

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

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Volume 86, Fall 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074495ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0059>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

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Cite this review

MacDougall, R. (2020). Review of [Jamie Woodcock, *Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2019)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 86, 218–219. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lt.2020.0059>

Schrecker. His book fits well with recent historiography, including works by Clarence Taylor and Marjorie Heins.

While Feffer has written a much-needed corrective to standard impressions of U.S. anti-communism, *Bad Faith* could have been strengthened with comparisons to other “Little HUACs” and consideration of what high-level CPUSA leaders thought about Rapp-Coudert; after all, the Patty was based in New York City. And Feffer indicates that public financing of education was a hot political topic in Depression-era New York, which tempts one to wonder if the Rapp-Coudert Committee was primarily driven by ideology. All in all, though, Feffer does a brilliant job of resuscitating an important story about education workers in Depression-era New York.

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

VIDEO GAMES, computer games, electronic games—whatever we decide to call them, these games may be the paradigmatic media of 21st-century capitalism. Born in the interstices of the Cold War military-industrial complex, video games have become a colossal, planet-spanning industry. They form a global commodity chain, built on both immaterial digital labour and the all-too-material exploitation of human bodies and natural resources. And they are a laboratory for training workers and consumers, monetizing deep psychological drives and colonizing hours of our attention.

Jamie Woodcock’s *Marx at the Arcade* is a short, readable book that aims to analyze video games from a Marxist point of view. A lifelong gamer, a digital labor organizer, and a sociologist of

work, Woodcock is well qualified for this task. To write his first book, *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres*, Woodcock worked undercover in a non-unionized telemarketing call centre, chronicling the isolation and alienation of its workers and their surveillance and control by the employer. In *Marx at the Arcade*, he draws on history, sociology, and Marxism to investigate video games as industry, commodity, and pastime. (He does not quite resolve the debate over what to call these games: opting for “videogames” in the text of his book but “video games” on the back cover.)

Woodcock is active in efforts to unionize the game industry in the United Kingdom, and he is so clearly one of the good guys that it seems churlish to find fault with this well-meaning, enjoyable book. He makes a bit more to-do than is probably warranted about the incongruity of juxtaposing Marx and video games; applying a Marxist analysis to the game industry actually makes perfect sense. Indeed, the juxtaposition has been made before, and deeper analysis can be found in works like Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter’s *Games of Empire* or Christian Fuchs’ *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. But *Marx at the Arcade* offers an accessible entry to the intersection of video games and Marxism, and Woodcock is an amiable guide to the territory.

It is not a criticism to say that this is an entry-level book. But it must be asked: who is *Marx at the Arcade* for? Labour historians who read it won’t learn much about Karl Marx that they didn’t already know; dedicated gamers who read it won’t learn much about video games. So is *Marx at the Arcade* an introduction to Marx for gamers, or an introduction to video games for Marxists? One might think there would be more to be gained by writing the former, both in book sales and political impact. But despite a few

moves in that direction, this book primarily concerns itself with the latter.

The book's strongest section is what Marx would have called a "workers' inquiry" into the software side of the game industry: the exploitation of underpaid and precarious labor, the punishing practice of "crunch time" (the industry's term for long hours worked in game development), and the widespread use of non-disclosure agreements to prevent workers from talking about their work. Woodcock draws a damning portrait of an industry with an utter disregard for the well-being of its workers, one that pretends work is play and uses its own workers' love for video games to exploit them. The last chapter of this section, the "what is to be done?" discussion that is so often vague and disappointing in books of this kind, is refreshingly concrete. Woodcock describes the efforts of groups like Game Workers Unite and Tech Workers Coalition to unionize the game industry and sees reason for real optimism in their progress.

The second half of *Marx at the Arcade*, which turns to analyzing video games themselves, is a little disappointing. Not that a Marxist analysis of video game play is not worthwhile—quite the contrary. It's just that the findings here will feel obvious to anyone familiar with the games discussed: first-person shooters glorify violence; the *Civilization* series naturalizes capitalism and imperialism; war games like *Call of Duty* amount to advertisements for the military-industrial complex. All of these things are true, and all of them have been truisms of game studies for a decade at least. *Marx at the Arcade* has less to say about more recent developments, like the rise of free-to-play and "freemium" games, a business model in which games are free to begin playing but players are pressured to make regular in-game purchases, so their play keeps producing revenue long after a game's

initial release. Nor does Woodcock wrestle with the larger gamification of the internet, the way game-like mechanisms and incentives have been deployed in countless non-game settings to colonize and commodify the attention of millions who do not even think of themselves of gamers.

What the Old Moor would think of video games I cannot say, but game studies scholars have pushed harder on games and play than *Marx at the Arcade*, and it seems to me that darker conclusions lurk in Woodcock's own material. He opens *Marx at the Arcade* with memories of video games from his childhood, memories that resonate closely with my own. The unspoken thread connecting Woodcock's memories is not how much fun these games were to play, however, but how much work went into playing them. That theme, the blurring of lines between work and play, recurs throughout the book: the "work-as-play" culture of the software industry; the addictive, compulsive, repetitive nature of so many games; the combination of tedious play and unpaid work Woodcock describes as "playbour." If the Fordist capitalism of the 20th century strictly separated work time from play time, 21st-century capitalism now collapses that distinction, pretending our work is play and harvesting our leisure activities as unpaid digital labour. Those of us who grew up loving video games may find it hard to face their outsized role in that collapse.

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**Bruce Pietrykowski, *Work: What is Political Economy* (New York: Polity Books 2019)**

THIS REVIEW OF Bruce Pietrykowski's very insightful *Work* took much longer than I had planned because work got