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Abstract

A review of Marijam Did: *Everything to Play For: How Videogames are Changing the World*. Published by Verso, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-804-29324-9, 288 pages.

Keywords

Game production; cultural studies; aesthetics; activism; political economy; capitalism; climate change; militarism; propaganda; reception; play

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How do you on one hand enjoy the wonderful, playful experiences that games provide, while on the other hand, know that they are only made possible through the exploitation and immiseration of people across the globe, while also destroying the ecological conditions of human civilization? Marijam Did is a multitalented anarchist-Marxist writer, researcher, game worker, activist, and artist hailing from Lithuania and the UK, and her new book *Everything to Play For*, published by Verso in 2024, grapples with this fundamental contradiction. She writes that play is,

> an activity that in and of itself should not be moralised [but] currently relies on exploitative routes to make those products, almost automatically rendering them tainted. With little to no choice, we are locked into a relationship of passive consumption, entertained in a circus not only while the world burns, but as we – with every push of the button – burn it ourselves. (2024, p. 176)

Her book is structured akin to an increasingly difficult game experience with varying levels with a final boss to overcome. The 'tutorial' gives a short political history of the videogame industry focusing on the larger companies that shaped and moulded the

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activity of play into the commercial industry it is today. Then Did invites us to consider the themes and ideologies that games facilitate as texts, where both reactionary and progressive values are present. The second 'level' of the book complicates how these values are played with by audiences, who can play oppositionally and in ways that game makers did not envision when they designed their game. The third part of the book explores the political potentials of games, not only as texts in comparison to other political artworks and their inherent limitations, but also through the political-economic factors that exclude radical or politically destabilizing play experiences. Did increases the difficulty in the subsequent fourth 'level' of the book, where she highlights the fundamental contradiction of progressive games when they are only made possible through their exploitative and ecologically devastating production. The final 'boss' of the book provides a more positive argument on how a non-destructive games industry might look. While Did clearly follows in the tradition of Marxist analysis and cultural studies, she also couches parts of her book in aesthetics, where she compares and contrasts the political potentials of art with games, thereby skirting between political economy, cultural studies, and contemporary art.

Did's book is particularly beneficial for three types of readerships: readers who are unaware of the dynamics and significance of video games as a cultural site for political struggle; readers who are unfamiliar with games at all, for whom the book provides a wide variety of cases that underscore the cultural and political dynamics across the production and consumption of videogames; and, finally, critical readers who might already be familiar with the dystopic nature of video games, but need to confront the inherent contradiction of contemporary video games as mere 'texts' to analyse and/or as forces for progressive causes. The book makes an ambitious and successful attempt at critically addressing the role of digital games in terms of how they are produced, what values and worldviews they represent, and how they are played for good and bad. The book's objective is a tall order, and it is commendable that Did provides an overview of complex topics while couching them in specific, tangible vignettes through which we more clearly can understand and acknowledge games as being ambivalent because they have both progressive and reactionary potentials. Did combines previously established research on games, capitalism, patriarchy and white supremacy with many different illustrative examples to substantiate her arguments, and sources from general mainstream writings on the issues that she is covering.

Did cites Stuart Hall to underscore the importance of culture as a terrain of political struggle. This is to especially convince progressive readers to take games seriously. She brings up many examples of how important and significant games are as playful objects, but also as an economic and ideological cultural industry. I personally have not encountered much opposition to or negation of the importance of digital games among leftist communities, as they have become normalized 'culture', but with Verso being a publisher aimed at a broad 'leftist' readership who are likely to be unfamiliar with the cultures surrounding videogames and their political significance, this appeal makes sense. Thus, if you do not know much about games, then the

book is a great illustration of the significance and political dynamics within their cultures, where Did goes through a wide variety of the social contradictions and political ambivalences in and around games.

For instance, Did points to how player communities around certain digital games negotiate and potentially subvert the meaning of games. She writes that "such activities by gaming communities exhibit the potential for game spaces to be sites of political expression" (2024, p. 108). This can be both for good and bad, as "games have the potential to enrich the fight for liberation and social justice, and they can equally be co-opted into tools for spreading hatred towards marginalised populations, trolling innocent people and propagating straight-up fascist conspiracies." (2024, p. 128). This means that Did holds a nuanced and critical view of games that acknowledges the flexibility and variety of what people do with and through the playing of games, and avoids falling into the trap of heavily criticized Jane McGonigal's (2011) naivety about how games can change the world for good.

The flurry of aphoristic anecdotes could be criticized for glossing over the specificities and differences between them. We suddenly read about *Pokémon Go* (Niantic, 2016) in the UK and then move quickly towards how it was played in Russia and then we immediately jump over to *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) Twitch streams and the artist Brent Watanebe's use of the game for artistic expression all in the span of a couple of pages. To some pedantic readers, these quick jumps might appear lacking in analytical clarity, but the book should not be considered as a dissertation with a singular, laser focus on one case study, but instead as a general overview of the politics inherent in digital games and play with accompanying examples and anecdotes that illustrate their global dynamics of production, distribution, and consumption. In fact, Did's machine-gun-like serving of anecdotes can appear overwhelming and unstructured, but it is precisely this deep familiarity and experience that makes the book go from being not simply a generalist, by-the-numbers critical analysis of games and capitalism, but a convincing dialectic between the specific and the general. Did's aphoristic approach to the many examples provides a rich tapestry that highlights the multifaceted nature of cultures surrounding digital games. These dynamics are precisely the motivation for the argument that cultures in and around games should be taken seriously as objects of analysis and as sites for struggle.

Finally, a key and significant aspect to Did's book is her insistence on and analysis of the ecological impact of games. As we are barrelling towards climate apocalypse with many nations such as the US, Norway and Russia increasing their fossil fuel production, the environmental costs of the production of hardware and software, as well as the energy consumption of playing them, mean that digital games are part of the problem. Indeed, Did points out how even progressive games about climate change contribute to the warming of the planet and potential civilizational collapse. This contradiction is refreshingly highlighted further when Did points out how few game companies, journalists, critics, and academics who cover the cultures around

digital games often ignore the elephant in the room that is games' ecological impact and their role in hastening our demise.

While Did recognizes the political potential of digital games—and their complicity and reproduction of cultural oppression, labor exploitation, and ecological destruction—she also identifies avenues of resistance, such as vulnerabilities in the production chain for sabotage, collective struggles through unionization in the games industry, and decarbonization guides. Moreover, one of the book's biggest strengths, especially in comparison to previous publications on the political economy of games, is that Did lays out her soul to bare in her analyses of games and their production and consumption. Her personal memories and testimonies playing games and how they are intertwined with deep personal connections with family, friends, and comrades make Did's human warmth radiate from the pages. Did manages to convey what would otherwise be cold and drab political-economic analyses of a misanthropic cultural industry as heartfelt social relations and memories in her life. This is a major strength to the book's arguments, as Did's approach underscores how much she cares about games as a cultural activity through which people bond, struggle, or even fight each other over. In this way, the book is both a general analysis of the production, distribution and consumption of games and the complex dynamics between systems of exploitation and oppression versus human agents, as well as a personal and heartfelt vulnerability rarely ever seen in critical publications on games.

All in all, Did's book is a great addition to a summary of the struggles and contestations in and around digital games. It provides a convincing case for why games should be taken seriously (if they aren't already), as they—like any other cultural form—are symptomatic of the exploitation and immiseration within capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy we live and breathe every day. The book could be criticized for being overly broad and generalistic, and it (understandably) does not include the most recently published academic articles from obscure closed access journals. But the book is not a doctoral thesis. Instead, it is an ambitious mapping of the politics of the video game landscape infused with a personal touch that elevates the quality of the reading experience. The book proves that Did possesses great insight and familiarity with both research, popular writings, online discourse, and anecdotes that any potential reader benefits from.

For those who are already more than familiar with the dystopic nature of video games without ever being offered a positive argument, Did's book also provides some rays of hope to work towards. As the world has only dived deeper into darkness with the continued genocide of Palestinians actively supported by most Western countries, the increase in fossil fuel extraction, far-right policies being implemented, and increased military expenditures with the trumpets calling for war blaring, such rays of hope are extremely necessary. After reading critical literature such as Did's, I am left with what Andreas Malm once wrote about climate apocalypse: "all has already been said; now is the time for confrontation" (2018, p. xx). Therefore, perhaps the next logical step in a future book springing from Did's *Everything to Play*

For and the historical tradition it is located within could be—paraphrasing Andreas Malm (2021) once more—on *How to Blow up a Datacenter*.

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