

THE RHETORICAL PROCEDURE OF WHITE SUPREMACIST VIOLENCE

by

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(Under the Direction of

Bjørn Stillion Southard)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines two white supremacist shootings for their articulation of what this project names the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence. This project analyzes the discursive elements of both attacks—the manifestos and various preparations, the livestreams and videos on demand of the attacks, and the online circulation of those materials—for their articulation of a procedure, or process, of enacting white supremacist violence. Drawing upon Ian Bogost’s theory of procedural rhetoric, this thesis argues that the 2019 Christchurch shooter co-opted a rhetoric of video games to blur the distinction between virtual and material violence against non-white bodies. This procedure was then re-articulated by the 2022 Buffalo shooter, demonstrating the *techne* of the rhetorical procedure. Careful attention is paid to the algorithmic arguments of social media sites that contribute to the blurred distinction between virtual and material violence and indeed may contribute to future violence.

INDEX WORDS: rhetoric; right-wing extremism; procedural rhetoric; Christchurch, NZ; Buffalo, NY; white supremacist communication; video game rhetorics; rhetoric of algorithms

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents—Mary Aurelia Lucas and William Randall Bowen—without whom none of this would be possible. Your support has been indispensable. Thank you.

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I’d also like to acknowledge the communities who were impacted by the violence analyzed in this thesis. Victims of violent attacks—those killed, injured, or left to deal with the aftermath—cannot be treated as simply objects of study. I believe in promoting those who work in supporting these communities and dismantling systems of inequity. For that reason, I would like to take some time to discuss two organizations.

The first is the New Zealand Islamic Information Centre (NZIIC). NZIIC is dedicated to “correct the misconceptions and share Islam’s noble values with the aim to

ensure peace” in Aotearoa New Zealand. NZIIC raised money and provided support for those impacted by the attacks on the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre. The center is a non-profit organization and accepts monetary support at nziic.org/support/.

The second is Black Love Resists in the Rust (BLRR). According to their site (blacklovesistsintherust.org/), “BLRR is a member-led abolitionist organization founded in 2017 that seeks to build and fortify strong, resourced, thriving communities in Buffalo, New York.” The group supported the Buffalo community in the aftermath of the attack on Tops Friendly Supermarket, and they continue to resist police brutality and the over-policing of the Black and brown citizens of Buffalo. Interested parties can make monetary donations to BLRR at their site <https://blacklovesistsintherust.org/>.

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INTRODUCTION

America is witnessing a change in its movie villains. 2022's *The Batman*, building on a long and storied history of previous films in the franchise, explores a new kind of villain: the online radical.¹ At the end of the film, Paul Dano's Riddler character reveals his plan for a mass shooting at the mayor-elect's celebratory election rally. The film's audience sees the online community that supports the Riddler's rambling videos and writings come to support his mission materially; in an online forum, they discuss how much ammunition to bring and reaffirm their 'righteous' plan. The climax of the film occurs as these followers shoot into an unsuspecting crowd and attempt to assassinate the progressive, Black mayor elect. While director Matt Reeves wrote this film before the January 6th insurrection, the key themes of social media driven, radical violence cannot be divorced from their real-world counterparts: the online radical mass shooter.²

These shooters and their manifestos, followings, and videos have captured our collective attention. When it comes to right-wing extremist (RWE) violence, another aspect of popular media has had its influence: video games. The video gaming community, especially online, has produced a subset of aggressive, ideologically motivated extremists that cover the gamut of RWE and misogynist harassment and violence. The most recent uptake from the video game community is the use of video

¹ A. O. Scott, "'The Batman' Review: Who'll Stop the Wayne?," *The New York Times*, March 1, 2022, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/movies/the-batman-review.html>.

² Dave Itzkoff, "Matt Reeves Explains the Ending of 'The Batman,'" *The New York Times*, March 6, 2022, sec. Movies, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/movies/the-batman-ending-matt-reeves-explained.html>.

game motifs, particularly first-person shooters (FPS), in acts of white supremacist mass violence.

In this thesis, I look to two mass shooting events for their articulation of the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence. I examine how this procedure was initially developed as a rhetoric of video games. This rhetoric encompasses the procedure, motifs, and blurred distinction between virtual and material violence all present in the FPS genre. I look at the shootings' preparations and enactments from the perspective of the shooters, including planning materials, manifestos, and livestreams. I then analyze the circulation and influence of those materials in online communities familiar with these rhetorical strategies. Using the theories explicated below, I explain how the video game-influenced procedure of white supremacist violence attempts to persuade its various audiences of white supremacy. These audiences include supporters online, other potential attackers, and the non-white communities targeted by this violence.

By understanding the role of the rhetoric of video games in the discursive framing of these shootings, this project helps to clarify the ideological and structural commitments of RWE discourse. Scholars in terrorist and security studies have noted the connection between video games and right-wing extremism. Scholarship in these areas have focused on identifying the 'gamification' of RWE violence.³ This study builds upon

³ See Robert Evans, "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror," *bellingcat*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/08/04/the-el-paso-shooting-and-the-gamification-of-terror/>, and Graham Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, July 18, 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>.

that work by analyzing the discursive methods of white supremacist violence—an understudied element to this phenomenon.

In this project, white supremacist violence is rhetorically defined in two ways. First, white supremacist violence is that which engages with replacement theory. The case studies explicitly cite this known white supremacist theory as justification for their attacks. Replacement theory argues that non-white persons immigrate to ‘white’ nations and have more children than the white population. Eventually, the white population will become outnumbered and overpowered by non-white persons.⁴ I demonstrate in the case study chapters how both shooters’ manifestos cite replacement theory. Second, white supremacist violence as discourse attempts to dehumanize non-white populations. Direct and selective violence against non-white persons serves as an example of such dehumanization tactics. Again, I will demonstrate in the case study chapters how such violence communicates its targets as less-than-human and thus can be classified as white supremacist.

This project makes two contributions to rhetorical scholarship. First, the project brings acts of white supremacist violence under the purview of rhetorical study. I demonstrate how rhetorical scholars may attend to acts of political violence, whether through the articulation of a genre of violence or through the ‘reading’ of an act of violence as text. Second, in establishing a rhetoric of white supremacist violence, rhetorical scholars may be inclined to see the patterns of such a rhetoric in other articulations of right-wing extremism, white supremacy, or political discourse generally.

⁴ Farhad Manjoo, “Opinion: The White-Extinction Conspiracy Theory Is Bonkers,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/opinion/new-zealand-great-replacement.html>.

In identifying such rhetorics early, scholars may be able to bring attention to a potentially dangerous rhetor before their influence spirals. Although I do not believe anyone can erase an ideology, I do think communication scholars can help develop strategies to limit the reach of right-wing extremists looking to radicalize and recruit others. To do so, we must first understand their persuasive strategies—like communication around the mass shooting.

Conceptual Background

How do video games influence white supremacist violence? We know video games exert social influence as the PC gaming industry is worth \$37 billion in the United States, and mobile gaming is worth \$77 billion.⁵ Two thirds of Americans played a video game regularly in 2021.⁶ Video games have influenced film and television, art, and music; educators have helped develop games for students to improve their math and reading skills.⁷ Video games have become a cornerstone of U.S. culture, and as such, they exert discursive influence. After a discussion of rhetoric and violence and a brief overview of the rhetorical treatment of extremist right-wing discourse, I explore the literature of rhetorical video game studies, theories of the virtual and of the blurring distinction between virtual and material violence, and the potential for the video game gaze to enact the colonial (or, white supremacist) gaze.

Rhetoric and Violence

⁵ J. Clement, “Topic: Video Game Industry,” *Statista*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/topics/868/video-games/>.

⁶ Mike Snider, “Two-Thirds of Americans, 227 Million, Play Video Games. For Many Games Were an Escape, Stress Relief in Pandemic,” *USA Today*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2021/07/13/video-games-2021-covid-19-pandemic/7938713002/>.

⁷ “10.4 The Impact of Video Games on Culture,” in *Understanding Media and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2016), <https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/10-4-the-impact-of-video-games-on-culture/>.

Rhetoric and violence have a complicated relationship. Many argue that violence cannot be rhetorical, drawing from Aristotle's original assertion that "Violence and necessity are the opposite of the voluntary and of persuasion."⁸ Coercion seems to preclude persuasion. But does violence necessitate coercion? On the bodies to which violence is done, of course—individuals targeted by violent actors are not given the opportunity to decide their actions for themselves. Those are not the only bodies at work in an act of violence, however. There are the bodies of those who perform violence, the bodies that make up the community targeted, and the bodies of those belonging to the targeted community's culture. And it is these bodies and their entanglement in violence that rhetoricians can study.

Not only can rhetoricians study this entanglement, but they also *should* study it. At the core of this project is Gayatri Spivak's "Terror: A Speech After 9/11" and the call for humanities scholars it purports. Spivak writes,

I believe that we must be able to imagine our opponent as a human being, and to understand the significance of his or her action. It is in this belief—not to endorse suicide bombing but to be on the way to its end, however remote—that I have tried to imagine what message it might contain.⁹

Humanities scholars must not reduce an act of violence to the depraved psychology of its proponent. Rather, it is the humanities scholar's charge to look through the wreckage to the message at its core. For violence is always sending a message, and there have always been people on the other side of violence to read that message.

⁸ Megan Foley, "Of Violence and Rhetoric: An Ethical Aporia," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 2 (2013): 192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2013.775706>.

⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Terror: A Speech after 9-11," *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 31, no. 2 (2004): 93.

Indeed, it is through our histories of violence that we come to understand the present and attempt to influence the future. Bradford Vivian writes of the attempt—to salvage some semblance of purposeful historical progress or *telos* from the foreboding wreckage of accumulated genocidal histories [sic] We are given to see and speak of current violent injustices predominantly through the accumulating imagery and language of previous violent eras.¹⁰

Acts of violence from the past produce the ways in which people discuss the present and future threats. Violence is thus producing our discursive tools—our available means of persuasion. Moreover, the “putatively universal truth of those brutalities transform the sheer existence of systemic violence—whenever, wherever it transpired—into a warrant for present-day political commitments.”¹¹ It is our understandings of violence that impact our current political decisions. Violence is that which “animates contemporary liberal-democratic political deliberation.”¹² In order to have such an influence on deliberation, which is inherently rhetorical, violence must have “epistemic and rhetorical forms that incorporate previous times of violence” into current political deliberation. Rhetoric and violence then inform each other, twining inextricably together to influence decisions about the future.

The discussion of violence’s relationship to rhetoric has by no means gone unstudied. Instead, rhetoricians have taken care to “step back from violent actions to understand violence’s functions in the construction of identities, in social movements, in

¹⁰ Bradford Vivian, “Times of Violence,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 2 (2013): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2013.775704>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹² *Ibid.*, 212.

our systems of justice, and in discourses of tolerance,” to name a few.¹³ Rhetoricians do not approach these topics with callous objectivism, something thankfully largely absent from the field; but instead, they “present situational arguments and conditional conclusions... [that] provide us with the opportunity to (re)consider our assumptions about the explicit and implicit role of violence” and its relationships to rhetoric.¹⁴ Discussing the rhetoric of violence requires careful treatment. Done well, though, these discussions contribute to scholars’ understanding of the messages within acts of violence.

One such scholar is Megan Eatman, whose book *Ecologies of Harm* explores “how violent rhetorical ecologies constitute public identity and structure surrounding debates.”¹⁵ Eatman discusses ineffective acts of violence in the U.S.— “lynching, execution, and torture all fail at their alleged purposes (punishing and deterring crime and extracting intelligence)” —and how they all constitute and maintain the “dominant identities perceived to be at risk: white, masculine, Southern, ‘American.’”¹⁶ In Eatman’s analysis, violence is a constitutive act that regulates who is designated as Other and inferior in an effort to protect the power and status of the normative population. Through study of the rhetorical effects of such violence, rhetoricians can begin to find openings in acts that may seem necessary or have come to be accepted as the norm.

Claire Sisco King and Joshua Gunn take up rhetoric and violence in their article “On a Violence Unseen: The Womanly Object and Sacrificed Man,” in which the two examine the interconnectedness of sex, violence, and power and the misogyny that

¹³ Erin J. Rand, “Thinking Violence and Rhetoric,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (2009): 462, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.0.0110>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁵ Megan Eatman, *Ecologies of Harm: Rhetorics of Violence in the United States*, *New Directions in Rhetoric and Materiality* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2020): 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

results. Their aim in the essay is to “identify a less reckoned way in which rhetoric is implicated in cultural expressions of violence.”¹⁷ Through an analysis of filmmaker Robert Kramer’s *Ice*, King and Gunn suggest that “in Western fantasy misogyny structures violence, whether or not the disciplined, violated, or destroyed body is female.”¹⁸ In their analysis, King and Gunn highlight a specific way in which violence is structured through the rhetorical construction of ‘being female.’ Whether or not their claim holds water is secondary here; rather, their argument opens a new possibility for treating violence rhetorically.

Finally, Cheryl Jorgensen-Earp’s book *In the Wake of Violence* discusses the catalyzing effect of violence on rhetoric. Violence, according to Jorgensen-Earp, always requires explanation.¹⁹ Attempts at explanation, either scholarly, political, private, etc., necessarily produce rhetorical discourse about the violence, the actor, and the community targeted. Violence frames events: violence demands response. Imagine the Challenger explosion without Reagan’s address. How would Americans, not to mention American children, who witnessed that event feel and talk about the space program without Regan’s guidance afterwards? Though anecdotal, the example stands. One cannot *not* respond to violence. Violence produces rhetoric.

To return to Spivak, this thesis follows her suggestion that “if in the imagination we do not make the attempt to figure the other an imaginative actant, political (and military) solutions will not remove the binary which led to the problem in the first

¹⁷ Claire Sisco King and Joshua Gunn, “On a Violence Unseen: The Womanly Object and Sacrificed Man,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 2 (2013): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2013.777770>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁹ Rand, “Thinking Violence and Rhetoric,” 475.

place.”²⁰ To examine white supremacist violence as having a rhetorical aspect is to argue that violence has an effect outside of reactionary responses to the, justifiably atrocious, killing of non-white individuals. It is the role of the humanities scholar to imagine the Other; otherwise, violent histories repeat themselves, and we remain bound in unproductive binaries.

Rhetoric and Right-Wing Extremism

With the rise of popular far-right discourses, rhetoricians have offered critiques that span the gamut of right-wing beliefs. The 2017 Charlottesville, VA “Unite the Right” rally marked one turning point in the visibility of right-wing discourses. Several different branches of right-wing ideologies marched together under Nazi flags, carrying lit torches.²¹ Stephanie Hartzell argues that this unity was achieved through “appeals to intellectualism and political correctness [sic] deployed to make space for overtly pro-white rhetoric in mainstream U.S. American public discourse.”²² Moreover, Hartzell argues that the umbrella term ‘alt-right’ came to be “positioned as a rhetorical bridge between white nationalism and mainstream political discourse.” Through the new term ‘alt-right,’ RWE discourse could wedge its way into U.S. popular discourse.

Furthermore, the figureheads of these discourses have developed rhetorical strategies to elevate their own voices. Chris Earle examines how these figures have shifted responsibility for right-wing violence onto the victims of that violence. Alongside the rise of far-right ideology in the public sphere, the U.S. has seen increased attention on

²⁰Spivak, “Terror,” 94.

²¹ Dan Merica, “Trump-Once Again-Fails to Condemn the Alt-Right, White Supremacists,” *CNN*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/politics/trump-fails-to-condemn-the-alt-right-white-supremacists/index.html>.

²² Stephanie L. Hartzell, “Alt-White: Conceptualizing the ‘Alt-Right’ as a Rhetorical Bridge between White Nationalism and Mainstream Public Discourse,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8, no. 1/2 (2018): 6.

anti-Black police brutality. In response to the Black Lives Matter protests, Earle argues that public facing right-wing figures have turned to “shifting the burden of proof to anti-racist challengers.”²³ Right-wing pundits and

defenders of the police couch their racist invective and denials of racism in the language of technical expertise and data... [they aim] to narrow and constrain deliberation by rearticulating racialized policing as a technical rather than political issue.²⁴

Earle explains how this rhetoric attempts to shift the public’s attention from viable solutions to both debating the finer points of potential ‘alternative facts’ and providing overwhelming ‘proof’ of racism.

Although popular discourse contends with this influx of far-right ideology, the extreme and radical right continues to enact white supremacist violence against minorities. Richard Branscomb examines the rhetorical strategies of the RWE manifesto, and he argues that the manifesto can be understood as a genre. He writes that the RWE manifesto works “not only to articulate perceived sociopolitical injustices, but to disclose the ‘truths’ of the terrorists’ selves as ethically-motivated beings compelled to act against an apparent threat to their ‘people.’”²⁵ Moreover, this insistence on the ‘truth’ of their actions attempts to convince others towards their “political outcomes, increasingly with the extreme outcome of mass violence against othered peoples.”²⁶ The mass shooter manifesto aims to persuade its audience to support, on one end, racist public policies, and

²³ Chris S. Earle, “‘All the Research Says’: Manufactured Consensus and the Burden of Proof in the Racialized Police Violence Controversy,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 58, no. 2 (2022): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511431.2021.1965303>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁵ Richard Branscomb, “After Gun Violence: Deliberation and Memory in an Age of Political Gridlock,” *Rhetoric Review* 40, no. 2 (2021): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.1898842>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

on the other, to commit race war. These are potentially dangerous texts that may reach broader audiences. In examining the manifestos of this thesis's two case studies, I argue these manifestos adhere to *procedural* tropes. I also offer comments on the interplay between genre and procedure in the conclusion.

Rhetoric and Video Games

Video games have only recently come under the purview of rhetorical study. As the video game industry progressed, rhetoricians began paying attention. Ken McAllister's *Game Works* marks the first attempt at justifying video games as viable rhetorical objects. McAllister first establishes the basics of the "computer game complex" as always involving "producers, artifacts, and consumers."²⁷ This is the sender-message-receiver model of communication repackaged for game studies. McAllister does not end his theorization there; he draws upon Kenneth Burke's conception of a grammar of rhetoric to develop his own multiperspectival method of a "grammar of gameworks." McAllister's method "provides a description of how meaning may be made and managed" while also taking "into consideration how rhetoric specifically is used to negotiate meaning."²⁸ Through this grammar, rhetoricians and game studies scholars may look to video games as complex sites of discursive significance.

The concept of procedural rhetoric revolutionized how rhetoricians and game studies scholars viewed the persuasive abilities of video games. Ian Bogost's 2007 book *Persuasive Games* laid the foundation for analyzing procedures as persuasive, arguing

²⁷ Ken S. McAllister, *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005): 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

that persuasion takes place “through rule-based representations and interactions.”²⁹ As Bogost’s theory serves as a foundation of this project, I go into further detail at the end of this section.

Scholars then find the establishment of a *genre* of video game—the first-person shooter. This genre maintains defining standards such as the player’s ever-present weapon in the foreground of the video’s frame.³⁰ Furthermore, this genre multiplies the immersion felt by the player or viewer. In quoting Steven Shaviro, Alexander Galloway expresses another generic convention of the first-person perspective camera angle, the aspect of “motion through space:”

The subjective camera doesn’t just look at a scene. It moves actively through space. It gets jostled, it stops and starts, it pans and tilts, it lurches forward and back. It follows the rhythms of the whole body, not just that of the eyes. This is a presubjective, affective and not cognitive, regime of vision.³¹

What sets this angle apart is its ability to capture motion and to immerse the viewer in the scene. Without an attempt at that immersion, a game cannot be classified in the FPS genre. Rhetorical critics, then, can examine how different video games utilize the first-person subjective angle to create immersion, and how the level of immersion may affect the game’s persuasive message.

Scholars have now established that video games are capable of persuasive communication, and thus fall under the purview of rhetoric. The next step is to integrate

²⁹ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010): ix.

³⁰ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): xi.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

the rhetorical situation into video game studies. Christopher Paul developed wordplay as a method that “uses the tools of rhetorical criticism to examine various elements of games, from the words found within and around them to the design, play, and coding of them.”³² Game studies can no longer perform close textual analysis without concern for the forces that helped shape the text. Not unlike Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s rejoinder to Hill, a rhetorical critic of video games cannot remain wholly in the “closed universe of the discourse.”³³ The roles and motivations of designers, programmers, investors, players, and more can influence the persuasive message of a game.

With this establishment of video games as viable rhetorical objects of study, we can see how rhetoricians have since analyzed various video games. Some video games mimic reality and the everyday rituals of living in a particular place. This may influence how players feel about the real-life rituals and their own roles in them. Amber Davisson and Danielle Gehm write that “When the rules and the fiction [of a video game] are both constructed around the mimicking of civic rituals, they work to make arguments about the player’s real life engagement with those rituals.”³⁴ As players engage virtually with certain rituals, such as voting, they open themselves to persuasive messages about those rituals in reality. Whether those rituals be civically minded or otherwise, video games may change one’s perception of one’s role in society.

As video games operate rhetorically, one may expect to see traditional tools of persuasion such as appeals to pathos. In a study of the “cultural logics” of the rhetoric of

³² Christopher A. Paul, *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012): 2.

³³ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “‘Conventional Wisdom-Traditional Form’: A Rejoinder,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58, no. 4 (1972): 453.

³⁴ Amber Davisson and Danielle Gehm, “Gaming Citizenship: Video Games as Lessons in Civic Life,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 4, no. 3/4 (2014): 41.

empathy, Bonnie Ruberg examines “the purported ability of video games to allow players to experience the feelings of others—with a focus on those who are seen as diverse or disadvantaged.”³⁵ The empathetic video game has consequences, positive and negative. Players may express feelings of allyship unwarranted by any material backing. However, empathetic video games can “allow players to feel with and for others” in ways they might not have opportunity for in their immediate day-to-day lives.³⁶ No matter how players act on their emotions, video games’ persuasiveness is aided by appeals to pathos.

Video game rhetorical scholarship has also taken a materialist turn. Sky Anderson provides an overview of the treatment of bodies as they interact with and around video games in rhetorical and game studies. This treatment has been lacking, but Anderson suggests that there “is no purely digital experience.”³⁷ Rather, scholars “must break the artificial barrier between players’ bodies, representations of players/viewers, and game character bodies inasmuch as all three types of gaming corporeality intersect, overlap, and influence each other.”³⁸ The body is as engaged as the mind in the act of playing a video game. There are immediate material effects as one engages with a video game. In analyzing the rhetoric of video games, scholars must pay attention the interactions between the game’s message and the body.

The theoretical core of this project is understanding white supremacist violence as a procedure or process. Procedural rhetoric examines the persuasiveness of a process, a set of rules. Although video game developer and theorist Bogost applies this to the

³⁵ Bonnie Ruberg, “Empathy and Its Alternatives: Deconstructing the Rhetoric of ‘Empathy’ in Video Games,” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 13, no. 1 (2020): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz044>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁷ Sky LaRell Anderson, “The Corporeal Turn: At the Intersection of Rhetoric, Bodies, and Video Games,” *Review of Communication* 17, no. 1 (2017): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2016.1260762>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

persuasiveness of video games and “computational processes in particular,” he admits that “procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general.”³⁹ The process itself becomes the object of rhetorical study. The rules governing that process are capable of persuasion.

Procedure is expressed symbolically just the same as language. Bogost writes that “procedural expression must entail symbol manipulation, the construction and interpretation of a symbolic system that governs human thought or action.”⁴⁰ There must be some symbolic communication that takes place in the articulation of a process. This could be as simple as reading the rules of Monopoly or as complex as understanding the various combo attacks of a fighting game like Mortal Kombat. Bogost draws from Kenneth Burke’s conception of rhetoric as “the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols.”⁴¹ Procedures induce cooperation through symbolic means. Otherwise, the game cannot be played.

This playability, or interactivity, of video games and procedures is also worth discussing. Bogost places interactivity in conversation with the Aristotelian enthymeme. An enthymeme foregoes stating every proposition of an argument, for “if any of these propositions is a familiar fact, there is no need even to mention it; the hearer adds it himself.”⁴² The enthymeme induces its audience to interact with the argument directly. Without the audience ‘buying in,’ the argument cannot be completed. An enthymematic argument invites audience interaction.

³⁹ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 3.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴¹ Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 43.

⁴² Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Rhys W. Roberts (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004): 9.

Furthermore, interactivity can be understood “in terms of a conversation: a cyclic process in which two actors alternately listen, think, and speak.”⁴³ The interactivity of a game or procedure is irreducible from the interactivity between symbol-understanding beings. Bogost prudently remarks that this interactivity does not guarantee “meaningful expression nor meaningful persuasion, but it sets the stage for both.”⁴⁴ Additionally, “Sophisticated interactivity can produce an effective procedural enthymeme, resulting in more sophisticated procedural rhetoric.”⁴⁵ When analyzing the procedure of white supremacist violence, one must attend to the enthymematic and interactive strategies of persuasion at play.

Video Games, Virtuality, and Materiality

This procedure of white supremacist violence takes place in an evolving space that is not purely virtual and not purely material. The persuasive strength of the interactivity of white supremacist violence comes from the blurring distinction between material and virtual violence. This blurring has its foundations in video games, particularly FPS games that emulate war time activities.

Video games have blurred the line between wartime acts of violence and virtual gaming. There exist many video games that simulate war; Call of Duty (COD), which boasts 17 game entries since 2003, allows players to mimic the actions of soldiers across past and future wars. The COD franchise made over \$3 billion in 2019-2020.⁴⁶ Its popularity and wide scope of plots makes it an interesting referent. COD has also been

⁴³ Bogost citing Chris Crawford, *Persuasive Games*, 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁶ Ethan Maurice, “How Many Call of Duty Games Are There, Really (All Spin-Offs Included)?,” *ScreenRant*, December 12, 2020, <https://screenrant.com/call-duty-cod-how-many-games-series/>.

the subject of several academic studies of the intersection of these games and wartime activities.

Carrie Andersen argues that COD desensitizes individuals to violence and death through the mechanism of drone warfare. The U.S. military consulted on the development of Black Ops II, the latest COD game, which provides “a surprisingly ambiguous and complex vision of the future of drones as surveillance and military tools and of the future of soldiers themselves.”⁴⁷ This future is one of geographically distanced violence through the frame of the video screen. Soldiers operating drone strikes have become functionally indistinct from COD players in their living rooms, apart from drone strikes enacting material violence. Both activities, however, enact symbolic violence on behalf of the U.S. military.

Moreover, the border between video games and reality is further blurred through the U.S. military using video games in their own training practices. The video game’s immersion and persuasiveness offer valuable instruction for drone operators. Derek Gregory writes,

Yet video games do not stage violence as a passive spectacle; they are profoundly immersive, drawing players into their virtual worlds, which is in part why the US military uses them in its pre-deployment training. The video streams from the UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles] seem to produce the same reality-effect.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Carrie Andersen, “Games of Drones: The Uneasy Future of the Soldier-Hero in Call of Duty: Black Ops II,” *Surveillance & Society* 12, no. 3 (2014): 361, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v12i3.4954>.

⁴⁸ Derek Gregory, “From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 7/8 (2011): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411423027>.

Both drone warfare and video games mimicking drone use impart an experience that feels real. They tap into the same emotional realities of the people at the controller. At what point, then, does the video game become as real as the drone strike?

Islamist terrorist groups utilize video game's persuasive abilities as well. Several Islamist propaganda videos use the FPS camera angle, complete with the viewer's weapon in frame, to immerse the viewer into the action. The former Islamic State (IS) introduced increasingly powerful weapons in a specific sequence that directly mimicked the sequence present in COD. Also, the IS gaming videos show a "sanitized" version of the violence; bodies are shown at a distance and almost no graphic imagery is present.⁴⁹ The parallels to COD are obvious and deliberate. IS used COD imagery to create identification with viewers; the jihadists are just like the players. However, IS offered the opportunity to 'play the game' in real life.

Additionally, Islamist groups have made a handful of FPS video games for individuals to play. Hezbollah produced and released two video games, *Special Force* and *Special Force 2* that were "tailored to the tastes of children and teenagers in the Middle East for inspiration and recruitment purposes."⁵⁰ More recently, IS produced FPS and Third Person Shooter (TPS) games that served "as a virtual imitation of real-combat experience, which may encourage some youngsters to become Islamist militants. This intention is evident when considering IS has used previously mentioned catchwords referring to Call of Duty."⁵¹ Leadership in jihadist organizations realized and attempted

⁴⁹ Cori Dauber et. al., "Call of Duty: Jihad – How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2019): 21.

⁵⁰ Miron Lakomy, "Let's Play a Video Game: Jihadi Propaganda in the World of Electronic Entertainment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 4 (2019): 389, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1385903>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 396.

to capitalize on video games' persuasiveness. Through the blurring of the real and the virtual, video games make violence accessible and posits that violence as having few material or emotional consequences.

This blurring distinction is not mere happenstance. Instead, it aligns with theories of the virtual. The virtual is a place not found in the material world. Instead, the virtual is “a space, a whole world of graphical objects and animated personae which populate fictional, ritual and digital domains as representatives of actual persons and things.”⁵² The virtual, then, is a world built of mimetic representations of the real. By real, I mean to say the way in which we talk about the real aligns “with concreteness, material embodiment, tangible presence and reliability.”⁵³ A video game depicting an undercover raid on an enemy base is not real; U.S. soldiers bodily converging on a geographic location with guns is real. However, both events symbolically demonstrate U.S. military's supremacy over life and death.

As rhetorical scholars well know, the symbolic can impart material consequences. Despite its technical intangibility, the virtual feels real. Rob Shields writes,

Even though the virtual retains a quality of something that is “almost so,” it can quickly come to appear to have real substance in and of itself. To describe something as ‘virtual’ indicates that is it not strictly according to definition, as in a “virtual office,” which is to say not literally an ‘office’ as one might understand an office to be, but an office “in effect.”⁵⁴

⁵² Rob Shields, *The Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2003): xv.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

Through this explanation, the virtual comes to be understood as again a mimetic representation of the real, but a representation that contains the “substance,” the material, that makes the real, real. The virtual can have a sense of concreteness. To this end, Shields writes that the virtual does not exist outside of the real but as a part of it. The virtual helps constitute the real. The virtual and the real “can co-exist and co-define an ‘actual’ object or process in the material world, the manifestation of which depends on the context or situation in which it takes place.”⁵⁵ The virtual and the real are thus co-constitutive.

Video Games, RWE Violence, and the Colonial Gaze

A recurring motif of video games like COD is the colonial gaze, which white supremacist shooters readily adopt. These games create a frame in which the player looks out onto the virtual world. There is always a power imbalance between looking and being looked at. The colonial gaze “conveys a sense of mastery over the unknown and over what is often perceived by the Western writer as strange and bizarre.”⁵⁶ The colonial gaze intensifies the othering of the persons being observed. Video games place the player in the normative, power holding perspective. As the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence purposefully emulates these games, the shooters and viewers are also embodying the colonial gaze.

The colonial gaze tends to come from the Western—particularly U.S.—perspective. Part of this is due to the “tremendous global media presence” the U.S.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁶ David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 15.

possesses.⁵⁷ This media presence includes the video game industry, and many video games like COD are played from a U.S. perspective. Raka Shome elaborates that “colonizing and imperialistic tendencies manifest in discursive practices of ‘first world’ countries in their constructions and representations of the subjects of ‘third world’ countries and/or racially oppressed peoples of the world.”⁵⁸ Throughout the COD series, the player acts in the interests of the U.S. military against those who would see the U.S. compromised. The games manifest imperialist tendencies with very little subtlety.

Finally, the colonial gaze is rooted in conceptions of whiteness. Whiteness and the white gaze are aspects of white discursive practices that “are inextricably linked to forms of political and social power.”⁵⁹ The white gaze also operates “within a binary logic that points to the white bodies’ own ‘signifying [and material] forces to call attention to itself’ as normative.”⁶⁰ The white gaze is the colonial gaze, and both are invested in maintaining white supremacy. The colonial gaze of the video game easily lends itself to white supremacist violence.

Preview

Following this introduction, the thesis examines two case studies for their articulation of the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence. Each chapter includes a discussion on how the white supremacist shooting has become a rhetorical procedure; furthermore, the chapters discuss how that procedure then acts to promote white supremacist ideology. Specifically, the use of video game motifs collapses the

⁵⁷ Raka Shome, “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View,” in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mark J. Porrovecchio and Celeste Michelle Condit, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016): 560.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁵⁹ George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (Washington D.C.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016): xxx.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

boundary between virtual and material violence. Though procedure may not seem the obvious choice to explore white supremacist violence, the continuity between attacks and online extremist responses to those attacks demonstrates a certain set of guidelines that are to be followed for maximum discursive effect.

The first event under study is the 2019 Christchurch, New Zealand shooting. On March 15th, a man killed 51 Muslim individuals, and attempted to kill 40 more, who were praying at two mosques in Christchurch.⁶¹ He prepared for this attack for years with the express intention of instilling fear “into those he described as invaders.”⁶² The Christchurch shooter is a self-proclaimed white supremacist who documented his fear of white power’s displacement by non-white immigrants.⁶³ These beliefs prompted his attacks, and he designed his violence to communicate his beliefs.

Just before the attack, the shooter posted a link to a Facebook livestream and another to his manifesto on image board site 8chan. He also emailed copies of his manifesto to over fifty media outlets and to New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s office. He proceeded to live stream first-person footage of his attack from a Go-Pro camera strapped to his helmet.⁶⁴ The live stream continued for nine minutes, after which the shooter continued to the second mosque, killed seven additional Muslim worshippers, and was finally arrested thirty-six minutes after he began the livestream.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Charlotte Graham-McLay, “Christchurch Inquiry Says New Zealand Couldn’t Have Prevented Mosque Attacks,” *The New York Times*, December 8, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/08/world/asia/christchurch-inquiry-report.html>.

⁶² “NZ Court Told Killer Spent Years Preparing for Mosque Attacks,” *Al Jazeera*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/24/nz-court-told-killer-spent-years-preparing-for-mosque-attacks>.

⁶³ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

In August of 2020, a New Zealand court sentenced the shooter to life imprisonment without parole.⁶⁶

This chapter studies the shooting as a turning point for rhetorical strategies of white supremacist violence. The Christchurch shooter, while taking some inspiration from previous extremist violence, utilized new technology (the livestream) to complete the rhetorical collapse of the material into the virtual; the livestream excised its victims' agencies by reducing them to targets and non-playable characters (NPCs). The shooter's embodiment of the FPS hero-character furthered this reduction; because of his success in demonstrating white power, the shooter established a procedure of white supremacist violence that continues today.

The second case study is the 2022 Buffalo, New York shooting of thirteen individuals in a predominantly Black grocery store. On May 14, 2022, a man entered a grocery store in a predominantly Black neighborhood and opened fire. The shooter claimed he was inspired by the Christchurch shooting; indeed, much of his own manifesto plagiarized the Christchurch shooter's.⁶⁷ The shooter carried several automatic weapons and wore body armor, including a helmet with a mounted Go-Pro camera. He used this camera to livestream the shooting, though it only played for two minutes before platform Twitch (popular with video game streamers) ended the stream. Despite this, a recording of the livestream circulated on site Streamable, where it was viewed over 3 million times; the livestream was also cross posted to Facebook and Twitter just hours

⁶⁶ Damien Cave and Amanda Saxton, "New Zealand Gives Christchurch Killer a Record Sentence," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/world/asia/christchurch-brenton-tarrant-sentenced.html>.

⁶⁷"The Buffalo Supermarket Shooter Pleads Not Guilty to Federal Charges," *NPR*, July 18, 2022, sec. National, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/18/1112035732/the-buffalo-supermarket-shooter-pleads-not-guilty-to-federal-charges>.

after the shooting.⁶⁸ During the video, the shooter aimed his weapon at a white individual behind a counter, apologized, and moved on.⁶⁹ He has been charged with twenty-six counts of hate crimes and weapons charges.⁷⁰

The shooter planned the attack for months beforehand, carefully selecting his target for maximum effect. He visited the grocery store several times, making note of shoppers' demographics and drawing a map of the store.⁷¹ It is also worth noting that the attack was planned for the anniversary of the Christchurch shooting.⁷² While the attack did not take place on that anniversary, the two shootings are intimately linked. Particularly, the second chapter argues that the Buffalo shooter followed the rhetorical procedure established by the Christchurch shooter three years earlier.

To argue this, the chapter pays attention to the discourse related to the shooting's preparation; the Buffalo shooter carefully scoped out and selected his target, he made internet posts and plans for months beforehand, and he wore a helmet-mounted camera to livestream the violence. He followed the Christchurch procedure while accounting for the history of anti-Black racism in the United States. However, the enactment of the Christchurch Call, an agreement made by top technology companies to limit the spread of extremist content online, altered the digital landscape for the livestream's circulation.

⁶⁸ Kellen Browning and Ryan Mac, "After Buffalo Shooting Video Spreads, Social Platforms Face Questions," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2022, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/15/business/buffalo-shooting-social-media.html>.

⁶⁹ "Online Diary: Buffalo Gunman Plotted Attack for Months," *AP News*, May 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-19514b0c6524bd428f4167ad9b490a12>.

⁷⁰ Jesse McKinley and Glenn Thrush, "Buffalo Shooting Suspect Is Charged With Federal Hate Crimes," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/15/nyregion/buffalo-shooting-hate-crime-charges.html>.

⁷¹ Shimon Prokopez et. al., "What We Know about Buffalo Supermarket Shooting Suspect Payton Gendron," *CNN*, May 15, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/15/us/payton-gendron-buffalo-shooting-suspect-what-we-know/index.html>.

⁷² *Ibid.*

This chapter discusses how the Christchurch Call—and sites’ failures to uphold its promises—conducts procedural arguments that further blur the distinction between virtual and material violence against non-white peoples. This chapter demonstrates that the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence is flexible to meet the needs of transnational contexts while sustaining the normative power of whiteness.

This thesis concludes with comments regarding the nature of this procedure and its implications for the future. The rhetorical procedure established with Christchurch will be used by other white supremacists and right-wing extremists. This thesis argues it has the rhetorical force and flexibility to further any hate-driven ideology. Therefore, scholars in communication studies, security studies, and others should focus their efforts on countering radicalism at its source. Community outreach and education addresses one side of the coin, as it were. Policy implementation and weapons restrictions address the other side. It is up to communication scholars to develop and advise on persuasive strategies to achieve these goals and limit the reach of right-wing extremism.

Although I by no means believe I have stumbled across a magical solution, I remain convinced that rhetorical studies can offer a viable path towards a reduction in radicalization and, therefore, a reduction in white supremacist violence. Extremists are persuasive; they would not have their impact if they were not. By examining extremist appeals for their persuasive strategies, not their rational arguments, I believe rhetorical scholars can contribute to the restriction of extremist radicalization. With this project, I hope to provide one such avenue; or, at least, the first paver on that road.

CHAPTER 1

ESTABLISHING THE PROCEDURE: CHRISTCHURCH, NEW ZEALAND

The Christchurch attack on 15 March 2019 was a notable and extraordinary act of violence. Part of what made the act so extraordinary was the coordination of procedural tropes of both video games and previous acts of RWE violence. Thus, the event articulated a rhetorical procedure of doing white supremacist violence. These tropes include modification of the shooter's body, the reference to numerous online memes and jokes, and the framing of the livestream as an FPS video game. The shooter's audience of other online extremists found this procedure particularly compelling as they massively circulated the livestream with various supportive comments, video edits, and more. This chapter explains how this act of violence developed into a rhetorical procedure. In bringing these tropes together, the shooter created a procedure that governs how white supremacist violence can operate in the world.

This chapter first provides a brief accounting of the case study, including how it was influenced by yet distinct from previous acts of RWE violence. Then follows a detailed discussion of the framework of procedural rhetoric and procedural tropes. Finally, the chapter analyzes the attack and its articulations of procedural tropes, particularly those that reflect the motifs of FPS video games. The chapter closes with thoughts on the consequences of such a procedure, including how the boundaries between virtual and material violence are blurred and the implications for future acts of white supremacist violence.

The Christchurch Attacks

In the years before 15 March 2019, Brenton Tarrant (hereafter referred to as ‘the shooter,’ or ‘the Christchurch shooter’) had been preparing for violence.¹ Between gym memberships and steroid use, acquisition of and training with firearms, and immersing himself in RWE ideologies, the shooter made every attempt to be as successful as he could.² Success, in this instance, refers to the shooter’s aim “to trigger a much wider racial conflagration to prevent ‘white genocide.’”³ As previously mentioned, the shooter believed in replacement theory which argues non-white peoples immigrate to ‘white’ nations and have more children than the white populations. Through this theory, anti-immigrant and racist individuals find ideological backing for their beliefs.⁴ The shooter titled his 74-page manifesto “The Great Replacement,” and in it, he espoused hatred for Muslim immigrants and fear of white power’s displacement.⁵

On the day of the attack, the shooter emailed copies of his manifesto to several media outlets and to the Prime Minister’s office.⁶ He also posted a link to his manifesto and Facebook livestream on 8chan, an anonymous image board site known for its

¹ I do not use the shooter’s name to limit individual sensationalism as informed by those in counter-terrorism studies. For more information, see James N. Meindl and Jonathan W. Ivy, “Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 3 (2017): 368–70, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303611>.

² “Preparation for the Terrorist Attack,” Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Attack on Christchurch Mosques on 15 March 2019, accessed November 12, 2022, <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz/the-report/firearms-licensing/preparation-for-the-terrorist-attack/>.

³ Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 18, 2019, <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>.

⁴ Farhad Manjoo, “Opinion | The White-Extinction Conspiracy Theory Is Bonkers,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/opinion/new-zealand-great-replacement.html>.

⁵ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁶ Ibid.

extremist members.⁷ The shooter then livestreamed the attacks from his helmet-mounted Go-Pro camera for nine minutes, after which the livestream cut out. The shooter continued to the second mosque, killed seven additional Muslim worshippers, and was finally arrested thirty-six minutes after he began the livestream.⁸ In August of 2020, a New Zealand court sentenced the shooter to life imprisonment without parole.⁹

The shooter's post and livestream received many positive responses from other 8chan users. Most startling is the video game imagery of the shooter's attack. Users commented on the shooter's high body count and "made references to their desire to 'beat his high score.'"¹⁰ As others have illustrated, the responses echo the video game characteristics of the attack itself.¹¹ Furthermore, online extremists copied and re-uploaded the video 1.5 million times on Facebook and an unreleased (but seemingly as large) number of times on YouTube.¹² These videos were edited to avoid algorithmic detection for removal. Although copies of the video are more difficult to find now, these online communities still praise the shooter as a "Saint."¹³

The Christchurch shooter took inspiration from other acts of white supremacist violence; most notably, from the 2011 Norway attacks and affiliated manifesto. Anders

⁷ Kate Conger, "It's Back: 8chan Returns Online," *The New York Times*, November 4, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/technology/8chan-returns-8kun.html>.

⁸ Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

⁹ Damien Cave and Amanda Saxton, "New Zealand Gives Christchurch Killer a Record Sentence," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2020, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/world/asia/christchurch-brenton-tarrant-sentenced.html>.

¹⁰ Robert Evans, "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror," *bellingcat*, August 4, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/08/04/the-el-paso-shooting-and-the-gamification-of-terror/>.

¹¹ *Ibid*; Robert Evans, "Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre," *bellingcat*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosque-massacre/>.

¹² Elizabeth Dwoskin and Craig Timberg, "Inside YouTube's Struggles to Shut down Video of the New Zealand Shooting - and the Humans Who Outsmarted Its Systems," *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2019, <https://bi.gale.com/global/article/GALE|A578911722?u=uga&sid=ebsco>.

¹³ Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

Breivik detonated a bomb near government buildings, killing eight individuals, then drove to an island hosting a Labour party summer camp for politically minded youth. He then opened fire, killing sixty-nine people, mostly teenagers. Before his attacks, he emailed his 1500-page manifesto to hundreds of email accounts, including Norwegian journalists and politicians. He was arrested and sentenced to twenty-one years in prison, the highest sentence in that country. He remains there today.¹⁴

There are some obvious similarities between these two attacks. Both shooters emailed their manifestos to journalists and politicians just before their attacks. They both carried out their attacks for the express purpose of white nationalism and supremacy. They also both carefully selected their targets to send a message against those who would purportedly de-center white privilege in their respective cultures. The Norway attack provided inspiration for other acts of white supremacist violence. The Christchurch attack, however, created a procedure that acts as a constraining form on white supremacist violence; furthermore, this procedure blurs the distinction between virtual and material violence. This blurring supports white supremacy's goal of dehumanizing non-white peoples.

Procedural Rhetoric

As discussed in the introduction, Ian Bogost's theorization of procedural rhetoric serves the foundation of this project. The core understanding of Bogost's *Persuasive Games* is that persuasion takes place "through rule-based representations and interactions."¹⁵ Although Bogost aims to bring video games under the purview of

¹⁴ "Norway's July 22, 2011, Terror Attack: A Timeline," AP News, July 19, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-norway-bd6c9d2efd6ce2148c3d85cb79d73af9>.

¹⁵ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010): ix.

rhetoric, his arguments on procedure as persuasive can find other avenues. Bogost admits this when he writes, “procedures found the logics that structure behavior in *all* cases... When we do things, we do them according to some logic, and that logic constitutes a *process* in the general sense of the word.”¹⁶ In any form of expression, then, can scholars identify the logic—the process—driving and governing that expression.

Furthermore, these processes are comprised of tropes, what Bogost calls procedural tropes. These procedural tropes function similarly to literary tropes that when grouped together define literary forms like the sonnet or novel.¹⁷ Certain forms determine the structure of a message as well as how we critique those messages. Procedural rhetoric focuses on how those tropes constrain the message, expressive as it is within the tropological frame.

When examining a message within its constraint, the constraint itself can provide insight into the message’s persuasive success. Bogost offers a definition of this persuasive success as “the effective arrangement of a work so as to create a desirable possibility space for interpretation... Success means effective expression, not necessarily effective influence.”¹⁸ In this sense, an evaluation of how many people were persuaded is extraneous. Instead, the focus remains on an argument’s formal structures and creative uses of rhetorical figures and tropes. For disciplines such as public address, those evaluative tools are longstanding. For new modes of rhetoric, it is a different story.

To bring in a new medium under the purview of rhetoric, such as videogames or white supremacist violence, Bogost advises rhetoricians to inquire about “how inscription

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 20.

works in that medium, and then how arguments can be constructed through those modes of inscription.”¹⁹ Scholars must examine how the inscriptions, the symbol-use, function and are manipulated for persuasion. In terms of the Christchurch attack, how does the use of video game symbols advance the white supremacist message being articulated?

Additionally, how do inscriptions particular to a procedure make arguments about the world? In his study of video games, Bogost states he is interested in games “that make arguments about the way systems work in the material world.”²⁰ Despite the inherent virtuality of the video game, games can offer commentary on the material. To extend Bogost’s argument, procedural rhetoric examines how *systems* themselves work in and comment on the material world. Systems and procedures govern how people in a culture operate daily. Through procedural rhetorical analysis, scholars can examine how procedures “support or challenge our understanding of the way things in the world do or should work.”²¹ These are arguments about the material world in a virtual space.

These arguments pertain to the systems and logics in place that people may take for granted or follow without thought. Although persuasive games “expose the logic of situations” to persuade players to imagine new ways of thinking, a procedure of white supremacist violence can reinforce the logics governing its own procedure.²² A rhetorical critique of that procedure, however, can expose those logics and demonstrate how they work to make persuasive arguments in favor of a white supremacist social order.

In sum, procedural rhetoric aims to analyze the underlying processes that govern a system, paying attention to how those processes constrain the messages or arguments

¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁰ Ibid., 47.

²¹ Ibid., 59.

²² Ibid., 332.

therein. Through procedural rhetorical analysis, scholars can see how the processes impact the realm of possibility in a given situation. From this perspective, then, scholars can address the processes themselves to explore how meaning is made, or they may choose to explore how those processes can be opened to real or imagined alternate possibilities and meanings.

The Christchurch attack articulates a rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence that works to maintain the governing structure of white privilege against perceived threats of white victimization. To analyze the procedural argument of the attack, there must first be identification and discussion of the procedural tropes used to build the argument. Leslie Hahner's analysis of memes and Kevin Michael DeLuca's theorization of the image-event serve as tools to identify the primary tropes of the procedure of white supremacist violence.

One factor in determining the influence of digital rhetoric is its circulation. Hahner in her article "The Riot Kiss: Framing Memes as Visual Arguments" argues that the circulation of an image can impact new and repeated arguments regarding that image. Although she discusses memes particularly, what she defines as a "virus-like cultural artifact that proliferates by replication and mutation," she goes on to generalize the term as "any trend that is replicated across the social."²³ Such images or trends can engage audience members in "multiple interpretive frameworks" at an "incredible speed of circulation."²⁴ Unknown but undoubtedly large numbers of people encounter a given meme when they spend time online, on social media platforms, or on internet news sites.

²³ Leslie A. Hahner, "The Riot Kiss: Framing Memes as Visual Argument," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 49, no. 3 (2013): 153.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

Each person can simultaneously engage in multiple arguments about the meme and invent new arguments, and thus the meme's interpretive frameworks grow and spread afresh.

Hahner goes on to explain how memes are capable of such interpretive scope. She cites Cara Finnegan's analysis of *Time Magazine's* cover image of O.J. Simpson's mug shot, writing—

this cover shot, like texts generally, “is neither a stable entity with a fixed meaning nor a simple visual argument that may be identified and analyzed... [the image] generated a field of discourse that advanced multiple readings of the same image simultaneously.”²⁵

This multiplicity of readings comes from the “material and discursive traces” of their circulation that remain with/in the image.²⁶ Aspects from each interpretation stay with the image in some capacity. Readers can then attend to each of these aspects and readings, deciding for themselves the argument they support.

The shooter's manifesto and livestream incorporate traces of extremist memes. These artifacts also incorporate how those memes/traces are received and circulated by those cultures' members. These references are some of the procedural tropes of white supremacist violence. They, along with the references to popular FPS video games, are the “manifestation[s] of what has become known as constitutive rhetoric: the mobilization of signs, images, and discourses for the articulation of identities, ideologies,

²⁵ Ibid., 155.

²⁶ Ibid., 155.

consciousnesses, communities, publics, and cultures.”²⁷ The procedural tropes of the attack and its preparation articulate the white supremacist ideology that then governs how white men can act in the world. The memes and video game references constitute the white supremacist actor.

Additionally, the bodies involved in violent acts must be considered both as material and symbolic. DeLuca’s comments on the role of bodies in image-events provides insight. He discusses how various activist groups, such as Earth First! and ACT UP, use “bodies as a pivotal resource for the crucial practice of public argumentation.”²⁸ By showing “vulnerable bodies, dangerous bodies, taboo bodies, ludicrous bodies, transfigured bodies,” these activists could commandeer airtime on major television news networks.²⁹ The body captures audience’s attentions and can both articulate non-verbal arguments and reinforce verbal arguments. The body acts a symbol for manipulation in persuasive efforts.

As DeLuca contends, however, bodies do not exist in a vacuum. He writes, “There are no *a priori* bodies. Bodies are enmeshed in a turbulent stream of multiple and conflictual discourses that shape what they mean in particular contexts.”³⁰ Particular bodies and their framing act as procedural tropes in white supremacist violence. Although of course the victims of shooters cannot consent to their own bodies’ use, their agency-less bodies are manipulated by the procedure of white supremacy enacted by the shooter and reinforced by those circulating and making arguments about the images online. The

²⁷ Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, Act Up, and Queer Nation,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 36, no. 1 (1999): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.1999.11951634>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

shooter's own body becomes the site of white supremacy's power over the lives of non-white persons. Furthermore, although the shooter did not need to commandeer television airtime, the inclusion of body rhetorics works to enhance the arguments of the livestream.

Regarding the livestream, the shooter utilized a helmet camera to capture the footage. Helmet cameras have a history in media-reported violence, especially wartime acts of violence. As the role of the embedded reporter in war zones developed, the images produced by such reporters became embedded in "the militarized reporter's perspective."³¹ The helmet camera is a "way of seeing through the martial eye itself."³² When utilized by the state's military apparatus, this gaze must adhere to will of the state. In terms of military propaganda, this gaze must dissuade ideological dissent against state violence.

In analyzing helmet camera specials shot by soldiers themselves, Roger Stahl demonstrates how the military oversees every stage of production and is the last to sign off on the final product.³³ The end-goal of these military-approved productions is the "absolute depoliticization of state violence."³⁴ State violence becomes necessary, even dramatized, by the framing of danger around soldiers' bodies. As Stahl writes, "The visibility of death appeared in direct proportion to the viewer's identification with the endangered soldier-body."³⁵ The militarized helmet camera only allows for the soldier's body to become endangered or relatable to the viewer.

³¹ Roger Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs: War, Visual Culture, and the Weaponized Gaze* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018): 142.

³² *Ibid.*, 142.

³³ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

This gaze, of protecting the vulnerable soldier-body, happens in the FPS gaze as well. If the player-character becomes too injured, the player must return to an earlier story-beat or location in the game and replay the challenge at hand. This is rarely if ever desirable for a player as the main purpose of most games is to advance in play until the game is won. Additionally, the FPS gaze minimizes the deaths of ‘enemy combatants.’ Non-playable characters (NPCs) are lines of code meant to present opposition to the player and a sense of achievement when defeated. They are not agents themselves; they have no role but to be nameless, faceless adversaries. Therefore, the helmet camera view of the shooting’s livestream incorporates these rhetorical effects of the militarized helmet camera.

Using these frameworks, I now turn to the Christchurch attack to examine the procedural tropes at work in this act of communication. The first task is to identify the procedural tropes that constrain the attack, particularly the internet-culture memes, FPS video games, and the framing of bodies. The identification and explanation move chronologically through the attack as a whole: the preparation, the livestream of the attack itself, and the online response and circulation of the livestream. This analysis demonstrates how the procedural tropes construct a procedure that argues for the sustainment and advancement of white supremacist ideology and practice.

Analysis

The Preparation—Crafting the Persona and Appealing to the Audience

In preparing for the attack, the shooter incorporated two procedural tropes. The first is the construction of the shooter’s persona: the white supremacist, main

character/player insert, hypermasculine soldier. The second is the incorporation of memes and extremist references in the manifesto and other materials.

In preparing for the attack, the shooter manipulated his body to better fit the persona of the main characters of FPS games. While video game players are supposed to embody the main character of FPS video games, often they are asked to identify with the protagonist character who has some plot investment. These characters are most often tall, physically fit, handsome men who are at the height of their military prowess. A Google search of “exercise programs to look like master chief” (the main character of the FPS *Halo* franchise, worth more than \$6 billion) provided over 57 million results.³⁶

A sample of some of these results illustrate the desired body type and how to achieve it. “Be a Game Character” provides hundreds of exercise plans for various video game characters. “The Master Chief” workout includes equipment, warm up and cool down plans, and alterations for different levels of physical fitness.³⁷ At the bottom of the workout is a photo-banner (fig. 1) with two faceless, white bodies with jacked arms and eight-pack abs.³⁸ A different Master Chief workout includes a description saying,

Even cybernetically-enhanced supersoldiers need to work out to stay buff. For a man of few words you need to be able to walk the walk as well as talk the talk and the Master Chief workout is good 'ol plain, solid military fitness. You need strong legs to cover the distance, strong arms to carry a heavy weapon and for those

³⁶ Eddie Makuch, “Halo Hits 81 Million Copies Sold Ahead Of Halo Infinite’s Release,” *GameSpot*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/halo-hits-81-million-copies-sold-ahead-of-halo-infinites-release/1100-6497908/>; “Exercise Programs to Look like Master Chief - Google Search.” Accessed December 9, 2022. <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=exercise+programs+to+look+like+masterchief>.

³⁷ Dan ‘DaRatmastah’ Wallace, “The Master Chief Workout,” *Be a Game Character* (blog), February 7, 2013, <https://beagamecharacter.com/2013/02/07/the-master-chief-workout/>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

hand-to-hand moments and a core that's simply tireless because your armour ain't made of cotton. If you think the workout's a little on the tough side just suck it up and be stoic, soldier.³⁹

The Master Chief workouts posit that the participant either is or should be at the physical level of a super-soldier. Participants can be as buff as this fictional character if they simply follow this regime.⁴⁰ The only thing purportedly stopping the video game player from becoming the character is themselves.



Fig. 1 Comment and photo at the end of the Master Chief work out.

This pressure is not relegated to the fitness corners of the internet, however. *Men's Health* magazine produced a YouTube video highlighting actor Pablo Schreiber's workout routine for the television adaptation of *Halo*. The video follows the actor as he warms up and completes a workout as his professional trainer offers commentary in the background. The video has over 200 thousand views.⁴¹ This video demonstrates

³⁹ "Master Chief Workout," *darebee*, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://darebee.com/workouts/master-chief-workout.html>.

⁴⁰ I believe it's worth pointing out that the character Master Chief is genetically modified to be a 'super-soldier,' and thus it is physically impossible to be as strong as this character.

⁴¹ *Men's Health Magazine*, "Halo Star Pablo Schreiber's Master Chief Workout To Get In Spartan Shape; Train Like," YouTube video, 8:17, May 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIuOZ9XNjiY>.

someone's body *becoming* Master Chief. Players can not only emotionally relate to the main characters of their games, but they can also physically embody them.

To meet this embodiment, the shooter performed several actions. To build muscle and endurance, the shooter attended a local gym three to four times a week, keeping to himself and rarely talking with other gym-goers.⁴² Additionally, the shooter had been self-administering oral steroids as well as injecting testosterone two to three times a week. After consulting with a doctor for a different medical issue, the doctor warned the shooter of the detrimental effects of such self-medication. Later, the doctor remarked to NZ police that the shooter was “cold and inflexible in his position” to continue to self-medicate.⁴³

Furthermore, the shooter spent significant time at a rifle club, practicing his aim and reload times. Reports attest that the shooter “usually shot standing up and went through a large amount of ammunition. His ‘primary interest’ was ‘firing at extremely fast rates and changing magazines quickly.’”⁴⁴ Just as in a video game where quick targeting and reloading can make the difference in high score, so too did the shooter want to emulate that persona. By modifying his body through exercise, medications, and training, the shooter attempted to mold himself into what he would see when loading a game like COD. Viewers of the violence can see a familiar build to the video game characters they regularly play as.

The manifesto enacted different procedural tropes such as references to extreme-online memes and video games. In discussing his ideology, the shooter establishes

⁴² “Preparation for the Terrorist Attack.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

himself as a self-proclaimed white supremacist. The manifesto contained “standard extreme right-wing boilerplate revolving around his central theme of ethnic, cultural, and racial ‘replacement,’ which he perceived to be resulting from immigration and demographic change.”⁴⁵ The shooter rationalized his attack as “defensive resistance” against an “occupying force.”⁴⁶ There is no way to obfuscate the intended purpose—this was an act of white supremacist violence. Though obvious, it is important to note that white supremacist ideology is a procedural trope of this process of violence.

The other procedural trope present in the manifesto was the countless references to online extremist in-jokes and memes.⁴⁷ The shooter ironically claims that Spyro: Year of the Dragon, a platformer featuring a kid-friendly purple dragon main character, “taught [him] ethnonationalism.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Fortnite, the battle royale FPS that made \$5.8 billion in 2021, allegedly “trained [the shooter] to be a killer... and to floss on the corpses of my enemies.”⁴⁹ ‘Flossing’ is a dance move popularized by the cartoon-like Fortnite characters. Moreover, the manifesto constantly throws in other references to internet in-jokes such as the Navy SEAL Copypasta, a meme originally from 4chan that has been circulating since around 2010.⁵⁰ According to reporter and analyst Robert Evans, these references “are meant to distract attention from his more honest points, and to draw the attention of his real intended audience”—the online extremists who know these

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Evans, “Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre.”

⁴⁸ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁴⁹ Mansoor Iqbal, “Fortnite Usage and Revenue Statistics (2022),” Business of Apps, November 28, 2018, <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/fortnite-statistics/>; Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁵⁰ Evans, “Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre.”

references like the backs of their hands.⁵¹ It is this group that the shooter has the greatest potential to persuade into taking up arms to defend white supremacy.

These procedural tropes—the FPS main character body-type, the white supremacist ideology, and the references to online extremist in-jokes—provide the framework of the procedure of white supremacist violence. These tropes govern how the rest of the attack can proceed. From this set-up, the violence that follows becomes of the FPS genre and its associations; participants are going to ‘play a game.’ This game has ideological backing in the form of white supremacist beliefs. Online audiences are put at ease by the references and jokes; they know that this person is a part of their community. In establishing these tropes, the stage is set for the second act of the attack: the livestream of the shooting.

The Livestream—Creating a Video Game IRL

The livestream of the attack draws from the procedural tropes of the preparation to realize ‘the game’ of white supremacist violence in real life. The livestream blurs the distinction between the virtual and the real, as material violence against individuals is framed as a virtual, immersive FPS video game. The livestream achieves this through a second set of procedural tropes: specific music, or a soundtrack, a progression of weapons ‘unlocked’ as the attack proceeded, and the helmet-mounted Go-Pro camera facilitating the FPS perspective. These procedural tropes originate in FPS video games like COD.

Music is known to influence emotional responses to messages. It is why a scene from a horror movie cut to have a pop song playing over it is not as scary as when viewed

⁵¹ Ibid.

with the creepy, suspense building original soundtrack.⁵² Video games operate similarly. Video games typically have carefully chosen music playing over plot-heavy cut-scenes or essential missions. The tone of the music sets the tone of the game.

This holds true for the attack's livestream. As he drove to the first mosque, Al Noor, the shooter played a song "from a propaganda music video made by Serb Army soldiers as a tribute to war criminal Radovan Karadžić."⁵³ The song expresses anti-Muslim discrimination, and the shooter wrote the title of the song on one of his firearms.⁵⁴ By playing a discriminatory song as he drove to the mosque, the livestream mimics the video game. The music sets the tone for a high energy, guns-blazing attack. The lyrics reinforce the message of white supremacist violence. Music emotionally pulls the viewer, either of the livestream or of the video on demand, into the scene itself. It places the viewer in the mindset of the attacker.

Additionally, the shooter's weapon choice and progression of weapons use is informed by video games. Halfway through the attack at the Al Noor Mosque, Tarrant returned to his car to swap his semiautomatic shotgun for a semiautomatic assault rifle. Additionally, the shooter had several incendiary devices in his car he had planned to use.⁵⁵ In the COD games, as a player achieves a higher kill count, the grade of weapons available to the player increases.⁵⁶ The progression of weapons the shooter used mimics

⁵² Alexis A. Strobin et al., "The Role of Music in Motion Picture Advertising and Theatrical Trailers: Altering Music to Modify Emotional Response and Genre Expectations," *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal* 19, no. 3 (2015): R244–60.

⁵³ Evans, "Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Richard Pérez-Peña, "Two New Zealand Mosques, a Hate-Filled Massacre Designed for Its Time," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/australia/new-zealand-mosque-shooting.html>.

⁵⁶ Cori E Dauber et al., "Call of Duty: Jihad – How the Video Game Motif Has Migrated Downstream from Islamic State Propaganda Videos" *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 3 (2019): 21.

the same procedural trope of the COD games. Additionally, this trope incentivizes further violence against Black and brown bodies as the player-character is rewarded for a high kill count.

Finally, the shooter livestreamed the video from a helmet-mounted Go-Pro camera to achieve an FPS perspective. This has two immediate effects; it solidifies the Christchurch livestream as using video game motifs, and it allows the viewer to imagine themselves as the attacker—to immerse themselves in the scene. The first-person perspective is rhetorically significant as the camera angles are—

powerful, because they create an immersive experience—just as in game play, or game space. The use of first person camera is probably the visual characteristic that is ‘first among equals’ in identifying a video as belonging to the gaming category.⁵⁷

The first-person camera angle, though used in other forms of the weaponized gaze, is instead used here to mimic the viewpoint of video games like COD.⁵⁸

Moreover, the first-person camera angle immerses the viewer into the scene. If we refer to Shaviro’s conception of the first-person camera angle as “motion in space,” then the immersion becomes more than watching a video.⁵⁹ It is the collapse of the space between the virtual violence of the video game and the material violence of the shooting. The livestream’s viewer is at once distanced from and participating in the violence. The viewers *feel* as if they are the ones enacting the violence. Yet while viewers are not enacting material violence themselves, they nevertheless see that violence play out on the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁸ Refer to the discussion of helmet cameras.

⁵⁹ Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006): 63.

screen in front of them. The livestream of violence is not wholly virtual, not quite only material. How online communities take up the livestream further blurs this distinction.

The Online Response

Not only did the shooter's attack draw upon procedural tropes common to video games, but so did the online extremists' response to the attack. Almost immediately after posting the announcement, livestream, and manifesto, online extremists began valorizing the shooter. On chat platform Discord, popular with video game players, administrators of twelve different servers tried to remove just under 40,000 comments praising the shooter within the first twenty-four hours of the attack.⁶⁰ Members of an 8chan board, a site popular with extremists due to its little to no moderation, praised the shooter as a "hero" and remarked upon his "ominous digits" and "THE DIGITS OF GOD" (emphasis original).⁶¹ This refers to the shooter's 'kill count,' referred to here as a remarkable achievement.

This initial response continues the tradition of counting and comparing right-wing extremists' 'high scores.' Starting after the Oklahoma City bombing, copycats and other right-wing extremists have been trying to beat each other's high scores, referring to how many people were killed in an attack. Christchurch has served as an exemplar of this trend, as "8chan users have commented regularly on [the shooter's] high body count, and made references to their desire to 'beat his high score.'"⁶² One New Zealand man, a known white supremacist, was arrested for sending the video of the shooting to a friend

⁶⁰ Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks."

⁶¹ Macklin, "The Christchurch Attacks;" Evans, "Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre."

⁶² Evans, "The El Paso Shooting and the Gamification of Terror."

with the request to add a kill count to the recording.⁶³ This community does not refer to the attack as a tragic loss of life; rather, the attack becomes a particularly skilled play-through of a COD combat map. Rhetorically, this diminishes the inherent value of the lives of the Muslim worshippers killed in the attack. It also reinforces the violent nature of these procedural tropes; there are no punishments or penalties for massacring non-white bodies. Instead, the massacre receives a number one spot on the leader board.

This online community rallied behind the shooter and cultivated a fandom, a subculture of fans typically of fictional media who create content and find comradery over that fiction. Many, if not all, video game franchises have an associated fandom, and the ‘hero’ of the game receives praise, support, and merchandising opportunities. For example, the COD wiki, a “community run and maintained” by fans of the games, has over 12,000 individual web pages of information and discussion about the games in the franchise.⁶⁴ This is, unfortunately, like the online response to the Christchurch attacks. 8chan community members elevated the shooter to a revered status of protagonist-hero. The shooter become more than just a violent, racist man.

Indeed, the shooter was sanctified by this community. Anonymous posters began referring to the shooter as a “saint.” Merchandise with the shooter’s and other right-wing extremists’ faces photo-shopped onto images of medieval saints became available to purchase. Another photo-shopped image of the shooter on a fresco became known as “Mural of St. Tarrant of Christchurch.” 8chan users were “collectively creating and disseminating, as [the shooter] had hoped that they would, hundreds of memes and other

⁶³ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁶⁴ “Call of Duty Wiki,” accessed April 30, 2022, https://callofduty.fandom.com/wiki/Call_of_Duty_Wiki.

forms of ‘fan’ art exalting the killings and revering him as a cult, religious figure.”⁶⁵ This elevates the shooter to a holy status, someone to admire and imitate. As time went on, the online admiration of the shooter only increased as supporters attempted to spread the new ‘gospel.’

One such method was making the manifesto more accessible to a wider audience. Over a week after the attack, 8chan users were spreading versions of the shooter’s manifesto translated into different languages. The post also encouraged users to translate the text into more languages and to spread these versions.⁶⁶ In another instance, a far-right YouTuber with 600,000 subscribers read the entirety of the manifesto in a video. Until it was removed by the platform, and one must assume it is still available in some form online, the video served as an audiobook for one to listen to the manifesto while going about one’s day.⁶⁷ Through these translations and recordings, online extremists attempted to widen the shooter’s audience and influence. Extremists made the document and its white supremacist message more accessible.

Another part of the online response is the video on demand of the shooter’s livestream. Initial viewers recorded the livestream as it happened, and online extremists jumped on the opportunity to spread that recording. The video was posted an estimated 1.5 million times on Facebook within the first 24 hours of the attack. Due to algorithmic censorship, about 300,000 videos were posted before being removed by site moderators.⁶⁸ YouTube also faced enormous amounts of posts and reposts of the video as site

⁶⁵ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁶⁶ Robert Evans, “Ignore The Poway Synagogue Shooter’s Manifesto: Pay Attention To 8chan’s /Pol/ Board,” *bellingcat*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/04/28/ignore-the-poway-synagogue-shooters-manifesto-pay-attention-to-8chans-pol-board/>.

⁶⁷ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

⁶⁸ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

moderators and the algorithmic censor struggled to take the video down. YouTube has not released how many copies of the video were uploaded to its site, though one reporter states that tens of thousands of videos were uploaded at a rate of one video per second.⁶⁹ At one point in the first 24 hours of the attack, YouTube users could not see search results for “New Zealand,” nor could they access the “recent uploads” search function.⁷⁰

One reason for this struggle to remove the video are the modifications individuals made to the video to circumvent moderators. YouTube’s censorship algorithm could not keep up with the “the tens of thousands of permutations of video being uploaded about the shooting in real time.”⁷¹ Some of the edits were as simple as adding watermarks or changing the size of the video’s frame. Others were more insidious: “Some even turned the people in the footage into animations, as if a video game was playing out.”⁷² To further virtualize the lives of the Muslim worshippers, their bodies were rhetorically transformed into animated characters rather than agentic individuals.

Sometime after the attack, far-right extremists took this dehumanization further by imbuing video games with footage from the attack. One game was released before the Christchurch attack and allows players to pose as figures such as Hitler and Mussolini and inflict violence on minorities. After the attack in New Zealand, players could choose to play as “Brent T.”⁷³ A second game “spliced video game action with raw footage of [the shooter’s] attacks.”⁷⁴ Not only was the attack designed with video game tropes in

⁶⁹ Dwoskin and Timberg, “Inside YouTube’s Struggles to Shut down Video of the New Zealand Shooting—and the Humans Who Outsmarted Its Systems.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks,” Jack Wright and Alan Selby, “Sick Video Game Lets Fans Play as Christchurch Mosque Massacre Gunman,” *Mirror*, June 1, 2019, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/sick-video-game-lets-fans-16238926>.

⁷⁴ Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks.”

mind, but extremist audiences responded to the attack by further virtualizing the material violence. Through the application of these procedural tropes, the attack becomes a procedure that blurs the boundary between the virtual and the material. That distinction weakens with every viewing, every animation, and every praise.

Conclusion

The Christchurch attack articulated a rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence that was reinforced by the extremist responses online. Using procedural tropes lifted from FPS video games as well as references to extremist memes, the shooter created a process of white supremacist violence. The procedural tropes governed how the message of white supremacy could be sent and received. The messaging was as like an FPS video game as possible, and extremist online communities enhanced those similarities.

That planning and post-enhancement blurred the distinction between the virtual violence of the video game and the material violence of the shooting. By reducing the individuals killed to NPCs, to lines of code in a program, Muslims become like *Space Invaders*: endless, threatening, and non-feeling. The threat they pose to white supremacy is great, but it is easy to act against this force. One does not even need to feel bad. A player does not feel any moral anguish or even concern about killing an unnamed enemy in COD. Rather, the player is rewarded with better weapons, badges, and their name on the leaderboard.

The white supremacist shooter is rewarded similarly. Not only does he take direct action protecting his community from an invading force, but he is also praised for his action. He is sanctified. Others aspire to become like him, to beat his high score and

become ‘greater’ than him. No wonder several white supremacist mass shooters have claimed the Christchurch attack as direct inspiration.

Since the attack, the shooter has been sentenced to life imprisonment without chance for parole, the highest degree of punishment in New Zealand. At the sentencing, Muslim community members had a chance to make statements of grief, anger, and, in one case, forgiveness to the shooter.⁷⁵ The Muslim individuals who gave statements in the courtroom also avowed that the act of hatred did not and will not sow division in the nation.⁷⁶ Moreover, New Zealanders quickly voted to ban assault weapons like the ones used in the attack, and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern led a global effort to restrict extremist content online.⁷⁷

That effort led to the Christchurch Call, a “community of over 120 governments, online service providers, and civil society organisations acting together to eliminate terrorist and extremist content online.”⁷⁸ Sites like YouTube (owned by Google) and Facebook were criticized for failing to prevent and stop the spread of the Christchurch livestream. Following Ardern’s prompting, companies such as Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Twitter have joined this effort to limit the posting and sharing of extremist content on their platforms.⁷⁹ Although the Christchurch Call is a noble effort, I will discuss in the next chapter how those efforts have failed.

⁷⁵ Dwoskin and Timberg, “Inside YouTube’s Struggles.”

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Christchurch Call to Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online,” accessed April 30, 2022, <https://www.christchurchcall.com/>.

⁷⁹ Kate Conger, “Facebook Says It Is More Aggressively Enforcing Content Rules,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2019, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/technology/facebook-content-rules-data.html>.

CHAPTER 2

REARTICULATING THE PROCEDURE: BUFFALO, NEW YORK

In the three years since the Christchurch shooting, there have been several copy-cat attacks attempted around the world. But it was the 2022 Buffalo, NY shooting that first enacted the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence established by the Christchurch shooter. From the preparation of the rhetorical persona to the details of the attack, the Buffalo shooter admitted strong influence from the Christchurch attack and followed the procedure carefully. This chapter demonstrates the uptake and rearticulation of the rhetorical procedure established in the previous chapter. The Buffalo shooter, though following the procedure in the preparation and attack, enacted his own authorial edits to establish himself as a credible successor to the Christchurch ‘saint.’ The changed digital landscape of 2022, most notably affected by the Christchurch Call, marked some differences in the circulation of the livestream. However, the distinction between the virtual and material is still blurred, this time through the procedural arguments of social media platforms’ algorithms. Several platforms did not remove the video of the attack, claiming in some cases that it did not violate site policy. In so doing, these social media platforms equivocated the material violence to that of virtual non-threat.

First, I briefly discuss the context of the Buffalo shooting. I then discuss how the Buffalo shooter enacted the procedure of white supremacist violence as a *techne* situated within Plato’s critique of rhetoric as *tribe*. Then follows an analysis of the preparation and attack as they demonstrate the procedural tropes established in Christchurch. When

discussing the circulation of the livestream, I demonstrate how the circulation both mimicked and differed from Christchurch; particularly, I discuss the rhetoricity of content moderation and its effect of further blurring the distinction between virtual and material violence in this case study.

The Buffalo Attack

While the Christchurch attack inspired several white supremacist shootings in the years since, only one has followed the rhetorical procedure laid out by the Christchurch shooter in its entirety. On 14 May 2022, Peyton Gendron drove to the Tops Friendly Market grocery store in Buffalo, New York and opened fire.¹ The Buffalo shooter planned the attack for months. He researched the census data for nearby towns to find the largest Black population in the area. He performed reconnaissance on the grocery store and drew maps of the building. These records were kept on a private Discord server that the shooter made public as he began his attack.² Along with the Discord log, the shooter published a manifesto and a link to his livestream. The attack in Buffalo left ten Black individuals dead, and three more individuals injured.³ The shooter has plead guilty to all state charges. He still faces federal charges, including terrorism charges.⁴

¹ See comments on not reprinting the shooter's name in chapter one.

² Jesse McKinley et al., "Buffalo Suspect Planned Attack for Months, Online Posts Reveal," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/nyregion/buffalo-shooting-attack.html>.

³ "Federal Grand Jury Indicts Accused Tops Shooter on Federal Hate Crimes and Firearms Charges in Buffalo, New York," *The United States Department of Justice*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/federal-grand-jury-indicts-accused-tops-shooter-federal-hate-crimes-and-firearms-charges>.

⁴ "Buffalo Supermarket Shooter Seeks Plea Deal to Avoid Death Penalty," *Reuters*, December 9, 2022, sec. United States, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/buffalo-supermarket-shooter-seeks-plea-deal-avoid-death-penalty-2022-12-09/>; Jesse McKinley, Troy Closson, and Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "Buffalo Shooting Suspect Expected to Plead Guilty in Massacre," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/17/nyregion/buffalo-shooting-payton-gendron-plead.html>.

Both the manifesto and livestream were heavily influenced by the Christchurch attack. The Buffalo manifesto demonstrates the ideological influences of the Christchurch attack by espousing belief in replacement theory as well as the Christchurch shooter's call for direct action. In fact, the manifesto plagiarizes the Christchurch manifesto extensively and reproduces it in its entirety as the shooter felt he couldn't "say it any better."⁵ Not only was the Buffalo shooter ideologically inspired by the Christchurch shooter and replacement theory, but he was also rhetorically inspired. The Buffalo shooter's persona, references made, and livestream framing all follow the rhetorical procedure established in Christchurch. This procedure does not preclude rhetorical agency on the part of the Buffalo shooter nor on the part of the manifesto, Discord log, and livestream video. Rather, the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence requires the *techne* inherent in any rhetorical address.

Procedure as *Techne* and Establishing Ethos

Techne not Tribe

Rhetoricians are justifiably concerned with the distinction between procedure and rhetoric. Brandee Easter remarks that rhetoricians "are uncomfortable with defining rhetoric as a procedural, rule-based enactment of communication."⁶ She goes on to say that rhetoric as procedure strips human agency, "and thus art and ethics," away from the *techne*.⁷ This is a valid concern; there is not a one-size-fits-all method for persuasion. If

⁵ Amaranth Amarasingham, Marc-Andre Argentino, and Graham Macklin, "The Buffalo Attack: The Cumulative Momentum of Far-Right Terror," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 19, 2022, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-buffalo-attack-the-cumulative-momentum-of-far-right-terror/>

⁶ Brandee Easter, "Fully Human, Fully Machine: Rhetorics of Digital Disembodiment in Programming," *Rhetoric Review* 39, no. 2 (2020): 204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2020.1727096>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

there were, the field of rhetoric would have exhausted its studies centuries ago or be reduced to “mere rules.”⁸

However, the “rules” of a procedure are “*authored*” (emphasis original).⁹ There must be some rhetor at the outset imbuing rhetorical art in the creation of a rule set. Moreover, those who use those rules impart some rhetorical authorship in the enactment. When dealing with human actors, concerns for mechanical reproduction fall away. In enacting the procedure of white supremacist violence, one must respond to the ever-changing contexts of national and international cultures, governmental restrictions, and societal histories. In establishing his ethos, the Buffalo shooter left an imprint that marks the difference in rhetor and rhetorical situation in Buffalo. While the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence has key features, it can also be worked within to open new possibilities.

For this is the case with any *techne*. James Porter writes that *techne* “requires both an abstract knowledge (e.g., of material and of form) and a procedural knowledge (e.g., of application and technique).”¹⁰ Porter goes on to cite John Wild’s comment on Plato’s own distinguishing between *techne* and *tribe*, writing that *tribe* is the “meaningless repetition of practice.”¹¹ Procedural rhetoric, then, pulls in the knowledges required of a *techne* while not falling prey to the thoughtlessness of *tribe*. This is the case with the Buffalo shooting. The Buffalo shooter did not repeat the steps of the Christchurch shooter; rather, the Buffalo shooter used technical knowledge to adhere to the form of the

⁸ James J. Brown, “The Machine That Therefore I Am,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 47, no. 4 (2014): 496, <https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.47.4.0494>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 497.

¹⁰ James E. Porter, “Recovering Delivery for Digital Rhetoric,” *Computers and Composition* 26, no. 4 (2009): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2009.09.004>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

rhetorical procedure while inserting his own authorial voice. This is necessary to facilitate the rhetorical procedure being enacted by a credible successor.

One may ask, why is this a rhetorical procedure rather than mimesis? Mimesis “refers to the ability of a discourse to imitate or copy lived experience.”¹² Mimetic representation attempts to mirror experience in some way. Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles demonstrate this in an analysis of how *The West Wing* constructs a representation of the presidency that emphasizes the romantic dimensions of that position during a time of political shifts.¹³ This representation “designates not a passive process of reproduction but the process of creation, representation, or enactment.”¹⁴ The mimetic representation of the presidency in *The West Wing* is not a one-to-one representation of the American presidency; it’s a facsimile meant to convey a certain message. This holds true for mimetic representations writ large.

Procedural rhetorics, on the other hand, “make claims about the structure of a situation, in the hopes of inspiring a disruptive event.”¹⁵ Procedural rhetorics make arguments about a rhetorical situation through a rule-based structure. The disruption could be proposing an intervention to promote voting for a candidate (e.g., *The Howard Dean for Iowa Game*) or to incite a race war to retake a ‘white’ country.¹⁶ However, the disruptive events “and the subjects they produce are individual and no one relationship exists between the logic of system (e.g., political campaigning) and a singular agent (e.g.,

¹² Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, “The West Wing’s Prime-Time Presidentiality: Mimesis and Catharsis in a Postmodern Romance,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630209384371>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 211 quoting Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture, Art, Society*, trans. Don Reneau, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2010): 331.

¹⁶ Ibid., 93.

the citizen).”¹⁷ Therefore, the logic of the system (white supremacy) can inform agents’ relationships to that system differently (e.g., protest movements against systemic racism, mutual aid networks responding to community needs). The procedural rhetorical argument, however, establishes a set of rules or procedural tropes to expose the logic of a situation rather than represent life experience.

Crafting the Credible Persona

The primary way in which the Buffalo shooter demonstrated his ethos was by proving himself to be a Discourse insider.¹⁸ Ann Amicucci draws upon James Gee’s theorization of “Discourse with a capital ‘D’”¹⁹ wherein participation—

is a matter of both ‘enactment and recognition,’ a two-part negotiation where not only does an individual need to act in certain ways and do certain things, but those actions and enactments need to be recognized and accepted by insiders as appropriate ways to perform a certain identity.²⁰

The Discourse under study is the online-extremist, meme using, video gaming community to which the Christchurch shooter appealed. To be seen as a credible inheritor of the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence, the Buffalo shooter needed to be accepted as a Discourse insider of that community. The Buffalo shooter must establish his extremist ethos.

The Buffalo shooter first emphasizes his radicalization in extremist communities on 4chan and his “awakening” after the Christchurch attack.²¹ The shooter was

¹⁷ Ibid., 331.

¹⁸ Ann N. Amicucci, “Rhetorical Choices in Facebook Discourse: Constructing Voice and Persona,” *Computers and Composition* 44 (2017): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2017.03.006>.

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 46.

²¹ Amarasingham, Argentino, and Macklin, “The Buffalo Attack.”

radicalized on 4chan where he read about replacement theory and developed “a belief in ‘white genocide.’”²² Although not citing any source directly, the shooter’s writings are replete with anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism that are common talking points on 4chan.²³ Furthermore, the shooter claimed that the Christchurch attack made him realize that “our replacement can be overturned.”²⁴ His manifesto is littered with references to the Christchurch shooter and attack.²⁵ It was the Christchurch attack, manifesto, and livestream that prompted the Buffalo shooter to take action into his own hands. Through these references, the Buffalo shooter established himself as a someone who knows the ‘truth’ and is a trusted insider.

The manifesto also completely lifts the Christchurch shooter’s manifesto, whole cloth, in a show of dedication to the ‘Saint’s’ words.²⁶ The Buffalo shooter felt he could not provide better ideological backing for his actions. As Amarasingham et. al. explains, “In other words, at least in the view of the Buffalo shooter, the ideological foundation for future attacks has already been ‘perfected’” by the Christchurch shooter.²⁷ The Buffalo shooter did not attempt to usurp a revered member of this extremist community. He rather establishes himself as someone who has studied the words of a ‘saint’ and is ready to follow the call.

The Buffalo shooter will follow the call, and his own voice can be heard in the Discord logs. The shooter used messaging app Discord to keep an account, or diary, of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ While I was not able to access a copy of the manifesto, I am able to pull quotations from the analysis completed by experts at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. See Amarasingham, Argentino, and Macklin, “The Buffalo Attack.”

²⁶ Amarasingham, Argentino, and Macklin, “The Buffalo Attack.”

²⁷ Ibid.

his planning process. Instead of messaging others, as the app's intended use, the shooter privately messaged himself and created 673 pages of personal writings. These were made public with the rest of the attack's materials (manifesto and livestream link).²⁸ The diary includes notes on each step of the planning phase, including demographic and reconnaissance research on the targeted neighborhood as well as the shooter's fluctuating emotional state.²⁹ Indeed, Amarasingham et. al. writes that the diary functions "to give future attackers a window into [the shooter's] emotional journey, how he was almost caught a few times, his self-doubt, his suicidal ideations, and his months-long dedication to carrying out the attack."³⁰ This window is the *techne* at work; this is the shooter's own appeal to ethos separate from the Christchurch shooter. Right-wing extremists can immerse themselves in the shooter's emotional investment—and it was a high one, at that. The manifesto demonstrates the shooter's commitment to the procedure. The Discord diary demonstrates his own rhetorical influence.

Additionally, the Buffalo shooter establishes himself as a 'gamer.' He was "heavily involved in gaming and gaming communities over the years" and thus could understand the references in the Christchurch attack and reproduce them accurately.³¹ The shooter's experience playing video games also informed his extremist beliefs. He writes that "the problem with video games is that it leaves you with a false sensation of progress. In reality, you haven't changed anything in the real world."³² Video games offer an escape and a fantasy but no social progress. For right-wing extremists like the Buffalo

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. Note the similarities in phrasing to the IS-produced video games and propaganda videos discussed in the introduction.

shooter, that ‘false sensation of progress’ can be rectified by pursuing real world violence. As is required of the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence, video game motifs become useful reference points and tools to pursue material violence.

The Attack—Creating a Game IRL

Those video game motifs are on full display in the attack itself. When the shooter carried out the attack, he kept to the procedure established. He attached a Go-Pro camera to his helmet to achieve the FPS camera angle. He then streamed the attack live on Twitch. Although the first 28 minutes were of the shooter driving to the store, there were two minutes of livestreamed violence before Twitch terminated the stream. The 30 minutes in total was long enough for any of the 22 viewers to record the video for publication elsewhere.³³ The FPS view heightens the effect of viewers being ‘in’ a video game. As in the Christchurch livestream, the viewer is both immersed in and distanced from the violence happening on screen. The viewer is not bodily inflicting violence. Yet, the viewer can imagine they are as they see bodies torn asunder.

Additionally, the shooter wore body armor in the style of the Christchurch shooter and carried several weapons. Although commenters argue that this was “part of his self-delusion that he was a military ‘partisan’ fighting against an occupying force,” they miss the commitment to dressing as a COD hero integral to the rhetorical messaging of the attack.³⁴ The ‘uniform’ conveys the strength and discipline of a player-character at the height of his military prowess. The weapons—an illegally modified semi-automatic, a rifle, and a shotgun—add legitimacy to this persona. The player-character of COD has

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

access to multiple weapons of varying intensity.³⁵ They are the soldier ready for any mission. Those familiar with these games can watch the video, see glimpses of the shooter and his weapons, and feel as if they are watching a play-through of COD on Twitch.

Furthermore, each weapon was painted with references to white supremacist ideology, the Christchurch shooter's attack and manifesto, and anti-Black racist slurs.³⁶ These writings act to both legitimate the shooter as a Discourse insider and to meet the rhetorical situation of anti-Black racism in the United States. The Buffalo shooter knew which references to RWE ideology and to Christchurch to paint on his weapons; he studied the text and the video to portray accurate references. Right-wing extremists can trust that he is an invested member of the community. Also, the anti-Black slurs and racist in-jokes adapt to the targeted population of the attack and demonstrate the flexibility of the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence.³⁷ If the Buffalo shooter wanted to copy the Christchurch attack beat-for-beat, he could have driven to any of the numerous mosques in Buffalo, NY.³⁸ Rather, the shooter was able to author his attack against a different non-white population while remaining within the bounds of the procedure.

That the target of the attack can shift near-seamlessly across identity borders speaks to the procedure's rhetorical flexibility. The procedure can be tailored to fit the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid; "Buffalo Shooter's Weapons Covered in White Supremacist Messaging," Anti-Defamation League, May 15, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/buffalo-shooters-weapons-covered-white-supremacist-messaging>.

³⁸ "Mosques near Buffalo, New York, United States - Prayers Connect," accessed December 12, 2022, <https://prayersconnect.com/mosques/search/Buffalo,%20New%20York,%20United%20States/42.8991241455,-78.8330459595/42.8991241455,-78.8330459595>.

needs of the attack, or the attacker can adjust the details of the procedure without moving entirely out of the bounds of the procedure. This is rhetoric as *techne*. The procedural tropes remain, but their specific content is altered. Because the procedure of white supremacist violence is not simply a step-by-step guide, but rather an alterable process, the procedure is rhetorical. And with any rhetorical act, the response will differ across audiences.

Circulation and Content Moderation

Responding as in Christchurch

The immediate reaction to the Buffalo attack and shooter mirrored that of the Christchurch shooter. Users on 4chan, 8chan, and Telegram (a direct messaging site popular with extremists) quickly canonized the shooter as another “saint” (see fig. 2).³⁹ This figure demonstrates the online consensus of extremist Telegram users; they have added the Buffalo shooter to the “Hail and Saints” calendar, marking the ‘holy’ days of previous attacks.⁴⁰ With this latest canonization, online extremists feel greater “hope” for the preservation of white supremacy.⁴¹ The online RWE community has firmly established the Buffalo shooter as a revered figure.

The video of the livestream was spread as thoroughly as the Christchurch video. A shortened clip of the video on demand, containing the violence before Twitch

³⁹ “Responding to Buffalo Shooting, Far-Right Politicians, Pundits Parrot Extremists,” Anti-Defamation League, May 24, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/responding-buffalo-shooting-far-right-politicians-pundits-parrot-extremists>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

terminated the livestream, received an initial 3 million views on sharing site Streamable. A link to that clip was plastered across social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.⁴²

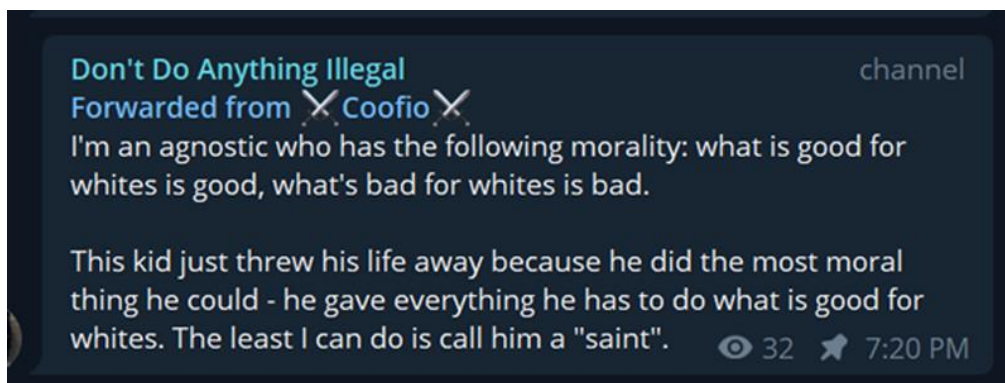


Figure 2. Screenshot of Telegram user praising the Buffalo shooting.

Users on 4chan’s extremist boards kept demanding the link to the video just to post that link on more mainstream platforms.⁴³ Also, as when posting the Christchurch video, right-wing extremists manipulated the Buffalo video to avoid detection from moderators. Memes like those in the Christchurch video were superimposed onto the Buffalo video.⁴⁴ The Global Internet Forum to Combat Terrorism (GIFCT) reported that within the first day of the attack, there were 740 visually distinct images and 130 distinct videos of the

⁴² Kellen Browning and Ryan Mac, “After Buffalo Shooting Video Spreads, Social Platforms Face Questions,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/15/business/buffalo-shooting-social-media.html>.

⁴³ Clare Duffy and Donnie O’Sullivan, “Social Media Platforms Vowed to Rein in Extremism. Buffalo Puts Them to the Test,” *CNN*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/16/tech/buffalo-shooting-social-media-response/index.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

attack online.⁴⁵ The video spread its message of dehumanizing Black people through the reduction of their bodies to those of NPCs. The video alterations bypassed moderation algorithms—algorithms that already were not enforcing sites’ content policies as strictly as promised.

The Christchurch Call, Problems of Moderation, and Blurred Distinctions of Violence

The most influential change between 2019 and 2022 is the Christchurch Call. This call for action was signed by popular internet companies to reduce the spread of extremist content online. Content moderation, the application of a site’s policies for what kinds of content are allowed on the site, is by no means an easy task. It is inherently difficult—

because it is resource intensive and relentless; because it requires making difficult and often untenable distinctions; because it is wholly unclear what the standards should be; and because one failure can incur enough public outrage to overshadow a million quiet successes.⁴⁶

Content moderation is notoriously taxing and impossible to perfect.⁴⁷ This does not preclude scholars from either critique when content moderation fails nor from exploring potential solutions.

Content moderation is an inherently rhetorical endeavor. Social media platforms have integrated themselves into the daily lives of billions. ‘Platform’ is not an incidental

⁴⁵ “Footage of Buffalo Attack Spread Quickly Across Platforms, Has Been Online for Days,” Anti-Defamation League, May 24, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/footage-buffalo-attack-spread-quickly-across-platforms-has-been-online-days>.

⁴⁶ Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 9.

⁴⁷ See Adrian Chen, “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed,” *Wired*, October 23, 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>; See Ryan Mac, Kellen Browning, and Sheera Frenkel, “The Enduring Afterlife of a Mass Shooting’s Livestream Online,” *The New York Times*, May 19, 2022, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/technology/mass-shootings-livestream-online.html>.

name; these sites are infrastructures that facilitate communication across publics. These infrastructures, which include content policies, restrict what kind of communication is possible.⁴⁸ Take Twitter’s current restriction of 280 characters, for example. Given this infrastructural restraint, Twitter users have created ways to communicate within that space, like threads linking tweets together with a number at the end of each tweet.

Zhaozhe Wang writes that “Rhetorical agency is distributed among the infrastructural, technological, and legal affordances of the internet as well as the users who create and consume information and sustain communication.”⁴⁹ Each act of communication online is influenced by content moderation at the infrastructural, technological, and legal levels. Therefore, internet users’ rhetorical agency is constricted or influenced by different site’s moderation practices.

These moderation practices are powerful and often invisible. Gillespie discusses how platforms “would like to fall away, become invisible beneath the rewarding social contact, the exciting content, the palpable sense of community.”⁵⁰ Social media companies highlight their openness and capabilities for connection rather than their “impartial handling” of content.⁵¹ These hidden “arrangements of technical architecture are inherently arrangements of power.”⁵² The individuals in charge of content moderation policies—private citizens—have the power to decide what is allowed to be said. Gillespie

⁴⁸ Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson’s *The Twitter Presidency* provides a thorough rhetorical analysis on the kinds of communication that Twitter’s infrastructure allows through a case study of Donald Trump’s tweets. See Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, *The Twitter Presidency: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of White Rage* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

⁴⁹ Zhaozhe Wang, “The Switched-off Circulation: A Rhetoric of Disconnect,” *Rhetoric Review* 40, no. 4 (2021): 396, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2021.1963041>.

⁵⁰ Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*, 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵² Laura DeNardis, “Hidden Levers of Internet Control,” *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012): 721, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.659199>.

makes the salient point that traditional news media has a long history of deciding what is allowed to be printed.⁵³ However, when online platforms can “interrupt the flow of money and terminate a presence online,” as in Laura DeNardis’s discussion of companies’ response to WikiLeaks, this power needs to come to light.⁵⁴ Especially since these platforms operate on code that make preprogrammed decisions.

These invisible structures can be understood through procedural rhetorical analysis. Procedural rhetoric, at its core, analyzes how a set of rules conducts persuasion.⁵⁵ Content moderation algorithms are programmed to detect posts that violate a site’s community guidelines.⁵⁶ Individuals hired to review content for potential removal are given sets of rules to reference for making the same judgements.⁵⁷ These rules govern what users see when they log onto their social media accounts. How are these rules authored? When are they changed, or broken? What are the consequences of breaking those rules?

What are the consequences of not removing footage of a white supremacist shooting despite clearly violating the rules of the Christchurch Call? Not only was content related to the Buffalo shooting visible on several social media platforms, but several platforms also played advertisements next that content. On Facebook, links to the Streamable clip of the Buffalo attack video had over 43,000 interactions.⁵⁸ Researchers were able to find the video posted directly to Facebook as much as five days after the attack.⁵⁹ Facebook could argue that their algorithms could not catch every post; however,

⁵³ Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet*, 4.

⁵⁴ DeNardis, “Hidden Levers of Internet Control,” 733.

⁵⁵ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, ix.

⁵⁶ “Footage of Buffalo Attack Spread Quickly Across Platforms, Has Been Online for Days.”

⁵⁷ Chen, “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed.”

⁵⁸ Browning and Mac, “After Buffalo Shooting Video Spreads, Social Platforms Face Questions.”

⁵⁹ “Footage of Buffalo Attack Spread Quickly Across Platforms, Has Been Online for Days.”

this disregards *users'* efforts towards moderation. Some Facebook users who flagged content of the attack were told that the posts did not actually violate the site's content policies.⁶⁰ Moreover, advertisements—ones personalized to a user's browsing history—ran next to posts with video or links to video of the Buffalo attack.⁶¹ The programs running Facebook enabled these advertisements. The programs make an argument that promotes white supremacist messaging.

In making this argument—that video of the Buffalo attack did not violate the site's content principles—Facebook blurs the distinction between virtual and material violence. In not removing the video of the Buffalo attack, videos of material violence become equivalent to videos of a COD playthrough where a player-character kills several NPCs in record time. Videos of the attack and videos of COD, similar in procedural tropes and motifs, are equivocated as methods for Facebook to make advertisement revenue. And it is advertisement revenue that Facebook seeks; as a 2016 review noted, advertisement revenue makes up 82-85% of Facebook's profits.⁶² Material violence becomes equivalent to virtual violence, and both are acceptable on Facebook if they are providing revenue.

Moreover, Facebook has additional monetary incentive to keep users scrolling through content and engaging with advertisements on their platform. Disconnection from a social media site is an existential crisis for platforms.⁶³ The fewer users connected to

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Why Am I Seeing Ads from an Advertiser on Facebook? | Facebook Help Center,” accessed January 16, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/help/794535777607370>; “Investigative Report on the Role of Online Platforms in the Tragic Mass Shooting in Buffalo on May 14, 2022,” Office of the New York State Attorney General Letitia James, October 18, 2022, <https://ag.ny.gov/sites/default/files/buffaloshooting-onlineplatformsreport.pdf>.

⁶² Tero Karppi, *Disconnect: Facebook's Affective Bonds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018): 12.

⁶³ Ibid., 8.

the platform, the less money the site makes. The “constant measurement of monthly active users, and how these numbers affect stock prices” drives platforms’ decisions, including decisions about what content is allowed on the site.⁶⁴ Social media platforms have monetary incentive to keep people using their sites. In the immediate aftermath of the Buffalo attack, Facebook saw an increase in userbase traffic.⁶⁵ To maintain that high traffic, Facebook’s programming recommended certain search terms related to the attack’s video because those terms were “popular now.”⁶⁶ In promoting the video’s search terms and playing advertisements next to posts of the video, Facebook’s algorithm demonstrated it is less interested in preserving the Christchurch Call than in promoting increased site traffic.

Facebook was not the only platform to fall short of the Christchurch Call. For weeks after the shooting, Twitter auto-suggested “to users a search for ‘buffalo live stream video’ after a user entered only the partial query ‘buffal.’”⁶⁷ If a Twitter user was searching for news coverage or commentary on the shooting—or ways to help those affected by the shooting—they were instead prompted to search for the video of the attack. Again, advertisements played next to posts of the violence.⁶⁸ TikTok, a video sharing website popular with young adults and teens, also auto suggested the video for weeks after the shooting, though without ads.⁶⁹ Instagram, Reddit, and Telegram also hosted the video or links to the video for days after the attack.⁷⁰ The most popular social

⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁵ “Investigative Report on the Role of Online Platforms in the Tragic Mass Shooting in Buffalo on May 14, 2022.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Footage of Buffalo Attack Spread Quickly Across Platforms, Has Been Online for Days.”

media platforms continued to host and spread the livestream for weeks afterward. The procedures established by these sites' programming see popular content and therefore promote popular content. The procedures elevate the white supremacist messaging.

Despite the video violating the content policies of each site and the Christchurch Call, the video was available for an extended time and produced monetary value for some of the sites. Why? Although perfect content moderation is impossible, the availability over time, advertising, and auto-suggesting goes beyond the challenge of removing a massive influx of posts in the first 24 hours after the attack. Perhaps the reason is the blurred distinction between virtual and material violence these attacks perpetuate. As the livestream was framed as a video game, and extremists made edits to the video to help avoid algorithmic detection, the video may seem less 'real' than other kinds of terrorist violence or propaganda.⁷¹

The rhetorical blurring that occurs due to the procedure of white supremacist violence is reinforced by the sites' programming. Algorithms make a procedural argument that the content is acceptable for platforms and that more users should see that content. In showing advertisements and auto-suggesting searches, the programs communicate an acceptance of the video and support it as non-problematic. In failing to moderate and remove white supremacist violence, the sites implicitly accept the message of the violence: that white people are threatened by the mere presence of non-white peoples, and that non-white bodies are as disposable as the bodies of NPCs in a video game—nothing more than lines of code.

Conclusion

⁷¹ "Investigative Report on the Role of Online Platforms in the Tragic Mass Shooting in Buffalo on May 14, 2022."

This chapter has demonstrated how the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence was rearticulated in the Buffalo attack. Rhetorical procedure falls under the category of *techne* rather than *tribe* as the rhetor enacting the procedure imparts authorial changes, and the response differs with different contexts. The Buffalo shooter followed the procedure closely while tailoring it to the context of anti-Black racism in the U.S. The shooter was praised by extremist communities, and the video of the livestream circulated massively despite policy changes enacted after the Christchurch attack.

Rather, the failure of content moderation by the internet's most popular social media platforms reinforced the message of white supremacist violence. White supremacist violence against non-white populations becomes virtual, game-like. This both minimizes the agencies of those victim to material violence and supports the argument of white supremacy—that non-white bodies are a threat to wipe out as easily as if playing a game on your couch.

As previously stated, the Buffalo shooter was indicted on 27 charges by a federal grand jury, including charges of hate crimes and firearms offenses.⁷² Though initially pleading not guilty to those charges, the shooter has since moved for a plea deal to avoid capital punishment.⁷³ On February 15, 2023, the Buffalo shooter was sentenced to life imprisonment in a state court.⁷⁴

⁷² “Federal Grand Jury Indicts Accused Tops Shooter on Federal Hate Crimes and Firearms Charges in Buffalo, New York.”

⁷³ “The Buffalo Supermarket Shooter Pleads Not Guilty to Federal Charges,” *NPR*, July 18, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/18/1112035732/the-buffalo-supermarket-shooter-pleads-not-guilty-to-federal-charges>; “Buffalo Supermarket Shooter Seeks Plea Deal to Avoid Death Penalty.”

⁷⁴ Mark Morales et al., “Buffalo Grocery Store Mass Shooter Apologizes for Racist Attack and Receives Sentence of Life in Prison,” *CNN*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/15/us/buffalo-tops-grocery-shooting-payton-gendron-state-sentencing/index.html>.

In Buffalo, Governor of New York Kathy Hochul pledged \$50 million in “targeted investments” to address community needs in the wake of the attack.⁷⁵ These needs include fighting food insecurity in East Buffalo, grants for small businesses, preventing home foreclosure, and assistance for first time home buyers.⁷⁶ Governor Hochul also granted \$3 million to the East Side Resiliency Center which provides social services, including trauma-informed support, to the community of East Buffalo.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ “Governor Hochul Announces \$50 Million of Targeted Investments to Address Vital Needs of East Buffalo,” New York State, June 18, 2022, <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-hochul-announces-50-million-targeted-investments-address-vital-needs-east-buffalo>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Resources & Services for Residents Impacted by Buffalo Shooting,” New York State, accessed October 15, 2022, <https://www.ny.gov/resources-services-residents-impacted-buffalo-shooting>.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined how the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence was articulated in the 2019 Christchurch attack and rearticulated in the 2022 Buffalo attack. Using a rhetoric of video games, the Christchurch shooter framed RWE violence as if it were a video game. The shooter's audience of fellow online extremists responded enthusiastically to the procedural tropes used. These individuals then circulated videos and images of the material violence to enhance the virtual quality of the attack's framing. As a result, the material violence enacted became rhetorically equivalent to the virtual violence of the video game.

The efficacy of this procedure was demonstrated by its rearticulation in Buffalo, 2022. Though the Buffalo shooter inserted his own voice into the technical production of the procedure, the core procedural tropes remained the same. The extremist-generated circulation of video from the Buffalo attack mirrored that of Christchurch. However, the changed digital landscape following the Christchurch Call impacted that circulation. Both the extremists and social media platforms equivocated material and virtual violence.

This thesis has also contributed to theories of violence's role in rhetorical study, of procedural rhetoric, and of rhetoric's role in distinguishing virtual from material violence. In following Spivak's call for humanities scholars to imagine the Other to escape from unproductive binaries, this thesis argues that violent events such as these two white supremacist shootings fall under rhetoric's purview. Any act of violence

communicates a message for those able to hear it. Although coercive, violence does not necessitate coercion. If it did, what would be the effect of the U.S.'s policy not to negotiate with terrorists? To speak on terrorism briefly, this thesis has carefully avoided labeling these two attacks as acts of terrorism, domestic or foreign. This is due to the large amount of literature on the rhetoricity of terrorism and in security and terrorism studies themselves. Rather, this thesis proposes that white supremacists have developed a rhetorical procedure of violence for ideological proponents to enact.

It is the extension of procedural rhetoric that is under study and contributes to the field's understanding of this kind of rhetoric. This thesis extends procedural rhetoric to be applicable to human enactment outside of the virtual worlds of video games or the act of program coding. In framing the attacks to be as close to certain kinds of video games as possible, the two shooters used procedural tropes of video games in their material acts. Furthermore, the procedure can shift slightly, it can flex, to be applicable in transnational contexts. Those who enact the procedure can apply their own authorial voice into the enactment. This speaks to the argument that procedural rhetoric is a *techne* rather than *tribe*.

This thesis also offers comments on theories of the virtual and material, arguing that the distinction between the two has been blurred through specific uptakes of video game rhetorics. As mentioned above, the articulation of specific procedural tropes and the circulation of the attacks' videos rhetorically equivocate the material violence of the shootings to the virtual violence of streaming a play-through. This is the latest example of this history of blurring the distinction between kinds of violences; the introduction demonstrated the U.S. military's involvement in the development and playing of video

games as well as jihadists' use of video games as recruitment propaganda. As of writing, players of the vehicular combat game War Thunder have posted online classified documents regarding the specs of a Chinese tank. This is the third leak of classified, though not security-threatening, information from players wanting game developers to make the tanks "more accurate" to reality.¹ The space between virtual and material violence is growing thin, and this thinning can benefit the aims of white supremacists.

This study is limited by its scope. Although the second case study references other white supremacist shootings influenced by Christchurch, this thesis does not have the space to discuss those shootings. Additionally, I believe a discussion of how other forms of white supremacist violence compares to this rhetorical procedure would illustrate the persuasive strategies of violences. The shooting at Emmanuel A.M.E. in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 was driven by white supremacist ideology, yet the violence was structured differently than what has been documented here. Perhaps a discussion on the larger evolution of white supremacist violence, including this period of the rhetorical procedure, would provide insight into its future.

This study is also limited by the availability of evidence regarding the preparations, attacks, and circulations. As the online presence of these events have been scrubbed by mainstream sites and the time constraints of this project prevented deep dives into extremist sites, evidence drawn from both attacks comes from secondary sources. These sources, vetted and with access to the original material, cannot provide

¹ Noah Smith, "Fans Wanted a War Game to Be More Real, so They Leaked Classified Docs," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2022/08/05/tank-plan-leaks-war-thunder/>.

every word of the manifestos nor every frame of the videos. However, the evidence compiled in this thesis has provided necessary context and explanation to address this lack.

Five Provocations for Rhetoricians

This conclusion offers several potential directions for rhetoricians' continued study and action. These include: 1) advising those in the security sector to recognize the procedural tropes of white supremacist violence and identify dangerous actors, 2) advising those in technology development how their programs and auto-suggestions may promote white supremacist rhetorics, 3) advising on the education of communities that are vulnerable to radicalization, 4) continuing to demystify the military-entertainment industry, and 5) expanding considerations of racial and genre critiques in rhetorical theory.

Advising the Security Sector

Rhetoricians can assist watchdog and/or security groups in identifying procedural tropes or 'warning signs' of potential violence. While this may be as imperfect as content moderation, the many quiet successes may outweigh the few missteps.² Additionally, rhetoricians can determine patterns in various manifestos or online postings to determine different rhetorical procedures; white supremacist violence may look different from sovereign citizen violence. What are the rhetorics of different extremist groups, and how do they signal their violence?

One way in which right-wing extremists mask their messages is through 'trolling' or claiming plausible deniability. In an analysis of Gamergate, a harassment

² Tarleton Gillespie, *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018): 9.

campaign that led to the alt-right's broader social platform, Aja Romano argues that "Gamergate was all about disguising a sincere wish for violence and upheaval by dressing it up in hyperbole and irony in order to confuse outsiders and make it all seem less serious."³ This hyperbole and irony mask the violence at the heart of these extremists' messages. Furthermore, Romano states that "it seems that very few people have really learned how to tell when a troll is just trolling or when it's about to commit real-world violence."⁴ Rhetoricians, trained to recognize how hyperbolic or ironic language functions persuasively, may be the ones to assist those in security in recognizing when a troll is a troll versus when a troll is the next mass shooter.

Advising the Technology Sector

In assisting technology companies, rhetoricians may be able to offer support in assessing the algorithms that run platforms. A 2017 NPR article on the Charleston, SC shooter makes an interesting argument on the role of Google in the shooter's radicalization.⁵ The shooter's defense attorney made the argument that the shooter's motivation came directly from the internet.⁶ While no one can know exactly what the shooter searched and read, reporters with NPR were able to look at how Google's auto-suggest functions with key search terms. Some of the results found "the letters 'b-l-a-c-k o-n'" elicited this top auto-completed suggestion: "black on white crime."⁷ Following

³ Aja Romano, "What We Still Haven't Learned from Gamergate," *Vox*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rebecca Hersher, "What Happened When Dylann Roof Asked Google For Information About Race?," *NPR*, January 10, 2017, sec. America, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/01/10/508363607/what-happened-when-dylann-roof-asked-google-for-information-about-race>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

that search term, the top five results were white supremacist websites.⁸ What exactly the Charleston shooter saw is a different argument; my purposes here are to highlight that Google's auto-suggest algorithm makes a procedural argument for the spread of white supremacist ideology, and that rhetoricians have a role in advising against such procedural arguments.

This role comes in the form of analysis of these procedural arguments. As the internet continues to increase its role in daily life, it may be worth rhetoricians' efforts to support democratic deliberation by examining the ways in which the internet provides information. Free and fair access to information is perhaps one of the internet's greatest strengths; this should not be threatened by discriminatory algorithms. Rhetoricians can work with technology companies to minimize discriminatory procedural arguments in their algorithms and programs. Technology authored by humanity cannot be impartial; rhetoricians are uniquely capable of recognizing those partialities.

Preventative Radicalization Efforts

Rhetoricians can also play a larger role in preventative efforts against radicalization. White supremacists and other extremists operate in a world of conspiracy: white people are threatened by the mere presence of Black people, the federal government is run by a cabal, and feminists are emasculating the global male population to name a few. Once people accept these conspiracy beliefs as truth, efforts to change their minds is terribly difficult. The best defense against extremism is to prevent its spread in the first place. Those involved in cult deprogramming, wherein

⁸ Ibid.

experts help people extricate themselves from cult beliefs and groups, can offer guidance in stopping the spread of extremist beliefs.

For it is preventative measures that are more effective in limiting the spread of conspiracies like the ones that inform RWE beliefs. Diane Benscoter, a former member of the Unification Church (i.e., “Moonies”), has been helping people deprogram from their extremist beliefs. In an interview, she states,

I think it's really important to try to help people inoculate, to try to create herd immunity to psychological manipulation and to hit that tipping point in society where more people understand how these tactics work. And those who try to use them will be less successful using them because they're easily spotted now.⁹

It is the prevention of manipulation that is effective. While cults offer a psychological persuasiveness—feelings of “camaraderie” and “righteousness”—these extremist ideologies are also rhetorically persuasive.¹⁰ It is through language that these feelings are first conveyed to vulnerable individuals. Rhetoricians could offer their knowledges and expertise in both analysis of and education against such manipulative discursive practices of the cult or of right-wing extremism.

Demystifying “Militainment”

Rhetoricians should also continue to demystify the military-entertainment industry and explore how military rhetorics pervade U.S. culture at large. Although the introduction discusses several instances of the military’s influence on video games, the military has come to influence entertainment across mediums. Roger Stahl’s book

⁹ Tovia Smith, “Experts In Cult Deprogramming Step In To Help Believers In Conspiracy Theories,” *NPR*, March 2, 2021, sec. National, <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/02/972970805/experts-in-cult-deprogramming-step-in-to-help-believers-in-conspiracy-theories>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Militainment, Inc. offers a comprehensive examination at just how pervasive the military has become in American media like movies, television, and games. Dubbing the industry “militainment,” Stahl marks the rhetorical elide of the two terms, so that one becomes indistinguishable from the other. As the military reaches through our entertainment screens, individuals are interpellated as virtual-citizen soldiers. The entirety of culture becomes oriented towards war, and arguments against such orientation cannot be made.¹¹ Rhetoricians, then, should continue to challenge the militainment industry as it continues to try to draft American citizens.

Provocations on Racial and Genre Rhetorical Critiques

Finally, this thesis offers provocations for racial and genre rhetorical criticisms. In following Lise Flores’s call that “rhetorical studies is fundamentally—at its core—the study of race...rhetorical critics must participate in the expanding area of racial rhetorical criticism.”¹² This project contributes to an understanding that violence often marks the borders between white and non-white bodies. Indeed, Alexander Weheliye argues that political violence “simultaneously serves to create not-quite humans in specific acts of violence and supplies the symbolic source material for racialization.”¹³ Violence, according to Weheliye, is integral in the development of—and subsequent study of—racialization. Paired with Flores’s assertion that rhetorical studies is the study of race, violence must come under rhetoric’s purview to further the goals of racial rhetorical criticism.

¹¹ Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

¹² Lisa A. Flores, “Between Abundance and Marginalization: The Imperative of Racial Rhetorical Criticism,” *Review of Communication* 16, no. 1 (January 2016): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2016.1183871>.

¹³ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014): 25.

Furthermore, this project demonstrates that mapping the rhetorical dimensions of kinds of violence is one way of expanding racial rhetorical criticism; particularly, an expansion of genre criticism may prove fruitful for further analysis. Carolyn Miller revisited her seminal article “Genre as Social Action” to write that the “internet has reminded us that recurrent social action is always mediated in some way,” yet—

mediation is not determining exigence: and cultural context all interact with mediation and technology platforms: thus, we can have two (and actually, many more) different types of blogs.¹⁴

Although Miller focuses on blogs, this intersection of mediation, exigence, and cultural context is at work in the rhetorical procedure of white supremacist violence. This project has examined how the mediation—the livestream and its framing, and the circulation—of this kind of violence responds to and perpetuates white supremacist ideology. The procedure, a rhetorical act that imposes onto violence the form of a video game, acts as a specific form of an updated genre for the digital age. Future studies may examine the rhetorical forms of different RWE groups; how might sovereign citizen violence differ from incel violence? How might they intersect?

Studying Violence

When thinking through *how* to study and write about right-wing extremism, I found myself turning to a feminist rhetorical lens to inform my ethics. I have found feminist rhetorical critique of abortion debates and messaging to be an insightful parallel to my work in extremist communication study. Harris’s discussion on “violent gender” provokes questions for how to talk about violence; she discusses two big ideas

¹⁴ Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action (1984), Revisited 30 Years Later (2014),” *Letras & Letras* 31, no. 3 (June 29, 2015): 64, <https://doi.org/10.14393/LL63-v31n3a2015-5>.

that have impacted my writing. The first is that violence is “multidirectional;” the second, do not reproduce violence in critiques of violence.¹⁵

Violence, like acts of communication, rarely have only one audience. Rather, scholars studying violence must “remain sensitive to the multidirectional, contradictory dynamics” of violence as the “cartography of violence is nonnormative, and trauma evades the straightforward representations used in maps *of* the world.”¹⁶ Violence does not fit neatly into boxes. Although this project attempts to map a specific way of doing violence, there is no way to encompass the full spectrum of its effects. Rather, scholars can learn from intersectional feminist critiques to discuss how identities overlap and result in different expressions of oppression.

Harris’s second main idea is to avoid reproducing violence in the study of it. She writes, “Scholars must not only assert the horrors of violence but also provide a map *for* a world with more complete justice, stronger communities, and collective psychological resilience.”¹⁷ In studying violence, communication scholars “must continue to invent ways to describe and explain violence while also resisting its abuses.”¹⁸ Understanding how violence communicates is a worthy endeavor, as this project has sought to demonstrate. However, scholars must pay special attention to the limits of their understanding as second-hand witnesses.

Expanding on that last point, Elizabeth Dauphinee’s writing on the ethics of autoethnography in the International Relations discipline provides excellent insight. She

¹⁵ Kate Lockwood Harris, “Mapping Gender and Violence: Describing Reality, Resisting Abuse,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 41, no. 2 (May 2018): 113-116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2018.1463770>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

begins by discussing a friend and collaborator in her research on the Bosnian war, Stojan Sokolović. When the two talked in a coffeeshop, Sokolović said,

You write about violence [sic] You say that fear is a violence—that the things that cause fear and insecurity are violences. But you do not know how that fear sits like a bear on my heart. You talk about fear, as though you understood what it tasted like—what it smelled like... Violence must be quantifiable in your world... you have not asked yourself about the violence the committer of violence has done to himself, and you have not bothered to theorise that.¹⁹

Violence as a subject of academic study cannot elide the material consequences and experiences of those subject to violence. I do not know the fear of the worshippers of Al Noor, nor the fear of the shoppers at Tops Friendly Market. I do not know the grief of loved ones and community members left to deal with the aftermath. I do not have to fear for my life or my loved ones' lives in our houses of worship or grocery stores. It is my hope, however, that in studying how white supremacist violence evolves and communicates, I can offer those maps *for* the world that “call a not-yet-present reality into existence.”²⁰

The starting point and ethical core of this project is Spivak's call for humanities scholars to imagine the other. To quote from her “Terror: A Speech After 9-11” once again,

It is the ability to imagine the other side as another human being, rather than simply an enemy to be psyched out, that is the greatest gift of romanticism. What

¹⁹ Elizabeth Dauphinee, “The Ethics of Autoethnography,” *Review of International Studies* 36, no. 3 (2010): 800.

²⁰ Harris, “Mapping Gender and Violence,” 113.

I was saying the other day about the humanities comes in here, because this is the terrain where a solid grounding in the humanities allows one to think the spirit rather than the letter of the law, and not think of the imagination as mere unreason.²¹

Humanities scholars are trained to “think the spirit,” to work within uncomfortable spaces that cannot be easily defined—if at all. Thinking through the spirit of white supremacist rhetorics is not comfortable for me nor for anyone reading this, I suspect. However, the individuals committing and circulating these acts of violence are individuals with spirit just the same as myself. One is not predetermined to believe in white supremacy.

Structures such as the militainment industry, histories of colonialism and enslavement, and laws that codify the ability to enact violences can lead an individual to online forums filled with predatory ideologues eager to draw in a new, unsuspecting individual. It is the job of the humanities scholar to think through these factors, to sit with the uncomfortable other, and to make our communities more equitable for all. It is this job I am dedicated to fulfilling, and this thesis marks the first step in my efforts.

²¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Terror: A Speech after 9-11,” *Boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 31, no. 2 (2004): 101.

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