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## **Book review: How to do things with videogames**

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**How to do things with Videogames**

**by Ian Bogost (Professor of Digital Media, Georgia Institute of Technology)**

**Minneapolis / London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 180 pages, ISBN 081667647X**

### **Review**

In a widely-tweeted blog post, Ian Bogost recently railed against the tendency within media studies towards what is sometimes called 'aca-fandom': the manufacture of academic publications that do little more than express the author's personal taste in television programmes, videogames, and other mass media products. "There are plenty of fans of *The Wire* and *Mad Men* and *Halo* and *World of Warcraft*", Bogost wrote, "but we scholars... have a special obligation to explain something new about the works we discuss" (Bogost, 2010). Bogost characterised aca-fans as television fans or hardcore gamers lucky enough to make a living out of their sub-cultural investments; the price of this good fortune, he argued, is a responsibility to write from the position of a scholar, rather than that of a gamer or fan. It was a well-judged argument, but one that inevitably suggests a benchmark against which to judge Bogost's own works. Does *How to Do Things with Videogames* fulfil its scholarly obligations? To me, at least, it seems that the answer is both yes and no.

*How to Do Things with Videogames* is a short collection of essays, most of them a little over six pages in length. The title is a throwaway allusion to J.L. Austin's (1962) classic study in the philosophy of language, and in fact provides little clue as to the book's content, which is hard to summarise because the thematic connections between essays are often very loose. For example, Chapter 11, 'Texture', briefly surveys the history of rendering and haptic feedback in videogames before offering a few words of advice to game designers, while

Chapter 3, 'Reverence', is a reading of a level in the first person shooter, *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games, 2006). I will quote from the latter as an example of what the book offers:

*"Yes, the player must discharge his or her weapons inside [Manchester] cathedral to avoid defeat. But when the dust settles, the cathedral empties, and the player is left to spend as much or as little time as he or she wants exploring the cathedral's cavernous interior.... It's a time to pause, to reflect, perhaps even to meditate on the relationship between God, human, and alien." (Bogost 2011, p. 29)*

This reflects the book's greatest strength and greatest weakness, which is its adherence to what might be called the New Critical model of media studies: digital artefacts are contemplated in terms of the experiences that they can be argued to make available to an ideal reader/player. We are thus given no idea as to whether any real player has ever actually been inspired with feelings of reverence by *Resistance: Fall of Man*, nor of whether it was the intention of the game's designers to inspire such feelings. As in much literary criticism since the early 20th century, the point appears instead to be to present a surprising interpretation of the work revealing hitherto unsuspected potentials for valuable reader/player experiences. On this level, Bogost fulfils the scholar's aforementioned "special obligation to explain something new about the works [he or she] discuss[es]", and the book can be considered a great success: the interpretations he constructs are perceptive, thought-provoking, and often wholly unexpected.

However, given that the back cover blurb promises a book that "explores the many ways computer games *are used* today" (emphasis added), one might perhaps be forgiven for expecting a little more: an account not just of how certain videogames might conceivably be experienced, but of how real people generally use games. Such an account may perhaps be implied in Bogost's stated aim to "reveal the impact of a medium's properties on society... through... specialised, focused attention to a single medium, digging deep into one dark, unexplored corner of a media ecosystem" (2011, p. 7), but this intention appears to be frustrated by his chosen methodology, since adoption of literary criticism as a model for videogame scholarship almost inevitably leads to a focus on the de-contextualised work and the analyst's ability to produce an imaginative reading of it (contrast empirical research in reception study, e.g. Staiger, 2005, and cultural sociology, e.g. Hall et al, 2010). In this, we see the need to take Bogost's above-quoted critique of aca-fandom further, and challenge the wider problems of media studies as a discipline in which "literary interpretation has marginalised sociological methods" (Rojek and Turner, 2000: 629). Without sociological methods, there can be no question of revealing the 'impact' of *anything* on 'society'. This is thus a book that does not so much dig into a media ecosystem as amble around it, holding forth on whatever specimens catch the author's interest.

That said, Bogost's facility as critic is great enough to persuade one that these are specimens of very significant interest. Moreover, they are drawn from beyond the staples of aca-fandom (i.e. recent classics such as *World of Warcraft*), and in many cases would probably have been lost to scholarship without Bogost's intervention. This can be seen in one of the book's best essays, 'Snapshots' (Chapter 10), wherein Bogost covers what may be the hardcore gamer's most despised category of games, i.e. those produced using DIY game-making software. Bogost argues that these works are to professionally-produced games what amateur snapshots are to professional photographs. Acknowledgement of the scholarly interest and personal value of such games forms an important part of Bogost's argument that the future of gaming lies not

in the proliferation of hardcore gamers - whose imminent disappearance as a group he in fact predicts - but in the integration of videogames within the general mediascape. In this context, Bogost's reading of the amateur game, *Wash Joe Jonas* (bibliographic details not provided) is particularly interesting: he writes that in "simulat[ing]... an intimate (if weird) relationship with a pop icon", this simple adaptation of a dog-washing game "functions like a wall poster or a printed note-book, or even like a Photoshop job that inserts teen beside heart-throb" (2011, p. 75). Through interpretations such as this, Bogost enquires about the possible meaning of videogames as a component of the media consumption (and in this case, production) of people with little or no investment in gaming *per se*.

Bogost's foregrounding of the non-gamer provides the most intriguing distinction between his project and that of an aca-fan - and indeed, that of the New Critic, since the New Criticism always aimed at the pedagogical reproduction of what we might call 'hardcore poetry readers' (see e.g. Brooks and Warren, 1938). This is of key relevance to anyone seeking to use games in education, because even if gamers do not "disappear altogether" from the wider world, as Bogost predicts (2011, p. 154), the average student is not - and is never likely to be - a hardcore gamer. In this light, the main contribution of this book may be to suggest directions for more empirical research. For example, Bogost's speculation that "one use of videogame porn is not to titillate at all but to give us [sic] a de-familiarised and uncomfortable experience of the various logics of perversion that stimulate other human beings" (2011, p. 109) virtually demands to be treated as a hypothesis for empirical testing, while his conception of DIY games as "snapshots" could inform ethnographic research into the communities that have grown up around game-making software packages. This should be of particular interest to readers of this journal because, while such packages have not achieved great commercial success, they have clear potential for educational use: for example, the open source system *Quest 5.0* (Warren, 2011) is already being employed in the teaching of programming, English, and other core academic subjects.

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