

Lucid dreaming

Alfie Bown, *The Playstation Dreamworld* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017). 140pp., £40.00 hb., £9.99 pb., 978 1 50951 802 9 hb., 978 1 50951 803 6 pb.

We are fast approaching a point where one third of the global population will play video games on a regular basis. As such, video gaming ought to become a serious object of philosophy, not least because of its impact on players' perception. It is this that frames the central argument of Alfie Bown's *The Playstation Dreamworld*, a book that makes the 'gamer' – that most contemporary of subjects – both the analysand and actor of twenty-first century life.

The power of video games in shaping our vision is not lost on the Right, as demonstrated by Steve Bannon's courtship of gaming communities during his time as executive chair of Breitbart, nor on the US military, which since 2002 has produced *America's Army*, a free-to-download game that allows potential recruits to explore the realm of battle training alongside other online players. Indeed, the world's most belligerent fighting force seems so convinced of gaming's potential that in November 2018 they announced the formation of an official US Army e-sports team. What should cause concern here is, however, not so much the notion that soldiers might make good e-sports players, but that the US Army sees the potential for backwards compatibility: gamers can make good soldiers. This does not mean that in the battle against the military industrial complex all is lost; Bown closes the first of six chapters – divided into a 'tutorial', three 'levels' and 'bonus features' – by effectively stating that if video gaming might be the worst thing that ends up ever happening to us, it could equally turn out to be the best. However, the outcome, for Bown, depends on a psychoanalytical reading of the position of the gamer in relation to the gaming 'dreamworld'.

Employing an array of examples from the history of gaming and film – including *Angry Birds*, *Candy Crush*, *Farmville*, *The Matrix*, *Papers, Please*, *Stardew Valley*, *Westworld*, *World of Warcraft* and *Zelda* – Bown argues that the task for the gamer is to turn the inner dreamworld outwards. In this way, she or he can avoid the dreamworld of the other (corporation or government) being turned inwards on them via the gaming interface. Here, Bown

makes a nod to McKenzie Wark's *Gamer Theory* (2006), arguing that the development of, for example, virtual or artificial reality means that 'it is less a question of games becoming like reality but of reality becoming like games.' Of course this notion of a reality dictated by the digital realm of video games causes alarm; and perhaps rightly so. The condensation within video gaming of just about everything negative in society – including misogyny, racial stereotyping, violence, competition, prioritisation of material gain over self-development, and so on – leads to a saturation point, which if ported back into the real world might seem to threaten a descent into barbarity. This fear grows if we consider the scope of new technology for controlling the movements of people. Artificial reality games such as *Pokemon GO* – whereby a smartphone interface superimposes digital forms over the real world – serve, Bown continues, to regulate our space as part of Google's 'interest in the organisation of desires.' *Pokemon GO* must be seen in this respect as part of the wider Google project, a side effect of its desire not just to map the world geographically, but to manipulate us within it. Subconscious desire is not so much fulfilled by technology as it is shaped by it. As such, any slide into savagery will not likely come from the street upwards but be imposed, in line with the dominant history of the twentieth century, from the top down via a media industry that is increasingly focused on the production of ever more absorbing video games. Google's founding motto was 'don't be evil'. But this has always appeared a strange form of reverse psychology; amoral at best, oddly sarcastic at worst.

Referencing Jane McGonigal's 2010 book *Reality is Broken*, Bown counters the latter's argument that games such as *World of Warcraft* act simply to engage the gamer in a kind of 'blissful productivity' by asserting that the replication of real world capitalist goals and violent competition only serve to shore up the capitalist cause. In short, if games can tell us how to behave, they can tell us how to *behave badly*, and this can make them a powerful ideological tool for the creation of specific forms of

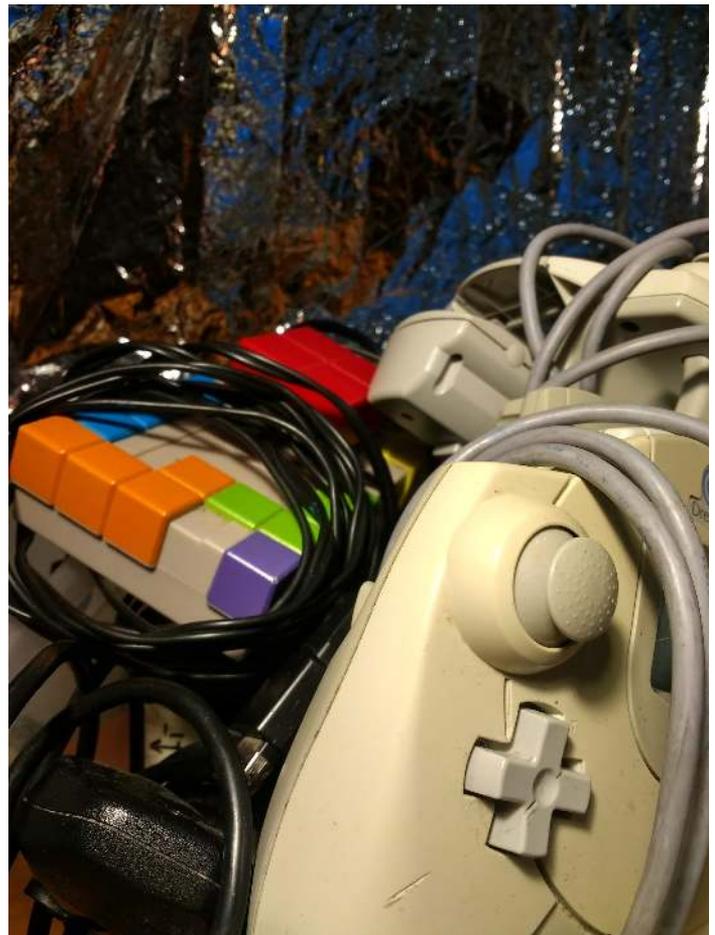
subjectivity. Drawing on Althusser's theory of 'interpellation', Bown argues that subjects are bound into particular behaviours by games. This is certainly worrying in the case of war games such as *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, which not only replicate the experience of the 'war on terror' but involve the player in it. However, one must be careful in choosing such sensational examples. While the proximity of gaming to the military-industrial complex may be cause for concern, its plodding infiltration into everyday life is perhaps more significant in terms of the overall political influence gaming might wield.

Indeed, Bown sees an obfuscated connection between gaming and capitalist ideology working on every level. For example, the seemingly innocuous distraction of a game such as *Candy Crush* – a puzzle-matching game developed for Facebook in 2012 – actually underlines the seriousness of capital, as play reinforces the sense that something more important needs doing (i.e. 'working'). Similarly, while the farming simulator *Stardew Valley*, released for PC in 2016, encourages a conscientious and almost mundane self-sufficiency, its anti-globalism risks teetering over into a kind of *volksisch* yet entrepreneurial rejection of internationalism.

Ultimately, all roads lead to capital. Even when one thinks one is enacting some counter-cultural form of gameplay, this invariably rebounds, thereby reinforcing, Bown asserts, the central tenet of Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*: that 'there is no alternative'. As familiar and unfulfilling as this point may be by now for readers of contemporary theory, it serves to remind us of the inexorable link between psychology and material conditions, a point central to Fisher's own body of writings. In lieu of any direct citation of Marx, other than a paraphrasing of Groucho in the first chapter, Fisher's mention in *The Playstation Dreamworld* is the link that drives home the fundamentally political nature of Bown's project.

From here it is argued – however cautiously – that gaming may just be able to help the Left find a way out of its impasse, for two principal reasons. The first appears entirely pragmatic: given the exponential growth of the gaming community, any change to the societal structure will have to involve gaming. The second is more nuanced and revolves around gaming's innate affinity with human psychology in so far as video games 'are not a text to be read but a dream to be dreamt.' In a dream, unlike a book or movie, the individual dreamer experiences 'de-

sires, anxieties, passions, and affects', yet they are also generally governed, to some greater or lesser extent, by the wishes of an external actor. The truth is that games operate us more than we operate them. Whilst this appears to present a limitation to political agency, Bown argues that it also offers an opportunity to consider the gamer, and not the game, as the analysand. As such, it may be possible to coax and guide the gamer to take on personal and social responsibility, provided she or he is accompanied by a worthy analyst.



The Playstation Dreamworld undertakes no extensive analysis of gamers, though the groundwork is laid for this via a consideration of Freud's and Lacan's characterisation of the dream as the 'disguised fulfillment of a repressed, infantile wish', or, in the case of Lacan, a repressed *drive*. In understanding the importance of this practice of analysis, two passages in the book are crucial. First, early in 'Level 2', Bown quotes Freud from the *Censorship of Dreams*, writing that 'dreams are things which get rid of psychological stimuli disturbing to sleep, by method of hallucinatory satisfaction' – in which case we need to enquire as to what are the 'disturbing stimuli'

relative to waking experience which gaming ‘gets rid of’. Several pages later Bown responds to this question by stating that videogames are the experience of someone else’s dream *as one’s own*. Put simply, the video game has the capacity to instill the drives of another, disguised as our own wishes. While the same could be said for dreaming, gaming uniquely makes us feel in control of our environment and is therefore particularly effective not only in instilling political viewpoints but in preempting them. As such the ‘disturbing stimuli’ replaced by the hallucination instilled by gaming is none other than our resistance to a given ideological program, as we make it our own.

As this point – in ‘Level 2’, so halfway through the book’s theoretical gameplay – we are left at an impasse familiar to media theory: namely, we can identify what is happening but are without an adequate course of action to do anything about it. We know the media is run by elite forces in order to influence us, but, if we are being influenced, is it really likely that we will succeed in developing some incisive response? Yet, in this case, due to the particular configuration of gaming and psychology, Bown doesn’t really need to deliver a knockout blow, for if gaming is a dreamworld and the gamer is a voyager,

the analyst need only provide the gamer with the skills to recognise the dream for what it is. As Bown points out in Level 3, the awareness of the existence of a mechanism for constructing gamers’ desires may be enough to lift the veil on what he terms ‘the desire revolution’. In psychology, naming a mental illness goes part way to solving it. This would appear to be the strategy which *The Playstation Dreamworld* favours.

Later on in Level 3, Bown refers to the famous choice presented to Neo in *The Matrix* between a red and a blue pill. The former reveals ‘the painful truth of reality’, while the latter will leave him ‘within the blissful ignorance of illusion’. Bown goes on to recall Slavoj Žižek’s proposed third choice: a pill that would enable – to quote the Slovenian philosopher – a perception of ‘the reality in illusion itself’. It is this eyes-wide-open approach that Bown recommends in analysis of the problems confronting the gamer, and wider society today. It appears less as an attempt to convince the reader of gaming’s revolutionary potential than an argument for the consideration of the gaming subject as both object of reflection and serious political player.

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Companion for a damaged world

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, eds, *Veer Ecology: Companion for Environmental Thinking* (Minneapolis; London: University Of Minnesota Press, 2017). 536pp., £83.72 hb., £20.93 pb., 978 1 5179 0076 2 hb., 978 1 51790 077 9 pb.

The resource depletion, environmental degradation and global climate change that characterise our present time warrant an urgent questioning of the ways that we frame our interactions with the world. Such evidence of ecological damage demands of us the development of positive alternatives regarding how we engage with our environment. This can best be undertaken with transdisciplinary thinking that momentarily slows down and resists temptations to hastily instrumentalise knowledge. The strength of *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking* is its proposition that, when we consider verbs in association with the environment, we should extend our thinking beyond describing the work that we can do to help the environment with words like *reduce*, *recycle*, *conserve* and *protect*. Instead, we might shift the

focus to ourselves in an attempt to understand how our self-conceptualisation informs our environmental engagement.

To this end, the contributors to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert’s collection consider words like *environ*, *curl*, *obsolesce* and *power down*, which they commonly relate to the verb chosen as the overarching theme of the book: *veer*. This task has a preventative aspect to it, because it seeks to harness a potential to restrict causing further environmental damage by improving our relations with the world. At the same time, it can also help us learn to flourish in the world that we have inherited. Prompted by Donna Haraway’s conception of companionship, whose etymological excavation of the word conjures up an image of breaking bread at a table, together