Gamification of Terror: Power Games as Liminal Spaces

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cases of transnational alt-right domestic terrorism have been repeatedly taking place in the last few years, reaching its peak in 2019. Although executed in often very remote locations worldwide, they share a lot of striking resemblances. They tend to be initiated by white male extremists, often referred to as "lone wolves" as they act outside of any direct and organized command structures. Many had been radicalized in an online ecosystem of user-moderated boards such as 4chan, 8chan or Gab, which have become cesspools of right wing ideology (Davey and Ebner 2019). There are two more important characteristics that increasingly relate to such cases – "head counting" of shooting victims on anonymous news boards and live streaming of the attacks over head-mounted cameras (Mackintosh and Gianuca 2019). And it is those two phenomena that have brought videogames back into the infamous spotlight in a long-lasting discussion on their relationship to ethics and violence. This time, however, the public discourse has shifted from videogames to that of gamification, denoting the use of game dynamics in non-game scenarios (Deterding et al. 2011). In search of accountability, politicians and journalists keep asking whether game-related strategies could enhance violent acts.

This paper is an invitation to explore and challenge the main line of argumentation in the discussions on the "gamification of terror". Video recording and live streaming of the acts of terror as well as turning killing into a virtual competition shed new light the ethical dimension of play. Trivializing death and making it the object of a ludic spectacle require a careful analysis, one going beyond a direct videogame violence cause and effect debate. Gamification of terror provokes to rethink not only the role of games or gamers in political extremism but above all forms of community and the infrastructure of the newly emerging alternative social platforms, which are providing a necessary space for the growth of the alt-right community. It is within these computer-mediated spaces that violence is not only gamified, but more importantly ritualized and in effect staged as a mass entertainment spectacle. In order to understand the place of games within the

context of transnational right-wing extremism, we want to bring two crucial concepts into the conversation: *rhetorics of power* by Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) and *liminality* by Victor Turner (1982).

Sutton-Smith argues that "understanding play primarily as contest reflects the wide-spread male rhetoric that favors the exaltation of combative power" (1997, 80). Combat is in fact inscribed into the etymology of play - the Anglo-Saxon *plega* denotes a game or sport but can also refer to a fight and battle. It comes as no surprise that the competition logic defines recent gamified acts of terror. The far-right online community scores the performances of the shooters, placing them indirectly in competition with one another, which in turn inspires and encourages more attackers to join in the "ranks". Jacob Davey, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a global counter-extremism organization, concludes in an interview for the CNN: "… people criticizing the attacker shows how these attacks have become gamified -- their criticism was that his score wasn't high enough. That's the way these people think, that these attacks are to be consumed, scored and dissected like a video game" (Mackintosh and Gianuca 2019).

The aesthetic of the first-person shooter is also reflecting the power image of a heavily armed figure well trained and prepared for the successful completion of a mission. In popular discourse ego-shooter-games are conflated with all games, as if violent competition was the only existing mode of digital play. That is why we want to differentiate here between games in general and what we may refer to as power games, shaped by combat and violence. It is an important point to make at the start of the discussion on games and terror in order not to fall into a rhetorical trap set by the majority of public discourse equating videogames *per se* with violence.

Gamification of terror cannot be fully understood without the concept of liminality (Turner 1982). Play and games are an important part in Turner's work as they have the power to create the sense of togetherness within a community. The Latin meaning of *limen* signifies a threshold; something, which remains in between different spaces, dividing and connecting them at the same time. To step over a threshold in a ritual sense is to undergo a transition from one state to another. A rite of passage illustrates such a transition towards a new position within the society, usually linked to an enhanced status. The main argument we will develop in the paper is that platforms such as 8chan in combination with power games open liminal spaces, in which anonymous users performing acts of terror go through rites of passage. Last but not least, we want to stress how crucial it is that the game studies scholarly community engages in larger social conversation on the place of games and videogames within the contemporary culture, even more so when games appear within the context of growing worldwide extremism.

Endnotes

1 The Halle (Saale) shooting of the 9th of October 2019 is the most recent one in a series of extremist terrorist attacks, which also took place in El Paso (USA), Pittsburgh (USA), and Christchurch, New Zealand.

2 It is difficult to pin point the origin of the term. Gamification of extremism seems to have been brought into public attention for the first time in March 2019 after the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. In August 2019 phrases „gamification of terror" and „gamification of terrorism" have been widely used in international media in the aftermath of the El Paso mass shooting.

3 4Chan, 8Chan are unregulated anonymous discussion boards. Gab can be described as an ultra-libertarian social media site. Amongst others, they have been attracting far-right propagandists.

4 A full argumentation introduced in this extended abstract can be read in our forthcoming paper referenced in the bibliography.

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