The release of media theorist McKenzie Wark’s new book Gamer Theory is many things at once. If you’re interested in the growth of a new medium, it’s a media academic’s major guide to the key issues. If you’re games-savvy, you are just as likely to recoil in horror at Wark’s analyses. To proclaim that he has simply expanded on his previous work, A Hacker Manifesto, ignores what Gamer Theory is—a study in the catastrophe of reading culture. It’s an intensely difficult-to-navigate work but ultimately rewarding for those up to the challenge of the game before them.

Appearing first as a website open to public discussion and later as a print edition with harvested commentary from the site’s visitors, Gamer Theory is a guide to possible action drawn from the logics of games and the material situations of capitalism in which they’re stuck.

Each of the chapters takes on a game (eg Grand Theft Auto: Vice City) and a set of concerns around a particular theme (say, America), and acts as a sort of strategy for playing the game in question, intellectually. Wark is out to show what games can’t do, what they can’t escape, and how they inculcate us into sometimes frightening systems of control. There is a sense that Wark is fearful of what the encroachment of gamespaces may mean for potential ways of working against capitalism—games offer escape but deliver us into the hands of the enemy.

This idea of play being a coded way of validating commodity is a common refrain; for Wark, the mechanics of games are an extension of the quality assurance process of manufacturing. This is a compelling concept, especially considering the mountainous tasks that sports and strategy games put before us. Many games are so weighted towards a process of commodity-validity that we have internalized an entire dictionary of business language to navigate them; ‘unlocking content’ is as common in computer game terminology as ‘magic sword’ or ‘health bar.’ Wark’s project is to illuminate these issues and to cast them in a narrative of control—that gamers are enjoying playing through the same systems that capitalism uses to keep its subjects in tow.

With each reading of Gamer Theory, the growing sensation is of Wark taking us on a tour of a disaster area via helicopter. We can see the sweat on his face. His voice comes to us through a headset, trying to overcome the furious roaring above. “This is where capitalism hit hardest...You can see the damage. People here are trying to build their lives up again...but there’s nothing left.” “WHAT?” “There’s nothing left!” And with each chapter, the gamer is painted in stark contrast to the hacker, whose DIY ethic can...
each chapter, the gamer is painted in stark contrast to the hacker, whose DIY ethic can cut through the systems of control with ease.

Wark doesn't pretend his book is from the heart of digital play culture, but rather a shot across the bow for our assumptions that gamespaces aren't having a profound effect on our perception of the world. In the process, we know as much about games as McKenzie Wark the gamer if not as much as the theorist playing at being McKenzie Wark. So it is no surprise that Gamer Theory has caused a few ripples in game research, with the author re-entering the fora that made the book possible to give it its most potent summary.

Responding to reader comments, Wark suggests that "making totality go away is not a task for thought. It doesn't yield to a merely conceptual labour, since it is an historical task, a remaking of the world." Which is precisely how Gamer Theory presents itself. We can now finally understand this vast new medium not merely as an interactive junket through media history, but as a space tainted with the technologies of control and power.

www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory

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