

PLEASURE ZONES AND MURDER BOXES: ONLINE PORNOGRAPHY AND VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES AS CULTURAL ZONES OF EXCEPTION

Rowland ATKINSON* and THOMAS RODGERS

New media formats and technologies raise questions about new-found abilities to indulge apparently limitless violent and sadistic curiosity within our culture. In this context, the mainstreaming of sex and violence via mobile and screen media systems opens important questions about the degree to which these influences are harmful or indicative of deeper social problems. In this article, we offer a preliminary analysis of the consequences of these new media zones, acknowledging their allure, excitement and everyday cultural position. In particular, we focus on a distinctive hallmark of much online pornography and massively popular violent video games—the offer of unchecked encounters with others who can be subordinated to violent and sexual desire. We suggest that a key implication of these zones of cultural exception, in which social rules can be more or less abandoned, is their role in further assisting denials of harm from the perspective of hyper-masculinist and militaristic social value systems.

Keywords: criminological theory, information society, social harm, video games, pornography

Introduction

One key narrative regarding crime in western societies is of an ascending arc of civility and declining violence (Spierenburg 2008; Pinker 2011; Muchembled 2012). These accounts all owe a major debt to the work of Elias (2000), who noted that social shifts traceable to medieval court etiquette were directly associated with an apparent truncation of the human emotional spectrum and a rise in voluntary self and social control away from passionate impulses. A core premise of Elias' 'civilizing process' theory was that the development of feelings of repugnance and guilt towards violent impulses would result in a world where people were 'much more restricted in their conduct, in their chances of directly satisfying their drives and passions' (Elias 2000: 375). Drawing upon Freud, Elias suggested that 'civility' involved the re-channelling of aggressivity and overt sexuality through cultural conduits, such as art, books and sport—all of which played a role in metering the release of libidinal desires whilst minimizing the risk of interpersonal harm (Elias and Dunning 1993). Our contribution in this article relates these debates to the landscape of new and developing image-spaces (video games and internet pornography) in which violence and harm is experienced, celebrated or produced as part of new repertoires of exceptional social conduct. Our argument is that these media technologies provide alluring and experimental landscapes. In these spaces, the outward veneer of our culture as intrinsically 'civil' or pacified is seen also to reveal anti-social forms of real and simulated conduct. Such experiences, available

*Rowland Atkinson, Chair in Inclusive Societies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK; rowland.atkinson@sheffield.ac.uk; Thomas Rodgers, Department of Sociology, University of York, York YO10 5DD, UK.

through certain strands of gaming and extreme pornography, necessitate a deepened criminological sensibility prepared to discuss physical and imagined forms of harm as they are enacted within—or bound up with—online and game spaces.

The potential for new media to facilitate forms of harm has been captured in early contributions like David Cronenberg's 1983 film *Videodrome* in which a covert TV station broadcasts pornographic and violent images that appear to show real torture, killings and rapes. Despite its hallucinatory complexity, the film was prescient in its concern with the relative ubiquity and allure of sexual and ultra-violent image experiences and their positioning as commodified forms of entertainment provided by corporate entities. The encounters between viewer and television within the home explored by Cronenberg only begins to capture the depth of the screen culture that now pervades our lives, into which we can submerge ourselves almost instantly. Instead of well-hidden broadcast channels reflecting desires that we might publicly disown, large portions of society are now exposed to pervasive internet and gaming technologies that facilitate engagement with extreme violence and sexual experiences (real and simulated rapes, beheadings and executions, fights, filmed death and injury), all of which are provided by corporate entities or uploaded by users. In light of this, it is crucial that cultural and critical criminologists study (and keep up with) what Ferrell *et al.* (2008) call the hybridized 'state of suspension', we find ourselves in as we unendingly flit between—and experience the conflation of—the reality and commodified digital spectacle of crime, violence and social harm.

Hitherto, many researchers have focused on questions regarding how exposure to media violence might generate interpersonal aggressivity. Current debates have moved beyond direct media effects and causation to the more subtle question of whether violence and aggressive sexual norms have been promoted and influenced by media content (for a summary of this literature, see Anderson *et al.* 2010) and there appears evidence enough to suggest that complex and variable harms can be attributed to interaction with exposure to such media content. Yet locating the extent and nature of such harms is difficult due to the kind of hysterical media reaction, which tends to exaggerate these harms. We acknowledge that such questions remain important but here seek instead to address questions of what the deeper cultural and social influences of highly accessible violent and sexualized media content may be. For criminologists such as Hayward (2012), an important first task is to ask what kind of spaces and opportunities for their navigation are opening up with the continued development of digital technologies; and to debate both the real and imagined consequences of these new media image-spaces, especially given that much theoretical and empirical work casts these phenomena in a celebratory light (Ferrell *et al.* 2008).

The interactivity, realism and pervasiveness of online environments enable individuals to wallpaper their worlds as they choose using bespoke internet provision. For Presdee (2000), the combination of technology, culture and corporate drivers had already insinuated the deepening presence of sadistic voyeurism into daily social life. Yet criminologists have not been fleet of foot in coming to terms with the nature of abuse and anti-social aspects of online and interactive image-spaces generated by digital technologies. It seems that there are at least two areas that might spur the imaginations and research of criminologists in relation to these shifts. The first of these relates to the material consequences of fantasy, which many practitioners have become concerned with as viewer behaviour is reshaped by online experiences that strip away

the social context of viewers and assist in the denial of harm to objects witnessed in these spaces (Wood 2011). The second is the kind of concern that criminologists like Dorling and colleagues have with the need to develop and incorporate notions of non-criminalized harm into criminology (Hillyard and Tombs 2007). Such a position lends itself well to what we call for in this article: a need to include forms of symbolic violence and humiliation, gendered and racial abuse, and the kinds of sado-voyeurism of certain media cultures within the remit of a fully functioning criminology. An important aspect of this being the need to interrogate how image and screen cultures contribute to the ‘cultural normalization’ and commodification of violence, social harm and subjugation (Ferrell *et al.* 2008).

In this article, we offer a reconnaissance of two spaces within the contemporary media-scape—online pornography and violent video games—that epitomize a broader patterning between digital media and the viewing of extreme violent and sexual practices that celebrate forms of social subjugation and unfeeling destruction. Many scholars have pointed to the criminological importance of commodified violence in the forms of ‘extreme television’ shows such as *Bumfights*, *Dirty Sanchez* and *Felony Fights* (Ferrell *et al.* 2008; Salter and Tomsen 2012), user-generated ‘happy slapping’ videos (Yar 2012) and video games depicting sadomasochistic and military scenarios such as *Manhunt* and *Americas Army* (Ferrell *et al.* 2008). Nevertheless, our focus is on how such forms of media content highlight the paradox of an apparent liberation of human experience offered by networked Information Communication Technologies and their capacity to open pathways toward drive-based fascinations with anti-social and violent fantasies. In the spirit of attempting to develop a theoretical lexicon with which to interrogate the underlying logic(s) of this broader patterning between digital media and the viewing of extreme violence and subjugation, this article develops the notion of ‘cultural zones of exception’. We use this term to refer to the ways in which certain networked media spaces offer the enactment or viewing of socially extreme conduct apparently without consequence or connection to everyday modes of social being and normative prescription. In what follows, we offer a theoretical commentary that focuses on the relationship between notions of ‘civility’, digital technologies, and forms of exception in order to begin interrogating the foundational characteristics of image-spaces that, far from being wastelands at the edge of contemporary media-scapes, are now central and widely shared experiences within popular culture and everyday social life.

‘Civilization’, Technology and Exception

Elias raises a key question in his civilizing process thesis: ‘how could one ensure for human beings in an increasingly regularized society a sufficiency of pleasurable excitement as a shared experience, without the risk of socially intolerable disorders and mutual injuries?’ (Elias and Dunning 1993: 174). Through this line of enquiry, Elias proposes that social and self-constraints have erred towards a particular configuration, whereby capacities for pleasurable excitement have become subject to forms of regulation that carefully meter the risks of socially intolerable disorders and interpersonal harm. Elias and Dunning (1993) discusses this through many examples, one of which consists in detailing fox hunting and the development of killing-by-proxy using hounds. These considerations led Elias to suggest that in the historical trajectory of social change we have witnessed a dampening or truncation of extreme fluctuations in behaviour and emotions:

The pressures operating upon the individual now tend to produce a transformation of the whole drive and affect economy in the direction of a more continuous, stable and even regulation of drives and affects in all areas of conduct in all sectors of life'. (2000: 374)

The idea that cruelty and violence may emerge under cultural conditions in which the autonomy and fulfilment of the self become paramount social demands have been recurring themes for a number of analysts. Elias' 'civilizing process' outlines a tendency 'towards a more even moderation, a more continuous restraint, a more exact control of drives and affects in accordance with the more differentiated pattern of social interweaving' (2000: 375). For Freud (1973), a search for personal pleasure and happiness is inherently in tension with social demands for civility, self-control and metered conduct, through which civilization was/is made possible. Yet, in an important but less well-acknowledged part of his thesis, Elias suggests, like Freud, that 'civilizing processes' must lead, in some cases, to perpetual restlessness and dissatisfaction:

precisely because the person affected can only gratify a part of his or her inclinations and impulses in modified form ... [...]... a permanent, apparently groundless inner unrest shows how many drive energies are dammed up in a form that permits no real satisfaction. (2000: 376)

This observation is similar to those made by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, where he contends that guilt—the effect civilization has on inhibiting aggressiveness that might otherwise prevent it—is both the most important factor in the development of civilization, yet paradoxically also a primary source of dissatisfaction (1973). For Freud it seems appropriate to question the 'potent obstacle to civilization aggressiveness must be, if the defence against it can cause as much unhappiness as the aggressiveness itself' (1973: 80). Thus, the writings of Freud and Elias coalesce around a common identification of a process akin to what we term here a kind of social undertow: the seductive draw and flow of opportunities to engage in aggressively sexual and violent experiences that appears as a strong undercurrent in contemporary popular culture and digital media networks. The idea of an undertow points towards a dialectic tension between individual urges toward more extreme affects and the need for increasing social refinement that channels emotional drives into cultural outlets where satisfaction can be subjected to forms of 'controlled decontrolling' (Wouters 2011). For Elias and Dunning (1993), this process was directly observable in the development and sophistication of modern sports that require aggression, yet are bound by rules to limit the risks of serious injury and harm. The proliferation of commodified forms of cage and staged fighting such as *Ultimate Fighting Championship* and *Felony Fights* (Salter and Tomsen 2012) offer examples of this process.

For commentators like Stiegler (2011), late capitalism has adopted something akin to a libidinal fix in which profits from a potent mix of hedonism, greed, pain and harm are enabled. In this kind of environment, our imaginings are all the more violent and destructive as we seek new ways in which to calibrate and understand our human condition whilst also being insulated from the possible harms that such avenues might generate. These themes were expertly handled in the underlying social commentaries offered by J. G. Ballard in a series of novels dealing with violence, cruelty and psychological decline in contained and affluent social spaces. Novels like *Cocaine Nights* suggest that anti-social impulses are aggravated by boredom while *Super Cannes* glimpsed the residents of a gated community descending into a hidden life of filmed rape, murder

and violent forays into the surrounding town at night, among other dryly presented atrocities. Ballard provides rich insights into this socio-cultural condition through the character Wilder Penrose, a psychotherapist. As Penrose sees it, Eden-Olympia (the gated community) requires its members to engage in brief moments of madness as a form of therapeutic ‘elective psychopathy’ that provides a release from the physical and emotional taxation of their working lives (Ballard 2006) presaging the themes of contemporary cultural criminology.

Today’s media architecture enables a range of deviant acts to engaged in or viewed at a moments notice, providing access to a wave of material detailing and allowing us to interact with a phantasmagoria of pain, suffering and humiliation—extreme pornography, videos of beheadings or animal torture, rapes and fights, archives of ‘fails’ involving human injury, game worlds based around the bodily destruction or murder of simulated victims and so on. Far from simply decrying or othering the engagement in such practices, it is important to acknowledge the draw of witnessing or taking delight in pain. Such experiences are now a key element of our popular and entertainment culture that Seltzer so aptly describes as a ‘wound culture’ (Seltzer 1997) or perhaps which Fromm had earlier considered a necrophiliac society drawn to death and dead bodies within popular culture and in which the ‘pure passion to destroy’ (1973: 437) had become increasingly central. In criminology, we see these elements bound together in the cultural criminology of Presdee (2000) and the identification of a ‘culture of spite’ in which victimization, the rending of flesh and fascination with death, injury and violence have become major sources of entertainment. Salter and Tomsen (2012) also make a similar observation about contemporary culture being replete with carnivalesque representations of violence, something which has become all the more prevalent with the advent of online technology. For Salter and Tomsen, ‘[s]adistic and voyeuristic interests that were previously sublimated in cultural life are now more openly nurtured in online representations of violence’ (2012: 309).

Since the time of Ballard’s fiction and Seltzer’s initial formulation of ‘wound culture’, the penetration of media technologies into daily life and the extremity of online content have deepened dramatically, forcing us to reconsider the connections between morbid fascinations and the corporate-led commodification of high demand, deviant experiences. Violence and torture are now hugely popular aspects of contemporary culture and the ‘gorno’ (‘gore porn’) genre of films like *The Human Centipede*, *Hostel*, and *Saw* indicate the overwhelming popularity of extreme media content as sadism has provided the basis for significant box office success. For Presdee (2000) and Ferrell *et al.* (2008), late capitalism is now replete with image-spaces that offer daily cruelty in reality TV and, more importantly today, self-made media content (see Yar 2012).

Much of the value attached to digital media focuses upon the capacity of consumers to be ‘freed’ by such technology and to experience a sense of sovereignty and control over their bespoke content choices. This can be observed not just in the well-known activist mantra ‘information wants to be free’ but also in the overwhelming capacity to customize and experiment with video game content, or in the myriad voyeuristic points of view of sexually dominated others in online pornography. The language used to define and demarcate these digital media spaces and sites—cages, rings, arenas, screens, boxes and networks—are regularly invoked to suggest the quasi-privacy of the kinds of entertainment contained *within* play-spaces in which conventional codes and norms can be temporarily suspended.

In line with Hayward's (2012) call for criminologists to think differently about the role and nature of (online) space within our discipline, we want to suggest that an underlying characteristic of extremely violent and sexualized screen/image-spaces is that they readily offer up 'cultural zones of exception', in which we become temporarily suspended from normative sociality and thus enabling permission to engage in otherwise transgressive experience. We adopt this terminology from Agamben's writings on the 'state of exception' (2005) and his observations on the designation of spaces—notably certain forms of state detention, refugee and concentration camps—that sit outside the remit of legal and normative frameworks (in a state of suspension). This terminology appears useful as a means of capturing something of the underlying logic of extreme media content as Agamben deploys the notion of zones of suspension to describe spaces within 'which life's maximum subjection to the law is reversed into freedom and licence' (2005: 72). Thus, for us 'cultural zones of exception' denotes the myriad kinds of experience-spaces afforded by screen interfaces in which viewers/users can immerse themselves in scenarios or narratives that absent normative social conventions (Hayward 2012). Life—real or simulated—in such spaces is rendered 'bare' or valueless in similar ways to that described by Agamben (1998) in relation to the qualities of the camp. Zones of suspension legitimate the pursuit of all and any actions or desires against those 'others' encountered within them. The architecture, content or coding of such spaces permits any conduct desired (within the realms of programmed possibility) and the subjugation of those found in such spaces who become, by definition, subordinate to whims and desires of player, viewer or voyeur.

As may now be clear, we wish to demonstrate that, despite the seemingly 'a-spatial' nature of digital and online content (Hayward 2012), there is a kind of zonal, compartmentalizing or 'boundary-making-and-breaking' logic to the kinds of engagements with our increasingly networked screen/image culture. For cultural criminology, a key challenge is to think critically about the role and nature of such space and experience—something which, as Hayward (2012) points out, raises the importance of questions about how online space is navigated and conceived by individuals, and how communication technologies have the potential to alter the way we experience the sense of *being* in an environment. To put this more simply, our aim here is two-fold: first, to facilitate understanding of the ways in which screen-image spaces provide certain forms of bounded/unbounded experiences; and second, drawing upon social and criminological theory provide food for thought regarding the allure and attraction of these spaces.

The Lure of Exceptional Space: Numb Subjects Labouring to Feel

We have argued that spaces in which extreme conduct and emotions can be experienced have become defining elements of screen culture. Yet these spaces or 'zones' are not rare, unusual or, arguably, even deviant modes of experience within everyday social life. More subtly, we might argue that the widespread accessing of pornography and games by increasingly younger groups has secured their place as forms of 'acceptable deviance'. Such experiences are commonplace, seductive and alluring to many going about their daily social lives; they constitute an 'undertow' of public culture that offers a dark promise of experiences (violent and sexual) that are permitted through a zonal logic of suspension. This undertow appears where desires and capitalist infrastructures

of ‘experience-commodification’ (Rifkin 2000) generate mediated environments characterized by violence, death and sexually charged experience. Desire-driven conduct that is essentially private in turn becomes an increasingly visible and accessible element of public life.

Two key explanatory factors in contemporary culture need to be recognized in understanding the kinds of changes we are profiling here. The first of these is the tendency towards forms of emotional glaciation (Gerhardt 2010) or social ‘numbness’ witnessed in both the dull, routinized work of everyday life and in responses to this, such as binge drinking (Winlow and Hall 2009) and other excessive forms of conduct. Similarly, reference to the emergence of what have been described as ‘bubble-wrapped generations’ as a result of parental fears of social danger raises further possibilities for the sheltering and social remoteness of many young people’s lives today (Currie 2005). Much like protagonists in Ballard’s novels, we are removed from the daily pain and tragedy of death, lost in a project of consuming and denying any confrontation with the reality of death and harms that remain present in social life (Becker 1973).

Second, the central irony of our loss of connection to social pain and suffering is that this—albeit unevenly experienced—dwindling of empathy has produced identifiable counter-reactions in which contact and feelings are sought out and worked towards: we ‘labour to feel’ as our disconnection from suffering generates a search for reality and authenticity in life. This tendency towards numbness needs to be recognized as being related to a desire to feel and to seek the real (themes identified in the film *Fight Club*). More prosaically, we might identify these currents of labouring to feel in the growing popularity of boxing by the middle-classes, diverse forms of reality TV, as well as climbing and other dangerous sports, which re-connect people to the possibility of injury or death (Lyng 2004).

A search for the ‘real’ (what warfare is really like, what is it like to watch someone killed, for unconstrained sexual encounters and violent release) may thus be interpreted as a search to escape insulated lives—a seeking to reinstate senses of reality and meaning into lives that have been atomized and hollowed by contemporary social life (Lipovetsky 2005). Networked media allow and encourage this pursuit of the reality of our human condition, or meditations on the rare and extreme. Yet perhaps we are no more authentic to ourselves than when we are immersed in these online virtual spaces and video games? As Žižek suggests:

Consider the interactive computer games some of us play compulsively, games which enable a neurotic weakling to adopt the screen persona of a macho aggressor, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It’s all too easy to assume that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace in order to escape from a dull, impotent reality. But perhaps the games are more telling than that. What if, in playing them, I articulate the perverse core of my personality which, because of ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in real life? Isn’t my virtual persona in a way ‘more real than reality’? Isn’t it precisely because I am aware that this is ‘just a game’ that in it I can do what I would never be able to in the real world? (2006: 32)

In Žižek’s terms, our escape into apparent fantasy becomes a means to achieve greater authenticity, and a process abetted by corporate institutions and media technologies.

In the spirit of attempting to weave a common theoretical thread between seemingly distinct media spaces, we present a snapshot of two cultural zones of exception in the form of online pornography and violent video games. Of course, there are many

different ways in which digital media can be used to view or experience extreme and explicit scenarios; our aim here, however, is to show that there is an underlying logic to the way in which such media provide a means to both 'escape' numb reality and achieve this 'greater authenticity' through the provision of a temporary suspension of normative sociality (Žižek 2006).

Pleasure Zones: Sexual Violence and Sadistic Arousal

The paradox of mass access to sexually explicit material alongside its relatively secretive engagement is a distinctive feature of today's cultural landscape. This prevalence has provoked increasing analysis by sociologists, health and psychology researchers to examine the possible overspill of the effects of such usage. Allegations of a wider 'pornification' of our culture, the sexualization of children and more tolerant attitudes towards violence against women have been among the allegations made about these shifts. The pornography 'industry' itself is in reality not only vast but also a complex variety of producers and suppliers and with a range of market segments. The industry is made up of, on the one hand, relatively mainstream suppliers of still and moving images and, on the other hand, a range of bespoke producers who respond to the aggregated market power of what were previously niche user demands and desires. In this latter camp, we also find the swathes of new, 'user-generated' amateur content (this includes the sale of personal pictures taken with and without permission or used as a form of revenge against former sexual partners), which far from generating a more authentic form of representation has tended to reproduce the scripts and tropes of male-dominated forms of mainstream pornography (Paasonen 2010).

Much of the research on access to online pornography has tended to focus on whether exposure generates attitudinal or behavioural changes that might be deemed problematic (Wood 2011; Hald *et al.* 2013) or harmful to personal health and relationships (for a review, see Anderson *et al.* 2010). While such evidence is not fully clear it appears to point to effects generated by deepening exposure and 'usage', usually mediated by the pre-existence of negative or violent sexual attitudes that are supported or amplified by pornography. However, it is also critically important to consider the kinds of victimization and exploitation implicated in the creation of images of abuse, degradation, sexual torture and violence associated with the many genres and suppliers of pornography.

Many representations in much 'mainstream' pornography today, to say nothing of the proliferation of internet rape and sexual abuse websites, share and celebrate forced sex (whether 'real' or play-acted). On many websites, content is framed in ways that highlight degradation and the omniscience of the viewer, such as through the use of blood dripping from text (as with one of the internet's most popular commercial websites *Evil Angel*), use of gothic text and fire, in order to heighten associations of violence with content (Gossett and Byrne 2002). Under these conditions, the range of what we might include as extreme pornography needs to be recalibrated; insertions of objects, gagging and vomiting resulting from forceful oral sex, simulated rape, strangulation, anal sex and spitting have become merely choices from drop-down menus on many popular porn websites. As Gossett and Byrne (2002) observe, the interactivity of these sites also heightens feelings of masculine control and excitement.

Criminologists have begun to be aware of these kinds of input/output harms, yet have faced difficulties in measuring and locating them. For writers like [Cacho \(2013\)](#), many women in internet pornography appear as a result of an intercontinental trade in female flesh that is generated by extreme regional poverty and callous and culturally embedded attitudes towards women more generally. Sexual violence is both the beginning and end point for forms of pornography that support the values of men who see the subjugation and usage of women as acceptable. Increasingly brutal portrayals online facilitate such values, as well as generate deviant and networked communities of users that help to reproduce and expand misogynistic value systems ([Durkin et al. 2006](#)). The world of online porn, even though differentiated, enables elective modes of experimentation with desire, through hyperlinks, suggestions and communities of users providing signposts to related or more extreme content—all of which facilitates the creation of implicit peer support communities ([Bray 2011](#)) with negative attitudes. As [Durkin and colleagues \(2006\)](#) note, the rise of networked spaces has facilitated the aggregation of deviant values that generate mutual support and the denial of harm, as well as viable consumer demand for online services that either match or feed these forms of sexual expression.

Our discussion here relates to these harms but more formally to a consideration of what *kind* of space experiences of pornography are linked to and *how* this may generate systemic denial of its associated harm. Such spaces appear to act as zones of suspension in which those apprehended made available and subordinated to the unchecked desire of consumers paying for such experiences. As writers like [Wood \(2011\)](#) have argued, internet pornography is implicated in the case histories of increasing numbers of patients whose behaviour has escalated and whose worldviews have become structured by their viewing of internet pornography, which, in turn, assists in allowing the disowning of sadistic and impulsive sexual behaviour. Online sites and communities thus generate sexual licence and the legitimization of predatory and abusive sexuality. The various straplines of even mainstream pornography providers demarcate a zone of social exception within which limitless fantasy can be engaged and in which sex subjects/objects can be apprehended and denuded of biography or humanity.

In these zones of cultural exception, subterranean values are capable of flourishing relatively unchecked as the constraints of dominant values and social norms are rejected or loosened. Excitement and engagement within these spaces can be experienced without feelings of guilt or repulsion as they are neutralized by the sense that these spaces are remote and apparently private. The logic of our participation is based on frequent libidinal unloading in which satisfaction is supported by the underwriting narratives and representations of many pornographic websites. Networked media and small-screen interfaces enable us to wallpaper our world with the things that we desire most, and it is in this space that all is permitted, or—at the very least—the illusion that such possibilities pervades.

The ability of viewers to experience pleasure in extreme online pornography is predicated on the denial of harm of those viewed and the fantasy that women ‘want it’ or make economically rational, and thus voluntary, choices to take part. Such issues are explored in the documentary *Date My Porn Star* (Channel 4, 2014) in which four satisfied users of hardcore pornography have their worldviews shattered by a visit to Los Angeles to speak with members of the porn production community and its actors. Revelations of violence, of being haunted by their on-screen presence, of physical exploitation, the

right exercised by some directors to have post-production sex with these women and, the most deflating realization of all, that the women find no real enjoyment while on set. These revelations appear to destroy the men's fantasies in the absence of a belief in a needful object upon which they can enact their desire.

Since fantasy takes precedent here, our use of such images for satisfaction requires legitimation in order to deny the possibility of victims, what [Matza \(1964\)](#) terms the denial of the status of victimhood. Such denial appears more forceful under the networked nature of new media since such victims appear remote or not fully real. We can also identify a form of denial that Matza describes as the 'negation of offence' in which we appear to be increasingly divorced from the material consequences of the articulation of our desire. Such techniques of neutralization can work powerfully in assisting the analysis of violent or extreme pornography since it rests on the idea that deviance of this kind may proceed where viewers are able to sustain the belief that their behaviour is harmless in its consequences. In Matza's model, we can see how individuals operating in subcultures that become partially detached from a normative order (in this case the power of the zones of suspension facilitate a sense of fantasy and detachment from an ethic of care) engage with these visions of others within a subculture generated by these new media architectures and the apparent presence of millions of other consumers.

Matza's idea of drift is also of use here since it helps us to locate this kind of individual/networked deviant behaviour and connects the draw of an undertow of illicit online content for social subjects labouring to feel. Through the concept of drift, we may better understand the process by which extreme content is encountered through everyday engagements with 'normal' pornography. Scripts involving more abusive or more overtly degrading routines are provided in the belief that larger audiences can be captured through recourse to more extreme representations. Whether much of that audience is directly attracted (or repelled) by such content becomes irrelevant—drift into screen experiences of generally greater cruelty and callousness occur over time as pornographic experience is populated and structured in ways driven by commercial imperatives that present women as expendable in order to generate market advantage.

Sexual norms are increasingly interwoven with increasingly hardened sexual ideals ([Winlow 2014](#)), such as the kind of pornographic aesthetic in some mainstream Hollywood cinema productions that have achieved massive box office success within the torture (torno) or gore porn (gorno) genres. In the *Hostel* films, US tourists in Eastern Europe are abducted and put into cells where they are tortured and murdered by rich men who pay for these experiences. Raising the possibility of commodified forms of killing, the film's director, Eli Roth, has argued that the function of the film, beyond its overt obvious horror, is as an indictment of sexual exploitation and the possibilities of human cruelty when harnessed to a market logic. No doubt there are also echoes here of totalitarian control and inhuman destruction within a concentrationary imaginary in which the format the camp continues to haunt cultural formats ([Pollock and Silverman 2013](#)). Themes of organized and commodified brutality and sexual violence are by no means unprecedented—George Orwell's opening to *Down and Out in Paris in London* introduces a character he met in a Paris bar:

'VOILA!' she said; 'go down into the cellar there and do what you like. I shall see nothing, hear nothing, know nothing. You are free, you understand—perfectly free.'... 'Without another word I pulled her off the bed and threw her on to the floor. And then I fell upon her like a tiger!...' More and more

savagely I renewed the attack. Again and again the girl tried to escape; she cried out for mercy anew, but I laughed at her. ‘Mercy!’ I said, ‘do you suppose I have come here to show mercy? Do you suppose I have paid a thousand francs for that?’ (Orwell 1933: 2)

The Murder Box: Violence, Torture and Interactive Killing in Video Games

Video gaming has developed at a phenomenal rate since its commercial inception in the 1970s. Starting off as the experiments of hacker hobbyists funded by the US military in the late 1960s, video games soon became the subject of major commercial investment and industry organization on a scale that, by the mid-1970s, established them as a multi-million dollar consumer industry (Kline *et al.* 2003: 84–192). Today, video gaming is positioned as one of the most profitable media-entertainment industries operating around the globe and is estimated to be worth around \$81 billion USD by 2016 (DFC Intelligence 2011).

The popularity of video game *playing* as part of everyday social life is revealed in a 2012 Entertainment Software Association report, which concluded that over 63 per cent of the US population can be defined as ‘video game players’ of one form or another and that 49 per cent of US households own a dedicated games console (ESA 2012). In Europe, industry figures compiled by the Interactive Software Federation for Europe (ISFE) paint a similar picture, estimating that around 68 per cent of people aged between 16 and 19, 57 per cent between 20 and 24 and 49 per cent between 25 and 29 are definable as ‘gamers’, with around 30 per cent of people aged between 30 and 49 also falling within this category (those who have played in the last 6 months regardless of whether or not they have bought a game). These figures are forecast to rise further, especially with the increasing popularity of games on mobile and tablet computing platforms (ISFE 2010).

These figures indicate the profoundly central position that video games and game culture now occupies. Our interest, however, is not in a kind of awestruck celebration of the scale and commodified commercial potential of the industry. These estimates are merely a backcloth to a more fundamental point: that despite a huge diversity in terms of the genres and types available, many of the most highly rated and commercially successful games are based around themes of extreme or exceptional violence, sadistic intent and frequently what Kline *et al.* (2003) refer to as ‘militarized masculinity’—media content that celebrates conquest and destruction. These types of game generate what might be called ‘murder boxes’: cultural zones of social suspension founded upon the release of explicit and exceptional forms of violence. Many of the interior worlds experienced and shared in such games are based around interactive media that empower sadistic pleasures of destruction, murder, rampages, and bodily dissection or dismemberment. Interactive video gaming technologies make possible participation in spaces that psychically connect the player to visions of increasingly complex societies that are often stripped of ethical constraints or humane values. We can immerse ourselves in these murder boxes effortlessly to release fantasies of domination and destruction. Violence, warfare, criminality and even premeditated murder are such common themes in popular video game culture that a glancing survey of available titles quickly reveals their seemingly *unexceptional* status.

Violence in video games has a protracted history as a subject of both public and academic debate. Mostly, these debates have been characterized by a mixture of outspoken

moralizing regarding perceived negative effects on young people on the one hand and reports of empirical evidence that might—or might not—suggest a causal link between media violence and aggressive behaviour on the other (see [Dill and Dill 1998](#); [Anderson 2003](#); [Anderson et al. 2010](#)). Aside from these often circular considerations, we can see the more recent emergence of academic literature that interprets gaming as a new and analytically intriguing media format. Often referred to as ‘game studies’ ([Aarseth 2001; 2004](#)), or ‘ludology’ ([Juul 2006; 2010](#)), this area of literature has arisen out of a desire to formally delineate and describe the properties of video games as a distinctive media format. Yet, even beyond these new interests—many of which are guided by celebratory sensibilities—it is important to understand the cultural position and dissemination of violence and morbidity in many games. Gaming’s immense popularity and the rise of industrial forms of game development and trade, as well as the imperative to capture new and ‘untapped’ markets, raise the question of how video game entertainment is necessarily bound to dominant anti-social tropes and themes (the focus on death and sadism, the military-gaming complex expressed by many warfare games ([Kline et al. 2003](#)) and the hyper-masculine/macho nature of their gender scripting ([Brown 2008](#)).

In light of the predominantly mainstream position of video games within contemporary popular culture, there appears significant value in supplanting stale debates about their causal ‘effects’ on individualized forms of violence and aggression—debates often relying heavily upon laboratory models of ‘media exposure’ (for an overview, see [Weaver 2011](#))—with more scoping analyses of their wider significance as cultural forms that connect players to sexist and dehumanizing value systems that are nevertheless exciting. In short, there is a need for scoping analyses of the ways in which hegemonic norms and values are reproduced through the scripts and assumptions of many games and the commercial logics that shape the nature of their content ([Rodgers 2014](#)). Experiments deprived of real-world context aiming to ‘determine whether short-term exposure to violent video games increases aggressive behaviour’ ([Dill and Dill 1998](#): 414), whilst raising issues of importance on their own terms, are of limited use in pursuing these kinds of questions. Moreover, the parochialism of the psychological theories upon which these studies are based ([Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009](#)) through elevating individualized players and their perceived problematic behaviours to the level of causal explanation, has tended to bypass considerations of video games’ wider cultural significance as purveyors of value systems and the social contexts in which they are shared, discussed and incorporated into many peoples’ lives.

Violence, torture and interactive killing in many of the most popular video games—such as *Call of Duty*, *Hitman*, *Battlefield*, *Assassins Creed* or *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) to name a select few—can be understood in terms of their position as a necrophilous form of popular entertainment in [Fromm’s \(1973\)](#) terms wherein there is now a passionate pursuit of the body, of death and the shining machineries that conceal the true reality of such destruction. The kind of norms, affectations and interpretive dispositions shaped by what have become conventions of violence, torture and murder within this ‘media milieu’ of playful, *ludic* engagement tells us something about our culture; more importantly, however, it tells us something of the kinds of social and commercial structures that undergird their proliferation and incorporation into everyday life. More concretely, we are arguing that there is a value to look beyond simple relationships of game violence and direct, interpersonal aggression and to think more deeply about the kinds of inner shifts, intersubjective re-formations and social impacts of our increasing

immersion in interactive experiences of violence. In short, what kind of shifts might be taking place here at the level of social *norms* and *values* given what Ferrell *et al.* (2008) suggests is the transparent profit potential of commodified violence and social harm? What does the prevalence of extreme forms of violence, killing and warfare in video-game content tell us about our culture and how can we enter these discussions without alarm or distorted moralizing about perceived ‘effects’ at an individualized level of explanation? Thinking about these experiences as places and plots of social exception, stripped of conditions, rules, impediments and certain laws goes some way to breaking free from a preoccupation with ‘effects’ on *users* by focusing attention onto the ways in which the commodification of—and engagement with—such experiences is symptomatic of a broader, more general socio-cultural patterning wherein: ‘crime and violence become cheap commodities, emptied of their embodied consequences, sold as seductions of entertainment and digital spectacle’ (Ferrell *et al.* 2008: 144). To play in these spaces is to experience certain forms of freedom from inhibitions—both social and psychological—and an inevitable subjugation of others encountered in these spaces as cannon fodder, expendable or necessary collateral damage. It is here that extreme forms of conduct are normalized as staple reference points for playful engagement. Building upon Atkinson and Willis’s (2007) concept of the ‘ludodrome’, the notion of played space, it seems apt to suggest the term ‘*ludic thanatodrome*’ as a means to describe the semi-closed ‘murder box’—a cultural zone of exception where one can play at and with death. The ludic thanatodrome is suggestive of the kinds of overt encouragements to *play at* human harm, assassination and torturous violence—it is a space where bloody killing, ‘head shots’, ‘frags’ and ‘kill points’ are at the heart of both a playful mode of engagement but also a casualization of warfare, brutality and a general devaluing of human life and pro-sociality.

Again we can see how the idea of spaces of exceptional conduct can be applied to video games and their suspension of social physics. In games like GTA, there is a suspension of social rule structures and an invitation to play with the possibilities of ludicrous and destructive behaviour—one well-known aspect of this game world being the ‘rampage’ mode, wherein the player must accumulate as many ‘gang-killings’ as possible within a certain time limit in a ‘one-man-army’ fashion, which both excite and horrify. In examples like these, impinging moral frameworks are sidelined and narrative devices help to encourage righteous rage and the negation of social obligations. The emptiness of law in these spaces is of course simulated and thereby allows an increased capacity to play with lawlessness, to test it and discover its coded limits. Agamben himself, in a somewhat prescient comment where video games are concerned, suggests that ‘one day humanity will play with the law just as children play with disused objects’ (2005: 64). For video games, it does indeed seem that exceptionality from normative and pro-social order itself becomes the norm.

Many gamers view their actions as fantasies without consequence and, in most cases, as deeply valued experiences that provide entertainment and complex narrative encounters, which become points of reference in their worldviews and shared identities as such media become more sharing-oriented (Atkinson and Willis 2007). Yet both of these aspects of gaming can be true at the same time; we can see how gaming encourages a focus on morbidity and violence, yet also that gamers are not dupes who cannot see or police the boundaries between fantasy space and their actions outside them—a point highlighted in the analysis of gamer worldviews by Atkinson and Willis (2007). Gaming

is both a social and a personal experience consisting of online and out-of-game interactions (competitions, scheduling, fan clubs and so on), all of which appear to contribute to an increasing cultural prestige attached to gaming more generally. Yet in many of the most popular games, we can see Agamben's camp being firmly pitched and made open to those willing to pay the entry fee for bloody possibilities. Games like *GTA*, *Call of Duty* or *Hitman* produce narratives and social logics in complex and massively realized game worlds, in which clear enemies are signalled as being available for slaughter to enable progress. In *GTA*, the camp that is the city generates playful engagements in which the streets, the homeless and passing pedestrians are made available to outright destruction on the part of the player character—it is here that we find trophy awards for achieving objectives such as holding up all 20 in-game stores (the *stick-up kid* trophy) or finishing a gang attack without dying whilst killing ten enemies (the *clean sweep* trophy). The apparent super-realism of these spaces is undoubtedly a simulation of real cities, but our belief in its realism adds force to the ways in which such games are viewed and valued in our culture more broadly. These games offer an interior world in which a kind of elective or temporary madness can be engaged, we can choose to go crazy, to take a kind of psychopathic holiday in which our everyday rules and conventions are fully suspended for the time that we are 'there', in the zone.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the cultural positioning of violence and harms in relation to enclosed screen spaces. We have developed the concept of the murder box to describe these spaces, where social and psychic desires that demand sexual and violent interactions draws on a new-found world of dark delights. These zones offer images and interactions with real and imagined harms, underpinned by the promise that all is permitted in these delimited areas. We have used the term cultural zones of suspension as a term to describe these space experiences and to debate the question of how such extreme content raises new and complex questions for criminology and its understanding of the precise locus and diverse nature of violence and symbolic forms of harm. What links exist, for example, between apparently virtual sexual fantasies and material harms enacted in remote locales? What is the relationship between fantasy and the potential recalibration of social affect, values, and actions outside these spaces?

We have argued that these are critical questions for a criminology operating within an apparently less violent western world, but in which we now appear to see an off-shoring of drive-based acts in virtual theatres that offer open engagements with sexual and violent conduct tailored to our personal desires. A growing distancing from physical violence and rising affluence appear to be associated with social numbness, atomization and the reduction of empathy. Yet, paradoxically these changes have signalled a hunger for representations of the deeper realities and finalities of life through film, internet and gaming media. The lure of images that speak of real horror, the end of life, destruction and human terror have become a mainstay of such representations; like the baying publics of Roman amphitheatres, seeking to witness death and sexual violence has become a major part of our cultural repertoires and mores. Despite the privacy of murder box screen spaces, such sites offer unsettling impressions of the kind of culture that we now inhabit. Such moral holidays may influence or even reformat

sexual conduct norms and deeper values around the value of life, suggesting that the undertow of such media generates consequences for social life.

Free-flowing access to socially extreme online content means that analyses couched either in conventional subcultural terms or in terms of crude media effects appears to be problematic, particularly since the diffusion of pornography and gaming make them open and shared cultural phenomena. Such activities are no longer a shunned back-region of social experience—our contact or engagement with extreme sexual and violent images now spills out into everyday life, previously forbidden desires and guilty pleasures have been culturally repositioned, their former deviance has been partially neutralized by their growing incorporation into contemporary social repertoires.

Within our contemporary cultural condition, certain facets of social life have been released from conventions, etiquette and norms that tended to offer some restraint on excessive forms of social behaviour. The appending of desires and drives to networked media has generated zones of experience that permit excessive, cathartic and aggressive engagement with diverse images and interactions. Such experiences have come to be threaded through daily social experience through the proliferation of networked and mobile technologies. Cumulative and deepening exposure within murder boxes may thereby generate complex social consequences with implications for how we understand the boundaries of deviance and crime in the future. The claim to fantasy and enacting of apparently harmless harms belies the way in which forms of sexual and violent expression are increasingly folded back into conventional ways of being. The wider impact has been two-fold. First, the availability of material that supports violent and sexual drives is increasingly identifiable in the kinds of selfhood shaped by information technologies among emerging cohorts. Second, given the ability to switch between modes of civil conduct and the focused release of desire, this libidinally driven economy appears to pave the way for further social excess underpinned by corporate providers searching for an ability to both broker and rent access to these experiences. Certainly, the disentangling of the deeper and complex human harms generated by these spaces, experiences and material consequences is likely to provide an ongoing challenge for critical and cultural criminology.

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