

g a meaningful educational  
ational games; it involves  
lassroom, recognizing that  
ach teacher will adapt the

test sites, our research has  
ations can take. We have  
genres, such as side-scroll-  
ways that are accessible to  
d that the fast-paced game  
the game into a classroom  
cerebral puzzle game that  
structional intervention.

eminds us that educational  
y educators, but remade in  
*Culture*, John Fiske draws a  
edia companies, and popu-  
contents for their own pur-  
dentities, social structures  
; designing an educational  
existing genres, tropes, and  
classroom, further negoti-  
ne meanings of games: are  
y environment or do their  
ving long enough to think

support materials and sup-  
/ to use the game effective-  
e critical reflection of their  
hope, however, is that this  
ghts but also result in prod-  
orm the social practices of  
argue that the best design  
e tested in social settings  
ible impact. We hope to not  
sroom but to also develop  
get there.

# SimSmarts

An Interview with Will Wright

BRENDA LAUREL

**Brenda Laurel** Over the years as I've played the games you've designed, it seems to be that there is a big quantum leap in terms of usability between *Sim City* and *The Sims*, and I'm wondering how you got to that. It seems like breakthrough.

**Will Wright** It's more procedural than anything else. Also, we have the luxury now of sitting back, taking some time. Almost a year before we put a new game on the shelf, we start a process called Kleenex testing, which is about once a week.

**BL** Why do you call it Kleenex testing?

**ww** Because we never use the people again; we use them once and then we throw them away.

**BL** Got it.

**ww** We bring in people who have never seen the game, never touched it; we usually bring in couples, whether they are roommates or friends, or married. We put

two of them at the front of the computer, boot the game up, and then give them the least amount of instruction. We give them some minor tasks, like "see if you can get this guy to do that", or "see if you can get to that spot on the game." And then we just sit back and observe them for like two hours.

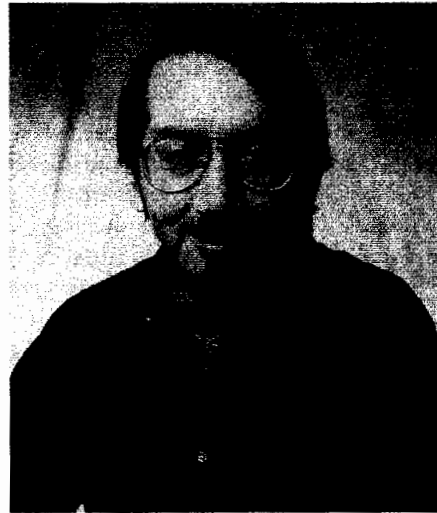
**BL** Do they talk to each other?

**ww** Yeah, that's the reason we bring in two. One person would sit there and just get frustrated, but two people will start verbalizing their theories about the way it works. "No don't click that, that'll make this happen." "No, I think it'll work that way." So you hear them verbalizing their internal models of the mechanism. And it's incredibly frustrating as a designer, because you think it's so obvious to go click on that to do that. But when you sit back and watch someone struggling with the button, not knowing what it does, it's totally clear what needs to be done. There's no argument from that point. And so every week we try to get on a cycle where we can iterate what we've learned from the week before.

**BL** When you did *The Sims* originally, had you changed your target audience from the audience for *SimCity*?

**ww** Not a lot, although I think at the end it became more apparent that we were shooting for a more gender-balanced audience. We always were shooting for a pretty broad age range. I think more recently we started thinking more in terms of more casual players, which kind of matches the females demographic, but not directly.

**BL** What did you learn about female players and how did it influence the design?



Will Wright, founder of Maxis

**ww** In the testing we found that when women played the game there were certain points where they had a lot of comfort. And not to be overtly sexist, but they were very comfortable with the shopping part, mainly because there was not time pressure. I find that in general women tend to be less comfortable in any game where there is the time pressure. They'd much rather sit back and think about what they're about to do, plan it out, run thing through their minds, and then do it at their own rate—as opposed to, “Do something right now or you're going to die.” This also maps a little bit more to games that are based on creativity and a little less around performance. In *The Sims*, there's live mode, build mode, buy mode and so on, and in the live mode women are just kind of clicking, watching characters do things, things happening, every interaction is a fun new surprise. Once they get to the buy mode, they totally understand it, and that becomes their structure for understanding the rest of the game. They work their way to the underlying game structure from that end.

**bl** So do you think most players have model of the underlying game structure?

**ww** Yeah, I think it's crucial.

**bl** Do they think if it as a program or do they think of it in some other way?

**ww** I think that they are reverse-engineering the model at all stages—even when they first see the box, because it's a really low-resolution model of the game. When you look at the box, you're running that low-resolution game in your head. When you go pick up the box and turn it over, and then your model gets more detailed. And if that model is still the imaginary model you play in your head and it's still fun, you might actually buy the game. A lot of times it's good to bring in a metaphor that people are comfortable with, that they can overlay on the game.

**bl** Sort of like the desktop interface metaphor...

**ww** Yeah—with something like *SimCity*, it's kind of like a train set, and *The Sims* is like a dollhouse. That automatically gives people a set of associations and expectations they can map, some of which will be correct, some of which won't be. If you can figure out what their initial metaphor is, you can leverage that to bootstrap understanding deeper and deeper into the game. So one of the things I find that I do every game now is I design a box, fairly early on, that is initially used inside the team. “Here's my model of what the game is going to be.”

**bl** So your box is your spec in a way?

**ww** Yeah, it's the lowest resolution model.

**bl** How did you make the decision to do *Living Large*?

**ww** That was more of an experiment really, to see if we could sell expansions for *The Sims*. At the time there was a lot of user-generated content you could download for free, and because we understand how to program these things to a deeper level we could add wholly new dynamics to the game.

**bl** Why did you pick that particular extension as the first one you did?

**ww** All the expansions have largely been driven by the players—by what we've



A 3-D representation of captured player data

e game there were cer-  
overtly sexist, but they  
ause there was not time  
omfortable in any game  
t back and think about  
eir minds, and then do it  
v or you're going to die."  
on creativity and a little  
, build mode, buy mode  
cking, watching charac-  
fun new surprise. Once  
and that becomes their  
work their way to the

the underlying game

i some other way?  
it all stages—even when  
on model of the game.  
tion game in your head.  
i your model gets more  
u play in your head and  
es it's good to bring in a  
overlay on the game.

i train set, and *The Sims*  
set of associations and  
some of which wont be.  
n leverage that to boot-  
one of the things I find  
on, that is initially used  
ing to be."

ould sell expansions for  
ontent you could down-  
theses things to a deep-

one you did?  
players—by what we've

seen them doing on *The Sims Exchange*, which is where they tell the stories of the game. We look at a lot of the stories and we look at where they're hitting brick walls. In their imaginations they want to be able to see the Sim do X or Y, and the game doesn't support it for whatever reason: there aren't the right dynamics or objects. So we looked at what players were telling in their stories on the website

and we found that early on that lot of people were pushing the game towards more of a fantasy world. They wanted to see kind of magical things or spooky things—popular genres like what we see in television. And so that was kind of the theme of *Living Large*.

**BL** Your design was driven by your fan community.

**WW** Yes, the direction of the expansion package. And in fact even the next version of *The Sims*.

**BL** Was the purpose of *The Sims Exchange* precisely to gather information from players that would inform future design?

**WW** Not really, that wasn't apparent until later. Again, that was kind of experimental, the whole storytelling aspect. People pair up with people

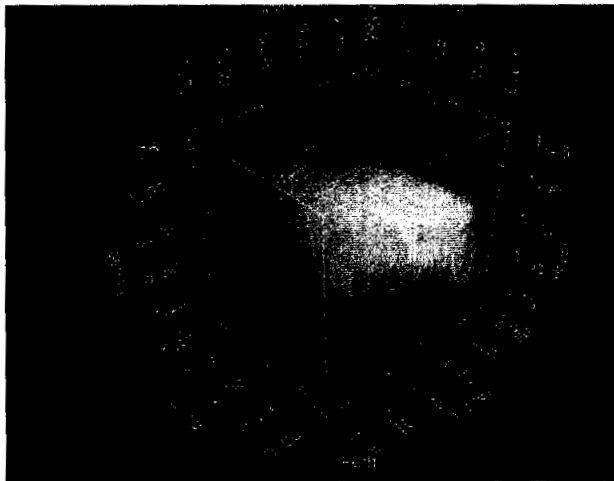
from another game, and they're telling stories to each other as they are playing the game, and the stories are hilarious.

**BL** And then you discovered that it was a resource for you?

**WW** Yeah, in a couple of ways actually. There's a point where players have had enough of the game and they want to go to the next level, so there's a meta-game they can play—they can compete on our website. They can rate stories, and there are competitions among the stories for each genre. We have about 50,000 stories now. Huge amounts! And some of them are amazingly detailed and really well written. They are like small novels, they aren't tiny little comic books—well, some of them are, but a lot of them are really deep, and certain people have a reputation for doing ongoing series.

**BL** So how does *Sims Online* relate to all this?

**WW** With *Sims Online*, we're trying to take a lot of the community dynamics that we've learned from *The Sims* off-line and reinterpret them in an online world. And we study the online community all the time. It's a very interesting community—it's over half female, which for an online game is totally different. And it turns out that a community of 55% females behaves very differently than a community that's 75% males. It's ongoing and we're still learning—we're capturing huge amounts of metrics in terms of the way people are playing the game. In fact, we're capturing very detailed information. I can tell you how many people are kissing more today than they were yesterday, or how that's correlated to other things.

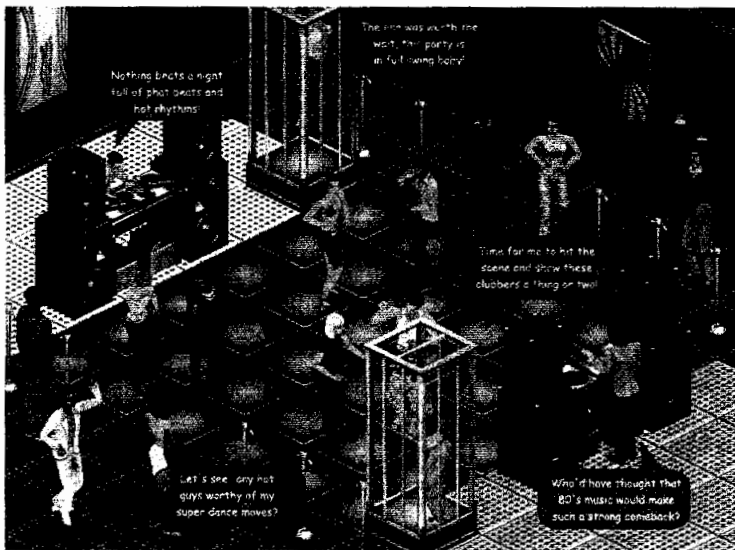


A 3-D representation of captured player data

On the story site, embedded in every story is the same game that the player created that story in, so anybody can read a story if they like the characters or the house, whatever, you can download it and play it as a game. Embedded in every saved game is a history file of how they played every Sim day, or certain key factors: how many friends, how many people in the house, how much money they have, where they were focusing their efforts on. And so I've had interns studying that data.

**BL** It's amazing that you can do that.

**WW** It turned out to be pretty easy. We have actually found some interesting game-play patterns in *The Sims* just by looking at thousands of players and the



way they traverse the game space. And so that's something that I think is going to be critical to us going forward, the fact that we have these endless tools that are fairly cheap to embed. We need to bring down the cost of that data mining and increase the relevance of it. But still the fact that we have analytical design tools available to us now that we didn't have five or ten years ago, its tremendous.

**BL** Do you see yourself as putting values into your games?

**WW** I'm actually much more interested in building a vessel that players put their own values in. With *Sim City*, a lot of people on the message

boards would attack our liberal bias on the transportation level, and I thought that was great, not because they didn't like the way our assumptions worked, but because they had to be very clear about what their assumptions were. And *Sim City* became a point of reference, a landmark, that they could then discuss: "Oh I think this city is too liberal in the way taxes are done." Or "I don't think so, I think it's realistic compared to where I live." Someone who's at odds with you model has to crystallize what their own assumptions are. Then it becomes a forum where people can come together and talk about what the issues are and how they feel about them, how they relate to where they live and how their lives are experienced. Players can use the game as a tool for communicating with other people.

**BL** What else do you learn from these conversations?

**WW** You know, one thing that has been kind of ironic about *The Sims* is that a lot of people play it for a while, like 4 to 6 hours, and they walk away thinking it's very materialistic. But the ones that have played it for 20 hours realize that it's

ame that the player cre-  
ce the characters or the  
me. Embedded in every  
day, or certain key fac-  
how much money they  
've had interns studying

found some interesting  
ands of players and the  
averse the game space.  
s something that I think  
e critical to us going for-  
act that we have these  
s that are fairly cheap to  
need to bring down the  
at data mining and  
relevance of it. But still  
at we have analytical  
available to us now that  
ve five of ten years ago,  
us.

see yourself as putting  
our games?  
ually much more inter-  
ding a vessel that play-  
own values in. With *Sim*  
people on the message  
level, and I thought that  
mptions worked, but  
mptions were. And *Sim*  
ould then discuss: "Oh I  
"I don't think so, I think  
dds with you model has  
comes a forum where  
s are and how they feel  
v their lives are exper-  
ting with other people.

ut *The Sims* is that a lot  
walk away thinking it's  
0 hours realize that it's

the opposite. If you buy stuff in *The Sims*—every object has some sort of traits—  
it can go bad, or break, need maintenance, need to be watered. If you sit there  
and build a big mansion that's all full of stuff, without cheating, you realize that  
all these objects end up sucking up all your time, when all these objects had been  
promising to save you time. So they are all kind of time-bombs in a literal sense.  
And it's actually kind of a parody of consumerism, in which at some point your  
stuff takes over your life. But because it's fairly subtle, and you have to play the  
game for that long—half the player don't even see it's a parody. They think, "oh  
it's so consumerist."

**BL** That must be really interesting for you to watch people have their little light-  
bulb come on.

**WW** Yeah, and there are a couple of spots in the game where I've seen people have  
interesting revelations. One that a lot of people have where they're playing *The*  
*Sims* is, their Sim is sitting there—maybe he's playing on the computer and staying  
up too late—and they realize that he has to go to bed early or he will not do well at  
his job tomorrow. They're very concerned in getting the Sim to bed, and he's trying  
to stay up late, and they suddenly realize they're up at three in the morning to play  
this game, and that's when they realize they are taking better care of their Sim than  
they are of themselves. Some of the players have had that epiphany.

**BL** Before we stop I want you to tell me a story about your adventures on dating  
boards, why you did that and what you learned from it.

**WW** We do that stuff all the time. We were doing research for the *Sims Online*, and  
one thing we were very curious about was how people liked to build representa-  
tion of themselves in their online space. Just by looking at all the different dating  
sites, it was interesting the different dimensions in which they have you describe  
yourself. There's something very compelling about glorifying yourself, period.

I've seen a lot of different dating sites, and some of them use different  
levels. My favorite one is *Hyper Match*—it has variable resolution descriptions, and  
it's actually very cool. First you can say where you are and then where your ideal  
spouse is, on each slider, and then also how you feel about it. So it's kind of multi-  
dimensional, with a cool little interface. They have kind of a first pass, which is  
maybe 20 questions—very first-level things—and then they have a second level  
that's much more detailed, and then they have a third level that's incredibly  
detailed. You go down to "hobbies" and one of the things on there is "I play *The*  
*Sims*." So you can go on there and make a very quick profile of yourself in five min-  
utes, but you can come back there and every day add a little more detail on your-  
self. You get this very impressionistic sketch to begin with, and then the next day  
it becomes more of an illustration instead of just a charcoal sketch.

**BL** So did you meet any interesting women?

**WW** Well it got to the point where they were sending me these matches, and at  
that point I didn't want to lead anybody on...

**BL** Was your research on the dating boards really valuable in designing player profiles?

**ww** Yeah, and what it basically told us is that we wanted the players to be in control of how much information about themselves they put up. We didn't want to force them to use a fixed form. They can either go with our template, or go with whatever they want. Some people go with a poem they wrote, or their favorite quote. The very first thing you see when you open these profiles, and this turns out to be one of the largest degrees of segregation for the game, is age. It has a lot to do with Internet talk—are they spelling words out or are they writing “2U”? That immediately tells you whether they are under 25. The next level is what are they talking about. Some people want to have relationships, and then there are intelligent people who are wanting to have fun and role-play. You can tell that stuff very easily by reading their profiles. A couple of other things are interesting. They crystallize around certain alpha-numeric symbols that they use for sorting each other. The strongest early community that we had in the game, even before we had many communities forming, was gays and lesbians. And they were scattered all over the world, and they all sort of clicked “rainbow” for the type of symbol. So it was the “Rainbow Club” or the “Rainbow Casino.” And eventually they ended up moving their lots and forming their own neighborhoods.

**BL** Some journalist called me a couple of days ago and asked me about *Sims Online* and what I thought of it, and I said I hadn't played it that much, but I wish players had made the Castro, and you're telling me they did. That's so cool.

**ww** Yeah, and it became the largest neighborhood we had in the game.

**BL** Are you ever present in the game as a player?

**ww** I was until just recently when I deleted that character because every time I logged on too many people knew who I was, but I had like 10 characters.

**BL** So you take a walk down the street in disguise every now and then?

**ww** All the time now.

**BL** Are you a girl?

**ww** I have one girl; I have about four males.

**BL** Do you think that's a really robust form of research, to be in there as a player?

**ww** I have about 10 close friends that I've made in the game, that know who I am. A lot of these people have a lot of visibility in some aspect of the community, and so they're kind of like my spies, and I can go in and ask them how it's going, what are the players like and what are they doing? In the metrics we have totally dispassionate statistics, and that's very different than going in and asking someone, “What have people really gotten into now?” What's the hot spot, or what's the cool activity, or what's the exciting thing to play or be talking about, or what's the thing people are really annoyed with? That's the type of thing you can't really get from metrics.

le in designing player

e players to be in con-  
up. We didn't want to  
r template, or go with  
rote, or their favorite  
rofiles, and this turns  
ame, is age. It has a lot  
re they writing "2U"?  
next level is what are  
s, and then there are  
lay. You can tell that  
things are interesting.  
t they use for sorting  
he game, even before  
. And they were scat-  
" for the type of sym-  
' And eventually they  
oods.

me about *Sims Online*  
ich, but I wish players  
so cool.  
n the game.

because every time I  
) characters.  
r and then?

rch, to be in there

, that know who I am.  
f the community, and  
h how it's going, what  
s we have totally dis-  
and asking someone,  
ot, or what's the cool  
it, or what's the thing  
can't really get from

**BL** So there are three levels of research that happen. You've got your personal experience, communication with other players of the game, and then you've got the metrics.

**WW** Yeah, I think the metrics are giving us the very raw, formal description of the system, things that we can measure. How long are they spending where doing what? Going around talking to people and playing the game is where you actually get the motivation. Why did somebody do that? Why are they spending all their time here? Then you go up and talk to them and they'll explain their motivation. "I really like doing this because of X, Y and Z," or "I really like going there because of that." What is the current flavor or mood? What is the collective interaction of all these people and their motivation? What does that add up to?

**BL** Do you get very involved in secondary research?

**WW** I start by thinking about what other fields have faced the design problem before, or what insights are going to come from psychology, or another design field, or even things like summer trends. How do you build a game out of that? What are the things that are actually turning over in the player's head? What type of mind-space is the player going to be in? Are they going to be dealing with the dynamics of shopping, or dating and flirting, or constructivism, and then what can inform me about that? The players, their mind-set, what motivates them—how can we leverage every click the player makes in the game to something that they will find valuable? Are there some surprising things that happen? Or some creative things they make? There are so many different ways you can look at any single problem. Each of our design staff will take a central problem and try to look at it from five totally different perspectives. You're triangulating your design problem with all these different perspectives. So for the designer, the greatest skill I can imagine having is to take any single thing and look at it from as many different perspectives as you can.