

Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games

By Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter.

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In a recent *London Review of Books* essay, “Is it art?,” John Lanchester (2009) complains that mainstream culture consigns video games to a subterranean status. For the “wider public ... they simply don’t exist,” Lanchester (2009: 18) writes. But such a belief is belied by the video game industry’s enormous economic heft. Video games and consoles generated nearly \$42b in global sales in 2007. And in that same year in the UK, video game sales exceeded the combined sales of all books and videos in that country. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in *Games of Empire* posit another reason for taking video games seriously. They are the “*paradigmatic media of Empire* – planetary, militarized hypercapitalism” (p. xv, original italics). Predictably Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter are never able to redeem such an enormous claim. It is probably unattainable anyway, just like the final quest of most video games. But that doesn’t mean you should give up on the book or the video game. It’s the journey not the destination.

Games of Empire is a spunky book, written with gusto, verve, imagination, and theoretical and empirical savvy. Its authors are based in media studies and communications. Nevertheless, they have a strong economic geographical sensibility derived in part from a close reading and application of David Harvey’s work. They are also influenced by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s writings, especially their 2000 book, *Empire*, and the inspiration for one of the two nouns forming the main title of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s volume. Empire for them means “a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military, and communicative components combine to create a new system ‘with no outside’” (p. xix). You can already see the problem, though. While it carries a punch, their definition of “Empire” makes it too big a

concept, too all determining. It is everything, with nothing left over (“no outside”). It provides the answer before the question is even posed. Empire did it. That said, watching Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter wrestle with this unwieldy concept of Empire, trying to contort, bend, stretch, and beat it into submission in light of their empirical work, is always engaging, sometimes even exciting, although you know in the end they are not going to win, are not going to fulfil their final quest.

Following an energetic introduction, the book is divided into three sections. The first, “Game Engine: Labor, Capital, Machine,” is the part of the volume that is most recognisably economically geographical. Tracing the origins of video games to the whimsical play of highly educated but bored researchers within the American Cold War Military-Industrial Complex, video games from the beginning were produced by “immaterial” or “cognitive” labor. Such labor becomes the progenitor of the later creative class. Also right from the beginning, production of video games blurs the line between work and play. That blurring is subsequently commercially exploited as “playbor” (p. 23), that is, firms increasingly relying on the free labour of players to modify, improve, and market their games, improving their bottom line of profit. When video game firms are not drawing on free labour Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter argue that they are oppressing and exploiting their paid workers. It is hard to think of the creative class as a version of the lumpen proletariat, but drawing upon the case of “EA spouses” (p. 35) that claim is made. Headquartered in California, Electronic Arts (“EA”) is one of the largest corporate players in the video game business. In 2004 an “EA spouse” posted an open letter to the company complaining that their partner routinely undertook “a seven-day, eighty-five hour work week” (p. 35) with the firm “pressing its workers to ‘physical health limits’” (p. 36): a headache that never went away, a chronic upset stomach, persistent irritability and insomnia. It might not

be quite as bad as the conditions reported by nineteenth-century English factory inspectors on which Marx relied, but you see Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's point. Finally, there are the machines – X-Box, Play Station 3, the Wii. They never suffer tension headaches or irritable bowel syndrome, are always ready for play, and are Siren-like in calling players and workers to them. Consequently we become as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (ch. 3) put it, “machinic subjects,” cyborgs, irrevocably tethered to consoles, controllers, power gloves and supersticks; machines and humans meld into a Second Life.

The second section of the book, “Gameplay: Virtual/Actual,” moves from a focus on game production to a semiotic-materialist analysis of games themselves, in particular, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. There are sometimes anorak moments to these discussions I could have done without (in the interests of disclosure I should say I am not a gamer), and some of the parallels drawn between fantasy games and the real world seemed trite or overdrawn. But Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter make some important insights, and especially give a lot of information at least that I never knew. For example, Chapter 4, “Banal War,” interprets the game *Full Spectrum Warrior* in light of the fact it was “based on an actual training aid for the U.S. Army” (p. 113). Indeed, the original X-Box game came with a “‘cheat code’ ... [to] unlock the Army version” (p. 113), but presumably a military snafu given that option was subsequently disabled. This lead Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter to postulate the emergence of a twenty-first century version of what President Eisenhower first warned the American people about in his farewell speech of 1961, a military-industrial-*entertainment* complex. This is why Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter no longer see an “outside”: every angle – politics, economy and culture – is covered, enveloped and controlled by Empire including even, or maybe that should be especially, the video games people play (60% of Americans have played

video games). Just as interesting was the next chapter ostensibly about the *World of Warcraft*, but not really. That game is used as a vehicle by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter to discuss so-called “gold farms” (p. 145), especially those in China. These are factory-sites comprised of banks of computers where workers point and click to “harvest” points from video games like *World of Warcraft* that are then sold for cash on eBay typically to first world gamers who use them to jump levels and acquire new accoutrements (in total goldmining is worth between a half and one billion U.S. dollars annually, possibly even more p. 139). In this case, there is no doubt that those who work in them, Chinese “gold farmers,” are oppressed and exploited. They work 12 hour shifts, 6-7 days a week, in sweated “gameshop” conditions, receiving wages that vary from US\$ 40 to US\$ 200 a month.

The final section, “New Game?,” should be the grand climatic conclusion, but instead fizzles out, finishing with whimper rather than a bang. To use the language of Hardt and Negri, this is where “the Multitude” should strike back against the Empire. It should be the return of the Jedi, the victory of the Nav’i. The section certainly starts in this vein, concerned with how “players can and do fight back against games of empire” (p. 187). But Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter somehow lose their way, or maybe lose their nerve. They become ambivalent about the possibility of winning the fight, suggesting instead as a solution an “Exodus” (their last chapter title). It is like saying, “I am not playing your game anymore. I’m leaving.” But where do you go? There is no promised land, not even an “outside.” I think the problem follows again from them conceiving Empire in monumental terms. In their minds it is so large that the only means of resistance is to try to walk away. Here Gibson-Graham’s (1996) work would have helped them. It is all about re-conceiving supposedly monumental entities as not-so-monumental, and

realising that change can be affected gradually, bit-by-bit, from the inside out. No cataclysmic revolution. No exodus. But nonetheless the end of Empire (as we knew it).

Although I did not always agree with them, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter have written a terrific book: theoretically informed and sophisticated, empirically rich, up-to-date and relevant, lucid, compelling, and laced throughout by trenchant economic geographical analysis. Ironically given that neither author is an economic geographer, the volume shows what is possible in the field when tackling big questions around globalization and the creative economy.

References

Gibson-Graham, J. K. 1996 *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It). A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Lanchester, J. 2009 Is it art? *London Review of Books*, January 1st, 31: 18-20.

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