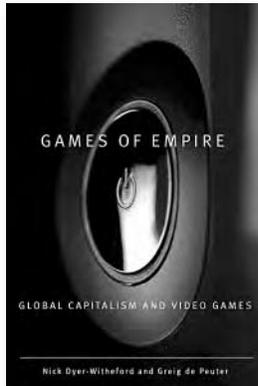


# empire of the games

by andrew m. lindner



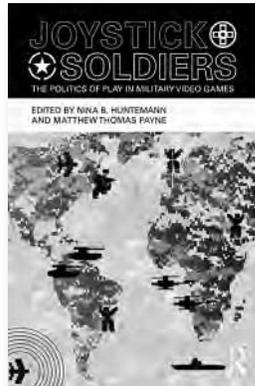
*Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*

By Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter

University of Minnesota Press, 2009  
298 pages

Despite the cheerful mushrooms and mustachioed plumbers that were the signature of early video games, popular discourse about video games since the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School has envisioned them as machines that turn innocent teens into sociopathic killers. This condemnatory approach relies on long-discredited theories about unreflective interaction with media and is often taken up most vehemently by those with little or no experience with video games. At the other extreme is a generation of young scholars who, having grown up with video games, take a celebratory approach, decrying the stigmatization of gaming and finding benefits like creative expression and enhanced strategic thinking skills in both developing and playing games. Taking a middle ground, scholars of race, class, and gender have adopted a blended approach to video games that denies neither their possibilities for propaganda nor their potential for liberation.

Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's well-written *Games of Empire* typifies this "third way" of understand-



*Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*

Edited by Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne

Routledge, 2009  
312 pages

ing video games. The authors draw heavily on concepts developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's in their popular social and political theory books *Empire* and *Multitude*. According to Hardt and Negri, we are living in a

new age of empire in which a network of nation-states, multi-national corporations, and non-governmental organizations combine to exert power in the name of expanding profits and elite interests. In this imperial order, we see massive inequalities, the blurring of work and play, and the securing of new markets by military might. The multitude—a radical, democratic resistance to globalized capital made up of publics worldwide—is, for Hardt and Negri, the only potential opponent to empire.

In *Games of Empire*, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter use video games as

a case study to illuminate the twin concepts of empire and multitude. Though theoretically satisfying, the book is approachable as the authors explore a diverse range of topics including the early development of video games and the "console wars" (Nintendo vs. Sega, Playstation vs. Xbox), the contemporary production process of games, and the militaristic and capitalistic logic of some of the most popular games.

In one fascinating chapter, they describe the studios where Electronic Arts (EA) designs its games. EA attracts many of its employees by touting the hacker mythology of "work-as-play," contrasting the supposedly "rebellious spirit" of their work environment with the rigid "stiffness of the corporate world." In practice, however, EA employees are regularly forced to work 80 to 100 hour weeks, sacrificing family life and any sort of real leisure time. Moreover, much of the work is so standardized that it's simply boring. As Dyer-Withe-

Scholars have adopted a blended approach to video games, denying neither their possibilities for propaganda nor their potential for liberation.

ford and de Peuter write, "...despite all the talk of creativity and innovation, EA's production facilities tend much more to a neo-Fordist, re-Taylorized disciplining of the cognitariat." In this way, EA's workshop exemplifies how labor is organized and exploited in empire.

Elsewhere, the authors recast the debate over the controversially violent game series, *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)*. While *GTA* has often been criticized for its violence, they argue that it is far more significant for the way it envisions the "imperial city," saying that *GTA* is not so much a "murder simulator" as an

“urban simulator.” By recreating the cities of empire, *GTA* reinforces both divisions of race and class and neoliberal logic in which “market imperatives are literally the rules of the game.” In *GTA: Vice City*, for example, Miami is unmistakably driven by the demands of commerce. The capitalist message becomes explicit when the game directs the player to “crack some commie skulls” by beating up striking workers. Likewise, though *GTA: San Andreas* innovates by featuring an African American protagonist, this character is the ultimate incarnation of the stereotypically criminal and sadistically violent black man. He moves through a racially segregated city where the divisions seem justified due to the criminality of the game’s African American population. As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter argue, the economic and race messages of *GTA* sync up neatly with a neo-liberal ideology of empire that attempts to justify the outrageous inequalities it perpetuates.

Lest the reader come away thinking video games are all bad, the authors

ter. *Velvet Strike*, a mod of *Counter-Strike*, encouraged players to spray-paint peace signs and make free love rather than shoot each other. Perhaps more meaningfully, in 2005, a French 26 year-old used Lionhead’s *The Movies*, an animated movie-making game, to create a film about his experience of the immigrant youth riots in the Parisian suburbs, explaining the outrage of young people living in these racially segregated communities. Other activist programmers have begun to design original games that undermine the ideology of empire, creating so-called “videogames of the oppressed” with titles like *Oligarchy*, *McDonald’s: The Video Game*, and the economic and environmental policy-making game, *QB-QUEST*. While such games cannot directly change real-life inequalities, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter see value in them as a means to mount a popular critique of an unjust society. Neither condemnatory nor celebratory, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter understand video games as an expression of empire, enacting and reinforcing

time, many of the most popular games have been first-person shooters, in which the player takes the perspective of a gun-toting hero who navigates streets and buildings, picking off opponents. Companies with top-selling series like *Halo*, *Call of Duty*, and the Pentagon-commissioned game *America’s Army* market a constant stream of sequels, each with a slightly different story and a new range of spectacular weapons. Military organizations use such games extensively for recruitment, training, and even rehabilitation for soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Among recreational players, these first-person shooter games simply spread the ideology of militarism.

The quality of the essays in *Joystick Soldiers* is uneven and reading just one or two will likely satisfy a casual reader. One of the most intriguing essays is Randy Nichols’s “Target Acquired” about the collaboration between the U.S. Army and Red Storm Entertainment to produce *America’s Army*, an incredibly popular “advergame” used for recruitment. The game teaches players the core values of the Army (“loyalty, duty, respect, selflessness, service, and honor”) and offers a first-person shooter with “realistic sights and sounds” set in the Afghani mountains. The development and use of *America’s Army*, which by 2007 had been downloaded 40 million times and had more than 8.5 million registered users, speaks to both the continued strength of the military-industrial complex and the burgeoning “military-entertainment complex.”

In another essay, Scott A. Lukas conducts interviews to examine how young people understand one of the central elements in any first-person shooter: the gun. Contrary to popular perception, gamers told Lukas they didn’t usually run through each level with

## The economic and racial messages of *Grand Theft Auto* sync up neatly with a neoliberal ideology of empire.

cite several examples of how games might just offer a chance to resist empire. Indeed, in several cases, video game makers have had their technology turned on them. With canny gamers nearly always able to hack the software, there have been a remarkable number of subversive “mods” (player-made modifications of a game). Using the game *Half Life*, a group of activists constructed a mod called *Escape from Woomera* to protest a controversial real-world Australian refugee detention cen-

global capitalism, neoliberalism, and militarism, but also offering a means of resistance for the multitude.

If *Games of Empire* offers a broad critique of how a global network of power benefits from video games, Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne’s edited volume, *Joystick Soldiers*, more narrowly focuses on the long relationship between video games and militarism. Indeed, one of the earliest games, 1962’s *Spacewar!*, was an intergalactic combat simulator. Since that

enormous automatic weapons blazing. Rather, they spoke about the importance of gun choice and how it had to fit the broader narrative of the game. The weapons were a way of expressing their character. One gamer was quoted as saying, "I don't care for games that focus on frenetic shooting without a sense of story..." while many other gamers even claimed that they "abhorred real-life violence," but saw the games as puzzles of strategic decision-making (like selecting particular guns).

An assortment of guns allows the user to choose between being a sloppy mass murderer or precise sniper, but it doesn't offer the user the choice of smiling, shaking hands, or talking it out with their digital opponent. In the same way that *GTA* reaffirms the ideology of neoliberalism, games like *America's Army* suggest that our range of choices is limited to militaristic ones. *Joystick Sol-*

*diers* does offer essays that show the possibility of resistance to the pervasive militarism of games, such as radical

(*Wii Fit Plus*), and music performance (*Rock Band*). By acknowledging such alternatives and offering examples of

## The medium is not the message. Video games can be art that challenges us to envision a better world.

"machinima" (movies made using the visuals from games) that critique the horror of war and unreality of games. But the volume largely suggests that video games cultivate the mind of the soldier, even in a couch potato.

Of course, not all video games are quite so serious. With the recent introduction of a new range of video games consciously targeted at women and casual gamers, some popular titles now feature perfectly peaceful activities like cooking (Wii's *Cooking Mama*), yoga

video games used to resist militarism and empire, the authors of both books argue that the medium is not the message: video games *can* be art that challenges us to envision a better world. Unfortunately, for now the bulk of the evidence suggests that most video games act as powerful tools for maintaining the militaristic empire in which we live.

**Andrew M. Lindner** is in the department of sociology at Concordia College in Moorhead, MN. He studies the intersection of mass media and political culture.

AD