

2 Billy Sim 0:12

I am not a benevolent God.

I am watching myself writhe in a puddle of my own urine, and I offer no response. I have not slept or eaten for days. My cries go unrecognized and my loneliness is ignored. I am watching myself endure a torture worse than death, yet I decline every opportunity to end this self-imposed nightmare. Darkness...imprisoning me...all that I see, absolute horror. I cannot live, I cannot die, trapped in myself; my body is my holding cell.

I am the master, and I am the puppet. And I am not the type of person who still plays video games.

I realize there is a whole generation of adults born in the seventies who currently play Sega and Nintendo as much as they banged away on their Atari 5200 and their George Plimpton-endorsed Intellivision in 1982. I am not one of them. I agree with *Media Virus* author Douglas Rushkoff's theory that home video game consoles were the reason kids raised in the 1980s so naturally embraced the virtual mentality—we never thought it seemed strange to be able to manually manipulate what we saw on a video screen—but I'll never accept pixels killing other pixels as an art form (or a sport, or even a pastime). A homeless man once told me that dancing to rap music is the cultural equivalent of masturbating, and I'd sort of feel the same way about playing John Madden Football immediately after filing my income tax: It's fun, but—somehow—vaguely pathetic.

However, some things are just too enchanting (and just too weird) to ignore. Those were my thoughts when I first read about *The Sims*, arguably the most wholly postmodern piece of entertainment ever created. Much like the TV show *Survivor*, the Pokémon phenomenon, and Parliament Funkadelic, *The Sims* is a keenly constructed product that seems hopelessly absurd to anyone unfamiliar with it but completely clear to anyone who's experienced it even once. Developed by Electronic Arts, *The Sims* is a video game where you do all the things you would do in real life if you weren't playing a video game. You create a human character, and it exists. That's it. Your character does things like read the newspaper. He takes naps, plays pinball, and empties the garbage. Your character invites friends over to his house, and they have discussions about money and sailboats. You buy oak bookcases and you get pizza from Domino's. *This is the whole game*, and there is no way to win, except to keep yourself from becoming depressed. *The Sims* is an escapist vehicle for people who want to escape to where they already are, which is why I thought this game was made precisely for me.

Who Am I? Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Who Else Could Be Me?

The Sims is the only video game I have ever purchased. My goal—and probably the initial goal of most people who buy The Sims—was to create a perfect replica of the life I already have. I would build a character who looked just like me, and I would name him “Chuck Klosterman.” I would design his home exactly like my own, and I would have him do all the things I do every day. Perhaps I unconsciously assumed I would learn something about myself through this process, although I have no idea what that could possibly be. Maybe it was just the desire to watch myself live. Pundits like to claim that a game like The Sims taps into the human preoccupation with voyeurism, but it’s really the complete opposite. I don’t care about peeping into anyone else’s keyhole; I only want to see into Chuck’s.

I designed my digital self as accurately as possible: pasty skin, thick glasses, uncommitted haircut, ill-fated trousers. Outlining my character’s personality traits was a little more complicated, because nobody (myself included) truly knows how they act. I’ve never met anyone I’d classify as self-aware: It’s been my experience that most extroverted people think they’re introverts, and many introverted people make a similarly wrong-headed juxtaposition about being extroverts. Maybe that’s why extroverts won’t shut up (because they always fear they’re not talking enough) while introverts just sit on the couch and do nothing (because they assume everybody is waiting for them to be quiet). People just have no clue about their genuine nature. I have countless friends who describe themselves as “cynical,” and they’re all wrong. True cynics would never classify themselves as such, because it would mean that they know their view of the world is unjustly negative; despite their best efforts at being grumpy, a self-described cynic is secretly optimistic about normal human nature. Individuals who are truly cynical will always insist they’re pragmatic. The same goes for anyone who claims to be “creative.” If you define your personality as creative, it only means you understand what is *perceived* to be creative by the world at large, so you’re really just following a rote creative template. That’s the *opposite* of creativity. Everybody is wrong about everything, just about all the time.

But ANYWAY...I eventually created a Chuck in my own image and dropped him into 6 Sin Lane, a \$15,000 home on the outskirts of an underdeveloped suburb of SimCity, a relic from an earlier incarnation of this particular game. SimCity was the first “simulated reality” game to capture people’s imagination, although SimCity seemed (at least retrospectively) oddly innocuous: The object of that game was to design a vibrant community (transportation systems, hospitals, animal shelters, etc.). It was really just a game for amateur city planners, which is actually less boring than it sounds. SimCity led to SimEarth, where players could exorcise their jones to be an Old Testament God—you took a dead planet and you created a breathable atmosphere and you caused volcanoes and you tried to spawn a few dinosaurs. This was a little more psychologically akimbo, but still not perverse; SimEarth was almost like an eighth-grade science project. However, The Sims broke new ground for electronic pathos. It’s not a game about managing life (like *SimCity*) or even creating life (like *SimEarth*); it’s a game about *experiencing* life, and experiencing it in the most mundane fashion possible. Whenever unimaginative TV critics tried to explain the subtle, subversive genius of *Seinfeld*, they always went back to the hack argument that “It was about nothing.” But that sentiment was always a little wrong. *Seinfeld* was about nothing, but its underlying message was that nothingness still has a weight and a mass and a conflict. What seemed so new about *Seinfeld* was that it didn’t need a story to have a plot: Nothing was still something. The Sims forces that aesthetic ever further: Nothing is everything.

My Life As a Sim. Or (Perhaps More Accurately) My Life As My Life.

As I had long suspected, my six-year-old niece Katie is not the former lead singer of the Talking Heads. This had been somewhat obvious for a long time, but never more so than the first time I saw a copy of *The Sims*, which I happened to find at her parents' house in rural North Dakota.

Since I had been fascinated by news stories about this game, I immediately tried to play *The Sims* when I noticed it was on the hard drive of my sister-in-law's computer. For about fifteen minutes, my seminal pre-Chuck wandered about the empty residential lots of Sim Village, trying to start conversations with inanimate objects. Young Katie couldn't help but notice my ineptitude and immediately tried to show me how the game was played (and—inadvertently—how existence works, although I doubt she would have explained it that way).

Katie displayed amazing dexterity at *The Sims*, effortlessly building a home and furnishing it with a cornucopia of household goods she could never operate in reality. She then instructed me to find a job and to make friends with other Sim citizens, especially the female ones (this is somewhat predictable, as Katie profoundly enjoys asking me if I have a girlfriend). However, I immediately had dozens of questions for young Katie about my new life: If I don't yet have a job, how could I afford this residence? Who put all that food in my fridge? Elves, perhaps? Can I trust them? Why don't I need a car? Where did I go to college? Don't I have any old friends I could call for moral support? *This is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful wife. Well, how did I get here?*

Unlike David Byrne, these questions did not interest Katie. "You just live here," she said. "That's the way it is." But where did I get all this money? "You just have money." But where did I come from? "Nobody knows. You're just here." Am I one of the 55 million Americans living without health insurance? "Be quiet! You won't get sick." This went on for several minutes, finally ending in a stalemate when Katie realized warm cookies were suddenly available in the kitchen. However, something struck me about this dialogue: It was uncharacteristic for Katie to be so unwilling to tell harmless lies. If she had been playing with her Barbie Dream House and I asked her why Barbie had four pairs of shoes but only two decent outfits, Katie would have undoubtedly spent the next half hour explaining that Barbie purchased the extra shoes while shopping in Hong Kong with Britney Spears and planned to wear them to a cocktail party in Grandma's basement. When playing with real-world toys, there's no limit to the back story Katie will create for anything, animate or inanimate. That's how little kids are. But somehow it's different when life is constructed on a sixteen-inch screen; in the world of *The Sims*, Katie won't color outside the lines of perception. The rules become fixed. Fabricating a Sim-human's college experience would be no different than randomly deciding that 90210's Brenda Walsh got a C+ in tenth-grade biology. Those facts aren't available to anyone. Clearly, video technology cages imagination; it offers interesting information to use, but it implies that all peripheral information is irrelevant and off-limits. Computers make children advance faster, but they also make them think like computers.

I tried to keep this in mind when I started my new-and-improved fake life upon my own purchase of *The Sims*. My hypothesis was that the game's accuracy would be dependent on my willingness to think within the confines of the game's creators; I had to think like a machine. And it's quite possible that this initial postulate was right. But I'll never really know, because I couldn't do it. As I made my little SimChuck live and work, all I could think about was what I would think about.

What makes The Sims so popular is its dogged adherence to the minutiae of subsistence, and that's where we're supposed to feel the realism. But the realism I felt was the worst kind; it was the hopeless realization that I was doomed to live in my own prison, just like the singer from Creed. The Sims makes the unconscious conscious, but not in an existential Zen way; The Sims forces you to think about how even free people are eternally enslaved by the processes of living. Suddenly, I had to remember to go to the bathroom. I had to *plan* to take a shower. Instead of eating when I was hungry, I had to anticipate an unfelt hunger that was always impending. If I didn't wake up at least an hour before work, I'd miss my ride and get fired. And though I need to do all those things in reality, the thoughts scarcely cross my mind unless I'm plugged into this game.

After playing The Sims for my first ninety minutes, I paused the action, logged off my computer, and drove to a Chinese restaurant called The Platinum Dragon. I had to pass through some road construction, and it suddenly occurred to me that there would *always* be road construction—not always on this particular road, but somewhere. There will never be a point in my lifetime when all the highways are fixed. It's theoretically plausible that my closest friend might someday abandon me for no reason whatsoever, but it's completely *impossible* to envision a day where I could drive from New York to California without hitting roadwork somewhere along the way. It will always exist, and there's nothing I can do about it. And for the first time, that reality made me sad.

Chuck Vs. Chuck. Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Why I Don't Understand Anybody.

There seems to be an inordinate number of movies about mankind going to war with machines (*Terminator*, *A.I.*, that Stephen King flick with all the AC/DC songs, etc.). That plot device always struck me as something of a cheap shot; as far as I can tell, machines have been nothing but completely civil to us. However, I can assure you that this scenario will never be a problem, even if they completely turn on us. It turns out that computers are the most gutless goddamn cowards you'll ever meet.

My SimChuck has absolutely no grit. He is constantly bummed out, forever holding his head and whining about how he's "not comfortable" or "not having fun." At one point I bought him a pretty respectable wall mirror for \$300, and he responded by saying "I'm too depressed to even look at myself." As an alternative, he sat on the couch and stared at the bathroom door. Quite the drama queen, my SimChuck is.

And *why* isn't my SimChuck happy? Because he's a self-absorbed, materialistic prick. This is perhaps the most disturbing element of The Sims: The happiness of the characters is directly proportional to the shit you elect to buy them. As far as I can tell, acquiring electronic equipment and name-brand furniture is just about the only thing Sims find psychologically satisfying.

The shopping angle appears to be the part of the game its designers found most compelling, as their catalog of faux products is both massive and detailed. This is the kind of shit that would prompt Tyler Durden to hit somebody in the face. Take the on-screen description of the Soma Plasma TV, for example. Buying this item for \$3,500 increases the owner's fun rating by six full points. And this is what you'd get:

Perfect form...perfect image conformity...perfect entertainment. Soma Consumer Electronics takes the 'plasma phenomenon' to a brave new level in this elegant technology statement. With its incredible image quality, unique form and super thin Flatuspective screen, the Soma Plasma TV is the undisputed leader in nanopixel technology.

It would be fun to claim that this kind of *Price Is Right* product exposition is a treacherous form of unexpected advertising, but that wouldn't be true, as all the products in *The Sims* are fake. And it would make me seem as astute as Chip Lambert if I suggested this game is latently attempting to brainwash children into believing that shopping is an important part of life, but I honestly don't think the wackmobile geeks at Electronic Arts have motives that sinister. It's basically just weird, and it's indisputable proof that *The Sims* is not a strategy game, even though that's what it calls itself. If this was somehow about strategy, all we'd need to know is that getting the biggest television gets you x number of fun points. But nobody cares about the math. The reason so much effort has been placed in the "promotion" of fake *Sims* merchandise is so that its real-life players will enjoy the experience of buying them. It's almost circular logic: If a human playing *The Sims* somehow enjoys pretending to buy a plasma TV that doesn't even exist, it stands to reason that my little SimChuck would profoundly enjoy watching said TV if it were somehow real. By this justification, buying high-end electronics really *should* cure depression.

And what's even more amazing is that this is kind of true, and—ultimately—it's what I'll never understand about human nature (simulated or otherwise). I never enjoy the process of buying anything, but I get the impression that most Americans love it. What *The Sims* suggests is that buying things makes people happy because it takes their mind off being alive. I would think this would actually make them feel worse, but every woman I've ever dated seems to disagree.

To succeed at this game, I am forced to consume like a mofo. Perhaps the greatest chasm between Chuck and SimChuck is that I don't own a bed and he can't live without one. I realize i might seem crazy for a thirty-year-old to exist without a bed, but I just can't get myself to buy one; it never seems worth it, because all I would use it for is sleeping (and once I'm unconscious, what do I care where I'm lying?). I get by fine with my "Sleeping Machine," sort of a self-styled nest in the corner of my bedroom. Oh, I can't deny that some overnight visitors to my chamber of slumber have been "disturbed" by my unwillingness to own a traditional bed, but the simple truth is that I don't need that kind of luxury in my life. My Sleeping Machine provides all the REM I require. I hope never own a bed. But don't tell that to SimChuck. Until I got him his \$1,000 Napoleon Sleigh Bed "made with actual wood and real aromatic cedar"), all he did was cry like a little bitch.

I Need Love. Or (Perhaps Less Accurately) Love Is All Around, But Only Around.

Truth be told, my secret motivation for experimenting with *The Sims* was to see if I could sustain any kind of successful relationship within the scope of the game—essentially "playing" to "get play." I'm guessing this is a pretty big draw for all *Sims* obsessives, since it's hard to imagine how anyone regularly sitting in front of a computer for hours at a time could be having much sex. I realize that's a stereotype, but the popularity of *The Sims* almost irrefutably proves it to be true: This game is single-mindedly designed to be a reflection of a normal life that's filled with normal human interaction.

Apparently, that notion is so far removed from gamers that it can only be pursued through a fantasy realm.

Still, there's something oddly Utopian about The Sims relationship-driven, peacenik theology. Unlike other video games I've enjoyed in the past—The Legend of Zelda, Elevator Action, the original Nintendo version of Metal Gear, etc.—The Sims does not require me to kill virtually everyone I meet. As I meet other Sims in the neighborhood, my initial options are to talk with them (understandable), joke with them (also understandable), tickle them (somewhat less understandable), or sneak up behind their back and scare the crap out of them (pretty incomprehensible, but hard to resist). Our interactions are marked by thought bubbles that contain little pictures of the conversation topic; the characters don't speak with real words. They talk in a goofy pigeon language that has been compared to the teachers in old *Peanuts* cartoons, although I tend to think it sounds like a combination of French, Ebonics, and the Japanese pop band Pizzicato Five (interestingly, *Sims* players in different counties sometimes assume that what they are hearing is real dialogue they merely can't decipher—Electronic Arts has fielded phone calls from Americans who thought they had accidentally purchased the Spanish version, Germans who suspected they had been sent the Italian version, Brazilians who thought they had the Canadian version, etc., etc., etc.).

The first two people I (“I” being “SimChuck”) meet in “Simburbia” are Mortimer and Bella, a guy with a mustache and a woman wearing a tight red dress. They evidently live nearby. Mortimer is a lot like my real-world friend Dr. Dave in Akron: He's always up for anything. Bella is a tougher nut to crack; she often glances at her watch when I talk to her. But because Bella's a woman, I keep talking (and talking, and talking), and I throw a little tickling into the mix, and I talk some more, and in no time at all I am given the opportunity to select the “flirt” option whenever I meet Bella on the street.

I start calling Bella on my SimPhone several times a day, and she always comes over immediately. This SimChuck is one suave bastard. A little pink heart icon appears next to Bella's on-screen dossier, and she begins defining me as “The Sim I adore.” We smooch hardcore. Yet—for some reason—I can't come up with a finishing move. It's not so much that Bella declines to sleep with me; it's more that I don't know how to ask. I stand by my bed and call her name, and she runs right over...but then we start talking about skiing. I buy a billiard table in order to impress her (and to set the stage for some, *Penthouse Forum*, Cybill-Shepherd-in-*The Last Picture Show*- style shagging), but all she does is clap her hands. I mean, I *know* she's comfortable with me: She has no qualms about using the toilet while I'm standing right next to her, an experience that's light-years more intimate than most kinds of oral sex. But SimChuck remains denied.

And you know why SimChuck gets no nookie? Because Bella was lying to me all along. At the height of our relationship, I invite Bella over for a game of pool (and “maybe more”), and she says, “Sure, I'd love to come over. Can I bring a friend?” I reluctantly agree, but guess who shows up: Mortimer! It turns out he and Bella are married. Upon watching Bella's hello embrace, Mortimer immediately slaps me, and we kind of scuffle. I try to call him the next morning to apologize, but he tells me to get bent. In a matter of simulated hours, I've managed to lose my only male acquaintance by *not* having sex with his wife. This is unprecedented. Even Chuck can't compete with the problems of SimChuck. I had no choice but to buy a Zimantz component hi-fi stereo system (\$650).

God's God. Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Will Wright.

After seventy-two hours of Simming I had grown so despondent over the sexless, consumer-obsessed state of my fake life that I called directory assistance and got the number of Electronic Arts in Redwood, California, demanding to speak to Sims creator Will Wright. They directed me to their satellite division Maxis, and I used the Maxis company directory to leave a message with Mr. Wright, assuming he was working on the prototype for Sim-Soul and would most likely never call me back. However, I was wrong: He returned my call in just a few hours and tried to help me understand how I've managed to destroy my life twice.

"If there's any core question with The Sims, it's got to be, 'What is the purpose of life?' Is it to be loved? Is it to be rich? Is it to be successful? They're the same questions you could ask if you never knew the game existed," Wright told me. "But it does seem like some people come to these interesting conclusions about themselves when they play. And if a game changes your perception of the world around you, it's successful."

By that definition, The Sims would, in fact, be classified as art (and art in the truest sense of the word). Wright clearly sees it as such, and he makes a good argument. A forty-two-year-old who never graduated from college (though he did log time at Louisiana State, Louisiana Tech, and the New School in New York City), Wright fell into programming and gaming as an extension of his interest in robotics, a mentality that's readily noticed in Sim behavior.

I explained the conditions of my dilemma to Wright, and—perhaps predictably—he seemed to have heard every one of my questions before. I told him what had happened with Bella. "Yeah, Bella's kind of a slut," he snickered. He explained that his larger vision with The Sims was to show how day-to-day living is—in and of itself—an ongoing strategy problem, which is why so much of The Sims is built around time constraints and the oblique pressure of responsibility. We even had a friendly chat about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which probably wouldn't have happened if I had called the creator of Donkey Kong.

However, Wright bristled when I suggested that The Sims is mostly a glorification of consumerism that ultimately suggests happiness is available at the mall. He didn't necessarily seem annoyed by this accusation, but he remains baffled that everyone who plays The Sims seems to come to that same conclusion.

"Materialism is the red herring of the game," he says. "Nobody seems to pick up on that. The more you play, the more you realize that all the stuff you buy eventually breaks down and creates all these little explosions in your life. If you play long enough, you start to realize that those things won't really make you happy."

When Wright told me this, I immediately asked if what SimChuck needed was a midlife crisis. Maybe if I kept playing, he'd eventually reach a point where he'd be self-actualized, even if I took away his \$1,800 pinball machine. Once again, Wright bristled; he asked if I was talking about the little person in my computer or the little person in my own mind. I told him that it was hard to tell the difference, because we both seemed to be doing the same shit and neither one of us knew why.

“Well, life doesn’t have a score,” Wright said. “I’ve noticed that whenever people play The Sims for the first time, they do all these little experiments. They want to see what their power will do, so they lock a character in a room for five days and watch them starve to death. They’ll try to make somebody electrocute themselves. But at some point, that power is meaningless. It stops being interesting. You need to have somebody pushing back.”

That reminded me of something. Or (perhaps more accurately), that reminded me of *someone*.

I hung up the phone and went back to my computer, opening The Sims and revisiting the place I had been when I started this essay. My SimChuck was still there, frozen in space, hungry and tired and gesturing like a madman, covered in piss. Up until my discussion with Wright, I had assumed individual Sims could not be killed; I thought they were like doomed vampires from Anne Rice novels, forced to exist eternally in a world they did not create. In truth, my Sim was just a confused little guy, still waiting for a reason to live.

I clicked on the “options” key and directed my cursor to the button that said “Free Will.” I deployed actualization, and SimChuck was emancipated. I watched him take a shower and crawl into his Sleeping Machine, where he slept for the next fourteen hours. And then I did the same.

“I don’t know how I feel about MTV’s *The Real World*,” he said. “I mean, is it really *real*? How real is it, really? Is it a depiction of reality, or is it a reflection of what we *perceive* to be reality? They advertise this as ‘reality programming,’ but isn’t anything *programmed* inherently fabricated? How real is real, you know?”

She said nothing. She continued smoking a menthol cigarette. Twenty seconds passed.

“Well, what do you think?” he finally asked.

“About what,” she asked, exhaling through her teeth.

“About *The Real World*,” he repeated. “Do you think it’s real?”

“Compared to what?”

“Well...to...I guess compared to things that are completely real.”

Twenty more seconds passed.

“Is the show taped or edited in the Fourth Dimension?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are the characters robots?”

“No.”

“Can the episodic plotlines only be perceived by people who have ingested mind-expanding hallucinogens, such as lysergic acid diethylamide, mescaline, phencyclidine, ketamine, or psychedelic mushrooms?”

“No.”

“Well then,” she concluded, “it sounds real to me.”