What are Video Games, Anyway?

Ian Bogost, **How To Do Things With Videogames**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 180 pp., $18.95 (paperback).

Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, **Gaming Matters: Art, Science, and the Computer Game Medium**, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2011, 155 pp., $35.00 (paperback), $28.00 (eBook).

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The growth of the video game medium as an economic force (Shaw, 2011) and a source of cultural scrutiny (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; NPR, 2011) has made the study of gaming anything but trite in academic circles. Likewise, the study of video games has proven to be increasingly complicated as the medium finds itself—as Judd Ruggill (Arizona State University) and Ken McAllister (University of Arizona) astutely point out in *Gaming Matters: Art, Science and the Computer Game Medium*—at "the nexus of engineering, mathematics, hermeneutics, logic, kinesthesia, narratology, performativity, art, and many others" (p. 3). The authors of both volumes attempt to navigate this nexus to explore the many dimensions of video games by offering various perspectives with which to better understand the medium. In *How To Do Things With Videogames,* Ian Bogost (Georgia Institute of Technology) argues that video games are best understood in terms of their larger role, and they function in the media ecology, perhaps as an microecology or "a small, specialized environment within a larger [media] ecosystem" (p. 6). Ruggill and McAllister take a different perspective in suggesting video games to be best understood as an amalgation of "wealth and pleasure through wit and work" (p. 103), comparing the process of creating a video game to an alchemist's mixing of base materials to create something greater than the sum of their parts. For Bogost, a focus on the function of video games rather than on their prominence and providence as a special medium is the best path to understanding their uses and effects. For Ruggill and McAllister, understanding the unique qualities of video game production, marketing, and consumption is the key to understanding their role in society. In short, Bogost maintains that we should see gaming as just another unremarkable offering in the panacea of media choices, while Ruggill and McAllister argue for gaming as a magical union of baser parts that cannot be studied as anything less.

Both texts are clever and thought provoking, but also vague and lacking in the precision one might expect from an academic treatise; indeed, both volumes are aimed more at provocation than at prescription. Neither volume offers a clear explication of what a video game essentially is, but in defense neither volume explicitly promises to do so (although the promise seems to be made implicitly throughout both). Both leave the reader with many questions about how to best understand video games, and this is

their great strength and weakness. For readers prepared to expand and challenge their own preconceived notions of what a video game ought to be, both texts provide ample talking points to fuel scholarly discussion and debate. For readers looking for a cogent set of research questions and hypotheses, the Bogost book perhaps comes closest to meeting this goal with its short but stimulating individual essays on gaming as a form of art and kitsch, titillation and relaxation, and 16 other discrete functions, ranging from the banal to the novel. While neither book would be sufficient enough to support a discrete empirical or cultural study, both serve well as supplemental readings and case study arguments in support of more rigorous and directed literature reviews.

Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things with Videogames*

A respected scholar on video games in his own right, Bogost, an academic as well as video game producer, presents his thoughts on the medium in the 38th installment of the *Electronic Mediations* series edited by Katherine Hayles (Duke University), Mark Poster (University of California, Irvine), and Samuel Weber (Northwestern University). His volume is a collection of 20 shorter essays addressing the not-so-obvious applications for video game play, with the end goal of showing "how videogames have seeped out of our computers and become enmeshed in our lives" (p. 8). Bogost takes issue with those who argue that media technologies can be the single cause of society's ills (cf. our insatiable diet for varied but shallow bits of information; Carr, 2010) and thrills (cf. the binding role of technology in creating social capital; Shirkey, 2010) and instead posits that ills and thrills—as well as any number of outcomes in between these poles—are best understood by understanding video games in situ; that is, as a smaller piece of the larger media ecosystem. This microecological approach implores the reader to consider the various applications of video games from the mundane to the magical, including, but not limited to, the 20 presented in Bogost's volume.

Bogost's presentation of video games as an allspice of media uses leaves the reader with an understanding of the medium as unremarkable rather than as unique, of banal rather than as novel. Indeed, this is his goal, arguing that "the more things [videogames] can do, the more the general public will become accepting of, and interested in, the medium in general" (p. 153). The author actively rejects the "gamer" label, arguing that it makes about as much sense as labeling magazine readers "ziners," television audiences as "tubers," and radio listeners as "airwavers" (p. 153). In fact, Bogost goes so far as to suggest that the notion of gamers—perhaps understood as a particular tastes culture along the lines of Gans (1974) or as an audience subculture along the lines of Zillmann (2000)—should be scrapped altogether, arguing that as video games become increasingly popular, their usage will become increasingly ordinary. In this, the reader is cautioned against confusing Bogost's dismissal of the "gamer" label as a dismissal of video game scholarship; rather, he argues precisely the opposite. Certainly, the study of mass media is bolstered with an understanding that media usage ranges across many different functions and goals—the most basic being the Lasswell-ian (1948) goals of information, correlation transmission of cultural heritage, and entertainment (added later by Wright, 1960)— and Bogost follows this line of thinking when he posits video games to be a medium capable of satisfying any number of discrete means. One of the more compelling examples Bogost gives is his discussion of "Disinterest" (pp. 134–140) in which he talks about video games as capable of driving players away from violent activities such as gunplay. He cites the tedium of *NRA Gun Club*, which requires players to collect, repair, clean, and

prepare guns for display and the occasional target practice, as a video game that might actually repel rather than glorify gun ownership by simulating gun reality (gun collecting as representative of a hobbyists love and devotion for a craft) rather than acting out gun fantasy (such as the combat in the *Call of Duty* series). In this and his other discussions, Bogost highlights aspects of video gaming that are often overlooked in scholarly and public discourse.

The title of the text is a bit misleading, as it reads more like a commentary on what we do with video games rather than as a set of recommendations on how to do things with video games. In his essays, Bogost gives examples of how video games have been used in the past and present as works of art, sources of titillation and relaxation, of exercise and habituation, and as venues for promotion and politicking among others. The examples are vivid and logical, but at times the reader is left wondering if Bogost is highlighting the long tail of gaming uses rather than talking about their routine use. Individually, the essays are often far-reaching, but logical and insightful. The researcher wonders, however, if his concepts can be operationalized into academic study, or if Bogost is able to take us beyond a simple uses and gratifications model (cf. Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1974) to discuss motivations. In addition, Bogost highlights several uses for video games that seem to extend far beyond their arguably primary utility— that of an entertainment device—which begs the question: "Are they still games at all?" Entertainment scholars might take issue with this, wondering if this focus on the mundane uses of video games somehow undercuts the study of leisure and autotelism as a meaningful and purposeful use of video games, despite research suggesting that the enjoyment experienced from gameplay itself is what makes the medium so adept at helping us attain and maintain general psychological well-being (Ryan, Rigby, & Przybylski, 2006), as well as a motivating force driving workplace productivity (Reinecke & Trepte, 2008), among other effects (many of which are discussed in Bogost's essays, such as "Relaxation" [pp. 89–95], and "Work" [pp. 117–124]). In other words, while Bogost suggest that the utility of video games might best be understood by looking at the medium as more than a game, other scholarship contends that the gaming-derived enjoyment from video games is precisely what makes them a unique medium.

For Bogost, games can and should be understood as far more than sources of mere pleasure. In his volume, he presents a discussion of the many-splintered uses of games as an increasingly pedestrian part of the modern media diet, rather than as a unique form of media known only to a defined subculture of gamers. The work, jarring at first, eventually allows the reader to find solace and inspiration in Bogost's commentary.

Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister,
Gaming Matters: Art, Science, and the Computer Game Medium

Gaming Matters offers a whimsical look at video games, video game scholars, and collectors, with authors Ruggill and McAllister painting a smarmy, yet poignant picture of video games as a boring, demanding, duplicitous, and anachronous medium. In this approach, the authors work to guile the reader into understanding video games as "nothing special" to initiate "a conversation about the complexities of the computer game medium" (p. 3). Incidentally, while the books does a stellar job in egging on the reader to initiate this conversation (so long as the reader remembers the whimsical nature of the text, which, at times, can be easy to forget), it does little to connect this conversation back to the central thesis

of the title—that is, the book never really addresses why "gaming matters," but rather leaves this up to the reader.

Through seven chapters, Ruggill and McAllister contend that video games are irreconcilable due to their interdisciplinary nature; aimless and boring by design, with players essentially held hostage in a meaningless and virtual world; anachronisms lost in the past and the future due to changing technologies; duplicitous in that they coerce players to buy (both with their wallets and their hearts) the unbelievable; and inherently, sources of work rather than of play. Similar to Bogost's work, the reading is incredibly jarring on one's first pass. This is precisely Ruggill and McAllister's intention: to shake readers out of their established definitions of a computer game. Unlike Bogost however, Ruggill and McAllister go beyond the medium itself to discuss the roles of production, marketing, and consumption as part of an overall understanding of video games.
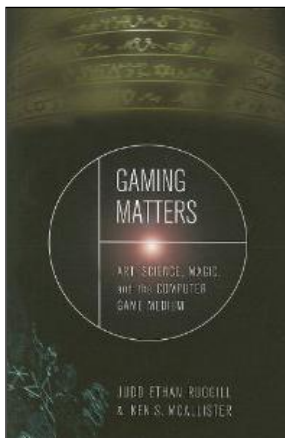
Gaming Matters is an exercise to convince us to consider video games as their antithesis—a boring and demanding series of algorithms that wraps the user in a false fantasy world that hides their blunt normalcy—that may spark young scholars into a deeper consideration of the devices as more than just toys. However, at times it does little to advance video game scholarship already grappling with concepts of user demand and mood management (Bowman, 2010), transportation (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2006), presence (Ravaja et al., 2006; Tamborini & Bowman, 2011), natural mapping (Skalski, Tamborini, Shelton, Buncher, & Lindmark, 2011), character attachment (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2006) and other variables that have been explicated to varying degrees in extant literature. At several times, the book refers to these concepts passingly, but never integrates them into the text. For example, in the chapter "Aimlessness" (pp. 32–49), the authors talk about video games being marked by a sense of boredom—understood, using Mikulas and Vodnovich's (1993) definition as a state of low arousal and dissatisfaction—yet they never reconcile their arguments against gaming as a source of relaxation and tranquility as argued by others (including Bogost, 2007, as well as his current text). Even when the reader is reminded of the whimsical nature of Ruggill and McAllister's work, this chapter reads more like a tongue-in-cheek take on the futility of gaming as a stimulating exercise and as result, falls short in prompting the reader to reconsider what constitutes the gaming experience. Conversely, their chapter on "Work" (pp. 82–96), particularly the subsection "Playing at Work" (pp. 90–93), presents an incredibly inspiring discussion of the sometimes fuzzy line between playing a video game and working in a video game environment (cf. gold farming in *World of Warcraft*; Dibbell, 2007), suggesting that video games could perhaps be understood best as extracurricular activities that are partly autotelic and partly prescribed activities. Indeed, anyone who has had to "level-grind" to strengthen their characters before fighting the next major enemy boss or traverse back and forth across a virtual world to gather resources for a future mission understands the sometimes juxtaposed forces of work and play within many virtual worlds.

At best, some of their arguments appear to overlook important scholarship on video games and at worst suggest current scholarship to be inadequate and flawed beyond utility. As a result, more

advanced readers are likely to lose the whimsy of the text or see it as unnecessarily vague. While the authors acknowledge this potential shortcoming in their introduction, it nonetheless poses a problem in placing the text into the larger body of literature on video game scholarship. At the same time, the book highlights fresh perspectives about video games—particularly, the inner workings of production and promotion of games that might be somewhat foreign to game scholars—that ultimately speak to Ruggill and McAllister's broad goal of challenging current understandings of what a video game is or ought to be.

Conclusions

Bogost challenges us to think about video games as more than entertainment devices designed for gamers, while Ruggill and McAllister (at times) cloud rather than clarify the notion of a video game through satire, intending to challenge the reader to think deeper about the essence of the medium. Both books charge us to think of video games in a new light. Bogost asks us to consider them as a multifaceted media option with a spectrum of uses, from the banal to the novel, while Ruggill and McAllister ask us to consider video games as an amalgamation of media forms. I recommend Bogost to scholars looking to challenge their often myopic considerations of what video games can be understood as, and I recommend Ruggill and McAllister as a thought exercise to young scholars and undergraduates who might see games as nothing more than devices to occupy time between other tasks. Neither book requires the reader to have much grounding in any particular area of scholarship, which makes them, at times, shallow for the expert reader, but also allows them to avoid the often myopic trappings of any one disciplinary approach.

Video games are entrenched in our modern media culture, and these volumes provide an easily accessible and provocative look at them as such. In these two volumes, the authors do not tell us what video games are or are not; rather, they tell us what video games can be. This alone should be the focus of future research and debate, as it informs the function of video games as an entertainment choice in an increasingly digital media landscape.

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