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Jill Johnson

QUESTIONS BY ASIASHAMECCA

ANSWERS BY JILL JOHNSON

We've all been stalking Sims 4. After the Sims 4 press conference, everyone found out about the exciting new CAS tools. We can't wait to play with our Sims faces "like clay" and enjoy the new tactile CAS tools. But we wanted to know more! How did these enhancements come about? Who's responsible for the future of CAS? And what's it really like to work for EA? Jill Johnson, Producer of Sims 4 Create-A-Sim was kind enough to spend a few moments with us during Gamescom in Germany and give us all the dish!

Tell us a little about yourself?

My name is Jill Johnson. I am the Producer for the Sims 4 Create-A-Sim feature. I've been with EA for about 7 years now. I started on the My Sims games, and then I moved on to The Sims Medieval. On that project I was the Create-A-Sim and Signature Objects Producer. So, it was really fun. I got to produce objects like "The Pit of Judgement" and the stocks.

Ohhhh... You were the "Pit of Judgement"?!?!... I loved that!



It was a lot of fun. And then after The Sims Medieval, I moved over to the Sims 4.

You guys look like you have so much fun. You all look like you really enjoy each other. Tell me what it's like to work for EA?

It's not an act. *laughs* I've been very fortunate with the Creativity Tools Team and just the Sims team in general. Everybody is kind of like a family. We work together really closely.

Really quickly, you get to become good friends. Me and the Build Designer-- we worked together on the Sims Medieval as well. So that was the first project where I met him. He's wonderful.

Marian is a blast. We have a good time.

Now at SF, it's all about fashion. How would you describe your personal style?

Oh! Fun, fun fun! I don't know if I have specific word for my style. I am obsessed and enamoured with bright freaky colors. No relation to the game, but I like bright fun colors. I wouldn't say that pink is my favorite color -my favorite color is yellow- but I wear pink as often as I can possibly get it. I love retro looking tennis shoes that are about 4 sizes too big for me. I just have fun with it. I dress about 10 years too young...

Don't we all? One of the things that Aaron (Houts - Build Producer) mentioned was that because of the new game engine, they were able to do so much more with the build tools. Do you find that in creating the assets, it's more freeing working with the new technology in Sims 4 and how so?

I would say it is. It's something we put a lot of focus on with the Sims 4; improving performance. So that means from the get-go, we put a lot of work in early on to make sure we were building our assets smartly...intelligently. So, it's give and take. There are certain things that make the system a little bit more in-depth. For example, the boots/pants pairing system. For CAS assets, all of the body logs that we have added surprisingly are not a hinderance in building our assets. Again, they invested really smartly with the tech artists, and they came up with... I'm not even sure of the actual name of the tech, but we call them D-Maps. It's pretty special because in previous games, if we ever changed the base body shape of the Sim later on down in the process, we would have to go back and retouch every single clothing asset that had been built originally. But at this point, it's really interesting because the base Sim's body



propagates out to all the other clothing assets. So even legacy assets that have existed before, if we add a new mod -like the arm mod or the foot mod - it doesn't have a hindrance on the existing assets. It just kind of propagates on in there, and everything updates automatically, so it's cool.

Within reason, because I know there are things you can't talk about at



Yeah! It's silly maybe, but it's little things that make a huge difference when you're building your Sim. So, I know that you can't just throw anything into the CAS bin. How do you select what kind of assets we see?

I'm really happy you asked that question. I think everybody with SF Magazine would be really excited to hear we have **Sam Maceli** (The very fashionable Ms. Maceli was interviewed in **SF Mag Issue 17**) working on our team. She is standing in as the Concept Art Fashion Director at this point. So the process we do for selecting clothing and hair and faces and everything we do on the project, it all starts with a list. It starts with a schedule, so we figure out our numbers. We figure out how many we are able to make. It starts really big.. just hair number 1, hair number 2, and at that point, production's able to give a really broad, high-level idea. So we want-- 15 sleepwear outfits, for instance, 15 trendy outfits, something along those lines. Then Sam and the Concept team are able to run with that.

They take that high-level direction, and Sam has some really specific fashion styles that she's come up with. So, she's got style guides and they just go to town gathering references, doing thumbnail sketches, all that type of stuff. They're able to kind of fit the role of fashion designers for the project. They're able to take styles from existing styles and trends, because we want to stay up with the times. At the same time, they are able to design some outfits that they personally would really love to see and that they come up with in their own heads. Then we have meetings, and we all put in input. 'Like this is nice... but wouldn't it look good as a gored skirt?' It's super fun. It's a good process. It's like a dream come true. Everyone seems to enjoy their roles.



Image by Arthur of Simified

What sort of things inspire you when you're planning and designing assets for the game? Like people on the street? Fashion magazines? Movies?

People on the street. That's where I pick up most of my inspiration. The Sims is a game about... life. It's about people. So, my biggest inspiration is... what people look like today. I do this everywhere I go. I'm kind of a lurker. *laughs* Having a fashion design





this point, what kind of things will we see in the Sims 4 that we've never seen before?

Good question! Well, first and foremost is the hat/hair pairing system. We're so excited about it. That was one of the earliest things, when I first came into the project that I was stoked about. It had really full support from the entire team. We knew it was going to be kind of a

complex system to make. But the artists, the engineers, everybody was so excited to make it work. We all just kind of put our heads together and came up with some really interesting ways to pull it together. It's going to be so flexible and so scalable. We're really excited... really excited.

It was so amazing to see the hats paired with any hair... I think the only question I asked during your presentation was about ethnic hair. It really killed me to have to wait for 3 or 4 EPs and then store content before things like afros started showing up. And then you finally get it.. and you can't do anything with it... you love the hair, you love the hat... you can't wear the hat.

I know! We definitely wanted to give players that flexibility. I was there too! I see a sunhat I really like and.. I don't have a bob haircut.

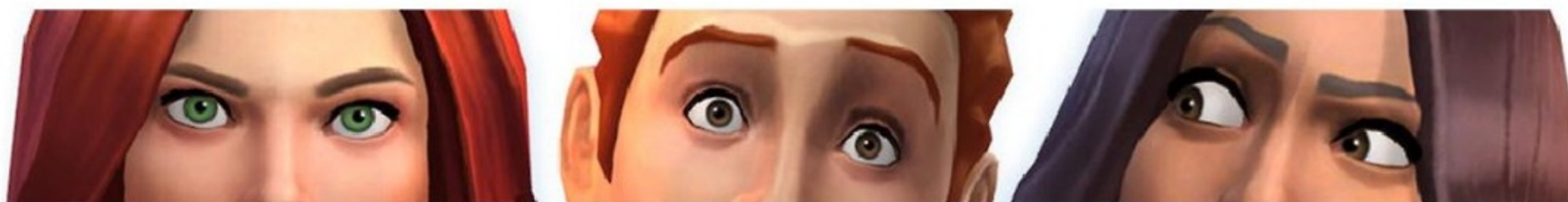
You asked probably my favorite question yesterday when you asked about having ethnic hair, more wavy hairs. One of my personal goals... Hairs are challenging. There's so much movement. They tell so much about a person's face. Everyone has emotional attachments with hairs. And I know we've had challenges getting the afros and wavy hairs in the past. It usually takes



Image by Soroya of Sims Nieuws

a few packs before we're really nailing our hair pipeline. So for this project, literally, I have been really pushing a range of hairs so hard. We know that more of the wavy and ethnic hairs are going to be challenging, but we're gathering so much ref for them. We're really pushing hard to make sure we get them in there early and that we get them nailed right.

background, I'm always so interested in what people are wearing. So you'll see me everywhere I go. I'm not really paying attention to the street signs. I'm not looking at where I'm supposed to go. I'm always looking at people. I just scope out people everywhere I go.



Do you actually get a chance to play the game? And how do you like to play?

Actually, I play the game constantly... constantly. I'd say 85% of that is work and because it's what I need to do. Bug testing. The other bit of that, I mean, I stay up late playing the game because I'm having fun with it. I am a CAS dork. I am obsessed with Create-A-Sim. Sims 2. Sims 3. I love that tool. I have a little bit of an art background, so I love making caricatures of myself. I love making faces. I spend lots of time in the game. I play it at home and on the weekends. That's why I'm so excited about what we're doing in Create-A-Sim. It really is a fun tool to use.



Image by Arthur of [Simified](#)

Do you spend a lot of time in the Community. Do you read the comments and the posts that people make?

I do a little bit. There have been a few inspirational tips I've gotten from the Community. Like, for instance, a little while ago someone was asking "Why don't we have more maxi-skirts in the game?" That immediately... I was so excited at that moment because we already had just a plain, basic maxi-skirt template already in the plan, already prepped. So I was so excited. 'They're going to love this!'

So I do read the forums every time I get a chance, because you are ones who are giving us all these amazing ideas, and you guys really are giving us the foundation to build on.

What would like to see more of in the future for the Sims and in the Community as a whole?

I just want us to continue on the course that we're setting out. Me personally, I'm really into caricature. I'm really into human expressiveness and making faces. I just want us to continue expanding on our content with faces, with hair. I really want us to give people the tools to make anyone that they know of, anybody that they relate to. I want people to be able to make their family. I want them to be able to make their roommates. And I want them to be able to look at the game and say "Hey! That looks just like Keira!" or whoever. That is the most important thing for me. Because it really is about the Sims. If you can connect with them, if you can relate to them, if you recognize them, if you know who you made, then that's a total win. I want us to keep settling on that course. Keep adding more content and get more and more flexibility.



Rebuilding Build Mode From the

HMSDRCO2001's INTERVIEW WITH SIMS 4 BUILD MODE DESIGNER, AARON HOUTS

Ground Up



Bill: I'm here with Aaron Houts who's in charge of Interiors and Build Mode for the upcoming Sims 4. Thank you for talking with me today.

Aaron: Yeah, my pleasure.

Bill: Hearing the presentations from the team and seeing the demonstrations and photos, I really get the sense that you approached this game with a clean slate and a fresh perspective. What do you think are some of the most amazing new developments in the Sims 4 from a builder's perspective?

Aaron: Well, yeah, you're definitely right about that. This was a clean slate. It's built from the ground up. And so in doing that--in starting fresh--we really had an opportunity to look at how we could make this Build really unique and take it to the next level. So in building from the ground up, we looked at how it's worked out in the past. We knew we were providing great creative tools with lots of depth to them, but we also knew that

people were intimidated about Build and might try it out and get kind of turned off by it and say, "You know what--I'm just going to go with pre-made stuff." So there was this whole aspect of the game that a lot of our fans weren't experiencing, and we wanted to get more people into it. When looking at the Sims 4 and building this from the ground up, we came up with this room system that you could build by. And so what this is is it allows you to very quickly and easily start putting together the structure of your house. It's very flexible. You can resize stuff on the fly. You can pick up a room and move it to a different spot on the lot. You can move it to a different floor. And it's really intuitive. It's really fast. And it's not intimidating. It's hard to make mistakes. The tool just adapts to you rather than you having to fight against the tool. We're really proud of how tactile and flexible we've been able to make this. We've seen some really positive responses.

Bill: What about from an interior designer's perspective? What are some the most amazing



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new features?

Aaron: From an interior perspective, we wanted to do a similar thing. A lot of people maybe don't have a good decoration sense or are not quite sure what goes together, and so we have a section of the build tool called the magazine view, and this is pre-made, pre-styled rooms. And so you can go in and browse through--we have these beautiful pictures of the rooms, and you can click on the different objects and buy them individually. And when you do that, you know you're buying from a styled set that goes together. So if I buy two things out of the same room, I know that that's going to look good. It kind of guides me. It will guide and inspire you. But I can also just buy the entire room. And so I can take this pre-laid-out, pre-styled room. Like we've done the color selections for you. You can select different sets of colors and just place those down. It's fully functional, and it just looks beautiful and it pops from the get-go. So from an interior perspective, we've done some of this pre-styling, but we've also been working with our assets to provide cohesive styles that go together. There are different furniture styles. I'm not going to go into too much detail right now on what those styles are, but you'll know when you're choosing from the catalog that these objects are part of a style that goes together. You don't have to guess at what will look good together. You're welcome to mix and match if you want to, but it's easy for people to go in and find stuff that is going to look beautiful.

Bill: There are so many expectations and desires from fans for this new installment. How do you strike a balance between meeting those expectations while creating what appears to be a paradigm shift and new vision for the game?

Aaron: That's a really good question. We've provided this really intuitive, really flexible, easy, fast way to build. But that doesn't mean that we've ignored the details. For example, we've added some details that haven't been in other Sims games. A great example is roof trims which is just this very subtle detail that goes along the edge of a roof. You can just add that personal touch. Or spandrels, which is kind of like a fence but on the ceiling. And we have these ornate kind of carved decorations of spandrels that you can put in to really personalize your porches and stuff like that. And there are friezes. Again, with a single click, I can pick a frieze style and then with a single click apply that to one of my rooms and see it just pop in around the top of the walls.

Bill: What do you foresee, if any, being the biggest adjustment for builders and designers who will be making the transition from The Sims 3 to The Sims 4?

Aaron: It's actually kind of funny because the biggest adjustment is that our new tools are so easy and make things so flexible that you're used to... for example, if you build something in



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the wrong place, destroying it all and rebuilding. And so you have these habits of like "Oh, I did this wrong. I better delete it." And you don't have to do that. So it actually takes awhile before our hard-core builders realize that they don't have to delete these things. You just make a quick adjustment, and then the room is where you want it to be. Another example of this is say I built my house, and I'm like, "Oh, shoot. I forgot the foundation." Well, in previous games, again you have to delete everything and rebuild. In Sims 4, we've actually added a foundation height adjustment slider. And so I can just open that up after having built everything and just raise the foundation, and it will pop in underneath all my rooms. And also, very similar to that with staircases--as I adjust wall heights and foundation height, the stairs will adjust on the fly to meet those heights.

Bill: So there are different wall heights?

Aaron: Yes. We have three different wall heights. It's another way that we're allowing deep customization. You can get that really tall first floor for a really grand entrance.

Bill: And there will be windows and doors to match these heights?

Aaron: Yeah, we have different assets to take advantage of the different wall heights and just really provide that flexibility and that ease of use.

Bill: I know that Create-A-Style is not necessarily a component of The Sims 4 at this point, but will we have similar groupings of patterns that we had in The Sims 3 for wall and floor customization?

Aaron: In our patterns catalog, when you're going to paint your house or apply textures to the foundation or anything that you want



Even if you've never been a builder before, I think you're going to love building in The Sims 4...

to colorize, we have your similar to Sims 3 categories like masonry, tile, and woodwork for the floors and stuff like that, but we also have a new way to filter the catalogs. I can say, "You know what--I'm kind of going for a red and blue color scheme," and I can set the filters to only show the stuff that is red or blue. It's an easy way, you know--we have so many different patterns in our catalog, it can be kind of a lot if you're looking through everything. So it's a great way to filter it down and focus on what you want to create.



Bill: Can you tell us more about the lighting? In the Sims 3, a light on a particular floor will not illuminate the floor above even if it's not obstructed. Is that something that is going to be different with this new game engine?

Aaron: Yeah, our engineers have done some great work with the lighting engine. If you have a double-story room, and you have lights on either the bottom or top floor, those lights will cast into both levels. It doesn't cut off. It's much more realistic with beautiful shadowing. It's wonderful.

Bill: Can you tell me more about emotions that are attached to particular objects? Like what types of objects will have them?

Aaron: I can tell you a little bit about that. We're still finalizing exactly how the content is going to be attached to which emotions, but the basic idea is that certain objects will be kind of infused with certain emotions. For example, if there's a painting that looks a little flirty maybe, and I place that on the wall, when Sims are near that painting or are looking at it, that will affect



their emotions. And we're hoping to expand that to many other objects, but we're still finalizing which ones those will be. But yeah, the basic idea is that through the way that you construct your house and the types of objects that you use, that that will affect your Sim's emotion and really add depth to the simulation that's going on, the life that is created by the Sims living in that house.

Bill: Will art be shiftable on the walls?

Aaron: Yeah, so without cheats you're able to move the paintings horizontally, obviously, and vertically, and you can have two paintings in the same horizontal space. Like one above the other. You don't have to use a cheat to do that. Yeah, you just move it around the walls. And that's great with the different wall sizes. If you go with the really tall wall sizes, you have a lot more room to work with. You can almost do art pieces of your own with the way you arrange the paintings and the lights. There's a lot of opportunity there.

Bill: Is there anything that you feel like I missed that I should communicate to our readers?

Aaron: If I have one message to the readers, it's that even if you've never been a builder before, I think you're going to love building in The Sims 4 because we've made it so intuitive and so easy and flexible. It's going to be great for our people who are builders. They're going to love it. But the people who haven't, I think that they're going to be in for a really good surprise.

Bill: I really appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

Aaron: Oh, no problem. Thank you.

[Read the full interview text on SF Webs!](#)