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The work of games

Jacob J. Peters

review of: Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games.* University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis (PB, pp. 320, £19.95, ISBN 9780816666119).

My heart sunk as the introduction to *Games of Empire (GoE)* began with a recounting of scene in *Second Life* – was this to be an analysis of the possibilities of virtual life tempered with warnings that the means of such life are brought to you by Empire? Three paragraphs later, the simple acknowledgement that *Second Life* avatars consume electricity produced somehow on servers located somewhere made the stakes of the book clear and allayed any such fears. This simple acknowledgement turns out to be a major intervention into video games studies that leads towards an analysis that deals with the whole life of a game: The labor process that makes the game, the infrastructural requirements of its play, its relation to resource extraction, the game's ideological roots, and above all, how war and global capitalism became both the context and content for many games. Or as the authors put it, the book is about 'the interaction of virtual games and actual power in the context of Empire, an apparatus whose two pillars are the military and the market … *video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire*' (xiv-xv, emphasis in original). Most surprisingly and productively, the book reads well regardless of opinion on Hardt and Negri's theorizing of Empire and Multitude – this is an empirically rich text that makes clear that anyone interested in the military-industrial-educational complex and capitalism's emerging extractive strategies would benefit from taking some time to think about video games.

GoE is about games and organizations, not gamers – yet many of the book's claims demand another book with a similar framework focused on the actual play of games and people who play them. When the book does delve into game play and the sort of subjectivities supposedly produced via game play, there are some questionable sweeping judgments about subjectivity that temper my excitement for the book. This is not a minor issue, as one of the primary means through which the book's arguments are advanced is subject formation: Video games 'reassert, rehearse and reinforce Empire's twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and solider-citizen' (xiv). Although this sounds solid and true, there is a larger conversation about subjectivity and capitalism at stake here. Such an assertion about games and subjectivity deserves some skepticism, as the actual acts that constitute virtual gaming are part of people's complicated lives.

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter often tend toward collapsing the subjectivities dreamed of and demanded by particular forms of the state or capital into a general vision subject-making/becoming engendered through gameplay. A consideration of gamers with the same material rigor that *GoE* applies to games would complicate statements such as 'virtual play … makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun' (xxx). There is certainly an ideological element to playing games, but this is far from the same thing as becoming a neoliberal subject, and it is worth questioning what it means to consider a whole person a 'neoliberal subject'. Yet, enabling this conversation is a crucial development for video games studies and scholarship that takes Empire out of the abstract and through the complex processes of an industry. Thanks to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter it is now far easier to get to the interesting and challenging questions and to the details of the material world of gaming; this is a fantastic book to argue with about important questions, it asks the right questions and provides a useful framework for thinking about video games.

GoE always works to place video games in the context of Empire, of 'governance by global capitalism' (xv). This means starting from an understanding of Empire as rooted in critiques of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's trilogy of *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*: 'By Empire, *we* means the global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states, among who the United States still clings, by virtue of its military might, to an increasingly dubious preeminence' (xxiii, emphasis in original). Although *GoE* came out prior to *Commonwealth*, this last volume is probably the best of Hardt and Negri's work to be read in relation the gaming industry. *GoE* answers a call in *Commonwealth* to 'investigate the "technical composition" of capital or, really, the technical composition of labor to ascertain who produces, what they produce and how they produce in today's global economy', precisely the sort of analysis that is sorely lacking in the trilogy (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 131).

After clarifying the stakes of the work, the introduction to *GoE* provides a very useful short literature review and periodization of 'Ludic Scholars'. The review is almost too tightly dialectic: It moves from a celebratory period of work to a condemning period, out of which emerges a third branch of scholarship, 'critical political analysis'. Scholarship in the 1990s on MUDs and MOOs is surprisingly absent – this literature could well inform *GoE* as it has attempted to work through some issues of intent, authorship and identity/subjectivity. However, the conclusion reached out of this review is dead on – it is crucial to create a shift in video games studies away from a generation of scholarship that deploys Johan Huzinga's *Homo Ludens* to place play in a 'magic circle' and pull it out of its context. This is no slight to Huzinga, who also set medieval play in the context of 'declining empires convulsively gripped by plague, war and peasant revolt', which Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter cite as inspiration for their situating of games in an age of Empire (xxxv).

The first of three sections, 'Game Engine: Labor, Capital, Machine', provides the context for locating virtual play by theorizing immaterial labor in relation to the history of how labor is organized in the video game industry, and by developing an analysis of the current dominant structure of the industry using an insightful interrogation of the firm Electronic Arts. Immaterial labor is defined as 'the way the production of

subjectivity and things are in contemporary capitalism deeply intertwined', in which early video game inventors are positioned as 'among the first mass draft of immaterial labor' (7). This surprising denial of the mass conscription of women in patriarchal family structures performing the labor of childcare and household reproduction leads into a vague description of immaterial labor. Immaterial labor is too easily positioned as 'measureless' (27) and requiring digital production skills and 'playful energies' (31), neither of which appears to be the case. Fortunately, this chapter is buoyed by a thoughtful history of the technology, gender formation and the professionalization of video game labor. Where *GoE*'s analysis of immaterial labor shines is when focused on the productive antagonisms of capitalism. The history of the video game industry provides several interesting examples of how 'resistance actively alters the course of capitalist development', and brings particular forms and organizations of labor into being (32).

While immaterial labor ends up lacking conceptual clarity in relation to the work of making games, the following chapter develops a clear and insightful analysis of how cognitive capitalism works in relation to the video game firm Electronic Arts. Using interviews with video game executives and workers as evidence, *GoE* argues that 'cognitive capitalism is the situation where workers' minds becomes the "machine" of production, generating profit for owners who have purchased, with a wage, its thinking power' (37). Sorting out the relation between shifts in ideologies of work – marked by an increasingly commonsense belief that capital purchases knowledge-labor, which is somehow different from previous labor purchased by capital – and what is going on in the actual labor process of the video game industry remains a large and open question. By delving into labor laws that enable exploitive work practices, *GoE* does an excellent job of locating the conditions of work in legal and geographic conditions, moving into the specifics of how corporations came to take particular forms in particular locations. This is one of the strongest chapters, exposing how the uneven geography of overtime exclusions for 'creative or intellectual' in US state and Canadian federal labor laws are a major part of the story of work in the video game industry. This makes clear the stakes for defining some types of work as 'creative' (often in the face of workers insisting that their work is routine and not creative), and ideological moves such as calling factories 'campuses'.

The next section 'Gameplay: Virtual/Actual' takes us through three games of empire: The military-industrial-academic triangulation that produced a military training tool and successful commercial franchise, *Full Spectrum Warrior (FSW)*; the international divisions of labor and infrastructure that drive play in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*; and *Grand Theft Auto*'s *(GTA)* vision of neoliberal urbanism. The chapter on how and where it became possible to produce a 'banal war' experienced through simulations of war in *FSW* is impressive. This is not an exploration of the effects of experiencing war via simulacrum, but rather a history of how, where, by whom and with what funds war simulators were developed – in particular the development of *FSW* at the University of Southern California with funding from the US Army using workers from film and television to make a simulator playable on Microsoft's Xbox. The previous section setups this chapter beautifully, the workings of cognitive capitalism and the history of the Xbox and its production all come through to make an argument for how *FSW* 'generates subjectivities that tend to war' (118). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's

arguments about subjectivity is complexly rendered and convincing in this chapter – subject formation becomes much more complex that emerging out of a video game collision between Empire and Multitude.

The next two chapters are not as strong, but nonetheless offer compelling analyses: First a well trodden analysis of 'gold farming' in *WoW*, then a political economy of the *GTA* franchise. In the chapter on *WoW*, massive multiplayer online games are linked to the ambiguity of biopower 'wielded from above and "biopolitical production" arising from below' (127). *GoE*'s major contribution to the deluge of writing on *WoW* is an analysis of the division of *WoW* play by geographic region via server location and access. The movement of virtual goods requires people to bridge regions separated by servers – which exposes how video game firms rely upon and struggle with the uneven development of gaming infrastructure. The following chapter that aims to explore 'neoliberal urbanism' via *GTA* falls somewhat flat as it appears to use *GTA* and Hardt and Negri's take on urbanization as proof for each other without meaningfully engaging with actual process of urbanization.

In dialectical form, to argue that video games are a paradigmatic media of empire is to argue that video games are also paradigmatic of the forces that challenge global militarized capitalism. The final section, 'New Game?' begins to engage with what these challenges could look like. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter position several games as demonstrating that 'players can and do fight back against games of empire' (187). Here the argument about subject formation becomes central: 'games are machines of "subjectivation" … when we play an in-game avatar, we temporarily simulate, adopt, or try out certain identities' (192). To follow through with such an argument in the specific context of games would require some work with gamers, and without doing so it becomes easy to misplace causality and simplify complexity. In the chapter 'Games of Multitude' this takes the form of privileging the author and narrative: In Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's account, for a game to offer a form of resistance, the game itself must have a narrative or authorial intent of resisting. Some games 'channel toward imperial subject positions' whereas others, in an argument developed via Felix Guatarri, 'generate new ways of perceiving the world' (214). This section maps the intent of game onto subjectivities produced by its play even in 'counterplay' (play in which a game can be played against its intent). Something like 'counterplay' could emerge from any number of games – it could come from playing *MarioKart* as easily as from a game such as *Alpha Centauri,* which is argued to possibly be 'virtually corroborative of … actual activism' (192). Oddly, earlier in the book it is argued that that the experience of play cannot be mapped onto the 'manifest content' of a game, yet the final few chapters fall into this very trap (92). Nonetheless, any future work on game play would benefit from working through the issues addressed here, exploring the way in which 'games are indeed exemplary media of an order that demands not just the obedience of assembly-line work, but also the mandatory self-starting participation of immaterial laborers and global migrants' (193).

From the above logic, it makes sense that the solution to 'corporate games' that tend toward war is for anti-corporate gamers to create their own games that tend toward something else, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter propose. Such solutions come too close to the liberationist narrative of new media recast for games – all we need to do is

to create better content and that will somehow change problems created by the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution of content. Gamers creating their own content could represent a step toward a different mode of owning gaming infrastructure and hardware, but the second half of this line of thinking is never developed. The book closes with a concise description of the paradox of gaming that makes such an argument – 'games tend to a reactionary imperial *content*, as militarized, marketized, entertainment commodities, they also tend to a radical, multitudinous *form*, as collaborative, constructive, experimental digital productions' (228, emphasis in original). There remains a missed opportunity here to imagine a future for gaming based on *GoE*'s rich analysis of the materials, infrastructure and labor that have been organized in particular places, with particular histories to make the video game industry and video games what they are. What would a future of gaming look like with different infrastructure? For example, computing hardware is a constrained commons, and gaming consoles such as the Xbox are a mode of making the common (standards, interoperability, user replaceable parts, etc.) proprietary. Game modders and hackers constantly recreate such commons by figuring out how consoles work and sharing that knowledge. As *GoE* often mentions, the gaming industry constantly struggles to contain and/or extract the value created in such commons. Reallocating the surpluses upon which game developers' empires are built is never directly on the table in *GoE* – console gaming, an inherently proprietary enterprise, is positioned as a permanent fixture of gaming. Fortunately, *GoE* provides the theoretical and empirical foundation from which to think about how such seemingly fixed realities of the gaming industry came to be and how they may be put to work toward other ends than war and capital accumulation.

references

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the author

Jacob J. Peters is a doctoral candidate in geography at the University of Southern California. His dissertation is a labor geography of fun and the negotiation between capitalism and the commons in the labor process of the international free software project Ubuntu Linux.
E-mail: jjpeters@usc.edu