

of *Zelda*, whose features are still drawn from white, Western folktales.

In the conclusion, Pugh rightly observes that representation of queer characters and narratives is not enough to “disrupt any normative codes of ludology” (p. 214). Yet, the book seems also to prove a corollary to this: the mere presence of a queer ludonarrative structure without centering the lived experiences of queer peoples does little to disrupt any normative systems of identity, power, or control. Still, *Chaucer’s Losers* is a significant work for its interventions in ludonarrative studies and will likely be of great interest for readers focusing on narrative, play, and gender studies.

---

—Cody Mejeur, *University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY*

### **Marx at the Arcade: Consoles, Controllers, and Class Struggle**

*Jamie Woodcock*

Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL: 2019.

Author’s notes, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, notes, and index. 200 pp. \$18.00, paper.

ISBN: 9781608468669

The cultural phenomena of play and games have been increasingly commodified by capitalism, which is perhaps most evident in how the digital games industry captures, exploits, and profits from people’s desire to play (see, for example, Aphra Kerr’s 2017 book *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era*). To understand this commodification, Jamie Woodcock’s *Marx at the Arcade* provides a

thorough and easily accessible overview of the economic and social struggles within the games industry, its products, and the culture around them. The book does a splendid job of appealing to two readerships—first, to those who are unfamiliar with games and play, introducing them to the significance of both within capitalism and, second, to those readers who are well versed in games and play but overlook the ways that capitalism shapes and exploits them by the production, circulation, and consumption through a global cultural industry and, importantly, how workers organize and struggle within this system. From global corporations like Microsoft, Sony, Apple, and Google to the *dagongmei* working at hardware factories in China to the easily exploited QA staff in Canada to the retail industry and monopolistic distribution platforms to the chauvinistic games themselves, Woodcock gives both readerships a state-of-the-art analysis of the games industry’s economic stratification, the dominating market actors, the labor struggles, and the relation between ideology and economy seen in mainstream digital games.

After introducing the way in which we should conceptualize games and play, Woodcock guides us through the economy of the industry, the type of cultural commodities it produces, the advent of platform capitalism, and the games industry’s ties to the U.S. military industrial complex and, notably, to gun manufacturers. The subsequent parts of the book adopt the stance of a worker’s inquiry to pinpoint the labor conditions of software development labor and how companies seek to control information through nondisclosure agreements. This inquiry allows Woodcock to

detail the fraught and precarious lives of game developers, with their experiences of crunch, burnout, masculinity, whiteness, and so on. This excellent worker's inquiry also serves well as a springboard to an important chapter dedicated to how game workers have increasingly organized, most notably in the case of Game Workers Unite in the USA and the UK, the latter in which Woodcock has taken part. Following the Marxist observation that culture depends on its material conditions, Woodcock guides his political-economic analysis of the games industry to an ideological critique of the prominent genres of first-person shooters, role-playing games, strategy and simulation games, and finally what he calls explicitly political games. These sections illustrate how games facilitate dominant ideologies through their mechanics and representational elements by the context of production from which these genres derive.

Thus, Woodcock underlines the importance of Marxist scholars and activists taking games seriously, because games are emblematic of twenty-first-century capitalism and the struggles against it. Likewise, scholars of play and games would benefit from taking Marxist approaches such as Woodcock's seriously, because their many theoretical insights address the otherwise hidden dynamics of how play and games are structured by contemporary monopoly capitalism. Indeed, *Marx at the Arcade* serves as a valuable contribution to existing research about games, labor, and capitalism, while also providing a very comprehensive and well-substantiated overview of the political economy of the digital games industry and the ongoing social struggles against

capitalism within and around it. From the role of play and how it is captured and exploited by capitalism to the grassroots organizing efforts at its imperial core, Woodcock provides a general account of what Daniel Joseph has aptly coined in his 2018 essay, "Battle Pass Capitalism," "the canary in the coal mine of capitalism"—i.e. the digital games industry's attempts to dominate the production, dissemination, and consumption of play.

I would have appreciated the author addressing questions about what Baran and Sweezy (*Monopoly Capitalism* 1966) called "monopoly capitalism" and twenty-first-century imperialism (see, for example, Zak Cope's *Divided World, Divided Class* [2015] and John Smith's *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century* [2016]), an approach applied to platforms (see, for example, Dal Yong Jin's *Digital Platforms, Imperialism and Political Culture* [2015]) and games exemplified by the Marxist writer James Bell (*ProleKult* 2019) and Carolyn Jong's doctoral thesis "Bringing Politics into It: Organizing at the Intersection of Videogames and Academia" (2020). In addition, further inquiry about the workers in the so-called Global South is also a severely underaddressed aspect in political economic analysis of the games industry, while an eco-Marxist analysis would likewise enhance Woodcock's account. However, these longings are no the detriment of the book. They simply affirm how *Marx at the Arcade* motivates a host of interesting directions. As such, I hope that the book also serves as an invitation to Lenin, DuBois, Césaire, Rodney, A. Davis, Foster, Suwandi, Federici, CLR, and other Marxists to one day come visit the arcade.

—Emil Lundedal Hammar, *UiT: The Arctic University of Norway, Norway*

**The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games**

*Bonnie Ruberg*

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, Acknowledgments, introduction, afterword, appendix, notes, bibliography, and index. 288 pp. \$26.95, paper. ISBN: 9781478006589

Framed by the cultural and political backdrop of the 2016 election in the United States, the #GamerGate backlash beginning in 2014, and the nascent indie games movement (queer and otherwise), Bonnie Ruberg's *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* offers a well-curated, thoughtful, playful, behind-the-seined-curtain look at the "rising tide of indie games being developed by, about and often for LGBTQ people" (p. 3). Ruberg weaves together working definitions of "queer" and "games" and "avant-garde" and makes astute connections across past, present, and future that leans into the messiness of a diversity of perspectives and lived experiences of the featured artists, writers, organizers, and creators and that emphasizes the powerful idea that "making video games as queer people is a political act" (p. 6). All of the conversations presented within the book are also in conversation with one another, and collected interviews revel in the resonances, frictions, sparks, glitter, and the occasional heavy petting across

games, stories, identities, and theories. These postcards from the vanguard allow LGBTQ players, designers, and makers to speak for themselves and to offer insights into the practicalities, economies, and the vagaries of game making and game sharing, as well as of the gaming communities.

The book is structured in seven parts, framed by an introduction and afterword that attempt to reimagine the medium of video games, and it features twenty interviews with twenty-two game makers. Ruberg's introduction identifies several main features of the "queer games avant-garde": it explores queerness beyond representation; it makes identity in- and out-of-games messy; it is interested in affect, emotions, intimacy, and "how games feel" (p. 20); it questions the idea that games can or should be about empathy, particularly through identity tourism; and finally, the queer games avant-garde is political and intersectional. Overall, the book invites meditations on and explorations of these features and gives space to those interviewed to share their personal histories, journeys, fears, and desires. Many of the interviews explore how the individuals got into games and game making, what their major influences are, what makes their games queer (or how they queer their games), and what advice they would give to other game makers and artists.

Part 1, entitled "Queer People, Queer Desires, Queer Games," presents three game makers that foreground queer characters and identities. Notably, Aevee Bee, writer and creative director of *We Know the Devil* (2015), argues, "Queer characters must remain complex" (p. 53). Part 2, called "Queerness as a Mode of Game Making," features creators who employ