

---

# “Unfiltered and True to Itself”

## How Content Creators Represent the Black Community in *The Sims 4*

●  
ABDAH ST FLEUR AND JENNIFER DEWINTER

Using interview data from six Black content creators for *The Sims 4* (2014), the authors consider the politics of representation and self-expression in computer games. Black content, the authors find, consists not merely of depictions of skin tones, but also of the diverse global cultures of Black lived lives and Black experiences—including hair textures and styles, fashion, and objects and assets. These Black creators, the authors find, are filling the gap left by *The Sims 4*'s predominantly white designer group and engaging in playbour, or work that resembles play. The authors highlight Black players' motivations to create, diversity of Black identities, creative skill development, and creative identities. The authors call for the industry to include Black designers and creators from the beginning of the creative process and offer a gallery of Black content created by those they interviewed—a snapshot of the diversity of representation in *The Sims 4* community of modders (players who make changes—“modify”—the game). **Key words:** diversity in electronic games; playbour; Sims 4 mods

**T**HAT BLACK PEOPLE are underrepresented in video games is well documented. The 2009 virtual census (Williams et al. 2009) found whites, males, and adults overrepresented in games, especially when compared to the U.S. population. Further, although Black characters in games accounted for 10.74 percent of the 8,572 characters analyzed, the number significantly decreased when sports games were excluded. The updated virtual census (Harrisson et al. 2020) found little change regarding the representation of Black characters as either playable or nonplayable in games developed in the intervening years. Problematically, when game designers include Black characters in their video games, they create characters that rely on and reinforce racial stereotypes emphasizing poverty and violence (c.f., Burgess et al. 2011; Yang et al. 2014), and characters who are

trapped in environments troublesome at best and often downright appalling (see Russworm's [2017] discussion of Black identity in dystopian narratives and DeVane and Squire [2008]). For example, Dickerman, Christensen, and Kerl-McClain (2008), in the article "Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games," explain how people of color are often represented in games: "Recently, video games have made some progress: More games feature African Americans as the main characters. However, these main characters are also portrayed in negative, racially stereotypical ways. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* . . . portrayed a young African American man trying to get rich and succeed through violent and criminal gang activity. . . . The majority of games that feature African Americans as main characters have a limited range of themes: The characters are typically criminals or sports stars" (24–25).

There is as well a dearth of intersectional Black identities when it comes to gender, economic status, education, and career in games, which further exacerbates a real problem. As Higgin (2009) explains, "Black characters within video games almost exclusively function as synthetic sites of racial tourism and minstrelsy, wherein white fantasies and desires of hypermasculinity and sexuality can be inscribed on the Black body and performed without punishment. Almost all leading Black men are sports players or gun-toting gangstas, and Black women are completely invisible. Blackness, as it is culturally rehearsed within games, does not fit into the heroic world of the MMORPG" [massively multiplayer online role-playing games] (16). Scholars have linked this to similar demographic data in the game industry itself, arguing that the lack of diversity among people making games is replicated in the medium (deWinter and Kocurek 2017; Williams et al. 2009). Regardless, the erasure of Black identities in gaming spaces occurs through what Dietrich (2013) calls normative whiteness or "white habitus"—the racial constraint of whiteness on all avatar creation.

We begin with a review of representational problems, then we pivot to echo Gray and Leonard's statement of hope in their introduction to *Woke Gaming* entitled "Not a Post-Racism and Post-Misogyny Promised Land: Video Games as Instruments of (In)Justice": "While current gaming culture systematically embraces ideologies that make clear that white males lives are the only ones that matter," they write, "it's clear that games can show that all lives matter, representationally and materially" (Gray and Leonard 2018, 8). We build on the important work of Gray, Russworm, Leonard, among others, to look to additional sites of Black representation, expression, and community, specifically content creators in the modding (player-made modifications) community of *The Sims 4*.

We explore these explicit and implicit arguments from Black content creators of *The Sims 4* for more inclusive representation in game space, which helps address the representational gap left by the game designers. Through the voices of content creators, we explore such topics as playbour (i.e., work that resembles play), skill development, community representation, and creator activism that demands more from *Sims* creators and its manufacturer, Electronic Arts (EA). The initial *Sims 4* game shockingly contained a lack of Black content, and its created worlds did not reflect any Black neighborhoods. Since the game’s release, Black content creators have been working tangentially to the game industry, filling the creative gaps left by production houses, inserting their voices and fighting for a diversity of representation to reflect a diversity of lived Black experiences. To give voice to these creators, we conducted a series of interviews that illuminate the same hope Gray and Leonard highlight and that echo Tanya DePass’s “#INeedDiverseGamesWork”—a recognition that race matters, that representation matters, and that the means of production are available to meet a pent-up demand.

### ***The Sims 4* and Modding for Diversity**

On September 2, 2014, the fourth major title in *The Sims* game series, *The Sims 4*, was released in North America by Electronics Art. Although this was the fourth title in the life simulation game franchise that allows players to tell their own stories, many spin-offs and one online games also exist. Available in eighteen languages and with over twenty million unique players worldwide as of 2020 (Jovic 2020), *The Sims 4* can be played on many platforms—PC, Xbox, PlayStation—and has eight expansion packs with numerous game and stuff packs. A game pack gives the players extra content on a specific theme, and a stuff pack has extra items like outfits and new hairstyles that people can play with. Like previous *Sims* games, players can use stories that replicate their fantasies or replicate their real life in both single-player mode and in online multiplayer mode. However, the evolution of the franchise has seen significant changes: *The Sims 4* introduced emotions as a game play mechanic. Developers also introduced sliders into the “create a sim” design process, enabling the player to use a mouse-like interface to click and drag physical assets to change the appearances of characters, like the shapes of their faces, their hair lengths, and so forth. Further, significant for our purposes, *The Sims 4* constitutes the first *Sims* game that does not offer

players official tools to create worlds, relying instead on player-creators to create assets and import them into the game, predominantly on Python script mods.

Since its inception, modding has been an important part of *The Sims* franchise. As Sihvonen (2011) notes in *Players Unleashed! Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*, “It is therefore through modding that the players have to create diversity and produce the kinds of body images that proliferate in other games as well as real-life; paradoxically, the Sims’ bodies, especially the nude ones, are reconstructed as more ‘realistic’ through add-ons provided by the modders” (283). Germane here, however, is the simple fact that modding proves essential for diversity in *The Sims 4* because it is one of the few ways Black Simmers can create Black content with Black bodies. Everyone is different physically. For example, although *The Sims* allows the creation of slim and curvy sims (player-created characters), the curvy sims can look unpleasant and unrealistic. When that happens, players who want Black bodies represented tend to look for content creators that do “skins,” or a downloadable overlay that changes the look of an object in a game. This is not a revolutionary sentiment. Collins (2020) notes the importance of representational aesthetics identification: “For women, including queer women, disabled women, and women of color, mods are a way to obtain representation and give voice to people who are sorely underrepresented in gaming development. Through modding, they can see themselves and create narratives for themselves that game developers do not anticipate. . . . Some mods improve the aesthetic of characters, thereby making them easier for a player to identify with” (32).

Shaw (2010) echoes this sentiment, noting: “First, people want to see people like them. This is part of the market logic reflected in interviews I have done for this and other projects. If you want people to watch/play/read something, you put people like them in it.” Yet market logic does not hold without the hard work of the modding community. In *The Sims* games, for example, players want to see sims that look like them; they want to see worlds that look like the neighborhood they live in. Importantly, every community has its own style, hairstyles, and clothing—there is no universal “Black” identity that represents the polysemous cultures of Black experiences. In *The Sims 4*, something as simple as clothing lacks markers that differentiate it among various communities or ethnicities. Whether the character is Black, white, or Hispanic, the options remain the same, creating a white Habitus in the practice of play.

## **“I Will Continue to Create Content that Represents Us”—Content Creators Interviews and Black Representations**

To understand better why Black content creators work on *The Sims 4* and how they feel about its lack of diversity, we conducted interviews with six of them: Complex Sims, Diversed King, Ebonix Sims, Xmiramira, xxBlacksims, and Kiko Vanity. We compiled a list of thirty Black content creators who create skin tones, hairstyles, clothes, shoes, makeup, and accessories from searches on Instagram, *Sims 4* forums, and YouTube, and we emailed them to ask for an interview (so, 20 percent answered our queries). We were interested in what they created and why, and we used our interviews to search out their motivations and political engagement. We also wanted to understand Black content creators’ sense of self and their work in relation to EA and its formal designers. And because we understand the cost of labor and tools in the value of content creation, we asked questions about their developmental processes and skills.

Interviews took place online. We sent in questions ahead of time and we conducted the interviews using a messaging application that enabled us to ask follow-up questions. Interviewees requested that we use their professional content creator handles here to identify their work and words. For each interview, we previewed the content these creators posted to understand their work. This preview helped focus many of our questions. We then talked with each of these content creators for thirty to sixty minutes. Here, we represent the voices of each creator concerning our four major themes: motivations to create; diversity of Black identities; creative skill development; and creative identities. We end with the pointed call for the industry to include Black designers and creators from the beginning of the process. The themes are fluid, with echoes of each in the four sections we use, yet we felt it important to see how the ideas related to each other as a whole.

### **“Black People Exist in Every Space”—Motivations to Create Diverse Representation of Black Experiences**

The motivation for all six of our interviewees to create content came down to a predictable yet poignant point: They were responding to the lack of representation of sims that looked like them and their communities. For a game system

that bills itself as a simulated representation of daily lived life, this very lack of representation echoed an erasure of Black bodies and Black experiences in the larger culture. For example, Diversedking is a Black *Sims 4* content creator from London who has been playing the game since 2016. He enjoys controlling his sims and dressing them up with different kind of clothing. He explains why he started creating content: “I started making content for *The Sims 4* because, when I started playing the game, I noticed that I wasn’t able to express myself or make sims of my own race.” He continued, “Most of the content EA were bringing out were mainly targeted towards Caucasian races. There was lack of diversity and ethnicity and I felt that maybe with my talent I could fill in that void, especially as a young Black gamer who wants to see a lot of representation for his community.”

Diversedking also explained his definition of a Black experience in *The Sims* and what type of experience he is looking for: “To me Black experience is when I can create melanated sims who look more like me, same race group as me, same hair type as me, and being able to express myself through them. I am looking for a diverse experience in *The Sims 4*, where everyone can feel as they are welcome to express their roots and culture. Where everyone is equal and not ashamed of their background. Where we can all play without being questioned or bashed by other simmers just because our sims are a certain color.” Here, Diversedking sees the inclusivity of representation in the game space not just in having an avatar that reflects a real self, but in an avatar that can participate in an inclusive environment that does not perpetuate the negative racial interactions of his lived life.

Xmiramira echoes this sentiment. Although she has recently risen to fame by participating in the *Sims*’ reality television show *Spark’d* (where her team, Team Llama, won) and now acts as an advisor for EA, at the time of our interview, she was merely a twenty-six-year-old content creator from New York. She began playing *The Sims* on the console when she was ten or eleven years old. Shortly afterward, she graduated to playing *The Sims 2* on PC. She enjoys playing the game “because it allows me to create characters and stories, and even sometimes live out things that I would like to do in real life, like own multiple businesses, etc.” She reminisced about why she started creating content for *The Sims 4*: “I began making content for *The Sims 4* on Twitch, Tumblr, and then YouTube. I was told that my content would be interesting, so I tried it and ended up loving it. The thing that drove me to continue to create was the lack of diversity in the content creation space and online sims community. Most of the stories all consisted of white sims with one body type and one look, and I

wanted to help change that. Even when it came down to downloading custom content online, the content was severely lacking for Black sims, and a lot of the top creators didn't care, are racist, and weren't interested in diversifying the CC (custom content) they created.” To her, a Black experience in *The Sims* is “being able to create yourself. Being that we are all different people, from different walks of life, who hold different perspectives and beliefs. I feel like just being able to create a character that looks like me can help set the foundation of what I want my experience to be like.” This is the very definition of an avatar creation—that Hindu religious form adopted in games to define the character who stands in for and represents the player. Representation here is not tokenism; it is a mimesis of the physical by the digital self that constitutes an experience.

Such creativity and representation validate life experiences, as Kiko Vanity explains. Kiko Vanity has been playing *The Sims* for thirteen years, and she shared that she enjoys playing the game because it allows her to live a life that can be both real and fictional. She did not begin by making content for *The Sims 4*, but she has recently done so because there is “a great absence of Black ppl with Black features, and it was disheartening being a dark-skinned woman and not being able to create a character in my likeness.” To her, the “Black experience in the simming community is very parallel to the IMVU [online metaverse and social networking site launched in 2004, eds.] community in the beginning. At the game's initial release, there was a great lack of Black phenotypes especially for Black women. Throughout the six years, there has been great improvements to show Black individuals. But without Black creators, I don't think that would be our reality. I'm looking for an experience that is similar to my community. I'd like to play the game, and it sparks nostalgia (not only because I've been simming since I was ten) that validates my life experience.” Interestingly, in Kiko Vanity's observations we find a recognition that change happens on the margins, pushing the center to adapt and adopt. Kiko Vanity's understanding seems to be that Black content creators and consumers compelled *The Sims* developers to attend to her community more (albeit imperfectly). Even so, the Black content creators and modders provide the majority of the assets and builds needed for Kiko Vanity and others to have a meaningful experience in the game.

The complexity of inclusive and diverse representation gets reflected in the interviews as well, challenging the idea of Black culture by recognizing Black cultures as a geographically, historically, and culturally diverse lived practice. Complex Sims, who has been playing *The Sims* since he was seven years old, reflects on why he enjoys playing the game: “I enjoy playing the game because I

can develop stories within the game play that make it an individual experience. My characters typically have a back story and go down a path that makes everything come full circle.” We wanted to know his definition of Black experience in *The Sims* and the type of experience he is looking for, and he stated:

A Black experience in *The Sims* mirrors your experience as a Black person. Black people can relate to one another on a lot of things, but there is not one uniform Black experience. I feel like it would just be at least having the opportunity to see what you can connect to as a Black person playing the game. I’m looking for the same experience as anyone else and by that, I mean that I can get on the game and see myself without pushing for it constantly. For the type of music and pop culture that my community indulges in to be available.

He explains what he would include if he were one of the developers: “I would add what I could without making it stereotypical. Black people exist in every space, so my goal would probably be to add content that focuses on various Black cultures. Seeing content in-game that mirrors Caribbean and African nationalities would be great.”

Such an observation echoes much of what the research tells us as well. Black people’s problem with the game industry’s Black characters ultimately lies in the game itself—such characters are almost always stereotypical.

### **“Accurately Represent Our Culture”— Black Representation Is More Than Skin Color**

As we have recorded, the content creators explicitly state that inclusive and diverse representation involves more than skin tone and color; it involves a representation of daily lived lives. For example, Ebonix Sims, another Black content creator from London, who has been playing *The Sims* since the original game was released in 2000, explains, “The Black experience in *The Sims* for me, is being able to accurately represent our culture, unfiltered and true to itself. Our many shades of brown, our different hair textures, our many, many ways of styling our hair, our unique style of dressing and trendsetting ways” (see figure 1).

For Ebonix Sims, the absence of Black bodies in *The Sims* virtual space is explicitly a political action, which drives her sense of mission. In her own words, she says:



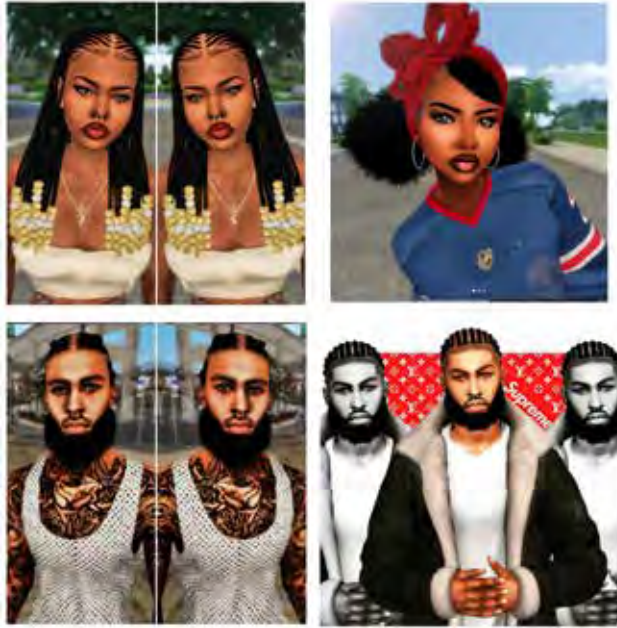


Figure 1. Hairstyles by Ebonix Sims

There is so much about Black culture that isn't represented in the game, that content creators like myself make it our mission to rectify. Without us, the Black experience in the game without custom content and mods is a sorrowful one. Our brown skin tones have gray undertones or are patchy; and without any expansion packs, out of sixty-four hairs for women you can only count six that have a kink or coil (excluding the buzz cut). It's a similar story for the male sims where eight of thirty-six hairs are Afrocentric. I'm looking to feel represented in the Sims in looks, gender, sexuality, and personality.

If she were a developer on *The Sims*, she would “definitely incorporate more hairstyles and introduce a color wheel for skin tones, so that we aren't limited by the selection we currently have.” Underneath the interview with Ebonix Sims lay a constant emotional undercurrent of loss or sorrow. Psychologists have noted that racism (both hostile racism but also passive racism that erases groups of people) lead to racism-related stress (Harrell 2010; Jones et al. 2020). Such stress manifests in different forms, so when we encounter explicitly emotional responses, such as sorrow, we note that they are stress-based responses to built

experiences that purport to cover a range of actual experiences. And taken in its larger context, these representational stresses form part of a larger narrative about the experience of race-based stress, which lies outside our scope here, although it arose in conversations about these interviews.

The missing fashion cultures of Black communities as expressive representation took on broader significance for Complex Sims. He observes: “I felt that *The Sims* was missing a lot of fashion that mirrors the Black experience. We have had so many Black people who are fashion icons like Nicki Minaj, Virgil Abloh, Beyoncé, and Rihanna that have made an impact on how Black people style themselves. So we needed something that matched that level of fashion that has always made us stand out.” Evident here is a simple observation, yet largely absent in discussions of racial diversity and inclusion. Black is more than the color of skin; it is the cultural practice of clothes, or food, or homes, as the example included in figure 2 shows (Bernard 2002; Davis 1992). Such diversity needs to consider intersectional Blackness to highlight the nuance of representation (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). Fashion as cultural self-expression



Figure 2. Black fashion from Complex Sims

sees both a cohesive expression within certain Black communities—such as hip-hop fashion or the more historicized “dandy” fashion—while having broader impact on national and international communities (Wilbekin 2020; Baily 2008; Way 2021).

More expansively than those in previous interviews, Kiko Vanity notes that were she on the development team for *The Sims*, she would “add in different cooking recipes from all Black cultural backgrounds and incorporate more pop culture-like games like *Fortnite* has done.” Race has expanded markers in her design and thinking process, both in what she creates but also in her personal creative subjectivity: “I want everyone who downloads my cc to know that I’m a Black woman and I make content for other Black individuals that sees themselves in my content. (Not to say nonBlack people can’t use my content). I choose to cater to the Black community because I understand what it’s like to not feel seen and to feel like an afterthought. I want to let every Black person who downloads my content to know that it was made with them in mind.”

She believes that the Black community is an afterthought for the developers

---



---

Figure 3. Detail-oriented content by Kiko Vanity

when they are creating the game. “I think that *Sims* gurus should go through our tweets to them and consider our requests.” Similar to the other interviewees, she believes that there is “a lack of diversity in *The Sims* game creators, and I also believe that since Black ppl aren’t showcased in our media like other racial counterparts.” In her concluding statement, she said, “I’d like to add a more detailed and diverse catalog [so] that more people feel more seen.” And indeed, this catalog is already growing in her library, as can be seen in figure 3. The focus on detail, from skin tone to hair styles and down to fingernail shapes, provides different options for her and the community that she aims to work within.

### **“Opened Many Doors and Unlocked Many Skills”— Modding, Skill Development, and Creative Identities**

In a short interview with XxBlacksims, we found a story of the need for content compelling her to develop the necessary creative skills from scratch. Like others, XxBlacksims wanted to create content because of need: “The main reason why I started making content for *The Sims* is because there was a lack of Black creators, and EA did not fully let me represent myself in-game without cc, because there is a lack of hair and skin tones to choose from for people of color.” We asked her what she did to create her characters: “When I first started making cc, I started off recoloring. I was making hairs that are blue or that are more European looking, and I would turn them fully Black for me and others who wanted to make a sim that looks closer to us as Black people in game.” The limitations of reskinning or recoloring soon frustrated XxBlacksims. Black character creation, in other words, is not just a case of changing color. Such colorism effaces the cultural and physical differences of Black communities and Black aesthetics.

XxBlacksims let her own ambition but also the demand from her community drive her to develop the artistic and modding skills needed to create new assets. She explained, “I still felt like recoloring wasn’t enough to fully represent us as Black people, so I started learning how to use Blender by watching YouTube videos. I learned how to make braids and curly hairs, 4c hair, and everything that I feel represents me and other Black girls and boys in game, and I’m still learning how to make the game better not just for me but for every other Black simmer as well.” XxBlacksims’s experience speaks to a strong community motivation. She started making new characters for herself and others. As she learned new skills, she saw it as an opportunity for change, for world building, for inclusive

design for a marginalized group (see figure 4). We could mention something about skill development and playbour (again, a hybrid form of play and labor, especially in modifying electronic game) here, but more importantly, we see stronger arguments about inclusive representational activism that is not about individual representation (I want to see myself in the game) but rather collective or community racism (I want us in the game).

Ebonix Sims likewise reflected on the role of being a creator in the same community in which she plays. In fact, it was the community aspects of creation that drove her enjoyment of the game. She notes that “there are endless possibilities to your game play and sim creations. It has opened many doors and unlocked many skills that I didn’t know that I had!” Although she has been playing the franchise since it was first released, she started making content specifically for *The Sims 4*. The broader tool set, the larger community, and the online Black player communities were all important considerations for this transition into creator.

Creative identities are not just about learning new skills; they are about larger subjectivities, and they are political and racial. Throughout her creative



Figure 4. XxBlacksims and a broader palette of design

practice, Xmiramira has had to explain and sometimes defend her racial focus in her design. She explains: “When I first started, race played a huge factor in the content I created. I was met with a lot of push back, a lot of racism, and it began to make me ask questions. People would come into my streams and constantly ask me why are all my sims Black. And my question to them would be, ‘Do you ask every other popular simmer why are all of their sims white?’” As has been noted by Gray and Leonard (2018) among others, just being Black is a political statement, a political body in games. With white characters as the unmarked category, Black characters are marked as different, as questionable. Xmiramira continues,

Now, after all these questions have been asked, conversations have been had, content has been created, I will continue to create content that represents us, but I know that I’m not alone anymore. Now you can go to YouTube and find hundreds of different stories from different Black simmers all over the world, showing off their game play and who they are. I just didn’t see enough of us making content and being visible. There were some Black simmers making content but most of them either weren’t making Black sims or they only made really light sims. There wasn’t enough plus size or dark-skinned representation in storytelling.

Here, we call out the visibility of the modding community and not just the assets that they create. Being a creator can often feel solitary and isolating. The act of always needing to defend the characters that emerge from the creative process compounds these feelings of isolation. In this interview, we discussed with Xmiramira the importance of being part of a creative community both to feel connected but also to continue to diversify, to see the needs and gaps and build off of each other’s successes.

### **“Lacking the Tools to Properly Capture Our Essence”— A Call to Include Black Developers in the Design and Development Process**

The modding cultures that we see exacted among these six content creators are in direct response to an absence—the lack of representational material that reflects the Black experiences they or their communities want to create. This absence was designed into the system, and all six interviewees strongly noted

the need to diversify the EA team. For example, Diversedking strongly asserted: “If I was a developer I would firstly change the EA team. I feel as if their team isn’t diverse, so they’re unable to give us our full experience and what we want because they don’t have people to tell them this and that.” More concretely, however, Diversedking offered suggestions about skins and textures in the game:

Another thing I would change to help the Black community for *The Sims* is the hairs and skins that come with the base game [see figure 5]. Firstly, the hairs for the Black community look dry, ashy, and have no texture at all. However, when you compare the hairs made for us Black simmers to all the other hairs made for whites and Asians you can see that it has a lot of detail, shine, length, and even looks more appealing in the eye. Sometimes we aren’t even able to represent ourselves fully and have to change something of ours just to make our self happy when really and truly we don’t have the resource to make us who we are.

We pause here to highlight an important observation about a lack of digital resources. Black communities are statistically underresourced for a vari-

---



---

Figure 5. Hair and skin examples from Diversedking

ety of socioeconomic and material reasons. However, we see the same politics of resource scarcity playing out in online, digital spaces. Modding, then, is a resource-generating project, but one that once again must be provided outside traditional market logics. The previous complaints about representation can be reframed within this design and market logic. Diversedking continues in this vein: “The skins given to us Black simmers are very sad. They aren’t even the right tone, some look blue, some look yellow, and it’s actually quite sad, because when you look at the other races it’s like they have everything you could think of, but when it comes to us, we are so limited. If I was to be a developer, I would focus on these main things as well as game packs for us Black people.”

In addition to modding, Diversedking discussed the role of fan community activism to effect change among formal developer communities.

I feel as if the developers do not care about the Black community. We’ve tried so many things to try and get their attention. Such as filling forms and even bashing them on Twitter. It took one tweet for them to realize that we are really serious and need a change in the game. They only care about their image and the content they make for people not of color. I really and truly feel as if *The Sims* need to listen to us and what we have to say about the game to make it more fun to play. We feel as if we’re getting ignored and don’t even have the opportunity to have our say.

The tension between formal developers and consumers represented, in this case, by modder and informal developers becomes palpable, especially in light of the labor of representation. One group, the developers, is allegedly concerned with corporate reputation. The other group, the consumers and modders, is self-defined and concerned with basic rights to representation in a game that purports to simulate our lived lives. The absence of these lives, of these representations, speaks to an absence or erasure that modders actively fight against.

Again, the lack of racial representation as a motivator for both creative activity and critique becomes a significant consideration in the content that Ebonix Sims notes, “mainly because we are very limited on the content that is available for Black sims and sims of colour. So, I make content primarily for these groups.” Ebonix Sims believes for *The Sims* to help the Black community, developers should focus on “reaching out to Black creators and creators of colour as a focus group to help bring ideas together on what kind of content they could bring to the game.” According to Ebonix, one reason it seems hard for *The Sims* team to give Black people a Black experience “could be not having many Black



people on the actual *Sims* team to feed into the development of the game.” She wants to emphasize that “the need for more diverse content hasn’t changed in the five years that I have been creating content. The fact that the need is still so high goes to show that there is still a lot of work to be done via EA in order to help people feel heard, but most importantly SEEN and represented in the game that they love.” Thus, Ebonix Sims, Tanya DePass, her organization, I Need Diverse Games, and the market are all asking for diverse characters, even demanding it. Whole submarkets are thriving, yet we find that content creators remain frustrated.

This same sentiment was echoed by Complex Sims, who believed that developers needed to change how they thought to help Black communities represent themselves. “I think white privilege plays a factor in why they’re lacking the tools to properly capture our essence. Most of the developers are white, and there’s typically not a lack of representation for white people so they probably lack the passion to make everyone feel included and seen, is that they can’t relate to being underrepresented.” We would contrast this observation with Potanin’s (2010) “I Design Methodology”—a design method by which game designers create games that they would want to play, and which attract more people like them (in this case, white male adults). Rather, what Complex Sims suggests is a design methodology more akin to that which Laurel (2003) developed in her work for game manufacturer Purple Moon. For example, Complex Sims offers this as a form of participatory design: “I think they should speak to their Black audience and invite more Black YouTube simmers to their Game Changer program so they could receive proper feedback from Black people with a large Black audience. That would also help avoid any potential negative feedback from racists and people who have no interest in seeing us represented.” The present team is not diverse enough to understand what the Black communities need and talking to these communities would help.

Xmiramira directly challenges nonnaturalized Black communities in Western locations. When we asked her what would she change or add if she were part of *The Sims* team, she responded,

If I worked on the team, I would like to be involved with choosing what CAS (create a sim) assets get shipped with each pack and directing them to create better makeup and more hairstyles for people to make Black sims. I would also redo those dark skin tones. I would like a hand in the characters that come with the packs. I would like to see more representation from across the African diaspora. some African American families, a Nigerian family, a

family from Guyana. I feel like the game is pretty diverse until it comes to Black people; then it tends to fall flat in that respect.

Her call for expanded representation might be reframed to imagine players from Africa or the Caribbean or African diasporas in non-Western nations. *The Sims* can be and likely is consumed by Black bodies in a variety of locations. And as Xmiramira suggests, cultural and aesthetic practices move with the people. Nigerian families hybridize their identities when they immigrate to Seattle, for example (see figure 6).

Here, Xmiramira's observations about developer communities help us think through EA workforces and how they could engage the Black community when creating *The Sims*. Specifically, we asked her whether the developers thought of or represented the Black community. She responded, "In the early stages of developing and releasing this game, no I do not. I don't think that Black consumers were thought of. Now? Yes, but there is still so much to be done and so much to be fixed. I think the team should create all of the things I listed above, better skin tones, better and more hair options, makeup, clothing that compli-



Figure 6. Diverse Black design and the Melanin Pack

ments brown skin, cultural items, etc. So that more of their Black consumers can feel seen and be able to create and share their experiences.” Similar to the other content creators, she believes the main problem to be that there are no Black people working on the team: “I literally only know of one Black woman. The stories can’t be told if the people there can’t tell them. The content can’t be created if the people aren’t there to create them. This is an issue all across the gaming industry. These companies need to hire more Black people.”

If, in fact, Xmiramira is correct and there are only one or two Black developers, then the danger becomes that their voices will be easily dismissed. DeWinter and Kocurek (2017) discussed this in a chapter about sexism in the electronic game industry, noting that isolated voices are easily dismissible, whereas teams saying the same thing carry weight and meaning. Such lessons need to be extended to more inclusive design and broader representation. Indeed, the developers need to include more people of color in the design and development process. Of the twenty-three designers credited on *The Sims 4*, seventeen of them presented as male in their online identities with the other six presenting as female, and the racial demographics of this design group was fourteen white designers, six Asian-identifying designers, one Latinx designer, and two about whom we were unable find clear data. To be clear here, of the twenty-three credited designers, there were zero Black designers. The design team’s demographics did not, in fact, reflect larger player demographic trends within the national borders of the United States let alone its global market. Thus, while the modders and content creators work to develop diverse assets and content within their own communities, what they call for—indeed, what many call for—is a diversified development team that can think about complex representation based on lived experiences. This would not eliminate fan communities and content creators. It would provide broader communities of engagement, more opportunities for player engagement across multiple player bases, and the chance for historically marginalized communities to be seen within games.

## Conclusions

We were drawn to interview content creators and engage them with the same design seriousness that game studies scholars engage with designers, developers, and players. These creative modders work at a liminal place in *The Sims* community, both and neither players and developers. Driving all of them is a

simple truth: representation matters. And more specifically, their representation matters. This is not revolutionary. In their conference paper “The Privilege of Immersion: Racial and Ethnic Experiences, Perceptions, and Beliefs in Digital Gaming,” Passmore, Birk, and Mandryk (2018) conducted a mixed-method study that looked at how a lack of diversity affects BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and white players, measuring specifically effects on behavior, emotions, satisfaction, engagement, and beliefs. They found, unsurprisingly, “Players of color generally agreed that accurate representation improves their experience and want to game as themselves, freed from everyday social restrictions and stigmas” (9). More importantly, however, “Players of color experience the absence of meaningful racial-ethnic representation as negative representation. Thus, there is little room for neutrality in the digital creation of experiences” (9). To be clear: A lack of Black representation is not “no representation.” Rather, it is negative representation, an erasure, a negation. Thus, these Black content creators are stepping in to provide positive play experiences for themselves but, equally as importantly, also for their larger *Sims* communities.

Black people struggle to find accurate representation in video games. *The Sims 4* is one of those games that does not have enough content to help the players represent themselves. The interviews help us understand how deeply rooted and yet obscure this problem has remained historically. We do not mean to suggest that this is intractable. In late 2020, *The Sims 4* developers released new content, which included over one hundred new skin tones and sliders, diversifying the skin color representation and improving the quality of these tones. Enacting a design goal of a more inclusive and representational experience, this is a far cry from the very first *Sims* game, which offered only three skin tones. In their tweet announcement of this upgrade, EA recognized the work of Black content creators as a voice in the community but also as a voice for the community: “A huge thanks to @Xmiramira @EbonixSims @MiaZaff1 @RaonyPhillips & @catherinegYT for the candid conversations & constructive feedback! Their input representing their viewpoints alongside their player communities was instrumental to current & future improvements. #GameChangers!” (Dec 7, 2020). We collected data for this article in 2019, and within one year—a year during which the political spotlight fell on Black lives in the wake of George Floyd’s murder—and this community of creative activists was ready with a transformational vision. From an uneasiness about skin tones, we see developing in these interviews a need to further address the representation of bodies, hair, styles, and objects.

Ultimately, in the interviews, all six content creators echoed one another. They all liked playing *The Sims* because it allowed them to tell stories and customize their sims. Most of them started making content for *The Sims 4*. To them, a Black experience is being able to relate to the content in the game, to its clothes, hairstyles, culture, and beliefs—not all Black people look the same, have the same culture, the same beliefs. Their feedback to game developers seems ultimately pretty simple. What they want the game developers to add to the game is accurate skin tones, accurate makeup, accurate hairstyles. They want content that represents diverse Black identities, whether American, Nigerian, or British. Content creators want more options on things as simple as recipes. If indeed “*The Sims 4* is the only game where new sims with unique personalities open up deep, rich, and sometimes weird possibilities in the stories you create” (*The Sims 4* FAQ), then the political and creative practice of these content creators is quite simple: It is to create the representational library that explores the stories that Black communities want to make.

#### REFERENCES

- Bailey, Eric J. 2008. *Black America, Body Beautiful: How the African American Image is Changing Fashion, Fitness, and Other Industries*.
- Bernard, Malcolm. 2002. *Fashion as Communication*. 2nd ed.
- Burgess, Melinda C. R., Karen E. Dill, S. Paul Stermer, Stephen R. Burgess, and Brian P. Brown. 2011. “Playing with Prejudice: The Prevalence and Consequences of Racial Stereotypes in Video Games.” *Media Psychology* 14:289–311. doi:10.1080/15213269.2011.596467.
- Cho, Sumi, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall. 2013. “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis.” *Signs* 38:785–810.
- Collins, Jennifer. 2020. “‘And Nothing He Has Wrought Shall Be Lost’: Examining Race and Sexuality in the Mods of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.” In *Women and Video Game Modding: Essays on Gender and the Digital Community*, edited by Bridget Whelan, 9–35.
- Davis, Fred. 1992. *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*.
- DePass, Tanya. “I Need Diverse Games Work.” <https://ineeddiversegames.org>.
- DeVane, Ben, and Kurt D. Squire. 2008. “The Meaning of Race and Violence in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.” *Games and Culture* 3:264–85. doi:10.1177/1555412008317308.
- deWinter, Jennifer, and Carly A. Kocurek. 2017. “‘Aw Fuck, I Got a Bitch on My Team!’: Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex.” In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, 57–73.

- Dickerman, Charles, Jeff Christensen, and Stella Beatríz Kerl-McClain. 2008. "Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 3:20–29. doi:10.1080/15401380801995076.
- Dietrich, David R. 2013. "Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters." *Sociological Inquiry* 83:82–105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12001>.
- Electronic Arts. 2021. "The Sims 4 FAQ." *The Sims 4*. <https://www.ea.com/games/the-sims/the-sims-4/faqs/base-game>.
- Gee, James Paul, and Elisabeth R. Hayes. 2010. *Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning*.
- Gray, Kishonna L., and David J. Leonard. 2018. "Not a Post-Racism and Post-Misogyny Promised Land: Video Games as Instruments of (In)Justice." In *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*, edited by Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard, 3–23.
- Harrell, Shelly P. 2010. "A Multidimensional Conceptualization of Racism-Related Stress: Implications for the Well-Being of People of Color." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 70:42–57. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087722>.
- Harrison, Annie, Shawn Jones, Jessie Marchessault, Sâmia Pedraça, and Mia Consalvo. 2020. "The Virtual Census 2.0: A Continued Investigation on the Representations of Gender, Race, and Age in Videogames." *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.11229>.
- Higgin, Tanner. 2009. "Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games." *Games and Culture* 4:3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412008325477>.
- Jones, Shawn C. T., Riana Elyse Anderson, Ashly Louise Gaskin-Wasson, Broderick A. Sawyer, Kimberly Applewhite, and Isha W. Metzger. 2020. "From 'Crib to Coffin': Navigating Coping from Racism-Related Stress throughout the Lifespan of Black Americans." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 90:267–82. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000430>.
- Jovic, Jovan. 2020. "The Sims 4 Has Become the Best-Selling Base Game in the Franchise." *SimsCommunity*. <https://simscommunity.info/2020/01/30/the-sims-4-has-become-the-best-selling-base-game-in-the-franchise/>.
- Laurel, Brenda. 2003. *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives*.
- Passmore, Cale J., Max V. Birk, and Regan L. Mandryk. 2018. "The Privilege of Immersion: Racial and Ethnic Experiences, Perceptions, and Beliefs in Digital Gaming." In *CHI '18: Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–19.
- Potantin, Robin. 2010. "Forces in Play: The Business and Culture of Videogame Production." In *Fun and Games '10: Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Fun and Games*, 135–43. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1823818.1823833>.
- Russworm, TreaAndrea M. 2017. "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*." In *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, 109–28.

- Shaw, Adrienne. "Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An Audience Reception Study." PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010. <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/286>.
- Sihvonen, Tanja. 2011. *Players Unleashed!: Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. Way, Elizabeth, ed. 2021. *Black Designers in American Fashion*.
- Whelan, Bridget, ed. 2020. *Women and Video Game Modding: Essays on Gender and the Digital Community*.
- Wilbekin, Emil. 2020. "Great Aspirations: Hip Hop and Fashion Dress for Excess and Success." In *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Malcolm Barnard, 355–60.
- Williams, Dmitri, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory. 2009. "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race, and Age in Video Games." *New Media & Society* 11:815–34. doi:10.1177/1461444809105354.
- Yang, Grace S., Bryan Gibson, Adam K. Lueke, L. Rowell Huesmann, and Brad J. Bushman. 2014. "Effects of Avatar Race in Violent Video Games on Racial Attitudes and Aggression." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 5:698–704. doi:10.1177/1948550614528008.