

# ***The Sims 1 Archive* – A Digital Library Plan**

## **1. Abstract**

This paper outlines a plan for a digital library – *The Sims 1 Archive* – which aims to collect content for the PC game, *The Sims* (2000). An overview will be given of: - a) items that will comprise the collection; b) collection organisation; c) item capturing and maintenance, and; d) how the collection will be presented to users. Finally, a summary of the plan will be made, highlighting any relevant resources needed.

## **2. Introduction**

*The Sims* is a PC simulation game released by EA/Maxis in 2000. In it, players create a family of characters, or Sims, and create the world within which the Sims live and interact, using various in-game tools. There is no final ‘goal’ and play is essentially unstructured. Structure is created by the user whilst playing the game. *The Sims* is fairly unique in that its source code allows various game elements to be manipulated by users. Using open-source programs created by Maxis (as well as users themselves), users may also create their own custom content (hereafter referred to as CC) to use in-game, from Sim clothing to home furnishings.

This flexibility of the game mechanics has proved popular with gamers, and there are many examples of CC to be found across the web.

Recently there has been a move to collect and archive CC, as *The Sims* is now 12 years old, and much of its related ephemera has been lost. Archives of old CC sites are now much sought-after by gamers, thus stimulating a need for Sims-related digital libraries. This paper seeks to draft a plan for such a library.

## **3. Domain/Subject**

*The Sims* falls into the domain of computer and video gaming. Generally, information in this domain focuses on reviews, screenshots, walkthroughs (guides), cheats and other general industry

news. A more niche aspect of this domain is ‘modding’ – that is, the modification of game elements in order to reconfigure or reinterpret the game (Sihvonon, 2011). As far as *The Sims* goes, modding activity can be categorised as: -

- Skinning (creating new character textures)
- Meshing (creating new 3D character models)
- Object creation (creating new furnishings and items to populate the Sim world)

There are other aspects of modification, but these largely fall outside the remit of this paper and will not be discussed. Skins, meshes and objects are the most popular forms of CC and the object of most gamers’ collections.

As yet, this particular domain of videogame CC is a nascent one, and there are few sites that collect CC material. Current CC digital libraries (e.g. CTO Sims, Saving the Sims) are organised on a largely ad hoc basis, are crowd-sourced, lack the relevant metadata, and as such cannot be described as digital libraries in the fullest sense.

## 4. Collections

*The Sims 1 Archive* will collect the 3 main types of CC, i.e. skins, meshes and objects. All these objects are born digital. The formats of each are as follows:-

- Skins - .bmp
- Meshes - .cmx; .skn
- Objects - .iff; .wll; .flr
- Sets (which may include any or all of the above objects) - .far

For the sake of efficiency, files will be contained in a .zip or .rar file, to package related skins and meshes, and sets of objects together. Thus, the primary downloadable item will be a .zip or .rar file, which may contain files in any of the above formats.

Images will accompany files in order to display file content to the user, so that they may readily discern the contents of the file. As such, provision will need to be made for a large quantity of image files in .jpg, .gif and .png formats. Animated .gifs may also be required to depict objects that are animated.

According to Harter’s Model (1997), *The Sims 1 Archive* will be defined mainly by the broadest view. Because items are born digital, they may take many different forms, and are not information

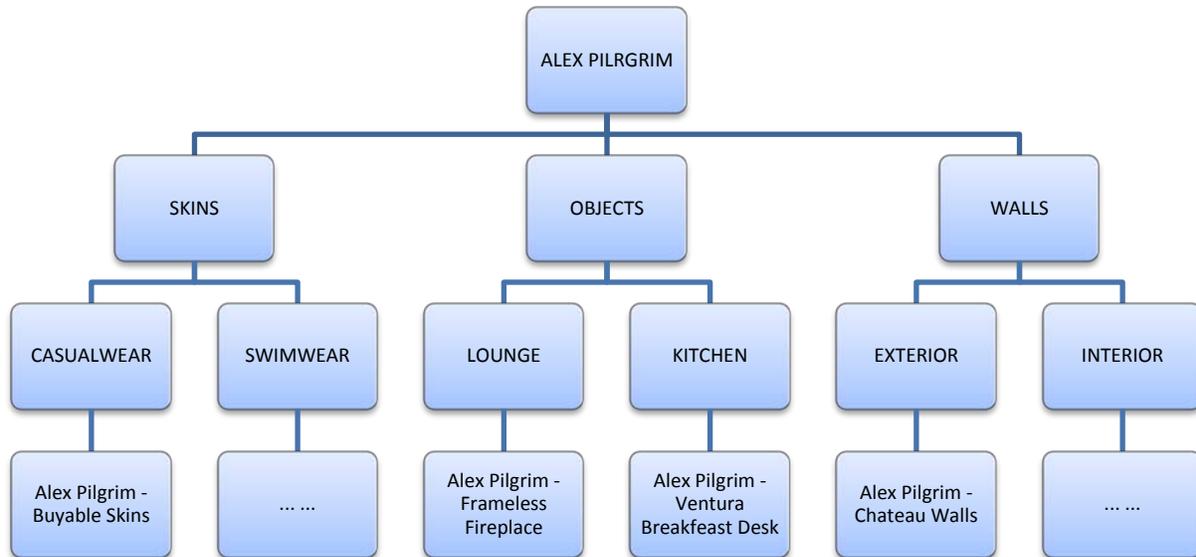
resources in the strictest sense. They are game assets, and as such have no surrogate. They are searchable in and of themselves. Because of the nature of digital born objects, the collection may be susceptible to corruption, deletion, or other mishaps. Likewise, they may often be changed or updated. This also fits Harter's broadest view. However, it does not entirely fit Bawden and Rowlands (1999) view of digital libraries holding mainly information resources and fulfilling the role of a 'typical' library.

## 5. Organisation

The aim of *The Sims 1 Archive* is to be easily accessible to the user. Therefore, organisation should facilitate easy access to library items. Metadata is crucial for this. However, with *The Sims CC*, metadata is not as easily applied as it may be to text-based documents, since the content may take many forms. Therefore, a flexible tool is needed. At present, Dublin Core is the most appropriate metadata standard for *The Sims 1 Archive*. It is simple enough to be used by non-professional cataloguers (as volunteers are likely to be the 'librarians' for *The Sims 1 Archive*), it is extensible, and can be applied to a wide variety of formats (Chowdhury and Chowdhury, 2007). Its basic elements are sufficient for Sims items, with additional elements added when necessary.

Classification is a difficult issue to tackle, mainly because *The Sims* community has already developed its own categorisation system for CC. While this is by no means standardised, there are general rules of categorisation which most gamers follow: -

1. Firstly, items are categorised according to their *author* (this may be a person, group, or website).
2. Secondly, they are categorised according to *type* – objects, skins, meshes, walls, floors and lots.
3. Thirdly, they are categorised according to *function* – e.g. female swimwear, kitchen furnishings, etc.
4. Lastly, individual items are expressed by a descriptive title, of which the author is usually the first element (Fig 1).



**Fig 1** – An example of item organisation for *The Sims*, showing the four levels of categorisation.

Since these conventions are already well-established in the community, they shall be implemented by *The Sims 1 Archive*, as they are readily familiar to potential users. Using more formal, ‘narrow view’ techniques of classification would be confusing to users and reduce ease of access.

The organisation of some CC is problematic. This is because some CC is very old and its provenance may be unknown. Therefore, only minimal metadata may be applied. As such, pertinent data should be added as and when it becomes known.

## 6. Capturing and maintaining

Collection items fall into two types: -

1. **Old** – items which were previously available on sites which are no longer extant; or items which are still ‘live’ in present user’s collections.
2. **New** – items which are available on currently existing websites.

These two types require different methods of capture.

## 6.1. Capturing old items

Old items may be collected through the following methods: -

- Directly from the librarian's own collection of files. This would comprise the base of *The Sims 1 Archive*.
- Harvesting – using an open-source web crawler such as Heritrix, which may be configured to search specifically for relevant file formats (Brown, 2006). However, since the relevant websites no longer exist, their contents would have to be harvested via an archive such as the Wayback Machine.
- Crowd-sourcing – users will be given the option to upload items from their own collections. This will require extensive moderation – administrators or librarians will be needed to: a) check and update current metadata; b) add a descriptive image where one is absent and if one is available, and; c) check that the item is not currently available on an extant website.

After moderation, each item may be approved and published to the library.

## 6.2. Capturing live items

Dealing with this type of item would require permission from authors and web-owners, and due to limited resources and copyright issues, should be avoided, as these items would already be available elsewhere on the Web. Exceptions would be made in cases where: a) the author voluntarily contributes their work to the library or; b) users request author permission and are given it. In the latter case, written permission would have to be presented to the librarian.

## 6.3. Maintenance

For the most part, the digital library will be static and therefore should require minimal maintenance, providing capture procedures have been appropriately performed.

Users will have the option to report faults with the collection, which should be dealt with by the librarian. Corrupt files should be kept in the library, but unpublished, until a replacement is found (e.g. a pre-corrupt version is donated by a user).

Migration as a form of digital preservation is not viable in this case. This is because library items are only functional in their present formats, and migration would render them inoperable by the game engine. Therefore, migration would render the items meaningless. In light of this, backups and regular media refreshment will be necessary<sup>1</sup>.

Transferral to a new server may be necessary in the future, due to space issues or the need to upgrade and improve performance. .iff files can be especially large and take up space rapidly. Administrators and web developers should be prepared for item transferral.

## 7. Presentation

Library users will be primarily game players and CC creators or collectors. Due to the heavy image content of the library, a Graphical User Interface (GUI) will be implemented. Most current CC libraries rely on browsing features as a finding aid. In a large collection, this is often inefficient for the user. Therefore, developing a search engine is a priority. Filters will be essential, as users search according to widely different needs. Filters should include search by: -

- Item author
- Item's original website
- Item type
- Item function
- Item title

Item titles should be given where known (authors usually name their creations); but where the original title is unknown, descriptive titles are preferred. A librarian/administrator should be responsible for the classification of each item, and for assigning an appropriate title.

Where the provenance of an item is unknown, it is important to have a separate category for 'grey' items – a 'holding station' where such items remain until additional information is found. Metadata should be updated as soon as additional knowledge is obtained, and the item should be reclassified if necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> Since use of the items is dependent on the continued existence of *The Sims* game and its related hardware (i.e. the PC), emulation of such hardware is the remit of games developers and not of *The Sims 1 Archive*.

As well as browseable categories and a search engine, other services will include a FAQ for users; submission guidelines for users who wish to donate files; a dynamic form for users to upload files (within the pertinent item category); and a form to contact the librarian for help.

Due to the complexity of the files and their organisation, an administrator or librarian would be needed to maintain the items and to moderate user submissions. They should also be available to answer user queries.

Greenstone would be the most appropriate Digital Library software, as it supports large-scale, diverse collections. It allows the implementation of an end user interface. It is flexible in its use of metadata schemes, which may be useful if more complex metadata is required in the future. It is also relatively simple to set up and use by a volunteer administrator.

## 8. Summary

In moving forward with the proposed digital library, the following resources will be needed: -

- A web server
- Greenstone digital library software
- Heritrix harvesting software
- A base collection of items with which to start the library
- Additional data storage for backups

First, the site with a GUI is to be built, using Greenstone's software. Basic metadata (Dublin Core) will be applied to each item, which is then uploaded to the server. Each item will be categorised. The library will then be made 'live'. Maintenance of the library will be ongoing. The librarian will be prepared to add further items, update metadata as needed, and create periodic backups. They will also be responsible for dealing with user queries.

Technical maintenance is the responsibility of the web developer. Any future need for transfer to a new server will be discussed between the librarian and the web developer.

## 9. References

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