

Dream Lovers

‘If you want a glimpse into how our desires are manufactured under our new techno-feudal order, and how love can prove our last defence, read Alfie Bown’s *Dream Lovers*.’

—Yanis Varoufakis

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—Richard Seymour, author of *The Twittering Machine*

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‘Informative, entertaining and devastating all at once. Extremely well-argued and persuasive, it clearly shows how the technologies that promise to help us find love, or even just sex, are also perfectly designed to exploit us at our most vulnerable.’

—Anouchka Grose, writer and psychoanalyst, Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research

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Dream Lovers

The Gamification of Relationships

Alfie Bown

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Introduction: The Grindr Saga

Dreams spring from reality and are realized in it.

– Ivan Chitchevlov (1953)

Wandering into the intoxicating world of bizarre and alluring pleasures that is the Tencent App Store, the world's largest digital marketplace, you'll probably experience an initial sense of confusion. Bombarded with gauche images, garish pop art text and bold promises of riches, orgasms and other delights, it would be hard not to feel at least somewhat overwhelmed. Over time, though, you get accustomed to this dream world of hallucinogenic commodities, and you might even find a little corner of it in which you can find some relaxation, distraction – or perhaps even pleasure – of your own.

Perhaps you navigate past the invitations of scantily-clad casino hosts, specialised dating sites and personally tailored pornography (now under greater censorship there), and bypass the artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, virtual reality (VR) relationship simulators and windows of livestreamers vying for your click and find yourself in the world of 希望: 再次遇見你, or *Hope: To See You Again*, an animated videogame made by one of the larger games companies in China. In that imaginary world you exist as an avatar, get attached to a Tamagotchi-like robot and set off on the long adventure of a second virtual life, ending in your marriage to an Anime-style fembot with whom you see out your days in blissful pastoral serenity. It might all be a bit strange, but it's familiar enough when it's safely confined to the virtual world of videogames and fantasy that we have become familiar with vacationing in through our screens.

Until it isn't. Between 2016 and 2018 Beijing Kunlun Tech, the company who own *Hope: To See You Again* and many of the world's most popular mobile and online games completed a takeover of Grindr. Grindr, the world's largest gay dating app, had been a US-based company since its inception in 2009 and one of the few that had remained independent. Until then it had escaped the clutches of IAC, the New York holding company whose offices are housed in a glass blob worthy of

science fiction that gazes across the water from Manhattan to New Jersey. Until 2020 IAC owned Match Group, the umbrella over almost all the major US dating sites, from Plentyoffish and OKCupid to Hinge and Tinder, all discussed in this book. Dating sites were grouped with each other, sharing data, algorithms, profits, and so on. Then, the love industry seemed like something of a closed circle, dominated by one conglomerate and operating according to its own logic. Now, the gap between games and love, and between simulation and reality, is closing.

The Grindr takeover embodies this trend. Of course, one significance of the takeover is the increasing globalisation of platforms, of the corporate interest in and use of their data and specifically of China's increasingly powerful role in these patterns. Access to the data that comes from dating sites is empowering. It is intimate data. In carrying out our sexual lives and our love lives at least partially and often entirely online, we create powerful data connected to our most intimate and ultimate desires. This data has great value, both as the basis for targeted advertising campaigns but also – as we shall see in this book – as the basis for a wider and more complete social reorganisation. By knowing and changing what we desire, platforms and tech companies are empowered to manufacture the future of social life, of sex and even of love. In 2020, under direct pressure from then President Donald Trump, Kunlun were forced to sell Grindr back to the US precisely because of fears about the handover of power to China that this powerful data would facilitate.

The Grindr saga is almost humorous given that it ended with a misogynist Trump getting his gay dating site back from the clutches of a Chinese government who themselves refuse to acknowledge LGBTQ+ rights. Perhaps the moral of that story is that money talks and that cultural ideologies can be put aside fairly easily if need be. But there is an even more significant lesson from the Kunlun Grindr connection: the nascent gamification of love. Though Grindr might be a perfect early example of this gamification, on a wider scale this new gamification of love is a process dominated by heteronormative and conformist politics.

As such, a lot of the material in this book – from sexbots to smart condoms to videogames and VR pornography – can be seen as part of this pattern that is dominated by capitalism, heteronormativity and masculinity. On occasion, radical 'alternative' examples of experimental technologies that have attempted to cut against the grain of these trends are mentioned, but on the whole there is less said here about race, trans, neurodivergent and disability politics than there might be. The project

of the book is to identify the normative and dominant trends that have been reshaping the world of love in the service of heteronormativity, capitalism and inequality, so the majority of examples discussed here reflect this pattern in order to criticise and begin to reverse it. It hopes to start the work of opening up this space to make way for radical alternative projects that can advance the agendas of anti-capitalism, feminism, trans activism, racial equality and other progressive projects.

Although not a heterosexual app itself, Grindr is a part of this process of digitised transformation of desire and having a videogame like *Hope: To See You Again* and Grindr under one roof is not merely fortuitous. Grindr is an early example of gamified dating, using location-based software now so common in games like Pokémon GO. Its comparable match count means matches with potential dates can be collected like coins or credits. As Evan Moffitt has recently written in an important reflection on Grindr culture, it has long since been common to attend hook-ups or sex events through Grindr where participants are glued to their phones, experiencing the event on the app itself while they are present live.¹ In that sense, Grindr was augmented reality before augmented reality, a gamified experience of sex and relationships that was ahead of its time. In videogame communities 'grinding' refers to the repeating of patterns of play to accrue points or experience, so perhaps there is a fortuitous clue even in the name. In 'Being Xtra in Grindr City', Gavin Brown writes that 'the app began to reshape and enhance our experience of the city's people and places'.² In a way Grindr was the start of augmented reality gaming.

This is a pattern of humans – and even their apparently deepest and most intimate desires – becoming predicted, influenced and 'gamed'. With our smartphones, smart condoms, sexrobots, dating apps, Fitbits, simulators and videogames, we are becoming increasingly robotic at the level of desire. When Allison de Fren studied the early online Usenet group alt.sex.fetish she noticed two patterns: those who desire robots and those who want to become robots.³ Today, the two strands are stronger than ever, but there are also major differences. We are falling in love with robots more than ever before, and through patterns of gamification, prediction and engineering our very desires themselves are becoming roboticised. However, this no longer belongs to the realm of online subcultures or niche sexual communities. Now, both desiring and becoming robots are at the centre of social life. This book will claim that it is the normative position to be in love with a machine, not a quirky

or interesting subversion of expected desires that belongs on the edgy fringes of social life. It will also argue that we are inevitably becoming more machine-like in our desires. We are robots, cyborgs, whose desires are changing with our technologies.

DESIREVOLUTION

In other words, this book argues that we are now in the middle of a digitally driven incarnation of what Jean-Francois Lyotard once called a 'desirevolution', a fundamental and political change in the way we desire as human subjects. Perhaps as always, new technologies – with their associated and inherited political biases – are organising and mapping the future. In today's 'anthropocene' we can hardly survive a day without being reminded of the fact. What we are less attentive to, and what may be more unique to our own historical moment, is that the primary site on which this reorganisation of social life is taking place is libidinal. Our very desires are 'gamified' to suit particular economic and political agendas, changing the way we relate to everything from lovers and friends to food and politicians. Digital technologies are transforming the subject at the level of desire – re-mapping its libidinal economy – in ways never before imagined possible.

Developments in the digital industries are particularly geared towards infiltrating the spheres of love, relationships, friendships and sex (from sex robots and smart condoms to virtual dating, social media and hook-up applications) but even those less obviously connected to the realm of love (such as food and travel apps, videogames and self-driving cars, even election canvassing technologies) are implicated in a transformation of the subject at the level of desire. These transformations are deeply political and fundamentally economic.

This revolution in desire presents as many opportunities as it does concerns. There will be no 'humanist' argument here that we would be better off without or before our technologies. Desires have in some ways always been mechanised, set up and organised through social institutions and impacted and edited by technology. Whether through the church, the family, literature, film or the internet, desires have always been shaped and reconstructed by our institutions, and the situation today is no different.

What is different today is that an emergent form of what Nick Srnicek calls 'platform capitalism' has taken us into a situation of unprecedented

inequality when it comes to the uses and development of technologies. Those in charge of our technologies and our data are an increasingly minute and increasingly powerful percentage of our population. If there was any truth in McKenzie Wark's idea that although we are invited to play god when we game, it is game designers who are 'gamer's gods' in that they design the world inhabited by the gamer – we are all gamers in a world of a very few gods – an increasing 1 per cent of those who set the terms and conditions of the world in which we play.⁴ Because of this situation, much of what is found in this book might be considered negative or critical, but this is a battle that is not yet lost. In a world where technocapitalists, neoliberal tacticians, Silicon Valley machisimos and right-wing activists are directly engaged in organising the desires of the future for their own agendas (examples of which will be explored later in this book), we need to step up and seize the means of producing desire for ourselves.

Adapting quickly to our changing conditions is one way to start taking control of our new desires. Writing of the ways in which apps, sex tech and social media have transformed desire at the level of the body, Bogna Konior seems to extend Freud's idea that with technology man has become 'a god with artificial limbs', writing:

Our bodies today are spread over a number of apps, each limb tended to by another wireless device, a piece of a body on the phone, a recording of a body on a website. ... Some prefer technical erotics and await the arrival of sex robots. Machines spread our phantom bodies over the globe, opening it up to titillation, annihilation, de-subjectification, livestreaming us. Sexuality needs to adapt.⁵

Konior is also aware that this transformation of what it means to think, feel and desire is fundamentally connected to developing forms of capitalism. Imagining us all as robot lemmings controlled from above, she asks how long it will be 'until capital truly has the remote' and we become beings who respond instinctively to instructions issued out from a system that we created but which has run out of our control.⁶ Tinder, for example, can be seen as an ally of a hyper-productive capitalism which allows us to organise sex into our neoliberal schedules and increase worker efficiency.

If my only desire, and thus my whole being [under neoliberalism], is to be an efficient employee, I have to move with the rhythm of capital accumulation. I have to become liquid myself if I am to mobilize for capital. I have to always be available and always ready to respond to the fluctuations of the market. Tinder, then, allows me to function as the perfect employee in a liquid market. I can choose to have sex at moments that do not hamper me [as a worker].⁷

This is just one of many ways in which the rhythms of everyday life are transformed to suit contemporary capital by a ream of new technologies each operating on a different part of our psyche to encourage us to become the subjects of the desired future. The French sociologist Henri Lefebvre introduced the idea of ‘rhythmanalysis’ to study the political changes to everyday life in the 1980s and a new kind of rhythmanalysis is needed in the age of platform capitalism and tech entrepreneurship to identify the changes in the patterns of our everyday life lived through apps, wearables and other extensions. Technologies of love, in particular, and our new patterns of friendships, relationships and sex, indicate this emergent everyday life as it develops.

In trying to understand how our desires, impulses and patterns of repetitious everyday life are changing, this book argues in particular for psychoanalysis as a way to make visible the new world of desire. Psychoanalysis – when it is at its best – is a way of thinking which connects politics with desire, making it a vital tool for the Left to deploy if it is to succeed in the war over the libidinal future. If this project is to be successful, however, psychoanalysis needs to be connected in new ways to both feminism and to Marxism. Often considered the remit of the elite and/or of men, psychoanalysis – as the study of desire – can be allied with feminist and Marxist theories of technology and of love to reveal the economic and political power structures that underpin even the most personal and apparently instinctive desires, drives and impulses that characterise social life today. Further, psychoanalysis has often been seen as focussed on individuals, whereas Ian Parker and David Pavon-Cuellar have shown that it can be an effective way of thinking *collectively* about our personal and political lives. A collective political approach to desire is what we need to deal with the technologies of today.⁸

In the 1970s, a group of Marxist and feminist-orientated therapists and mental health professionals put together a pamphlet called ‘Red Therapy’. It argued that capitalism had begun to create new needs, new

forms of ‘consumer luxury, romantic love, sexual excitement’ and other impulses. ‘Parts of our lives that used to be controlled by religion (our sex lives, relationships, our personal and spiritual life) have now been invaded by the commodity ethic’, they argued, and their project began from the idea that ideas and practices of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy could help us handle the situation.⁹

Things have come a long way in the last 30 years, but the idea of psychoanalysis as an ally of political activism is more important than ever. To have an influence of any kind on the technologies around us, operating through us and sharing our space with us, we need to understand the way in which they impact us at the level of psyche and of desire, and that has always been the remit of psychoanalysis. A psychoanalytic approach shows us how we are being reorganised and controlled by the new digital, corporate and political forces in society today.

There is a long history of connections between a critique of capitalism and psychoanalysis, in particular when it comes to questions of desire. In *Capitalism and Desire*, Todd McGowan describes the situation:

Several anticapitalist theorists following in Freud’s wake equated the destruction of capitalism with the complete elimination of sexual repression. They either worked to bring about sexual liberation with the belief that this would portend the end of capitalism, or they worked to combat capitalism with the belief that this would free repressed sexuality.¹⁰

Some key figures in this philosophical history have been Otto Gross and Wilhelm Reich, who believed that political and sexual revolution would go hand in hand. These theorists considered how revolution in the sexual arena could potentially lead to the elimination of repression in wider social life. This book is also interested in how the revolutions that are taking place at the level of sex, love and desire can be central to wider possibilities of social change. However, it does not work on the assumption that the end goal would be to ‘free’ or ‘liberate’ desire. Another theorist in this tradition, Herbert Marcuse, points out that ‘the individual lives his repression “freely” as his own life: he desires what he is supposed to desire; his gratifications are profitable to him and others; he is reasonably and often exuberantly happy’.¹¹ In other words, capitalism appears to play a particular trick of making us experience our own organised, mediated and controlled desire precisely as if it is free, unre-

pressed and our own. Never has this been more so than in this digital age of technologies of desire. Since technologies edit and reorganise our desires to suit their own agendas, we can't trust our desire to simply work on our behalf.

McGowan's own work shows that it is not necessarily simple repressiveness that is the main characteristic of capitalism. For McGowan, 'the recurring fantasy within capitalism is that of attaining some degree of authentic belonging (in a romantic relationship, in a group of friends, in the nation, and so on)' but while capitalism 'spawns a type of fantasy, it constantly militates against the fantasy's realisation' because if the subject were to reach the fulfilment promised by capitalism, it would stop needing to pursue the infinite pleasures and commodities of capitalism itself.¹² Capitalism doesn't just prevent us from getting or being what we want. It also creates the desire for what we want and for who we want to be, before mediating, limiting and controlling those desires. This wider capitalist logic is the backdrop for all the digital technologies that are discussed in this book. Our sexbots, simulations, dating apps, videogames and wearables all give us what we want, limit our fulfilment, control our desire and construct our impulses.

Although this book takes its inspiration in particular from the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, no familiarity with psychoanalysis is assumed here. The ideas of these historical psychoanalysts – along with the subsequent development of their work carried out by feminist and Marxist contributors to the psychoanalytic tradition – form the core ideas expressed in this book. Each chapter brings their collective approach to the politics of love to bear on a different aspect of new media and technological development. The first chapter considers the increasing role of data in the organisation of relationships. The second considers the smart city as the new space of desire. The third considers simulations of love from games to robots and the fourth discusses dating apps and the algorithms and interfaces which make decisions about who we interact with and how. The latter chapters finish with a playful 'pitch' which suggests how these technologies might be used differently with a progressive agenda in mind, were we to be able to wrest power from the few technocapitalists who currently dominate design and production. These are intended less as prescriptive answers to our problems and more as attempts to provoke discussion as to how we might repurpose our technologies and redesign our relationships to them in the future.

Each of the areas explored in what follows reveals different aspects of a new triangulation between politics, love and games. Throughout we will see that the Grindr saga is just a tiny little clue on the surface of a much deeper and more complicated set of connections between capitalism and desire in the gamified world of love that we now inhabit.