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Gamification of Terror—Power Games as Liminal Spaces

Sonia Fizek and Anne Dippel

Abstract

Cases of domestic terrorism have increased in the last few years. Although executed in often remote locations worldwide, they share a lot of resemblances, the most striking ones of which have resulted in their recent gamified character as seen in achievement systems and first-person shooter esthetics. This chapter is an attempt to understand the so-called “gamification of terror” by looking for answers not in videogames per se but in their capacity to build communities, however destructive they might turn. The authors propose to see gamified acts of terror as dark rituals “played out” in liminal spaces to argue with the anthropologist Victor Turner.

Keywords

Video games • Gamification • Violence • Rhetoric of power • Liminal space • Ritual • Alt-right • Terrorism • Game studies • Play studies • Anthropology

“Computer games are a key part of the shared culture from which one can begin – as laborious as it is playful – the process of creating a reflective and critical approach to the times.” (Wark 2007).

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“Every type of cultural performance, including ritual, ceremony, carnival, theatre and poetry, is explanation and explication of life itself.” (Turner 1982, p. 13)

1 Gamifying Terror

October 9, 2019—An average noon in an Eastern German town of Halle (Saale). The city’s residents become witness to an attack in front of the synagogue’s closed door. After several failed attempts to enter the Jewish place of worship, the shooter leaves, killing a passer-by and a Kebab shop customer, and wounding a couple.

August 3, 2019—A late morning in El Paso, USA. A gunman opens fire in a local Wal-Mart supermarket, killing eighteen people and wounding several others.

March 15, 2019—Early afternoon in Christchurch, New Zealand. A heavily armed man enters a mosque and an Islamic center, leaving 51 people killed and 49 injured.

Cases of domestic terrorism like the ones listed above have been repeatedly taking place in the last few years, reaching a peak in 2019. Although these acts have been committed in locations far apart from each other, several noticeable commonalities can be pointed out. They tend to be initiated by far-right and alt-right white male extremists, often referred to as “lone wolves” as they act outside of any direct and organized command structures. Many had been radicalized in an online ecosystem of right wing terror spread on user-moderated boards such as 4chan, 8chan or Gab.¹ In addition to that, two other noteworthy aspects increasingly common to such acts become apparent: public head-counting of victims on anonymous news boards and live streaming of the attacks via head-mounted cameras (Mackintosh and Mezzofiore 2019). And it is those two phenomena that have brought video games back into the spotlight of infamy in a long-lasting discussion on their relationship to ethics and violence. This time, however, the public discourse has shifted from videogames per se to that of gamification, which explains the use of game dynamics in non-game scenarios (Deterding et al. 2011; Deterding and Walz 2015). Competition, achievement-centered logic and first-person perspective in displaying video recordings on live streaming platforms are presented by many publicists (Schiffer 2019; Mackintosh and Mezzofiore 2019, TAZ 2019) as the common key to understanding the recent right-wing terror attacks.

¹4Chan and 8Chan are unregulated anonymous discussion boards. Gab can be described as an ultra-libertarian social media site. Amongst others, they have been attracting far-right propagandists (Davey and Ebner 2019).

As inciting as it may be in theory, gamification provides only a partial answer. It can explain how the acts of terror are being carried out within the esthetics of video gaming. It cannot, however, address the core of the problem: Why are videogames discussed within the context of extremism in the first place, and what makes them such a “perfect” fit? Or, to ask with Mark Siemons, a columnist of the FAZ (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung), “Why would an anti-Semitic terrorist model his attacks on a first-person shooter videogame?” (Siemons 2019).

This chapter is an invitation to explore the above questions and challenge the main line of argumentation in the ongoing discussions on the “gamification of terror”.² Video recording and live streaming of the acts of terror as well as augmenting killing by turning it into virtual competition between anonymous radicalized news board users shed a new light on the discussion of the ethical dimension of play. We consider these esthetic and narrative aspects part of a strategy of spectacular entertainment framed within a global sociotechnical practice, partially drawing on the imagery of mainstream video gaming. Trivializing death and making it the object of a ludic spectacle require a careful analysis, one going beyond a direct videogame/violence cause-and-effect debate. The gamification of terror requires us to rethink not only the role of videogames or gamers in political extremism but, above all, forms of community and the infrastructure of the newly emerging alternative social platforms, which are providing a necessary space for the growth of the alt-right community as they serve as a host to many scattered, angry and, most importantly, scared white male individuals. It is within those computer-mediated spaces that a new form of community emerges and generates an alternative concept to the post-modern “public” (Habermas 1962) by exploring alternative forms of expression, in this case destructive to the societal body defined by modern constitutions and the equality of rights.

Within the context of gamified terror, violence is not only gamified but, more importantly, ritualized and in effect staged as a mass-entertainment spectacle. Rhetorics of play as well as the anthropology of community and ritual offer an insightful starting point to understand the emerging place of videogames within the context of transnational right-wing extremism. We intend to bring two concepts in particular into the conversation: the rhetorics of power

²It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of the term. Gamification of extremism seems to have been brought to public attention for the first time in March 2019 after the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. In August 2019 the “phrases gamification of terror” and “gamification of terrorism” were widely used in international media in the aftermath of the El Paso mass shooting. Previously, the term “gamification” was employed within the context of American drone warfare (Pugliese 2017) and the ISIS game modification of the videogame Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar Games 2013).

by Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) and liminality by Victor Turner (1982). At this point we would also like to emphasize that the complexity of gamified terror can barely be explained within the modern framework and only partially within the post-modern one. Above all, in order to understand the dynamics behind this phenomenon, we need to acknowledge the crucial role digital media play in the formation of trans-national alt-right communities: not as mere tools but as co-agents, whose communication infrastructures foster the dynamics of radicalization. In this chapter we seek to illustrate how rhetorics of power and liminality can be employed to explain the phenomenon of gamified terror within the context of digital media.

Our main argument is that alternative online social platforms (such as 4chan, 8chan or Gab) in combination with videogames esthetics create ritualized liminal spaces. Both rituals and games (often overlapping) have the capacity to open up liminal spaces, allowing individuals to go through a process known in anthropology as “rite de passage” (van Gennep 1960). Within liminal spaces reality is turned upside down, and the lines between fact and fiction become blurred. Visions of reality represented by the alt-right community and those who turn into domestic terrorists are inspired by fictitious conspiracy theories (Davey and Ebner 2019), often shared online in the form of memes or pseudo-documentary films produced by the members of that community. The acts of terror are turned into gamified spectacles, which resemble post 1990s documentary television (Koch 2019), fusing the immersive character of an audio-visual spectacle with a first-person shooter narrative structure often amplified by affective background music and accompanied by live commentary. By live-streaming the acts of terror on global platforms, the usually isolated individuals manage to exert an impact on the collective realities of their audience.

The strategy is clear: Personalization and statistical comparability through pointsification, visualization through head-mounted cameras, dramatization through weaponization and emotional music, narrativization through letters claiming responsibility and chat comments, and a representation of planned and committed attacks in present tense, as well as authentication of reality through actual commitment of murder, traces of blood and in the end the will to kill and the wish to die a heroic death, even suicide—the last and most existential expression of free will a human being has. The narrative that holds the perpetrators together must be readable by anyone since the action is intended to have effect on a global scale.

2 Play as Power

Human play is ambiguous (Sutton-Smith 1997). Contrary to its most popular connotations, it is not always pure, positive, good, or free of ideological bias. It can be cruel (Sutton-Smith 1997), dark (Mortensen et al. 2015) and violent, especially when related to competitive or agonistic play. Sutton-Smith argues that “understanding play primarily as contest reflects the wide-spread male rhetoric that favors the exaltation of combative power” (1997, p. 80). Combat is also inscribed into the etymology of play—the Anglo-Saxon *plega* denotes a game or sport but can also refer to a fight and battle.

Apart from the ostensible motive (misogyny, evolutionism, anti-Semitism and anti-Islamism), the idea of competition is an additional moving cause for the recent gamified acts of terror. The assaulters often see themselves in direct competition with their predecessors. For instance, in a white nationalist manifesto posted online, the Halle attacker expressed his desire to “beat his high score”, the pronoun “his” referring to the Australian attacker responsible for Christchurch shootings in New Zealand (Mackintosh and Mezzofiore 2019). Also the far-right online community scores the performances of the shooters, placing them indirectly in competition with one another, which in turn inspires and encourages more attackers to join in the “ranks”, forming a community of sworn solitary partisans that appears to attract a cult-like following. Jacob Davey, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a global counter-extremism organization, concludes in an interview for the CNN, “... people criticizing the attacker shows how these attacks have become gamified – their criticism was that his score wasn’t high enough. That’s the way these people think, that these attacks are to be consumed, scored and dissected like a video game” (Mackintosh and Mezzofiore 2019).

The esthetic and narrative structure of the first-person shooter on the other hand reflect the power image of a heavily armed male figure well-trained and prepared for the successful completion of a mission. Within this context, to play is to fight. And to fight is to potentially win, to take over control, even at the expense of one’s own life. Games can offer the opportunity to come to terms with death, war or violence (Golstein 1998) and open up space for a variety of emotions (Bareither 2016). However, in the case of gamification of terror, the stakes are larger than the game itself, involving the lives of those who stand in the way of the armed terrorist. In popular discourse first-person shooter games tend to be conflated with all video games, disregarding the fact that violent competition does not constitute the only existing mode of digital play. For this reason we want to differentiate between video games in general and what we refer to as

“power games”, which are characterized by control, combat and violence. It is an important point to make at the start of the discussion on games and terror in order not to equate videogames as such with violence, falling into a rhetorical trap set by the political discourse.

Control, power and competition are traditionally important rhetorical tools for fascist ideologies in general and the alt-right community in particular, which considers violent action as an effective way to solve social tension (Butler 2020) and participates in an imagined ongoing evolutionary struggle of a survival of the fittest: “I can’t sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw Your Optics. I am Going In”, posted the shooter responsible for the Pittsburgh synagogue attack on Gab social platform (Sacks 2018). The military first-person shooter esthetic strengthens the image of an allegedly endangered white supremacist “species” attempting to defend itself against extinction prophesied by white supremacist conspiracy theories, which could be subsumed under the banner of “The Great Replacement” (Davey and Ebner 2019). But the transnational extremist terror fueled by conspiracy theories would not have spread so quickly, had it not been for computer-mediated online spaces, which synthesize otherwise fragmented and scattered trans-national individuals into a community-like pattern.

3 Online Platforms as Active Matter

Most of the alternative social networks, which have become the hotbeds of extremism and radicalism, ironically stage themselves as decentralized spaces standing in opposition to the status quo of big technology companies, the so-called “Big Tech” oligopoly represented by, for instance, Apple, Amazon, Facebook and Google (Karabell 2020). Gab, a social media website established in 2017, claims to champion free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online:

“At Gab, we believe that the future of online publishing is decentralized and open. We believe that users of social networks should be able to control their social media experience on their own terms, rather than the terms set down by Big Tech. Gab’s codebase is free and open-source, licensed under the GNU Affero General Public License version 3 (AGPL3).”³

It is at Gab where the Pittsburgh synagogue shooter of 2018 posted anti-Semitic content and his terrorist manifesto. Since its launch, Gab has been attracting a considerable alt-right and extremist user base, which in the name of allegedly free speech propagates hate speech, abusing and misunderstanding

³Gab Social: <https://not-develop.gab.com/about>.

the true notion of freedom of expression within democratic societies. As the authors of the report “The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism” emphasize.

“Far-right propagandists have used the entire new media ecosystem to promote the idea of a white genocide: they have been particularly active across unregulated imageboard threads on 8chan and 4chan, censorship-free discussion platforms like Voat and ultra-libertarian social media sites like Gab and Minds.” (Davey and Ebner 2019, p. 24)

4chan, an anonymous imageboard launched 16 years ago as a space for anime fans, has given its users even more freedom often associated with the early days of the World Wide Web. “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” goes the popular meme inspired by a cartoon caption published in 1993 on the pages of *The New Yorker*. Although originally conceptualized as a hub for Internet subculture and home to a plethora of themed boards, 4chan’s boards/new/ (news) later renamed to/pol/ (politically incorrect) started attracting racist and alt-right audiences. The website is often referred to as a cesspool of hate, with instances of hate speech increased by 40% since 2015 (Arthur 2019). The site has further interesting dynamics apart from user anonymity. It has no memory. 4Chan’s zero data retention feature means that content is not archived, making it difficult to trace after it has been posted unless someone saves the data at the moment of its being posted for later access (e.g., by taking a screenshot). Otherwise, older posts are simply replaced by newer threads.

Similarly to 4chan, 8chan is an imageboard attracting predominantly alt-right communities. Established in 2013 as an answer to a growing “surveillance” of content on 4chan, the website was supposed to re-instantiate free speech on the Internet. It has attracted posts linked to conspiracy theories and white supremacy, neo-Nazism, alt-right, as well as child pornography. In August 2019, 8chan rebranded itself to 8kun, following three mass shootings (Christchurch, New Zealand; Poway, California; El Paso, Texas), whose initiators used the website to share their manifestos. Also the shooter in Halle (Saale) was an active 8chan user. And although correlation does not imply causality, the significance of the above media channels within the context of gamified terror attacks should not be downplayed. Those platforms provide ample space for far-right extremist ideas to spread amongst growing follower base (Davey and Ebner 2019). Non-moderated social media platforms (such as 4chan, 8chan and Gab, among others) bring otherwise scattered alt-right users together, giving them the possibility to form coherent communities and realize their unfulfilled desires of belonging and wholeness in

a fragmented globalized world. It is a bitter, if not a broken reality,⁴ in which the democratic right of freedom of speech and the right of anonymity designed for protecting members of a given civil society transform social spaces into echo chambers of alt-right extremism (subverted by racism, fascism, and misogyny) capable of rapidly polarizing and radicalizing more users. Individual users transform into members of a transnational counterculture flourishing in digital spaces such as 8chan. Here, they stage themselves as a revolutionary and liberating force opposing the global status quo, but above all, the democratic values, which paradoxically grant the existence of their “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) in the first place.

The concept of the “imagined community” is crucial here as it places the medium in the center of the discussion. In his work on imagined communities, Benedict Anderson emphasizes the role of capitalized print media in the process of nation formation. It is with the introduction of the printing press and national print languages that otherwise dispersed local communities started forming their overarching identity by finding a common voice, he argues. The relationship between the sixteenth century print medium, its nineteenth century culmination point in the formation of nation states, and today’s networked digital media gives rise to an analogy that goes beyond mere rhetoric and stems from the materiality of the communication medium. Without the networked computer and the possibility to join a global conversation, in which every opinion may be potentially of an equal weight (an average citizen has access to the same communication channels as the head of state, e.g., Twitter), trans-national alt-right communities would not have the possibility to form on the same scale. Unlike the printing press, the networked computer has the capacity to turn each potential user into a messenger, while also speeding up the communication and re-instantiating the importance of image and sound as primary message carriers (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, live-streams, memes, etc.). 4chan and 8chan were originally established as imageboards, so each new post or discussion was supposed to be initiated with an image. Digital media, which rely primarily on visual and oral storytelling elements (Ong 1971), are putting an end to societies of letters initiated by the printing press, and with it, to a certain degree, to argumentation, the foundation of dialogue in democratic societies based on constitutional values, laws, commonly accepted scientific truths and secular social rules as opposed to beliefs, opinions, alternative truths and conspiracy theories.

⁴A reference to Jane McGonigal’s book titled *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (2010).

Media should not be frowned upon as mere tools of communication but taken seriously as co-agents in discursive practices with a performativity of their own. In other words, online platforms such as 4Chan and 8Chan are neither pure cause nor pure effect of alt-right communities but should rather be understood as agoras amplifying the spectacles of gamified terror. Networked media are digital matter that matters (Barad 2003, p. 26) as much as the printing press in its contribution to the fall of monarchies and the formation of nation states.

4 Gamified Extremism as a Liminal Space

We draw on the anthropological concept of liminality to sketch the complexity of gamified terrorism initiated and embedded in digital media. Originally conceptualized within the framework of rituals in non-modern societies by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep to understand ceremonies of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960), it was developed further by the Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner (1982). According to Turner, liminality demonstrates how community, or “communitas”, is built. Apart from ritual, play and games constitute an important part in Turner’s work on the liminal as they have the power to create the sense of belonging amongst members of a social group. We are arguing here that video game esthetics in combination with alt-right ideology propagated via online social platforms generate “liminal spaces”. In this specific framework, video games serve as community-building and mediatized rites of passage performed through ritualized modes of action. In the context of recent terror attacks, video games accompany the transition from a pre-ritual status of an anonymous alt-right user (“anon”) to an elevated (and usually existentially annihilated) status attained after a successful terrorist attack by generating the highest score (body count) possible. In other words, gamified acts of terror may be interpreted as “dark” (Ortner 2016) rituals performed by the members of the community, who, via the terror-driven rites of passage, change their status from “anons” to “heroes” recognized by their own community.

To illustrate the applicability of the concept of liminality to the framework of this discussion, a look at the etymology of the word “liminal” will prove insightful. The Latin word *limen* signifies a threshold, something that remains in between different spaces, dividing and connecting them at the same time. To undergo a rite of passage means to cross a threshold in a ritual sense, turning symbolic meaning into physical effect. To undergo a liminal state means to transition from one state to another, usually involving an elevation of status, for example from childhood

to adulthood. A classical case of a violent rite of passage is for example male circumcision in Judaism and Islam, turning the circumcised into a full member of the community (Derrida 1999). The symbolic and physical transition can be accompanied by a passage in space. It may be a literal crossing of a threshold separating two spaces, like in traditional European weddings when a husband carries his freshly wed wife over the threshold of their house. These spatial crossings and symbolical transitions from meaning to matter may also signify a passage from the virtual to the real space; from an online message board to a synagogue, a mosque, a street, or a supermarket.

As Turner emphasizes, “the ritual subjects ... undergo a ‘leveling’ process, in which signs of their pre-liminal status are destroyed and signs of their liminal non-status applied” (1982, p. 59). Those non-status signs may be signified by the absence of clothing, name or identity. In the virtual space of 8chan, the anonymous users refer to themselves as “anons”. It is only after a terrorist attack that the real name is revealed and becomes public. Liminality usually involves rituals that can be considered sacred spatiotemporal phenomena of community building. Games as fictitious and immersive spaces of play, suspended from reality, offer a ground for “communitas” (Hamayon 2016). The ludic dimension of gamified terrorism opens a ritualized space within the framework of which terrorists turn their bodies into political bodies occupying a public space, dominating it and restoring their control over it. Liminality may also involve subversive and ludic events, writes Turner (1982, p. 59). Within a liminal space, the existing structures are reversed or temporarily suspended. This change further strengthens the sense of “communitas”. The alt-righters employ the first-person shooter esthetics and other competitive elements of play as means of subverting the existing social status quo and introducing the so-called “anti-structure”, which in turn makes their community even more submerged in conspiracies. Expanding on that logic, we could say that an “anon” transforms into an anti “anti-hero, and through their act of “ending the game” they complete the imagery of social war. The terrorist wages war against every value that seems to have common consent in modern constitutions—equal rights, tolerance, freedom of religious and sexual choices, and no discrimination against women, People of Color and any other minority that does not fall into the category of the hegemonic dominant white male population. An anti “anti-hero” strengthens the realization of the community they pledge their allegiance to.

Liminality seems to be characteristic of stable, cyclical and repetitive systems—in short: of non-modern societies (Latour 1993). As Turner emphasizes, contemporary societies (contemporary with his, i.e., pre-digital times), do not create “pockets of liminality” but operate within liminoid spaces. They lack the

communal rhythms of non-modern societal structures and can therefore only create liminoid spaces. The major difference between the two lies in the concept of social obligation detached from a constitutional public. Whereas liminal situations in non-modern cultural aspects are obligatory (e.g., one has to go through communion as a child to become a full member of the Catholic community), liminoid situations do not require the same level of commitment. Theaters, carnival, modern film, or universities—in other words: institutions, traditions and media of modern and post-modern societies—are liminoid spaces with individual degrees of commitment. With the growing significance of networked media, we are witnessing the emergence of an era that is no longer defined solely by liminoid situations, but again liminal ones. Thus, the liminoid digital includes aspects of the liminal; aspects that create individualized visions of belonging as much as safe spaces of transitioning. Our contemporary digital societies then combine the liminal elements of non-modern societies with the liminoid ones characteristic of modern societies. Video games, similarly to rituals and myths, are usually perceived as an epiphenomenon of digital liminoidity. Gamification of terror complicates the modern-versus- non-modern distinction of liminality and liminoidity as it breaks the fictional and non-obligatory setting by turning from imagination to reality through the computer as the symbolic machine. In the world of existential being, the stakes are higher than the game itself. Gamified terrorism then may be described as a symptom of digital liminality: a liminal phenomenon within a liminoid framework of digital entertainment, which usually connotes a non-binding scenario. Within digital communication spaces or “digital matrices” (Hörl and Parisi 2013), however, the liminoid space thickens through emotionalized speech, especially communal hate speech or “excitable speech” (Butler 1997), creating frames of violence (Butler 2009) and pushing (psychologically vulnerable) members of society to perform pseudo rites of passage, turning words into action.

In contemporary secular Western societies that have effectively rid themselves of traditional obligatory rites de passage, spaces like 4Chan accompanied with gamified mobilization techniques may be read as signs of how an online world is changing societies, reminiscent of the outdated concept of tribalism. The alt-right communities may force us to revive the analytical category of the “tribe” as a form of community, but in a non-classical and beyond-modern sense. These digital tribes are creating pockets of “communitas” in a fragmented and globalized world. Platforms such as 4Chan and 8Chan attract “free-floating” members of a society that did not have the chance to develop a stable sense of “communitas” within secular constitutional frameworks. It is not video games that make

them change, but the digital liminal space of communication that creates pseudo-communitas and evokes a sense of belonging to a community of anti-society, with values, habitus, rituals and concepts much more appealing to those who might feel lonely amongst the physical presence of their immediate others. The liminal within gamified terror is a longing for and a performance of the non-modern social order.

Perhaps it is also not coincidental that entertainment (live-streaming and video game esthetics) is central in staging the acts of terror. Victor Turner emphasizes the word entertain, derived from Old French *entretenir* meaning to “hold apart” that is to create a liminal space in which performances may take place (Turner 1982, p. 41). In other words, gamification of terror is a complex liminal phenomenon, one that plays with the elements of the familiar (games) only to defamiliarize them (as acts of ludic terror). It is “entertainment” in the most literal and gruesome of meanings. And it is a symptom of the networked computer era.

5 Video Games and Violence Revisited

It is not the first time that the alt-right has nested itself within the videogame culture. In 2014 a misogynist personal bullying incident developed into a fully-fledged harassment campaign referred to as the Gamergate controversy (Chess and Shaw 2015). An unspecified and dispersed group of male online users targeted several women in the video game industry with the aim to defend their own core gamer identity, which was allegedly endangered by “raging” feminists and “social justice warriors”. Gamergaters gathered amongst others on such social networks like 4chan, which a few years later would become a hotspot of alt-right ideology and “head-count competitions”. This might have contributed to the popular image of video games as sources of social violence and gamers as white male supremacists.

Due to their interactive character and ever more refined realistic visual style, games (especially the first-person shooter genre) have been readily abused as examples of deviant media, directly responsible for crime. After increasingly more frequent mass shootings in the United States and a growing social plea to either restrict or ban access to guns, the old argument concerning violence allegedly caused by video games has vehemently reentered the public discourse. Politicians such as Donald Trump have dubbed videogames violent media and proclaimed their negative social impact (Draper 2019; Voytko 2019).

Such statements may seem hypocritical at best, taking into consideration the fact that the US Army has been officially employing the medium of videogames to create a positive image of the soldier's career and recruit new war talent. Games such as *America's Army* (United States Army 2002) or one of the first military-themed games *Tank* (Kee Games 1974) frame their mechanics through wartime violence (Symonds 2012) and yet do not seem to cause as much public concern as they should. Also the German Bundeswehr uses videogame esthetics as a recruitment tool. The armed forces of Germany attend the Gamescom, the world's largest video games trade fair, regularly as a host. Their posters adopt videogame esthetics and rhetoric by implementing such slogans as "Multiplayer at its best" or "Mehr Open World geht nicht" (trans. As open world as it gets), placed against a background of highly stylized military shots resembling blockbuster video game or film covers (Horizont 2018).

Digitalized societies are exposed to what Robertson Allen calls cultural militarization (2017), a process "shaped by the economy of war, immersed in the interactive spectacles of conflict, and distracted by a pervasive overload of information" (2017, p. 11). The logic of gamified violence lies at the heart of military structures (ranking, badges, status), which often use digital technology as a distant tool trivializing and gamifying death. American drone warfare has been linked to videogames, for instance within the context of the so-called civil militarization, which "articulates the colonizing of civilian sites, practices and technologies by the military" (Pugliese 2016, p. 2017).

Games and warfare co-exist in a mutual embrace, where the technology and esthetics of war and entertainment are constantly overlapping. Many games and toys of the past were also "deliberately designed for conflict oriented and violent play styles and themes. War toys are among the oldest examples of these" (Mäyrä 2015). Toy soldiers and miniature weapons were known already in antiquity (Golstein 1998). Strategic war games also have a long history preceding digital computers by centuries (von Hilgers 2012).

Despite a historical connection between war and games, no study has been able to point to direct behavioral change caused by playing videogames. To extend the argument even further, "...after fifty years and more than five thousand studies, no one has established a clear connection between media violence and violence in the general population" (Karlsen 2014). That is not to say that the abundance of violence esthetics in media, including videogames, is not a major problem in contemporary societies. To look for a simplified cause-and-effect chain between the two, however, is to miss the point.

6 Destruction by Connection

Games bring people together. Their communal aspect is encoded in the etymology of the word “game”. The Proto-Germanic prefix *ga-* means “together” and the stem *-mann* signifies “men” (stem *-mann*). The act of gamified terror distorts the social dimension of gaming for the purpose of disturbing a collective social order that is based on equal rights and tolerance, at the same time deriving its appeal from a strong sense of a transnational alt-right communal bond, standing in the long tradition of fascism, racism, misogyny, anti-Islamism, anti-Semitism, and evolutionism. The paradox here is that while an existing social order is diffracted, a trans-national extremist community is built.

Videogames play an infamous role in this complex scenario. Their immersive narrative structure, ritualistic repetitive mechanics, and their community-building potential contribute to the formation of a digital ecosystem, in which extremism is given a chance to flourish. As we tried to argue in this text, “imaginary communities” formed over the networked social platforms regain a sense of control, a feeling of belonging, even an imagined vision of completed missions, all enhanced by the idea of competition and the first-person shooter esthetics. All those aspects grant alt-right ideologies a fitting narrative to confirm and share their Darwinist survival of the fittest narrative.

Through competition (previously mentioned head-counting and bringing the terrorists into indirect competition with one another), dispersed alt-right users establish proximity. Comparison and competition add up to the sense of belonging and community in half-public spheres of the digital social platforms. Framing the acts of terror within videogames esthetics further dismantles acceptable social rules, which usually separate the world of make-believe from reality. In times of post-truth and fake news, however, fiction and facts are constantly superimposed, weaving a web of conspiracy theories rarely withstanding logical reasoning. Shared via unregulated and anonymous social media platforms, they quickly gain “truth” status, emerging from the misinterpretation of the idea of freedom of thought and speech. Videogames esthetics provide for a live-streamed entertainment distorting the presented reality within the framework usually reserved for fictitious scenarios.

It is not videogames or game logics per se then that lead to violence. It is their capacity to create bonding via ritual, repetition and competition that is abused and distorted by human actors. Neither videogames nor the operational infrastructure of digital media may be summoned before the court. It is the human actors that are to be held accountable. Gamification of terror shows how play and gaming culture can be instrumentalized within the least expected contexts.

Anonymous alt-right online users undergo mediatized rites of passage, some of which culminate in a liminal ritual enhanced by videogame esthetics. These bring the feeling of control over reality back and frame the acts of terror within a fictitious yet globally recognizable format. The terrorist acts alone but at the same time in the name of a collective, offering cultural sense and collective meaning to hypothetical claims of conspiratorial riotous assemblies formed, amongst other, on social platforms and in chat groups.

Each social platform user can be understood in a not so far-fetched analogy with the concept of agent-based computer simulations of elementary particles (DeRaedt et al. 2014; Dippel and Warnke forthcoming). The users have their personal spin, a historical momentum, their individual emotional charge, as well as social, cultural, economical and national “mass” or “capital”, as Pierre Bourdieu sees it. It is the platform as such that polarizes and radicalizes those freewheeling individuals. The operational logic of social media turns a diffracted set of individuals into a coherent group, providing those who in their daily lives feel left behind with a new sense of belonging online.

Perhaps gamified terror then embodies play at its most intoxicating, the opposite of fair, ethical and moral play; the kind of play which makes more sense in the context of war games and power games rather than videogames. The kind of play that paradoxically and ironically brings destruction by connection.

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