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Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter



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Synopsis

In Extra Lives, acclaimed writer and life-long video game enthusiast Tom Bissell takes the reader on an insightful and entertaining tour of the art and meaning of video games.Ã Â In just a few decades, video games have grown increasingly complex and sophisticated, and the companies that produce them are now among the most profitable in the entertainment industry. Yet few outside this world have thought deeply about how these games work, why they are so appealing, and what they are capable of artistically. Blending memoir, criticism, and first-rate reportage, Extra Lives is a milestone work about what might be the dominant popular art form of our time. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

I enjoy Mr. Bissell’s writing and critical thoughts on game design and story presentation. So that each chapter focuses largely on in-depth critiques of some of the most thoughtfully designed and innovative games of the last fifteen years, was absolutely this book’s greatest strength.However, each chapter also ties somewhat loosely into his life during the periods in which he was playing these games, but none, save for the very final chapter, go into great, or interesting detail on his life during those periods. By the end of the book we are reminded of places in which his video game habit resided, along with his being, but we have hardly any reference point as to what was happening in his life at that point, besides what games he was most consumed by at the time. I

enjoyed the final chapter the most, as it not only delved into his finely provoked game critiques, but also into his personal life and how games intersected with it in both destructive and fascinating ways.If you begin reading this book with that final chapter in mind (as it is a big part of the description on), you're going to be disappointed in your expectations for the rest of the book. If you enter into it expecting a thoughtful, insightful, and introspective piece of games criticism, you most likely will not be disappointed. Even if you disagree with many of his points, as I often did, it's still worth a read if you're a fan of games and a student of games criticism.

I loved this book. It is a critique of video games as a medium. No critique of an art form is possible without giving the context of the one experiencing the art, so Bissell obliges and fills us in.I wish he'd spent more time talking to more indies than Jonathan Blow. Even in 2010 and before there was lots of great stuff happening in the indie scene. I suspect it's because he didn't play indies and that would've broken from the memoir-ish aspects of the book.Throughout the book Bissell, by turns, loves video games and hates them and is proud of them and picks at them and plays them and tries to get away from them. This guy loves video gaming, clearly. He also has no idea exactly why and (spoiler alert) the book does not give a clear answer. However, I think that's a strength and a startling bit of honesty: this book is not going to be able to tell you why this art matters to you. That's your answer to give. This is his. No objective truths here because there is no such thing. The currency of mattering is emotion.Bissell focuses a lot on narrative and whether or not games with narratives work. Clearly they don't, he'll say. Then he'll provide a bit of narrative that worked. But, boy, that dialogue was terrible. But this voice acting in this other game was great. All these things are true at the same time of virtually all games. The most successful video games of all time have terrible formal structures or are super violent or racist or whatever. And we love them.The other reviews exemplify the ambivalence that Bissell displays in the book perfectly.One review talks about the storyline for Mass Effect like this: "...without a doubt a sci-fi story worthy of classic status regardless of medium..." but ends the review by saying "...[s]o why do games matter? They really don't." Which is it? Mind-expanding classic or light entertainment?Another review says the book is "entirely too academic" but "There is no sociological umbrella theory at work here, just Tom Bissell's own experiences." Again -- which is it? Did you want to position games in some higher-level framework, or didn't you?So, be warned. No answers, lots of ambiguity, more of a memoir than an instruction book. But, I think, also a great introduction to how deeply meaningful games can be for someone who doesn't quite "get it".

I really enjoyed Tom Bissell's Observer article about his video game addiction, specifically about his love of and obsession with Grand Theft Auto. He was honest, winning, and thoughtful in that piece, and the piece has been reproduced in its entirety as the final essay in a collection of essays about video games in "Extra Lives."While it is fairly easy to describe the subject and nature of Tom Bissell's Observer article (a writer becomes addicted to video games, and analyzes why he became so) the subject and nature of "Extra Lives" are much harder to pin down. It is essentially video game criticism -- an analysis of its gameplay mechanics -- but it is also attempts to explore if video games can become great pieces of art and literature. As someone who both likes to read and who likes to play video games with literary pretensions (Final Fantasy VII, Warcraft, Starcraft, etc.) I was intrigued by the book at first, but soon found it too mired down by its own literary pretensions.Part of the problem for me -- and to be perfectly fair to the author -- is that Tom Bissell is almost completely focused on first-person shooter games (I prefer role-playing games or real-time strategy), and I've never played any shooter games. That said, I found it disappointing that there wasn't a much eclectic mix of video game genres in this book. While Tom Bissell introduces us to some great video games I was surprised that he didn't mention Blizzard at all -- a great video game company whose products are just as memorable and exciting as Grand Theft Auto and Bioshock.

As the writer himself discusses this book is set and likely will become dated. However, the books works to inform about the world of gaming and how games have an impact on us. A mix of personal experience and reviews of games it interesting to see the thoughts of Bissell unfold around us. I had original bought the book looking to see if this could provide some more general philiosphical stuff but it does not. If you are looking for something that will provide arguements on why games have a place in serious society you will not find it here. The most you will walk away with in that vain is in the first chapter when Bissell talks about how playing games provided him an extra life to live. Still this is a pretty good read. If anything get the audio book and listen to it.

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