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INTRODUCTION: REORIENTATING THE DEBATE

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Video games have become a multi-billion-pound industry, now generating more income than any Hollywood blockbuster (Malim, 2018; Mitic, 2019). Since the early 1990s, the sale of video games has risen dramatically, and thus, as Jones (2008, p. 1) states '*games are arguably the most influential form of popular expression and entertainment in today's broader culture*'. As Hayward (2012) denotes, virtual spaces have an increasing presence within our lived reality. Thus criminology needs to give attention to video games in order for us to fully conceptualise the world we now exist within and the inherent

symbolic violence (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). Alongside this, Raymen and Smith (2019) have developed deviant leisure as a strand of criminology which propositions social scientists to increasingly consider how contemporary forms of leisure can manifest or include forms of deviancy.

Before introducing some of the main arguments put forward in this book, it is first important to provide brief yet vital definitions. Deviant leisure, the conceptual 'toolkit' vital in the framing for the subsequent chapters, may conjure particular images of well-known and traditional acts of deviancy (for example, certain forms of clothing linked to subcultures; certain forms of tattoos; loitering). However, this more 'traditional' definition of deviancy is rather narrow in scope and omits a range of potential harmful behaviours and activities (Atkinson, 2014). As noted by Atkinson (Atkinson, 2014), the limitations of conventional criminological approaches to understanding the actualities of crime and deviance are displayed -when Stan Cohen posed three simple questions:

> *The stuff of criminology consists of only three questions: Why are laws made? Why are they broken? What do we do or what should we do about this?*
>
> (Cohen, 1998, p. 9).

In posing these relatively straightforward questions, Cohen was highlighting the shortcomings of criminology as a discipline. Specifically, he highlights that such questions are (usually) posed by those with authority within criminal justice and crime control agencies. So too, there is an inherent shortsightedness with regard to the realities and complexities that create and perpetuate the conditions that often result in criminal behaviour. In order for us to break free of this restrained and misguided questions, we need to move beyond

such orthodox notions and draw upon more critical and contemporary perspectives. Deviant leisure, as proposed by Oliver Smith and Tom Raymen, attempted to provide such solutions by drawing upon contemporary paradigms including ultrarealism and more modern critical strains of cultural criminology. In defining this new perspective, Smith (2016) – aware of the inherent restraints of criminology – posits that

> *'deviant leisure' began to orient itself toward a reconceptualisation of social deviance and an exploration of how individual, social, economic, and environmental harms are structurally and culturally embedded within many accepted and normalized forms of leisure, asserting that criminologists need to travel beyond the boundaries associated with more traditional socio-legal constructions of crime and into the realm of harm and zemiology*
>
> (Smith, 2016, p. 6).

Taking this quote into consideration, along with the previously discussed orthodox notions of deviance, a deviant leisure perspective seeks to articulate a more nuanced interpretation. One which is better suited to contemporary application was designed to 'capture' and deduce a wider range of harms that criminology is otherwise incapable of determining. Along with drawing upon more critical strands of criminology better suited for the realities of 21st century life, deviant leisure also puts zemiology to the fore. Zemiology, similar to the rationale behind deviant leisure, was inspired by the notion that much of criminology and relevant research is conducted, produced and maintained by 'very powerful interests, not least the state, which produces definitions of crime through criminal law' (Hillyard & Tombs, 2017, p. 284). Again, such a perspective is crucial in transcending the

preverbal cage in which many within academia and wider society unwittingly find themselves within, unable or inhibited from perceiving notions of harm outside of the traditional notion which is constrained via legal frameworks. To summarise this brief introduction to deviant leisure, such a perspective seeks to uncover those behaviours that within a more ethical social order would be seen as the harmful acts that they actually are. More specifically, as a growing assortment of forms of 'deviant leisure' become culturally entrenched within the conventional and their associated harms become regularised, 'deviant leisure scholars argue that the usual focus of criminology on legally defined crime and forms of deviance which controvert social norms and values requires some conceptual expansion (Smith, 2016, p. 10).

The following book stems from the aforementioned points as well as a short blog written by the editors in June of 2018 for the British Society of Criminology. The blog was an exasperated response to various discussions within the mainstream media following the tragic school shooting in Santa Fe High School in Texas. The blog put forth a short but critical discussion of what the authors view as the myriad and myopic positionality that video games were a mitigating factor in the exponential rise in mass murders across the pond. Crucially, however, it did not hope to just dispel such discussion but to instigate social scientists to progress past such a blinkered view and aide us in identifying, investigating and accounting for various other forms of deviancy we perceived could be identified within video games and the wider industry. The following collection is the product of our supplication, one which we hope will play at least a minor contribution towards two key objectives.

The first is for criminology and wider sociology to possibly offer nuanced understandings of the effect of video games on ever-increasing influence upon society. This being a feat, we

believe only a select few academics have managed to do thus far (Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016; Atkinson & Willis, 2007, 2009; Denham & Spokes, 2019). Secondly and most hopefully, this is for wider academia and perhaps most importantly the mainstream media, to finally transition past such basic and wholly inept excuses for the loss of life through abhorrent acts of violence. Of course, by-and-large academia has increasingly progressed past such notions in the last decade, though remnants of such outdated perspectives can still be found.

It seems the media though have not nor have policymakers. As we sit down to write the first draft of the introductory chapter, both the Twittersphere and radio are giving comprehensive coverage of another bloody weekend in the United States. A weekend that, unfortunately, by the time this goes to print and is (hopefully) being read will likely be a distant memory to all but the immediate and secondary victims and of course the first responders.

The first of these shootings was on 3 August 2019 in El Paso, Texas (Beckett & Levin, 2019a). About 48 victims have been confirmed at the time of writing, 22 of which are deceased. This shooting was conducted in a Walmart close to the Cielo Vista Mall. The perpetrator, Patrick Crusius, reportedly drove around 10 hours to El Paso before opening fire on members of the public. Shortly prior to the incident, it is being reported by authorities he uploaded a manifesto online which supposedly cited that the attack was a response of the 'Hispanic invasion of Texas' (Beckett & Levin, 2019b). The manifesto was uploaded to the online community 8chan (now 8kun), which has frequently been linked to various acts of fringe movements ranging from far-right ideologues as well as the incel movement (Beckett & Levin, 2019b).

A few hours after the terrorist attack in El Paso, Connor Betts opened fire on a bar in Dayton, Ohio (Sewell & Seewer, 2019). Included within the nine fatalities was the perpetrator's

sister (Sewell & Seewer, 2019). Another 27 people were reportedly injured. Betts was shot dead during the incident. The shootings at El Paso and Dayton marked the 250th and 251st mass shootings in 2019 (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). A quick (though not comprehensive) scour of the internet details four more mass shooting since aforementioned attack in Dayton, two of which were in Chicago, Illinois, on August 4, with a combined total of 15 victims and one fatality (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). One was in Memphis, Tennessee, with three members of the public injured and one fatality (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). Finally four people were injured in Brooklyn, New York, during a candlelight vigil (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). So far today, there have been no mass shootings reported, though it is only 9:34 a.m. in New York as we type.

Haberman, Karni and Hakim (2019) suggest that perhaps due to his close relationship to and numerous donations from the National Rifle Association, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, again did not condemn the endemic gun culture which is facilitating these devastating acts on such a regular basis (The White House, 2019). Nor did he recognise that the divisive politics which has dogged American politics in recent years may have contributed in any way as influencing any of the shootings. This is not to say that recent sociopolitical changes are the only reason for such atrocities to occur, to propose as such would be ludicrous when accounting for the rise in mass shooting over the previous decades. However, such an approach could lead to some reduction in an otherwise endemic problem which is largely American-centric. It should also be acknowledged that gun-related violence in American schools can be traced back to the 1890s (Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis, 2018).

Whilst disavowing the arguably logical issues which implicate upon the regularity of such actions, President Trump held a press conference in which he offered a five-point plan to

tackle the issue that he terms a '*monstrous evil*' (The White House, 2019). The first priority in the plan was for the authorities to act upon early warning signs much quicker; importantly, he states that such agencies would need to work alongside social media companies (The White House, 2019) Second, Trump stated that the glorification of violence in society must be stopped. He stated that '*This includes the gruesome and grizzly video-games that are now common place*', citing that troubled youths can too easily surround themselves with violent content (The White House, 2019). Third, he proposed furthering mental health support systems as that is '*what pulls the trigger, not the gun*' (The White House, 2019). Forth, he stated extreme risk protection orders should be put in place to ensure access to firearms by dangerous individuals is limited. Finally, he stated that the Department of Justice had been instructed to propose legislation that ensured those committing mass shootings would face the death penalty '*quickly, decisively and without years of needless delay*' (The White House, 2019).

In providing some much needed nuance and evaluation of such political rhetoric, it is important to consider that when it comes to debates on crime and punishment, it is important that we do not simply descend into populist and (supposedly) common sense arguments, built solely on emotion or gut feeling. That is not to deny the place of emotion or common sense, but rather to suggest that sometimes in the social sciences, the evidence and reality might be counterintuitive – what at first appears to be the case may not be, when we look at empirical evidence. Yet the desire to do that seems to be under attack. Recently, on both sides of the Atlantic, political arenas have been transformed into hotbeds of misinformation. What better term to capture this than the contemporary mantra of 'alternative facts', a phrase used by US Counsellor to President Trump, Kellyanne Conway, in a press interview

on 22 January 2017, in which she defended White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the attendance numbers at inauguration (Swaine, 2018).

The first, third and fourth proposal seem at first to be a strong and reasonable rhetoric from a politician dealing with an urgent crisis within their nation. In addition to this, it echoes the notion of *severity, celerity and certainty* embedded within deterrence theory, whilst negating the prevalence of offenders in such situations that commit suicide. The second, however, has almost by necessity become the opening of this book – video games cause violence – a phrase which has been utilised by Trump on numerous occasions previously as well as various politicians before (Draper, 2019). The notion in simply incorrect. This chapter will briefly explore this before the remainder of this book offers possible forms of deviancy that could be cited as attributable or intrinsically linked to the modern video games industry to varying degrees.

There is a long history of emerging forms of media being implicated as having a relationship with violent behaviour since the Victorian era (Schecter, 2005) both within academic studies and media discourse. Such discussions began centred around the increasing literacy of the population and the content they were opting to consume. By the 1950s, Werthem (1954) had professed that rising rates of delinquency were attributable to violent comic books. As with the earlier concerns around literature, the focus upon comics being attributable to society's ills came at a time the comic book market was rapidly gaining momentum (Sabin, 2001). Increasingly through the late 1980s and 1990s, under the Reagan administration, various subgenres of Hip Hop were brought to the fore as causations for youth-related violence (Duggan, 2014). At the same time, artists such as Ice T and groups such as NWA were being blamed for the rise in interpersonal violence in ghettoised areas of America, and

video games were increasingly cited as the reason behind various high-profile crimes (Kocurek, 2019) The game Doom (iD Software, 1993) was cited for the murder of a school principal and another student by Evan Ramsey in 1997 (CBS News, 1999). Again, in 1999, Doom (iD Software, 1993) was cited as a causal factor for the Columbine Massacre (Kocurek, 2019). Since these early incidents, it is evident that the notion of video games being a casual factor has gained traction not only by the media but also in some cases by the perpetrators of such crimes. Indeed, Evan Ramsey professed in prison (after his trial) that playing Doom had been a mitigating factor in his actions (CBS News, 1999). So too, Anders Brevik cited within his manifesto playing Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2007) as a training simulator (Breivik, 2011, p. 908). It should be noted, however, that he also cited World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), a fantasy role-playing game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004, p. 1380). From this and countless other cases which were cited as having video games as a mitigating factor in violent offending, we can offer that perhaps video games do not cause violence, but media portrayals of that narrative offer to some individuals a technique of neutralisation (Matza, 1964) in which the social scripts maintained in public discourse allow them to alleviate their accountability to some degree. However, the media and politicians do not operate in an isolated bubble and the routes in which such arguments have fermented and developed are highly visible throughout academic discourse.

Perhaps building upon the perspective of new media and the supposedly intrinsic link to violence, in 1961, Albert Bandura (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963), a Stanford Psychologist, began experimental studies aimed at the notion of limiting the access children have to violent media. This prominent study, known as the Bobo Doll experiment, aimed to bolster Banduras' perspective that human behaviour was

not inherited through genetic factors but learnt through social interaction. The essence of Banduras' argument was that watching violent acts provides the individual with a 'social script' to guide behaviour. One would hope that within the chronological context, Bandura's argument is likely perceived by most as a response the positivist movements and the notion of the atavistic criminal. However, despite the study now being widely discredited, primarily due to the questionable research methods employed (Hart & Kritsonis, 2006), a pool of academics who have an interest in the link between violence and video games have in fact been influenced by the social script of Bandura's legacy, the irony of which seems to have been lost. Whilst the form of media under discussion has progressed from television and comics to video games, the same tired debate has continued (Colwell and Kato, 2003; Hasan, Begue, & Bushman, 2012; Kutner & Olson, 2008; Sherry, 2006; Unsworth, Devilly, & Ward, 2007).

Following the tragic Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings (Wilson, Yardley, & Pemberton, 2016), the media and even the FBI soon latched on to the notion that the perpetrators use of violent video games were intrinsically linked to their abhorrent acts, much in the way that the recent tragic events in Santa Fe High School have been mirrored (Beckett, 2018). This notion went as far as the parents of some of the victims of the Columbine tragedy attempting to sue gaming companies citing the shooters were desensitised to violence due to the use of their products (Ward, 2001). The convergence of the factors discussed so far have become increasingly problematic. Following the tragic Columbine and Sandy Hook shootings (Wilson et al., 2016), the media and even the FBI soon latched on to the notion that the perpetrators use of violent video games were intrinsically linked to their abhorrent acts, much in the way that the tragic events in Santa Fe

High School and more recent statements by Donald Trump mirrored.

Such notions were duly preyed upon by the media in an effort to create what Cohen (2002) would refer to as a moral panic. It must be noted, however, that the authors perceive this to be a by-product of capitalist culture and an effort to generate profit. Due to this stance, they do not subscribe to the notion of moral panics as a theoretical basis (a point that is expanded upon in Chapter 2). This, combined by the neoliberal intensification of administrative criminology and the wider social sciences, duly gave rise to the ensuing tidal wave of studies (Sherry, 2006), hypothesising the link (or lack thereof) between video games and violence. It is within this administrative paradox that the link between the media and academia converge to create the redundant epoch this book aims to challenge. The countless number of repetitive studies largely utilises similar methodological tendencies as Bandura's discredited contribution. As Paik and Comstock (1994) highlight (in regard to television violence and antisocial behaviour), the less precise measures utilised tend to over-estimate the effects the studies proscribe. This combined with the publication bias detailed by Ferguson (2007), who also proscribes to the view that researchers in the area of video game studies are overly concerned with proving or disproving a link than testing theory in a methodologically precise manner, highlights the issues of the 'video games create violence' discussion.

Whilst the view of Ferguson (2007) momentarily inspires an optimistic glimmer that respected academics within the field may have already transitioned past the scholarly epoch described is however short-lived, evidenced by the academic discussion between Ferguson and Konjin (2015) in which they engage in a 'peaceful debate' around video games and the issue of violence. Whilst it was hoped Ferguson would

progress past the tautological discussion, he instead, eight years later, engages in a debate on the subject. It is this discussion and lack of prudence to look past the discussion of days gone by that epitomises the redundancy of the field.

However, some academics have in the past decade managed to marginally transition past the fixed academic gaze and offer small developments within the scope of the field of study. Notable was the discussion by Luck (2009) around the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia followed by the rebuttal of such distinction by Bartel (2015). In the midst of the discussion, Schulzke (2010) offered perhaps the most promising development in the field for numerous decades which was unfortunately overwhelmingly disregarded. Schulzke offered a scholarly article upon defending the morality of violent video games. Whilst unfortunately still transfixed upon the notion of violence, the paper offered Kantian, Aristotelian and utilitarian moral theories. Within this context, Schulzke offered a rare and important advance within the academic discussion of deviancy in video games.

The disintegration of this myriad approach to video games through the sociological gaze is beginning to wane. McCaffree and Proctor (2017) offered a welcome, if not short, development of the discussion. Their paper hypothesises that both violence and property crime are negated by the use of video games. Their response to psychologies insistence on identifying and debating causal links between video games is indeed necessary, as well as their inclusion of sociological perspectives in the form of routine activity theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) being eagerly received. Unfortunately, the paper stays within the nexus of administrative academia whilst failing to observe the key factor in regard to the discussion of video games and deviancy.

In short, the historical legacy of Bandura alongside the media's incessant proclivity for regressive but profit

generating headlines which offer to the public a comfort blanket explanation for heinous acts of interpersonal violence, rather than reflecting upon wider structural conditions has ensured both political discourse and academia have been unwilling or unable to look past the superfluous perspectives of days gone by. Video games may or may not incite a small minority of consumers to commit violence, though we would maintain the latter. We propose in this book, however, that they can instigate a wider variety of harms. The gaming platforms are intrinsically linked to other forms of deviancy and crime, observable once the myopic gaze is avert and they are perceived from differing theoretical lenses. Since the early developments of the video game industry, beginning with the Atari, games have consistently presented deviant and taboo topics to consumers as detailed in more depth in Chapter 3. Whilst some of these games have been attributed to acts of rebellion and political statements, many have purely been objects of consumerism presenting deviant acts to boost sales through shock value. As we finished the final draft of the collection, it came to light that Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony were suspected to have had some involvement in the Chinese forced labour camps (Xiuzhong Xu, Cave, Leibold, Munro, & Ruser, 2020).

To engage with such a focus of the video games industry, which allows us to question the depth and spectrum of harms, it is crucial to first articulate what is meant by deviancy. As Smith and Raymen (2018) detail, the perspective is shaped by both cultural criminology's critique of liberal and consumer capitalism (Hayward, 2016) and ultrarealism's (Winlow & Hall, 2006) focus upon the corrosive nature of consumer capitalism corrosive values, which underpin harmful subjectivities. From this approach, the atypical and widely accepted perspective of deviancy accepted within sociology, premised upon behaviour which exceeds the tolerance of the

community (Clinard & Meier, 2007), is 'inverted' (Smith & Raymen, 2018). From this opposing theoretical gaze, we can begin to ascertain how the sociopolitical structures, framed within economic capital as the central driving force, promote modes of deviant behaviour as a normalised. We increasingly pursue individual identities, utilising symbolic materials and experiences as the signifier of such an identity. However, the increasing homogeneity propelled by consumer culture stifles the possibility of the desired individuality. Such bids for individuality invariably lead to those engaged within the nexus to impinge upon the rights of the other (Smith &and Raymen, 2018), resulting in a multitude of harms, though due to the homogenisation of material culture the harms are largely unrecognised. Smith and Raymen (2018) identify four core harms within the remit of deviant leisure: subjective harms, environmental harms, socially corrosive harms and embedded harms. The seminal work of Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) of 'murder boxes' in video games is observed as a demonstration of the subjective harms they discuss within the remit of deviant leisure. Indeed, many of the notions proposed within the following chapters align with such categorisation, though as will become apparent we propose elements of embedded and subjective harms are also observable.

With this in mind, we approached various colleagues with the notion that video games are inexplicitly intertwined with aspects of deviancy to varying degrees. The following collection is the result of this. It does not seek to provide any definitive answer, nor is it based upon methodologically robust research projects seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis around the content as some scholars have sought in recent months (see the brilliant article by Denham & Spokes, 2019). The following chapters are likely best premised as theoretical thought pieces which hope to provoke

discussions around the nature of deviant leisure and video games in the future away from the Bandura affect.

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