**Reception Studies**

**The Sims modding as a way for women to approach and learn IT**

# Abstract

Modding represents an important part of many well-known video games and it is often used as a way to teach, or self-teach, IT and coding, and the EA’s The Sims franchise makes no exception.

This paper analyses how game modding, with a particular attention to The Sims, can be used as a precious mean to make IT more approachable and appealing for young girls and older women.

Different observations and self-observations are conducted, including an analysis of which skills are needed to engage into modding.

Many stories and researches are taken as examples to highlight the usefulness of this method to learn IT, or at least develop an interest in this field.

Finally, it is concluded that using The Sims modding to make IT accessible to girls and women seems to be a very valuable mean to develop new interests and learn new important skills useful to computer-related activities or careers, whether technical or artistic oriented.

# Introduction

Even though in the UK 46% of gamers are women (Luke, 2018), only 14% of games jobs are held by women (Ramanan, 2017).

These numbers are worrying, especially considering that the percentage of women in tech jobs is expected to decline even more by 2025 (Morris, 2017).

It becomes obvious that a solution to this huge gender gap must be found. However, even though many associations to facilitate this process exist (Women in Tech) (Wise Campaign) (Girls Who Code), there are no direct ways to find an effective solution, the problem itself seems to originate from many different issues. The most popular opinion supports the theory that this issue originates from girls childhood, as “the home computers for boys and not girls is a compelling theory” (Elizabeth, 2017) or “that boys are being nudged down certain career paths and girls down others” (Khan, 2017). But also stereotypes and the need to adhere to socially-acceptable manners seem to influence young girls’ decisions, as computer-related activities, especially programming, are seen as “something overtly masculine and geeky” (Vu, 2017). Therefore, the need to find a solution becomes even more compelling considering how deeply-rooted into young girls’ minds these thoughts are.

As women, of all ages, enjoy playing video games as much as men, video games themselves can become a powerful mean to invert the trend just described. However, starting to create video games from scratch might seem a quite scary and difficult task, especially to young girls. Even though there are many workshops and clubs that point at making this approach straightforward and easy to understand (ComputerXplorers), there is still a strong “school-related” aspect that might induce youngsters to feel forced to adapt to a specific teaching scheme, creating oppositions to the learning process (Hayes & King, 2009).

This is where modding becomes handy. Unlike creating video games from scratch, “modders” can work on small aspects of existing games, from their gameplay to their graphics. For this reason, girls and women can potentially work on their favourite games, making the whole creative and technical learning process much more appealing, approachable and scalable.

Therefore, this paper focuses on modding as a way to make girls and women’s interest towards IT grow, but also to improve their logic and computing skills. The EA’s The Sims franchise is used as main example for this approach, and this choice is extensively explained in the following sections of the document.

# The Sims and Modding

In this section, both the approach and game choices are further analysed, in relation to female audience’s game trends.

## Learning Approach Choice

As already discussed before, modding represents a unique and invaluable learning approach that very much differs from video game creation from scratch. Few articles and researches highlight these differences, favouring modding over game creation (El-Nasr & Smith, 2006) (Emmerson, 2004) (Yucel, et al., 2006) and their summarised concepts are the following:

* Modding reduces complexity of learning process compared to creating games
* Learners can work on games they already know and played with
* Modding requires learners to adapt to existing game systems – something IT professional have often to deal with
* Modifying games can increase learners’ motivation and interest as they can work on complete games straightaway
* As modders work on existing games, they can understand what actually makes up a convincing and well-designed game

For these reasons, modding seems a more approachable method to teach IT to people that may feel intimidated by the idea of creating a whole game from scratch, especially young girls and older women. Moreover, modding is also less demanding in terms of resources and time than game creation and it is, therefore, a less frustrating task for first-time learners.

In this paper context, the word “modding” includes art, design and programming content creation for an existing video game, which is The Sims (all franchise considered).

## Game Choice

The EA’s The Sims franchise has sold almost 200 million copies (Wikipedia - The Sims) and, in 2014, around 57% of The Sims players were women (Harwell, 2014).

Even though it might be easy to identify the reasons of this success amongst the female audience in the game’s resemblance to a “dollhouse” (Schiesel, 2006), this is not the whole truth. Hayes and King have identified other aspects to women’s affinity to this specific game (Hayes & King, 2009): even considering The Sims as a real-life simulation where players have to build families, it is also true that most of the users find unconventional ways to play the game, such as creating fantasy or sci-fi environments that involve vampires, aliens and many other features that go beyond the very traditional and wrongly stereotyped female-like family simulation game (Hayes, 2011).

But what makes The Sims ideal as learning tool specifically addressed to women is not only its success amongst this audience. Indeed, there is a whole Community of mod creators behind the game itself: one of the many existing fan sites for custom content, The Sims Resouce (TSR), counts more than one million mods and other creations available to download. The Community plays a crucial role in the young girls and women learning process, as it is a supportive community, open to new users and, moreover, users themselves upload tutorials and guides to help others to create mods. Within this friendly environment where users are available to help and praise each other, it is not a surprise that women can easily fit in, especially if The Sims Community is compared to other predominantly male online gaming environments where many female gamers have reported to have been harassed by other male users (Valentine, 2018) (Fletcher, 2012).

Therefore, The Sims represents a learning opportunity for women because of its modding potential, but also for the women-friendly Community where every user can share their creations and find learning support.

# Researches and Case Studies

Numerous articles and books by many authors are available on the topic of video game modding as a learning method, but Elisabeth Hayes produced material specifically related to women’s IT learning playing and modding The Sims. In her works, Hayes addressed The Sims as an ideal way to teach IT to women of all ages with different starting IT skills.

This section highlights relevant researches and interesting case studies discussed and analysed in Elisabeth Hayes’s works.

## Researches

Through her TechSavvy Girls Club, Hayes could closely observe middle-school girls learning process with The Sims modding and content creation (Hayes, 2011). The girls attended the club for 18 months, during which period instructors allowed them to familiarise with the game before introducing custom game content creation.

As Hayes stated in other papers, she observed

## Case Studies

# The Sims’ Community stories

In order to have a wider and more updated overview of the topic, some female users form the ModTheSims Community (MTS) had been directly contacted, requesting them to ask few questions about their The Sims modding experience. More than ten users replied within a couple of days, expressing their appreciation for the shown interest in their personal modding stories.

# Self-Observations

# Reflections and Conclusion

# Future Work

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