

Selling the American Dream: U.S. Gold, Intersectional Pleasures, and the Ludoindustrial Complex

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ABSTRACT

The British games publisher U.S. Gold was founded by Anne and Geoff Brown in Birmingham, UK, in 1984, in parallel to their distributor, CentreSoft. The publishing label mastered the transatlantic fantasy of selling the pleasure of Americanness to European players. U.S. Gold's catalogue included several Japanese arcade titles which engaged with Americanness, forming a byzantine cultural transaction that concealed its hybrid origins (Kocurek 2015). It reimagined Japan's stylised versions of America, for instance the Californian landscape of Sega's *OutRun* (1986) or the patriotic combat of Capcom's *1943: Battle of Midway* (1987), where the European player of a Japanese game plays an American pilot. Therefore, U.S. Gold sits at the nexus of what we term the ludoindustrial complex – the network of ideological, technological, and affective forces linking videogame production to global systems of consumption and cultural desire (Seiwald and Wade 2022; 2023). Reframing this concept through the lens of intersectional pleasure, U.S. Gold's marketing and distribution practices transformed the American Dream with its promises of freedom, success, and individual agency into a pleasurable consumer experience mediated through play. These were represented as aspirational commodities for British and European audiences, offering what Ahmed (2010: 38) calls an affective orientation towards happiness and belonging – an imagined route to self-fulfilment through consumption. In this sense, the pleasure of play was not only ludic but also ideological: to play American became to participate in capitalism's most seductive fantasy of self-making.

This paper explores how these pleasures intersect across class, gender, and geography. In Thatcherite Britain, videogames became markers of technological literacy and social aspiration, reflecting Veblen's (1994 [1899]) and Trigg's (2016) analyses of conspicuous consumption. The Commodore 64, marketed as both educational tool and leisure object, embodies what Bourdieu (1984: xiii–xiv), based on Kant's critique of judgement, contends for the relationship between class and leisure: “by seeking in the structure of the social classes the basis of the systems of classification which structure perception of the social world and designate the objects of aesthetic enjoyment.” For working- and middle-class players, U.S. Gold's glittering gold medallion logo – “All American Software” – promised access to a cosmopolitan transatlantic lifestyle otherwise beyond reach. The pleasure of digital play encodes an intersectional politics of visibility: to own and play American games was to inhabit a fantasy of class mobility and global belonging. Yet these pleasures were profoundly mediated. This simulation of Americanness, as Baudrillard (2007) would suggest, transformed geopolitical asymmetry into affective pleasure. British consumers were not buying ‘America’ itself, but an aestheticised idea of it: surf culture, neon skylines, and fast cars encoded in pixels and packaging. The resulting pleasure was both ironic and sincere: the authentic joy of participating in an unattainable dream.

Crucially, this pleasure was intersectional. Drawing on hooks' (1992: 31) analysis of cultural consumption as exchange and decontextualization as well as Fiske's (1989: 2) notion of “popular culture as made from within and below,” we argue that U.S. Gold's players negotiated identity through play, embracing, resisting or reinterpreting the American Dream. This generated a very postmodern mode of consumption where high and low culture intersect in the form of digital games. For some, these games offered escapist joy amid economic precarity; for others, they reinforced the pleasure of identification with hegemonic whiteness, masculinity, and Western modernity. Pleasure, here, is neither innocent nor universal: it functions as a lubricant of ideology, transforming consumption into a site of affective participation in global capitalism.

U.S. Gold's marketing practices reveal how these affective economies operated. Spending five times as much on magazine advertising as their nearest competitor (Meades, Nolan, and Wade 2026), the company constructed an immersive ecosystem where magazine spreads, competitions, and arcade conversions merged into sensory experiences of desirability. The gold medallion logo and Californian imagery of the jewel-case game covers promised a form of digital cosmopolitanism that blurred borders and identities. These promotional aesthetics turned retail browsing into a ritual of affective investment, transforming the shop floor into a cruelly optimistic space (Berlant 2011), where pleasure depends on identification with an unattainable fantasy.

By situating U.S. Gold within the ludoindustrial complex, this paper demonstrates how pleasure operates as both affect and ideology in Cold War gaming culture. To do so, the study draws on archival material around U.S. Gold, game packaging, advertisements, and magazine coverage. These artefacts allow us to discuss how the American Dream, reimagined as a game one could buy and play, offered consumers the illusion of participation in global modernity while concealing the material asymmetries of its production. In this light, U.S. Gold's games exemplify what intersectional pleasures look like under late capitalism: desires for belonging, power, and identity entwined within circuits of simulation, marketing, and play. In this sense, this study demonstrates that the pleasures of play are inseparable from the pleasures of consumption. Through U.S. Gold's glittering promise of Americanness, the ludoindustrial complex exposes a central truth of digital culture: in the global marketplace of games, to play is to desire, and to desire is to consume.

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