

## POLITICAL PORN, GAMES, AND DEADLY COSPLAY



When the internet began to be used widely in the mid-90s, one of the first successes of the new phenomenon was the widespread peddling of porn. It was no longer necessary to sneak into the x-rated section at Blockbuster video. Furthermore, you could avoid exposing yourself to viruses (other than the computer variety). But porn gets old pretty fast; there are only so many variations. The next big thing was fantasy worlds in which the user participated. Then came first person shooting games, such as *Grand Theft Auto*. In a relatively brief time video games progressed from *Donkey Kong* and *Mario Brothers* to murder and mayhem. But even that wore thin. With political porn, instead of identifying with the hunky pizza delivery boy, the viewers imagine themselves to be Nazi storm troopers and KKK Klansmen. Ultra-right websites, in which the visitor believes himself to be a participant in real world crusades, have now become the most dangerous use of the internet.

The world of games, with heroic avatars on epic quests, is perfectly suited to the mythology of the white supremacists of all eras: neo-Nazis, neo-fascists (as in current Italian politics), the KKK and neo-confederates. They all imagine

themselves as knights ridding their world of evil, that is, people of color, Jews, and self-confident, accomplished women. Apparently the only women these trolls find attractive are cartoon characters, such as those in Japanese anime and manga, with baby faces and huge breasts. This has led to attacks, including death threats, on women who have dared to enter their fantasy worlds: Gal Gadot for not being appropriately well-endowed for the role of Wonder Woman (and also for being an Israeli?), Leslie Jones for daring to appear in the remake of “*Ghostbusters*,” and Kelly Marie Tran for appearing in “*The Last Jedi*.”

So many people, but particularly alienated young men, participate in these worlds in order to feel important, dangerous, and powerful. They are angry; their lives don’t seem significant and women aren’t attracted to them. That brings us to INCEL, the organization of young men who believe that no woman can find them attractive. Their answer is revenge against the entire gender. This sounds so pathetic and ridiculous that you want to laugh. But one of these guys drove a rented van into a group of women on a sidewalk in Toronto, killing 10 and wounding 13. It seems

that the brutal fantasy worlds where these people live can leak into the real world. Since there is no emotion (other than anger) and no empathy allowed in these worlds, the fact that the games can morph into violence should not be surprising. Think about the Australian who murdered 51 people in two New Zealand mosques. He wore a go pro on his helmet and created a live internet feed during the slaughter. He was creating his own real time first person shooter game.

The online fantasies that draw in angry young men are on one level foolish and laughable, but they are also dangerous. The white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville to protest the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee were carrying lit tiki torches, implements we expect to see only at backyard barbecues. Most of them were dressed in khakis and polo shirts, perhaps re-imagining themselves as preppies stepping out of a Ralph Lauren ad. Apparently this attire is the new neo-Nazi uniform: a way of saying that their pernicious ideology has gone mainstream. Yes, it is ridiculous and laughable. But the guns many of them were toting were real. And the car that killed Heather Heyer was real. And so were the synagogue shootings, and the bombs



(even if they were duds) mailed to a who's who list of Democratic leaders.

As in the Wachowski brothers' film "The Matrix," the created world of violent games, internet hate groups, and disinformation leaves many completely open to manipulation by the gamemasters. But who are the gamemasters? The billionaire Mercer family of New York City poured a great deal of money into Breitbart News when Steve Bannon was running it. And the Mercers are not the only financiers behind the ultra-right. Steve Bannon, the self-appointed cheerleader for an international coalition of ultra-right parties, is not a young man, but he fits the profile of the angry young men described above. Bannon, in his shaggy hair and multi-layered fatigue jackets, performs cosplay as a 1960s revolutionary, whisking around Europe, encouraging his brand of white supremacy. He is also distributing money from unknown sources, although it is suspected that much of it is Russian. Speaking of ridiculous cosplay in dangerous men, Vladimir Putin styles himself a shirtless, horse-riding rugged outdoorsman, a motorcycle gang member (the leader of the pack), and a hockey star. It is easy to laugh at these people. But we need to remember that both Adolf Hitler and

Benito Mussolini were considered buffoons in their earlier days. Not taking them seriously, allowing them to proceed with their insane plans, led to the greatest tragedy of modern history.

Donald Trump is the epitome of the angry white male we are discussing, even though he is far from young. He is a homely old man, so he paints himself orange and sports a cartoon hairdo, turning himself into a computer game avatar. He creates narratives of his own success and social position that are total lies. He would like to be part of the world Ralph Lauren depicts in his ads, but New York society has always considered him a lowbrow buffoon. Do all these things make his fans turn against him? Not at all. He has elevated his image in the eyes of a significant portion of the population. He has done what they all dream of doing.

Insecure, sad men have always existed, but never until now have they had a way of exacting mass revenge on the people they envy and hate. There have been horrendous acts of violence by people from this group in the last several years, but they have also become a home-grown troll army for the ultra-right, ready to spread disinformation, to threaten and intimidate people online. It is

possible that they are the core of the group Trump suggested would lead bloody riots in the streets if he didn't win in 2016. These young men are the "Matrix" human pods that provide the energy to run the international conspiracy to replace democracies with fascist autocracies, like the one Putin runs in Russia.

What can we do to respond to this scourge? We can certainly attack the social media companies that have betrayed our country, our institutions, and our democracy itself. If we boycott them, out and shame the leaders as criminal enablers, maybe they will lose enough money to relent. This strategy has worked with the Sackler family. Their Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, has single-handedly produced the nation's opioid addiction crisis. Intense scrutiny of Sackler malfeasance has led New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim, and other museums to refuse their donations. For people like the Zuckerbergs and the Sacklers, the pose of philanthropy is their best defense. Take it away and they're in trouble. But finally, the most important way to fight the organizations of the ultra-right is to be sure that we are aware of what they are doing, online and in the real world. We can no longer just laugh at them.

