The Man with the Gun is a Boy who Plays Games: Video Games, White Innocence, and Mass Shootings in the U.S.

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, survivors, parents, police investigators, journalists, lawyers, and other members of the public looked for explanations for what seemed a senseless eruption of horror. In the narratives that emerged, the two murderers were alternately framed as monsters and as victims in their own right, innocents corrupted by the nefarious influence of high school bullying, latent homosexuality, or video games. In the twenty years since, mass shootings carried out by young, white men have become a grisly routine in the United States as has the invocation of video games as a possible motive. Media effects research shows at best a tenuous relationship between on-screen violence and real-life transgressions, and, more importantly, video games are only rarely invoked in discourse regarding other types of violence or in mass shootings in which the perpetrators are not white. I argue that the invocation of games in this national and historical context stems from a desire to exonerate or ignore a broader culture of white supremacy and misogyny—which can find expression and reflection but does not originate in games and gaming culture. In the U.S., mass shooters, overwhelmingly young white men, are seen as corrupted innocents, and this narrative demands a corrupting influence. Video games, erroneously seen as external to the broader popular culture landscape, have long been seen as an insidious influence on youth. Further, popular representations of gamers as white has helped fuel the misperception that game players are disproportionately young white men. Games, then, are misunderstood as a kind of white male cultural enclave both by moral guardians unfamiliar with video game culture and *by the type of video game insiders who see themselves as protecting the form from the encroachment of outsiders. This misunderstanding of how games function culturally, reinforced and propagated by disparate groups, serves as a basis from which video games are conceived as a niche medium. The thing unique about the shooters, this logic suggests, is* not *that they are white, or male, or engaged in white*

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supremacy or virulent misogyny, but that they play games. *Ultimately, I argue that the demonization of games serves to rehabilitate and preserve the innocence of white boys and young men in the U.S., even in the wake of horrific acts, and to obscure the role of white supremacy both in mass shootings and in popular culture including games.*

In 2012, *Mother Jones* magazine first published its open-source database and guide to mass shootings in the United States. Focusing on what the publication refers to as random spree killings, the guide suggests (and elsewhere, *Mother Jones* directly argues) that mass shootings have become an increasingly acute issue in U.S. society (Follman et al., 2021). Editors and writers at the magazine have repeatedly pointed out that most mass shooters purchased their guns legally and that a disproportionate number of these shootings—approximately 54%—are carried out by white men. Exact statistics regarding mass shootings are somewhat elusive, in part because there is no standard definition and so this 54% may be an inexact number. However, even critics of *Mother Jones*'s methods, like researcher Duwe (2019) who maintains that the database underreports mass shootings prior to 2013, agree with the basic premise that white men are more likely than others to carry out mass shootings, although he sets the percentage at 63%.

Exact numbers, however, are of less interest here than the accurate generalization that white men are, by and large, the perpetrators of mass shootings. Further, in this article I am specifically interested in the public discourse about white men who become mass shooters, how this discourse is overtly concerned with finding an external cause for these devastating acts of violence, and how video games are routinely held up as a possible corrupting influence—even in cases where the shooter's investment in violent ideologies has been made

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Author Biography

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quite explicit. My work here builds on my research in *Coin-Operated Americans*, considering in particular how the iconography of the gamer as young, promising, white man—a gender expression I termed technomasculinity—dovetails with racist assumptions about violence and criminality (Kocurek, 2015). It also works from the supposition that games are part of a broader political and cultural landscape; they are not a subculture, but are part and parcel of culture and are deeply imbricated with cultural ideologies (Dyer-Witherford & de Peuter, 2009; Wark, 2007). Those ideologies, in the U.S. context specifically, include economic, geographic, political, and racial conquest and superiority (Cronon, 1983; Limerick, 1987; Roediger, 1991). In this article, I argue that the mythical (in the Barthesian sense) figure of the gamer in play in the popular discourse around mass shooting events in the United States rests on white supremacy and in particular on the white supremacist myth of innocence.

In this article, I examine popular press coverage and discussion of four mass shootings: the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in Columbine, Colorado; the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut; the 2018 Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida; and the 2019 El Paso shooting in El Paso, Texas and show how video games are leveraged as a type of scapegoat to uphold white innocence. Ultimately, I argue that as games researchers we should focus less on defending video games against the largely baseless accusation that they cause violence and instead focus on pushing back against the way video games are being used rhetorically to uphold white supremacy. To do the former while ignoring the latter is to tacitly participate in the further mythologizing of white innocence when we should be helping to dismantle it.

This is not to argue that video games exist at some remove from racist ideologies. Media forms, including games, can be powerful vehicles for propagating and reinscribing hegemonic ideology (Kocurek, 2021; Russworm, 2018; Saber & Webber, 2016). The surrounding culture of video games has, also, become a recruiting ground for white supremacists who see disaffected teen gamers as fellow travelers and potential allies (Condis, 2021). However, while gaming as pastime is the obvious shared interest between open white supremacists and those seen as ripe for recruiting, the real, meaningful shared interest is in a violent political ideology. That video games don't cause mass shootings matters—not because we must protect the innocence of video games, but because we must dismantle the innocence of white terrorists. And, if video gaming culture is making a safe place for white supremacy to flourish, then we must dismantle that, too—but that is a problem much larger and distinct from the ill-defined genre of violent games. Assigning blame to violent games gives the games too much power and the surrounding culture too little.[1]

When Do We Care Whether Shooters Played Games?

Coverage of mass shootings varies largely based on the race of the shooter. Specifically, news reports are more likely to invoke video games as a contributing factor to a mass shooters' actions in cases where the shooter is white, and people are more willing to believe that video games may have credibly played a role in the crime when the perpetrator is white. Psychologists have demonstrated through both an experimental study and an analysis of news coverage of mass shooters that the discourse about video games and mass shootings is explicitly tied to the race of perpetrators (Markey et al., 2020). The paper, "He Does Not Look Like Video Games Made Him Do It: Racist Stereotypes and School Shootings," reports on a study that found "participants who read a mock news story about a school shooting were more likely to blame video games when the shooter was White than when the shooter was Black" (p. 1). The researchers also examined 204,796 news articles about mass shootings and found that in the case of school shootings, in particular, video games were 8.35 times more likely to be discussed when the perpetrator was White (p. 5). As they point out, racist stereotypes associate White people with victimhood rather than criminality and so it is possible this drives efforts to find a further reason for mass shooters' actions *only* or at least *particularly* when the shooter is white. There is little to no evidence that video games cause real-world violence, including mass shootings, but that lack of evidence does not prevent games from being invoked quite regularly (Ferguson, 2015; Ferguson et. al., 2020; Mathur & VanderWeele, 2019). Further, the invocation of video games has increasingly become a type of political cudgel to stave off meaningful consideration of shooters' often quite explicit motivations, which, again, are often mired in white supremacy. By blaming video games, politicians and cultural critics sidestep the often very real cultural issues at play, deliberately ignoring factors that contributed to the individual crime and thereby avoiding any messy reckoning with, for example, racist and xenophobic rhetoric in the shooters' personal history or cultural context—which may include but is never limited to video games.

Columbine, Colorado

Historically, mass shootings of course predate video games. However, the Columbine High School massacre seems a clear watershed. In 1999, two teenage boys in Columbine, Colorado, carried out a mass shooting in the halls of their high school. That shooting, horrific in every dimension, seems to have launched an era of school shootings. It also launched what has now become a decades-long practice of implicating video games in acts of violence by young white men.

While the pair did play games like *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and *Quake* (GT Interactive, 1996), at the time, they were hardly unusual in this—the games were among the decade's top-selling titles. Notably, id Software released the first episode of *Doom* as free shareware, inviting users to distribute it freely by internet, and some sources estimate that the game had been installed over ten million times by 1995 (Pinchbeck, 2013, p. 4). *Quake* also had a shareware edition, which was the sixth-best-selling computer game of 1996; physical copies sold via retail channels were the twentieth best-selling computer game that year, and it remained a top retailing game in 1997 (Bauman, 2000; "READ.ME; PC Data Best-Sellers," 1997; "The Best-Selling Games of 1997," 1998). In short, a lot of people played both games, and anyone with a particular interest in computer games in the late 1990s likely played both.

In context, the games are much less concerning than an obsession with murder and death that included the idolization of Hitler, recurring uses of Nazi imagery, and expressions of white supremacy. One of the boys maintained a website that included detailed documentation of how to build bombs and stressing shrapnel was important if you wanted to kill a lot of people. He had also posted threats to a classmate to the site and was obsessed with war—he'd even tried to enlist in the Marines unsuccessfully because he wanted to shoot people (Duggan et al., 1999). The pair had previously been arrested for breaking into a car and charged with a felony (Duggan et al., 1999). One classmate mentioned that one of the boys had a reputation for shoving girls to the ground or tackling them during gym class games of flag football; when she yelled at him to stop, he began pointedly harassing her (Duggan et al., 1999). Another peer recounted the same boy shouting "Heil Hitler" and saluting in a bowling alley (Duggan et al., 1999).

At least one report from the time mentions that while the boys played video games, they weren't active in the area's then substantial fan community and suggests, perhaps, they were more dabblers than dedicated players (Duggan et al., 1999). How seriously they played, however, is less important than the facts we do know: Both young men had a history of aggressive and violent behavior that had affected classmates and even led to an arrest and both expressed white supremacist ideology and iconography. Lots of people play violent video games without, themselves, engaging in violence, but that someone fixated on violence might like violent entertainment seems unsurprising.

But, articles mentioned the video games over and over. For example, a *Chicago Tribune* report quoted extensively from Columbine High School students to establish the shooters' gaming behavior. Marsh, a 16-year-old classmate, is quoted saying, "They did train on video games, like it was a real war." Others alleged "the boys began blending the game with reality by using paintball guns to practice shooting skills" (Janega & Deardorff, 2018). In a *Denver Post* report, several sources said one of the shooters had made maps of the high school in the game; however, the existence of these was not confirmed by investigators cited, and *Next Generation* editor Charla pointed out most modders tend to make levels based on familiar places like their homes, schools, or workplaces (Simpson & Blevins, 1999). Regardless, the unconfirmed game maps seem extraordinarily sinister. In this framing, video games become not just a cause of the mass shooting, but a tool for carrying it out.

The *New York Times* gave a florid description of *Doom* in an opinion piece titled "The Gaming of Violence" that seems to argue strongly for video games as the root psychological cause of the shootings before making an odd about-face in the final paragraph:

> On psychologically vulnerable children, it seems plain that such games must wreak a kind of havoc, reinforcing their isolation and fortifying their anger. Still, most children who play violent video games do not go on to murder their classmates. Nor, in a nation full of real guns, is banning virtual violence likely to put an end to school shootings. (The New York Times, 1999)

Those caveats, including the note about access to real guns, easily disappear under the weight of the piece, however, which ruminates on desensitization and lack of empathy in games for most of its word count. One article in the *Guardian*, published roughly a year later, summarized the pairs' gaming behavior to dramatic effect: "They were known to enjoy Doom, a video game licensed by the US military to train soldiers to kill. In a classroom project the pair made a videotape of their own version, in which they dressed in trenchcoats, carried guns and killed school athletes" (Radford, 2000). That video, while mentioned in reports, seems not to have caused significant alarm initially. Entertainment media in general and video games specifically remained central to discourse: A 1999 Gallup poll reported that 62 percent of adults surveyed rated violent entertainment as the major catalyst for the shooting (Bella, 2019).

The lengthy search for an explanation seems to suggest that the boys were, themselves, innocents, corrupted by some force beyond their control. Van Sant's (2003) fictionalized telling of the story in *Elephant* which moves the location to a fictional suburb of Portland, includes several possible explanations for the spree—neglect, Nazism, bullying, and, of course, video games. But, in reality, the violent games the shooters both played were only one part of a much broader and well established obsession with violence, death, and guns and an explicit interest in white supremacy. In the popular imagination, the story becomes one in which something happened to turn two otherwise innocent white boys into killers, not one in which two dangerous young men found outlets for their violent impulses in both fantasy and reality.

Newtown, Connecticut

The 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School rekindled vigorous debate about gun control in the United States, and it also resurrected discussion about the role of video games in such incidents. Several reports produced about the incident discussed the shooter's history of playing games, but missing from much of the popular press coverage is critical context—the shooter played violent games, but he also played other games, most notably, *Dance Dance Revolution*, which, for at least a year, he played for hours a week. He also consumed an array of violent and disturbing media with games being only one example. The role of video games in the shooting emerged first in sensationalized news coverage, then in more mainstream press well before official reports were initially released; while the reports showed a more complex picture of the shooter's gaming and media habits and did *not* blame video games, by the time of their release, video games had been widely reported as a leading cause, based in part on a tabloid article sourced from a local plumber.

Notably, CBS ran a report that relied heavily on anonymous sources and was titled, "Newtown shooter motivated by Norway massacre, sources say." However, the article's lede is not about violent obsessions or mass murder, but video games: "Law enforcement sources say [redacted] was motivated by violent video games and a strong desire to kill more people than another famous mass murderer" (Orr & Milton, 2013). The article goes on, "Evidence shows that his mind, sources say, [redacted] was also likely acting out the fantasies of a video game as he killed 20 first graders and six adults at the school. For [redacted[the deaths apparently counted as some kind of 'score.'" The article continues in this vein, mentioning the shooter's interest in video games but rendering this mundane activity salacious: "They've recovered what they called a 'trove' of video games from the basement of [redacted]'s home. Sources say [redacted] spent countless hours there alone, in a private gaming room with the windows blacked out, honing his computer shooting skills." The article does not name its sources, and Lt. J. Paul Vance of the Connecticut State Police in fact rebutted it, saying that the investigation was not complete and any ideas about the shooter's motive were only speculation. However, the article remained up and was quoted and disseminated widely.

The Hollywood Reporter (2013) ran a story with a headline blaming games: "Sandy Hook Shooter Motivated by Violent Video Games, Norway Massacre: [Redacted] Set Out to Beat Another Killer's 'Score' of 77 Murders, Law Enforcement Sources Tell CBS News." Other outlets ran with the story. In this context, the details of the reports from state agencies serve to support an existing interpretation that was not supported by the reports or the evidence. An article in *The Guardian* headlined "Sandy Hook report—shooter [Redacted] was obsessed with mass murder," notes that the shooter's motives remain unclear, but that "One aspect of the report that is likely to be pored over by both sides of the gun control debate is the evidence of [redacted]'s computer game obsessions that was discovered in his bedroom in the basement of his Newtown home" (Pilkington, 2017). The article goes on to summarize the video games listed in the state attorney's report. Tabloids like *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* explicitly blamed video games, and news outlets like *The Telegraph* and *Business Insider* and local news stations repeated their reporting and claims (Hartley-Parkinson, 2013; Henderson, 2012; "Report: Newtown Gunman [redacted] Spent Days In Basement Playing Call Of Duty," 2012'; Yin-Poole, 2012). The main source for these articles was a plumber who had done work on the family home.

The first of two official reports I consider here, produced by the Connecticut Office of the Child Advocate (2014), offer a fairly detailed picture: As a young child, he enjoyed playing Pokémon games and would make up his own games, particularly strategy games involving maps; in high school, he participated in a school Technology Club and would host Local Area Network (LAN) parties at his house that were attended by classmates. Club members noted that he helped with broadcasts of games on a local channel. He was known for enjoying computer games, particularly "Fantasy Start" and "Pokemon 6."[2] After dropping out of high school, he played online games including *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). When the house was searched by authorities, they found gaming consoles and a number of games including *Dynasty Tactics* (Koei Tecmo Games, 2002), *Kingdom Hearts* (Square Enix, 2002), *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Electronic Arts, 2002), *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One* (Gray Matter Interactive, 2005), *Call of Duty: Finest Hour* (Activision, 2004), *Dead or Alive 3* (Team Ninja, 2001), *Halo: Reach* (Bungie, 2010), *Lego Star Wars* (Traveller's Tales, 2005), *MechAs-*

sault (Day 1 Studios, 2002), *Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction* (Pandemic Studios, 2005); the report notes he played *Combat Arms* (LithTech, 2008) and “another, multiplayer first person shooter game” which is not named.[3]

A second report from the state’s attorney also includes a list of games. The relevant section of the report reads:

“Numerous video games were located in the basement computer/gaming area. The list of video games includes, but is not limited to:

- ‘Left for Dead’
- ‘Metal Gear Solid’
- ‘Dead Rising’
- ‘Half Life’
- ‘Battlefield’
- ‘Call of Duty’
- ‘Grand Theft Auto’
- ‘Shin Megami Tensei’
- ‘Dynasty Warriors’
- ‘Vice City’
- ‘Team Fortress’
- ‘Doom’” (Office of the State’s Attorney Judicial District of Danbury & Sedensky, 2013, p. 25)

The report notes that the shooter regularly spent between 4 and 10 hours playing *Dance Dance Revolution* at a local movie theatre on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday each week (Office of the State’s Attorney Judicial District of Danbury & Sedensky, 2013, p. 32). Other game-related findings listed as electronic evidence include: “The computer game titled ‘School Shooting’ where the player controls a character who enters a school and shoots at students,” “Screen shots (172) of the online game ‘Combat Arms’”, “ ‘Dance Dance Revolution’ (DDR) game screen shots”, “Videos of the shooter playing DDR” (Office of the State’s Attorney Judicial District of Danbury & Sedensky, 2013, pp. 26–27).

This list of games is more banal than interesting—most of the titles listed are major releases that would have been readily available and widely played. While, of course, many of the games listed are violent, others like *Kingdom Hearts* and *Lego Star Wars* were games marketed to a broad audience, including youth and, in the case of *Lego Star Wars* in particular, families and children. Further, the list of games is not complete, which the report makes explicit, and some details are confusing. There is no game named *Fantasy Start*, which likely references the game *Phantasy Star*; the game *School Shooting* went unidentified at the time and still remains ambiguous. State's attorney Stephen Sedensky insisted at the time the game was *not* the infamous *Half-Life 2* mod *School Shooter: North American Tour 2012*, and journalists noted the game was unlikely to have been a commercial release (Good, 2013). No complete list of the shooter's media collection would have been possible, since he had smashed a hard drive, rendering that data irretrievable (Pazniokas, 2014).

Importantly, neither report suggests video games were a cause of the shooter's actions, and in both, the video games are listed alongside a host of other violent media and artifacts, ranging from videos depicting suicide to newspaper clippings about school shootings and child murders. However, as the story spread in the press, as the reports were quoted and requoted and summarized, video games remained part of the narrative even in the presence of much evidence suggesting they were only part of the shooter's media and cultural landscape and that his most-played game was not about violence, but dancing. President Obama authorized a $10 million expenditure to further research into the connections between video games and real-world violence (LeJacq, 2013).

The Sandy Hook shooting was unusually horrific both because of the number of deaths and because of the number of victims who were young children. It also happened in a different media and political environment; reporters and the general public had extremely easy access to official reports, for example, and online reporting had become much more normal than it was in 1999. Salacious detail was readily available and widely distributed. The first wave of reporting blamed games on partial and spurious evidence, and then, even when ore detailed, official sources were readily available, their lists of games, often lacking key context from the reports, circulated and recirculated for months. Video games became a key part of that story in part because reporters, politicians, and cultural commenters were all desperate for a palatable and plausible explanation for the shooter's actions. Further, that effort to explain the events and blame an external source is, again, only undertaken because of the shooter's identity; in this case, he *did* look like video games made him do it.

Parkland, Florida

The mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida remains the deadliest high school shooting in U.S. history. As with the 2012 incident in Connecticut, public discussion of the 2018 events reflected the political and media landscape. In particular, the story becomes convoluted in part because members of white nationalist and fascist groups engaged in an active disinformation campaign claiming the shooter had ties to the Republic of Florida, a white supremacist group (Musgrave, 2018). Said ties were reported widely before being debunked by an investigative report. However, at the same time that the organizational connection was debunked, a group chat in which the shooter expressed racist, xenophobic, homophobic, misogynistic, and antisemitic views was verified (Murphy, 2018). Whether or not the shooter was a member of any formal group, he held and espoused white supremacist beliefs. Ammunition magazines recovered as evidence were marked with swastikas (CBS News, 2018). The shooter had a well-established interest in guns, and deputies had been called to his home dozens of times; he had been removed from the high school due to behavioral issues (CBS News, 2018).

Unlike in the Sandy Hook incident, individual games are not greatly detailed in reportage. The shooter played "violent games" with *Call of Duty* (full title unspecified) being the only named title. Playing *Call of Duty* is not necessarily exceptional: *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* was the best selling title of 2015 with *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* ranking as the tenth best selling title of the year (Grubb, 2016); in 2016, *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* took the top sales ranking for 2016 with *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* taking eighth (Minotti, 2017); *Call of Duty WWII* took the top sales position for 2017 (Grubb, 2018); and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4* was the second highest selling game for 2018 (Grubb, 2019). Huge numbers of people play one or more games in the series, which has an exceptionally devoted fanbase. The game series reflects increased attention to military themes across popular media and is part of a renewed visibility of military culture across entertainment platforms (Hemovich, 2017, p. 6).

The role of video games in the Parkland incident received a significant amount of attention, due in part to claims by then-President Trump that video games were a major cause of mass shootings. Trump continued to forward these claims even as his administration's Federal Commission on School Safety (2018) released a report largely absolving video games of blame (Whalen, 2018). In its executive summary, the report says only:

> Violent entertainment and rating systems: The role of the family is central to controlling violent entertainment. State and local educational agencies should collaborate with parents to strengthen internet safety measures to curb access to inappropriate content. In addition, the entertainment industry should ensure its rating systems provide parents with the full complement of information needed to make informed decisions about entertainment for their children (DeVos et al., 2018, pp. 13–14).

The report makes clear that video games are only one part of a larger landscape of violent media: "It is estimated that depictions of violence are present in 90 percent of movies, 68 percent of video games, 60 percent of television shows, and 15 percent of music videos" (p. 63). Ultimately, the report recommends state and local educational agencies and school and district leaders take measures to ensure internet safety. The report is largely positive about industry-led rating efforts like those by the ESRB, MPAA, etc. and suggests, only, that "all of them should review and improve policies to ensure access to content is limited to age-appropriate consumers" (p. 65). However, given free speech protections, it is unclear what those limitations could realistically be.

Despite the report's relatively measured commentary on violent media, coverage in some news outlets furthered or supported Trump's claims about the impact of violent video games by providing details about the shooter's gaming habits. One article, "Violent video games may have primed the Parkland school shooter," mentions the shooter's interest in *Call of Duty* and games his teachers considered inappropriate, and which he played up to 15 hours a day; while the article details little about the specific games he played, it does mention frequent violent outbursts that centered on gaming and the use of gaming in behavioral contracts intended to help with anger management (O'Matz, 2019). Those contracts, and in particular the use of video games for anger management, became the subject of a lawsuit (CBS Miami, 2019). At least one school held a "violent video game toss" inviting students to toss their violent games into a bin and inviting their parents to sign a pledge form "that they will promise not to allow their kids to play violent video games, will eat at least one meal a day together with their children and limit the use of cellphones" (Cohen, 2018). Despite the general exoneration of video games as a causal factor in the tragic events, video games remained a clear part of public discourse and remained tied to the crimes in public imagination, their contents shrouded in mystique for many nonplayers and easily bent to fit a narrative in which the smoking gun revealing what made a young white man plot and execute a horrific crime is not the literal smoking gun but instead, a game the killer played.

El Paso, Texas

The 2019 mass shooting at a Wal-Mart in El Paso, Texas further reinvigorated discussion of gun control. The shooter, who was 21 at the time, posted a manifesto espousing his white nationalist and anti-immigrant beliefs and deliberately targeted Latino people; the massacre was treated as domestic terrorism, and the shooter was ultimately indicted on hate crimes among other charges by a federal grand jury (Andone et. al., 2019; Kennedy, 2020). As in the three cases previously discussed, the shooter had spoken openly about his violent fantasies, his interest in guns, and his bigotry, including in particular his belief in "the Great Replacement," a racist conspiracy theory whose adherents believe white people are being deliberately replaced by ethnic and racial minority populations.

Despite the shooter's explicit statement about his motivations, then-U.S. President Trump and other leading Republican political figures again pointed to video games as a cause for the horrific events. House Minority Leader McCarthy offered comments blaming video games during a television interview, saying in part, "To have a game of shooting individuals and others, I've always felt that is a problem for future generations and others" (qtd. in Coaston, 2019). Texas Lieutenant Governor Patrick made similar comments: "We've always had guns. We've always had evil. But what's changed where we see this rash of shooting? I see a video game industry that teaches young people to kill" (qtd. in Bella, 2019).

While in the three previous cases the shooters' gaming was well documented, in this case, the shooter's interest in games is less well documented. His manifesto briefly mentioned *Call of Duty* (Snider, 2019), a fact that McCarthy, Patrick, and Trump leveraged, but again, the Call of Duty franchise is hugely popular, and one passing mention in a manifesto that went into great detail to explain the shooter's ardent belief in a white supremacist conspiracy theory, his anger at interracial couples, and his hatred of Latinos seems to bear a low relative significance. The shooting came in the midst of a rising tide of white supremacist rhetoric in the United States and globally. In the U.S., in particular, racist rhetoric had played a key role in Trump's campaign for the presidency; most notably, Trump had referred to Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists (McHendry, 2018; Reilly, 2016). The shooter's violent fantasies drew directly from that rhetoric, but rather than reap what had clearly been sown—both by fiery political rhetoric of the preceding few years and by a much longer history of xenophobia and white supremacy in the U.S.—leaders heaved up a passing reference to a video game like a shield to deflect attention from the shooter's investment in white supremacy and how its expression in the manifesto echoed campaign speeches from the preceding years. This maneuvering, doubtless, has contributed to just how partisan this discourse has become. As Bogost (2019) suggests, "Games have shifted from a broad cultural enememy—a gory medium that all types of people might hold responsible for social disgrace—to a political tool."

White Innocents at Play

In all of these cases, any close examination of circumstances demonstrates that video games are just one part of the shooter's interests. However, in cases where the shooters are white men, and especially in situations in which there is a political desire to assign blame for the crime, video games become a critical part of the story. Campbell, in an article in the games journalism outlet *Polygon* notes that only four school shootings as of 2018 were carried out by perpetrators who were definitively gamers; and, he notes that the Sandy Hook assailant's favorite game, *Dance Dance Revolution*, isn't exactly violent (Campbell, 2018). In at least one case, a shooter was widely reported to be a gamer before the claim was debunked by his roommate—an unverified detail repeated so often it became part of the story. Video games do not cause mass shootings, but they are part of the story of mass shootings, largely because of how often they are invoked. However, we shouldn't be surprised that some mass shooters play video games—most people in the U.S. play video games, and playing video games is unexceptional. What is worth noting, as the study of mass shooting reportage mentioned previously confirmed, is how this need to find answers is apparent primarily in cases where the shooters are white men.

Baldwin (1963) introduced the concept of white innocence in his book *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin summarizes and condemns how an assumed innocence allows white people to engage in and benefit from white supremacy while claiming ignorance of the harm they cause. Rodriguez (2008) explicates that white innocence is a type of racist fantasy that prevents white people from accepting or facing accountability for racism. This innocence extends beyond discussions of racial inequality, shaping how we understand white people's actions and reactions broadly. It feeds into cultural understanding of violence carried out by white people—in the cases I am discussing, specifically white men. While some white male mass shooters are explicitly and directly engaged in white supremacist ideologies, not all are. The innocence applied to these shooters is not innocence in the legal sense—all are guilty, and those that lived confessed their crimes—but in a rhetorical and interpretive sense. These shooters are understood to be innocent, as if their heinous crimes exist separately from them, and the narratives are constructed such as to assume something external to the perpetrators must bear the real culpability for the crime. In looking for some specific cause, something containable, like video games, is ideal, since it offers a problem that can be addressed; more diffuse problems—like an increase in political extremism—or more politically loaded ones—like ready access to weaponry—are messier and less useful for pundits.

Cacho (2014), writing about two self-defense trials in the Florida criminal justice system, argues that white innocence within the court system confers on white people the status of permanent victim—a status surely at play in the cases of many mass shooters, whose life stories are recounted in narratives that often shimmer with empathy. People of color are denied victim status, and this unequal assignment of victimhood is often paired with a demand for violence against the Black or brown body. There is a reason white people suspected of crimes—including mass murder—are less likely to be harmed by police (Nix et al., 2017). In *American Settler Colonialism: A History*, Hixson (2013) defines the righteous violence that has long justified violence done in the name of the settler state or by settlers themselves. These white people are able to engage in horrific violence while continuing to see and understand themselves as morally righteous. I am not arguing that the average mass shooter is enacting righteous violence; but I do want to suggest that the knee-jerk need to see young white men who have engaged in unconscionable crimes as corrupted innocents is deeply entangled with ideologies of race, gender, and nation. If we defend video games against blame in these cases without identifying and dismantling the white supremacist impulse to find a cause in the first place, we are adding legitimacy to the underlying racist logic. We are also ignoring the way gaming communities can propagate political extremism (Beauchamp, 2019).

Further, popular perceptions of gamers can absolutely contribute to white supremacy and, historically, they have. While at a factual level almost anyone could be a gamer – the majority of U.S. Americans across age ranges play video games—at the level of myth the gamer occupies a specific position marked by both positive and negative stereotypes. At its most positive, the gamer looks a bit like Lightman in *WarGames* or Flynn in the original *Tron*. These characters are technologically adept, brilliant, young or at least boyish, and have a willingness to bend or break rules. They are also, generally, portrayed as white and middle class, and they are strongly associated with video games. In *Coin-Operated Americans* (Kocurek, 2015), I define this enactment of masculinity as the technomasculine, since gender and technology are inseparable in these characters. Negative stereotypes of gamers—that they're lazy, antisocial, disengaged, etc.—abound as well. But, the mostly positive myth of the gamer is already problematic on its own. By treating these technologists as boys and emphasizing their youth even as they pass well into adulthood, we make these men both less accountable and more impressive than they otherwise would be. This duality tells a self-reinforcing story of white exceptionalism—these young white men are exceptionally gifted, brilliant, geniuses even, but they're also innocent, their crimes (surely it is fair to call breaking into a corporate headquarters or accidentally almost causing nuclear annihilation while illegally accessing classified information crimes) forgivable, mere accidents. This is invoked in coverage of technologists like Bezos, Musk, Gates, and Jobs who are better understood as captains of industry than hapless boys; but somehow, they get to be both.

Framing gamers as boyish, an aspect of gamer culture that Burrill (2008) covers extensively in *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture,* makes them seem vulnerable and childlike. When mass shootings happen and whether or not video games were part of the shooter's list of hobbies and interests becomes a hot question, we are enacting something similar. Sometimes this is furthered or doubled by the use of the shooter's childhood photos, images of his grieving parents, childhood bedroom, or high school yearbook. One article about the Sandy Hook shooter's gaming habits includes a yearbook photo of him (Report: Newtown Gunman Redacted Spent Days In Basement Playing Call Of Duty, 2012), another shows his school photo identification card amongst the detritus of a desktop (Pilkington, 2017). Coverage of the Parkland shooting frequently included the shooter's JROTC photo (Murphy, 2018; Stewart, 2018). And, while coverage of the Columbine shooting was less web focused, photos of the shooters, mostly taken from the high school's yearbook, were frequently used in print and television stories and continue to circulate widely (Duggan et. al., 1999; Sawyer, 2016). These types of images appear even when the shooters are well into early adulthood or had dropped out of school previously. They become in the aftermath of horrific acts: child-like, innocent, in need of protection. Whether or not mass shooters play video games is no more or less important than whether or not they watch movies or television or spend time reading comic books—the specifics of those consumption patterns may seem revealing, but finding out a mass murderer really loved a particular piece of media—whether that's *Taxi Driver, Grand Theft Auto IV,* or *The Catcher in the* Rye—is less important than the fact that he spent dozens of hours learning how to build pipe bombs or posting on internet forums dedicated to raging about the audacity of the women who declined his advances. When journalists, police officers, school officials, or others report on or offer commentary on mass shootings and point to video games as a potential culprit, they are often engaging in a white supremacist framing of young white men as innocents corrupted by outside forces.

Video games make a convenient corrupting force. There are, after all, violent video games; and people—including most young men—do play them. And, so, inevitably when some young men become agents of devastation, in the rush to explain what exceptional thing could have led to these otherwise innocent white men engaging in such horrors, video games are easy enough to point to. Like all cultural forms, video games are implicated in and perpetuate real power imbalances—as made clear for example, by the military's long-standing interest in games as training and recruiting tool, and the industry's entrenched and indefensibly inequitable work culture (Leser & Sterrett, 2010; Nichols, 2010; Nieborg, 2010; Prescott & Bogg, 2011; Zwiesen, 2021). However, in the case of mass shootings casting video games as the root problem is an easy and politically expedient explanation that cannot bear scrutiny. Violent games are part of a broader political and cultural imaginary marked by imperialism, white supremacy, and military might (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, 2009; Payne, 2016).

Assigning blame for horrific acts of violence committed by white men to violent video games severs games from their broader cultural contexts and even from the contexts in which they're encountered and played. Further, doing so presumes innocence: something had to have happened to make the shooter that way. Perhaps, but that something is statistically much more likely to be rage and entitlement, exposure to radical political ideologies including white supremacy, and the access to guns and the knowledge of how to use them. Games, even at their most realistic, are not how-to manuals. And white men who engage in mass murder are far from innocent.

Ideologically, white innocence perpetuates racism at both the individual and institutional level since it vacates white responsibility both for racism itself *and* for repairing racism. The implications of white innocence are profound and entrenched; white innocence can, for example, explain both why white parents are less likely to talk to their children about racism or even race as concept and why white people are less policed, less prosecuted, and less convicted. White innocence, and white supremacy, without which white innocence is inconceivable, also undergird much of the public discourse about mass shootings. White men who become mass shooters are frequently discussed and understood in a way that assumes their violence is not inherent or intrinsic. Rather, violence is attributed to corrupting external forces that are often explicitly or implicitly apolitical; so, for example, rather than understanding a shooting spree targeting young women as the act of a white man who felt entitled to female attention and adoration on the basis of his very existence, popular narratives will seek complicating factors that seem poised to invoke sympathy—childhood trauma, medical diagnoses, social difficulties—or to villainize some external factor, such as video game content. By externalizing the cause of white violence from perpetrators, these narratives both assume and reinforce white innocence, abdicating mass shooters for responsibility, and scapegoating a single entertainment form without meaningfully interrogating the broader culture that has produced it.

Endnotes

1. Let me note that I will not be naming the perpetrators of these shootings. Researchers including Lankford and Madfis (2017) have pointed out that many mass shooters desire fame and compete with one another to cause the greatest harm. The researchers argue that refusing to name shooters denies them notoriety and may help deter future perpetrators. They recommend against naming or showing photographs of the shooters and a growing number of journalists and news organizations have implemented policies that reflect these recommendations (Beckett, 2018). My decision not to name shooters is based on these best practices.

2. There does not appear to be a game released by either of these names. “Fantasy Start” likely refers to *Phantasy Star*, and “Pokemon 6” could refer to any of the Pokemon video games.

3. The report does not specify exactly which Halo title, but based on date, this is the title the shooter is most likely to have been playing. Additionally, the report does not give the full title of the Mercenaries game and could be referring to the sequel, *Mercenaries 2: World in Flames* (Pandemic Studios, 2008). Ultimately, the exact names of the games are not of great consequence to the argument, but I wanted to note the thought process by which titles were identified.

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