

# From Virtuality to Actuality: The Power, Wealth and Ambivalence of Video Games

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Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* deftly merges a critique of Empire and its practices with the social and historical context of video games and the gaming industry. Refusing to cast video games as either a fully imperialist force or an immediately liberating technology for social change, the watchword of *Games of Empire* is ambivalence. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue that "while 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 original). Written in three sections, the text examines video games as commodities (including their relationship to labor practices and global markets), as narratives capable of reinforcing and disrupting social systems (including militaristic, racial and class-based narratives) and, finally, as *multitude* (possibly radical forms that have the capacity to change social structures and remake social practices).

*Games of Empire* is an engaging account of the history of influences behind video games; it focuses on the cultural context surrounding the gaming industry, exploring the relationships among video games and globalization, intellectual property, class stratification, military force and activism. The book does an excellent job of combining Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's theories of Empire, biopower, immaterial labor and multitude with pertinent examples from video game culture. The combination of theory and industry examples makes the more complex Marxist theories accessible to a novice reader. All the usual suspects are represented here: Electronic Arts (EA), Take-Two Interactive, the Xbox, military crossover games (*Full Spectrum Warrior*), *World of Warcraft* (WoW) and *Grand Theft Auto*

(*GTA*). But while the subjects may be familiar, the analysis focuses not on the effect on the individual player or on rehashing the ludology versus narratology debate so common in game studies, but on showing the links between gaming practices and their respective socio-cultural moments, as they are shaped in the form and content of video games. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter skillfully reconnect video games (hardware and software) to conditions of labor and production, social practices and legal struggles. Beyond that, it also provides a detailed analysis of the political and social underpinning of video games, which is often overlooked in debates over violence and media effects. At its core, the book is an intriguing investigation of both the relentless imperial manifestations of video games *and* their capacity for social change.

The text's first section develops Hardt and Negri's definition of immaterial labor as a framework for discussing the labor practices of EA and the kinds of subjectivities that Microsoft's Xbox generate. *Games of Empire* is more interested in the immaterial labor of video games as an example of the new "technological, affective, and communicational work" that is being produced (in contrast to material labor, which focuses on production of material objects). The gaming industry has transformed labor into "playbor," capitalizing on the innovations of players to enhance industry products (25-27). Working from examples like *Spacewar!* (1962), *Doom* (1993), *John Madden Football/Madden NFL*, *Quake* (1996), *EverQuest* (1999), *Halo* (2001), *The Sims* (2002), and *Star Wars Galaxies* (2003), *Games of Empire* gives a history of video games that often involves subversive workers creating unsanctioned games only to find those games (and their labor) appropriated by global capital. As games become international commodities, the rhetoric of "work as play" is used to efface the grueling labor practices that rule the game production cycle (with both material and immaterial labor). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter make the case that gaming companies like EA are not just following a path of globalization and U.S. imperial domination; rather, they are participating in a type of cognitive capitalism that exports U.S. products and ideology for maximum profit, but also modifies products to fit local interests to secure sales in foreign markets. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter adopt the rhetoric of "glocalization" to describe the efforts of game companies to adapt their products to the economies and player-base of each market they enter. For example, for *FIFA Online*, piracy in Korea made selling the game software an unsuccessful business model, so EA partnered with a local studio to give the game away, marketing purchasable game enhancements and add-ons instead (52); similarly, recognizing a difference in player skill and internet accessibility, EA added a functionality to *Battlefield Heroes* that would allow casual gamers to be matched with other amateur players in order to encourage new players to enter the market (52). These practices, also common to other multinational corporations, have the effect of acknowledging

regional or national differences while still creating homogenized groupings that benefit corporate interests (51).

Software developers are not Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's only concern; they also examine video game hardware, especially Microsoft's Xbox. They argue that it is not just the "machine design or game theme but also the social contexts of plays [sic]" (82) that are indicative of Empire. The book describes how controller design and corporate branding participate in controlling, assigning and reinforcing the players' subjectivities as gamers. While the book is critical of these mechanically-produced subjectivities and of the practices of the game industry in general, it is careful to acknowledge the ways these hegemonic subject positions (i.e. the hyper-masculine, hard-core gamer) are resisted by creators and players. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter skirt the debates over the moral, physical and media effects of games in favor of evaluating the production cycle of and rhetoric behind games and their imperial and revolutionary capacities. By choosing to reframe their discussion of games apart from popular arguments in the field, the authors are able to unpack the complex relationship of pleasure, production and power that subtends these discourses.

The second section of *Games of Empire* investigates the intersection of the virtual and the actual. Through a discussion of the military history of video games, the racial and financial ramifications of Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games and the cynical portrayal of urban environments in *GTA*, the authors paint an incisive picture of how video game technology is controlled, how video games are involved in global wage-labor conflicts and how video games often reaffirm capitalist ideology despite seeming to critique it. They demonstrate how military training games like *Full Spectrum Warrior (FSW)* are adapted to civilian games. These military-civilian crossovers serve to acclimate players to "the perpetual conflict of the war on terror" (99): "In American living rooms...the armed vision of *Full Spectrum Warrior* and its ilk contributes to the culture shock necessary on the homeland to banalize the global violence of primitive accumulation" (118).

*FSW* strives to be painfully racially diverse in the ethnic makeup of its military unit, while at the same time instilling a monolithic and negatively racialized view of the enemy. The messages war games send about race and nationality help to establish the book's argument about biopower, which is further developed in a discussion of the disconnect between virtual behaviors in *WoW* and the actual material conditions of the "gold farmer" game laborers/displaced Chinese peasant farmers. *Games of Empire* scrutinizes Blizzard's MMO *WoW* because it provides an example of both in-game conflict over the status of Western and Chinese players and out-of-game class stratification that supports the in-game economy:

Here the intersection of Blizzard's digital biopower with the material biopower of Chinese capitalism snaps into sharp focus. When Blizzard polices the digital realm of Azeroth (a kingdom created from the commercial enclosure of cyberspace) for virtual gold farmers, the offenders it seeks are likely to be actual peasant farmers who have left or been thrown off their fields by Chinese capitalism's enclosures, abandoning an impoverished and ecologically devastated countryside for its cyber-connected cities (145).

*Games of Empire* argues that a full understanding of *WoW* and the practices it fosters is not possible without thinking through the transformation of Chinese media, consumption and labor, three factors provide the context for the debate about gold farming and its ramifications for the very real (virtual) economy that *WoW* operates. *WoW* is a game of Empire not only because of its commodification and its stark racialization of its community (Alliance versus Horde), but also because it refuses to question the exploitation of laborers and players.

On the surface, the *GTA* games seem to address issues of race and class relations the book's other example games avoid. They depict a broken and corrupt system in a dystopian and highly racially-divided space. However, as *Games of Empire* argues, *GTA*'s cynicism simply recreates the system of exploitation rather than enabling a space to interrogate it. *GTA* puts the brutality of Empire on display, but does not, in the end, allow for any (playable) social reorganization. Overall, the book's second section reveals how video games continually reconstruct imperial forms of labor and social practices both virtually and in actuality.

But *Games of Empire* does not leave the reader with a pessimistic view of video games as a simple tool of Empire; its third and final section looks at video games' (primarily untapped) potential to become "games of multitude." Games of multitude have the capacity to change the structures and practices they support by generating new subjectivities, by providing circuits of opposition to global capital and exploitation and, most importantly for the authors, by allowing designers and players to not only "resist Empire but also to develop, protect, and propose alternatives" (188). The final section returns to earlier discussions of *FSW* and *WoW*, positioning these games alongside independent games to argue that even as games are utilized for corporate interests they also allow for unsanctioned player self-organization and can be appropriated by activists and players to benefit anti-Empire movements. *Games of Empire* outlines six compelling video game capacities that mark games as serving the multitude: "Counterplay, dissonant development, tactical games, polity simulators, self-organized worlds, and software commons are six interweaving paths of social activity remaking *ludic* practices" (211, emphasis original). By remaking play in ways that actively challenges current social prac-

tices, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter contend that video games might fulfill their capacity to present alternative social systems and enact change. In its refusal to herald video games as an instantaneous route of social change, the book succeeds in convincing the reader that “[a]ll games of Empire are, it bears repeating, also games of multitude, shot through, in the midst of banal ideological conventional-ity, with social experimentation and techno-political potential” (228).

*Games of Empire* follows a persuasive logical sequence, first defining, modifying and defending the economic theory at hand, then showing how the theory relates to the (im)material practices of developing video games and the main sectors invested in video game production, then illustrating the effects on laborers, creators and players alike and, finally, making a case for why video games are an increasingly important object of study. Although the array of terms and theories marshaled in the process occasionally obscures the connections and overarching arguments between chapters, the book lucidly accomplishes its goal. It provides depth to debates over violence, exploitation, economic, political, and ideological subtexts in video games and offers a multifaceted view of games’ cultural context. While it covers an expansive range of complex concepts, *Games of Empire*’s most convincing evidence is its storytelling; the fascinating accounts of the companies and players whose conflicts over what games are and what games could be aptly demonstrate economic imperatives in action. But perhaps the book’s best quality is its accessibility to both the experienced and novice scholar in multiple fields; fluidly combining Marxist theories, game studies and socio-cultural history, Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter’s volume is one that media and cultural studies scholars should surely add to their reading lists.

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