Article

Games and Culture
2018, Vol. 13(2) 136-152

DOI: 10.1177/1555412015612611
journals.sagepub.com/home/gac
SAGE

Shooting to Kill: Headshots, Twitch Reflexes, and the Mechropolitics of Video Games

Amanda Phillips[1]

Abstract

The headshot burst into the cultural imaginary with the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and it has been remediated from historical anxieties about execution and brain death to the eye-popping spectacle of the exploding head to video games, where it has entered a regime that holds virtuosic reflexes as the highest form of capital. By examining the textual and technological history of the headshot, this article develops a theory of mechropolitics: a way of thinking about political death worlds as they operate in the mechanics of video games and digital simulations. Moving beyond questions of whether violence in video games has a direct effect on aggression, mechropolitics mobilizes aesthetic and social justice critique to unmask the affective structures operating within digital death worlds. These prioritize twitch reflexes and offer few consequences—precisely the scenarios that render events like police shootings both legible and likely.

Keywords

race, headshot, police brutality, death, mechanics

[1] University of California Davis, Davis, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Amanda Phillips, University of California Davis, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA.
Email: aphill@ucdavis.edu

Introducing Mechropolitics

In the introduction to *Death and the Moving Image*, Aaron (2014) notes that death is "everywhere and nowhere," with historical cycles of obsession and denial that are documented in the critical record from Freud to Gorer to Becker and more. Although Aaron turns her analysis of death toward the narratives and thematics of cinema, it is as "a mechanism rather than a subject of representation" that death, ironically, "animates" her discussion (p. 5). I would like to take this turn of phrase—mechanism of representation—which Aaron borrows from Tanner's (2006) *Lost Bodies*, as my point of departure for this article. Death, as the ending of life, is a rather effective mechanism. A good anthropocentrist might call it the most effective mechanism. It instills fear, ensures loyalty, and inspires great works of art and great depths of despair. Indeed, it is as a mechanism that Mbembe (2003, pp. 39–40) recognizes death when theorizing necropolitics, the postcolonial school of theory that aims to supplement biopower as a concept "insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death." Where articulations of biopolitics suggest a shift from physical punishment to more subtle methods that discipline the processes of life, the concept of necropolitics amends biopolitics, in Reddy's (2011) expansive sense of the term, with a consideration of how death continues to circulate as both an absolute punishment and a state of life. Mbembe's contemporary moment begins with plantation slavery, a system that vividly ties together the oppressive practices of white supremacy, capital, biopower, and heteropatriarchy. Rather than governing the processes of life, necropolitics deals in death, and it does so in a way that is intimately tied to contemporary racial politics, operating in one-sided wars, settler colonialism, and even the high mortality rates of people of color in confrontations with civilian police. Necropolitics marks specific populations for execution but can also leave them in a constant state of near death or living death, where chronic abuse and lack of access limits the life chances of entire communities.

Video games construct death and dying as both technological processes and gamic goals, turning them into mechanisms and mechanics that structure the activity of gaming: for fun, frustration, or fairness. The systems that comprise video games determine who may live and who may die and in what manner according to interlocking scripts of rules, procedures, and narratives. This entwining of the technological and the cultural is what launches death from mechanism to mechanism of representation, and it is this difference that is at the heart of reconfiguring necropolitics to mechropolitics. While the digital bodies of video game avatars suffer representational violence rather than the real violence to which Mbembe (2003) refers while theorizing necropolitics and necropower, they nevertheless constitute part of the technological apparatuses that contribute to what he calls "death-worlds" (p. 40). Machines already govern death in significant ways, and technology is central to the way that Mbembe articulates necropolitics. Technologies of war help to end life, and technologies of medicine help to determine the boundaries of mortality.

Assistive technologies such as Google's self-driving car may soon have the power to make everyday life or death decisions.

Chun (2011) urges us to remain aware of the ways in which computers impact governmentality both by direct management of populations and through the intrusion of computational metaphors that structure the way we think about how society functions. The ludic and narrative structures of many contemporary video games create digital death worlds that allow and even encourage gamers to play with dying and killing, so it is important to think about how these cultural products fit into a wider milieu of domination by death. The links between media like video games and militarized society have been articulated elsewhere as the military industrial complex or the global matrix of war, and you'll soon see how my work is indebted to the army of scholars who have written extensively on the coconstitution of militarism and entertainment technologies.[1] While it is with this orientation toward video games' capacity to inform and reflect the values of militarized society that this article proceeds, it is important not to rehearse these same arguments about violence—particularly state violence—in video games. These links have been well established. What is of more interest here is how the simulation of death as both technological feat and gamic goal produces a playground of mortality in which new orientations toward death and dying might be invented, rehearsed, and even normalized. These simulated death worlds, governed by what some have called procedurality and others protocol, enact what I call "mechropolitics": a virtual, often whimsical, politics of death and dying with complicated resonances in the real world.

The question of violence in video games has been of interest primarily to parents, legislators, and clinical psychologists who seek to determine and regulate the links between participating in virtual violence within video games and enacting violence on bodies in the physical world. These conversations, however, easily slip into predictable binary arguments about whether video games are worthy pieces of art or whether they are contributing to school shootings and the intensification of gun culture in the United States. My purpose here is to sidestep these circular debates and move forward with an investigation into video game violence that is more interested in a sustained argument holding multiple pieces in tension than in neatly explaining causality. Video games have shifted our media ecology quite a bit in the past few decades, and accounting for these broader changes will help us move toward more nuanced conversations about their political dimensions.

This article makes a case for understanding the headshot, one of the most iconic actions in gaming, as a mechropolitical device that can inform how we understand the national crisis of police violence against people of color, specifically because of the way it encourages twitch responses and technological virtuosity. It will begin with a brief exploration of ragdoll physics to illustrate the primary tension at the heart of mechropolitics: the pull between honoring the seriousness of death and the impulsion to play with and become its master. Next, it will proceed with a history of the primary object of interest, the headshot, to trace its evolution into a game mechanic that is very different from its incarnations in other media. Finally, the

conversation will move beyond gaming specifically to investigate how gamic headshots connect with other mechropolitical media like forensic simulations, and how these relationships inform the way people think about tragedy generally and racially inflected police brutality in particular. Whether such an understanding of the links between headshots, twitch reflexes, and lethal force might lead to measurable solutions is beyond the scope of this article. For now, it is enough to propose the conversation.

Virtuosity and Fun in Digital Death

Mbembe's (2003) observation that "a new cultural sensibility emerges in which killing the enemy of the state is an extension of play" (p. 19) inadvertently gestures toward gamic contributions to real-life death worlds. Mechropolitics makes death fun, not merely as a visual spectacle but as a cooperative activity performed with a machine and encouraged by the mechanics of game and system design. These systemic relationships, in turn, influence how we think and behave within real death worlds. A mechropolitical view connects mechanical operations to the political resonances they have in the real world, often by working through the juxtaposition of fun and seriousness created by the digital reenactment of death. Ragdolls are a perfect example of this, and I will use them here before settling on my primary object of headshots in order to demonstrate the centrality of humor and virtuosity to digital death worlds. As a mechanic, ragdoll physics work to simulate a limp body falling and settling on the ground by reducing it to solid masses strung together with elastic, allowing a computer to procedurally animate a theoretically endless supply of unique death animations. Ragdolls balance a desire for realism with a desire for entertainment. They are notoriously glitchy in gamespaces and are well known for providing unintentional comedy when they cause bodies to fly improbably through space or settle in provocative or humorous positions. So while they aim to create more variety (and hence a degree of realism) in death animations, they have also come to operate independently of this goal as sources of humor and horror—often both simultaneously.

The mechropolitical function of the ragdoll—that is, its role as a political mechanic of death in gaming—is centered on the way ragdoll physics literally objectify a body, bypassing its agency to subject it to the physical forces of the game world. They also subject the body to the whims of the player. Švelch (2014) suggests that the pleasure of ragdoll play is centered not only in the wacky animations it produces for the spectator but in an appreciation of the virtuosic manipulation of the interfaces required to achieve such animations. He writes about hours of footage distilled into minutes of entertainment and of how the creators of machinima carefully curate their play recordings into highly selective bits of serendipitous spectacle. Intentional ragdoll humor requires an intimate knowledge of the mechanics of the game: physics, controls, rendered characters, and so on.

But there are myriad ways in which ragdolls are entertaining to the public. Limp human corpses, unprotected by lifelike rigor mortis or old-fashioned fixed death animations, are ripe for abuses that call up not only military scandals like Abu Ghraib but also cultures of sexual assault. Multiplayer opponents abuse corpses with bullets, grenades, and manual manipulation in ways that seem to give it extra life after death. Teabagging is a particularly favorite pastime of competitive gamers, who navigate their avatars over the fallen bodies of their enemies, and lower themselves to simulate placing their testicles on the corpse's face. The unsettledness of the dead body often means that it twitches and trembles on the ground as the deed is being done. The experimental nature of play also gives way to the suicidal impulse of the ragdoll, a release of the digital body to the procedural forces that govern it without regard for personal preservation. Games like *Stair Dismount* (Lauha, 2002) or modes like "Hall of Meat" in *Skate 2* (EA Black Box, 2009) and its sequels turn the digital body into a morbid playground of maximum damage, where the goal is to manipulate the game's system in order to rack up points by executing a series of horrific accidents.

Like the abused corpses of a fallen enemy, player-controlled ragdolls offer a playground of cruelty that operates firmly within the logics of necropolitics—and yet, it is still just a game. This blended moment of seriousness and fun is ripe for critique, yet so much energy has been invested into characterizing them as one or the other. Mechropolitics, on the other hand, holds these registers in tension, and critics must understand how they play off, amplify, and potentially negate each other. Indeed, a deeper investigation into any of these briefly assembled associations would uncover that the fun is present in the real-world seriousness as well—at least for those in a position of power. Abu Ghraib, after all, was such a scandal not because of the abuses per se but because of the gleefulness with which their perpetrators seemed to execute (and document) them. Pursuing these slippages in other game mechanics will certainly reveal other such uncomfortable truths: "it's just a game" cannot always hold.

A Brief Cultural History of the Headshot

To think about the fun of virtual video game death and its relationship with cultural forms of power, the rest of this discussion reflects on headshots, marks of skill in shooting games that are often rewarded with point bonuses and special character celebrations. In video game culture, headshots are highly respected feats whose repetition lends the gamer considerable cultural currency. Although they are widely associated with military snipers, headshots are not so popular with these practitioners in the physical world because of the range at which they engage their targets and the risk of exposure that comes from taking multiple shots. Rifle marksmen are trained to target a triangular region from the neck to the nipples, a more reasonable tactical goal when lives and time are on the line. Headshots pose greater difficulty because of the "size and constant motion" of the head, but they are recommended

for specific types of close-range encounters such as hostage situations (Department of the Army, 2003, pp. 3–26). Hunters are similarly advised to target the larger vital organs of animals rather than the head, both to increase the likelihood of a quick lethal shot and to preserve the animal's trophy skull. There are exceptions to this rule that have to do with size and utility: elephants often require shots to the head to bring down, and very small animals like rabbits should be shot in the head to preserve meat or to avoid a big mess.[2] Despite the selective application of headshots in real-life training, they are a widespread feature of popular culture generally and video games in particular.

Perhaps it is most accurate to describe headshots paradoxically as a tool of the untrained (in the sense that professional firearms training discourages it) and of the elite (in the sense that headshot training is reserved for elite sharpshooters in highly specialized circumstances. They are associated with violent and bloody deaths, and their popularity in literature like the gangster classic *The Godfather* (Puzo, 1969) aligns them in particular with unlawful execution. The term "execution style" has come to connote the murder of someone who has been restrained and shot in the back of the head, despite the fact that government-sanctioned execution by firing squad is a shot to the heart.[3] Quinlan (2013) argues that the shift to headshots in the literature and cinema of the mid-20th century reflects collective trauma surrounding the suicide of Ernest Hemmingway and the circulation of two images in particular: the assassination of John F. Kennedy and summary execution of Nguyen Van Lem during the Tet Offensive. Quinlan notes that these deaths occurred during the same period in which the brain became recognized as the seat of human vitality, displacing the heart thanks to advances in medical science that could prolong the body's life despite cranial trauma. Although the heart could still beat and the lungs draw breath, it was easy for most to see that there was something more to life than the circulation of blood. Brain death, for Quinlan, is central to the rise in the headshot as a cultural touchstone, driving a fascination with the mind that ultimately looked to the destruction of the skull as a definitive symbol of annihilation—of life as well as consciousness itself.

The extensive history of the face as a site of recognition and ethics lends headshots additional symbolic weight as the destruction of subjectivity. In video games, customizing a digital face helps gamers develop a sense of intimacy, even ownership, over their avatars, although many of these contemporary interfaces bring centuries-old politics to the fore: the quantification of facial dimensions and their attachment to descriptors of race and gender brings back the specters of physiognomy and other racial sciences. Here, headshots taken by firearms collide with their less violent kin: the polished photographic headshots produced to advertise a face. These headshots, currency of the entertainment industry and increasingly a staple of social media, trade on the face's ability to communicate the value of an individual in terms of attractiveness, personality, intelligence, and skill—really, any of the traits that people have historically believed we can read in a face. All of these traits, it is important to note, come with expectations and assumptions about race and

gender. The litigious counterpart to fashion headshots are the mugshots that purport to display the face of criminality.

While other methods of cranial-focused execution like beheading leave the visage intact, headshots, whether offensive or self-inflicted in nature, are a violent destruction of the brain, and they often result in disfiguring damage to the face and a symbolic erasure of subjectivity. Although South Vietnamese forces branded Nguyen Van Lem an enemy combatant, the shot of his summary execution, an act that had questionable legality even in the fog of wartime, touched off renewed interest in ending United States involvement in the Vietnam War. Kennedy's assassination was another landmark, perhaps one of the first viral moments in U.S. media history. News of his death circulated the globe within hours, and Abraham Zapruder's grainy recording of the shooting became a long-enduring meme, circulated and enhanced countless times over the past few decades in the hopes of figuring out who shot what from where. The skull flap blasted open by the bullet exiting Kennedy's skull did not literally deface him, but it did become a symbol by which people marked the death of something more than a man. These headshots, of course, are dramatic because of the people executed and the historical moments of tension in which they were killed, but there is something particularly symbolic about death by the "pink mist," as military snipers describe the moment of impact.

As with any symbol co-opted by mass media, the headshot increasingly shifted from expression of historical and medical anxiety into a spectacle of technological proficiency. Quinlan's account of the history of the headshot traces it further into the technical and technological developments of mid-20th-century film. Driven by the relaxation of censorship regulations, the development of special effects equipment like squibs and the responsiveness of audiences to ultraviolent content, headshots rode to the front of cinematic fascination with gore from war movies to zombie flicks. Rather than the comparatively mild pink mist followed by a paralytic collapse to the ground, cinematic headshots up the ante to a variety of spectacular technological feats, from the Godfather's squibs to the gelatin and soft plaster skull blasted from behind in *Scanners* (Héroux & Cronenberg, 1981) to plain old computer graphics in *Terminator 2* (Cameron, 1991). The headshot became a way to showcase technical mastery in the cinematic arts but lost its connection to the political anxieties that pushed it to the front of memory.

The Gamic Headshot

The video game headshot burst onto the scene after the cinematic headshot was well established in culture, but its technological and ludic lineages are somewhat different. In gaming, headshots are a challenge on both sides of production. For developers, they require a system that can track projectiles and detect localized damage to a digital body. For gamers, they require quick reflexes and dexterity to line up the shot. This convergence of technological innovation and gameplay proficiency makes the headshot one of the most iconic acts in gaming, and it is associated with

some of its most iconic games. Totilo (2010) traces the development of the first headshots in video games to a moment in the late 1990s in which the mechanic emerged simultaneously in a number of games—most prominently, Rare's (1999) *Goldeneye 007* and Valve's (1999) *Team Fortress*, a *Quake* (id software, 1996) mod that added headshots just before *Goldeneye 007* released. These games turned the headshot into a staple of virtual competition. *Goldeneye 007* introduced a sniper rifle on top of a tower, with inattentive guards nearby to furnish the perfect first targets. The game even included a cheat option, "DK Mode," that inflated the heads of characters so that they were easier to hit, implicitly suggesting that heads were new, fun targets to exploit. Epic Games' (1999) *Unreal Tournament*, an online multiplayer arena game, included public announcements whenever someone accomplished a headshot. Both of these tropes—environments designed to facilitate and encourage headshots and celebration at their execution—are well established in headshot culture today.

Rewards for headshots vary from extra damage dealt to impressive and graphic animations, and as a virtuosic mechropolitical performance they mark the shooter as a master over others by being a skilled, often unseen, executioner. Such mastery is key to the experience of play. The work of Przybylski, Ryan, and Rigby (2009, 2010) suggests that feelings of satisfaction in gaming have less to do with specifically violent content like exploding skulls and more to do with experiences of competence and autonomy during play. This suggests that any reward for virtuosity might provide the same gameplay benefit. Indeed, in headshot culture, there is a particular game mode that illustrates this quite well: the *Halo* series' "Grunt Birthday Party," in which headshots trigger an explosion of confetti and a cheering sound effect rather than the gore of other titles (Bungie, Ensemble Studios, and 343 Industries, 2001–2015). The appeal of the headshot in gaming is not necessarily limited to the fetishized gore of the skull exploding (although this is undoubtedly a component of its appeal in some genres), and placing the headshot as gamic reward into conversation with the cinematic exploding head subverts the expectation of the headshot as spectacle while still maintaining its necropolitical function of connecting killing to mastery within the gaming text. Headshots are mechropolitics par excellence: fusing mechanics of fun, death, and domination into one.

Mechropolitics and the Headshot

To draw out some of the stakes operating in the mechropolitics of the headshot, I would like to consider Mbembe's (2003) discussion of slave plantation governance, in which "relations between life and death, the politics of cruelty, and the symbolics of profanity are blurred" (p. 22), and its applicability to contemporary domestic police terrorism, which governs poor communities of color by implementing policies of engagement that disproportionately render men and women of color as threats to agents of the state. One might note here how the description also stands in for an online multiplayer arena. The twitchy reflexes cultivated and rewarded

by the gamic headshot prioritize split-second decisions that lend credibility to officers' shoot-to-kill mentality under the guise of individual preservation, a diffuse cultural effect that influences the discourse surrounding headshots and other types of gun violence. Although the incidence is higher in poor communities and communities of color, most individuals in the United States do not have direct experience with gun violence, and even fewer will handle firearms in a confrontation with other people. Simulations like video games are important locations for individuals to form an idea about what the act of shooting someone in the head might feel like, not because it helps them understand the sensations of murder or of death per se, but because it helps them access the mechanics of aiming and shooting in a particular fictionalized context. Rather than set up a deterministic relationship between video games and violence, a task that has occupied researchers for decades without conclusive results, I aim here to put them into more sophisticated conversation with one another. I am reading sideways, as queer of color scholar Siobhan Somerville (2005) calls it, to keep in mind parallel developments and mutual constitution rather than linearly for causality.

What might a virtual experience of the shooting scenario look or feel like? Video game marksmanship is not the same as gun marksmanship, although research bears out that skill in one may indicate skill in the other.[4] Shooting a gun is a specific type of bodily experience: Muscles lift and hold the weapon, trembling with fatigue over time; eyes line up the sights, each fighting for dominance unless you hold one shut tight (a particularly bad habit in law enforcement); and breath and heartbeats interfere with a carefully drawn aim. If you don't remember to pull the trigger straight back with the tip of your finger, you'll pull the whole thing to the side. Some pistols will slice the hand open when held incorrectly, and the kickback from a shotgun or rifle can leave a bruise if not braced properly. This says nothing about the environmental conditions that affect bullet trajectory, most of which are not simulated in twitchy shooter video games.

To shoot a gun in a game, you place a cursor over the desired target and press a button. This might involve holding down a second button to bring up the aiming reticle, but the task is quite a bit less complicated. This is not to say game marksmanship is trivial: the fun of games is all about balancing challenge with satisfaction. But I am reminded here of Kelly's (2007) commentary in *Vectors* about the lopsided nature of contemporary war: "we LOOK, the enemy dies." While the gaze cannot be said to exist in the same form in video games as in cinema, in most shooter games, the gaze is completely subsumed within the gun, literalizing what Clover (1991) has called the assaultive gaze. To get a clean shot, one needs only to center the camera on the target and shoot. With most of the complexities of the body left out of the simulation, there is no incentive to perform the tasks normally associated with marksmanship: holding one's breath, propping the weapon on a stable surface, and so on.[5] Moreover, digital bullets in video games are programmed only to harm certain bodies. Friendly fire is rare in all but the most difficult games, and lines between good and bad are clearly drawn, which means that the only real consequence for taking a shot

is missing the target. There is a chance to be outed as incompetent, but in a frenzied multiplayer arena, missed shots often escape anyone's notice. After stripping away the physical and psychological challenges of shooting someone in the head, the gamer is left with tasks of visual acuity and reflexes multiplied by quantity of hits. Shooting to kill becomes a riskless, fast-paced, twitchy enterprise.

Instant Replay: Death Beyond Gaming

Video games are overrepresented within mechropolitical media because of their histories of representation, but they exist alongside other computational practices that strive to replicate the mechanics of death through numbers, from laboratory tests to statistical analysis. It might stretch some to think about a large set of numerization practices as practices of mediation, but they all translate one experience into another. One of the difficulties in assessing police violence is that it often happens in an instant, allowing biases to rule split-second decisions in a scenario that is often characterized afterward as a struggle for life or death. Everything happened so fast. Numbers, in gaming or in other practices, can provide the comforts of consistency and replicability, both of which alleviate the feelings of vulnerability in a world that sometimes moves too fast. With headshots, security comes in the form of mastering the twitch, which requires a predictable interface governed by recognizable rules. With other types of media, security comes in the ability to slow down and replay an unthinkable disaster.

Siegel (2014) writes, "Forensic media participates in the grand project of arresting, managing, regulating, and representing the troublesome accidentality of time in modernity" (p. 23). While he focuses on accident reconstruction rather than criminal events, the comparison is plain. Kennedy's assassination, the headshot ur-text, happened in an instant—between frames 312 and 313. Forensic debate about the film continues to this day because of the insufficiency of the answers provided by sequential media. Siegel's account of the early scientific analysis of car crash footage echoes the painstaking detail paid to each frame of the Zapruder film, despite the little information that it ultimately yields. Simulations offer a bit more certainty without necessarily providing more information: it is the job of the simulation to render limited information in legible, rehearsible ways. Death simulations begin with the technological apparatuses of cinema, have been refined in forensics dramas like *CSI* and *Bones*, but find their most satisfying expression in the procedural mechanics of video games, which can calculate specific damage to the body and repeat it over and over and over again at the command of the user. Here, the forensic drive to understand traumatic violence clashes with the imperative to simply enjoy the moment, but both impulses help users to feel more in control of what they might otherwise simply witness.

Many games, in fact, use forensic aesthetics to enhance the fun of play, taking advantage of games' constant data crunching to offer personalized reports and additional information about what type of damage the gamer dealt out or received. This

can be as simple as the kill cam, a replay of how a gamer died at the hands of another, often zoomed out so that the moment of death becomes an out-of-body experience. Alternatively, the view can move further into the body to trace the path of a bullet or fracture. The sophistication of these internal simulations ranges from an indicator of place of impact, such as in the skateboarding series *Skate*, to a detailed account of the wound, such as in the *Sniper Elite* series (Rebellion Developments, Rebellion Oxford, and Raylight Studios, 2005–2014). *JFK: Reloaded*, the infamous 2003 "docu-game" by Traffic Games, brings this forensic logic to the fore: Poremba (2009) notes that *JFK: Reloaded* more strongly engages the documents surrounding the assassination rather than the historical event itself, meticulously calculating bullet physics and camera angles of the event without accurately simulating its emotion. These moments of forensic dissection are technical showcases that change the way we think about the digital body, which is otherwise constructed and animated as a series of surfaces. It is no coincidence that this is precisely the same effect that forensic technologies such as the X-ray had on the ways in which society viewed the physical body.[6]

Shooting to Kill

Twitch responses, forensic media, and racism converge in the popular discourse surrounding police violence against people of color. Research has long established that law enforcement officers are more likely to perceive Black individuals as armed and dangerous, often leading to a decision to shoot.[7] U.S. law enforcement culture is marked, like so much else post-9/11, by paranoid vigilance against a world that is trying constantly to kill them, despite the release of 2013 data by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) that did not place policing in the top-10 most dangerous professions in terms of number or rate of fatal injury in the United States.[8] Much of the responsibility for this violence can be laid squarely at the feet of an institution tightly bound to generating revenue for the government and for-profit prison systems and at systemic media representations that continue to portray people of color as deviant and dangerous. However, the field changes slightly in the context of headshot culture.

The headshot has been remediated from the historical anxiety of assassination and execution to the spectacle of cinema and finally to video games, in which it enters a regime that holds a distilled version marksmanship as the highest form of capital. However, this marksmanship is now placed against a backdrop of the autopsy not of a president but of people of color like Michael Brown, who was fatally shot 6 times by Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson. Conspiracy theorists are poring over Brown's autopsies in similar ways to the assassination of JFK, looking for proof of police conspiracy or self-defense and circulating documentation of the crime scene in order to support one theory after another.[9] This forensic fascination with the physical mechanics of death, even while deployed in the service of justice, might be read as an extension of death worlds in that they recirculate graphic images of the deaths of people of color as spectacle, in much the same way that lynching postcards were circulated for macabre entertainment in the 19th century. However, it can also serve to

soothe the anxieties of communities faced with inexplicable violence or to fuel rage against continuous unjust punishment. As more autopsies pile up, communities increasingly turn to science and simulation to understand tragedy.[10]

After witness testimony, three autopsies, and local and federal investigations into the matter, it is still unclear exactly what transpired when Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson fatally shot Michael Brown 6 times, including twice in the head, on August 9, 2014. Although a grand jury failed to indict Wilson on any charges, supporters rallied around him on the basis of his claims for self-defense. Despite (or perhaps because of) the racial undertones of his story about the large, aggressive, demon-faced teenager, Wilson's supporters have found reason to identify his terror as a justification for shooting to kill. This narrative aligns with a hand wound that many claim indicate Brown was reaching for Wilson's pistol at the time of discharge. But it is the shots to Brown's head that are the most suspicious for skeptics, and they are the wounds around which the opposition rallies. Many found it difficult to imagine a scenario in which a bullet with a downward trajectory into the top of the head of an individual who stood 6'5'' tall was in any way defensive, especially with such a vivid textual and cinematic history of pistol headshots that represent summary executions by war criminals, gangsters, and crooked cops.

When headshots are part of a media ecology that produces and encourages twitch responses, however, the unthinking pull of a trigger in the face of a charging enemy is a much more relatable feat. The connection of bullet to skull might even seem a lucky break.[11] In a foreboding report of what this might mean in the long run, Whitaker and Bushman (2014) recently found that playing violent video games, particularly those that emphasize headshots and use gun-like controllers, result both in better marksmanship skills and a marked increase in the tendency to shoot for the head in the gun range—a tendency that historically has been discouraged during firearms training.[12] While there has been no conclusive evidence linking video game violence with aggression in the physical world, we face a future in which a growing civilian body considers shooting for the skull a norm, even a joy, of firearms practice. It is also a future in which twitch responses are valorized for a growing segment of the populace. Implicit biases govern the realm of twitch responses, and they have already been found to affect rapid decision-making along the lines of race and lethal force. As more people begin to relate to headshots in the affective and temporal terms set by video games rather than actual combat or law enforcement scenarios, they raise important questions about the future of lethal force. Will these habits be easy to train out of law enforcement cadets? Will commentators understand the shifting history of shoot-to-kill scenarios? Will juries increasingly identify with the shooter who scored the epic win?

Coda: Entangling Life, Death, and Play

In December 2014, an officer in the National Guard discovered her brother's mugshot, along with the mugshots of several other Black men, on an array of

photographs used for sniper practice by the North Miami Beach Police Department (Torres & Shepard, 2015). In the context of increased awareness of police brutality against unarmed people of color, these targets prompted outrage and condemnation of racist police departments that would train their officers to shoot at the faces of Black men. However, such critique effectively removes the act from its context as a training mechanism for sniper-specific skills: namely, the ability to recognize an individual target from among a group of similar faces.[13] Torres and Shepard (2015) cite Chief J. Scott Dennis explaining that the target array found at the shooting range was one of a number of other arrays produced for sniper training that feature individuals of various races and genders, which he produced for video documentation. While we still must question the use of Black men's faces on that particular day of training, many federal and state agencies use photorealistic targets of various races for their training and firearms qualifications.[14] What the sniper mugshots saliently reveal, then, is less about the racial politics of policing than about how the slippages between the structures of games and simulations and the structures of real life cannot be separated from contemporary racial concerns.

Mechropolitics entangles life, death, and play within a field of simulation that we can identify as operating within strict technological or gamic mechanics. In this final example, adding representation of human faces introduces an additional layer of difficulty (and, one might add, ''realism'') to the mechanics of a firearms drill meant to prioritize pinpoint accuracy that might one day save lives. The result is an exercise bearing an uncanny resemblance to twitch-reflex light gun games that punish gamers for shooting innocent bystanders who jump in the way. Games have been entwined with tactical and strategic training since their inception, so the structural similarities between drill and game is neither surprising nor alarming. It is, rather, the way this drill introduced real-life photographs of Black men in the cultural milieu of real death for Black men in encounters with police that begins to blur the lines. The mechanics of simulated death become hopelessly entangled in the necropolitics of contemporary domestic policing. This collapses all the levels that we have been building to this point: the headshot as a virtuosic but impractical feat of skill, its rise to ubiquity in culture, despite selective application in real life, and the gamic inducement to enact violence on representations of bodies.

This discussion of headshots has traced ways that these various intersections play out, but video games are full of mechanics of death and dying rich with similar implications for thinking about the real world. Mechropolitics, like any politics, are diffuse and difficult to pin down, but they provide useful nodes of critique and appreciation to expand the artistic and technological practices of game design. As the field shifts into increasingly sophisticated conversations about video games' relationship with violence and social justice, we will need more intersectional paradigms that can cut across identity categories, technological processes, and human actions without losing sight of the complicated relationship between play and reality. Thinking mechropolitically is one way to do just that.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank her colleagues at the University of California, Santa Barbara and members of the ModLab at the University of California, Davis, for their feedback on earlier versions of this work, as well as Lisa Nakamura, who offered commentary on a draft presented at the American Studies Association in 2014. She would like to thank Roberto Delgadillo of the Library Association of UC Davis for the invitation to present this research at the War and Gaming Symposium in 2015.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author's postdoctoral work has been funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada through the IMMERSe Network for Video Game Immersion, as well as by the Interdisciplinary Frontiers of Humanities and the Arts grant of the University of California, Davis, Office of Research.

Notes

1. The work of Kaplan (2009) and Virilio (1989) come to mind as well as De Landa (1991), Der Derian (2001), Gray (2004), Nina Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (2009), and a host of others.
2. While one need to only speak with seasoned hunters and shooters or follow debates on gun enthusiast forums to understand the place of headshots in responsible firearms practice, *The Oxford English Dictionary* documents these different hunting circumstances in the selected quotations for its definition of "headshot," with material dating as far back as 1893.
3. "Execution style" is often used in legal proceedings to suggest murders worthy of the death penalty, though Liebman (1985) notes that this designation describes "vastly different factual contexts" (p. 1443). Nevertheless, colloquial use of the term strongly indicates a shot to the head.
4. See, for example, Whitaker and Bushman (2014). The military also makes use of virtual training to supplement marksmanship programs.
5. While most shooter games do not incorporate these elements, there are some simulations that do, such as the *Sniper Elite* series. They are certainly not a common feature of the competitive multiplayer games that have made headshots most popular.
6. We might also pursue the question of avataric interiority with procedural animation techniques like ragdolls that simulate interior structures when determining the motions of the body. For information on how the X-ray came to interact with Enlightenment theories of interiority, see Lippit (1999).
7. See, for example, Carrell, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2002); Greenwald, Oakes, and Hoffman (2003); and Plant and Peruche (2005). These studies, coincidentally, used virtual simulation to assess these tendencies.

8. It seems prudent here to make a personal statement: Growing up in a law enforcement family, I am quite sensitive to the fear that accompanies having a loved one on the force. These statements and observations are not meant to diminish the feelings of vulnerability experienced by officers or their families but to contextualize them in terms of actual statistics about death as well as cultural narratives of endangerment that render safe populations continually fearful as opposed to actually in danger, in turn rendering other populations under the constant threat of "defensive" violence.
9. In addition to formal media coverage such as The Washington Post (2014), informal arguments have been laid out in social media, such as those documented by Very White Guy Drew (2014), to contradict official accounts.
10. This article was written in the wake of Michael Brown's murder, although more recent events like the death of Freddie Gray while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department exhibit the same turn toward autopsy evidence by the public to piece together an otherwise mysterious crime.
11. Law Enforcement Targets, a company that produces targets for both governmental and recreational use, came under fire in 2013 for its "No More Hesitation" line of photorealistic targets designed to desensitize officers to nontraditional dangers such as pregnant women, children, and elderly people with guns. In a statement to *Reason*, the company explains that the targets were designed by request of law enforcement officers in order to reduce reaction time to shoot (Riggs, 2013).
12. While Quinlan (2013) uses statistical forensic data to draw a comparison between the representation of headshots in literature and film and their prominence in real-life cases of suicidal and homicidal violence, Whitaker and Bushman (2014) attempt to draw a causal relationship between video game headshots and headshots taken on the range.
13. Police sharpshooters train for headshots due to the frequency with which they handle hostage situations, which require a shot that destroys the nervous system before retaliation is possible.
14. One can easily view the qualifying targets for specific state and federal agencies through a number of retailers, such as Law Enforcement Targets, Inc.

References

Aaron, M. (2014). *Death and the moving image: Ideology, iconography, and I*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.

Bungie, Ensemble Studios, & 343 Industries. (2001–2015). *Halo* [Computer game series]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2014). *National census of fatal occupational injuries in 2013 (preliminary results)* (News Release USDL-14-1674). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

Cameron, J. (1991). *Terminator 2* [Motion picture]. Culver City, California: TriStar Pictures.

Carrell, J., Park, B., Judd, C., & Wittenbrink, B. (2002). The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *83*, 1314–1329. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.83.6.1314

Chun, W. (2011). *Programmed visions: Software and memory* (Print). Cambridge: MIT Press.

Clover, C. (1991). *Men, women, and chain saws: Gender in the modern horror film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

De Landa, M. (1991). *War in the age of intelligent machines*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Department of the Army. (2003). *Special forces sniper training and employment* (Field Manual No. 3-05.222). Washington, DC.

Der Derian, J. (2001). *Virtuous war: Mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment network*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

EA, Black Box. (2009). *Skate 2* [Computer game]. Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, Inc.

Epic, Games. (1999). *Unreal Tournament* [Computer game]. New York, NY: GT Interactive.

Gray, C. H. (2004). *Peace, war and computers*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Greenwald, A. G., Oakes, M. A., & Hoffman, H. G. (2003). Targets of discrimination: Effects of race on responses to weapon holders. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *39*, 399–405. doi:10.1016/S0022-1031 (03)00020-9

Héroux, C. (Producer) & Cronenberg, D (Director). (1981). *Scanners* [Motion picture]. Canada: Avco-Embassy Pictures.

Huntemann, N., & Payne, M.T. (2009). *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. New York, NY: Routledge.

id Software. (1996). *Quake* [Computer game]. New York, NY: GT Interactive.

Kaplan, C. (2009). The biopolitics of technoculture in the Mumbai attacks. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *26*, 301–313. doi:10.1177/0263276409349281

Kelly, R. (2007). Designer's statement. *Dead reckoning: Aerial perception and the social construction of targets*. *Vectors, 2*. Retrieved from http://www.vectorsjournal.org/projects/index.php?project=11&thread=DesignersStatement

Lauha, J. (2002). *Stair dismount* [Computer game]. Helsinki, Finland: tAAt.

Liebman, E. (1984–1985). Apellate review of death sentences: A critique of proportionality review. *U.C. Davis Law Review*, *18*, 1433–1480.

Lippit, A. M. (1999). Phenomenologies of the surface: Radiation-body-image. In J. M. Gaines & M. Renov (Eds.), *Collecting visible evidence* (pp. 65–83). Minneapolis: Minnesota UP.

Mbembe, A. (2003). Necropolitics. *Public Culture*, *15*, 11–40. doi:10.1215/08992363-15-1-11

Plant, E. A., & Peruche, B. M. (2005). The consequences of race for police officers' responses to criminal suspects. *Psychological Science*, *16*, 180–183. doi:10.1111/j.0956-7976.2005.00800.x

Poremba, C. (2009). Frames and simulated documents: Indexicality in documentary videogames. *Loading . . .* , *3*.

Przybylski, A. K., Ryan, R. M., & Rigby, C. S. (2009). The motivating role of violence in video games. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *35*, 243–259. doi:10.1177/0146167208327216

Przybylski, A. K., Ryan, R. M., & Rigby, C. S. (2010). A motivational model of video game engagement. *Review of General Psychology*, *14*, 154–166. doi:10.1037/a0019440

Puzo, M. (1969). *The godfather*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam.

Quinlan, S. (2013). Shots to the mind: Violence, the brain, and biomedicine in popular novels and film in post-1960s America. *European Journal of American Culture*, *32*, 215–234. doi:10.1386/ejac.32.3.215_1

Rare. (1999). *Goldeneye 007* [Nintendo 64 game]. Kyoto, Japan: Nintendo Co., Ltd.

Rebellion Developments, Rebellion Oxford, and Raylight Studios. (2005–2014). *Sniper Elite* [Computer game series]. Montreál, ON and Calabasas, CA: MC2 France and 505 Games.

Reddy, C. (2011). *Freedom with violence: Race, sexuality, and the US state*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Riggs, M. (2013, February 25). Law Enforcement Targets, Inc., discontinues line of targets featuring mom, child, grandparents, pregnant woman. *Reason*. Retrieved from http://reason.com/blog/2013/02/25/law-enforcement-targets-inc-discontinues

Siegel, G. (2014). *Forensic media: Reconstructing accidents in accelerated modernity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Somerville, S.B. (2005). Queer *Loving*. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, *11*, 335–370.

Švelch, J. (2014). Comedy of contingency: Making physical humor in video game spaces. *International Journal of Communication 8*, 2530–2552.

Tanner, L. (2006). *Lost bodies: Inhabiting the borders of life and death*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Torres, M. C., & Shepard, W. (2015, January 15). Family outraged after North Miami Beach Police use mug shots as shooting targets. *NBC 6 South Florida*. Retrieved from http://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/Family-Outraged-After-North-Miami-Beach-Police-Use-Criminal-Photos-as-Shooting-Targets-288739131.html

Totilo, S. (2010, August 30). The history of headshots, gaming's favorite act of unreal violence. *Kotaku*. Retrieved from http://kotaku.com/5625054/the-history-of-headshots-gamings-favorite-act-of-unreal-violence

Traffic Games. (2013). *JFK: Reloaded* [Computer game]. Scotland: Traffic Games.

Virilio, P. (1989) *War and cinema: The logistics of perception*. London, England: Verso.

Valve, Corporation. (1999). *Team Fortress* [Computer game]. Fresno, CA: Sierra Entertainment, Inc.

Very White Guy Drew. (2014). @ShaunKing exposes Ferguson PD lie about distance from SUV. *Storify*. Retrieved from https://storify.com/VeryWhiteGuy/shaunking-exposes-ferguson-pd-lie-about-distance-f

The Washington Post. (2014, November 25). *The confrontation: Different stories*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/national/ferguson-grad-jury-findings/

Whitaker, J. L., & Bushman, B. J. (2014). "Boom, headshot!": Effect of video game play and controller type on firing aim and accuracy. *Communication Research*, *41*, 879–891. doi: 10.1177/0093650212446622

Author Biography

Amanda Phillips is the IMMERSe postdoctoral fellow at the University of California, Davis. She received her PhD as a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellow in the Department of English at the University of California, Santa Barbara, with an emphasis certificate from the Department of Feminist Studies. Her research unites platform and software studies approaches with feminist, queer, and critical race theory, investigating specific video game design practices to understand how difference is produced and policed in gaming communities. Her interests more broadly are in issues of social justice in and around technoculture, popular media, and the digital humanities.