

*Through an interdisciplinary approach that includes media, film, and video game analysis, Brett Moody's essay, written in Jennifer Cayer's "Writing Art in the World," looks closely at the cause and effect between school shootings and the media that provoke and exploit them.*

## SCHOOL SHOOTINGS IN MEDIA: A PATHWAY TO EMPATHY OR A BLUEPRINT FOR EVIL?

Brett Moody

On April 20th, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two teens from Littleton, Colorado, drove to their high school with a small arsenal of heavy weapons and explosives. After the propane bombs they had put in the school's cafeteria failed to explode, they entered Columbine High School and shot twelve students and one teacher. During the shooting, they also managed to injure more than twenty other people. As they murdered their classmates in cold blood, their dialogue was like that of two teens playing a video game: witnesses report that they yelled phrases like "This is what we always wanted to do. This is awesome!" and "Peek-a-boo!" When the police arrived, the two teens shot themselves (Kass). The Columbine Massacre further ignited debates that still rage on today about American gun laws, bullying, high school culture, and, most compellingly, the relationship between mass shootings and media that depicts realistic violence. Since art has imitated violence and violence has imitated art with an increasing frequency the past several years, this last topic has become a critical issue for artists, consumers, and media distributors.

In the Massacre's aftermath, media pundits were quick to make connections between the shooters' actions and the media they enjoyed: Marilyn Manson's music and *Doom*, a violent computer game (Bell; Jaccarino). Though these theories were proven to be

shaky at best, school shootings have since been more concretely linked to the works of Stephen King, Dan Houser and many other renowned artists (Katz; Jaccarino). After reading Stephen King's novel *Rage* obsessively, which is about a high school student holding his classroom hostage with a pistol, Jeffrey Lyne Cox stormed his own high school with a semi-automatic rifle (Katz).

At the same time, school shootings have become a highly publicized phenomenon. They are frequently put on the front page of news outlets like the *New York Times* and have been represented by a diverse group of high-profile artists, including Pearl Jam, Michael Moore, Lionel Shriver, Gus Van Sant and Foster the People. These representations run the gamut in terms of their interaction with the issue: Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin* utilizes the Massacre as a means to explore themes of nature vs. nurture while Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* employs it to criticize the United States' gun laws and culture. The parallel growth of school shootings and art that depicts school shootings begs an important question: how can art responsibly represent real life violence, particularly school shootings? More specifically, which representations of violence generally produce prosocial behavior and which representations risk generating antisocial or copycat behavior?

On April 20th, 2005, the sixth anniversary of the Columbine Massacre, another disturbing series of shootings began: high school students, apparently bullied and rejected by their peers, brought a small arsenal of weapons to their high school. While recalling the affronts that they had experienced in high school, these shooters threw explosives and fired weapons at the people they identified as their school's 'jocks,' 'preppy kids,' 'church girls,' and 'janitors.' After a brief shootout with the police, the students pulled their guns on themselves. By April 20th, 2006, this event was estimated to have occurred close to ten-thousand times across the world (Jenkins).

Thankfully, these thousands of shootings did not occur in the real world, but in the world of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, a free computer game that allows users to "play" Klebold and Harris on April 20th, 1999. Danny Ledonne, the game's creator, researched the Columbine shootings extensively so that he could fully recreate it in his game: the players do exactly what Klebold and Harris did on day

of the Massacre. Real images, videos and recordings from the Massacre are included in cutscenes throughout the game, including two images of the pair with their brains blown out. The game, which has been downloaded from the Internet more than 400,000 times, has aroused both outrage and admiration from the critical community and Columbine's residents (Dugan, "Why You Owe the Columbine RPG"). While the game's critics, including writers published in the *New York Post* and *Denver Post* respectively, have labeled it a "twisted game" that "shows a lack of humanity," many of its supporters praised the game's social commentary: game journalist Patrick Dugan says that *Super Columbine* "is a work of art . . . It puts you in the mindset of the killers and provides a very clear suggestion of why they did what they did . . . [T]he game shines light on [the shooting] as an indictment of the American dream and way of life painfully close to the main nerve" (qtd. in Totilo; Dugan, "Super Columbine Massacre RPG"). Does *Super Columbine*, with its problematic representations, immoral game-mechanics, and ambiguous message, reduce real-life violence by trying to generate empathy toward the shooters? Or does it foster more violence by glorifying the killers' actions?

In his artist's statement for *Super Columbine*, Ledonne states that the question at the center of his production was: "why did they do it?" After playing *Super Columbine*, Ledonne's answer rings clear: Harris and Klebold were seeking revenge for the ostracization and bullying that they experienced at Columbine High School. Throughout the game, Klebold and Harris speak of "the shit [the jocks] put [them] through." As they fire on their classmates, there are flashbacks to episodes of bullying that they experienced. One particularly brutal cutscene shows Harris being cornered in a locker room and beaten by three 'jocks.' Another cutscene shows Klebold sitting alone in a crowded cafeteria, hoping that someone "would notice that [he] was alone" (Ledonne). Upon finishing *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, players get the impression that Klebold and Harris were victims of their high school. Empathizing with Klebold and Harris in this way is uncomfortable and confusing. At the end of the game, players are caught between the pain of the killers and the pain of their victims. Personally, it made me wish that someone had stood up for these boys and that our society would not tolerate this level of bullying. But can

these feelings of empathy toward the shooters evoke concrete behaviors that will make our society a more humane place?

There is broad support for the theory that empathy can create altruistic behavior. In the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*, psychologists C. Daniel Batson, Nadia Ahmad, and David A. Lishner write that:

Results of the over 30 experiments designed to test [the empathy altruism] hypothesis against various egoistic alternatives have proved remarkably supportive, leading to the tentative conclusion that feeling empathetic concern for a person in need does evoke altruistic motivation to see that need relieved. (417)

This research suggests that *Super Columbine* is a worthwhile game because the empathy it evokes can promote altruistic behavior. For example, a player might befriend a bullied or isolated peer after seeing Harris and Klebold get bullied in *Super Columbine*.

However, further research suggests that *Super Columbine's* prosocial effects may be counteracted by the aggressive actions and attitudes demonstrated by its avatars. In their scientific study "Superman vs. BAD Man? The Effects of Empathy and Game Character in Violent Video Games," researchers Christina Happ, André Melzer, and Georges Steffgen at the University of Luxembourg found that there is a link between real-world "empathy" and "game character." The researchers asked college students to play a video game for fifteen minutes as either the evil Joker avatar or the heroic Superman avatar. They were then presented with a task in which they could choose to act altruistically. Ultimately, the researchers found that the "[p]articipants who played the hero character (Superman) showed more helping behavior and less hostile perception bias than those who played the evil Joker," therefore "empathy may backfire depending on avatar characteristics in video games" (776). Though Ledonne presents Harris and Klebold sympathetically in *Super Columbine*, their avatars still commit mass murder and display a deep hatred for the people around them. Ledonne portrays Harris and Klebold's loathing far more often than their pain: for every reference to the bullying that they experienced, there are four lines like, "I fucking hate this place"

and “[the students of Columbine High] need to die” (Ledonne). Ledonne reduces the victims of the Massacre to negative stereotypes like, “Jock Type.” This diminishes the value of the victims’ lives in the player’s eyes: “Jock Types” are replaceable. The real Isaiah Eamon Shoels, a “popular boy” who played cornerback and had dreams of becoming a “comedian” or a “record producer,” is not (Shepard). Most disturbingly, Ledonne awards every kill the player completes with “experience points” and the message “Another victory for the Trenchcoat Mafia!” (the shooters’ supposed group-nickname) (Ledonne). If the University of Luxembourg’s researchers’ character-empathy-interaction theory is sound, it follows that the empathy (and resulting prosocial behavior) generated by *Super Columbine*’s bullying scenes is countered by the antipathy generated by playing as malicious characters like Harris and Klebold. This finding has massive implications for video games about real-life violence: you cannot promote prosocial behavior by inviting players to role-play as perpetrators of violence. Beneath this finding is the wider lesson that you cannot relieve violence by spawning hatred for its sources. Art that breeds hate can only impel people to destroy.

In fact, the role-play in *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* is extremely dangerous because it gives potential shooters a story through which they can justify their violent actions. Upon finishing the game, players have a disturbingly intimate understanding of the shooter’s motives. In the context of Ledonne’s version of the Columbine Massacre, it makes sense—on some level—that Harris and Klebold would do what they did. In the same way that a theatergoer can intellectually understand why MacBeth would murder King Duncan, a player can understand why Harris and Klebold murdered the “Jock Types” that so relentlessly bullied them. It is easy to imagine a troubled, bullied youth relating to the characters in *Super Columbine* and coming to the conclusion that their own bullies deserve the long end of shotgun as well. In fact, readers don’t have to imagine that scenario: it actually happened when Gill Kimveer posted on a blog that he loved playing *Super Columbine*, then shot nineteen people at Dawson College in Westmount, Québec (Gerson).

But the most disturbing thing about *Super Columbine* and its copycat killings is that Ledonne’s Harris and Klebold are largely fic-

tional. The real Harris and Klebold did not kill thirteen people because they were bullied. In an article for *Psychology Today*, Dr. Peter Langman, who studied Harris and Klebold for several years, writes that "there were students at Columbine who endured truly abusive behavior from several problematic students, but [Harris] does not seem to have been one of them." In fact, the teens were known to be bullies themselves. Langman writes that "[Harris, Klebold] and other boys threatened and intimidated another student to the point that he was in tears and afraid to attend school." He goes on to state that Harris "engaged in a variety of criminal behaviors including theft, credit card fraud, and vandalism." Dave Cullen, who spent nearly ten years researching the pair, says that Harris was a "psychopath" with "a total lack of remorse or empathy." Klebold, by contrast, was a "depressive and suicidal" teen who was pulled into the scheme by Harris, who Cullen describes as the attack's "mastermind and driving force." In 2004, the *New York Times* published an Opinion article also stating that the Columbine killers were not "were not outcasts" (Brooks). They had a group of friends and applied to colleges like Arizona State University before the shooting ("The Columbine Shooters"). By superimposing his own experience as a kid who was "bullied" and a "loner" onto the psychopathic actions of the Columbine killers, Ledonne has created a dangerous and unfounded causal link between being bullied and being a school shooter (Crecente). By downplaying the pain of Columbine's victims and falsely justifying the Columbine shooters' own pain, Ledonne's game suggests that murdering a community is a reasonable response to bullying.

Putting viewers in the perspective of someone as evil as Eric Harris or Dylan Klebold seems, at best, an ineffective way of generating empathy, or, at worst, extremely dangerous, at least as orchestrated by Danny Ledonne. But what if an artist put viewers in the perspective of the victims of the Columbine Massacre? If a viewer experiences a shooting as one of its victims, they may better understand the human cost of such an event and take steps to prevent similar events from happening in the future. Director Gus Van Sant tests this hypothesis with his feature film *Elephant*. The film follows a group of Oregon high school students during the hours leading up to a school shooting modeled after the Columbine Massacre. Each of the stu-

dents are introduced with a brief title card and a slice-of-life episode: Elias takes photos and develops them in the school's dark room. John arranges for his drunk father to be picked up from the school. Michelle goes to gym class and files books in the library. Nathan and Carrie make plans to see each other after school. Nothing out of the ordinary happens. The film plays like a dream—students walk in and out of Van Sant's soft focus while ethereal electronic music envelops them like English fog. Several Steadicam shots follow the students as they casually walk to their next classes, blissfully unaware of the impending carnage. No motive is given for the shooting, and the students seem to survive or perish at random. This sense of random violence is echoed in the final scene, in which one of the shooters, Alex, plays "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe" to decide whether he will kill Nathan or Carrie first.

*Elephant* left me with a hollow feeling because it avoids assigning meaning to the violence it depicts. Unlike *Super Columbine*, which misleads players with a revenge tale, *Elephant* sidesteps narrative structure in order to focus the viewer on the violence of school shootings. The film ends before the killers are apprehended, so there is no feeling of justice. The killers never explain their motives, so there is no root of evil to persecute. None of the characters have an epiphany or change as a result of the shooting. The movie is simply about innocent students being murdered as they go through their day-to-day lives; it is about naked hate, violence, and pain. In his review of the film for *Variety*, Todd McCarthy said that the film was "pointless at best and irresponsible at worst" because it offered "no insight or enlightenment" in regards to the Columbine Massacre. However, it is Van Sant's refusal to color *Elephant* in the typical Hollywood style that makes it such a remarkable film. Van Sant does not try to turn an act of violence into a mystery-thriller like Oliver Stone does in *JFK*. Nor does he try to turn the Massacre into a debate point like Michael Moore does in *Bowling for Columbine*. Instead, Van Sant recreates the Columbine Massacre in the same way that its victims probably remember it: as a random, senseless act of cruel violence, wrapped in the hazy shroud of memory. By emphasizing the shooting's victims over its perpetrators and their motives, Van Sant highlights the real human pain created by events such as these without sensationalizing

them. As a result, viewers do not see the Massacre's victims as statistics—one of 13 dead, 20 injured. They see them as individuals like Isaiah Shoels, Kelly Fleming, and Lauren Townsend. It is far easier to care about an individual than a number representing them.

However, according to the research of pioneering empathy scientist Ezra Stotland, this does not necessarily mean that *Elephant* evokes significant empathy from its viewers. According to Stotland, there is a difference between watching someone experience pain and empathizing with someone experiencing pain. Stotland found that “persons instructed to imagine how the victim feels (an imagine set) become more [empathetic] than persons instructed to [simply] observe the victim's movements” (Toi and Batson 283). People watching *Elephant* or other films that represent real-life violence are definitely observing victims of violence, but they are not necessarily ‘putting themselves in the shoes’ of those victims. Unless a film somehow motivates viewers to think in an empathetic manner, it cannot inherently generate empathy—the viewer must meet the film halfway.

This has profound implications for the marketing and presentation of media that depicts real-life violence: an art piece's ability to affect positive change is largely dependent on the context in which it is first seen. Assuming that Stotland's findings are sound, if *Elephant* is presented as a purely aesthetic experience, as it might be in a film festival or a video store, it can lose most of its ability to create empathy because its viewers are primed to see the film's characters as fictional representations as opposed to actual people. By contrast, if *Elephant* is presented as a recreation of a school shooting, it can create a powerful empathetic sensation in its viewers and, assuming that Batson's earlier empathy-altruism hypothesis is correct, promote altruism and its attendant prosocial behaviors. By this logic, while *Elephant* does not always generate empathy from its audiences, it is still a valuable piece of socially-minded work because it can generate a great deal of empathy in the right context.

However, it is naïve to assume that *Elephant* will generate much empathy precisely because it is unlikely to be presented as a recreation of real-life violence due to the generally audience-pandering nature of the film marketplace. Though *Elephant* is both an art film and a recreation of the Columbine Massacre in which viewers can empathize

with the tragedy's victims, it will almost always be marketed as an art film to sell more tickets. In the description on the back of *Elephant's* DVD cover, the film's distributors highlight the film's beauty and touch on its abstract concepts: "beautiful and poetic . . . *Elephant* demonstrates that high school life is a complex landscape where the vitality and incandescent beauty of young lives can shift from light to darkness with surreal speed."

Viewers are not invited to relive the Columbine Massacre through the perspective of the Massacre's victims, even though that is an experience that the film provides. This description of *Elephant* is not inaccurate; *Elephant* is a bona fide art film—it won the Palm d'Or. However, from the perspective of a socially-conscious artist, this description is problematic because it encourages viewers to bring to the film what Stotland would call an "observational perceptual set" instead of an "empathetic perceptual set" (Toi and Batson 283). *Elephant's* distributors cannot be blamed for marketing their film in this way. It is much easier to sell an art film than to sell a real-life pain simulator. And, while this problem is subtle, it presents significant challenges to artists and distributors who seek to generate empathy with their art. A violence-centric artwork's potential to create empathy may be counteracted by its need to sell itself as something other than a recreation of a violent experience. In a market flooded with films that cater to a viewer's desires, a film that asks for something—in this case, empathy—from its audience is unlikely to make the money to fund its own creation. To effectively create empathy through violence-focused art, an artist must somehow convince her audience to pay to experience another person's pain as their own. When she is competing against crowd-pleasing spectacles like *Star Wars* or the newest installment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, this is no small feat.

In the past few years, new tools have emerged which artists can utilize to create empathy. In particular, virtual reality has emerged as a powerful means of connecting audiences to real-life tragedies. Artists such as Nonny de la Peña have already used virtual reality to create photo-realistic environments which replay real-life tragedies such as a mortar strike on a Syrian town (Peña). As the medium offers a new means of representing real-life violence, we, the inheritors of

this technology, may take lessons from past representations. We cannot provide false narratives to would-be perpetrators of violence or breed hatred like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* does. Artworks that add hatred to the world under the guise of ‘explaining’ real-life violence will only produce more violence and pain. Instead, we must support a marketplace which sells films that ask viewers for empathy, as well as cultivate a culture that values challenging pieces like *Elephant*. Art can make the world a better place by generating empathy, but it cannot do so alone. As artists and consumers of art, we must meet these pieces halfway. Most importantly, we must remember not to mistake the forest for the trees. Art is an extremely powerful tool for creating empathy in ourselves and others, but we do not need it to empathize with our fellow human beings. Our ability to put ourselves in the position of others is largely determined by our willingness to do so.

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