

EA Chats 2.0

Benjamin Skubi and Vaidehi Agarwalla

Project Note: *This project will be called EA Chats when it is published. We initially used the term EA Pen Pals when we first conceived of the idea, but the name is confusing and not intuitive given that most of the interactions are voice or video calls.*

Thanks to William Saunders for invaluable feedback and advice.

Summary

This is a proposal for a digital chat service for the EA community. Users will be randomly matched, given each others' contact information, and provided with discussion prompts. They can then video call and get to know each other.

We believe this would create a valuable alternative way of building high-fidelity EA connections and friendships. This service could especially benefit newcomers to the movement, aspiring EAs and EAs without local community, like those living in smaller countries/cities or rural areas. Because this system can be automated, it requires low maintenance and upkeep.

Table of Contents

Summary	1
Project Proposal	2
Objective	2
The Service	2
Covid Update	2
The Current Situation	2
Risks	3
Costs	3
Checks for Success	4
Beta Test Feedback Results	5
Hosting	8
Why Hosting on the EA Hub	8
Minimizing Maintenance	8
Appendix	9
Webpage layout	9

Software needs	10
Admin Interface	11
Security features	11
Security Design	12
EA Chats 1.0 Summary	13
Conversation Prompts	14

Project Proposal

Objective

Create a way for EAs to connect with other EAs with no prerequisite connections, shared interests or geography.

The Service

Once you sign up, you get randomly matched with another person. The system also provides some EA and non-EA icebreaker questions. Users can correspond via email, video chat, voice call, or letter. For the user flow, please see the appendix.

Covid Update

As countries are opening up the previous interest in online events will decrease and so will the number of events hosted online. We believe that EA Chats can help to serve the need for ongoing connection to the communities in the long-term and work in conjunction with events like the International Icebreakers to help EAs connect online.

The Current Situation

This project would help improve high-fidelity online interactions in the EA community. Currently available platforms like the EA Forum, Facebook groups and the discord server cannot substitute high-fidelity 1-on-1 conversations and relationships, for the following reasons:

- 1) The most active users on these and groups tend to be those already integrated into the community and thus may not be motivated to seek out new connections. Others may hesitate to approach them for fear of wasting their time.
- 2) The networked effect on less formal platforms like Facebook and the Discord server can create other pressures that might prevent people reaching out to each other.
- 3) The level and quality of conversation on less formal platforms can vary, and may not provide people with the in-depth conversations they are looking for.

- 4) The people who would most benefit from this service are likely silent observers, but because of this may not be able to find others to connect with.
- 5) People who do find online EA friends most likely find them through shared interests. With the option of connecting to a random stranger, we help bring some of the spontaneity and randomness of a local group.

We believe insufficient attention has been paid to the importance of interpersonal bonding and connections in online EA movement building. We hypothesize that local community and interpersonal relationships are important predictors of involvement and motivation, but limited research has been done on this topic. The chat format allows people to develop interpersonal bonds as well as intellectual ones, and give each other better advice, alert each other to relevant opportunities and encourage each other. Conversations also contribute to learning, people could better process thoughts and improve their understanding of EA concepts, without the pressures of sharing them publicly or semi-publicly. Presenting EA as an opportunity to make connections, friendships and be involved in a network may seem more appealing to talk about EA to one's friends and family.

Risks

People's level of engagement might decrease if they have a negative experience through our service. Prior to running the beta test we were concerned with harassment or spam through this service, but did not come across any issues with this at all. We can probably avoid spam through the vetting process and craigs-list style format of users emailing each other via a third email (we did not do either of this in our beta-run) (see Appendix), and predict it will be fairly low as these services will be targeted to the community. We can then clarify to users what steps we are taking to mitigate those risks, and how we would respond to incidents of harm via the service. Please see our [security design](#) for more details.

We think another risk might be if people get matched with people who are not very aligned or who are too different. From our beta-run, the one person who felt this way in our feedback mentioned they would be willing to try again, and had a generally positive review of the service. At this stage we do not think matching people by interests makes sense because we don't know if enough people will sign up to support this, but we are keeping it mind as we develop this further.

Costs

Beta-test

- Writing the project proposal and planning (25 hours)

- Sending out match emails and trouble-shooting (20 hours)
- **Total time:** 45 hours split by 2 people

Full project

- Researching and organising an auction to take bids for creating a dependable, fully-automated matching tool (10 hours)
- Creating the matching tool itself (~30 hours and ~\$5,000 for a professional (if we can't find a suitable volunteer), ~60 hours for Benjamin and Vaidehi)
- Coordinate with EA orgs to get it linked to a site for visibility (10+ hours?)
- **Total time:** ~80 hours for us alone, OR ~20 hours for us and ~30 hours for a professional software engineer (volunteer or paid).
- **Total Cost: ~\$5000** if hiring someone, less if a volunteer (although we think compensating them by ~\$1000 would be ideal), \$2500 discretionary budget for project maintenance

Checks for Success

We have conducted a non-automated 1-month long beta-test. We received 16 responses (33% response rate) and two emails. From June - September 2019, we matched 48 people, and expect that around 70% of them actually ended up talking to the person they were matched with based on survey data. Given the small sample size, we don't want to extrapolate the data too far, but the results are encouraging and people found this service valuable. (Survey results [here](#))

We originally designed this project to help people with limited access to a local EA community, and it seems we attracted our target demographic - 53% of respondents had no local community available, and only about 50% attended any local meetups.

Our level of success may be difficult to quantify, because the benefits of this service are expected to be intangible, and the activity is carried out privately. Rich, qualitative survey feedback will help us understand whether our service is really helping people but this is also time-consuming and it is unclear whether people would be willing to provide this feedback.

Where possible we try to quantify the usefulness of the project by asking questions like:

- Questions about change in engagement with the EA community
- Would you enjoy meeting any of your contacts through this service in real life?
- How disappointed would you be if EA Pen Pals stopped running?

We checked in with participants at the end of the month, the summary of our feedback is below.

Proof of Concept

A few years ago, a very similar volunteer project was run called EA Chats. It was well-received at the time, however, the organiser was unable to keep it running because the system was never fully automated and other priorities prevented them from focusing on the project. For more information about EA Chats and the feedback results of the project, please see the [appendix](#).

Beta Test Feedback Results

Quality of conversations

Enjoyability: 38.5% Very enjoyable, 23.1% Slightly enjoyable, 38.5% Neutral

About 60% said they'd want to meet their match in real life.

Usefulness: 50% Not useful, 21.4% Very Useful, 21.4% Moderately Useful, 7.1% Slightly Useful

The overall quality of connections was rated as neutral to very positive, which we consider a great success considering that matching was random. 86% of respondents said they had multiple conversations with their match, which suggests to us that they found value in their talks.

One person was inspired by their call to start a project, another started weekly accountability meetings, several were connected with people or online resources, and one obtained career advice. 5 people said they made a friend.

Connection to the movement: 56.3% Neutral, 18.8% Slightly Increased, 18.8 Significantly or Moderately increased, 6.3% (1 respondent) Slightly decreased

The one person who felt a decrease commented that they would prefer a trio call for a better sense at community and that "it was just bad luck, but my pen pal's concerns are not at all the same as mine, and I think they also do not concern the greater EA community". Over 90% said they would be at least somewhat disappointed if the service stopped running.

What if EA Pen Pals stopped running?: 50% of respondents moderately or very disappointed, 41.7% would be slightly disappointed, 8.3% (1 respondent) not be disappointed.

Positive Feedback from Users

"Please keep this going. This is an incredible idea, full of potential. This is far better than other online interactions. It's perfect for people who have no one else in their city to have these EA related conversations with. It gives people in those cities someone to relate to. That's beyond valuable." From a user with no local community.

"Wonderful job you guys! So important for EAs to be able to connect, thank you very much!"

“Just thank you so much for doing this, it is an incredible service. Value drift is a real and important problem, and you guys are helping us stay on track. Thank you, truly.”

Improvements

The following problems were observed by our users and us over the course of the beta run.

Problem 1: Not enough people

User feedback: “If there were more people. Otherwise, it's excellent.”

Solution: The service needs to be hosted on the community sites listed below to ensure regular usage. We think posting about the service once every 3-4 months on community channels in the initial year following the launch would be appropriate to get people used to this service, but not often enough to create reader fatigue. Posting solely on community channels is not sustainable over the long-run.

1. [Effectivealtruism.org](https://www.effectivealtruism.org/get-involved/) Get Involved Page, as one of the filterable activities. For example:
-

Have a conversation about EA

- **Occupation:** Student, Professional, Retired
- **Time commitment:** Hours
- **Duration:** Short-term, Medium-term, Long-term
- **Familiarity with EA:** New, Familiar

Building a community is essential for coordinating on the world's most pressing issues. Talking to others can be a great way to learn more about EA, get inspired and make a friend!

2. [EA Hub](#) (For our proposal for Hosting on the Hub see [here](#))
 - Under Community and Discussions (currently it goes straight to the EA forum, but at some point it will link to more online community options and this could be one of them).
 - “Learn about EA” resources

Other methods to maintain usage:

- One-click re-entry into system for existing users
- Users can opt into monthly reminders to prompt them to sign up
- Have some “reserve” users, possibly more experienced EAs (doesn’t have to be) who can be matched up quickly with new users as they enter the system to prevent long delays. We will check with these users monthly and they can opt out of the system if they are no longer available.
- If users sign up and don’t receive a match within a certain number of days we can automate messages to encourage them to look for local EA or EA-aligned communities while they wait and other online platforms.

Problem 2: User nonresponse

User feedback: “My penpal didn’t respond, but I’m willing to try again”

Based on our survey we estimate that about 60-70% of users actually had a call (rounding down to account for response bias amongst those who did fill out the survey).

We can address this by:

- Explicitly stating the expected code of conduct for calls, possibly by providing data on how many people actually call or reply (once we have enough data points).
- Provide people a mechanism to ping them in a week if they discover the service when busy so they can sign up when they have the time.
- The methods above to maintain usage. If there are enough users then someone can simply sign up again to get another user.

Problem 3: Finding better matches

User feedback: “Better matching (I’m about 85% sure that it ought to be possible to find people who share more of my listed interests than the “match” found for me).”...”The original form should probably contain some more specific questions in order to find a better match. I’m nowhere near an expert on how this should work, but the original form seemed surprisingly sparse (I don’t know if it’s changed since).” (both quotes from the same user)

“it was just bad luck, but my pen pal’s concerns are not at all the same as mine, and I think they also do not concern the greater EA community”

Although we explicitly stated the matching was random in multiple places, some users still wanted user matching. Given the low volume of users this was infeasible at the time, but might be possible if the service grows. Until then, we will strive to make sure that our messaging is clear. One factor we definitely want to include is matching based on a user’s experience with EA, and if they are open to talking to newcomers, especially if they are very involved. We think this

will really help integrate new members into the community, and ensure some basic standard of positive experience for them.

Possible solution

- Make the goal or structure explicitly interdisciplinary for now. Encourage matches to discuss one thing they share in common and one thing they don't and make that be part of the expected structure, instead of a "bug."
- See added discussion prompts [here](#)

Hosting

We will host the feature on the eahub.org as part of the "Community and Discussion" section. We hope to link it on effectivealtruism.org/get-involved

Why Hosting on the EA Hub

- **Accountability** More accountability as users can use their hub profile to sign up (newcomers can make one-time sign ups as well, but the system will encourage them to create a profile if they would like to save their data to get new matches)
- **Convenience/Steady User Base** Users may be more likely to sign up if the service is located in a feature they already use. The hub currently has almost several thousand users, and this is expected to grow in the future.
- **Encouraging engagement with the hub** Encouraging/introducing newcomers to EA to the hub, its resources and its network
- **Safety** Makes maintenance easier as it integrates into the Hub's admin system. This is more convenient and efficient.
- **Potential for more use-cases in the future** Once the first iteration of this project is set, we can draw on other user fields (expertise, areas of interest) to do more catered matching if the need arises in the future. For example, in the future there could be an accountability partners matching - something which would be useful to randomize, but also only applies to a subset of people.
- **Shared Values and Mission** We believe that our project and the Hub have closely aligned values and a shared mission

Minimizing Maintenance

- The program itself is fairly straightforward and only requires associating the Chats form with your user profile. The program would send out match emails etc. on its own.

- We will budget for a discretionary amount of money to pay for any maintenance or extra integration work that needs to be done. This money would sit with the Hub to use as and when it is necessary.
- We will try to hire a programmer who has already worked on the Hub to mitigate miscommunication
- We will make sure that we and the programmer we hire communicate closely lead developers of the hub throughout the process

See the Appendix for technical details.

Appendix

Webpage layout

- Have a "EA Chats" button or link within the "[Community and Discussion](#)" Tab
- When you click it, it takes you to chats.eahub.org (like <https://donationswap.eahub.org/start/>)
- Main page contains a short description of EA Pen Pals and tabs on the top right
 - "My Chats Profile"
 - If logged in, the fields Name, email, and intro para populate from Name, Email, and Summary (with option to edit)
 - "Find me a match" button
 - See history of matched users (unless you've been blocked)
 - "Sign Up"
 - Fields mentioned above
 - "Advice on talking to people"
 - "Code of Conduct"
 - "Feedback and reporting an issue"
 - "Contact Us"
- **If you are not logged into your hub profile/don't have one**
 - "My Chats Profile" greyed out
 - On the "Sign Up" form, it suggests making an account (and links to it) if you want your preferences to be saved, otherwise you can just enter your details and it'll match you. You will have to sign up every time if you do not have an account.

Software needs

- Sign up form inputs (will autofill from EA hub if user is logged in)
 - Name
 - Email
 - City/Country
 - Whether they have a local group near them
 - Experience level in EA
 - Introductory paragraph (with no identifying details)
 - Preferred communication style (multi-select)
 - Prefer Email
 - Prefer Voice call
 - Prefer Video call
 - No preference
 - Any comments?
 - Whether they want a monthly reminder to go back into the system
- Vetting system:
 - Re-captcha
 - Introductory paragraph
- User Flow
 - Sign up for a match on EA Hub profile
 - Receive match email with:
 - Potential matches' intro paragraph, email and full name of your match
 - Question prompt
 - Feedback, reporting, rematching buttons (see security)
 - If no other penpals are in the system, an email letting them know they'll receive a match as soon as someone new enters.
 - Schedule a meeting with your match
 - 1 week after you receive your match, users receive a feedback email which will contain:
 - Feedback Form link
 - One click opt in
 - Option of whether they want a monthly reminder to go back into the system
 - Opt in window
 - Confirm name, email and intro

- Option to update any of this information
 - Another feedback form link is sent after 1 month
- When a match is made, both users are eliminated from the active system. There will be a log of previous matches so the program doesn't match two people twice. They can re-enter the system if they want another match and the system will get their old intro. This system ensures that all users in the system are active.
 - The system will have a memory of who was matched to prevent rematches.

Admin Interface

- Admin tool will contain tabs for each of the following:
 - Configure match emails** Change contents and format of the matching email
 - User feedback logs** View log of user feedback
 - User block list**
 - Configure email notifications**
 - Automatic email on a new subscriber
 - Automatic email when feedback

Security features

- “Give us feedback or report a problem”
 - Feedback form links to the EA hub tab“, where users login to submit feedback and select their match from a list of previous matches (so it's easy to block users)
 - Tool will track user matches
- “I would prefer not to speak to this person” tool which would simply send an automated email to the other person, and offer both users the option to re-match.

Security Design

This section contains all the measures we will be taking to mitigate risks associated with the service:

1) Anti-spam measures

- a) RECAPTCHA

2) Soft vetting

- a) Introductory Paragraph

- b) Users always have the option to not engage with someone they are matched with, although we want to discourage this as a norm. There will be a button which says "Please match me with someone else".

- i) We will let them know that if they would prefer not to match with someone, to click the button which will send an automated email to the other user so they have the option to be rematched with someone else. It will say something along the lines of "actually, we found you another match" We will also ask them for a reason in case this person needs to be blocked.

3) Code of Conduct

- a) Before signing up users will be asked to agree to a message that could read "The goal of these chats is to provide friendly, helpful connections. In participating, you agree to abide by that goal, and to avoid any kind of harassment or unwelcome attention. Please let us know if you have questions or have noticed a problem: [link to feedback form]"

4) Report an incident

- a) Users will be able to report others through a button when they view their history of past Users
- b) A button which says "Give us feedback or report a problem" will be in the footer of all emails, as well as contact info for CEA Community Health team

5) Ability to blacklist users

- a) The program will maintain a list of names/emails of users. If users with those emails sign up they will not be matched with anyone in the system
 - i) CEA Community health staff can be given admin access to the Chats tool
 - ii) The community health liaison will be sent an automated email when someone signs up and can enter the tool to block them
 - (1) They can also go through and block on the tool itself.
- b) Admins can pre-block people by adding their email to the list.

- ~~e) When a user reports someone, they will be automatically blocked and the admin will be notified of the issue. If it is deemed they don't need to be blocked, the admin will be able to unblock them.~~

EA Chats 1.0 Summary

EA Chats was a similar service offered in 2016 for several months (the exact dates are uncertain). Because the system was not fully automated it eventually became too burdensome for the sole organiser to run. However, he was able to collect feedback on the last round of the project and we summarise those results below.

At the time the survey was sent out 40 people were signed up to the service and of those 22 responded to the request for feedback. Overall people found the service useful and enjoyable. Most importantly, it made them feel connected to the community - almost 30% said it significantly increased their connection to the EA movement, and another 61% said it slightly increased their connection to the community. For a full breakdown of the results please see below.

Feedback Summary Statistics

Enjoyability

- 59% (13) of them had scheduled an interview with their most recent match
- 55% (11) found the chat very enjoyable on a 5-point scale, and 45% (9) found it slightly enjoyable. No one who responded found the chats unpleasant

Usefulness

- 15% found it very useful, 65% found it slightly useful and 20% did not find it useful
- People found it useful to make contacts, get advice on careers and connect people to resources in the community

Connection to the EA movement

- 27.8% (5) reported it significantly increased their connection to the movement, and 61.1% (11) found it slightly increased their connection, and the remaining 11.1% (2) found it was neutral

What if EA Chats stopped?

- 30% they would be very disappointed, and 70% said they would be slightly disappointed.

- A few times after the organiser stopped the project, people contacted him and asked if it would start up again

Suggestions

Users suggested the following tips - see parentheses for how we have included them:

- Tips on scheduling software (see match email)
- What to do if the conversation doesn't flow (see match email)
- Having a prompt to spark discussion (see match email)
- Fixing software issues (see automation plans)
- Ensuring people reply when matched (matching people ASAP so people still want to engage, included courtesy tips in our match email)
- Having a mentor pairing system (we are marketing this as only peer-to-peer connections)
- Advertising more widely (we hope to have this hosted with other shared resources to it is easy to find)

Note: None of the questions were mandatory, hence the differing numbers of respondents

Conversation Prompts

See [EA Chats Prompts](#) for one possible resource. We sent this to half the beta audience and are awaiting further feedback, but think it doesn't hurt to include this (as well as two selected prompts from this selection).

Other:

{{[TODO]}} update the new questions re: previous connection to the community for [[EA Chats]]