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From GunPlay to GunPorn.

A techno-visual history of the first-person shooter

Matteo Bittanti

Happiness is a warm gun (Happiness bang, bang, shoot, shoot)
Happiness is a warm gun, mama (Happiness bang, bang, shoot, shoot)
("Happiness is a warm gun", The Beatles**)**

What is a first-person shooter? It is a digital application, originally created for recreational purposes, resulting from the interaction of four major components: computer, film, television, and military technology, with the latter informing the previous three. The computer is both a production tool and a consumption space. Cinema and television provide the visual style and the narrative context of the FPS, whereas the military ethos supplies the ideological basis for the genre. Key to all components is the *gun*, as a notion, icon, tool, and narrative. As Rune Klevjer (2006) suggests, in this type of games, "'first-person' means first-person gun, a unique and rather extreme perceptual articulation within a broader cultural category of violent gun-play. The genre holds up and celebrates the gun as the ultimate technology, a focus point for a wide range of modern technology. Captured by the First Person Shooter, technology is interpreted in the image of the gun" (2006, 120).

In this paper, I intend to examine how a recent fist person shooter, Criterion's *BLACK* (2006) articulates these different components. By juxtaposing the game within the broader range of cultural artifacts, the aesthetical and phenomenological implications of the first person shooter will be discussed. Specifically, I will argue that the first-person shooter represents the last step in a long history of mediated gunplay, a history that begins with the emergence of the photographic medium in the 19th century. At the same time, I will try to explain how and why the first-person shooter emerged as a key genre of digital gaming, and why it holds such a prominent place in the menu of leisure activities that we all choose from.

1. The origins: the *fusil photographique*

In a thought-provoking essay titled "Gunfire", originally published by *Sight & Sound* magazine in October 1995, film critic Jason Jacobs (1996) reminds us that "to a certain extent cinema and gunfire had always been intertwined. Guns and movies have been twin obsessions of American

culture in the twentieth century, and both possess mythic status" (163). Jacobs goes as far as suggesting that:

> Perhaps, cinema and guns were made for each other. In both, the apparatus is mechanical, chemical, and rhythmic. They share the same terminology (the shot, the magazine), a point-and-shoot rationale, and a historical moment: in the late nineteenth century, the development of the fully automatic Maxim gun (mounted on a tripod) coincided with the first showing of the Lumiéres films (163-164).

This connection has been discussed at length by many critics, most notably Paul Virilio. In *War and Cinema* (1989), the French philosopher explores the technology-military-entertainment complex at length. He writes that the world's first portable motion picture camera, Etienne-Jules Marey's *fusil photographique*, shared the *appearance* and *functioning* of a gun.

What is the *fusil photographique?* In 1882, Marey invented and built the chronophotograph, a camera in the shape of a 'rifle' which could be used to take twelve frames of birds in flight. A physiologist, Marey was fascinated with the problem of analyzing the movements of insects, birds, animals, and humans. With the aid of the chronophotograph, he recorded images of moving targets. His preference to follow the movement of birds from one perspective led to the *fusil photographique* or photographic 'rifle'. Through this method Marey was able of moving with the bird in air, as in panning, attaining an accurate scientific study of movement. Marey's mobile camera allowed for the birds to be followed more easily than a still camera. He therefore shared the idea of the Janssen 'revolver'. Simply by aiming his gun at the flying birds, Marey was able to place twelve exposures along the outer edge of the plate. The very end of the barrel could be moved in or out thus providing focus. At the bottom of the end of the barrel housed the magazine containing the gelatin plate. In front of the plate was another disk, opaque, with twelve shutters, and in front of that disk, one more opaque disk with only one opening. By firing the trigger, all three disks moved with the help of a clocked mechanism. With the gelatin-based film that George Eastman introduced in 1885, Marey was also able to produce rudimentary movies. They were at a high speed – 60 images per second, unlike conventional cinema which rely on a 24 frame-per-second format[1] – and of great image quality.

The *fusil photographique* is one of the first examples of the technical overlap between guns and cameras, cinematic entertainment, and ideology. In fact, as Virilio notes, Marey "placed the cronophotography that he had invented at the service of military research into movement"

[1] Incidentally, 60 frame-per-second is the *de facto* standard for first-person shooters.

(1989: 10)[2]. Moreover, the *fusil photographique* represents the first step of mediated gunplay. It had scientific, not recreational purposes. It had creative, rather than destructive consequences. Moreover, the *fusil photographique* prefigures the emergence of cinema, whose birth is conventionally set in 1895.

1.1 *The Great Train Robbery*

Flash forward to 1903, one year before Marey's death. Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* is considered by many critics the first narrative film and the precursor to the western genre. It used a number of innovative techniques including parallel editing, double exposure composite editing, camera movement, and on location shooting. More importantly, the film ended with a medium shot close-up of the bandit chief (George Barnes) with his hat pushed back on his head. He points and shoots his revolver point-blank, directly into the camera, virtually aiming at the audience. This scene was completely irrelevant to the plot – in fact, theater owners were told they could use it at their discretion as either a prologue or an epilogue. However, the historical importance of this simulated shooting should not be underestimated. According to film historians, the scene with the gun pointing at the audience had the audiences at the time screaming in fear, then laughing in relief. This spectacular moment that had a film character engaging in cinematic gunplay with the spectators prefigures the virtual shootouts of the first-person video game. In both cases, as the fourth wall that separates reality from the fictional world is smashed by fictional bullets, the spectators' emotional response reaches its peak. Unlike the *fusil photographique*, Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* produces dynamic but non interactive images of gunplay.

1.2 *The Wild Bunch*

Flash forward to the 1960s. The role of cinematic gunplay rose dramatically in the second part of the 20th century, to the point that one might legitimately argue that the history of Hollywood cinema is the history of the representation of gunplay, a history that becomes progressively more spectacular. The turning point was the appearance of the New Hollywood cinema in the late Sixties. Movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) redefined the notion of gunfire. According to Jacobs (1996) here "the shooting is no longer a means to an end but en end in itself" (163), losing any narrative implications to become pure spectacle.

[2] For more information, see Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey* (1830-1904), Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

At the same time, gunfire acquired a new degree of verisimilitude. According to Jacobs, this transformation was motivated by two key historical episodes: the assassination of JFK and the Vietnam War. "With these two events, the representation of gunfire was required to become more visceral and out of control to be realistic" (Jacobs, 1996: 164). Discussing the final sequence of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, a milestone in the history of cinematic gunplay, Jacobs concludes that it is "the active mediation of gunfire and bullet impact in this movie which supplies the meaning of the sequence, even if the meaning is painfully nihilistic" (165).

This sequence – characterized by "fast cutting between firing and bullet impact, snap zooms cross cutting between the slo-motion, bullet ripped leaps of Mexican soldiers [...] Close-ups of blood exploding from flesh, close-ups of roaring guns, close-ups of faces screwed tight in agony" (164-165) – is a paradigmatic example of the "gradual transformation of modern Hollywood cinema into a *pure thrill machine*, offering sensation before story, the cause-effect narrative engine becoming (at significant points, in various ways and to varying degrees) subordinate to the spectacle" (165, emphasis added).

The proliferation of brutal cinematic spectacles in the late '60s and '70s was not welcomed by all critics. Many were disgusted by the "transformation of modern Hollywood cinema into a *pure thrill machine*". For instance, Tom Wolfe (1976) publicly denounced this evolution (or devolution) in a seminal piece titled "Pornoviolence". Wolfe lamented the emergence of a new form of pornography, a "fantasy of easy triumph in a world where status competition has become so complicated and frustrating" (184). He appeared to be particularly troubled by the ambivalence of this obscenity, and by the visual collusion of the camera and the weapon:

> What makes it pornoviolence is that in almost every case the camera angle, therefore the viewer, is with the gun, the fist, the rock. The pornography of violence has no point of view in the old sense that novels do. You do not live the action through the hero's eyes. You live with the aggressor, whoever he may be. One moment you are the hero. The next you are the villain [...] On the rare occasions in which the gun is emptied into the camera – i.e. into your face – the effect is so startling that the pornography of violence all but loses its fantasy charm (1976: 184).

1.3 *Meanwhile, on the East Coast*

As gunplay in cinema was becoming more spectacular and visceral, a new medium was hesitantly making its way in the mediascape: the computer game. One of the earliest examples of this new art form is *Spacewar* (1962).

The game was created by a group of hackers including Steve "Slug" Russell, Martin "Shag" Graetz, and Wayne Wiitanen of the ficticious "Higham Institute". In 1961, Russell

conceived the game with the intent of implementing it on a DEC PDP-1 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The basic gameplay of *Spacewar* involves two armed spaceships attempting to shoot one another while maneuvering in the gravity well of a star. Each player is in command of a ship, and must attempt to simultaneously shoot at the other space vessel and avoid colliding with the star. Player controls included clockwise and counterclockwise rotation, thrust, fire, and hyperspace.

In *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984), Steven Levy suggests that Steve "Slug" Russell and the other game designers created *Spacewar* because they wanted to experience the space battles that Doc. E. Smith described in his pulp novels, specifically, the *Skylark* series. They created a game – inventing a new medium in the process – because they did not have the means to make a film based on Smith's space operas. In an article titled "The Origin of Spacewar", J. M. Graetz (1981) explains the hackers' intensions:

> We asked ourselves, why doesn't anyone make *Skylark* movies? Hearing no reply (our innocence of current film technology, economics, and copyright laws was enormous), we often passed the time in the Hingham Street common room in deep wishful thought, inventing special effects and sequences for a grand series of space epics that would never see a sound stage […] Nonetheless, these books, movies, and bull-sessions established the mind-set that eventually led to *Spacewar* (Graetz, 1981: 78).

In other words, what led Russell and the other hackers at MIT to design a computer game from scratch was the absence of a cinematic adaptation of the *Skylark* novels. *Spacewar* – "a cross between a b-movie and a 120.000 dollars toy" (Levy, 1984: 59) is the solution to that problem. "*Spacewar* was not a simple computer simulation: it made you into a pilot of a spaceship. It is as if Doc Smith's sci-fi novels became reality" (Levy, 1996: 62).

Like cinema, the roots of the video game medium can be traced back to the East Coast, although both media quickly migrated to the West, i.e. California. As Lev Manovich (1996) has convincingly argued, the computer is a byproduct of cinema, both technically and culturally.

> Cinema not only plays a special role in the history of the computer. Since the late nineteenth century, cinema was also preparing us for digital media in a more direct way. It worked to make familiar such 'digital' concepts as sampling, random access, or a database -- in order to allow us to swallow the digital revolution as painlessly as possible. Gradually, cinema taught us to accept the manipulation of time and space, the arbitrary coding of the visible, the mechanization of vision, and the reduction of reality to a moving image as a given. As a result, today the conceptual shock of the digital revolution is not experienced as a real shock -- because we were ready for it for a long time (Manovich, 1996).

With *Spacewar*, mediated gunplay reaches a new level. It becomes dynamic and interactive. Albeit rudimental, *Spacewar* displays all the quintessential traits of the video game medium: it allows the user to manipulate images on the screen in real time and provides instant feedback. The game features almost no narrative elements: what matters here are such factors as agency, interaction, and spectacle. The role of the user changes dramatically: the player is not (only) a spectator, but assumes the roles of the actor and of the co-director. In the process, he becomes a cyborg: he uses an interface – a joystick – to operate inside an electronic, abstract space. While playing a videogame, his presence and agency are spread onto different planes of realities: the real and the simulated. There is only one goal, i.e. the other player's annihilation.

1.4 *Run-and-shoot with the steadicam*

Back to cinema. In the early 1970s, inventor and cameraman Garrett Brown invents the Brown Stabilizer, which eventually became known as the steadicam. As Serena Ferrara (2000) explains in *Steadicam: Techniques and Aesthetics*, the steadicam is a camera that combines the stabilized, steady footage of a conventional tripod mount, with the fluid motion of a dolly shot, plus the flexibility of hand-held camera work. The steadicam's armature absorbs the jerks, bumps, and other small movements of the operator, while smoothly following the various movements needed to cover any given scene, such as moving over irregular terrain or through a crowd.

After completing the first working prototype, Mr. Brown shot a ten minute demo reel of the revolutionary moves this new device could produce. The reel was seen by numerous directors, including Stanley Kubrick and John Avildsen. The latter directed *Rocky* in 1976, one of the first movies to feature steadicam shots, whilst Kubrick would use the Brown Stabilizer in *The Shining* (1980).

Like many other new technologies, the steadicam created a new visual style, redefining the kinetic nature of cinema. Even more important, it redefined the nature of the camera operator. Using a steadicam, the operator becomes an athlete who dances on the set, following the main characters, instead of shooting their actions behind a stationary camera. "Using the steadicam is like leading a partner into a dance" (Brown, quoted in Ferrara, 2000: 61). The steadicam operator is akin to a game player in the sense that they are both cyborgs: his mechanical arm also functions as an electronic eye. Shooting a movie with a steadicam becomes a performance, not dissimilar from a race or a dance.

1.5 *Aliens: the steadicam becomes a weapon*

A spectacular conflation of gun and camera happens in James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986), the sequel to Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). *Aliens* is a high-paced, sci-fi movie that had a tremendous success and helped to establish Cameron as a major action director. It has been noted that *Aliens* (1986) conforms to the majority of the common traits of the Western, as laid out in Will Wright's *Sixguns and Society* (1977) and, in this sense, it can be considered an evolution of both *The Great Train Robbery* and *The Wild Bunch.*

The role of gunplay in *Aliens* is crucial: spectacular gunfire sequences take up most of the narrative of the film[3]. In fact, *Aliens* was part of a wave of movies that defied the convention that futuristic weapons would be variations on energy beam firing devices such as lasers, plasma or particle emitters. The guns used by the marines are all based on real, fully functional weapons. For instance, the pulse rifle is made from a Thompson SMG with an attached Remington 870 shotgun that was mounted in a Franchi SPAS-12 barrel shroud. However, the most important weapon is the M56 squad automatic rifle, created by mounting a World War 2-era German 7.92 x 57 mm MG42 light machine gun on a free moving Steadicam harness. An auto-targeting computerized chain gun steadied by a suit-mounted battle mounting, the M56 was used to devastating effect against the ferocious aliens by two soldiers, Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein) and Drake (Mark Rolston) during the chaotic battle under the heat exchangers midway through the movie. This large weapon is carried with an upper-body mounting harness worn by the operator, which is connected to the gun itself via a computer-controlled, gyrostabilized articulation arm. To aim and fire the weapon, the operator looks through a sighting system that is worn over one eye. This sighting system is connected to infra-red sensors mounted above the barrel, giving the operator a video display of the combat environment. When a target is acquired, the weapon is automatically steered to obtain a lock at center-mass. The gun can then be fired using electronic triggers on the foregrip or the rear hand-hold. The presence of a camera mounted on Vasquez and Drake's guns allowed Ripley and the remaining soldiers to follow the furious battle onscreen, remotely, in a relative safe area.

With the M56 smart gun, fighting becomes an exercise in visualization. Paraphrasing Virilio (1989), the battlefield is really a field of (electronic) perception. The camera and the gun, literally, become one.

1.8 ***Enter the FPS: Doom***

[3] In the *Alien Quadrilogy* DVD, the main character, Sigourney Weaver, who holds strong views on gun control, has stated that she was deeply uncomfortable with the amount of gun violence in the movie, and that Ripley would be required to strap on firearms herself. However, she admitted she ended up enjoying the role and in particular the firearms training. She also admitted that the gunplay held a seductive appeal.

Flash forward to 1992. In Mesquite, Texas, a small game studio led by maverick programmers John Carmack and John Romero created *Wolfenstein 3D*, a three dimensional action game that redefined the very notion of computer game. In *Wolfenstein 3D*, the player is an American soldier named B.J. Blazkowicz attempting to escape from the eponymous Nazi stronghold. He has to confront and eradicate a flotilla of armed guards, as well as killer Dobermans. The building features hidden rooms containing various treasures, food supplies, and medical kits, as well as three different guns and ammunition.

Galvanized by the enormous success of *Wolfenstein 3D*, the creators decided to embark in a new project. Rather than producing a mere sequel, they initially thought about transforming James Cameron's *Aliens* into a video game. After long ponderation, however, they opted for something else: *Doom*. David Kushner (2003) explains:

> There was another idea on the table too: Aliens. Everyone at id was a huge fan on this sci-fi movie. They thought it would make a great game. After some research, Jay found that the rights were available. He thought they could get a deal. But then they decided against it […] Here was this amazing new technology, so why not have a game about demons versus technology, Carmack said, where the player is using high-tech weapons to defeat beasts from hell? […] They all agreed that was what the game could be like: a cross between Evil Dead and Aliens, horror and hell, blood and science (Kushner, 2003: 122-123).

In other words, *Doom* was born as a videoludic remake of two cult movies, Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* II (1987) and James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986). The creators' aspiration was clear: with the aid of the digital medium, they wanted to re-write well known narratives, making them interactive. Kushner stresses the fact that even the title of the game, *Doom*, has cinematic origins: "It was taken from *The Color of Money*, the 1986 Martin Scorsese film in which Tom Cruise played a brash young pool hustler" (2003: 123). "Doom" is the name that Tom Cruise assigns to his favorite pool cue.

Whereas *Spacewar* cinematic ambitions were frustrated by technical limitations, *Doom* is visually closer to film as it borrows, and simultaneously reinvents, such conventions as the subjective camera and the continuous shot. *Doom* gave the players direct control of the camera, allowing them to modify their point of view at will. While *Spacewar* was set in an outer space, *Doom* transported the user in a Martian base made of polygons. The space in which the hero of the FPS operates shares many affinities of the "abstract space" described by Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1991). Its main features are geometric homogeneity and the dominance of the phallic. According to the French philosopher, "abstract space" is:

> Both a result and a container, both produced and productive – on the one hand a representation of space (geometric homogeneity) and on the other a representational space (the phallic). The supposed congruence of the formants of this duality serves, however, to mask its *duplicity*. For, while abstract space remains an arena of practical action, it is also an ensemble of images, signs and symbols (288).

First-person shooters like *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* redefined the relationship between the means of destruction (*the gun*) and the means of depiction (*the camera*). In these games, the player controls the camera, which also operates as a weapon. Whereas in cinema the protagonist of the story is generally a person, in first-person shooters, the central character is a weapon. During gameplay, the gun is situated at the center of the screen. This convention has aesthetical, ideological, and phenomenological implications. While the avatar controlled by the player is transparent, the weapon that he carries is simulated in great detail, in terms of aesthetic and functioning. In a first-person shooter looking and shooting, tend to overlap. As Rune Klevjer (2006) noted:

> Because the hand with the gun is fixed in relation to the framing of he first-person perspective (as if mounted to a subjective camera, immovable), the gunpoint is always at the centre of player's vision. Looking and targeting comes together in the same movement, and the player is invited to (…) follow his gun (122).

Thus, John Carmack and John Romero's re-writing of *Aliens* is not faithful to its source, as Cameron's movie centers on a female character fighting against hordes of phallic-shaped monsters. *Rather, they adapted the M56 smart gun itself*. The phallic becomes both narrative and spectacle, content and interface. Gameplay as gunplay. In other words, *Aliens*'s fictional weapon prefigures – both technically and aesthetically – the emergence first person shooter. In fact, as Klevjer (2006) notes:

> The first-person camera of the PFS is not really just a camera, but a camera-and-gun joined in the virtual apparatus, a camera-gun. The basic set-up does not allow the gun to be moved independently of the camera, which is mounted in a similarly fixed way on the largely invisible body of the player-avatar. When the gun moves, the frame of the camera and the body of the avatar moves with it, and vice-versa. The subjective camera-gun gives unified control of vision and destruction, based on the mathematical simulation of a 3-dimensional space. The visual and auditory response from the weapon that occupies the central position of the game-space is hyper-reactive, loud, and graphically in-you-face, forcing an awareness of sheer power and destruction (119).

Video games – and first-person shooters in particular – are the quintessential *thrill machine*. The first-person shooter is a direct evolution of New Hollywood cinema as it offers

spectacularly realistic simulations – not mere depictions – of gunplay. These games literally transform the viewers into techno-visual weapons, allowing them to orchestrate – rather than simply witness – an imaginary carnage in a geometrically constructed space. As Lefebvre wrote, "*there is a violence intrinsic to abstraction*, and to abstraction's practical (social) use" (289).

It must be noted that the compulsive urge to shoot and to be shot on the screen, assuming the role of the performer rather than a spectator, is not alien to movie audiences. For instance, Geoff King (2000) writes that the spectators of contemporary action films often express an aspiration to "'participate in the film', to be directly acted upon by the film, an effect defined more than anything in terms of the pace at which the action proceeds" (p. 99). These "impact aesthetics", as King calls it, have become the "staples of contemporary action cinema" (ibid.). As we have seen, however, "impact aesthetics" are as old as the medium itself.

1.7 Televised gunplay

> "Video games share characteristics not only with machines, but also with television: they have screens upon which symbolic narratives are played out" (John Fiske, 1989: 88)

Cinema is far from being the only visual reference of the first-person shooter. It should not be forgotten, in fact, that video and computer games are mostly played on monitors and television sets in a private context (i.e., the player's home), not onto the projected screens of film theaters. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the first-person shooter genre shares many affinities with televised gunplay, in particular with reality-based crime shows such as *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*.

The reality-based crime show appeared on North American television networks between the late Eighties and the early Nineties. These programs follow police officers, constables, and sheriff's deputies during patrols and other police work. *Cops*[4], one of the longest-running television programs in the United States, relies on a winning formula that involves no narration or scripted dialog, thus depending entirely on the commentary of the officers and on the actions of the people with which they come into contact. *Cops* uses anywhere from five to ten two-person camera crews riding in different cities across the United States for each weekly 30-minute episode. Each two-person crew consists of a camera operator and a sound mixer. The camera operator typically sits in the front passenger seat of the police car while the sound mixer sits in the back. In the case of a car with two officers, both crew members will sit in the back.

[4] *Cops* was created by John Langley and Malcolm Barbour. It premiered on March 11, 1989, and since then it has aired over 600 episodes.

A paradigmatic example of Wolfe's pornoviolence, *Cops* uses violent action and forceful visual techniques to vicariously immerse the spectator in a thrilling ride. In a poignant essay titled "This is for Fighting, This is for Fun: Camerawork and Gunplay in Reality-Based Crime Shows" (2000), Fred Turner suggests that programs like *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted*,

> [U]rge viewers to confuse the guns of the police with the cameras though which they see events. Just as the military training has long sought to break down the physical barriers between killing and sex in the minds of its soldiers, so the visual styles of these programs work to intermingle the process of seeing and shooting (192).

Turner also points out that reality-TV shows are not *watched*, but "experienced" (2000: 192). Specifically, reality-based crime shows allow the user to experience "highly sexualized and hyper-masculine experiences within their sedentary bodies" (ibidem). Phenomenologically, these shows are much closer to a first-person shooter than any Hollywood film. In fact, first-person shooters are also experienced, not simply watched. Here too the action is not narrated, nor (entirely) scripted: there is room for improvisation. The characters are not professional actors, although their roles are clearly defined. These shows lack narrative depth: they are not conventional stories, but, rather, peripatetic performances. Rather than following an authoritative figure, such as a policeman, the player becomes the policeman, or, better, his gun. The weapon, of course, is also a camera. Thus, if *Cops* were a game, it would be *Counter-Strike* (1999).

There are, however, significant differences between a first-person shooter and reality-based crime shows. Fiske (1989b) notes that "While the reader of the television narrative is able, within limits, to control the meaning of that narrative, he or she cannot physically alter the events as he or she can, and does in video games" (88-89). Gameplay happens in real-time whereas televised time always happens in the past. Thus, the player has much more control over the text in comparison to the spectator. Fiske explains:

> Even though the reader does exert some control over the meaning of the TV narrative, the control is semiotic rather than material. Video game joysticks and firing buttons concretize this control by extending it from the meanings to events. The outcome of the video narrative may always be the same, but the means of achieving it is delegated to the player. This lack of narrative authority in the games works with the absence of meaning to evacuate the author, and into that space the player inserts himself. The player becomes the author" (Fiske, 1989b: 89).

2. GunPorn: *BLACK*

> "Let us now praise insanely violent first-person-shooters. Let us praise the joys of double-wielding a pair of Uzis with unlimited ammo; let us delight in the gorgeous fractal carnage of a rocket launcher as it slams into your target. Let us talk openly about how just totally awesome it is to grab a fully loaded railgun in Quake 4 and wade into a mass of gibbering Strogg aliens and kill and kill and kill again, until there are guts on, like, the ceiling"
> (Clive Thompson, 2006)

BLACK is a first-person shooter for PlayStation 2 and Xbox, developed by Criterion Software and published by Electronic Arts in the United States on February 28, 2006. An example of a "run-and-gun"[5] first-person shooter, *BLACK* achieved "total sales of 530,000 copies in just a two-month span" (David Radd, 2006).

A highly stylized exercise in nihilistic destruction, the game deliberately incorporates Hollywood action movie conventions, with special emphasis on destroyable environments and the handling and performance of real-world firearms. Bullets impacting buildings, terrain, and objects leave visible and persistent damage while great accuracy has been paid to the guns' appearance. The movement, sound effects, and reloading operations are very truthful representations of their equivalent in 'real-life', leading the developers to label the game as "GunPorn". The online slang dictionary *UrbanDictionary.com* defines gunporn as follows:

> Used to describe entertainment that is of an unrealistically gory and gratuitously violent nature […] Jokingly insinuates that guns would readily use the game to fuel their "pornographic" fantasies (*UrbanDictionary.com).*

In other words, *BLACK* provides "unrealistically gory and gratuitously violent" entertainment through the use of virtual guns that act out their "pornographic" fantasies. The juxtaposition of eroticism and violence – as well as the association with cinema – was reinforced in the televised campaign. As Lincoln Hershberger, Director of Marketing for EA told David Radd of *GameDailyBiz*,

> Working with our advertising agency, Wieden+Kennedy, we developed a TV ad around the concept of 'Beautiful Destruction.' We put together an all-star production team including an Academy Award winning special effects crew with film credits like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down* and *The Professional*. We shot the spot in Bucharest Romania on a set designed to look like an old embassy, then topped it off with a classic piece of music, Blue Danube by Johann Strauss. The spot really captured the visceral feel of *Black* and was an exclamation point on a well crafted marketing campaign (Lincoln Hershberger, quoted in Radd, 2006).

[5] "Run-and-gun" first-person shooters emphasize explosive action over narrative depth. They often contain a large number of enemies and allow the player to sustain unrealistic amounts of damage without dying.

With *BLACK*, the developers and the marketers did not shy away from stressing the link between violent entertainment, pornographic pleasures, and gunplay. Actually, they made it explicit. But how can we make sense of such an oxymoron as "beautiful destruction"?

Since film, television, and games use different languages, the gratification that derives from their consumption differs significantly. Jacobs argues that, in cinema "the pleasure gained from watching gunfire sequences is bound up with issues of control and its loss [...] (and it is) connected with a modern fascination, centred on the body as a site of both perfection and decay (1996: 168). In a first-person shooter, on the contrary, the depiction of violence is always external to the character, although the level of damage directly affects the performance of the player's avatar in the game world. In other words, we can only see the enemy being 'impregnated' with bullets, but our avatar – because of its transparency – is not shown being penetrated. The typical FPS assigns a visual priority to offensive gunplay.

Superficial affinities between cinematic and videoludic gunplay should not deceive us. Videoludic gunplay is always *performative*, whereas cinematic gunplay is purely *spectatorial*. Moreover, on a purely aesthetical point of view, videoludic gunplay violates the basic rule of cinema. First-person shooters are not 'edited' like films, and it is often hard to see who is shooting us from which direction. In a first person shooter, the lack of montage[6] makes the action direct and often overwhelming. Cinematic action is created with fast editing that often creates a breathtaking "in your face experience"[7]. As King (2000) notes:

> An entire sequence of action coming out at the viewer might be too much even for the devoted action fan, creating a chaotic and disorientating effect. To have a clear impact the assault requires a point of contrast, just as most action films are structured overall to move from periods of high intensity 'noise' to quieter and more reflective interludes" (162).

Whereas the first-person shooters continuous shoot creates 'un-edited' gunplay, cinema uses fast-cutting to make action scenes more dynamic. As David Bordwell (1998) wrote:

[6] This statement requires further clarification. Michael Nitsche (2005) convincingly explains the difference between cinematic and interactive montage, that is, the montage used in video games: "Montage in film, here, is understood as the technique and result of selecting, and piecing together separate clips into a linear sequence. In contrast, 3D video games generate the picture on the fly, usually picking from a number of rule-driven viewpoints. Interactive montage leads to even less predictable results as it depends on the player's interaction. This complicates the traditional categorization of montage as a result of the editing as as a distinct process of cinematic meaning generation" (1).

[7] Thus, in a sense FPS games are more realistic than cinema since they respect the "unity of space", as Bazin argued ("Essential cinema, seen for once in its pure state, on the contrary, is to be found in straightforward photographic respect of the unity of space […] It is simply a question of respect for the spatial unity of an event at the moment when to split it up would change it from something real into something imaginary" [Andre Bazin, quoted in King, 2000: 94)]. According to Bazin, rapid editing can destroy any sense that the action involved was actually played out at some level of reality. In FPS, the action happens in real time, as a continuous shot.

> Hollywood films of the 1930s-1950s typically contained between 300 and 700 shots, giving them an average shot length of 8 to 11 seconds. In the 1960s, this norms starts to change: Most films drop to between 6-8 seconds, and some down to3-5. In the 1970s, the average accelerates more, with 5-8 seconds being the norm. By now films typically have 1000 shots. The 1980s see some narrowing: many films are averaging 5-7 seconds per shot, and several drop to 3-4 seconds ASL, including music-video movies like *Streets of Fire* and *Top Gun*. However, this fast cutting isn't limited to action films; comedies and dramas begin to be cut faster as well. By the 1990s, we find movies with 2000-3000 shots (e.g., *The Last Boy Scout*), and by 1999, we have the 3000-4000 shot movie. After 1993 or so, many films have 2-3 seconds ASL, such as *Armageddon* and *South Park*. The prototype of fast cutting is, of course, action scenes - sequences of chases, fights, and gunplay (2).

The action of a first-person shooter is very intense, and it can produce a sense of slightly nauseous queasiness that one associates with too much channel-surfing. Interestingly, the very same element that makes digital games so enjoyable, that is, to immerse the player into the virtual battlefield, is considered by many to be despicable in cinema. Discussing Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), Will Self (1996) writes that "The catharsis effected by those filmic depictions of violence that attempt to place us in the driving seat, give us the POV, is both manifold and disturbing" (79).

Many film critics have expressed a growing frustration at the emergence of spectacle in contemporary cinema, because they see it as detrimental to narrative. Gunfire sequences are particularly criticized. As Jacobs (1996) notes, some pundits label them as "an infantile characteristic" (165) of Hollywood cinema. Others condemn cinematic violence on a moral ground, blaming the spectators as well as the directors. For instance, in a famous essay titled "Killing Time," originally published in *The New Yorker (*1974), Pauline Kael wrote that "the audience of action pictures reacts to the killing scenes simply as spectacle" (1996: 172).

However, other commentators point out that the even apparently undemanding and straightforward blockbusters have a very complex and sophisticated narrative component[8]. Geoff King (2000) writes that "spectacle is often just as much a core aspect of Hollywood cinema as coherent narrative and should not necessarily be seen as a disruptive intrusion from some place outside. The coherence, or drive towards coherence, often ascribed to classical Hollywood films, can be a product of a particular kind of critical reading rather than a quality of the text itself" (4).

Video games do not present a strong narrative element – they produce gameplay, rather than stories – but they are extremely rich in spectacular content. In a sense, *spectacle is their narrative*. First-person shooters are specifically designed to simulate spectacular violence. Like

[8] Interestingly, the dispute between narrative and spectacle in film studies mirrors the clash between ludology and narratology in game studies. For an exhaustive account of the former, see Elsaesser, 2003 or King, 2000.

many other FPS, *BLACK* is an exercise of nihilistic omnipotence and solipsism. It is interesting to note that both the gunfire sequences of action films and first-person shooters seem to be consumed prevalently by male audiences. In regard to cinema, Jacobs writes that:

> The pleasure of gunfire is also somewhat gender-specific […] Gunfire sequences offer particular pleasures for men, pleasures which often cannot be found elsewhere" […] Somehow the pain and agony of gunfire legitimates a kind of male intimacy usually outlawed in the Hollywood film (167).

As for arcade games, John Fiske (1989a) suggests that:

> Violence is an element of masculine popular cultures. To say this is not to deny the pleasures of many women in violence, but to point to the masculinity of using violence as a cultural resource from which to produce resisting meanings of subordination. The patriarchal ideology of masculinity is a cause of cultural anxiety for many subordinate males because the economic system that it underpins denies them the social means to exercise the power and control upon which it tells them their masculinity depends (136).

First-person shooters offer an ever more satisfying gratification than cinematic gunfire, because they allow the player to become one with the gun. Another pleasure of the FPS derives – somehow paradoxically – from the sheer unbalance between the player and his enemies. The former is always outnumbered even if during the game can sometime rely upon other NPCs (non-playing characters). This phenomenon is hardly peculiar to games. In fact, a similar disproportion is present in many action movies, and it could be argued that this imbalance is what makes the viewing so compelling. Rather than producing despair, such disparity makes gunfire action – either cinematic of videoludic – engaging. As Jacobs notes,

> Profoundest desire and deepest pleasure in these gunfire sequences [lies] in the will to fight back, to gain mastery over one's life even in circumstances so desperate and agonized […] In critically and actively fighting back, even as the odds and guns are ranged against us. *Pleasure in gunfire sequences simultaneously reflects our recognition of our vulnerability and our desire to fight back* (1996: 170, emphasis added).

Precision in shooting is paramount in both cinema and games. And precision is always technologically-enhanced. Condemning the proliferation of fictional violence, Kael lamented that "To the extent that screen violence is technology-led, a specialized value system will try to assert itself" (1996: 15). Martin Amis (1996) went a step further suggesting that "screen violence, we might notice, has close affinities with the weapons business, and to borrow an ageing phrase from the nuclear-arms community, it is always technology-led" (13)

The value-system that informs FPS is technologically-based. These games have clear rules, goals, and outcomes; they operate on the basis of a numeric, quantifiable system. In *BLACK*, the player is rewarded for his accuracy – thus, headshots are more important then, let's say, a shot in the torso. However, Fiske's explanation of the appeal of violent entertainment – especially video games – to male audiences relies more on social, rather than aesthetical, reasons:

> Video games are relevant and functional because their structure can be related to the social system, and playing them can therefore enact the social relations of the subordinate with the one crucial inversion – in the video arcade the skill, performance, and self-esteem of the subordinate receive rewards and recognition that they never do in society" (Fiske, 1989a: 140).

In other words, games are pleasurable because they grant the user the access to a symbolic, imaginary, and yet convincing world where meritocracy triumphs.

The gameplay of first-person shooters is intentionally designed to emphasize repetition over difference. As James Twitchell wrote in *Preposterous violence*, "In popular culture, efficiency is everything, repetition and predictability the rule" (22). The replication of the same moves within the game world is the quintessential aspect of the simulated experience, an aspect that some commentators find problematic. As Gerard Jones (2003) observes, "We are troubled by the idea of repetition. We fear that if kids do something over and over again in play they're more likely to replicate it in life" (181). However, Barry Atkins (2005) correctly pointed out that, unlike movies, games are *iterative* rather than repetitive. Cinematic repetition is *mechanical reproduction*, whereas videoludic iteration is a form of *procedural generation*. In regards to gunfire sequences in cinema, Jacobs suggests that,

> What constitutes the spectacle is not simply the amount of gunfire released, but the visible impact on the body [Thus] it is the cumulative effect of such spectacles – the sustained provision of visual and kinetic motion – which makes a good gunfire sequence so enjoyable […] As with those who hate Techno music, the fundamental misunderstanding is that it's all the same, just banal repetition: once you've seen one guy shot, why show the other twelve dozen? Those who like both Orbital and John Woo know that more *is* more, that repetition is part of a cumulative dynamic, that no part is ever the same as that preceding it: it is the constant and unbelievable accumulation of impact and firepower that makes a Woo film like *The Killer* akin to an all-night blood-and-bullet rave (Jacobs, 165, 166-167).

Procedural generation is a widely used term to indicate the possibility to create content on the fly, as opposed to creating it before distribution. The term procedural is strictly related to a procedure used to compute particular functions. Procedural generation techniques have been

employed for years in countless games, and it is expected to become more and more widespread. Thanks to procedural generation, the content of games varies whereas the simulation context remains the same. This means that the player navigates over and over spaces that are similar and yet [slighlty] different: in digital games, procedurality operates both at the level of production and consumption.

The pleasures of the text

"Zardoz: The gun is good.
Exterminators: The gun is good.
Zardoz: The penis is evil. The penis shoots seeds, and makes new life, and poisons the earth with a plague of men, as once it was. But the gun shoots death, and purifies the earth of the filth of brutals. Go forth and kill!"
(From *Zardoz,* John Boorman, 1973)

Superficially, the pleasures associated with cinematic gunplay and videoludic gunporn are similar, if not identical: they both center on control, power, and mastery. But in cinema, those values are vicariously experienced though the actions of an actor, while in games, the spectator is also a perfomer, thus the issue of competence becomes a crucial factor. What remains constant, however, is the association between the mediated and the corporal, eros and thanatos. In cinema,

> Mastery and power (the cool handling of high-tech weapons) are directly contrasted with the loss of control over the body, the messy exit of blood and the involuntary convulsions [...] This quick transition between mastery and vulnerability is certainly the characteristic trajectory of male orgasm, and there are further correspondences: a 'powerful weapon' is brandished, its contents released; there's an analogous cause-effect chain, in that the beating spurt of orgasm has its equivalent in the gushing of the bullet impact and consequent involuntary body movement. But one should be wary of the cliché' which equates all specific cinema thrills to sexual pleasures: because control and its loss has a far more significant meaning in the real world" (Jacobs, 1996: 168).

The sexual tension described by Jacobs is clearly present in FPS, albeit in different form. The FPS can be read as a stylized sex-hunting game – the always-erect gun looks for virtual bodies so that he can impregnate them with bullets – there is no other way of negotiating the encounters with other characters. *BLACK* is replete with images of electronic bodies perforated by bullets, bodies tore apart, bodies ripped with blood. The moment in which the enemy is destroyed confirms the player's power over the simulated environment and characters and corresponds to the vignettes of reality TV shows in which the authoritative figure, usually a cop, capture a subject. As Turner (2000) suggests, "monotonously styled and frequently repeated, these vignettes are the equivalents of the "money shot" or "cum shot" in a porn movie: they are

moments at which the full masculine potency of the leading character is revealed" (193). As Lefebvre suggests,

> Phallic erectility bestows a special status on the perpendicular, proclaiming phallocracy as the orientation of space, as the goal of the process – at once metaphoric and metonymic – which instigates this facet of spatial practice […] [The phallic] fulfils the extra function of ensuring that 'something' occupies this space, namely, a signifier which, rather than signifying a void, signifies a plenitude of destructive force – an illusion, therefore, of plenitude, and a space taken up by an 'object' bearing a heavy cargo of myth. (1991: 287).

In a seminal essay on arcade games, titled "Virtual Pleasures", John Fiske (1989b) stresses the link between the electronic and the corporeal. After noticing that "games are played with the body, and excess of concentration produces a loss of self, of the socially constructed subject and its social relations," (93) he concluded that:

> 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 (1975b) 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 the 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 (93).

If "video arcades are semiotic brothels of the machine age", then the marketing of *BLACK* as gunporn makes perfect sense.

Epilogue: the *fusil photographique 2.0*

On August 26 2002, *The New York Times*'s contributor Sandra Chartrand reported that resident of New York, Terry Gordon, won his patent for a telescopic scope or sight for a firearm with a "fully integrated compact digital camera". Such camera automatically photographs the target at the instant the trigger is pulled. Wondering why would anyone want such photographs, Chartrand explained:

> In his patent, Mr. Gordon says pictures taken of a bullet's impact are of interest to recreational hunters, just as deer heads, animal skins and other trophies are valued. The pictures could be another way for hunters to display their successes, he writes, if the hunter had "'a simple, straightforward way to photograph his or her prey or target just before, during, and/or after the kill." He also suggests that hunters could use the pictures

> as a training aid, to hone their accuracy by creating a record of what appeared in their scope as they fired and comparing it to "where the shot actually struck on the target." But he also envisions a use for his device when the targets are human. Mr. Gordon says law-enforcement officers could find such photos helpful in controversial shootings, like those between police and unarmed civilians. The military could find a use for his technology, too, he added (Chartrand, 2002).

The gun. The camera. The game.

One hundred and twenty years later, Marey's invention has been upgraded. His dream was to make the world visible. His successors made sure that it could become fully destroyable as well.

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