At the age of twelve, I started playing a sick and disturbing video game. It caused me to question my deepest beliefs, and it left me depressed, angry, and emotionally scarred. Although I stopped playing this game years ago, it is still wildly popular for millions of people around the world. In fact, it’s the best-selling PC game of all time. You may have played it at some point. It’s called The Sims.

Most other video games have a clear and defined objective: shoot the aliens, save the princess, win the match. But The Sims is different. The Sims is life in video game form. It creates a creepy digital reality where people live vicariously through programmable avatars. You can build houses for them, buy them stuff, and control their every move. The initial appeal is obvious. Who doesn’t want the chance to start a new life? A life where you have total control of everything—where if anything goes wrong, you can press a button and restart.

For my twelve-year-old self, The Sims stood out right away when I saw it on the game shelf at Best Buy. This was the original version, at the height
of its popularity and before any of the subsequent editions. The be-all and end-all of virtual reality. It came in a bright-colored box with the title printed in friendly block letters. Beneath it, there was a tagline—“The People Simulator from the Creator of SimCity™.” Later, I would think of a more fitting slogan: “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”

I didn’t buy The Sims right away. First, I had to save $60 worth of allowance money and Hanukkah gifts. The day I finally bought the game was nothing less than magical. I rushed home and popped it into the computer.

At the beginning, The Sims was everything I expected and more. For hours on end, I would escape into my new virtual life. I built magnificent homes with wide, green lawns, multiple stories, and brightly colored walls that could be seen and admired all the way across town. As I designed these digital palaces, I shut my bedroom blinds to obscure the dying, overgrown grass outside our grey New England ranch house. Then I began filling the Sim houses with a wondrous array of goods: velvet sofas, high definition plasma TVs, bathtubs with little feet, mahogany tables, and the finest art available. With my eyes fixed on the computer screen, I never looked towards our dark hallway with its broken lights or our small den with its stained futon. And listening to the soft jazz of the game’s background music, I never heard the incessant buzz of the Trinitron TV that my parents
bought in the 1980s (the Trinitron didn’t even have a remote control, and I tried my best to avoid it whenever friends came to visit).

After I had purchased and arranged all of the gorgeous and fully functional Sim furniture, it was time to add the Sims themselves. From a small selection of archetypes, I engineered their appearances, clothes, and personalities. Then I placed them into the fantastic houses I had created for them, the homes where they would play out their imaginary lives. Alone in my room, I propelled my Sims to find love and success in their digital paradise. Whenever my parents told me to get started on my homework, I shut the door and kept playing.

For a while, life was good. Both Sim life and real life. Every day, I enjoyed helping each Sim get closer to the big promotion or to the next big step in his or her relationship. But then they got those promotions, and they took those next steps. And things were different. Every morning, I commanded the Sims to get up, take a shower, and eat breakfast. A car took them to work, and several hours later, it brought them home. Every evening, I commanded them to make dinner, watch TV on their high definition plasma screens, and go to bed. Day after day, it was the same routine. No more excitement. My Sims had already found their soulmates, started families, and gone as far as they could go in their careers without being truly exceptional. The monotony got to me. I thought, what am I doing with my Sim life? Is this all there is? I need to shake things up.

Twelve years old, and I was having a mid-life crisis.

After that, I stopped playing The Sims. I switched to simpler games, where you could win or lose. But I couldn’t stop thinking of the digital mansions, the fancy furniture, and all of the Sims with their perfect lives.
They were still in there, saved to that disc. It made me sick. I wanted to crush them and take everything they had. Unfortunately, the game made it far too easy.

I started with the most efficient strategy. After commanding my Sims to go swimming, I deleted the pool ladder, leaving them trapped in the clear blue water. For a few days, they swam back and forth, complaining incessantly of hunger and exhaustion. Then, when they could take no more, they fell asleep and never woke up. Their bodies disappeared into Sim oblivion, leaving only a tombstone or urn at the side of the pool. With this method, I could wipe out up to eight Sims at once, the maximum number per household.

When I wanted to have a little more fun, I moved some trash and newspapers in front of the fireplace. Then I made the Sims light fires that would spread to the detritus. I had already removed all of the doors from the room, so the Sims couldn’t escape when the inferno began. The flames consumed the velvet sofas and the mahogany tables, and when the Sims had nowhere else to run, the flames consumed them too. The burning Sims spun around in circles, shrieked miserably, and then turned into piles of ash.

Sometimes there was a Sim I really didn’t like, a Sim who aggravated me even more than the rest. This Sim deserved a special kind of torture. I put a wall around him, and then increased the game speed. At first, he patiently waited to exit and resume his life, but one day passed and then another with no release from the solitude. The Sim began to pace around the room shouting nonsense. A thought bubble appearing from his head contained the outline of a juicy hamburger. More days passed. Near the end, he urinated on the floor and started to sob. I imagine that death was a relief at this point.
With water, fire, and occasionally hunger, I killed Sim after Sim and eventually created whole families just so that I could destroy them. I filled entire plots with Sim tombstones from which translucent Sim ghosts would rise every night to wander their wide, green lawns. On at least one occasion, I recreated the story of Job, which had fascinated me ever since I learned it in Hebrew School. Could a man really retain his faith in the midst of such undeserved misery? To figure it out, I made a Sim with a bunch of kids and a really nice house. Then I burned the house and drowned the kids. I took everything from my digital Job, stringing him along for days on the brink of starvation. I wanted to see if he would curse my name in his gibberish Sim language. He didn’t (as far as I could tell), but the religious link got me wondering. What if there was a higher power in the universe and he was doing the same thing I was? The Old Testament concept of an angry and vengeful God started to make perfect sense. Maybe all human existence was just for the amusement of some cruel deity. Perhaps misery and joy were no more than a set of programmed reactions. Suddenly, the world became a dark and cruel place.

Twelve years old, and I was having an existential dilemma.

After that, I stopped playing The Sims for good. It was much more fun to shoot aliens anyway. As extraterrestrial heads exploded, I tried to forget about the tedium and futility of my own existence. But I couldn’t purge the epiphanies from my mind. Life is boring and repetitive. God probably doesn’t care about us. He might even enjoy watching us suffer. And if we’re anything like the Sims, then there’s definitely no heaven or hell. Only our world, as empty and meaningless as a computer simulation.
I’d like to say that I’ve stopped thinking about these things, but I haven’t. Growing up is irreversible, and once you realize something, you can never un-realize it. In real life, days pass more slowly than they do for the Sims, but they still slip by too fast. The monotonous, consumption-based daily routines are eerily similar in both worlds. What’s different is the level of detail. Reality is complex, and compared to a video game, it takes a lot longer to get bored of. Outside of the digital world, I can exit a pool without using a ladder, my neighborhood has more than ten houses, and personalities can’t be engineered in a matter of minutes. And if things ever get too dull, I can always travel to Peru or skydive or just take a walk in the woods. The Sims can never do any of that. They’re stuck within the confines of their houses and possessions, even after they die. Real life may be just as pointless, but at least it gives us a little more variety.

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