Book Review

Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle

by Jamie Woodcock (2019)

Chicago: Haymarket Books

Reviewed by Kevin Judge

Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Scotland

Email: kevin.judge@stir.ac.uk

Woodcock, J. (2019). *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle*. Chicago: Haymarket Books

At the heart of this text is an in-depth exploration of how videogames have become tightly bound into the political and social fabric of popular culture. It is a tale of empowerment, exploitation, globalisation, independence, relationships, and resistance. Historically, it is the story of hobbyists, passionately developing games and honing skills, that have nurtured the global industry of videogaming. Presently, it is a movement for change by addressing exploitation and underrepresentation within an industry that needs players' input more than ever.

For Woodcock, a competent Marxist analysis of this increasingly popular cultural product must apply to two spheres of videogaming: making videogames, and playing videogames. It is a welcome exploration into the dovetailing of classical sociological theory and popular culture, and specifically seeks to "draw out the struggle and resistance that has marked videogames from the start" (Woodcock 2019: 8). Before a generous discussion into each sphere, readers are made aware of the growth and maturity of videogaming. Hugely popular and ferociously personal, videogaming in the UK has in the region of 32.4 million players contributing to an estimated global revenue of $108.4 billion (UKIE 2018; Crecente 2018). Yet, despite the global impact, reach, and profits involved in videogaming production and play, it is rather paradoxical that gaming and research still feels quite niche or novel.

In 'Making Videogames', readers are treated to a thought-provoking and engaging historical account of videogames. With an origin story that replicates many comic book superheroes and villains, Woodcock narrates how the cultural form of videogaming is beholden to military projects. It is explained that during the development of specific programming, a separate, but important, strain of spare-time allowed adaptation and modification to spark change into the function of these military machines. This introduction follows into a useful overview of theories of play that includes the essential characteristics of unproductiveness and possessing 'no intrinsic value', while simultaneously, acknowledging the ambiguity and opportunities that play can invoke (Sutton-Smith 1997; Huizinga 1955). These observations are pivotal to Woodcock's analysis because play can also be empowering, a catalyst for resistance and transitions. On this point, Hendricks notably illustrates that a western perspective has constructed this dichotomy—work or play—that only serves to limit any appreciation that play

can be instrumental in building human relationships through chat, gossip, and song (2015).The stagnancy of this perspective fails to understand that work and play have always possessed a natural permeability.

Playing is part of the capitalist process, and a major concern for Woodcock is how the videogame industry has become congealed for those consumed by the product. It is argued that each component of videogaming, including physical, informational and cultural, provides capital with an opportunity to expand from use value to exchange value. Sparks of creativity by bedroom coders and garage hackers have become endorsed by governments, who have come to realise the potential of the videogame industry. The transition of this relationship has been gradual. Within a decade, Boris Johnson moved from bemoaning videogames for 'teaching children nothing' and prompting parents to 'yank out that plug' and 'get out the sledgehammer', to the glowing praise that "games software now influences the way we manage our health, educate our children and even how we explore space, but international competition remains fierce and we need to ensure our city can compete with our global gaming rivals" (Woodcock 2019).

Indeed, AAA games (triple A) are produced with budgets that are comparable with blockbuster movies, shedding some light on the struggles that independent developers face in marketplace competition. Woodcock is fully aware of these tensions and provides an excellent breakdown of game pricing that unpacks the supply-to-retail chain involved. This discussion helps to inform how the informational and cultural aspects of capital continues to find new ways to grow. Videogames are sold as incomplete experiences, with downloadable content (DLC) and 'patches' becoming more common. This shift from physical to digital demonstrates how videogame companies can bypass distributors and connect to consumers directly. The removal of the retailer from this process means physical products and places evaporate into attractive digitally downloadable forms and forums of consumption and communication.

Focusing on working conditions, Woodcock creates tangible links to concepts generated by capitalism. Workers with a variety of skillsets and experiences often work remotely from the entire project and there is a tendency for employees to sign NDAs (Non-Disclosure Agreements) to limit communications between staff and consumers. Furthermore, videogame construction involves the use of SDK (Software Developer Kits) that actively promote uniformity whilst de-skilling developers. This process means that these cultural products of

technical marvel represent compartmentalised occupations and understanding of the entire effort. Combine this experience of diminishing ownership with the account that larger game organisations have studios located across the world, and the reader begins to get the sense that the sun never fully sets on the production of videogames. It should not be understated that, abstractly, the Earth's cycle may act as a natural conveyor belt, as once begun the development of a videogame may never cease. A 'nicely interlocking organisation', as Mumford describes, fails with any abandonment, adaptation, or interference to this cycle of collectivism (2010). Individual creativity would be a problematic return to nature as capital cannot 'be at the mercy of natural forces' (Mumford 2010: 281). It is under these conditions that those passionate about games are exploited. The intensification of deadlines and the chain of development, or conveyor belt, never ceases, and the term 'crunch-time' manifests. Crunch-time depends on the profiling of employees as young, male workers with no family or the ability to shift parenting responsibilities onto others. Further to the shifting of responsibility, 'pink collar' work becomes standardised through female imagery associated in the glamour of game advertisement or 'scoops' in journalism. Capital will use every trick to normalise the cycles and roles involved in the production of play.

The second half of the book examines how this complex cultural product is played with. Woodcock uses a selection of gaming genres to blend the themes of processes and relationships into this argument that concerns the forming of an ideology of control and power that feeds into game production. The genres of FPS (First Person Shooter), Role Playing, Simulation and Strategy, Political, and Online Play are employed as effective examples that relate to globally popular play. This player-focused move manages to shed new light on how the previous experiences described in videogame production are woven into the experience of gaming.

The aim of an FPS game is to assume the role of a direct participant. Described as a form of escapism, FPS's almost always involve armed conflict. This prevalence, to paraphrase Woodcock, is simply that 'stories of conflict sell'. It is a genre that can be seductively immersive as it combines stories and graphics to create 'flow' within the game experience (Csikszentmihalyi 2002). Upon examining this profound experience, play is transformed into a spiritual phenomenon, where time is lost and a state of 'no mind' is entered during the immersion of engaging, intellectual play (Feenberg 1994).

For Woodcock, the importance of how we play is attributed to the hugely popular Nintendo 64 game, *Goldeneye 007*, as a moment when multiplayer superseded single player campaigns and a transition from story in games. This transition does not mean a complete eradication of story, as real-life conflicts and historical accounts of war have been integrated into the narratives of many videogames, as evidenced in the statement that *Medal of Honour* (2002) was the most educational FPS ever made. However, it is an unsavoury blurring of history and memory, and a stimulus for play that would make Postman wince at the disappearance of childhood (1994). Similar arguments have been made concerning the responsibility of entertainment and art as forms of education; Girouxand Pollock's target of Disney and Mickey Mouse comes to mind as a worthy comparison (2010). Issues of responsibility, or irresponsibility, are often raised concerning the appropriateness of violent depictions. Not only are historical conflicts revised for contemporary players (or audiences if cut scenes are factored into experiences) but the use of specific guns are rewritten from history at the request of manufacturers. These decisions go beyond the concerns of desensitization of violence and become subtly blended into murkier regions of ethics and morals that plays with the tenets of history and memory. Subversion and violence in videogames are used to hold players accountable for their in-game actions. Woodcock cites *Spec Op: The Line* as an explicit tale of morality with a military setting, and other ethical examples exist such as the Sorrow river section in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, and opting for pacifist play in the run-and-gun game *Cuphead*. However, such subversions may never be fully realised by players of violent videogames.

Exploring role-playing and simulation and strategy genres, the concept of open-worlds and sandboxes is introduced. These are described as 'digital doll-houses', capturing the imaginations of adults as well as children in expansive 'other-worlds' and augmented realities. Avatars grow in abilities, skills, and strengths through the grind by human players so that a spiritual experience can be simulated without the guilt, grief, or bloodshed. However, this grind can involve huge amounts of investment by the player. Finite possibilities and the boundaries of gameplay are limited to coding resulting in the recurrences of certain videogaming tropes or the omission of key historical events and experiences. Videogaming can imbue surface level representations of success that mean in-game progression shares the capitalist characteristics of accumulation, imperialism, and conflict. Meanwhile, political games are used to confront players with experiences of consequence and responsibility. This form of play reverses the endeavours of gamification with the drudgery of banal and bland work, where paltry rewards are replicated. Games like *Papers Please*, *Phone Story* and *The Uber Game* are set apart from

the exploits of a portly plumber or speedy hedgehog. These examples feel like a redefinition of 'simulators' as they provide an unflinching reflection of the inequalities and insurmountable conditions hidden within the grind of real life.

Understanding the growth of online play is to appreciate the rise of online forums, and it is how Woodcock culminates ideas around the toxic culture of videogaming. Criticisms, opinions, and voices appear entrenched within tightly guarded clusters of players and genres of games. These clusters hold specific political views that, when combined with levels of gaming elitism, often reduce immersive experiences into a depraved set of behaviours, interpretations, and reactions that would not exist in other social environments or contexts. Alternatively, opportunities for collective action have begun to emerge from online play and communication. Games Workers Unite has assembled because experiences from all sections of gaming provide insight into the challenges faced by workers and the barriers confronting players. All these experiences reinforce the premise that videogames are complex cultural commodities and this movement has begun a long absent dialogue that acknowledges compositions and consciousness needed to spark change.

In summary, Woodcock shares that videogames represent the ever-present dualism of resistance and consent within popular culture. Videogames embody a potential for expression, contest, connection, compliance, and rejection. They are, fundamentally, a product of human relationships that have faltered in allowing new voices, expressions, and ideas to participate in shaping play. A growth in consciousness, one that listens to the unheard and seeks out the hidden, must recognise the urgency for a return to the nature and rawness of games and play. In short, the playfulness of making videogames has been lost to the seriousness of gaming. Intriguingly, this latest form of capitalism is suggested as the model that will be experienced by the rest of us in years to come. It is with this grim prediction that game workers and players of all countries are encouraged to unite!

References

Crecente, B. (2018) Nearly 70% of Americans Play Video Games, Mostly on Smartphones (Study). Variety. Available from: https://variety.com/2018/gaming/news/how-many-people-play-games-in-the-u-s-1202936332/#! [Accessed 1stAugust 2020].

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002) *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*. London: Rider Books.

Feenberg, A. (1994) Alternative Modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture. *Cultural Critique*, 29, pp. 107-138.

Giroux, H.A.& Pollock, G. (2010) *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.

Hendricks, T.S. (2015) *Play and the Human Condition*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Huizinga, J. (1955) *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture*. Boston: Beacon.

Mumford, L. (2010) *Technics & Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Postman, N. (1994) *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York: Vintage Books.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

UKIE (2018) The Games Industry in Numbers. UKIE. Available from: https://ukie.org.uk/research [Accessed 1stAugust 2020].

Woodcock, J. (2019) *Marx At The Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

Bibliography

Beynon, H. (1973) *Working for Ford*. Wakefield: EP Publishing Limited.

Boucher, G. (2012) *Understanding Marxism*. Durham: Acumen Publishing Limited.

Joseph, J. (2006) *Marxism and Social Theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Law, A. (2015) *Social Theory for Today: Making Sense of Social Worlds*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Marx, K. (1976[1867]) *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1998[1848]) *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition*. New York: Verso.

Roediger, D. (2017) *Class, Race, and Marxism*. New York: Verso.