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

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Reviews

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

Joseph Rebello

It is becoming more and more difficult to ignore video games. They are not simply for children. They are not a passing fad. While much popular and academic debate concerning video games touches on topics of interest to Marxists, neither opponents nor proponents of gaming typically have a Marxian framework in mind. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's Games of Empire helps fill this gap. There are some unresolved theoretical issues in their autonomous Marxian account of gaming. Nonetheless, this book offers the best analysis of the contradictory problems and promises of video games within the context of contemporary capitalism.

Key Words: Empire, Immaterial Labor, Multitude, Popular Culture, Video Games

It is easy to mock public discourse concerning video games, which has been dominated by sensationalism and sloppy citations of psychological studies. It would, however, be unwise to mock the topic itself. Literature on video games typically begins by describing how lucrative the industry has become, but for a medium that is often pirated and (re)played many times, revenues underestimate its social impact. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* is an excellent contribution to our understanding of video games, maintaining an anticapitalist critique of the industry without dismissing play itself.

As the title suggests, the authors approach video games through the concepts of “empire” and “multitude” as developed by Hardt and Negri (2000). Reactions, both positive and negative, to this work have been strong. This is not the place to rehash existing debates, but a reader uncomfortable with the very concepts of empire and multitude will probably not be entirely convinced by the book's arguments concerning imperial and multitudinous games. That being said, the book offers plenty of insight to anyone interested in the political economy of video games (or that of popular media).

In short, this book is a political-economic critique of the “magic circle” approach to video games (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, xxxiv). The magic circle metaphor suggests that what happens inside a game (i.e., play) can easily be separated from its outside (work, life, etc.).¹ This concept is not completely unappealing. Part of what makes the experience of play distinct is an apparent suspension of the normal rules and roles of real life. Game developers and players work to keep the nongame world out. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (138–44) describe, the incursion of real money trade (RMT) into video games, where firms virtually gather in-game goods/money to sell for real-world dollars, has been met with fierce opposition, including legal challenges from developers and xenophobic in-game hostility from players (directed at Chinese RMT firms and workers).

Rather than thinking of RMT as exceptional, it is better to consider the lack of any (truly binding) magic circle as a condition of its existence. Games are part of the world. They influence, and are influenced by, other processes. There is nothing sensational about a magical sword that exists in a computer network gaining the status of a commodity; these networks exist within economies in which commodities are common. If it is *weird* for use-values (virtually) located in video games to become exchange-values, it is only due to the fact that the commodity itself is “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1976, 163).

The first major attempt to think of the world of games as real economies (or situated in real economies) is the work of Edward Castranova (2005). While groundbreaking, with fascinating accounts of these worlds, Castranova’s approach was largely neoclassical. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s is explicitly Marxian. Instead of studying gaming through the lens of rational utility-maximizing agents, their object of focus is the relationship between games (including their production and consumption) and global capitalism. I cannot go into all of the specific topics they address, but the list is significant, including immaterial labor, surplus value in new-media industries, global inequality, the (ab)use of games by the U.S. military, environmental justice, and the subjectivity of play.

A reader of *Rethinking Marxism* might wonder whether this critique of the magic circle is overdeterminist. One problem with Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* was its contradictions—half Hegel and half Spinoza; determinism and voluntarism; orthodox historical materialism and postmodernism. Like *Empire*, *Games of Empire* has moments that are decidedly determinist and others that are more postmodern. Perhaps most determinist is their use of “real subsumption.” Whereas Marx uses this concept to speak about the labor process under capitalism, writers in this tradition have used the cognitive characteristics of contemporary production to expand the field of capitalism’s real subsumption across the entire social space. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (150) describe RMT as an example of “hyper-subsumption.” This may be a case of what Gibson-Graham (1996) calls capitalocentrism. It is arguable that the notion of an entire globe really (not just formally) subsumed to capital goes beyond even standard economic determinism. Most certainly, it lacks the mutual constitution, complexity, and contradiction found in overdeterminism.

1. See Huizinga (1950) for more on the “magic circle” metaphor.

The book's attempts to characterize some games as absolutely "of Empire" are the least persuasive arguments for me. While first-person shooters used by the U.S. military might be irredeemable, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's critique of the controversial *Grand Theft Auto* series refuses any possible ambiguity or contradiction. They admit that the representation of crime, corruption, and capitalism in contemporary America in *Grand Theft Auto* might have some satirical/critical value, but they insist that even its apparently redeemable/critical elements ultimately serve the logic of global capital. Even if they are right about the problematic use of stereotypes and cynical themes, the insistence that we cannot think about its ambiguities without falling into the ruse of a totalizing global capitalism goes too far.

Despite what I would consider its essentialism, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter follow the methodological ambiguities of Hardt and Negri and eventually leave real subsumption behind to consider the ambiguity of empire. By the end of the text, we can imagine games that are "of Multitude." They do not present these games as magic (anticapitalist) bullets, but rather as potential elements of a broader emerging movement against empire.

One multitudinous element of gaming is what they call "counterplay" (191)—playing against the ideological tendencies of a game. An example could be a person who attempts to complete a game typically dominated by fighting/killing with no kills. Additionally, they discuss "critical content in a few mainstream games"—games that are developed for explicitly political purposes (raising consciousness about particular issues), simulators with possibly critical pedagogical value, noncommercial/noncapitalist game production, and attempts to make common intellectual property (191–209). Though pacifist gameplay might be of little interest to nongamers, it is easier to imagine how these latter examples are of general postcapitalist interest. There is no reason games could not be developed to illustrate/simulate concepts of surplus or class—even better if these games were developed communally. The entire book is enlightening, but these concluding chapters may be the most provocative; I would like to have seen more methodological emphasis on ambiguity throughout.

I have some theoretical concerns. Do firms engaged in RMT actually create surplus value, or are they capturing distributions of value generated elsewhere? If the former, does this require rethinking the concept of value? In some cases these novelties are treated with new terminology (e.g., "playbor," the combination of play and labor) that does not adequately address my concerns. The concept of machinic surplus, first developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983), assumes that constant capital can create value. I think this is a wrong theoretical turn and primarily reflects a misunderstanding of the difference between value production and distribution. Furthermore, at times they rely on the work of David Harvey, whose entire account of capitalist accumulation and crisis is premised on the more traditional conceptualization of value. Despite my misgivings about some of these concepts, my primary interest is not to defend any orthodoxy, but rather to see more recognition and interrogation of the theoretical tensions and contradictions Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter create. This is an excusable limitation.

The book tackles many issues that I have not been able to give justice to here. For the community of scholars interested in expanding this research (including along the

lines of Marxian economics), *Games of Empire* will be invaluable for its exhaustive synthetic work and analytic contributions. More generally, for people who want a baseline understanding and critique of video games as cultural, political, and economic phenomena, this is the book to read.

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Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism, by David McNally. Chicago: Haymarket, 2012.

Philip Kozel

McNally's stated thesis in his Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism concerns how global capitalism induces a "systemic market-dependence" that requires the eradication of noncapitalist social relations. The establishment of this "market-dependence" produces anxieties that find an outlet in tales of monsters—especially zombies and vampires. The text, however, revolves around another thesis (unstated but primary): namely, that market society is monstrous in and of itself. Despite failing to substantiate his stated thesis, the text contains chapters useful for economic historians.

Key Words: Commodity Fetishism, Global Capitalism, Monsters, Vampires, Zombies

Monsters of the Market (Haymarket, 2012), David McNally's latest book, reads as an extension and elaboration of his previous works, such as *Against the Market* (Verso, 1993). Unlike *Against the Market*, in which McNally defines capitalism from a world-systems perspective as essentially just market activity, *Monsters* delimits capitalism from a production perspective—namely, as a society where owners and laborers have no means of reproduction outside of buying and selling, a situation inducing a "systemic market-dependence" (2012, 37). The resulting "market-compulsion" requires the destruction of prior modes of production in which people are not