

Chaucer's Losers, Nintendo's Children, and Other Forays in Queer Ludonarratology*Tison Pugh*

Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. Introduction, conclusion, notes, works cited, and index. 282 pp. \$55.00, hardcover. ISBN: 9781496217615

It has become common in the twenty years since the start of the infamous narratology versus ludology debates in game studies for scholars, developers, critics, and players to comment on the supposed antagonism between play and narrative. In *Chaucer's Losers*, Tison Pugh challenges the assumptions inherent in this theoretical divide and poses new, queer directions for considering narrative play and playful narratives across media. Although certainly not the first work to consider narrative and play together or to explore the concept of ludonarratology (recent explorations include works by Souvik Mukherjee, Tamer Thabet, and many others), *Chaucer's Losers* is innovative for its focus on gender and identity in the dynamic convergence of narrative and play in many types of texts that Pugh calls "ludonarrative artifacts," including novels, plays, films, and fan creations such as Muggle Quidditch, based on the Harry Potter novels. This eclectic and eyebrow-raising collection of case studies is surprisingly fitting for a book on queer ludonarratology, and it allows Pugh to highlight how ludonarrative takes many forms that all relate to gender and identity in some way and further have queer potentials to disrupt these systems. In this regard, *Chaucer's Losers* is a timely intervention in ongoing discussions of

game narrative that rarely consider gender outside of representation of women and LGBTQ characters. That said, while the book draws heavily on game studies research, its case studies are almost exclusively not games (except for one chapter on The Legend of Zelda series). As Pugh states in the book, this is intentional—it pushes for a broader understanding of where we find games and game-like structures—yet readers with backgrounds in games and play may find the lack of game references and examples limiting.

Chaucer's Losers is divided into two parts. The first, shorter part is "Theorizing Queer Ludonarratology," which explores various theories of narrative, play, and game narrative in the past twenty years and then turns to how the theories and structures discussed could be queered in transformative ways. At times, these chapters read mostly as a literature review of relevant scholarship, but they also model crucial considerations for ludonarrative and are punctuated with new concepts for the study of queer narratives. For example, the chapter "Queering Ludonarratology" offers reconsiderations of familiar concepts such as loss, irony, and victory in new lights that allow us to use them to subvert cultural norms and expectations. The second part, "Structures and Reading in Queer Ludonarrativity," consists of a series of case studies of different ludonarrative artifacts across media, with each proposing a concept such as the win-loss binary, sadomasochism, and god games as an interpretive tool for queer ludonarratology. Of these, the chapter "Children" is of particular note for scholars of games and play for its exploration of the innocence and queerness of eternal childhood

and the potentials of playing queerly in the Legend of Zelda series.

Chaucer's Losers, at its strongest and most innovative, seeks to find both play and queerness in unexpected places. Each of its case studies demonstrates that ludonarrative artifacts, such as novels and films, that seemingly have little or no play, interactivity, or game structures, are often not just full of them but even rely on them. It is a drastic oversimplification to assume that readers of novels and viewers of films are merely passive observers of a static narrative, because this ignores how playful, active, and rule bound interpretation can be. Similarly, the book searches for queerness in ludonarrative artifacts that at first glance do not have it—none of the case studies has explicitly queer characters or narratives. Rather, Pugh unearths the hidden queer structures and potentials (what he calls the “queer chinks” in the heteronormative armor) hidden in what are often overwhelmingly straight narratives such as tales from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or David Fincher’s film *Seven*. By looking for play and queerness in unlikely media and texts, *Chaucer's Losers* encourages readers to rethink their categories and binaries and imagine other ways to play in and beyond games.

Unfortunately, the book’s greatest strength is also the source of its most problematic conclusions and missed opportunities. By locating queerness primarily in narratives of cis-heterosexual relationships and experiences, *Chaucer's Losers* forwards a number of questionable claims about queerness as a “praxis of engagement” divorced from any specific identity (p. 13). For example, throughout the book Pugh claims that narrative moments in which

cis-heterosexual male characters are emasculated—or in which straight relationships do not live up to gender ideals—are queer. But are any and all deviations from gender norms automatically queer, particularly when these deviations are still comfortably contained within and return to cis-heteronormativity? When straight people fail at their own gender games, is that queer? These questions are essential because queer is not just an abstract theoretical concept—it is a political statement emerging from the marginalized, lived experiences of LGBTQ folks. There can be power in tracing the queer subtexts of otherwise heteronormative lives, but in *Chaucer's Losers* it is not always clear if doing so effectively furthers queer communities or simply recenters heteronormativity in the discussion of queerness. Similarly, the book’s focus on narrative theories based primarily on literature and film leads to a number of disappointing missteps in game studies, like calling queer game studies scholars such as Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw “queer ludologists,” which few (if any) queer game studies scholars use to describe themselves for significant reasons (p. 6). Ludology as a dominant ideology in game studies has for years minimized the value and contributions of feminist and queer scholarship, especially but not exclusively in the narratology versus ludology debates, as Emma Vossen, Alisha Karabinus, and others have described. Finally, although the book mentions intersectionality at one point as a current prerogative in queer studies, *Chaucer's Losers* is conspicuously lacking in any characters, narrators, or authors who are not white—the closest example is Link from Legend

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