PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE: CONTROVERSIAL DISCUSSION

A critique of leftist gaming

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a discussion between Jan De Vos and Alfie Bown on leftist gaming. Bown wrote a well-read and well-referenced book entitled *The Playstation Dreamworld* (2018a) in which he also advanced the idea of the necessity to develop gaming for the left. In his book *The Digitalisation of (Inter)Subjectivity* (2020), De Vos challenged and critiqued the concept of leftist gaming in a chapter entitled 'Digital Mass Effects'. In this article, Alfie Bown introduces the discussion after which Jan De Vos rehearses the main arguments of his book, adding a few extra elements to his critique. De Vos's main question is whether the fact that digital technologies, historically underpinned by mainstream psychological theories, undermine Bown's psychoanalytic project for leftist gaming. In his response, Bown then pleads to scrutinise not only the pre-digital history of coding but also the future of it, so as to rewrite the history of the digital infrastructure as inherently tied to the history of capitalism. De Vos closes this article with a brief afterthought.

KEYWORDS: capitalism; culture; digital technologies; gaming; digitalisation of (inter)subjectivity

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INTRODUCTION - *Alfie Bown*

A lot has happened since I wrote *The Playstation Dreamworld,* the ideas of which were developed mostly in the year 2016. Then, we were still in what we might retrospectively see as the aftermath of Gamergate, the saga in which racist and sexist trolls mobilised against what they perceived to be a diversification of the game industry. After years of imagining videogames as a bit of harmless (or harmful) escapism, the world had suddenly realised that videogames intersected deeply with politics. At that time, we were also seeing the rise and election of Donald Trump and vast attention to the image board 4chan and its associated communities of memeists and digital activists, who were seen as the hard edge of an 'alt-right' activism that had mobilised behind Trump out of nowhere. The liberal media were obsessed with a very real threat from the political right and turned their attention toward anti-fascism, but had once again neglected the anti-capitalism that was needed to go alongside any progressive agenda. In my book, I argued that the games industry was making the same mistake: endorsing diversity and responding by promoting anti-fascism, but failing on many levels and in many ways to be anti-capitalist. Against that, I tried to show that there could be a gaming for the left that might emerge out of this moment of political chaos that had thrown the industry—and beyond—into chaos.

Six years later, there are plenty of questions. Have games and associated digital media, particularly those technologies which 'gamify' our world, made any progress when it comes to promoting leftist, progressive, or revolutionary ideas, or did the far-right have a strong hold on this space that continues today? Alternatively, have the corporate forces of Silicon Valley and the platform capitalists smoothed over the cracks and (in the way that capitalist realism does) ironed out the wrinkles that were visible in 2016? Can there be leftist gaming now? I was presented with the following paper—a kind of response to my book—by Jan De Vos. It is full of provocative questions and reflections on the complex problem of how digital media, games, and capitalism form an important triangulation in contemporary society. De Vos argues that any concept of gaming for the left—if it is even possible—would have to go much further than my book had suggested. In that I agree fully, and we present below his paper followed by my response. Between us we attempt to work out, at least in a preliminary way, how we might think of the relationship between digital capitalism, videogames, and psychoanalysis in 2022.

A CRITIQUE OF LEFTIST GAMING - *Jan De Vos*

Introducing Alfie Bown's plea for leftist gaming

Alfie Bown argues that video games are political, and predominantly biased, conservative, and patriarchal in nature (e.g., depicting imperialist values such as empire, domination, and conquering by force). From here, he pleads for the need for new kinds of games that are not only leftist and emancipatory in terms of their content, but also in terms of their form itself. For, as he argues: 'Video games communicate ideology at the level of form, and laying a progressive storyline over the top does not necessarily prevent a game from serving right wing ideas.' (Bown, 2018b).

To open up the discussion, let me point to a related debate concerning certain political propaganda techniques that are used by the right to deceive and hook people. The argument here of some critical theorists and leftist scholars is that the left should adopt these same strategies on the condition that they should explain to people how the luring is done (see, for example, Connolly, 2002; De Vos, 2013). The question, however, is whether models or techniques truly can be said to be inherently neutral and thus can be used either for foul (rightist) or good (leftist) politics: are they not also *political, and predominantly biased, conservative, and patriarchal in nature*?

It is in this sense that I endorse Bown's argument: the strategy should not be to use pre-existing gaming forms and merely add leftist content to it. However, we should perhaps also go a step further than Bown and state that it would also not suffice to simply invent new gaming forms (that would envision a more emancipatory use of gaming and engender a more critical attitude amongst gamers), but that instead we should seek to question or rework the very issue or form of digital gaming itself, or even, perhaps, address the forms of the digital technologies that underpin gaming as such. For, at the very least, should we not add to Bown's argument by stating that the issue of forms being contaminated by ideology is already at work at the very level of digitality as such?

Gaming, literature, and reading heads

To begin with, Bown's argument is predicated on a slightly problematic comparison between gaming and literature. Through recourse to Raymond Williams, Bown (2018b) contends that novels such as those by Charles Dickens, despite their left-wing content (evoking sympathy with the repressed working class, for example), ultimately are conservative with respect to their form, and are thus incapable of instigating social change and instead exist as mere commodities to be enjoyed by bourgeois readers. Modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf realised that the very form of novels needed to be problematised, and that this was what was required for literature to become more progressive and politically forward-

thinking. For Bown, gaming must undergo an analogous shift. However, can gaming truly be situated on the same level as reading and writing?

That is to say, if today gaming restricts gamers to performing specific tasks (to kill, to conquer, to build, etc.), then, in accordance with Bown, can one imagine games that subvert such preconfigured actions by either bestowing upon players a greater degree of freedom or allowing them to deconstruct these actions? However, would this not solely concern, at least to begin with, hidden or simply unspoken tasks: *conquer the castle in a critical or deconstructive way*?

Or, phrased otherwise: in contrast to being a scholar among a reading public (to use the Kantian designation), is being a gamer among a gaming public not subject to the narrower confines of gaming, and, as such, its very form itself? That is to say, even with the advent of more creative and politically daring games, such critical engagement with them would still occur within the boundaries of the game itself. Consequently, it appears to me that an answering player cannot but accept the basic coordinates of the specific game that is being played. Moreover, even if a meta-answer would be possible; that is, if a game could be answered and/or criticised within another or a new game, would this not mean that the public debate would ultimately be a debate between technicians and experts, and thus exclude code-illiterate laypersons? Indeed, even if games could be built in such a way that incited users to become code-literate—i.e., allowed gamers to learn the hidden algorithms and the obscured strategies of data-gathering, or even allowed users to rewrite the algorithms and manage the data themselves—would this not ultimately mean that the very base of digital technologies (the current hardware, software, and anything in between) would remain completely untouched and unquestioned? It is perhaps here that one can discern the crucial difference between writing and gaming technologies: the latter's forms are constrained and conditioned by a different and underlying technological level, which cannot be simply contested. Or, to put it another way, while Joyce and Woolf were able to use writing as a way through which to subvert writing as a bourgeois technology, this cannot be simply transposed to defying the constraints that digital technologies place upon us.

The crucial point to make here is that while both writing and digital computing technologies are arguably not about mimicking human nature or improving it—regarding writing, recall the Derridean argument (Derrida, 1974) that writing is not the result of a natural process nor the obvious or logical transposing of spoken language—it can be documented and demonstrated that digital technologies do set out from specific *scientific theories and models* about human nature (something which, arguably, is not the case with the advent of writing). Just consider McCulloch and Pitts' (1943) phrasing of 'neural networks' most commonly used by AI developers to back up their claim that the technologies they develop are modelled after the nature of the human brain. To show how particular conceptions of the human are mobilised in digital technologies, it is instructive here to refer back to Alan Turing's so-called universal machine (see, for an extended discussion, De Vos,

2020), where the algorithmic handling of data is based on a 'head' that reads squares on a paper strip, with each square containing data (Turing, 1950). The head of the Turing machine thus places a kind of agent in charge, an unproblematic (and also unproblematised) fully present agent, who engages directly with the data, whilst, simultaneously, remaining independent from the data, and thus remaining unaffected by what it reads. This, one could argue, is the ghost in Turing's machine. Clearly, this head-subject is not the subject that is delineated in psychoanalysis (on which also Bown leans to develop his plea for leftist gaming); it is neither the Freudian split subject nor Lacan's subject that is suspended between two signifiers, or, as Lacan himself put it: 'a signifier represents the subject for another signifier' (Lacan, 1964/1978, p. 207). The difference between Turing's head and Lacan's subject is that the latter concerns a zero-level of subjectivity, which means that the subject has no weight nor amplitude as such but, rather, only exists in the interstices of language. Even though, most remarkably, Turing and many other Artificial Intelligence theorists and cyberneticists initially started out from explicitly referencing psychoanalytic theory (De Vos, 2020), they ultimately resorted to simplified mainstream psychological conceptions of the human being in order to devise their technologies. Hence, in contrast to the divided and thus necessarily ephemeral subject of psychoanalysis, Turing's head simply is what it is, undivided and fully present, which is where, I would argue, subjectivity disappears as such: the head is not that which gives rise to fissures or ambiguities. Can it not be argued that this scheme, which underpins our digital technologies, is also constitutive of how our subjective and intersubjective spaces are constructed in the era of digitalisation? Consider here the contention of Dave Winer, a software developer, who argued: 'Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today' (cited in Lovink, 2012, p. 11). This can be considered as a mortifying reversal of Lacan's formula, whereby humans are narrowed down to *persons*, mere datasets to be incorporated into Winer's definition of the social, which, above all, appears to fit the definition of the market.

Will digital gaming not also eventually be structurally marked by this scheme? Arguably, gaming today does not allow space for the subject. In this way, gaming can perhaps be wholly situated at the level of *dream work*, which is one of the key arguments put forward by Bown in his book on gaming. I would argue that dreaming in the Freudian sense of the term has no subject per se, and that the subject of the dream only arises in the act of remembering and awakening, which is the other space of dreaming, where dreams enter the social as they are told to someone else: only there does the subject divided between the dream and the world come into being. Digital gaming, which is based on our current digital technology, thus can be said to be above all the dreams from which one cannot wake up, as it does not allow any 'other space', an elsewhere that is necessary for the subject qua split being. Moreover, as *dream work* is about fantasies being put to work while our motor functions are shut down, as per Freud's account, then one could perhaps conclude that game-dreaming about the leftist revolution is not likely to lead to any significant action.

For it, at the very least, is not the crucial question, which is perhaps overlooked by Bown in his hopes for more emancipatory forms of gaming; what constitutes the social in gaming? Even though new forms of gaming could incite us to think critically (and thus be educational as such), could they truly bring people together, could they truly engender a collective body capable of opposing the hegemonic forces? In other words, the question I am interested in is whether the technological conditions of gaming communities are not only structurally incompatible with a true understanding of subjectivity, but also with a proper political community, or 'the entire public of the world of readers' as envisioned by Kant (1784/1996, p. 18)? For, if one accepts that the digital technologies we have currently are based on what I would call a psychologised falsification of subjectivity, then how would they allow for a genuine manifestation of sociality? One is reminded here of how Bernard Stiegler assessed the conditions of the social under digitalisation. Stiegler (2010) argued that 'psychotechnical attention capture' results in

> an immense psychological, affective, cultural, economic, and social disaster, and has led to the weakening and increasing fragility of social linkages that at this point are capable only of engendering generalized insecurity and immense doubts about the future condition of all intergenerational relations. (p. 58)

Hence, should we abandon all hope when entering the digital game? Will the revolution not be gamified? Or, for that matter, will the revolution not be digitalised because it cannot unite people around a collective cause? Hence, the question that requires addressing in greater detail is a general one: what does it take for a collection of individuals to form a group? Perhaps the psychoanalytic distinction between a mass and a society, between a gang and a group, might be expedient for this purpose.

The deadlock of subjective identification in the play cave

Digital gaming clearly sets out from the 'one-on-one' model. One could compare this, for example, with all sorts of digital education platforms which are ostensibly wholly adaptable to the individual needs of students, thus signalling the realisation of the ultimate solipsistic form of education and schooling. Digital learning platforms appear intent on ruling out group effects, or, at the very least, wholly containing, controlling, and steering them. To put it more dramatically yet still: the digital *one-on-one* is where the erstwhile collective *speaking being* becomes the solipsistic *speaking beast*; every utterance or deed is now tracked, while every 'social exchange' is managed as a result of everything being processed along the individualising psychological schemes that form the backbone of the algorithms.

It is precisely here that educational technologies and also, for that matter, social media platforms and hence gaming platforms, by virtue of addressing the *individual as an individual* (in order to pre-script, nudge, steer, and ultimately commodify them), turn the digitalised human being into a mere cog in the systemic faceless mass. It is against this backdrop that

Winer's aforesaid definition becomes more tangible: 'Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today' (cited in Lovink, 2012, p. 11). Think in this respect of a Facebook project aiming to develop non-invasive sensors capable of detecting brainwaves, which, in turn, would allow one person to feel what another person feels (see Lee, 2017). This, arguably, would mean the end of subjectivity and individuality as we know it, insofar as it would lead to the establishment of a uniformed swarm mind; the ultimate form of massification.

Of course, concerning these telepathic technologies, the question imposing itself here is how would brains be connected; that is, *which theory* of the psychological and the social would be used as the interface? For, arguably, the mere electro-chemical brain activity would need to be modelled in order to transport and then transpose them into another brain. I contend that the algorithms that would do this job would inevitably lean on certain theories and models of the human being and their social interactions. One could argue that, for all sorts of reasons, psychoanalysis will not be the first inspiration base here, being on its decline and probably coming across as too complex and even contradictory. As such, it can be observed that programmers and designers of, for example, digital education technologies or social media tend to take recourse to the more simple and straightforward psychological models of the human being and of society: much easier to model (compare this with neuroscientists using mainstream psychological models in order to chart the brain; De Vos, 2016)! Would it not be an insurmountable ordeal for digital engineers or designers to implement the overly complex and baroque psychoanalytic theory on how individuals form groups and, most importantly, how this is mirrored and interconnected with how groups form individuals? One can safely argue that no one in Facebook's Building 8 team working on developing the 'brain–computer interface' is pondering on how to model the interconnectedness of the Oedipus complex (as formative for individual subjectivity) with the Freudian myth of the primal horde (as formative for groups and society as such).

However, here we might make a remarkable side observation: is not digital culture, and especially gaming, testifying of a golden age for fantasy and fiction providing ample grist for the psychoanalytic mill? Or, if one is in doubt about where all the rich imagery of psychoanalysis has gone, now that psychoanalysis is ostensibly in decline, then one answer might be that it went to the digital entertainment industry: to the endless series and content on Netflix and similar streaming services and gaming. Indeed, incest stories, castration fears, father figures, sibling rivalries, and so on and so forth all appear to have found refuge in the world of fantasy and gaming. Hence, while mainstream neuropsy-scientists explain the 'mental' via dry cognitivism, behaviourism, and cerebral functions and regions, and laugh warily at the 'old' psychoanalytic explanations, in the meantime the Romanesque imagery of psychoanalysis proliferates across popular culture.

All this perhaps justifies a first psychoanalytic conjecture of the possible changes in times of digitalisation as to what concerns the formations of subjectivities and intersubjectivities.

For, can we not discern in the digital hero cult, especially rampant in gaming, a crucial shift in the processes of identification? Instead of forming a symbolic identification with the hero, first and foremost the gamer acts *being* the hero: does this not mean that instead of symbolic identifications, then, gaming invariably confines gamers to imaginary identifications? This stems from the fact that the form, or perhaps more accurately, the structure of gaming involves an *acting out*, a repetitious role-play in which we play at being the hero, which, in turn, can be said to provide us—if I am allowed this wink to Lacan's Mirror stage—with an image of unity and substantiality that we ourselves do not possess. This is perhaps because there is only space for acting out in the digital realm as opposed to developing symbolic identifications whereby one would not merely identify with what one would like to be, but, rather, to use Žižek's designation, one would identify 'with the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love' (Žižek, 1989, p. 116). At the very least, such modes of symbolic identification entail that we do not identify in the first place with that what we want to be (or with what we are said to be), but, rather, we identify with what we want to be *from the perspective (or the gaze) of where we would be seen as that which we want to be*. For example, a child role-playing as a knight with a toy sword must, at the very least, imagine the gaze of someone (the archetypal example here would be an invisible audience) watching them and admiring their sword skills and heroic courage at confronting all these evil forces. Here, one can firstly discern the split subject, who is split between a primary and secondary identification and, hence, eventually a zero-level of subjectivity: ultimately, we are nothing but the gaze from where we look at ourselves.

The key question here is whether this precise constellation, form, and structure is wholly impossible within the historically contingent development of digital technologies. Consider, once again, Turing's reading head, which can be said to be the equivalent of a full agent, insofar as it was wholly equal to itself and remained unaffected by the data. Does this mean that digital technologies are simply incapable of offering us anything more than placeholders for the solipsistic imaginary ego, which serves to foreclose the symbolic subject; the subject who lacks a full subjectivity and who has no choice but to lose itself in the act of attempting to establish itself symbolically? Hence, are gamers, and by extension everybody dwelling in the digital virtual life-world and its limited forms of subjectivity (pre-configured on the base of the cardboard mainstream psychological models and theories) condemned to fool around within the range of imaginary coordinates designed by game developers and the like? Could one not argue that the symbolic antagonism that is made possible via the adoption of an external gaze, which allows for an act of subjectivation (where the individual can become a subject and a mass can become a social group), structurally has no place within the digital? Indeed, the entire issue of making gaming more 'real' (via ever more realistic 3D graphics and virtual reality possibilities that make fully immersive gaming simply a matter of time) might result in the symbolic 'as if' dimension becoming thinner yet still. In gaming, the toy sword is an AK 47, and you can literally feel the kickback of the weapon in your hands as the control

pad rumbles when you fire. However, as virtual reality technology advances it will soon be possible for gamers to feel the sensation of the cold steel on their hands, to smell the gun oil, and so forth, while if cerebral access becomes possible, we would not have to play as the hero, or imagine ourselves as being the hero, we would just *be the hero*.

However, perhaps, for the time being, it suffices to say that the digital promotes imaginary rather than symbolic identifications. The crucial issue here is that the external gaze which structures symbolic identifications (the perspective from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves worthy of love) in digitality is no longer external, but, rather, is fully drawn within the framework of the digital itself, which, in turn, condemns us to be locked up in imaginary identifications. This is where 'the loving gaze' is no longer supposed, but, rather, is either realised imaginarily in the form of either systemic rewards (gaining experience points (XP), reaching another level, winning trophies), or is substantialised via the gaze of our peers in the gaming community. While the community aspect is regularly invoked as a positive feature of gaming (in the sense that it brings people together), one could argue that gaming and social media, in fact, deprive us of the 'invisible audience' and condemn us for life to endure the 'real' presence of peers evaluating, applauding, supervising, following, sympathising, and, of course, liking us. The horror!

However, while the horror is all mine, it clearly has its counterpart in the zealous enthusiasm of those pedagogues who are so anxious to include gaming as soon as possible within their educational practices: to use, for example, gaming to let teenagers experience the dangers of sexting in a playful way, or to even let adults become acquainted with healthy food via online interactive platforms that are replete with funny movies and entertaining quizzes. While technology in this way draws us all into its imaginary scenery of immature and even childish play, in the meantime our new economy condemns us to life-long learning. This is the paradox: as school is on the verge of being shut down and replaced by an interface between persons and data, we ourselves have become eternal pupils dispersed on the learning platforms, which we cannot escape from as the prospect of finally graduating and entering public life appears to have been foreclosed. Hence, is the ultimate objective, then, to keep everybody immature and continually part of a virtual classroom/playroom where each person is isolated and addressed separately? Within such a constellation, group formations are bypassed for a more generalised solipsism; at most, we could say that we are led to *fake* pre-configured groups, based on empty socio-psychologised signifiers, such as well-being, empathy, and participation. It is precisely here, I would argue, that massification and its unchecked effects are imminent.

Conclusions: Reclaim the concrete

Digital technology so it seems, is easily usable for both corporate interests and rightist ideologies. Seemingly, the capitalists and the alt-right does not have work too hard and can

suffice to use technology straightforwardly and naively. The left, in contrast, has to think and work hard so as to reverse engineer the digital machinery. This argument—which considers the advent of technology as a natural process which, for reasons left unexplained, tends to favour the right in its manipulation of the people—is what I have questioned in this essay. At times, Bown seems to embrace this position I have critiqued as he contends that tinkering with the emotions of the people via technologies should also be part of the subversive game of the left as it should go beyond merely deconstructing ideology:

> This is a question about the politics of subversion in a much wider sense, since embracing this possibility would involve an admission that it is necessary not only to deconstruct existing ideological assumptions but to construct new ones, operating consciously to manipulate the emotions of others. It may be time for the left to accept this necessity. (Bown, 2018a, p. 78)

However, if, as I argue throughout my latest book, it is the mainstream neuropsychological models that are mobilised when it comes to digitally (pre)designing emotions, is not the first problem that, if one opts for an alternative digitality starting out from psychoanalysis, for the latter emotions are far from an unproblematic category? For example, Lacan argued the following concerning the function of the Chorus in Greek tragedy:

> Your emotions are taken charge of by the healthy order displayed on the stage. The Chorus takes care of them. The emotional commentary is done for you … Therefore, you don't have to worry; even if you don't feel anything, the Chorus will feel in your stead. Why after all can one not imagine that the effect on you may be achieved, at least a small dose of it, even if you didn't tremble that much? (Lacan, 1992, p. 247)

The central insight here is that emotions and psychology only come to the fore in the very process of outsourcing them to the Chorus. The human being itself does not do emotions, and neither does it tremble—that is what the Chorus is for. Is hence the central question here not: would this critical psychoanalytic model be capable of serving as the basis for devising new forms of digitalities?

Consider, in this respect, how Srecko Horvat condemned Tinder for being a brutal commodification of love and sex that has messed up the emotional lives of an entire generation of young people, only to then plead for a leftist variant of Tinder (Horvat, 2016). However, is the question that one must ask here not what would be the psychological theory that would underpin this pharmacological variant? Given that Horvat himself leaned on psychoanalysis, did he himself consider how one would build into Tinder some of Lacan's most famous dicta, such as 'Woman does not exist' (Lacan, 1990, p. 38) or 'there is no sexual relation' (Lacan, 1985, p. 170)? These two dicta, at the very least, testify to the non-psychological approach of psychoanalysis, which understands the field of sexuality as being inherently antagonistic; one name for this irresolvable antagonism is precisely the subject. Simply put, in light of psychoanalysis being useless at acting as a stand-in for the *bad and fake psychologies* that currently inform social media and digital technology, I believe that Tinder, Facebook, and the like cannot be disconnected from the psycho-economy of digital

capitalism: they cannot be tweaked, neither at the level of content nor at the level of form. That form is never neutral is one of the key lessons of psychoanalysis: form is always condensed or crystalised content.

At the very least, perhaps Bown's central argument that the digital and virtual world actually function along the psychoanalytic logic of subjectivity (revealing the human subject as driven by desires which in the end are alien to the subject) has to be amended. Bown (2018a) depicts the alleged homology between subjectivity and digitality as follows:

> while our instincts (insofar as they exist) to a certain extent belong to us, our drives certainly do not. Like a decision made inside the virtual dreamworld, we are given a kick in the arse but nevertheless feel instinctive agency driving us in the directions in which we move. (p. 75)

Hence, for Bown, the algorithmic organisation of desire in the digital points to the fundamental otherness of the drives. Once could refer here to the neurological experiments Žižek often mentions: the manipulation of the brains of rats via implants so that one can control the rat's movements making it turn left or right as if using a remote control. Žižek (2017) asks how a human subject would experience this:

> …will a steered human continue to experience his movements as something spontaneous? Will he remain totally unaware that his movements are steered, or will he become aware that something is wrong and an external power is deciding his movements? And, how, precisely, will this external power appear: as something inside the person, like an unstoppable inner drive, or as simple external coercion? (para. 13)

However, should one here not be a bit more Freudian? That is, if these (thought) experiments seem to point to a mere formal logic of desire and drives, are we not justified to bring back in the Freudian references to repression and its links to infantile sexuality and subjectivation history? For, can we not argue that the uncanniness that would be provoked by stimulating your brain will be in the end far removed from the uncanniness that you experience in, for example, your nightmares? Only in the latter case, the dimension of the psychoanalytic Real is to truly be at play; that is, only there one is confronted with how one's subjectivity is fundamentally thwarted and how this, on the one hand, passes over the dimension of sexuality and, on the other hand, is inextricably linked to the history of one's subjectivation. What I want to argue for is a radical qualitative difference between how the Real would be evoked by mere cortical stimulation as compared to it being evoked within the everyday logic of the subjective. From here, cannot the same be said regarding to the algorithmic creation of drives and desires? These will arguably remain external, and never become truly intimate/extimate, as the latter antagonism concerns the subjectivation history which, I argue, necessarily remains outside of the algorithm. Put differently, either the illogical of cortical stimulation or the logic of the algorithms are not the same of the *un-logic* of human subjectivity.

Moreover, it could be argued that cortical stimulation and algorithmic simulation of 'desires' and 'emotions' would make subjectivity as we know it disappear. However, to make it clear, the issue here is not to safeguard particular forms of subjectivation, but perhaps, subjectivation as such. Does this then mean that what is left to confront are structures, and in the first place, as I attempt to show in my book, the structure of Logos? Is my reasoning ultimately that digitality, as a thing of Logos, as Logos radicalised, inevitably will go rogue on human beings and human subjectivity? To put it tentatively: Logos is a machine that uses subjectivity in order to grow, but this cannot but engender the vision, the final fantasy, of Logos only reaching its ultimate end when it swallows whole subjectivity, and, thus, abolishes it. That is to say, Logos, grounded in a zero-level of subjectivity (the empty subject situated between two signifiers) cannot but eventually fully realise the zero-level of subjectivity. Hence, the contemporary thrust towards our very own digital death represents Thanatos in its most elaborate form.

However, I have tried to demonstrate here and in my book that, in order for things to go bad, digital technologies must have been developed from bad models (bad in the sense of leading to bad things, but also bad because these models overlook the truth of human subjectivity and sociality). Hence, is my final conclusion that we must fight the entropy of Logos, by fighting its lies, and, hence, fighting Logos as such? The typical strategy has hitherto centred on pointing out to everyone: *we are speaking-beings, we are children of Logos, so do not underestimate the power of the symbolic when you speak of our brains, body, society, economy, and so on*. Perhaps we have now reached a point where an alternative strategy is needed; that is, instead of defending Logos, the time has come, not to reject it (by pointing to the body or the brain), but simply to oppose it, not through gaming or playing, but, rather, through actively withstanding it and fighting it from the perspective that *real and concrete* people in their *real and concrete* circumstances are suffering because of it. Of course, the real and the concrete are here not to be understood as 'really existing', but rather, as the logical outcome of partisan and engaged and thus leftist, political struggle.

FUTURE CODE - Alfie Bown

To begin to answer this question of whether leftist gaming is even possible, with or without psychoanalysis, is a difficult task. To start thinking about it, I'll take three main points from De Vos's article and briefly give some reflections on each. First, I consider how games relate to literature, film, and other art forms and whether De Vos is right that the peculiar digitality of gaming separates it from those other mediums in a way that limits the subversive potential of gaming. Second, I connect games to the digital love industry and the question of social life, which connects De Vos's comments on sociality and digital apps like Tinder to developments in contemporary gamification, which are perhaps the most significant way in which games

relate to the political future in 2022. Third, I re-articulate the role psychoanalysis might play in the future of digital media. Then it will be time to load up the PlayStation again.

For De Vos, because of the formal mechanical structure of games, 'even with the advent of more creative and politically daring games, such critical engagement with them would still occur within the boundaries of the game itself.' Games have rules and limits that cannot be transgressed, even if they allow for a certain variability within those limits. Life, on the other hand, is often imagined as a swirl of endless possibility in which no line is ultimately impassable. Or so the argument goes. I would suggest, on the contrary, that the limits of a game are not as dissimilar from the limits imposed in (psychological) life, rendering the connection between games and psychoanalysis a pertinent one.

In 1986, just before both myself and the internet were born (two things I always think of as connected) Niklas Luhmann wrote *Love as Passion: The Codification of Love.* It was a book about how romance and relationships are structured by sets of codes, how romantic exchanges are scripted and planned, executed to perform certain functions. We are actors on the stage, but we didn't write the script. Of course, this was a time before the coding, scripts, and functions that we associate with contemporary digital life. For Luhmann, once upon a time, the institutions of the church were the biggest force which set the code of love, or perhaps at another point in time it was the institution of the family. At a certain point in history, Luhmann argues, literature takes over as the dominant force which writes the script in which we live, love, and desire. After that, we might add that cinema and the television industry take up the mantle and teach us how to think and feel, setting the codes for love, romance, and social relations.

I would argue (though there is not space to prove it here) that videogames and (perhaps even more importantly) gamified social applications have taken the prime spot as the dominant force that organise the codes of desire today. Apps that use algorithms to organise and curate individuals, interfaces which organise the movements of citizens within the smart cities of tomorrow, and games which turn us into the players of today's contemporary society all organise and script social life in a way that literature could only dream of doing. We were actors on a stage playing out a script we didn't write, and now we are players in a game that we didn't design.

However, for Luhmann, literature does not simply *take over* from the church and the family as the author of the codes of everyday life. Rather, almost like a blockchain ledger, each re-writing adds itself to the long history of codification, taking things in new directions and perhaps even retroactively changing the past, but often containing within it what has gone before. He writes:

> Each individual characterization of love must be understood as referring back to all others. As this is true of *every* characterization, and thus holds true for *all the others,* every theme occurs in all the others as *the other of the others.* (Luhmann, 1986, p. 29)

When platform capitalism—the kind of Facebook, Tinder, Grinder, and so on—takes over from literature as the primary code-writer that produces the scripts through which we interact, desire, and relate, it does not replace what has gone before but retains it (and even intensifies it). In other words, the histories of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and of religious oppression that have historically played a role in organising social life—from the church to the family to the state to the movies—are not replaced by a digital future that shoots off in a new direction, which exists untethered from the past. On the contrary, these forms of digital capitalism re-shape us only by adding to the ledger, often preserving those much deeper and more longstanding codes that organise us on economic, gendered, sexual, and racial lines. As Eva Illouz writes, economic and cultural institutions 'have clearly codified the cultural fantasies through which love as a story, as an event, and as an emotion is imagined.' (2012, p. 198). These codes reach back into long histories of power structures that tell us how to emote, think, feel, and love. It is a *longue durée* of capitalism, a kind of systems update, capitalism 9.0, or whatever one chooses to call it.

De Vos comments that 'while Joyce and Woolf were able to use writing as a way through which to subvert writing as a bourgeois technology, this cannot be simply transposed to defying the constraints that digital technologies place upon us.' This is a provocative question: is there less space for subversion in the digital, than there was in the literary? In a sense this—and the above argument—recall Donna Haraway's (1991) famous claims from her 'Cyborg Manifesto' that the digital can be the site for re-writing our politics and escaping the long history of oppression that precedes digital life. In recent years this has been the task of the Xenofeminism movement, which argues for an 'explicit, organized effort to repurpose technologies for progressive gender political ends', and seeks to 'strategically deploy existing technologies to re-engineer the world' (Cuboniks, n.d., para. 3; see also Hester, 2018). In seeing the digital world as fundamentally limiting, De Vos suggests a restriction to how earth-shatteringly revolutionary those spaces can be, and in some ways cutting against this trend in seeing a way out of political problems in digital and internet life.

There can be no doubt that digital life today is inherently connected to capitalism. In De Vos's response, the following point seems absolutely critical:

'Connect persons to data objects to persons. That's the social today' (cited in Lovink, 2012, p. 11). This can be considered as a mortifying reversal of Lacan's formula, whereby humans are narrowed down to persons, mere datasets to be incorporated into Winer's definition of the social, which, above all, appears to fit the definition of the market.

This recalls the arguments of Mario Tronti, the still-living Marxist critic of the *operaismo*. For Tronti, when capitalism reaches its peak the whole of social life becomes a macrocosm of the factory, where every interaction (every click, let's say) is a monetisable moment of production for the factory (platform) owner.

> At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation is transformed into a *moment* of the relation of production. The whole of society is turned into an *articulation* of production, that is, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination to the whole of society. (Tronti, 2020, p. 31)

This is what we are up against. Today, our empathies, emotions, and interactions are programmed for us in advance. We opt into a digital 'Chorus'—as Lacan says—which speaks and feels through us as if we are ventriloquist's dummies whose masters sit in Silicon Valley, in Alibaba's 'Cloud Town', or on the outskirts of Shenzhen.

However, the fact that Tronti and Luhmann are pre-digital writers is vital and significant. The quote via Lovink (2012) has its pre-history in conceptions of pre-digital capitalism. Digital life today is indeed new, but it is not unprecedented. It's rather the ultimate articulation of a capitalism that has been incubating for centuries. The actions of platforms like Facebook and Tinder add themselves to the infinite ledger of codification, 'nudging' us (to borrow the term from the Facebook boardrooms) in altered directions but hardly shooting us off into uncharted territory.

In this sense, De Vos is quite right that Tinder, Facebook, and the like cannot be disconnected from the psycho-economy of digital capitalism. He argues that such platforms cannot be tweaked, neither at the level of content nor at the level of form. I would agree that they cannot be tweaked, but add that they can tweak us instead.

These technologies are already nudging and editing, and if we don't play an active role in the process, then we will have no control over the future directions in which we are nudged. In a quotation above, Žižek wonders whether 'a steered human' will become aware of being steered or continue to feel as if they are acting 'spontaneously'. It was the legendary feminist critic Shulmaith Firestone who wrote that women cannot afford to be spontaneous in the realm of love because they are on the wrong side of the oppression created by the entire history of romance (1970). Today, any progressive finds themselves in this position. We should both be aware of our being steered humans and seek not to be 'free' of such steering (as if liberated or unrepressed desire existed) but to re-steer and re-orient the direction of travel to one that suits progressive ends. Technologies of gamification, even games themselves, I still believe, could be part of this process.

To achieve anything like this, I hope to have suggested in this brief response, would mean to steer against a current that has been running for many years and to steer against capitalism itself. Against the claims of *The Playstation Dreamworld,* Vos argues that rather than inventing new gaming forms that might in various ways serve a progressive political agenda, we might be better served instead by seeking to question or rework the very issue or form of digital gaming itself, or even, perhaps, by addressing 'the forms of the digital technologies that underpin gaming as such'. In other words, 'game-dreaming about the leftist revolution is not likely to lead to any significant action' when the digital itself (on which video games cannot

help but rely) is so connected—as De Vos shows—to mainstream psychological conceptions of the human being and to a particular socio-economic political system: namely, that of capital. In short, for gaming to be leftist, it would have to steer against the current not only of the history of digital capitalism but of capitalism itself. A few leftist games aren't going to do much, but they might be part of a larger project of re-imagining digital space. The question of whether there can be 'leftist gaming' then, is also the question of whether we can address the very form of digital infrastructure, as De Vos says, but it is also the question of whether we can reject structures of capitalism from pre-digital history.

Ultimately, De Vos sees subjectivity as illogical or un-logical, and therefore as fundamentally distinct from the logic of algorithms. There are indeed fundamental ways in which the subject might be un-logical, and this is central to certain aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic thought. There are also ways in which the subject is completely predictable, mechanical, and logical. These can often be its most uncanny moments, and of course the scariest thing about the algorithms of Facebook, Alibaba, Tinder, and such platforms is not that they fail to give us what we want but that they know what we want better than we know ourselves and our own desires.

Further, we can perhaps say that algorithms are not always as logical as they seem. Like a human subject, they can be full of inconsistency, glitches, and errors, which—when it appears—undermines the structure of the program itself. In that sense, the algorithm can confront the Real in a way the subject cannot. Psychoanalysis as a way of thinking about digital structure can be used in quite different ways. As a model for digital subjectivity, it may not always be the most appropriate theory—indeed, it is way out of fashion in media and communication studies—but as a way of thinking about how we experience impulse, desire, emotion, and even love *as if* they are internal, spontaneous, and our own when in fact they are external, planned, scripted, and edited, it is a vital tool. It politicises desire at a time when neoliberal tacticians and Silicon Valley technocapitalists precisely seek to make us think desire is apolitical. Psychoanalysis reveals the fantasy of ideology. We buy into digital desire because it knows what we want and offers it to us, and it is only with a psychoanalytic view that we can question this situation and seek to edit and steer desire in new directions.

In 2016 when I decided to write *The Playstation Dreamworld*, it seemed to me that we were in the middle of what Lyotard once called a 'desirevolution' (Bown, 2018a). From the Pepe memes circulating on 4Chan to the Jeremy Corbyn football chants, it appeared to be a moment in which political forces were battling over the libidinal future. It seemed then that desire was in a kind of deterritorialised moment, as Deleuze and Guattari might put it, and that both the right and the left were fighting to re-territorialise it (Deleuze and Guattari, 2000). Now, it seems rather that the corporate forces of 'centrist' neoliberal capitalism are the ones to have re-territorialised the libidinal economy back onto their side. Just as politicians in the traditional capitalist mould (such as Biden or Starmer) take back the microphones from those on both the right and the left (from Trump to Sanders and Corbyn),

so too does the field of desire shift away from the memes and image boards on the fringes to the old models of AAA gaming and apps designed in Silicon Valley. In 2016, it perhaps seemed enough to bring progressive discourse into the industry of videogames, but now from this bleaker position it seems there is a greater task ahead. In this sense, I think the arguments of De Vos bring much to the table. He shows how, if we are to discuss anything like the idea of progressive play or gaming, we need to think as well about a much wider digital infrastructure that is inherently tied to the history of capitalism. It's this history that we need to rewrite.

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I was born before the internet; I always think that it this is important. Hence, in a way, like Tronti and Luhmann evoked by Bown, I myself am pre-digital too. However, perhaps the latter designation does not make much sense, and perhaps I should side above all with the position once described by Rainer Maria Rilke as 'each age has such disinherited children, to whom no longer what's been, and not yet what's coming, belongs' (cited in Agamben, 1993, p. 43). However, is this in-between position not defining human subjectivity as such; are we not always occupying this perspective once described by the Flemish novelist Louis Paul Boon as belonging to a time where one culture passes away in its death bed while another culture is born in the childbed (cited in Haasse, 2000, p. 23)? So perhaps, the designations of the pre-digital and the digital native should not be given too much weight, maybe the crucial question here is whether digitality still presupposes, evokes, or needs this in-between subject. Perhaps, the horizon of digitality is precisely the doing away of this subject interpellated to construct itself from an external or 'extimate' (to use Lacan's neologism designating a kind of intimate exteriority; Lacan, 2006, p. 224) vantage point: digitality's final move would be to incorporate this perspective fully within the coding itself. This is what I, in my book *The Digitalisation of (Inter)Subjectivity* (2020), tentatively called the 'digital death drive', referring to a potential final incorporation of subjectivity within the algorithms (which would not be the incorporation of an imaginary full psychological subject, but rather, the incorporation of the *zero-level of subjectivity* that according to psychoanalysis is the non-vitalist core of the human subject). This is not the place to re-elaborate on this, but let me just add that I also wrote that (1) the algorithmisation of the psychoanalytic subject is not possible and (2) that if it would be realised, it would mean the end of the digital machine (of data producing data) as the external motor would be removed. Hence, in a paradoxical way, it is in the interest of capitalism that we somehow stay *in-between subjects*, keeping the machine of digital capitalism running. It is precisely here that I concur with Bown as he concludes with the call that we need to rewrite the history of how capitalism is tied to digital technologies. Additionally, I think we both agree that the psychological, or better the psychoanalytic, is a key element, though I'd still be hesitant to conclude from here that it is up to us, as Bown writes, 'to edit and steer desire in new directions', so let us continue to discuss this.

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