



Videogames as a sphere of resistance and play

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review of

Woodcock, J. (2019) *Marx at the arcade: Consoles, controllers, and class struggle*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. (PB, pp. viii + 194, \$18, ISBN 978-1-60846-866-9)

Jamie Woodcock, well known for his influential ethnography *Working the phones: control and resistance in call centers* (2017), is a sociologist who focuses on work and writes mostly about digital labour and the gig economy. His latest book, *Marx at the arcade: consoles, controllers, and class struggle* is an extended version of a previous article (Woodcock, 2016). His new book contributes to literature that explores changing labour processes, worker subjectivities and the emerging resistance and organization of workers in the tech industry by providing a Marxist analysis of the gaming industry.

The book review presented here is organized into two parts and follows the structure of the book followed by a brief critical reflection at the end of each section. As the book's first part titled *Making video games* presents an

overview of the size and the dynamics of the videogaming industry as well as the labour process and the movements of resistance within it, I will begin by establishing a connection between Woodcock's analysis of the industry and his autonomist Marxist approach of worker's inquiry and class composition. The second part of the book, *Playing videogames*, explores videogames as cultural artifacts of contemporary capitalism. Here, my review focuses on Woodcock's investigation of games as a vehicle of critique and resistance.

Videogame industry, labour process, organizing

In the first part of the book Woodcock uses class composition theory to sketch the labour process as well as the social and political composition of videogame workers. He refers to *Notes from Below*, a socialist online publication for which he is one of the editors, to define class composition as:

A material relation with three parts: the first is the organization of labour-power into a working class (technical composition); the second is the organization of the working class into a class society (social composition); the third is the self-organization of the working class into a force for class struggle (political composition). [69]

According to Woodcock, class composition traditionally provides the necessary framework to understand and apply worker's inquiry, a method rooted in Marx's call for investigating the working conditions at the time and began circulating in 1880. According to this method, he proposes a set of questions to survey the workers' points of view. In his call for applying the inquiry, Marx lists a hundred questions ranging from how many people work in their workplaces to how widely the state is involved in the workplace. Woodcock and other proponents of the inquiry as a method believe that Marx wanted to complement his analysis of capital with the information gathered from workers. Woodcock argues that 'Marx wrote *Capital* to put a weapon in the workers' hand yet, it is a book about capital not about workers' [67]. Worker's inquiry is about filling this gap and getting in touch with workers 'The goal of worker's inquiry is not to only collect data but to contact with workers' [67]. However, *Marx at the arcade* does not have a component of the worker's inquiry. Instead, it provides a glimpse into the labour process, social composition and political decomposition of the

videogame industry. These themes are addressed in the chapters titled 'Technical and Social composition' by means of surveys conducted in the industry and by gathering demographic data, as well as previously conducted interviews with workers to implement his understanding of the class composition approach.

It is important to note that Woodcock's analysis of the labour process is based on the cognitive capitalism paradigm and puts an immense emphasis on the knowledge of workers as the determinant in the changing terrain of class struggle under contemporary capitalism. The thesis of cognitive capitalism conceptualizes the conflict between labour and capital in terms of where the ownership of knowledge is situated (Vercellone, 2007). Carlo Vercellone one of the pioneering thinkers who theorizes this form of capitalism, draws similarities between pre-industrial and cognitive capitalisms by arguing that in both modes of capitalism, knowledge is incorporated in living labour as opposed to industrial capitalism where the knowledge is incorporated in the fixed capital (machinery). Consequently, the workers under cognitive capitalism possess the power and autonomy that come from this knowledge. In response, capital has new management techniques and creative labour processes to capture this knowledge and turn it into profit. Within this paradigm, Woodcock talks in length about the widespread practices in the videogame industry as competing gaming companies battle for knowledge. NDAs (nondisclosure agreements) that prohibit workers to talk about any project they work on is an important example for demonstrating the growing importance of knowledge in the videogame industry. The level of secrecy and harsh legal contracts that the videogame workers have to sign have multiple consequences for organizing workers. It also has a psychological effect on workers due to the level of isolation it imposes [64]. Woodcock states that:

The use of the NDAs therefore creates serious problems for workers themselves, because in addition to making it difficult for outsiders to understand the work of the industry, it isolates workers from each other. It makes the act of complaining around the water cooler, an integral part of so many jobs, significantly harder. [65-66]

However, according to Woodcock, the strict regulations and agreements by capital to capture the knowledge of workers demonstrates its vulnerability to the workers' power and control over the production process and its potential for becoming a form of resistance by labour.

We should remember that information leaked by developers can now “reach millions of people within minutes”. The release of such sensitive information — or even the threat of doing so — represents a very powerful weapon that video game workers possess. [66]

Videogames as a profitable industry emerged from the hacker culture where players created games for their enjoyment by modifying games developed by the U.S military establishment. The hacker ethos connotes ‘leisure, hedonism, and irresponsibility against clock punching, discipline, and productivity’ [76]. Therefore, hierarchical or controlling work cultures in the industry is often met with resistance from the workers. According to Woodcock, the tension between control and autonomy is at the heart of the labour process. Woodcock argues that the unique situation in which videogame workers negotiate this tension coupled with the issues of crunch time and representation intensified the conflicts, which resulted in widespread organizing and resistance among the workers. Firstly, crunch time (overtime work closer to the completion of a project) as a common practice in the industry requires that workers work up 70 hours per week to complete a project without overtime pay or vacation compensation. Secondly, representation of women and people from different racialized populations and individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds are also another issue in the industry as the majority of the workers are young white males.

Departing from these issues, which he identifies as problematic within the industry, Woodcock's chapter on political recomposition titled *Organizing in the videogames industry* is an exciting and important contribution. He states that when he started writing the book, there was not much momentum in organizing workers in the industry. However, as he started writing the book, the workers in the Bay Area and Seattle started to organize. There are multiple organizing initiatives that Woodcock analyzes in this chapter, including the Tech Workers Coalition (TWC) and Le Syndicat des

Travailleurs et Travailleuses de Jeu Vidéo (STJV) in France. He is also involved in Game Workers Unite as an organizer. According to one TWC member, the 2016 election in the United States set in motion multiple forms of political unrest which, in turn, lead to organizing labour ‘among workers at all levels in the tech industry, from food service workers to programmers and engineers’ [91]. In the process of organizing, members of the TWC observed an immense solidarity building up in the struggle. Woodcock quotes an organizer, Jason Prado, from the TWC:

Service workers on my company’s campuses have organized and won union contracts, and workers further up the hierarchy have actively supported these efforts... service workers and professional union organizers... are happy to leverage support from high-prestige tech employees, and tech employees gain firsthand experience working on an organizing campaign. [92]

Woodcock’s previous experience conducting an inquiry into the lives of workers and writing an ethnography about call center workers published in 2016 came in handy once the movement of the videogame workers started to take place in the United Kingdom. He actively participates and continues to provide insights on the growing worker movement in the gaming industry.

Thus, in the first half of *Marx at the arcade*, Woodcock provides a comprehensive analysis of the videogame industry and the resistance forming within it. It successfully touches upon critical topics such as the continuity between the military establishment and the development of video games, as well as the racial and gender bias towards the workers in the industry, however, it hardly offers any new theoretical or empirical insight. Apart from his involvement with the Game Workers Unite, Woodcock relies heavily on simple demographic data and the well-known blog post titled ‘EA: The human story’ by ea_spouse, which details, as the title suggests, their partner’s working conditions at Electronic Arts (overtime up to 80-90 hours a week) and the toll it is taking on both of them (ea-spouse, 2014). Even though the EA spouse’s post and its impact on the movement of the game workers is crucial, the post was published in 2004 and used in multiple studies since then. Therefore, the first half of the book falls short of giving a closer and more contemporary look at what making video games look like despite what the sub-section’s title (*Making videogames*) suggests.

Woodcock's background in ethnographic work and organizing is a valuable asset for the study of the video game industry and the resistance of workers. The book does not utilize this potential to the fullest: it provides only a glimpse of it through his observations and reflections on previously published work in the field. For example, Woodcock often turns to Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's (2009) famous book *Games of empire: global capitalism and video games* and borrows multiple points of departures from the authors. *Games of Empire*, published almost a decade ago, provides an excellent autonomist Marxist analysis by implementing theories of immaterial labour, multitude, and exodus to investigate the gaming industry and the possibilities and potential of resistance within it. Hence, if you have read *Games of empire*, some parts of Woodcock's book seem repetitive.

Videogames as cultural artifacts and spheres of resistance

In the second part of the book titled *Playing videogames*, Woodcock provides short chapters on the experience of playing different kinds of video games such as first-person shooter games, roleplaying games, political games and online games that revolve around a community of players. As a videogame player himself, he dives deeper into the experience of playing these videogames in this part of the book. His objective here is to provide a Marxist cultural critique of the current videogames and situate them in the realm of popular culture.

Certain characteristics of videogames differentiate them from other cultural commodities. For example, they are highly addictive due to the degree of power and authority a player can have while playing. Thanks to the complex game design and innovative technologies, videogames provide the player a virtual platform for participating in, for example, changing the course of history in games such as *Civilization*, or building cities and playing god in games such as *SimCity*. The level of authority given to a single player and the technological tools make the user experience profoundly immersive, thus making these games highly addictive. This also explains the exponential growth of the industry.

In addition to giving us a glimpse into the most popular videogames, Woodcock draws our attention to the potential implications of the connection between the gaming industry and the military establishment and its personnel. In this context, Woodcock refers to the concept of *militainment* developed by Roger Stahl (2010) that explains the phenomena of state violence being ‘translated into an object of pleasurable consumption’ [55]. An advertising deal between gun manufacturers and game developers to normalize using guns and to familiarize young audiences with different types of guns as future buyers is a startling example of the concept of ‘militainment’ [57].

The chapter on political videogames is also both informative and entertaining. Aligned with his general argument of popular culture as another terrain for class struggle, Woodcock presents interesting examples of political board games and videogames. One example is *Class struggle*, a board game developed by Bertell Ollman in the early 1970s as an alternative to *Monopoly*. At its core, the game speaks to the conflict between capital and labour with phrases such as “‘Socialism (The Workers Win!)” and Barbarism (The Capitalists Win!)” scrawled on the middle of the board’ [139]. More contemporary games created by Paolo Pedercini and published on the website Molleindustria include *Phone story*, which reveals the production process of smart phones, *Built better mousetraps*, a critique of management strategies, and *Every day the same dream*, a portrayal of the daily life of an office worker. Molleindustria’s mission is ‘to reappropriate video games as a popular form of mass communication’ and ‘investigate the persuasive potentials of the medium by subverting mainstream video gaming cliché’ [141]. In that sense, Woodcock’s chapter on political games successfully draws our attention to the potential of videogames as a sphere in which play and resistance can converge and grow.

The second part, *Playing videogames* starts with a short theory chapter that reiterates the significance of understanding the relations of production to grasp the cultural artifacts under capitalism. However, this short chapter that includes lengthy quotes from Marx and Engels to offer a Marxist discussion of ideology and culture does not sufficiently set the rest of the

analysis up for a well-rounded cultural critique of the video games. Woodcock writes:

The economic base of society is constituted by relations and forces of production. Stemming from these, but also going beyond, are the superstructural elements that Marx discusses. These are composed of “definite forms of social consciousness (political, religious, ethical, aesthetic and so on),” which together form “ideology”, as discussed above. Ideology should receive our focus because its function is “to legitimate the power of the ruling class in society; in the last analysis, the dominant ideas of society are the ideas of its ruling class.” The challenge here is that ideology is not a straightforward or direct command to obey — it is far more complex, subtle, obscured, and even contradictory phenomenon than that. [109]

This quote is as far as Woodcock goes to provide a theoretical framework. While he dedicates four chapters to describe the different kinds of games as summarized above, a more in-depth critique and analysis of those games does not take place. In that sense, the second part of the book accomplishes to draw a map of what kind of videogames are in the market and worthy of a cultural critique and it also points the readers and scholars in the field to study videogames in ‘their complexity’ [159].

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a videogame player, a Marxist scholar and an activist, Jamie Woodcock makes a convincing case for why we need to pay more attention to the videogames as cultural artifacts of contemporary capitalism. The lessons and insights presented by Woodcock are valuable to understand the changing nature of labour process and the potential and the obstacles for resistance. His involvement in Game Workers Unite and his observations on workers’ changed perception of how solidarity can be built provides a hopeful and dynamic look into organizing today [102]. While he reveals once again how capital can access and transform every human feeling for profit by documenting his own experience of gaming, it leaves the readers with more questions than answers.

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