

Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade

Matt Schaefer

Herbert Hoover Presidential Library

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2018 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Schaefer, Matt. "Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 219-221.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12517>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade, by Carly A. Kocurek. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. xxvii, 244 pp. Illustrations, graph, notes, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paperback.

Reviewer Matt Schaefer is an archivist at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library. His wide-ranging interests include issues related to gaming and masculinity.

Carly Kocurek's *Coin-Operated Americans* is a challenging book. It aims to "explore gaming culture along two major threads: the rise and fall of the early coin-op video game industry, and the consolidation of gamer identity as it came to be allied with an idealized vision of youth, masculinity, violence, and digital technology" (xvii). Kocurek labels this cluster of ideas as "technomasculine." This is an ambitious thesis to demonstrate using only the building blocks of arcade video games, trade journals, popular magazines, oral histories, and deep analysis of selected movies. At points Kocurek's argument is persuasive. Within chapters, it is sometimes compelling. For the book as a whole, however, the threads of her argument do not hold.

As someone for whom video game arcades were a part of my mispent youth in the suburban Midwest, Kocurek's descriptions of these arcades resonates. These were immersive environments, largely supported by young men. But her broader analytic points seem strained. The young men in the arcade with me were not a disruptive cohort aiming to subvert existing economic and cultural values by mastering a new video game. We did not see the arcade as a microcosm of the "generalized economic values we now confront as consumer, laborers, and citizens" (35), as Kocurek concludes at the end of her first chapter. We were young men with time (and quarters) to burn, having more in common with our miscreant forefathers who hung out at pool halls than with the technomasculine future.

Kocurek dates the birth of the video game era to 1972 with the introduction of *Pong*. Arcade video games boomed for the next decade, reaching their peak in the early 1980s, being featured in *Life Magazine's* 1982 "Year in Pictures" issue. The image used to represent the pinnacle of gaming culture shows 16 clean-cut boys, 5 girls in cheerleading garb, and 6 arcade video games on Main Street in Ottumwa, Iowa. The photo was shot there at the behest of Walter Day, proprietor of Twin Galaxies Arcade and creator of the national scoreboard to track the top scores across a range of video games. In a chapter titled "Gaming's Gold Medalists: Twin Galaxies and the Rush to Competitive Gaming," Kocurek uses this single photograph to analyze "the representational threads evident in the image . . . gender, athleticism, youth, and Amer-

ican national identity" (38). She concludes, "The *Life* photograph attempts to frame the gamers as All-Americans, drawing on the ethos of athletic display and boy-genius narratives . . . suggesting that the new medium of the video game, and by extension, the newly domesticated technology of the computer were nothing to worry about: they were merely new arenas for American men to prove their masculinity and superiority" (65). The argument has merit, but the foundational photograph may not bear the full weight of her conclusions.

Kocurek's next two chapters examine the resistance to this emergent technology and the moral panic attending some of the more violent extremes presented in arcade games such as *Death Race*, which debuted in 1976. Kocurek aptly notes that the moral panic surrounding *Death Race* may have been misplaced given that the violence within the game is stylized, the on-screen graphics are rudimentary, and the gameplay involves running over stick-figure gremlins in a graveyard. The negative publicity surrounding *Death Race* enhanced sales of the game and set the stage for ensuing moral panics in the late 1990s over *Grand Theft Auto*, which enjoyed decades of solid sales, evolving over time to be judged the "most controversial video game ever" by *Guinness World Records* (90).

Kocurek devotes the fifth chapter of the book to a detailed analysis of two movies from the early 1980s, *Tron* and *War Games*, which she asserts "helped reify the gamer identity" and to establish "the emerging digital landscape in the popular imagination as a dangerous proving ground for young men coming of age in an age of computerization" (146). Kocurek's analysis of these two films is solid insofar as they reflect on the nature of the uneasy relationship between humans and machines. She capably situates *Tron* and *War Games* in the cultural and historical contexts of John Henry as a steel-driving man, Chaplin in *Modern Times*, Lucy and Ethel working the line in the chocolate factory, and the *Terminator* films that followed. She astutely notes that the two movies are unique in presenting the human-machine conflict as taking place within the tightly defined space of computerized game. The argument begins to strain when Kocurek holds that *Tron* and *War Games* "are establishing texts in constructing a distinctive, late 20th century masculine identity that has profound implications for the development of video gaming and the tech industry more broadly" (125). It is hard to assign this much credit to two movies that enjoyed such modest box office success.

Kocurek closes with a chapter titled "The Future Is Now: Changes in Gaming Culture," bringing the history of video gaming to the present. She points out that video games, born in the arcade and moving to

home computers over time, have been enjoying a resurgence as an arcade-based enterprise, trading on the nostalgia felt by folks like me longing to recapture their misspent youth. Today's video games still skew heavily toward a male point of view, pushing limits of stylized violence, and offer escape for the disaffected and the displaced. As Kocurek notes, "Video games became a point of articulation for anxieties over economic, cultural and technological changes" (195). This more circumspect conclusion has merit.

Good Apples: Behind Every Bite, by Susan Futrell. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2017. xiv, 252 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$20.00 paperback.

Reviewer Maureen Ogle, an author and historian, lives in Ames. She is the author of *In Meat We Trust: An Unexpected History of Carnivore America* (2013) and *Ambitious Brew: The Story of American Beer* (2006).

Susan Futrell, who grew up in Ames and now lives in Iowa City, realized young that she "love[d] business when it's done right" (5). To that end, she built a career in the "alternative" food system—marketing, sales, distribution—in Iowa and beyond. That work deposited her on the frontlines of the American apple industry and led to the realization that apples are a microcosm of the complexities and contradictions of the nation's "food system."

Futrell's narrative structure in *Good Apples* is standard in contemporary popular nonfiction writing: She opens with an anecdote about her failed effort to buy an Iowa apple orchard that might otherwise be plowed under. (The auction quickly deflated her dream: She'd underestimated, significantly, the property's value.) That's followed by a short history of American agriculture in general and apple culture in particular and then by the bulk of her narrative: tales of orchard owners and farmers' markets, geneticists and breeders, pickers and packers.

Futrell is especially good at detailing the obstacle course that is agriculture/food production in America: If it's not wildfire, drought, and floods, then it's federal and state paperwork, cutthroat competition, corporate farming, and grocery chain clout. And that's just for "regular" apples. Toss organic and local into the equation and making apples becomes exponentially more difficult.

Then there is the apple itself. Futrell learns that an apple worth marketing must offer the illusion, however engineered, of adhering to a platonic ideal: perfect in shape and color; blemish-free; able to endure both shipping and storage and still offer its buyer crisp flavor and texture.