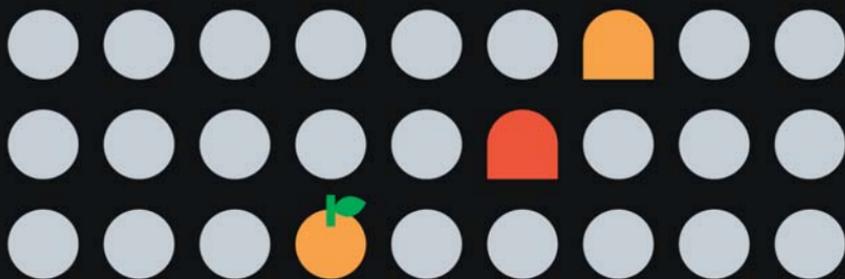# VIDEO GAMES, CRIME AND NEXT-GEN DEVIANCE

Reorienting the Debate

Craig Kelly, Adam Lynes and Kevin Hoffin

Foreword by Professor Rowland Atkinson

EMERALD POINTS

VIDEO GAMES, CRIME AND NEXT-GEN DEVIANCE

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Reorienting the Debate

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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.

<div style="text-align:right">

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Craig

First and foremost I would like to thank my wife Charlotte. Her continued support made this possible, not to mention the fact that I would be hard pressed to find anyone else who would put up with my rants and ramblings as she has in the last few months (though she would probably argue longer). Thank you to my little man, Oscar who discovered video games as I wrote this. Thank you to my mum, if it wasn't for your support I would never be sat typing this (I even managed not to call you mother here!). A thank you to my wider family for all your support, with special thanks to Anne and Stuart for all the childcare and other help in the last four years. A thank you to the many academics who have taken their time to help me, mentor me and support me in the last few years, with a special thank you to James Treadwell, Emma Kelly, John Lamb and Simon Winlow. A huge thank you goes to Rowland Atkinson for being kind enough to provide the foreword to this edited collection. Thank you to Adam Lynes and Kevin Hoffin for supporting me in the project, it is not lost on me how random this all sounded when we first discussed it! Thank you to all of those who were kind enough to contribute to the collection, taking time out of such busy schedules was not easy and we really appreciate it. Thank you to all my colleagues at BCU for your support as I start my

career, especially Sarah Pemberton, the greatest line manager I could of wished for!

Adam

First and foremost I would like to thank Lore for her continual love and support, without which I would have given up a long time ago. Special thanks also go to the contributors of the collection, who I know took time out of their (incredibly) busy schedule to make this possible. Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering encouragement, guidance, and who instilled in me the priceless value of knowledge. Thank you to Rowland Atkinson for the foreword.

Kevin

Thanks go to Eleanor, my family, my cousin Sam for helping to keep my love of gaming alive, all the contributors to this text, my co-authors Elaine DeVos and Dr Geraldine Lee-Treweek. And especially my co-editors Adam and Craig and friends at BCU and elsewhere.

1

INTRODUCTION: REORIENTATING THE DEBATE

Craig Kelly, Adam Lynes, and Kevin Hoffin

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