IF YOU ARE one of those people who just plays PC games out of the box, you may be missing out on some of the most creative interactive entertainment. Many games these days are never truly finished but are shipped with tools and editors that enable fans and technophiles to make extensive modifications, adding artwork, content and ideas, rendering the game a lot more fun and better value for money. Modding has been around for years, but it has exploded in popularity in recent times. Ever since the first games were hammered together by hobbyist coders keen on doing something more than calculations with their computers, there have been hackers, or mod-makers, who have customised games.

The earliest mods were probably small changes to the PDP-1 classic mainframe computer game, Space War, developed in the early 1960s by Massachusetts Institute of Technology students. The game was modded as the code travelled from campus to campus and different students changed it.

Space War went through many iterations, and many of the game's fans were effectively co-creators, adding to the smorgasbord of variants that gamers could enjoy.

This helped make the game more popular as creation and play became intrinsic parts of the culture.

However, Space War didn't become a commercial reality, as it needed a massive mainframe to run.

The home computer boom made games technology accessible and established a familiar pattern of creation being tied to play. Modding was a part of the growing commercial computer game scene in the late 1980s. Superb Commodore 64 games such as Boulderdash and Lode Runner shipped with editing programs that made it possible to create and modify levels.

There were even early game mod development kits, shipped as complete products that allowed users to build playable games.

Classics such as Strategic Simulation's brilliant Wargame Construction Set and Shoot Em Up Construction Set also fueled the idea that half the fun could be had by making the game.

On the PC, the trend cranked up a notch. Back in the early 1990s, a then little known technology company called Id Software was developing and releasing free shareware games that users found they could edit, changing key elements.

Wolfenstein was the first game to really fit this bill. Technical boffins who were fans of it did oddball things like replacing the Nazi gunmen with a giant purple digital likeness of Barney the dinosaur.
Id's games struck a chord. For the first time the technology behind the game was accessible. Users could easily type in a command and access the control panel. In this line-mode instruction area it was then possible to input commands that changed the game. Finally people were being encouraged to get under the hood of existing games.

With Id's support, mods took a variety of forms. The most basic changes involved subtle tweaks to existing games, adding weapons or changing existing weapon effects to add to the gameplay in minor ways.

Before long, however, mods were more adventurous than this, with new artwork, audio, character skins and even entire levels being developed.

In particular, after the 1993 release of Doom, fans were using the game's basic code freely to churn out 3D shoot 'em ups based on Star Wars, World War II, Battlestar Galactica and even their own high school. There were even comic pie-fight versions of the game.

Doom pretty much launched the concept of modding on a massive scale, and successive Id games such as Quake continued the trend. Id got the ball rolling by making its games easy to muck about with. The art files and level details were stored in separate folders in the program and the technology was accessible so users could quickly download their own set of official tools that could be used to shape the game.

The artificial intelligence and behaviour scripts were even accessible, with only the 3D engine being excluded from this open source approach.

This worked well for Id and other games companies hoping to establish their titles during the early and mid 1990s. However, before long the issue of intellectual property arose, as companies began compiling shareware collections of mods and selling them in commercial packages. The most notable example was the hugely successful D!Zone collection, which at one stage outsold Doom and led to a much-publicised court case.

Since then legal controls on mods have become more stringent, with games companies making it easy to make and distribute mods for their games as long as the results aren't used for commercial purposes.

As the 1990s ended Quake mods grew dramatically in numbers. There were mods based on The Matrix, US presidential candidates, Aliens, The Simpsons and even gridiron football.

Half Life, based on Id's Quake code, was probably the next major game to influence the modding scene. Half Life's technology was also made available to those who wanted to make their own gameworld and the game was so successful that one mod in particular, Team Fortress, was downloaded three million times.

Counter Strike, also a byproduct of modding, was so successful that a range of PC and console games grew up around it.

In recent times mods have started to have a broader focus.

Racing games such as Grand Theft Auto as well as the runaway hit, The Sims, have inspired healthy online communities, with the number of mods being produced for The Sims absolutely mind-boggling.
Most tended to be more cosmetic mods, with furniture, interior paint schemes and clothing proving very popular, but some dedicated modders were using the game as a virtual cartoon system, making up soap-style plots and presenting them online.

This sort of approach has even led to the development of games such as the soon-to-be-released epic The Movies, (http://www.lionhead.co.uk) in which the player is cast as a movie director and the challenge is to finance a script and make a film.

This is, in a sense, an extension of the ultimate modding desire, as the game system in The Movies is purely about creating custom content.

Modding has even made some inroads into the world of console culture. Some games companies, such as EA, make the customisation of content an important part of the gameplay. Recent games such as Def Jam: Fight For New York and Tiger Woods PGA 2005 both have extensive character design suites, which make it possible for players to mod their in-game avatar right from the onset of play.

It makes sense for many reasons to produce games that are as open and configurable as possible. For a start, a player who can create a character they can more closely identify with is more likely to be emotionally attached to the game.

Also, when a game is packaged with an editor that makes additional content possible, it extends the life of the product, as users get not only the game but the toolset and the additional content that eventually flows from other modders.

Community-generated content is here to stay, and certainly getting your feet wet as a modder serves as a legitimate way of getting into games development. It is also mighty good fun.

Top mod download sites

The biggest Sims site with a huge selection of mods. mods.moddb.com <http://mods.moddb.com>
The mod mecca with mods, articles, tools and even a tutorial program that you can download and work with to get your first mod under way.

mobygames.com/stats/recent-modifications <http://mobygames.com/stats/recent-modifications>
The mods here are good and there are lots of other general articles.

<http://www.cncgames.com/>
If you like real-time Command and Conquer games, this site is a ripper with many mods and lots of commentary.

Half Life has had a massive impact on the modding scene and this site has a lot of content.

Games that changed modding:

- Doom
• Unreal
• The Sims
• Grand Theft Auto
• Freespace 2
• Battlefield 1942
• Homeworld
• Command & Conquer: Generals
• Half Life: Team Fortress

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