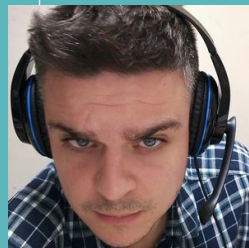


Do Digital Games Promote Capitalism?

Interview with Alfie BOWN

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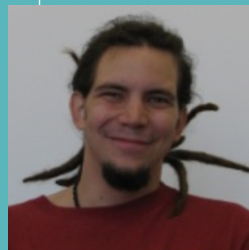


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Interviewer

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Silvester Buček is a teacher of digital games at Masaryk University and the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius. His specialisations are game typologies, game language and ideologies of games. He is the secretary of the Central and Eastern European Game Studies Conference Steering committee. His major comes from Media Studies at the Faculty of Social Science at Masaryk University. He is also a freelance game designer. His focus are digital and board games with educational (and social responsibility) overlapping. Some of his projects include ECO 2050, Hraj Sa Bratislava, or SadOvo. He is also a board member at Vlčatá.sk, a website about educational games for teachers and parents

Silvester Buček (S. B.): If playing games is like dreaming, is it our dream or is it the dream of someone else?

Alfie Bown: That is a great question. I think part of the reason why I wanted to make this argument that games are like dreams is so that we might reconsider what dreams themselves are. So, to put it simply, I think our dreams are not our own. They may feel like they are just for us – inside our heads – but they are also dreams of others. Of course, some aspects of psychological processes might be, in some context, called individual or internal, but for me, our psyche is a public space. So when we are sleeping and dreaming we are not in our personal private sphere but a public space. So when we are dreaming, we are in fact dreaming the dreams of others and the dreams of ideology and of discourse and of the public rather than something private or our own. I think this would also be true for digital games – we experience them in a dream-like state, when we play we are conscious and unconscious at the same time. We are in this weird semi-conscious state often when we game, a little bit like when we dream. Of course, in a very direct sense they are created by individuals that are not ourselves. The games are created by writers, designers and other stakeholders, but they are also created by cultural discourse, the ideas, and the ideology, that are floating around and circulating hoping to get produced. So if we experience games in this way and so games become a way to understand the less visible, more unconscious or subtle aspects of ideology, of cultural life and of our society – they can show us our unconscious thoughts.

S. B.: You say that in a work environment, the casual games trigger a strange guilt function which causes a better result in work. Why do you attribute this to the guilt function? Can there be another interpretation such as simple relaxation?

Alfie Bown: I think there are probably several possible interpretations. My point about guilt is – when I started to work on digital games back in 2014 and it was really the first thing I was writing about – *Candy Crush* and capitalism. My focus here was really on my own experience at the time, I guess, so it was less theoretical and more about certain mobile games that seem to play a very important role in workplaces. Before I became an academic I used to be a chef and I used to cook in a hot kitchen and I would pretend I was a smoker so that I could go outside with my colleagues for a five minute break (or whatever) and what I would do during that time is basically complain and start to talk to my colleagues about our terrible boss and how underpaid we were and how tiring the job was and so on. Then I went to university and after my degree I went back briefly to work part time in the kitchen. I found that what I was doing on my break was just spending all my time on *Pokémon Go* or *Temple Run* and *Candy Crush* and my colleagues were doing the same. I was noticing how certain kinds of mobile games seemed to be an outlet for frustration, or distraction from the very moment when you would be thinking and reflecting on your work conditions. When I started to research that, I found out the impression seemed quite valid, because the most common time to play games like *Candy Crush* is on the train home from work and on your lunch break. It is when we are feeling most overworked or most frustrated that we have this impulse to plunge into a game like that. So I was thinking that these games operate as a real ally to capitalism and it is strange because usually we think of playing *Candy Crush* as a complete waste of time, but actually, it could be seen as a very active mechanism for capitalism – very productive time in the capitalistic sense – to absorb frustration and revolutionary energy into something soft, like a cushion, which prevents people from socializing and developing models of rebellion with colleagues, for example, but also which removes some of the frustration or distract from the frustrated,

stops you from complaining about your working conditions. So my first point was that games like this CAN serve as an ally to a capitalistic system. And after that, we start seeing that work places start to bring digital games into the offices quite a lot. You see a lot of Xboxes in corporate offices in London if you are working in PR or in banking or advertising. You find that they encourage 10-minutes gaming sessions or spending your lunch breaks doing this and it's a tool of fracturing peoples social bases and also it's a way in which these people have proven (so-called proven) to be more productive after they play Xbox. You might be right, it could be seen in a positive light – that we let people relax for an hour and then they come back to work refreshed and ready to do something good – that's the narrative of the corporate capitalists that are implementing these techniques. I probably doubt it myself, I think it has much more to do with a mixture of fracturing worker solidarity and maybe provoking some kind of guilt function – the feeling that the time wasted must be compensated for. You do not find games being played in these times to be thoughtful games or really complicated games, it's generally just some shooting, or Candy Crush, or Temple Run, something that can be perceived by the gamer as a waste of time, so then they unconsciously compensate with capitalist productivity.

S. B.: So, basically, you are saying that the companies are trying to gain control also of the personal time of the employees?

Alfie Bown: I guess so. I think there is a very important connection between leisure time, personal time and digital games and it would relate to a bigger pattern of gamification in society. You can actually see work itself becomes gamified and we can maybe say that the distinction between work and games is not as clear as it was back in 2013 when I first started to think about these arguments in fact. You get these apps like Robin Hood; basically it's a trading app which is like a digital game in which you are actually trading on a stock market, which many traders use. And then you see in-game rewards offered by workplaces, digital reward and things like that. You can actually see workplaces integrate gaming into their functioning and companies integrate games very closely. In some ways we live, I think, now, in what McKenzie Wark describes in her book from 2009 – still the best book on digital games – as a true 'gamespace'. There she argues that we are all in the game space whether we like it or not. I think that has really become the case, that we all are living in this gamified world where the games are not leisure anymore because the relationship between work and play is completely transformed and geared toward serving a new kind of platform capitalism. That is why I am resisting the idea of games as leisure and fun. I think that games have a really complicated relationship to work and they are no longer separate from it as they were.

S. B.: You also mentioned that the games are great in getting us to the 'semi-aware state'. But is not this more caused by the technologies themselves – social networks are probably much stronger in getting us to this semi-aware state. At least, in my experience, I am much more 'semi-aware' when I am on Facebook than when I am playing a game. So, is this not more a case of technology than games themselves?

Alfie Bown: I see your point – you think this is not something specific for the game but something that can be said about other kinds of technologies as well. With social media you can say that when you are scrolling the feed there is sort of a semi-awareness in it. I think that is a good point and my response would be to say that I think that Facebook or Twitter, for example, are games, in some ways. They have ludic, playable elements. Tinder is an interesting example that I have been looking at recently because I have been working

on love industries and gamifications of relationships. The swiping on Tinder is an element from a game; it is an example of gamification bringing in a bit of play to the experience of dating. If you think about the way it works, it is almost like a deck of cards that you are sorting through. There is a pleasure in this kind of play – an old tradition of play really – the pleasure of the card, the associations with competition, with the casino even. So this function (what I call semi-aware state) has its prehistory in games and later it became part of digital technology, social media and dating sites. If you think about it, it has got a lot to do with the body. When people talk about emerging games, they are always thinking about VR, but even when you have got something just like a controller and somehow, your body is in your thumb – this inclusion of the body in the process is part of what it means to play. It would have to be applied to the emergence of touch screens phones as well. I know it does not sound much – to swipe – we are used to it and we do it all day, but actually, it is part of the gamification of information that we are sharing and using. There is an element of the body coming into a relation with the phone, controls or game controllers. It is a *chicken or egg* sort of situation, I do not know which came first, but certainly digital media used this gamification and put the users and players in a particular psychological state. Whether it intends to or not. I am not saying Mark Zuckerberg came up with this. It has happened organically, but that is the development of the media and increasingly, we are in that state.

S. B.: There is actually a small niche game genre that is based on swiping. It uses the same logic as Tinder and you just make choices – you control a Kingdom or something similar and choose what faction to listen to.

Alfie Bown: I find that stuff really interesting. It is not just Tinder. There is this huge restaurant reviews app which functions like that. Also a version of LinkedIn, I think it's called Shapr, a professional networking site, which is also based on swiping. It is actually quite fun, you can swipe up and down as well. It is actually quite interesting how this emerged like something we enjoy doing, without necessarily thinking we are enjoying it. If you imagine a dating site, structured like Reddit, it would not work. It is almost the opposite; it is much more an early internet style of interaction. In some ways it is game-like, but it's almost a completely different kind of game. In one way, you are this kind of digital detective, going through these links and holes, searching for truth, it's kinda the active reverse of something like Tinder, where you are superficially swiping.

S. B.: Not only technologies, but other media as well are really good with this semi-aware state. With other media, the author has much more control of what the user experiences. What makes games so unique in this way, when actually, you, as a consumer have much more control (in what you experience) than in other media? When reading a book, you also can get immersed and closed to the outside world.

Alfie Bown: Something I am very interested in is what is typical for gaming when comparing it to other forms. I am very interested in that question, for example; what is the difference between the viewer of a movie and the player of the game, or the reader of a book and the player of the game. I am not sure I am with you on the idea that you are more in control as a gamer, but you certainly get the illusion of control. You are put in a position where you are free within some limits. It encourages you to remove critical distance between you and the piece of media that you are involved in. Of course, it is possible to watch a film or read a novel and become completely absorbed and to lose all sense of the distance and to enter that world in an imaginary way, but I think games do that differently. I think they ask you

to enter that space uncritically and it makes you more susceptible to being more in control rather than less. That is why I think games are such an incredible ideological tool or tool of political enforcement. They have immersion and interactivity in a way other media do not have. And this presents new opportunities for corporations, discourses and individuals to impact their subjects. This is not a crazy idea but one that is already concretely happening. You get many companies, which basically use these technologies of immersion to sell products and to sell ideas. Some people do interesting stuff with it; for example, the VR film company Within, which was created by Chris Milk, who is doing a lot of philanthropy and uses virtual reality to encourage people to give money to charity, and it works. People give more when they are experiencing things in VR than when they see things on a flat screen. There have also been other things, like VR news – for example one by *Vice News*, directed by Spike Jonze when you are viewing a protest for police accountability in virtual reality and of course people would report feeling more affinity with the protest than they would do if they were seeing into flat TV or on the news. These are examples of why the immersion and interactivity of game space does offer new opportunities to influence (rather than manipulate) the psychic experience of the gamer. And those are on the soft end, the good end – I am not quite sure it is good, but it's good enough for me not to complain about it too much. But there are also scarier examples – there is a corporation called Aures London that sells experiences to corporations to bring in investors. They use 360 sound, they use interactive VR headsets, and they operate on all basic senses, even smell. And the purpose of this company is to build brand loyalty. So an incredibly wealthy capitalist company can pay this company to convince investors to invest and to feel connected with the brand, so it is a question of manipulating the body and using that opportunity of immersion to influence the person who is experiencing it in some particular way. Of course there are some problems with philanthropy, but there might be a nice agenda, or there might be a negative agenda – let's make people feel brand loyalty to this product. But the point is, this is through a game. Games are these kind of immersive ideological spaces. If you are a gamer, you might agree; people are very upset with virtual reality at the moment; how immersive it is – but I think for most games, it is a normal feeling. Games have never struggled to be immersive and even a simple game can be incredibly immersive. My reasoning behind mentioning these examples is that they show what games have always been doing. Games have always had the power to bring our bodies into that world and to influence our senses and to encourage us to feel X or Y thing. Perhaps in a way that older forms of media or different forms of media do not have.

S. B.: You are really getting to my next question. In your text, you often use Benjamin, who speaks about dreams and capitalism. The arguments he uses are about earlier 'distractions', of course, but we can see similar or analogical arguments in music or TV (or mass media in general) and I would argue that this argument is repeated very often. Can we say that the meaning of free time (and I do not mean it in a simple way of consuming) is always ideological?

Alfie Bown: The reason why Benjamin was so attractive for me is partly that he is a theorist that I find useful and interesting, but partly because of his work with the word *arcade*. Benjamin has written this huge project called *The Arcades Project*, focused on cities and how they are formed by new technologies, he was very interested in ironwork and glasswork. In the 19th century we see the emergence of these fantastical glass and iron structures in Paris or in London (there are still some in London, but they were new at the time – they are the origin of the department stores – these huge glass stones that are called arcade with all the capitalist products inside) and Benjamin talked about the experience

of going into the arcade and basically becoming the perfect capitalist consumer because you are so affected by the technology of this building and you are immersed – immersion before technology was immersive (or pre-VR). But it is a virtual reality in a way, when you step into this place. It has been done in academic research, I think Oliver Grau, which is about religious churches and how churches are the origin of VR in some way, because when you step into this 'sacred' space, you enter this state of marvel and think about ceiling and glass windows and things like that. And of course – this is the ideology – religious ideology in putting the person in that state where they can be sold, I suppose, religion. And Benjamin thinks of the arcades as the space of immersion where people can enter this semi-aware state – it is the perfect example of every product, it is full of charm and desire and these early department stores are the example of it. It is not a coincidence to me that digital games were traditionally played in arcades, because I think we should also see arcades as spaces where when we enter them, we are in this magical dream world, where our desires can be fulfilled or where we feel like we are being promised fulfilment of every desire and impulse. It is a space where you have to pay for fulfilment, space of desire and all these weird combinations of ideology and capitalism. I think using Benjamin's study of these places is a really interesting way to think about game space today. And of course, the arcades are gone. I don't know how it is in Slovakia, but they are mostly gone in London. In Hong Kong though, where I was writing this book, they are still arcades. I would say the contemporary arcades are much more like PlayStation Network or Google Play Store or something that is imagined in terrible movies like *Ready Player One*. When we go to the arcades today, we enter the screen of a computer, or PlayStation or Xbox and we enter this magical world of wish fulfilment and promises and it's a huge dreamland of desire and energy and this is the new version of 19th century Benjamin's arcades. That is why I like Benjamin as well as Freud in discussions of digital games.

S. B.: Can even free time in a capitalist society be ideologically not capitalist?

Alfie Bown: The short answer is no, at least not currently. But even if we cannot escape ideology, we can experience different ideological spaces. This is one of the big things that I believe is important about digital games; because a lot of people either think that games are apolitical or they don't want games to be political. They hate the fact that games are political and say that games should be escapism and not political and fun and apart from politics. I do not know if you remember when *The Division 2* came out – it is all set in Washington in this dystopian anti-government stage. The CEO of Ubisoft was asked: "So this is the most political game that Ubisoft put out in ages" and he said: "No, there is nothing to do with politics in this game. It's just about imaging a dystopian city, nothing to do with politics at all." So what you can see there is gaming companies not wanting to alienate the parts of the consumer market, but there is a big problem there, because that reinforces the idea that games are not politically engaged. Of course, that is impossible, every game is political, even *Mario*. If you think about how games emerged – look at something like *Space Invaders* and those early games like *Space Wars* – they all come out of fear of Russia, post-war space race and they are all very symptomatic of their culture. Games have always been political. Even *Sonic* is political – in fact, there is an interesting thing we said about *Sonic* – level one is full of green hills and got nice music and then you release the rabbits and birds from technology of Doctor Robotnik and then as you go through the game, the graphics, the imagery, the artwork become more and more silvery colour and less green, much more like dystopian technology future. *Sonic* is a perfect example of a game that people would flaunt and say "oh, it's a bit of harmless fun" but it actually is deeply political. My point is, we can escape capitalism, and it is difficult and nearly

impossible to imagine doing so, but actually, digital games offer an opportunity here. They offer us an opportunity to create different ideological spaces and enter into them. And we do have games that are not necessarily capitalist spaces to enter. Even out of *Animal Crossing* one could make a case. But I think something like *Everything* (one of my favourite games) by Chris O'Reilly is an interesting example. I think the famous example can also be *Papers, Please*. We cannot make games that are not political, but we can make games with different politics. We can challenge and change ideology through games.

S. B.: I just thought of the Journey. It is hard for me to find anything political in this game. Ideological? Probably yes. But can you find something political on it?

Alfie Bown: I talked about these games in my book, probably about *Flow*. I enjoyed them and I think they are interesting experiments. But they can be seen as having some parts of nostalgic representations of nature, and it's all about melody and the relationship between movement and music and it sort of tends to present a holistic idea of life that is in tune with the world and at one with the world. It might have some naturalism. But I do see what you mean and I think that there are some interesting spaces that these games made, *Flow*, *Flower* and *Journey* by Thatgamecompany. They are, at least, experimenting about what games can be. They are not fun in a traditional way that digital games offer pleasure – it is not the fun of shooting somebody in the head with a sniper rifle or of jumping over a little gap between earth like in *Sonic* and *Mario*. But it is a different kind of fun, I think that's something to be pushed, that games can be experimental places that we can enter and derive pleasure (and sometimes thoughtful pleasure) from. There is no reason why they can't therefore be at the forefront of the progressive politics, because to enter a different kind of space, in which logic is different from logic in our society, is a potentially radical thing to do. I am often read as somebody who thinks games are bad or who seems to have a problem with every game. But I always felt like I have to qualify this and say I have been playing games since I was seven, I play every day, and I am never going to stop. I think they can be incredibly radical and this is my point; first of all, we need to recognize how political, how influential and important they are, see them as a real place where we can battle over the future of our society, and then, if we do that, we will stop thinking of the games as apolitical and start seeing some games as the ally of the left wing politics, let's say, and we can use them and produce them in ways that might help develop ideas for fairer and better society. I think they can be part of that project. Games will not overthrow capitalism and start a revolution, but they can be part of it. In terms of reference we made earlier to a semi-aware state, it might be there is not only one type of semi-aware state. Because *Journey* and *Everything* are two examples of games where you are put in an odd psychological situation when you are going with the flow of the game and not really thinking too much as you play. But it might not be the same state that, for example, *Call of Duty* puts you in. So if games can put us in different psychological positions, they can be used to explore possibilities for the future.

S. B.: In the conference in Trnava you said there are not too many in core leftist games. You used Tropico as an example of a game with mechanics that are basically pro-capitalist even when it seems to be anti-capitalist. In one interview you also mentioned that even if the game like Wolfenstein seems anti-Nazi on the surface, the mechanics can be interpreted as fascist. What do you mean by fascist mechanics?

Alfie Bown: The first thing I want to head off here is the idea that I am against violent realistic games. I am actually not. So often this conversation leads to the question whether the game is violent and I think that's the wrong way to be thinking about it for the most part. I am not against games that have aspects of violence in them per se, and I do not think that is the way to think about it. The point I am trying to make here is how people are so focused on the content of the game but the politics is found much more in the algorithms and mechanics than it is in narrative content itself. *Plants vs. Zombies* is a good example, a game that is silly and harmless. Most people (adults and kids) who play it are politically disengaged, but if you look at the way it functions, it is a very aggressive form of defence game. You are encouraged to take the position of somebody who is frightened about invasion (where zombies represent these invasive others) and you are encouraged to play quite aggressively as a gamer towards the other and you should defend your border very vigorously. There is almost a sort of Trump element in this game. The content is often meaningless and yet we are so focused on deciding on a game based on its content. Similar can be said about *Wolfenstein*; „I am shooting Nazis, so therefore it's alright.“ Whereas after 9/11 there was a real rise of FPS games from the US which were shooting Arabs with very cliché, stereotypical and awful representations of the Arab world which of course reflects Americans' fear after 9/11 and these very in fact very American-dominant ideological games. The level of actual mechanics – there is not that much difference between *Wolfenstein* and these games. I am not saying all shooting games are fascist, because that is how they are structurally built. What I am saying is that if you just look at the content of the game, you only have half of the picture. The politics might not be found in the artwork or in the story, but in the way in which algorithms and mechanics of the game ask the gamer to act and how it rewards those actions. I do not think you can necessarily have a socialist first person shooter, though I am open to the idea. Maybe something like *Portal* can be an example of an interesting FPS, although it is not a real FPS. But one can imagine using that viewpoint in interesting ways. I am not quite saying all shooting games are fascist. I am using that as an example to say that if you want to understand the politics of the games you can look at the narrative and the artwork but you also have to look at what we call gameplay, mechanics and algorithms and to think about the politics of that.

S. B.: That brings me to another question: when we see games from the second world war that use Nazis, we see a lots and lots of strategy games where you can play as Nazi and where you can be the big Nazi boss and send soldiers to their deaths. But I think I saw two or three games where you can play as a Nazi soldier. Why is this the case?

Alfie Bown: In games like *Counter-Strike* when you choose between terrorists...

S. B.: But that's terrorists and anti/terrorists, not nazis.

Alfie Bown: There might be a joke somewhere here in presenting it this way, because clearly, all that's different in those two choices are like the colour of the badge. It is quite interesting that they do that. There may be something potentially interesting in offering that choice actually. Because in the case of not offering that choice, you are invited to a world where enemies are a fixed thing and your ideology, as the hero, is the one that you are encouraged to feel agreement with. Like in any game – like *Modern Warfare* or something that emerged after 9/11 you have the American flag and there are these hostile Arab figures. You are being invited to experience these games only from the perspective of an “American civilizing force” or whatever ridiculous way in which they think of themselves. When you are presented with a choice to be a Nazi or a terrorist or an anti-terrorist, at least

there is an invitation to reflect on how the game is structured. It makes visible how at the level of mechanics, these are two sides of the same thing. And it almost makes you reflect on that. It could, potentially. You know what? I am defending games when you are allowed to be an enemy, no matter how the ideology of the enemy is corrupt, because at least you get the sense of how war functions.

S. B.: We already touched this a little, but let's close this topic: how can games escape the connection to capitalism and fascism? Do you think there is something the game designers, journalists and researchers should do? What can we implement to get out of this?

Alfie Bown: You mean how do we make better games?

S. B.: Well, yes.

Alfie Bown: We need to go back to more open source technology and more affordable technology and more environmentally sustainable ones. There is a great project where Lewis Gordon is taking apart a PlayStation 4 and sorts through the components and so on, to show how ethically questionable that console really is. This is a point that I take from Marijam Didžgalvytė who does a lot about digital games and the ethics of the hardware and software. Because of all of the issues with this question – if I just say let me make the game and it will be really cool, there would be a lot of hypocrisy, because if you release a game on PlayStation, you are already complicit in so many patterns of platform capitalism (and global networks of contemporary capitalism). It does not make a lot of sense to proceed that way. The point has been made by Marijam Didžgalvytė about feminism for example; there are games where you play as a forward thinking feminist protagonist (that is good to see – at least there is diversity in games) but all the components that make this hardware are made by mostly women underpaid in Chinese factories in working conditions that are basically unliveable. So there is only so feminist a game can be when its hardware is made by exploited women. We can say the same about these attempts at socialist games – there is only so socialist that a game can be, if it's built on platforms with plastic with minerals and materials that are on platforms which themselves are inherently connected to global capitalism. What we need to do is to go back a bit. Personally, I am bored with games that offer the same experience with so-called fantastic graphics. I find it much more enjoyable to play games that are made by independent companies, which go back to older graphic styles. I have PhD students who make some fantastic stuff, and they are trying to make it more environmentally sustainable, it is more open source, it is more collaborative and cheaper, more accessible. We need the whole industry to take a step back from this kind of high level gaming and go back to more open, more easy access communities that can collaborate and make games together on affordable and slightly less damaging platforms in order to even start thinking about how to produce a socialist one.

S. B.: In your book, you challenge your readers to interpret games critically – as you say against the grain. It reminds me of Stuart Hall's concept of oppositional reading – is it a proper comparison? How do you suggest doing it?

Alfie Bown: I think so. It is also another idea of Walter Benjamin but I cannot even quite remember where he said it – one of these things that I learned years ago and kept in my head. I think it is Benjamin's idea of reading against the grain. Let me read a game against the grain really quickly. *Grand Theft Auto V* – do not get me wrong, I think there are some

horrendous aspects. I think the online mode of GTA V is one the most evil things in digital games today. It is obscene capitalism – but still, I am going to defend Grand Theft Auto. As an art project, it focuses on the fact that there is violence, sure, it is as bad as all your mums thought it was. But if you think of it like a representation of the city, and how it renders of the city, it can be seen as an incredible art project. There is this fantastic project, *Down and Out in Los Santos* by Alan Butler – it is a sort of photography project. When you first glance at it, it looks like photography of working class areas in America, but actually, when you glance at it again, they are all screenshots from GTA V. It is actually unbelievable, if you look at the poor neighbourhood and rich neighbourhood in GTA and you look at how they are represented, how poverty is represented, the places and characters. And actually the first/third person view encourages you to think that way because one of the playable characters is wealthy, lives in a suburb, another is staying on the couch in someone else's apartment. You have to experience the game through how class affects it where the city is the space where all of the class politics is very visible. That is almost like reading against the grain, because although it might be superficially a game full of problems, full of capitalism, patriarchy and misogyny, there are nevertheless aspects of it, which provoke very interesting reflection. Taken as that, as a representation of the city, it is actually the best and most politically engaged in gaming. It can be used to make points about class politics, about Marxism. I think most young people playing GTA get a different and useful idea of class politics from doing so. That is what we should look for in games – moments like that.

S. B.: The last topic is about your newest book/project: *Love, City and Games*. Can you elaborate a little more? What do games have to do with it?

Alfie Bown: This is what I am working on now, it will come out with Pluto Press – it is called *Dream Lovers: The Gamification of Relationships*. It is about how love and relationships can be gamified. In a way, it is an extension of what I have been doing in *The PlayStation Dreamworld*, there is a lot of history of dating simulators, which come from the 1980s with a game called *Girl's Garden*, Japanese game, and then goes through games like *Harvest Moon*, farming simulators which have marriage narratives and then virtual reality relationship, virtual girlfriends, AI chatbots, things like that. A lot of it is about digital games and about how games, in some way, set the blueprint for thinking about relationships to go forward. Another aspect of it we already mentioned earlier when we were talking about Tinder, where basically programs and dating technologies inherit characteristics from games. Those are the gamification angles. I don't mean just finding a lover or finding sex, but I also mean finding friends, finding colleagues and the algorithms used by social networking sites – even thinking about thing like Zoom and Google Meet. Also there are these new trends like sex robots, smart condoms. These are just examples of how the processes of sex and relationships have become gamified, quantified, measured, competified. So we are looking at the new technologies and how they use the characteristics of game and play to transform the love industry and what it means to make friends and find lovers and meet people in society today. This is a really exciting topic and I think it's a topic for gamers but also for people broadly interested in social life and digital media today.

S. B.: Next question is quite forward and simple: is there a difference between love and passion? From what you said at the conference, I understood that there is an equation mark.

Alfie Bown: Whether there is, or not, is not really my interest. I am more interested in where there is not. There are actually so many theorists who might think that passion would mean

a different kind of love. Great ones – I really like Srećko Horvat, a Croatian philosopher whose book *The Radicality of Love* – it is about the distinction in what he calls love and falling in love. Then there is Lauren Berlant and her book *Love/Desire*, which is essentially about the question you just asked me. There are plenty of people who will say there is desire, or lust, or passion on one hand and there is love on the other. I am not saying that is wrong. What I am looking at is where digital technology today draws similarities between those two. For example; the way that we access a Pokémon and the way that we access a date or sex are sometimes through very similar mechanisms. Now, that is fascinating to me. It does not mean that the Pokémon and a girlfriend are exactly the same things and I am not saying that you feel exactly the same way about them (of course, you might). But similarities between the ways that we access the objects of desire are really interesting and they make visible how digital technology works on the wider scale of the smart city. To answer your question: I don't really know if there is a difference between love and desire, but there are definitely some fascinating connections between the way we relate to different objects. Sometimes the similarities rather than differences are more important.

S. B.: You were a little bit sceptical or even dark when you were talking about smart cities and the future that is coming. You used China as an example – do you think western countries will follow that trend, let's say in our lifetime?

Alfie Bown: One of the things I absolutely wanted to make clear – I used Chinese examples because I was living in China when writing the book, not so much because I think of China as more dystopian than the West. Almost every technology I discovered being used in Chinese smart cities already exists at least in some form in the UK or US. So no, this is not a Chinese problem – it is just the case of China having a lot of tech giants and being at the forefront of these developments, but those things are happening everywhere else too.

S. B.: You also mentioned that games studies are not heading in the right direction, so my last question is: What direction of game studies would you like to see? What is your vision?

Alfie Bown: We are struggling with this at the college, because we offer a really interesting degree I think, half design and half theory (maybe not half but a mix of two things). I believe it is a great blueprint and the reason why we do that is that you cannot make a good game unless you understand the politics and history of games. So often we see a real divide between those who are thinking about games and those who make them and that's the part of the issue. It is tempting to blame the producers but that is not the whole story. Game studies has developed into academic institutions less actively engaging in making games. What you tend to get now is a degree that is about making games or a degree that is about thinking about them. What we need to do is to stop this distinction and start to have programs where people learn to think about culture studies, feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, postcolonialism and those should be the same people who make games. Then, I think, we will see politically interesting games and game studies could really engage more of the producers in game studies. That is what we probably need to build; a more blended approach. We are recognizing that – in order to make a good game you need to understand critical theoretical concepts and the industry and how they relate to one another. We are trying to do that in a really small way – we only have about twenty students, but I hope there will be more and more of these attempts.

