

"ONE OF THE BRIGHTEST PIECES OF POP ANALYSIS TO APPEAR
THIS CENTURY." — THE ONION A.V. CLUB

SEX,

**DRUGS, AND
COCOA PUFFS***

**CHUCK
KLOSTERMAN**

AUTHOR OF *FARGO ROCK CITY*

*A LOW CULTURE MANIFESTO (NOW WITH A NEW MIDDLE)



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There are two ways to look at life.

Actually, that's not accurate; I suppose there are thousands of ways to look at life. But I tend to dwell on two of them. The first view is that nothing stays the same and that nothing is inherently connected, and that the only driving force in anyone's life is entropy. The second is that everything pretty much stays the same (more or less) and that everything is *completely* connected, even if we don't realize it.

There are many mornings when I feel certain that the first perspective is irrefutably true: I wake up, I feel the inescapable oppression of the sunlight pouring through my bedroom window, and I am struck by the fact that I am alone. And that everyone is alone. And that everything I understood seven hours ago has already changed, and that I have to learn everything again.

I guess I am not a morning person.

However, that feeling always passes. In fact, it's usually completely gone before lunch. Every new minute of every new day seems to vaguely improve. And I suspect that's because the alternative view—that everything is ultimately like something else and that nothing and no one is autonomous—is probably the greater truth. The math does check out; the numbers do add up. The connections might not be hard-wired into the superstructure to the universe, but it feels like they are whenever I put money into a jukebox and everybody in the bar suddenly seems to be having the same conversation. And in that last moment before I fall asleep each night, I understand Everything. The world is one interlocked machine, throbbing and pulsing as a flawless organism.

This is why I will always hate falling asleep.

What you are about to read is an evening book. It was written in those fleeting evening moments just before I fall asleep, and it's built on this ethos: Nothing can be appreciated in a vacuum. That's what accelerated culture does; it doesn't speed things up as much as it jams everything into the same wall of sound. But that's not necessarily tragic. The goal of being alive is to figure out what it means to be alive, and there is a myriad of ways to deduce that answer; I just happen to prefer examining the question through the context of Pamela Anderson and *The Real World* and Frosted Flakes. It's certainly no less plausible than trying to understand Kant or Wittgenstein. And while half of my brain worries that writing about *Saved by the Bell* and *Memento* will immediately seem as outdated as a 1983 book about *Fantasy Island* and Gerry Cooney, my mind's better half knows that temporality is part of the truth. The subjects in this book are not the only ones that prove my point; they're just the ones I happened to pick before I fell asleep.

In and of itself, nothing really matters. What matters is that nothing is *ever* “in and of itself.”

1 This Is Emo 0:01

No woman will ever satisfy me. I know that now, and I would never try to deny it. But this is actually okay, because I will never satisfy a woman, either.

Should I be writing such thoughts? Perhaps not. Perhaps it's a bad idea. I can definitely foresee a scenario where that first paragraph could come back to haunt me, especially if I somehow became marginally famous. If I become marginally famous, I will undoubtedly be interviewed by someone in the media, ¹ and the interviewer will inevitably ask, "Fifteen years ago, you wrote that no woman could ever satisfy you. Now that you've been married for almost five years, are those words still true?" And I will have to say, "Oh, God no. Those were the words of an entirely different person—a person whom I can't even relate to anymore. Honestly, I can't image an existence without _____. She satisfies me in ways that I never even considered. She saved my life, really."

Now, I will be lying. I won't really feel that way. But I'll certainly *say* those words, and I'll deliver them with the utmost sincerity, even though those sentiments will not be there. So then the interviewer will undoubtedly quote lines from *this* particular paragraph, thereby reminding me that I swore I would publicly deny my true feelings, and I'll chuckle and say, "Come on, Mr. Rose. That was a literary device. You know I never really believed that."

But here's the thing: I *do* believe that. It's the truth now, and it will be in the future. And while I'm not exactly happy about that truth, it doesn't make me sad, either. I know it's not my fault.

It's no one's fault, really. Or maybe it's everyone's fault. It should be everyone's fault, because it's everyone's problem. Well, okay...not *everyone*. Not boring people, and not the profoundly retarded. But whenever I meet dynamic, nonretarded Americans, I notice that they all seem to share a single unifying characteristic: the inability to experience the kind of mind-blowing, transcendent romantic relationship they perceive to be a normal part of living. And someone needs to take the fall for this. So instead of blaming no one for this (which is kind of cowardly) or blaming everyone (which is kind of meaningless), I'm going to blame John Cusack.

I once loved a girl who almost loved me, but not as much as she loved John Cusack. Under certain circumstances, this would have been fine; Cusack is relatively good-looking, he seems like a pretty cool guy (he likes the Clash and the Who, at least), and he undoubtedly has millions of bones in the bank. If Cusack and I were competing for the same woman, I could easily accept losing. However, I don't really feel like John and I were "competing" for the girl I'm referring to, inasmuch as her relationship to Cusack was confined to watching him as a two-dimensional projection, pretending to be characters who don't actually exist. Now, there was a time when I would have thought that detachment would have given me a huge advantage over Johnny C., inasmuch as *my* relationship with this woman included things like "talking on the phone" and "nuzzling under umbrellas" and "eating

pancakes.” However, I have come to realize that I perceived this competition completely backward; it was definitely an unfair battle, but not in my favor. It was unfair in Cusack’s favor. I never had a chance.

It appears that countless women born between the years of 1965 and 1978 are in love with John Cusack. I cannot fathom how he isn’t the number-one box-office star in America, because every straight girl I know would sell her soul to share a milkshake with that motherfucker. For upwardly mobile women in their twenties and thirties, John Cusack is the neo-Elvis. But here’s what none of these upwardly mobile women seem to realize: They don’t love John Cusack. They love Lloyd Dobler. When they see Mr. Cusack, they are still seeing the optimistic, charmingly loquacious teenager he played in *Say Anything*, a movie that came out more than a decade ago. That’s the guy they think he is; when Cusack played Eddie Thomas in *America’s Sweethearts* or the sensitive hit man in *Grosse Pointe Blank*, all his female fans knew he was only acting...but they assume when the camera stopped rolling, he went back to his genuine self...which was someone like Lloyd Dobler...which was, in fact, someone who *is* Lloyd Dobler, and someone who continues to have a storybook romance with Diane Court (or with Ione Skye, depending on how you look at it). And these upwardly mobile women are not alone. We all convince ourselves of things like this—not necessarily about *Say Anything*, but about any fictionalized portrayals of romance that happen to hit us in the right place, at the right time. This is why I will never be completely satisfied by a woman, and this is why the kind of woman I tend to find attractive will never be satisfied by me. We will both measure our relationship against the prospect of fake love.

Fake love is a very powerful thing. That girl who adored John Cusack once had the opportunity to spend a weekend with me in New York at the Waldorf-Astoria, but she elected to fly to Portland instead to see the first U.S. appearance by Coldplay, a British pop group whose success derives from their ability to write melodramatic alt-rock songs about fake love. It does not matter that Coldplay is absolutely the shittiest fucking band I’ve ever heard in my entire fucking life, or that they sound like a mediocre photocopy of Travis (who sound like a mediocre photocopy of Radiohead), or that their greatest fucking artistic achievement is a video where their blandly attractive frontman walks on a beach on a cloudy fucking afternoon. None of that matters. What matters is that Coldplay manufactures fake love as frenetically as the Ford fucking Motor Company manufactures Mustangs, and that’s all this woman heard. “For you I bleed myself dry,” sang their block-head vocalist, brilliantly informing us that stars in the sky are, in fact, yellow. How am I going to compete with that shit? That sleepy-eyed bozo isn’t even making sense. He’s just pouring fabricated emotions over four gloomy guitar chords, and it ends up sounding like love. And what does that mean? It means she flies to fucking Portland to hear two hours of amateurish U.K. hyper-slop, and I sleep alone in a \$270 hotel in Manhattan, and I hope Coldplay gets fucking dropped by fucking EMI and ends up like the Stone fucking Roses, who were actually a better fucking band, all things considered.

Not that I’m bitter about this. Oh, I concede that I may be taking this particular example somewhat personally—but I do think it’s a perfect illustration of why almost everyone I know is either overtly or covertly unhappy. Coldplay songs deliver an amorphous, irrefutable interpretation of how being in love is supposed to feel, and people find themselves wanting that feeling for real. They want men to adore them like Lloyd Dobler would, and they want women to think like Aimee Mann, and they expect all their arguments to sound like Sam Malone and Diane Chambers. They think

everything will work out perfectly in the end (just like it did for Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones and Nick Hornby's Rob Fleming), and they don't stop believing, because Journey's Steve Perry insists we should never do that. In the nineteenth century, teenagers merely aspired to have a marriage that would be better than that of their parents; personally, I would never be satisfied unless my marriage was as good as Cliff and Clair Huxtable's (or at least as enigmatic as Jack and Meg White's).

Pundits are always blaming TV for making people stupid, movies for desensitizing the world to violence, and rock music for making kids take drugs and kill themselves. These things should be the least of our worries. The main problem with mass media is that it makes it impossible to fall in love with any acumen of normalcy. There is no "normal," because everybody is being twisted by the same sources simultaneously. You can't compare your relationship with the playful couple who lives next door, because they're probably modeling themselves after Chandler Bing and Monica Geller. Real people are actively trying to live like fake people, so real people are no less fake. Every comparison becomes impractical. This is why the impractical has become totally acceptable; impracticality almost seems cool. The best relationship I ever had was with a journalist who was as crazy as me, and some of our coworkers liked to compare us to Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. At the time, I used to think, "Yeah, that's completely valid: We fight all the time, our love is self-destructive, and—if she was mysteriously killed—I'm sure I'd be wrongly arrested for second-degree murder before dying from an overdose." We even watched *Sid & Nancy* in her parents' basement and giggled the whole time. "That's us," we said gleefully. And like I said—this was the *best* relationship I ever had. And I suspect it was the best one she ever had, too.

Of course, this media transference is not all bad. It has certainly worked to my advantage, just as it has for all modern men who look and talk and act like me. We all owe our lives to Woody Allen. If Woody Allen had never been born, I'm sure I would be doomed to a life of celibacy. Remember the aforementioned woman who loved Cusack and Coldplay? There is absolutely no way I could have dated this person if Woody Allen didn't exist. In tangible terms, she was light-years out of my league, along with most of the other women I've slept with. But Woody Allen changed everything. Woody Allen made it acceptable for beautiful women to sleep with nerdy, be spectacled goofballs; all we need to do is fabricate the illusion of intellectual humor, and we somehow have a chance. The irony is that many of the women most susceptible to this scam haven't even *seen* any of Woody's movies, nor would they want to touch the actual Woody Allen if they ever had the chance (especially since he's proven to be an *über*-pervy clarinet freak). If asked, most of these foxy ladies wouldn't classify Woody Allen as sexy, or handsome, or even likable. But this is how media devolution works: It creates an archetype that eventually dwarfs its origin. By now, the "Woody Allen Personality Type" has far greater cultural importance than the man himself.

Now, the argument could be made that all this is good for the sexual bloodstream of Americana, and that all these Women Who Want Woody are being unconsciously conditioned to be less shallow than their sociobiology dictates. Self-deprecating cleverness has become a virtue. At least on the surface, movies and television actively promote dating the nonbeautiful: If we have learned anything from the mass media, it's that the only people who can make us happy are those who don't strike us as being particularly desirable. Whether it's *Jerry Maguire* or *Sixteen Candles* or *Who's the Boss* or *Some Kind of Wonderful* or *Speed Racer*, we are constantly reminded that the unattainable icons of perfection we lust after can never fulfill us like the platonic allies who have been there all along.² If

we all took media messages at their absolute face value, we'd all be sleeping with our best friends. And that does happen, sometimes.³ But herein lies the trap: We've also been trained to think this will *always* work out over the long term, which dooms us to disappointment. Because when push comes to shove, we really *don't* want to have sex with our friends...unless they're sexy. And sometimes we *do* want to have sex with our blackhearted, soul-sucking enemies...assuming *they're* sexy. Because that's all it ever comes down to in real life, regardless of what happened to Michael J. Fox in *Teen Wolf*.

The mass media causes sexual misdirection: It prompts us to *need* something deeper than what we *want*. This is why Woody Allen has made nebbish guys cool; he makes people assume there is something profound about having a relationship based on witty conversation and intellectual discourse. There isn't. It's just another gimmick, and it's no different than wanting to be with someone because they're thin or rich or the former lead singer of Whiskeytown. And it actually might be worse, because an intellectual relationship isn't real *at all*. My witty banter and cerebral discourse is always completely contrived. Right now, I have three and a half dates worth of material, all of which I pretend to deliver spontaneously.⁴ This is my strategy: If I can just coerce women into the last half of that fourth date, it's anyone's ball game. I've beaten the system; I've broken the code; I've slain the Minotaur. If we part ways on that fourth evening without some kind of conversational disaster, she probably digs me. Or at least she *thinks* she digs me, because who she digs is not really me. Sadly, our relationship will not last ninety-three minutes (like *Annie Hall*) or ninety-six minutes (like *Manhattan*). It will go on for days or weeks or months or years, and I've already used everything in my vault. Very soon, I will have nothing more to say, and we will be sitting across from each other at breakfast, completely devoid of banter; she will feel betrayed and foolish, and I will suddenly find myself actively trying to avoid spending time with a woman I didn't deserve to be with in the first place.

Perhaps this sounds depressing. That is not my intention. This is all normal. There's not a lot to say during breakfast. I mean, you just woke up, you know? Nothing has happened. If neither person had an especially weird dream and nobody burned the toast, breakfast is just the time for chewing Cocoa Puffs and/or wishing you were still asleep. But we've been convinced not to think like that. Silence is only supposed to happen as a manifestation of supreme actualization, where both parties are so at peace with their emotional connection that it cannot be expressed through the rudimentary tools of the lexicon; otherwise, silence is proof that the magic is gone and the relationship is over (hence the phrase "We just don't talk anymore"). For those of us who grew up in the media age, the only good silence is the kind described by the hair metal band Extreme. "More than words is all I ever needed you to show," explained Gary Cherone on the *Pornograffiti* album. "Then you wouldn't have to say that you love me, cause I'd already know." This is the difference between art and life: In art, not talking is never an extension of having nothing to say; not talking always means something. And now that art and life have become completely interchangeable, we're forced to live inside the acoustic power chords of Nuno Bettencourt, even if most of us don't necessarily know who the fuck Nuno Bettencourt is.

When Harry Met Sally hit theaters in 1989. I didn't see it until 1997, but it turns out I could have skipped it entirely. The movie itself isn't bad (which is pretty amazing, since it stars Meg Ryan *and* Billy Crystal), and there are funny parts and sweet parts and smart dialogue, and—all things

considered—it's a well-executed example of a certain kind of entertainment.⁵ Yet watching this film in 1997 was like watching the 1978 one-game playoff between the Yankees and the Red Sox on *ESPN Classic*: Though I've never sat through the pitch sequence that leads to Bucky Dent's three-run homer, I know exactly what happened. I feel like I remember it, even though I don't. And—more important—I know what it all means. Knowing about sports means knowing that Bucky Dent is the living, breathing, metaphorical incarnation of the BoSox's undying futility; I didn't have to see that game to understand the fabric of its existence. I didn't need to see *When Harry Met Sally*, either. Within three years of its initial release, classifying any intense friendship as “totally a *Harry-Met-Sally* situation” had a recognizable meaning to everyone, regardless of whether or not they'd actually seen the movie. And that meaning remains clear and remarkably consistent: It implies that two platonic acquaintances are refusing to admit that they're deeply in love with each other. *When Harry Met Sally* cemented the plausibility of that notion, and it gave a lot of desperate people hope. It made it realistic to suspect your best friend may be your soul mate, and it made wanting such a scenario comfortably conventional. The problem is that the *Harry-Met-Sally* situation is almost always tragically unbalanced. Most of the time, the two involved parties are not really “best friends.” Inevitably, one of the people has been in love with the other from the first day they met, while the other person is either (a) wracked with guilt and pressure, or (b) completely oblivious to the espoused attraction. Every relationship is fundamentally a power struggle, and the individual in power is whoever likes the other person less. But *When Harry Met Sally* gives the powerless, unrequited lover a reason to live. When this person gets drunk and tells his friends that he's in love with a woman who only sees him as a buddy, they will say, “You're wrong. You're perfect for each other. This is just like *When Harry Met Sally*! I'm sure she loves you—she just doesn't realize it yet.” Nora Ephron accidentally ruined a lot of lives.

I remember taking a course in college called “Communication and Society,” and my professor was obsessed by the belief that fairy tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Little Red Riding Hood” were evil. She said they were part of a latent social code that hoped to suppress women and minorities. At the time, I was mildly outraged that my tuition money was supporting this kind of crap; years later, I have come to recall those pseudo-savvy lectures as what I *loved* about college. But I still think they were probably wasteful, and here's why: Even if those theories are true, they're barely significant. “The Three Little Pigs” is not the story that is fucking people up. Stories like *Say Anything* are fucking people up. We don't need to worry about people unconsciously “absorbing” archaic secret messages when they're six years old; we need to worry about all the entertaining messages people are consciously accepting when they're twenty-six. They're the ones that get us, because they're the ones we try to turn into life. I mean, Christ: I wish I could believe that bozo in Coldplay when he tells me that stars are yellow. I miss that girl. I wish I was Lloyd Dobler. I don't want anybody to step on a piece of broken glass. I want fake love. But that's all I want, and that's why I can't have it.

1. Hopefully Charlie Rose, if he's still alive.

2. The notable exceptions being *Vertigo* (where the softhearted Barbara Bel Geddes gets jammed by sexpot Kim Novak) and *My So-Called Life* (where poor Brian Krakow never got any play, even though Jordan Catalano couldn't fucking read).

3. “Sometimes” meaning “during college.”

4. Here's one example I tend to deploy on second dates, and it's rewarded with an endearing guffaw at least 90 percent of the time: I ask the woman what religion she is. Inevitably, she will say something like, “Oh, I'm sort of Catholic, but I'm pretty lapsed in my participation,” or “Oh, I'm kind of Jewish, but I don't really practice anymore.” Virtually everyone under the age of thirty will answer that question in this manner. I then respond by saying, “Yeah, it

I designed the perfect girlfriend once. She was a friend of a friend, and—from the moment I never met her—I decided she was the seamless combination of intellect, wit, and altruistic sincerity (she was also supposedly an English major). My love for this girl was spawned before I ever laid eyes on her: her physical appearance was merely described to me by other people, and I quite suddenly convinced myself that this woman was my soul mate. I'm not sure why I did this; maybe it just seemed like an interesting decision to make in advance. I do this sort of thing quite often (sometimes I buy records and pick which song is my favorite before I actually play them, and I find that I am right almost half the time).

Since I had never spoken to this woman (her name was Annette) and had only an anecdotal understanding of what she looked like, my best avenue for cementing our future passion was to send her a letter, which is what I did. And since David Letterman was very popular at the time (and since I am not creative, and since I was nineteen), I sent her a comically agile Top 10 List, which I titled “The Top 10 Reasons Annette Should Fall In Love with Chuck Klosterman.” My assumption was that we would share our first kiss forty-eight to seventy-two hours after she received this missive, particularly because of the cleverness of reason number 4, which was as follows:

4) I am almost a carnivore.

Unfortunately, Annette wasn't my soul mate. She also was not an English major, a fact that became abundantly clear when our mutual friend told me he talked to her on the telephone and asked her about my letter, to which she replied, “Why would I possibly want to date someone who eats other humans?” And the thing that broke my heart wasn't that she didn't know the definition of the word *carnivore*; I could live with that. What killed me was that she thought I had claimed to be “almost a cannibal,” and that didn't work, either.

2 Billy Sim 0:12

I am not a benevolent God.

I am watching myself writhe in a puddle of my own urine, and I offer no response. I have not slept or eaten for days. My cries go unrecognized and my loneliness is ignored. I am watching myself endure a torture worse than death, yet I decline every opportunity to end this self-imposed nightmare. Darkness...imprisoning me...all that I see, absolute horror. I cannot live, I cannot die, trapped in myself; my body is my holding cell.

I am the master, and I am the puppet. And I am not the type of person who still plays video games.

I realize there is a whole generation of adults born in the seventies who currently play Sega and Nintendo as much as they banged away on their Atari 5200 and their George Plimpton-endorsed Intellivision in 1982. I am not one of them. I agree with *Media Virus* author Douglas Rushkoff's theory that home video game consoles were the reason kids raised in the 1980s so naturally embraced the virtual mentality—we never thought it seemed strange to be able to manually manipulate what we saw on a video screen—but I'll never accept pixels killing other pixels as an art form (or a sport, or even a pastime). A homeless man once told me that dancing to rap music is the cultural equivalent of masturbating, and I'd sort of feel the same way about playing John Madden Football immediately after filing my income tax: It's fun, but—somehow—vaguely pathetic.

However, some things are just too enchanting (and just too weird) to ignore. Those were my thoughts when I first read about *The Sims*, arguably the most wholly postmodern piece of entertainment ever created. Much like the TV show *Survivor*, the Pokémon phenomenon, and Parliament Funkadelic, *The Sims* is a keenly constructed product that seems hopelessly absurd to anyone unfamiliar with it but completely clear to anyone who's experienced it even once. Developed by Electronic Arts, *The Sims* is a video game where you do all the things you would do in real life if you weren't playing a video game. You create a human character, and it exists. That's it. Your character does things like read the newspaper. He takes naps, plays pinball, and empties the garbage. Your character invites friends over to his house, and they have discussions about money and sailboats. You buy oak bookcases and you get pizza from Domino's. *This is the whole game*, and there is no way to win, except to keep yourself from becoming depressed. *The Sims* is an escapist vehicle for people who want to escape to where they already are, which is why I thought this game was made precisely for me.

Who Am I? Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Who Else Could Be Me?

The Sims is the only video game I have ever purchased. My goal—and probably the initial goal of most people who buy The Sims—was to create a perfect replica of the life I already have. I would build a character who looked just like me, and I would name him “Chuck Klosterman.” I would design his home exactly like my own, and I would have him do all the things I do every day. Perhaps I unconsciously assumed I would learn something about myself through this process, although I have no idea what that could possibly be. Maybe it was just the desire to watch myself live. Pundits like to claim that a game like The Sims taps into the human preoccupation with voyeurism, but it’s really the complete opposite. I don’t care about peeping into anyone else’s keyhole; I only want to see into Chuck’s.

I designed my digital self as accurately as possible: pasty skin, thick glasses, uncommitted haircut, ill-fated trousers. Outlining my character’s personality traits was a little more complicated, because nobody (myself included) truly knows how they act. I’ve never met anyone I’d classify as self-aware: It’s been my experience that most extroverted people think they’re introverts, and many introverted people make a similarly wrong-headed juxtaposition about being extroverts. Maybe that’s why extroverts won’t shut up (because they always fear they’re not talking enough) while introverts just sit on the couch and do nothing (because they assume everybody is waiting for them to be quiet). People just have no clue about their genuine nature. I have countless friends who describe themselves as “cynical,” and they’re all wrong. True cynics would never classify themselves as such, because it would mean that they know their view of the world is unjustly negative; despite their best efforts at being grumpy, a self-described cynic is secretly optimistic about normal human nature. Individuals who are truly cynical will always insist they’re pragmatic. The same goes for anyone who claims to be “creative.” If you define your personality as creative, it only means you understand what is *perceived* to be creative by the world at large, so you’re really just following a rote creative template. That’s the *opposite* of creativity. Everybody is wrong about everything, just about all the time.

But ANYWAY...I eventually created a Chuck in my own image and dropped him into 6 Sin Lane, a \$15,000 home on the outskirts of an underdeveloped suburb of SimCity, a relic from an earlier incarnation of this particular game. SimCity was the first “simulated reality” game to capture people’s imagination, although SimCity seemed (at least retrospectively) oddly innocuous: The object of that game was to design a vibrant community (transportation systems, hospitals, animal shelters, etc.). It was really just a game for amateur city planners, which is actually less boring than it sounds. SimCity led to SimEarth, where players could exorcise their jones to be an Old Testament God—you took a dead planet and you created a breathable atmosphere and you caused volcanoes and you tried to spawn a few dinosaurs. This was a little more psychologically akimbo, but still not perverse; SimEarth was almost like an eighth-grade science project. However, The Sims broke new ground for electronic pathos. It’s not a game about managing life (like *SimCity*) or even creating life (like SimEarth); it’s a game about *experiencing* life, and experiencing it in the most mundane fashion possible. Whenever unimaginative TV critics tried to explain the subtle, subversive genius of *Seinfeld*, they always went back to the hack argument that “It was about nothing.” But that sentiment was always a little wrong. *Seinfeld* was about nothing, but its underlying message was that nothingness still has a weight and a mass and a conflict. What seemed so new about *Seinfeld* was that it didn’t need a story to have a plot: Nothing was still something. The Sims forces that aesthetic ever further: Nothing is everything.

My Life As a Sim. Or (Perhaps More Accurately) My Life As My Life.

As I had long suspected, my six-year-old niece Katie is not the former lead singer of the Talking Heads. This had been somewhat obvious for a long time, but never more so than the first time I saw a copy of *The Sims*, which I happened to find at her parents' house in rural North Dakota.

Since I had been fascinated by news stories about this game, I immediately tried to play *The Sims* when I noticed it was on the hard drive of my sister-in-law's computer. For about fifteen minutes, my seminal pre-Chuck wandered about the empty residential lots of Sim Village, trying to start conversations with inanimate objects. Young Katie couldn't help but notice my ineptitude and immediately tried to show me how the game was played (and—inadvertently—how existence works, although I doubt she would have explained it that way).

Katie displayed amazing dexterity at *The Sims*, effortlessly building a home and furnishing it with a cornucopia of household goods she could never operate in reality. She then instructed me to find a job and to make friends with other Sim citizens, especially the female ones (this is somewhat predictable, as Katie profoundly enjoys asking me if I have a girlfriend). However, I immediately had dozens of questions for young Katie about my new life: If I don't yet have a job, how could I afford this residence? Who put all that food in my fridge? Elves, perhaps? Can I trust them? Why don't I need a car? Where did I go to college? Don't I have any old friends I could call for moral support? *This is not my beautiful house. This is not my beautiful wife. Well, how did I get here?*

Unlike David Byrne, these questions did not interest Katie. "You just live here," she said. "That's the way it is." But where did I get all this money? "You just have money." But where did I come from? "Nobody knows. You're just here." Am I one of the 55 million Americans living without health insurance? "Be quiet! You won't get sick." This went on for several minutes, finally ending in a stalemate when Katie realized warm cookies were suddenly available in the kitchen. However, something struck me about this dialogue: It was uncharacteristic for Katie to be so unwilling to tell harmless lies. If she had been playing with her Barbie Dream House and I asked her why Barbie had four pairs of shoes but only two decent outfits, Katie would have undoubtedly spent the next half hour explaining that Barbie purchased the extra shoes while shopping in Hong Kong with Britney Spears and planned to wear them to a cocktail party in Grandma's basement. When playing with real-world toys, there's no limit to the back story Katie will create for anything, animate or inanimate. That's how little kids are. But somehow it's different when life is constructed on a sixteen-inch screen; in the world of *The Sims*, Katie won't color outside the lines of perception. The rules become fixed. Fabricating a Sim-human's college experience would be no different than randomly deciding that 90210's Brenda Walsh got a C+ in tenth-grade biology. Those facts aren't available to anyone. Clearly, video technology cages imagination; it offers interesting information to use, but it implies that all peripheral information is irrelevant and off-limits. Computers make children advance faster, but they also make them think like computers.

I tried to keep this in mind when I started my new-and-improved fake life upon my own purchase of *The Sims*. My hypothesis was that the game's accuracy would be dependent on my willingness to think within the confines of the game's creators; I had to think like a machine. And it's quite possible that this initial postulate was right. But I'll never really know, because I couldn't do it. As I made my little SimChuck live and work, all I could think about was what I would think about.

What makes *The Sims* so popular is its dogged adherence to the minutiae of subsistence, and that's where we're supposed to feel the realism. But the realism I felt was the worst kind; it was the hopeless realization that I was doomed to live in my own prison, just like the singer from *Creed*. *The Sims* makes the unconscious conscious, but not in an existential Zen way; *The Sims* forces you to think about how even free people are eternally enslaved by the processes of living. Suddenly, I had to remember to go to the bathroom. I had to *plan* to take a shower. Instead of eating when I was hungry, I had to anticipate an unfelt hunger that was always impending. If I didn't wake up at least an hour before work, I'd miss my ride and get fired. And though I need to do all those things in reality, the thoughts scarcely cross my mind unless I'm plugged into this game.

After playing *The Sims* for my first ninety minutes, I paused the action, logged off my computer, and drove to a Chinese restaurant called *The Platinum Dragon*. I had to pass through some road construction, and it suddenly occurred to me that there would *always* be road construction—not always on this particular road, but somewhere. There will never be a point in my lifetime when all the highways are fixed. It's theoretically plausible that my closest friend might someday abandon me for no reason whatsoever, but it's completely *impossible* to envision a day where I could drive from New York to California without hitting roadwork somewhere along the way. It will always exist, and there's nothing I can do about it. And for the first time, that reality made me sad.

Chuck Vs. Chuck. Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Why I Don't Understand Anybody.

There seems to be an inordinate number of movies about mankind going to war with machines (*Terminator*, *A.I.*, that Stephen King flick with all the AC/DC songs, etc.). That plot device always struck me as something of a cheap shot; as far as I can tell, machines have been nothing but completely civil to us. However, I can assure you that this scenario will never be a problem, even if they completely turn on us. It turns out that computers are the most gutless goddamn cowards you'll ever meet.

My SimChuck has absolutely no grit. He is constantly bummed out, forever holding his head and whining about how he's "not comfortable" or "not having fun." At one point I bought him a pretty respectable wall mirror for \$300, and he responded by saying "I'm too depressed to even look at myself." As an alternative, he sat on the couch and stared at the bathroom door. Quite the drama queen, my SimChuck is.

And *why* isn't my SimChuck happy? Because he's a self-absorbed, materialistic prick. This is perhaps the most disturbing element of *The Sims*: The happiness of the characters is directly proportional to the shit you elect to buy them. As far as I can tell, acquiring electronic equipment and name-brand furniture is just about the only thing *Sims* find psychologically satisfying.

The shopping angle appears to be the part of the game its designers found most compelling, as their catalog of faux products is both massive and detailed. This is the kind of shit that would prompt Tyler Durden to hit somebody in the face. Take the on-screen description of the Soma Plasma TV, for example. Buying this item for \$3,500 increases the owner's fun rating by six full points. And this is what you'd get:

Perfect form...perfect image conformity...perfect entertainment. Soma Consumer Electronics takes the 'plasma phenomenon' to a brave new level in this elegant technology statement. With its incredible image quality, unique form and super thin Flatupective screen, the Soma Plasma TV is the undisputed leader in nanopixel technology.

It would be fun to claim that this kind of *Price Is Right* product exposition is a treacherous form of unexpected advertising, but that wouldn't be true, as all the products in *The Sims* are fake. And it would make me seem as astute as Chip Lambert if I suggested this game is latently attempting to brainwash children into believing that shopping is an important part of life, but I honestly don't think the wackmobile geeks at Electronic Arts have motives that sinister. It's basically just weird, and it's indisputable proof that *The Sims* is not a strategy game, even though that's what it calls itself. If this was somehow about strategy, all we'd need to know is that getting the biggest television gets you x number of fun points. But nobody cares about the math. The reason so much effort has been placed in the "promotion" of fake *Sims* merchandise is so that its real-life players will enjoy the experience of buying them. It's almost circular logic: If a human playing *The Sims* somehow enjoys pretending to buy a plasma TV that doesn't even exist, it stands to reason that my little SimChuck would profoundly enjoy watching said TV if it were somehow real. By this justification, buying high-end electronics really *should* cure depression.

And what's even more amazing is that this is kind of true, and—ultimately—it's what I'll never understand about human nature (simulated or otherwise). I never enjoy the process of buying anything, but I get the impression that most Americans love it. What *The Sims* suggests is that buying things makes people happy because it takes their mind off being alive. I would think this would actually make them feel worse, but every woman I've ever dated seems to disagree.

To succeed at this game, I am forced to consume like a mofo. Perhaps the greatest chasm between Chuck and SimChuck is that I don't own a bed and he can't live without one. I realize i might seem crazy for a thirty-year-old to exist without a bed, but I just can't get myself to buy one; it never seems worth it, because all I would use it for is sleeping (and once I'm unconscious, what do I care where I'm lying?). I get by fine with my "Sleeping Machine," sort of a self-styled nest in the corner of my bedroom. Oh, I can't deny that some overnight visitors to my chamber of slumber have been "disturbed" by my unwillingness to own a traditional bed, but the simple truth is that I don't need that kind of luxury in my life. My Sleeping Machine provides all the REM I require. I hope never own a bed. But don't tell that to SimChuck. Until I got him his \$1,000 Napoleon Sleigh Bed "made with actual wood and real aromatic cedar"), all he did was cry like a little bitch.

I Need Love. Or (Perhaps Less Accurately) Love Is All Around, But Only Around.

Truth be told, my secret motivation for experimenting with *The Sims* was to see if I could sustain any kind of successful relationship within the scope of the game—essentially "playing" to "get play." I'm guessing this is a pretty big draw for all *Sims* obsessives, since it's hard to imagine how anyone regularly sitting in front of a computer for hours at a time could be having much sex. I realize that's a stereotype, but the popularity of *The Sims* almost irrefutably proves it to be true: This game is single-mindedly designed to be a reflection of a normal life that's filled with normal human interaction.

Apparently, that notion is so far removed from gamers that it can only be pursued through a fantasy realm.

Still, there's something oddly Utopian about The Sims relationship-driven, peacenik theology. Unlike other video games I've enjoyed in the past—The Legend of Zelda, Elevator Action, the original Nintendo version of Metal Gear, etc.—The Sims does not require me to kill virtually everyone I meet. As I meet other Sims in the neighborhood, my initial options are to talk with them (understandable), joke with them (also understandable), tickle them (somewhat less understandable), or sneak up behind their back and scare the crap out of them (pretty incomprehensible, but hard to resist). Our interactions are marked by thought bubbles that contain little pictures of the conversation topic; the characters don't speak with real words. They talk in a goofy pigeon language that has been compared to the teachers in old *Peanuts* cartoons, although I tend to think it sounds like a combination of French, Ebonics, and the Japanese pop band Pizzicato Five (interestingly, *Sims* players in different counties sometimes assume that what they are hearing is real dialogue they merely can't decipher—Electronic Arts has fielded phone calls from Americans who thought they had accidentally purchased the Spanish version, Germans who suspected they had been sent the Italian version, Brazilians who thought they had the Canadian version, etc., etc., etc.).

The first two people I (“I” being “SimChuck”) meet in “Simburbia” are Mortimer and Bella, a guy with a mustache and a woman wearing a tight red dress. They evidently live nearby. Mortimer is a lot like my real-world friend Dr. Dave in Akron: He's always up for anything. Bella is a tougher nut to crack; she often glances at her watch when I talk to her. But because Bella's a woman, I keep talking (and talking, and talking), and I throw a little tickling into the mix, and I talk some more, and in no time at all I am given the opportunity to select the “flirt” option whenever I meet Bella on the street.

I start calling Bella on my SimPhone several times a day, and she always comes over immediately. This SimChuck is one suave bastard. A little pink heart icon appears next to Bella's on-screen dossier, and she begins defining me as “The Sim I adore.” We smooch hardcore. Yet—for some reason—I can't come up with a finishing move. It's not so much that Bella declines to sleep with me; it's more that I don't know how to ask. I stand by my bed and call her name, and she runs right over...but then we start talking about skiing. I buy a billiard table in order to impress her (and to set the stage for some, *Penthouse Forum*, *Cybill-Shepherd-in-The Last-Picture-Show*-style shagging), but all she does is clap her hands. I mean, I *know* she's comfortable with me: She has no qualms about using the toilet while I'm standing right next to her, an experience that's light-years more intimate than most kinds of oral sex. But SimChuck remains denied.

And you know why SimChuck gets no nookie? Because Bella was lying to me all along. At the height of our relationship, I invite Bella over for a game of pool (and “maybe more”), and she says, “Sure, I'd love to come over. Can I bring a friend?” I reluctantly agree, but guess who shows up: Mortimer! It turns out he and Bella are married. Upon watching Bella's hello embrace, Mortimer immediately slaps me, and we kind of scuffle. I try to call him the next morning to apologize, but he tells me to get bent. In a matter of simulated hours, I've managed to lose my only male acquaintance by *not* having sex with his wife. This is unprecedented. Even Chuck can't compete with the problems of SimChuck. I had no choice but to buy a Zimantz component hi-fi stereo system (\$650).

God's God. Or (Perhaps More Accurately) Will Wright.

After seventy-two hours of Simming I had grown so despondent over the sexless, consumer-obsessed state of my fake life that I called directory assistance and got the number of Electronic Arts in Redwood, California, demanding to speak to Sims creator Will Wright. They directed me to their satellite division Maxis, and I used the Maxis company directory to leave a message with Mr. Wright, assuming he was working on the prototype for Sim-Soul and would most likely never call me back. However, I was wrong: He returned my call in just a few hours and tried to help me understand how I've managed to destroy my life twice.

"If there's any core question with The Sims, it's got be, 'What is the purpose of life?' Is it to be loved? Is it to be rich? Is it to be successful? They're the same questions you could ask if you never knew the game existed," Wright told me. "But it does seem like some people come to these interesting conclusions about themselves when they play. And if a game changes your perception of the world around you, it's successful."

By that definition, The Sims would, in fact, be classified as art (and art in the truest sense of the word). Wright clearly sees it as such, and he makes a good argument. A forty-two-year-old who never graduated from college (though he did log time at Louisiana State, Louisiana Tech, and the New School in New York City), Wright fell into programming and gaming as an extension of his interest in robotics, a mentality that's readily noticed in Sim behavior.

I explained the conditions of my dilemma to Wright, and—perhaps predictably—he seemed to have heard every one of my questions before. I told him what had happened with Bella. "Yeah, Bella's kind of a slut," he snickered. He explained that his larger vision with The Sims was to show how day-to-day living is—in and of itself—an ongoing strategy problem, which is why so much of The Sims is built around time constraints and the oblique pressure of responsibility. We even had a friendly chat about Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which probably wouldn't have happened if I had called the creator of Donkey Kong.

However, Wright bristled when I suggested that The Sims is mostly a glorification of consumerism that ultimately suggests happiness is available at the mall. He didn't necessarily seem annoyed by this accusation, but he remains baffled that everyone who plays The Sims seems to come to that same conclusion.

"Materialism is the red herring of the game," he says. "Nobody seems to pick up on that. The more you play, the more you realize that all the stuff you buy eventually breaks down and creates all these little explosions in your life. If you play long enough, you start to realize that those things won't really make you happy."

When Wright told me this, I immediately asked if what SimChuck needed was a midlife crisis. Maybe if I kept playing, he'd eventually reach a point where he'd be self-actualized, even if I took away his \$1,800 pinball machine. Once again, Wright bristled; he asked if I was talking about the little person in my computer or the little person in my own mind. I told him that it was hard to tell the difference, because we both seemed to be doing the same shit and neither one of us knew why.

“Well, life doesn’t have a score,” Wright said. “I’ve noticed that whenever people play The Sims for the first time, they do all these little experiments. They want to see what their power will do, so they lock a character in a room for five days and watch them starve to death. They’ll try to make somebody electrocute themselves. But at some point, that power is meaningless. It stops being interesting. You need to have somebody pushing back.”

That reminded me of something. Or (perhaps more accurately), that reminded me of *someone*.

I hung up the phone and went back to my computer, opening The Sims and revisiting the place I had been when I started this essay. My SimChuck was still there, frozen in space, hungry and tired and gesturing like a madman, covered in piss. Up until my discussion with Wright, I had assumed individual Sims could not be killed; I thought they were like doomed vampires from Anne Rice novels, forced to exist eternally in a world they did not create. In truth, my Sim was just a confused little guy, still waiting for a reason to live.

I clicked on the “options” key and directed my cursor to the button that said “Free Will.” I deployed actualization, and SimChuck was emancipated. I watched him take a shower and crawl into his Sleeping Machine, where he slept for the next fourteen hours. And then I did the same.

“I don’t know how I feel about MTV’s *The Real World*,” he said. “I mean, is it really *real*? How real is it, really? Is it a depiction of reality, or is it a reflection of what we *perceive* to be reality? They advertise this as ‘reality programming,’ but isn’t anything *programmed* inherently fabricated? How real is real, you know?”

She said nothing. She continued smoking a menthol cigarette. Twenty seconds passed.

“Well, what do you think?” he finally asked.

“About what,” she asked, exhaling through her teeth.

“About *The Real World*,” he repeated. “Do you think it’s real?”

“Compared to what?”

“Well...to...I guess compared to things that are completely real.”

Twenty more seconds passed.

“Is the show taped or edited in the Fourth Dimension?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are the characters robots?”

“No.”

“Can the episodic plotlines only be perceived by people who have ingested mind-expanding hallucinogens, such as lysergic acid diethylamide, mescaline, phencyclidine, ketamine, or psychedelic mushrooms?”

“No.”

“Well then,” she concluded, “it sounds real to me.”