

#EAListen: A Thematic Analysis of a Successful Fan Activist Campaign

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter protests taking place in cities all over the United States made their way into a peculiar corner of Internet culture: the fandom for EA's hit video game franchise *The Sims*. Fans put pressure on EA to improve the avatar design process by including more diverse options using the hashtags #StopEAAbuse and #EAListen. A thematic analysis of the tweets in these hashtags reveals four themes that made this fan activist campaign a success. First, users communicated strategically with one another about the branding of their movement. Second, participants made a point to reach out to fannish influencers. Third, fans highlighted the work of modders who made content for gamers of colour. Finally, fans drew attention to EA's own public statements regarding diversity to highlight the discrepancy between their product and their public image. Through this work, we hope to provide scholars with a case study of effective fan activist tactics.

Keywords: Fan activism, Black Lives Matter, hashtag activism, The Sims, Electronic Arts

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests that were springing up all over the United States made their way into a peculiar venue: the online fandom for EA's hit video game series *The Sims*. Fans spent the summer putting pressure on EA to improve the Create a Sim avatar design process by including more diverse options for skin tones and hairstyles using the hashtags #StopEAAbuse and #EAListen. While both of these hashtags had been used in the past as a vehicle for all sorts of complaints and requests on the part of the fanbase, the intense focus on diversity and inclusion that took over the community during this period resulted in EA announcing that they had heard the community loud and clear and that additional skin tones would be made available by the end of the year. A thematic analysis of the tweets in these hashtags reveals four key themes that made this fan activist campaign a success. First, the users of the hashtags communicated strategically with one another about the branding of their movement, debating the effectiveness of the slogans #StopEAAbuse and #EAListen to ensure that their message was not drowned out by community in-fighting. Second, participants made a point to reach out to people they saw as influential within the fan community including EA employees, popular streamers and content creators, and even celebrities to help spread the word. Third, fans highlighted the work of modders who focused on creating content for gamers of colour, providing EA with an idea of exactly the kind of content they were asking for and demonstrating that it was possible to implement within the game (and that such features were already very popular within the community). Finally, fans drew attention to EA's own public statements of commitment to diversity and their support for Black Lives Matter in order to highlight the discrepancy between their product and their public relations campaigns. Through this work, we hope to provide scholars with a case study of effective rhetorical tactics in fan activism that establishes the importance of demonstrating an alignment between the desires of fans and the values that corporations want to be seen to hold as well as the need for fan activist campaigns to create and maintain coalitions with influencers and industry professionals. We believe that such a case study has the potential to be useful not only to fans but to any and all activists looking to leverage social media to help their cause.

Background

Unlike many popular video games, which depict fantastical science fiction and fantasy scenarios for players to explore, *The Sims* is a game franchise that focuses squarely on the mundane. Starting from the first game in the series, released by developer Maxis Games and publisher Electronic Arts in 2000 (Rak, 2015: 164), the franchise asks players to take control of individual characters called Sims and to guide their decisions as they go about their everyday lives:

Sims live alone or in family groups, in homes that must be furnished and made comfortable. They may go out to work or stay at home. They must interact with others, make friends, form close relationships. They may marry, or move in together, have babies, or care for children. If their basic needs are not met, they will die or at least fail to thrive. (Nutt and Railton, 2003: 577)

Gameplay revolves loosely around the concept of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Rak, 2015: 164) with the various desires and urges of the Sim characters, from their highest-order desires for personal fulfilment, love, and social stimulation down to their most basic requirements like hunger or the need to use the bathroom, represented by a series of status bars that the player must manage:

Characters are given desires, urges, and needs which can come into conflict with each other, and thus produce dramatically compelling encounters. Characters respond emotionally to events in their environment, as when characters mourn the loss of a loved one. Our choices have consequences, as when we spend all our money and have nothing left to buy them food. (Jenkins, 2004: 128)

The Sims is not really the kind of game that you can definitively win or lose. Rather it is 'a kind of authoring environment within which players can define their own goals and write their own stories' (Ibid: 128), a 'life lab' (Rak, 2015: 155) that has often been likened by critics to a kind of 'interactive, intelligent dollhouse' (Flanagan, 2003).

Players engage with this open-ended system in many ways. For example, at the beginning of the game, players are given the ability to design their own characters, a process which 'encourages players to create characters who are emotionally significant to them, to rehearse their own relationships with friends, family, or coworkers' (Jenkins, 2004: 128). In fact, according to the game's designer, Will Wright, 'one thing that almost everybody does, usually right off the bat, is they place themselves in the game with their family and their house and next-door neighbors' (Donovan, 2011; see also Griebel, 2006). However, many players also get enjoyment out of the architectural aspects of game play, the ability to design and furnish their own dream homes. Still others enjoy cooking up elaborate scenarios to torment their Sims, testing the limits of the game's engine by locking their creations inside a burning building or sending them swimming in a pool and then deleting the ladder so that they cannot climb out and they eventually drown (Nutt and Railton, 2003: 589; see also Beavis and Charles, 2005: 364). *Sims* fans have also taken to creating their own content for use within the game, designing their own fashions, furniture, and other digital objects for their fellow players to download (Nutt and Railton, 2003: 578) as well as mods and hacks that can change the base functionality of the game. They also enjoy creating media with and about their Sims, for example composing short stories about the characters that they have created and

illustrating them with screenshots from the game (Rak, 2015: 165-166) or filming machinima, a kind of animated film that is generated via the game engine (Manente, 2020).

Considering the game's mechanical flexibility and ability to cater to so many different styles of game play as well as its ability to appeal to fans across a wide variety of demographics, including both boys and girls, children and adults (Beavis and Charles, 2005: 365-366) it is unsurprising that *The Sims* 'has arguably the biggest following of any PC game released' (Nutt and Railton, 2003: 578). As of 2019 Electronic Arts reports that the franchise had surpassed \$5 billion in sales across 'four main titles and a handful of spinoffs' (Valentine, 2019) as well as an avalanche of expansion packs and add-ons that give players 'the opportunity to go on holiday, keep pets, go out on dates and a host of other everyday activities' (Nutt and Railton, 2003: 577). And the most recent entry in the franchise, *The Sims 4*, is perhaps the most popular one yet: the game boasted '20 million unique players worldwide' as of February of 2020 (Favis, 2020) and its average player rate continues to grow year-after-year (Valentine, 2019).

And yet, while the community surrounding *The Sims* is extremely devoted to their favorite game, they are most definitely not shy about voicing their concerns when they feel that series publisher Electronic Arts is failing to perform as a proper custodian of the franchise, as the recent controversy surrounding the fan-driven hashtags #StopEAAbuse and #EAListen amply demonstrates. The movement began in late September of 2019, when a Spanish *Sims* fan who goes by the Twitter handle @immiriamg first used the hashtag to call for a 'huelga contra EA' which translates to 'a strike against EA'.¹ The initial focus of the hashtag campaign does not seem to have been issues of race and diversity. Rather, complaints centred around the idea that *The Sims 4* was 'an incomplete game' in that it lacked many updates and features that had been introduced in previous games in the series (and that fans were thus being asked to pay for expansion packs 'one after another' in order to get access to content that they thought should have been included in their initial purchase of the base game).² People using the hashtag also complained that *The Sims 4* was 'plagued with bugs' and 'game-breaking' issues that had gone unfixed for several years (Sylvia, 2019). 'Patches/updates do not come frequently enough,' they complained, and when they were released, it was often only when EA was 'gearing up for a new expansion pack of some sort, or as a hotfix after one has been released' meaning that players were 'left waiting for another paid content release update to fix and issue introduced with the last paid DLC'.³ Posts using the hashtags also called attention to the high 'cost of admission... and the decision to continue

¹ @immiriamg, 'Voto por la huelga contra EA. En mi último vídeo me desahoguo diciendo todo lo que pienso sobre esto y creo que nosotros, la comunidad de habla hispana que somos los que nos sabemos quejar deberíamos hacer algo. #StopEAAbuse', *Twitter*, September 28, 2019, <https://twitter.com/immiriamg/status/1177909383780540416>. Note: all language from tweets including typos and emojis has been preserved from the original.

² 'Why #StopEAAbuse', *StopEAAbuse*, 2019, <https://stopeaabuse.web.app/>.

³ DLC stands for 'downloadable content' and refers to extra game content sold separately from the base game. See Sylvia, 2019.

to develop and release DLC and expansions while ignoring the issues that have been present for years' (Sylvia, 2019). In other words, according to one fan, it was conceived as 'a hashtag with which we try to be heard by [EA] so they stop selling us uncomplete products,' a place where players could 'place together all our complaints to make them arrive to EA and let them know we are tired'.⁴

Over the course of 2019 and into the beginning of 2020, #StopEAAbuse and #EAListen continued to be used by the *Sims* community to express a wide variety of frustrations and complaints. During this period, usage of #StopEAAbuse fell away as the community determined that #EAListen was a better label to describe the goals of their movement (see Theme 1 below). However, starting in the summer of 2020, the discussions taking place within the #EAListen hashtag started to narrow to focus specifically on concerns about diversity and representation in the game franchise. This shift occurred as the Black Lives Matter movement became more and more visible on social media and protests against police brutality and systemic racism dominated the news in the United States. After all, players of *The Sims* often act as 'player/authors constructing, albeit within the constraints of the game's setting, complex stories of living in the social world' (Nutt and Railton, 2003: 578). As such, it is unsurprising that real-world concerns about racial injustice and disenfranchisement would spill over into *The Sims*. And these concerns were not new: players had been complaining that the game's software-imposed constraints on those who wanted to make stories about black and brown characters since the launch of *The Sims 4* back in 2014 (Bailey, 2020). Critics noted that while the previous game in the series featured 'a color wheel and sliders, allowing Simmers an enormous amount of fidelity over the color of their Sims' skin', *The Sims 4* took a step backwards with regard to racial representation by instead only offering a limited palette of swatches for players to choose from (Jackson, 2020). Furthermore, many simmers complained that the black and brown skin tones that were present in the game were of low quality, describing them as "'ashy" or "pale" looking' or as having 'a lack of depth and vibrancy' to the point that they 'look almost sickly' (Ibid). Players also complained of 'issues with the game's afro textured hair—there's not a lot of it, and not all of it is even passably good—as well as the game's make up, which looks awkward on all of the game's existing dark skin tones' (Ibid).

One extremely popular tweet that came up again and again within the hashtag was a piece of emoji art featuring a colourful array of pointing fingers with the text 'FIX THE SKINTONES #EA LISTEN' framed in the centre (see Figure 1). Other posters wrote messages like 'it's fun to recreate ourselves in the Sims and then make ourselves do amazing and/or dumb shit, but non-white people have a hard time doing that when darker skintones show up weird in-game'⁵ and 'The reason I am the person I am today is because @TheSims allowed

⁴ '#StopEAAbuse.'

⁵ @hancydrew, 'it's fun to recreate ourselves in the Sims and then make ourselves do amazing and/or dumb shit, but non-white people have a hard time doing that when darker skintones show up weird in-game #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 6, 2020, <https://twitter.com/hancydrew/status/1291469595543580674>.



Figure 1: This emoji art was copied and pasted dozens of times in the hashtag. @TheKixg, “FIX THE SKIN TONES #EAListen,” *Twitter*, August 5, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TheKixg/status/1291054994897219585>.

me to create my TRUE self in a computer game. The fact someone who isn't white cannot do the same is disgraceful in this day and age.⁶ Still others attempted to recruit influential community members and EA employees to the cause by tagging them into the conversation.

The skin tone issue gained even more notoriety when EA CEO Andrew Wilson released a statement in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Wilson, 2020) and players logged into their *The Sims* accounts to discover a message claiming that ‘We stand with and for the Black community – our players, friends, and family’ and ‘*The Sims* is committed to creating a world as it should be, one that is kinder, more connected and built on representation and inclusion’,⁷ which some simmers found ironic in light of the long-term refusal to engage with fan complaints on this topic.

As the hashtag continued to gain traction, getting boosted by several prominent YouTubers within the community and even helping to launch both a Change.org petition that garnered over 85,000 signatures (A colour wheel and more skintones for *The Sims 4* 2020) and an ‘in-game Black Lives Matter rally’ in June of 2020 (Grayson, 2020) EA decided to

⁶ @MikeyMoozles, ‘The reason I am the person I am today is because @TheSims allowed me to create my TRUE self in a computer game. The fact someone who isn't white cannot do the same is disgraceful in this day and age. #EAListen’, *Twitter*, August 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/MikeyMoozles/status/1292262621723463682>.

⁷ u/MusicalNut2407, ‘Just Booted Up Sims4 and Found a Message for the BLM Movement’, *Reddit*, June 20, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaming/comments/hcgk01/just_booted_up_sims4_and_found_a_message_for_the/.

respond. In a video message posted to social media, Lyndesay Pearson, the Executive Producer and General Manager of *The Sims* told fans:

We hear you and recognize that we have not done enough to address the variety of skin tones and hair styles that you expect to find in *The Sims 4*. While we have made additions and improvements and fixes in the past, there is much more for us to do. We are making it a priority to release more options this year, as well as to address the visual issues with current skin tones – specifically to improve the blotchy artifacts and ashy tones. We’ve iterated on these before, but we are doing a deep dive into our full pipeline to trace our assets through every step and compare the before and afters to assess any loss in quality.⁸

As a result, in October of 2020, an update was released that would ‘visually improve darker skin tones and some hair options’ (Colantonio, 2020) while a more substantial update promising to add ‘at least 100 new skin tones’ came out in December of the same year (Brown, 2020). This was a great victory as having its demands publicly acknowledged by the organisation represents an important milestone for activists (Taylor, Kent and White, 2001). Moreover, EA’s acknowledgment of their customers’ complaints provided activists with leverage to hold the organisation accountable in the future (Gross, 2020; Alaimo, 2017).

Fan Activism

As such, we see the #StopEAAbuse/#EAListen campaign as a great example of fan activism in action. Activism is traditionally defined as ‘a process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions that the activists find problematic’ (Smith, 2005: 5) while ‘fans are typically understood to be individuals who engage deeply with, and often assert their identity through, popular cultural content’ by, for example, ‘writing or producing pop-culture related content such as fan fiction or remixed videos... self-publishing analyses of media content, role-playing, and organizing conventions or other fan group activities’ (Brough and Shresthova, 2012). Fan activism, therefore, can be defined as ‘forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed with metaphors drawn from popular and participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2014: 65). While some imagine fan activism to be mostly ‘associated with active fans lobbying for a content-related outcome’ (Brough and Shresthova, 2012) such as letter-writing campaigns to

⁸ @SimGuruLyndsay, ‘I want to acknowledge your concerns about the variety of skin tones represented in *The Sims 4* & I have some updates from the team to share’, *Twitter*, August 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SimGuruLyndsay/status/1293339102981402624>.

save tv shows in danger of cancelation (Scardaville, 2005; Savage, 2014) or demands for better representation of minority groups within a favourite franchise (Brough and Shresthova, 2012; see also Garber and Paleo, 1983; Lopez, 2012) and therefore dismiss it as mere 'action that looks like political activism but is used towards nonpolitical ends' (Earl and Kimport, 2009: 221), others point out that 'such a definition seems increasingly problematic, given the porous boundaries between cultural and political concerns as well as the overtly political orientation of many fan activist fan campaigns today' (Brough and Shresthova, 2012). For example, many fan activist groups such as the Harry Potter Alliance (Hinck, 2012; Jenkins, 2012) and the Nerdfighters (Wilkinson, 2012) use popular culture as a recruitment tool to get fans involved in civic causes while other fan activist campaigns use beloved fannish texts as a means to explore their thoughts about and ultimately speak on political issues.⁹ Indeed, according to Brough and Shresthova, 'the political potential of participatory entertainment cultures lies in the ways cultural codes and discourses are contested and remixed, as well as the ways in which the resulting content is consumed and reconfigured as a resource for mobilization' (2012) such as when a discussion about the avatar creation options in a popular video game becomes a jumping off point for talking about the Black Lives Matter movement and the pervasiveness of institutional racism in the United States.

Fan activism often takes advantage of social media to spread awareness about campaigns, recruit supporters, and gain attention from traditional media outlets (Jenkins and Shresthova, 2012). In particular, hashtags are a very effective tool for creating discursive communities within fandom around social issues (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020). On social media platforms like Twitter, hashtags serve 'as an indexing system in both the clerical sense and the semiotic sense. In the clerical sense, it allows the ordering and quick retrieval of information about a specific topic' (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015: 5), meaning that fans communicating asynchronously with one another from all over the globe can quickly and easily catch up with an ongoing conversation simply by searching for the hashtag. This means that the hashtag provides a vital function in helping to organise discourse, which makes it much easier for 'users to sift through the cacophony of voices online to identify personal relevant topics and conversations' (Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019: 12). However,

in addition to providing a filing system, hashtags simultaneously function semiotically by marking the intended significance of an utterance.... Hashtags allow users to not simply 'file' their comments but to performatively frame what these comments are 'really about,' thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent. (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015: 5)

⁹ Of course, fandoms are capable of conservative and even reactionary political expression. Per Brough and Shresthova (2012) 'fan communities... are also susceptible to the homogenizing of views that may preclude, or even at times silence, others'. See also Stanfill, 2020; Blodgett, 2020.

This means that ‘although individuals do not always interact with one another as they share their tweets, the shared use of a certain hashtag allows the various contributions of personal sentiment and affect to aggregate into a structured set of meanings and dominant themes’ (Minocher, 2019: 625).

In the case of the #StopEAAbuse/#EAListen campaign, the aggregate theme within the hashtag was the creation of a ‘doppelgänger brand image’ (Ibid: 621) that could facilitate the ‘creation and attachment of negative meanings to a brand image’ in order to ‘alter the company’s public façade’ and to ‘challenge the values a company claims to represent’ (Ibid: 623). In particular, participants focused on counteracting advertisements and public relations campaigns that frame *The Sims* as a franchise focused on providing diversity and inclusion for fans from all different walks of life.

The creation of a brand doppelgänger is in keeping with the three fan activist strategies identified by Ashley Hinck (2020: 164): connecting, expanding, and retelling. Using Hinck’s framework, we see that, in the connecting phase, people connect fan objects to a social issue. In the case of *The Sims*, fans first pointed out the lack of skin tones as an issue in the game and then linked the skin tone to the larger framework of diversity and inclusion. Next, simmers expanded on themes regarding diversity and inclusion, relating the topic to the larger political context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Finally, fans used the hashtag to retell the brand story of *The Sims* as a franchise in hopes that their reframing would push EA to make changes to their game.

Methodology

On August 27, 2020, we scraped Twitter for all instances of the hashtag #EAListen, resulting in a corpus of 4,384 tweets. We chose to focus on Twitter for data collection because, although there are various other online subreddits and forums where discussion of *The Sims* takes place, Twitter was the main hub for conversations on this topic (indeed, posts in these other forums referring to the skin tone controversy often directed users to the Twitter hashtag). The hashtag first appeared on Twitter in September of 2019 and became a flashpoint for the community in the following months, after which it continued to be discussed sporadically throughout the year before spiking in popularity once again in August of 2020 in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests of that summer (See Figure 2). We also did a second scrape of Twitter for all instances of the earlier hashtag #StopEAAbuse on September 12, 2020, which resulted in a list of 3,607 tweets (though a large number of these tweets also contained the hashtag #EAListen and so were already accounted for in our initial list). Following a careful thematic analysis (Owen, 1984) of these tweets we identified four key themes within this collection of posts that we believe contributed to the success of the campaign: strategising about which hashtag would accomplish their goals most effectively, performing outreach to potential influential allies, sharing the work of modders, and

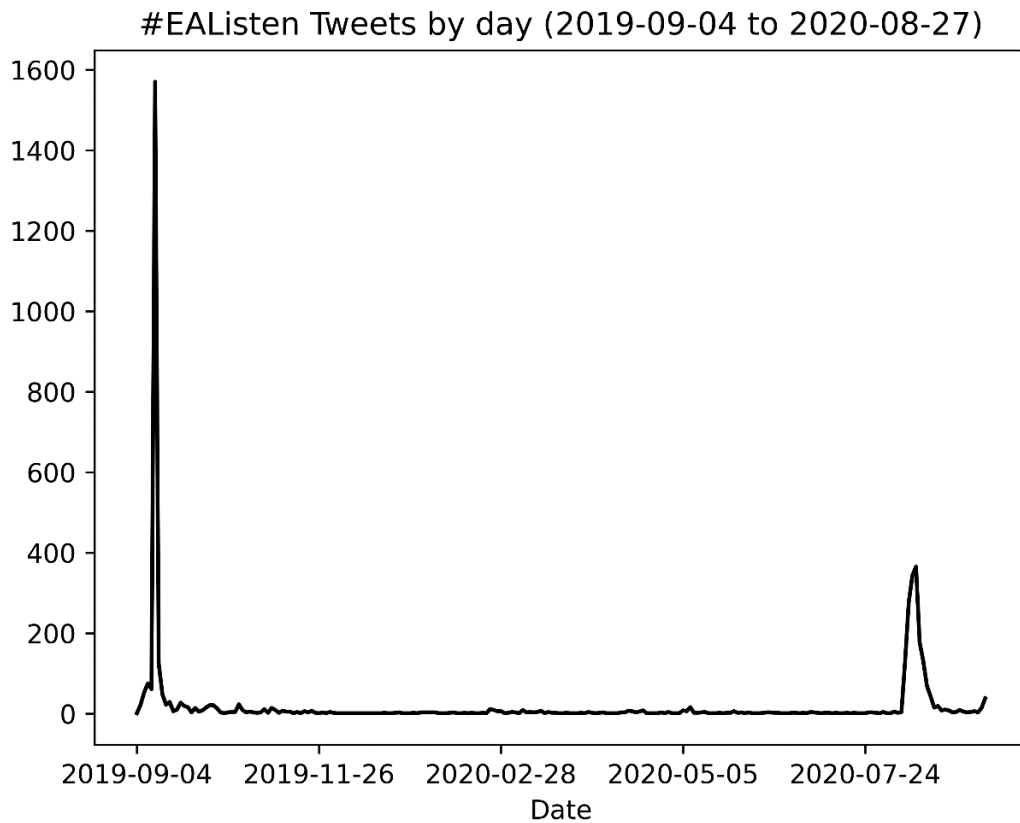


Figure 2: A graph showing the distribution of Tweets featuring the hashtag #EAListen. Note the initial spike of Tweets when the campaign first began in the fall of 2019 followed by low but consistent use for around a year before another uptick in use in the summer of 2020.

highlighting the disconnect between EA’s inclusive brand image and their failure to accommodate *Sims* fans of colour.

Theme 1: Workshopping an Effective Hashtag

As mentioned above, the #StopEAAbuse hashtag was first used by a Spanish simmer named @immiriamg, who called for a ‘strike’ against Electronic Arts. Soon after, a debate broke out amongst users of the hashtag over the purported appropriateness of the hashtag for the purposes of getting the company’s attention. Debating about a right hashtag to use for their cause and tweeting it out is a key step in message development (Smith, 2017) and if these issues were not worked out early in the process of developing the hashtag, then it would not have available as a tool for fannish activism once the fan community’s focus dialled in on the issue of skin tones. In particular, some fans worried about the negative connotations surrounding the word ‘abuse’. For example, @MorbidGamer_ writes: ‘Just finding out about the #stopEAabuse hashtag...bruh. Abuse has such a STRONG connotation that it feels wrong

to use with a movement that I probably agree with'.¹⁰ @KaceyLynnBrown agreed, writing that 'Reading the word abuse so much is triggering in a way and just discovering about this now and going to the hashtag my anxiety spiked. I much prefer #EAListen or #justiceforsims4'.¹¹ These fans felt that use the word 'abuse' to describe the relationship between a video game company and its fans was a bit overblown and risked potentially alienating some within the community. @astronuggie explains their misgivings thus:

i 100% agree that we're being taken advantage of and manipulated, but that word in the english language seems very harsh in comparison to victims of abuse. ea isn't cornering me into buying packs, if i feel mistreated i can just stop buying them/playing to show them my point.¹²

Participants also worried that choosing the wrong hashtag might get them labelled as 'toxic fans' (Arouh, 2020: 68) who were therefore not worthy of being taken seriously. @Smithence writes, 'I think the @StopEAAbuse hashtag should just be dropped 😬 #EAListen sounds so much better because it's not offensive to anyone in any language, period. Plus it sounds less hostile towards EA'.¹³ By arguing against being seen as overly hostile, participants in the hashtag indicate that their goal is not to punish, threaten, or harass EA but rather to communicate with the company and to collaborate with them on bringing the product more in line with their desires. This is in keeping with a phenomenon observed by Lori Kido Lopez in her study on 'Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*' (2012), in which she describes fans pointedly warning each other to refrain from coming across as angry or aggressive in hopes that they will be more likely to be taken seriously.

Defenders of the hashtag #StopEAAbuse pointed to its Spanish language origins to defend its use of the word abuse, pointing out that the word has different connotations in that language than it does in English. For example, @corelia17 wrote:

¹⁰ @MorbidGamer_, 'Just finding out about the #stopEAabuse hashtag...bruh. Abuse has such a STRONG connotation that it feels wrong to use with a movement that I probably agree with. And I speak eng/span so don't even @ me. #Justiceforsims4 wouldve been more appropriate imo 🙄 #JusticiaParaSims4', *Twitter*, October 3, 2019, https://twitter.com/MorbidGamer_/status/1179632556326567936.

¹¹ @KaceyLynnBrown, 'Reading the word abuse so much is triggering in a way and just discovering about this now and going to the hashtag my anxiety spiked. I much prefer #EAListen or #justiceforsims4', *Twitter*, October 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/KaceyLynnBrown/status/1179761992506265600>.

¹² @astronuggie, 'i 100% agree that we're being taken advantage of and manipulated, but that word in the english language seems very harsh in comparison to victims of abuse. ea isn't cornering me into buying packs, if i feel mistreated i can just stop buying them/playing to show them my point.', *Twitter*, October 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/astronuggie/status/1179516931046555649>.

¹³ @Smithence, 'I think the #StopEAAbuse hashtag should just be dropped. 😬 #EAListen sounds so much better because it's not offensive to anyone in any language, period. Plus it sounds less hostile towards EA. It's more versatile too I think, people from different EA games can use it! 🙄', *Twitter*, October 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Smithence/status/1179908565718446082>.

La palabra puede sonar dura, pero si miras en el diccionario comprobarás que, aunque tal vez poco usada, también es válida en este tipo de situaciones. De todas formas, se han creado hashtags, como #EAListen, para quienes se encuentren incómodos usando el primero (#StopEAabuse).

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The word may sound harsh, but if you look at the dictionary, you will notice that, although perhaps rarely used, it is also valid in these kinds of situations. Anyways, hashtags, such as #EAListen, have been created for those who are uncomfortable using the first one (#StopEAabuse).¹⁴

@PronCron agrees, writing

#StopEAabuse started from the Spanish word “abuso” meaning exploitation/corruption. The Spanish speakers felt cheated by the price for the poor quality. They felt exploited by EA b/c EA is the only one making Life Simulators and can essentially take advantage of that.¹⁵

@miriamslowly even created a Twitter poll to help determine which hashtag the larger community preferred:

Chicxs! Un simmer educado angloparlante me ha dicho que quizá sería mejor cambiar el HT #StopEAabuse por #EAListen

Quiero saber vuestra opinión. Creo que para complacer a más gente deberíamos utilizar los 2 HT para los que no queréis cambiarlo y para los que no se sienten a gusto

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Guys and Girls! An educated English-speaking simmer has told me that it might be better to change the HT #StopEAabuse to #EAListen.

I want to know your thoughts. I believe that to please more people, we should use the two HT for those who don't want to change it and for those who do not feel comfortable.¹⁶

¹⁴ @corelia17, ‘La palabra puede sonar dura, pero si miras en el diccionario comprobarás que, aunque tal vez poco usada, también es válida en este tipo de situaciones. De todas formas, se han creado hashtags, como #EAListen, para quienes se encuentren incómodos usando el primero (#StopEAabuse)’, *Twitter*, October 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/corelia17/status/1179521008807632897>.

¹⁵ @PronCron, ‘Like I said, #StopEAabuse started from the Spanish word “abuso” meaning exploitation/corruption. The Spanish speakers felt cheated by the price for the poor quality. They felt exploited by EA b/c EA is the only one making Life Simulators and can essentially take advantage of that’, *Twitter*, October 4, 2019, <https://twitter.com/PronCron/status/1180217166605492228>.

¹⁶ @miriamslowly, ‘Chicxs! Un simmer educado angloparlante me ha dicho que quizá sería mejor cambiar el HT #StopEAabuse por #EAListen

In the end, participants switched over to #EAListen in hopes of refocusing attention away from disagreements about the branding of their movement and onto the issues that they wanted to bring to light. @Another Plumbob sums up this idea nicely, posting ‘I read that the hashtag is now being replaced by #eaListen so that hopefully the debate can steer away from the hashtag itself and into the actual issues.’¹⁷ In addition, several participants like @Debs19971 noted that the campaign was more likely to be successful if everyone used the same hashtag, writing:

StopEAabuse may sound inappropriate to some of you, but I suggest using #EAListen everytime you want to “complain” about #TheSims4. If we are a team, we have more possibility to be heard 😊¹⁸

All of these debates took place very early on in the life of the hashtag when it was home to a bevy of complaints about all aspects of the game. However, as the summer of 2020 approached, the newly established and agreed upon hashtag #EAListen started to narrow its focus to issues regarding diversity and inclusion within the game’s Create a Sim system. This led to the development of a second major theme within the data set as the community began to reach out to powerful and influential voices in *The Sims* community to try and get them on board with their cause.

Theme 2: Enlisting Content Creators, Game Changers, and SimGurus

One common strategy that participants in the hashtag used to try and amplify their movement was to try and recruit influential community members who, they reasoned, might be more effective at both getting the attention of EA itself and at disseminating the hashtag within the fandom. Per @averageasalways posted:

The fact that simmers with lots of influence are not only supporting, but are ACTIVELY HELPING us get better skin tones, makes me so happy. What you’ve

Quiero saber vuestra opinión. Creo que para complacer a más gente deberíamos utilizar los 2 HT para los que no queréis cambiarlo y para los que no se sienten a gusto’, *Twitter*, October 2, 2019, <https://twitter.com/miriamslowly/status/1179478138952327168>.

¹⁷ @AnotherPlumbob, ‘In any event, I read that the hashtag is now being replaced by #eaListen so that hopefully the debate can steer away from the hashtag itself and into the actual issues.’, *Twitter*, October 3, 2019, <https://twitter.com/AnotherPlumbob/status/1179894998885699585>.

¹⁸ @Debs19971, ‘StopEAabuse may sound inappropriate to some of you, but I suggest using #EAListen everytime you want to “complain” about #TheSims4. If we are a team, we have more possibility to be heard’, *Twitter*, October 5, 2019, <https://twitter.com/Debs19971/status/1180446518609879040>.

done with your platforms is incredible and I'm so proud. WE WILL GET THERE
♡ KEEP DEMANDING CHANGE #EAListen #SimsOfColour¹⁹

For example, a group of elite players and content producers called Game Changers were often invoked as potentially powerful allies for the campaign. The EA Game Changers program is a 'community partnership program that fuses content creators and expert players directly into the game development process enabling early collaborative feedback for improvements.... by granting creators early access to gameplay capture.'²⁰ In other words, players, streamers, and content creators chosen for this program act as representatives of the *Sims* community, participating in beta tests and feedback sessions with game designers, and acting as brand ambassadors for the game.²¹ As a result, fans of *The Sims* often look to Game Changers to serve as their voice when they have an issue with the game. Thus, participants in the #EAListen hashtag were eager to get Game Changers to use their platforms to discuss the lack of diverse skin tones within the game, tagging them on Twitter to make them aware of the campaign and praising them when they released videos about the issue. For example, @Marc_Coronado celebrates when he realises that '@lilsimsie is helping us with this issue!'²² and posts a link to her video titled '*The Sims 4* NEEDS to do better' on YouTube²³ while @MissCharlottie highlights a video called 'We need to talk about skintones in *The Sims 4*'²⁴ by @plumbellayt by writing 'This is it. This video. So happy to see people with big platforms voicing important issues in the Sims 4'.²⁵ Likewise, @_UVRei_ writes '@lilsimsie @plumbellayt and others not listed: Thank you guys for making those videos – we don't have a voice when it comes to big companies in general and sometimes we really do just need someone with a platform to call them out. #TheSims4 #EAListen'.²⁶

¹⁹ @averageasalways, 'The fact that simmers with lots of influence are not only supporting, but are ACTIVELY HELPING us get better skin tones, makes me so happy. What you've done with your platforms is incredible and I'm so proud. WE WILL GET THERE ♡ KEEP DEMANDING CHANGE #EAListen #SimsOfColour', *Twitter*, August 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/averageasalways/status/1292191719719686145>.

²⁰ 'Game Changers', *EA*, 2020, <https://www.ea.com/game-changers>.

²¹ 'Frequently Asked Questions', *EA*, 2020, <https://www.ea.com/game-changers/faq>.

²² @Marc_Coronado, '@lilsimsie is helping us with this issue! #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 8, 2020, https://twitter.com/Marc_Coronado/status/1292134526177574915.

²³ lilsimsie, '*The Sims 4* NEEDS to Do Better', *YouTube*, August 8, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgC9bv0AZQs>.

²⁴ Plumbella, 'We Need to Talk About Skintones in *The Sims 4*', *YouTube*, August 7, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FA3IjVQBld0>.

²⁵ @MissCharlottie, 'This is it. This video. So happy to see people with big platforms voicing important issues in the Sims 4. <https://youtu.be/FA3IjVQBld0> via @YouTube #EAListen @plumbellayt', *Twitter*, August 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/MissCharlottie/status/1291804431906938886>.

²⁶ @_UVRei_, '@lilsimsie @plumbellayt and others not listed: Thank you guys for making those videos - we don't have a voice when it comes to big companies in general and sometimes we really

At the same time, participants urged one another not to harass or intimidate another influential group within the *Sims* community, the SimGurus, who are EA employees that work on *The Sims* franchise and often interact with players on social media. Such warnings suggest that participants wanted to avoid allowing their fan activist campaign to devolve into abuse directed at individual developers. Instead, they urged one another to aim their critiques towards EA. For example, @jennshinee posted 'The gurus are not at fault, don't send hate when they are just doing their jobs. Target @EA'²⁷ while @Technicolorttv urged her fellow fans 'Please do not call out the gurus about the skin tone issue. We know that they're on our side here. Instead, continue to use the hashtag #EAListen!'²⁸

As posts like these demonstrate, the recruitment of influential community members who already had the ear of the company and the policing of fellow posters to ensure that no potential allies were alienated from their cause were both important tactical considerations. But in addition to Game Changers and SimGurus there was one more group of influential community members who also received a great deal of attention within the hashtag: modders.

Theme 3: Modding In What Is Missing

While appeals to Game Changers and SimGurus were mostly focused on amplifying the hashtag, appeals to modders operated differently. Modders within *The Sims* community are players who create new custom content that people can download and add on to the base model of the game. This custom content might include new fashions that Sim characters can wear, new objects to decorate their homes, and, most relevant here, new skins and hairstyles that players can use when building their avatars. As such, they exist in a 'role somewhere between... the fan/user and the creator/producer' (Condis, 2018: 68-69). Julian Kücklich describes modding as 'an important source of innovation in the digital games industry' as:

without the creativity of modders, developers would be hard-pressed to come up with new ideas, and it would prove hard to implement these ideas in the high-risk gaming market were it not for the huge 'test-market' the modding community provides... In effect, the creativity of modders significantly reduces game developers' R&D and marketing costs. (2005)

do just need someone with a platform to call them out. #TheSims4 #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/UVRei/status/1292318765640830976>.

²⁷ @jennshinee, 'The gurus are not at fault, don't send hate when they are just doing there jobs. Target @EA #EAListen #SimsOfColour <https://twitter.com/JAVONTII/status/1291401160730042368>', *Twitter*, August 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/jennshinee/status/1292576431566970881>.

²⁸ @Technicolorttv, 'Boosting this! Please do not call out the gurus about the skin tone issue. We know that they're on our side here. Instead, continue to use the hashtag #EAListen!', *Twitter*, August 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Technicolorttv/status/1292524145566052353>.

Indeed,

hackers and modders... are sometimes viewed by industry professionals as potential bellwethers through which they can catch a glimpse at the desires of the underserved parts of gamer culture. When game designers see that a particular mod is doing exceptionally well, they may include these features in their next official release. (Condis, 2018: 69)

Furthermore, the creation of a mod 'posit[s] the existence of a need or a desire in the community' (Ibid), something that the original game was missing. As such, they can sometimes be a vessel for marginalised groups looking to 'create space within a particular fictional universe' for themselves when they find themselves unrepresented in the base game (Ibid). Mods provide evidence to game designers that these underserved audiences exist and that they are willing to go the extra mile to seek out the content that they want (and therefore that they might make for reliable paying customers).

Participants in #EAListen regularly used the hashtag to share information with one another about mods that improved upon the skin tone options provided in the main game. For example, @PronCron posted a gallery of pictures comparing screenshots of the base game to screenshots created using modder and Game Changer Xmiramira's 'Melanin Pack', noting that 'This is why we need better skin tones in #TheSims4' and 'The EA skin tones lack the richness and life that comes with melanin infused skin'.²⁹ @Michessiah123 shared a link to a Tweet from modder Xmiramira showing off her 'Melanin Pack' and exclaiming 'This is how it's done!' while tagging in '@EA @TheSims'³⁰ and @ALLJArt declares that 'The Sims should hire modders and pay them to use their skin tones in the game. I think that would be a cool thing for them to do and then skin tones would actually be decent'.³¹

Many users also expressed hurt that mods were necessary for them to make a representative of themselves within the game, noting that EA's failure to release an official patch updating the skin tones felt like a slight, an indication that fans of colour were not considered worthy of the investment in time and money that the development of such a patch might require. @spellcastersim expresses frustration that:

We have to ASK EA. Modders have to create CC [custom content] so people can represent themselves. To have the luxury to be in a LIFE simulation. And

²⁹ @PronCon, 'This is why we need better skin tones in #TheSims4. I went into the game and selected four of the darkest skin tones from both #TS4 base game and @Xmiramira's Melanin Pack. The EA skin tones lack the richness and life that comes with melanin infused skin. #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 6, 2020, <https://twitter.com/PronCron/status/1291555154706276352>.

³⁰ @Michessiah123, 'This is how its done! #EAListen @EA @TheSims', *Twitter*, August 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Michessiah123/status/1291894196287287296>.

³¹ @ALLJArt, 'The Sims should hire modders and pay them to use their skin tones in the game. I think that would be a cool thing for them to do and then skin tones would actually be decent. #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 10, 2020, <https://twitter.com/ALLJArt/status/1292822626226835456>.

that's cruel and wrong in so many ways. I really don't get EA. I don't wanna download something to feel represented³²

@prettyoddsim concurs, posting 'The fact that it's already been 6 years and black simmers still have to use cc just so that they can create themselves, their friends, their families, is pathetic on EA's part. It's time for the darker skin tones to be fixed #EAListen #SimsOfColour'.³³ @rachelcatfish summarises this sentiment particularly well, declaring that 'representation matters' and demanding that EA:

increase the shade range of sims. show us you listen to your audience and care about equal representation of your players. #EAListen there shouldn't have to be cc mods to make up for a lapse in representation. do better.³⁴

While grateful for the increased diversity made possible by mods, *Sims* fans felt frustrated by the fact that EA had failed to address the skin tone problem within the core game itself. And this failure felt especially egregious given all the lip service that the company chose to pay to issues of diversity and inclusion, especially during the summer of 2020 and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Theme 4: Pointing Out EA Hypocrisy

An organisation will often use public relations campaigns to try and paint themselves as 'a value-based representative of the collective' (Gross, 2020). In EA's case, *The Sims* has long prided itself on its support for diversity and inclusion. It even made this commitment the subject of its Play With Life ad campaign in which a group of players from a variety of backgrounds discussed how interacting with the game helped them to become more comfortable in their own skin.³⁵ As such, many participants in the #EAListen hashtag were quick to point out what they saw as hypocrisy on the part of EA in that they were happy to

³² @spellcastersim, 'Exactly my thought. We have to ASK EA. Modders have to create CC so people can represent themselves. To have the luxury to be in a LIFE simulation. And that's cruel and wrong in so many ways. I really don't get EA. I don't wanna download something to feel represented in a life -', *Twitter*, August 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/spellcastersim/status/1292133982147153922>.

³³ @prettyoddsim, 'The fact that it's already been 6 years and black simmers still have to use cc just so that they can create themselves, their friends, their families, is pathetic on EA's part. It's time for the darker skin tones to be fixed #EAListen #SimsOfColour', *Twitter*, August 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/prettyoddsim/status/1292575994201735174>.

³⁴ @rachelcatfish, 'representation matters. increase the shade range of sims. show us you listen to your audience and care about equal representation of your players. #EAListen there shouldn't have to be cc mods to make up for a lapse in representation. do better.', *Twitter*, August 8, 2020, <https://twitter.com/rachelcatfish/status/1292209475361878018>.

³⁵ The Sims, '*The Sims: Play With Life*', *YouTube*, July 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKVaeMOVfXU>.

cultivate a public image that was invested in cultivating a diverse audience but had thus far failed to deliver what that audience needed to feel included. @cosy_foxes writes:

forget your bonehildas and your cowplants. ACTUAL inclusivity and representation from a game that claims to have just that is so much more important and is the matter that should be gathering the most momentum within the community #EAListen #SimsOfColour³⁶

@zbaz10 also emphasises the disconnect between EA's claims of inclusivity and their actions, asking 'What about fixing the skin tones? You praise yourselves on inclusivity but yet you decide to ignore what the community has been asking for so long! #FixSkinTones #EAListen'.³⁷

Many posters also felt that EA's public statements in support of Black Lives Matter during the summer of 2020 were especially hypocritical in light of their failure to address complaints about skin tones. @pansexualwhoo asks

remember when the attention to blm protests was at its peak this year, and they had the nerve to make a popup that said that EA stands "with and for the Black Community" and "The Sims is comitted to a creating a world [...] built on representation" ???? the nerve?? #EAListen³⁸

@spellcastersim makes a similar point, writing 'Isn't it weird that EA/The Sims posted all that stuff to BLM but STILL POC can't create themself in THEIR life simulation game without the help of CC [custom content]? Where's the logic? Where the moral? #EAListen #SimsOfColour'.³⁹ Participants in the hashtag were especially contemptuous of a tweet from *The Sims* franchise's account (@TheSims) stating 'We stand with and for the Black community – our players, friends, and family. Black Lives Matter. The Sims is committed to creating the world as it should be, one that is kinder, more connected and built on representation and

³⁶ @cosy_foxes, 'forget your bonehildas and your cowplants. ACTUAL inclusivity and representation from a game that claims to have just that is so much more important and is the matter that should be gathering the most momentum within the community #EAListen #SimsOfColour', *Twitter*, August 7, 2020, https://twitter.com/cosy_foxes/status/1291715069827522563.

³⁷ @zbaz10, 'What about fixing the skin tones? You praise yourselves on inclusivity but yet you decide to ignore what the community has been asking for so long! #FixSkinTones #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/zbaz10/status/1291783295609573377>.

³⁸ @pansexualwhoo, 'remember when the attention to blm protests was at its peak this year, and they had the nerve to make a popup that said that EA stands "with and for the Black Community" and "The Sims is comitted to a creating a world [...] built on representation" ???? the nerve?? #EAListen', *Twitter*, August 7, 2020, <https://twitter.com/pansexualwhoo/status/1291675393288699905>.

³⁹ @spellcastersim, 'Isn't it weird that EA/The Sims posted all that stuff to BLM but STILL POC can't create themself in THEIR life simulation game without the help of CC? Where's the logic? Where the moral? #EAListen #SimsOfColour @EA @TheSims', *Twitter*, August 5, 2020, <https://twitter.com/spellcastersim/status/1290882133276397569>.

inclusion.⁴⁰ @oy_its_martha replied to this post by demanding ‘#EAListen unpin the tweet if you won’t acknowledge simmers demanding more skin tones POC deserve to see themselves in #SimsOfColour Acknowledge the mistakes and damage and begin the process of healing those mistakes.’⁴¹ @misskeisha retweeted this tweet from @TheSims, with a note that read ‘I’m failing to see the representation and inclusion we were promised. This was performative and congrats you have done@the bare minimum #EAListen #fixtheskintones #SimsOfColour.’⁴² And @hallontroll seemingly referenced this same tweet from @TheSims when they posted ‘Love going to @TheSims account to see if they’ve been allowed to respond in any way whatsoever, only to see some nice pinned performative allyship @EA #EAListen’.⁴³ As these tweets suggest, one of the key tactics that posters in the #EAListen hashtag used was to point out EA’s own statements regarding diversity and inclusion and to demand that the company take action in keeping with their own stated values.

Conclusion

A close analysis of the content of the #StopEAABuse/#EAListen campaign yields several lessons that future fan activists (and really any activists who wish to use social media to further their cause) should take to heart. First, message discipline was strongly emphasised as participants debated which hashtag would be the best vehicle to deliver their complaints in a straightforward, unambiguous, and respectful way. Any behaviour that could be construed as hostile or abusive to Sim Gurus was roundly rejected as both unproductive and deleterious to the movement. Second, participants continually pointed out EA’s prior public commitments to diversity and inclusion to contextualise their demands for more skin tones and hair styles, thereby suggesting that, at least in this matter, corporate values were in alignment with the fans’ desires. This framing rhetorically transforms fan activists from antagonists into collaborators working to help EA achieve their own goals. Finally, participants leveraged fan ‘prosumers’ (Ritzer, 2015) like modders and streamers whose continued

⁴⁰ @TheSims, ‘We stand with and for the Black community - our players, friends, and family. Black Lives Matter. The Sims is committed to creating the world as it should be, one that is kinder, more connected and built on representation and inclusion.’, *Twitter*, June 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/TheSims/status/1267986752737812486>.

⁴¹ @oy_its_martha, ‘#EAListen unpin the tweet if you won’t acknowledge simmers demanding more skin tones POC deserve to see themselves in #SimsOfColour Acknowledge the mistakes and damage and begin the process of healing those mistakes’, *Twitter*, August 9, 2020, https://twitter.com/oy_its_mantha/status/1292514764396965889.

⁴² @misskeisha_sims, ‘I’m failing to see the representation and inclusion we were promised. This was performative and congrats you have done@the bare minimum #EAListen #fixtheskintones #SimsOfColour’, *Twitter*, August 11, 2020, https://twitter.com/misskeisha_sims/status/1293199351385219072.

⁴³ @hallontroll, ‘Love going to @TheSims account to see if they’ve been allowed to respond in any way whatsoever, only to see some nice pinned performative allyship @EA #EAListen’, *Twitter*, August 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/hallontroll/status/1293231244260642816>.

investments in fannish labor (Stanfill and Condis, 2014) is key to the success of the franchise. By reaching out to these influential members of the community, fan activists increased the visibility of their movement both amongst fans and within the industry. These tactics enabled fan activists to create an effective doppelgänger brand image for both *The Sims* and EA, thereby enabling them to apply public pressure to the company and, ultimately, to leverage that pressure to create change within their community. And the while the campaign was only able to create material change within the boundaries of the fandom itself, it enabled participants to explore broader political issues connected to both the Black Lives Matter movement and the co-opting of social justice campaigns on the part of corporations.

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