

## Studies in Videogames



Viktor Koen

Videogames have won a prominent place in popular culture, but as a field of academic study, they're still working through an intermediate stage. "No scholar has to justify being a chemist or a French literary scholar," says Ian Bogost, author of "Persuasive Games" and a professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology, but games scholarship is "a research track you have to get away with." While some games researchers moonlight from disciplines like anthropology or cultural studies, the number of gaming thinkers -- and outlets for their work -- is mushrooming. Peer-reviewed journals such as Game Studies and Games and Culture have launched in recent years, and the Digital Games Research Association is gearing up for its fourth international conference.

Though students can pursue the technical side of game design at many colleges and universities, only a handful, including the University of Southern California and MIT, offer graduate degrees that put students on the track to games scholarship. Of the roughly 40 students in the digital media graduate program at Georgia Tech, about one-third are focusing on games, including a doctoral student looking at videogames through the historical lens of avant-garde art. But because Georgia

Tech's Ph.D. program is only four years old, a doctor of game studies has yet to graduate.

Here's a sampling of recent work from the field:

Gamers have a **competitive edge in the modern workplace**, according to an article published by the Harvard Business Review. In "The Gamer Disposition," Douglas Thomas, a

USC professor who studies virtual worlds, and former Xerox chief scientist John Seely Brown wrote that gamers find fun in problem-solving and adapt rapidly to changing conditions.

Videogames can tug at the heart strings. Games like Nintendogs, where the task is to rear virtual puppies, prompt **warm and fuzzy emotions** in players. In a paper called "Communities of Nurturing," Finnish researcher Aki Järvinen used psychological methods to analyze these responses, and then came up with a framework for making games that reward nice behavior.

Early research focused on the structure and aesthetic of videogames; lately scholars are more interested in **who's playing them and how**. "Cheating," a book by Ohio University's Mia Consalvo, explores the history and meanings of cheating in games, and the commercial products that sprung up to help players cut corners. In the upcoming book "Playing with Videogames," James Newman of England's Bath Spa University breaks down the ways players take ownership of games by modifying them or conquering them at a breakneck pace, a practice known as "speedrunning."

Do violent videogames promote violent behavior? Many scholars grew bored of the debate long ago, but acknowledge it won't go away anytime soon. Released just ahead of Grand Theft Auto IV, a book called "Grand Theft Childhood" argues that making such a connection is too simplistic. After conducting a study of 1,200 middle-school-age children, the husband-and-wife authors, who direct the Center for Mental Health and Media at Massachusetts General Hospital, deliver this **message to parents: relax**.

Conventional wisdom has it that gamers are predominately young men and boys. "That is a huge misunderstanding," says MIT researcher Jesper Juul. For example, the category of "casual games," including digital puzzles and word games, is **largely fueled by female players**. For an upcoming book, Mr. Juul is digging into history for more evidence. He traces videogame stereotypes back to views about card games like solitaire, which in the late 19th century was widely perceived as a pursuit for "idle ladies."

--John Jurgensen