

# Let's Play *The Sims*: The Un(der)studied Women's Origins of a Media Format

Tegan Pyke

Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies  
University of Bergen  
Norway  
[tegan.pyke@uib.no](mailto:tegan.pyke@uib.no)

## Keywords

*The Sims*, Let's Play, videogame history, emergent narratives, creativity, writing, feminist game studies, women in games, fan culture

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Let's Play—a form of user-generated online media, in which gameplay is recorded with commentary by the player (McKittrick et al. 2023; Kerttula 2019)—has become a staple of contemporary online culture. The origin of the format is commonly credited to the forums of *Something Awful*, an American comedy website known for its “fanatical and almost all-male following” (Dibbell 2008), in 2004. More specifically, credit for the form is often placed on a single forum member: Michael Sawyer, known as “slowbeef” (Klepek 2015). This history is part of what Laine Nooney has described as the “patrilineal chronicle” of videogames, which is “punctuated by ‘founding fathers,’ ‘hacker heroes,’ and ‘game gods’” (2013).

But what if this is *not* the origin of Let's Play media?

While the Let's Play *nomenclature* has undoubtable origin within the *Something Awful* forums, I argue the *format* of early Let's Plays had an origin point several years earlier in an entirely different online community, a community that historically been marginalised in mainstream gaming culture: the primarily female player base of *The Sims* franchise (Sihvonen 2011; Price 2014; Ring 2023). My research intends to correct this oversight by placing the cultural phenomenon of ‘*Sims* stories’ in conversation with existing research on early Let's Play forms (as evidenced in McKittrick, Gibbs, et al. 2023; McKittrick, Rogerson, et al. 2023) to establish an alternative, feminist origin point of the Let's Play.

Early Let's Play content—which combined screenshots with written commentary—is identical in format to ‘*Sims* stories’, a digital-first narrative form produced by *Sims* players previously likened to scrapbooking (Jenkins 2004; ‘Sim Capital’ 2005; Murray 2017). The *Sims* stories format first emerged on the official *TheSims.com* website as part of *The Sims* Exchange, a virtual platform created by the games’ developers to leverage participatory culture for marketing purposes (‘Sim Capital’ 2005; Jenkins 2006, 166-167). By the time the first official *Sims* website went offline, over 100,000

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

*Sims* stories had been posted to the Exchange (Maxis 2009), a figure excelled by the second iteration of the official website, *TheSims2.com*, where users uploaded 172,061 *Sims* stories (Maxis and EA Games 2012) before the site went offline. While these figures don't account for the entire of the community's story production—which quickly spread across independent websites, platforms such as Geocities, Livejournal, Freewebs, and Dreamwidth, forums like boolprop.com, and is still being produced today—they provide insight into the prolificacy of the form.

Unfortunately, *TheSims.com* and *TheSims2.com* have both been taken offline and, across the dispersed *Sims* community, link rot has taken hold. This means the majority of early *Sims* stories are effectively lost media, with only fragments available for viewing. The exception to this is *A Certain Reader*, a rogue archive (Kosnik 2016) created and hosted by a prominent member of the *Sims* Livejournal community. *A Certain Reader* allowed users to scrape *Sims* stories from *TheSims2.com* site when it was still live and, collectively, *Sims* fans have preserved 4,039 stories on the platform.

Many of these stories are not Let's Plays; one of the quirks of the *Sims* stories phenomenon is the clustering of narratives documenting play under the same heading as fictional narratives created using *The Sims* game screenshots as an illustrative medium. This has, in some ways, acted as a smokescreen to the form's recognition as a Let's Play format as, previously, only the second variety of story—which fall under the category of 'gamics' or 'machinomics' (Price 2014)—has received scholarly attention. These studies focused on the impact of participation on the literacy of teenage participants (Johnson 2009; Gee and Hayes 2010), the stories' status as fanfiction (Stein 2006), or a combination of the two (Lammers 2016).

In this presentation, I will introduce a taxonomy of *Sims* stories that will delineate between the varieties of *Sims* story. This taxonomy will be rendered as a quadrant chart, split by two axes: the horizontal axis will represent type of narrative, from 'predetermined' to 'emergent', and the vertical axis will represent the subject matter, from 'original' to 'transformative'. This will establish four types of *Sims* story, which I have categorised as the Let's Play, Original Fiction, Transformative Fiction, and the Transformative Let's Play.

From here, I will perform a close reading of three Let's Plays documenting the highly popular *Sims* gaming challenge, the Legacy Challenge. Created by *TheSims2.com* user PinStar1161 (2004), the aim of the Legacy Challenge is to play a single *Sims* family through 10 generations. This goal assures that the narratives of such stories are emergent—or shaped via gameplay (Jenkins 2004)—as the personalities, goals, and appearances of each successive generation are entirely dependent on the player's interaction with *The Sims 2* game engine.

This analysis of Legacy Challenge stories will build an understanding of the early *Sims* Let's Play community's approaches to documenting emergent narratives, the conventions established through them, and the ways in which they regurgitate wider societal values; particularly those of the Anglosphere during the mid to late 2000s. This understanding, once reached, will cement *Sims* stories as an origin point of Let's Play media; a tradition that continues in contemporary *Sims* fan circles on social media platforms such as YouTube, Tumblr, and TikTok. In doing so, further weight will be given to Nooney's proclamation that there "has always been more girls to game history" but we "have not always known where to find them" (2013).

## REFERENCES

- Dibbell, Julian. 2008. 'Mutilated Furies, Flying Phalluses: Put the Blame on Griefers, the Sociopaths of the Virtual World'. *WIRED*, January 18.  
<https://www.wired.com/2008/01/mf-goons/>.
- Gee, James Paul, and Elisabeth R. Hayes. 2010. 'A Young Girl and Her Vampire Stories: How a Teenager Competes with a Best-Selling Author'. In *Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning*. Palgrave Macmillan US.  
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230106734>.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2004. 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture'. In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin, Pat Harrigan, and Michael Crumpton. MIT Press.
- Jenkins, Henry. 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.
- Johnson, Nicola F. 2009. 'Exchanging Online Narratives for Leisure: A Legitimate Learning Space'. *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 7 (1): 15–27.
- Kerttula, Tero. 2019. "'What an Eccentric Performance": Storytelling in Online Let's Plays'. *Games and Culture* 14 (3): 236–55.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016678724>.
- Kosnik, Abigail de. 2016. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. The MIT Press.
- Lammers, Jayne C. 2016. "'The Hangout Was Serious Business": Leveraging Participation in an Online Space to Design Sims Fanfiction'. *Research in the Teaching of English* 50 (3): 309–32.
- Maxis. 2009. 'The Sims Exchange: Power Search: Search Results'. *TheSims.com*, October 15.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20091015015602/http://ad.doubleclick.net/adi/sims.a//simsall;kw=dcopt=ist;sz=468x60;ord=8678669410150892?>
- Maxis and EA Games. 2012. 'Exchange Home'. *TheSims2.com*, June 5.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20120605022410/http://thesims2.ea.com/exchange/>.
- McKittrick, Brian, Martin Gibbs, Melissa J. Rogerson, Bjørn Nansen, and Charlotte Pierce. 2023. 'Let's Play Something Awful: A Historical Analysis of 14 Years of Threads'. *Internet Histories* 7 (2): 122–40.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2022.2084823>.
- McKittrick, Brian, Melissa Rogerson, Martin Gibbs, and Bjørn Nansen. 2023. "'What Are You Bringing to the Table?": The Something Awful Let's Play Community as a Serious Leisure Subculture'. *Games and Culture* 18 (3): 402–21.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221101310>.
- Murray, Janet Horowitz. 2017. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Updated edition. The MIT Press.

Nooney, Laine. 2013. 'A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History'. *Game Studies* 13 (2).  
<https://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney>.

Pinstar1161. 2004. 'The Legacy Challenge!' *TheSims2.Com* BBS, October 23.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20051123035310/http://bbs.thesims2.ea.com/community/bbs/messages.php?&openItemID=&threadID=03a73f5d0386f69343b5e4b7e2aae942&directoryID=25&startRow=1#d33158125d37bff57ee4492886808527>.

Price, Ludovica. 2014. 'The Sims: A Retrospective – A Participatory Culture 14 Years On'. *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* 7: 135–40.

Ring, Phillip. 2023. "'The Sims': Process and Learnings for Developing DEI Content'. Game Developers Conference 2023, San Francisco, CA, USA, March 22.  
<https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1029364/-The-Sims-Process-and%20Stats>.

Sihvonen, Tanja. 2011. *Players Unleashed!: Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048511983>.

'Sim Capital'. 2005. In *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter. McGill-Queen's University Press.

Stein, Louisa Ellen. 2006. "'This Dratted Thing": Fannish Storytelling through New Media'. In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse. McFarland & Company.