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Playing and Writing

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Killing Fake People for Real Fun

Immediately following the September 11th terrorist attacks, Newgrounds.com, an online aggregator for user-created video games, art, animation, and music, was inundated with dozens of new games whose sole purpose was to let the player kill Osama Bin Laden. These games proved so numerous and so popular—some garnering over a million plays in under a month—that they necessitated the creation of the Anti-Osama Collection, an admin-curated page of all the best Bin Laden-busting videos and games. A mainstay of the Newgrounds front page well into October of 2002, the collection included such acclaimed titles as *Taliban Twister*, *Die! Osama Die!*, and *Osama Eats Poopoo*.

If this sounds juvenile, it's because it quite literally was. Almost everyone coding and playing these games were teens and tweens—a fact that becomes all the more apparent the deeper you scroll down their miles-long list of barebones, incomplete games which, more often than not, consist entirely of clicking on an image of Bin Laden's head only to watch it explode into a fine red mist.

They aren't going to win a Golden Joystick anytime soon, but I think these games rock.

They're so unabashedly honest and transparent about what they are and what they offer: the innate pleasure of bashing a simulated person's head in with a rock. The developers stripped away any semblance of fun—engaging gameplay mechanics, loops, or environments—, replaced it with gore alone, and yet somehow managed to captivate millions.

Games of this ilk—of simulated violence for violence sake—have been central to the culture of Newgrounds.com from its inception in '95 to the present day. They weren't anything new, and Osama Bin Laden was most certainly not the first object of their sadism. If a public or private figure even slightly annoys or angers anyone, you can bet some fervid Newgrounds user has programmed the means to let you hold a 12 gauge against their temple and pull the trigger. *Whack Your Boss*, *Torture Bill Gates*, *Relationship Revenge*, *Kill Your Teacher*, and *Seinfeld Assassination* are only five titles plucked from the awful offal sea of viscera that is Newgrounds.com.

I'd guess that upon learning this, most people would presume that Newgrounds.com is home only to the most dysfunctionally degenerate Internet perverts, and that's only partially true. I believe the behavior and interests of Newgrounds users is indicative of the attitudes of a much larger population. The sheer popularity of the Anti-Osama Collection speaks volumes not just about a fringe online community, but about the innate pleasure all people get from committing or witnessing gruesome acts of brutality.

And it *is* innate; a penchant for violence is hardwired into us, its enactment directly linked to the same neurologically rewarding sensations elicited by sex, food, and drugs.¹ That's a simple fact of who we are, ingrained in us as naturally and as uncontrollably as height or eye color. But paradoxically, we've all more or less agreed that real-life violence is, in most cases, a morally abhorrent activity that deserves punishment. That's why it's so embarrassing for anyone to actually admit that they, heaven forbid, *enjoy* stomping digital Bill Gates into a big red splat, when so easily follows the assumption that they'd enjoy doing the same in real life.

This assumption is wrong. So long as no real party is harmed, the enjoyment a person gets from an activity that is instinctually pleasurable to people is nothing to be ashamed of.

And yet we are ashamed. I do not exaggerate when I say this contradiction is at the heart of every single problem that's ever existed. Man's ability to believe his own most urgent desires—be it to kill or to take or to fuck—are inherently wrong is both his greatest strength and most crippling weakness. Meta-cognition, the capacity to think about one's own thoughts, is an incorrigible constant of human existence, and one that results in two distinct minds that literally hold separate places in our heads. Deep inside the brain, structures like the hypothalamus, amygdala, and pituitary gland—structures found in the brains of all vertebrate animals—control what would be considered more instinctive action: sleep cycles, hormone and temperature regulation, hunger, thirst, and sex drives, and fight-or-flight responses: everything that keeps you alive and fit for procreation. Inversely, the outermost lobes of the brain, responsible for what we traditionally think of as “thinking,” have the final say, and can therefore determine, based on a rational assessment of current circumstance, whether or not to act upon the drives our innermost primal systems are *screaming* at us to act upon.² The mere existence of these two minds necessarily creates an internal tension we all ail under from the cradle to the grave. Yet without this tension, self-reflection and self-improvement and self-control and self-hatred and self-doubt—everything that makes people people, for better or for worse—would be impossible.

But even though we still harbor the same selfish persuasions that our a-billion-greats grandfathers proved were tantamount to survival, we simultaneously derive intrinsic pleasure from altruism. Empathy is as measurable and testable as any other psychological function; it feels bad to see other people feel bad.³ How paradoxical is it to have soldered into us both an unyielding appetite for and extreme distaste towards violence? Towards any sin? There are an infinite number of behaviors we engage with that spark both orgasmic elation and untenable guilt in tandem. On both short- and long-term scales. Masturbation, overeating, procrastination, poor

hygiene, overachievement, underachievement, narcissism, lying, competition, war: everything that's wrong with you and me and your family and your friends and Adolf Hitler and the Dali Lama. No one is spared. Everyone must one day face the gaping disjunction between the animals we once were and the animals we are becoming.

Considering the staggeringly stark mental contradictions we're forced to juggle day to day, it's no wonder almost every world religion has some concept of original sin: that you are born evil and can only find atonement through a strict regimen of rules and routines designed to better the lives of the people around you. After all, sins are only sins because, despite their negative consequences, we *like* to do them. They're tempting. Why can't we stop ourselves? Since its genesis, religion's one and only purpose has been to answer this question, to create an outlet through which people can reconcile the actions our animal minds reward and the actions our "moral" minds know to be right—two things tragically seldom the same. This is by intentional design; evangelists knowingly market christianity to prospective worshippers as a tool for self-improvement, a tool with which to *fix* oneself. And it's heartbreakingly easy to think oneself is in need of fixing when we're all, to very tangible effect, born broken.

Though as time marches on, and the archaic commandments and origin stories of the Bible or the Torah or the Quran or whatever other spiritual text become less and less compatible with the values and facts we as a species hold true, what will we have left? How can we possibly expect to find agreement between our two minds without anything to worship? This is not to say that religion should remain a central tenet of modern life, nor that it should fall out of practice, but that it *will* fall out of practice. Young adults around the world are consistently less religious than their older counterparts, and the past century has seen an undeniably significant decrease in both religious affiliation and interest.⁵ This trend will no doubt continue, and by the time it's

reached its inevitable endpoint, what will we do? What *can* we? Without an inviolable code or a supreme role model or the ultimate explanation for why we feel the horribly maladapted way we feel, what do we have?

We have *Osama Eats Poopoo*.

And I'd argue that's even better. We, as the player, can feel the intrinsic pleasure that comes with inflicting harm unto someone we hate without any of the real-world consequences of actually doing so. The mere existence of such a game both acknowledges that people are fundamentally attracted to violence, and simultaneously assures those people that such an attraction is natural and controllable and doesn't make you wicked inside. That such an attraction isn't proof of your degeneracy or your depravity or your debauchery, but of your humanity. Somehow, as if through divine intervention, *Torture Bill Gates*, *Shoot Kim Jong-Il*, and *Snipe Justin Timberlake* manage to miraculously collapse our two minds, and for once the tension is gone.

Because these games and their developers are so intentional and forthright in their honesty—"why yes of course you want to launch an ICBM directly into Osama Bin Laden's skull; we all do; here are the tools with which you can,"—the shame and guilt that clings tumorlike to our morbid enjoyment is suddenly gone. And to feel no shame, to objectively observe our animal yens without judgment or prejudice, is the only true way to reconcile what we want and what we know is right.

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