GAMES OF EMPIRE

GLOBAL CAPITALISM AND VIDEO GAMES

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A million avatars inhabit this archipelago. At any given moment thousands are navigating pixilated islands, flying over open waters, wandering among rococo architecture, imbibing at house parties, bending their gender, chatting with friends, attending rock concerts, enjoying erotic encounters, and much else besides.[1] You are among them. Curiosity excited by the massive publicity surrounding *Second Life,* the virtual world created by Linden Labs of San Francisco, you signed up, hoping in this new society to escape the getting-and-spending spin cycle of your everyday existence. Yet soon you discover your getaway was hardly clean.

"Basic play" in *Second Life* is free. But Linden Labs charges a monthly fee for the ownership of land. And sale and rent of virtual buildings are the major source of wealth generation in this online domain. You can also make vehicles—from cars to spaceships—furniture, works of art, and machines; design landscapes, fauna, and flora; and craft the skin and gestures of your digital character. These creations are legally yours: in a breakthrough in game-world economics, Linden recognized players' intellectual property rights to user-generated content. Such property can be sold to other denizens of *Second Life* for the "Linden dollars" that are its official currency. But these transactions link to a more mundane market. At time of writing, one U.S. dollar bought 250 Linden dollars at *Second Life*'s official LindeX currency exchange. Speculating on the chances of transforming virtual goods into actual profits, many entrepreneurs have flocked to

Second Life, and some real fortunes have been made. Yet the income distribution in *Second Life* is strangely familiar; while about 20 percent of its residents constitute a Linden-dollar-wealthy minority, the rest languish in virtual poverty.

Virtual poverty is, of course, not the same as actual poverty. Playing *Second Life* requires a computer and a broadband connection, which in itself limits access to the upper percentiles of global wealth. The majority of *Second Life*'s population are in their twenties, evenly divided by gender, living in Europe, the United States, or Japan (the most active players, however, are in the Cayman Islands, a notorious haven for shady financial capital, suggesting Linden dollars have become a means of money laundering) (Au 2007a, 2007b). Over 60 percent hold a college degree, most make at least $45,000 per year, and 40 percent earn $90,000 annually (Au 2007a). This is a demographic that attracts corporate marketers and fills the streets of *Second Life* cities with familiar logos. Apple, Adidas, Nike, Nissan, Volkswagen, Toyota, American Apparel, CBS, Dell, Sun Microsystems, and many other actual companies have an in-world presence, installing not just billboards but in-game stores where you can purchase virtual equivalents of offline products, supposedly stimulating actual sales, and certainly keeping property fees flowing into Linden Labs' coffers, building the company's current $20 million capitalization. Maybe you were *told* to join *Second Life:* employers are embracing it as a "fun" platform for training workers and conducting meetings; IBM owns several "private islands" that it uses for workgroups (Whyte 2007). However you came to enter this new dimension, your personalized avatar is powered not just by mouse clicks but by computer servers that, according to one estimate, annually use about 1,752 kilowatts of electricity per *Second Life* resident, as much as is consumed by an average actual Brazilian, and generating about as much CO_2 as does a 2,300-mile journey in an SUV (Carr 2006).

Inhabitants of *Second Life* are, in other words, class-divided, property-owning, commodity-exchanging, currency-trading, networking, energy-consuming subjects of a comprehensively capitalist order. Welcome to your second life—much like the first.

This is not enough for you. You want a virtual life that is more adventurous, more challenging. You want to be all that you can. Frustrated by your failed escape attempt, you sign up for another networked game: *America's Army.* Now you are in the Afghan mountains. It is the middle of the night. Your squad has been assigned to

assault a terrorist training camp and secure a computer terminal storing valuable intelligence information. As a rifleman with the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, it is your job to penetrate the enemy compound, eliminating any resistance along the way. You turn on your night-vision goggles. The all-clear signal comes through on the radio. You charge the compound. When you're almost at the entrance, tracers start to fly over your head. A grenade explodes to your left, taking out one of your buddies. Ducking behind a large rock, you spot muzzle flash coming from a window on the second floor. You raise your M16-A2 assault rifle and fire a three-round burst. A terrorist falls out of the window like a rag doll. Invigorated by your first kill, you get up and rush forward again. As you pass through a door, there is another eruption of gunfire. Suddenly you're hit. Those tedious rounds of "Basic Training" you had to grind through before getting to actual combat clearly weren't thorough enough.

Downloaded over seven million times (Verklin and Kanner 2007, 90) since its release on the Fourth of July, 2002, *America's Army* is an online first-person shooter intended to put into playable form the military service performed by some of the nearly three million active soldiers and reservists employed by the United States. Money is no matter in *America's Army;* it is free to play online, courtesy of a publicly funded, multi-million-dollar investment by the U.S. Department of Defense. A more recent addition to the *America's Army* Web site is "Real Heroes," which includes a list of the accomplishments of soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan who have earned awards for valor, and gamers can read profiles or watch video interviews of soldiers talking about their childhood and military experiences.

As you log in and out from your skirmish via the home page of *America's Army,* you have the opportunity to link directly to the Web site goarmy.com. Twenty-eight percent of all visitors to *America's Army*'s Web page click through (Au 2002a). It is a major recruitment site for the U.S. Army, one that reportedly has a higher success rate in attracting enlistments than any other method. The battle you experienced as a cathartic bloodbath, a bit of fun, is for the world's undisputed armed superpower a serious public-relations device targeted at a generation of game players and intended to solve the crisis of a military struggling to meet its intake targets for the fatal front lines of the war on terror.

Second Life and *America's Army* are both highly successful games. Recently, however, there have been some troubles in these virtual

domains—small disturbances to the commercial economy of the one, to the recruitment lures of the other. The corporate influx to *Second Life* invited by Linden Labs provoked dissent from players who saw it as a violation of the libertarian ethic that they believed informed "their" virtual world. On the day that IBM's CEO appeared in-game, the Elf King, monarch of the influential Elf Clan, abdicated in protest. Acts of anticorporate satire, spoof, and sabotage have been rife: a CopyBot program ran amok with intellectual property, cloning copyrighted items in a cornucopian frenzy, and a guerrilla Liberation Army vaporized a Reebok store with nuclear weapons.

And while it sometimes seemed that Linden Labs could use a bit of help from *America's Army,* the Pentagon's game was itself disrupted. In March 2006, on the third anniversary of the Iraq invasion, the artist and professor Joseph Delappe of the University of Nevada logged in under the user name "dead-in-Iraq" and began using the chat channel to transmit the name, age, service branch, and date of death of real soldiers killed in the occupation (Clarren 2006). Meanwhile, back in *Second Life,* though elfin protest hadn't warded off Big Blue, things were getting virtually grittier. On September 25, 2007, IBM's "corporate campus" in *Second Life* was the site of a digital protest organized by an international labor union supporting striking Italian IBM workers—prompting one journalist in *Second Life* to ask, "Avatar-based workers unite?" (Au 2007c). These were not just fanciful exuberances but turbulences at the edge of virtual worlds embedded in wartime capitalism.

Which brings us to the argument of this book. The "militainment" of *America's Army* and the "ludocapitalism" of *Second Life* display the interaction of virtual games and actual power in the context of Empire, an apparatus whose two pillars are the military and the market (Burston 2003; Dibbell 2006). Consider that the virtualities of *Second Life* feed back into the actualities of capital via the medium of the Linden dollar, and that the virtualities of *America's Army* cycle into the actualities of combat via the Web link to the U.S. Army home page. Add, moreover, that the two games are connected: the high-energy consumption and consumer goods of *Second Life* are what *America's Army* recruits soldiers to fight and die for. The two games reassert, rehearse, and reinforce Empire's twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen: *Second Life* recapitulates patterns of online shopping, social networking, and digital labor crucial to global capitalism; *America's Army* is but one among an arsenal

of simulators that the militarized states of capital—preeminently the United States—depend on to protect their power and use to promote, prepare, and preemptively practice deadly operations in computerized battlespace (Blackmore 2005). Yet the examples of digital dissent in *Second Life* and *America's Army* show that not all gamers accept the dominion of what James Der Derian (2001) terms "MIME-NET"—the military-industrial-media-entertainment network. Minor gestures that they are, these protests nevertheless suggest a route from game virtualities to another sort of actuality, that of the myriad activisms of twenty-first-century radicals seeking to construct an alternative to Empire.

Our hypothesis, then, is that *video games are a paradigmatic media of Empire*—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism—*and* of some of the forces presently challenging it. But investigation of this claim requires setting down some intellectual foundations.

Play Factory

Some forty years have passed since digital games were invented in the nocturnal hacking of Pentagon programmers who whiled away tedious hours tending giant military computers by transforming the electronic screens of nuclear war preparation into whimsical playgrounds. Within a few years, Atari, the first commercial games company, had converted this bold experiment in computer liberation into an entertainment commodity. Over the following decades, a string of legendary game firms—Nintendo, Sega, Sony—perfected and popularized the hardware and software of this commodity: by 2000, the sale of over one million newly released PlayStation 2s in the console's first week on the market confirmed that gaming had become a staple in the media diet of young people. Today digital play is a vast industrial enterprise. News in 2007 that the first day of sales for Microsoft's *Halo 3* reached $170 million heralded the most commercially successful media entertainment launch in history (BBC 2007a), or that about twelve million people around the planet disport themselves as orcs, elves, trolls, and paladins in the massively multiplayer *World of Warcraft* (Caoili 2008), or that a merger between two giant game companies, Blizzard and Activision, commanded a market value of some $18.9 billion are just a few of a stream of factoids announcing the market triumph of virtual play (*Economist* 2007a, 2007b). Although networked virtual worlds such as *Second Life* and *America's Army* are rapidly expanding

and are often predicted to succeed television as mass entertainment (Castronova 2005a, 2007), they are only a corner of a much bigger field of digital gaming. By far the most populous and lucrative part is that contested for by competing video game consoles, the distant and infinitely more powerful "seventh-generation" descendants of Atari's primordial TV-connectable gaming device—Microsoft's Xbox 360, Sony's PlayStation 3, Nintendo's Wii. A smaller but still vital sector is devoted to games played on personal computers. Indeed, mobile gaming on devices from the handheld consoles that started with Nintendo's Game Boy, now succeeded by its DS and Sony's PlayStation Portable (PSP), to play-capable cell phones, is now giving programmed-play culture a 24/7 availability. Taken together, this combination of digital game machines and gaming practices—an ensemble that we shorthand as "virtual games"—amounts to a techno-cultural-commercial nexus of formidable depth and scope.

The common boast about virtual games is that they are now "bigger then Hollywood." This disguises a more complicated reality. In North America, sales of games rival the cinema box office, though globally they lag behind them (Lowenstein 2005; BBC 2007b). But games lack the ancillary revenue streams of film, from advertising to DVD and cable television release. So cinema remains a larger commercial enterprise, although this may change as "advergaming" experiments intensify. On the other hand, games do seem set to overtake the music industry in revenues (Andersen 2007).

More significant than either of these comparisons, however, is that games are increasingly integrated *with* film, music, and other media. In a world of fiercely bargained cultural properties, titles and themes are traded between cinema, comics, and video games; *Spider-Man* becomes a game, *World of Warcraft* a film, and *The Simpsons* travels from television to both video game and film. For a music industry facing flagging CD sales, licensing tracks to digital games is now a vital revenue source and has become a way for bands to extend their exposure. The runaway success of *Guitar Hero* exemplifies the way virtual games are not just contending with older media but, as important, melding and morphing with them in a convergent entertainment complex.

A decade ago, it might have been countered that, profitable as gaming is, its influence remains limited to a subculture of adolescent and preadolescent males. But these demographics are changing: the Entertainment Software Association claims that in 2008 some 60 percent of North Americans play virtual games (ESA 2008a). The altered

composition of digital play is especially clear in regard to age: people who grew up with games persist with them as adults, so that the average gamer's age now hovers around thirty. Gender is more problematic. In North America, industry surveys, which have in the past made hyperbolic claims of near-gender-equity gaming, now admit that some 60 percent of players are male, 40 percent female (ESA 2008a). The testosterone profile of games, though waning sharply since the early 1990s, is far from abolished. But the success of apparently female-friendly devices such as the Nintendo Wii points to further shifts. Moreover, in Asia, where digital gaming's future expansion will probably be fastest, gendered patterns of play are significantly different from those in North America, with more women participating in a culture of primarily online games than in the West (Krotoski 2004; Maragos 2005a). So even though women play fewer virtual games than men, and often play in different ways (see Kerr 2006), it does seem that game culture is becoming more gender universal.

Planetary game revenues are forecasted to soar in 2009 to $57 billion (Androvich 2008c). Such figures are often held to qualify virtual games as a "global media industry" (*Economist* 2007b). Most of the sales of this supposedly global media are in North America, Europe, and Japan, with the United States still the largest single market. Game culture is thus heavily concentrated in the developed, rich zones of advanced capitalism. Rapid expansion of digital games into Asia is, however, giving it a new territorial dimension. Moving from South Korea—one of the most intensive gaming cultures in the world—into China, a game industry focused on online play in collective cybercafé settings is opening up vast new player populations. Nonetheless, for the majority of the world's inhabitants, a mint copy of *Halo 3,* let alone the Xbox 360 on which it plays with its $400 price tag, remains a luxury for all but elites. This does not, however, mean that games are completely out of mass reach. Both large-scale pirating of game software (which the officials of the global media industry energetically try to stamp out) and the market in old consoles and game devices give games a circulation outside the planet's affluent regions, into Latin America, the Middle East, and southern Asia: we have seen sports games played in wooden booths on the streets of Cairo's Old City, black-market game bazaars in the center of Delhi (where an "original" current hit—that is, an initial copy—goes for five dollars, with a copy of a copy selling for even less), and Game Boy handhelds in the slums of Mexico City.

There is another aspect to the internationalization of digital games: it is not just consumption but production that is going global. As much as any other industry, the video game business works with transcontinental value chains. The U.S. and Japanese console manufacturers—Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo—have their new machines assembled offshore, in Latin America, eastern Europe, and now, especially, southern China (in factories that provide video games as part of recreational facilities intended to contain workers in their dormitory-style compounds). North American, European, and Japanese game publishers are increasingly driving back production costs by outsourcing sections of software development to studios in Bangalore, Bucharest, or Ho Chi Minh City (see Gallaugher and Stoller 2004; Johns 2006). And ultimately the components of game machines come from sources such as the mines of the Congo and end up in the electronic waste dumps of Nigeria and India. In both consumption and production, play and work, the game industry is omnipresent around the planet, though its pleasures and its pains are unevenly distributed.

This fractured economic order is far from stable. In 2008–9 a compounding series of crises shook the market system, from subprime crisis to stock market plunge to credit crunch to full-bore recession. Amid the ongoing convulsions, however, global capitalism has one consolation left for its increasingly desperate subjects: you may have lost your job (or will never be able to retire from it), you can't afford to go out, but you can always stay home (if you still have one) and play a video game. As Lehman Brothers, Bear Sterns, and Merrill Lynch fell and General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler reeled round the edges of their graves, North American sales of game hardware and software hit all-time highs in 2008. Forecasters claimed that virtual play was recession proof; a maturing audience of stay-at-home gamers would cocoon around the Wii, Xbox 360, or PS3 or migrate to *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life* to enjoy a diversion from economic disaster. Such estimates of game-business resilience may prove optimistic: by 2009 job losses and studio closures were announced by game-industry icons such as Sony and Electronic Arts.

To these quantitative measures of the digital play industry's importance should be added another, qualitative one. To a greater degree than perhaps any previous media other than the book, virtual games are a direct offshoot of their society's main technology of production. From their origins in nuclear-age simulations, games have sprung from the machine system central to postwar capital's power and profit—the

computer. Born out of the same military research matrix that gener-
ated the personal computer and the Internet, virtual games continue
to be a testing ground for some of the most futuristic experiments in
digital technology: online play worlds incubate artificial intelligences,
consoles are linked into grid computing systems, and games are the
media of choice for neurobiological experiments in emotional stimu-
lation and telekinetic digital devices driven by brain activity alone.
More mundanely, games once suspect as delinquent time wasters are
increasingly perceived by corporate managers and state administrators
as formal and informal means of training populations in the practices
of digital work and governability (see Beck and Wade 2004). A media
that once seemed all fun is increasingly revealing itself as a school for
labor, an instrument of rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of
advanced techno-capital; all the more reason, then, to subject virtual
games to political critique through a theoretical optic whose key con-
cept is Empire.

Empire Theory

"Empire" is a term with a long and bloody genealogy (see Pieterse
2004 and Colás 2007 for overviews). To connect it to virtual games
is not to import some distant, gloomy concern to the carefree world
of play. Games themselves nominate "empire" as a theme in a strategy
genre that runs from the text-based *Hamurabi,* an important game in
the freeware culture of the early 1970s, to Microsoft's *Age of Empires*
franchise to the even more frankly named *Empire,* the latest iteration
of Creative Assembly's *Total War.*[2] If one were to throw into the mix
a few games about business dynasties *(Casino Empire, Restaurant
Empire, Circus Empire),* an entire study of games about empire could
be written. This, however, is not our purpose. Instead we set out to lo-
cate virtual games within a larger analysis of, and controversy about,
actual global Empire.

Our point of departure is the recent and controversial definition
offered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) in their book
Empire. They claim we are witnessing the emergence of a new plane-
tary regime in which economic, administrative, military, and com-
municative components combine to create a system of power "with no
outside" (Hardt and Negri 2000, xii). Earlier examples of imperialism,
such as ancient Rome, sixteenth-century Spain, or nineteenth-century
Britain, were in their time rooted in specific nations that dominated the

world map. What distinguishes Hardt and Negri's Empire from these earlier empires is that it is not directed by any single state. Rather, it is a system of rule crystallized by what Karl Marx (1858) called the "world market." Empire is governance by global capitalism. This domination works, Hardt and Negri say, through "network power" (2000, 167). Its decentered, multilayered institutional agencies include nation-states but extend to include multinational corporations, like Microsoft and Sony, world economic bodies, like the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund, international organizations like the United Nations, and even nongovernmental organizations, like the Red Cross. What results from the interaction of these nodes is an imperium more comprehensive than any preceding one.

But this is not just an analysis of international relations. Hardt and Negri offer something more ambitious, a comprehensive account of conditions of work, forms of subjectivity, and types of struggle in contemporary capital. Empire is global in terms not only of its geographic reach but also of its social scope. Capital now taps its subjects' energies at multiple points: not just as workers (as labor power) but also as consumers (the "mind share" targeted by marketers), as learners (university degrees as vocational preparation), and even as a source of raw materials (the bio-value extracted for genetic engineering). Empire is thus a regime of "biopower"—a concept borrowed from the philosopher Michel Foucault (1990, 135–45)—exploiting social life in its entirety.

Within this system, Hardt and Negri (2000, 289–94) ascribe an especially important place to what they and others term "immaterial labor" (Dowling, Nunes, and Trott 2007; Lazzarato 1996; Virno and Hardt 1996). Immaterial labor is work involving information and communication, "the labor that produces the informational, cultural, or affective element of the commodity" (Virno and Hardt 1996, 262). The importance of immaterial labor to Empire, what makes it in Hardt and Negri's view the key activity in contemporary capitalism, can be grasped by thinking of how central media, marketing, communication, and surveillance are, not just in creating new commodities—such as video games—but also in managing the workplaces that produce them and in appealing to the consumers who buy them. It is through the fiber-optic cables and wireless connections of digital networks run by immaterial labor that the tendrils of business stretch around the planet, the equivalents for today's Empire of the Roman roads that tied together Caesar's dominion.

Yet if this picture of a world swallowed by capital is all there was to Empire, it would be just another account of corporate domination of a familiar sort. What made people take notice was that it spoke about opposition to capitalism—even of alternatives to it. That touched a contemporary nerve. The book came out at the high-water mark of the struggles against corporate globalization that were racing around the planet from the jungles of Chiapas to the streets of Seattle. Hardt and Negri declared this wave of activism signaled a new revolutionary power—"the multitude" (2000, 393–414). Precisely because capital is increasingly everywhere and has subsumed increasingly everything, rebellion against it upsurges at many points, from work to school to leisure, and from many agencies, including workers and unions but also indigenous communities struggling over land rights, students opposing the corporate campus, antipoverty groups fighting for a living wage, migrants contesting the oppression of borders, environmentalists demanding ecological conservation, open-source advocates promoting knowledge sharing, and many others. The multitude is thus made up of many protagonists pushing for a more democratic deployment of global resources. Transnational connections, cultural hybridities, and new technologies are seen by Hardt and Negri as containing immense potential for the multitude. Crucially, they spoke not of antiglobalization but of a movement for *another* globalization, an "exodus" from capital (210). Compared with the characteristic gloom of the Left, their book was a breath of hope.

Empire attracted wide attention not only from academics but also from activists and journalists (Eakin 2001). This was extraordinary, since the book was written at a high level of abstraction and openly declared a radical, anticapitalist position. Its success was in part due to timeliness: the reek of tear gas from the streets of Genoa, Seoul, and Washington seemed to rise off the page. But *Empire* also had intellectual and political credentials. Behind it lay Negri's history as a militant in the Italian *autonomia* movement (for overviews, see Cleaver 1977; Dyer-Witheford 1999; Wright 2002), a role that earned him imprisonment and exile; both authors' engagement with the work of the philosophers Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault; and a series of debates within a Parisian Left locked in battle against neoliberal governments. *Empire* therefore encapsulated a wider experimental fusion of Marxist militancy and poststructuralist theory. It circulated novel concepts—biopower, immaterial labor, multitude, exodus—among students of globalization and its discontents and, in

the process, catalyzed considerable excitement. It even seems to have at least partially inspired a computer game: a group of Serbian digital artist-developers produced *Civilization IV: Age of Empire,* displaying the highly multileveled power apparatus of global capital that Hardt and Negri described.[3]

Empire also drew fierce criticism, with some of the most incisive response coming from the Left (see Balakrishnan 2003; Boron 2005; Passavant and Dean 2004). There was intense debate between theorists of Empire and analysts of "imperialism." For many Marxists, the concept of a decentered transnational Empire seriously underestimated the continuing importance of the nation-state for capitalist power (Wood 2003). In particular, it fatally downplayed the importance of U.S. hegemony as a force driving globalization and, along with this, the continued subordination of the global South to Northern capital (Arrighi 2003; Seth 2003). There were also other objections to Hardt and Negri's work, and not only from more traditional left perspectives. Their concept of "immaterial labor" was widely criticized for emphasizing the importance of information work at the expense of older—but still alive-and-well—forms of drudgery and exploitation: what about all those factories in China, those mines in Africa? (Dunn 2004; Dyer-Witheford 2001; Moore 2001). And the idea of "the multitude," which Hardt and Negri seemed to propose as a replacement for the working class, was charged with being nebulous and romantic, resting on a rosy confidence in a revolt that would spontaneously self-organize from wildly disparate sources (Laclau 2004; Rustin 2004).

Criticisms gained force from the dramatic turn of global politics in 2001. Only a year after the publication of *Empire,* the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the subsequent so-called war on terror, appeared to end the very project of corporate globalization of which *Empire* was in many ways an interpretation. The supernationalism of the Bush regime, the Iraq war, and the associated rift between the United States and its European allies made the idea of a unified international capitalist regime dubious. The daily swap of blood for oil around Baghdad reminded everyone that capital didn't just run on code, and that some vital resources weren't so immaterial after all. And the chill of post-9/11 wartime politics—think Patriot Act—subdued the Seattle-era oppositional optimism to which Hardt and Negri gave voice. The times suddenly seemed more conducive to analyses such as David Harvey's (2005a) account of a "new imperialism"—essentially a continuation of old imperialisms based on

resource grabs by nationally, and particularly U.S.-based, corporations (see also Chomsky 2003; Lens 2003).

More or less holding the line, Hardt and Negri's 2004 follow-up to *Empire, Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire,* emphasized the role of military force in maintaining capitalist order, cited global mobilizations against the Iraq war as an example of the multitude in action, and argued that the protracted fiasco of the occupation demonstrated that "go-it-alone" U.S. unilateralism was, in fact, unsustainable. Other writers have attempted a synthesis between the conflicting accounts of Empire and imperialism and have introduced new elements to the analysis. *Afflicted Powers* by the collective Retort (2005, 5, 4) describes a pugnacious "American empire" driven by oil capital and the military-industrial complex, opposed from one side by reactionary jihadis and from another by the "multitudinous" progressive forces theorized by Hardt and Negri. Retort stresses the importance of media spectacle and its various "emotion machines" in these struggles (Anderson, cited in Retort 2005, 21).

We too take an intermediate position. In our view, Hardt and Negri were right to suggest that post–Cold War planetary capital is a new social formation whose analysis demands the reworking of many categories of critical political thought. They also, however, overstated several of their points and missed some important features of an emergent scene. So we work with a revised and modulated version of Empire. By Empire, *we* mean the global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative neoliberal states, among whom the United States still clings, by virtue of its military might, to an increasingly dubious preeminence. This is a regime of biopower based on corporate exploitation of myriad types of labor, paid and unpaid, for the continuous enrichment of a planetary plutocracy. Among these many toils, immaterial labor in information and communication systems, such as the media, is not necessarily most important. But it clearly occupies a strategic position because of its role in intellectually and affectively shaping subjectivities throughout other parts of the system. This Empire is an order of extraordinary scope and depth. Yet it also is precarious. It confronts a set of interlocking crises—ecological (global warming), energy (peak oil), epidemiological (HIV/AIDS and other pandemics). Its governance is threatened by tensions between a declining United States and a rising China that could either result in some supercapitalist accommodation, consolidating Empire, or split

the world into warring Eastern and Western empires. Its massive in-equalities catalyze resistances from below. Some, such as al-Qaeda, are disastrously regressive. Others, like the global justice movement—whose complex diversity Hardt and Negri's multitude gets closer to than any other category their critics can offer—contain the seeds of a better alternative. Empire is flush with power and wealth, yet close to chaos. This is the context in which we place virtual games.

Ludic Scholars

The growing body of academic game studies presents both insights for and obstacles to the perspective that orients this book. Schematically, scholars can be said to have responded to this young medium with one of three broad stances: condemnatory, celebratory, or critical, posi-tions whose popularity and influence have approximately followed a chronological sequence.

The first, and longest, condemnatory phase, from 1972 (the year of the foundation of Atari) to just before 2000, was one of malign ne-glect. Relatively little was written by academics about virtual games. Much of what was bore the characteristic mark of generational "moral panic" about new media. Authors were unfamiliar with video games, and the culture surrounding them, and displayed an a priori distaste; the focus was on the "problem" of video game play, preeminently the alleged role of violent games in causing real-life crimes (Dominick 1984). Psychological studies were often based on simplistic models of "media effects," supported by laboratory research isolated from real-world contexts and variables (see Gunter 2004).

Other perspectives were rare. There were no major studies of video games by critical political economists comparable to those of news-papers, television, radio, or cinema. Cultural analysis of video game content was almost equally scarce, at least until Nintendo made its mark on North American children. Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power* (1991) provided a nuanced analysis of videogaming in the wider networks of commodified children's toys and media. More typi-cal of this phase, in both its hostility and its knowledge base, was Eugene Provenzo's *Video Kids: Making Sense of Nintendo* (1991), a searing indictment of video games' misogynistic violence. Such bluntly condemnatory perspectives—which persist to this day—surged after the Columbine school shootings in 1999, whose teenage perpetrators were, journalists rarely failed to mention, avid *Doom* players, a con-

nection that was cemented by texts bearing titles like *Stop Training Our Kids to Kill* (Grossman and DeGaetano 1999).

Studies of this period raise issues of continuing importance: we too will engage with the game violence debate. But the narrowness of the psychological theories on which they are based is of limited relevance to the broad-level analysis of societal power we wish to contribute, and their denunciatory mode is at odds with a perspective that sees an appreciation of the pleasures and the possibilities—in short, the ambivalence—of virtual games as crucial to the analysis of this medium.

Eventually scholars, many of whom had by now grown up with consoles, got game. Around the turn of the new millennium, a second phase of game commentary emerged, whose trademark stance was *celebratory.* This shift was started mainly by an increasingly sophisticated body of work published outside academia by game reviewers, game journalists, and amateur game historians (Herman 1997; Herz 1997; Kent 2001; Poole 2000). Contrasting sharply with earlier perspectives, these commentators presented video games as media at least potentially as rich as literature or film; took games' aesthetic and narrative qualities seriously; found complexity, conviviality, and cooperation—rather than isolation—in game culture; and were skeptical about its stigmatization by moral authorities.

Academics also contributed to this more affirmative evaluation. A leading figure was Henry Jenkins, a professor in MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program, who has written prolifically about the aesthetic merits and cultural importance of games (Jenkins with Fuller 1995; Jenkins 2005), supported the "girl games" movement (Cassell and Jenkins 1998), defended video games from the charge of being "murder simulators" at U.S. Senate hearings (Jenkins 1999), and enthusiastically situated DIY game-making activities such as "mods" (player-made modifications to commercial games) and "machinima" (game-generated cinema) in the wider context of participatory fan cultures (Jenkins 2006a). While not entirely uncritical of video game culture, Jenkins's assessment of the medium is generally optimistic, an outlook that has encouraged game companies to support his influential program with donations to the Convergence Culture Consortium, demonstrating that, as academics become more sophisticated about games, the industry has become increasingly savvy about academic alliances (see Young 2007).

Upbeat reevaluations of the medium helped lay the foundation for the emergence of game studies as a recognized academic field, complete

with its own journals *(Games and Culture)*, conferences (DiGRA), an-thologies (Raessens and Goldstein 2005), citations from the canonical texts of play theory (Caillois 1958; Huizinga 1944), and in-house disputes, such as the polemics between "narratologists"—who view games as stories or as texts to be analyzed in the same way as books, films, and television—and "ludologists," who want to discuss games as sports, structured by rules, goals, and strategies (see Aarseth 2001; Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004).

Much of this literature is concerned with delineating the specific properties of games as media, describing their genres and conventions, and forming a lexicon with which to describe them. When the literature does look to games in their larger context, the assessment is often positive, asserting the creative empowerment of game players compared to the audiences of the broadcast media. Rob Cover captures this sentiment when he writes, "Interactivity achieves a new stage in the democratization of user participation with the electronic game" (2004, 173). If in the earlier, condemnatory phase the gamer was a bad subject, delinquent, or victim, in this second, more enthusiastic period, she is the empowered denizen of the postmodern mediascape, happily prepared by play for rewarding digital careers. The title of Steven Johnson's best-selling book conveys the inversion: *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2003).

Such eager, sophisticated game studies, which ride a wider wave of academic enthusiasm for popular culture, are a corrective to the not-so-well-informed condemnations of the previous phase. But in giving this media some overdue respect, they often bend the stick the other way, ignoring the political and economic contexts of virtual games, skipping lightly over the conditions of paid and unpaid labor in game production, reinscribing platitudes about the information-age jobs that gamers are training themselves for, and failing to raise awkward questions about the global order for which gamers are now the new model of empowered participants.

Intertwined with the emergence of academic game studies is, however, a third position, the one that we see this book as working within. It tempers both knee-jerk condemnation of, and celebratory euphoria about, virtual games with a critical political analysis of the medium. Again, the impetus comes not from purely academic voices but also from media artists, independent game designers, and media literacy advocates who are developing hacks, alternative minigames, and cur-

ricula that trouble, probe, or depart from the norms of official game culture (Bogost 2007; Ochalla 2007; Schleiner 2002, 2004).

These theorists write critically about games not to dismiss them but often in the hope that they might be otherwise. They situate digital play within formations of societal power and thus depart, to varying degrees, from the formalism of much of game theory. This research does not deny the singular attributes of digital play—but neither does it assume they simply transcend "old-media" problems of ideology and political control. And unlike earlier generations of media-effects perspectives that emphasized individual psychologies, the new research addresses social structures, corporate contexts, and institutional forces. Finally, in contrast to the boosters who have discovered the training merits of gaming, it does not assume that socialization for the prevailing social order is benign; instead it looks at games, and the discourses surrounding them, as vectors of contending interests and agendas, and as inculcating skills that can serve—but also potentially subvert—established norms.

Among the currents here are those addressing gender, race, militarism, and corporate power. Probably the most sustained is the criticism of virtual games as a masculine domain from academic feminists, women working in the industry, and female gamers, hackers, and digital artists (Alloway and Gilbert 1998; Flanagan 2002; Laurel 2001). Initially these critiques of "toys for the boys" focused on the gender inequities of game company employment and the traces this left in virtual worlds where women were invisible other than as "virgins and vixens" (Buchanan 2000). More recent takes acknowledge the ambiguities of increasingly common Lara Croft–type action sheroes (Deuber-Mankowsky 2005; Richards and Zaremba 2004). How recent changes in the gender composition of game culture—slow but significant in game play, near imperceptible in game production—will affect feminist critique remains to be seen. Meanwhile, although critical race-theory work on games has taken longer to emerge, depictions of ethnicity in games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* have stimulated analysis of a new media whose screens and studios are overwhelmingly white (Chan 2005; Everett 2005; Leonard 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; Marriott 1999; Ow 2000).

Two recent waves of social activism have added new elements to this critical game politics. The first was the wave of counterglobalization protests that culminated in the protests of Seattle and Genoa, the second the international mobilizations against the Iraq war. Both

generated a politically spirited alternative game culture and an accompanying analytic literature. The sort of digital dissent from both corporate and military power that we have already mentioned is discussed in Anne-Marie Schleiner's texts on her own game hacks (2002), Alexander Galloway's search for a "countergaming" tradition (2006a, 107–26), and Ian Bogost's work on the design of "persuasive games" for political issues (2007). Looking at the situation from the other side of the hill, the study of military links to games, though predating 9/11 (Lenoir 2000), has been accelerated by the war on terror (Der Derian 2001; Halter 2006a; Herbst 2005; Stockwell and Muir 2003).

In all of this, gaming's relation to the combined military and capitalist power of what we term Empire has not been ignored. Important grounds for such an analysis were prepared some time ago in an extraordinary essay by Julian Stallabrass (1993), "Just Gaming," later included in his book *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (Stallabrass 1996). Writing from the perspective of the Frankfurt school, Stallabrass discussed computer games' fascination with war and the incessant reproduction within their worlds of market structures, concluding, "In their structure and content, computer games are a capitalist and deeply conservative form of culture" (1996, 107). The essay is suffused with a sardonic contempt that veers close to a condemnatory antigame rant. Yet Stallabrass zeroed in on issues such as "virtual trading," which would a few years later attract a great deal of attention. Although Stallabrass flattened out elements of conflict and contradiction within virtual play, we find his account an important backdrop to our own attempt to understand the interaction of games and capitalism.[4]

More recently, McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory* (2007) has visited this terrain, though arriving at different conclusions. He argues that video games provide an "atopian" refuge from a real-life "gamespace" dominated by a "military-industrial complex" whose arbitrary power plays rule our lives. Virtual play is, he proposes, a revelatory antidote to the false promises of neoliberal capitalism: "The digital game plays up everything that gamespace merely pretends to be: *a fair fight, a level playing field, unfettered competition*" (Wark 2007, para. 21). This is a persuasive account of the compensatory pleasures of gaming in a cynical age—though the point we want to press is how far the forces of armored neoliberalism have already broken into this ludic refuge via networked games like *America's Army* and *Second Life,* compelling critical gamer theory to explore responses more radical than atopian immigration.

We aim to build on the existing body of critical game analysis to construct something that is so far lacking: an account that explores virtual games within a *system* of global ownership, privatized property, coercive class relations, military operations, and radical struggle. We began this task in an earlier collaborative book that examined the video game industry as an aspect of an emerging postindustrial, post-Fordist capitalism (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003). Now we offer a more directly political perspective on what we call "games of Empire."

Games of Empire

Virtual games are exemplary media of Empire. They crystallize in a paradigmatic way its constitution and its conflicts. Just as the eighteenth-century novel was a textual apparatus generating the bourgeois personality required by mercantile colonialism (but also capable of criticizing it), and just as twentieth-century cinema and television were integral to industrial consumerism (yet screened some of its darkest depictions), so virtual games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, also of lines of exodus from it.

Why are virtual games *the* media of Empire, integral to and expressive of it as no other? They originated in the U.S. military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination, to which they remain umbilically connected. They were created by the hard-to-control hacker knowledge of a new type of intellectual worker, immaterial labor, vital to a fresh phase of capitalist expansion. In that phase, game machines have served as ubiquitous everyday incubators for the most advanced forces of production and communication, tutoring entire generations in digital technologies and networked communication. The game industry has pioneered methods of accumulation based on intellectual property rights, cognitive exploitation, cultural hybridization, transcontinentally subcontracted dirty work, and world-marketed commodities. Game making blurs the lines between work and play, production and consumption, voluntary activity and precarious exploitation, in a way that typifies the boundless exercise of biopower. At the same time, games themselves are an expensive consumer commodity that the global poor can access only illicitly, demonstrating the massive inequalities of this regime. Virtual games simulate identities as citizen-soldiers, free-agent workers, cyborg adventurers, and corporate criminals: virtual play trains flexible

personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun. And games exemplify Empire because they are also exemplary of the multitude, in that game culture includes subversive and alternative experiments searching for a way out.

At the start of *Empire,* Hardt and Negri say that they see their book as "a toolbox of concepts" (2000, xvi). We have already mentioned some of these—biopower, immaterial labor, multitude, exodus. But there is an array of other ideas associated with their line of thought, elaborated by authors with similar perspectives but distinct voices: cognitive capitalism, machinic subjectivity, futuristic accumulation, cynical power, lines of flight, general intellect (Lazzarato 2004; Vercellone 2007; Virno 2004). These are intellectual tools we use in our inquiry into games of Empire. A useful concept, write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "makes us aware of new variations and unknown resonances" (1994, 28). Opening new pathways of thought, concepts "pack a potential in a way a crowbar in a willing hand envelops an energy of prying" (Massumi 2002a, xv). It is in this prying, pragmatic way that we pick up concepts from autonomist Marxism and poststructuralist radicalism (and from critics of both) and put them to work on virtual play, setting up encounters between theoretical concepts and game activity so that each might shed light on, and critique, the other.

The rest of the book is structured in three parts. Part I, "Game Engine: Labor, Capital, Machine," looks at the main ingredients of the corporate game complex. We begin in chapter 1 with a bottom-up history of digital play, focusing on immaterial labor. It shows how video games, hacked into existence forty years ago by a Pentagon-mobilized technical workforce as part of vibrant freeware culture, were captured by entrepreneurs, commodified, and transformed into a colossal corporate complex. The continuing dynamism of the game industry has depended on trapping the innovations of game player-producers within commercial structures. Today this process culminates in a situation where virtual games are being sent "back to work," where they are used as a means of training new generations of immaterial labor across all sectors of capital.

Arguing that the game industry is at the front of new forms of cognitive capitalism hinging on property rights over intellectual and affective creation, chapter 2 undertakes a case study of this sector's publishing giant, Electronic Arts (EA). EA's game development studios,

rinse-and-repeat game franchises, high-intensity marketing, fanatical corporate culture, and U.S.-based but transnationally distributed production webs provide a state-of-the-art example of how to make billions from digital play. But the unexpected outbreak of a scandal about the overwork of EA employees shows how trouble can flare up even in the smoothest-run fun factory.

Chapter 3 moves to the game machines that, connected to gamer bodies, power the corporate game complex, focusing on Microsoft's game console, the Xbox, in its most recent iteration, the Xbox 360, but also glancing at its rivals, Sony's PlayStation 3 and the Nintendo Wii. Game consoles, we argue, are not just hardware but techno-social assemblages that configure *machinic subjectivities*. They operate as corporate machines, eliciting ongoing expenditures on software; as time machines, commanding hours of attention; as biomachines, initiating intimate relations between players, artificial intelligence, and networked collectivities—but they also sometimes operate as nomadic war machines, appropriated by hackers and pirates challenging proprietary controls and raiding corporate revenue streams, within the larger biopolitical machine of Empire.

Part II, "Gameplay: Virtual/Actual," looks at the relationship between games and reality, body and avatar, screen and street, first life and second life. It examines how game virtualities arise from and cycle back into the social actualities of markets, battlefields, sweatshops, and law courts. Any particular interaction between game and gamer remains singular and unpredictable. But there are also regular pathways, sometimes institutional, sometimes clandestine, along which the traffic passes. We trace pathways through which virtual play materializes, with digital virtualities and corporeal actualities combining in the reality of Empire. Our examples—of subjectivities shaped for war, for work, and for only those rebellions that can profitably be recuperated—do not pretend to cover all of virtual game culture. Just a lot of it.

We examine the deep linkage of games and war in chapter 4, where we present an in-depth study of *Full Spectrum Warrior,* a military-civilian coproduction that doubled as a U.S. Army trainer for urban warfare and a "fun" variation on conventional shooter games. In its sanitized normalization of the carnage in Baghdad or the Balkans, *Full Spectrum Warrior* amply demonstrates the role of virtual games in the banalization of war, the habitual identification of civilians with "our troops," and the acceptance of an armed vision that perceives

the world through the preordained categories of the war on terror. But our example shows what can go wrong with the best virtual plans as dissidents at home question the boondoggles of high-tech military contracting, and enemies abroad start to adopt the same techniques of virtual training and indoctrination.

Chapter 5 examines the massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft*. Our key concepts here are *biopower* and *futuristic accumulation*. We look at the interaction between two regimes of capitalist biopower—Vivendi/Blizzard's *Dungeons and Dragons*–style virtual world, and the marketization of China. The two are linked through the practice of "gold farming"—the selling of virtual goods for actual money—which now sustains a Chinese digital-sweatshop industry of thousands of workers. Many of these are migrants from rural communities being destroyed pell-mell by the entrance of, among others, the very electronics companies who produce the computers and consoles on which virtual games are played. The link between primitive accumulation in the Pearl River and futuristic accumulation in corporate game worlds is symptomatic of both the complementarity and the potential conflicts between the Western and Eastern halves of Empire.

A complex spiral of virtual/actual interactions is presented by the infamous *Grand Theft Auto (GTA),* which we discuss in chapter 6. At once the most celebrated and reviled of video games, *GTA,* developed by Rockstar Games and published by Take-Two Interactive, stands at the center of the protracted controversy about violence (and some sex) in virtual worlds. But its more important contribution is, we think, not as a "murder simulator" but as an "urban simulator"—virtually re-creating the great metropolitan centers that are key sites of Empire. Our discussion here pursues the way in which *GTA* constitutes the politics of city space in ways that are not just generically urban but characteristically imperial. Its digital sandbox arises, we argue, from a specific moment in global capital's creation of world cities and, in turn, reproduces imperial territorializations of class and race. We examine three turns in this spiral of virtual and actual city building in Rockstar's famous franchise. In *Vice City,* we look at how *GTA*'s Miami is constructed as a virtual space exemplary of a "neoliberal urbanism" driven by a free-market logic whose imperatives are, literally, the rules of the game. In *GTA: San Andreas* we examine how the game's urban configurations recapitulate and reinforce the racialization of space in American cities. When we turn to Liberty City—the virtual New York of *GTA IV*—we shift focus to observe how not only

the play but also the production of *GTA* contributes to the imperial cityscape, showing how Take-Two's own role in the media industry's remaking of its headquarters global city "slips and segues" into the world of criminal capitalism it depicts. Finally we consider the complex, contradictory blend of insight into, and complicity with, urban corruption that *GTA* represents, and argue that the category of cynical ideology explains why the "punch line" that Rockstar's virtual cities deliver is, ultimately, that of Empire's brutalism.

Having examined virtual games' integration in Empire, we invert our perspective in Part III, "New Game," to look at aspects of alternative gaming culture that challenge or subvert the dominant order. We have referred to the interplay of the virtual and the actual in Empire—meaning by the virtual the digital world fabricated by the computer or game console, and by the actual the corporeal, embodied world off-screen. But there is another meaning of "the virtual" relevant to our discussion. In recent philosophical discussions of ontology—the nature of being—"virtual" denotes *potentiality:* the manifold directions in which a given arrangement of forces, in any concrete situation, *might* develop (see Deleuze and Parnet 2002; Lévy 1998; Massumi 2002b; Shields 2003). The technological and ontological virtual, digitization and potential, are distinct; they should never be conflated. But there is an oblique relation. Computers create compelling, dynamic digital depictions of potential universes. Their simulations extrapolate from what is to what might be, fancifully or plausibly. In a sense, the slogan of every gamer is "another world is (temporarily) possible." There is nothing necessarily dissident about this. Many—probably most—digital virtualities amplify and reinforce imperial actualities, as we have discussed. And flight to imaginary worlds can be a dead-end escape. But aspects of gameplay can and occasionally do link to radical social potentials. It is in this light we apply to digital games Hardt and Negri's assertion that "the new social virtuality" is the substance of the multitude's "productive and liberatory capacities" (2000, 357).

So here we ask: Can there be "games of multitude"? Chapter 7 therefore looks at how digital-play culture implants capacities and follows trajectories that exceed and disturb its own commodified circumference. These lines of flight include gamers' abilities to sometimes play against the grain of even ideologically loaded games; dissonant development from a handful of mainstream game studios; the tactical games produced by counterglobalization and antiwar activists; the ambivalent social planning potential of "serious games";

experiments at radical self-organization in online virtual worlds; and the emergence of software commons challenging information capital's intellectual property regimes. Modest as these virtual initiatives are, they nonetheless open toward a remaking of ludic practices along lines connecting to an array of struggles against Empire.

Our conclusion, chapter 8, contrasts two contradictory aspects of virtual games. The very real wonders of the increasingly complex game "metaverse" display this medium's potential for virtually conceiving and exploring alternative worlds and social possibilities—a capacity of evident interest to radicals seeking an exodus from Empire. At the same time, however, virtual games are deeply embedded within global capital, a point we underline by reflecting on the working conditions in the African coltan mines and Asian e-waste sites that lie at the beginning and end of the console-production value chain. Assessment of the emancipatory possibilities of digital play, we conclude, must take into account these opposed, but simultaneously existing, sides of the game.

"A Sky Steeped Blood Red"

Games have always served empire: from Cicero's claim that gladiatorial sports cultivated the martial virtues that Rome required to the Duke of Wellington's apocryphal assertion that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton or the Prussian general staff's Kriegspiel rehearsals of their World War I Schlieffen Plan. But games have also been turned against empire, in ways ranging from the bloodbath of Spartacus's revolt to the gentler revenges of West Indian cricketers defeating their colonial British rulers (James 1966).

Today's academic writings on virtual games often prefer to start not with such charged and conflictual aspects of play but with the work of the conservative medieval historian Johan Huizinga and his concept of the "magic circle," enunciated in his great *Homo Ludens* (1944, 10). Huizinga's famous account of play as a quasi-sacred "autotelic" activity, conducted purely for its own sake, in a space and time ritually segregated from everyday life, is a favorite in recent game studies, where it tends to underwrite a formalist approach to digital play, with the video game controller, display screen, and introductory cut scene marking the liminal boundaries of an enchanted space set apart from the turmoil of global markets, preemptive militarism, and street protest.

Yet Huizinga himself, writing in the shadows both of the recently concluded World War I and of the approaching European fascism that

would eventually take his life, was well aware of what Ian Bogost describes as "a gap in the magic circle," such that "instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two way street through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space" (Bogost 2006a, 135). This recognition of the inescapable relation between "magic circle" and "material power" is subtly present in *Homo Ludens*. But it is paramount in Huizinga's less-remarked-on study of decaying feudal power, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. There he shows how games such as jousts and tournaments cultivated the skills of chivalric elite, whose supremacy his account, despite its romanticism, unmistakably reveals as based in military barbarism and armed expropriation (Huizinga 1921, 90–97). The medieval magic circle of play, with all its visual pageantry and elaborate rules, is firmly set in the context of declining empires convulsively gripped by plague, war, and peasant revolt, with the game theoretician's eye "trained on the depth of an evening sky, a sky steeped blood red, desolate with threatening leaden clouds, full of the false glow of copper" (xix). It is in a similar light that we examine virtual games in today's age of Empire.