

Book Review

**Jamie Woodcock (2019) *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
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*Reviewed by
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I had never been interested in video games – until I read *Marx at the Arcade*. Jamie Woodcock provides pleasurable reading and makes a convincing case that studying the video game industry reveals much about current modes of capitalist production, as well as the ways for workers’ self-emancipation. This research interest influences the author’s variety of publications and involvements such as the most up-to-date introduction to the gig economy (Woodcock and Graham, 2019), the Fairwork Foundation (<https://fair.work>) – a project aiming to increase working standards for platform workers – or the activist-research collective Notes from Below (<https://notesfrombelow.org>).

So why is it important to gain insights into the video game industry? According to Woodcock, there are three reasons. First, it is an important cultural commodity: millions of workers escape from the stress of the outside world or from boredom in their offices through video games. Second, being one of the most profitable sectors of the entertainment industry, it involves vast supply chains reaching from the production of hardware to the construction of software to the retailing of the commodity. Third, according to the author, the industry reflects current modes of production involving digitalisation, isolation, precarious employment and weak unionisation.

Recently, critical labour researchers pushed so-called workers’ inquiries as a research tool for contributing to worker’s self-organisation and eventually self-emancipation. For researchers, this means it is useful not only to ground their perspective within the working realities of people but also to conduct research as a collective project in an attempt to increase working-class power. Utilised also in an earlier work of the author (Woodcock, 2017), Woodcock applies this framework to the video game industry, along with the concept of class composition, to understand the working realities in the game industry.

Class composition involves three dimensions: technical, social and political composition. Understanding the technical composition of game workers covers the labour process and working conditions. The labour process in the video game industry is quite complex and interconnected; it needs a variety of professions such as designers, programmers, level designers, sound engineers and testers. Large video game corporations exploit the passion of video game designers, who often lack a clear distinction between play and work, and whose surplus labour is appropriated in already scheduled “crunch times”, that require long working days to meet stressful project deadlines. The work is not only stressful, but workers are also isolated. This is partly because non-disclosure agreements are widespread and silence workers, as they cannot talk about any aspect of their work. Researching this industry naturally is complicated, and organising workers even harder.

Social composition is the less-elaborated part of the book’s analysis. Generally, it asks how workers are embedded outside of work or, as the author puts it, “the factors that contribute to the

reproduction of labor power” (p. 86). For instance, the long-hours culture in video game design systematically excludes people with caring responsibilities; structurally these tend to be women. The systematic dependence of capitalism on non-paid reproduction work is a core focus of Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017), and that not only includes reproduction work, but what class composition analysis labels social composition. As class composition analysis is interested in how social composition of workers influences the degree “to which workers can resist and organize” (p. 87), it would be fruitful to see the links between those two emancipatory streams of research elaborated in the near future.

Political composition in the context of the video game industry refers to how game workers unite. Woodcock portrays several self-organised interest groups of video game workers, such as the Tech Workers Coalition and Game Workers Unite. Their organising effort filled a gap that mainstream unions left, as the latter considered this segment of non-standard workers to be unorganisable. The groups portrayed in the book aimed for a different logic of collective action: While for mainstream unions, organising means joining a union, the worker groups want to organise at their workplaces and build mutual solidarity.

In the second part of the book, Woodcock moves from analysing game workers’ class composition towards analysing the content of video games: “Investigating how videogames are played is clearly different from understanding how they are made” (p. 106). They are an important cultural commodity and thereby promote particular ideologies that legitimate capitalist power relations. First-person shooters are not only linked to the military-industrial complex, but its best-selling games are also shaped by a US-imperialistic perspective. Role-playing and strategy games centre on dominating opponents and enforce a specific view on how to run a society by privileging capitalist accumulation, imperialism and conflict over collective cooperation. Progressive video games, on the other hand, are rare. Phone story – a game about the exploitative supply chains of smartphone production – is one of the few successful examples.

While the book provides a necessary field study showing how to apply class composition analysis, it focuses less on a transnational perspective. In the book, we learn about the supply chains and the global division of labour. However, after reading *Marx at the Arcade* I am still curious about transnational organising efforts that go beyond designers but include “lower” strata. Were there any? If not, why not? What would be the obstacles; what could be the strategies? What about the consumers? Could they be included in workers’ self-emancipation? These questions also relate to the concept of class composition. At this point, it seems that the analytical focus centres on workers in a defined locality. If labour processes stretch over several localities, I would be interested in discovering how this affects class composition analysis. For instance, if workers in high-income countries benefit from the poor working conditions in supplier countries, how would that affect political composition?

Woodcock’s *Marx at the Arcade* provides important insights into an overlooked industry which shapes current popular culture. The book guides us through contemporary modes of capitalist production and provides a great opportunity to get to know class composition analysis. This makes *Marx at the Arcade* not only an interesting piece for people who like to game, but more generally an informative piece for critical labour researchers.

REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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