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**Women and Gaming: *The Sims* and 21st Century Learning.
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REVIEW

Both my role as a lecturer in Games Development and my involvement in the 'Women in Games' organisation have made me only too aware of the ways in which girls and women can be sidelined within the computer games industry. As such, I approached this book with a hopeful, yet cautious, view. In this book Gee and Hayes explore computer gaming holistically, and without the negativity that can cloud many discussions of gameplay. User game creation and 'modding' (modifying games) are a part of modern culture that can be overlooked as childish pastimes, and Gee and Hayes help bring into focus the usefulness of these activities in terms of helping children and young people develop skills and expertise that are marketable in today's technological society. The focus on games as an educational and social tool is a welcome change from the often utilised argument of violence and violent behaviour linked to computer games by many educational psychologists.



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The authors focus on the 'creation' rather than just the playing of the game, reflecting an approach that incorporates the audience into the process of production. Technology has already reshaped our society in terms of where and how information is known and accessible. Gee and Hayes discuss taking this further, and using Internet and computer games as productive interactive teaching tools. Computers in schools are now common place and knowledge gathering a global rather than localised event. Gee and Hayes explore how information gathering and integrating social networking and forums into the curriculum can enrich children's and young people's engagement with computer science. This is the crux of the message - that society needs to embrace new methods of teaching and learning to develop and thrive.

Gaming and its context is explored in the introduction (Chapter 1), with Gee and Hayes discussing areas such as modern gaming, [The Sims](#) and 'emotional intelligence'. Chapter 2 begins by looking at the "recent world-wide interest in video games and what they have to teach us about learning in the modern world" (p17) and considers a boy named 'Sam' and how his use of technology developed his educational and cognitive skills.

Chapter 3 is where the 'women' part of the title becomes relevant, and the beginning of a significant part of the book in which Gee and Hayes discuss various case studies that focus on girls' and women's interaction with *The Sims*. Chapter 3, an especially captivating study, looks at a socially conscious woman (Yamx) and her use of *The Sims* to create a social experiment where the player becomes a poor single mother and has to live day by day following strict guidelines. Yamx based this on the book [Nickel and Dimed: On \(Not\) Getting By in America](#) by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001), which itself was a social experiment where the author lived in poverty. Chapter 4 considers 'Jade', a young girl disenchanted with school, and how her experiences of engaging with *The Sims* and then [Second Life](#) changed her perception of technology. In Chapter 5 Gee and Hayes discuss a retired woman's, 'Tabby-Lou', use of *The Sims* and how her granddaughter's request for a 'purple potty' in the *The Sims 2* led to a passion in design.

The focus of Chapter 6 is 'Passionate Affinity Groups' - groups that all share a passion, which results in members of the group supporting and mentoring each other when creating content. Gee and Hayes then explore the contrast between this and modern schooling. Chapter 7 looks at 'Alex', a teenager who writes fan fiction. Gee and Hayes discuss this 'modern author', who writes for the Internet (in this case for the *The Sims* with accompanying images), and her success, in terms of the high level of readers and positive feedback she receives, comparing it to 'real' authors such as Stephanie Meyers and her [Twilight](#) series.

The final case study (Chapter 8) considers 'Jesse', an adult gamer who felt she had experienced racism in the 'real world', but found acceptance in virtual worlds, eventually moving with her online 'family' to *Second Life* . Jesse explored many identities within the virtual world - her avatar is a man, and the identities she explored included her own homosexuality. Jesse is now in a relationship and

moving in with a woman she met through *Second Life*. She is also using her knowledge of virtual worlds to help her complete graduate study in information and learning technologies.

In Chapter 9 Gee and Hayes conclude by looking at education and the reforms this book advocates, and how "we need to learn to reshape ourselves as ethical, emotionally intelligent, lifelong learners in a complex, high-tech world" (p184).

Throughout the book social networking within a game context is considered as a positive interaction, which is a refreshing change from the popular media's widespread dystopic view of social networking being a hazard and endangerment to children. These case studies of 'atypical' women involved in *The Sims* (and *Second Life*) are involving and wide ranging. They 'capture the flavour' of how much is lost when women are ignored as serious consumers and producers of games, yet do so by showing realistic portrayals that the reader can follow as an almost active participant.

With the modern western child having an understanding of and access to technology unthought-of even a decade ago, Gee and Hayes reveal to the reader the level of engagement possible in the 21st century between children and computers. The case studies discussed show what games are capable of teaching the 'gamer' not simply on a technical level, but also on a "socioemotional" (p14) one. This book has the potential to provide parents with a window onto what their children can and are achieving. Gee and Hayes make the argument that in order to achieve in the modern age children and young people (and also adults) need to widen their skills in both 'soft' and 'hard' skills. The authors show how problem solving and working in a group is as important as technical skills in the modern age.

Although heavily focused on what the authors see as the flaws in modern education, and that focus may at times be a little narrow, this book is still very 'readable'. The discussion flows well, with a chatty yet informative style. This is a book I would highly recommend to academics, parents and students as an antithesis of the views that games are simply violent or that girls would not be interested in creating games. It offers insight and a new perspective on gaming, which is well worth a read. Be warned though, you might find yourself playing some of the games listed once reading!

REFERENCE

Ehrenreich, B. (2001) *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, New York, Metropolitan Books