VIDEO GAMES, CRIME AND NEXT-GEN DEVIANCE

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Reorienting the Debate

EDITED BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Dedicated to Charlotte, Lore and Eleanor

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FOREWORD:
CLIMAX CULTURE

The crude idea that violent games directly influence violence outside these worlds is increasingly rejected. Yet, as the contributions in this volume highlight, our concern with the subtle and more complex articulations of harm that flow from game worlds is only just beginning to take shape. As with film, literature and other products of our material culture, video games join with and shape the subjectivities and complex social lives of their many players. Games bed down in both the complex social, economic, political and psychological structures of their times, but they are also products of those conditions. The players of games and the designers of those games are themselves social subjects, keen to experience or produce visceral responses in those walking the spaces they have designed. The companies that publish and develop software, code and new titles are increasingly large organisations with the kind of mercenary motives to make profits and to win their own corporate battles – for hearts, minds and the dollars of players, shareholders and venture capitalist investors. The rules and culture of capitalism are increasingly evident as recent stories highlight practices of tax avoidance and sharp practices that rival the in-game narratives of Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar, 2013). Gold farmers spend time sourcing goods that can be sold, companies embed casino mechanisms into games filled with corporate messages and

systems – advertising, rankings, billboards and social media. Meanwhile the stuff of games themselves has become what some see as a kind of constant creative inertia – more of the same, another Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2019), a slight graphics upgrade here, a new and more sadistic perspective there to draw jaded gamers in. The economy and society loom large in all of these configurations.

As the contributions highlight in diverse and useful ways, the question is not simply one of violence and more a question of how games are situated within a much wider web of harms as these cultural products become part of the contemporary culture. We need to understand the complex pathways of articulation, reception and cultivation of what may be subtly anti-social formations as well as those, more fleeting engagements with little of substance to them. One of the problems of the media effects holy grail in research is its highly psychologised approach which diminishes the complexity, variety and range of social settings and contexts within which such pursuits occur, shape and are deployed by their users. None of this denies the concern we will still have with anti-social, misogynist, blunt sociological models in narrowly defined gameworlds. As I write this, the most popular games are overtly militaristic, para-nationalist and unremittingly violent games whose 'social' content has if anything reduced some claim to narrative and good storytelling. Fragging all round. But also there a farming simulator (Focus Home Interactive, 2019), various Lego games (Interactive Entertainment, 2017, 2019), Minecraft (Mojang, 2009) and several delightful if derivative Nintendo games. Like drivers who are also pedestrians and cyclists, many gamers match mood and time with particular titles and the sense that a genuinely anti-social force is pervasive needs to be tempered.

The thesis of Kelly, Lynes and Hoffin that we are diverted from wider and multiple harms by a simplistic interest in

direct violence is a valuable one. Indeed, we, our societies and polities, remain significant producers of violence through our neglect (and direct promotion of) of the deeper causes of violence, structural conditions, family violence and weakening community structures. Yet a focus on games and gaming continues to provide a useful scapegoat. Even so we can recognise that these leisure forms may have harmful impacts while being subtly woven into a culture fixed on vicariously experiencing violence. Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2019) or GTA (Rockstar, 2013) may not induce killing, but a vulnerable or damaged child's maturing moral world can now (whereas in the past it could not) be enveloped in an electively engaged world of bleak media that might include not only violent video games but diverse forms of pornography, celebrity culture, Instagram bodies, mediated bullying and fail videos – a phantasmagoria of images and experiences. The idea that such points of social and technological confluence should not concern us would seem perverse and complacent. The influence of these complex and varied experiences in a less cohesive and more complex and precarious social world remain thought-provoking and important areas for study. What these contributions also focus on is the potentially deepening corrosion of the subject by capitalism that operates through its games as well as through labour, via endless rounds of consumption, immersion and stasis – a kind of apathetic hyperactivity that is now incredibly pervasive.

The pursuit of experiences in a kind of climax culture is everywhere – a focus on the peak moments, the explosive release, an endless repeating of constantly, exploding, perfectly aimed at heads serving as the preparation for competitive, empty, apolitical, corporate staging posts in a modular (or indeed military) life. The harms and effects of games themselves are shaped within variegated worlds and formats – online players cajoling, competing and bullying in

ways that mirror or extend behaviour in playgrounds an hour or two earlier. Complex single player adventures create more or less fascistic ubermenschs whose unassailability makes all into cannon fodder and render all subordinates to the game-driven narrative of a hero or, increasingly, anti-hero. All of this is a long way from Super Mario 64 (Nintendo, 1996), but of course we can also choose to return to such formats, taking joy in non-networked safety, immune from the baiting and exhausting tribal competitions of Fortnite (Epic Games, 2018) or Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2019).

Look away from mass shootings apparently inspired by gameplay, and a more intricate series of connections between a shifting line of deviance and normality revolves around videogame culture and play. A forceful argument that spans the contributions found here is the sense that an inquiring attitude is needed in a world still immature and grappling with what it means to spend time in, to compete (sometimes professionally) and to enjoy or find another form of labour and drudgery in the wide world of games around us. Crime, deviance and harm are inevitably parts of this emerging context. But it is clear that the increasing social content of many games spills out, bleeding into the fabric of the 'real' world in new, complex and sometimes unanticipated ways, inspiring guilt, deviance, pleasure or simply joy. This book is a worthwhile engagement that dials down a reactionary response to games, replacing this with new questions and perspectives constructively engaging with today's ludodromes.

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