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Something Is Killing the Sims, and It's No Accident

By JOHN MARKOFF

IMAGINE a computer game in which you follow all the rules, but your characters still die, because someone has introduced a virus into the game. Not only that, but the person who invented the game is the one who is distributing the virus.

Exactly that is happening with Sims, the most recent creation of Will Wright, the Sim City game designer. When Sims was introduced earlier this year it immediately became a best seller. Mr. Wright's earlier games had focused on planning cities and then watching them come to life -- and frequently run amok.

Sims operates on another scale. It zooms in on the people, allowing players to create individual characters, build families, furnish their homes and watch over a dollhouse-like suburban world on a PC. Only this time Mr. Wright, who co-founded the design company Maxis, secretly decided to push the interactivity and realism of the game one step further. Soon after the game was released, the Sims Web site began offering components intended to enhance the homes of Sims. Party balloons, plants, a pet guinea pig, a moose head to hang on the wall, a cuckoo clock, wall lights and slot machines could all be added to the game.

Each item was, of course, a small software program specifying how the object would fit into a living room or den and how it would respond to the actions of game characters. None of this was unusual. But what the players who downloaded these objects did not know was that many of them were also Trojan horses. Mr. Wright had quietly decided to introduce a little trouble into paradise.

It took only weeks before Sims players discovered that the pet guinea pig was carrying a potentially fatal virus that could kill a human character in the game. In the world of the game the disease spread from one species to another, and once loose in the human Sims population, the virus could also infect other characters. But in the underlying software code, the guinea pig was itself a computer virus, a small, hidden program that surreptitiously affected the game play. Mr. Wright was playing games with his game, with the players and with the whole idea of a virus.

Soon the Sims bulletin board was full of lively debate over the secret code. Some players agonized over the loss of game characters that they had spent dozens of hours developing. The characters had taken on the qualities of pets, and their creators reacted with outrage and confusion to the plague.

Indeed, the guinea pig is still causing confusion among some players. As recently as last week a player who identified himself as Malc wrote in a posting on the Web site: "My Sims keep getting a cold and dying. Has someone done something to my game or is this possible? Can anyone help? Is there a way to cure them?"

Others defended Mr. Wright in his decision to add secret features to a game. "Why some people are making such a big fuss about it is beyond me," a player wrote. "I had a family of eight who all came down with this thing, and through common sense game playing they all survived quite well and only one even missed a day of work."

In a recent telephone interview, Mr. Wright acknowledged that the virus "threw a lot of people for a loop. But then most of them got it."

Like almost everything in the game, the guinea pig's function as a disease vector was carefully simulated, Mr. Wright said. For example, the guinea pig only spreads the disease if a Sims player neglects to clean its cage, and only if a player reaches into the cage to pet the software animal and is bitten will he get sick. Someone who has gotten sick sneezes and coughs and will infect other human characters in the game who come within several "tiles" distance.

Death is not inevitable, Mr. Wright noted. A sick character will return to health if given sufficient rest. Ignore the illness, however, and your Sims family is in danger.

PC game players seem to love the idea.

"It's a great example of exactly how bizarre and wide-ranging the ideas that are built into this game are," said Rob Smith, editor in chief of PC Gamer, a computer gaming magazine. "People have yet to discover many of them. It's really quite amazing."

Mr. Wright acknowledges that there are other hidden features awaiting Sims players. For example, the antlers on the moose are supposed to serve as a global happiness meter, he said. The worse the family situation in a player's home is, the more the antlers will droop. There is also a way to hack the slot machine to get it to produce free money to use in the game.

Although there is no easy possibility that the guinea pig virus will escape from Sims and cause havoc in the Internet world, the specter of software viruses in the future of computer gaming is real, Mr. Smith said. "When they introduce a future multiplayer version of Sims, it will create an interesting social dynamic," he said.

The idea of a computer virus that is also a real virus appeared in the 1992 science fiction novel "Snow Crash," by Neal Stephenson. Except that in the novel, real human beings in old-fashioned real life die. "Snow Crash" was set in a world in which an interconnected virtual reality is called the "metaverse," and the virus could spread in that world, as software, or in life as a real virus.

Other science fiction, like John Brunner's 1975 novel "Shockwave Rider," explore the consequences of software viruses, and a virus in a computer context appears in David Gerrold's novel "When Harley Was One" (1972).

And there have been other viruses in computer games. In 1984 a virus appeared in Core Wars, an early game in which users created programs that did battle in the memory of a computer, said Fred Cohen, a researcher at Sandia National Laboratories who wrote early computer viruses when he was a graduate student at the University of California at Los Angeles. The viruses Mr. Cohen wrote then were strictly experimental, done as a research project and as a warning. Mr. Cohen discussed protection against viruses in his research paper.

"The computing world is getting closer to the biological world in every way," Mr. Cohen said.

The movement of viruses and similar programs, known as worms, into the multiplayer gaming world of the Internet appears inevitable. (A worm is similar to a virus but is self-propelled rather than moving by attaching itself to a host program.) Worms preceded the virus work by a number of years. The first worm was designed at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center.

Although version 2.0 of Sims is still in development, Mr. Wright acknowledged that it is almost certain to bring with it such a brave new world.

The program is intended to be modifiable, and at some point Maxis, now a division of Electronic Arts, plans to make the language it has created, known as Edith, available to the players. Edith is designed to permit anyone with minimal programming skills to extend the game.

Mr. Wright said he realized that such a language in the hands of antisocial game players would create vexing problems. "Hopefully," he said, "they will be balanced by people doing more creative things."

By then, however, gamers may have been forced to confront the same challenges that face e-mail users whose computers are frequently attacked by hostile programs.

"Right now it would be hard to convince a prosecutor to attempt to convict someone for such a program, but that may change," said Mark Rasch, a former assistant United States attorney who successfully prosecuted a Cornell graduate student for releasing the first Internet worm in 1989. "These things become more important as online gaming proliferates. With online gambling it will become even more problematic."