



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:
The 21st Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Virtual Event / 27-31 October 2020

GAMES OF EMPIRE TEN YEARS ON

Caroline Pelletier
IoE UCL, London

Paolo Ruffino
University of Liverpool

Jamie Woodcock
University of Oxford

Ergin Bulut
Koc University Istanbul

David Nieborg
University of Toronto

Robbie Fordyce
Monash University

Panel overview

The seminal book *Games of Empire*, by Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter, made two major contributions to the field of internet studies. First, it illustrated the productivity of social theory, and autonomous Marxism in particular, to an analysis of digital culture. Second, it demonstrated methodologically the importance and value of treating digital culture, and game culture in particular, as a practice extending from sites of text production to sites of text consumption / textual play, by contrast to focusing on one or the other end of that spectrum. The book played a central role in the development of the then nascent fields of internet and game studies, and helped to situate both in relation to other, more established domains within cultural studies which also deployed long-standing theories of social organization.

Pelletier C, Ruffino P, Woodcock J, Bulut E, Nieborg D and Fordyce R (2020, October). *Games of Empire, Ten Years On*. Paper presented at AoIR 2020: The 21th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

This panel has been brought together to revisit the themes and analytic approach of *Games of Empire*, and explore where this tradition within the study of digital culture can be taken next. Each paper takes key concepts from the book – including, ideology, desiring machines, empire and multitude, minor and major subjectivity, cognitive capitalism – and applies them to the present moment in videogame culture. Our aim is to revisit the significance of autonomous Marxism for cultural critique and also identify how games culture has evolved over the last ten years. The panel will discuss the productivity of an approach to criticism which, across the papers, combines sociological / ethnographic analyses of workplaces and working conditions with interpretations of the cultural objects produced there as well as cultures of play / consumption. This approach aligns with attempts to re-think cultural studies methodology in the wake of playable / interactive texts, as well as participatory cultures in which the boundaries between producers and consumers are being reconfigured (Caldwell, 2009). In this respect, the panel also aims to explore the possibility and value, in game studies, of identifying continuities, as well as discontinuities, between the different components of game culture, and integrating text and social analysis.

Each paper will highlight the productivity of *Games of Empire* but also some of its flaws, the latter in two respects. First, in relation to theoretical developments within autonomous and post-marxist thought. The limitations of concepts such as ‘cognitive capitalism’ will be reviewed, as well as developments within Deleuzian practices of analysis. Recent post-colonial theory will also be drawn on to highlight the neglect of matters of gender and race in the original book, and its theoretical framework, particularly noticeable in the wake of phenomena such as Gamergate and analyses of digital culture which attend to representation. Second, the panel will also identify the book’s limitations in relation to empirical developments within the games sector and games culture. The games sector has changed significantly over the last ten years, with the emergence of ‘independent games’, games as apps, the growth of unionisation and a far more globalised production and distribution network. We will discuss the productivity but also the problems of understanding these new phenomena in the light of the concepts central to the original book, and explore how more recent work in new media studies, including the field of production culture, can inform current research. For instance, we will explore the benefits and problems of treating the ‘independent games’ phenomenon as an instance of ‘multitude’ opposing the extension of Empire. Discussing the flaws of *Games of Empire* is intended to review how critical social theory can inform the analysis of a more culturally and economically complex games sector than existed ten years ago.

The panel brings together contributors to a Special Issue of the journal *Games and Culture*, due for publication in 2020, and which retrospectively evaluates the significance of *Games of Empire*, within game and new media studies. It has been convened by the editors of the Special Issue and each paper will be based on an article within it. The panel will provide contributors with the opportunity to reflect on the productivity of situating games, theoretically and methodologically, within digital culture, and the costs and benefits of having a specialist disciplinary sub-field dedicated to it. For example, the panel will reflect on the difference and continuities in thinking and talking about games at AOIR, versus Digra (the digital games research association conference). The panel will also allow presenters to consider the collaborative editorial

process which underpinned the development of the Special Issue, including how some of the issues highlighted in *Games of Empire* are themselves affecting the study of games culture, such as unsustainably precarious working conditions which inhibit long-term careers, the marginalisation of feminist and anti-racist critiques, and the uneven concentration of resources in a globalised network of work and production.

References

Caldwell JT. (2009) Screen studies and industrial theorizing. *Screen* 50: 167-179.

Dyer-Witherford N and de Peuter G. (2009) *Games of Empire: global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.

Game Workers Unite: unionisation in the UK video game industry

This presentation will investigate some of the key debates that have emerged within the nascent labour union Game Workers Unite UK (GWU UK). Game Workers Unite is an international organisation and movement dedicated to unionizing the video game industry. The group started as a response to a panel at the annual Game Developers Conference in San Francisco in 2018. The event, titled “Union Now? Pros, Cons, and Consequences of Unionization for Game Devs”, was organised by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), traditionally considered as an anti-unionisation association. Participants organised an alternative pro-union event, which worked as the starting point for the establishment of Game Workers Unite. The UK GWU branch became part the IWGB (Independent Workers Union of Great Britain) in December 2018, building ‘a worker-led, democratic organisation that represents and advocates for UK game workers’ rights’ (GWU UK, 2019), and represents one of the first and most significant examples of unionisation within the video game industry.

The presentation is informed by a period of participatory observation at the local meetings of the union in London and by a series of interviews with members of the association, which took place throughout 2018 - 2020. One of the authors has participated in the establishment of the union in the UK since 2018, drawing on previous examples of co-research with workers.

First, we look at GWU UK in its historical continuity with previous attempts at organising the workers of the video game industry, and other, less notorious, forms of resistance. We identify how GWU UK, often presented by the press and even by its participants as a breakthrough moment in the history of labour in the video game industry, should be more accurately represented as the upshot of a long series of struggles. The analysis of comparable examples (such as the French union *Le Syndicat des Travailleurs et Travailleuses du Jeu Vidéo*) is not presented with the purpose of denying GWU of its historical relevance. On the contrary, it serves to strengthen its significance and stress the likelihood of it continuing in its operations in the future. The national unions that work as part of the global GWU network should not be seen as exceptional events, made up by a small number of organised volunteers. On the contrary, they provide a name and identity to a much longer and complex series of demands for better conditions of work.

For this purpose, we take the case of EA Spouse as a significant example to look at in relation to the findings we have gathered while observing and participating at GWU UK. Published in 2004, an anonymous letter written by the wife of an employee at Electronic Arts described how the exploitative regime of labour inflicted on their husband was damaging their lives and relationship. EA Spouse revealed a condition of labour that was shared among many in the sector, highlighting the culture of very long working hours often termed “crunch.” EA Spouse constitutes one of the most famous examples of demand for workers’ rights in the industry (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009, pp. 35-68). However, it came about at a time when similar forms of protest did not have an institution to refer to, or an identifiable community that could scale up an individual protest towards a demand for structural and systemic change. Seen through this historical comparison, we conclude that GWU UK acts as a catalyst for pre-existing but isolated struggles within the video game industry.

Second, the presentation will identify a series of keywords to articulate the differences that GWU introduces in relation to the conditions of labour analysed in previous literature. In chapter 7 of *Games of Empire* by Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, ‘Games of Multitude’, the authors imagined the possibility of emancipation via independent labour, as well as other ‘politics of withdrawal’ (p. 218) via practices of ‘counterplay’ (Galloway, 2006). Since the publication of *Games of Empire*, the emergence of social media has incentivised practices of self-promotion, which are often conflated with self-branding and the promotion of one’s own labour (Gregg, 2011; Tyni, 2017). These dynamics can draw attention to and implicate game workers are overtly visible. They need to be active on Twitter, and other channels of promotion and visibility, to get access to, or keep their position within, the networks of production. Presence in first person is also required at the frequent meet-up events, workshops, festivals and conferences, which often act as cultural mediators and gatekeepers (Parker et al., 2017). The current state of the video game industry in the global North is characterised by formal and informal relations of production, and a large number of producers who could be identified as independent of a publisher or producer (Keogh, 2017; GDC, 2018; Vanderhoef, 2016; UKIE 2017). While participating in the meetings of GWU UK and engaging with their members, it emerged that the main issues currently faced by the organisers concern the excess of visibility and individualisation of the game worker implied in practices of independent labour, and the organisation of bottom-up networks for the exchange of practices and legal advices for those working *within* the industry. The article concludes that the visibility and individualisation of the game worker, exacerbated through the last decade in many sectors of the creative industries, are currently challenged by GWU via strategies of opacity and collectivism.

References

- Dyer-Witthford N and de Peuter G. (2009) *Games of Empire: global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.
- Galloway A. (2006) *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.

GDC (2018) *State of the Game Industry 2018*. Game Developers Conference, USA.
GWU UK. 2019. *We Are Game Workers Unite*. GWU UK. Available at <https://www.gwu-uk.org/>.

Gregg M. (2011) *Work's Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Keogh, B (2017) Who Else Makes Videogames? Considering Informal Development Practices. *Proceedings of DiGRA 2017*, Melbourne, Australia.

Parker F, Simon B, and Whitson J. (2017) Megaboost: The cultural intermediation of indie games. *New Media and Society* 20(5): 1953-1972.

Tyni H. (2017) Double Duty: Crowdfunding and the Evolving Game Production Network. *Games and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1555412017748108>

UKIE. (2018) *UK Games Industry Fact Sheet*. April 2018. UKIE The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment.

Vanderhoef JR. (2016) *An Industry of Indies: The New Cultural Economy of Digital Game Production*. PhD thesis, University of California Santa Barbara, USA.

White Masculinity, Creative Desires, and Production Ideology in Video Game Development

My presentation will revisit *Games of Empire* and complement the concepts of “desiring machine” and “ideology” with narratives from my three-year-long ethnographic work in a medium-sized video game studio in the U.S. Midwest. Drawing on postcolonial approaches to gaming (Harrer, 2018; Mukherjee and Hammar, 2018), and cultural studies (Slack & Wise, 2015), I argue that *Games of Empire*'s Deleuzio-Guattarian framework fails to illuminate how racialized and gendered histories inform game developers' practices of creating racialized and gendered fantasies.

In my fieldwork, I asked developers what they thought about the criticisms of objectionable representation of certain demographic groups in their games. AI programmer Chris (White, late 30s) said: “A lot of it is letting out your inner child... The general freedom to do what you want to do is a pretty big deal.” For Matthew, a programmer of color, they were “definitely playing off of stereotypes” but it was really about “escapism.” Though these two programmers felt comfortable with claims of escapism, Ricardo (White, midthirties), an artist involved in constructing the game's urban territory, expressed discomfort about the questionable color choices for some characters: “I've always kind of felt that was a little racist. So, I'm not sure where that came from.”

In analyzing how machines operate in the game industry, *Games of Empire* examines hardware's unequal production materiality in Asia, but it casts insufficient attention to the racialized and gendered histories and longings of game industry's creative labor force. As argued, the computer screen is never blank prior to game production (Mejia and LeSavoy, 2018). The phrases I encountered during my fieldwork (“escapism,”

“letting out your inner child,” and “the general freedom to do what you want”) are “a continuation of the Western historic project of securing pleasure through the other” (Leonard 2003, 5). Therefore, one has to acknowledge how white masculinity hegemonically shapes how game workers desire, how they imagine escapism, and ideologically structures how they relate to technology.

My presentation will then address the dominance of white masculinity behind game developers’ productive desires through another concept that *Games of Empire* analyzes only at the representational level: ideology.

According to Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *GTA IV* both constructs essentialized identities of people of color and provides a “comedic exposure of U.S politics” and a “scathing parody of neoliberal sensibilities” (2009, p. 179). Yet, *GTA*’s criticism fails, because it doesn’t suggest a way out of the urban decay and corruption. For the authors, *GTA*’s ideology is cynical because both its producers and players believe that the game is too absurd to take seriously (2009, p. 181). While dissecting the cynical ideology shaping *GTA IV*, the book fails to illuminate how white-masculinity informs the cynical desire of equally offending everybody.

In my fieldwork, I asked game developer Stuart (White, early thirties) his thoughts about their game’s subversive narrative. He said:

We go after men. We go after women. We go after fat. We go after skinny.
We go after White, Black, Asian, Latino. It doesn’t matter to us. I think that’s what allows us to get away with it.

This statement reveals a discursive strategy of Whiteness, which exists by systematically denying its actuality (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995). Denying its centrality to power relations, white masculinity becomes the gatekeeper for boundary-making. Through the discourse of equally offending everyone, it establishes an unquestionable coherence around who the proper subjects and objects of offense are (Ortiz, 2019). So, *Games of Empire* misses the racialized and gendered roots of cynical ideology in production.

Yet, there is also a technological dimension to this. I expand ideology beyond game representation to encompass how game developers’ desire functions in relation to technological work. Through my concept of ludic religiosity, I unpack how game developers hold onto the idea that video games are advanced machines to push innovation within white masculine technocultures (Johnson, 2018).

As a belief system, ludic religiosity measures everything against the commensurability of ludic and technical pleasure in a supposedly neutral technological system. This ludic function is related to game content but even more deeply connected to the capacities of technological machines, which game workers push for professional pleasure. If technology, as James Carey (2009, p. 87) suggests, holds a “secular religiosity” within the Euro-American imagination, the theology of game developers is ludic and technological experimentation.

Evoking the racialized and gendered desire for technological mastery, many of my interlocutors would make a claim for good command of computer skills, display a masculine libertarian work attitude, and endorse a gendered attitude regarding passionate work. Programmer Karl (White, early forties), would tell me how their initial success depended on “just a personal sacrifice from a number of people and ridiculous hours that we pulled that pedal off.” “Pulling that pedal off” was possible because most of the developers were “either single or pretty close to it, no kids,” he added.

Ludic religiosity accomplishes a few things. While it reinforces whiteness as the universal arbiter of what counts as escapism, it also claims to erase whiteness in shaping production cultures in the gaming industry (Dyer, 1997). My interlocutor Stuart’s color and gender blind rhetoric of “equal opportunity offense” promises an abstract form of liberal individualism and liberalism in the context of post-racialism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014), rendering “radical resistance to and revisioning of racial logics unlikely if not impossible” (Young, 2016, 359).

Ten years after *Games of Empire* was published, foregrounding the racialized and gendered nature of desire and ideology at work is vital, given how GamerGate’s resentful and networked white masculinity feeds into authoritarianism.

References

- Bonilla-Silva E. (2014) *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and The Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. Fourth Edition. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Carey JW. (2009) *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Revised Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Dyer R. (1997) *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Harrer S. (2018) Casual Empire: Video Games as Neocolonial Praxis. *Open Library of Humanities* 4 (1): 1–28. <https://doi.org/DOI>: <http://doi.org/10.16995/olh.210>.
- Leonard D. (2003) 'Live in Your World, Play in Ours': Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 3 (4): 1–9.
- Mejia R and LeSavoy B (2018) The Sexual Politics of Videogame Graphics. In Gray K et al. (eds) *Feminism in Play*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 83–101.
- Mukherjee S and Hammar EL. (2018) Introduction to the Special Issue on Postcolonial Perspectives in Game Studies. *Open Library of Humanities* 4 (2): 1–14. <https://doi.org/DOI>: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.309>.
- Nakayama TN and Krizek RL. (1995) Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81: 291–309.

Ortiz SM. (2019) The Meanings of Racist and Sexist Trash Talk for Men of Color: A Cultural Sociological Approach to Studying Gaming Culture. *New Media & Society* 21 (4): 879–94.

Slack JD and Macgregor Wise J. (2015) *Culture and Technology: A Primer*. New York: Peter Lang.

Young H. (2016) Racial Logics, Franchising, and Video Game Genres: The Lord of the Rings. *Games and Culture* 11 (4): 343–64.

Apps of Empire

A decade after *Games of Empire* was published, it is time to revisit its key argument: games are emblematic of twenty-first century hypercapitalism. Whatever metric one uses—revenue, players, published titles—digital play has become more international and lucrative. In 2004, while acknowledging that “predicting the future trajectory of videogames and videogaming is a highly problematic, perhaps even foolhardy, undertaking”, Newman gestured towards the bright future of gaming, which would “not be distinguished by its uniformity, but by its diversity” (p. 169). In certain respects, this is true. After decades of “aggressive formalization” on the part of the industry, independent and amateur game makers have found new ways to develop more games (Keogh, 2019). Similarly, alternate reality and virtual reality games push the boundaries of technology, while eSports and streaming platforms offer consumers novel ways to engage with play as spectators (Taylor, 2018). In this presentation, we focus on popular mobile game franchises and question their radical potential along the lines set up by *Games of Empire*. We ask: Do apps, with their colourful, cartoony aesthetics, deviate from the banalization of war, or, are they embedded in the very same militaristic spirit constituting global capitalism?

Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter consider three games to be emblematic of *Games of Empire*: *Full Spectrum Warrior*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. Each of them are either still dominant or have spawned a series of spiritual successors. For example, late 2019, *Grand Theft Auto V* has sold over 110 million copies and earned its publisher over US\$6 billion. The war simulator *Full Spectrum Warrior* marked a direct and unique cooperation between the US Army and a US-based game developer. The game’s spiritual sibling, the first-person-shooter franchise *Call of Duty*, has been similarly unapologetic in its celebration of modern warfare and serves as an enduring example of the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex’s impact. Also in 2019, Activision Blizzard launched *Call of Duty Mobile*, which quickly rose to the top of the app store charts.

The instant, global uptake of *Call of Duty Mobile* can be seen as a restoring of the, one might say, natural order of hard-core gaming’s decade-long dominance. Casual game apps, such as the *Candy Crush* series and *Pokémon GO*, may be widely popular, they are surpassed—in terms of the revenue they generate—by titles that offer a twist on what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2019, p. 97-122) describe as “banal war.” Consider titles that raked in hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, such as *Boom Beach*, *Clash of Clans*, *Clash Royale*, *Mobile Strike*, *Lords Mobile*, and a title that serves as the

most literal instance of the militarization of digital play: *Game of War*. Each of these offer a variation on the argument that games “banalize the global violence of primitive accumulation” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2019, p. 118). Enemies are notoriously faceless and often nameless, there is no collateral damage, and there are no moral or geopolitical dilemmas to grapple with. The player is put in the role as a benevolent general tasked to conquer enemy bases and accumulate resources.

The representation of modern war in apps, much more so than console and PC-games, is notoriously desensitized. Even if game developers would want to present players with the weight of their life and death decisions, Apple would not allow for it. The App Store Reviewer Guidelines are quite explicit when they state that an app cannot be “upsetting” or “intended to disgust”. These limitations instantly foreclose any meaningful avenue to grapple with the implications of modern warfare. Apps of war are therefore unduly generic, in which “clans”, “kings” and “lords” battle, storm sunny beaches, or just simply “clash.”

Most of these successful titles are online multiplayer games, whose lineage can be traced back to titles like *World of Warcraft*, which is still drawing millions of monthly players itself. Similar to *Call of Duty* and testament to the pervasive cultural conservatism among players, or as they call it “nostalgia,” its developers reincarnated its blockbuster by launching *World of Warcraft Classic* in August of 2019. This reissue allowed players to experience the game as it was late 2006. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter point to *World of Warcraft* to make a broader point about “biopower play”, as online multiplayer games provide virtual worlds that recapitulate “the accumulative structure of consumer capitalism” within their “archaic dream worlds” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2019, p. 150). The very same can be said of one of the most enduring app store hits, *Clash of Clans*. If *Warcraft* offers, as Rettberg argues (2008, p. 20), “a capitalist fairytale in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through society’s ranks and acquire great wealth” thereby serving “as a form of corporate training,” than *Clash of Clans* distills this logic to its essence. The game’s builders are perpetually busy to build, upgrade, or rebuild structures (e.g. decorations, defensive walls, and traps) and buildings (e.g. barracks, cannons, and workshops). Players have to hone their managerial competencies to work together—not in guilds but in clans—to coordinate weekly attacks against other clans. *Clash of Clans* thus serves as a prototypical game of Empire, the fastest way to accrue significant amounts of virtual currency is to invade other bases and destroy other clans.

And this brings us back to the interrogation of *Games of Empire* a decade after its publication. Do apps that oppose global capitalism, or at least develop or propose alternatives to it, even exist? If they do, they are more marginalized than the predecessors described by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, p. 185-214). Mobile platform power as exerted by Google and Apple challenge, if not foreclose many avenues of dissent. Sure, there are thousands of quirky, challenging, and sometimes slightly transgressive apps available in the app store. Independent (“indie”) developers have grown in numbers and broadened the ludic landscape. But do they allow to play against the grain and are they part of a new wave of activist-developed “tactical games” espousing radical critique? If they are out there, they are rare and hard to find. “Dissonant development” of apps, understood as “ludic dissent against today’s capitalist

Empire” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009, p. 196-197) has the same unicorn status as platform companies. The stifling app store guidelines make sure of that.

References

Dyer-Witheford N and de Peuter G. (2009) *Games of Empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis: Minnesota Press.

Keogh B. (2019) From aggressively formalised to intensely in/formalised: accounting for a wider range of videogame development practices. *Creative Industries Journal* 12(1) 14–33.

Newman J. (2004) *Videogames*. New York: Routledge.

Rettberg S. (2008) Corporate ideology in World of Warcraft. In Corneliussen HG and Rettberg JW. (Eds.) *Digital culture, play, and identity. A World of Warcraft reader*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 19-38.

Taylor TL. (2018) *Watch Me Play. Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Reading Dwarf Fortress as a game of multitude

This presentation uses the model of videogame analysis drawn from the work of Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter’s (2009) *Games of Empire* to analyse the videogame *Dwarf Fortress* (Adams, 2006-present). *Dwarf Fortress* has a relatively unique development model: the game was initially started as a side project by disaffected mathematics scholar, Tarn Adams, who quit his post-doc so that he could fully dedicate his time to the game. *Dwarf Fortress* has since become Adams’ full-time project and has been estimated as having at least a twenty-year development cycle (Weiner, 2011). The reason that *Dwarf Fortress* remains of interest, approximately fourteen years into its development, is partly due to its remarkable influence in videogame circles. *Dwarf Fortress* has directly influenced the development of the extremely popular *Minecraft* (Goldberg and Larsson, 2013) as well as the MMO *Fortnite* (Urquhart, 2019), it has acted as a museum piece in the Museum of Modern Art (Adams, 2011). *Dwarf Fortress* has influenced the development of several major games, but more importantly, it provides a perspective onto a type of production strategy that we can identify as what Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter call a ‘game of multitude,’ providing insights into an alternative videogame production system. *Dwarf Fortress* remains a free game and is supported entirely through a series of donations. The online community itself supports the process of telling interesting stories and developing unique explorations or interpretations of events that happen in the somewhat buggy world of the game (see Denee n.d. for an example). Its code is modifiable, and save games circulate within the player community. The idea that videogames might foster a capacity to think beyond the present economic system is an established idea (see, for instance, Ruffino, 2019), and is located in the same search for cultural or imaginary models for thinking on the problem of contemporary imperialism.

Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's argument is that there needs to be a consideration as to how videogames are embroiled in international geopolitics and the development of political resistance. In doing this, *Games of Empire* follows the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* trilogy (2000; 2004; 2009) in the focus on labour and production as being central to the nature of politics and, ergo, a primary component both of imperialist expansion and of resistance to it. In the context of these works, 'Empire' is the proper name for the liberal-capitalist globalisation project that has expanded through both culture and economy to create a standardised system of order that covers much of the globe. Empire carries with it systems that standardise states through the opening up of borders and the liberalising of trade; alongside this comes familiar economic icons such as American Express, Coca-Cola, and greenwashing. In tandem with the identification of Empire is the constitution of the multitude: the multitude is a diverse and varied subject, aligned in its co-constitutive nature. The multitude is also defined in its capacity to break out from Empire and forge new futures that might go beyond the limits of present social and economic structures. Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy itself reads like the script to a videogame; it is on this fantastic telos for the multitude that critique has often been located: the *Empire* trilogy is too abstract, too fantastic (see Boron, 2005; Brennan, 2003, 2004; Tilly, 2003; Žižek, 2004). Indeed, reading Hardt and Negri's work, it is clear that at times that they work to *avoid* evidence; trying to keep their arguments abstract and seeking to avoid locating their claims within a specific context.

Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter's work solves the issue of context, and provides an account of how digital cultural production in videogames are connected with a variety of geopolitical forces, mainly through transnational production processes for the videogame industry, from the mining of coltan (222-224) and to the outsourcing of digital labour (144), the prevalence of crunch time (59-65) and the push for unionisation (63), and the propagandistic elements of military shooters (97-122) aligned against digital storytelling of the experiences of refugees in offshore detention (185-191). The use of production as the analytical framework for the assessment of politics proves to be extremely useful when deployed in the context of videogames; it seems like videogames as a cultural product are capable of providing a clearly demonstrated role at every level of imperial operation, from direct public relations fights over the responsibility for coltan militias, through to the large-scale propagandistic multiplayer online military shooting games that they call 'games of Empire'. It is perhaps for this reason that Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter argue that games are a "paradigmatic media of Empire" (2009: xv). The particularities of cultural production and consumption combined with an economy that prioritises work with the use of digital devices and digital infrastructure describe a materialistic condition where people may well spend large portions of their life in a digital environment.

Dwarf Fortress, despite its fantasy-derived name, offers a concrete example of what Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter call 'games of multitude'. In contrast to games of Empire, these are games that offer a way of thinking or perhaps – to follow Hardt and Negri – an experiment in alter-globalisation, where a way out of the current system is perhaps feasible. A game of multitude represents itself not just through the generation of an ideological context where imperialism is not a virtue in itself, but it also presents a different model of production and exchange.

References

Adams T. (2006-present) *Dwarf Fortress*. Washington, DC: Bay 12 Games.

Adams T. (2011) Dwarf Fortress – gallery listing. *MoMA.org*. Available from: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/164920>

Boron A. (2003) *Empire and Imperialism*. London: Zed Books.

Brennan T. (2003) The Italian Ideology. In Balakrishnan G. (Ed) *Debating Empire*. London: Verso. 97-120.

Brennan T. (2004) The Magician's Wand: A Rejoinder to Hardt and Negri. *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2): 374-378.

Denee T. (n.d.) Oil Furnace. *TimDenee.com* <https://www.timdenee.com/oilfurnace>

Goldberg D and Larsson L. (2013) The Amazingly Unlikely Story of How Minecraft Was Born. *Wired*. 5 September, 2013. Available from: <https://www.wired.com/2013/11/minecraft-book/>

Hardt M and Negri A. (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hardt M and Negri A. (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Hardt M and Negri A. (2009). *Commonwealth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Ruffino P. (2019) The End of Capitalism: Disengaging from the Economic Imaginary of Incremental Games. *Games and Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019886242>

Tilly C. (2003) A Nebulous Empire. In Balakrishnan G. (Ed) *Debating Empire*. London: Verso. 26-28.

Urquhart E. (2019) The Dwarves Who Built the Road to Fortnite. *Slate*. 6 June, 2019. Available from: <https://slate.com/technology/2019/06/dwarf-fortress-fortnite-minecraft-strange-play-it.html>

Weiner J. (2011) The brilliance of Dwarf Fortress. *New York Times*. 24 July, 2011 Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/24/magazine/the-brilliance-of-dwarf-fortress.html?_r=0

Žižek S. (2004) The Ideology of the Empire and its Traps. In Passavant P and Dean J. (Eds) *Empire's New Clothes*. London: Routledge.