

The 'First Person Shooter' Perspective: A Different View on First Person Shooters, Gamification, and First Person Terrorist Propaganda

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gac**Sam Andrews**¹ 

Abstract

During the 2019 Christchurch attack, the perpetrator livestreamed footage from a helmet-mounted camera. The aesthetic similarity of the attack footage to first-person shooter (FPS) videogames has led to speculation that this might have somehow 'gamified' the attack. Generally, the argument for this is that the attack footage (1) imitates or resembles FPS games, gamifying attacks (2) increasing the affective appeal of propaganda by presenting it as play and thereby (3) increasing the salience of these attacks within gaming communities. This article challenges these notions. It argues that the FPS genre should not be associated with such footage due to visual similarity and is better considered in relation to film. The idea that such footage was purposefully shot to look like an FPS is unsupported, and more likely the result of practical considerations. While the framework of gamification might be useful, it should rest on interactivity, rather than aesthetic similarity.

Keywords

terrorism, extremism, first-person shooter, propaganda, gamification

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Introduction

The first-person shooter (FPS) is a major genre in video gaming. It is also one that has attracted controversy. Becoming popular with the release of *Wolfenstein 3-D* in 1992 and *DOOM* in 1993, the genre gained quick popularity due to its fast-paced and visually intense style. It also gained notoriety – after the 1999 Columbine shooting, then-President Clinton ‘highlighted the ultraviolent video games Harris and Klebold played as one of several possible societal causes for the Columbine shooting’ (Janega, 1999). The families of victims also attempted to sue the makers of *DOOM*, which the perpetrators played, claiming that the game contributed to the killings. While studies since have failed to show a link between real-world violence and violent video games (Ferguson, 2009) the FPS genre has nonetheless stuck in our social memory as a ‘problematic’ genre (Ferguson and Markey, 2017).

The latest manifestation of this is found in our interpretations of first-person footage of terrorist attacks. This footage, either livestreamed during an attack or uploaded to the internet later, is usually taken using a helmet-mounted camera (helmetcam) and gives the viewer a first-person view from the attacker’s perspective. This was most notably used by the Christchurch attacker in 2019, as well as by the Halle and Buffalo attackers in 2022. Other examples are taken from battlefield footage shot and compiled by ISIS. Studies of this first-person propaganda usually note a similarity to FPS games, and many consider this similarity to be significant:

[Kupper et al. \(2022\)](#): ‘Live-streams in particular make attacks more accessible, as they are portrayed in the first-person shooter perspective and blur the lines between play and reality.’ (p. 10)

[Macklin \(2019\)](#): the Christchurch attacker filmed ‘the atrocity using a GoPro camera ... [giving] the footage the quality of a first-person “shoot ‘em up”’. “Terrorism as theater” became terrorism as video game.’ (p. 19)

[Lakomy \(2017\)](#): ‘[an] innovative feature introduced by Daesh concerns a series of “photo reportages” depicting assassinations of its enemies in Yemen, shown in the first person perspective (FPP), which brings to mind the popular FPP video games genre’. (p. 45)

[Lakhani \(2021\)](#): ‘Since the Christchurch attacks in 2019, in which the perpetrator streamed his assault on Facebook Live, mirroring “Let’s Play” videos which are popular within gaming communities, there has been much anxiety about the strategic use of this tactic, something that was realised in a similar type of attack conducted by Stephan Balliet in Halle in 2019, which was livestreamed on Twitch’. (p. 8)

[Schlegel \(2021\)](#): ‘It does not get more “front row” than watching a livestream of an attack mirroring the style of first-person shooter games and commenting on the perpetrator’s

actions in real time, much like a livestreamed Let's Play video. Livestreams, therefore, gamify both the attacker's and the viewers' experience of the event'. (p. 6)

[Evans \(2019\)](#): 'Brenton Tarrant livestreamed his massacre from a helmet cam in a way that made the shooting look almost exactly like a First Person Shooter video game. This was a conscious choice, as was his decision to pick a sound-track for the spree that would entertain and inspire his viewers'.

Alongside noting the aesthetic similarities between first-person terrorist propaganda and first-person shooters, it is also becoming popular to link first-person footage with *gamification*. Generally, this is understood as introducing gaming elements to a non-gaming environment. Frameworks for understanding gamification are varied, and range from the need to rulesets game-like frameworks to encourage people to 'play' with media, to broad inclusions of anything that might be drawn from games, such as visual or auidial similarities. As gamification is new to the study of violent extremism and terrorism, there has yet to be an agreed definition and framework. [Schlegel's \(2020\)](#) outline of gamification provides a good overview of the theory and notes how gamification can be 'top-down', purposefully included by the producer of content, or 'bottom-up', created by the audience.

Many of the connections made between extremism and gamification are recent, coming off the backs of attacks like Christchurch and linked to other digital manifestations of extremism and terrorism. [Lakhani and Wiedlitzka \(2022\)](#), looking at the manifesto and online footprint of the Christchurch shooter, argue that not only did the shooter 'purposefully or otherwise, [include] a number of gamified elements within his assault' (p. 2) but that also he chose to livestream 'the attack in the format of an FPS—a common videogame style used within some of the biggest games and gaming franchises, including Call of Duty, Halo, and Doom' (p. 2). They outline that:

Mounting his GoPro to his helmet gave the attack the feel ... of a FPS, a popular gaming style where the player sees the game, or mission, from the view of the character or avatar, as used in globally popular and widely-recognisable game franchises like Call of Duty, Halo, or Doom. The use of multiple weapons was also reminiscent of a video-game, with Call of Duty once again holding distinct similarities. At 1:40 P.M. local time, the assailant approached his first target, the Masjid al-Nur (or Al Noor Mosque). First using his shotgun to kill four worshippers at the entrance, he continued its use inside. Once ammunition had run out, he abandoned it and used a semi-automatic rifle he had with him. When he returned to his car after the first wave of his attack, he dropped his semi-automatic rifle and picked up another. He also momentarily picked up one of his incendiary devices but decided for some reason to leave it in the car. In video-games, like Halo for example, the main character often carries guns as well as alternative (sometimes incendiary) devices, including frags, grenades, and others. Music was also featured within the assault, which was heard throughout most of the attack as it was played on his

car radio and also on the speaker attached to his tactical vest. Although the music was thought to be curated and featured songs linked to wider far-right extremist narratives, including 'Remove Kebab' (also known as 'Serbia Strong'), what is important in this analysis is considering the parallels between using music for the attack and the use of music to add effect within many FPS games. (Lakhani and Wiedlitzka, 2022, p. 8)

The article is notable in that it details what is considered to be a purposeful attempt to ape FPS aesthetics and links it with a wider gamification of the attack, arguing the visual similarity with an FPS is a gaming element being introduced to a non-gaming environment. This argument rests on both the visual similarity of the attack footage to FPS games and that the streaming of this attack online made it similar to a 'Let's Play' video, where the audience watches and comments on a player streaming themselves playing a videogame. They also argue that there were a number of similarities to video gaming found in the planning and execution of the attack, including a building of a narrative, a ruleset, and including language similar to what is found in videogame cultural spaces.

The overall theme of many such arguments is that livestreamed attacks from the first-person perspective and first-person propaganda in general, (1) imitate or resemble FPS games and thus gamify the attacks which (2) increases the affective appeal of propaganda by presenting it as play or theatre and thereby (3) increases the salience of these attacks within gaming communities.

However, these arguments are problematic. In the first instance, there is little evidence available that demonstrates that the first-person perspective is chosen by attackers to mimic first-person shooters. Thus, the initial assumption that this perspective is purposefully chosen *specifically* to mimic video games needs investigation, as it appears to rest on a simplistic assessment of aesthetic similarity between the two media, rather than on evidence. More importantly, the linking of FPS aesthetics and first-person propaganda draws on and strengthens, wider assumptions about extremism in the video gaming community. Again, these assumptions lack proper evidence. Without further elaboration, this could lead to unwarranted interventions, both political and policing in nature, within the video gaming community. The [European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator \(2020\)](#) has already argued that

Many popular video games involve violence and war, which appeals to players who could be attracted to violent extremist messages. The predominant player-base of violent video games is young men, who may be socially isolated or disenfranchised, and drawn to violence for those reasons ... Accordingly, the psychological profiles of these gamers can make them prone to radicalisation ... For socially-isolated gamers, gaming echo chambers are social media echo chambers on steroids. (pp. 5–6)

This claim however rests on a fledgling literature which has not settled the question as to the vulnerability to extremism within gaming communities ([Andrews and Skoczylis, 2021](#)). Thus, it is imperative that the arguments presented are given more scrutiny, lest

we act in haste, stigmatize and damage trust between institutions and gaming communities.

Finally, the argument that such propaganda is gamified by virtue of it being broadcast in an FPS style requires more development. Many of these arguments begin with the assumption that the broadcast is purposefully made to ape the FPS genre. This article rejects that assumption, and on that basis, we should assess whether calling this into question requires a change in how we understand gamification. While the wider elements of the Christchurch attack, and other attacks, could constitute gamification, this article focuses solely on the aesthetic similarity to the FPS genre.

Thus, this article looks to provide a critical appraisal, and rejection, of the assumptions outlined above. It looks at the extent to which livestreamed first-person propaganda looks like an FPS game, and argues that instead, we should look to film to understand the salience and usage of such shots. Following this, it looks at the technology used to generate such shots – primarily, the helmetcam. Investigating the history and usage of this technology again calls into question the association of first-person propaganda with first-person shooters, as the resulting shot is more likely the result of practicality than it is the purposeful mimicking of FPS aesthetics. Finally, the article assesses how we should understand gamification in this context, arguing that the social sharing of this kind of footage is not novel, but again embedded in widespread practice. Finally, the article offers some brief thoughts on how we should understand livestreamed and first-person propaganda in the future. The mainstream nature of videogaming means that practically anything can be turned culturally linked to videogaming. However, instead of thinking about what first-person propaganda *looks like* we should think about what it *does*. In particular, the analysis in the context of gamification should retreat from drawing on aesthetic similarities, and instead should look for evidence of intent as well as actual elements of play in terrorist propaganda and activity.

What Does an FPS Look Like?

When discussing first-person propaganda in relation to terrorist attacks, there is an array of examples that one can draw on. It was used by ISIS in their social media campaign, and more recently, by lone-actor right-wing terrorists, most prominently in the Christchurch, Halle and Buffalo attacks of 2019 and 2022. In these incidents, attackers used a helmetcam to record their actions, giving viewers a first-person view, including an image of the weapon used. While each instance is important in understanding how first-person propaganda functions, this article will focus mainly on those attacks post-Christchurch, as these have generated the most discussion around gaming and extremism.

One of the core arguments linking first-person propaganda and first-person shooters is the visual similarity that stems from the use of helmetcams. Typically, in first-person shooters, the player can also see the hands and weapon of the character, and occasionally other body parts, such as the torso and feet when looking down. Both media use a

perspective that gives the audience a view ‘through the eyes’ of the game character or person. Galloway (2004) calls this the ‘grammar’ of the FPS – the combination of ‘a subjective camera perspective, coupled with a weapon in the foreground’ (p. 57). The similarities when comparing images produced from the Christchurch, Halle or Buffalo attacks to an appropriate FPS title can be quite stark – the image below, from 2003’s *Postal 2*, is a good visual demonstration of this possibility (Figure 1).

Galloway recognises that this similarity is however a possibility and not an absolute, stating that his grammar is introduced for ‘simplicity’s sake’ (p. 57). Some FPS games lack the weapon in the foreground, just showing a first-person viewpoint.



Figure 1. Comparative stills from the videogame *Postal 2* (2003) and the Christchurch attack video.

For example, earlier *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* games – where the player takes on the role of an elite SWAT, special forces, or counterterrorism officer and eliminates criminals – lacked the gun in the foreground, but are generally accepted as an FPS by players and by videogame publications. Hitchens (2011) recognises this problem by offering a different definition, in that the FPS is ‘characterized by a first-person viewpoint and a heavy emphasis on combat’. This, too, cannot capture the entirety of the genre, as it excludes FPS games which follow the rules of Galloway’s grammar, but do not involve much combat. Video games such as *Mirror’s Edge*, *Portal* and *Neon White* use different mechanics to explore the potential of the genre, emphasizing exploration, puzzle solving, and strategy, over combat (Figure 2).

Much of our understanding of what an FPS is rests on the influence of *DOOM*, and the contemporary popularity of franchises such as *Call of Duty* and *Halo*. These games are typically cited as examples of the genre and combine realistic visuals with fast-paced arcade-style combat. However, this obscures a range of other titles and possibilities within the genre. Therrien (2015) outlines how the influence of games like *DOOM* has resulted in the sidelining of many key moments in the evolution of FPS games, including the vehicular-based games of the 1980s such as *Battlezone* or the popular light gun games of the 1990s including *Time Crisis* and *The House of the Dead*. We also ignore hybrid titles which combine key aspects of other genres such as the FPS-Role Playing Game or the FPS-Real Time Strategy. Klevjer (2006) makes a similar point in the essay *The Way of the Gun: The Aesthetic of the Single-Player First Person Shooter*, noting that the tendency to concentrate on games which are commercially successful means that we also miss the possibility for creativity in the



Figure 2. Still from *Portal 2* (2011).

development and play. Not all FPS games require the player to use lethal force, and many notable games in the genre explore how dialogue, diplomacy, and stealth can be used to succeed. Many players recognise this possibility and pursue no-kill or pacifist runs. Some games, such as *BioShock* and *Spec Ops: The Line* also use player violence as a way to explore philosophical and ethical problems in society and warfare. Thus while we tend to associate FPS games with straightforward violence, this represents a small – albeit popular – subset of the genre (Figure 3).

Importantly, these titles cannot be compared to the kind of first-person propaganda produced from attacks such as in Christchurch. We can decisively say that the Christchurch attack broadcast did not look like *Neon White* or *BioShock*. While the subjective camera-gun perspective that dominates the medium is one of the few things that links the genre as a whole, the genre is not synonymous with the arcade-realism or military-sim shooter that dominates our popular imagination. If *Fortnite* launches its rumoured first-person mode this year, then the most popular FPS on the market will look very little like anything produced by terrorist propaganda, save for the first-person perspective and the gun.

The obvious point is that Christchurch, and similar attacks, produced footage that looked like FPS games that strive to be realistic, and which place a heavy emphasis on modern warfare, accurate reproduction of weaponry, lifelike animations, and immersive game mechanics that mimic the tropes of popular war media. As outlined by Stahl, since 2001 and the beginning of the ‘War or Terror’, ‘realistic’ FPS games have increased in number and in their ambition and ability to appear as real life. Many of these games dwell within the wider culture of pro-war militarism that emerged following 9/11, generally supporting U.S. aims in the war and supporting

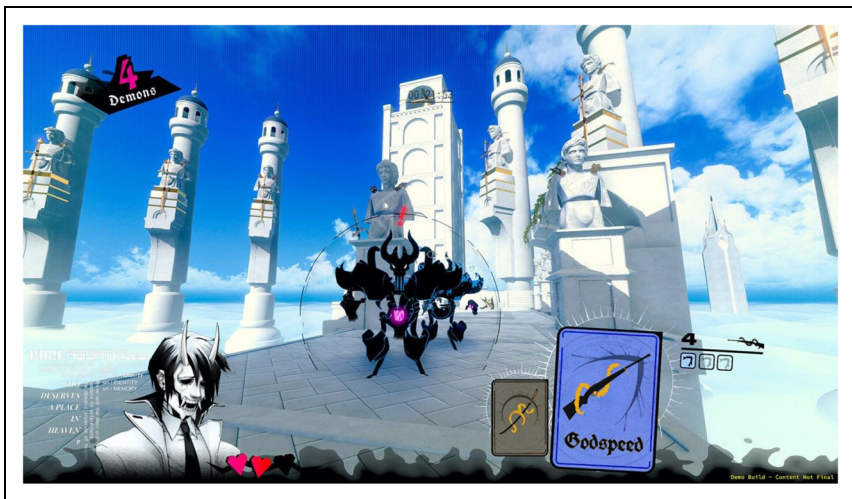


Figure 3. Still from *Neon White* (2022).

the idea that Western militaries were fast, efficient, deadly, and accurate, as well as being ethical. This broader thrust is reflected most clearly in *America's Army* U.S. Army recruitment game, but also in popular commercial games such as *Medal of Honour: Warfighter* and the *Call of Duty* series. While these games now look close to reality, the direction of causality flows from life and into art. The speed and lethality shown by avatars in FPS games is not something which terrorists then take upon themselves to recreate, but rather an example of the 'anticipatory impulse' (Crogan, 2011) of gaming, which through the creativity of game designers and within the safe environment of the game world, allows gaming to take ideological cues from life to broader conclusions. Thus prior to the mass shootings of the Bataclan and Mumbai terror attacks, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* virtually staged a similar scene in an airport, the infamous *No Russian* mission. The player's role in this mission is to massacre civilians in an airport with automatic weapons. Apart from Russian media linking the mission with the 2011 Domodedovo airport bombings (Thorsen, 2011), there is little else to imply that other mass shootings followed the template of this mission to try and amplify their resonance (Figure 4).

As such while attacks which use a first-person perspective have some visual similarities to the broader action-realism and military-sim FPS sub-genres, we should be careful to not to overstep in our analyses. As demonstrated above, the FPS genre as a whole is diverse. Not all FPS games strive for a realistic, militaristic aesthetic, and not all FPS games place a premium on combat and killing. We should not be reductionist when looking at first-person propaganda. As Järvinen argues, 'game genre equals hybridity, because game genres are complex sums of interaction and rule mechanisms, audiovisual styles, and popular fiction genre conventions' (Järvinen, 2002). Instead of

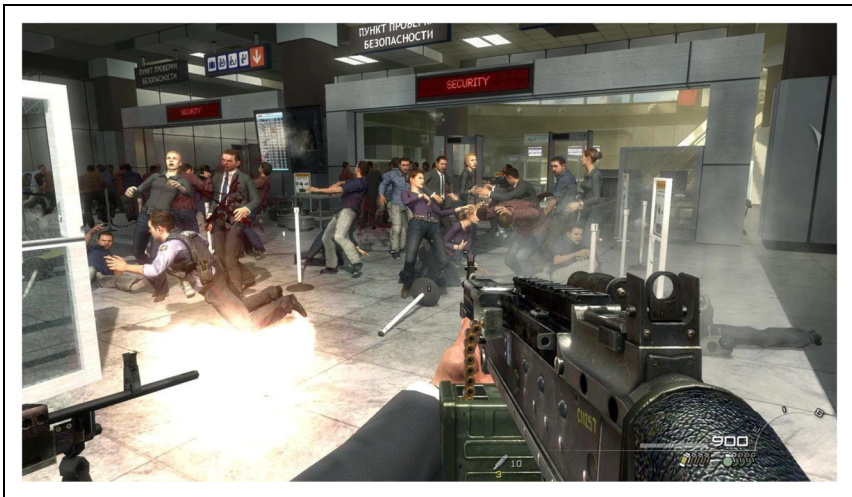


Figure 4. Still from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) – *No Russian* mission.

leaning into problematic narratives that reproduce arguments about *DOOM*'s potential to corrupt young minds and cause violence, we should instead recognise the diversity and broad-based nature of the FPS genre. In short, first-person propaganda does not resemble an FPS. First-person propaganda resembles the military simulator or arcade-realist style of FPS, which itself is attempting to resemble real life. Coming full circle, first-person propaganda simply looks like real life.

The First-Person Viewpoint in Film and Gaming

A second point linking the FPS genre and first-person propaganda is the assumption that the perpetrators chose this style to imitate first-person shooters. While I argue above that we should be careful in linking first-person propaganda with the FPS genre simply based on aesthetic similarities, it is still possible that the perpetrators chose this style of broadcast for this reason. This section, and the section following it, will question this assumption from a theoretical and a practical angle.

In reviewing the development of the FPS, Galloway traces the source of the subjective-camera-and-weapon combo to film, specifically to the 1925 Buster Keaton film *Go West*, where the audience sees the perspective of a bull with the 'weapon' of the bull's horns appearing in the lower portion of the frame. More broadly the film studies literature highlights how the first-person perspective might be used by directors to try and bring the audience closer to a subject, or augment a desired affect, such as anxiety. Moreno, for instance, argues that stories told from the first-person perspective could

gain another advantage of literary narration ... by increasing the identification between reader and protagonist. The film seeks to put the spectator in the position of a participant, involved in the world of the narrative, living as his own the experiences of the story. (Moreno, 1953, p. 342)

While film from a third-person perspective allows the audience to imagine themselves as an observer, the first-person perspective is supposed to bring the 'literary I' into film, turning the audience into *spectator-actor*. Moreno argues that 'the principal goal sought with this technique is to bring the spectator to identify himself with the protagonist to the point of feeling himself personally involved in the action' (p. 352). However, despite this ambition, the perspective is not thought to be successful in this aim, as the viewer cannot properly be embodied in the character: 'the spectator sees himself deprived of this object [the character] with which he could identify himself: the protagonist is now no more than a viewpoint, merely a look' (p. 357).

A short essay on the subject by *Film School Rejects* puts Moreno's critique succinctly – we are not really getting a first-person view, as we see through someone else's eyes and not our own, and thus we are alienated from the character rather than connected to her (Campbell, 2014). The view is not first-person, but rather pseudo-first-person, with the film telling you, the audience, what you see. However,

this alienation that is inherent in this viewpoint can still be harnessed. Horror films have used this to great effect as a way of increasing audience anxiety. The ‘killer viewpoint’, where the camera looks through the eyes of the killer as they stalk their victim, is effective in revealing the vulnerability of the victim and the power of the perpetrator (Hart, 2019). Science fiction films have also used the perspective to highlight the overarching menace or alien nature of the Other, with *Terminator*, *Predator*, *RoboCop* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* using this perspective with electronic overlays or fish-eye cameras to highlight enhanced capabilities and/or difference to humans (Figure 5).

One reason that the first-person perspective might work in these instances, and not in those instances when the director wants the audience to identify with the character, is that the perspective highlights the fact that in this viewpoint we are voyeurs. That we cannot control a character that we are viewing so intimately highlights our externality. This is also pertinent when the character whose viewpoint is being shown is not meant to be empathised with, and so the alienation we experience with this viewpoint is transferred into an Othering.

The problem of alienation is resolved in the FPS genre, as the player has direct control of the avatar. The view in this form is genuinely first-person rather than pseudo-first-person as in the film. Many FPS games also have a silent, faceless protagonist, which further allows the player to identify with them. Avatar customisation is sometimes also used to this end. Identification with an avatar has been identified as having a positive relationship with immersion and enjoyment, furthering our ability to enter into a roleplay with the game characters (Trepte and Reinecke, 2010).

Importantly, this experience largely rests on the players’ ability to properly manipulate and control their avatars. As Fiske (2006) argues, ‘games are played with the

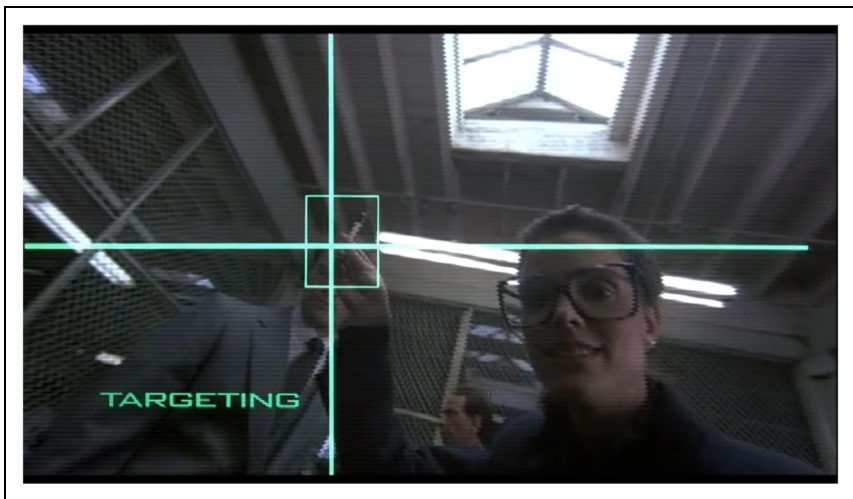


Figure 5. Still from *RoboCop* (1987), showing the first-person view of the protagonist.

body, and excess of concentration produces a loss of self, of the socially constructed subject and its social relations' (p. 93). When a player is immersed

Subjectivity collapses into the body. The body becomes the site of identity and pleasure when social control is lost. 'Losing oneself' (in a text or game) is for Barthes (1975) the ultimate 'eroticism of the text,' and the pleasure it offers is the orgasmic one of *juissance*, which is experienced at the moment when culture collapses into nature or when the ideological subject reverts to the body. The physical intensity with which the games are played produces moments of *juissance* that are moments of evasion of ideological control. The muscular spasms and collapse experienced by many players when they finally die, when their money is spent, are orgasmic. 'Dying' and 'spending' are, respectively, Elizabethan and Victorian metaphors for orgasm. Video arcades are semiotic brothels of the machine age. (p. 93)

This experience of bodily immersion is however reliant on the physicality of gaming – simply watching another play is not the same experience. Fiske's argument highlights many of the differences between watching media and actively playing media. Trepte and Reinecke (2010) for instance note that the psychological effects of watching media can be emotional or cognitive, while gamers will match those effects with action in the game environment, embodied through behaviours. Hefner et al. (2007) likewise found that compared to a group that watched a videogame being played, players of the game experienced significantly higher identification with avatars.

Following this, viewing a video that *resembles* a game should not be understood as something that results in game-like responses. Even if the visual similarity were absolute, we still lack that behaviour aspect of interaction and the bodily aspect of immersion that Fiske describes. For this reason, first-person propaganda, despite the visual similarity to a videogame, is still video media. As explored above, the first-person viewpoint should not immediately be analysed as adjacent to game media, too. The idea of the 'killer viewpoint' and the alienation of the self-explored through first-person shots in horror films appears much closer to what we see when we look at first-person propaganda. Both highlight anxiety, power, and the vulnerability of victims. This is not to say that viewers will not identify with the perpetrators; they can, and many no doubt will. Rather, it is to say that they will identify with the perpetrators through a film-like, rather than game-like process. This could mean that the viewer has a higher identification with the perpetrator because they see visual similarities with the games they play. This however does not mean that identification is mediated through an immediate association with gaming. It also means that those aspects of gaming which might increase identification, including player control, choice, and avatar customization/identification, are absent from video media. Thus first-person propaganda should be analysed *prima facie* as its own genre of video media, rather than as a videogame or adjacent media.

Helmetcams and the Utility of the First-Person Perspective

The practicalities of producing first-person propaganda also need to be taken into account when we are considering whether the perpetrators produced this content with an intention for it to look like an FPS. By definition, these videos are produced using a camera strapped to a mount on the body, almost universally attached to a helmet.

Such 'helmetcams' are today ubiquitous, with GoPro cameras and other small body-worn devices, including mobile phones attached to mounts or affixed to the body, being commonly and easily available. This kind of recording became popular in mountain biking communities in the 1980s, being used as a way of vicariously experiencing the sport, and for sharing ride footage for training and socializing. The footage could be rewatched in order to pick out mistakes in runs, learn the track, or otherwise pick up on strengths and weaknesses in technique and style. Sharing this footage could be used to build community, as well as being sold for use in sports videos and promoting the self as a rider. The experiences of the rider could also be extended by rewatching footage (McSorley, 2012).

By the 1990s, helmetcam usage had spread to other sports, becoming so embedded in some sporting subcultures that Ferrel et al. (2001) note that within the BASE-jumping community 'mediated dynamics saturate the BASE-jumping process, from planning and execution to aftermath and audience' (p. 95). The release of the GoPro in 2004, later including various mounts for helmets and sporting equipment, furthered the social aspect of sharing sporting footage and other lifestyle footage by making the technology more accessible.

The ubiquity of such cameras, with their focus on recording sports and action shots, combined well with the advance of Web 2.0 technology. The durability and portability of modern helmetcams also facilitated the spread of this technology to military personnel, with footage being used for training at a command level, and for social sharing at an individual level (McSorley, 2012). This is the source of a vast library of first-person combat footage that can now be found on the internet. The occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by US and coalition troops following the 2001 and 2003 invasions furthered this, with many deployed soldiers using it to share their experiences at war, including in combat, on patrol, and at rest.

Footage from deployed soldiers also demonstrated the capability of this technology to democratise news media, removing some level of control from established government and media sources. As Andén-Papadopolous (2009) argues, traditional news media tends to represent 'warfare as clinical and even compassionate. ... the images are relatively bloodless and seldom hint at the capacity of modern warfare machinery to injure the human body' (p. 18). Conversely, McSorley (2012) argues, the footage from soldiers provides a deeply personal insight into warfare:

[This] footage offers a boots-on-the-ground sensory immersion: into the rhythmic kinaesthetics of patrolling through the unforgiving landscape [...]; into the domestic routines of mundane embodied life on base; and into the breathless, visceral dramas and bodily risks of 'contact'. (p. 48)

Such footage demonstrates to the viewer the confusion, anxiety, and simultaneously human and inhumane aspects of warfare. Soldiers can be shot at by, and shoot targets that they cannot see, and demonstrate the sudden nature of death close up. Indeed, actual combat footage is described as ‘sensory overload’, ‘embodied disorientation’ and ‘mayhem’ (McSorley, 2012), a far cry from both propaganda footage and action films that instead show friendly combatants as calm, professional, and clean killers. These experiences are typically enhanced by the later addition of music to fit the scene – hard-rock and heavy-metal music to match the adrenaline of combat, and ballads to reflect the sorrow of loss (Andén-Papadopolous, 2009).

It is these dynamics of utility, action footage, and sociability that make helmetcams attractive, both to soldiers and to the modern terrorist. For the lone or group attacker, helmetcams are useful in that they provide ready footage that conforms to a more action-oriented style. The video that results is intriguing because of that aspect of ‘sensory immersion’ that McSorley identifies, largely and simply as a result of the camera being affixed to a living, breathing body. For the lone attacker, the first-person perspective is also useful in that it is sure to stay pointed in the correct direction, always picking up on the bloodshed and thus the shock factor needed to galvanise propaganda. As Suss et al. (2018) point out, this position is superior to other possible body-mounted positions, such as the shoulder or the chest, as these can be obscured by the user seeking cover or raising their weapon. The head-mounted position is the least likely to be obscured, and the most likely to be pointed in the correct direction.

Based on this, we should not be quick to assume that the choice of a first-person viewpoint is a deliberate choice made to imitate FPS games. There is little evidence to suggest this – thus far, no perpetrator has indicated that this was their primary motivation. The Christchurch killer was extensively interviewed as part of the investigation into the attack, as well as planning documents being reviewed, and there was no indication that mimicking an FPS was the intention of the first-person viewpoint. It is also apparent that the Buffalo shooter took great care to ensure that his livestream of the attack would not be interrupted or fail due to technical reasons and that his primary motivation in livestreaming would be reach and influence, rather than matching the aesthetic of an FPS (Amarasingam et al., 2022). The primary motivation appears to be practicality rather than aesthetics. The addition of a music playlist to accompany the attack is described as ‘fun’ rather than a move intended for ape gaming, and similarities can be drawn with military helmetcam videos that soundtrack combat and emphasize the emotional and affective experience according to the wishes of the creator.

With a lack of evidence that the killers produced first-person footage to ape first-person shooters, some alternative hypotheses can be offered. First, we could consider the adoption of the first-person viewpoint to be due to utility. Aside from a chest mount, the head mount is an obvious choice for camera location. Indeed the evidence suggests that this is the best mounting location for capturing footage. Secondly, we could consider whether the choice to shoot footage of the attack with a helmetcam was simply a result of the development of helmetcam usage in sporting and military

contexts. As noted, military helmetcam footage is ubiquitous on the internet, and it is just as likely that the Christchurch, Halle, and Buffalo shooters were influenced by the cultural and military history of helmetcam usage as they were by FPS games. A review of previous terrorist attacks shows that many perpetrators viewed military footage as part of their preparation.

Much like the FPS hypothesis, those offered above are also hypotheses. It is unlikely that there will be evidence to adequately support them. However, these are offered to demonstrate that assuming the aesthetic similarity between FPS games and first-person propaganda is purposeful might be unwise. Overall we need much more evidence before we begin to consider such footage as being linked with first-person shooters, and gaming cultures more widely.

Gamification, Irony and the Mediated Event

Finally, there has been speculation that first-person propaganda is gamified in the way it represents ‘Let’s Play’ videos. These videos streamed on platforms such as YouTube, Twitch and Discord, show footage of games being played by others, who usually provide some narration over the video as they play. Viewers are frequently allowed to chat with each other and the player as the video is shown. This allows for socialization and sharing, building a community among like-minded gamers. Sometimes e-sports competitions or other gaming events are also streamed live. An aspect of many games – especially first-person shooters – is that measurements of performance are usually shown to the players. The viewers can then also comment on these. A common measurement in first-person shooters is the ‘kill-death ratio’, a measurement of how many times a player has died, and how many kills they have in a match.

In relation to livestreaming and terror attacks, scholars point to two features: (1) the comparative measurement of casualty rates in attacks and (2) streaming in the style of a ‘Let’s Play’ video, where the audience watches and comments on a person playing a videogame on a streaming site. Although not documented on typical gaming platforms, [Lakhani and Wiedlitzka \(2022\)](#) note how during the Christchurch attack, 8chan users commented on the forums about whether the assailant would get a ‘high score’ or otherwise gain a position on a mass-shooter leaderboard that was posted on the forum. This is indeed similar to what an audience watching an FPS livestream might comment on and does point to a possible gamification of the attack from the bottom-up, especially where it is not clear that the perpetrator intended to appear in such a ranking. The Halle attacker also included ‘achievements’ in his manifesto, mimicking a system of comparable rewards found in many video games ([EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator, 2020](#)).

However, does this mean that those attacks were gamified because of this? In the first instance, as argued above, the FPS-like nature of the livestreams is not necessarily gamification. Further to this, we need to maintain an awareness of the cultural environment that these attacks speak to. Rightly, Macklin identifies these attacks, and their

copycats, as following a ‘cultural script’ (Macklin, 2019). It is likely that new attackers are copying predecessors and drawing lessons from them. Indeed, in a study of far-right lone attackers, Kupper et al. (2022) found that seven out of 10 attackers attempted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to livestream their attacks. Many of those attacks directly referenced or copied aspects of previous attacks, implying that they watched and learned from those that came before them. These attackers interacted in and posted manifestos on supportive online forums, which then went on to share, discuss, and create new cultural forms from the videos and manifestos that resulted from the attacks. As Schuurman et al. (2019) point out, so-called ‘Lone Wolf’ attackers are embedded in online milieus, which provide a ready audience for sharing footage with. Much of this points to new perpetrators copying what had come before them, of which a minimal amount has evidence of real attempts to ape FPS aesthetics.

Additionally, as Neumann (2009) argues, one of the key features of ‘new terrorism’ in the post-9/11 era has been the perpetration of high-casualty attacks, where killing as many persons as possible is a key objective. In such attacks, terrorists seek to create spectacle through mass violence, using the shock factor to provoke enemies into blind action, to ‘awaken’ sleeping masses, or to otherwise increase the cost of military action beyond that which a state is willing to bear. Thus as mass killers and terrorists increase their casualty rate, ‘outbidding’ by other groups means that new killers will seek to escalate violence in order to prove their strength and to further shock the public (Nemeth, 2014). We should thus be careful in interpreting ‘high-score’ lists as a manifestation of gamification, as this could also simply be a reflection of the new *modus operandi* of modern terrorists.

Keeping track of ‘outbidding’ by terrorists could also be reflective of the social environment in which high-score lists are kept. The cultural spaces where mass-killer scoreboards arise and are maintained are not gaming forums, but rather the ‘Chans’, such as 8chan and 4chan. These image boards thrive on irony, transgression, dark humour, and misanthropy (Reiger et al., 2021; Thorleifsson, 2021). Celebrating mass killers in such environments could be as much performative, ironic humour, as it is a genuine attempt to gamify killing and encourage others to take part. While scoreboards could be an attempt at gamification in these communities – so-called ‘bottom-up’ gamification enacted by communities rather than the initial actors (Schlegel, 2020), we should be cautious, and question whether these communities post such messages to generate new attacks or simply as part of a wider in-joke. Thus like the communities that formed around helmetcam videos, whether sporting or military, it is worth pointing out the inherently social nature of sharing videos of others. New cultural products based on the melding of other popular cultural forms with new video content are likely to arise in such contexts, and these might not be meaningful outside of these communities. While it is true that much of what is created surrounding first-person propaganda is striking in its similarity to video gaming culture, we should again practice caution.

Thus as argued previously, there are problems with directly translating the visual similarity between FPS games and first-person propaganda, as well as cultural

output, into an actual relationship. In the first instance, we can draw on the work surrounding helmetcams in the military and sporting subcultures, which identifies such footage as being the result of (1) practicality, in that the helmetcam perspective captures ‘the action’ in most instances, more so than other positions and that (2) the resulting footage is ready-made for sharing and sociability. This sharing and sociability are likely to draw on other dominant cultural forms, one of which is gaming. In short, we should question whether keeping score on terrorist attacks is simply a manifestation of ironic, misanthropic humour, or a genuine attempt to gamify terror. A broader view on this brings into question the limits of gamification theory and its application. On the one hand, it can be a useful framework – there are aspects of these attacks which are videogame-like, and will call to mind popular gaming franchises. This likely will be picked up on by people steeped in this culture, which is now ubiquitous. There are also some extremist and terrorist actions that explicitly create a game out of attacking others. However, as argued above, we should not take stretch this framework beyond recognition by applying it to everything that simply *looks like* a game. This will not only weaken our analysis, but also place a focus on a community that does not necessarily deserve it.

Conclusion

The study of gaming and extremism is quite new and generating a lot of interest. Naturally, attackers that seem to draw on the irreverent humour of online forums, and appear to match the aesthetics of popular first-person shooters, have generated new theories and ideas about the intersection between cultural forms of gaming, and terrorist acts. This article, focusing on the apparent similarities between first-person shooters and first-person propaganda, argues that we should be careful. While at first glance it seems that these two cultural products are more than superficially similar, a broad look at the development of the FPS, the history of the first-person viewpoint, and the development of helmetcam technology, point to the need for care. We should also be careful about the application of gamification frameworks in interpreting such media, especially if the argument rests in some way on aesthetic similarity. This is not an adequate basis for assuming that these videos were created to draw on video gaming aesthetics. As [Bittani \(2006\)](#) argues, ‘[s]uperficial affinities between cinematic and videoludic gunplay should not deceive us. Videoludic gunplay is always performative, whereas cinematic gunplay is purely spectatorial’.

As such, this article leans towards caution. Instead of taking a broad view, we should consider gamification within the framework of gaming itself. What differentiates a game from a film – indeed what differentiates the game *DOOM* from the film *DOOM*, both of which have sequences of killing shown from a first-person perspective – is the element of *play*. Repeating Fiske’s argument, that ‘games are played with the body’, I propose that we limit the gamification framework to actual moments of play. This eliminates simple first-person propaganda from our analysis, which, as I argue, is a problematic inclusion. It however includes things

like the achievement structure used by the Halle shooter, which actively provides a framework and ruleset for future ‘games’ to be ‘played’. At the core of this argument is the idea that games require players, and not simply just spectators. We now live in a world where photo-realistic graphics mean that potentially anything can look like a videogame, as video games can be indistinguishable from real life in their most powerful instances. Thus it is not enough to look at aesthetic similarities, as these are potentially misleading.

This means that instead of looking at what first-person propaganda looks like, we should return to what propaganda does. It is calling out to a certain constituency; if we think it is calling out to a video gaming constituency *specifically* then we should look for evidence of that beyond aesthetics. More so, if it is calling out to that constituency to do something, we can use the gamification framework to see if that something has a ruleset, win conditions, and recorded competition. Importantly for a gamification framework to be meaningful in a world where gaming is a multi-billion-dollar industry that saturates our popular culture, we should consider such a framework only where there are players. Today anything can look like a videogame – even power washing has its own videogame. What differentiates a game from other media is *interactivity*, and this is where the crux of our analysis should lie.

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