In this chapter we will meet a young girl named Jade (we have changed her name for privacy). Jade was part of an out-of-school Tech Savvy Girls Club (TSG; Hayes & King, 2009). The club was started with MacArthur Foundation funding, and had the goal of getting and keeping middle school girls interested in learning about digital technologies, particularly technologies that they might not otherwise find appealing. Lots of research has shown that, for boys, video games can serve as a gateway to technical skills. It is not just that boys play video games. Many of them eventually develop an orientation to games and other digital technologies that involve tinkering, modifying, “getting under the hood,” and producing digital artifacts—games, art, and software programs—themselves. From game-related activities, these boys acquire wider interests in computers and other digital tools, and some go on to major in technical fields in college (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Tillberg & Cohoon, 2005).

It is not that modern girls do not play video games. There is plenty of evidence that young girls like and play such games. But many of them lose
this interest around middle school (Barker & Aspray, 2006; Gorriz & Medina, 2000). This is the same time that many girls give up or hide their interest in things like science and mathematics (Barker, Snow, Garvin-Doxas, & Weston, 2006; Goode, Estrella, & Margolis, 2006; National Science Foundation, 2007). As boy-girl relationship dramas become the center of middle school social groups, it is still, for too many girls, “uncool” to be a “techie” and smart. It is hard to believe this still happens in the twenty-first century and at a time when girls are succeeding more than ever before in school and beyond, but it does.

TSG was formed in response to a national concern. Women not only were underrepresented in fields like mathematics, engineering, and computer science, but also, in computer science, their numbers were declining (National Center for Women and Information Technology, 2009). Colleges across the country were worried about the lack of women in their technical majors and were trying a myriad of different approaches to solve the problem. Few seemed to yield much lasting success.

TSG was intended to create a place where it would be “cool” for girls to play games and get interested and passionate about technology. However, unlike many other such projects across the country, and there are a great many, that start with learning how to program (Hayes & Games, 2008), TSG started with a digital tool very much associated with girls and women: The Sims. The Sims is about building communities, social interactions, relationships, and virtual lives inside a simulation.

The choice of The Sims is controversial. Girls already seem to be adept with digital, social-networking tools (like MySpace and Flickr; Lenhardt & Madden, 2005). But, they do not seem to be as comfortable or proficient with the high-tech computer skills that lead to careers in science and technology. So why give the girls a game that focuses on the very social relationships they already are drawn to in such a big way? Shouldn’t they be programming, hacking, and modding? Worse yet, The Sims involves players in designing clothes and houses and in having children and building families. Isn’t this just reinforcing stereotypes about girls and women?

The Sims, when players become passionate about it, is not just about families, social interaction, and designing things. It is also about twenty-first-century skills. The Sims can create a distinctive approach to technology-related learning, one that melds technical skills with emotional intelligence. We argue that this approach, far from being just a “woman’s