Welcome to the New Dollhouse

By SETH SCHIESEL

AROUND lunchtime one recent Sunday, Francesca Rookwood, 9, and her brother Richard, 6, were hard at play in Pelham, N.Y., renovating the four-bedroom house they share and picking up after the wayward family they look after.

"Who left food on the floor?" Francesca sighed, turning toward Richard and almost rolling her eyes.

"It wasn't me," he said quickly. "It was probably Francine."

Francesca picked the microwave dinner up off the kitchen floor and put it back on the table. "Yeah, you're probably right," she said. "Francine can be a little messy."

Francine is Francesca and Richard's mother, but that's not who they meant. Instead, the children were referring to the other Francine — the matriarch not of their flesh-and-blood family but of their family in The Sims, the wildly successful computer game that has found its most fervent audience among millions of children across the country.

Francesca and Richard have been playing the game since last fall and within its electronic confines have built a fantasy world that looks surprisingly similar to their own. Comfortable suburban home. Parents named Mark and Francine. Children named Francesca and Richard. Antique French sofa in the entry hall. Lots of leopard-skin patterns scattered about the house.

At the moment, the suspected food-dropper — call her Sim Francine — was coming out of the shower and trying to decide whether to take a nap. Sim Mark was working out in his new home gym. Naturally, Sim Francesca and Sim Richard were at school.

As the small animated characters move through their daily lives, they evoke living dolls.

As far as we know, children have always played with dolls of one sort or another to act out variations on their own lives, or lives they observe or imagine. Today, a vast and growing number of kids are doing the same thing — but with a very new tool. Instead of dolls, they are using video games. And perhaps most of all, they're using The Sims.

Some video games let players battle aliens or quarterback a pro football team; The Sims drops the player into an even more fantastic environment: suburban family life. Each Sim, as the characters are known, is different — one might be an old man, one might be a young girl; one is motivated primarily by money, for instance, while another may want popularity — and it's up to the player to tend to those needs. As in real life, there are no points in The Sims and you can't "win." You just try to find happiness as best you can.
And though video game players are often stereotyped as grunged-out, desensitized slackers, it is the nation's middle-class schoolchildren, particularly girls, who have helped make The Sims one of the world's premier game franchises, selling more than 60 million copies globally since its introduction in 2000.

"I like Sims more than other games, and Sims is way more fun than TV because TV gets so boring — you just stare at a screen and watch and watch and watch," Francesca said in her (real) airy playroom as she tinkered with the layout of the new (imaginary) home office she was designing on the monitor connected to her Dell computer. "But in The Sims you make your own characters and give them a personality and give them stuff and build their houses and make them live."

In the impeccably maintained real-life Rookwood household, there was no food on the floor, or on the stove for that matter, so Francine Rookwood, 44, ordered pepperoni and mushroom pizza. "Initially I was a little concerned because it is rated T for Teen and Francesca said she had tried it at a friend's house and I was concerned that she had done that without checking with me first," she said after the pizza showed up. "But then I looked into it and now I don't mind them playing this game at all. Actually, it seems to have some value for them. And I'll tell you, she used to really be into dolls, like Barbies and the Bratz dolls; once The Sims came along the dolls were done. And I mean done."

Mark Rookwood, 46, a currency trader in Manhattan, didn't seem to have had any initial reservations. "The entire concept seems very creative," he said. "It seems as if it teaches them a lot about the different motivations and desires people have in life and it shows some of the frustrations of running a household. In other games you see a lot of violence and we're not into that as a family. But it's interesting to see how they react to things with The Sims that normally a parent would have to deal with, like if one of their Sims doesn't want to go to school or is messy or if there are conflicting desires in the family."

As Francesca explained: "They need to take care of fun, comfort, hygiene, food, room, energy, bladder and social life."

"And is it hard to keep them happy?" her mother asked.

"Yeah, it's hard because they have a lot of different desires and they don't always listen," Francesca replied.

"Ah, so it's frustrating sometimes when they don't listen?" said Mom, with only the faintest hint of amusement. Francesca nodded. "O.K. then," and finally a chuckle. "Keep that in mind."

Not every parent is so comfortable with the game. Miranda Saylor, a 14-year-old who lives in Montclair, N.J., has played The Sims since shortly after its introduction. But her father, Durston Saylor, an architecture photographer, said he was still a bit baffled by it.

"I think it's a little more stimulating than television and I don't think it's harmful, but I still don't like it very much," he said. "I've never quite understood what the pleasure is of constantly monitoring the
characters’ various emotional and financial thermometers to make sure they’re getting enough food and happiness to keep your characters buzzing around."

"That is kind of what life is," Mr. Saylor said. "But the difference is that in real life it's happening to you and when you're in a relationship you feel real pleasure, and it's not this vicarious thing like it is with The Sims."

AMONG psychologists and education experts, it is widely accepted that playing with dolls is a safe and perhaps even essential part of self-discovery and growing up for many children, especially girls. Now, some of those experts are catching on to how quickly video games are moving into the territory formerly dominated by a slim blonde named Barbie.

"It's not that surprising when you look at the game," said James Paul Gee, an education professor at the University of Wisconsin who directs a program that studies the intersection of learning and gaming among both adults and children. "It's a great resource for them to design and think about relationships and social spaces."

"We leave most of the social work in our society to women and The Sims lets young girls, in particular, work out their desires and conflicts about those relationships," said Professor Gee, whose team has formally interviewed about 100 children and included more than 50 others in continuing projects during the four years they have studied video games. "Rather than calling it a dollhouse, it's like they are writing their own interactive stories in The Sims to do what novelists do, which is explore personal themes about social relationships. And they have fun doing it."

When adults or older adolescents play The Sims, it is often with the slightly perverse goal of seeing just how dysfunctional or outlandish a household they can create — "Three's Company" meets "Peyton Place," perhaps, with maybe a little "Brokeback Mountain" sprinkled in. But when children play, they usually try to make healthy "normal" families, often modeled on their own lives.

As to how the stories that children create when playing The Sims differ from those in traditional doll play, there appear to have been no serious studies.

Caitlin Kelleher, a doctoral candidate in computer science at Carnegie Mellon University, helps to run a program that uses interactive storytelling software to encourage girls to pursue computer programming. Over the past two and a half years, about 300 girls have passed through the workshop.

"One of the things that children and adolescents really deal with is trying to figure out who they are as people and what their values are," she said. "One of the ways they do that is by role-playing through different social situations. Figuring out their reaction to those situations helps them understand their values and priorities. Things like The Sims help them make that thought process concrete. By creating actual characters that they can see and manipulate, the game becomes a tool through which they can explore these life issues and issues of identity."

Naturally, the young players don't describe their favorite game in quite those terms, but they say basically the same thing.
Fresh off the miniature golf links at Walt Disney World in Florida last month, Meghan McGoldrick, 12, also from Pelham, explained by cellphone why she switched from dolls to The Sims two years ago.

"You can't really develop the dolls," she said. "But in the Sims you're building the houses and putting the characters into different situations. You can actually decide what you want to happen and it's more descriptive when you're playing it because you can see what the characters are really doing. And also you can see how they get older and how they grow over time."

Asked what he had learned from the game, Meghan's brother, Conor, 10, was blunt: "I learned don't leave your baby crying or people will come take your baby away."

Boys certainly play The Sims, but more than half of the game's players are female, according to Electronic Arts, the game's publisher. That is a huge anomaly in an industry in which fewer than 25 percent of video game players are women; for many of the more violent and intense games that figure falls to less than 5 percent.

The popularity of The Sims among girls dovetails neatly with some researchers' ideas about the fantasy lives of kids. "Children generally want to create characters, but with girls we see them wanting to create a friend," said Marjorie Taylor, head of the psychology department at the University of Oregon and author of "Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them" (Oxford, 1999). "It might be expressed through a doll or something like The Sims or be completely imaginary, but with a girl that character is often going to be someone just like them, another girl that they can relate to."

"But with boys," she said, "they are often more interested in actually taking on a pretend identity. Rather than it being a character outside themselves, boys want to create a character and actually inhabit it."

Why might The Sims take girls where no other video game has gone before? Will Wright, its creator (and long one of the luminaries of game design) has a few theories. "To start, I think women are much more discriminating in general than men in their choice of entertainment experience," he said. "Men will do the same stupid thing over and over again and be happy. Women tend to want a more complex, creative experience. And The Sims appeals to that."

"Also," he said, "if you look at movies and books and television, many of the most successful properties are set in normal contemporary situations. And I don't really understand why we don't have more games like that. So if you look at boys and men, there are a lot of games that appeal to them, but it seems like women have fewer choices."

(In Mr. Wright's next big game, called Spore, players will create an entire species from scratch and guide it through billions of years of evolution. As with The Sims, Spore, due out in the next year or so, will enable players to define their own goals and style of playing, rather than navigate a set of predefined obstacles.)

BUT the very characteristics that appear to make The Sims popular among girls — free-form game play and everyday setting — may also help explain why many girls stop playing The Sims once they actually start living young adult lives. The game as training ground gives way to the real thing.

Anna Harbaugh, 18, a freshman at the University of Oregon (and Professor Taylor's step-daughter), said
she started playing The Sims regularly when she was around 15 but stopped fairly abruptly halfway through her senior year of high school, around the time guys entered the picture.

"The Sims was really an important part of my life for a few years," she said. "But I stopped because real life started to get more interesting, so at that point games like that started to seem a little bit less relevant. Around that age is when my social network started expanding and that kind of interaction was no longer something you had to practice in The Sims."

To some researchers, stories like Ms. Harbaugh's are as demoralizing as they are revealing. "Modern girls are very interested in video games, but then when they get toward high school they start to gravitate away because they begin to think that boys don't like girls who play games," said Professor Gee. "They give up their interest in video games around the same time they give up their interest in science and math and that's a real problem because boys use video games to foster an interest in technology, and if girls give that up we're going to continue to see a real gender imbalance in these areas."

Ms. Kelleher of Carnegie Mellon said her research with school-age girls made much the same point. "If you walk into a room full of girls and ask them, 'Who wants to learn to program computers?' you don't get very many hands," she said. "But if you ask them, 'Who wants to learn how to make a movie like Pixar or perhaps something like The Sims?', you get a very different response. And fundamentally, those two activities can be the same thing."

Back in Pelham, Francesca Rookwood wasn't thinking about such broad issues as she and her brother picked out a new leopard-pattern rug for her parents' bedroom.

"It's just I never saw a game like this before," she said. "You get to make the game however you want it to be, and I like that. I like making the characters and the houses and taking care of them. I'm really happy they made this game. I just wish there were more games like The Sims."