

## 'More Awesome than Electronic Arts': resistance and appropriation in The Sims gaming communities

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### Abstract

This paper explores discourses of resistance and appropriation within the gaming communities surrounding *The Sims* franchise, particularly with regards to users modding and creating their own custom content for the game. I present some findings from a large-scale survey of Sims fans (over 1000 respondents) and analysis of over fifty different Sims blogs, sites and forums to demonstrate how resistance and appropriation form an integral part of the communities' discourse and activity. I argue that resistance to Electronic Arts forms a key part of this discourse, with users perceiving the company as 'greedy' or 'incompetent' whilst they appropriate its content into their own creations. At the same time, there is a counter-resistance from some users to modifying the game or incorporating user-generated content.

### Keywords

gaming; resistance; user-generated content; modding; appropriation

### Introduction

This paper explores resistance and appropriation within *The Sims* gaming communities. Fans of this franchise, now in its third iteration (*The Sims 3*) have long been associated with modding and creating their own custom content for the games (Gee and Hayes, 2010; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2008; Sihvonen, 2011). Indeed, in the early days of the franchise, the creation of user-generated content was encouraged by original creator Will Wright (Jenkins, 2006a/b). Here, I present findings from both a large-scale survey of Sims fans (over 1000 respondents from across a range of communities<sup>1</sup>) and analysis of over fifty different Sims blogs, sites and forums to demonstrate how resistance and appropriation form an integral part of the communities' discourse and activity.

### Background and context

*The Sims* (2000) is a sandbox-style game where users build houses and venues, create characters and run their lives. The original game, itself a spin off from the Maxis<sup>2</sup> *Sim* franchise (e.g. *SimCity*, *SimTower*) has spawned a franchise of its own, with the arrival of *Sims 2* (2004), *Sims 'Stories'* (2007) and *Sims 3* (2009)<sup>3</sup>. The games also have several expansion and 'stuff' packs allowing users to purchase more game interactions and opportunities as well as furniture, clothing and décor. Electronic Arts runs an internet-based store where *Sims 3* users can buy 'simpoints' to spend on exclusive items for their game, including content labeled as 'premium' including new lots and worlds.

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<sup>1</sup> All users are identified by a pseudonym that is different from the pseudonym they use in the communities.

<sup>2</sup> In 1997, Maxis was bought by Electronic Arts and most *Sims* games carried branding for both companies. Gamers coined the term 'EAxis' to refer to the company – something that stuck as common parlance within the Sims communities even after latter *Sims 2* expansion packs and the *Sims 3* series omitted the Maxis logo. The Maxis logo reappeared on *Sims 3* expansions released after 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Although there are console versions of many of the *Sims* games, this paper refers to users of PC/Mac editions, the most popular versions of the series.

Since the first iteration of the franchise, users have been creating their own custom content and mods to enhance gameplay. Indeed, the series' creator, Will Wright, envisaged that "more than 60 percent of the content for The Sims will have been developed by its fans" (Jenkins, 2006a, p170). A plethora of sites and communities dedicated to the games sprang up, and more developed with the arrival of the sequels. *Sims* communities and players can be found on almost all blogging, forum and social media platforms – and appropriation and resistance form a key part of many gamers' experiences, from their use of game mods and custom content, to the way they discuss the EA/Maxis created characters, worlds and scenarios and appropriate (or resist) these in their own gameplay, world building and story creation.

## Method and approach

This paper draws upon findings of survey data with over 1000 *Sims* players, sourced via circulating the call for participants to dozens of official and unofficial sites, blogs, forums and social media outlets. In addition, discourse analysis of over fifty popular sites, blogs and forums was conducted.

## Findings

86% of users surveyed used custom content or mods in their game - 17% were creators of such content. Modding and content creation is frequently framed by users as being explicitly resistant to Electronic Arts (or Maxis/'EAxis')<sup>4</sup>. High-profile modders from sites such as *More Awesome Than You!*, *Mod The Sims* and *NRaas Industries* are regularly credited with fixing what EA 'got wrong' and 'making the games playable'. User-created items such as hair, skins, clothing and worlds are compared to those created by EA, with the latter frequently seen as being inferior.

*[Creator]'s mods are my ultimate favorite. I had all but stopped playing the Sims because my town just kept dying out. Since finding his Story Progression mod, I have completely found my love of Sims again! (Respondent 1357)*

*[Creator] is my favorite modder. I wouldn't be able to play the game at all if not for his mods, because they solve a lot of the problems created by the game itself. (Respondent 1843)*

Creating custom content involves users appropriating the 'meshes' provided in the original games as templates. Some creators then offer content as free downloads, whilst others charge a fee or 'donation' for their work. The act of paid creation is controversial and some sites recirculate this content for free, arguing that charging for custom content contravenes the EA terms of service forbidding users to profit from EA content, as the items are based on EA meshes.

Some of the fans and sites who are resistant to paid creators, however, also support the sharing pirated and 'cracked' material - from the games themselves, to content licensed and sold through the Electronic Arts store. Gamers use the discourse of 'pirate not thief' and 'the municipality' when discussing this activity, presenting themselves as offering legitimate resistance to what they perceive as 'theft' from the major corporation, which is accused of charging gamers too much, both for the games and for additional content, and of providing substandard and inadequate products, which fans have to then 'fix' themselves.

*Paying \$25 for EA worlds is ridiculous. There are beautiful custom worlds out there that are free, so why should I pay so much for an EA one? If EA worlds cost way*

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<sup>4</sup> Resistance to Electronic Arts is not only common to *The Sims* franchise. Fans of other games, including *Sim City*, *Mass Effect 3* and *Fifa* have publicly condemned EA's practices - and in 2012 it earned the epithet 'Worst Company in America' from readers of the site *Consumerist* (REFERENCES).

*less, I would buy them. But until then, I will get them through other means. (Rif, modding forum)*

*The routing issues, bugs in object scripts, and bland assembly-line building, decor and premade sims that feature in many EA worlds... Are you aware that [Modder] has had to provide overrides to fix problems with the routing paint in every world EA has produced? Somehow EA's world design team never seems to have learned that those holes cause stuck sims that lead to massive lag. Our best world creators, on the other hand, understand how to test for and avoid that type of problem... if these worlds actually had been playtested for any amount of time, these things would be caught and fixed. (Skarf, modding forum)*

Despite the prevalence of adaptation, customisation and resistance practices within the community, some users and bloggers remain vehemently 'anti-modding', 'anti-piracy' or both - indeed, they are resistant to these developments.

*No, not all custom content is bad, but how do you know good content from bad? The only way to know is to stick it in your game. It's always a gamble... Thus, our stance is, as it always has been, that 3rd party custom content is bad. We don't encourage it, and if asked, we don't recommend it. Taking any other stance is what would be irresponsible. (Hak, hints and tips forum)*

Tensions prevail between those who feel they should play the games as designed and those who see gaming as a more user-driven, customisable experience; between those who wish to subvert Electronic Arts and those who do not.

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