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Praxis

Simblr famous and SimSecret infamous: Performance, community norms, and shaming among fans of *The Sims*

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This paper explores the way fandom is performed on Tumblr by fans of the games series *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000), as well as how the LiveJournal site SimSecret attempts to regulate and shame Tumblr behavior. Through interviews and surveys with fans and content analysis, I examine the way in which Tumblr lends itself to particular performance norms in terms of its aesthetics, content tagging, and interactivity. I explore how fans also call out other fans for behaviors they do not approve of and how some of this shaming is connected to wider discourses surrounding the pleasures of fans, particularly teenage female fans, often deemed to be excessive, inappropriate, or overly dramatic.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fan community; LiveJournal; Performance; Social media; Tumblr

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1. Introduction

[1.1] In the summer of 2009, I was midway through my PhD and hit the point many will be familiar with of hating everything about my project and doing anything else to avoid working on it. I may not have written much of my thesis that summer, but I did manage to play through several generations of a legacy on my new copy of *The Sims 3*. I discovered the legacy challenge (whereby players play a sim family through 10 generations of offspring) by accident when searching for game play tips and thought it sounded fun. As others were doing, I began to blog about my legacy sims, quickly moving my story away from the slide show style-presentation format used on the official EA forum to a WordPress blog. I thought little of how I blogged or who was reading it until one day I got this comment on one of my posts:

[1.2] I have a suggestion for you, and I hope it won't make you upset that I busted in giving advice without being asked. I see the walls are down in a lot of your pictures. I don't really mind that if the story is interesting, but I've heard lots of people say if they are checking out a new story and see walls down photos, they automatically stop reading. Like I said, I found your story in this post interesting enough so I'll come back, but just thought it might help you if I mentioned that. (Cas) (note 1)

[1.3] This experience was my introduction to the way in which members of the Sims fan communities attempt to govern one another's performance in terms of play and sharing styles through a mode of aesthetic policing. This leads to fans developing systems of aesthetic and behavioral norms in order to attract and maintain a following within the communities. There are various blog posts, forum posts, and similar texts that offer players guidance on how to take a good sim photo, including how to improve the lighting of the game, how to angle the camera, and how to pose sims. In addition, there is a wealth of user-generated content or

custom content (CC), as the Sims community calls it, designed to improve the way that sims look.

[1.4] The Sims fandom is long-standing (note 2) and as with other fandoms (Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Deller 2014a; Booth 2010), Sims fans engage in a variety of practices, including game modding, storytelling, photo sharing, file sharing, and discussing game play (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins and Cassell 2008; Sihvonen 2011; Gee and Hayes 2010) across a wide range of platforms, including blogs, forums, wikis, photo sharing sites, file-sharing and torrent sites, and every form of social media. These spaces are not mutually exclusive but overlap at many points in terms of membership and cross-references.

[1.5] In this paper, I focus specifically on how fan performance is enacted on Tumblr and on the attempts of fans to regulate or govern this performance through both establishing norms and offering comment on other users' behavior, often via processes of shaming or calling out. Tumblr was chosen as a site of research because of its popularity with different fandoms (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014; Renwick 2013; Bury et al. 2013; Thomas 2013) and the large number of Sims-related Tumblrs—which many users refer to as Simblrs (note 3)—on the platform. In addition, the way in which community norms develop on Tumblr and within its fandoms despite the lack of specific codes of conduct or welcome posts to tell fans how they should behave (as one might expect in a forum, for example) makes it an interesting example of how fan practices and norms develop and operate.

[1.6] In terms of exploring the way in which fandom is performed within the Simblr community, I am interested not only in the norms demonstrated on the blogs themselves, but also in how fans attempt to control and comment on Simblr performance outside of the

platform—particularly with an emphasis on the LiveJournal community page, SimSecret. SimSecret was chosen as it is one of the most popular and long-standing Sims sites to offer commentary on fan community practices (several Tumblrs and blogs have been set up with a similar remit, but have rarely gained enough traction to survive). That LiveJournal is used as a platform to monitor Tumblr (and other) activity fascinated me as it could be seen as a predecessor of Tumblr in many ways as a site for fan-oriented content—many of the key features associated with Tumblr fandoms, such as animated GIFs, discussions of shipping and OTPs, and notions of flailing, were present on LiveJournal years before Tumblr became the fandom platform du jour. Indeed, one commenter saw a distinct generational shift between users of the two platforms:

<blockquote>[1.7] Historically, as well, much of the original development of sims community norms has taken place on both a variety of sims forums and LJ, so sometimes there's almost a parental view of what is happening on tumblr. (SimSecret comment, 30 August 2014)</blockquote>

[1.8] The LiveJournal and Tumblr Sims communities are not mutually exclusive, however, and whilst LJ users position Simblr users as ‘other’ to themselves, there are also many overlaps between the two sites’ users (and, indeed, other platforms including forums, WordPress, Blogger, YouTube, Twitter, Twitch, Facebook and Instagram). One commenter claimed that many:

<blockquote>[1.9] Simsecrets regarding tumblr generally aren't criticisms from outside the tumblr community, they are criticisms from within the tumblr community. (SimSecret comment, 29 August 2014).</blockquote>

[1.10] SimSecret (<http://community.livejournal.com/simsecret>) operates as a secrets blog similar to PostSecret (<http://www.postsecret.com> and Fandom! Secrets (<http://fandomsecrets.dreamwidth.org>); fans submit anonymous secrets weekly in the form of JPEG images. The number of secrets each week varies greatly, but an average would be 30 to 40 in a weekly post. Secrets posts are open for comments, including from anonymous users, and generate several hundred comments a week. Secrets may discuss posters' own personal secrets or their feelings toward the games but are mostly a form of metacommentary on the community, offering praise or criticism for other users and their practices. Such metacommentary on fandom has long been a feature of LiveJournal communities (Busker 2008), and SimSecret operates similarly to communities such as Fanwank (http://www.journalfen.net/community/fandom_wank/) or Fail Fandom Anon. (<http://fail-fandomanon.dreamwidth.org/>), in its attempts to regulate fannish behaviours through offering commentary on how fandom is performed and through shaming unacceptable practices.

[1.8] Fandom practices being commented on and shamed is nothing new, of course. Fans and fandom scholars alike are well aware of the way in which fannish practices, particularly those of young and female fans, are often ridiculed by those outside of the community (Jensen 1992; Jones 2014). However, my focus here is not on external monitoring of the fandom but on monitoring that comes from within the Sims fan community. SimSecret's mode of anonymous commentary echoes the likes of other in-fandom anon memes (Zubernis and Larsen 2012) in creating drama and wank through calling out other fans for behaviors that mark their fannish performance as unacceptable.

[1.9] The type of Simblr performance being monitored and/or shamed can largely be summarized as falling into one of three categories: Tumblr performance (adoption of

platform norms, functions, and conventions), aesthetic performance (particularly regarding the appearance of sims and sim photography) and fan activity performance (e.g. the nature and content of fan posts, discussions, and interactivity). In this paper I explore the way each of these modes of performance is enacted, regulated, and shamed.

2. Methodology and approach

[2.1] This research is based on survey data from almost 1,500 Sims players about their use of the Internet, around 50 follow-up interviews conducted by Tumblr, Skype, and email, and netnographic study of the Sims community across different platforms, although I primarily use examples from Tumblr and LiveJournal. Research was conducted between June, 2012, and May, 2014 (note 4). Users have been given pseudonyms, and identifying features such as site names have, where possible, been blocked out.

[2.2] Survey participants were 84 percent female, 14 percent male, 2 percent other (including genderqueer, genderfluid, trans*/transgender, male to female, both, and androgynous), and 2 percent who did not disclose gender. The oldest participant was 69 years old and the youngest claimed to be 6 (participants were asked to supply a date of birth rather than select an age category). The largest age groups represented were 11–19 (47 percent) and 20–29 (35 percent), followed by 30–39 (12 percent), 40–49 (6.5 percent), 50–59 (3.5 percent) and 60–69 (1 percent) (note 5). All participants in the follow-up studies were women aged from 18 to 50 years old, although fans in other demographic groups were offered the opportunity to participate. Fifty-seven nationalities were represented, but by far the largest user base (50 percent) was from the United States—possibly a consequence of using English-language platforms, many of which originated in the United States, to distribute the call for participants

and of the US-centric nature of the Sims games themselves. A wide range of ethnicities were represented, although Caucasian or white dominated (note 6).

[2.3] I followed over 200 Simblrs from my Tumblr dashboards (selected both from survey responses and randomly when suggested by the Tumblr dashboard) and regularly searched tags via Tumblr's search engine including sims, sims3, sims2, sims1, sims4, simblr, simstagram, ts2, ts3, ts4 and ts1. In addition, in May, 2014, I conducted a content analysis of a sample of 50 Simblrs, sourced by means of the sims search tag on Tumblr and sorting by most popular. All had been updated within 24 hours of the search. This analysis involved determining how many of these adhered to particular conventions, either those found in other Tumblr fandoms, such as animated GIFs, reblogging, and ask me anything, or those specific to the Sims fandom, including using particular tags, offering downloads, and sharing gameplay. The analysis also involved identifying how many conformed to particular aesthetic norms, such as photo editing or using unusual camera angles. Of these Simblrs, 37 were focused on *The Sims 3* and 4 on *The Sims 2*. Eight contained content from more than one game in the franchise. Forty of the 50 were exclusively Sims-focused, with the rest containing content relating to other fandoms (most notably *Orange Is the New Black*, Disney, *Doctor Who*, *Skyrim*, and Lady Gaga), gameplay in other games, celebrity gossip, or personal content.

3. Tumblr as a site of fan activity

[3.1] Although Tumblr was launched in 2007, its user base has grown substantially in recent years, with 2010 seeing the platform attract 4.5 million posts a day. The previous year this was 650,000 new posts a day (Siegler 2010) and at the time of writing (May, 2014) this

figure was close to 91 million new posts a day. (Tumblr 2014)

(<http://www.tumblr.com/about>).

[3.2] Tumblr does not give users a how to guide and allows them to create content in a range of ways such as links, text posts, and images. However, as with other social media platforms (Halavais 2014; Burgess 2014), several user-generated conventions have emerged. There are guides on the web instructing users how to become ‘Tumblr famous’ detailing the etiquette expected of users, including reblogging rather than reposting (i.e. attributing content to its original source); tagging content in a way that makes searching for it meaningful; posting regularly; following other popular users; using images more than text, and creating more original content than reblogged content ("How to Be Tumblr Famous," n.d.; King-Slutsky 2013; Moreau, n.d.). These conventions also include using particular slang and terminology (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014; Orsini 2012; Peffer 2012) with the Oxford Dictionary's blog even devoting a post to Tumblr language, claiming that understanding this language is crucial to being part of the community:

<blockquote>[3.3] Their community of users employs a special set of terminology to describe various actions and features on the site, common memes, and community members. Tumblr speak is often hyperbolic in nature and usually associated with fandoms...learning the language of Tumblr is essential in order to navigate the platform and have fun. (Hernandez 2013)</blockquote>

[3.4] What is interesting about many of these guides to Tumblr is their connection between the platform and fandoms, highlighting fan lingo such as OTP (One True Pairing) and shipping (favoring particular relationships) as part of the platform's lexicon, even though, of

course, this kind of fan lingo predates and is not exclusive to Tumblr. Fan practices on Tumblr vary but can include activities like sharing photos or stills, fan fiction, animated GIFs, memes, quizzes, analysis, and commentary or jokes (Thomas 2013; Renwick 2013). The boundaries of fandom on Tumblr, if there are any, are loose and informal, as Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter note in their study of Tumblr TV fandoms:

[3.5] We learned that "belonging" to a fandom was a fuzzy concept. Unlike Facebook, Tumblr users do not get accepted to groups. Instead, they are part of the fandom when they feel they are. Participation entailed following posts with hashtags associated with a TV show, following posts by users who posted about a show, or posting about a show, regardless of whether others read the posts. (2014, 4)

[3.6] However, the fuzzy concept of belonging to Tumblr or to a fandom is still accompanied by a range of norms, such as those mentioned above, that have arisen through community practice. The ease of use of Tumblr's dashboard allows easy sharing within and across communities, which can then lead to particular approaches, be they humorous, aesthetic or linguistic, spreading between communities in much the same way in which online memes and jokes do (Shifman 2013; Davison 2012).

[3.7] There are several reasons why Tumblr may have become such an active site of fan activity. Kayley Thomas notes that its emphasis on the visual and its ability to act as a site of intertextual play enables it to operate as a democratic space that can break down fan hierarchies "by exhibiting engagement with multiple sources and providing coherent meaning for other viewers, even when those viewers might not immediately understand the

intertextual nature of the posts" (2013: ¶2.3). This intertextuality can not only lead fans to discover people with shared interests; but it can also introduce them to new fandoms (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014, 5). Tumblr users often find that their introduction to the technology comes through following others and adopting their conventions (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014). As fans primarily find one another through tags rather than through the linear and more formal threads of a message board or forum, Tumblr allows for fluidity of engagement and a community with no clear boundaries to define membership.

[3.8] The simplicity of the Tumblr interface means that users can post, reblog, and like content with ease, something my own users cited as a key advantage of the platform, with descriptions such as quick and easy most often provided along with community and people (figure 1):

<blockquote>[3.9] The convenience of being able to quickly post several photos at once. (Respondent 1263)

[3.10] You can "like" something without having to pause to think of what to say in a comment. It's a quick, gentler way of interacting. (Respondent 1209)</blockquote>

Figure 1. Wordle of responses to the question, "What do you most like about Tumblr?" [alt text=most common words: 'people,' 'post,' 'community,' 'like,' 'easy,' 'share'] (June 2014)

[3.11] The simplicity of the Tumblr interface may make it easy for fans to discover content, but it can also be alienating for some, who find its lack of clear organization initially disorienting—particularly if users don't follow it as an always-on stream like Twitter but

prefer to see every update from the people they follow, or who struggle with the lack of functionality in places or with the ease of use of the mobile app (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014). While some find a sense of belonging to fandoms through Tumblr, others "struggle to become part of a fandom community, question when and if they are a part of a fandom, are unclear of the size of the community they are a part of" (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014, 6). Several of my own respondents commented on problems they had with the interface:

<blockquote>[3.12] The layout seems too minimalistic and limited. (Respondent 1096)

[3.13] Wish it was easier to keep track of stories I read on there. (Respondent 1137)

[3.14] It is often difficult to follow a particular topic I become involved in due to time zone differences and the rate at which my dashboard gets filled. (Respondent 1223)</blockquote>

[3.15] The conventions of posting, tagging, sharing, and reblogging mentioned above are often enacted in particular ways within Simblr, along with a series of aesthetic conventions relating to gameplay, sim modeling, and photo editing. In the following sections I look at the way in which, despite the apparently fuzzy, democratic and fluid nature of Tumblr fandom, there are a number of expected norms that go with Simblr performance. These norms are scrutinized, policed, and monitored both within the Tumblr platform—primarily through reblogs and likes as means of approval, and through anonymous commentary as a means of disapproval—and outside of it by the anonymous users of SimSecret.

4. Tumblr performance: Tagging and trigger warnings

[4.1] As fans tend to discover content on Tumblr through searching for particular tags, the tagging system forms a key part of how Simblr operates. As well as tags allowing users to search for content, add-ons such as TumblrSavior (<http://bjornstar.com/tumblr-savior>) and Xkit (<http://xkit-extension.tumblr.com>) also allow users to filter content so that they can hide particular hashtags. Users can also use these extensions to hide certain types of posts, such as reblogs.

[4.2] The way in which tags are used was a recurring theme in my surveys and interviews as well as forming a part of several complaints on SimSecret about users not properly using the tagging system. While there is no prescribed system for tags, nor any requirement for users to adopt them, it is clear that the community has developed its own norms with regard to tagging and that there is an expectation that all users will somehow, presumably from observing others' practice, learn what these norms are and adhere to them (figure 2):

[4.3] [I dislike] people who use the wrong tags (for example a picture is tagged with sims/simblr but has nothing to do with it. (Respondent 1746)

[4.4] Bella reblogged over and over and over this week was annoying as hell because people refuse to tag properly. (SimSecret comment, May 9, 2014)

Figure 2. Secret post about incorrect tagging. [alt text= 'WHY??? This do NOT belong under #s3cc. And #sims4? Really? How on earth is this related to sims 4? This is almost worse than Instagram tagging (and don't get me started on that one)'] (April 2014)

[4.5] While tagging forms a key part of frustration for other Tumblr users, some fans note that the complainants could take responsibility themselves for what appears in their feed:

[4.6] It also annoys me to see the same god damn thing down my dash. But Xkit has this nifty Plugin called Show originals, so...yeah. (SimSecret comment May 9, 2014)

[4.7] Some of the complaints about tagging are to do with users expecting a trigger warning tag for certain types of content in order that they can block such content from their dashboard; a trigger warning is a mechanism to warn users of content so they can avoid it if it triggers certain responses. This is particularly the case when it comes to images of adult content, which they feel should be tagged #NSFW (not safe for work) (figure 3):

[4.8] Other users think Tumblr is a place where they can post their 'ART' (NSFW, naked people I mean). So I think these posts should never be on Tumblr. (Respondent 1516)

Figure 3. Secret requesting NSFW tags. [alt text= 'Dear Simblrs, I think sims porn is stupid and weird but hey, it's your site so put what you want on it. PLEASE tag it NSFW or something similar though! This way users like me who don't dig it can hide it from our feeds'] (April 2014)

[4.9] Many scholars have noted the shaming that occurs—usually from those outside of the fan communities in question—around fans' sexual desires, particularly the desires of female fans (Jensen 1992; Jones and Harman 2013; Bennett 2010; Jenkins 1992; Driscoll 2006; Busse 2013). While fandom operates as a space in which sexual desires and fantasies can be expressed—in the case of Sims fans, through activities like fiction, game mods, poses, and photography—this space is not always safe and it can be one where fans are perceived as being attacked by one of their own in the way in which they express these desires. This kind of in-fandom shaming of desire has largely been studied in relation to debates over slash fiction and fan shipping of particular pairings (Jones 2014; Zubernis and Larsen 2012; Busker 2013) where some—often female—fans' sexual preferences have been criticized or belittled by others within the community.

[4.10] The relationship between fandom, sexual desire, and fan-created content is complicated, and there has been much fan debate over whether or not certain subjects, such as rape, incest, underage sex, male pregnancy, and violence, are appropriate subject material for fan creations (Winters 2012; Åström 2010; Jones and Harman 2013). A significant proportion of SimSecret metacommentary is concerned with regulating the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are performed within the Sims fan communities, from calling out homophobia, misogyny, or cissexism to arguing whether or not game-mod penises look realistic, to concerns over sim pedophilia, particularly relating to male fans/creators (figure 4).

Figure 4. Secret regarding "*Sims* pedophilia." [alt text= 'I threw up in my fucking mouth. PIG'] (February 2014)

[4.11] One common theme is the role of rape narratives within Sims stories, including Tumblr but also stories hosted on other sites, including LiveJournal and WordPress. The role of rape within fan fiction is something that is often contested, as it can be used in many ways: as a vehicle to explore characters overcoming adversity, as an opportunity for hurt/heal narratives, as a backstory or explanation for character behaviour, or as something sexually stimulating (Chan 2010; Winters 2012). For SimSecret users, a frequent accusation is that rape is used as a plot device and as such is trivialized by Sims story writers (figure 5).

Figure 5. Secret regarding rape narratives. [alt text= "The thing that bothers me the most about the Simblr community is the way a lot of simmers write about rape in their legacies/stories. They either sexualise it to make it look okay, use it as a ploy to explain why a character is mean, or it fits perfectly within the ideas of rape culture. It seems like they are writing their own definition of what they truly think rape is and I wish they would just educate themselves more on the issue. It's a sick/sad reality, not a way to spice up your story."] (April 2014)

<blockquote>[4.12] Name one person, one story who did it compassionately and didn't victim blame or something equally vile. As a rape survivor, I feel it has no place in a story about sims, because people on simblr who write about rape are using it as a means for attention—in my experience. I have not seen one person write it any other way. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.13] I am also a survivor, and never have I ever seen someone write about rape, on simblr, in a way that I felt was empowering or inspiring. I have only seen it used as like you said a

way for attention, a plot twist. I have only seen it written about poorly and in such a disturbing way. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.14] What is wrong with writing about rape to get attention? People write about murder, abuse, suicide, mental illness, maiming, kidnapping, etc. for attention. Not everyone is a good writer and does it well, but does that really mean they shouldn't attempt to write it? Victim blaming is vile and should be addressed, but it is a real response that happens and even if it wasn't, terrible things happen in fiction all the time. As a rape survivor I don't mind reading sims stories with rape or other difficult topics, even poorly done. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.15] I wouldn't mind seeing a well written story if it was compassionate, or well written, or even empowering. As of right now? I don't believe it has a place in a story with sims, at least on Tumblr. It's my opinion. (SimSecret comment May 2, 2014)

[4.16] The merits (or otherwise) of trigger warnings, tags, and authors' notes (Herzog 2012) are a continued source of debate on SimSecret, which uses trigger warnings itself at the start of posts to highlight controversial content. These may be things one might expect to find trigger warnings for, such as NSFW content, rape, or eating disorders, but it can also include humorous tags such as references to repetitious content and fan wank that fans may want to avoid because it is boring or annoying. When one user posted the following secret (figure 6) referencing the tags they had blocked from Tumblr, it sparked heated debate over the merits of particular tags and trigger warnings:

Figure 6. Secret about blocked Tumblr tags [alt text='blocked tags including 'second life,' 'hannibal,' '#food'] (April 2014)

[4.17] I really want to be able to take this one seriously but blacklisting for food is such oversensitive hugbox nonsense. Food is not a "trigger." (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.18] Again, for people with/recovering from eating disorders, it is. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.19] This trigger mentality can eat my whole ass (#trigger warning eating mention!!) (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.20] You are an asshole. Some people have weird triggers. This was their personal blacklist. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.21] Oooor maybe they're tired of seeing every single meal that chronic facebook/instagram/tumblr users are always posting? Not EVERYTHING is a trigger. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.22] OP [original poster] of the secret. I don't have any of that stuff, I just got tired of getting hungry from tumblr because I follow a theme maker who posts normal stuff + food. It was just annoying to get up all the time to snack, when I really just wanted to sim. I'm surprised, out of the whole list, this is what strikes you about [m] y

blacklist. Maybe y'all need to lighten up, not me. (SimSecret comment April 11, 2014)

[4.23] In these exchanges we see several examples of community negotiations over why users may wish to blog tags and over whose job it is to regulate content in the first place—Tumblr doesn't require users to tag posts, yet it is a common complaint when posts aren't tagged in the ways in which readers want them to be. However, these exchanges also hint at other sources of division within the community and that is over what can be deemed a legitimate source of offense and whether or not tags and trigger warnings are an appropriate mechanism for managing such material. This debate is not exclusive to the Simblr community, of course, and is impossible to go into here at length (for more on the trigger warning debate, see Shaw 2012; Sterne 2014; Jarvie 2014). However, common debates about perceived oversensitivity are common, alongside debates about inclusion and intersectionality, such as secrets relating to racism, cultural appropriation such as white sims wearing dreadlocks, sexism, homophobia, cissexism, and so on.

[4.24] In such debates, Tumblr users are accused of being SJWs (social justice warriors), a pejorative term used to describe users who are obsessed with social justice—the term is effectively a social media version of the old political correctness gone mad narratives—or pearl clutchers, the type who take offence at any little thing (figure 7). SJWs are seen to relish opportunities to create drama out of anything they may see as problematic (figures 8 and 9):

<blockquote>[4.25] Go back to Tumblr and clutch your pearls about how triggered you are about this problematic shit. (SimSecret comment, May 8, 2014)</blockquote>

Figure 7. Secret about Tumblr SJWs [alt text= 'The one thing I hate most about the Simblr community are the 'SJWs.' The Sims is a game where a perfect world exists. Where there is no such thing as racism, sexism, homophobia etc unless the person playing it decides to project them into their game. That is the beauty of the game though, it's whatever you want to make it, good or bad. But because of this, sims do not need social justice, real people do. People are not harming sims, they are projecting their real life ideals into the game. Obviously not everyone thinks this way and understands that 'harming sims' sounds stupid and also understands people's motives for playing their games in such ways. But the amount of times I've seen people get mad over someone 'treating their sims badly' is just absolutely ridiculous. Not everything someone does in a game reflects how they are in real life. If I had a nickel for every time I've seen a completely normal person delete the pool ladder and purposefully let a sim drown, I'd be pretty rich'] (March 2014)

Figure 8. Secret about potential drama on Tumblr caused by cultural appropriation. [alt text=Photo of a native American headdress. 'Tumblr is gonna throw a fit. [Name] you got your wish'] (May 2014)

Figure 9. Secret confirming that drama occurred. [alt text='Is anybody else offended by that Native American headdress that's going round or it just me.' 'There it is! I knew someone who was desperate for attention and drama would bring it up eventually'] (May 2014)

[4.26] The way Tumblr is conceived of here is not exclusive to the Sims community. For example, Reddit has several subreddits dedicated to Tumblr users, such as TumblrInAction (<http://www.reddit.com/r/TumblrInAction>) (figure 10), which has the stated aim "to make fun of Tumblr SJWs." Tumblr has also been conceived of, graphically, as a teenage girl—a meme

that dates back to the Operation Overlord trolling war between Tumblr and 4Chan (<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/4chumblr>). The idea of Tumblr as a teenage girl often contributes to the derogatory comments made about its users—on SimSecret, it is frequently assumed that the SJWs and the authors of fiction featuring rape are teenagers who will one day grow up and know better. This denigration of teenage female Internet users should come as no surprise to those of us who have followed the way in which teenage girls' interests and activities have frequently been derided, often from within the fan communities they are part of (Busse 2013; Pinkowitz 2011; Felschow 2010).

Figure 10. TumblrInAction sidebar. [alt text=crying bear saying 'my feels, I can't, plus banner text making fun of 'SJWs,' 'otherkin' etc] (April 2014)

[4.27] While the Simblr userbase is by no means solely composed of teenage girls, much of the criticism of Simblr on SimSecret does criticize those known or assumed to fall within this demographic, particularly when there is perceived to be drama between users:

[4.28] You all need to fuck off tumblr, [name], [name] and whoever else is involved in this stupid drama created by 14 yr old girls with nothing better to do. I have them all ignored and blocked. Jesus you're all so fucking annoying, grow the fuck up.
(SimSecret comment, July 5, 2014)

[4.29] This section has demonstrated that despite having in place no formal guidelines for user practice, Tumblr/Simblr performance is scrutinized by fellow members of the community, and where users are found to be performing badly, because of using or misusing tags and trigger warnings, causing drama, acting like an SJW or pearl clutcher, or failing to

self regulate through turning off anonymous commentary or unfollowing other users, (figure 11) their aberrance can lead to public shaming by other fans.

Figure 11. Secret criticizing Tumblr users [alt text=tumblr. Y'all need to CALM THE FUCK DOWN. Tumblr is such a shitty medium for Sims creators because all of you get so absurd and petty. My advice for you little shits: 1. Try and learn something about what the fuck feminism is before you go on ridiculous and uninformed tirades (looking at u, bro trait banshees). 2. It's very easy to ignore stories you don't like . . . so ignore them, instead of complaining about them like idiots on simsecret/through anon asks. 3. You are so DRAMATIC just play the game and calm down. We are all tired of blacklisting. 4. TURN OFF ANON ASKS. This solves 99.5 percent of problems. If you get mean anon asks and don't turn it off, you're making a choice to allow people to hurt you, since you secretly just want attention. TURN IT OFF. Thank u.] (February 2014)

5. The aesthetics of Simblr

[5.1] Simblrs may contain a range of content from downloadable mods, sims, houses, and custom content to stories, gameplay shots, animated GIFs, and personal blog posts. However, the majority of posts are image based, usually of sims, lots, or scenery from the games.

Figure 12 shows the typical results of a search using the sims tag. The most common form of photography in the blogs that I analyzed (35 out of 50) were sim model-style shots—shots focused on a sim (or occasionally groups and couples) with the emphasis not on gameplay or interactions but on the sim's appearance—often enhanced by means of modified sliders that allow players to create sims with more facial variation than the original games allow, or by the use of user-created custom content such as hairstyles, clothing, replacement skins, or

makeup. In addition, a further eight blogs used sims in poses that could only be created using mods to stage sims and not with in-game actions, for storytelling rather than modeling purposes.

Figure 12. Tumblr search results for "sims." (May 2014)

[5.2] Given the emphasis on the way that sims look, it is perhaps inevitable that SimSecret often features secrets insulting the way that sims look. These may be praising a user for the look of their sims—these secrets usually feature sims created using custom content and sliders and displayed using photo editing software—but more often comes in the form of complaining about popular Simblrs all adopting a similar look for their creations (figure 13), sims perceived as ugly or freakish (figure 14), or sims and sim photographers who are not good enough to become popular. For instance, figure 15 refers to a Simblr user's creations not being acceptable for Simicide Girls (<http://simicidegirls.tumblr.com/>), a group Tumblr dedicated to showcasing sims with an aesthetic similar to Suicide Girls (<https://suicidegirls.com/>). Sim-related body shaming—sims that are perceived as too fat, too thin or in some way deformed—also occurs from time to time within the community. Almost all aesthetic policing of sims relates to adult or young adult sims rather than other life stages, the exception being criticisms of makeup or clothing deemed to be too adult being used on toddler or child sims (figure 4).

Figure 13. Secret about Simblr aesthetics. [alt text='Tumblr's guide for generic pretty sims'] (April 2014)

Figure 14. Secret about freaky sims and overediting. [alt text='Are you fucking serious? This is NOT COOL at all. It is freaky as hell. All of these sims look like they have some kind of a disease. And most of them look HIGHLY edited.'](April 2014)

Figure 15. Secret about alleged Simicide Girls wannabes. [alt text='[name] is for the unknown blogs that weren't allowed to be in simicide girls . . . and maybe this is why. #this chick tries so damn hard to be relevant LOL'] (May 2014)

[5.3] Photo editing plays a huge role in the content of Simblr (note 7); it is a common practice to use filters or effects such as sharpening, desaturation, or adjusting curves to make photos more aesthetically pleasing. Common effects applied to these photographs replicate those found on sites such as PhotoBucket and Instagram and applied to photographs and GIFs in other fandom content on Tumblr and LiveJournal. Of the 50 blogs I studied, 28 used obvious photo editing (i.e. achieving effects that would not be possible using the game alone, even with lighting mods), although it is possible that others also used more subtle forms. Simblr user Astra explained how her approach to picture editing had changed over time:

<blockquote>[5.4] At first I did not edit at all. Over time, I started creating god awful edits on gimp and patting myself on the back thinking they were masterpieces. Now, inspired by a PG challenge that someone I follow was playing that used soft colored tones, I downloaded an action off deviantart and use it on my pictures. When it comes to special screenshots such as photoshoots or introductions, I like to use a gradient on the background and heighten the picture's vibrancy and saturation, color is important to me when it comes to being satisfied with an edit. (Astra, interview, May 2014)</blockquote>

[5.5] The aesthetics of Tumblr do not go unquestioned, however, as SimSecret posts frequently criticize Simblr users for using effects too strongly or for making aesthetic choices, such as splitting a picture, something 9 out of 50 Simblrs in my sample did, that were seen as unnecessary (figures 16–18).

Figure 16. Secret about oversaturation. [alt text= 'Your sims are really cute but the oversaturation needs to STOP.] (May 2014)

Figure 17. Secret about split pictures. [alt text= 'Wait, what is the point of THIS? The argument for the goofy split pics is some nonsense about photo quality . . . so what is the argument for splitting up a picture and a swatch of background color?'] (March 2014)

Figure 18. Secret about lack of contrast. [alt text= 'I don't like it when photos are edited like this, with the grey background. It makes it seem so bleak, and the colors aren't as rich as they should be. I don't see the point.'] (April 2014)

[5.6] Although there is nothing to strictly enforce a particular aesthetic, users may well adopt practices that they see others employing in order to conform, in much the same way my early blogging attempts met with criticism over my game visuals. None of the Simblrs I observed had obvious walls-down shots, and only three had the headline effects (speech bubbles and plumbob icons) option on; showing these effects is also regarded as poor photography within the Sims community. Another common choice was to take or crop photos from an unusual angle, something adopted by 17 of the 50 Simblrs.

[5.7] Simblrs also, to some extent, use other trends that are common among Tumblr users, such as Selfie Sunday posts or animated GIFs. In my sample, five users posted Selfie Sunday posts and seventeen posted animated GIFs. Interestingly, only two users posted animated GIFs from the Sims series—the rest used GIFs depicting other celebrities or characters, although these tended to be reaction GIFs to activities such as the game crashing or having free time to play.

6. Good and bad inter/activity on Simblr

[6.1] I have looked so far at the way Simblr operates in terms of both functional and aesthetic norms. I now want to consider the interactive forms of fan performance that contribute to whether or not one is a successful Simblr by community standards. The speed of being able to simply like something was appreciated by some users, as was the ease with which reblogging from other users could help people's audience grow with very little work on their part in comparison to blogging or other activities:

<blockquote>[6.2] On Tumblr, I could just post a small group of photos together with a couple paragraphs, or even just a clever comment, and that was enough. Other Tumblr users could give feedback directly on that one little part of my story by reblogging, favoriting, or commenting that post. The reblogging led to more followers, so each post worked as an advertisement for my Simblr, and I didn't have to go to several forums and post about my updates, because it got around well enough just within the Simblr community (CS, interview, October 2013)</blockquote>

[6.3] For others, however, one of the key frustrations was the way in which Tumblr only encourages certain kinds of limited interactivity, predominantly liking and reblogging. Comments are limited to a primary account only, so if you have both a Simblr and a personal Tumblr, you can't effectively switch between the two, and there is a word restriction in place:

<blockquote>[6.4] I would like to be able to reply to posts more easily and reply to COMMENTS as well, in the same post...a HIGHER CHARACTER LIMIT because I am wordy and always run out of space. (Respondent 1299)

[6.5] I like commenting a lot, and so not being able to comment on all posts can be frustrating. Also, if you DO have comments enabled, to respond to any comments someone has posted on your post, you have to start a NEW post. (Respondent 1319)</blockquote>

[6.6] Perhaps because of the limitations on commenting, many Simblrs have an ask me anything box where readers can submit questions, sometimes anonymously, which will then be answered on the blog. In addition, users can opt to receive private messages, although they can't read their own sent items, which can cause frustrations (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014). However, the ability for anons to send private messages on Tumblr leads to some Simblr users experiencing unwanted negative attention:

<blockquote>[6.7] I never really interact enough to annoy anyone to the point of sending them on a rant in my ask box. However, I have had some situations where unintentionally I would say something or participate in something and people would

not like my opinion or would feel that I am an unfair person and then I would very much so get hate mail. (Astra, interview, May 2014)

[6.8] Nasty anons turned me off Tumblr for a while and now I'm not as excited about it. (Respondent 1439)

[6.9] The notion of receiving abuse from anons is not limited to within Tumblr, of course. As we have seen, SimSecret is a site of much anonymous commentary on Simblr users and practices. Very rarely are secret makers called out for this, except in instances where their secret makes them seem entitled (such as begging for custom content) or seeking attention (such as posts complaining about numbers of followers) (figure 19).

Figure 19. Secret asking why they are not liked. [alt text= 'I hate the fact that I never got more than 15 notes (and I even have 1000+ followers and do good CC) in my posts and I see simblrs doing horrible editions and getting 30/50 notes. What I'm doing wrong?'] (April 2014)

[6.10] The notion of popularity within the community is a divisive one. If people don't update regularly enough, whatever enough may mean, they are criticized for this and told that they don't deserve their following (figures 20 and 21). As within other fan communities (Booth 2010; Veale 2013), followings within *Sims* fandom are often earned through activity; therefore, there is a sense among some users that status within the community has to be earned and sustained through regular posting, interaction, responding to questions, and thanking fans. Although there isn't sufficient space to discuss fan gifting in this paper, a

common practice is for followers to be offered gifts when a Simblr is celebrating hitting a follower milestone (e.g. custom content or downloads).

[6.11] In this manner, the relationship between Simblrs and their followers becomes that of a commodity exchange—one may earn followers and thus become a big name fan through performing successfully in the community through picture taking, tagging, reblogging, and other activities, but to maintain this following, the expectation is that you will both post on a regular basis and adopt an appropriately interactive mode of performance whereby you are seen to respond to the desires, questions, and comments of your audience. Audiences are also thanked for the gift of their loyalty by means of free gifts when Simblr authors reach follower milestones, an inducement to not only stay loyal but also to seek new followers for the authors through reblogging, sharing, and favoriting content in order that others may discover it and become followers too.

Figure 20. Secret criticizing someone for not updating. [alt text= 'I'm [name] and I guess you could say I'm a simblr? More active on my personal blog' or with other words always active on his personal blog but never ever on his simblr'] (May 2014)

Figure 21. Secret claiming someone does not deserve his or her followers. [alt text= 'you are the least deserving person of 6K followers ever. You never answer asks, you take long unexpected hiatuses. If you want to thank your followers, appreciate them'] (April 2014)

[6.12] Another way to become unpopular within the Simblr community is to create a blog in which Sims-related content has to share space with personal news and other fandoms. While some users have adopted the practice of tagging such posts personal, non-sims or saviorhide,

these are not practices adopted by all (in my sample, 18 blogs contained such content, and 11 used tags to identify it). Although Tumblr can be seen as an intertextual playground where users can share a variety of content (Thomas 2013; Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014), it seems that many of these fans prefer to read and write Sims-specific Tumblrs—several operate multiple Tumblrs to separate personal content from content relating to fandoms—or at least for people to use tags. This creates the image of a community of shared interest, then, but perhaps not one where members choose to know one another outside of the shared fan experience. It is notable that the undesirable non-Sims posts are often characterized as being 'teenag' again or having a sense of drama:

<blockquote>[6.13] If I follow your Tumblr for your Sims stuff and I don't know you from Adam, I don't care about your Algebra teacher or the fight you had with your boyfriend last week. More commonly, I don't care about non-Sims games you might play. (Respondent 1234)

[6.14] I don't like the teenage drama. I wish they would tag their posts about Loki or Tom Hiddleston, or their endless ASK ME IF I HAD SEX or WHAT DO YOU THINK OF ME posts so I don't have to look at them. (Respondent 1114)</blockquote>

[6.15] To perform successfully on Simblr, then, fans must not only adopt Tumblr-related norms and aesthetic norms relating to gameplay and photo sharing, they must also behave as a member of a participatory and interactive community. Users are reminded of the importance of the poster/follower relationship and the need to attend to this appropriately through frequent posting and responding to questions. In addition, followers may be thanked

for loyalty through gifting when an author reaches a milestone. Users are also reminded that Simblr is a Sims-related space and therefore posts relating to other fandoms or to one's personal life should be tagged as such in order that it doesn't spoil the experience for followers whose only interest is in the game or games (note 8).

7. Conclusion

[7.1] In this paper I have discussed the ways in which fandom is performed on Simblr—Sims-related Tumblrs. I have also considered the way in which this performance is scrutinized and commented on both within Simblr and outside of it via the LiveJournal site SimSecret. I have shown how users perform aesthetic and behavioral policing as they attempt to enforce norms of practice, often through anonymous public shaming of users in the hope that this will change behaviors.

[7.2] That fan practices should receive scrutiny is, of course, no surprise. Much has been written on the ways in which fans are scrutinized and develop norms to self regulate (Baym 2000; Crawford and Rutter 2007; Jones 2014). What is particularly interesting here, however, is the way in which one fan space (in this case, one operating on LiveJournal) is used to comment on, judge, and attempt to control another through a public form of shaming. Rosenblatt notes that shaming is often

<blockquote>[7.3] an external, aggressive action—a (generally public) appeal to the shame of another. Shaming may have many motivations, including a desire to impose norms on another, to trigger someone else's shame, or to inflict reputation-based

punishment. Regardless of the motivation, shaming appeals to community norms and attempts to impose them on someone else. (2012, 13) </blockquote>

[7.4] However, in the context of Simblr, SimSecret, and shaming, the notion of there being impossible community norms is hugely problematic. Indeed, the shaming that occurs via SimSecret is not only about imposing norms but is also concerned with questioning the validity or relevance of perceived norms such as whether or not particular aesthetic trends have any merit. Shaming in the context of the Sims often seems to be related to age, with teenagers—and teenage girls in particular—often receiving the harshest criticisms.

[7.5] What is unclear, however, is what effect—if any—these practices of shaming have and how successful attempts by users to regulate each other's performance are. It is difficult to tell how many Simblr users read SimSecret, let alone how many are shamed into changing their performance style. It is probable that performance norms are regulated more through observing the practice of others—learning how to edit and crop photos, how to interact with other users, and how to tag from one's fellow fans (Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter 2014)—than through public attempts at calling out fans whose behavior is somehow shameful. If this is the case, then perhaps the acts of shaming are merely another form of performance—this time to a crowd who will debate the drama or wank caused in the comments and perform the outrage expected of them.

[7.6] For Sims players, then, playing the game itself is rarely enough to warrant one's place in the Simblr community. While gameplay discussion and storywriting occur, these often take second place to one's ability to make sims, locations, and lots aesthetically pleasing, and one's ability to maintain and reciprocate one's following appropriately through frequent updating

and interacting with others. Simblr operates as a highly performative space, but one where the performance of playing the game is perhaps less important than the ability to perform according to the community's norms.

8. Notes

1. There are three ways you can view your sim household: with walls down, so you can see the sims moving around and interacting with each other and objects in whatever room they are in; with walls up, so you can always see the walls in rooms along with wallpaper, paintings and other objects; or partial walls which has a combination of rooms with walls up and walls down.

2. *The Sims* was released in 2000, the latest in the franchise of popular Sim games produced by Maxis (e.g., *Sim City*, *Sim Tower*), *The Sims 2* in 2004, *The Sims 3* in 2009 with *The Sims 4* due late 2014. Sims games have also been produced for tablets, consoles, mobiles, and social media.

3. Simblr is one example of how players simmify social media—other examples include using the terms simstagram or simsta on Instagram, creating Sims-specific profiles on Twitter and Facebook (which may be as if the user was a Sim character, but are more often used by users to promote their Sims content away from their real accounts and the prying eyes of family and friends). I use the term in this paper to distinguish Sims-oriented Tumblrs from any other form of Tumblr. Although it is commonly used, it should be noted that not every Simblr uses the term in its tags or descriptions. When asked, just over two-thirds of my respondents who used Tumblr used the term.

4. The survey and interview research was concerned with a wide range of aspects of online Sims fandom, not exclusively Tumblr.

5. The remaining users either put dates outside of these ranges, (including dates in the future, or did not specify an age.

6. It is difficult to provide clear statistics relating to ethnicity and race as this was an optional question and users could write whatever they chose. Thus many identified here with nationality (e.g, Canadian, British) rather than any other form of ethnicity, as well as users offering a diverse range of other answers (including one who described themselves as "a big ol' pot of mixed up!").

7. This is true of posts relating to *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3*. However, posts relating to *Sims 1* tend to be unprocessed and often used for humor because of its retro and lo-fi quality (Deller, 2014c). Images from *The Sims 4* were also unprocessed; as the game was not yet released, these were stills released by Electronic Arts that users circulated to either build excitement for the game or to express cynicism toward it (Deller, 2014b).

8. A frequent complaint about the tagging system (figure 2) is from users who only follow one particular game, such as *The Sims 2* or *The Sims 3*, and therefore don't want to see posts relating to the other Sims games in their dashboard.

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