

Jim Rossignol, author of *This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities*  
University of Michigan Press, 2008  
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## **Q&A with Jim Rossignol, author of *This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities***

Part personal history, part travel narrative, part philosophical reflection on the meaning of games, *This Gaming Life* describes Rossignol's encounters with gamers in three unique gaming cities: London, Seoul, and Reykjavik. From his days as a Quake genius in London's increasingly corporate gaming culture, to his encounters with Korea's high stakes, televised professional gaming milieu to his adventures in Iceland, the national home of his ultimate obsession, the idiosyncratic and beguiling *Eve Online*, Rossignol introduces us to a still-emerging and largely undocumented world of gaming lives.



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***University of Michigan Press: Why did you write this book? How does *This Gaming Life* add to the conversation, and what is happening in the world that makes your book particularly relevant?***

**Jim Rossignol:** Videogames are incredibly important to a large section of my generation. They're incredibly important to me. They've changed people's lives, and my motivation is as simple as that: they changed my life and I've been writing about that for years.

Games have provided much of the cultural backdrop to our lives, and have the same emotional resonance as movies, novels, or music for the people who play them. In the past decade I'd heard people talking about events relating to videogames that were "defining experiences" in their lives, just as we regularly hear people talking about a book, record, or lecturer having changed their life. Recording some of this, and describing some of what it is that makes games such interesting entities is what *This Gaming Life* is all about.

***UMP: Why did you choose London, Seoul, and Reykjavik? How do these cities fit into the current gaming climate?***

**JR:** Those three cities are important for me personally. They're landmarks in my own gaming experience. London is the city I've had most experience of first hand, partly because I live in the UK, and partly many of the gamers I know personally live there. Much of what I've talked about in terms of games changing individual lives stems from London.

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Seoul was important because it's home to a gaming culture that is quite different to the one found in the West: a kind of competitive, social sporting culture of videogames, where the same videogames found in the West have quite a different status. There are five TV channels dedicated to videogames, that kind of thing. Examining that and looking at how gaming is global and yet provincially reinterpreted was essential to fleshing out how it is that gaming changes cultures, as well as individuals.

Reykjavik is the home of my pet subject, *Eve Online*. This is a massive multiplayer videogame quite unlike anything else currently on the market. Its esoteric nature makes for some esoteric players, and some unusual player-projects. I used the meetings I had in Iceland to illustrate how games and gamers have entered a kind of symbiotic state, with games evolving to suit the tastes and personal projects of the gamers who play them.

***UMP: There's a term being used for some of the writing about games: "New Games Journalism"? Is that how you'd describe your writing about games, and if so, what is new games journalism?***

**JR:** This is a difficult topic for me, because the "New Games Journalism" idea became something of a joke within the gaming community. The arguments that it spawned were sprawling and vitriolic, and usually fueled the belief that Kieron Gillen, who coined the phrase, was being enormously pretentious. The heart of the matter, however, lies with the fact that games journalism has been unfairly dominated by a product-orientated marketing ecology, which is based on the preview/review model of consumer guide journalism. Gillen argued that games writing simply needed to become free to explore other modes, just as the New Journalism of the 1960s had encouraged techniques that seemed unconventional at the time. He was right, of course, and we've seen plenty of writing that breaks the review/preview mould both before and since Gillen penned his manifesto. I'm sure I'll get dragged over the coals for suggesting that I'd written a book of New Games Journalism, but by Gillen's definition that's probably what it is.

***UMP: Do you have to field a lot of questions about why you spend (or spent) so much time on games, when you could have been spending it on something more "constructive"? And if you do get a lot of these kinds of questions (from non-gamers, I'm guessing) how do you answer them?***

**JR:** Actually non gamers tend to express little more than disbelief or surprise when they find out how I live. There's occasionally a sense of amazement that I could spend so much time doing any one thing, but then the same sort of attitude would probably be brought to bear on people who spent the same amount of time gardening or reading comics. Ultimately, my writing about

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games pays the bills and keeps a roof over my head, and everybody understands that.

***UMP: You write that what's most important to your analysis is "the fact of video games' ambiguous social value: they're beloved by gamers and derided or dismissed by the uninitiated." Why do you think this is the case?***

**JR:** People have trouble dealing with change, and videogames are all about change. I think that's the fundamental problem. Not only are games radically different to literature or TV, they're evolving rapidly. That's hard to digest, or to keep up with, and for a while there were the domain of fast-learning kids or dedicated geeks. But there's also something deeper going on: our cultural value judgments with regards to leisure and entertainment. Videogames are tied to the idea of play, and play is still devalued against money-making work, or practical transferable skill-imbuing education. Play for its own sake is still tainted with a notion of idleness that is like a sin when viewed via traditional puritanical work ethics. I think we receive certain values like this and don't even question them, even if we don't adhere to them. Gamers, when questioned, will usually say that they should be reading a book rather than playing a videogame, and yet few of them have ever taken the time to quantify why they "should" be reading, or what value that actually would have for them.

Ultimately, as I think some of the cases in my book illustrate, games are good as part of a balanced cultural diet. And that metaphor goes a long way: you need a mix of foodgroups and exercise regimes to be physically healthy, and you benefit from a mix of cultural and intellectual experiences to maintain a balanced mind. I fully expect that games will be seen as necessary to agile thought within a couple of generations.

***UMP: Why do games have to struggle for the same status of "art" as other media? Is it a case of the new kid on the block threatening the well-established neighborhood?***

**JR:** Absolutely, it's the same for generation after generation of new media. However, there's a lot to be said for the value of games as a purely pulp medium. Some games are art, no doubt, but I think we'd suffer if they were all reaching for the stars.

***UMP: You write that games change gamers' brains for the better. What empirical evidence is there to support that? And how have things changed in that regard even since you wrote your book? Have more studies been done?***

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**JR:** The cognitive neuroscience of videogames is a remarkably well documented area for research, and numerous scientific papers have shown how gameplay can improve hand-eye co-ordination or visual and spatial comprehension. This research is ongoing, but it seems to show that certain faculties of the brain do benefit from "exercise" via videogames. However, most of these studies take place using very simple arcade action games, which account for only a small amount of gaming today. Games are remarkably sophisticated - often demonstrated quite complex decision making. It's the effects of long-term exposure to these games, and to more social games, that I think is most interesting. Clearly, what we need are larger, long-term studies of how complex, social games and long-term internet use effect the brain. My subjective feelings about these effects generally are positive, but it's clear that more scientific work is needed in that area. (Full of useful references: [\)www.bcs.rochester.edu/people/daphne/TCN\\_of\\_VGP.pdf](http://www.bcs.rochester.edu/people/daphne/TCN_of_VGP.pdf)

**UMP:** *Can you think of an "old-fashioned" game (non-video/electronic/computer) that could be a parallel to how video games help people learn? In other words, is there another game out there that, by way of analogy, has historically provided similar learning opportunities?*

**JR:** I play Scrabble almost every night with my girlfriend. We sit with a dictionary next to us, and regularly learn new words: that's something you only see a limited amount of electronic gaming. However, videogames as a medium have exploded what it means to be a game. Games are so diverse now that the parallel is probably found less in old fashioned games, and more in activities unrelated to the traditional notion of a game. The subset of games made up by board games, or card games, say, is tiny compared to what now constitutes a game in the electronic medium. The best comparison, then, is probably either to sports, in which we learn by focusing on a particular physical discipline, or pen and paper role-playing, where mathematics, acting, descriptive writing, and socialising all factor into play. What I learned playing Eve Online was more like running a company, or getting involved in feudal politics, than playing any traditional game.

**UMP:** *You write that "what is most valuable to me about computerized play is the fact that it offers new and far greater possibilities for being entertained." This seems to go against the more upright idea that games enrich us mentally. Can you expand on this a bit?*

**JR:** I'm afraid this is the truth of my personal hedonism coming through. I was once asked what I'd like written on my gravestone, and I think "He Was Entertained" would do nicely, as long as it was true! I think there is value in simply enjoying life, and being entertained. I don't think every sedentary activity we value should be edification via education or intellectual enrichment:

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enjoying life because it is thrilling, spectacular, and beautiful is also important. We must not lose sight of the fact that the primary, driving force of videogames is their capacity to entertain people. Videogames deliver rather more visceral experiences brilliantly, and we need to understand that this is just as valuable as their potential to make us faster or smarter.

***UMP: Then of course, there's boredom, a thing that games help to alleviate. Can you talk a little about boredom and how games relate to this often overlooked human malady?***

**JR:** Boredom, as I discuss in the book, has much in common with videogames. It's readily dismissed, for one thing, but the connections run a little deeper. I think that videogames, like much of modern entertainment culture, represents a sophisticated response to the conditions of modern life, the conditions that have made boredom into one of the great unmentionables of the last two hundred years.

It's telling that word itself has increased dramatically in use since its appearance in the 20th century: the very concept is in tandem with modernity. Increased leisure time and increased disposable income seems to necessarily lead to boredom, at least for a certain kind of people: usually the ones who aren't workaholics, which is most people. For those who are utterly focused on work or family, the idea of boredom is almost incomprehensible, but the closer you look, the more intense the idea becomes. New experiences, it seems, are the best way to combat boredom: hence the explosion in tourism, and the rise of videogames. As travel becomes more and more expensive in the coming decades, I expect to see people relying more and more on their virtual excursions for relief.

***UMP: Everyone experiences boredom, but is there a generational thing going on with games? In other words, is gaming mostly for—or played by—the young, those who grew up with computers?***

**JR:** More and more older people are discovering electronic gaming, but there is a massive difference in skills and perceptions between those who grew up with gaming, and those who did not. It comes down to the tiniest things, like being able to navigate a menu screen proficiently. I've seen people of my parent's generation simply not understand a scrolling menu. The interface is the most difficult boundary—which is one of the reasons the Wii has been so successful. Hand someone a button-encrusted gamepad and they freeze up: you might as well have handed them a loaded pistol.

***UMP: What do you see as some future scenarios for the world of gaming? How are things evolving?***

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**JR:** Game is going to become ubiquitous in culture, to the point where it's as widely proliferated as TV screens are now. Coming generations will expect to be able to play and interact with everything, and to be able to call up their library of entertainments as easily as we call up a collection of MP3s on an ipod today. Exponential storage capacity alone will mean that in twenty years we'll be able to carry around all the games ever made on a keyring. Hopefully games still have some revolutions in gameplay design to undergo too: there's too much recycled material at present. We need—and will get—some major innovations that we can't even imagine today.

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