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How video-game-images can turn into lethal reality

Massacre of civilians in the video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, which A. Breivik has played and recommends for marksmanship training

From A. B. Breivik's "European declaration of independence".

"Marksmanship training

Target practise is likely going to be a problem for many people in certain countries (urban Europeans like us, ouch:). Consider taking a vacation to a country where you are able to train in marksmanship or join a gun club. Simulation by playing Call of Duty, Modern Warfare is a good alternative as well but you should try to get some practise with a real assault rifle (with red point optic) if possible." (p. 900)

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I just bought Modern Warfare 2, the game. It is probably the best military simulator out there and it's one of the hottest games this year. I played MW1 as well but I didn't really like it as I'm generally more the fantasy RPG kind of person - Dragon Age Origins etc. and not so much into first person shooters. I see MW2 more as a part of my training-simulation than anything else. I've still learned to love it though and especially the multiplayer part is amazing. You can more or less completely simulate actual operations". (S.1418)

A. Breivik recommends the video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* for marksmanship training. Despite his outspoken statements, there were only few public comments that analyzed the role that playing ego-shooters in general or using this particular game might have had in the development of his murderous plans. Among them most rejected the idea of a possible impact. **Christopher Ferguson**, one of the researchers who had provided arguments to America's Supreme Court's decision to allow the sale of violent video games to minors, claimed, "**Linking the playing of violent video games to a mass homicide, when the perpetrator is a young male is like blaming the killing on the fact that he was wearing sneakers.**"¹ And the video-game-community, in self-righteous denial, ridiculed the idea that the perpetrator's recommendations about marksmanship might be taken seriously, "Real-weapon-marksmanship can hardly be learned "by mouse-pushing."²

Statements like these, however, misrepresent what critics of videogame violence say. **There is not a single researcher who claims a mono-causal relationship between media use and real life aggression, and there is consent among them that the influence varies with users.** The Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony, the institution I work for, supports a risk model, maintaining the idea that instable people are more vulnerable to the effects of game violence than stable ones.

The rejection of the marksmanship claim seems particularly hypocritical. A rifleman does need eye-hand-coordination for aiming at moving targets, especially if he has a great number of them and if he handles two weapons at the same time and maybe even takes photos of what he is doing. And the improvement of eye-hand-coordination has been one of the central issues with the advocates of video-game-culture. When it was found that former use of ego-shooters improved an operating-surgeon's skills, there was not a single gamer who contradicted by saying "You can't improve real-life-surgery by pushing a mouse." It is not about pushing a mouse. It is about the transfer of a general skill that can be used in different areas of reality.

I now want to give a particular piece of information about *Call-of-Duty: Modern Warfare 2* that in Germany at least has not yet been discussed in the context of the Utoya massacre: it is about the notorious "Airport Scene".

In one of the very first missions, the gamer joins a group of Russian terrorists as a CIA undercover agent in a raid on an airport. In this role, he can³ commit an atrocious massacre on unarmed civilians. Similarities of the scene to Breivik's deeds on Utoya are striking.

The mission "No Russian" was leaked for dubious reasons about half a year before the game appeared in November 2009. No other video game scene has been more controversial so far than

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/johngaudiosi/2011/07/28/expert-calls-blaming-video-games-on-tragic-massacres-like-oslo-and-columbine-racist/> (10.08.2011)

² <http://stigma-videospiele.de/wordpress/?p=5431> (07.08.2011)

³ The gamer is offered to skip the mission because of its "disturbing elements".

this one: many general newspapers and all the gaming magazines wrote about it (in mostly critical comments), and there were heated discussions in gamer-forums. Raffael Schupisser in a Swiss



Massacre Scene in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*

The Gamer/CIA undercover Agent (holder of the ego-shooter-weapon) together with Russian terrorists shoots down unarmed civilians, among them those who are fleeing like the woman in the bottom left picture who is running into the line of fire.

quality paper (Neue Züricher Zeitung), despite attributing critical intentions to the mission, thought the scene contained “the most vicious three and a half minutes of gameplay in video game history.”⁴ Concerning duration though, he was mistaken, obviously having taken the German Version as a model, which had undergone a very peculiar mode of censorship (see below). A little search on YouTube, with almost half a million video clips from this game, shows that there is an uncut German version, too, and that other gamers managed the duration of nine minutes.

In the example, I watched⁵ you see the terrorists move across an area which is soon covered with dead bodies and then perform a real manhunt, chasing men and women through various parts of the airport, at times shooting from an elevated viewpoint into the waiting area. Panic has broken out, and you hear the screams. Sometimes victims crawl on their knees and are shot a second time. Blood is all over the place, and there are splashes against the screen.

⁴ http://www.nzz.ch/magazin/unterhaltung/spielrezensionen/grenzerfahrungen_fuer_ego-shooter_1.4036779.html (01.08.2011)

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H51cZLk7rsI> (05.08.2011)

So the mission is quite a nightmarish experience.⁶ Anyone who has followed the news will be aware that the description parallels the Utoya scenes in striking details.

In Germany, the official rating board, the USK, had the scene de-activated by the publisher in a way that gamers cannot shoot civilians (or terrorists). If they do, it is “game over” for them and they have to start the scene again. Norway, however, has PEGI-ratings (Pan European Games Information), and in the European version of the game, the mission remained uncut,⁷ which means that A. Breivik was able to play it.

There may be various reasons why, after July 22, the general media have not started a debate on a possible function this scene may have had in A. Breivik’s mental preparation. Many Journalists will not know it, but possibly the PR-efforts of the video-game-industry have already created a certain self-censorship. In addition, the gaming community, of course, is not interested in this kind of clarification. Many gamers feel misunderstood, in fact stigmatized, and barricade themselves in closed circles. They are afraid that their public reputation will suffer even more and that a new debate on banning violent games may ensue.

Certainly, the contrary is the case: An un-fearful confrontation with the implications of the Norway massacre would rather gain them respect among non-gamers.

I anyway, agree with Nils Minkmar, who in an essay in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* analyzed the **similarities between A. Breivik and SS-men who committed mass shootings in Russia**. He claimed that in the light of the atrocities A. Breivik committed „we owe it to the victims to study even the smallest detail of what he has written and the way he preceded.“⁸

ONE detail, and not a small one, is the virtual massacre in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare2*. “It can well be imagined that with unstable people this scene might have a negative effect,” Raffael Schupisser, who I quoted above, wrote in 2009. What a macabre prophesy!

Certainly, I do not imagine a naïve copying effect. However, the risk-model I mentioned above claims exactly what R. Schupisser predicted. **The fantasy of an instable person like A. Breivik may have been stimulated by the massacre in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and he may have had it at the back of his mind when he planned his murderous deeds.**

The information about the mission and the images that are needed to analyze its possible contribution to the complex network of causes for Breivik’s crimes should in any case be available to the public.

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⁶ Among the YouTube commentators there are a number of gamers who say that they didn’t shoot at all and just had the Russians do the killings. The fact that this is possible, too, does, of course not excuse the horror of the scene.

⁷ http://www.pegi.info/de/index/global_id/505/?searchString=call+of+duty&agecategories=&genre=&organisations=&platforms=&countries=&submit=Suchen#searchresults (04.08.2011)

⁸ <http://www.faz.net/artikel/C30351/anders-breivik-wahn-und-sinn-30476396.html> (4.08.2011)