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How to do things with videogames.
Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press.

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Book Review:
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How To Do Things With Videogames is Ian Bogost at his most McLuhan-esque. The book, a collection of very short essays on a variety of deliberately diffuse topics to do with videogames, is a play with both the form and structure of intellectual writing and the form and structure of videogames themselves. It is ostensibly an examination of a medley of 'things' one can do with videogames, from "Empathy" to "Kitsch" to "Titillation" to "Disinterest," each chapter briefly suggesting how videogames 'do' these things before moving on to the next.

The theory component of *How To Do Things With Videogames* is only stated plainly in the framing introductory and concluding chapters; however, the theory of the book is frequently argued obliquely and through example throughout its entirety. It is a book deliberately structured to make Bogost's point through practice—in a way, more of what Bogost in his more recent *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) has identified as "carpentry:" an artifact, and not just a piece of writing, that does philosophy. Might we then more justifiably place *How To Do Things With Videogames* alongside *Cow Clicker* (2010), Bogost's satirical Facebook game and his most famous (or perhaps infamous) example of carpentry thus far? Perhaps this comparison is not so strange after all, as we shall see.

In *How To Do Things With Videogames*, Bogost intends on doing what he calls media micro-ecology. That is to say, if media ecology, taken on from the likes of McLuhan and Neil Postman, is the study of how various media arrange and buttress against each other at a level equivalent to a global ecosystem, then media micro-ecology "seeks to reveal the impact of a [single] medium's properties on society" (p. 7). Hence Bogost uses *How To Do Things With Videogames* as an incomplete catalogue of sorts for the kinds of types, roles, and effects associated with the medium of the videogame: "how videogames have seeped out of our computers and become enmeshed with our lives" (p. 8).

The central point of *How To Do Things With Videogames* is this: if we can "understand the relevance of a medium by looking at the variety of things it does" (p. 3), then for videogames to be most relevant, they must do a variety of things. This is not an argument for a gamification-like approach, where the properties of a media form are filtered outwards to other activities. Instead, what Bogost is suggesting here is that we can measure the relevance of videogames by the spread of the medium itself, and that implicitly, limiting videogames to being either *Call of Duty* or a serious game designed to cure cancer is not good enough.

Bogost comes at this point mostly with an agnostic approach—it seems that he states this more as an observation rather than an argument for how things should be. There is a feeling throughout *How To Do Things With Videogames* that Bogost is merely identifying a stage in the life of a media form, and is using it as an opportunity to explore hitherto uncharted landscapes. Yet it is ultimately difficult to view a book like *How To Do Things With Videogames* as anything but an appeal for the medium's diversification. As Bogost concludes,

> *Soon, gamers will be the anomaly. If we're very fortunate, they'll disappear altogether. Instead, we'll just find people, ordinary people of all sorts. And sometimes those people will play videogames. And it won't be a big deal, at all.* (p. 154, original emphasis)

There is something strange in witnessing an academic arguing for their object of study to become more normal, more mundane, and less unusual. As Bogost himself puts it, a focus on the mundane and unremarkable uses of a media form is "not a popular sentiment in our time of technological spectacularism. It wouldn't play well in a TED talk or on a *Wired* cover" (p. 3).

In this respect, it is interesting to contrast it with another book that *How To Do Things With Videogames* will surely share shelf-space with, Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*(2012). Anthropy's book argues for the adoption of simple and sometimes crude tools of videogame creation by "freaks, normals, amateurs, artists, dreamers, dropouts, queers, housewives, and people like you", so that videogames can have more "weird shit" (2012, p. 135). It would be easy to place these two books at odds, and to some extent they are; however, it feels more like they end up arguing similar points from different angles. Where Bogost sees mundanity, Anthropy sees "weird shit"—yet they both argue for a large-scale creative diversification for videogames. It may be easy to criticise Bogost's *How To Do Things With Videogames* from the perspective that mundanity is a strange thing to strive for; yet for Bogost, mundanity and diversification are concepts that are tied up with one another. A media form does not achieve diversification in one strata alone, he seems to suggest: it is not that videogames will be incapable of the extraordinary, but that videogames as a media form will no longer have the extraordinary aura they currently possess.

Moreover, if by his micro-ecology Bogost means to draw a sketch of how the medium fits into society, then perhaps it is the role of the reviewer to attempt to draw a sketch of how *How To Do Things With Videogames* fits into the literature of videogames, or media studies, or other such microsystems. This is no easy task. In fact, more so than any of Bogost's prior books (or his even his following publications), it is difficult to pin down exactly where *How To Do Things With Videogames* fits. Is its audience a general one, or academics, or interested enthusiasts, or is it genuinely a how-to guide for rank outsiders, as its deliberately naive title might suggest?

As I have noted, in *How To Do Things With Videogames*, Bogost is at his most McLuhan-esque. While this could not quite be described as a 'pop' book of videogame theory, it is certainly Bogost's most accessible book, and intentionally so. *How To Do*

Things With Videogames is not quite aiming at the same general, entry-level audience as, say, Pippin Barr's *How To Play a Videogame* (2011) (a book that is more or less what it states in its title). Yet Bogost is definitely competing more with books like Barr's, or indeed with Clay Shirkey's *Cognitive Surplus* (2010) or Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows* (2010) (two books Bogost discusses in his introduction) for the same shelf space or the "people who bought this book also bought…" recommendation than with his own *Unit Operations* (2006) or *Persuasive Games* (2007).

This approach is reflected in the style of the book, and not just its framing. The extremely short chapters of *How To Do Things With Videogames* (all are less than ten pages) gifts Bogost a nimble structure that allows him to engage with areas that traditional academic investigations do not. Consider Bogost's(2011) examination of videogame kitsch through the lens of painter Walter Kinkade (pp. 83-88), or of the rhetoric of disinterest around gun safety in the target shooting game *NRA Gun Club* (pp. 134-140). These are new areas interestingly framed by Bogost, and his compact style here makes for interesting analysis.

How To Do Things With Videogames' nimble structure also means that readers expecting the usual level of academic scrutiny—for all claims to be tested, explored and supported—will be left wanting. This is a book that features a potted history of music in three short paragraphs. Theorists and intellectual frameworks fly past the reader like songs in a '60s disco remix: here comes Slovoj i ek on page 35, followed by the Dadaists on page 41. There goes Walter Benjamin on page 46, with Wolfgang Schivelbusch in hot pursuit on page 47. *How To Do Things With Videogames* is not a book that lingers.

Yet we must consider that it is not so much the content of each chapter as the form of *How To Do Things With Videogames* that is important. Despite Bogost's warning that "the medium is the message, but the message is the message too" (p. 5), it seems that the structure of *How To Do Things With Videogames* is reflective of its central argument. It is not so much the content of the short, individual chapters of *How To Do Things With Videogames* that is important as what their structure can point towards.

If we can "understand the relevance of [the videogame] by looking at the variety of things it does," then *How To Do Things With Videogames* is a book that spirals outwards, constantly pointing towards fresh uses for the videogame before moving on to the next. It is a book that revels in unfulfilled blank spaces and the pathways not taken, for it expects that the reader—or maybe even videogame culture—will filter outwards to fill these spaces on their own steam. As I suggested earlier, *How To Do Things With Videogames* thus feels a bit like a media object in itself, its very structure reflecting Bogost's central argument. Perhaps, returning to the McLuhan comparison and Bogost's own philosophy of 'carpentry', *How To Do Things With Videogames* is not most like Barr's *How To Play a Videogame* or Carr's *The Shallows*, but rather McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), another book that utilises the form of publication in order to mount an argument obliquely through structure.

Thus, the key to *How To Do Things With Videogames* is plain and clear in the book's own title. This is a book that is interested in what kind of things you can do with

videogames, but it is more interested in how this diversity shapes the form itself within a micro and macro ecology perspective, and this is reflected in the book's structure. It is therefore not *what* you can do with videogames that is especially interesting here, but *how*.

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