

Ian Bogost

How to Do Things with Videogames. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2011). 180 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8166-7647-7 \$18.95.

Ian Bogost begins *How to Do Things with Videogames* with a short introduction that attempts to dispel dualistic notions concerning critical approaches to video games.¹ Video games, he argues, are neither wholly medium, nor wholly message; neither wholly gameplay, nor wholly narrative; neither wholly leisure activities, nor wholly training tools. Bogost proposes 'to reveal a small portion of the many uses of videogames, and how together they make the medium broader, richer, and more relevant' through the twenty essays that constitute this volume (7). His ultimate goal is to demonstrate how the individual strands of visual tropes, narrative patterns, and modes of procedural rhetoric associated with video games have become tightly woven into the fabric of our non-digital lives.

Each of the book's short chapters focuses on a particular use to which video games can be put, typically using three to five titles as illustrative examples. In addition to concrete applications, some of these uses might better be described as sensations such as titillation, relaxation, habituation, and disinterest. Other essays focus on a particular internal aspect of video games, such as music, visual kitsch, and repetitive drill.

The collection's third chapter, 'Reverence', serves as a representative example of just what sort of things video games can do. At the beginning of this essay, Bogost puts forth the truism that 'videogames are often accused of disrespect, especially for celebrating violence and for encouraging disdain of man, woman, and culture alike' (24). The author then challenges this stereotype by asking, 'But can a game do the opposite, embracing respect, deference, or even reverence?' As a case study, Bogost sketches out the controversy surrounding the PlayStation 3 first-person shooter *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006, Insomniac Games). The Church of England threatened to sue the game's

1 In this review, I use the term 'video game' instead of the writer's preferred term, 'videogame'. 'Video game' is by far the most common spelling (with 220 million results returned from a search on Google, as opposed to 'videogame', which returns 36 million results), as well as the industry standard spelling used by developers and the vast majority of English-language gaming magazines, websites, and blogs. Certain writers differentiate a 'videogame', or an instance of a new narrative and visual medium, from a 'video game', or a more 'traditional' competition-based game that occurs on a digital platform, but this distinction is arbitrary and contrary to many of the arguments expressed in Bogost's work. I have therefore chosen to use the more common term 'video game'.

regional publisher, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, for its photorealistic depiction of Manchester Cathedral as a decimated battleground. Bogost explains that the game's use of the structure was not intended to be perceived as a defilement of a sacred space, but instead as a respectful reference to the history of the building, which survived the German blitz of 1940. The partial destruction of the church's nave in the game conveys the inhumanity of the alien combatants, who are incapable of appreciating its sanctity. By defending Manchester Cathedral, the player is not performing further violence, but rather defending the humanistic values of the institution.

The game's implicit demand that the player act according to a sense of respect regarding the privileged position of sacred spaces in human history can also be applied to more mundane spaces. Although video games may acclimate the player to certain types of representational violence, they are also able to convey the terrors of war. As Bogost explains:

The military occupation of civilian spaces is the reality of any wars fought on civilian terrain, but videogames have a unique power to stimulate the experience of this estrangement thanks to their propensity for world building. The first time the player cowers behind a bus or encounters a destroyed bathroom, the reality of war surfaces in a powerful way. (26-27)

In other words, the sustained act of witnessing the devastation of everyday environments while traversing the shattered landscapes of post-disaster landscapes can help to engender an awareness of the dangers involved in military conflict, as well as a reverence for philosophies that are capable of transcending the darker chapters of human history.

Each chapter thus persuades the reader to look beyond the surface details of video games in order to better understand not only what a game does at its most concrete level but also what it has the potential to do on a more abstract level. Bogost concludes his collection with a rhetorical question that embodies his project: 'What if we allowed that videogames have many possible goals and purposes, each of which couples with many possible aesthetics and designs to create many possible player experiences, none of which bears any necessary relationship to the commercial videogame industry as we currently know it?' (153)

Perhaps the only critical flaw of *How to Do Things with Videogames* is that it provides little context for any of the texts it cites. It offers no commentary, for instance, on different laws regulating entertainment media in different countries, or on intended or actual player demographics, or on how diverse audience receptions might be influenced by factors such as nationality, gender

and sexuality, economic class, or racial or ethnic identification. Instead, the essays assume a more 'universal' audience of players who can or will presumably react to video game texts in subtle yet predictable ways.

That being said, *How to Do Things with Videogames* is more of a series of thought experiments than it is an attempt to read deeply into any particular text or set of texts. The value of Bogost's collection of short essays is its cornucopia of ideas and approaches; each chapter is a seed that has the potential to grow into a multi-branched line of inquiry. Moreover, many of the author's suggested approaches can be applied to a range of interactive digital media, from online message boards to Twitter-based poetry. The volume is of interest to specialists in Asian Studies in its unbiased inclusion of dozens of games of East Asian (particularly Japanese) origin, which are often omitted from English-language scholarship. Bogost's lucid writing style, humour, and careful evasion of esoteric jargon render *How to Do Things with Videogames* accessible to undergraduates and readers outside the academy with a passionate interest in video games.

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