

Life after The Sims

In 2005, when I was 16, I worked in a busy local café. I churned out hot beverages at high speed, while constantly restocking my cup and saucer area. I found the work hard and boring, which was strange given that at the end of every shift I'd rush home to play Diner Dash, a video game in which you become a waitress in a busy restaurant, taking orders, serving customers, clearing away their cups and plates. In the great gallery of video games, Diner Dash was not among the most realistic, but I enjoyed its simplicity and I was enthralled by the thrill that came with pleasing customers and advancing levels. How many levels were available was never made clear. The game seemed infinite. I'd play for hours.

In 2017, I lost my job — my dream job — and slipped into the uncertain world of freelance work, a transition that led to a period of acute anxiety. I began to spend most of my working week at home, alone, making lists, staring out of the window at the pigeons. Sometimes I read Amazon reviews of household items, which was exciting. I tried exercising. I tried structure. But nothing seemed to ease my nagging, hollow feeling of worry. Then I downloaded a new-ish version of The Sims, the popular simulation game. Bingo. It was like putting Vaseline on chapped lips.

The Sims, in which you design and build homes in a blank slate of a neighbourhood, and set about creating 'Sims' to live inside them, was released in 2000, and is the bestselling video game of all time. As a teenager, The Sims was my thing. Back then I averaged two or three hours every weekday, and I'd put in a proper sesh at the weekend. It felt wonderful to return home from the incomprehensibly dull monotony of school to a digital world I'd created — a kind of haven of order and control.

My interminable adolescent thirst to be someone else was quenched. I could throw teachers I disliked into swimming pools. I could invent a handsome Sim and command him to kiss an incredibly cool, elegant Sim who, coincidentally, shared my name. I could make a Sim of a pretty, popular girl in my school, and prevent her from falling in love. It was a kind of escapism. Beautiful. Addictive. A little devilish.

The game's appeal also comes from its close-to-real-life-ness. You pay bills. You load the dishwasher. You make beds. You clean stuff. (In a game, you clean stuff!) Tuck your Sims up after a hard day's work and dinner spent together as a family, and experience the pride of a weary, content mother. You cannot 'win.' Your Sims might reach the top of their career ladders, retire with a healthy pension and then die, but the game goes on.

My Sims habit resumed last year, when actually I had a lot of work on. I had a huge deadline which I had kept putting back. A few days before the deadline I was nowhere near ready and had reached peak procrastination. I knew The Sims would be catastrophically detrimental to my deadline. And my social life. And my relationship. But I clicked 'purchase' anyway. That week I played until 3 am every night. I played in every spare waking minute I had. Once, I considered getting out my laptop and playing on the top deck of a bus. A few weeks after I downloaded the game, my right eye started twitching uncontrollably — too much late-night screen-time. I told people it was because I drank too much caffeine.

In some of my lowest moments of last year, pre-Sims, when the anxiety was a struggle, I became obsessed with doing laundry. It excited me, particularly a good white wash, the removal of stains. Laundry became an achievable goal. Something I could do well and quickly. The Sims offered similar rewards. I became good at the game. In a world I had designed and constructed, my Sims thrived. And having control over their lives meant it became easier to escape dwelling on what was going on in my own. When I played the game, my worries floated away, my thoughts disappeared.

In 2017, the video games journalist Andy Kelly wrote an article about the most relaxing games available at the time. 'Flick to any news channel and it's like watching the pre-credits sequence for an apocalyptic action movie. So turn your TV off and switch on your console, where lovely, precious video games will help you forget about the world burning outside.' The ultimate

50 escapism.

Huge numbers of new games are now being designed with distraction, joy or tranquillity in mind. Calm games that present you with manageable, gratifying tasks and puzzles. Games that don't make you want to smash your controller into the wall with frustration.

55 One expert observed: 'Video games place you at the centre of the story — you are an active participant, instead of a passive observer. They offer us a safe place to interrogate and test the emotional consequences of our actions. Far from being a meaningless waste of time, games help us explore what it means to be human, to explore notions of love and loss, and to allow us to travel to far-off incredible places, to become incredible people — all from the comfort of our own home.'

60 Psychologist Kirsten Godfrey believes that it is a normal aspect of human nature to desire a certain level of control over ourselves in order to achieve some positive outcomes in our lives. 'We're often drawn to tasks that are easy to complete or give us some sense of reward,' Godfrey says. 'That buzz you get from completing your to-do list or achieving the next level on a game can trigger the release of dopamine in the brain, making you feel good — just the ticket when you're

65 not feeling good.'

But like any dopamine hit, it's best enjoyed in small measures, and with caution. It can be addictive. 'It's about knowing when to do enough to make yourself feel better,' Godfrey warns, 'but not so much you become dependent.' She says that desiring a feeling of control is simple human nature.

70 She's right. Since realising why I am playing The Sims so much, it's made me want to play it (a little) less. Work feels manageable and it doesn't feel as difficult to keep my head above water. I'm excited about the future but I'm not ashamed of how I'm spending my time. You can't 'win' at life any more than you can 'win' at The Sims. All you can do is spend it doing what you love, with some laundry thrown in for good measure.

Adapted from an article in The Observer by Liv Siddall

Total marks — 30
Attempt ALL questions

MARKS

1. Look at lines 1–8.
Using your own words as far as possible, explain why it was strange that the writer liked to play Diner Dash.
You should make **two** key points in your answer. 2
2. Look at lines 9–14.
By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer highlights the negative effects of losing her job. 4
3. Look at lines 15–25.
Using your own words as far as possible, explain why The Sims is such a popular game.
You should make **five** key points in your answer. 5
4. Look at line 26 ‘The game’s appeal also comes from its close-to-real-life-ness.’
By referring to any part of this sentence, explain how it helps to provide a link between the writer’s ideas at this point in the passage. 2
5. Look at lines 31–35 (‘My Sims . . . minute I had’).
Using your own words, explain fully what the writer means by the phrase ‘peak procrastination.’ 2
6. Look at lines 39–45.
By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the writer makes it clear that doing laundry **and/or** playing Sims helped her during a difficult time. 4
7. Look at lines 46–53.
By referring to **two** examples of word choice, explain how the writer makes it clear that many new video games **do not** contribute to stress or anxiety. 4
8. Look at lines 54–65.
Using your own words as far as possible, identify **five** positive points made about gaming. 5
9. Look at lines 70–74.
Select any expression from these lines and explain how it contributes to the passage’s effective conclusion.