CONSIDER THE GUNSHOT
Pippin Barr

You fire from the hip, hitting a terrorist in the chest and dropping him to the ground ... you throw a powerful uppercut, connecting with Ken's chin and sending him flying into the air ... you drive your car at top speed into a gang member, crushing him against a lamppost ... you leap to land hard on a turtle's head, sending it back into its shell before you kick it off a cliff ... you step forward just after an undead soldier has missed his attack and cut him down with your sword.
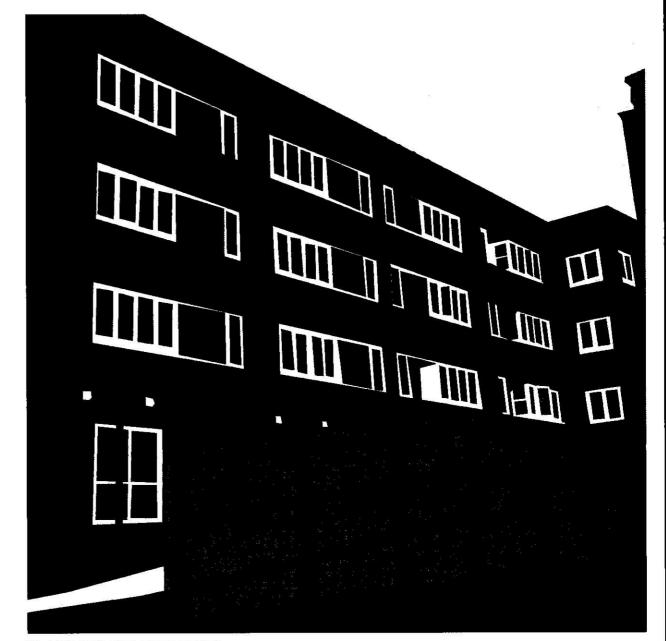
Violence is as central to videogames as high-scores and heroic stories. The examples I've given above are all everyday game events in which a player uses violence to solve a problem, advance a plot-line, win a fight or simply for the fun of it. Some of the violence can be cartoonish, as when Mario from *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) jumps on a Goomba's head to squash it away to nothing. Often it can be astonishingly

explicit, as when Joel in *The Last of Us* (2013) wrestles a zombie to the ground while stabbing it in the neck. Crucially, these acts are not only depicted but enacted. It is this interactivity that gives many of us pause when we witness or take part in videogame violence. These are not merely images flickering on a screen: you shoot the gun, you kick the turtle, you stab the neck. So, when I wanted to think about videogame violence, I made a game.

A Series of Gunshots (2015) engages with the place and nature of violence in videogames by using the medium itself. The game, playable online, presents you with a series of scenes of streets and homes backed by soft ambient noise. If you interact with the game by pressing a key on the keyboard there is a flash of light in a window and a gunshot rings out before everything returns to its uneasy hum. You find the gun can be fired between one and three times before the scene fades out and the sequence repeats itself in a new location, over and over, until the game ends. The visuals and sound effects are stark, reduced to essentials, devoid of colour and personality, all with the objective of creating a focused concentration. There is nothing but you, a quiet street, and the inevitable gunshots.

Debate on representations of violence has been part of our

52 *A Series of Gunshots*, game screenshot

understanding of videogames since before I was born: in 1976, *Death Race* was pulled from stores for depicting what were in fact highly abstracted hit-and-runs. Public and governmental concern about videogames has often flared up over particular cases in this way. Take the US Congress hearings about games like *Mortal Kombat* (1992) and *Night Trap* (1992) which led to the formation of the ESRB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board). Games are now stamped with age-oriented labels such as 'E for Everyone' and 'M for Mature'. This seeks to control access to potentially problematic media, but the question of whether there is actually an effect remains. Turning to psychology has led to mixed results, with some studies finding links between videogame violence and real world aggression[1] and others reporting no real impact.[2]

And yet, whether or not there are quantifiable outcomes of this kind, a simple emotional question remains: how do we feel about violence in videogames? As an artist, my practice has centred on the exploration of such philosophical and aesthetic questions directly through the creation of games. Videogames have been used to exhaustively examine affirmative and celebratory meanings of violence, but there's been all too little effort put into the opposed, darker meanings.

A Series of Gunshots is premised on a number of oppositions to conventional representations of violence in videogames, with each one tied to specific experiential goals. That meaning is created through opposition or contradiction is well-established in semiotics[3] and we are all familiar with the idea in everyday life: there's 'no hot without cold' and 'no happiness without sorrow'. In *A Series of Gunshots*, oppositions are intentionally created between the game's treatment of violent acts and the time-honoured tropes of conventional videogames.

With ever increasing fidelity, violence in videogames is often represented in loving detail. Blood sprays out of arteries onto walls and even mists the 'camera' we watch through. A slow-motion replay of a sniper shot from a great distance follows the bullet until it impacts the target's head. Enemies fall dramatically to the ground like rag dolls, limbs akimbo. Much of the pleasure in these games is seeing and hearing what you've done, having the results of your actions play out in high definition. *A Series of Gunshots* follows an opposed principle of restraint in its treatment of events: you see a flash in a window, hear a gunshot, and that is all. You know that a gun has been fired, but you do not know why or by whom, you do not know how much blood was shed nor what make and model of gun was used, you do not even know if the bullet found its mark. This not-knowing is at the heart of the game: everything in its design flows from a decision to *withhold* rather than 'overshare'.

In the context of a videogame, when we fire a gun we generally expect it to be not just satisfyingly shown on screen, but to be understood as an integral part of our success. Shooting or otherwise violently eliminating other people or agents in videogames tends to be in the service of larger gameplay causes. We kill soldiers in *Half-Life 2* (2004) in order to clear the way for us to advance through its spaces. We laser *Space Invaders* (1978) into extinction to build up our points total. We sneak up on a guard and thrust our sword through his back in *Dishonored 2* (2016) in part to loot the resulting corpse. When you trigger the gunshots in *A Series of Gunshots* there is thus a sense in which it can be seen as 'unrewarding': there are no points, no loot, and no victory. This indifference is intentional: it leaves a space for the act itself.

A key role offered by the rewards in traditional videogame designs is to validate our actions. This validation comes in many forms, from points received for destroying enemy tanks in Atari's *Combat* (1974) to the narrative of a just cause in *Call of Duty: World War II* (2017). Who could be blamed for killing Nazis? Occasionally there are videogames that explore alternate narrative framings of violence, from the fatalism of *Bioshock* (2007) in which it turns out you are under mind control, to the 'you had a choice not to play' rug-pull of *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). In *A Series of Gunshots* it was my objective, as much as possible, to remove the comforts of validation in favour of the *discomfort* of sitting with the realities of the situation represented in the game: a gunshot rings out, people may have died, and *you* pulled the trigger. Removing celebratory narratives and the mechanics of validation gives the player a chance to feel the dark truth behind a gunshot. Without external justification, we can begin to grapple both emotionally and intellectually not just with *this* gunshot in *this* game, but with the many guns we have fired or seen fired in other games and in other media.

In *A Series of Gunshots* the gun is fired the instant you press any key of your keyboard. At first this is an unexpected hair-trigger, later a too-easy act of power. Players do not need dexterity or an ability to read complex patterns of movement in order to shoot this gun and take part in the violence implied. Where in most implementations of videogame violence we must choose our weapon, dance into position, and hold our breath as we line up the shot, in *A Series of Gunshots* the shot is fired before you quite know you've pulled the trigger. Without the pleasure of exercising a skill,

53 *A Series of Gunshots*, game screenshot

54 *A Series of Gunshots*, game screenshot

the gunshot itself is fully isolated. Your experience becomes the only thing for you to acknowledge and ultimately confront. A skilled player of *Counterstrike: Global Offensive* (2012) can perhaps abstract the violence of killing terrorists (or counter-terrorists) into its angles, geometries and timing, but the player of *A Series of Gunshots* must sit alone with the act itself – it was too easy for an act of such magnitude.

A crucial outcome of the minimalism of *A Series of Gunshots* is foregrounded as you sit with the game. Without any explanation, you are pushed toward a personal understanding of your own actions. With the setting of the gunshot, the reasons for it, and the people involved obscured, you are invited to construct your own scenario. In this way you are invited to *perform* the gun violence both mechanically and dramatically – *your interpretation* of the act becomes the central gameplay. You must imagine what is taking place and hold this in your mind as you trigger the gunshots. The number of gunshots begins to matter and is threaded into this story. The timing of the gunshots may speak volumes about the emotional tenor of the moment. In contradiction to videogames that conventionally

dictate to us what to do and why – because we are a soldier or because we are a criminal or because we have nothing left to lose – *A Series of Gunshots* leaves you both as the performer of the violence and the author of its meaning. In a sense, you play both the aggressor and the victim.

In Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary *The Act of Killing* (2012), perpetrators of mass killings in Indonesia reminisce about their crimes against alleged communists and even restage them. In a particularly horrifying scene we see one of the killers talk about his ingenuity in constructing a more efficient means of murdering people, caught up in the mechanical details of the apparatus. This abstraction of violence into a form of *productivity* is a feature the world of videogames shares: each killing or other violent act tends to become abstracted as an item on a to-do list driven by the attendant visual and auditory rewards, the narrative and mechanical necessity, the pleasures of skillful action. In *A Series of Gunshots* a careful minimalism is designed to reclaim the concept of *violence* itself, to move from representations of killing as a form of labour toward the sobriety of a morality play.

1
'APA Review Confirms Link Between Playing Violent Video Games and Aggression', *American Psychological Association* (APA) (13 August 2015). See http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2015/08/violent-video-games.aspx (last accessed 19 September 2017).

2
Gregor R. Szycik, Bahram Mohammadi, Thomas F. Münte and Bert T. te Wildt, 'Lack of Evidence That Neural Empathic Responses Are Blunted in Excessive Users of Violent Video Games: An fMRI Study', *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8 (2017). See http://dx.doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00174 (last accessed 19 September 2017).

3
Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris), Open Court, Chicago and La Salle, IL (1916) 1999.