

## **A review of Tom Bissell's *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter***

Tom Bissell has written three widely-praised books, in addition to the one under review here: *Chasing the Sea*, a travelogue on Uzbekistan and ecological disaster; *God Lives in St. Petersburg*, a collection of extremely literary short stories; and *The Father of All Things*, a meditation on not only father- and son-hood, but also the Vietnam War. He's received prestigious awards and fellowships. He's a contributing editor at both *Harper's* and the *Virginia Quarterly Review*.

I'm not introducing Bissell at a creative writing event, but he is a serious and seriously good writer—and this is worth noting since his new book is about videogames. The videogame industry now pockets more of our money than do its counterparts in music and movies, but you'd never know it from glancing at a newspaper or magazine, where Nashville and Hollywood still get far more profiles, business items, and, of course, reviews.

*Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* is, among other things, a wonderful example of how and why this imbalance might be fixed. Instead of a history of videogames or a consumer guide (buy this, rent that), Bissell aims to write criticism. "I wrote this book as a writer who plays a lot of games," he explains, "and in these pages you will find one man's opinions and thoughts on what playing games feels like, why he plays them, and the questions they make him think about."

These opinions and thoughts are not always positive. In fact, Bissell sometimes seems to spend more time attacking videogames than defending them. At their worst, videogames become a "democracy of garbage," populated with stale characters, redundant plots, and dialogue that makes "Stephanie Meyer look like Ibsen." But Bissell's frustrations rise from a desire to see videogames live up to their potential—he's the parent who, several weeks in, has gotten over the thrill of a wobbly child and just wants her to walk already.

One of *Extra Lives'* main arguments is that videogames should stop trying to follow or even to improve on old aesthetic models. The goal shouldn't be an interactive movie, but a genuinely new experience. Here's how Bissell puts it in a passage that's typical in its clarity and intelligence:

For designers who want to change and startle gamers, they as authors must relinquish the impulse not only to declare meaning but also to suggest meaning. They have to think of themselves as shopkeepers of many possible meanings—some of which may be sick, nihilistic, and disturbing. Game designers will always have control over certain pivot points—they own the store, determine its hours, and stock its shelves—but once the gamer is inside, the designer cannot tell the gamer what to pursue or purchase.

Big ideas like this should interest all kinds of readers. Less clear is why they'll care about the videogame community's anxieties over Bethesda Studios taking control of the *Fallout* series, to

which Bissell devotes several paragraphs. Gamers—and everyone, really, but especially gamers, to whom a sense of history means The Top 5 Characters of All Time—can benefit from a massaging of their institutional memory. After all, the sequel to *Fallout 3*, out this fall, is generating not anxiety but sweaty excitement. Still, Bissell’s focus on this episode is both odd and indicative of a larger problem with *Extra Lives*. While anyone can find pleasure in its individual sentences (“The art direction in a good number of contemporary big-budget video games has the cheerful parasitism of a tribute band”), the book will feel too vague to some and too detailed to others. At times, Bissell seems to swap out ideal readers mid-thought.

It’s also disappointing that a book so worried about narratives doesn’t offer one of its own. *Extra Lives*’ nine chapters feel more like essays, and while they manage to survey the contemporary videogame canon—*Bioshock*, *Mass Effect*, *Gears of War*, *Far Cry 2*, *Call of Duty 4*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Braid*, and many more—they don’t really build on or relate to each other. The book’s second half, which profiles some of the videogame industry’s stars, is weaker than the first, even if it does underscore how intelligent and intentional many designers are. Bissell is better when he just talks about videogames—and he’s at his best in a chapter on the first *Resident Evil*, where, in a playful second person, he describes his own conversion point (“For the first time in your life, a video game has done something more than entertain or distract you”) and squeezes details out of the game that I never noticed, or never noticed myself noticing.

How much of this depends on having fond memories of *Resident Evil*, as Bissell (and I) do? Or, to get at the bigger question: has Bissell written the *Axel’s Castle* of videogaming? *Extra Lives*, if you’ll allow me a moment of consumerism, has four potential audiences: hardcore readers, casual readers, hardcore gamers, and casual gamers. These will, in some cases, overlap and intensify, but Bissell (and, based on the promotional materials, his publisher) seems to be targeting everyone at once. And while you don’t need to know what a “ludonarrative” is to enjoy this book, my guess is that non-gamers (and especially videogame skeptics) will find it hit-and-miss.

But hardcore gamers will revere it. The easiest way to secure a big audience would have been to include some Bug Zapper of a statement about “videogames as art,” but Bissell resists that temptation. (He’s actually more clear on that topic [here](#) than in the book.) Much better than an argument for videogames as the new novel is an analysis of videogames by someone who probably has a couple of killer novels in him. Not all of the ideas in *Extra Lives* are new, but that’s not the point. Here we have a professional-grade writer and thinker wrestling with videogames in a mainstream medium. Now we need more.