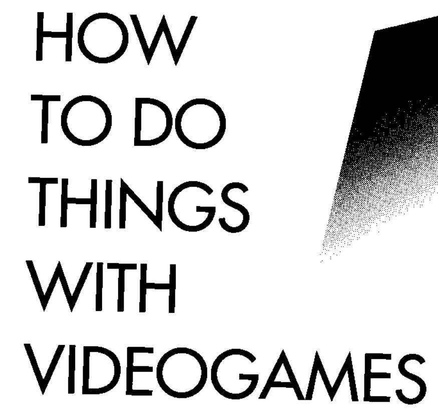
HOW TO DO THINGS WITH VIDEOGAMES



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Electronic Mediations 38

University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bogost, Ian.
How to do things with videogames / Ian Bogost.
p. cm. — (Electronic mediations ; v. 38)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8166-7646-0 (hc : alk. paper)
ISBN 978-0-8166-7647-7 (pb : alk. paper)
1. Video games—Social aspects. I. Title.
GV1469.34.S52B63 2011
793.93'2—dc23
2011023625

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

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18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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INTRODUCTION

Media Microecology

These days, you can't open a website or enter a bookstore without finding yet another impassioned take on emerging technologies' promise to change our lives for the better—or for the worse. For every paean to Wikipedia or blogging or mobile computing, there's an equally vehement condemnation.

On one side of one such contest, the journalist Nicholas Carr argues that the Internet has contributed to a decline in the careful, reasoned, imaginative mind of the period between the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution.[1] Though we may feel that we're "getting smarter" by grazing across multiple bits of knowledge, Carr suggests that this feeling is a fleeting one, the burst of energy from a sugary snack instead of lasting nourishment from a wholesome meal.

Carr's book about the problem, titled *The Shallows,* hit store shelves at the same time as Clay Shirky's *Cognitive Surplus,* which argues just the opposite: the social power of those tiny snippets Carr reviles. In a characteristic example, Shirky describes South Korean protests against the reintroduction of U.S.-raised beef after the mad cow disease scare of the early 2000s. Surprisingly, the uprising was fueled not by radical agitators or by media pundits but by fans of the Korean boy band Dong Ban Shin Ki, whose website forums became, in Shirky's words, "a locus of coordination."[2]

Carr's and Shirky's accounts provide two opposing takes on the value of reading and writing excerpts online. Who's right? It's a question that drives blog commenters, talk show banter, and book sales, to be sure. But things aren't quite so simple, and reflection on both positions should make either one feel incomplete on its own.

As Matthew Battles has argued, Carr seems to assume that reading is monolithic. "Dipping and skimming," Battles reminds us, "have been modes available to readers for ages. Carr makes one kind of reading—literary reading, specifically—into the only kind that matters. But these and other modes of reading have long coexisted, feeding one another, needing one another."[3] Skimming isn't just something we do with literary texts, either: we also skim menus, signs, magazines, and countless other textual objects. It shouldn't be any surprise that reading is a varied activity. And besides, the isolated, single-sense, top-down, purportedly truth-bearing process of reading after Johannes Gutenberg is also precisely the aspect of print culture Marshall McLuhan lamented three decades *before* the Web.[4]

On the flipside, when he celebrates the Korean boy band forum uprising, Shirky makes his own assumptions. In particular, he takes for granted that the will of the people matters above all else. Whether the end of a five-year ban on U.S. beef in Korea really ever posed a health threat to the population isn't of much concern to Shirky; rather, the emergence of unexpected, collaborative discourse is his primary interest. Shirky assumes that the potential collective impact of online communications justifies the more mundane and, as Carr would have it, pointless uses of media—like swooning over boy bands.

Carr's worry about the Web's tendency to encourage skin-deep thinking about unimportant subjects does ring true. But Shirky's account of the surprisingly political amalgam of all those seemingly useless, skin-deep comments also demands acknowledgment. As with most best-seller list disagreements about culture, both Carr's and Shirky's takes make broad, far-reaching claims of impact: either the Internet is ruining society or it is rescuing it.

Here's a different, less flashy answer: technology neither saves nor condemns us. It influences us, of course, changing how we perceive, conceive of, and interact with our world. McLuhan calls a medium an *extension of ourselves* for just this reason: it structures and informs our understanding and behavior.[5] But the

Internet extends us in both remarkable and unremarkable ways. From keeping a journal to paying a bill to reminiscing about an old television advertisement, the Web offers just as many mundane uses as it does remarkable ones. Probably more.

That's not a popular sentiment in our time of technological spectacularism. It wouldn't play well in a TED talk or on a *Wired* cover. But I'm going to insist on it as a media philosophy: we can understand the relevance of a medium by looking at the variety of things it does.

It's a fact true of all media, not just computers. Think of all the things you can do with a photograph. You can document the atrocities and celebrations of war, as did photojournalists like Eddie Adams and Alfred Eisenstaedt. You can record fleeting moments in time, as did photographers like Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank. You can capture the ordinary moments of family life, as all of us do at birthday parties or holidays for an album or shoebox archive. You can take a snapshot reminder of a home improvement project to help you buy the right part at the hardware store. An automated camera at a street intersection can capture a license plate for ticketing, and a pornographer can capture a naked body for titillation. Photography has common properties—it bends light through an aperture to expose an emulsion or digital sensor. But the uses of photography vary widely. It is this breadth and depth of uses that makes photography a mature medium.

We can think of a medium's explored uses as a spectrum, a possibility space that extends from purely artistic uses at one end (the decisive moment photograph) to purely instrumental uses at the other (the hardware store snapshot). In a given medium, many of these uses are known and well explored, while others are new and emerging. One way to grasp a medium's cultural influence is to examine how much of that field of uses has been explored. This approach represents a shift in how we encounter media artifacts as creators, users, and critics.

Carr's and Shirky's books show us just how far the media ecological approach has come since McLuhan popularized it in

the 1960s. He suggested that we study the *properties* of a medium rather than the individual *messages* produced by media, thus the famous aphorism "the medium is the message."[6] His point was that the things a medium does to a culture are more important than the content it conveys. For example, McLuhan argued that the printing press ushered in an era of visual culture and that the mass-produced book homogenized experience and knowledge. Photographs allow light to be recorded on photosensitive film. Telegraphs allow words to be transmitted over long distances. Paintings allow pigmented substances to cover surfaces. Where once our understanding of media was limited to their representational aspects (the meaning of a photograph, film, or novel), McLuhan's influence helped steer scholarly, journalistic, and public attention toward the effects a medium exerts on society (the way the Web changes how we think, socialize, work, and play). Both *The Shallows* and *Cognitive Surplus* take a media ecological approach, offering strong positions on the positive or negative effects of the Internet on human culture.

Understanding the properties of a medium *does* help us better comprehend their nature and their implications. Videogames, the subject of this book, also have properties that precede their content: games are models of experiences rather than textual descriptions or visual depictions of them. When we play games, we operate those models, our actions constrained by their rules: the urban dynamics of *SimCity*; the feudal stealth strategy of *Ninja Gaiden*; the racing tactics of *Gran Turismo*. On top of that, we take on a role in a videogame, putting ourselves in the shoes of someone else: the urban planner, the ninja, the auto racer. Videogames are a medium that lets us play a role within the constraints of a model world. And unlike playground games or board games, videogames are computational, so the model worlds and sets of rules they produce can be far more complex. These properties—computational models and roles—help us understand how videogames work and how they are different from other media.

But the media ecological approach alone gets us only so far. For example, many misconceptions surround videogames. All-too-familiar questions arise about whether games promote violent action or whether they make us fat through inactivity. Such accusations stem partly from overly general assumptions about a medium's content and reception (which, in the case of videogames, is assumed to be violent scenarios that induce aggression). But they also emerge from overly general assumptions about a medium's properties and the contexts in which those properties get deployed.

The content and context of a media artifact is not as inessential as McLuhan would have it. The medium is the message, but the message is the message, too. Instead of ignoring it, we ought to explore the relationships between the general properties of a medium and the particular situations in which it is used.

A recent trend in videogames helps drive the point home. Hoping to overturn the idea that games are only for entertainment, *serious games* claim to offer an alternative: games that can be used "outside entertainment" in education, health care, or corporate training, for example.[7] For serious games proponents, videogames' ability to create worlds in which players take on roles constrained by rules offers excellent opportunities for new kinds of learning. While indeed worthwhile, this media ecological perspective risks collapsing into a mirror image of accusations that videogames can only encourage violence and sloth. Serious games play the role of Clay Shirky to videogame detractors' Nicholas Carr. Once more, technology either saves or seduces us.

Games—like photography, like writing, like any medium—shouldn't be shoehorned into one of two kinds of uses, serious or superficial, highbrow or lowbrow, useful or useless. Neither entertainment nor seriousness nor the two together should be a satisfactory account for what videogames are capable of. After all, we don't distinguish between only two kinds of books, or music, or photography, or film. Rather, we know intuitively that writing, sound, images, and moving pictures can all be put to many different uses. A voice can whisper an amorous sentiment or mount a political stump speech. A book can carry us off to a fantasy world

or help us decide where to eat dinner. A television program can shock us with an account of genocide or help us practice aerobics.

Such an attitude requires us to expand our understanding of media ecology. In McLuhan's terms, the media ecosystem entails "arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another."[8] In other words, media ecology is a general, media-agnostic approach to understanding how a host of different technologies works individually and together to create an environment for communication and perception. Traditionally, media ecologists have explored their subject at a level equivalent to the global ecosystem, concerned with how particular technologies change the overall style and quality of life. Here's Neil Postman on the subject:

> If you remove the caterpillar from a given habitat, you are left not with the same environment minus caterpillars: you have a new environment, and you have reconstituted the conditions of survival. . . . In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry.[9]

Keeping the biological metaphor, the *individual* range of functions afforded by a particular medium's properties could be compared to a *microhabitat*, a small, specialized environment within a larger ecosystem. Postman's caterpillar is not merely an aspect of the woods but also an agent in its own right, one that relates to leaves, logs, and pollen. Indeed, the dedicated media ecologist must be concerned not only with the *overall* ecosystem but also with the distinctive functions of its components. *Media microecology,* we might call it. Such an approach sometimes requires a more specialized and perhaps a less glamorous method: like the ecologist reveals the unseen purposes of a decomposing log, so the media ecologist must do with particular media forms.

Following the lead of media ecologists like McLuhan and Postman, media microecology seeks to reveal the impact of a medium's properties on society. But it does so through a more specialized, focused attention to a single medium, digging deep into one dark, unexplored corner of a media ecosystem, like an ecologist digs deep into the natural one. Just as an entomologist might create a collection that thoroughly characterizes the types, roles, and effects of insects on an environment, so a media microecologist might do the same for a medium. In doing so, the value of that medium (the sort of question authors like Carr and Shirky pose) is less important than the documentation of its variety and application. For it is only after conducting such an investigation that we should feel qualified to consider distinct varieties of a medium as promising or threatening to a particular way of life. And indeed, after doing so, we might well feel less certain of such definitive moral positions anyway.

In this book, I attempt such an effort for videogames. Its goal is to reveal a small portion of the many uses of videogames, and how together they make the medium broader, richer, and more relevant. I take for granted that understanding games as a medium of leisure or productivity alone is insufficient. Instead, I suggest we imagine the videogame as a medium with valid uses across the spectrum, from art to tools and everything in between. I won't assume that the best or most legitimate specimens are still to come, or that laying a groundwork for designers, markets, players, or critics will help them realize the videogame's potential in some revelatory master work. Instead I'll take for granted that videogames are already becoming a pervasive medium, one as interwoven with culture as writing and images. Videogames are not a subcultural form meant for adolescents but just another medium woven into everyday life.

Yet most of us haven't begun to think about games in this way, as a medium with many uses that together pervade contemporary

life, and as a result, interesting adoptions of the form have been labeled illegitimate or simply ignored. In the short essays that follow, I cover myriad examples of applications for, sensations of, and experiences with videogames. In each, I hope to show how videogames have seeped out of our computers and become enmeshed in our lives. I offer these essays not as a complete catalog of videogames' present or future potential but as a starting point for us to think about how to do things with videogames.

1 Art

Are videogames art? It's a question that's sparked considerable debate, most notably thanks to the film critic Roger Ebert's declaration that "the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art."[1] For the philosopher and game designer Jim Preston, it's an absurd and useless question:

> To think that there is a single, generally agreed upon concept of art is to get it precisely backwards. Americans' attitude towards art is profoundly divided, disjointed and confused; and my message to gamers is to simply ignore the "is-it-art?" debate altogether.[2]

Preston sheds light on a fatal problem with the "games as art" conversation. Forget games, *art* doesn't have any sort of stable meaning in contemporary culture anyway.

There are many reasons for such a development, perhaps the most important being that the twentieth-century avant-garde changed art for good. In the turbulent times of the first two decades of the last century, localized movements in Europe gained attention by rejecting traditionalism. Futurism's founder Filippo Marinetti spurned all things old and embraced youth, machine, violence. Then when violence became reality in World War I, a handful of artists in Zurich concluded that if progress since the Enlightenment had led to the destruction of the Great War, then such progress had to be rejected. They called their work Dada. The futurists called for a total reinvention of cultural and political life.