

Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*

A Bookreview by Simon Ferrari and Ian Bogost

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Book Review: Games of Empire

* Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter.

Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games.

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In *Games of Empire*, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter expand an earlier study of “the video game industry as an aspect of an emerging postindustrial, post-Fordist capitalism” (xxix) to argue that videogames are “exemplary media of Empire” (xxix). Their notion of “Empire” is based on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2000), which characterizes the contemporary world order as a decentralized system of global economic, political, and economic power that transcends national boundaries. In the view of the authors, Hardt and Negri’s account sets itself apart from other analyses of international politics by offering a “comprehensive account of conditions of work, forms of subjectivity, and types of struggle in contemporary capital” (xx). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter thus divide *Games of Empire* into three sections to reflect each of these aspects of *Empire*’s argument, seeing their work as the first account to explore “virtual games within a system of global ownership, privatized property, coercive class relations, military operations, and radical struggle” (xxix).

Books in the University of Minnesota Press’s Electronic Mediations series “explore the humanistic and social implications” of new technologies that spark “significant changes in society and culture, politics and economics, thinking and being.” That’s an abstract goal, and one that *Games of Empire* surely meets. Yet at times it can be difficult to understand exactly which specific intervention this book seeks to make. It is unclear whether the authors of *Games of Empire* see their work as an indictment of game scholars’ lack of attention to political economy, or whether it’s a work of political theory hoping to show that other disciplines should be paying more attention to the production and play of videogames. Because Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter don’t directly criticize previous political critiques of gaming—such as Edward Castronova’s exploration of the “porous membrane” allowing two-way traffic between virtual economies and those of the real world, or Alexander Galloway’s unraveling of control protocols in algorithmic design, or Ian Bogost’s idea of political procedural rhetoric—they sometimes leave the reader wondering how to situate the book in the broader discourse on games and politics, either separately or together.

Thus, *Games of Empire* might best be seen as an introduction to the writings of Hardt and Negri for game players and designers, rather than as a text for communicating the basic concepts of

game studies and design. It is neither a truly new theory of games or digital media, nor is it a new theory of Empire—and that’s not a criticism. It is instead an introduction to Empire through popular culture, as Žižek does for Lacan in *Looking Awry*. If one were teaching an introductory course on contemporary political theory, this book would offer obvious inroads into Negri and Hardt’s thinking for a number of reasons. Despite its radical ideological bent, the book isn’t off-putting to readers who don’t necessarily share the authors’ politics. It synthesizes complex ideas from difficult thinkers like Marx, Foucault, and Guattari while integrating modifications and critiques of Empire theory itself. And although the book is dense, sometimes feeling longer than it actually is (just over 200 pages), *Games of Empire* maintains a breezy readability by tightly coupling core concepts of Empire theory to well-known games and widely-publicized conflicts within the videogame industry.

The first section of the book focuses on immaterial labor, the accumulation of “cognitive capital,” and the global process of manufacturing videogame consoles. It is significant for the authors that videogames began as hacker experiments within research institutes of the military industrial complex, programmed on stolen time, before becoming a commodity (7). This is the first in a string of examples showing how creative dissidence and conflict fuel the continuing evolution of Empire’s control. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter explain that the videogame industry now constitutes an international production apparatus dominating both creative work in developed nations and manual labor in developing ones. Because game industries in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan are predominately non-unionized, they serve as an exemplary system for analyzing how global capital exploits contemporary intellectual work—including an excellent analysis of the “EA Spouse” scandal of 2004. On the side of the consumer, the authors argue that rabid “console races” that drive the industry forward from a technological perspective serve to structure gamer identity and combat piracy; later in the book, these machines offer a window into the worlds of Congolese coltan mining and electronic waste (222-224).

In the second section, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter move on to deep case studies of individual games to show how the most popular game genres embed imperial assumptions about conflict, exchange, and urban life. First they argue that military training games such as *Full Spectrum Warrior*—co-developed by university researchers, industry developers, and military contractors—contribute to the “banalization” of war, a subjective state wherein perpetual preparedness for war

is accepted as a part of everyday life (100). Chapter five covers Michel Foucault’s notion of “biopower,” the extension of capital accumulation to life itself. The authors argue that virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*, which take market capitalism as a given and force players into essentialist roles and racial antagonisms, are organized to maximize control and profit (often on the backs of virtual currency “farmers” in China and southeast Asia). Finally, they criticize the naïve assumption that humor and cynicism in the popular sandbox game franchise *Grand Theft Auto* offer any remedy to its racialized, violent content. Instead, such games indulge and normalize the fantasy of getting rich at any cost by keeping the realities of contemporary urban life and corporate greed at a safe distance (181).

Part three of *Games of Empire* focuses on “games of multitude,” a preliminary attempt to escape from Empire’s order through alternate modes of videogame development and play. Multitude is defined dialectically, as “the engine and the enemy” of Empire (187). This is the most important, yet also most contradictory section of the text. It lays bare the process by which Empire and its media feed our creative and intellectual development to overabundance. At a certain point, the force of the multitude reaches such a level that it threatens the stability of Empire; however, instead of following Hardt and Negri’s utopian assumptions about the radical potential of the multitude, the authors here follow Paolo Virno’s warning that Empire is “very good at adopting apparently iconoclastic practices and utopian ideas as management techniques and revenue sources” (188). At every turn, advances in player configurative power provide new sources of revenue and advertising angles for the game industry.

A disappointing shortcoming of these latter pages is the lack of truly new examples for radical resistance within game development. Instead, it turns out that the radical left seems satisfied with the same mild successes that the left-of-center also has celebrated: artist’s mods, virtual world activism, and critical counterplay within strategy- and wargames. Having been frequently cited by many authors before Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, this idea of subversion or resistance through play feels tired and unpersuasive. It is unclear if the authors believe it is possible to embrace game design itself as a way of pursuing what they call “exodus” from Empire, or if an all-too-fashionable subversion is the only workable strategy. While the book does explore how the earliest independent game studios were eventually subverted and incorporated into the game industry proper, it doesn’t affirm or critique more recent non-commercial, DIY game development projects such as Klik-of-the-Month Club and Ludum Dare.

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Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's analysis of so-called "tactical games," including the editorial works of La Molleindustria, leads to an even more ambivalent take on the contemporary design ecology. At the conclusion of his essay on "Counter-gaming," Galloway asserts that avant-garde videogame artists "should create new grammars of action [...] should create alternative algorithms" (Galloway 125). Yet Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter characterize works such as *McDonald's Video Game* and *Oligarchy* as didactic, suggesting that the role of radical political games might be "limited to that of agitprop" (199). They are concerned that games like those of Molleindustria rigidly structure the activities of their players in order to prove a point. Yet, despite their repeated assertion that the equation of greater interactivity with democratic digital liberation is flawed, the authors see potential in policy simulators that "allow players to edit or tweak" (202) their parameters in response to what Bogost has called *simulation fever*, the simultaneous drive toward and fear of simulation (Bogost 108). The possibility of practicing radical design is bucked, and early attempts at critical game development like those of Molleindustria's seem to be relegated to the status of exceptions that prove the rule for player-centered exodus.

Overall, there is one glaring question *Games of Empire* leaves unanswered: how exactly are videogames the "exemplary media" of Empire, and what are the implications of videogames being exemplary in this way? Presumably Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter want to avoid essentialist claims, so they're not keen on following Wark's desire to mark "the game's difference from [legacy media] as something that speaks to changes in the overall structure of social and technical relations" (Wark 225). It is also unclear how the production apparatuses, labor standards, and subjectivizing processes involved in the creation and use of other any other kind of digital media would fail to justify their equally exemplary status. Even the book's concluding paragraph holds that virtual games "are one molecular component of this undecidable collective mutation" (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 229) of intellect, labor, and daily life. In the end, the authors seem to back away from their focus on games as exemplary to bring their work in line with broader theories of the gradual digitization of the everyday, in line with Galloway and Manovich.

Despite these flaws, there is an undeniable elegance to *Games of Empire*'s contrasting of gaming's overwhelmingly imperial *content* with its multitudinous *form*. And its ambivalence about the potential of independent or political game development might be seen by scholars of Empire

as a strength rather than a weakness, an acceptance that every new expression of multitude offers another opportunity for the expansion of Empire. The book also functions as a strong, all-encompassing call to greater responsibility on the part of mainstream game developers to be more conscious of the ideologies they embed in their work, of the way their intellectual property is used and manipulated by those who employ them, and of the material impact their industry has on the world at large. For players it offers a toolbox of concepts for radical examinations of their own play activities, asking them to be more cognizant of the consequences of their consumption of digital media and the ways in which their virtual lives interface with the real.

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