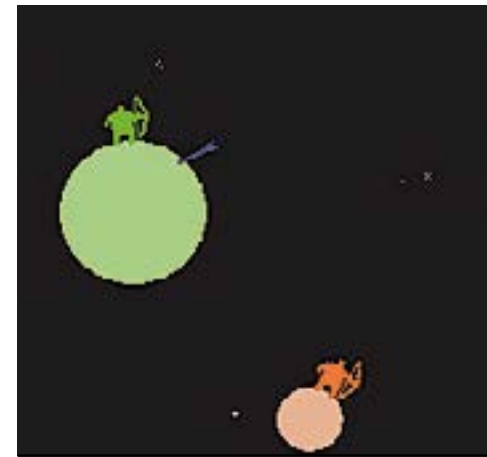
Five



Giraffes Volleyball Championship 2016.
Sandwich Puissant

It's an idea so obvious (and genius), I'm surprised it hasn't been done before. Giraffes with their ridiculous necks and, in this case, infinitely extendable legs are a perfect match for everyone's favourite summer sport. Awkwardly controlled arcade games are the indie scene's bread and butter, and while *Giraffes Volleyball Championship 2016* isn't quite QWOP, it's still a lot of fun. With extendable legs, you have full movement in the 2D plane which you'll have to use to beat the devastatingly difficult AI, Amazing Giraffe. This is another game best played with a friend.

Six



Sagittarius.
George Prosser

For years, Team 17 have churned out small variations on the Worms formula, never straying far from the iconic 2D deathmatch gameplay that has made them so successful. With *Sagittarius*, Prosser has achieved more than Team 17 have in over a dozen sequels. Like *Worms*, *Sagittarius* is turn-based with each player equipped with a bow and arrow. The similarities don't end there: gravity also plays a major role. Planets with their own gravity guide and ground the arrows that kill opponents in one shot. It's hugely satisfying lining up the perfect shot through the gravity fields of numerous planets – a feeling that is only matched by an epic ricochet in PopCap's *Peggle*.

Seven



Barb.
Kenney

The monochrome world inhabited by Barbara guides players through a morning routine. Bright red household objects highlight what the player must interact with next. The ordinary rituals of drinking coffee, showering, getting dressed and checking your phone are familiar to all. They become second nature, beyond our own control. They come to define us in ways we are not cognizant of. And only when we stop and change routine do we realise what we were doing. *Barb* is the embodiment of this idea. The twist that it ends on might be shocking for some but it shouldn't be. For players that don't quite get what is going on Kenny gives them a hint: "I didn't realise who I was until stopped being who I wasn't."

Eight



Cooldog Teaches Typing.
Cooldog

Over the years we've seen a surprising number of typing games based on franchises as wide ranging as *Pokémon* and *The House of the Dead*, yet none are as rad as *Cooldog Teaches Typing*. From the yabbering of cooldog to the warped voice of your retro computer, the sound is what makes *Cooldog* so humorous. Each time you type the wrong character on your keyboard the computer erupts with a loud squeak or boink. Underneath the comical interface and characterisation, *Cooldog* is a reasonably competent typing tutorial.

Half-Life 2 Revisited

The tale of a scientist and his crowbar

Words by Harry Mitchell

When I was 13, for Christmas I asked for Valve's *The Orange Box*, a collection of games which are now commonplace in most gamers' Steam libraries: *Team Fortress 2*, *Portal*, and – last but not least – *Half-Life 2*. While my brother and sister played with their new festive gifts, I went straight to the family computer, put in the disk, and left it to download during Christmas lunch. And the typical Christmas evening television began, I began my journey into the dystopian world of Gordon Freeman.

Half-Life 2 is, unsurprisingly, the successor to the 1998 game *Half-Life*, which saw Gordon Freeman, the employee of the 1970s-era Research Facility known as Black Mesa, take part in an experiment which went horribly wrong. As far as it goes, opening a hole in the fabric of space, allowing hostile beings to charge through and attack the facility, was probably the worst outcome imaginable. Dr Freeman charges his way through the facility, defending himself against threats, terrestrial and otherwise, until a mysterious figure offers him an even more mysterious job. Cut to darkness, and *Half-Life* ends.

Half-Life 2 begins in the same way its predecessor begins: on a train. However, over the next few minutes Valve sets a scene slightly more ominous than your average South Kensington tube station. The train stops at a drab, worn down platform, guarded and controlled by mask-wearing police officers, and you soon see several of these officers attacking a civilian in an alleyway – the final evidence of the dire situation you're in. It emerges you've found yourself several years after the original *Half-Life*, where an invading force known as the Combine has taken over the planet.

It feels unnerving to start in such a hostile environment with no weapons, but soon you are equipped with many, including an ordinary crowbar, shotgun, a rocket launcher, and a zero-point energy field manipulator (fondly nicknamed the gravity gun). With these tools, you shall carve a rebellion into the face of this

dystopian world, one click at a time.

The physics engine is one of a kind. There are many puzzle-like parts earlier on in the game which highlight this, and unlike current games which possess physics gameplay that mainly facilitates fantastic and chaotic destruction, the physics engine from *Half-Life 2* is shown off as a means to solving problems throughout the game. There is a part in the sewers below City 17 where a beam lies across a big lump of concrete like a seesaw; like a caveman learning how to use tools, the player slowly works out that the breezeblocks in the surrounding area can be used to weigh down one side of the beam, to allow access to a pipe higher up in the room. The capability of this engine led to the infamous sandbox game *Garry's Mod*, which uses the physics and assets from *Half-Life 2*.

On the other hand, sometimes the physics made the combat feel slightly awkward. When you encounter an enemy they show no visible reaction or distress when attacked, and when their health is completely drained they immediately become a ragdoll at the drop of a hat. Bungie's *Halo 2* was released seven days prior to *Half-Life 2*, and another Valve game, *Counter-Strike: Source* was released eight days prior to this. In *Halo*, you can blaze your way through an army of invading hostile aliens, wielding nothing but a battle rifle on a militarized quad-bike, whereas in *Counter-Strike* you and your team must carefully prevent bombings and hostage situations using modern weaponry. Both franchises, although focusing on totally different styles of combat, are renowned for their excellent shooting mechanics. In comparison, *Half-Life*'s strengths lie in the plot and other aspects of gameplay.

I returned to *Half-Life 2* during the long summer before my first year at Imperial started. There are some great achievements in the game, specifically one which I pursued in the final episode: Little Rocket Man, which asks the player to carry a garden gnome for over half of the game, and send it off into space. Simple, right? Not so simple when you

have to drive a beaten down truck across the baron wasteland, with nothing to hold your new ceramic friend in place but a ridiculously unstable passenger seat. It took me three days to get that achievement, but it was fantastically rewarding. The second episode ends with Gordon Freeman and his partner in crime, Alyx Vance, about to head off to a research facility (or more accurately, accidentally teleported freighter) in a frozen wasteland. The epic tale concludes with Alyx's father, Eli, being attacked and mortally wounded by one of the alien overlords, his fate unknown. With this inconclusive ending, people craved a third episode which could sate their desire to put crowbar to hand, and apply crowbar to enemy. However, Valve moved onto *Left 4 Dead 2*, *Portal 2*, and many other brilliant games. While fans have found hints of *Half-Life 3* in *Dota 2* code, and suggestions of a virtual reality game, Valve have remained silent about anything involving a possible third episode.

Personally, I hope that there is no *Half-life 3*. Of course, based on Valve's track record, the gameplay would be fantastic and innovative, but that is not the point. *Half-Life 2* is a classic, one of the first games I played, so naturally there's a sense of nostalgia which I don't think a reboot could live up to. Reboots in any media format can be remarkable; *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* made one billion dollars in the first twelve days of release, the fastest movie to ever reach that that feat. This was achieved because of an army of writers, actors, fans and supporting crew understood what *Star Wars* is all about. The problem with returning to 'old' franchises is that companies change and the people working for them do to. Marc Laidlaw, the main writer of *Half-Life 2* and its expansions, no longer works for Valve; since the plot and writing were core to *Half-Life 2*'s critical success, the absence of Laidlaw could put a sequel (or reboot) on thin ice. Of course, much like *The Force Awakens*, another instalment of Gordon Freeman could be a masterpiece, but only time (and Valve) will tell. ✎

Through a computer screen darkly



Interpreting The Sims

Words by Fred Fyles
Images by Indra Mallik

The fire started in the kitchen. First shooting up from the cooker, it soon spread across the wooden countertops and engulfed the refrigerator, which began to darken and burn. There wasn't much furniture in the house – the family had only just moved in after all – but there was enough. Bella, who was home at the time, saw the wisps of smoke and went running into the kitchen; upon seeing the flames she panicked, and, rooted to the spot, she could do nothing as the fire consumed her. The children came home from school to find the kitchen reduced to a pile of dust; their mother's ashes contained in a gleaming metal urn.

This is my clearest recollection of *The Sims* by far. The fires may have just been a pattern of pixels – looking at screenshots now, they

retain a subtle menace; their artificiality, their ludicrous orange hue, only heighten the intuition that they should be feared – but to 7-year-old me they seemed very real. I immediately exited the game, threw down my headphones, and did not approach it for at least a week. But I did return. I returned to *The Sims*, and to its numerous expansion packs; I returned to *The Sims 2*, released a few years later, and have vivid memories of going to a friend's for Easter lunch, only to spend the whole time playing it upstairs; and I returned to *The Sims 3*, which is still installed on my parents' computer back home.

What I am trying to say, really, is that for my entire gaming life, *The Sims* has formed an indelible backdrop. It was the first game I really played seriously, and even today, when I go back home for the holidays I may find

myself tempted to load it up, slipping back into the comforting reminders of childhood. Between then and now there have been countless hours spent on the Xbox, a fleeting fraternisation with Nintendo, and an even briefer month or two of MMORPGs, but *The Sims* occupies a special place in my heart. Originally this essay was meant to involve me revisiting my favourite childhood game, but as I read up on the origins of *The Sims*, and more of my early memories were unearthed, I began to realise just how complex the game actually is. In trying to replicate our own existence, the creators of *The Sims* actually created a great work of art; and like any great work of art, *The Sims* cries out to be analysed, deconstructed, and critiqued.

But why interrogate a game, something that



Figure 1: *The Sims* allows the player to create virtual avatars, who can represent any number of real-life individuals. Above is Bella Goth, a member of one of the premade families available to play from the start of the game.

Sims goes one further: where a work aims to straightforwardly reproduce life, examining the aspects of the simulacrum that make us feel uneasy can provide us with important lessons. Lived reality may provide the inspiration for *The Sims*, but *The Sims* can provide us with insights into our own existence. In the words of Frasca: “videogames could become a mirror where players could look for answers to the problems of their lives”. The fact that the MoMA included *The Sims* in the original 14 videogames acquired as part of their Architecture and Design Collection, only speaks to the importance of *The Sims* to the wider world. And this is why I believe it is important to critically interrogate *The Sims*; to interpret it, and locate it within a conceptual framework, allowing us to identify what the game is trying to say, and what we are able to hear as players.

§

The fact that my clearest memory of *The Sims* is of a fire seems fitting, since it was a fire that provided the impetus for designer Will Wright to create the game. In 1991, a firestorm raged across the hillsides of Oakland, central California. A combination of dry, hot weather, and brisk gusts of wind – a type of weather characteristic of the area; Joan Didion wrote of it: “the wind shows us how close to the edge we are” – lead to a wildfire that destroyed an area twice the size of the City of London, before being brought under. More than three thousand homes were destroyed in the fire, among them Wright’s. At the time, Wright was a successful game designer and co-founder of the studio Maxis. His breakout game, *SimCity*, was released in 1989. A simulation game that put the player in charge of designing a metropolis, kick-started the city-building game, and was an instant success.

Following the loss of his house, Wright needed to rebuild, and this provided the inspiration for a home-design simulation game; initially titled *Doll House*, the game was a straightforward building simulation, an architect’s toolbox. Somewhere along the line, Wright realised that it would be more interesting for people to control the building’s inhabitants, and thus *The Sims* was born. Released on 4th February 2000 to rave reviews, it quickly became one of the best-selling PC game of all time, shifting a total of 11.24 million units. Expansion packs followed, such as *The Sims: Unleashed*, which introduced pets, and *The Sims: Hot Date*, which added a ‘downtown’ area to the neighbourhood. A sequel was released in 2004, then another in 2010, and the most recent iteration, *The Sims 4*, hit the shelves

three years ago – all have been resounding successes for Maxis, but none have come close to the innovation and success of the first iteration.

The Sims sits uneasily among the canon of videogame classics. Typically, the experience the game developer aims to provide is one that acts as a radical departure from our normal lives, from the exploration of ancient ruins in *Lara Croft*, to running and gunning in *Grand Theft Auto*. Even in the earliest games, players were thrust into improbable scenarios, whether it be the earth-defence mission of *Space Invaders*, or the hallucinatory endless labyrinths of *Pac-Man*. In sharp contrast, *The Sims* simply aims to replicate the player’s life. We are able to create little avatars of ourselves, and spend our downtime watching them live out lives similar to our owns; in a meta-twist, *The Sims 4* allows sims to play *The Sims* on their own computers. *The Sims* therefore provides us with that most mundane and complex of fantasies: real life.

The central theme of *The Sims* is work. Once your family has been created, they are provided with the arbitrary sum of 20,000 simoleons (§), the in-game currency, with which to buy a property. Presumably, the simoleon was used as a stand in for any real life currency, but given the fact that the neighbourhood consists of archetypes of American vernacular architecture set against an isometric suburbia, you’d be forgiven for merely viewing it as a pseudonym for the dollar. §20,000 isn’t much – just enough to purchase the house and furnish it with the most basic of necessities.

Upon opening ‘Buy Mode’, pausing the game and initiating catchy music, you are presented with a selection of different objects, ranging from cheap plastic flamingos and lawn chairs to modern sculptures and plush sofas. Those items that you cannot afford are visible, but covered in a forbidding red filter – like in all

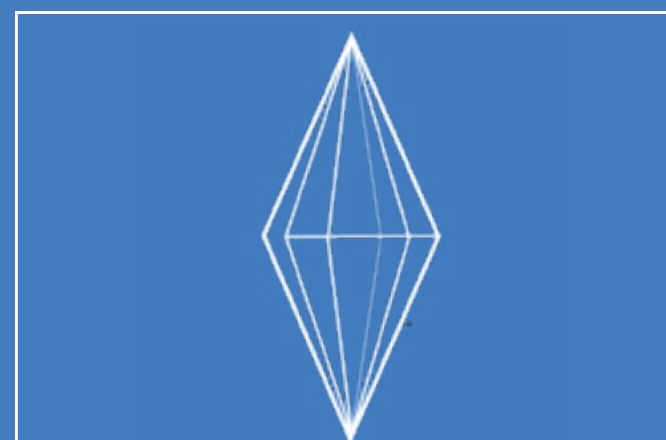


Figure 2: The “plumbob” indicates which sim you are currently controlling. Originally intended to be a placeholder before the designers created something else, it has gone down in gaming design history.



Figure 3: Players are faced with three different game options: Live, Buy, and Build. Acting as a vast catalogue, the Buy Mode shows players all the things they could purchase, once they begin to work and earn money

consumerist societies, the objects you need, or are told you need, are dangled just out of your reach. Since the cheapest objects impact negatively on your sims’ ‘Room’ mood score, and generally fail to efficiently satisfy their needs, *The Sims* forces the player to adopt an aspirational mind-set, wherein they pine for flat screen TVs and matching dining sets. Add to this the fact that utility bills continually pile up, and the player is left with no other option than to force their sims to work.

While some areas of *The Sims* are close approximations to reality, other aspects are beguiling. One such feature is the lack of weekends or time off: for your sims, every single day is a working day, and any relaxation must be done in the period between clocking off from the job and going to bed, preparing for another day of labour. The seven expansion packs to the game added in Frankenstein monsters and genies, magic spells and movie superstars, but did not include the concept of ‘retirement’. The sims must work every day of their lives, which – provided there are no accidents, are endless. A lifetime of work without end stretches out before us like a Kafkaesque nightmare. The closest comparison in the world of videogames I can think of is *Molleindustria’s Every Day The Same Dream*, a short art-house game in which you control a faceless individual navigating a grey world of repetitive work, and disenchanted by modern alienation of labour. It makes its point in a radically different way to *The Sims*, but both share a deep sense of unease.

The Sims itself doesn’t have victory conditions; there is no actual ‘end’ to the game, which can continue as long as the player’s attention-span allows. However, it is possible to reach the ‘end’ of a career, past which point your sim will no longer be promoted. Promotions are achieved through increases in both the number of friends a sim has, and their relevant skills – a hearts and minds approach to career development, if you will. The ‘Politics’ career path, for example, requires high levels of charisma, as well as huge numbers of friends – in *The Sims*, as in real life, it’s all a popularity contest. The result of this mechanism is to transform features of

life like friendship and knowledge, which are traditionally viewed as intrinsically valuable, into things possessing mere instrumental value. Friends are only used to secure your next promotion; knowledge is a means of increasing your sim’s labour value.

The centrality of work to *The Sims* can be seen in the etymological myth that has surrounded the company. Although untrue, many believe that ‘Maxis’ refers to 6 AM spelt backwards, a legend actively encouraged by the easter egg in *SimCity 3000* that stated “Do you know that Maxis spelled backwards is Six AM?” 6 AM is, in Western society, heavily associated with the beginning of the working day; the shrill tone of an alarm going off at such an early hour is, across a variety of media, indelibly linked to the beginning of work. In *The Sims*, it is the time that your sims will naturally wake themselves, ready to begin another day in their endless life of labour.

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Another key theme in *The Sims* is that of simplification, which is understandable, given the vast diversity of human life and the limited processing power of computers. Your sim’s personality is shrunk down to five main characteristics: neatness, niceness, outgoingness, playfulness, and activeness. The entire diversity of human temperament in *The Sims* is reduced to a balance, or imbalance, of these five factors. Similarly, the realm of possible knowledge is represented by 6 different ‘skills’, which can be improved by interaction with objects; for example, a sim may increase their logic skill by playing chess until the bar above their head fills up. Some have criticised this as being far too simplistic, such as Janet Murray, the seminal digital media scholar, who said that humans were far more complex than that. While undoubtedly true, one only has to look at the continuing popularity of psychometric tests, such as the Myers-Briggs classification, to see how many of us yearn to be reduced down to simpler individuals.

While *The Sims* may represent a radical departure from the goal-orientated action-based games of the 1990s, it has a number of features in common with the Role Playing Game (RPG) genre. Like RPGs, simulation games are centred around an open-ended state of play, one in which the ‘end’ is relative, and often set by the player. *The Sims* also shares with RPGs an emphasis on ‘grinding’ – an engagement in repetitive mechanical tasks in order to progress to a new level. While traditionally associated with MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Runescape*, *The Sims* uses the

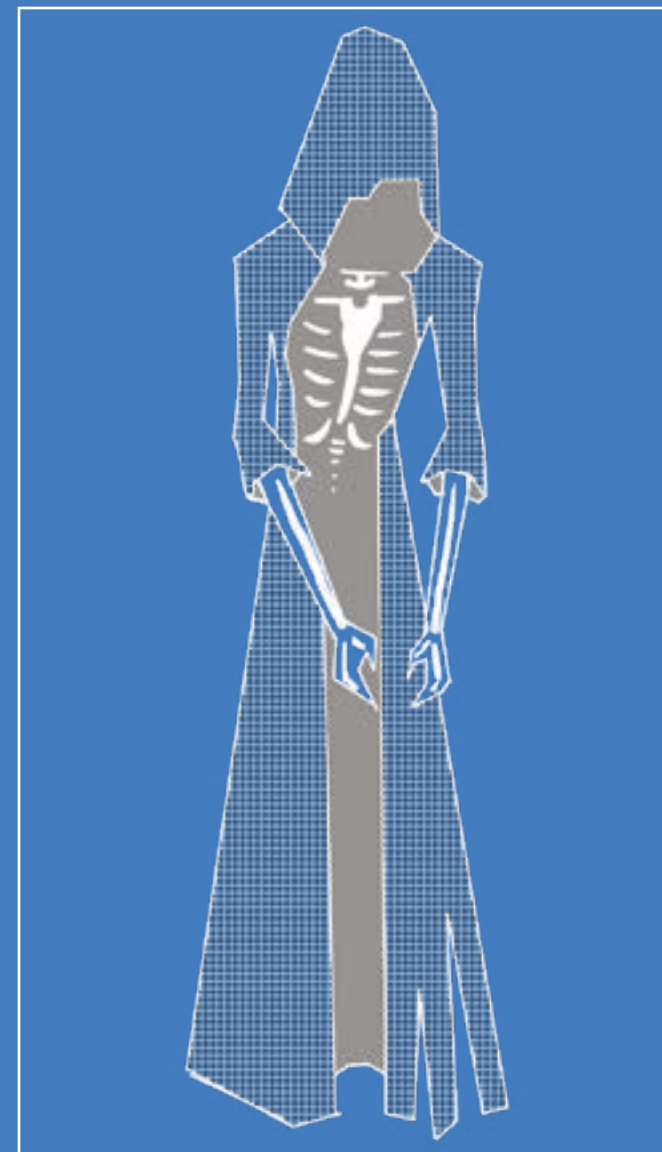


Figure 4: If your sims happen to perish, they will receive a visit from the Grim Reaper. They are given the opportunity to “cheat death” by playing *Rock-Paper-Scissors*, but if they fail they are removed from the game, leaving behind ashes in an urn, and a mourning family.

career path algorithm to encourage players to force their sims to repetitively work on their skills, in order to gain the points needed for career progression.

So far, so innocuous, but where the grinding aspect in *The Sims* becomes more questionable is in social interactions. The relationship between two different sims may be measured using the relationship bar, which spans from -100 (indicating mortal enemies) to 100 (indicating best friends); clicking on another sim will open up a number of different possible interactions, which may be friendly, romantic, or mean. In order to increase your relationship with another sim (an indirect form of ‘levelling up’, as it were), you will need to repeat particular social interactions over and over again, ensuring that your conversational partner does not get bored. In real life, telling someone seven jokes in a row will earn you a bemused look, but in *The Sims* such practice is actively encouraged. By reducing human interaction, something so nuanced, so complex, to a series of grinding tasks, *The Sims* encourages us to see relationships

as mere algorithms – kind interactions in, an increase in the number of friends out – which in turn lead to further career progression.

But not all of us play the game in such a straight-forward RPG style. Some stay true to the architectural origins of *The Sims*, and attempt to build luxurious dwellings, filled with expensive, yet tasteful, furniture. Whether or not the player chooses this method, or focuses on career progression, the end result is largely the same: a manor house filled with the trappings of wealth, and all that a sim could desire. But what then? What happens to the game once this endgame of the American dream has been reached?

For me, it is at this point that the game begins to lose interest. Where a sim family is rich enough that no object in the Buy catalogue is out of their reach, we begin to enter a sense of listless purposelessness – once we have attained all the possessions (a limit quantified by need, not by supply – in the sim-world, resources are infinite), the goal of our sims' lives is removed. *The Sims* centres itself around work, and as such seems to clearly reflect entrenched capitalism, where we can only find meaning through cycles of labour and consumption. Once our virtual avatars have attained enough wealth, we are faced with an existential crisis out of which there are two escapes: starting over, or death.

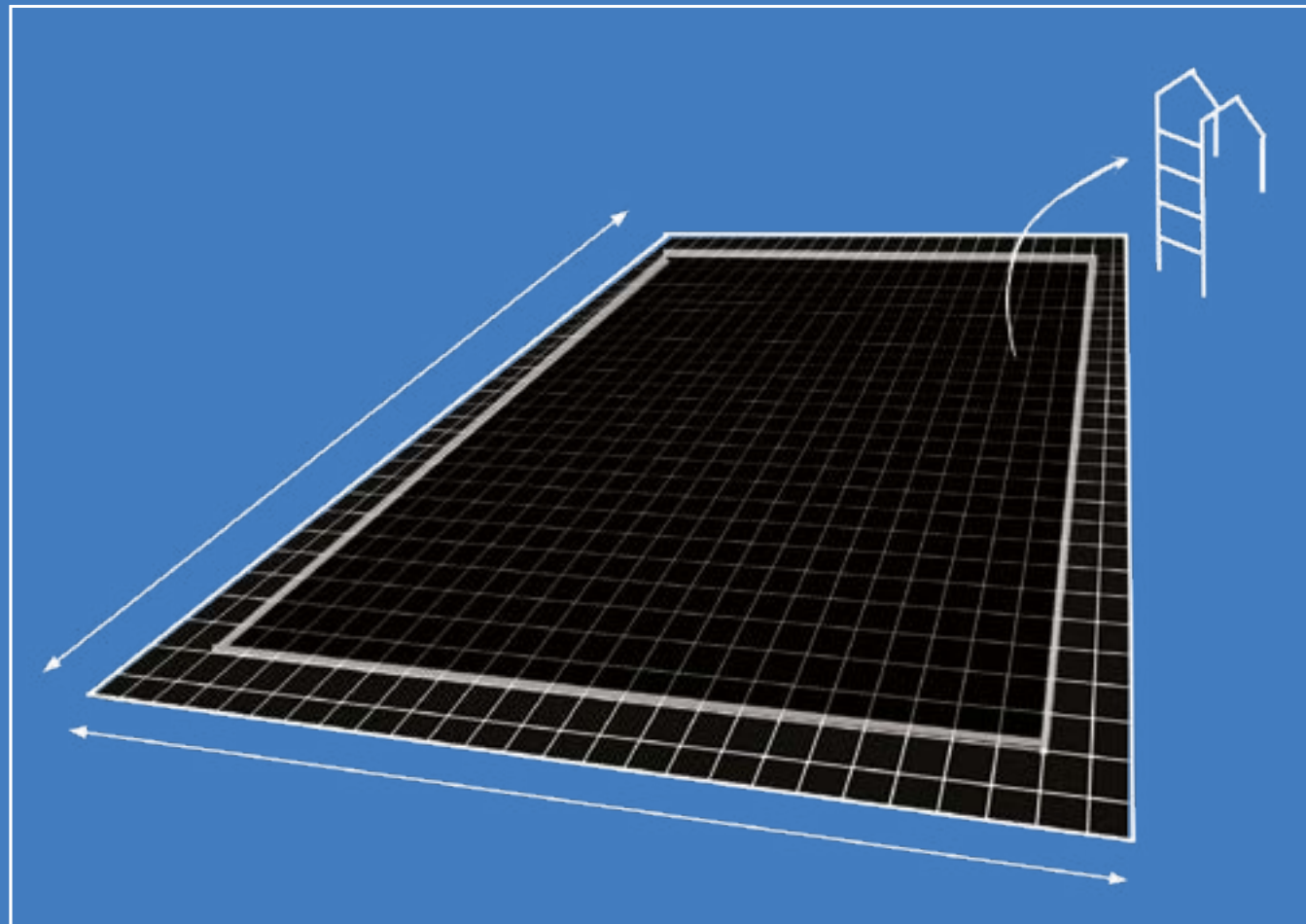


Figure 5: Alongside electrocution, immolation, and starvation, the final method of death in *The Sims* is drowning, which players typically achieve by placing their sim in a swimming pool and removing the ladder. Unable to exit the pool, your sim will instead flounder around until they tire, before sinking to the bottom of the pool. Many players have strong memories of doing such an act as soon as they had a copy of the game.

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The original base-game of *The Sims* provides us with only four possible deaths: electrocution, starvation, fire, and drowning. Later iterations and expansion packs added in a myriad of other creative ways for us to torture and dispose of our sims, but there is an attractive simplicity to these original four methods of death: they remind me of the points of a compass, or perhaps the four humours – fixed and exact (and exacting). Sims are not only unable to die from old age, but seem immune from the aging process altogether: child sims do not turn into adults, and – just as adults are stuck in a cycle of work – children must go to school every day (it is worth pointing out that the penalties of breaking out of this cycle are more severe for children – they will be sent off to military school, never to be seen again).

The striking result of this is to transform all instances of death in *The Sims* into a personal failing on the part of the player. While in the real world death can be seen as a chance of misfortune – blameless, although certainly not victimless; by eliminating deaths from illness, or crime, or old age, *The Sims* confers an enormous responsibility. As it says in the manual, “if they die, it is your responsibility

alone”. If your sim starves, it is because you haven’t provided them with enough food; if they burn, it is because you lacked the foresight to install fire alarms. As such, despite the fact that you can turn on ‘autonomy’ in the settings, *The Sims* embraces a form of determinism in which the ultimate decisions – those of life and death – are controlled by the player, who is raised to the status of a miniature God.

There is a deep undercurrent of unease that runs through *The Sims*, one that is reinforced by the glee with which some players torture their sims. In my instruction manual for *The Sims*, the language used tends to encourage players to experiment in making their sims’ lives as miserable as possible: it speaks of “mismanagement” of their affairs, of how you can “ruin their lives”. The internet is littered with innumerable videos of players torturing their sims in a number of ways, typically by placing them in a small room with no exit, and watching as they slowly starve. *The Sims* highlights the delight which we inflict cruelty, albeit virtual, giving credence to the Nietzschean idea of an instinct for cruelty.

So does *The Sims* – with its emphasis on endless consumption, its bland presentation of modern suburbia, its endless cycle of work and rest – represent a parody of modern capitalist culture? Wright certainly intended for it to be read as a satire of society: “If you sit there and build a big mansion that’s all full of stuff...you realise that all these objects end up sucking up all your time...and it’s actually kind of a parody of consumerism, in which at some point your stuff takes over your life” However, others disagree: Frasca writes that while *The Sims* may poke fun at consumerism, ‘since it rewards the player every time she buys new stuff, I do not think this could be considered parody’. For Frasca, the more important ideological claim made by *The Sims* is merely that life can be simulated.

While the nature of videogames, whose designers legislate algorithmic laws, make them ripe for interpretation, I believe that *The Sims* functions as neither a parody nor a tacit endorsement of consumer society. As Frasca writes, “the author does not set the meaning of a simulation, but it is rather interpreted by the player” – regardless of what Will Wright intended, once *The Sims* has been downloaded onto our computers, it takes on a life of its own. In some sense, when we play *The Sims*, there occurs a cybernetic version of Roland Barthes’ ‘death of the author’, where the programmer’s intentions do not carry over to her creation – this is a feature exacerbated by allowing the player to take screenshots and establish a ‘family album’, encouraging the player to form their own narrative.



Figure 6: In *The Sims*, it is possible to pause, fastforward, and “superspeed” the game. This reduces the mundanity of watching your sim sleep, or waiting for your sim to get back from work, but doesn’t change the fact that you’re actually just spending your free time living the lives of others. While *The Sims* may allow the player to act as a God by speeding up time, it doesn’t allow us to rewind it – when we make a mistake, the mistake is forever (unless you’ve got a save backed-up).

What *The Sims* is doing, therefore, moves past parody. It is fruitful to bear in mind the distinction expressed by post-modern theorist Frederik Jameson between parody and pastiche: while both involve a sense of mimicry, pastiche is a neutral mimicry, “without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter”. In this sense *The Sims* is nothing more than a mere ‘blank parody’. In its recreation of human life, *The Sims* does not express an opinion; it is emotionally blank. All it does is reflect our existence, allowing us to be the judges. Whether we read it as a parody or an endorsement of consumerism says more about ourselves than the game.

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My own reading of *The Sims* is that it works as a videogame version of a security blanket, shielding us from social, economic, and political worries. *The Sims* replicates real life, but with all the rough edges smoothed off, rendering it hospitable and welcoming. Consider things like racism: in a nod to diversity, the game allows you to alter the skin tone of your avatars, but these are nothing more than lines of code, and make absolutely no effect to what happens in game; even the skin colour of your sims’ offspring is decided on randomly, eliminating any ideas of race. Similarly, same-sex relationships are possible within the game, but they do not provoke any reaction from your sims’ friends and neighbours; and anything women sims can do, male ones can do too, bar getting pregnant. *The Sims*, therefore, provides us with the idealised utopia of a world that is post-gender, post-sexuality, and post-race; logging on allows us to forget that bigotry exists in the real world, even if only for a couple of hours.

As well as looking forward to this utopia, *The Sims* allows players to look back. While the buy catalogue is large enough to cover a number of different eras, the relentless optimism and endless consumption reminds me of the 1950s and 60s – that period of

American dominance, regularly referred to as a ‘simpler time’, when, with the benefit of rose-tinted glasses, all was right with the world. The game also takes us back to the specific time before the events of 9/11, and the ushering in of a terror-obsessed panoptic world. As terms like ‘war on terror’ and ‘Patriot Act’ become more and more commonplace, people in Western society began to experience a sense of unease, and the emancipatory vision of the computer as a means of social liberation disintegrated, to be replaced with NSA monitoring, ‘Big Brother’ society, and mass data surveillance. To play *The Sims* allows us to forget that politics exists – the closest *The Sims* comes to a political statement is in forcing all players to buy their homes, making society based around property, but nothing else forces the player to look at political quandaries.

When we play *The Sims*, therefore, we are soothed by this lack of economic and political turbulence. *The Sims*, while it is supposedly modelled on the world, removes anything from the world that could be provoking or challenging: the family we create does not need to worry about whether or not they will be able to get a job, they do not need to worry about Brexit, or the Middle East, or the presidential election. *The Sims* provides a pancea for our modern sense of alienation and confusion, taking us to a world before it was made difficult.

I believe that *The Sims* will continue to carry this kind of nostalgia with it, but in the coming years it will also begin to accrue another kind of appeal. In their book, *Inventing the Future*, left-wing writers Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams make the case that increasingly sophisticated technology, coupled with an increase in automation, could usher in a post-capitalist age. As the neoliberal project begins to falter, evidenced by the financial crisis and the lurch towards austerity, Srnicek and Williams put forward a new vision of the future, one in which working hours will be cut and a universal basic income implemented. Whether or not this will actually occur, their

prediction that our burgeoning technological power will undercut the need for raw labour seems to be sound, and in the future it is likely that – unless things rapidly change – we may be facing a world without work. In such a world, *The Sims* may provide us with a different kind of attraction: with its emphasis on the centrality of labour, the ease with which your sims can find and keep jobs, *The Sims* can serve as a throwback to a time when work was a reality. In *The Sims* there will be no technological revolution. There will be no post-capitalism. And so when we plug in, *The Sims* can provide us with a nostalgic look back to before the world was automated.

As we have seen, *The Sims* leaves itself open to a multitude of interpretations: the neutral isometric world of pixilated suburbia allows us to read it in any number of ways. *The Sims* may be an anti-consumerist parody of American life, a soma-esque escape from the problems of the real world, or a nostalgic amusement in a post-capitalist future. In attempting to replicate life, *The Sims*’ innate blankness holds a mirror up to our society. Astonishingly advanced for its time, and ground-breaking in the videogame world, *The Sims* provides us with much more than an opportunity to play God: it offers us the chance to take a deep look into our own human nature, and come out the other side enriched. ✎

The History of Storytelling in Videogames

Words by Dani Hernandez Perez

Videogames tell stories – not just through their images, text and sound, but also through their interactivity. The first commercially successful videogame that began defining the medium was *Pong* in 1972. In the 40 years since we have created an industry that handles more money than the entirety of the music and film industry combined, and tells tales that are equally compelling. How did we get here? How did storytelling develop from fake ping pong paddles to crying over Aerith's death in *Final Fantasy VII* and beyond?

In the early days, games were all about mechanics: game creators did not bother with immersive plotlines. Hardware could barely run anything, constraining game design. And most arcade games were seen as technological feats of their time, with the ability to play with a machine enough of a novelty on its own. Much like the early days of cinema, the first true games displayed their mechanics through a shallow plot that could barely be regarded

as a story, much less part of a bigger 'lore'. The aim of *Space Invaders* was not to make you feel like the last line of defense against an alien invasion, and when *Jumpman* (Mario's original name) came out, all of its narrative was laid out in the accompanying manual, with very little development to the story itself playing out on-screen – not an uncommon practice at the time.

By the mid 80s, a change to the way experiences were delivered had emerged. *The Legend of Zelda* was released in 1986, introducing a save system. This opened the fourth dimension to game design, as each game session did not have to start from the beginning of the game, and was subsequently adopted by the vast majority of game genres with a few exceptions. The state of the game could be stored, stopped, and resumed. Open worlds became possible, and the concept of playing through a story was born. Instead of revealing a game through mechanics, the interaction of these mechanics with the world

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Space Invaders. Taito



The Secret of Monkey Island. LucasArts



The Legend of Zelda. Nintendo

– the stages and levels – became the focus of attention, plot development, and game exposition. This also meant that a larger set of game features could be expanded upon: Link could not only slash his sword, he could spin, shoot arrows, plant bombs, and acquire new items, creating a sense of achievement and progression that previous games were severely lacking.

As time progressed, tales began to be told outside of the playable mechanics. Mirroring the success of the film industry, a whole branch of games were born. *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) gave a critically acclaimed start to graphic adventures. And even today, titles like *Heavy Rain* (2010) or *Until Dawn* (2015) keep refining the interactive movie scene, allowing you to step into your favourite generic American teenage horror movie. A personal favourite is the innovative 'environmental narrative': this emphasises storytelling through map layout, enemy location, item drops, music, and much more. FromSoftware, creators of the *Dark Souls* franchise, do a wonderful job of it. For example, the player can deduce a connection between a boss, and two previous bosses in the first *Dark Souls* title through the incorporation of musical motifs of the characters from the original game in the theme of the new boss.

The games that started the industry, those interested in engaging mechanics with little focus on a storyline, also evolved and improved over time. From *Tron* (1982), *Super Mario Bros* (1985), all the way to the modern age with titles such as *Skate* (2007) or *Mirror's Edge* (2008). While you might not think the latter two fall into this category, try to imagine *Tony Hawk's* without any skating mechanics, or *Portal* without, well, portals. Beautiful things happen when this method meets storytelling. The *Hotline Miami* saga (2012-2015) makes its mechanics, and how the player feels about them, a major piece of its storytelling. And *Undertale* owes part of its might to how every battle is tailored to each enemy, with personalised combat mechanics for each encounter. These tell you more about the world you're playing in, and what you're fighting for and against.

In the end, videogames differentiate themselves from other mediums because they allow players to play a story, to be part of it, to shape it to their own liking. Literature, film, performing, painting, cannot deliver this. Of course, this is not an easy task. Even when a game's story is well written and its mechanics are compelling, there may not necessarily be coherence between the two. This is known as ludonarrative dissonance: the conflict between a game's narrative and its gameplay. Take for instance the newly

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released *Uncharted 4*: its story pivots around the idea that Nathan, the main protagonist, wants to leave his adventurous life behind, and thus ending all the maddening slaughter that has been the focus of the whole saga. Yet somehow the game manages to make you go through endless stages of cover based shooting, entirely defeating the point that the game is trying to make. In fact, if you stick around enough to kill a 1000 enemies, you will be rewarded with a trophy named 'Ludonarrative dissonance'.

“I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself.”

Roger Ebert

