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Technology

How to Do Things with Videogames
Ian Bogost
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You have no idea what videogames are, or what they can do. Ian Bogost—a game scholar and award-winning game designer, and author of *Persuasive Games*—does. In his latest book he offers a multifaceted overview of what the medium is capable of. The title is misleading—this is not a how-to manual, but an examination of how games can be used to communicate empathy, to relax, to exercise, to work. Each brief chapter examines one of these key concepts, through a combination of examples from the book's extensive "gameography," far-reaching cultural references, and Bogost's own experiences as a game developer.

In the "Kitsch" chapter, for instance, Bogost links popular social games like *FarmVille* and *Diner Dash* to Thomas Kinkade paintings. These games play to the same tropes and overt sentimentality that defines kitsch in the wider world of art, he argues. And as far as the constant stream of posts these games send to their user's Facebook walls is concerned: this array of virtual trinketry might help realize the videogame equivalent of Kinkade's million-seller art. After all, Facebook games like *FarmVille* boast tens of millions of players, all clicking cows and crops to show their friends, just like they might display Kinkade cottage-paintings or Precious Moments angel figurines.

Though rigorously researched and drawing on formal disciplines like art history and cultural criticism, the book remains accessible. Only occasionally does Bogost lapse into academic impenetrability. Those unfamiliar with games should not shy away from this any more than they'd shy away from a book on philosophy even if they've never read texts by Aristotle. Those with a preexisting interest in games, particularly mainstream "gamers," will likely find that even they've underestimated games as a medium. For anybody remotely interested in media studies, it's an excellent survey of the state of this medium.

Bogost's book is somewhat lacking in a strong central argument; the chapters are largely discrete. On the other hand, in showing the sheer variety of things you can do with videogames,

his message emerges from the chapters just as software emerges from ones and zeroes. Bogost's is a future in which games are so ubiquitous that the term "gamer" is unnecessary. "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."

Kenrick Vezina