Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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According to the Entertainment Software Association, 68% of American households now play computer or video games.1 A growing body of both academic and popular literature has begun exploring the implications of this growing trend. In Glued to Games, researchers (and video gamers) Scott Rigby and Richard M. Ryan offer one explanation for why digital gaming has become such a phenomenon. In their view, the burgeoning popularity of video games is due not to intense, violent content or simply because they are fun, but because playing them satisfies certain deep-seated psychological needs.

Based on their research using a model called Player Experience of Needs Satisfaction (PENS), Rigby and Ryan argue that video games enable those who play them to meet three very basic needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Music games such as Guitar Hero, first-person shooters such as Doom, and sports games are examples of genres that reward the need for competence. Role-playing games, simulations such as the Sims, and turn-based strategy games like the Civilization series enable players to fulfill their desire for autonomy. Finally, multiplayer games such as World of Warcraft serve the needs of players to feel relatedness by enabling them to work together in pursuit of common goals.

Surely there are plenty of real-world opportunities to fulfill these needs. Why then, do so many choose to satisfy them through playing video games? According to Rigby and Ryan, there are a number of reasons. One is the interactivity of digital gaming. You are part of the story, not merely a passive spectator. In addition, good video games allow us to be immersed in an alternate reality that becomes emotionally meaningful. Finally, games offer an immediacy, consistency, and density of experience that real life can rarely match. In video games, “life is fairer, more rule bound, more predictable...and thus more reliably satisfying.”

While clearly pro-gaming, Rigby and Ryan make a genuine effort to be fair minded, acknowledging, for example, that the same qualities that make digital gaming so appealing can make it addictive. They note that an estimated 10-15% of gamers can be considered video game addicts.3 The authors also refrain from dismissing out of hand the idea that there may be a connection between violence in video games and violence in the real world. Rigby and Ryan agree, in fact that violent video games can have at least a short term negative effect. They downplay, however, the overall attraction of violence to gamers, arguing that inflicting virtual violence is simply a means to fulfilling the PENS needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. “We know it’s hard to watch your teenage grinning from ear to ear as he or she blows people’s heads off,” they write. “But chances are the smiles grow from the mastery satisfaction this represents, and not the gore itself.”

Rigby and Ryan’s goal is to offer an objective explanation of why people play video games, one that parents, educators, gamers, and others will find useful. For the most part, they have succeeded. However, there are several objections that can be raised to their arguments. Many readers will find something disturbing about the authors’ implied equivalence between “virtual” and what they call “molecular” reality. While acknowledging that there is still a distinction, Rigby and Ryan also insist that “the boundaries between the virtual and the molecular are becoming more permeable.” The prospect of blurring the line between reality and simulation, indeed between reality and fantasy, raises profound social and cultural concerns. Winning a softball game may not be any more satisfying than storming an enemy stronghold in World of Warcraft, but it still involves a level of physical exertion and indeed physical risk greater than any simulated success. Becoming a rock god in Guitar Hero is not the same thing as learning how to master an actual instrument. To put it even more bluntly, unlike in Call of Duty, there was no reset button at Omaha Beach.

Another concern involves Rigby and Ryan’s downplaying of the importance of violence in games. As noted above, they argue that such content is unimportant and have even done research suggesting that gamers would derive just as much satisfaction from less-violent games. This begs the question, then, why do so many gamers choose to fulfill their psychological needs by blowing off heads instead of winning races, achieving quests, or guiding their team to the championship? Not to mention the increasing number of games like Grand Theft Auto, where the violence is anything but heroic. To insist that playing video games is an emotionally meaningful experience, but then downplay the emotional and psychological consequences of engaging in “violent” virtual gaming seems like an exercise in squaring the circle. The only real way to square that circle is by making an argument that Rigby and Ryan acknowledge, but shy away from: that digital gaming’s primary appeal and ability to satisfy PENS stems from offering gamers an escape from the pressures and travails of the real world.

Finally, in emphasizing the psychological appeal of video games, Rigby and Ryan give short shrift to other possible causes that might help explain their popularity. One factor of particular interest to librarians is the neurological research suggesting that using screen-based technologies such as video games leads to rewiring of our neural pathways. Once this process takes hold, we become more inclined to continue such activities and less likely to pursue activities which require a different alignment of neural pathways, such as reading. This may explain why television viewing, a passive but screen-based activity, has continued to increase even in the age of the Internet and video games.4

Overall, though, Rigby and Ryan have produced a useful volume on a highly relevant topic which most medium and large libraries will want to add to their collections.

Endnotes
3. Ibid, p.98.
5. Ibid, p. 171.