

# Challenge Balance and Diversity: Playing *The Sims* and *The Sims 2*

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## ABSTRACT

How can we begin to empirically analyse computer games as dynamic systems that seek to motivate and facilitate meaningful and pleasurable player activity? This paper suggests that the concept of ‘challenge’ offers a promising starting point for such inquiries. First the notion of challenge will be briefly introduced. Then the *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* will be analysed and compared with regards to their challenges in order to highlight some of their distinct characteristics as games and to identify some of their differences. These games are interesting in terms of challenge because they, according to a narrow definition of games, are borderline games due to their lack of clear overall goals and a winning condition. Still, challenge seems to offer a fruitful frame of understanding, thus showing promise as a foundation for an extended definition of games.

## Keywords

Computer games, challenge, analysis, *The Sims*, *The Sims 2*

## INTRODUCTION

The people simulation games *The Sims* [10] and *The Sims 2* [11] have been highly successful both in terms of sales and devoted fans. Between the release of the first and second generation game, six extensions were sold to an ever growing user group at nearly the same price as the original game. Apart from a transition to more sophisticatedly modelled 3D graphics, the game mechanisms have undergone changes from *The Sims* to *The Sims 2*. Keeping in mind that the first game and its extension were such a great success, why, then, did Maxis introduce these changes in gameplay? There may, of course, be several reasons for this, but here I will focus on the relation between the games’ challenges and players’ strategies of use.

Prior studies of *The Sims*, such as Flanagan [5], Kline et. al. [9] and Frasca’s [6], have mostly been concerned with ideological and cultural aspects of the game. The focus here will be more along the lines of Consalvo’s study [4], albeit with a different perspective, as game mechanisms and playing styles will be central. How can we, taking a starting point in the actual games, begin to analyse computer games as systems that seek to motivate and facilitate meaningful and pleasurable player activity? This paper suggests that the concept of ‘challenge’ offers a promising starting point for exploring this question [8].

First the notion of challenge will be briefly introduced. Then the *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* will be

Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play.

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analysed and compared with regards to their challenges in order to explain both some of the reason for their success as games and to identify some of their differences. The analysis will focus on:

- The games' *expectation frame*.
- The *types* of challenges posed by the games.
- The challenge *initiation* and *management*.

I find these games interesting in terms of challenge because they are borderline games, at least by the standard of the classical definition of games [1, 16], due to their lack of clear overall goals and a winning condition. Still, challenge seems to offer a fruitful frame of understanding, thus showing promise as a foundation for an extended definition of games.

### **THE CHALLENGE GAME**

A game sets up an expectation frame and one or more desirable goals which the player must seek to achieve within the limits and with the means defined by its rules. Thus, all games, except those of pure chance, are created to entertain and train players by engaging them in challenging situations. According to an ordinary dictionary [7] a challenge is a “**1** demanding or stimulating situation. **2** a call to engage in contests, fight, or argument. **3** a questioning of a statement or fact. **4** a demand of a sentry for identification or a password”. All these meanings are retained in my use of the notion. However, in order to use the concept analytically there is a need for a definition which stresses its experiential properties. Thus, I define a challenge as *a situation of resistance that calls for transformative action in order to be resolved, and which either requires enough effort on behalf of the challenged to be non-trivial or whose outcome is not certain from the outset*.

Taking an example from the analysed games, the player who wants a sim to get a promotion must find the time in the daily schedule to gain the skills and number of family friends that a certain level of employment requires. The resistance, in this case, is the criteria determining when a sim may gain a promotion as well as the limited time available. The transformative action is the acquisition of the required skills and friends. As it takes time from other possible endeavours it is a challenge that requires effort and strategising from the player.

Based on a set of rules that define limits and means for reaching one or more desirable goals, game designers construct challenges for players. These challenges are *intended*, and in order to avoid a stand-still in the gaming session, the various challenges must at least have the potential to be solved. Thus, a given intended challenge presupposes affordances and constraints that can be experienced by the player in a meaningful way, informing her more or less explicitly of her tasks and the actions she may take. Players even add their own challenges while playing games. These *additional* challenges function within the designated rule system, but are not enforced or supported by them. A good example related to *The Sims 2* is the ‘legacy challenge’ proposed by the player Pinstar1161 [13].

### **FRAMING CHALLENGES**

Briefly put, *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* are everyday life simulations that let players create and

control virtual characters, houses and neighbourhoods. The games offer players various tools for playing as detailed in table 1:

**Table 1:** Tools offered by the various game modes to the players

	<b>Create a sim</b>	<b>Neighborhood handling *</b>	<b>Live</b>	<b>Buy</b>	<b>Build</b>	<b>Camera**</b>	<b>Album</b>
Enables the player to:	Create sims.	Add features to a neighborhood, move families and houses.	Run the simulation and control the sims.	Buy and arrange objects on a given lot.	Build structures and sculpt landscape.	Take in-game snapshots.	Arrange images and add text.
Time a Crucial factor:	No.	Yes, but the game can be paused.	No.	No.	No.	No.	No.

\* Only available for *The Sims 2*.

\*\* *The Sims 2* provides tools for recording live video sequences from the game.

Neither the manual nor the game sets up any explicit winning conditions for the two games, and the player is free to define her own goals, whether they are to tell interesting stories, create dream houses, or send the sims into all kinds of disasters. Thus, both games are extremely open challenge structures that leave much to the player’s initiative. However, although players to a great extent get to pick and define their own challenges, both games pose intended challenges because the expectation frame – which is culturally derived as well as determined by the game mechanics and the meta-texts surrounding the game – indicates a desirable direction. As the previously mentioned studies have pointed out, this is a direction of growth, achievement and gain. Especially with regards to *The Sims*, but even in the case of *The Sims 2*, the sims’ success and happiness is proportional with their earnings. The more expensive goods they can afford, the more they get time for other things, such as making friends or learning new skills. Likewise, both games revolve around families – though not necessarily the typical nuclear unit – their homes, their relations, and careers. This does not limit the possible challenges of using the games to playing “mum, dad and kids” or “dolls house”, although it confines the possible themes that may be enacted. For instance, while it is possible to kill sims off in a variety of ways, and many players enjoy a destructive playing style [15], the games cannot be turned into a fast paced first person shooter because the particular actions and reactions associated with this format are not available.

## CHALLENGE TYPES

A rough categorisation of challenge types may be derived from the ways players use the games. Thus, looking both at the games affordances and players’ descriptions of their use of the games, it is possible to observe competitive, explorative (in the widest sense), and constructional challenges.

### Competition

Although neither game has a specified winning condition, they still provide competitive situations. Firstly, time is a factor in live mode as sims’ needs, if not fulfilled, grow over time,

and in the case of *The Sims 2* because sims age over time and finally die. Thus, the player who wants to play in accordance with the game's frame of expectation by keeping her sims satisfied and ever more successful enters a race against time; a clearly competitive situation.

An additional competitive element is present in *The Sims 2*. Here each sim has a player-chosen life aspiration as well as wants and fears, allocated to each sim by the system. Meeting a want incurs a reward, while fulfilling a fear incurs a penalty. Thus, the player may *win* or *lose* by taking conscious action in order to achieve a certain state of affairs while striving to hold others at bay. For instance, a family oriented sim may have the want of having ten children. This want is a major challenge for a player to fulfil because a lot of effort goes into conceiving and raising just one child past toddlerhood. In order to get ten children within the limited time period where a sim may bear children, the female sim has to be almost constantly pregnant. The resistance in this situation, then, stems from the race against time and the problems arising from spending most resources on the childbearing project. It is a challenge because the transformation is not easily brought about but requires effort and strategising on behalf of the player.

It is important to remember that the player does not have to enter into the competitive situations offered by the games. She may choose to ignore these and may even deliberately "lose" in order to see the effect of unmet needs and fulfilled fears on the sims. However, as fulfilling wants is equal to winning points and because taking care of sims' needs is the sympathetic thing to do, it does require a lot of conscious effort to ignore the needs and wants in order to pursue other goals, for instance, those of storytelling.

### **Exploration**

When it comes to exploration, neither game provides a large world in terms of scale. Thus, the explorative challenges of *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* are instead concerned with technical aspects and the various rules shaping the simulation. From observing communities such as *Mod The Sims 2* [12], it seems that some players derive as much challenge and enjoyment from exploring the game as a program as they gain from playing it in a more traditional sense. This exploration is a player-defined (but producer-allowed) challenge concerned with modifying or adding to the game. Here the resistance stems from the system itself, while the transformation is brought about by creating objects or hacks that are compatible with the system.

Many players even spend much time exploring the relation between cause and effect, seeking to determine the exact rules of the simulation, especially in the case of *The Sims 2* because this game offers a much wider range of sim reactions than the original game did. Thus, players expose their sims to a variety of different situations in order to see how they have been programmed to react, and players often report and collaborate on experiments in order to uncover the game mechanics [14]. This explorative challenge only announces itself subtly to players. It emerges as an effect of the system's properties, but only the observant will realise that there is something to explore. The challenge in this case, then, is to first find interesting features to explore and then uncover their workings, the resistance being the rule's hidden nature.

### **Construction**

While most computer games offer constructional challenges to a lesser extent, for instance, giving the player the option of choosing between different looks or weapons for his avatar, *The*

*Sims* and *The Sims 2* offer constructional challenges in abundance. A main proportion of the games' challenges are concerned with construction as the games offer a variety of tools for constructing sims, houses, as well as stories via the use of the camera and video functions. Constructional challenges are mostly defined by players as their perceived visions for the activity form the challenge. Thus, a player may choose the challenge of constructing copies of real houses [3], while others seek to build the most optimal house in terms of gameplay requirements and within the offered budget [2].

Constructional challenges are not concerned with building projects alone. The games even offer constructional challenges in the form of "playing with identity" through the activities the player makes his sims engage in or through the stories a player creates in retrospect. Likewise, a player who chooses to play her sims "in character" also engages in constructional challenges. These challenges are all defined by the players within the confines of the rules and are informed by the individual goals these players subject themselves to.

### **CHALLENGE INITIATION AND MANGEMENT**

Apart from sims' needs, *The Sims* does not impose any challenges strongly on the players. This is somewhat different in the case of *The Sims 2*. When playing in live mode, the player is confronted with challenges all the time in the form of sims' wants and fears. Whenever one want or fear is met, another takes its place. The game system decides based on the sim's identifiers, player input, and the game's rules which new challenges to introduce at any given point. For instance, if a sim's relationship to another sim is defined as "being in love", their normal wants and fears, which are connected to their life aspiration, may be replaced by wants and fears regarding this particular sim. While the game system initiates and manages the challenges represented by wants and fears, it does not force any challenges on the player like many other games do. Rather, the game is still playable if the player chooses to ignore the wants and fears, focusing, for instance, on skill-building or story-telling instead.

Apart from the general needs and the wants and fears, both games leave challenge management to the player. That is, the player chooses which challenges to take on and which to ignore. In the case of build and buy mode, the game system offers challenges that the player may engage in but they are not explicitly communicated and may be overlooked by many novice players. One competitive challenge related to buy mode is concerned with resource management, that is, making the most of a sim family's money in terms of the comfort and happiness they get out of it. Mostly, expensive furniture is better, but it is even possible to combine cheaper options and get the same effect out of it. Often players do not outfit the house based on the effect of the furniture on the sims, however. Instead they set themselves a constructional challenge of creating aesthetically pleasing homes. The same is true for build mode. Here the player may either focus on building the optimal house in terms of its effect on the sims, or they may choose to focus on aesthetics. Experienced players, of course, may even choose to combine the two challenges, seeking to construct both aesthetically pleasing and practical homes for the sims.

### **CONCLUSION**

Compared to computer games with a clear goal and a winning condition, whether these are adventure, action or strategy games, both *The Sims* and *The Sim 2* are atypical when it comes to challenge management, that is, the ways challenges are made manifest in the game.

Firstly, no challenges are ever forced on the player, like, for instance, approaching enemies in an first person shooter or computer role-playing game. At all times, the games leave the initiative with the player. Neglecting sims or exposing them to their worst fears is as meaningful within, for instance, the constructional challenge of storytelling, as doing the opposite may be within a competitive challenge. Thus, in defining a successful play session much depends on the goals the player has set for himself.

Secondly, only a limited part of the challenges facilitated and motivated by the game are initiated and managed by the game system. By initiation is meant that the game system decides when these challenges appear and what they entail. These are the competitive challenges in the form of needs growing over time, and in the case of *The Sims 2* even the wants and fears. In most computer games, the game engine is much more decisive in exposing players to challenges.

Thirdly, the challenges of many computer games are mainly posed in their' "live mode" whereas in the case of *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* (as well as turn-based strategy games) a large proportion of challenges are related to buy and build mode's constructional space. The player's freedom to choose the type and level of challenges is apparent in the fact that it is possible to have a great time playing the game only in live mode or only in buy and build mode respectively.

What new understandings do we gain from analysing *The Sims* and *The Sims 2* on the basis of a challenge perspective? It may help us explain both why the games attract players who do not otherwise play many computer games and it may enlighten us with regards to the differences of the two games. As noted above, the games offer a combination of challenges that is seldom seen in other games. Constructional challenges get the main focus, although challenges concerned with both exploration and competition (mainly in the case of *The Sims 2*) are facilitated as well. At the same time, the games offer an incredible freedom to players in terms of defining own goals and which challenges to engage in. Thus, the games attract players who want to create and make decisions themselves rather than just be subject to constructions made by others. In the case of *The Sims 2*, however, the game even caters for players who need more directional prompting by introducing a stronger competitive element in the form of wants and fears. This means that *The Sims 2* is closer to being a game in the classical sense, although the game still lacks a clearly stated winning condition. Likewise, this game offers more explorative challenges, in that much more rules concerned with sims' reactions and long-time behaviour have been added. Presumably, the experience with *The Sims*, which offers less explorative and competitive challenges, has convinced Maxis that more of these would create a game that pleases a greater variety of players.

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