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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>



Column Editor's Note: A quick **Google** search indicates the large number of conferences that center around video games and the gaming industry. These meetings cover everything from virtual life to the laws on online games; from business in gaming to video graphics. Without a doubt, video games have become a major part of American and international culture. In this month's column, new **ATG** reviewer **David Durant** explores **Praeger's** new title **Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us In and Hold Us Spellbound**, which is a part of the **New Directions in Media** series.

David holds an **AB** in history from **University of Michigan**, an **MA** in History from the **University of California**, and an **MS** in Information (Library and Information Services) from the **University of Michigan**. His primary research interests are Islamism radicalism and intellectual freedom and the future of books and reading in the digital age. When he's not working or researching, his hobbies include reading, and watching and playing soccer. **David** served nearly five years in the **North Carolina National Guard** and deployed to **Iraq** from **April 2009** to **January 2010**. Welcome, **David**, and happy reading, everyone! — **DV**

Rigby, Scott and **Richard Ryan**. **Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us In and Hold Us Spellbound**. New Directions in Media. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011. 978-0313362248. 186 pages. \$34.95.

Reviewed by **David Durant** (Federal Documents and Social Sciences Librarian, Joyner Library, East Carolina University) <durantd@ecu.edu>

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."²

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 teenager 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."⁴

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."⁵ 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 aspect of the 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.⁶

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

1. Changed, "FYI: Video Game Statistics by the Entertainment Software Association," Critical Gaming Project, University of Washington. Posted April 6, 2010. Available at: <https://depts.washington.edu/critgame/wordpress/2010/04/fyi-video-game-statistics-by-the-entertainment-software-association/>. Accessed March 23, 2011.
2. **Rigby** and **Ryan**, p.13.
3. *Ibid*, p.98.
4. *Ibid*, p. 135.
5. *Ibid*, p. 171.
6. For a popular synthesis of this research, see **Nicholas Carr**, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2010.