FCJ-113 Games of Multitude

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Street Games

3 Revolts within the gates, protests in the desert beyond, accusations of human-rights violations, and, embarrassingly for the private corporation running the compound, successful escape attempts—the Immigration Reception and Processing Centre holding nearly 1,500 refugee claimants in the desert at Woomera, Australia, was notorious. Detention is among the most draconian devices of imperial control. A government policy barring access by the press meant outsiders could only imagine living conditions within the center— until someone made these conditions a topic of virtual play. Built as a *Half-Life* mod, *Escape from Woomera* is an activist-made game that set out to recreate the camp's "architecture of intensity and fear" from the point of view of asylum-seeking inmates "ever-alert for what sources of danger lie around the corner" and trying to find a way out (Wilson 2005, 114). The game involved an alliance of digital designers, investigative journalists, and migrant rights activists (see Schott and Yeatman 2005, 84). The mere announcement of its construction stirred controversy about detention in Australia, especially since the game's early stages were financed by a government arts grant. *Escape from Woomera* didn't progress past prototype. But even as an unfinished demo, it contributed to the wider current of Australian antidetention activism that shut down the center in 2003.

4 Leap a year and a hemisphere. Late at night on August 28, 2004, as the U.S. Republican Party's National Convention met in New York City, a mobile troop of ludic activists took to the streets. Two female cyborgs, one with a laptop, another with a video projector, beamed visuals from *America's Army* onto downtown buildings as the game was hacked, in real- time, by coconspirators linking in from different locations around the world. This was OUT, "a live action wireless gaming urban intervention." Playing on MOUT (Military Operations on Urban Terrain), the U.S. military doctrine rehearsed in *Full Spectrum Warrior*, OUT's architects demanded, "The United States OUT of Iraq and the Middle East. Escalating worldwide Militarism and Violence, from whatever source, (right-wing oil hungry U.S. capitalists or wealthy Islamic fundamentalists), OUT of Civilian Life. The U.S. Army and Pentagon computer game developers OUT of the minds of prepubescent gamers." OUT was the brainchild of Opensorcery (2004), an initiative that for nearly a decade has troubled the militarist bent and gender norms of game culture through a variety of hacktivisms, its best known the *Velvet Strike* interventions in the multiplayer online shooter *Counter-Strike*, where it digitally scrawled peace signs and encouraged gamers to give each other virtual blow jobs instead of virtually blowing each other away. Now this crew of media activists dissolved amid the 800,000 protesters converging on the street during the Republican convention that nominated George W. Bush to run for his second term as president.

5 Jump another in autumn of 2005. The torched cars had barely cooled, tear gas hung in the streets, and the riot squads still stood ready for any rekindling of the four-week uprising by immigrant youths in the *banlieux* (suburbs) of Paris when a video account from the insurgents' point of view circulated around the Internet. Alternative-media messages are a familiar part of political crisis. But this one was different: *The French Democracy*, created by twenty-six-year-old Alex Chan under the pseudonym "Koulamata," was made using a commercial video game, *The Movies*. Published by Lionhead, *The Movies* invites players to manage their own Hollywood studio ("Build Your Own Movie Empire" is one of its marketing slogans) and includes machinima tools allowing player-producers to record computer-generated animated films in real time. Lionhead's promotion emphasized the creation of comedies, dramas, and other entertainment genres. But Chan made a thirteen-minute political documentary. It dramatized the police- pursuit death of two immigrant boys that had sparked the riots, and the racism, unemployment, white-fright indifference, and frustration of racialized communities reviled by politicians that were its wider context. Chan explained his intention: "to bring people to think about what really happened in my country by trying to show the starting point and some causes of these riots" (cited in Musgrove 2005). Posted to *The Movies Online* Web site, where Lionhead encouraged players to exhibit their productions so as to publicize its game, *The French Democracy*, made for a cost of some $60, was downloaded many times, for free, was uploaded to YouTube, drew widespread press attention, and was shown at from the *banlieux* to leap across the Atlantic and around the world.

6

Escape from Woomera, OUT, and *The French Democracy* show that players can and do fight back against games of Empire. They are examples of a different dynamic, that of games of multitude.

Games of Empire

7 Our point of departure is the controversial definition of Empire offered by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000). They claim we are witnessing the emergence of a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military, and communicative components combine to create a system of power "with no outside" (xii). Earlier 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 (upper case) from these 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 (2000, 167) say, through "network power." Its de-centered, multi-layered 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 non-governmental organizations, like Red Cross. What results from the interaction of these nodes is, they claim, an imperium more comprehensive than any preceding one.

8 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, they say, global not only in terms of its geographic reach but also of its social scope. Capital now taps its subjects' energies at multiple points: not just at work (as labour-power), but also as consumers (the "mind share" targeted by marketers), in education and training (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.

9 Within this system, Hardt and Negri (2000, 289-94) ascribe an especially important place to what they and others term "immaterial labour" (Dowling et al. 2007; Lazzarato 1996; Virno and Hardt 1996). Immaterial labour is, according to the theorists who devised the term, work that creates "immaterial products" such as "knowledge, information, communication, a relationship or an emotional response" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). It involves the less tangible symbolic and social dimensions of commodities. There are various subcategories of immaterial labour: high technology work manipulating the codes on which computers and networks run; affective work, generating emotion of, say, ease or excitement; and work involving social coordination and communication in a wide range of neo-managerial tasks. Immaterial labour is, Hardt and Negri (2000) say, the leading or "hegemonic" form of work in the global capitalism of Empire. This ascendancy is not quantitative—they recognize that not everyone works with computers or in a creative industry—but qualitative: immaterial labour is the activity advanced capital depends on its most dynamic and strategic sectors. The importance of immaterial labour to Empire can be grasped by thinking of how central media, marketing, communication, and surveillance are, not just in creating new commodities—such as videogames—but also in managing the workplaces that produce them and appealing to the consumers that buy them. It is, moreover, through the fiber-optic cables and wireless connections of digital networks run by immaterial labour that the tendrils of business stretch around the planet, the equivalents for today's Empire of the Roman roads that tied together Caesar's domain.

10 If this picture of a world swallowed by capital was all there was to Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, it would be just another account of corporate domination of a familiar sort. What made people take notice was that their book spoke about opposition to capitalism–even of alternatives to it. 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 (2000, 393-414) declared this wave of activism signaled a new revolutionary power—"the multitude." The multitude is made up of many protagonists pushing for a more democratic deployment of global resources, including workers and unions, but also indigenous communities struggling over land rights, students opposing the corporate campus, anti-poverty groups fighting for a living wage, migrants contesting the oppression of borders, environmentalists demanding

ecological conservation, open-source advocates promoting knowledge sharing . . . Compared with characteristic left gloom, Hardt and Negri's book was a breath of hope. Crucially, they spoke not of anti-globalization, but of a movement for *another* globalization, an "exodus" from capital (Hardt and Negri 2000, 210). In this sense, what distinguishes the concept of immaterial labour from theories about, say, a "creative class," is its link to ideas of autonomy and struggle. It comes from a line of thought—that of autonomist Marxism—that emphasizes not the right and power of corporations to control life in the name of profit, but rather the way workers' desires exceed, challenge, and escape that control (see Dyer-Witheford 1999).

11 Our hypothesis is that *videogames are a paradigmatic media of Empire*–planetary, militarized hyper-capitalism–*and* of some of the forces presently challenging it. Why are virtual games *the* media of Empire, integral to and expressive of it like no other? They originated in the US military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination, to which power they remain umbilically connected. They were created by the hard-to-control hacker knowledge of a new type of intellectual worker, immaterial labour, 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 which the global poor can only access 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—taking us to the focus of this article—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. 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 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 hyper-capitalism and, perhaps, also of lines of exodus from it.

The Multitude and the Media

12 The multitude is the social force that is at once the motor and the antagonist, the engine and the enemy, of Empire (Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004). It can be defined in three different but connected ways.

13 First, the multitude refers to new forms of subjectivity (Hardt and Negri 2000, 195–97; Virno 2004, 75–93). It is based in emergent individual and collective human capacities, the fresh ways of producing, communicating, and cooperating that global capital requires to run its vast and complex Empire. The example central to our topic is the technological and cultural know-how energizing immaterial industries such as the video game business, though there are also other, and not unrelated, instances, such as the cosmopolitan literacies of the massive mobile migrant labor flows integral to the world economy. Capital needs and, up to a point, fosters these new ways of being human. Empire is, however, a thoroughly ambivalent system. To use an old metaphor from Marx and Engels (1848, 85–86), capital is like the sorcerer's apprentice, conjuring up forces it cannot fully control. Multitudinous subjectivity is not only technically astute and culturally creative but also potentially subversive because its skills, aptitudes, and desires exceed the uses to which Empire tries to confine them.

14 This takes us to a second manifestation of the multitude—new movements opposing global capital (see Notes from Nowhere 2003 for an overview). Hardt and Negri's main theme is the way Empire's subjects refuse to submit to its bottom-line logic. Despite all the apparent victories of the world market, time and again resistances to the total monetization of social relations and the primacy of primacy of profit erupt. Because corporate power has enveloped society so completely, there are myriad points around which insurgencies spring up: the environment, citizenship status, housing,

employment, education, public space, art, and media. Grassroots mobilizations against corporate globalization from the jungles of Chiapas to the streets of Quebec City, international resistance to the invasion of Iraq, the struggles of nonstatus people, and the wave of ecological activism around global warming are all instances of a multitude contesting Empire.

15 Such movements open up a third dimension of the multitude—a capacity not only to resist Empire but also to develop, protect, and propose alternatives. Hardt and Negri (2000, 400) say the "political project" of the multitude is nothing less than constituting a world other than that of global capital. They have been—fairly—criticized for not providing a full account of this large task. But they do sketch some elements of a program: a "global citizenship"; the right to a social wage and a guaranteed income for all; and free access to, and control over, "knowledge, information, communication and affects" (396–407). Of particular importance to our discussion is the importance they give to wresting control of the means of communication away from capital. The "indymedia" of the counterglobalization movement, with their famous slogan "Don't hate the media, become the media," are a key expression of the multitude's "powerful desire for global democracy" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 305).

16 When all three dimensions of the multitude—subjective capacity, social movement, political project—coalesce, Hardt and Negri suggest they become a utopian arrow, pointing to a possible future life beyond Empire.

17 This optimistic account of the multitude is, however, tempered by other authors. Paolo Virno also explores the concept of multitude but emphasizes the way it can oscillate between subversion and submission. He stresses that contemporary capital is very good at adopting apparently iconoclastic practices and utopian ideas as management techniques and revenue sources. Information-age, post-Fordist enterprise, with its participatory workplaces and social networking, presents the face of what he terms "the communism of capital" (Virno 2004, 110)—a regime of profit that invokes team spirit, revolutionary change, and individual empowerment the better to harness people to work. Thus, Virno notes, while one "emotional tonality" (84) of the multitude is the radical energy that Hardt and Negri celebrate, its other side is a cynical opportunism and nihilistic resignation born of pragmatic adjustment to a world where capital seems to swallow everything.

18 It is also ambiguity that Virno highlights in discussing the relation of the multitude to media. He begins with the category of the spectacle. From grumblings about Rome's "bread and circuses" to the Situationists' scathing account of the twentieth-century "society of the spectacle" (Debord 1967) to Retort's (2005) more recent emphasis on the importance of spectacle to American global power, critics have long pointed to the role of extravagant media displays in exciting, intimidating, distracting, and ultimately pacifying the subjects of a social order. But today spectacle has, Virno suggests, a "double nature" (2004, 60). One part is the subjugation of culture to the commodity form; the other is intensifying "productive communication." In contemporary capitalism, the industries that create spectacle—the so-called cultural or creative industries—driven by their own profit-seeking dynamic, make and disseminate the tools of communication. To capture the attention of people, and even to involve and exploit new types of labor, they give people instruments for producing and reproducing media in a way that paradoxically diminishes capital's monopoly of spectacular power.

19 This analysis clearly applies to virtual games. Interactivity seems to break with the passivity traditionally associated with watching spectacular entertainment. The possibility for players to select even limited—though in new games, rapidly widening—options and to become involved in practices of modding, machinima making, and MMO participation appears to mark a quantum jump in engagement beyond that of, say, networked television audiences. We want, however, to insist on what Virno (2006) terms "the ambivalence of the multitude" and even to amplify his point. As we noted in the introduction, many scholars of game studies see interactivity as automatically empowering and democratizing. But although the capacity for "productive communication" Virno describes may overcome spectacle, it doesn't necessarily do so: on the contrary, it can be subordinated to, and even intensify, spectacular power. When a Canadian solider creates a *Half-Life 2* mod, *Insurgency*, allowing gamers to take either side in Iraq, it is not to challenge the logic of the war on terror but to enrich cultural militarization: "If you just want to get into the action and have some fun, grab your AK47 . . . and let loose as a Guerrilla or Paramilitary fighter." Similarly, when *Second-Life*-ers sell their skills to advertising agencies beaming brands to the virtual world,

the outcome is deeper commodification. Here we recall Retort's point that contemporary spectacular life is a "self-administered reality" (2005, 187): subjects already deeply immersed in a commodified and militarized regime are provided the means to animate, elaborate, reextend their own commodification and militarization, all the while having empowerment-through-interactivity trumpeted in their ears by acolytes of corporate power. People no longer just view wartime capital "accumulated to the degree that it becomes images" (Debord 1967, para. 34) but insert themselves into this image, labor at its accumulation, as its self-spectacularizing cocreators (see Wark 2007, para. 111). This is not a break with spectacle. It is an ever-deeper affective and intellectual investment in it.

20 An analysis of the multitude's relation to media after 2001 cannot, then, just applaud "indymedia." Rather, it has to recognize what Matteo Pasquinelli (2006) describes as conditions of "immaterial civil war" (see also Lovink and Schneider 2003). New media such as Web 2.0 applications, social software, the blogosphere, and, of course, recent generations of virtual games are both the terrain and the prize of a pitched battle, fought twenty-four hours a day across innumerable digital devices and platforms, between two sides of the multitude's collective subjectivity—creative dissidence and profitable compliance. On the one side are the prospects for what theorists such as Steve Best and Douglas Kellner (2004) and Henry Giroux (2006) term "interactive spectacle," in which the participatory capacities of digital machines are captured to reinforce imperial power; on the other, the possibilities that Steven Duncomb (2007) identifies when he discusses opportunities for "ethical spectacles" that turn media dream-worlds to radical ends.

21 Tracking this ambivalence is the project of this book. So far we have focused on how virtual games reinforce actual Empire. Yet our analysis also revealed conflict, from the unauthorized creativity of the first game makers to the online denunciation of labor exploitation by EA Spouse, to Xbox hacking, to guerrilla war simulators, to MMO players' transgressions and the controversies over the modding of *GTA*. Games and gamers get out of the control of their corporate military sponsors. Many of these lines of flight are recouped by game capital, and some are black holes of pointless or destructive energy, but all persuade us that it isn't quite "game over" yet. Game culture is full of glibly promoted "empowerment" and slickly marketed "participation" that provide game capital free labor and expanded revenues. Yet it is also and simultaneously shot through with instances of player self-organization, from warez collectives to tactical game makers, which intersect with movements against Empire. Despite everything, as Hardt and Negri say, "the spectacle of imperial order is not an iron-clad world, but actually opens up the real possibility of its overturning" (2000, 324). Games of Empire are thus also games of multitude.

22 So we turn now to what Alexander Galloway dubs "counter gaming": the prospect of playing against—and beyond—games of Empire (2006, 107–26). We survey six pathways of multitudinous activity that can be seen, sensed, or speculated on at the margins—and sometimes deep in the heart—of contemporary video game culture: *counterplay*, or acts of contestation within and against the ideologies of individual games of Empire; *dissonant development*, the emergence of critical content in a few mainstream games; *tactical games* designed by activists to disseminate radical social critique; *polity simulators*, associated with the educational and training projects of the "serious games" movement; the *self-organized worlds* of players producing game content independently of commercial studios, especially in MMOs; and finally *software commons* challenging restrictions on, and monopoly control over, game- related intellectual property. Not all these often-intersecting paths are as explicitly militant as the "street games" with which we started this chapter; many are tentative, and some, skeptics may think, trivial. But though gamers' contribution to toppling the global power structures will, we suspect, be modest, it is not as irrelevant as some might suppose.

Counterplay

23 Earth has been destroyed by war and ecological mismanagement. Humanity takes factions: the Spartan Federation (fascist militarists), Gaia's Step-daughters (green pacifists), University of Planet (academic technocrats), Peacekeeping Forces (bureaucratic diplomats), Human Hive (state-socialists), Lord's Believers (Christian fundamentalists), and Morgan Industries (neoliberal capitalists). Each faction races to expand its colony, selecting political structures (police state, democratic, or theocratic), economic systems (free market, planned, or green), and cultural values (prioritizing wealth, power, or knowledge). Victory—planetary hegemony—might be achieved

through conquest, diplomacy, economics, transcendence (collective consciousness), or cooperation (an alliance of factions). The permutation of these choices makes Sid Meier's 1999 *Alpha Centauri* among the more complex of civilization-building games. There's no doubt that it deeply embeds some premises of what Kacper Poblocki (2002), in an analysis of the game, terms "bio-cultural imperialism." *Alpha Centauri* is, after all, one of an inauspiciously named genre of "4x" games, as in eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate.

24 But let's imagine a gamer, a unionized media worker—maybe a scriptwriter on strike against Hollywood's conglomerates—also involved in the antiwar movement and ecological activism, who regularly plays *Alpha Centauri*. Let's imagine she plays by forging a multitudinous alliance of Gaia's Stepdaughters, Human Hive, and University of Planet against the imperial powers of Morgan Industries, Spartan Federation, and Lord's Believers. This may not be an optimal gambit for winning, yet it could be both pleasurable for our gamer to try, and also virtually corroborative of her actual activism.

25 Games are machines of "subjectivation." When we play an in- game avatar, we temporarily simulate, adopt, or try out certain identities. Games, like other cultural machines, hail or "interpellate" us in particular "subject positions" (Althusser 1971). These subject positions may be utterly fantastic, quite realistic, or somewhere in between. But such in-game identities are never entirely separated from the options provided by the actual social formations in which the games are set, from which their virtualities derive and into which they flow back. Game virtualities remove us from, but also prepare us for, these actual subject positions. Mostly, as we have discussed at length, they simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order—consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal—not to mention the rapid shedding and swapping between identities that is such an important aptitude of workers in "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989).

26 Contra enthusiasts for game "empowerment," interactivity does not mean virtual play is free from ideology; rather, it intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, of their own choice, rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities. The scope and substantiality of such choice vary from genre to genre, from games "on a rail" to sandbox games. Even in the most open game, it is only a range; one of our points in this book is that some games widely praised for their latitude—such as MMOs and sandbox games—are coded to constrain and channel toward imperial subject positions. Whereas the old broadcast media of industrial capital rather obviously (and often not very successfully) exhorted audiences to specific subject positions, interactive media manifest a more flexible order where users *of their own initiative* adopt the identities required by the system. In this sense, games are indeed exemplary media of an order that demands not just the obedience of assembly-line work but also the mandatory self-starting participation of immaterial laborers and global migrants. Empire wins only when played by multitude. But this mode of internalized media discipline, while potentially far more powerful than old-fashioned indoctrination, is also riskier. Shaping subjectivity is an ongoing process; people are exposed to various machines of socialization and contain multiple aspects, some of which may be surprisingly activated. Moreover, to be truly involving, a game often has to include some "bad" subject positions, renegade options, outlaw possibilities, even if the logic of play often tends to their being unattractive to play or unlikely to win.

27 In the case of our hypothetical *Alpha Centauri* player, the game machine is unusually aligned not with becoming a subject of Empire but with a wider process of becoming a multitudinous activist. This is an example of the process William Stephenson (1999) suggests when he asks: "What if the player elects . . . knowingly to be a Bad Subject? The power of the computer," he argues, "can be harnessed by the skeptical, dissident player." Here Stephenson is thinking particularly of empire-building games, like *Alpha Centauri* or *Civilization*, whose remote ancestors are the training exercises of old imperial elites, who had to know about the weaknesses of their own system and the strengths of their opponents to win global domination. The sweeping social, economic, and ecological choices of such games can be quite rich for politically dissident gaming, but it can occur in other genres, too. Declare your seventeenth-century *Europa Universalis III* territories republics, earning the enmity of all AI-controlled monarchies; queer your avatar's gender in *The Sims*; rejecting the attractions of superior weaponry and better "shock and awe"; never play the fascists in *Combat Mission*.

28

Such game choices are what we call *counterplay against Empire*. That game players do not always accept the imperial option reflects a base-line capacity of "refusal." Not only do gamers sometimes "resist the dominant messages" encoded in games of Empire, but they can also "manage from within . . . to produce alternative expressions" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 263). We don't exaggerate the subversion of dissident play or lower the bar on what counts as political engagement: it is easy to laugh at a ludic multitude thumbing through dissent rather than taking it to the street. But let's ditch double standards. Few political activists consider reading or watching films just time-wasting distractions. We extend the same courtesy to gaming. Just as in cinema, music, and literature ideologies are challenged, new subjectivities coalesce, and flashes of autonomy appear, so too sometimes with games. There is, however, no doubt that the scope of such expressions depends largely on the content programmed by their developers, to whom we now turn.

Dissonant Development

29 Given the origins of immaterial labor in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and a gaming culture where a "rebel" stance is de rigueur to this day, it is not surprising that politically critical content does sometimes get into mainstream games. If we focus for a moment on shooters, the "evil corporation" is a standard game trope, from the Union Aerospace Corporation responsible for unleashing demonic forces in *Doom* to the Ultor against which you revolt in *Red Faction* or the Alliance conglomerate you struggle to topple in *Armored Core: Last Raven*. [1] Of course, this is such a commonplace in popular culture that it is almost a toothless cliché. In games as in other media, its subversive charge is usually canceled by story lines in which critique of capital comes down to a tale of bad-apple delinquency defeated by individual heroism. And this is a matter not just of plot but also of game dynamics: political reflection is eclipsed by high-intensity action, and analysis of Empire falls very fast to the imperative of getting that last sniper shot to complete your game.

30 In the late 1990s, however, at just about the same time as protests against global corporate power were gaining steam, this formula was elaborated in a number of "stealth" games, such as Hideo Kojima's famous *Metal Gear* franchise and Warren Specter's *Deus Ex* series. The play of these games emphasized guile and subterfuge as much as speed and violence, and their byzantinely complex plots revolved around the malign machinations of transnational elites and the role of high technologies, computer networks, and virtual realities in the maintenance of planetary power systems. Such games are clearly vulnerable to Fredric Jameson's critique of "conspiracy theory" fiction in general as "a degraded attempt . . . to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (1992, 38), exercises in misrecognition that emphasize mysterious cabals at the expense of systemic forces. But in the context of gaming's long domination by straightforward action narratives, the somber convolutions of these stealth games represented a sophisticated modulation in virtual play and a substantial injection of dissonant content.

31 Such dissident infiltration has intensified since 9/11. With books bearing subtitles like "America's Quest for Global Dominance" topping bestseller lists (Chomsky 2003) and Michael Moore's documentaries breaking big at the box office, so too have critical perspectives on the war on terror appeared among a handful of game developers. One example is *Bad Day L.A.*, whose protagonist is a Hollywood-executive-turned-homeless-man protecting Los Angeles' paranoid citizens from all manner of disaster, from meteor shower to "Mexican invasion." The game is openly promoted as a satirical "counter message," a "critique of America's fear culture." Its outspoken designer used the publicity around the game as an opportunity to criticize representations of certain ethnic identities in games (i.e., Middle Eastern) as "less than human because they are video game cannon fodder" (Totilo 2006).

32 Or take *BlackSite: Area 51*, a first-person shooter attuned to imperial blowback, war profiteering, and implosion of public trust. An infantry squad leader, you've been in Iraq on the hunt for weapons of mass destruction. Now you're back home in the United States in a dustbowl Nevada town, and something monstrous is emerging from the barren state-controlled lands on its outskirts. It's been manufactured by the U.S. government, which has been using the country's poor as raw material for the creation of designer militarized mutants, the Reborn. An ambitious solution to the recruitment problem—but the result was unpredictable: "The enemy you're mostly fighting is an insurgency on American soil," says *BlackSite*'s designer, "but we created the enemy that we're now sending our troops to fight, and somebody's profiting from that" (Smith, cited in *Edge* 2007,

34). Again, the game's controversial wartime content is actively promoted by the developer: "We're getting a lot of people saying, 'I can't believe you're touching this subject matter.' And I'm like, 'I can't believe you're not'" (cited in Totilo 2007).

33 Perhaps even more strikingly critical, and rather subtler, is the highly acclaimed 2007 shooter *BioShock*, created by Irrational Games. It is set in an underwater city where a utopian experiment has gone horribly wrong, leaving behind monstrous residues. But *this* failed experiment in social and genetic engineering is the product not of socialist planning but of capitalist hubris. As the player proceeds through the ruins of The Rapture—so the city is called—s/he discovers from diaries and audio journals that it was founded in postwar America by the libertarian Andrew Ryan (a thinly disguised Ayn Rand), who believed in the power of the free market to create an Edenic future based in unconstrained techno-industry. The dream was slowly corrupted by war, black markets, and class conflict, leaving only a decaying submarine necropolis peopled by mutant "splicers," who had obeyed advertising exhortations to "evolve" via genetic modification, the victims of insane cosmetic surgeons obsessed with bodily perfection, and an ecological catastrophe of dying trees, rotting vegetation, and declining oxygen supplies. Despite a 1960s setting, The Rapture's combination of free markets and fundamentalist religion is irresistibly reminiscent of early-twenty-first-century U.S. neoliberalism, making *BioShock*'s success a game-world sign of the fading luster of the post–Hurricane Katrina Bush regime.

34 That media giants find it profitable to produce games about the malignancies of capital is a symptom of the paradoxical relation of Empire and an antagonistic multitude. [2] When game magazines such as *Edge* (2007, 31) discuss whether creations such as *BlackSite* and *Bioshock* can both reflect on "ideology, modern geopolitics and cultures of fear" *and* be "unashamed balls-to-the-wall first-person shooters," it is a sign of a shift in the political wind of game development. But the proposed answer—that success depends on imparting politics in small details "without impinging on the running and gunning"—shows the challenge such projects face in a commercial context where the domination of genre conventions means that dissident politics easily become no more than a novel twist to refresh tired formulae. In this context, it is interesting to note the boldness of one unusual mainstream game with the unequivocal title *Republic: Revolution*. Here the dynamics are not just "running and gunning" but the slow—even tedious—process of grassroots radical organizing to overthrow an unjust social order: ideological agitation, clandestine media, under mining the military, bankrolling the movement. . . . But note the setting: *Revolution* is plotted in Novistrana, a fictional post-Soviet country in eastern Europe, remnant of a former, fallen, hostile evil empire—and hence a safe site for virtual subversion. To find such frank ludic dissent against today's capitalist Empire, we have to step away from the center of its entertainment apparatus, to the equivalent of *samizdat* gaming.

Tactical Games

35 Drill a hole into every box passing your station on the assembly line. Go home. Wait. *Zip*. Sit at the front desk and answer the phone, e-mails, and intercom. Go home. Wait. *Zip*. Transport the boxes, one by one, from the truck to the conveyor; don't let the barking supervisor distract you. Get fired. Busk. Start over. Passage through this tedious sequence of random jobs, material and immaterial, performing rote tasks at ever-quickening pace, is facilitated by TuboFlexInc., a "staffing solutions" company whose breakthrough distance-defying tube technology permits nearly real-time transfer of employees, satisfying the requirement of the corporation of 2010 for labor to be supplied on an as-needed basis. This is *TuboFlex*, a small online game satirizing the hodgepodge experience of the perma-temp that arises from the corporate demand for maximum flexibility—a demand whose severity has spawned a trans-European activist movement that, linking together issues of labor and migration, is contesting the increasingly precarious conditions of social life under Empire.

36 Since 2000 a growing number of activist-made games—what the game theorist and indie designer Gonzalo Frasca terms "videogames of the oppressed" (2004, 90)—have circulated online. Most are preliminary experiments, but they represent the entrance of gaming into the toolbox of "tactical media" (Garcia and Lovink 1997). Made possible, like the culture of camcorder activism before it, by evolving technological know-how and lowering technology price points, tactical games mobilize the do-it-yourself digital practices that are so integral to gaming culture: the machinima making demonstrated in *The French Democracy*; the modding practices that enabled *Escape from Woomera*; the Flash authoring technologies behind *TuboFlex*. Tactical games connect such autonomous

game-production capacities, and a small group of indie game studios trying to survive outside the orbit of the big publishers, with radical social criticism and global movements against Empire. We cited several such experiments at the beginning of this chapter. There are many more: Frasca's *September 12*, showing the inevitability of so-called collateral damage in the war on terror; the famous Flash game *Gulf War 2*, released six months before the invasion of Iraq, presciently foretelling the consequent chaotic descent of Middle Eastern politics; the *Civilization IV: Age of Empire* project we mentioned in the introduction. [3] Today, those who frequent sites, such as Kongregate and Klooningames, that host free online games can find titles such as *Raid Gaza*, which criticizes Israel's military strategy, *Trillion Dollar Bailout*, which savages CEOs saved by the state from the economic crisis they generated, and even *The Truth about Game Development*, which satirizes the exploitative practices of the game factory itself. But to examine the logic of tactical games, we'll look at more productions of *TuboFlex*'s makers, Molleindustria.

37 Molleindustria is a Milanese collective of media activists whose ludic critique of pedophilia in the Catholic Church led the Italian Parliament to shut down the group's Web site in 2007 until the game in question was removed. Operating out of a social center self-managed by and for activists, Molleindustria has developed a catalog of smart but simple online games addressing precarious labor, media concentration, queer politics, and street protest—themes that reflect the group's immersion in the social movements of contemporary Italy. Active since 2004, these self-described "videogame detractors" emerged from a milieu crosscut by two opposing tendencies (Molleindustria, n.d.): from one side, their country's communication system was overwhelmingly controlled by the prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi; and on the other side, the nascent counterglobalization movement demonstrated the activist potential of digital media. With the slogan "Radical games against the dictatorship of entertainment," Molleindustria has done much to add gaming to the repertoire of radical critique and to experiment with how the form of social criticism might be changed by the distinctive power of virtual play.

38 So, for example, Molleindustria's *McDonald's: The Video Game* turns upside down the "tycoon" game genre. Restaurant, head quarters, slaughterhouse, farmland—these four sites must be carefully managed in fluctuating market conditions. Real-time financial calculations determine the course of action. Begin on a farm, tending to matters of land, livestock, and crops. Purchase cattle and let them graze on the recently razed forest. Back at head office, command a public relations specialist to negotiate with the environmentalist threatening a campaign against the South American rain forest destruction. Get to the front line: hire another burger assembler to keep pace with the lengthening queue at the cashier, and award that slacking teller a star for model performance to ensure speedy service with a smile. Bustling business (and an isolated case of Mad Cow) has meanwhile emptied your slaughterhouse, so plump those calves with steroids and test out the new high-yielding genetically modified soy. All of this in a couple of minutes of virtual management multitasking. Motivated by research on the political economy of meat and marketing, this game puts into playable form the processes of the globalized fast-food production and consumption chain. Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria calls it an experiment in "procedural critique" (cited in Dugan 2006). It makes its point through what behavior is allowed and rewarded, what action is required or excluded, by the game's programming (see Bogost 2006). *McDonald's* doesn't give the gamer room for maneuver: accept the growth imperative (and the dodgy dealings it demands) or bankrupt your big business.

39 Molleindustria's countersimulations are intended to invite players to reflect on the nature of "the systems that produce those events" (cited in Dugan 2006). Its most recent productions include *The Free Culture Game*, "a playable theory" in which the player liberates digital resources from corporate capture and releases them into a media commons, and *Oligarchy*, which makes the player CEO of a petro-corporation: "explore and drill around the world, corrupt politicians, stop alternative energies and increase the oil addiction" (Molleindustria, n.d.). Such tactical games are frankly didactic. Their stripped- down, graphically rudimentary production sacrifices affect for instruction. The genre teeters between brilliant ludic alienation-effects and a digital-age version of socialist realism. But for Molleindustria and other tactical game makers, constructing a politicized game culture is about more than overlaying alternative imagery in established genre conventions; as Alexander Galloway observes, building "radical action" in game culture requires the creation of "alternative algorithms" (2006, 125). Or as Pedercini says of Molleindustria: "We often claim that it

is important for us not to produce games to entertain radical people, but (to make) radical games" (cited in Nitewalkz 2007). From the pamphlets printed by labor militants in the early twentieth century to the wikis maintained by network activists in the twenty-first, alternative media have cultivated oppositional intelligence: now games enter these ranks. But is the role of politicized games limited to that of agitprop? To answer this question, we must turn to some more ambitious, and more ambivalent, experiments.

Polity Simulators

41 Georgia Basin Futures Project is an "interactive social research" initiative by sustainable development scholars at Canada's University of British Columbia (Robinson and Tansey 2006, 152). One of its components is inspired by Will Wright's *SimCity* and *SimEarth*. Simulating the ecological and social makeup of Vancouver and its surrounding region, *GB- QUEST* invites players to set variables for regional economic development and environmental policy, ranging from taxation and air quality to land-use zoning, transportation, and unemployment. It then generates a model of what the area might look like in 2040 based on the user's registered preferences. *GB-QUEST* underscores the imbrication of ecological, social, and economic factors and illuminates the complex consequences of particular actions. The game's "backcasting" feature allows users to reset their choices until they arrive at a configuration that gets them closer to their desirable future. This platform not only logs users' preferences regarding desirable future scenarios but could also forward them to local government to give a sense of ludic public opinion on ecological policy. The goals of the project are, the coordinators explain, to allow users "to play iteratively with the model to explore the trade-offs involved in alternate regional futures" and "to examine whether tools such as *GB-QUEST* can be used to create an informed constituency for social change" (Robinson and Tansey 2006, 153).

42 *GB-QUEST* is one of a range of games that we will call "polity simulators." Involving players in issues of public policy formation, they are a subset of what have recently become known in gaming circles as "serious games." The Serious Games Initiative is a Washington-based nonprofit organization promoting diverse social applications of gaming. Broadly referring to games as a means of learning, "serious games" has become a wildly inclusive label, spanning simulations on topics from election campaigning to health care (Laff 2007). Much in this category resembles the training games for Empire whose workplace applications we discussed in chapter 1 and whose military uses have been a persistent theme in this book. But an offshoot movement, Games for Change, is more ambiguous, encompassing social awareness minigames aiming to educate players about a variety of international political, ecological, and health crises (see Ochalla 2007). Often technically and graphically quite simple, usually playable for free online, these games also feature links to associated materials about the social issues addressed, and often include activist guides to "things to do."

43 This is an increasingly crowded game subfield. *Third World Farmer* addresses issues of global poverty and food supply by placing the player in the position of a struggling family of African agricultural producers; *Darfur Is Dying* simulates life and death in a Sudanese refugee camp; *Climate Challenge*, based on UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change data, positions the player as EU President seeking a solution to global warming; *Food Force*, developed for the UN's World Food Program, takes on famine-relief missions; *Peacemaker*, a commercial game simulating Middle Eastern politics, makes the gamer either the Israeli or Palestinian leader seeking a two-state solution; *A Force More Powerful*, developed by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, trains players in civil disobedience strategy; and *Karma Tycoon*, a progressive twist on business simulators, makes the player a coordinator of not-for-profit organizations.

44 Most of these games emerge from and reflect the concerns of civil-society agencies such as nongovernmental organizations and their sympathizers in the game industry and academia. Outside the corporate-military axis, NGOs are nevertheless often part of the apparatus of Empire, appliers of sticking-plaster solutions to its endless wars and structural catastrophes (Hardt and Negri 2000, 35–36). Serious games reflect this. Most code neoliberal assumptions: *Food Force*, for example, engages players with issues of global famine but never really probes the structure of the world market. Other serious games are sponsored by flagrantly hypocritical corporate philanthropy: the sustainability game, *Planet Green Game*, is funded by Starbucks, emblem of global monoculture, and *Karma Tycoon* by JPMorgan Chase, a massive investment bank implicated

in the Enron accounting scandal (responsible money management is touted as one of the game's pedagogical assets). *A Force More Powerful* is connected to the National Endowment for Democracy, whose projects for "revolutionary" free-market democratization of eastern Europe are supported by the U.S. Congress (Barker 2007).

45 But the compromised nature of many current serious games does not mean the genre lacks radical potential. Eroding the monopoly of the military-industrial complex over simulation tools, however modestly, to foster their use by ecologists, peacemakers, and urban planners, is a welcome development. While activist-made tactical games expose the catastrophic procedural logics of Empire, polity simulators can take a step toward envisaging alternative procedures. Critical discussions of deep alterations to Empire are, we believe, too often averse to the issue of planning. This is surely out of an understandable fear of the centrally planned command economies of the Soviet era. But like it or not, crises like global warming have put back on the table precisely what the unfettered market of the neoliberal era attempts to erase: massive social planning. The challenge is to explore forms of planning that escape the authoritarianism of state socialism and surpass conventional representative democracy. We think projects of counter-Empire require more attention to issues of participatory governmentality and longer-term planning—and even utopian envisioning—than many activists often allow, and that serious games with radical politics could contribute to this.

46 Of course, polity simulators face design challenges. Just as military simulators like *Full Spectrum Warrior* can proceed from spurious premises (no suicide bombers in occupied cities), making them worse than useless, so too civil-society games can embed dubious assumptions: "nonviolence always works," "individual recycling can save the planet," "philanthropic donations will solve poverty." But if, as Ian Bogost (2006, 108–9) suggests, the pedagogical value of games lies in inducing a "simulation fever" in which players question the premises programming virtual (and actual) worlds, then games that allow players to edit or tweak such parameters—as in *GB-QUEST*—may be more politically educative that those that simply impose their own presuppositions on players. So while *GB- QUEST* was an academic experiment, it leaves us wondering whether such a platform could act as one tool among others for distributed, bottom-up, participatory planning around political, economic, and ecological issues affecting a locality. Asking this question, we are in good company: none other than the eminent *Sims* designer Will Wright, commenting on his next potential project, ponders, "If you could just get everybody to be a little bit more aware of the world around them, and how it works, and have that feed back into the course the world is taking, gaming could be an incredibly powerful mechanism for steering the system" (cited in Morgenstern 2007). We'll come back to this question of how virtual rehearsal might be linked to a system reboot. But first we'll take a look at another sort of virtual world building.

Self-Organized Worlds

47 Their world, it was announced, would be deleted; commerce decreed it no longer viable. Facing imminent erasure, three hundred residents assembled to discuss what could be done to maintain the society they had painstakingly labored to create—that was, in a real sense, collectively theirs. Apparently without recourse, they fled and settled in another land. But their former landlord had not destroyed the original territory, just left it dormant, his attention absorbed by more profitable pursuits. The evicted paid him a visit. Citing their competence, they negotiated a return, agreeing to expect little in the way of assistance; they would, as much as possible, self-organize and autocreate their society.

48 An actual story of a virtual event, this episode is the topic of a study by Celia Pearce (2006) investigating the "intergame immigration" of groups of players from the MMO *Uru* to other MMOs after the publisher pulled the plug on the game server. One proficient player guild—which had already established a rich diasporic culture within another persistent world—obtained from Cyan a transfer of control over the servers, enabling them to return to their "homeland." The result is that "players have quite literally taken it over and made it their own, carrying it forward to a new level" (Pearce 2006, 23). That a band of itinerant gamers could squat *Uru* in this way testifies to the advance of what Pearce dubs "autoludic culture" (23)—or what we will refer to as *self-organized* virtual play, yet one more extension of do-it-yourself game culture. Following Pearce, we'll focus on some of the multitudinous skirmishes with capital in the realm of MMOs, the digital domains substantially created by the collective efforts of their player populations.

49

We have already looked at the political conflicts in some corporately owned virtual worlds, with mixed conclusions. Gold farming in *World of Warcraft* (chapter 5) certainly showed how precarious publisher control of online populations can be, but also how transgressive player participation, driven by the basic market structuring of a world, can deepen microcommodification. In *Second Life* (introduction), we glanced at some instances of what Nancy Scola (2006) terms "avatar politics," such as the IBM workers' strike. There's no doubt that corporate-owned MMOs can become sites of audacious online activism: to add another *Second Life* example, the opening of a virtual office by the Front Nationale, a French neofascist anti-immigrant political party, was given a savagely carnivalesque greeting by demonstrators displaying antiracist placards in a protest that culminated with the explosion of a "pig grenade" that washed the zone in a sea of pink (Au 2007d). So we don't discount entirely the prospect of waging anti-imperial protest inside commercial virtual worlds. [4] But despite these outbreaks, the majority of avatar politics in mainstream MMOs seem tepid affairs, ranging from Save the Children selling virtual yaks for real money to U.S. Democratic Party politicians organizing "town halls" to support their election campaign. Virtual takeovers of "the party apparatus" (Scola 2006) sound all too much like politics as usual stepped up a notch, with virtual liberal democracy the natural complement to *Second Life*'s virtual market economy.

50 More exciting prospects, however, open up as players challenge the basic structures of corporate ownership over virtual worlds. One famous example occurred in Sony and LucasArts' *Star Wars: Galaxies*. Created in 2003, the game was originally a complex virtual world emphasizing strategic choice and a deep skill system, which encouraged elaborate avatar creation. In 2005, unsatisfied with the game's low profits, the publishers revamped it, making fundamental alterations to its architecture. The so-called New Game Enhancements, implemented like the video game equivalent of a structural adjustment program, converted *Galaxies* to a much simpler point-and-click combat system designed to generate frenetic firefights and attract younger players, and eliminated whole classes of characters. Many of the original players abandoned the game, forfeiting the days, weeks, and months of time invested in creating in-game identities. Not all the deserters went quietly. The Web sites they created commemorating their losses and declaring their grievances made *Star Wars: Galaxies* a notorious example of how *not* to cultivate digital community, especially since Sony's revised game was a conspicuous failure (see Varney 2007). The episode was especially poignant given the basic trope of the *Star Wars* mythos—rebels versus empire—a point underlined by the name of the main dissident Web site: imperialcrackdown.com.

51 Legendary as this episode has become in MMO culture, it is nevertheless a long way from shaking control of virtual worlds. Another group inched slightly closer to success. In 2006 Nevrax, the French developer of the MMO *Ryzom*, went bankrupt. Under the banner of the Free Ryzom Campaign, a coalition of former employees, committed players, and cyberlibertarians banded together to raise money to buy out the game. These campaigners promised to rerelease *Ryzom* as nonproprietary "free software," thereby enabling players to access, revise, and enhance the programming, while the hardware—the game servers—would be maintained by a nonprofit organization (BBC 2006). Despite raising $200,000 in pledges, their bid was beat out by a commercial offer. Their effort was nonetheless considered a victory by many protagonists who point out that it drew game culture closer to the Free Software Movement, which views the development of a free MMO as "a high priority project" for their movement (Free Software Foundation 2006). The Free Ryzom Campaign has since morphed into the Virtual Citizenship Association (2007), which, declaring "virtual worlds should belong to all of their players," wants to spearhead an MMO project rooted in FLOSS principles as well as "participative democracy" in both virtual and actual places of game labor.

52 The next step is clearly for anticorporate players not just to dispute or defect from corporate virtual worlds but to create their own. This step has been taken. Launched in 2004, *agoraXchange* is the working title of an alternative MMO project devised by the political theorist Jacqueline Stevens and the game artist Natalie Bookchin, with prototype funding supported since 2007 by a grant from the University of California (Devis, n.d.). In this virtual world, the rules change. Inheritance has been deemed a mechanism sustaining class privileges over time, an obstacle to a more egalitarian society. Personal wealth left by the deceased will be directed to a transparently run international institution whose mandate is global redistribution to ensure that basic human needs

for resources like clean water are met. And no longer will migrants, fleeing from oppression or seeking reunion with family, have reason to fear detainment, deportation, or worse; borders will be opened to the flow of people, not just commodities. Private property will go, too. Land will be held in the trust of the state, leased to individuals and businesses.

53 Stevens and Bookchin, like many others, view the MMO as a rich laboratory for experimenting with different models of social organization and for studying emergent political behavior. The game's prescribed norms have been a topic of debate among early participants. But *agoraXchange*'s initiation of this discussion is, in our view, a promising multitudinous development toward deploying networked gaming technologies as a platform for planning a new social order. Instead of either embedding the premises of existing institutions or presenting an utterly fantastical scenario, the agora prototype is to be based on "a feasible alternative model for the real world and to witness, through the creative participation of its inhabitants, what that world would look like—what alliances, affinities, and conflicts might arise" (cited in Devis, n.d.).

54 The idea that virtual worlds might be testing grounds for actual social innovations is one that has recently gained some currency (see Castronova 2007). In 2008 the Institute of the Future, a California nonprofit organization, launched *Superstruct*, the "first massively multiplayer forecast game." Set in the year 2019, it postulates that a Global Extinction Awareness System (GEAS) has forecast human self-destruction by the year 2042 as the result of "super-threats": Quarantine, a result of "declining health and pandemic disease"; Ravenous, the global collapse of the world food system; Power Struggle, "as nations fight for energy supremacy and the world searches for alternative energy solutions"; Outlaw Planet, covering increased surveillance and loss of liberties; and Generation Exile, with a "massive increase in refugees" (Institute for the Future 2009). The aim is for players to collaborate, communicating not only in-game but across e-mail, blogs, and social networks to devise solutions to these problems. We don't necessarily hold any brief for the answers *Superstruct* comes up with—as we've already indicated, the global demographics of gaming promise plenty of scope for bias. But the basic point remains: if the Pentagon and Wall Street can use virtual worlds to plan the Empire, why should communards not use them to think through their escape routes?

55 *AgoraXchange* is a virtual world influenced by the wave of writing about "life after capitalism" that accompanied the turn-of-the-millennium counterglobalization movement (Albert 2003). *Superstruct* is clearly informed by the current wave of concern over global warming and ecological disaster. Such experiments actualize the recent suggestion by an eminent computer scientist in the journal *Science* that online games enable large-scale studies of alternative governmental regimes "next to impossible in society at large," including explorations of "how individuals can be induced to cooperate in producing public goods" (Bainbridge 2007). To look at games' potential contribution to collective-goods production, we need, however, to examine further the involvement of games of multitude in struggles over intellectual property.

Software Commons

56 Online guerrilla warfare throws a massive corporate complex into crisis, brings some of its sectors to the brink of collapse, forces others to rethink their strategies, calls forth drastic countermeasures—but seems to remain undefeatable. Neither a sci-fantasy nor a radical fantasy, this is how Todd Hollenshead of id Software characterized the state of the virtual play business to a rapt audience at the Game Developers Conference in 2007 (cited in Radd 2007). He was referring, of course, to piracy. Citing the Electronic Software Association's (ESA 2007) estimate of $3 billion annual losses by North American publishers to piracy, Hollenshead suggested that illegal copying of games was propelling the computer side of digital play to crisis. Such estimates are suspect, often making the unlikely assumption that all pirated games would otherwise be purchased at market price (Tetzalf 2000). But Hollenshead wasn't being completely hyperbolic about "guerrilla war," at least in regard to the counterinsurgency measures of the game industry: with pirates facing international police crackdowns, multi-million-dollar fines, and multiyear prison terms, and gamers' hardware routinely scanned by digital rights management systems, law enforcement is ramping up in play-space.

57 Commercial games, like the music and film businesses, are suffering at the hands of rip-and-burn digital culture. This is a return of the repressed: the hacker knowledge that the games industry commodified bites back as new generations of consumers learn to copy and pass on the goods it

makes without paying. As we saw with “nomad gamers” chipping consoles (chapter 3), piracy covers a range of practices from large-scale for-profit operations to warez networks inspired by technical challenge and anticorporate politics to small-scale game swapping. We don’t simplify or romanticize piracy. Nor are we without sympathy for independent game developers who see revenues disappearing into the black market. The game industry’s guerrilla war is, however, a symptom of new forms of networked creativity not easily or productively contained in the commodity form.

58 This war has generated innumerable conflicts and anomalies. For example, much of the preservation and archiving of game culture is conducted by “abandonware” sites that make available online old games that are no longer sold commercially (Costikyan 2000). All these sites are technically illegal; since U.S. copyright endures for ninety- and developers—acquired, merged, and resold—may even be unaware of, or indifferent to, their ownership of game classics and rarities. Persisting despite periodic threats of prosecution, abandonware operators, like pirate librarians of the game world, run in a legal twilight zone. Meanwhile the use of antipiracy technology has raised issues about both privacy invasion and collateral damage. A notorious case was the Starforce Digital Rights Management, whose success in degrading the performance of many players’ computers occasioned class-action suits and eventually abandonment by leading game publishers (Loughrey 2006).

59 Similar uncertainties hang over the creation of new content. A flashpoint is the practice of mixing content from multiple games and other media. The first known intellectual property prosecution of modders occurred when Twentieth Century Fox shut down a *Quake* “Aliens vs. Predator” mod. Fox became notorious for contacting mod teams, demanding they cease production, remove Web sites, surrender destroy copies, and reveal the names and addresses of members. A new term —“foxing”—entered gamers’ lexicon (Kahless 2001). But other corporations followed suit. Mods for *Quake*, *Mario*, and *Mortal Kombat* have been foxed to degrees from total shutdown to renaming; a recent high-profile case involves the importation of copyrighted comic-book characters into the superhero game *Freedom Force*. While the pattern of enforcement is highly uneven, the issue hangs as a potential damper over the creativity of both mods and machinima.

60 In yet other parts of the piracy battlefield, prosecutions have raised far-reaching issues about the scope of corporate control over networked software. Blizzard’s early *Warcraft* games were not designed for online play, but players independently created shareware to enable it. Blizzard then constructed its own proprietary multiplayer meeting place, Battlenet. A group of player-programmers promptly reverse-engineered Battlenet software and constructed an alternative network, BnetD. Blizzard sued, claiming BnetD enabled use of pirated games. BnetD’s creators said they aimed only to evade notorious Battlenet problems of crashes, slow response, and rampant cheating. They were joined as codefendants by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which argued that outlawing reverse software engineering would prevent new programs interoperating with older ones, thus allowing companies to eliminate rival products that interface with their own. Courts ruled in favor of Blizzard, in a decision widely seen as pivotal to legal regulation of new media (EFF 2005; Miller 2002; Wen 2002).

61 While media corporations struggle to contain digital culture within the bounds of profitability, multitudinous counterinitiatives take an opposite direction, trying to legally enlarge the domains of collective intellectual and artistic practice and expand a “knowledge commons” (*Mute* 2005). Two instances are the Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) movement and the Creative Commons initiative. FLOSS is a movement of libertarian-minded programmers voluntarily collaborating to develop operating systems and software whose source code is available for free. Legal instruments such as the GNU General Public License or other variants of what is colloquially known as copyleft permit users to copy, alter, and redistribute the software provided they allow the same freedoms to subsequent users. Although FLOSS has many internal divisions and factions, it has become a globally important counterforce against corporate lockdown on digital knowledge (Stallman 2005). Creative Commons refers to a growing set of licenses that disaggregate the prerogatives bundled together in conventional copyrights, allowing creators to permit copying with or without attribution, for commercial or noncommercial use, allowing or disallowing derivative works, in a variety of permutations (Lessig 2004). It is an alternative form of copyright, which grants users certain specified permissions regarding what people can do with your created

content, rather than insisting, “all rights reserved.” Such licenses have now been applied to millions of cultural products of authors, bloggers, and musicians. While the politics of both open-source and Creative Commons licenses are ambivalent, and by no means immune to corporate co-optation, both express a deep restiveness against the corporate controls over intellectual and cultural life and are part of the intellectual property activism that one writer for the *New York Times* declared “the first new social movement of the century” (cited in Sunder 2006, 258).

62 FLOSS and Creative Commons have had only limited influence on games. The Ryzom free software initiative cited in the previous section is one example of open-source incursion, and online repositories of open-source projects such as SourceForge are littered with hundreds of game proposals, preliminary code strings, and graphics, though most range from modest to abandoned. But the Linux operating system, the most famous creation of the FLOSS community, is very rarely supported by game publishers; indeed, its inhospitability to virtual play is one of the major barriers to its wider adoption. Many of the tactical and serious games discussed earlier in this chapter carry a Creative Commons license. The control of mainstream game production by commercial publishers ensures, however, that licensing remains dominated by standard copyright and the click-through EULA, or end user licensing agreement.

63 Some of the more innovative game publishers have, however, attempted to assimilate these new developments. In *Second Life*, Linden Labs allows, in addition to the copyright bestowed on user-generated content, Creative Commons licenses (Mia Wombat 2006). More recently, Linden released the source code for the viewers that enable players to join *Second Life* and then, in April 2007, announced the server software would go open-source. The politics of this move are complex. As Andrew Herman and his coauthors (2006) note, Linden’s initial move giving players ownership over virtual property was in part a response to grievances about free labor in virtual worlds, but one that dealt with the issue through the very concepts of individual property ownership on which neoliberal capitalism depends. Throwing some Creative Commons and FLOSS provisions into the mix is part and parcel of Linden’s broader corporate strategy, opening access while making money off the selling and taxing of virtual property. In this sense, it is part of a wider corporate drive across the entire Internet sector to reabsorb open source as yet another way of mobilizing the coding intellect of its users (see Hardie 2006). The cutting edge of corporate game strategy thus rests on partially encouraging the very initiatives that, if they were to run “out of control,” invite anticapitalist experimentation—precisely what we would expect from the mutually entwined relation of Empire and multitude, where the issue of who is co- opting whom is chronically ambivalent

64 Our point, however, is not to predict a major outbreak of copyleft licensing in game culture, though the practice may well become more frequent. It is to suggest that such commons projects are symptomatic of a deep disparity between the real conditions of digital production and existing property laws (see Coleman and Dyer- Witheford 2007). Game production, like that of film, music, and all digital arts, exemplifies conditions where creativity rests on derivation from preceding works, boundaries between producers and consumers blur along a continuum, and restrictions on illegal copying and circulation can only be achieved, if at all, by deep invasions of privacy and restrictions of technological capacities. The conditions are, in short, those of highly socialized production, a de facto commons that is incompatible with stringent de jure intellectual property rights. Game culture, we would say, exemplifies practical open-source and Creative Commons practices, *even though it continues to be governed by conventional intellectual property regulations*. It is a practical reality of multitude, ruled by the old law of Empire. This is what makes the “war on piracy” so frustrating to both proprietors and players.

65 While media capital struggles to either repress or co-opt do-it-yourself digital culture, these attempts at commodification resemble a group of feudal lords trying on the eve of the industrial revolution to figure how to tithe “a newly invented power loom” (see Boyle 1996, xiv). “Dot.communist” (Barbrook 2001) practices of digital creation and circulation, not just in games but also in other fields, such as P2P, tactical media, grid computing, and microfabrication, are signs of deep tectonic shifts in the forces of production. In this view, the logic of the commons is no anachronistic remnant of fading hacker culture but a premonitory avatar of some yet-to-emerge “commonist” mode of production (see Dyer-Witheford 2002; Strangelove 2005). Such a shift would be marked by protracted crisis, in which heightened policing of intellectual property confronts

expanding piracy, a proliferation of freeware and open-source programming, and the migration of much that is inventive not just in games but in digital culture at large to "autonomous zones" and "dark nets" (Bey 2003; Biddle et al. 2002). The full potential of this to reorganize social ways of making, doing, and living could only be realized in the context of a wider transformation of social relations, of the very sort Hardt and Negri suggest as the political project of the multitude.

Conclusion: Strange Contraptions

66 Hardt and Negri's concept of the multitude reveals the strong presence of the radical French philosopher, psychoanalyst, and activist Félix Guattari. Indeed, in the 1980s Guattari and Negri coauthored a book whose discussion of "integrated world capitalism" anticipates the core thesis of *Empire* (Guattari and Negri 1990, 47–56). What distinguished Guattari and Negri's collaboration was their emphasis on resistance, on "new machines of struggle" (110–21), on the urgent need to "think and live in another way" (131). Very near the end of his life, in 1992, Guattari (1996a) wrote an essay titled "Remaking Social Practices," a short, whirlwind synthesis of some of his longstanding proposals for thinking and acting beyond what we now call Empire. Here, in conclusion, we note the strong affinities between some of the ideas presented in that and related texts and the games of multitude explored in this chapter. Counterplay, dissonant development, tactical games, polity simulators, self-organized worlds, and software commons are six interweaving paths of social activity remaking *ludic* practices.

67 Guattari envisaged "a new alliance with machines," an alliance that would "join science and technology with human values" (1996a, 212, 267, 264). This requires shattering the subjectivity of what he called the "tele-spectator," the individual reduced to a consumer "passive in front of the screen" (263). "Technological evolutions, combined with social experimentation," would, he imagined, lead into a "post-media" era characterized by "reappropriation . . . of the use of the media" (Guattari 1996b) against the values of the market that dominate our media-machines today. With mounting ecological catastrophe and mental disorientation, Guattari described the remaking of social practices as fundamentally about "exploring the future of humanity," even, perhaps, of "utopia" (1996a, 264). Aspects of game culture resonate strongly with this idea of a "post-media era" of liberated, self-producing subjectivities (1996b, 106–11). But Guattari was also well aware that integrated world capitalism itself invites us to participate, not vegetate, noting that it "loosen(s) up the measure of work-time" only to "practice a politics of leisure . . . all the more 'open' (to) better colonize it" (206). Virtual gaming is ambivalent: one face points toward the increasing corporate absorption of unpaid "playbor" to extend the life and profitability of games; the other turns towards intensifying autonomous production, with periodic but increasingly frequent flashes of conflict and outbreaks of anticorporate game activism

68 Yet we agree with Guattari when he advises fellow activists to "try to find a way out of the dilemma of having to choose between unyielding refusal or cynical acceptance of the situation" (1996a, 95). Our gamble on games of multitude started from the apparently negligible moment of gamers selecting anti-imperial options in play. This instance of autonomy—a voice that "defines its own coordinates" (Guattari 1996a, 96)—disrupts the manufacture of consensus, of imperial common sense. Such possibility, as we noted, usually arises from, and depends on, the algorithmic choices coded in game programming by commercial developers. The emergence within a few game studios of critical political perspectives is both a reminder that game designers, while subject to bottom-line constraints and genre conventions, do sometimes enjoy a degree of creative autonomy in their immaterial labor, and also a mark of *dissensus*, an act of disengagement from the cultural consensus of integrated world capitalism (Guattari 2000, 50).

69 But gaming alternatives that open onto truly "new universes of reference" (Guattari 2000, 50) come mainly from outside the play factory. With the post-2000 emergence of tactical games, the virtualities of digital play have for the first time been connected to actual insurgencies of social movements, in perma-temp offices, outside detention centers, within antiwar demonstrations. While tactical games have become part of the multitude's arsenal of mediated resistance, the polity simulators of serious games, though rife with contradictions, also offer prospects for alternative forms of counterplanning and participatory governmentality. Games not only cultivate the imagination of alternative social possibilities; they also present practical tools that may be useful for its actualization. Tactical games, polity simulators, and also the self-organized worlds of

MMOs all emerge as part of a wider autoludic culture in which the ability to code, change, and copy digital culture is diffusing.

70 Such distributed creativity reflects an emergent subjectivity equipped with impressive capacities for designing virtual worlds independently as player intelligence, creative desire, DIY design tools, and platforms for networked collaboration thread more tightly together. This is a critical part of the capacities of multitude. It shows that cognitive capitalism is paradoxically both reliant on, and the host of, a *noncapitalist virtuality*, that of "autonomous production" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 276; Thoburn 2001). This is exactly what we catch a glimpse of in the *Uru* migration and the Free Ryzom Campaign: a geographically diffuse network of intelligent agents declaring their capacity to creatively reproduce a virtual world—without the intermediary of a capitalist corporation. In a longer horizon, the project of going beyond world capitalism requires a revival of utopian imagination. Projects like *agoraXchange* can be understood as a *counteractualization* of an essential virtuality of gameplay: "an escape from particular demands and an exploration of possibilities" (Schott and Yeatman 2005, 93). They support a future-oriented optic that, Guattari stressed, is crucial if the market's emphasis on short-term returns is to be supplanted by a different conception of time capable of preserving humanity.

71 But the play of multitude still remains locked inside games of Empire. The mechanism of this lockdown is an intellectual property regime that deals all the trump cards for legal control of digital innovation into corporate hands. The inadequacy of this regime to the realities of digital culture is demonstrated by the futile war on piracy, with its colossal waste of resources and inhibition of technological capacity and human creativity. This means that the full potential of self-organized culture can only be realized in a system that relaxes commodification in favor of more shared and open uses of digital resources. "Commons" is a concept that sums up many of the aspirations of the movements of the multitude for collective and democratic, rather than private and plutocratic, ownership in a variety of vital spheres: an ecological commons (of water, atmosphere, forests); a social commons (of public provisions for welfare, health, education, and so on); and, as we have suggested here, a networked commons (of access to the means of communication).

72 To speak of games of multitude is thus to assert that the possibilities of virtual play exceed its imperial manifestations, and that the desires of many gamers surpass marketers' caricatures of them. Indeed, unlike the virtual-actual traffic that is characteristic of games of Empire, here we saw virtual games nourished by and nourishing the multitude. By proposing "games of multitude," we start asking of digital play what Guattari asked of collective humanity: "How can it a compass by which to reorient itself?" (1996a, 262). His response, by "remaking social practices," was grounded in a reading of transformations already under way. Games of multitude are, in Guattari's conceptual terms, a "molecular revolution" involving "the effort to not miss anything that could help rebuild a new kind of struggle, a new kind of society" (1996b, 90). Not missing anything includes virtual games. "Strange contraptions, you will tell me, these machines of virtuality, these blocks of mutant percepts and affects, half-object, half-subject," Guattari mused, perhaps (who knows?) contemplating a video game console—yet potentially, he insisted, such "strange contraptions" were "crucial instrument[s]" to "generate other ways of perceiving the world, a new face on things, and even a different turn of events" (1995, 92, 97).

Notes

[1] The theme reappears in other genres. The *Final Fantasy* series exquisitely wrought RPG world of quasi-chivalric character types seems the extreme of "spectacular" gaming. But the famous seventh game (1997) in the series revolves around a conflict between a group of disaffected youth and a multinational conglomerate, Shinra (which, translated from the Japanese means "New Rome"), a weapons-developer whose attempt to drain a universal source of "mako" energy (a clear allegory for biopower) both enables it to attain the status of world-government and cause massive ecological destruction until it is defeated by the activists.

[2] Even apparently conventional games betray some dark skepticism towards the Bush era. Consider *Just Cause*, released in 2006, in which we begin by guiding the parachuting Rico Rodriguez —a US-appointed Central Intelligence Agency operative—in his freefall to the lush shores of "San Esperito" on a mission to assassinate President, Salvador Mendoza, an oppressive ruler who has become a thorn in the U.S.' side. Central to game victory is partnering with armed anti-government revolutionary forces in the mountains, and pitting the country's oppositional factions against one

another. When, finally, you approach the Presidential Palace, there is not much time to contemplate the morality of your mission, and, in any case, the mayhem you've fomented is too intense stop: kill, overthrow, and 'Lead a nation to freedom!' (Eidos 2006, 4). Standard imperialist fare? There is just enough irony in *Just Cause* to make it plausible to "counter-play" as critical parody of the role of the U.S. in Latin American politics, interpreting the back-story of the game as not just a jab at the contemporary rhetoric of the War on Terror, but also as a sardonic medley of a controversial history of US intervention, whose modern episodes include the US invasion of Panama in 1989 to oust erstwhile US ally, Manuel Noriega—an invasion, we remember, carried the code-named, Operation Just Cause, and also a trial run of aerial tactics deployed months later in the first Gulf War (Lindsay-Poland 2003).

[3] Two important sites for tracking and discussing tactical games are Watercooler Games, https://www.watercoolergames.org.shtml, maintained by Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca, and Selectparks, https://www.selectparks.net.

[4] In 2005 we contributed an early essay about 'Games of Empire' (de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford, 2005) to *Flack Attack*, a journal virtually published out of The Port, a community-driven space inside *Second Life*. Other articles in a first edition on the theme of Autonomy discussed the situation of "prosumers" (self-producing consumers) in *Second Life* and their need for unionizing, the position of sex-communities in virtual worlds, on the desire for voluntary submission and slavery, on the balkanization of Wikipedia, on establishing commons in the grey-zones of intellectual property law. The overall orientation of the journal was to explore the possibilities "to act critically or subversively within the framework of somebody else's code and business strategy" in virtual worlds, with the organizers explicitly recognizing that a situation where "the user group voluntarily produce their own consumption . . . relates to the neo-marxist notion of the "social factory" in which all of life is enclosed within a logic of labor" (Goldin and Senneby 2007). *Flack Attack* appears to have been short lived, but the issues it raised are central to our considerations here.

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