

Jim Rossignol, **This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities**, University of Michigan Press, 2008, 212 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

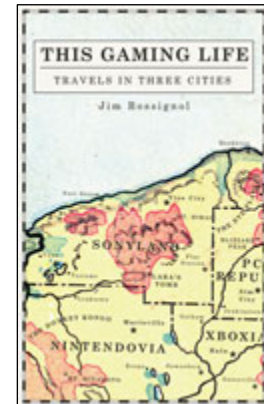
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The very significance of gaming as a human activity has always been a subject of contention between those who play and those who do not. The reason is simple: it is all too common for people to judge (and misjudge) things that they know little about. To understand gaming, you have to play – not just watch people play. Thus, the world of gaming has remained largely inaccessible to and poorly understood by the outsiders, whose lack of knowledge and experience have left them in confusion or even contempt.

As a result, the burden largely rests on the gamers to document and present their own unique culture to the uninitiated public. *This Gaming Life* is such an attempt, in which Jim Rossignol takes us up close and personal to the real lives changed by gaming. Just like an anthropologist examining his own tribe, Rossignol is intimately familiar with the culture, acutely perceptive of the latest trend, and able to observe and articulate fascinating details that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. As a veteran gamer and journalist, Rossignol is an ideal candidate for such an endeavor. *This Gaming Life* tells compelling personal stories, fused with philosophical thoughts about the ultimate meaning of gaming.

To cover the vast terrain of the gaming world within 200 pages is no easy task. Nevertheless, in *This Gaming Life*, Rossignol draws from an extensive stock of anecdotes. His scope covers games from old classics like Quake and Zelda to new fads like World of Warcraft and Second Life. It also covers multiple media including arcade, console, PC-based and online games. The formats are likewise varied and span from purely commercial creations to those with an educational or political agenda, from role-playing, first-person shooter to real-time strategy, and from strictly rule-based to sandbox types that allow for more freedom and creativity. Although such a wide spectrum of games could have made the narrative full of jargons and insider jokes that might require 10 years of playing to decipher, Rossignol manages to make the writing accessible to the average non-gamer by providing adequate descriptions of each game.

Still, chronicling the historical trends of the gaming industry is by no means the biggest accomplishment of this book. As the title indicates, Rossignol centers his narrative around three cities, each of which offers a unique angle to observe the experience of playing. While London houses the typical western gaming culture, Seoul presents a riveting picture of group playing at the numerous PC baangs (cafés), televised national StarCraft competitions and a much more accommodating society where gaming is considered hip rather than nerdy. Reykjavik, home of the overwhelmingly sophisticated EVE Online, provides a look at the intersecting visions and voices of the gamers and game developers as they



collectively transform — and are transformed by — the game that constitutes a significant part of their lives.

Rossignol's vivid narrative of gamers and their lives is, in my opinion, the most valuable contribution of this book. These personal stories, largely undocumented before this effort, go well beyond popular myths and media hypes about the world of gaming. They are fresh, genuine, and beautifully told. The book appeals to a broad audience: non-gamers and experienced gamers alike (myself included in the latter) can discover interesting new elements of the gaming world through Rossignol's odyssey.

As Rossignol traverses numerous locales in the incredibly diverse global community, he also tirelessly searches for the answer to the ultimate question: the meaning of gaming. As a result, *This Gaming Life* is an intimate mixture of a travel journal, personal storytelling, and reflective essay. However, the soul-searching quest does not end with a definite answer. Rather, the philosophical reflections remain quite shallow, filled more with meandering thoughts and inconclusive descriptions than sound arguments. This part of the book may provide some food-for-thought for curious readers in general, but to game scholars and analysts, the discussion as a whole feels a little too thin and journalistic.

Still, *This Gaming Life* is worthwhile reading for games researchers and those who have a general interest in understanding the gaming world. For those who have never gamed, it provides a rather welcoming interface to accommodate their initial forays into this outlandish world, a task that may otherwise seem intimidating. For games researchers, its value lies in the histories, anecdotes, and narratives — albeit casually documented — that enrich the researchers' existing knowledge and help connect games with their idiosyncratic social contexts. Finally, as it is not uncommon for games researchers to have little firsthand experience of their subject of interest, *This Gaming Life* serves as an excellent primer of contemporary gamers' lives. Through its vivid descriptions and rich details, readers can quickly get some vicarious gaming experience. However, reading *This Gaming Life* and similar titles is no substitute for real gaming. After all, you have to play in order to understand.